

# GUARDIAN

## Chapter 2

The street lights flickered like fireflies in the wind, and darkness reigned over the light in the dismal and dreary night. A young girl's staggering steps bashed at the bumpy brick road. Suddenly, she tripped and heavily fell on her knees.

In the suffocating heat of a summer's night, Li Qian panted and puffed vigorously, her fingers tightly clutching her clothes.

She could hear the thumping of her heartbeat, along with the thumping of someone else's footsteps.

The noise seemed to originate from a pair of old, soft-soled cloth shoes, and the wearer seemed to be stumbling due to a leg disability. Li Qian abruptly looked behind her but there was nothing in her sight besides the small, swiveling insects floating around the street lamp.

She had a delicate look, and would have normally been considered pretty. However, her hair now clung uncomfortably to her face, messy and soaked in sweat, and her cheeks and lips were becoming paler by the minute. Her current state was far from her natural beauty.

Gradually, her expression became strangely unsettling, almost like an evil smirk or a malicious glare, with a remarkable yet indescribable hint of pure terror.

“Go away.” She bolted up and said, grinding her teeth, “If I can get rid of you once, I can get rid of you twice.”

The footsteps stopped.

Li Qian rolled up her sleeves, her snow-white arms now covered with goosebumps. In the cooking heat of summer, something invisible was making her cold.

She picked up a brick from the ground as the footsteps closed in on her from all directions like a swarm of bone-devouring maggots. Yet, there was still nothing within her sights.

The unseen was the most terrifying.

Li Qian began to scream as she smashed and bludgeoned the air with the brick.

The brick began to grow heavier and heavier and the coarse surface pained her palm. Exhausted, her eyes grew dark. Hunched-backed, her arms rested on her crooked knees. Puffing and panting, she inadvertently stared at the ground. Li Qian’s irises began to narrow and her entire body began to tremble with vigour. The brick in her hand dropped to the ground, plunging onto her toes through her sandals. But as though she had not felt the pain at all, she stumbled backwards, her knees bent, she crashed down, sitting on the ground.

A shadow... it’s a shadow!

The street lamp was directly in front of her, so how was a shadow cast despite nothing blocking the light?

The shadow looked like black ink spattered across the ground and the figure watched her for god knows how long. Li Qian was paralyzed on the ground, but the shadowy figure was standing upright.

“If you haven’t done anything wrong, why are you so terrified by a shadow?”

She seemed to hear a screeching laughter.

It was dawn, almost five o’clock, the phone on the bedside drawer rang with a ghastly howl.

Zhao Yunlan had worked overtime from dusk till dawn, and when he got home, he simply rolled right into bed without even taking his clothes off. Yet, just as he had gotten himself comfortable, the phone had more work for him. His clothes were scattered everywhere, both on the bed and the floor. Nobody knew whether they were meant to be washed or worn. The big twin bed had all sorts of miscellaneous objects on it, some being of rather unimaginable sorts: a single sock wrapped around the corner of a laptop, a pair of sunglasses, an umbrella, an origami top hat, and a whole can of cinnabar powder. With all these piles of garbage cramming up the space, there was only a tiny spot large enough for a single person to sleep on.

Zhao Yunlan wore an incredibly resentful expression, looking as if he was just about to burst out swearing. When he picked up the phone, though, his tone was awfully normal, perhaps having gotten used to this kind of life.

“What’s happened now?”

“Someone died,” Wang Zheng’s voice came from the other side.

“When?”

“Last night or this morning, just a while ago.”

“Where?”

“University Street.”

“Hmmm...” Zhao Yunlan ran a hand across his face, “let Old Chu take care of it.”

“Chu Shuzhi went on a business trip to Xiangxi.”

“What about Lin Jing?” “Got transferred by Hell.”

“Fuck me... What about Zhu Hong? Oh never mind, there was a full moon yesterday, she must be on leave. Who else is at work?”

“Me, but it’s almost sunrise so I have got to go soon,” said Wang Zheng. “There’s still Da Qing and the new intern Guo Changcheng.”

Zhao Yunlan feebly yawned, and said, “Tell Da Qing to go with the intern, give him a chance to learn.”

“Guo Changcheng can’t go anywhere right now.” Wang Zheng explained. “When he came over last night, he passed out on the floor and he’s still unconscious.”

“.....”

Zhao Yunlan asked, “What scared him?”

“Old Wu and I.” Wang Zheng even added, “I told you to find a professional shroud shop to make Old Wu a new body. What

Zhu Hong makes with sandbags and paper can never look like an actual person.”

Zhao Yunlan silently sat on the edge of the bed and slowly sighed. “It’s against procedure for me to go there in person, it might scare others... but I guess I have no choice. Fine, tell Da Qing to wait for me. I’m coming.”

He hung up, showered in three minutes, and sped towards University Street in his car.

Zhao Yunlan slowed down right around the corner, and a black shadow suddenly fell from the sky. A round ball of animal fur came crashing down like a grenade, almost leaving a crater on the front of the car.

He swiftly slammed the brakes, rolled down the window and yelled, “This is called an automobile! It’s a transportation device, not your litter box! Don’t try to break it will you!?”

On the front of the car sat a pitch-black cat, so fat and round that it seemed to have no neck, possibly being the African cousin of Garfield.

The big, fat cat looked around, and after making sure that there was no one around, flicked its whiskers, and said, “Stop babbling and get out. Haven’t you noticed that smell?”

The air was filled with an inexplicable foul odor like that of a bio-weapon. Covering his nose, Zhao Yunlan got out of the car and asked the cat, “Did you just fart? What’s that smell?”

Ignoring his remarks, the black cat jumped off the car and started walking ahead.

A few police cars had already stopped by the side of the road, and a police line had been set up at the entrance of a small narrow alley.

Zhao Yunlan rummaged his pockets, and, after a long while, finally managed to locate a scruffy staff card. The policeman guarding the tape didn't look too well. He quickly glanced at Zhao Yunlan's card and returned it, and then rushed off to a wall and started vomiting. Zhao Yunlan scratched his head, bewildered, "Is my photo really that nauseating?"

The cat, who was walking quite some distance ahead of him, impatiently turned back and urged him with a long and angry "meow".

"Right, right, the important stuff. Damn, this smell. I can't even stand ten steps." Zhao Yunlan crouched down and crossed the police line.

Zhao Yunlan had just arrived, yet someone already seemed to have been waiting for him.

"Are you from the Special Investigations Unit?"

In the Ministry of Public Security, everyone knew of the enigmatic department called the "Special Investigations Unit".

They certainly were not low-tier officers but nobody knew what exactly it was that they did. Every time someone from the SIU (Special Investigations Unit) was involved, it was always by the orders of the higher authorities, and nobody could object.

But if they weren't present, nobody would know where to find them.

They belonged to the MPS, but weren't always closely monitored. They were strictly organized and their procedures were completely non-transparent. If the media didn't have official approval, they would never have been able to locate the SIU, let alone interview or report anything about them.

To be honest, nobody knew how they did things. When a case is handed to the SIU, it was as if it was entering a black box, and the only thing that came out was a mysterious report.

Sometimes, staff members from the SIU were even more baffling than the most bewildering of cases.

Their case reports were always detailed, logical, and impeccable, giving a full account of the entire process of solving the case and catching the criminals involved.

But there was one aspect that was unceasingly suspicious – the criminals always died by the end of the case.

While most of the cases they handled involved heinous crimes where most of the suspects most probably deserved such demise, it was perhaps... a little too coincidental.

The police officer in charge of the investigation was a senior policeman named Yang. He offered Zhao Yunlan a friendly handshake and sized him up curiously, "What should I call you?"

"Zhao, Zhao Yunlan. You can just call me Little Zhao."

Old Yang was quite taken aback. Never would he have thought that this young man was the Chief of the SIU. He gave Zhao Yunlan an even closer look and realized that he was tall, slender,

and handsome, like a model from a fashion advertisement. Though it must be said that his outfit was not very pleasing – a scruffy shirt which was half-buttoned up, only half of it tucked in while the other half not, and not to mention that bird’s nest of a hairstyle.

But Chief Zhao Yunlan was the Chief after all. No matter how messy he looked, even if he ran naked on the street, lower tier officers would probably have to praise him for trend-setting. “Oh dear!” exclaimed Old Yang. “You’re Chief Zhao! Excuse me for my ignorance. Who would have thought our Chief is so young and accomplished?!”

Zhao Yunlan was rather used to flattery, and naturally replied with some utterance of formality.

At this moment, someone was growing rather impatient, and a loud and clear “meow” could be heard. Old Yang looked down and saw a black shadow which swiftly climbed up Zhao Yunlan’s pants, shirt and onto his shoulder.

Normally, seeing a black cat with green eyes at a crime scene would be rather ominous but this particular cat was just a bit too plump, which instead seemed to lighten up the situation rather than darken it.

Old Yang stared at it and it stared right back. “This... this...?”

Zhao Yunlan embarrassingly adjusted his pants which were almost pulled off by the cat and laughed, “This is our cat manager. He is really hard-working, so he doesn’t like it when we chit-chat during work.”



“...” Old Yang was left speechless.

The black cat arrogantly stretched its neck, albeit with difficulty due to its sheer size, and impatiently swung its tail.

Zhao Yunlan got the message and showed Old Yang the little badge sported around the cat’s neck.

“This is a SIU special permit. It’s basically equivalent to our staff cards. Don’t worry, he is an experienced cat so he knows his way around.”

“...” Old Yang began to find this whole ordeal rather nonsensical.

A moment later, Chief Zhao carried the cat and followed Old Yang into the crime scene.

The further they went, the nastier the smell got.

A female corpse laid in the narrow alley, wearing a t-shirt with “Dragon City University Orientation Camp” printed on it. Her eyes and mouth were open. Her body laid flat in the shape of a star and her stomach had been cut open and emptied.

Old Yang covered his nose with a paper towel, visibly disturbed.

The fat cat on Zhao Yunlan’s shoulder let out a long “meow,” leapt onto the ground, and circled the corpse twice. It then stopped beside the corpse, sat down, and stared at Zhao Yunlan like a well-trained search dog.

Zhao Yunlan walked towards the corpse, took out a pair of scruffy gloves from his ragged pocket, and put them on. He

examined the spot the cat was sitting on and carefully lifted up one of the corpse's arms.

Old Yang, leaning forward for a closer look, saw a bloody hand mark on the floor.

That definitely couldn't be a human's hand. The palm was only the size of a child's hand yet the fingers were at least twenty centimetres long. Old Yang had been a policeman practically his entire life, and he'd never seen anything so bizarre.

While Old Yang was still stupefied, Zhao Yunlan remarked in a serious tone, "From this point onward, the SIU will be in charge of this case. The handover procedures will be completed in two working days."

Old Yang never got the chance to reply as Zhao Yunlan pointed towards a dilapidated door and asked, "What's this place?"