

镇魂 Guardian Chapter 91-100

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Lantern of the Guardian

Chapter 91

Guo Changcheng's phone keeps buzzing, the screen showing an unfamiliar number that looks neither like a mobile number nor like a proper landline number. It starts with a lot of fours. It looks like a home shopping channel number to Guo Changcheng, so he assumes it's trying to sell him something. Everyone else is discussing important matters, and even though he can't quite follow, he makes an effort to look attentive and ignores the constant buzzing of his phone.

Even though they've been talking for a long time, they're nowhere near the end of the discussion. Chu Shuzhi keeps harping on about the Water Dragon Pearl from Fourth Uncle Snake. He lives in graveyards all year round and pursues the Path of the Undead, so his thoughts can be quite dark sometimes. He's a total conspiracy theorist.

"Your Fourth Uncle definitely knows something," Chu Shuzhi insists. "Otherwise why would he suddenly want to take you away now, and just so happen to ask you to give Chief Zhao the Water Dragon Pearl?"

Zhu Hong has her arms folded in front of her chest, and frowns as she lets out a sigh.

The humans and ghosts in the office all fall silent. Just then Lao Li, the daytime receptionist with a foible for bone carvings, suddenly speaks up. "Actually I... I have a source of information."

Everyone looks at him at once. Lao Li seems a little embarrassed and smiles awkwardly. "I'm an old loner, with nothing much to do after work. Normally, I like to go down to Antique Street and play Xiangqi¹ with some old friends. Over the last two days, I heard one of them mention this. He says that the house-guarding snakes his family keeps have all left in the past two days, not even eating their offerings. The same has happened in other households. It seems like the whole Snake Tribe is moving out of Dragon City."

Zhu Hong is stunned. "This... my Fourth Uncle didn't actually tell me this."

¹ Xiangqi - Chinese Chess - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiangqi>

“Not just the Snake Tribe. Look, it's almost spring, but is there even half a crow in the city? That bunch of Crow Tribe idiots, if there's so much as some wind and stirring of grass, they run away faster than rats.” Saying 'rats', Da Qing makes a show of wrinkling his nose to express his considerable disdain—for a cat, just about everything despicable in the world can be described with the word ‘rat’.

“My Fourth Uncle, he...” Zhu Hong pauses, the creases between her brows deepening further. Fourth Uncle Snake brought her up since she was a child, and to her, he basically seems omnipotent. She has never seen him troubled by anything; in her mind, as long as the Snake Tribe has him, the sky can never fall.

Zhu Hong suspects that he might not have told her anything for fear that her feelings for Zhao Yunlan run too deep; while Zhao Yunlan's fine, she might lose hope and leave quietly, but if she knew he was in danger, she couldn't just walk away.

But how big does the problem have to be for Fourth Uncle Snake to straight up move away the entire Snake Tribe, without even stopping to think of possible solutions?

Out of all of them, only Da Qing is vaguely aware: whether it's the abnormal activity of the ghosts or that strange book from eleven years ago, it all seems to point toward the events that happened over 5000 years in the past. That was a time when the skies collapsed and the earth caved in, and a number of gods died. It was definitely no trifling matter.

And yet, he also clearly sees Zhao Yunlan's attitude.

Since he was little, Zhao Yunlan has always been someone to take the easy way out, and he's very skilled at getting people together and establishing groups. But once he's assigned specific tasks for work, he goes impotent all of a sudden and delegates everything to anyone even slightly less lazy than he is. Sometimes he's even too lazy to read the reports of the people he sent out to investigate. He'll sit in his chair acting all cool², hypocritically making people turn their report into a Powerpoint presentation and read out all the contents to him.

But concerning what he, or rather the Guardian Order, is facing right now? Other than occasionally asking them to check some small detail, Zhao Yunlan seems to be keeping everything to himself, not disclosing the slightest bit of information. He likely knows that if he involves his people, they might end up as cannon fodder, so he wants to shoulder everything by himself.

The black cat looks around, and when his gaze lands on Guo Changcheng, he finds a random excuse to interrupt everyone's clueless guesswork. “Xiao Guo, your phone is buzzing so hard it's shaking itself to pieces. Isn't your hand numb yet? Go take the call! The way I see it, discussing it any longer won't get us anywhere. Those who've been on day shift, go home to

² Idiom: 大尾巴狼 - short form of the quote: “[a toad-butt decked out with chicken feathers, pretending to be a] big bushy-tailed wolf” - show off, play the bigshot, pretend to be all cool, act high and mighty

rest; Sang Zan, Wang Zheng, go out to his house on your night shift, check if he's come back. If Chief Zhao isn't back by daybreak tomorrow, we'll go to the Underworld to look for him. If worse comes to worst.... There's no shame in asking them for assistance once in a while.”

With that, the cat jumps on the table, looking very much like the deputy taking over for the absent leader. Soberly, he commands, “Right, Zhu Hong, you'll call Lin Jing in a bit, ask him whether he's on the train yet and exactly when he'll get back.”

Zhu Hong makes an affirmative noise and reaches out to pat his fur, then casually scratches his chin while she's at it.

Da Qing immediately turns from a domineering tyrant into a lazy, gluttonous kitty. Her scratching is so comfortable, he puts his front paws on the table to stretch out his back, enjoying himself so much that he lets out a long, high “meow”.

There are some suppressed chuckles in the office.

Da Qing shakes his head violently, quickly pushes Zhu Hong's hand away with a paw, and demands, “What are you doing? Stop this improper touching³ and show me some respect!”

Next to him, Lao Li is casually stroking the white bone ring on his hand and asks politely, with an air of flattery, “Da Qing, you've been busy all day, do you want some dried fish? Yesterday I also fried some at home...”

Da Qing tries to look indifferent, but his pricked-up ears betray him. Eventually, he reaches out a paw with an aloof manner reminiscent of royalty indicating ‘you may lend me a hand’, and lets Lao Li carry him away.

Guo Changcheng finally takes the call that's been nagging him all day. His domestic knock-off phone is particularly loud, and even from two steps away, people can hear what the other end is saying. The speaker has a thick foreign accent and speaks at lightning speed⁴. Chu Shuzhi observes how Guo Changcheng listens politely to the other person's entire long diatribe before weakly saying, “My apologies, I couldn't hear very clearly... could you s-say it again a bit slower?”

The other end of the line goes silent for two seconds, then suddenly there's a low sobbing sound.

Guo Changcheng's phone may be truly awful, but those sobs are exceptional, flowing out from the speakers across the entire office room like waves of water. Chu Shuzhi, who has been

³ Idiom: 男女授受不亲 (nán nǚ shòu shòu bù qīn) from a Mencius quote, lit. “men and women should not touch hands when they pass each other things”, i.e. a classical way of insisting on propriety

⁴ 离开大气层飞上月球 (lí kāi dà qì céng fēi shàng yuè qiú) - lit. fast enough to 'leave the atmosphere and fly to the moon'

packing his things to leave, stops and turns around. He snatches Guo Changcheng's phone, presses the hands-free button, and places it on the table.

Guo Changcheng is stunned. Chu Shuzhi puts his index finger to his lips. He listens carefully, then pulls out a pen from the penholder on the table. On the memo pad, he writes: 'It's a ghost wail.'

Guo Changcheng has goosebumps all over.

Chu Shuzhi rapidly writes again: 'Tell her to stop crying, ask her what's going on.'

Guo Changcheng does as he's told. After quite a while, the crying from the other end subsides a little. Sobbing and sniffing, the person tries very hard to speak in broken Mandarin. "Teacher Guo, do you remember me? Three years ago you came to my house for a home visit when you were teaching. My daughter is called Cui Xiuyun. I gave you a bowl of vegetable tofu."

Guo Changcheng is stunned. "Ah! I remember! I remember you!"

The other end hiccups. "Xiuyun is missing."

The girl he met three years ago should be 15 or 16 years old now. He asks, "How could such a big girl be missing? Is it possible that she's gone hiking in the mountains by herself?"

Chu Shuzhi watches him with interest. Guo Changcheng's is now speaking louder, and more smoothly.

Whenever the other party gets desperate, she starts sobbing and her accent gets stronger. Communication between the two sides is difficult and it takes a while. They learn that the young girl's father worked out of town and earned some money. He bought her a mobile phone which was considered quite advanced in those parts, and after she learned how to use the internet, she very quickly made a couple of dubious internet friends. One of them even came all the way to see her, promising to take her to Dragon City to find a part-time job, and whisked the silly girl away just like that.

When her family found out, all they found was a little note.

Guo Changcheng glances up to see Chu Shuzhi writing: 'Ask her if she can leave the region, come to Dragon City.'

Guo Changcheng asks, and the other person suddenly turns stuttering and hesitant. "I... I can't leave the village, I... I'm a bit sick..."

Chu Shuzhi nods. This spirit is bound to a particular location.

Guo Changcheng asks, “Is there anyone else in the family?”

“There’s only an old grandma... You’re the only person I know in Dragon City. Teacher Guo, help me out, help me find her, my daughter’s still so young, she doesn’t know anything...”

Dragon City is big, with lots of traffic. Looking for one person will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. And even though Guo Changcheng has met the girl, he hasn’t seen her in 3 years – who can tell how her looks may have changed.

Chu Shuzhi shrugs, writing on the paper. ‘Don’t randomly promise things to a ghost, you’ll be inviting trouble.’

Nobody could’ve known that as soon as the words ‘randomly promise’ are written, Guo Changcheng will do just that! “All right, don’t worry yourself, auntie, I promise I’ll find and bring back your child!”

The tip of Chu Shuzhi’s pen slips, leaving a long mark down the paper. He’s just about to scold Guo Changcheng for his shortcomings⁵, when he sees the white light representing merit on Guo Changcheng’s body flash for a moment. Unexpectedly, it changes colour so that for a split-second, it seems to glow a fiery orange.

Taken aback, he clutches Guo Changcheng’s shoulder. Guo Changcheng has just hung up and gives him a puzzled look.

“N-nothing, my eyes must have deceived me,” Chu Shuzhi mutters. He thinks for a moment, then puts his bag back down. “How do you plan on looking for this person? I’ll help you.”

Around this time, the ghosts Wang Zheng and Sang Zan have arrived at Zhao Yunlan’s house and are politely knocking on the door. There’s no sound from inside, so Wang Zheng takes Sang Zan and just slips in straight through the door itself. There are no lights on, but the coffee table is in a different spot, the chair and bed both look sat on, and the water kettle is still boiling, almost boiled dry; but there’s nobody to be seen.

Sang Zan bends over and fiddles around with the stove, knowing to turn it off without being told. “Someone came and leaved again, two peoples; they leaved before it got duck.”

Setting out tea indicates a long conversation; what may they have talked about?

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<sup>5</sup> Idiom 恨铁不成钢 (hèn tiě bù chéng gāng) lit. to hate iron for not becoming steel = to be disappointed in someone

Earlier that evening: after Zhao Yunlan has finished speaking, Shen Wei stares at him for a long while as though drowning in his eyes. Finally he says, in a low voice, "All right."

Then he falls silent for even longer, his gaze travelling over the white steam curling upward from the tea pot, seemingly lost in a daze.

As he traces back ten thousand years of memories, he suddenly looks very old.

It takes a long time for him to release a small breath. He gives Zhao Yunlan a wry smile: "I... I don't know where to start."

As he speaks, he puts down his tea cup, sits upright on the bed and reaches out towards Zhao Yunlan: "Why don't you come see for yourself?"

Zhao Yunlan feels like he should really still be holding a grudge, but before his brain can catch up, he's already given Shen Wei his hand.

Shen Wei grabs it and with a burst of strength pulls him into his arms. Zhao Yunlan thinks he's about to crash into him and, on reflex, reaches out to brace himself against the edge of the bed. But his fingers seem to pass through a void, and then it's like he's falling into something. He stumbles, but a pair of hands steadies him.

His eyes are wide open but he can't see a thing. All he can do is clutch tightly to the hands holding on to him. "Shen Wei?"

Shen Wei makes a soft sound in response.

Although it's dark, it's not at all quiet around them. There's a sound like wind howling, but Zhao Yunlan can't feel the slightest movement of air. He calms down and listens carefully – it sounds like crying but also a bit like roaring; changing, sometimes high, sometimes low, sometimes close by and sometimes far away.

Zhao Yunlan can't help but ask: "What is that?"

Shen Wei reflexively grips his hand tighter, and only after a while does he say, "Wait a little longer."

Just as he's finished speaking, the world around them lights up. There's the cry of a dragon in the distance, sounding like it's suffering. The ground is trembling, and then a great ball of fire falls out of mid-air, as if the sun is dropping out of the sky, scorching hot.

With the change from extreme darkness to extreme brightness, tears shoot into Zhao Yunlan's eyes at once, but he endures the pain, unwilling to close them.

He feels like he's witnessing a scene from the creation of the world.

As the fire falls, it shatters into countless shards, sparkling like specks of gold, as if one were stepping on the Milky Way. The scene of overflowing light and colour is breath-stoppingly beautiful. Zhao Yunlan quickly wipes away his tears; he can't bear to even blink.

Then, countless hands reach up from below the scattered tongues of fire, as though they're growing out of the mud, gradually adjusting their own shapes, until eventually they're as tall as human beings and start climbing out of the soil.

No one 'created' them; they emerge, alive, out of the primordial mud.

No one teaches them how to survive, how to reproduce; stumbling across the land made of splintered light, they learn to walk and run, and finally, instinctively, learn how to fight and devour each other.

The ghost tribe, born from the cracks between light and darkness.

A gigantic fire is blazing where the fireball landed, igniting the earth around it. As it burns, the mud underneath begins to transform, slowly expanding into a large flower bud.

It grows bigger and bigger while the fire above it becomes smaller and smaller. Eventually, the fire is completely absorbed into the 'flower bud' made of soil. All the running, feeding and killing ghosts stop what they're doing and simultaneously turn their heads toward it. Suddenly a crack splits through the soil flower, rapidly becoming a large rift, until - with a bang like pottery burned too long in the kiln - the flower bud shatters into several pieces.

Within it, two shadowy shapes are growing. The nearest of the ghost tribe are sucked in, barely able to struggle, and quickly devoured. With every member of the ghost tribe swallowed, those shadowy figures become clearer. They slowly develop a head, neck, torso, four limbs, facial features and even hair.

Just like the droplets of mud that Nüwa casually flicked out, it's as if all the beings born from the mud are driven in a certain direction by a mysterious force, growing toward the same goal—exactly like the Great Ones.

Perhaps... the Gods and Great Ones that nature brought forth were also born this way.

After a long while, Zhao Yunlan asks, "The thing that fell just then, was that my soul fire? Is that... you and the Ghost Face?"

"That is us... at the time when Chiyu entrusted you with the protection of the shaman and shifter tribes." Shen Wei's voice in his ear is deep and calm. "I didn't expect that just a few decades after the first great war between gods and demons, the Water God Gonggong and

Emperor Zhuānxū<sup>6</sup> would start another one. The Water God was close to the dragon tribe, and they formed an alliance with the shifter tribe. Then Houyí<sup>7</sup> from the East found Fuxi's Bow, gathered Chiyóu's former troops, and sided with the shaman tribes. Shamans, shifters, humans; the three tribes fought and could hardly be pulled apart.

“At that time, the world hadn't settled into any kind of order yet. Not long after Nüwa created humans, she could only watch as they reproduced in droves, and died in droves. She hadn't even turned into Hóutǔ<sup>8</sup> yet. So, at that time, the concept of becoming a ghost didn't exist yet, and of course the so-called ‘cycle of reincarnation’ didn't exist either. For all the people who died in those days, death was simply death. As Shennong said, ‘death’ is the return to chaos, to the Profane Lands: utterly empty, devoid of living beings, cut off from hope, from the senses, from everything. A return to absolutely nothing. There was nobody who didn't fear ‘death’, especially those who died whilst holding onto hate. They didn't wish to close their eyes and die contentedly, so they were stuck in between life and death, and their souls remained trapped in the living realm.

“In the two great wars between gods and demons, much blood was shed. The souls of those that hesitated to move on drifted through the air all day, desolately wailing, with no hint of disappearing. Suffering under the scorching sun during the day, some burned up, returning to chaos. Others survived, slowly recovered overnight, and then suffered the same torture again the following day.”

Shen Wei falls silent, gazing towards the site of his birth. After a while he says, “Nüwa only then realised that what she had created wasn't virtue, but evil. She provided humans with brilliant but short lifetimes, as delicate and vulnerable as spring flowers. After that short life, she made them suffer the worst hardships – suffering under the burning sun, with no place for their souls to go, always chased by death.”

Shen Wei turns his head to face Zhao Yunlan. “Some people say the reason why newborns cry is that they are one step closer to their preordained death. So at the time when Shennong had lost his divinity, he had no choice but to ask for your soul fire. Only the sacred soul of the Mountain God could pacify all the vengeful spirits in the world that died in war, lessen their suffering and let them be at peace a little sooner. This protection you provided the souls is the reason why the Holy Tree that you left behind was later known as the Guardian Order<sup>9</sup>.”

The whole time, the crack above their heads has been growing larger and larger. Finally they can see a sliver of sky with weak moonlight drifting in. Mount Buzhou is on the brink of collapsing completely.

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<sup>6</sup> 颛顼 (Zhuānxū) - one of the Five Emperors

<sup>7</sup> 后羿 (Hòuyì) - a legendary archer - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou\\_Yi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou_Yi)

<sup>8</sup> 后土 (Hòutǔ) Earth Goddess - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houtu>

<sup>9</sup> 镇魂令 (Zhenhun Ling) is in this novel usually translated as “Guardian Order Token”, but 镇 not only means “to guard”, but also, “to calm down, to appease,” which is the literal sense here - Kunlun's soul fire calmed the souls (镇魂). The Holy Tree represents that power, and is later used to make the tokens for the Lord Guardian, the Guardian Order Tokens.

Shen Wei continues, "Shennong carried your soul fire cupped in his hands when he passed Mount Buzhou, and he happened to come across Gonggong riding the heavenly dragon. Bound by duty and unable to turn back, the great dragon crashed into the stone pillar of Mount Buzhou. Its tail clipped Shennong's shoulder just so; your soul fire fell from Shennong's hands and by a twist of fate, it landed in the Profane Lands at the foot of Mount Buzhou."

Shen Wei pauses and gives a cold laugh. "These are the things you told me, I don't know if they're true or false. Maybe it was really an accident, or maybe Shennong did it deliberately; who knows?"

At that moment, Zhao Yunlan sees two people landing in the Profane Lands exposed to the human realm. They're Kunlun and Shennong.

Looking at all the demons and monsters in the place, Kunlun seems to be at a loss. "What are all of these?"

Shennong says, "They're born from nature."

## Chapter 92

This answer makes both Lord Kunlun on the far side of the memory and Zhao Yunlan on the near side fall silent.

Suddenly, it's no longer important whether Shennong dropped the soul fire intentionally. Shennong clutches Kunlun's wrist. His murky old eyes stare at the ignorant and ferocious ghost tribe and he takes two steps forward. He's very old, so Kunlun has no choice but to bend down slightly to support him. When he looks down at Shennong, a shadow passes over his face. Shennong is old; that means he'll die soon.

Kunlun has never experienced 'old age' or 'death' before, but he can already smell the appalling odour of decay on Shennong's body.

"You heard everything I said to Nüwa last time?" Shennong asks.

Kunlun frowns. "Who's in the mood to listen to you guys' endless mysterious ramblings? Just tell me what we should do now. I'm surprised you mention Nüwa. If she finds out that you fumbled the fire and it burned through Fuxi's Great Seal, I'd be surprised if she didn't turn against you. And you even used my soul fire. You really know how to get me into trouble."

Shennong shoots him a glance. "She won't."

Kunlun snorts twice, his words dripping with sarcasm. "I beg to differ."

Shennong coughs feebly for a while. "Life and death are very important. Nobody is born without fear of death; you can't joke about it. However, if you can jump out of the circle of life and death, you'll no longer need to fear."

"I'm going to behave and stand here. I'm not going to jump anywhere and I don't need to fear anything," Kunlun says coolly. "Seems like the one who should be afraid is you. By the way, the Holy Tree has borne fruit. These past hundred years, there have only been two ripe fruits. I gave one to my cat bro, the other one I saved for you. It can extend your life by a hundred years."

"Thank you very much." Shennong smiles. "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'll understand."

Kunlun rolls his eyes and looks around as if trying to find something with which to stuff Shennong's godly mouth.

“There will be hope.” And finally, as they're leaving, Shennong looks at the land teeming with the ghost tribe. “If there can be life in even the most desolate place, is anything impossible?”

Kunlun is helping him cross the rough ground, but on hearing this, he turns his head to look at the two members of the ghost tribe closest to them. One has the other's head in his grasp and is gnawing on it. Kunlun, god of the desolate mountains, frowns. “Okay, old fart, does life as shitty as this even count? Seems to me you're getting senile. You'd better spend your time thinking about how to explain this to Nüwa.”

As Kunlun and Shennong leave the Profane Lands, Shen Wei, who has been silently observing, takes Zhao Yunlan's hand: “Come on.”

The two of them follow along. Only then, Shen Wei says, “Considering how smart you are, it's not that you didn't figure out what Shennong was thinking. It's just that you thought his ideas were too fantastic to agree to.”

Zhao Yunlan pauses, then asks, “So... Shennong wanted to build the wheel of reincarnation. Unless a soul is destroyed entirely, it can reincarnate in the Six Realms, so life becomes death and then life again—that's what he meant by ‘standing outside life and death,’ right?”

Shen Wei smiles softly. “Shennong wanted to use the Underworld to separate yin and yang on the verge of death, and set up the wheel of reincarnation there.”

“Then it didn't work, or Nüwa wouldn't have sacrificed herself for the Great Seal.”

“Do you know why?” Shen Wei stands still, a strange smile on his face. He continues the story without waiting for Zhao Yunlan's answer. “Because members of the ghost tribe have no souls.”

Great, soul-less fiends...

“We're nothing but chaos and resentment—no matter our rank, our lives consist of one instinct only: to devour, to plunder, to thirst for the freshest flesh and blood.” For the first time, Shen Wei realises that saying these words gives him an unexpected thrill—like the thrill from bearing down on a wound, or from cutting one's own flesh with a knife. “As for me... you raised me to godhood, so I have become a monster: neither human nor god, neither demon nor ghost, nothing but a misfit, unique under the sun.”

Zhao Yunlan is lost for words.

Shen Wei smiles gently again. From the moment Zhao Yunlan figured out he was lying to him, Shen Wei's heart has been like a lump of ice stuck fast in his body, chilling and depressing him. Having said these words, he feels miraculous relief.

"Ultimately, no one really knows what the ghost tribe is. Maybe we are just a form of chaos – chaos that can run and move. The Ghost Face was actually right: by a single surge of flame, 'death' itself spawned us, us 'living beings' who aren't born and cannot die. In fact, we're quite a freak accident." Shen Wei's smile fades. He turns towards Zhao Yunlan, his voice soft and intimate. "But you keep on teasing me recklessly. Do you have any idea what you're provoking? Do you understand just how dangerous that is?"

Zhao Yunlan hugs him from behind. "Hey, just give me the gist. I don't want to hear this bullshit."

His human body heat flows into the hug. Shen Wei feels like a man whose chest was frozen numb swallowing his first mouthful of hot congee, and he almost shivers with it.

He remains silent for a moment, then clasps the hands in front of his chest with his own and continues. "Mount Buzhou collapsed and the sky fell, and that happened to interrupt the battle between humans, shamans, and shifters. It rained continually, and that rain washed the resentment out of the air and into the ground, making the lands barren. Underground, millions of demonic soldiers climbed up from the abyss. You probably saw all this when you were in the Holy Tree.

"The first time I saw you should actually have been at the place where I was born. But you stood too far away and refused to come even a step closer to me, as if I was something filthy. My eyes weren't fully opened and I could just vaguely make out the shadow of green clothes."

Shen Wei closes his eyes. He nuzzles his chin gently against Zhao Yunlan's hands and lowers his voice a little. "But from the moment I was born, I was more ferocious than my brother. At that time, I had devoured more of my tribe members, so I already had the ability to hear, and could roughly understand what you and Shennong were talking about. Unlike him, I have known what I am from birth. I searched for you all over the world, enduring the temptation of human flesh and blood along the way. I still only ate the things that crawled out from underground... Ghost tribe members who are as disgusting as I am.

"I always wanted to ask you: 'What counts as life?'" Shen Wei feels Zhao Yunlan's hands tighten around him. "I finally met you at the Peach Forest, when you were preparing to go up to Mount Penglai<sup>10</sup>. I didn't expect that when I finally saw you, the question would stick in my throat and I wouldn't be able to get out a single word.

"Why was I going to Mount Penglai?" Zhao Yunlan asked in a hoarse voice.

"Of the three great ancient godly mountains, Buzhou had already fallen. Kunlun was a forbidden area only accessible to gods that ordinary people couldn't reach. Only Penglai could protect the living creatures of the earth. But there were too many of them. Of the three tribes, two at most could go up. The rest could only wait for Nüwa to perfect the technique of mending the sky with

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<sup>10</sup> The third of the three godly mountains in this novel - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Penglai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Penglai)

the five colourful stones, and leave their fate to the Heavens.” As Shen Wei says this, he suddenly pauses. “I hate the phrase ‘leave your fate to the Heavens’.”

“Wouldn’t they just start bashing each other’s heads in even more?”

Shen Wei said, “Shennong thought that because you were born as a mountain god, you would favour the shamans and shifters, and abandon the humans. He planned on personally bringing Emperor Zhuanxu to the mountain to see you, but he didn’t imagine that you’d set a trap at the foot of Mount Penglai. You arranged a simple altar containing Chiyou’s head and placed it right in the middle of the mountain road.

“The shifters had always regarded Chiyou as their ancestor. They were the first to kneel down to pay their respects. The human tribes also respected Chiyou as the God of War, ever since the reign of the Yellow Emperor. So Emperor Zhuanxu stopped them and made them stand behind the shifters, bowing their heads in respect.

“Only the shaman tribes ignored it, busy competing to claim a position on the mountain; they paid no respects and walked right past Chiyou’s head. As soon as they had passed by, Chiyou’s head disappeared and became a road leading up to the mountaintop. Already having walked past, the shaman tribes were deceived and got trapped in the chasm at the bottom of the mountain.”

To this day, the shifter tribes sing praises to the Fall of Mount Buzhou. It was when their rise over the shaman tribes began, claiming a foothold during the great flood and gaining equality with the human race... even though this equality didn’t last very long.

“You took me all the way through that troubled, disaster-stricken land,” Shen Wei says. “From Mount Kunlun to the Peach Forest, and from there to Mount Penglai. We walked to every last corner of the human world, saving people and killing man-eating ghosts. We were even roped into the battles between the different tribes. In the ghost tribe, we’d always regarded each other as potential food. We never developed the concept of ‘kindred’. I didn’t understand anything at that time. Sometimes I thought that you were being wasteful, only killing them and not eating them. And you became more and more silent.”

“Come on, let’s go up the mountain.” Shen Wei turns around and grabs Zhao Yunlan’s waist. Zhao Yunlan only feels the scene before him shift, and then they’re already standing at the foot of the godly mountain. Then Shen Wei leaps up and takes Zhao Yunlan directly to the top of Mount Penglai.

There’s no thunder and lightning, only a sky so gloomy and heavy that it looks about to fall down. Rain is stirring up clouds and mist, the water in the air bringing an unspeakable stench with it.

On the mountain top, Zhao Yunlan sees Nüwa – alone, dragging her long serpent tail through the sea of clouds. Kunlun and the young Ghost King are standing at the cloudy shore and watching her from afar.

Kunlun seems to have changed a lot since Zhao Yunlan first saw him in the Profane Lands. He's thinner now, his naturally deep-set features more haggard. Yet his gaze is clear and steady, particularly striking above his gaunt cheeks.

Nüwa suddenly turns her head, worry marring her beautiful face. “Lord Kunlun, what if Shennong was wrong? What if we were all wrong?”

Kunlun slips his hands into his long sleeves, the wind chasing and flapping his garments. Unperturbed, he says, “It doesn't matter—then this is our atonement, we'll die for a just cause. These primordial lands will see someone rise again, someone as mighty as Pangu or even more powerful, and they'll learn from our mistakes and finish what we could not.”

Nüwa sighs, her frown smoothing out. “You're right. Shennong was already wrong once. I hope he isn't wrong again, but... even if he is, we can't turn back. You've truly grown up a lot. Even if I die now, I feel that I can leave this world in your hands.”

The Great One's words are as set in stone<sup>11</sup>. In the wake of her voice, Kunlun can feel an immense pressure mercilessly slam down on his shoulders, but he doesn't shake or move. Even the Ghost King behind him doesn't notice anything unusual is happening to him.

And so Kunlun takes a deep breath and extends his hand palm-up to catch the drizzle falling from the Heavens, quietly accepting the tremendous burden now pressing down on his body. “Actually, there's one thing I've been wondering over the past few days: humans are so frail, they can't rid themselves of their greed and anger; they're selfish, stupid and short-sighted, cruel and violent. Why would creating such useless things bring you merit? Why would Heaven choose humans over and over again?” Kunlun narrows his eyes, gazing out at the five-coloured stones far away in the churning sea of clouds. “Now I understand that the human race is just like Heaven and Earth, just like us.”

The corners of Nüwa's mouth show traces of a smile: “How are they just like us?”

“From the moment they're born, humans know they'll die. Each day that passes is a step closer to death. Whether they're heroes and heroines or cowards and villains, the decades pass, ephemeral as clouds and gone with a snap of the finger; all their paths lead to the same end, as if they were born only in order to die.”

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<sup>11</sup> Idiom: 金口玉言 (jinkouyuyan) lit. “mouth of gold, speech of jade” - Jade is the signifier of the Emperor, so it implies that the words are as law.

He smiles faintly. "But you see, every day of their lives they struggle for food, clothing, power, property, feelings, and the ability to live another day—for anything you can imagine. They escape death so many times, and then in a final struggle, they still die."

"I don't understand what you're saying," the young Ghost King at Kunlun's side and Shen Wei at Zhao Yunlan's side say at the same time. To Zhao Yunlan's ears, the youth's clear voice and the man's low one combine to form a strange duet; it makes him feel as if he were there in person, unable to tell himself apart from the illusion of Kunlun.

Words suddenly pop into Zhao Yunlan's head, and he can't help but blurt them out, resonating with Kunlun's voice thousands of years ago. "Sealing away the ghost tribe is unjust, yes. But I already committed genocide when I trapped the shamans and let them all drown in the great flood. This deed already rests on my shoulders, but I have a clean conscience and bear my crime without fear. If we can't build Shennong's wheel of reincarnation and eternal life; if we fail, if we're wrong, if we bring about a worse disaster... then that's just the first failed attempt. If we all die, new gods will come down to this world and struggle again to achieve eternal life, just like we did—even though we're all well aware that absolute permanence doesn't exist and that we'll die in the end, just like humans do."

Kunlun turns his head to look at the young Ghost King next to him; then his gaze slips past him and seemingly lands upon Zhao Yunlan, thousands of years in the future. Even though he knows Kunlun can't see him, it still feels to Zhao Yunlan as if he's facing himself across an abyss of time and space.

"If 'death' is chaos, then 'life' is ceaseless struggle, right?" Kunlun says, a soft smile appearing on his lips, and small dimples on his cheeks. His smile is a child's but his eyes are those of an old man.

"Nüwa," he says, "you can go ahead. I'm here, so you don't need to worry about what you leave behind."

Having finally heard the complete exchange, Zhao Yunlan understands at last how Shen Wei picked a few words from this compassionate account of the world and humankind and changed their meaning entirely.

Nüwa gives Kunlun a meaningful look. The coloured stones flash and soar across the sky in rainbow brilliance; with a roaring sound, they crash through the heavy clouds, making them erupt into earth-shaking thunder and lightning. The humans and demons on the mountainside can only throw themselves to the ground in worship.

Eventually, the thunder stops, but it takes months before the dark clouds part, auspicious ones appear, and the sun finally shines again upon the desolate, scorched earth.

Nüwa's body, standing silently within the sea of clouds surrounding Mount Penglai, suddenly breaks apart. The three spirit parts of her soul complete the Great Seal once more. Her body transforms into Houtu, and the seven corporeal parts of her soul scatter amongst the thousand mountains and rivers, allowing tender shoots of grass to show their first green between cracks in the stones.<sup>12</sup>

At some point, old Shennong has also climbed to the mountain top. He says to Kunlun, "I'm leaving too."

With those words, he falls to the ground, stiff and dead. His divine spirit, no longer suppressed by a human body, plunges from the sacred mountain into the ground and turns into the wheel of reincarnation. All the souls lingering in the air, unaware of day and night, are attracted by it and follow it down. The Awl of Mountains and Rivers pierces and subdues the gently trembling earth; the Sundial begins to rotate on top of the Three-Life Stone<sup>13</sup>; the Ink Brush of Virtue, suspended high on the Holy Tree, floats down along the River of Forgetfulness and reemerges with a record of every soul's merits and demerits.

"Just one last thing," Kunlun says lightly. Suddenly the sky above him is shrouded in dark clouds; lightning flashes and thunder rolls as if the gods were about to send down divine punishment. "My soulfire lit up the Profane Lands and let the ghost tribe emerge from the mud, only for me to abandon them. Selfishly deciding whether the ghost tribe should stay or go was indeed a great crime. But there's still something I haven't finished."

Zhao Yunlan watches as Kunlun takes his heart's blood and turns it into a lamp wick and then turns his body into the lamp itself. And suddenly, he feels he has known all these things, not just from what he's seen within the Holy Tree and the stone next to the Great Seal, but rather... they really happened, he just couldn't remember them for a while.

Thus, the wheel of reincarnation is finally completed; life and death have become a circle, and from then on there's neither life nor death.

The primordial essence of Kunlun drains from his body and dissolves, and the mighty mountain gales sweep away the young Ghost King, who'd been sitting by his side crying himself hoarse. Together they sink down to the Underworld, to guard the Great Seal.

Zhao Yunlan turns to Shen Wei. "And then what? Why do you say that you and Shennong are absolutely irreconcilable?"

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<sup>12</sup> In Daoist tradition, every human has both a spiritual, ethereal, yang soul (魂 *hún*) which leaves the body after death, and a corporeal, substantive, yin soul which remains with the corpse (魄 *pò*). In most traditions, there are three hun and seven po souls - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun\\_and\\_po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po)

<sup>13</sup> A legendary stone that helps people reincarnate together, located at the River of Forgetfulness - <https://chineseaesop.blogspot.com/2009/06/legend-of-three-life-stone.html>

## Chapter 93

At first, Shen Wei doesn't reply. He looks in the direction where the unbearably sad little Ghost King has disappeared, with a strange smile on his face—as if he were a bit nostalgic, and maybe a bit embarrassed. Eventually, he says gently, “I actually really respect Shennong. More than you and Nüwa, he seemed like a real god.”

“Wait, wait!” Zhao Yunlan lifts his hand to stop him, frowns, and thinks for a moment. “If you ask me, all this is your fault. You don't explain things properly, you've been randomly lying to me, and I feel like my head is about to explode.”

Shen Wei shuts his mouth, waiting for Zhao Yunlan to decide he doesn't want to see him any more... but no matter how long he waits, it doesn't come. It's like he's hanging onto the edge of a cliff by a blade of grass, unable to beg for life or death.

Zhao Yunlan glances at him and suddenly says: “Shen Wei, do you know what the most difficult thing in life actually is?”

Shen Wei turns to look at him.

“It's that I married a difficult scoundrel of a wife with a head too full of ideas. Even if you kick him, he won't let out even one<sup>14</sup>... Well, in a word, sooner or later your endless notions will totally disorient me.<sup>15</sup>”

Shen Wei is speechless.

“That's right,” Zhao Yunlan says, “I'm talking about you. I'm already very disoriented right now.”

Shen Wei thinks he hears a certain hint in these words, though he's not sure. He fixes Zhao Yunlan with a stare which for a moment burns frighteningly bright. “So?”

Zhao Yunlan's reflexes have long been trained by Shen Wei. As long as Shen Wei is even a little sad, he'll do his utmost to coax a smile out of him; but as soon as Shen Wei shows the slightest bit of strength and aggression, Zhao Yunlan can't help but tease him and flirt with him.

So Zhao Yunlan rubs his own chin, making a serious face as if he's a figure of authority. “So... what happens next between us depends on how sincere your confession is, and how much lenience you therefore deserve. Comrade Shen Wei, those who play tricks on the masses will eventually be submerged by the waves from the masses revolting, do you understand?”

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase 三脚踹不出一个屁 is missing the last word here - “even kicked three times, he won't release a single [fart]”

<sup>15</sup> Idiom: 找不着北 (zhǎo bùzháo běi) – lit “unable to tell where north is”, confused and disoriented

Shen Wei's lips move a little, but in the end he says nothing—he's probably long lost the ability to frankly express his feelings that he possessed in his youth.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "First let me work out the sequence before we argue about the things that happened. Starting from when the great beauty Nüwa created people with her spinning leek dance<sup>16</sup>. Kunlun—who seems to be me, by the way—was just out of baby clothes<sup>17</sup>. Being an immature little idiot, I ran my mouth while looking on, and said that there were other things contained within the mud she used to make people. Because I said that, Nüwa found the three evils within the mud: greed, hatred, and obsession<sup>18</sup>. That's when Nüwa foresaw those three characteristics in humankind, which would eventually lead to an irreparable war between gods and demons? Hm, this means..."

Zhao Yunlan pauses. "...the lady was a bit paranoid?"

Shen Wei isn't used to his casual manner, so he's silent for a while; but Zhao Yunlan isn't wrong. He nods reluctantly. "Yes."

"Later, Nüwa called Fuxi and the two built the Great Seal together, suppressed the fire, and formed the Profane Lands," Zhao Yunlan says, then lowers his voice. "Oh, right, I meant to ask, were those two really together like the legends say?"

Shen Wei, still reluctantly, says, "Yes."

"Damn, even gossip can be true! So they lived in peace for a few years. But then, the first war between gods and demons broke out, or rather, the Yellow Emperor fought against Chiyou. As they fought, Chiyou found that his opponent was winning and he couldn't hold out any longer. His spirit left his body and went to Mount Kunlun to find Kunlun, begging the mountain god—that's me—to take care of his followers, the shaman and shifter tribes. But Kunlun, the lazy dog, didn't want any of it. He'd starve before bothering to move a muscle<sup>19</sup>. Of course he also couldn't stand the god's constant begging and kowtowing as if he was beseeching the heavens. Plus, he had a stupid and gluttonous cat who went and accidentally licked Chiyou's blood. So Kunlun was forced to return the favour and offer his help. By the way, that cat was Da Qing right? Fuck, I knew that fatty would fuck up his dad's life."

Shen Wei turns away; he doesn't want to look at this 'dad whose cat fucked up his life'.

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<sup>16</sup> Zhao Yunlan is comparing Nüwa's creation of humans to a dance routine used in the Japanese game Hatsune Miku - [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=levan+Polkka+-+Hatsune+Miku](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=levan+Polkka+-+Hatsune+Miku)

<sup>17</sup> 脱了开裆裤 (tuōle kāidāngkù) = lit. "shed his open-crotch pants" - not yet toilet-trained babies and toddlers in China wear pants like this instead of diapers

<sup>18</sup> 三尸 (Sān Shī) "Three Corpses" = a daoist belief that humans carry three demons inside them that cause sickness and hasten death - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Corpses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Corpses)

<sup>19</sup> Lit. "too lazy to turn around a pancake" - Translated very freely here. If you're interested, the story referenced here is about a child who has a pancake but still starves because it's too lazy - <http://folklore.usc.edu/the-laziest-boy-in-china/>

“Kunlun protected the shaman and shifter tribes in the first big war between gods and demons. He also gave them a place to live and practice, and looked after them for generations. However, the peace didn't last very long. The second big war between gods and demons began. This time it was a civil war between the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor. The water god Gonggong and Emperor Zhuanxu, a descendant of the Yellow Emperor, joined forces. The Emperor of the East, Houyi, also tried to use the chaos for his own profit. The war of three worlds entangled the shaman and the shifter tribes once again. This time around, all the tribes had grown, and so the death count was even higher, providing more samples for Shennong. He came to the conclusion that 'death is chaos' and 'souls discontent with chaos suffer more agony'. To sum it up, Nüwa created a human race 'unhappy in life, tormented in death'. And so Shennong and Nüwa came together and discussed how to get rid of death forever. That was when he came up with the idea of reincarnation.”

Shen Wei shows an acerbic smile. “Maybe it was because he had become a mortal and had to face the reality of a lifespan as short as an insect's, born in spring and dying in autumn. Maybe he himself was afraid of death.”

“Uh, let's put this thought on hold, it's not important for now.” Zhao Yunlan continues, “Shennong took the soul fire from my left shoulder, intending to calm the souls. When he arrived at Mount Buzhou, he unfortunately ran into comrade Gonggong, the inventor of suicide bombing, and dropped the fire.”

Shen Wei laughs coldly. “I think he did it on purpose. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to persuade Nüwa and so found an excuse. His goal was to establish the wheel of reincarnation in the Underworld all along.”

“Come on, stop holding a grudge. He already got his just reward; didn't he fail?” Zhao Yunlan feels for a cigarette and squats down on the ground to light it. Like a big monkey he slings his arms over his knees and wantonly pollutes the air on top of the holy mountain. “As a result, he accidentally discovered the ghost tribe. But you guys were inherently born missing parts: you had no soul. Not only were you unable to enter the reincarnation cycle, the moment the Great Seal cracked, you came onto the surface to make trouble.

“It was a great catastrophe. And so, together, the gods helped the living creatures up holy Mount Penglai; the shaman clan were abandoned for their ingratitude, while the humans and shifters were saved. Nüwa mended the lands and the skies, Shennong died of old age and his spirit entered the reincarnation cycle, Kunlun sealed the four pillars and lastly went to guard the Houtu Great Seal.” At this point, Zhao Yunlan pauses slightly. “Oh, I think I kind of get it.”

Zhao Yunlan, being busy all year, hasn't had the time to get a haircut. It has grown a little bit long, almost covering his ears. When the mountain wind blows, his fringe is swept over the bridge of his nose. Shen Wei bends down and smooths the messy hair away from his forehead. Quietly, he asks, “What do you understand?”

“At that time you were so young. As I was guarding the Great Seal, of course I wouldn’t let you escape, so why did I give you Kunlun’s divine tendon?” Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei’s wrist and looks up. “It was because Shennong was going to kill you, wasn’t it? I wanted to protect you, and this was the only thing I could do, in the hope that if I wasn’t around anymore, I could pass the power over the hundred thousand mountains on to you.”

“This time you’re wrong,” Shen Wei says. “He didn’t want to kill me; he wanted to exterminate the entire ghost tribe. Shennong couldn’t believe that there were things in this world without a soul. If they didn’t have a soul, how could they be considered alive? It was him who facilitated the birth of the ghost tribe and of course he wanted to take responsibility for it and ‘make up for’ his mistake.” As Shen Wei says this, he suddenly starts shaking. “If you hadn’t given it to me, if you hadn’t... you wouldn’t have left me so early.”

Zhao Yunlan laughs gently. “Maybe not that early, but sooner or later.”

“If I’d had a little more time, maybe...”

“Now that you’ve grown from a little beauty into a big beauty, looking back, do you think you’d act differently?”

Shen Wei is unable to respond.

“And then?”

“...And then I attacked you and confined your spirit. I went down to the wheel of reincarnation to beg my enemy Shennong,” Shen Wei says. “The only time I begged in my life—was to beg him.”

“At that time, the cycle of reincarnation was already established, the governing body of the Underworld had been formed and a complete set of laws had been created. I begged him to allow you to enter the reincarnation cycle like a mortal. That way, even if you didn’t remember me every lifetime, you’d at least still be there,” Shen Wei says. “But he didn’t agree. Ancient gods cannot enter reincarnation because reincarnation began with the support of Shennong’s own spirit. Although it could accept the spirits of different humans, demons, and ghosts, it could not withstand a real mountain god. The only exception was...if he personally suppressed all your godly powers and washed your soul to become that of a mortal. That way, Shennong would scatter and die...it would be equivalent to a life for a life, him using his life in exchange for yours.”

“What did you promise him for this?”

“I must forever protect the Great Seal. As long as the Great Seal exists, I exist. If the Great Seal is broken, then I must die along with all of the ghost tribe.” Shen Wei’s fingers are icy cold. “And...I can never see you. If I can’t resist, I will drain your essence and you will die with your soul scattered.”

Shen Wei suddenly breaks away from Zhao Yunlan's hand to stroke Zhao Yunlan's face with his palm. Then he takes his chin, forcing him to look up. He speaks carefully. "I kept this promise for thousands of years. Now the Great Seal is breaking; I have arrived at my ending. Originally I wanted to come quietly and go quietly, but by chance I met you and failed. From that night you really belonged to me... no, from that day you told me for the second time that you will give me your heart, I could no longer let you go.

"I deliberately left false memories in the Holy Tree to mislead you, and then I deliberately let you see me extract blood from my heart for you. I also deliberately left you so that you would come down to the Underworld to find me, and deliberately showed you the edited memories within the Houtu Great Seal. All that was to make you feel guilty, make you unable to leave me, and make you decide in the end to willingly accompany me to death." Shen Wei's hand is turning colder and colder. His agitation mounting, his grip also becomes tighter, until Zhao Yunlan's chin starts to hurt.

"Even now, after you've seen through everything, I'm still trying to compel you." Shen Wei's voice is very low, almost broken. "Will you choose to die with me and forever belong to the chaos? Or will you choose to let me remove your memories of this life so that you don't recognize me anymore? You won't remember me and you and I will no longer have anything to do with each other."

Because he refused to be deceived, these two paths are finally laid clearly in front of him.

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Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan are at the foot of Mount Penglai in Shen Wei's memories, so Wang Zheng and Sang Zan come up empty-handed and call No. 4 Bright Avenue. Wang Zheng, maybe subconsciously, feels that it isn't such a big deal for the Ghost Slayer and their leader to be together, so she speaks in a brisk and reassuring tone.

Despite that, when Guo Changcheng puts down the phone, his eyes go wide with anxiety. "But how do we find her?"

He looks back down at his mobile phone and rummages through his pictures. Eventually, he finds a big group photo; the faces in it are so small they're barely visible. After five minutes, he has come up with a crude and simple plan: "What if I enlarge her photo a bit and then post it to the internet and the newspapers under missing persons?"

"By that time the swindler has sold the girl twice around the human trafficking market already," Chu Shuzhi says. "Why don't you go to Carrefour²⁰ to look for her, it'd be quicker."

Guo Changcheng gives him a perplexed look.

²⁰ A supermarket chain

"Well, then tell us where her family is from. How did they come to Dragon City?"

Guo Changcheng names the province and the administrative region. "Of course they aren't from the city. They're from a remote village called Cuijia. From the countryside, you take a long-distance bus for eight hours to get out of the mountains, and then once you're in the next bigger city, you can switch to the train."

"The train is impossible," Chu Shuzhi interrupts. "You need an ID with your real name to take the train. Even if the swindler would do that, we don't know if that little girl even has an ID card. She can't just steal the family residence certificate and run."

Guo Changcheng is stumped.

Chu Shuzhi turns on his computer to check the long-distance bus schedules from the town Guo Changcheng named to Dragon City. He considers for a moment, then also looks up the highway route. "Looks like you have to take National Highway 220 to get into the city from there. That's about a thirty-hour trip. If the child left home yesterday, she should be almost in Dragon City by now."

Guo Changcheng's eyes brighten. "That's right! Chu-ge, you're so smart! We can go to the highway exit and wait, and maybe we'll meet her."

Chu Shuzhi lifts his wrist and finds it's almost 11 o'clock. How long would they have to wait?

He thinks to himself that Guo Changcheng must be crazy. Besides, he looks way too cheerful, so he can't help but pour ice water over him. "Human trafficking isn't even part of our duties, can't we just go home and sleep? It's your fault you ran your mouth and casually made an agreement with a ghost."

Guo Changcheng immediately picks up on the complaint in his words. For a moment, he's stunned, then he starts rubbing his sleeves uneasily. "Chu-ge, why don't...why don't you go ahead home and rest, it's enough if I drive over by myself. Thank you for today. If it wasn't for you I definitely wouldn't have thought to look at the car route."

Chu Shuzhi frowns.

Guo Changcheng instinctively thinks he's done something wrong, so he bows and apologises at once. "I even troubled you to bring things for me today. I'm really very sorry. Why don't...why don't I treat you to a meal when you have time?"

Chu Shuzhi harrumphs, grabs his coat, and walks out.

Guo Changcheng hesitates wordlessly behind him. Chu Shuzhi is already almost at the door when he notices Guo Changcheng isn't following. He turns his head and says impatiently, "What are you dawdling for? Wasn't it you who wanted to find her? Get over here!"

Guo Changcheng immediately perks up like a freshly watered flower and scuttles after him.

They drive Guo Changcheng's car to the highway exit and wait. Whenever they see a car with a licence plate from the missing girl's province, they stop and search it.

They wait the whole night.

Although the New Year has passed, Dragon City doesn't enjoy spring temperatures yet; mornings and evenings aren't much different from winter. Anyone standing outside for a while is easily frozen.

Sitting in the heated car for a while, Guo Changcheng becomes sleepy. Chu Shuzhi observes him as his head keeps dropping to his chest. Then he suddenly starts awake, quickly wipes his face, and gets out of the car to look around, only relaxing after confirming that no long-distance buses have passed. His coat wrapped tightly around him, he walks back and forth in the night wind, hoping to make himself wake up a bit. He only comes back to the nice warm car once he's frozen solid.

He comes and goes several times. Chu Shuzhi doesn't say anything, just observes him thoughtfully.

The Zombie King rarely pays attention to Guo Changcheng, but just then, he suddenly feels it's weird... How old is Guo Changcheng? The aura of virtue around his body is so thick he can't see through it, like smog. Even old monks who spend their whole lives free from worldly matters may not accumulate this much virtue. Da Qing said he did everything in secret and didn't let others find out, which would double it... but it still doesn't add up unless Guo Changcheng helped old ladies cross the road every morning, noon, and night.

Just then, another long-distance bus comes along. Once Guo Changcheng sees the licence plate, he jumps out of the car excitedly, readies his badge, and stands in the middle of the road, jumping and waving to stop the bus.

"Tch, idiot," Chu Shuzhi mutters. He looks at Guo Changcheng's back before calling Da Qing. "Hey, night owl, you aren't asleep yet, right? In that case, I have a question for you."

Da Qing is in the middle of a dream. In his dream, he's floating on the ocean, gnawing on a big whale in his grasp, thinking that this should be enough food for a year and a half. However, he only manages two bites before the big whale flops about and splashes his face with icy cold water.

Da Qing wakes abruptly. He looks up and sees Sang Zan, who's holding a freezing cold phone receiver against his face. Beaming, Sang Zan says, "Cat Stud. T-telephone."

Sang Zan has long since learned that "studderer" isn't anything good and stopped using it—now it has become Da Qing's exclusive nickname, and he has shortened it to a sarcastic "stud".

The 'Cat Stud' lifts his head grumpily and puts the receiver to his ear. When he hears Chu Shuzhi's voice, he growls, "Get lost, old man. You wanna die?"

Chu Shuzhi doesn't care for his foul mouth. "Eating right before going to sleep is bad for you. Be careful your tonnage doesn't reach whole new levels by the end of the year. Forget about the lady cats, even dogs won't look at you then. Aren't you afraid of high blood pressure and cholesterol, your eminence?"

Sang Zan watches the Cat Stud sink his claws into his work desk and gouge out a row of deep lines, before he calmly floats away, his book under his arm.

"Whatever you have to say, spit it out or get out. Don't beat around the bush. What do you want so late at night, Chu Shuzhi?"

"Have you ever seen orange-colored virtue before?"

"I have," Da Qing says, ill-tempered. "I've seen it in all colours of the rainbow. If you collect all seven, you can summon the godly dragon to perform bow-tying air acrobatics for you."

"I'm not kidding you." Chu Shuzhi lowers his voice and glances at the bus parked outside the window. "It's not always orange. Normally it's white, but occasionally it's like it's on fire and flashes like a flame."

Da Qing is silent for a moment. "Where did you see that?"

"On Guo Changcheng's body."

"That's impossible," Da Qing states firmly. "I know the type you're talking about. That's not ordinary virtue, it's Great Virtue. Do you know what that is?"

Chu Shuzhi raises his eyebrows: "Hm?"

"I haven't seen it with my own eyes, but I heard that back when Nüwa created people, she was surrounded by fire which represented Heaven's Great Virtue. Now the merits and demerits of all creatures are written in the *Book of Life and Death*. At best, for the higher levels, they're written on the Ancient Tree of Virtue, by the Ink Brush of Virtue. But it can't possibly be at that level. You're bullshitting meow. It's impossible."

Chu Shuzhi is stunned. By now, Guo Changcheng has already gotten off the bus. He can see how he's hanging his head. It seems he didn't manage to find her this time, either.

Chu Shuzhi lowers his voice and quickly says to Da Qing: "Is Xiao Guo really human?"

"Sure he's human," Da Qing says. "Wang Zheng even has his ID registered."

"I need to check his birth certificate. The kind from a hospital that says 'male baby born on x year x month x day'," Chu Shuzhi insists.

"Eh?" Da Qing says. "Fucking humans are too curious. The things you spend your time on..."

"I'm done talking nonsense with you," Chu Shuzhi says, "I'm busy over here. Gonna hang up. Remember to look into it for me." He hangs up before Guo Changcheng gets back into the car.

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Guo Changcheng looks wilted, like a sad homeless person who spends his nights in the waiting halls of railway stations. When he climbs into the driver's cabin, all Chu Shuzhi can think is that he looks like a mess.

"You didn't find her?" Chu Shuzhi asks, even though he already knows the answer.

Guo Changcheng nods silently.

After a moment Chu Shuzhi asks tentatively, "Maybe I was wrong. She might have taken the train, or stayed in the city for a while. How about we go back?"

Guo Changcheng is silent for a while. Staying up so late has slowed down his already not very bright mind. Then he wipes his face hard and says quietly, "I'm sorry Chu-ge, how about... how about you drive back first? I'll wait until I find her, then I'll get a taxi back by myself."

"Get a taxi? Are you planning to stay out here overnight and freeze?" Chu Shuzhi considers, then adds, "You don't have to worry. It doesn't matter that you promised the ghost. It's just an Earthbound spirit with hardly any cultivation, I'll sort it out."

Guo Changcheng stubbornly shakes his head. He's just about to push open the car door and get out, but as soon as his back is turned, Chu Shuzhi's hand shoots out of his pocket. With a 'smack', he slaps a paper talisman on the back of Guo Changcheng's neck.

"What are you? Why are you attached to a person's body?" Chu Shuzhi asks coldly.

Guo Changcheng feels like his limbs are suddenly weighed down with lead. He wants to turn his head to ask Chu Shuzhi what is going on, but his neck has become stiff and he can't twist it. His consciousness seems to float out of his body, and he's looking at his own ridiculous body, and Chu Shuzhi with a serious expression behind him, as if from outside.

Chu Shuzhi frowns, his head raised to look at Guo Changcheng's spirit floating in mid-air—that's definitely a mortal's soul, and it's 100% compatible with the body, nothing out of place.

In other words, the 'spirit' he smacked out with his talisman is truly Guo Changcheng himself.

"So you're really Guo Changcheng?"

Guo Changcheng, floating in the air, wants to say, "Chu-ge, what are you doing?"

But when he opens his mouth, it's as if someone has pressed the 'mute' button on him... or rather, as if he has entered a vacuum field where sound cannot be transmitted. He makes a

noise, but can only hear his own voice through his own body; it leaves his mouth but gets no further.

Then, Chu Shuzhi reaches out and removes the talisman. Guo Changcheng feels a huge rush of pressure, like a skeletal hand pressing directly on his soul. It feels very strange and makes Guo Changcheng shudder. Then, in an instant, the floating feeling from before is gone and his body feels unusually heavy.

Guo Changcheng turns his head with trepidation and is met with Chu Shuzhi's analytical gaze.

Guo Changcheng is a little slow, but he realises that his soul had left his body just then. In his understanding, 'the soul leaving the body' and 'death' are pretty much the same. In other words, Chu Shuzhi nearly smacked him to death with that talisman.

Guo Changcheng cowers, his back tightly pressed against the car door in terror. With his heart beating in his throat, he asks weakly, "Chu... Chu-ge, this— what does this mean..."

"Are you human?" Chu Shuzhi asks.

Guo Changcheng stares at him dumbfounded. He doesn't know what the problem is. Instinctively, he thinks he must have done something so unreasonable and unacceptable that he'd be scolded as 'not human'. But after thinking carefully, he can't recall anything at all. Surely, he can't have committed crimes in his dreams?

"Let me put it this way: do you have any recollection of your parents?"

Guo Changcheng nods.

"Sorry, I know what happened in your family, you're grieving too," Chu Shuzhi apologises without an ounce of sincerity, "but I must get this clear. Are your parents your biological parents? How can you prove they're your biological parents?"

Chu Shuzhi doesn't have very high emotional intelligence, specifically shown in how, even though he knows how to speak politely, he sometimes just finds it too much of a drag and doesn't bother.

If he'd given attitude like this to Zhao Yunlan instead, he'd likely have got a hard smack in return. But Guo Changcheng is a softie; he feels a little awkward hearing this, but shows no sign of losing his temper. He even thinks about it carefully, replying in all seriousness, "I look very much like my uncle and my grandfather when they were young. My paternal grandfather had slightly elevated blood pressure, which he passed down to my dad. I have some early signs of high blood pressure, too... I'm pretty sure they're my birth parents."

"Then are there any cultivators among your ancestors?"

“Ancestors?” Guo Changcheng is stunned. “I don’t know what my ancestors did, I can only think back three generations, at best up to the time of the war²¹. No one knows what happened before that.”

Chu Shuzhi doesn't linger on the issue—even if Guo Changcheng really has some special blood lineage, the last three generations have all been ordinary humans, so it's clear that the blood has been diluted and isn't a decisive factor. Then the last possibility is that he's someone's reincarnation.

But he really has an ordinary mortal soul; even with his Zombie King eyesight, Chu Shuzhi can't see anything unusual.

Just then, the headlights of a bus sweep across the road, and Guo Changcheng grabs Chu Shuzhi's arm. “Chu-ge, bus! Bus!”

Chu Shuzhi hesitates, but puts aside his questions for the time being. “All right, off you go.”

Guo Changcheng, as though suddenly pardoned, half-falls, half-rolls out of the car and runs off. What a strange coincidence, just after a bus from the girl's home province has passed by, here's another one. He waves his hand to stop it, hops on the bus, and shows the driver his badge, then spools off his request to check the passengers in the bus, like a newsreader reciting his memorised lines.

Sometimes there are random spot checks during the New Year, so the driver is very calm. He turns back and shouts to the passengers, “Everyone wake up! Wake up! Please cooperate for a moment. ID check!”

Chu Shuzhi has originally stayed in the car some distance away, but just then he feels a twinge in his heart. Cultivators often get these kinds of premonitions. He gets out of the car and walks over, just in time to see a small, skinny girl of around 15 or 16 coming out of the bus behind Guo Changcheng. She's wearing a dingy school uniform, and her head is lowered down to her chest.

“She's the one?”

Guo Changcheng nods, and adds, “The person who took her away is still on the bu—”

He's barely finished speaking when they hear a 'bang' as someone jumps out of the bus and runs off. There's in fact no evidence that he kidnapped and trafficked the girl. After all, the girl has been sitting on the bus properly, and has followed the person of her own free will. But most likely that person has done something wrong, so as soon as he heard those words he panicked and fled.

²¹ 抗日战争 - The Second Sino-Japanese War, which is part of the Second World War

But he hasn't even run two steps before he trips over something underfoot and falls on his face. He picks himself up and keeps running, but after two more steps falls on his face again. Only after the third time does Chu Shuzhi, a disinterested 'civilian' just slowly wandering over, haul him up by the collar, seizing him and clasping an ice cold object around his wrists.

Of course, because of the extraordinary nature of his job, the Zombie King never uses handcuffs; so due to lack of familiarity with this handcuffing business, he almost fails to put them on properly.

Chu Shuzhi turns his head and sees Guo Changcheng speaking softly to the girl, saying that she shouldn't have run away from home without permission. He's forgotten that the girl's mother is already a ghost and calls her number. "Hello Auntie, don't worry. We've found your child, and tomorrow I'll find someone to take her back home."

When he's finished, he naturally gives the phone to the girl. "Your mother was crazy worried about you, and called me in the middle of the night to beg me to find you. Say something to her."

The girl is in a rebellious phase. Even though she recognized Guo Changcheng, to her he's more playmate than teacher, come to help out in the summer holidays during middle school. Her attitude isn't very good anyway, very 'devil may care' and unwilling to submit to discipline. Guo Changcheng has kept talking and talking and she's totally ignored him. But when she hears that sentence, she freezes.

She lifts her head abruptly and looks at him as if she wants to yell 'You liar!' But the words won't leave her mouth. As though guided by a ghost or spirit, she takes the phone with trembling hands. "Hello?"

The person on the other side of the line is silent for a while, but then a loved one's familiar countryside accent once again reaches her ear through the ether, piercing the veil. She really does hear her late mother's voice. "Cui-er."

Tears suddenly start gushing down the girl's face. "Mom!"

Through the phone, her mother says, "Don't cry, Cui-er, don't cry. Listen to Teacher Guo's words. Come back tomorrow, ok? You went so far, Mom can't keep up with you. I worry when I can't see you..."

The young girl in her old school uniform ends up standing at the highway exit to Dragon City in the middle of the night, wailing with unspeakable grief.

Chu Shuzhi isn't good at dealing with that kind of situation, he just wants to catch her and be done with it. Again, he glances at Guo Changcheng, but again, there's that shining orange light thick with virtue.

The light seems even brighter, and for a split second, Chu Shuzhi thinks maybe Guo Changcheng is on fire. He rubs his eyes hard. When he looks again, it has disappeared.

Firelight...

Though Da Qing already said that it's Heaven's Great Virtue from when Nüwa created man, Chu Shuzhi can't help but have some ominous thoughts. He finally can't hold back any longer and pulls out his phone, dialling Zhao Yunlan's number again. He already tried a few times while waiting for Guo Changcheng in the car, but always got an 'out of service area'. This time, he gets 'this phone has been turned off'.

Does this mean Zhao Yunlan is back?

Chu Shuzhi lights a cigarette, feeling like he's become weak. But this thought gives him some strength again.

They've been watching the highway exit until 4:30am that night, virtually pulling an all-nighter, just like Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan have been wandering Shen Wei's memories the whole night.

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At the top of Mount Penglai, after Shen Wei has finished asking his question, he doesn't wait for Zhao Yunlan to reply, but immediately says, "I won't allow you to think about it; you must answer me now."

Zhao Yunlan raises his head to look into Shen Wei's eyes. After a long while, he reaches out and grasps Shen Wei's wrist. "How much longer will the Great Seal last? Are the remaining days enough for me, this tiny mortal, to live through half my life, nurse my ageing parents, and send them off?"

For a moment, Shen Wei almost doesn't understand what he means. His face is snow white and so are his lips; the only colour all seems to gather in the blood vessels of his eyes. His mind is completely empty except for the two answers that he himself has spoken, his own words repeating over and over in his mind.

Zhao Yunlan hasn't immediately chosen one of those two options, and it's beyond Shen Wei's ability to comprehend. He doesn't respond to Zhao Yunlan's words.

After a long time, he clutches Zhao Yunlan's shoulder and half crouches down, as if just waking from a dream. "What... say— say it clearly, what do you mean?"

Zhao Yunlan reaches out to touch his hair, softly stroking it for a bit. "Your heart is so heavy. Your schemes are also so heavy... Ah, you're so hard to take care of. Let's go, we're going home."

Shen Wei's eyes widen; he stares at him intensely for a second. Suddenly, he lunges forward and sweeps him up into his arms. Then, after a rush of spinning skies and rolling earth, Zhao Yunlan feels a familiar touch underfoot. He hears a crisp, sharp sound; it seems one of them landed wrong and accidentally knocked the little tea cup off the bedside table, spilling the leftover water.

They pay no attention to it.

Shen Wei pins Zhao Yunlan roughly to the bed, almost violently ripping off his clothes.

"Hey, wait!" Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei's hand. "I'm not drinking your blood."

"To me, it's like a mosquito bite."

"Well, it's not to me." Zhao Yunlan gives him a shove, then reaches for the bedside lamp, but his arms are soon imprisoned.

Shen Wei licks his Adam's apple. Zhao Yunlan lets out an impatient growl. "Enough, stop messing around."

"Even if I dug out my whole heart, I still wouldn't die straight away. At least I would live longer than the Great Seal," Shen Wei says in a low voice, his heated breaths brushing against Zhao Yunlan's collarbones again and again. "Actually, I wondered at the time whether the effect would be better if I ripped out my heart and gave it to you. But I was afraid it would really frighten you, so I only showed you the process of extracting blood."

Zhao Yunlan is silent for a while, then says dryly, "Much gratitude to you, for still remembering that I'm easily scared."

Shen Wei nestles closer and delicately kisses the corners of his mouth, the tip of his nose rubbing this way and that on Zhao Yunlan's face. His fingers are tangled with Zhao Yunlan's, their half-naked bodies tightly pressed together. "All of that was nothing... Yunlan, there's only these few decades left. Let's spend our lifetime together like ordinary mortals?"

In the darkness before dawn, their gazes meet. It's as if Shen Wei is enchanted by Zhao Yunlan's eyes. He kisses him lightly, and it turns into an extremely gentle lingering kiss.

But Zhao Yunlan doesn't give in easily. After he comes back to his senses, he pulls away sharply in the blink of an eye. His hands slip inside Shen Wei's clothes to encircle his waist.

“Spending a lifetime is very good, but I need to reclaim my position as the man of the household.”

He clamps down around Shen Wei’s waist and pulls sideways with the intention of flipping them over and pushing him down... but nothing happens.

Shen Wei seems to weigh a tonne. Zhao Yunlan remembers lifting Shen Wei up before; he definitely had the weight of a normal human, one you could lift with two hands.

Didn’t you fucking say you want to be like a mortal? Then don’t pick on mortals like that!

The moral of this story tells us that even if covered in sheepskin – even a sheepskin capable of blushing – a wolf will always be a wolf.

## Chapter 95

The sky has just brightened and the ghosts at No. 4 Bright Avenue have finished work. Da Qing, worried sick, runs anxiously over to Zhao Yunlan's house, fat body wobbling. First he jumps onto the windowsill in the corridor and then, with a fierce lunge like a cat pouncing on food, flies through the air and accurately shoots towards Zhao Yunlan's front door, his paw landing on the doorbell.

Then he slides down the wall like a cat pancake.

The doorbell rings.

Zhao Yunlan often plays video games with headphones on when he's at home. That's why his doorbell is piercingly loud, so he doesn't miss it when someone rings. Even from outside, one can hear it blaring an obnoxious folk song loud enough to wake the dead. Once pressed, it plays the whole song.

But even after it's been playing a long while, no one answers.

Da Qing isn't like Chu Shuzhi, nonstop calling Zhao Yunlan's phone. He just assumes that Zhao Yunlan isn't home.

The black cat walks anxiously back and forth in front of the door. Unconsciously, he starts chasing his own tail and quickly becomes a black whirlwind.

Undeterred, he decides to try again. Just as he has jumped up to the corridor windowsill with his front paws, his back legs still struggling in the air, the door opens from the inside with a quiet 'click'. Startled, he lets go with his paws and lands flat on his ass, like an albatross missing its landing.

He rolls over, staring with wide eyes. Just as he's managed to sit up, his paws slip on the polished floor of the corridor and he falls again, his heavy chin bouncing and wobbling.

This time he collects his limbs with great care, sits up in a dignified manner, sticks out his chest and sucks in his stomach, and quietly meows, "Your Honour."

Shen Wei flicks a finger and Zhao Yunlan's endlessly ringing doorbell immediately falls silent.

Da Qing can't help but straighten his neck even more, and he swallows hard. His eyes unconsciously fall on the clothes Shen Wei is wearing—he's sure that shirt belongs to Zhao Yunlan! Zhao Yunlan, the freak, likes to roll up his sleeves, and he always, ridiculously, asks the dry cleaners to iron his shirts with the sleeves rolled up so that they're folded neatly.

A series of images appears in Da Qing's head, such as them taking off all their clothes and then...and then...

Da Qing lowers his big round head. He needs to adjust his mental state.

"What's wrong?" Shen Wei asks.

"Oh... I just came to see if Chief Zhao is back or not. When he suddenly jumped into the Underworld river, we were all pretty worried."

"He's back but he's resting right now," Shen Wei says quietly. "If you need anything, you can leave a message; I'll pass it to him when he wakes up."

Da Qing immediately gets the picture and decides to back away quickly on his short stubby legs. "Ah...ah then I won't bother you anymore. It's nothing important, just reminding our leader he still needs to write new work arrangements for New Year's in the next two days and prepare a New Year's speech for the department. It's nothing, nothing. You're busy, I'll get going."

"Ah, wait a moment." Shen Wei smiles a little embarrassedly and says politely, "There's something that I might have to trouble you for..."

Da Qing wisely scuttles back at once. Lifting his head, he says, "Please tell me."

Ten minutes later, an absurdly fat cat pushes open the door of the breakfast shop downstairs with his head. His face is so round, his eyes are almost squeezed out by fat; it makes him look a little sinister. Of course, the stupid humans don't know that this is the expression of the cat's true mood.

The waitress almost trips over him and immediately shouts, "Hey! How did a cat get in here? Get it out, get it out quickly!"

The cat looks up and shoots her a contemptuous glance. Then, he jumps onto the counter and knocks on the table with his front paw. Under the cashier's stupefied gaze, he spits out a piece of paper he's been carrying in his mouth.

The cashier unfolds the paper with trembling hands only to see neatly written: "One soymilk, one tray of buns, three deep-fried bread sticks. Please put them in a sturdy bag. The money is around the cat's neck, please take it. If there's change, please put it back in there. Thank you."

The cashier looks up and tries to figure out where the cat's neck might be. The black cat rolls his eyes and raises his head, revealing a collar in the dense cat fur under his double chin. The cashier finds 30 yuan folded into it.

The cashier raises his voice. "Hey, hey! Everybody, quick, come look! Incredible! Cats can even buy things now!"

Surrounded by onlookers, Da Qing is ready to die of embarrassment and indignation—what a bunch of stupid humans!

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Zhao Yunlan, startled by the sound of the door opening and closing, opens his eyes briefly. "Who is it?"

"Your cat." Shen Wei shuts the door. "He came to see you. I asked him to buy breakfast. Sleep a while longer."

Saying this, he gently pushes Zhao Yunlan back into the quilt, stuffs his hand back underneath, and bends down to kiss his forehead. Reaching out a finger, he smooths away Zhao Yunlan's frown at being abruptly awakened.

When Zhao Yunlan's breathing has evened out again, Shen Wei walks to the window and looks at the plant on the windowsill, which is almost dead from neglect. He reaches out and cups the flower pot, a milky white light radiating from his palm. Like a good rain after a long drought, it makes the withered plant quickly become radiant again and straighten its stalk. After a few moments, it stands upright.

Shen Wei quietly cleans the spray bottle and then carefully sprays water onto the leaves.

Most people have already started their workday and the roads are teeming with traffic. Shen Wei glances outside through the gap in the curtains. At the end of this busy world, far away on the horizon, a column of black smoke is rising from underground all the way towards the sky.

Shen Wei only glances at it briefly, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. Then he lowers his gaze back to the task at hand. He feels strangely at peace, his whole body relaxed, almost as if it wouldn't be a big deal if he died in this moment.

It's almost noon by the time Zhao Yunlan is woken by the scent of the hot cup of soymilk Shen Wei sets on the bedside table.

He stares at the soymilk for quite a while, then suddenly turns over and sits up. "What did you say this morning? What did you have Da Qing do?"

Shen Wei is wearing glasses and reading a handwritten lesson plan. He says calmly, "Buy breakfast."

Zhao Yunlan sits for a moment with a dumbfounded expression, perhaps making up a scene from “Fat Cat Wandering”²² in his mind. Then he shakes his head hard, props his elbows on his knees and his forehead in his hands, and starts laughing.

“What’s the matter?”

“For half my life, I thought I was a Casanova, but I was at last crushed by you. Comrade Shen Wei, you’re too skilled.”

Zhao Yunlan’s tone is actually quite sarcastic, and it’s not clear whom he’s trying to tease. Either way, Shen Wei pretends not to hear him and only smiles at him with a face full of virtue and chastity.

“Oh baby, I beg you, let’s stop pretending. And don’t pretend to be like this, I can’t bear it.” Looking at his virtuous and chaste expression gives Zhao Yunlan a toothache. Pressing a hand to his sore waist²³, he drags himself to the bathroom like a half-dead donkey, slamming the door behind him.

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Just as Zhao Yunlan has decided to eat his gloom away, he gets a phone call from Zhu Hong. “Hello, Chief Zhao? Da Qing said you’re back. Are you all right?”

“Hm.” Half a deep-fried breadstick in his mouth, Zhao Yunlan asks, “What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to you about something. Lin Jing bought a train ticket to return to Dragon City last night. I wanted to call him to confirm it this morning, but he didn’t have service. At first I thought it was because he might have lost signal in all those tunnels on his route, but he still isn’t back. I tried to call him just now and it still comes up as ‘out of service area’.”

Zhao Yunlan’s chewing slows. “Has he contacted the office?”

“No.”

“Hmm...” Zhao Yunlan frowns.

The SIU has a stipulation that no matter whether they’re only classifying a case or actually starting to handle it, there should never be fewer than two people involved. Of course, Da Qing also counts.

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<sup>22</sup> 肥猫流浪记 - a 1988 Hong Kong movie, probably chosen for the title more than its content - <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%82%A5%E7%8C%AB%E6%B5%81%E6%B5%AA%E8%AE%B0>

<sup>23</sup> “a sore waist” is a euphemism often used in novels, it means they had sex.

If, in rare special circumstances, one of them has to act alone, they're still required to check in with No. 4 Bright Avenue at least twice a day and report back about their location, progress, and any potential danger.

Lin Jing may be unreliable in small matters, but he seldom neglects the big ones. He wouldn't ignore this rule and go missing for no reason.

Zhao Yunlan ends his call with Zhu Hong and dials Lin Jing's number. Sure enough, it comes up as 'out of service area'. He takes a Guardian Order Token out of his pocket, dips his chopsticks in soymilk, and writes Lin Jing's name on it.

The Guardian Order Token is like a compass. First it sways back and forth, then tentatively picks a direction. A fine red line rises from Lin Jing's name, slowly stretching out; but as it stretches, the colour becomes darker. By the time it extends underneath the table, the string is almost grey.

Then it breaks.

## Chapter 96

Shen Wei lifts his head from his lesson plan and meets Zhao Yunlan's gaze. He bends down to pick up the broken line, but at the slightest touch, it disintegrates into dust and ashes.

Shen Wei withdraws his hand and carefully sniffs his fingertips. "It should be okay for the time being. There is no bad smell or trace of death. He should still be alive, we just cannot contact him. You can rest assured for now."

Without a word, Zhao Yunlan stuffs the last bun into his mouth, but he has lost his appetite. He takes a stack of notepads out from under the table. Surprisingly, this slob of a man is very precise in his time management. There are three sticky notes on the notepads: the one on the very top is labelled 'urgent', the next one 'important', and finally there's 'completed'.

The last section is empty; it's obvious that he's had a very heavy workload lately, and all his tasks were at least 'important'.

The handwriting is incredibly messy, like the scrawl of a doctor riding a rocket through a storm, but Shen Wei can decipher that in the 'urgent' section there's only his own name and the sentence 'find a way to get rid of Dad's broken bowl'. In the 'important' section there's a long list of entries related to his work.

Zhao Yunlan lifts his pen and puts a check mark after Shen Wei's name. He then adds a third item to 'urgent': 'Find Lin Jing ASAP.'

As he writes, Zhao Yunlan says, "Lin Jing actually comes from a long line of Buddhist ancestors. Truth to tell, there's no one else under me with such pure lineage. And he's so unattractive, even his selfies can basically be used as talismans to ward off evil spirits. He's also very good at pretending to be scared and would never purposefully stir up trouble. Plus, I only asked him to investigate a common case of stealing life force that happens on the seventh of every month. Meaning, he'd normally be the last person I'd worry about."

He drums his fingers on the table. "I have to take someone to go check it out; are you coming?"

Earlier, Shen Wei has been trying to figure out what the people in the Guardian Order are so busy with. Hearing this, he looks up from the check mark near his name and turns a limpid gaze on Zhao Yunlan, his eyes almost overflowing. He's smiling, and doesn't seem to mind at all that Zhao Yunlan wrote his name as illegibly as a dog writing with its paw. "Hm, stealing life force?"

Zhao Yunlan pulls out the message Wang Zheng forwarded to him. "This one. Please, Oh Great One, take a look at it."

Shen Wei, being an antique, has never used a smartphone before. He takes a look at Wang Zheng's words, then wants to look at the photo more closely. But he can't handle the touch screen, and can't enlarge the photo no matter how he tries.

He turns to Zhao Yunlan, who's gulping down soymilk, and says, "Lower your head for a moment, don't look."

Then, he hovers his palm above the smartphone screen with a gesture as if grabbing something from the air. The picture of the dead victim floats into the air like a 3D projection, a shocking visual effect. At first glance, it's almost as if the dead body, face bloated like an eggplant, is lying flat on the dining table.

Curiosity makes Zhao Yunlan raise his head again soon after he lowered it, and he reaps what he sowed: he chokes on his soymilk and almost spews it all over the corpse's face.

It's a prime example of old-fashioned superstition defeating modern technology.

Shen Wei carefully examines the corpse's complexion, and then uses his fingers to 'pinch' the corpse's eyes. It's like he's turned the air into a 3D touch screen which can be zoomed in and out as necessary.

"This man may not have died from taking someone else's life force," Shen Wei says, pointing to the eyes of the corpse which are enlarged to the size of a palm. "Take a look at his eyes."

"I just finished eating..." Zhao Yunlan covers his stomach in pain. But he follows Shen Wei's finger to look at the extremely enlarged eye. The pupil is dilated, but on closer inspection, a human figure seems to be reflected in it.

Zhao Yunlan is stunned, holding down Shen Wei's hand: "Can you enlarge it a bit more?"

Shen Wei shakes his head. "It's only a picture. If I enlarge it any more it won't be clear anymore."

"Oh, it doesn't matter." Zhao Yunlan pulls out a piece of napkin from underneath the table, quickly wipes his mouth, and then rips a piece of paper out of the back of his notepad to sketch the general shape of the shadow. "It's already much better than our crappy part-time technician."

Shen Wei asks casually, "Who is the part-time technician?"

"Zhu Hong."

The feet of the table make a gnashing sound as they grate against the floor.

Zhao Yunlan only feels a chilly gaze land on his bare nape. He feigns ignorance and sprawls on the table, carefully drawing the image inside the corpse's eye with his ballpoint pen. With his back turned to Shen Wei, he secretly smiles in delight.

"Legend has it that the eyes of the dead must be destroyed, otherwise the shadow of the last person they saw will show in them, and the police could find out," Zhao Yunlan says as he draws, "But even Pleasant Goat<sup>24</sup> knows that's impossible, or the criminal police would have nothing to do all day except study ophthalmology. But there's no smoke without fire...folklore always has a grain of truth. What's this shadow in the victim's eyes?"

Shen Wei doesn't say a word.

Zhao Yunlan shoots him a smile, his eyes crinkling. "Hm?"

Shen Wei's gloomy face makes it clear that he doesn't appreciate the topic of Zhu Hong. He's silent for a few more seconds, then says somewhat coldly, "The soul was ripped from the body. If someone dies after their allotted time, and the reapers collect their soul, their eyes will be clear. But if their time was cut short, either by creatures of the Underworld or something in the living world, their eyes will retain a ghostly reflection."

"Hm...then what do you think this is?"

Shen Wei lowers his gaze and says quietly, "How would I know?"

"Hey, what's wrong? Are you unhappy? Jealous?" Zhao Yunlan is utterly shameless. "I like it when people are jealous. Come on, look at daddy again..."

Shen Wei is speechless.

"Before, you used to keep it in all day, like some Mr Perfect, ascended from the mortal plane. I'm tired of seeing you pretend, even looking at that makes me feel exhausted on your behalf." Zhao Yunlan casually sticks the note behind a lesson plan that Shen Wei has been drafting. "Come, Mr Perfect, there's a scanner beside the computer. Help me scan it and send it to the office so they can find out as much as possible before I go over there."

Shen Wei takes the note over to the computer, only to then stand in front of it in a stupor. After turning it on, he starts a staring contest with the device in front of him—Mr Perfect actually only knows how to turn machines on and off and how to play PowerPoint presentations others have made for him. Everything else, his teaching assistant does for him; he can't even distinguish between a printer and a scanner.

Just then, Zhao Yunlan suddenly comes up behind him, reaching around him with both arms and taking his hand to guide the piece of paper into the scanner. Step by step, he operates it.

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<sup>24</sup>a cartoon character - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleasant\\_Goat\\_and\\_Big\\_Big\\_Wolf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleasant_Goat_and_Big_Big_Wolf)

Finally, covered by the noise of the machine, he deliberately breathes into Shen Wei's ear. "Hm, you don't know how to do it? If you don't know how to do it, why don't you ask your husband to teach you?"

Shen Wei doesn't know how to respond to that.

With a smirk, Zhao Yunlan quickly touches Shen Wei's butt. Before Shen Wei, face and ears flushed, can tackle him, he has already sidled far away to turn over a calendar sitting on the table. He taps on the email account and password written on the back. "You at least know how to do this, right? Go through the contacts and find the one that says 'colleagues', and send them the scanned picture."

With that, the smile drops off his face. He quickly dials No. 4 Bright Avenue's number: "Wang Zheng? You're still awake, right? Thank you for staying late. Close the curtains a bit tighter—yes, I know something happened to Lin Jing. I sent you a picture; let everyone in the office take a look at it and see if you can figure out what it is. Ask Lao Li to get two cars ready. We'll leave for the crime scene in half an hour."

Right then, the lamp hanging from the ceiling suddenly swings back and forth; Dragon City is experiencing a mild earthquake. After it has passed, the sound of an email notification can be heard both over the phone and in the room at the same time.

Over the phone, Wang Zheng says, "Wait, Chief Zhao. There's an email from Lin Jing."

Next to the phone, Shen Wei turns around. "It seems the person you are looking for sent an email."

Zhao Yunlan narrows his eyes and says to Wang Zheng, "Don't hang up just yet."

What Lin Jing has sent is a video of himself, taken with his mobile.

This selfie king, who's always preening and taking pictures of himself, has superb camera skills. Usually, his hand is steady and the picture perfectly stable. But this video is constantly shaking, and Lin Jing is panting. The screen is rocking up and down; he's either walking quickly or running.

He's a little out of breath, but the sound of his gasping is very low. His hand is shaking badly. The screen is directly aimed at his face but when he opens his mouth, no sound comes out. With a frown, Zhao Yunlan deciphers his lips: "I...lost my voice...are...ear...I'm starting to lose my hearing... my figures... no, it's fingers, my fingers are stiffening and I have a bad feeling about this."

After that, Lin Jing's shaky hands move the camera away from his face to point directly at an upscale resort complex—the rehabilitation resort where the life force stealing case occurred.

On the surface, all the houses look beautiful, but as soon as Zhao Yunlan sees them, he feels a sense of dissonance.

At this point, the sound of Lin Jing's fingers tapping on the back cover of the mobile phone plays back in the video, very loud and grating. By contrast, the entire resort is deadly silent.

Lin Jing lifts a finger and writes out 'empty, nobody here' in front of the phone's camera. Zhao Yunlan notices that the second joint on his finger is a strange grey colour and stiff like stone; it can't bend at all.

Then, Lin Jing's fingers pause. He aims the camera at his face, points to his ears, and shakes his head with a solemn expression. He absently reaches for his prayer beads and closes his eyes. His lips are moving, and although he doesn't make any sound, it seems that he's reciting sutras to keep himself calm.

When he opens his eyes again, he looks stunned for a moment, and then narrows his eyes with seemingly great effort. After that, the camera shakes violently for a while until finally the video cuts off.

"At the end, it's likely he found he couldn't see clearly anymore and so quickly sent the video," Zhao Yunlan determines. "Maybe because of his failing vision, he clicked the wrong thing and sent a timed email, that's why we only saw it now, or..."

"Or for whatever reason, the email couldn't be sent," Shen Wei continues.

Zhao Yunlan turns his head and their gazes connect. A moment later, they both say, "The earthquake just now."

Right as they've said it, the faint tremors come again, like an ordinary aftershock. Then there are sounds in the corridor: footsteps and voices. Zhao Yunlan lives relatively high up, so perhaps the shaking is stronger on higher floors and people are running out in a panic.

Zhao Yunlan has experienced earthquakes before. He stands where he is, unmoving. "Don't you think this 'earthquake' is a bit strange? When the Earth's crust is moving, it usually causes more of a swaying motion...this feels more like shaking."

Shen Wei lowers his eyes and carefully listens to his senses. "It seems to be movement from the Underworld."

"The Underworld?"

Shen Wei's expression turns grave. Zhao Yunlan considers for a moment, then squats down and makes sure his gun is fully loaded with special bullets. He puts a dagger engraved with

incantations into his ankle holster. Then he carelessly crams all the money from his wallet into his pockets, and fills the now empty wallet with a thick pile of talismans.

Finally, he takes a piece of wood out of his drawer. This is the real Guardian Order Token, actual bark cut from the trunk of the Holy Tree. When the words 'Guardian Order' on the bark touch Zhao Yunlan's fingers, they burst into a series of dazzling sparks.

He pockets the Guardian Order Token and says decisively, "Let's go."

Twenty minutes later, they arrive at No. 4 Bright Ave. Another while later, two off-road vehicles leave the yard at the same time, heading directly towards the place where Lin Jing had his accident.

It's less than 300 kilometres from Dragon City to the crime scene, about four hours on the highway. The place has no local industry, but there are mountains and hot springs; it's a typical little wellness tourism town. The natural villages in the surrounding area have been relocated for the sake of a beautiful environment. The only people who come through here every day are buyers and service personnel.

The town is as quiet as a ghost town. A produce truck is parked haphazardly on the side of the road at the edge of town, inside it a full load of fresh vegetables. Not a single thing is missing, but the driver's door is open and there's no one inside.

"A lot of service personnel must come here from the surrounding small towns and villages every day," Zhao Yunlan says. "Xiao Guo, get over there and drive the truck to the police station in town. Ask our colleagues there if they've received any reports of missing people in recent days."

Guo Changcheng is stunned. He's keenly aware of the strangeness of this town. Even just standing here, his legs are shaking non-stop. It's obvious that Zhao Yunlan is letting him go in order to protect him. At first this makes Guo Changcheng breathe a sigh of relief, but then for some unknown reason he feels his heart beat higher in his throat.

"Let Zhu Hong go with you," Zhao Yunlan says.

Zhu Hong isn't a random whipping-boy like Xiao Guo and protests immediately. "No! I'm not going anywhere!"

Zhao Yunlan takes out a cigarette and holds it in his mouth. He doesn't spare her a glance: "What, you haven't officially resigned yet but my words are already useless?"

"I..."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't give her a chance to argue, only gets back in the car and closes the door. "Lao Chu, come sit over here."

Zhu Hong stands frozen in place, glaring angrily at Zhao Yunlan.

Before getting into the car, Chu Shuzhi nudges her shoulder gently. "Hurry up and go, Chief Zhao's orders make sense. There's not much you can do to help here, but Xiao Guo over there isn't all that great at talking, so go help him out."

Zhu Hong doesn't even have time to reply. Zhao Yunlan, that bastard, has already floored the accelerator and driven away.

## Chapter 97

“Bastard!” Zhu Hong bends down to pick up a stone from the ground. This snake demon is certainly no soft lady; her arm strength is amazing and she’s very good at smashing things, being steady, accurate, and ruthless about it. With a ‘bang’ she hits the boot of the official car, and a piece of coating very obviously comes off it.

Zhao Yunlan doesn’t even care, let alone stop the car.

Just then, the phone in Zhu Hong’s pocket pings. She takes it out and sees a text from Chu Shuzhi: ‘Chief Zhao says to tell you that the money for destroying public property will come out of your bonus this month. Once your bonus is gone, we’ll take it out of your salary. So take it easy, before you don’t have a single cent to take with you when you resign.’

Zhu Hong squeezes the edges of her phone in her hand and roars, “Zhao Yunlan, you dickhead!”

Guo Changcheng’s face is ashen as he watches this defiant behaviour. That a coworker would dare to clash with a superior terrifies his fragile little heart.

Zhu Hong turns to glare at him with reddened eyes. “What are you looking at? Hurry up and get going!”

Guo Changcheng scuttles after her.

Zhu Hong rages, “Are you a man at all? If you’re a man, drive! Have you ever seen a man who makes a woman drive?!”

Guo Changcheng blinks at her and realises she’s taking her anger out on him. Driving a beat-up car isn’t like going to a public bathroom with male and female sections. Besides, Zhu Hong isn’t human, so Guo Changcheng isn’t particularly afraid of her. He says bluntly, “Zhu-jie, you actually aren’t a woman either—”

Zhu Hong’s face goes very still, like a King Cobra about to give a deadly strike, almost flicking her forked tongue. Sensing danger, Guo Changcheng dives into the car without making a sound.

However, Zhu Hong doesn’t get into the car herself. She slams the passenger side door and waves at Guo Changcheng: “Fuck off by yourself, I’m going to find Zhao Yunlan.”

Before Guo Changcheng can figure out what’s going on, she has already disappeared.

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Sitting in Zhao Yunlan's car, Da Qing and Chu Shuzhi are also suffering. The front passenger is a great God who looks vastly different from his past appearance. Knowing that he's the Ghost Slayer, both the Zombie King and the old cat have trouble going back to their innocent days of acting shamelessly towards everyone.

They drive in awkward silence all the way to the main entrance of the little resort town.

A marble sign with the words 'Spring Bay Holiday Resort' sculpted in large letters rises imposingly from an exuberant bed of flowers. Whether due to the material or to the weather, the words carved into the stone seem very bleak.

There are two security booths and two roads leading into town, but both entrances are barred. On the side, there's a card reader for residents to open the gates automatically, but it doesn't light up. It seems there's no power.

Zhao Yunlan parks the car at the entrance, then checks his phone. There's only a very faint signal, so tiny that it might as well not be there. After he shakes his phone a little, the signal is gone completely.

The window of the security booth is open, a small parcel sitting on the windowsill. There's a notebook beside it with an uncapped pen on top.

Both windowsill and objects are covered in a strange layer of grey dust.

Zhao Yunlan puts on his gloves and picks up the notebook for a closer look. He finds it's a record of courier deliveries: packages are accepted and signed by the doorman on behalf of the recipient, to later be countersigned by the recipient himself.

The date of the last entry happens to be that of the previous day, and reads "10A, owner Mr. Li, bag..."

The word "bag" is incomplete; the hook at the end of the last character is missing as it comes to an abrupt end.

Zhao Yunlan closes his eyes and imagines the scene: the delivery man passes the package in through the window, then takes the sign-in sheet and writes down the information, until he's suddenly interrupted before he can finish the word "bag".

Interrupted by what?

The item is still there. Where has the man gone?

Just then, Shen Wei comes over and wipes some of that fine, strangely colored dust off the windowsill.

He rubs his fingers together, carefully observing for a moment, then says lightly to Zhao Yunlan, “It has not been long since it settled.”

Zhao Yunlan is ready to kneel to this expert who can analyse traces of dust with the naked eye: “Dust settling? You can tell just like that? How do you do it?”

Shen Wei pats his hands clean. “I cannot tell with other kinds of dust, but this is bone dust. It has not settled for very long, it is still fresh. I don’t think it could have been here longer than two or three days.”

Zhao Yunlan is speechless.

Shen Wei’s tone is just as if he were saying, ‘This milk is fresh, straight from the cow’.

Stupefied, Zhao Yunlan closes the notebook and fishes out an evidence bag to put it in. He’s very glad that he sent Guo Changcheng away, because that guy would be scared enough to pee himself and attack indiscriminately with his anti-ghost electric stick.

“What did you call it? Bone dust? Like ashes? It doesn’t look like that.” Zhao Yunlan subconsciously thinks of ashes packed into an urn after cremation, and is sceptical for a moment.

Shen Wei explains patiently, “Those are not the kind of ashes that have been burnt. You know what ‘ground to dust’²⁵ means, don’t you? The man could have been standing right here, and then his flesh would have disintegrated in a moment, and his bones pulverised, landing on the windowsill.”

Chu Shuzhi, who has also come over at some point, asks incredulously: “What about that person’s flesh and blood?”

“Evaporated.” Shen Wei pushes up his glasses, “Flesh and blood don’t have the resilience of bone. It’s very difficult for those to leave any traces.”

Chu Shuzhi says carefully, “Hearing this, it seems that Your Honour knows how the people here disappeared, right?”

Shen Wei nods politely, and modestly says, “I don’t know much, but I do indeed happen to know a bit about this.”

²⁵ 挫骨扬灰 (cuògǔ yánghuī) - lit. “grinding the bone and scattering the ashes” = “with extreme prejudice”, “destroying completely”

And then, to his audience of two people and a cat, he intones evenly as if passing on common knowledge about an everyday occurrence, “During the times of great chaos, after Gonggong knocked down Mount Buzhou, the skies shattered and the earth cracked. When the Ghost tribe came up to the surface for the first time, people and animals within a 5km radius were instantly turned into bone dust. Within 50km, not a single blade of grass would grow.”

He raises his hand to point below the marble signboard of the resort, at the flower bed still flourishing in the middle of winter. “So the flowers over there are probably all fake.”

“But this small resort town isn’t even 5km across,” Zhao Yunlan points out. “There are two big pine trees at the main gate over there, and those are definitely not 50km away...”

“Because of that.”

Their gazes follow Shen Wei’s finger, and see a small flower garden at the entrance to the town. A venue surrounds the garden on all sides, split into many small buildings of various heights that delicately encircle the garden like a wall, providing privacy for the owner inside.

“The pond in the middle has the shape of a flower petal. The water flows in all four directions, perfectly connecting the small buildings.” Chu Shuzhi is very arrogant, but right now there’s no trace of his usual attitude as he humbly asks, “May I ask, Your Honour... That is a five-to-five plum blossom array²⁶, right?”

“Yes. You’re very knowledgeable, Mr. Chu—the plum blossom array is used to protect the home from evil spirits and ensure its safety,” Shen Wei says. “The dark energy was blocked by the array, it couldn’t get out. The only unprotected area is this small section of the road by the entrance. However, if this crude plum blossom array was able to suppress the energy surge, I think the Houtu Great Seal is probably all right. There just happened to be a small gap here. Once it’s patched up, it should be fine.”

Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing don’t know what the Houtu Great Seal is exactly, but hearing Shen Wei talk, they feel that it’s like a question of a button falling off and merely needing to be sewn back on.

Zhao Yunlan can’t help but look at him. At first glance, Shen Wei seems like a person with well-defined boundaries, never stepping out of line; but in reality, there’s not a single line he wouldn’t cross.

Zhao Yunlan understands that Shen Wei has already got what he wanted. He’s probably very relaxed now and doesn’t care about the Houtu Great Seal at all. Zhao Yunlan suspects he doesn’t even care about his own life or death.

²⁶ 梅花阵 (méi huā zhèn) = lit. “plum blossom formation” - a) a position in Go which traps the opponent’s playing pieces, b) a circular landmine array

“No wonder the Underworld is making such a big commotion. They're in complete disarray now, right?” Shen Wei can't help smirking, but then he senses that gloating so openly is rude; he drops his smile immediately and coughs lightly. “No matter; just follow me closely.”

Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing immediately abandon their leader, deciding to cling to the leg of this promising ‘leader’s wife’ instead.

Zhao Yunlan says nothing, just follows silently, unable to shake an ominous premonition. To borrow a life...he was out of it when he passed the problem to Lin Jing and didn't have time to consider it in detail. Now he thinks of it, doesn't this perfectly match up to the Sundial of Reincarnation case from before?

But the problem is, the Sundial of Reincarnation... is in the Ghost Face's hands.

The Great Seal is weak; it may be able to control the majority of the ghost tribe, but it has already failed to contain the Ghost King for thousands of years. Three of the Four Mystical Artefacts have already appeared. All except the Sundial of Reincarnation are actually in the possession of Zhao Yunlan and his people. However, the four pillars are like four legs—you don't have to lift all four together. You merely have to saw off two of them, and the Seal will topple.

Who knows what that elusive²⁷ Lantern of the Guardian really is?

As they walk in from the pedestrian access road next to the main gate, an intense, sickening smell assaults their senses. Even in Shen Wei's shadow, Da Qing can't stop his fur from bristling. The Guardian Whip quietly slips down Zhao Yunlan's arm, a little tip of it sticking out at his wrist; his other hand touches the small dagger hidden in his sleeve.

To Zhao Yunlan's eyes, the hot spring resort town in front of them is more like a trap. Lin Jing's video did not, in fact, film him going inside. Given Lin Jing's cautious nature, he'd never have gone in by himself under such bad conditions without contacting headquarters.

Something must have misled him or... forced him by making him lose his five senses, and his sixth sense too, before he even had time to step into this part of the town.

Even if Lin Jing were a direct descendant of Buddha, he still wouldn't have been able to fend off the intense air of resentment that came up from the Underworld when the Great Seal cracked open. Wouldn't it have been easier to kill him outright?

Keeping him alive... was it to lure someone here?

²⁷idiom: 神龙见首不见尾 (shén lóng jiàn shǒu bú jiàn wěi) - lit. “you can see the heavenly dragon's head, but not its tail” - never fully visible, secretive, mysterious, elusive, appearing one moment and disappearing the next

The Guardian Order or Shen Wei?

The tastefully sculpted pathways are empty; all the strangely-shaped houses are empty, not even a single shadow of a ghost. But at some point, Shen Wei's black robe materialises on his body. He probably felt something, and now his hand is clasping the Soul Slashing Blade.

The footsteps of the three people and the cat make eerie echoes, far and wide.

Gradually, the sinking sun has turned from a warm orange to a dull blood red... just like the creepy red cinnabar circles painted on the faces of paper servants that can be found in mourning shops²⁸.

It makes everyone throw amazingly long, dark shadows.

Just then, Zhao Yunlan suddenly stretches a leg to kick aside the black cat by his feet. At the same time, he takes a big step forward, and without time to turn around, brings the dagger up behind his back. A teeth-aching sound rings out as the demon beast collides with the blade and loses several teeth while the iron blade cracks from the impact.

Immediately, Zhao Yunlan pivots on one foot to slash at the demon beast again... when it suddenly looks terrified and its entire hideous body is sucked into the centre of Shen Wei's palm, like an ugly balloon with the air let out.

Countless bells start ringing in the distance, all at the same time. A layer of black fog rises up two feet high from the spotlessly clean pavement of the little town. The black cat lets out a high-pitched scream and dashes up onto Zhao Yunlan's shoulder: pustule-covered hands reach up from the ground!

A demon beast must have climbed onto the roof at some point, and just like those zombies that suddenly appear behind someone in the movies, it jumps down from the roof in a whoosh. With its giant claw, it grabs Chu Shuzhi's head and opens its mouth to bite down. Chu Shuzhi's thin hand becomes stiff as stone in an instant, and he shoves it viciously into the demon beast's throat. The demon beast stumbles backwards a few steps and falls to the ground. Even before it's dead, countless even more strangely shaped ghosts pounce on it and devour it, flesh and bones and all.

The Ghost tribe is crawling out from the ground in infinite numbers, revolting and nauseating.

Shen Wei's eyelids twitch for a moment. Born to the Ghost tribe himself, he holds a deep-rooted hatred for his fellow tribe members... and these ones even dare appear in front of Zhao Yunlan!

²⁸ All manner of paper objects, called zhǐzā (纸扎) are sold in mourning shops as offerings to the dead. Most commonly known is paper money, but zhǐzā traditionally included paper men meant to work for the deceased as servants - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhizha>

With a 'zing', he draws the Soul Slashing Blade. Zhao Yunlan, catching sight of it from the corner of his eye, says, "Shen Wei, slow down, this isn't—"

But it's already too late. The Soul Slashing Blade lengthens until it's several metres long; it effortlessly sweeps through countless ghosts, instantly disintegrating them. His eyes cold, Shen Wei flicks his wrist and his blade crashes down with unstoppable force. Across the whole town, the thick black fog is blown away. Then, his blade falls on the ground, leaving a long, narrow gash dozens of metres deep. An inhuman scream rings out to the ends of the earth, and he stares fiercely down the crack. "Come out."

He was so quick and destructive that Zhao Yunlan, who was only five steps away from him, can only now grasp his arm and finish what he meant to say. "This isn't a break in the Great Seal. I suspect it's only an altered Shadow Blitz. Don't act rashly!"

Shrill laughter suddenly breaks out all around. "Yes, it's a shame that the Lord Guardian's brain and mouth aren't as fast as the Lord Ghost Slayer's blade."

The gash Shen Wei tore into the ground cracks open wider, splitting the earth. Shen Wei drags Zhao Yunlan into his arms, while Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing have ended up on the other side.

The rift grows larger and larger, as if earth itself were turning somersaults. In the blink of an eye, those on the two different sides have lost sight of each other.

Shen Wei suddenly groans under his breath, tightly clutching Zhao Yunlan's hand as though something is violently pulling him away. A swirl of black energy has entangled his arm like a sticky cobweb.

Chapter 98

On Guo Changcheng's mobile phone, the last text message Chu Shuzhi has sent him tells him not to come to the resort town no matter what and, even more importantly, to stop others from going there.

By the time Guo Changcheng has thought of going back to ask how to achieve the simple-sounding goal of 'stopping others from going', and to report that Zhu Hong has run away while he's at it, he finds that Chu Shuzhi's phone is no longer reachable.

Suddenly he feels that everyone in the world has disappeared, leaving him alone and helpless. He doesn't know how long he sits at the roadside in his parked car before he summons the courage to follow the GPS to the nearest town, heading straight to the local police bureau.

From far away, he can already see a large crowd in front of the police station, blocking the intersection. Guo Changcheng honks his horn, but nobody pays him any attention. Just as he's about to open the car door, he sees an old, white-haired woman being helped out of the station. Her lower limbs seem to have lost their dexterity; two people are bracing her on her left and right, and a girl in a police uniform behind her also often reaches out to help. Despite this, she still trips over some object and stumbles, only to fall right onto the bonnet of Guo Changcheng's car.

Guo Changcheng rushes out of the car. The old woman's relatives and friends, the passers-by, and the police who followed her out are all scrambling to pull her back up.

But the woman suddenly bursts into tears, heedless of the crowd.

All the people around join in the commotion. Guo Changcheng hears someone whisper angrily, "I don't know what the police are doing nowadays. They don't care about anything, and nothing gets solved. What's our country paying them for?"

Another person whispers back, "Right, look how pitiful this old woman is. Her husband's dead, and she only has this one son. They depend on each other for survival. If something happens to him, I think she probably won't live long either."

This hits the old woman's sore spot and she starts crying even more hysterically.

The young policewoman who has been following behind her the whole time looks about the same age as Guo Changcheng—almost a child, just recently graduated. When she sees everyone looking at her, she feels so embarrassed, she doesn't know what to do. Blushing, she mumbles, "We have regulations here, we have to wait 48 hours before we can..."

Her voice is quickly drowned out by the others.

“What do you mean, 48 hours? Rules are dead but people are alive! Right now, the person is alive but what if he isn’t anymore in a few days? If something really is wrong, it’ll be too late by then! The body’s already cold and you guys still don’t care? Hey, girl, you tell me: what’s the difference between you guys and murderers who kill for profit?”

The young policewoman listens and thinks they have a good point, but the police force is limited and rules are rules. No matter how reasonable she thinks people are, she can’t ignore the regulations. She’s anxious and her eyes turn red, tears about to fall.

A middle-aged man, another family member come to report a case, waves his hand. “Enough! Even if she wanted to, she wouldn’t be able to help. Everybody stop pressuring her. Miss, let me tell you, my younger sister was supposed to leave work yesterday but she never came home. She’s about the same age as you; put yourself in her shoes: this young lady is usually very obedient, and then suddenly, for no reason, she doesn’t come home at night, and we can’t get in contact with her. We’re her family, of course we’re worried! If this happened to you, what would your parents and family think? I know this is hard on you. How about you help us go talk to your chief, ok? Help us get our point across...”

Watching the scene, Guo Changcheng develops a splitting headache. Slowly gathering the courage to speak in front of such a big crowd, he listens closely to the people talking next to him. They’re saying all sorts of things, their descriptions chaotic. Some only keep going ‘My XX didn’t come home yesterday’—if he didn’t know better, he’d assume they just gathered here deliberately to cause trouble.

Just then, the old woman still sprawled crying on top of his car suddenly faints, her eyes rolling back into her head. Instantly, Guo Changcheng finds his courage and pushes through the people in front of him. “Let me through, excuse me, let me through, everyone.”

He pulls out his staff ID and his car keys and, in his excitement, throws the ID directly at one of the old woman’s relatives. “Drive my car. Take her to the hospital!”

The person holds up the small card. “Huh?”

Guo Changcheng looks over. “Oh, sorry, wrong one. It’s this one here.”

He quickly exchanges the ID for his keys and hands the ID to the policewoman. “Comrade, can you take me to see your chief? It’s urgent business.”

The policewoman gives him a confused look, and then her eyes widen: “You... are you the Chief from Dragon City?”

“No, no, I’m not the Chief. We sent someone to investigate a homicide two days ago. The relevant procedures have already been completed and submitted to you. But yesterday that

colleague disappeared, and our Chief is at the crime scene right now. He sent me here to give you a heads-up.” He wipes his forehead, which has become sweaty even in the dead of winter. With better composure than expected, he says, “Is everyone here to report a crime? Are they all disappearance cases?”

Many people nod.

“Oh...oh...then how did the people disappear?”

That question is like poking a hornet’s nest. All of a sudden, everyone begins clamouring at once, like five thousand ducks all quacking together, noisy enough to make Guo Changcheng feel dizzy, as if his blood sugar were dropping. He steadies his nerves and pats his pants pocket, worried that his social phobia might make the electric rod in his pocket emit 100,000 volts and accidentally hurt innocent people.

However, to his surprise, he isn’t as afraid as he thought he would be.

Whenever he asks others for help or asks questions, he always feels that he’s a big annoyance who doesn’t understand anything. By nature, he fears other people and fears having to communicate or make eye contact. But when he realises the person in front of him is the one needing help, he can be surprisingly smooth.

With a flash of inspiration, he suddenly waves to interrupt the noise of the crowd. “I can’t hear what you’re saying. I’ll ask a question and you raise your hands to answer, okay? May I ask if your lost friends and relatives worked at the small hot spring resort town? If that’s the case, could you raise your hand?”

With a whoosh, everyone raises their hands. The eyes of the policewoman next to Guo Changcheng widen. Earlier, everybody’s arguing just buzzed in her ears and she was only concerned about how long after an adult’s disappearance a case could be filed. She didn’t realise it might be a serious incident involving a wide range of people.

Guo Changcheng is starting to get a clearer picture. He goes on, “If you’re sure that your friends and relatives went missing in the resort town, keep your hands raised. If you can’t confirm it, lower your hand for now, ok?”

A few hands waver and go down. After a moment, they hesitantly come up again.

The middle-aged man from before says, “Chief, can I say something?”

Guo Changcheng: “I’m not the Chief... oh, whatever, please speak.”

“My little sister works as a waitress in the town hall cafeteria. She didn’t come home yesterday evening. That’s not something that’s ever happened before, so everyone in the family was

extremely anxious. In the middle of the night, my dad, my brother, and my sister's partner went out together and looked for her along the road to her work. But later those three also disappeared and I couldn't contact them by phone. After I got up this morning, I came right here to report it." The man's eyes are still bloodshot. He does his best to keep his voice steady, trying to be as calm as possible. "Chief, think about it. If it's just a young girl, that's one thing, but what could possibly happen to three adult men together? I think it must've been something big."

His judgement is very accurate; practically spot-on. Although Guo Changcheng is out of his depth, he knows that everything the man said is correct.

When the others hear this, they get even more upset. With their loved ones gone missing, they were already like cats on hot bricks, and now they all try to squeeze in front of Guo Changcheng to say a few extra words about their family members. They all want to talk to this young man; he might look wet behind the ears, but to them, he's a saviour.

If they only wanted to have a discussion, that wouldn't be a problem, but some people start pushing others, and a woman carrying a child falls down. The toddler starts wailing loudly. Some people shout, "Don't push, we're all worried here!" and others scream, "Watch the child! Don't step on the child!"

It's incredibly chaotic.

Guo Changcheng is seeing stars. If only Zhu Hong would come... if only Chief Zhao would come!

He squeezes his mobile and thinks of the task Chu Shuzhi has given him. He can't go back. Moreover, he can't allow these people to act rashly... but they did lose their loved ones; who can stay calm under these circumstances?

Guo Changcheng's mind goes blank.

What should he do? They trust him so much, allowing him to take care of this task. This is also the first time since his induction over half a year ago that he's undertaking a duty on his own. How could he dare fail them and screw things up?

If it were Chief Zhao, what would he do? If it were Chu-ge?

He can't let anyone go over there, it's too dangerous. He steps forward suddenly, standing on the curb. "Everyone! Everyone!"

The crowd quietens down.

Guo Changcheng holds up his staff ID. "I'm here from Dragon City's Special Investigations Unit. We specifically handle major cases. Earlier, our Chief took all the elite staff members to the

scene of the crime and sent me over here to explain the situation clearly to everyone. Although we haven't found news of your loved ones, there also isn't any bad news. Our people are already expending all their efforts on the search. The best you can do now is to help the comrades here at the local police station to coordinate well and report relevant information. Absolutely do not get close to the crime scene! If you did, it would bring trouble to the search and rescue team, and wouldn't help us find the missing persons."

He's never said this much in one breath before, but in this moment, he feels that he isn't fighting alone. There's a fire burning inside of him.

He brings his hands together and, with a palm-fist salute, bows to everyone in a circle. "I thank you all, and promise that we'll do everything in our power. Right now, can I ask everyone to line up and go inside with me to register?"

The crowd stands there, people looking at each other in consternation for a while. Then, they actually line up in silence. A few minutes later, the young policewoman leads them inside in an orderly fashion.

Now it's Guo Changcheng who stands there in a daze. For a moment, he can't believe what he has just accomplished.

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Meanwhile, the others don't have it as easy as Guo Changcheng. Shen Wei, entangled by the black shadow, has relapsed into stubbornness and refuses to let go of Zhao Yunlan no matter what. He holds the back of the Soul Slashing Blade in his teeth, its icy cold reflection making the corners of his already bloodless lips seem even whiter. Turning his head, he aims the blade at the black shadow trapping him.

Zhao Yunlan snatches the blade from his mouth. "Gimme."

Using this matchless blade, he fiercely slashes at the black energy wrapped around Shen Wei's arms. But it's like glue, and the sharp blade can only force it apart slightly – it's too sticky to be cut.

Shen Wei holds Zhao Yunlan tighter, glances over and says quickly, "I understand now. That thing is The Profane Land itself; the only thing the Soul Slashing Blade cannot cut. You can't do it like this. Quick, cut off my arm!"

Being a mortal, Zhao Yunlan can't understand this great God who can cut off his arms, legs and head with ease, so he ignores him. He thrusts the Soul Slashing Blade back into the scabbard, then retrieves a Guardian Order Token. With a snap of his fingers, a small flame spurts out. The Guardian Order Token, carrying the flame along, dives straight into the black shadow...

...and vanishes. Not even a bit of ash remains.

In the past, Shen Wei has spoken to him softly, but this time, uncharacteristically, he raises his voice. “Cut off my arm before it’s too late!”

Zhao Yunlan turns a deaf ear. He immediately takes out the original Guardian Order Token from his pocket, the real deal carved from the Holy Tree that he purposefully brought along. Shen Wei is shocked. “Isn’t that—”

But this time, it’s Zhao Yunlan who acts faster than he can blink. Before Shen Wei finishes speaking, the Guardian Order Token from the Holy Tree is already burning with a flame about a foot high and abnormally red. The black fog entangling Shen Wei’s arms finally withdraws a little in fear.

Shen Wei pulls back his arm, and the first thing he does is pluck back the half-burned Guardian Order Token. With Zhao Yunlan in his arms, he dodges away from the fog. Then, out of nowhere, he condenses a pool of clear water in his palm and douses the Guardian Order Token.

The word ‘Guardian’ is already half burned away<sup>29</sup>, and the line ‘guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead’ on the back has long since disappeared.

The two of them quickly start running away. Even through all their evasive manoeuvres, Shen Wei’s frown stays firmly in place. Carefully wiping ash off the Guardian Order Token, he scowls at Zhao Yunlan. “Do you even know that you weren’t originally allowed to enter the wheel of reincarnation? That being the Guardian, the Guardian Order Token is your protective talisman? This was carved from the Holy Tree. In a crisis, it would protect you and save your life without any difficulty. You—”

It turns out that even if his upright-gentleman façade was mostly pretend, this trait is real: Shen Wei is really bad at swearing. Ultimately, he has to settle for the next best thing and blurts, “You, you’re a total loser!”

The darkness pursues them relentlessly, thick as indelible ink. This time it hasn’t been summoned by Shadow Blitz. It’s the real deal. Wherever it passes, it leaves nothing behind—absolutely nothing, like it can even swallow up the void. This is real chaos. The two of them, who’ve always run roughshod over others, never imagined they’d cut such sorry figures now, running for their lives.

In this life-and-death situation, Zhao Yunlan still takes the time to roll his eyes at Shen Wei. “Oh shove off! You just cut off your arms and dig out your heart at every opportunity. Do you think you’re a gecko? Looks to me like you’re the loser.”

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<sup>29</sup> The left half has burned, turning it from 镇魂 “Guard Souls” into 真鬼 “Real Ghost”

Shen Wei suddenly realises that his company must be rubbing off on him. He's still in the mood to bicker with Zhao Yunlan even at a time like this, stupidly and quite unlike himself. He immediately closes his mouth. He puts his arms around Zhao Yunlan, the Ghost Slayer's huge black cloak billowing into the sky like a black cloud. His feet leave the ground and, with Zhao Yunlan in his arms, he leaps forward close to a hundred metres before he touches down again lightly. Then he plummets directly into the rift in the earth, dodging the fissure's many jagged edges, as swift as a pitch-black swallow.

The ground shakes yet again.

In a flash, a large group of ghost messengers, always late at the critical moment, burst out from deeper below. Tragically, before they can grasp the situation, the indestructible black shadow swallows half of them right as they surface.

The judge shrieks and curls into a big ball, trying to go back into the ground without a word. However, Ox-Head and Horse-Face yank him back out like a radish. "Your Honor, it's useless. Underground isn't a good hiding place."

Another ragtag group of strange looking Underworld messengers join his troupe in their efforts to flee, only adding to the disgraceful mess.

By now, Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan have finally put a decent distance between them and the black fog. Abruptly, Shen Wei leaps out of the fissure and forcefully pushes Zhao Yunlan forward. Zhao Yunlan gets it at once, and, using that strength, jumps about ten metres far. He catches himself against the ground with his hands, and quickly gets back on his feet, his stance firm.

Shen Wei is already in midair, making a gesture with his hands, silently reciting an incantation from a distant time and space. The black shadow is approaching slowly. When it's almost close enough to touch the edge of his cloak, a piercing white light bursts out of Shen Wei's hand.

The timing is perfect.

The black shadow swirls to a halt right in front of Shen Wei. It suddenly shudders, then it's slowly being pulled in by that white light.

Everyone holds their breath.

Within five minutes, the overpowering black shadow has been absorbed by the increasingly bright light. Cold sweat is running down Shen Wei's face and along his jaw. The judge slumps down to the ground. Zhao Yunlan lets out a breath and slowly relaxes his fist - it was clenched so hard there are fingernail imprints on his palm.

The glaring white light begins to return into Shen Wei's hands. Everything seems to have settled down.

Suddenly, things change.

Without warning, a silhouette appears behind Shen Wei, ripping apart the air. The Ghost Face, who has been lying in ambush for who knows how long, stabs a yard-long icicle into Shen Wei's back, directly into his heart.

## Chapter 99

Before the judge and his retinue can even recover from this sudden incident, they see a long whip curl towards the Ghost Face like a venomous snake. The Guardian Whip wraps around the Ghost Face's neck with absolute precision.

The slash of the whip has triggered a fierce wind that stings everyone's face. The bystanding ghost messengers feel a collective slap across the face, burning painfully, and they turn to flee as one.

Bile is rising in the judge's throat, he can barely hold it in—it has become impossible to ignore the disturbance to the Great Seal, but it seems like all those with authority have chosen to turn away.

Everyone ranking high enough to know the ancient secrets of the Great Seal is now either a millennia-old demon and head of his tribe, or has cultivated through countless challenges and become immortal.

Five hundred years ago when the Great Seal first showed signs of weakening, the Underworld brought all the forces together in one place to jointly discuss the issue. At the time, hundreds of voices responded to their call. The various immortals were enthusiastic, each and every one of them extolling justice. They wouldn't shut up about the commoners and the mortal realm, all promising that they could be counted on and wouldn't give up even if they were to die ten thousand deaths.

But ever since the Battle of Mount Kunlun, they all must have conspired to go missing.

They were all experienced cultivators, and they all knew it wasn't something particularly impressive or promising for the future. Cultivation is an incredibly long process, where one must experience hardship that others can't imagine and loneliness that bystanders can't understand. The natural-born traits of the person must be good, they must already be rare and unique, with a persistent mind, and they must walk alone on that path. They mustn't be impatient to achieve small successes or be prone to giving up halfway. They're one in a million. Added to that, regardless of how good their natural qualities are, regardless of how hard they strive, if they're missing a little bit of luck, they'll still fail in the end.

Who wouldn't show off their feathers as a result of this cultivation, when they've been through so much hardship?

If it weren't for the Great Seal being damaged and the Underworld needing to step forward because they'd feel the impact first—the judge silently examines his conscience and concludes he'd have stayed out of this as much as he could. Not to mention that he's just a lowly judge.

The Kings of the Underworld might have dared to play many little tricks that were beneath the Ghost Slayer's notice, but if they did go too far, which one of them would have the guts to step forward and face this Ghost King directly?

Not to mention that strange, moody Ghost Face.

The judge can't make up his mind, and his eyes fall on Zhao Yunlan—only true natural-born gods and demons from primordial times had that kind of skill, and the kind of mindset where they didn't care if they died.

Even if he's just a mortal now, he still dares strangle a Ghost King with his whip.

The judge feels uneasy. He doesn't understand such desperate passion, and can't imagine that kind of insistence, throwing himself into the breach while everyone else is fleeing. Least of all can he grasp that pioneering spirit born from a fearless past.

Kunlun has long since disappeared into the cycle of reincarnation, and now this man in front of him is clearly just a glib-tongued mortal. How dare he not be fearful and terrified? After having lost the authority and power of the Primordial Mountain God, could he just be relying on his soul that was cleansed and cultivated through countless reincarnations?

At last, Shen Wei closes his hands into fists and the white light disappears, the dark chaos completely engulfed within. Suddenly his body convulses violently; black threads like spider silk burst from the icicle piercing his chest and, in the blink of an eye, wrap him up in a giant cocoon.

The Ghost Face is clutching the end of the icicle in one hand, and he's managed to bring up his other hand to protect his throat before the Guardian Whip wrapped around his neck.

Hovering in the air, he meets eyes with the mortal standing far below him. The fire in that man's eyes burns hotter than the soul fire that ignited the entire Profane Lands.

"If the Guardian Order wasn't compromised..." The Ghost Face's voice sounds hoarse and thready under Zhao Yunlan's attempt to strangle him. "...perhaps my neck would already have lost a layer of skin by now. Tch, what a shame..."

Zhao Yunlan grits out one sentence through his teeth: "Let. Him. Go."

The Ghost Face looks at him blankly. "He and I are both Ghost Kings. Despite our differences in circumstances and personalities, I don't wish to hurt him. It's he who forced me into a dead end step by step. You want him, you can have him - in exchange for the Lantern of the Guardian."

Zhao Yunlan turns a deaf ear to any suggestion of a hostage swap. But his handsome face darkens. "Then let me advise you. If you're smart, stab me with an icicle too, or I'll make sure you'll never attain reincarnation for eternity."

The Ghost Face listens, falls silent for a moment, then bursts into loud laughter. "If you were Kunlun, I'd certainly not let you get away alive even at the cost of my own life. As it is..."

His body shudders violently, and the Guardian Whip, having lost the Holy Tree's protection, shatters into countless segments, slashing Zhao Yunlan's palm almost to the bone. "Ah, my Lord Guardian..." the Ghost Face sighs. "I'm grateful that you let me borrow your light, and I've also been influenced by him. I can't help it... I do actually like you a little bit; it wouldn't hurt to keep you around."

As the Ghost Face finishes talking, a black fog rises along with the sound of his shrill laughter. Suddenly he and Shen Wei, who's still wrapped in the black cocoon, simultaneously vanish without a trace.

Zhao Yunlan stands in the same place for a long while, his hand covered in blood. The judge finally can't help clearing his throat: "Lord Guardian..."

The sound of his voice startles Zhao Yunlan back to reality. He slowly raises his head to look at him, the corners of his eyes a disturbing shade of red, and his pupils terrifyingly black. He raises his hand to gently lick the wound on his palm, his eyes brooding and deeply shadowed.

The judge shivers instinctively.

"I need to trouble you with something, judge," Zhao Yunlan says in a strangely calm tone. "Please take me to the Underworld to see the real Wheel of Reincarnation."

For a moment, the judge thinks that there's something quite alien about him. After a long while, he says incongruously, "This humble one thought the Lord would want to ask about the Lantern of the Guardian..."

"The Lantern of the Guardian?" Zhao Yunlan's eyebrow twitches slightly. The fingers of his left hand are unconsciously pressing down on the wound in his right hand, but his fingertips quickly turn bright red. That whole time, the judge is terrified that Zhao Yunlan will say something frightening, but Zhao Yunlan only continues to be strangely calm, his eyelids drooping until they don't even reveal a little slit. Then he says simply, "Please lead the way."

"Chief Zhao!" a woman's voice suddenly rings out behind them. Zhao Yunlan doesn't need to turn around to know that it's Zhu Hong.

"Yeah." Zhao Yunlan doesn't lose his temper, or have any particular reaction at all. He just answers casually, as if he has forgotten that he sent Zhu Hong away and she disobeyed his command by coming back. He briefly stops walking. "If you bump into Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing, tell them to continue to look for Lin Jing. I have something to attend to, I'll be gone for a bit."

"I'll go with you!" Zhu Hong says.

Zhao Yunlan looks at her blankly. "No need. Taking you along would be inconvenient. Cultivate a couple more years, little snake."

Zhu Hong is seething. "Little snake? I'm a little snake? Then what are you? Those of your age in our tribe would still be gnawing on their own eggshells! You're just a mortal!"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't even turn his head, only the corners draw up silently in a cold smile. So quietly that his words are barely audible, he replies, "There's no rush; soon I won't be."

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Lin Jing, the person everyone's searching for, is currently meditating with some difficulty. He doesn't know where he is. When he came to, he was tied up, behind him an abnormally shaped large rock, and next to that a tall tree, its top completely out of sight. He seemed to be underwater, but with his body in some large transparent bubble and not affected by it.

Strangely shaped demon beasts surrounded him on all sides... some in typical beast forms, some looking more human, and some basically puddles of mud. They were crowding around him so densely that his delicate nervous system immediately triggered a bout of claustrophobia. He instinctively closed his eyes and started to recite scriptures.

But he's only chanted two lines when he realizes that Buddhist scriptures seem to anger his 'good neighbours' who were already eyeing him up covetously. The demon beasts are becoming agitated, large and small beginning to roar and growl.

Lin Jing gulps with difficulty and manages an unattractive smile: "That...well, um, I didn't know there's a rule against reciting scriptures here. I'm a person of low quality, I'll correct myself at once, I'll correct myself."

The greedy gaze of the beast closest to Lin Jing darkens and it shuffles forward a step, pricking up its nose and carefully sniffing the smell of fresh blood and meat on the man.

With an expression of anguish, Lin Jing cries, "I haven't bathed in three days! I'm not fit to be groped! Watch your manners!"

That demon beast suddenly opens its mouth and takes a bite in his direction. Just then, a more human-looking beast grabs it by the neck for daring to get started on the meal all on its own. Its wrinkled fingers give a hard squeeze, turning the lower-ranked beast into a wind chime in its hands, jingling and jangling as it hangs there, dead.

After killing its tribemate, it screams and rips an entire ear off the corpse. No need for soy sauce or vinegar - it puts it straight into its mouth and eats it.

Then, it generously lifts up the body to throw it into the crowd. As if on cue, countless demon beasts pounce excitedly. In barely half a minute, not even skin or bones are left.

Lin Jing is stunned. “Ami—Amitabha, my Buddha have mercy. Please, dear benefactors, mind your table manners.”

They all growl at him, probably wanting to use him to practice better table manners.

“All right, all right, if you don’t want to then don’t, do as you all please!”

Just then, there’s a sharp whistle in the distance, and the demon beasts—the entire ghost tribe—falls quiet. Then, like a thick fog blown away by the wind, they’re all gone.

Lin Jing feels a gust of wind sweep by, and then a man falls out of the sky and rams into the trunk of that great big weird tree next to him.

Four black shackles grow from the tree trunk, securely clamping around his limbs. The man has a single three-foot long icicle stuck in his heart—he’s literally nailed to that tree. For a moment, Lin Jing stops breathing, thinking the man is dead.

But just then, the man opens his eyes.

His breathing is unsteady, but his face doesn’t show any emotion. Lin Jing calls out in shock, “Teacher Shen!”

Shen Wei glances at him with his head down, not making a sound. However, Lin Jing can see the cold sweat on his forehead, and his lips are pale as paper. Looking closely, his body seems to be trembling ceaselessly, but his face still doesn’t reveal a single hint of pain.

Then the Ghost Face drops out of the sky, and lands facing Shen Wei. He looks at him with a smile and, after a while, slowly raises his hand to take the mask off his face.

Lin Jing sucks in a breath of cold air. “My Buddha have mercy, grant your disciple a pair of glasses! My eyes are weak... how... how come it looks like there are two Teachers Shen?”

However, upon closer inspection, the ‘Teacher Shen’ with the mask has even paler skin—not the usual white but pale to the point of looking blue, as if he just climbed out of formalin. Lin Jing can’t find words to describe the effect. It’s full of resentment and darkness, as if Shen Wei’s face with its handsome chiselled features was pasted onto a skull; the more beautiful, the more terrifying.

Lin Jing's eyes are almost popping out of their sockets. He immediately concludes that the newcomer must be truly shameless and had plastic surgery to look like their leader's wife. Clearly, he's an ugly faker!

The faker says leisurely, "I'm a pretty sentimental person, and we go back a long way, but you push me hard with every step. I really have no choice but to kill you, my brother."

As the Ghost Face says this, his eyes glint with a strange light, regretful and eager at the same time. He and Shen Wei are both Ghost Kings. Not to mention that Shen Wei received Kunlun's favour and attained godhood....

"If I devour you, do you think I'd break the entire Great Seal open?"

Shen Wei is pinned to the Ancient Tree of Virtue, in so much pain that he's sweating all over. But when he opens his mouth, the first thing to come out is a cynical laugh. "What, you can't take the road of the Artefacts? Did something happen to the Sundial of Reincarnation? Did it turn into a normal rock?"

"It's you!"

The Ghost Face blinks violently, then slaps Shen Wei so hard his head snaps to one side. Shen Wei clenches his teeth so tightly that he breaks the skin inside his mouth, but he doesn't feel it.

Casually spitting out the blood, he laughs aloud. "The Sundial of Reincarnation came from the Three-Life Stone, but the Three-Life Stone and the Ancient Tree of Virtue each hold one type of soul³⁰. They are connected to each other through the souls of all living things. Only the yin and yang of the Awl of Mountains and Rivers engender one another in a self-contained whole, as an entity that can trap anything in the world.

"It's not in vain that I used the Awl of Mountains and Rivers to lure you here, to land the Soul-Chasing Lure on your body. And then you really lived up to expectations and brought out the big cauldron³¹. You burned the Ink Brush of Virtue in front of everyone. You think I don't know that the crucial hearthstone in the Soul Cauldron is the Three-Life Stone? Where are you going to find a shard of the Three-Life Stone? Never mind. Even if you don't say it, I will still know.

"When the Ink Brush of Virtue came into being, that was when I found the Sundial of Reincarnation and pressed it into the Awl of Mountains and Rivers.

³⁰ As in the 三魂七魄 (sān hún qī pò) - "the three and seven souls" - in Daoist philosophy, every living human has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal souls - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po

³¹ 鼎 (dǐng), here the 炼魂鼎 (liàn hún dǐng) Soul(-Refining) Cauldron - cauldrons are symbols of power - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ding_\(vessel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ding_(vessel))

"Why do you think the great cauldron fell into your hands so easily? Do you really think it's because you have particularly good fortune, and everything will fall into your lap?"

"The Awl of Mountains and Rivers...you had the Awl of Mountains and Rivers from the start?"

"Can't you read? Mountains, rivers; mountains, rivers. Kunlun was where the 36 Mountains and Rivers originated. I succeeded him and am already connected to a hundred thousand mountains. Why would I have to come all the way to fight with you over... something that was always just under my nose?"

Shen Wei's cold sweat is dripping into his mouth; he carelessly smudges it away with a purse of his lips. "Now, I think perhaps there's one more thing you want to know. What you used to lure me in just then, what you released in order to contain me... that one thread of chaos that you took out from your own body, now where did I put it?"

The Ghost Face turns various shades of purple, his expression hideously twisted. Suddenly he grasps the icicle stuck into Shen Wei's chest. Blood has already soaked right through Shen Wei's long robes, skin and flesh tightly stuck to his clothes. He cuts a very sorry figure.

With a heave of strength, the Ghost Face gives the icicle in Shen Wei's chest a hard twist. Shen Wei doesn't scream like he hoped, but he's no longer capable of speaking.

"I don't want to know at all." The Ghost Face is breathing harshly. He leans close to Shen Wei's face. "I can remain ignorant. I can just drain the blood from your heart until you can no longer sustain this human body. I can extract the Kunlun tendon from your primordial spirit, and then devour you mouthful by mouthful, and the world will have only one Ghost King. Truly, I am the one. Unparalleled. In. The. World."

In his agony, Shen Wei can't say a single word, but the corner of his mouth still holds that cynical smile, as if saying to the Ghost Face 'you can try'.

The Ghost Face pulls the icicle half out of his chest, then brutally shoves it back in again. Shen Wei convulses violently, and finally he faints, head hanging, unmoving.

Lin Jing is scared and horrified, but the Ghost Face doesn't even spare him a glance and walks away in long strides. In the blink of an eye, he has vanished into the bottomless darkness.

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Author's note from Priest: Don't worry about Teacher Shen. He's a naturally dark-hearted monstrous being who just happens to have the ability to blush.

## Chapter 100

"It's all going to be fine, right?" Seeing there's nobody around, Lin Jing can only talk to himself.

The Ghost Face didn't spare him a single glance the whole time. He probably didn't think much of his negligible taoist skills. Lin Jing starts to console himself by muttering: "It's going to be fine, Amitabha, clearly it's going to be fine."

He's on pins and needles. If he weren't tied into a neat bundle<sup>32</sup>, he'd be jumping up and down.

Lin Jing cranes his neck towards Shen Wei, but he can't see him well. It occurs to him that it might be better if he were a turtle: not only would he be able to swim, he'd also have a much more flexible neck.

He looks around carefully, and tentatively calls: "Hey, Teacher Shen! Teacher Shen?"

Shen Wei doesn't respond.

"Shen..."

At this point, a demon beast suddenly appears and bares its crooked fangs at him.

Lin Jing quickly shuts his mouth in fear that it would hate him for his neat row of little white teeth and use his white meat to have a large, delicious meal.

The demon beast licks its lips. It's probably been sent to guard him. After some thought, it doesn't dare steal what was entrusted to its care. With a constipated expression, it circles Lin Jing a few times and then backs up to eye him covetously.

Lin Jing takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, trying to soothe his miserable mood by silently reciting scriptures. However, when his eyes are closed, he tragically finds that it's not the lilt of the Prajna Paramita<sup>33</sup> sutra that's filling his consciousness, but the nagging itch of a phantom limb: if that brute Zhao Yunlan knew that he was indifferently reciting scripture while watching his darling wife suffer, he'd definitely forget their shared history and turn him into cat food for Da Qing.

Considering this, Lin Jing opens his eyes to lock gazes with the demon beast in front of him.

Then he suddenly says, "Hey, can you talk?"

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<sup>32</sup> 粽子 (zòngzi) - a type of rice dumpling tied in bamboo leaves - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zongzi>

<sup>33</sup> The Prajna Paramita is a collection of Buddhist sutras - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prajnaparamita>

Of course, high-level members of the ghost tribe are capable of human speech. After guardedly looking at Lin Jing for a bit, the demon beast says in a strange, hoarse voice, "Shut up."

Lin Jing sighs. "Look, they all ran away. There's only the two of us left here. If I shut up, won't you feel lonely? Don't your balls shrivel up in fear when you see His Excellency the Ghost Slayer nailed high on that tree? You do have balls, benefactor, right? Aah, don't be like this! Please be a bit more civilised!"

The demon beast threatens him with a jaw full of teeth like a great white shark.

"I'll shut up, I'll shut up, I'll immediately shut up, really, believe me! Monks don't lie!"

The demon beast retracts its claws and teeth and slowly retreats to one side.

Lin Jing once again looks up at the unconscious Shen Wei.

However, his worries are quickly interrupted. As he cautiously studies the beautiful, blood-drenched man, the wart-covered face of a big demon beast shoots into his field of vision. At once, Lin Jing feels transported from a sentimental little arthouse film into a hardcore horror flick, and he chokes on a breath.

Quietly, he looks away, saying, "So what if I give my eyes a treat, asshole."

Finally he realises, even if Zhao Yunlan is going to make mincemeat out of him, there's nothing he can do to remedy the present situation. Recalling this, Lin Jing really does calm his mind and starts to silently recite the Great Compassion Mantra.

Seeing that he's closed his eyes, the demon beast thinks he's finally behaving, so it stops caring about him. Silently, it looks up at Shen Wei where he's nailed to the ancient tree, then hides further away in fear. In the depths of the Underworld, tranquility is finally restored.

But suddenly, the beast feels something. Alarmed, it raises its head: it sees Lin Jing sitting there with his eyes closed, as if he were a Buddha statue. But the Great Seal behind him seems to be responding to something, lighting up with a soft white glow.

It leaps up, trying to reach past the Great Seal to grab Lin Jing's shoulder. But the moment its hand meets the white light, it turns black and charred.

The demon beast shrieks piercingly, finally interrupting Lin Jing's mantra.

The fake monk is a clever man. When he opens his eyes and sees the situation, he knows at once what's going on. Therefore, he takes a deep breath, finds his voice and starts to recite the mantra out loud. The white light on the Great Seal behind him becomes more and more scorching. The demon beast guarding him jumps about but can't get close.

The halo of white light gradually expands, some of it even spreading to Shen Wei. The unconscious man seems to feel something; he frowns uneasily.

The demon beast obviously has no idea what's happening, and gets more and more restless. Finally it decides to risk all to stop Lin Jing creating trouble. It rushes over with a howl, deciding that even if it burns up, it has to tear apart the mouth of this damn monk who said he'd shut up but actually risked his life to recite mantras.

There's the sizzling hiss of barbecued meat. The valiant demon beast is broken in body but firm in spirit, and with its gaping mouth—burnt away to nothing but the razor-sharp teeth—it hurls itself forward to bite Lin Jing's neck.

Finally Lin Jing's recital is interrupted. Closing his eyes, he howls, "Buddha, this disciple is about to sacrifice himself and become a saint. Where's my master?! Help! Teacher Shen! Chief! Martial brother!"

He shouts all sorts of nonsense, but Shen Wei doesn't move. After a good while, Lin Jing cracks his eyes open a little, still hunched to protect his neck. The demon beast, which was just so willing to sacrifice itself, has turned tail and is running away in terror.

Lin Jing is stunned. A moment later, he senses something and slowly raises his head, meeting the cold pools of Shen Wei's eyes—the man has woken up.

Tentatively, he calls, "Teacher Shen?"

Shen Wei's gaze moves towards him, and he gives him a courteous, gentle nod.

"You... you're ok?"

Shen Wei struggles faintly, the shackles on his limbs clanging together. Even that small motion makes blue veins stand out on his forehead. After a while, and a few gasps, he finally says hoarsely, "Not too good."

He's lost so much blood that his pale lips are trembling.

"Why are you here? How did you end up in, end up in that... that, uh, the hands of that guy who looks like you?"

Shen Wei closes his eyes, leans his head back against the Ancient Tree of Virtue as if he's lost all his strength, and says quietly, "He attacked from the back. I normally could have dodged him, but I couldn't stop what I was doing, so he managed to stab me. For the time being, it is not a big deal and nothing serious."

For a moment, Lin Jing is dumbfounded. Then he asks uncertainly, “Really...?”

Shen Wei seems to be getting weaker. As if trying to conserve his strength, he lowers his voice and slows his speech. “But because he stabbed an icicle made from Underworld river water into my heart, I can’t move.”

Lin Jing swallows hard, thinking that it doesn't at all sound like 'nothing serious'. “So what should I do? Do you have a way of getting me down from this broken rock so that I can free you?”

Shen Wei stays silent for a bit: “The ‘broken rock’ behind you is actually the marker for the Houtu Great Seal that Nüwa set up herself.”

Lin Jing is again stunned into silence, and finally says dully, “I’m so scared I’m about to pee myself.”

Shen Wei smiles gently. “Don’t worry. Just now, the Ghost Face is in trouble. I carry Kunlun’s godly tendon on my body, so for now he doesn’t dare do anything to me. He probably doesn’t have time to worry about this place either. For the time being, it’s safe.”

Lin Jing says quickly, “No, no, I should still think of a way to save us. If Chief Zhao knew that I saw you bleed this much and didn’t do anything, he’d turn me into this year’s New Year’s Eve dinner.”

Shen Wei laughs soundlessly, his gaze softening for a moment. After a while, he thinks and says, “Actually, if you really want to try, you can recite some more mantras. The Great Seal originated from Nüwa’s compassion. If you are sincere, maybe it can help you.”

Shen Wei doesn't actually expect Lin Jing to accomplish anything. Although he’s currently indisposed, his will is unbroken. He casually suggested this just so Lin Jing would have something to do.

But Lin Jing, hearing it, actually sits up with serious determination. Like a news anchor reporting the news, he evens his breathing and, articulating clearly in a mellow and full tone, starts broadcasting the Buddhist evening study program. When Shen Wei first hears him, he finds it a bit funny, but he gradually starts listening to it. The blood on his face makes him look quite vicious, but now his expression becomes gentler. He looks down at the icicle on his chest, his thoughts unfathomable.

The white light around the Great Seal marker becomes brighter, piercing. Lin Jing is really going for it, unexpectedly proving himself worthy of the school of Dharma.

After a while, the ropes on Lin Jing’s body actually melt in the glare, but he doesn't notice. Although Shen Wei is surprised, he doesn't open his mouth to interrupt.

Suddenly he realises that the people around Zhao Yunlan are more or less similar to him—birds of a feather really do flock together. They all have something they're obsessive about, to the point of getting carried away.

This one, for example; and also that little boy who gets nervous the moment he opens his mouth.

Shen Wei narrows his eyes. He has already had some conjectures about the Lantern of the Guardian. Right now, he feels it might be better if it didn't show up at all.

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'Little boy' Guo Changcheng has successfully kept all the families with missing relatives from leaving the town. However, no good news has come.

It's nearly midnight when Chu Shuzhi comes back, travel-worn and weary, with Da Qing. It wouldn't have made sense to collect other things, so they only gathered up IDs, personal keys, phones, and such that they found scattered on the ground. It seems that only living beings were obliterated, but their belongings didn't get pulverised at all; they're completely undamaged.

The small Public Security Bureau in the town is ablaze with lights. Suddenly the first sharp cry rings out from somewhere, and the conference room vacated specifically for them is thrown into turmoil. Chu Shuzhi, carrying Da Qing on his arm, wearily pinches his eyebrows. He waves at Guo Changcheng and takes him to the little office nearby, shutting the door.

Guo Changcheng has a bad feeling about this. He looks at Chu Shuzhi, then at Da Qing. "Chu-ge, where are Chief Zhao and the rest? Did you find Lin Jing? What about Zhu Hong? Is there still no news of the missing persons?"

Chu Shuzhi takes an evidence bag out of his pocket and hands it to him. Inside is a handful of what looks like ashes.

Guo Changchang is momentarily stunned. He has an awful premonition. "This is..."

"Bone dust."

The evidence bag drops to the floor with a thud.

"Yes, it's pulverised human bones." Chu Shuzhi briefly explains what happened in the small town, then says to Guo Changcheng, "Call headquarters immediately and tell Wang Zheng that she and Sang Zan will deal with this matter. These people should be treated as missing for now. However, dead is dead—we won't be able to hide it for too long. Let her communicate as she sees fit; let's see how she can put a good spin on the news."

Guo Changcheng says incredulously, "Put... a good spin on it?"

In fact, it's about asking Wang Zheng to find a way to cover up the truth of the matter.

Chu Shuzhi glances at him. It's definitely the SIU's unwritten rule on handling matters, but for some reason, he doesn't want to tell Guo Changcheng this. Thus, the Zombie King is silent for a moment, then says evasively, "You need to know that, in most situations, DNA can only be detected when there are human remains left. With bone ashes burnt in high temperatures, it's impossible; the DNA has been destroyed. There's not much we can do about it. Even if you collected all the dust in this entire little town, we wouldn't be able to tell the family who it used to belong to."

"But there should at least be a murderer..."

Chu Shuzhi laughs helplessly. "Guo Changcheng, someone who can secretly plot against His Honor, the Ghost Slayer, even if he uses dirty tactics, must be at least equal to the Ghost Slayer in cultivation. Have you been with us for such a short time that you still don't know what kind of person the Ghost Slayer is?"

Guo Changcheng looks at him dazedly.

"I'm not afraid to tell you the truth. I cultivated for a thousand years and can already walk underneath the hot sun. Now I'm considered a Zombie King, able to command all the skeletal zombies. My next step up will make me a drought demon, otherwise known as an immortal corpse. However, if it wasn't for Chief Zhao's relationship with him, I'd give someone like the Ghost Slayer a wide berth. Do you understand?" Chu Shuzhi pauses. "We better not touch this case. It's out of our league."

At first it seems like Guo Changcheng can't accept this conclusion. However, he never argues with others and he isn't some hot-blooded teen overestimating his abilities. He feels like a fist is clenched around his heart, but he has no idea what to say; the colour is slowly draining from his face.

Eventually, he asks, "But what about the soul? Even though the body is gone, the soul should still remain, right? How can someone be born and then just disappear like that without any reason?"

Chu Shuzhi is taken aback but Da Qing jumps out of his arms to sit on the table. Suddenly, he opens his mouth and says, "It's happened before."

Both of them turn toward the black cat.

However, Da Qing seems to be lost in thought and doesn't say anything else. After a while, Chu Shuzhi has no choice but to prompt him. "Da Qing?"

He has barely spoken his name before Da Qing's body suddenly starts changing strangely—his cat body stretches slowly and the black fur gradually disappears. Under Guo Changcheng and Chu Shuzhi's bewildered gazes, he turns into a youth with hair down to his ankles!

He's wearing clothes from some distant era. In fact it looks like he's merely wrapped in a plain piece of cloth, and his feet are bare... This isn't important. The important thing is, he's neither black nor fat.

Chu Shuzhi: "Da... Da Qing?!"

A languid expression appears on the youth's face, distinctly cat-like. He shoots them a glance with eyes a little bigger and rounder than others'. "Yeah."

He jumps off the table to land soundlessly on the floor. His actions are also cat-like—he even walks in a cat's straight line. Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng move out of the way to clear his path in wordless, mutual agreement.

Da Qing says, "I don't know who sealed my memories. I haven't been able to remember things from the far past for a long time now. That time at the top of Mount Kunlun, stimulated by the Holy Tree, I was able to transform. Although I'm really ugly without fur, some blurry memories become a bit clearer like this."

Similarly without fur and thus 'even uglier than ugly', Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng subtly exchange a look.

"The things we met today, the officials of the Underworld call them demon beasts, but actually, in the earliest times they were called the ghost tribe." Da Qing, with his unique aesthetic standards, pays no attention to the reactions of the two in front of him and continues, "I don't know the theory of where the ghost tribe came from. Either way, I know that they're connected to the death of the two great Gods—Fuxi and Nüwa."

"You heard what Shen Wei said at the gate of the resort town. When the ghost tribe was born, the entire land was barren." The black-cat-turned-teenager's eyes flash. Looking carefully, one can see his eyes change colour with the angle of the light. "But as far as I know, the ghost tribe gnaws human bones and sucks human blood. They also drink the souls of cultivators, but not those of ordinary humans. Human souls are useless to them."

"I think maybe it's because what happened was so sudden. Those people weren't supposed to die. Their bodies suddenly disappeared, but their souls are in fact still alive. The Underworld cannot take them away and so those terrified souls have fled."

Guo Changcheng's brain is a bit slower than others', and it takes him a while to digest what Da Qing's words mean, but suddenly, he says, "Then I'm going to go find them."

Da Qing and Chu Shuzhi, who've already started discussing the possible whereabouts of Zhao Yunlan and Zhu Hong in low tones, lift their heads at the same time. Da Qing asks in confusion: "Why would you look for them? It's the Underworld's problem that they lost living souls - even though right now they probably aren't in the mood to care."

Guo Changcheng is silent for a moment. "But...but I promised them, those family members out there who have missing loved ones, I promised that I would give them an explanation..."

"You can't," Da Qing says. "Plus, they'll never believe you."

"Then I'm going to look for the souls of the dead. How can a person who should naturally exist disappear so suddenly?" Guo Changcheng is particularly obsessed with this question. "That... that's not supposed to happen."

Chu Shuzhi laughs coldly. "There's plenty of things that shouldn't happen. How do you plan on looking?"

Guo Changcheng is stumped with just this one question. His heart starts racing and he lowers his head in embarrassment.

Chu Shuzhi remains silent for a moment, then suddenly takes out a bottle of eye drops and tosses it to him. "Cow tears. They're used to open the Third Eye, allowing you to see living souls."

Guo Changcheng raises his head in disbelief and looks at him excitedly.

"Take care of proper business first. Call Wang Zheng, ask her to deal with external affairs, then send for reinforcements." Uncomfortable, Chu Shuzhi avoids his overzealous gaze. "I'm going to go find Lin Jing anyway, so it's on the way. Don't cause me any trouble."

"You guys go together. I'm going to find Zhao Yunlan," Da Qing says. "I'm worried about him being by himself."

Da Qing takes a few awkward steps in his human form. When he gets to the window, he turns around and warns, "If the kid doesn't know the gravity of the situation, Zombie King, you should take more responsibility. Absolutely be careful. We just got our new office...we haven't even had time to decorate it yet."

Having said that, Da Qing jumps out of the window. In the dim light of the night, he can barely be seen darting away before he disappears without a trace.

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Zhao Yunlan is silent for the whole trip. The Underworld messengers, who still have lingering fears, don't dare approach him for conversation. Only Zhu Hong follows him step by step, no matter what he says.

After passing the Gates and arriving in front of the Underworld Palace, the judge is just about to lead Zhao Yunlan inside when a lower-ranking ghost suddenly appears to block their road.

The judge frowns.

The ghost smiles quietly. "Lord Guardian. The Ten Kings of the Underworld request the pleasure of your presence."

Before Zhao Yunlan can speak, the judge can't help himself and says, "What is the meaning of this? The Ghost Face has plotted against the Ghost Slayer, chaos is about to break out, the Great Seal is about to completely fracture! Can you take responsibility if you delay official business? Get out of the way!"

The ghost bows deeply. "Yes, Lord Judge, but this humble one is merely acting under orders."

"You're..."

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. "Take me there. I've lived for this long and still haven't met the Kings of the Underworld."

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