

Guardian Chapter: 9

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Zhao Yunlan leaned backwards and crossed his legs.

“Why are you so agitated? If you didn’t know the victim, and her death had nothing to do with you, why are you so frightened? Why did you take the longer route to the East side? What did you see?”

Li Qian suddenly screeched, falling to the ground, trying to cover her face with her hair.

Zhao Yunlan grabbed her wrist, continuing to question her. “You can’t run away from it. Tell me, what did you see?”

Li Qian struggled out of his grasp and began to shake uncontrollably.

“I don’t know!” she screamed, her voice nearly breaking from its force. “I don’t know! Don’t ask me anything! I don’t know anything!”

“Your campus isn’t very big,” Zhao Yunlan continued, lowering his voice, “you must have seen her or met her somewhere, perhaps in a study room, the library, or the cafeteria. Do you wanna know how she died? When she was found, her body was lying all alone in the small alley, her stomach slashed open and emptied. There were teeth markings on some remaining guts, so the murderer could have eaten her internal organs. Blood... everywhere. The stains are yet to be cleaned up, and you know what...”

Li Qian squeaked in terror, shuddering in response to the gruesome descriptions.

“When her stomach was slashed open, she was still alive; her guts and intestines were being eaten, one by one, while she was still conscious...” Zhao Yunlan heartlessly continued. “Can you imagine? She would have heard the crunching and munching of her own organs.”

Li Qian curled up into a ball, burying her head between her knees.

A doctor, in response to her earlier screaming, rushed inside, shouting in distress. “What’s wrong?”

Zhao Yunlan showed him his staff card and closed the door, saying, “Excuse me, this is a police investigation. Please give me five more minutes.”

Zhao Yunlan crossed his arms, turned around, and repeated, “Tell me what you saw.”

“A shadow...”

Zhao Yunlan’s expression grew sombre and he dashed forward, kneeling beside Li Qian. “What kind of shadow?”

“Watch out for the shards,” Shen Wei reminded them, grabbing a broom to clean up the shattered glass. “Should I see myself out? Li Qian, do you want some water?”

“No,” Zhao Yunlan waved his hand in refusal. “It’s good that you’re here. I didn’t bring a female colleague along, so it wouldn’t be appropriate if it’s just the two of us in here.”

He helped Li Qian up, handing her a pack of tissues, repeated his earlier question. “What kind of shadow? Please tell me.”

“When I passed by her and saw her wearing the T-shirt, I greeted her even though we didn’t know each other. But she told me to ‘back off’, and hurried away. Then...” Li Qian’s red eyes widened and she shivered. “...Then I looked down, and I saw... she had two shadows.”

“Multiple light sources can create multiple shadows, perhaps...” Shen Wei softly explained.

“No, not like that!” Li Qian trembled as she recalled what she’d seen. “The shadow appeared where there was no light, and it was much darker than normal. And... and it was moving all on its own!”

The room was eerily silent. Li Qian had been trembling and quivering for so long, it seemed that her bones were about to shatter.

Shen Wei leaned forward, softly murmuring, “Calm down.”

“I saw it, Professor Shen, I really saw it!” Li Qian grabbed his shirt, tears starting to leak out of her swollen eyes. “I saw it follow the girl, and when she entered the narrow alley, the shadow stood up like an actual person... I ran and I ran. I thought I was dreaming, I thought it was just an illusion, you know? But you just had to tell me that she’s... she’s...”

She pushed Shen Wei away, sprinted to the nearest corner and vomited.

Shen Wei glared at Zhao Yunlan with disapproval.

Zhao Yunlan rubbed his nose, commenting, “Uh, don’t worry, her reaction could have been worse. You didn’t see it, but earlier this morning one of the policemen at the crime scene vomited even more.”

Shen Wei helplessly looked at Zhao Yunlan and shook his head. Turning away, he asked the doctor at the door for some water and helped Li Qian up.

Li Qian shakily stood, legs resembling boiled noodles, and stumbled to the bed, staring at Zhao Yunlan with a helpless gaze. "It killed her and now it's coming after me. I saw it, so it wouldn't let me go, would it?"

Zhao Yunlan didn't respond and took a small notebook out of his pocket.

"What did it look like?"

"I'm not too sure, but it was... it looked like a person, about this tall." She motioned with her hand. "It was all black, a little short, and a little fat..."

"Short and fat?" Zhao Yunlan echoed her, his face twisting into a frown.

Li Qian nodded.

"Could it be that it wasn't short, but you ran away before it stood up?"

Li Qian paused for a moment, then dropped her head. "May... maybe."

Zhao Yunlan paused and looked at her strangely before resuming his writing. "And then?" he prompted.

"Then I ran away."

Zhao Yunlan silently scrutinised the girl.

Li Qian clenched her fists under his gaze, fingers turning white.

After a moment, Zhao Yunlan tore off a piece of paper and wrote down a string of numbers. "If there is anything else, please call me; my phone is on twenty-four seven. Thank you for your time," he said.

Stuffing the paper into Li Qian's hand, he stood up.

"I will walk you out," Shen Wei offered.

"Oh, there's no need," Zhao Yunlan replied. "I'm going out for a smoke. You stay behind to chat with her a bit. Sorry if I scared her."

Zhao Yunlan left.

"Are you hungry? I can buy you a meal from the cafeteria," Shen Wei gently asked the scared girl.

Li Qian nodded feebly, slightly relieved that Zhao Yunlan was gone.

Shen Wei then asked, "I will call the doctor in to look after you. You have a good rest here before you head back, okay?"

Li Qian nodded again.

Shen Wei reached the door, before worriedly turning around. "Do you have enough cash? I could give you some."

Li Qian smiled lightly. "Thank you, professor, but I don't need it."

Shen Wei sighed and subtly reminded her, "Some lies are intentional, some are not. The former is to deceive others, the latter is to deceive yourself... but both are pitiable regardless of the situation."

Li Qian froze.

Shen Wei looked down before letting out a sigh. "Never mind, take care of yourself."

He picked up a bottle of medicine from the pharmacy and rushed out.

Zhao Yunlan was still in the corridor, on the phone.

"I checked, this time it's not our problem. It's a problem from 'the other side'," the female voice on the phone, unlike Wang Zheng's, contained hints of mischief. "Last night the Gates of Hell opened and several ghosts went missing, but most of them were new ghosts less than a week old. The problem is, I heard a hungry ghost got away in the mix."

Zhao Yunlan thought he heard her wrong. "A what???" he questioned in surprise.

"Hungry ghost."

Zhao Yunlan was furious, but managed to lower his voice. "What the fuck is going on? Which motherfucking Hell Guard wants to get fired?"

"The prisons aren't perfect. Besides, 'the other side' is still using the same management from over a century ago. Hungry ghosts are the most desperate and the prison guards are pretty useless. I could probably break out of that prison eight times a day." She paused for a moment. "Oh right, since someone died, 'that person' will be sending a letter and perhaps may even visit us in person. Come back quickly, I don't dare to open that letter."

Zhao Yunlan frowned. "Right, got it, I'm coming. Help me take care of something in the meantime. Since the small alley faces the University's main road, there should be

CCTVs around. Help me dig up the footage. Then check on Li Qian, a first year postgraduate in Dragon City University, studying foreign languages. Also, I want you to help me ask 'the other side' whether they've heard of an ancient sundial with a Wheel of Reincarnation on it."

Zhao Yunlan glanced to the side and saw Shen Wei rush out of the room. "That's all. I've got to go. Call me if you find anything."

He hung up and turned around, quickly putting on a polite and friendly face. "Wait a moment, Professor Shen. You're too kind."