

Guardian Chapter: 21

Chapter: 21

No. 4 Bright Avenue isn't a spider cave, nor is it a skeleton lair.

When it's daytime, there is not a single shadow of a ghost.

The office has great natural lighting, each person has their own desk and desktop computer; the office is decorated with plants, and well air-conditioned. The pantry room has a fridge, and there is cat food and other snacks inside for everyone.

One time, Guo even saw an entire drawer in the fridge filled with thinly sliced raw meat, the kind used for hotpots. He wonders who would eat hotpot in summer, but he soon realises that the meat is for Zhu Hong, who takes a bag and eats it raw like potato chips; blood dribbling.

The next day, Zhu takes sick leave; reason: inevitable monthly problem.

Not the kind of problem everyone thinks. The third day, she comes back, and Guo is petrified to find her slithering around on a giant serpent tail. Zhu keeps eating raw meat for a few days, and after a while, her tail is replaced by normal human legs, and she eats humanly again.

There is another member in Chief Zhao's investigations team besides snake beauty, fake monk, and black fatty catty. Half a month after the incident of the hungry ghost, he comes back after what looks to be an exhausting work trip. He spends an entire afternoon claiming work expenses, then falls asleep on his desk. Chief Zhao comes back and sends him home to have a rest.

Guo sees the name plate on his desk, which reads "Chu Shuzhi"; everyone calls him Big Bro Chu. But Guo is a bit frightened of him: he is around the same age as Lin; extremely skinny, with his cheeks almost sinking into his bones. He has a menacing and sombre face, and is always frowning.

Perhaps it's Guo's illusion, but Chu seems to frown even more when he sees the trainee.

There isn't much work to do in general: only a handful of cases come in within a month, and the Chief usually just sends one or two in the team to take a look. Their principle is: "we catch ghosts not humans". Since most of these cases aren't involved with ghosts, all they need to do is a file a report and hand the case to another department.

Most of the time, everyone is reading books, surfing the web, chitchatting, and waiting to go home.

But Guo realises that there are quite a few procedures to follow when handling a case: first, send someone to the crime scene, then file a report to the Chief; the Chief will decide whether or not to take the case. If he decides to take it, he will file another report to the higher authorities; it usually takes one or two working days before the report goes through, and only then can the Chief and the team start working on the case.

That day in mid-July was one strange coincidence: it just so happens someone was killed by a ghost, and no-one was in office. Da Qing smelled something fishy from Hell, so the Chief had no choice but to investigate in person, and only got the chance to file all necessary documents afterwards.

Lin worked for three days just to file all the documents for this case.

And so Guo aimlessly stayed at the SIU for three months, during which not a single case came up; miraculously, he passed his trial period.

Even more miraculously, Zhao seems to have forgotten how annoyed he was initially at Guo getting in through his uncle, and quickly signed the papers for his official employment.

Guo slowly gets used to the empty human resources department during daytime, and takes his official employment form there for filing.

Da Qing looks at his enthusiasm intently, and wiggles its butt on to Zhao's desk, "all men are fickle; at first you wanted to kick him out more than anything, but now you're letting him stay for good."

Zhao is focused on messaging, and says without looking up, "he has good virtue all over his body like words in a dictionary, treat him as a mascot, he will bring us good luck; plus, he's quite hilarious to watch."

Da Qing is curious, "what virtue?"

Zhao points at his drawer, and the black cat paws it open. Inside is a huge file holder, with documents, pictures of volunteer work, donation account books, etc.; having accumulated since a decade ago. There is a picture of a post card on the wall of a country-side primary school, and the post card reads with scribbly words: "take care guys."

Da Qing is shocked, "you mean Guo Changcheng did all of this?"

"Yea, you know about his family, incredibly rich. But when he does these sorts of things he never lets his family know, and he uses up almost all his pocket money for charity and only leaves a little for himself. That's how he accumulated immense virtue; I saw his aura the other day."

“Oh... someone like that is hard to come by.” The black cat who seems to have gotten even plumper sluggishly dawdles away and peeks at Zhao’s phone, quickly changing the topic, “don’t you get tired? You message him like a million times a day, asking about unimportant stuff all the time. It’s been three months, and you’re still stuck in the ‘going out for lunch and dinner’ stage?”

Zhao sends the message, and flicks the cat on its head, “good things come from slow work, you don’t know cat about this.”

Shen’s reply appears on the screen: “sorry, I have a school gathering tonight.”

The black cat rolls laughing on the desk, “school gathering! School gathering! Ahahahaha, Chief, you can keep boasting about yourself; aren’t you the self-proclaimed invincible charmer? What do you usually say: that girls can’t stop staring at you, cute bottoms drool when they see you? You’ve been rejected, eh? Tell me, Mr Zhao Yunlan, how does it feel?”

Zhao grits his teeth, resisting the urge to have cat meat for dinner.

After the case of the hungry ghost, Zhao intentionally keeps contacting Shen; initially using his work as an excuse, always bothering the Professor with the tiniest progress on Li Qian’s case. Afterwards, he starts shamelessly making up all sorts of excuses to ask him out, but the Professor is incredibly difficult to get hold of: perhaps he’s really busy, or maybe he is avoiding Zhao on purpose.

Zhao is too used to the eager and desperate type: the more reserved, subtle and hesitant Shen is, the harder he tries.

Suddenly, the phone rings, and the nosy cat eavesdrops on the conversation: an unfamiliar voice asks nervously, “hi... is this Mr Zhao? You offered to buy my grandfather’s antique book, is that true?”

Zhao’s eyes sparkle, “yes, when can you get the book to me? I want it as soon as possible.”

The voice says, “It’s rather expensive, do you think...”

“I think there is no problem, pick a time to meet.” Zhao says like the rich and powerful.

The person on the phone seems very excited, and agrees to meet this afternoon; they only hang up after mumbling a few “you’re really an antique enthusiast”, “can’t believe I’ve met someone who values cultural heritage”.

Da Qing coldly says, “right, if charm doesn’t get you what you want, money should certainly do the trick. Chief, you’re really the epitome of a good-for-nothing rich spoilt

brat. This poor book seller certainly doesn't know you're an idiot who's only into action movies and martial arts novels."

Zhao takes a cheque book and car keys, picks the cat up by the nape, and throws it out of his room.

The staff hears the door open; Chu raises his head from a stock market candlestick chart, and only manages to see a hurried shadow. Zhu sighs, "he's out cruising again."

In the evening, Zhao successfully tracks down the Professor at the university.

Shen sees his car, and his eyelids twitch; he lowers his head, pretends not to notice him, and rushes for the car park. Zhao hums a sweet little tune and slowly follows the Professor in his car. After a while, students who pass by are starting to grow curious, and Shen helplessly sighs as he knocks on the car window, "Officer Zhao, what brings you here?"

Zhao rolls down the window, wears a bright smile of sunshine and rainbows, and stuffs a big wooden box in the Professor's arms, "this is for you."

Shen lifts the lid, takes a glance, and returns the box, "no, this is too expensive, how can you..."

"Hey, listen to me first," Zhao blocks him with his hand, and starts lying, "I have a friend, he is moving out of the country; he has a lot of antiques, and he doesn't want them to go to waste, and I immediately thought of you. You're the only person who knows how valuable this is, so please help my friend keep this."

This smooth-talking jerk, he doesn't even blink when he lies.

"I..."

Shen only said a word, and Zhao starts firing away, "stop mumbling, aren't we friends, aren't friends supposed to help each other? I have somewhere to go, see you next time; help me keep it safe, I will take you out for a meal this weekend."

He steps on the gas, not giving Shen a chance to say a word, and rushes off.

Shen carries the heavy box that was forcefully stuffed into his arms, and watches his car speed away; a million emotions rush through his veins.

On the one hand his heart is softening, he really wants to give in and indulge himself just this once; on the other hand, he thinks of what a playboy Zhao Yunlan is, and imagines that he must have done the same things for countless others. Shen grinds his teeth, he really wants to lock him up and... but whether he is happy, or angry, he calms down and what can only remain is unbearable loneliness.

Shen knows that his meeting Zhao wasn't a coincidence: someone is setting him up. And the living and the dead walk separate paths, for that someone's own good... he better keep his distance.

The gift was delivered, and he even got a date out of it; Zhao relishes his own success, and whistles merrily.

There is no fun in being straightforward and explicit: Zhao especially doesn't like the type who only has a great face and a big butt but no brains. Even when watching a strip dance, it's the ones who never let you see everything that are the sexiest.

Zhao Yunlan thinks: a man with good taste can't be satisfied with only vulgar and materialistic things; there has to be depth, and quality.

Shen Wei. Zhao looks at himself in the rear-view mirror with self-complacency and narcissism. He repeats the name in his heart.

That person is like a priceless antique porcelain vase; even if he can't own it forever, putting it in his house for a few days is well worth the while.

Guardian Chapter: 22

Chapter: 22

Perhaps this winter in Dragon City is especially cold; the leaves have all fallen before turning yellow. Zhao is idling, and seems to be rather uninterested in doing anything whatsoever. There isn't much work, apart from a few work gatherings, and occasionally harassing the Professor, so he spends most of his time slacking at home.

Zhao left his parents when he was very young, and bought an apartment in the city centre. For a very long time he lived like most single men: sloppily and irresponsibly; messier than a pig.

Da Qing always thinks that this generation's Guardian really is one of the most difficult to deal with, he even changed the Guardian Order into a governmental department, and gave it the name "Special Investigations Unit". He is capable, and well-connected, sure; you could say that he is observant, intelligent and decisive, but Da Qing feels a little insecure.

The black cat is worried that one day Zhao will just quit his job and work full-time as a frivolous playboy.

But although Da Qing is over a thousand years old, it's still just a cat; Zhao's life outside of work is actually not as exciting as the cat imagines.

Zhao is probably a classic case of “off-work silence”, a common symptom among busy city-dwellers. He has stayed single for most of his life; partly because of his unusual job, and partly because of himself: he seems garrulous and confident on the outside, but his true self is detached and unsociable; if you don’t talk to him he can stay silent for an entire night, without any expression on his face.

The handful of lovers he has had dumped him because of the same reasons: “lack of communication”, “lack of excitement”, “no common interests”. There is even this one girl who very furiously said, “you never loved me, I’ve never had a place in your heart!”

Certainly, Zhao is handsome, rich and young; but there are quite a few guys like that in this big city. He does have a lot of money, but he spends it almost as fast as he earns it, and he still doesn’t have a proper place to live in. His apartment looks like a shabby hotel room; and his entire person oozes unreliability.

The date with Shen is on Sunday night, so he has no plans for Saturday. The hungover Zhao wakes up at noon, and barely survives on some leftover bread. He does some research on the Four Mystical Artifacts, and plays video games til the evening.

Finally, as the night falls, his stomach reminds him that he has yet to have dinner, and pulls his attention away from the game.

Zhao doesn’t want to move, and tries to fill up his stomach with a glass of warm water. Forty minutes later, his stomach’s protest grows stronger and stronger and he starts sweating. So he has no choice but to go out for food.

It’s winter, but the lazy Zhao only puts on a cloak on top of his pajamas, and doesn’t even wear socks.

Zhao goes to a small restaurant he is familiar with, and orders a fried rice and a congee.

The food will not cook itself instantly, and Zhao starts realising that he really should’ve worn more. He decides to head to a nearby convenient store for some cigarettes.

Zhao passes by a dimly lit trail, and hears someone’s voice.

A man violently demands, “give me your money, quickly!”

Another voice says, “don’t blame us, we don’t want to do this either, we’re just trying to make a living; you’re dressed so well, you must be rich, just do as we say and nobody has to get hurt, got it?”

A robbery?

Zhao slowly dawdles forward, and takes a closer look: a handful of gangsters gang up on a man, who looks rather familiar.

Shen Wei.

Why is he here?

Shen isn't only gentle and polite towards his students, Zhao soon realises, he is like that towards everyone. Even when threatened by a group of gangsters, Shen doesn't resist howsoever, and obediently takes out his wallet!

The gangsters see that he is so soft, and asks for more, "your watch too! Must be a luxury brand, take it off!"

Shen is silent and calm, and takes his watch off.

"Bookworms are good for nothing." Zhao thinks, and sighs. He can't bear to see this, and walks forward.

The gangsters snatch his watch, and pushes him on to the wall. A red line appears on his neck.

"Hey, he's wearing something round his neck, might be a jade," one of them says.

Another one rapidly tears open Shen's shirt, and a small pendant is hanging between his collar bones: it's the size of a nail, but it sparkles under the dim street lights like a star.

"This... this isn't diamond, is it?" One of the gangsters reaches forward and grabs the pendant.

Shen finally frowns, and holds the pendant in his hand, "I've given you enough already, don't go too far."

His face turns dark, and his eyes glare coldly at the gangster. A surge of terror overwhelms him, and the thug lets go and stumbles backwards.

But the gangsters soon realise, they shouldn't be afraid of this man; there is only one of him, but there are a bunch of them. Besides, if he is not soft why would he give them money so willingly?

One of the hoodlums raises his hand and goes straight for Shen's face: from his experience, when dealing with someone with glasses, the most efficient way is to knock the glasses off so that they can't see, and kick them down.

But he only just raised his hand, and a powerful kick smashes on to his back; he almost spurts out blood, and stumbles forward. Shen dodges, and the thug crashes right into the wall.

Shen looks up in shock, and sees Zhao, who rubs his hands, and says in a vulgar tone much like a gangster, "it's fucking cold, who wants some warming up?"

The thugs are startled by the sheer force of his kick, and one of them asks only after a while, "who... who are you? Mind your own business."

Zhao tilts his head, and kicks on the ground a few times as if cold; he says with a cold smile, "you'd better not know, otherwise you might pee your pants."

Five minutes later, Zhao calls the police. He hangs up, and gives the gangsters rolling on the floor another kick, "you were still drinking milk out of your mom when I first came out here. Next time, better check whose territory it is before you do anything, understand?"

The thug screams in pain, and says, "big... big brother, we... we... AH!!!"

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? Who's your fucking brother?" Zhao adds another kick, "you think flattery will save your ass? I'm a cop, not your brother, is your brain an onion? Take off your belts, quick!"

Shen watches him tying up all the gangsters skillfully, and heartlessly smiles.

Until now, Zhao finally realises that he just acted out a classic scene of a knight in shining armour swooping in to save a damsel in distress. This coincidence is too beautiful, so beautiful that he begins to think he might have orchestrated it.

Zhao is immediately pumped, feeling like the world seems prettier and the air seems fresher; his stomachache seems to wear away.

He hands Shen the wallet and watch, "never thought I'd see you here; are you alright?"

Shen wipes off some dust on himself, and takes his belongings, "thanks."

Zhao inadvertently stares at the pendant; on a closer look, it's a small transparent sphere, and some substance inside is emanating a dazzling gleam. It's probably some type of fluorescent material.

But he has never seen fluorescent light of this kind before; Zhao has the illusion that the sphere contains a burning flame... it's almost as if it's alive.

When he sees the spark of blaze, an inexplicable sense of familiarity and intimacy surges up.

But Zhao soon realises that it's impolite to stare, so he looks away and says, "aren't you afraid of radiation? It's so bright, it might be harmful to your body."

Shen hides the pendant under his clothes, smiles, and says nothing.

Zhao isn't the curious type, he sees that Shen would rather not talk about it, so he stops asking. Zhao buttons up his cloak to hide his pajamas underneath, and says, "these thugs look strong on the outside, but they're actually very cowardly, why are you afraid of them? Have you eaten? Come, I'll treat you to supper, it will calm you down."

Shen smiles, "you're too generous, I should be treating you."

He hesitates, and says while looking behind at the tied-up gangsters, "actually, they're quite poor..."

Zhao faces the other way and rolls his eyes. He ignores him, and asks, "oh right, does Professor Shen live nearby? I've never seen you around here before?"

Shen's eyes sadden, "it's a big city after all, two people may never meet one another even if they live close by; but some day, perhaps they will start seeing each other all the time. I guess that is fate."

Zhao laughs... being an introvert who stays at home all day, he doesn't even know his neighbours; this really has nothing to do with fate.

Shen doesn't say anything, he follows behind Zhao. Zhao doesn't see it, but his eyes glare from behind, obscured by the glasses; his gaze is complex and difficult to understand, filled with greed and desire, but marked with self-restraint.

Guardian Chapter: 23

Chapter: 23

In the few times that they've met each other, Zhao has always felt the restraint adoration Shen has towards him. But for an unknown reason, once Zhao starts reciprocating, Shen retracts like a monk resisting temptations.

Zhao has never seen someone like Shen: gentle and benevolent, never argues with anyone, and treats everyone with kindness no matter who they are. He has the unique quality of a saint that is almost unworldly.

Zhao can't seem to figure out anything about him.

Initially, Zhao thinks of a high-end clubhouse with a Western restaurant: the perfect place for a romantic date night. But Shen would certainly refuse, and personally, Zhao isn't a fan of Western cuisine.

It's not everyday that you get a chance like this one, so Zhao will not let him go easily. He puts on a relaxed facade, and brings Shen to the bistro he had already ordered from. He orders a bowl of wonton and a few popular dishes; the whole table is filled with steamy food.

At this hour, the shop is empty, and they are the only two people eating. Shen has yet to sit down, but he is feeling rather nervous and tense already.

Zhao makes small talk, and mentions Li Qian, "she confessed to killing her grandma; her father disowned her, and I heard her mother cried and passed out twice. Let's hope the tribunal will be lenient, she turned herself in and confessed, so she might be able to get a lesser sentence."

Shen remains silent shortly, and sighs, "I should've taught better."

Zhao is dying of hunger; he gobbles down the food like a starving beast. With a mouthful of fried rice, he looks at Shen with an incredulous gaze; he can't say anything, but his eyes convey the message: what does this have to do with you?

Shen looks down, and takes a sip of soup as if lacking appetite, "in the past when a student commits a crime, the teacher is punished as well; the goal of education is to teach good morals, and yet one of my students..."

The rest of the sentence is probably not very pleasant, Shen pauses, frowns, and doesn't finish it.

What kind of nonsense is that, it's not like we're still in a feudal society! Zhao thinks.

But of course, he wants to appear educated in front of Shen, so he swallows that thought together with the fried rice.

Although Shen tries to avoid Zhao the best he can, when he is sitting with him he doesn't seem annoyed at all, but rather at ease and comfortable. Also, Shen is considerate and caring; he pushes the dishes forward as Zhao extends his chopsticks, and pours both of them some tea.

Zhao immediately says, "I can do it myself."

"It's hot, don't touch it." Shen avoids his hand and pours him some steaming tea, "you're eating too fast, it's not good for your stomach."

Zhao wipes his mouth, and pretends to be gentlemanly, "I haven't had dinner, so I'm a little hungry; I usually eat very slowly."

Shen smiles, and Zhao is about to say something; but suddenly, the table wobbles, and an unused bowl falls off the table. Zhao swiftly catches it; the lamp above swings about.

The trembling stops shortly. Zhao wants to say something, but his chest inexplicably stiffens, and he feels as if he were falling a thousand miles in a dream.

Something... something is coming out.

For god knows why, a voice says in Zhao's mind.

Maybe the fried rice is a bit cold, or maybe the congee is a bit hot; after he rapidly stuffed all kinds of food down his throat, his stomach feels even worse than before. A sharp pain rushes from his stomach through his entire body, like stabbing needles.

"What's wrong?" Shen asks.

"Ah..." Zhao curls up, elbows slamming on the table.

Shen supports his shoulder, "where does it hurt? Is it your stomach?"

But although he is unwell, Zhao still remembers to take advantage of the situation; he grabs Shen by the wrist, and half-intentionally touches the back of his hand, not softly and not heavily, a little seductively but perhaps unintentionally, and says with a nasal voice, "a little, you jinxed it."

Shen doesn't know what to say; he rapidly withdraws his hand, "... I will bring you some hot soup."

Zhao can't figure out whether Shen is shy or uninterested, so he sits upright with a gentle smile, pretending to be decent. But soon, karma strikes, and his stomachache grows more severe; he can't help but curl up, and his forehead is wet with a cold sweat.

Of course, he still manages to stealthily call the waitress for the bill.

Shen brings back a hot wonton soup, Zhao only drinks a little, and waves his hand; he really can't drink it. His lips are turning pale.

Shen looks at his face, "should I bring you to the hospital?"

Zhao forces a smile on his face, "this is nothing, why would I need to go to the hospital? I have medicine at home."

He tries to stand up, holding the table, but quickly falls back down on the chair.

Shen's expression becomes serious, "no, you have to go to the hospital."

Zhao presses against his stomach with one hand, and pulls Shen back with the other, "they will force me to have a gastroscopy, it's really painful; please, I don't want to be tortured."

“Besides, I want to bring you to watch a play tomorrow, I’ve already bought...”

“Return it.” Shen interrupts him, and helps him get up carefully, “I am not going... excuse me, can I have the...”

Shen has yet to say “bill”, and the waitress hands him the receipt and change.

These courting tricks... Shen glares at Zhao, and thinks: you deserve to die of stomachache.

Zhao looks down at his shoes and smiles pervertedly.

Finally, due to Zhao’s determined refusal and extreme disagreement, Shen has no choice but to bring him home.

It’s his first time in Zhao’s apartment. The lights are not on, and he trips on an open umbrella. Winter in Dragon City isn’t a rainy season, the last time it rained was over a month ago; only someone as lazy as a mushroom can leave the umbrella on the floor for that long.

On the shoes cabinet is a bag of clothes from the laundry shop; it was delivered two days ago.

Shen looks around in the room further, and sees a bunch of clothes scattered on the couch, and heaps of books and a laptop computer occupying the bed; there is not even space to sit, let alone lie down.

Shen silently looks at Zhao, puts him in a tiny space on the couch, and starts cleaning up the bed.

Zhao curls up on the couch, painfully and ecstatically gazing at Shen’s beautiful legs; his mouth watering.

Shen turns around, “where do you put these usually?”

“On the bed during the day, on the floor at night.”

Shen sighs; he does that a lot whenever he sees Zhao.

He swiftly piles up the books on the desk, and puts the computer on the nightstand, “come on, lie down, I will get the medicine... where is it?”

Zhao points at a small cupboard below the desk.

Shen carelessly says, “get in bed and take off your cloak.”

Zhao hesitates, “if I take it off you might say I take advantage of you.”

Shen touches his forehead, which is covered in cold sweat. Shen can imagine how painful it is, and his heart wrenches; he’d rather endure the pain for him. But the jerk who’s cared for only knows to bullshit with an annoying giggly face.

... Really feels like a waste of affection; Shen’s face grows stern, “stop that nonsense and take it off.”

Zhao immediately rips off his cloak and pants without restraint, and stands in front of Shen heedlessly in his pajamas, with half his chest uncovered.

Shen’s face reddens at an instant.

Zhao shamelessly shows off his physique, “you told me to take it off.”

Shen rapidly looks away, sets the pillow in place and spreads out the rolled up duvet, “give me the cup, I will help you pour... Zhao Yunlan, why are you bare-footed!?”

Zhao sits on the bed, takes off his shoes, and Shen sees his freezing feet.

Zhao says regardlessly, “I was just going out for a quick meal, if I wore socks I’d have to wash them...”

Shen grips his feet, though his hands are cold, they’re still much warmer in comparison. Zhao is startled, and tries to retract, but Shen grabs hold tightly, and starts massaging an acupoint.

“No no no... wait, I... I... I haven’t washed my feet... AH!!”

“Now you know it’s painful?” Shen frowns, “you never take care of yourself; your bad habits give you a weak stomach, and you...”

He suddenly realises his tone is too intimate, and lowers his head in silence.

Zhao’s feet are beginning to feel numb, but he must keep his cool in front of Shen, so he swallows the pain and pretends to be calm. Miraculously, his feet start warming up and relaxing, and Shen puts them under the duvet.

The Professor hands him the medicine, pours him warm water, and watches him gobble it down.

The two men have nothing to say; the atmosphere is rather awkward.

Zhao's pajamas really suit his slutty self: there are only a handful of buttons, and the collars open all the way down to below his ribs; he presses against his stomach, and Shen can barely see his beautiful abs.

He forces himself to turn away, and starts looking around in the room; he sees the leftover bread in the rubbish bin, and asks, "What did you eat today?"

Zhao lies on the bed, and points at the bin.

"Only that? For the entire day?" Shen's face darkens, "What about last night?"

"Last night I went out with a few friends; we drank a lot, I don't remember."

Shen almost can't control his anger; he stays silent for half a minute, and lowers his voice so that he doesn't sound too furious, "You live like this everyday?"

Shen sombrely glances at him, and silently walks over to the kitchen. He opens the fridge, and stares at all the empty space inside. Then, he takes out an expired carton of milk... and half a bag of opened cat food.

Zhao is seriously getting on Shen's nerves; veins pump up on the back of his hand, and the refrigerator door squeaks as his hand clutches.

Guardian Chapter: 24

Chapter: 24

Finally, after a thorough search, Shen manages to find a pack of instant egg drop soup that hasn't expired; this is the only edible item besides water and medicine in Zhao's disastrous apartment.

Zhao starts smoking again, and peeks at the busying Shen in the kitchen; the smile he wears is rather annoying, and who knows what's going on in that dirty mind of his.

Shen stomps towards him, discontentedly snatches his cigarette away, and puts it off in the ashtray. He slams the soup on the nightstand, "drink it."

Zhao blinks, silently picks up the bowl, and ponders while sipping: Professor Shen doesn't even get mad when robbed by a bunch of gangsters, but he does with Zhao.

After a while, Zhao realises the reason behind: it's because he is handsome, and Shen is falling for him.

Shen cannot imagine how busy this person in front of him is: even while drinking soup, he does not waste time in being narcissistic.

Shen is getting more and more irritated by Zhao's apartment, and wonders how a human can live in this condition. Even a prisoner about to be executed can have one last meal before he goes; what sane person would starve himself like that?

He looks at Zhao, and suspects that if he dies, no-one would come collect the corpse.

Shen stays silent for a while, and suddenly says out of nowhere, "Officer Zhao is not young, and you've got a stable job, it's time for you to get a girlfriend and start a family; it's better to have someone take care of you."

Zhao instantly chokes on the over-salty egg drop soup, his lungs almost bursting.

Shen's hand nervously twitches, and he puts down his hand and hides it behind his back; a fist tightly clenching.

Zhao never anticipated Shen would say something like that, and is startled for a while. Shortly, he thinks of a plan, and puts the bowl on the nightstand; he decides that his best bet is to attract sympathy.

"Don't tell me you haven't realised I'm going after you?" Zhao intentionally pauses for a while, and says slowly and softly; he raises his head sluggishly, glances at Shen's face and his eyes finally rest on Shen's tensed-up body.

From Shen's point of view, it looks like Zhao is disappointed; his worn out face is instantly marked with depression.

Shen feels like the softest spot on his heart is clenched heavily.

Zhao sees his reaction, and is proud that his plan worked; he still puts on an upset pretense, and feebly waves while concealing a smirk, "then never mind, thank you for today; I'm fine now, you can go."

Zhao is ready to pounce forward and hold him if he walks closer, and has prepared the best lines he can think of. But Shen stays silent, and after a long time, his voice becomes coarse and muted, "then I... you have a good rest."

Unexpectedly, he gets up and leaves without turning back.

What's going on!? What went wrong with the plan?

Zhao is puzzled for ages; he slams his head on the pillow, his feeling right now cannot be described with words. Finally, he takes out a calendar and turns the page to today, and it reads "avoid marriage". So he heartbrokenly blames it on fate.

It's like a dried steam bun being stuck in his throat, choking him.

Zhao is not in the mood to do anything, and goes to sleep.

It's almost midnight, the streets are quiet, and most of the lights in apartments are off. There are hardly any cars passing by downstairs; only the occasional glimmer which doesn't shine through the curtains.

The moment the hour and minute hands meet, Zhao's wristwatch softly vibrates, and Zhao instantly wakes up from his deep slumber.

Then, the sound of a wooden clapper echoes through the darkness; emerging out of thin air and disappearing into thin air.

The claps are getting closer, and a bland male voice speaks, prolonging every syllable; every word clearly sounds into Zhao's ears.

That person chants as if at a funeral, "Hell Guard patrolling, living souls retreat..."

Afterwards is three wooden claps.

The curtains open on their own, and fractals form on the window glass. A flickering white light waits quietly outside the window.

Zhao sits up, tidies his clothes, and says, "please come in."

The window unlocks, and opens itself; a chilling breeze rushes through, and Zhao's skin tingles with goosebumps.

A black shadow holding a white paper lantern floats outside the sixteenth floor.

That "person" is also made of paper, as tall as a regular human, white-paper-faced with painted eyes; a giant mouth extends above the cheekbones. Reminds one of Old Wu from No. 4 Bright Avenue.

Zhao opens the lowest drawer in the nightstand, and takes out a pottery tray, some paper money and incense. He lights the money and incense and puts them into the tray, and respectfully smiles, "just a little token of respect... Hell Guard, Your Honour, what brings you here?"

The paper person twitches its mouth; thankful of the bribery.

People of high status and power among the living never care for the Hell Guards, but the Guardian of this generation never forgets a little bribery.

The paper person cups its hands in front of its chest, and says politely, "when the hungry ghost escaped, the King of Hell was furious; His Majesty ordered a thorough investigation of the three worlds, and from now on all living souls, ghosts and spirits

alike must be recorded into the Book of Life and Death. I have been ordered to give the Guardian a copy of the book.”

The paper person hands a black notebook to Zhao with both hands.

It looks like a normal notebook, the cover feels like soft leather, but it’s incredibly light: as light as just a few pieces of paper.

Zhao rubs the paper lightly and sniffs the pages, “mulberry paper, written in dragon ink; it’s the Book of Life and Death, and the Record of Virtue, with a soul talisman, right?”

The paper Hell Guard calmly says, “the Guardian has keen eyes, presumably there is no need for me to explain what it can do.”

“If you get someone’s name and horoscope readings,” Zhao says, “or a strand of their hair, you can see into their past life and afterlife.”

As he is saying, he flips through the notebook, and a piece of paper falls off, “huh? An arrest order?”

It’s an empty piece of rice paper, as it touches Zhao’s hand, a cloud of black mist oozes out; amidst the mist is a face, bald and laden with tumours... it’s the monster that was executed by the Ghost Slayer.

Zhao remains calm, and asks, “what’s this?”

The Hell Guard says, “this creature is human-like, but not a human; we call it a spirit beast. It speaks human language, but is incredibly vicious; it preys on human flesh and souls. If the Guardian sees one, please be careful and kill it as soon as possible; it is afraid of fire and light.”

A spirit beast...

The Hell Guard doesn’t mention where the beast comes from, what is its nature, or why it must be killed. Zhao is rather intrigued by the “human-like, but not human” description.

He turns around, naturally puts the arrest order back into the notebook, and adds a few more paper money into the tray; he smiles and says, “sorry to have troubled you.”

The Hell Guard bows, and the tray lights up in flames; it whips out its sleeves and the ashes that remain of the incense and paper money disappear. Contentedly, the paper person says, “I shall take my leave.”

The white paper lantern flickers, and the paper Hell Guard disappears; the windows are locked and the curtains close themselves.

The Ghost Slayer, the Four Mystical Artifacts, a spirit beast... and the “mastermind” behind all this. Zhao lies in bed, and struggles to fall asleep; he forgets about being upset from the rejection, and a million thoughts flow through his mind. The night darkens, and his thoughts deepen; Zhao suddenly has an ominous feeling.

Zhao is wide awake all night; he later feels unwell again, and takes some medicine. His bad lifestyle has accumulated a lot of health problems, like chronic gastritis and gastric ulcers, and he is tortured by them once in a while.

It’s seven o’clock in the morning, and the doorbell rings. Zhao is sleepy and cranky and in the state of a mad dog.

A mad dog, as it’s name suggests, is in a state of insanity: it will bite anyone. Zhao struggles to get out of bed, and his entire body is in pain. He stumbles forward painfully, and is ready to torture whoever is bothering him at the door.

But when he opens the door, he sees Shen Wei carrying a few big bags.

Zhao is mesmerised for two seconds, and then quickly wipes off his mad dog face. He struggles to put on a smile; since his brain isn’t functioning properly, his expression is awkwardly trapped between “eating you alive” and “happy new year”, it’s difficult to describe...

But if it must be said, perhaps he looks like the new year monster.

Guardian Chapter: 25

Chapter: 25

Shen touches Zhao on the forehead, “you have a bit of a fever, what are you doing standing there? Get in bed and cover yourself with the blanket.”

Only then does Zhao realise that his head is growing heavy, and Shen pushes him as he stumbles into the bedroom.

Shen pours him some warm water, and brings the medicine; he says softly, “take the medicine, and go back to sleep; don’t mind me, I’ll make you something to eat.”

Zhao’s messy mind starts thinking: if a tasty sheep enters a wolf’s lair, would the wolf go to sleep?

The wolf would probably...

But perhaps his fever is rather serious, or maybe the medicine causes drowsiness; after a minute, Zhao falls asleep.

Shen spends a long time unpacking all the stuff he bought, and fills up the mostly empty refrigerator with food. He searches the kitchen, and finds out that there are an ample of cooking utensils; all brand new, still in their packages with price tags.

Shen takes out a clay pot, washes it, and prepares the ingredients. He starts cooking for a while, then turns to medium heat, adds the seasoning and lets it simmer slowly.

Shen washes his hands, warms them on the heater, and softly walks into the room. Zhao is fast asleep, and Shen gently puts his arms back under the duvet.

He stands by the edge of the bed, and looks down at Zhao for a while. Then, he carefully extends his hand, and gently caresses his hair; it's really soft. Shen lightly touches his face, but quickly retracts. He lets out a deep breath, closes his eyes, and silently kisses his own fingers; his expression marked with devotion.

Shen doesn't know how he managed to leave Zhao's apartment last night. He wandered on the streets aimlessly until he realised that his limbs were going numb. He's like a moth that suddenly understood its fate, desperately trying to resist the temptation of the flame; the struggle between reason and instinct agonises him to death.

And after all this mental torture, he only managed to get through one night.

He is sick, and nobody will take care of him, so I have to look after him... as a friend; Shen tries to convince himself. But no-one knows better than himself what's really going on.

Shen laughs at himself mockingly, and picks up Zhao's cloak on the floor, folds it and puts it on the chair. He notices a pottery tray on the floor, with some residue ash.

Shen wipes off the ashes and rubs them in his hands, as they fall, the ashes turn pale white, like the energy inside has been absorbed.

"A Hell Guard?" He lifts his glasses, looks up at the tightly-closed curtains, and frowns. He thinks of something.

Zhao finally awakens from his deep slumber, and the sun is already shining brightly through the curtains. He is soaked in sweat, and the blanket sticks to him uncomfortably. His head feels dizzy, and his nose slowly picks up on an unfamiliar aroma. Zhao is excited, and instantly bounces up.

He sees Shen sitting on the small couch, quietly reading an old ghost novel. He lowers his head in concentration, and his eyes look as though they come from a beautiful painting; Zhao is lost for words, and stares at him dumbly.

Shen looks up and smiles, "you're awake, are you feeling better?"

Zhao nods, half-awake; Shen touches his forehead, and the fever is gone, “what about your stomach, still painful?”

Zhao shakes his head. He realises that his clothes have all been tidied up into a nice pile next to the bed; the clothes are still warm from the heater.

“I turned on the heater in the bathroom, go take a shower and get changed; I made you something to eat.”

Zhao silently takes his clothes and goes into the bathroom.

As if dreaming, Zhao has a very peculiar and exquisite feeling. He left his parents when he was young, and got used to frivolous, single life very early on. He can't remember the last time he woke up to the smell of food and someone urging him to take a shower.

When he finishes and gets changed, he shockingly realises that his chaotic apartment has been cleaned and tidied up. As the perpetually-closed curtains are finally open, and the windows as well for some fresh air, the entire apartment has a refreshing sensation.

Zhao miraculously feels embarrassed. He walks to the kitchen, and sees Shen open the lid of the clay pot, as a strong pleasant smell comes floating out. Zhao realises he is quite hungry.

It's as if there were a string in his heart, and someone plucked it, not violently, but the resonance seems to echo for days.

“I bought two tickets at the theatre for tonight, and I was gonna take you to see a play after dinner.” Zhao suddenly says.

Shen looks at him, turns off the stove, and takes the rice and soup, “help me take this out.”

Zhao sluggishly walks over, and brings the food to the table; he laughs, “but now you being here with me feels too great, and I don't wanna go anymore.”

“It's cold at night, better not leave the apartment,” Shen tries to brush him off.

Zhao sits opposite to Shen, his eyes sparkle as he gazes at the Professor, “I'm not kidding, Shen Wei, if you accept me, I will sell this place tomorrow and buy a much bigger house right next to your school.”

Shen doesn't make a sound.

Zhao continues, “I've never thought of buying a house before, I found it burdensome, but now I understand the saying: if you want to get the girl, buy her a big house to live in.”

This is naked flirtation; Shen stiffly avoids his gaze, “eat, or the food will get cold.”

Zhao suddenly puts his hand on top of Shen’s, “I know I don’t look like it, but I’m serious.”

Shen’s hand is still cold, and Zhao can’t help but hold it even tighter; the other person vigorously quivers.

Shen raises his head abruptly, his eyes are not friendly as usual, but from Zhao’s perspective, they seem a little aggressive. Shen stares at him for a while, and swings away his hand heavily; he lowers his tone, “you should marry a woman and have children, you’re still young; don’t be ridiculous.”

Zhao is startled by his reaction, “no, why is this ridiculous?”

Shen asks, “if you’re involved with a man, how do you explain it to your parents? If you don’t have children, who will take care of you when you get old?”

Zhao asks incredulously, “explain what? Why do I have to explain? I’m not responsible for procreating and sustaining the human race, Professor Shen, are you... are you an alien?”

Shen realises he cannot communicate with Zhao, especially not with these unconvincing, self-delusional excuses; he stops speaking and silently eats.

Zhao studies Shen, he cannot believe such a pleasant beauty would turn out to be an old-fashioned pedant; he dejectedly gobbles down half a bowl of soup, and tests the waters, “when it comes to children, you can’t know for sure: even if you get married, you might not have kids, even if you have kids, you might not be able to raise them up, and even if you raise them, you can’t always expect them to take care of you when you’re old. I’d rather invest in A-shares. Besides, if you really want kids, surrogacy is always a choice, it’s very easy these days.”

Zhao continues, “if it makes you painful you ought to think more, otherwise you’ll repeat the same mistakes; but if it makes you happy, you ought to think less, and just do what you want to do. If it’s the end of the world today, and you’ve never followed what your heart truly desires, wouldn’t that be a shame?”

Shen pauses and says, “how can you just do what you want to do all the time?”

“Right,” Zhao says, “other people mistreat you, but would you do that to yourself? Then what’s the fun in living?”

Zhao notices Shen’s tone softening, and extends his two legs in a relaxed pose; he asks, “then will you go watch a movie with me next weekend?”

Shen hesitates, but shakes his head eventually.

Zhao is instantly disheartened.

Shen cannot bear to see his expression like this, and explains, "I have a trip on Wednesday, I need to take the students out on a field trip; I'm substituting one of my colleagues."

Oh? There is a chance, Zhao can clearly feel it; there is a small gap in Shen's tightly shut door.

"Where? For how long?"

Shen ignores the first question, "around a week."

Zhao doesn't follow up; even if Shen doesn't tell him, he can figure it out himself.

He merrily finishes his meal.

In the afternoon, Zhao thinks of all sorts of ridiculous reasons and cheap tricks to use on Shen. He takes out all the old movies in his collection, and turns on his home cinema for the very first time, and forces Shen to stay until nighttime.

If possible, Zhao would've begged him to stay longer, but he can clearly feel that as night approaches, Shen becomes more tense and uneasy. And as a long-term planner, Zhao decides to be careful with such a delicate situation; he doesn't want to scare Shen. He resists the temptation and lets him go, for now.

After all, he will still have a lot of chances in the future.

Guardian Chapter: 26

Chapter: 26

It's Monday morning, and the office is filled with the scent of breakfast. Zhu Hong brought three kilograms of buns from the canteen, deliciously big and juicy with great stuffings. Those who got in late and haven't had breakfast have all been gathered by the smell of delight; even Chief Zhao who normally hides in his office room has been seduced to come out.

Zhao has long forgotten what Professor Shen told him about avoiding smoking, drinking and eating oily foods, he stuffs a big fat meat bun in his mouth, and knocks on Guo's head, "hey kid, turn on the TV."

Guo wiggles his butt forward; Zhu looks at him from behind, and says amusingly, "Little Guo is quite nice, he's hardworking and considerate; but he's just too timid, til now he still only dares to eat what I give him."

Zhao says, "that's normal, he's afraid of people."

Zhu wants to nod, but realises something odd.

Zhao kindly adds, "he isn't afraid of you, which means he doesn't treat you as a human."

Zhu ignores him, and watches Da Qing sneak on to the desk. It observes intently, and as Zhao is about to put a bun in his mouth, it snatches it with its claws precisely; the accurate timing and agile movements make you forget how fat this cat is.

Then, Da Qing bravely leaps off the desk, bites on the bun mid-air, and nimbly does a backflip, landing on the ground. And then, it shakes its butt and catwalks away.

The startled Chief is left with an oily face.

"Fuck this cat!"

"You deserve it." Says Zhu Hong.

The television is showing morning news, and it's about the earthquake last night. A few areas were affected, but it was a mild quake so no major casualties have been reported.

Zhao mumbles, "why wasn't it stronger, I could have offered him a hug to calm him down."

Lin Jing knows what happened, and smiles mysteriously.

Zhu looks at him, and asks Zhao, "who did you hook up with this time?"

"Don't use such a nasty term; this marvelous world needs love. You filthy people shouldn't insult pure love."

Lin says, "may Buddha have mercy on your soul..."

Zhao tries to catch her hair with his oily hands, and she screams and dodges. Chu Shuzhi steps back to avoid drama, but he looks up and is astonished, "Wang Zheng? Why are you here during the day?"

Everyone is startled, and Zhu jumps up, "close the curtains, quickly!"

Guo and Lin scramble towards the windows and close all the curtains; the office has two layers of curtains and one of them is anti-UV. The room is instantly pitch-black; Da Qing finishes its meat bun and turns on the light.

Wang's face turns pale and almost translucent, she waits til the curtains are fully closed and floats across, feebly laying on a chair. She curls up and looks so frail like she might disappear.

Lin takes out some incense and lights them up; he puts them under Wang's nose, "quick, inhale some incense."

The incense has been burning for a while until Wang recovers; she sighs and her body is looking a little less virtual.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zhao ruthlessly smacks her on the head; he can actually touch ghosts, and Wang leans back on the chair, "you wanna die again? How about I take you out sunbathing?"

Guo has never seen the Chief get angry before; he trembles.

Wang deeply stares at Zhao, and points to the television.

The news is showing the rescue team and news reporters at a village that was affected by the earthquake, checking the damage level.

The epicentre was located at the Northwest, where the roads are poorly built and population is scarce. The camera shows a few small huts, which may or may not be inhabited; half of the roofs have collapsed.

A ruined stone plate reads: "River Village".

Wang stares at the plate with her big eyes, and softly says, "that's my..."

Guo thought she would say "home" or something similar; but Wang pauses and turns to Zhao, "that's where my body is."

A chilling breeze whips up in the office.

"Chief Zhao, I want to take leave." Wang says with her unique, unsteady but bland voice, "I want to rest in peace."

Zhao frowns, and takes out a cigarette, "you.."

Wang leans backwards, "I don't want second-hand smoke."

"You're a ghost, Ms Wang Zheng, you won't get pneumonia."

Wang says seriously, “ghosts can smell cigarettes too, if you continue like this you will soon turn into a human mosquito-repelling incense.”

Zhao stuffs the lighter back into his pocket, “you joined the Guardian Order, so you won’t be able to reincarnate; even if you rested you wouldn’t be in peace, so why do it? Besides, isn’t burial uncommon where you’re from?”

Wang stays silent, and lowers her head; after a while, she repeats, “I want to go home.”

Zhao sighs, “how do you plan on doing that?”

Wang says, “haven’t thought about it.”

“And so you decided to think about it in broad daylight?” Zhao angrily asks.

Zhao is about to say something, but the phone rings; he goes outside and takes the call, and when he returns his face is wearing an unconcealable smirk.

He coughs, and raises his watch; he says to Wang, “how about this, you come in to hide, I will let you back out when night falls; I will figure out something... and when the time comes I will go there with you.”

Without wasting time, Wang immediately turns into a cloud of white mist, and scurries into his watch.

The others are all startled.

Chu asks, “Chief Zhao, you’re so lazy that you always sends someone else unless you absolutely have to go; what brings you to the Northwest?”

“Fuck off, I take the lead all the time.”

Lin points out, “Amitabha, you never do anything unless it’s for your personal interest.”

Zhao looks like he wants to say something, but he seems rather busy; his phone rings again, he frowns and glares at his disloyal subordinates, and goes out to take the call. His face turns to a bright smile, “hi, oh, my dear brother- in-law... say what? You’re too kind, we don’t have to be so formal, do we?”

Zhu stares at him with a bun in her mouth, and asks curiously, “brother-in- law? Since when?”

“That’s Manager Song,” says Da Qing on the table, sniffing at the delicious meat.

“Bright Avenue is being reconstructed into a commercial area, we might have to move in one or two years. He has his eyes set on a small courtyard house, it’s in the city centre,

near the University City. He needs the connection to do this.” Da Qing licks its paws, and explains with the nosiness that is atypical of cats.

Zhu continues, “how did that Manager Song become his brother-in-law? He doesn’t even have siblings.”

Da Qing sneezes, “who knows; after a good dozen of drink gatherings, he now has a lot of brothers-in-law out of nowhere.”

Professor Shen finishes his morning lecture, and as the students are leaving, he tidies up his textbooks on the speaker’s stand.

The sunlight shines in, and blinds his eyes for a split second; he pauses, and as he looks down he sees a golden line piercing through, connecting to the pendant round his neck.

Shen wants to snatch the line off, but his fingers pass right through it; the line moves as though it’s alive, and starts spreading into many lines, wrapping around his fingers, body and neck.

Shen shuts his eyes; when he opens them again, the lines are gone.

He can’t help but put the glistening sphere in his hand; he knows, once he meets that person, he won’t be able to avoid him again.

Zhao’s warm hand confuses his heart; a day has passed, yet the warmth remains on the back of Shen’s hand. So hot, as if it’s burning.

Better... avoid him for a while longer.

Zhao leaves the office early in the morning, and only calls in at night when it’s almost close of business. Lin and Zhu are long gone, Da Qing lays behind a ventilation outlet of a computer, deeply asleep, and Chu is still wearing the same coffin face, mine-sweeping without regarding anyone else.

Guo takes the call, “hello?”

“Little Guo?” Zhao asks, “are you busy? If not help me with something.”

“Alright, please tell me.”

“The revealing mirror... oh, I mean my wristwatch, it’s too unpleasant inside, Wang cannot stay in there for long. Two days later I will figure out a way to get her out, so we need a substitute. Go online to buy a human doll, we need a bigger one, better if it can stand and move. It’s urgent, tell them to send it within a day.”

Guo nods and searches online, "Chief Zhao, I found one: it's human-size, the joints are movable, and it can stand..."

Zhao seems to be occupied, and hurriedly interrupts him, "right, this sounds good, buy this one; tell them to deliver it quick."

Guo is about to click purchase, but he sees the name of the shop, and is shocked by a lightning strike... it's a sex shop.

The pure, introverted boy blushes instantly, and mutters into the phone, "Chief... Chief Zhao... this... this is a bit..."

"What? It's okay if it's expensive, you can claim work expenses, you don't have to pay a penny... I'm hanging up, I've got something to do; buy it ASAP!"

Zhao hangs up without another word.

Guo stares at the computer screen silently... his balls start hurting.

Guardian Chapter: 27

Chapter: 27

On the day of the trip, up until they arrive at the airport, Zhao's face is stiff like a coffin.

When that human doll is sent to No. 4 Bright Avenue, even the delivery boy heard Zhao's furious roar on the way out.

"Guo Changcheng, do you have a portable toilet for a brain!?"

Guo is not used to a furious Chief Zhao, and is too frightened to say a word.

Da Qing curiously paws the human doll, and triggers some sort of switch; the doll lets out a very realistic... and indecent moan.

Da Qing is startled, and Zhao's face turns blue; he points at the doll, and is too aggravated for words.

Guo is like a petrified little mouse, dumbly standing against the wall.

Zhao swallows down his anger with difficulty, and feebly says to Zhu, "can you... put some clothes on it..."

He feels something terribly wrong about this; his phone rings, and he mumbles, "this is driving me nuts."

He bashes the door open and stomps outside.

Zhu turns to Guo, "you pissed him off so much that he couldn't speak? Good job."

Guo can't say anything.

Lin pats him on the shoulder, "I just realised, Little Guo, you're a real brave man!"

Guo is on the verge of tears.

Chu silently picks up Da Qing the cat, and covers its eyes; he wears his normal expression of contempt and indifference, and turns away from these indecent things.

When they're almost on their way out, Zhu takes out a big bag and stuffs the doll inside, and says while looking into space, "stay in the revealing mirror for a while longer, hang in there. You can come out when the plane lands."

A cloud of white mist flies out of the watch on Zhao's wrist, and swivels around Zhu. A weak figure of a girl appears before Zhu; it probably makes a ghost feel uncomfortable being so close to Zhao, so Wang is visibly worn out.

"Just pretend I passed out on the plane," Wang says quietly, and looks at her future body with condemnation.

Guo doesn't dare to look up.

Finally, the whole criminal investigations team of No. 4 Bright Avenue shamelessly follows along on the trip, they're bored to death with no work to do after all; they are determined to find out what made Zhao's lazy ass leave his office.

But nobody dares to irritate the pissed off Chief on the trip; Da Qing even transformed into a cat-shaped pendant and quietly hangs on Zhu's phone as a decoration. The Chief looks like he wants to hijack the plane.

Until... they see Professor Shen and his students at the airport.

The team watches as Chief Zhao's stormy expression instantly turns into a bright sunny day. His cold and glaring eyes melt and soften.

Without hesitation, he abandons his colleagues, and scurries towards the man amidst the pupil crowd; pretending that this encounter wasn't meticulously planned, "Shen Wei, what a coincidence!"

Shen's eyes sparkle, but Zhao cannot tell if his reaction is a pleasant surprise or an unpleasant shock. A while later, Shen nods while pushing his glasses, "Officer Zhao."

Zhu watches their interactions and understands something.

Among the huge crowd of students, Zhao quickly takes control, and before Shen can say anything, the students have already told him their destination and the details of their project.

Zhao asks the kids with a friendly smile, "it takes way over ten hours to get to River Village, how do you guys plan to go there?"

Shen instantly realises this bastard has an ulterior motive, but the students are too gullible, before he can speak, the female class captain answers, "we'll take the bus!"

"The bus only makes one trip per day, it leaves at six o'clock in the morning. I know which one you're talking about, it doesn't take you directly to River Village." Zhao seizes the chance as the student takes the bait.

The class captain hesitates, "I checked the map, we could get off midway, and it shouldn't take long to walk..."

"From your physique, I guess it should take around five hours." Zhao leans backwards and peeks at Shen, "the map doesn't show you how convoluted the mountain ranges can be, you might need to detour several times. And when I say five hours, it's assuming you don't get lost; when you get off the bus it's

probably nighttime already, it's snowy in the mountains and incredibly cold during this time of the year. And you might even need to camp outdoors..."

As expected, the students begin a frantic discussion.

Zhao realises that Shen is looking at him with a half-smile, and he is slightly embarrassed that his plan has been exposed; he rubs his nose and coughs, "alright, calm down you guys; how about this, my friends over there will get us a few cars, and we can go there together, what do you think?"

The class captain says, "that... that's too troublesome for you, isn't it?"

Zhao waves, and takes out his phone; he wraps his arm around Shen's shoulders, and winks at the class captain, "how can it be troublesome, my relationship with your teacher is..."

Shen turns his head aside, and stares at him blandly, "what relationship?"

Zhao is stuck, and Shen's gaze is like hooks... this question... if he understates it he's ruining his own plans, but if he overstates it it would seem too shameless. He hesitates before saying, "neighbours! Remember, kids, treat your neighbours kindly and they might be closer to you than your relatives, isn't that right Professor Shen?"

Shen gives him a slightly helpless smile, and the cunning Chief Zhao is instantly stunned by it.

“Thanks.” Zhao hears him say.

“What are you thanking me for?” Zhao stands upright and eagerly says, “oh right, you guys probably haven’t eaten, wait for me.”

Shen has yet to pull him back, and he has already left.

Shortly, Zhao carries over a few plastic bags, and stuffs two in Guo’s hand on the way.

Chu says, “I almost thought he forgot about us completely.”

Lin says at the fried chicken leg, “Amitabha, forgive me.”

And then this fake monk starts tearing the chicken leg apart, and washes it down with coke.

The food in Guo’s hands is quickly divided among the group, and he is still standing there like an idiot; someone hands him a hamburger.

It’s Zhu Hong.

Zhu isn’t looking at him, but at Zhao... he says something, and the crowd laughs; it seems this guy is always the centre of attention wherever he goes.

“Thanks...”

“No problem.” Zhu interrupts him, and asks, “who’s that guy?”

Guo realises she’s talking about Shen, “that’s a professor from Dragon City University. Last time during the hungry ghost case, Chief Zhao wasn’t there, and he helped us fight off the ghost; but the Chief says he won’t remember that incident.”

Zhu peers at him and mumbles, “he is a professor already? He looks very young... but he shouldn’t be too young since he’s a professor? He should be married?”

Guo scratches his head, “how would I know?”

Zhu glances at Guo, and then looks back at Zhao; Shen picks up a piece of chicken, and Zhao instantly opens the sauce pack and hands it to him. His eyes are tender like still water, and he seems like a completely different person from the grumpy and furious Chief in the morning.

“Okay, then it seems like he is single.” Zhu keeps observing for a while, and concludes, “that jerk is shameless as hell, but he never hits on someone who’s married... oh god, get a room.”

Zhu and Guo are both watching, as Zhao’s phone rings again like a hotline, and he holds his drink in one hand, takes out his phone in the other, and bites away a French fry in Shen’s hand at lightning speed.

He gobbles it, and licks his lips while looking at Shen; the Professor unnaturally retracts his empty fingers.

Guo’s expression turns from dumb to astonished.

And so the entire SIU team has been abandoned by their Chief for three hours: Zhao uses the excuse of “wanting to listen to Professor Shen talk to the students about River Village”, and switches to a seat near Shen... the plane finally lands, and they arrive at a city near the destination.

The group has yet to realise how cold somewhere with high altitude can be, and is met by a crowd in the waiting area. A plump, middle-aged man comes out of a jeep, which is one in a row of many, and holds a sign that says “Chief Zhao”.

Zhao leads the two groups, and heads over there; the plump guy sees him, and is hesitant at first, but he soon smiles in realisation, and greets Zhao warmly, “Chief Zhao! It’s you isn’t it? I see how smart you look and I know you’re definitely the Chief.”

“Oh, what Chief, don’t call me that.” Zhao offers a handshake with both hands, “we don’t know our way around here, luckily we’ve got you, Brother Lang, we’d feel much safer.”

Fat Brother Lang vigorously shakes his hands, “Xie Yuanming called me and told me to send a few cars; I said how could that be appropriate? Brother Xie is one of my best friends, and his friend is also my friend, of course I had to come in person!”

Zhao pretends to be surprised, “oh really? You’re such good friends with Brother Xie?”

Brother Lang says, “of course, we sworn to brotherhood when we went drinking one time.”

Zhao points a finger at him, and looks serious, “well this is you’re fault then, Brother Xie’s brother is my brother, and what did you call me just now? How can we be so formal?”

Brother Lang knowingly laughs, “of course, my bad... that’s great, now I can tell people I have a brother who’s a Chief from Dragon City, how honoured! Come on, let’s get you settled down!”

The two keep going back and forth, and nobody else has a chance to say anything.

Shen's students are all speechless.

Zhu follows them, and whispers to Da Qing, who's still hanging on her phone, "right, now I understand how Manager Song became his brother-in-law."

Guardian Chapter: 28

Chapter: 28

Shen and the group are all puzzled as Zhao pulls them along with Brother Lang, who treats them to a lavish meal and has them stay at the only five-star hotel in that city.

The next morning, the sky is still gloomy, and three jeeps arrive at the entrance of the hotel. In the back of the jeeps are winter clothes, outdoor gears, high energy foods and first aid kits. They have everything a professional research team would need.

Zhao doesn't look embarrassed or thankful at all, he gladly accepts the tremendous help, and tells Lin to give the chauffeurs each a cigarette. He chatters with Brother Lang some more.

Lang pats Zhao vigorously on the shoulder with his bear paw, "my good younger brother, off you go. I haven't treated you well enough, please understand."

Zhao stares, "you see, you're getting formal with me again? Brother Lang, if you visit Dragon City in the future, I will welcome you with all I can offer; we can call Brother Xie too and the three of us will have a great time."

They bid each other farewell, and Zhao turns around to Shen, "the mountains are not easy to drive through, and the kids have poor skills; I'm worried. How about this: Lin, Zhu and I will each drive a car, we'll separate the students into groups, what do you think?"

Even a paid tour guide wouldn't be so diligent and considerate, if Shen rejects him, that would seem very impolite.

But Shen isn't as shameless as Zhao, he is rather embarrassed that Zhao went through all this trouble, "I didn't plan ahead for the trip, and I really troubled you. Besides, I don't even know Mr Lang, and this must have cost him a great deal; do you think we should send him something after this..."

Zhao generously waves his hand, "no, don't worry about it, I'm going to pay for all of this, and you don't have to thank me."

They stop at a red light, and Zhao turns aside and smiles at Shen, two dimples deepening. Shen's face reddens, and he peeks at the students behind; they're all looking out the window excitedly. Shen relaxes a little.

Zhao's heart quivers, and he decides to make another move. He extends his hand and adjusts Shen's shirt collar a little, then carelessly touches Shen's ear as well. Shen has yet to react, and he withdraws his hand.

"Your collar was flipped." He fixes the rear-view mirror, and looks forward as if nothing happened.

This time Shen's ears are bright red.

The lights turn green, Zhao steps on the gas, and concentrates on driving; his mouth suspiciously curves up.

Shen looks out the window, as if bashful, but he faces away so Zhao cannot see it. The redness gradually wears away, and his face turns pale.

Shen seems to be always frowning. His gentle face is marked with coldness; solitary and distant.

Driving up the mountains is exhausting: the roads are bumpy and it makes you dizzy, after six to seven hours, the students are all asleep. Shen doesn't dare to close his eyes; he needs to keep an eye on the driver, lest he falls asleep... especially a driver who drank a lot last night.

As they move forward the roads are getting narrower and bumpier. Around a metre from the wheels is the edge of the cliff, and there is not even a fence.

Luckily, Brother Lang's cars are great, and although Zhao looks like an unreliable guy, he drives steadily.

The temperature is dropping as they go up the mountains.

Thick layers of snow cover the roads. Fewer and fewer people can be seen along the way.

Zhao begins to slow down, and the other two cars follow suit.

"The roads ahead are getting tougher, I think we should put on snow chains." Zhao opens the door, and says to Shen, "it's cold outside, stay in the car."

Shen ignores him, and jumps down to help. Not only is it cold, but the wind is howling; not even a thick down jacket could protect you from this chilling gale, not to mention Zhao's pretentious cloak.

The students are awake, and come out to help as well. Zhao urges them to get back inside, "I don't need your help, get back inside, you'll catch a cold out here."

The two men quickly chain up the tires, and their fingers freeze very quickly as well. Zhao looks afar, and sees the magnificent mountain ranges; the snowy mountains look as though they merge with the sky into one.

They get back inside, and Zhao calls the other two cars, "we're entering a glacial area, stay quiet and don't honk without reason; beware of avalanches."

The distant glaciers are getting closer, and from the top of the mountain a piercing glimmer shines out of nowhere, and quickly disappears.

Zhao turns on the headlight, and Shen sits quietly next to him; he dares not interrupt Zhao. The car moves slowly, and the chained tires dangerously tread through layers of snowfall. The endless cliff is not far away, and in the sheer whiteness nothing much can be seen other than the occasional rocks.

The ridges wear a snowy cloak, and light up the sky like a beacon.

The sky darkens finally.

The two students sitting behind them include the red-clothed female class captain, and a spectacled boy. The spectacles quietly asks Shen, "Professor, will we make it out of the mountains tonight? Can we find a place to stay?"

Shen has yet to answer, and Zhao speaks first, "don't worry, River Village is nearby, we're almost there, but..."

He is interrupted by a shining light before he can continue; he frowns, and carefully stops the car.

The class captain asks nervously, "what's wrong? Is it the car?"

Shen waves, "the car is fine; there is a light ahead, you guys stay here, I'll take a look."

Zhao asks, "you see it too?"

Shen looks at him, and their expressions turn sombre.

The girl senses the weird atmosphere, "is... is it a street light?"

"There are no street lights around here; you stay seated." Zhao turns around, "there is chocolate and beef jerky, take some if you're hungry."

He opens the door and gets off, and Shen follows suit.

The wind has stopped, but the temperature continues dropping. The air is uncomfortably frigid and humid, and the area is unbelievably quiet: not even the sound of a breeze or of snowfall. They move forward with light footsteps.

The shining light flickers, like a white paper lantern. It seems to be moving closer.

Zhao's eyes widen, and he quickly opens the door and shoves Shen inside the car. He turns around and gestures a "stay in the car and don't come out" to the other two cars, and swiftly gets inside and locks the doors.

The light is getting even closer now, and a few figures emerge.

Zhao turns around and says to the two students, "no matter what you see, don't say a word, and don't stick your face against the window; don't make any sound."

The glass windows are covered with mist, only the windshield that is cleaned by the wipers gives a clear view. From a distance, there is a crowd, which is led by someone holding a lantern at the front, walking towards the cars. These people are of all ages and sexes, but they all look ragged and miserable, as though they are escaping from a disaster.

So many people... why would they be walking here?

The class captain trembles and asks softly, "who are those people?"

"They're not people," Zhao lowers his voice, "they are war spirits."

The girl covers her mouth, and she can see the faces of the people: they are all emotionless, and strangely injured. The figure leading the way with a paper lantern, he... or she, doesn't have a face. He wears a really tall hat, which covers his head all the way down to his chin. The figure is snow white, like it's made of paper.

The legs and shoulders look as though they are not moving, and his entire body floats in the wind like a dying kite.

They pass by Zhao's car, and the figure with the lantern bows twice towards the car; Zhao nods in response, and that "person" keeps floating. The group follows and moves along the mountain path.

When they are all gone, Zhao gets off the car, and takes out a torch from the back; he says to Shen, "something might have happened over there, I'll go take a look, you keep an eye on the children."

Shen inadvertently frowns.

Zhao holds his hand, and his warmth is frantically absorbed by Shen; Zhao feels tender and protective.

“Don’t frown,” Zhao says, “everything will be fine.”

Guardian Chapter: 29

Chapter: 29

The wind begins howling again, and the snow on the ground is whipped up and flutters in the storm; the gale attacks ones face like sharp knives.

Zhao’s figure disappears in the whirling wind; his torch shines feebly like a firefly.

Twenty minutes later, he doesn’t return; Shen can’t stay still any longer.

“Don’t move, and don’t get off,” he says to the students, “hand me the torch; I’ll go look for him, it won’t take long.”

“Professor,” the girl is worried, “did something happen?”

Shen pauses; under the dim light, everything about him seems to be tightly concealed behind his glasses. He says in his regularly gentle voice, “no, I’m here, how could I let anything happen to him?”

He opens the door and scurries off.

The class captain explains to the spectacled boy, “that’s not what I meant, I was asking whether something happened ahead, and whether our cars can keep moving.”

Little spectacles says, “...I know.”

The two students stare at each other; in this horrifying moment, they seem to have realised something... well, something they really shouldn’t know.

Coarse bird cries echo. Shen wipes his snow-laden lenses; he looks ahead and sees a bird amidst the endless snow.

It seems to be a crow, but it’s much larger than regular ones. A long and thin tail extends from its backside, and its red eyes glare at him curiously; it doesn’t seem frightened at all.

Shen moves forward with difficulty, and the crow screeches with its beak pointing to the sky. It then closes its eyes and bows down, beak almost touching the ground, as if mourning for something.

The violent gusts swirl up a veil of snow; Shen quickly feels like he is about to freeze solid... it's like blood will stop flowing and solidify.

But Shen miraculously uses his freezing nose to pick out a smell: it stinks, but not too much; it seems something is decaying beneath the snow.

He stops abruptly, and stares at the white layer of snowfall; a small mount emerges from the snow and scurries towards the mountaintop.

Something passed by under the snow!

Shen's mind goes blank, for an instant, he forgets about who he is. His hand twitches on its own and the veins pump up; Shen's black eyes exude inexplicable ferocity.

The snowy ground boils like hot water underneath him, and something seems to be wriggling vigorously under the snow and about to emerge...

At this instant, a voice comes from behind him.

"Didn't I tell you to wait in the car, why did you come out?"

Shen is startled; the blood-thirst in his eyes wears away and is replaced by perplexity. He doesn't turn around, and his entire body is wrapped in soothing warmth. Zhao doesn't seem afraid of the cold, he wraps his coat around Shen; Zhao's body warmth transfers on to Shen.

Zhao's freezing face wears a rigid and warm smile, "you came for me?"

"Don't answer him, don't answer him!" A voice frantically screams in Shen's mind, but he seems to be intoxicated by something, and inadvertently nods.

Zhao smirks, and wraps his arm around Shen's shoulders, almost giving him a firm embrace. They're about the same height, and they clumsily tread through the snow. Zhao puts away the small torch, and holds Shen's hand.

Shen wriggles, but Zhao grabs hold of him even tighter.

"Don't move," Zhao whispers in his ear, "watch your step, it's slippery."

The bird suddenly ascends, swivels around twice, and soars up into the sky.

Zhao looks and says, "don't look, that's an obituary bird. The elderly will tell you: crows that are particularly big and have long tails are obituary birds. They only appear when there is a big disaster, and they are a sign of bad luck."

He doesn't wait for Shen's reply; he frowns, and his eyes sparkle. But he pretends to be bewildered, and tests him with suspicion, "that's strange, how's your horoscope readings? Why do you always bump into these kinds of things?"

"What happened?" Shen doesn't want to dwell on this, and diverts his attention.

"Oh, I took a look," Zhao swallows his suspicion, and continues, "we probably have to find a place to stay the night; the road ahead is blocked, probably by an avalanche."

He says while trying to pull the car door; his hand is already frozen and numb, and he struggles to pull the handle.

Shen opens the door, "go inside first, get yourself warm."

The heating in the car is making Zhao dizzy; he frowns as he rubs his forehead, and takes a piece of chocolate that the girl hands him, "this road is around seven years old, and it even appeared in a travel magazine once, so tourists come here quite often; but the road ahead is blocked, and I suspect it's an avalanche..."

The spectacles asks carefully, "the ghosts just now, did they die in the avalanche?"

Zhao shakes his head, and takes out his phone to call someone. He asks about disasters in the area, and his frowning deepens as the person on the phone keeps talking to him.

"Alright, thanks. It's fine, we can hang on for a night... yes, I know what to do." Zhao hangs up. "We're in trouble."

"It's really an avalanche?"

"Yea," Zhao says, "it's on the news tonight. A widespread disaster, seems like a few villages down there have been buried; the rescue teams are trying, but the chances of survival are slim."

The students are silenced.

After a while, the class captain asks, "then... where do we stay tonight? In the car? Do we have enough gas?"

"The gas is enough, but an avalanche just struck, so it's not safe here. We should go up. Don't be afraid, I will take you there; I saw a small hut at the mountaintop with binoculars. It's probably uninhabited, but at least it has a roof." Zhao has warmed up, and he goes out and takes some food and clothes from the back of the truck and hands it to the others, "get dressed, and eat something. I will call the others behind us; pack your sleeping bags and tents. The class captain can just carry the food, I will take your sleeping bag for you."

The others get a call from Zhao, and quickly gather together. Shen is very observant, and he realises that in the group... there seems to be an extra person.

That person follows behind and doesn't make a sound; from the physique it's probably a girl. She is wrapped in very thick clothes and her face is obscured.

This person is very strange; perhaps she is numb from the freezing cold, but her movements are so uncoordinated.

Zhu sometimes talks to her, and she would nod or shake her head. Shen notices that when she moves her head, her legs stop moving; it's as if she can only move one part of her body at a time.

As he is thinking, an arm wraps around his shoulders and the back of a hand sticks against his face.

Shen's skin is numb from the weather; he slowly feels something, and freezes in place. He can't dodge it, but he can't accept it either. Zhao only touches him shortly, and quickly moves his hand away, "why are you so afraid of the cold?"

"No, I'm not cold."

"Yes you are, your lips are turning blue." Zhao interrupts him, and takes off his jacket and wraps it around Shen.

Shen is startled, and grabs his hand, "what are you doing? You'll catch a cold!"

"I have thermal underwear." Zhao rolls back his sleeves a little, "I came prepared; now put it on!"

Shen refuses.

Zhao lowers his voice and says tenderly, "come on, don't make me worry about you."

Shen really cannot stand his tone and his gaze; he almost wants to run away.

Zhao wraps the jacket around him even tighter, and walks back, "watch your steps; Little Guo, help Zhu Hong carry her suitcase. Can you actually do something useful?"

Chief Zhao's fury lingers, and Guo scurries to the back and takes Zhu's suitcase.

Shen stares at Zhao from behind, and his hand nostalgically cherishes Zhao's lingering body warmth. He zips up the jacket, and touches the pendant... the sphere is exerting a little warmth too; all the more apparent in the frigid snow.

Very weak, but very comforting.

They walk for about half an hour and the hut that Zhao mentioned finally enters their line of sight. Another half an hour, and they arrive.

The hut is built with stones, with wooden pillars and a leather roof to block out the snow.

A ruined fence surrounds the hut, almost being buried in the snow.

It's lonely and battered, standing at the mountaintop amidst a great space of nothingness; frighteningly tranquil.

As Zhao pushes the wooden door of the fence, Da Qing suddenly pounces forward from Zhu's phone, and screeches; its fur stand up.

Zhao picks up the big cat and asks softly, "what's wrong?"

Da Qing glares at the snow-laden courtyard, and a voice comes from behind.

Wang sighs and says feebly, "Chief Zhao, Da Qing wants to tell you something is buried in the courtyard."

Guardian Chapter: 30

Chapter: 30

Wang's voice is actually quite pleasant, if she were still a human, she could become a singer or something. But she is a ghost now, so her voice has deteriorated, and she speaks with a feeble and airy tone that gives you goosebumps and sends shivers down your spine.

She suddenly speaks, which startles the crowd.

Shen's students all stare at her, and since Wang is not used to her body, she has no choice but to stand within everyone's eyesight.

Zhao rubs his hand to feel warmer, "you guys wait here, I will take a look."

Zhao fearlessly enters the courtyard, and Shen follows without hesitation.

Due to the weather, the courtyard is waterlogged and rugged. Zhao slows down, and walks around. The black cat's eyes sparkle like lanterns, and all of a sudden, it jumps out of Zhao's arms and rushes forward to a corner. With its fat paws, the cat begins clawing a small mound on the ground.

Zhao kneels down, picks up the cat on the nape, and wipes its paws clean. He holds out a torch, and takes a closer look at the hole in the mud.

He sees something ivory white. Zhao takes out a small shovel from his bag, and starts digging with difficulty... until he sees a slightly flat forehead and half an eyehole. Zhao realises he dug up half a skull.

The silent Shen watches Zhao dig up the skull and begins looking around the courtyard: there are many similar mounts scattered across. There is probably a huge pile of skeletons buried underneath them.

Shen turns around and sees the frightened but curious students peeking in; he holds Zhao's arm still and says, "bury it, don't tell the others."

Zhao buries the skull and stands up as if nothing happened; he invites the students and the others inside.

"It's nothing, just a few broken pieces of bricks. Watch your step. Get inside and set up your tents, and remember to keep yourself warm." Zhao puts away

the shovel, lights a cigarette, and watches the group get inside the hut one by one.

Wang still walks at the back. She stops next to Zhao, and whispers so only he can hear, "you saw it right? There is more than one layer."

Zhao is getting a headache; he lowers his voice, "fuck me, I have never seen so many layers before. If we stay here will they complain to the authorities? Nothing we can do about that though, our cars can't get up here, and there is nowhere else to stay. If we let the camp outside they will freeze to death."

"It's quite the taboo to stay here," Wang hesitates, "I will tell them later, as long as we do the rituals, staying for one more night... shouldn't be a problem."

Zhao nods, and urges her, "be quick."

Wang counts her steps as she walks outside. Then she walks backwards by two steps, turns around, and kneels on the ground. With her hands above her head, she bows down in worship towards the courtyard. The students peek curiously; Shen tells them to stay quiet and stand back... as he realises: Wang's "fingers" are plastic, and her "hair" is made of nylon.

It seems that she isn't a real person, but a plastic mannequin from a shopping mall.

Of course... our Professor Shen's mind is too pure to think otherwise.

Zhao stands against the wall and watches Wang.

She kneels outside the door, lowers her voice and mutters some unknown dialect. The others don't understand, and can't even figure out how many syllables make a word. All

they hear are notes flowing out of her mouth like water, echoing through the courtyard and seemingly awakening some ancient spirit; this causes a deep palpitation in everyone.

Every single person in the hut feels it, even Shen's students. The youngsters can't help but look down somberly. Except Zhao, who's still smoking; he stands by a corner blandly, without emotion.

"What's that?" Zhu walks forward after Wang is done and softly asks.

"Ancestors' spirits." Wang stands up and rigidly wipes away dirt on her trousers, "I greeted them, so it should be fine now. Don't crowd up in front of the door, get inside, everyone. Remember, don't throw rubbish in the courtyard, say greetings when you leave and if you need to go to the toilet walk further away."

The wind and snow are howling, nobody wants to go outside in the cold. But today they've experienced so many incredible incidents that they're starting to get afraid of taboo. After hearing what Wang said, they hurry back into the hut with relief. It's very shabby inside, but at least it shelters you from the wind.

When everyone is inside, Wang turns to Zhao and says softly, "Chief Zhao, you can "see" from birth, you're born to be with things that people don't believe in, you're born to know the existence of spirits and deities. But whether you pass by shrines or temples you never show any respect. I heard that you entered the Jokhang Temple three times, where all worshippers dream to visit, and yet you saw the golden Buddha and only nodded but didn't kneel. That's inappropriate."

Zhao flickers some ashes on to the window sill without a care, and smiles while nodding, "yea, too indecent; not worth learning from and not worth advocating. The constitution recognises religious freedom, so we must respect others' religions..."

Wang gazes at him with her plastic eyes as if they were real, and lowers her voice even more, "there is always something you don't know about in this world. Perhaps you're very capable, but you're just human, can you reign over the earth and sky, can you reign over destiny? You can't be too arrogant, if you're so crazed as to disregard the gods, karma will get to you one day."

Zhao's smile wears off a little. He looks at Wang and gently fixes up her messy clothes; he says coldly, "I have no guilt, no regrets, and no wishes to pray for. Whether it be gods or spirits, what gives them the right to judge me? They can be powerful and almighty on their own, but why should I care?"

Wang stares at him deeply, and sighs.

She extends her plastic hand, and gestures in the air, muttering something, and touches Zhao on the forehead with a finger.

“You’re a good person,” she says softly, “may Buddha have mercy, forgive you and protect you.”

Zhao doesn’t dodge, he even lowers his head so that she can reach it. After Wang finishes, he asks, “you were a good person when you were alive, did Buddha forgive you and protect you?”

Wang looks up; the stare from the rigid plastic eyes shows a hint of melancholy.

Zhao lifts her shoulders gently, “it’s cold outside, good lady, let’s get inside.”

In the hut, Zhu and Chu work efficiently, and they manage to set up a small cooking pot quickly. They pour snow water and start boiling, using the steam to heat up some beef sticks. Then, Zhu starts grilling the beef on the fire.

The students take out their notebook, and gather around Wang as she enters with sparkling eyes. A tall and slender boy says with a little hesitation, “would you mind if we asked about the customs of this small hut?”

He glances at Shen after saying this, and realises the teacher is frowning. He frantically adds, “sorry, I mean, only if it’s appropriate... if there is any taboo we don’t know about, please don’t get mad.”

Wang sits beside the stove, and says softly, “no problem.”

She hides her hands in her sleeves, and picks up a chocolate ball. It’s a small and beautifully wrapped treat. She really wants to try it, but she only fondles with it and stares.

The female class captain picks up another piece and hands it to Wang, “this is good, please try it.”

“I’m just looking, I can’t eat... sweet things.” She says softly, then pauses before she answers the students, “these mountain ranges have changed a lot throughout the years, and the people living down in the valley have also migrated and merged with other clans. It’s said that during the early times, a Kamba tribe used to live here. The Tibetan people have a tradition of sky

burial: after a person’s death, the corpse is handed to the Sky Burial Master for disintegration. He would chop up the body and oil it up for the birds to eat... if the corpse is not fully cleaned by birds, it’s considered very unlucky, so the job of the body-breaker is very important. This hut used to be that of the Sky Burial Master.”

“Although the Sky Burial Master is greatly respected in the clan, he touches dead corpses all the time, so people usually wouldn’t want close contact with him.”

Lin explains. As Guo listens, he thinks of someone else... the Ghost Slayer.

Isn't he greatly respected but feared as well?

Besides Zhao, nobody dares to even talk to him; even ghosts and spirits avoid him, it's as if... he would bring about some horrible misfortune.

"In the next centuries, many tribes have settled here, and inevitably, a few widespread conflicts broke out. Sometimes the tribes would go to war, and sometimes they would make relations by intermarriage, and their bloodlines begin mixing. Soon, quite a few other tribes started performing Sky Burials, only they had different customs compared to the Tibetans."

Wang lectures like a history teacher: with a soft voice, and monotonously; it's rather sleep-inducing. But Shen's students are used to this discipline, they eagerly rub their hands together, and frantically jots notes.

Zhao gobbles some jerky, moves his sleeping bag next to Shen to get a nice view, and starts napping.