

Guardian Chapter: 20

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“When I was small, grandma always woke me up in the morning and help me comb my hair. Then she would walk me to school, and tell me stories on the way; grandma was my favourite person in the world.”

Li recounts as if only speaking to herself.

Zhao finally takes out a cigarette, and plays around with it; Guo asks, “then... you stopped liking her?”

Li looks at him, “I remember you said that you would give up your life to bring your grandma back, but the sundial wasn’t in your house; you’re really lucky.”

Guo looks at her blandly, and struggles to think of a reason, “was it because taking care of her was too exhausting, too...”

Li’s eyes redden as if bleeding, and stares at him inhumanly, “don’t insult me with such a stupid reason.”

Guo heats up with anxiety.

“She became a different person. She didn’t remember anything, she kept babbling on and on about the same things illogically. She would pee her pants all the time, when she ate the food got everywhere, and she drooled a lot. No matter what I was doing, she would just follow me around the house, babbling inaudibly, day after day!”

“I saw her everyday, and all I could think was: this is what I got in exchange for half my life.”

A cold and eerie smile appears on Li’s ghastly face.

“The grandma that I want never came back, I used up half my life, and what I got was...” Li’s face twitches with vigour, and says with contempt, “a monster.”

Li’s bloody eyes stare into Guo’s soul, “I hate her; whenever I saw her, I wanted to kill her. Everyday, I had to patiently and gently ask her what she

wanted to eat, whether she needed to go to the bathroom, whether she was tired, cold; and she would just laugh at me like an idiot.”

Guo’s hands quiver.

"The sundial tricked me, you know? You can't bring back the dead. I didn't get my grandma back. I got a monster that tortured me day after day!" Li laughs abruptly, "you don't understand anything, don't try to judge me! When she was alive she wouldn't leave me alone, and when she was dead she still wouldn't leave me alone! I..."

"She will leave you alone now," Guo interrupts her; he cannot imagine himself speaking in such a serious tone, but he does, "she disappeared; the hungry ghost was coming for you, and you were possessed... she stepped in to protect you, and the hungry ghost killed her. She died again, we all saw it, but you didn't."

Li is petrified.

Guo looks down in melancholy, and says on the verge of tears, "even if you saw it, you'd think that she was trying to harm you, right? But... she wasn't."

"She wasn't trying to hurt you, she wasn't trying to get revenge."

Frivolously your heart changed, yet you blame the whim of human emotions.

"Murder is not our department," Zhao says, standing up, and patting Guo on the shoulder, "let's go, she can stay here for the night; next morning Zhu Hong will call our colleagues from Criminal Investigations, and they will take it from there. I will call Professor Shen in the morning to tell him what happened... ah, anything else Your Honour?"

The Ghost Slayer walks up to Li.

Li curls up instinctively.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not concerned with the living," the Ghost Slayer says, "but it's related to the Artifacts, so I must ask: where is the sundial now?"

"It's... at my place," Li lowers her voice, "my parents rented us a small apartment; they never come visit."

"Address?"

"Room 207, Unit Three, No. 101 South City Street."

"Thanks." The Ghost Slayer nods, and looks at Li for a little longer, and says, "when we meet again in Hell, you shall be treated equitably."

Guo mindlessly follows Zhao, and they walk the Ghost Slayer out; Guo turns around to look at Li one last time.

The Ghost Slayer leaves in a hurry to retrieve the Sundial of Reincarnation before sunrise.

After he left, the room returns to normal temperature, and the frozen windows gradually thaw out. The air conditioner returns to normal.

Guo wants to say something, but only follows behind Zhao silently.

Zhao picks up his car keys, and glances at him, "aren't you going home?"

"Chief Zhao," Guo looks at his feet, "can a ghost reincarnate again... after being killed by a hungry ghost?"

Zhao frowns, "probably not."

"So... so the old lady, she's really gone?"

Zhao pretends to be deep in thought, and suddenly smiles; he takes out a small bottle, and waves at Guo like calling a dog, "I almost forgot, come here, kid."

Guo comes over, confused.

"Take this, the Ghost Slayer gave it to me. His Honour sometimes shows mercy, if you're lucky," Zhao stuffs the bottle in his hand, and dawdles over to the cat's bed; he covers the cat's mouth playfully, and the sleeping Da Qing wakes up, "whoever comes in early in the morning, remember to tell the canteen to make some grilled dried fish."

Guo examines the small glass bottle curiously, and widens his eyes.

The old lady is inside the bottle!

She is only the size of a thumb, quietly sitting there, and softly smiling.

Then, the wrinkles on her face rapidly disappear, her hair grows, and turns from white to black; her teeth grow back, and her body starts slimming. Soon, her face turns to thirty years old, then twenty, then she shrinks and shrinks, and...finally, she curls up as a baby.

The infant closes her eyes, and disappears in the bottle.

Guo shouts in shock, "she... she is gone!"

"That's a Bottle of Rebirth, she is entering reincarnation again." Lin stands behind him, and says, "from birth to death, and from death to birth, the cycle of life and death will continue for eternity."

Lin looks down, mutters a Buddhist mantra, and says, “go home now, come back nine in the morning for work; the canteen is open at eight o’clock, if you wanna eat there then come earlier, don’t be late.”

Guo is incredibly relieved, and carefully puts the bottle into his bag, and happily leaves.

Lin turns around and says to Zhao, “the Ghost Slayer didn’t give you anything. Li shouldn’t have used the sundial, and the old lady died for her willingly, that is all karma; and the Ghost Slayer wouldn’t intervene with destiny.”

Zhao “humphs”, and says, “alright, you’re smart, you got me, you happy now?”

“I heard you don’t like this trainee, because he only got in due to his uncle; why did you have to make up a story to console him then?”

Zhao lights a cigarette, and impatiently gestures him to go, “because I like to, now why don’t you just get lost?”

Lin shakes his head and sighs. As he is about to make another comment, Zhao glares at him, and Lin leaves with a cup.

Zhao locks the door, and is about to go home for much-needed sleep. Suddenly, he thinks of the Ghost Slayer who hurriedly left, and somehow

becomes curious about the Four Mystical Artifacts. Prepared to skip work the next day, he drives to the address Li gave.

When Zhao arrives, the apartment building is already shrouded in a menacing dark mist. He is startled, and runs up the building with a gun.

A gigantic black hole hangs above the rooftop, like a hungry beast. The elevator is out of service, so Zhao runs straight up to the roof, which is already laden with dead corpses.

Zhao takes a closer look, and finds that all the corpses are monstrous creatures: three-headed ones, double-bellied ones, half-human and half- skeletons... all were beheaded without exception. The moon shines eerily, and the Ghost Slayer holds his blade against someone’s neck.

That someone is not fully human, its entire face is covered with tumours; disgusting and terrifying.

“What’s wrong, Your Honour? Aren’t you just here for the sundial, how did it turn into a massacre?” Zhao’s path is completely blocked by heaps of corpses.

The Ghost Slayer hears him, but doesn't answer, and says to the deformed figure, "I will ask you one final time, where is the sundial?"

The monster says rigidly, turning its face towards Chief Zhao, "my master has some words for Your Honour... for centuries you have dedicated to this job, and always acted with self-restraint, but aren't you afraid of losing control?"

The Ghost Slayer says nothing, but the air stiffens and becomes more frigid.

"My master admires you, and wanted to test whether you truly have no desire, and so he is sent to..."

The Ghost Slayer doesn't let him finish, and slashes its head off; a big burst of bloody explosion oozes a foul odour. Strong wind attacks the rooftop, and Zhao is forced to take cover and close his eyes. When the wind stops, everything returns to normal: corpses, monsters, nothing remains.

The Ghost Slayer turns around, and gestures a goodbye. Without a word, he hurriedly enters the black hole; Zhao seems to notice a hint of panic from his figure.

The Ghost Slayer is feared by ghosts, spirits and even gods; who would dare challenge him like that?

The Sundial of Reincarnation... who stole it?