

GUARDIAN

Chapter 1

It was the 15th of July in the lunar calendar, and the sky was still gloomy

Nocturnal cats, big and small, had all returned to their resting places. Everything seemed awfully quiet, even in the wide avenue of Dragon City, with only the occasional buzzing of a bug from the bushes, elusive and bewildered, heightened with anticipation

It was half-past two in the morning. The morning dew had settled and the air was damp

It was wet and sticky

Perhaps it was the wind, but there always seemed to be a shadow lurking in the corner; when one walked down the avenue, it was as though something was constantly glaring from behind

At present, Guo Changcheng found himself entering No. 4 Bright Avenue while carrying a document of notice.

Unfortunately, Guo Changcheng failed to live up to any expectations. He had struggled to graduate from a low tier university, with rather mediocre grades at that. Even now, despite being an adult, whenever he met any strangers, he was always tongue-tied and afraid.

As one would expect, Guo Changcheng could not find a job. After he graduated, he wasted almost a year at home, slacking. Eventually, when his uncle was transferred to the Ministry of Public Security, his uncle made use of a few connections to get his lacklustre nephew a job

And so Guo Changcheng thought that his future would consist of working from nine to five in a uniform, making tea for important people, and playing solitaire whenever he was free. That was until he received a bizarre “recruitment notice”.

When the notice arrived, Guo Changcheng thought there was some sort of mistake. The notice, written in big, red letters stated:

Comrade Guo Changcheng,

Congratulations! You have been recruited by our department. Here, you will enjoy the treatment and status of a national civil servant, with an above average salary. You will also be responsible for serving the people. We hope that you will work hard, with both passion and ambition, for the good of our nation and society

Please bring this notice and your identity card, and report to our office at 2:30 am on August 31 (July 15 lunar calendar). Our address: Human Resources Department, 1/F, No. 4 Bright Avenue.>I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you as our new comrade on behalf of all our staff.

Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China

Special Investigations Unit

DD/MM/YYYY

Normally, when someone sees such a strange reporting time, they would expect it to be a typo, and would probably call in for confirmation. But Guo Changcheng, being the anti-social freak he was, had a rather peculiar case of telephone phobia. Even the thought of having to make a phone call left him sleepless all night

And so, he never made the phone call

After a bit of thought, Guo Changcheng came up with the perfect plan: he would stay up all night and go to No. 4 Bright Avenue at half past two in the morning. If there was no-one there, he would take a nap at a McDonald's not far away and come back at half past two in the afternoon. He figured that either one of these two times must be the right one

Since at this hour the metro was not in service, Guo Changcheng had no choice but to drive. Struggling, and with the help of his GPS, he finally managed to find the place.

No. 4 Bright Avenue was, in fact, not so bright, but rather hidden in a secluded courtyard. Guo Changcheng stopped for a while, hesitating at the entrance, then turned on the flashlight in his phone. He found a small sign underneath the lush Japanese ivy with the building number on it

Below the sign was a small engraving on the rock, which read "Special Investigations Unit." There was even the emblem of the MPS (Ministry of Public Security) beneath it.

The courtyard was flourishing with vegetation. There was a line of Japanese pagoda trees past the car park, forming a small grove. Among the trees was a narrow path which lead to a small reception hut and an old office building

The lights were on in the small hut, and a uniformed figure could be seen inside it. The figure wore a service cap and appeared to be reading a newspaper

Guo Changcheng took a deep breath and started to sweat nervously, without giving much thought as to why the reception office would be open at this hour

“I am reporting in as a new recruit, this is my notice letter... I am reporting in as a new recruit, this is my notice letter... I am reporting in as a new recruit, this is my notice letter...”

Guo Changcheng, still rooted in the same spot, recited his lines as though he was a schoolkid preparing for an exam. Finally, he gathered his courage and shakily knocked on the window of the reception hut, and feebly muttered, “I am reporting in as a new notice... this is my letter recruit...”

“What?” asked the bewildered, middle-aged man at the reception

He was screwed, how could he mess up a line as simple as that? Almost in tears, his face began to look like a purple yam

Fortunately, the man spotted the notice letter and realized what he was here for

“Oh! You’re the newbie! What should I call you? Oh, I see it, Little Guo, huh? We haven’t had a newcomer for quite a few

years now. So, how's it going? I suppose this place wasn't that easy to find?" Guo Changcheng nodded in agreement, feeling relieved. He liked meeting friendly and eager people. The more talkative the other person was, the less he would have to say

"So this is your first day, huh? Let me tell you, you're extremely lucky today! It just so happens that our Chief is here tonight! Come on, I will introduce you to everyone."

Guo Changcheng tensed up in an instant, not feeling lucky in the least

Guo Changcheng was particularly afraid of people with high status and power; when he was little, whenever he saw a teacher he'd start to curl up, and would turn around and run for his life if he ever saw the principal. Albeit a law-abiding citizen, when he saw a policeman, it was as if he was a rat seeing a cat

Meeting the Chief? He'd rather meet ghosts

At this moment, a young man came striding out of the small office building

The man, with his hands buried in his pockets, had a cigarette in his mouth. He had a tall and slender figure, with upright shoulders and thick eyebrows, along with deep eye sockets and a high nose. Extremely handsome, and yet extremely sombre

With a frown and a quick pace, his body seems to be saying, "No matter who you are, get out of my way." Guo Changcheng inadvertently found himself looking at him, and was immediately stunned by a set of beautiful, yet abrasive, eyes. This handsome man seemed to be quite ill-tempered

Surprisingly, when the handsome man noticed that someone was standing by the doorway, he made an abrupt stop, and within a split second, put on the most genuine and cordial smile possible

When he smiled, two soft dimples appeared on his cheeks, and his mouth curved up, with the cigarette still held in it. His eyes shrunk into even steeper curves, amiable yet with a hint of mischief

“Well, speak of the devil! Hey kid, go meet our Chief.”

The middle-aged man gave Guo Changcheng a push from behind, making him almost stumble and fall. His mind went blank as he heard a voice from behind say, “Chief Zhao Yunlan, we have a newcomer today.”

“Hello, a warm welcome to you.” Zhao Yunlan eagerly extended his hand

Half-paralyzed, Guo Changcheng tried to wipe off the sweat on his hands and embarrassingly picked the wrong hand for a handshake. He quickly withdrew his hand. The nerve-wracking experience left his short-sleeved shirt soaked in sweat, slowly forming a world map on his back

Zhao Yunlan, letting out a very restrained laugh, naturally raised his hand to give Guo Changcheng a pat on the shoulder, “No need to be so nervous, our colleagues are all very nice and friendly. Since it’s your first day, I really should walk you around, but you see, today happens to be a special day, and we’re extremely busy, so please don’t feel left out. We will hold a welcome party for you sometime later. Well, this isn’t a very

convenient time is it... How about this? Old Wu will bring you inside to meet Wang Zheng, our HR manager. She will help you with the employment procedures. After that, you can go back and get some rest and come back tomorrow morning. Does that sound good?"

Guo Changcheng nervously nodded

No matter how desperately hurried Zhao Yunlan seemed to be a moment ago, the fact that he was currently standing still, talking to Guo Changcheng in his calm and stately manner was remarkable. "Sorry, I'm in a hurry. If there is anything you need, you can tell me when I get back. No need to be shy, we're a family now. Sorry for troubling you today." Zhao Yunlan gave Guo Changcheng a gentle, apologetic smile, nodded towards Old Wu at the reception, and rushed off in a hurry

Old Wu was certainly a big fan of Zhao Yunlan. Just a few rather meaningless words of formality had gotten him into a good mood instantly. He took Guo Changcheng towards the office whilst muttering, "Our Chief is young, capable, well-tempered, and always kind and genuine towards everyone..."

Guo Changcheng had yet to recover from the horror of meeting the big Chief, and only vaguely heard Old Wu

Since he was always terrified of making direct eye contact, he hadn't noticed that Old Wu's face was as pale as a wall, his lips blood-red, his mouth almost wide enough to reach his earlobes, and that he had no tongue

The office was full of busy people, it seemed to be a really hectic time

It is only until this moment when Guo Changcheng finally realized that there was something strange about this office. Why would the whole office, including the receptionist, be working overtime til this hour?

“No worries,” Old Wu explains, “you will mostly be working during daytime in the future. As long as there aren’t any big cases, we rarely have to work overtime. But since it’s July, only these couple of days are the most hectic in the year for us. Don’t be concerned though. Overtime pays three times the usual salary and you’ll even get a bonus at the end of the month.”

Guo Changcheng was even more perplexed. What’s with that “only these couple of days are the most hectic in a year for us”? Do criminals pick this time of the year to commit crimes? And they follow the lunar calendar too!?

However, Guo Changcheng, fearing that he’d appear stupid, left his questions to himself and nodded instead

Old Wu continued, “I usually work the night shift, another colleague manages the reception in the daytime. Ah, I guess we won’t really get to see each other much in the future. Have you just graduated? From which university? What did you study?”

Guo Changcheng shamefully admitted his rather disappointing and lacklustre academic achievements, adding, with the voice of a mosquito, “I’m not very good with studying...”

“Well, you’re still a university graduate nonetheless! I like educated young people since I wasn’t that capable myself. When I was young, my family was poor, so I never got the chance to get a proper education. When I was around seven or eight, I studied at a private school for just a short while. But after all these years, I’ve forgotten almost all the stuff that I’d learned, I can barely read the newspaper now!”

What stuff? Private school?

Guo Changcheng was once again confused, but because of the fear that he would appear stupid, he kept it to himself

“Oh, we’re here!” Old Wu cheered

Guo Changcheng lifted his head up to see a giant sign that read “Human Resources” on the door, written with red letters on a white plane, being a very eerie red as well. Guo Changcheng pondered why this red seemed so strange and suspicious, and to his surprise, he realized that... the words look as if they were written with... dried blood!

Old Wu knocked on the door, “Little Wang, are you in? We have a newcomer today. Can I trouble you to complete his employment procedures?” After a moment of silence, a very soft female voice replied, “I’m coming.”

The voice seemed very far away, and yet also seemed as if it was floating just beside one’s ears. Guo Changcheng immediately felt a chill running down his spine

“Sorry for troubling you at this time of day Little Guo, but you see, Little Wang is just like me. We can only do night shifts so

employment procedures can only be carried out around this time.”

Hold on...

What did he meant by... “can only do night shifts”?

Guo Changcheng felt increasingly uncomfortable, and another wave of frost rushed through his bones. Trembling with fear, he glanced at a worker passing-by, and was instantly mesmerized with horror

Guo Changcheng clearly saw the uniformed worker swiftly gliding in mid-air through the corridor

He... he he he he he he he didn't have any legs!!!

The door opened with a screeching squeak, and a young girl in a white dress appeared at the door and eerily asked, “Have you brought the notice letter and your identity card?”

A burst of chilling breeze came rushing out of the room. Guo Changcheng felt as if his heart was about to burst and stop beating. He was afraid that if he didn't speak now, he might not be able to speak again for the rest of his life

He held his breath and slowly lifted his head, gazing across the spotless white dress, stopping at the girl's bare neck

A second later, Guo Changcheng let out a croaking noise as though he was being choked. His jaw hung open, but he couldn't produce a single scream. His eyes looked as though they were about to pop out, his limbs petrified as he slowly stumbled backwards as if his body was no longer his

He saw... he saw a red line running across the girl's neck! It wasn't a necklace, but rather a line that was deeply sunk into her skin... a tightly sewn line that stitched her head to her neck!

An icy hand rested on Guo Changcheng's shoulder, and Old Wu asked, "Yo, Little Guo, you doing okay?"

Guo Changcheng turned around and saw Old Wu's pale paper face and humongous mouth

'Meeting the Chief? He'd rather meet ghosts.'

Perhaps this was karma paying back

Two seconds later, Guo Changcheng passed out without a sound

His frozen body lay straight on the floor

His uncle really had found him a remarkable job.