

THE DIVINE FLESH I

乩身：踏火伏魔的罪人

The troubled human avatar of a powerful god discovers that a once-defeated enemy is again preparing Earth for the arrival of a dark power. A tale of demons, damnation, and redemption strongly in the vein of Constantine.

Han Chieh looks for all the world like a young tough: he lives in a dump, spends his days sparring and playing pool, and sports a tattoo of ancient armor covering half his scarred torso. But much more hides beneath the rough exterior. Han Chieh made a deal with an ancient deity, Prince Nezha, to be his avatar on Earth in exchange for lighter punishments for Han Chieh's relatives, who languish in Purgatory. Han Chieh is Nezha's eyes, ears, and sword on Earth, commanded to stand guard against the encroaching forces of the Nine Hells.

Yet recently, Han Chieh has gotten lazy. When a young girl shows up at his door, begging him to investigate her father's possession by a demonic woman, Han Chieh tries to brush her off. When he finds that she is telling the truth, he discovers something else as well: the source of dark energy is the young acolyte of a demon lord, whom Han Chieh once prevented from invading the human realm. Now, the young man has taken advantage of Han Chieh's lowered guard to gather his forces and prepare for a second assault.

The Divine Flesh will have you turning pages from the start, as Teensy's energetic writing fills your imagination with all the action of supernatural conflict on earth, the plot snowballing with the intrigue of a rich Chinese occult. Fans of *Constantine* will fall in love with the hard-nosed protagonist and revel in his badass exploits.

Teensy 星子

A powerful storyteller in the fantasy genre, Teensy is well-known for integrating nativist mythology and occult legend into stories of the modern, urban world. Originally a writer of online serial novels, he was picked up by a publisher, and has now authored several well-



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known print works, such as *In the Underworld*, *The Immortal Gene*, and others.

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By Teensy

Translated by William Sack

Prologue

The foul steps snake down, slanted and warped – dirty old dark things.

With difficulty, he descends, step by excruciating step.

The metal steps are sizzling hot, and threaten to cook the soles of his feet like steak tips on a steel plate.

The irons secured to his ankles drag behind him, clanging loudly down the stairs.

He does not know how far he has gone.

He does not know who the guide before him is.

The guide is dressed in a black suit. The head above his shoulders is animal, with curved horns and long, pointed ears.

An ox head.

A cacophony of noises echo around him – booming and roaring, rustling and hissing. It is the voice of a great conflagration, tearing up everything.

And a multitude of human voices weeping and wailing, cries of helplessness, regret, mourning, and hate....

His mouth is parched. He feels like a lump of well-kneaded dough, sliced and leavened with all this cataclysmic noise, being sent into an endless oven to be baked by an infernal flame.

Yet somehow, he feels no desire to look back or to flee. He knows there is nowhere to run. More importantly, even if he could flee, he would not. Because his father, mother, and sister are here too.

“I’m sorry....”

Looking up, he sees nothing but black. Looking down, nothing but fire.

This staircase is deep and winding, but open on all sides, and away from it extends stretches of charred multi-story buildings: an endless sprawl steeped in flame, a scene from some apocalypse movie.

Human forms appear in every window. Those ceaselessly wailing voices are, he realizes, coming from behind glass.

Hearing his mumbling, his guide turns to him and wrinkles his ox nose. “You say something?”

“Momma...Daddy...Sis...” He descends step by step, charred skin cracking open. By now he could neither sweat nor cry, and the air he draws into his lungs burns his voice away. In a gravelly whisper, he says: “I’ve done wrong.”

“Hm, you confessing?” The ox-head man scratches one ear and shrugs. “Confessing is good. Turning over a new leaf is a fine thing. But...you must face up to your sins, you still gotta take the punishment you earned.”

He does not argue, but continues behind his guide, treading ever downwards, step by burning step.

This place is far, far deeper than anywhere ever penetrated by humans.

Below underground.

Below the shadow lands.

Purgatory.

1.

She stood under her red umbrella and gazed through the evening's misting rain at the dilapidated four-story building across the street. Inside, between the entrance and stairs, a mottled and peeling sign read: "Tung-Feng Market."

Most of the ground-floor shops had already killed the lights and drawn the shutters. On the second floor, only a handful of apartment windows remained lit. On the third and fourth floors, every window sat lightless, with faded packing tape heavily binding most. One corner of the building's outer wall of the building showed signs of fire damage, and the long absence of human residents could be felt.

Cutting across the street, she collapsed her umbrella and stepped into the stairwell. Inside, she found the stairs to the underground market blocked off by a metal grille, with planks and junk piled on either side, as if it had been out of business for many years already.

Beside the refuse, though, was a custodial office – seemingly built as an afterthought. Fluorescent light faintly glistened within. An old custodian sat in a slacking relic of a rattan chair staring raptly at a small TV on the desk, showing no concern at all for if someone came or went.

She slowly climbed the stairs. The corridors of both wings of the second floor were piled with household implements: shoe racks, bicycles, and even washing machines. She noticed that paper talismans had been affixed to the stairwell wall as well as several apartment doors. On the landing between the second and third floors stood a little folding-leg table, which held several boxes of cookies and a small burner of incense. Talismans lay under each foot of the table.

In the third-floor hallway, the lights were dim, and the windows on either side opaque. Odds and ends also crowded this hallway, but they sat under dust – nothing here had been used in a long while.

She continued on up. Both halves of the fourth-floor hallway were empty without hint of the piles below. However, the wall and ceilings bore the sharp traces of a fire.

Beads of sweat arose on her forehead, but she did not know if this was due to fear or exertion. She took a deep breath and went further down the hallway.

Going around a turn, the burn marks became more obvious. Absent doors on both sides revealed lightless spaces within, and a sadness seemed to fill the air.

Trembling slightly, she continued toward the end of the hallway. The scorched wall at the far end contained a little window, through which she could faintly make out the incomplete apartment building rising across the way.

The residence to the left of the window showed much grayer scorch marks around its doorway, as if someone had whitewashed over them. Yet the job had been so cursory that the black still stuck out comically through the white.

Nearing the steel outer door, she noticed that the small, inward-facing window beside it had been covered with newspaper from the inside. Pale yellow light and breathy moans came from within – she recognized the latter as the sound of sex. Standing by the door, she lowered her head and blushed gently. Not knowing whether to knock or wait, she hesitated, all the way till the moans ceased and the sound of water and chatter emerged. Only then did she summon the courage to ring the doorbell.

Inside the metal door was a wooden door, and inside the wooden door stood a beautiful woman, who opened it wearing no more than a towel. Looking over the visitor with a bemused expression, she called inside, “Chieh, there’s a girl here for you.”

“Hm?” A man called back from the toilet, his tone audibly confused.

“One sec,” the lovely lady said, laughing. She closed the door halfway, and there followed the soft rustling of clothes. “Chieh, you must be hungry, huh? Can you manage going right from dinner to your midnight snack?”

“What?” His voice was even more confused now. “Who’s at the door?!”

“How should I know?” Already dressed, the woman picked up her bag to go. As she brushed past her, she stopped mid-stride to look her over thoroughly once more. With a tone of clear misgiving, she asked: “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one,” she answered.

“Twenty-one!” the woman exclaimed. Turning back to the apartment, she called out, “Chieh, she’s only twenty-one, don’t do anything you’ll regret!”

“Mei-Na, what are you even talking about?” Still dressed only in boxers, the man emerged from the bathroom. But Mei-Na was already headed to the stairwell, her eyes locked on her smartphone.

The man and woman who remained stood and stared at each other, unsure of what to do.

“Who the hell are you?” He asked her. After waiting several seconds for a response, he approached the door. “Where’d you come from? I don’t remember having sent for you.”

“You must be...Master Han Chieh?” She gazed doubtfully at this man called Han Chieh who stood before her. His naked torso was lithe like a cheetah, and it bore a tattoo of armor plating that ran from his left breast to his bicep. While its detailing was quite fine, it abruptly unwound at the end in a tangle of red scars. The scarred flesh brought to mind monstrous talons, grabbing his shoulder and raking across his back.

“Master Han?” Han Chieh hesitated, his face confused. “Very few people call me that. You are...?”

“My family name is Ye, and my classmates all call me Leaf.” She bowed. “I’ve heard Master Han’s specialty is helping people with...a certain kind of issue.”

“A certain kind of issue?” Han Chieh laughed hollowly.

“Issues pertaining to the supernatural...”

Han Chieh was silent for several seconds, then chuckled drily. Reaching out to close the door, he noticed that she was in his way, and added, "Sorry. I don't take work requests." At the same time, he put his other hand on her shoulder and pushed her out.

"I know, I know. Grannie Lu said so before." Leaf anxiously pushed his hand away. "Grannie Lu said you only work as Nezha directs, and cannot personally take asks, but...but I really have no other options, I can only turn to you for help, so I'm here. Please..."

The sight of Leaf fighting back as if it were he who was trying to break in gave Han Chieh pause and the mention of Grannie Lu surprised him. "Grannie Lu? You mean that old lady who grows tangerines in her yard?"

"Yup, yup, her! My family and hers live above the same street. We're neighbors!" Leaf nodded, hurriedly adding, "You helped her once, and she's always been grateful to you."

"Who cares if you're neighbors..." Just as he made to refuse her, Leaf ducked underneath his arm and scurried into the apartment. He couldn't quite believe his eyes. "Hey! What are you doing?"

Leaf ran inside and reached inside her bag to draw something out, at once looking in all directions, suspicious of the décor. "This...is your place?"

Apart from the entryway she stood in, the walls were covered floor to ceiling in sloppily pasted clippings, from newspapers and advertisement leaflets to ripped-out magazine pages and movie star playbills. Scrawled words covered most of the celebrity faces. Looking down, Leaf saw that even the floor had been collaged over. Where the naked walls peeked out between newsprint and wallpaper edges, she saw the same charcoal black under a coat of whitewashing.

A large bed had been placed directly opposite the television, where tables and sofas normally go. This arrangement made the living room feel more like a hotel room.

"Master, why are you sleeping out here and not in a bedroom?" asked Leaf, puzzled.

Han Chieh's place was no sardine-can, but a three-bedroom, two-room flat. Still, she could vaguely make out that two rooms of three sat empty, with nothing but bare walls. The other one was filled with debris and seemed as if it had been abandoned long ago.

Diagonally across from the bed and near the kitchen sat a low cabinet with a small incense censer on top. The butt-ends of used incense sticks packed tightly but crookedly, and the ash piled so high in the censer it spilled into little mounds beside it.

Waste paper and advertisement leaflets sat piled up next to the cabinet. Beside them, there leaned a small bamboo tube containing more than ten leaflets rolled into scrolls, causing it all to resemble a temple's fortune-telling sticks.

Near the cabinet's top, a wicker bird cage hung on a nail. The small door lay open and nesting grass had been placed inside. The water and feed box were full, but there was no bird.

"Master, has your bird flown off?" she mumbled. But Han Chieh grabbed her arm and dragged her outside. "Master, you...Are you angry? I'm sorry, please – I really need you. Please, it's important, a matter of life and death!"

"For life-threatening emergencies, dial 1-1-9; to report something to the police, dial 1-1-0!" Han Chieh pulled Leaf to the door and sullenly added, "Normally, the only women who come by here are selling themselves – hurry home, little girl, and get some sleep."

“Wait, wait!” Although Han Chieh had pushed her all the way outside, Leaf refused to give up. When Han Chieh started to shut the iron door, she pulled out a red envelope from her bag and stuffed it through the grate. “Master, look at this!”

Han Chieh took the red envelope and opened it a peek: inside there were fingernail clippings and a lock of hair.

“Some bastard put this under my dad’s pillow, and a succubus has enchanted him. He’s become all muddled and wants to divorce my mother!” By now she was shouting. “I’m begging you, Master Han, think of something to help my Mom and Dad—”

“Fuck off.” Han Chieh threw the red envelope back through the outer gate, then slammed it with his hand hard enough to startle Leaf into letting go. “Go get a private eye to deal with your old man’s affair. I don’t go around catching folks in the act. Also, lay off those demon movies or ghost stories or whatever you’re watching!” Han Chieh slammed the wooden door shut.

Leaf stared at the door for a few seconds before bending down to pick up the envelope, still not knowing what to do.

Ten seconds later, the wooden door opened again. Han Chieh put his face against the grate and said coldly, “It’s 10:40ish. Hurry home and sleep. You hear me?”

She just shook her head, unwilling to budge.

Han Chieh ignored her response and closed the wooden door. Leaf looked at the door for a long time, pulled out her cell phone. Checking the time, she also took out some water and a little pillbox. After taking the medicine, she turned to the end of the corridor and looked out at the rain and the unfinished building.

“It’s 10:50 – and you’re still here!” Han Chieh scolded her, this time through the little window. “Outside is a construction site. What’s so fun to look at there? Go home already!”

Leaf turned and flashed a look at Han Chieh, before turning back to the window. “I can’t sleep.”

“Well, if you can’t sleep, you can read books, watch TV, play on your phone.” Han Chieh said irritably, “Why the hell are you loitering at my place?”

“This is outside your place – doesn’t count,” Leaf snapped back.

“Since when does the area outside my door not count as home?” Han Chieh opened his eyes. “You think it’s a sidewalk?”

“The hallway is a public area, and public areas are for everyone!” said Leaf.

“Everyone, my ass, this was built for its tenants. Are you a tenant?” Han Chieh snapped back. “It’s ten fifty-three now! Fuckin’A, could you kindly scam already?”

“If you don’t help me, fine – but now you’re not even going to let me stand here and breath?!” Then Leaf hissed, “Grannie must have remembered wrong. You lack the guts to be a master. I don’t think you’re a master at all, just a lying little hood, covered in tattoos.”

“I have never been a master!” Han Chieh clunked the window shut and opened the door with annoyance. Leaning Leaf’s way, he spat, “I’ve always been a hood. You recognize that, but you still haven’t fucked off. What could you be doing lingering at the door of a bad man’s place, hmm?” He looked back at the clock in his house and then turned to her. “Ten fifty-five!”

"Why do you keep reporting the time to me? I have a cell phone. I know the time!" Leaf said. "I'm a grown-up. I'm free to stay as long as I like, and it's no business of yours. You don't even help other people, so what do you care what time I get home?"

"Nobody cares when you get home or where you go – just go!" Han Chieh shouted, and slammed the iron gate loudly. "Scram!"

"I won't budge. How 'bout that? Smelly hood! Fake master! You say I'm loitering on your doorstep. Then you call the cops!" Leaf yelled back in anger.

"Eh?" Han Chieh did not think Leaf would bite back like this. For a moment, he just dumbly held her gaze.

She panted, as if tired, and stepped back to lean against the wall.

"Don't touch the wall!" Han Chieh suddenly shouted. Leaping toward her, he pulled her away from the ground with one hand.

"Ahh! That hurt. Why did you—" Leaf had felt the pain in her arm when he grabbed it, but now her whole body was burning up. Such a strange heat!

Her eyes widened, but she could not make out more than an otherworldly breeze drifting all around the hallway. It distorted the scene before her, making it shimmer like air heated by a candle. Flecks of ash, some still glowing red, floated in the wind, swirling by her. Following that, she heard screams and miserable wailing come from the other end of the corridor and from within the other residences. Writhing, warped shadows galloped her way.

"Close your eyes!" Han Chieh yelled and hugged her to the wall by the window. He leaned against the wall, using one arm to prevent her back from touching it.

Leaf was scared senseless, only cognizant of the burning air filling her mouth and nose. Heat choked off words. She could only bury her face in Han Chieh's chest and close her eyes tightly. She heard mournful shrieking draw nearer and nearer – and then the sounds passed through the window and faded away.

The soles of her feet were still on fire and her back was hot; Han Chieh's chest oozed sweat that soaked her face and hair, while his encircling arm between her and the wall spasmed and shook.

"Master, you..." As she tried to speak, her mouth was immediately flooded with bitterly hot air. She could only cover nose and mouth with one hand and gasp. Her body felt so enervated that even standing was difficult, but Han Chieh's other hand grasped her waist and prevented her from sitting down.

After an untold amount of time, the infernal air gradually dissipated. The crying and miserable yells also subsided, and all around seemed to have regained its original stillness.

Han Chieh collapsed into a seated position on the ground, and Leaf sat down also, stunned. The pair looked at each other for a long time, gulping air.

Still trembling, Leaf asked, "J-just...what was that just now?"

Han Chieh glared at her angrily. After struggling to prop himself up, he grabbed her and pulled her inside.

2.

Leaf curled up on the couch by the bed and lay quietly, like a scolded child. The sofa's cushions, arms, and surfaces all bore the unsightly scars of numerous haphazardly repaired seams. The overlap of fabrics made it hard for Leaf to get used to even sitting on it, but she did nonetheless, and it was cozy. Only, the chair legs were not quite even, so it swayed with even the slightest motion.

The newspapers and advertisements covering walls and ceiling looked like they had been charred and yellowed even further by the recent blast.

Han Chieh took a cold shower. After coming out of the bathroom, still glowering, he removed a large, cold beer from the fridge and took a few large swallows. Then he rummaged through an old wooden set of drawers until he found a tube of ointment, which he squeezed out liberally. Sitting on the dining table, beside the piled trash, he squeezed a long line of it onto the arm that had kept Leaf away from the wall, where an ugly burn had risen.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't my plan to stay outside and..." Leaf said, "I was just tired and wanted to catch my breath. I'm not in the best of shape."

Han Chieh finished with the ointment and took out gauze to wrap his arm and hand, still occasionally glaring at her in anger.

"I'm not trying to make trouble, and it's not that I've seen too many horror films." Leaf took the red envelope out again and said, "My dad is really about to be killed by a succubus. Some bastard is hurting my father, and now my mother is getting hurt too. I need your help, Master Han. Only you can save our family."

"I've already said, I'm no master." Han Chieh finished his beer and took out two more. His small refrigerator was full of beer cans. He cracked open one beer, and leaned his bandaged arm against another, icing the burn. "I'm just a hood."

"Oh, Master...I was just shooting my mouth off. I shouldn't have spoken out of turn. Forget I said that."

Rousing herself with visible effort, Leaf stood up and bowed in his direction, saying, "Grannie Lu said that the master is greatly skilled, as well as a kind and good person. Just now, if you hadn't protected me, I...I..."

Han Chieh snorted. Sipping, he took a breath and said, "How is the old lady doing these days anyways?"

"Grannie Lu? She passed away two years ago." Leaf replied respectfully, "I used to listen to her tell stories. She often spoke of you."

"She told my stories to you little imps, eh?" The news of Grannie Lu's death had no visible effect on Han Chieh. He took two more gulps of beer, and looked at Leaf for a few seconds. "Oh! Your home is on the same street as Old Lady Lu's you said...so you're rich then."

"My parents are senior executives in major corporations." Not only did Leaf not seem to object to Han Chieh's statement, she added, "If Master Han saves my parents, they would certainly be willing to pay you a handsome reward. I know Grannie Lu said that you cannot accept business requests, but—"

“Don’t call me a master.” Han Chieh interrupted Leaf. “I am not a master nor do I want to be a master; I’m Han Chieh. Just call me by my name.”