

Guardian Chapter: 71

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After a while, Zhao withdraws his pressurising glare, looks down and half-genuinely frowns. He asks nonchalantly, "Besides, I find this exceptionally strange, that you don't even dare touch the Guardian Order, and yet you recognise an ordinary human like me as the Guardian, why is that? You see, I have a big mouth and a thick skin, but I have really got no real talents, and my brain is not working well either."

The judge finds a rusty organ in his stomach squirming with pain, but rigidly squeezes out a smile, "That is not true."

Zhao suddenly leans forward, and says, "Don't tell me my ancestors are related to Kunlun. That's way too badass."

The judge is calling out for help deep inside.

Unfortunately, Zhao has no intent of letting him off easy, and keeps on yapping, "And boy has it been hectic the last six months, first the Sundial of Reincarnation, then the Pillar of Nature, and now the Ink Brush of Virtue, if the fourth one appears too we'll have the Four Winds. Do tell, where do the Four Artifacts even come from? So it seems the Ink Brush of Virtue is related to Kunlun. As for the Sundial, legend tells that it was crafted from the Stone of Reincarnation. When Nuwa created mankind, a pebble would form when every human was created, and soon the pebbles have gathered into a pillar piercing through the sky, threatening the three realms. Empress Nuwa made haste to collect the pebbles, turning them into a stone, which contained the limitless reincarnations of all mankind. As for the Pillar of Nature, Xuanwu belongs to water, so perhaps it's related to Fuxi? We're in deep water here, aren't we? I'm terrified just thinking about it."

The judge wipes off sweat, "My knowledge is limited, this is really..."

"Besides, a calamity that affects the Thirty Three Skies would definitely attract a good amount of formidable figures. Saving all living souls, what a tremendously virtuous deed, there must be many who would want to seize this opportunity. What's Hell's backup? The fairies? Cultivationists? Angels? The Ghost Slayer must be obliged to settle a problem that hits so close to home, is he not?" Zhao pauses for a moment, and glances towards the judge, "What can a wishy-washy jellyfish like me do? The only person I know is the Ghost Slayer. Don't tell me..."

The judge's heart sinks and skips a beat, as Zhao laughs lightly, and slowly says, "I'm just supposed to go and say hi and chitchat?"

The judge is terrified, and looks up abruptly to the same impenetrable and inexorable face.

For a moment, he believes the man sitting across might have figured him out, but there does not seem to be any discernible clues.

Da Qing's fur stands upright, and screeches with an unfriendly "meow" from the throat: it doesn't sound like that of a normal cat, but rather the roar of a tiger. It stands up on Zhao's legs, and reveals its razor-sharp claws; the bell on its neck quivers.

The judge seems to fear it, sitting back on to the chair. He looks up to Zhao, all smiles, "What is the Guardian trying to say..."

Zhao cannot be more relaxed: unfashionably leaning back on to the chair, "I'll tell you what I'm trying to say. I'm just an ordinary human, getting involved in such a perilous ordeal, what if something goes wrong, what if I don't get to see next year?"

"We swear to ensure the Guardian's safety."

Zhao sneers, "Can't even get into mountain on your own, how do you ensure my safety?"

"Well..."

"I'm bringing my own men, that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

The judge flinches.

Then, Zhao the bane puts on a look as if he had a toothache, and the judge can't help but feel like he is getting one too, as Zhao lets out a long sigh, "But I don't have enough backup, you see. Almost all my staff are nocturnal, the only exceptions are a little snake that still can't fully transform, a little cat less than a foot long, a useless trainee, and a selfie-obsessed geek..."

The judge can somewhat tell where he is going with this.

"We do have a Zombie King who is quite strong, except... oh, what a pity!"

The judge knows well between Chu's matter and the Ink Brush of Virtue, which is more important. Though Hell has made it a custom to keep postponing jail time, but it seems now that it wouldn't do them any good opposing Zhao, especially on something so trivial. So the judge compromises, "Mr Chu's time has been served, we only have some procedural matters to finish. Since the Guardian mentioned it, then I will issue the order first, he is free to go immediately."

“Ow,” Zhao hears his tone and seizes the opportunity to twist the knife deeper into the wound; he says with austerity, “and here I thought he did something terrible behind my back, I even locked him into the room... look at this mess, your people aren’t very efficient it seems; what a misunderstanding, those who don’t know the details might even think Hell is stalling on purpose.”

The judge is lost for words; he really wants to drop dead right in front of Zhao. He wonders what he has done to displease this troublesome Guardian, who seems to be toying with him all day: this game of trick or treat leaves the judge no time to catch a breath.

Zhao waves, feigns helplessness and takes out a piece of letter paper from his desk, and begins writing while he says, “Forget it, Old Chu and I are not on good terms, so I really don’t have enough backup right now. But this is an important matter, of course I won’t be the one who hampers it, I can’t bear this sin...”

The judge seems to be getting used to his torture. A breath is held in suspense; in a horror movie, if the sky is clear and bright, something menacing must be looming. The judge looks at Zhao with increasing anxiety.

Zhao continues, “I can’t go, but you won’t take the Guardian Order either, so I have come up with the perfect plan: find someone who dares to take it...”

The judge instantly has a bad feeling. He takes a look at the letter, and barely understands Zhao’s chaotic handwriting: “To the Ghost Slayer: take this letter as my person.”

The judge almost falls off the chair.

Hell is of course not too afraid to take the Guardian Order. This is nothing but a scheme of those ten ruling Hell: they thought that three of the Four Mystical Artifacts have emerged, the Sundial is with ghost face, the Pillar is nowhere to be found, and the Ghost Slayer naturally has no intention of handing it away. Who can say for sure that the Ghost Slayer will never try to do what ghost face is doing? If he turns, what will they do then?

There is no-one on Hell’s side who can stand up to those two mighty gods, so all they can think of is to use Zhao to threaten the Ghost Slayer.

But this Guardian is no average Joe, what goes on in his mind can almost qualify him for ascending to godhood, it’s no wonder trying to take advantage of him is virtually impossible, isn’t it? The judge feels like Zhao already knows everything they’re thinking, and he is only toying around with him.

He doesn't know exactly how much Zhao has figured out, or whether he has a plan that the Ghost Slayer also knows, but he simply can't handle this anymore; his face sinks, "What does the Guardian mean by this?"

Zhao says innocently, "Nothing really, does the judge think this is inappropriate?"

The judge stares at him coldly.

Zhao continues, acting surprised, "How come? Doesn't the Ghost Slayer come from Hell as well?"

Another question the judge can't answer.

After moments of painful silence, the judge finally understands what is meant by "to hide a lie, a thousand more are needed". He says rigidly, "That foul creature was born beneath Hell in front of the Primeval Tree of Virtue, and is somewhat related to the Ghost Slayer, so it might be inconvenient for him."

"Oh," Zhao's smirk wears down a little, and nods, "and here I thought the judge would stick by 'not talking about the great saints behind their backs', turns out beating around the bush gets us nowhere, though, wouldn't you agree? You worry about him, I can understand that... this is my being inconsiderate then."

He crumpled up the letter into a ball, "I will go with you."

The judge is knocked unconscious by this manna from Heaven.

The next moment, Zhao takes out his phone, and calls HR, "Hey, Wang Zheng, it's me, did you get my message? Uh, right, print a copy, bring it upstairs for our guest."

Wang is well-trained for this: she floats in within three minutes with an extended name list; when the door opens, the judge can see a horde of ghosts, small and big, all glaring inside, nervewreckingly headache-inducing for the judge.

Zhao's chin rests on one hand, the other handing the name list to the judge, "When it comes to unjust cases, these few years have been full of them. Some perpetually postponed by procedural technicalities, some were simply disproportionate punishments. Since the judge is here already, how about we settle this once and for all... ah, right, as for Chu Shuzhi's incident, were there not some 'old belongings' still with you?"

The judge sits in silence.

"Hm?"

The judge squeezes out one phrase with great difficulty, "They will be returned."

Zhao seems displeased still, "When, we are gonna need some time to pack."

The judge doesn't want to see more of him, utters "before sunrise", and leaves with the name list.

Zhao smirks at his scurrying figure, lights a cigarette with the burning paper money, puts them out, and opens the window for some air.

Da Qing jumps on to the window sill, "Didn't the Ghost Slayer tell you not to go?"

"Why are you so nosy?" Zhao glares at him, and then gets serious, "There is no debate, I must go."

Although Shen Wei seems gentle and polite on the outside, he is in fact extremely stubborn. Most of the time he needs to consider his status, but he would not tolerate Hell like this. Zhao thinks that there must be something more, something that he must abide by. And not only that, it seems like he has already planned the future for him, and Zhao has a bad feeling about it.

He fondles with Da Qing's head, and agilely dodges a cat paw, then says. "I want the Ink Brush of Virtue, it can be my wedding gift..."

Da Qing is pissed, "Don't be ridiculous!"

"A tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye." Zhao's face darkens, "The Kings of Hell have a term of a century; this batch has only been up for 20, and they have been more and more deplorable. I never meant to cross them, but they messed with me in the first place... so, I'm taking you up to Kunlun together, Mount Kunlun is a forbidden and sacred place, not a backyard for their freak show."

Da Qing bounces on to his shoulder, "What about Chu?"

"Leave him, how dare he talk to his boss like that." And yet Zhao can't help but want to go in to take a look.

Guo is already sound asleep, but not on the bed, only on the desk. Chu can't do a thing against the Guardian Order, so all he can do is sit. But he has a blanket wrapped around him, and Guo probably feared that he might be bored, and gave him earphones, then put a long movie playlist on.

Chu nonchalantly glances towards Zhao, and as if he saw nothing but air, he turns back towards the computer screen.

Zhao locks the door and leaves, "Keeping an eye on a prisoner became serving the great king, Guo this motherfucking idiot, how I pity his uncle."

The next day, Guo is awakened by a phone call from Zhao. He rubs his eyes, and is shocked to find Chu already standing up, and the blanket now no longer on him but wrapped around Guo himself. Chu stands in front of the window with a stern expression, brows intensely frowned, glaring at the sky... pitch-black; the street lights are out.

The sky is still dark.

Zhao says, "Little Guo, are you up?"

Guo rubs his eyes again, and replies.

Zhao puts on a very rare gentle tone, "Later someone will be coming over to Bright Avenue No 4, it's someone from the 'other side', prepare some gifts. Keep an eye on your Brother Chu, tell him to stay calm, this is not the time to start a fight. No need say too much to them, but don't be afraid, got it?"

Guo nods sluggishly, "Chief Zhao, where are you?"

"I have something to do." Zhao seems to be losing signal: some buzzing noises are heard. He says finally, "Call your family, and listen to Chu."

Guo puts away the phone, and immediately hears a chilling sound of wooden clappers. He turns around, and hears a knock on the door of Zhao's office. Chu turns around, and says calmly, "Come in."

The locked door opens itself, and a paper man wearing a high hat comes in with a gigantic bag, placing it in front of Chu with reverence. The person puts their hands together, mutters something, and Chu's body begin to change: some writings appear on his face, and shackles emerge around his neck, wrists and feet, then all these things fall off on to the floor, roll up into a ball, and is sucked in that person's hands.

Guo's mouth is agape with shock.

The paper person bows, Guo returns the bow, and accidentally bangs his head on Zhao's computer.

Chu glares at the Hell Guard with arrogance, and then opens the bag... most of the items inside are made from bones, sparkling with cold violet light. These are all familiar to him... from three centuries ago.

Chu frowns, and then says with an unfriendly tone, "Where's the Guardian?"

The Hell Guard must have been lectured by the judge... shaking their head, showing that they won't talk, bows, and then leaves.

Right this moment, the Ghost Slayer is at the bottom of Mount Kunlun. He takes a deep breath of the thin and freezing air, almost carrying a brush of primeval solitude and sobriety. It is dawn, and yet the peak is pitch-black and the sky is still night.

Vaguely, sounds of wailing and weeping are mixed in the wind; chillingly macabre, as if slumbering souls from Hell are being awakened.

He holds on to his blade. Just this moment, the Ghost Slayer hears footsteps from behind. Without turning around, he says stately, "We should get moving."

"Hang on," a familiar voice says, "the one who invited me is not here yet. I was afraid the plane might be delayed so I came early."

The Ghost Slayer turns around abruptly, and sees Zhao wrapped around in many layers of hiking gear, with a black cat following him by his feet. He is holding a cup of coffee, and takes a bite out of a burger. He waves, and says with a blissful smile, "Have you eaten? I still have a hash brown."

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The Ghost Slayer – Shen Wei is at the end of his tether; his hand begins trembling inadvertently.

Zhao doesn't seem to realise that he is making the other's blood boil... or perhaps he is pretending. He sits on a rock with less snow, finishes his cup of coffee, and nabs out the piece of cheese in the burger and hurls it away.

Shen silently waits for him to finish his breakfast, and asks with a restraint, almost inaudible voice, "What did I tell you?"

"No matter what Hell asks for, don't agree to it, and wait for you to come back." Zhao wipes his mouth.

Shen's voice gets deeper and deeper, spouting one word after another, "Then what are you doing here?"

Zhao looks around, making sure that there is no-one else besides the black cat. He walks forward, and wraps his arms around the ice sculpture that is the Ghost Slayer. On his toes, he gives the head behind the large hood a light kiss, "Are you mad?"

Da Qing looks away, not wanting to watch this disaster.

Shen doesn't move, but remains still as a rock, "Do you really like getting on my nerves? I... I really wish..."

Zhao lets go of him, and looks at his shrouded face. For a moment, he can find where his eyes are beneath the black mist, and he can even feel the glare. Zhao sighs, grabs Shen's hand, but then lets go, and whispers, "You can punish me however you want, alright? There won't be a next time, I promise... Besides, this is not entirely my fault, you can ask Da Qing, it's all because of Chu Shuzhi; that brat, otherwise Hell wouldn't have the goods on me..."

When in fact it's Zhao who has the goods on Hell, and even managed to bargain for Chu's release... the black cat ignores him, and begins cleaning its face with its paws... if this deceitful man can be trusted, pigs can fly.

"And there's no going back at this point." Zhao puts his palms out in helplessness, "Hey... don't be mad, I can't bear seeing you mad... Shen Wei? Ah Wei, Little Wei, baby.... don't ignore me, say something."

Shen makes no sound, his fists clenched with pain underneath the sleeves.

This "baby" thing got Da Qing shuddering and its head bumping on to its tail. It silently walks away, not wanting to hear anything else.

Zhao is about to lean forward, but the next moment, he rapidly returns to normal, and steps back a few... not long, a crowd following the judge approaches, with ox-head, horse-face, black ghost, white ghost, and numerous others, including the fairy tribes, and perhaps a few saints. Zhao takes a glance... none of these people are of the ordinary.

The Ghost Slayer remains his enigmatic mien, while Zhao stands on the other side emotionless, perhaps due to the cold, or lack of oxygen; his face is pale and his lips with no colour. He turns around, with a slight frown, and nods politely, "Morning."

The judge can't tell for how long has Zhao been here, or what is going on between the two.

Yet, for Zhao and the Ghost Slayer to meet first was their plan after all... the Ghost Slayer wouldn't let Zhao go back on his own, so he has no choice but to bring him along. With his sweetheart here, even if he has second thoughts, he wouldn't do anything.

But with such a plan, Hell is blatantly prodding the Ghost Slayer's reverse scale.... they have utterly infuriated him.

The judge tries to work out the Ghost Slayer's enshrouded figure; his heart pounding with fear.

Despite his title, the judge is under the Ten Kings of Hell, and has no real power. At times he feels like his job is nothing but running tiresome errands and being the scapegoat... now that the ones in power are the younger generation, they know little to nothing about the ancestors. The judge thinks that those ten are simply idiots who think they have great power.

Zhao is better, but someone like the Ghost Slayer... forget cosying-up and flattery, they are deliberately locking horns with him; haven't they heard of "dogs that bite don't bark"? If the Ghost Slayer gets seriously mad, not only Hell, but even the Thirty Three Skies might not survive his blade.

The judge laughs dryly, his heart almost jumping out of his mouth, muttering, "The Guardian arrived quite early."

Then he turns towards the Ghost Slayer, bows almost to the ground, and says most reverently, "Your Hon..."

Before he can finish, the Ghost Slayer heads up the mountain without a word... he is throwing his manners out the window; he really is enraged.

The judge makes haste to bring the crowd forward; he knows that the Ghost Slayer is only constraining his anger because Zhao is present.

The sky grows darker and darker. Violent gales rush through the thundering Nine Heavens; looking up, there seems to be a black dragon swiveling and dancing behind the clouds.

Perpetually snowbound, endlessly lofty, magnificently jagged and steep, Mount Kunlun pierces through the clouds. Countless hills see not a bird fly by, numerous paths bear not a footprint in sight.

As they enter the mountain ranges, Da Qing suddenly moves around restlessly on Zhao's shoulder; it seems to have recognised something.

All his suspicions and speculation are resolved as soon as Zhao sees Mount Kunlun.

He has never seen Kunlun before. Not in a million years would he ever think that a gigantic snowy mountain could have any connection with him. And yet, as he enters the Kunlun range in his sleep-deprived state, he instantly feels the inborn blood-bond.

It's a mystical feeling, like a data line deep in his soul suddenly connecting with the entire mountain range as one elaborate network.

For one moment, Zhao forgets about all the complications, all the strange creatures behind him, and doesn't even look at the infuriated Shen anymore.

He walks forward, guided by instinct; the Guardian Order burning with increasing heat against his chest.

“Guardian... Guardian?”

Zhao is startled, and breaks out from his trance. He turns around towards the judge, eyes widened with perplexity.

Without him realising, the group has reached a plain covered in untrodden snow. On the side are giant boulders, each taller than an average person, arranged in the 64 hexagrams formation. Tiny cyclones occasionally rush through; tranquil to the point of solemnity.

The judge continues cautiously, “Beyond this is the entrance to Mount Kunlun, would the Guardian please lead the way.”

Though Zhao can't see Shen's face, he feels his gaze. But when he tries to find it, Shen turns around as though he doesn't care.

Zhao smiles miserably, and gives Da Qing a pat on the butt; it jumps off his shoulder. He takes out the Guardian Order, and walks into the huge rock formation.

With every step he treads, the crowd holds their breaths, and the wind stops blowing as he reaches the centre of the boulders. A long trail of footsteps are left behind Zhao, marking a track of solitude and serenity.

He shuts his eyes, wearing a face as calm as a rippleless gulf; echoes throughout the boundless ranges reach his ears and resonate.

North of the Scarlet River, pillar of Heaven and Earth; great hill of immensity, the birthplace of deities.

Upon the colossal peak, vista of the vast plains within the seas and beyond; the root of all mountains and rivers, the fabric of the world and all things in it.

Thus named Kunlun.

No-one is telling him what to do, nor has he asked anyone – and yet Zhao simply knows, as if a voice in his heart is guiding his every move. He opens his eyes, and glances through the giant boulders, which revolve around him along with his mind and soul; capricious like the galaxy, flashing before his eyes.

Finally, some people begin chattering, wondering who is inside the formation; Shen ignores all, and only looks at one person.

Though he is wearing an unfashionable jacket and hiking shoes, his short hair blown into an unpleasant bird nest, but in Shen's eyes, this figure miraculously fuses with that in the long blue gown from years and years ago.

He begins to lose control; dark mist oozes from his sleeves, engulfing Zhao and blocking out everyone else, as if they are the only two left in the world.

Momentarily, Shen laughs mirthlessly at himself. A few thousand years ago, all he wanted was for the other person to look at him; he would have died for him, and yet he feared that he was unworthy and too filthy. Now his greed overflows, wanting to have him all for himself, not wanting others to even lay an eye on him.

Without him noticing, from centuries ago, a seed had been sown, sprouted and spread throughout him into an unbreakable obsession.

Perhaps it's his nature, perhaps it's instinct, but Shen has been fighting against them since he was born, and yet, one fateful encounter has had him spiraling down ceaselessly.

The earth trembles, a thundering echo comes from far away up in Mount Kunlun. Lightning strikes through thick clouds, reaching the earth in a threat of destruction. Upon the barely visible peak, an eerie mask flashes and flickers; it seems to be ghost face, standing up above coldly glaring downwards.

With a tremendous rumble, the palace of giant boulders sink into the earth, and in an instant, the group is brought to the peak of Mount Kunlun.

Most have yet to keep their balance, and the black cat in Zhao's arms screeches, as the group follows its gaze towards the holy tree, that which has lived as long as the universe. The entwined branches have almost completely withered; no leaves, no flowers, only a sense of death.

The black cat breaks free from Zhao's embrace. The instant its paws touch the ground, its body abruptly elongates, transforming into a human.

Zhao never knew that Da Qing can transform. He flinches in shock; the man before him has long black hair flowing down behind, a pair of cat eyes sparkling like precious gems, gleaming with dazzling and freezing light. He speaks; still Da Qing's voice that Zhao is familiar with.

It... he says deeply, "Who dares to desecrate Mount Kunlun?"

Da Qing stares at the withering tree, his eyes reddening with tears.

At this moment, countless spirit beasts emerge from the soil, absorbing energy from the roots of the holy tree, jumping on to the ground in a giant horde, screeching and wailing.

Violent gales whip through, as ghost face's gigantic head emerges behind the thick clouds, of some several thousand metres long, covering the sun and the sky, grinning devilishly.

Then, his mountainous limbs flicker in the darkness, his hands barely visible as a humongous cauldron rises up from behind him, as tall as a multistory building, whirling rapidly. Wind howls aggressively, bombarding the ears to the point of agony.

Someone screams with fright, "Soul Cauldron! It's a Soul Cauldron!"

The hand behind ghost face's back suddenly comes crashing down with a ginormous axe.

Zhao is pushed aside in a pinch, almost losing balance; when he manages to stand still, a blood-scented cyclone is whirling in front of him as he struggles to open his eyes. The axe strikes down like a mountain, but is stopped by a thick blade only three feet long.

The Ghost Slayer is like an ant holding up a giant boulder. With a blast of vicious gust, his sleeves are torn, revealing his bare hands. Then, with a slight crack, the Ghost Slayer's wrist twists, leaving a fracture in the gigantic axe.

Then he adds another swing, and with a resonating clang, the gigantic axe is swung away as the small fracture spreads like wild fire. The axe crumbles to the ground, making a hundred-metre-long abyss on the peak of the snowbound hill. Numerous spirit beasts perish in the abyss under the axe of their master.

"Soul Cauldron." After this petrifying duel, the Ghost Slayer bellows, "You're out of your mind."

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"I'm not. You have the Pillar of Nature, and so be it; you will bring it to me eventually. But I must have the Ink Brush of Virtue. If half of the four pillars holding up the sky collapse, no-one will be able to stop me then." Ghost face finally speaks. Then, his dark gaze scans through the crowd, "I see you brought company... are they afraid that you might switch sides?"

His words come out like a slap across the face for almost everyone present.

Ghost face looks around, and sees Zhao; his smile growing ever more eerie, "Oh, the Guardian is here as well, no wonder."

Da Qing is about to take a step forward, wearing a stern face, but Zhao grabs his long hair and pulls him back.

With an ersatz smile, he clenches Da Qing's hair and locks him in place, the other hand searching for a cigarette from his pocket.

Now in human form, Da Qing is still instinctively feline; he turns around and claws at Zhao, but without cat claws it is not very effective. Zhao's hand is freezing cold, which has Da Qing flinched.

"Don't give me trouble, fat fuq." Calling this ethereal "person" by that nickname doesn't seem out of place at all coming from Zhao.

Da Qing says, "What's wrong with you?"

Spewing a ring of smoke out of his pale and bloodless lips, his eyes sparkle with shocking light. He whispers while fidgeting with the cigarette, "I'm a little nervous."

Da Qing's eyes widen.

Zhao glances towards the sides, "The Ravens are with Hell, the other fairies in their own tribe, and the Arhats of the West, what about those people, Taoists?"

After ghost face's earth-shattering axe crumbles down, the crowd naturally divides into their own groups.

"Some are saints, some have transcended and are working for Heaven." Da Qing says, "But none of them have what it takes to meddle with these two; without you, they can't even get up here. Besides these two, the only one who dares start a fight up here would be the one with the snake body."

The face of a person, the body of a snake: that would be the ancient goddess and almighty empress, Nuwa.

Snowflakes fly in the murky sky. Hideous spirit beasts and the angels and demons from all places stand on opposing sides; a battle erupts.

Da Qing avoids contact with the holy tree, attempting to keep himself calm, and says to Zhao, "You better stand back."

Snow falls on Zhao's cigarette. He takes out some tissue, wraps up the cigarette and stuffs it in his pocket, and leaves the battlefield as Da Qing suggests. He walks under the holy tree, and puts his hand on the freezing and withering trunk.

It is hard to tell how tall the holy tree is, but its roots protrude from the earth all the way up to Zhao's chest level; the tree itself is like a deity.

“Even though I don’t know anything,” Zhao says in his mind, “but you recognise me, right?”

All of a sudden, a verdant sprout springs out of the tree trunk, slowly curling like a strand of hair, and gently wraps around his finger.

Zhao grabs hold of his small backpack, and smiles, “Then I will give this a try.”

At this moment, the gargantuan Soul Cauldron is lifted into ghost face’s sky-covering grasp. Upon his pale fingers, a dark substance boils within the cauldron.

“The primeval tree of virtue... a body not yet lived but dead.” Zhao hears ghost face mumbling, “Does the Guardian know what really is the Ink Brush of Virtue?”

Zhao turns around, back against the holy tree, and looks up to ghost face from afar, “Let’s hear it.”

“Before the Yan and Yellow Emperors battled Chiyou, numerous conflicts among deities were common. Fuxi and Nuwa wanted to establish order, so they went up to Mount Kunlun, and obtained a branch from the holy tree. Nuwa regretted the three eternal evils from the soil when she created humans, and so she took it upon herself to plant the branch in the land of great blasphemy...”

The Ghost Slayer roars, “Shut up!”

A depthless void of darkness surrounds him, as the blade in his hand mounts up indefinitely, like Sun Wukong’s Ruyi Jingu Bang; only the handle remains in size, supporting the colossal weight of the mountainous blade.

The Ghost Slayer’s blade almost reaches the bounds of the horizon, whipping up a violent thunderstorm, which seems to puncture an opening in the sky, causing thunder and lightning crashing down... the divine lightning comes striking towards ghost face’s head.

With bellowing laughter, ghost face looks up, opens his mouth and swallows the lightning. The Ghost Slayer’s blade comes crashing down immediately, aiming for the Soul Cauldron in his hand, and all the way towards his chest. The blade attacks with strong gusts to follow, whipping up pellets of ice the size of fists. A mass of spirit beasts comes pouncing forward; amidst the dark chaos on the peak of Mount Kunlun, the battle with the many deities and ghosts persists.

Zhao struggles to keep his balance, and takes a seat on the roots of the holy tree. There is nothing to do amidst the chaos, so he lights another cigarette; he finally understands the Ghost Slayer’s dilemma... ghost face doesn’t treat him as an enemy, others do not treat him as an ally... here they are finally showing their true powers; last

time under the Pillar of Nature, if it weren't for ghost face holding back, it would not have ended that easily.

Ghost face doesn't seem to want a real fight with the Ghost Slayer.

"The land of great blasphemy?" Zhao repeats; ghost face very succinctly uncovers all the questions he has... legend says that humans are born with three evils, that being "greed", "hatred" and "ignorance"; in that book, it is said that the three eternal evils come from the soil, so the land of great blasphemy is probably the root of "greed, hatred and ignorance".

Ghost face springs up, dodging the Ghost Slayer's blade, which crashes on to the ground, causing a tremor throughout Mount Kunlun. He continues, "The holy tree showed

clemency, it withered and died, and then sprouted again and became the legendary primeval tree of virtue. Then, after the battle between Chiyou and the two emperors..."

"Shut up! Shut up!" The Ghost Slayer's blade slashes towards him horizontally. Zhao cannot see where Shen is standing, and cannot imagine how he is wielding a hundred-metre-long blade with ease.

With a slash in the middle, ghost face is stopped; his body shrinks and as his height is halved the Ghost Slayer's blade barely miss his head. With a large thump, the Soul Cauldron crashes on to the ground, and countless voices come from all directions instantly, calling out its name.

An infinite horde of spirit beasts spawn from the Soul Cauldron.

Zhao stares at the Soul Cauldron, neither with indignation nor with agitation. He doesn't even realise it as someone is approaching from behind.

Da Qing is a lot less calm. He pounces down from the tree with a dagger in his palm, like hiding cat claws in his paws, dashing towards that someone like a phantom.

Ghost face blocks the dagger with his bare hand of steel, and with a light clang, Da Qing's dagger is sent flying away. Ghost face reaches out to grapple Da Qing by the neck, but even after transforming, he is still agile as a cat; he bounces back with two back flips and on to the holy tree, glaring at ghost face.

"Think about who's the owner before you try to hit a cat." Zhao finally speaks; he pauses, turns towards ghost face slowly and stops smiling. Staring at him blankly, he laughs, "You only made it up here because of the flame on my shoulder, do you really think this is your territory?"

With these words, the conceited ghost face stops at his feet, standing three metres behind Zhao, and dares not approach.

Shen hears the same, and is frozen in shock.

“After the battle between the Yan and Yellow Emperors and Chiyou, the Three Sovereigns could not bear to see the world in its state, so they crafted the Ink Brush of Virtue from the primeval tree of virtue; all things in the world have spirits, so the Ink Brush of Virtue records all good deeds and bad.” Zhao leers at ghost face’s mask, spouts out a ring of smoke and continues without haste, “Then the Ink Brush of Virtue, as one of the Four Mystical Artifacts, was sealed away as Nuwa repaired the Heavens and turned the four legs of the Ao into the four sky pillars. The Sundial of Reincarnation was left on earth, the Pillar of Nature was buried underground, the Ink Brush of Virtue...”

Zhao’s lips curl up slightly, as he glances towards the other side, “The Ink Brush of Virtue shattered into countless pieces, and landed on to every living soul on earth... is that right, honourable judge?”

A figure hiding behind the holy tree trails forward and kneels on the ground, head against the soil, trembling, “Please forgive my dishonesty, Lord Kunlun.”

Zhao doesn’t look at the judge any longer, and only sighs, “Perhaps the judge is a kind soul and not very good at lying... let me tell you, the key to lying is to get the details right. What you said to me last night was nothing but a load of nonsense, anyone could see right through it... human souls came with Nuwa’s creation, how can the shattered pieces of the Ink Brush of Virtue be human souls? A soul from every living person to form the Ink Brush of Virtue. I wouldn’t be able to do that, none of us here would be able to do that, wouldn’t you say? I’m afraid many who came here today were tricked by your little story?”

The judge shivers like sifting.

At this moment, the colossal Soul Cauldron suddenly tremors, along with the entire Mount Kunlun. The holy tree behind Zhao suddenly overgrows with countless sprouts, and a few flowers blossom where the branches have already withered.

The man sluggardly leans against the tree trunk, seemingly unmoved by this commotion, and even adds after the quake, “The Ink Brush of Virtue belongs to me, so why don’t you return it to its rightful owner?”

The mask on ghost face twists and deforms; Zhao squints, catches something with a tissue, wet from the snow, squats away some ashes, and tosses away a bomb, “Don’t play tricks with me, I know what you look like.”

Zhao lowers his voice, "Looks are but an illusion, do you really think I can't tell the difference?"

Before the Ghost Slayer can say anything, a giant storm whips up on Mount Kunlun. Da Qing is almost blown off from the tree, he transforms into a cat and hangs on to the branch with his claws. Besides ghost face and the Ghost Slayer, and Zhao who has the holy tree for cover, everyone else is swept off their feet.

The judge rolls on the floor with a face full of dirt, those who were fighting mid-air are sent crashing down, those who were going under are sent back up; numerous spirit beasts are whipped into the cyclone which threatens to suck everyone in.

In the centre of the cyclone, a gigantic ink brush sparkles with wavering light: it's the Ink Brush of Virtue!

The Soul Cauldron shatters instantly, and the Ink Brush of Virtue is whole again.

And yet Zhao, Shen and ghost face are not moving at all, as if that giant ink brush they have all been after suddenly doesn't matter anymore.

Ghost face suddenly asks, "If the Guard... Mountain God must have it, why don't you go get it?"

Zhao successfully keeps his cool in the crushing gusts, and says with connotation, "I'm afraid someone might try to take advantage."

The judge's head stays low, and does not dare utter a word.

Ghost face sighs, "We owe you one for the fire, I really don't want to do this."

He whistles, and a horde of spirit beasts rise up from the ground, surrounding them in the centre. The Ghost Slayer stands beside Zhao, hand on his blade.

"Oh." Zhao says coldly, "So my tree has worms in it."

Suddenly, something comes out from his hand, like some kind of acidic spray. The spirit beasts wail with inhuman screams; the judge is scared bloodless, and sprints away while saying, "Five black soup, it's... it's five black soup..."

Five black soup, made from the blood of a black dog, black cat, black mule, black pig and black chicken, they must be born at a dark hour of a dark month, has black innards and completely black fur. Not anything particularly precious, but particular, and is used against those from below the earth.

It's needless to say who this was prepared for originally.

Before anyone can make a move, the Ink Brush of Virtue shrinks and flies into the holy tree in a split second, sinking into the tree trunk.

Nobody could foresee this turn of events. Ghost face swats the judge, sending him flying away, and heads for the holy tree. Zhao blocks his hand.

Ghost face's arm is hard as steel, Zhao's wrist must be bruised.

But he doesn't show the pain, and ghost face doesn't seem to want to deal with him head-on; he slips through to the other side and tries to enter the holy tree.

With a piercing screech, ghost face's hand is bounced back by the tree; with such sheer force, two of his finger nails broke, dripping with black blood.

Zhao puts his hand into his pocket, looking like he was that coming, and says with a smile, "Didn't want you to hurt your hand, but you don't like a favour, do you?"

Ghost face grits his teeth, and then quickly vanishes into a cloud of black smoke. Yet, he did not bring his minions away, though the horde is quickly beheaded by Ghost Slayer's blade.

Zhao lets out a sigh of relief, and wears a sly grin. Then, he touches the tree trunk of the holy tree, and feels a force pulling him in.

What a great tree, Zhao thinks to himself.

"You..." Shen's hood was blown away when the Ink Brush of Virtue appeared, and even the dark mist that usually shrouds his figure has dissipated. The face that Zhao is familiar with wears complex emotions: hope, angst, nerves... "You remember everything?"

"Of course it was all bull crap, these idiots, so gullible." Zhao winks, and flicks his wrist, "Oh fuck me, hurts like Hell, that ghost face kid is like a steel statue."

Shen feels like his heart has ascended all the way to the tip of his throat, and then sent crashing down into his stomach; his chest hurts.

"Help me stall them; the holy tree is calling, I have to go take a look. Even better if I can get the Ink Brush of Virtue." Zhao says, and jumps into the holy tree. With half his body already submerged, he thinks of something, and turns around towards Shen, "Whoever gets back home first leave the lights on and the door unlocked. Love you."

Then, he disappears into the holy tree.

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Shen looks down, and Da Qing naturally droops its head... he doesn't seem to remember the cat that went "Professor Shen" this, "Professor Shen" that all the time.

Shen nods, "Take care."

With great relief, Da Qing opens the door and skedaddles. Sharing a room with the Ghost Slayer is no joke; if it weren't for the douchebag Zhao, it would not have left a whole fridge of dried fish snack uneaten and came here to suffer.

Zhao isn't going to any sort of gathering. He isn't going anywhere really. After he sends the messages, he begins wandering on the streets of Dragon City.

It's usually dry in winter here, but this winter, for some reason, is exceptionally snowy and foggy. The roads are frozen with a layer of thin ice; the occasional car drives by cautiously and sluggishly. Most shops have closed, pedestrians are few; the city seems somewhat desolate.

With misery in his eyes, he doesn't seem to know where to go. Streaks of blood reach for the irises: a look of exhaustion.

Some time later, his phone rings. Zhao answers with a coarse voice, "Hey dad."

"Hm." A voice replies from the other side, "How come I couldn't call you earlier?"

Zhao stands on the side of the road, where the wind blows quite strongly. Dry and cold gust makes his eyes redden. Dumb for two seconds, he then answers sheepishly, "No signal perhaps."

Zhao's father asks, "Where are you now?"

He doesn't know either. Looking up for a road sign, he utters his whereabouts.

"Wait. I'll come pick you up."

Zhao crouches on the side of the road, waiting. About twenty minutes later, a car stops beside him. The driver looks at him with disdain, "Why do you look like a beggar? Get in the car."

Zhao throws him a scowling glance, and gets inside the car. Like a dying dog, he sits his butt on the seat next to the driver, arms crossed against his chest, shoulders shrugged, acting out the message "I don't want to talk to you or answer any questions".

His father begins driving, and glances at him, "Where did you go, why are you dressed like this."

“Tibetan Plateau.” Zhao says, expressionless.

“What were you doing there?”

“After some nefarious Kekexili bandits.”

Zhao’s father says, “Bullshit.”

Zhao doesn’t say anything.

After a moment of silence, Zhao’s father says, “Your mum told me two days ago. I couldn’t figure out what to say to you, so I didn’t come and find you sooner.”

Zhao looks at him with exhaustion.

“When you were young, that was around the time when my career took off. I was busier than ever. Back then it was always your mum taking care of you, but I never thought too much about it. Not until you started going to school, and your mum dragged me to the school’s parents club. Only then did I realise, after chatting with teachers and other parents, that you’re different from all the other kids.”

Zhao smiles bitterly, “Not just different, you gave birth to a freak... alright, dad, let’s find some other time to talk. I really don’t feel like it today.”

Zhao’s father looks at him quietly, “I think I’ve spoilt you.... Did I say anything when you came up with the outrageous idea of starting up a Special Investigations Unit? I even helped you pull some strings. Don’t push it too far.”

Zhao sits quietly for a moment, “Alright, what do you wanna ask?”

“I know I’m old-fashioned, but I have to ask, can you break up with that teacher?”

“No.” Zhao says, steely and resolute.

“I’m not fighting with you, we can discuss this calmly.” Zhao’s father frowns, “Tell me, what do you like about him? What about him is irreplaceable? Does it have to be him? Even with all the social stigma, and the fact that you can’t be together legally?”

“Mum is not as beautiful as Chi-Ling, why did you give up the entire forest for a tree?” Zhao says impatiently, then humphs unpleasantly, “What do I care about stigma, what about legal or not? If I want, I can make my own wedding cert. I can buy seals made from carrots on University Street, five dollars each, what’s so great about that?”

“I’m discussing this with you calmly, what kind of attitude is that?”

“Sorry...” Zhao sits silently for a while, looks down, and pinches between his eyebrows.

“Perhaps one day, when your hormonal levels are back to normal, you will regret this decision.” Zhao’s father maintains a calm and stately tone, relaxing and not at all intimidating. It’s much easier to persuade someone this way; he says, “Passion is attractive; I’ve been young, I know that feeling. But I don’t agree with difficult love, do you know why?”

Zhao does not reply.

“Have you read ‘Anna Karenina’?” Zhao’s father drives sluggishly on the empty streets, “Why did Anna die in the end? Of course, you could argue that her love affair is immoral, but your relationship isn’t. And I would agree. But there is still a similarity... love is strong yet frail; perhaps in the face of adversity, it can rise up with great power, transcending into a sort of exemplary ardour, and that is why it’s been praised since ancient times. But you have to remember the saying: ‘It isn’t the mountain ahead that wears you out; it is the grain of sand in your shoe’.”

Zhao does not make a sound.

Zhao’s father sighs, “Difficult love can be overcome with perseverance and grit. But love has to subside eventually, have you thought of that? By that time, the passion is gone, and when you look at the other person, you won’t recall any pleasant memories, you’ll only remember how difficult it was. What would you do then? Have you thought of that? Everyone is the same, you’re no exception; do you remember the ice cream shop that you really liked as a kid?”

Zhao shakes his head slowly.

“Your mum thought it was bad for your health, so she didn’t let you eat any junk food. You were obsessed with it all day, and even went on a hunger strike. Then I came up with an idea... I brought you to have ice cream three times a day, and you would eat at least two big boxes everytime; even when you got an upset stomach I still brought you there. That went on for a month, then whenever I mentioned the ice cream shop again, you would cry and refuse to go.”

Zhao’s lips very reluctantly curl up. Zhao’s father says calmly, “Think again. Can you really keep going like this with that teacher?”

When he reasons like this, no-one would refuse to listen. Zhao pauses for a moment before he replies, his voice still incredibly coarse; he grabs a bottle of water, drinks half of it, and then says slowly, “I have known Shen Wei for a very long time, way back when I first started working; it’s been quite a few years now. Dad, I know what you mean, but there is always someone in your life, it’s not because of attraction, allure, obsession, or mere lust; it’s if you don’t treat this person right, then you’d feel like a worthless prick.”

Zhao's father turns to look at him. Zhao leans on the seat, eyes half closed. Perhaps in his sleep-deprived state, his double eyelids almost look three-fold, with an extra touch of exhaustion.

His father remains silent for a while, and then says, somewhat with difficulty, "All right, you're an adult now, some things are not for me to decide. If you really believe that, then I've nothing to say... when I'm free and at home, you can bring him over to have a meal."

"Thanks." Zhao doesn't seem relieved or merry. He keeps wearing the same frown; after a while, he says with difficulty, "Dad, let's have a few drinks?"

Zhao's father looks at him, and turns the car around. He drives to a small local restaurant that is relatively quiet. Puhing the menu in front of Zhao, "Order what you like, my treat."

Then he says to the waiter, "Give me a pot of Iron Goddess Tea."

Son and father sit on opposite sides, miraculously alike in air and mien. One downing tea, one downing alcohol; neither making any sound, neither disturbing the other whatsoever.

Intoxication never shows on Zhao's face: the more he drinks, the more pale he becomes.

By his second emptied bottle, his father stops him and calls the waiter, "Give him some honey water... you can drink a little when you're feeling down, but I'm your dad, I've to keep an eye on you; too much can cause poisoning or worse."

Zhao stops, and says, "I haven't eaten, I'll have some fried rice."

"So what's going on with you? Got in a fight with your teacher?"

"Of course not." Zhao smiles with unease, "I'm way past the age of throwing tantrums."

"Then what is it?"

For a while, Zhao says nothing; only staring at the marble table, seemingly searching for some pattern amongst the totally random swirls. When his honey water and fried rice arrive, his eyeballs turn slightly and says, "Many things... I can't figure out if I'm right or wrong, what to do?"

Zhao's father lights a cigarette, keeps silent for a while before replying, "I can tell you how I feel. All these years have made me realise, there are four things in life you can't get too bogged down in: forever, morality, virtue, and life and death."

Zhao looks up at him.

"Insistence can sometimes be a virtue. But if you insist too much on 'forever', your fear of losing someone will blur your vision; if you insist too much on 'morality', it will just become a stubborn obsession, most things are not so black and white; if you insist too much on 'virtue', you will become conceited, and try to change the rules to suit your values; if you insist too much on 'life and death', you're dwelling on the insignificant, and you would just be living a second-rate life."

Zhao listens in silence.

"There are just some things that ought not to be questioned, ought not to be dwelled upon. What's done is done, whether it was right or wrong matters not. Wouldn't you rather think about the future?"

Zhao doesn't reply. He downs the whole cup of honey water, and then says calmly, "I've lost my appetite. I need to throw up. After that, just drive me home."

Zhao's father drives him to his place, and doesn't plan on going up, "That teacher is at yours, right? I won't interrupt you. We'll meet some other time."

With his back facing his father, he waves, and goes upstairs with exhaustion.

Shen has been waiting by the door. The doorbell rings. He flings the door open. Zhao looks somewhat awake still, but he stinks of alcohol. He trips on the doorsill, and Shen holds him in place, "How much did you drink?"

"I'm fine." Zhao's head rests on Shen's shoulder. After a while, he smiles, "I'm gonna take a shower... anything to eat?"

Regarding Zhao going to Kunlun on his own accord, Shen has quite a few bones to pick with him, and yet when he sees his poor stomachaching face, none of it comes out of his mouth. Finally, Shen only sighs, and says, "I'll heat up some dim sum."

Zhao pecks him on the neck quickly, then takes out a small and thin wooden box and hands it to Shen, calling it a "gift", and then heads for the bathroom.

Shen opens the box, and inside he finds a slender ink brush: its handle made of wood, with an unknown kind of hair, which, surprisingly, sparkles in gold. The brush is astoundingly heavy, gleaming with shining dazzle, and exquisitely lustrous, yet humbly delicate. Undoubtedly, this is the legendary Ink Brush of Virtue.

Shen is mesmerised. At this moment, besides the sound of flowing water, and bang is heard from the bathroom.

Startled, Shen quickly puts the Mystical Artifact away, and knocks on the door, "Yunlan, are you alright?"

There is a bathtub in Zhao's bathroom, with a shower head; on a slow day he might take a bath, in a hurry he could just take a quick shower. Zhao accidentally turns the temperature up too high, and the hot water pushes his mild intoxication up to his brain; the bathtub is very slippery, and he trips and falls, almost ending in a concussion.

Twinkling stars are all he sees; he doesn't hear Shen's voice at all.

With no response, Shen can't help but worry, and pushes open the bathroom door.

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Nobody wears any clothes in the shower.

Zhao finds himself lying helter-skelter in the bathtub, hot water drenching his face, sending him into disorientation. He grabs on to the edges of the bathtub with both hands, and struggles to get up. His hunched back outlines his strong shoulder blades, the smooth lineation of his muscles curve narrowly downwards towards his waist, forming a densely alluring shape, and below that... Shen doesn't dare look below, the mere sight of the bruised wrists is an assault on his eyes.

The bathroom is too hot for Shen. He is almost cooked in just a second.

He hastily grabs a large towel, and is about to hurl it out hurriedly, when he realises the water is still running, and so he frantically turns off the tap, looks away, holds out his arms and wraps Zhao in the towel. Blushed and red-eared, he carefully carries Zhao out of the bathroom.

Fortunately, Zhao does not add insult to injury with his trademark shamelessness; indeed, he gives no response whatsoever, since his brain has been reduced to a puddle by alcohol and steaming hot water.

The towel is quickly drenched in body heat, still wrapping up most of the body except the two long legs, bare and uncovered. Shen listens to the pounding pulse in his own temples, while lightly placing Zhao on to the bed, who is curled up into a ball.

Then, as if touching a hot frying pan, he quickly retracts his hands and stands beside in helplessness, fidgeting with his fingers.

Only when Shen sees the growing water stain on the pillow does he come to and pull a blanket over Zhao. Then, pulling out one corner of the towel, he tries to drag it out from beneath the blanket.

But at this moment, Zhao suddenly catches his hand.

Warm and moist, Zhao's hand grapples with the immense strength of intoxication. He barely opens his eyes, but with no focus in his irises: a gaze even more miserable than when he was blind, as his cheeks heat up in crimson.

Flames flare up within Shen's throat. He swallows with dryness.

Zhao utters something inaudibly. Shen bends down, centimetres away from the other man's mouth, "What did you say?"

Zhao's grasp tightens. This time, Shen hears him clearly.

The man murmurs, "Sorry... I'm sorry..."

Shen flinches.

Zhao's grasp tightens yet again, as Shen starts feeling pain.

Shen sits on the edge of the bed sheepishly, then carefully, with the blanket still wrapped tightly, he embraces Zhao, and pats his back lightly, "What are you sorry for."

Zhao turns over and wraps his arms around the other's hip, revealing his bare torso. Shen's hand awkwardly freezes mid-air, as if turning into stone; his forehead is bulging with veins.

After a while, he realises that Zhao is shivering all over.

Shen tries to wriggle out of it gently, but Zhao tightens his embrace in a deadlock. Then, Shen realises, much to his astonishment, that his own clothes are getting wet. He lifts up

Zhao's chin, and finds his eyes reddening with tears, "You..."

If Zhao were only half drunk, he could perhaps still put on a pretence. But now he is genuinely intoxicated, and after the fall, he is only half-conscious; all he does is unwittingly repeating the same phrase: "I'm sorry".

A fire burns bright in Shen's heart. Even all the water from the lakes and rivers of the world cannot put out this blazing flame.

His palm finally rests on Zhao's naked back, slowly but steadily. The warmth radiating from every single inch of Zhao's skin entices his senses. Shen's voice turns coarse, as the

abyss within his irises darkens. He whispers into Zhao's ear, "You're the only person in the world who doesn't have to apologise to me."

Zhao shakes his head. His eyes close suddenly, and a teardrop emerges on his eyelashes.

He feels like weeping, otherwise he would have no way of venting his sorrow. Yet, he has no strength to do so. He is losing strength to speak, even. In the thirty years of his life, he never experienced such profound distress... and Shen has never seen him in tears.

Although Shen has stood by him for all these years, at that moment, he is almost overwhelmed inside.

Shen lowers his head, and kisses Zhao on the eye with utmost care. He savours the slightly bitter flavour, and says, "You gave me my life, you gave me my eyes, you gave me my everything... what do you have to be sorry for?"

"If I had known..." Zhao mutters inaudibly, "If I had known, I would rather have killed you then..."

He doesn't go on. Shen enfolds him in his arms, letting go of the blanket, and pushing Zhao on to the bed. With his arms holding out on either side of Zhao, he seems to be catching his breath, as his chest vigorously heaves. After a long while, he says, "Kunlun, is it you?"

Zhao lies on the bed, looking up. A tiny trickle of tear stream down from the corner of his eye. He shuts his eyelids, with utmost dejection. A bright scarlet ring has emerged around his eyes, as his lips tremble for long, and with nothing else to utter, still the same: "I'm sorry."

"It's been five thousand years, up above and down below. Is that all you have to say to me?" Shen asks. After a while, he sighs, "Do you remember what I said to Li Qian? I said, there are only two things worth dying for: first, for the country and the world, and that is for the sake of the people; second, for your soulmate, and that is for the sake of yourself. People have found love worth dying for, ever since the beginning of time. If I can die for you, then I can live for you. I have no regrets. You have never cried before. Don't cry for me."

Then, Shen gently strokes Zhao's face with the back of his hand, "Some things are better

kept inside than said out loud. But keeping them in for too long starts to become suffocating. They all want Lord Kunlun to come back, I want that too actually... you're quick-witted, there is no point in beating around the bush... those who make sacrifices,

no matter how willingly, and no matter how discreetly, always secretly hope that the other might one day realise it. I am no different.”

Shen gazes into the windows of Zhao’s soul, “Sometimes I think, if one day you can remember everything, then I will be able to say to you: look, I did it, I did all that I had promised you; not one bit did I miss, not one word did I go back on. What would be the look on your face then? No-one is entirely selfless, Ah Lan, and that goes for me too... but I really couldn’t bear it. Destiny commands life, even the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors had to follow a set path, Pangu collapsed, Nuwa’s soul dissipated. You were the almighty Mountain God, but nonetheless subject to the same fate of the great saints before you... you had no choice. Lord Kunlun bore the weight of all the mountains of the world, I couldn’t bear to see you live in pain. Being a happy human seemed a much better choice. When they all turned against you, on top of Mount Kunlun, I really... really wanted to kill them all.”

Zhao asks, lowering his voice, “You blocked Da Qing’s memory? You cut my connection with the Guardian Order? I... a happy human? And leave you to bear all the burden? What gives you the right?”

Zhao’s voice lowers and lowers, till it is barely audible, and mutters with all his might, “When you made that promise, were you thinking that since the life of a human passes in the blink of an eye anyway, I would soon forget about you, and so you planned to stay with me for this final stretch, and then follow in the footsteps of Nuwa?”

Shen says nothing in response.

Zhao wrenches his collar downwards, fingers quivering with convulsion, teeth clattering uncontrollably, “I would never agree to it, not over my dead body! Not over my dismembered body! Not over my dissipated soul!”

Shen is pulled down, as Zhao tightens his arm around Shen’s neck, pulling him down and kissing him chaotically. He rips off two buttons from his shirt, revealing Shen’s pale chest, “I’ll never... agree to it!”

The first time of intimate passion lights up a sweep of wild fire, paralleling the many scenes of euphoria Shen had awakened from at night, like a magnificent dream that sends the world into disarray.

One does not know when a dream ends. Though the sky might collapse, and the earth might shatter, it might never see the light of day. Such is all the thoughts that never emerge under broad daylight... never expressed, not in life, not in death, never forgotten,
and never remembered passion.

Finally, Shen loses control, and flips over, shoving Zhao into the soft pillow. His heart overflows with towering torrents, plunging out potently.

The next morning, Zhao is awakened by the shining sun seeping through the curtains. His mind goes blank for a moment, in an utter state of stupor. For most of the night before he was in a muddled daze. Now and then suffocating, and utterly intoxicated, he could not tell if he had a ludicrous dream, or actually...

He tries to force his eyes open, but his eyelids weigh down heavily. As he manages to get up, his head begins spinning as he watches the ceiling whirling and twirling, and his body plummets back down.

If he looks into the mirror now, he will see that he is not simply tired. His face is shrouded in a cloud of murkiness, he is plainly beyond exhaustion, almost reminiscent of death... then, a pair of hands carefully lift him up, and a bowl is placed beside his mouth. It holds an unknown kind of medicine with a terribly strange flavour, like the smell of gore. Zhao instinctually dodges, "What..."

"Herbal medicine. I hurt you last night." Shen's voice is incredibly gentle, but his hands are not. He turns Zhao's head to face him, and basically forces the medicine down his throat.

Zhao suddenly regains strength, and pulls his hand away. After vigorous coughing, he feels as though the awful smell is about to make him puke. Then, a glass of water is handed to him; he finally regains consciousness, opens his eyes, looks at Shen, and drinks the water quietly.

He sits up in bed, leans against the headboard, elbows against knees, throwing Shen a distressed look. Then, he looks down and reflects upon something for a while, and then throws Shen an even more distressed look. Finally, he utters, "I'm a fucking total top, you... you... you couldn't have been gentler with me?"

A sweep of cerise spread over Shen's cheeks, who turns away and coughs, embarrassedly, "Sorry."

"I..." Pain from his waist down paralyzes Zhao as his face contorts into an ugly expression. He takes a deep breath, but when he looks at Shen's expression, it almost seems like Shen is the victim but not Zhao!

Though he has dreamed of dying in the bed of beauty, at least figuratively, he never dreamed of it quite the same way...

He'll be damned. Who will he speak his mind to?

Emotions flash through Zhao's face. Then, he looks down at the bowl that contained the unknown medicine. Reminded of the taste, his expression contorts again, "Get me another glass of water. For this, anti-inflammatory pills should work just fine."

Shen takes away the bowl, "This is effective, I mean no harm."

Zhao says, expressionless, "You mean no harm, but you like to torture me to death."

The gentlemanly Professor Shen stands aside with tremendous guilt on his face for having wronged the saint, like a wifey who broke a bowl.

Zhao has nothing to say to that.

Shen carefully helps him lie down, "You should... sleep for a while longer. What do you want to eat?"

Zhao says stubbornly, "You... lie down and let me ravish you."

Shen looks down rapidly, as his ears redden. He pouts, embarrassedly, "What nonsense are you talking about."

"Motherfucking." Zhao thinks.

Whatever Shen gave to him seems to be helping him sleep. Zhao quickly grows drowsy, as he still clings on to Shen's hand persistently, "I've even lost my virginity to you, don't give me any more troubles, do you hear me... there's always a way... I'll find a way... I'll find..."

Shen sits down beside him, and tenderly places his palm on his forehead. As he feels his breathing becoming steady, under the effects of that "herbal medicine", Zhao's face begins to lighten up and return to its normal colours. Shen is relieved. He tiptoes into the kitchen and cleans up the bowl.

Zhao sleeps till night-time, in a deep slumber replete with scattered and fragmented dreams.

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When Zhao went inside the holy tree, he took away more than just the Ink Brush of Virtue.

The holy tree has always been connected with Mount Kunlun, overseeing the five-thousand-year history of this universe. Zhao headed inwards to a brand new dimension. He tried to grab hold of something behind him, but the tree bark was nowhere to be found. As he moved forward, he could not make out anything in front.

Lightless were his surroundings, where the air ceased to flow, and all was dark.

He squinted his eyes, and tried to look into the distance. Finally, he found a feeble flicker in the darkness, much like that of a firefly. As he moved in closer, he could see that it was the Ink Brush of Virtue, having shrunken down to the size of a normal ink brush.

Zhao tried to take hold of it, and surprisingly, it did not take much effort at all. He raised his eyebrows, and found acquiring this treasure too easy to be true. Soon, the Ink Brush exerted an unknown force which pulled him forward.

Rationally, Zhao knew he should have taken the Ink Brush and headed back. Yet, he could not help but be enticed to keep walking forward.

As the Ink Brush settled down, it had already lured him in.

None of his lighting equipment was working, as he sat on the ground, helpless in the never-ending darkness.

He held his mind strong, and was not frightened by darkness or loneliness, so that place did not trouble him a great deal. Still, a boundless space of complete darkness can be rather depressing. The dark, however, was a very strange kind of dark: not only was he indifferent to the possibility of being trapped, he even started to believe that he was always supposed to fall into deep slumber there.

As he sat in the darkness, he yawned, and grew drowsier and drowsier.

At that moment, a crumbling roar bombarded his ears, as the dark space shattered, and a glaring light flashed in. Zhao jumped on his feet and backed up several feet. As he looked up, he squinted his eyes in the gleaming light; a gigantic axe had hacked the darkness apart, and a massive opening on the ground widened with a bellow, splitting the earth in two.

A colossal man towered amidst the chaos, wielding an axe. His head reached the sky, his feet on the earth, his lush beard and hair flowed in the wind as he furiously bawled, sending shock waves across the wild lands.

He who bested the sky and surpassed the earth; day by day, the sky soared, the earth thickened, and Pangu grew. It had been so for eighteen thousand years, till the sky soared to its zenith, the earth thickened to its extremity, and Pangu grew to his acme.

Thus the belief that the sky and earth sit apart ninety thousand miles, and the Three Sovereigns came thereafter.

Such was Pangu the creator.

Zhao opened his eyes to the vast sky and earth, and watched as Pangu collapsed, his humongous axe splitting into two: the handle became Mount Buzhou, and the head became Mount Kunlun. The giant fell as his limbs and head became numerous mountains and hills, towering into the skies.

Then rivers flowed, the sun and the moon shone, and valleys and caves were formed.

The stars above shone in mass like an ocean; an inexplicable touch of sorrow arose in Zhao's heart. He inadvertently began moving forward to take a closer look at this giant man that made him, but he soon witnessed the giant dissipating.

Zhao turned around abruptly, and found himself in the vast wilderness, as several ten thousand years flashed forward. He heard the sublime resonance of the wind from Buzhou, and he heard the restless tempest from within the depths of the earth. Yet, time flew swiftly without leaving a trace.

From the depths of the earth: the truest, cruelest, crudest, savagest, fiercest... were all connected by blood with the true Kunlun. As they were born from chaos, the unknown connection was too.

Mount Kunlun was born with the sky and earth, and after one hundred million and three thousand years, the soul of the mountain had materialised, and thus Lord Kunlun was born.

At that time, the Three Sovereigns were young, and the Five Emperors had yet to be born. The world was only replete with raptors and beasts, and humans were nowhere to be found.

Zhao was soon bewildered: on one hand, he knew where he came from, and held the Ink Brush in a tight grasp; on the other hand, he thought he had turned into a mischievous, troublemaking youngster.

He peed on the almighty Fuxi's tail, then he scared away the phoenix nesting in the holy tree, which made the bird frightful and from then on to exclusively nest in parasol trees. Finally, Nuwa found a kitten from somewhere and gave it to him, which got him the quiet down at last.

The kitten was very fragile, and the forever-snowbound Mount Kunlun was not of any help: it looked as though it was about to die.

Lord Kunlun had never seen anything quite as troublesome. He made a small bell out of golden sand, which stabilised one's soul and enlightened one's wisdom. He hung it around the cat's neck, and after some hassle, he finally managed to keep it alive, and he no longer had anytime to give others trouble by then.

He only left the mountain when the kitten had grown up and began running around on its own, so he took it downhill, and there, he saw Nuwa making humans out of clay.

She made a rope out of vines and carelessly swirled it in the air, then numerous “people” that looked much like gods emerged from the earth. Lord Kunlun had never witnessed such fever, and was instantly mesmerised.

Nuwa turned around and smiled at him, “Kunlun, you’ve grown a lot.”

Lord Kunlun put down the cat in his arms, and carefully trod forward. He stared at a clay man intensely.

He saw the man quickly grow from juvenile to adolescent, and the adolescent kneeled and worshipped him with fear and reverence, then before he could stand up, he grew to adulthood, then his full head of hair started falling and turning white, and finally he laid motionless on the ground, and turned back into clay.

Lord Kunlun felt an inexplicable envy, though he could not tell why: perhaps time had been moving too slow for him, so he coveted a life that burnt bright and brief like a shooting star.

“How fun.” Lord Kunlun held the clay in his palm, “What is this called?”

Nuwa replied, “Humans.”

Lord Kunlun said without much thought, “Humans are great, so innocent, yet they carry with them the things I have heard from beneath the earth even before I was born.”

When Nuwa heard this, her expression changed to one of utmost terror and menace.

Lord Kunlun was still young, and knew only of fooling around with his cat under the holy tree. He did not understand from Nuwa’s eyes that in a split second, she had already foreseen the great calamity that was to come.

Humans were born from the earth, and ridden with the Three Corpses, along with the evil that came from within the depths of Hell. And yet they have already started living their happy lives like monkeys, and even started pairing in marriage, according to Nuwa’s rules, and started creating offsprings.

Why make men from the earth? The Heavens had granted Nuwa great virtue for creating humans. Suddenly, when she looked up to the chaotic stars, she felt something... something cold and ever-present, like an invisible hand that grappled her and pushed all men and gods forward, and none could resist.

Yet it was water under the bridge, unless she killed all the humans.

For forty nine days, Nuwa could not sleep. The clay men had already ran across mountains and traversed across rivers and seas. Countless days and months, soon several generations have passed. Nuwa turned around abruptly, and saw that humans had already started forming tribes. Men and women wore the skin of beasts, and children were playing in crowds: all of them looked identical to the gods.

She suddenly covered her face and wept... Kunlun and the cat stood beside helplessly, neither could understand her sorrow.

Looking back, it was probably natural for a mother to feel for her children.

Nuwa sought help from Fuxi, and borrowed three thousand stars from the galaxy. The two worked together for thirty three days, and made the Great Seal, which covered the earth like a giant net.

Lord Kunlun held his cat in his arms and sat beside; he never knew so much flame was hidden beneath the earth. It roared ferociously from beneath: yet nobody wrote of it, and nobody knew of it. All who witnessed it were ignorant, completely oblivious to the fact that a battle more intense than the battles of gods that were to come had just taken place.

Finally, Fuxi made the Eight Trigrams, and forced the Great Seal upon the depths of Hell.

Nuwa asked Lord Kunlun for a branch from the holy tree, which she planted at the entrance of the Great Seal, and named it "the Land of Great Blasphemy". From then on, Lord Kunlun never saw Fuxi again.

When the Great Seal was made, Lord Kunlun felt empty inside. The evils from the depths of Hell burnt like wild fire, and could cause great disaster if not handled with care. Yet, it was free and passionate, and Kunlun suddenly felt nostalgic.

The young Kunlun could not put his feelings into words; a single droplet of tear fell from his eye, which became the Yangtze River.

Fuxi had disappeared, leaving Nuwa behind, wandering alone across the lands of the primordial times. She watched the sunrise and sunset, she watched humans endure the challenges of life, and she grew more and more anxious.

Then, Nuwa went into hiding, and Lord Kunlun returned to his mountain. For a hundred years, he passed by the Land of Great Blasphemy several times, and saw the withered branch from the holy tree. As time passed, he matured, and gradually, he began to understand what was locked away by the Great Seal, and he began to realise the reason behind. Though he was curious to take a look inside, he never did.

Kunlun could not forget what Fuxi sacrificed to make the Great Seal. He could not let all that effort go to waste.

Yet, the seeds of the Three Corpses were sown nonetheless. Men grew to become emperors and saints: Shennong's downfall, followed by the rise of the Yellow Emperor and his battle with the God of War, Chiyou. All creatures of the universe were inevitably sucked into that vortex of calamity.

The Three Sovereigns disappeared, and the primordial lands never saw a day of tranquility again. Humans have lived devoutly and sturdily, with warmth and with joy, and still with the same inevitable need for bloodshed and warfare much like any other animal.

They were like gods, and they were like demons. They were ones with countless eccentric emotions: envy, aversion, obstinacy, repression... and incomparable love and hate.

Yet the ones from when they were first created were nowhere to be found.

Lord Kunlun finally understood why Nuwa was so afraid of her creation despite the great virtue the Heavens bestowed upon her.

When Pangu destroyed chaos, it had merely been dispersed into the universe. Chaos remains, as it waxes and wanes. Great virtue, great evil, great wisdom, great valour: all would come to this world with hubris, yet leave in vain and emptiness.

Smoke signals announced the outbreak of war, as the clouds gathered in the Nine Heavens; the Kun Peng ascended to the West, never to return. Kunlun turned a blind eye to the first great war of gods and demons, which coincidentally revealed his own destiny. Within his heart of solitude and purity which had been hidden from the world for millions of years, there suddenly emerged an uncontrollable surge of grief and unbearable loneliness.

Chiyou seemed to have foreseen his failure, and came to Mount Kunlun. Lord Kunlun refused to see him, so the three-headed, six-armed God of War made his way up the snowy mountain, one step one kowtow. Blood flowed along his way, as the figure in ragged clothing eventually transformed into a galsang flower struggling to survive in the deep snow. Chiyou had hoped that Lord Kunlun would remember that witches and fairies were born from his mountain, and would protect them.

Chiyou kowtowed repeatedly on Mount Kunlun, yet the Primordial Mountain God was not moved.

Kunlun was born atop that freezing mountain, and his heart grew to be as cold and hard as the peak. Yet, the black cat was born of the fairies, and was inadvertently attracted by their ancestor. The cat sneaked out, and licked Chiyou on his bloodied forehead.

By the time Lord Kunlun found out, what was done had been done. The God of Mountain, much like Nuwa, was pushed towards a future that he wished to avoid, and he, too, could not escape this invisible force.

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Chiyou perished from fatal wounds of war, and turned into a blood-red maple forest. The Yellow Emperor was impressed by his bravery, and named him the God of War posthumously.

From then on, witches and fairies of the world worshipped Lord Kunlun as their leader, and were protected by the mountains.

Unfortunately, after the great war, humans continued warring, among tribes and among races, and soon a single tribe could split into several, and so on.

Yet, Lord Kunlun never showed up. He was waiting.

He witnessed Fuxi's downfall, Nuwa's solitude, Shennong losing his powers, and went missing. For all this time, he waited.

He witnessed the Yellow Emperor lifting Chiyou's head up, without a word. It mattered not who it was, but he needed someone to bring peace to the world.

He awaited the Yellow Emperor to conquer the Land of Gods, and he awaited the end of all conflicts. But the Yellow Emperor fought all his life, and passed away having only made slight progress.

The Flame and Yellow Emperors left descendants who fought for power along the Yellow River. The East was not in peace either, for the descendant of Chiyou, Houyi, somehow acquired the great bow Fuxi left behind, crowned himself "Emperor Jun", fought the barbarians and won, and united the Eastern tribes, along with the witches of the primordial lands.

That year, all the ravens fell to the ground and never made a sound again. The descendant of Shennong, Gonggong the God of Water, and the descendant of the Yellow Emperor, Zhuanxu, began another great war.

Gonggong had power over water, and was the descendant of the Flame Emperor. He made an army of dragons from the oceans, and subsequently fairies were involved in the war as well. Though Houyi from the East had yet to partake in the war around the Yellow River, the witches and the fairies, who were both protected by Kunlun, started splitting paths.

In that war, many of the fairy tribes perished. The world was in great chaos, souls trapped among the living howled with great despair day and night amidst the charred battlefields.

After Chiyou's death, he got the utmost respect of his rival, but his descendants had burnt the Temple of the God of War to the ground. Gradually, no-one seemed to remember this ancestor anymore, who was the very symbol of savagery and bravery.

In common folklore, Chiyou slowly took the image of a hideous and evil deity.

Lord Kunlun was greatly disappointed.

He finally understood why Nuwa was in such great shock. She must have foresaw the tragedy that would befall the world as soon as she created mankind. However, she could not resist the hands of fate, and could not bear to see the world decay.

Lord Kunlun was master of all the mountains of the Earth, and always took a liking to spirits of the hills and rivers. Chiyou lured the black kitten to lick his blood, and Lord Kunlun had no choice but to suffer the consequences. Still he promised Chiyou that he would protect the witches and fairies of the lands.

He witnessed them grow, cultivate and find their places in the world.

Then, he had to watch them perish in the war one by one.

If this is destiny, if destiny means endless warring and bloodshed, if destiny dictates boundless chaos that troubles the world and waxing and waning despair...

Gonggong lost the war and rode the godly dragon to make his retreat. The dragons were always a cherished bunch on Lord Kunlun's part, and yet as Gonggong reached the great void of the Northwest, Lord Kunlun stabbed the godly dragon in the eyes, and Gonggong crashed on to Mount Buzhou along with the dragon, puncturing a hole in Fuxi's Great Seal.

The ghosts of the Land of Great Blasphemy wailed horrifyingly, sending a surge of evil energy into the atmosphere. They enveloped the entire Mount Buzhou with nothing to fear, as if they were deities themselves. Lord Kunlun took a soul flame from his left shoulder and awakened the entire Hell from its deep slumber. He destroyed the heavenly pillars, and the sky collapsed.

Whereat do the Sky and Earth converge;

where to doth the bourn of Heav'n extend?

Whereat are the Eight Pillars of Skies;

wherefore are the East and South havocked?

The God of Mountain standing atop Mount Kunlun had finally grown to become a man, and went on a path that differed greatly from those before him. Nuwa finally reappeared after years of disappearance. She almost did not recognise the child who was so easily distracted by a kitten... his green cloak danced vigorously amidst the strong gusts of the mountains, eyes sharp as the great axe of Pangu from all those years ago.

Lord Kunlun had already sent the cat down the mountain. He turned around at the roaring collapse of a fallen sky pillar, and saw Nuwa. He was not surprised, and simply said, "What you could never bring yourself to do in the past, I have done in your stead."

Pangu spent his life separating Heaven from Earth, and shattering darkness. Finally, he was destined to perish. Why should the deities of primordial lands bow to something so nebulous? Why should they all be pushed towards a predetermined tragic end?

"I want the sacrifices of the sons of Zhuanxu to bring a land of peace. I want Heaven and Earth to no longer converge, so unknown forces above shall no longer interfere. I will cut off the pathway to Heaven, so that life on Earth will be born of Yin and Yang as in Fuxi's Eight Trigrams. They will be their own individuals, and they will take fate in their own hands. No-one shall ever judge my deeds, I will make an ink brush from the dying branch of the holy tree: every living soul shall write their own destiny. I will purge this world of its sufferings."

Nuwa stared at him, wordless.

"Whatever shall come, let it come my way... Pangu and Fuxi are gone, now it's only you and me. You wish to retire from this world, but I have my aspirations." Lord Kunlun laughed lightly, and his voice was quickly swallowed by the howling wind, "I will never stop, unless Heavenly Thunder crash down to Mount Kunlun, and strike me to death."

And exactly that happened. Heavenly Thunder struck down as the never-ending hail swirled around the peak of Mount Kunlun. Nuwa's eyes watered in the glaring light; she could not see a thing.

But she could hear Lord Kunlun's feral laughter.

Heavenly Thunder roared for an entire day. Heavy rain pelted the lands, as spirits roamed everywhere. The next day, Lord Kunlun's clothes were unrecognisable, as his entire body was scorched black, and he sat completely nude on the ground.

Then some time later, he stood up, with new, freshly-grown skin and flesh, like a cicada having come out of its shell.

He extended his arm, and a single leaf felled off from the holy tree, wrapping around his body into a new green cloak. Lord Kunlun flicked his hair back, stood straight, and coughed up a mouthful of blood. Then, he turned around towards Nuwa with a bloodied smile, "See, what can the Heavens do to me?"

That smile looked the same as always, with a never-caring naivety.

Nuwa finally spoke, "Kunlun, come with me to get the stone to repair the sky, don't be obstinate."

"But I want to try." Lord Kunlun said, "No matter what, I want to try... even if I die trying, I would die as Mount Kunlun, not just a small mound in the middle of nowhere."

Then, he went down the mountain without turning back.

Pangu died of fatigue, then Nuwa was compelled to create humans, from which countless more stories would come. Fuxi foretold something with the symbols of the Eight Trigrams, but nonetheless could not avoid the fate of perishing. Shennong saw his own downfall, and gradually became like any ordinary being. Only Nuwa was left.

The great saints fell one after another. Then, it was Lord Kunlun's turn.

In this world, are only the feeble and the foolish allowed to live brainless and brief lives?

Fungi of dawn know not of the month, winter cicadas know not of spring and autumn.

In myths and legends told centuries after, Mount Kunlun was portrayed as the land of the gods. Nobody knew that the primordial god of the mountain, Lord Kunlun, was the first to rebel.

Lord Kunlun came down from the mountain, and saw the countless spirits from Hell running wild. These were the Ghost Tribe. They did not come from living souls, but from the evil energy sealed in the Land of Great Blasphemy for ages. They have turned mad, and they preyed on humans and drank their blood.

And yet, such creatures had somewhat of a hierarchy.

The lowest class was the ones with no discernible shape, like muck rolling on the ground, feeding on decaying corpses. A slightly higher class above that was the ones with a barely humanoid shape, infested with pustules, with distorted faces, and savage blood thirst... those were the spirit beasts.

As the creatures went up the ranks they would resemble humans more and more. A Ghost King looked like an angel. As if the filthier the creature, the lovelier the appearance.

Legend says that in the depths of Hell, there were only two Ghost Kings. Coincidentally, as Lord Kunlun went downhill, he arrived at where Kuafu had left a field of peach woods, and encountered one of them.

It was a youngster with dark eyes and dark hair. He sat on a giant boulder, bare-footed, long hair resting on his shoulders, wearing clothes made of rough garments. He saw Lord Kunlun suddenly emerging from the woods, and carelessly fell from the boulder into a small stream.

At this instant, a spirit beast emerged from underground and viciously gnawed at the youth's neck, which looked tender and weak, as if it could be broken with one hand.

Suddenly, the youngster's hand extended from under the water in an eerie angle, smothering the beast's gaping jaw. He pushed the beast into the water, crushing its skull in half. Blood gushed out on to his face, like red plum blossoms on a white field of snow.

The teenager panicked as he was covered in blood. He carefully kneeled down, and washed his hands and face in the stream. Then, he picked up the corpse habitually, and started nibbling at the neck with his sharp tiger fangs.

Lord Kunlun was then certain that he was a Ghost King. He had never seen anyone more like one than the teen in front of him. The handsome youngster sat expressionless in bloodied stream water, feeding on a dead spirit beast; it was a scene more gruesome than anything ever seen above the underworld.

As the teen realised that Lord Kunlun was watching him, the eating slowed down. He peeked at Kunlun, then looked down and took another disinterested bite, careful not to let the blood spill out of his mouth. Then, he tried to wipe the blood stain off of his mouth.

Although Lord Kunlun did sacrifice a soul fire for Hell, he only did it to break off Mount Buzhou, which connected Earth to Heaven. He had forgotten Nuwa's regrets when the Land of Great Blasphemy was first sealed away, and he never showed any interest in coming close to these bloodthirsty creatures.

At that moment, however, he strangely walked forward, as if inadvertently, and said, "Hey kid, you're a Ghost King, right? Shouldn't you be able to control the Ghost Tribe, why did that thing try to bite you?"

The teen trembled and the corpse fell from his hands into the water, sending a splash on to his face. He looked at the approaching Lord Kunlun with panic, mouth agape, and could not respond for a moment.

"Do you not know how to talk? That can't be." Lord Kunlun leaned against the boulder awkwardly, raising his eyebrows, "Got a name? What do I call you?"

“... Wei.”

“Which Wei?”

“...Mountain, ghost.”

“Mountain Ghost?” Lord Kunlun laid on the boulder, “Fitting, but not quite impressive. Look at all the endless mountain ranges of the world. How about we add a few more strokes, and change it to Wei?”

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Lord Kunlun asked, “Little Ghost King, why aren’t you with your people?”

The young boy lowered his head in silence for a moment, and then said softly, “They’re dirty.”

Lord Kunlun hesitated for a while, and asked with enthusiasm, “Dirty how?”

The youngster did not dare to look at him, but instead stared at Lord Kunlun’s reflection in the water. He said with a serious tone, “All they do is slaughter and eat. Is there anything else that they can do? I don’t want to be near them.”

Lord Kunlun pointed out solemnly, “The Ghost Tribe is like that.”

The young Ghost King looked down with glaring eyes of gloom. But when he looked back up towards Lord Kunlun, he successfully restrained his savagery, perhaps out of habit. In a while, he lowered his voice, and asked softly, “Must I be the same as them, purely because I was born of the Ghost Tribe?”

Lord Kunlun did not reply. The teen stood up in the water, probably having lost his appetite. He stowed away the corpse of the spirit beast, and hurled it aside. Then, he washed his face with the water that is now clean, and wrung his clothes out as he bent down. He rolled up his trousers, got up from the water, and looked at Lord Kunlun.* His eyes were like raven feathers on a field of white snow. Then, he said with utmost nonchalance, “I don’t like it. I’d rather not live.”

After that, he did not sit near the boulder he sat on moments ago, which was now occupied by Lord Kunlun. Instead, he sat beside the water, his bare feet wet on the

ground, as he gazed upon the peach woods, and the mountain ranges behind the woods, and the fog and snow atop the mountains, and the thundering skies in perpetual rain.

Lord Kunlun couldn't help but ask, "What are you looking at?"

The teen pointed towards where he was looking, "What's nice to look at."

"What's so nice about rain?" Lord Kunlun said, as he sat beside the youngster against the boulder. "When it's sunny, Mount Kunlun is truly magnificent. The golden beams of the sun shine downwards, sending gleams on the snow, like blossoms. And when it is summer, a thin layer of green will grow on the craggy layer of rocks beneath the snow. And flowers too... those small blossoms, we call them galsang flowers."

The youngster was mesmerized for a moment, staring at Lord Kunlun intently.

Lord Kunlun then said, all of a sudden, "Ah, none can be seen anymore."

"Why?"

"I punctured a hole in the sky to set your people free." Lord Kunlun couldn't help but caress his head. The young Ghost King's hair looked so soft; his neck froze in place, and tamely let him touch his head. It was unbelievable; just a moment ago he was gnawing at a spirit beast's throat, and on a closer look he hadn't even wiped his mouth clean.

This reminded Lord Kunlun of his pet kitten.

"Why puncture the sky?" The young Ghost King asked.

"It was a promise." Lord Kunlun pressed lightly on his head, "You wouldn't understand, kid."

The youngster looked up with utmost seriousness, "I do understand. I never knew what was outside. If I had known sooner how beautiful the world beyond the Great Seal was, I would have punctured a hole in it too."

Lord Kunlun shook his head, and laughed. The youngster looked at him with unblinking eyes. After some time, Lord Kunlun said gently, "If one has no choice in life, one would rather not live. Looks like I've met my soulmate."

Lord Kunlun stood up, and was about to leave, as Nuwa's figure emerged in mid-air. Hurriedly scrambling, she must have been desperately searching for the stone to repair the Heavens. Lord Kunlun let out a low chuckle; life had plunged into darkness and chaos, and he felt a strange surge of ecstasy.

The young Ghost King stood up after a moment of hesitation, and followed after Lord Kunlun.

Lord Kunlun didn't stop him. He held up one hand, and a hefty mountain sprung up from the Earth: Mount Penglai. The fairy and witch tribes went to Mount Penglai to hide from the storm, which caused a humongous flood that had devoured the lands with a sweeping surge to the East.

The flood took away countless lives on Earth. Zhuanxu knelt and beseeched the Heavens.

Yet the Heavens never heeded his pleas.

Young Ghost King followed Kunlun on their way to the peak of Mount Penglai. The endless mountain ranges of the Earth rumbled amidst the chaos, which sent waves all the way to Mount Penglai. All were shaken; the witches brought Chiyou's descendants, and Houyi led his people in the footsteps of his ancestor, ascending Mount Penglai with one kowtow every step. Infants would cry amidst the crowd, and for fear of disturbing the gods, these infants were suffocated to death.

On their way up, the monstrous flood caught up to them and swept away a large group of people. The God of Mountain sitting atop the peak closed his eyes, like Nuwa, and acted like a statue.

Then, from the West came another group of people led by an old man with a medicine basket. Zhuanxu followed after the old man reverently. Lord Kunlun finally opened his eyes, and said, "Shennong."

Shennong felt something, and suddenly look up from amongst the crowd. Thunder and lightning in the sky seemed to flash within his murky eyes.

Kunlun said he would destroy Zhuanxu's people, and destroy all of humanity, but he never did. He simply would not yield to fate, and he did not bother slaughter these living beings with his own hands. He watched as Shennong brought the people up to Mount Penglai. Zhuanxu knelt and worshiped Lord Kunlun, thanking him for creating Mount Penglai as a refuge. Shennong said nothing.

When the humans stepped aside, Kunlun stood up, and before he could greet Shennong, the withering old man slapped him across the face.

The young Ghost King shone his manacing claws; roaring, he was about to pounce towards Shennong, but Lord Kunlun stopped him.

Lord Kunlun looked at the senile god, and saif softly, "You're no longer a god. You're on the verge of death."

Shennong looked at him with yellow eyes, "My sacrifice is worth it, as I have achieved what I set out to do. You were born of the mountains of the Earth; naturally, you were connected with the chaos and menace of Hell. And you carried with you the three souls

of Pangu's axe. I always said that you were born of violence, and you would one day become the bringer of destruction; the never-ending snow atop Mount Kunlun was one such omen. And now here we are."

Kunlun stood in silence.

"You fail to look beyond forever. You fail to tell right from wrong, good from evil, life from death. How dare you defy the Heavens?" Shennong slowly uttered one word after another, "Can't believe you had the gall, you will suffer the consequences! You... sigh!"

What Shennong foresaw had unfortunately come true.

On the third day, stars in the sky shattered into chaos, and ghouls terrorized the lands.

On the fourth day, the flood rose, and the people fled towards the peak. Witches and fairies had begun warring again.

On the seventh day, the war continued, and half of each tribe had perished. Descendants of the Flame and Yellow Emperors allied with the descendants of Chiyou, and they struggled to survive.

On the tenth day, Shennong preached words of wisdom amidst catastrophe and eulogies, beginning with the dawn of the universe.

On the twelfth day, Nuwa finally repaired the skies, and took the four limbs of the great Ao as the new sky pillars; she had exhausted herself to the extreme.

On the thirteenth day, the Heavens were collapsing. The Ghost Tribe plagued the lands. The four pillars trembled. The sky slanted downwards in the Northwest; mountains crumbled and the Earth cracked.

The ignorant deities had brought destruction upon themselves after defying Heavenly fate time and time again.

Heaven and Earth were merging, and the Ghost Tribe was on its way to devouring the entire world into chaos.

Lord Kunlun sat atop Mount Penglai like a statue, without a movement or a word.

"Nuwa wrote in a letter that she had sealed the four pillars to secure them. She plans on sacrificing herself to stabilise Fuxi's Great Seal." Shennong said, "You did no wrong, Kunlun. Pangu did no wrong. All of us did no wrong. But there are countless sufferings in the world, all of which are destined. Whether silent as Fuxi, rebellious as you, death is inevitable. I will soon perish like an ordinary human, and this is also fate. No-one can resist that. The problem is you know too much."

Kunlun opened his eyes calmly, and asked, "Chiyou asked me to protect the witches and the fairies, and now fate has me decide which to save, or else they shall both perish, is that it?"

Shennong stared at him in silence.

"Save the fairies." Kunlun finally said.

Shennong let out a long sigh, knowing that he already compromised.

The great flood finally subsided. Nuwa greatly injured the evil Ghost King who wielded a great axe like Pangu. She then turned into Houtu, and repaired the opening in the Great Seal, forcing the Ghost Tribe back under the four pillars. Yet, Nuwa had used up too much of her energy repairing the sky, and she had suffered injuries from the Ghost King's axe. The Great Seal was barely repaired, but was unstable still.

Shennong sat at Kunlun's temple, not uttering a word.

"I thought I would have died by Heavenly Thunder." Lord Kunlun suddenly said, "Who would have thought that my death had been determined when I stabbed the dragon in its eye, and destroy Mount Buzhou."

Shennong lifted his weathered eyes, and silently looked at the final one remaining of the four great saints of the primordial lands... perhaps Lord Kunlun could have went into hiding, he could have forced the doors of Mount Kunlun close with his primal magic. Even if the universe returned to chaos, he could have survived.

Yet, Lord Kunlun was born of Pangu's great axe, and he was the only one who would never go against what Pangu had hoped for the world.

Lord Kunlun was Pangu's legacy.

"I want to... see my cat one more time."

Shennong carried his medicine basket and trod towards the deep mountains. Nuwa was nowhere to be seen.

All seemed lost. Lord Kunlun returned to his empty temple, and found only a dark-haired, dark-eyed, slender and feeble-looking teen.

The young Ghost King asked softly, "Are you sending me back under the Great Seal?"

"No. There is nothing I can do, except... I can at least protect you." Lord Kunlun grinned, as his body trembled strangely, and his voice quivered subtly, "You don't want to be one of the Ghost Tribe, so I will grant you that wish."

The young Ghost King was greatly shocked. He turned Lord Kunlun around by the shoulder, only to find the mountain god with an almost translucent body, and a face white as snow. Lord Kunlun held up his hand with a gust of wind, and a ball of fire shone bright like a star in his palm, "Take it."

The young boy received it with both hands.

"This is the soul flame on my left shoulder," Lord Kunlun was sweating on his forehead, but he kept a gentle smile, "and I... I will give you another thing."

His body trembled vigorously, as he pulled out a silver tendon from his body... there is no pain greater than that of peeling off one's skin and pulling out one's tendon. The young Ghost King teared up, but Lord Kunlun looked as though nothing had happened, "With this, you'll be able to... escape from the Land of Great Blasphemy, and become a god..."

"You... you have to help me protect the four pillars." Kunlun smiled, "With Nuwa's Sundial of Reincarnation, Fuxi's Pillar of Nature, and... the Ink Brush of Virtue from the primeval tree of virtue. I will add one last thing to that..."

"Kunlun!"

Lord Kunlun held up the young boy's face with his thumb, and said softly, "Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen; body, not yet lived but dead... If Shennong was willing to give up godhood and become a human, I will give him one last thing to complete his dying wish..."

He coughed up a mouthful of blood in his palm, which transformed into a crimson candle wick. The mountain god standing before the Ghost King was becoming more and more transparent, more and more feeble. As he dispersed, a snow-white lamp remained, with just one word engraved at a corner: "Guardian".

Soul, not yet burnt but dispersed. The Lantern of the Guardian.

From then on, the Four Mystical Artifacts were complete, and the four pillars were saved. The young Ghost King was somehow tasked with the tremendous responsibility of protecting the pillars that held up Heaven... it was Lord Kunlun's final ridicule of Heavenly fate.

And thus began some 5000 years of such responsibility.

Zhao Yunlan thought something had exploded in his brain. He must have experienced the pain of being skinned, of being crushed by all the mountains of the Earth, and of being bound by the Heavens all over again.

Years flashed before his eyes, as an undated sigh came from within the holy tree... a voice saying, "Why did you have to..."

"Pan... gu..."

Zhao opens his eyes to glaring white light. He feels heavy on the head and light on the feet. As he opens his eyes yet again, he is back in Dragon City during the New Year. Lights are out at No. 4 Bright Avenue; lush trees cover the courtyard even in the cold.

He feels a bit cold on his face. With his hand, he wipes off a face full of tears.

Translator's Note:

Part Four: Primordial's Past was a lot to take in. I know some of you might be confused by all the references to Chinese mythos. Bear in mind that the author took a lot of liberties in creating her own story, only loosely basing some parts on the Classic of Mountains and Seas.

I hope the following summary of key events helps. We'll start from the beginning of the universe.

1. Pangu died separating Heaven and Earth, thus paving way for life; the head of his axe became Mount Kunlun, and Lord Kunlun was the manifestation of the soul of the mountain.
2. Kunlun was a naughty teenager, so Nuwa gave him Da Qing to distract him.
3. Nuwa created humans.
4. Realising humans were born of the evil of Hell, Nuwa sought help from Fuxi to create the Great Seal to seal away the evil; Fuxi died to make the seal.
5. Nuwa went in hiding, Kunlun grew up, and humans began to war.
6. Kunlun witnessed the war for countless years, and finally put an end to it by breaking the Great Seal, awakening Hell with his left shoulder flame, and destroying the pathway to Heaven.
7. Kunlun wanted a world free from Heavenly fate, he wanted to create the Ink Brush and let every living being write their own destiny. But his plan ultimately caused greater chaos.
8. Kunlun met the young Ghost King for the first time.
9. Nuwa repaired the sky and restored the sky pillars, then sacrificed herself to restore the Great Seal; Shennong died too.
- 10.. Kunlun gave young Ghost King his left soul flame and his tendon so that the Ghost King could become a god, the four mystical artifacts so that he could protect the four sky pillars; Kunlun then died.

Guardian Chapter: 79

Chapter: 79

When Guo Changcheng gets home, his first priority is sleep. Once he gets his sleep, and starts looking more like a human, he tidies up his place, and heads out to visit relatives, not forgetting to pick up a few gifts on the way. First, he arrives at his second uncle's place... he has to hand uncle the red packet as per Chief's instruction; Guo has this problem, if he has "someone else's stuff" on his person it gives him the heebie-jeebies... despite the fact that he knows uncle will probably just hand the red packet back to him anyway.

When he enters his uncle's place, after a greeting, the first thing he takes out is the red packet. Like giving a police report, he recites everything verbatim, "Uncle, our Chief said it's the New Years, so this is for aunt and sister to buy some new clothes."

Guo's sister is a spoilt brat: spends money like water and brings back none. This is his uncle's very first time receiving a red packet from one of his nephews. Greatly surprised, he takes the packet after a while, and peeks inside with disbelief, then returns it to Guo, "Wow, that's quite a lot, you can use it to buy something for yourself... that's strange, isn't that Old Yang a total scrooge, why did he think of giving out red packets all of a sudden?"

Guo is confused, "Who is Old Yang?"

Uncle stands up to take a tray of dumplings, and says, "Isn't the head of the Residence Registry Old Yang? His name's got three words, what was it again?"

Guo says, "Our Chief is Chief Zhao."

Uncle seems nonchalant, as he places pairs of chopsticks on the table, and says, "Whatever it is, I remember hearing that this guy is as thrifty as one can get. But then again, everyone's got a family to feed, so it's understandable. You need to work hard, especially if your boss likes you, you're not a kid anymore, don't spend all your money, save some for emergencies and what not, you've got to learn how to take care of yourself..."

Guo is more and more bewildered, "Uncle, our Chief isn't even married."

"How is that possible? Isn't his daughter going to university soon? I was telling everyone to go easy on him, that things are not easy for him." Uncle finally feels like something is wrong, "Hold on, who gave you the red packet?"

Guo replies, "Our Chief Zhao."

"Chief Zhao? Which Chief Zhao?"

"Chief Zhao... of the Special Investigations Unit?"

“SIU? Bright Avenue? Chief Zhao? Zhao Yunlan?” His uncle fires a flurry of questions, and stares at Guo intently. He puts a dumpling in his mouth, and starts chewing distractedly. Still, he finds this all too incredible, and says with a mouthful, “That makes no sense, how do I have the influence to recommend someone to the SIU?”

“What influence?” Aunt sits down at the table as well, “Aren’t you at the Residence Registry?”

Guo replies candidly, “I’m working for the Special Investigations Unit now.”

“The what now? Crime investigations?” Aunt knows this embarrassing kid all too well, and immediately begins to worry, “What’s with your uncle’s recommendation, how can our boy work for crime investigations? It’s dangerous, and unstable; what if he gets given a deadly case.... say, what kind of cases do you work on?”

Guo’s mouth is agape, but uncle slams his chopsticks on the bowl and says, “Don’t ask, SIU cases are all classified, I won’t have him breaking the rules... just say, is your work dangerous? Do you get tired all the time? How about I help you put a word out, maybe you could switch to a safer position, albeit less well-paid.”

At this point, the slow-witted Guo finally realises... from the very beginning, his being assigned to the SIU was a mistake. Considering his brain-power, he knows well enough that he is not qualified for this position.

Of course, Guo no longer remembers how he passed out from fear on his first day.

Guo has always been the unsociable kind. He had barely gotten used to the atmosphere at No. 4 Bright Avenue, but he has already become strongly fond of that place, especially Chu Shuzhi and others.

As for Zhao, Guo basically treats him like half a dad... although this “half-dad” suddenly found him a stepfather unannounced.

And yet, this stepfather is the kindest, and easiest to talk to, so Guo very adamantly says to his uncle, “I don’t wanna leave.”

Guo has always been indecisive, and would jump at any chance to agree with everyone else. Uncle and aunt are both taken aback by his new-found decisiveness.

After a good while, aunt asks, “Is that place.... really that good?”

Guo nods his head very forcefully.

“You really want to work there?” Uncle is still worried, “Is it really not dangerous?”

In order to stay, Guo very decisively lies, “Not dangerous at all.”

“Well alright then,” Uncle thinks, he is an adult now after all, though he has never had any achievement or ambition. Now that he has passion for his work, it wouldn’t be wise to extinguish that passion, so he hesitantly agrees, “Then give me your Chief’s number, I will find the time to meet with Zhao Yunlan. He is not much older than you, you need to learn from him.”

The ringing cell phone awakens Zhao. He feels as though his temples were punctured, pain radiates, and he seems even more exhausted despite having just woken up.

He doesn’t know for how long he had slept. Chaotic dreams drowned his mind in disorder, always revolving around stabbing the godly dragon blind, and then crashing into Mount Buzhou. The visions would never go away.

Zhao’s hand runs through the nightstand, and soon his phone is gently placed on to his hand. His eyes have yet to open as he is answering the phone. Once he realises who is calling, he enters the appropriate mode automatically. After some lengthy pleasantries, Zhao very carefully and arduously picks a few of Guo’s strengths, taking care not to exaggerate, so as to stealthily butter up the other. And so the two agrees to meet up.

Zhao hangs up, and buries his head in the pillow, “My head hurts.”

Shen immediately stops whatever he was doing, and holds him in his arms, endlessly caressing his forehead, “A bit hot, why do you have a fever all of a sudden?”

Zhao leans his feeble head on the other’s shoulder, and says with gritting teeth, “Why do you think? Get me some inflammation and fever medicine, you quack doctor.”

With immense regret, Shen silently abides.

Zhao swallows a few small pills in one gobble, then rolls up the sleeves on the pajamas that Shen somehow put on him. Suddenly, he pushes Shen on to the bed, a horrifying expression emerges on his face, “Mister, were my services last night satisfactory?”

Shen sees that he still very unstable, and makes haste to hold him by the waist, and buttons up his pajamas properly, “Don’t mess up the blanket, you will catch a cold.”

“That’s none of your business.” Zhao pushes down his shoulder with one hand, the other pulling up his collar, and says with a menacing voice, “If mister was satisfied, maybe you owe me my tip?”

Shen lets him do whatever he wants, and only looks up at him. To Zhao, that is blatantly an invitation to ravish him. His courage somehow skyrockets in his anger, and he begins ripping Shen’s clothes off, “If I don’t do you today, I will take your last name tomorrow... ow, fuck!”

Shen hurries and wraps his arm around him, “What’s wrong?”

“Ow... ow ow ow, leg cramp.”

Zhao probably always lacked iron, and on top of that last night was utter ravages, which only worsens his cramps... first his thighs, then his calves, then the feet. Shen can only stretch his legs amidst all the screaming and swearing, and gradually relieve his cramps.

Zhao’s pain worsens till he starts biting the blanket. Then, after a while, the pain subsides. Shen catches a glimpse of patches of olive and mauve bruises on Zhao’s body. He sits besides Zhao apologetically, and begins massaging his sore muscles. Zhao settles down, and lays on the bed to enjoy. He peeks at his phone on the nightstand, and suddenly says, “Guo’s second uncle is a higher-up, he only started his current position starting this year, and I don’t know him too well. Some say that he is not good at anything, but he knows how to please everyone.”

“His nephew has been working for me for over half a year, but he has never contacted me all this time. That is until just now, do you think that’s normal?”

Shen doesn’t understand the messy unspoken rules of the workplace, and asks, “How so?”

“I suspect that the old man only just found out that Guo is working for me, and that...” Zhao stops for a moment, and doesn’t continue. He peeks at Shen, and quickly changes the topic, “Did I really destroy the pathway to Heaven, Mount Buzhou?”

Shen hesitates, and then says, “Legends say Gonggong destroyed Mount Buzhou.”

“Uh.” Zhao closes his eyelids... if the Ghost Tribe was only released after Mount Buzhou collapsed, then Shen probably wouldn’t know who exactly destroyed Buzhou.

Shen hesitates, but he couldn’t help asking, “So when you were in the holy tree, what...”

“I saw things that happened five thousand years ago.” Zhao lays on the pillow, and turns towards him, “I saw you meeting me for the first time, when you fell from a big boulder into a pool of water. And so I thought, that must have been because I was too handsome, so handsome that you were blinded by the glimmer, and fell into the water out of shock... ah!”

Shen’s grip inadvertently tightens on Zhao’s hip.

“My... my old hip... are you trying to murder your husband?”

Shen gently massages him, staying silent for a while. But perhaps since they have already taken the most intimate step, he very surprisingly admits, “When I saw you for the first time, I was in huge panic. I will never forget that moment.”

Zhao's smile is smug and lascivious, "Hehehe, hey, Professor Shen, take off your glasses, and show your husband your old long-haired look."

Shen very obediently takes off his glasses, and returns to his original look. Jet black hair lengthens and spreads on the bed.

Perhaps these stupid men just somehow have a thing for long hair. Zhao finds that a soft spot in his heart is pierced precisely with an arrow. He stares at Shen intently for a long time, and then his dirty paws begin carefully caressing Shen's hair, and he murmurs, "Super, super super super beauty. This life is definitely worth living."

Shen massages his shoulders, and Zhao gradually hides away his obsessed, idiotic expression. He ponders in silence, frowns, and then continues, "But I think, since I grew up with dat fat fuq, even if he did anything wrong, like eloping with a cat mistress, I still wouldn't do anything to him."

Shen blinks in confusion, not quite sure why the topic has now turned to eloping cat.

"If I really promised Chiyou to take care of his descendants, and I watched generations of dragons grow up from small worms to several-million-mile-long beasts, I would have never stabbed the godly dragon in its eye and crashed it into Mount Buzhou. I would

have rather stabbed myself in the hand." Zhao very adamantly announces, "I definitely didn't stab the dragon in the eye, and Mount Buzhou was definitely not my doing either."

"The judge very shamelessly spewed a bunch of bull crap, and none of it was true. How much of the things that I saw in the holy tree is true, do you think? And who showed it to me?" Zhao twirls Shen's hair around his finger, with a smile on his face, but coldness in his eyes. After a while, he says gently, "Hey, baby, tell me more about when we met at the peach woods."

Shen lets out a quiet chuckle, and says quietly, "There's not much. I didn't know anything at that time, and you treated me very well. You took me to see the mountains and streams of the Earth. But Nuwa had yet to repair the skies, and you would always say that even the most beautiful landscapes lose their charm when it's raining perpetually. But I didn't mind, it was the most beautiful landscape I have ever since."

"Even the most beautiful landscapes lose their charm when it's raining perpetually". Perhaps that was only a casual complaint. Zhao frowns, and ponders that if he indeed planned to send the world into chaos, he would not have brought a beautiful stranger travelling.

"Then afterwards, I made you a god." Zhao says.

Shen smiles, "Don't feel sorry for it. I was born an abomination, and you rescued me from the depths of Hell. I will always be grateful."

As he is saying this, he leans forward and gently places a kiss on Zhao's beard. He grabs hold of Zhao's hand, and says, "The days that we spent together are worth dying for."

"Bullshit." Zhao interrupts him, "After Nuwa repaired the Heaven, I sealed the sky pillars with the Mystical Artifacts, and then I left you behind and died... didn't I?"

Shen's hands freeze in place, and he embraces Zhao tightly.

"Why..." Zhao murmurs, "Was it because of Nuwa?"

A flash of discontent emerges on Shen's face, and Zhao happens to catch a glimpse of it. This idiot immediately forgets all about what he was thinking about, and lifts up Shen's chin with his finger, "Don't be upset. I was just asking casually. You are way prettier than Nuwa of course. Come on, beautiful, tell your husband, how did you use your young, pretty face to seduce me all those years ago?"

Shen covers him with the blanket, and glares at him unnaturally, seemingly about to enter serious mode and chastise him for misbehaving. But then, he sees the marks of love left on Zhao's collarbone, which reminds him of god-knows-what. He looks away, and his ears turn red. Finally, all he can say is, "I am going out."

He speedily stands up, takes the laundry receipt on the table and heads out.

Zhao massages his hip, which is still very sore. A million feelings swell up that words can't describe.

After a while, he crawls up and cleans himself. He eats a bowl of food Shen prepared for him, and starts talking on the phone, "Hey dad, you free tomorrow? I'm bringing Shen Wei to meet you."

As he says this, there is no joy on his face, but only freezing coldness.

Guardian Chapter: 80

Chapter: 80

And as expected, Zhao's father is not home. Mommy Zhao is all apologetic, and keeps explaining that "he was really called away last-minute by a super important phone call".

Of course Shen wouldn't mind. Zhao wears a smile, and surprisingly has nothing to say. The two enjoy a meal at Zhao's place and leaves.

Zhao was thrown into dismay by the holy tree, so he somehow didn't notice... but what father would coldly excuse himself because "preparations need to be made, so we shall

meet later”, when he knew full well his son’s male lover was right there in the apartment?

It’s not a date, what’s there to prepare for?

He simply doesn’t want to meet Shen.

But why not? Does he not want to? Or does he not dare to?

Just before leaving, Zhao retrieves a small and weathered wooden box from his bedroom. Mommy Zhao asks, “Didn’t you play with that when you were young? How come you never threw it away, and what are you doing with it?”

“Sharing childhood memories with my lover. Lonely, old married couples like you who have grown to hate each other wouldn’t understand.”

And for that, his mother beats him out of the house.

It’s Valentine’s Day. The empty streets are suddenly crowded with people. A girl who sells flowers passes by the two nonchalantly, but is called back by Zhao, “Hey girl, how many flowers do you have?”

The girl looks at them with surprise, and then smiles, “As many as you want, I can go back to the shop to get them for you.”

Zhao says, “Then I will have five thousand...”

“Sorry, sorry, he is just kidding.”

Shen covers Zhao’s mouth and tows him away.

Zhao struggles to free his head from Shen’s arm, “I still wanna buy stuff, wait!!!!!!”

Shen pulls the car door open and stuffs him inside without a word.

Zhao half-genuinely complains, “Do you know romance?”

Shen fires back, revolted, “As if you do?”

Zhao very irresponsibly says, “I will buy a few thousand flowers, and cover the entire car with flowers, then I will take you as my wife.”

Shen has probably been bullied by him for too long, he no longer silently bursts out in anger, but has silently become corrupted. He takes down his glasses, and somewhat inhibitedly wipes the snow off of them. He feigns nonchalance, while arduously raising a flag of resistance.... he says, taking care to appear calm, “I thought you wanted to

become a flower supplier... shouldn't I be taking you as my wife? Yesterday you said you will take my last name."

Zhao has been used to one-sided abuse, other than that one time he got drunk, his teasing has never met any comeback. He is instantly left gobsmacked.

Of course, what he doesn't know is that much like Guo, Shen had to rehearse his line three times in his mind to finally be able to say it smoothly out loud.

And yet, this old, sly gangster very quickly recovers, and very shamelessly starts taking his clothes off, "Alright, I will take your last name, wanna bone right here, hubby? You don't need to do anything, just lie there, I will satisfy you."

Shen is furious, "Zhao Yunlan!"

"Present."

"How... how can you be so improper?"

Zhao's hands press on to his car seat, and says with a naughty smile, "You haven't seen me at my worst."

Embarrassed and outraged, Shen's face darkens. He pulls Zhao in by the collar, and glares at him menacingly, spouting one word after another, "Do you realise we're on the streets? Do you realise people might see us? Do you know for how many times I've thought about the people who have been with you before, and wanted to scoop all their eyes out?"

Zhao is speechless.

After a good while, Zhao finally withdraws back to his seat, and mumbles, "Hey, actually I was just kidding, just kidding. I wasn't gonna do anything. Still got serious stuff to do here."

Shen starts the engine in silence. Zhao rubs his nose, and sits aside in good discipline. He opens his little wooden box, and starts rummaging through the sundries inside. He finds a small radio receiver, and then takes out a box of small screwdrivers kept in the car, and begins working on the small machine.

His fingers are incredibly dexterous. Obviously, he used to mess with wires at school all the time... one can totally foresee, if only Zhao weren't the thriftless and fickle kind, being with a man like him means no new electrical appliances needed, ever.

The two sit in silence for a while, and as Shen's anger subsides, he becomes regretful... most people are pretentious and uptight in front of strangers, but relaxed and genuine with their loved ones. But Shen is the exact opposite, he has gotten too used to

restraining himself in front of Zhao. He is always afraid that Zhao would notice his condemnable nature. Sometimes, Shen doesn't even know what to say to Zhao... he has always found himself filthy and disgraceful, thus not worthy of Zhao.

Zhao has been working his small tools for long, and hasn't said a word. Shen finally peeks at Zhao at the traffic light, and very anxiously whispers, "What are you doing?"

Luckily, Zhao is quick to forget, and quick to forgive. He excitedly explains, "This is a signal receiver I made as a kid. I'm fixing the broken parts... stop at the supermarket later, I'm gonna get some batteries."

Zhao has his batteries, and the small monitor on the receiver lights up with a "hiss". There is a barely visible dot on the screen, but the brightness is very low. Zhao puts his hands around the screen and leans in for a closer look.

He changes the channel slowly, and adjusts the size of the dot, while comparing with some markings on the side that nobody understands. After a while, he says, "Uh, not far away. Seems to be avoiding us... let's turn back."

Shen makes a u-turn, while Zhao leans close to his small screen, and gives instructions, "Turn left... this is a tracker I made out of a radio receiver when I was a kid."

"What does it track?" Shen seems to be quite interested, although he probably doesn't even understand what "radio" means.

"It tracks my dad. I put a signal generator in his phone, and who would have thought he is still using the same phone for all these years." Zhao says, "I was still going to high school, so my technique wasn't very good. It's unstable, and it loses track if the signal is too far away."

Shen can't help but touch his pocket, as he thinks of his age-old phone that he never uses, and doesn't even know how to answer sometimes... if someone did something to it, he wouldn't have any idea.

Zhao sees what's going on, as he crosses his legs and lights a cigarette leisurely, "Don't worry, I won't put anything on you as long as you aren't cheating on me with some young pretty boy."

Shen glares at him, irritated.

"Left, left. Yes, that tea house. I see my old man's car." Zhao's voice seems lighthearted, but his face sinks deep, "I must find out today, just who is this man who raised me."

Shen's car has barely stopped, and Zhao is already out of his seat belt and off the car. He runs up the stairs.

Shen locks the car, and adjusts his glasses. He finally follows suit, with utmost composure. He even nods towards the waitress as he goes up the stairs.

The waitress is only in her twenties. She is mesmerised, and a tea cup falls to the floor, and shatters.

Zhao's father sits with his back facing the door. He turns around when he hears something, and his eyes look out from behind the light-reflecting lenses of his glasses.

His eyes look calm and his gaze is distant. Zhao stops at first, then he takes big leaps forward and signals the waiter to leave. He sits opposite his father, and lowers his voice, "You're not my dad, who are you?"

"Zhao's father" has yet to answer. He looks towards the stairs with a stern expression, and watches Shen making his way up. The two lock eyes precisely, and after some hesitation, Shen very politely nods, "Uncle."

"Zhao's father" has a strange gaze, and his facial features tighten greatly. Because of his age, smile lines on his face deepen. After a while, he replies with a neutral tone, "You are too kind."

Shen wears a barely noticeable smile, and does not sit at the table. He sits in a chair on the side, a few steps away from the two. He takes a new cup, washes it, and makes some tea for himself. Without batting an eyelid, he clearly doesn't intend to join the conversation.

Zhao says, "I was a drunken fool that day, otherwise I would've realised you are a fake just from your eyes... my dad has always been an ambitious beast, he would never wear a face with so much tastefulness. You tricked me into calling you dad for a few times, and I can let that slide, but where's my dad? And how are you connected to Shennong? Don't tell me.... you are Shennong?"

"Zhao's father" moves his lips, but for whatever reason, doesn't say anything. After a while, he lowers his eyelids, and glances to the side at Shen. He then takes a sip of tea, and still makes no sound.

Zhao's patience is running out. He knocks on the table lightly with his finger, and says, "Hey mister, I'm only so civil with you because you might be related to Shennong, if you won't co-operate... as a son, I owe it to my dad, this is something I cannot ignore."

"I'm not Shennong." After a good while, "Zhao's father" begins, "And your father is fine. I borrow his body once in a while, and I always leave some useful memories for him. I've never been an inconvenience."

"Then what are you?" Zhao asks.

“Zhao’s father” smiles, “I’m only the great Shennong’s medicine bowl. During the war of gods, by some sheer luck I completed cultivation and became a minor deity. If I was any inconvenience to Lord Kunlun, I am truly sorry.”

“What are you doing in my dad’s body? Are you connected to the memories I saw in the holy tree?” To Zhao, whether he is a deity or something else has no bearing, he treats people and gods the same anyway. Somehow, he has assumed the role of a cop interrogating a criminal.

“Zhao’s father” raises his eyebrows, and asks slowly, “How did Lord Kunlun find out that the memories inside the holy tree aren’t your true memories?”

“I’m not that childish zombie who works for me, and I’m not Sun Wukong either,” Zhao drinks tea like water, and finishes a cup in one gulp, “I might be a bit wild sometimes, but mostly I’m carefree. If there is anything that can force me to rebel, it must be some tremendous rage. But why didn’t I feel anything while watching, except sorrow?”

“Zhao’s father” nods in agreement, “Makes sense.”

“No matter what, I just cannot believe I would do something so simple and violent like puncturing a hole in the Heavens out of anger.” Zhao continues, “After all, Kunlun was born master of the mountains and rivers, the protector of life on Earth. For all my past and present lives I have always been an animal rights activist. I would never stab the godly dragon blind.”

“Zhao’s father” smiles lightly, and doesn’t speak.

Zhao’s gaze grows cold, “So I want to know, why did you mislead me using the holy tree?”

“Zhao’s father” sighs, “Perhaps when Lord Kunlun can look beyond forever...”

“Don’t give me that bullshit.” Zhao interrupts, “Talk like a human, I’m running out of patience. If you make me angry, I don’t care who’s broken bowl you are, you’re gonna be in real pain.”

“Zhao’s father” looks at him, and then his gaze lightly shifts, falling on Shen who is flipping through a magazine. Suddenly, his body trembles vigorously. Zhao’s father loses focus in his eyes, and then soon regains clear sight, but his gaze... no, his entire person has changed.

Zhao’s father massages his temples, and then frowns, looking at Zhao, and asks confusedly, “What were you saying? I’m a bit tired these few days, I couldn’t concentrate.”

Zhao flinches. Immediately, he transforms from a ferocious gangster to a juvenile delinquent. He almost melts down, and after a while, he very softly says, "Dad?"

Zhao's father frowns, "Hm?"

That expression speaks a thousand words. Zhao can clearly make out a complex message: "say whatever crap you need to say, I will give you one full minute only because you're my son, I'm tired I don't want to hear some bullshit wasting my time".

Zhao immediately pulls Shen towards him as a human shield, "Nothing. It's just that we agreed to meet. You're not home, so I brought him here to meet you..."

"I had something to do last-minute, came here to meet a friend." Zhao's father murmurs, and then rigidly turns to look at Shen. After some detailed scrutiny, owing to Professor Shen's gentlemanly charisma, he could not find any wrong to nitpick. Finally, he greets him drily, and then says, somewhat forcefully, "I have been rude to our guest, I hope Professor Shen wouldn't mind."

Shen very politely greets him back.

Zhao takes out a paper talisman, it's a deity repellent. He secretly folds it into a triangle behind his back, and then pushes it towards his father, "And also, I went to the temple to get you a talisman for good luck. Don't open it, keep it on your person."

Zhao's father unsuspectingly accepts it.

And yet, nothing happens. The talisman does not respond. Zhao instantly frowns... has that broken bowl ran away, or is it so strong that even an advanced talisman like this has no effect?