

## GUARDIAN

### Chapter: 92

This answer made both the Kunlun Jun from that side of the memory and the Zhao Yunlan on this end fall silent.

Suddenly, it was no longer important whether that ball of fire was purposefully thrown down by Shennong.

Shennong clutched Kunlun's wrist. He stared at the ignorant and ferocious ghost tribe with his murky old eyes and took two steps forward. He was already elderly and Kunlun had no choice but to bend down slightly to carefully support him. When he looked down at Shennong, Kunlun's expression contained an imperceptible shadow – he's old, this meant that he would die soon.

Kunlun Jun had never experienced “old age” or “death” before, but he had already smelled that terrible decay from Shennong's body.

“The things I said to Nuwa last time, you heard it all?” Shennong asked.

Kunlun Jun furrowed his eyebrows: “Who's in the mood to listen to you guys' endless mysterious ramblings? Just talk about what we should do now. You even mentioned Nuwa to me. If she knew that you old folk trembled and burned through the Fuxi seal, I'd be surprised if she didn't turn against you... And you even used my soul fire. You really know how to bring disaster my way.”

Shennong glanced at him: “She won’t.”

Kunlun Jun hmm-ed twice sarcastically: “I beg to differ.”

Shennong coughed for a while in an old and feeble way: “Life and death are very important. If you live without fear you are akin to dead. You can’t take them as jokes. However, if you can jump out of the circle of life and death, you will no longer need to fear.”

“I am going to stand here obediently. I’m not going to jump anywhere and I have no need to be afraid.” Kunlun Jun replied coolly, “Seems like the one who should be afraid is you—  
Oh right, Da Shenmu’s fruits are ripe. These 100 years, there have only ever been two ripe ones. I gave one to my cat bro, the other one I saved for you. It can extend your life 100 years.”

“Thank you very much.” Shennong smiled, “Actually I’m not afraid of death either. Little Kunlun, you don’t understand. No death, no extinction, no godhood. Maybe when we all die, you will understand.”

Kunlun Jun rolled his eyes and looked around. It seemed as though he really wanted to find something to stuff into Shennong’s bizarre mouth.

“There will be hope.” At last, as they were leaving, Shennong looked at the land filled with the ghost tribe and said, “If there can even be life in the most desolate places, is there anything that is impossible?”

Kunlun Jun assisted him through the uneven terrain. When he heard this sentence, he turned his head around to look at the two men.

members of the ghost tribe who were closest to them. One of them had the other's head in its grasp and was gnawing on it. The great sage of the barren mountains furrowed his eyebrows and said pointedly: "Enough, old fart, does this shitty life even count? Seems to me like you're becoming confused with your old age. If you have the time, you better first think about how you're going to tell Nuwa about this."

As Kunlun Jun and Shennong left the profane land, the silently observing Shen Wei grabbed Zhao Yunlan's hand: "Let's go."

They also followed along. Only then did Shen Wei say: "With your intelligence, it's not necessarily that you didn't figure out what Shennong was thinking. It's only that you thought his ideas were too fanciful and so you didn't go along with them."

Zhao Yunlan paused, then said: "So... Shennong wanted to form the wheel of reincarnation. As long as souls aren't extinguished, they can reincarnate in the Six Realms, so life turns to death and death turns to life—

this is what he meant by his words 'stand outside of life and death,' isn't it?"

Shen Wei laughed lightly: "Shennong wanted to use the underworld, and at the verge of true 'death' separate yin and yang to set up the wheel of reincarnation."

“But later he didn’t succeed, or else Nuwa wouldn’t sacrifice herself to die for the Great Seal,” Zhao Yunlan said.

“Do you know why?” Shen Wei stopped, a strange smile showing on his face. Without waiting for Zhao Yunlan to reply, he answered himself. “Because the ghost tribe doesn’t have souls.”

The most murderous, soulless ones...

“We’re merely chaos, sinister currents—no matter how high or low the rank, from birth to death we only have the instinct to swallow, to plunder, to crave the freshest flesh.” For the first time, Shen Wei discovered that when he said these words, unexpected delight was in his heart—like the kind of delight from willfully pressing down on his body’s wounds, or from using a knife to slice his own flesh, cut by cut. “As for me—because you raised me up to godhood, I became a freak who’s neither human nor god, neither demon nor ghost, but a chimera matchless in this world.”

Zhao Yunlan was speechless.

Shen Wei laughed lightly again. From the beginning, when Zhao Yunlan indicated he knew Shen Wei was deceiving him, Shen Wei’s heart had settled down like a lump of ice, neatly stoppered there in suspended motion and chilling his whole body—unbearably pent up until he finished saying these words. To his surprise, he felt almost miraculously carefree.

“There’s really no one who can clearly say what the ghost race is, when all’s said and done; perhaps we’re just a mutation of cha

os, merely chaos that can run and move and nothing more. What Gui Mian (t/n Yezun in drama) said is also right, in fact: ‘death’ itself flared up and boiled over from a flame and spawned us, we ‘living things’ who aren’t truly born and can’t truly die. Actually, we’re quite a freak accident.” Shen Wei’s smile weakened. He turned his face to look at Zhao Yunlan, his voice intimate and gentle: “But you insisted on acting recklessly by provoking me. Don’t you know what kind of thing you’re provoking? Don’t you know it’s dangerous?”

Zhao Yunlan embraced him from behind: “Hey, tell me the main points. I don’t want to hear this shit.”

The warmth of that body flowed out from his hug—like the kind felt by a person with their chest frozen numb, who had swallowed their first mouthful of hot congee and almost shivered at the warmth.

Shen Wei remained silent for a while, then clasped the hands in front of his chest with his own and continued: “Mount Buzhou collapsed, the heaven and the earth crumbled and unexpectedly interrupted the battle between humans, demons, and witches. Continuous rain fell from the sky—

that rain washed away the resentment in the air and caused it to land on the ground, creating barren lands. Underground were hundreds of millions of the ghost tribe climbing up from the abyss... you should have seen all this when you were in the Da Shenmu. The first time I saw you should actually be at the place where I w

as born. However, you were standing too faraway and refused to get closer to me by even a step as if I was something filthy. My eyes weren't fully opened and I was only able to vaguely make out the shadows of green clothes.”

Shen Wei closed his eyes. He nuzzled his chin gently against Zhao Yunlan's hands and he said in a slightly lowered voice: “But from the moment when I was born I was more ferocious than my brother, devouring more of my race. At that time I already had the ability to hear and could roughly understand what you and Shennong were talking about. That's why I am different from him. From the time I was born, I knew what I was. I searched for you all over the world, enduring the temptations of the flesh and blood of humans along the way. I only ate the things that climbed out from under the ground...I believed that they were ghosts as disgusting as I am.”

“I always wanted to ask you...what counts as life?” Shen Wei felt the hands that Zhao Yunlan had wrapped around him tighten. “Later, at Denglin (Deng Forest), I finally met you as you were preparing to go up to Penglai...Who would have thought that in the end when I saw you I wasn't able to get any of the questions hovering on the edge of my lips out.”

“Why was I going to Penglai?” Zhao Yunlan asked in a hoarse voice.

“Of the three great ancient godly mountains, Buzhou already fell and Kunlun is a forbidden area for the gods that ordinary people couldn't reach. Only Penglai could protect the creatures on the ground. However, there were too many creatures. Within the three

tribes, at most only two could go up. The rest could only wait for Nuwa to perfect the technique of mending the skies with the five colorful stones and leave their fate to the heavens.” As Shen Wei said this, he suddenly paused, “I hate the phrase ‘leave your fate up to the heavens’.”

“Then wouldn’t they be beaten even more to a stupid state?” (lit: their people brain be beaten into dog brain)

Shen Wei said: “Shennong thought that because you were born as a mountain god, you would favor the witches and the demons and abandon the humans. He originally planned on personally bringing Zhuanxu (t/n: an important mythological emperor) to come up the mountain to see you. He didn’t imagine that you’d only set up an altar at the foot of Mount Penglai. At the bottom of Mount Penglai, you arranged a simple altar containing Chiyou’s head and placed it right in the middle of the mountain road. The demon tribe had always regarded Chiyou as its ancestor. They were the first to kneel down to pay their respects. Additionally, after the time of Huangdi Xuanyuan (t/n: a legendary emperor), human tribes also respected Chiyou as the God of War and so Emperor Zhuanxu stopped them and made them stand behind the demon clan to bow their heads in respect. Only the witch tribe did not give heed. They clamored to claim a position on the mountain and did not bow or show their respects. They were indifferent to Chiyou’s head and walked directly past it. Right as the witch clan passed it, Chiyou’s head disappeared and became a road leading up to the mountains. The witch clan that had already walked past became trapped by the camouflaging magic in the chasm at the bottom of the mountain.”

This was why the demon tribe to this day eulogized Buzhou Mountain. This was the time when the demons officially replaced the witch tribe, claiming a foothold during the great flood and gaining equality with the human race...even though this equality didn't last too many years.

“You took me and brought me through this flooded land swarming with disaster,” Shen Wei said, “From Kunlun to Denglin, and then from Denglin to Penglai. We walked bit by bit through the human world. We saved people, killed the man-eating demon clan, and were even roped into the battles between the different tribes. Us demon tribe had always regarded each other as devourable. We never had the concept of ‘same clan’. At the time I didn’t understand anything, only sometimes thought that you were wasteful when you only killed and didn’t eat, but you became more and more silent.”

“Let’s go up the mountain.” Shen Wei turned and held Zhao Yunlan’s waist. Zhao Yunlan only felt the scene before him shift and the two of them had already rapidly arrived at the foot of the godly mountain. Then Shen Wei leaped forward and, in an instant, brought Zhao Yunlan directly to the top of Mount Penglai.

He didn’t see any flash of thunderous lightning, only a sky so heavy with gloom that it seemed close to collapse. Rain stirred up layers of cloud and mist, the water vapor carrying some kind of indescribable stench.

On the mountain summit, Zhao Yunlan caught sight of Nuwa. She was alone, dragging her long serpent tail within the sea of cloud



ds, while Kunlun had with him the young Ghost King as they stood beyond the cloudy waves, watching her from afar.

The Kunlun of then and there had changed greatly since the time Zhao Yunlan had first seen him in the Profane Land. He was leaner, his naturally deep-set features revealing a trace of ineffable weariness; yet his gaze was clear and steadfast, above his whittled thin cheekbones all the more evident.

Nuwa suddenly turned her head, her beautiful face still worn with worry, and said: “Kunlun, what if Shennong was wrong? What if we were all wrong?”

Kunlun tucked his hands in his sleeves, the roaring wind blowing his long sleeves and raiment up and down, to and fro, as he calmly said: “It’s all right—then this is our atonement by death, dying for a just cause. Afterwards, in these chaotic lands, when those more mighty and powerful Pangu emerge to meet fate once again, they’ll see our wrong path as a warning, and finish what we could not.”

Nuwa sighed, her brow smoothing out softly: “What you say is right. Shennong was already wrong once, I hope he isn’t wrong again, but... Even if he’s wrong, we can’t turn back. You’ve truly grown up a lot; it makes me feel that even if I die, I can leave this world in your hands.”

The words of the primeval sage were as weighted as gold and jade. As her voice descended, Kunlun could already feel an immense pressure slamming down on his unguarded shoulders, but he didn't move or shake. Even the Ghost King behind him didn't sense his strange state.

And so Kunlun breathed in deeply, stretched out a level palm to catch the fine rain falling from the heavens, and grasped from that delicate experience... the ever-present burden pressing down upon his body.

“Actually, over these past days I've suddenly realized something

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humans are so small and weak, they can't rid themselves of lifelong greed, anger, and stupidity; and with their unclean six senses, they're foolish and short-sighted, cruel and fond of strife—so why would you gain merit from creating this sort of useless thing? Why would Heaven choose the human race again and again?” Kunlun narrowed his eyes; he gazed at the clouds churning in the distance, and within them the faintly visible five-colored stones. “Now I understand. The human race is really something no different from heaven and earth, no different from us.”

The corners of Nuwa's mouth carried the traces of a smile: “How are they no different?”

“Humans know from birth that they'll die. Each day forth is a step closer to death, whether hero or coward; decades pass like smoke before their eyes, and scatter with a snap of the fingers—for different paths all lead to the same end, as if they were born to die.”

Kunlun smiled lightly. “But you see, they strive and struggle each day they’re alive: for food and warmth, for power and property, for sentiment and the ability to live one more day—for anything you can think of. And after countless escapes from mortal danger, in their last struggle they exhaust themselves to death.”

“What you said, I don’t understand.” At that moment, the young Ghost King at Kunlun’s side and Shen Wei at Zhao Yunlan’s side suddenly spoke in unison. It sounded to Zhao Yunlan as if the bright and clear voice of the youth and the deep and low words of the man had mingled to become a strange duet; it made him feel all at once as if he were there in person himself, indistinguishable from the illusion of Kunlun.

Unexpectedly, ineffably, words rose up in Zhao Yunlan’s mind, and he couldn’t help but let them fall to coincide with the voice of Kunlun thousands of years ago: “Sealing the ghost race is indeed unfair; but the sin of genocide already came upon me when I trapped the witches and let them all drown in the great flood. I have no qualms in my heart, and bear this sin without fear. If the wheel of reincarnation and eternal life that Shennong spoke of isn’t successfully completed—

if we fail, if we’re wrong, if we bring about greater calamity... then it’s only our mistaken attempt and struggle. If we all die, new gods will come into this world. They’ll be like us, and strive in the next attempt for the sake of eternal life, though we all know deep down inside that absolute permanence doesn’t exist, and—like humans—in the end we’ll die.”

Kunlun suddenly turned his head and looked at the young Ghost King behind him; then his gaze slipped away once more, and see

med to fall upon Zhao Yunlan many thousands of years later. Even though he knew Kunlun couldn't see anything, Zhao Yunlan still held a kind of... illusion that he was confronting himself at an abyss splitting space and time.

“If ‘death’ is chaos, then ‘life’ is a never-ending struggle.” Kunlun spoke thus, and lightly smoothed out the corners of his mouth to reveal a hollow smile. Faint dimples appeared on his cheeks. His smile was like that of a child, his eyes like those of an elder.

“Nuwa,” he said, “you go first. I’m here, so you don’t need to worry about things once you’re gone.”

At last Zhao Yunlan had heard the complete dialogue—and at last he understood how Shen Wei had picked out several words from this conversation that lamented the state of the universe and pitied the suffering of mankind, and changed them to mean something completely different.

Nuwa looked deeply at Kunlun. In a dazzling flash, an arc of stones overflowing with light and color soared like a rainbow above the horizon—they boomed and rumbled, crashing into thick layers of clouds that burst open with a world-shaking roar of thunder and lightning. Halfway up the mountain, humans and demons couldn't help but prostrate themselves in worship. After an unknown time passed, the resounding thunder ca

me to a stop; after several months, the stratus clouds parted and auspicious ones appeared. The sun shone once again in the sky, its rays falling upon the wild, scorched, overgrown earth.

The body of Nuwa, silent within the sea of clouds over Mount Penglai, suddenly collapsed and fell to pieces. Her threefold human soul completed the Great Seal once more, her body transforming into Houtu; her sevenfold personae fell among the mountains and rivers, where soft shoots of delicate grass exposed their newborn green from cracks in stone.

At some point, the doddering Shennong had climbed up to the summit. He said to Kunlun: "I'm going too."

As he finished speaking, his body fell to the ground, stiff and rigid in death. Once suppressed by a human body, the divine soul cried out as he plunged from the sacred mountain to the underground and transformed into the wheel of reincarnation. Souls that were wavering in space, that couldn't distinguish between day and night, were as if drawn in: and all followed him down. The Axioms of Mountains and Rivers bore into the softly trembling earth to subdue it; the Sundial of Reincarnation began to revolve upon the Three-

Life Stone; and, hanging high on the Ancient Tree of Merit, the Merit Brush followed the endless waters of Wang Chuan up and surfaced with every soul's merits and demerits recorded.

"There's one last thing missing," Kunlun said lightly. In that moment the sky above him was suddenly shrouded in dark clouds drawn from afar; lightning flashed and thunder rolled within, as if divine thunder from the highest of heavens was on the verge of f

alling. “My soulfire lit up the Profane Land, and boiled the ghost race out of the mud. Abandoning them without care and selfishly deciding the ghost race’s destiny, it’s indeed a serious crime—but there’s something I still haven’t finished.”

Zhao Yunlan watched him draw out his heart’s blood to be transformed into the lamp wick, and take his body to be transformed into the lamp base. All of a sudden, he felt that he knew all these things, not only from what he’d seen within the God Tree and the rock of the Great Seal, but rather... they had truly happened, and he’d simply not thought of them for a while, nothing more.

And thus the wheel of reincarnation was completed in the end, life and death became a circle and henceforth there was no life or death.

The primordial essence of Kunlun bled away, and the devastating mountain wind swept along with it the young Ghost King who had wept himself hoarse. Together they descended beneath the Huang Quan, to keep watch at the Great Seal.