

Guardian Chapter: 51

Chapter: 51

If you asked Zhao Yunlan, besides Shen, he doesn't want to bring any third wheel. But considering black cat Da Qing's vigorous protest the other day, Zhao squeezes out an ounce of responsibility from his brain full of rainbows, butterflies and unicorns, and gives Guo a call, telling him to come along, and help him learn in fun and games... ah, no, it's practical training for the newcomer.

Pitiful little officer Guo, it's been over half a year since he first started working for the SIU, but he still knows next to nothing. Till now, there is finally a tiny hint of basic training for him.

Guo is a responsible and diligent kid, and naturally, he wouldn't have the Chief wait for him. As soon as he gets the phone call, he rushes out at the speed of light, and to avoid morning traffic, he sprints towards the subway station. He tries to get on board at the busiest station, but is crammed out of the carriage twice. Third time's a charm: a fierce old lady gives him a kick from behind, and he is jammed inside just before the doors close.

All soaked in sweat, Guo arrives at the hospital, and realises he is there too early. The day-shift doctors are only just arriving at work, as for their Chief, well, he is still too captivated in whatever paradise he calls home sweet home.

Guo rubs his hands together, withdraws his necks, and waits in the freezing winter of Dragon City for more than two hours. A whole pack of tissues is used for his runny nose, and his whole body almost crystallises into a snowflake. Finally, the belated Zhao arrives... oh, and Professor Shen too.

Guo is so cold that he can't speak clearly anymore, "Chi... Chichichichichichi- Chief Zhao."

Zhao is rather amused by his appearance, "When did you arrive? How long have you been waiting?"

"Al... almost three hours."

Zhao doesn't ask things like "why didn't you call me" or "why didn't you go inside", he is used to it... if Guo wasn't stupid, is he still Guo?

But Shen is quite surprised, "Why don't you go inside if you got here early?"

Zhao locks the car, and carelessly tosses the car keys into Guo's arms, and chuckles, "He doesn't dare."

Bingo. Guo shamefully sucks up a trickle of snot, and glances at Shen.

Shen sees it, and patiently says, "Morning, have you had breakfast?"

Guo nods, and at the same time thinks with his messy brain: why is Chief Zhao bringing "family" to work?

On the face of it, it seems like the Chief has a problem. And yet, Guo can't help but feel like a gargantuan third wheel. Greatly embarrassed, as he sees Shen and Zhao whispering to each other, he only dares to stand three steps away, head drooped and shoulders shrugged. His frozen face is looking all the more miserable, like a small eunuch following behind.

It's influenza season, and the hospital is too crowded to begin with. As Guo tries to keep his distance, swarms of people quickly surpass and surround him. While he tries to wriggle his way out of the crowd, at the same time he stands tall on his toes searching for the other two men. But when he finally manages to bust out of the horde, Zhao and Shen are nowhere to be found.

Luckily, he came here once before, so he knows to go upstairs to in-patient department on the sixth floor.

As he arrives on the sixth floor, some doctors and nurses are hurriedly pushing a patient, and Guo quickly steps aside to make way.

He tilts his body, and accidentally looks towards a window.

After having witnessed "filthy things" on reflective glass for several times already, Guo is quite mentally disturbed. He now has a habit to close the curtains and turn on the TV as soon as he gets home, cover the reflective table with a tablecloth, and only ever lift open the laptop when he's using it.

But it only took a careless glance, and Guo's eyes are drawn to the glass.

He sees a person outside the window of the sixth floor. A man, slender, wearing a shabby beanie, and from underneath it his coarse-skinned ears and white hair can be seen. He is wearing an equally shabby cotton-padded jacket.

Instinctually, Guo senses his eccentricity. His heart begins beating rapidly, and yet sometimes, the more terrified you are, the harder it is to look away.

As Guo slowly looks down, his mouth widens, and a look of extreme horror emerges on his face... he sees the man floating mid-air, and he has no legs!

The man's legs are cut from near the pelvis; on the narrow window, Guo can clearly see the irregular wound: a short segment of bone protrudes from within the rotten flesh, and

it's, it's still bleeding! The blood oozes out of the gaps of the window, dripping on to the ground, gathering into a small puddle, like it will never stop flowing.

But the doctors and nurses passing by don't seem to notice.

The legless man quietly glares at the in-patient department, half his face covered in dirt and blood. His eyes are popping out and his face is void of expression like a frightening wax figure. All he does is creepily eyeing the people that come and go, and tilting up his parched and cracked lips slightly to one side, wearing an inexplicably begrudging, mirthless smile...

Right this moment, a hand forcefully pats on his shoulder out of nowhere, and Guo's fear reaches a certain level where he can't even scream, and only silently leaps up, eyes dilated, and even his breathing stops. The heart in his chest "kachunks", and skips a beat.

Not exaggeratingly, Guo clearly feels a surging urge to pee.

Luckily, he soon realises it's Zhao patting him on his shoulder, and so he forces the urine back inside.

Zhao sees his pale and petrified face, and his hunchbacked and cross-legged awkward posture, and frowns, "What's up with you now?"

Guo opens his mouth, attempting to explain, but his brain is a blank slate. He is still trapped in a state of temporary mutism, and all he can do is raise his trembling hand, and point towards the window at the end of the corridor.

Zhao looks up with suspicion, and follows Guo's pointer... not particularly glistening, but not particularly filthy either. Besides a little dirt and tiny fractals, nothing can be seen.

Zhao asks, puzzled, "What did you see?"

As Guo panickingly looks up again, he is shocked to find the window completely blank; he sees nothing.

He frantically glances around, realising no-one is looking, and lowers his voice, speaking on the verge of tears, "I saw a man floating outside the window... no, half a man, his legs were cut off, blood dripping from the gaps of the window, and spilled everywhere."

Zhao looks at him while frowning: Guo sucks a trickle of snot back in with all his might, still the same silly look that has "come bully me" written all over it.

Zhao knows he isn't lying. From what he knows of Guo, he finds it highly unlikely that this kid has the intellect to support the demanding task of "lying to the Chief".

He heads for the window, but his revealing watch does not respond, and only calmly walks by the second. Zhao touches the window sill, and opens the slightly rusted window; just a small gap, and a chilling northwesterly comes gushing in.

Yet it's just a breeze. Besides chill, he doesn't feel anything else.

Not long after, a young female nurse comes running towards Zhao by the window, and protests, "Hey, this mister, will you please close the window? If you need fresh air please go outside, there are patients here, and they can't stand the cold."

Zhao closes the window, turns around, and gives the young nurse an apologetic smile, nodding.

The girl is stunned by this high-quality handsome, and struggles to react. After a while, her face reddens, and she feigns a discontent mumble, and rushes off.

Shen, who walked towards them not long ago, can't hold it anymore, and coughs lightly, intentionally blocking the way of the girl staring back with his body.

Zhao glances at him with a half-smiling face, and pulls his scarf gently. Leaning forward, he whispers into Shen's ear, "Did you catch a cold? Why are you coughing?"

Shen hastily stumbles backwards. The look on his face and his movements make Zhao suspect that if he were to wear a long gown, he would flick his sleeves and lower his head, saying, "in broad daylight, men shall not stand too close".

He can't help but laugh subtly.

"What are you looking at?" Shen's ears grow reddish, and awkwardly changes the subject.

Zhao glances at Guo, who stands far far away, not getting anywhere near the window whether dead or alive. He summarises what happened briefly.

Shen ponders, and lowers his voice, "Logically speaking, he shouldn't have a third eye. But it's very bewildering, I think he can see what happened in a place from reflective surfaces."

Zhao frowns, "How so?"

"Do you remember the first time we met at Dragon City University, I suddenly appeared and interrupted him?" Shen says, "Actually, the night before I heard something happened, and suspected that it was related to the escaped hungry ghost. I sent a puppet to investigate the bedroom of the victim, and the puppet left before sunrise. But when this young man climbed up to the window sill, he and my puppet suddenly had a

strange connection. I was afraid of blowing my cover, so I had to stop him... it's just that I didn't know you were there."

That day, someone, by unknown means, cut off his sense of Zhao's whereabouts.

In Guo's report, he did mention seeing a skull on the window, and something along the lines of "a figure in a black cloak in the eyehole of the skull". But Zhao only skimmed through the report, and found that ninety percent of it was fabricated bullshit, and so he used the report as drink coaster... he never expected Guo would be able to write anything useful anyway.

"Which means that last night, there was a legless man... or ghost, peeking in from the window?"

Shen lowers his voice even further, "Didn't you say these two were sent in in the middle of the night? If I had a plan to hurt people, I'd probably come see for myself what happened to them."

Zhao smirks, "Oh you wouldn't hurt anyone, even when you kiss someone you do it so secretively..."

Shen cannot get used to whispering in each other's ears, and even touching on such a private subject in the eyes of the public. His face reddens instantly, and he interrupts him, bellowing, "Stop that nonsense!"

Zhao shuts his mouth. But a slut is still a slut, even with his mouth closed. He uses his gaze to invade and sexualise, and he does it skillfully and with great experience.

Finally, Shen can't stand his eyeing up and down his body, and turns around, heading to the rooms with wide steps.

The three awkwardly walk towards the patients' room, and Guo realises that the bestial solo lament from the other night has turned into a duet, and the first victim isn't here anymore.

Big officer cap from a police branch comes out with a difficult face, holding Zhao's hands, as welcoming as the Fourth Red Front Army meeting the Second Red Front Army in victory all those years ago. He says with great anguish, "You must be Chief Zhao? I'm Li. Our Chief ordered me, and I have been waiting for you all day."

Zhao asks, "Where's the victim from yesterday?"

Office Li says, "He is almost dying, sent to the ICU. The hospital is about to send these two over there as well."

Zhao asks, "How is he almost dying?"

Officer Li says, "He was screaming through the day, like a fish out of water. His eyes widened, and he couldn't speak. He was in a comatose state, he would quiver occasionally, and he wouldn't feel anything from the legs

down... is this really poisoning? All these years I haven't come across a drug that can get someone in this state."

"Maybe it really isn't poisoning." Zhao looks at him, and Officer Li finds this man's eyes dark and hollow, as if he had some kind of insinuation. Li trembles. Zhao pats him on the shoulder, "After all, the hospital doesn't have a conclusion yet, anything is possible... you work on moving them first, I'll talk to the victim, and figure out what's the situation."

Guardian Chapter: 52

Chapter: 52

Doctors, nurses, and the victims' relatives are all called out by Officer Li, and only the two victims are left complimenting each other in a screeching duet.

Zhao glances at the two, and knocks one of them unconscious. He asks Guo, "Did you bring a notebook?"

Guo nods eagerly.

"Jot notes." Zhao bends down, and asks the victim, "Miss, do your legs hurt?"

The victim is a middle-aged woman. She thrashes about in pain, and the medical staff had to tie her to the bed. She nods with watery eyes.

Zhao takes out a wallet, but this "wallet" doesn't have cash or credit cards in it. He opens it, and inside is a thick pile of yellow paper talismans.

Zhao flips through the talismans, and explains to Guo, "Paper talismans are very important tools. You have to keep them organised, according to their categories... ones used for attacking, ones used for exorcism, and so on... otherwise when you need them you won't be able to find what you want. Learning how to use them is also a profound subject..."

This inconsiderate Chief starts giving a slow-paced lecture amidst the pig-slaughtering screams of the victim.

Guo doesn't have that kind of mental strength. He can't listen to a word, and all his attention is diverted by the miserable victim.

“Let’s talk about her.” Zhao continues, like a medical professor giving his students a lecture with the help of a corpse. He walks forward, and flips up the woman’s ear, “You don’t have a third eye, so you can’t see her virtue. A very basic talisman can do the job for you.”

He takes out a paper talisman and shows it to Guo, “It’s called the third eye’s talisman.”

Guo has yet to take it, and Zhao slaps the talisman precisely on to Guo’s forehead, right between his eyebrows, “Like this.”

Guo is slapped with a talisman like a zombie, and he instantly feels an inexplicable surge of chill rushing from the talisman. As if with great weight, a force enters his forehead, and the world in his eyes changes... but exactly what changed, he can’t really say.

“Come take a look.” Zhao waves at him.

Guo looks down, and he shockingly realises that the victim is shrouded in a dark mist. Her weathered look has turned unspeakably creepy, with a hint of impending death. Her legs, though unharmed, are engulfed in black smoke, looking as though they were cut off irregularly.

Guo looks at the woman’s ear. He sees a big black mark behind her ear, not a very deep colour, but murky and surrounding almost her entire neck, like an eerie birthmark.

“A black mark behind the ears, that’s a sign of bad virtue.” Shen suddenly says behind Guo, “The Book of Life and Death has records of a person’s virtue. Whenever a person commits a bad deed, small ghosts will leave a black hand print behind their ear. The darker the colour, the more culpable the deed. Like this one here, none of the marks are very deep, but the area is large, which means she never did anything too out of line, but she’s selfish and does small evil frequently.”

Shen pauses, and adds, “But of course, this isn’t punishable by death. That thing put her in such a state, and it wasn’t appropriate.”

Guo nods with modesty. But soon, he realises he might be nodding to the wrong person, and suddenly looks at Professor Shen as if looking at an alien.

“The heck you looking at.” Zhao turns his brain around, “He is the real sage. I was blind to not have realised sooner.”

As he hears this, Guo turns from surprised to astonished, and greatly admires this “sage” the Chief speaks of. Then, Zhao takes out another talisman, and again puts it in front of Guo for him to observe, “This is a simple exorcism talisman, it’s rudimentary, so sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Of course, when it doesn’t work, then at least we have an idea of how strong the opponent is.”

Guo says nothing.

He doesn't want to know how the woman must be feeling hearing this.

As Zhao sticks the yellow paper talisman on to the woman on the bed, Guo, with the help of the artificial third eye, sees a massive cloud of black smoke spouting out like a geyser, surging up and back down as it reaches the ceiling, and from within emerges a distorted face. Mouth agape, the face howls with all its might.

Faster than lightning, the lecture quickly becomes haunted mansion horror. Guo yelps, and reflexly runs towards the door. However, Chief Zhao pulls him back by the collar as though he has an eye on his back.

Zhao calmly holds Guo with one hand, and with the other in his pocket, he locks eyes with the... thing floating mid-air. After a while, he mutters, "That's strange, why is there so much grudge?"

Guo screams, "Ghost! Gh-gh-gh-ghost!!!"

Zhao snickers, "Yea how surprising, like you've never seen a ghost before? If there isn't one I wouldn't call you here."

"It hurts people! It's an evil ghost!" As Guo squeals, a strong surge of electricity bursts out from his pocket. Luckily Zhao has had experience with this, he lets go and dodges even though he created this mighty weapon, and the floating shadow is vaporised with the same power seen in the Hanga's cave.

"I haven't asked anything, who told you to kill it!?" Zhao the Monday- morning quarterback waits for the smoke to disperse, and slaps Guo on the back of his head.

Guo's eyes are flooded and tears can fall any moment, he looks at Zhao, "... I was scared..."

"Why didn't you hold it for a while?" There are always idiotic chiefs who like to demand their staff of the humanly impossible.

Unfortunately, Guo is a die-hard fan of his Chief, and he has always respected and feared him at the same time. Even if Zhao uttered some bullshit, he would probably regard it as the highest law, and find the Chief's bullshit greatly sensible.

Guo follows his orders and begins holding back his fear. He stands in place in silence as his face reddens, and yet his internal organs are still trembling, and he whispers like a mosquito, "... I really can't hold it."

Zhao stares at him sideways, Guo cannot figure out what it means and trembles in fear. Another jolt of thunderbolt almost comes out again, but the heartless Chief suddenly laughs, and praises, "You're so amusing."

Guo stays silent.

He finds this sentence a rather weird praise.

Shen looks at the two of them, and finally says something, "Don't bully him."

Zhao doesn't say anything else, and instantly shows the good quality of "listening to ones wife". He lets go of Guo, and stands upright. The sheer speed of his movements shows how well-trained he is; he can probably enter the next round of the "National Canine Championships".

The woman on the bed has calmed down. She witnessed the whole process, and is petrified for long. As she regains her senses, she struggles to get up, and kneels on the bed and bows towards Guo, "Thank you angel, thank you little angel!"

Guo is greatly embarrassed, "No no no, I I I..."

He stutters, and his face and ears are all red. His mind goes blank in the face of a stranger, and the stun baton in his pocket crackles. A spark discharges, and Zhao's coat almost catches fire.

Guo quickly shuts his mouth. As he feels more at ease, he also realises how Wonder Boy must have felt.

Zhao gets serious, pulls a chair and sits down. He waves towards the woman on the bed, "Alright, stop bowing now. I have a few questions for you, please co-operate."

The middle-aged woman quickly nods.

"Last night you also ate an orange you bought on the street, and then ended up in hospital?"

"Yes. It was night time, I went to the supermarket, and when I came out I saw someone selling oranges by the road."

"Hold on, did you see the fruit vendor when you were heading to the supermarket?"
Zhao interrupts.

The middle-aged woman thinks, and says uncertainly, "Probably... not? Most likely no, I was out to buy fruits, I would have noticed it."

So it was waiting for her intentionally.

“The one selling fruits, did you see their face?”

“Uh... a man, slender, wearing a shabby beanie... and, and a dusty and grey jacket, I think?”

“What about his legs?” Zhao asks.

“Legs?” The woman is taken aback, and only remembers after a while, “Oh, right! I remember. His legs had a problem, he was limping, and walked with difficulty. I didn’t think of it until you mentioned, he was probably a cripple with a fake leg, no?”

She doesn’t wait for Zhao’s response, and begins commenting, “I tell you what I think great saint, the crippled and the dumb and all the handicapped, none of them are good people. Their bodies are incomplete, so all their minds become messed up. They are poisoning people, isn’t that insane? I think these people should all be locked up and monitored, after all they can’t live normal lives anyway, all they do is disturb the society.”

Zhao wears a deep frown. He finally knows where the huge black mark behind her ears come from. Some people are born wicked, every pore on their skin oozes small evil. None of it fatal, but none of it not hurtful.

The woman continues, “Like the deaf guy in our neighbourhood. He can’t get a woman, and so he got a crappy dog. As soon as he opens the door I can hear the dog barking and barking. He is deaf so of course he can’t hear it, and he just lets his dog bark. I should’ve bought that rat poison long ago, that thing didn’t die soon enough...”

Zhao is growing impatient. He looks up and stares into the woman’s eyes. Without sympathy, he controls her mind by force, and the babbling woman’s eyes instantly go blank. Soon, her eyes roll back and she falls unconscious.

Zhao says next to her ear, without any expression, “You ate something dirty, but you went to the toilet just now, and all the dirty stuff are now gone. Oh, and you lost your balance and fell into the toilet. The stink on your body will not go away no matter how hard you wash...”

Shen hears him getting out of line, and heavily coughs.

“Uh, although you turned yourself into a pile of shit, your food poisoning has recovered. In the afternoon some handsome policemen came to ask about the guy who sold poisonous oranges, just standard police business. And while they were here, they also gave someone’s filthy mind some kind of moral education...”

Shen coughs again.

“That’s all, reflect on your conscience.” Zhao shuts up as per Shen’s request, and as he is walking out of the room behind the others, he turns around and smirks, “I wish you have nightmares, old woman.”

Shen pulls him out, afraid that he might narrate The Ring to her ears.

“She clearly doesn’t know the poisoner.” Zhao leaves the room, and enters into teaching mode. “The Line of Karma under her eyelids isn’t deep. Though I find her incredibly annoying, it probably wasn’t the dog selling poisonous oranges. From experience, it’s usually the poisoner hurting random people.”

He stops here, and looks at Guo who is rapidly dashing his pen across the pages. He slows down, waits for Guo a little, and continues as though without a care, “If the old woman is directly related to the poisoner... say she killed him, and he is back for revenge, then there’s nothing we can do. Human laws forbid revenge, but the order of Karma, and Yin and Yang does not.”

Guo hastily nods.

“But according to the victim, she clearly doesn’t know the guy. And since the Line of Karma is light, their only connection is probably something trivial like bumping into each other on the streets. Of course, there could be something

more. But most likely, it’s the evil ghost deliberately hurting people. In that case, not only can we capture the ghost, we can execute on the spot.”

Guo subconsciously pats on the pocket with his stun baton in it. The corner of Zhao’s mouth cramps, and he is so helpless that his balls are hurting a little.

“Then, I’ll go to ICU to check out the even more unlucky one.”

He looks to Shen, who knowingly nods, “I’ll take care of the other victim.”

Zhao smiles to Shen like the breeze of Spring. Then he turns around, and switches to a menacing look towards Guo, “You go, call Zhu and tell her to contact the authorities. I want full authority on this case by tonight... stop dawdling, whenever I see you dawdle I wanna kick your ass. Faster!”

Professor Shen, the one who can stand up for him, is gone, so Guo covers his butt and runs off to do his job.

Guardian Chapter: 53

Chapter: 53

Past four o'clock in the afternoon, before sunset, Zhu rushes to the hospital with a formally approved letter of authorisation.

"The police from the district branch have all been called back. Just now I ran into Little Li downstairs, and he said he would treat us to dinner later, so..."

Zhu stops here, and swallows the rest down... because she sees Shen walking towards them with a drink. She pauses, and switches to a more subtle tone, "Now the case is entirely up to us, what do you think we should do."

Shen senses the doubt in her eyes, and quickly stuffs the drink in Zhao's hand, and says considerately, "You get to work, I'll leave you alone."

Zhao grabs him, and shows his true nature, that of a sticky candy, "I'm not letting you go. What if you change your mind, and I can't find you anymore after you're gone?"

There are always passers-by in the corridors of the hospital. Besides, Zhao is a tall and well-built handsome, so he has always been quite an eye-catcher. Not to mention now he is getting handsy and intimate with another man, and soon there are curious eyes staring.

Shen quickly glances around, and whispers, "We're still outside. Be careful."

Zhao hears, and immediately turns towards the people who are staring, staring back at them, and says without a care, "Whatcha looking at? You've never seen handsome gay guys?"

They really haven't seen one so bossy and full of himself, and embarrassingly turn away.

Zhao tries to ingratiate himself with Shen, and turns to him, "hee hee hee."

Shen is speechless.

Zhu cannot believe this idiotic guy is supposed to be their brave and formidable Chief Zhao. Her raging heart withers until four words are left: what an appalling sight.

But Shen lightly frowns, and says, "You are working, it's not very appropriate for me to stay."

Zhu whispers, "Yea, Chief Zhao, we have regulations..."

Zhao interrupts, "I set the regulations, if I don't like them I can change them anytime... besides the regulations say to avoid outsiders witnessing or participating, but he's not an outsider."

Shen is stunned. For a moment, he thinks Zhao is about to reveal his identity.

But Zhao lowers his voice, and says to Zhu with a smug face, "He's my 'wife'."

Shen is left speechless again.

Zhu turns towards the window after a moment of silence, and says to Guo, much like saying "the number you have dialled is not in service", with the same monotonous voice, "Little Guo, look, the sunset is so green! It looks like it was marinated in vinegar!"

Guo rubs his eyes.

Zhao coughs dryly, adjusts the look on his face, and resumes his composure as the Chief, "Alright... Zhu, call the guys, I want the whole team here. Especially Lin, last night he left very early, today I'll have him know the consequences."

Zhu gives him an "okay" and turns around to send a message to everyone in criminal investigations at No. 4 Bright Avenue, "Come to Yellow Stone Temple Hospital, have a look at the smug face on our bastard Chief."

And so everyone rushes to the hospital before the sky is dark. And yet there is nothing for them to see, just Zhao sitting there like a boss, ordering everyone around, "Old Chu, go to the rooftop and set up two layers of 'net', one way in, no way out; don't let him escape. Little Guo follow him, and write me a learning report. Zhu go and set up 'surveillance alarms', and isolate this area, turn it into your zone, don't let anyone enter. Make it clean, don't leave any traces... Da Qing will help with that."

Da Qing is listening to Lin, who's whispering, "Look at Professor Shen's hand, it's wrapped in gauze. Just how much of a beast is our Chief." And as Da Qing is lost in imagination, it hears its name and quivers.

Shen uncomfortably pulls down his sleeve.

"As for Lin..." Zhao takes out a small bottle, and Lin has an ominous inkling.

Zhao smiles cunningly, and says to Lin, "Inside is a fragment of grudge taken from one of the victims."

Chu explains to the newcomer who knows nothing, "All evil ghosts are born from grudge. Fragments of grudge will be left on people they make contact with, and they are like his tentacles. Since their nature is the same, the ghost will react to it."

Guo has been following Zhao around all day, and he hasn't had dinner. As he hears this, somehow he thinks of grilled octopus balls, and swallows a mouthful of saliva; his stomach bellows.

Chu is left speechless.

Sometimes he really can't understand what this piece of garbage is thinking all day.

Zhao crosses his legs, and throws the bottle to Lin, "One was killed accidentally today, but the thing didn't show up, probably couldn't during the day. At night, I'm afraid he won't fall for the trap, so your mission is to crush the tentacle inside when it's night time, and lure the evil ghost into Zhu's zone."

Lin silently looks at him, and then looks at the small bottle in his hand. Realising he is to become a human shield, he denounces with the emotional weight of a speaker at a funeral, "You're using me as bait."

Zhao does not hesitate, "Yea, so what?"

He can so openly admit to his immorality, you can see just how carefree he is!

Lin looks around, and only sees the black cat's cunning sneer and all the others being void of expressions and sympathy; despair rises up within him.

The fake monk suddenly turns around, and pounces towards Shen who has been standing against the wall quietly, "The King wants to use me as sacrifice, please save me, Queen!"

Shen is speechless.

When he's the Ghost Slayer, whoever sees him acts like a mouse seeing a cat. He has never been joked with like that, and doesn't know how to respond. As though seeking help, he turns towards Zhao.

Zhao finds this especially flattering and amusing. He looks the other way.

Shen pauses for a thought, and takes the bottle, "Then how about I go."

As soon as Shen says that, Lin realises what will go wrong. Of course, he instantly feels two glaring eyes piercing straight through his spine from behind. The gaze comes with a force that seems to pin him on to the wall and slash him with a thousand swords.

Lin laughs dryly, and takes the bottle back. He walks away, and says quickly, "Amitabha. Battling evil and protecting the lives and property of the people are our responsibilities. It's a glorious and daunting mission, how can I abandon it? I'm going."

Then, the fake monk runs away at the speed of light.

Shen asks, "So what can I do to help?"

“Oh,” Zhao says, “I know there’s a decent restaurant nearby, you can have dinner with me.”

Shen is left in embarrassing silence.

Zhu grits her teeth, “Angry but dare not say anything.”

Chu drops his head, “Dare not say.”

Da Qing meows.

Guo really dares not say anything.

Luckily Professor Shen is kind-hearted, and he sees the look on everyone’s faces and hears their spoken thoughts, so he shakes his head, “How’s that appropriate? How about this, you stay here, and I’ll help you guard the life door. If anything happens, I can help.”

After he says this, everyone is silent.

Zhu instantly looks at Shen with very complex emotions, and even Chu is lost in thought. But Guo stupidly asks for clarification, “What’s the life door?”

Chu ignores him, gets serious, and asks, “How does Professor Shen know what formation my two layers of ‘net’ will be in?”

Shen smiles lightly, “‘Two Layers, Four Doors, Eight Trigrams; Life Door, one way in, Death Door, no way out.’ I figured it out from the surveillance spots Yunlan pointed out... it’s just that if the grudge is too strong, the evil ghost might break the ‘net’, if the life door becomes a death door, then the formation will lose control. I will stand by the guarding eye, just in case.”

As he finishes, he nods towards everyone politely, and then looks at Zhao. Bending down slightly, he lowers his voice and says, “I’m going then, you be careful.”

Zhao sees him out, feeling great.

This time neither Zhu nor Chu are using what Shen said to tease Zhao, they both turn towards him. The black cat Da Qing lies on the window sill, and sees Shen walking outside the hospital, and precisely standing on to the ‘spot’. It even seems like he already knows it’s watching, and smiles, looking up.

Da Qing’s eyes sparkle, “An expert.”

Zhu lowers her voice, her eyebrows tightening, “Chief Zhao, who is this Professor Shen?”

Zhao is in a splendid mood, and doesn't mind her tone. He says half-jokingly, "You wouldn't want to know."

Da Qing turns around, and stares at him with emerald eyes, "So you know?"

Zhao sluggishly leans on the chair, and asks with a fake smile, "Is there anything I don't know?"

Zhu starts firing, "I found it strange a long time ago... he was there in the first case involved with the Sundial, and then a second time he just so happened to be with us in the mountains where the Pillar was. Dragon City is so big, I don't even recognise all my neighbours, how can there be so many coincidences? Don't you think it's too deliberate? You..."

Zhao blinks. He didn't think Zhu would be so agitated.

Even Chu looks at her silently.

"Oh, about the Four Artifacts, there really is a reason behind." Zhao pauses, "But I think he probably doesn't want you to know, so about him, I can't tell you anything, please understand, okay."

So the man who considers himself brothers with the gods above said "please understand", but Zhu is not touched at all. What she's feeling is inexplicable.

If Shen were just an ordinary professor from Dragon City University, then she can talk about these two like a joke with Lin and the gang, teasing the Chief, and even writing stories about them on Weibo. And yet, now that she knows Shen is not so ordinary... and he even might be partly the "same kind" of people as them, she is feeling very difficult.

Like someone pierced her heart with a fine needle, not gently, but not heavily, and a painful and numbing liquid oozes out.

Chu asks, "Then is he an expert in formation? Maybe we can discuss that when we're free?"

Da Qing's tail stands up, and asks doubtfully, "So this time you're not involved with a normal human, what're you gonna do? Even if you can't tell us, at least let us know which tribe he's from?"

Zhu is still frowning with a solemn face... as if Zhao didn't just find a partner, but a sugar daddy.

Finally, Zhao's temporary good temper because of his good mood crumples in the face of their vigorous questioning, and he impatiently waves, "Go do your job! Fuck off! Why are you so nosy? Did I say this is a press conference?"

Chu runs off with Guo, full of excitement; he decides to make an impeccable net tonight... better not make a mishap in front of an expert.

Zhu still wants to say something, but Da Qing jumps off from the chair and turns around, meowing towards her. Zhu takes a deep breath, looks down, her fists clenching under the sleeves, and silently follows Da Qing.

Zhao senses Zhu's subtle hostility, but he doesn't mind... he thinks that women are particularly attentive to details and also particularly prone to thinking too much. He suddenly brought someone like Shen into their circle, and without any explanation, so she must be feeling insecure.

So he considerately calls her, "Hey, wait."

Zhu stops at her feet.

Zhao says, "You see, I can't say anything, out of respect for him. But I assure you there's nothing to worry about, just treat him as me."

Zhu doesn't say anything after hearing that, and just walks away. She really wants to slap Zhao across the face.

Guardian Chapter: 54

Chapter: 54

Eventually, the sky darkens.

Chu finishes his job, and stands on the rooftop with hands in his pockets. The north wind howls and blows his hair up. Guo suspects that he might be whipped up by the wind the next moment; Chu really is too skinny, so much that he appears malnourished.

Guo doesn't dare to move; beneath his feet is a rooftop covered with cinnabar powder.

Chu used the rooftop as a big piece of yellow paper, and drew a gigantic "talisman" with cinnabar powder. Then, he used black stones to mark eight positions. Guo, standing at the centre of the "talisman", instantly feels a change of atmosphere. The night breeze comes with some kind of special odour; he can't describe it well.

The smell is sticky, humid, not putrid, but mixed with the scents of mud and blood, and a touch of elusive bitterness.

Guo is pumping his nose, puzzled, "Brother Chu?"

"That's the smell of grudge." Chu doesn't turn around. He looks down into the darkness. They have set up an elaborate trap, and in the gloom, Shen wears a light grey coat; especially outstanding. He is standing right on the spot of the capturer. Chu shakes his head, "Who is Chief Zhao involved with this time? Shen... I've never heard of such a figure before."

This instant, Shen looks up, but it's too dark so Chu can't make out his expression. The next moment, he vanishes from where he stood.

Chu's face tenses up, "It's coming."

Guo says, "Ah?"

"Ah your head!" Chu rushes towards him, and like treating psoriasis, sticks a yellow paper talisman on to his face, "Shut your mouth! Don't make any sound."

The special smell grows thicker and thicker. Lin puts away his phone after taking selfies, and in the northeastern corner, he opens the bottle with a stern face. A filthy cloud of black smoke ascends; Lin looks up, holds with his hands a Mudra Mahabala, his face incredibly solemn. And yet, he doesn't kill it as Zhao ordered, but begins chanting transcendence scripture.

This used to be a living soul, born within the Heavens and the Earth, and from the essence of Nature. Perhaps it's a new soul, or perhaps it's one that had reincarnated countless times. Lin cannot bring himself to execute it so violently, unlike Zhao.

And yet the bellowing chant has as much effect on it as music does on an oblivious ox. The grudge will not be appeased, and the repetitive babbling only causes it to grow larger mid-air and spread out like a colossal monster. It howls towards the sky, and the moonlit night is quickly shrouded in darkness.

The next moment, three gunshots pierce through the silence of the night. The small fragment of grudge shatters into pieces, and in a short while, dissipates in the air.

A window on the sixth floor is open. Lin can see a flickering light, and he can almost imagine Zhao's expression, as he looks down, frowning, and says "stupid monk chanting scripture" with discontent.

Not everything in this world is capable of transcendence. If that were the case, the Guardian Order and the SIU wouldn't have to exist. Maybe you'd like to help him cross the river, but he wouldn't even budge a step.

A screeching howl comes from afar. Lin holds his palms together, bellows a mantra, and somersaults on to a branch of a withered and leafless tree. An enormous sphere of

black smoke crashes like a bomb on to where he stood just a moment ago; the bricks on the ground are instantly shattered, and pebbles fly out into the air. A humongous figure arrives with a whirl of gust, around four, five metres tall, with only the upper body, and all that's left of the legs are bones; black blood drips as it walks, and every droplet sizzles on the ground, melting rocks along the way.

"You're not letting anyone stand in your way at all, so it seems." Lin laughs bitterly, but his legs are not hesitant. Like a giant spider, he leaps on to a window of the second floor, and with bare hands he ascends the hospital

building, climbing up the windows and cracks in the wall; he moves even faster than an elevator. The black shadow follows behind persistently.

Lin mounts up to the sixth floor, and shouts towards the black cat by the window, "Catch!"

Da Qing pounces out like a black meatball, and six bells hung in several corners ring together. With the sound of a woman's shout, a giant serpent slithers out from a corner, forked tongue rolling, and a cloud of black smoke is sucked in.

The black shadow tailing Lin thrashes about. The ringing grows more and more intense, and clouds of black smoke are being sucked into the mouth of the giant serpent. The half figure is shrinking down.

Then suddenly, the shadow floats in the air and from within the clear face of a man emerges. It's the man Guo saw: white-haired, red-eyed.

Zhao puts out a cigarette on the window sill, "Zhu Hong, dodge!"

At the same time, the six ringing bells are stuck, and are muted simultaneously.

The black cat pounces on to the serpent, and as they fall to the ground, the serpent transforms into a woman again. The windows on the sixth floor are all shattered, and the half-bodied man swells up a few sizes.

Zhao bends down and helps Zhu get up. He then stands by the window, just a few metres away from the grudge floating mid-air.

"Guardian Order." He says, like it's only standard police business, "So you died and didn't enter reincarnation properly. It's almost New Year, and you decided to start poisoning people?"

The words "New Year" seem to have aggravated the grudge, he extends his ginormous hand and tries to seize Zhao's neck with an endless swirl of black smoke.

The Guardian Order morphs into a whip and grows like a living vine, sliding out of the man's sleeve and wrapping around the giant hand. Man and ghost are in a deadlock standing on a bunch of shattered glass.

Zhu pushes Lin hard, "Are you blind, go help!"

Lin was just chased after by the grudge and played Spider-Man for a while, his fingers are still hurting, and he has yet to catch his breath. He wears a bitter face, "Help? He... help with what? Do you see how big this thing is, what do you think I can do?"

"Chime your bell! Aren't monks supposed to chime bells every day!?"

She shouts into Lin's ear, which begins to buzz. He says helplessly, "Good madam, please calm yourself down. I'm a Shaolin disciple, we don't chime bells all day! Besides, may Buddha have mercy, mercy on dark and evil souls. This one used to be a human, the bell wouldn't have much effect anyway; and you couldn't even swallow the grudge, you think my crappy bell will work?"

"I don't care, think of something!"

Lin looks towards Zhao, and sighs miserably, "May Buddha have mercy... mercy on my face and make me more handsome."

Then, he takes out a small pot, about the size of a hand; he opens the lid, and a smell of lamp oil oozes out. Lin very reluctantly looks inside, and is about to put his hand in, but Zhao waves towards him, like he can see sideways, "Save your lamp oil, I don't need your help."

The next second, the grudge wriggles out of the Guardian's whip, which swirls into the air and retracts into his sleeve. The grudge roars and rips out the window frame; a massive cloud of black smoke squeezes inside, almost bursting open the wall.

At the same time, Zhao stands back, both hands straightened out in front, fingers spread out, holding a dagger in his right hand, and silently slashes open his left palm. Bright red blood flows into the fuller of the blade, then stops moving as if solidified.

A smile emerges on the man's face.

Da Qing sees it, and its fur stands upright, pouncing away from him and into Zhu's arms. That smile does not look like Zhao in the slightest. In that moment, his eyes are incredibly hollow, his gaze menacing, the silhouette of

his nose casts on to half of his face, and his mouth curves up with chilling diabolism.

For a moment, none can tell which of the two is the actual ghost.

“Depths of Hell, heed my call,” The voice doesn’t seem to be Zhao’s either; deep and inexplicably coarse, it cuts one’s ears like a blunt saw, “blood as oath, cold iron as proof, borrow thy three thousand soldiers, men and gods, none shall survive...”

The last few words were uttered slowly, one after another; indescribably eerie and berserk. The blood on the blade turns black, and countless empty armours burst through the white wall behind him, riding on skeleton war horses, towing rotten blades, charging forward with the force of crumbling mountains and devastating tsunamis. The grudge is forced outside, and one of its hands is quickly slashed off.

Zhao stumbles backwards, as if fatigued, and leans on to the wall, falling to the ground amidst the horrified gazes of the others. He lowers his hand, from which blood keeps on flowing, and says, puffing and panting, “Fuck, it’s all over my sleeve, can dry washing clean this up?”

Da Qing walks forward and a little closer to him, testing the waters; it stops around half a metre away, and asks carefully, “Yunlan?”

Zhao raises his eyebrows, “Hmmm?”

Black cat is familiar with this look... it’s familiar with all looks that make a cat want to paw, and so it does not hesitate to slap him across the face, and roars, “What the hell was that just now!? I never taught you this kind of dark magic!”

“Humans read, stupid cat.” Zhao says boastfully.

Da Qing almost loses it, climbing on to his body, it stands on his legs with its front paws on his upper arms, “What book did you take from the library!?”

Zhao pats it on the head with his uninjured hand, “Book of Souls. Don’t worry, I was just trying to clarify something, and accidentally came across this. Just now I happened to think of it. I’m not plotting anything, do you not believe in my integrity?”

Black cat roars, “Do you have integrity at all!?”

Zhao has an entire face of cat saliva.

But the black cat eventually jumps down from Zhao’s shoulder, and barely accepts his explanation. It can somewhat believe in Zhao’s judgment, but it still says with discontent, “If you want your ugly ID card picture to be posted on Hell’s arrest order and passed around for everyone to see, then I have nothing to say.”

As it finishes, Zhao pushes it on to the ground, and scolds, “The picture on my ID card is handsome, cool, extraordinarily good-looking and captivating, you’re just jealous, you cake-faced pig-fat cat.”

Chu calls on the phone from the rooftop, overflowing with excitement, "Was that Shadow Blitz? Who the hell did that? That was totally insane! That was too motherfucking awesome, alright?"

Zhu can't help it; she snatches the phone and hangs up.

Lin feels compelled to ask, "Shadow Blitz? Catalysed with blood?"

"Blood and iron serve as channels." Zhao catches a breath, crawls up from the floor, pats off some dirt from him, and heads outside, "The true catalyst is malice. From malice comes brutality, I guess this counts as fighting evil with evil."

Zhu hesitates; as she follows him out, and asks, "You have malicious thoughts?"

"Of course, am I not human?" Zhao smiles, and candidly admits, "I have a lot in fact... I actually think that Shadow Blitz should not be classified as dark magic, I think it's quite nice: spiritual yoga, detox; you come out of it refreshed and relaxed."

Zhu has nothing to say.

Da Qing jumps on to Zhao's shoulder, and punches his nose.

"Ouch! You fat fuq!"

The grudge is being cornered by the Shadow Troops, it realises that this is a losing battle, and decides to run for it.

Chu's two layers of 'net' are instantly triggered. Actually, they didn't expect the evil ghost to be so powerful. If Shen weren't in the guarding position, as the grudge is almost defeated by Zhao, it might escape.

A lightning strike, having accrued for long, comes crashing down from the sky. The grudge is being held in place by something invisible, and the Shadow Troops on its tail vanish suddenly. It struggles frantically, and the entire area around the hospital is quivering; those outside of the protected zone must think it's an earthquake.

Chu shouts from the rooftop, "The bug is on the web, spider don't let the prey escape!"

Having vanished for long, Shen suddenly appears behind the grudge, and claws in the air; the grudge's neck is seized by an invisible hand, and the black smoke shrouding its body disperses until a legless man remains, glaring at Shen with contempt.

Without much movement, Shen's fingers tighten. Like a piece of paper, the grudge is squeezed into a sphere. Flash, and it evaporates in Shen's grasp.

Guardian Chapter: 55

Chapter: 55

The prey is caught. Zhu's zone automatically unlocks, and the shattered glass sticks back on to the windows. Nurses come and go checking on the patients, and a few people have arrived at night for emergencies. Some patients are awakened, going outside to see if there are any abnormalities, and one by one they return to their rooms.

Street vendors have called it a day and all left. Occasionally, a few taxis pass by quickly, not intending to pick up passengers.

Shen rushes up the building, and bumps into Chu coming downstairs. Chu is the conceitful type, he is fine with people he knows, but to strangers, he almost never says anything. But now when he sees Shen, he extends a hand and praises, "That was a beautiful catch."

Shen quickly nods in acknowledgement, but the look on his face is even worse than the patient who came in with acute appendicitis. He takes out a small medicine bottle, and says briefly, "It's inside, take care of it."

Then he tosses the bottle to Chu, and grabs Zhao by the hand, "You come with me, we need to talk."

Zhao is pulled away without resisting.

Shen pushes him into the toilet, locks the door, and glares at him in the dim lights; he lowers his voice, "Just now, was that Shadow Blitz."

"You did it?"

Shen says no more, and his hand comes slapping across.

But though this slap comes with tremendous force, he still cannot bring himself to hit Zhao, and his hand stops right next to Zhao's ear.

Zhao is stunned, and asks, bewildered, "Shen Wei?"

"Don't call me!" Shen's face goes pale with fury, and his hand trembles in mid-air. After a long while, he grits his teeth, "'Men and gods, none shall survive', Guardian is certainly formidable and fearless. Are you... are you not afraid the Heavens will punish you!?"

Zhao rarely sees Shen get angry, not to mention this angry. It hurts him seeing Shen so infuriated, and he grabs hold of his cold hand, "Yes, yes, it's my fault, if you want to hit me then hit me. Don't be mad. Don't be mad."

Shen flicks his hands away, "I'm not kidding! Do you know gathering the Shadow Troops is absolutely forbidden dark magic? Do you understand what's dark magic? Can the three worlds tolerate this? You have no regard for the laws of nature do you, how big of a mess do you need to make before you learn!? You... you..."

His voice stops abruptly. After a long time, he asks with a quivering voice, "What will I do if that happens?"

Zhao wraps his arms around him, and softly kisses his hair, "It's my fault, baby, I'm sorry."

He thinks his attitude is really good, but this phrase gets on the wrong side of Shen, who pushes him away, locking him against the door with one hand, and the other grappling his collar, "Don't use the tricks you've used on countless others to fool me."

Zhao smiles helplessly, "Then what do you want me to do?"

The fury on Shen's face gradually wears away when Zhao smiles. After a moment, it softens a little more... there's always this one jerk, even if he punctured a hole in the sky, Shen wouldn't scold him too severely.

After quite some time, Shen sighs, lets go, and says blandly, "Can't you change your temperament a little?"

Zhao is all apologetic, and hastily nods... although he doesn't think he has a problem at all, as long as Shen says there is one, he will apologise no matter what.

Shen looks down, and holds his injured hand; he asks softly, "Does it hurt?"

"I... just now I was a little short-tempered..."

"But you hurt my back." Zhao says, without an expression, "And you shouted at me. You're always polite to other people, but you shouted at me."

The look on his face scares Shen, who doesn't realise he's just flirting. Shen hesitates, and helplessly holds up Zhao's face with both hands, "I..."

Zhao keeps looking at him with a blank expression.

Panicking, he has yet to finish, and Zhao points towards his own lips, "Take care of me well and I'll forgive you."

Shen is stupefied for a second before realising what he said. His face goes blank before saying, "Such indecency!"

Then his ears turn red, and he heads out.

And yet as he walks to the door, he looks back and finds Zhao still leaning against the wall in the same pose, looking at him with a half-smile.

Shen's hand is on the door handle. But he hesitates for long. Then, he rushes back in big steps, embraces Zhao's waist and kisses him.

He has him wrapped around his fingers, what will he do in the future?

Zhao's lips are swelling a little. When Zhu sees them, she furiously looks away, and thinks: this queer man whore, is he really that horny?

The gang head back to No.4 Bright Avenue. Chu sets up another 'net' around the interrogation room, and sticks yellow paper talismans everywhere like prayer flags. And then he locks the door, opens the bottle, and lets the grudge out.

Zhao moves a chair for Shen to sit on, and leans against the wall with arms crossed. He lights a cigarette, and says sluggishly, without looking up, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in court. Think before you say anything."

The legless grudge is locked on a chair by three fettering talismans. Raising his head eerily, he asks with a coarse voice, "Used in court? What court?"

"The Court of Hell, fair and impartial, to judge all the crimes of your life. No more babbling, just answer our questions!" Lin was chased after by him like a giant gecko, and he is not content... he is the most schizophrenic when it comes to this, outside he is a cunning monk who puts on an honest and upright

pretence, but once he is in the interrogation room he transforms into roaring Lin, as if he has to shout to exert dominance.

The grudge laughs scornfully.

Chu glances towards Guo, who instantly sits upright, clears his throat, and peeks at the "cheats" scribbled all over his palm, and recites, "Na... name, age, time of death, cause of death."

The grudge looks at Guo, who shivers.

Chu puts a hand on Guo's shoulder, and at the same time, Lin slams his hands on to the table, and says with hostility, "The hell you lookin' at, speak!"

"Wang Xiangyang, 62, died last year, December 29 of the lunar calendar, car accident."

Guo carefully looks at Chu, who nods, signalling him to continue. And so Guo looks at his cheat palm again, and Chu can't help but peek as well; written on his palm is: "2.

Oh, XXX (insert their name), if your cause of death was XXX (insert their cause of death), then why did you hurt innocent people?”

Then he hears Guo stuttering, “Oh, Wang Xiangyang, if your cause of death was December 29... no, your cause of death was car accident, then why did you hurt innocent people?”

Chu really doesn't want to laugh in this sombre occasion, so he turns around to Zhao, “Chief Zhao, give me a cigarette.”

Using this to hide his overly creepy expression.

“Innocent?” Wang's face wears a greatly distorted smile; like a lunatic, he leans forward, “Who's innocent? Tell me, kiddo, who's innocent? They're innocent? You're innocent?”

Oh no, why is he replying with a question? He didn't prepare a response to that.

Guo is instantly puzzled, and doesn't know what to do.

Chu looks down, and Lin looks away; his two backup both tacitly abandon him.

But Shen suddenly asks, “Can you tell me how you died in a car accident?”

Wang turns towards him with a bland face, in silence.

Shen asks again, “Was it related to the people you cursed? Was it related to the oranges you were selling?”

“I used to sell oranges for a living.” Wang answers him after a long time, “I lived in a village on the outskirts of Dragon City. Every day, I would push a small cart full of fruits into the city, and sell them on the streets; my entire family lived off of this source of income. My wife had uremia, she couldn't work. My son, he was almost thirty, couldn't get a wife, and since we were poor farmers, I couldn't afford a house for him in the city.”

“If you have to ask, then I'll tell you... I really really liked the few days before and after the New Year. It's usually when most street vendors have went back home, and when the supermarkets are the most crowded. Some people would buy from me out of convenience; and I would make the most money around that time.” Wang calms down in Shen's gaze, but he wears a scornful smile nonetheless, “December 29, what a great day.”

Guo finally finds something useful on his palm, and seizes the chance to ask, “Do you despise society because of family problems?”

“Despise society?” Wang repeats, and shakes his head, “I don't. I know all those who wronged me, and I just had to get to them. I would've left if I were done with all of them.”

If you want to grill me, then do it; if you want to throw me down to Eighteen Levels of Hell, then do it. But I had to make sure those people would go down with me, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

He says all that calmly, but to the others’ ears, it comes across as vile and vicious.

Then, Wang Zheng knocks on the door, and comes in with a tray full of fruits, along with her eternal follower Sang.

Wang Zheng hands the fruits to Zhao, and looks at Shen with a strange gaze. But she doesn’t say anything, and only reminds Chu, “The talismans outside, if you’re not using them then take them off, don’t give the janitor a hard time.”

When the two cleaner ghosts are gone, Shen continues, “Who are they?”

“Those three in the hospital, and many more... uh, but it really wasn’t the driver’s fault.” Wang Xiangyang says as though he were an outsider, “People can light firecrackers on December 29. That day, two teenagers were fooling around like buffoons, though they were dressed like humans, and most decently too... down jackets that must have cost a few thousand per piece. They went crazy and threw firecrackers everywhere, and their parents wouldn’t interfere. They threw some under my cart, and I scolded them; I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help it, my brain was probably malfunctioning in the cold. Those kids got even crazier, and started throwing firecrackers at me, I chased after them, and one kid ran behind me and flipped my cart over. Oranges, apples, all my fruits rolled on to the streets.”

He stops here, and looks down at the neatly arranged fruit platter. He can’t help but lick his lips. He could never bring himself to eat his own fruits when he was alive, and now he cannot eat any even if he wanted to.

Bizarre lights sparkle in his eyes, “That cartful of fruits was our entire year’s worth of income. I was desperate. I ran out to pick up the fruits, but I couldn’t get all of them back. It was daytime, and there were many passers-by. I said, ‘Please help me, will you please help me’, but someone picked up one of my oranges, didn’t even look at me, and started eating it. He even said, ‘your stuff are all dirty now, nobody will buy them, whatcha doin’ that for?’ And then he picked up an apple and left.”

Wang Xiangyang pauses and his face surprisingly wears a serene and relieved smile, as though his words pleased him greatly, “Many were like him, so many... they saw the fruits, and they took them and left; some even came with bags. I said you can’t do that, you have to pay, you can’t just take my fruits like that. Once they heard that, they took my fruits and ran off. I went after them, and a taxi ran me over.”

“It was snowing a lot that day. The car couldn’t stop; the driver hit the brakes, but the car glided a few metres forward, grinding over me. My upper body rolled out with the

wheels, and my legs were cut off and left where I fell. Before my last breath, an orange bumped into my face. You tell me, didn't I die of injustice?"

Wang Xiangyang continues, "Shouldn't I take revenge? Should you have arrested me? When I'm in Hell, how should the Kings of Hell judge this case?"

No wonder the Lines of Karma on the victims were all so light... the person who actually caused his death was the driver, and yet the driver wasn't related to any of this.

Wang Xiangyang leans back on to the chair, an action that looks particularly terrifying when a legless man does it. He laughs with a deep voice, "When I was alive I didn't know there were people like you whose jobs were to look after these kinds of things. If you want to uphold justice, then why arrest me and not them? Forget it, I'm done with this world."

Guo sees the final reminder on his palm, which says "family, friends", and so he says without thinking, "Haven't you thought about your son and your grandchildren? What about your wife who is sick? Don't you want to do good deeds for their sake?"

Wang Xiangyang says with a bland face, "My son didn't get married, I don't have grandchildren. Besides, my wife and son are both dead. Our bloodline ends here, who the fuck should I do good deeds for?"

Guo hears himself ask, shakily, "How did they..."

"I did it. I put out the fire on the stove we used as a heater. It was night time, and they were both still sleeping. They were poisoned by the gas leak." And Wang Xiangyang adds, "No pain."

Guo says, "How... how can you do that?"

Wang Xiangyang looks at him candidly, and smiles lightly, "I think being alive is more painful than being dead, what do you think?"

Guardian Chapter: 56

Chapter: 56

Besides Zhao, who knows the truth, Wang Xiangyang knows better than the others in this room that Shen is special. He looks at Shen in scrutiny, and says succinctly, "No."

Shen turns around, and asks Zhao pretentiously, "How do you want to handle this?"

You've already handled it on your own, what the hell are you asking me for... Zhao stares at him, and coughs. He still has to help him cover up. And so he takes out a

Guardian Order, slams it on the table, and pushes it towards Wang Xiangyang, "Wait here, the Hell Guards will get to you before dawn. Show this to him, and he will take you to the Kings of Hell for a permit."

Wang Xiangyang's lips quiver. After a while, he leans forward, and holds up the Guardian Order talisman with both hands.

"Final reminder," Zhao says routinely, "like he said, once you've got the permit, you can get your revenge, but afterwards your punishment will be sized up, think before you act."

Wang Xiangyang stares at the Guardian Order in his hands intently, and shakes his head, "No need to remind me, I've killed more than a dozen, I'm already in deep water."

Then, he smiles bitterly, "I never thought after dying, there would still be a place of reason. Thank you."

Everyone in the room is shocked. Zhu immediately asks, "Hold on, you said you already killed more than a dozen? Using the same method? And they're all dead?"

"Of course they are, and they died untimely and dreadful deaths too, the kind that prevents them from entering reincarnation for eternity."

Zhu looks at Zhao with astonishment... since the population is dense, and the city is busy and loud, it's normal if they can't realise when an evil ghost killed a few people. But when the number rises, not only the Guardian Order, but urban tribes in the same city with some cultivation should all be able to feel the black aura that reaches up to the skies.

And yet, till now, if it weren't for Wang Xiangyang mentioning, none of them realised he had already killed more than a dozen people... including Shen Wei!

Shen instantly thinks of the Ink Brush of Virtue, and asks, "Did you by any means... change the Mark of Virtue on you?"

"I did." Wang Xiangyang candidly admits, "I had just poisoned by wife and son, and was about to go after my first target. Then someone made a deal with me."

"What kind of deal?"

"He said if I went on a killing spree so overtly and fearlessly, that would quickly alert law enforcers on earth. So he sold me a talisman, and told me to wear it around my neck, then you wouldn't sense my presence. And in return, he would take away the souls of the people I killed." Wang Xiangyang says frankly, "I thought, I had no use for the souls, and I'm already a dead man, I haven't got anything to lose anyway, so I went with it. And turns out, he really up held the end of his bargain, and no-one stopped me... most

of those people thought they got some strange, incurable disease and died in hospital, and who would have thought that someone eventually called the police for food poisoning.”

Zhao follows up, “Did you see what was written or drawn on the talisman?”

“I did.” Wang Xiangyang says, “There’s my name, date of birth and horoscope readings; first written in black, and then the words are circled in red, with cinnabar powder.”

He says, while holding up a small paper talisman folded into an octagon from his neck, “This one, you can take a look if you want.” Chu takes it and unfolds it, and sees a line of words circled in red. But he has yet to take a closer look, and the paper talisman combusts into a small pile of ash.

In just a glimpse, it is difficult for Shen to make out who the handwriting belongs to. But from Wang Xiangyang’s description, it’s almost certainly the Ink Brush of Virtue: black for evil and red for good, one on the left and one on the right, whether you’re a boon or a bane, a villain or a hero, it does not matter; the moving brush writes, and having writ, all will be forgiven.

Legend says that the shaft of the Ink Brush of Virtue comes from the root of a tree that grows in Hell. The wood is invincibly sturdy, unbreakable by blades. And yet the tree is leafless, flowerless and fruitless, and for unknown reasons, people call it the “Primeval Tree of Virtue”. The name came from ancient times, and the reason for its naming is now lost.

But Shen thinks, perhaps the naming of this “not yet lived but dead” tree ridicules the very concept of virtue and karma in the three worlds: doing good for good virtue, eschewing evil for fear of karma, virtue is born, but the heart is dead, and pure good is dead.

Zhao then asks, “What did the person look like, and where did you see him?”

Wang Xiangyang hesitates, then replies, “He looked... quite normal I guess. It’s strange, I can’t think of it now that you mentioned it, it was...” He pauses, and rubs between his eyebrows; he seems to find it weird himself, “Exactly where I saw him, I can’t really remember. But it was probably near my home, in Plum Village, twenty miles from the city. You can take a look there.”

Shen stands up, and nods, “Thank you.”

Wang Xiangyang says calmly, “I should thank you instead. I will not lie about killing or anything, there really isn’t anything I can’t tell you, so you can just ask me if you have questions.”

Shen gives Zhao a knowing glance, and leaves the interrogation room.

Zhao pats Lin on the shoulder, and says with a low voice, "Call the Hell Guards, explain the whole thing, and the other side will know how to take care of this."

Then, he follows Shen out.

Shen awaits at the end of the corridor, and Zhao brings him to his office, locks the door, and asks, "So? Do you think it's THE Ink Brush of Virtue?"

Shen frowns, "I'm not entirely certain, but it's very probable. Even if it were a fake, whoever made it knows the Four Artifacts inside and out."

"Hmmm." Zhao touches his own chin.

"What?" Shen asks.

Before Zhao says anything, suddenly, the silhouette of a skeleton puppet is cast on to the window of Zhao's office. He opens the window and lets it in.

The puppet lowers his skull, and eerily bows towards Zhao. Then, he walks beside Shen, transforms into a letter, and floats on to Shen's hand.

Zhao squints, stands beside the window, and looks into the hazy night. He can't help but feel like a pair of eyes is watching his every move.

After a while, he closes the curtains, and laughs scornfully. But as he turns around, he returns to the know-it-all knucklehead prone to all sorts of ridiculous hoity-toity with or without a reason.

And as Shen finishes reading the letter, he frowns.

Zhao asks, "You've got something to do?"

"It's urgent, I've got to go." Shen swiftly transforms from a gentle and polite professor to a cold and cloaked Ghost Slayer. He rushes towards the window, and reminds Zhao, "You will not go to Plum Village on your own, no matter what, wait for me to return."

Zhao doesn't answer.

Shen turns around to look at him, who is sluggishly leaning against the wall, and half-genuinely complaining, "Jeez, it wasn't easy getting Your Honour to open up you know, and here I thought I would get some tonight. I'm horny, and I get insomnia when I sleep alone. Sigh, I'm gonna go to work as a panda tomorrow."

Shen realises he can't talk about serious matters with this one, and so he silently passes through the window, swoops into a cloud of black smoke, and vanishes without a trace.

Zhao stands beside the window, and takes out a cigarette. Without moving, he silently finishes it. Knowing that Shen is probably long gone, he opens a drawer in his desk, fully loads the gun he usually hides at the bottom of his pants, and adjusts the dagger he wears on him. Then, he takes out the talisman

wallet, leaves half of them, and only brings with him those for attack and defense.

“Why wouldn’t I go?” Zhao snickers, “I wouldn’t want to let down whoever led you away intentionally.”

Then, Zhao puts on a jacket, takes with him his bag, and like always, greets his colleagues and walks out steadily. He turns on GPS in his car, and heads for Plum Village.

The roads are clear at night. In about two hours, Zhao arrives at Plum Village. It’s like any other village on the outskirts of Dragon City: very tranquil, with the occasional dog barks.

He drives around the village, and finally, at the western corner, he finds several conjoined pagoda trees.

Zhao stops his car, walks around the gigantic trees, and finds something... years ago, when the fairy tribes ran rampant, they used the same trick: they would plant pagoda trees in the shape of the asterism Big Dipper, the “bowl” in shadows and the “handle” extending to the west, taking the meaning of connecting Yin and Yang, the realms of the dead and the living. When an enough amount of dark energy is collected, the entrance will be found.

And just so happens, the mountain above these trees is laden with barren tombs.

A deserted and frozen hillside, a land full of mounds.

Guardian Chapter: 57

Chapter: 57

Wang Zheng’s complaint echoes through the corridor, “Chu Shuzhi, I told you, if you aren’t gonna use these talismans take them off, what should the janitor do when she comes tomorrow?”

Chu frowns with great contempt and suffering, Guo knows what that look means, and with the alertness of a newcomer, he diligently runs forward and starts cleaning.

Without a word, Da Qing passes by them and heads straight into the “wall” of the criminal investigations office.

What a wonder it is behind the wall: rows of bookshelves made of hard wood, reaching almost up to the ceiling, with an old ladder. There is barely enough space for one cat to pass through between the shelves and the ceiling. On the wall a big Sea Dragon Pearl is inlaid, brightening the entire room like it's daytime, but ghosts and spirits that cannot withstand sunlight will not be affected.

Among the bookshelves oozes out the smell of antique books; it's the long-sedimented aroma of ink, mixed with the subtle scent of mould from between the pages that have not seen the sun for long. The resulting mixture is the ripe, misty and freshening aroma of books.

Sang is working on organising the books. With most of them written in either traditional or simplified Chinese, he simply doesn't recognise any of the words, and so he has to do a lot of symbol-matching between the spines of the books and the markings on the shelves. He is very slow, but he checks everything thoroughly, and he has never made a mistake.

After Zhao got him out of the Pillar of Nature, he opened the restricted library to him, and left him in charge of this job. His salary is the same as that of Guo: the regular pay check for all junior staff members, but the benefits are pretty good. Except that Guo is getting bright red banknotes, whereas Sang gets a lot of paper money and high-quality incense for the dead.

This is the first dignifying job he ever got in his life: no longer a slave ordered around like an animal, no longer a leader looked up to by foolish people that he simply wanted to destroy... though this job comes a bit too late, now that he has already died a few hundred years, he still treasures it a lot.

Living a peaceful and unfettered life with the person he loves: it's a kind of life that he couldn't get no matter how extensive his schemes were.

As he sees Da Qing walking in, he greets it with seriousness, "Hellu, cat."

Da Qing replies, "Hellu, stutterer."

Sang is confused... Wang is a polite and quiet girl, so naturally she would not have taught him to insult people. He doesn't understand, and asks properly, "Studd... studdera, is... is what?"

Da Qing treads atop the wooden shelves with a bustling mind, and says carelessly, "Studdera means good brothers."

Sang nods in understanding, and says passionately, "Oh, hellu, cat studdera!"

Da Qing is silent.

Sang continues, "Cat studdera, waat... what do you want to read?"

Da Qing is not really in the mood to tease him anymore, it lays on top of the shelf above him and asks, "Zhao Yunlan... Chief Zhao took a book from here the other day, did he put it back? Let me see it."

Like doing a listening exam, Sang listens to the "recording" devotedly and asks Da Qing to patiently repeat it three times, after which he finally understands most of it. He wears a big smile of accomplishment, and takes a book that has yet to make it on to the shelves from a small cart, "Eats... it's this wan."

The book cover is ruined, and a corner of it is stained with coffee... there is no need to say which clumsy dude did that. The words "Book of Souls" are written eerily on its cover, but a part of it is torn off, looking particularly dilapidated.

Da Qing leaps off from the top of the shelf and lands on to Sang's small cart. It paws through the pages, but they are all blank; nothing is written.

Its heart sinks; it has yet to reach the level of cultivation to read this book.

For some reason, its power has shrunken down to less than ten per cent compared to when its power was at its peak. It can't even transform anymore.

Nevertheless, it's still a few-thousand-year-old cat fairy, it could not have been surpassed by a mere human who is not even thirty, could it?

That is utterly impossible.

Unless... that someone's soul is gradually awakening, little by little...

"I have never seen this book before," Da Qing pats its paw on the book, and then inadvertently spins around in place, chasing its own tail, "where did it come from?"

If it doesn't know, Sang obviously doesn't either. A cat and a ghost stare at each other for a while, and the black cat slowly droops its head. With repressed emotions it bounces from the cart on to the ground, and walks out; not even in the mood to have milk-dipped cat food, its usual favourite.

It really can't tell whether Zhao "awakening" is a good thing or a bad thing, but it just feels uneasy.

Zhao is living quite well now: on one hand intelligent and on the other moronic, he eats well and when he's free his dirty mind starts fantasising, he has a comfortable and pleasant life on the whole.

The black cat is a kind of animal that only wants to find a nice, warm spot to sleep all day when it's winter, and only wake up to eat, and then go back to sleep. By its very nature, it cannot comprehend the so-called "ideals" humans pursue. Now that its owner is silly and happy, looking just like a jolly and naive youngster all day, Da Qing feels rather pleased, and it really doesn't want any... complications to crop up.

And yet complications have indeed cropped up.

The biggest complication Shen Wei closes his eyes, passing through Hell. Even the emotionless spirits and ghosts that have been soaking in Hell for eternity inadvertently float away to the sides like duckweed washed away by big waves.

He keeps sinking for an unknown amount of time, into the depths of Hell.

The water gets deeper and darker, and it is utterly pitch black down there. A black aura seems to be drawn to him, swivelling around him and sucking him

As he gets further down, there is no water anymore, but only dead darkness. If a human visited this place, their sense of time and space would be quickly lost, and replaced by the solitude of being the only man in the universe.

The road behind and the road ahead, neither can be seen. Frighteningly cold, and frighteningly empty.

Here is the land of nothingness: nothing can be seen, nothing can be heard, nothing can be smelled, nothing can be tasted, nothing can be felt.

And as a deep roar breaks through the silence, Shen's blade almost simultaneously touches the other's neck.

In the sheer darkness several sounds of footsteps approach him. A handful of spirit beasts and one Ghost Slayer: all born in here, grew up in here. They were all born out of the light, and they are all equally familiar with darkness. No-one has the upper hand here: it's a fair match of whether the Ghost Slayer's blade is faster, or the spirit beasts' fangs are sharper.

Shen cannot shake away the thought of Zhao. He doesn't want to waste time here: he dodges three times in the dark, and the cautious beasts quickly turn from testing to attacking, pouncing towards him. Shen shouts, and the blade in his hand slashes out horizontally, chopping off a row of beast brains with sheer destruction; the heads roll all over the ground.

Shen does not hesitate; without looking at the corpses, he kicks away a brain, and walks ahead.

After a long time, he stops, and from beside him comes a vague sound like that of a human's heartbeat.

The "troops" summoned by Shadow Blitz are not soldiers from Hell in the usual sense. After all, how could the small ghosts working for Hell answer to the feral and supercilious command of "men and gods, none shall survive"?

Indeed, they come from a lightless place even darker and deeper than Hell.

The white skeletons in iron armour riding on warhorses are only a result of the unrealistic imagination of the guy who did the magic. In fact, these things are

not corporeal, and perhaps... if it weren't for Zhao using blood and iron as catalysts, most people would only see them as a horde of "spirit beasts".

In that kind of situation, Zhao summoned the Shadow Troops, and even managed to keep them under control. On one hand that could be because of his natural talents, on the other hand, it was perhaps good luck: after all, Shen was just downstairs, those things didn't dare cause any trouble.

"In the lightless land lies a blasphemous prison." When Pangu the Creator first stretched out Heaven and Hell, there was an apparent boundary between the clean and the filthy. The Earth was filth, and the order of the world was set in stone. As chaos subsided, and filth accumulated for millenia after millenia; outside of Heaven and Hell, there came a place where foul matter would reside.

Afterwards, when Nüwa created humans out of clay, she did not have the patience to wait for the filth to sediment, and so humans were born naturally and intrinsically from sin, and the root of that lays here... from which originates the inherent desire of malice and destruction in human beings.

Once the saints were enlightened, they were greatly remorseful for the creation of the lightless land, and named it the "great blasphemy", and sealed it away by force. Till now, the primeval godly prison has broken, and a huge opening is ripped apart from its roots. Afterwards, someone added a layer of protection with some formation, and yet this newer seal is about to crumble down as well. The ghost face is freed and runs rampant, and more and more spirit beasts follow suit.

The opening cannot be bigger.

Shen kneels down on one knee, chanting an imprisoning spell, temporarily sustaining the seal. The commotion gradually quiets down, and the opening seems to be covered with an added layer.

With a sombre expression, he leaves. No-one knows how much longer this quiescence can last.

Shen returns to the living, and the sky is turning bright. He arrives at Zhao's small apartment, and plans to put off his black cloak quietly, without waking Zhao. Suddenly, he is in great shock; as he turns on the lights, there is no-one

in the apartment. The bed he had made in the morning is still perfectly untouched.

Having been out all night, Zhao tightens his coat in face of the mountain of tombs, stops the engine and gets off the car.

When Shen mentioned the puppet that Guo saw in the reflection, Zhao realised the hidden truth Shen left untold... when he met Zhao as Shen, it was not his intention, and he was probably set up.

Zhao believes, if he had not been so persistent, Shen would have avoided him the best he could. If at that time he knew Zhao was there, no matter what Guo saw, even if he saw Ghost Slayer himself, Shen would never have appeared... wiping away Guo's memory is just a piece of cake.

And then Zhao thinks of the incident of the sundial, when the Ghost Slayer went to Li Qian's place, he heard something on the rooftop: "and so he is sent here to you". Who? What does that mean?

If the master of the spirit beast is the ghost face, why is he so determined on making the Ghost Slayer meet Zhao?

At the Pillar of Nature, Zhao felt that ghost face had been using something to blackmail the Ghost Slayer, and yet he had no intention of letting Zhao in on the truth. In comparison, the black book the Hell Guard gave him was a much more apparent move.

Zhao stands on earth, among the living, and yet he feels as if there were a gigantic whirlpool beneath him, with thousands of entangled hands grabbing and pulling him; everyone is plotting, everyone's face is shrouded in mist.

Zhao lifts up his head, and sees a sparkle of ghostly fire in the mid-ranges. Chilling lights pierce through like menacing eyes in the darkness of the night, staring at Zhao not far yet not too close away. He stops, and the fire stops as well, as though it were leading the way. Zhao follows it, heading steadily towards the graveyard in Plum Village.

Fog engulfs the place, growing thicker and thicker. With only a visibility of one metre, amidst the beguiling whiteness, still a flickering flame leads the way.

The air dampens, and the occasional droplet wets his face; eerily cold.

A moment soft and then heavy, ebbing and surging sighs pass by the ears, like countless spirits wandering in the depths of the woods. Zhao looks straight ahead, and

walks straight ahead... they do not commit evil, nor do they do good, they wander among the living, and never enter reincarnation, all weeping and wailing, all mourning for themselves.

How many people ever die without regret?

Zhao treads through the thickening fog, and his long dark grey coat sweeps along his path: white mists and groping hands extending from tombstones all can't help but make way. No ghost dares come near him.

Afterwards, in the barren graveyard of the wilderness at nighttime, weeps and wails sound from far and near. Zhao cannot stand it any longer, he stops at his feet, violently opens his palm and some talisman papers light up in intense flames. The wails swiftly turn into screeches, and countless silhouettes scurry away in chaos. The white mist seems to be inflammable, and flares up easily like a fire dragon, spouting out from his palm and instantaneously sweeping clean the misty graveyard.

"If you have complaints, go to the Court of Hell and hit the drum for your grievances. What good does it do you crying in front of me?" He looks up with a stern face, and the ghostly fire has disappeared.

The night cold as water, and the starlit sky pristine as cleansed.

A half moon hangs in the sky. Droughty and frigid gale whips like sharp knives, slashing on to his skin. Zhao pulls up his scarf, almost covering half his face.

This moment, a voice sounds from beside him, sometimes nearby and sometimes from afar, and with a piercing coarseness, it chants:

*Shadow moon, barren tombs, will-o'-wisp ignites the path of doom;
Grove zephyr, bone piper, man skin on spectral fox impostor.
This grey wight shall count for thy, will you please attend to I,
One human head for silver sold, one beauty's skin for pot of gold;
In hundred days fifty ounces carcasses oil,
For riches and grandeur in half a lifetime thou shall roister;
If three of souls seven spirits one can bestow,
Then dust unto dust shall from dirt to dirt your life return to quietus;
Thy time on earth a butcher must enlighten evermore.*

That voice penetrates like nails scratching on glass, inexplicably agonising on ones head.

Guardian Chapter: 58

Chapter: 58

Zhao says coldly, "Legend says that villains with opening lines that are too long usually get one-shot-killed, do you think that's true?"

Hustling noises come from near and far in the woods, like countless fluttering footsteps. Zhao presses on to his lighter, the small flame is lifted high-up, shedding light in a small halo.

Suddenly, he turns around, and a stubby figure flashes across from behind, floating mid-air, and instantaneously vanishing; leaving behind a long, web-like trail of a gown, dashing away faster than the eye can see.

Laughter sounds, like the night squeals of obituary birds.

Zhao stands silently in place for a while, and that thing seems to be wary of him; it only floats around cautiously, emerging and vanishing, but never getting too close to him.

Suddenly, a long whip extends with a whirling vortex, and traps the creature by the waist at a strangely precise angle. Zhao thrusts his wrist, and the end of the whip falls heavily. A muffled screech comes from the creature, and as he takes a closer look, a "person" just above one metre tall falls to the ground.

It isn't clear if that "person" is male or female: an entire face laden with wrinkles, an exceptionally outstanding nose, which takes up over half of the face with the eyes and mouth almost having nowhere to be placed. On a glance, the creature looks like an ominous bird; the tiny eyes are pitch black, with no white to be seen, exuding a sinister vibe. With a sudden smirk, sawtooth and contorted yellow teeth are seen.

Zhao gets down on one knee, arm on his knee, and stares at that person; he says, "Hey, what the hell are you?"

That person glares at him eerily, and says with a sawing voice, "Puny kid, you do not know the highness of the sky and the depth of the earth."

"Ow," Zhao eyes him up and down, "so tell me, just how high and how deep?"

He takes out a pack of cigarettes, jerks his wrist and a cigarette is in his mouth. The lighter somersaults in his hand flexibly, sparkles fly, and lights up with a crackle. The mint-flavoured smoke smoulders the person, who leans back and coughs incessantly.

Zhao holds the other end of the whip, and without untying it, he asks, "Just now you were peddling?"

The person humphs, "Right, you got anything to offer?"

Zhao ignores that, and asks, squinting his eyes, "And so the Ink Brush of Virtue is with you?"

The person says nothing; cunning, small eyes glare at Zhao like a viper.

Zhao flicks off ashes from his cigarette, and picks the shorty up by the collar, lifting him up to eye-level, "I don't believe that the Four Artifacts have all been unearthed like carrots, who sent you? And who told you to lure me here with a fake Ink Brush of Virtue?"

A sinister smile emerges on that person's face, looking more and more like a gigantic bird; he says with hoarseness, "Someone you can't afford to mess with."

Zhao isn't angered by that, but rather, he laughs. With his cigarette dangling on the side, he says sluggishly, "There are only two people I can't afford to mess with: my mum, and my wife; look at your face, do you think you meet the aesthetic standards of either of them?"

He doesn't wait for a response and throws the person in his hand on to the ground, stomping fiercely on to the stumpy figure. The smile on his face wears away, and he says coldly, "I'm growing impatient, don't make me kill you. Speak!"

The person under his foot glares up at him with a strange gaze, and asks with a rugged voice, "In the southwestern lands of the West Sea, the northwestern lands of the North Sea, thirteen million miles onshore. With the Ruoshui River swirling and encircling... Abreast of the portal to the skies, beneath the doorway to Heaven. Such sublimity, resplendence and marvel, do you remember still?"

Zhao replies with no expression, "You should say that to my wife, I have always failed language when I was a kid."

That person cackles coldly, and moves his deformed shoulders with great difficulty; he reaches for a small golden bell and takes it out, "Then what about this, do you not remember either?"

Goosebumps crawl up his skin as he sees the bell. Bells can reach the spirit world, and are usually used to summon souls and gather spirits. He is missing a soul fire on his left shoulder, so his soul is naturally unstable compared to the regular human. Without hesitation, he breaks the other's shoulder with a stomping leg and reaches for the small golden bell, bending down.

And yet as his hand touches it, he finds it impossible to lift up. The tiny bell, only the size of a fingernail, seems to weigh more than a dozen tonnes. His wrist is in agony as the bell weighs down on his hand, not moving even a millimetre.

The shorty laughs heartily, "Oh the almighty and great... can't even lift a bell. Muahahaha, is there anything in this world that's more absurd?"

This instant, a sweeping rush of mystical wind abruptly assaults. The bell hanging on the shorty's broken arm rings lightly. Zhao's nerves tense up instantly, the whip in his hand flies outwards as a humongous sphere of ghost fire is swirled away, landing on to a tree. In the blink of an eye, the thick tree is swiftly scorched and charred, withering as it is drained of life.

Afterwards, huge lumps of ghost fire come swivelling with the wind; Zhao's whip whirls thrice and he is soon forced to retreat twenty metres away.

He can't help but feel that as the end of the year approaches, apart from his love life, all other areas of his life have been victims of bad luck. Not only is he penniless, the kinds of criminals he has to deal with all seem to be increasingly devious and cunning.

Claws of white bones crawl out from underneath the tombstones of the mountain on to the ground. The shorty who was just crushed under his foot now agilely floats mid-air, with three hundred sixty degrees of surrounding ghost fire roaring behind him. The small golden bell hanging on a broken finger begins to wobble lightly in the wind, emitting a subtle and vaguely audible ring. Dark energy gathers among the mountains and huge swarms of

white mist emerge from hibernating in the canopy layer. The trees soon wither and die; a crow residing in the trees shrieks a long screech, and soars into the dark and endless night sky. At some point in time, the moon has already started glowing with a blood-red hue.

Zhao knows that tonight will probably not end well.

He puts off the cigarette, sprints towards the edge of the woods, and says, "Hey, don't start attacking for no reason, you haven't told me why you lured me here."

Zhao is suddenly the world peace ambassador, and who knows which guy just broke someone else's arm.

"You wouldn't just want to fight, would you?" Zhao says, "I'm always at the office, and I rarely workout, I'm no good at fighting. Perhaps we could resolve this in a more civil way, what do you think?"

The shorty only gives him a mirthless grin.

With ghost fire tailing him, Zhao climbs up a big tree with bare hands, swiftly hanging on to it, and then somersaulting back down to face the other side. Getting down on one knee to buffer the impact, he asks the shorty, "Reviving dead corpses, manipulating ghost fire... are you a spectral mage or an earth angel? From what I know spectral mages avoid all contact with the living so as not to damage their pure darkness, or cause them to remember incidents from before their deaths. Perhaps you're in fact someone from Hell? But from what department?"

This time the shorty hesitates for a moment, then denies, "Hell is nothing, I wouldn't bother getting involved with them!"

"Ah," Zhao nods, "I understand what that means. So you must be from one of the fairy tribes, but which one?"

The shorty knows he has said too much, and shuts up.

Zhao's eyeballs twitch, and dimples emerge on his face, "You don't have to say it, just from your look, you're probably 'those who can hear the dead', from the Black Raven Tribe, no? Well after this I'm gonna have to talk to the elders of the fairies, I have always been quite close to the fairy tribes, though not to

the point that we're brothers, but we're always friendly with each other. What do you think you are doing now?"

The shorty cannot let him keep guessing, and begins abruptly jiggling the bell in his hand. At this time, Zhao laughs, and takes out both his hands from behind his back.

He has already made a cutting in his finger, and used blood to draw a complicated symbol between two paper talismans. Each makes one half, and together they merge into one.

And the two pieces have already quietly burnt up, one towards the sky and the other towards the earth.

Zhao lets go of the talismans, and lightning strikes from the sky, as a flaming dragon emerges from the earth. Heaven lightning and Hell fire instantly sear and char the entire mountain of tombstones till everything turns black. Countless ghost fires are sucked into the vortex, devoured without a sound. Massive flames set the raven shorty's clothes ablaze, and yet the vile-looking fairy stands in place without nudging.

His stature is little, but in that moment, the look on that hideous face is one of stoicism.

Zhao locks eyes with the creature, and is stunned.

And though he can summon lightning and fire, keeping them under control or stopping them are out of his capabilities. Zhao extends a hand, as if he wants to pull the other out, or say something.

Suddenly, the shorty engulfed in flames, with a half-human and half-bird face, grows black raven feathers, and spreads out a pair of shrivelled and deformed wings. The feathers are instantly lit up, and behind his body is a pair of grilled New Orleans chicken wings, pathetically grotesque.

The shorty screeches towards the sky, transforms into a cloud of black smoke, and enters into the golden bell.

The flare surrounding the golden bell instantaneously changes colour, like millions streaks of blinding light fusing and condensing in one place. Zhao hastily closes his eyes, but it is too late: extreme pain comes from his eyeballs,

as he rapidly stumbles backwards, arms out, and in a sightless state. Rings of the bell come raiding on his soul, like a drill piercing into his ears.

Momentarily, he seems to hear the sound of mountains crumbling, the pillars holding up the sky rupturing and crashing down with incessant thundering roars, as if the sky is falling down altogether.

Zhao feels someone behind him. Someone who must have watched in the shadows for long, watching two dogs fight for a bone, and now the third one comes in, reaching out to grab his shoulder.

Zhao struggles to hold himself up in a state of dizziness. He steps aside and his whip comes swirling towards the one behind him. And yet he cannot see or hear anything, and knows not where the whip goes. After a small noise, a great force comes from the other end of the whip, pulling him forward.

Zhao isn't afraid of losing the whip; he instantly lets go with rapid reflex.

Then, a ghastly hand reaches his nape, fully demonstrating mastery of fishing in troubled waters. Zhao passes out in that someone's arms.

Ghost face's giant cloak covers the burning fire, putting it out instantly, and the thunder and lightning wear away as well.

Seemingly without much effort, he grabs Zhao, and picks up the heavy-as-anvil bell with just two fingers. Examining it closely, he sniggers, hides it in his sleeve, and leaves.

Shen leaves the empty apartment, and rushes to No. 4 Bright Avenue. But he finds that all lights are out, and only the ghosts are here still working meticulously. Shen is like ants in a hot pan, he heads to the backyard and takes several deep breaths to calm down, barely. Forcing himself to stay focused, he begins sensing for Zhao's whereabouts.

In astonishment, he finds that Zhao is coming towards him.

Where was he all night, and why is he heading back to the SIU?

Shen turns around abruptly, and finds a familiar figure floating mid-air.

The expression on the usually gentle and polite Professor Shen drastically changes.

Ghost face calmly faces the Ghost Slayer's blade pointing at his chin, not at all frightened. Rather, he patiently tidies up Zhao's messy clothes, and softly laughs, "When he sees you he is all smiles, following you around, pleasing you, virtually inseparable; when he sees me, he gives me a whipping, do you see just how biased he is."

Shen bellows between his teeth, "Let go, don't touch him with your filthy hands."

"Filthy hands?" Ghost face chuckles, "So you must be very clean?"

Shen's face freezes.

With a soft titter, he throws Zhao forward. Shen hastily puts the blade away to avoid hurting him, and holds him steadily in his arms.

"The other side never treated you like one of their own, but I'm different." Ghost face says with patience, "I want you to think carefully, who treats you better. Harming yourself for people who don't matter, whether it's really worth it." He pauses, and looks at Zhao, "Who are you? Is there anyone you can't have? Even if... why make yourself so anxious, on edge all the time, craving, and yet never having? Even I pity you."

Shen says coldly, "No need for you to worry."

The mask on ghost face wears an eerie smile, "Fine, don't regret it."

Ghost face turns around, the huge cloak swirls up and vanishes into the night sky.

Shen immediately takes Zhao back to his apartment. Zhao's injuries do not look to be serious, just small scratches and bruises. His nape has a red mark, probably left by a striking palm that knocked him unconscious. Other than that, Shen can't see anything wrong with him, and so he impatiently sits beside the bed, waiting for him to wake up.

Zhao sleeps till afternoon the next day. His phone rang several times but he still laid in bed without any movements.

As the sun is in the south, his fingers begin moving. The anxious Shen instantly grabs his hand, shaking it gently, and says nervously, "Yunlan?"

Zhao has yet to open his eyes, and he covers his neck, "Fuck, which son of a bitch..."

Shen is half-relieved seeing that Zhao is swearing, but afterwards Zhao calls him with a deep, nasal voice.

Shen hastily asks, "Uh, what?"

Zhao seems to be only half-conscious still, and he asks, puzzled, "What time is it, why are you still up? Why didn't you turn on the lights?"

Guardian Chapter: 59

Chapter: 59

Shen freezes for a few moments. Then he extends his hand slowly, under the blazing sunlight of the brightly-lit noon, waving it in front of Zhao's eyes.

Zhao's gaze has a subtle hint of misery and confusion, and does not react to Shen's movements at all. Shen's heart plunges downwards.

From his silence, Zhao senses that something is wrong, and reflexly turns to the side, "Shen Wei?"

Zhao frowns, and suddenly he extends his hand, precisely grabbing on to Shen's hand, like he expected Shen to make such a move. Shen's hand is cold as porcelain, and Zhao only says after a moment of silence, "Oh... so something's wrong with my eyes?"

His eyes can't see, and so Zhao's gaze appears exceptionally miserable, floating around without a place to rest on. Shen suddenly clenches his fists, and forces his voice to stay low, "I'll get you to the hospital right away."

On their way, Zhao is exceptionally quiet, almost not saying anything at all. And who knows what he is thinking. As he gets off the car, he occasionally wears a look of perplexity while walking.

It is really distressing for an ordinary man to suddenly lose his eyesight. He doesn't know which leg to raise when he walks, and he can't help but to grab at everything he can reach... even though Shen is holding his hand.

Sometimes he cannot tell towards which direction Shen is pulling him, especially when they're making a turn.

Those who do not see well usually have their other senses sharpened, but that is the result of long-term habit and subconscious training. If a person suddenly loses the ability to see, his reflexes are slowed, and he can't help but concentrate too much on what he's hearing. Without his vision, it is difficult to discern what all the sounds represent; on top of that his sense of balance is affected as well, and it takes him long to react to Shen pulling him.

Perhaps the ghost face hit him quite hard, or it's the many injuries he had accrued, but Shen finds his face exceptionally pale. Zhao seems to be quite calm towards going

blind: he is not panicking, nor is he whining. He only wears an emotionless look, as his eyebrows subtly frown.

Shen is well aware that Zhao makes the same face normally as well, it's only that he changes his expression instantly when he finds someone looking at him... but now he can't tell if people are looking or not.

Shen's expression is abruptly clouded, and a hint of ferocity emerges between his eyebrows. Yet, his hands help Zhao move forward with increasing tenderness.

The nurses are almost trembling in fear as they take Zhao from him. They can't help but find this bespectacled gentleman very much like the low-profile mafiosos in crime movies who slaughter people like pigs but pray to Buddha and are vegetarians.

As expected, Zhao's eyes don't have any discernable problems: no injuries, no diseases, and yet he can't see... the doctors find it very strange, and after almost an entire day, they subtly imply that temporary blindness could be of a mental cause, and advise him to see a psychiatrist.

When they're out of the hospital, the sky is already dark. And finally, like a sturdy cockroach, Zhao adjusts to life as a blind man with shocking speed.

As they leave the hospital, Zhao grabs Shen, and says, "The sky is dark probably."

Shen is the most afraid of him not talking, so he hastily asks to get him to say more, "How did you know?"

Zhao says, "I feel the air is a little wetter, and cooler, so the sun is probably set."

Shen opens the car door, one hand leading his way, the other blocking the ceiling of the car so he wouldn't bump his head. Then he bends down and helps him fasten his seatbelt, and as he gets up, he sees Zhao smiling. Shen asks, "Why are you smiling?"

Zhao says, "I was thinking, if one day I'm old and dumb, and you're still willing to take care of me like this. What if I don't recognise people anymore, and I call you daddy?"

Shen doesn't reply.

Although he is happy to see Zhao smile, sometimes Shen really cannot understand his eccentric sense of humour.

Zhao fantasises for a while, and even laughs. His hands start wandering everywhere; Shen sits in the driver's seat, and holds his hand. Zhao shakes him a little, "Oi, if I call you daddy you can't answer, don't take advantage of me when I'm dumb."

Shen is rather helpless, "It would be nice if you were dumb."

“What?” Zhao feigns astonishment, and holds on to his collar, “What do you want to do to me? Do you want to lock me up for a game of coerced forbidden love?”

Shen blinks. He knows this is just Zhao’s usual bullshit, and yet he can’t help but imagine...

Zhao sniggers perversely, and continues, “Actually I think that’s a possibility.”

Shen is silent again.

As the car starts moving, Zhao can’t stand having been introverted for almost a day, and begins performing his fun show with retarded kid.

He finds the buttons for adjusting the seat, and he adjusts it back and forth, and to and fro, like a newborn stupid monkey messing around in the car. He also occasionally presents his ideas to Shen, “Hey I tell you what, being blind is actually quite fun. There is a darkness experience showroom in the town centre, and it costs 40 for a ticket, so now I’m saving myself 40 dollars.”

Shen answers, and reluctantly smiles; he really cannot understand how this can be amusing.

Shen stops the car at Zhao’s place, and reminds him not to move. And yet, once the car is stopped, Shen finds Zhao walking on to the street on his own, practising walking in a straight line like walking on stilts.

The straight line is not bad, it’s just that he is heading straight into a street lamp.

This kid just likes getting himself in trouble...

Shen rushes forward and picks Zhao up by the waist, and Zhao’s ribs rest on Shen’s shoulder.

Perhaps it’s a thrilling experience to be lifted into the air while blind, when Shen puts him down, Zhao merrily whistles.

“I find that my balance is still okay, I can walk a straight line.” Zhao says, and then he lowers his voice, “Perhaps I can even...”

Even what, Shen can’t hear, but he sees him softly smiling.

Shen pats his arm, and bends down, “There are stairs ahead, I’ll carry you.”

Zhao stands aside, smiling, and not saying a word.

Shen turns around, and asks gently, “What? Come on.”

Zhao finds Shen's hand, caresses it softly, and then lifts it up, and lowers his head for a kiss on the back of his hand, "I can't let you carry me, I'm too heavy, what if you get hurt?"

Shen doesn't say anything.

This one probably doesn't understand who carried him home last night.

After saying that, Zhao slowly walks forward. If he hadn't kicked at the stairs lightly to check where it is, Shen might have thought he got his sight back.

He goes upstairs, head up and chest out; smoothly mounting the stairs one step at a time, each step is basically the same distance, and reaches the elevator eventually. He finds the button, presses it, and then stands aside waiting for Shen.

Shen walks with heavy footsteps intentionally, "How did you know the elevator was here?"

Zhao says arrogantly and shamelessly, "Someone as observant as myself would know the place I live in inside out, wouldn't I? How many steps in the staircase, how many steps from the stairs to the elevator, I don't need to see, I know all that."

Shen knows he is bullshitting, as if he is really that smart... he can't even find his tea cup and slippers without running his hands over everything.

He must have counted the steps and remembered them when he left the apartment in the afternoon.

It's probably in his nature: no matter what happens, Zhao always gives other people the feeling that "this is no big deal". Sometimes even when other people know it really is a big deal, they can't help but be influenced by his attitude.

He is just so keen on face-saving.

Zhao opens the door and goes inside, and he hears a voice from below, "If you dare step your stinky foot on to my tail you're dead."

"Da Qing?"

Zhao bends down and pats it. Da Qing instantly feels something is wrong; it climbs up his arm and stands on his shoulder, watching closely, and asks, "What's with your eyes?"

Zhao walks into the apartment with his hands finding the way, and says carelessly, "My ability is disabled."

Shen pulls him back, "Careful."

Zhao almost bumps into the doorframe.

Da Qing is astonished, and pounces off of him and then on to the sofa quickly, "What happened!?"

Then it carelessly glances at Shen, with an apparent look of interrogation... since Shen already went to No. 4 Bright Avenue, Da Qing really doesn't need to hide the fact that it's a talking cat.

Shen immediately says, "It's my fault."

Zhao doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, "How the hell is this your fault now?"

His hand grabs at air, and Da Qing looks at his hand hanging mid-air, wearing an annoyed cat face with squinting eyes that says "I'm only doing this 'cause I pity you", and nudges its head into Zhao's palm.

Zhao smiles, and says with an unclear connotation, "Don't be worried, there is no weal without woe."

He finds the sofa and sits down, takes out a cigarette, and hands it to Da Qing bossily, "I can't see, light it for me!"

After a moment of silence, it quietly rolls up into a ball of fur, facing away, ignoring him.

Shen takes his hand, lights the cigarette with a fizzling flick, and hands him the ashtray.

"Last night I ran into a small raven fairy," Zhao ponders, and succinctly summarises what happened the other night, with a bit of cherry-picking. He continues, "and he said to me about... uh, some place of the West Sea, and some place of the North Sea, how many miles from the shore, and then I didn't quite understand; probably talking about a mountain."

Da Qing is stunned, but Shen instantly understands, and his face darkens, "Don't talk about that, how did you hurt your eyes?"

"Don't even mention it." Zhao waves, and briefly describes his most unfortunate experience, clearly expressing his hatred towards bells.

Da Qing suddenly stands up, "What kind of bell?"

"I have it." Shen puts his hand in his pocket, and takes out a dusty little golden bell, "Are you talking about this?"

Da Qing's irises contract, and not waiting for Zhao to reply, it interrupts, "Why is this with you?"

Shen looks at Zhao, pauses, and says subtly, "Well... the person who sent you back last night gave it to me."

Da Qing goes in circle around Shen's hand, staring at the small bell for a while, and suddenly says with a lowered voice, "That's mine."

"That's from my... first owner," Da Qing glances at Zhao, "he wore it round my neck, about a hundred years ago, but I lost it because of some accident."

Zhao extends his hand, "Let me see."

Shen retracts, "You probably can't lift it up yet."

Now that he thinks of the dark history of the other night, Zhao blows out a ring of smoke with melancholy; can't even lift up the bell his own cat wears round its neck... just how pathetic that sounds!

This moment, Da Qing lowers its head, snatches the bell with its mouth, and without a word, jumps out the window.

As plump and carefree as it usually is, it is quite rare for it to seem so occupied emotionally.

Zhao listens, "Da Qing?"

"Gone." Shen closes the window, bends down, and caresses the corner of his eye, "I will find a way to cure you."

Zhao thinks of something, and suddenly chuckles, "Actually there is no hurry."

Shen has an intuitive feeling that he will not say something decent to follow. As expected, Zhao is still perverted and persistent as ever even when blind, and he continues, "Now that I can't see, it really is quite inconvenient, could you take a shower with me tonight?"

Shen swats away his filthy and lascivious swine hands that somehow started molesting his butt.

Without a word, he turns around and heads for the kitchen.

Zhao retrieves his smile, closes his eyes, and leans on to the sofa. He listens to the clinging and clanging from the kitchen, and in sheer darkness, he feels a rare sense of

tranquility. He is almost enjoying this moment, and as he is more and more relaxed, he suddenly sees some strange shadows, vaguely in the distance.

He abruptly opens his eyes, and yet he still can't see a thing. The shadows are gone.

Zhao calms his mind and concentrates. He closes his eyes again, counting his breathes and ridding his mind of excessive thoughts, and he begins to see a few shadows after a moment. On his left, he sees a lump of green, glowing and flickering, very softly, and with an exceptional beauty in its flowing movements... the shape is rather familiar.

After a while Zhao thinks of it: that's the direction of the window sill, and there is a pot of plant a friend sent as a gift.

This is... the third eye.

And so it seems the third eye between the eyebrows does not depend on normal eyesight.

Zhao concentrates between his eyebrows, and begins to see his surroundings clearly. He is "seeing" more and more things around him: the flowers on the window sill, the cat fur on the couch, some antique books on the bookshelf... and the reportedly precious antique painting on the wall.

But things like the sofa, the coffee table, the bed... things without spiritual energy are still invisible to him.

Zhao "looks" down at his own body, and sees a swirl of white light flowing through; a blazing ball of light is hanging on his right shoulder, but on his left, there is nothing.

This kind of light is very familiar... he feels he must have seen it somewhere before.

Suddenly, Zhao stands up, his knees heavily crashing onto the coffee table, but he doesn't care, as he stumbles into the kitchen.

He hears the sound of chopping, but does not see Shen, who is merged with darkness, or even darker than darkness... the only thing visible is the small pendant, which holds a sphere of dazzling flame, identical to the ball of light on his right shoulder.

Guardian Chapter: 60

Chapter: 60

Shen is handling a Chinese cabbage; he hears a sound, and turns his head looking at Zhao, "It's messy in here, don't come in."

Zhao ignores that, and carefully walks inside while holding on to the walls, heading towards Shen's voice. He slowly reaches his hands out, and embraces Shen from behind; his chin rests on Shen's shoulder, his eyes closed.

First, he tries to "look" at the chopping board, but the vegetables are all derooted and frozen, so he can't "see" anything. Then he sniffs, and barely smells a faint scent of vegetable juice.

He lowers his head, and he sees Shen's incredibly coal-black body overflowing with a blush of blood-red the moment he hugs him. The colours flow from his heart, gushing out like magma, and instantaneously saturates Shen's entire body. In Zhao's murky vision, a slender and svelte silhouette is outlined.

It's as if... the dark shadow is suddenly given life.

Seeing such a sight, Zhao is left in silence for a while. Then, without showing it on his face, he half-seriously complains to Shen, "What are you cutting? I don't wanna eat this, I want meat. I'm not a rabbit, I'm disabled now, and I have the right to better meals."

He hears Shen laughing softly with pampering, lifting the lid on a small pot slightly, from which an aroma of meat disperses, and says, "I made what you like, but you have to eat a bit of everything, don't be picky."

As he says this, the flaming colours on his body are lightened, and the swiftly flowing scarlet transforms into a tinge of exceptionally warm cherry pink... like the colour at the break of dawn, when one first sees the sun rise and shine.

Shen lets him keep hugging, and doesn't push him away. Zhao swings left and right with Shen's movements, listening to the sound of the vegetable knife chopping on to the chopping board. Zhao doesn't speak for a long while; his eyeballs black with depth, looking down, but not with gloom, only with inexplicable darkness.

After a long time, Zhao nudges forward, and asks randomly, "Hey, do you think I'm handsome?"

Shen's hands stop moving, and he shakes his head helplessly, "Do you ever have anything decent to say?"

"Oh, something decent." Zhao clears his throat, and announces beside Shen's ear with great enunciation, like a news reporter, "Shen Wei comrade, do you find this man beside you, this colossus of cognition, this pioneer in his career, who bathes in the comfortable breeze of a peaceful society, handsome or not?"

Shen has nothing to say in response; after a while, he only smiles lightly. He looks down, cutting the vegetables into thin slices; even a simple task like this seems to warrant his full concentration. Then he says softly, "It doesn't matter whether you're

handsome or not, I don't care. Even if you were hideous with warts and lumps all over, in my heart, there is no difference."

Zhao says with a lowered voice, "So touching, the next moment you should be proposing to me." Even though they're at home, and there are only the two of them here, they are in the kitchen after all, which isn't a place for intimacy. Shen is somewhat embarrassed, and shoves Zhao away with his shoulder, "Move, I have to fry the vegetables. Go sit outside, don't give me trouble."

Zhao obediently lets go, steps backwards, and his hands touch the cold metal edge of the sink.

Suddenly, he says half-unintentionally, "Then would you ever lie to me?"

Shen is stunned with his back facing Zhao.

Zhao continues, "Would you?"

Shen takes a deep breath, still not turning around. After a moment, he says with a deep voice, "I will never lie to you, and I will never hurt you."

Zhao uses the third eye to search for his shadow. He sees very clearly that the shining lights on Shen's body gradually grow dim and fade away, like firework at its end. An inexplicable surge of sadness springs up all of a sudden.

And so he nods, "Uh, good, then I believe you."

Shen abruptly turns around, "Just a few words, and you believe me?"

Zhao smiles unexpectedly, "As long as you say so, I believe you."

After he says this, he can no longer bear to "look" at the waxing and waning radiance on Shen's body. Zhao turns around, and pretends that the conversation they just had was merely chitchatting, and could be forgotten in the blink of an eye. He runs his hands through every compartment in the cupboard, and mumbles, "Where's my beef jerky, I remember I have a pack of beef somewhere..."

In panic, he bumps into a plastic broom, steps on it, and almost falls flat on his face.

Shen has a handful of vegetable juice, and doesn't want to make him dirty, so he reaches out his arm and blocks him mid-air. Zhao falls right into his embrace.

Zhao's apartment is not very big. The kitchen is so small that it's barely suitable for one person. With two big men cramped inside, they can hardly move at all. Shen can only keep this pose, extending his hands forward, washing them under the faucet. His chin naturally rests on Zhao's shoulder.

Zhao suddenly doesn't speak anymore, nor does he move.

After Shen cleans his hands, he keeps the same pose, hands guarding Zhao's waist, and pushes him outside, "They probably expired a long time ago, stop looking for them. There are some dim sum under the table, I just put them there, if you're hungry you can eat some. But don't eat too much, dinner's almost ready."

Zhao looks down and smiles, "I'm starving, but I don't want to eat rice."

Shen is stunned, "Eh? Then what do you want to eat?"

Zhao turns his head to the side, finds Shen's chin, and runs his hand along the jawbone, reaching the ear. He leans towards Shen's ear and whispers, "I wanna eat you."

When he says this, his gaze precisely "looks" towards Shen's face. Zhao's eye sockets are very deep, irises intensely black, and as his eyelids are half-down,

his eye lashes cast a shadow on to his high nose bridge... although Shen knows he cannot see anything, there is still the false impression that "his gaze is full of passion".

Shen finds his spirit quivering under that piercing gaze.

Zhao leans even closer, smiling, and sniffs the scent of shampoo in Shen's hair. He kisses him on the cheek, "Why are you so nervous? You can give it a try, I'm very gentle."

Shen doesn't say a word, throws him on to the sofa, and runs away.

Zhao extends his legs, and sits on the couch like a boss. He thinks he really should order two red candlesticks, and light them up beside the bed at night. Perhaps only in this kind of atmosphere can he get this conservative gentleman's clothes off.

As night has truly fallen, Zhao's heart is itching all over. Shen is afraid that he might be bored when he can't see, and so he leans on the side of the bed, and reads to him.

Shen's voice is mellow and tender, with perfectly ideal sonority. And yet Zhao is in no way cultured amidst the flowing aroma of books, but he only wants to unleash his inner beast.

And in Zhao's suffering and joy, Shen seems to feel something. He suddenly stops reading, and turns towards the window with an ambivalent expression. At the same time, Zhao holds Shen in his arms and rolls on to the bed, weighing on top of him, and whispering beside his ear, "Stop reading. Turn off the lights."

The lights in the apartment go out instantly.

Zhao's hand probes under Shen's shirt, and skilfully runs along Shen's waist side all the way up to his chest. He pinches at his chest, and a surge of numbing sensation rushes towards his head. Shen can no longer process what he just said, and he panickingly holds Zhao's wrist in place.

Zhao lowers his head and nibbles softly on his collarbone. He says with an exceptionally flirtatious tone, "You're already hard with just one touch, do you miss me so much?"

Shen is incredibly embarrassed, and he almost forgets that someone is outside the window.

At this instant, the howling wind brings along the subtle sound of wooden clappers from outside the window. Zhao's fingers that were lighting flames along Shen's body quickly write "don't move", and he pulls the duvet and covers Shen entirely.

Zhao sits on the edge of the bed, the buttons on his shirt undone till his stomach, shakily hanging on his body. He says coldly, "If I were alone, Your Honour is welcome here anytime. But now that I have company, this seems like a bit of an intrusion, doesn't it?"

A soft cough sounds from outside, "The Judge heard that Guardian injured his eyes, so I was sent here to take a look. If I am bothering you, I am incredibly..."

"The Judge?" Zhao raises his eyebrows, and laughs with profound meaning, "His Honour sure found out fast. I went to the hospital during the day, and it isn't even midnight now, he has already sent you here, Your Honour? I'm just fine, tell him that, and thank him for asking."

After a deep "yes" from outside, in just a moment, the thick cloud of dark energy disappears.

Zhao searches on the bed, and Shen grabs his wrist, "Hell Guard? How..."

"You silly bean," Zhao sighs, and runs his hand across Shen's hair, stroking gently. He says with a lowered voice, "they're all plotting against you... Hell probably knows about 'Shen Wei', right?"

Shen hesitates, and nods. He has disguised himself as a human and stayed on earth for a few decades already. And all that just to stalk someone, of course he wouldn't announce that publicly. And yet, Ghost Slayer staying among the living is not trivial matter, so at the very least the Ten Kings of Hell have to be informed about it.

Zhao frowns, and says worrisomely, "You really don't have to get involved with the other side, they have their way of thinking, and between humans and ghosts, there are always so many convoluted schemes and plots, and you..."

Shen asks softly, with uncertainty, "Are you... are you worried about me?"

Zhao stops. Then he lowers his head towards where the sound is coming from, "What do you think?"

Shen clenches his fists, and suddenly embraces him tightly, his face buried in his nape for a very, very long time. Shen is incredibly strong; Zhao totally wants to do something else seeing that the mood is right, and yet he cannot wriggle out of it at all.

Shen hugs him as tightly as he can, with immense possessiveness. He probably intends to keep hugging till dawn. Zhao ponders for a long time, but cannot think of a good plan, and quickly grows drowsy. And so he falls asleep reluctantly with a mind full of filthy thoughts. He has never fallen asleep so helplessly in his life.

He is so horny that his nose might bleed.

Perhaps Shen is squeezing too tightly, making him a little uncomfortable. Zhao falls asleep and begins dreaming.

In his dream, he finds himself wandering around in a foggy place filled with ruins and debris all over the ground. Countless people prostrate themselves in worship towards the sky. He looks at them, and keeps walking.

Afterwards, he finds himself in an incredibly barren place, and in utter darkness. Zhao feels inexplicably perturbed, and tries to light a fire by snapping his fingers. The flame dies before it can light up anything. Then, someone sighs beside his ear and says, "I didn't mean it when I said that, did you have to go that far?"

That voice is difficult to describe. It doesn't seem to go through the ear, but instead it goes through the heart. The words pierce through his chest like an ice pick, coldly pouring into his heart. Zhao shivers vigorously, and wakes up. It seems to be morning already. Shen is not beside him; he probably went out to buy something.

It's dark when he opens his eyes, and also dark when he closes them. Zhao's heart thumps like thunder, thrashing about incessantly. The air in his lungs is almost depleted, and his palms are frigid.

That was... who was talking?

Zhao sits on the bed, and pinches between his eyebrows with force. He swipes off cold sweat, which dribbles on to his fingers. His heart is knotted with a million thoughts, and all he can see with his eyes is sheer darkness; he really cannot stand this state for another second.