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The Ghost Slayer hears the commotion behind him, and twists his wrist, swinging his blade at the ghost face. He turns around, and is almost blinded by the gigantic flaming sphere. For a moment, he can't see where Zhao is, and in sheer desperation, he shouts urgently, "Yunlan!"

As he is distracted, ghost face doesn't dodge, but lets the blade slash right on to the mask. Strangely, the Ghost Slayer hesitates, and retracts his blade, which slides right over the mask. It seems he doesn't dare break the mask, and dodges aside.

Ghost face guffaws, and whooshes forward like a huge cloud of black mist, rushing towards Zhao. The long cape swirls, and absorbs the Samadhi true fire. The ghost face stands in front of the pillar, facing Zhao, and the spirit beasts hide behind and surround the pillar.

Zhao takes a closer look at ghost face, and calmly says, "that Bifang chicken even boasted that its fire can burn the Monkey King, but it couldn't even burn your crappy cloak, you must be an important figure."

The ghost mask turns to emotionless, and stares at him, "I don't want to hurt you, Guardian, you better stay out of this."

With one hand in a pocket, one side of his shoulders tilts upwards. There's no need for street talk, his figure already looks very much like an experienced gangster. He humphs insincerely, "wow, I'm scared to death."

The Ghost Slayer hurries forward and pulls Zhao behind him, his blade blocking in front. The protectiveness in this gesture is too apparent, and Zhao looks at him with confusion.

Ever since the creepy ghost face appeared, the Ghost Slayer hasn't been acting normally.

But now is not the time for that. Zhao stands behind the Ghost Slayer and fumbles around in his pocket; he says, "perhaps the pillar is really afraid of fire... no, the pillar suppresses and imprisons all spirits within it, I suspect it's afraid of anything that flows, including water, fire, and even the wind. It's just that normal wind, water and fire are all too weak, perhaps?"

The frighteningly huge eyeballs on the ghost mask twitch, staring at Zhao, "Guardian, being too smart will get you in trouble. It's been so many years, but it seems you never learn."

The Ghost Slayer bellows with a horrifying voice, "if you dare touch one hair on him, you will regret crawling out of 'that place'."

Ghost face cackles, "you?"

The Ghost Slayer waits for the laughter to end, and calmly says, "try me."

The ghost mask distorts, and ghost face springs up like a gigantic bat, spreading its wings and swooping down towards the Ghost Slayer's menacing blade.

At the same time, Zhao runs towards another direction, and a crowd of spirit beasts rise up from the ground. He shoots all of them down, one by one.

Ghost face's eyes sparkle, and doesn't care that the Ghost Slayer hacks its back open, leaving a foot-long opening, and black blood starts squirting out over a foot high. It chases after Zhao at all costs.

The density of the spirit beast horde rapidly surges, reaching the level of a train station during the New Year. Zhao's kick lands on the face of a beast, and who knows if his leg hurts.

The beast falls back, and Zhao steps on its shoulder. The long whip suddenly emerges in his hand, and swirls towards the ghost mask.

For some reason, the Ghost Slayer is afraid that the mask will come off. He is astonished by Zhao's attack, and almost uses his scabbard to block the whip...

Luckily he remains sane, and restrains himself.

And though ghost face is immune to gunshot, it seems to fear the whip. It jumps back seven metres at an instant, out of the reach of the whip.

Zhao suddenly smiles silently.

Ghost face senses something wrong with this expression, but it's too late, as it turns around... with an explosive noise, a streak of lightning comes crashing

down from the Nine Heavens, sucking the spirit beasts round the pillar into a storm of spark. They are quickly cooked and light up in flames.

The fire from the sky scorches the entire Pillar of Nature.

Nobody can stop it in time.

Zhao opens his hand and a thunder god talisman shatters into ashes.

The cunning, the evil, the filthy and the sinful are all subject to thunder and lightning as punishment from the Heavens. The spirit beasts are inherently filthy creatures, so summoning lightning here is easier than usual.

Zhao thinks he isn't infuriating enough, and says with an annoying voice while dusting off his hands, "this story teaches us not to be a show-off, unless you enjoy death by lightning."

As he finishes, the pillar begins shrinking like a melting glacier. The lightning fire explodes into a hundred metres of intense flames, reaching up to the sky. Amidst the thundering blows, a blazing cyclone surrounds the pillar.

Countless obscured faces flash across in the light of the fire, and quickly disappear. In the depths of the earth comes a vigorous quake like a heartbeat; it's like he really called out the spirits and souls of the mountains and rivers.

Ghost face leaps towards Zhao all of a sudden, but luckily the Ghost Slayer isn't paying attention to the burning "Artifact" at all. His blade heavily clangs against the giant axe.

Surprisingly, ghost face isn't going for Zhao, it turns back with a creepy smirk and says beside the Ghost Slayer's ear, "he ruined my plan, and you're happy? Let me tell you, he must know a lot more, it's just that he hasn't told you."

The Ghost Slayer turns his wrist, the blade vibrates with vigour, and a hand comes off of ghost face. But it doesn't seem to care, and rushes back a few dozen metres faster than the eye can see. The surviving spirit beasts scramble to catch up.

The blood-stained sleeve flickers in the wind, and with a screeching howl, ghost face says one last phrase, "you better watch your back!"

The group vanishes into thin air.

Zhao's face lights up in the blazing heat, and as the Ghost Slayer looks at his profile, he panics: what did ghost face mean by "he knows a lot more than he said"?

Zhao turns around and says, "Your Honour, give me a hand with your sleeves."

A familiar smokescreen rises up, and Zhao releases Wang. He holds out a scruffy piece of paper talisman, "call him, see if I can summon Sang Zan's soul."

Wang's eyes widen.

Zhao urges, "quick, do it before the fire burns up!"

Wang floats mid-air and shouts towards the pillar something that Zhao doesn't understand. The talisman shatters, and turns into a soft breeze, gently bringing Wang's

words towards the blazing pillar. Wang cannot leave the smokescreen, but she stands as close to the edge as she can.

The usual depressed expression of the girl turns into one of great anticipation.

The Pillar of Nature continues to shrink, and the fire gradually begins to wane. The sparkle in Wang's eyes eventually darkens, but as the flames are about to burn up, a shadow of a man emerges in the ember, looking from afar.

From Wang's expression, it's clear who this man is.

Zhao takes out a Guardian talisman, and flicks it with his fingers. The talisman shoots up and floats mid-air, and he says to Wang, "go talk to him, if you want you can go inside the Guardian Order."

This isn't necessary: as Sang sees Wang, he freezes shortly, and then he walks out of the flames and enters the Guardian Order. The two vanish, and the talisman flies into Zhao's watch.

After a long time, the last flame burns up, and only a battered ritual site remains; the pillar is nowhere to be seen.

Zhao walks ahead slowly, and kicks around on the ground. He finds a small octagonal rock, it's thicker at the top and narrower at the bottom, like a wedge. He takes it out of the mud, and throws it to the Ghost Slayer, "your Artifact, catch."

The Ghost Slayer catches, and examines the small rock that appears ordinary. He puts it next to his ear, and listens closely: soft sobbing is heard from within, it's incredibly feeble, and not violent at all. But the sound leaves a mark on the heart: a mark of despair.

Wang's hopeful voice comes from the watch, "they... they are all freed, aren't they?"

"No," the Ghost Slayer replies, "still inside. The Guardian said the pillar is afraid of anything that flows, but that only applies to the parts of the pillar that formed on Earth. This is the true form of the Pillar of Nature, and it can't be burned."

Zhao smirks, "yea, I was just bullshitting, who would have known that bastard was so easy to fool. I find that people who like to hide behind masks are usually idiots."

The Ghost Slayer says nothing to that comment.

"Oh," Zhao adds, perhaps intending to make things worse, "of course I wasn't referring to you, Your Honour."

The Ghost Slayer knows Zhao is probably pissed about him not willing to answer his questions. This fearless jerk was making a deliberate insinuation.

The Ghost Slayer can neither laugh nor cry, but the next second, he realises perhaps Zhao only said that after what ghost face said. On one hand, he wants to lighten up their relationship, and on the other hand, he is implying that he won't think too much about what ghost face said.

The Ghost Slayer's heart sinks: this man is the best of his kind. He can't help but feel like... the secret will come out soon.

Wang shouts and asks anxiously, "what can you do to release them? Can you let them rest in peace?"

She finally draws the attention of the two.

"He is bringing the Pillar of Nature away, so the restriction on the souls will be lifted naturally. When they want to, they can come out. If they don't, it's because they don't want to. Besides themselves, what's left holding them back?" Zhao pauses, and says with profound meaning, "what happened all those years ago, wasn't it because of someone's heart?"

Zhao takes out his phone and sets the time on his watch, "you are the same, aren't you? You silly girl."

Zhao quickly say, "oh yes, I want a thirty-thousand-word reflection, and I'll cut your annual bonus in half. Think about what you've done Wang Zheng comrade, you will join the internal training at the end of the year. I will ask Zhu Hong to find a body, wear it and go to the lessons."

She stays silent for a moment, and says softly, "from the beginning, there was not a thing I could have done, was there?"

Zhao suddenly smiles, "you stupid girl, now you realise."

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"There are always some things about which there's nothing you can do," Zhao says while digging a small hole and burying the page about Luobula restriction magic. He pats the ground, stands up, and continues, "either become strong enough to deal with anything, or let go and forget. Does you no good remembering all the useless things, it's just a waste of space."

This time, Wang remains silent for even longer.

The Ghost Slayer walks forward, and extends one hand, "We should go, I will bring the Guardian out of here."

Zhao is already exhausted, of course he doesn't want to walk if there is another means of transportation. He holds the Ghost Slayer's hand, who pulls him into an embrace. Their surroundings darken, Zhao has yet to stand still, and as he opens his eyes again, everything is different.

The cloak opens up, and at an instant, they're back at the mountain pass.

The Ghost Slayer lets go, stands back, and fixes his cloak with a polite greeting gesture. He leaves, and in the blink of an eye, vanishes into a giant black hole.

Zhao looks at him from behind, and rubs his chin in deep thought. As he is thinking, Wang speaks from inside the watch.

"Oh right, Chief Zhao, didn't you say you left your wallet in the car? Then what was that you pulled out just now?"

Zhao's pretentiously mysterious expression shatters, and frantically covers his chest. "What do you want? I'm short on cash lately, I can give my body but not my money! What about your guy? What's he doing with you, and why are you concerned with someone else's wallet?"

"He doesn't understand," Wang's tone relaxes a bit, "I heard you're buying a lot of antique books lately, like you're planning to become an antique vendor. Besides that, what did you spend all your money on?"

"A man eventually has to buy a house and support a family." Zhao hides his hands in his pockets and dawdles forward. "You don't get it, little girl."

Wang laughs lightly, "I died three hundred years ago, who's a little girl?"

Zhao agrees, "You're an old tramp who died three hundred years ago, and you're asking for red packet money? How can you be so shameless?"

The two keep on squabbling back and forth in the white snow land. After a long while, Wang says softly, "I didn't say it earlier, but thank you..."

Zhao smiles, and knocks on the watch, "Don't think a sweet tongue can replace your reflection, email it to me next week. When it's New Year's Eve, reading out your reflection in front of everyone will be one of the activities, you won't get away with it."

When Zhao leisurely arrives at the mountaintop hut, it's already evening.

Zhu Hong's eyes signal a question, and Zhao waves his watch around. Zhu understands, and takes out a handmade woollen doll. She pretends to pass by Zhao unintentionally, and pushes the doll on to his watch without anyone noticing. Two streaks of white smoke swiftly enter the doll, which moves in Zhu's palm as if alive.

Zhao's gaze scans around the hut, and he finds that everyone is here; they all look pretty well: Chu Shuzhi stealthily guards the door, with Da Qing laying flat by his legs, Guo Changcheng helplessly tends to a cooking pot in which something is boiling, the students sit around fake monk Lin Jing and listen to his ghost stories with amazement and fright, and Shen Wei... eh, where's Shen Wei?

Why did he think that everyone was here?

Zhao's face darkens, and asks Zhu, "Where's Professor Shen?"

Zhu is apparently stunned, and her expression is marked with vacancy. But shortly, Shen carries a pile of firewood and enters; he says calmly, "Looking for me?"

It seems Zhu has just remembered, and smacks herself on the forehead, "Right, Professor Shen said the fuel might not be enough for another night, so he went out for firewood."

Shen puts the wood next to the fire to dry, "Just in case. Did you find Little Wang?"

Zhao glances at him, and replies naturally, "Yea we did. We ran into the rescue team on the way, I had some errands for her to run, so I had the rescue team take her back."

"Oh." Shen turns around, and smiles gently and sweetly, "It's good you're fine; you must be exhausted, drink some Indigowoad root water, it prevents you from getting a cold."

Zhao stares at him for a moment, and smiles as if nothing happened. He takes the medicine and guzzles it down in one gulp. He never mentions what happened the other night and the many doubts he has tangling in his mind.

These few days, Zhao has been living quite an inhuman life: first he drank an entire night with Brother Lang, then he drove in the snow for one day, he didn't sleep all night, then Wang drugged him, then the Pillar of Nature almost killed him, he trod through the snowy mountains for ages, he somehow ended up battling a horde of monsters... And so the sequelae of such an intense lifestyle hit him the next morning.

He wakes up with a sprain neck.

But even with a stiff neck, the boss is still the boss. As soon as he wakes up, he starts ordering people around, and the small mountain hut is in chaos early in the morning... He orders Lin to give him a shoulder massage, and Lin gives him the Shaolin Great Strength Vajra Finger, which almost breaks the Chief's neck. Zhao is almost in painful

tears, and suspects that Lin did it on purpose. The two forget about the important things and chase around the house like adolescents. After some twenty minutes, Zhu can't stand it anymore, and growls "are we leaving or not"; the two boys finally stop.

Zhao heavily punches Lin, but his neck miraculously moves again. And so, he dawdles away, hands behind his back, and begins packing. He picks up Da Qing, and wears it around his neck like a fur collar.

The female class captain asks out of curiosity, "When did this cat get here? Is it coming with us? I thought it's a wild cat."

Zhao the asshole says, "Have you seen a wild cat this chubby before?"

In response, Da Qing courageously slaps him in the face with its paw, fulfilling its wish of beating up the boss violently.

The female class captain walks forward, and out of sympathy, caresses Da Qing's shiny and smooth fur, "Poor thing, must have been uncomfortable riding on the plane as luggage... Oh right, Big Bro Zhao, our teacher said he will drive on the way back so you can have a good rest."

Zhao covers the cat-pawed side of his face, hesitates on the feet, and turns around to look at Shen.

They lock eyes with each other. Shen looks down slightly, and smiles mildly.

Shen's expressions and words are all too subtle. It seems to Zhao that every look on his face conceals endless words yet to be conveyed. His heart suddenly quivers, and thinks of the other night when he woke up and locked eyes with Shen, who had been staring at him all night. It's as if his heart were clenched, it softens and leaves a tinge of sourness.

Zhao falls asleep next to the driver's seat as the car goes downhill. When the ringing phone wakes him up, it's way past noon and the sun is shining from the West. The car has left the snowy mountains, and there are a few people along the highway.

It's Brother Lang calling, it seems that he really needs a favour from Zhao. He enthusiastically arranges accommodation for them, and says that last time they haven't had enough fun: this time they will not return if they're not drunken.

Zhao hangs up, and his face is sullen... he is not a drunkard, nor is he superhuman. What he really wants now is a bed he can sleep in for eternity, not being forced to drink and chitchat with an old fat guy.

The unexpected tragic turn of events has him devastated, and he isn't even in the mood to flirt with Shen anymore. He drops the phone and closes his eyes: every second of sleep counts before tonight's disaster comes.

Shen waits for his breathing to even out, and then he pulls up a blanket around Zhao.

When Brother Lang meets them in the city centre, Zhao comes back to life from his withering, and becomes his usual energetic self once more.

The two start citchatting a bunch of nonsense, and half a bottle of white wine is gone. Brother Lang is a little drunk, but still very spirited, and eagerly calls for more.

Though Zhao makes drinking wine look like drinking water, his face is getting paler.

Brother Lang howls in a thundering voice of mountain singing, and orders the waiter, "Full! Full! Fill it full!"

Zhao doesn't want to stop him, and generously nods towards the waiter; his smile shows a hint of desperation.

Brother Lang stands up and gives a speech, "I'm not very cultured, and I don't speak well; I'm just a crude man. The luckiest thing in my life is to have brothers like you. Like the saying goes, 'friends visiting from far away, is that not...' Is that not a what? You know what I mean, cheers!"

Zhao can only raise his glass to 'is that not a what', but suddenly, Shen holds him back.

Lang and Zhao are both shocked.

Shen raises Zhao's glass and stands up, nodding towards Lang, and says politely, "Chief Zhao got a bit of a cold in the windy mountains, so he's not feeling too well."

Zhao instantly coughs a few in co-operation.

Shen smiles, "But we all owe it to Mr Lang for taking care of us on this trip. I only brought a group of poor students, there's no way we can pay you back, so let me propose a toast, to you."

His glass clangs with that of Lang's, and he finishes the drink.

Brother Lang is quite taken aback: he knows what kind of person he is, he can hang with a gangster like Zhao, but not an intellectual such as Shen.

He never thought Shen would join in, this is a completely new experience for Lang. He gulps down the drink, and dizzily starts firing his words at Shen.

Zhao looks around the table: fake monk Lin avoids drinking using religion as an excuse, but he mumbles some Mantra and keeps gobbling down meat till his mouth is covered in oil, and Zhu pretentiously says "a lady only drinks red wine" and continues eating very happily, Chu only drank half a glass and is already playing dead, Guo... well this poor

and honest kid, he's actually "dead". A whole table of people... none of them would help their Chief out.

Zhao grits his teeth and makes a mental note of his disloyal staff. He quickly stuffs a lot of food in Shen's bowl so that he doesn't get drunk too soon. They work together to get the troublemaker Lang drunk as soon as possible, and they are finally free from this nightmare.

Shen is clearly not used to this kind of gathering. His cheeks are crimson, and his gaze vacant and disoriented. He struggles to stand up, but stumbles, and drops back down. Zhao swiftly catches him, and asks quietly against his ear, "Damn, can you walk? Are you okay?"

Shen doesn't reply and only wanders in intoxication. As Zhao grabs him, he wraps his arm around Zhao's waist, rather tightly and assertively.

This time... someone is obviously not quite okay.

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Zhao holds up Shen's shoulder, and drags him up, arms tangled together, almost in an embrace. Fortunately, even when Shen is drunk, he is still very well-behaved, and doesn't talk gibberish or frolic like a lunatic.

Zhao wakes himself up, hurriedly takes care of the others, and carries Shen away. He swipes a key card and opens the door to the room next to his. He hesitates, and miraculously decides not to take advantage.

He puts Shen on the bed and has him sit on his own. He looks at Shen's vacant and bland expression, and can't help but ruffle his hair lovingly, "If you can't drink you shouldn't have helped me, where do I find someone else as silly as you?"

Shen looks up as he messes up his hair, and stares at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Wait, I'll fetch you a towel to wipe your face." Zhao walks into the restroom, and takes two towels. He soaks one in cold water, and the other one in warm water. As he is about to bring the towels to the drunk cat, he turns around and is startled: Shen has been standing at the door stealthily since god knows when, in complete silence, and with a penetrating leer that shoots right at Zhao.

His gaze has gravity and gloom that exert immense pressure.

Zhao hands Shen a towel, "Here."

Shen seems rather sluggish, and only raises his hand after a long time. But his hand passes by the towel, and grapples Zhao by his wrist. Aggressively, he pulls Zhao in.

Zhao has long felt something abnormal with Shen tonight, but his attitude towards this turn of events is that of eagerness and enthusiasm. He doesn't resist at all, and is easily pulled in.

With tremendous might, Shen thrusts him against the wall, and seal their lips together, wrenching, seizing, and gnawing like a wild beast.

Zhao almost instantly tastes blood. His animalistic desires awaken, and with elation, he enclasps Shen's back. His fingers sneak in beneath Shen's shirt with dexterity, and seductively caresses his back. The skin he touches is cooler than normal human temperature, like smooth and slushy jade... except this precious gem is clawing and tearing his clothes sadistically.

Zhao lifts up his head in encouragement, and lets him go on a rampage. His one hand extends downwards, and salaciously reaches for Shen's lower back, exploring inside his pants.

But before he can explore further, his entire body is abruptly lifted up. This takes him by surprise, as his feet dangle in mid-air, and his body turns full-circle rapidly before he falls backwards, landing on to the bed. Shen violently holds him in place.

The bed squeaks. Fortunately, the hotel has soft pillows and thick duvets, so a fall wouldn't hurt. Zhao "ouches" pretentiously, and wipes blood off the corner of his lips. He chuckles, "Babe, you're too hot."

Shen looks down at him. His black irises swirl with an inexplicable, unspeakable, yet overwhelmingly profound affection.

A thin layer of light red surfaces on his face, and under the dim lighting, he looks more handsome than ever. Zhao admires the sight and his heart tingles with sensation. He takes off his spectacles, sits up, and pulls Shen in round his waist. He pulls off his shirt collar, as his hands slide down his body, lighting flames of passion as he slowly unbuttons the shirt. The man's body is unveiled, pale, but not frail.

The light in Zhao's eyes darkens as he leisurely kisses Shen's chest. He says with a magnetic voice, "I was gonna let you go tonight, you asked for this yourself."

Suddenly, Shen seizes his shoulders, pushes him down, and pounces forward biting on to Zhao's throat. He locks his wrists in place and holds him on to the bed tightly.

Zhao feels that the man on top of him is panting more vigorously by the minute; it's like he wants to swallow him whole.

Zhao is rather shocked by how passionate and aggressive he is. The biting is making him uncomfortable, so he laughs and resists a little, "Alright baby, take it easy, you..."

Zhao's small movements somehow trigger a switch, and Shen goes utterly insane. He shoves Zhao's wriggling arm behind him, flips him face-down and clutches his nape, as if trying to strangle him to death.

Zhao is forced to look up, and he feels that his old bones are cracking.

Shen weighs his own body downwards and his icy fingers grasps Zhao's chin. Kisses bombard his face invasively. The lights in the room go off on their own, and in the darkness the only sound is the man's bellowing and unbearable gasps, like a starving monster.

Zhao's half-buttoned shirt is ripped apart with a slash.

"Ah... that's enough, babe..... Shen Wei!"

Though Zhao is aroused, he doesn't want a drunken and crazed Shen. With great agility, he retracts his arm.

After his bellowing, Shen stops moving all of a sudden. Without a sound, he falls into Zhao's arms. No movement. The lights go back on in the room.

Zhao struggles to open his eyes in the light, and stretches his agonised shoulder. He holds Shen in his arms. He is not in the mood anymore, and laughs bitterly, "Even when you're drunk you're special..."

Zhao's voice stops midway, and his eyes widen. His intoxication disperses through pores in his skin: he wakes up in terror.

In the silence, he can't hear Shen's breathing!

Zhao presses his hand against Shen's neck. Some ten seconds later. Still no pulse.

Shen's face is still a little red, but his body looks like a corpse.

"Shen Wei! Shen Wei!" Zhao flips him over and slaps him in the face. There's no response. He starts performing CPR.

The man lying on the bed is like a mannequin. No matter how hard Zhao tries, there's no change.

"Fuck!" Zhao jumps off the bed and picks up his phone from the floor. The battery fell out when the phone hit the floor, he puts it back together and calls emergency.

Following the doctor's suggestion, Zhao looks through Shen's luggage... if he has any long-term illnesses, there must be some medicine.

At this instant, Zhao inadvertently sees his ripped shirt.

From the left shoulder to the lower-right abdomen, a long diagonal opening cuts the thick winter shirt in two. Zhao examines the opening, and realises that it was cut opening by a sharp blade.

Where did Shen get a sharp object?

Zhao was half-drunk and in tremendous shock. Only until this moment does he come back to his senses... a normal human wouldn't stop breathing and lose his heartbeat so instantly. Even a sudden heart attack has certain symptoms that come with it. But Shen was like the lights in the room: pull a switch and he is instantly turned off.

Zhao looks back at the man lying on the bed, and frowns. He takes out a black leather-covered notebook and walks to the side of the bed. He pulls out a yellow paper talisman from the notebook, and picks up a strand of Shen's hair. He curls up the talisman with the hair inside, burns it, and lets the ashes fall on to the notebook. Like salt sprinkled into water, they vanish without a trace.

Moments later, a line of writing emerges on a page in the notebook: Great Menace, a soulless person.

Zhao's expression suddenly turns sombre. He presses one hand on the page, and asks, "Where does this person come from?"

The writing on the page flashes and disappears. After a long wait, another line of words emerge.

"From the depths of Hell, an unspeakable place."

The look on Zhao's face tenses up.

After a while, he quietly tidied up the room, and holds his ruined shirt together with a few small pins. He puts his jacket back on.

The ambulance arrives not long afterwards. The others are all astonished, and amidst the chaos, Shen is carried away.

The students all panic in desperation, and Zhao forces them to stay behind. He signals Lin to take care of them, and follows Shen to the hospital.

Shen's heart is still not beating. The doctors frantically try to save him. Zhao waits aside in silence; he knows that Shen is alright. It's just that the person who possessed this body has left or fallen asleep temporarily, perhaps due to drunkenness.

He hides his hand behind his back and takes out a summoning talisman. The paper ignites on his palm. Four burnt talismans later, Shen is still unconscious.

Time passes, and the doctors begin to think he is dead.

Zhao concentrates, and ignites the fifth one. He recites in his mind, "Wandering souls, heed my call."

The third time he recites this, the talisman flashes, and Shen's body quivers vigorously. Zhao hears someone shouting, "He has a heartbeat! He has a heartbeat!"

He sighs in relief, and hides a handful of ashes in his pocket.

Shen doesn't seem to be waking up just yet.

Shen is brought to the hospital in the middle of the night, and the doctors run checks on him frantically. And yet, they can't find anything. Zhao shivers in the winter night: he only called the ambulance stupidly as he was still half- drunk.

Even Brother Lang got the news, and rushes to the hospital. He never thought drinking can get you in hospital. Zhao urges him to go back; that poor fat guy, his face turned green in terror like a cucumber, a shivering cucumber.

When Shen finally wakes up, all sorts of tubes are connected to his body. He struggles to recall what happened, sits up, and begins pulling off the tubes.

"I'm afraid you would have to stay here for a few more days." A voice comes from the corner of the room. Shen realises Zhao is in the room, wearing a big overcoat and holding a steaming cup.

"Hospital?" Shen is stunned, and his face changes, "I... did I drink too much?"

"Not just too much, your heart stopped beating."

"I..."

Shen never thought he would get drunk so easily. He hurriedly searches for an excuse, and Zhao puts the cup aside. "But this is my fault, I was dizzy and only half-conscious, and you scared me. I really shouldn't have called an ambulance. These few days I would have to trouble you to stay and play along..."

Shen realises something unusual.

Zhao pauses for a moment, and finishes his sentence. He says, "... Your Honour."

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For a few minutes, Shen doesn't make a sound. And Zhao is in no hurry: he sits stately in a corner. The hospital room is incredibly tranquil, even the ticking and tocking of the watch is barely audible.

After a long time, Shen sighs, and waves his hand as the hospital gown comes off. In the blink of an eye, he sits in a giant black cloak. His blade emerges in his hand, and he wears the ancient weapon round his waist... this time, he isn't hiding his face anymore.

"How did you find out?" Shen asks quietly.

Zhao looks at him, and ponders. After a long while, he says, "Actually I wasn't sure, I was just testing you."

The look on Shen's face is difficult to describe.

Zhao smiles and says, "Of course, I wouldn't have if I didn't pick up any clues. Like your small puppet messenger that arrived just a while after I reached the Hanga tribe cave. I mentioned the Hell Guard, but didn't say what he was doing, but you already knew he was leading a few hundreds to the afterlife. I couldn't help but recall the Hell Guard bowing twice towards the car. I asked Zhu about you, and she only 'remembered' you when you arrived. You travel much faster than me, Your Honour, so you must have made a trip to the 'other side'. And also..."

And also when he stared at him sleeping all night in the hut... this was when Zhao first became suspicious. But now it seems inappropriate to mention that to the Ghost Slayer. Zhao pauses, and swallows down the rest of his sentence.

"And also your breathing and heartbeat stopped so suddenly. I got curious, and asked the Book of Life and Death. It told me that 'Shen Wei' is a soulless person from an unspeakable place." Zhao's fingers lightly knock on his knees, "Now that I think about it, you gave me a lot of hints."

The Ghost Slayer does not speak. He probably doesn't know what to say at all.

Actually, Zhao feels rather uncomfortable as well. He regrets saying everything so directly and bluntly. As soon as he remembers the things he did with "Shen Wei" in the past and his motive, he really just wants to drop dead and have amnesia.

Zhao massages his temples. He can't help but feel like his IQ just plummeted rapidly tonight, he made so many foolish decisions.

The two remain in silence for long, until Zhao finally decides to face his embarrassing past, and coughs, "I didn't know Professor Shen was... uh, if I ever offended you, please forgive me, Your Honour."

Shen shakes his head.

The doubts in Zhao's mind haven't decreased, but more and more questions arise. But as he sees the vacant and miserable look on Shen's face, there's nothing he can ask.

He washes his cup and gets on the small single bed for visitors. Zhao curls up in the tiny bed a little uncomfortably.

He says naturally, "It's late, get some rest, call me if you need anything."

Only then does Zhao realise he's not actually talking to a real "patient". He finds himself saying the wrong things all day.

For the first time in his life, Zhao sombrely and undoubtedly realises the cruel truth that he is a complete moron. He decides to shut up, lie on his side, and pretend to sleep.

It's just that tonight, neither of them can fall asleep.

The next few days. Zhu is the first to sense something different: their Chief Zhao has "changed his evil ways".

More specifically, he no longer goes drinking with Brother Lang, he no longer spouts bullshit all day long, and he no longer finds excuses to flirt with Professor Shen!

Even when they want to go shopping at the night market and claim work expenses for it, Chief Zhao does not hesitate at all and just grants it; doesn't scold anyone, doesn't seem to want to tag along either.

As Shen Wei stays at the hospital for a "check-up", Zhao brings his laptop and stays in the small visitor's bed, looking up some peculiar information... One

thing that seems strange, though, is Zhu hears Zhao ordering Guo to bring him some clothes from his luggage at the hotel.

Zhu stares at Zhao with profound thought. All these occurrences make Zhu suspect that something must have went wrong after he got drunk, that he must have did Shen.

Perhaps it was too rough, and he had to be rushed to the hospital?

Zhu feels doubtful. Zhao doesn't get drunk easily, that day only Shen was actually drunk, Zhao was definitely still conscious and rational. Besides, Zhao's reputation isn't bad: those who have dated him all admit that he is willing to spend money, loyal, and always left his relationships on good terms. Nobody ever spoke of any bad habits, let alone rape.

Or perhaps Professor Shen is just too attractive and Chief Zhao lost his mind, turning it into an unorthodox story of coercive love?

Zhu ponders and ponders but still doesn't understand. She thinks with a hint of envy: is this Shen guy really that good?

At night, Zhao succinctly reminds Shen to "play along", and who knows how Shen manages that. Anyhow, two days later, the report is out and the doctors say he went into cardiac arrest due to allergy to alcohol.

As Brother Lang bids them farewell at the airport, he apologetically holds Shen's hands and says, "My brother, if your Old Brother Lang knew you can't drink, I wouldn't have let you touch any at all!"

Zhao thinks of who this fat guy is calling his younger brother, and his eyelids twitch inadvertently.

Brother Lang glances towards Zhao while speaking, and as he sees Zhao's unpleasant expression, he lets go of Shen, "Next time I will make it up to you. You can drink Iron Goddess tea, and I will drink one litre of wine, how about that?"

Shen doesn't understand why he thinks drinking one litre counts as making it up to him, but he politely nods.

Zhao carries both their luggage, and reminds him, "It's time to check in."

Shen hurriedly turns around, "I can do it myself."

Zhao dashes aside and silent carries away all their luggage.

The SIU boys witness all of this, and led by Lin, they both cough suggestively. Neither of them understands their Chief's endless misery and helplessness that floweth like a river all the way into the ocean. Intending to cause further chaos, they make all sorts of faces and collectively tease Zhao.

Lin turns around with a look of adoration, and asks Chu, "Are you hungry?"

Chu covers half his face with the boarding pass, and feigns embarrassment, "Oh, I'm fine."

“Wait here, I’ll get you something to eat.”

Chu keeps covering his face, and acts like his teeth is hurting; he says with a flirtatious tone, “Oh, don’t trouble yourself, there’s stuff to eat on the plane.”

Lin imitates Zhao’s arrogance, and waves his hand, “Is that food even for humans? Even if it were, would I let you eat something like that?”

And that time at Dragon City airport, Zhao bought Shen some junk food “for humans”.

As they recall how silly the Chief was, the guys look at each other smuttily, and chortle smuttily.

Zhu elbows Guo, “Little Guo, do you have anyone you like?”

Guo shakes his head with a red face.

Zhu looks at Zhao from behind and says, “If you do in the future, learn from your Chief, you will become a star of the new generation... but of course, if you want to stay in a relationship for good, be selective in what you learn, that dude usually messes things up in the end.”

Guo’s face and ears redden, but he has a slight feeling that Zhu is openly cursing the Chief.

Zhao turns around and glares at them. Lin and Chu crazily snigger.

The depressed Chief cannot put into words his many embarrassments as his gang of bastardly staff follow him around. He usually has thick skin, so thick that not even the Pillar of Nature could get through, but his face now heats up a little.

On their trip here, Zhao asked the air hostess to change his seat, following behind Shen like a housefly tailing a farting butt, not giving a darn about how silly and embarrassing he looked.

But this time, Zhao really isn’t in the mood. But as he checks his boarding pass, he realises that Lin switched their seats intentionally to two connected seats away from the crowd.

As Lin helps him with his luggage, he whispers in his ear, “You don’t have to thank me, Chief.”

Zhao grits his teeth, “I thank all your ancestors for this.”

But his lousy teammate will not let him go. A difficult three-hour flight finally ends, and they land. Lin realises that Shen didn’t drive since he brought his students along. So the

fake monk diligently sends the students on taxis, and turns towards Shen like a matchmaker, all smiles, "Doesn't Professor Shen live quite close to Chief Zhao, he can drive you back then."

In his mind, Zhao stabs the little person named Lin Jing into a hedgehog.

Lin feels the grudge, he turns around and sneezes earthshakingly.

Shen smiles, "No need, I will call a taxi..."

Zhao squeezes out a smile, and starts carrying his luggage, "Let me drive you, it's late, if I drive you it's..."

He wants to say "safer". But before he can, he unfortunately recalls that night when he helped Shen with the gangsters. Not only did he beat them up, he intentionally put on a cool and badass pretence, like a stupid and conceited peacock fanning its tail when everyone can see its dirty ass.

The smile on Zhao's face almost wears away.

Like the poem goes... one cannot beareth reminiscing under the moon.

"Zhao Yunlan," he turns around and walks towards the car park decisively, and says to himself in his mind, "just how idiotic are you!?"

Zhao drives to his apartment in complete silence, and accurately stops at Shen's place, "We've arrived."

Shen looks up at the apartment building, and doesn't move in his seat. He asks, "How did you know I live here?"

Zhao has nothing to say, and only laughs softly.

Shen looks at him, and suddenly says, "Guardian must have a lot of things to ask me, yes?"

Zhao doesn't speak. The two lock eyes in the rear-view mirror.

After a while, Shen looks down, "Then why don't you just ask?"

Zhao stays silent for a while, before he says, "You assumed this human form to stay here, it's probably not for a usual errand. Is it for something very important, Your Honour?"

"No." Shen says, "It's just for personal reasons. It's just... because of someone."

Zhao doesn't have to ask who that someone is at this point.

Guardian Chapter: 45

Chapter: 45

Right after saying that, Shen instantly regrets it. He doesn't know what he tried to convey by saying that to Zhao, neither does he know what he was hoping for. This moment, he finds himself despicable and ludicrous.

Shen is used to subtlety. Those few words had him slashing his chest open and pulling his heart out for the other to see. But he doesn't want to hear Zhao's reply. He has always been indecisive, and he feels he did not have the right to say that at all.

All his life he has been a resolute executor, never has he been so hesitant. Perhaps... it's just because he had yet to meet that special person whose joy and sorrow heave and haul a string in his heart.

After a moment of silence, Shen lowers his head and opens the car door, "Thank you, I'm going up then."

Zhao feels as if he were about to split apart. He spent almost half a year going after Shen with all the tricks up his sleeve, and he was so incredibly close to having him. If he were to describe the process, it was "completely shameless, ask for the stars and I'll give him the moon too", he feels like even a straight guy would've turned gay for him... but he dares not treat the Ghost Slayer that way.

He has known the Ghost Slayer for many years, they aren't close, but always on good terms. And yet they could never develop their relationship any further. Any sane person would treat a formidable figure like the Ghost Slayer with due respect.

His supremacy doesn't come from pure power... the Ghost Slayer was born with godly powers, and there's not much to say about it... but from his own person.

Usually the darkest places give birth to the darkest evil, and there is logic behind. When there is no hope to hang on to one falls into darkness easily, not to mention creatures born in the shadows are mostly born vicious and deadly.

Since the dawn of time, the Ghost Slayer is the only exception: born in filth but rising up as a god. And it wouldn't have been possible without an indestructible heart of steel. Zhao doesn't doubt it for one moment: someone like the Ghost Slayer... like Shen Wei, even if one day he were to fall and perish, it would be immensely noble and irreproachable.

As Shen opens the door, his usually good-looking profile is marked with profound melancholy. Zhao doesn't know what he is thinking anymore, and suddenly holds the door in place, "I have never been to the Ghost Slayer's place, why don't you let me in?"

Shen's eyes sparkle in a split second, but he only nods politely towards Zhao, "Please."

Zhao locks the car, and follows Shen to his flat with an intricate sensation. Shen's home is impeccable, especially when compared to Zhao's horrifying dog lair... the phone and television are both in dust covers, the bin is very clean, dozens of documents neatly pile up on the desk. The door to the bedroom is locked; not an inkling of what's inside.

It's just that his apartment is inexplicably inhuman

Shen says, "Sit."

Looking at the perfectly unwrinkled sofa, Zhao doesn't want to sit his butt on it. His movements seem particularly civilised.

Shen fills up a kettle with cold water, but doesn't set it on a stove. He holds the kettle in his hands, and shortly, the water starts boiling. He quietly takes out tea cups and a can of tea leaves, makes some tea and puts it in front of Zhao, "I usually just stay here for a short time, haven't got any new tea, hope you don't mind."

Of course Zhao wouldn't mind... it's not like he can tell the difference between new tea and old tea. He picks up the cup, and his fingers feel the scorching heat. He suddenly asks, "Why didn't you tell me, Your Honour?"

Shen hesitates, "It's embarrassing to talk about."

Zhao almost finds this both infuriating and amusing, "Right, you saved yourself the embarrassment, and just watched how embarrassing I was? Were you cracking up when I did those silly things? I'm an idiot, there's nothing I can say about that, I admit it, but Your Honour, you were quite cruel to me."

Shen doesn't disagree, and only wears a well-tempered smile. He changes the subject, "The ghost face we met that day, if you see him again, be very careful."

Zhao blows the floating tea leaves, "He is coming for the Four Mystical Artifacts?"

"What happens when all four are gathered together?"

Shen explains, "The Artifacts were produced under Pangu the Creator, before the order of Yin and Yang was established. At the beginning of time, there were souls but no spirits, life but no death; men were deities and deities were like ants. The Artifacts contain power from a primordial time of chaos, if manipulated with purpose, they can

disrupt the order of everything. It's my responsibility to keep them away from the wrong hands."

At this point, Zhao has been listening in silence, which makes Shen rather uncomfortable... he isn't afraid of Zhao's questioning, he's afraid of him not asking. This man knows his boundaries, he never says what he's not supposed to, and he never asks what he's not supposed to. And yet he has a lot of speculations in his mind. What Shen is most afraid of is not knowing what he has figured out in that brain of his.

After a long while, Zhao slowly asks, "Ghost face wore a mask, and that day you didn't seem to want it to come off, is it because I would recognise his face?"

He noticed right then and there, and the whip towards the mask was intentional too!

Shen's face turns pale. What ghost face looks like doesn't actually matter, they both travel between the realms of Yin and Yang, so they both understand that a body is just a vessel. And yet, Shen doesn't want Zhao to know all the convoluted intricacies behind this. But Shen is too used to being a gentleman, he doesn't know how to lie, and so he freezes and doesn't know how to respond.

Zhao instantly says, "Alright, you don't have to say anything, I know who it is, and I won't ask. You... you don't have to frown."

His last few words soften, showing a hint of his usual and subtle caring. Shen's heart is wrenched, his throat dries and he can't utter a single word.

Zhao rushes one whole cup of tea down, and feels like he might have crossed the line. He is rather uneasy about this, and stands up, "We've been out for so long, and many things happened, get some rest, I won't bother you."

He turns around and leaves. When he is already outside the door, Shen calls him suddenly, "That day when I was drunk, besides leaving this body, did I do anything inappropriate?"

Zhao stops at his feet.

Shen looks rather anxious.

Zhao turns around and smiles; his smiles are usually either cold or indecent, rarely is it so gentle and pleasing. He points to himself and says half-jokingly, "Sure you did, Your Honour, you threw yourself at me, till now I'm still flattered and in shock."

Shen can't tell if he is telling the truth, but his tone does sound indecent and flirtatious. Shen looks at him helplessly, "Everyone else is frightened of me, how dare you."

Zhao is all smiles, but his heart sinks.

He bids Shen farewell, and leaves the building. Before he gets in the car, he can't help but turn around and look up: lights are still on in Shen's flat, which isn't many floors up, Zhao's keen eyes can clearly see a shadow by the window, quietly watching him leave.

It's like he has been seeing him off from behind forever.

Legend says he was born from the depths of evil, vicious and soulless; from the periphery of Hell, his blade cold as snow... but every time Zhao thinks of him coming from and into darkness, always in solitude, wandering along the freezing road to Hell with countless souls, he can't help his feelings of sympathy and tenderness towards this lonesome man.

He doesn't know what happened between him and the Ghost Slayer in all his past lives, and the other person obviously doesn't want him to know.

Zhao didn't want to keep asking Shen. On one hand, the suppressed emotions he saw in Shen's eyes at the hotel have him in fear and awe, and he almost doesn't dare go near it. On the other hand... he really doesn't want to hurt his feelings, and damage his pride.

And although it's hard to say whether his pampering and caring for Shen is true love or lust or just a crush, Zhao can't bring himself to be so heartless suddenly.

He leans against his car, finishes a cigarette, and throws it into a bin. Then he gets in and slowly drives away.

When Zhao arrives at his place, the black cat Da Qing has been sitting beside the refrigerator for long. It interrogates him furiously, "Where's my cat food? You haven't been blessed with my presence for merely a short time, and you threw away my cat food! Treason! Treason!!!"

Zhao ignores its yelling, silently puts on slippers, pours a plate of milk, cuts up some sausages, and heats them up in the microwave for Da Qing... his refrigerator only has so much food thanks to Shen.

Da Qing is shocked, and circles his leg. Sniffing his scent, it asks, "What's up with you? Why do you look like you ate rat poison?"

Zhao extends his legs, and lays on the sofa. He picks up the black cat and puts it on his legs, and asks while staring into its eyes, "When I was ten, you found me, and gave me the Guardian Order."

The black cat strangely nods, having no clue as to why Zhao is feeling nostalgic all of a sudden.

“At that time, I was a happy-go-lucky naive child. I thought I was some male version Sailor Moon,” Zhao laughs bitterly, and pats fat cat on the head, “Da Qing, tell me the truth, who am I?”

“You said you are a servant cat fairy of the Guardian Order, and that you would seek out every generation of Guardians. I always thought that the Order was like an ancient spiritual sword, that anyone worthy of it could wield it, but... actually, the Guardian has always been just one person, right?”

Da Qing’s round eyes stare at him, sometimes its pretence isn’t good enough, and its gaze doesn’t look like that of a cat.

“Where’s the true fire on my left shoulder? And what crime did I commit?”

These questions have Da Qing’s hair standing up furiously, “How did you find out?”

“I was guessing, I tricked you, stupid cat. You’re just as easy to fool as him...” Zhao takes out a cigarette, and leans against the sofa in exhaustion, “but paper cannot wrap fire, the truth will eventually come out, so what are you angry about?”

Da Qing meows and hesitantly moves closer. Like a real cat, it curls up into a ball of fur, and its head nudges his stomach softly.

Dat fat fuq is unusually good, so Zhao puts it into his arms and softly caresses its back.

“I don’t know,” Da Qing says quietly, “I was only a little cat that still hadn’t finished cultivation; I spent my days fooling around, and you... you were about the same as you are now, a complete jerk, fearless and unruly. But one day, you suddenly left, for... a few dozen years. Nobody knew where you went, and when you came back, the true fire on your left shoulder disappeared. You held me, and patiently grilled me a fish, which you would rarely do. You took out your whip and turned it into three talismans, and gave them to me.”

Da Qing closes its emerald eyes in the warm embrace of the man.

“What did I say?” Zhao asks gently.

“You said you made a god-awful mistake, and... that you would never return. I kept the Guardian Order and continued my cultivation, and I searched everywhere for you for centuries.”

Da Qing’s tone sounds as if it’s about to cry. Zhao can’t help but sigh, but before he can say anything, Da Qing wriggles out of his arms, shakes its shiny black fur, and stands on top of his thighs, demanding arrogantly, “So you need to treat me better! The microwave rang for several times already, go fetch my milk and sausage!”

Zhao has nothing to say.

And so he flips dat fat fuq off his lap.

Guardian Chapter: 46

Chapter: 46

In the evening, Guo Changcheng leaves the care centre for children with autism. The sky is murky, and the streets are not easy to get through as snow has just fallen in Dragon City. He can only drive like a snail in the snow, and pray that he will get there before the post office closes.

His small battered car is stuffed with all kinds of books: some are textbooks and exercises, some are young fiction; all wrapped in multiple layers of kraft paper and plastic wrapping. Pile after pile, neatly arranged; at a glance, it looks very much like a delivery from purchasing books online.

Guo plans on giving these to a primary school he is sponsoring before the New Year.

His driving skills are rather mediocre, and he is not very brave. On the slippery road, his car crawls like a giant tortoise, and still, he almost bumps into someone.

A person in grey dashes out into the traffic, and almost rolls under the wheels of Guo's car. Several cars stop abruptly, luckily everyone has been driving slowly, so no further chaos is caused.

A grumpy driver rolls down the window. He bellows, "Are you sick!? Find somewhere quieter for racketeering, will ya?"

But Guo isn't as fierce. He's frightened, and his palms are drenched in sweat. He scrambles off the car and his voice shivers, "You... Are you okay? Sorry, I'm really sorry."

The person who fell is really skinny, so skinny as to appear deformed. A weathered and withering face, the wide brim hat covers almost half the face, as if the whole person is shrouded in darkness. With skin in the colour of a pale yellow, the person looks to be on the verge of death.

The angry driver is still yelling, "Hey bro, leave him, will ya? He's a lunatic! Why didn't you just run him over?"

Guo indecisively waves towards the angry driver, but as he looks at the person in front of him, he is even more terrified. He hesitantly extends his hands to help, "Can you stand up? How about... how about I send you to the hospital?"

But the person in a hat doesn't accept his help and quickly squats his hands away, facing up and staring at Guo. The eyes look dead, and the gaze inexplicably petrifying. Guo shivers.

Then, the person with a hat stands up, and without looking at him again, hurries off.

Guo notices a black stain under their ear as they pass by, like a fingerprint left by a finger covered in ash.

He helplessly stands in place, and shouts from behind, "Are you really okay? How about I give you my contact, if there's anything you can call me, my name is..."

But the hat-wearer takes a turn into a narrow alley, and is gone.

The angry driver leaves too, and as he does, he says to Guo in the freezing cold, "Bro, you stupid or what?"

Guo sighs. He opens the door to his car. As he does, he sees a person in the reflection... the person with a hat.

The hat-wearer stealthily hides in a corner. Then, two women pass by, and as they do, the hat-wearer suddenly opens its mouth and its head morphs into a half-human form. A several-inch tongue slithers out, and the creature sucks the two passers-by.

Guo's eyes widen. One of the two women stumbles and almost faints as if from low blood pressure. Luckily, the other helps her stand. Guo cannot make out what they're saying. He only sees a cloud of substance floating from the body of the woman who almost passed out, which flies into the agape jaw of the hat-wearer.

Guo is astonished, and looks back abruptly. But he sees nothing except a snow-laden street and normal pedestrians.

He scrambles into his car, heart thundering. He pulls out the stun baton Zhao gave him, and stuffs it in a pocket in his jacket, patting on it heavily. It's as if he found his mainstay, and slowly drives forward.

That stun baton really is the best thing he got from SIU, besides his salary.

The next day, Guo arrives at work, and Zhu Hong's cafeteria card flies on to his face, "Little Guo, I want a beef cake today, the very crunchy ones, and get me a soured milk too!"

Guo puts down his bag and without saying anything other than a simple "yes", he rushes to the cafeteria. He runs into Chu Shuzhi who's munching half a deep-fried cake. Guo stands upright and greets, "Good morning, Brother Chu."

Chu gives him the cold shoulder, and only glances at him, "Uh."

He keeps walking, but quickly walks back. He grabs Guo by the collar, and pulls him back, "Hold on, did you run into something dirty?"

Guo stares at him stupidly.

Chu's hands that smell like deep-fried cakes grab him by his shoulders, and turn him around, patting on the back of his heart and both sides of his waist. Then, Chu wipes his hands with a paper towel, and pushes Guo away, "You were oozing bad luck. Alright, now you're clean, you can go."

Guo's face and ears redden. He runs off with tiny steps. Chu finishes off his meal, "What has this kid been cultivating, his virtue is so thick that it's dripping oil."

Hungry Zhu swallows saliva, it sounds like he is describing a tasty pig.

"Food! Food!!!" Zhao crashes the door open, and without saying anything, searches Chu's body. He finds an egg, and takes it as if it's his.

Chu is furious but dares not say anything.

Then, Zhao takes out a pack of milk, and drinks it.

Da Qing howls, "That's mine! Mine! You're robbing cat food! You shameless prick!"

Zhao looks at it without a care, "Yea I did... short fatty, what can you do?"

Da Qing has nothing to say.

"Why don't you go to the cafeteria..." Zhu says.

"I'm in a hurry." Zhao finishes, and crashes into a wall. Guo comes back with a beef cake and sees this. There is not enough time for him to be scared, and Zhao already passes through the wall and disappears.

"You can close your mouth." Zhu takes her breakfast, "There's a door to the library, you're not capable of understanding anything inside, so naturally you can't see the door either."

Chu gobbles down his fried cake, and still feels one egg away from full. He quickly snatches a small piece from Zhu's beef cake, "Better than me, I can see it but can't get inside... the library is not open to me."

Guo asks, "Why not?"

Chu's grouchy face turns into an eerie smile, and says to him, "Because I have a criminal record."

Guo is left silenced.

He really is still frightened of his Brother Chu.

A while later, Zhao hurries out of the "wall" with a rotten old book. He throws the egg shell and empty milk packet into Guo's rubbish bin, and snatches a paper towel from Zhu's desk. Without a word, he scurries off with a strong breeze at his feet.

And then he disappears for one whole day.

It's been half a month since returning from the snowy mountain ranges. In the blink of an eye, new year passes. Then Dragon City quickly gets cold in the stormy weather, which brings everybody towards the Lunar New Year.

Chief Zhao is so incredibly busy that he is almost forgetting his own name. He has to prepare gifts for all those with connections, and receive all the gifts from fair-weather friends in all sorts of places. There are non-memorable dealings, unfulfillable gatherings, and incompletable work reports and meetings. The phone in his office is becoming a railway ticketing hotline.

New calendars are displayed on the working desks in all departments. This day, the sky goes dark early, and Sang Zan floats to criminal investigations before the day-workers leave.

This comrade has a tough life. He was a ruthless conspirator when he was alive, and he entered the Pillar of Nature upon death, being trapped in a lightless and timeless prison for centuries, until he is ready now to lead a new life... no, afterlife. And yet he realises his transformation from conspirator to moron: he can't even understand human language anymore.

Wang Zheng is the only one left who can communicate with him in the whole wide world. And although Hanga language is Wang's mother tongue, she only spoke it for less than twenty years, the some three centuries afterwards she has been speaking mandarin. When Sang realises that Wang is much more fluent when she talks to humans and other ghosts, he is determined to learn mandarin.

There's no holding back when Sang is dead-set on a goal: he even poisoned his own wife and child. In half a month, he almost spends every of his waking moment murmuring Pinyin into Wang's ears, which almost gives Wang the ghost neurasthenia. Finally, he begins to grasp the basic rules of pronunciation, and he is now capable of parroting, even making some simple conversations on his own.

Sang spouts out one word after another in putonghua, and announces, "Gelan said at the end of the year besides year... year-end 'bawnus', there will be extra benefeets, so... everyone please send, send your flour."

He hasn't memorised it well, and is clearly mouthing without understanding what he's saying.

Lin Jing asks, "Amitabha. What are we sending flour for, are we making steamed buns for New Year's Eve?"

Sang says while gesturing, "Not bans, it's 'sending flour', butter be 'trunspart fees'..."

"Chief Zhao said besides year-end bonus we'll get an additional five thousand as extra benefits. Come get it from me by this weekend, and send me the receipts next week. Better be transport fees, but it can also be labour insurance." Wang floats downstairs hurriedly, and glares at Sang, "Can't even speak properly."

Sang looks at her, and his sombrely fierce face softens as he smiles stupidly, and carefully reaches for her hand.

"Don't give me trouble, I'm busy." Wang softly censures him, and asks, "Zhao Yunlan went to a gathering with a brother-in-law of his, but I still have a document for him to sign urgently."

Sang quickly says, "I... I go..."

Wang retracts her hand, "No you won't, you'll scare his brothers-in-law to death."

Sang doesn't argue, and silently follows behind her, watching her busying around when it's dark outside.

Wang turns around and says something no-one else understands. Sang's face wears a tranquil and satisfied smile, marked with a settled sense of transcendence.

"What I hate the most is PDA, especially in a foreign language. My eyes are going blind." Zhu lowers her voice and mutters, "That bastard has just stopped his flirting recently, and now these two are doing it!"

Lin says, "Goodness it be, madam please don't be burdened with envy and hatred."

Zhu is about to hit him, but her phone on the desk rings. She picks it up, "Hi... oh, where?"

She gestures for everyone to stay behind, as some are about to leave already. She takes out a stack of memo pad papers, "Uh, go on... Yellow Stone Road, Yellow Stone

Temple Hospital. Alright, I'll tell them... oh right, if you have time come back to the office, Wang has things for you to sign."

Everyone can tell it's their Chief Zhao calling. Zhu hangs up, and sighs disheartenedly, "Come now, as it always happens in our office... no work during the day, but overtime only at night. Five minutes after close of business and our shady Chief has work for us."

Lin hears that, and pushes the door open like a surge of lightning, and disappears at the speed of light.

Zhu writes the address on a memo note and sticks it on the wall. She covers half her face with a scarf, "It's winter, and I'm a girl, I can't stand the cold..."

Da Qing continues, "This old cat hasn't got a down jacket."

Eyes stare at Chu who has no time to react. He faces his bastardly colleagues, and a millions words only turn to one, "Motherfucker."

Ten minutes later, Chu sits in Guo's car, heading to Yellow Stone Temple.

Guardian Chapter: 47

Chapter: 47

Although Chu doesn't talk to Guo much, in the few times they've made contact, he always manages to show off what he can do. In the "small and young" heart of Guo, an everlasting impression is left.

Guo thinks, though the Chief is remarkable, he is usually a lot friendlier, and his jokes and pranks give him a more down-to-earth vibe. He is at most like a father or big brother, no matter how powerful he may be, there is not much mysteriousness.

But Chu is different. Brother Chu is totally an otherworldly "sage".

Guo acts like he's following the "Code of Conduct for the Newcomer at Work" online, he brings a small notebook with him, and follows Chu eagerly. He dares not say anything, and only jots notes on everything he sees.

The two enter the hospital, and they see a young policeman waiting at the door. They show their police ID, and get inside a room.

The one waiting for them is called Little Wang, who says while walking, "Our Chief is inside too, just now I briefly discussed with Chief Zhao. This incident is particularly severe, family of the victim called the police to report someone selling poisonous food. The victim is inside, till now, the doctors still can't figure out what kind of poison it is."

Chu asks, "Food poisoning? What kind of food?"

"Fruit." Little Wang says, "The victim got off work last night, and didn't have time for dinner; according to his family, he ate an orange he bought from a street vendor, and passed out immediately and ended up in hospital. I've heard of poisoned water or processed food with harmful chemicals, but never poisoned fruits."

As he speaks, he pushes open the door to the patient's room, and a burst of earth-shattering screams explodes. Guo is frightened, he tiptoes and peeks inside behind Chu.

A man in his late thirties lay on the bed, wriggling and quivering. The doctors and nurses hold him in place. There is a crying woman in the room as well, probably family of the patient.

The man on the bed clutches the hand of a doctor, almost tearing off his skin, and howls insanely, "My legs, my legs are broken... My legs! Ah! Ah!!!"

In wails and in screeches, the veins on his neck pump up.

"Help! Help me... my legs are broken... it's so painful, help... it hurts!!!"

"Legs?" Chu asks Little Wang, "Didn't you say it's food poisoning? What happened to his legs?"

"Nothing," Little Wang says. "not even a bruise. They scanned his legs and found nothing... which is why we're clueless."

Chu walks forward and pats a nurse on the shoulder, signalling her to move aside. He lifts up the man's eyelids, and studies his irises. Then he examines the back of his ears, mutters something, and clutches a fist and pushes it forcefully between the man's chest and abdomen.

The man suddenly stops struggling.

Chu asks, "Still painful now?"

The man catches a breath and gratefully looks at him, shaking his head.

The doctors and nurses beside all stare at them as if they were an evil cult.

Chu heartlessly releases his hand, and without a care for the resumed screaming behind him, he turns to Guo and says, "We're done here, let's go, we'll head back to write a report."

Guo is speechless.

Their job is done just like that! That... what just happened?

Shen's elective course is at night, as he watches the last batch of students leave, he packs his stuff, and goes back to his apartment on Earth. On his way, he can't help but keep looking at his phone... like he is really concerned about the time.

His phone has merely three functions: phone calls, messaging, and telling the time. The games came with the phone, and he never plays them.

Shen doesn't like this gadget, he finds writing a letter more convenient. If it's urgent you could write a quick note, if it's not you can take your time and write a little longer. Unlike making phone calls, which is charged by the hour, whenever he thinks of that, he feels like someone is watching him talk on the phone, it's very uncomfortable.

And opening a letter is a process marked with joyful anticipation, especially when the sender is someone special. Only their handwriting can trigger the deepest longing, and all their letters can be kept in a collection for a long time.

It's a pity that Zhao never writes letters. Even when he's signing for a delivery package he finds his name too long and just scribbles an illegible "Zhao". To "Ghost Slayer", he gives the messenger puppet a verbal message; to "Shen Wei", he bombards him with instant messaging.

The cold fonts of the messages look no different from those sent by the telecom company to notify remaining values. Though Shen never deleted any of them, he isn't quite used to it... but now there's nothing for him to get used to, ever since they came back from the mountains, Zhao never disturbed him again.

Perhaps this is for the best, Shen thinks. A normal human can only live for several dozen years, to him, that's like snapping his fingers. Men die like burnt-out candles, and everything from their lives no longer matter thereafter; by then, Zhao will forget all about him once again.

Shen pushes open the door to his bedroom that has always been closed. As it opens, the lights turn on automatically.

In the room, there is no bed, no table, and no chair; only a cluster of pictures on the wall. From the frames one can see that they are aged, and they are all paintings of a man: front, profile, back view; the paintings are arranged chronologically, as seen from his clothes, which change through dynasties and periods. And yet, it has always been the same person; even the most detailed expression in his eyebrows is portrayed scrupulously, and it never changes throughout centuries.

And after the ancient paintings come big and small photographs, some of his teenage years, others of his older years... smiling, frowning, chitchatting and fooling around;

there's even one in which a cat pounces on to his head, and he's tilting his neck and yelling.

All are Zhao Yunlan. It's always been just him.

Shen thinks, there are some things that only he has to know, only he has to remember. When the time is up, he will also disappear, alone. Better if no-one notices... after all, his very existence is a mistake.

Before that, the only thing Shen can indulge in is stealthily watching that person, without his noticing.

He would sneak into Zhao's apartment late at night, but that man is very alert, so he can't stay for long. Luckily, Zhao has been having a lot of dinner gatherings lately, and he usually arrives home half-drunken. Only then can Shen walk just a little closer

Coming without a sound. Leaving without a sound.

Shen affectionately looks at the wall full of paintings and photographs, and disappears in a cloud of black mist.

He speeds through the road to Hell, and beside the Bridge of Fate, the Judge is leading a crowd of Hell Guards, including Black Ghost and White Ghost, as well as Ox-Head and Horse-Face, all waiting for the Ghost Slayer.

The Judge is a pale-faced and plump middle-aged man; he wears a kind expression. As he sees Shen, he's all smiles and incredibly polite, "Your Honour, the Ten Kings of Hell are expecting you."

On the deserted land full of wails, next to the Bridge of Fate, Shen's refreshing eyes seem a bit cold. He nods towards the Hell Guards, and without looking up, he says politely, "Thanks."

The Judge watches his expression, and heedfully says, "Last time we sent the Guardian the Book of Life and Death, that was truly a mistake on our part. It almost revealed your identity, and we are incredibly sorry, Your Honour."

Shen looks at him quietly. The Judge drips in cold sweat.

And so the old guy tries to brush things off, "But everything regarding Lord Kunlun has been wiped away, I can guarantee, nothing remains, not even the tiniest clue. The Guardian is now amongst the living, as long as that ghost face doesn't spout, he will not find out anything. Besides, Guardian is noble and

pristine like the winds and moon, a filthy being like ghost face would not dare 'awaken' him."

Shen laughs softly, marked with unspeakable ridicule. He doesn't say anything... he really has nothing decent to say.

The Judge struggles to laugh dryly, and wipes off sweat with his sleeves.

He himself feels that sending Zhao the Book of Life and Death was indeed an all-too-apparent and idiotic move on the part of Hell, but what can he do about it?

It's not like he calls the shots here.

There are ten big deities above him. The big guys even ordered him to secretly find out what the Ghost Slayer thinks, and which side he is on... though the Ghost Slayer rarely speaks, and always seems gentle and polite, his mind is clear as a mirror.

Nobody is stupid here. The old Judge really doesn't want to try how fast Ghost Slayer's blade is.

Besides, if that big god is really awakened, would he then agree to be on their side?

When he was banished all those years ago, wasn't it due to defiance?

Guardian Chapter: 48

Chapter: 48

"After investigating a case outside we need to write a report. I type slowly, you do it." Chu pours a cup of tea, and leisurely leans back on a chair. "Type what I say."

Guo immediately sits upright in front of the computer, as if he has to take care of a huge task.

The "people" of SIU are all gone, all that's left are floating ghosts. In the darkness, only one light shines in criminal investigations, like a lighthouse amidst the ocean at night.

Not long after the two are seated, someone knocks on the door. Chu answers, and a big steaming tray comes flying in. Upon a closer look, the tray isn't flying on its own, but is carried by a headless person, you just can't see them behind the big tray.

There are two sets of utensils on the tray, four dishes, a pot of soup and two bowls of rice. The headless ghost floats inside softly, and softly places the food on the table. It takes out a bag of cat food out of nowhere, and fills up Da Qing's cat bowl.

Da Qing sits with elegant composure, and nods subtly, "Thank you... it would be splendid if you could offer your king some concentrated milk as well."

Some TV shows ought to include a warning: mentally retarded children and fat cats must be accompanied by an adult.

Headless ghost floats towards the fridge and takes out a bottle of milk, pouring a bowlful for Da Qing the Great.

Guo has gotten used to the environment in No. 4 Bright Avenue. Gradually, he finds that humans and ghosts are not much different. Some ghosts are kindhearted, like this headless fella who brings people meals whenever they have to work overtime. When Guo leaves the post office everyday, he has only twenty dollars left, so this helpful ghost really makes him feel the warmth of Spring.

After their meals, Chu sluggishly drinks his hot tea, and says to Guo, "That's roughly what it means. As for the format, find the old reports and adjust them

on your own... that guy wasn't poisoned, he was cursed by spirits... uh, as in grudge. The victim's lower limbs suffer from pain, so the spirit might have died of physical injury. The victim's forehead is darkened, eyes are reddened, the Line of Karma beneath his eyelids isn't deep, and the black Mark of Virtue behind his ear is very light. He is probably not directly related to the spirit who laid the curse on him, and didn't deserve it. On the face of it, that spirit is breaking laws..."

Guo's eyes widen, his paws lay dead on the keyboard... he doesn't understand, and can't keep up with what Chu is saying at all.

Chu sighs, and extends his legs. He turns around and asks the dead-eyed idiot, "Alright, what do you not understand?"

"What's the Line of Karma?"

Da Qing raises its head from the milk, and a white beard forms on its black fur. It says furiously, without licking off the milk stain, "What's up with Zhao Yunlan? He spends his days indulging in lust and greed, does he ever have time for important business? Has there ever been a training session for the newcomer? Why does this kid not know dog crap?"

Chu can't let a cat badmouth the Chief, so he says, "Chief Zhao is busy with the renovation thing lately, if it's settled, we'll move to a private chateau with a huge garden, and you can have a big cat house up on a tree, with a view at the bird nests."

The bossy cat pauses, and its anger subsides a little. After a while, for the sake of its big tree house with a bird-nest view, it wiggles its whiskers and reluctantly explains to Guo without a care, "The Line of Karma is just that, it's karma, it's causality. Let's say a murderer comes in, and kills you for no cause, then there's no karma, and no Line of Karma. If a murderer comes in, and you're blocking his way, and he stabs you to death, that barely counts as karma, since you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, and

that's just fate. But the Line would be very light, and it can be wiped off easily. If a murderer comes in, and realises that you were cheating with his wife, and kills you out of wrath, the Line of Karma on you cannot be wiped off, but it wouldn't be very deep. You weren't innocent, but didn't deserve to be killed either, so the cause and the result do not match. If a murder comes in..."

Having been murdered several times already, Guo can't help but continue, "and he realises I'm his enemy, the one he wants revenge on, and he stabs me to death, then the Line of Karma would be deeper?"

Da Qing shakes its head to and fro, "Stupid but not completely hopeless."

Guo then asks, "Then... then what's the Mark of Virtue?"

Chu continues, "Whether a person has done good or bad deeds, there will be a mark behind their ears. If a person kills someone without anyone finding out, and not even the police could catch him, there would still be a black mark behind his ear, that's the Mark of Virtue."

As for those with good virtue... Chu looks at Guo, and he can see an apparent white mark behind Guo's ear, shining in a thick and gentle ray. However, the shining light isn't visible to everyone. Even those with a third eye must be immensely focused to see it.

Guo seems to be in thought, "Does the black mark look like a dirty hand print?"

Chu is startled, "You've seen it?"

Guo nods, and tells them about how he almost ran someone over with his car last night.

Da Qing giggles, "A black mark so big that even a normal human can see, that jerk will probably be electrocuted by the Heavens very soon."

Chu explains as he sees Guo's puzzled expression, "A human's Mark of Virtue isn't visible to the naked eye, the thing you met wasn't human. The reason why most fairies dare not harm humans is because of the Mark of Virtue. If the black mark gets too deep, they will be punished by thunder and lightning, and that's no fun at all. Not only the punished fairy, but nearby fairies will be electrified as well. And so every year when the fairies gather before the New Year, they would monitor everybody's virtue to make sure no-one is crossing the line. They would take care of the evildoers themselves before it reaches the Heavens."

Guo understands only partly, "Then if a human does bad deeds the Heavens would also punish them by lightning strike?"

"No," Da Qing wiggles its tail and jumps on the floor. Its back curls up into a ball of fur and lays next to the heater, "haven't you heard of 'he who mends bridges goes blind, he

who kills people has plenty of children'? The human world has its own laws, and most people never get to reincarnate anyway. Life is so short, and men die like ants, long before karma can catch up to them, so accruing good virtue really does a human no particular good... perhaps it would make them luckier, but not always. You see, you have great virtue, but you're still an unlucky little cabbage."

Guo lost his parents when he was still young. He became an orphan, and on top of that he was born unintelligent and timid. Though Zhao jokingly said that bringing him along as a mascot would bring some strange luck, fairly speaking, Guo has had quite a difficult life.

"Really? I have good virtue?" Guo is shocked to hear this, "I have an unlucky life? Not really, I think my life has been quite good, it's just that I'm not very capable."

He always feels that he is not very capable. Since he was little, all his relatives pitied him, and always gave him a lot. Now that he has grown up his is still a useless piece of work, but his uncle arranged such a well-paid job for him, and his Chief and colleagues all take care of him well, even letting him stay when he adds no value to the team whatsoever... isn't he kind of lucky?

The black cat's drooping eyes open wide, and looks at Guo. Its emerald eyes shine with a flash of golden light.

Before it can give a speech, Zhao comes in with a whole body of coldness and intoxication. He asks with a voice that is almost mute, "How's the report going?"

"Eh..." Guo is about to say something, but before he can, Zhao waves towards him and stumbles into the toilet. He vomits.

Chu and Guo hurriedly follow. Da Qing "pffts", sluggishly extends its fat paws from underneath its body, and dawdles forward while rocking like a boat, "Stupid human."

The stupid human presses his stomach and stands helplessly, with a pale face. Chu pats his back, and orders Guo, "How did you get so drunk... Little Guo, get some warm water.

Zhao finishes vomiting, washes his mouth, and stands up wobbly. He laughs bitterly, "Those bastards ganged up and forced me to drink, what could I have done?"

Chu replies, "That's bullshit, who can force you if you don't want to drink?"

Zhao walks outside while holding on to the wall, "I'm broken-hearted, why can't I drown my sorrows in alcohol?"

"Ouch, Professor Shen still doesn't want you? Teachers really do have good taste, the people approves." Da Qing slides against his leg, "Hey, it's almost New Year, not a

good time for drunk driving, you wouldn't be so stupid, would you? You can land in jail for half a year."

Zhao succinctly and bitterly says to the fatty, "Fuck off!"

He finds a chair to sit down on, and sits feebly like a dying dog, "Little Guo, go get Wang here, she has things for me to sign. Old Chu, tell me what this is about."

Chu briefly summarises the uncomplicated incident, and Zhao pauses for a thought, "How about you finish up the report tonight, I'll wait, when it's done I'll stamp it and fax it, hopefully we can get a reply by tomorrow."

Chu wouldn't have a problem with that, after all, it's not like he has to type up the report.

Then, Wang comes downstairs and pours him a cup of honey water. Zhao doesn't even have the energy to look at what Wang has for him, he can't even open his eyes, and just carelessly picks up a pen and signs a bunch of illegible symbols. He waves at the ghastly man behind Wang, "No PDA in front of a lonely single man, fuck off!"

When Chu and Guo finish up the preliminary report for Zhao to sign and stamp, he has already been sleeping on his desk for long.

Da Qing wakes him up with a storm of mighty cat punches, and asks, "I forgot to ask, how's my super luxurious tree house with a bird-nest view going?"

Zhao says half-consciously, "Fat fuq, I'm gonna kill you and eat your meat."

Da Qing pounces on to his shoulder, and roars into his ears, "Meow!!! Jerk!!! Where's my luxurious cat house? Where's my luxurious cat house!?"

He gobbles down a cup of cooled water, picks up the cat by its stumpy neck and throws it aside. Wiping his face, he is a little more awake, "It's basically done, if it goes through fast we can probably move by Autumn next year."

The black cat instantly changes its arrogant attitude, and nudges his hand in flattery, "Well, well, our Chief is so capable. That... that nearby bird nest, better have eggs inside..."

Zhao flicks its cat brain away, and wipes his hands.

"Fucking cat," he says coldly, "your fur is all over my hands."

He doesn't wait for Da Qing to get mad, and quickly signs the report and gets up, "I'm going then, thanks for your work guys."

Chu asks, "Hey, wait, how did you get here?"

“Taxi. I’ll take another one back.”

Guo kindly reminds, “It’s very late, and very cold outside, you might not be able to find a taxi, how about I dr... Ow!!”

Chu steps on him heavily under the table, and rapidly rushes up and pushes Zhao back on to his chair. He snatches Zhao’s phone from his pocket like a thief, “Professor Shen is probably on holiday, let me call him to pick you up.”

This guy wouldn’t want to know who he is trying to call as a chauffeur!

Zhao tries to get his phone back, but Chu agilely jumps aside, and orders Guo, “Hey, go hold him in place, look at how drunk he is... Trust me, when he looks at you there is something strange, I don’t believe Professor Shen would hold off for so long.”

Zhao is held in place by Guo and Da Qing the cat who just likes causing trouble... it even diligently sits on his stomach, which almost suffocates their Chief.

“No, say I beg you alright, don’t give me trouble will you?” Says Zhao.

Chu raises his eyebrows, and Shen’s voice comes from the other side, “Yunlan? What is it?”

He picks up instantly, even a father might not be so attentive to his son’s phone calls. Chu gestures to Zhao... Chief Zhao, you’re a badass! Why are you heartbroken?

Chu coughs, “Oh, Professor Shen, it’s me. Our Chief drank a lot tonight, he is hugging everyone he sees. The office is in chaos, you see, could I trouble you to come and pick him up?”

Zhao grabs a pencil holder, and hurls it towards Chu’s brain. Chu dodges, and continues, “No, nothing’s wrong, it’s just the drunk cat throwing things at me... right, we’ll take care of him. Please come as soon as you can, it’s No. 4 Bright Avenue, second floor, criminal investigations. See you!”

Zhao points at him, “A bunch of bitches.”

Da Qing wiggles its tail, “Yup, we’re bitches... big stupid guy, what can you do?”

Guo is the most innocent accomplice, and under Chief Zhao’s knife-sharp gaze, all he can do is learn from the ostriches, and curl up into a shivering mushroom.

Not long, Shen arrives.

He has only knocked once, and the door to the office is already sprung open. A body is thrown outside, and Shen catches; Zhao falls right into his embrace.

Zhao can't even stand properly, but he still has a fighting spirit. He points at Chu inside the office, "Little bitch, just you wait."

Chu's bitter face suddenly wears a smile, "Ow, I'm scared to death."

Shen doesn't know to cry or laugh, and pushes down Zhao's trembling hand, "Alright, alright."

Maybe Zhao really is drunk, or perhaps he is embarrassed in front of Shen, and uses Chu to divert attention. "If I don't beat you up today, you don't know how many eyes the Horse God has."

Then he struggles out of Shen and tries to pounce forward.

Shen sighs, and nods towards the few inside the office, "Thank you, I'll take care of him."

He wraps his arm around Zhao's waist, the other hand grabbing Zhao's wrist, not letting him quiver and ramp, and tows him away.

Da Qing stands at the door, and stares at the two from behind with profound meaning. It suddenly says, "I'm sensing the peculiar vibe of a reverse couple. Our Chief is such a slut, could it be... hey, homo sapiens, what do you guys think?"

Chu kicks its fat butt away.

Guardian Chapter: 49

Chapter: 49

Actually, Zhao is feeling a rather unique sensation.

He really drank too much, and can't really walk straight. But he already threw up and took a nap, so he isn't as drunken by now.

It's just that Chu exaggerated on how drunk he is, and so he just decides to play along. Pretending that he is utterly disoriented, he lays in the seat next to the driver like a dead corpse, feigning unconsciousness.

Shen went upstairs to pick him up, but left the car engine on to keep the air con running. Zhao feels it as soon as he gets inside.

Shen sits down and pushes him lightly, "Wake up, you can sleep when you're back at home, it's easy to catch a cold outside."

He hears the man beside him sighing. Shen sees that he can't wake him up, so he leans forward to pull his seat belt for him. The two men are so incredibly close that Zhao can smell Shen's scent, it's different from when he's the Ghost Slayer. He has the scent of soap from the clothes that probably just came out of the laundry... when the Ghost Slayer sheds his feared black cloak, what's underneath is actually such a clean and soft man.

Then, Shen takes out a bottle of mineral water, and pours some into a little cup. He shakes the cup a bit, and the cold water warms up with white mist. He holds the cup beside Zhao's mouth, "Drink some."

Zhao opens his eyes slightly, and inside of the car is pitch black, with only the light shining from Shen's eyes. They are just the right amount of light, not murky but not glaring either.

Zhao's heart suddenly stomps heavily. He leans forward, and guzzles down the cup of water in Shen's hand. Then, Shen takes out a blanket from underneath the seat and wraps him tightly in it. He turns up the temperature of the air con, and drives away steadily.

Zhao leans against the seat with his eyes close, but he is awake... it's been a long time since he felt so warm in a cold winter's night.

It's been half a month since they came back from the snowy mountains, and Zhao never contacted Shen.

But constantly annoying and worrying about the thing he likes has become a bit of a habit, and it's always painful to change one's habits. Zhao has therefore been living quite messily. And although humans are social animals, too much socialising can wear anyone out.

If you don't take care of your appearance meticulously, it's perhaps to make you appear less alone.

Men and women go after him, it has always been like that. When he is in a good mood, he likes engaging in a bit of an ambiguous love affair, just to make himself feel better. But ever since he stopped contacting Shen, he began comparing everyone with him. And the more he did, the more disappointed he was... among all those people, none of them has the same charisma of a well-educated scholar, none of them has the same features that look as though they come from a famous portrait.

Zhao feels like he turned into an old monk void of desires in just one night. One time during a dinner gathering, someone hired a young model that he always liked, but he was utterly uninterested... Da Qing can testify, there was a time when Zhao very perversely set a swimsuit picture of that model as his desktop background.

And whenever he is so drunken that he forgets what year it is, he thinks about the day when he shamelessly coerced Shen to stay at his place till night time because of his stomachache.

They watched movies together, and talked occasionally. When he got bored of the old movies he picked up some files that he was reading. They would do their own thing and not disturb one another. And then, Shen would place a pillow behind him.

It's a lifestyle that Zhao has always dreamt of... two people who don't always have to talk, who won't annoy each other or demand a lot all day like going on movie dates and giving flowers. They live their own lives, but they're not distant... it's like they are meant to live together, just the two of them.

At this age, Zhao is smart enough and experienced enough to realise that when a man looks at someone he likes, and doesn't see tiny waist long legs big butt, but sees home, that's definitely not lust.

If it weren't like that, perhaps he would have treated it as a joke, and ended it with the Ghost Slayer openly.

Whenever Zhao thinks of the pair of eyes he saw when he woke up at midnight in the shabby house in the snowy mountains, he can't help but feel that if he ended things just like that, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

Zhao's dog lair isn't far away from No. 4 Bright Avenue. He has yet to retrieve himself from his convoluted thoughts, and they've already arrived. Shen helps him get upstairs, takes off his jacket and hangs it aside nicely, and then puts him on the bed. He heads to the washroom for a wet towel.

Though Zhao seems to be drunk as mud, Shen is incredibly well-behaved. He only wipes his face and limbs, and avoids touching all other places, not even one millimetre. He wraps him in a blanket, sets the towel aside, and helps him tidy up the trash habitually. He sets it beside the door and plans to bring it out as he leaves. Then, he begins picking up clothes that are scattered everywhere, and gathers them into a laundry bag. He sticks a memo note reminding Zhao to send the clothes for washing the next day.

Attentive to every detail, he takes away the cup of water on the bedside cupboard so that Zhao wouldn't knock it off when he's sleeping.

Zhao listens to the rustling noise of the man tiptoeing around, tidying up the room, and not only does the knot in his heart not loosen up, it just gets messier inside.

Shen puts him in his heart, and Zhao can feel it. All his life, besides his parents, other people always seem to want something from him, or want to rely on him. Never has anyone cared so deeply for him.

Well, Da Qing isn't a person, it's just a bad-tempered fat cat.

When Shen finishes, he then realises that Zhao, who was still half-consciously peeking a moment ago, now seems to be in deep slumber, laying there restfully.

He seems so tranquil. Shen hesitates shortly, but doesn't want to leave. He stands beside the bed, staring at him lustfully.

"Fuck," Zhao thinks, while pretending to be asleep. The blood in his heart pour out like streams, "please stop looking, just go. This is killing me."

The Ghost Slayer doesn't hear his thoughts, the god above doesn't hear his thoughts. After a while, Shen seems to be hypnotised, and slowly bends down, leaning closer and closer to Zhao, till he can feel his breath on his face.

Zhao holds his corpse-like pretense with the strongest will possible. And yet, he can clearly feel that he is about to collapse.

At this instant, Shen can't hold it anymore. With his arms placed on either side of Zhao on the bed, he nudges on to Zhao's lips gently. Like a dragonfly dipping its tail in water, touching for just a split second. Shen closes his eyes, just one short-lived touch has given him immense satisfaction. Thundering thumps thrust through his body of flesh. For one instant, Shen feels like a human. Under dim lights, stealing a kiss from someone you love, and joy and sweetness swell up in your heart. Even if he died right now, he would have no objection.

All of a sudden, Zhao's mind goes completely blank.

A strand of hair holding up countless tonnes of weight breaks in his heart, in just a flashing moment, and without a sound. Zhao's slightly intoxicated brain is incredibly awake, "Ghost Slayer? So what if he's the Ghost Slayer? If I like him he's mine, to hell with everyone else!"

And so Zhao who was "sound asleep" just a moment ago suddenly wraps his arms around Shen. Shen has yet to realise what's happening, and in great shock, Zhao flips him over and weighs down on top of him.

In his breath, a tinge of alcohol remains. And yet, his eyes are crystal clear, staring into Shen's eyes. He asks softly, "What are you doing, Your Honour?"

Shen opens his mouth, in great embarrassment, there is nothing he can say.

Zhao stares at him with complex expressions for a while. Suddenly, he pinches Shen's chin lightly, "I always thought you were a gentleman, Your

Honour, but who knew you're the kind who kisses someone else secretly in the middle of the night. And it was such an unprofessional kiss as well."

Then Shen hears his muffled laughter.

Until Zhao's kisses come raining down, Shen is still stupefied. As though he were in an absurdly splendid dream, he can't help but embrace Zhao's body, pulling him in tighter.

This man is incredibly adept at kissing. Frisky, and flirtatious. As though only carelessly, Shen is already stripped of his helmet and armour, utterly vanquished.

And then, Zhao holds his body up a little. The two men are almost touching noses, and Shen hears him whisper, "This is called professional level."

Shen is lost for words.

Two buttons are undone on Zhao's shirt, and his slender and refined collar bones are unveiled. A faint aftertaste of cologne comes pouring out, and with just a soft stream, Shen is sealed in silence. He can no longer tell who is really drunk now.

Zhao sighs. He gently brushes away Shen's messy fringe, "Let me ask you, for such a long time, you've always hid from me, but never too far apart, is it because a long time ago we knew each other and you did something terrible to me, or are you afraid that human and ghost aren't meant to be together?"

Shen is stunned. His eyes become clearer, and he pushes Zhao away and sits up. The tinge of flowing blood wears away from his body, and his hands quickly retract.

Zhao sits facing him sideways, half his body on the bed, and pulls his hand in. He slowly opens Shen's clenched fist, "Look at you, why do you give yourself such a hard time. If it's the first reason, I'm telling you now, from now on, whatever happened in the past is completely written off. You won't mention it, and I won't even remember. As for the second reason... isn't that bullshit? Humans die and become ghosts too, maybe someday I'll..."

Shen quickly covers his mouth.

Two men, four eyes, they stare at each other for long. Then, Shen finally shakes his head, very, very slowly.

Zhao sighs, and gets out of bed. From his words he seems very conscious, and yet he stumbles as soon as he touches the ground and falls bottoms first. He wraps his hands around his head and moans, "Fuck, I see dozens of bees flying around."

Shen makes haste to help him get up, "I thought you weren't drunk. Does it hurt?"

Zhao is now in a peculiar state where his logical mind remains, but he struggles to walk straight. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been so blunt and bold.

He shakes his head, kneels and opens the bedside cupboard. From the bottom he scoops out a plastic folder, and slaps it on to Shen, "Open it."

Shen hesitates, but opens it soon. He finds a property contract, it's for a house near University Road, Dragon City University... he spent such a tremendous amount, this explains why he has been so short of cash lately.

Zhao hides his teasing smirk, leans against the cupboard, and sits on the ground, legs straightened out. He looks up, and lights a cigarette.

He stays silent till almost the entire cigarette burns out, and says with a deep voice, "I bought it before we went to the mountains. I thought it's a nice environment there, and it's quite accessible. It's just beside the University, so if you're willing to move in with me, you wouldn't have to drive to work, and you can even wake up later in the morning. Next year, I'll move the SIU office to somewhere nearby. The house is quite big, more than enough for the two of us, you can have a huge working room, you can bring your students over, I can invite some friends over sometimes... and I also thought about having a big silly dog, I could provoke it to fight with Da Qing and we can watch Dog Versus Cat live, New Year Edition..."

Shen's hands tremble out of control, the plastic folder crackles.

Zhao chuckles, "Who would have thought, that after going to the big Northwest, I'd find out it's you, Your Honour... you can get from East City to West City in the blink of an eye, why would you have to drive? And waking

up in the morning? If I had known I wouldn't have spent unnecessary money, now I don't even have enough for New Year."

Shen gradually lowers his head, and they lock eyes with each other. He finds this man's gaze the same as ever. Without mischief, all that's left is deeply, deeply hidden tenderness. Even just a minuscule fragment of it, like a tiny feather, grab it, and you shall drown within it

Shen is being split in halves: one half is over the moon with ecstasy, the other is sinking deep down into the abyssal depths of Hell. In just one moment, he finds himself on the verge of insanity.

Several thousand years of solitude, and yet he always remained sane. Just a few careless words from that man, and upheaval, havoc, tempest: unruly passion engulfs him.

No wonder the old saying goes like this: For love, the living can die, and the dead can once again live. The living who feareth death, and the dead who cannot again live, art those who love enow not.

Mind and soul in utter disarray, who would remember what day and what year it is?

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Shen's heart quakes with convulsion, he almost loses control.

Now he realises, for thousands of years, he hasn't been void of emotions, and he hasn't been unaggrieved. The things Zhao said tonight have only ever appeared in his dreams. On one hand, he knows none of this will ever be possible, but on the other, he can't help but hope.

Hope is like a strand of spider silk, and his life depends on it.

He was born because of him, and lived till this day because of him.

The strongest of hearts cannot be defeated by the knives and blades that are the storms and blizzards of life, but only by a helping hand that comes out of nowhere, or a gentle whisper by the ear, "Come home."

For one moment, he really wants to ask, why does he have to be the Ghost Slayer? Short-lived ants can come and go in pairs under the sun and dew, voyaging birds can find a nesting place among tree branches, and yet in heavens and earth, he was born unique, why isn't there a place he can belong?

Everyone is frightened of him, respectful on the outside but plotting discreetly and wanting him dead.

He was born in chaos, brutality and menace. There is always a part of him that overflows with malevolence, wishing to slay all those people with his blade.

But that... no, he chooses to abide by a promise that only he remembers. Till now, many thousands of years have passed, and he never strayed, since that is the only thing left connecting him with that person.

Zhao watches Shen's eyes redden, looking like they will drip in blood.

Much later, Shen shakes his head incredibly slowly.

Zhao hears him whisper, "I'm bad luck, you will get hurt because of me."

Zhao frivolously tilts his lips upwards, and two dimples emerge on his cheeks, "Sure, do you wanna try if your Attack is higher, or if my HP is thicker? Hey, by your logic, I ought to marry a Maneki-neko, damn... isn't that a bit too kinky?"

Shen doesn't understand his humour, and doesn't reply. His palm is almost clenched till blood comes out, and he finally says, "How can you... how can you pressure me like this?"

Zhao's smile wears away, and he puts off the cigarette in an ash tray.

When he first saw Shen, he fell for him instantly. He thought Shen is just the type he likes, but neglected the sense of natural familiarity, the feeling as though they've met before. The past of Ghost Slayer, Zhao has yet to find out, and he cannot bear to ask him face to face.

He always finds Shen in so much suffering. Why does the air freeze every time he wears his black cloak?

Does he not feel the cold?

"Sorry." Zhao stays silent for a while, and flips open Shen's fist. Holding his hand, Zhao kisses the back of it gently, and carelessly tosses the expensive property contract aside.

Shen shuts his eyes. He finds himself immensely disgraceful.

Why didn't he stay further away, why didn't he hide in the depths of Hell, then no matter how many times Zhao reincarnates, they would never meet, and he would never know of his existence; but he couldn't help it.

He finds himself very much like a shameless slut, who stands seductively on the streets, but when that someone comes, he puts on an honourable and upright pretence.

He has always loathed himself, now more than ever.

Zhao lays sideways on the bed, and massages his temples gently. Then, he speaks with a stifling tone, "I have other things, but you probably wouldn't want any of it. There is only one thing: my heart... if you don't catch it, then forget about it."

These words brutally bludgeon Shen's heart like a rock. He is reminded of a long time ago, when someone said beside his ear, with the same ostensibly careless sigh, and a profound tone that he rarely spoke with, spouting one word after another, "I am rich with the mountains and rivers of this world, but

if you think about it, that's hardly worth relishing: just an old bunch of pebbles and some wild creeks. There is probably only this one thing on me that's worth a little something: my heart. You want it? Take it."

The past is still present, flashing before his eyes.

All of a sudden, he embraces Zhao with all his might. Zhao's bones crackle, and Shen buries his head in his neck.

Those who show their emotions do weep or howl in grief and despair.

But for Shen, all he can do is sink his teeth into his own wrist over Zhao's shoulder. It's hard to tell how much force was in that bite, his wrist is soaked in blood-red instantly, and the wound almost reaches his bones.

Yet, he doesn't seem to feel the pain.

The unending depth of Hell weighs down on him. He sheds no tears, but in extreme agony, he can only shed his blood.

Zhao picks up a bloody odour, and senses something wrong, "Shen Wei! What are you doing!? Let go!"

Shen only locks him in place even tighter.

Men can only live for a few dozen years, that time passes by momentarily, like a flashing glint, a swooping silhouette. Shen suddenly thinks, how come he doesn't deserve to have just this tiny fragment of time?

"Shen Wei!" As Shen is lost in thought, Zhao finally struggles out of his arms, and sits up. He finds his bed sheet covered in red. Infuriated instantly, he almost censures Shen as if he were Guo, "Is your brain made of nuts!? Yes I'm a motherfucking vulgar pig, but I would never force a guy against his will. You shook your head, and did I say anything? Did I say anything? Did you have to shed your own blood?"

Then, he grumpily pounces up, and tries to find the first-aid kit. But Shen suddenly grabs him.

"I caught it."

Zhao hears Shen say, very lightly.

Zhao is stunned. But Shen smiles, and with a greatly contrasting... almost tranquil tone, he continues, "I caught it. In your entire life, whether living or dying, dying or living, I will never let go anymore. Even if one day, you become sated and jaded with me, and you want to leave, there is no way I will let you go. If I have to, I will strangle you to death in my arms."

In silence, Zhao blinks. It took him a while to understand what Shen meant.

Up until now, he finally smells a tinge of what belongs to the Ghost Slayer on “Professor Shen”.

Then, Zhao makes no comment about his sweet yet savage speech, and takes out a first-aid kit from underneath the bed. He finds an anti-septic towel, and sits on the edge of the bed, frowning, pulling up Shen’s bloodied wrist, and wipes off the blood stain that is slightly cold like the person. He treats him tenderly, but his words are not so pleasant: after a long while, Zhao sighs, and comments, “You’re really quite crappy you know.”

Afterwards, Zhao is probably exhausted to death. Half-human and half-ghost creatures saturate the SIU, and not one of them is reliable. Zhao is always busy, like he was born to labour hard everyday. After he changes the bloodied sheets, he is in no mood for lovemaking anymore. He falls head first on to the bed, and shortly, his breathing evens out.

He really is sound asleep this time.

Shen looks at his wrist, which is wrapped tightly and neatly. He lifts up the other half of the blanket, and holding his breath, he lies down on the other side of the bed with incredibly gentle movements.

He holds Zhao’s hand against his chest, and shuts his eyes.

Shen never thought the day would come when he sleeps through the night. He has never been blessed with the sweetness of slumber, and he has never tasted a serene, dreamless night.

It’s been too long since he last felt this blissful.

The next morning, a weird smell from the kitchen awakens Shen. To his surprise, he gets up and is stupefied for half a minute before he realises where

he is. He sees the “incriminating evidence” on his wrist, and his face that always seems to be pale is veiled in a pink film.

Look at the things he did, and the things he said last night!

Such is... the unbearable past.

This moment, someone mumbles, “Morning.”

Shen looks up, and sees Zhao holding a pair of chopsticks in his mouth. He has a one-metre-long plastic tray in his hands, with five slots on it, each big enough for a huge bowl or a moderate-sized plate.

Five slots, if there aren't a lot of people, that's just enough for the standard four dishes and a soup, and he can carry everything in just one trip.

What kind of sloth designed this godly tool, the world may never know.

And yet the godly tool in Zhao's hands has other godly things on it. From left to right, a tidy queue of large-size instant cup noodles sits on the tray, steaming with a mix of indescribable odour.

What can Shen say in this situation.

And so Zhao sits himself on to the couch like a badass, and starts explaining as if counting mountains, "First left is braised beef noodles, boiled in water, second left is old-altar pickled cabbage noodles, boiled in hot milk, in the middle is mushroom and chicken stew noodles, microwaved in water, with a knob of butter, second right is assorted seafood noodles, I found it a bit bland, so I added a spoon of sweet sauce, first right is bacon cream noodles, boiled in hot coffee... this one should be good. Pick whatever you like."

Then, he finally finds himself a little awkward, "Well, you see... I don't know how to make other things. You don't come over often, and I thought just making two instant noodles was a bit too embarrassing."

And so he made five... oh how generous of him.

Shen glances across the five steaming cup noodles. He cannot fathom how this man hasn't poisoned himself to death already.

But luckily, even if he were to cook a bowl of arsenic, Shen would eat it willingly without so much of a frown... but Professor Shen still chooses the bowl that looks the most normal, and subtly reminds him, "These oily foods are bad for your health, don't eat too much."

Zhao admits honestly, "I'm poor lately, if I don't get my bonus, I'm gonna have to ask my dad for help."

As he is saying, he catches a glimpse of Shen, and he just so happens to think of something, and says, all smiles, "A gold digger, and a bed warmer."

Shen gags on a mouthful of spicy soup, and coughs vigorously, turning his head away.

Zhao "hee hees", and says carelessly, "It's almost the end of the year, the time for reviewing virtue is here again. Recently there are more and more thieves on earth, the fairy tribes and ghosts are all scrambling last-minute."

Shen sits up, poised, and wipes his mouth. He says tardily, "Deliberate deeds can only amount to superficial karma, how can good virtue be accrued so easily?"

"Yea," Zhao seems to have impaired taste, as he guzzles down the god-awful mixture of coffee and instant noodle soup, "speaking of which, there's a case recently, and you'd think they'd behave this time of year."

The Sundial of Reincarnation is the first of the Four Mystical Artifacts, then comes the Pillar of Nature, and the third is the Ink Brush of Virtue. Now that the first two have surfaced, Shen is understandably a little oversensitive towards the word "virtue".

But he has yet to ask, and Zhao's phone rings.

Zhao hurriedly puts down the noodles, and looks at his phone, "Speak of the devil, here it is again."

Just one night, and there are two more victims who ended up in hospital.

The same symptoms: no illness, no injuries, just frantically jerking to and fro while holding their legs. The victim's family called the police five o'clock in

the morning, so the comrades in charge of the case have no choice but to crawl out of their beds.

Widespread poisoning has severe impact on the well-being of the society. The incident is worsening by the minute, and it just so happens to be the end of the year, when stability maintenance is crucial. The chief of the district police has not a clue what to do, so Zhao is harassed with death-threatening frequency.

Chu and others have basically concluded that this case will sooner or later be handed to the SIU. When it's morning they will send the report up, and Zhao won't be able to brush it aside.

But it's gonna take one whole day, give or take, before the procedures go through. Zhao promises over the phone that he will go to the hospital to take a look today.