even if i have to start again

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by cloudycats

Summary

"I need you to kill Ghostblade," Ghostblade's boss says from behind him.

Ghostblade overhears Rock ordering the hit on him and, badly and under duress, makes a good decision for once in his life.

"I need you to kill Ghostblade," Ghostblade's boss says from behind him.

The words reach him faintly. The window of Rock's car is open no more than a sliver. Ghostblade suffers through a surreal instant of believing he misheard, before Rock's voice continues, "He knows I lied to him about why he had to kill Little Johnny's father."

...Hey.

"After all, Ah Sheng never actually bred an artificial monstrosity he intended to use for chaos and terrorism."

Hey.

"As if that man would. I heard he found a mouse that had been hit by a bike once and carried it fifteen kilometers by foot to the nearest emergency vet that accepted wild rodents. I've never been happier to see Ghostblade report in a successful mission than on that night. What a load off my shoulders it was. Did you know that before he moved out to the countryside, Ah Sheng volunteered at animal shelters every weekend and at soup kitchens every other weekend? He apologized to flowers he stepped on. When I learned he'd died begging for his son's life, I brought out my best cups and filled them from the bottle of rice wine my grandfather wrapped up in the shed the day my father was born."

Hey.

How does Rock even know about Ah Sheng's last words? He didn't hear them from Ghostblade.

"He thought he was so much better than us," comes the new E-Soul's voice.

Should.

Should someone be doing something about this.

Should Ghostblade be doing something about this.

"Every second of his life," Rock says, "thankfully short as it was. That wasn't why I ordered him killed, but no one could call it a negligible bonus. A do-gooder who would find an orphaned alien creature in a spaceship and secretly adopt it as his beloved grandson has no business being alive.

"Once you've dealt with Ghostblade, E-Soul, you should mop up after the Glimmer Labs team."

Ghostblade draws a knife without particularly thinking about the movement and watches the blade's edge catch the morning light. The steel shines a harsher silver than Nuonuo's hair does, closer to the shade that Ghostblade's has tinted towards after decades of the public associating him with the tools he uses. Killing the research team. Killing the *research team*.

"Assuming Mickey or Zac don't send their own cleaners in first, anyway. Those two.... Hm." Derision spills out from the small sound. "No hero company should want this expedition succeeding."

"You didn't have to ask. I would have done it anyway. A power that can destroy the trust system has no reason to exist." Then: "There's a breeze coming through the window. It's... not rolled up the whole way?"

"Ah," says Rock. "It isn't. That's strange."

"Ghostblade didn't hear any of that, did he? He's standing right outside."

"No," replies Rock with a level of confidence that Ghostblade suspects most other people would find frightening, "he couldn't have listened to that without a reaction."

"He's standing *right* outside," says E-Soul. "He hasn't moved in three minutes except to grab a knife."

"That's normal behavior from him," says Rock. If Ghostblade tries to assassinate him, every single active hero will come for the bounty MG will set on Ghostblade's head, which would be a problem either way but especially if the attempt fails and he needs to make a second pass at it. "Driver, start the car."

Leaving Ghostblade alone on the steps leading down from the Hero Commission headquarters.

He should... probably do something about... all of that.

So his boss wants to kill him. Okay. Right.

And his boss wants to kill Nuonuo. Less okay. (And Nuonuo's friend, whose death would upset Nuonuo regardless of how bad of an influence that terrifying girl has become on her everyday life.)

And his boss wants to kill Little and Big Johnny. But Ghostblade can't kill the Johnnies and then go into hiding to draw Rock's attention away from the research team, because, even leaving aside the fact that the Johnnies apparently haven't done much to deserve dying for, in that situation Rock can always send one person after Ghostblade and someone else after Nuonuo's team.

In other words, Ghostblade still has to travel with the expedition if he wants them to bear any semblance of survivability. Nuonuo's friend is very good in a fight, but she's not good enough to take out a hero of Ghostblade's ranking, which, unreasonable as it may be, is the minimum standard he feels safe setting.

Little Johnny will be there as a hero, too, but he can't protect the scientists; he has no combat experience to Ghostblade's awareness, and Big Johnny's ability to transform into a giant hellbeast with the girth to level forests will be the opposite of helpful on a bodyguarding mission.

The role those two will be fulfilling is to become another person and alien cat Ghostblade will need to keep alive.

No way to take them off of the mission and spare Ghostblade some trouble, either. He could put Little Johnny in a hospital for the duration, but of course a seemingly inexplicable attack on such a popular hero would earn Ghostblade a dismissal from the expedition, too.

He's really not much good at planning. All he's managed to think of so far are actions he *can't* take.

Can't remove himself from the mission. Not sure how he'd be able to remove Nuonuo. Can't remove the Johnnies. Can't kill Rock – if Rock was right about the other top hero companies also scheming to sabotage the venture, then even successfully pulling off that assassination wouldn't help Nuonuo enough. Can't kill every hero on MG's payroll, for similar reasons. Not capable of stopping the entire research expedition from happening at all, or at least not capable of stopping it without attacking a large number of people who've done nothing wrong.

So, he can't remove any person from the situation.

...Can he add someone?

It seems unlikely, but... if they had another hero on the mission roster.

A secret last-minute one, who Rock couldn't prepare for. One who can handle themselves in a fight against a hero as high in the rankings as the new E-Soul, or even protect others while fighting, while also not being someone Ghostblade has to worry about keeping his back safe from because they'll have a clean public image and be high-profile enough that if they'd ever done anything to put blood on their hands then they wouldn't have been able to keep it buried. Who's principled enough about heroism that they won't object to aiding a research project that might eventually destroy their profession. Who won't make this trip weird for Nuonuo.

Does someone like that even exist?

If only Little Johnny wasn't safety-conscious enough to wear a seatbelt, Ghostblade could slam on the brakes and shut him up via blunt force trauma against the windshield.

"You listen to Lucky Cyan, too?!"

He could pull the keys out of the ignition and stab his passenger with them.

"But you're so old!"

He could do it.

"Hey, did you know that nine out of ten people who like ‘My Color' have deep, emotional backstories?"

Is there honestly anything stopping him from crashing this car into the nearest boulder? They're far enough behind the main convoy that no one would notice. All four of the living creatures inside would probably survive the impact, if not necessarily happily.

"I want to hear about yours, Mr. Ghostblade! Oh – I forgot, you can't talk! How about I guess what your trauma is and you nod if I'm right?"

So this is his karma for Ah Sheng's death.

Ghostblade punches the skip button, but Little Johnny hears the first note of the next song on the playlist and *lights up*. "You have that song too?! You're a real Cyan fan!"

Ah Sheng probably deserved what happened to him, anyway. Maybe he didn't commit the crime Ghostblade thought he did, but being involved to any capacity in the birth of the man sitting in the car's passenger seat *has* to tip someone's moral balance closer to evil than good. The universe can't be so unjust that it would allow for any other option.

"Wow, the sound quality's amazing! Was it always this good? It's almost like hearing Cyan sing live!"

Another half an hour. That's all he needs to put up with. Just twenty-seven more minutes of this.

"I didn't realize you were so tech-savvy! You don't look like it at all! You must have burned the CD yourself, huh? That's so cool! My dad was always asking me for help with the apps on his phone, hah...."

Wasn't Ah Sheng barely thirty?

"What's your favorite song out of – "

An alarmingly familiar pink robot strikes down from the sky and smashes feet-first into the windshield with the force of a wrathful god. Cracks spread so thickly across the glass that the entire window goes opaque white.

The adrenaline saves Ghostblade by finally letting him tune out Little Johnny's screams, along with the surprised yelp from the back. He slams his full focus into swerving while also trying not to wreck the car against the sporadic rocks jutting out of the plains.

Unfortunately, Nuonuo's friend clings on no matter how badly he tries to drive, and he spots a rapidly nearing cliff through the driver's side window before he makes anything approaching progress at throwing her off. He turns the wheel as far as it'll go and steps down with as much weight as the brakes can take.

The car spins to a stop mere centimeters from the cliff. Ghostblade grunts as the seatbelt cuts into his chest.

Little Johnny's still screaming a little, but quietly.

A cat-eared helmet with an angry pink face displayed across the screen presses itself against the windshield and meets Ghostblade's glare.

"Get out of the car," Luo Li bites out after nearly killing them all.

This girl is insane.

"Who are you!" Little Johnny cries, hugging his growling cat son to his chest while Ghostblade unbuckles from his seat and pushes open the door. "Mr. Ghostblade, aren't we being attacked?"

Ghostblade considers the approximately eight-storey drop into a sheer rock canyon he'd be stepping out into.

He's not sure he's met anyone who blatantly wanted to murder him as much as Nuonuo's friend does. Even Zhang Lan's contempt has caveats. He's always made sure to pay child support on time, so he's not quite better off dead as far as she's concerned. A lucky gust of wind makes him squint his eyes halfway shut and shifts the car the barest fraction further from the edge.

He sighs, turns back towards the front, takes a knife from the glove box, and raps the hilt into the fractured windshield.

Little Johnny screams again as glass rains in a crystal shower across the front seats. Luo Li's frown morphs into a (°　°) ! and she leans away as Ghostblade clambers onto the hood of the car beside her. He shakes the glass off of his trench coat.

"You creep," Luo Li grits out. For some reason her volume is less actively painful than Little Johnny's has been. Maybe because she's using it in Nuonuo's defense? Or because they haven't been trapped in an enclosed space with each other for two hours. Either or. "Who are you? What is your problem?"

"You can't ask questions like that! You attacked *us*!"

"You have *accomplices*?" Luo Li says, oddly sounding disappointed as much as angry, and looks down at Little Johnny climbing out of the car onto the increasingly crowded hood.

Her expression shifts again.

"Little Johnny," she says, aghast. "Little Johnny the hero is stalking Nuonuo."

This doesn't sound like an interaction that requires further input from Ghostblade.

He hops down to the dirt, keeping half an ear out as Luo Li and Little Johnny hash out what the situation is (Ghostblade also wouldn't mind knowing what the situation is). He circles around the car, opens the rear door, and sticks his head in to check behind the back seats.

Lucky Cyan lowers her guitar and waves at him from her disheveled nest of blankets and pillows. "Everything okay out there?" she mouths.

She seems unharmed at a glance. The turbulence knocked over her pile of snacks as well as the two small travel fans Ghostblade had gotten for her, but she isn't showing notable signs of pain or upset. She runs her hand along her guitar's body, glances down at it, then sets it back in its case, apparently satisfied that it hasn't taken damage.

Despite the lack of personal injury, though, she does still look generally concerned.

Instead of trying to answer, Ghostblade side-eyes his two nemeses yelling at each other on the front of the car. Cyan can eavesdrop on them for better results than from asking him.

"*Hey*!" Luo Li shouts suddenly, and Ghostblade twitches with a frisson of uncharacteristic panic as her boots thud onto the earth. If anyone finds out about Cyan then the news will have a chance of getting back to Rock. That will set them all back to square one.

He unsuspiciously pushes the door shut as Luo Li marches over.

"Get back here, don't you walk away – "

She pauses, somehow putting him in mind of a tiger scenting blood. He reaches for the keys in his pocket and presses a button, and her head swivels to follow the sound of the locks quietly clicking shut.

"You weirdo," she says, tone level in a way that feels more ominous than the angry yelling did. "Do you have something bad in the back of the car?"

The car's locked now, so he at least has a bit of time to -

Luo Li, a sixteen year old girl, punches her armored hands through solid metal, grips the newly created holes as handholds, and wrenches the door off. She throws it away, sending it sailing over their heads and off the cliff into the abyss, and pokes her head into the car.

Was that – was that necessary? Was that really necessary?

A modulated gasp filters out from the helmet, and Ghostblade covers his medical mask with his hands. Little Johnny, of course, picks this time to follow Luo Li over and squeeze his head in around her to see what she's looking at. He lets out the same loud gasp. Big Johnny crawls in over his shoulder and gasps, too.

Ghostblade's hands creep up to cover the rest of his face. He can't just kill them all. They haven't done anything.

"*Lucky Cyan*?"

"Hi!" says Cyan. "Hi, Little Johnny! Aww, Big Johnny – "

Slowly, ponderously, Luo Li straightens up.

Steps back.

Turns her visor towards Ghostblade.

"Why does the grey-haired pervert stalking Nuonuo sis," she says, "have Lucky Cyan hidden in the back of his car?"

It sounds really bad when she puts it like that. Why is she putting it like that.

But luckily he has a good reason. He can explain -

" – Ghostblade kidnapped me," Cyan says brightly.

...who was he kidding.

"I *knew* it!" Luo Li, out of her robot suit but still just as frightening, shouts. Little Johnny makes helpless "but why" noises. Professor Luo looks deeply uncomfortable. Nuonuo is staring at Ghostblade in horror.

Cyan laughs. "It wasn't as bad as all that," she says, and Ghostblade glances up at her with a weak flicker of hope until he sees that she's unfolding a sheet of paper she pulled out of her pocket. She was carrying that thing *on* her? "He came down to my floor on the tower and knocked, which was pretty startling, I don't think we've ever talked before – but it was just to give me this note and a very nice cake from a bakery."

She holds up the paper.

The already tense mood of the gathering plummets further.

"That looks like a serial killer made it to leave at a crime scene," says Luo Li.

Ghostblade *knows* that.

It was either that note (with words) or drawings (without words) or physical pantomime, okay? He doesn't have a lot of options to work with.

Nuonuo looks like she wants to dissolve into the earth. Ghostblade is a terrible parent. Everything is the worst forever.

Support arrives from an unexpected quarter. "It fits his image, though!" Little Johnny pipes up.

Badly attempted support. It... doesn't really fit his image. His brand veers closer to *mysterious, haunted, but mostly noble edgelord* than to *literal serial killer*.

"That's important for heroes," Little Johnny continues.

"More important than not being horrible?" Luo Li says.

"...Sometimes?"

Luo Li makes a face like she stepped barefoot into dog waste. Ghostblade and Cyan both understand what he's hedging at, but, naturally, to someone outside of the hero scene it probably sounds ridiculous.

Everyone knows that gaining trust can give a person superpowers. But the other things that high trust value can confer are kept under wraps as insider knowledge within the industry.

The reason why Little Johnny at twenty-eight has yet to show a hint of stubble, why Firm Man rarely strays far from the Hero Tower (he can use public bathrooms for the most part, but if he needs to do anything that usually requires sitting down then only the toilets on his floor of the tower are designed for him), why Ghostblade can't get words out no matter the medium or language so long as he intends for another living soul to perceive them – most of the people in this camp don't know any of that.

If they understood the power they held over their heroes, something as simple as a single viral, targeted smear campaign would be enough to drive a wedge into the system.

Heroes who rely on technology have more leeway to count on. Lack of trust won't rust a machine, and a gun will fire the same bullet no matter who pulls the trigger. But even heroes with robust research and development departments at their backs can't fully cleave themselves from the public's approval. The old E-Soul found that out definitively.

"That's – that's not super important," Little Johnny says, and leans forward in his seat. "What's it actually say?"

What the cut out magazine characters glued onto the paper read is:

NEed fAvoR
cAn i KIDnap yOu?
DOnt tell aNyONe pleAsE
In 2 dAYs 7aM

Luo Li makes a face like she's realized the dog waste she stepped into was diarrhea.

"This is all I have, though," Cyan says, mildly apologetic. "I don't honestly know where we are or why everyone is here. You know more than I do now."

"And you just went with him?" Luo Li demands, eyes wide. "With *this* guy? After *that* note?"

Little Johnny adds, "This is a top secret mission to survey an alien shipwreck."

"Oh, *wow*, that's really cool!"

"No no no," says Luo Li, "we are not skipping over that. He said he wanted to kidnap you and you said *yes*?"

He chose that word less for literal reasons and more because no one can blame Cyan for going on an unauthorized mission behind her employer's back if it sounds like Ghostblade forced her to at knifepoint.

Cyan glances his way, even though he would desperately rather she didn't. "Ghostblade... I've never heard anything bad about him, you know?" He's decently scandal-proof because the public already understands and is supportive of the fact that he extrajudicially kills bad people. Most of the dirt a journalist could dig up on him would amount to *oh no, the hero who kills people killed someone* or *oh no, a hero killed another hero.* "He's a pretty good hero, right? He had to have some reason. Anyway, I told Queen before we left" – Ghostblade jolts in his seat – "so she always knew where I was going. Just Queen! Nobody else knows about this secret mission." Oh, that's fine, then.

"Ghostblade," Professor Luo says, "I think we need an explanation."

Ghostblade opens his mouth. No sound comes out. He closes it.

"We don't need an explanation," Luo Li seethes. She points at him. "It's obvious what's going on! This guy is a pervert and a stalker who harasses cute girls he is way too old for."

Agh.

"First it's creepy phone calls to Nuonuo and watching her from bushes, and now it's kidnapping Lucky Cyan into the back of his car? What depths won't he sink to?"

No, that's – objectively true aside from the very first part, he's never known interest in anyone except Zhang Lan, but -

"He definitely has a good reason!" Little Johnny declares.

What did Ghostblade ever do to deserve this, aside from all of the things he did to deserve this.

"When we were discussing our pasts on the ride over" – why – "his eyes were filled with this deep, soulful sorrow!" What on earth is he talking about. "He was playing Cyan's ‘My Color', too! The people who like that song – "

" – nine out of ten have tragic backstories!" Luo Li finishes. "I remember that study. But having a tragic backstory and being a fan doesn't make it okay for him to *kidnap Lucky Cyan* – " She inhales sharply. (Cyan is starting to eye Ghostblade with more skepticism than previously. This is sort of bad.) "‘My Color' is Nuonuo's favorite song, too! That can't be a coincidence!"

It's – in this case it's not a coincidence, but in most any other circumstance it could be, Cyan's catalogue is incredibly popular, so where is this outrageous confidence coming from -

Little Johnny bursts out of his seat. "How long has Mr. Ghostblade been stalking Nuonuo for?!"

Luo Li leaps to her feet to match. "Years! Probably! He's obsessed with her!"

"Is it possible he brought Cyan here for Nuonuo's sake because he knows Nuonuo is a fan?!"

Ghostblade's never empathized as much with Zhang Lan as he does in that moment. He, too, wishes he could divorce himself and take their daughter and leave.

The catboy and Nuonuo's teenage best friend who barely reaches Ghostblade's chest in height go on to tear apart his motives like hyenas shredding into a carcass. He dug his own grave, but they are going to put him in it. He risks a glance at Nuonuo to gauge her reaction. She turns out to be dissociating. She is, unfortunately, her parents' child.

"That's enough," Professor Luo interjects once Luo Li and Little Johnny have determined Ghostblade to be just about every type of bad news under the sun. Luo Li somehow guessed enough *right* that he can't bring himself to give a flat denial.

He needs to stay away from this girl. What a dangerous person.

"This is the situation now, so we'll adapt to it. Lucky Cyan, I'm sorry to say we weren't expecting you, but since you've come: welcome to the team. We're honored to have you on board. Please make yourself at home."

A line of tension eases from his shoulders. Even Cyan just staying with the team would be helpful, regardless of what else she does. Good fortune granted by the well-wishes of the dead is an absurdly enviable power. They'll benefit from any amount of extra luck they can get.

"I'll contact the Hero Commission and tell them about – "

No!

Every face in the group turns towards Ghostblade with varying degrees of alarm.

"...Don't tell the Hero Commission?" Professor Luo tries, and Ghostblade immediately stops flailing his arms in a general X shape and switches to nodding fiercely.

If he can only manage to not flub one part of this discussion, let it be this. He'll be content with this.

"*Do* tell the Hero Commission?"

Absolutely not.

Little Johnny exists to help FOMO sell merch, Cyan is a newcomer to the scene who gets sent on the shiny missions heroes are supposed to go on, and everyone else is a layperson. To them, this must come across as paranoia -

"No, you're right," says Professor Luo, stunning Ghostblade out of his solo performance. "Maybe it is best to have an additional person here the Commission doesn't know about."

Thank everything that can be thanked. One person here understands him.

Professor Luo stands. "Alright. Everyone else can get back to what they were doing. Ghostblade, I need to talk with you."

Ghostblade trots after him to the edge of camp. He expects a reprimand for sneaking unauthorized personnel into a classified operation, creating conflict within the team, observing Nuonuo in secret for years, so on and so forth, which Professor Luo delivers readily on.

Luo also asks him for his opinion on how much danger the operation is in and how likely it is they might be attacked, and then believes him without question when he indicates *tons of danger, so much danger, even with three combatants on this team it might take a minor miracle for all of you to make it home at the end, at least one top ten hero will make an attempt on our lives and that's just the one I know about right now* which even the best case scenario he could imagine didn't include. This is going shockingly well. He can hardly believe it.

Then Professor Luo informs him that if he wants to date Nuonuo then it is deeply disrespectful of him to go around unfaithfully picking up other girls on the side, no matter how pretty they might be.

Ghostblade used to be able to send text messages.

Back when he newly signed on with MG, before his reputation cemented, words were only difficult rather than impossible. He and Zhang Lan fell fast and hard for each other. They weren't just dating; for both of them, the other was also their first *friend*. He remembers the thrill whenever he heard the custom message notification sound he'd assigned to her contact number, and the way his replies had flowed out from his keyboard with an ease that seemed to grow the longer he knew her for.

He still has the chat logs on his FOMO account, the essays they typed back and forth about topics they'd once enjoyed alone but which seemed to take on a new shine since they found a second person to share with. Every few years he'll open their message history by accident while trying to press a different button, and the sight of Zhang Lan's cheerful replies to the long messages he can no longer even imagine writing will inflict him with some strange, unpleasant feeling that lingers after he closes the chat.

The food photos he sent to and received from her (she hadn't cared much about what she ate before she met him, but afterwards she began noticing the presentation of her food because

she knew that if she sent him a photo of an interesting dish she'd get a heart or an exclamation point back), the juicy tabloid articles about television actors she followed, comments about annoying people on the bus or interesting new shops opening up in their respective parts of town that they wanted to visit together.

They got married. Ghostblade loved her more than the sun and moon. She moved into the hero tower with him, and the floor became a silent sanctuary for the two of them.

Everything was wonderful. He was living the dream as a cool assassin who shared a home with his best friend and never had to talk to his family. Sometimes his parents video called, and he'd let the phone ring until it stopped and then wait five hours or five days before sending back *busy. later.*

Then Zhang Lan got pregnant.

Neither of them had wanted children. Zhang Lan was on birth control at the time, even. But somehow the reality of the child growing inside her body struck them both as more significant than the theoretical, nonexistent baby they'd agreed would be unwise.

Zhang Lan wanted to keep it. Ghostblade thought that'd be fine.

He continued to think that up until the baby happened.

The unavoidable thing about children is that they make noise. The newborn Nuonuo cried. She screamed. She wailed.

Ghostblade and Zhang Lan had planned for him to request a month's leave to take care of Zhang Lan after the birth, to avoid disrupting their rhythm by asking their mothers over or hiring a nanny, but neither of them had counted on him being incapable of remaining in the same room as their child without risking a panic attack.

He busied himself in the kitchen instead to at least ensure Zhang Lan had fresh meals to eat, but the combination of a shrieking baby the next room over and a pile of raw meat on the chopping board in front of him froze him in place.

He switched to preparing chicken in place of pork and put on a mask to filter out the blood scent. That worked for a few days, until suddenly it didn't and he couldn't bring himself to enter the kitchen at all anymore.

Zhang Lan called her mom and asked her to live with them for the month.

Ghostblade returned to work early and requested overtime hours.

Half a year after Nuonuo's birth, Zhang Lan began looking into classes for adults. Parenting classes. Conversation classes. Speech classes. She took advantage of her position as the spouse of a public figure to find a well-reviewed psychiatric counselor who, she assured him, was not at all like the doctors his parents had thrown him at as a child.

She asked Ghostblade to come with her to the classes, but his trust value had grown enough that he couldn't speak aloud anymore, so most of them sounded a little pointless to him. He

did go to one session of the parenting lessons with her and ended up unable to endure the full hour inside a confined space with so many infants.

She became acquaintances with two other new mothers she met at the parenting lessons. Ghostblade came home some mornings to find that she'd taken Nuonuo and gone out to brunch with them.

The development gave him mixed feelings: trepidation that she had changed her schedule, relief that he didn't have to bear with Nuonuo's noisy babbling.

Their messages to each other grew less frequent. Besides the fact that they couldn't find as much common ground those days, Zhang Lan started mixing verbal speech into their conversations, and for some reason Ghostblade couldn't seem to achieve the text output he'd been able to less than a year ago. He assumed his trust value had begun to encroach further on his written communication, though he didn't understand how he had warded off that effect for so long when his ability to vocalize had long since vanished.

On one of their last dates together, he remembers Zhang Lan turned to the couple sitting at the restaurant table beside theirs and, entirely by her own initiative, praised the cuteness of their three-year old and answered their politely returned questions about Nuonuo. Ghostblade sat to the side and watched, silent and motionless. Left behind.

It had taken him too long to realize that the version of herself that Zhang Lan wanted to become – a parent who could raise a happy and well-adjusted daughter and teach her the skills it would do her good to learn – was incompatible with the version of herself who had found happiness with Ghostblade.

Three years after Nuonuo's birth, Zhang Lan took Nuonuo and moved back into her parents' apartment across the city, placing her closer to Ghostblade's parents' home in the countryside than to Ghostblade.

He didn't contest the divorce or custody. He signed his name onto the papers she gave him and went down to the Civil Affairs Bureau at the time she'd decided on.

The clerk checked that they hadn't missed any forms, asked a few clarifying questions, then stamped their papers without fuss or pause and called for the next pair in line.

When Zhang Lan stood up from the desk and turned to leave, the trust value on Ghostblade's wrist ticked down by one.

He wouldn't realize until later, when he tried to text his parents to tell them he had work and felt his fingers lock in place before he could type the first character, that it was Zhang Lan's trust in him that had preserved his ability to write messages.

The expedition goes wrong in all sorts of stressful ways.

Nuonuo finds Ghostblade's journal about her and learns that he's her dead father.

He's not sure what to do with that yet.

Nuonuo doesn't seem to have much idea, either.

Also, DJ Shindig attacks the team, and Ghostblade doesn't get to kill him for making Nuonuo cry because Cyan turns out to have experience at non-lethally shooting the fear corruption out of hostiles with her arrows. Considering the scale of the favor Ghostblade owes her, letting her deal with DJ Shindig via her methods instead of his is probably the very least he can do.

DJ Shindig seems appropriately miserable about the situation, at least. As he should. He doesn't know the identities of the people who told him about fear or who infected him with it and aimed him at the expedition, though, so he's no help on that front.

After they get into the spaceship, part of the floor collapses under the Johnnies, and Cyan drops down to rescue him.

Meanwhile, Phobiaclone attacks the main body of the expedition, Luo Li flies in out of nowhere to beat the former rank two hero halfway to death with her cat fists and a random crate while Nuonuo cheers her on in apparent delight at how well the armored suit she helped engineer performs, Nice tries to ambush the rest of them while they're distracted by that spectacle, and Ghostblade deflects the sneak attack and forces Nice to retreat.

Ghostblade spends that fight with one eye over his shoulder, anticipating E-Soul's untimely arrival at any moment, but E-Soul doesn't turn up.

Queen does, though, apparently in response to a distress signal sent by Cyan. She jumps into the Johnnies-created hole without a word or glance at the rest of them and returns about twenty minutes later with a battered group of Cyan, the Johnnies, and E-Soul in tow.

So that's where he got off to.

In the aftermath, as they come together to organize the timeline of events, it becomes abundantly plain that if not for Cyan's presence, Ghostblade would have had to go after the Johnnies instead and fight E-Soul in the process while Luo Li would have needed to single-handedly fend off Nice and Phobiaclone, which would simply not have worked. Ghostblade might owe Cyan and Queen his daughter's life.

He's not the only person who notices how closely death scraped them by. The entire team looks shaken by the end.

Queen sticks around afterwards, meaning the researchers have three members of the top ten, DJ Shindig as a former X, Luo Li, and Big Johnny all working to keep them alive. No enemy turns out to be suicidal enough to launch a raid against that roster. The remainder of the expedition passes uneventfully.

Nuonuo asks to meet with Ghostblade at a historical district over the weekend. Luo Li will come too, though. (In fact, Luo Li will come whether Ghostblade does or not. Nuonuo's father is being invited on her outing with her girlfriend, not the other way around.)

Ghostblade stares at that horrifying pink caveat for a second before, dread in his heart, reacting with a thumbs-up.

Nuonuo sends back a happy cat sticker.

Ghostblade feels mildly better about his choices.

He's had a little more time to self-reflect since he resigned from MG and since Luo Li threatened him with disembowelment if he kept stalking Nuonuo. He doesn't intend to give up the Ghostblade identity, both for practical reasons (he knows what happens to heroes who retire for their families' sakes, and Ghostblade in particular is a looser end than most heroes considering the secrecy of some of the missions he took; also, he's probably built up enough grudges that if he goes too long without wearing the costume with all of its included talismans then the ghosts of those he's killed will take the chance to curse him) and less practical (it's still a cool name), which means he'll need to sign up with another company sooner rather than later.

Independent heroes don't last long and never break into the top ten, the inexplicable exception of the current X aside. Hero companies run social media and news campaigns to undermine unaffiliated heroes as a way of decreasing the competition; though, even if that wasn't the case, Ghostblade still wouldn't be able to manage his own brand. His skill set doesn't include marketing.

Before that, though, he has time to solve more important issues.

It turns out to be a good thing that Nuonuo's terrifying friend who she loves very much (and who Ghostblade, as an aspiring no-longer-dead-to-his-child parent, must be supportive of (why)) is there when they go on the day trip, because neither Nuonuo nor Ghostblade could have carried any semblance of a conversation on their own.

For the most part, Nuonuo and Luo Li drag each other cheerfully around the district while Ghostblade lurks after them, though Nuonuo makes regular attempts to engage with Ghostblade, too.

"Mom told me a little more about you when I asked," she says, and blatantly notices how he tenses. "Um, it... she said your powers make it so you can't talk?"

That is by far not the worst thing that Zhang Lan could have told her about him.

Nuonuo likely pivoted from whatever she'd originally intended to ask. Still, he nods.

"And can't write?"

He nods.

"That's hard to believe," Nuonuo says quietly. "I saw the journal...."

She's led them out of yes-or-no questions and into territory Ghostblade can't navigate.

"Mom didn't explain, um, why you two... um...."

"I'd have divorced him, too," Luo Li says, slinging her arm over Nuonuo's shoulders. "I mean, look at him."

"*Luo Li*!" But Nuonuo's laughing a little. "How can you say that?"

"Little Johnny's right. You shouldn't call yourself a parent if you never make time for your kid." Luo Li sniffs. "Guess you can't explain what changed your mind about Nuonuo. Hey Nuonuo, look over here, the stationery they're selling is really cute – "

Ghostblade doesn't follow as Luo Li drags Nuonuo off into a huddled discussion that does not look like a conversation about stationery.

He's spent long enough watching Nuonuo from afar that this position feels comfortably familiar, even though logically he knows he's doing a terrible job of offering her reasons to want to spend time with him again.

There might be... a way around the downsides of his trust value.

He covers his mouth lightly with a hand. Ghostblade isn't one of the heroes who can't disguise themselves at all; he isn't terribly recognizable out of costume. Strangers and relatives across his life have informed him that he looks uncommonly attractive, but his own appearance in the mirror has always seemed to him fairly generic. No unique markings like Little Johnny; no attention-drawing aura of confidence like Queen.

The highly visible mask his costume includes has led people to look for that feature of Ghostblade's instead of paying as much attention to his face, too.

No one on the street around them sees him as the silent killer hero.

In other words, Nuonuo's father's trust value doesn't have to mirror Ghostblade's trust value.

Ghostblade's silence comes from a lack of desire to speak, not lack of ability. The person who called Nuonuo on the phone last week in a painfully desperate attempt at connection was her father, not the hero; and the person who knocked on Cyan's door behind both of their companies' backs, and the one who learned to listen to the songs Nuonuo listens to and eat the desserts Nuonuo eats.

Those weren't Wang Yi either, though. Wang Yi was the man who left his wife to raise their child alone for three years despite living in the same rooms, and Wang Yi was the boy who grew up in a household he spent every second of every day dreaming of leaving.

For Nuonuo's sake, he can try to become someone new. Someone who he hasn't been before.

Whatever Nuonuo and Luo Li ended up talking about, it results in Nuonuo sticking more strictly to yes-no questions with him when she wants a response and Luo Li making fewer jabs about his suitability as a parent. So that's the power of communication.

"Oh, do you like dragons?" Nuonuo asks when his attention lingers a second longer on a carved wooden paperweight displayed in a shop.

At lunchtime: "We're getting food. Are wontons okay for you?"

When his steps slow briefly while they pass the mouth of an alley: "Is there something down there?"

He shakes his head. He thought he killed someone in that alley once, but either he misremembered the location or a sanitation worker did a commendably thorough job of cleaning off the blood splatters.

While Luo Li skips off, lured away by skewers of candied strawberries: "You don't really like sweets, right?"

He can't easily answer that question.

"It depends on the sweet?" Nuonuo amends, and Ghostblade nods. He likes the ones she likes.

Later, Nuonuo says, "We're going to get ice cream."

She shows him the address on her phone: she and Luo Li will be leaving the district and taking the subway to a mall back in the modern parts of the city. Ghostblade eyes the photos of multi-tiered cookie-studded sundaes, then looks at Luo Li swiping flecks of amber rock candy off her cheek with a napkin. That girl will need dentures by thirty.

"Do you want to come? I remember you like ice cream?"

He does, on both counts.

Nuonuo and Luo Li get a sundae to share. Ghostblade sticks to a less exciting order of a single scoop of coffee ice cream and takes the stand-alone wooden chair across the table from their booth seat. This is definitely nicer than watching her eat from a bush outside the windows, though he can only hope she agrees. He hasn't done much to contribute to the atmosphere.

A little ways through, Nuonuo looks at him and says, slowly, the word resting awkwardly on her tongue from lack of use, "Um... Dad?"

Oh.

...He needs a minute.

"Is that okay?" Nuonuo adds hurriedly. "Can I call you that? Or is Ghost – "

Nod.

Thumbs up.

Double thumbs up.

Dad is – *Dad* is great.

He still needs a minute, though.

"I know you heard me say this on the work trip, before I read the journal. But, um... a dad was the one thing I didn't have growing up. I was happy, but I – I always wondered, you know? What he must have been like. Why Mom didn't want to talk about him. She told me I look like him, but she never made it seem like that was a bad thing, and she'd married him in the first place, so I thought there had to be something good about him. Everyone told me you were dead, but also – Mom used past tense for you, but my grandparents use present tense. So I didn't know for sure that you were dead. I thought there was a chance I could meet you someday."

Ghostblade did always consider it a bit much that Zhang Lan let Nuonuo believe he was literally, physically dead as opposed to dead to Zhang Lan specifically.

"So I'm really happy that I could, and that you're here now."

He... can't tell her the same.

He's her dad, and he can't tell her the same.

No. No, that's not true. Ghostblade is the one who can't tell her. He stares at the ice cream in his cup, the curve of the spoon cutting through it. He's Ghostblade, but that doesn't have to be all he is. Ghostblade the assassin doesn't follow his daughter onto dessert dates with her friend. Or, well – he does it from the shadows outside, not seated across the table from her.

Nuonuo called him her dad.

He has to at least try.

He looks up at her (and does his best to ignore Luo Li watching her in turn with a disarmingly soft expression). Steels himself. Works his throat.

The words he meant to speak come out as an exhale.

"You don't have to say anything!" Nuonuo sounds like she means it. "I just wanted you to know. It's okay if you can't...."

He shakes his head. Checks his trust value, which turns out to have increased slightly in the last hour alone. Somehow people have liked him more since the ruins incident. That's unhelpful.

Whatever. Ghostblade's trust value doesn't matter. That identity isn't part of this conversation.

He swallows. Breathes in.

And for the first time in his life, in a voice rusted and weak from two decades of disuse, Nuonuo's father says her name.

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