

## **The guardian of the alley**

Jun lit her fifth cigarette for the night. She flicked the match down into the alley below, following its arc with her eyes. She was sitting by the cracked wall besides a window on the fifth floor. Her dark clothing made her blend in quite well with the fire escape ladder; the only thing giving her away was the tiny glow from her cigarette. Her hood pulled all the way down partially shadowed her face, but any observer close enough could still make out the tattoos covering her neck; a jumble of lines and intricate patterns seemingly sprouting from the collar of her leather jacket.

This was the fourth night she was sitting here, staring down at the gloomy alley. The many layers of graffiti covering the walls and the steam pumped out from the restaurant at the ground floor gave the scene an almost creepy feel. Jun did not dislike this place; it revealed the more uncivilized side of mankind, the way life was meant to be.

This night was unusually cold, but it did not bother Jun; it was all a part of this world's charm. The rats scurrying below did not seem to agree though. Seeking refuge from the cold they rustled through the trash bins lined again the wall, adding to the unending movement of this city. It was something she had grown accustomed to. Many of her kind thought it beneath her to associate with a place such as this but Jun did not mind. The almost unsettlingly clean streets of Hong Kong had bothered her during her many years spent there. She much rather preferred San Francisco and its vivid representation of humanity, but her peers would never understand this. Because of this reason she would often take the backstreet jobs that no one else wanted, leading to her being known as a loner. But then again; Jun could make do without the company of a bunch of pretentious undead traditionalists.

As she raised the cigarette to her lips she could see movement in the corner of her eye. The window beside her creaked open and the face of a sweet old lady peeked out. The lady looked around for a bit until she spotted Jun, sitting alone in the dark. A worried smile spread across her face. "Sorry, who are you?" The old lady spoke in broken English. Jun sighed and answered, in Mandarin, "It does not concern you". The smile on the old woman's lips grew. "Oh, you are Chinese?" Jun gave a short nod. "I barely recognized your accent, where are you from?"

Jun was used to this. Her almost ancient Mandarin was quite hard for native speakers to understand, but older people would at least

recognize it as Mandarin. "I am from Hong Kong" Jun could tell that the old lady was skeptical, but Jun did not care. "Please, go back inside, it is cold outside and I would not want you to fall ill" The old lady snorted "there are worse things for my health than a bit of cold weather" She pointed towards Jun's hand "cigarette smoke stinking up my bedroom four nights in a row for example" Jun looked at her cigarette for a second. She quickly put it out on the sole of her boot and lowered her head "I do apologize, I did not realize..." Keeping up with the traditions of her mortal days she pressed her hands together. "Do not mind me" the old lady dismissed Jun's apology with the wave of her hand "But I do wonder why a young woman such as yourself is sitting outside my window in the middle of the night" Jun raised her head and peered deeply into the woman's eyes. "I am guarding this alley from evil spirits" the air shifted as she spoke. The old lady shivered as if she just now had realized that the night was cold.

"This is the final night I will stay here, so you can safely go back to sleep" The woman's gaze fixated on Jun's eyes. She had done this uncountable amount of times. It would always tear her apart to erase herself from the memory of mortals, but it had to be done. "You were kept awake by a stray cat scratching your window" she explained. The old woman slowly nodded. "Now go back inside and go to bed" the old lady did as told and closed the window. Jun felt a tinge of sadness seeing her go. A small part of her just wanted to follow her inside and embrace her, protecting her from the terrors of the night, but she knew that would undo everything she had worked towards.

This was the fourth night Jun had stood guard against the looming evil, but it was not the final. The Yama Kings had appeared in her dreams and she knew their hunt had begun. Jun did what any sensible Cathayan would do under these circumstances. She stood guard, protecting that which is most important; family. She had guarded this woman for almost a century now, but she knew that this was the first time her granddaughter was in actual danger. The demons were on the prowl, and it is true what they say; *"when the demons hunt, the innocent dies..."*