

盗墓筆記

盜墓三叔◎

《盜墓筆記》系列



杭州出版集團、浙江出版聯合總社
浙江出版集團、浙江出版聯合總社

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Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol. 11: Ten Years Later

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Summary:

Wu Xie fulfills his ten years promise to Zhang Qiling to meet him in front of the bronze door at Changbai Mountains.

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Chapter 1 Ten Years Later

The temperature had risen.

I gave up smoking for a while, but then I couldn't help myself and lit a cigarette. The sun was rising, and the mixture of dew and muggy heat made me feel a little anxious. Smoking helped calm me down.

"Maybe he's already left." Fatty was also smoking beside me. "You know his temper. We're too virtuous, and always get deceived by old people."

"Then he's completely offended me." I thought about it. It wasn't impossible, but I didn't know if it was true in this case. Should I be angry or happy for him?

Pan Zi's tombstone gradually became clear in the morning light, and I could see the gloomy lettering. I was familiar with the edges of the strokes because I had written them myself. The red paint had already peeled off.

For a long time, I didn't accept the fact that Pan Zi wouldn't be with me. But now, I had finally accepted this ending, and ten years later, even without him, I sat in front of the tombstone without wavering.

Some people desperately wanted to change from a rock to a person, but I had unwittingly become a rock.

Fatty poured a sack of paper money in front of Pan Zi and lit it with a lighter. I took some cheap Baisha cigarettes from my bag and pressed them on top of the paper money.

"Fuck, if you're so rich, why don't you give Big Pan some high-end goods?" Fatty asked.

"This is for me," I said to him. If it failed this time, then these cigarettes would be delivered to Pan Zi first. I amused myself by thinking that if Uncle Three was also down there, then the two of them would probably have already put King Yama down and were waiting for me to gloriously descend

with splendor, wealth, and a high rank. I had to take pleasure in the little things in life.

Fatty was saying something in front of Pan Zi's grave, and I already had a general idea of what it was. After so many years, I didn't bother listening or complaining anymore.

It took fifteen minutes for the pile of paper money to completely burn, after which Fatty and I stood up and looked at each other.

Fatty's hair was a little white at the temples, but his ceaseless spirit hadn't changed at all.

I had changed too much.

In any case, people who had experienced all this couldn't miss this moment.

"Let's go, don't be sentimental." Fatty patted me. "You have to try to find your previous feelings. This is the last time. We have to do this happily."

As we left the cemetery, a few guys who were on their phones saw us coming. When I waved my hand and gave them some orders, they ran to their respective cars in the huge motorcade waiting outside.

I walked past them, and in the car's flickering lights, I could see everyone's eyes were full of desire.

Even at this time, these people still made occasional mistakes, and the gathering of so many troops was too eye-catching.

I really couldn't remember how many people there were, but all the ones here by my side were willing to help me these past ten years. This was the whole net worth of the Wu family's Little Master Three.

Fatty and I got into my jeep, and Mute Sister in the passenger seat handed me the walkie-talkie. I dialed the channel and shouted: "Everyone in the Wu clan, honk your horns and say goodbye to Master Pan."

I looked to the distant horizon as loud car horns sounded throughout the land.

“Let’s go to a cool place for the summer.” I threw the walkie-talkie back to Mute Sister.

The motorcade roared to life and Fatty looked out the window. My phone rang, and when I picked it up, I saw it was Xiao Hua’s WeChat. The Beijing and Changsha motorcades had already left.

I took a deep breath and rubbed my expressionless face.

Ten years.

Chapter 2 Arrow

The road from Hangzhou was so familiar that I soon fell asleep. My tiredness was no longer the same as what it was back in the old days. It made people want to kneel down and never get up, as if they were being beaten down by the tide. Or maybe it was more like a chronic disease. You remembered it was there, but it didn't seem so important as long as you didn't think about it.

I had constantly been subtracting things during this whole affair so that from the previously complicated things up until now, my only focus became my core purpose. I had asked myself more than once, "What do you want? Do you want answers, or do you want the people around you to be safe?"

I was going to end this now.

I would completely end the endless conspiracy that began thousands of years ago. It was for this reason that I had passed on the harm to innocent people these past few years.

As long as the result was good, I was willing to be the last one standing, just like Uncle Three. Even if it did bring self-loathing. The good news was, everything would be settled as long as we faced it head on. The city bus driver would only get off work when he finished his last route, but he could at least look at the scenery and listen to music during that time.

It had been a week since I arrived in Erdao Baihe. I had stretched the time out so that everyone could get enough rest and reduce their desires.

Erdao Baihe was very lively, and many young people had gathered here. It appeared Changbai Mountain Scenic Spot had some activities going on. Compared to the time when it had first started running, there were fewer and fewer uninhabited areas in China. More and more roads were being built, and everyone was flocking to the wilderness. If this continued, what Wang Zanghai wanted to hide so long ago probably wouldn't last long.

After the vanguard had their rest day, we went to the mountain. There was a hotel there called Changbai Pine, whose manager had a good relationship with us. Fatty directly arranged a temporary headquarters there, because there were too many people in our group, and Xiao Hua and the others were scattered to the nearby hotels. That night, more than thirty whole lambs were roasted for everyone to eat.

Summer in the north was cooler. In the open air of the farmhouse, the boss recommended we try the thorny buds and cinnamon fern shoots that could only be found in summer. Fatty found it strange and asked: "Aren't they weeds from the back of your shop? Can you eat them?"

"How can they be weeds? They're planted. They're always delicious." The boss was an older sister. "Don't talk nonsense when Big Brother comes back. If you're not careful, he'll cut you. He's the one that planted them."

"It's the era of a market economy, how can you cut customers?" Fatty didn't want to try them. After thinking about it, he decided not to eat them and took a lamb leg instead. The cumin and pepper had mixed with the roasted scent of the meat, which made me drool as I watched him eat it.

"Cutting customers is a feature of our farmhouse." Big Sister was happy. If she wasn't slightly fat, her curves would be even smoother than Mute Sister's. Fatty wiped the oil from his lips and said to me: "This big sister is married. Let's not eat here again. We'll change to another restaurant that has a younger girl."

"Does lamb make you angrier or something? If you're always aiming at others, you deserve to have Big Brother cut you." I was laughing as I watched Xiao Hua come in through the door. He was wearing a black leather jacket, carrying two bottles of wine, and asking why I was talking in a northeastern accent. After moving a stool over so he could sit down, Xiao Hua whispered, "The vanguard has found something."

With that said, he put something down on the table.

The table was a relatively crude, iron-footed table pressed out of cedar waste, and the stool was the plastic kind with a backrest that was commonly used in food stalls. Fatty had to push two together to sit down safely.

The thing he had put down was a strangely shaped arrow, which looked exactly the same as the arrow I had found in my grandfather's ashes. The arrow had been buried in Grandpa's body for so many years, yet he had never mentioned it to anyone. We suspected that it came from an unknown ancient tomb, which must have been related to the core secret.

I remember my own mental state when I saw Grandpa's ashes get put into the urn back then, so I was still a little depressed when I saw this arrow. The arrow was badly rusted and there were pieces of rotting veneer on it, which meant it must have been taken out of the woods. I looked at Xiao Hua, wanting to hear where he had found it.

Chapter 3 Forest Farm

Xiao Hua told me that it was found at one of the villager's homes. Ever since I had suffered losses in the past, I was in the habit of collecting things from the villagers' homes in advance. Based on all the articles I had received, I could tell what the economic situation of the place was, and whether there were any legends. These fragments often disclosed a lot of information.

"The man's name is Miao Xuedong, and his father is a forest farm worker. His father was middle-aged when he dug the arrow out of a rotten piece of wood while sawing. He said that many of these kinds of arrows can be found in some of the old logs in their forest farm, and they're all rotten."

"Forest farm?" Fatty turned and asked the older sister, "Big Sister, do you still have a forest farm here?"

"How can there not be a forest farm in northeastern China?" Big Sister didn't even look up.

"Still cutting down trees? Can't you leave some for our children and grandchildren?" Fatty angrily asked. "Don't you know that trees can produce oxygen? How can this fat man live without oxygen?"

"You can go to the forest farm and howl if you'd like, but I didn't cut any trees." Big Sister also grew angry.

Fatty looked back at Xiao Hua and muttered. "This elder sister knows where the forest farm is. Let's get her to take us there later. A Hua, go on."

"My name isn't A Hua." Xiao Hua rubbed his forehead.

I lit a cigarette and told Fatty not to interrupt.

"There are a lot of dead trees beneath the forest farm, so if you dig, you'll find a layer of rotten wood." Xiao Hua said. "When the Construction Corps came back from the mountains, there was either something wrong with the wood, or it wasn't processed and shipped out because of scheduling

problems. After accumulating for too long, it started to rot. Miao Xuedong said there should be a lot of these arrows in the rotted wood.”

There were arrows in the tree trunks. I didn’t know from which dynasty or battle they came from, but this kind of arrowhead may have been used in the last war between the Mongols and Emperor Wannu. If there were a large number of trees, they could have been around during the time of a unified ancient battlefield.

There had to be a clue in that place since it wasn’t particularly wise to take so many people along the snow line I had taken so many years ago. I needed to know more about the terrain here. I wasn’t in any hurry, since there was still a long time before the appointed day. I could even spend my summer vacation here.

We called some people up, ask Big Sister to lead the way, and took Miao Xuedong to the forest farm.

The car had been driving for a long time, and the mountain road was getting narrower and narrower. Fortunately, it wasn’t a dirt road. The concrete stretched all the way up to a big iron gate halfway up the mountain, which opened for us. Once we entered, we could see that the area inside was a large piece of flat land, which was covered in bits and pieces of wood. Miao Xuedong said that there wasn’t much wood recently.

I was glad that the road kept going, and the jeep could continue on so we wouldn’t have to walk. We drove up a muddy road covered in weeds and soon came to the back gate of the forest farm. We saw an old, small iron gate, which was completely rusted and covered in dodder vines. A hinge had rusted and broken on one side of the gate, which caused it to appear almost lopsided. There were four words on it: Guard Against Mountain Fires. The nearby brick wall was covered in more layers of dodder vines, and there seemed to be a board on it that had rotted and warped.

“The old forest farm is behind here.” Miao Xuedong said: “Those things are in the old field.”

We went up and tore the dodder vines off the gate. The locks back in those days were made of different materials, so although it was all rusted, it was still very strong. Once we saw that no one was in the forest farm, we wrapped our clothes around our hands and jumped over the dodder. Those on the other side threw the tools to us.

The weeds were as high as our knees, and we could see that there was a smaller square full of weeds just a bit further ahead. There weren't any traces of wood there, just a few low workshops.

"There's a problem." I was just about to go forward when Fatty squatted down.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Fatty looked at Miao Xuedong who was climbing after us and shouted, "Did anything happen in this forest farm?"

Chapter 4 Wang Meng

“What happened?” Miao Xuedong was puzzled and didn’t know how to answer. He was a young local man who obviously didn’t understand what we were doing here. “Nothing happened?”

“Then why was the gate locked if there’s nothing valuable here?” Fatty asked.

“Hey, boss, your concern is a little too strange. Could there be beasts here?” Miao Xuedong walked straight into the grass and went all the way to the middle of the square.

I looked at the words “Guard Against Mountain Fires” posted everywhere, and lit a cigarette without any remorse.

I glanced at Fatty, but his expression hadn’t relaxed at all. Miao Xuedong gave us a questioning look as we all stood motionless at the gate.

I squatted down: “Fatty, if there’s really not a problem here, our reputation as a group of psychopaths will definitely spread in the village.”

“Mr. Naïve, I’ve been shooting pistols for half my life. My eyesight might decline, but my eyes will still catch anything that’s off. This place isn’t right.” Fatty looked back. He was familiar with my buddies and called out, “Kan Jian!”

Kan Jian was also a soldier. There were quite a few retired guys in my team, all of whom had been scattered in the industry. They had heard about Pan Zi and had a favorable impression of me, so they gathered here. This was what happened with people like Pan Zi. Even if they were gone, their shadow and history would still become a kind of power.

“Fat Master, you called?” Kan Jian leaned down.

“The tree in the northeast corner. Three inches on the side. Don’t miss.” Fatty said.

Xiao Hua and I both watched. After so many years, if Fatty was being serious, then we had to pay attention to him. Just after Fatty finished speaking, Kan Jian pulled a slingshot from his waist, drew it back to his shoulder, and released it with a twang.

This kind of clay slingshot was very powerful, and I immediately heard an “oof”. A man came out from behind the tree Fatty had mentioned, clutched his neck, and fell to the ground.

After the man fell, we immediately noticed more movement coming from behind the grass and shrubs behind the big trees around the square. There seemed to be a lot of them hiding.

“Shoot freely.” Fatty looked at the dumbfounded Xuedong standing in the middle of the farm, while Kan Jian used his slingshot to blast the people out from behind the grass one by one. Every time the slingshot’s rubber band twanged, we could hear screaming as those who were hiding got hit in different places and jumped up and down in pain.

A total of seventeen people were scattered throughout the area. After running out, several of them made to rush at us. Just as we drew our defense batons, however, they seemed to change their minds and ran back into the woods by the square. They ran so quickly that there wasn’t even a shadow left, and Miao Xuedong was left alone in the middle of the farm, completely unsure of what had just happened.

When we reached Miao Xuedong, we asked, “Who are those people?”

He looked at their retreating backs and stammered: “I don’t know. Not locals.” I heard someone in the woods shout, “Wu Xie, just you fucking wait!”

I immediately remembered who this man was.

“I can’t have enemies.” Over the past few years, I had been carrying out this sentence, because I needed to be able to get the best help when this situation came. I would have to break through all the obstacles and dispatch

everyone in the business. It was easy for people to think that I had discovered something great, thus arousing vigilance within the industry and giving rise to obstacles.

I didn't have the energy to deal with these people anymore, so I had always been determined not to make enemies. I even frequently brought all my people with me whenever I was doing something, which gave them the impression that I liked these grand scenes. It was all in order to not attract attention.

But no matter what I did, there was one person who always regarded me as an enemy.

And I couldn't do anything to him.

His name was Wang Meng, and when I entered this business, he was the only guy in my shop. After I came back, I found that he had opened a shop called Wangzi Guiju in the same location where my shop used to be. He obviously didn't expect me to come back.

Just as the widowed man finally forgot the past and was ready to start a new life, his other half suddenly appeared. It was obvious Wang Meng was very uncomfortable with my return.

While Wu Xie was away, Wang Meng was taken care of by his "dead" boss's friends everywhere. But Wu Xie came back, so Wang Meng was no longer Boss Wang, and it seemed like he'd have to go back behind the counter to be my subordinate and play Minesweeper again. But after experiencing so much, this boy began to fight for the first time.

He knew so much about me and what we were doing at this time, but the rabble didn't seem to be coming at me in anger, so I didn't know what they wanted.

I shook my head and decided to ignore it. I then told everyone to pick the guys up, and asked Miao Xuedong: "How should we go about this?"

“It’s full of rotten wood that’s dug up one layer at a time. This forest farm has been buried under it for so many years. My dad said that he couldn’t remember where the wood came from, but he remembered that when he found the arrow, the wood was in the northeast corner of the farm.”

When we arrived at the northeast corner, we began to dig up the land. Xiao Hua looked in the direction where Wang Meng had run away, suddenly became a little dazed, and then said, “Look at this mountain, what’s it look like?”

Chapter 5 Train

I followed Xiao Hua's eyes. We were on the mountainside, so we could see the other mountain opposite us. Since this used to be a forest farm, the trees around here had been cut down, and all of the remaining ones were young trees that hadn't been old enough. But the mountain wasn't very big, and there wasn't anything strange about it. Then, I saw the mountain that Xiao Hua was talking about.

When I looked at the mountain in front of me, I saw that there was a bigger mountain behind it far in the distance. Even though it was hidden in the clouds, I could still see the snow on top of it.

The mountain looked far away from us, and that saying about the horse dying as it ran towards the mountain popped into my head. My visual observation showed that it was already far away, which meant the actual distance may be even more exaggerated. The shape of the mountain was like a seal, which was why it had captured Xiao Hua's attention.

"Is this mountain in the same direction as the mountain we're going to?"

If the mountain was near the Three Sacred Mountains or on the same mountain range, this shape may not be a coincidence.

Xiao Hua took a photo of the mountain with his phone and asked Miao Xuedong what mountain it was. Miao Xuedong shook his head: "Now young people are looking towards the outside world, who cares about the mountains at home? And there are so many mountains here, you'd have to ask the old hunters if you want to know. But we can't find them now."

What could ten years change? When we had first entered this place, we could still find the old hunters. Even if they were eighty-nine or ninety years old, we could often find some. Ten years later, however, I knew that there might not be any of the so-called old hunters left.

If we had time, we could take a week to look inside. The closer we got to the mountain, the clearer it should be.

The other side had been dug up, and the surface had been shoveled away. After digging for more than a meter, broken wood, rotten wood chips, and soil were all mixed together. Although the wood was rotten and tender, it was still very difficult to dig through, and we encountered hard parts from time to time.

Everyone was soon exhausted. We were already considered very physical city people, but pure physical labor was beyond our imagination.

As a result, we dug until it was dark out, and all we ended up with was a big hole that looked shabby.

Come to think of it, Qin Shihuang had to use seven hundred thousand people to dig a mausoleum.

I called another group of people to take over while the others set up a tent to sleep in and made a bonfire. Some of the others sifted the soil and wood with a sieve like they were panning for gold.

After digging about six meters down, there was no longer any wood below, so we started to dig sideways. At dawn, someone came to my sleeping bag and woke me up to show me what they had found.

It was another arrow. It was still wet and must have just been sifted out. I went to look at it under the sky and saw that it was exactly the same as the one in my grandfather's ashes.

The whole forest farm had been dug out of shape, and this arrow was found ten meters away from where we had first started digging. Many pine cones had been dug out at the same time, indicating that there were pine trees here.

“At least we know that wherever these arrows were shot into the tree trunks, there are a lot of pines. According to the number of pine trees in the

original forest here, we can at least reduce the scope of our search by half. It'll only take two hundred years to find it." Fatty said: "This Fat Master will start practicing T'aichi every day from now on. I can help you deal with it for thirty years, and cheer for the rest of the time!"

I gave him a blank look and grabbed a handful of the sifted pine cones and small rocks. "If we know the logging route from those days, we can narrow it down." It really wasn't possible. I could only follow the original road, which I still vaguely remembered. But if that was the case, I'd have to set out now, because the landscape would change and become indistinguishable once it snowed.

"Railway." Xiao Hua suddenly said.

When we turned to look at him, he said, "All the forest farms' logging routes are along the railway. The railway soldiers set up tracks in front, and the construction corps behind them followed the logging. All the wood was transported by small trains."

The small trains here referred to the locomotives specially used for special transportation, which were much smaller than normal locomotives.

At Kan Jian's command, the guys tossed aside their tools and started looking for tracks in the grass.

They soon found the rusted tracks. The railway ties were still there, along with the crushed gravel underneath. The tracks were also covered in weeds, but they were a little sparse because of the gravel.

The tracks crossed the square and led to a dilapidated brick house that didn't have a roof. The other side of the tracks extended in the direction where Wang Meng had just run.

"What should we do?" Kan Jian asked me.

I gave a tsk and asked Xiao Hua, "You have deep pockets. Do you know where they sell trains?"

Chapter 6 Dodder Cocoon

Xiao Hua looked at me coldly and obviously didn't want to bother answering. The others also looked at Xiao Hua expectantly, hoping that he could really buy a train.

"Focus." Xiao Hua said after a moment.

He was always reminding me to focus, and this kind of admonishment was actually the motivation that kept me going. In the end, there obviously wasn't a train for sale, so a group of twelve people started walking all along the tracks.

We looked for someone to borrow nearly twenty mules from, so we could half ride and half carry our supplies as we set off.

I was very familiar with this kind of journey over the past ten years and wore an old but particularly useful jacket as I sorted out all the shoes, tents, and mosquito-repelling equipment. I had three Kukris: one that was sheathed on the mules back, one at my waist, and one on the side pocket of my backpack. Brother Xiao Man led three mastiffs into the primitive forest after they ate their fill.

We ended up walking for four days and hardly spoke the entire way. We had already entered the primitive forest's hinterland and were passing through a pine forest that obviously wasn't old enough. Even though Xiao Hua said it couldn't be here, we still looked around just in case but didn't find anything special.

"This felled forest is only four days away from the forest farm and is the nearest pine forest. It should have been the first one to get cut down. The earliest trees were used to build houses in the forest farm. The rotten wood we dug out from the ground must have come from someplace deeper than here."

We moved on.

At night, the forest was damp and cold, so we cooked instant noodles over a crackling bonfire. Brother Xiao Man had a good harvest every day, and either brought back a hare or a pheasant. Both Kan Jian and Fatty were having a good time roasting different things every day. I hadn't been able to eat too much meat in recent years, so I could only eat the first bite or two.

When we came to a mountain depression a week later, Fatty gave a cry and everyone stopped.

There was a huge mass of dodder in the mountains, which looked like a giant cocoon. There were many "hairy sticks" around it that were actually dead trees that had been completely entangled in the dodder. The dodder vines were also dead, and the yellow silk looked like a large tent over the area. The weeds on the ground had withered and turned yellow, but they had grown extremely high, indicating that they had obviously grown wildly for a period of time before they had died.

We were all intrigued by this dodder cocoon, and when we looked closer, we found that the cocoon was really huge and seemed to have a huge rock inside.

"This should be it." My instincts were telling me. I looked around and saw a sparse pine forest around us, which had such a strange landform. The mountains on both sides had gentle slopes, and this rock in the depression was very strange.

We began to sweep the ground everywhere with metal detectors, and soon found that when we dug up the surface soil and sifted it, it wasn't long before iron lumps appeared. They weren't fragments of ancient armor, but the iron dregs of weapons, arrows, and so on.

"It's an ancient battlefield." Fatty struck a pose like he was Huo Qubing¹ and turned to point to one side of the mountain. "This boulder should be from

¹ A distinguished military general of the Western Han dynasty during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. Wiki link is [here](#)

the other side of the mountain. After the Mongolians entered here, Emperor Wannu's army pushed this boulder down and then rushed down after it."

Was it an ambush? But there should be a lot of falling rocks in an ambush. A single boulder would make for a tough battle. I looked in the direction Fatty was pointing and said, "Emperor Wannu's army was guarding an important place. When the Mongols climbed the mountains and attacked, they needed a boulder to crush anything in its path. Let's go up the mountain from here. Everyone, stay vigilant. There must be something on the hill."

Chapter 7 Crack

It was extremely difficult for ordinary people to climb from the foot of the mountain straight up, but Xiao Hua could climb cliffs or even reverse slopes, so this kind of climbing was like child's play.

Ten minutes later, Xiao Hua had climbed far ahead. Everyone else in the group was very indignant as we watched him do it like he was on a casual field trip.

"Young people have good waists." Fatty gasped out before he started complaining that his physical strength wasn't what it used to be. "I think when I was working in the northeast, I could go up and down this kind of mountain seven times a day without breaking a sweat."

"Fat Master, have you been in the northeast before?" Kan Jian wanted to help Fatty carry something, but Fatty pushed him away. Kan Jian asked: "Do you know what the four comforts in Northeast China are?"

"Who doesn't know?" Fatty said. "Don't you just wear big shoes, fart loudly, sit in an ox cart, and watch a big show? I'm telling you, I don't know anything else. I almost killed your boss once when I farted. But this Fat Master can still carry out the revolutionary tradition like usual."

"Amazing, Fat Master is really well informed." Kan Jian twisted open a bottle of wine. "I've also mixed in the northeast, so that means big brother and I are connected to each other. We must have a drink. Come, come, come, come."

I didn't know what kind of wine it was, but it was very fragrant. Kan Jian took over most of Fatty's equipment and conveniently handed him the wine. "Fat Master, drink steadily."

I glanced at Kan Jian approvingly. Fatty took a sip of wine, shivered, and then started praising me, "You're better than your Uncle Three. Look at you guys, you're all so sophisticated. Kan Jian, when you go in, this Fat Master will

grab something good for you. I'll make sure it's better than the stuff your boss finds."

As soon as he said that, the others immediately came forward to hand over cigarettes and take his backpack.

Xiao Hua whistled from up above and we sped to the top of the hill. As we looked at the setting sun from among the tree trunks, we could see that the whole valley was covered in light. It was shining on the vast mountain forest as if there were a group of golden fireflies under tree leaves. It was the kind of effect you'd see when sunlight sparkled on clear and crystalline waves.

The moon rose, the temperature dropped, and our smelly sweat started to feel a little cold.

If we looked down from this position, we could see a clear track of how the boulder tumbled down to the foot of the mountain, and where it had hit. The mountain was separated by the huge depression, which had obviously formed when the huge boulder plowed its way through.

"Is it possible the dodder in this valley is so lush because there used to be a river of blood and the soil is full of Mongolian bodies?" Kan Jian asked.

"Stop." I said, "Damn it, don't talk about what happened thousands of years ago. There must be other reasons. As long as we continue to explore here, we can always find something."

The slope where we were at was covered in gravel and sand, and the trees weren't tall. Fatty nodded to me. We had seen such landforms in the mountains near the Heavenly Palace in the Clouds before. If Emperor Wannu once holed up here, then what he was guarding should be under the gravel beneath our feet.

Fatty had a deep love of blowing up mountains, so I got far away as detonators and gunpowder were pulled out. Now that explosives technology was far more advanced than before, the kids were as excited as if they were setting off firecrackers during the New Year.

Xiao Hua and I had worked together for a long time, so we went to the safest place, which was the nearby forest. I shouted: “Be careful you don’t collapse the hill and bury yourselves.”

“Oh, rest assured, this is called directional blasting. The explosion hits the ground, blasts the gravel, and directly blows a deep pit.” Fatty replied. “Don’t you know my skills?”

Xiao Hua and I retreated to the edge of the forest, and I scratched my head, still feeling like Fatty was going to have an accident. Xiao Hua smacked me on the shoulder, and when I turned my head and looked, I immediately told Fatty to stop.

We had unwittingly retreated all the way to the edge of a mountain crack. The crack on the rock was so abrupt that we could tell that something unnatural had caused it.

Chapter 8 Catfish

Fatty came to look at the crack. It was about as wide as two people, quite exaggerated, and exposed the rock. This kind of gap couldn't be formed naturally except by an earthquake.

It had been formed a long time ago, so there were many small shrubs on the crevices in the wall below the crack. When we kicked a rock down, we could tell that the crack went very deep, because we could hear the rock continue to hit the wall as it went further and further down.

This was a cut that seemed to lead to the very heart of the mountain.

When we looked up at the crack, we could see that it got wider and wider as it went all the way to the top of the mountain. If the crack developed any further, it would probably become a one-line sky kind of landform.² Bird droppings and soil in the crack enabled vegetation to grow there, and the vegetation increased as the area widened. Pine trees as thick as a bowl were also growing in the crack.

In the place where we had originally found the crack, Xiao Hua carefully tested the protruding rocks on the wall and then climbed down. He was very fast and had to turn on his flashlight as he quickly reached the place where the light shifted to darkness.

“Water!” He shouted in disappointment. I also saw the reflecting light, which could only come from the beams hitting the water's surface.

I took a deep breath. Water meant that the bottom was blocked off. Maybe fallen leaves had mixed together with sediment, and then rainwater poured into the crack and formed a pool.

Whether this was an entrance or not, it was definitely impossible to enter.

² A “one line sky” looks like [this](#).

“Is the water moving or stagnant?” Fatty asked.

“How can I tell?” Xiao Hua retorted.

“Put some dandruff into the water to see if it’s flowing slowly.”

“I don’t have dandruff.” Xiao Hua said angrily.

“Don’t fucking bullshit with me. Everyone has dandruff. No one will laugh at you.” Fatty said.

After a long silence, Xiao Hua shouted below: “It’s running water.”

Fatty looked at me and said softly: “Moving water means groundwater. The hot springs here are well developed, and there are underground water systems everywhere. The imperial tomb we went to last time had a moat, which means there’s a hidden river in that huge underground crater from before. This is a clue.”

I nodded. I knew what he wanted to do, so I waved to some people to get a wooden bucket. There were more than a dozen eight-whiskered catfish in the bucket, and each one had a GPS locator on its upper gill. They had all been removed from those eighty-yuan wholesale electronic watches in North Huaqiang and sealed with wax. We lowered the bucket down the crack and let Xiao Hua drop them into the water.

“It’s a pity.” Fatty couldn’t bear it. I was a little surprised and thought, *when people get older, do they also become soft-hearted?* But Fatty continued: “It would taste good with chili peppers fried in garlic and then put in a soup.”

I wouldn’t blow up the mountain today, because I was afraid that the crack would expand and cause the whole mountain to collapse. It would be a shame if I had to sleep here forever before Little Brother even came out.

We went back down the mountain, cut down some dead trees and dodder vines to make a fire, and waited to see the results the next day.

Fatty tried to find out why the dodder was flourishing so much here, but nothing came of it. I had been resting with my eyes closed and said nothing for a day and a night. The next morning, I figured it was almost time, so I turned on the computer to see where the catfish were.

To my surprise, all the catfish signals that could be found were distributed in a narrow area like a centipede, and they were more than ten kilometers away from us.

Considering how the GPS signal could only be identified in the open air, and the catfish were in a long and narrow distribution, the river might have come out aboveground.

Fatty found it boring and insisted on blowing up the mountain, but Xiao Hua and I had to go and have a look at this situation. In the end, the soldiers were divided into two groups. Xiao Hua and I took Kan Jian to find the place where the GPS signal was coming from and walked until dusk.

Once we made it over the hill, I thought I would see a lake or a river, but I only saw a forest with dense vegetation. There wasn't any kind of water system at all.

"Strange." I looked at the signal distribution on the IPAD, which showed that the catfish were definitely in this forest. Could there be a lot of puddles connected with the underground river in this forest?

We walked into the forest before the sun set and found that the ground between the lush shrubs and pine trees was covered in dodder. It was like a giant net spread on the ground, which made it difficult to walk. As Kan Jian opened a path with his knife and we went deeper in, we found more and more dead trees, which made me feel that things were getting stranger. More dodder crept along the ground, almost covering the entire forest floor. We could see that these dodder lumps were hiding ancient, vine-covered dilapidated wells, which were distributed every meter or so throughout the forest. They numbered in the hundreds of thousands and looked just like graves.

Chapter 9 Well

Kan Jian was speechless for a long time when he saw this spectacular sight.

Xiao Hua gave me a look, and there was a lot of meaning in his eyes. The fact that there were so many ancient wells in the same place in the wilderness was really bizarre.

“Back in those days, Puxian Wannu’s tribe was hidden here. We can assume they wouldn’t hide underground all year round. When times were peaceful, the people in the tribe lived aboveground and needed to dig wells to get water.”

“This is an addiction to digging wells to get water. So many wellheads have been dug that the land looks pockmarked.” I silently counted the wellheads that I could see with the naked eye, and found that there were no fewer than a hundred.

“Did they dig, take all the water out, and then dig the next one?” Kan Jian asked.

“The groundwater is connected, it’s not like a pig bladder.” I went to the closest well, pulled out my Kukri, cut off the dodder, and exposed the wellhead. A lot of the dodder had climbed into the well, but the well wasn’t deep. I could see fallen leaves below, but there wasn’t any water.

Based on the GPS signal on the IPAD, those fish were definitely in this area. Was there water under the fallen leaves?

Kan Jian found a brick and threw it down, but it landed very solidly on the fallen leaves. It was definitely soil.

The well was an ordinary stone well that was surrounded by broken rocks and covered in moss. I wanted to climb in and have a look, but Xiao Hua stopped me.

“Do you want to risk your life like this?” Xiao Hua frowned and looked at me: “You’re not here to die.”

Kan Jian nodded and said, “Boss, let me risk my life and you can take the blame.” With that, he jumped down.

The fallen leaves below were so deep that they reached his ankles. He kicked the leaves aside and saw a lot of jars underneath, but it seemed like most of them were broken.

When Kan Jian found a relatively complete one and tossed it up, I immediately recognized it. It was a wine made by soaking hericium mushrooms in a jar, which I had often seen in tombs before.

People in eastern Xia loved to drink this kind of wine, so was it possible that these wellheads were used to chill the alcohol? Much of the groundwater here came from the snow-capped mountains and was bone-chilling, after all.

“Fastidious. Really fucking fastidious.” Xiao Hua looked at the wellheads with a slightly envious expression on his face.

“You’re a big cancer of the bourgeoisie.”

“There’s nothing wrong with pursuing a little happiness like drinking iced wine in the summer. In this kind of mountain environment, it’s very difficult to endure without such a thing.” Xiao Hua sniffed the jar, hoping to smell some wine.

Kan Jian continued to sift through the jars, but the sand below was dry, indicating that the well water here had been dry for hundreds of years.

As we walked (tripped) through the dodder, we cut the vegetation away from the wellheads one by one and found that they were all exactly the same. We followed them all the way to the middle of the forest and suddenly became enlightened when the tree canopies overhead suddenly disappeared. There turned out to be a dry riverbed here.

I squatted down, touched the soil, and found that the river had been dry for many years. The forest on the opposite side was equally dense, but the riverbed was full of gravel and shrubs.

The darkness all around was already pressing in, and the air was getting colder and colder.

“Can catfish swim in such a dry place?”

“Of course not.” I darkly scolded him in my heart, while telling myself that it might be possible if it was a catfish spirit.

“Fuck, then these signals...” Kan Jian scratched his head. “Where are the catfish? There’s no water anywhere?”

Xiao Hua touched his chin and suddenly said, “No, could it be?”

When I looked at him, Xiao Hua said, “Something ate all those fish.”

Chapter 10 Up and Down the Galaxy

The first thought that came to my mind when I heard that something ate those catfish was Fatty.

I told myself that Fatty was unwilling to accept it, and decided to catch the catfish before us and eat them while we weren't paying attention. Aw, fuck. If that was the case, I'd definitely strangle this old bastard.

Once I thought about it, however, I realized that it was impossible. Not only could we not find the catfish, but the GPS signal distribution was in a strip that stretched for more than ten meters. Fatty clearly wasn't that size.

"Could it be the kind of centipede you mentioned before?" Xiao Hua asked.

I nodded. It was possible. The forest was completely dark, and this kind of bug was nocturnal. But if we encountered a centipede at this time, the consequences would be unimaginable. After being eaten, I'm not sure how my family would feel at the fact that they would only be able to cremate the centipede's excrement and put it in the urn.

"Uncle, this is Wu Xie's urn, which is full of shit. I'm sorry for your loss."

Fatty would really do such a thing.

This forest was in a valley and it was too late to go back to the mountain, so we found a big tree to climb up.

The trees were covered in dodder vines that had climbed to the top of the canopy to form a gauze-like layer. It did a lot of harm to the host but gave us shelter.

The moon began to peek through the clouds, and the valley was illuminated by the bright white light. Xiao Hua liked heights, so he was leaning against the tree branches above me and flipping through his phone even though there shouldn't be any signal. He looked up dejectedly and stared at the moonlit sky from under the dodder tent.

“Do you think he’ll still remember us?” Xiao Hua asked.

I knew it was a rhetorical question. After so many years of tacit understanding, he didn’t have to fill the silence with mindless chatter.

“It doesn’t matter if he remembers or not. Even I can’t remember what I used to be like.” The old days were vivid in my mind, but my own face was blurred. This was a fact of life. I had paid too much attention to the people around me in my life.

“If he doesn’t remember us, he may end up bypassing us. He may not come out from where he went in. We’re taking a risk having so many people, but we might not even catch his shadow.”

“Everyone has their own purpose.” I replied.

Xiao Hua broke off a piece of dry food and gave it to me. It was a special compressed biscuit that was much better than the ones I had. I took a few bites and watched as the moon dimmed and the stars began to appear in the sky.

At the same time, I noticed that the forest floor beneath us started to show a slight fluorescent glow.

The fluorescence was centered around the wellheads and began to spread in such a way that it was like the wells were spewing a green galaxy.

I sat up, and sure enough, there was a sudden flash of inspiration. Fuck, the dodder here grew so thick. Was it because those things kept climbing up the trees and bringing the dodder seeds with them?

There were many stars in the sky, and the whole valley was covered in a green fluorescence, among which were red dots like eyes. We couldn’t appreciate the wondrous sight at all, however, because the dots condensed and started to climb up the tree.

“Kerosene!” I shouted.

Kan Jian took the bottle from his backpack and sprayed the kerosene at the bottom of the tree trunk. I flicked on the lighter, wrapped my legs around a tree branch, and hung upside down, so I could light it directly.

The burning oil formed a small barrier around the tree. At that moment, the branch I was hanging on broke with a snap and I fell down straight into the middle of the red dots.

I didn't hesitate to run the lighter over the parts of my body that were covered in centipedes. When Kan Jian threw the kerosene bottle to me, I held the lighter up and made a flamethrower, directing the flames at myself. After spraying a few times, I suddenly looked through the burning light and noticed that something was wrong.

In the darkness in front of me, something seemed to be standing behind a tree about three meters away.

It was in the shape of a person.

Chapter 11 Fuck

“Kan Jian, eight o'clock. Behind the tree!” I shouted, stamping my feet and using the flamethrower to spray the centipedes that started to climb up. The centipedes were as big as crayfish, and if I hadn't experienced them before, the fine hairs all over my body would have been standing up. But fortunately, the centipedes' feet and antenna were easily scorched by the fire, and they all fell to the ground after one sweep of the flamethrower. The problem was that after burning them, there was a strange scent in the air, that was somewhat fragrant and sweet.

My nose had gone through so much abuse over the years that the doctor said I probably wouldn't be able to smell anything for a long time. These smells were all in my head.

It was almost impossible to distinguish the centipedes' color from the leaves on the ground, so when I looked down under the firelight, I felt as if the leaves were crawling all over the ground. I could also see countless hairs mixed among them.

Kan Jian pulled his slingshot out and fired, causing the rubber band to make a twang sound. It hit the figure behind the tree, and the sparse little black hairs shook. They were apparently covering the centipedes.

I knew how powerful the slingshot was, but the shadow didn't make a move and there was no response.

I pulled out the elastic band of my hooded jacket, used it to tie the lighter to the front of the spray can, stamped my feet, pulled my Kukri out from behind my back, and twirled it in my hand.

Black Glasses did this every time he taught me to use a knife. It was a bad habit, yet I still learned it anyways.

I got within about a meter of it, but the area in front of me was dark. There was only a small gap illuminated by the flamethrower, so the first thing I saw was a group of centipedes crawling all over the tree.

No, the humanoid figure I had seen was basically made up of centipedes.

It's not a bug with a high IQ, but I've learned a few things from the hei feizi, I said to myself. Then, I saw a bloody hand in the gap where the centipedes were crawling.

The fingers of this hand were very long, and I clearly recognized this feature even in the flickering light.

Fuck me. My head was buzzing and I shouted, "It's Little Brother!"

"Fuck!" Xiao Hua immediately burst out of the canopy, but I couldn't worry about him now. I thrust my knife into the ground and rushed to the figure, using both hands and the fire to get rid of the centipedes. I pulled them off with one hand and sprayed wildly with the other, burning all the centipedes off.

The wound-covered body slid down from the tree, and I saw that his clothes, fingers, and hair were all very similar to Little Brother.

He was dead.

His mouth was wide open, and when I pinched his jaw, I found that his body was still warm, indicating that he had just died. His mouth was full of centipedes, and he had apparently died from a blocked trachea.

No, it wasn't Little Brother. This person's muscles were far inferior to his.

The centipedes covered my whole body and started to climb into my nose and mouth. I rubbed them away with my arms and went to look at the body's hand. Xiao Hua came to my side and put flares around me to keep the centipedes away.

The hands and fingers on this corpse were fake, and when I pulled hard, the fake fingers were torn off.

Angry from the bottom of my heart, I tore the wig off the corpse and found that I recognized this person. He was one of Wang Meng's men.

"Damn it!" I roared into the woods. "Fuck your ancestors for eight lifetimes!" The curses echoed through the valley.

Wang Meng must have followed me all the way here. But what did he mean to do by having his men pretend to be Poker-Face? Disgust me? Or lead me somewhere?

If it weren't for these centipedes' sudden appearance, I might have really fallen for it in the dark.

I turned around, pulled my knife from the ground, cut open my hand, and pressed a bloody mark on Xiao Hua's ankle. The centipedes began to retreat as I threw my blood on the ground and then picked up the flares.

"Are you going to seek revenge?" Xiao Hua asked me coldly.

I looked at him and said quietly, "He must be nearby. With his IQ, he won't survive the night. We must find him. We'll save him one last time."

Chapter 12 Stand Up

It wasn't long after we had climbed the tree just now that these centipedes burst out, so it must have been caused by the man secretly walking through the forest. I recalled the order in which the centipedes appeared, and knew that they had come from a wellhead in the southeast. That person must have come from there, so Wang Meng should be in that direction, too.

The wound on my palm really hurt and would take a long time to heal. I really hadn't wanted to use this method now, but there was no other way.

"Boss, do I need to come down?" Kan Jian asked from the tree.

"If you can handle it yourself, just stay in the tree," I replied.

Kan Jian jumped down, went up to me, looked at my hand, and I gave him a bloody mark too. He finally got to see my blood in action for the first time and was very excited.

"I won't wash my hands," he said.

"Don't talk nonsense, saying something so impossible," I said. After being alone, how many people had talked about going down together, but hadn't even made it halfway through the journey? People's promises were mostly based on temporary emotions.

"Why on earth are you two making such a scene?" Xiao Hua took his defense baton from his bag, twisted it into a long stick, and shoved away some of the centipedes that were in the way. With this stick in his hand, he could do anything, including using it as a chopstick.

I knew he was actually referring to Wang Meng, and I paused. I was a little tired as I recalled everything. "What people want to be, and what they can be, are two completely different things."

With that said, I tightened my belt, nodded to the two of them, and the three of us began to quickly make our way through the woods. Because

there was dodder all over the ground, we could only use the flares to light the way, so even if we ran slowly, we would find that the whole forest, trees, and shrubs were full of stars and fluorescence. It was as if there were countless fireflies. If you didn't know what it was, you couldn't help but wonder how such a fantastic place existed in the world.

There were also larch trees here, and some other broad-leaved trees that I couldn't name. The trees were very close together, and sometimes we couldn't squeeze between them. The dodder formed a cobweb-like ecology in the middle.

After running for more than ten minutes, we saw flames and heard noises coming from the trees up ahead. When we got closer and looked towards the flames with binoculars, we saw a big coniferous tree, where Wang Meng and his party were using torches to push away the centipedes that had climbed up. The torches were almost extinguished, and he and his buddies were yelling and pushing each other. The pine needles were hurting their butts, and it looked like they were about to fall from the tree.

Kan Jian wanted to go up, but I pulled him back and turned my gaze from Wang Meng's position to the forest behind him. I thought that the trees around Wang Meng were different from those around us.

It was an indescribable feeling. They all looked like pine trees, but it seemed as if the shape of the branches was very strange and there was no sense of coordination that trees normally had.

I put out the flare and made a gesture. The three of us crouched in the bushes, and I stared at the shadow of the forest around Wang Meng with my binoculars. After watching for a while, even Xiao Hua, who didn't have any binoculars, gasped.

"Those shadows are moving." He whispered.

I nodded. The shadows of the trees on the other side were getting closer and closer to Wang Meng, and those "big trees" were gathering at a speed that could even be seen by the naked eye.

I had a flash of inspiration, took out the IPAD, and saw that all the GPS signal points were heading in Wang Meng's direction, but the shape had changed into a circle.

"Those aren't trees. Those are giant centipedes that are standing up," I said.

Chapter 13 Centipedes

“Centipedes?” Kan Jian sniffed: “Are the centipedes as big as a tree?”

Anything could happen in the Heavenly Palace, but it seemed a bit exaggerated once I thought about it.

The branches of the distant shadows of the trees were extremely thin, just like a centipede with long, needle-like feet. When I looked closely, it seemed to be a giant centipede with its upper body lifted up. Wang Meng hadn't noticed anything yet and was still yelling angrily. I wanted to go up and strangle him directly.

When Puxian Wannu was chased here by Zhijin Guiyou³, and the descendants of Eastern Xia moved underground, they must have been shocked to find these giant centipedes living in the geothermal cracks. They probably linked the Jurchen myths with these wonders.

Wannu and the Mongols fought a decisive battle on this land, but even with the power of ghosts and gods, they could only be defeated in the face of the Mongols' victorious period. The rest of the tribe fled underground with the gold, silver, and agate they had plundered at the border for decades.

Was it because people in Eastern Xia had been operating here for many years and digging through the mountain crevices, so the underground centipedes could run aboveground?

Son of a bitch, don't dig casually, I said to myself. If these shadows were really centipedes as big as trees, then with the small knife in my hand, it was better to be merciful and let Kan Jian directly break Wang Meng's head open with an iron ball from his slingshot.

³ I went with the pinyin, but I'm pretty sure it's [Güyük Khan](#) (March 19, 1206 – April 20, 1248), who was the third Great Khan of the Mongol Empire and a grandson of Genghis Kan.

“What should we do?” Kan Jian asked me. I looked at Xiao Hua, who looked back at me before saying, “This time it’s your call. You always manage to come up with a solution.”

I twirled my knife in my hand. Was there nothing I could do? How many times had people said that there was no way, but I managed to think up plenty of ways?

Cleverness could never compare with the great principles of the Mystic Nine, but when it was used to save people, it was called a miracle.

I opened my backpack, poured out the dry food and sundries inside, then cut a centipede with my knife, broke off its head, and threw it into the bag. Kan Jian was shocked, but I told him not to ask and to follow.

I packed the big bag full of centipedes like cut up shrimp. The decapitated centipedes could still live for a long time, so the whole bag was moving, and the juices soaked the whole bag. I picked it up and trotted all the way towards Wang Meng’s direction. As I ran, I asked, “How far away can you aim? Let me know when we get there.”

Kan Jian nodded. Xiao Hua already knew what I was going to do and said, “Be quick!”

“I know!” I yelled. I ran for five minutes before Kan Jian suddenly stopped and said “Stop! Here!”

“Go up the tree!”

Xiao Hua went up the tree, pulled the two of us up, and climbed to the tree branches with a height similar to that of Wang Meng. At this time, we weren’t far from them and could clearly see the fire.

A few of the giant trees that I suspected were centipedes were all around them. I still couldn’t see clearly from this distance, but I was sure that they weren’t trees. They had to be some living creatures.

I tore the gauze from the wound on my hand, pressed it hard until it split open, and then let the blood continue to flow out. I grabbed a headless centipede with my bleeding hand, pressed it hard, mixed the blood and juices, and then threw it at Kan Jian. “Hit their ankles and faces.”

The advantage of keeping Kan Jian close to me was that he never asked anything. Two iron balls were stuffed into the centipede’s body, the slingshot was prepped, and then the centipede was shot out. The centipede disintegrated in the air, so not many of the balls hit Wang Meng. He immediately noticed and looked around.

When I turned on the flashlight to signal him, he immediately knew it was me and shouted, “You’ve got guts to hit a person when they’re down!”

“Hit him in the mouth,” I said coldly.

Kan Jian fired the slingshot and hit Wang Meng in the mouth, almost choking him to death.

Everything was chaotic after we hit them with the pack of centipedes, but my blood and the centipede juices seemed to help. Wang Meng had also discovered the secret with the slingshot and immediately accepted it with a resigned expression.

After I finished signaling them to come quickly, I watched Wang Meng climb down the tree and then threw the flashlight to Xiao Hua, “Lead them out.”

“What about you?”

I watched those strange “giant trees” start to shake as they obviously noticed that their prey was escaping. *I want to see what these things are.* I took a flare from my waist, loaded it, and shot it in that direction.

The flare exploded in the air and fell slowly like a little sun. I only took one look and didn’t even bother looking a second time before I started running: “Fuck, run! Don’t look back!”

Countless wings suddenly rose from the shadows of the distant trees, and a big bird flew up. It wasn't a centipede at all, but a withered tree full of those man-faced birds. So many of them were standing on it that the tree couldn't support the weight and started swaying.

I heard screaming and saw that one of Wang Meng's men was caught in the air.

I need heavy firepower, I thought to myself. Fatty, where are you?

"Get into the well!" Xiao Hua yelled from the darkness ahead.

Wang Meng was still holding his torch. "Kan Jian, put out the lights!" As soon as I yelled, a twang split the air and Wang Meng's torch was blown away. It was quickly caught by a shadow falling from the sky.

As several human-faced birds scrambled in midair for the torch, I saw a wellhead in front of me and jumped in. As soon as I landed, the ground under my feet became loose, and the whole bottom collapsed, dragging me down with it.

Chapter 14 All the Way Down

As I fell all the way down, I found that there were many slates below, which were filled with jars. It was no wonder the well was so shallow.

My weight, coupled with the broken jars, caused me to fall through multiple layers, and I didn't know how many I had fallen through before I reached the bottom.

A bunch of broken pieces of porcelain were stuck in my flesh, and I cursed as I turned over. Ever since my debut, zombies rose everywhere I went, and I fell down whenever I stepped on something. But I also blamed my bones for being too heavy. There wasn't much meat on them, but I still weighed so much.

It was so dark that the moonlight and fluorescence from above couldn't reach, and I turned on my flashlight to look around. I turned and found that this was a particularly narrow, but fairly high well shaft made entirely of blue bricks.

I had studied architecture and knew at a glance what its purpose was. When the water level in the well was too high, it would overflow from the wellhead and submerge all the jars. The channel at the bottom of this well must've been connected to all the wellheads, but it had been dry for quite some time. I didn't know where the channel would lead, so I stood up, shook off the fallen leaves and broken porcelain pieces, and then looked up at the wellhead.

As soon as I looked, I saw a huge face staring at me. I raised my middle finger, and it suddenly opened its mouth and spit out a monkey, which fell right in front of me. I was stunned for a moment before I turned and ran. The old memories that surfaced weren't good, and I remembered how fucking unnatural these birds were.

Under the flashlight's shaking light, I saw that the channel was full of grid-like forks in the road. I heard the sound of another person falling down and

shouted “Xiao Hua!” to see if it was him, but it was Kan Jian who responded with, “Boss, it’s me! We’re safe. They can’t get in, right?”

“Fuck you, run!” I yelled.

“Don’t worry, they can’t get in. And if they can, they can’t run fast. Ah!!! What is that thing!?” I didn’t know where Kan Jian’s scream came from in the dark.

“Idiot, I told you to run.” When I stumbled, an idea popped into my head. There was a wine jar on top of the collapsed wellhead in front of me, which was blocking the way. When I looked back, the monkey rushed up and threw itself on my face.

I fell on my back, flipped the flashlight over so the taser part was facing outwards, and pointed it at the monkey. The monkey convulsed under the electricity and fell to the ground. I got up, put my foot on its neck, and sent it back to its maker. Since it had been on my face when it was electrified just now, my entire jaw was numb. When I turned and saw a mass surging in the darkness, I knew that something else was coming. As soon as I lifted my flashlight, I saw a dense pack of those monkeys.

“Aw fuck,” I took a deep breath and turned to continue running. “Kan Jian, are you dead?” I shouted.

“Not yet!” Kan Jian yelled back, his voice far away. “But I’ll definitely die in a minute!!!”

I also heard Wang Meng’s voice come through the darkness, “Where is everyone? Where is everyone?” It was right next to me, so I turned and ran into the fork, but I ended up tripping and rolling down. *Fucking hell, there are even steps.* When I got up, I just happened to collide with Wang Meng, and one of the monkeys immediately jumped towards me. The two of us kicked out and sent it flying. I got up and saw that Wang Meng had a gun on his hip.

“Why are you running with a gun?!!! You piece of shit!” I pulled out his gun and cocked it, but Wang Meng shouted: “You can’t use this gun!” As soon as I pulled the trigger, I heard a loud noise. My whole body was blown back by the recoil, and I hit the wall. I couldn’t feel anything from my hands to my shoulders. “You dick, what did you put in it?” I could taste blood and knew I had bitten my tongue. When I looked up, the monkey that had jumped towards us just now was beaten into a bloody pulp. I could hardly hear anything and had to shake my head a few times before the sound started filtering in again.

“One bullet is a combination of six Remington bullets.” When I looked at the tip of the gun, I saw that it had burst open like a blooming flower. I glanced at Wang Meng, and he said, “The man who did it said it can only be fired once, so I wanted to keep it for myself as a last resort.”

“You were saving the last bullet for yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Who would use something like a cannon to commit suicide?” I stared at him and then started yelling, “How much do you fucking hate yourself? You shoot yourself in the head, and nothing’s left, yeah? Don’t you know it’s hard to clean this kind of mess up? The medical examiner is also a human being, you know? Don’t trouble others, ok?” Wang Meng was completely speechless as he looked at the monkey that had been beaten into a pulp. I lifted him up. If this continued, I couldn’t go on like this. I went to lift the hand that had just fired the gun but found that I couldn’t.

I looked down, *fuck, if my hand is twisted like this, it must be fractured. Is it really going to end here? No, there has to be a way out.* I took out a cigarette and lit it before I started shouting, “I’m going to die young! Xie Yuchen, come and fucking save me!!”

Chapter 15 Aiya

My own personal Mystic Nine rule is: when you encounter difficulties, you should first ask your friends for help. Seeking help is actually the number one skill in the world, and those with such skills can accomplish almost anything. The last skill to activate this skill is called shamelessness. After yelling, I heard a series of tapping sounds, which was Xiao Hua's signal.

It appeared he was more cautious than me. The signal was coming from the channel on the left, so I picked Wang Meng up with one hand and started running.

There was the sound of claws scratching the brickface all around us. After the taser part of the flashlight had been used, the light was now dim, and I didn't dare look at the surrounding shaft walls for fear that the light would attract all the monkeys.

Everyone knew what Xiao Hua's signal meant. The tapping sounds were getting louder and louder, and when we ran to an intersection, Kan Jian also rushed out. His face was covered in blood from numerous scratches, and when he saw Wang Meng beside me, he pushed him away. "Die!"

Wang Meng staggered and also wanted to rush up to fight, but I jumped up and smacked him on the back of the head. Our legs got tangled and all three of us fell. When I got up, I heard the tapping sound coming from behind me. It was clearly behind the wall, but I couldn't see anything when I turned around.

In the darkness, the sound of countless monkeys scratching the walls was getting closer and closer. We dared not make any noise as we slowly crawled over to the darkness where the tapping was coming from.

I heard the sound of breathing and turned on the flashlight for a moment. I saw Xiao Hua and Wang Meng's men huddled in a corner behind a barrier of wine jars and broken bricks. The barrier blocked the whole passage, just like a wall. There were many gaps in the wall like the kind of shooting holes army

bunkers had. Wang Meng's men were all armed with local guns and ready for battle.

When we approached, a jar was moved away to reveal a dog-sized hole in the corner where we could enter. The three of us carefully climbed into the hole and entered the "bunker", only to find that it was actually a wellhead. Someone was taking down the wine jars one by one and piling them in the direction that the monkeys were coming in. This would completely block the passage so that we could set up a defense and make an exit at the same time.

"There are birds out there," I mouthed. It just meant that going out would lead to a faster death. Xiao Hua mouthed back: "Huarong Road."⁴

I understood that we weren't going out, but going into the vertical shaft and blocking the bottom of the wellhead. It would take time for the monkeys to dig up these wine jars and climb up, but even if they made it through, it wouldn't be the same as how it was in the channel. When all the monkeys swarmed up, we could divide and conquer them.

And it wasn't like the human-faced birds could climb down since they couldn't spread their wings in the wellhead. These things only moved in the dark, so we would be safe if we made it until dawn. As soon as I thought that, one of Wang Meng's men fired. The resounding gun blast was deafening, and everyone hunkered down. I looked out through the bunker's shooting hole and saw countless green lights flash in the firelight. They were all monkey eyes. I figured one of Wang Meng's men had gotten scared and fired accidentally.

"How many bullets do you have?" I asked urgently.

"Seven rounds!"

"Ten rounds!"

⁴ Traditional puzzle involving sliding wooden blocks, loosely based on an episode in Three Kingdoms

“Four rounds!”

“Nine rounds!”

I looked at Wang Meng. “Since you have a gun, can’t you prepare more bullets?”

“I originally brought a lot, but then I was shooting at wild boars in the woods and found that they were all fake and couldn’t do anything at all. The first bag we tried was real.” Wang Meng said, very aggrieved. “We just divided the bag.”

“Great.” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as I looked at Kan Jian. He nodded, turned around, and flipped his waistcoat inside out. The inside was specially designed to hold all kinds of projectiles. “More than two thousand is enough, but even if it’s not, I can make it work with the broken pieces of porcelain.” As he spoke, he lifted up his slingshot, which was reinforced with stainless steel, and then pulled out a red rubber band from his belt. He untied the yellow rubber band that he had been using before and wound the red rubber band around it.

Chapter 16 Hello

Kan Jian was from a family skilled in using slingshots. They practiced slingshots from an early age and had amazing arm strength. The rubber bands they used on their slingshots had three colors: yellow had average power and was used to shoot birds; red could break a person's skull open and couldn't be pulled by normal people at all; and black—which I hadn't seen him use so far—was only used for something special.

I was holding my knife while Xiao Hua was in front holding his defense baton. I started wondering when I had become a hand-to-hand combatant. Things had certainly changed.

“Boss, help me with the lights.” Kan Jian said quietly as he occupied a shooting hole.

I went to another shooting hole, covered the flashlight with my palm, aimed it at the hole, and then suddenly moved my palm away.

The channel was immediately illuminated, and I could see that the first monkey was almost four meters away from our bunker. All of Wang Meng's men lifted their guns up to shoot, but a big “wu” sound like an airplane taking off was suddenly heard and the monkey's head burst into a bloody mist. It was completely broken.

Everyone looked at Kan Jian, whose moves were as smooth as water as he slid another steel ball from his waistcoat, caught the rebounding rubber band, and then fired again. He repeated the action over and over again, and a loud roar could be heard each time. The projectile slid through the shooting hole, shook the nearby jar as it passed, and then hit the monkey with a sound like a whistle. The monkey screamed in the distance.

But it was no use, for we could see at least a few hundred monkeys rushing towards us on the ceiling and walls.

I can't describe the scene. Everyone immediately opened fire. The first batch of monkeys was shot and rolled into the monkey pile, but didn't hinder the others' stampede at all. A dozen monkeys had rushed to a distance four meters from us in an instant, and the second round of shooting blew them all away. Before we could even see their bodies fall to the ground, more monkeys poured in.

All the guns kept firing, the monkeys hit the outer wall of the bunker, and the jars outside began to break and fall.

Almost all the bullets had been used up in thirty seconds, and there was no need to aim as flesh and blood went flying. Kan Jian grabbed three projectiles at once and fired them at the same time, pulling the slingshot to the limit. I looked at the crumbling barrier and yelled at Xiao Hua: "It's not going to hold!"

Xiao Hua looked at the Huarong Road above, slammed it with his baton, jumped up directly, stuck his legs on both sides of the well, and reached down, "Come up first. Fight as you retreat!"

Wang Meng and the others climbed into the shaft one after another. A monkey climbed in from one of the shooting holes and rushed towards Kan Jian, but I threw my knife in time and managed to cut it. Kan Jian pulled out a few pig bladders, put them on the slingshot, and fired them towards the ground. The bubbles burst and the liquid splashed, emitting a nasty odor.

I pulled out another Kukri, retrieved the one I had just thrown, and defended myself with the two knives as I shouted, "What the hell is that?!"

"Bear urine!" A monkey crawled in from another shooting hole and threw itself directly on Kan Jian's face, but he was able to use his slingshot to pull it down. At the same time, all the monkeys began to squeeze themselves through the shooting holes, just like squeezing cream out of a tube. Five monkeys jumped on his back, and when I went up and cut two of them, I became the new target. I got up, turned around, and kicked Kan Jian into the well, where six or seven hands instantly stretched down to lift him up. I

quickly followed, and as soon as I had climbed up, Kan Jian fired an iron pellet at a jar inside the bunker. The whole bunker loosened and began to collapse toward the gap below us, and the bottom of the wellhead was soon completely blocked.

We could still hear the crazy crash from our position, but the sound wasn't as loud, and all of us breathed a sigh of relief.

The slate and wine jars above hadn't been cleared out, which meant we had barriers above and below us.

I looked at Wang Meng, and he looked at me, the both of us too tired. I turned to look at Xiao Hua, but the whole well suddenly shook, as if some monster was hitting the blockage below our feet.

Chapter 17 Big White Face

Even if there were more of those monkeys, they would never make such a noise. Everyone shrank back, hesitantly glanced below their feet for a few seconds, and then felt a violent tremor. All the dust above our heads was shaken loose.

My way of thinking was different from others, so I was deeply puzzled. I knew the dimensions of the channel outside, but this kind of violent vibration had to come from a large object crashing into the pile of jars and debris below at a certain speed.

The degree and height of the outside channel couldn't accommodate anything too big, so I couldn't figure out what it was.

Xiao Hua and I looked at each other, and I saw that his eyes were full of doubts.

There was another huge shock, which filled the air with a lot of dust and bugs. They kept getting into my eyes, so I had to keep shaking my head. The stone slate above our heads began to crack, and we heard the sound of jars being moved above us.

"It's a bird." Wang Meng said in horror.

I shined my flashlight into the gap in the slate and suddenly saw a huge, clear eye squeezed into the gap. The golden pupil shrank when the light hit it. Then, there was the sound of claws scratching the surface, and more gray dust scattered down. Xiao Hua took his defense baton and thrust it up amid the chaos. The stick was quickly caught, and Xiao Hua had to pull it back.

There was another huge tremor, and the crack opened wider. All the debris that had been on the slate overhead began to fall through the cracks. Kan Jian raised his hand, shot a broken tile at the bird, and managed to hit it. We then heard the clear cry of the monkeys come from below.

It appeared the impact caused our barrier to collapse, and more gaps had been created. I couldn't deal with the problem above our heads right now, but just as I was about to tell the others to start filling in the gaps, Wang Meng broke down with a roar, picked up the porcelain tiles, and threw them at the ground. It appeared to actually be scaring away the things outside.

After roaring for a few minutes, there was another tremor. Wang Meng's men saw that it was useful, and they all started yelling as well.

At this time, a huge roar sounded from beneath the tiles, causing the ground to shake and everyone to fall down.

It was a loud roar that was really close at hand and almost sounded like we were standing on a loudspeaker.

I knew that it was bad. The impact just now wasn't in the channel but in the area below the well.

Something was definitely hitting the bottom of the well.

Then, the underground tiles arched up like a giant mouth and started to collapse. Something had punched through the bottom of the well, and a black hole appeared. Cold air instantly gushed out from below, and the porcelain tiles clattered as they fell in. Wang Meng and his men also unexpectedly fell.

The monkeys outside jumped in and started crawling towards us.

Kan Jian aimed his slingshot at the monkeys coming in through the gaps below and knocked them into the hole. Xiao Hua stabbed the monkeys climbing up with his baton and shouted to me, "See what's down there!"

I shined my flashlight into the dark hole, only to see Wang Meng and his men clinging to the cave wall. But instead of looking at us, they were looking at whatever was below their feet. I moved my flashlight down and saw a big, fat white face sticking out.

When I shined my flashlight at him, he narrowed his eyes and scolded: “Fuck, fancy meeting you here. Don’t turn on the high beam, ok? The industrial workers need time to adjust.”

“Fatty, you piece of shit, why are you coming out of the ground?” I asked angrily. I really wanted to slap him so hard that it sent him straight to heaven.

Chapters 18 and 19 Beating Wang Meng

While I was still talking, a monkey pounced on Fatty's face. He knocked his head against the wall until the monkey was rendered unconscious, and then threw it directly into the hole. When he looked back and saw more monkeys crawling in from the gaps everywhere, he raised his gun and started shooting.

The rest of my men were climbing up from the darkness one after another and were also taken aback upon seeing us.

"Why are there so many monkeys?!" Fatty was furious: "What are you doing? A Hua, has your Monkey King appearance been seen through?"

"Fuck off! Gun!" Xiao Hua exploded. Fatty turned and threw his "domestic" AK-47 to Xiao Hua.

Fatty needed to hold onto the well wall with one hand, but Xiao Hua could hold the gun with both hands since his legs were placed on both sides of the wall. He fired several shots and directly annihilated the monkeys near the entrance. In this space, the gunfire almost deafened us, and the hot bullets grazed my cheek, causing it to swell up.

Under Xiao Hua's covering fire, Fatty climbed to the gap, and the people below threw up some guns and bullets.

As soon as I started firing the heavy domestic AK, my anger burst forth and the hatred bolstered my courage. I figured that was why they said you shouldn't let the oppressed take up arms.

I raised my hand to the slate above my head and shot it until it was smashed to pieces. As it fell down together with the monkey, Fatty ducked his head. I continued firing at the wellhead as I climbed, and eventually managed to roll out of the well.

I turned over and immediately got up, catching sight of the human-faced birds that had landed in the surrounding trees and on the edge of the well. There were at least a few hundred of them, and at that time, all the “faces” turned to us.

“Everyone fire!” I shouted at top of my voice as I started shooting. I hit the ones that started flying, but one must have gotten behind me because I felt a sudden pain on my back. I took the butt of my gun and thrust it behind me. Xiao Hua also rolled out of the well and landed right next to me. At this time, all the human-faced birds flew up at once and covered the moonlight.

“Ammo!” I yelled, as Xiao Hua and two other people started shooting at the same time. Feathers were falling all over the sky and several ammo clips were thrown out of the wellhead. I dumped my empty one and quickly replaced it. I felt a presence above my head swoop down, and I shouted, “Stop fucking dawdling in the well!”

I started shooting at the sky, when suddenly, there was a gust of wind beside me and Xiao Hua was lifted into the air. I raised the gun but didn’t dare shoot in the dark. Kan Jian was the third one to roll out of the well and used his slingshot to knock both Xiao Hua and the bird down. I rushed up, stepped on the human-face bird, and shot it. Xiao Hua kicked me down. I felt a chill behind me and realized that a talon had almost slashed my back. Xiao Hua shot it from where he was lying on the ground, and the blood splashed all over me. He turned over and yelled at Kan Jian: “Don’t shoot until you can fucking see it! It hurts!”

“I’m sorry! Master Hua!” Kan Jian pointed his slingshot at Xiao Hua, and an iron ball slipped through Xiao Hua’s hair and hit the bird coming up behind him. At the same time, Fatty came out of the well with two grenades in his hands and threw them into the air. “Take cover!”

“Shit!” I was furious. The three of us jumped up, found the other wellheads nearby, and leaped in.

The exploding grenades made the sky shine as if it were daylight. Then, I felt the ground at my feet loosen and I fell into the channel again.

I almost fell into the monkey pile, but I managed to break away by beating them with the butt of my gun and firing in a sweeping arc. All of the ones in front of me were swept away, so I took the opportunity to start climbing up the well wall. I felt severe pain and knew that a monkey had bitten my spine.

I copied Fatty and rammed my back against the wall until I managed to scrape it off. Kan Jian came down the well at this time, and I saw that he was completely covered in blood. He came up and slashed the monkey with a branch, while I fired a few shots and retreated to the wellhead. I asked him: "What happened to you?"

"Fuck me! Fat Master's grenade fell directly into my well. If I hadn't jumped out quickly, I would've become shrimp paste. Boss, can we not come out with Fat Master anymore? He's way more terrifying than these things."

I was so pissed I was about to explode. I shot the monkey that was rushing towards me and climbed out of the well again. I saw Fatty get lifted into the air by a human-faced bird, but he was too heavy for the bird to fly. I raised my hand and beat the bird's head in until it was a pool of blood, and then yelled at Fatty: "Can you not use explosives?!"

I looked back and saw that there were fewer birds in the air, and almost all of them had fallen to the ground.

Fatty got up and took a shot at the bird that had just tried to take off with him, and then made a move like he was a conductor taking a curtain call. "Look at this Fat Master's efficiency at clearing the field. A one-two kick will send the big birds flying, and a two-two kick..."

Kan Jian climbed up: "Will send our own people flying."

"Xiao Hua!" I yelled, praying he hadn't been blown up by Fatty.

The man-faced bird that had been beaten to the ground started to get up.

After shooting several times in a row, I found that I couldn't lift the muzzle of my gun at all. I realized my hand was injured, and the reason I hadn't even felt the pain was because I had been so excited just now. I could still use a knife, but I couldn't use a rifle with such a strong recoil. My whole hand was completely numb after only shooting a few times, so I immediately pulled Kan Jian over and put the gun on his shoulder.

Kan Jian's aiming technique was excellent, and he knew what I wanted to do. He grasped the barrel and helped me aim by pointing it to the right target. After I finished firing, the hair on the back of his head had been completely burned by the shell casings.

The people in the well were coming out one by one, and our firepower became stronger and stronger. Xiao Hua also rolled out from where he must have fallen just now. Everyone was red-eyed as they went on a killing spree, and they didn't stop until they couldn't see any more targets.

The harsh sound of gunfire was still ringing in my ears, and the air was filled with the smell of sulfur. There were no more creatures in the air, and the ground was full of pools of blood.

"Cease fire," I shouted with all my strength.

Countless centipedes gathered and began gnawing on the human-faced bird carcasses, as a torrent of green fluorescence flowed on the ground.

"Run away." Fatty stamped his feet. I threw the gun to Kan Jian, and he helped me walk out of the forest.

All the centipedes were attracted by the flesh and blood, so we had to keep beating them away as we quickly passed. Once we left the forest and made it to the bushes on the hillside, Fatty sprayed some kind of insect repellent everywhere and set fire to the bushes. After the fire went out, I lay down in the ashes, and wearily watched the approaching dawn.

The plant ash was warm, so I wrapped myself in a tarp and soon fell asleep. When I woke up, the pain in my arm was unbearable. I turned over and

noticed that the sun was already overhead, and Kan Jian was huddled next to me, sleeping like a log.

I got up, kicked him awake, and saw Fatty and Xiao Hua making tea and rice. Wang Meng and the others were also off to the side, fast asleep.

I grabbed Fatty's feet, took off his shoes, went up to Wang Meng, and smacked the shoes against the back of his head.

Chapter 20 Keep Beating

Wang Meng didn't wake up until the second hit, and when he did, he looked at me with a puzzled expression and touched the back of his head. "What?"

I went up and beat him so much that he got up and ran all over the camp. "Wu Xie! Don't think I'm afraid of you just because you have so many people!" I got even angrier and gave him a flying kick that caused him to stumble. Fatty stretched out his legs and tripped him, causing him to face-plant in the mud like a dog. I went up and gave him two more hard slaps: "Say it! What are you doing?"

"Oh, so if we're doing the same thing, you're allowed to do it, but I can't? There's no such thing!" Wang Meng still wasn't convinced, so I backhanded him, put my foot on his chest, and threw the shoes back to Fatty.

Wang Meng was staring at me fiercely while he gasped for breath, but he didn't dare say anything. I stared at him, and he stared back at me for a long time before he said, "What if he's dead? A lot of things can happen in ten years. You've changed, and he's changed. Even if he's not dead, he may have forgotten you. You're risking your life to come here and pick up your demons."

I lit a cigarette and looked at him coldly.

Wang Meng continued: "You know he only told you to find him in ten years to give you an unknown future. People are forgetful. He thinks ten years is enough time for you to forget. You know no one can live underground for ten years. You're crazy to really come here to pick him up."

Fatty and Xiao Hua both looked at us, and Wang Meng pointed to them: "For the sake of your personal demons, you dragged these people into the water. You dragged me into the water. This isn't my life. You can't do whatever you want just because you have your own demons. It's not fair!"

I lifted my foot and looked at the scars on my hands. I didn't expect Wang Meng to say these things to me, but my heart would never waver because—"Everyone has their own demons," I said. "What are yours?"

He looked at me and couldn't answer.

I said coldly, "I'll give you two choices: you either go back to handle the shop for me, or I'll bury you right here right now."

His eyes became red-rimmed.

"You don't even want to talk to me."

"There are some people you just can't stand up," I replied.

Poker-Face may not appear, or I may die on the road, but after so much, I needed to be free. I needed a full stop. This freedom couldn't be solved by a sudden epiphany. In the past ten years— and even before that— everything was realistic and could be touched. These memories needed some closure.

"But when I come back, I can tell you why I had to do this," I said as I looked at him.

As Wang Meng continued to stare at me, Fatty came over and squatted beside him: "Go back. Your IQ can neither stop us nor stop you from dying."

Wang Meng stood up. The memory of last night made him too afraid to try and be brave. He started putting away his equipment, and his men stood up one by one. I gave Kan Jian a look, and he threw them some food.

Wang Meng glanced at me, turned, and then started limping down the mountain. After a few steps, he turned back and whispered, "Boss, you have to come back alive."

I nodded, and he turned back around and started his slow, depressed descent down the mountain.

I took a puff of my cigarette and Fatty said, “He made his men pretend to be Little Brother because he wanted to...”

I didn't listen to the second half of Fatty's sentence. I wasn't interested in knowing what Wang Meng wanted to do, so I asked Fatty, “How did you come out of the ground?”

Chapter 21 Fatty's Efforts

After so many years, I no longer expected anything from anyone, because for whatever reason, they would eventually leave in the end. I especially didn't like those that brought forth a lot of emotions and then left. I liked my friends because they were all consistently self-reliant. They didn't need anything from me, and I didn't need anything from them. Everyone's reason for doing things came from their firm hearts.

I sat close to where the tea and rice were being prepared, and Fatty drew several pictures on the ground with a tree branch: "After you left, I tried to use a small-scale explosion to blow up the mountain. But after only two or three places were blown up, the whole mountain unexpectedly became loose and cracked. The whole area collapsed, revealing a big hole. The bottom was full of water that was waist deep. I led the team down and we started walking. There was an underground river below, and the channel in which the river was located in went up and down. We continued walking in the water and found that three sections of the river were exposed to the ground above through cracks in the mountain. The rays of sunlight coming in were as thin as razors, but everything else was underground. When we came to the end, the channel became narrow and dried up, and the man-made wells began to appear overhead. When we heard shouting and gunshots from above, we climbed up but saw stone slates blocking the bottom of the well. So, we blew them up one by one, and that's when I saw you."

The explosions had traveled through the well shaft and made a terrible roar, which had scared us half to death.

I was lost in thought as I looked at the route Fatty had drawn.

In the place where Fatty had entered the underground waterway, there had been a bloody battle between the Eastern Xia and Mongolian people, indicating that the mountain was very important to the Eastern Xia people. Now, it had been proven that there was an underground water vein there,

which ran all the way to this forest full of ancient wells. Fatty said that the water veins extended even further underground.

This place was far from the Heavenly Palace, but there were plenty of water sources in Changbai Mountain's hinterland, so there was no need to transport rainwater from here. This vein had to lead somewhere underground, where the key to Eastern Xia lay. Plus, there were so many human-faced birds inhabiting the forest here, which made it obvious that it was connected to their underground habitat.

I called everyone to sort out their equipment and count their ammo, and then I went to look for the doctor to get my hand checked out. The doctor said that it was only fractured, not broken, and gave me a splint and told me not to put stress on it. I put it on, looked at Wang Meng who was far in the distance, and then said to Fatty, "We have to keep going. What's the air like below?"

"There won't be any air problems if there's running water, but in the area below the wellhead, the waterway is so narrow that it's impossible to go any further unless you dive."

I nodded. We only had three sets of diving equipment outside and didn't bring them in. Fatty and I were the only people who had diving experience here, and there was also a man who specialized in waterways. He had taken after his father, who fished corpses out of the Yellow River. He was in his twenties, had long hair, was pale, slender, and taller than 1.9 meters. If he was boneless, he would look like a white snake when he swam in the water, which was why his nickname was Suzhen.⁵

Fatty used the satellite phone to call outside the mountain and asked the rest of the troops outside to bring in all the supplies. I also took the opportunity to get some support.

⁵ Suzhen was Madam White Snake's alias. [Here's](#) the refresher on the story if you need it. FYI, another name for white snake is Baishe (白蛇) and NPSS starts referring to this guy as such starting next chapter.

That night, we continued retreating for several kilometers in order to consolidate our camps. Fatty's people who had stayed behind to guard the camp joined us the next day. Xiao Hua decided to split from us, and moved by land to see what else he could find.

As we waited for the diving equipment to arrive, the valley was already very busy. Suzhen and I checked the equipment, while a group of people returned to the forest again to find the wellheads.

The ground was full of bird bones after all the corpses had been eaten by the centipedes, and there were a lot of centipedes hiding under the bones. We adjusted our watches, went down to the channel where Fatty had come out of the bottom of the well, and landed waist-deep in the underground river. The fallen porcelain tiles were scattered all over the bottom of the river. I looked around with my flashlight, but the water was clear and there weren't any impurities at all. I looked ahead and saw that we could only go forward by staying hunched over. Luckily, the river's current was very slow. After walking for more than thirty meters, we came to the place where Fatty had said we would need to dive through. The waterway extended downward and was completely submerged.

Chapters 22, 23, and 24

There was the slight smell of sulfur in the channel, and compared with the clay detonators we'd used before, the smell and power of the recently used chemical explosives were much more controllable. I checked the waterproof rubber on the flashlight and then submerged it. The light appeared bright orange in the water, which was a very special color.

I put on my goggles, looked at the oxygen meter, and then sank down. The channel ahead was very low, so we had to move hunched over in the water until the entire channel was completely submerged.

The waterway's four walls were all black slabs of rock, which were very rough to the touch. When I moved in the water, all the impurities were stirred up, and I could see a lot of bubbles and cotton wool floating in front of me.

I looked back at Fatty, who was incessantly moving around because the water was so cold. He made a gesture that meant: "Hurry up."

Baishe's tall and slender body was at the end of the line, so he had to turn sideways in order to move smoothly past us in the channel. I made a gesture to remind them to watch the lights on their oxygen tanks and then dove down headfirst.

After swimming for a long time, I came to an underwater canyon that was about two people wide on both sides, and flat as an axe. The area in front and behind was very wide, so Baishe swept over my head and swung his long legs to start observing quickly.

I had a strong deep-sea fear, and would basically become terrified if I was surrounded by darkness and emptiness. Part of it was a fear that something would suddenly appear in the void, and the other part was a fear of the void itself. The rock walls on both sides here looked very sinister, but they could at least keep me focused on reality.

After sinking for more than ten meters, we were spaced farther apart from each other. Fatty started to show that he was similar to Baishe in the water by doing various difficult movements, but Baishe was completely focused on the situation at hand. Under the distorted light, his skin looked like some kind of aquatic creature.

He soon sent a signal from far away, and I signaled Fatty over. The two of us swam towards him and found that there were a lot of reliefs on both sides of the rock walls where he was at.

The reliefs were really faded and many human figures could be seen, but almost all the details had disappeared. There were a lot of deep holes on the relief with rusty iron tenons⁶ inside.

An ancient project took place here before. The iron tenons were mostly concentrated on the lower part of the reliefs, which gave off the feeling of a plank road. It was as if the reliefs served as decorations for both sides of the road.

Indeed, they were extremely fastidious, I said to myself. *Building a tomb here in such a pretentious style, they really wanted to fucking stick out.* I looked at all the seemingly endless iron tenons ahead and found that they slowly descended.

I was vaguely worried about the oxygen gradually decreasing. Even though I had a few cans on standby, I would basically have to give up this path if there weren't any results this time.

I soon arrived at the bottom of the canyon and found that it was full of sharp boulders that were sticking out like fangs and the "relief belt" was moving upwards. At this time, the oxygen meter's warning light came on.

In order to be safe, I had to strictly adhere to the meter's warning and return, but at this moment, I saw a fish swimming in front of me. As my

⁶ A tenon is a projecting piece of wood (in our case, iron) made for insertion into a mortise in another piece. Pic [here](#).

flashlight was sweeping the area, the light must have surprised it, for it immediately darted away and swam upwards.

I was stunned when I saw the fish because I could clearly see the GPS signal generator on its fin.

Catfish normally lived in shallow waters.

I pointed the fish out to the others, but they hesitated after looking at their oxygen meters. Baishe moved first, and then Fatty and I followed. My heart began to beat faster. It was a gamble. If this catfish took us into deeper waters, we would probably run out of oxygen and drown on the way back.

There was a strong internal battle between my thoughts and my intuition, but my body still followed the catfish upwards. Fatty passed by me, and I could feel his saliva floating out from the edge of his breathing tube.

It had been more than five minutes since we started swimming up, and my anxiety had reached its peak. I wanted to turn my head and flee, but Baishe— who had almost left us behind as he chased the catfish— signaled again.

I saw a ray of hope and rushed up. The water pressure on my body slowly eased, and my head soon breached the cold water's surface.

Fatty lit a flare to illuminate our surroundings and we found ourselves by an underground river beach. There was a gap where the sunlight was coming in, and countless roots and dodder vines were hanging down, accompanied by water rivulets.

We walked slowly up to the beach, took off our diving equipment, and found that we had passed through the flooded area and returned to the accessible section of the waterway.

“Where's the fish?” Fatty asked me. I squatted down and saw a layer of white, clay-like mucus floating on the water here. When I touched it with my hand, a very fishy odor assaulted my nostrils. It was animal feces.

I looked around carefully. A lot of niches had been carved out of the mountain wall here and were as densely packed as those in the Dunhuang Caves. There were a lot of human-faced birds sitting in the niches with their heads buried under their wings, all dormant.

We all immediately lowered the sound of our breathing. Fatty took out the pistol he was carrying, but we all knew we'd be dead if we disturbed the birds here.

A huge bronze statue mottled with bird droppings had collapsed at the center of these niches.

This is where those catfish were hunted before, I said to myself. After last night's battle, the number of human-faced birds had decreased a lot, but these niches extended out on both sides, and I didn't know how many birds were lurking in the cliff in the dark.

"These Eastern Xia people offered sacrifices to these shitty birds as if they were gods." Fatty mouthed as he kicked a lot of bones under his feet.

"They've eaten all the beasts here."

Baishe picked up a human skeleton from the ground that was wearing a diving suit. The person had been thin and tall, just like a creature from the Heavenly Palace.

"Wu Xie, look at this."

Baishe always boasted that everyone was equal and that he was a dignified henchman, so he always called me directly by my name.

I walked over and saw that there were a lot of human bones mixed in with the animal bones, and there were some nylon fragments attached to them. I flipped the bones over and found half of a rusted belt buckle underneath.

I knew whose belt buckle it was. Ye Cheng had died in the Heavenly Palace that year, and I figured his body had been torn apart here.

I couldn't believe that I was seeing the relics of an old acquaintance again. It felt as if it had happened a lifetime ago.

We couldn't return the same way we had come. I looked at my watch and saw that we still had time before it got dark. Our best bet was to climb out through the gap above, but seeing Ye Cheng's relics made me suddenly realize that I might find another person's remains here. He had some information on him, which could still be useful to me.

Fatty thought I was crazy. He said it would be better to climb out directly, come back with a large group of people, and then look for whatever I wanted, but I insisted on searching through the things now.

The human-faced birds could only consume the feces of the monkeys in their mouths. I first saw this kind of interdependence in the waterway leading to the Seven Star Lu Palace, when I saw the Warring States Period bell on that corpse-eater. I didn't know who built the Yin and Shang imperial tomb at the bottom of Changbai Mountain, but it was the same as that of the Seven Star Palace. It was obvious that this kind of technology was widespread at the time.

After entering the underground area, King Wannu was bewitched. I had heard all kinds of legends before and wondered if we had found some long-lost knowledge in the Yin and Shang dynasties tomb.

The monkeys were a kind of miscellaneous creature, so aside from large animals, they usually preyed on amphibians, rodents, mice, and frogs. As a result, many of the broken bones under the water were very small, and the big bones came from relatively large prey that the human-faced birds had brought back.

After searching for half a day, I found more than a dozen human bones. Grandpa Chen Pi's nose bone had been cut deeply a long time ago, so he should have been easy to recognize, but I couldn't find him. I went over to the mountain wall and saw countless nail marks on the bottom.

There were a lot of them and Fatty asked me, "Did the birds scratch them?"

I shook my head. The birds' claws were three-pronged, while these nail marks had been made by something with five fingers. The scratches had either been made by a monkey, or by a human. But the monkeys' claws weren't that big.

"That's not a good sign," Fatty said. "It seems that someone came here like us, but didn't climb out."

I scratched on the rock with my own nail, but it didn't leave any kind of mark, indicating that it wasn't something ordinary fingernails could make. If someone wanted to climb out of here, then they must have been very abnormal.

"My grandfather ordered us to cremate him when he died." I said softly and coldly: "Granny Huo's skin and Chen Pi Ah Si's lifespan were also somewhat strange. As long as they were active, these people in the Mystic Nine's middle and lower clans weren't very normal in their later years. I don't know what they experienced when they conducted the largest grave-robbing operation in history."

"What do you mean?"

"I wonder what my grandfather would have become if he wasn't cremated."

Chen Pi Ah Si wasn't cremated, and his body must have been brought here. If he had the same constitution as my grandpa, then I might finally know why Grandpa had to be cremated.

"You go out first." I looked into the nearby darkness. I wanted to go in and see where this passage led to.

Chapter 25 Zombie

Fatty looked at me. “What, did you think I came here with you?” He patted me: “I’ll leave you behind if you don’t hurry up.” With that said, he walked into the darkness and signaled me to keep up.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as I motioned Baishe to keep up—it was too risky for him to climb here alone. We’d have to advance and retreat together.

The three of us carefully walked into the darkness, dripping water along the way. Once we left the place with the skylight, the surroundings quickly became pitch black and I knew after only a dozen meters that it was impossible to keep exploring.

“We don’t know if these birds here are dead or alive, and if we use flashlights in the dark, then we’ll become targets.” Fatty said. “We just killed all their distant relatives yesterday, and now we shouldn’t sneak in to steal from them today. I do actually have a conscience.”

Plus, if we used our flashlights, the light would shine on the birds and cause unimaginable consequences. We thought about the problems and decided to withdraw first. I asked Fatty, “Do we have enough bullets to come back and sweep this place clean?”

Fatty sighed: “Killing the fathers and then the sons. Mr. Naive, you’ve become inhumane after so many years. I like it. But bullets will be the most inefficient way to kill them all. Let’s go out and kill your dog, mix some potassium cyanide in the meat, and then throw it in here. Make sure you never waste a bullet—”

“Don’t fucking touch my dog,” I said angrily. I knew he was joking, but those dogs understood people’s words and might secretly kill Fatty at night.

I was just about to turn around when Fatty suddenly grabbed me again.

“You’re getting old and starting to shiver, aren’t you?” I asked angrily.

“How am I old? You’re young, so young, yet your eyes are so bad?” Fatty looked into the darkness and motioned for me to look.

I squinted, but couldn’t see anything in the dark.

“Are you hallucinating?” I asked. Fatty pointed to the water with a flashlight. When I looked down, I saw a lot of small fish swimming in a dense pack between the cracks in the rock, heading for the darkness ahead of us.

“Those are spring fish, and there’s a fishy smell up ahead.” Fatty slowly moved the light in the direction the fish were swimming in and lifted it up.

The beam of light shot into the darkness, and I could vaguely see a humanoid figure standing on the distant beach, facing the rock.

I couldn’t see clearly from this distance and was just about to get closer, but Fatty grabbed me and took out a pair of binoculars. “New equipment.” He adjusted the focus and licked his lips. “Use it to look at the jade seller with long legs across from my shop. Even her hair—” He suddenly shut up and turned to look at me. I asked him what was wrong, but his jaw dropped and he couldn’t say anything.

After knowing him for so many years, Fatty has never been speechless, so I grabbed the binoculars and looked at where the flashlight was pointing.

I saw a naked old man standing upright in the darkness. His skin was purple and looked as dry as bark under the light, and I could see his hands hanging by his sides. His fingernails stretched down into the water.

“Grandpa Si?” My hands began to shake.

Although I had already guessed it, it was still shocking to actually see the dead body of an old acquaintance rigidly standing here after ten years.

“Zombie!” Fatty mouthed at me. “Stop reminiscing and run.”

“I want to see the front,” I said as I pointed to the water. We still had some oxygen left, so I was going to dive and see what was going on.

Chapters 26, 27 and 28

“Can zombies swim?” Baishe asked me as we put the oxygen tanks back on.

I tried to recall all the ancient books I had read, but there didn't seem to be any records of zombies swimming in any of them. But now that they were dead, it should be impossible for them to drown.

“The dead are heavy; the dead are very heavy.” Fatty said. “When that thing goes into the water, it'll sink to the bottom. It doesn't stand a chance.”

Even our whispers echoed in the cave, making it sound like a lot of people were whispering. It was really creepy. Or maybe it felt that way because my pores had shrunk after I got out of the water, and my body was feeling colder and colder.

Fatty found the sound interesting, and said another sentence: “Wu Xie's a little bitch.” The whole cave reverberated with the subtle sound.

I glared at him and put on my goggles, but Fatty grabbed my hand with a serious expression.

“It might not necessarily be Chen Pi Ah Si. Are you really going to look?”

“You mean it could be Little Brother?”

Becoming an old zombie underground was a really suitable ending for him. But it was impossible.

The pebbles made it difficult to walk with flippers, so we all sank down into the water.

The part along the rock wall wasn't deep, which made it difficult to maneuver. We could move forward by using our hands to pull us along the bottom of the beach. I got used to it and swam to the place where the old man was standing.

When I swam to the place where I thought he was, I turned on the flashlight, held the beach bottom with one hand, and slowly lifted half my face out of the water. I stuck my other hand out of the water and shined the flashlight over there.

The place where the naked old man had been standing just now was empty.

Gone? I wondered. Fatty and Baishe also raised their heads out of the water. We looked around but didn't find any signs of the old man.

"Did he go for a walk?" Fatty shut down the oxygen tanks and lifted his upper body out of the water. "Hey, this old man is pretty quick."

I estimated how much time had passed since we put the diving suits on. We didn't spend a lot of time doing it, so we couldn't go far.

Fatty looked to me to see what we should do. I had to find some clues, so I shined my flashlight underwater. I looked around and suddenly saw a head in the distant water that was about two people away.

The head and face were covered in hair, so I couldn't see what it looked like, but I could see the shadow of its torso underwater. The nails were very long and curling like aquatic plants after soaking in the water for so long.

"Grandpa, are you taking a bath?" Fatty whispered. "Why don't you ask him if he wants his back rubbed?"

We were in an awkward position. We had flippers on our feet and the heavy oxygen tanks didn't have any buoyancy. We were just like stranded fish in shallow waters. We couldn't stand up and run away, nor could we swim fast.

I motioned with my head, and the three of us slowly retreated to where the water was deeper so we could sink down.

I pulled my flashlight beneath the water and then moved closer. In two steps, the light beam passed through the muddy water and showed the portion of the corpse that was underwater.

From where it was standing in the water, I could see that its skin was wrinkled and pale, and it almost looked like a skinny wax figure soaked in formaldehyde.

I saw a tattoo on his body, but it definitely wasn't a Qilin. It looked like something from the old society. It was a very pale cyan, but I couldn't see what it was because of the wrinkles.

It was Grandpa Si. Even though I couldn't see his face or eyes, I definitely recognized these tattoos.

Fatty pulled me away quickly, but at that moment, I saw something hanging around the corpse's neck.

I squinted, but couldn't see what it was. I had a hunch that the rope still hanging around its neck after so long was of exceptional quality, which meant that the thing it was holding must be very important.

I pointed to the thing around its neck, but Fatty shook his head. I pointed again, but Fatty still shook his head. I glanced at Baishe and pointed to the thing around its neck, but Fatty and Baishe both shook their heads.

I shook Fatty's hand off, sank down until I was on the bottom of the river, and tried to dive behind Grandpa Si. There was a sudden jolt in the water, and my vision was obscured by the bubbles that immediately formed. I froze where I was and saw that Grandpa Si had disappeared from right in front of me. At the same time, I noticed a shadow swimming in the water that moved just like a sea monkey.

It's not a zombie, I thought to myself as I suddenly recalled Grandpa's will.

This thing wasn't a zombie, but something else.

It was too late to think carefully about what was on my mind. Baishe was the first to respond and disappeared from my side as soon as there was movement in the water. Fatty and I swam towards the deeper section of water and saw two white shadows flash past us in the flashlight's beam.

Baishe had run away in an instant. It seemed that when he found out the zombie could swim, he immediately utilized his strengths to slip away.

I really didn't know what to do. Whether it was the first or last time I had encountered this kind of thing, I always adopted the same strategy—run. When Fatty and I looked at each other, I immediately calmed down, and my reasoning instantly returned.

Don't think about anything, run first!

Fatty and I swam back wildly and followed Baishe's shadow all the way to the shallows. Fatty dumped his oxygen tank and flippers, looked up and saw that Baishe was already climbing up the mountain wall, and then immediately followed him.

I shed my flippers and stepped into the waist-deep water to catch up, when suddenly, there was a wave of water around me, and my ankle rubbed against something strange. Then, a strong force pulled me directly into the water.

As I struggled to get up, my respirator fell out of my mouth and I was surrounded by bubbles. In a panic, I saw a pair of blank, pupil-less white eyes appear among the bubbles.

Then, the great force pulled me to the bottom of the river. I felt a sharp pain in my ankle and knew I had obviously been hooked by something.

The last time I tried to get out of the water, I saw Fatty jump down and rush at me, but then I was dragged deeper into the depths. The last bit of reasoning I held onto made me grab the breathing tube and shove it into my mouth.

I started to spin, and my head kept hitting the bottom of the beach. I could feel myself being pulled into a narrow gap and managed to grab my flashlight. I knew this was my only hope. As long as I had two or three seconds, I could come up with a solution, but I would need light to do it.

I quickly found, however, that my grip wasn't as strong as before—probably because of the fracture—and then the flashlight was knocked out of my hand. I watched as it quickly fell away, and then everything became dark.

I exhaled in the chaos, and the oxygen tank's warning light came on. I soon found that inhaling wasn't as effective as before—there was no oxygen.

I immediately broke out in a cold sweat and forced myself to be quiet. Once I slowed my breathing and stopped struggling, I found that it was very quiet all around. I slowly felt the rocks on the bottom of the river. I couldn't see anything besides the oxygen tank's warning light, but based on the speed at which the stones swept across my face and the current, I knew that I was moving very quickly through the water.

I didn't know how long it took— maybe only a minute or two— but I felt as if I was being dragged in the dark water for a long time. My body temperature dropped rapidly, and my sense of touch and consciousness began to blur.

I quickly regained my senses and found that I felt warm. I didn't know how much time had passed. It was like I had nodded off a bit while driving, but when I woke up, I felt as if I had slept for a long time.

I noticed that the respirator wasn't in my mouth, but I could breathe just fine.

My face hurt.

I opened my eyes and found that the oxygen tank's red warning light was illuminating a small area. My upper body was out of the water, but my lower body was so cold that I could feel my ankle throbbing.

I tried to get up with one arm—I couldn't even tell which—but found that I didn't have any strength at all.

I tried the breathing method Black Glasses taught me as I worked to move my whole body. After a short amount of time, I finally started to regain feeling in all of my limbs and sat up.

I found that the oxygen tank itself was missing, and all I was left with were some accessories hanging on my diving suit.

I touched the ground and found that it was a slate.

I picked up the oxygen tank's warning light and felt as if I were picking up a star in the universe. I touched the gap in the slate and stuck the red light close, trying to make myself remember.

This was a man-made building, and considering how dark it was, it had to be underground. In this underground area, the only man-made building was the imperial tomb. I screwed up. I didn't have any lighting, and the warning light would go out in twenty hours at most. I could only continue to grope around in the dark while I waited for Fatty and Xiao Hua to find me again. I didn't know how long it would take, but maybe I would get closer to that door in the meantime.

As long as I could take a look around and know where I was...

If I was already within the imperial tomb of the Yin and Shang dynasties, then I could deduce countless routes and even walk around blind in the dark.

I didn't know why, but I suddenly smiled.

It wasn't like anyone could see it in the dark anyway.

My eyes slowly adapted to the absolute darkness, and the oxygen tank's red warning light helped illuminate the fuzzy outlines of my surroundings.

I took off my diving suit. The temperature around me was so low that I could breathe out white puffs of air, but I obviously couldn't see them clearly.

I took the oxygen light, walked a few steps forward, saw a stone wall, and walked a few steps back. I was on a step sticking out of the water.

I immediately discovered that I was on a long, wide step that extended all the way up from the water. But there were a lot of other incomplete square stones sticking out of the water, all of varying sizes. The big ones were as big as trucks, and the small ones were the size of gravel. They were all stones that had rolled down from a collapsed building above the steps. These collapsed stones were blocking the only way up the steps.

I looked at it bit by bit with the oxygen light and found that I kept kicking something at my feet. I glanced down at the ground and saw a lot of metal sheets, traces of bonfires, and some empty rusted cans.

There was some rotting leather on a rock with some fungi growing out of it, and a lot of broken bones.

Someone had been living here. And based on the number of broken bones, they must have lived here for some time. It was probably Chen Pi Ah Si.

It was a miracle that he had such a strong sense of survival when he was so old. Of course, I had no idea know why. At that time, I felt that his body was in a constant state between death and life, but his physical strength wasn't like an old man at all.

I slowly probed forward with the oxygen light and saw a pair of bare feet. The nails were very long and had naturally broken, just like a bird's claws. They were standing in front of a huge rock.

I didn't dare go forward. Under the faint red light, I could see Chen Pi Ah Si's body standing there facing a huge boulder that was blocking the path. It was practically glued to it.

It wanted to go forward, but couldn't get through.

It was the one that brought me here. I took a deep breath and noticed that some words had been carved onto the boulder it was facing.

The light was very dim and the corpse was blocking the words, so I couldn't see them clearly at all. Plus, the oxygen light was fading.

My heart was pounding as I continued watching it face the rock. I wasn't afraid of this scene like I would've been before. I only felt strong anxiety, uneasiness, and sadness. Maybe it was because I wasn't afraid of death now, but more afraid that I wouldn't achieve my goal.

The thing around its neck was still there, and looked like you could reach out and snatch it from this distance.

I picked up a stone and threw it into the water. It made a sound as it fell, but the corpse remained indifferent. I couldn't understand why it brought me here. Maybe it was just repeating what it had done during its life.

When the diving suit was dry, I looked at it and remembered Uncle Three's experience at the bottom of the sea, when his diving suit had saved his life.

This was the only clothing I had at hand. I thought about it, took off my diving suit again, tied a stone to one of the legs, and made a meteor hammer.

I leaned over carefully. This would either give me an advantage or completely plunge me into the worst possible situation.

"Grandpa Si!" I called out. "Remember me?! I'm from the Wu family!"

The corpse in front of me slowly turned around, and only the reflection of its white eyes could be seen in the extremely weak light. Then, I heard the familiar "gege gege" sound come out of its throat.

"Grandpa Si! Come on, give us a hug." I took a deep breath and began to fall back. It turned around and seemed to be looking for the source of the sound.

Chapter 29 Rock

Grandpa, Chen Wen-Jin, and all the others must have met something that changed their bodies.

There were many possibilities, for example, did they eat something? They had been searching for the ancient method of immortality in the tombs because it was rumored that the alchemists kept the method of immortality in their own tombs. Of course, Black Glasses and I both said the same thing: If they could live forever, why did they have tombs?

That was why people in ancient times went looking for the Mountain of Immortals. They wanted to shed their earthly skin and become immortal by cultivating. Of course, shedding their earthly skin referred to the corpses the immortals left behind in ancient times, which were often very old but didn't rot for a long time. The thing in front of me seemed to be an immortal who shed his earthly skin, but no one told me that it would basically be the same as a zombie. Whatever happened to them so long ago must have affected their bodies, which was why my grandfather thought his body would change after he died.

Chen Pi Ah Si lived to the point where his life and death were unknown, but the condition of his body after death was really strange. Chen Wen-Jin was even more serious. Based on my investigation, she thought she would become a monster in a very short period of time. Whatever happened to Grandpa and the others must have happened in the ancient tomb, and may have come about because of a mechanism or accident.

But what happened to Chen Wen-Jin must have occurred in the nursing home in Golmud, and may have even been man-made.

Grandpa Si's corpse leaned toward me little by little, and I shook my meteor hammer. As long as I was a little farther away, I couldn't see its state clearly. It was too dark, but it didn't seem to be relying on its eyes to know that I was here.

“Excuse me.” I saw an opportunity and threw the meteor hammer out for the first time and then ran. I was hoping that I could wrap the meteor hammer around Grandpa Si’s corpse, catch the other end, and then tie it to a stone.

But the meteor hammer wasn’t as useful as I thought. It couldn’t reach that far, so after I threw it at Grandpa Si, it hit him hard and then fell.

I pulled it back, ready to throw it out again, but the oxygen tank’s warning light went out at this time. My surroundings immediately plunged into absolute darkness.

I threw the meteor hammer at random and hit a rock, causing sparks to appear. As I drew it back, my heart began to beat wildly and my mind went blank. Absolute darkness meant that the eyes couldn’t give the brain any information to process.

I swung the meteor hammer like a helicopter blade, making sure nothing was near me. It only turned twice before it suddenly hit something and fell to the ground. I pulled it up and retreated in the opposite direction while spinning it again.

All that was needed was a nebula chain.⁷

I threw it again and hit a rock in front of me, causing sparks to fly everywhere. Yes, a rock! I fumbled over, touched the rock that was as tall as a person, and began to climb up. The sharp rock immediately cut the soles of my feet, but I resisted the severe pain and climbed to the top, breaking off several fingernails in the process.

I felt a little more secure now.

⁷ It’s a weapon the protagonist Andromeda Shun from the “Saint Seiya” manga uses. The chain is legendary for its durability and defensive nature. It can extend enough to reach light years away, penetrating the very fabric of space. When there’s a threat, the chain can give out warning signs and become charged with enough electricity to release shocks of at least 10,000 volts. More info [here](#)

I went to pull the meteor hammer back to my side, but after tugging twice, it suddenly tightened. It looked like the hammerhead had been caught by something. When I pulled, the strength on the other end was very overwhelming and wouldn't yield.

I didn't dare pull anymore, but I suddenly had a plan. I tied one end of the meteor hammer in my hand to the sleeve of the diving suit, then took off the diving suit and wrapped it around the rock.

Because the rock had edges and corners that would snag clothes, the diving suit stayed snug against it under the tension. I didn't think this immortal would know that he was in a tug-of-war with a rock right now. I carefully jumped off the rock and shook the oxygen warning light. This thing was connected to the barometer, and it was reasonable to use lithium batteries so the power wouldn't go out as quickly.

I suddenly realized that with the oxygen tank gone, there was something wrong with the barometer. I shook it a few times and the red light finally came back on. I had two goals:

1. Immediately look at what was written on the stone.
2. Find a second light source immediately, because this one wouldn't last long.

I saw the figure pulling the meteor hammer in the dim light, leaned to the other side to avoid it, and went over to the stone where it had been facing just now. I held the red light against the rock, and could almost make out what the text was saying by looking at each individual character.

The first word was: if.

I narrowed my eyes and finished reading the five lines of text. "If future generations come here and find my body, take half of my nasal bone. Heaven and earth are within it, so you may be able to obtain karma."

Chapter 30 Secrets

My hands trembled and I looked back into the darkness.

Between Grandpa Si's broken nasal bone and his eyes, I never knew whether he was blind or not. But he showed almost no signs of being blind when he was alive, which I never understood.

He must've had a lot of secrets.

Chen Pi Ah Si wasn't like other people. He wasn't burdened by morals, killed people without batting an eye, and didn't care much about other people's life or death. My family was often more than a hundred percent cautious when it came to the overall situation, which led to messages being too cryptic and not circulating smoothly. But Chen Pi Ah Si wouldn't do that. The message he left made me curious in a way I hadn't been for a long time.

But I really didn't know how to remove his nasal bone in this kind of situation. I thought it would be good for me if he didn't take mine instead.

I took a deep breath and slowly walked into the darkness. When I came up behind Chen Pi Ah Si, I smelled a faint aroma, which I knew was the so-called "forbidden woman scent".

I covered my nose and slowly approached, trying to make some noise.

I didn't know why, but it didn't respond. I pulled my shorts up and kept trying to get closer.

The figure in front of me slowly appeared in the extremely dim light, and I was covered in a cold sweat as I went around to face it.

I saw a skinny face dripping with water that was full of wrinkles and spots. The eyes were bulging, but they were all white without any hint of a pupil. The nails of both hands were caught in my meteor hammer.

The corpse had a terrible scar that went across the eyes and bridge of its nose. The nasal bone should be right under the scar, but how to take it?

I held my breath and said to myself, *do you want me to put my fingers in your nostrils? That's just fucking awesome.*

I knew that a lot of nose operations required lifting the upper lip, cutting the junction between the upper lip and gums, and lifting up the skin to expose the whole nasal bone. It was difficult to reach the upper end of the nose using other ways. Of course, smashing its face in directly would also do the trick.

After thinking about it, I squatted down and retreated, deciding to take the stupidest risk.

I grabbed the oxygen light, moved around to gather some stones, and then started building a wall next to Grandpa Si.

I didn't have time to feel around blindly in the dark, and I didn't know how long it took, but it must have been a long time considering I was sore all over. When I was done, I had built up a tower around Grandpa Si's corpse, trapping him inside.

This was really messing around, and my grandpa and Uncle Three would be furious if they knew I was doing something on the level of child's play. But I had nothing else besides these stones.

I knew this thing was really powerful, so I specially built several layers using stones the size of a human head. Since I had studied architecture, I knew all the mechanical structure tricks. As I placed each stone on top of the other and the base got higher and higher, the tower became stronger. Grandpa Si was surrounded by stones until only his head was exposed, just like eating monkey brains.⁸

⁸ Monkey brains are served directly in the skull of a monkey that is still alive or where the cook has just killed it prior to serving.

I then climbed up the tower, held up a sharp rock, pointed it at Grandpa Si's face, and smashed it down.

Grandpa Si only moved once, and that was to bump into the stone encirclement. The stones quickly loosened, but I had designed it so that all the collapsed stones would fall on the corpse and completely suppress it.

I smashed my rock down again and its entire face collapsed. The stones stirred as it tried to climb out and I shouted: "Excuse me!"

I smashed down with all my strength and its face split open.

The face was still moving even though both eyes had been smashed out.

I didn't dare reach in directly. There was nothing nearby I could use, so I had to take off my underwear, wrap it around my hands, reach into its nose, and break its face.

I felt a ring.

There seemed to be a copper wire leading into its nasal cavity.

Chapter 31 Key

Did Grandpa Si turn into a grenade spirit?

My first reaction was to think that when Buddha was teaching the sutras, there was a grenade buried in front of the altar. After listening to sutras day and night, the grenade turned into a spirit. Now that it was in its original form after death, I only needed to pull this ring to immediately become fried beef tartare.

I didn't think it was possible. If a grenade was implanted in your nasal cavity during your lifetime and the lead wire accidentally got caught and pulled while you were picking your nose, it would truly be a terrible death.

I pulled the copper wire and Grandpa Si convulsed. Now that I thought about it, I had dug up Grandpa's grave and sifted his ashes, cut off Granny Huo's head, and smashed Chen Pi Ah Si's face in. The nine families were really unfortunate to have offspring like me.

The copper wire suddenly loosened and I pulled out something that was deep in the nasal cavity. It felt really awesome.

The thing was covered in slimy mucus, so I wrapped it in my underwear and carefully looked at it with the oxygen light. I had seen it before. It was a copper key that was inset with a pearl. At this time, I saw Grandpa Si's corpse start to shrink, and it kept twitching as the flesh began to emit an odor.

I covered my nose and stepped back, but grabbed the thing hanging around its neck at the last minute and pulled it off.

Grandpa Si's body rotted and collapsed, and I was relieved to see it shrinking down into the pile of stones.

I looked at the two things in my hand.

I had seen this key in the Seven Star Lu Palace. It was in the mouth of that female corpse that was beside the green-eyed fox and was said to prevent decay. When I took it out at that time, I thought it was to open the puzzle-box, but the key ended up disappearing later. I didn't expect that it would end up in Chen Pi Ah Si's hands, or that he would embed it in his nasal cavity.

Little Brother worked for Chen Pi Ah Si at that time, and Uncle Three needed to borrow one of Chen Pi Ah Si's men. He ended up exchanging the black and gold blade for Poker-Face's help. Did Little Brother take this key in the chaos and give it to Chen Pi Ah Si?

After that, the ninety-year-old Chen Pi Ah Si did his best and ventured to find the Heavenly Palace deep in the mountains with Poker-Face's help.

I slowly began to see the parts that I hadn't paid attention to before. I used to think about Uncle Three's motives and what Poker-Face was doing, but now it seemed that it was better to understand Chen Pi Ah Si's relatively simple purpose first.

Chen Pi Ah Si participated in the largest joint tomb-robbing operation in history. With his character, he must have personally taken risks during that time. After that, he spent a long time in Guangxi and eventually found Little Brother who had lost his memory.

Chen Pi Ah Si must have purposefully been searching for Poker-Face, because for those in the Nine Gates after liberation, Guangxi was a place where too many stories had happened and too many secrets were hidden.

Little Brother, who had lost his memory, had been working for Chen Pi Ah Si since then. Chen Pi Ah Si was a very smart person. He probably didn't want to know the truth, and only wanted to solve his physical problems. Maybe he got the original Warring States silk book and distributed it to those in the business until finally, Uncle Three solved its secret.

Based on my later understanding of him, when Uncle Three saw the silk book, he must have used it to set up a big trap. But Chen Pi Ah Si didn't

know this, so when he heard that Uncle Three was going to look for the ancient tomb on the silk book, he lent Zhang Qiling to him.

Poker-Face finished his work in the Seven Star Lu Palace, but I still didn't know what he did after that. Based on what I knew now, he had taken the ghost seal, changed the silk books, killed Iron Mask who was in the jade armor, and then brought Chen Pi Ah Si the anti-decaying key. All of this seemed to have been prepared for Chen Pi Ah Si to come to the Heavenly Palace.

But I could still remember those feelings of doubt. When Poker-Face was in the Seven Star Lu Palace, I felt as if he had been there several times before.

But based on his character, if he didn't want me to know, he would've flawlessly pretended that everything was fine. I think the reason I noticed was because he started to recover his memory in the process of entering the Seven Star Lu Palace. Even he didn't expect it to happen.

In the process of assisting Chen Pi Ah Si to enter the Heavenly Palace, his memory completely recovered, and he already knew his purpose. That was why he finally entered the bronze door instead of Chen Pi Ah Si.

What did Chen Pi Ah Si want? Entering here was risky for someone over ninety years old, so it couldn't be for money or love. Chen Pi Ah Si definitely thought there was a way to prolong life here. If he had participated in the biggest grave robbery in history, then he should have been very familiar with these things.

If all the people in the Mystic Nine had participated in the biggest grave robbery in history, then that meant all their bodies had changed.

Zhang Qiling said that he was one of those in the Nine Gates who undertook the task of entering the bronze door.

Was that the cost of immortality? Many people in the Mystic Nine got the seeds of immortality during the biggest grave robbery in history, but the whole process had to be completed behind the bronze door. They needed to

find the bronze door within a certain period of time, so that was why everyone went crazy looking for clues all over China in the 1970s. During this process, people were becoming zombies, and those who provided support started to die. In the end, only Chen Pi Ah Si remained.

I took a deep breath and felt a chill in the darkness.

I was the eldest son. When did my grandfather give birth to my father? Was it before or after the biggest grave-robbing operation in history? Why was my grandfather so emotional after I was born and named me Wu Xie?⁹

What was this evil?

Was it possible that the changes they suffered during this grave robbery were genetic? Could this explain the huge difference between Uncle Two, Uncle Three, and my father's personalities, and the extraordinary interest the post-liberation generation of the Nine Gates had for these things?

Well, if I was Wu Xie, then what about Xiuxiu and Xiao Hua?

I dared not think about it anymore.

The thing that had been hanging around Grandpa Si's neck was an iron plate with an address and a phone number stamped on it.

I was a little surprised that it was something like this. I flipped it over and saw that something else had been stamped on the back: If future generations see this iron plate and Chen Pi Ah Si of Guangxi, they can get a lifetime of wealth if they transport the intact corpse to the address printed on the back of this plate.

It was a body collection plate. I couldn't help but smile. I came all this way just because I wanted to see this thing. I didn't expect that it would be so worthless, but I at least got another clue.

⁹ Remember, Wu Xie's name sounds like "no evil"

Life was often like this. As I looked at the iron plate, I suddenly thought that I could make a lot of money if I found a random old guy's body and sent it to that address. I immediately felt ashamed. This businessman's habit had grown with age, which clearly showed that my value for life was getting progressively worse.

As I admonished myself that the purpose of my visit was very simple, I put the iron plate around my neck. After wearing it, I suddenly felt that something was wrong. The thing around my neck seemed to contradict what was written on the stone.

If Chen Pi Ah Si wanted future generations to transport his body back, why would he tell them to smash his own face in? It really didn't make sense.

I jumped off the stone tower, embarrassed at my own nakedness. I didn't think I would find myself in such a mess when I came to this place. Before reaching the stone wall again, I couldn't help laughing at the five lines.

This wasn't Chen Pi Ah Si's handwriting— not because I knew what his handwriting looked like, but because I recognized it. This was Poker-Face's handwriting.

I hadn't seen it for a long time and I was a little rusty, but when I looked carefully, I immediately thought of it.

This should be what he left behind when he came here again after we parted ways.

This was for me. He knew I would fulfill my part of the contract.

I clenched my fist, and a sense of security that I hadn't felt for many years suddenly rose up from the bottom of my heart.

If he believed that I would fulfill the contract, then I wouldn't be facing a cold Heavenly Palace. He definitely would've left me something. A mark? A hint?

Chen Pi Ah Si didn't leave this key to future generations, Poker-Face left it for me.

Chapter 32 Hint

I tried to change my way of thinking. If I were Poker-Face and knew that someone would come to me in ten years, what preparations would I make?

I would place hints at all the possible entrances here. "To the friend who's picking me up, please go here and watch out for the slippery floor."

If Fatty and Xiao Hua were to enter from somewhere else, they may encounter similar prompts.

Why was it on this wall? If Chen Pi Ah Si was facing this wall, then he must've had a fixed route. But why would he follow along a fixed route?

What was driving him?

The phrase "you may be able to obtain karma" had been written very big.

I suddenly had a flash of inspiration and picked up the copper wire and looked at the key. The dark green pearl inset on it reminded me of the color of the bronze door.

The key kept slowly turning and then stopped, pointing in one direction.

I poked it again and watched as it rotated and then stopped, still pointing in the same direction.

So that's how it works.

My heart beat faster. I didn't dare put my underwear back on, so I threw them on the ground, pulled the meteor hammer and diving suit from the pile of stones, went up to the water's edge, and started washing the suit. By the time I put it back on, the oxygen light was almost useless and could only light a few centimeters ahead. I hung it on my chest, grabbed the copper wire, followed the key's direction, and started to move forward.

The area in front of me was dark, and I only took a few steps before I felt the rock in front of me and began to climb up.

I couldn't see anything after I climbed to the top, and was worried about losing the key, so I tied the copper wire to my finger. I used my other hand to grope around as I crawled through the rubble bit by bit.

After climbing for several hours, I was exhausted, my hands and feet were cut to pieces, and I almost lost my sense of touch. At this time, I finally stepped on flat ground.

The ground was so rough that for the first time, I couldn't completely reconstruct the surrounding environment in my head. Maybe this was the bluestone floor of the tomb chamber, or the shrine of the emperor's tomb, or even the bottom of the moat. But when I crept forward, I didn't touch anything.

I walked step by step in the darkness like someone was holding my hand.

The oxygen light went out again and wouldn't come back on this time, so I had to rely on my other senses in the darkness.

At first, I heard a lot of sounds that seemed to indicate that the area around me was very empty. There was no wind, but there were all kinds of noises in the distance. Was it water? Rain? I couldn't tell. My sense of awareness seemed to disappear, and I couldn't tell what direction I was going in or how much time had passed. I couldn't even tell if I was moving or not.

I didn't know how long I had been walking in the dark. It seemed like only a few seconds had passed, but I felt as if I had been walking for several days.

This essentially proved that one's awareness was really just a quick response of the body's subtle senses, and its effectiveness needed the perfect coordination between the eyes, ears, nose, and brain.

My hands and feet were constantly moving and I was feeling all the sensations with my toes.

Plan B.

I tried to recall all the various scenarios I had discussed with Fatty and the others before we came here. Fatty had watched many American movies and was full of ideas like Plan B and C, but unfortunately, his pronunciation of B sounded wrong.

The place where Fatty and I had separated wasn't far from here, so based on his experience, he should be able to find this place faster than Xiao Hua.

If he and I got separated, we promised that we would meet before proceeding to the next step, so we agreed on two indicators: one was a flare and the other was sound. If we were in the same open area, Fatty would fire off a flare, but if both of us lost our equipment, we would whistle a certain rhythm at regular intervals.

I could whistle very sharply with my fingers or a thread, but for it to spread far, I still needed something that could emit a whistle at a high frequency.

I stopped, squatted down, and began to grope around. This was the first time I wasn't following the key's direction. I started searching the area beside me, hoping for something to use.

After taking two steps to the side, I felt a person's foot standing there in the darkness.

I was covered in a cold sweat and all my hair was standing on end as I quickly pulled my hand back. Then, I subconsciously touched the other side and felt another foot.

Fuck, I said to myself, there are a bunch of people here in the darkness.

Chapter 33 and 34 Ghost Soldiers

There was a reason why I said the area was full of people. I would've been able to tell if I had touched a stone foot because there weren't a lot of details carved onto the feet of stone figures, especially those used in burials. Carved feet were generally round, and you could also tell it was a stone by the temperature, texture, and hardness.

But I knew I had touched a human foot because the nails were very long, and the cracked skin I had touched was soft.

I might have ventured a guess that it was a leather figurine, but there was no way to explain the broken toenails. No one who carved a stone figurine would carve the toenails like this.

I wondered if I had felt wrong considering it had only been a momentary touch. But I wasn't as confident as before, so after carefully recalling it, I decided I was right.

In the darkness around me, people were standing in a line. Their skin was dry and their nails were still growing, just like Grandpa Si.

These people must be dead.

My heart was pounding as I retreated into the darkness.

It was very quiet all around, and my actions just now didn't seem to trigger anything.

I could almost imagine that I was surrounded by rows of corpses that were probably wearing armor and covered in dust.

At this moment, I temporarily gave up the idea of meeting Fatty as my desire for light reached its limit. I stood up, my whole body numb, and my back drenched in a cold sweat. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down as I thought about what I had done over the past ten years. The pressure around

me gradually eased, and I was able to focus on the rotation of the key on my finger and move forward again.

It was pitch black. If I held onto the beliefs that had gotten me through the past ten years, then they would now act as a kind of guidance at my fingertips. Compared to ten years ago when I couldn't touch anything, this little bit of traction was already a lot.

Light, I needed light.

I had a diving suit, a broken oxygen tank warning light, a copper key, and an iron dog tag. If I rubbed the dog tag on the ground fast enough, I could generate some sparks. But they may not be hot enough, and I didn't have kindling to make a fire.

Patience, I told myself. The corpses next to me belonged to a nomadic people, so it was very likely that there would be burial objects like fire strikers on their bodies. As far as I knew, most nomadic people's belts held fire strikers and flint.

If I kept going, I might run into some wood or something. I already had copper wire, so as long as there was wood, I could take the cord holding the dog tag around my neck, and use the cotton ends to start a fire.

In short, I was far from despair.

I continued walking in the darkness but didn't encounter anything. Fatty didn't appear to save me and there wasn't any wood. There was only the unending cold stone beneath my feet. Some sections suddenly turned into gravel, so I had to carefully climb over.

I got tired of walking and lay down. The old me would've gone crazy long ago, but now I curled up in the darkness and began to wonder when I first got carried away by a key.

It was the key I found when an incident occurred while we were moving my grandfather's grave in my hometown.¹⁰ This key helped me find Grandpa's real coffin and opened the locked urn where I found those arrows.

I didn't know whether it was a good idea to carry the ghost seal with me, so I had left it outside. I was afraid things would be too dangerous when we came in and I'd lose it, so I left it with the big troops. If the huge bronze door was at the end of this road, then I really should have taken it with me.

Despite being really cold, I couldn't control my exhaustion and fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke up, I saw light.

I was stunned for a moment when I found that the light was on my hands and feet. Then, I fully came awake and saw that it was the fluorescence from the centipedes. They were digging into the wounds on my hands and feet.

I stood up, got rid of the bugs, and looked around. The scent of my blood had attracted a lot of them.

My blood didn't always work, but I had found the pattern. When my heart beat faster and my body temperature rose, my blood would become effective, but when my body temperature dropped, my blood became just like an ordinary person's.

I got up and used all my physical strength to move my limbs and raise my body temperature.

I took off my diving suit, wrapped the legs around my hands as gloves, broke off the centipedes' legs and teeth, then pulled the elastic band from the diving suit's waist, and put it around the centipedes to form a string of lights. With my make-shift lantern in one hand and the key in the other, I looked around.

¹⁰ This is referring to "[Extra 1: 2009 Chinese New Year Special](#)" but we only knew he found a key at that time, not the other stuff

Under the fluorescent light, I finally saw the tall soldiers in armor standing neatly around me. Their faces were so long that they didn't look human.

I knew them. Zhang Qiling had first entered the bronze door dressed in their armor.

Their eyes were pure white like Chen Pi Ah Si's had been, but their eyelids had been cut off and their bodies were covered in dust.

I hadn't been to this place before. It must be deep in the underground crevice, for when I looked up, all I saw was more darkness.

I deviated from the direction the key gave me and walked through the first row of armored soldiers. This was where Little Brother had set off for the Heavenly Palace, so I walked around, hoping to see some clues.

At this time, something fell on my head, and when I looked up, I saw a few tiny beams of light high above me.

I suddenly realized where I was. The last time I had entered the Heavenly Palace, we had passed through a huge mountain gap, where hundreds of millions of centipedes formed a galaxy-like landscape. Now, I was at the bottom of this mountain gap and someone up above was following the original path to the imperial tomb.

The light in my hand was too small for the people above me to see, so I had no other choice. I took a deep breath and shouted at them: "You are the wind; I am the sand!"¹¹

The sound circulated upwards and soon lost its tone, but the melody was still there. It had been said that the human brain could understand this melody the best, and I couldn't let them think my cry was the wind.

¹¹ The ending theme song of "My Fair Princess 2". According to baidu, it's a lingering love song that expresses the deep attachment and tenderness between two people in love lol. Here's a youtube [link](#)

As I shouted as hard as I could, I paid attention to the ghost soldiers around me.

After four or five times, a clear whistle sounded from above.

I didn't know if it was Xiao Hua or Fatty, but I was overjoyed. Then, gravel fell from above, and something rolled down the cliff. It was so high up that it took a long time for it to roll down and fall nearby.

It was a backpack.

Chapter 35 Giant Bronze Wall

I rifled through the backpack and took out a flashlight first. I kissed it and turned it on, getting blinded by the bright light.

Under the strong light, the nearby stones and dust on the armored corpses all turned white. I wiped my eyes and wept with joy as I dug out a high-frequency whistle.

I looked up, blew the whistle, and signaled with the flashlight at the same time.

I knew when the signal came back that it was Fatty above me. He said that once he climbed out and made it aboveground, he contacted Xiao Hua. The area we had been trying to climb out of earlier was the entrance where we came in for the first time so many years ago, so he followed it to find me.

I breathed a sigh of relief, flipped through the bag again, and saw some hardtack. I was hungry, so I opened the packaging and ate a few mouthfuls as I told Fatty about my situation using the whistle and flashlight.

Fatty told me to put my pants on as soon as possible, or a centipede would crawl up my ass. I did as he said and then found half a pack of cigarettes in the bag.

There were only two or three left in the pack, and I scolded Fatty for being so stingy as I lit one and took a puff.

I was so exhausted that I felt as if I had entered a fantasy, and the chaotic feelings were swept away.

The ghost soldiers around me didn't respond, but my cold sweat kept increasing. After my regular senses recovered, my sixth sense became more and more sensitive. When I looked at their white eyes, I kept feeling like they would move at any time. They gave off such an evil aura that I knew I had to leave as soon as possible.

After analyzing both our situations, Fatty said that I was in a position to reach the bronze door directly, and I should be careful of the big centipedes and human-faced birds. He would move on and enter the crater, where he would wait to rendezvous with Xiao Hua. Then, they would take the old route and meet me in front of the door with the ghost seal.

Since my path was essentially a beeline, I would probably arrive before them and may have to wait in the dark for a while. But when I thought of how I was groping around in the dark before, this was nothing.

I walked back to the main road, looked at the direction the key was pointing in, and was just about to start trotting forward, when I saw that the copper key under the flashlight looked a bit strange.

Zhang Qiling, what have you done? I thought to myself.

I looked at the ghost soldiers all around me. Normally, zombies rose wherever I went. There were so many strange corpses here, yet I had made it this far without any of them moving.

It seemed a little unusual.

Fatty continued to move slowly along the protrusions on the rock wall, so I quickly left him behind.

For the next eighteen hours, I ran all the way through the gap at the bottom of Changbai Mountain without any distractions and kept running until large chains started to appear above my head.

When I saw it for the first time, the scene was shocking, and even seeing it again now was still creepy. Chains ran across the whole valley, with countless birds nested on them, their heads curled up under their wings in a dormant state. I had already walked out of the phalanx of ghost soldiers by this point and held my breath as I slowly walked through the bones and rocks on the ground. My flashlight seemed to show a huge bronze wall at the end of my path.

I remembered the huge bronze door embedded in the rock wall, so enormous that I couldn't even see it clearly.

The flashlight's beam couldn't show the whole thing, but it definitely seemed to be there. I had dreamed of it many times, and always wondered when I woke up if I had been hallucinating at that time.

I was so nervous that I thought my heart would burst, and my legs were shaking so much that I had to sit down on the ground.

I really didn't think I would come back here in my lifetime.

The key in my hand was pointing in that direction, but I wasn't in any hurry to go there. I wanted to smoke the second cigarette, but then I looked at the shadows above my head and didn't dare light it.

There was a stone platform in the distance, so I stood back up on my wounded feet and climbed up.

I saw a pile of things spread on top of the stone.

I approached and shook off the dust, finding that it was a pile of clothes. I stared at them for a long time before I recognized them as Poker-Face's clothes. He had taken off his clothes, folded them, and then put them here under a pile of stones.

Did he change into the armor again? I moved the stones, pulled the items out, and found that they were a coat and a pair of shoes. I smelled them, but only got a whiff of bird droppings.

I fiddled with the stains on the clothes, shook off the dust and dry poop, took off my diving suit, and put on the jacket and shoes. Before putting on the shoes, I tore off the inner lining of the jacket pocket and used it to make socks to wrap my feet.

The diving suit did have some insulation to keep me warm, but it obviously wasn't as warm as clothes. I shook the jacket some more, but no matter

how much I shook it, the dust still kept coming out. Despite this, a feeling of comfort began to return to my body.

Little Brother didn't have any personal belongings or anything in his pockets. I sat on the stone, feeling a little overwhelmed.

I'm finally here.

I turned off the flashlight to save the battery, and countless stars appeared in the surrounding darkness. I sat there in the dark, silent and carefree as if I were sitting under the stars outside.

The starlight before my eyes began to move and converge into one constellation after another. Some had Uncle Three's face, while others had Little Brother's face.

Chapter 36 Ten Years

In the past ten years, I had had many dreams. I dreamed of him as a young man whom I had met when I was young. I dreamed of the white bones in front of the bronze door. I dreamed that when I saw him again, he had become something like Chen Pi Ah Si. There were so many possibilities that I had imagined and accepted over these ten years. I also dreamed that Uncle Three tied me to a tree when I was young and left me all alone there by myself.

Before everything started, my Uncle Three was the one that had left the biggest impression on me. When I was old enough to sit at the dining table—my table was in front of the window, outside of which was a bridge. There was a cotton fluffer¹² on the other side of the bridge whose children always snuck to my window, broke the screen, and stole my little toys from the table— my parents always talked about how much trouble Uncle Three caused. He liked to mess around, and whenever he visited my parents, if the rest of the family was cooking, he never helped with the housework. Instead, he would lift me on top of his head and take me out to catch crickets.

I had a very analytical mind, so once I recalled these things— especially over the past ten years—I could see many things that I couldn't see before. I liked catching grasshoppers because you got to look at them quietly after you successfully caught them. They weren't as noisy or competitive as crickets, either. But Uncle Three liked the process of fighting for something, so his purpose for catching crickets had always been clear.

For me, catching grasshoppers was within my power, while catching crickets meant we had to go to dirty places and turn over bricks. I also thought crickets looked terrible and were dangerous, so I followed Uncle Three and watched him turn over stones, trample on oil gourds, and pounce on those

¹² A traditional Chinese handicraft. The purpose is to make cotton softer and suitable for use.

crickets in the wet mud and dead leaves. Maybe my habit of following Uncle Three to spy on his world stemmed from my childhood.

As I sat in the dark, many things flashed through my mind— Grandpa's notes, Changsha Dart Summit, and those from Grandpa's generation. For those like Grandpa who only wanted a full meal and a warm bed, they had to try their best to achieve those things. In addition, their love almost always happened in an instant. They could see someone from afar with one glance, and that would be the moment they fell in love.

At that time, people used simple means for simple purposes but made cruel choices that were unimaginable in this era. That was why Grandpa didn't trust people and liked dogs so much.

Over the past ten years, I had become more and more aware of Grandpa and even Poker-Face's indifference to the world. What was a person? Everyone in this world had their own complete set of problems to be solved, with their own complications, so if you connected with any one of them, you would be connecting with all their problems that needed to be solved.

During these past ten years, I had become more and more aware of the best thing I could give. If it wasn't an element that could solve the other party's problem, then you would be stunned by their determination to turn around and point the gun at you.

Most people in the world didn't know what they needed; they only knew what others had, and decided they couldn't live without it.

That was why most people's hearts were incomprehensible. No matter how much you took out, the huge spider-like web of desire between people wouldn't diminish.

If I were Poker-Face and had experienced this kind of heartache again and again, I would rather be alone in the world. Few people could remain innocent and guiltless after experiencing this kind of ostentatiousness, so those who were born pure could only live in endless loneliness.

I looked up at the continuously changing stars around me. They turned into jumping crickets and other scenes from the past ten years, which were full of sad and incomprehensible things that people had done.

A light in the distance slowly appeared. It seemed to be from an oil lamp, because unlike these stars, it was a distant dot of light that almost looked like a ghost fire.

My heart was weighing heavy in my thoughts just now, and for a moment, I couldn't tell whether it was reality or illusion.

The light drew closer and closer, and I slowly woke up and started to panic as I listened to the sound of footsteps coming from a distance.

If Fatty and Xiao Hua had followed the original plan, then they shouldn't be appearing here yet. This was the bottom of Changbai Mountain, so how could anyone be walking around with a lamp?

Was Little Brother tired of staying in the door and came out for a walk?

Chapter 37 The Third Me

I picked up a stone from the pile beside me. I didn't think he would be able to find me so quickly since I was in the dark, but if anything had changed, I would at least have a chance to defend myself.

The only walkable path in this underground valley was very narrow, and the light wobbled as it gradually approached my position.

I saw a man coming towards me, and he was holding a lantern and wearing a ragged jacket. He didn't see me standing there in the dark as he stopped to catch his breath and looked around.

He then sat down and put the lantern on a waist-high stone that was off to the side.

I initially felt confused when the light illuminated his face because it was like I knew it, but at the same time, I didn't. Then I realized that both feelings were correct because what I was seeing was my own face. The man who had come here looked exactly like me.

I narrowed my eyes. *Zhang Haike? Or...*

His face was full of fatigue, and he was looking around in confusion. No, not Zhang Haike. Those in the Zhang family usually had sharp, resolute eyes.

He didn't seem to have any plans to move on and began tidying up his backpack. There was some food in his backpack, which he seemed to be eating.

My hands were shaking, my mind was blank, and I didn't know how to react. Suddenly, the man seemed to hear something and raised his head in alarm. I quickly held my breath but noticed that he wasn't looking in my direction. He was looking into the depths of the canyon.

I turned to look and saw another dot of light swaying in the distance.

The Wu Xie in front of me seemed nervous. He watched and waited for a while before taking out a pistol, but he didn't make any other moves.

I continued clutching the stone in my hand, and after half an hour, I saw another man holding a torch and approaching very carefully.

As the man came closer, I saw that he was wearing a tight cotton-padded jacket for mountain climbing and carrying a huge mountaineering bag. He seemed to smell the kerosene nearby and pulled out a mountaineering pick. When the other Wu Xie looked at him from under the lantern's glow, neither of them looked surprised at all. Instead, the newcomer put his backpack down.

His hair was very long— longer than mine and the other one's—and he hadn't shaved his beard for a long time. He took the mountaineering pick and cleared out a section of gravel to give himself a place to rest.

I looked at this third person's face and felt even more cold sweat come pouring down. It was also my face.

What's going on?

My clear mind became chaotic, and I couldn't think.

Why was there more than one of me here?

And they were acting just like me. Could it be that the Wu Xies Zhang Haike had been hunting down before were disguised as me for this purpose?

Then, in the distant darkness, lights began to appear one by one. I was horrified when I realized that countless people were starting to come here.

Fucking hell, I said to myself.

As I watched the lights continue appearing one after the other, all the hair on my body stood on end.

These people didn't pay any attention to the others and merely found a place to sit down, just like that first "me". They didn't talk or look at each other and just sat there quietly. Soon, the canyon outside the bronze door was filled with lights and the starlight disappeared. It looked just like the firelight covering the mountain during the Shiva Lantern Festival.

Chapter 38 Enter the Door

I stayed in the dark for a long time, until there wasn't any more darkness to hide in. When I finally decided to move, I started walking between them. I walked for a long time, but none of them looked up at me. Some were looking around in confusion or at the things in their hands, some were resting with their eyes closed, and others simply fell asleep.

I squeezed the stone in my hand. I didn't understand what was going on, but I knew that this scene was different from what I had imagined countless times.

The idea to kill them all kept springing to the forefront of my mind. No matter why these people appeared here, I didn't want such a complicated situation.

I took the stone and went up to a sleeping Wu Xie, looking at him coldly as I lifted the stone up.

He turned over, opened his eyes, and looked at me without a trace of fear. At this time, I suddenly realized where I had seen him before.

He was sleeping wearily on a rock and clutching a bottle of unlabeled liquor in his hand.

This was what I looked like when I returned to Hangzhou. I was lying in front of the shop, facing the West Lake, and drinking liquor as I watched people pass by in front of me like threads woven on a loom. I had no alcohol tolerance at all, and once I woke up, I still felt dizzy despite only having two drinks.

At that time, I felt tired and desperate. Everything had returned to zero.

I lost everything and gained nothing.

I put down my stone and looked at the Wu Xies around me. They were all moments from my life over the past ten years. Everyone was a reflection of me.

They were wearing different clothes, had different degrees of vigilance, and were armed with different weapons.

People never have this kind of opportunity to look at themselves so clearly. I climbed onto a big rock and suddenly thought to myself, *is this an illusion? Why are so many pieces of my past projected in front of me? Did I unknowingly enter the bronze door, and this luster illuminated by my flashlight is the back of the door?*

As I thought this, the lights around me began to go out bit by bit, and the darkness slowly returned, leaving only the glow's afterimage. Then, I felt something licking my lips.

My consciousness slowly returned, and I realized that I had been sleeping. I could hear someone talking nearby, and when I opened my eyes, I saw a bonfire in front of me and Brother Xiao Man was licking my face.

I didn't know what Xiao Hua had given him, but his saliva stank. I rolled over, sat up, and saw several bonfires around me.

I was relieved when someone handed me a cup, but when I went to take it, I found that the scars on my hands had been sewn up.

"Huh? When did I fall asleep?" I asked.

Someone poured hot tea into my cup, "You're not asleep, you're in shock."

"Nonsense." I took a sip of the hot tea. Over the past ten years, I had experienced much harsher environments than the one I was in now. Why would I go into shock here when I didn't then?

I turned my head, thinking I would see Fatty, Xiao Hua, or someone else. Instead, I saw a man in leather, wearing sunglasses and looking at me with a cup in his hand.

“I haven’t woken up yet, have I?” I took a sip of tea. “Why else would you be here?”

“Yes, you’re hallucinating. You’re going to die soon.” Black Glasses said to me. “The temperature here is very low, and you’re sleeping on a rock. It’s highly unlikely they’ll find you before you die.”

“I won’t die. Why would I be hallucinating about you before I died anyway?” I asked, looking at Brother Xiao Man.

I suddenly had a bad feeling. I could see hallucinating Black Glasses, but why would I be hallucinating about this smelly dog?

I was keenly aware that I wasn’t awake yet, so I stood up and looked around. In a single glance, I saw Fatty lying dead behind the boulder I had been laying on. His neck was broken, his hands and feet were twisted all out of sorts, and his spine was exposed. One of the monkeys was eating something from his spine.

“When he came down, he slipped off the chain and broke his neck.” Black Glasses came up behind me, hooked his arm around my shoulder, and motioned me to look to the other side.

I turned to see Xiao Hua’s head rolling in a pile of rubble, his body nowhere in sight.

“Take his head and give it to Xiuxiu and see if she’ll still want to be friends with you this time.” Black Glasses said. “He was torn to pieces by a human-faced bird. Your men tried to save him—”

Beside Xiao Hua’s head, Kan Jian was pressed under a stone. His eyeballs had been squeezed out and his brain was flowing out from the empty sockets. “The birds here grabbed the stone and dropped it like a bomb.”

I walked towards them, looking at the bodies of the guys around them, which had all been torn to pieces. Internal organs littered the ground and the smell of blood permeated the air.

No one was alive.

My hands were cold. When I looked at Black Glasses, all he said was, "I told you it might end like this. As long as one person continues moving forward, the people around him will continue to encounter these things."

I didn't speak. I might have collapsed if this was ten years earlier, but now I wouldn't. I had already recognized the impermanence of life.

Black Glasses looked at me: "Not talking? Come on, come with me."

"Where to?"

Black Glasses pointed up ahead with a flashlight, and I found that the huge bronze door had opened. A gap had appeared between the bronze, but it was slowly closing.

He picked a gun up from the ground, threw it to me, and rushed toward the gap. I checked the bullets, picked up the flashlight from Fatty's body, and then followed him toward the gap.

As the human-faced birds swooped down toward us, I stuck close behind him and fired the gun. There was one tracer for every ten rounds, and as the light arced through the sky, I took advantage of the chaos and rushed into the gap.

Chapter 39 Strange

It was pitch black inside the gap, so I pointed the gun muzzle upwards and shot the tracer bullets into the darkness. In the subsequent flash, I saw countless stone towers and piles of stones that were covered in tiny decorative patterns.

“What is this place?” I turned back and shot at the door, killing one of the human-faced birds that flew in, but more kept coming.

Black Glasses grabbed my neck, pushed me down behind a pile of stones, and revealed a detonator in his hand. He threw it out and it exploded in mid-air.

The loud roar created a very strange sound effect in the bronze door, and it was as if I could see the sound waves moving across the whole area. All the patterns on the stones lit up, and as the phosphorescence shone across the whole cave wall, I could see that all of the walls were covered in delicate patterns.

After the sound waves, there were light lines that went all the way to the depths of the earth.

As blood rained down from the sky, Black Glasses shouted, “Stand up!” He and I stood up together and kept shooting towards the door, killing the monkeys that crawled out of the bloody bird carcasses that had been blown up.

Is this what it's like inside the door? As I looked around, the phosphorescence flashed as if it were talking to me.

“What is this place?” I asked as I involuntarily stopped shooting.

“See for yourself!” Black Glasses shouted.

I looked at the cave walls covered in patterns and noticed that there were a bunch of stone people embedded in them. These people were naked, and

their skin was exactly the same as the stone here. There were thousands of them curled up in the fetal position in pits on the cave walls, and I could see an umbilical cord leading from their stomachs to the stone here.

At almost the exact same time, I saw those strange lines more clearly and realized that they were countless numbers.

These stone people were of varying sizes. Some were babies, some were teenagers, and some were adults, but all of them had Poker-Face's face.

They weren't moving at all and were just lying there quietly.

Each one was marked with a number, which may have been written with a dye made from the insects here. I couldn't calculate how many there were, because I didn't know how deep the cave went, but as far as I could tell, the whole mountain here was full of these stone people.

"Wang Zanghai wrote that he came down the chains, saw the giant bronze door standing at the bottom of the mountain crater, and the thousands of stone people inside. The stone is like a womb, and the umbilical cords connecting these people to the stone eliminates any ruthless desires or calculating hearts. Each is marked with a number. It goes on and on, and is seemingly endless." Black Glasses said.

"Little Brother is a fucking stone person?"

Black Glasses finally killed a monkey, picked up a piece of stone from the rubble on the ground, and threw it to me. It was shaped like a human hand.

"Every once in a while, these people turn back into stone. Each stone pile here is a Zhang Qiling. After one gets broken, another one will grow in ten years."

"Nonsense." I was cold all over as I looked at the piles of stone. The Zhang Qiling I knew was one of them? "I'm dreaming, I have to wake up quickly."

Black Glasses looked at me: "He's just stone, just like any other piece here."

“I’m dreaming.” I looked at Black Glasses. “Fuck, let me wake up quickly!”

The real and illusory feelings were in constant chaos, and I felt sick to my stomach as the Black Glasses in front of me went in and out of focus.

He looked at me: “If some people can’t come back in time, they’ll become a statue. And for those that do come back here, the part of their memory that they cherish—”

I pointed my gun at Black Glasses. “Stop it.”

“You won’t shoot.” Black Glasses looked at me. “Even if you think you’re dreaming, you won’t shoot me.”

I put down my gun and looked around. In the dim light, these people appeared like mushrooms on the rock walls. What the hell was this place?

In ten years, what about the next Poker-Face? I used my flashlight to look closer at the stone people, but a figure suddenly flashed behind Black Glasses and a knife stuck out of his chest.

I jolted awake, rolled over, and sat up.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!” There was a wild cry from someone beside me. I turned around and was surprised to see Fatty and Baishe.

“You’re like a zombie.” Fatty wiped the tea he had spilled all over his chest when I scared him just now. I quickly looked around and found that the charcoal fire around me was very steady and warm, and I was covered in Fatty’s clothes.

I was covered in a cold sweat as I turned around twice, looking for Black Glasses. When I didn’t see any sign of him, I felt relieved.

“You finally made it down. How long have I been asleep?” As I moved around, I found that a warm bag had been placed on me.

“We don’t know. When we found you, you were already in a coma.” Baishe said. “You’ve been moving around in a low-temperature environment and may have been too excited to know that your metabolism stopped. Wu Xie, you’ve really disappointed me. What happened just now?”

“Madam White is right, and really knows everything. We’re totally invincible with Madam White on our side,” Fatty said. “Even this fat man has to admire Madam White for a week.”

Fatty was all about respect and seniority, so Baishe’s habit may have been too much for him.

Baishe ignored him and said, “All men are created equal. Calling each other by titles makes me feel bad.”

I looked at the bronze door in the distance. “Where’s Xiao Hua?”

“I can’t contact him here, but don’t worry. He and the others are strong.”

I told myself I wasn’t worried about that. Time was running out and he was the one that had the ghost seal.

“Do you know how that thing opens the door?” Fatty handed me a cigarette and motioned for me to chew it.

I looked in the direction of the bronze door as I chewed the cigarette to pieces. “Damn it, it’s all sweaty.”

“I kept the last pack close to my body to protect it. It’s what you’d call a fat man’s fragrance. You used to vomit when you chewed it before, but now you’ve really matured.” Fatty shined a flashlight in the direction I was looking, revealing the luster of the looming bronze. It truly was too big to miss.

I spit out the cigarette and retched twice. Fatty winked at me and motioned for me to follow him.

“What did you find?”

“When you were having your nightmare and shouting ‘Don’t! Don’t!’, I looked around here again and found something strange.” As he said this, he walked to the bronze door.

Chapter 40 Retirement

The two shaking flashlight beams in the dark couldn't slow down my unstable heartbeat. When I approached the huge bronze door, the overwhelming luster gave off an ancient, deep feeling.

It took some time to cover the distance and get closer to the door. As it got bigger and bigger before my eyes, I started to get more out of breath.

Luckily, we left the ghost seal outside. Otherwise, the door would probably open when we reached it.

No one knew how exactly to use the ghost seal, but last time, Little Brother seemed to have just taken it and gone in.

"It's not time yet. If you get to the door and it fucking opens, he'll be super embarrassed since he's not wearing any pants." Fatty said.

"He has pants. I'm wearing them." I pointed to my pants.

"Then it's even more fucking embarrassing." Fatty said.

"Do you think Little Brother is the kind of person who cares about saving face? If he could come out early, then it wouldn't matter if he wasn't wearing any pants. If I was locked up for ten years, I'd definitely be willing to come out without any pants on as long as I can come out a few days early."

Fatty sniffed, "Have you ever seen Little Brother lose face?"

"I don't think so." I tried to remember.

"In other words, Little Brother is definitely the kind of person who really cares about saving face. Otherwise, ordinary people will definitely have experiences losing face. Moreover, if we open the door before the time comes, maybe there will be a chain reaction." Fatty made a move like Little Brother snapping our necks.

I turned to look at the door and was surprised to find that even at such a short distance, the patterns on it were still very delicate, just like in my dream. I thought of everything that had happened in my dream just now and felt a little uncomfortable.

The two of us looked at the door for a long time without speaking.

“Do you think I’ll live forever if I lick it?” Fatty murmured.

I took a deep breath and told myself it wasn’t that simple or crude.

“Little Brother, Little Brother, we’re here. If you’re in there, give us a squeak.” Fatty shouted at the top of his voice.

We quieted down and listened, but didn’t hear a peep.

“The door’s too thick.” Fatty patted me.

“Don’t mess around, what did you find?” I was a little impatient as he took something out of his pocket and gave it to me. I found that it was a stone.

“This is?”

“A stone tower,” Fatty said. “Someone put a simple stone tower on the shrine. We only got here so quickly because we followed it. It seems to be a mark left by Little Brother.”

It looked like he had put guide markers on every path. I touched the stone and asked, “Then what?”

“Then, there’s generally only one way to go, right?”

I nodded, and Fatty said, “The path Little Brother showed us led to a fork in the road.”

I was silent for a moment and suddenly realized the reason why he had asked me to come over. I thought about it and quietly asked, “Did you go and check out the other path?”

“I was worried about your safety, so I came here first.” Fatty sat down in front of the bronze door. “Are you going to have a look?”

I also sat down and shook my head. Fatty showed a surprised expression and asked, “Oh, you’re not interested? Maybe Little Brother left something there that you’ll need to know.”

“True,” I said. “Maybe everything is in that place. But maybe, he’s just trying to test me. Maybe he’s worried I’m still someone who can’t see the truth clearly and can’t let it go.”

Fatty was silent and gave me a long look. I stared right back, and after a long time, he finally asked, “You really don’t want to see it?”

“I’m not interested at all,” I answered.

“The prodigal son can really turn around.” Fatty gave a thumbs up. “It’s not that you have a bad temper, but after going through so many experiences, you have to know when to stop. In that case, we’ll wait. What are you going to do when Little Brother comes out? Have you ever thought about it?”

I looked at the bronze door in front of me and said, “I once visited a mountain village in the south of Fujian. The feng shui of the village is very strange. It’s located on half the slope of a valley, and water from six waterfalls falls on the village all year round as if it were raining. There was an old man in the village who said that monks had visited there before, and they wrote a poem saying that it hadn’t been dry for thousands of years.

“It’s beautiful there and the water is clean. There are a lot of big trees near the village, and the village itself is very simple. I’m going to stay there for a while. Little Brother will be free if he comes out, and I don’t know where he’ll go.”

“What about your business?”

“I’ll give it to Xiao Hua. I owe him. Whether he shuts it down or keeps it going, it’s up to him.”

“Damn it, I’ve been your brother for so many years, yet you’re giving it to Xiao Hua instead of me?”

I grabbed Fatty’s pig neck and said, “As your brother for many years, I’ll solemnly tell you that you should retire. Come to the village with me. The village secretary is perfect for you.”

Fatty smiled and suddenly pushed aside the stone in front of him, revealing the ghost seal and a bronze groove underneath.

“Xiao Hua said that if you chose to go to the fork in the road and have a look, your fate wouldn’t change and this thing should be buried here forever. If you give up, you deserve a future.”

I looked at him and asked, “What are you playing at?”

“He won’t come down.” Fatty replied.

I felt an ominous premonition in my heart, “What happened to Xiao Hua?”

“Don’t worry, he’s fine. He’s waiting for us up there.” Fatty shrugged and stood up. “This is the last time you’ve been deceived. We should all retire. It’s only when you really leave that you can—”

“End it.” I finished for him. “Become someone without a past or future. Someone who has nothing to do with this world.”

Chapter 41 The Finale

When I woke up in the morning, I realized that it was the last day of our agreement. I woke Fatty up and washed my face.

How will he show up? What will be the first thing he says? Will he be alone when he comes out? If there's a bunch of things following him out, will I have to kill them all?

I checked my ammo and sat in front of the bronze door with two guns. After thinking it over, however, I decided it was inappropriate.

Truthfully, I didn't sleep a wink last night. I yawned and put the guns behind me.

Fatty came over and handed me a phone. "Let's listen to some music. What should we listen to today?"

"What do you have?" I brought it over, clicked on the app, and found that the playlist was full of square-dancing songs. I figured Little Brother would probably shrink back behind the door if I played this, although I did find it quite interesting.

"Don't you have anything else?"

"There's a song that's been very popular recently. A little girl in Banai sent it to me." Fatty took the phone back, searched through it for a long time, and then showed me the title: "See You Again."

I made sure the volume was low and hit play. It was all in English. I listened to the song silently, and even Fatty didn't speak.

“It’s been a long day without you my friend,
And I’ll tell you all about it when I see you again.”¹³

Fatty hummed along. The song was quite nice, so I kept silent and listened for a long time.

Is he not coming out? I sighed. Fatty slowly fell asleep beside me, snoring lightly.

I struggled to stay awake, but I couldn’t help feeling sleepy listening to the music.

In the dim light, I saw the bronze door open.

*I’m just like the little match girl*¹⁴, I thought as I rubbed my face and opened my eyes.

Sure enough, nothing had actually happened.

I knew it wouldn’t work, so I looked at Fatty and started talking to him.

“The people in that village make a dessert from glutinous rice and brown sugar. Since there’s plenty of rain in the village, a special weed called Yuzaishen grows there. The petals of this weed are put into the dessert and are said to help with memory. Of course, it’s only a local legend.”

I kept yawning as I spoke. My consciousness began to blur, but I didn’t stop talking. I don’t know how long I stayed up, but in my hazy state, I suddenly felt someone slowly sit down beside me.

I hesitated for a moment, glanced sideways, and saw the other person looking at me as well.

¹³ This was in English on the raw if anyone cares. Same with the song title “See You again”. I found 2 versions. The Wiz Khalifa version ft. Charlie Puth is [here](#) and the one without Wiz Khalifa is [here](#). Based on the ambience they’ve got going on, I feel like they’re listening to the latter.

¹⁴ From Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale. The story is about a dying child’s hopes and dreams. More info [here](#)

Fatty slowly woke up and looked at us.

I saw a familiar face and indifferent eyes reflecting the light of the bonfire.

People say that when you forget someone, the first thing you forget is their voice. But when he spoke, it wasn't unfamiliar at all.

"You've aged," he said

The music was still flowing in this place close to hell.

Fatty came up, hooked his arm around Poker-Face's shoulder, and caused him to stumble: "How can we compare with Little Brother? And you were willing to come out!!"

Poker-Face swayed from all the jostling.

I pulled down my sleeve, covered the scars on my arm, and stood up.

He smiled at me and I lifted my bag. "Let's go."

We just...haven't seen you for a long time.

<><><><><>

I live at the North Sea and you at the South Sea,
I asked the wild goose to pass a letter but was told they could not.
Each of us held a cup of wine and talked amid spring wind with peach and plum blossom,
For ten years we missed each other before lamps during night rain outside.¹⁵

-Grave Robbers' Chronicles: Ten Years Later (end)-

¹⁵ "Ji Huang Ji Fu" is a poem by Song Dynasty writer Huang Tingjian. Credit goes to [this website](#) lol

Chapter 42 I'm Still Hopeless. Please Forgive Me

I finished the last chapter on the plane. I wanted to write more about them walking around, but no matter how I wrote it, I could only stop at that place. (Originally known as: died one meter away)

I had a strange idea that as long as I wrote a few more words, there wouldn't be any emotions stuck in my throat or that blank feeling after the last sentence appeared. But I needed this feeling. It's like that feeling you get when the scene ends, the screen suddenly goes black, and then the music and end credits start. There's no need to wait for the lights to come back on, but you can't get up and leave.

No, actually, I can't write.

In the last chapter, after so many years of figurative language and inspiration, I knew all the skills needed to make people cry at the end.

But I can't write any more. You can see how exhausted I am by looking at the last sentence. I'm really exhausted. After typing thousands of words, my fingers feel like huge weights, and they can't take it anymore.

As an untrained writer, God must have used my fingers to type this book, for as I was writing, I was always in a panic, fearing that others would find out that I was actually a layman. I did everything to try and hide it, and it's a miracle I could come this far. I admit that I really can't write well, but I've run out of steam and can't write another word.

I'm 33 years old, and I've been writing my debut work for ten years. Forgive me for blanking in the end. The lingering emotions are still there, but I'm already a meter away from becoming a dried-up skeleton.

Sometime in the future, my slogan will probably be: "The pits are still there!" because Sand Sea 3 & 4 and Tibetan Sea Flower 2 haven't been published after being revised. Since they'll be published eventually, I didn't

want to keep you in suspense. The pit has been filled a little, but there are still some unfilled ones, so don't have any illusions about me. I still dare not write about some of the ideas I had for filling the holes. I only dare to write about them in my dreams.

In fact, I had been thinking about this "Ten Years Later" story on the drawing board for a long time, but after scribbling it out hastily, many of the sentences were incomprehensible. It's not a published story, after all, and hasn't been revised numerous times. There are still a lot of pieces of logic hidden in it, but you don't have to worry about them.

At this time, I don't know what to do. I always felt regretful and apologetic for how "Grave Robbers' 8" ended. It's a pity I've been drawing a blank for ten years. I'm so sorry. I always feel like the book shouldn't be like this, but should be better.

Unfortunately, I don't have that kind of talent or skill. I'm just a layman, damn it. It's really not fair.

However, the green hills do not change and the clear waters will keep flowing. I hope to see you soon.¹⁶

¹⁶ This either came from Bai Juyi's "Farewell" poem, or Lu Guimeng's "Parting" poem (or neither lol), I can't tell. They were both Tang Dynasty poets.

Chapter 43 Peaceful

I'm different from other people when it comes to trending on the homepage. I follow more than 400 people, so I've divided them into two groups: must-see and attention out of etiquette.

Must-see is a group that I have to see directly no matter what happens. For example, with Caitou (@hecaitou), no matter if it's a late-night meal or a catfight, I have to watch it without fail. As far as the attention out of etiquette one is concerned, I'm sorry. Those who always post marketing stuff, negative news, and travel photos on Weibo will be in this group.

But even so, it's painful to be on the homepage, because for me, I've been trending for more than 9 years, and have been saturated with the same topic every day. This isn't a life fit for humans.

I really want to take a break, so I've been thinking about how to avoid trending on the homepage.

I think many people have the same wish as me.

After the 8/17 post, I wish I had something else for you to look at, but I don't know what else I can post besides the advertisements I have to post. But I'll try, so that at least those people who only follow me can have a rest. For example, I could live-broadcast me river fishing?

I'm very grateful to those many people who fight to defend me, and in the next three months, I think I'll be able to face all the people who have blackened me. I say three months, because that will give them all enough time to have their fun slinging mud at me, and after three months, I figure they'll lose their motivation. Of course, that only applies to blackening. If any rumors start spreading, I'll sue.

Therefore, if someone hacks me in the next three months, I hope everyone will let me bear it alone. Don't feel aggrieved for me. This is normal in a

network environment. If I get into the habit after three months, it'll all calm down.

Maybe I'll try to take this approach first.

Of course, it's easy to pretend to be a fan¹⁷, so my reputation might take a hit, but the first thing I'll focus on is my own peace. "Grave Robbers' Chronicles" has been going on for so many years, so it's time I learn to protect myself.

Another thing is giving up some identities. Everyone has also supported me for so long, but because of their persistent support for me, they gradually took the brunt of the negative comments directed at me. It's unnecessary. Loving a book should be a simple thing, after all. I hope everyone's first priority is to stay positive.

Saying you like Nan Pai San Shu and "Grave Robbers' Chronicles" has become a symbol of determination and courage for fans. I think there is no need to be this exhausted, and I'll have no other choice but to feel the pressure to do well. I hope everyone's external evaluation is very simple: "Can't say I love the books very much, but at least Nan Pai San Shu did good." That's it.

The world is dangerous. When I was writing a book in the past, there was only one person talking to you all. Now, there might be many people telling you many things about me and this book.

I can tell you frankly that I have a principle where I only recognize the ones involved, and I only fight for the interests of those involved. I don't do this for the people around them, because a prosperous person always has a group of people hanging around them for the money. I won't help them and sell my friends out, because their income has nothing to do with it.

¹⁷ He actually says "rice" in the sentence. Per Tiffany: the nickname of Daomu Biji fans is "Daomi". Even though it means "rice" in Chinese. It's a play on words since Daomi can also be interpreted as a word short for fans ("Mi" in Chinese) of Daomu Biji—> Daomi.

Chapter 44 Postscript

After listening to people's thoughts after reading "Ten Years", I thought for five days after 8/17 before I found what I wanted to say. Although I talked a lot in the interview, I kept feeling that I should finally write something to give back to the fans in the comment section. Maybe it's a complex called "falling leaves come back to the roots". From the time I first started writing "Grave Robbers' Chronicles", I just quietly listened to your voices, and now at the end, I want to go back to the comments and continue listening to your voices.

Previously, many friends asked me why it was called "Tranquil Sea". I'm sorry I pushed it for a long time. Maybe digging pits is my style and I can't change it. I had called it "Tranquil Sea" because writing was like a sea of bitterness formed by countless deep pits. In this sea, all I did was wander around and get myself lost several times. I used to struggle alone in it, very quiet and depressed. But because of you, who have been supporting me during my most difficult time, the sea has blossomed and borne fruit, and now there are trees that can survive and flourish.

In fact, I have been reading the messages on Weibo and the replies in the comment sections the whole time. This silent support has stayed in my heart and gradually converged into a driving force, which supported me to the end.

The Bodhi Tree¹⁸ represents my longing for the finale. After fasting under the Bodhi tree for seven days, the Buddha finally became enlightened. The Bodhisattva turned the willow branches in the jade bottle into towering trees to extradite the refugees in the flood. Maybe in the world of "Grave Robbers' Chronicles", we all need such a big tree to extradite us. Maybe someone has discovered after reading "Ten Years" that the whole tomb-raiding adventure, from "Tibetan Sea Flower" to "Sand Sea", is interwoven

¹⁸ A large and ancient sacred fig tree located in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India, under which Siddhartha Gautama, the spiritual teacher who became known as Buddha, is said to have attained enlightenment or Bodhi circa 500 BCE. More info [here](#)

by entwined roots, and the blood of this root extends to the foot of Changbai Mountain.

Sometimes, when a person stays at home for a long time, he will suddenly feel that the world is like a huge TV, and we are just fragments in one of the movies that will be gone once it's over. Remember the single-player games you played as a child? Every game has a final Boss and a final destination. Just like "Legend of the Sword 3"¹⁹, the dying Jing Tian and Xue Jian returned to the pawnshop in Yuzhou, and like Xiao Ding's "Jade Dynasty"²⁰, Zhang Xiaofan and Lu Xueqi returned to Caomiao Village. At that time, I envied that kind of sad and beautiful ending. Biyao's life and death were uncertain, but the dark green ends of a cloth and the tinkling of a bell still accompanied Zhang Xiaofan.

I still remember the paragraph to this day:

"The two of them stood still, gazing into each other's eyes. After so many years, the worries and feelings of the mortal world seemed to flash within this deep gaze. Then, the both of them laughed at the same time... A light breeze blew past, causing the bell under the eaves to chime, and the ends of the green cloth to gently float in the air, as if it were also smiling. The clear ringing of the bell floated up with the wind and reverberated between the heavens and the earth..."²¹

I'm sorry that "Ten Years" didn't give you such a beautiful ending and ended abruptly. As for why this happened, I've already said it before. Some people say that the Sphinx is still perfect without its nose, and the Venus is still perfect without its arms. Even the last piece Bach wrote before he died was unfinished, so the notes came to an abrupt end. But even when there's no sound, the intoxicating feeling seems to continue. I don't want to find

¹⁹ It's a video game. [Here's](#) more info

²⁰ It's a xianxia novel written by Xiao Ding. The novel keeps looking for the answer to a question "What is true righteousness?" but concludes that "Heartless World, treat everything as straw dogs!", which perhaps is the main theme. It got turned into a video game too. Book info [here](#) (I found it on [novel updates](#) too lol). Game info [here](#)

²¹ Owlhoot translated that whole paragraph (and the story obviously) [here](#) if you prefer their version to what I have.

excuses for myself one way or another; the fans have a right to experience their own moods.

If the hands on the clock can turn back, I hope they'll always stay at the moment when the three people "Wu Xie", "Fatty", and "Poker-Face" get together. The story is over, but their friendship will continue. I hope this "feast" will never stop...

Let's go back to a summer night many years ago when I was a senior in high school. As I was sitting alone on the playground, I started thinking about dreams and so-called life for the first time. Before that, I merely used writing as a tool to attract girls' attention. Time brought me back to reality and those countless days and nights of feeling helpless. Those wishful thoughts I came up with when I was bored eventually became stories that touched thousands of people's hearts. At that time, I only thought that I didn't have any skills besides writing stories, so why didn't I write them out and continue writing them? I didn't expect this writing to be an obsession that would continue for ten years.

As for the finale, meticulous people may find that the "snake cypress" in the "Seven Star Lu Palace" story, the bronze tree in the "Qinling God Tree" story, and the "centipede trees" and stone people "umbilical cord trees" in "Ten Years" have always revolved around a "tree". Unlike the "sea" in "Deadly Desert Winds" and "Sand Sea", the "tree" is more likely to act as a clue that runs throughout the whole series. Then how can the ultimate of everything just be a tree? I doubted myself so much. Before Darwin's "Theory of Evolution" was written, people didn't believe that they came from "monkeys". Now, however, we accept that people came from "monkeys", "monkeys" came from lower animals, and lower animals came from immobile plants. These plants first came from the sea, but there were only simple "bacteria" in the sea at first.

The magical thing about this world is that under its originally simple appearance, an extreme complexity is often hidden. There are hundreds of billions of stars in the Milky Way, hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe, hundreds of billions of neurons hidden in everyone's mind, and

tens of millions of species on Earth. All these complicated things may have been the simplest things in the beginning.

Buddha said: one flower becomes one world; one leaf becomes one bodhi.²²
God said: let there be light, so there was light. Daoism says: Dao begets one, one begets two, two begets three, three begets all things.²³

My first idea was that maybe one day, more than three billion years ago, a black meteorite crossed the night sky and fell into the sea. The “bacteria” on the meteorite multiplied in the sea and grew into plants... and finally became a tree of life that bred all life on Earth. The branches and leaves on the tree would be as complex as the patterns on the bronze door. But when “Grave Robbers’ Chronicles” was first conceived, it didn’t fit within the scope of “novel” or “historical”, and considering this was the field of science or theology, I didn’t write it in. If any readers wanted to ask again, I can only say that there’s nothing and everything behind the bronze door. It’s a huge mixture that contains infinite possibilities and covers all forms. From chaos to order, from simple to complex, it’s as boundless as the universe. That’s why I can’t describe it.

In fact, like you, I’ve thought more than ten thousand times about what’s hidden behind the bronze door and what the ultimate of all things is. There are actually many answers. The bronze door may be the beginning of this story, or maybe it’s the origin of Chinese civilization. Just like the creator in “The Matrix”, who hides in an empty room and looks at this seemingly bland world indifferently, while those of us outside ignorantly continue our trivial lives, this bronze door might represent a bug in this game-like world.

Then where’s the bug in our real world? No one knows. Maybe it’s in the majestic Changbai Mountain, buried under thousands of years of ice. Or maybe it’s some ancient sleeping god, like the “leopard-tailed, tiger-

²² It basically ties to the author’s theme about complicated things starting from simple things

²³ “Dao” means way or path. Daoists preferred to understand the dao as the Way of Nature as a whole. [Here’s](#) some background info if you want it. You can also read it as “Dao begets One (nothingness; or reason of being), One begets Two (yin and yang), Two begets Three (Heaven, Earth and Man; or yin, yang and breath qi), Three begets all things.”

toothed” Queen Mother of the West, or the “human-faced, snake-bodied” Fuxi²⁴... or some other god.

If they really exist, I think they certainly don’t want to be disturbed by our noisy world, so we need a guardian—Zhang Qiling, who must live for a long time, not feel any worldly desires or emotions, never enter the cycle of reincarnation, and stubbornly stick to the path. But this kind of life for him is very cruel. It brings to mind that pianist who was buried at sea in the movie “The Legend of 1900”. Why couldn’t he leave the cruise ship? Because he was born on that ship. That was where his life—his whole world—was. Zhang Qiling’s heart was bound to the bronze door from the beginning, and the warmth of the world was beyond his reach—until Wu Xie appeared.

Buddha said that if two people are predestined, they can meet unexpectedly even after ten years of separation. “Wang Zanghai came down the chains, saw the giant bronze door standing at the bottom of the mountain crater, and the thousands of stone people inside. The stone is like a womb, and the umbilical cords connecting these people to the stone eliminates any ruthless desires or calculating hearts. It goes on and on, and is seemingly endless.” Will the Zhang Qiling who can’t go home solidify like that stone statue in the Tibetan lama temple? And for whom were those tears hanging from the corner of his eyes? Only you can judge.

As for Wu Xie, where’s his destination? Or, what has he been looking for and why? Wu Xie isn’t a man who covets fame. He has seen selfishness from “Qiu Dekao”, “Chen Pi Ah Si”, “Wang Zanghai” and even “Wu Sanxing”, but what Wu Xie wants isn’t money or power. All he has is a fatal curiosity and obsession with his friends. He just wants to solve the puzzle he accidentally fell into. He was getting deeper and deeper, but now he’s reached the end.

²⁴ In early Chinese texts, the Queen Mother of the West was said to have a wild, almost feral appearance befitting her ferocious personality. But around the Tang Dynasty, texts started describing her as having the appearance of a human woman, though she retained some beastly traits—notably, tiger’s teeth and a leopard’s tail. She’s referenced a lot in DMBJ but [here’s](#) some more info. Fuxi (or Fu His) was a legendary Chinese emperor 2852-2738 BC. Said to be the mythical creator of fishing, trapping, and writing. Also said to be a creature that had the face of a human and body of a snake. Info [here](#)

Fate is often double-sided. On one hand, everyone is happy; on the other hand, everything is burning. In front of the bronze door, Wu Xie finally realized his original intention. He can withstand every minute and every second after those ten long years, and let go of his obsession like the passing rain. He doesn't care about the truth behind this door, or where Zhang Qiling comes from, or even if he's the same person. All he cares about is the "Poker-Face" in his heart.

That is why Wu Xie is as detached as "Fatty" in the end and able to let everything go.

Life is like a big dream, and except for some differences between reality and dreams, we are all here to interact with each other. After all the bitter resentment, gains and losses, and right and wrong, he let it all go. The time spent with the people we care about is too short, so you might as well take advantage of those remaining decades. This is the best ending, because from now on, he doesn't have to take risks and run around everywhere.

Fate's arrangements are hard to fathom, but they are inextricably linked. For example, when a person should do something, things will end when they're supposed to. If they haven't ended, then that person just hasn't realized it yet, and there's no way to end it desperately.

It's just like a dream I had many years ago. Some people say that there's no color in dreams, but this one was vaguely colored. There was a teenager in the dream. He was as white as snow and his smile was as bright as summer. I asked him what was behind the door, but he just shook his head and said with a smile, "You'll know when you go in." But I couldn't touch the door and ended up waking up. Many years later, I had the same dream again. I pushed open the door in the dream and suddenly saw the young man in front of me. He smiled and said to me, "I'm the one hiding behind the door..."

In order to make a joke, he waited for me in this dream for ten years.

Under the bodhi tree, there's a tranquil sea glazed with lights. The Sea of Tranquility is gone forever. Ten years gives rise to enlightenment.

Author: Uncle Three's Bodhi Tree

End of Volume 11: Ten Years Later