

Dust motes swirled like trapped spirits around Red's trembling fingers. The artifact—an iron knot twisted with glass veins—thrummed beneath his touch. Midnight-blue light pulsed from within, a heartbeat out of sync with the monastery's ancient stones.

The air shifted.

A shiver crawled across Red's arms, every hair bristling as if touched by an unseen hand. Torchlight sputtered, shadows stretching long and skeletal. Floorboards cracked like splintering bone.

The monks moved first.

Heads snapped. Necks cracked with mechanical precision. Eyes ignited—not brown, not human—but electric blue, burning with a hunger older than language. Their chants began low, a sound that wasn't sound. The rhythm gnawed at flesh and marrow until Red's lungs stuttered, refusing air.

Red froze.

His throat tightened, a scream clawing desperately behind clenched teeth; a wild animal trapped in a cage of bone. The monks' bodies twisted. Shoulders dislocated. Spines curved like broken branches. Fingers elongated into razor talons that scraped stone floors.

Red bolted.

His feet slapped against the stone, wild and uncoordinated, carrying him without thought. The monks mirrored him perfectly. When he sprinted, they sprinted. When he stumbled, they stumbled. Predator and prey, locked in a grotesque dance.

His stride faltered, muscles burning, breath tearing at his chest. Each step dragged like wading through stone. Memories of Tai Chi surfaced unbidden—not as thought, but as motion. He

slowed, pivoted, shifted weight. Breath steadied. His stance grew rooted, shoulders fluid, balance returned.

The monks softened. Their frenzy thinned to mimic his calm. Movements aligned, for one fragile heartbeat, with his own.

Then the artifact pulsed.

Dark energy tore through the air. The monks lunged as one, a single body with many limbs. Cold fingers grazed Red's skin, and lightning knifed through his veins.

Light devoured everything.

Monk. Artifact. Stone. Breath. All dissolved in brilliance, a blinding eruption that tore form from form. When darkness crept back, only drifting dust remained.

A newborn red panda blinked.

A single crimson stripe burned across its fur. In its gaze shimmered ages of memory, lifetimes folded within eyes too ancient for such a small body. Red's corpse lay slack beside it, chest still, eyes vacant, nothing left inside.

The spirit lingered.

The panda's gaze turned outward, unblinking, as if testing its new skin. An inner light began to grow from within the red panda. The air trembled with the weight of beginning.

Silence pressed in, clutching secrets tight. Waiting. Always waiting.

The glass veins of the artifact throbbed faintly in the rubble. Stone quivered. Beneath it all, something vast and patient stirred.