

Guardian Chapter: 61

Chapter: 61

Hastily, Zhao washes up, and finds the bandages and medicine on the coffee table. He closes his eyes, wraps bandage around for a few times, and takes a piece of paper and a pen from the nightstand. It doesn't matter what kind of paper it is; he scribbles some messy symbols which are supposed to read "I'm going to No. 4 Bright Avenue", then he leaves the apartment with cautious steps.

His heart which has been thumping since he woke up from the nightmare is now gradually quietening in his swift movements.

When the elevator stops at the first floor, Zhao adjusts his breathing, and concentrates all his energy to the third eye between his eyebrows. He walks outside with big, confident steps.

He sees a lot of people coming and going, very rapidly. Zhao can quickly work out that the figures with a glowing halo are people, as for those without, he clearly would not know what they are.

At first, for some reason, his vision is not very clear; he only sees a blurry layer of shadows and lights. And yet as Zhao slowly walks out of the small residential area, he seems to be gradually getting used to this way of "looking" at the world, and the figures are beginning to materialise.

Slowly, he begins to see the Samadhi true fire on everybody, and even the three flowers on their heads. Finally, Zhao sees very clearly from someone who passes by... the halo on a living person is really a layer of blurry "membrane", covering the entire person from head to toe, with strange symbols written all over.

Zhao stands still by the road, and puts his hand out to hail a taxi. But after all, he can't see, so all he can do is just keep his hand out, and try his luck.

When he does hail a cab, and finds his way into the car, Zhao can clearly see that the symbols written on people's bodies aren't exactly hieroglyphs, but they are words.

Incredibly small, and incredibly dense; changing every second. Zhao can't help but stare at the taxi driver. The driver calls him twice, and he comes to, "Oh, sorry. No. 4 Bright Avenue, just bring me to the entrance."

The taxi driver gives the bandages on his eyes a strange look, "Hey kid, what's with your eyes?"

Zhao casually lies, "Hurt it playing basketball."

The driver goes “yikes”, and continues, “Can you still see?”

“Applied ointment, can’t open my eyes.” Zhao says, “I’ll just have to be blind for two days.”

They chitchat along the way and finally arrive at No. 4 Bright Avenue. The taxi stops on the side of the road; Zhao ponders, and takes out his wallet, handing it to the driver, “I can’t see anyway, just take as much as it costs.”

The driver is stunned, “Ah? You trust me?”

Zhao smiles, “There aren’t a lot of money in there anyway, go on.”

The driver hesitates, prints him a receipt, and puts his hand into the wallet. At the same time, Zhao stares intently at the ever-changing words on his body. He hears the driver going through his wallet, making rustling sounds, and he also hears him take something out, hesitate, and putting it back. Then, he takes out another bank note, takes some change, and put them into Zhao’s wallet.

Zhao’s lips lift up on one side... his vision is getting clearer and clearer, and he can now tell the colours of the words. He sees both black and red. As the driver puts the change into his wallet, Zhao sees a line of small red characters passing by on his body.

So that’s what it means... he thanks the driver, and tells him there is no need to help him walk. Zhao realises that the small words indicate a man’s virtue: red is good, and black is evil. Turns out the driver didn’t take advantage of him just now.

Then, Zhao frowns, as he feels an apparent sensation that something seems to be awakening within him with an unstoppable speed. He cannot tell whether it’s a good or a bad thing.

This feeling... it started when the earthquake unearthed the Pillar of Nature.

Was that really a natural earthquake caused by tectonic movements?

The doorkeeper who’s sculpting bones sees him from afar, and merrily puts down the sickle, greeting him, “Hey, Chief Zhao! Oh? What happened to your eyes?”

“Accident.” Zhao says calmly, “Uncle Li, can you help me a little.”

Uncle Li has yet to come forward, and someone else already rushes up from behind. Shen grapples his hand, and suppresses the force in his grip and the tremble in his voice with might, “Why didn’t you wait for me? All I did was go out to buy breakfast, and you were gone when I came back. Do you know I was worried sick? If you do that again I swear I will...”

Will what?

Shen takes several deep breaths, as his lungs are almost bursting in anger. And yet he can't seem to finish his sentence.

Zhao turns towards him, and through the vision of his third eye, which is becoming increasingly bright and clear due to unknown reasons, he sees rows after rows of bright red characters on Shen's body, representing good virtue.

And yet they do not last. Like a rush of waves, swiftly surging up, then immediately drenched in a tsunami of darkness and rinsed away. Like a beach on which no markings can ever remain.

Zhao's eyes are sore, but he doesn't understand where the unexpected surge of soreness comes from. It is like an ancient memory that had been buried for centuries, and finally a violent gust blows away countless inches of floating dust, unveiling the naked body underneath, the inevitable corner of truth. His heart is pierced with sorrow.

"That's because I knew you would catch up with me in no time." Zhao almost loses control. He puts on a smooth-talking pretense, but his voice has a subtle tremor that is not easily noticeable, "Just in time, go in with me."

Zhao makes his grand entrance without telling anyone in advance, which sets the office in utter chaos. Da Qing has gone off sulking somewhere, so up until now, the folks of SIU finally realise that their Chief who disappeared for two days wasn't out having fun, but had an accident.

Zhu's hands shiver as she unties the bandages, and when she sees the bright yet unfocused eyes, her eyes redden.

Zhao moves his hand, but realises that since he cannot see it would be inappropriate to touch a female colleague blindly. He embarrassingly puts down his hand and says helplessly, "Is it you or me that's blind now, I'm not even crying so what are you getting so worked up about?"

Zhu hurls the bandages on to his face, "You crying? If only you knew how to cry! There is not a place in this world that you dare not go to, and there is not a person in this world whom you dare not mess with, is there? You really think you're the younger brother of the gods of above, don't you? Moron!"

Zhao stays silent for a while, and replies, "Aye, the moron heard you."

No knives and guns can hurt him, and no words, whether harsh or kind, can get to him. Zhu gives up on trying on him, and glares at Shen. And as if she ate gunpowder, her words fire like machine guns, "Don't you like him? Aren't you an expert? What were you doing when this happened?"

Chu and Lin stare at each other in silence; this situation really seems to be somewhat... awkward.

Zhao can hear it too. He instantly feels embarrassed, and tries to cover it up with a joke... Zhao pulls at Shen's sleeves, and tries to wear a pretentious smile, "You like me? Why you never mentioned it? I say, Professor Shen that's mighty odd of you, if you like me why did you tell her first..."

Zhu does not want an easy way out, and interrupts him, "You shut up!"

The smile on Zhao's face looks like a drawing, and it instantly wears away, "That's enough from you, I got into an accident on my own, what the hell does it have to do with him? Do we have to be tied together twenty-four-seven? Tell me that when three-legged races enter the Olympics!"

Zhu's gaze almost becomes hostile, and Shen can't help but interrupt, "Actually it was my f..."

Zhao frowns and waves his hand, domineeringly ending the conversation, albeit stiffly, "I don't want to discuss this now. We can discuss trivial matters later. Shut up for now."

Then, he takes out a Guardian Order, and lights it up. He says, "Da Qing, come over here."

With the rings of a kitten bell replacing his voice, Da Qing emerges from the corner of a wall, and silently passes by everyone. He jumps on to Zhao's legs, and examines his eyes.

Then Da Qing jumps on to the table, "I thought for a long time, and went through some books. I roughly know what's wrong with your eyes now. You said you summoned Hell fire, burning the little crow, and then he sacrificed himself and entered the golden bell, right? The sound of soul crashed with Hell fire, and the amount of dark energy must have skyrocketed. You were standing too close, so you're eyes were injured, and you're temporarily blind."

Zhao nods subtly, but Shen notices what the black cat said, "Temporarily?"

Da Qing confirms, but then looks at Zhao.

In fact, it feels like Zhao already knows something.

But Shen does not notice. He panics when he is anxious about Zhao, and he keeps asking, "When can he recover? What medicine does he need? Where to find it?"

Da Qing silently glances at Shen, and sees that he is genuinely concerned. With a sigh in its heart, it continues, "The Flower Fairies usually stay hidden from the rest of the

world. But they have an extraordinarily precious kind of honey, the Thousand Flowers. Legends say that this kind of honey is made from thirty three kinds of flowers from the Heavens, thirty three kinds on Earth, and thirty three kinds from Hell; taking the purest essence from the nectar of each flower to make. It can cure all kinds of toxins, it heals and revitalises, and is the most suitable for eye injuries... if you want to find them, probably..."

Zhao softly continues, "In the fairy market at the end of the year."

Da Qing asks bluntly, "How did you know?"

Zhao pats its head, but doesn't answer. He seems to be pondering something. Then, after a while, he says with a low voice, "You're done now, so it's my turn to say something... First, from now on, whoever contacts Hell must send

me a transcript, don't leave anything out. Second, No. 4 Bright Avenue is now strictly forbidden for unrelated persons, those who come with gifts during the New Year can just stop by the reception office. Third, tell other departments that we're entering the finalising period at the end of the year, so unless the Commissioner hands down a case directly, try not to take any cases. Fourth, if anyone under the Guardian Order cannot come to work on time or has to take leave of absence, I must have signed and approved it. I need to know your whereabouts at all times."

Zhu loses focus for a little, and asks, "So the fairy market..."

"That's not a big deal, Shen Wei can go with me." Zhao pauses, "I will have them set up a room for you on the third floor, if you need to rest you can go there."

He doesn't care about other people's reactions, and stands up holding on to the desk. He walks towards the library in the wall, "I need to talk to Sang Zan. Shen Wei wait for me. The others inform the other departments of what I just said."

The library is brightly lit, yet without a ray of sunlight, so Sang can freely work inside even during the day. He sees Zhao, and happily greets him, "Hallu, Shiev Zhao studdera!"

Zhao stays silent for a while, and comments, "What the heck, who taught you that?"

"Cat studdera." Sang knows his pronunciation is not accurate, so he diligently practises, "Shie... Chies... Zhao studdera!"

Zhao smiles, and doesn't mind him. He looks around with the third eye, and finds that he can see the shape of most of the books. He searches around for a while, and says to Sang, "Get me the book I read the other day."

Sang swiftly takes out the Book of Souls. It's quite impressive that although he doesn't know the words, he clearly remembers where each and every one of them is.

Zhao clearly "sees" the words "Book of Souls" on the cover. And before he moves, the book opens itself, and he sees something he didn't notice before... a

page has been torn off, and under the vision of the third eye, the torn page seems to be dripping with violet blood.

Zhao slams the book shut. Sang peeks at his expression, and Zhao does not say a word.

After a long while, Zhao asks in a deep voice, "Do you believe there are perfect 'coincidences' in this world?"

Sang makes much effort, and after some time he finally figures out what "coincidence" means. Because he cannot speak with clarity, he always appears a little dumb. But after all, he isn't actually dumb, everybody knows that.

Sang shakes his head, and says with rare accuracy, "I don't."

"Neither do I." Zhao says slowly, "The fairy tribes seem to be friendly with Hell, but they really aren't. I hold the Guardian Order, and all I really want to do is fulfill my own responsibility and protect the realm of the living, then enjoy my happy life with the wifey and the fat cat. But some people just don't want to give me an easy time."

Too much was said, and it was far too complex, so Sang doesn't understand. And yet he gives Zhao a look of realisation, and asks directly, "How can I help yar?"

Zhao lowers his eyes, "Hand me a piece of paper."

He writes down what the raven fairy said the other night. Turns out he was feigning ignorance; in fact, he can remember every single word. Then, under the final line, he writes "Kunlun" with broad characters, and a heavy turn of the pen at the last stroke.

"I want all books with this word." Zhao says, "Don't tell anyone about this, including Wang Zheng. Thank you brother."

Sang treats him as half a saviour. Though he used to be a cunning and manipulative schemer, deep down he knows good from evil. He promises Zhao formally, "Don't worry, Chief Zhao studdera."

Zhao says half-jokingly, "Good, I will kick dat fat fuq's fat ass for ya."

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The night carnival of the fairies in Dragon City will be held on December 28 of the lunar calendar, which is the second last day for this year.

In the morning, Zhao receives the invitation to the fairy market. A sparrow sent it to his window side.

His office has been brightly cleaned by housekeeping, windows are crystal clear and the tables are glistening. On one side is a giant ceiling-to-floor window which faces the sun. Opening the curtains, the winter sunshine glows inside in a broad beam. With ample air conditioning, one can comfortably stay in-doors with just a shirt on. Two pots of alocasia plants drip with morning dew in lush viridescence. There is also an aquarium by the door, with a silver arowana fish swimming leisurely.

The hi-fi set is playing a soothing guqin piece. In the spacious office, the two men enjoy their own space... Shen comes in to water the plants, and then sits aside to read a book, like a temporary assistant. Zhao asks him to prepare a bowl of cinnabar powder, and he takes out a thick pile of yellow paper talismans that have yet to be used. With his eyes closed, he begins drawing on the talismans. At first he would mess up a lot, but gradually he gets used to it, and this becomes a way of mental relaxation rather than just to kill time. Exorcising talismans pile up in the corner on his desk.

From a great distance, one can feel the warm and overflowing energy oozing from the talismans. Usually he would find these things hard to stand, and yet when he is with Shen, he can't help but be influenced by him, and his heart inevitably settles down.

Zhu knocks and comes in, and sees the two men who fit together like puzzle pieces spending time with each other so independently and blissfully. Her steps hesitate at the doorway apparently, and feels like going inside is redundant. It really feels meaningless.

She bites her lips, and coldly nods towards Shen. Then she says to Zhao, "I'm going out. The year-end bonus is here, I am going to the bank for Wang."

Zhao the penniless is instantly revitalised as he hears this, and hastily nods, "Uh, uh, right, go."

Zhu takes a form from a folder, "Also, this is our department's budget for this year's reunion dinner. Besides food, we need to buy offerings beforehand. I will read it to you, sign if there's no problem. Then I will get a loan from a moneylender."

Zhu reads out every entry, and Zhao sits and listens. The two quickly go through everything, and Zhao signs on the paper. After they're finished, Zhu looks at Shen, and asks, stuttering, "So this year... this year are you still spending New Year with us?"

Zhao doesn't look up, "Yea, why wouldn't I?"

Joy emerges on Zhu's face, but the next moment, she hears Zhao say, "Not only me, I'm bringing family as well, am I right wifey?"

Perhaps he has gotten used to the constant harassment and flirtation, or perhaps since Zhu is here, Shen does not overreact, and only softly grins, and almost playfully chides him, "Go away."

Zhu face darkens instantly, and after a while, she says disheartenedly, "Oh, I will go if there is nothing then."

"Hey, wait." Zhao calls her back, and tidies up the talismans on the desk. Then he opens the drawer, and takes out a thick pile that he drew before, and hands them to Zhu, "There is a small shop in Antique Street, behind the big pagoda tree at the very end. There is no shop sign, and only an old man looking after the shop. Go inside and show these to the old man. Same price as always, he knows. But tell him, I drew these blind, so if there are defects, give him a discount."

Zhu takes them, stuffs them into the pocket of her down jacket, and asks, surprised, "You're selling paper talismans?"

Zhao smiles, "I have to raise the family you know, I've gotta bring home some bacon. Just bought a house, now I urgently need some cash for renovation."

Zhu doesn't wait for him to finish, and leaves without a word.

She was going to ask whether she should accompany him to the fairy market, but it seems that would be rather unnecessary now.

The door of the chief's office is violently slammed shut. Shen raises his head from an antique book, "Does she have feelings for..."

"Uh." Zhao takes a new yellow paper, and says while measuring with his fingers, "I didn't notice before. But now that I know, I better make her give up as soon as possible."

Shen sighs.

"Why are you sighing?" Zhao laughs without a sound, "Can office romance ever amount to anything? Besides, I'm human and she's a fairy, we don't belong together."

Zhao says that unintentionally, but Shen has every intention to read into it. After a moment of silence, he says, "Then you and me... I'm a ghost and you're human, do we belong together?"

“Eh?” Zhao dips into the cinnabar powder, and is stunned. He soon realises he said something wrong, and immediately corrects himself, “How are you the same? I like you so much.”

He says this so carelessly, curtailing the seriousness of it that it doesn't even seem like deliberate sweet-talking, but merely... when the whole world is engulfed in blizzards of the winter, the casual chitchat as you raise a cup to sniff the aroma of tea in a cosy, toasty room.

Suddenly, someone grabs Zhao's hand on the talisman paper. His pen derails and the magic on the talisman is lost; the paper goes to waste.

Before Zhao realizes, Shen leans very close with his hands holding the armrests of the chair; his two arms surrounding Zhao. He even holds his breath, and devotedly moves towards the other. With his eyes shut, eyelashes subtly quivering, he heedfully kisses the other's nose. A while later, he gathers the courage to slowly move downwards, testing the waters, one inch at a time, and gradually landing on Zhao's slightly arid lips.

So incredibly sensual, and so incredibly gentle. Even though he tenderly pries open Zhao's lips and enters, it doesn't seem like he wants to do anything.

It's just that the sensation of love overwhelms him, and he desires for an intimate kiss.

To Shen, that feeling is a certain kind of deadly toxin. After effortful struggle, it is impossible to endure, and he inevitably sinks deeper and deeper downwards.

At this instant, someone comes in without knocking. After it sees something it's not supposed to see, that thing moans, and silently goes back out.

Shen is startled by the sound of the door, and panickingly springs up. He coughs dryly, trying to conceal something.

Da Qing scratches at the door, and attempts to shrug off what just happened, but fails. It asks loudly with elongated words, “Chief? Chief comrade are you there? Are you busy?”

Zhao is pissed, “Just come in!”

Da Qing wiggles its butt inside, and glances at Shen. It finds this specimen very intriguing... it has never seen such a subtle and easily-embarrassed human being with Zhao before. For a moment, Da Qing miraculously finds Shen's expression rather like the prostitutes being arrested by the police on the news.

He is almost dying of embarrassment; a rush of blush spreads from his face to his neck.

From this sight, he truly has the beauty of peach blossoms, and the aesthetics of a well-crafted portrait. No wonder the big gangster so persistently went after him for over half a

year, and yet until now he has yet to have his meal. Da Qing silently scrutinises Shen with its cat eyes.

Then it wiggles its tail, and merrily thinks: no matter how good-looking, the big gangster still doesn't get to see it.

The big gangster says impatiently, "Two minutes to say what you need to say, if you give me catshit I'm gonna skin you to make a fur neck collar!"

The black cat crouches on his desk, "I wrote to the flower fairies, you've got the invitation, right? You've quite a lot of acquaintances among the fairies, after dusk, someone will be waiting for you at the western entrance of Antique Street. Just go in directly, but don't forget to bring gifts."

At this point, it looks at Shen, "Professor Shen knows the rules, I assume?"

Shen nods, "Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

Da Qing is relieved... it believes that if a human knows shame then he knows boundaries, and if he knows boundaries then he's reliable. Professor Shen seems so much more credible.

Zhao is about to send the guest away, but his phone rings. He finds his phone without a care, mumbles "who is it", and picks up. Da Qing crouches on the desk and peeks at the phone screen, it reads: "Empress". It instantly feels refreshed, sits up straight, and waits for a hilarious show.

First, Zhao says frivolously, "Hi, Chief Zhao of the SI..."

Then his voice abruptly stops, and he turns into feeble cat, speaking in a gentle and obedient tone, and says, "Aye, aye, I didn't see, it's my fault, mum."

A moment ago, Zhao was just sitting in his comfortable swivel chair like a boss; such majesty and arrogance. And yet as soon as he picks up the phone he begins curling up into a ball, wiggling its tail like a eunuch following behind an emperor. Da Qing silently rolls on the desk laughing.

"No, I wouldn't dare to forget." Zhao says, "I really have something to do tonight, really... ow, please don't ask, it's work... no, why would I fool around? Where would I go fooling around in this freezing weather?"

Shen stands aside, and hears him talking to the other side with an intimate and affectionate tone. His gaze darkens. This time, it cannot be clearer to Shen that Zhao is a living, breathing human of flesh and bones, and with parents, with countless ties in the living world. Zhao is, after all, different from himself.

Since Zhao finds this phone call rather detrimental to his image, he stands up, holding on to the chair, and slowly dawdles into a room.

Da Qing licks its paws, and stares at Shen. After a while, it asks, "Are you human?"

Shen is left in silence.

Da Qing hastily explains, "Oh, I'm not scolding you. I just meant its literal meaning. Literal meaning, you understand right? So... are you human, or, uh... something else, or whatever, you know?"

This question pierces into Shen's painful spot. He stays silent for a while, then shakes his head.

But Da Qing seems quite relieved, and murmurs, "Not human, not human is good... uh, that kid looks like a jerk most of the time, but he's actually quite nice. He really likes you, don't hurt him."

Shen replies with an incredibly soft and stately tone, spouting one word after another, "As long as he still wants me, I will never let him down, whether in life or in death."

Da Qing stares into his eyes. It feels the indescribably deep affection and sincerity in his pitch-black gaze. It has been many, many years since it last saw such genuineness from someone; for a moment, it is mesmerised.

Then, Zhao hangs up and returns. Da Qing comes to, dashes towards his legs and goes in circles around, "What did the old lady say? I want to eat her fried yellow corvina!"

"Eat your ass. Go away, don't stick to me." Zhao nudges it away with his leg.

Da Qing persists, and claws on to his trousers tight. Following his movements, it flings to and fro in the air like a round ball of fur, and yells with much energetic noise, "I want to eat... FRIED, YELLOW, CORVINA!!!"

"I'll bring you along, okay? Cat ancestor." Zhao bends down and picks Da Qing up by the nape, hurling it aside. Then slaps it on the butt, "We'll go at night on the first day of the New Year. To quote my mum, that cat has lived for so many years, it probably doesn't have much time left. So she told me to treat you better."

Zhao turns towards Shen, "I told her to make dinner for one more. You free? Got other plans? Wanna come home with me?"

Shen is stunned. He retrieves his voice after a long time, "I... I better not. It's the New Year, an outsider like me probably..."

“Outsider?” Zhao raises his eyebrow, and carelessly says, “So what now, you’ve decided to dump me?”

Shen has nothing to say.

Da Qing silently shakes its head, and slips out through the door gap. Then it kicks the door shut agilely with its rear legs. It feels like someone inside must have had his sense of decency eaten by a dog.

Needless to mention how gangster Zhao can be. As night falls, and they head to the fairy market, somehow he got Shen to agree.

The two arrive in Antique Street. Zhao wears a pair of sunglasses, holding a walking stick that came out of nowhere. Shen helps him walk with one hand, and in the other he brought along a big lacquer box, which has four layers. The first layer contains lingzhi mushrooms and *Haworthia cooperi* plants picked from the mountains, the second layer contains antique golden and jade ritual instruments, the third layer contains precious pearls and dragon whiskers from the deep sea, and the fourth layer contains black gold and iron from Hell. With all the treasure inside, this box probably weighs a few hundred kilograms.

Antique Street in fact does not have a western entrance. Its western side is a dead end, and the handful of shops there have already closed early. There is only a big pagoda tree with a red paper lantern hanging from it. The mottled wall is lit with a glowing halo.

The two men walk below the lantern. With a flash of light before their eyes, a carriage appears in front of the two, but with no horse. A “person” comes out of the carriage, exceptionally tall and slender, wearing a strangely old-fashioned long gown. It has a fox face, like a furry mask when seen from a distance.

The fox hides its paws in the long sleeves, its narrow and cunning eyes glaring at the box in Shen’s hand, and bows, “Welcome my important guests, please come this way.”

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The fairy market is usually organised in different units, one unit per district, like the village markets in the past. Normally, they are organised annually, and some units are more crowded than others.

The roads in Dragon City form an elaborate network of transportation, so congested with traffic that citizens get into roadside quarrels every day. The hustling and bustling crowds of pedestrians in the city are also the largest. And yet, the size of the fairy market is basically the smallest in the area.

Though the big city is densely populated, mixed with myriad kinds of good and evil, and there is even the saying that “legends lurk in the cities”, it is in fact not an ideal place for cultivation. Unless with ties to the living, or having come all the way here to complete karma, otherwise most fairies would not reside here, for their own sake.

Once Zhao’s SIU was established in Dragon City, countless fairies have been his stool pigeons, and many more whom he calls brothers. And yet, he has never been to the fairy market... this is basically the year-end reunion dinner of the fairy tribes, it wouldn’t be appropriate for an outsider like him to join, no matter how close they are usually.

Come to think of it, this is the first time he has ever been invited to the fairies’ night festival.

Zhao sits inside the steady carriage, and his lips suddenly curve up into an unconcealable, eerie smile.

Shen asks, “What is it?”

Zhao pinches Shen’s hand, which has been holding on to him the whole time. Amidst the whirs of the wheels, he lowers his voice, “I think our relationship is developing quite traditionally. First we introduce ourselves and get to know each other, then we begin by holding hands, and now we’re going out on dates. I feel like if we develop further, we’ll soon get to the ‘endgame’.”

Shen hastily glances outside the carriage door; he knows foxes have sharp ears. He lowers his voice and says to Zhao, “You can say these things when we’re back home tonight, but not now.”

Zhao says, “What do I say it with?”

Zhao is met with silence.

He continues with an operatic tone and a multitude of expressions, “My good big brother, I miss you so much, I can’t stand it anymore, become mine.”

Shen flicks his hand away. After a while, he sees Zhao’s hand wandering in mid-air, grabbing at everything. He hesitates, and secretly holds his hand again.

Nobody knows if the fox heard them, but the carriage has been steady throughout. Around a quarter of an hour later, the carriage stops; the fox lifts up the curtains, and invites the two outside. Chilling breeze rushes in. From neither afar nor nearby, the rough duet of guqin and xiao can be heard; the tune is melancholic, and yet the players embarassingly try to create a joyous atmosphere with it, the resulting music is rather freakish.

At the entrance stand two doormen, with horse heads and human bodies. Not far away, there is a man standing with a snake tail... this is one of the unspoken rules of the fairy market: all fairies must reveal a part of themselves besides their human bodies, so that the less experienced newcomers could recognise everyone, lest unhappy misunderstandings occur.

The snake man smiles towards Zhao, "The Guardian is here."

It's freezing cold during Winter, and by their nature, snake fairies tend not to go outside once it's cold. They usually avoid the festivity, and only send one or two members to represent all of them.

This snake fairy was clearly waiting for Zhao at the door.

Zhao listens attentively, and says politely, "My eyes are not working today. I hope I didn't hear wrong, it must be Uncle Four?"

The snake man nods, "What a surprise that the Guardian still remembers. Come in, Zhu Hong told me everything. If you need anything, just tell me."

Shen hands the lacquer box to the horse doorman, and helps Zhao get inside.

Once they are inside, it's like walking in a pedestrian zone. The street is some one hundred metres long, paved with flagstones on both sides, and divided with a long and narrow river in the middle. A small stone bridge hangs across the river, with tall tables already set on the bridge. Both sides of the street are incredibly crowded, brightly lit with lanterns and decorated with pompoms and ribbons. Yet, the pedestrians are mostly half-beast and half-human. Some fairies have set up stalls selling products to other fellow fairies.

Uncle Four the snake walks ahead, leading the two all the way to the stone bridge.

The cold stone bridge still has a thin layer of snowfall, but the small stone pillar at one end of the bridge has already been wrapped in flowering vines, sprouting small yellow flowers scantily.

Uncle Four stands still and says to the flowers, "Miss Yingchun, the Guardian is here. Please come out to meet him."

As he says this, the lone shoot of winter jasmine suddenly bulks up and instantaneously spreads across this side of the bridge, covering the deck with a flower rug. Countless tiny and young blossoms bloom across the floor. Then, a young girl springs up from the vines; her upper body is that of a human, but her lower body is still connected to and virtually indistinguishable from the lush vegetation.

From her looks, she appears to be around fifteen. With a double bun hairstyle, long and narrow eyes, she looks like a young girl. She looks at Zhao, and then at Shen.

For some reason, Yingchun seems to be rather frightened of Shen. She only glances at him, and quickly looks back at Zhao, and giggles, "Uncle Black Cat said Guardian is a great handsome, why are you covering your face with such big sunglasses?"

Zhao takes off the sunglasses and hangs them at his collar, "To attract sympathy... little girl, when you see a handsome guy like me, but find out I'm blind, you might want to give me more honey."

Yingchun laughs, and then looks at his eyes closely. She frowns, and asks Uncle Four, "What's with the black ravens? Why are they hurting humans for no reason?"

Uncle Four pats her on the head, looks down, and says nothing.

Yingchun glances around, "The Raven Tribe didn't send anyone this year?"

"Not only here, but all night festivals in other areas too." Uncle Four says, "You don't need to bother with this, focus on your cultivation, and bloom some beautiful blossoms when Spring comes."

Yingchun murmurs; a little upset. She takes out a small bottle, and puts it on Zhao's palm, "Our leader told me to give this to you. He even said that if Guardian needs anything in the future, just tell him, we're all willing to listen to your commands."

Zhao is stunned, "My commands? No, no, no, your leader is way too kind..."

His voice is interrupted, and a small monkey jumps on to the tables on the bridge out of nowhere, and heavily clangs with copper gongs in its hands.

The fairies immediately quiet down, and many stone tables emerge along the street. Yingchun goes "oh", and says, "The dinner is going to start, I have to perform. Big brother Guardian, that's all I can say for now, please excuse me. Take care!"

"Wait..."

Before Zhao can continue, Yingchun transforms into a sweep of flowering vines, and swiftly covers all the tables on the stone bridge. Each and every post of the fences are wrapped completely in vines, and the small platform on the stone bridge is quickly brightened up and replete with exuberance.

Zhao has yet to retrieve his hand from his pocket. In his pocket is a small linen pouch, given to him by Da Qing, who claims that it's from the former Guardian... and so it seems it must be a treasure from his former life, or the former life of his former life and so on... it's a small jade cup with patterns of moonflowers engraved on it; indescribably

intricate and enchanting. It is said that the cup can preserve moonlight; for the cultivation of flower fairies, that would be a priceless item.

Zhao intended to exchange this with the Thousand Flower honey, but he never would have thought the fairy would just hand him the honey without a price, like an offering to a deity.

The flower fairies' attitude towards him, coupled with the black ravens who attacked him, seem to have unthinkable implications. Zhao ponders, and turns around to ask Shen to leave. And yet as he does he bumps into a corner of a stone table.

Shen holds on to his waist, embracing him, and blocking the sneaky glances of several fairies who are peeking towards them curiously. He says to Uncle Four, "We've got what we came here for, since this is the fairy tribes' dinner gathering after all, us outsiders will see ourselves out. We wouldn't want to bother you, would we?"

Uncle Four catches a glimpse of his possessive gestures, and says stately, "They've already set tables for you; we treat you as our most honourable guests. Please stay for a few drinks before you leave, do you mind?"

Shen frowns.

Uncle Four says, "Next year is our tribe's year... the Year of the Snake. I will be hosting tonight's activities, please excuse me."

Before Shen can reject, he steadily mounts the small platform with his long snake tail trailing behind and long sleeves almost sweeping the floor. Music begins again, but not an eerie duet anymore; this time they are playing ritual songs from ancient times.

From afar, a bright female voice sings, "Lives of Heav'n and Earth, born from Mount Buzhou."

All fairies are solemnly silenced. Uncle Four flicks his sleeves, looks down, and stands still. He begins with a deep voice, "The old fades, the new nears. 'Tis year-end, all fairies bow to the Three Saints. Bow to the Primordial God of the Mountains. Bow to our Great Ancestors..."

The fairies all stand up, and silently bow towards the northwest.

The female voice continues to chant with elongated tones.

"Lands of primal times, hills in form unjoined. Peaks abreast of clouds, pillars of the skies. Son of God of Fire, King of all the Seas. Touch with dragons called, stars shall turn the time..."

Zhao raises his eyebrows in astonishment, and whispers to Shen, "Who is she singing about? Sounds like Gonggong the God of Water."

Shen is still frowning, and his face darkens further by the minute. He hears his question, and nods, replying succinctly, "Uh, it's him."

Zhao continues, "Is it the part where Gonggong knocked down Mount Buzhou?"

Shen replies incredibly briefly once again.

Zhao asks again, "But isn't Gonggong the God of Water? Who is this Primordial God of the Mountains? The mountain god of Mount Buzhou?"

This time, Shen is silent for a while, and then replies vaguely, "Uh... perhaps? I'm not too sure what happened back then."

Zhao seems to have heard something from his tone of voice, and he stops asking questions. With his finger to his palm, he taps to the rhythm of the song.

The fairies' song is long-winded, and tells of the battle between Zhuanxu and Gonggong, how Gonggong made Mount Buzhou collapse out of rage.

Legend says because of how inconsiderate Gonggong was, the world began to have the order of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. This story seems to be greatly connected with how the fairies came to being, and yet what exactly is the connection, the lyrics do not tell explicitly.

Many tales of history are incomplete, and all that can be deduced from bits and pieces of information is "this is more than meets the eye". Not to mention these are stories from the dawn of time, telling of far-from-accurate legends and myths of gods. Zhao knows that he really shouldn't get bogged down in some age-old lyrics, and yet he can't help himself. It's as if a voice in his heart is telling him that these stories which appear petty and unrelated, in fact hold some profound meaning.

It is unheard of that primeval deities would take two jobs at the same time. If Gonggong is already the God of Water, then he cannot be the "Primordial God of the Mountains" that the fairies worship right after the Three Saints.

Which chief of which mountain village made it in history as a godly figure?

Zhao's fingers twitch. He suddenly recalls what the raven fairy said. A word emerges in his mind... Kunlun.

After a very long time, the fairies finish their worshipping. Beautiful female fairies rush back and forth, pouring tea, wine, and bringing dishes. The fairies' reunion dinner officially begins.

Shen uses driving as an excuse to reject the wine. He watches Zhao drink a cup, and urges, "Should we leave."

Zhao nods, and is about to stand up.

He hears a commotion from within the crowds of fairies.

Zhao listens intently, "What's wrong?"

Shen looks at the high platform, "The snake pushed a half-fairy on stage. The thing is oozing black smoke and reeking of blood. Probably did a lot of terrible things. To avoid punishment from the Heavens affecting innocent fairies, they will execute him first. It's an old tradition."

If Guo were here, he would recognise that this is the same guy he ran into accidentally.

Zhao listens, and realises that it's the fairies' family matters, and so he loses interest. Amidst Uncle Four's reciting the many counts of sin, he has Shen hold on to his arm, and help him walk outside.

As they are about to leave, Uncle Four is done with the charges. He announces, "Half-fairy of the Raven Tribe, who had steered from the righteous path. Many people he had harmed, and the Laws of the Heavens he had breached. This is a shame for our kind. Now I shall rid our kind of outlaws, and exercise justice for the Heavens..."

"Raven Tribe" has Zhao and Shen stopped at their feet.

Simultaneously, a voice interrupts Uncle Four, "Wait!"

The voice is incredibly coarse, with a hint of unspeakable ill omen.

Shen shoves Zhao behind him, and his gaze freezes with icicles... at the entrance of the fairy market stand a row of black and hideous figures, all laden with pitch-black feathers and wearing wings.

It's the Raven Tribe.

Guardian Chapter: 64

Chapter: 64

Zhao grapples Shen by the wrist. Though he is blind, he can still feel the malevolence materialising from the intruders, so frigid that it pierces deep into the bones.

He hears Shen's voice, no longer gentle as always, but deep and indescribably horrifying. Shen says, "How dare the ravens harm you, those ungrateful creatures. I shall slaughter them with a thousand lacerations and obliterate their kind..."

The last few words are overflowing with bloodthirst. Zhao embraces him and Shen instinctually struggles out of his embrace.

For some reason, at that moment, something dawns on Zhao's mind, and he says without thinking, "Little Wei!"

Shen is petrified. After a while, he asks with a quivering voice, "What... what did you just call me?"

"Shhh, listen to me, don't move." Zhao closes his eyes, and opens his third eye, which is a little blurry under the influence of the fairy market. He pulls Shen back and the two hide into the crowd of fairies.

Shen is utterly flustered. He did not control what he said, and Zhao instantly grasped the tiniest hint... what was meant by "ungrateful"? Shen and the Raven Tribe... no, Shen and all the fairies, what is their connection?

Zhao recalls something he heard a long, long time ago, "Crows foretell calamities."

What did the black ravens foretell?

Uncle Four's tone does not change at all. He nods towards the ravens with reserve, and says calmly, "And I thought the ravens were not coming this year."

The leader of the Raven Tribe is a woman. And yet, in this tribe, apart from the half-fairies, they are all stumpy with big noses and faces infested with wrinkles. One simply cannot tell whether they are young, old, pretty or ugly.

Her eyes are slanted and she seems to be glancing aside, carelessly peeking at Zhao. The murky eyes sparkle with a subtle light. Then, she crashes the ground with a spectre, and as she lifts up her hand, the tied-up half-fairy is instantly freed from bondage. The raven elder lowers her voice, "Child, come here."

Uncle Four hides his hands inside the sleeves, and disregards this action, with no intention of stopping it. Discussions within the fairy market spring up from all corners.

Until the half-fairy stumbles forward and almost comes down from the platform, Uncle Four says, "If the elder wants to take one of their own, I have nothing to say. But if the Raven Tribe does that, does that mean you wish to leave the fairies and be on your own?"

The raven elder says with a coarse voice, "Yes!"

That word is met with complete silence. The fairies look around with confusion; Yingchun sticks her head out from the flowers and helplessly look here and there.

Uncle Four looks at her with a bland expression, "The ravens can eat all the carrion you want, and be as close to death as you can. And yet you are still fairies, not Hell Guards, and not ghost angels. The words are out of your mouth, elder, and there is no turning back, think carefully."

The raven elder suddenly bursts out with bellowing laughter. Her voice is rough and thick; one cannot tell whether she is contented or agitated, but all that there are seem to be ancient indignation and ridicule. She says stately, one word after another, "If Uncle Four didn't hear me the first time, I'll say it again... We the Black Raven Tribe shall no longer be part of the fairies. We shall form our own clan, and we will never turn back. If we go back on this oath, let Heavenly thunder punish us!"

She waves her hand, and the pitch-black ravens come and go with her.

In just a few moments, like thunder and lightning, everything has been decided. The other fairies have yet to react to what had happened.

Murmurs and whispers turn into hectic commotion. Nobody knows what's going on.

Uncle Four signals with a wave, and the little monkey beside him gongs to berate the crowd. Amidst the chaos, Zhao pulls Shen out of the crowd and the two head for the doorway swiftly, where there is a giant cloud of fog.

Beyond the fog is the neon-lit streets of Dragon City. Night extends far and wide.

A flock of pitch-black ravens land on to the giant pagoda tree outside Antique Street. A taxi swiftly passes by, and the talkative driver says to his passenger, "Look, mister, even crows are celebrating New Year!"

The black cat silently emerges from the corner of a wall, its thick paws cling to the ground lightly, and it agilely mounts a wall. Dozens of ravens turn towards it simultaneously; a row of blood-red eyes glow like ominous lightbulbs.

Da Qing stops at a distance, and doesn't walk forward; showing that it means good.

The raven elder steps forward into the shadows where she cannot be seen, and says impolitely with a coarse voice, "What do you want?"

The black cat holds still, its emerald eyes sparkle like two Cat's Eye gemstones with a murky glow, tilting slightly upwards. The sloth and elegance unique to felines manifest perfectly; for a moment, one almost forgets about how it is a laughably plump ball of fur.

"I have a bold request." Da Qing says politely, "I would like to ask the elder, how did the bell I lost a few centuries ago end up with your tribe?"

The raven elder stare at it in scrutiny, and says coldly, "What a foolish question. Our tribe tell of calamity, not of prosperity; we delve in death, not in life. How did it end up with us? From a dead person of course."

Da Qing's body tenses up for an instant.

A while later, the black cat asks, "When and where, and how did the person die?"

The raven elder cackles screechingly, "A dead person is a dead person. His former life is no more, once reincarnated, in the next life he could be a swine or a canine. Why do you care when and where he died?"

Da Qing's head droops a little, and it says nothing for a long while.

The raven elder looks at it again, and after a while, she says impatiently, "A pavilion twenty miles outside Shanhai Pass. If you want to, go and see for yourself. I wouldn't lie about this. Wearing a bell from a dead man... I see that you don't mind bad fortune."

She whistles, and a huge flight of ravens soar up into the sky, into the horizon of black jade.

Da Qing droops its head in the darkness. It stands in place for a while; suddenly, its figure appears to be that of a desolate stray cat.

Then the headlamps of a car shine, and it leaps off the wall silently, disappearing into the night.

A blink of the Torch Dragon's eyes, and a night has passed. It is now New Year's Eve.

The night before New Year, SIU is brightly lit. Humans feast on lavish meals and ghosts on incense.

Old Wu finally gets the chance to meet with his daytime colleague who likes carving bones; he merrily raises a burning incense in a toast to the other... of course, the other returns the toast with wine in a bone china cup. Old Li seems to have some kind of almost sickly obsession with bones.

Later that night, the bells have rung, announcing the New Year, and the drunken men and ghosts begin to go on insane sprees... Guo rests on the table and weeps generously, but for no reason it seems. Then, he stops crying and sits in a corner as if there are no other people but himself. He carefully takes out a piece of lens cloth and begins wiping his staff card endlessly. Wiping more, and more and more, until he rolls under the table, and falls sound asleep.

Chu, Lin, Zhu, and Da Qing have set up a Mahjong game. The gambling chips will magically turn into small dried fish when they are put on the cat's side of

the table. Da Qing wears a stern expression... it can only keep winning, since it has almost eaten up all its chips.

Old Li takes out a giant bone out of nowhere, and starts pole dancing with it. Sang pulls Wang into an embrace and lifts her high-up by the waist. Wang giggles, and starts humming an ancient tune. They dance the choreography of the Hanga people.

Luckily, No. 4 Bright Avenue is locked behind closed doors; normal people cannot come in.

Zhao drank a lot tonight, and isn't sitting upright. His eyes can see a little now, but still very blurry, like severe short-sightedness. Although he can't tell six dots from nine dots, he squints his eyes with persistence, face sticking on to the table, and says behind Da Qing, arms frantically waving in the air, "Pong! Pong! Pong!!!"

Da Qing paws him away, "Pong your mother! Professor Shen, take that talkative donkey away... four bamboos!"

Zhu Hong says, "Sorry, I win."

Zhao hits Da Qing on the head, and says, angered at its misfortune, "See, ignore what your elders say, then it's you who's going to pay!"

Da Qing heart-wrenchingly watches its dried fish being taken away and turned into chips, and roars furiously, "Take him away!"

Shen comes over with a smile, and bends down to get Zhao. Gently, he pulls him out. Be it a tall man or a few-hundred-kilo lacquer box, he picks up almost anything like a thin antique book.

Zhu looks down and intentionally avoids eye contact.

Shen sits on the couch, and lets Zhao rest on his legs. He tenderly massages his temples, and says with a deep voice, "Close your eyes. They haven't recovered fully. Don't trying to see just yet, it'll wear you out."

Zhao closes his eyes in incredible bliss, and mumbles, "Pour me some warm wine."

Shen is apparently not paying attention; he doesn't hear him.

Zhao opens his eyes, and watches Shen with his blurry eyesight. He finds that Shen is staring at a corner of the table, spacing out.

Zhao's quick mind instantly understands, and pulls Shen's collar gently. He whispers, "What's up, you're nervous about meeting my parents?"

Shen comes to, and caresses his hair. Well-tempered as usual, he only says softly, "All parents want their children to have peaceful lives, marry well and have children, and build a beautiful family. If you just bring me there so recklessly, and they can't even enjoy New Year peacefully, isn't it too..."

Zhao grapples his hand, and shuts his eyes... since his eyesight is coming back, his third eye is affected and he can no longer see the virtue written on someone. And yet, he still remembers the words on Shen being washed away by darkness like the never-ending tides.

Zhao asks with rare seriousness, "If I don't bring you along, where will you spend the New Year?"

"Whether I celebrate New Year or not, it really doesn't matter..."

"You'll return to the other side?" Zhao interrupts him, "To Hell? Where there's not a beam of light, and only the occasional spirits wandering by?"

No, it's even worse down there.

Shen never thought anything about this kind of life. But for some reason, now that Zhao mentions it, he suddenly feels wronged. The lifestyle that he had gotten so used to now seems unthinkable and even impossible to endure.

But after long silence, Shen only says blandly, "It's alright, I'm used to it."

From the dawn of time, the chaos of the beginning and the genesis of the spirits of many and all things in the universe, all the way until now: the passage of time has written and erased many things from this world. Still, he has always abided by the vow he swore with someone who no longer remembers; it's as if his entire life has been about those very words and nothing more.

Zhao speaks no more. He holds Shen's hand against his heart. His heart beat is racing a bit, probably because of the alcohol. After long, till Shen almost thinks he is asleep, Zhao asks with a lowered voice, "Wei... why this name?"

"At first it was 'Wei' as in 'mountain ghost'." Shen looks down, his dark irises gaze on to the dazzling floor, visualising the distant past, "But someone said to me, although 'mountain ghost' is quite fitting, it is perhaps a little lacking. The seas and mountains of this world conjoin in a splendid nexus, and countless majestic hills extend across the horizon and beyond. He suggested that I add a few more strokes, and gave me a grander name."

Zhao rubs his nose, and finds the way this person speaks oddly familiar, "Who was this egomaniac, who gave him the right to change other people's names?"

Shen smiles, "Just someone I met by chance."

They do not keep chatting. It's dawn, and the entire avenue is replete with the cacophony of blasting firecrackers. The Mahjong players are making an uproar. Small ghosts hide from the morning sun, and sprint off into the shadows.

The vibrant and hectic New Year can blind one's eyes.

A slight touch of snowfall raises the curtains for New Year in Dragon City. Peace and quiet bless the bounds of the Earth; flamboyant lanterns are put out to welcome the first sunrise.

The first breath of air, mixed with the flavour of timely snow and the scent of gunpowder, reaches the nostrils of numerous from numerous families. Another year, another multitude of joy and sorrow for the living.

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Chapter: 65

When it is almost noon on the first day of the New Year, the devilish chaos at No. 4 Bright Avenue has finally subsided, and the intoxicated crowd grab their coats and queue up at the doorway waiting for taxis.

Old Li washes his face when everyone has left, takes out some cleaning equipment out of nowhere, and begins cleaning up the giant mess in the office.

Da Qing heads inside, and as it sees the room in an utter shambles, it cautiously retrieves its paws.

Old Li hastily takes out a towel and wipes the chairs clean, then proceeds to line them up. He puts master cat on to the chair with reverence, "Walk up here, it's not dirty."

"They left you here all on your own again. Youngsters these days, so inconsiderate." Da Qing mumbles with conceited venerability. It carefully bounces from the chairs on to the desk.

"Not just me, there is still someone." Old Li points towards a corner, and Da Qing sees Guo crawling up.

"Oh, perfect. Hey kiddo, come here, I was looking for you." Da Qing glares at Guo, and grabs a saucer on Zhu's desk. It paws the saucer away and finds a red packet with a

few shopping coupons inside. It picks up the red packet with its mouth and hurls it towards Guo, and humphs, "Old Zhao wants you to bring this to your Uncle Two. Chief Zhao said he won't disturb the Director's New

Year holiday, so help him pass this gift, maybe buy some new clothes for his wife and children... humph, stupid human, these kinds of words are sure to disgust a cat."

The slow-witted Guo understands after a while: he stands in place, dizzied and half-conscious, and finally remembers where he is. He picks up the red packet and puts it away with restraint, and smiles sluggishly. He turns around and sees Old Li smiling at them, holding a mop. He immediately rolls up his sleeves and walks forward, "Big Brother Li! Let me help you, let me..."

And he trips on the leg of a chair and falls flat on to the floor.

Da Qing humphs and sits upright in front of the computer. It turns on the computer, and uses its cat paws to move the mouse, inconveniently, and opens a web browser.

Old Li sees that and walks up enthusiastically, "What do you want to type? I'll help you."

Da Qing carelessly says, "Shanghai..."

"Hai" comes out of its mouth but quickly changes in tone and almost sounds like "he". Then, Da Qing shuts it, stares at the monitor with no expression, and then looks down, "Oh, I mean I want to go on Weibo."

Zhao said he is headed to handle a "big deal", and will come back to pick it up later. Da Qing sits behind someone's computer, and opens its Weibo account "No. 1 Master Cat in the World", and begins posting selfies out of boredom.

Old Li and Little Guo quietly clean up the chaos. In that moment just now, Da Qing really wanted to find out about the pavilion twenty miles outside Shanhai Pass.

But the raven elder was right. So what if you find out? A dead person is dead; all are from the dust, and to dust all return.

"Click" and Da Qing posts its fatty cake face on to the web, and adds a description: "World's Handsomest Cat". In no time, many cat lovers have left comments; some praising the cat for its pure-bred fur, others kindly suggesting: "OP, your cat might be too fat. Be careful of what it eats, and remember to take it exercising to keep it healthy."

Da Qing deletes that comment at the speed of light. It thinks angrily, "Stupid humans."

The bell round its neck wiggles to its movements, but it doesn't ring; only the occasional golden light reflects on to the snow-white walls.

Old Li can't help but block the blinding light. He turns around and looks at the unusually desolate black cat, and is about to say something. Suddenly, Chu rushes out of the wall. It seems that the first day of the New Year is the only time when he is allowed in the library. And yet, he doesn't look like he borrowed any books or read anything. He wears an incredibly bizarre expression: mocking, yet inherently wretched.

Guo instantly stands upright to greet him, "Brother Chu!"

Chu doesn't seem to hear. He heads for his bag, lips slowly curving upwards into what can almost be described as a smirk marked with grief and suffering. Then, he heads outside.

Da Qing peeks out from behind the computer, and asks randomly, "How many years?"

Chu stops walking, and says almost inaudibly, "Exactly three hundred."

Da Qing goes "ah", and says, "Well then... uh, congratulations I guess?"

After it says this, Chu suddenly takes out a black wooden plate. He doesn't turn around, and just holds up the plate and shakes it in the cat's face. Perhaps it's Guo's own imagination, but there seems to be a flash of writings on Chu's face, right on his cheeks, like the engraved words used to mark criminals in ancient times.

Da Qing's ears stand upright, and its eyes widen.

Chu's hand turn pale green as he clutches the wooden plate with tremendous force. Veins pump up on the back of his hand, oozing in ferocity.

Without a word, he heads out in hasty steps. Da Qing instantly turns towards Guo and says, "Little Guo, call a taxi for your Brother Chu!"

Guo replies sluggishly as usual, and Da Qing continues with a stronger tone, "He is drunk, go home with him and make sure he is alright before you come back, do you hear me?"

Guo rapidly takes out a napkin and wipes his hands, then sprints outside, and helps Chu carry his bag. Chu is acting like he lost his soul; Guo takes away his bag, and he has no reaction at all.

From behind, his figure is incredibly slender. For one moment, he almost appears cadaverous.

Just as Shen is carrying the drunk-as-mud Zhao home, the plump, good-for-nothing head teacher who only knows flattery suddenly calls. Apparently, he needs a document urgently.

Shen finds this very odd. Before he can ask further, the head teacher is like ants in a hot pan, and hangs up hastily after some hurried mumbling.

Shen has no other choice, so he brings Zhao the koala to his cold and tiny apartment that he rarely stays at.

He steps inside, and coincidentally, the head teacher's stubborn and resilient phone call is on to him again, urging him to send the stuff to the west gate of Dragon City University.

Zhao rolls around on the cushionly sofa, opening his eyes only slightly, and says, half-awake, "It's the first day of New Year, is that fat guy out of his mind?"

Shen searches for his stuff, while sparing a hand to save Zhao's head from banging on to the coffee table. He puts a pillow under his head, "I have to go, I'll be back soon, you..."

"I need sleep." Zhao's voice sinks down like his eyelids.

Shen asks, "Want some water?"

"Uh..." Zhao turns to the side, and gently squats his hand away, "No."

His eyes glisten in watery light, cherry lips soft and fine. His long eyebrows tilt up and almost hides underneath his hair. His head is slanted a little, extending his neck, and his chin is marked with a slightly rigid outline. Buttons are undone on his shirt; his slim and long neck is bared with indescribable charisma.

Shen skips a breath, and carefully flicks his fringe away. He covers him with a blanket, thumb tenderly lingering over Zhao's lips, caressing him affectionately, and leaning forward to kiss him on the forehead. He takes what the head teacher needs and car keys, and heads out.

A moment later, Zhao hears the door close.

Zhao instantly springs up like a zombie, though he was still intoxicated and disoriented just a few moments ago. He takes out his phone and sends a message: "hold him for longer", and then he phones the moving company he contacted before.

The young man from the moving company has never received such a ludicrous order before. He hesitates, "Then... if the owner is not here, should we..."

"Should your head, I want everything moved today." Zhao says bossily, "Sooner or later I'll add his name to my household register, you think I'll write two addresses in the same booklet? I am pissed whenever I see all his disposables. Get your ass here in five minutes, do you hear me?"

Zhao hangs up and takes out a big pile of memo notes from his bag, and starts rapidly making a list of what to move, and what to throw away and buy again later.

Suddenly, Zhao stops at the tip of the pen, and an extremely lecherous thought sprouts in his mind... He absurdly begins to ponder: wherever might Shen's underwear be? Especially the ones he has worn... Although recently Shen has been forced to stay at Zhao's tiny apartment, half-reluctantly, he has managed to keep his fine tradition of "love shall be bound by etiquette" in such a cramped space.

Besides, Zhao has been blind for more than half a month, though he never stopped trying to actualise his perverted plots, he is nevertheless limited by the confines of his physical capabilities. He lives under the same roof with the man he loves every day, and yet it is not for him to see or eat, only to imagine... Gradually, he finds himself living very much like a monk.

"I really have no other choice, you see." Zhao rubs his hands, snickers a "hehe" to himself, and walks outside to the balcony. Perhaps it really has been long since Shen stayed here; the clothes hangers are still on the balcony, but nothing is hung. Zhao doesn't give up, and proceeds to open the big wardrobe in the living room. Yet, he only finds a few shirts, trousers and coats, and a few pairs of shoes that look basically alike; there isn't even a pair of socks.

Zhao's eyesight is still recovering, and he doesn't see a small box covered under a long trench coat. He adds "clothes" to both the "move" and "buy" lists. Still not willing to give up, his gaze rests on the eternally-shut door of Shen's bedroom, which seems to contain an otherworldly dimension.

The door does not have a handle, nor is it locked overtly. Zhao takes out a small hand torch, flashing it around through the gap and the shaft of the door. He doesn't find a pivot, nor does he find a hidden lock.

He finds this oddly suspicious. With his palm on the door, he sees subtle markings on the door with his third eye; the black door seems to contain some kind of flowing energy. It flows in a steady path, with indescribable solemnity. Each strand of marking is tightly fitted with another, and all are impeccably woven.

Zhao feels the door with his hands for a while, and finds this sensation somewhat familiar. Soon, he remembers, "Kunlun lock?"

0 These few days, behind everyone's back, he has been asking Sang for help in researching about Kunlun. But besides the fact that it is a really awesome and really ancient mountain, as well as some strange techniques named after Kunlun, he did not find anything useful.

Using his third eye, he came across Kunlun lock as recorded in one book.

It is said that the Kunlun lock is round at the top and square at the bottom, symbolising that the sky is round and the earth is square. There are fourteen pins in the middle, thus the eight direction points of the compass, and the six direction co-ordinates. At that time, the sixty-four hexagrams system had not been developed yet. The Kunlun lock was only based on Yin and Yang, and is therefore not as convoluted as succeeding lock structures. Yet, on some level, it is in fact more eccentric and capricious, and difficult to grasp.

What would require a Kunlun lock to protect?

No... what is the relationship between the Ghost Slayer and Kunlun? Why does Shen know about this ancient seal?

Zhao stands at the door for a while, his mind filled with uncertainty. Then, he gathers spiritual energy at his palm, and tries moving the Kunlun lock. The lock is instantly activated, and all fourteen pins begin propelling in and out, according to the order of Yin and Yang. It is difficult to catch up with the constant motion. Zhao has too many thoughts in his mind, he knows an ample but is an expert in none. Sometimes his imagination brings him to greatly unrealistic places. All in all, he is not as apt in dealing with such intricate structures as Chu.

However, when Zhao is faced with the Kunlun lock, for some unknown reason, a sense of familiarity boils up inside of him. He sees every change and every motion, and the shifting lock seems to be in sync with a particular rhythm ready to launch from within his heart.

Zhao's fingers rapidly run across the door, as if someone is guiding them.

Sky door, earth joint, round square, along thirty-six columns, until...

Kachunk!

The pitch-black door slowly opens a small gap. There is not a beam of light inside. Zhao stands at the doorway, and is suddenly hesitant.

For some reason, he regrets opening this door.

But after moments of hesitation, he takes off a miniature torch from his key chain and cautiously enters the room.

What the walls are congested with has Zhao effortfully squinting his eyes in the light, and instantly petrified in place.

Filling up the entire walls: some large, some small, some angry, some laughing, all are... Zhao's hand trembles and the torch almost drops to the ground. His subtle intoxication quickly wears away.

In a while, the torch light slowly moves towards an antique painting on the western wall. It is gigantic, almost taking up the entire wall. Made with some unknown material: as light and delicate as cicada wings, and as smooth and clear as snow. On it is a portrait.

The man is painted with fine and detailed eyes and brows; his presence vivid as to almost coming to life, with lengthy hair extending to the earth and in a long turquoise gown that cannot be more simplistic. He looks to the side slightly, and appears to be wearing a hint of a smile... Zhao feels like he is looking into a mirror.

On the side of the painting, a line of small words are written. It is not in simplified or traditional Chinese; in fact, it is not in any script that he is familiar with. Though he has never seen these characters before, for an uncertain reason, he understands what is written instantaneously:

*Beneath the umbra of peach woods
First encounter with Lord Kunlun
One fleeting glance from astounded allure
The aria of my heart had stirred
Wei*

Ten minutes later, the young man from the moving company arrives and knocks on the door. A strange man comes out of the apartment.

He does not explain anything at all. All that he says is there is no need to move anything. He grabs his wallet and pays. He apologises for having troubled them for nothing.

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When Shen sees their head teacher, he realises that someone intentionally lured him away. His face sinks; when the head teacher turns around, he gives his shoulder a forceful tap, and asks coldly, "Who told you to call me?"

His voice exudes unspeakable pressure, and in the blink of an eye, the head teacher's soul is enveloped tightly in his body, crushed into immobility. Like a soulless cadaver, the head teacher's gaze loses focus and blandly stares ahead with disorientation.

Shen tightens his grasp, turns the head teacher around, and bellows, "Answer me!"

No person can lie deliberately in the face of the Ghost Slayer's blade that judges all good and evil. And yet, the head teacher's expression is increasingly blank; he cannot utter a word. Shen's heart sinks; he knows that this human's memory has been messed with.

Shen lets go of him and leaves without looking back. The head teacher regains consciousness, and watches Professor Shen leave hurriedly with bewilderment... Luckily, he never thinks to check other people's electronic devices; Shen never uses that stuff, and he would never think along those lines when it comes to it... not to mention, anyone who dares go against him wouldn't use these human tricks anyway.

Of course, in Shen's very gentlemanly mind, he would never imagine that someone would go through so much trouble, with a meticulous plan, just to move his things and steal a few pieces of underwear.

Shen hurried back to his apartment, and busted inside. The living room is empty. His heart almost freezes solid.

He stands stupefied at the door, and a surge of uncontrollable brutality rises up within him, like a ginormous dragon that has been in deep slumber for eons suddenly roused by someone touching its reverse scales... Ever since his carelessness which resulted in Zhao's eye injury, Shen's heart has been on edge like a dangerously strained string, although he looks fine on the outside.

The emptiness of the living room almost breaks that string... luckily, he hears a voice from the balcony. Shen comes to his senses, and his figure flashes and reappears on the balcony instantly.

He sees Zhao nicely laying on the window sill, lazily smoking, and yelling at the phone, "No, not the ones made of stone, I know... white marble? The heck! I'm not decorating a fucking palace. Don't be like that, Old Wu, don't give me this nonsense... no, no, no, you listen to me, do your job nicely, and I will pay you extra bonus. I will not give you a penny less than what you deserve, alright? But I tell you, if you mess with me you're gonna be in deep shit..."

Shen is greatly relieved. He leans on to the balcony door. Now he realises that he is soaked in cold sweat, and even his palm is cold.

Zhao hears some noise, and sees Shen when he turns around. He wears a smile instantly, and says to the other side, "Alright, alright, don't argue about unimportant things, I want eco-friendly materials, ok... what Copenhagen, I have to live there, just don't turn it into the ruins of bio-chemical warfare, otherwise the smell will not go away for centuries.... my wife's home, that's all for now, bye."

He hangs up, puts out the cigarette, and leans against the wide-open windows amidst the chilling winds, opens his arms in his scruffy shirt, and says pervertedly, "Baby come here, your hubby wants a hug."

Teasing Shen has become a habit of his, but this time Shen really comes forward and embraces him, burying his face into his shoulder. Then he picks Zhao up by the waist

with both hands, lifts him off the window sill, and closes the window. Shen touches Zhao's icy hands, and frowns, "Silly kid, do you not realise it's cold?"

Zhao the silly kid places his hands on to the window sill and traps Shen inside his arms. He stretches sluggishly and lazily places his chin on Shen's shoulder. Closing his eyes, his lips curl up into a tranquil and peaceful smile, like a sunbathing cat with a full belly.

Shen finds him a little weird, and asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." This word comes out after a while. Then, Zhao opens his eyes, gazing at Shen's profile, and says without a change of expression, "Rarely does the great beauty show his affection, I'm overwhelmed by the pleasant surprise... of course, if I can be blessed with a smooch, I'll be even more flabbergasted."

Then, before Shen notices, he quickly pecks on his lips. When Shen realises what happened, he escapes at the speed of light and announces, "I'll go wash my face, pick up Da Qing, and then I'll bring you home."

Not a single word about what he saw.

Zhao and Da Qing were planning on going there empty-handed and empty-stomached, but this shameless plan is rejected by Shen, who forcefully pulls the yawning Zhao off the car to shop for a lot of gifts.

The closer they get, the more nervous Shen becomes. If it weren't for his insistence on keeping promises, he would have ran away.

The door to Zhao's home is not locked. He doesn't have the habit of knocking either, and opens the door right away, like he knows that someone is waiting for him.

The place is rather large and appears somewhat vacant. Past the entryway, they can hear the clanging of plates and bowls from the kitchen. Two pairs of brand new slippers are placed at the door.

Da Qing bounces off of Zhao, tiptoes towards the doorway of the kitchen, and politely meows.

Zhao mumbles as he puts on the slippers, "Shameless fat fuq, trying to act cute, as if nobody knows how old you are."

Da Qing glares at him with a vicious look.

"Oh, isn't this Da Qing?" The gentle voice of a woman comes from the kitchen. She wipes off the flour on her hands and tenderly picks up the heavy black cat. The sheer weight of the cat almost breaks her wrists. She sighs, "Look at your smooth little face, why are you getting fatter and fatter?"

A ruthless attack on Da Qing's greatest weakness. It has no response to that. Two fat paws furrily tap on the female owner's hand, keeping its adorable pretence, with its long body looking more and more like a big, fat and stupid black caterpillar.

Zhao laughs.

Shen reluctantly lifts his lips upwards a little, but he really cannot bring himself to smile.

Zhao's mother aged well. Her long hair is tied up, revealing a slender neck. She doesn't look a lot like Zhao, but on a closer look, there is perhaps some resemblance between the eyes and brows. But the shape of her face is much more gentle and pretty, with a hint of a smile even when she is not in fact smiling. She is wearing a pair of rimless glasses.

On a glance, she has the appearance of a well-educated and elegant upper-class lady... perhaps when it comes to taste in a romantic partner, it's like father like son.

But who would have thought that as soon as this "lady" sees Zhao at the door, her look changes instantly. With a vicious expression like that of "female yaksha", she growls, "What are you laughing at, like you wanna laugh your teeth off. Get your ass over here!"

Zhao hastily obeys, and Zhao's mother sees Shen behind him.

She is stunned. She washes her hands, adjusts her glasses, and says with a welcoming look, "Oh, this must be little Shen?"

Zhao puts his arm around Shen's shoulder, and pushes him towards his mother, "Your soon-to-be son-in-law, good-looking, right?"

Shen is left speechless instantly in great embarrassment. He has never hated Zhao more for his disrespectfulness.

Luckily, Zhao's mother doesn't take him seriously. She glares at him, and sees the stuff that Shen is carrying, "Oh you didn't have to bring gifts when you come to auntie's place, why the formality?"

Zhao points at his own nose, "It's me, I bought all of that."

Zhao's mother beats him with a rolling pin, "No need to bullshit me. You? If you ever have the decency to do that, then I will have no regrets... go pour some water for our guest, and then help me make the wrappings!"

Zhao's back is stained with the trace of a flour-filled rolling pin, he dares not get mad, "Roger..."

Shen cautiously sits on a corner of the couch. When he's given fruits, he would take a tiny piece of apple with seemingly no interest. When he's given water, he would sit upright and take a very tiny sip. When Zhao's mother finds out Shen teaches Chinese at the University, she says passionately, as if meeting a long-lost friend, "Oh that is great! Wouldn't it be nice if you were my son, unlike the two men in our family... sigh, I don't want to say anything about them. Just sit here and wait, auntie will go make you some dumplings, then we can talk more."

Shen smiles unnaturally. His back is upright and greatly tensed, like a fully-drawn bow.

Five minutes later, Zhao has proven unhelpful in the kitchen... the wrappings are irregular and hideous. He is punished with further rolling pin strikes. Zhao stretches his shoulders, pretentiously dodging, but not actually dodging. While she is beating him with the rolling pin, he whispers, "Don't make me lose face in front of someone else."

Zhao's mother says, "All you do is eat and play, and you don't even come home anymore, what did I raise you for? Lose face, do you even have any to lose?"

Zhao steps aside to leave her some space, but doesn't leave the kitchen. All smiles, he puts one hand on the wall and watches her busying in the kitchen. Pretentiously, he asks, eyes rolling, "Where's auntie? And dad? Why is it only our beautiful miss at home?"

"Your aunt went home for the New Year. Your dad has work tonight, he's not coming back."

"Great." Zhao is relieved. He watches his mother from behind, and cautiously lowers his voice, "If dad finds out about this... I'm dead."

Zhao's mother turns around, "What did you do now?"

"Nothing actually..." Zhao's gaze wanders on to a chopsticks rack. His eyesight has yet to recover fully. He can't help but squint his eyes. Then, he peeks towards his mother, and continues, "So... um, mum, what do you think about being gay?"

Zhao's mother doesn't seem to understand, "Not much. It's a normal social phenomenon, and it exists even in animals. Sooner or later, the law will recognise it... Why are you asking this? I was talking about your problem."

"This is my problem." Zhao rubs his nose, "Don't be so academic with me. I just wanna ask, if one day, your son came out to you, what would you do?"

"Don't change the subject, I..."

“Mum,” Zhao interrupts her. His wandering gaze settles, and his expression shifts from “guilt-ridden” to “stout-hearted” instantly. He looks at her with incredible seriousness, “I mean it, I’m not joking.”

The rolling pin drops on to the floor with a thud.

Zhao sighs. He bends down and picks up the rolling pin. The muscles on his waist contract, outlining a robust shape beneath the clothes, “I’m afraid dad will find this hard to accept, so I wanted to tell you first. I have thought about this, I can’t hold it any longer, and I can’t hide it from you, you’re the only mother I’ll ever get...”

Zhao’s mother is petrified still. In shock, she takes the rolling pin. After a long time, she stutters, “So... you brought him here...”

Zhao nods. Then, he blocks the door with both hands and his body, and says, “But I have to tell you first, I went through so much for the past months, I used all kinds of tricks and tactics: encirclement, ambushing, Thirty Six Stratagems, this-that and what-not, every single scheme that I could think of I used. It was even harder than a revolution. If you’re angry just kill me, don’t hurt him, I will be heart-broken.”

Zhao’s mother seems to be struck by lightning. She stands motionless for a long time. Then, like a rebooted robot, with a bland expression, she begins picking up the dumpling wrappers and adding ingredients inside thoughtlessly.

Zhao suspects he might have been too direct. He asks, “Ma?”

Zhao’s mother doesn’t hear at first. For a few minutes, she is trapped in a narcotised state, like she doesn’t know what she is doing or what she is hearing, but she only keeps working with her hands on auto-pilot.

Zhao calls her for a few more times, and she suddenly awakens. She begins firing, “What about your work? And... what will other people say about you? Will your future prospects be affected? Right, I... I heard from your dad that you bought a house, do you still have enough money?”

Zhao is stunned. He can’t figure out why coming out suddenly relates to money issues. It seems that her logic is a gigantic mess now, and she is hastily picking up keywords, messily constructing sentences and brainlessly spouting them out.

His mother is well-educated and never had to worry about necessities in her life. Thanks to his dad, she seems to be always in a good mood, and has an open mind. Zhao’s plan is simple enough: if he can take care of his mother, then his father won’t be a concern. And

luckily his mother is easy to communicate with; she is knowledgeable, well-tempered, sharp-witted, and not stubborn at all. She can almost always deal with something rationally.

He formulated many possible reactions from her. For instance, maybe she would be angry at first, or maybe she would calmly suggest discussing this matter for a few hours, or maybe like other mothers she would begin grilling him about Shen's background... but he never expected such a worrisome and astonished reaction.

Perhaps it's because he has never been a parent himself.

Zhao is speechless. He really doesn't know what to say for a moment.

Zhao's mother seems to have calmed down a little. Her hand stops moving, holding a pair of chopsticks, and she asks after some hesitation, "Are you serious about this or is this some kind of joke?"

"How can I joke about this. Dad would cook me in a pot."

Zhao's mother leans aside. A long time later, she takes a deep breath, and says, "Don't... don't tell your dad yet. You let me think about this first... who is he? What... what does he do?"

Before Zhao can answer, she pinches between her eyebrows, "Oh, right, my bad, you told me, he is a teacher at Dragon City University."

Zhao's mother concentrates effortfully, and fires a load of questions, "Where does he live? Do his family members agree with this? What is he like? Is he a good person? Does he treat you well? I... I remember you had girlfriends before, why suddenly..."

Zhao answers very skilfully, "As long as you agree, no-one in this world will dare disagree. Dad will have to agree with you too, right? As for what he's like..."

He smiles, "In my heart, he is 'a perfectly crafted piece of jade, he is one of a kind in this whole wide world'. Just talk to him and you'll know. And hit me if you're mad, but besides girlfriends, I dated a few boys before as well. But I'm willing to be completely gay for him."

Zhao's mother stares at his expression. Her heart sinks... this cannot be considered selfish; as parents, watching someone fall in love with your child is moving, heart-warming and delightful, but if it's the other way round, perhaps it would be a bit bitter.

Amidst this bitterness, she says a little snappishly, "I don't believe you."

Zhao's expression remains, but his heart is jumping out with anxiety.

Unexpectedly, his mother continues, "If he really is as good as you say, then why would he want you? Does he not have the right glasses?"

Zhao trips and almost falls kneeling down.

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Chu says his address when he gets in the car, and then he rests in silence with his eyes closed.

Guo doesn't know the truth behind all this. He secretly peeks at him along the ride, and finds his Brother Chu's face shrouded in a layer of dust; with his eyes closed, his face resembles sculpted and weathered mountain rocks: cold and void of emotion.

After Guo pays the taxi driver, he remembers the task he was given by Da Qing. Hastily, he picks up Chu's bag, which he has forgotten, and runs behind him in small steps.

Chu lives deep within a small hutong. They are standing where the wind blows strong. Some northwesterlies pour into Chu's collar, inflating his already-oversized jacket, like he is about to be carried away by the wind.

Guo can't help but call him, "Brother Chu..."

Chu suddenly stops walking, turns around and viciously glares at Guo. He says with an incredibly soft yet incredibly vile voice, "Why are you still following me, don't you know I'm not human?"

Guo stops at three steps away from him, and stares at him blankly, "Then... then what are you?"

Chu instantaneously flashes towards him, his agility escapes the naked eye. He snatches his bag from Guo; his fingers are icy cold, and his entire body oozes an eerie stir of moisture. His pitch-black irises sparkle with an indescribable gleam, "Have you seen zombies? Zombies feast on human flesh. Let me tell you what humans taste like. Human flesh is tender and greasy, the tendons chewy and crunchy, the organs are rank and reek of blood. You pull them out from the stomach while they are still steamy and fresh, like meat straight from a cooking pot..."

He leers at Guo with malice, and licks his lips, "I'm a zombie."

Guo shivers intensely, but only from the frigid hands. He feels that it must be only logical to be frightened in this situation, and yet he does not feel fear boiling up inside

him as it should. Perhaps he has worked with Chu for too long, and it seems no matter what his Brother Chu is, he can accept him.

Strangely, an incredibly strange thought flashes in his mind: no wonder Brother Chu doesn't eat peas.

Chu seems to think that he must be horrified, and from his horror he gets an unspeakably vile sense of satisfaction. He turns around and leaves, but only a few steps later, hesitant footsteps sound from behind him. He turns around, and there is Guo following behind him again.

Chu raises his eyebrows, "What, you want to follow the zombie into a coffin?"

Guo stands still, "I... I..."

Chu humphs, and goes again. And there goes Guo following behind him in typical little waifu steps, again.

Chu's patience has finally run out, and he bellows, "Before I get mad, fuck off!"

Guo stutters, "Da... Da Qing told me to make sure you get home, you haven't..."

Before he can finish, he is suddenly crushed on to a wall with immense force. Chu's skeletal hand of steel easily picks up Guo and squashes his throat. Guo's feet are lifted off the ground, his back against the wall, and the weight of his entire body is sustained by that one hand grasping his neck. He begins suffocating very soon; his face reddens completely.

Chu looks up at him coldly. Only in a short distance can one see the subtle tinge of grey in Chu's irises, which isn't usually apparent. Under the beam of the sun, there from within comes an elusive emanation of death.

Guo's legs struggle in the air frantically, but in vain. Instinctually, he grabs hold of Chu's hand, but he cannot remove it no matter how hard he tries.

"I never deviated from the conscience of Heaven and Earth. I have borne this crime for three hundred years. No matter what I did, it must have been repaid by now. Who do they think they are, what gives them the right to judge whether I leave or stay?" From between the gaps of his teeth, Chu squeezes out these words with terrifyingly sunken eyes, "Maybe I should actualise this crime for them to see!"

Guo's eyes become watery. He really is a cry baby; anything can make him cry. He is boneless and soft. One simply has to wonder how he survived growing up; it's like he lacks any sort of strength whatsoever. As he looks at Chu, he is incredulous, he is beseeching, he is dejected, and yet, he is not angry.

Guo moves his mouth with incredible difficulty, but fails to make any sound. Vaguely, from his mouthing, he seems to be trying to say "Brother Chu".

Chu lets go and Guo drops on to the ground. He slowly retracts his hand, and stands aside coldly, watching Guo cough with the most sky-shattering vigour.

With a perplexing expression, Chu looks at this kid who is always carrying a small notebook, following him around and jotting notes... his notes are ludicrous: child's handwriting, scrawly and scribbly, all about pointless matters. Basically, he jots down everything anyone says, even pet phrases. Chu has seen him write down Da Qing's "stupid human" many, many times... it doesn't seem like he is trying to learn how to do his job, but rather, he is cautiously writing the biographies of all his seniors.

In his gaze, he can still see the immense white light of virtue emanating from Guo, who is coughing till his respiratory tract almost curls up into a ribbon knot. He suddenly finds the light somewhat irritating on his eyes.

The hand that seized Guo's neck just now suddenly pats him on the head gently. Reflexively, Guo curls up.

Chu caresses his head, and then softly fondles his hair, like patting a child or a small animal. He says deeply, "You probably didn't study well when you were young. Do you know an excerpt from 'The Injustice to Dou E'? It says very clearly, 'those who do good lead impoverished and short lives, those who do evil are blessed with fortune and thrive'; ever heard of it?"

He has heard of it, more or less. Unfortunately, studying really isn't Guo's strong suit. Whenever he tries to remember something from a textbook, his brain automatically erases everything like formatting a hard disk. He has yet to escape from the state of a reddened face and a bulging neck. He crouches on the ground and looks up at Chu miserably.

Chu bends down slightly, holds up Guo's head by the chin in scrutiny, and shakes his head, "Your forehead is not wide, that means bad fortune for your parents. Your auricles are thin and soft, that means frequent hardships in your younger years. Your dorsal bridge has a slight hump, that means by middle age you would lose support from your elders, and probably die in destitution and decrepitude. Your face determines your dreadful fate. No matter how many good deeds you do, apart from making you poorer, what good does it do you? Don't be so stupid; just enjoy being from a rich family while you can, perhaps there are still a few prosperous days ahead of you."

Guo looks up at him with perplexity.

Chu stares at him for a while, and suddenly laughs bitterly, "You're really just a naive child, aren't you."

Then, he picks up Guo like a little chick, and waves his hand, "Go back and tell that cat fairy. What's there to worry about me? I'm just a nobody. I'm gutless and powerless. I'm just a puppet. I don't have the means to cause trouble, and I'm not suicidal. But if there isn't anything, I'll take a few days off during the New Year. I'll be back after the fifteenth."

He finishes, and vanishes into thin air under Guo's gaze. Like a cloud of vapour, gone in the blink of an eye.

The long and narrow hutong is empty and exuding the odour of sulphur from firecrackers. The streets on the first day of the New Year seem rather desolate; chilly breeze swirls up strands of protruding hair on Guo's head. With tear stains on his face, he snorts and stands spacing out for a while. Finally, he turns around and heads home in heavy steps.

He doesn't know whether what Chu said was for his good or just whining, but Guo finds what he said unreasonable.

Bad fortune is his destiny, and nothing can be done about it. But what does that have to do with what he does with his life?

Guo has always felt like an incurably useless piece of garbage, an utter waste of space and resources. As for other things, some might say it is "charity", some say it is "kindness", but he only does it so that he feels like he can be of some use.

Guo never wanted anything in return.

Yet... hearing someone attest to his "dreadful fate" clogs his heart a little.

When Shen leaves Zhao's place, he feels like he is about to collapse. He was immensely cautious so as to not give away any "flaws" in front of Zhao's mother, lest Zhao get into trouble because of it. But Zhao's mother glared at him with X-ray vision incessantly, almost scrutinising him till holes were punctured in his body.

On the way back, Shen pinches between his eyebrows, "Why did your mother keep looking at me like that, did I give away anything?"

Before Zhao can say anything, Da Qing interrupts, holding a full box of dried fish in the backseat, "Old Zhao used to fool around a lot before, he is a notorious playboy. I think his mum must be afraid of her own shadow now."

Shen does not want to make trouble out of nothing, but after hearing this he can't help but frown.

"You little fat fuq if you keep saying nonsense I'll throw you out of the car, do you hear me?" Zhao says with a bland expression.

Da Qing sits with its tail curved up, wiggling like a clock pendulum in all innocence, “Meow, meow...”

Zhao glares at it in the rear-view mirror. Then he says to Shen, “About that, don’t think too much, though I used to be... cough, I’ve never brought anyone to meet the old lady. Besides, I’m a brand new person now, I’ve changed my evil ways; even criminals are given a chance to start a new life... no, hold on, besides being dumped all the time, I never did anything bad in the past. Dat fat fuq, tryna mislead me... actually her reaction just now wasn’t because of you, it was mainly because while making dumplings I accidentally came out to her...”

Shen’s expression freezes. Luckily, he is not the one driving.

“Oh,” Da Qing pauses for two seconds, and says dryly, “gladiator of the new age, Zhao Yunlan I have faith in you.”

Shen stutters, “You... you told your mum...”

“I told my mum that I love you till the sky crumbles and the earth shatters into splinters. If she agrees, she would have another son, so two sons in total, but if she doesn’t, she would lose a son, and then she won’t have any left.” Zhao says pompously, “My mum is not stupid, she can do the math, don’t you worry.”

Da Qing very ruthlessly takes the wraps off him, “Drop the act, you would never dare speak to the empress like that... Professor Shen you see flour on his body right, he must have kneeled down to his mum in the kitchen... two days ago he even made sure that his dad wasn’t coming home today, what a puny wimp.”

Zhao is speechless.

Mother... fucking...

Shen doesn’t know what to say for a moment. After some time, he says softly, “You’re really...”

Really what? He doesn’t say. The sentence ends in an ever softer sigh.

Eventually, Da Qing breaks the ambiguous and embarrassing silence. It’s tired of their sluggishly irresolute relationship, and says bluntly, “Oh right, Old Zhao, let me ask you something, do you know Old Chu’s shackle of virtue expires today?”

“Ah?” Zhao hesitates, and a moment later he comes to, “Has it been three hundred years? Then what did he say? Is he leaving SIU? But either way it’s a good...”

“Thing” hasn’t come out, and Da Qing interrupts, “Good your ass, Hell doesn’t let him take it off.”

Zhao frowns, "Why not?"

"How would I know, some nonsense like 'not enough virtue'. It's not like they have a clear index, who knows how virtue is measured, and how much is enough; after all, they call the shots."

Shen asks, "How come? Chu is wearing a shackle of virtue?"

"Uh." Da Qing says, "Sometimes the Guardian Order is short-handed, and the Guardian will take in a prisoner from Hell, as some form of rehabilitation I guess."

Shen nods, and explains with a somewhat discontent expression, "This is inevitable. Most prisoners in Hell are small ghosts and spirits, and are not particularly useful. As for those with actual power, unless they hand themselves in, it is not so easy for Hell to capture them. It has been Hell's habit to extend the duration of the shackles of virtue; when this happens, they usually add one or two centuries more."

Zhao doesn't say anything. His frown deepens.

After a series of events, Zhao's grudge against Hell is not news, it's just that the time for turning against them has yet to come. Zhao is no longer a naive teenager, he is well aware of all the messed up plotting and scheming, but so long as everyone's goal is generally the same, some level of underhand dueling is not a concern.

But lately the other side has been intervening in quite a lot of matters, though Zhao doesn't say it, deep inside he is vexed.

Then, Shen asks, "Why is Chu wearing a shackle of virtue, could you tell me?"

"I only know roughly what happened, but not the details," Zhao replies, "you should ask Da Qing."

Da Qing sits in the back seat, cat eyes gazing towards Shen... it knows that Shen must be a powerful figure, but exactly how powerful is uncertain. Not even Zhao can explain all the unscrupulous, unwritten rules of Hell, how come Shen seems to know them inside and out?

This has Da Qing hesitating for a long while before it says laggardly, "Chu's cultivation is the path of the undead, Professor Shen must have realised as much?"

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“Initially, he was pointed on to this path by a sage. You could call it fate, or fortune. But he did not become one of his disciples... and this is not peculiar either; the undead are mostly eccentric and deviant. Chu is a good apple in the bunch; their kind usually struggle to communicate with anyone, which is why most think they are devilish and foul creatures. All those years ago, Chu somehow stumbled into their kind, and he was not aware of a lot of rules and taboos.”

“Professor Shen is a crouching savant, so you must be aware that the foundation of the undead’s cultivation is their tombs. If they have yet to reach a certain level of competence, and their tombs are destroyed, then so would their spiritual essence be damaged. All life is judged by karma. Sabotaging another’s cultivation with no good reason will be met with rightful vengeance, and that aligns with the conscience of the Heavens and no-one can intervene.” Da Qing embraces its precious little dried fish snacks, and says stately with a wiggling tail, “Once, someone was chasing after a cricket into a mass grave, and dug up Chu’s tomb looking for it. In rage of not finding it, they then burned down Chu’s grave. Fortunately, Chu had already passed the Gates of Hell and was on his way to the Doorway to Heaven. He was no longer afraid of the sun and could walk freely out of his grave. So although his grave was demolished, his body was not harmed.”

“No wonder Chu is always so on edge, he is even worse than me,” this seems to be the first time Zhao has heard of this, “I thought it was just because he is an undead. He deals with the dead every day; he is alright though when nothing gets in his way, but if he is mad he will bite anyone’s head off... so what did he do to that person? Cut up the stomach and ate all the insides? Swallowed in whole?”

“Hung up to dry, then gobbled down like bacon.” Da Qing says, “Normally, it would be considered that person’s own fault, and no-one would intervene. But the problem was that the tomb vandal was merely a kid. He was a spoilt one from a wealthy family, and when he did that, he was one day and a half from being seven.”

Zhao doesn’t quite understand here, “Eh, why does it matter that he was not yet seven?”

Shen explains softly, “Small fairies that have yet to complete their cultivation fear young children below the age of seven the most. If they’re hurt by adults they can seek revenge, but kids are innocent, and the saying goes that ‘Heaven chastises not the juvenile, but only accredits rectitude’. So if they are killed by impish kids, they can only succumb to their fate. And if any dares to hurt them, it would be a serious sin. His case had been decided three hundred years ago, and closed cases cannot be re-opened, otherwise I...”

Otherwise, the Ghost Slayer has the power to negotiate his release, perhaps.

“What can I say, Old Chu is really...” Zhao doesn’t really know what to say.

When it comes to cultivation, it is inherently against the Heavens. Only one in a million would ever succeed. There is want of talent, diligence and luck; especially luck.

If it were Zhao, though he must have thought that the kid was a brat, all he would have done was maybe cast a nightmare to scare him a little. After all, no injury or death was caused, he would not have held a grudge against a six-year-old... "Heaven chastises not the juvenile" is a rule with good reason. Does a young infant understand right from wrong? Cultivating fairies can avoid them; play dead, or camouflage. It's not difficult to hide from kids. As for the ones that really cannot be avoided, perhaps it is karma, perhaps it is a set-up, or perhaps, as the old saying goes, "the Heavens determine all".

Unfortunately, Chu is as narrow-minded as can be, and when he is out for revenge, he will not let the Heavens stop him.

Indeed, fate is inexorable as it is insidious.

Zhao's gaze freezes... certainly fate in the Heavens is inescapable, but since when did orders from Hell become the same?

He takes out his phone and hurls it on to the back seat; he says to Da Qing, "Call Chu."

First attempt, Chu hangs up.

Zhao says blandly, "Try again."

By the third call, Chu turns off his phone.

Zhao hits the brakes on the side of the road. He takes out a Guardian Order from his wallet, and rapidly scribbles a few words on to the talisman... "Meet me at No. 4 Bright Avenue before midnight". Then, he folds it into a paper crane.

Before he can send it out, a traffic officer knocks on the window, "Hey, what's going on, why is your car parked here?"

Zhao bends down and puts on an agonised pretence, "Sorry, I have a cramp in my legs. I need a minute, just one minute."

He stealthily wipes his palm on the car door, and the paper crane in his hand sublimates into a swirl of smoke, vanishing in the air.

Afterwards, Zhao does not head back to his place. While the sky is not too dark, he drives to their new place near Dragon City University.

The place is only one street away from the backyard of the university. It's a garden villa with a unique architectural style. Zhao takes out a bunch of keys from a small storage

compartment in the car, carefully takes off one set, and hands it to Shen, "I know you don't need keys to get inside, but let this be a formality."

Shen is stunned. His hand inadvertently tightens, grasping the keys.

Zhao grabs his hand and pulls him forward, "The walls and ceiling works of our place are basically done. They started work on the floors before the New Year, so it must be quite messy now, but give it one more week and it'll probably be finished. You can then move your stuff here, put what you use often at my place; then after January, we'll move in together... come on, the lift is this way."

His palm is warm and dry. Shen feels as though his heart is dipped in water; aching, softening and swelling.

There are only four floors: one flat per floor. The car park is in the basement, with elevator access; there are still some renovation debris in the elevator.

But inside the apartment, natural lighting is ample. Even at sunset, the afterglow shines through and delineates grubby sundries on the floor with golden contours. From the window, one side is the lush view of Dragon City University, and the other side is an artificial creek. Though the water is sucked away in winter, stains left by the running river is still visible on the river-side stone statues.

Zhao says, "As the saying goes, a wife deserves a golden house. But I don't have that much money, if I build a house out of gold I'll probably be investigated for corruption. You will have to settle for this first, when I earn more money we will build a better one."

Then, he turns around, all smiles, "The master bedroom is in the south, it has a balcony; you can pick one from the other rooms to be your working room."

Shen's gaze sinks deep with a few millennia of repressed longing and affection, so effortlessly ignited by his words. Fervour intensifies to the extreme, and awakens inexplicably sadistic desires within Shen; he wants to lock him in an embrace and crush his flesh and bones into dust in his palm.

But Shen knows that he is reluctant to even touch a strand of hair.

Of course, there is always a third wheel, there is always some insolent cat who likes to exert its sense of presence. It is a feline victory that the two lovebirds have been prevented from getting too cosy on the messy floor.

Before Shen can say anything, Da Qing bounces on to the window sill and announces at the top of its voice, "I want a guest bedroom! I want a suspended cat bed! Swing style!"

“Fuck off,” Zhao says with no regard, “suspended your fat ass, can you manage to jump up with all that weight? Let the people downstairs have their peace... besides, I didn’t ask you, don’t you see I want some alone time here, keep your dog nose out of my business, remember that you’re a cat!”

“My jumping power is just fine, and I’m much faster than you. You’re the stupid dog, you blind guy!”

Zhao doesn’t bat an eye, “Fat fuq.”

All this talk of weight problems have gotten Da Qing quite mad, it pounces on to Zhao’s shoulder and runs its claws through his hair.

“I will let you know what a fat guy can do!”

“Fuck, you messed up my hairstyle, you’re a dead fat fuq!”

Man and cat rapidly get into a chaotic row.

Shen slowly sighs, and leans against the window. Afterglow warms his body, and even his forever-pale face is beginning to warm up. He quietly watches the bustling living room, and inadvertently smiles.

At this moment, a black shadow emerges in his sleeve. Shen’s smile wears away; frowning, he flickers his fingers and the black smoke turns into a letter. Shen opens the letter, and it reads, “Black clouds have emerged in the northwest of the Thirty Three Skies. It’s an evil omen. Requesting Your Honour’s prompt return.”

Shen crushes the letter into a ball and seizes it in his palm.

“Yunlan,” he suddenly says, which catches Zhao and Da Qing’s attention, “I have some urgent matter, I need to go. If you’re free during holiday go home to spend time with your parents. Have them take care of you so that I don’t have to worry.”

Zhao frowns, “What is it?”

“I don’t know yet. My puppet delivered a letter from Hell, black clouds in the Thirty Three Skies; a big storm is coming. No matter what it is I must go.” Shen gently pinches his frowning brows.

“Black clouds?” Zhao is stunned.

Shen mistakenly thinks that Zhao doesn’t understand, and explains, “Normal clouds never reach the Thirty Three Skies. There are only two types of clouds up there: auspicious ones glowing with a purple aura, or ominous ones in sheer darkness.”

Da Qing licks its paws, "It's been a long time since black clouds last appeared. From what I know, it was eight hundred years ago when black clouds were last seen up in the Thirty Three Skies."

Zhao asks sensitively, "What was the cause that time?"

Da Qing is puzzled, "How would I know?"

Shen is speechless. He inadvertently avoids eye contact.

Zhao is almost becoming the god of reading people... especially someone who is bad at hiding their feelings, like Shen. He can't help but ask, "Is it related to ghost face? Was it him as well last time? Who is he really, why is he so powerful?"

Da Qing is even more puzzled, "Ghost face? Who the hell is this ghost face?"

The slightest tinge of redness from the sunset vanishes from Shen's face.

Zhao can't bear seeing him like this; he glares at Da Qing with warning. Then he gives up questioning, "Then go, be careful. I will wait for you at home, come back soon."

Shen can't say much since Da Qing is here. He gazes at Zhao longingly; then within three steps, he vanishes into a cloud of black smoke.

Zhao walks on to the balcony, and looks up into the sky; the afterglow is greying out. He lights a cigarette.

Da Qing jumps on to the fence, and asks, "Do you really know Professor Shen's background?"

Zhao silently nods.

Da Qing's head tilts to one side, "What are you worried about?"

"A lot." Zhao lets out a ring of smoke, and squints his eyes in the mist, "Hey, Da Qing, let me ask you something. How come there is this one person I just can't find anything about no matter how many classics I go through?"

"Who?"

Zhao hesitates, then says, "Lord Kunlun."

Da Qing opens its mouth, then after while, it closes it. Then it sighs and walks towards Zhao on the fence, "Plants and animals are not like humans, we are not born with intelligence. We need to be immensely fortunate to even have the chance to set foot on the path of cultivation, and only with much experience do we begin to understand

humans. Lord Kunlun was around in the times of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. When Mount Buzhou collapsed he was already accorded as a deity. Then afterwards he disappeared, and till now it has been at least five thousand years. Yes, I was there too, but I was like an ignorant infant. Do you remember things that happened when you were a baby? To tell the truth, until you left me, I was only a lazy little cat. You overestimate my cultivation.”

Zhao lights a cigarette impatiently.

Da Qing lowers its head, and whispers, “If I know, I won’t lie to you. We’re different from humans, we’re stupid, we’re naive even after centuries. I only have one owner, and I only need you.”

Zhao flickers some ashes, and suddenly says, “Actually, I saw a portrait of Lord Kunlun somewhere.”

Da Qing looks up.

Zhao doesn’t continue, but Da Qing understands from his expression.

“Little cat,” Zhao is silent for a while, then he blows out smoke, “for how long did you remain a little cat... what place on earth can impede the growth of a cat?”

Mount Kunlun was the origin of all the deities, as well as the resting place of many gods and devils. Forever shrouded in white snow, on the mountain sprouts a flower that blossoms every millennium. From the dawn of time till now, it is still just a thick branch, but every growth ring marks an era of countless tales.

In that instant, Da Qing grows more and more uneasy... ever since Zhao said “Lord Kunlun”. It can’t help but feel like an invisible hand is pushing everyone towards a destined direction.

Just like all those years ago when Pangu ended Chaos, when Gonggong demolished Buzhou, when the man from Qi Guo apprehended the sky collapsing, when Kuafu halted at Yuan Yu, when Houtu dissipated in the depths of Hell...

Da Qing has goosebumps all over, and its fur stands right up.

All things wax and wane. In the past and at present, in only five thousand years, countless deities have risen and fallen like ants; no different from humans. Nothing can always remain on top in this world.

Did Pangu really put an end to Chaos? Or did it merely assume another form?

Da Qing’s emerald eyes exude unspeakable terror. Most memories from its kitten days are gone, and yet, some memories have found their way deep into its flesh and bones.

Lord Kunlun, the Primordial God of the Mountains, not less divine than the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors; why did he vanish and never came back for some thousands of years?

Da Qing vaguely remembers the green gown, of the colour of mountains in a distance, exuding the aroma of new snow and bamboos between the sleeves. Bellowing laughter marked with rowdiness, warm hands tenderly lifting its body up... could he really be...

At this moment, a shrieking screech of a bird pierces from not far away. Da Qing and Zhao look towards the same direction. Even in winter, the area near the university is the most replete with vegetation, and many birds reside here. Countless crows soar into the sky after that shriek; all the crows in the city flap their wings and almost cover the entire sky.

Crows foretell calamities.

Zhao asks a serious question amidst the crying crows and howling wind, "I want to tell you something, can you keep a secret?"

Da Qing turns around cautiously, and looks at him, "Nothing comes out of this mouth, tell me."

Zhao says carelessly, "Shen Wei is the Ghost Slayer. I'm worried about him."

Da Qing stumbles as if having a stroke and falls straight from the window sill.

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Da Qing embarrassingly rolls on to the floor and pounces up like a fat meatball. Its first reaction is a loud roar coming at Zhao, "I can't believe you have the gall!"

Inattentively, Zhao replies with "uh".

"You... you you you....!" Da Qing is lost for words. It has been roaming over the world for centuries, and it has seen countless strange phenomena. Yet, this is the first time it realises what is meant by "love will find a way".

Now it seems apparent why King Zhou of Shang killed to please Daji, why King You of Zhou pranked his army, or why Emperor Xuanzong of Tang abandoned the affairs of his empire... these foolish men will do anything in the face of beauty!

Da Qing is flustered and petrified. Then, it asks in a feeble voice, "Then... you... what... how far have you gone?"

Zhao rubs his nose, "Not far, we've been in bed together, but we only slept; he is shy, he never let me touch him."

Da Qing is left speechless.

In bed... together... shy... didn't let him touch.....

These words are like a bombing raid; explosions echo around Da Qing and its soul is bombarded with force even greater than thunder and lightning from the Nine Heavens.

At an instant, images of Zhao and Professor Shen together flash across Da Qing's mind. Every memory punctures an endless abyss in its brain; all of a sudden, this poor black cat experiences some sort of otherworldly wonder and philosophical lament... motherfucker, is there a worse cat owner in this world than Zhao Yunlan?

Da Qing struggles to extend its neck beyond the thick layer of meat, and stares at Zhao for long with deference, admiration and incredulity. Then, truest words have never been said: "What a pervert."

The black cat bounces back on to the window sill, but with a weakness in its legs, "Do you know what kind of person the Ghost Slayer is?"

Zhao flickers some ashes, "That's what I want to ask you."

"I don't know either." Da Qing gets serious, "Ever since the beginning, all the deities of the Heavens and all the fairies of the earth, I have seen them all and I know them all. But the Ghost Slayer is a different story. Do you know how serious this is?"

Zhao is not surprised. He saw Shen's painting... if he has seen Lord Kunlun, then he must be from a time when Da Qing was still ignorant.

"Just tell me what you know."

"Do you know Houtu?" Da Qing asks.

Zhao hesitates, and then says, "According to the Classic of Mountains and Seas, Gonggong gave birth to Houtu, so she is a descendent of the Flame Emperor. In the Summons of the Soul, Houtu is said to be the goddess in charge of Hell. In some later

folk tales, 'Houtu' is usually seen as the counterpart of 'Huangtian', so her status seems to be even higher... in some legends, Houtu is thought to be Nuwa."

"More or less." Da Qing says, "When Gonggong destroyed Mount Buzhou, and Nuwa repaired the Pillar of the Sky, she then turned into soil, and separated Yin and Yang; that marked the beginning of the order of the universe. Some say that the Ghost Slayer was born from pure dark energy, and some say that he was born in the depths of Hell.

But the dreariness of Hell is only the imagination of humans, this so-called dark energy really has nothing to do with Hell... after all, when the Ghost Slayer was around, Hell was not yet formed, why say he was born some thousands of miles underground?"

"So you're saying that the Ghost Slayer wasn't born in the depths of Hell?"

"Perhaps somewhere nearby. But I think he is only working with Hell for a mutual partnership, they are not actually related." Da Qing says, "I can't say for sure about incidents that are too ancient in time, I can only hazard a guess. Most say that Houtu is the earth, but the true earth was formed when Pangu struck with an axe and destroyed Chaos. Just think, Nuwa repaired the Heavens, she finished her job, why did she have to turn into Houtu and become one with the earth? Was she trying to cover up the true earth? Whatever is down there, it must be somewhat related to the Ghost Slayer."

The cigarette in Zhao's hand is almost burnt out, but he does not notice.

Da Qing sighs, "I can only think of so much. These things are too ancient; this water is way too deep, and you... how did you get involved with him? You really just can't keep it in your pants can you?"

Perhaps it's even more tragic that he hasn't even gotten the chance to get his pants off...

"Too late." Zhao puts out the cigarette and hurls it on the floor among the debris, "You're telling me this way too late."

Da Qing says grumpily, "That's because you didn't tell me who he was when you first started seducing him! Otherwise I would have stopped you no matter what it took..."

"No, when I say you're too late," Zhao interrupts, "I mean you're late by a few thousand years."

The black cat stares at him blankly. For one moment, it seems like Zhao is remembering something. But then, Zhao lights yet another cigarette, and stands by the window; the afterglow casts a long shadow.

Da Qing accompanies him while he finishes a whole packet of cigarette. With a whole floor full of cigar butts and an empty pocket, he signals Da Qing to jump on to his shoulder, and walks out.

Da Qing asks, "Where to?"

Zhao says with a cold face, "No. 4 Bright Avenue, I'll see Chu first, and then meet with someone from Hell... my people will not be taken advantage of by anyone."

The day workers of No. 4 Bright Avenue have just left. Chu is not here yet. Zhao takes out some dried fish and milk for Da Qing, and enters the library.

He takes out a pair of glasses, puts them on, and then sees Sang and Wang separating panickedly in the corner. Zhao says calmly, "Keep going, don't mind me."

Wang tsk-tsks, and hurriedly leaves.

Sang ruffles his own hair; he has a thick skin, and doesn't seem to feel embarrassed at all.

"Still need Kunlun?"

For some reason, Zhao's gaze is obscured by the lenses, and seems exceptionally cold. His nose seems even higher, and in these few days he seems to have gotten slimmer. His handsome profile appears somewhat unapproachable and withdrawn.

"No need, all the useful ones have been wiped by someone." Zhao's fingers run across the books on the shelves, "I want to find out... about Nuwa."

Sang hesitates.

"Nuwa creating humans and repairing the Heavens, Chiyu battling the Flame Emperor, Gonggong fighting Zhuanxu... I want all of it. I don't believe besides wiping out one person, they can even change the entire history." Zhao adjusts his glasses, and climbs up the ladder.

He crosses his legs, sitting high up on the steel ladder. One after another, he goes through every book he can find. Sang quietly awaits on the floor, and organises the books into a pile.

Most people would assume that someone like Zhao probably never reads anything decent, but his knowledge of ancient texts is exceptionally profound, and he reads at an exceptional speed. He can quickly finish a page as his fingers fly across it; the library is filled with the sound of turning pages.

Occasionally, Zhao would pause for a moment, put down the book, and massage his eyes with force; he would then chat with Sang very slowly.

"Mount Buzhou is the path to Heaven," Zhao gestures with his hands, and continues with a coarse and worn out voice, "as it is recorded in history, Gonggong and Zhuanxu fought for power; in the end, Gonggong was defeated, and in fury he rode a godly dragon, and destroyed Mount Buzhou."

Sang listens effortfully, and slowly nods.

"I don't buy this." Zhao stares at Sang, "The Flame Emperor battled Chiyou for countless years, the sky, the earth and the universe were in utter chaos, but Mount Buzhou was never affected; Pangu hacked open the sky and the earth with an axe, but Mount Buzhou was still intact. Even if the godly dragon was born with godly powers, would it really be enough to knock down Mount Buzhou?"

Sang is used to ignoring all unnecessary adjectives and nouns. After a while, he says with a weird accent, "If this is impossible, someone must have caused it."

"Destroying the path to Heaven," Zhao's finger lingers on the ancient book, "Huangtian, Houtu... not counting the ones that have fallen, or the ones that have gone missing, then we're only left with..."

Sang looks up into his deep gaze.

"After Mount Buzhou collapsed, Nuwa repaired the collapsing sky with a giant boulder, and then transformed into Houtu, and dissipated into Hell." Zhao's eyebrows are tightly locked, and he continues, "Mount Buzhou was connected to the sky, but not to the earth... Hell was not yet formed at that time. So Nuwa repaired the sky and created the earth... the sky had a hole and was raining incessantly, but what about the hole in the earth? The earth... the ground... soil..."

Zhao gradually begins to whisper, and then he suddenly says, "Hold on, give me the passage about Nuwa creating humans again."

Sang hands him the book, and Da Qing sneaks in, saying to Zhao, "Old Chu is here."

Zhao puts away the book, climbs down the ladder, takes off the glasses and hands them to Sang, and pats him on the shoulder.

He is about to leave, but Sang says, "At that time, it was orderless, everyone wanted more bow... power. Moun... you said the path to the sky, if it broke, maybe someone, wanted to end..."

He can't think of the appropriate word; he gestures with his hands, and Zhao instantly understands... he is trying to say "war". Zhao nods, and leaves. All of a sudden, he has a new perspective.

The universe was first created; it was a time when countless deities fought with each other. The Flame Emperor defeated Chiyou, and gave rise to a new order. Mankind flourished after Nuwa breathed life into figurines made of clay; thus, something called power was born. No matter who it was, perhaps knocking down Mount Buzhou was an attempt to put an end to the old order, and make a new one; to return the world to... back to the very beginning, when it was a peaceful time?

Zhao recalls his weird dream. Who was talking to him in the dream? What did he mean?

Chu isn't alone, he has a little tail... Guo is dressed like a ball of cotton, and his neck is wrapped up in at least two scarves, covering half his face. His look is that of a new generation Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

And so it turns out, when Chu vanished, Guo thought that he must not fail the mission that Da Qing gave him. And so he went searching for him tirelessly, forcing himself to ask strangers for directions.

His constipated expression and inarticulate words resembled a foreigner learning Chinese.

After over half an hour, cold and red-nosed Guo was luckily brought to Chu's doorstep by a kind woman.

When she left, Guo didn't dare knock on the door. He circled around in front of Chu's door, and couldn't hear a thing. He couldn't and didn't want to leave, but he didn't dare knock on the door when he thought of how annoyed Chu was at him. Until Chu received the Guardian Order and went outside, only then did he realise a frozen, foolish child has been sitting at his doorstep for long, and so he brought him along.

The atmosphere in the office is stiff. Chu sits at the office desk, one hand in his pocket, and the other fooling around with Zhao's lighter. He glares at the desk with a menacing expression. Da Qing walks back on forth on the side quietly. The SIU office is only filled with the noise of Guo's sniffing nose.

Zhao comes out of the wall with a book, and Chu looks up slightly, "What am I here for?"

Zhao sits across, studies Chu's expression, and says, "No small talk, I just have one question, are you planning on leaving?"

Chu looks down; doesn't say a thing.

Zhao says coldly, "Take out your hand, I can smell what's inside!"

Chu snickers, and takes out a small piece of bone from his pocket. The end of it sparkles with a faint glow of indigo; the bone is hollow, with four holes on its side. This is a bone whistle, used to control zombies and other undeads. Because manipulating a dead person's corpse is disrespectful, the bone whistle has always been considered a kind of dark magic.

Guo sneezes. Chu glares at him, and says slowly, "I think you should send this poor kid back first..."

Zhao ignores him, and says to Guo, "Little Guo, sit down... Da Qing, ask the kitchen to make him some Indowoad Root water."

“Tell me, what do you plan on doing?” Zhao pressures him, “You’re gonna take this stinky thing and go back into the soil to be your Zombie King? Forever trapped in the shackles of virtue, hiding in the shadows, and always running away from Hell?”

Chu’s face freezes, “Three hundred years ago, I didn’t know the rules. I broke the rules so I suffered the consequence, I didn’t complain for the past three hundred years... otherwise what can a few Hell Guards do to me? And now they just can’t get enough!”

“Extending the shackles of virtue is as expected, if other people can accept it, why can’t you?”

Chu deepens his voice, and spouts out one word after another, “I, am, not, other, people. Let me remind you, Zhao Yunlan, I willingly put on the shackles, but that doesn’t mean I admit I was wrong...”

Zhao interrupts furiously, “You have the audacity to mention the messed up things you did in the past?”

Chu slams on to the desk, “Yes, I said it, so what? I don’t regret it. If I went back in time, I would have still skinned that brat alive, I don’t mind another three hundred years of imprisonment! How are kids and adults any different? There are only two kinds of people: those I can kill, and those I can’t. After all, Chief Zhao, I’m not asking for trouble, they are coming for me. If three hundred years weren’t enough, then it will never be enough... I might as well then, it doesn’t matter how many times I do it. Kids better watch out for me, my bone whistle will dissolve their souls and turn them into small ghosts.”

Zhao slaps him across the face. Fast, precise, firm and loud. Chu’s face is knocked to one side.

Chu doesn’t seem to mind, but Guo anxiously leans back and falls off the chair.

The two men glare at each other with hostility. Da Qing growls softly. For a moment, it seems like they want to fight.

In that moment, a cloud of grey mist seeps in from the window, and rolls down Zhao’s shoulder and arm and turns into a letter.

It’s an urgent note from Shen: “The Hell Guard is coming, no matter what he asks you to do, don’t agree to it, wait for me to come back — Wei.”

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Zhao reads the note silently, and his cold and stern expression loosens up. Carefully, as he rarely is, he folds up the note and stores it safely inside his wallet, as if having received a love letter.

Chu glances at him, and gets up to leave. But before he can, three Guardian Orders fly from Zhao's hand with a tail of ember, soaring up and burning into a shackle, crashing down and locking on to Chu.

A tremendous force crushes Chu back on to the chair; he cannot move an inch now.

Chu's contract with the Guardian Order has yet to be discharged. No matter how powerful he is, he is still bound by this pact.

Zhao glances at him, and takes out a sound recorder. He hits playback: "Kids better watch out for me, my bone whistle will dissolve their souls and turn them into small ghosts."

Sounding from the machine, the man's voice is horrifyingly cold and excruciatingly coarse.

"Do you hear yourself? Is this something a sane person would say?" Zhao asks without an expression.

Chu's eyes sparkle. But the next moment, he obstinately turns away, and says defiantly, "I am not a person."

Guo mutters, "Chu... Brother Chu, don't be mad."

Chu peeks at him coldly, not saying a word.

Guo hesitates for a long while before cautiously walking walking and nudging at his clothes. He whispers with the voice of a mosquito, "I... I think you... you don't believe that at all, I didn't understand, but I know Brother Chu is a good person, you won't do bad things for no reason..."

Zhao humphs, and leans back on the chair. He flickers the lighter, lights a cigarette, and turns towards Chu angrily, "Put the saddle on the right horse, Chu. Even a little kid like Guo understands that, but all you do when you're pissed off is fuck everyone. I really feel ashamed for you."

Chu glares at him with pitch black eyes.

"What are you looking at? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? I don't have time to deal with you right now... Little Guo, push him into my office, lock the door and keep an eye on him. There is a single bed in there, if you're tired you can lay down and have a rest."

Guo immediately asks, "Then what about Brother Chu?"

"Him?" Zhao glances at Chu, "He can sit, give him time to think things through and wake up."

He picks up a tea cup, and stirs the cold tea. He continues, "I really wanna splash you a face full of tea."

Guo pushes Chu on the office chair. When he gets to the door of the office, he looks back towards Zhao, who waves, and so he pushes Chu all the way into the office, and closes the door lightly.

Zhao rests his legs on the desk, puts a book on his knees and starts reading.

The legends related to Nuwa are scattered to different sources. The book he has is the Book of Primeval Secrets, in which there is a chapter on Nuwa. It was probably written by a saint from the Song dynasty. The author is anonymous, and the original version cannot be found; this is an audio-video version from modern times.

The beginning quotes from the Imperial Reader, the passage about Nuwa creating humans: "Legend has it that at the dawn of time, humans did not yet exist. Nuwa crafted men out of clay, yet the quest of creation proved onerous and toilsome, thus the goddess led a rope through the soil, and from the earth haled up innumerable people."

Then the author makes a small note to supplement: "Humans, blessed with five sensory organs, all take the form of empress Nuwa herself. They are born with the power of speech from the soil of the earth. The winds from Heaven feed three eternal fires on each and every one, the soil from the earth befalls three eternal evils on each and every one. They are gifted with intellect but are unclean. From infancy to senescence, they are born at dawn and perish at dusk. Nuwa pitied them, and took the role of matchmaker. The goddess married them in pairs and thus the species flourished for centuries."

Zhao takes a pen from the desk and underlines "the winds from Heaven feed three eternal fires on each and every one, the soil from the earth befalls three eternal evils on each and every one". Then, he flips over, and begins reading the part on "repairing the Heavens".

"Huainanzi reads: In primeval times, four pillars collapsed, nine continents fissured. The sky ceased to shelter, the earth ceased to bear. The world was devoured by inextinguishable flames and irrepressible torrents. Beasts preyed on humans, raptors snatched the decrepit. So Nuwa repaired the Heavens with five multicoloured stones, cleaved the four legs of the Ao to replace the four pillars, killed the black dragon to free

the people, and burnt reed to halt the flood. Hereinafter, the Heavens were complete, the pillars were intact; the flood was dried out, the land was at peace; the monster had been slayed, and the people had been saved.”

There is another footnote which reads: “The longevous Ao bestowed its legs, and empress Nuwa was eternally grateful. She granted it extravagant garbs as fins. The four pillars held up the universe. In the northwest of the skies, Kunlun declaimed: Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen; body, not yet lived but dead; soul, not yet burnt but dispersed. Such are the impossible, thus sealed where unreachable, and named the Four Mystics. The sky shall not collapse, the earth shall not crumble, and the Four Mystics shall not come forth. Henceforward, the world shall be at peace.”

Zhao strokes Da Qing’s fur, and says quietly, “It says here that human’s evil come from the soil, and then Nuwa used the Ao’s legs to hold up the sky. Kunlun spoke of the four pillars... mountains don’t speak, so here ‘Kunlun’ must be referring to Lord Kunlun... also, I have heard of these few lines before.”

“Where?”

“Under the Pillar of Nature.” Zhao says, “If ‘the impossible’ is referring to the Four Mystical Artifacts, then does that mean when all four are gathered, ‘the impossible’ will be completed, and the four sky pillars will be reachable?”

Da Qing goes around in circles round his hand, and mumbles, “What kind of mess is all this, I’m getting a headache just listening to it.”

Zhao ignores it, and continues along his train of thought, “Five multicoloured stones to repair the sky, then if I’m right, perhaps the four pillars are in fact meant to ground the earth... I think it all makes sense now; ghost face wants to use the Four Mystical Artifacts to destroy the four pillars.”

Zhao touched the dried fish snacks, and an aroma lingers on his fingers. Although Da Qing doesn’t want to appear too desperate, it really can’t resist the temptation. It sniffs incessantly among Zhao’s fingers, and asks, “Who is this ghost face that y’all talk about?”

Zhao briefly summarises what happened at the Pillar of Nature, then, with a stern expression, he says, “Ghost face wears a mask, but I think I know what he looks like.”

“It can’t be...” Da Qing wonders.

“Probably looks almost identical to Shen.” Zhao sighs softly, “This guy, he keeps way too much to himself. He is kind to everyone, but not to himself; who knows why he is an enemy of himself, I really worry about him...”

Da Qing looks up, “What?”

Zhao looks down at the black cat. Then all of a sudden, he takes down his legs from the desk, sits upright, and whispers, "Someone's here."

The sound of wooden clappers come from far away and approach nearer and nearer. A cold and murky aura begin to manifest, and the northwesterlies attack the windows with a crackling noise. Zhao calmly takes out some incense from the drawer, lights them up, and fixes them in the soil in a flower pot. Then, he takes out an ashtray and burns some paper money inside. Smoke rises; he puts away the book, and pours himself a hot cup of tea.

Having learnt their lesson last time, the intruder stands at a distance outside the door, and says, "My apologies for intruding, Guardian, may I come in?"

Zhao adjusts his tensed up expression, and clears his throat, "Please come in."

The door to the SIU office opens, and the visitor smells the aroma of incense and burning paper money... even ghosts care about money; the visitor smiles, and greets politely, "The Guardian is too kind."

Zhao sees who the visitor is, and is stunned. After a while, he stands up, and says with surprise, "What brought you here, Your Honour?"

The judge remains his friendly composure, not like someone sent by Hell, but perhaps like a kind matchmaker.

The two chitchat about unimportant things back and forth, and then they both take their seats; amiable on the outside, sly on the inside. Da Qing bounces on to Zhao's lap, and its tail wraps around his wrist. It glares at the judge with emerald eyes, as if in a guarding posture.

The judge finally gets serious, "Sorry for disturbing late at night. I have a request, hope that the Guardian can help for the sake of the people."

"Oh please," Zhao waves his hand, "don't flatter me. I'm just an ordinary human; I know a little magic, and it's an honour that you see me as the icing, but I'm really no cake. I don't know what to do if you flatter me like that. Go on, if it's something that I can do, I will try my best."

The judge sits still and sighs. He wants to wait for Zhao to start asking questions, but Zhao seems to be utterly oblivious, and keeps drinking tea. After a while, the judge can't help it, and asks, "Did the Guardian notice the crows in the evening?"

Zhao puts on a surprised face, "No. I was watching television with my mum, I really didn't pay attention."

The judge is speechless.

Zhao asks with utmost innocence, "What about the crows?"

The judge knows that he is playing dumb. He really didn't want to come talk to the Guardian. For starters, the judge is one of the few who knows about Zhao Yunlan, and he would really prefer not to anger this mighty god. Not only that, but the mighty god has the thickest skin possible, and is as sly as a fox. He has three godly skills: being shameless, stalling, and going off-topic... in short, the stuff of the judge's nightmares.

"Crows are always bad omen. Black clouds are forming in the northwest. Someone is not afraid of divine punishment, and has set up an altar at the peak of Mount Kunlun, attempting to steal one soul from every living person."

Zhao is stunned, and asks, "Every single person? There are billions of people on earth, is he strong enough to lift them all?"

Met with silence, Zhao smiles, and says, "I'm confused, do explain. Who is on that snowy Tibetan mountain, what did they build, and what for?"

The judge takes out a wanted poster, Zhao glances forward to a familiar face... ghost face.

"He is the king of the foulest creatures from the filthiest place in the world. Long story short, Nuwa sealed him in the depths of Hell in primordial times. Gradually, the seal has loosened, and he managed to escape. The Guardian understands, I won't beat around the bush with you... I'd say eight tenths of his power is still under the seal of goddess Nuwa, if we go up against him together we still have a chance, but if he breaks away from the seal completely..."

Zhao pretends not to understand, and asks, "Ow, that's terrible. A filthy creature sealed by Nuwa, so it must be different from other evil creatures? Which one is more powerful?"

The judge has nothing to say.

Zhao continues with enthusiasm, "Then what does he need so many souls for?"

The judge catches a breath, and says, "He is going after the Ink Brush of Virtue. Every person carries a soul and on it good and bad virtue is recorded, from past lives and the present, red as good and black as evil. If he collects the souls and gathers them at the peak of Mount Kunlun, he will get the Ink Brush of Virtue. We cannot let that happen, otherwise..."

Zhao suddenly interrupts, "Some time ago, a small raven fairy lured me with a fake Ink Brush of Virtue, and hurt my eyes. Now my vision is still not perfect, I see shadows all the time, and when I look at you you seem to have gained weight. Now that I think about it, 'someone' tricked me intentionally, didn't they?"

The judge's heart pounds faster, but no words come out of his mouth. He looks at Zhao who stares back with a mocking look. The raven tribe feeds on decayed corpses, and has always been oppressed by Hell. That the ravens are sent by Hell is a no-brainer; the judge can't help but wonder which idiot came up with that idea.

Sweat dribbles as the judge tries to think on his feet.

"The Four Mystical Artifacts has been scattered across the universe for so long, but Hell never thought about them, never thought to search for them or to keep them safe. Now that something has happened, then you tell me it's serious, and leave me with this last-minute mess... that's not very reasonable, is it?"

The judge squeezes out a smile, "Well... this is negligence on our part..."

"Negligence?" Zhao raises his eyebrows, "Why do I feel like it's an abuse of power?"

The judge really is on tenterhooks.

Zhao knocks on the desk, and his face turns dark, "Let's get to the point, what do you want me to do?"

The judge says, "Will the Guardian please lead me up to Mount Kunlun to put an end to his plans."

Zhao says calmly, "Why me? I stay indoors all day, I'm no backpacker, I don't even know which side to enter Mount Kunlun, you're asking me to lead the way?"

Finally a response that the judge foresaw. He has an answer prepared, and speaks with much better fluency, "The Guardian might not know, but the Guardian Order is in fact a piece of wood from the holy tree on top of Mount Kunlun. That holy tree was planted by Pangu the creator, and has lived for as long as the universe has. The peak of Mount Kunlun is a forbidden place, and only this can serve as a pass."

Zhao points towards the photo on the wanted poster, "Then this... 'king of evil', how did he get up there? Through the backdoor? Don't tell me he is Pangu's brother-in-law."

"I would not disrespect the divinity," the judge says cautiously, "but this evil creature was born beneath Hell, next to the primeval tree of virtue, which was conjoined with the holy tree of Mount Kunlun. Indeed, he is somewhat related to Kunlun, so..."

Zhao continues with half a smile, "Then summoning the Ink Brush of Virtue on top of Mount Kunlun is also related to that tree?"

The judge is not sure what he means, and doesn't dare answer lightly.

Zhao says, "Beneath Hell... hey, isn't that quite near where the Ghost Slayer lives?"

The judge hesitates, and answers ambivalently, "You could say that."

"Oh," Zhao's face brightens up with a smile, but his eyes gaze coldly, "so the judge is implying that the Ghost Slayer is related to the evil creature."

The judge can't be sure whether he is really dumb or playing dumb now. He hesitantly scrutinises Zhao, but can't find any clues whatsoever.

They already gave him the black book, does he not know that Shen Wei is the Ghost Slayer?

The last time the Hell Guard came back, and said that being blind didn't stop him from fooling around with his lover; then... perhaps he doesn't know? Otherwise, how can the Ghost Slayer tolerate...

The judge calms himself down, nudges his beard, and wears a concealing smile, "I wouldn't dare speak of the great saints behind their backs, would I? The Guardian must be kidding."

Zhao looks at him, and starts searching in his pockets, "You want the Guardian Order? Hold on, let me find it for you."

The judge hastily waves, "No, no, we cannot touch the holy Guardian Order. The Guardian will have to come with us to Kunlun."

Zhao hesitates, and stares at the judge with an unclear purpose. His irises are black and bright, and his gaze pierces right through. The judge finds himself stuck with an arduous and fruitless task.