

## Guardian Chapter: 31

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“And later on, the climate in this region becomes more and more awful,” Wang adds a bit of water in the pot, “the population declines, and then around... hmmm, I’m not too sure, I guess around the Song and Yuan dynasties, there was a catastrophic disaster. Ever since, most of the people here have either died or migrated, and all that was left was a small clan of Hanga people who stayed in a cave.

The class captain asks, “are any of these recorded in written history?”

Wang shakes her head, “in ancient times these mountain ranges were not part of the Central Plain, so Han civilisation never reached these areas. Perhaps there are some geographical data, but this place is so secluded that the imperial government probably never knew it was inhabited. There are legends passed down by the natives though, they say that the snow became monsters and came down from the mountains, and white creatures emerged from cracks and the water, capturing humans and livestock, tearing their guts out and slicing their heads.”

The class captain ponders, and nods as though she understands, “so, it might have been an avalanche caused by an earthquake.”

Wang doesn’t move her head, “the Hanga people later moved into the deep mountains, somewhere near River Village. When you’re studying ethnic minorities in River Village, you’ll realise many of them bear similarities with the Hanga people. The Sky Burial Site was destroyed, but the Sky Burial Master’s hut remained, and later became a watch house of the Hanga people. Every month they would send a strong ping man to watch for signs of disaster. Eventually, the watcher became the most respected person in the clan and this hut became his place of residence.”

“And so the watch house became a sacred place for the Hanga people, and when the time comes for important rituals, the whole clan would come up to the mountaintop and gather round the watch house.”

The little spectacled boy asks, “why haven’t I heard of the Hanga people before?”

“Because their population was small, and they didn’t intermarry with other tribes. This tribe ceased to exist a long time ago, so nobody knows about it now.”

The students finally understand, and the slender bamboo guy concludes, “oh, I understand, it’s tribal extinction caused by centuries of close-kinship reproduction.”

Wang doesn’t comment, but only laughs softly; the person sitting closest to her shivers.

Any normal person would find it difficult to talk to Wang: although she doesn't say or do anything creepy, her very existence oozes creepiness.

As their curiosity is satisfied, the students go to bed as Shen urges them. Wang doesn't need sleep, and Da Qing is the most active at night, so the two stay awake.

Shen is the last to go to bed. He checks the door and windows, and takes some tape to seal all holes and gaps in the hut. He reminds the students to stay warm, and asks Wang if she needs more clothes. He puts out the fire so that the water wouldn't spill.

As everything is taken care of, he quietly enters his sleeping bag.

Zhao fell asleep quite a while ago as the boring history lecture was going on. With his earphones still in his ears, his head is slightly tilted and his body is curled up.

His face is deeply and sharply contoured: he's energetic when he's awake, and still good-looking when he's asleep, but his face is frozen and pale.

Shen gazes at him: Zhao's sleeping face is tranquil and composed, it's like even if the sky were falling, he would still find a corner and fall asleep. Shen's eyes are fixated, he quietly watches Zhao. Shen's face softens as he watches him, and he takes off the earphones and set them aside. Then he takes Zhao's jacket and wraps it around him.

Guo is sound asleep. Wang is tidying up the cooking pot and stove; some soft clinging and clanging echo.

Shen takes a deep breath and lies sideways, turning away from the others. After awhile, it seems like he is asleep.

But where no-one can see, his eyes are wide open.

In the dim light of the night, he keeps watching Zhao quietly, like he wants to continue til sunrise. Shen has restrained himself for far too long. He can't help but indulge in desire. He lays close to Zhao, and his thoughts come gushing out.

He wants to extend his hands and embrace that warm body; kiss his eyes, hair and lips, taste and devour him in whole, and possess his everything.

Shen's breathing trembles; his desire and longing are that of a dying person longing for a hot bowl of soup in the freezing cold. But he doesn't move, it's as if... only thinking about it makes him satisfied.

Da Qing curls up into a ball next to Wang, it's tail wiggling. When it's almost midnight and everyone is presumably asleep, it whispers, "are those skulls or skeletons buried in the courtyard? Who were they?"

Wang's plastic face hides behind the hoodie, and she says after hesitation, "just the skulls, the Hanga people had the tradition of beheading."

Da Qing can't help but wonder, "how did the Hanga people go extinct?"

"The student said it's because of close-kinship reproduction." Wang says.

"Don't use that stupid reason to fool me, even horses can avoid that problem, are humans really too stupid to realise?" Da Qing impatiently quivers its whiskers, "besides, men in the past were all polygamous, this so-called 'no intermarriages' probably wasn't strict on the concubines. And the clan must have had a few families, they wouldn't all have been close kins."

Wang looks down on the cat, and pats it on the head, "you're just a cat, eat your cat food and dried fish. Why do you care about human problems?"

Anyone who just joined the SIU would think that Wang is probably younger than twenty. But as she is speaking, she seems experienced and weathered, like an old lady.

Da Qing lays on the ground, and comfortably closes its eyes as Wang strokes it like any cat would. But its eyes are not fully closed; it gazes out into space.

The small hut on the mountaintop is silent; all that can be heard is steady breathing and snoring.

Midnight just passed, and Zhao suddenly opens his eyes, staring right into Shen's unspectacled and gentle gaze. Shen panics, and looks away in concealment. Zhao doesn't mind the attention, and quietly sits up. He listens intently, and turns towards Shen, striking a 'don't make any sound' gesture with his index finger.

Zhao comes out of the sleeping bag, grabs a torch, and heads outside.

Da Qing meows and scurries along. Shen hesitates; he is worried after all, and follows him.

Once Zhao is outside, he realises the torch is redundant.

The entire valley is in unworldly flames: on one side is a glacial mountain range, on the other a blazing inferno.

They stand a few thousand metres away on the mountaintop, but they can hear the crackling and screeching flames, and feel the acute pain of fire scorching one's skin.

The entire sky is lit in sunset orange.

It's as if they weren't on earth anymore: the howling flames engulfing the valley strike misery into people's minds; one forgets the time and the place in this moment.

The courtyard seems to have felt something, and the ground is trembling. The frozen soil cracks, and the skulls are exposed. They come in all shapes and sizes, and the eyeholes sparkle. Bones cackling sounds echo, and the skulls all face towards the same direction as if arranged by someone.

More and more skulls emerge from the ground: they all eerily look towards the scorching blaze as if worshipping. As the ground is shaking, the bones let out creepy crashing sounds.

Zhao extends an arm to block Shen behind him, and picks up the cat, "fatty, be careful!"

"That's Hellfire." Wang suddenly stands behind them, her hoodie is gone and the expressionless plastic face is clearly seen. Shen has yet to figure out what this plastic body is, and 'Wang' crumbles to the ground.

Shen instinctively gives her a hand, and the doll lets out an indecent moan. The startled gentleman Professor Shen retracts and drops the doll.

A girl in a white dress appears and says, "as sinners enter the Gates of Hell, Hellfire burns and flares to welcome them. It is said that when Hellfire comes from the underworld, it's always to burn those who have sinned."

Zhao says, "bullshit, shut up."

Wang points with a finger, "see for yourself."

The skulls have all turned around suddenly, and look back at them from the door. Their dark eyeholes send chills down your spine; they open their jaws and jump around as if they were laughing.

The people and the cat are all getting goosebumps, but Wang calmly says, "my people, they all want to peel off my skin, tear off my veins and suck up my blood."

Zhao takes a gun, "Wang Zheng, get back into your body. Shen Wei, go inside the hut."

Wang ignores him and sighs.

"But..." she says with misery and melancholy, "I'm already dead."

"Are you entering menopause? Stop babbling and go inside!" Zhao grabs her spirit and violently stuffs her into the doll, and throws the doll to Zhu who was awakened by the commotion.

The skulls open their mouths and pounce towards them, Zhao holds the door latch, and fires three shots.

His gun is probably not firing bullets: the skulls scream and turn into white smoke as they are shot.

Zhao closes the door, but a skull is trapped in the gap. Zhao swiftly puts away the gun and takes out a dagger. He crushes the skull like eggshell and closes the door.

The skulls outside bash and bang at the door; they jump up and devilishly peek in from the window.

A few students are awakened. As they see what is happening, they are rather calm... any normal person would think they were just dreaming.

Even Guo is quite calm... in this small hut there is the invincible Chief Zhao, the brave talking cat, the fake monk who defeated the hungry ghost, the raw- meat-devouring snake woman, and the mysterious Chu who Guo still doesn't dare talk to... Guo honestly believes that they are all very safe despite the situation.

This poor kid really blindly trusts to his colleagues.

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"Amitabha," Lin and Zhao hold the door together. The fake monk huffs and pants and glares at the bouncing skulls outside the windows, "I'm losing hope in a world in which even skulls try to act cute! What is going on?"

Zhao turns and asks Wang, "what are these things that are coming for you? Not only do they bite people they even tried to bite you, are they not afraid of food poisoning from plasticisers?"

Lin has a mild hint that he might have said too much, and pulls at the Chief's clothes.

The female class captain hears it and giggles. But she covers her mouth as the situation is rather inappropriate for laughing; and her classmates are all staring at her.

"It was 1712, a civil war broke out among the Hanga tribe." Wang stands up with the help of Zhu and covers her face with the hoodie, "the rebels won, and the Old Headman died. His wives and children, and the one hundred and twelve warriors who followed him were all beheaded and burned. Their heads were buried in the courtyard of the watch house, and they would be enslaved for eternity."

Zhu hesitates, “so these are their skulls in the courtyard?”

The skulls keep bashing at the door.

Chu Shuzhi instantly tears off his windbreaker; the sweater he wears underneath is very unfashionable, it has a lot of pockets on it, and he looks like a walking storage bag. He checks all of the pockets and gathers a few yellow paper talismans written in cinnabar powder. He sticks one on each corner of the door.

A faint white light shines from the talismans, and the skulls stop banging at the door.

Then, Chu starts sticking the talismans on the windows, the walls and all over the hut like posting advertisements. The skulls outside feel the power and move away from the hut.

Zhao stops holding the door; it’s freezing cold but he is soaked in sweat.

He sits besides the stove and adds some milk powder and mineral water to the cooking pot. He points at Wang, “let’s all drink some milk, and after we finish, you have to explain to me what’s happening.”

“Sorry.” Wang doesn’t talk much, and all she replies is, “you can throw me outside, if I’m not here then nothing will hurt you.”

Zhao calmly asks, “do you hear how ridiculous you sound?”

Although Wang looks frightening, she’s kind and reserved, always polite to everyone but never gets too close to anyone. She seldom talks like that; after Zhao’s comment, she looks down and doesn’t say anything.

Chu stands beside the window, and watches to make sure the skulls are not coming again. He signals to Zhao, “have someone stay up to keep an eye, and the others can go back to sleep. These things are not a big problem, no need to worry.”

Danger has just passed, and the tall bamboo guy is looking for more trouble, “Professor, can I go take a few pictures... I’m not going outside, just beside the window.”

Shen really wants to know how this kid grew up to have such a sense of adventure.

A grabby, dirty hand comes for Shen’s shoulder, and Zhao leans forward, lowering his voice, “it’s not against the rules to take pictures, but you have to know: it’s said that cameras can capture the souls of people. Do you want to bring a few ghosts to keep as pets?”

The bamboo guy trembles in fear after Zhao’s eerie, ghost-story-telling tone.

Zhao smiles and continues, "I guess you could bury them in flower pots, and then whenever midnight comes they will come out and start munching at the pots, munching at your table, and munching at your bed..."

Zhao has yet to finish, and the bamboo guy twitches in discomfort.

Shen's mouth quivers, "are you alright?"

The boy's face looks uneasy, and he stutters, "I... I... I have to pee."

So scared that he's wetting himself; Zhao is surprised. Soon, he laughs wildly and mockingly.

"It's only three hours till sunrise." Chu says, "my talismans can last for five hours, don't worry... but you better wait till the sky is bright to go to toilet. If something wants to bite you, pee on it; virgin pee repels evil spirits, it might not kill them but they would probably get a brain concussion."

Wang says softly, "I can stay up and..."

Zhao interrupts, "if something goes wrong, you can't stop it; let me do it."

He takes out a wind-resistant lighter, "anyone afraid of second-hand smoke? If not I'm gonna need this little precious to wake me up."

The students are surprisingly calm; they giggle and return to their sleeping bags... perhaps Zhao makes everyone feel very safe, or maybe they weren't fully awake.

Shortly, the hut is all quiet. Only the skulls rolling on the ground can be heard. Da Qing falls asleep in Zhao's arms; Wang sits at a corner, thinking about something.

The torches are all turned off, and only the talismans are faintly glowing in the dark.

Zhao stands beside the window to block a small gap; he lights a cigarette.

When he was awakened by the weird noises, he saw Shen's gaze. But Shen looked too embarrassed, so he pretended not to notice.

Zhao is almost certain that Shen didn't just wake up from the noise, neither was he insomniac. His calm and satisfied expression and his convoluted but gentle gaze are heart-wrenching to watch, it's as if... he had been staring at Zhao all night.

If Shen likes men and is falling for Zhao, that's very normal... Zhao thinks of his own image as not too shabby: he has a stable income, is of a suitable age, not too old and not too childish. Though he suffers from mild machismo, he

does care for other people's feelings, sometimes. And he never shows his animalistic ill-temper to people he's not too close to, so others usually get the wrong impression that he is nice and capable.

But whether it's lust, affection or just an impulsive crush, Zhao can't imagine someone would stay up all night and watch him sleep with such passion and obsession.

Zhao thinks of the first time he met Shen.

He must have had a deep connection with Shen without even noticing it.

Zhao is lost in thought for a long time, till the entire cigarette is burned. He puts it off and inconsiderately throws it out the window. The cigarette hits a skull, and it turns black and stops moving.

Before ten years old he didn't know anything, probably even had trouble telling men from women, so nothing could have happened then. For the periods when he was older, his memories are clear and in sequence, he remembers everything precisely.

There are indeed ways to mess with someone's memory, for instance hypnosis, or other secret techniques that Zhao can think of. But these methods only prevent the person from recollecting the altered memories. Human experience is incredibly complex, and only that person himself can know in detail what happened.

For instance, if a guy had a car accident, when he looks back, he will realise the accident happened because he was running late. And why was he late? Cos he had a stomachache and was stuck in the toilet. Why did he have a stomachache? Cos he ate too much oily foods. And why did he eat so much? Cos his fast food coupon was gonna expire...

If he keeps going he would think of who gave him the coupon, was it from someone else or did he just get it on the streets, et cetera.

Every minute detail in someone's memory can be recalled from interconnected events. No matter how smart you are, you can't possibly figure out all the trivial details in a chain of events and alter them one by one.

If someone's memory is manipulated, these details will be obscured, and when that person tries to recollect them, it would appear unnatural.

Coincidentally, Zhao is an expert in memory.

Since he was little he knew how fragile and crucial a person's memory is. When Da Qing handed him the Guardian Order, the first lesson was teaching him to regularly reorganise his memories through meditation. Zhao is certain that he didn't know Shen Wei before they met.



Then... perhaps the decent and charismatic Professor Shen is actually a stalker who has been in love with Zhao for a long time. But of course, Zhao knows that this is practically impossible. If anything, Zhao would be the creepy stalker.

Then perhaps, this “Shen Wei” is just a pretence, he isn’t just some normal guy.

If Zhao can’t find anything about him, either he is really ordinary, or he is really extraordinary.

Three hours passed by quickly. The sky begins to light up, and the skulls have all fallen to the ground, no longer moving. And the creepy flames have burnt out.

Zhao goes out to the courtyard to confirm that the sun has risen and the ghosts are gone, and he goes back inside and takes a nap by the wall.

“When it’s morning,” he thinks, “I will find a chance to talk to Shen.”

Zhao falls asleep thinking about him.

Perhaps this whole ordeal has really worn him out; Zhao quickly falls into a deep slumber.

An hour later, Zhu wakes him up.

Zhao realises someone gave him a blanket, and he instantly starts looking for Shen. But Zhu interrupts him.

She asks, “Chief Zhao, do you know where Wang is?”

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What?

Zhao tenses up. His brain feels as though it were glued together; his eyelids weigh down heavily.

“Wang Zheng?” Zhao pinches the bridge of his nose, and blinks although his eyelids are sticky. He struggles to sit upright, and says half-consciously, “I only slept for less than an hour... wasn’t she still here earlier?”

Zhu sombrely scrutinises him.

She had known Zhao for many years, even if he were tired he would only sleep lightly. They are now in the wilderness, and underneath them is a heap of skulls, and yet he still fell into deep slumber. That has never happened before. Being careless is different from being heartless. Zhu leans downwards and sniffs.

“Don’t move.” Zhu pulls off the blanket and runs her fingers attentively across the fine fibres. She wipes off some brown powder and smells it. She instantly understands, and says to Zhao, “you were drugged.”

The dizziness fades and is replaced by impaired hearing. Zhao feels like all sounds are being blocked out by a layer of something. When he finally realises what Zhu said, a million words are shrunk down to just two: “fuck me!”

Everything happened so fast, Zhao has yet to figure out which realisation pisses him off more: “Wang drugging him” or “the person who gave him the blanket wasn’t Shen”.

“Get me some mineral water.” Zhao says softly, “I like it cold.”

“It’s not like we have hot water.” Zhu grabs a frozen bottle, shakes it, and pieces of ice fall off.

Zhao drinks a little while frowning, and then pours the rest all over his head.

“You’re crazy!”

Zhu and Shen exclaim together. Shen wants to stop him but he is standing too far away: ever since Zhao saw Shen staring at him all night, he has been trying to keep a distance from Zhao.

“Lin Jing, stay behind and take care of Professor Shen and the students.” Zhao ignores them, and wipes the cold water off his face. He puts on a jacket and stomps outside, kicking a skull three metres away, “everyone else follow me!”

Lin hastens to ask, “what to do with the skulls?”

“Dig them up and smash all of them.”

Lin is startled, “that... would that anger some...”

“I wouldn’t touch them if they mean no harm.” Zhao stands at the doorway, turns around, and says coldly, “but if they do, I will dig up all their graves. Last night we came here politely, and look how they welcomed us. Now it’s daytime, so it’s time for payback. Smash all of them, I’ll be responsible for anything that happens.”

Zhao has the temper of a bandit, when he’s mad, nobody dares to provoke him, so Lin shuts up.

Zhu runs to catch up with him, and bravely says. "Wang... probably has her reasons."

Zhao doesn't turn around, "bullshit... say something that's not bullshit, if you can't then shut up."

Zhu shuts it for two seconds, but can't hold it any longer, "why can't you talk decently? Do you use that tone to pick up girls too, you jerk?"

Zhao finally looks at her, and says something even more aggravating.

He raises his eyebrows, "when did I say I'm picking you up?"

Zhu really wants to slap him right across the face, but she doesn't dare, so she holds her anger and bites her teeth. She says fiercely, "no wonder all your past relationships have ended terribly, you will stay single for the rest of your life!!"

Zhao quickly leads the group to where they parked the cars. He takes out a few bags of supplies, "the cars can't go up there, we'll probably have to walk. There are some food and water inside, just in case we get lost."

"And these," Zhao takes out a big pile of supplies and hand them to Zhu, "bring these back to the hut for everyone."

Zhu is surprised and stares at him, "you're sending me back?"

"Not that again... just because you look like human doesn't mean it makes you warm-blooded." Zhao impatiently slams the back of the car shut, locks it, and signals Chu and Guo to come. He waves to Zhu, "alright woman, before you're frozen into hibernation, rush back to the hut. Oh right, take this, don't drink it cold, heat it up a bit."

He throws a small bottle into Zhu's arms. It's a small bottle of rice wine... it's a warming drink, not found in the Northwest. Zhao must have prepared it beforehand; needless to say who he prepared it for.

Zhu suddenly feels a bit touched... though he has a strange way of showing that he cares.

To conserve energy, the three guys are not talking as they walk. Luckily it's sunny, despite the potent gale, the sun's warmth lessens the rigours of the wind.

Guo feels like they must have crossed three to four mountains, and they are way past the original destination "River Village". In the afternoon, they finally arrive at a small col away from the winds.

Chu opens a few packs of beef jerky, and shares among the three frozen men. Zhao takes out a detailed map, sits on a rock, and studies it carefully.

“Do you know where we are going?” Chu asks.

Zhao puts a marking on the map, and says without looking up, “the place where Wang’s people used to live is not the same as River Village, I checked her files.”

Chu is surprised, he thought that Zhao had been so occupied with pleasing his many “brothers” and obsessing over his crush that he must not have had any

time for important stuff. He can’t help but want to know more, “what’s in her files?”

“Wang herself is Hanga, her name used to be Gelan; when she joined the Guardian Order she changed her name.” Zhao says, “the Hanga people were neither friendly nor welcoming, they wouldn’t have had stayed in the River Village where it’s close to the main road.”

“There is record about them in history?” Chu is startled again.

“Not history,” Zhao marks three spots on the map, “it’s the Ancient Scroll of Dark Magic.”

He straightens out the old map, and stops at a spot with a pen. From Chu’s reaction that’s probably where the watch house is.

Zhao continues. “when I entered the courtyard I thought the skulls must be related to the legendary Luobula restriction magic. In Hanga language, ‘Luobula’ means ghost. And it’s ‘restriction’ not in the sense of ‘forbiddance’, but in the sense of ‘imprisonment’... Guo Changecheng, why are you standing over there, get over here! You’ve passed your trial period so you’re an official member now, try to have a more enthusiastic work attitude will you?”

Guo hurriedly stumbles forward.

“So this magic is used to imprison ghosts.” Chu concludes.

“Yea, the Hanga people had the traditions of beheading and exorcism.” Zhao says, “it’s probably related to their social structure. Their tribe had a system of slavery, and their people believed that their slaves were to serve them even after death. They would behead the slaves and bury their skulls, then they used magic to seal away their spirits to enslave them forever.

Chu asks, “why bury the skulls at the mountaintop, is there a special meaning?”

“Yes, the Hanga people had been influenced by several other civilisations. Some of their beliefs originated from our religion. But of course, their core conceptions were different. Unlike Buddhism, they clearly did not believe that all things contain spirits.

However, they did believe in mountain spirits, and that they are powerful enough to suppress the souls of people. They chose to

build a ritual site at the Spirit Portal of a mountain... which is a place at the mountaintop where the sun never shines. The Luobula restriction magic was influenced by the belief of reincarnation in Buddhism, it was thought that a triangle is a complete shape, which can form into a circle and become eternal shackles of souls.”

Chu is very intelligent, he instantly makes the inference, “which means that there must be three identical ritual sites on similar altitudes, forming a symmetrical triangle!”

It’s more efficient talking to someone with brains. Zhao nods; the triangle he draws on the map is almost equilateral. He then draws a small circle inside the triangle, “imprison the spirits here, and they shall be enslaved for eternity... this must be where the Hanga tribe used to live.”

“Let me see.” Chu’s sense of space and direction is superb. He studies the map and says, “look, isn’t this the valley that was on fire last night?”

“Must be,” Zhao puts away the map, and quickly stuffs his mouth full with beef, “eat quickly, then we’ll keep going.”

Chu chews the jerky stately, pauses for a while, and glances at the stupid and puzzled baby Guo. He then says, “Chief Zhao must have studied this dark magic before and not just for this trip?”

Zhao says calmly, “if you can’t tell ecstasy from heroine, how do you join the narcotics bureau?”

Chu pauses for a thought, and smiles; but his face is used to frowning too much, the smile looks out of place, “if that’s the case why doesn’t our team have training sessions?”

Zhao stops chewing and stares at Chu.

Guo looks here and there and cannot figure out what’s happening. They both scare him, he dares not say anything and just retracts his neck.

After an unknown amount of time, Zhao says, “Old Chu, you’re smart, I rarely see someone as smart as you. I won’t waste time explaining, I’m sure you know why.”

Chu stares at the pack of beef jerky, lost in thought. He doesn’t say anything, and nobody knows what he is thinking. He is still wearing his usual face, as if nothing happened.

Fifteen minutes later, they set off again; this time Chu is leading the way.

The sun was ablaze in the morning, but now snow begins falling. The three head West, and spends almost an hour spiralling down the mid-levels. Guo suddenly sees something in the snow that's... rather familiar.

He scurries forward and starts digging with his thick gloves on. A plastic arm startles him.

Zhao hears Guo scream and shout, "Chief Zhao! Chief Zhao! That's Wang Zheng's arm, it's her arm!"

He really is a mascot, bring him along and you will have some strange luck. Zhao thinks while treading forward. He snatches the arm and smacks Guo on the head, "her arm has turned to soil, this is the fake and cheap one you bought. The arm dropped here, where could she be?"

The light snowfall could not have covered her footsteps so quickly. Zhao realises: maybe the arm fell from above.

Chu looks around and then at the map; he points upwards and pats Zhao on the shoulder, "look there."

There is a cliff around three metres above them, and on it is a giant stone cave covered in weed and snow. The layer of snow at the entrance seems to have been trodden, which drew Chu's attention.

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All is quiet in the small mountain hut. Zhao's friend contacts Lin, telling him that the road will probably be blocked for another three to four days. Shen briefly discusses with the students and they agree that given the aftermath of the avalanche, the survivors in River Village probably wouldn't want to entertain them. They decide to head back to Dragon City when Zhao returns.

The class captain heats up some milk for Da Qing, and starts preparing breakfast. The students are told by the Professor to help Lin clean up the courtyard.

It's a simple and violent task... under Lin's directions, they dig up all the skulls that were trying to bite them last night, and line them up on the ground. The fake monk takes a giant rock and smashes all of them to pieces.

A while later, Zhu returns with a gigantic bag: its taller than a person. Superwoman puts down the bag, takes out a small bottle, heats it, and gobbles the liquid down. Then she quickly takes over what Lin has been doing, and smashes the skulls one by one like

smashing walnuts. Success rate a whopping one hundred percent, it's efficient and quality work.

This straightforward and brutal morning workout continues until the girl inside calls them in for breakfast.

Zhu must be on drugs: she pushes away a boy and Da Qing who's drawn to Shen, and squeezes on to a spot next to Shen. She says impolitely, "Professor Shen, can you pass me the chocolate sauce."

She mixes sweet with savoury: one cannot imagine what chocolate beef jerky would taste like. Zhu eats while peeking at the calm and reserved Shen. She pretends to focus on dipping chocolate sauce, and says without looking up, "our Chief is courting you."

Shen pauses and looks at her.

Zhu is still looking down, and says as if making small talk, "you wouldn't have not noticed, would you?"

Shen's expression doesn't change, and he doesn't answer either. He hands her another pack of chocolate sauce, "want some more?"

Zhu stops talking, and looks up; she stares at Shen with a very peculiar gaze. Her round irises gradually contract into two thin slits: the eyes of a cold-blooded animal. The snake eyes look exceptionally creepy on her pretty face.

But Shen only glances at her, and focuses back on the food as if nothing happened.

"Then do you like him?" Zhu lowers her voice and asks softly by his ear.

Shen asks calmly, "why do you want to know?"

"I..." Zhu's eyes roll around, "I'm nosy, every exploited and oppressed employee has the right to be nosy about their boss."

Shen looks at her with a half-smile, "if you're so nosy, can't you figure it out yourself?"

Shen laughs lightly, and takes the pot of heated milk with a wet tissue; he asks, "this food is dry, want something to drink?"

Zhu's face is slightly distorted, and struggles to fake a smile, "sure, I'll have some, thanks!"

Zhu carelessly crushes a few dents on the outer layer of a thermos cup. Shen doesn't seem to notice, and pours her some milk; he says, habitually considerate, "drink it while it's warm."

The dents on the cup deepen in her grasp.

A hint of smile flashes across his eyes, and Shen puts the pot back. Suddenly, he feels something, and turns around looking out the window. His face changes.

Zhu doesn't know whether she is over-sensitive or not, but Shen's sombre expression makes her very uncomfortable. Instinctively, she wants to move away from him, but she stops herself.

Why would she be afraid of a helpless university teacher?

Sunlight shines on Shen's lenses, reflecting a blinding gleam.

"I'm full," shortly, Zhu hears him say, "I'll go tidy up the courtyard. You guys don't run off on your own, listen to the police officers."

He walks out to the courtyard.

Nobody is paying attention to this small interlude... what's odd is, twenty minutes later, everyone has finished their breakfast, and nobody realises that Shen is missing as they enter the courtyard.

He is like someone who never existed. Including Zhu and Lin, nobody realises there ought to be one more person.

Ten minutes later, the missing Shen appears at the spot where Wang's "arm" was found.

He doesn't even have a jacket. The wind whips up the collar of his shirt and his hair; snow falls on his lenses. He doesn't seem to feel the cold.

Shen stands below the cliff, looks around, and suddenly extends his arm. His palm faces downwards in a clawing gesture.

His hand is incredibly pale, and green veins emerge clearly, as if his body were meticulously crafted. The ground shakes with his movement, the wind strengthens and whirls into a howling vortex, soaring into the clouds like a sharp blade. Then, the entire ground is lifted up in mid-air, and beneath the thick layer of ice is a cracked layer of frost soil.

At this instant, something drills out of the ground and shoots at Shen from behind like an arrow.

A mixture of decaying odour and floral aroma slowly spreads. The next moment, Shen turns around at a speed imperceptible by the naked eye, and clutches the other's neck.



The thing that he picks up by the neck is a spirit beast.

Shen's eyebrows twitch, and his face is filled with ferocity.

The spirit beast's throat crackles, its bloodshot eyes glare at Shen.

"Rules are rules." Shen says without an expression, "you blatantly crossed the line, and came here without permission. Punishable by death."

The spirit beast is lifted up and struggles mid-air like a dying fish.

Shen tightens his grip, and the spirit beast wriggles vigorously, then stops moving.

He throws it on the ground, and the corpse disappears as it touches the snow. A peculiar flower emerges from the snow.

Shen stomps on it and crushes it in two without looking.

He points his finger to the ground, and a black line extends vaguely across the snow and up the cliff into the stone cave along a trail of subtle footprints. Soon, something cracks explosively, and Shen's eyes shine. The black line breaks into pieces.

At the same time, a sharp screech echoes from far away, and eight spirit beasts emerge from the ground. These look different from the ones Zhao saw on the rooftop. Each of them is at least three metres tall, red-eyed and howling ferociously; the snowy mountains quiver.

A cloud of grey mist emerges underneath his feet, and intimately swivels around his legs. Shen touches it with his toe, and the cloud flies into the stone cave.

Then, a black blade emerges in Shen's hand: three feet and three inches long, incredibly thick and pitch black. There is only a slight glimmer at the edge of the blade... only the souls that will be slayed can see it.

The howling stops. In just a split second, they're all beheaded simultaneously.

The humongous beasts crumble down. Then, a few even larger ones emerge, like undying weeds. It seems like someone desperately wants to stall him.

As for Zhao and the guys, they are inside the cave. At first, the cave seems ordinary, but as they move forward it gets deeper and darker, and eventually pitch black. Zhao turns on a torch.

Around a hundred metres further in, a door blocks their way.

Under the torch light, the door cannot be clearly seen, but it seems to be made of some ancient alloy; it's rusty, and three skulls hang on top and on both sides. There is an inverted triangle marked on the door.

"A triangle? Is it Luobula restriction magic?" Chu moves closer and puts on gloves. He carefully runs his fingers on the door, and then knocks on it lightly as he puts his ear against it. He says, "there must be some hidden switch, it's not that complicated, I will examine it."

Zhao kicks Guo on the butt, "move in closer and learn from your brother Chu."

Guo mindlessly stumbles forward.

Chu looks down on him with disdain... the arrogant and intelligent probably all disregard the dummies. But since the Chief is here, he examines the door while responsibly explaining, "it's nothing remarkable, you will learn as you watch more."

He says while taking out a torch. He points the torch at the door gap, and peeks inside. He says, "there is one thick column with thirty five small ones, making a total of thirty six. Since it's divisible by six, they're probably all hooked together."

He signals Guo, "get down, I'll step on your shoulders."

Guo kneels down like a dog.

Chu doesn't give him an easy time: he steps right on to Guo, and starts knocking at the triangle.

It's not easy sustaining the weight of a man... though Chu is very skinny, Guo is very feeble. Soon, he starts shaking; afraid that Chu might fall, he grits his teeth and stays still.

When Guo thinks he is about to be squashed, Chu jumps down and says, "there are thirty six iron columns behind this door; because of the secret switches there are hollow spots. The materials are different too, so density varies. If your hearing is sensitive enough, you'll be able to tell the difference with practice."

Guo kneels on the floor, eyes wide open, huffing and panting with his mouth agape; he doesn't understand a word he's saying!

Chu glances at him, and ignores him. He is only talking to Zhao behind him, "now that I know it's general structure, I'll have to guess the details from experience."

Chu triggers a switch and pulls out a piece from the centre of the triangle; Guo is startled and sits on the floor, falling backwards.

Chu runs his fingers across a circle and turns around, “there are thirty six columns round this circle, I guess only three can be triggered. Which three do you think it is, Chief Zhao?”

“South, Northwest, Northeast.” Zhao says without thinking.

Guo finally hears something he thinks he can talk about, and quickly asks, “so... are we counting upwards as North, downwards as South, left West and right East?”

Chu and Zhao tacitly ignore his existence.

Guo’s self-esteem is severely crushed; he doesn’t dare say anything else.

In this instant, his drooping head is pulled up, and Zhao shines the torch at the door. He points to the left and says, “what’s that?”

Guo says stupidly, “... mountains.”

Zhao violently turns his head to the right, “what about that?”

“The Hanga people lived between the rivers and the mountains, from the mid- levels down to the valley... I told you earlier, idiot... because of the mountains it was hard for them to tell directions. To them, upwards were the mountains, and that’s the South, downwards were the water, and that’s the North. What’s with the left West and right East,” Zhao smacks him on the head, “even a pig is smarter than you!”

As they are talking, Chu has already cracked the secret switches; the door opens slowly.

A humid and decaying odour engulfs their nostrils.

## **Guardian Chapter: 35**

### **Chapter: 35**

“I’ll lead the way, Little Guo follow me, Old Chu stay at the back.” Zhao starts walking, and thinks of something. He takes out a spare gun from the bottom of his pants, and asks Guo, “did you pass the shooting test?”

Guo shamefully lowers his head, “the examiner said unless he dies and comes back to life, otherwise he wouldn’t let me pass.”

Zhao sighs, “what about a knife? Can you use that?”

Guo lowers his head even further.

Chu laughs coldly and mockingly; his attitude makes Guo even more miserable.

“I recruited a world peace ambassador.” Zhao looks at the endless cave sadly, and pulls out a miniature stun baton, handing it to Guo. He explains impatiently like teaching a kid how to wipe his ass clean, “take this, its very simple, just hold it out in front of yourself, no need to do anything else. Just try not to be too scared to move, is that okay?”

Guo holds the small gadget and shakes it a bit, nothing happens. The thing looks like a little torch. But Guo doesn't suspect that the Chief is lying, he thinks he must be too dumb to understand what this does... he has a tendency to think the worst about himself.

Zhao is tired of explaining, and starts moving forward. Guo runs a few steps to catch up, pondering whether he should ask. A normal human's rational mind tells him that under dangerous circumstances he shouldn't be kept in the dark, but...

Guo stares at Zhao's tall figure, and fearfully thinks: if he asked, the Chief would probably bite his head off.

When he imagines a furious Zhao, he trembles, and the “stun baton” suddenly shoots out a string of sparkling flare, which rushes towards Zhao from behind.

Luckily Zhao is incredibly alert, he hears something fishy, and swiftly dodges aside. The streak of ember flies deep into the cave with a rush of heat.

Chu shouts, “fuck!”

Chu stares at Guo with shock, he never thought this piece of garbage would do what nobody in the SIU dares to even think about... beating up the bastard Chief.

Zhao embarrassingly wipes of mud and water from his clothes, “what the fuck did you do!?”

Guo is extraordinarily innocent, “I, I don't know... it it it it suddenly moved...”

“Bullshit, that thing attacks when you're scared. The more frightened you are, the more powerful it becomes. It's totally tailor-made for you, alright?” Zhao is losing his mind, “what the hell were you thinking looking at my back that got you so scared!? We were just walking!”

After a period of eerie silence, Guo points at the stomping and enraged Zhao while quivering, “this... I was thinking about this.”

Chu really can't hold it anymore, he laughs wholeheartedly at the hilarious situation.

Then, Chu extends his hand, “let me take a look.”

Chu rarely talks to him. Guo is flattered and dazed, and obediently hands it to him.

Chu shakes the “stun baton” next to his ear, and knocks on it. His eyes seem to realise something, and throws it back to Guo. He looks at Zhao with a hidden realisation, “Chief Zhao, this is probably something inappropriate, isn’t it.”

Zhao chuckles, “as if you’re a decent guy yourself... careful!”

He hasn’t finished his sentence, and his face changes. He kneels down and pushes Guo aside. A large explosion blasts off, and a surge of gale sweeps above their scalps. A putrid odour oozes out, and a giant comb-shaped object flies above. Its base is made of thick wood, around three metres long, and is covered with sharp blades. If it hits you, you’d turn into a meat pie instantly.

Chu stands against the wall, and takes out a dozen of paper talismans.

The ten-feet “giant comb” makes a u-turn mid-air, and swings towards them from above. The talismans in Chu’s hand fly out like throwing darts, and precisely adhere to the densely packed knives. But perhaps he picked the wrong talismans, the object is completely unaffected, and comes crashing down with a penetrating gust.

Zhao’s gun slides on to his hand.

At this instant, nobody sees it coming, but the slow-witted Guo finally realises the situation, and screams inhumanly, “mommy!!!”

Then, a blast of flames shoots out from his “stun baton”: three metres of intense heat. The power of the fire is not less than that of a gas explosion. Zhao and Chu dodge at the same time, and the pillar of blaze crashes towards the few dozens of blades. The giant “comb” quivers in the fiery vortex and eventually melts into a liquid, splashing on to the ground with hissing noises.

For a minute, nobody speaks.

A long time has passed, and Chu rigidly turns his neck, sincerely looking at Guo, and exclaims from his heart, “you’re so badass.”

Guo’s mind went blank in pure terror, and his heart is still thundering. He desperately needs some medicine to calm him down. When he hears Chu, a million emotions surge up inside of him.

“I thought you just sealed an earthbound spirit into a stun baton, which feeds on fear as a source of energy,” Chu turns towards the Chief, shivering a little, “what... what did you do to make that thing?”

Zhao's expression switches from astonished to pretentious at the speed of light. He adjusts his clothes, and says seriously, "it's illegal to imprison spirits, I'm a decent, law-abiding civil servant, why would I blatantly break the law?"

Chu has nothing to say to that.

"Well... inside contains the shattered souls of a few hundred executed ghosts, most of them I got from the Ghost Slayer, and some I exchanged with the Hell Guards for spirit money. Then I mixed the souls with Samadhi true fire..."

Chu is having an emotional breakdown, "and where the hell did you get the fire?"

"Last year I captured an escaped Bifang bird, and I borrowed its flames to light a cigarette. And then I saved up a fire seed."

Chu stays silent and can't make any comment. He extends an arm to help Guo get up, and says feebly, "never mind, let's keep going."

He has a gangster Chief who makes friends with good and evil and all sorts of beings from the three realms, he's afraid that in his entire life, through normal means, he will never fulfil his wish of beating this person up... perhaps this glorious and arduous mission will land on the office mascot Guo Changcheng comrade.

Zhao smiles, and is about to remind them to be careful. Suddenly, a long whistling sound comes from far away, and a cloud of grey smoke sparkles in fluorescence, floating forward and landing in Zhao's arms. The shining mist disappears and a letter emerges in Zhao's hand.

A familiar scent, pitch black envelope, blood-red words.

Chu's face tenses up, and he retracts his step. Zhao is afraid Guo might lose control again, and walks forward a little to avoid that troublemaker.

Chu asks, "it's the Ghost Slayer?"

"Yea." Zhao rips the envelope apart, but what's written in the letter puts a frown on his face.

The Ghost Slayer usually has a lot to say. He would have started with greetings and unimportant formalities, as if he wanted to ask about all your distant relatives, before he says what he's actually writing to say in just a few words. Perhaps that's called the subtlety of an accomplished gentleman. But this time, the letter is incredibly brief, and the writing is all scribbled; it reads: "danger, do not proceed, return promptly."

Chu asks, "why would the Ghost Slayer send his letter here, what's wrong?"

Zhao folds the letter and puts it in his pocket, not saying anything.

The Ghost Slayer usually sends his letter to the office, unless it's extremely urgent, otherwise the letter wouldn't fall right into Zhao's hands. After all, the Ghost Slayer prefers not to be seen, and the same applies to his letters.

What's happening now?

How does the Ghost Slayer know where Zhao is?

Zhao stays incredibly calm on the outside, but his mind goes round and round thinking of all sorts of possibilities. He hesitates, and says to Chu, "Old Chu, you bring him back to meet with Lin and the others."

Chu says, "what?"

Guo asks, "we're not going to find Wang Zheng anymore?"

"I'll go alone, you guys go back first." Zhao pats Guo on the shoulder, "hold it tight, and be careful on your way back. Destroy the ritual site on the mountain with Lin, keep an eye on Shen and his students. Wait for the rescue team to clear the road."

Chu has an uneasy feeling, "you're going alone?"

Zhao nods without saying a word.

Chu frowns, and holds Guo's hand decisively, "let's go."

Guo still wants to say something, "but..."

Chu says, "but what, don't waste time. Our Chief is in a hurry to get things done and go back to his boyfriend. Now come on."

Chu pulls the reluctant Guo out of the cave, who keeps looking back at Zhao worrisomely.

Zhao holds the torch in his armpit, with his leather-gloved hands in his pockets, watching the two leave. As they leave his line of sight, and the sound of a closing door is heard, he keeps walking.

Suddenly, the grey smoke from earlier reappears and solidifies into the skeleton of a five-year-old. The skeleton blocks his way with arms wide open.

"Oh, you're a very small puppet. Did the Ghost Slayer send you?" Zhao raises his eyebrows.

Perhaps it's because of how small it is, the puppet's black eyeholes seem to look very innocent. It doesn't seem to understand what Zhao is saying. It blocks his way still.

Zhao rubs his chin... he never thought that the quiet Ghost Slayer actually knows him pretty well. If he had sent a giant skeleton, Zhao would have busted his way through violently. But this small creature doesn't speak, and it's so tiny and fragile, Zhao doesn't want to hurt it.

Zhao examines the determined little puppet, "you're not gonna move away, are you?"

The puppet twitches its mouth, and a cackling noise is heard.

Zhao shakes his head. He raises his leg and crosses above the small creature with a big step.

The small thing has yet to realise what's happening, it turns its head following Zhao's movements, and its skull almost falls off. It finally realises that Zhao is already walking ahead.

The small puppet scrambles forward and grabs hold of Zhao's clothes, not letting him go.

Zhao keeps walking with the skeleton attached to him... the small thing isn't heavy after all.

If it had eyes, it would probably be crying anxiously.

As he heads forward, a decaying smell grows stronger and stronger. The air humidifies. An ancient and battered flight of stairs extends downwards, and it gets narrower the further down he goes. Then, Zhao doesn't want the skeleton getting in his way, so he picks it up like a child and puts it on to his shoulder. He looks at his watch.

The revealing mirror is eerily calm.

Zhao stares at it for two seconds, and he stops walking abruptly... he realises, the hands are going backwards!

No... not all of them are. The second hand is going anti-clockwise, but the minute hand is going clockwise, and the hour hand is at twelve o'clock. There seems to be a strange force drawing the three hands together.

Finally, they all meet at twelve, and stop dead.

Zhao wipes off some mud from the cave wall, and sniffs.



“Perhaps it’s an illusion.” Zhao murmurs, perhaps also saying to the mini skeleton, “but I feel like I’m buried alive.”

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The small puppet cackles, and stabs Zhao on the cheek with its tiny finger bones. It then points towards a wall not far away, and cackles again.

Zhao raises the torch, and finds some writings on the wall.

“Well, you don’t have eyeballs, but your eyeholes are sharp... that’s Hanga language.” Zhao moves closer, and touches the wall lightly, “no... strictly speaking the Hanga didn’t have their own language, this must be a special kind of spell.”

The small skeleton says, “ga... ga...?”

“Don’t ask me, I’m not a multilingual dictionary, god knows what that means.” Zhao moves in even closer, and murmurs, “but I do know that in Hanga culture, round shapes were considered benign and peaceful, whereas cornered shapes were considered evil. For instance a triangle is the prison of spirits, and I saw an octagon too but I haven’t yet figured out what it means...”

He runs his fingers across the writings, and finds an octagonal symbol.

“There it is,” Zhao says calmly, “great, now the scary part comes.”

A huge explosion interrupts him, and the entire cave quivers. Zhao almost loses his balance, and the small puppet screeches as it tightly clutches Zhao’s collar and hair. A flaming dragon howls and comes rushing forward; Zhao holds on to the wall and puts the little skeleton in his arms, a blazing red light shines on his face.

The flickering flames reflect on his black irises, with a peculiarly scorching coldness. Zhao pats the scaredy skeleton on its skull, “don’t hang on to my clothes, get in my watch if you’re scared.”

The small puppet forgets all about his master’s orders, and turns into a cloud of grey mist and jumps into his watch. The next moment, a wave of flare engulfs him.

Zhao clutches a paper talisman in his hand, but it doesn’t burn in the fire, and he doesn’t feel the heat either.

Zhao hesitates, and puts away the talisman. He looks up to the vortex of flames sweeping the entire cave clean, but the fire doesn't touch him. As the fire wears away, the octagonal symbol on the wall falls off along with a pinch of mud.

He quickly catches it and puts it in an empty cigarette box.

Then, larger pieces of the wall begin to crumble, and as Zhao wipes off the dirt, a wall painting vaguely emerges.

Perhaps due to its age, most of the painting is obscured. The symbols on it are very abstract, they're scattered all over the place like a stream of consciousness. Maybe an archaeologist can figure it out, but not Zhao. He studies the painting till his eyes almost become short-sighted, and still he has no clue what it's about.

He loses interest quickly, and continues walking. Suddenly, he thinks of something and stops, and looks at the wall from further away. The torch light shines on to the top of the painting, then forty five degrees downwards, three o'clock position, then forty five degrees downwards...

He realises that the painting makes a giant octagon, and each corner has a small octagon.

Zhao stares at the painting, and starts searching in his pockets: wallet, some coins inside, and credit cards and receipts and finally, a small piece of scruffy paper... teared off from an ancient book.

It's a page about Luobula restriction magic from the Ancient Scroll of Dark Magic. For some reason, he didn't show it to Chu.

On it is a drawing of a hideous monster, with six arms, a head and only one leg, each pointing to one corner of an octagon. The monster looks ferocious and menacing, and its wide-open jaws hold a mountain, while its left chest has an octagonal symbol on it.

"The mountain is in its mouth, and that thing is in its heart..." Zhao pauses for a moment, and sticks the old map he carries around on to the wall.

Zhao then puts the drawing of the monster on to the map, and slowly rotates the map, turning South upwards. He marks a line with his fingernail connecting the monster's mouth with its heart and finally to the deepest part of the stone cave.

The strange fire in the valley, the skulls at the mountaintop, and the dark magic of the extinct tribe: these things all seem to hold a deeper and darker secret.

And why did Wang run off here on her own?

Why is she so obsessed with her hundred-year-old corpse?

Zhao has an ominous feeling... when he finds Wang Zheng, he will lock her up in a dark room for a month, this troublesome suicidal girl!

Zhao keeps heading into the cave, which keeps getting narrower and narrower. He lowers his head and keeps walking, almost developing a chronic spinal injury, and only then does he arrive at the end.

There is another door, with the six-armed monster engraved on it, the same one from the page Zhao tore off.

Except it doesn't look terrifying, it looks terrified.

Zhao slowly raises his hand, and as his palm touches the door, his chest sinks as if having a heart attack. But he does not hesitate and pushes the door open. He finds himself on the edge of a cliff in the mid-ranges, and below him is the mysterious valley.

He feels as though he were standing amidst a stormy ocean: heavy waves crush towards his chest, suffocating him.

The sun is still up, but the clouds enshroud the sun and no light can shine through. Zhao pauses for a moment, then walks ahead.

He takes the first step, and something is triggered.

From deep under the earth comes a silent wave of lamentation, like ripples on water, spreading out from the mountains of the Hanga people.

This valley contains something... something mystical.

Zhao walks towards the valley, and the air gets thinner and thinner; the force that clutches and squashes his chest grows stronger and stronger. His temples seem to be clasped and crushed: only he can hear the rapid pumping of his veins. His vision darkens, and he slowly adjusts his breathing... he would be exhausted if he breathes too vigorously.

His intuition tells him: if there is something that Wang cannot forget even after so many years since she died, it wouldn't be her corpse, it would be this.

The small skeleton hiding in his watch sticks its skull out, and crashes its jaws together. It seems to be saying something, but it's clearly scaredy; it wants to stop Zhao, but it doesn't dare come out.

Zhao pushes it back into his watch, and moves forward against the overwhelming pressure with a sombre expression. He takes out three yellow paper talismans, but they are different from the ones he used before: they each have "Guardian" written on them.

If the black cat were here, it would recognise them, as these are the legendary Guardian Order.

He doesn't make any other movements, and keeps walking. For every step, one of the talismans will burn up, and as the final one burns and disappears, a long whip appears in his hand with three whipping sounds. The whip seems to be alive, it extends forward and pulls him along... until he sees a disappearing white shadow.

Zhao's face darkens. He sends the whip flying, and pulls the white shadow towards him. Wang's plastic body is long gone, and her spirit is incredibly feeble. She looks at him with the calm gaze of a dying person.

"Motherfucking, you must have lost your kind." Zhao pulls her over and furiously stuffs her into his watch. In this moment, his agonised heart is about to explode, "this fucking place."

Zhao has Wang now, and immediately decides to head back. But something seems to have attracted him, and he inadvertently looks up to where Wang was standing.

He sees a colossal stone monument, a few dozens metres tall, towering from the Earth into the Heavens. It's entirely black, thicker at the top and thinner at the bottom, like a gigantic wedge nailed into the ground. At the bottom is a

ruined ritual site. Hanga spells are engraved all over stones at the ritual site, and the offering table is filled with freshly-prepared bloody offerings.

The moment when Zhao sees the humongous tower, a million faces emerge on it, tightly packed together in a giant horde. Each of them is mourning and screeching in agony and suffering; cacophonous wails pierce through his ears. It's the sharp shrieks made by millions of people at the same time, with all their might.

It's as if a huge boulder crushed on to his chest. A sharp whistle echoes inside his brain. His entire body suffers in acute and tormenting pain. He vomits and blood gushes out of his mouth. He struggles to stand up but he can't feel his limbs. His knees bend, and he falls backwards.

For a few seconds, Zhao sees and hears nothing. His chest vigorously quivers in agony and eventually becomes numb.

I can't pass out here, he thinks. He decisively takes out a knife with his bloodied hand and slashes towards his other hand.

A freezing hand stops him. Zhao is pulled into someone's arms. Amidst the odour of blood he picks up a familiar scent... the odd aroma that comes from Hell.

Is it... the Ghost Slayer?

Zhao's knife falls to the ground. His heart softens, and he falls unconscious.

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The Ghost Slayer's dark cloak is a thick cloud of smoke that no light can shine through: a dozen metres of smokescreen whips up and engulfs the two, and extends into the Heavens. The shroud of darkness blocks out everything outside.

He embraces Zhao in his arms, and shouts towards the wristwatch, "come out!"

The small puppet floats upwards, and droops its disproportionately big skull. The Ghost Slayer glares at it, and absorbs it back into his sleeve, "come back."

The small puppet obediently turns into a rush of grey mist and rolls into a ball and back into his sleeve.

Wang comes out of the watch as well, and looks at Zhao worryingly.

The Ghost Slayer glares at her coldly, his gaze sombre and frightening; Wang quivers in terror.

After a long while, the Ghost Slayer looks away, sits on the ground, and carefully adjusts the man in his arms, "you work for him, I won't judge whether you were right or wrong; sit aside."

Wang dares not sit too close; she hesitates, and sits at the far corner in the pillar of smoke.

The Ghost Slayer seems to be afraid of making Zhao dirty... although it's not like Zhao is in a pristine state after this whole ordeal... he carefully sets his weapon aside; Wang realizes that his blade is tainted with dark blood stains.

A pale white hand comes out of the black hole of a sleeve, and gently wipes away the blood stain at the corner of Zhao's lips. As the finger touches the lips, he stops, as if he wants to kiss him. He acts like he is holding a piece of fragile and precious treasure, but not the ill-tempered and crude Guardian.

Wang's eyes widen in astonishment.

A long time later, Zhao finally wakes up. He finds his head leaning against someone's shoulder. He frowns; it's as if he has just awoken from a deep coma and his entire body is drained of vitality.

He struggles to open his eyes and looks at the Ghost Slayer, “you...”

A frigid finger lightly presses on to his lips. The Ghost Slayer holds his hand against his heart, and says softly, “don’t talk, focus.”

Afterwards, a surge of freezing yet soothing energy gushes out of the Ghost Slayer’s palm. Zhao starts shivering, and yet as the energy passes through his entire body, he closes his eyes, and comfortably lets go and leaves his fate up to the other person.

The freezing flow comes from the ferocious and cruel nature of the Ghost Slayer, but Zhao’s vigorously chaotic heart seems to calm down amidst the endless stream.

Zhao admires the Ghost Slayer: ever since the Guardian Order passed on to him, the Ghost Slayer has always worked with him in times of crises. Throughout these years, Zhao has never seen him lose control.

The Ghost Slayer always seems so perfectly poised, polite and yet extremely restrained: his brutal and malevolent nature has always been in chains, and not a sign of it can be seen.

Extreme restraint could be to achieve utmost freedom: if a person, for thousands of years, has always hidden his true nature, then on one hand, he lives in pain, but on the other, he lives above everyone else.

Soon, the agonising torture on his soul wears away. Zhao opens his eyes, and sits up, “thank you, I guess I got lucky again this time.”

The Ghost Slayer reluctantly lets go of him, and moves aside a little. He says politely, “it’s my pleasure... but the Guardian should not have ignored my warning.”

“It’s all because of that stupid girl,” Zhao points at the head-dropped Wang, “I was worried sick, she works for me after all, I can’t just leave her to die.”

His face sinks into darkness, “come on over here, quick!”

Wang silently floats over, and Zhao’s whip comes whipping towards her. She closes her eyes, but the whip doesn’t touch her, it only rushes towards the ground, leaving a deep scar.

“Open your eyes. I never beat women up, now move in closer.” The whip transforms into a paper talisman, which floats like a feather on to Zhao’s hand. A corner of it is blood-stained. “You’re not listening to the Guardian Order now, are you?”

Wang kneels down in front of him.

But Zhao isn't moved at all, "get back up, don't give me that. What the hell are you kneeling down for, my wallet is still in the car, no red pocket money for you."

Wang bites her lips.

Zhao furiously glares at her, and takes out a cigarette and lighter. A hand silently snatches the cigarette away.

He rubs his nose. He feels like something similar happened before.

"I checked your files," Zhao rubs his fingers unnaturally, "you died in 1713, the second year of the civil war of the Hanga tribe. So what happened then? Did you prepare the offerings at the bottom of the big pillar just now? What's that thing?"

The Ghost Slayer interrupts, "that's not just any big pillar, it's called the Pillar of Nature."

Sounds familiar. Zhao pauses for a thought, and frowns, "one of the Four Mystical Artifacts?"

The Ghost Slayer nods, "the Guardian knows a lot."

First the Sundial of Reincarnation, then the Pillar of Nature. The Four Mystical Artifacts have long been lost and scattered across the universe, it's not like they are vegetables found in a wet market; coming across two of them

in just half a year, Zhao feels like he should have bought the lottery ticket instead.

The conspiracy theorist in him emerges, a million possibilities shine through his mind: the oddly tranquil office building of the Dragon City University, the hungry ghost that chased after Li Qian, the missing sundial, and the wanted criminal spirit beasts, and... the warning from the Ghost Slayer.

Zhao's expression turns to solemn, and asks the most important question at hand, "what's the Pillar of Nature?"

"People often say 'the gods and the spirits control Life and Death', but that's not true. Ever since the dawn of time, there were Good and Evil. The earliest judgment was engraved on the Pillar of Nature, to tell Good from Evil. This great pillar was formed from a million mountain and river spirits, and it extends from the Nine Heavens down to the depths of Hell. On it is the details of all Eighteen Floors of Hell, and the Book of Life and Death comes from the judgment engraved upon it. Ever since the creation of the pillar, people believed that the mountains and rivers have their spirits."

The Ghost Slayer pauses for a moment, and adds, "the Pillar of Nature was first created to suppress ghosts, over time, millions of evil spirits end up imprisoned within it. Who would have thought that humans made use of it to enslave their own kind for eternity."

“Other people wouldn’t be affected by it, but you...” The Ghost Slayer hesitates, and he rarely does. He continues, “you were born with an unstable soul, so you were affected greatly by it.”

Zhao has never heard of that before, he asks, “my soul is unstable? My soul is just fine, how is it unstable?”

The Ghost Slayer stays silent for a moment, and says, “a human has Samadhi true fire in three places: head and both shoulders. Your left shoulder is missing a fire, in the olden times that was called a ‘ghost-handed shoulder’. It causes instability in your soul, the Guardian must be extremely careful in the future.”

Zhao frowns and looks at his left shoulder. But he gets over it quickly and continues, “so Luobula restriction magic was the Hangas using the Pillar of Nature?”

The Ghost Slayer nods, “they would behead people and burn their bodies, and use dark magic to trap their souls inside the valley. The pillar would absorb the souls, and one can control the dead spirits using their skulls.”

Zhao points at Wang, “what about her?”

The Ghost Slayer looks at Wang, who shivers as his gaze seems to pierce through her soul and look into all her past-lives.

He says, “she was beheaded, but her body seems to have been kept intact, so her soul was never imprisoned in the pillar.”

Wang smiles bitterly, “yes, I was immature back then. I died with a grudge, and took possession of the body of a living. The former Guardian captured me and took me in under the Guardian Order. ‘Wang Zheng’ wasn’t my birth name, it was the name of the girl I possessed... my real name is Gelan, I was the daughter of the leader of the tribe who died in the civil war.”

Zhao realises with discontent that his SIU is full of people born into rich and powerful families.

Wang continues, “the leader of the rebels was called Sang Zan, his mother was my mother’s maid. Our tribe didn’t have normal citizens, you were either the royals or a slave. So Sang naturally became a slave as well. He was one of the elites among the slaves as he was capable and brave. My father appointed him to be in charge of the war horses. He was quite admired by many.”

She laughs bitterly, “but in our tribe, no matter how capable you are, if you’re a slave, your life can only amount to that of a dog or a pig or worse. You can be sold and killed for no reason. You could have had a lot of admirers, and you could have been rich, but you wouldn’t have had dignity after all. At one point, my father got a female servant



pregnant, and my mother was furious... that servant was Sang's younger sister. My mother furiously beheaded Sang's mother for some trivial reason, and my brother killed Sang's father. His sister... well, she eventually hanged herself."

Zhao starts chewing some beef jerky, and comments, "your dad was a jerk."

The Ghost Slayer can see that he is not in a good mood; he coughs, and asks, "there used to be a stone tablet at the bottom of the pillar, and on it a list of all

the imprisoned souls was engraved. I see that the stone tablet remains, but the list had been scrapped, did that happen during the war?"

Wang nods, "Sang brought his followers to victory, and eventually arrived at the forbidden site... the Pillar of Nature. He said he wanted everyone in the tribe to live equally and with dignity, so he destroyed the name list on the stone tablet. The leader... my father, mother and brother, the rest of the royal families, and all their followers and soldiers were all hanged in the watch house at the mountaintop. Ever since, the Hanga tribe abolished royals and slaves."

"What about you?" Zhao asks, "you weren't executed, because you helped Sang in secret, didn't you?"

Wang drops her head, "I knew him since we were little. My father was hunting him down, and I hid him... I really didn't want him to die, but I never thought the war would turn out like it did..."

## Guardian Chapter: 38

### Chapter: 38

Zhao frowns and looks at her, "you're not sick are you?"

Wang doesn't answer, she stares straight at the ground. She always seems to be dazed when her eyes fixate on a spot. After a while, she says softly, "I was young, around seventeen. I didn't know anything. I was naive and foolish. I only saw what was happening right in front of me, and I only considered one path in my mind. I... Sang and I had been close ever since we were kids. Though he was a slave, I treated him as family. Dad wanted to kill him, and I... of course I didn't want that."

"You hid him, like a form two girl hiding a love letter from her parents." Zhao says impolitely.

A faint smile emerges but quickly vanishes from Wang's face, "perhaps. At the time I blamed my father, he brought shame on me, he... he was our great leader, how could he be so shameless?"

Zhao stays silent, still wearing an unpleasant face, but his gaze subtly softens. Wang sighs after a long while, "is there a place in this world where everyone is free, where everyone is equal?"

Nobody answers. After a long time, Zhao suddenly says, "yes."

Wang and the Ghost Slayer both turn towards him. Zhao's lips are still stained with bright red blood marks; his face is particularly pale. Along with his dark grey shirt, his figure is weathered, only his eyes are shining astonishingly... his eyes are always sparkling, like nothing in this world can wipe away the glimmer.

Zhao pauses, and says slowly, "in death."

The Ghost Slayer's face remains out of sight underneath a thick layer of swivelling mist. As he hears this, he can't help but disagree, "wouldn't that mean there is no hope? What is the purpose of living then? The Guardian is too pessimistic."

"Only if one dwells on the surface, Your Honour." Zhao calmly looks up, "what's fairness and what's equality? If someone considers himself equally treated, others must feel that they are not. If people are starving, equality would mean everyone is adequately fed. When no-one is concerned with survival, equality will then entail dignity for all. Even if everyone lives with dignity, there must be something each person desires to make one appear superior over others, and they would never quit till death, wouldn't they? Equal or not, isn't that all up to each person to decide?"

The Ghost Slayer is lost for words for a moment, and lightly laughs, "nonsense."

Zhao laughs too, and changes the subject, "Sang won the war, killed your dad, and abolished slavery, then what?"

"Afterwards, the eldest in each family would represent the whole family to raise concerns and vote for solutions, the majority view would be adopted." Wang says, "Sang suggested this system. He wasn't educated, but he knew what the people wanted. It's like what people call democracy now. I guess humans have always wanted the same things."

Zhao bends one leg, putting both his hands on to his knee, and sits in a rather laid-back and unappealing position. But his words are still sharp like knives, piercing at Wang's heart. He suddenly says, "that was when you died, wasn't it?" Wang is taken by surprise, and is stunned silent. Her gaze saddens.

And when everyone thinks she will not speak, suddenly, she says, "I was... at that time I had nowhere else to stay but at Sang's. But I couldn't do any work: when I was little, my mother only ever taught me how to dress up and order the servants to do everything else. I couldn't hunt, and I couldn't even take care of house work... Then, a girl in the tribe wanted to marry Sang, her father came for matchmaking, but Sang turned him

down. The girl was devastated and ran up to the mountains on her own. When they found her she was dead; she fell down the hillside and banged her head on a rock. Her father despised me, he convinced a lot of people that since I was the leader's daughter, I must have used magic to put a curse on the girl. So... so they decided to behead me."

Wang's shoulders suddenly begin to tremble... she used to believe wholeheartedly that her father was wrong: the people should not have been enslaved, they were humans too, they didn't deserve to live with shame and be controlled by others. She used to be like Sang, wishing that the people could all live equally, freely and happily.

But despite her sympathy and compassion, the tribe loathed her.

"The girl's father led the tribe to vote raising their hands: those who didn't meant they abstained or didn't want me to be killed, and those who did meant they agreed to beheading me..."

When she says "beheading", her voice cracks and she starts crying.

That day, a huge crowd gathered together, all looking rather pleased. Rows after rows of raised hands packed tightly in a cluster. When looked at from above, they appeared as claws of evil spirits in the deepest river in Hell. Almost everyone raised their hands. They glared at the tied-up girl, coldly, blandly, foolishly, and sadistically.

Shockingly, they reached a consensus: kill her, chop off her head.

Even if there were thousands of lights in your heart, they would be extinguished till not even ashes remain.

Nobody remembered what she did... or perhaps, she did it with an ulterior motive anyway.

Tears fall in large droplets from Wang's eyes on to the ground, turning to smoke as they hit the ground, and disappearing into thin air. Her figure grows weaker... she died over three hundred years ago, so she shouldn't have tears; but now her heart is broken beyond repair, and her soul is burning up.

"Don't cry." Zhao feebly extends his hand and holds her chin. He wipes off the tears on her face, and puts a soul-stabilising talisman against her forehead. The crying stops, and she stares at Zhao with her innocent eyes. Zhao's gaze is gentle and subtle, and Wang seems to be stunned for a while.

Zhao holds out his watch, and lowers his voice, "go inside first."

Wang suddenly feels that Zhao already knows the entire truth about her.

Wang is still silent, and feels a gentle but irresistible force pulling her into the revealing mirror. Zhao says, "I'll let you out when it's night."

Wang disappears. Zhao and the Ghost Slayer are left in silence.

Zhao closes his eyes; he is exhausted.

The Ghost Slayer stays silent for a moment, then pats his shoulder, "don't sleep just yet, if you did, your soul that was just stabilised might disperse again. You can rest later... is your chest still painful?"

Zhao forcefully rubs between his eyebrows, and says with a coarse voice, "I'm fine, it's just that stupid girl's drugs, my head is still dizzy."

"How about I escort you back first, then I will return for the Pillar of Nature."

Zhao waves his hand, and forces a pretence of being energetic. Finally, he can't help it but says painfully, "can I have a cigarette?"

Zhao treats his silence as acquiescence, and swiftly lights up a cigarette. He smokes deeply like an addict, and not even secondhand smoke comes out; every last bit of smoke is sucked into his lungs. He seems refreshed, "I'm fine, really, I treat vomiting blood as detoxing. I just didn't know what that thing was and I panicked. You don't have to walk me back, You Honour, taking the pillar is the priority. Last time someone else got to the sundial first, so don't waste time on me."

The Ghost Slayer freezes, "you saw everything last time?"

Zhao strangely looks at him, "I'm not blind... but the Hell Guards are putting an arrest order for spirit beasts, I wonder who's behind all this, who would dare challenge you like that?"

The Ghost Slayer is silent for a moment, and Zhao instantly feels his embarrassment, and says, "oh, you don't have to answer me. It's just that I'm in charge of the living world, so if it ever affects us here, it would be nice if you could warn me in advance, Your Honour."

The Ghost Slayer agrees. Zhao stands up, puts off the cigarette in the snow, and seems to be alive again. He pulls out a scruffy paper talisman, and eats it, "damn, so hard to chew. Let's go, shall we, Your Honour?"

The Ghost Slayer nods, and retracts the smoke barrier; the Pillar of Nature reappears in front of the two.

Zhao swallows the soul-stabilising talisman, but he still feels the incredibly brutal and menacing force emanating from the Pillar of Nature. He puts a hand into his pocket, and

stands upright facing the colossal monument. He realises that the cross-section of the pillar is an octagon. It sharply penetrates the ground all the way down to the centre of the Earth.

The Ghost Slayer walks forward, stands still, palms pressed together, and after a moment, from the ground whips up a fearsome storm. His hoodie and dark cloak look as though they may be pulled away by the gale, but he remains poised.

The Ghost Slayer bellows, "the Spirits of the Mountains!"

The Pillar of Nature quivers. Then the ground. Afterwards, the snowy mountains tremble together as well. In the depths of the valleys and hills comes a thundering blow, like a deity trapped under the icy rocks being awakened, letting out a terrifying cry that darkens the skies.

Zhao struggles to keep his eyes open in the gusts, as he barely sees a mirage flashing across in the air; it seems like a few figures have emerge.

He sees Wang in her teens, innocent and naive. He sees a handsome young man in shabby clothing, standing atop, looking back at her with a bloodied face and a genuine and pure smile.

Then he roars, and swings a giant iron shovel on to the stone tablet. Underneath his feet is a blood-red hillside, laden with corpses.

Those who are alive look up intently at his every movement.

The man clears the stone tablet, stays silent, and suddenly howls in a coarse voice. Zhao doesn't understand the language, but he knows what it means.

Bloodied and full of mud and dirt, though he emerges victorious, he doesn't seem content, but only indignant... a tribe that has been repressed for a thousand years. The first breath of fresh air in forever, it almost brings him to tears.

The silent crowd eventually joins in; the howling and weeping of men echo in the valley.

The mirage disappears abruptly, and the Pillar of Nature gradually rises up from the ground. The Ghost Slayer points a finger, "the Souls of the Rivers!"

Zhao stands motionless, and the black shadow of the pillar reflects on to his irises. His eyes redden from the howling wind, and he presses on to the watch, comforting the the soul of the girl trapped within: a soul of never-ending solitude and melancholy.

At this instant, a screeching shriek pierces through the air and attacks the ears. Zhao lowers his head inadvertently: his brain gets dizzy again. The screaming gets denser

and louder and the rigorous cries echo like fingernails scratching at your internal organs.

The screeching continues to strengthen and soon explodes out of control; Zhao feels like vomiting.

The Ghost Slayer stands not far away, and summons a wall of smoke again, blocking out all noises. The Pillar of Nature reverts to normal and falls back into the ground. Zhao tastes blood: he realises he bit his tongue.

“What was that?”

The calm and poised Ghost Slayer finally shows a sign of worry, he says, “I was reckless, this must be handled with caution. That was the wails of ten thousand ghosts.”

## **Guardian Chapter: 39**

### **Chapter: 39**

The Ghost Slayer sits on the ground, and a moment later, he retains his usual composure, “the Pillar of Nature has been erected here for thousands and possibly millions of years. Sang Zan cleared the stone tablet, so logically the spirits imprisoned within should have been freed, but who would have thought... ghosts normally cannot cry, the spirits were screaming and wailing with the risk of shattering their own souls. Neither of us can withstand the force of their weeping, even the mountains may crumble.”

Zhao puts his hands behind his back and stands behind him in silence.

The Ghost Slayer says, “what happened exceeded my expectation.”

Zhao has yet to reply, and suddenly, his revealing mirror flashes and a rush of white swiftly emerges, pouncing towards the pillar at lightning speed with determination.

Her body has yet to leave the watch entirely, and from Zhao’s hand a transparent string grows out like spider silk, tightly securing Wang in place.

Wang is stunned. She lowers her head, and the man and ghost lock eyes with each other. Wang’s eyes are watery, but the talisman pushes her tears back. Zhao remains emotionless, appearing rather heartless.

“You ran away once under my watch, if I let you run away a second time, I will chop my head off and you can kick it like a ball.” Zhao says coldly.

Wang silently retracts a bit, and the spider silk is still restraining her.

Zhao stares at her with an unpleasant expression. Wang is scared, naturally, and looks down. Eventually, the Ghost Slayer pulls him back softly, and calmly advises, "Guardian, compose yourself, it's best not to get mad."

Zhao looks at him... he can reprimand his staff all he wants, but he has to show the Ghost Slayer some respect. He tries to be as calm as he can, and says to Wang, "you think if you sacrificed yourself to the Pillar of Nature you can appease the spirits? I don't understand, do you really believe that 'faith can move mountains', or do you just want to become casserole?"

He started out nice, but he gets angrier and eventually howls, "are you stupid!?"

The red line round Wang's neck grows brighter, and the talisman on her forehead flickers as she trembles. Her appearance is almost comical, like a silly zombie girl from a crappy horror flick, but nobody is laughing.

Zhao stops yelling; he finally let his anger out and begins to calm down. He sits beside the Ghost Slayer on the ground, and mercifully says to Wang, "you sit down too."

The binding silk swivels in the air and transforms into a silvery chair, just big enough for one person to sit on.

Perhaps too much has happened in her life and afterlife, she doesn't have the passion and rowdiness unique to ethnic minorities in the Northwest. She always seems depressed, silent, and withdrawn.

The girl's dark hair hangs on both sides of her cheeks, floating in mid-air with no movement.

With much effort, Zhao finally manages to speak with a mild tone, and slowly says, "there are some things that outsiders can easily guess the whole truth about, do you know why?"

Zhao sighs, "that's because it's gonna happen no matter what; it's fate. You cannot stop fate."

Wang mutters, "you know?"

"I just understand people like Sang." Zhao says, "for centuries the people had been enslaved, and nobody had ever rebelled. He was the first in his time, and he must have felt immense indignation. Such a courageous and elite man, he must have been fearless even in death, but he could not have let anyone hurt his pride. And a man's pride has nothing to do with riches and fame; it only boils down to protecting his wife and children, and providing those he loves with a stable life, doesn't it?"

As the Ghost Slayer hears this, he can't help but ask, "is the Guardian the same?"

"I cannot control my fate," Zhao cannot think of a reason why the Ghost Slayer would want to discuss something as trivial as this, and just says, "but if someone willingly and devotedly follows me, takes care of me and worries about me, and I can't even protect them, then what kind of garbage am I? Would I deserve to be called human?"

The Ghost Slayer hides his hands in the sleeves, and tightly clenches his fists out of sight; he struggles to control his emotions. After a while, he says in a deep voice, "the Guardian is truly a romantic, one wonders who might be lucky enough to have that."

"Eh?" Zhao is stunned by the flattery, and it certainly sounded strange coming from the Ghost Slayer. He laughs, "oh, don't flatter me, Your Honour, I'm getting goosebumps."

The Ghost Slayer lightly laughs, but doesn't reply, and only says, "for the sake of his tribe, Sang bore a terrible crime, and took an immense risk to fight for the livelihood of the people. And he succeeded, he made the unlikely wish a reality, but he must not have anticipated what followed."

Zhao says, "if I were him, and the person I loved died by the rules I set, I must have hated those people more than the old leader."

"Not just that," the Ghost Slayer looks up and through the smokescreen he created, staring at the towering pillar. He says softly, "not even a thousand bludgeonings would ease the anger."

His tone exerts an appalling chill. Wang senses it and moves a little closer to Zhao.

Zhao asks, "did Sang see your execution?"

"They detained him." Wang shakes her head, "that girl's father said he was bewitched by me, and they locked him up for his own good."

Zhao pauses for a moment, and then asks, "so Sang hid your body?"

"So, when you said you wanted to come back for your body and be properly buried, that was a lie?"

Wang drops her head, and after a while, she nods.

Zhao frowns and looks at her, then he looks away and says stiffly, "don't let there be a next time."

The Ghost Slayer sees that his attitude is softened, and continues, "and then Sang put your body into the water?"

Wang takes a deep breath, and says after a moment of silence, "yes. Our tribe believed that the mountains represent imprisonment and suppression, whereas the rivers



represent thousand miles of light and freedom. When slaves or criminals died, they would be beheaded in the mountains. When the royals died, their bodies would be washed down the rivers. Sang dug up my head, and stole my body. He took the head of the girl who died accidentally, and swapped the two bodies. Then, he sewed my head and body together, and placed me into the girl's corpse bag next to the river. He wept in front of my body all night. The next day, he watched as the people washed my body down the stream."

She raises her head and runs her fingers softly across the red line round her neck. The stitches are tightly sewn, normally, it would appear frightening. Now, one somehow feels a wrench in the heart.

How did he feel when he was washing her face, when his fingers ran across her dead and pale profile, and when he had to sew her head and body together?

And perhaps, he never got the chance to tell her his true feelings that he always kept hidden.

How preposterous and ruthless time is; just a slight hesitation, and it will strip your life down. You will be left heartbroken, and there will be no turning back.

The two men beside her are silenced. They must be thinking about something.

"The river brought my body away but I never left," Wang says, "I watched him. And he became another person. Originally, three people took turn to initiate voting among the tribe: Sang, the man who initiated my execution, and a respected elder. Sang married the granddaughter of the elder, and they worked together to frame the third. Two years later, the people voted for executing him."

Zhao takes out a cigarette, and sniffs it.

"Another year passed. The elder passed away. Everyone thought he died of old age, but I saw Sang poisoning him." Wang's eyebrows twitch vigorously, it seems that she still cannot believe the truth... poison is the weapon of the cowardly; how did a brave warrior become a cunning coward who uses poison?

"Then his wife, and his son who was still learning to walk... his own flesh and blood," Wang clutches at her vague white dress with her translucent fingers, "for every person he killed, he would behead them secretly, bury their heads at the mountaintop, and put a rock in their corpse bags so that their bodies would sink to the bottom of the river. Eventually, nobody in the tribe could oppose him anymore, and they all followed him with the illusion that they were making decisions out of free will. He became the new leader."

An all-powerful leader who only wanted to destroy the tribe.

Then internal conflict arose, Sang would suppress them, but worsen the conflict behind the scenes...

The once righteous and courageous young man became a villain; the young man who held the body of his lover and wept for an entire night became cold-blooded and dangerous... just like how the dancing and singing people who only wanted to live a good life all raised their hands, and chopped off the head of an innocent girl, and even wished for her soul to be enslaved forever.

"Fifteen years after I died, a civil war broke out again. The people who used to be enslaved turned against each other and divided into two forces. This war was even more brutal than before. Corpses filled up the valley. Bloodied children wept next to the corpses. Vultures circled the air but didn't swoop down... since Sang led the rest of the people to the ritual site, and started a fire. Standing in the flames, he pulled a switch under the stone tablet."

Wang softly says, "the once cleared stone tablet had everyone's names engraved on to it again. The flames burned brightly for a long time, scorching the entire valley. And the Pillar of Nature stood still, like a pillar of shame..."

The wails of ten thousand ghosts, it didn't happen without a reason.

## **Guardian Chapter: 40**

### **Chapter: 40**

Zhao heartlessly interrupts her tragic reminiscence, and rubs his palms, "don't talk about the past, let's talk about what we do now?"

The Ghost Slayer is silent. Wang moves her lips and is about to speak, but Zhao points at her and says, "I didn't ask you, shut your mouth."

"The Pillar of Nature suppresses souls and spirits. Not only the souls of those who died of unjust, but any soul that becomes imprisoned within will eventually become resentful." The Ghost Slayer ponders, and says with composure, "in my view, there aren't many options available: either destroy the artifact, or forcefully suppress the souls within."

Wang doesn't understand, and asks with bewildered eyes, "Your Honour, what you meant by that..."

Zhao says, "he meant that if we can't blow up the pillar, he'll just slay all the souls inside and shatter all of them into pieces."

Wang covers her mouth with her hand.

The Ghost Slayer shakes his head, “executing for no reason is unjust.”

Then the only option left is to blow up the pillar.

Zhao sits on the ground and plays with the lighter. Suddenly, he stares at the flickering flame and says to the Ghost Slayer, “now I remember, on our way up the mountain, we met a Hell Guard with a paper lantern, on the road right outside River Village. How could he not know what happened here, and just passed by the Pillar of Nature like nothing.”

The Ghost Slayer says, “he was leading hundreds to the afterlife, probably too busy.”

Zhao looks at him with suspicion, but he hides his doubts and continues, “the Four Mystical Artifacts have been missing for a very long time, scattered on Earth. Your Honour, why are you collecting them now? Last time, we came across the sundial by chance, but this time, you probably came for the pillar, didn’t you?”

The Ghost Slayer instantly realises his carelessness, and remains silent... this man is too smart. No matter how silly and unreliable he seems on the outside, he is merely hiding his overly sharp mind. Whatever the incident, it seems he can always puncture a hole in a story.

Zhao doesn’t let him get out of this easily, and looks at his wide sleeves, and points out, “your sleeves still have blood stains, Your Honour.”

“I have never heard of spirit beasts, and they appeared together with the sundial. Hell wouldn’t say anything about them, what are they really? They could not have appeared out of thin air, so where did they come from? And the Mystical Artifacts, people must have fought for them till death, haven’t they? Why would you let the Artifacts stay on Earth for so long?”

The Ghost Slayer has always been the interrogator, never the interrogated. He stays silent for a long time, and struggles to find a suitable explanation. Finally, he says very gentlemanly, “forgive me, I can’t tell you.”

Lying to someone like Zhao is basically bringing shame on yourself. You’re better off being frank: “I know why, but I just don’t wanna tell you”, save yourself the trouble of making up a story.

Zhao lights another cigarette, and sucks in deeply. Nobody knows what he’s thinking. After a while, he really stops asking about this.

Zhao stands up, and takes out his empty cigarette box. He takes out the peeled layer of mud with an octagon on it, and asks Wang, “what does this mean? Does it mean the Pillar of Nature in Hanga symbols?”

Wang ponders, “when I was little, my father taught me that means mountain, and a circle around it means water.”

“Your dad didn’t lie to you, did he?” Zhao asks, “didn’t your illiterate tribe have another symbol for mountain?”

Luckily Wang is well-tempered, she remains calm and doesn’t want to punch the Chief at all. She explains, “the octagon represents the godly mountain, which is where the Pillar of Nature is located. This place used to be a forbidden site, and only the leader of the tribe could enter.”

Zhao frowns, “but there are no rivers around this mountain.”

Wang hesitates, “it’s been so many years, perhaps the landforms have all changed.”

Zhao disagrees, “that’s impossible; if a circle around the octagon represents rivers around a mountain, that’s understandable. But it can’t just mean water, in Hanga script, there is no precedent of such ambivalence.”

Wang stares at Zhao dumbly: she always thought that although the Chief is a nice guy, he is probably not the hardworking type. But in only a few days, he already knows the Hanga tribe so well.

Zhao raises his head, and looks towards the pillar, “the spirits and souls of the mountains and rivers... the Hanga people used the Pillar of Nature to perform Luobula restriction magic for god knows how many generations. They must have known something deeper: if water burial can prevent a soul from being trapped by the pillar, then it’s very peculiar that the circle around the octagon represents water.”

The Ghost Slayer follows his thought, “the Guardian is suggesting that water might be the pillar’s weakness?”

Zhao laughs, “why not give it a try?”

The Ghost Slayer stands up, and Zhao waves at Wang as if calling a dog. He impatiently knocks on his watch.

Wang flashes, and vanishes.

The Ghost Slayer retracts the smokescreen, and points at the snow. The layer of snow around the pillar melts rapidly, and a stream of water soon surrounds the pillar.

As expected, the quivering pillar miraculously calms down, like a temporarily appeased maniac in menacing silence.

This time, the Ghost Slayer doesn't force his way in, and stands cautiously outside the stream, watching the pillar.

Under his movements, more and more snow begins to melt, and the streams grow bigger in the freezing mountains. Gradually, they emerge through the thick layer of snow and swivel towards the pillar like snakes.

Zhao hears an echo. He heard it as soon as the smokescreen was lifted up. At first he thought the pillar was still having an effect on him, but now he seems to hear a stuttering voice.

"Not yet old... not yet old but ravaged..."

He has a familiar feeling, like the sudden rush he felt after the earthquake on that day.

Zhao listens to the voice closely, and shortly, he becomes mesmerised, and inadvertently follows the voice, murmuring, "rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen; body, not yet lived but dead; soul, not yet burnt but dispersed..."

The Ghost Slayer abruptly turns his head towards Zhao, his face is not seen, but his gaze seems to pierce through.

Zhao quickly retains consciousness, and forcefully rubs his forehead. He suspects that he must be over-sensitive and having illusions... he feels like the Pillar of Nature is trying to connect with him, and attract him in.

As he lowers his head, he sees a flash of white light on the snow, and a person emerges out of thin air behind the Ghost Slayer. A gigantic axe slams towards the back of his head.

Ever since he entered the valley, Zhao's hand never left his gun in the pocket. At the speed of light, he pulls out the gun and lands his hand on the Ghost Slayer's shoulder, and pulls the trigger without blinking.

Under the silencer, the bullet goes right through that person's head. At the same time, the Ghost Slayer turns around in a pitch black cyclone, and his blade crashes with the giant axe with a screeching noise.

The two both stumble backwards, and Zhao sees that the person with an axe is wearing a pale ghost mask. A bullet hole in the forehead exudes a dark liquid.

Zhao looks at the Ghost Slayer, then looks at the person, and is confused... he has never heard of anyone like that before.

The ghost face raises its hand and wipes off the black blood on its forehead. The pale ghost mask turns towards Zhao and the painted face distorts into an eerie smile.

“Guardian,” a voice comes from beneath the mask, “it’s been a thousand years, and you haven’t changed a bit.”

Zhao isn’t quite used to this way of meeting an old acquaintance.

The eyebrows on the mask droop down, and the face becomes half smile and half cry, and the ghost face continues, “but the Guardian didn’t use to be so ruthless. But it doesn’t matter, no matter how you treat me, I will never forget borrowing the fire...”

The Ghost Slayer doesn’t let it go on, and his blade slashes down with a blinding ray, hacking the air with a screeching howl. Although Zhao has no clue who is who here, he quickly dodges aside so that he doesn’t become collateral damage of two gods duelling.

He has never seen the Ghost Slayer so furious.

Wang’s voice comes from his wristwatch, “Chief Zhao, who’s that?”

With a cigarette in his mouth, Zhao kneels aside in an unnatural position, and says with a dull voice, “How would I know, it’s not like I know everyone... do I look like I make friends with everyone?”

If Wang were a little more unrestrained, she would probably have replied with a “can you be more shameless than that”. Unfortunately, she is naturally subtle and indirect, so she replies with silence.

Zhao is in the mood of watching an action movie in 3D, and leisurely stays aside while putting off the cigarette in the snow. He warms his hands with his breath and rubs his freezing palms together.

“Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen.” He says, and knocks on the watch, “I suddenly thought of something, I’ll give it a try.”

Wang is afraid of what crazy idea he has, and shouts, “Chief Zhao, Chief Zhao!”

Zhao ignores her, and takes out a string of keys. There is an old key in the shape of a book, the patterns on it are all weathered, and the back of it has a scribbled “G” engraved on it. G for Guardian. The key is hollow.

He holds the key and walks towards the pillar. Suddenly, a few spirit beasts emerge from the ground and surrounds him menacingly.

The beasts aren’t attacking him, they only block his way to the pillar.

Zhao yawns and stretches, and says sheepishly, “Oh, I understand now, he must be that ‘master’. You guys took the sundial, but what do you wanna do with the Four Artifacts?”

The spirit beasts do not reply, and move in one step closer to scare him away.

Zhao laughs coldly, and takes out a cigarette. He opens the little book, but inside isn't a family photo, it's a kindle of fire. It's like a miniature lighter, lighting the cigarette.

Zhao closes the pendant, but he doesn't start smoking. He holds the cigarette with two fingers, and sighs, "there are two things I hate the most in my life: ugly thugs and disobedient dogs. You guys are quite the full package, and you're really getting on my nerves..."

The cigarette in his hand flies out like a small firecracker, and as it leaves his hand, it burns into a giant ball of flames. With a long tail, it pounces towards the spirit beasts like an unstoppable meteor.

One of the beasts exclaims "Samadhi true fire", and they are sucked into the inferno. The fire of the Bifang bird is one-of-a-kind; it burns them into ashes in a matter of seconds.

Zhao smiles in the light of the blaze, "what true fire fake fire, haven't you morons heard of the king of secret weapons, what people like to call the 'firecracker monkey'?"

The fire ball that's called a monkey rushes towards the base of the pillar.