

Grave Robbers' Chronicles: Extras

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EXTRA 1: 2009 Chinese New Year Special

Chapter 1.1 Shrine Hall

This village was no different from the new countryside.¹

It happened after New Year's Day in a certain year, but I can't remember the exact date. It was freezing cold during that time and I must've stayed in Hangzhou during this season, either staying at home or occasionally going to the shop. Basically, it was unlikely that I would go out of town under such circumstances. But that year was an exception—I had to travel over long distances with my family to return to a mountain village on the edge of Changsha.

The village was our ancestral village and its name was Maoshajing.

From the outside, this village was no different from the new countryside of today—the houses were built high and the walls had fancy porcelain tiles stuck on them. A little further inside was the old village with many old yellow mud houses built along the mountain. The houses were so old that it was almost impossible to find out when the first wooden beam was erected. Most of them were occupied by the elderly, but some of them had been left unattended and were vacant. As a whole, the houses were leaning and looked ready to collapse.

We didn't come back to the ancestral village to catch up on the old days. In fact, from my birth up until now, I could count on one hand the number of times I had returned to my hometown, especially after I went to college. There were no entertainment facilities and only a few TV channels that I could receive in these ten miles. Naturally, I didn't want to stay.

But this time I had to come back—not only me, but also Uncle Three, Uncle Two, and my father.

On the surface, it seemed that something big had happened in the village, but the actual reason made me speechless: the highway was going to be built here. The road would pass right through the old cemetery, so the

¹ Apparently this “building a new countryside” movement was done in the early 2000s by China's government to coordinate urban and rural development and gear up national economic growth

family's ancestral graves had to be moved; otherwise, they would be bulldozed.

This kind of thing seemed very pointless to me, but the old men in the village valued it a lot. Moving ancestral graves involved changing feng shui and disturbing the ancestors, which was a big event. My father was the eldest son, and our branch of the Wu family was the most prosperous in the village, so my father and uncles had to come back to take charge of the overall situation—in fact, they had to pay most of the money.

My father was notoriously accommodating and also agreed to have me and several cousins return home to recognize our ancestors. As a result, we all came back here.

Originally, I had a little hope—with many people getting back together at this time, it might be more interesting than before. After all, in the mountains, you could have some fun as long as you had company. I vaguely remembered that my cousin might still have an old shotgun, so I thought hunting might be a good way to pass the time.

To my surprise, our party had just arrived when Uncle Two was taken away to handle the feng shui. Uncle Three was very familiar with this place and came by more than fifty times a year, so when he arrived, he looked for someone to play mahjong with. My father was approached by several old members of the family to discuss the matter, but he knew I was restless and wouldn't let me run away. They discussed things in front of the ancestral hall while I was left to wander around inside alone.

Our ancestral hall was on the border of the old village. It was a big house, but it was different from the old houses on TV—although it was also painted with yellow mud, there were no white walls or black tiles. The first thing you would see when entering the hall was a courtyard. There was a pavilion-like stage in the middle of the courtyard and the hall was further inside. The hall itself was tall and big, but when I looked up at the roof, I saw that it was full of holes. It was probably impossible to waterproof on rainy days. The ancestral tablets were placed at the end of the hall—there were many niche-like holes dug in the wall, each with two tablets inscribed with the names of our ancestors. There was a table in

front of the spirit tablets, but the candles had been switched out with electric ones.

This ancestral hall was built by my grandfather, so it had been around for a long time. The Wu family wasn't very prosperous and the most populated branch had moved to Hangzhou, but the ancestral hall was still passable. I looked for grandpa's spirit tablet, which was one of the bigger ones. In fact, because my grandfather went to Hangzhou, he shouldn't be allowed in this ancestral hall according to the rules. But now that I was here, I wondered if maybe it was one of his tricks he thought up during his lifetime.

It was extremely boring in such a place, and since the weather was cold and there was no one in the ancestral hall, I couldn't bear it and began to touch everything. As I was reading the couplets and looking at the merit monuments, I suddenly noticed that there was a corridor on the side of the hall which led to a door. After going out the door, I saw a vacant lot where an old thatched cottage sat.

At that time, I didn't think much of it and walked over— there was sunlight shining down in the open space and the thatched cottage looked very old. I saw that it was locked with a big iron chain, which was very intriguing.

When I walked to the edge of the cottage to look at the lock, I found that it was really old.

The cottage's windows were two large holes, and the window frames had been covered with very old newspapers—these windows obviously had glass in them.

I was bored so I looked inside. The light was very faint, but I could vaguely see that the mud floor was full of dry wood, on top of which sat a coffin covered in dry mud.

Chapter 1.2 Coffin

The light in the thatched cottage was dim, so I could only see that it was an old-fashioned coffin—a large wooden box with a big top and a small bottom, but it wasn't very big, unlike the coffins of large families that you would see on TV. The coffin was covered with so much mud that its contours could hardly be seen.

This coffin made my heart beat a little faster and aroused my infinite curiosity. Although the memory wasn't very clear, it seemed that this ancestral hall was originally related to the coffin, since family funerals and ancestral halls were the places where dead bodies rested during the rituals. I remembered that when Grandpa died, his body stayed here. Since it was still midsummer at that time, a Taoist priest sealed the stench using a generally cumbersome ceremony which I can't remember clearly. So, it shouldn't have been surprising that there were coffins here.

The question was: why was this coffin placed in the thatched hut behind the ancestral hall and covered in dry mud? According to the surrounding cobwebs, the thickness of dust, and the degree of rust on the locks, this coffin had been sitting here for quite a long time. Whether it was ten years ago or a few decades ago, why was this coffin carried here and left like this until now? Was there a body in the coffin? If so, who was it?

Many thoughts flashed through my mind in an instant and I felt a little antsy. It seemed that there was a story behind this ancestral hall, this thatched cottage, and the ancient coffin inside.

But I was wearing a new ME CITY shirt I bought a few days ago, and I didn't have the skills to be agile enough; otherwise, I definitely would've climbed in and taken a closer look. But I knew that even if I went in, I couldn't see anything—it wasn't like I could pry open the coffin. Plus, who knew what was inside? After looking for a long time, I angrily turned and walked around the thatched cottage where I found a piece of farmland. As I walked down the ridge of the field, I found that the farmland had been abandoned for a long time and was overgrown with weeds. This was supposed to be our family's share of the ancestral land—it was a pity that

all three of my grandpa's sons weren't made for farming so the land had become such a wasteland.

I could see other people's land further ahead because it was always easy to make out where the boundary was—there was the hillside, which extended from the path down to the next section of the terrace.

To keep going was pointless. While I walked back to the hall, I thought about how much these pieces of land would cost if they were in Hangzhou. I didn't know if dad and the others had finished their talk, but if they hadn't, then I would just listen from the side. It was better to practice listening to the Changsha dialect than hang around here, anyways.

When I passed by the thatched cottage, I took another look inside, but the sun was a little weaker and the room was darker so I couldn't see anything clearly.

Chapter 1.3 Past Events

At dinner that night, I asked Biao Gong² about the origin of the coffin.

He was a 79-year-old veteran here who hadn't left the village except to go to market. When asked about this matter, however, he wasn't very clear about the origin and simply said that all the people in the village knew that there was such an old coffin. As to when the coffin appeared? They had no clue. Few people usually passed by the area.

Some older people also said that the thatched cottage was there before the ancestral hall was built. At that time, there was an abandoned earthen house that was bought by the Wu family and leveled so that the ancestral hall could be built. The only thing left was that cottage, which had remained there until now. As for who originally built this thatched cottage and the origin of the coffin inside, it couldn't be verified. That was about sixty years ago.

Biao Gong at that time was only nineteen years old and since it was so long ago, he couldn't remember whether the coffin was already in the thatched hut or whether someone put it there in the following sixty years. But the coffin itself looked very old, and no one could say for sure when it was made. I thought the idea a little frightening but felt that there had to be a story there.

Dinner was a "big table meal" in the ancestral hall that was eaten with our other relatives from the village. Biao Gong, who was very healthy for his age, smoked hookah after the meal before he went back to feed the chickens. My dad asked me to keep an eye on him so I quickly followed. On the way, Biao Gong told me that if I was really interested, I could go to another village and ask an old man named Xu A Qin about it. He had been invited by the Wu family to take charge of the ancestral hall since he had been a long-term worker in this village when the hall was first built and had helped in the hall's construction. Later, in the second year of the

² A reader said this isn't a person's actual name but more of a name for a distant relative from grandpa's generation.

Agrarian Revolution³, he divided a large area of land and went to farm. He may be over a hundred years old by now, so if anyone remembered, it could only be him. But it also depended on luck. If he was more than a hundred years old, who knew what he was like now.

Even though my curiosity wasn't sated, I didn't have much experience in building relationships with centenarians, so I told myself to just forget it and nodded my head.⁴

This was the first and most serious mistake I made during the whole incident.

³ Agrarian Revolution (1927-1937) was a civil war b/t the Communist Party led by the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army and the Chinese people against Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Kuomintang Party. They worked towards abolishing the feudal land system and founding the workers' and peasants' democratic republic

⁴ A centenarian is someone who is over 100 years old

Chapter 1.4 Move the Coffin

The Wu family's ancestral grave was on the sunny side of a rocky mountain. The unspectacular mountain was about two hundred meters high and housed more than just the Wu family's tomb. The hillside on the front was scattered with four or five grave sites in different positions, all containing the ancestors of large families from the village. There was a dirt road up the mountain full of many weeds that hadn't been cleared since many people didn't visit. Fortunately, it was winter and the grass was thin, so it wasn't very difficult to walk.

There had originally been a large stream in front of this rocky mountain. The so-called feng shui treasure land at that time was a concept of "water in the front and mountains in the back", but the stream had long dried up since some people had built small hydropower stations and dug up the sand on the rocky mountain.

The grave removal ceremony was held on the morning of our third day in the village. Seeing that the almanac marked this as an auspicious day, not only our family, but many others from the village were also preparing. The rocky mountain was densely packed with people here and there.

As the eldest son's child—and therefore the oldest grandchild—my rank was higher, so I had been kneeling in front of the burial mound since earlier. The Taoist priest was still doing preparatory work off to one side, surrounded by the sound of firecrackers going off.

I had always been very interested in what a grave robbers' tomb would look like, but it was a great disappointment to see it. It was similar to an ordinary farmer's tomb—a fan-shaped screen-type tomb poured with cement, in front of which was a large cement tablet. Behind it was a mound of earth sealed to the mountain, all surrounded by weeds. Without the cement part, you would've never known there was a grave there.

Uncle Three told me that our ancestral graves were relatively old in the village and had been rebuilt by government officials during the Qing Dynasty. The cement was poured after the founding of the People's

Republic. Grandpa lay on the level that was built on top of the old tomb. Six or seven meters below the old tomb was the ancestral grave. They had never seen what it looked like, but it wasn't like there would be an underground palace so Uncle Three told me not to hold my breath. In this line of work, people could only hope for an intact corpse, so they wouldn't undergo such large-scale construction for their own tombs.

When I heard this, I suddenly thought it was very funny—about half the people kneeling here dug up other people's graves for a living and I didn't know if they would end up doing the same later. I couldn't help laughing at the picture of these people suddenly pulling out a large number of folding shovels. Grave robbers moving ancestral graves and forensic doctors examining the bodies of their relatives... I bet they felt helpless.

I had been kneeling there for two or three hours and was freezing so much that my shivering was making a rattling sound. It was almost eleven o'clock before the Taoist priest in Nike shoes finished his dharma ritual. With my father in the lead, my uncles and several other relatives lifted the tombstone and began to open the grave with a masonry hammer.

The whole process was completely unskilled, and it took them two hours to break through the grave. There were four juxtaposed concrete holes with coffins stuffed in them. Two of the holes were empty, presumably for my grandmother and my father. There were two wooden coffins in the other two. I knew that one of them was my grandfather's, but I didn't know who the other one belonged to.

Uncle Two counted the names on the tombstone and compared them with the family's genealogical tree, saying that there should be nine coffins. Uncle Three said that some of them must be cenotaphs⁵, such as those belonging to grandpa and great-grandpa. This generation was too big and I didn't know how to call it any further. I didn't know the situation of those old coffins, but if they fall apart, it would be even more troublesome.

⁵ Cenotaph can be a monument erected in honor of a person whose remains are elsewhere. Basically, Grandpa Wu's brother, dad, and grandpa who died at the beginning of Cavern of Blood Zombies should have their names on the tombstone even though their remains aren't there... I think.

The two coffins were lifted out, and then dad smashed the cement grave above and began to dig through the mountain mud below. This was Uncle Three's strong point, and in the time it took to smoke a cigarette, they had dug deep and soon hit the blue brick—they had reached the top of the old ancestral grave.

I wasn't qualified to watch the following process, but my dad and the others called me over anyways. They jumped down and opened the top of the grave while the Taoist priest began to chant sutras and scatter paper money.

I didn't know what was going on in the old grave, but it looked like the things were too old and difficult to deal with. It wasn't until the sun set that the first coffin was carried up. It was rotted to the core, didn't look modern at first glance, and gave off an uncomfortable smell upon landing that should be the peculiar scent of underground soil.

One by one, the other coffins were also brought up, some still dripping with mud. Not long after, all nine coffins were carried out and lined up on the flat hillside. The tops of the coffins were sprayed with water so that we could see the engraved names of the coffin owners. Then, the Taoist priest began to take notes.

I was almost frozen stiff at this point. Although I was witnessing such a scene for the first time, I wasn't interested at all—the mountain was too cold. Seeing that the last coffin was carried out, my heart was finally at peace and I thought to myself, *it's finally fucking over*. This was a really big project that wasn't any easier than going to the tombs.

The next step was to wash the coffins a little and carry them to the ancestral hall to rest for a period of time. But because ancestors had seniority, the oldest coffin needed to be lifted first before the others could follow. Thus, we still had to wait for the person who recorded the names to locate that ancestor.

Just when everyone was feeling relieved, I suddenly heard my father shouting. We turned to look at him and saw that the people in the grave were still pulling something out.

The sun was going down and it was getting darker and darker. Biao Gong shouted loudly in the Changsha dialect, asking them what was going on.

“There’s another one!” My father shouted.

“Huh?” There was a commotion in the crowd and everyone looked over. Then, we all saw another coffin being carried up from below.

“How is that possible?” Biao Gong looked at the tombstone, then at the coffins on display, and asked in a baffled voice, “Strange, why is there another one?”

Chapter 1.5 Mistake

According to the names on the tombstone and the records in the genealogical tree, there should be a total of nine coffins under the yellow sandy soil of the Wu family's ancestral grave. This was different from counting soybeans; it was difficult to make any sort of deviation. Since there were only a few ancestors, it was really incredible that there was an extra coffin.

The incident caused quite a stir among the crowd, and we could hear the onlookers who were there to help constantly whispering to each other.

Of course, the most shocked group was the Wu family's representatives from the village, who were born and raised there. They had never heard of such a thing and naturally found it hard to accept.

At this time, I had no regard for whether I was qualified or not and also went over to look at the tomb. I only saw a pit that was dug deep, and a large number of old black bricks wrapped in mud and grass roots that had been tossed aside, but I couldn't see what the tomb's original appearance had been like.

Ten coffins were placed on the gentle slope. After they were all lined up, I found that this last one that was carried out didn't have any mark or name on it. But it was one of the four oldest coffins lined up at the bottom of the tomb. From this point of view, it was unlikely that an ownerless solitary coffin had been dug up since there were blue bricks all around the tomb.

After consulting with another old man whose name I really can't remember, Biao Gong immediately sent all ten coffins back to the ancestral hall and found someone to guard them day and night. The ceremony here was concluded, but the issue obviously needed to be discussed behind closed doors.

At this time, we young people naturally couldn't get a word in. All we knew was that it felt as if the atmosphere had changed. This matter obviously had a great impact on the Wu family's face. Moreover, if the genealogy was wrong, it would all have to be redone. This would be a

very big deal that might even require the family members staying overseas to come back. But this possibility was unlikely unless there was something hidden in this ancestral grave that we didn't know about.

My father was also at a loss and said nothing the entire time, so the Taoist priest cleared the way. It was already dark by this time and the dark mountain roads coupled with the cold weather made me shiver involuntarily. But my mind was constantly filled with the ancient coffin in the deserted thatched hut behind the ancestral hall. Sure enough, in this village, it was impossible to get rid of a coffin.

As was customary in the evening, everyone had a “big table meal” in the ancestral hall. The ancestral rules stated that it was to be vegetarian today. After eating a table of tofu dishes and lighting a charcoal stove to warm themselves, they began to ponder over these coffins.

The coffins were placed in the mourning hall, so I was able to approach them for the first time. I found that the first two coffins pulled from the tomb were well preserved and sealed⁶, but the old coffins caked with mud were still not dry yet. The veneer on them was so rotten that it showed a deep, dark green and it looked so disgusting that I didn't dare get too close.

One of the four oldest coffins should've been dated a long time ago, so the reconstruction in the late Qing dynasty was very suspicious. But none of the people who could remember that time were present and the genealogy only contained a simple sentence, which was basically unreliable. It was surprising, however, that there wasn't any word-of-mouth information—both Biao Gong and all those old people said that they hadn't heard anything related to this from the previous generation.

My father looked upset when he heard this, and I didn't know what he was worried about until much later.

In the Wu clan, the ancestral graves were full of firstborn sons and grandchildren, which meant that the second and third children had to build their own graves. This meant that Grandpa couldn't enter the main tomb under normal circumstances, but his generation's situation was

⁶ Wu Xie's grandpa's coffin + Wu Xie's great-great-grandpa's coffin

really too special—the last three generations were all dead and my grandfather's elder brother had no descendants. Only my grandfather's family had successors; otherwise, there would be no one to maintain the ancestral graves.

So it wasn't reasonable to say that my father was the authentic Wu family. Although the Wu family didn't have many businesses and my father basically wasn't in charge of the family, he still had an advantage—whether it was to divide the land or decide anything, my father had to first give his approval. So as soon as something like this happened, idle people were sure to stir up trouble.

Chapter 1.6 Open the Coffin

There were many aspects involved here, such as Uncle Three's business in the village and the relationship between our family and the main family, so my father, as the head of this family, naturally had to handle everything carefully. But he was also the kind of person who took an honest approach, had a traditional style of work, and believed in working hard until he died. Naturally, he wasn't good at dealing with such complicated situations, so I figured he was a little worried about the emergence of such a situation.

I couldn't help him with this kind of thing. On the one hand, I didn't know about the situation and couldn't differentiate between the old men in the family to determine their seniority so I could only pretend to be clueless; on the other hand, even if something embarrassing happened, the Wu family's ancestral hall couldn't be sold since it was really the only one that could be managed. So, there was nothing to lose. According to my mother, it was high time to distance myself from these things since they were arduous and thankless tasks.

But this matter was quite fascinating. As they were all smoking and pondering over it while warming up, I was stuck in the middle listening, which was a bit fun.

Biao Gong mentioned a possibility: this coffin was placed on the lowest level, so it was only natural that it was the oldest one. It probably housed someone from our great-great-grandfather's generation who lived during the Jiaqing period.⁷ It may be that this ancestor had a concubine that he doted on, and although she couldn't be added to the genealogical record on the tombstone, she was secretly buried in the ancestral tomb.

A search of the genealogical record showed that it was impossible. This great-great-grandfather died before his wife and she was the one who had made the funeral arrangements. According to the social ethics at that time, it was unlikely that such a thing would happen. Moreover, once they became rich and wealthy in this line of work, they would desperately search for a wife, afraid that the family line would end with them. My

⁷ Any time from 1760-1820

grandmother was from a good family and gave birth to three children. There must have been one brood after another in the village since love was basically not an integral part of life at that time.

Anyways, could the body have been damaged? Maybe something happened during a job and the whole body wasn't recovered so they buried it first. Later, the rest was dug up and buried in two separate coffins. Uncle Two shook his head at this nonsense, saying that in this kind of situation, it was absolutely necessary to open the coffin and re-bury it. The ancestral grave wasn't a freezer where you put your head on the top shelf and your bottom on the lower shelf and exchanged them whenever you liked.

After hearing this disturbing analogy, the surrounding people frowned and smoked faster than even incense could burn.

I was thinking about it myself, but the strangest thing to me was that the coffin had no name on it. According to the custom here, it was very humiliating not to inscribe a name on the coffin. Since coffins were qualified for burial in ancestral graves, it was impossible to receive such treatment. In this way, I felt that there may not be a corpse in this extra coffin.

It was meaningless to think about it, however, since there was essentially no basis for reference regarding the situation. I thought this was the case, but then again, I was totally guessing.

At that moment, Uncle Three suddenly raised a possibility, "Everyone knows what our ancestors did. Do you think one of them, for whatever reason, hid something in the ancestral grave?"

When Uncle Three said this, the other people's faces changed.

Although this statement sounded shocking, it was also a possibility since people in this line of work would definitely be willing to do something out of line. Compared to those who made baseless conjectures, I felt that this possibility was still a little more likely.

Everyone looked at each other, not knowing how to react. Uncle Two clicked his tongue, seemingly wanting to refute it, but Biao Gong suddenly stood up and said to us, “Stop thinking about it, damn it. Just open it up and take a look!”

Chapter 1.7 Heaven and Earth⁸

I still remember the atmosphere in the ancestral hall after Biao Gong said that sentence. The overhead lamp's wattage wasn't enough, the light of the fire was dark, there was wind outside, and everyone wore a very stiff expression. I couldn't say what it was, but I realized that the atmosphere wasn't quite right.

In principle, someone would definitely jump out at this time and say something like "No, this is an outrageous idea" and so on and so forth. After all, it was always something you'd see in TV dramas. At this time, however, there was no voice of opposition and it took a long time before someone finally said, "Who's going to open it?"

This was followed by another uproar. Uncle Three sneered, "My eldest brother is in charge so of course we'll do it."

As soon as this remark was made, I knew immediately why the atmosphere was strange and I couldn't help but tense up.

The Wu family's ancestral estate had been divided down through the ages, but it was basically just a name only. My father's family was also just a name. At most, he could be regarded as a clan leader with a reputation and a voting right. Even so, there was a lot of idle gossip. Just now when Uncle Three said that the coffin might be something hidden by our ancestors, the first thing that probably came to everyone's mind here was: maybe a patriarch from previous generations buried some artifacts in his ancestral grave that couldn't be disposed of at that time.

The era when grave robberies were rampant was different from present times. Back then, the technology was limited and the channels weren't as smooth as they were now. As a result, many of the things that came out at that time but were too hot to sell were all good items that must be very valuable. As it turned out, the people here were unexpectedly greedy.

⁸ Characters are 乾坤 (pinyin: qian kun) which are 2 of the Eight Trigrams. Qian= heaven (male principle) and kun= earth (female principle). Best way to think of it is yin and yang).

But this was our ancestral tomb and we couldn't be presumptuous, so the atmosphere was a little strange. But Uncle Three's sentence was enough to stir up the pot and it seemed that this matter was beyond my father's control.

Sure enough, before Uncle Three finished speaking, someone jumped up, "Why? If that happens, we won't have any share in the ancestral tomb!"

Uncle Three gave the man a look, "Shit, Cao Er Daozi, you fucking took your mother's surname. When did you change it back? Is it your turn to talk bullshit?" His voice had just faded when another voice cried out, "This is a matter for the Wu family. Everyone surnamed Wu has a part in it!"

Uncle Three spit in contempt, not even bothering to look at him, "There are a lot of people surnamed Wu! I'm telling you, we three brothers have to open this coffin! You have no say in this, but if you want to complain, go blame your grandfather for running too slowly when he was reincarnated!"⁹

"Fuck you! I'll beat you to death!" The man immediately cursed him, dropped his cup of tea, and stood up, wanting to come over. Uncle Three was a tough character and almost cracked the table with a bang when he stood up and shouted, "Fucking try it!"

Uncle Three's voice was fierce, and coupled with his reputation here, all the people who hung out with him stood up at once. While the other side had more people, those who followed the guy who had just cursed also stood up. There was a lot of abuse flying back and forth at this time. The two people who had been toasting each other just now had immediately started to oppose each other. As long as someone started a small fight, it was possible that things would escalate.

My father had a wooden expression on his face; he couldn't handle the present situation at all. When he saw everything unfolding, he couldn't help but clap his hand to his forehead and sigh. Just as these people were about to fight, Biao Gong suddenly stood up and kicked the heating stove a few steps forward. Flaming coals suddenly flew out and rushed into the

⁹ Basically saying that guy's grandpa has less seniority than Wu Xie's grandpa since he was born later.

crowd, pushing everyone back a few steps. He then took his bamboo crutch and gave the table a hard whap, “You pair of thieves have turned against each other?”

“Biao Gong! This Wu Sanxing...” one of them cried out. But before he had finished speaking, Biao Gong gave another whap, the sound so loud that everyone immediately drew back. Then he said to us, “This is the ancestral coffin of the Wu family! Even if you really open it and find something, you have to bury it again untouched. No one better get any ideas! As usual, the eldest son and grandson will open the coffin to examine the bones. Everyone else will withdraw!” As he finished speaking, he swung like he was ready to hit someone.

He was from the older generation, so no one dared offend him—those who were beaten could only admit that they were unlucky. The group of people all rushed to the door of the ancestral hall. Uncle Three tried to sneak his way back in but was beaten out with a few good whacks. Only me, my father, and a few old men were left in the ancestral hall.

Biao Gong was so angry that he had to sit down to catch his breath after he had finished driving the others out. My father hurriedly gave him some space. On one side, our relative who everyone called Aizi Tai Gong¹⁰—I didn’t know his level of seniority—urged him, “Is it worth it, is it worth it? At such an old age, do you want to piss yourself off?”

“No, it’s not worth it!” My father said, and then continued “Take it easy, easy.”

Biao Gong slowly calmed down before he stood up and looked outside. Then he sat back down and softly whispered to my father, “A Qiong, I’ll settle this for you. Let’s say it up front: if there’s anything good in this coffin, you have to split it with us!”

¹⁰ Short great-grandfather

Chapter 1.8 Inside

When I think of Biao Gong's face at that time, I still don't know whether to laugh or cry. But it seemed like everything was perfectly normal with him: there was nothing wrong with his face and his expression was surprisingly serious. Without waiting for my father to respond, he got up and walked towards the coffin while one of the two old men guarded the door. The other one went to get the tools.

Dad and I gave each other a wry smile. Biao Gong beckoned us to help lift the nameless coffin so that it was under the lamp. When I lifted it up, I found that it was extremely heavy. I thought that if there was a dead person inside, it must be someone on Shaq's level. Dad and I couldn't lift it at all and wondered what the bodies of those who carried it back were made of. There was no way we could do it, but we also couldn't call the people outside to help. Biao Gong lit the brazier again, put some wood into it, and poured the paper money into the fire, making it flare up. Then he brought the bench over and put the brazier on it for lighting.

When I thought of opening the coffin, I was shocked, excited, and scared—there was no course like this at university. And this was an ancient coffin that was at least over a hundred years old. Looking at it, I suddenly felt that the room was somewhat cold.

The village wasn't large, so three crowbars were soon brought over. If Uncle Three were here, there wouldn't be any problems, but my father and I couldn't do it at all. The crowbar was upside down, and when I held it up, I was laughed at by Biao Gong, "What the hell are you doing, playing billiards?"

In the end, the three old men couldn't wait any longer and did it themselves. After a few tries, the coffin nails were all pulled out. The three men then stepped aside, inserted three crowbars into the gap together, and gave it a hard lift.

The whole coffin made a series of "popping" sounds like wood bursting, and then the lid lifted up and flipped over. At this time, a strange smell of traditional Chinese medicine suddenly reached my nose.

Biao Gong drew the brazier closer for lighting. We all leaned towards the coffin and saw a black liquid inside which almost reached the mouth of the coffin.

I had never looked at a coffin so closely, so I didn't know if it was normal, but Biao Gong's expression also looked confused. He turned to my father and asked, "Was there any water in the grave?"

My father shook his head, "It was just damp and wet, there was no water."

"Eh, that's strange. Where did the water in this coffin come from?" Biao Gong asked.

Chapter 1.9 Black Liquid

It was quite common for there to be liquid in a coffin. When a coffin is sealed, wooden nails are used to secure it, and then all the gaps are sealed with clay lime and a cement-like substance made of rotten fishing nets. If this procedure was done perfectly, the body would rot in an absolutely enclosed space and all the water from the body would remain in the coffin.

Sixty to seventy percent of the human body is made up of water, which is a staggering amount. This is especially evident when the body decays, as the small bones are hard to find under all the liquid.

This kind of liquid is called corpse fluid, or coffin fluid. Of course, some coffins weren't tightly sealed and water got in them from accumulated water in the tomb's burial chamber. In our case, the volume of coffin fluid was very large, so that was why Biao Gong had asked.

My father answered with great certainty—I had also caught a glimpse at that time—that there really wasn't any water in the ancestral tomb. So this coffin fluid must not be rainwater, let alone corpse fluid. With so much liquid, I was afraid the body inside had been fatter than Shaq.

Neither was possible, which left only one extreme situation—the liquid may be antiseptic medicine poured into the coffin when it was buried. This was indeed more likely since the black liquid in this coffin emitted a strong smell of traditional Chinese medicine.

There was also an interesting legend here, which I might not have mentioned before—in ancient China, people used the liquid in coffins as a medicine guide. This legend sounds strange, but its origin is reasonable because the antiseptic medicine poured into coffins contained a very rare ingredient, which was lost late in the Ming Dynasty. If the world wanted to use this drug, the only way was to have the patient go to a tomb to find the liquid containing this ingredient.

But there were too many quack doctors at that time and they were usually misinformed. As a result, many patients vomited and had diarrhea because they drank the liquid from the ancient coffins. In addition,

arsenic and cinnabar were placed in the coffins to both prevent insects from getting in and to keep the coffin dry. The liquid in the coffins was highly toxic and instantly killed people.

This bad habit spread to modern times, and even Lu Xun was also deeply affected by it—he hated traditional Chinese medicine for a reason.¹¹

I felt uneasy when I looked at the black liquid in this coffin. I knew that if there was anything in the coffin, it would have sunk to the bottom. I didn't know what would happen, but the feeling that the large volume of liquid would overflow quickly crept me out, and I kept imagining something terrible under there.

Biao Gong and the others naturally weren't afraid. They put down the crowbars, gathered together by the edge of the coffin, and carefully looked into the black liquid.

It was black liquid, of course, but the cloudy light formed the illusion that it was ink. Biao Gong lit up one end of some paper money and held it close to the liquid.

When I looked at it from a distance under the firelight, I saw that the black liquid was so deep that it seemed as if there was no bottom.

¹¹ The pen name of [Zhou Shuren](#), a Chinese writer, essayist, poet, and literary critic. He was a leading figure of modern Chinese literature and regarded by Mao Zedong as the most influential Chinese writer who was associated with the May Fourth Movement. He wrote a short story called "[Medicine](#)". The themes focused on superstition and the negative impact of beliefs about traditional Chinese medicine.

Chapter 1.10 Abyss

The black liquid in that coffin gave off a very strange feeling. Seen from above, it wasn't like looking at liquid held in a container but more like water in a well. The liquid wasn't pure black and I could see debris deposited underneath, but if I looked deeper, I couldn't see the bottom of the coffin at all. It was as dark as an abyss and gave me the illusion that the coffin was connected to another world.

Of course, this was impossible. The coffin wasn't deep—only about the height of one arm—and the liquid wasn't like ink, so how could such an illusion be created? I figured that a large number of impurities were deposited at the bottom due to precipitation, which prevented the light from passing through.

Just as I was thinking all of this, Biao Gong poked his crowbar into the black liquid and stirred it. As expected, the liquid in the coffin darkened and many floating objects could be seen. The smell of traditional Chinese medicine was also more intense.

I didn't know if the black liquid was poisonous, but no matter what was inside, it was definitely unwise to touch it with bare hands. After muttering a few times, Biao Gong called my father over to help and asked him to clean up the liquid.

As he spoke, he picked the washbasin we had used for burning paper money up from the floor and dumped the ashes out so that we could use it to hold the liquid. Then, another old man clenched his teeth and inserted a crowbar into a slit in the coffin, prying a bigger gap out of the side with a crunch. The black liquid immediately flowed out of the gap and into the basin.

My father went over to help and brought three washbasins to catch the liquid. When one was full, he poured it into the ditch outside the back door of the ancestral hall. I felt sick even watching from a distance, but I could finally see that the black liquid wasn't pouring out as fast now.

The first thing that emerged was an outstretched hand, which had rotted and blackened in the liquid. It looked similar to a claw and seemed like it was trying to reach out and grab something.

This person's death obviously hadn't been a peaceful one. In general, when a dead person was placed in a coffin, they would lie flat, but this corpse's position made one feel that the person had died in a strange way.

Biao Gong's brow furrowed and he leaned over to look at the hand carefully. After looking at it for a long time, he suddenly took a deep breath and said, "Huh?"

Everyone else turned to look at him. He grabbed a pair of chopsticks, picked up something from that hand, and waved it in front of us, "What do you think this is?"

When we got closer, we found that it was a river snail the size of a nail. The cover of the snail's shell hadn't been closed, but it was still unexpectedly alive.

Chapter 1.11 River Snail

There were many strange things in the world, but this was the first time I had encountered one myself. Several of us stared at the snail and looked at it carefully, unable to speak.

The coffin was completely sealed and no liquid had spilled during the trip over. The snail must've been inside the coffin, but this coffin had been buried for nearly a hundred years. How could the snail still be alive?

“Don't tell me, our Wu's family's ancestral grave is really...” an old man whispered from the side. Biao Gong snorted and brought the snail to one side of the ashtray with his chopsticks. “Don't say anything, let's look at it again,” he said.

We continued to look at the coffin while the basin catching the black liquid filled up. The black liquid overflowed, but everyone else was too busy to take care of it so I had to continue dumping it out.

After less than ten minutes, the whole body was revealed.

We looked down and only took a single look before everyone fell silent.

I don't know how to describe what I saw—it was a small, wet corpse that hadn't decayed completely but had kept its approximate shape because of the antiseptic medicine.

But what made our hair stand on end were the countless large and small snails that were attached to the body. They were black and white and almost completely covered the whole body, making it look like it was covered in pustules at first sight.

My father began to retch after he got an eyeful. He stumbled and almost fainted as he rushed out of the ancestral hall and threw up in the courtyard, regardless of etiquette. I was completely terrified and unable to move, the hair all over my body standing on end.

The corpse was stuck in a strange pose with its claw-like hands. It obviously didn't die peacefully. When I saw that its huge mouth was

practically full of snails, there was a brief moment where I felt as if my own mouth was uncomfortable.

Once again, Biao Gong used chopsticks to pick one up and we clearly saw the snail's shell cover slowly closing up. We immediately felt a chill on the backs of our necks: these snails were all alive! How did they survive? Even if they ate the corpse, there wasn't enough oxygen in the coffin. Moreover, the turbid liquid was likely to be highly toxic.

After a long silence, he put the snail onto the ashtray with the other one and said to the man beside him, "Old Si Tou, why don't you call Wu Sanxing and Cao Er Daozi in."

Old Si Tou paused, "Why, A Biao? Those two will rip each other's heads off."

"Let them come in and have a look; otherwise, I don't know how to convince them that our old ancestor left us a coffin full of snails. If they want to fight, let each of them get a plate and go back to fry it themselves." He threw the chopsticks into the brazier and knelt down in front of the shrine to offer incense.

Chapter 1.12 Discussion

I don't know much about what happened afterwards since Uncle Three and Cao Er Daozi practically rushed in. The scene was chaotic, and Biao Gong was so angry that he was almost vomiting blood.¹² Uncle Two took everything in and then told me to help my father back first. He also warned me not to cause any trouble.

When I saw that things were completely out of control, I immediately ran away. As soon as I left, I saw a mess outside the ancestral hall and knew that they had already had a fight.

There was such an uproar about this matter that it wasn't until the morning of the third day that I saw Uncle Three again. He had a head wound wrapped in gauze and he was squatting on the threshold to eat breakfast. I grabbed my share and squatted down next to him to ask what had happened afterwards.

Uncle Three cursed as he ate sticky rice cakes and drank rice congee, saying that he was too fucking unlucky. He didn't expect that the coffin would have nothing and that he and Cao Er Daozi had beat each other's heads open for no reason. Shit, he was definitely one of their own and wouldn't be easy to kill; otherwise, how could he take this loss?

I told Uncle Three that he was too greedy going after his ancestors' grave without even giving his own family a pass.

"You don't know shit," Uncle Three scolded me. "I'm doing this to give your father some face! Damn it, if it weren't for me walking sideways in the village like this, do you think your father could still act as the patriarch? Besides, that loser Cao Er Daozi sees that I'm successful and has been jealous of me for years. I don't want to be thrifty with him since we're family, the bastard. Our family didn't kick him out but he still fucking came to argue with us! Telling me I can't even bury the ancestral grave. If he wants to bury it, all he can do is bury it beside the toilet!"

¹² It's one of those Chinese sayings that's an exaggeration. The vomiting of blood as a result of extreme anger, hatred or sadness is frequently seen in Chinese dramas, he's not actually puking blood

When Uncle Three cursed a second time, Uncle Two's voice came from inside the house, scolding him in turn, "You're not fooling your nephew. Why do you still act like that when it comes to your eldest brother? Don't you know that he's terrified of such scenes?" After saying this, Uncle Two carried out a bamboo chair. He lived like those immortals you read about in novels: he got up early and hardly ate anything. He had already finished his Tai Chi exercises long ago and now came to sit in a chair and feed chickens beside us.

Uncle Three lost his temper at Uncle Two and muttered, "In my profession, I just can't suffer losses in front of others. What if the coffin had something really good in it? I really thought something might have been hidden there under the chaos of war. I didn't think it was a pile of stinking snails."

Knowing that Uncle Two was quite knowledgeable, I asked him, "Uncle Two, you read a lot of books. Have you heard of this before?"

Uncle Two put away the rice bran, thought for a moment, and then said, "Now that you mention it, this really wasn't the first time. I remember that a tomb was found in Fenghuang Mountain, Hangzhou that belonged to a eunuch in the Southern Song Dynasty. There was a colorful pool with live fish in it. It was said that the pool was also closed off. Later, someone ate one of the fish and suddenly died." He frowned, appearing so anxious that the chickens squawked, "That was in the tomb, so maybe there was a reason, but that's not the case with this coffin."

I looked at Uncle Three and asked him if he had also encountered such things in the tombs he had been to but he shook his head, "There's no reason for why such things often happen; this kind of thing is God playing around. Don't think about it too much, just act like you don't know. There are many things we encounter in the tombs, and if we all stop to think about it, then even people like your Uncle Three will become philosophers." With these words, he was basically alluding to the fact that he believed Uncle Two thought too much.

"Then what happened to the coffin?" I asked.

Uncle Three sighed. He had also left early and got his head beaten by Cao Er Daozi. All he knew was that the corpse belonged to a nameless woman and we couldn't move it until we knew who it was. The corpse's pose was also very inappropriate, so he suspected that it was sealed in the coffin and killed by accident.

"They were killed?"

"Probably forced into the coffin, sealed in, and then drowned. This kind of thing was more common back then. What Biao Gong said may be right: it may be a maid or a concubine." Uncle Three sighed, "Who cares. After all these years, who knows what's going on?"

"Then the main issue now is how to deal with it?"

"The coffin was cleared, lime was spread inside, and the body was put back in. All the snails were picked out and the Taoist priest was invited to do the ritual." Uncle Three took a hard bite of a rice cake. "Biao Gong said that if he really couldn't find anything, then he would bury it intact as if he didn't know about it."

Uncle Two ignored him as he continued to feed the chickens while angrily asking, "What about the snails? Didn't Biao Gong ask you to bring them back and fry them with some sauce?"

"Shit, if he wants to eat them, he can have them. The old bastard might as well eat too many and die," Uncle Three said. "We dumped them all into the stream yesterday. It made me sick."

"Hey, how can they do this?!" I asked, completely disgusted. "Who would dare go into that black liquid and touch the snails?"

"The Taoist priest said to release them, so what else could we fucking do?" Uncle Three retorted.

At this time, a man rushed into the courtyard, ran over to me, and hurriedly asked, "Where's your father?"

My dad had been overstimulated and still hadn't recovered, but before I could answer, Uncle Three kicked the guy and asked, "Hei Pi, what's the matter?"

"Biao Gong asked for Wu Xie's father to immediately come to the stream. Shit, there seems to be something in it."

Chapter 1.13 Stream

The part of the mountain stream that flowed through the village was in the shape of “ω”, and the village itself was in the middle of the semi-O shape. The stream became very large when it rained or when water was released from further upstream, but in general, it was very shallow and only reached your knees. The bottom of the stream was full of stones. There were a lot of people who dredged through the sand a few years ago and sold a lot of the smaller pebbles, so now the only things left were big smooth stones the size of washbasins that were covered in green moss.

Although there was running water in the village, most people were still used to pouring out their chamber pots, washing clothes, and taking baths by the stream. The cleanliness of the stream depended on the number of people upstream of you. I once saw a lump of excrement floating in front of me while swimming, so although the water was a frighteningly clear picture that couldn't be seen in the city, I still didn't have any good feelings for this mountain stream.

I was certain that my father wouldn't be able to go, but Little Hei wanted to know what to do since Biao Gong was in a hurry. We were still in charge of this matter, so Uncle Three and I immediately threw down our rice bowls and ran to the stream to look at it, scaring Uncle Two's chickens in the process.

The village was very small so it was only a few steps away. This was the period when the water level was low and there was a large dry beach by the stream. They were all there, surrounded by several villagers. Everyone immediately gave way when they saw us rush over. “Where's your father?” Biao Gong asked me.

I said that he wasn't awake. Uncle Three, who had already parted the crowd of onlookers to look into the stream, kept asking, “What's the matter? What's the matter? What's in the stream?”

Several people's faces were ashen. Biao Gong came over and pointed to a huge rock in the water, “You can stand over there and look in the water.”

The boulder was sitting in the middle of the water and could hold several people. There was already a man over there lying on his stomach, so Uncle Three and I jumped over and copied him, looking into the water.

The water was so clear that you could see it clearly even when the sky was overcast. As soon as I looked, I immediately broke out in a cold sweat. Uncle Three also cursed.

I saw that the bottom of the stream under the stone was thickly dotted with those black and white snails. But what creeped me out was that these snails weren't stuck to the stream-bed irregularly; instead, they were gathered into a very strange shape.

The shape looked like the shadow of a person who wanted to climb to shore.

"Shit, who the fuck did this?!" Uncle Three probably thought it was a prank.

"Who did it?" Biao Gong sneered from the shore. "Didn't you do it?"

"Bullshit!" Uncle Three jumped ashore.

"If it wasn't you, Wu Sanxing, then it wasn't done by anyone else," Biao Gong retorted. "We've been squatting here for three hours and this shape hasn't scattered at all."

Chapter 1.14 Shadow

Uncle Three paused for a moment and then looked at the shadow. Feeling a little embarrassed by his anger, he changed the subject and said, “Fuck, who discovered this damn thing?”

Everyone turned to look at one person—a child. I knew him; his name was Wu Shuang Dan. At that time, I asked him how his father gave him such a name, and he said his father’s name was Wu Yi Gen, so it was probably to get back at his grandfather.¹³ The child turned pale with fear when we all looked at him and couldn’t speak.

A man standing on the side told us the story. It turned out that this kid was picking up stones nearby on the way back to repair his father’s cooking stove. He needed to pee urgently, and since children liked to play, he jumped onto the stone to pee and that’s when he saw it.

Uncle Three looked at the kid and asked him, “When was this?”

But the trembling kid ignored Uncle Three and just continued to stare at the stone as if he were scared to death.

Uncle Three asked him again in a different tone to try to get a reaction but was at a total loss. “What’s he afraid of?” He asked the man on the side.

The man’s face was pale as he pointed to the snails under the stone. “He said to us just now, ‘It’s moving’. Compared to when he first saw it, it’s climbed up a little!”

A creepy atmosphere suddenly spread among us, and I saw that Biao Gong’s fingers were trembling slightly.

After a long silence, Uncle Three cursed, picked up a branch from the bank, and jumped into the water. He then stirred it vigorously, swept all the snails out from under the stone and shoved them to one side, and

¹³ Tiffany cleared this up: The surname “吴” (Wu) is pronounced the same as another Chinese word “无”. “无” means “No/nothing”. So “Wu Shuang Dan” sounds an awful lot like “No pair of balls” in Chinese. His father’s name “Wu Yi Gen” basically sounds like “No dick”. So... that’s how the revenge on the grandpa came to be.

then turned back and shouted, “What should we do if such cool guys are afraid of being killed by fried snails?”

Sure enough, everyone looked relieved once they saw the strange shape disappear. Uncle Three called out to his man who was mingling among the onlookers, said something to him, and then said to the others, “Go back! Don’t look at it anymore. Go back and fry some yourself.”

The onlookers scattered quickly. Uncle Three walked up to Biao Gong and whispered to him, “Can you trust me, old man?”

He frowned at Uncle Three, “What do you want?”

“This fucking matter—you just leave it to me. My brother can’t do this job, and there’s no one under you. If you continue to make trouble, I’m afraid the whole village will know.”

Biao Gong apparently knew that it was bad at this point and thought for a long time before nodding, “Don’t play any of your tricks or you’ll die more miserably than the snails.”

Uncle Three grinned and looked at the stream before asking, “When will the new ancestral grave be ready?”

“Three more days,” Biao Gong said.

“Don’t delay, do it tomorrow. Give the Taoist priest some money and get him to change the day.” Uncle Three patted him on the shoulder. “This young lady must’ve really had an accident.”

Biao Gong nodded, “I know. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll have my brother guard this stream,” Uncle Three replied. “Wait a minute while I go buy something to dry up all these snails.”

With that said, Uncle Three beckoned me to follow him. He wanted to go shopping in the city and asked me to drive.

I hurried over to him and asked, “Uncle, this is too crazy. What’s going on?”

Uncle Three motioned me not to ask. As soon as he got in the car, he immediately narrowed his eyes and said to me, "Damn it, we may have made a mistake."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm afraid the extra coffin wasn't for the corpse, but the snails."

"Eh, why?"

"How would I know?" Uncle Three frowned. "Shit, I'm afraid something is going to happen. Anyway, let's get rid of the snails first."

Chapter 1.15 Attack

I took Uncle Three to the store in town and bought a kind of pesticide specially used to kill snails. It was very expensive and I had to foot the bill since Uncle Three didn't bring any money.

It was already sunset when we returned to the village, and when we got to the stream, I saw that it was being guarded by Uncle Three's men. The snails didn't seem to have gathered together again. After searching, Uncle Three's men couldn't even find a single one and didn't know where they had gone.

Uncle Three didn't care about this and just assigned some people to spray the pesticide in several places. It was dark by the time everything was finally done. "Well," Uncle Three said, "no one will be eating snails from here in the next year."

Feeling sick, I said, "I don't want to ever eat any."

We went back to the house to sleep, as I was a little tired after driving for several hours. My car hadn't been maintained for a long time and the brakes seemed to have some problems, so driving was exhausting. As soon as I lay down, I fell asleep.

Before I fell asleep, however, I was still thinking about what would happen tomorrow, why the snails converged into that strange shape, and whether any ghosts were attached to the snails. Half dreaming and half awake, my mind was full of strange shadows, as if the snails had climbed out of the stream and came all the way to my bed.

This sleep was more exhausting than staying up late, and I couldn't wake up even if I wanted to. It was after three in the morning when I finally woke up to pee.

I couldn't go to the public toilet in the countryside. It was just a dung vat and I didn't have the confidence to not fall down in it, not to mention the fact that I couldn't stand the smell. There also wasn't any toilet in my room, so I went to the playground outside and took care of my business.

When I returned, I suddenly found that Uncle Three's door was open and the light was still on inside.

The cold wind outside made me feel very invigorated and I walked over to get a look, wondering what Uncle Three was doing. No one was inside and I noticed that his clothes were gone, as if he had left in a hurry. I was returning to my room in a huff when I suddenly felt someone looking at me.

I wasn't a neurotic person, but I felt this way because I was sure that I had seen something when I was wandering around.

But I wasn't familiar with everything in the old house. I looked back but didn't see anything that might have caused my delusion.

After looking around a few times, I couldn't help feeling angry, thinking that the events these past few days had made me confused. It was said that creepy and mysterious things seemed to have a peculiar charm that always bewitched people.

I lay back down to try and get some more sleep. I hadn't slept well before, but now I felt refreshed and could hardly fall asleep quickly. I turned off the lights and put on headphones to listen to some MP3s.

Strangely enough, after lying down for a while, I still felt like something was wrong. I felt uneasy all over, as if someone was still looking at me. This feeling wasn't very strong, but it was very uncomfortable and wouldn't go away.

In the end, I really couldn't stand it. I turned off the MP3 player, sat up, and massaged my temples hard while taking a deep breath, hoping to settle down.

This was somewhat helpful. I took a few deep breaths for about ten minutes until I gradually calmed down. Although the feeling still existed, I wasn't as agitated as before. I rubbed my face hard, feeling like I didn't need to sleep. According to my experience, even if I fell asleep tonight, I wouldn't feel any better. I would wait until dawn and then take a mid-afternoon nap.

Thinking about what I should do so early, I looked at my watch and found that it was a little before four in the morning. *Shit, I guess I can accompany Uncle Two when he does his tai chi since he'll come down soon.* I yawned and reflexively turned to look out the window.

The sight scared me to death and my heart almost stopped.

I saw a shadow lying on my window.

A figure—

Chapter 1.16 Peeper

At that time, I didn't have much experience, so I was totally shocked upon suddenly seeing the shadow again in that kind of environment. Before I could control myself, my first reaction was to shout.

After yelling twice, Uncle Two came down—he was dressed for tai chi—and rushed into my room to ask me what I was doing. I stuttered as I pointed at the window, “Sha... shadow!”

Uncle Two looked at it and also got a fright, but he responded faster than I did. He immediately rushed over, opened the window, looked out, and cried, “Who's there!”

I also put on my clothes and rushed over, only to find that there was nothing outside the window. There was a large courtyard where the millet sat, and a large area was illuminated by the street lamps, but absolutely no one was there.

Uncle Two looked around the windowsill, a little puzzled. Even if someone ran away, there would still be at least some movement. At that time, he gave a grunt and suddenly looked down at his hands. I saw that they were wet.

Looking at the windowsill again, I found that it was covered in water. I suddenly had a bad feeling and immediately pulled half of the shutter back. With one look, I saw that the window outside the glass was fucking covered in black and white snails!

The other side was also unexpectedly covered in them.

I took a deep breath, immediately ran outside, closed the shutters, and saw that there were actually more snails than I had seen the previous morning. They were all crowded together into a strange shape that looked like a person lying on my window, peeping in.

My whole body suddenly went cold and I felt an extremely creepy sensation pass from my head to my toes. Uncle Two's face was also pale and he didn't say a word.

My legs were trembling and I took several deep breaths before I could speak. “Uncle, what is this?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What should we do then?” For a moment, I didn’t know what to do.

Uncle Two didn’t answer me, but took out his cell phone and made a phone call. My mind was completely blank so I didn’t hear what he said at all, I only knew that he called my Uncle Three.

Soon, Uncle Three ran over from wherever he was outside. It turned out that he had gone to the stream with his buddies in the middle of the night to keep watch. Not a single snail had floated up after they sprayed the pesticide, so he was afraid that the stream was too active and had rendered the pesticide useless. He figured the snails might gather at night, so he was patrolling.

With a few of his guys trailing behind, he ran up to us without asking anything and looked directly at the window. With just one glance, he immediately turned pale.

A man beside him said, “Fuck, where did these motherfuckers come from?”

Instead of answering him, Uncle Three immediately picked up the millet rake and scraped the snails off my window.

The number of snails stunned me—piles upon piles of them fell to the ground. When I used to eat snails before, why didn’t I think it was so disgusting?

After all of them were removed, Uncle Three fiddled around on the ground a few times and said, “They’re wet; they haven’t been out of the water long. Go and find out if there’s any water nearby.”

His buddies immediately spread out to look around and had only walked a few steps before Uncle Two said, “Don’t bother, it’s from there.”

We turned to the place he pointed at and found that there was a sink under the wall, which led to the sewer.

The drainage system in the countryside was very simple and crude and was similar to farm irrigation systems. All domestic sewage flowed into the nearby stream, so this sewer was connected to the stream. In fact, all of these sewers were connected to the streams. Uncle Two said, "Look, it's not raining and the sink is wet. They must have climbed up the drain."

Uncle Three started cursing, "Son of a bitch. No wonder I didn't see any poisoned snails. They all hid in the sewer."

"How do we deal with it?" A man asked.

"Kill them all!" Uncle Three immediately said, picking up the rake and smashing it onto the group of snails on the ground. His buddy immediately went to help, but Uncle Two quickly stopped them.

"What are you doing?" Uncle Three asked.

"It's useless," Uncle Two said. He opened the lid of the sewer, and when we looked at it, we saw that it was completely full of snails.

Chapter 1.17 Uncle Two

At six in the morning, we all gathered at the ancestral hall while Biao Gong and several knowledgeable old people were called over.

Uncle Three blocked the sewer with stones and then poured rice bran and white cement over it. In addition, all the water outlets in the house were blocked, and any snails that crawled out were shoveled aside, smashed, and burned.

The winter here wasn't very bright, and everything looked a little gray. The ceremony for the nine coffins had been completed and they could be buried today at noon, but this originally grand ceremony wasn't important at all right now. We gathered around the brazier, feeling the eerie, creepy atmosphere.

"Who was the Taoist priest who said to release the snails? I'll drown him in a pit!" Uncle Three said resentfully.

Biao Gong snorted, "Now it's useless to drown him in a pit." He coughed several times. He apparently didn't sleep well either. "Let's think about what happened."

"In my opinion, this motherfucker is haunted," someone said from the side.

"Have you ever seen a ghost like this?" Cao Er Daozi quipped, "Maybe your Master Three's ghost is like this."

The man, an associate of Uncle Three, immediately glared at him, "What do you know, have you ever been to a tomb?"

Biao Gong waved his hand and stopped him, "If you have any grievances, wait until this matter is resolved before airing them. I don't want to listen to this nonsense!"

The man shrank back. Biao Gong said to Uncle Two, "Wu Er Bai, you always seem to have an opinion about everything and you're always meticulous. Don't keep silent, tell me what you think about it."

Uncle Two hadn't spoken much on this occasion, but now that he had been asked, he frowned and said, "I'm not sure, but I feel that this matter may be caused by someone playing tricks."

"Playing tricks?" Biao Gong shook his head before launching into the story of the ghost-like figure the snails made, which he had stared at for three hours. "Is what I saw with my own eyes really a trick?"

"There's always an explanation for everything. In other words, the possibility can be high or it can be low," Uncle Two said.

"Oh, tell me," Biao Gong said with interest.

"For example, if you're the one playing tricks, the matter can be explained," Uncle Two said. "Who knows if what you said is true or not? Snails in the countryside... you can have as many as you want."

"Nonsense," Biao Gong said, striking the table.

"I'm just giving an example," Uncle Two said. "If we can explain it, it will all make sense. I could also say that the ghost of the corpse woman is attached to the snails. I can say anything. Any conjectures we make are useless."

"What do you think we should do now?" Cao Er Daozi asked. "Mobilize the whole village to destroy the snails?"

Uncle Two shook his head, "What we should do is find out why there was an extra coffin in the ancestral grave. This is the root of the matter. Once you know, you can solve the problem later."

The crowd was silent; it was obvious that Uncle Two was right.

"I'm afraid it's very difficult. The coffin has been buried for too long and the old man is gone. I'm afraid it will always be a mystery," Biao Gong said.

"Is there no one left?" Uncle Two asked.

"It seems that's really—"

As soon as he said this, I suddenly remembered something familiar and said, "Biao Gong, didn't you say there was a Xu A Qin in another village who is over a hundred years old? He also helped us to repair the ancestral hall. We can ask him."

After hearing this, Biao Gong's eyes brightened, "Yes, there's Xu A Qin!" But then he frowned. "I don't know how he is, though, since he's over a hundred years old. Can he remember what happened back then?"

"Xu A Qin?" Uncle Three muttered, as if he remembered something.

"This matter is so strange that if he knew about it, he would certainly have a deep impression of it," Uncle Two said. "In any case, now we can only give medicine to a dead horse.¹⁴ I don't want to run away every time I see snails in the future."

¹⁴ Idiom that means to keep trying everything in a desperate situation.

Chapter 1.18 A Qin

Xu A Qin's village, Zhao Shandu, was also beside the mountain stream, but the stream was very wide there so it had a ferry at that time. When the bridge was built later, the ferry was abandoned, but Zhao Shandu's name was still used.¹⁵ The bridge was ancient and covered in herring reliefs that were said to be about something from the town's stream. Legend had it that there were originally stone carvings of turtles at the bridge head, but they were later stolen.

We got in my car and drove over, listening to Uncle Two's story the entire way. I noticed that Uncle Three's expression changed while we were talking about the stone carving of the turtles, so I asked him if he did it. "I'm ashamed of not catching up," he said. As far as he knew, his old man—my grandfather—may have been the one who did it. If not, he at least had a part in it, because Uncle Three saw similar things at home when he was a child.

Biao Gong didn't come with me—my little car couldn't hold so many people—so it was only Uncle Two, Uncle Three, and one of Uncle Three's buddies that tagged along.

Zhao Shandu definitely wasn't far from here. Looking up at the mountainside from the entrance of the village, we could see that a temple belonging to Zhao Shandu was upstream. But driving would kill you. The mountain road tested my driving skills to the extreme, and I had gone less than twenty yards before it was already noon.

This was the time when the ancestral tomb was going to be reburied. I didn't want to take part in it, so I gave myself an excuse to be a driver and ran away. Biao Gong said that we should withdraw since our birth dates were inauspicious so my father was the only one who took part. He looked much better today, but he was resting before and didn't know about all the bad things that had happened.

¹⁵ A reader said the "Du" in Zhao Shandu means ferry and Zhao Shan can mean mountains besides a village where the residents' surname is Zhao. So even though the ferry is no longer used, they still keep the "Du" in the village's name.

When we arrived at Zhao Shandu, we asked if anyone knew a centenarian named Xu A Qin. It turned out that he was very famous, so we were told where he lived as soon as we asked. The village wasn't large, and we soon arrived at his home.

It was a very shabby wooden house with half of the tiles gone and looked almost transparent from top to bottom. Entering the gate, I saw a wire in the courtyard with a lot of pickles hanging from it and a dish I didn't recognize still sitting on the ground. A withered old man huddled in the doorway to bask in the sun, dressed in blue linen and a fluffy hat.

"Damn it, Number Two, who said eating pickles makes you short-lived?" Uncle Three muttered.

"Call me Second Brother, not Number Two," Uncle Two said.

I refrained from laughing and followed them in. The old man looked up at us, obviously a little surprised. The moment I saw his face, I felt my heart clench.

I had never seen such an old face before; the feeling was indescribable. I had seen many old people including hundred-year-olds before, and I could accept those people's faces, but this one made me feel a little scared. That face was too old. Was he really only over a hundred years old?

When Uncle Two explained our purpose for being there, Xu A Qin didn't react at all or even stand up. He just nodded and moved his toothless lips as if he were thinking. After waiting for two minutes, he began to speak in a pure old Changsha dialect, "I don't know if I can remember something from such a long time ago."

"Please think about it," Uncle Two said.

"If you buy some of my pickles, I'll think about it." Xu A Qin pointed to the pickles hanging on the wire.

My Uncle Two and I were both stunned. Despite being so old, I understood this man very well. We looked at each other and Uncle Three asked, "How much is it?"

Uncle Three was thinking that when Xue A Qin said this, he meant it as a cover and was really asking for money. Of course, the price wouldn't be the real price of a pickle, but something very high. This was essentially a way of getting ripped off.

“Two yuan each.”

We looked at each other again, feeling that the old man really just wanted to sell some pickles. “Ok, then we'll buy three,” Uncle Three said, then motioned for me to pay.

Damn it, he was making me pay again. But I was too embarrassed to say no so I felt around my pockets. When I only came up with a hundred and five yuan, I reflexively said, “Five yuan for three pickles.”

Uncle Three smacked me on the head, “You're trying to fucking bargain at a time like this?” He took the hundred and handed it to the old man. “Master, I've bought all of them. Please think quickly.”

Xu A Qin received the money with trembling hands and held it up to the sun before saying, “What did you ask me just now?”

Chapter 1.19 Legend

When Uncle Two repeated the question, Xu A Qin fell deep into thought as he tried to recall his memories. After thinking for a long time, we all thought he fell asleep, but then he raised his head and asked us, “Are you from the Wu family?”

Uncle Two nodded and Xu A Qin sighed, “Yes, you can only ask me. I am the only one who knows this.”

“Do you still remember?” Uncle Three asked urgently.

Xu A Qin’s face showed an indescribable expression as he patted the bench beside him and told us to sit down. Uncle Two and I sat while Uncle Three squatted. The old man shivered and lit a pipe before taking a few puffs and saying slowly, “I don’t remember it very clearly, but I do remember the general course of events.”

Xu A Qin spoke slowly and there was a long pause between each sentence. It was obvious that even though his hearing hadn’t been greatly damaged, his mind was indeed quite slow. We all stayed calm and didn’t press him for fear that he might forget what came next.

He paused and looked at the sun before adding, “That was when I was working in your village as a long-term worker, helping your Wu family build the ancestral hall. At that time, I heard it from an old man in your village. That old ghost died a long time ago, but he still owes me 1.60 yuan.”

It was at the beginning of the Agrarian Revolution when no one knew how the revolution would change things. At that time, the Wu family was classified as rich peasants and belonged to the re-education class. The whole country was at war, which meant that this should have happened in the 1930s. It was more than sixty years ago, so I couldn’t imagine what it was like since I was only in my twenties.

Back then, the repair of ancestral halls was heavy manual work, unlike now when it was only necessary to do things on the scene. At that time, expanding the scale of the ancestral hall was equivalent to building a

bungalow now, so the Wu family hired long-term workers and stewed meat in the old ancestral hall first.

In those days, it was the emperor who ate meat, so many people came. Xu A Qin was an old long-time worker and was very familiar with the Wu family at that time. After everyone finished eating, they took a rest and basked in the sun in the square where the poles for bunting boats were stored. At that time, the people gathered together to talk about which wife had big tits, which widow's wall had been knocked down again¹⁶, or any manner of trivial gossip.

Xu A Qin was an honest man at that time and listened to everything. There was an old man who was bragging and saying that the reason why the Wu family was so prosperous was because ancestral graves weren't simple.

When the ancestor of the Wu family made his fortune that year, he bought half of the village's land and the big house with four courtyards. But before that rich ancestor's generation ended, the family fell into strife and there were endless wars, which made it useless to have money. By the time the grave was set up, he was almost the same as the rest of the village, so he quickly found a place to be buried. When digging the grave, however, an ancient dry well was unexpectedly dug up there.

No one knew how long it had been there, but there was a large piece of bluestone on top that was engraved with a word nobody could understand. They removed the bluestone and saw that it was a dry well with dried snail shells thickly dotting the wall.

¹⁶ Tiffany confirmed, they're being crass and saying that the widows were sleeping around

Chapter 1.20 Lime

The number of snail shells was very large and they were all packed on top of each other in a dense layer, just like a tumor growing out of the well's wall. The eldest Wu brother thought it was very strange but also good because the ancient bricks used to build the old well's wall were very strong and could be dug out and used. This would save him a lot of money in the tomb's construction and he could even make a profit if there were any extras that could be sold.

In order to get the bricks, they knocked the calcified shells down with pickaxes. But after a particularly strong hit, they found several skeletons that had been hidden under the snail shells. Not only were the bones completely covered in the dried shells and stuck tightly to the wall, but they were also completely calcified.

But the strangest thing was, when they struck the deepest part of the snail shells, water started seeping out. After hitting them some more, they found that there was a cavity inside that contained a wet corpse.

The body was well preserved and had only slightly shriveled up. Although the skin was a rotten green color, it still had a shiny luster to it. He could see that this was a very young woman. She was naked, and her nails and hair were extremely long. Her nails were so long, in fact, that they had curled over.

This matter was unusual. Digging up a dry well while trying to dig a grave and then discovering an ancient corpse in that well... would this tomb be built or not?

They suspected that the woman's body may have been from a previous dynasty. She had probably been thrown into the well or killed by someone. These snails may have gathered in the past to fight over the carrion, but they probably all died because the female corpse was highly toxic. As a result, a "snail shell coffin" was formed and the woman's corpse was preserved.

The eldest Wu brother had no choice but to go to the family elders at that time and ask them how to deal with it.

But no one had ever seen such a corpse before. The body was placed at the old ancestral hall and soon began to stink, but the Taoist priests couldn't seal it. And that kind of smell wasn't corpse rot, but a fishy smell like snails. Some people suggested that the eldest Wu brother find a feng shui master to take a look at it.

The feng shui master was called One-Eyed Shen and was said to be very powerful. One-Eyed Shen looked at the wellhead but said nothing. No matter how the eldest Wu brother asked, he just wouldn't talk. In the end, he eventually left without taking a single penny, but he did leave a note for the eldest Wu brother.

No one knew what was written on that note. The villagers only knew that the eldest Wu brother still built the grave there and buried the Wu patriarch in it. The body that had been discovered was later missing.

The incident spread from village to village and a saying gradually came about: the village where the Wu family lived was called Mao Shajing, which seemed to originate from that well. Legend had it that in ancient times, this was a land of heavy droughts. The village was built here because there was a well that ended up being the lifeblood of the village. The well dug up by the eldest Wu brother may have been the old well from that time. Now their ancestral tomb was pressing on the village's lifeblood and the Wu family had taken all the benefits.

Coincidentally, from then on, the Wu family's reputation suddenly started to rise again, as if they also agreed with this statement.

During the ride back from Zhao Shandu, we carefully pondered over Xu A Qin and the legend he had relayed to us. Uncle Two was very good at feng shui so I asked him, "Is our ancestral grave so good?"

"This doesn't fall under feng shui anymore," Uncle Two said. "Didn't you listen? It's because it was pressing on the wellhead. In ancient times, there was a saying that the wellhead might be connected to the vital energy of a dragon vein. That kind of dragon vein is called a 'hidden dragon' and the wellhead is called the 'dragon's eye', but this isn't obvious. If One-Eyed Shen could see it, he wasn't a feng shui master but a

feng shui scholar, which means he wasn't reliable. And to tell you the truth, the feng shui of our ancestral tomb is actually quite ordinary."

"Then what do you think was written on the note One-Eyed Shen left for our ancestor?"

"I think it's something like 'don't let the cat out of the bag, you can find someone else' or something."

"You're even more unreliable. If that's the case, our ancestor surely wouldn't dare continue digging the tomb. But he demolished the well at that time so that bastard must have told him something," Uncle Three said.

Uncle Two nodded, "If it weren't for the well, I think it might have something to do with the corpse. Maybe it has nothing to do with the well at all and it was the corpse that made the feng shui master afraid to speak. The note may have been about the dead body."

When I saw the strange expression on Uncle Two's face, I asked, "Have you got any answers?"

"It's hard to say. I have to go back and look at our genealogy to see if what I think is right," he said. "If I am, then we've made a big mistake."

Chapter 1.21 Genealogical Record

Back in the village, the ceremony had been completed. The tofu banquet hadn't completely ended and my father and Biao Gong were still dealing with the aftermath, but this major event was finally over. There were still several tables left on one side, most of which were for the Taoist priests and the band. They sang while the others ate and now it was their turn to eat. Dad looked tired, but he was still in good spirits. He was still having dinner with several singers and didn't have time to bother with me. When Biao Gong saw us coming back, he greeted us and asked how everything went.

Uncle Three gave a cursory account of the incident, but Biao Gong didn't understand it very well so Uncle Two said that we needed to go to his house to look at the genealogical record. After that, he would explain it in more detail.

There were two copies of the genealogical record—one was a copy at another relative's house while the other was the original which was hidden at Biao Gong's house. Biao Gong excused himself from the table and told us to follow him.

The genealogical record was placed in a securely locked ebony box in his bedroom. For Biao Gong, this thing was a symbol of his status. The way the old genealogy was recorded was very special so we couldn't just flip through it. With Biao Gong's help, we quickly found our branch of the family.

The first coffin in the Wu family's ancestral tomb wasn't the eldest son in the family tree, but the other branches couldn't be verified and this branch was so prominent. The back of the record was basically those from the old Wu family. I saw that this Wu ancestor's name was "Zu Yi Gong", his eldest son's name was "Shang Cheng Gong", and under Shang Cheng Gong's name was some small print that read: eldest son is Wan Ji, second son is Wan Bo, and third son Wanxiang.

Xu A Qin said the eldest Wu brother was Shan Cheng Gong, whose mother was called He Shi. Shan Cheng Gong had three sons—the eldest

son Wu Wan Ji, the second son Wu Wan Bo, and the third son Wu Wanxiang.

There were no women's names in China's genealogical records so we didn't know who Shan Cheng Gong's first wife was. But in the back of the record, all those who had made some achievements had a brief biography, each one about a page long with a brief introduction of that person's achievements, as well as their marriage and whether they had children. Uncle Two looked it over and directly checked for Shan Cheng Gong. He said that Shan Cheng Gong was the second generation of our branch and must have compiled this record, so there must be a brief biography about him.

After looking through the record, we finally found it. Shan Cheng Gong—the eldest Wu brother who built this ancestral tomb—had two wives and three sons. Uncle Two carefully looked at his wife's name and said, "Found it."

We leaned over and asked what he found. He said, "Look, these two wives—the first one was called An Shi and the concubine was called He Shi." Uncle Two turned to the front to look at the genealogy and pointed it out to us, "All three of Shan Cheng Gong's sons were born to Concubine He Shi."

"So?" I asked. "It's quite normal that the first wife didn't have any children and nothing happened. At that time, there was no Maria Women's Hospital to treat infertility."

Uncle Two asked Biao Gong to take out the paper that recorded the coffin names of the ancestral tomb and said calmly, "But you see, the person who was buried together with Shan Cheng Gong in the ancestral tomb wasn't An Shi, but He Shi. Even if nothing happened, it was impossible to let the concubine serve as the first wife for burial. Let's look at He Shi's brief story in this biography. She was the fourth daughter of the He family in Zhao Shandu. There's a little written about when she died, but the first wife's An family has no record. In feudal society, this kind of situation was impossible. Even if the He family relied on Shan Cheng Gong to throw his weight around, the Wu family still had elders and in-laws and wouldn't allow for an exception to be made in this respect. Unless she did

something, she would have to be sunk in the river. Don't you think this is strange? It's almost like the first wife An Shi was an invisible person; it's very mysterious." Uncle Two spoke as if he were a teacher.

I didn't have any clue about these kinds of family matters, so when I heard this, I asked him to stop, "Uncle Two, please put it simply."

Uncle Two took a pen and wrote it on the back of the paper on which the coffin names were recorded. "I don't know if you've read the book 'San Ming Tong Hui'¹⁷, but it contains many classical stories and describes some of the alternative meanings of words used in ancient times. Among them was the character 'an'¹⁸: the homonym for 'ān' is 'àn'¹⁹ and 'àn' is the equivalent of having no light, or not being bright. In other words, 'àn' is the same as ignorance. An Shi was basically anonymous. Someone also wrote a verse in a poem that said, 'The pitiful city is full of people without a name (An Shi). A stranger has no need to harbor the East land in their heart'."²⁰

I kind of realized what Uncle Two meant, but I couldn't believe it. Biao Gong and Uncle Three were even more confused so I said, "Uncle Two, do you mean that this first wife had no name? The extra nameless coffin was that of the first wife, An Shi?"

Uncle Two nodded, and Biao Gong said, "But the woman's corpse in the coffin didn't follow the burial methods used for first wives."

"Hear me out," Uncle Two said before once again turning to the genealogical record. "At that time, how could anyone allow a woman whose name was unknown to be the first wife? The existence of this An Shi is quite strange."

¹⁷ Most authoritative work on the 'Eight Characters, Four Pillars of Fate' form of Chinese divination that uses astrology, but this particular book is about three pillars of fate

¹⁸ 安= ān, can mean: content/calm/still/quiet/ safe/secure/in good health. The first wife they're discussing has this character in her name

¹⁹ 暗= àn, can mean: dark/gloomy/hidden/secret/muddled/ obscure

²⁰ Per Tiffany: "氏(Shi)" can mean "surname". "安氏" means people whose surname is "安"(An). Since there were no women's names in China's genealogical records, they would put down women's surname from their original family in it at most. So they assumed the first wife's surname was "An". But according to Uncle Two, "An Shi" didn't necessarily mean people whose last name was "An". It could also mean "anonymous", people with no surname or no name at all.

“Don’t be so absolute. Maybe she was a special low-key first wife who happened to have the surname An and couldn’t have children,” Uncle Three said. “You’re also flying blind here, so how did you come up with this theory? When I heard that old monster speak before, I couldn’t think of anything at all.”

I was also baffled and thought to myself, *Uncle Two, your thinking is so bold and imaginative.*

“Of course there’s a reason,” Uncle Two said. “I noticed it at the end of his story.”

Chapter 1.22 An Shi

Uncle Two leaned against the rattan chair and slowly continued to explain to us while looking through the genealogical record, “Xu A Qin said that our ancestral grave was the place where the old well was dug up. In the end, Shan Cheng Gong didn’t change to a different location but was buried in the same place. Moreover, this matter involved a more powerful feng shui master so there’s a part that doesn’t make sense—the feng shui of the place was very normal and they dug up a corpse from the ground, which meant that it was a place of yin and evil spirits, so why did Shan Cheng Gong insist on keeping the ancestral tomb there?”

“The rumors that the villagers treasured the well were obviously unfounded. Mao Shajing generally refers to the drought in that area. Our old village was well-known for its drought, and famine was the worst in this area. According to them, it’s strange that our ancestral tomb would be built in an area that was devastated by drought. It definitely wasn’t an ideal spot to bury them there. Since Shan Cheng Gong didn’t do it because of the benefits, it shows that the situation was just the opposite—he was forced to do so.”

“Forced?”

“Yes, building the ancestral tomb in that location was a last resort. It must be related to One-Eyed Shen’s note. I think the only problem revolves around the corpse that was discovered in the old well.”

Biao Gong listened to this, took a puff of his pipe, and then said hesitantly, “So you’re saying—”

“I’m very certain about these things, so I began to consider what was most likely to happen in light of these factors. After thinking about it, I realized that the woman’s snail-covered corpse was like a cellar corpse. When it was dug up before, the big bluestone that had a word engraved on the wellhead was obviously used to seal the well. So, this cellar corpse may be the problem since it was sealed inside. And a few generations ago, bandits flourished here—”

When I heard this, I suddenly understood, “You mean, One-Eyed Shen thought that this ancient corpse wasn’t killed, but—”

“Naked, without any jewelry or jade... she was apparently robbed of everything after a bandit raid and then thrown into the well. Moreover, there were other bones outside the old well, so it may have been the place where the bandits disposed of the bodies before. They may have also stolen fresh goods from recently buried people.”

I immediately nodded in agreement, “Brilliant.”

“This woman’s corpse was a rotten green color, and even though she was dead, her body wasn’t showing signs of rigor mortis. There were suspicions that she would become a zombie, and at that time, they were afraid that she would come out to harm people if she was buried.” Uncle Two continued, “The thieves at that time may have also thought this, so they quickly threw her into the well, covered the wellhead with huge stones, and made a warning sign. Many rotting corpses were thrown into the well and the snails multiplied in great numbers, so they fought for new corpses and were poisoned by the corpse poison. The snails covered the surface of the corpse and formed a closed coffin, which preserved the woman’s body—of course, this is only speculation.” Uncle Two then turned around, “Archaeology can only get infinitely close to the truth, but it can never be equated with the whole truth.”

Biao Gong nodded, “Go on.”

“Then the next question arose. Shan Cheng Gong dismantled the dried-up well, dug up the corpse they discovered, and placed it in the ancestral hall. If it was an ordinary corpse, it would probably be burned. The planned location of the grave was inauspicious, so they would normally change to another one. But why did they invite a feng shui master at that time? I think it must be because some strange changes took place with the body they discovered, which caused Shan Cheng Gong to panic. When I think about it, I find that these things seem to be connected.” Uncle Two rubbed his temples, “Feng shui masters at that time were mostly frauds, and they would definitely take this opportunity to ask for money. A lot of them must have made up some strange lies.”

“Xu A Qin said that the feng shui master didn’t want money.”

“According to the custom at that time, feng shui masters that were invited weren’t given money but gifts. The same is true for many fortune tellers now. They say they don’t want money, but if you want to sincerely thank them and they want something from you, then you ‘gift’ it to them. Your father was tricked out of a watch last time. Therefore, feng shui masters will not suffer losses and will definitely receive greater benefits than money,” Uncle Two said. “So I started to wonder, what kind of bad idea did this feng shui master come up with? After going through the usual tricks that frauds use, I came up with a rather shocking idea.”

“What is it, Number Two? Can’t you just say it? You’ve almost caught up with Master Cai, the storyteller in your teahouse,” Uncle Three said.

“It’s a yin marriage.”

“Yin marriage?”

“Yes, it’s where you marry a ghost wife. The feng shui master must have said something like this—Shan Cheng Gong had disturbed the ghost’s corpse. This woman’s corpse appeared abnormal and was bound to become a fierce ghost. To ensure the family’s safety, this dead woman had to get married, and allowing her to enter the family tomb could prevent the whole village from suffering. Therefore, under the pressure of the patriarch, Shan Cheng Gong had no choice but to build the ancestral tomb in its original place.”

I broke out in a cold sweat and felt a little sick. None of us spoke. After a while, Uncle Three asked, “Did they need a bridal room?”²¹

“We don’t need to know the details,” Uncle Two said in a leisurely manner. “These are all just my theories, so I want to look at the genealogical record to see if I can find any clues to prove them. Now it seems that this kind of speculation is still possible. I estimate that the An Shi discovered in the well is the corpse in the nameless coffin. Even though He Shi was called the concubine, she was actually the first wife, so

²¹ Tiffany said Uncle Three wanted to know whether Shan Cheng Gong needed to have sex with the corpse when he made the decision to marry the ghost wife.

both coffins had to go into the ancestral tomb. But this thing is too strange, so—”

“If it were me, I wouldn’t want anyone to know,” Uncle Three said.

“Then according to the feng shui master, isn’t the shadow formed by the snails the fierce ghost of the ancient corpse?” I suddenly felt a chill on my back.

“No!” Uncle Two put down the genealogical record, “So-called fierce ghosts and terrible monsters are unfounded. They were just a product of the Qing dynasty at that time. People believed in such things during those times, but how can we believe in them now?”

Chapter 1.23 Heavy Rain

“If you don’t believe them, then how do you explain what happened to us?” I asked him. The living snails in this coffin and the shadow in the stream were both mysterious. If it wasn’t haunted, I really didn’t know how to explain it.

“This is still unknown. I don’t believe in ghosts and gods, but now that I know the origin, I at least have a direction to think in,” Uncle Two said. “Anyway, we don’t have to worry too much about these snails now. We won’t return to Hangzhou for another three days, so I’ll think about it and see what happens. If it’s really the evil spirit of the woman’s corpse, then our ancestral grave has been moved and the nameless woman’s corpse has been buried in it. There’s no reason to complain.”

We all sighed. It seemed that there was nothing better we could do now. Biao Gong looked at the clock on the wall and stood up while saying, “Let’s get busy then!” He went back to see if the dinner was over while Uncle Two, Uncle Three, and I went back to rest.

Xu A Qin’s pickles were also in my car. “What should I do with these?” I asked. “I can’t take them all the way back to Hangzhou. When I deliver goods, people will smell pickles all over the antiques and the sales will be ruined.”

“Find a place to pile them up first,” Uncle Three said. “I love to eat them.”

After tossing and turning for a while, I still felt uneasy as I thought about the legendary woman’s rotten green corpse. I felt uncomfortable all over and checked all the sewer drains in the house again from top to bottom—the water tower connected to the tap water was in town so I figured that probably didn’t matter. I couldn’t think of any other places where water flowed, so I felt a little more at ease.

After yesterday’s fatigue, staying up late, and getting up early in the morning to drive all day, I really couldn’t help it and fell asleep at eight o’clock. This was the sleep of pure exhaustion, and I slept heavily for once. I was so tired that I didn’t even dream and managed to sleep through the night.

When I got up at five in the morning, I was completely refreshed and rejuvenated, but I noticed that the sky was very dark. I put on my clothes and went to the window to listen to the sounds outside when I suddenly froze—something was wrong.

I didn't know when it had started raining.

A sense of foreboding entered my heart and I immediately rushed out from under the eaves of the house, only to see Uncle Two and Uncle Three standing there with pale faces.

I followed the direction of their gazes—in the pouring rain, there was something standing in our yard.

Chapter 1.24 Object

It was raining heavily and my line of sight was blurred. Since the sewer was blocked, the yard was full of accumulated water and the curtain of rain under the eaves poured down with a majestic sound.

With the light of the street lamp, I could see that the object was in the shape of a person, but it wasn't very human-like. All that could be seen in the rain was a vague shadow, but all the details weren't very clear.

Even so, I could guess what it was. I swallowed a mouthful of saliva and said dumbly, "It actually has a human form—"

"What kind of human form is this? Aliens?" Uncle Three retorted.

"When did this happen?" I asked them.

"I saw it half an hour ago when I got up to exercise," Uncle Two said. "It was still at the gate at that time."

I felt my heart quiver—this thing was now located in the middle of the yard, about ten meters away from us. In other words, after only half an hour, this thing had gotten closer to us.

When I noticed that Uncle Three and Uncle Two's clothes were dry, I asked them, "Didn't you go over and take a look?"

"Why don't you go?" Uncle Three glared at me.

I saw that their expressions were a little different and asked, "What's the matter?"

"This time it's a bit unusual," Uncle Two said. "Look at the rain."

I looked down at the accumulated water in the courtyard and found that the water was separated into individual puddles, several of which had a layer of dark red things floating in them, "This is..."

"Blood," Uncle Two said.

I gasped and immediately felt a strong sense of uneasiness. Even my hands felt a little cold. After a moment of silence, I asked, “What should we do?”

“Don’t panic, I’ve already called my buddies and asked them to bring a weapon over,” Uncle Three said. At this time, I saw him holding a sickle in his hand and his eyes were full of a fierce light. “No matter what it is, I’ll make sure it never comes back,” he said.

I nodded—my heart unwittingly uplifted— and immediately looked around for something to defend myself with. I eventually found a pole and immediately grabbed it, acting like the Japanese devils were entering the village.²² Then I drew back behind Uncle Three to wait.

The rain continued for another ten minutes before it started to slow down. At this time, Uncle Three’s buddies arrived, but no one dared to enter through the gate. Instead, they handed the weapon in through the window of Uncle Three’s room. He had been waiting for this moment for a long time. He thrust his sickle into his belt and shook off the oilcloth that was wrapped around the weapon.

I saw that it was a short-headed shotgun, which was new and shiny. “Look at this beauty. Bought it in Changjiang, the place where the Baisha uprising took place. It’s all the manual work of the local people. One shot fired... not to mention the snails, a mule’s head will be blown off.” Uncle Three grinned.

“You came back this time mainly to sell this thing?” Uncle Two asked.

“Nonsense, I’m not a poacher. My friend brought it for me.” Uncle Three said as he loaded the cartridges neatly and covered the gun with the cloth again. “Alright, let’s go and see what’s going on.”

As Uncle Two and I followed behind him, Uncle Two calmly opened up an umbrella. We approached the thing in a few steps but stopped two or

²² Guess he’s imagining it’s back in WWII where the Japanese raided villages, that’s why he said “Japanese devils”.

three meters from it, not daring to get any closer. As I looked carefully at it, it gave me the creeps.

It was a huge “pillar” of black and white snails that was vaguely shaped like a human being. But this wasn’t the most terrifying thing. That was reserved for the thing’s huge head, which unexpectedly had vague facial features that were distorted and deformed, making it look very ferocious.

Uncle Three looked at it coldly. We walked around the thing twice, but it didn’t move. Uncle Three raised his gun, “Let’s shoot it first?”

Just as he was about to pull the trigger, Uncle Two stopped him and said to us, “Wait, this... there seems to be something inside.”

“What?”

Uncle Two stared at it for a while before taking my pole and thrusting it into the pile of snails. After stirring it around a bit, the snails scattered, and a hand was unexpectedly exposed from the inside.

Chapter 1.25 Death

Biao Gong's body was lying in the ancestral hall, still dripping with water. In front of the body was a screen, behind which all the Wu people who had the right to speak were present and sitting on the bench. My father sat in the main seat, holding his forehead and practically unable to speak. This time, he was really hard-pressed.

Uncle Three and I were huddled in the corner. The iron basin for burning paper money that had just been extinguished was taken out again, several female relatives began to burn paper again, and the men were all desperately smoking.

The Chinese New Year was approaching; it was really unlucky for such a thing to happen.

Uncle Two and several others were inside examining the body. The police in the village also came, and after staying in there for a long time, they came out with Uncle Two, who gave us a sign to follow.

I grabbed an umbrella and went to the village police station (in fact, it was just an office) to explain the matter. The three of us squatted under the eaves outside the police station, disappointed and confused. Uncle Three was smoking a cigarette, looking at the sky, and not talking. Naturally, their relationship with Biao Gong wasn't that deep. These people were quite open to death, but they weren't happy about it.

"Drowned," Uncle Two said. "After we finished yesterday, he may have had a few drinks with those Taoist priests and drunk a little too much. It rained heavily that night, so he probably rolled into the stream on his way back and was swept away."

"What happened to that blood?"

"He was washed away by the stream and was badly scratched." Uncle Two shook his head. "He's cut up so bad you can see the bones. It's too bad."

"So we're not going to talk about the snails?" Uncle Three asked.

“Who would believe it? Do you think our village police station has a department similar to the X-Files?” I retorted.

Uncle Three finished smoking his cigarette and threw the butt out into the rain. With Biao Gong’s death, he couldn’t return to Hangzhou at the scheduled time. And now that someone had died, the nature of things had changed. Everything was more troublesome. Since Biao Gong was the loudest speaker in our branch of the family, he usually relied on his prestige to suppress the people below and he also supported my father as the patriarch. Now that he was dead, not only would my father’s position be threatened, but there would be increasing internal problems in the family. Especially the past few days, Biao Gong was always talking with us in secret and others had no doubt noticed. They would definitely speak out.

“If he really fell on his own, I would feel at ease,” Uncle Three said.

I nodded. Biao Gong had a pretty high alcohol tolerance, so it was hard to believe that he was drunk. On the other hand, people here drank mung bean liquor, which had a high alcohol content that could go to one’s head. We drank Jian Nan Chun wine at the tofu banquet, which had a low alcohol content, so I was afraid that he had drunk too much. After all, this wine was like plain boiled water to the people here.

“But who knows how old he really is,” I comforted myself.

“Big nephew, I can’t stand this. When the rain stops, we have to go to town to buy more pesticide. Let’s fight those fucking snails!” Uncle Three cursed. “We’ll see who killed who!”

I sighed, thinking that it was really suffocating. I came all the way out here in winter to compete with snails. How the hell did I spend this year? I also began to think about things in Hangzhou—if I didn’t go back for such a long time, how was I supposed to handle matters over there? Wang Meng would go home in a few days, so would he close the shop early? There was no end to things here and I didn’t know when it would stop. I had a hunch that if this matter couldn’t be satisfactorily resolved, we may never get to go back.

At this time, I found that Uncle Two was looking at the nearby sewer in a daze, as if he had something on his mind. I patted him, "Uncle Two, what are you thinking about?"

He came back to his senses and said, "I have a question I can't figure out."

"What's the matter?" Uncle Three leaned over.

"Don't you find it strange? Why does that thing keep running to our yard? The place we're staying at is kind of far from the stream."

"Ah!" When Uncle Two said that, I also trembled for a moment. I really hadn't thought much about it.

"What is its purpose?" Uncle Two muttered to himself as he stood up, looked at Uncle Three, and just stared at him.

Uncle Three looked uncomfortable and said, "What?"

"Third Brother, be honest," Uncle Two said. "Have you done something we don't know about?"

Chapter 1.26 Purpose

Uncle Three denied it and swore that he had nothing to do with it, saying that all he had done this trip was deal with the snails.

Uncle Two was quite skeptical, so Uncle Three asked angrily, “Do I need to lie? I’m your younger brother. Even if I have done something, what can you do about it?”

Uncle Two nodded, and I also thought that this made sense. With Uncle Three’s temperament, he didn’t need to hide anything from anyone at all. And besides, he was still in Changsha, his own territory.

“I thought you and Cao Er Daozi secretly took something out of the coffin and that’s why the snails keep looking for trouble. Why else would you come back so early?”

“If your head was bleeding, would you not go to the hospital and just let it keep bleeding?” Uncle Three wasn’t in a good mood.

“If it’s not because of you, what else could it be? What exactly is attracting it to our yard?” Uncle Two asked himself.

As he was thinking about it, the rain stopped. “Don’t think about it anymore,” Uncle Three said. “Elder brother can’t handle it alone. Let’s go and help him first.”

Uncle Two was still thinking it over but also stood up. When we returned to the ancestral hall, we saw that everybody was in an uproar, so Uncle Three went to help. I didn’t want to talk about these disgusting things so I went home alone.

The yard had been cleaned up and the sewer had been opened to see if there were any more snails, which allowed the accumulated water to drain out. The snails that had been attached to Biao Gong were collected and placed in a water tank on one side, with stones pressed on top of it. It was said that there were as many as half a tank of snails, which would be taken care of after the rain stopped. I felt very uncomfortable when

looking at the water tank since I kept thinking that the contents looked like a large snail. I couldn't help bypassing it from a safe distance.

Back in my room, I was bored and didn't know what to do. I kept feeling uncomfortable as I imagined that the water tank was a ticking time bomb, but that just made me uneasy and very nervous. It was a little too cold to sit alone in my room during the middle of winter so I went out for a walk.

While wandering around the village, I was so busy thinking about everything that had happened that I came to the stream before I knew it.

The stream was surging after the heavy rain, and the water level was much higher than before. I stepped on the gravel by the stream and watched the debris washed down from upstream get stuck on the bank. It was all branches and dead leaves and the water was very muddy. I picked up a few rocks from the bank and threw them into the water, thinking about Uncle Two's problem.

In fact, when Uncle Two mentioned it, I already had an answer in my heart but I kept silent. I remembered that when the coffin was opened at that time, it was Biao Gong, two other old guys, me, and my father present. That thing's target might be me. Of course, I didn't know the reason, but I figured that maybe "it" was going after the five of us who opened its coffin and disturbed its peace.

Not to mention, I was also its descendant. Although there was no blood relationship between us and the process was kept secret, it had been registered and buried in the main grave from the start. Why was it still so aggressive? What exactly did it experience when it died to make it so bitter? Or was Uncle Two wrong, and it was as Uncle Three said: the coffin wasn't for the woman, but the snails?

I wanted to laugh when I thought about these questions, but Biao Gong's death frightened me. This matter involved life and death, so it wasn't funny. I reminded myself that if possible, it was better to go back early. Hangzhou was so far away from here that it would take ten years for that thing to follow. But it didn't seem right to run away now, and I was unwilling to do so.

The ground was wet, and I didn't think the rain would stop, but there was always a day or two where it would rain intermittently. I really wouldn't be able to sleep that night, so I had to get a weapon and be ready at any moment. Thinking this, I suddenly had an idea—why not borrow a dog?

Before Grandpa died, there was an old dog he had trained. Now it was raised in Hangzhou by Uncle Two, but he didn't bring it with him. If he had, the dog could look after the house and protect the courtyard or something. But there was no use in thinking about it. Snails crawled so slowly that there was almost no sound, and a dog may not be able to find it.

With this thought, I suddenly realized that something didn't add up: there seemed to be something weird with what I said just now.

I thought for a moment and knew why I felt uncomfortable just now.
That's right, snails crawl very slowly!

How far was it from where I was staying to the nearest stream? With a snail's speed, would they be able to climb here in half a night? The more I thought about it, the greater this feeling of wrongness grew. I stood up and started walking. I found that there was a distance of more than eight hundred meters from the stream to the place where I was staying. I did some calculations and knew that a snail's full speed could reach about eight meters per hour, and river snails moved slower than land snails. I estimated that it would take at least ten minutes to climb a meter and more than eight thousand minutes just to move eight hundred fucking meters, which was more than a hundred and thirty hours. If it wanted to appear in my yard this morning, it should have come out of the stream five days ago. Damn it, this whole thing hadn't even happened five days ago.

Fuck, what's going on? Are these snails taking steroids?

I immediately called to share my thoughts with Uncle Two, but he wasn't excited at all. He just grunted and said, "I know." Then he quickly hung up, as if something difficult was going on over there.

Chapter 1.27 Setting a Trap

I didn't know what was going on until they came back. It turned out that, as expected, there was a dispute after Biao Gong's death. My father was hit by someone and chaos ensued. Even Biao Gong's corpse was knocked over. Later, the police came to break up the scene, but we had completely lost face. Uncle Three said that we should call somebody; otherwise, we wouldn't be able to stay in the village.

My father said to forget it, it was better to avoid unnecessary trouble. And in the end, we were all members of the Wu family. Uncle Three was so enraged that he ended up arguing with my father, who angrily went upstairs.

Uncle Two didn't seem to care. He watched my father go upstairs and close the door before beckoning us to his room.

Curious, Uncle Three and I followed him and asked him what he was doing. He took out something from his pocket and said, "Look at this."

"What is it?"

"I found it in Biao Gong's cuff when you were fighting," Uncle Two said.

On the table, I saw that it was a medieval key that looked familiar.

"Isn't this the key to the box where old Biao Gong keeps the genealogical record? We saw it at his house yesterday," Uncle Three said. "What does this mean?"

"Biao Gong left a message for us before he died. It seems that he wants us to look at the family tree again," Uncle Two said. "He may have thought of something before he died."

This was an unexpected change. "Why didn't you say something just now?" Uncle Three scolded him. "It was more convenient to go earlier, but I'm afraid it's a bit problematic now."

I had also read our genealogy, but I really couldn't understand the contents so I didn't have much of an impression. Now that Biao Gong was

dead, there was a fear that the genealogical record would be stolen, so someone must be guarding it. Since there was a big fight just now, it may not be realistic for us to go to Biao Gong's house and look through his things.

"Money makes the world go 'round. Wu Sanxing, don't tell me you can't settle this matter," Uncle Two said.

Uncle Three nodded, "Understood." Then he called the man who was going to stand watch tonight, whispered something to him, and the man left. I asked Uncle Three how he arranged it, but he said that children didn't need to know. We would be able to go in tonight to get the things we needed.

I didn't think Uncle Three's method was the way to go, but it didn't matter if he wouldn't tell me as I didn't have to bear the burden. Turning my head, I asked my uncle what he thought of my phone call earlier. Uncle Two made a gesture not to mention it and told me not to ask.

I was puzzled and felt like Uncle Two was being secretive. But when I saw his expression, I knew that it wasn't a convenient time to ask, so I had to give up.

Uncle Three's guys soon came back and whispered something to him that made him give a simple "Ok." We had dinner and stayed at home until midnight, then set off with a flashlight.

There were few street lamps in the village at night so some places were dark and had no light at all. Rural people went to bed early so there were only dogs barking on the road. I wasn't used to walking in the village at night, so I followed closely behind Uncle Three. After walking for about twenty minutes, he stopped and nodded to Uncle Two, who motioned me to keep silent and then turned off the flashlight.

I was baffled. After turning off the flashlight, it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness around me, but then I saw Uncle Three tiptoeing around a corner. I was surprised to find that we were back, and the place in front of me was our own yard.

Chapter 1.28 Prey

Uncle Three led me to the corner of the courtyard wall and the three of us sat down against the wall. I kind of understood what was going on now.

It was obvious that Uncle Three and Uncle Two had other plans besides looking at the genealogical record. Of course, I didn't know what they were thinking at all, but based on this situation, this was obviously an ambush. I stilled my movements and decided to cooperate with them.

It was the middle of the night in winter, and although the weather hadn't yet reached the coldest time, staying up late in the open air on such a rainy night was really torture. My teeth were soon aching and my whole body had shrunk in on itself. I felt as if my body temperature had been blown away by the wind hitting my neck.

It was after midnight, and I was completely numb from the cold when we suddenly heard a noise in the courtyard. Uncle Three and Uncle Two appeared to be sitting, and when the sound rang out, they both quivered. It was obvious that they were also unbearably cold. We stood up slowly, looked over the wall into the courtyard, and saw that the big stone on top of the water tank had suddenly moved.

I narrowed my eyes as my nerves sorted themselves out. On closer inspection, I found that it wasn't the big stone that had moved, but the wooden lid of the water tank that was pushed up. Then the stone rolled to one side, the lid was pushed up further, and a man climbed out of the water tank. He looked around and then walked into the house.

"So it was actually hiding here!" Uncle Two whispered.

"Go!" Uncle Three stood up with a wave of his hand. "This bastard finally appeared."

I went to follow, but my feet were numb with cold and I shivered twice before I managed to get up and follow.

While walking, Uncle Three lit a cigarette. It almost seemed like he had endured a terrible hardship. As he passed by the debris pile in the yard, he pulled out a bag from inside—I had no idea when he hid it—took out the shotgun from the bag, and cocked it.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“This is the fierce ghost.” Uncle Two sneered.

“Is it a person?”

“In this world, people are more fierce than ghosts,” Uncle Two said. At this time, there was a sudden shout from the room. *Not good*, I thought to myself as I cried out, “My dad’s still upstairs!”

I was about to rush up but Uncle Two stopped me and said, “Don’t worry, I was already prepared for this.” Uncle Three had already broken into the house. As we hurried up to the second floor, we saw my father’s door was wide open and the room inside was a mess. A squirming man rigidly held on the ground by a burly man was crying in pain.

“Da Kui, lift his face up,” Uncle Three said. The burly man immediately tightened his hold, pulled the man’s upper body from the ground, and thrust the man’s neck out.

It only took a quick glance before I recognized this face that I had often seen these past few days—Cao Er Daozi!

“It was you, you son of a bitch.” Uncle Three gave an insidious smile, “I’ve caught you!”

Cao Er Daozi looked surprised, making it obvious that he still didn’t understand what was going on. I couldn’t see my father anywhere and anxiously asked, “Where’s dad?”

“Preparing things in the ancestral hall,” Uncle Two said before turning to ask Da Kui, “Did you film it?”

“It’s all there.” Da Kui nodded. “This guy is so ruthless. He almost suffocated me.”

Uncle Three squatted down in front of Cao Er Daozi and said, “Didn’t fucking think of that, did you?”

“Damn it! Didn’t you get caught by my men at old Biao Gong’s house?” Cao Er Daozi looked genuinely baffled.

“With what eyes did you see me get arrested?” Uncle Three asked.

I felt confused as I listened to this exchange. While Cao Er Daozi was set off to one side, I asked Uncle Two what was going on. He smiled and said, “I told you earlier, I don’t believe in ghosts and gods. In this world, only the human heart is the most terrifying thing.”

Chapter 1.29 The Truth

In the car back to Hangzhou, Uncle Two told me the story in detail.

It turned out that when he saw the snail ghost-shadow on my window, he knew that it must have been done by someone.

“It’s too simple. With the crawling speed of snails, even if they were possessed by a fierce ghost, what do you think they can do? A pile of snails can’t crush you and can’t stretch you flat. Even if you were only one meter away from it, it would take more than ten minutes to reach you if it wanted to harm you. Plus, I study feng shui and know too many frauds so I didn’t believe it. At that time, I was sure someone was doing it.” Uncle Two checked his stocks on his phone and added, “But I wasn’t sure who it was. This wasn’t an ordinary scare tactic and I figured he had a special reason for doing so.”

He paused before continuing, “My money was all on the coffin. After the live snails in the coffin were released, the snails’ ghost-shadow appeared in the stream. I felt that this troublemaker’s purpose may be related to the coffin, but there wasn’t anything in it. I couldn’t imagine what he was trying to do.” Uncle Two turned to look at me, “Little Xie, Uncle Two is giving you some good advice, which I’ve learned after so many years’ experience—there’s a motive to everything. There is always a motive behind things, which must be figured out first.”

“This is what you learned from the stock market,” I teased him.

“You can say that. With the ups and downs, there’s always a reason why the stockbroker does something,” Uncle Two said while looking at the stocks. “So I went to Zhao Shandu first, to find out the origin of the coffin. But after asking, I found that it was all just groundless speculations that weren’t of any value. I realized that maybe his purpose wasn’t the coffin, and this might just be a pretext for what he really wanted. Sure enough, after we came back, Biao Gong died in such a suspicious way. I immediately understood that this was the other party’s purpose.”

“Why? Was it necessary?”

“Everyone in the Wu family works in the tombs, and like your Uncle Three, they have a small belief in things like ghosts and gods. If they had just pushed Biao Gong into the stream to drown, we would have known that he was killed because we could figure out how much alcohol he drank. But if it occurred in such a strange way, then it becomes very mysterious. If the people on this side don’t make it public, they can literally deceive everyone and also point the finger at us. At this time, I began to think about his second motive. Why did he want to harm Biao Gong?”

“Biao Gong was childless, had no family property, and didn’t have any particularly deep-seated enemies. The only thing that would arouse envy in others is his position. This is what bothered me the most because even his position wasn’t particularly attractive. In order to figure this out, I wasted a lot of time without getting any results.

“In the end, I had to give up thinking from this angle and turn to another question: Who was not only in conflict with Biao Gong, but also wanted to deal with us? Third Brother and I thought of the same person— Cao Er Daozi. Later, I secretly took the copy of the genealogical record and discovered that Cao Er Daozi is the same generation as your father. That is to say, if your father isn’t the patriarch, then Cao Er Daozi would take over before you came of age. When I saw this, I suddenly realized that if Cao Er Daozi really was the culprit, then he still had one more person to kill, and that was your father.

“But your father is different from Biao Gong. Third Brother is staying in the room below your father’s and I get up early so he didn’t have time to do it. In order to determine whether it was him or not, I created an opportunity for him—pretending to steal the genealogical record and leaking the information to his spy who was beside Third Brother. Thinking this was a good opportunity, he would surely find someone to ambush us over there while he came to kill your father himself.”

I thought of the conversation at that time and said, “If no one went to steal the genealogical record, wouldn’t your plot be discovered?”

“That’s why I quickly called Pan Zi and Da Kui and brought some buddies with fresh faces,” Uncle Three said. “It was Pan Zi who stole the family

tree. How could that gang of small, useless children catch Pan Zi and not be beaten by him? They did everything they were asked to do. Da Kui was lying in ambush in your father's room, waiting for Cao Er Daozi."

I felt a little stunned as I listened, "So Cao Er Daozi came out to kill my father and Biao Gong? For the patriarch's position?"

Uncle Three nodded and smiled, "Exactly." But Uncle Two put down his phone and said, "No."

"Oh, no?" Uncle Three wondered, "Then what was he doing it for?"

"What I've said so far is just the tip of the iceberg. In other words, what we've seen is only the surface of the real matter," Uncle Two said.

Chapter 1.30 Secret

Uncle Three's face changed slightly as Uncle Two rubbed his temples and said, "Why did Cao Er Daozi want this useless patriarch position? Why did the snails in the coffin not die after a hundred years? Also, why could the centenarian recall a story he heard sixty years ago so smoothly? I still have a lot of things to think about."

I was a little puzzled as I listened to Uncle Two's tone change, but then I saw him squinting at Uncle Three, "Some people always think that their brains are better than others, but they don't realize that the second child is always a little better than the third. Don't you think so, Third Brother?"

I immediately saw Uncle Three break out in a cold sweat. His face darkened and he didn't speak as Uncle Two unexpectedly exerted a very strange pressure.

After a long silence, Uncle Two said, "I have a guess here. I don't know whether it's right or not. Just listen to it."

After a pause, he said, "When opening the ancestral grave, a greedy descendant found an extra coffin there. Sensitive by nature, he immediately realized that the coffin might be an artifact hidden by his ancestors. But surrounded by his own people, he couldn't rob it openly, and he knew that once the coffin was opened, these things would be distributed to others. This descendant had a brave nature and never gave way to others. In that short span of ten minutes, he came up with a solution: he asked two close associates to take the nameless old coffin from the woodshed behind the ancestral hall and exchange it with the coffin from the ancestral grave while they were on the mountain road between the graveyard and the village where there were no street lamps.

"In order to prevent the pallbearers from discovering the change in coffin weight, his men dug up a large amount of wet mud from the stream and poured it into the coffin. But with such a tight schedule, they made a mistake. They poured too much water in and the snails that were hibernating in the mud were dumped in as well. The snails were disturbed and woke up from hibernation. And because it was dark when

the coffin was raised, everyone couldn't see it clearly so no one noticed at the ancestral hall that the coffin didn't come from the ancestral grave.

“He originally thought that the plan was flawless, but he didn't expect strange things to happen afterwards. Then he heard that we were going to ask Xu A Qin about the past. He knew that the coffin from the ancestral grave was actually hiding artifacts. Xu A Qin would surely tell us if he knew about this, and we would have discovered that the coffin was replaced. So, he rushed to Xu A Qin's house overnight and bought the old man with money, asking him to read a prepared manuscript. With that old man's memory, I bet it wasn't easy to remember so many things. As a result, he finally had no choice but to let one of his buddies pretend to be Xu A Qin. It's a pity that the make-up was too old and looked really uncomfortable.

“Even so, the truth was still hidden. He didn't know that there was another person in the same generation—Cao Er Daozi—who had a very similar temperament. Cao Er Daozi recognized that there must be treasures in the coffin, but Wu Xie and our elder brother, as well as the three old men, went to open the coffin and ended up saying it was a coffin full of snails. How could he believe it? Cao Er Daozi believed that this must be the collusion between Biao Gong and our elder brother and his heart was filled with resentment. On one hand, he wanted to find the coffin; on the other hand, he wanted to kill and get his revenge. As a result, there were so many incidents just to hide this big case.

“Plus, I was confused by the things in the genealogical record, so I made a wrong judgment. As a result, some things were ignored.

“But this shrewd descendant made a big mistake in the end, which made me realize immediately that there was still fraud in this matter!”

After saying all of that, Uncle Two sighed and asked, “Third Brother, is most of what I said right?”

After a long silence, Uncle Three sighed, “I thought I really hid it from you this time. Where was the flaw?”

“Your speed. Your two buddies appeared too fast. Unless they had wings, they definitely wouldn’t arrive half a day after I set up the scheme. This shows that the two of them must have been nearby,” Uncle Two said.

Uncle Three grinned. I glared at him and asked, “Did you really do such a wicked thing? What’s in the coffin?”

Uncle Three’s smile turned bitter, “Well, if there was something, I wouldn’t be so depressed. I’ve been busy for nothing. The whole coffin was full of rotten wood shavings. I had to run around all night to set up a scheme for all this junk. I’ve received my retribution, so you don’t have to scold me.”

“Really?”

“Really, I admit it. Why would I lie to you?” Uncle Three scolded.

I was surprised and asked Uncle Two, “This isn’t right either. Why bury an empty coffin in the ancestral grave?”

Uncle Two received a text message and said, “Of course it wouldn’t be empty. The coffin was so heavy, I figure it must’ve had a false bottom. That was when the Qing dynasty was in turmoil so I think there should be gold bars in it.” As he said this, Uncle Two showed me the text message, which was from my father. He wasn’t coming back until the first seven days of Biao Gong’s funeral ceremony in the village were over.

The text contained a picture of the thatched cottage behind the ancestral hall. The old coffin inside had been smashed open. There really was a gap between the coffin boards and pieces of gold nuggets were scattered all over the floor. Uncle Three snatched the phone and his eyes became fierce as he shouted at me, “Go back!”

Uncle Two took his phone back and sighed while saying to himself, “We can finally enjoy the New Year.”²³

²³ Chinese New Year is usually sometime b/t between Jan 21 and Feb 20 since it’s determined by the lunar calendar. Think it lasts 7 days. Also called the Spring Festival.

Chapter 1.31 Postscript

After speaking, Uncle Two took out a handkerchief from his pocket. When he unfolded it, I saw that it held the key found in Biao Gong's hands.

"Hey, wasn't that just to trick Cao Er Daozi into thinking we were going to look at the genealogical record? Where did this key come from?"

"This was indeed found on Biao Gong's body. I just took advantage of the situation," Uncle Two said. "But this isn't the key to the box where the genealogical record is kept. I tried it but it didn't work."

"How's that possible?" I asked him. "This is the key I saw."

Uncle Two shook his head and said, "No, this key may be to another similar box. And—" he lifted the key and I saw the character "Wu" on it, "Biao Gong hid this key before he died. What do you think we should do?"

"Don't think about it," I said. "Let's talk about it next year."

"That's right," Uncle Two put the key back in his pocket, "let's celebrate the New Year first." Then he gave me a pat, "Drive slow and be safe."

EXTRA 2: 2014 CHINESE NEW YEAR SPECIAL

Chapter 2.1 Fantasy

I had been looking for an absolutely quiet place for a long time.

My shop wouldn't work. Although many people still weren't coming to the door, there were always a few disturbances during the day, whether it was Wang Meng coming in to ask questions, or guys coming in to get things approved. My house wouldn't work either, because the sounds of cars passing by downstairs would affect what I saw.

Later, I found an abandoned power station near Huanglong in Baoshi Mountain. There was a small dirt road that led all the way to the top of the mountain, but it was full of weeds because it had been abandoned for a long time. If it weren't for a paranoid person like me, it would be hard to find.

The scenery on top of the mountain was quite good and overlooked the West Lake and Yuquan campus. In spring, when the appropriate wind was blowing, you would feel like everything was so beautiful. If the mist was lighter, and the sun was warmer and more transparent, then people's moods would be better in an instant.

I couldn't buy this abandoned little house, but I could borrow it. I moved an IKEA lounge chair over and put it in the sun by the window, along with a small blanket and a basket of carbonated drinks.

Drinking too much of this stuff made my bone density decrease, but it seemed to be the only thing that could alleviate my pain afterwards.

There was an iron gate at the entrance, which I would lock firmly with a big chain that was as thick as two fingers. I wasn't afraid anyone would dare climb in because the walls here were covered in weeds, which were full of sharp pieces of glass. They also had rusty barbed wire wrapped around them.

I took those things with me. Black Glasses said that most of the information was an illusion. Just like some of those mushrooms in Yunnan, this biotoxin was a powerful hallucinogen. It couldn't be confirmed whether the information was real or had been spliced together

from various fragments in my brain, but only those who were resistant to the toxin could prove its effect by constantly trying.

I usually came to this small house around one in the afternoon and smelled the mildew inside. As the sun warmed me, I would take out a tiny test tube full of liquid and drip it into my nostrils.

At first, there was the pain of my nasal mucosa burning, and my nose started to bleed. Then, numbness began to spread from the inside of my nose all along the rest of my face, before climbing into my brain. My neck became paralyzed, all the sensations in my body disappeared, and various scenes started appearing in my brain.

“Gentlemen, the village in front is where the Black Yi live.²⁴ Those Bimo live behind the cottages, surrounded by the Black Yi. It’s a valley surrounded on all sides, so the only access point is blocked by the Black Yi’s village. In order to see those Bimo, we must first get the trust of several Black Yi leaders.” There was a person talking in front of me.

There was a group of people on a boat—no, it should be a bamboo raft—and I could see Poker-Face opposite me, leaning against a pile of luggage. There were about a dozen or so strange-looking people around me.

It must have just rained all around, for the air was filled with the unique scent of the southwestern Sichuan mountains, and a huge river was flowing under our feet. The water was yellow and full of silt.

This was the Jinsha River, where the mountains on both sides were like cliffs, but not quite. Trees were towering on the mountainside, but nothing was growing along the river.

The water was flowing fast, and the person who spoke just now smoked a cigarette and continued, “We’ll pretend to be herbalists this time. Remember to be generous and never feel bad about spending a penny. The folk customs here aren’t civilized yet, so pay attention to your own identity and don’t show any disrespect. All the knives are buried at the

²⁴ The Yi are an ethnic group. They were split into Black Yi (nobles), White Li (commoners), and slaves. Their religion is called “Bimoism” and the Shaman-priests are called “Bimo”, which means “master of scriptures”. Here’s more [info](#)

village entrance, and the weapons are re-purchased in the village so as to avoid suspicion.”

There was a young Yi man next to him, who was only about seventeen or eighteen years old. He said a word in the Yi language, and then explained: “When someone wants to touch you, remember to say this word. It may save your life. Remember, we’re only entering the village to see the Bimo and ask about that matter. If you hurt my people, I won’t spare you.”

Chapter 2.2 Fantasy

When the young Yi man finished speaking, someone on the side sneered and replied, “Oh, now you’re pretending to be a good guy? When you cut your dad and escaped from the village before, you weren’t so gentle then, were you?” The speaker looked like a pampered son of a wealthy family. He was sitting on the edge of the bamboo raft, pale and thin, and wearing a white shirt that had a pen in the chest pocket. He was wearing a pair of glasses and looked like a typical intellectual from the 1970s or ’80s, but I noticed that the middle and index finger on his right hand were very long.

The young Yi man held his knife in his hand and looked at the guy coldly, but Pampered Guy didn’t show any signs of weakness.

The smoker exhaled a puff of smoke, and then tossed the cigarette butt aside. He grabbed the Yi guy’s hand and pushed the knife down: “Using a knife on a bamboo raft won’t solve any problems.”

The words had just fallen, when suddenly, the whole bamboo raft shook, as if it had hit something underwater. Some of the luggage fell off, but these people moved very fast and were able to reach out and catch them midair. One suitcase was missed, however, and fell into the Jinsha River. It immediately started to drift away, but I saw a clawed hook attached to a thin chain get thrown out from among the crowd of people. It hooked the handle of the suitcase and immediately pulled it back, splashing water on everyone’s faces when it landed back on the raft.

“How are you steering the raft?” The Yi guy took advantage of the incident to shift his wrath to the boatman.

A man that looked as strong as a mountain was standing at the other end of the bamboo raft. He didn’t look back, but said faintly, “Look at the water yourself.”

They all turned to look at the Jinsha River, only to find that there were ribbon-like strips in the water. They saw that some strips were full of a golden yellow silt, some were light yellow, and others were as clear as a

snowy mountain spring. The whole river's surface was like a huge rock layer inlaid with various gem veins flowing at the same time.

"There are springs under the water. The clear water gushes out from the springs underneath." The strong man said. "Look at the springs, there's something there."

They lay down on the edge of the bamboo raft and were surprised to see that the clear water gushing from the bottom had split the turbid Jinsha River. These waters were so clear that they could take in everything at the bottom of the river in just a glance. The springs were very big, and each one was the size of a buffalo, forming huge, deep-looking glasses under the water. Everyone could see that the bottom looked like a honeycomb.

"Where do these springs lead?" Pampered Guy asked.

The strong man replied, "According to local legends, these springs are bottomless holes. Every few hundred years, when the Jinsha River dries up, these holes become exposed. It's said they have no bottom. When the local people threw cattle, sheep, and virgins down them as part of their worship, they never heard the sound of anything hitting the bottom. Later, in the Qing Dynasty, some people tried to fill them with sand and stone. They poured for a month, but the holes didn't overflow. They're bottomless. There's a legend that someone went in one. When the rope went down more than sixty meters, he saw evil spirits and black scriptures carved on the stone walls. He didn't dare go down again."

During the conversation, the springs under our bamboo raft started to become scarce. It appeared this strange section of the river only seemed to be concentrated in a two- or three-kilometer area.

It was at this time that I noticed that Pampered Guy had started watching the surrounding mountains. His eyes were full of a kind of luster, and everyone's faces showed repressed excitement.

"There's water gushing out of the water, and the current is fast. These holes must be connected to some big lakes or underground rivers in the mountains." Pampered Guy said, "The water's cold, clear, colorless, and

tasteless.” He bowed his head and scooped up a sip. “Slightly bitter.” When he took out a canteen and filled it halfway, there was a sly smile on his face.

The one in the team who had caught the suitcase with the flying hook didn’t seem to care. He spit in the water and said, “Pay attention to the mountainside.”

When they looked up, they saw a large number of houses had been built on the mountainside. No one saw anyone, but when we passed the village, a long horn sounded somewhere in the valley.

“Remember what I said.” The Yi guy said coldly as he listened to the horn’s echo pass down through the valley.

Chapter 2.3 Fantasy

With that said, everyone on the raft quieted down. They were holding their respective weapons and looking at the multi-storied buildings hanging from both sides of the valley cliffs. These simple wood and stone buildings had a commanding presence, which seemed very threatening to those of us on the river. As the sound of the melodious horn gradually died down, we knew that the news of our arrival into the valley was no longer a secret.

After entering this area, the current had slowed down and the river slowly started to widen. I found that the cliffs were covered in a kind of fibrous vine, which was coiled around the shrubs and rocks, and even followed along the cliff at an inverted angle (that is, the top of the cliff was more prominent than the bottom, just like eaves). From where they were hanging down, I could see that the thick ones resembled the branches of a banyan tree, while the thin ones resembled roots. They were all mixed together with other smaller parasitic plants.

This was what the ancient ethnic minorities used to use to make rattan armor, and it was also strong enough to be used to weave knotted ropes. I knew that the locals called it centipede vine.

I soon saw a rattan rope as thick as an arm strung mid-air across the cliff. For hundreds of years, it was the only bridge the locals had used to pass through the valley. This should be a big village, for I could see three old vines set at different heights in the distance.

It took three months to weave a ten-foot rattan rope, and every rope here was woven layer by layer for several years, and then soaked in butter and wrapped in drum skins. They were stronger than any chain.

Everyone's eyes were constantly scanning both ends of the rattan rope, and even Poker-Face had opened his eyes. They were all skilled and knew that observing the environment at this time could save their lives.

I took this opportunity to look at my clothes and hands.

I had to find out whose memory this was.

I saw that my luggage was a single rattan suitcase, and there was a Western-style gun at my waist; it was a heavy flintlock, full of gunpowder and lead bullets. The suitcase was knee-high and should have everything I need.

When I saw my boots, I realized that I was a man.

Riding boots had been around for quite a long time, and the ones I was wearing were in a foreign style, with patches on them and puttees²⁵ to fasten the boots tightly. I told myself that maybe I was a foreigner. I raised my head and saw that the gaps between my fingers were black and soaked in some kind of grease, and there was an agate ring on my thumb. As I looked at the color of my hands, I was reassured that I was still a yellow man. The stuff on my hands should be related to some of my work, but I was somewhat disappointed to find that my finger length was normal.

When the raft crossed under the first rattan rope, the guy who had used the hook asked, "How many steps?"

"From when we first heard the horn, there are a total of 2,400 steps to the first rope bridge, which has 700 steps." The white-clothed intellectual said.

"How do you cross this rope bridge?"

"You hang from it and slide across. The vines are soaked in oil so the monkeys can't stand on it." The Yi teenager seemed to be very nervous and lowered his head. "This first line is called a hanging rope, which generally isn't used. If there's a war between tribes, or if someone in the tribe commits a felony, then their heads are hung on this line, and people can see them as they enter and exit the valley. If we fail, we'll see you on this line."

²⁵ A cloth wrap that's spiralled around the ankle and performs the same purpose as a gaiter. Gaiter (also known as leggings by non-soldiers) are the canvas (or more rarely leather) wrap that forms one unbroken piece from ankle to approximately mid-calf. They strap over the boot and around the person's leg to provide protection from branches and thorns and to prevent mud, snow, etc. from entering the top of the boot. They may also be worn as protection against snake bites.

“That sounds unlucky. How about I come and burn this rope tonight.” A girl said from among the crowd. I looked around and saw a short-haired woman sitting at the stern in a Yi costume. The woman’s skin was a little dark, but her eyes were very seductive. She wasn’t young—probably around thirty-seven or thirty-eight—but she still had a youthful face. It wasn’t that she wasn’t good-looking, it was just a little strange to see a mature woman with a naive expression.

She wasn’t of Yi nationality, for her facial features were those of a typical Han Chinese. She must have just put this outfit on now. I noticed that her hands were very delicate, and she didn’t look like the kind of person who would do rough work.

“Damn bitch, the rope in my crotch is slippery, too. Why don’t you burn it for me tonight?” Hook guy burst out laughing. The woman didn’t care at all but pointed her foot towards the knife box where Poker-Face was sitting: “Save your old withered vine for your mother to burn. I like it when it’s just sprouted.”

Poker-Face gave her a glance, but ultimately ignored her, and the white-clad intellectual started snickering. Then, I felt the woman’s hand grab my crotch from behind. “As long as it’s just budding, any will do. This aunt can wait. Little official, how come your crotch is cold? Don’t tell me you released with just a few words?” Just as she finished speaking, the woman let out a scream and jerked her hand back. “Snake!”

I felt something move in my crotch and climb all the way up my waist and into my sleeve. A blood-red snake crawled out and coiled in my hand, and when I spoke for the first time, I heard my own voice say: “Don’t touch me.”

Chapter 2.4 Fantasy

As we drifted into the valley depths, there were more and more houses on both sides. Somehow, we didn't see anyone the entire way, and only the dull sounds of the horn accompanied us. I couldn't help but feel that the whole valley was full of hostility, and I wondered if all kinds of crossbows were aimed at us.

But that didn't make sense. Tribal disputes weren't so tense, after all, and there were only a few of us. It was kind of unreasonable to alert the whole village.

After drifting quietly for a while, I saw a pass up ahead that looked like a black tiger. A huge stone had been carved into the tiger's head, and there were rocks piled beneath the water's surface all along the route, making it look like a reef. There was only one way through this mile-long stretch of river, which was why you needed a local guide. This layout prevented other tribes from sailing straight through and easily reaching the core area of the village.

A village had been built on the water right before the pass, and I could see the water on one side of the valley was full of rocks. Part of the cliff must have collapsed, and the debris had piled up at the bottom. The village was built on stilts that had been stuck in the rocks, enabling the buildings to sit two meters above the water, where rafts were docked. The wooden stilts in the water were covered with rattan baskets, which should have been a specialty here. These rattan baskets would be transported to market, where the Yi people could exchange with the Han for gunpowder and raw opium. There was a black stone on the cliff rock in front of the village that had been carved into a ferocious tiger head, and it was half-submerged in the water. It must have been a black tiger totem unique to the Black Yi here that was meant to act as an important deterrent to outsiders.

The multi-storied buildings in this water village extended out along the cliff and even went up it. There were forty or fifty of them all densely packed together, and it looked like they could be accessed using stone steps that had been cut in the mountainside, or some hidden way

underneath. The buildings were attached to the cliff in a staggered formation, and the second rattan rope connected them to another dense group of buildings on the opposite cliff wall.

I still hadn't seen anyone, which was incredible considering mountain people worked from sunrise to sunset.

As far as I could tell, there was a wharf in the deepest part of the valley, which must have been the village's core. Since we were outsiders and the locals were guiding us to the village's center, the buildings here must have been meant to act as a sort of checkpoint. The mountain-like man stopped the boat but didn't signal us to disembark once we had gotten closer.

The Yi youth exchanged glances with everyone and then started shouting at the village in the local dialect. I couldn't understand what he was shouting, but it was probably something about businessmen coming to collect herbs or something.

After shouting for a moment, there was no response, and the whole village was very quiet.

What was going on?

Pampered Guy whispered, "Where's everyone gone? Is your village usually like this?"

At this time, the Yi youth began to realize that something was wrong. He looked around and called a few more words in the local dialect.

The sound of the horn continued, but other than that, we didn't hear anything else. The Yi youth said, "No way. There are hundreds of people living in this water village. And the horn is still blowing. Where is everyone?"

Everyone looked at each other in dismay, and Smoker clicked his tongue. He apparently hadn't thought of such a situation.

"Claw, go up with Asa and take a look." Smoker ordered. Off to the side, the man who had used the clawed hook before responded, and then got

ready to dock. Smoker said to Asa, “If you pull any tricks, those of us outside will level your village.”

The Yi youth sneered. Once we got closer to the stilts, he quickly climbed up, with Claw following close behind. The two of them made it into the village, and Claw spit out a mouthful of phlegm. Then, the two of them called out a few times and turned to look into the buildings’ windows.

Smoker turned to the big boatman and gave him a look, and the big guy slowly pushed the boat back against the current. As he slowly maintained a distance from the village, Smoker said softly, “Phoenix, you, Big Brother Zhang, and Snake Ancestor go into the water and check. This village is all wrong. We can’t trust that boy. You all go and ambush first. We’re too passive on the boat.

I didn’t know who Big Brother Zhang and Phoenix were, but I saw the woman tut. She clearly didn’t like the idea. On one side, Poker-Face had opened his luggage and took out a small thing similar to a life jacket. I wondered if it was the legendary shuikao.²⁶

As we continued to go against the current and stay away from the village, the woman unexpectedly took off her Yi costume, leaving only a close-fitting outfit on. She quietly slipped into the water and held the edge of the raft with one hand. I also moved and opened my rattan suitcase, finding that there was a black and blue snake inside that was as thick as my arm. I slowly put the snake down into the water, took off my coat, put the “shuikao” on, and sank into the water. Poker-Face slipped into the water at almost the same time. The serpent twisted its body in the water and then wrapped around me.

It appeared Snake Ancestor was my nickname.

²⁶ One-piece diving suit made by the ancients with fish skin, sea scorpion skin, or shark skin.

Chapter 2.5 Fantasy

I felt two sensations as soon as I slipped into the water. First, I found that I had a lot of things on me, which I kept close. As soon as I entered the water, they all came alive and started leaving my body.

There were a lot of snakes of varying sizes and colors that emerged from the water around me and began swimming, but the current was too fast, and they weren't strong enough, so they all ended up landing on me.

“When the time comes, use the ghost whistle to make contact.” Smoker ordered. The three of us loosened our hands at the same time and dove into the water, headed downriver.

All the snakes on my body immediately loosened and began swimming downstream with me. They were amazingly obedient.

The current was very fast, and we were immediately swept toward the black tiger pass in front of the village. The water in this section of the river was almost black, which would make it easy for us to sneak in if we stayed below the surface. But Phoenix—who was in front of us—didn't bring a shuikao, and she was swimming in very deep spots. The water here was muddy and hard to see through, so only her white, practically naked thighs were clear.

As Poker-Face followed closely, I realized that Phoenix was an excellent swimmer, and I would have to follow her through the black tiger pass; otherwise, it would be easy to hit those rocks with such a fast current.

As we continued moving underwater, all kinds of grotesque, sharp-edged black tiger stone carvings were scattered beneath the water's surface. Some had been dulled by the current, while others had apparently been sunk to the bottom more recently and were still sharp. They looked very dangerous, and if we lost control in the swift current, we'd surely be cut directly.

We passed the black tiger pass in an instant, and the water became deeper. As I looked at both sides of the valley underwater, I could vaguely see some multi-storied buildings. The water level here had obviously not

been that high before and must have risen over the years because many of the stone steps and buildings were submerged.

It was a really amazing view. The stone steps and paths extended down towards the bottom of the river, and it felt like you could walk into the deepest part of the valley.

I couldn't hold my breath anymore and watched Phoenix flip over and get close to the water's surface to take a breath of air as quickly as possible before diving again. Poker-face and I copied her, but I didn't get enough air and had to repeat it four times before I was satisfied.

The current gradually slowed down up ahead and the river began to narrow. I could see that Phoenix had gradually slowed down in front of me and was leaning towards one side of the valley, where several creases in the rock had formed in a place where the nearby cliff met the water's surface. Phoenix went over there, grabbed the creases in the rock, and then surfaced. She leaned against them as Poker-Face and I also floated up, and then three of us huddled together as we caught our breath.

"Keep your snakes away and stay away from me," Phoenix said to me, sounding somewhat fearful.

She was almost naked and flushed from the physical exhaustion, but I answered coldly, "They're not interested in you."

With that said, I turned to take a look at the surrounding mountains and terrain.

The wharf on one side was five hundred meters away from us. Poker-Face had already caught his breath and started to climb up out of the water and along the cliff.

There was a row of about six buildings on stilts above us, and we could see that the area below the buildings was six or seven meters away from us. The cliff was covered in vines, which would make it difficult to climb up.

Not to be outdone, I took a few steps up the stone wall, and the snakes in the water started to return to me. Phoenix looked at me in disgust and

didn't dare approach at all. I looked up at Poker-Face and saw that he had swiftly moved to the bottom of the buildings, so I quickly followed.

I couldn't see his face clearly, just like in a dream. And when I wanted to see every detail carefully, I couldn't. It was at this moment that I had a strange feeling regarding this person.

Was it because it had been so long?

He ignored me— which wasn't surprising considering the person I “possessed” was meaningless to him—but this indifference was still very familiar.

Phoenix was under our feet, urging us to hurry up. I calmed down and listened for any sounds on the floor above us to see if there was anyone in the building.

I didn't hear anything, but before I could react, I saw Poker-Face use his two fingers to slowly pull a wooden peg from the floorboard.

Chapter 2.6 Fantasy

Poker-Face pulled out eight wooden pegs and pushed two of the floorboards up, revealing a gap that was barely big enough to allow people to pass through. Later, I checked the information and realized that if he hadn't done this, the safest and most concealed passage for us would have been to climb up the dung hole in the toilet. Before Poker-Face went in, he put a whistle under his tongue and climbed into the building. Soon, I heard a series of sounds similar to "gege gege".

I couldn't understand the whistle, but I felt as if it sounded like the building's wooden boards were naturally squeezing. Based on Snake Ancestor's behavior, however, it should mean "safe".

For the convenience of narration, I have to explain this kind of ghost whistle first. This way of communicating by whistle had developed all over the world, from the communications between islanders to the "clip language" variant used by the Allies during World War II. There were various whistle languages in the world, but only China's ghost whistle hadn't been deciphered yet.

First, the number of people who used ghost whistles to communicate was very small, and the language often changed. The whistle language itself spread among small groups, so it was difficult to use unified research to study a sub-category of an already special language.

There were several sayings about why it was called a ghost whistle. Some people said that it was because grave robbers initially used this whistle in tombs out in the wilderness, which made people mistakenly think it was a ghost howling. Others said it was because this whistle could confuse zombies.

The sounds that came from a ghost whistle were very diversified, and people with quick tongues could use it to imitate dozens of sounds on different occasions. For example, Poker-Face entered the multi-storied wooden building and immediately used the ghost whistle to imitate the sounds of people walking in various parts of the house. The ghost whistle

could even imitate the sounds of insects in the grass and birds in the mountains.

I recalled the scene where Poker-Face communicated with the blood zombie in the Seven Star Lu Palace. Maybe the ghost whistle had resonated with the corpse-eater bug in the zombie's brain, and he had been testing whether it was the king of corpse-eaters or just a normal one.

In order to not make things complicated—and make the story coherent from now on—I'll describe any ghost whistle communication in words.

I also climbed up into the building and realized that it was a home. There were a lot of materials for weaving rattan baskets piled up in the corner and some woven rattan baskets were placed in the middle of the room. There was a charcoal stove next to them, where the woven baskets were drying to get rid of any excess moisture. There were a lot of cattail and worn bamboo tools, but I didn't know what they were used for.

On one side, there was a wooden staircase leading to the second floor. The doors and windows facing the valley were all closed, and there were a lot of meat strips hanging in the window.

This was how ordinary Yi people lived, but it was also reasonable to say that this was a wealthy family. Judging from the hanging meat strips, the patriarch of this family was in his prime and should be a hunter. Those kinds of people had social status in the village.

We had been quiet for a while, and I already had a feel for how these people who often came and went on such occasions moved. As they quieted down and listened to what was going on upstairs, they started removing their wet clothes without any hesitation.

Phoenix had a hot body. Although she wasn't a young girl, her skin was smooth and white, which gave off a kind of primitive sensuality. But I could clearly feel that Snake Ancestor wasn't distracted at all, for he and Poker-face took off their shuikao as if there was no such thing as gender here. Snake Ancestor pulled out a thin, close-fitting strip from the inner layer of the shuikao, and with a bare upper body, folded the shuikao and

tied it around his waist. All the snakes naturally came back to him, with half going inside the shuikao, and some remaining exposed, looking like colorful tattoos.

Off to the side, the blue-black serpent that was as thick as an arm slowly moved to the building's main beam and disappeared.

Phoenix didn't have a shuikao, and obviously didn't bring a change of clothes, so after stripping all her wet clothes off, she went upstairs naked. I wasn't worried. With her figure, there wouldn't be any immediate danger if she appeared naked in front of any man or woman. After watching Poker-Face clean up, I squatted on the stairs. If there was any change in Phoenix's situation up top and the ghost whistle went off, then we could immediately go and support her.

Poker-Face didn't have any weapons at this time, which made me feel a little strange.

Chapter 2.7 Fantasy

This person's skills and state were so strange; maybe it was because I felt a little distorted through the illusory layer, but I also suspected that this may be how he was originally.

At the beginning of our acquaintance, this feeling of paleness and detachment from the world was so vivid. But I was a rookie back then, and full of curiosity about everything, so this paleness and detachment were also novel to me. But now I was very different from how I was before. It wasn't that I had caught up with him— he lived in a world I couldn't understand, and I couldn't stay with him forever—but I was calmer when it came to dealing with things now. At first, my extreme fear of ancient tombs prevented me from noticing how strange people were, but now I could observe everything around me calmly.

His strangeness was even more obvious right now.

Indeed, just as I had often imagined, he was like this at first. But we had caused some changes in his appearance in the end, which I found encouraging.

It was just that these changes came at such a high price.

Phoenix's ghost whistle sounded a few times to signal that it was safe. When we went up to the second floor, we found a bedroom with a wooden bed in the corner, and furniture consisting of just a few rattan boxes. The bedroom was very small, and the window was also closed. Phoenix had opened one of the boxes and put on a Yi outfit from inside. It didn't fit well and was a little too small. The sleeves and pants were short, but they made her look even slimmer.

Three spears hung on one side of the wall, and when I went up and looked at them, I found that they were well maintained and must belong to a meticulous hunter.

There was no sign of a struggle or any sort of hijacking in the bedroom, and it was clean and tidy.

“It’s strange,” Phoenix said to us. “These people seem to have just left of their own volition.”

“The windows are closed.” Poker-Face also found an outfit to put on and pulled out a Yi knife from under the bed. “They didn’t leave without closing the windows.”

“That’s right.” Phoenix went to the window, which was a square plaque made of rattan that could only be opened if it was supported by a pole. She pushed it aside a little and looked out: “It’s no accident. All the windows on the opposite buildings are closed, too.”

“Let’s spread out and look.” Poker-Face wrapped the Yi knife in a piece of cloth and broke it in two. It was obvious that he didn’t like that the knife’s length was so long. He then threw the knife head under the bed and inserted the broken knife into the shuikao at his back—it had been rolled up and looked like a scabbard.

At this point, I suddenly realized that I was the least talkative one in this small team.

This was a little embarrassing. I never thought that I would intercept the memory of someone who talked less than Poker-Face. I was a little sullen and figured that I would have to silently complain to an unprecedented extent.

There was the dull sound of a horn in the valley.

I began to look for a way out, while Poker-Face leaned against the window, opened it, and made a series of sharp birdcalls to the river below. The correspondence to our people outside said: we have arrived safely.

A few minutes later, there was a very slight echo: Claw and Asa didn’t come back. There’s something going on with this village. Split up.

Chapter 2.8 Fantasy

Just like the building we were in, the water village from the previous part of this hallucination also had its doors and windows closed. There must have been an ambush, and Claw and Asa were captured. Or maybe Asa was actually a cover, and the villagers actually lived outside the village, lying in wait for scheming outsiders like us to come.

But there were at least a hundred people in this village— which made it a rare big village—so even though everyone on the raft was an expert, there were ways of dealing with them. They wouldn't even need to muster a large force. It would only take a dozen crossbows pointed at the raft to force us all to surrender. The group of people I was with had excellent ears, and even though we had been in this building for at least ten minutes, we hadn't heard anything. I wasn't sure, but my gut said that no one was in this village.

With Claw and Asa not coming back, I was afraid something even stranger was going on.

Poker-Face's ghost whistle went back and forth several times, and then he turned and listened to the sound of the horn. It was the only sign of movement in the entire village. It wasn't the wind blowing, which meant someone was up to something.

I found the way out. The doors of these multi-storied buildings were usually at the back of the house, close to the cliff. There were paths leading up to the other buildings, but they were hidden and difficult to find because the buildings were often close to the cliff, and densely packed together. That was definitely the case with this building. The hole was in the corner, hidden behind several bundles of straw. Once the straw was parted, a wooden door leading to the cliff outside was revealed, and we could see a path that was only half a meter wide.

The sound of the nearest horn was coming from our side. There was a turret-like building near the top of the cliff, which was uninhabited. The multi-storied buildings didn't reach that high, so it had to be a lookout

tower. If we wanted to go all the way up there, we'd need to go through the whole cliff complex, and then go more than thirty meters up the path.

"I'll go," Poker-Face said. "Spread out and check the surrounding area." With that said, he turned and went out, quickly disappearing as he made his way up.

Phoenix followed him out and went to another building at another fork in the path. There soon came the whistle of "empty building", which was far inferior to Poker-Face's whistle, but ordinary people shouldn't be able to tell what it was. I also climbed out, went in the opposite direction of Phoenix, and came to the door of another building.

The Yi people's customs were simple and honest, and they didn't bother locking their doors at night. When I entered, I found that this building was also a home, but it was even darker and more cramped. I looked around, but there was no one there. I used my whistle to relay the information and found that the bedroom on the second floor wasn't a single bed, but a row of four or five plank beds that surrounded a carbon stove.

This was similar to an "inn". Many people must have come to the Yi village to do business and would stay in this building. Those Yi people who didn't work would set aside some space in their homes and make food for these businessmen in order to earn a living.

This "inn" was full of things, and I easily found that three of the five beds here had been occupied. There were little rattan-woven things near the first one, which I had seen a lot of on the first floor just now. This was a rattan merchant who went door to door to buy rattan goods. Well-made rattan goods needed very good materials and a tung oil finish once they had been dried at the right temperature. This businessman sold high-grade products and needed to look for them one by one in the village.

On the other side of a screen were two beds that had also been occupied. These two guests may or may not have been together, but either way, there weren't many things next to their beds. All I could see were clay pots.

These were insect medicine farmers. I had heard long ago that some Yi villages sold centipedes on the side, but insect medicine and herbal medicine belonged to Chinese medicine merchants. Insect medicine—especially live insects— couldn't be processed on these cliffs, so the live insects must have been taken to the nearby river towns. As a result, they were more expensive. At that time, there was a kind of centipede product called Golden Wings, which was actually a scam made up of two kinds of insects. It was said to be a full-proof treatment for rheumatism. The price was about the same as that of gold, so these insect farmers would dry the fake bugs in the village. This basically meant that these people would live in the village almost all year round.

If these people were here in the village, then that indicated that the villagers were very open, and there was a lot of trade. Phoenix whistled and asked me: where's the snake? If I run into it, I'll hack it to death.

I reached out to pick up one of the pots by the bed, but at this moment, a small snake on my waist moved fiercely.

I was startled and immediately stopped my hand. The snake was very sensitive to the environment, so the fact that it was twitching indicated that there was something in the pot making it uncomfortable.

Chapter 2.9 Fantasy

There were several kinds of snakes on my body, but this startled snake was the least daring and its venom had a dumb effect. It was very difficult to catch and tame because it was alert to any harmful changes in the environment and would run away as soon as it felt a shift in the wind.

I didn't know what it felt from this bug jar, but the warning had to be taken seriously. The snake might have been too timid, but it was definitely useful since it listened to everything.

I carefully picked up the pot and put it in a spacious spot on the floor. The snake at my waist became even more alarmed and retreated into my shuikao.

I rubbed my teeth together a few times. The snake's hearing was very dull, but it was very sensitive to bone vibrations. Those who trained snakes could use the vibration caused by their teeth rubbing together to command their snakes. This was also the reason why people who trained snakes were hard to guard against; there was no way to tell when they started making their move. Generally, whenever you met a snake charmer, it was good to be wary of any little moves he would make. The upper and lower jaws rubbing together could form slight bone vibrations, which would transmit instructions to the hidden snakes.

That was why the snakes had to hide close to the body.

Once I had rubbed my teeth together, a green, slightly translucent snake flew down from my waist and slithered to the clay pot. I pulled out a rattan cane from next to the baskets and immediately opened the clay pot's lid.

As the snake at my waist tightened in alarm, I saw something strange inside the pot that looked like bird down.

I didn't know what it was, but it was obvious that Snake Ancestor was shocked. My body immediately retreated to the window, and as soon as I clenched my teeth, more green snakes flew down from my waist and

surrounded the pot in an instant. I opened the window, took the whistle out from under my tongue, and blew it three or four times.

This should be a very serious warning. After hearing the response, I tapped on the floor with one hand and used the cane in my other hand to hit the clay pot. At that moment, a strange and colorful bug crawled out of the bird down.

It looked like a centipede, but all of its front legs were very long, and when it spread them out from both sides of its body, they looked like a hand or crown. Its lower body was similar to a centipede but thinner, and every part of it was a different color. Moreover, these gorgeous colors made it seem like the photoshop saturation had blown up.

There were so many ostentatious insects in nature, but I was surprised to see this one raise its upper body and spread all of its long legs open, just like a proud peacock displaying its feathers. It was as big as a cattail fan.

At that moment, I suddenly felt weak all over, and I realized that this was a creature that didn't belong in this world. This bug must have come straight from hell.

Even though it was as an insect, it was too confident. Its contempt for other creatures meant it no longer fell under the category of "bug" and was instead more like an advanced creature.

It must have felt threatened by the green snakes around it and reacted. The green snakes were immediately stimulated by this momentum and all lifted their heads.

I thought since they were special letter snakes, they would be able to control the bug since letter snakes were the quickest vipers and could leap up and bite flying insects out of the air. But now that this bug was so big, a fierce battle was inevitable.

Snake Ancestor obviously knew what it was and didn't dare approach it. As the snakes on my body kept wriggling, I took a small bottle of something similar to wine from the inner pocket of the shuikao tied around my waist and began shaking it.

I suddenly realized that I was going to see a rare snake drama unfold in this hallucination. Snake Ancestor wasn't a person's name, but a mysterious profession in China.

Chapter 2.10 Fantasy

I didn't have the exact information, but I knew that there had been legends of snake farmers in this area since ancient times, especially in the numerous Han legends about the Miao and Yao people. Even in numerous wuxia novels, there were countless plots involving things like the five poisons²⁷ in the jungles of southern Xinjiang.

Snake farmers were more a part of reality than legend; they were people who caught and trained snakes. Most snake farmers made a living by selling snake medicine—i.e., treating snake bites— but a superstition arose saying that the medicine needed to be made from the snakes themselves, so that was why the snake farmers spent a long time catching them in the mountains. But the snake farmers were really catching the snakes in order to sell the venom to drug peddlers in the Central Plains. The snake medicine was mostly herbal medicine and had nothing to do with the snakes themselves, but the families had secret recipes that were inconvenient to disclose. These snake farmers also went deep into the mountains because that was where the herbs used in the snake medicine grew.

Among the ethnic minorities, snake farmers, insect farmers, and herb farmers were three very mysterious branches. It wasn't that they pretended to be mysterious, it was just that their movements were erratic because they were active in the mountains all year round.

Snake ancestors were a relatively advanced class of snake farmers. In addition to taking snake venom and raising snakes, these people could do a lot of things with them. In the early days, they used to perform snake shows for entertainment, but there was always conflict in southern Xinjiang, so these snake ancestors became mercenaries and started working in the underworld. Because they had accumulated knowledge of snakes for dozens of generations, it was easy for these people to use snakes to do things like assassination and fighting. Among the ethnic minorities in southern Xinjiang, snakes were also considered to be related

²⁷ If I got the context right, the 5 poisons refer to 5 animals that the ancients perceived as "poisonous": snakes, scorpions, centipedes, toads, and spiders. In some variations, toads were swapped out with tigers.

to witchcraft and sorcery. The identities of these snake ancestors often overlapped with witchcraft, which made it even more mysterious.

But I never thought that snake training could reach this level. I didn't think anyone among the ethnic minorities could make such a sinister and covert set-up in the early days. All the tactics and information that drove these snakes revealed the characteristics of Ming and Qing Dynasty gangsters. When there was chaos in southern Xinjiang back in those days, the Central Plains gangs and local strongmen fought for hundreds of years, and I thought such sinister tactics were all forced out by various plots.

I focused back on the four green snakes surrounding the colorful bug that had been in the clay pot. They were constantly raising their heads to make threatening gestures, but the bug looked a little scary after it opened its front legs. That degree of color made one feel frightened to the bones.

The green letter snakes were not only fast, but also courageous, and would never be intimidated by the enemy. That was why they were usually hidden in cuffs or somewhere within easy reach. The speed at which you could raise a hand and have the letter snake bite the opponent's throat could be as fast as an arrow. The best-trained letter snake could even decide whether to kill the opponent or slither into their clothes according to the instructions issued. An assassination could be launched at any time, which made it a very dangerous trick.

I believed these snakes were extremely poisonous, but based on the coloring of this poisonous bug, it didn't seem too afraid of their venom.

I was confident that I could stall the bug with the letter snakes so that I could escape downstairs. But training snakes wasn't easy, and they couldn't easily be abandoned.

As I deliberated, I shook the small bottle and then opened the cap. Sure enough, the strong aroma of wine reached my nose.

This was a kind of medicinal wine that had the very obvious scent of herbs. I shook it well, scattered it in the bug's direction, and then changed

the rhythm at which I tapped on the floor. The letter snakes immediately began to surround the pot and started slithering in a circular track. Just like a paintbrush, they passed through the places where the medicinal wine had been sprinkled and drew a circle on the floor. Soon, the clay pot was completely surrounded by a circle of wine.

I took a piece of flint out of the shuikao, immediately struck the floor, and the four snakes flew back to me. As soon as I struck the flint, the circle of medicinal wine ignited.

Chapter 2.11 Fantasy

The reason why insects were lower life forms was because their self-healing ability was far inferior to that of other animals, and it was easy for them to die even if they had superficial wounds. As a result, insects were very afraid of fire.

After the ring of fire ignited, my heart calmed down a little bit. I took out a strange leaf from the shuikao and started chewing it; it should be a kind of food similar to betel nut, which was used to calm one's mind. I then took out another bottle of medicinal wine, shook it, and sprinkled some of it on the strange bug.

The rising temperature made the bug very nervous, and it kept twisting its body. I used some of the wine left in the fire circle to light the bottle on fire and smashed it on the bug's clay pot. The bottle shattered, and the leftover wine inside instantly ignited the bird down inside the pot. The bug let out a squeaky cry—I didn't know whether it was calling for backup or being baked by the fire—and then came out of the clay pot for the first time.

The bug's lower body was very slender, its claws were very strong, and it started to roll on the fiery ground like a lobster. I looked at it coldly without a hint of mercy. It was better for this monster to die early.

Before I could catch my breath, its long legs began to burn and curl from the scorching fire, and it suddenly jumped up into the air. It leaped as high as a person, made it out of the fire, and then came towards my feet.

I was startled and immediately fell back as the bug ran wildly and braved the fire to climb all the way to my feet.

The fact that I wasn't wearing shoes made the fear that much greater. A huge, lobster-like centipede coming to bite your toes... even if it only rubbed against you, it was still extremely disgusting. I sprang up, and the letter snakes around my waist immediately sensed my danger and shot out.

This time, it was direct hand-to-hand combat. After the snakes landed on the ground, their heads immediately shot forward like a spring and bit the bug's body. They then coiled around it, trapping it completely.

The four or five snakes were still covered in the medicinal wine, so all of them started burning. I fell to the ground, banged on the wall, pulled the snakes back, and spit out the chewed leaves, dabbing them on the snakes to put out the fire.

But one was missing. I looked back and saw that one letter snake had been captured by the bug. The claws were so sharp that the snake's whole body had been torn, and its body fluids were leaking out. As the bug and snake kept strangling each other, the fire on the colorful bug had been extinguished by the snake's body fluids. The snake's internal organs were hanging outside its body now, and I could see that they were all in a muddy state. There seemed to be strange black hairs mixed in as well.

This bug was corrosive and highly poisonous, and even more toxic than a letter snake. If you managed to get hold of it, your hand would be a goner in an instant.

If the insect merchants here were actually catching this kind of bug, then they must have used special equipment. I looked around and immediately realized that the rattan merchant, maybe even the bug merchants, were in a group. As the saying went: wherever there were monsters, there were adversaries. If these bugs were found in the mountains here, then the vines may be able to stop it.

I leaped into the fire circle, came out on the opposite side, and pulled out a rattan basket.

The bug climbed up the wall and started crawling along the roof beam, and when I looked up, I saw several long feet drilling into the thatched roof. If it ran away, there would be an endless amount of trouble in the future. I waved and sent the letter snakes flying onto the beams. As the three remaining snakes flew up and surrounded the bug, I clenched the rattan basket with my teeth, jumped up and grabbed the beam with one hand, and then used my strength to flip my whole body up. Without hesitation, I slapped the rattan basket.

The colorful insect had been burned out of shape, and its raised upper body no longer had that frightening sense of brilliance. I immediately trapped it in the rattan basket. The basket had a gap, however, so countless insect feet were sticking out from it.

I immediately let go so that I wouldn't be stabbed, and the rattan basket twisted and fell into the fire circle below. The bug was so strong that the whole rattan basket moved when it twisted, but it appeared to have barbs on its legs, and the rattan was so tough that it couldn't pull itself free without breaking its legs.

I was about to go down and give it a final blow, but I suddenly noticed that there was something strange in the thatched roof. I remembered how the bug just now was about to climb up here.

Chapter 2.12 Fantasy

When I looked carefully, I saw that most of the thatch was made up of something that was like cotton wool. It looked like the fluff the bug in the clay pot had been wrapped in before.

I was even more alert now and got up. I could only bend between the beam and the thatched roof as I parted the grass stalks. I immediately saw that a blackened little finger was stuck in this “fluff”. When I pulled it a few times, the thatched roof collapsed into a big hole, and two heads that were almost glued together rolled out.

There were all kinds of entangled things that looked like silk cocoons, so the heads ended up hanging in the air. Not only did I see those two heads falling out together, but there was also a lot of rotten meat and ribs.

Among all these things that had been melted and stuck together, I could see cotton wool and bird down. It was only then that I realized that the thatch was also in a fragmented state.

When these things first fell, I had taken a step back to avoid any bugs that might run out. But none came. There didn't seem to be any living creatures there except for the semi-melted bodies.

I thought of all the things that had happened before and immediately took a deep breath, telling myself that this was bad.

At first glance, the two heads seemed to belong to villagers, so that meant all the living people must have been bitten and “woven” into the thatched roof. This must have been the habit of some kind of bug, and it wasn't something only one or two could do.

Based on the number of clay pots, there were quite a few of those colorful insects, and it appeared the village had been overrun with them.

The residents here were either dead or had escaped.

If that was the case, then there were probably a lot of these poisonous insects hidden in every corner of the village.

I got down from the beam. The bug still hadn't broken free from the rattan basket, but I didn't dare burn it with fire for fear that it would break its legs to save its life. It would be extremely troublesome even if it didn't have any legs. I instead flipped one of the bed boards over, gave the rattan basket a fierce beating, and then went up and stepped on the board until the creaking sound of the insect being crushed below could no longer be heard.

The sound of Poker-Face's whistle floated in through the window; he was too close to the watchtower to turn back. On the other side, Phoenix's whistle rang from outside the house, indicating that she had already arrived.

As I continued to press on the bedboard, I used the whistle to tell them the situation. The whistle couldn't convey such complicated information, so I could only roughly tell them that there were poisonous insects in the village and to be careful.

Phoenix was dumbfounded when she came in and saw the internal organs and ribs hanging from the roof.

Based on my analysis, after this bug poisoned people, the corpse's muscles and bones would gradually soften until they could be crushed, and then they would be dragged to the roof, strung together with this silk thread, and then the straw would be glued back together around them as camouflage.

Although the bugs were very big, it would take quite a long time for two adults to be crushed. It was very clean here, so there obviously weren't only two or three bugs doing such a thing, but a whole group of them.

Snake Ancestor didn't explain at all, but these people had good analytical abilities, so Phoenix must have understood as soon as she saw it.

If that was the case, then Claw and Asa might not have been so lucky when they entered the village before.

"What kind of bug is this bastard? Move your legs and let me have a look." Phoenix said.

I kicked the bedboard aside, revealing the colorful insect's broken carcass. Even at a glance, you could tell that it was an unusual bug.

"Oh my God." Phoenix showed an incredulous expression. She fished something out from where it had been hidden in her outfit, and asked me, "Little devil, do you understand foreign languages? Look at this."

"I can't even read Chinese characters, you think I can understand foreign languages?" I asked, noticing that what she had pulled out was a bunch of rough straw papers tied together with a clip. They were full of a foreign script. "What is this?"

"I just found it in another house. There must have been some foreigners living there. Everything was still in the house, but the people were gone. The clothes were all in a foreign style."

"There are foreigners in the village?" It wasn't all that surprising considering there were a lot of exploration activities in Shangri-La at that time. But if foreigners were killed, it would be better not to get involved in this matter, because it would lead to endless troubles.

I took the stack of paper and saw a sketch on the first page that looked just like this bug.

Chapter 2.13 Fantasy

Although Snake Ancestor couldn't read English, I could. Unfortunately, however, I couldn't absorb such fine details in the illusion. I could only vaguely see the English word for rock written on the paper. The word had been written in very large font and was emphasized.

This could be interpreted in many ways: one was that these bugs may have been related to some kind of rock; another was that the word may have been referring to someone's name. I knew that throughout the history of exploration in this area, there was a very famous man named Rock²⁸, who had completed the West's preliminary exploration of this mysterious region.

There were a lot of sketches of this bug on the following pages, including close-ups of certain parts.

With foreigners intervening, things had become very complicated. Unlike the Russians, the Americans and British didn't go to Dunhuang or the Heishui River, but instead came to these kinds of backwater regions. They often had loftier interests than treasure, such as the great honor and status brought by exploring the unknown world. There was also the thirst for new species.

By entering an area that even the Han people in southern Xinjiang were unfamiliar with, the possibility of obtaining new species would be much higher.

But this kind of bug was really too shocking. It had never been seen before, and there wasn't even anything that came close to it. Although poisonous insects were everywhere in southern Xinjiang, and the numerous deep mountain tribes had a lot of mysterious customs, these kinds of poisonous insects had never appeared in the previous legends. The fact that they were suddenly appearing didn't make sense.

²⁸ Joseph Rock (1884 – 1962) was an Austrian-American botanist, explorer, geographer, linguist, ethnographer and photographer. More info [here](#)

If this kind of bug appeared in the village, and the people either died or fled, it showed that this bug's appearance was a very sudden event. I just didn't know if it had anything to do with the foreigners appearing here.

Phoenix and Snake Ancestor exchanged a look. Although they didn't get along with each other, at this time, they had reached the same conclusions based on their experience working in this business.

There was a big crisis in the village, and the situation had significantly changed. They shouldn't carry out any more activities at this time, and the best thing to do was to leave here.

They still had some time before it got dark, so the two of them left the building, found a bare rock to rest on, and Phoenix blew a long whistle of retreat.

After the long whistle had sounded, there was no response. Phoenix spat and unfastened her collar, revealing half her chest, which was full of fragrant sweat. She said angrily, "That smoking iron chopsticks must feel like he won't be able to finish his customer's job if he goes back like this. If he doesn't respond to us, I won't give my fucking life for this amount of money. When Big Brother Zhang comes back, the three of us will take a vote. We'll either withdraw and not refund the money, or they'll have to give us more money."

"You may not get your wish." I felt uncomfortable every time I heard "Big Brother Zhang" and wanted to ask, *Zhang Qiling, can't you have a better nickname? At least Poker-Face can be regarded as both elegant and trendy. I can't believe you once had such a common name. Rather than Big Brother Zhang, I should just call you Fish Brother Zhang.*²⁹ "I listened to Iron Chopsticks and the boatman whispering to each other on the way here in their local dialect. When I spent some time riding in a caravan, I took lessons from some of the people, so I could understand a little of what they were saying. They purportedly brought us to help find the Bimo here, but it seems like the foreigners hired them to find their missing companions here."

²⁹ Tiffany said "Fish Brother Zhang" sounds exactly the same as how Chinese pronounce "Squidward" in SpongeBob SquarePants. So Wu Xie was basically calling Poker-face Squidward lol.

“Foreigners again?”

“This village is on the edge of southern Xinjiang’s hinterland. There are only a few people who have been in the huge forest, and the mountains are connected. There are no roads, no people, and poisonous insects everywhere along the cliffs. In recent years, many foreigners have wanted to go inside, and have spent a lot of money to do so. I don’t know what they were looking for, but many of them died. The last expedition started from this village. There was a Bimo here who acted as a guide and took them in, but he was the only one that came back. Afterwards, no one in the village was allowed to see him. None of the foreigners came back, so Smoker brought people in to try and find out what happened to the expedition.”

Snake Ancestor said: “We’ve just told Iron Chopsticks about the foreigners and the situation here. That is exactly the kind of information they’re looking for, so now they have to find out more.”

As soon as the words were spoken, a whistled response came from the far end: all the people on board are in the water. Stay still, we’ll rendezvous with you immediately.

Chapter 2.14 Fantasy

We went back to the original building, climbed back through the floorboards, and went all the way down the cliff close to the water's surface. The current was so loud that we wouldn't be able to hear any whistles clearly. Fearing that these people might drift past us, Phoenix shot several "pickled seeds" upstream with a slingshot.

This was a ball made of wine trough and a kind of fodder, which had iron beads inside. It immediately fell into the stream and sank to the bottom, and then started emitting a very strange odor. As soon as the people in the water smelled it, they would know that their goal was near, and immediately head towards the cliff.

Although the current was fierce, the "pickled seed" odor could spread in large quantities and wouldn't fade for several hours.

At this time, Phoenix asked: "You said that foreigners have gone to the deep mountains and forests behind this village in recent years. What are they looking for? What could be back there?"

The huge primitive forest behind this village was actually the border between China and a certain country. Since ancient times, there weren't a lot of chances for humans to step foot in this area, and only the village Bimo would dare enter it. It was said that there were some paths handed down to the Bimo through the ages, which could enable them to safely travel to places that were about seven days away. But the forest became so deep after that that you would be traveling for half a year. Anything you could possibly imagine about South China's tropical rain forest could be satisfied here: the mountains were full of obstacles, the vegetation was deep, and there were poisonous insects, gases, swamps, and ferocious beasts.

The only things we knew came from very fragmented oral stories from some of the people who had strayed into it. Apart from the deified legends, there was no historical data that could be analyzed.

Snake Ancestor shook his head. "I don't know, but it must be related to that bug. Smoker knows the foreign language, but I don't know if he'll tell us the truth."

Given the size and fierceness of this bug and the fact that it could tear people up and eat them, it couldn't be widespread in the forest. Otherwise, the food chain would have collapsed long ago. It might be a special species in a certain area or simply have a more complicated origin.

After a short amount of time, black shuikao appeared in the water, and Smoker and all the others floated downstream. Once Phoenix blew her whistle, they all headed towards us and climbed up the cliff.

"Where's Big Brother Zhang?" Iron Chopsticks asked.

Phoenix pointed up above us and Iron Chopsticks frowned.

With more people, one's courage becomes bolstered. I took everyone up to the building above us, where they all put away their shuikao. I suddenly looked up at the thatched roof and wondered if there would be melted corpses hidden inside

Coincidentally, I saw Smoker and the mountain-like boatman look above their heads at almost the exact same time. The three of us looked down and glanced at each other, immediately understanding that the other party knew more than they thought.

"Brother Meng." Smoker gave him a look, and the mountain man climbed up the beam, told the people below to get out of the way, and tore open the thatch above his head. Something similar to bird down floated through the air like snowflakes, and a pile of minced meat immediately dropped down and hung there.

It was a child. The little hand didn't even look like it belonged to a child older than three.

The owner of this house had also been crushed and hidden in the roof.

"It's fucking amazing. There's a chance not even wolves could crush people like this." The big guy said.

“No.” Pampered Guy had put his shuikao away and put his outfit back on. Even though he had gone all the way through the water, his white shirt wasn’t wet at all, and it hung as if it had just been ironed. I didn’t know how he did it. He put oil on his hair and said, “These people weren’t killed by bugs. They were chopped up and hidden to attract them.” At the same time, he stretched out his hand to Phoenix. “Where are the foreigners’ things?”

Phoenix quickly handed the papers to Pampered Guy, who immediately looked at them. He was obviously very familiar with English and said, “All of you, if you don’t have a problem with it, listen to my plan right now.”

“For what reason?” Smoker laughed: “This Little Brother Zhang’s got a screw loose. You’re the one I brought in, so why would I want to listen to your plan? Who do you think you are?” With that said, he went up to grab the papers.

Little Brother Zhang took a step back and kept them out of reach: “If you don’t listen to my plan, you’ll all die here tonight.”

Smoker suddenly turned pale and was just about to give him a look, when Little Brother Zhang held up a finger: “Listen to me first. There’s something evil documented in these papers: the pieces of dead human flesh on the thatched roof were set up by the villagers themselves. An insect infestation broke out in the village, and people were dying one by one. After the Bimo came forward, he found that these people’s deaths were related to a kind of witchcraft. It says that this village— and the Bimo’s living area— are located here in order to guard the entrance of the forest and prevent the magic from leaving the forest. The Bimo of this village had been taught magic since he was a child and learned about this kind of bug and its habits during that time. They chopped up those who had died, put them in the straw, and placed everything on top of the buildings in order to attract the insects at night and kill them.” He raised his second finger: “The Bimo suspected that the reason why this witchcraft suddenly appeared in the village was related to the foreigners’ previous expedition into the forest. And the only survivor of that expedition—a Bimo—may have been the one who brought this kind of witchcraft out with him. The people who wrote this report were investigators who came to look into the expedition’s disappearance. But

they later disappeared in the village. The Americans realized that the village had become hostile to them, so they asked you to try and find any news from the locals. This is partly from the comments on the back of these papers, and partly my own guess.”

Iron chopsticks said nothing, and it became obvious Pampered Guy had guessed right.

“The journey here is very inconvenient, and there’s no mailing system. We can only speculate that the investigators who came here to look into the expedition team’s disappearance weren’t harmed by the villagers. After they came here, they must have immediately discovered the insects and helped the locals with their pest control activities. He recorded these materials while participating in these activities, but unfortunately, this investigator may have been killed. Based on the degree of decay of these corpses and the traces of long-term feeding by a large number of insects, the villagers must have had a huge accident during their pest control activities. They either suffered huge losses, or the entire village was abandoned.” Little Brother Zhang handed over the documents. “To sum it up, it’s a huge feast at night, and we’re all fresh dishes.”

Iron Chopsticks obviously couldn’t read English as fast as Little Brother Zhang, and immediately tried to read and understand it. Little Brother Zhang continued: “There are still four hours before the sun sets. This place has no lighting at night and depends on oil lamps. If you don’t want to listen to me, then tell me, what do you plan on doing?”

Chapter 2.15 Fantasy

“Do you have an idea?” Iron Chopsticks asked in a slightly softer tone as he labored to look at the English documents. After oiling his hair, Little Brother Zhang climbed out of the window and looked around. He then turned back, swept away the thatch debris that had fallen from the roof onto the ground, and rolled some kind of black thing out from underneath his tongue.

It was a very sharp piece of iron. He squatted down, took it out of his mouth, and started to draw on the wooden floor.

“The village is divided into three parts. The place where we stopped before is the shuizhai, which is the outermost part of the village. Now we’re in the qianzhai, an area where ordinary people live. It’s very large and there are a lot of these kinds of buildings here. It’s said that the houzhai should be behind the qianzhai and is surrounded by both the qianzhai and the mountains behind it. This is where the Bimo of the village lives. The houzhai is a forbidden place, so one knows what it looks like. Asa used to sneak in there before, so he’s the only person who knows the situation there. But his whereabouts are now unknown, so we can’t count on him.” He said. “When the expedition returned from the forest, all the things that Bimo guide brought back were placed in the houzhai. The most important thing for us to do is complete the task and enter the houzhai. Our main problem is that without Asa, we don’t know the route to enter, and we also don’t know what the situation is like there.”

It wasn’t that these people didn’t already know everything Little Brother Zhang was saying, it was just that his logical reasoning made everything clearer.

“But there’s no one in this village now. Even if I wanted to find someone to ask, I can’t.” Phoenix frowned.

Because I had experienced so much before, I instinctively realized that when Little Brother Zhang said these words, he had actually started manipulating these people through layers of logic. For those of us who

wandered in the underworld, it was an instinctive speaking skill used to convince others that they could achieve their goals better. It was difficult to detect if you weren't particularly alert.

If this kind of thing developed all the way to the end, it was easy for people to be blind to what the analyst was doing which could lead to them being exploited.

On the whole, Little Brother Zhang's analysis hadn't yet reached that stage. When the Bimo came back from the forest alone, he must not have been happily singing "Little Stars" with his hair in twin pigtails. All the American expedition members were missing, so they must have encountered something extremely tragic. As a result, the Bimo must have gone into a state of self-cultivation in the houzhai. If he brought the insect disaster back with him from the mountain depths, then that place must have been the first to suffer and might have even been hit the hardest.

"Don't worry, I might not know where the houzhai is, but one person must already know." Little Brother Zhang pointed above our heads: "The person you paid a lot of money for is definitely worth the price. We have to do two things now. One is to retreat. If something happens within two hours, how can we go back? The second thing is that this houzhai is extremely dangerous, so we have to make complete preparations. You have to tell us everything you know about this bug, because honestly, we probably can't survive with what we know now."

Snake Ancestor hadn't said a word the entire time. I still hadn't figured out his character yet, and I kept feeling like he was the strong, silent type. I opened my mouth to ask a question but found that it was impossible.

Iron Chopsticks and Brother Meng exchanged a look before Brother Meng said, "Well, if we find the houzhai, I'll tell you."

Little Brother Zhang was just about to respond when Poker-Face's whistle pierced the air, and everyone rushed out of the house. The whistle meant: I found a living person, come up immediately.

“Go!” Iron Chopsticks shouted. Everyone who came with him started climbing, except for Little Brother Zhang, who smiled and immediately ran into the depths of the village. Iron Chopsticks was stunned for a moment, and then he came to his senses and said to me: “You go with Little Brother Zhang and see what he’s up to. If it’s really strange, don’t worry about asking me and just kill him directly.”

Chapter 2.16 Fantasy

I responded and chased after Little Brother Zhang.

With my character, I had so many reservations about this matter. All of Snake Ancestor's various actions weren't in line with my character, so his behavior actually made me very uncomfortable. If it were me, I would definitely follow Iron Chopsticks up the mountain at this time so that I could understand the overall situation and wouldn't make any rash decisions. I suddenly had a deep understanding of the indecisiveness Gemini must go through all the time.³⁰

The stone steps on the cliff were very dangerous, but Little Brother Zhang's skills were at least on par with Poker-Face's. Even though he was bent over the whole way, he had already run out of the building complex and started running towards the wharf located at the core of the village—the area with the highest concentration of buildings.

All the buildings here were clustered together and connected by the path cut into the cliff, so if the villagers were lurking nearby, we would be completely exposed as we went up. If someone ambushed us, we'd have no other choice but to jump off the cliff. This was also why I didn't want to take risks, but Snake Ancestor said he'd follow, so he proceeded without any hesitation or ambiguity. Even though I knew it was an illusion, I still felt like my heart was beating erratically.

Despite his determination, Snake Ancestor soon found it difficult to follow. Fortunately, Little Brother Zhang stopped to observe the terrain from time to time, so we could barely keep up. There was a huge six-storied building stretching all the way to the top of the wharf, and it was connected with ten large buildings that must have belonged to ordinary villagers. It seemed to be the place where the tribal leaders discussed matters.

³⁰ I think he means like the horoscope kind of Gemini because they're represented as twins (so like two different personalities in one). Since Wu Xie and Snake Ancestor's personalities are different and they're in 1 body right now, he's saying he understands how being a Gemini feels.

Little Brother Zhang stopped, but instead of entering, he turned to look at me. I could see that the sharp iron piece in his mouth was pressed against his lower lip.

“What are you doing?” Snake Ancestor had finally caught up and instantly became alert as he said, “It’s against the rules to leave the team without authorization.”

“That wasn’t Big Brother Zhang’s whistle. No matter how loud his whistle is, it wouldn’t be so sharp.” Pampered Guy looked at the top of the cliff—it was really hard to call him Little Brother Zhang—and saw that the sun had begun to shift, and the line between sunlight and shadow was slowly moving up.

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m not, but I am sure of one thing. With that guy’s personality, he would never stop and wait for someone. If he found a clue, he would act on it right away.” Pampered Guy said. “Therefore, he would never blow a ghost whistle to remind us of anything. I’m afraid he’s already entered the houzhai by this point.”

“Then who was blowing the whistle?” Snake Ancestor exclaimed. He looked back in the direction we had just come, but could no longer see those people climbing up.

Pampered Guy said, “I know the whistle we agreed on. If it’s not Big Brother Zhang, it must be one of those two people who disappeared in the shuizhai before. The whistle is a lure and should lead to something hostile. I’m afraid Iron Chopsticks is walking into a trap.”

“Then why didn’t you speak up? Do you want them to die?” Snake Ancestor asked. He clenched his teeth, obviously wanting to do something.

Among the lamas³¹, this kind of behavior was the most unacceptable, because if they turned against each other in the field, then their places in

³¹ More grave-robber slang from Vol 8 Chapter 5. Remember, lama in this context is someone who goes into the field (aka the tombs) to get the goods.

the business would be eliminated. And this business was too profitable, so if there were no basic credits or inviolable principles, then almost every lama's return journey would be a disaster.

Pampered Guy narrowed his eyes— he had obviously seen Snake Ancestor clench his teeth—but he didn't care and looked around before asking, "Do you know who Iron Chopsticks is? His name is Jiutou Yandai. Twenty years ago, he was the White Paper Fan³² of the caravan here in western Yunnan. The caravan's been missing for twenty years, but now he's suddenly appeared here as a lama. His face has changed drastically—he obviously deliberately smashed his facial bones— so if it wasn't for him smoking that tobacco pipe, I really wouldn't have recognized him. If this kind of person suddenly came out to work, then the person who asked him to hire the lamas must have offered him more than just money. It was either on his seniors' orders or has something to do with his retirement. As his name suggests, Jiutou Yandai smokes nine different types of tobacco in his pipe, and each one is used in various strange and secret medicine concoctions. When they're smoked, they have all kinds of unexpected uses. I'm not sure I want to plot against such a worldly person, and the big guy who follows him is far above you when it comes to skills, so you don't have to worry about them."

"Bullshit! How would you know anyone from twenty years ago? How old were you back then?" Snake Ancestor asked. Pampered Guy furtively looked around a few times, and suddenly found a clue.

"Guess." With that said, he started climbing up one of the nearby building's stilts. When Snake Ancestor followed him up, he saw a strange mark carved in a hidden spot above the stilt, pointing in one direction.

"Here it is!" Pampered Guy was smiling as he spit out the iron piece and started scraping the mark off. He then said to Snake Ancestor, "You should follow! Come on, let's go!"

Before he had finished speaking, Snake Ancestor grabbed a letter snake from his waist and threw it. It flew to the cliff where Pampered Guy had

³² Person in the gang who provides financial and business advice. Info on Triad structure is [here](#)

gone and bared its fangs to stop him. “You’re not allowed to go. What’s your purpose for joining this operation?”

Chapter 2.17 Fantasy

At this time, I felt a little enlightened as I realized that Snake Ancestor's behavior was all about the balance between principle and trust. When I did things, trust was always greater than principle. As long as I trusted a person or found them intuitively trustworthy, then I wasn't worried about principles and could run around with them. But this obviously wasn't the case with Snake Ancestor.

This was almost like seeing a whole new world, because I usually ignored people who had such different personalities. But this time, I had to live in some strange young man's body. No matter how pedantic I thought he was, I was finally getting to know how someone else in the underworld lived.

Needless to say, most of the world was made up of such people, which helped maintain the basic order. If there were as many people like me, then the whole underworld system—which operated on potential rules—would no longer exist.

When it came to hiring lamas, the rule was that the lamas needed to obey the iron chopsticks' command and complete their own work. In exchange for following this insurmountable rule, the iron chopsticks would ensure the lamas' safety. Of course, lamas often died, but good lamas would look at how the lamas' hired by these iron chopsticks ended up. If the previous lamas had frequently died, then who would want to participate?

Generally speaking, people were willing to work with two kinds of iron chopsticks: one was the new chopsticks, who had never hired someone before; the other was the old chopsticks, who were the famous grave robbers. With the new chopsticks, the lama group would have equal distribution interests, the iron chopsticks' control would be low, and the lamas would be able to take more than the chopsticks in the later part of the operation. With the old chopsticks, the success rates were higher, they had stronger control, and whether you came back alive depended on your own luck and skills. No one could blame anyone.

Of course, there were some masters who especially liked to hire lamas like Chen Pi Ah Si. Even though the group might have initially set out with ten people, only two or three would return. But those that survived would often get enough money to be set for life.

These kinds of people were either very confident in themselves or eager and greedy. Or really desperate. But the desperate ones couldn't be underestimated, either. Although their skills weren't good, their lack of concern meant there was a chance they could still get things done.

This time, the lama group seemed to belong to the second category. The iron chopsticks here had strong control, and the lama group paid special attention to unity, so they would be relatively safe as long as they listened to him. Based on this principle, acting in a unified manner was practically iron law. It had been well executed along the way, but two people in the lama group suddenly started moving freely as if nobody else was there. It was the kind of thing that would really surprise others, but it also reflected how strong Iron Chopsticks' control was. Although it was very rare for a member to suddenly start moving on his own, Iron Chopsticks still made a very clear judgment—if you didn't obey, you would die.

As a result of this, I realized that Poker-Face's and Little Brother Zhang's overall behavior here was the same as when we had gone to the Seven Star Lu Palace before. At that time, we weren't hired lamas but Uncle Three's own buddies, while Chen Pi Ah Si lent Poker-Face out. He was obviously using Poker-Face to buy shares in Uncle Three's team.

But Poker-Face's behavior at that time was almost the exact same as it was now.

Through this comparative analysis, I had almost reached a conclusion: Poker-Face didn't enter this lama group simply for his own livelihood or to travel the country. Just like when he had mixed in with Uncle Three's team, he had his own purpose for joining this operation.

The Zhang family seemed to be just like those sharksuckers in the sea, attaching themselves to various groups, absorbing intelligence, concealing themselves while simultaneously saving money, and

immediately separating once they entered the scene so that they could start working on their own goals. The speed with which they moved was beyond ordinary people's comprehension, and they would have already entered the second or even third stage by the time others reacted.

Jiutou Yandai and his group here today would be Uncle Three and us in the future. I would be completely passive at that time, but right now, I had finally chosen the right path to follow Poker-Face's footsteps.

If only I could control Snake Ancestor, I said to myself, why the fuck are you wasting time here? All of the snakes on Snake Ancestor's body were restless as he stared at the cliff above. If Pampered Guy didn't have any superior skills, then these snakes would be really hard to defend against. Just as I was starting to get anxious, I saw him reveal the iron piece under his tongue, and then spit out a small hexagonal bell earring that had also been under his tongue. As he put it on and smiled, a slight breeze caused the faint sound of the bell to spread through the air.

That smile was so evil, but I couldn't help wanting to laugh at how ridiculous it seemed. How many things did he have in his fucking mouth?

Chapter 2.18 Fantasy

Pampered Guy was obviously an evil madman, but all the details had gone a little overboard, so he seemed like a character from a wulitou drama.³³ For example, that kind of smile didn't seem appropriate for the occasion at all. It was also possible that Poker-Face had given me the impression that the Zhang family was dull and lifeless, so this Pampered Guy acting a little more lively made him seem like a psychopath.

I didn't know why, but I suddenly felt as if he kind of resembled Black Glasses. But it obviously couldn't be him.

The snakes on Snake Ancestor's body slowly calmed down as they listened to the sound coming from the earring. Pampered Guy continued to laugh and said to him, "Friend, we have an indescribable trust. You and I are one and the same."

Snake Ancestor was obviously in a trance and didn't answer.

Pampered Guy drew closer and continued, "I won't hurt you, and you'll never hurt me." The sound became distorted as if it were coming from all directions.

Snake Ancestor began to look around, dazedly trying to pinpoint the source of the sound, but his movements had become sluggish.

I knew that bronze bells were powerful, and took almost no time to confuse people's senses, but at this time, all I could see was that Snake Ancestor was confused and couldn't do anything. I watched as Pampered Guy came up to Snake Ancestor and whispered in his ear: "Now, follow me."

With that said, he drew back and ran to the top of the mountain path.

³³ Another word could be "nonsensical" I guess. But I kept the pinyin because it's "a type of slapstick humor associated with Hong Kong popular culture that developed during the late 20th century. The humor arises from the placement of surprising and incongruous elements, and the complex interplay of cultural subtleties. Typical components include nonsensical parodies, juxtaposition of contrasts, sudden surprises in spoken dialogue and action and improbable and deliberate anachronisms." I stole all that from Wikipedia lol but the full article is [here](#)

Snake Ancestor followed him up in a daze, without the slightest bit of hesitation. When he passed the letter snake, it instantly coiled back around him, but he didn't slow down at all.

I didn't know if it was because Snake Ancestor's senses were distorted, but Pampered Guy was running so fast that I could hardly see his outline clearly. Snake Ancestor continued listening to the slight chiming of the hexagonal bell as he tried to keep up, and even I became a little dizzy.

I thought it would take at least more than ten minutes, but Pampered Guy climbed up to a protruding rock, stopped again, and turned back with another evil smile. At this time, everything in the hallucination was distorted and sinister, so his smile really did look evil.

Through the bell's chimes, I heard him continue talking: "I won't hurt you. Just do as I do, we're the same person." With that said, he suddenly fell back, the dropped off the cliff.

It was at least thirty meters above the river and very dangerous to dive at such a high altitude. The velocity at which you'd enter the water was likely to reach a hundred kilometers per hour. Pampered Guy flipped in the air and fell into the water with his legs down.

Snake Ancestor jumped without the slightest hesitation, imitated Pampered Guy's movements in the air, and immediately fell into the water.

Suddenly, all the confusion disappeared, and Snake Ancestor woke up. He struggled for a moment and found himself falling into a huge, deep pool.

The sunlight reflected through the clear surface of the water above, showing a transparent aqua-green color. But the area four meters below quickly became dark and I couldn't see the bottom at all.

It was a hole just like the ones we had seen before at the bottom of the Jinsha River. But this one was surprisingly large, and the clear water gushing out from it made the surrounding water clear. The two currents meeting here formed numerous small eddies, but they also slowed down the river's flow.

I saw that Pampered Guy had gone deeper underwater, so I immediately swung my legs to follow him. After he dove into the darkness, I soon saw a strange light appear in the water's depths. The green light was vague and gloomy, just like a ghost fire.

Chapter 2.19 Fantasy

As we dove past the ghost fire, I found that it was a water lantern with some kind of fluorescent ore inside.

It was a very small water lantern hanging on a chain that must have been placed about eleven or twelve meters down from the water's surface. I looked down and noticed even more chains beneath it, strung up on both sides of the underwater cliffs. It was exactly the same as what I had seen under Changbai Mountain.

We couldn't go too far free diving, but Pampered Guy looked at the nearby cliff and saw an underwater cave.

The water lantern must have been left by Poker-Face to guide us there.

The chains led right into the three-meter-wide cave, so we grabbed them and snuck in. After entering, I discovered that the chains extended all the way into the cave and seemed to be guide chains. It was completely dark inside, the water temperature was very low, and the current felt as if it would pierce us to the bone.

Pampered Guy's water lantern could barely light more than a meter ahead. After waiting for a moment, he quickly dove in and I unhesitatingly followed closely behind. He went in about six or seven meters, and then suddenly stuck to the cave ceiling, causing his whole upper body to look like it was embedded.

I also went up, only to find that there were some air holes in the cave's ceiling. After kicking forward a few more times, my head broke through the water's surface.

The air hole was as big as a car and when Pampered Guy lifted the lantern out of the water, he found that the rock walls here were wet, and there were many rattan frames on the side with strange stones inside.

"Oh, so this kind of stone is here. No wonder there's oxygen all year round." Pampered Guy climbed up, and I quickly followed. Once he raised the water lantern, I could see many primitive carvings on the rock walls of

this air-bubble cave. “These were carved by the Yi people’s ancestors when they first discovered this place. They thought that such caves were excavated by mountain gods, so they carved totems. Look at how neat the marks are carved here; they really did make all these.”

I was panting as I approached him. I had completely regained my senses and wanted to question him, but I felt suffocated and couldn’t seem to catch my breath.

Pampered Guy looked at me and smiled, “Why bother? I had so many opportunities to get rid of you along the way. Aren’t you embarrassed to follow me so shamelessly?”

“Shut—shut—shut up!” I stuttered out.

Pampered Guy ignored me as he looked at the cave wall in admiration: “It’s really right this time.” With that said, he jumped into the water again.

I immediately wanted to catch up with him, but before I did, I gave myself a few blows to the chest, inhaled a mouthful of air, and jumped down.

Pampered Guy was still waiting for me underwater and hadn’t left me behind. He watched me come down, made a “come on” gesture, and then carried the lantern and swam forward.

This guy was more organized, disciplined, and responsible than Poker-Face, and I said to myself, *damn, Poker-Face really is scum when it comes to organizational discipline.*

We passed two more air holes along the way, and then saw a light in front of us. We breached the surface and found that we had come out in a huge, deep pool. I tried to open my eyes a few times as I floated there, but the sun was too bright.

Once I had adapted, I looked up and saw that we were in a bowl-shaped pool of water. There were large trees on the surrounding cliffs that were lush and green, and this huge pool was in the middle. There were a few multi-storied buildings placed on stilts around the pool, but these were much more extravagant than the ones outside. The tiled roofs, colored

glaze decorations, and pillars were all constructed from large wood that had been painted red.

The whole area was sunny, the scenery was dream-like, and the area was completely enclosed. It would be impossible to know of its existence without a satellite. These sorcerers had really found a good place.

“Blow the whistle and see where Big Brother Zhang is.” Pampered Guy said to me.

I blew my whistle and immediately heard a response come from the top of a multi-storied building. When we looked around, we saw Big Brother Zhang standing up there, pointing in one direction.

There were stone steps where you could go up the cliff wall, and at this time, I found that there were a lot of reliefs on the walls. A strange face had been engraved, and it looked like a mask.

Chapter 2.20 Fantasy

The carvings on the cliffs were all fox-faced totems, which had been done in the style of the Warring States Period. Most of them had been eroded by water, and the lines were blurred. It looked like the local people had gone back over them again with paint, but now the pigments had faded badly. When we looked closer, however, we found that the reliefs had originally been quite detailed before they were eroded, and must have taken a lot of effort at the time. It was a work of art, and not something a simple craftsman could do.

When we got to shore, Big Brother Zhang pulled me up. Now that it was two against one, Snake Ancestor had obviously given up the idea of arguing; not to mention the fact that he had followed Pampered Guy all this way. It was a bit ridiculous to accuse them of breaking the rules now and then try to kill them.

But the first thing he did say was: Your method isn't in line with the rules. What exactly are you trying to do?

I was also confused. This obviously wasn't a tomb raiding job, so Iron Chopsticks should be paying them a fee. Even if these two people finished the task quickly and economically now, Iron Chopsticks still wouldn't give them a penny. Unless they had their own purpose and didn't care about the fee. But if that was the case, then it was hard to tell whether I had become their accomplice or their prisoner. It had turned into a very awkward interpersonal relationship. But since Iron Chopsticks ordered me to follow them, it could still be counted as completing the task.

Pampered Guy's shirt was soaked, and he completely ignored me as he started complaining: "If you hadn't been crying and grumbling behind me, then I could have changed into the shuikao and jumped in again. This is a shirt Hengsheng's boss in Shanghai made for me. I don't know if it'll shrink."

With that said, they started to climb up and entered one of the nearby multi-storied buildings. I knew the Zhang family's habits—no matter what they were doing, their feet were always moving forward, and they would

never wait unless they were forced to. While ordinary people were busy speculating, discussing, and being cautious, the Zhangs had already run thousands of miles away.

The floor in this multi-storied building was made of the best wood and was very exquisite. The brazier was also of foreign make, and at first glance, the craftsmanship appeared to be Nepalese. Compared to how it looked from outside, there was a lot of space inside the building and six or seven velvet cushions had been placed on the floor. There was also a loft with a view of the water down below.

The brazier was still warm, and two pots of tea were still steaming on the edge. Pampered Guy took off his shirt and revealed his thin upper body. He had a strange tattoo that was similar to a Qilin but wasn't. Fortunately, this Little Master Three was experienced and knowledgeable, and I knew at a glance that it was a Qiong Qi.³⁴

The Qiong Qi was a strange beast that was almost the complete opposite of the Qilin. Qilins were a kind of harsh judge of the wicked and represented a fierce, but irresistibly positive force. If people with Qilin tattoos did the right thing, then they would be very quick and strong, but if they did the wrong thing, then they would be burned by the Qilin. It was a kind of contractual beast, while the Qiong Qi was completely evil and would eat people. If there was a fight between two sides, it would bite off the nose of the one who was in the right. And if it found that someone had done something bad, it would catch a lot of wild animals and give them to him, encouraging him to keep doing it.

I really felt like the Qiong Qi tattoo fit Pampered Guy perfectly considering his lousy attitude.

The most amazing thing was that the Qiong Qi's penis was five meters long, and some regions depicted it as the prime male reproductive organ. People who had Qiong Qi tattoos were fond of obscene pleasures.

Pampered Guy hung his shirt on a shelf to dry, served some hot tea, and then signaled me to make myself at home. I was completely at a loss. They had made their way here so fast that even if the people outside

³⁴ Basically a winged tiger. Considered 1 of the 4 evils in ancient Chinese myths and legends

wanted to come here, it would still take them at least a day or two to arrive, no matter how skilled they were. And now these two guys had started drinking tea leisurely?

“There are a lot of traces of Han people in the details and decorations here. Some Han must have helped the Yi construct these buildings.” Pampered Guy said. “It takes time for the medicine in this tea to take effect. If you don’t drink it, then no one can save you tonight.”

I asked, “What kind of medicine? I can’t just take medicine casually.”

Pampered Guy handed me half of his drink. “Drink it. Drink it before it’s all gone. This medicine is a strong tonic, but don’t worry, it won’t conflict with your snake medicine.”

I sniffed it carefully, reluctantly took a few sips, and realized that there was something like human blood in it.

After drinking, both Zhang brothers began wiping their hands and necks with the tea. I followed suit and heard Poker-Face say: “After finding the nest, I’ll continue to give chase.”

“Patriarch, I’m the kind of person who does the dirty work, so I should be the one doing it.” Pampered Guy said. “You have to make it to the right time.”

“What’s your purpose?” I finally couldn’t help speaking up again. These two people really regarded me as an invisible person. “Since I found the entrance and came in, I’ll inform Iron Chopsticks like usual. I can’t mess around with you here.”

Pampered Guy turned his head and asked me with a great deal of interest. “Snake charmer, for what reason were you were hired?”

Chapter 2.21 Fantasy

I put the teacup down, somewhat stumped by the question.

There was a set of rules in the underworld— such as keeping your distance from each other, and what kind of topics could and couldn't be discussed— that had been tacitly agreed upon for a long time. This kind of mindless chatter wasn't allowed. Who the fuck had the luxury to talk about this? You may never meet each other again after the job was over, so why would you need to know such a thing?

Snake Ancestor had obviously started working in the underworld very early and was used to the dangers. As a result, his lousy attitude indicated that he was more alert than most people right from the start. But he didn't expect that the two Zhangs were on the same level and that they were so unruly. It would be better to just keep his distance, but the two Zhangs' strength was unfathomable. It seemed ridiculous to sneer and play it cool.

I silently helped Snake Ancestor criticize the two Zhangs over a hundred times.

Seeing that I didn't answer, Pampered Guy continued: "I don't even have to ask to know that people like you are definitely in it for the money. Let me tell you, it's not worthwhile to be a lama for the money. How much can you get this time?"

I was stunned again as Pampered Guy continued, "Oh yeah, you can't tell me about it because of the rules of the underworld. So many of them are fucked up. If Iron Chopsticks takes ten thousand silver dollars, then maybe you can take a hundred. Why bother? There's no future in this business." After that, Pampered Guy said faintly, "I'll take three hundred, and Big Brother Zhang will take two thousand. You certainly won't get as much as us."

I quivered. It appeared Pampered Guy had guessed right. I saw him pull a roll of something that looked similar to a sausage out from his sleeve— it was a roll of silver dollars wrapped in gauze.

This kind of thing had amazing purchasing power in ethnic minority areas. Pampered Guy took out fifty or sixty pieces and threw them to Snake Ancestor: "I'll give these fifty pieces to you if you'll wait a day before informing Smoker and the others. Don't ask any more questions about us, just follow along, and you'll make some money."

Snake ancestor looked at the silver dollars, hesitated for a long time, then silently put them away in his pocket and asked: "Why is Big Brother Zhang so expensive?"

I couldn't help holding my forehead. This Pampered Guy was really amazing considering he had completely tamed the snake charmer. It basically meant that the three of them were supporting each other now.

"In the evening, you'll know why he's so expensive." Pampered Guy said. "By the way, where are you from? I've rarely seen any snake charmers. Come and socialize, and I'll introduce you to some work in the future. Us brothers are very generous."

"I'm of the Wa people from Binlong, which is now in southern Yunnan. Foreigners burned my village, so I want to buy guns and go back and kill them." I said.

"This is an ancestral craft?" Pampered Guy pointed to the snake around my waist. "If this thing is used well, I wouldn't stand a chance. Will it bite someone's dick?"

"No. Without that bell, you're no match for me." Snake Ancestor said, "What kind of magic weapon is it? Do you know sorcery?"

"I don't know what it is, either. I'm an outsider, but my boss's verbal skills are really bad." He pointed to his tattoo: "You saw that my tattoo looks like this. Although my boss and I are surnamed Zhang, we're not related by blood. I was adopted."

"Adopted?" There was too much information, and Snake Ancestor couldn't accept it. At that time, life here on the southern frontier was very simple, so it was hard to understand complicated things.

“Yes, I do dirty work. The boss’s family raised me, so I took their surname.”

“Do you dump the patriarch’s chamber pot out or something?”

“Not that kind of dirty work.” Pampered Guy frowned and said, “Oh, your education level is so bad that I can’t deal with you.”

“Why do you keep everything in your mouth? Aren’t you afraid you’d swallow it?”

“The best place to hide things is in the mouth. But I can’t tell you how I do it in case you end up plotting against me later.”

Since we were no longer adversaries right now, Pampered Guy and I began to chat. Our previous state of pretending to be cool on the raft had disappeared, but I could see that everything he said was to fish for information. Snake Ancestor was obviously no match for him and practically revealed everything during their chat.

This Pampered Guy was always putting on an act and hiding his true face. In a sense, he truly was a dirty worker. The reason why the Zhang family had remained hidden was because there were people like him helping behind the scenes. Did they need different tattoos to determine their ranks because they had all received the same training?

But up until now, all his dirty work only made Little Brother’s facade of coolness stronger and stronger. The Zhangs were an outlandish family and deserved to be extinct.

As we talked, the sun began sinking in the west. The scenery around this deep hidden pool was especially beautiful as the light from the sunset fell on the glazed tiles of the buildings. This place was like a fairyland, and even the palace couldn’t compare.

Pampered Guy’s clothes had finally dried, so he put them back on. Poker-Face had taken two or three naps during the day but was fully awake now. At this time, I saw green lights appear in the dark places of the village one right after another, just like ghost fires. If I hadn’t seen that

kind of cold light underwater before, I would have really thought that all the villagers had died and turned into ghosts.

Poker-Face must have placed those lights all over the village before we had come here.

“Pay attention to all the dark haystacks and be careful of the roofs. None can remain.” Poker-Face said.

Chapter 2.22 Fantasy

I saw a lot of strange rattan things lying in many places as we snuck around, and realized that they were traps.

The whole Bimo Village was obviously empty, and these two people didn't seem to have much interest in exploring. It appeared Poker-Face had spent all his time here arranging these things.

I realized that their real purpose for participating in this lama operation was to come here and catch and kill these insects. It was obvious that they already knew where the bugs came from, what harm they could do, and how to catch them.

"Did you see what the bug looked like?" Pampered Guy asked me. When I nodded, he continued: "The ones here are different, be careful."

I asked, "Why is it different?"

"All those outside are male, while all the ones here are female."

"What's so different about the females?"

"If one of the female's legs gets broken off, all the males will come." Pampered Guy said, "You can't let the smell disperse. If you pinch the two spots on the female's back, it won't be able to move. Once that happens, put it in a rattan basket along with a stone, and throw it in the lake to drown."

There were rattan baskets everywhere, so I asked: "Why are you only mentioning something so important now?"

Pampered Guy said, "You don't get to decide when I want to reveal information."

The three of us passed the tall, multi-storied buildings and various covered bridges, and then came to a main hall that had the most traps. Four huge pillars were supporting the hall, and there was a strange iron pillar in the center.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a weathered bronze statue, but I could no longer tell what it was supposed to be.

“This is the village’s divine iron and the origin of everything here.” Pampered Guy said, “There was a Bimo eighty years ago who discovered this iron in the depths of the forest and brought it back. Later, the Americans who came here discovered that they knew what was in the forest.”

“Divine iron?” Snake Ancestor touched it: “How is it divine?”

“According to the myths here, this statue is the first human in the world. The ethnic minorities—including the Baima Tibetans, Nakhi, and Dulong people—say there are three eras. Humans in the first era had only one eye and were called cyclops. If you look closely, you’ll see that this statue’s head only has one eye. These myths and legends were only passed down through word of mouth, and there were never any cultural relics or clues that would help confirm them. This is the world’s first statue, and it came from the wild mountainous area behind the Yi people’s village. No one had migrated inside this area since ancient times, and the Americans believed there was a reason for that.”

“This statue came from the woods, and the Americans went in to look for it? What kind of place is it?”

“No one knows, it’s a huge mystery. And no one knows where this statue came from, either. That Bimo from eighty years ago was the only one that left a few clues.” Pampered Guy walked around the divine iron: “You might not be able to tell, but this thing is metal, very light, and of a very advanced craft. Ah, you really don’t understand. It’s rare to use bronze to make such thin things. The Americans have always suspected that there’s something inside, but the Bimo wouldn’t let them touch it.”

“But how do you know so much?” Snake Ancestor suddenly reacted and asked.

Poker-Face lit a strange spice and placed it in the center of the sacrificial basin that was in front of the divine iron. Pampered Guy picked up the

basin and walked around the room, saying, “You can’t tell, but I’m very old. And old men always know a little more.”

Chapter 2.23 Fantasy

Snake Ancestor was simply a fool and chased after Pampered Guy, asking him how old he was. Pampered Guy was obviously teasing him and casually replied, "Older than your grandfather?"

"No way, you look as old as my dad." When Snake Ancestor said that, Pampered Guy touched his face and said, "When did your father give birth to you? What kind of praise is that?"

Poker-Face finally couldn't listen anymore and looked back at Little Brother Zhang: "You should go back home."

Pampered Guy immediately shut up and made a gesture to Snake Ancestor to be quiet: "Concentrate."

"What is this?" Snake Ancestor pointed to the smoke, and Pampered Guy said, "This is insect fragrant jade to bring the insects here. Don't worry, the tea in your hand can protect you once or twice, but it won't help if you run into them."

"Shh!" Poker-Face silenced us once more, and I suddenly heard a series of movements above our heads.

The three of us looked up and Snake Ancestor clenched his teeth. Two snakes slithered up his neck like they wanted to make an all-around defense. I saw a colorful insect hanging upside down from the roof, which quickly crawled into our field of vision.

Poker-Face swung his broken Yi knife, jumped on the beam with one foot, and then leaped from beam to beam like a bat, catching up with the bug in almost half a second. He still had the basin in his hand, and his knife was held in a reverse grip. He released his hold on the knife, but the handle had a strap that was attached to his wrist, so it swung like a meteor hammer and hit the bug. When he pulled his wrist back, the knife turned in a 360-degree circle around his wrist and returned to his hand

The bug was still struggling, so Poker-Face put it in the basin, where the high temperature inside immediately made it squeak. He then directly stabbed the bug and randomly threw it into the pool below.

“One.” Pampered Guy said, “There are still sixty-seven left.”

“How do you know how many there are?” Snake Ancestor was surprised, but he suddenly felt the snakes at his waist tremble, and a colorful insect twice as big as the one just now jumped down from the roof.

Snake Ancestor had immediately jumped back and did a tumble roll as soon as he felt the snakes tremble. The bug fell to the ground and immediately jumped towards Pampered Guy’s feet.

Pampered Guy flipped back, supported himself on the ground with one hand, and immediately spit something out of his mouth. The thing glinted in the light as it hit the bug, and I realized it was the iron piece he usually kept in his mouth.

The bug was crucified on the hall floor, and Snake Ancestor immediately took out the medicinal liquor and poured it on top. The bug curled up as it burned, and Poker-Face came down, slapped it with the knife, and shot it into the water.

“Two down. It’s a good start.” Pampered Guy shook his hand. He must not have expected the attack just now, and his hand was a little numb.

“That’s a spitting skill.” Snake Ancestor said, “How can you spit so much? Can you teach me?”

“How can you possibly call this a ‘spitting skill’. I’m not going to teach you anything since you’ve said something so offensive.” Pampered Guy took out some smaller pieces of iron from his shuikao and put them in his mouth one by one. “I’ve practiced this skill since I was a kid. Even if I kissed a girl right now, she wouldn’t have any idea that there were so many things hidden in my mouth. Your snakes are fast, but they can’t attack. When those bugs come down, you contain them, and I’ll kill them.” As soon as he spoke, I heard the crawling sound of insect feet

start spreading throughout the village. I looked up and saw a lot of bugs crawling up on the roof, on the pillars, and under the floor.

“The females are coming.” Pampered Guy pointed to the seven o’clock direction: “Little Snake, let’s cover Big Brother Zhang so he can deal with the big ones, and we’ll deal with the small ones.”

As soon as he said that, Poker-Face grabbed the backs of our necks and flung us backwards. Two poisonous bug antennae stabbed through the gap in the floor where we had just been standing. The whole floor arched up and started to crack, and we could see a monster as big as a calf was underneath. Almost at the same time, the letter snake that was coiled around Snake Ancestor’s neck bit Poker-Face’s hand.

Chapter 2.24 Fantasy

Poker-Face pinched the snake's neck and pulled its fangs out. Snake Ancestor immediately pulled the snake back, but Poker-Face's wrist had already turned black.

Indeed, as Snake Ancestor had said, his strength was on par with that of Pampered Guy. If they were fighting people, Snake Ancestor would probably have a very powerful role, but unfortunately, this was a fight against bugs. It was his one weakness.

"Where's the snake medicine?!" Pampered Guy's face became livid, and he started scolding loudly. "What kind of stupid snake is this?"

"You can't reason with snakes." Snake Ancestor said coldly. He grabbed Poker-Face's hand and started to suck out the poisonous blood. He then pulled out a dagger and exposed his wrist, where I saw a row of subcutaneous protrusions on his forearm. He cut one, squeezed out something similar to a plant seed, crushed it, and then pressed it against Poker-Face's wound

"You're not sick, are you? Don't infect my boss." Pampered Guy cried out as he kicked the arched floor in front of him to keep the things below from coming up.

Snake Ancestor completely ignored him. When he was done, he said to Poker-Face, "Your hand will hurt for three days and you won't be able to move it. It'll feel as heavy as a rock, but you won't die."

Poker-Face raised his bitten hand and took a deep breath. I saw that the blood vessels near the wound were bulging, and his rigid fingers immediately started moving.

"You can still move? Impossible!" Snake Ancestor was surprised. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"A lot." Poker-Face shook his hand and changed the knife to his other hand. There was a loud noise, and Pampered Guy fell over and rolled behind the two of them. The whole floor arched up, and then a huge,

claw-shaped bug emerged from below as fragments of the floor collapsed everywhere.

“This one’s a female.” Pampered Guy got up and gestured to where we could see two black spots on the colorful body that were as large as saucepans.

“How is it possible to ‘pinch’ these two black spots? They’re bigger than our heads.” Snake Ancestor staggered back and Poker-Face also looked at Pampered Guy.

“Damn it, that’s exactly what was written. Did I read those English documents too fast?”

Snake Ancestor retorted, “That’s why those foreigners are dead!”

The huge bug climbed up the beam, causing the beam to sink under its weight, and sending the roof tiles toppling into the water below. It seemed that although the female bug was very big, it wasn’t actually as big as a calf. It merely looked like that because there were a large number of bugs surrounding it. In addition to its long legs, the males that were several times larger in size were wrapped around it in a huge ball, giving people the illusion that it was voluminous. But the female bug was black, so those two spots were actually a part of her body that had been exposed despite the male bugs wrapped around her.

The bug approached quickly. If not for the beams, falling tiles, and bug legs getting stuck in the roof gaps from time to time, the three of us would have jumped to the ground. Pampered Guy spit out an iron piece, hit one of the males that was crawling on the female, and then watched it collapse.

The three of us kept retreating.

The female bug finally couldn’t hang on anymore. There were too many bugs on her body, and she wasn’t able to hook herself to the next beam. She fell into the hall, and the bugs wrapped around her scattered all over the floor.

I wondered if they were mating just now. *Damn, we always pick the wrong time and end up interrupting others when they're having fun. We're so inhumane.* But Pampered Guy pointed to the pile of bugs and said, "This female bug is dying."

As the female bug rolled on the ground, I noticed that her two antennae had fallen off. They weren't actually mating like I thought. It was just as Pampered Guy had said—the males were really swarming around the female bug because she had been injured.

Based on what we knew, these bugs would normally frantically attack anything around the female bug, but now they were all rushing towards her.

"There's something on the female bug," Poker-Face said. At this time, all three of us noticed that among the swarm, there was a small, unfamiliar jasper-like bug above the female.

Chapter 2.25 Fantasy

It was an emerald beetle. Of course, green beetles were common, but this one's color looked as if it had been carved from jade. Under the illumination of the nearby green light, it seemed a little inky, and the luster of its body made people feel like it had just come out of the water.

“Have either of you seen this kind of bug before?!” Pampered Guy cried out. When we shook our heads, Pampered Guy said, “Not good.”

The female bug struggled to get up but was obviously in a great deal of pain. The green beetle on her body was hurting her, and she kept turning to try and throw it off. The males also kept climbing on her, but they couldn't attack, as if there was some magic around the beetle that was keeping them away.

There was a myriad of colors in the cluster of bugs, and those with tryphobia³⁵ wouldn't be able to bear such a mind-numbing sight.

While the female was rolling around, many of the males were pushed to the edge of the hall and fell into the lake. Pampered Guy frowned when he noticed since this obviously prevented him from keeping count. The three men stood still for a moment, before Poker-Face said, “Don't miss this opportunity. Get to work.” After flipping the knife in his hand, he ordered Snake Ancestor, “Give me the wine.”

“There aren't many bottles.” Snake Ancestor tossed one to Poker-Face, who caught it, took a sip, and then sprayed it on the knife. He then proceeded to stick the knife in the brazier and let it catch fire. He threw the iron basin away, went up, and stabbed three bugs to death one right after the other.

The male insects crackled as they burned, and Poker-Face threw their burning broken legs into the water before stabbing them again. Pampered Guy and Snake Ancestor also went up to help, stationing themselves on the tall pillars so that they could keep track of what was going on below. They could see a lot of insects falling from the hall and

³⁵ A fear or disgust of closely-packed holes

landing in the lake, as well as those that were clinging to the hall's wooden floor. Snake Ancestor shook himself, and all the letter snakes on his body climbed onto the pillar. Pampered Guy didn't even let the nearby male bugs get close to him as he repeatedly spit the iron pieces at them and threw them into the water below. Once they hit the water, he spit at them again so that they would sink.

I didn't know if Pampered Guy had lived to modern times. This whole thing probably took place during the Warlord Era, or it may have been the later period described in the novel "The Lost Horizon".³⁶ I honestly didn't know the exact year.

If Pampered Guy had a chance to live to the present, I didn't know how he must have felt when he saw the game Plants vs Zombies.

Snake Ancestor was very sullen. He could only order the snakes to defend while he stood off to the side and watched Pampered Guy spit. Pampered Guy was soon out of breath, and started panting heavily. "Don't you have anything to help?! Spitting dozens of iron pieces does take a lot of work."

"My handgun is in the outer part of the village." Snake Ancestor said, shaking his head. His hair was very long and soon came loose, and a dark snake that looked like a nine-segmented whip slithered out of it.

A closer look revealed that the black color wasn't actually the snake's coloring, but an artificially made layer of armor that was on the snake's back.

This snake was as thick as a finger and almost seemed to stick to the post as it slithered up.

"Stay back!" Snake Ancestor snapped. The snake raised its head, and the armor on its body suddenly opened, revealing black hairs.

"What kind of snake is this?!"

"Cat snake." Snake Ancestor said, "No one can be saved from its bite."

³⁶ A 1933 novel by English writer James Hilton. Wiki info [here](#) (it actually sounds kind of interesting lol)

The snake started imitating the sounds the insects were making and issued a series of “gegege” sounds. When two insects crawled towards it, the black-haired snake shook its black hair and stirred the armor, making a creepy sound.

When I saw this snake, I was as shocked as when I had seen that strange bug. Although it wasn’t big, it made people feel that it was very dangerous. It was the kind of aura that only existed with poisonous snakes and insects.

Then, I saw an amazing scene. The black-haired snake violently snapped at the nearest bug, agitated its upper body, and then coiled around the bug. The pieces of iron armor seemed to be very sharp, and the bug was torn to pieces in an instant.

“Won’t it be poisoned?”

“No, the snake has crocodile skin in its mouth, and its teeth are iron nails. If this snake could reveal its fangs, I wouldn’t dare put it in my hair.”

Chapter 2.26 Fantasy

The iron-scaled snake lay in front of Pampered Guy and Snake Ancestor, preventing all the colorful bugs from getting close to them. This kind of snake was extremely fast, and its attack efficiency was very high. Its instantaneous ability to snare the bugs far exceeded our intuitive understanding, and when it used its sharp scales to crush the bugs, it was like a shredder.

But Snake Ancestor had to withdraw the letter snakes. It seemed that this iron-scaled snake didn't recognize any of its relatives, and would attack everything besides Snake Ancestor.

With two people's cooperation, the bugs in the hall below were soon cleaned up, and Snake Ancestor withdrew the black snake and put it back into his hair. When they looked around and didn't see any bugs, they climbed back to where Poker-Face was.

Poker-Face had cleared the scene perfectly. We could see that the Yi knife had returned to his dominant hand, and the flame had been extinguished.

With the exception of the female bug's body and a few male bugs that had been caught by its antennae, all the other bugs had disappeared. Poker-Face had cleaned up well, and no visible residual limbs appeared on the floor. Most of the ground had been sprinkled with the insect fragrant jade ashes, and it seemed that we could brazenly step barefoot where the bugs had been climbing just now.

Pampered Guy opened his mouth to attack the remaining male bugs on the female, but was stopped by Poker-Face. "Be careful of that beetle, don't let it feel threatened."

The female bug was dead, and we could see that the bright green beetle had obviously grown in size. It seemed to be sucking the juices from the female bug's corpse.

Snake Ancestor took out medicinal liquor and looked at the beam. He wanted to climb up, pour the medicinal liquor on the female bug's body from above, and then ignite it.

He didn't know what kind of bug it was, but the safest way was to burn and kill it.

Poker-Face stopped him.

I couldn't really get a feel for the state of this scene at the moment, but I clearly realized what Poker-Face was feeling.

I hadn't been too nervous the entire time, because I knew that Poker-Face was very good when he passed by me for the first time.

But at this point, I had a feeling that seemed to resonate with Pampered Guy and Snake Ancestor. (Black Glasses said that this kind of process confused emotions because they weren't being gradually produced, but piled up at once. At the moment I came into contact with this kind of thing, all the information had poured in. I was experiencing a lot of hallucinations in a very short period of time, so the subsequent coma was actually the body's way of healing after receiving such a brain injury.)

This kind of process was a very dangerous thing because it would make you form an emotional resonance with some of the people in the shortest amount of time. As a result, most people couldn't handle such complicated emotions all at once.

To be honest, I didn't want to see Pampered Guy and Snake Ancestor die in this illusion, but Poker-Face's state made me feel that he had lost his grasp of the present situation, which had me worried.

Poker-Face rarely lost his confidence. Even in the face of unknown situations, his experience was so rich that he always seemed to be able to predict certain situations. Even if he hadn't experienced it, he could probably sense how things would go.

I didn't know why this bug made him feel this way until I saw his injured hand.

His palm had been cut, and the footprints on the floor led close to the female bug's corpse.

He had tested the green beetle, but it obviously had no reaction to his blood.

"This bug is from that door." Poker-Face said faintly: "Be careful, it will attract those things."

Chapter 2.27 Fantasy

Door? What door?

In recent years, I hated it whenever I heard this word. Whether it was a zipper door³⁷, a cucumber door³⁸, or whatever kind of door, I didn't want to listen to it at all. I didn't know what was wrong with this society. Everything had to be related to a door. When ordering food, if someone dared order marinated pig's tongue³⁹, then I would drag them out and break their legs.

So, it was even more remarkable that Poker-Face would say this word. If I could speak, I would definitely ask him directly, "What door, the bronze door?"

And why was this bug in the door? How could such an extraordinary bug come out of the door? Couldn't you practice good hygiene?

This seemingly dim-witted Snake Ancestor seemed to agree with me at this time, and asked in a low voice, "What door?" I silently cheered for him: Good question!

"It's none of your business." Pampered Guy quickly answered, and then said to Poker-Face, "Little Snake has a special trick in his hair. How about we let him send the snake to try?"

Poker-Face shook his head. "Find a lever cutter."⁴⁰

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll attach the lever cutter to my hand and catch it."

³⁷ Think it refers to a sex scandal. My search results kept coming up with the one between former US President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

³⁸ In May 2009, a university girl used a cucumber to comfort herself in her dorm. It accidentally broke and stayed in her body and she couldn't get it out. She was sent to the hospital for treatment, but they were helpless. The "Cucumber Gate" (the Chinese character for door can also mean gate) incident attracted a lot of attention from schools.

³⁹ It translates as "door cavity"

⁴⁰ It's a lever-style guillotine (for chopping fodder etc).

Pampered Guy immediately stopped: “Patriarch, what age are we in? Doing such a thing is so outdated. Don’t be impulsive. Trust me, let me think of a safer way first.”

In the world, people’s impression of others was related to themselves and those around them. We all looked like fools around Poker-Face, but Pampered Guy was very good at acting. It was so good, in fact, that he made it feel like Poker-Face was living in a comedy. It may be that in this era, Poker-Face ignored a lot of rules, so Pampered Guy had to follow him around and present himself as a comedic character.

“The Americans brought back samples of these bugs from somewhere in the forest behind us. They were originally packed in earthen pots that the locals made. We saw some of these pots outside, which shows that the bugs were taken out of here. Maybe the Americans wanted to take them outside the village.” Pampered Guy said. “This beetle is different from the other bugs, considering it killed this female. Is it also a sample brought back from the forest?”

Snake Ancestor said, “Can you think about it faster? Otherwise, I’ll go up to the beam.”

Pampered Guy said, “Any beetles that the Americans can catch shouldn’t be that dangerous. But it’s also possible that it was a parasite in the female bug, which makes it dangerous. Let’s do an experiment. You watch here, and I’ll find something.”

In a short amount of time, Pampered Guy found a bamboo pole from somewhere and put a dead colorful insect on the end. The bug must have come from one of the traps Poker-Face had set up along the path because several of its legs were broken. When he came back to the two of us, he said, “Let’s pretend that the bug is attacking it and see how the beetle reacts.”

“Will it really work? You stuck such a big pole in its back.” Snake Ancestor said.

“I don’t believe a bug could understand such a thing.” Pampered Guy glanced at Poker-Face, who nodded in apparent acquiescence.

I felt like this method of deceit insulted the dignity of the Zhang family, but it seemed that Poker-Face didn't particularly care about it. He watched as Pampered Guy pushed the bug towards the green beetle while imitating the crawling sound the bugs had made.

Snake Ancestor glanced at Pampered Guy but didn't say anything. He apparently didn't have the strength to talk anymore. They watched Pampered Guy push the bug right up to the green beetle, take a deep breath, and then jerk the bamboo pole so it looked like the bug was attacking the beetle. As long as his wrist shook even a little bit, the bug could be pressed up against the green beetle.

At this time, the beetle finally made a move.

It flew up, and without paying any attention to the fake bug or us, proceed to soar straight to the water and flew away in an instant.

We looked at each other. Although this was what bugs should do, we were still a little startled.

Chapter 2.28 Fantasy

After about five minutes, all three of us realized that it had really flown away, and didn't seem to be coming back.

Poker-Face had classified it as a hell bug, and now it had just flown away. I didn't know why I felt like the earth was going to be destroyed, but when I looked at Poker-Face, I slowly relaxed. We all stood up, and I really wanted to ask him directly: "Is this ok?"

It turns out that all you had to do was drive the bug away, so what were you so nervous about just now?

"Will it come back?" Pampered Guy asked.

"Whether it wants to come back or not, it may not remember the way." Snake Ancestor said, "You just said this thing couldn't be so smart."

"So... it's over? Won't it fly around everywhere and hurt people?"

"Then what else can we do? Find all the bugs in a five hundred li⁴¹ radius and see if it's inside?" Pampered Guy sat down on the ground and rubbed his neck and arms: "It's over, the task is complete."

Don't relax! I cried in my heart. In European and American films, the best supporting roles all died at this moment, just when the whole audience thought everything was over. This increased the absurdity and happiness of life. It later became a typical movie trope, which was why I felt nervous here.

The three of us rested as if nothing had happened. The difference between reality and movies was that reality would never conform to your ideas.

"Clean up and count the number," Poker-Face said.

"I memorized how many I killed and how many I saw die with my own eyes, but I don't know how many fell into the water before that. It should

⁴¹ Not sure if you remember, but it's a traditional Chinese unit of distance. 500 li= 250,000 meters= ~155 miles.

basically be close to the total number. Even if I missed a few, the chances of them being alive aren't great. Except for those in the traps, all the bugs should be here."

When I saw Pampered Guy taste the river water when we were on the raft before, I knew he had this skill. This kind of person knew everything like the back of his hand and had an amazing memory.

There were traps along the cliff path, as well as those around the divine iron in the hall, so Pampered Guy counted the bugs, killed them, and then threw them into the lake. Finally, there was only the huge female bug left, so we used bamboo poles to push her into the lake.

"How much longer?" Poker-Face asked.

"Four hours. It's enough time."

With the exception of the damaged areas, no bugs could be seen in the whole village after we finished cleaning up. As we were working, we scattered the insect fragrant jade dust everywhere, and then took the green lanterns and threw them into the pool of water. The nearly extinguished lanterns slowly sank to the bottom, turned into ghost fires in the water, and then slowly disappeared.

As the night wind blew, a huge reflection of the moon formed on the water's surface, and the moonlight was dazzling. If we weren't deep in the mountains, the moonlight here would have painted another magnificent scene.

The night breeze blew the jade ash away from the places where the bugs had crawled. The ash had a kind of fluorescence, which made the whole village appear as beautiful as a sand painting getting blown away by the wind. The three of us went to the water's shore, followed Poker-Face's lead and took off our clothes, and then started washing our whole bodies.

"There are so many bugs in the water, is it ok?" Snake Ancestor asked.

"Don't worry." Pampered Guy motioned him to stay away. "You and your snakes are really intimate. It's a little disgusting to see you naked, so turn

around. Wash the tea off your body quickly. As time goes by, it becomes more poisonous than those bugs.”

“So dangerous?”

“How else did you think you could live up to this point?”

“Then you should have told me in advance.”

After washing their bodies, the three men washed their clothes, went back to the place where they had tea before, and started drying their clothes again. Snake Ancestor asked what was going on.

Pampered Guy poured the tea water into the lake, threw the tea set down, and then found another tea set to make fresh tea that didn’t smell of blood. “That tea just now is a kind of poisonous corpse liquid, and the toxicity comes from some kind of red bug, which is very strong. But if you mix something with it, you can prevent the corpse poison from taking effect for a certain period of time, and at the same time restrain other bugs’ poison. If you apply it to your body, it can save you a few times as long as you’re not badly hurt. We’re clearing the way for what comes next.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think would have happened if the army had come in instead of us? How many people could survive?” Pampered Guy touched his stomach and seemed a little hungry: “We were so conscientious while escorting these people along the way, yet they’re still on guard against us.”

“You mean, you came in early to protect those in the underworld?” Snake Ancestor was surprised and asked, “Why?”

“We’ve always been like this.” Pampered Guy said. “It’s because all of you are too confident in yourselves. Many people simply don’t know how many things we’ve done for them. They already feel that they’ve traveled through a mountain of knives and a sea of fire.⁴² It seems scary how lucky

⁴² Basically means “extremely difficult and dangerous situation”

they are. What they don't know is that we've already cleaned up the road in front of them, just like what we did in this village."

Chapter 2.29 Fantasy

Snake Ancestor nodded his head, and Pampered Guy made a celebratory gesture: “Let’s stop talking about such suffocating things. What about your big snake from earlier? Is it lost?”

“You know the rules. I can’t tell you, so just forget about it.” Snake Ancestor said, glancing at Poker-Face, who was leaning against the post and slowly starting to fall asleep.

“Where did you learn your Mandarin? You don’t seem to have a dialect. Does no one doubt you in this area?”

“When I was a child, my family found someone to teach me, saying that I should be an official in the future.”

“Oh, it seems like you had a special status as a boy.”

Snake Ancestor smiled and looked around at the dark village. It was as if nothing had happened here. “What’s next?”

Pampered Guy pulled a bag of something similar to fennel beans from out of nowhere, and poured a little bit for Snake Ancestor. “The Bimo’s room has the Americans’ map, which is Jiutou Yandai’s real reason for coming here. Everything else is fake. The American expedition went into the forest and set up an outpost at the Meihe River’s third bay. In recent years, this village was their supply station. The Americans conducted geological surveys and made hydrological records near the Meihe River, and these bugs were brought out from there. The boss of this whole affair is called Richard, by the way. But the bugs couldn’t leave that place. When they were taken out of the forest, they couldn’t adapt to the outside water and would die when they got to the village. As a result, the Americans said they would take some of the Meihe River’s water, but the Bimo here wouldn’t let them.”

“Why?”

“The Meihe River is connected with large and small underground water veins, and the people here drink from it. There’s something special in the

water, which can detoxify and promote wound healing. It's impossible for the Yi people to sell their holy water as goods. Such a thing is blasphemous." Pampered Guy lowered his voice: "Of course, there was a deeper reason—the Americans had been in talks with this village for a long time but to no avail. So, they came up with an evil idea. They wanted to build a dam on the other side of the Meihe River and lead the river to another village, which was this village's enemy. The leaders here didn't dare openly challenge the Americans, so they raided the expedition team over at the outpost. Many people died on both sides and the outpost was burned in the skirmish. The bodies were piled up in the woods, and it took a long time to wrap things up, so they weren't disposed of in time. All the bugs inside came out, and all the people here in the houzhai died overnight."

"The people in the outer part of the village didn't understand the situation, so they brought in the Americans from outside. The Americans counted the eggshells on the bodies and wrote in their report how to determine how many bugs there were. But what happened to the bodies gave them an idea of how to get these bugs out alive. Because of the relationship between water and soil, the locals' blood was similar to the water composition in the forest, which could feed that kind of bug. So, they kept a few bugs in the corpses in order to take them outside the village. At that time, there was a Bimo who was seriously injured. Everyone thought he was dead, but he later crawled back from the forest alone. He discovered the situation and killed those foreigners, but when they were dying, the bugs were released. This is probably the simple version of the story. When the Americans saw that nobody had come back, and all the villagers had disappeared, they went to Jiutou Yandai to try and find the chieftain." Pampered Guy continued: "America is a commercial country, so everything can be used to make money."

"If the bugs we killed just now were sold to the Americans, wouldn't we get a lot of silver dollars?" Snake Ancestor frowned. "How do you know so much?"

"Because—" Pampered Guy obviously didn't know if he should disclose it, so he looked to Poker-Face, who nodded with his eyes closed.

“Because we’ve been looking for that place in the forest long before the Americans discovered it.”

Chapter 2.30 Fantasy

Little Brother Zhang gave Snake Ancestor a rough idea of what they had been doing in the forest. The scene that popped into my head was the one where the alien was watching Arnold Schwarzenegger in the movie “Predator”. The heavily armed Big and Little Brother Zhang were wrapped up in the tree branches, using the tall trees as camouflage while they watched every move the American expedition made down below.

They had probably discovered that the Americans were catching the cherished poisonous insects and taking them outside the forest. Anticipating that an emergency might arise, they gave up their work, followed them to the village, and saw everything.

This was their way of doing things, which was clear and simple. If we were still in Jiutou Yandai’s group now, then the whole thing would have still been a mystery, but here, we had started leisurely drinking tea.

“If you were here watching things happen, why didn’t you stop them beforehand?” Snake Ancestor asked: “You look capable of saving people.”

“Because people are too arrogant. They’re arrogant even as they’re suffering, and don’t believe that there are people in the world who can save them.” Pampered Guy said. “Xiang Yu⁴³ slit his own throat by the Wujiang River. Why do you think he did that?”

Snake Ancestor contemplated it, but after thinking for a long time, he sighed and asked, “Who is Xiang Yu? It sounds familiar, is it your relative?”

“Drink more tea, drink more tea. It’s good for your health.” Pampered Guy laughed. “Xiang Yu is my dad.”

“Isn’t your surname Zhang?”

“Zhang Xiang Yu, Zhang Xiang Yu. We Han people like to call each other directly by our first names and make out. Right, Snake?”

⁴³ Xiang Yu the Conqueror (232-202 BC), warlord defeated by first Han emperor.

Snake Ancestor was skeptical: “Will you still go back to the forest after this?”

“Well, our patriarch has replaced the map that the Bimo brought back. Smoker and the others will come in and take the map back to the Americans. When the Americans go in to find the bugs again, the fake map will lead them to the west side of the forest. The road there is difficult to walk, and will soon be full of miasma because of the rainy season. While they’re bogged down on this road, we’ll go back to the forest. Things haven’t been settled yet. Going back and forth like this has wasted a lot of time.”

“If you tell me this kind of thing directly, and it’s not in line with the rules, aren’t you afraid I’ll tell Smoker?” Snake Ancestor got nervous, suddenly looked at the tea, and immediately put it down: “You don’t want to kill me, right?” After saying that, he clutched his throat and went to spit the tea out.

Pampered Guy sighed, and without looking at Snake Ancestor, said, “This tea is very expensive. Why are you so stupid? You can go and talk to Smoker. He’ll probably head right back to get the silver dollars once he has the map. Even if you tell him it’s fake, do you think he’ll believe you? I just told you so much, yet you didn’t understand any of it.”

Snake Ancestor looked at Pampered Guy, who stood up and looked at the water. The sky was already starting to get lighter.

“There’s no doubt that Smoker is arrogant. With so many people from the underworld being invited to the mountains at such a high price, he may remember that he suffered losses. You’re so arrogant, Little Snake, do you think the others will believe what you say? If you talk too much, he’ll be the one who wants to kill you.” He lit a cigarette. “Either follow Smoker and go back to receive the reward, or follow us into the forest. You can make money anywhere, and we work so well together.”

Snake Ancestor looked at Poker-Face and then looked at the water outside. The morning light slowly formed a blue halo behind the mountain. He thought for a long time and said, “I only took the down

payment from Smoker, so if you want me to go with you, you'll have to pay me the rest of the money Smoker owes me."

"It's not a problem." Pampered Guy took out a wedge. It was a small stick full of inscribed words, which was the lama's voucher. Half of it was the family's, and half was the partners'. If the lama had an accident, then the family could use this to get the money. If the iron chopsticks didn't honor it, then the bamboo stick could prove who had been cheated.

Ordinary wedges were made of bamboo, but this one was covered in ivory and gold. The wedge alone was worth a lot of money. Each piece represented a certain amount of money, so Pampered Guy took out a dozen and put them in front of Snake Ancestor. He then told Snake Ancestor to place his fingerprints in his account book.

"How long do you think you have to look in the forest? What are you looking for?" Snake Ancestor asked.

"We don't need to look for it. We already know why we couldn't find it before." Pampered Guy smiled slyly and showed Poker-Face the ledger: "Patriarch, aren't I right? It was difficult to finish the job at the beginning, but you see, we have one more buddy. I told you, with me, the Zhang family will definitely make a comeback." He then said to Snake Ancestor: "From now on, your surname is Zhang and your name is Zhang Xiaoshe."⁴⁴

Snake Ancestor had been counting his wedges and froze for a moment. The rising sun made the whole pool down below look like it was on fire.

"They're coming." Snake Ancestor said. He walked to the part of the hall overlooking the water and saw a black snake floating up. Then, Phoenix's head breached the surface and she started cursing the snake for swimming too fast.

Snake Ancestor retreated and saw that Pampered Guy and Poker-Face had already grabbed their things. "Let's go." Pampered Guy said, and three men disappeared into the village depths.

⁴⁴ Xiaoshe means "Little Snake". Pampered Guy is so original...

Chapter 2.31 Fantasy

Zhang Xiaoshe was sitting in a tree. The trees here towered over everything, and the fog barrier lay just beneath their branches, making it seem like they were sitting in the giant trees that stretched above the clouds at the Southern Heavenly Gate.

He didn't know what branches Pampered Guy and Poker-Face were on, but they had already dressed and were sleeping. Because of the fog, he couldn't even see three or four meters in front of him.

All the snakes on Zhang Xiaoshe's body were coiled around him, absorbing the day's heat from him. They were a little restless, so Zhang Xiaoshe fed them some of the bugs they had hunted, which he had mixed with some dried meat.

The good thing about raising snakes was that they only needed to be fed once a week.

After feeding, the snakes dispersed one after another. If they wanted to eat more, they would have to work hard by themselves. Since he had joined their group, he gave Pampered Guy and Poker-Face some of the medicinal liquor to drink every day, so that there wouldn't be any accidental bites.

Less than a week after entering the forest, he already knew that they were walking towards the Meihe River. At that time, the Americans were going to set up a dam but were killed by the Yi villagers. Now that I thought about it, what Pampered Guy didn't say was that there was probably something underwater.

Zhang Xiaoshe took out a bronze mirror and used a match to illuminate his eyebrows. He could see a tiny black snake underneath the skin of his eyebrow, which had its tail connected to one of his veins.

He sighed, blew out the match, wrapped himself in his clothes, and slowly fell asleep in the moisture. The surrounding snakes slowly spread out and coiled around the tree branches.

When the sun absorbed the fog and completely dispersed it, I turned to see where Poker-Face was but saw the sunset coming in through the side window instead.

It was over.

I stared blankly for a moment before I realized what had happened. I was back in the small power station.

My hands and feet slowly revived, and the severe pain in my nasal cavity started flaring up. There was a taste of blood in my throat, and it felt as if it was lodged there.

There was always a very sad feeling in my heart every time I came back, and I would have to sit there in silence for a moment.

The fantasy couldn't be too beautiful, because it would fade away in the end. You think you've captured it, but there was nothing there. This kind of memory was no different from my real memories. People couldn't really have anything.

It was a familiar feeling. After curling up, I closed my eyes and waited for the next round of intense pain to hit.

I emptied my mind and gritted my teeth.

I won't describe this feeling. Let's just say I started yelling and screaming at the pain emitting from my body and head.

At about six in the evening, I stood up for the first time and took a few sips of Sprite.

The sugar started to make up for the damage to my body. I needed it so much that I felt extremely happy drinking it, and ended up guzzling two small bottles in a row before I slowly woke up.

I took out a voice recorder and recorded two names: Zhang Xiaoshe and Little Brother Zhang. This was a clue, so I would definitely find out more about what happened to them later.

I told myself that it had only been a day, and I couldn't stop. I forced myself to stand up, wiped my bloody face and neck with a wet towel I had prepared before, packed my things, and then slowly walked out of the small building.

As I overlooked Hangzhou, the city lights on the other side of the West Lake and the spotlights on the embankment were still the same, although the lake surface was no longer visible.

I can't stop and feel, I told myself again.

The mountain road was dark, so I put on my headphones and played soothing music as I walked slowly down the mountain.

"Brother, go forward boldly." There were drunken mountaineers singing in the grass, which was worse than ghosts.

"I'm going." I looked at the stars in the sky and inhaled the lake wind.

~~~~2014 New Year's Eve Fantasy End~~~~



## **EXTRA 3: 2015 CHINESE NEW YEAR SPECIAL**

## Chapter 3.0 At This Moment

Wu Xie :

The firecrackers outside were popping sporadically.

The room was well heated.

The last business at the end of the afternoon was unlucky and had ended in a hurry. Mom was putting out melon seeds. I didn't usually eat them, but we'd always put them out at the end of the year for good luck.

But that didn't matter to me anymore. I knew for a long time that I could eat without God's help, but after sending the red envelopes out to my employees yesterday, I still felt a little uncomfortable, because more than a dozen of them didn't get to receive the envelopes themselves, only their families did.<sup>45</sup>

This industry had become more and more dangerous. In a few years, not only would the Mystic Nine disappear, but our generation would as well.

There was nothing to say during the meal. Dad would occasionally give me food, and I would bow my head and eat it. I had been going home on time every day for a long time, just like when I was in middle school, so I wasn't in the same state as those kids who finally came home for the New Year after staying away for so long.

I hadn't made any big moves that would make my parents happy. My business was doing well and I was in high spirits, so it seemed that there was nothing more to talk about.

"It's next year, isn't it?"<sup>46</sup> My mother suddenly asked me.

I gave a noncommittal hum.

How much did they know about what was going on with me? The scars on my hands and neck weren't obvious, but they were my biological parents,

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<sup>45</sup> Those who didn't get the red envelopes themselves were dead because the industry is so dangerous

<sup>46</sup> For Poker-face to come out of the bronze door

after all. It wasn't like those kinds of changes would make it past their eyes.

They didn't ask me anything. After dinner, they went to watch the New Year's party, while I went online and huddled in my old room, waiting for the city outside to roar at midnight.

I fell asleep in my chair, and when I woke up, I saw that a plate of cut apples had been placed beside the computer.

It was my mom's habit.

The firecrackers outside were what woke me up. When I left my room, I saw that they had fallen asleep in front of the TV. I put a blanket on them, sat down beside them, and ate the apples.

The apples were so sour that every bite made me pause for a long time.

Little Brother:

He had lost his sense of time. There would never be light. He could hear drops of water, which was the only way he could calculate time.

This year was coming to an end.

When he had been with the clan in the past, the New Year's Festival was also decorated with lights and banners, and there would be an especially festive atmosphere outside the family home. But that had nothing to do with him, nor did the other children in the main family for that matter.

The main family's gatehouse always looked like a dead building. The obscure lights were surrounded by huge, tentacle-like towers and high walls in a ventilated space, much like the remains of an ancient beast.

It was a very strange experience. Ordinary people were ignorant at first and then gained knowledge by opening themselves up and perceiving the world. But the clan members endlessly closed themselves off, so all that remained were the memories they had when they came out of the womb.

This was fate. Everything he had to do in his life gradually appeared in his brain. He couldn't resist it. Any external information would be swallowed up by these original memories that had been determined since birth. If he wanted to keep what he cherished, he would need to experience a great deal of pain.

His clansmen called themselves shepherds because the memories in their brains made them do things that would change a lot of things. It was as if God was interfering in the development of the world in this way.

His memory of the festival at that time had turned to fragments after being swallowed by countless memories. He seemed to remember a candy, but all he could recall of the person who gave it to him was that they had five fingers of the same length. The candy's color was so bright, which wasn't something you could see in the main building unless you were looking at blood.

It would be great if there was some candy now. Amidst the darkness, he heard the voice in his head again, pushing him towards the candy.

Don't forget, don't forget those things. Time was running out. He had to remember, even if it was only for a moment.

Black Glasses:

Su Wan used the nut cracker to crack open a walnut, pulled the nut out, and then put it in a small dish.

"How exactly do I explain this to my dad? On New Year's, an adult friend of mine asked me out to crack walnuts. He must think that I'm being threatened by the underworld."

Black Glasses smiled, grabbed a walnut, and threw it in his mouth.

Su Wan was surprised when he turned and saw a violin. "Do you know how to play?"

Black Glasses motioned him to bring it over, and Su Wan quickly complied. Black Glasses tuned it a little bit before playing “Erquan Yingyue”.<sup>47</sup>

“This is an unlucky song.”

“I’ll make it sound lucky then.” Black Glasses suddenly changed the style, and the music became cheerful. Coupled with the sound of cracking walnuts, it seemed like a crappy duet.

Fatty:

“Are you sure you want to finish eighteen holes?” The caddie was a young girl no taller than one and a half meters, and her pert butt would shake every time her hips moved. Fatty lit a cigarette, squatted in the sandpit, and angrily stabbed his golf club in the sand.

“Golf is a gentleman’s sport. Look at you like this. You look like a farmer squatting down like this. It would only be natural to see you start spreading fertilizer.” The young girl spoke with a Cantonese accent, which was very interesting. “What’s the use of getting angry? The ball won’t come out by itself.”

“Are you done? Are you done?” Fatty asked angrily. “I already said this was my first time playing. Looking down on newcomers... it would only be natural for your family to be born finding holes with poles. I’ll be putting in a complaint about you.”

The young girl pouted, picked up the sand rake, and raked away Fatty’s footprints in the sandpit. She then squatted down beside Fatty and patted him. “Don’t be angry. You can’t deny it. It’s impossible to learn it all at once. I know why you’re really angry, and it’s definitely not because of this.”

“Then why am I angry?” Fatty raised his eyebrows in anger. “You’re an amazing caddie if you can tell what I’m angry about.”

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<sup>47</sup> Can be translated as “The Moon’s Reflection on The Second Spring”. Here’s a link on [youtube](#) if you’re interested in listening (it’s pretty soothing). The composer is Abing, and his info is [here](#)

The young girl stopped talking and continued pouting while using her fingers to play with the sand in front of her.

After a while, Fatty asked, "Why is your place still open on New Year's Eve? Don't you go back for the New Year?"

"To make money," The young girl looked at her hands. "Who would have imagined you rich people would rather golf in the middle of the night instead of play mahjong? It takes more money to play golf than it does mahjong. That's why we aren't closed. But you're here playing alone, which is very abnormal. If you're playing alone on New Year's Eve, do you not have any family?"

"It's just me." Fatty continued smoking, silently noting that the golf course lights were very bleak at night.

The wind blew, and the young girl shuddered. "There are seven more holes. Let's finish it quickly.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Fatty suddenly asked.

"No, why? You want to introduce me to someone?"

"You don't? If that's the case, let's stop fighting and go. We'll make a guest appearance. I'll take you to eat something nice.

"No, I have to work. I'm already miserable enough having to work overtime. I don't want to be fired, too."

"Don't worry, the boss is my friend." Fatty put the cigarette out and put his hat on the young girl's head. "I'm telling you, you're lucky. We can eat as much expensive food as you want until we can't eat anymore. Don't be shy."

"Why are you being so good to me? You want to chase me?" The young girl smiled cunningly.

"There aren't many people who need me now. You need me to treat you to a good meal in this cold weather. You've been good to me." Fatty looked at his watch. "Happy New Year."

Master Hua:

In the shop, Xie Yuchen stroked his beard.

He used to think that he would only grow a beard after he was sixty because his face really wasn't suited for it.

Er Ye made it very clear that appearances were meaningless for people who worked underground. In this world, your face was an IOU, and you had to pay back however much you borrowed when you got old.

Of course, Er Ye wouldn't have said that if he had grown up like Fatty. Fatty's face could be regarded as a bankruptcy liquidation statement.

He was living above a supermarket and pet shop in this small county with several tenants who hadn't gone back for the New Year. The owners of the pet shop had been away in Hainan for the winter, so he was helping with their business and checking on the dogs they kept.

Since today was New Year's Eve, no one would come to the store. He changed to a black, basic cell phone that was very small and light. He spun it in his hand and made it disappear like magic. He glanced at the aquarium on one side and saw the many turtles hibernating in it. The little turtles' lives weren't cherished, and many of them had retracted into their shells and would die in the following spring.

A faint "thump" came from the roof.

The phone in Xie Yuchen's hand stopped. He narrowed his eyes and raised his head, alert. Suddenly, the guest sensor at the door rang.

A girl came in and stamped her feet. When he saw her eyes, he could tell that she had been crying.

"I'll take it back." The girl said.

Xie Yuchen saw a big black car behind the girl that was idling outside the door.

“Did you have a fight?” Xie Yuchen smiled and asked her to pick it up herself. The girl tugged the hair that was exposed by her hat: “I came back alone, and he left alone.” She handed him the money and left.

Xie Yuchen looked above his head again, put on his coat, ran out, and then got into the passenger seat of the girl’s car. She looked at him and asked, “What are you doing? I’m going home.”

“Give me a ride.” Xie Yuchen looked at the roof in the rearview mirror, but couldn’t see anything.

“That’s all you’d better want. If you dare mess around, I’ll cut you.” As the girl started driving, Xie Yuchen took out his cell phone chip and threw it out the window.

Xiuxiu:

A lot of Buddhist worshippers had gathered outside Jietai Temple’s New Year’s bell-ringing ceremony.

Huo Xiuxiu distributed the incense in the inner room, took out the whole box of incense sticks, put them into red festive paper bags, and then distributed them to the believers.

Laba porridge was being cooked in the kitchen, and you could see the heat wafting out of the windows on one side.

In times past, it was the old lady who presided over these things. There actually weren’t many people in the family who were interested in doing it, so when the old lady was gone, she learned the rules and came to the temple.

“Here’s your porridge.” The little novice monk outside pushed the door open and came in. He had put it in a small bowl because he knew Xiuxiu couldn’t eat too much.

The little novice monk was wearing gold-rimmed glasses and seemed to be from the Buddhist College. He put the porridge down and sat beside Xiuxiu, looking at her with a glassy stare.



“What are you looking at?” Xiuxiu wondered.

“You’re so beautiful.” The little novice monk said.

Xiuxiu gave a slight smile. “That’s a worldly desire.”

“Beauty is beauty. It has nothing to do with the desire.” The little monk said: “Perceiving beauty is completely different from wanting to possess beauty.”

With that said, he suddenly remembered something and took a tiny turtle out of his pocket. It appeared to already be hibernating.

“For you, a New Year’s present.”

“Where did you learn to gift a girl a turtle?” Xiuxiu was amused.

“It’s not from me.” The little novice monk helped to distribute the incense. “A brother asked me to give it to you.”

Xiuxiu looked out the window and silently took the turtle. It slept like a log and she didn’t know when it would wake up.

“When it wakes up, he’ll come back.” The little novice monk said.

Xiuxiu put the turtle down and heard the sound of bells outside. As she was tidying up her clothes and putting her hair in a bun, she found that it was snowing again.

## Chapter 3.1 Inventory

I strained my back halfway through helping Xiao Hua move things out of the warehouse, so now I was sitting in the empty building.

This was the Xie family's old residence. It was said that each of the nine families had a huge warehouse back in the day, and moving the warehouse was one of the most troublesome things. The style of storehouses was also very different. Some were full of rows of coffins from various dynasties that had to be sealed in order to preserve them. Of course, OCD families like the Xies were extremely neat and organized.

The house was old, and all the surrounding buildings had collapsed and been abandoned. In order to protect this old house, the walls were mostly supported by wood. I was busy worrying about Fatty's trip, so I got distracted and ended up pulling a muscle in my back while moving things.

When we arrived, most of the things had already been loaded and transported away. The house was actually only used as a way station for goods. It was a French villa built in the 1930s and located in Tianjin. The Xie family bought it sometime after the 1980s. Most of the buildings on the street had been bought by the government, and this was the only one that had fallen into disrepair. It was about to be demolished, but the Xie family paid the maintenance cost and got two certificates.<sup>48</sup>

Practically the whole house was used as a warehouse. The reason why we "besties" had to do such heavy work was because the goods had been moved to an area outside the inner room, which couldn't be accessed unless you belonged to the family. Not even the underlings could get in.

Those of us helping weren't family members, but there weren't many people in the Xie family, so Xiao Hua didn't have much of a choice.

There were some special items in the inner house that had been passed down through the ages, but we could no longer tell what many of them

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<sup>48</sup> Tiffany thinks this refers to the certificate for the use of state-owned land and the certificate for construction planning permit.

were, so there was some relative danger. Even Xiao Hua wasn't very familiar with the items in there.

Although the items weren't valuable, they could be considered important or special.

The inner room was under the stairs and blocked by a very strong iron door. When the door was opened, we could see a corridor leading down to the basement, along with a shelf full of things that had been set up beside the stairs to hold the overflow. I finally understood why Xiao Hua basically didn't know what was inside the inner room—everything was wrapped in cloths that were covered in words. The words were very small and in different fonts, and the cloth itself was very dense. If you didn't open it carefully and just passed on by, there was no way to know what was inside.

Most of the cloths were white, but some were yellow and red, which made the interior look inauspicious. But surprisingly enough, there was only a very thin layer of dust inside.

We were faced with two choices. One, regardless of the consequences, we could start moving the items directly. Based on the number of items, we would be here until the early hours of the morning, and I didn't want to stay in this old house that late. Or two, we could take a closer look at the situation. The scene was really spectacular to someone like me who came from a poor family. With the exception of a few dog kennels my grandfather had left behind, I had almost ruined all the other valuable businesses. And as far as I was concerned, a thriving family was “electricity, light, and only a fairytale.”<sup>49</sup>

We walked directly into the basement, which had bookshelves running all along the walls. There were almost no shelves in the middle, but there was something strange. Upon seeing it, Xiao Hua paused and stopped us with his hand.

It was also wrapped in white cloth and was the size of a BMW mini car. It could have been a bunch of things piled up or some huge object.

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<sup>49</sup> Tiffany said they're lyrics from a song called “Superstar”, which was sung by Taiwanese girl group S.H.E.

“This thing wasn’t here the last time I was in here.” Xiao Hua said.  
“There’s a problem.”

“When was the last time you came in?” I asked him. Xiao Hua didn’t come here often and hadn’t been here in three or four years as far as I could tell. Maybe someone in the family made a new profit.

Xiao Hua stopped us and took a step back. He had a strange expression on his face as he turned to me and said, “The last time I entered this room was fifteen minutes ago.”

## Chapter 3.2 Large Object

I recalled that Xiao Hua really had come down fifteen minutes ago to open the door to let some air in. The basement had a lot of built-up gas, so we had to turn on the ventilation system before coming in.

We were all chatting while we waited outside, so it was impossible for anyone to sneak in and put something in there when we weren't looking.

Plus, the guys in the Xie family didn't have a penchant for pranks.

What surprised me the most was that this thing was so much bigger than the door, so how was it transported down here?

There was no way it came in through the door.

"You're so smart, tell me what's going on," I said to Xiao Hua.

He quietly responded: "You're actually the smartest one in this generation. The Xie family members are generally just good-looking."

There was no movement under the white cloth. I was most afraid that someone had contorted his body into this shape to hide underneath it, but once I thought about it carefully, I realized that it was impossible.

We stood there for a while until Xiao Hua drew out a four-segmented defense baton, went over, picked the white cloth up, and then threw it aside.

There was a lot of dust. I saw that it was actually a piano under the white cloth, and the reason why it had looked so weird was because there were a lot of tools and piano wire bobbins sitting on top. No wonder I hadn't recognized it at first sight.

The piano didn't seem to be dangerous, so Xiao Hua and I got closer.

That was when we noticed a pair of work gloves laying on the seat in front of the piano. Xiao Hua picked them up, and we were surprised to find that these gloves were very special. They were made of common cotton, but instead of five fingers, there were seven fingers.

This was a glove worn by a man with seven fingers.

“Is it him?” Xiao Hua looked up at the ceiling.

“Do you know what’s going on?”

“Haven’t you heard the story of Seven Fingers?” Xiao Hua asked. “Didn’t your family ever tell you?”

I shook my head.

“Back when I was a little kid and there were elders in the Xie family who cared for me, they often told me this story.” Xiao Hua looked around at the simple room. “It’s just like the ‘The Secret World of Arrietty’.<sup>50</sup> All the children in our family know it.”

*I was kicked out of this business when I was a kid, I said to myself, before making an expression that I would like to hear more.*

Xiao Hua didn’t like to be as long-winded as Uncle Three, but he really thought about it this time and said, “Seven Fingers is a mark. Our families bought a lot of real estate across the country in the 1990s. They especially looked for old houses with underground air raid shelters, mainly to use as warehouses. You know that people in this business are very sensitive to visually deceptive mechanisms, and can notice even a slight difference in the brick on an ancient tomb’s wall. They used that skill when selecting properties, and discovered a particularly interesting phenomenon.

Xiao Hua went back to the stairs, sat down, and looked at the time on his phone: “There are a lot of ‘excess’ parts in many buildings, which had been hidden using various illusions. For example, the inner corridor in an old house in the northeast was a hundred meters, but the house had been extended to a hundred and thirty meters. So, where were the extra thirty meters? We later found that a staircase had been enclosed in the wall at the end of the corridor. The upper and lower parts were sealed off and didn’t go anywhere, but each step was engraved with numbers.”

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<sup>50</sup> Ghibli film. Here’s the [Wikipedia page](#)

“Was it an architectural drawing error?” When I looked at him, Xiao Hua said, “No, it was a prank. We found a handprint with seven fingers on the building’s concrete wall. Later, we found this mark in many buildings that had the same problems. We concluded that there was an architect after liberation who probably had some talent that couldn’t be displayed, so he played practical jokes on all the projects he handled. Of course, it would be an insult to simply call him a prank master, because we soon found some buildings that weren’t only interesting, but could be considered real works of art. They were all seemingly ordinary, but the insides were strange and unimaginable. They were full of imperceptible dark passages, secret rooms, and hidden moving doors. He often borrowed these ‘back doors’ he designed to use the hidden parts of these buildings.”

Xiao Hua finished and looked inside the inner room. I suddenly realized something. “This building is also one of his works?”

Xiao Hua nodded. “Some people in the family were eager to find this architect, and there was a period where they collected many of the houses he designed. This was one of the buildings bought at that time. We believed that man was one of the first to renovate this building after liberation, and he must have tampered with it at that time.”

I looked at the piano in the center of the room. “Has anyone ever established contact with him?”

Xiao Hua shook his head. “But I believe he’s in this house now. This piano is the signal he sent to us. He’s someone who especially likes pranks.”

## Chapter 3.3 Shadow Under the House

Many people tried to investigate Seven Fingers' background before and found that he worked in an engineering brigade in Inner Mongolia in the 1980s. After that, however, they couldn't find anything else.

By the 1990s, there were no traces of the Inner Mongolia engineering brigade, and nobody knew where the members had gone. They must have been doing confidential mining projects in some parts of the country and were later merged with other units, so it was basically a dead end.

The buildings with Seven Fingers' mark were mostly in the north because that was where the brigade had been most active. But there were a few scattered throughout the south.

Creating such a strange bit of architectural design had to be done during construction, and couldn't have been done by one person. I said to Xiao Hua: "Is it possible that Seven Fingers isn't one person, but seven people?"

Xiao Hua frowned: "Why do you say that?"

"I'm familiar with this kind of work. I know how many people would participate in such a project, from the design drawings to the final construction of the house. It's absolutely impossible to hide the internal structure of the house in the early stages without being discovered. That's why I think it has to be an organization, and one that most likely has seven people."

It had been an age when creativity and personality were suppressed. If there was a group of young people who wanted to realize some strange ideas in their architectural designs, then this was the only method they could use.

I suddenly thought of something and asked, "When was the most recent Seven Finger building built?"

"None have been discovered since the mid-1990s."



In China's fastest-growing era, where various institutional transformations were taking place, a team consisting of seven people actually wasn't that small. It was also impossible for all of them to continuously move in one direction during such a tumultuous period in history. They had gathered because of their interests, so when the times started changing and the humanities started to be liberated, their original outlet for venting gradually became less important.

As a result, Seven Fingers may have been dissolved after the mid-1990s. Based on the amount of time that had passed between this building being constructed and the mid-1990s— and even up until today— the Seven Fingers members certainly weren't young. Maybe some of them had even died.

Of course, this was all just a theory.

I turned on my cell phone and started taking pictures of the piano. If someone was in the house, then there had to be a hint on the piano.

The piano was very large and heavy and made of solid wood. I could even see that many of the wires inside hadn't been strung yet.

Truthfully, the piano was very ordinary. It must have been a foreign concession the previous owner of the house had left behind, but I really didn't know anything about musical instruments. I studied it carefully but didn't find anything besides the noticeable lack of oxidation traces at the end of the piano wire. This indicated that the piano's restoration was a recent affair.

Xiao Hua and I grabbed the cloth that had originally covered the piano and spread it on the ground, finding that there was a picture on it.

It was a section cut design drawing. I immediately recognized that it was the drawing of this old house we were currently in. There was the very obvious design of the hall, the heavy correlation between the basement and the second floor, the two stairs, and the ventilation structure of the fireplace. Some of the decorations on the outside were typical of mansions made by Italian designers imitating the French at that time. I

had seen many such cases when I was studying back at school and had actually gone to many concessions<sup>51</sup> to sketch on the spot.

But this wasn't part of the design drawing's main focus. I was surprised to find that this small house only occupied less than a tenth of the design drawing, and someone had painted a huge black shadow in the area below the house.

The shadow was at least ten times as large as the house, and the irregular edges seemed natural. It looked like a huge ugly creature was crawling below the building.

"What is this?" Xiao Hua and I looked at each other at the same time.

"Is there a foreign object under this house?" I started asking questions.

"Or was this house built on a huge foreign object?"

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<sup>51</sup> I'm pretty sure he means the places that used to be occupied by foreign powers. Here's [info](#) on concessions that happened in China in the 20th Century. You can even think along the lines of the "[Shanghai French Concession](#)"

## Chapter 3.4 Dusty Piano

Looking at the size of the shadow, if it had been drawn to scale, then the thing below was ten times as big as the house.

I roughly estimated that the area could be as big as twenty thousand square meters. A construction unit was usually scaled to fit several warehouses or ten small filming studios, so what was this?

I sat on the chair in front of the piano, while Xiao Hua leaned against the piano and stared at the huge black shadow on the white cloth.

It had to be either a cave, a huge stone, or an underground building with a particularly strange shape.

I knew there were cases where buildings could be inverted underground, and the relationship between the one above and the one below was like the reflection on a lake's surface. They were called "mirror palaces", and were considered a special system in ancient Chinese architecture. The old-fashioned term was "reverse feng shui". What was arranged aboveground was also arranged underground.

I thought for a long time, but I started to get confused. In the old "Classic of Mountain and Sea" legends, there was a kind of turtle that lived underground. People would build houses on them, and they only moved a little bit every ten years.

But this was an old housing block in Tianjin city, with a bustling stream of people. Although the design of the courtyard and fence outside had achieved the effect of quieting the hustle and bustle outside, it was still a bit of a joke to say it was the habitat of a "mythological beast". Besides, it took ten years to move a single millimeter. If the government decided to dig the subway here, it wouldn't even have the chance to escape.

If it was a cave, then the ground would resonate when it thundered. That was how a lot of grave robbers found many of the huge, cavity-shaped emperors' tombs.

Moreover, it must have been difficult for the house to be sitting on such a big hole in the ground.

I was leaning toward there being a huge building below, but after looking at the edges of the shadow, I felt that it was indescribably strange. What the hell was it?

“Since the piano appeared in this room, do you think the entrance to that shaded area is in this room?” Xiao Hua moved away from the piano and shook his hands and feet. His joints were so loose that the movements looked freaky.

I saw his relaxed appearance and knew that he wouldn’t indulge in it. To him, this thing in front of him may just be a way to kill some time.

He was the worst kind of opponent for Seven Fingers. If Xiao Hua was the only one here, then he probably would have just ignored what happened, moved the goods, and then left, leaving the mysterious man secretly staring at us, all lonely and bereft.

But I was obviously a little intrigued. This kind of puzzle and atmosphere had always fascinated me. Xiao Hua looked at me, neither showing approval nor rejection. He obviously wanted me to voice my desire.

Maybe he was even a little envious of my desire. He once told me that because of his personality, he could no longer be as passionate about things as I was.

At this time, I noticed that the black T-shirt he was wearing was covered in dust. I narrowed my eyes and told him to stop moving.

The dust that had been on the piano just now was currently stuck to the back of his T-shirt in what appeared to be patterned lines. But the lines were incomplete.

Xiao Hua looked into my eyes and knew that something was printed on his back, so he carefully took off his T-shirt. The words “twenty-three” had been spelled out on Xiao Hua’s back. I took the shirt over to the piano where Xiao Hua had been leaning just now and pressed it against the dust

as if I were doing rubbings. I could make out a few more words:  
Seventeen minutes.

Twenty-three seventeen... it was a time.

I looked at my phone and saw that we had about seven and a half hours.

Xiao Hua continued to press his shirt against the piano but found that the dust in all the reliable parts had been smeared. All he could make out was “twenty seventeen”.

“There’s no place to sit in this room, and there’s no wall to lean against if people have been standing for a long time. That’s why this piano was placed here. He planned it this way. And he knew someone would definitely sit on this stool.” Xiao Hua said, suddenly looking at my ass.

I immediately stuck my ass out and asked, “Is there anything printed on it?”

“Don’t move.” From between my legs, I could see Xiao Hua’s face change.

## Chapter 3.5 Someone is Trapped Here

Xiao Hua came forward and took a picture with his phone. I stood up and looked at it, and found that something was actually printed on my ass. It looked like traces of decayed leather and was the same color as the seat cushion.

There were two words on it: the first was “save”, and the second was “me”.

Save me.

I raised my eyebrows and looked at Xiao Hua.

Save? Was this a distress signal?

Xiao Hua was also surprised. He bowed his head, sniffed my ass, and then frowned: “It’s blood.”

“Fuck you.” I said, “You’re the one who just got your period.”

“No, these two words were written in blood.” He walked to the chair and knelt down and smelled it. “It’s blood. It was written in blood.”

*What’s going on here?* I thought it was just a challenge, but I didn’t expect it to turn into this kind of a situation. I saw Xiao Hua start sending messages on his phone. “Interesting, I remembered something.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Someone’s trapped in this house.” When Xiao Hua looked back, there was a hint of excitement in his eyes, and I wondered if the smell of blood had refreshed him. He looked at the room. “There are generally two areas in this kind of house: one is the area for ordinary people, and the other is the hidden space designed by Seven Fingers. If you enter the rooms Seven Fingers designed, you may not be able to find your way out.”

“Doesn’t the Xie family own this house? Who would be trapped here?”

“A long time ago, a man named Lu Sha worked here as a doorman. He wasn’t very smart, but he was very conscientious. My elders had him watch the house, but he suddenly disappeared fourteen years ago. At that time, I had just taken charge of the house. I thought he had simply quit, so I didn’t take much notice of it.” Xiao Hua continued: “Now that I think about it, if he didn’t leave here, then maybe something else happened.”

“You mean he’s still in this house?” I suddenly got goosebumps: “He walked into one of Seven Fingers’ spaces, got trapped inside, and everyone thought he was missing?”

Fourteen years... if that were the case, wouldn’t he have been trapped for fourteen years? Who could make it that long?

“Lu Sha was different from others. His thought process itself wasn’t very normal. If it was him, maybe he could really survive here for fourteen years.”

“Then what would he eat?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.” Xiao Hua kept sending messages: “I’m looking for someone to help.”

I looked at the bloody seat. If this message hadn’t been transmitted by Seven Fingers, but Lu Sha instead, then the gloves on the seat just now looked very ceremonial and deliberate. It didn’t make sense.

And if Lu Sha could send the piano to this room, then he should be able to come up directly. Why did he want to pass the message in such a secret way?

Something was threatening his safety, so he had to pass on the information in a subtle way.

Twenty-three seventeen.

What did this time mean?

I felt uneasy. The deliberate and uncoordinated information made me feel like there was something evil in this place.

“We...” I said to Xiao Hua: “We need to get out of here first. Two people here by themselves isn’t safe.”

Xiao Hua slammed his phone shut. “We can’t leave.”

When he looked at the stairs we had just come down, I was puzzled. I walked past him to get a look, but after taking a few steps, my whole body was covered in a cold sweat.

Originally, the upper floor was the first floor, and the stairs were very short. When I looked up, however, I found that the staircase had become infinitely long, and kept winding up. The flashlight couldn’t reach the top, and the darkness seemed endless. It was just like looking up the stairwell of a hundred-story high-rise building from the ground floor.

I rubbed my eyes and suspected that I was hallucinating. How the fuck did this happen? Now it looked like the house was at least a few hundred meters high, but the house we had walked into before only had two floors and a basement.

Xiao Hua walked up to the shaded part on the white cloth design drawing, stepped on the shaded part, and said: “Twenty-three seventeen isn’t a time, but a coordinate.”



## Chapter 3.6 Climbing the Stairs

He put his shirt back on, and the expression on his face was like a smile, yet not a smile. Xiao Hua's body had been very strictly trained and his movements were very rhythmic, so when he closed the phone and spoke earlier, he looked very capable and self-controlled.

I was a little upset with people who could be handsome at any time. I said to myself, *didn't you say I was the smartest in this generation?* I was too innocent. As soon as he said that, he started to crush my IQ and found an excuse to boast about his good looks. And I actually believed it.

"How did you figure it out?" I was particularly reluctant to ask him because I hadn't noticed anything.

Xiao Hua handed me his phone, and when I opened it, I saw a short message on the screen: You can't get out. Twenty-three seventeen isn't a time, but a sign.

The sender's name was gibberish.

"There must be a fake base station installed here, and my phone's been hijacked; otherwise, it would be impossible to receive a signal. When I came down just now, I found that the signal here was abnormally good."

I squatted on the ground with my head in my arms, and said to myself, *this brother doesn't play games according to common sense.* I also turned my phone on, but I hadn't received any texts.

*Fuck me, are you looking down on knockoff phones? Wait until I find you. I'll take you to Huaqiangbei and chop all seven of your fingers off!*

"Reply back." I said: "Tell him to come out and fight one-on-one if he's got the guts."

"We still don't know how serious this matter is, so don't provoke the opponent. There certainly aren't any monitors here, so it'll be easy for them to guess our status if we text back." Xiao Hua pointed to the stairs. "Now, according to the plot, we should try to climb the stairs."

Sometimes when I talked to Xiao Hua, I felt like I was talking to myself. He and I were very similar in many aspects, but there were some differences that I really couldn't discern.

But this similarity also made the tacit understanding between us relatively synchronous. It wasn't like when Pan Zi, Fatty, and Little Brother made eye contact with each other and would start moving to outflank. Once they made eye contact with me, I would end up tripping and falling depending on the circumstances.

When Xiao Hua and I reached the stairs, he gestured at me not to talk and pointed to the piano. I found that his phone had disappeared, and seemed to be placed on the piano. I nodded at him and knew what he meant.

The two of us walked up the stairs.

The stairs were rubber-painted cement and completely bare, unlike the stairs before that had all the antiques on the shelves. The stair railing was made of iron and looked very unstable. There was a very dim, open-faced gas lamp placed on every third step, and the light made everything seem gloomy.

If the staircase was going down, I could understand designing such a mechanism as long as there was enough manpower, but this staircase was going up, which was totally illogical.

We reached the area where the door we came in just now should have been, but it had disappeared.

"Did the room move?" Xiao Hua touched the wall.

"This kind of mechanism could only be made at the expense of human lives during the feudal dynasties. After 1900, such a project was basically impossible to achieve." I told him that it was almost impossible to use cement and steel bars to do such projects, with the exception of those like the Zhang family's ancient building, which brought together the aspirations of contemporary geniuses and the wisdom accumulated by

craftsmen throughout the ages. This staircase could only be a cover, but how could he convince us that it was real?

“Going up?” I asked, “There must have been a change when we went up.”

“Are you considering the problem from Seven Fingers’ standpoint?”

“I’ve been played a lot, so I especially know how to play people,” I said, but it was impossible to really start this game without causing some kind of change. I took a deep breath and started walking upstairs, but Xiao Hua stood where he was.

“We’ll both be careful.” He said. “You go forward three and I’ll follow behind and go four steps much later.”

I looked at my phone and said, “See you in fourteen years.” Once I started running up three floors, Xiao Hua started walking.

“Talk, otherwise we won’t know if one of us disappears.” Xiao Hua shouted from below.

I stared at the stairs and the side walls, trying to find any flaws. “What do you want to talk about?” After a second, however, I shouted, “Truth or dare.”

## Chapter 3.7 Truth

Xiao Hua was silent for a moment, and I shouted again: “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“I am assessing the risks.” Xiao Hua answered.

“What are the risks of talking?”

“If you want to tell the truth, of course there will be risks.” Xiao Hua paused: “When will you start your plan?”

My mind and body were fired up, and I started to gasp at this time. I was afraid to hold the decaying railing on the side, but when I looked down, I saw that I had already climbed seven or eight floors. The entrance down below looked blurry.

I knew which plan Xiao Hua was asking me about, and I secretly cursed. I wouldn’t have suggested truth or dare if I knew he was going to talk about such a bad topic.

I stopped, leaned against the wall, and gasped out, “You’ll know when it starts.”

“Planning this kind of thing isn’t so easy. Having said that, even if the losses are heavy, it has to be carried out. Otherwise, it would be better to maintain the status quo.” Xiao Hua’s voice came floating up.

I said in my heart that I already knew this.

I wasn’t a competent leader. I was often timid and would retreat whenever I encountered losses. I always hoped everyone would get in and out safely, but such stories didn’t exist in reality. I could never achieve Xiao Hua’s level of understanding. It was normal to determine who to save and who to leave behind, but I couldn’t do it. If I did, then I was afraid it would only happen once in my lifetime.

If I left more people behind, my self-loathing would swallow me up one day. And for me, once was enough.

“Alright, I’ll play with you this once.” Xiao Hua said: “You go first.”

I heard his voice approaching, wiped the sweat from my face with my T-shirt, went up, and then asked him, “Is Xie Lianhuan your father after all? How come I saw your name under his family tree?”

Xiao Hua paused and gave a tsk from below, “Why are you asking about family affairs?”

“I can’t ask about your business since that will be like exposing your scars, right? It’s not like I can beat you. I have to rely on you to save my life later. It’s better for everyone to be friendly.”

Xiao Hua’s laugh came from below: “You want to reciprocate. Fine, I won’t ask you what you don’t want to answer.” After a pause, Xiao Hua said, “No, he didn’t have any descendants. He adopted me into the genealogy, but I don’t know him very well. Er Ye abides by the rules, and it’s all according to the genealogy.”

“You’re an only child, yet you were adopted by others. Didn’t your father have any opinions on it?”

“This was definitely something they considered based on the situation at that time. If he didn’t have any children, there may have been some instability in the family, so this was set up very early.” Xiao Hua said. “By the way, when did you read my family tree? Who let you read it, and where did you read it?”

*I can’t give Xiuxiu up*, I said to myself and immediately responded, “It’s your turn to ask me.”

I had climbed to the eleventh floor by this point, and my legs were a little tired. Some of the gas lamps on this floor failed and went out from time to time, so I placed my hands on the concrete wall. I was a little surprised when I looked up and actually saw the top. If we kept going up, we’d reach the end of the staircase.

This really did appear to be a stairwell.

The gas lamp's light was smoky, and the underground was very hot, despite the walls being very cool. I didn't know where the heat was coming from.

"Do you hate your Uncle Three?" Xiao Hua asked from below.

I stopped and sat down on the stairs, gasping for breath.

I really didn't hate anyone. What I hated the most was the naïve and taken-for-granted decisions I had made along the way.

I was just about to answer when Xiao Hua urged: "Just blurt out what you really think."

I involuntarily looked up and was surprised to find that Xiao Hua's voice had appeared from above me this time.

Was it an illusion?

I was clever and immediately poked my head out to listen to his footsteps.

They were really coming from above my head.

I immediately shouted, "Stop, where are you?" I saw a dark shadow poking out from the stairs above me. He seemed to be surprised, too.

"Hey, when did you get below me?"

What happened just now? I looked at both ends of the stairs. Xiao Hua had somehow passed me and gone up seven floors, thus reversing our positions. But I hadn't seen him pass by me at all.

I saw that there were about three floors between us, and when I looked at him, I couldn't see his face clearly from here.

The training I had received to sense details immediately kicked in, and as I stared at the shadow, my intuition immediately made me feel that something was off.

I sneered: “Don’t play games, who are you?”

## Chapter 3.8 I am Wu Xie

I looked at the shadow, and the shadow looked at me.

Sure enough, he really didn't think I would expose him so quickly, so he didn't know how to react at all.

There was a gas lamp beside me, and he could see that my expression as I stared at him was firm and reprimanding.

"Xie Yuchen, are you still breathing?!" I yelled at the stairs, causing a series of echoes.

No voice called back to me. As expected, something must have happened between those two sentences just now.

I kept staring at the shadow, subliminally sending him a message that said, "You won't get any fun out of messing with me!"

The trap that suddenly sprang up was unfair to us, but I was too familiar with this kind of person's mentality and wouldn't give him anything he wanted to see.

"If you don't speak, I'll send you on your way." I suddenly exerted a lot of force and jumped up and grabbed the stairs above me. As I was hanging there with one hand, I immediately flipped myself up.

I had practiced this kind of move many times before.

"Change yourself." This was a phrase that Black Glasses kept repeating to me over and over again. "The reason why you can't change anything and never realize your ideas is because you can't do what you want to do. What's the use of thinking so much? Can you do it?"

At first, I went up the stairs a lot slower than I did just now, but no one would believe that there was such hidden power in my thin arms. And they wouldn't realize that my other body muscles had also learned to reflexively cooperate with this amount of force.



When I leaped up to the next level and my feet touched the stair's surface, I exerted my strength again. I curled my body to maximize the tension and bounced up again. I couldn't achieve Xiao Hua's skill of sticking to almost any rough vertical surface, but for me, the stairs were just like the practice field.

In about two seconds at most, I had already climbed three floors above my head. During the whole process, my heart and adrenaline made me feel as if the dust around me was in slow motion.

Just as I jumped up, I saw a person retreat into a slab in the stairwell. When the slab was on the brink of closing, I rolled over and hooked my fingers into the gap at the last moment, squeezing my hip inside to prevent it from closing more.

"Give up!"

The person couldn't resist my strength and let go, causing the slab to be thrown open and revealing a secret passage.

Without an ounce of hesitation, I bent down and jumped in. My whole body had just been put through a great deal of pressure, and my calves were stretched to the limit. All the muscles in my body felt as if they had exploded.

I no longer cared about the secret passage's structure, or how it came to be.

Black Glasses told me that every human body had several special features. My physical fitness was basically really poor, except for when it came to running away.

"You should pursue others. That's the right way to play to your strengths."

I rushed at the only thing I cared about in front of me, just like an arrow leaving the bowstring.

The shadow had been running in front of me, but when he saw me appear, he started to hurry.

*So weak.* He was just like me in the old days whenever I was pressured, losing his reasoning and making wrong judgments.

There were two kinds of laws in the world. Intelligence was lovely, of course, but the simplest was the most terrible.

Fifteen seconds later, I jumped up, stepped on the wall (I didn't know where I was), leaped, and then pressed one knee to my opponent's shoulder.

It was only when I had done it that I realized that it was almost impossible for me to get both knees locked around the other's head at the same time. I had imitated Little Brother many times before and had hoped to use this move to blind this fucker. This was all I could do for now, but it was enough.

My knees pressed against the shadow's back and shoved him to the ground.

Without any hesitation, I aimed at the back of his head and gave him a heavy blow.

After he shook and fainted, I pulled out my phone and saw that I had been climbing the stairs for about fifteen minutes.

Game over.

## Chapter 3.9 He Knows

All my body's functions stopped at this moment, and I knew I had been too enthusiastic.

My heart rate must have broken the meter, and I could still hear it hammering in my chest even after I had stopped so abruptly. Then, a wave of nausea surged up.

I was getting a little old. By the time I had started physical training, my prime had already passed. In the words of Black Glasses, there was no way to exercise your internal organs.

At this moment, the person I had just subdued woke up and started struggling.

He wasn't very strong, but I didn't have any remaining strength to subdue him again, so he managed to push me aside.

I looked at him and was surprised to find that it was actually a woman in front of me. She was seventeen or eighteen at most and had a radio hanging from her chest.

"Who are you?" She definitely wasn't Lu Sha—who I knew had to be a man—and she was way too young to be Seven Fingers.

The girl looked at me, and I saw she had a strange appearance. Her forehead was very big, and she looked very young, but her figure had already matured.

Was she Seven Fingers' daughter or mistress? I went to check her fingers, but she swiftly put her hands behind her back.

"Let me go. Let me go back." She pleaded.

"What the hell? Didn't you put us in here?" Through my anger, I saw the girl point to the radio on her chest and then point to the surrounding walls.

I didn't know what it meant, but I suddenly heard the time on the radio.

Seventeen sixteen.

The girl's face changed and she turned and ran.

I would probably only be able to move in fifteen minutes. As she ran away, my stomach convulsed and I tried to catch one of her hands. I missed, and by the time I looked up again, I saw her shadow disappear at the end of the passage.

As the adrenaline faded, the pain from where I had sprained my back before started to spread after doing such strenuous exercise. I leaned against the wall, panting and coughing while darkly cursing in my heart.

I made several attempts to run after her once I caught my breath, but found that I could no longer run.

Except for the dim gas lamps on the walls, it was too dark to see anything clearly, and my eyes became blurred due to physical exhaustion.

*What's going on? Between Seven Fingers, Lu Sha, Xiao Hua, me, and now a girl, we can even play "Three Kingdoms Kill"<sup>52</sup> now. It seemed like this woman couldn't say anything here. She pointed to the radio and then pointed to the wall. What did it mean?*

I held the wall, got up, and turned on my phone's flashlight function. Fortunately, it was a knockoff, so it should be able to endure for a while.

Where was Xiao Hua?

This was a completely blank cement corridor, with no details or decorations. I looked up and found that the ceiling was so high that I couldn't see it. It was a bit like that back tunnel in the Xisha underwater tomb where both sides would close in, only this one was equipped with gas lamps.

It was a bit like a gap between two giant buildings.

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<sup>52</sup> It's a Chinese card game based on the Three Kingdoms period of China and the semi-fictional 14th century novel "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by Luo Guanzhong. Wikipedia info [here](#).

I went forward with the help of the wall but had only made it a dozen steps before I saw the girl lying on the ground. I had obviously really hurt her earlier.

*Ah, Wu Xie, Wu Xie. After training so hard, and learning your skills, you fought for the first time and defeated an underage chick with a slight advantage.*

I really wanted to find a piece of tofu and hit myself against it until I died.

When I lifted her up, she burst into tears and cried out, "Please, let me go."

I looked into her eyes and frowned. This definitely wasn't acting. Even her snot was coming out.

*Who the hell are you?* I wondered.

At this time, I saw a light in her clothes. When I fished it out, I found that it was her iPhone. There was the face of a popular young idol on the screen saver, and a prompt saying she had received a message. The content of the message had been pushed to the notification bubble, and I could see it without having to unlock the phone. It was a short message sent by a garbled number that said: "Take this radio to the fourteenth staircase. Return to the original place within five minutes of hearing the time. Don't let anyone find it. Then you can leave."

I flipped through her phone and found a lot of chat records between her and her friends and boyfriend. She was called Tang, and there was a pattern formed by two symbols after her name, which must have been a common way for people to decorate their names now.

She was an ordinary person.

I frowned and picked up my knockoff phone, but I hadn't received any text messages.

I leaned the girl against the wall, wiped her nose, and said, "I'm not the one who locked you up here. Please calm down and tell me how you got here first."

When the girl looked at me, a big snot bubble appeared and she cried out, "How can I believe you? Let me go, I don't have any money."

I raised my knockoff phone: "Have you ever seen such a powerful murderer use such a cheap phone?"

Little Tang looked at my phone, and I could tell her thoughts had entered a chaotic state. After a long time, she stopped sobbing and was just about to talk when her phone suddenly lit up again. She and I looked at the screen at the same time and saw a new message: "Don't trust him."

*Fuck*, I said to myself, *this bastard even wants to engage in psychological warfare*. The girl pushed me away and stumbled to the depths of the passage.

At the same time, my cheap phone finally sounded. The first text message had come. I gave up chasing her and turned to my phone.

It was also a garbled number, and the content of the text message said: "Find me and I'll tell you how to save him."

## Chapter 3.10 Disrupt the Rhythm

I limped in the direction the girl had gone in, thinking she wouldn't be able to walk very fast. I didn't know why, but as I was looking at the text, I felt a sense of comfort that I had finally been favored.

Sure enough, I took a few steps forward and saw the girl leaning against the wall more than a hundred meters away from me. She had obviously slowed down. The gas lamps in the corridor were relatively spaced out, and there was a dark area in between each one. I could see her walking in and out of the darkness, just like a mime.

I was also a little slow, and if it weren't for the pain in my back, I was sure I could catch up with her.

I held my back and she held the wall as we two disabled people continued our chase at a speed of three kilometers per hour. As I was getting closer and closer to her, I looked at my cell phone and my thoughts began to wander.

In this world, I was probably the only one who could make such an in-depth analysis of such a sentence.

If it was anyone else, my first reaction when I read this sentence would be that Xiao Hua was under his control, and the kidnapper was using him as leverage to get me to participate in the game. Since my behavior had disrupted the rhythm of the game, he wanted to break my spirit.

I didn't know why, but when I read this message, I had a very strange feeling.

If Xiao Hua was under his control, then normal people would say something like: "The only way to save him is to find me."

But this sentence said: "Find me and I'll tell you how to save him."

This was the kind of sentence a third party would say when they were coldly watching things play out between A and B. "A" was trapped

somewhere and the person who sent the text informed “B” that he knew the way to rescue him.

For some reason, I remembered that another person had also been trapped a long time ago.

Just now, he used that short message to tell the girl to leave me, so she had to know something. I decided to ignore it and go at my own pace. I had already messed up the whole game, so the harder I pushed, the more uncomfortable he would be. He would soon make mistakes as he tried to deal with any emergencies that occurred after the plan went out of control.

There was a turn up ahead. Just like the stairs, this corridor seemed to be a circular structure. As soon as I also turned the corner, a second text was sent.

“By the way, ‘he’ refers to your Zhang friend.”

I paused. This short message successfully froze me in place, and I immediately slowed down.

After reading it two or three more times, I realized that I wasn’t mistaken. The text had downplayed it, but it had mentioned the one person I didn’t want to talk about.

My hands were shaking. If the person who sent the text knew about Zhang Qiling, then he had to be an insider that had a deep understanding. Who was the other party? Was Seven Fingers also involved in these events?

If it was related to Little Brother, could this whole thing still be considered a coincidence? I recalled the situation when Xiao Hua had asked me to come and help him set up the warehouse. Xiao Hua would never create such a joke to entertain me. But judging from everything that had happened so far, it seemed that I was the protagonist of this incident, and it was all directed at me. If I had intervened by accident, I wouldn’t have been targeted like this.



“Who the hell are you?” I didn’t hold back and immediately responded to the text.

“I’m the only person in this world who knows how to save you.” The other party came back and said. “I’m not deeply involved, but I know the solution.”

I stopped completely and the other party sent another message: “Yes, a long time ago, I helped your Uncle Three design that basement.”

I was practically leaning against the wall as my heart suddenly sped up. I was afraid fewer people knew about this matter compared to Zhang Qiling’s matter, and I had never told anyone about it.

“You haven’t found the real use of that study yet.” The other party took the initiative to send another text. “If you find me, you can really save him.”

## Chapter 3.11 Light Bulb Room

At this time, I had no other choice. The person behind the phone had successfully forced me into this game.

I was a little surprised that this mysterious man didn't seem to be stingy with communication. Uncle Three and the Little Brother I had met in the past both kept these things a secret, but this person was very ostentatious with his words.

Was he really Seven Fingers?

It didn't matter anymore. I no longer cared who he was, but I would call him Seven fingers for the time being. I would learn all about the other things once I found him.

Seven Fingers was the one who had designed my Uncle Three's basement. It was very simple and narrow, and I could still remember the pressing odor.

As I looked at the concrete walls around me, I suddenly realized that this place was very similar to the dark room under Uncle Three's study.

Little Brother... basement... this information had been said very easily, but it had taken me several years to learn about them.

The corridor turned again, and I realized it was actually a winding corridor. I had gotten closer to the girl by this time, and when she looked back and saw me, there were only six or seven lights between us.

"Don't run away, I mean no harm," I called out as I looked at my cell phone and clutched my back.

"Don't follow me!" She was starting to get hysterical.

If my stomach was bigger, I could easily shout out: "You're the one responsible for the baby in my stomach!" It seemed really appropriate considering the way I was clutching my lower back.

"Are you in this building now?" I asked in a text.

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you come out and meet me directly?” I carefully sent the texts. “Where’s my friend now?”

“He’s fine, I just separated you two for a while. The outside world is too complicated.” The answering text said. “I really need to talk to you. Alone.”

“It’s easy to meet with me alone. You can come out and see me at any time.”

“I can’t get out.” After a long time, the phone lit up. “You’ll understand when you see me. You can only find me by yourself. I’ll give you a hint.”

If he couldn’t get out, did that mean he couldn’t move around freely? My heart thumped. I kept feeling like it was Seven Fingers, but there was something else.

At the end of the corridor, a warm yellow light appeared. It seemed to be the kind of brightness that came from an incandescent lamp. The girl rushed towards the light and I followed her in.

The increased brightness almost blinded me, and I couldn’t open my eyes. I tripped over something on the ground and fell. As I struggled to get up, I saw that this was a room at the end of the corridor.

It was about thirteen or fourteen square meters and had an old sofa. The walls and ceiling were covered in newspapers, and there was a big hole on one side of the wall. Someone had apparently dug here, but the excavation failed partway.

Countless wires were hanging down from the ceiling, and there was an incandescent bulb on each one. They were scattered throughout the whole room, making it seem as bright as a microwave oven.

There were at least a thousand bulbs hung at varying heights like gourds, making it so bright that I couldn’t look up.

For the first time, I saw a vent on the floor where a cold wind was blowing out of. When it met the heat generated in the room, a faint chaotic airflow formed.

It was completely dark under the vent.

The girl was hiding behind the sofa. This room appeared to be a dead end, and there was no place to move forward. There had to be something wrong with the person who designed this place.

I squatted down. The temperature near the lights was so hot that I felt as if the glass bulbs hanging down would melt.

I was sweating profusely as I looked at the girl and thought, *it's finally over*. I saw her phone vibrate, and after she picked it up, she suddenly giggled at me.

"I'm not late." She said.

With a "pa", all the lights in the room went out. It instantly became dark and I covered my eyes with a shout. Almost at the same time, there was another "pa" and all the lights came on again.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but everything around me had the shadow of retinal burns. I squinted and saw that the girl had disappeared.

I rushed to the place where she had just been standing, looked around, and pushed the sofa, but it had been lodged in the cement.

She was gone.

It was like she had evaporated from the room in an instant.

"What happened to the woman just now? Why is she here if you want to see me alone?" I texted.

"Woman? You saw a woman here?" The responding text asked.

## Chapter 3.12 You're Crazy and I'm Stupid

"Yes, it's true." I typed back before going to sit on the sofa and rubbing my back.

The sofa was made of real leather that had cracked and peeled off after so many temperature changes. It looked very old, but the spring and foam inside were equally comfortable. It was a finely crafted sofa.

It used to be brown, but was now a grayish-white and its four legs were stuck in the cement.

It didn't make sense. The sofa had to have something to do with the girl's sudden disappearance just now.

No text came back. The heat from the lights had dried the sweat all over my body, but then I broke out in another layer of sweat. The other party still hadn't responded.

I looked at my phone and thought about his last words. He didn't know that there were other people here and was very surprised that I had seen someone else. If it was normal, he should be thoroughly investigating the matter at this time and had no time to reply to me.

But it wasn't normal.

I wiped my face and thought about it again. Not only was it abnormal, but there were also problems with the logic.

I used the notebook app on my phone to list all the details I had noticed.

She hid her hands when I wanted to see them.

When I was chasing the girl, he kept chatting with me and giving me a lot of shocking information, which led to me slowing down.

The lights in this room had been designed in such a way that if all of them were suddenly turned off and turned back on again, then they would burn the eyes. It was the best place to cast a smokescreen, and considering how hellbent the girl was on getting back to this room, the

reason was obvious. Moreover, the smokescreen couldn't be used by people who weren't familiar with mechanisms, which seemed to indicate that the girl knew about it.

I clearly saw that Seven Fingers had sent a text to this girl because she found the opportunity to push me away as soon as I read it. But now he was pretending to be surprised. If he didn't know there was a girl here, then did that mean she wasn't one of his own? If so, that meant there was another person hijacking another phone base station and communicating with this girl. Was this a variety show with Group A and Group B? No, it couldn't be that complicated.

The timing of his texts and the girl's behavior had a very good sense of rhythm, and it was obvious he knew how far away I had been from her.

Fatty's enumeration method was very useful for sorting out ideas and finding the many abnormal issues.

There were more and more contradictions between Seven Fingers' texts and what I had seen, which made the matter even more complicated and incomprehensible. It was just like what happened with me and Uncle Three back then.

But if things were very simple, and I only believed everything I saw, then this girl definitely wasn't the mysterious fourth person who had appeared here. It was very likely that this girl was Seven Fingers.

If that was the case, then she started this whole game by creating an atmosphere with the piano's sudden appearance, and then trapped us and separated me from Xiao Hua. In order to make me feel afraid and disoriented, she pretended to be Xiao Hua above me on the staircase. But she didn't expect me to move so fast. She didn't have time to escape in her panic, and I managed to kick her down.

In order to escape, she first sent herself a message with her phone, and then took the opportunity to push me away and send me a message while running. In a panic, she had to break the news, which shook me.

Based on the clues, it was impossible to determine if Seven Fingers really was a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl. There had to be a story there, but either way, it didn't matter whether she was a descendant of Seven Fingers or if Seven Fingers was a monster.

When she finally managed to get to this room, she controlled the lights with her phone, started the mechanism, and then managed to escape. But the story had been broken. Mysterious buildings and strange architects before liberation... terrible secret rooms that broke through the sense of time and space... These premises had already gone pear-shaped, and she had no coherent way to explain her appearance.

From beginning to end, there were only three people in this place— me, her, and Xiao Hua.

That was about it.

My heart rate gradually slowed once I thought of it. If I was right, she was now racking her brains to try to figure out how to reasonably explain everything I had seen.

I stood up and went over to the spot where she had just been. After turning the lights off with her phone, she must have started the device manually.

When I raised my hand and reached up to touch the nearest hot bulb, the hair on my hand immediately curled up. I touched the surrounding bulbs one by one with my fingers and shrank back when I found ones that were too hot. After trying for more than half an hour, I finally felt a light bulb that wasn't as hot as the others and could be held in my hand.

I yanked on it hard, while placing one hand on the sofa. The minute the sofa in front of me tilted up, I was thrown to the side and landed directly in the intersection where I had first come in.

At the moment when the lights were dim, the girl had used this trick to jump over my head and get behind me.

“It’s just a magic trick.” I suddenly lost interest and looked up. I saw a rope hanging down in the darkness above the corridor and grabbed it. I was immediately pulled up into the darkness above.

In an instant, the corridor lit by the decorative belt of gas lamps quickly disappeared, and then a black thing slipped by in front of me, and I entered an all-black well-shaped passage.

The rope was very fast and dragged me all the way up, finally stopping after about six or seven seconds. I felt around with my hands and caught a railing-like iron bar in the darkness. I then felt around with my feet and finally touched the ground.

It was dark, and there was only a small dot of light far ahead.

I turned on my phone’s flashlight and looked around. The floor was covered in steel bars that were sticking out of the cement one by one. If you fell down here, you’d definitely become a shish kebab.

They were also on the wall, so I carefully stepped onto the middle of the steel bars and approached the dot of light bit by bit.

“I found you,” I said to the light. It was obvious that it was a phone’s screen light. “Girl, I know it’s you. You don’t have to pretend.”

With a click, a desk lamp turned on, and the yellow halo pierced the darkness. I saw a sofa in front of me that was in the same style as the one before and a desk lamp beside it.

I saw the girl sitting on the sofa, trussed up and looking at me in horror. I turned my head and saw Xiao Hua walk out from behind the desk lamp, holding a cup of tea in his hand.

“Sorry, I got here first.” He sat down on the sofa and said, “Is your back alright?”

I was stunned for a moment, and could only stare at Xiao Hua’s slightly smug expression as he crossed his legs and put the teacup on his knee. I secretly scolded in my heart, *you bastard, do you want to steal my sense of accomplishment like this? I thought we were friends.*



I clutched my aching back as I walked over to him, and saw a big swollen lump on the girl's head.

"Beating women, none of you are men!" The girl cried.

I grabbed her hand and secretly smiled when I saw a scar on the outside of her little finger. Was she really Seven Fingers and the two extra fingers had been removed in an operation?

I turned to Xiao Hua and asked, "When did you arrive?"

Xiao Hua drank a mouthful of tea, "Half an hour ago. I've been following you."

"You were behind me? Didn't you fall for her trick?"

"You mean on the stairs? How could that kind of trap hold me? I just thought she couldn't tell if I fell for it or not, so I didn't bother speaking up. I didn't expect you to immediately climb up. Your hands are good, but now your physical strength needs to be increased. You have to quit smoking."

"Don't talk about that yet. And then what happened?" My face turned red as I suddenly realized that during everything that had happened just now, Xiao Hua was looking at me from behind. Fuck, it was so embarrassing.

"Then, I followed you all the way to the light bulb room. Just as the woman came out and grabbed the rope, I ran up and grabbed the end of the rope. You know I'm good at playing with rope, so I trussed her up." Xiao Hua raised the teacup and asked me if I wanted some.

I covered my face and felt like an idiot. *So stupid. How could I be so stupid?*

"Then I found that there was a tea set here, and I remembered that you were very engrossed down there, so I decided to take a break—"

"Stop, don't say anymore." I looked at the woman and decided to change the subject: "Who are you? Can you tell the truth now?"

## Chapter 3.13 Devil Design

The young girl turned her head with an air of disdain and ignored me.

I went up, grabbed her face, and pulled it, causing her to cry out in pain.

There were no traces of a human skin mask. It really was a young girl. On the other hand, if a seventy-year-old Seven Fingers was pretending to be a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old girl, then that was really perverted.

I was a little angry. When people were young, they had little experience. Even Xiao Hua, who had done extraordinary things, wouldn't have been too sophisticated when he was sixteen or seventeen. Maybe her earlier words about "saving him" and Uncle Three's basement were all nonsense, but I had no idea where she got the information from.

I didn't like people who messed around with me about this kind of thing, so my expression must have been quite cold.

Xiao Hua put the teacup on the sofa's armrest, stood up, and then went behind the desk lamp where I saw a hot water kettle and a bucket of mineral water sitting on top of a table. There was something strange under the table that looked like a lot of boxes and antenna tied to a stick. It must have been the phone's base station. I had never seen one before, but it looked exactly like how I pictured it. The stick looked like it had been cut off. Shit, it looked like it had been stolen.

A lot of the wires led straight to the stick, while the other ones were thrown into the corner and connected to a laptop. There were all kinds of patch boards beside the laptop.

Xiao Hua made me a cup of tea and my depression eased a little after I drank it.

The atmosphere became very awkward after no one spoke for a long time, and the young girl's face changed as she slowly realized her cute act wouldn't work on us.

I coldly finished my tea, picked up her phone, flipped through it, and saw the several texts she had sent me, including the one she had sent to herself. I opened her photo album and skipped through a lot of selfies before I saw a lot of pictures had been taken when we had first entered that inner room. It appeared she had been following us the whole time.

Most of them were focused on me, but they were all mid-range shots, and the few of Xiao Hua were all close-ups.

It looked like the difference between work photos and fan photos.

I opened her contact list but saw that there weren't any numbers in it.

"This is an invasion of privacy. Why are you being like this?" The girl shouted at me.

"Why are you holding us to society's standards?" Xiao Hua asked, "We're not your classmates or your teachers." He looked at the table behind him. "If you did all this, although you weren't very particular about it, you were at least more resourceful than the average person. You're not someone living in ordinary society. You should know what kind of people we are?"

The girl stared at Xiao Hua angrily and then blushed slowly. I frowned and saw her biting her lower lip.

*What's going on?* I wondered

"I'm still a girl, so you could at least be gentlemanly."

Xiao Hua smiled and his expression suddenly grew cold.

His change in expression was completely different from mine. When Xiao Hua lowered his lids, tilted his chin down, and then looked up again, all his micro-expressions disappeared. There wasn't an ounce of amicability that could be seen on his body.

"My feelings are few, and whatever is left is enough for my friends. If I have to treat the enemies differently based on their genders, then living that kind of life is too difficult for me."

Xiao Hua's previous expression— whether severe or soothing— had a natural friendliness that lowered people's guard and made them feel relaxed and comfortable. When this friendliness disappeared, it was like he was a completely different person. It wasn't a fierce expression, per se, just that he stopped smiling and the corners of his eye dropped down, making people feel uncomfortable.

In fact, Xiao Hua was an extremely difficult person to get along with. He put all his good things together and gave them to a few people.

The girl felt the atmosphere change, and her whole body shrank back. Xiao Hua turned his head to me and revealed a playful expression, as if to say, "You see, you have to scare people like this."

When he turned back, his expression became very cryptic again.

*Sure enough, he's a born actor. He's so fucking good at this,* I said to myself.

I looked at the girl and said, "I've found you. According to the agreement, you should tell me. Now, talk."

The girl retorted, "Alone. Like I said, you have to find me alone."

"That's right." I looked at her and pointed to the rope tied around her body. "You were stupid. I can't help you."

The girl was angry and shook her head: "Don't say that!"

I had a headache. This girl didn't play according to common sense, and I couldn't follow her line of thinking at all. This was usually a special stunt that women in love tried to pull, but I didn't want to hurt her. On the other hand, if I broke her nose first, it would be impossible for her to destroy the atmosphere by trying to act cute.

Just as I was wondering, there suddenly came the sound of empty steel wires twitching on the wall. Then, there were several loud noises that seemed to stretch from near to far.

"Here we go again." The girl's face changed.

“What do you mean?”

“That thing is coming again.” The girl hissed a few times, and we heard a muffled wail reverberating through the walls before it slowly disappeared.

I looked at the girl and saw that her face was pale: “So close.”

“What is it?” I grabbed her chin and yanked her face closer.

“I don’t know. It’s in the inner layer, and we’re on the outer layer. It can hear our voices and find us, but it can’t get out.” She said.

“What don’t you know? Didn’t you design this place?”

The girl grinned at us and said, “Who the hell said I designed it? Could I design something like this?” She lowered her voice: “This place was designed by the devil.”

## Chapter 3.14 Bronze

“Designed by the devil?” I looked at the girl, and she smiled proudly. The sound around us slowly died down and then disappeared. I could still see a hint of fear in her smile; she was obviously very afraid of the sound just now.

“Too close.” She said. “It’s all your fault. If it finds us, I don’t know what will happen.”

I really didn’t understand what she was saying, but she was still dominating the situation, both emotionally and linguistically. I looked back at Xiao Hua, and he looked back at me as if he were watching how I would handle it.

Ever since Black Glasses publicly told others that he was going to teach me something, everyone acted like they were my mentors. It seemed that everyone wanted to teach me, as if they wouldn’t be considered high-class people if they didn’t teach me something. It really bothered me, but I really couldn’t do anything about this kind of girl.

Fatty was especially good at dealing with this kind of situation, but unfortunately, he wasn’t here.

“I’ll tell you what.” The girl glanced at Xiao Hua, and then said to me, “Have your friend stay here, and I’ll take you to a place and tell you about it along the way. Then you can go quickly.”

I looked at her, she looked at me, and I said, “It sounds like you’re going to play tricks.”

“You could tie me up. It’s very comfortable anyway.” She said: “Don’t tell me you can’t afford to do so.”

I really couldn’t, but how could I tell Xiao Hua if she ran away? Unexpectedly, Xiao Hua gave me an encouraging expression.

“We don’t have time to mess around with her here. I’ll stay here to check her phone. I’ve already searched her. She’s unarmed. You can familiarize

yourself with this kind of situation since you'll certainly encounter it in the future."

When I glanced at Xiao Hua, he gave me a seemingly meaningful look, but I couldn't figure it out.

Since Xiao Hua was the one that said it, I couldn't be terrified anymore. I slung her over my body, then lowered the rope down with a winch, and went back to the corridor. When the girl saw the rope pulled back up, but Xiao Hua didn't come down, she was obviously relieved.

She looked at me, I looked at her, and she sniffled. "Let's go."

"Don't play tricks," I said sternly.

"Can you stop nagging? I've never seen a man like you. If you hadn't run after me so fast earlier, I would've thought you were a coward." She jutted her chin out at me.

The phone's screen lit up, and I saw a text message had been sent by the garbled number again. This time, however, it wasn't sent by her, but by Xiao Hua.

"Untie her rope, but don't explain why. If she runs away, it means she wanted to from the beginning. I'm watching you from above, so she can't get away. If she doesn't run, it means she really has something to tell you.  
-Xie Yu"

I put the phone away and untied the girl's rope. She was a little surprised and shook her hands out: "Why?"

I ignored her and made her keep walking.

"You're not afraid of me running." She blinked her eyes.

"I'm in a hurry." With that said, I continued walking forward. She pouted and quickly followed.

I inwardly sighed. It really turned out to be like this. In order to deal with girls, you had to loosen the reins a bit.

We reached the back tunnel entrance where we had originally come in at. From the inside, this mechanism wasn't so magical. It only made the stairs on a certain floor a little thicker and used gas lamps to create a difference in brightness between each floor, thus hiding the thickness. I climbed up, pushed the stair slab open, and went back to the stairs.

It had actually only been an hour from the time I started chasing her up to here, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

"What's this stairwell for?"

"This is the devil's lair." She said. "Tell your friend to enter #deck-room all-c # on the phone and send it to 03498."

I typed what she said and sent the text.

"I'll let you see why I call him the devil."

Xiao Hua returned an "Ok", and after a second, the gas lamps on the floor went out one by one. The code just now apparently controlled the lamps here.

The whole floor was plunged into complete darkness, and only the light from the phone screen was left.

A fluorescence slowly started to glow in the space, and lines began to appear on the concrete walls. The walls were very dark, but that just made the fluorescence that much clearer. I rubbed my eyes and covered the phone screen so that I could see more clearly. Slowly, various geometric patterns began to appear on the stairwell walls.

I looked up and was surprised to find that these were all design drawings, and they had been painted all over the concrete wall with fluorescent paint.

"My grandfather designed this place because of the tense situation with the Soviet Union at that time. He was ready to avoid the world here and hoarded a lot of food, but then the situation didn't deteriorate, so this place was abandoned. A long time ago, a fool accidentally entered here. At that time, it was absolutely dark, and no one knew how he got in. He



lived here almost completely blind for fourteen years. He painted all these pictures. My grandfather carefully analyzed them and said that at first, the fool tried to draw the original layout here. Two years later, he finally succeeded, but he was completely crazy at that time and didn't leave. Instead, he continued to work on my grandfather's structure and drew these designs. Then, he began to draw the internal structure of a building that even my grandfather couldn't imagine."

A fool accidentally entered? Was she referring to Lu Sha?

The fluorescence was getting brighter and brighter, and there were countless complicated lines and numbers. I said stupidly, "Why did you use fluorescent paint?"

"It's not paint, it's blood. It was preserved after using a fluorescent treatment."

I sat down, staring at the whole space filled with complicated halos of light.

This was a tower with winding stairs and only a wall-wide stairwell in the middle. The whole space was filled with yellow cement and based on the iron railings and decayed sections, it had obviously been built very early.

There were no distinguishing features, decorations, or aesthetics here, and the only adornment on the wall of this stairwell was a giant structure a fool had drawn in his own blood after thinking in the dark for more than ten years.

"My grandfather started to expand this place according to these design drawings, but then he disappeared." The girl said, "In the middle of the project, he entered the building and never came out again. Come on, I'll show you something. You'll find it interesting."

In the dark, she took me up to the top of the stairwell, where there was a bare wall. I saw that someone had drawn a huge design that was about as tall as a person and looked very rough.

It was a huge and complex space; so complex, in fact, that it looked like a high-intensity integrated circuit board. At the bottom, I noticed that a door had been drawn.

Although it was small, I realized that this was the bronze door.

I took a step back and almost fell straight down the stairwell.

This was the design behind the bronze door.

“I didn’t lie to you, did I?” She asked.

## Chapter 3.15 Trap

“What happened to that fool?” I asked the young girl. If I hadn’t guessed wrong, he had probably died in the end.

The young girl pointed to the ground in front of me. “He died after drawing this picture. Right here.”

A long time ago, I heard many legends of heavenly taught epics in Nepal and Medog. After a serious illness, many people could suddenly recite the epics that had millions of words. They didn’t say that it was handed down from husband to son or from master to disciple, but that these words appeared in their minds overnight.

The illiteracy rate in ancient Tibet was very high. Most of the education was concentrated in the monk and noble system, while the common people practically lived in a world without words.

Such legends not only occurred in Tibet, but also in the Central Plains and northern China, and there were a lot of them. Known locally as “zhuangxie”, it occurred when a person suddenly acquired a lot of information and images in his head. Unable to deal with the huge influx of information in such a short amount of time, his behavior became abnormal.

I didn’t know Lu Sha, but the fact that he was enclosed here in the dark for more than ten years—during which time he kept drawing such complicated design patterns—seemed similar to a certain person’s behavior.

The Zhang family had very long lifespans. It was said that after reaching a certain age, some of them would also experience the heavenly taught phenomenon, and would be driven to do some strange things by the information suddenly appearing in their minds. These things often had various subtle influences on the world.

“Is his body still here?” I asked. The huge pattern in front of me wasn’t an ordinary design, but something more primitive and intuitive. I couldn’t

understand it at all. But I had an architectural design foundation, so I could immediately determine the overall meaning.

When the young girl shook her head, I sat down where Lu Sha had died. I was completely quiet and focused, just like a statue.

Lu Sha was Xiao Hua's concierge. If he was a special person who had experienced the heavenly taught phenomenon after being trapped here, then he understood his mission, but also knew that he had been trapped to death. In order to spread the information that was in his mind, he used his own blood to write all the patterns on the wall before he died.

This was one possibility. The other possibility was that this place was special, and some people— such as those with low intelligence—could easily receive some of the heavenly information. Lu Sha couldn't understand what was in his head and went completely crazy, drawing all these pictures in his frenzy.

I didn't believe in coincidences, so I thought the first possibility was the likeliest.

"You didn't tell me the truth. This place wasn't used as a shelter, was it?" I looked at the young girl and said, "Your grandfather was Seven Fingers, right? You said he helped my Uncle Three design that basement?"

The young girl nodded and looked at me.

"This place is a trap," I said. "Your grandfather designed this trap, and my Uncle Three must have put something particularly important down here. That's what led Lu Sha down here."

Whether it was the Zhang or Wang families, Uncle Three was very disgusted with the invisible forces around him at that time and had the malice to set these kinds of traps.

And when the whole family was keen on finding Seven Fingers, it was true that only he could establish contact with Seven Fingers.

Seven Fingers and Uncle Three (or Xie Lianhuan) made a trap under this house and put bait in it. Their actions aroused the curiosity of one side, so

someone disguised as Lu Sha snuck into the house. The mechanisms were tripped, and Lu Sha was trapped alive under the house.

“Your grandfather isn’t in this place,” I said.

Seven Fingers designed the mechanism here to hurt people. The other party couldn’t let him go and must have taken him away.

“Huh? Then where did he go?” The young girl was initially very pleased with herself, but when she saw that I seemed to know everything, she wasn’t used to it.

I stood up. If whatever my Uncle Three put down here led Lu Sha here, then it must have been very important. I had to know what it was.

## Chapter 3.16 Speculation

The atmosphere was suffocating.

Just like after Tibet, I felt an invisible danger and pressure, and when I thought of my family living under such pressure all the time, I especially knew why they named me what they did.<sup>53</sup>

The young girl was still asking me: “Where’s my grandfather?”

I put my arm around her shoulder. “Let me ask you a few questions. The situation is worse than you think, so you must answer these questions truthfully.”

She tried to break away from me. She was a stubborn child, but I held her tightly.

“When did your grandfather disappear?”

“Two months ago.” She showed an uncomfortable expression at being touched.

“Ok, listen. These drawings represent one secret after another. The fact that they’re still on the wall and haven’t been erased shows that Lu Sha’s people haven’t been here since he died. Your grandfather is very powerful. The house he designed made these people afraid to come in.”

“Of course.”

“They’re very cautious, so the best way is to catch your grandpa and get him to disclose how to crack the mechanism here. Let’s speculate on how things developed. First of all, after your grandfather entered here after many years, he found Lu Sha’s body and these pictures on the wall. He cleaned up Lu Sha’s body, which was his first mistake. It must have been this mistake that led them to discover your grandfather. Lu Sha’s body reappearing in the world attracted those people, and your grandfather was arrested.”

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<sup>53</sup> His name sounds the same as “No evil”. His family expected his life could be free of evil people

The girl looked at me and I said, "I remember you told me that you couldn't leave, and asked me to find you myself, right? It wasn't a complete lie. The second part of the text was to delay me, but the first part had your true feelings. You came in to find your grandfather, but he had been renovating here, so you found that the original layout had changed after you came in." I also looked at her: "You can't get out, right?"

There was a subtle change in the way she looked at me. She didn't agree with me, but her expression showed confusion and resistance.

"No, it's not that you can't get out." I looked at her eyes to see if my guess was correct, which I had learned from fortune-tellers. "You're afraid to go out. Your grandfather left you a warning here. After he entered here for the last time, he found that he had been targeted. He was trapped here for a long time, and finally decided to go out and deal with it, but he was caught in the end. He knew that you would definitely look for him after his accident, so he left you a clue while he was in this house. After you came in, you saw the hint and knew that you would be caught if you went out. You didn't know what to do."

The girl's eyes were red, and I continued to ask: "What tip did your grandfather leave you?"

"He said that I should give these drawings to a man named Wu Xie at any cost."

I took out a cigarette and lit it for myself while trembling.

"My grandfather also said that I'll be caught as long as I leave here, so I have to find my own way." The girl's tears fell down. "I don't know what to do. My grandfather didn't tell me anything. It's like he didn't care about my life or death at all. He just wanted to be responsible for you. Are you his illegitimate child?"

*Don't just casually recognize relatives,* I said to myself.

Seven Fingers knew me so well. I suddenly had the feeling that he might not be a stranger after all, and might even be someone I knew.

Through the stairwell wall, I could hear the incomparable sound of steel cables being pulled enthusiastically. I looked in the direction of the sound coldly. It wasn't appropriate to pursue the issue now.

"Will they hurt my grandfather?" The girl squeezed her hands and touched the scar on her hand.

"No, but they'll force him to tell them how to get here safely. But he should have prepared for it long ago. These people should have been led to your so-called 'inner layer'. The sounds you've been hearing should be their movements." I said. The girl had to know, which was why she was afraid instead of alarmed when she heard the sound.

This was a tight knot Seven fingers couldn't find a way to solve. He would be caught as soon as he went out, so he couldn't inform his granddaughter or make any arrangements. He knew his granddaughter would make the same mistake he did, so all he could do was write everything down in detail.

He was desperate, but the girl did what he couldn't. It was no coincidence that I came to this place.

"Maybe your grandfather has a lot of faith in you," I said. "What's your name?"

"My name's Tang Song." She said.

"Tang Song, what did you do to lead me here?"

"I didn't need to do anything." She replied. "I sent a text message to my grandfather, saying: No matter who sees this text, I discovered the internal layout behind the bronze door. Let Wu Xie come down to me; otherwise, I'll erase all the pictures."

I was dumbstruck as I stared at her. It was a direct conversation with the opposing side, and she even threatened them.



## Chapter 3.17 Search

“Then what?” If there was no last resort, it was no different from suicide.

She cried again and covered her face. “How would I know? Then, I showed you all these pictures. I’ve done my best.”

In the end, it was those people who plotted a way to get me to come to this house. For them, it was too easy to arrange for me to obliviously enter a place or do something.

At this time, they may have even used the relationship I had with the people around me. I didn’t know why Xiao Hua suddenly wanted to do inventory, but it was likely that someone else created a reason for it. And you needed manpower to do inventory. Using various tricks, they must have made it so that Xiao Hua couldn’t find anyone else and had to call me.

If I didn’t arrive here at this house with Xiao Hua, they definitely would have found other ways.

Then, Tang Song used the mechanism to bring me down here.

What she didn’t expect was that Xiao Hua came down with me. She didn’t know who he was, so she tried every means possible to separate us.

“Have you seen me before?” I asked her. I didn’t know her, so I didn’t know how she knew I was here.

“I used the radio.” She couldn’t stop crying: “That radio can hear all the sounds in all the rooms. FM is fine. There were a lot of people doing inventory, so it took me a long time to make sure that you were inside and which room you were in.”

When I saw her appearance, I suddenly remembered what I looked like before and my heart was a little sour. Compared with me, she was doing much better.

I touched her hair. I still had a lot of doubts about her, but now the most important thing was something else.

“Is there any way to erase all these structural drawings?” I asked her.  
“And make it so this is the only one left?”

Some of these layouts were of huge ancient tombs, and some were caves. There was probably a huge, brilliant story behind each picture, but I wasn't interested. My only interest was the picture in front of me.

“It's fine to destroy the wall. But you don't want to destroy this one, too?”

“No, I want to memorize it,” I said.

My train of thought was very clear. This wasn't a gift. Tang Song's intuition was right. Seven Fingers wasn't a kind mentor and didn't care about her life or death.

Everything had a price.

“Wu Xie, if you want to save him, you must save me first.”

I couldn't understand this picture at all. Even if I put it on the internet and spread it all over the world, the final result would be the same as before. There would only be more and more strange threads, and that hidden power would prevent effective information from coming to me.

I had to find Seven Fingers. He could understand this picture, but he had to be in the hands of those people right now. This meant that I not only had to confront these people head-on but also had to be on the offensive side.

They were most likely the Wang family, because I finally understood in Motuo that the Zhang family had almost disappeared by now.

As far as the Wang family was concerned, the family had protected me for many years, which still made them slightly afraid of me. But after I reached a certain point, I would cross the line and have to die.

I couldn't find the line before, but now I was finally close to it.

I had so many problems to solve now.

How would I get the Wang family to cut me some slack when I left here?

And I also had to save this girl and Xiao Hua.

First of all, the Wang family had to achieve its goal, but it couldn't achieve it completely. I couldn't look one step, two steps, or even three steps ahead. I had to look a hundred and even a thousand steps ahead. I had to fully understand how to deal with it by myself. I couldn't rely on Xiao Hua, because that would paint a target on his back.

He couldn't play a role in my strategy, so I could only rely on myself.

I sat in front of the drawing for three hours, making sure that I had memorized all the complicated details, just like memorizing Go strategies.

The complexity of the lines was beyond anyone's imagination. I can only roughly describe it as an integrated circuit board, with numerous lines crossing each other, while countless subtle lines branched out at the junctures. If I had to analyze it carefully, I'd say it wasn't an architectural design, but a very complicated seal pattern. Or a huge maze.

Under the extremely weak light, I really couldn't do any kind of thorough analysis. No matter how badly or quickly I wanted to know what it was, there was nothing I could do now.

I rolled up my sleeves, pulled an oyster blade from my belt, and cut my own hand. The blade had been sharpened using high-density deep-sea shells, so my blood came gushing out in an instant.

I took off my T-shirt, covered my wound, waited for the blood to soak through the shirt, and then drew a pattern of seven fingers on the bronze door image.

Even though my arm was burning, I squeezed both sides of the wound to prevent it from solidifying. Then, I began using my own blood to wipe out the most complicated part of the picture.

Wash blood with blood.

“What are you doing?” The sleepy Tang Song on the side was shocked and flustered.

“You said that Lu Sha had figured out the layout of this whole place, right?” I asked her. “Show me those pictures.” With that said, I went to run down the stairs.

First, I still needed to find what Uncle Three left here. That thing’s importance definitely wasn’t inferior to the value of the bronze door, but there were only three of us here, so we needed more trump cards to keep us safe.

## Chapter 3.18 Eleven Rooms

Tang Song immediately stopped me.

“I have it here!” She shouted, “I have that thing.”

I stopped and looked back at her, finding that she was staring at me with something in her hand.

“My grandfather found it in that corpse’s backpack. He left it to me with the information just now.” I went up and saw that the thing in her hand was very small. But just as I was about to take it from her, she suddenly put it in her mouth and swallowed.

I frowned and tried to catch her, but she ran back and jumped as the thing got stuck in her throat. By the time I grabbed her hair and slammed her against the wall, she had already swallowed it.

“Are you crazy?”

She kept gagging and knocking on her chest. “Well, now you’ll just have to think of me as that thing.” She was blue in the face, but this girl’s throat was apparently big enough. Xiuxiu would have choked to death.

“Who would want to treat you like that thing?” I was furious.

“In this way, no matter what you do, you have to include me. If you want to protect yourself, you’ll have to protect me. If you want to kill me, you’ll have to kill yourself,” she said.

“You’re fucking sick!” I grabbed my hair, resisting the urge to bang my head against the wall.

“My grandfather said that people have to find their own value. Don’t give others any reason to give up on you.” She stared at me. “You should understand. I told you everything. What would I do if you leave me here?”

I had lost control of my emotions, so I tried to suppress my anger. I took dozens of deep breaths and said to her, “Go to the bathroom.”

“No.”

“You’ll have to go sometime. It’s out of your control.”

“I’m constipated, you’ll have to wait.” She was a little proud.

*Calm down, calm down.* I could feel my blood pressure rising and my gums hurt from clenching my teeth so hard. When I saw my wound start bleeding again, I tore my T-shirt up and bandaged it, and then said to her, “At least tell me what you swallowed.”

“It’s a ring.” She said, “My grandfather said that it was taken from Lu Sha’s body. Lu Sha must have found it here. It’s very important, so I had to keep it close.”

I stared into Tang Song’s eyes. “Lu Sha died here. His body would definitely start to rot first, and then dry a little bit at a time. There must be a lot of blue spots on that ring. Those are called “corpse seepage”. It happens when the body fluids seep out from the corpse. Do you know what a corpse’s body fluids look like?”

Tang Song covered her mouth, and I continued, “Have you ever seen slop? If you pour milk and butter into the slop, it’s exactly what the corpse’s fat looks like before it’s completely rotted. It’s sour and smelly.”

Tang Song turned pale.

“Well, please give me a detailed explanation of what this ring looks like,” I said.

“There’s a ghost head on it.” She tried to recall it but started gagging once she thought of it.

Ghost head. I took a deep breath and an old image suddenly popped into my head.

I still didn’t know whether this ring had practical functions, but based on the hints on the relief back in those days, it had a very strong connection with the Ghost Seal’s earliest totem. All the materials related to the Ghost Seal recorded that it had three grooves, which happened to be the heads

of three ghosts. I had guessed at that time that it was probably related to the ring worn by the one holding the seal.<sup>54</sup>

Was it just as I expected, and Uncle Three found one of the rings?

When I had been analyzing it carefully back then, I was fascinated by the numbers two and three, because Poker-Face had two special fingers, and the ghost seal had three grooves. But I didn't know what the connection was.

There was the sound of cables being pulled again, and although I had confidence in Seven Fingers, the sound was getting louder and louder. The other party wasn't a pushover, after all. There may have been some unexpected situations where this kind of pressure often existed, which caused me to feel very uncomfortable.

Tang Song puked some mushy things up, and there was the familiar smell of bile. It appeared she hadn't eaten anything serious during this period of time.

"Regret it?" I asked her.

She looked dejected as she nodded with tear-filled eyes. I picked her up. Things were already like this, so I could make her spit it out or leave it to chance, but time was running out, and we needed to get some other things done.

Xiao Hua had been keeping in touch with us using his phone, but it was already late at night, so he must have been taking a nap. I was nervous, but I was also a little tired at the moment.

When Tang Song and I reached the building's structural diagram that Lu Sha had deduced, the fluorescent light had already started to dim, and my eyes were really going blind.

At first glance, I could tell that this structural diagram had been drawn by a layman, because it was clear, but had many unprofessional aspects.

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<sup>54</sup> He's referring to [Chapter 20 of Vol 7](#) if you need refresher like I did. FYI, he's a liar liar pants on fire. Fatty is the one that said it.

Compared with the diagram drawn after he went crazy, this one was much simpler, and the logic was also that of ordinary people.

I had majored in architecture so I understood the simple structure with just a quick glance. This place actually wasn't mysterious, so Lu Sha must have felt a kind of despair when he had to give up leaving here and started desperately drawing the pictures in his mind.

He had used up the lighting equipment when he was here, so even if he had figured out the layout in complete darkness, he still wouldn't have been able to leave here.

There were many numbers on the design drawing—like “twenty-three eleven” and “eleven twelve”—written in each room, but there wasn't any logical order.

“Explain it,” I asked.

“Do you remember the room full of light bulbs? All the rooms here have a lot of objects piled up in them. These numbers are coordinates. In all the rooms, only one thing is a switch, and all the others may start traps. These traps are deadly.” She said. “Take, for example, the coordinates written on the piano. If you go to the antiques on the surrounding bookshelves and compare them according to the coordinates, you can find the mechanism that made the piano appear. But the coordinates aren't static. They're reset in every room every hour. If you have that radio, the coordinates after the reset will be reported to you by time.”

“So.” I looked at this design.

“So, the coordinates on this picture are all wrong now. When he finished drawing it, he must have also understood it.”

“Wasn't it dangerous for me to be in the light bulb room just now?” I asked.

Tang Song shook her head: “I already removed the trap in that room. Didn't you see the big hole in the wall? I often use that room to make preparations, so I wanted to avoid a mishap.”



*You worked hard*, I said to myself. This girl showed a lot of qualities that many men didn't have.

"It's easy to get out from here. From the piano room, you have to go through eleven rooms and find the mechanisms in each one. Once all the mechanisms are turned on, the piano room will return to the house."

## Chapter 3.19 I've Already Seen Through Everything

"Eleven mechanisms? Do they have to be in order?" I asked.

"I don't know, but it's safer to go in order." Tang Song replied.

"So, did you write the coordinates on the piano?"

Tang Song nodded: "The first room is used to separate people. As long as one of you touched the mechanism on that coordinate, then the room would change. Unless you held on to each other, you would definitely be separated, which was what I was trying to do."

After being out in the field a lot, I found that people in this business generally didn't like to move separately.

I thought about it and lit another cigarette. "Did you get hurt when you were here before?"

She shook her head and gave me a defiant look: "I have pretty good skills."

I nodded and pointed to the surrounding walls. "Then you're responsible for destroying all these pictures with me. After that, I'll tell you my plan."

"Do you have a plan?" She was surprised.

I nodded, "I have a perfect plan you'll be satisfied with."

We went to the lowest room, which was Xiao Hua's inner warehouse. Based on the design drawing I just saw, I couldn't figure out where this room was now. Had it sunk into that black shadow that was on the previous design drawing, or was there some other smoke screen? The stairwell was real, however, and so was the picture above, which had to be destroyed first.

There was no mechanism on the bookshelf closest to the stairs, so it was relatively safe. We untied the white cloth from the wares and looked for

any tools that could be used. Soon, I found an ancient double-edged sword.

According to the record on the white cloth, this ancient sword came from a riverbed in the southern part of the Taklimakan Desert. It had been unearthed from a merchant's wooden tomb. The merchant was from the Tang Dynasty and wore an outfit from the Central Plains. He died during a journey and was buried by the local people. His only funerary object was this ancient sword, which had a very dull edge. It may have been the reason why it was discarded, but a discerning person would know at a glance that the sword's handle was very similar to a copper cipher ring. Turning the ring and putting the specific symbols in a row would activate the machine. I twisted the cipher ring according to the instructions on the white cloth, and a blade poked out from the other end of the handle.

It was a reverse blade that was about half a meter long and made of iron. Such gadgets often appeared after trading with the western regions, and most of them were just skilled craftsmen showing off their skills. They actually didn't have much historical value, but if one was an isolated product and the only one in history, then it often sold for a good price in the private collection community.

The reverse blade had to be sealed and protected. I could feel the cold edge of the blade after it stuck out of the hilt, and it gave off a very dangerous feeling whenever I looked at it.

If we used this thing to destroy the image on the wall, I estimated that it would take about three days to completely destroy it and make it unrecognizable.

I pointed to the gas lamp outside. "Use this gas lamp, break the lampshade, pull the wick out, and burn the wall."

"It's just the two of us for such a big project? What about that guy?"

I said: "Let him rest. Let's not disturb him. This matter has nothing to do with him in the first place."

Tang Song went out, and I held her legs so that she could reach the gas lamp. She broke the lampshade and pulled the wick out from inside. The gas pipes were all open lines, and there was a vertical pipeline in the middle of the floor that the pipes of each floor were connected to.

All the pipes had been fixed on the cement walls with retaining rings, so I pulled them out. After that, I asked Tang Song to send a message to Xiao Hua, asking him to turn on the gas lamp switch.

The gas lamps lit up one by one. The lamp light mainly depended on heating the lampshade made of thorium dioxide, so once the lampshade was removed, the flame's light was very weak. I turned the regulating valve, and the flame became bigger, so I told Tang Song to start burning the wall. I ran to the next floor to repeat the process with another gas lamp.

After doing this for three or four hours, I managed to pull down all the gas lamps on the staircase. The walls were completely blackened on both sides, and Tang Song and I were sweating profusely.

"Done?" She asked me.

I didn't know if it was done or not, because the gas lights could hardly illuminate the area once the lampshades had been removed. I removed a few lamps, and several floors became dark. I could still make out some fluorescence on the walls, but the lines had been burned beyond recognition.

Even if we missed a few, I didn't have the strength to deal with them. The whole floor was burning hot, leaving only the picture of the structure behind the bronze door, which I had kept. We walked in front of the picture again.

"What should we do next?" She asked me. We were both holding our injured hands after burning our fingers to some extent during the operation just now.

I looked at my cell phone. "If we open the mechanism now, we'll be caught when we go out. Our first step is to make them give up here.

There are two ways they'll do that: the first is that they find the thing they're looking for; the second is that those who can threaten their plans will never come out." I took a picture of the wall with my phone. "This picture has been defaced but most of it is still visible. They should be satisfied." I handed her the phone: "Here you go."

Tang Song frowned and didn't know what I wanted to do.

"I've been telling you that I studied architecture. The structural diagram just now clearly showed me why the people outside are afraid to come in." I looked at the stairwell. "Where do you think the gas from the lamps is coming from?"

When she looked at me, I said, "Gas tanks have been buried in all the walls of this stairwell. If there's a forced entry or exit of any kind... boom!"

All the walls in the design drawing were covered in frames and pipes, and there were ten gas tanks with many sponge-like holes in the middle so that the gas and air could be fully mixed. Once the gas tank valve was opened, it would only take about five minutes to escape. Once those five minutes were up, the whole stairwell would become a cannon and we'd be goners.

Seven Fingers wasn't messing around. He was clearly a mastermind when it came to architecture, and it was only with these kinds of settings that he could stand up against the Wang family.

"Do you think it's good to be alive?" I touched Tang Song's hair and raised my cigarette in front of her: "Sunshine, rain, warm weather, cold weather, breakfast, beer, various colors, do you find these things valuable?"

## Chapter 3.20 Retrospect

Tang Song imitated me and touched my hair: “What are you talking about? Did you eat something bad? What’s wrong with your head? Why are you normal one second and crazy the next? So pitiful.”

I smacked her hand away. I hated those who pretended to know me very well even though they had known me for less than a day. I said to her, “You know, I experienced a lot in Tibet. I know my enemies. They’re not the kind of people who are interested in people’s lives and feelings. If they know there’s a trap, they won’t hesitate or struggle outside. They’ll send someone in that they can sacrifice, bring the information out somehow, and then leave the victim in the trap. But I don’t believe none of them don’t have any feelings for life and the world. Some people are naturally sensitive and are afraid of death. In particular, the thought that you would be completely trapped here in the dark, hoarding food, staying underground for more than ten years, and eventually dying crazy... this is even more terrible than a simple death.”

Tang Song was silent.

“They sent a girl down. But after she came down, her desire for survival broke through the previous training. She chose to remain silent. She didn’t convey any information to the outside world, so the people above thought she was dead and sent another person down. The girl made a trap with the coordinates in the first room and killed this person.”

“After two consecutive people disappeared in the trap, the people above didn’t dare make another move. Things were at an impasse. After doing some calculations, we started inventory three days ago. The second person should have come down within those three days, and she would have my photo on her phone.” I pointed to Tang Song’s forehead: “She’s used to moving around with human skin masks on, but after a long time, the mask starts deforming. It’s very hot here, and she sweats a lot, so her face looks very strange.”

Tang Song bit their lower lip, and slowly moved away from me.

“Tang Song, I know this isn’t your real name. When you start talking nonsense, I also start talking nonsense. Every time I analyze it, I stop a little before exposing your lies, giving you time to make them consistent. You unconsciously made up a big but flawed story for me.” I said. “You couldn’t help but go back to your real purpose. It was the same every time, so how could I not know what you really want to do? But you don’t see the one thing that made all your efforts a joke.”

Tang Song raised her head: “Go on.”

“My friend and I appeared in this room. At that time, the second person who was killed had just fallen into the trap. You started the trap again in a hurry, but that person was still in the trap and wasn’t dead yet. You didn’t have time to check and didn’t notice it. She wrote the bloody words that exposed you on the piano seat.”

Tang Song’s expression changed.

“In fact, you have no idea who we are, do you?” I said, “You didn’t know our identities until you got her phone.”

I looked at the darkness under the stairs.

“But you aren’t that worried. You’ve betrayed your family, so no matter who we are, it’s meaningless to you. You mean to kill us. You’ve been guiding us, hoping that we would trip the mechanism in our haste to leave here. As long as we listen to you and trigger any of the mechanisms, we’ll stay here forever, just like your first victim.”

“What’s in it for me?” She said coldly, “If it’s as you say, I’d still be trapped here alone.”

“As long as the people above don’t know the secret here, you’ll always have a chance to be rescued. But if they know the information, they’ll leave you here, and you’ll be trapped for the rest of your life. So, until your people find a way to rescue you, you can’t let anyone who enters here live.” I said. “The eleven rooms and eleven mechanisms are all fake, but the eleven traps are real. You don’t know how to get out of here.”

She looked at me and her eyes turned red. "I don't want to stay here alone. They'll soon forget about me."

"Tang Song, I like people who have a thirst for life. I see a lot of qualities in you. I don't know what happened to you, but you're different from the people in your family I've met in the past. Maybe you're in love, or maybe you're more sensitive than others." I said. "But I don't meaninglessly hurt others."

She looked at me and I continued, "Actually, I know how to get out of here, but we need to make a deal."

She looked at me in surprise and I said, "I can't tell you how I know, but I can tell you that the first thing Uncle Three taught me when I got involved in this incident is related to this."

I touched her hair again: "First off, my friend's been resting this whole time. He hasn't seen this picture or heard any of our conversation. After you go out, you should protect him in front of your people. I believe you can do it. In exchange for doing this, you can take my phone and tell them that this is what the picture looks like." I paused. "I'll stay here for two weeks and then leave. You have to rack your brains and use any means to keep them from attacking me. Otherwise, they'll know through various channels that you've betrayed them."

"I can do it." She nodded her head firmly "I'll tell them that you got lost here and are probably dead."

I tore my T-shirt and tied it over her eyes. She suddenly hugged me for a minute before letting go.

"Do you want to see my real face?" She asked.

"Not interested," I said.

I took her hand, and led her all the way to the middle of the stairs, before returning to the corridor. Xiao Hua came out of the darkness, carrying Tang Song on his back. I mouthed a secret code, and Xiao Hua nodded.

"Goodbye." Tang Song seemed to feel something as she said this.



I turned and retreated into the darkness. Xiao Hua went back to the stairs and ran all the way to the bottom room. I started the mechanism and went to the room where Tang Song had been hiding above the corridor. When I saw the radio, I put it on the sofa, sat down, opened my hands, and found them covered in a cold sweat.

## Chapter 3.21 I'm Coming

I had just sent Tang Song on her way. To be honest, when I had been speaking with her, I was cold all over.

At the old house in my hometown, in the room where Uncle Three had lived before, I saw the money-suited playing cards<sup>55</sup> Uncle Three and I use to play when I was a child. At that time, I was really naïve and thought that the complicated game he had taught me was really just a game. I opened Uncle Three's drawer this time and found that the old cards were lying in the innermost part, and the rubber bands had lost their elasticity. It was only then that I realized that something was wrong.

The Water Margin<sup>56</sup> characters on the card were very simple and rough, but after each character was arranged differently, their lines would form different intersections when viewed in the sun. The children's song that Uncle Three taught me to recite in those days had the different arrangements and combinations of these cards.

Now that I thought about it, the song was too long for a kid my age at the time. I was afraid I wouldn't have remembered it so deeply if I hadn't compiled all the "Water Margin" character's stories.

This was Uncle Three's earliest calculation. I figured he just wanted to have another backup by teaching me this song, but when I deciphered the meaning of it, I knew he had set a trap.

In fact, Poker-Face had prevented me from investigating for the same reason. For thousands of years, the Zhang family forged historical documents, falsified various clues in history, and pointed these clues to the ancient tombs they found. Most of these ancient tombs had become traps the Zhang family had set.

So much time had passed that after the Zhang family's decline, the truth and falsity of these clues and traps became unrecognizable. With my skills

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<sup>55</sup> Thought to be the ancestor of both modern playing cards and mahjong tiles. These cards are also known as Water Margin cards. Too much info to put down, so here's the [wiki article](#)

<sup>56</sup> It's a 14th-century Chinese novel attributed to Shi Nai'an. Considered one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, the novel is written in vernacular Chinese rather than Classical Chinese. Also translated as "Outlaws of the Marsh", "Tale of the Marshes", or "All Men Are Brothers". Info [here](#)

and abilities, if I rushed to investigate myself, I'd soon disappear from the world.

Uncle Three had similarly understood this point after a lot of life and death experiences. Suffering from an invisible enemy that would never meet him head-on, he had only one fanatical thought at that time. He wanted to really face that invisible force once. As a result, he began thinking about how to set traps.

First, he needed a trap that couldn't be broken or easily escaped from. The Zhang family used ancient tombs as their basic trap structures because large ancient tombs were often built by tens of thousands or even more than a hundred thousand people and were firmly concealed and naturally divided.

I didn't know how he found Seven Fingers, or whether Seven Fingers even existed at all and was just a smoke screen.

After that, Uncle Three set a total of three traps and placed the three things he thought were the most important in them. These three traps had a common feature, which was "hidden from the outside and confusing on the inside". Once the trap was started, it was difficult to find your way outside the trap again, and you would be "separated" from the world. This made it almost impossible for the outside world to rescue you, so even if all the houses were torn down, it was still impossible to violently enter.

For example, if the entrance of a trap was designed like this, once you entered, it would be filled with 170 tons of cement, and the entrance would then be located in the center of a newly formed hundred-story building. After the cement had solidified, it would be impossible to go in from the original entrance unless the whole hundred-story building was blown up.

Such a trap was basically equal to entering and being unable to leave. The only hope was that hunters set aside an entrance for themselves so that they could harvest their prey.

There was no logic to the entrance and exit here. It was on the other side of a certain wall here, and the password for opening this wall was different every hour. Only I knew the equation.

If my calculations were correct, the last text Xiao Hua sent when he entered this space should mean that Black Glasses was already in place. He was responsible for opening the entrance from the outside and should be behind one of the walls in this room now. I turned on the radio, used the static to look for his nearby cell signal, found the wall, and then began knocking on it with a steel bar.

I was relieved when I heard the echo from behind the thick wall.

Acting was exhausting. It took me a long time to restart the trap, draw so many strange pictures on the wall, and replace the ring on Lu Sha's body with a GPS. In order to convince others that Lu Sha had been trapped here for so many years, I went and specially found a corpse with long fingers.

I waited a long time before this prey appeared.

It even took a long time to get the gas lamps working here. When I first came here, they were all rotten, and it took a lot of energy to make the old gas valves work.

The first time I pulled Tang Song's face, I knew she was wearing an excellent human skin mask. But she had cried too much, which was a big mistake when wearing that kind of mask because it was difficult to restore the mask's original density after it swelled up and dried.

I found this surprising because crying showed her soft inner side.

She was an interesting girl. I didn't think she would actually swallow the ring. There was also the scar on her hand, which she had gotten from training. When she subconsciously hid her hands, it also showed that she had really been panicking.

I laughed as I recalled everything. How could I possibly memorize that picture in three hours? It had taken me a long time to paint it. If they

knew those pictures were different forms of my WeChat QR code, I bet they would cut me into thin strips and send me to Guangzhou.

But I really didn't expect to meet a girl here, or that she had such a strong will to survive.

The internal collapse of such a tight organization had already started, and the Wang family's internal structure seemed to be experiencing some long-held problems.

It was all because of the current era. It was so beautiful.

I could lay low and stay here for a few weeks, but the plan had already started. Plus, those who came out of Kangbaluo— those who collected fingers— should have already moved.

This was the first counterattack. I'm coming.

(End of the full text of the 2015 New Year's Special)

**EXTRA 5: 2015 CHINESE NEW YEAR SPECIAL  
(aka Fishing King Extra)**

## Chapter 5.0 God of the Kitchen End of Year Short

1.

If there was a god of the kitchen in my family, he would probably feel that I had abandoned him this year.

It's hard work to live alone, I understand, but I also have a last resort.

I've been busy for more than three hundred days. Today, there was a meeting in the afternoon, and my heart was full.

In my early years, I struggled with the problem of having fun and living a life that is beneficial to me, because the two principles gradually seem to diverge from each other. When I was in good health earlier, I didn't feel the violation of these two principles. I would simply get drunk and sleep for one night. When I lost my voice after singing loudly, I'd recover the next day. But when I get drunk nowadays, I can't wake up for a week. If my voice is hoarse, it turns into chronic pharyngitis, which lasts for half a year and is very painful. As a result, the choice has cruelly been put in front of my eyes.

Because of a serious case of pharyngitis throughout the year—especially after September—I finally began to face up to my body. I went around to sort out all my memories and looked up some information. I suddenly realized what the two words “poor blessing” meant. Good wine, food, and beautiful women are unbearable. I don't like driving, so I don't pursue luxury goods. The only thing I'm passionate about is hot springs, but the resources are scarce.

The reason for my sudden realization is because of the so-called “spleen deficiency” symptom. The shape of the human brain is similar to that of the intestines and stomach, so it's said that the intestines would react quickly because of mental stress, and the resulting spleen deficiency would deplete one's qi. Check Baidu. Once you have spleen deficiency, the following foods are taboo:

Bitter melon, cucumber, Chinese squash, eggplant, water spinach, celery, Chinese spinach, water bamboo, lettuce, day lily, persimmon, banana, loquat, pear, watermelon, mung bean, tofu, naked oats, duck meat, pork, turtle meat, oyster meat, milk, sesame, buckwheat, hawthorn, radish, cilantro, etc.

At that time, my expression was like: I like to eat all of those!

But suffering from the fact that I have decided to live seriously, I began to think about what I could eat if I couldn't eat all this. On Baidu Encyclopedia, I found the following suggestions:

Nonglutinous rice, Indian rice, guoba (scorched rice from the bottom of the pan), coix seed, cooked lotus root, chestnut, yam, lentil, black-eyed bean, beef, chicken, rabbit meat, cow tripe, pork tripe, mandarin fish, grape, red date, carrot, potato, mushroom, etc.

Those before coix seeds were a staple food, but there were no more than thirty dishes you could make with the things that came after them. In other words, would I have to spend the rest of my life eating these dishes?

I sat on the steps, smoked a cigarette, and felt sad as I thought of my life rules in the past. One was that I couldn't obtain what I wanted, and I wasn't happy with what I had. Another was that gains and losses were a fixed amount based on your luck and fortune. I would like to discuss with you here whether everyone is like this.

The so-called "can't obtain what we want, unsatisfied with what we have" situation occurs when you want something in particular, but can't get it no matter how hard you try. When you finally get it, you've lost your enthusiasm because you've gone through too much suffering. It's better to be rational and objective.

The so-called "gains and losses fixed on your luck and fortune" means that your enjoyment would inevitably disappear after you succeeded at something. Ever since I started writing the "Grave Robbers' Chronicles", the more it became popular, the faster my skills were lost. I initially got severe acid reflux, so I couldn't drink anymore. Then, I lost interest in



meat for some reason, and gradually lost my appetite (but I still couldn't lose weight). If I had only suffered from illness without losing my desire, I could have kept pushing forward. But I soon discovered that I didn't even want to write anymore if I couldn't drink.

These were all early warnings. If the things I enjoyed in life kept reducing according to this trend, then I could only become a monk in my forties.

I couldn't help but feel scared.

If A connected to B, then were things turning out like the fortune-teller had said when I was thirteen? Supposedly, I only came to Earth to change one person, and when I was done, I had to go back to my life, so anything that tempted me and kept me away from this task would eventually bring endless pain no matter how much I liked it.

In any case, I started a strict diet and felt my body change, but it ended up making me feel even more terrible. The reason was because there was only one kind of food that really made me feel comfortable—oatmeal doughnuts.

Although they aren't that delicious, it's true that my stomach always feels comforted and the pressure is relieved every time I eat them. At that time, I thought of the "Big Bang Theory" and Sheldon's practice of choosing doughnuts based on their fiber density every morning. It turned out to be true.

2.

I don't want to say anything.

When I was under pressure in the past, I was always full of grievances and felt that no one understood me. This year, someone kept asking me to talk to him, but I didn't want to say anything.

In the past, I had a utilitarian but sensible way of deciding problems but became purely utilitarian when it came to deciding the purpose. It felt better for everything to go in this direction, but I was always so emotional and did whatever I wanted. We were going in the right direction, but the driver was crazy. It was just like in the imperial era when nails were put

on all strategic routes, but the cavalry directly charged at the spears in every actual encounter.

Life is like a tug of war. Victory seems certain, but it's full of troubles.

In fact, many choices aren't right or wrong. To teenagers, the world seems endless. Wonderful people in front of them are infinitely good, the distant world is infinitely big, and their lives are infinitely long. When I was in my twenties, I began to fear my thirties. After I hit thirty, I saw my end. The reporters this year especially liked to ask me these questions: Why did you choose to do these things? Do you regret it?

In fact, the answer to these questions depends on the moment and is always completely different. I usually ask a question in return: When you're near the end of your life at the age of eighty, if you have the chance to direct a movie, would you choose to accept it or not?

Or let's spice it up a bit: When you're near the end of your life at the age of eighty, if you have the chance to live a crazy and wild life for a year, would you choose to accept it or not?

If it was right now, the choice would be very difficult. You would have to consider things like courage, reason, age, and family very carefully.

But at the age of eighty, your future is no longer precious, and things bought with money can no longer be enjoyed. The fans who turned seventy can no longer go out to meet you or give support. Many people have forgotten you. The choices you make at that time are what you need in your life because everything you've achieved before can't be reproduced at that moment. At that time, only the memories accompany you, which is the only wealth you have before you die.

It's really hard for people to say that they have no regrets in this life. There must be things that people haven't done or didn't do enough of. If we try our best at the moment and eliminate the things we haven't experienced, then maybe we'll scrounge up a review that this life was ok.

So, the rational judgment of the current choice, what's right and what's wrong, and whether it should be this way or that way, the greatest torture comes from your own future.

Of course, this is just my own life philosophy. Maybe it's not even worth mentioning, but I always abide by it. Let me report to you that I am almost thirty-four years old. In my first thirty-four years, I explored, fought, wrote novels, made movies, suffered a serious illness, and lost my mind. I was a handsome man who now weighs 265 pounds, but it's far from enough.

We can meet here at the ripe old age of eighty—I hope we can stay healthy enough to live to that age—and this text will appear in your mind one day before the Spring Festival. At the age of eighty, I hope that every one of us will be able to look back on the turmoil we've overcome, and see how prosperous we've become.

Happy New Year.

## Chapter 5.1 Old Village Fishing Tackle

I lit a cigarette and looked at the scenery outside the window. Fatty opened my window a crack so the airflow would suck the smoke out of the vehicle.

He was driving very slowly. Poker-Face sat in the back seat, crowded in next to the New Year's goods. There were a lot of people coming to visit this trip, so I had prepared a lot of specialties. Unfortunately, they wouldn't all fit in the cab of the vehicle.

We were in a used Nissan pickup truck. It was far less practical than my Jinbei, but it was the only one in town that I could buy on such short notice. Although the owner kept ensuring us that the engine was well maintained, it hadn't been turned on in a while and the throttle felt uncomfortable. It was like stepping on cotton.

If you left the town, went to Panshan, and then to the city, you could get on the Tongsan Expressway and drive for more than ten hours from Fenshuiguan in Cangnan to Hangzhou in Zhejiang for the New Year. That was what I had originally intended, but I decided to stay here in the end.

Xiao Hua and the others had mentioned that they wanted to visit the south, saying that Fujian should be warm this time of year. *Hehe, you'll know when you get here*, I said to myself.

The county road back to the village took a winding path up the mountain, where it became a single lane in many places. Coupled with the cliff right outside the window, it was very exciting.

It was very cold this year, so all the mountain springs were frozen into icy layers that covered the slopes and streams. Since I was holding my hand out the window as I smoked, I could clearly feel the sting of the low temperature outside.

"By the way, are you still in your thirties this year?" Fatty suddenly asked me.

I didn't answer but focused on unscrewing a bottle of mineral water to use as an ashtray. I raised my hand and looked at my fingers, finding that the place where I had held the cigarette had turned black and yellow from the smoke. It was a result of smoking shoddy cigarettes. When going to graves in the mountains, it wasn't enough to pack a few cigarettes, so I had to bring tobacco and roll them myself. But the tobacco couldn't be pure, so I had to find a kind of bean leaf on the side of the road, dry it, and then roll it with the tobacco. Like this, it could be used for a long time. It didn't taste good, but it was much better than going cold turkey.

*I have to give up smoking, I said to myself.*

The days after Poker-Face came out of the mountains were the coldest in Fujian. Fatty and I watched him dump cold water over his head in the yard and both felt as if we had brain freeze. We had all been timid and felt the weakness in our bodies, but he was still the same.

*You're in your thirties. Forget your age. This may be the only way.*

Just as I was thinking this, the car suddenly slowed down and then came to a stop. I looked up and saw that the cars on the road in front of us were in a long queue and there was a traffic jam. There was a big truck leaning precariously on the side of the road, with one of its wheels hanging over the edge of the cliff. Its center of gravity was shifted more towards the cliff and it felt like it would turn over with just one kick.

Most vehicles took this road to avoid the highway tolls and weren't all that careful. If they went too fast, they were prone to accidents in this kind of freezing weather.

Fatty lowered the window and poked his head out. As the cold wind poured into the car, Poker-Face woke up. When Fatty pulled his head back in, he was already swearing, "Damn it, it's blocked again. I swear, this is the eight hundredth time on this road. I told you we should've taken motorcycles. If we had, we would've been able to pass by these fucking bastards."

Our truck had stopped at the very end of the line, and we could see many drivers had already gotten out of their vehicles and were doing radio

calisthenics. A farmer aunty set up a stall and started selling the goods from her vehicle directly, indicating that the traffic jam was going to last for a while. I opened the door, got out, and threw the cigarette butt into the bottle. The cold air made my dizzy head feel more and more awake.

There were mountains on one side of the road, cliffs on the other, and scattered trees above and below. We could see hills behind the mountains, and a village about half a mile away that was looming in a mountain depression. The houses were made of yellow cement and had dim black tiles. It looked to be a relatively poor village.

I stretched, turned on my phone to look at WeChat, and walked along the side of the road.

Xiao Hua and the others had already set out from Beijing. Their first stop was Hangzhou to visit my parents and Uncle Two. After that, they would charter a car to come and visit me. Fuck, I wondered what my parents would say to me. But I wasn't afraid of that. Uncle Two was coming. He must be worried about me.

Xiuxiu's WeChat Moments posted more than twenty new products to be sold before the end of the year. I resisted the impulse to block her and went to give her a few likes.

WeChat didn't exist a few years ago, but now I couldn't do without it.

After walking for five or six minutes, I reached the big truck and asked the driver who was smoking in front of it what had happened. The driver was from the northeast and transported things from Guangzhou to Fujian. The truck was his. He looked disappointed as he told me that he got scared when he hit a bird, and ended up jerking the wheel. Now he wouldn't be happily celebrating the New Year. The truck was stuck here, and he estimated that it would take more than six or seven hours to fix it. It was difficult to get help in a place like this, so I could only offer some words of comfort.

I walked back to our truck and told Fatty to pull over. There was no other choice. We'd have to be our own porters and carry our things over the mountains to the nearby village. Hopefully, we'd be able to find a few

motorcycles there to transport the goods. It was more expensive, but it was better than not being there when my parents arrived.

It was impossible for three people to get out of the car and carry all the New Year's goods. Even if they picked the important ones, it would still be thirty kilograms per person. If it hadn't been for the fact that we were used to carrying heavy things, we would've probably had a hard time celebrating New Year's.

We walked off the road and down the mountain into the sparse hilly forest, headed towards the village.

Visually, it would take about an hour to walk the distance, but it actually took an hour and a half since we had to walk up and down the mountain. We were sweating all over as we walked to the small dirt road towards the village, trampling a lot of the soybeans that had been planted. I was prepared to go into the village and pay the villagers for the damage.

But when we finally approached the village, we panicked. After passing by the earthen houses on the outskirts of the village, we saw that the doors had rotted and collapsed. There were offerings and incense burners full of red paper in front of the doors. They had clearly been there a long time, for all the perishable offerings had rotted away and there were only some unknown things that were covered in dust. The ink from the red faded paper had spread like blood along the ground. If it had only been one house, it would be fine. But every house here had it, which was a bit scary.

I glanced at Poker-Face and found that he looked calm. He obviously felt that things were a little strange, but he wasn't interested. As the three of us despondently walked closer to the village, I prayed again and again that this wasn't a deserted village and that someone here had a motorcycle. When we finally walked into the village, we came to an area with concrete houses, where I was relieved to see a shop.

Fatty immediately went up. A young wife holding a baby and watching TV in a purple down jacket was the one watching the shop. Fatty went up and knocked on the glass counter. "Big sister, I'd like to ask you something."

The young wife turned around and showed a frightened expression when she saw that we were carrying heavy loads and sweating profusely. She started to shout in the local dialect, and an old woman who was probably her mother soon came out of the back room. Fatty put on a simple and honest smile and continued to ask, "We can't climb the mountain anymore. We're hoping to find some motorcycles to take us out. We're willing to pay for them."

"Motorcycles?" The young wife's face was pale as she looked at us expressionlessly. I immediately pretended to be very simple and put on an honest expression as well, hoping to charm the old woman.

The young wife didn't say anything else to us but answered the old woman when she said something in the local dialect. The two of them talked for a while, and it was clear the old woman knew what was going on. The young wife pointed to the other side and said, "My mother says there's a tractor in that alley over there. The owner is willing to transport goods for money."

We immediately nodded and thanked them before fleeing to the alley near the shop. Fatty rubbed his cold sweat and said, "Damn, why was that young girl just like a ghost? She had no charisma at all."

"Maybe the men in this village have gone out to do work. It's too deserted here. There's usually no business, so she's probably always watching TV. It's easy to become expressionless like that." I said, suddenly remembering Wang Meng. "People might come back in the next two days, and then it'll be lively."

As we went further into the deep alley, we could see that the doors on the concrete buildings were rusty. I couldn't tell if there was anyone living in them. After walking for two or three minutes, we suddenly saw a crude wooden sign hanging on the door of an old brick house.

In rural areas, the simplest buildings were yellow mud houses that were often used for storing farm tools and raising livestock. Old brick houses came in second. Most of the older ones were either well preserved, or retained after the landlord's house had been knocked down. Most of the bricks were old blue ones because many of the old walls would bulge or



crack. That was the case with this house. The expansion and deformation of the wooden window frame also proved this point.

The wooden sign was obviously old and had several words painted on it: Lei Meilian Fishing Tackle.

The gate was open and it was dark inside. It was the entrance of a traditional peasant's house and had several benches and a square table placed against the inner wall. There was a calendar of Chairman Mao and the Eight Immortals<sup>57</sup> on the wall, along with some offerings on the square table. The floor was laid with sunken brick and had a lot of bamboo and bamboo shavings on it. There were some tools like iron hoops on the side, which seemed to be used for processing the bamboo.

But other than that, there was nothing else here.

“Is this it?” When Fatty asked me this, I couldn't help but think, *if you ask me, who am I supposed to ask?*

“No tractor?” Fatty stuck his head in. “This place is so fucking poor, will there really be a tractor?” Just as we were thinking about giving up and leaving, we suddenly saw a thin old man come out of the alley close to where we were standing. He was wearing a pair of old glasses and looked at us with a frown.

We also looked at him as we passed by slowly.

The old man's eyes glinted and it was clear to see he wasn't afraid of anything. He watched us pass by intently, as if he were looking at a thief.

The situation was really awkward, but Fatty whispered that we should leave quickly and not look at him. When we passed the old man, we could see that he was actually following us. Every time we moved forward, he would follow closely behind.

“Is it a robbery?” Fatty asked. “Did he get a look at our pork ribs? I told you we shouldn't flaunt our wealth!”

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<sup>57</sup> A group of legendary “immortals” in Chinese mythology. Each immortal's power can be transferred to a vessel that can bestow life or destroy evil. More info [here](#)

“This bastard looks almost ninety and is still robbing? How weak do you think we are?” I retorted. “Don’t fucking jump to conclusions. Maybe he thinks we’re thieves.”

“Would a thief steal a hundred and twenty kilograms worth of stuff and put it on his back? Such a thief is way too inspiring.” Fatty spit out.

We were just preparing to speed up when the old man suddenly opened his mouth and asked in broken Mandarin: “Friends on the same path, can you do me a favor since you happened to pass by?”<sup>58</sup>

We paused for a moment and then stopped, noticing that the old man was looking at Poker-Face instead of us. He walked up to him and said, “Looking at the way you walk, you do *that*, right?”

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<sup>58</sup> I think this is a code for grave robbers to recognize each other.

## Chapter 5.2 Old Man

Over the years, it wasn't very common for people to ask us this kind of question on the road, especially in code. But the old man's code was only half right, and we couldn't really understand it. The way Little Brother walked was no different from that of ordinary people, so if this old man could tell just by that, then he must have also been a grave robber and couldn't be ignored.

The old man's Fujian Mandarin was actually very difficult to understand. It would have been completely impossible to understand the complicated dialect system here if I hadn't been eating and drinking with the locals in the village during this period of time. But for the convenience of narration, I'll still use the Mandarin pronunciation to record what the old man said.

If it was back then, we might have also responded with the answering code. But now the wind was calm and the clouds were clear. I didn't care about grave robbing or the old demon under the mountain. Moreover, this line was very different from the past. Many young people had long since stopped using these old routines.

Little Brother naturally understood and shook his head at the old man while saying, "No." With that, he turned to leave.

The old man froze for a moment, obviously not expecting to get such an answer. Fatty hooked his arm around Poker-Face's shoulder and secretly gave him a thumbs up. "Very good, you've got to maintain your image."

I chuckled to myself and turned to follow them, but the old man was in good health. He took a few steps and cut us off while still talking to Little Brother, "Young man, I know I'm not mistaken. The layman can't see it, but I've helped those in this business for more than fifty years. I recognized that scent on your body as soon as I smelled it. I know what you do."

Fatty and I looked at each other. I couldn't help but think that the old man was really adamant. "Old man," Fatty said, "we're just passing

through here. We're in a rush to get back for the New Year, so we can't help you."

The old man gave Fatty an angry look and said, "Your boss didn't speak, so who are you to get in the way of people making money? What kind of unorthodox livelihood are you making?!"

The old man spoke so self-righteously that Fatty suddenly became angry, "Which one of your fucking eyes can't tell that I'm qualified? I've been to three of the Five Sacred Mountains—" <sup>59</sup> I immediately stopped Fatty and listened to the old man say, "My friend, go inside and take a look. You won't regret it. There's nothing I can do; otherwise, I wouldn't want to share such a good deal with you."

I felt my heart thump and said to myself, *what are the chances of meeting a random grave robber after taking a shortcut to find a motorcycle?* It was a pity we had washed our hands of this outlaw lifestyle; otherwise, I would have definitely joined in.

I was just about to refuse when I turned to Fatty and saw that his eyes were fierce and his face had an "Open for business!" kind of look on it. I grabbed him by the shoulder and reminded him, "There aren't many opportunities to enjoy this life once you've made it out of the business."

Fatty sighed. The old man looked surprised when he realized that I was the one in charge of our little group.

I wasn't interested and wanted to reject him directly, but the old man raised his hand in a gesture for me not to speak, "I'll tell you what, I'll help you find a motorcycle if you'll go in and have a cup of tea. I'll explain things to you and if you're still not interested, then I won't insist. I'm familiar with this village. If I don't tell the people to show you the way, you can only go by yourselves. The road isn't so easy to walk, so you should think it through very carefully."

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<sup>59</sup> It's an idiom I think. The five mountains refer to Mt Tai (泰山) in Shandong, Mt Hua (華山) in Shaanxi, Mt Heng (衡山) in Hunan, Mt Heng (恆山) in Shanxi, and Mt Song (嵩山) in Henan. According to Baidu, there's a theory that the 3 mountains refers to the Chinese ancient myth of the legendary three dragon veins: the Himalayas, the Kunlun Mountains, and the Tianshan Mountains (Queen of the West's domain I think). I'm pretty sure Fatty's saying he's been to all three of those, so he's plenty experienced.

The three of us looked at each other. Although it sounded funny, this statement really grabbed our attention.

I looked at the old man coldly. I was no longer the kind of person who would find this kind of situation very interesting. Instead, I'd rather forget about it entirely. But my waist was screaming, and the pressure of my back joints rubbing against the pork ribs made me feel like they were going to explode.

After thinking about it for a few seconds, I finally compromised. For the sake of getting some motorcycles, I gave up my dignity as a man who had washed his hands of this business. I nodded and said, "Please arrange some motorcycles. Thank you, uncle."

The three of us followed the old man into the old house with the "Lei Meilian Fishing Tackle" sign. It turned out that this old brick house was his, and I wondered if his name was Lei Meilian. It wouldn't be surprising since the surname Lei was one of the most popular surnames of the She ethnic group in the nearby area.

There was a door to the left of the Eight Immortals table, behind which was an inner room that should have led to the backyard. Most old houses had this kind of structure.

He took us into the inner room and turned on the incandescent lamp. Even though the gloomy room was now filled with warm light, it still felt very cold. He then went and dialed a number on the landline, speaking a few words in the local dialect to help us find a motorcycle. We took the opportunity to observe our surroundings and found that there was a bed placed against the wall, while all the other walls were covered in bamboo poles. They were all thick and thin and hung in several layers. When I looked carefully, I found that they were actually fishing rods.

I liked fishing, but when I looked at these fishing rods, I had some doubts. I could see that even though they were made of bamboo, they still gave off a different kind of feeling. I turned to Poker-Face and saw that he was also looking at these fishing rods silently, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

There was a tea table beside the bed, with a tea set that was commonly found in Fujian. It was well known throughout the whole country that Fujian people loved drinking tea. The old man's tea set wasn't valuable, but it was definitely exquisite. There were a few low seats beside the tea table, so we sat down, put down our loads, and started to relax. After drinking a few cups of hot tea, our cold cheeks finally started to diffuse with color again.

"I see you're in the fishing rod business." Fatty said as he looked around at the bamboo poles on the wall. He was in a good mood once he saw that the motorcycle issue was being taken care of.

"No, these fishing rods are all mine." The old man said. "To tell you the truth, I'm not a native. I've been in this village for twenty years. I came here to catch a fish."

## Chapter 5.3 Eight Hooks

“Fishing?” Fatty took a sip of tea. “Twenty years? What kind of fish? After twenty years, you could’ve even caught the Dragon King<sup>60</sup> by now.”

The old man was enjoying himself and looked at the walls lined with fishing rods. “These twenty years weren’t spent on fishing, but on trying to find the right bait. That fish won’t be hooked with just any old bait.”

I had heard a few legends from some fishermen before. I hesitated, lit a cigarette, and then said, “I’ve fished before. I’m no expert, but I’m pretty good. I’ve heard many of the most skilled foreign fishermen make special bait, each with their own unique secrets.”

Fatty nodded. “I’ve also fished before and still fry fish. Tell me what you have, old man. Don’t lie to us. We’ve been deceived for more than ten years. We can’t afford to play around.”

The old man wasn’t in any hurry and made another pot of tea. My heart thumped as I wondered if the old man had arranged it so that the motorcycles would come after we had talked enough. Shit, I didn’t have anything prepared back at the village. If my parents arrived first and I wasn’t there, Uncle Two was bound to give me shit for it.

When the old man saw me anxiously looking out, he patted me and said, “I see the situation. You’re the boss, but the boss shouldn’t be so impatient. Look at this little brother, he’s not in any rush.”

He pointed to Poker-Face, who was still looking at the fishing rods. He had been so quiet recently that I was a little scared he had some kind of mental problem or something.

“If he gets anxious, you’d be scared to death, uncle,” I said to the old man. “And I’m of the same mind. Just say what you need to say. It’s the New Year and our elders are waiting for us at home.”

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<sup>60</sup> Aka the Dragon God. Chinese water and weather god. He’s regarded as the dispenser of rain as well as the zoomorphic representation of the yang masculine power of generation (whatever that means). More info [here](#)

There was a faint look in the old man's eyes. After a moment of silence, he sighed, "Well, to be honest, I was hoping you could help me rob a grave. There's something in that coffin that can be used as special bait."

Fatty and I looked at each other, and Fatty coughed, "Amazing, old man! So is this 'bait' a code that's really a double entendre? To be honest, this fat man," Fatty patted his chest, "is the last illiterate in New China. I didn't understand it at all."

"It's not a code. I meant what I said." The old man said seriously. "That's why I said you should listen to me until the end. Otherwise, it would sound really ridiculous to laymen like you."

Fatty and I looked at each other again. He gave me a wink that meant: endure it for the motorcycles.

I sighed in my heart and prepared myself for a long speech. Fatty said to the old man, "Ok. Take your time and tell us. We'll rest here."

After that, the old man spent two hours telling us about his experience.

In hindsight, it was very interesting to hear about this experience, so I might as well lay it all out here. I've sorted out the narrative, but you first need to have a basic understanding of fishing.

Fishing is a very old sport that was widely praised as a kind of elegant activity in ancient poetry. According to the earliest legends, fishing had been a very common sport in Jiang Ziya's<sup>61</sup> time. It wasn't only done to support people's livelihood, but also served as a good leisurely activity.

The act of fishing itself was often depicted in poetry, but it had a far-reaching meaning. People who have actually fished can probably understand what I'm trying to say. Fishing is basically a game of wits between you and the fish.

People's IQs were much higher than a fish's, so if we only talk about catching skills, then fish are definitely no match for humans. But the

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<sup>61</sup> Aka Jiang Taigong (c. 1100 BC, dates of birth and death unknown), partly mythical sage advisor to King Wen of Zhou and purported author of "Six Secret Strategic Teachings", one of the Seven Military Classics of ancient China. He's apparently well-known for being a fisherman. More info [here](#)



whole fishing process cleverly balances the rules of the game. With fish swimming underneath the water's surface, people can only fight with a very simple fishing rod. It's like hunting in a dense fog.

This kind of charm has greatly been weakened in such an information-rich modern era, but if we imagine that it's a different world underwater—like when the ancients first fished and didn't know what they would catch—then the curiosity and expectation are very exciting.

The old man's name was Lei Benchang, and his nickname was Eight Hooks. In the fishing industry, he was basically on the same level as the middle three clans in the Mystic Nine.

Lei Benchang loved fishing, but he didn't like pond fishing. His circle mainly made a living by betting on fish. Fishing enthusiasts set off at sunrise and returned at sunset to place their bets. Among the people in Hubei, the bets that were placed were usually huge. In modern times, the fun of fishing had been replaced by the fun of gambling.

It wasn't until twenty years ago—maybe more than that, the old man himself couldn't remember clearly—when he was talking with friends about fishing that he overheard something about a strange murder that happened in a mountain stream in Fujian.

At that time, a group of fishing friends hiked to the mountainous area of Fujian and caught a strange fish in one of the mountain streams. Since they were wade fishing at the time (i.e., walking deep into the mountain stream and fishing during summer), no one saw what had happened when the accident occurred. Three people died in quick succession, and their bodies were dragged into the mountain stream, never to be found again.

At that time, Lei Benchang knew that the mountain stream had to be connected to an underground river; otherwise, they wouldn't have gone wade fishing. He could imagine what the bottom of the mountain stream looked like. There must have been a lot of large, deep holes at the bottom of the mountain stream. Moreover, the stream was very wide, indicating that it had been formed when the mountain split. If you didn't wade in, then you couldn't cast your line in the deepest areas.

This group of young men wanted to catch the big fish at the bottom of the stream. Sometimes the fish found in underground mountain rivers were as big as monsters, but Lei Benchang had never heard of any fish that could drag people down and kill them. At that time, he was just like a martial arts expert who had heard of a possible opponent. He suddenly became very curious.

## Chapter 5.4

Lei Benchang used his previous experiences to predict the whole thing. The stream had been formed by rain and spring water accumulating in the sunken parts of the mountain. Some of these sunken parts were even deeper than ordinary lakes. The downward flow of water eventually connected with the water channels and underground rivers inside the mountain. The fish hiding in this place had a long life, so it was easy for the so-called “Fish King” to come about.

It was very difficult to catch the Fish King. For one thing, it rarely swam up to the surface. Unless the weather was special, the air pressure made the oxygen at the bottom of the water very thin, so special fishing lines and hooks were needed to catch the Fish King when it was at the bottom of the stream. Second, deep pools that had Fish Kings were generally protected by the locals. This was especially the case in a place like Fujian, where the people felt very strongly about it. Many deep pools and streams with Fish Kings even had temples or ancestral halls built by them, and sacrifices would be sunk to the bottom of the pool during festivals.

The kind of fish that could kill people and drag them to the bottom of the deep stream definitely wasn't small. And considering the fact that the people were able to fish freely, it must have been an unattended wild pool in the mountains. The only thing Lei Benchang couldn't figure out was whether the fish in the pool had drowned those people, or if there was something else going on. As a result, he made some inquiries.

At that time, the fishing association was still a well-organized organization. He used his connections to find one of the people who had been at the scene and spent a lot of money to persuade him to talk. Once he did, he heard something from that man's mouth that he just couldn't understand.

Those three people who had died consecutively after casting their fishing lines had completely disappeared into the bottom of the pool. They had all been alive before they were dragged to the bottom of the pool, and they had all said that they saw something.

They clearly stated that it wasn't a fish, but from their expressions, it seemed like an aquatic plant was moving or something. It must have floated up from the bottom of the pool.

Lei Benchang was very excited when he heard this. Although he didn't know what kind of Fish King it was, big fish found at the bottom of deep pools that had aquatic plants on their scales were probably about the same age as a human adult. Legend had it that the scales of this kind of fish would turn into armor plating after thirty years, which was called keratinization in academic circles. The ancients said that this was a transitional step before the fish turned into a dragon. After the scales turned into armor plating, it was easy for aquatic plants to grow on them like a parasite without corroding the fish's skin.

So, he took his fishing tackle and followed the path the man had given him. When he got to this village, he found the pool and started trying to catch the Fish King. But twenty years later, he had fished in all the deep pools here, and even tried to use a float to draw the entire mountain range's underground waterway. After using countless bait, he didn't even see the shadow of the fish.

Fatty and I were both well acquainted with the ways of the world. As soon as we heard this, we looked at each other and listened for what the old man was really trying to say. For twenty years, the old man had stayed in this village to catch a fish.

I had some doubts in my heart. It was impossible for people to pursue something for so long after constant failure. It probably wasn't that he couldn't catch the fish, but that there was something else keeping him in this village.

Fatty voiced our questions, "I'll take the liberty of asking you why you're so persistent, and what happened while you were fishing?" For example, did you accidentally fuck the village head's daughter or something?"

When Lei Benchang glanced at him, it was clear to see that he didn't like Fatty very much. "Even if the village head fell for me, he couldn't keep me here." He said coldly. "Why I've stayed here has nothing to do with you. I

just want your help now. I've been strategically approaching this fish, and now I'm one step away."

I watched as the old man's eyes dimmed and knew that he had something on his mind. I motioned for Fatty to back down and stop asking questions.

After hearing everything, I was closer to believing that the old man's words were true. Although the content was somewhat bizarre, I could easily tell whether someone was speaking the truth or not.

There were all kinds of idiots in the world. Some people would do anything for a puzzle, so why couldn't that be the same for fishing? It wasn't all that surprising.

Fatty rubbed his hands. "Uncle, you just said you wanted us to rob a tomb for the bait inside. What is it?"

"Do you know something called dragon coffin fungus?" Lei Benchang asked.

I jerked my head up. Dragon coffin fungus was a folk name for what was essentially just lingzhi<sup>62</sup> growing in the coffin. It was said that lingzhi grew over the corpse's face as a result of the corpse's mouth spewing blood after it was buried. There were legends about it everywhere, and it was used as a patented Chinese medicine. But it was so rare that no one really knew what it was.

I looked at Poker-Face, but he was still unresponsive. It seemed that he had completely lost interest in these terms and was just looking at his phone. Fatty and I had spent a long time cultivating his phone skills. His fingers were very long, so he had to use a different method to operate the phone compared to others.

This feeling was very different from that of the past. I often felt resistant to it, but this was what the times had become. When I went to Yanyuan to pick up some bronze pieces, some local "villagers" who were former

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<sup>62</sup> Lingzhi (aka Ganoderma lingzhi) is also known as reishi. It's a polypore fungus that's red-varnished and has a kidney-shaped cap. The peripherally inserted stem gives it a distinct fan-like appearance.

grave robbers were all using smartphones. The bronze wares would never be given to you directly but would be shown to you first.

The time when I went to the Seven Star Lu Palace was really over.

“This thing is bait?” Fatty asked.

I came back to my senses, flicked the ash off my cigarette, and frowned, “What’s your basis?”

“If I hadn’t found something during these past twenty years, there’s no way I would have persisted for so long. It’s because I found a local fishing book.” Lei Benchang turned and took out a photocopy of a book.

Most of China’s ancient books about fish came from Fujian, so it was normal for them to keep local fishing records. Lei Benchang’s fishing book had an unknown origin, but he flipped to a record detailing a story about a local village that fished with nets. The so-called ground net was a special fishing net that was thrown into an underground river to catch the fish there. It was nothing new. There were detailed records in 1965’s edition of “One Hundred Thousand Whys”.<sup>63</sup>

But there was a part in this record that had a few words describing a kind of fish, especially the kind of fish that had aquatic plants on its scales. As mentioned above, you needed dragon coffin fungus bait to catch this kind of fish because the fish would: “Eat dead bodies all year round.” It loved the strong stench that came from corpses. Dragon coffin fungus fresh out of the coffin was extremely pungent, so it was definitely suitable for this.

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<sup>63</sup> It’s a popular science book series in China, mostly intended for children. As of 2013, it’s on its 6<sup>th</sup> edition (according to Baidu). There are over 500 versions of books with this same title from various publishing houses so Shanghai Children’s Press couldn’t trademark their science-y version. More info [here](#).

## Chapter 5.5 Underground Lake

Many years ago, Lei Benchang met a grave robber here, who told him that there was an ancient tomb in the pine forest at the back of the mountain. The dragon coffin fungus in the tomb had already started growing, so he could take it any time in the next three years. He was getting older and older, and he didn't want to use this kind of method, but this might be his only chance to catch the fish alive.

I felt like I already knew what was going on after listening to him, including what he did and didn't want to say. Before, he said that he had worked as a "lantern lighter" for more than fifty years, so he knew what business Poker-Face was in as soon as he saw him.

"Lantern lighter" was one of the codes used in the Central Plains, which referred to the person in charge of distributing the spoils after a tomb had been robbed. A few decades ago, there were a lot of things in ancient tombs, so each participant would take their distribution of the spoils depending on the risks and their experience and duties. This proportion had to be agreed upon before the operation took place.

Grave robbers usually had a low level of education, so they used code words like "plum blossom", "cutlassfish", or "leather train" to divide the goods into classes.

Many people would renege on the agreement once the good items were taken out, so the need for a lantern lighter arose. In fact, once the grave robbers had reached an agreement, they would tell the lantern lighters their codes such as "plum blossom", "cutlassfish", "leather train", or "big old K". In this way, if someone wanted to renege on the agreement, they would need to find the lantern lighter to inspect and verify the goods. The lantern lighter couldn't actually do anything about it, but they would know who had broken the agreement. Whenever someone went to hire these experts in the future, they would often ask for the lantern lighter's opinion.

In fact, it was a personal credit scoring system.

After more than fifty years, this lantern lighter had seen many grave robbers, so he could practically identify them with a glance. Fatty told me that it was like a brothel owner spotting a beautiful prostitute in the crowd. It only took one look. Those in the underworld definitely gave off a different aura compared to ordinary people.

I stared at the old man a little ruefully. Whenever I saw such an old-timer in the early years, my legs would tremble and I would feel that the old expert's gestures were oppressive. Now, seeing that the old man in this village was actually an old grave robber—whose mannerisms and conversation while drinking tea weren't that bad—I only felt an unknown pity in my heart.

*You've gone further than them, so you don't need to be afraid at all.* I said to myself.

"Can you believe this ancient book?" I flipped through the copied fish records. "You don't know where it is on the back mountain, but say it's not too far from here. Why don't you go pick it up yourself? If the tomb's already been robbed, it shouldn't be dangerous."

Lei Benchang sighed, shook his head, and said, "Although I know a lot of grave robbers, I can't do it myself. In fact, I've begged many people in recent years, but they were unwilling to help me. These kinds of people won't help unless they get something out of it."

It was obvious the ancient tomb had already been robbed. If it were me, I wouldn't want to go the extra mile just to help him dig up a coffin fungus, either. But he had just said that there was a good thing for us, so I asked him what it was.

The old man suddenly looked at the door, got up, and closed it. He then went to the back room, closed that door, and then told us to help him move all the fishing rods on one of the walls. We were surprised to see that the wall was covered in many lines.

The old man's handwriting was actually very good. The lines were annotated, and some of them could easily be understood at a glance. Some hills had been drawn with distance markers written in the old



man's handwriting on the sides. A lot of rivers had been drawn under those mountains, but I looked at them and knew that most of them weren't actually rivers aboveground. Most of the black lines had been blackened into many strange patterns, marking the underground rivers.

"I fish in the underground river here. In order to find out what direction it flows in, I tag the fish and throw them back. For more than ten years, the fish I've thrown back in this pool have been caught in other pools. The farthest distance is more than thirty kilometers. I've marked all the logical relationships among them. They're here, which is where most of the underground rivers lead to." The old man was very excited, just like a kid showing off the porn DVD he had hidden.

The three of us got up and stood in a row in front of the wall. We copied Poker-face and put both hands in our pockets as we looked at everything. The black lines were like blackened veins, and there were more than a dozen rows of numbers written on them.

"What's this?"

"This is the time." The old man said. "The fish released in this pool would pass through the underground river and reach the next pool. I was determining how many twists and turns the underground river has. It's very strange. Some pools are only one or two kilometers away, but it takes several months for the fish to get there. Other pools are more than thirty kilometers apart, but the fish would appear in them overnight."

"Is it the current?" I asked.

"I thought the same thing at first, but it wasn't right. After I released some of them in a deep pool thirty kilometers away, I could still catch them in another pool further upstream after only a day. If it was because of the current, it should be a one-way instead of a two-way. Later, I discovered that there might be another explanation. Was it possible that all the deep pools weren't connected by underground rivers, but by something else?"

He pointed to the center of the wall. There was a big circle, which had been completely painted black. Almost all the underground rivers were connected to this black circle.

“What is this thing?” Fatty asked.

“This is an underground lake.” The old man continued. “But this isn’t a natural underground lake, it’s artificial.”

## Chapter 5.6 Where to Stay

“Just think about it. The underground river’s current is fast, but it can only be rushing in one direction. If there are two fast currents flowing in opposite directions between the two pools, then it must not be an underground river, but a huge lake. There’s a circular current at the bottom of the lake, just like when you’re stirring soup. So, I used these two pools that are thirty kilometers away from each other as the focal points of the two currents.”

We watched the old man fumble around under the tea table, pull out a marker, and start marking the walls. He looked just like a madman. It was really similar to what I had done when I deduced everything before, which was a little disconcerting.

“I drew a circle with a diameter of thirty kilometers and figured out how all the deep pools in this circle worked. But there were two strange pools in the middle that were only a few kilometers apart. No matter what I tossed in there, it would take a few months for it to appear at the bottom of another pool.” The old man tapped his marker on two of the deep pools that were very close to each other. “I was puzzled and kept asking myself why it was like this.”

“Why?” Fatty asked.

“I’ve thought about countless possibilities, but it’s really amazing. It’s the simplest possibility, which I never thought of before. I’ve been thinking about the water flow’s direction for many years. The underground river here is like a spider’s web. I’ve made a lot of assumptions, but I’ve never been right. Who would’ve thought it was because—”

“Because there’s a wall.” Poker-Face quietly interrupted him.

The old man choked and could do nothing but stare as Poker-Face took his marker and drew a curved line between the two pool centers on the wall.

Now there was a thirty-kilometer diameter circle with a curved line in the middle, and two pools on either side of the line.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Fatty said surprised. “It’s a Taiji.”<sup>64</sup>

The old man looked at Poker-Face, “Correct. I told you that the lake below is artificial.”

“Which pool did the deaths occur in?” Poker-Face asked.

The old man pointed to one of the Taiji’s dots and said, “Here.”

“What day did it happen?”

The old man was a little hard-pressed to remember and stood still for a long time before giving a date in 1995. Poker-Face looked at me, and I knew what he wanted to do. I calculated silently and said, “Yihai year.”<sup>65</sup> With that said, I took out my phone and began checking the information. It all became clear once I did. “There was a rare spell of high temperatures in Fujian during the Yihai year. The water evaporated and the underground lake’s water level dropped, forcing the fish up from the bottom of the deep pool.”

Poker-Face said, “After the high temperatures, there were heavy rains in the mountains. When the water level rose again, the fish went back. You can’t catch this fish again unless the temperature is as high as it was that year.”

The old man looked at Poker-Face with bright eyes. “Little brother, I already know everything you’ve just said. I want to go fishing. I want to—” He pointed to the line with his marker. “Since the fish are stopped by the wall, it means that the wall reaches above the underground lake’s surface. I want to go fishing on the wall, and I want you to send me down. I don’t know who designed this underground Taiji, but there must be a mystery behind it. And whatever comes of that mystery is all yours. I just want to go fishing.” After that, the old man looked at me again, “Is it a deal? Does everyone agree?”

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<sup>64</sup> Chinese cosmological term for the “Supreme Ultimate” state of undifferentiated absolute and infinite potential, the oneness before duality, from which Yin and Yang originate. Basically, looks like this [pic](#) which I’m sure everyone is familiar with.

<sup>65</sup> Yihai= 12<sup>th</sup> year B12 of the 60-year cycle. So 1995

Poker-Face looked at me, and I asked the old man faintly, "If it's like you said, you know you're basically not coming back, right? You're so old."

"At my age, I no longer have the luxury of time to think about where I can come back to. What I need to think about is, where do I want to stay?" The old man looked at the drawings on the wall as if he were looking at his home. "You're the same. One day, you'll be considering where you want to stay as well!"

I looked at Fatty and then at Poker-Face, and told myself that it was different. There was one person here who didn't need to think about it.

I snapped my fingers, and they followed me out the door, "Don't worry, we'll take a vote."

Once the three of us were outside, I rubbed my face and asked the other two, "What do you think?"

Fatty said, "Your parents and Big Hua are stuck on the highway. The news said that there was an eighteen-car collision. We still have some time. We just have to send the old man down before your parents arrive. But I figure it'll probably be difficult. We don't have diving equipment.

"And the most important thing," Fatty continued, "is that this underground lake wall definitely wasn't built by ordinary people. There might not even be treasure there. Even though we always manage to make a narrow escape, it's New Year's. It doesn't seem worthwhile."

I nodded to Fatty and said, "You've grown. So, you mean we should refuse?"

Fatty shook his head. "I mean, you two shouldn't go. It's not worthwhile. I'll go with him. I don't have a big family like you anyways. The old man is going to die on New Year's Day, so this admirable spirit should be fulfilled. If we're lucky enough and this is just a trifling matter, let's open a sauna in the village. That'll make things better."

When I looked at Fatty, I knew he wasn't being honest. He was always courting disaster, so his heart was probably itching to do something. But the main thing was that Fatty couldn't stand to see the old man just die

here, and it was the same for me. We could've still run away if it was before, but now we couldn't leave when we saw the old man crazy like this. If he sank headlong into the deep pool during New Year's Day, there was no way we could claim we didn't bear any responsibility.

Fatty started to comfort me when he saw that my face wasn't good. "Don't worry, I'll take him to that place to get a look at it. He can't go down if we don't have any equipment, so he should give up after a few days. If we don't spend time trying to figure this out, there's no way for him to go down, right? Go back and celebrate the New Year."

It was useless to persuade people like Lei Benchang, who had a demon in their hearts. He almost reminded me of the ninety-year-old Chen Pi Ah Si. It turned out that they were quite similar. I was feeling irritated at this time, which was an emotion I hadn't experienced for a long time after returning from Changbai.

I shouldn't have gotten out of the truck earlier. There definitely wouldn't have been so much trouble if I had stayed in the vehicle.

Just as I was starting to get angry, Poker-Face said, "You can get down there using a road; otherwise, the wall couldn't be built."

Fatty looked at Poker-Face in surprise, not expecting him to be on his side. "Two masters," I said. "Today's the New Year. While you're pitying the old man, can't you also pity me?"

Poker-Face didn't answer me. I took a deep breath and Fatty handed me a cigarette and said, "Wu Xie, we'll grow old, too. At that time, where do we want to stay? Little Brother will accompany us then as well."

## Chapter 5.7 New Year's Celebration

We looked out at the rolling hills from the edge of the pine forest at the back of the mountain. I sighed deeply in my heart and thought, *this is Fujian*. I never thought that I would re-examine the landscape here with this mentality.

There were endless mountains and hills in Fujian, which really fit the saying that there were eight mountains, one river, and one field<sup>66</sup> here. We could see Fujian's topography clearly from where we were, along with the Hengshan Mountains that stretched out before us with no end in sight. Most of these mountains were neither tall nor short, but they were all similar in shape and difficult to distinguish from one another. Other than the numerous mountains, the water system in Fujian was also amazing. Most of Fujian's water actually originated within its own borders. China's water system was closely related to Chinese dragon veins and feng shui, but Fujian's system often originated within its own mountain areas and directly flowed into the sea. Essentially, its feng shui had its own vein. I checked the information on the internet and found Xu Shen's Han Dynasty dictionary called "Shuowen Jiezi"<sup>67</sup>, which said: "Fujian, Southeast region, snake species". It defined the Fujian people as snake-worshippers. I found it interesting that there were seven snake tribes here before, but there was no mention of any strange fish.

At this time of year, the snakes were also freezing to death.

I lit a cigarette and shivered. "Let's get to work."

Fatty pulled out the hammer drill, put on work gloves, and looked at the small forest behind him that was full of Chinese red pines. The mountains near here were covered in shrubs and small forests. These red pines had grown very well and seemed to be more than twelve years old.

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<sup>66</sup> It doesn't specifically refer to a certain mountain, river, or field, but refers to Fujian Province as a whole (because there are more mountains and less land). According to Baidu, mountains and hills account for more than 80% of the total area of the province.

<sup>67</sup> Shuowen Jiezi is the original Han dynasty Chinese character dictionary with 10,516 entries, authored by Xu Shen in 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It was the first to analyze the structure of the characters and to give the rationale behind them. More info [here](#)

They had been artificially planted.

Twelve years ago, someone planted these trees here without any rhyme or reason. The reason I say this is because they were too close to the village. There had to be stone slabs in the ancient tomb under the forest, which needed to be drilled or blasted through. But you would be captured and killed if you were caught blasting directly at the back of the mountain. If this afforestation started more than ten years ago as a cover, then this wasn't an ordinary thief.

Without the proper equipment, Fatty had to rely on the silly drill. Fortunately, the forest covered up our activities so we weren't afraid to do it. Before long, Fatty found a place, shoveled away some of the soil, split through the fake soil covering the surface, and exposed the grave robbers' tunnel below.

I took a deep breath. The tunnel was old and had clearly been made a few years ago, so it was probably all empty.

It was a really crude job.

The three of us did rock-paper-scissors, and Fatty ended up losing. He cursed, took off his coat, and poked his cigarette lighter into the grave robbers' tunnel. I wanted to give Poker-Face a fist bump, but he looked at my fist and then at me again, not knowing why I wanted to continue playing since the winner had already been determined. In the end, he slowly made a "paper" gesture.

Fatty went down to open the coffin and scolded the other party for not doing a good job. I dropped a lunch box down and then pulled it back up with a rope. The whole area immediately filled with an unbearable stench. I covered my mouth, noticing that the lunch box's lid wouldn't fit and there was a lot of yellow juice squeezing out of it. The dragon coffin fungus was inside, but I wasn't interested in opening it.

Fatty crawled back out and packed it in a plastic bag while I washed my hands with mineral water. The two of us had frustrated looks on our faces.



When we went back to the village, we saw that the old man had been preparing his fishing rod. He was carefully selecting the weapon he'd use for the final battle by swinging it and forcefully bending it to test the tension. I was intrigued by his focus and went over to get a closer look. The old man had first chosen some conventional carbon and bamboo ones, and then I saw one that was made of steel.

In fact, the other fishing rods were very strong in their own rights, so I couldn't help looking at the steel one in doubt. Nowadays, some fishing rods—especially those used for catching large fish—were stronger than steel bars. This steel fishing rod was very thick, and I couldn't hold it for long even though my arm strength had vastly improved compared to before.

A fishing rod that couldn't be lifted was useless.

I asked the old man what it was for, but he only smiled mysteriously and didn't answer me. I saw him expend a lot of effort to lift the fishing rod to his waist and place it on one of those fishing rod belts I had seen before.

A lot of yellow cloth had been tied to the fishing rod, which made it look like a magic weapon. I felt a jolt in my heart as I realized that this steel fishing rod wasn't used for normal fishing, but for fishing corpses out of the Yellow River.

Was the old man trying to catch the bodies of those people who had sunk into the deep pool?

The old man's equipment box was very heavy. After opening it, I could see that there were at least a few hundred hooks ranging from single hooks, double hooks, anchor hooks, and bomb hooks. There were all kinds of things I could name, and many others that I had never seen before. In addition, there were various kinds of bait and materials to make fish food. The hooks were very old and had been used for a long time, but they were oiled and well maintained. There was also something in the box that could be used to wash away the oil, for fear that the fishy smell would affect the taste of the bait.

The old man had to spend a long time preparing, so we copied the address of the motorcycle group he had found for us. His status in the village wasn't low. He not only helped us transport our things back to our village but also picked up our truck and helped me get back to the village so that I could meet my guests. Since there wasn't enough time, we made an appointment to start on the seventh day. That way, we could go back and celebrate the New Year first, which somewhat relieved me.

When we said goodbye to the old man, he gave us more than a dozen pieces of bacon. We then got on the motorcycles and finally rushed back to the village before the big troops arrived.

I almost immediately forgot about the old man as Fatty and I got to work. We boiled water, cut radishes, and washed the meat while Poker-Face killed the chicken with a knife. Upon hearing the aunt next door scolding: "That's my chicken!" I quickly told Fatty to give her some money.

The aunt next door conducted business in Wuyishan City and had a lot of opinions about me. This was all because after I came to the village, I was the most well-behaved citizen and stole her thunder. Her husband worked in the town's finance bureau, so she was regarded as the family member of a government official. She always went against me no matter what.

I looked at the time on my phone and calmed down. My magic weapon this time was bamboo shoots because the ones here tasted very good. My parents loved bamboo shoots, Uncle Two loved chickens, and Xiao Hua and Xiuxiu liked salty things. The boiled eggs with pork ribs and white soup here should be good with some wine. Wine, wine, wine.

I turned pale and suddenly realized that I had forgotten to buy wine.

"Fatty!! It's over!!" I rushed out and saw Fatty quarreling with the aunt next door, "Fuck you. You're bullying my pretty boy, right? How can you prove that this chicken is yours? Will it respond when you call it?"

I went up and immediately apologized, "Sister, I'm sorry we killed your chicken." I motioned to Fatty: this elder sister must have a gift of wine

from someone in her house. No matter what it looks like, I have to ask for it even if it's in a clay jar.

## Chapter 5.8 Running Account (Part 1)

Fatty immediately changed his tune as soon as he heard that there was no alcohol since it was also a big deal for him to not have any alcohol during New Year's. He smiled and said to the elder sister, "You're lucky, elder sister. It doesn't matter if it doesn't respond to you. Do you know why? Because it told me that you're its mother, ah no, its leader."

The two of us went back and forth and put on a show that we wanted to compensate her for the chicken but didn't have any change, so she should add a few bottles of wine. Alas, the price of a bottle of wine was too high, so I would lose a bit of money after everything was calculated. In the end, we successfully made the aunt feel that she had hit us hard with only a chicken and a few bottles of wine.

The taste of local wine was different from one jar to the next, and the brewing method depended entirely on one's imagination. Some people added things indiscriminately, while the fermentation time and temperature set by others were entirely dependent on their moods. As a result, the taste after opening the jar couldn't be guaranteed, and could only be used as a temporary measure. But there was one thing that wouldn't change—the alcohol concentration wouldn't be low. For me, this was enough. We could get drunk quickly and forget all about the troubles.

After Poker-Face removed the chicken feathers and internal organs, I washed the organs, cut them into diced pieces to make stir-fried chicken giblets, and put a little pepper on them. My grandmother especially loved cooking this dish because it tasted absolutely delicious.

Fatty was standing close by in "chef mode" as he boiled the tofu and vegetables in a pot of water. He opened one of the wine jars directly and poured himself a small bowl. After drinking and stirring the pot, he said to me, "Hey, when I went down that grave robbers' tunnel just now, I felt like I was coming home. Do you think we should display our skills for old time's sake? You have to know that we'll lose our status in the underworld if we don't do anything after a while."

“Are you a weasel? What do you mean you feel like going home when you go down a grave robbers’ tunnel?” I asked. “Stop eating and go find a wife to plant your seed in as soon as possible. At this rate, you won’t even be able to reproduce.”

“Hey now, Mr. Naive, when is it your place to doubt my reproductive abilities? Let me tell you, this Fat Master has beat three of the Five Sacred Mountains and planted seeds all over China. Do you know why the sea is salty? It’s because—”

“It’s because you were bored!” I said angrily. Fatty fished out the tofu and vegetables, picked up a rag, wrapped it around the pot, and started to stir-fry. It was very loud, so I didn’t catch what he said after that.

I actually knew better than anyone why Fatty said this. It was just like those people who suddenly liked taking pictures once they reached a certain age. They felt like their youth was about to disappear and their pure beauty was about to be lost. The stage of “there’s still time, but I’m starting to see the loss” was the most confusing one, so people subconsciously wanted to keep their beauty during this period. Fatty was the same. Taking risks made him feel like he was still young. Even though his skills were still top-notch, he should already be feeling his age sinking in.

I was better off than him. Since I hadn’t been good at it since I was a child, the feeling of being powerless was always with me. Some say that people in their thirties act like they’re in their sixties, and I wasn’t all that different.

Two-thirds of the dishes had been started when the sound of a gong rang out at the entrance of the village. The village’s terrain was very complicated, so Fatty had set up a gong there and told them to hit it when they arrived. The gong was so loud that it felt as if the devil had entered the village. Fatty wiped his hand on the apron and said happily, “Coming, coming!”

The two of us left to go greet them and arrived at the village entrance, where we saw Xiuxiu first. She was wearing a red dress and looked like she was freezing as she looked around dully. When she saw me, she

waved happily and called out through chattering teeth: “Brother, isn’t Fujian in the south?”

When I got closer, she came up and hugged me. I knew that she was really happy. She had taken over many of the Huo family’s affairs, so it was rare for her to see this kind of rustic country village. But her attire made her look like a candle stub. It was easy to see that she had bought cotton-padded clothes from a random shop on the road.

All the people behind her saw us and called out a greeting. We went over to pick up the New Year’s goods and help carry them back. When we saw my parents, I immediately changed from the rain village’s little downtown prince and future money maker to my parents’ son. I couldn’t smoke too much and had to be subtle when introducing my friends. I went up and introduced Fatty as my agricultural products investment partner here. We were preparing to make some local ecological products. I also introduced Poker-Face as Fatty’s assistant and said that they were brothers so my parents wouldn’t ask: “Why didn’t you go home for New Year’s?” This kind of question would be a direct hit to the Zhang family, although now my parents were worried about the fact that the eldest brother seemed to suck all the nutrients away.

Uncle Two had already seen through everything and lit a cigarette. He had come up with an idea to try and get me to go back to the city but didn’t start his attack since he had just arrived. I avoided his eyes.

Xiao Hua was also very happy to see me. He looked around at the village and called me a liar. I had described it as a once-in-a-thousand-years paradise, but all he saw was a crude village. At least the sound of the never-ending waterfalls was easy to calm people, though.

When I took them to my house, Xiao Hua also showed a surprised expression, “Although it’s less than desirable, I can still see you put some effort into it.”

“Why don’t you come and stay, too?” I challenged him.

“Whether it’s the indistinct big city or indistinct small field, my Peach Blossom Spring<sup>68</sup> should be in my heart.” Xiao Hua touched my greasy table, rubbed his fingers together, and then glanced at me, “Don’t you have a tablecloth?”

I muttered to myself that life in the village was inconvenient and I had to do a lot of things by myself, so there wasn’t a need for something like that. Xiao Hua continued to examine everything and looked at the ingredients I had prepared. He silently took off his jacket, pulled an apron from his backpack, put it on over his shirt, and started helping.

The room warmed up instantly with more people, and the moisture started to fog up the glass. Xiuxiu prepared melons and fruits for the elders, Poker-Face was cracking walnuts, and Fatty and Xiao Hua bickered back and forth about the two-yuan supermarket kitchen utensils. My eyes got a little watery and I kept feeling like everything was so surreal.

At this time, my phone vibrated. I picked it up and saw that Lei Benchang had sent me a short message.

He was an old-fashioned person who didn’t use WeChat, so the text message didn’t display anything when it popped up. I pressed my finger to open it, but hesitated.

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<sup>68</sup> A hidden land of peace and prosperity. Think of it like your own personal Nirvana.

## Chapter 5.9 Running Account (Part 2)

I hesitated for a few minutes but didn't click on the message. It wasn't that I was afraid, I just felt that there wasn't a need to open it at this time. I had spent most of my previous life eager to explore all kinds of possibilities so that I could prepare myself before I met my fate.

When Fatty asked me what was wrong, I smiled and said that Lei Benchang had sent us a New Year's blessing text. Fatty let out an exclamation and said that the old man was really pitiful.

I turned my cell phone over and put it on the stove as I went to keep busy.

With Xiao Hua's help, we set a table full of dishes that were steaming hot and emitting a delicious aroma. I had put a lot of thought into every dish so that they would look like a sunflower after they had been placed, with the yellow in the middle and the green in a circle around it. Although they were all local products with similar tastes, everyone was starving after the long journey and climbing the mountain road. They moved their chopsticks and started shoveling the food in.

The Spring Festival Gala was playing on the TV. When my parents were in the city in years past, they would watch it in the living room. I went into my room to surf the internet and wait for the sound of the firecrackers to pass. This time, the Spring Festival Gala would have to be background noise.

During the dinner, Fatty asked Xiao Hua about his business while Xiuxiu waited on the elders who were talking about family affairs. Poker-Face was just staring at the TV, seemingly mesmerized by the Spring Festival Gala (or maybe it was all irrelevant to him).

How did he spend his previous years? Or, since he had such a long life, did he have a larger unit of measuring the passing time than just a year? Maybe our lives were set out in a large grid, and it was the second hand of his life that had just ticked.



I speculated that the Zhang family probably didn't celebrate the New Year. The year was the biggest step forward in our lives, and we had lost so much of it, so we had to savor it and leave an impression. But that didn't necessarily mean anything to the Zhang family.

I was feeling very emotional when I thought of this, but I had learned not to get entangled in these unchangeable things.

My parents were very quiet in the beginning and only said some polite words. As the younger generation, we all toasted our elders. My mother got a little wine in her and started channeling the director of the local committee of the Women's Federation. At an extremely slow speed, she began to summarize the mistakes she made when educating me, and then slowly shifted the topic to me. Uncle Two was very smart and quickly found a topic to interrupt my mother's speech, saying that he was incompetent as an elder, and the previous generation left me with all kinds of problems. But those who needed to apologize the most were gone, so he could only say it instead. He drank a glass of wine and looked at me. "You have so many friends here, you can also say something."

Everyone looked at me eagerly with a bit of sick pleasure on their faces. I looked at Uncle Two and thought to myself, *the last time I performed in front of people was when I was eight years old. Now that I'm almost forty, what am I supposed to say? We all know each other so well at this point.* I stood up, picked up the wine, looked at the roof beam, and said, "I'm sorry. Thank you." Then I drank the wine.

In fact, these were the only two sentences I wanted to say, and they were the only two that could represent all my thoughts. Xiao Hua patted my back to show that he understood.

After drinking, I looked at Fatty. He was afraid that I was going to make him give a speech, so he immediately stood up and said, "Today is a really happy day. Let me sing you all a song. But since the elders are here, I won't sing something from my repertoire. I recently learned a new song called the 'Song of the Five Rings'<sup>69</sup>."

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<sup>69</sup> Song by Yue Yunpeng and MC Hotdog. Based on the adaptation of "The Song of Peony", composed by Tang He and Lu Yuan. I think it's this one [here](#)

Fatty started to sing, and it actually sounded quite nice with the TV's background music accompanying him. After Fatty finished singing, Xiao Hua got up and started to sing an opera song in the xipi liushui style.<sup>70</sup> Uncle Two quickly became a fan. Xiuxiu was shy and didn't want to perform so it soon became Poker-Face's turn.

In order to divert attention, Xiuxiu pointed directly at Poker-Face's position and said: "Girls go only after the boys have finished their turn." When I turned my head, I found that Poker-Face was no longer in his seat. I immediately looked at the door and found that he had gone out to the yard for some air.

He was truly a quick-witted boy.

During the middle of the night, firecrackers started going off in the village. People in the countryside were more generous when it came to firecrackers, so the continuous crackling and popping echoes made it sound like a hundred thousand of them had been set off. As fireworks exploded in the sky, Fatty shouted jokingly, "The gunfire at the frontlines has started, brothers! Take out all our firecrackers, and let's show next door what a homemade bomb really is. The explosions will blow all their chickens straight to infertility."

My ears were numb, so I walked out to the yard. Amid the smell of fireworks permeating the air, I lit a cigarette and sucked the cold air into my lungs along with the nicotine.

Xiao Hua came up and stood beside me with his hands in his pockets, looking at the bluestone road under the street lamp. A lot of people smoked while playing mahjong inside, so he had come out to relax.

"Are you really going to stay here the whole time?" Xiao Hua suddenly asked me.

I looked at him, not thinking that it was a problem. With the cigarette hanging from my mouth, I pumped a bucket of water from the well and

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<sup>70</sup> Xipi= one of the two chief types of music in Chinese opera. Liushui= flowing water. Xipi Liushui melody/beat conveys a sense of anticipation or excitement. May be used by two characters to debate or argue. A little more info [here](#). Peking Opera info [here](#)

washed my hands. “I don’t know,” I said. “I just want to stay here for now.”

Xiao Hua didn’t continue asking, but put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You just don’t want to stay somewhere else.”

I smiled at him. I knew what he meant, but there was no need to discuss it any further. I knew exactly what I wanted.

He and I walked towards the mountain as the village children came out to visit each other. We arrived at a dark place outside the village’s ancestral hall and sat down on the steps in front of the entrance.

We didn’t talk again.

There was no need to discuss any complicated situations, possible changes, or response levels since we had already talked about such things too much. We were used to it, so now we didn’t have to talk about it. We both found that we didn’t know what to say to each other. I passed a cigarette over, but Xiao Hua refused me for the nth time. We just stayed silent and scrolled through our circle of friends’ WeChat Moments. The phone lights shining on our faces were cold, but it was very peaceful.

## Chapter 5.10 Set Out

Black Glasses' WeChat Moments were hardly updated, and no one knew what he was doing. But he posted a picture just now that had the word "poor" on it<sup>71</sup>, with a caption that said, "Feel free to employ me at the beginning of the year. I'm waiting for dinner."

Xiao Hua and I liked it at the same time but didn't say anything.

That night, we all went to bed late.

My house in the village was actually very big, so I arranged a room for everyone to sleep in with electric blankets. When I returned to my own room, it was almost four in the morning. I slowly washed up and lay down on the bed, only to realize that my heart was excited under the extreme sense of ease.

I fell asleep quickly and slept until noon. When I woke up, everyone had already played their second game of mahjong, and Fatty had just gotten the first thirteen orphans hand of the year.

I washed my face with warm water and then braved the cold air outside to stand in the yard. I watched Little Brother dig out some of our previous equipment and check to see if it was still usable.

My parents, Uncle Two, Xiao Hua, and Xiuxiu all left at about seven that night. They also had their own New Year's plans, so we sent them to the town and said our goodbyes. On the way back to the village, only the three of us were left. Uncle Two and I chatted for a while after dinner. Instead of embarrassing me, he just told me to think about what my parents would do in a few years.

Fatty was driving and I was sitting in the passenger seat. I picked up my phone and clicked on Lei Benchang's text message. It contained the place, time, and things we might need to prepare ourselves. There was no New Year's greeting.

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<sup>71</sup> Tiffany found what Black Glasses' picture would look like if you're interested in it. It was even used in the Reboot drama where Black Glasses' avatar had this picture as Wu Xie was using his phone. Pic [here](#).

No one in the vehicle spoke.

This job was a bit shameful for us retirees. I still couldn't figure out why we had accepted it, and I especially couldn't figure out Little Brother's reason for it. But I kept feeling like he wanted me to see something.

Time flew by. Fatty and I did some recovery training over the next few days to at least get our joints adapted to running and jumping again. I also sorted through and did some research on the examples Lei Benchang had sent me. Fatty cooked all of Lei Benchang's bacon and we ate it. Based on the facts, that bacon was the down payment so my last chance to back out was gone. But it did taste good.

When the time finally came, we all met in town. It was early, so many of the shops were opening one right after another. The old man was waiting for us with his tractor and fishing equipment at the entrance of a breakfast shop. I looked at the things in his tractor while eating ding bian hu<sup>72</sup>, and found that he was really a skilled expert. Although much of the equipment was ready-made, it had all been modified.

Good modifications wouldn't make you feel apprehensive, but would actually make you feel more reassured. Even if the workmanship was very unattractive, I could instinctively feel that these changes were effective just as soon as I looked at them.

We drove the tractor into the mountains for fourteen hours, settled at a farm Lei Benchang had arranged for us, and then drove the tractor to a remote mountain village. I had heard of this kind of village before. I called it a cut-off village since there was no way for the road to extend back to it. It was often backed by mountains or too far away from the next village. This particular village that we went to had been built near Mt. Wuyi.

There was a ridge at the end of the village road that had a forest graveyard with modern cement graves. We got off the tractor and walked through the graveyard until we reached the wild mountain area. The forest on the mountain was very contained since there were no towering

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<sup>72</sup> Ding Bian Hu is a characteristic dish of Fuzhou cuisine, a branch of Fujian cuisine, consisting of a rice flour batter poured around the side of a cooking wok to form a thin noodle. It's then scraped into a stock to simmer and served in broth.

trees or particularly dense clusters of trees. As we walked through it, we could see the remains of abandoned stone steps in many places, along with the shadow of Mt. Wuyi in the distance.

Fujian didn't really have genuine uninhabited areas.

After walking for half an hour and climbing a hill, I looked around in interest. There was a green mountain ridge in the distance, along with terraced fields set behind another hill. Even though this was deep in the mountains, it was clear to see that some people were still farming. We did this two or three more times and finally entered the mountains.

The deep pools that Lei Benchang had mentioned weren't too far away and we finally reached them after a few hours. The mountains here were magnificent. The big southern mountain peaks had an unusual abundance of water and there were waterfalls everywhere. I thought the waterfalls in Rain Village had the highest density, but the water system in the mountains here was comprised of a dizzying number of streams, waterfalls, and deep pools. Every time Fatty passed through a pool, he would ask Lei Benchang a bunch of questions. Lei Benchang would patiently answer whether there were fish or not, the name of the pool, what its origin was, what fish it had, and when and how many times he had been here.

He didn't hesitate and stepped down confidently, which clearly showed that he was very familiar with this area.

When I arrived at the final deep pool, I realized that it was completely different from what I had thought. It was located under a huge rock that covered the pool's surface like a cap. Most of the pool was under the shadow of the rock, so only one side was exposed. It was only when I got to the edge of the rock that I realized why those people had gone further into the pool at that time. The deepest part of the pool was in the innermost area under the rock, so they had to wade under the rock before they could cast their line to the bottom of the pool.

The sunshine was very bright, so we could see that there were several huge mountain rocks at the bottom of the shallow areas. They had been

corroded by the water to form a circle of shell-like lines that were very slippery.

We put down our equipment and pitched a tent nearby. Poker-Face looked around as Lei Benchang prepared his fishing hook like usual. He had broken the dragon coffin fungus up and mixed it with bean cake and shrimp paste, but it was useless according to Poker-Face's theory. We weren't experiencing any type of special weather, so the fish definitely wouldn't swim up from the underground lake.

As Poker-Face continued to look at the mountains around us, I asked him what he was looking for. He didn't speak, but Fatty answered for him, "Your skills have certainly deteriorated. I can tell with just one look that Little Brother is looking for a stone quarry. If you build a wall in the mountains, it's necessary to use the local materials. Look here. The top of that hill is missing a piece. The path they made to build the wall is bound to be close by."

Lei Benchang knelt down by the edge of the pool, lit three incense sticks, and then placed them in a gap in the rock. I lit a cigarette and suddenly realized that there was something the old man didn't tell us.

## Chapter 5.11

I squatted down beside the old man and watched him kneel piously in front of the pool. I narrowed my eyes and asked him, “Who are you worshipping?”

“Do you know how many people have died in such a pool since ancient times?” The old man closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, they seemed very murky. “Deep pools are spiritual. It’s never wrong to pay homage to them.”

I looked at his bitter smile. I used to believe such things, but now I knew that it was just a pool of water. Respecting or belittling it wouldn’t change anything.

“Do you and those dead fishermen really just have an ordinary relationship? Aren’t you strangers?” I took his other incense sticks and lit three of them as well.

The old man sighed and started putting his fishing rod together, connecting each piece one by one. “You smart people always have to figure everything out.”

I recognized this expression. It was the same one Uncle Three often had when there was something he didn’t think I needed to know.

I wasn’t angry anymore. After all, most of those who had experienced things probably had this kind of character. Even I sometimes understood this feeling, since too many things said would only bring about more questions that I didn’t want to answer. But at the same time, I had also learned how to pry open these kinds of people’s mouths.

I pointed to Poker-Face, “Look at this guy.”

The old man glanced at him as he continued to assemble the fishing rod. He threaded the fishing line through the guides on the pole and then picked out a bomb hook that had smaller curved hooks the size of a little finger. Once that was done, he wrapped the dragon coffin fungus bait



mixture around the hook, filling the air with an awful stench. "He's the most skilled one here."

"Do you think you can see through him?" I asked.

The old man smiled, "All humans are the same. Why would I need to see through him?"

"I've known him for many years," I said. "But he doesn't let me see through anything. He always does things that look simple, but actually have a very complicated purpose. I want to help him, but I don't even know what he wants to do." I took a puff of my cigarette, "That's because he thinks that he's the only one who can do these things and others can't."

The old man didn't speak as he continued working, so I continued, "People who don't like to explain things clearly are just like this. Most people in this state have seen through life and death, fame and fortune, and other things. They feel that no one in the world understands them, but there's one thing that they haven't seen clearly."

The old man stopped and looked at me. "And what is that?"

"This state is nothing remarkable. There are actually a lot of people like this in the world." I said as I looked into his eyes. "It's ok not to tell me, but don't lie to me. Lie once, and I'll know right away. No matter how far we've gone, I'll pull the plug on this."

The old man bowed his head, and I couldn't see his expression. It was hard for people not to lie. No one could live in the shadow of always telling the truth, after all.

I was sure that he would eventually tell me what he was keeping in his heart, so I turned and retreated a few steps.

The old man took off his shoes, rolled up his pants, and stepped into the deep pool. I could see that his calves were full of scars caused by frostbite. He walked towards the rock until the water reached his thighs, but didn't go any further. The rocky bottom became so steep in that area that people wouldn't be able to stand up.

Lei Benchang pulled the fishing rod back, released the flywheel, swung sideways towards the innermost part of the pool, and threw the hook in like he was cracking a whip. He had swung the rod with such ease that a layman would never understand it. It only took me a single glance to understand how much skill was needed for this casting technique.

The hook swung out horizontally across the water's surface and flew in, landing accurately at the pool's mouth before sinking.

Even in the eyes of fishermen, that kind of easy throw was already a stunt. Lei Benchang was holding onto a fishing line that had about forty kilograms of tension and was two hundred meters long. Even the flywheel looked to be at least twice as big as an ordinary one. The fishing line continued dispensing, making it obvious that the hook was still sinking. At least half of the line had gone into the water, but the wheel didn't stop moving.

Lei Benchang retreated to the edge of the pool and connected the end of the flywheel's line to a roller that was about the size of a basketball. The roller was full of fishing line that had to be at least several kilometers long. The line on the fishing rod soon ran out, and then the fishing line on the roller began to dispense.

I realized that the old man fishing here for so many years definitely didn't count as a long time if it might take half a day to put a fucking hook on. And even casting the line once might take at least a few days, which meant it might take a whole day to pull the hook back up.

I didn't know how many reels of fishing line were used before it finally stopped moving, indicating that the line had penetrated deep into the heart of the mountain.

"Why don't you use more hooks? I've watched people fish in the sea before and they usually put a lot of hooks on the line. They make it a few kilometers long so they can catch giant oarfish." Fatty said as the old man took the flywheel off the fishing rod.

I knew that the rod was only a means to throw the hook in since a pulley system was needed to pull the fish up. The old man found a big rock and

pressed it on the huge roller before saying to Fatty, “Too many hooks make it easy to get caught on the rocks. If that happens, the only way is to cut the line.”

He sat on a rock by the shore, unscrewed his thermos, and started to drink tea as his eyes remained fixed on the spot where the line had been dropped into the water. It was almost like he had entered a meditative state.

Fatty shrugged and we returned to where Poker-Face was. I was a little frustrated that the old man wasn't afraid of me and said to the two of them, “Be careful with that Lei Benchang.”

Poker-Face carefully observed a spot high up on the rock, but he wasn't as active as before. It appeared there weren't any clues here. I also helped him look for a stone quarry, but my mind was on the deep pool of water, where a fishing line with cold, smelly bait was fluctuating on the dark water's surface.

This was all happening just a few hundred meters below my feet. It was like a slender hand groping aimlessly for my own hand.

*Does that fish really exist? I thought to myself. Does it know we exist?*

## Chapter 5.12 Fishing

The old man didn't pull the line up, so we couldn't leave. The three of us sat on the cliff and watched the clouds drift across the sky. We didn't say a word as the sun set and painted the rocks in a golden light.

The air was still cold even though the wind wasn't strong, so the three of us stayed huddled together. It reminded me of all the many, many times before. Back then, each of us had something to do in our hearts, but now our hearts were empty and there was nothing.

"It's really beautiful. I've seen so many mountains and rivers before. Why didn't I stop and have a good look?" Fatty wondered aloud.

Yes, it was beautiful. As the sun gradually sank towards the horizon, I turned my phone on. There wasn't a signal here, so it had plenty of battery power left. I put an instrumental on and then fell asleep by Fatty. He had a peculiar smell that was a blend of his own scent and tobacco smoke. After three months in the wild, everyone smelled like this.

After coming back from Changbai Mountain, I never slept in the wild again. Before going to bed every night, I always hoped that nothing would happen and that I wouldn't dream. This time, hopefully nothing would happen again.

It was around eight o'clock that night when the temperature dropped, and I woke up from the cold. Fatty was sleeping with his mouth open and Poker-Face wasn't around. I rubbed my face, lit a cigarette, and pushed Fatty away. When I stood up, I saw two fishing lights on the edge of the deep pool that were actually waterproof miner's lamps. Poker-Face was helping the old man shine them on the pool's surface. The old man was standing in the water and turning the roller to pull up the fishing line.

"What's the matter?" I asked as I walked over.

"It's a fish." The old man replied.

The fishing line was pulled taut, and the old man had to use almost all of his strength every time he turned the roller to pull the line in. He turned it

hard two or three times and then suddenly let it go, watching the roller turn more than ten times before locking it again.

“Is it that fish?” I asked as I secretly wondered if the dragon coffin fungus was really that useful. After not being able to catch it for so many years, did he finally succeed?

The old man sighed, “No, it should be another fish. It’s very strong and is about one meter long. I’ve caught it before. If it’s the fish I’m looking for, then—”

I didn’t know how the old man wanted to finish that sentence. Maybe it was something like: “then there’s no way I can pull it up at all.” I watched him gradually increase the frequency and intensity as he continued pulling the line up. Soon, the tension and explosive force on the other end of the fishing line gradually weakened, and the old man began reeling the line in without pause. At this time, we could finally help.

Each of us would continue reeling the line in for an hour before the next person would go, so I was excited when it was my turn. Although there wasn’t any more resistance on the other end of the line, it still felt very heavy. I used up all my strength after a few minutes and had to rest before I could continue. When Fatty woke up, we were just pulling the fish out of the deep pool. The moment it came out of the water, I could see a black shadow with white scales appear under the lamp’s illumination. The water’s surface had a magnifying effect, so the shadow looked like a monster.

It was a big carp with deteriorated eyes that was about 1.6 meters long. I didn’t know what specific kind it was, though.

“Have you ever eaten fish from a deep pool?” The old man asked me.

I didn’t know where the fish I ate came from, but I figured they all tasted the same. “Put it back. It’s not easy for it to grow so big.” I said to the old man. “Besides, the four of us can’t eat that much.”

The old man pulled the fishing line and dragged the fish to dry land while shaking his head. At this time, I saw that there was a huge hole in the big

fish's stomach. It almost looked like something had tried to eat the fish in one big bite.

"I didn't consume its strength just now. It suddenly stopped because it was bitten by a bigger fish and died immediately."

I used my palm to measure the wound and felt a chill. The mouth wasn't big, but the strength and accuracy of the bite meant that it was a beast. Just one bite was practically fatal since all the internal organs would be ripped out in an instant.

"What I said is true, right?" The old man looked at me. "It's down there."

His expression was intense and the murkiness in his eyes had disappeared. He looked at the water's surface as if he could see straight through the depths.

*Maybe he's also wondered numerous times over the years whether this fish actually exists,* I said to myself. The old man stood up silently, hung the fish from the branches of a nearby tree, and began scraping the scales off and removing the internal organs.

I took another look at the pool with a flashlight. As I re-examined it, I walked around the edge to see how high the water level could be. I was hoping it could give me an idea of what really caused those people's deaths at that time.

Based on what the old man had said, those people had seen aquatic plants moving under the water before they died. And those plants were said to grow on the fish.

There was a huge drought in Fujian back then, and the water level was definitely lower than it was now. The water's surface itself didn't span a large area, so if a fish covered in aquatic plants was seen under the water's surface at a low water level, then it couldn't be too big.

After looking at the carp's wound just now, it was clear to see that the fish's mouth wasn't big. Was it possible that this fish was smaller than a meter? But if a fish that small was so strong, could it really kill a carp with just one bite?

I had a lot of doubts in my heart. The water's surface here seemed to conflict with all the clues I had heard, but I really didn't know anything about fish.

I smoked another cigarette. The underground lake was completely dark, so how did the fish grow aquatic plants? Or, if they weren't aquatic plants, then how did the fish grow aquatic-like plants?

If I listed all my doubts out, then: Little Brother was interested. The underground lake was in the shape of a Taiji. There was an artificial stone wall in the lake. There were strange fish swimming to the water's surface to prey during the drought. The deep pool where the strange fish appeared was very small. There were aquatic-like plants on the strange fish.

Lei Benchang was a lantern lighter for grave robbers.

I stopped that line of thought. We were still fishing, so I wouldn't let this matter evolve into something else. I would keep things simple. If I really detected a lie, then I would leave Lei Benchang right where he was at the time.

Lei Benchang finished processing the fish, cut it into strips, and used it as bait. Based on the size of its wound, he cut it into pieces about half the size of his arm and then soaked it in the liquid from the dragon coffin fungus.

After washing his hands in the pool, he walked over to where we were studying the fish head and began dealing with it. Fatty immediately understood, "Fish head tofu soup! Damn, I've never seen a fish head that big. Is our pot even big enough?"

"Since there was coffin fungus in the bait, the fish head can't be eaten even if it was washed clean." Lei Benchang said. "But the fish brains can be dug out and eaten. We'll go in tomorrow to the place where I said the two pools are very close. But it normally takes several months for the fish to go down, so it'll depend on you next."

"Why don't you try it? Isn't there a fish in this pool?"

“During all those years, it was normal to catch pond fish. But that fish never took the bait once. The lake here is so big that it’s too difficult to catch a specific fish.” The old man said. “If you could accompany me for half a year, then I would try my luck. But that’s obviously impossible, and I don’t want to delay you any longer.”

The old man coughed a few times, and his eyes became murky again. When he turned and retreated into the tent, we all looked at each other and Fatty said, “He’s a dead man.”

“What do you mean?”

“He knows that his end is coming, so he won’t be distracted by anything. Have you ever seen such a person?”

I felt a twinge in my heart as Pan Zi’s last expression flashed through my mind.



## Chapter 5.13 Fish Gall

When we set off the next morning, I was both calm and tense. My body had been completely relaxed over the past six months, but this environment made me instinctively start to mobilize my nerves and want to be active again.

As we walked, Fatty flipped through the photographs he had taken of the fish last night on his phone and kept squinting. The fish had been turned into a fillet, so this was the only evidence of its existence now. I didn't know why Fatty kept looking at it.

"Are you unhappy that you didn't get to eat the fish head, or are you sick enough to get off on a fish?" I asked him.

"You don't know shit. You have to learn to find the clues in the details." Fatty said. "Mr. Naïve, you don't know anything about production. It's a wonder that you, a young master living in the city, can even distinguish pigs from sheep."

In Fatty's eyes, I may always be a young master. I leaned over and watched him enlarge the picture and look at the fish's wound.

"What's the matter?" I hooked my arm around his shoulder. "Don't play dumb. Now, now. Tell me right now. Come on."

"You can see for yourself. Where's the bite?"

I looked at the wound and said to myself, *I'm not familiar with the physiological structure of fish. How am I supposed to know where it is?* I looked at it carefully and noticed that it was lower down on the stomach. I gulped and asked, "Was its dick bitten off?"

"When have you ever seen fish grow dicks? Has your family eaten fish dicks before?" Fatty retorted. "This is a very special part on a carp. If you've engaged in fish production, you would know that carp have two treasures: carp stone and carp gall. The carp gall is highly toxic and can be used as medicine. But you can die if you eat too much of it."

“Where did you learn this useless bit of information?” I asked while looking at the carp’s wound in the picture. “You mean to say that this was where the carp’s gallbladder was?”

Fatty nodded, so I continued my line of questioning, “So it’s no accident that this part of the fish was bitten? Then what can carp gall be used for?”

Fatty was silent and then snorted. “I didn’t catch it, so how would I know? Ask the old man, he must know.”

Lei Benchang had been walking in front of us and staring straight ahead the whole time. I knew he wasn’t thinking about anything in particular, but he wasn’t wandering around aimlessly. He knew exactly where he was going. At this time, nothing between heaven and earth could bother him except for me. I went up and asked him Fatty’s question.

Lei Benchang glanced at the picture on the phone and frowned. “Hmmm, that is a bit interesting.” The old man then told me that carp gall was important for getting rid of inflammation and improving one’s eyesight. But if you ate too much, it could cause vomiting and diarrhea. In the worst cases, it could easily cause paralysis and shock, or even death. When I returned to Fatty and told him what Lei Benchang had said, Fatty responded with, “Let’s assume for the time being that this bite was meant to target that specific area and that the old man’s strange fish loves eating fish gall.”

We couldn’t verify it at this time and could only really rely on our imaginations, but for some reason, I kept thinking that what Fatty said could be possible. Why did I have this intuition? I wasn’t really sure. I just always felt that there was some basis even though I didn’t know where it connected to.

We soon arrived at the spring.

The old man was very familiar with it, so he had a convenient route for us to take. Although there wasn’t a path, he knew exactly where to place his feet on the loose gravel. When we finally reached the deep pool, we could tell at a glance that it was unusual.

The pool was located beneath a small sinkhole. The rocky crevices around the sinkhole were full of banyan trees, which were so densely packed together that the roots covered the walls. The entwined branches looked like a lot of giant hands that were stretching above the sinkhole to cover it completely, only letting some mottled rays of sunlight shine through. Countless aerial roots hung down past the branches and dipped into the pool of water below.

The whole sinkhole was the size of two basketball courts, and the pool of water was very large. I looked down and saw that the water was a blackish blue, which made it obvious that it was very deep. Countless birds were startled by our approach and hurriedly flew out of the hole.

“It’s kind of interesting.” Fatty said. “Little Brother, if it was summer, we’d definitely have a good swim.”

Poker-Face didn’t speak but looked at the surrounding rocks. I already knew that this was the quarry we had been looking for before. The banyan trees had sprouted in the stone crevices and grew into trees that were so big, four or five people would have to join hands to wrap around them. From this alone, we could infer that the stone quarry here was at least a few hundred years old.

Poker-Face turned his head slightly. I was more familiar with some of his habits now and knew that he was looking at the distance between the rocks. He suddenly ran two steps forward and jumped up, stepping on a protruding crack on the rock wall before turning and jumping again. He continued stepping and jumping up without stopping at all until he reached the top of the nearest banyan tree and grabbed it with one hand.

His movements were almost inhuman, but Fatty and I were used to it. Just like setting off a bottle rocket through the air, we didn’t bother looking at him. We passed by the stunned Lei Benchang and started slowly helping each other climb up.

“Be careful with your back.” Fatty said as he helped me jump onto the rock Poker-Face had jumped on before. I turned and pulled him up, then hugged a tree branch while Fatty slowly pushed me up.

## Chapter 5.14 Fish Ladder

As I climbed up, I told myself that I wasn't incapable of jumping up. Although my jumping skills weren't as good as they used to be, my ligaments were still loose. The rapid training I had undergone with Black Glasses back then still enabled me to control my body. I just didn't feel the need to do so right now.

I could climb up, so why should I bother jumping up?

As I grabbed the tree trunk and had Fatty push me up, Lei Benchang asked from below, "What are you all doing on the trunk?"

"If you don't understand, then shut up." Fatty said. "This is to find a way for you. Don't ruin our inspiration. If you're interested, go get us a fish to celebrate."

The old man still didn't seem to understand, so he just nodded his head and went about his business. I pulled Fatty up, and the two of us continued to climb up to the canopy. We saw Poker-Face leaning on a branch and looking out at the surrounding mountains.

I pretended that I wasn't breathless as I climbed up and easily leaned against another branch. Fatty looked at the branch's thickness and settled down on the one below. I had just gotten into position to look at the mountain when Poker-Face suddenly saw something. He walked to the end of a long branch that was towards the top of the tree. At the moment when the branch was bent, he squatted down, kept his hands on the branch as he jumped onto the rock beside the pool, and then grabbed a handful of leaves, tossing them into the deep pool.

As the leaves fell and drifted slowly towards the pool's surface, Fatty and I looked at each other. I wondered if he had given up observing the mountains for now. If so, climbing up and down would be the death of me.

When I saw Lei Benchang looking at us, I decided to keep up the facade; otherwise, it would be easy to see that we couldn't keep up with the rhythm. I pretended to look afar as I wondered what Poker-Face had seen.

After looking around, all I could see were banyan trees. The mountains around here were very short, and there weren't any huge rocks. There was nothing to see in this place. In order to determine the hidden dragon vein, we'd have to go to a high place. But this tree was the tallest thing here, and it obviously wasn't high enough. I really didn't know what the ancients were thinking.

I jumped and landed firmly, leaving Fatty to figure out his own way. I went up to Poker-Face and squatted down on the rock to see the pool below. "There's a hole," he said.

He pointed to a spot on the sinkhole's wall that was surrounded by the banyan trees' snake-like roots. I couldn't see what was behind the roots, but he was pointing in a direction that was close to the water.

"How do you know?" I asked. Poker-Face pointed to the floating leaves on the pool's surface, and I immediately understood that he had dropped them just now to see if there was a breeze blowing below. There seemed to be, which indicated that there was an air vent below. There were probably caves or crevices in this enclosed space that had air vents.

I looked back at the canopy. I couldn't understand these actions even if I had seen them dozens of times before. But I had tried to ask him for advice several times during this period and probably understood his logic. He went up to see the mountains and look at the feng shui and dragon vein. He couldn't see them, so he looked at the water level down below. The mountain's state here wasn't consistent with the deep pool's water level, which raised a suspicion that there was something wrong with the deep pool itself. I just didn't know if that was truly the case.

I tried to observe carefully and used binoculars to take a closer look. Sure enough, there was a small hole behind the banyan trees' roots that was just big enough for a person to fit through if he squatted.

Poker-Face took out an ax, climbed down, and started cutting off the roots that were blocking the hole. As he was working, it was clear to see that the roots penetrated deep into the hole. We used ropes to slide our backpacks full of equipment down and then tied more ropes to the trees before going down one by one. The banyan trees' roots were very easy to climb, but those roots near the water were covered in a slippery moss.

It was very dim once we entered the hole, and the entrance was full of intertwined roots that were very uncomfortable to step on. The wet moss squeezed out green-looking water whenever we stepped on it, indicating that this hole was sometimes flooded. There was a sharp downward tilt as we went further in, and it quickly became pitch-black. The walls were made up of layer after layer of uncut stratified rock, and damp air was blowing through the hole.

Fatty and I were squatting there awkwardly, and I could feel my foot cramping a little. Lei Benchang was in the back and Poker-Face was in the front.

"Look carefully, everyone," Fatty said. "It's not something you see every day. This isn't a tunnel for people to walk through."

"If it's not that kind of tunnel, then what is it?" I asked warily. I didn't know what shocking—but often correct—conclusion he was about to say.

"This is for fish to use." Fatty said. His eyes were shining and he was obviously very surprised. "This is a fish ladder."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Also known as a fishway, fish pass or fish steps. It's a structure on or around artificial and natural barriers (such as dams, locks and waterfalls) to facilitate natural fish migration. Most fish ladders enable fish to pass around the barriers by swimming and leaping up a series of relatively low steps (hence the term ladder) into the waters on the other side. More info [here](#)

“Fish ladder?” I touched the rock around me, and Fatty said, “I’ve only heard of it, but I didn’t expect that it actually existed. If there are any buildings in this underground lake, then the bricks needed weren’t transported by people, but by fish. Look at the size of this stone tunnel. If a fish was about the same size and diameter as this tunnel, then it could only keep going downstream. The stones it dragged would be pulled into the depths by the fish ladder, where they would be intercepted and taken down below.”

I touched my chin and asked myself if it was really possible. But how did the fish come up? If it was a waterway, then why was there no water now? If there was water in the depths of the cave, then did that mean we couldn’t go down?

Poker-Face lit a flare and threw it into the depths of the fish ladder. From my position, I couldn’t see the end at all. He looked for a while and then started moving down while saying, “Don’t talk.”

## Chapter 5.15 Salt

I was wearing a headlamp, which I felt was the most suitable for cave exploration among all the lighting devices I had used before. Although it couldn't light that far ahead, it moved in sync with my head. The only problem was that it was easy to go blind if two people talked face to face.

“Don't look at me” often became our mantra.

After Poker-Face went down, we tied a pulley to the rope and hung all the equipment on it. We would use the rope to go down and use the pulley to lower the equipment once we reached the bottom. Like this, we wouldn't have to bear a heavy load and could save our energy.

Fatty was the second one to go down. The stone tunnel wasn't straight but had enough of a slope that it was like a slide. It was clear to see that it had been artificially cut, but this slide was very long and there were a lot of sharp protrusions sticking out of it. If we lost control while sliding down, then we would be shredded into minced meat. As a result, we stepped on these protrusions very carefully, preferring to go down like we were rock climbing.

After going down for more than ten minutes, the fish ladder was completely dark. During all my explorations, I had always hated groping around in dark and narrow spaces. Being unable to move freely made me feel very anxious. The stone tunnel here was only as wide as a forearm was long, which made me feel very uneasy. Lei Benchang was experiencing this process for the first time, and I could see that he was breathing harder and his hands and feet were shaking.

After coming in, I knew why Poker-Face told us not to talk. He was listening to the airflow, which was weak but turbulent in the stone passage. The wind was whistling slightly as it blew through the stone passage and ruffled our hair.

I listened carefully to it, trying to see if I could gain some information from it. As I listened, I could hear some small movements that weren't from the wind. I really didn't know what they were, but Poker-Face was completely absorbed.



We continued climbing down silently and found a place to rest. Poker-Face had stopped tiptoeing around and started to make noise again. We ate some bacon and started talking amongst ourselves.

“Have you ever thought about how we’ll get up later?” Fatty asked. “It looks like we’ll have to spend the Lantern Festival<sup>74</sup> down here. This isn’t a good sign, you know. Definitely not a good sign.”

“Shit, why didn’t you say that when you took the job?” I scolded him. My headlamp was shining on the rock wall, and I could see a lot of traces of where it had been eroded by water. The wall was colored in various degrees of gray and I couldn’t help but wonder about the water. Where did the water in this fish ladder go? Based on our current position, we were already far below that deep pool’s water level. If the water systems were interlinked, then why was there no water here?

I touched the rocks and tried to find a trace of water vapor on the surface, but it was dry. The only moisture was coming from the humid air.

Fatty showed a very pleased expression as he looked up at me. “You know, when I see you paying attention to the details, I really feel safe.”

I rubbed my fingers and found that the rock dust on the wall was very dry. In any case, it shouldn’t have been as dry as it was. “Why?” I asked him.

“Because you went to college. It’s better to observe things from different angles, after all.” Fatty said while gasping for breath. He was already covered in sweat.

College. The off-topic conversation gave me a sudden flash of inspiration. I had recently been thinking about what I should do, but I never thought about going back to school.

I had a very uncomfortable time studying back then, so I never thought about going back after I graduated. But now that I thought about it, it was a good idea to take the two of them to college. At least there were some

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<sup>74</sup> Celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the first Chinese lunar month, the Lantern Festival traditionally marks the end of the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) period.

things to do, and it could give them more chances to understand the world. And it wasn't like they'd retire for half a year and then have to climb underground again. With Fatty's character, he'd definitely be willing to go to a place where there was an abundance of female students.

But this passage was too dry, and really didn't look like a stone tunnel in the mountains. Was it really a fish ladder leading to an underground lake?

We put down our equipment and placed the pulley in the resting position in case the rope was used up. I had a sudden whim as I looked at my fingers and lay down on the rock and licked it.

"Wow, Mr. Naïve, you pervert. What are you doing?" Fatty asked angrily.

I smacked my lips and found that the rock was very salty.

"It's salt," I said. The rock here contained salt.

Fujian's sea salt was very developed, so no one cared about the small salt mines in the mountains. Was there a salt layer in the rock strata here?

As I thought that, I licked it again. Lei Benchang found my movements odd, but he also copied me and licked it. Fatty licked it too, and then quickly spit it out.

*Interesting*, I said to myself. I probably had a few theories I could come up with. I used to have little control and would spout them off like a frog suddenly jumping out. It used to bug me, but now I kept these thoughts to myself. I knew that I could really gain a lot of information as long as there was another clue, so I wouldn't worry about it now.

We continued our descent for another three hours before a large area of rock clusters began to appear. When I broke one off, I found that it was also salt. Under the illumination of our headlamps, these salt clusters glowed as bright as gems.

This was a salt mine.

If this underground area was in this kind of geological state, then the lake below may not be a fresh water lake. But the pools in the mountains were all fresh water.

A theory was starting to form in my head, but at this moment, I felt like something was wrong. My stomach began to ache, which meant that there were bad impurities in the salt.

I clutched my stomach and endured it for more than ten minutes, but my face turned pale as the cramps increased. Should I do it right here on the slope? But if it rolled down, Fatty and Poker-Face would get a face full of it. All my hard work over the past ten years would be for naught.

Maybe I had a terrible expression on my face because Lei Benchang asked me what happened. I waved my hand. As both an expert and leader, I had to solve this problem myself. And it had to be a very sophisticated solution, too.

## Chapter 5.16 Waterfall

The stomachache was unbearable, and the pain of my cramping intestines was enough to interrupt all thought. Unless there was a greater pressure bearing down on me mentally, this kind of pain was really tortuous to endure when the mood was so peaceful.

I used to not care about it before, but all my ailments had increased tenfold after the tension had loosened, as if they were getting revenge for the past ten years. This also confirmed my theory that I was the type of person who became stronger under mental pressure.

I stopped and let them go down first, telling them that I would catch up later. Lei Benchang knew that something was wrong when he brushed past me and saw my pale face, but Fatty was already slipping away. I figured he knew what I was going to do.

When their headlamps disappeared down the passage, I could finally drop the façade and start looking around. I needed a natural depression or two, after which I could break off all the salt clusters on the wall and sprinkle them on top. After it dried, there shouldn't be any evidence left.

With a solution in mind, my heart finally stabilized. I used the headlamp to look around inch by inch, but there wasn't a deep enough depression on the stone wall. Even if there was, it was above my head, and it wasn't like I could go against gravity.

I took a deep breath, pulled out the rock pick from where it was hanging at my waist, and started hitting the salt clusters under my body. There was a thick layer of them on the rock here, and I didn't know how thick the salt actually was. If it was thick enough, I could probably dig a salt pit instead.

As my mood worsened, I started moving a little faster and hit the clusters a few times. I ended up knocking a whole one off and it rolled down the tunnel. "Be careful," Fatty scolded from below. "My hairstyle cost eighteen hundred yuan."

I dug through the crushed salt cluster and found that the salt layer was as thick as a palm. I thought I would see another layer of rock after removing the cluster, but I immediately found that that wasn't the case. There was an obvious man-made object under the salt that looked like a perfect right-angle board. After I dug some more, I found that it was actually a rusty old bronze plate.

I looked around and used the rock pick to knock out more of the salt clusters around me. I was surprised to find that copper plates had been embedded everywhere on the rock tunnel's surface. The copper plates and rocks merged together to form the tunnel walls here. The plates were just like patches that were stuck to the wall's surface one by one.

I knocked on the copper plate with my pick and immediately knew that the area behind it was hollow. I put my ear up against it and finally understood what Poker-Face had heard earlier. The strange sound mixed in with the wind was coming from under the copper plates. It appeared to be the sound of water, which sounded more turbulent than wind.

The copper plate's surface was pitted, and there were a lot of rust bubbles due to the corrosion. There were other places that were full of green copper clusters, while some were blue, and others were a strange red color.

I knew that copper rust was different from iron in that it formed bumps, while iron became scaly.

I looked at the thousands of layers of rust and used my fingernail to scrape a few away, finding that the copper plate had rusted through. I intuitively knew that these bronze plates were products of the Tang or Song Dynasties.

There were copper pieces on the plates that appeared to be densely patterned tadpoles. Two abstract fish with cloud-patterned scales had been placed side by side about every meter or so. There was a round shape in front of the fish heads that seemed to be the sun. These patterns didn't seem to serve any kind of function and must have been the default pattern on the bronze grinding tools. The copper plates varied

in size, and some had even been cut. I touched the copper and found that it felt a little warm.

I endured the stomachache and shouted at the others not to leave yet. I hurried down and told them to also look at the surrounding salt clusters.

Fatty and Poker-Face knew that I had found something as soon as they heard. After hitting the salt clusters a few times, Fatty's eighteen-hundred-yuan hairstyle was covered in dust and salt grains. It wasn't long before they exposed a huge bronze plate, which had been made into a curved pipe. It was much bigger than the small ones I had just seen.

I went down and carefully observed the joint between the copper plate and the rock with my headlamp. At this time, I realized that the plate wasn't actually a patch.

These rocks went through the copper pipe's inner wall, which made it one whole piece.

We started hitting the rock even harder and knocked chunks of stone off the tunnel's wall, finding that there was a complete copper pipe embedded in the rock wall. The rock seemed to have formed at a time when water still traveled through the pipe. There were all kinds of sediments in the water that adhered to the pipe wall, and a millennia of dirt had wrapped around the pipe's inner wall. It was just like those patients whose arteries became blocked with plaque.

*No wonder it's so dry here*, I said to myself. None of the water vapor in the whole mountain could penetrate at all. But red copper had been greatly admired in the Tang and Song Dynasties and the usage of bronze had gradually declined. Why was the copper pipe here bronze? Did I get the wrong dynasty?

But red copper only gradually became more popular during the beginning of the Tang Dynasty. Bronze still had the most mature production and craftsmanship. This kind of large copper pipe was definitely easier to construct with bronze.

Fatty knocked on the copper pipe. We were all positive that the other side of the pipe's wall was hollow. This copper pipe hadn't been inserted into the rock stratum, so there might be a huge hanging cliff or deep pool of water on the other side of the wall.

Poker-Face put his ear to the copper pipe and Fatty immediately copied him. After listening for a long time, I asked them what they heard. Fatty shook his head, "Maybe a waterfall?"

I crawled over to his position and listened. There was a sound on the other side that was very faint. I didn't know how thick these copper pipes were. There could be a thick layer of salt and gravel on the other side that was making it difficult to hear, but the subtle sounds I heard were very hard to figure out. If it was a waterfall, then it definitely wasn't just one. There could be countless huge waterfalls rushing right below us.

## Chapter 5.17 Source of the Salt

There really wasn't anything to say, so we all remained silent. We couldn't determine what the situation outside was like and could only use our imaginations. I was the type of person who always wanted to see the whole picture, but I also knew the price of doing so. If we broke through this copper wall, it was possible that the rapids outside would rush in and we'd be swept hundreds of meters down the tunnel. I had feared death and been so careful during these past ten years, so it would be really ironic if I died searching for a fish.

I suddenly didn't know what I was doing here. It was as if I had been bewitched by something and came upon this kind of situation again. I would never make such a mistake before. I had remained absolutely calm for ten years, but for some reason, I lost it.

As we continued to go down, I looked at Poker-Face, who was moving steadily ahead. That was when I suddenly realized something.

I had been making my own decisions over the past ten years and acting accordingly. I was normally a cautious person. The fact that my family's small shop that I ran wasn't so successful was one such example of this. Of course, my ability at that time was limited, but my personality was also a huge factor in maintaining the status quo. I had greatly improved my ability over those ten years, but I had finally returned to making my own decisions. Either way, my character had always been cautious.

But when the three of us were together, I naturally gave up my decision-making habits. Although I still made independent judgments and could face any kind of problem directly, I wasn't the engine of this small group.

I was in Rain Village, but that definitely wasn't the case now. The engine of this small group was now exploring the path ahead.

I actually felt relieved when I thought of this. I had initially thought that Poker-Face got involved in this matter because he wanted to tell me something and just didn't know how to explain it clearly. If he was trying so hard to convey something to me, then it showed that he had enough confidence to ensure that this matter developed smoothly.



Most of the instructions Poker-Face had given me in the past were correct, and almost all the dangers I had encountered were of my own making. Now that I was following him, I was ready to listen to whatever he said. I believed it was much more reliable for him to be walking up front than me.

I straightened my headlamp, relaxed a little, and decided to focus on earnestly completing this adventure instead of pretending to be a Big Bad Wolf.

Lei Benchang watched us knocking on the salt clusters in horror. After finding something strange, the three of us had solemn looks on our faces and remained silent. Then, we suddenly turned and continued going down the tunnel. It was clear he didn't understand what had happened. And to make matters worse, Fatty started ruffling his hair and complaining about how careless he had been just now.

Lei Benchang must have thought we had discovered something and didn't want to tell him. He was very embarrassed and vaguely worried that the situation had taken a bad turn.

After climbing down for seven hours, the salt clusters became so thick that it was difficult for us to pass. We had to break them off most of the time just so we could get through. Our collars and cuffs were full of salt clusters and my stomach continued to ache for a while, but it wasn't as bad as before. Finally, we heard the sound of running water and a strong wind. Even the breeze blowing through the tunnel grew stronger and stronger. After going down for another ten minutes, Poker-Face finally whispered, "We're here."

We climbed out one by one, and when it was my turn, I could see countless salt particles floating in the air in front of my headlamp. The ground in front of the exit was covered in salt, making it look just like snow. The area seemed to be very empty, and our headlamps couldn't reach the end.

When I crawled forward and poked my head out, my hair was immediately blown upwards and salt poured into my mouth. It tasted extremely bitter and salty.

The flesh on my face started to shake from the huge crosswind that blew past. This fish ladder's exit was located on the wall of a dry pool that almost looked like a salt pit. It was half a man deep and full of salt clusters.

We climbed to the edge of the pit and saw that it was pitch black in front of us. We couldn't see anything except for the salt particles flying through the air, so Fatty pulled out his Wolf-Eyes flashlight and turned it all the way up. The area hundreds of meters in front of us was instantly illuminated and we found that we were standing on a salt field. There was nothing in the surrounding area except for the white salt covering the level ground. In fact, the ground was unusually level.

As the flashlight moved over everything smoothly, we didn't see anything besides the salt particles. In the places where the light couldn't reach, there was only nothingness. I didn't know where the wind was coming from, but my ears were numb and the salt particles felt like sandpaper as they hit my face. I could vaguely see some cave walls on the very far edge that seemed to be covered in more salt clusters.

It turned out that this was a huge underground salt cave.

Fatty pointed the flashlight up and we could see the inverted salt ceiling that was more than ten meters above our heads. The surface of the salt was multi-crystalline, so it reflected a lot of color under the light's beam.

I looked behind me and saw that the salt wall looked like a monster. The salt clusters were twisted around the rock wall in such a way that they looked like tentacles. We walked a few hundred meters forward and looked back again, only to find that this rock wall wasn't actually the edge of the huge cave. Instead, it was just one side of a huge flat stone pillar, where the salt clusters on it had grown into a kind of huge canopy.

The tunnel we came out of was at the lower edge of this stone pillar, and there were a lot of rocks piled up beside it. They must have been the building materials that had been transported down through the passage. I looked up at the huge stone pillar and thought it was more like a ten-thousand-ton ship.

“What is this place?” Fatty asked loudly.

I also took out my Wolf-Eyes light and shined it on the snow-like salt field beneath my feet. This was an underground field made up entirely of salt. There had to be even more stone pillars as large as aircraft carriers that were supporting the salt ceiling here.

*How big is it? I asked myself. With such a huge cave, I could monopolize the whole country's cabbage pickling industry.*

“Where's the lake?” Lei Benchang asked us, not the least bit frightened by the situation in front of him.

## Chapter 5.18 Salty

We set up a radio antenna at the entrance so we knew where to come back to, and then turned on our walkie-talkies to test the noise frequency. After that, we braved the strong wind and started looking for the lake.

I still couldn't understand what was going on in this huge underground cave and I couldn't figure out what the geological structure was like. From the old man's account, this underground area should be a huge underground lake. There was an artificially built stone wall in the center of this lake that divided it into two. But after we came down, we found the materials for building the stone wall but didn't see any signs of the lake.

*Is this salt source the bottom of the original underground lake?* I asked myself. *Did the lake dry up?* When I came out of the tunnel just now, I thought I had heard the sound of flowing water, but I later found that it was just the friction of the salt particles scraping across the salt field.

After taking a few steps, Lei Benchang seemed confused and was glancing around with a blank look on his face. Fatty patted him and told him to calm down.

"Where are we now?" I asked Fatty. He was more clear-headed than me when it came to climbing up and down like this. He told me that we should be in the mountain now. After we had encountered the place where the bronze pipe entered the rock stratum, the slope didn't angle down as much and seemed to level out more. He figured we were going straight into the mountain rather than walking towards the bottom like we had expected, which actually made sense.

"Let's do some calculations," Fatty said. "We shouldn't walk around blindly." He used his feet to wipe away the loose salt particles under our feet and revealed the hard salt surface underneath. He pulled out his rock pick and started scratching a picture on the salty ground.

"What's the underground water system normally like? First, there are numerous pools in these mountains. The water comes from the

mountains and flows in all directions. Water is the same no matter what. It always moves from high to low ground. The water on top of Mt. Wuyi flows downward in all directions, and those streams accumulate into pools. But the water in these pools has to go underground, so what does it do? It seeps into the cracks in the rock and slowly penetrates down. When it encounters underground caves, it starts to drip and converge. This forms countless pools which in turn form underground streams. These streams then converge and become underground rivers or lakes.”

When I nodded, he continued: “But based on this principle, the number of fish in these deep pools would be depleted one day. But there’s an endless amount of fish in these deep pools, so where are they coming from? The ancients had a legend that stated the centers of these kinds of pools were connected to springs or the Dragon Palace.<sup>75</sup> In modern times, some people have a more scientific explanation: these deep pools are connected to underground rivers. But the question is how? There has to be a big hole at the bottom of the pool with the underground river below it. All the water in the pool flows into the underground river, which is why most people think that it’s wrong for an underground water system to be above the pool and below the river. But most of the time, the underground river isn’t located below the deep pool. It’s inside the mountain on the other side of the pool. The two have the same water level, so it’s reasonable to believe that there’s a connecting hole under the water.”

I continue to nod. My family had the orange-covered 1962 version of “One Hundred Thousand Whys”, which also said this. As long as there was any conclusion, Mao Zedong’s quotes would be written on the side.

“There’s also another possibility. It’s a kind of tributary,” Fatty said. “The deep pool we saw is like a sub-lake and there’s a mother lake inside the mountain that’s at the same height. We can’t see it, but there are channels connecting them below the water level. There are dry tunnels above the mother lake’s water level that connect to the dry tunnels in the underground river. They are also above the water level. It’s only when the underground lake is at high tide that the underground river’s water level

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<sup>75</sup> Palace of the Dragon King at the bottom of the Eastern Sea. I figure they’re basically saying all the fish in those pools came from the sea so that’s why they’re never depleted.

rises above the norm. As a result, these dry tunnels would be submerged, and both the fish and water would transfer to the mother lake. Like that, the fish could then swim from the mother lake to the sub-lake.”

From a logical standpoint, these two situations were actually the same. And it also applied if you replaced the underground rivers with underground lakes. Based on the trend and logic, it was correct to assume that the ancient bronze fish ladder extended all the way into the mountain and that we had really reached the underground lake basin. Since we hadn't seen the deep pool, it should be somewhere close to the edge of the cave.

If the underground lake had dried up, then some geological changes must have taken place. If so, then the fish that the old man wanted to catch must have died long ago or turned into a giant salted fish.

“This should be the right fucking spot. Where's the lake?” Fatty scratched his head, dislodging a lot of salt particles.

I lit a cigarette and took a puff, but found that it was all salty. After looking down at Fatty's picture, I frowned: “Wait, where's the wind coming from?”

There was no wind in an enclosed cave, but the airflow was surging here so there had to be a lot of places where it was coming from. This was in line with Fatty's second theory that it was a kind of tributary. There could be a lot of dry tunnels above this huge salt cave that were connected to caves and tunnels throughout the whole mountain. The wind could be coming in through these tunnels, which was why it was so chaotic. It fit perfectly with the theory.

As I walked several laps and continued to explore, the wind and salt quickly dried my lips out and caused them to crack. My eyes and nose also felt like they were full of salt. In Fatty's words, if we went any further, our lungs would be pickled in no time. But there was still no sign of water.

While we sat on the ground to rest for a bit, I looked out at the salt field and listened to the salt particles that sounded like flowing water. *This is*

*simply a sea of salt, I said to myself. If there's a lake here, does that mean there are fish that can survive in such salty water?*

When I thought of this, I suddenly had a flash of inspiration. Was the salty sea—in other words, the lake—under the salt crust beneath our feet? I pressed my ear to the salt field, but couldn't hear any sounds from below. My actions woke Fatty up. He struck the salt crust with his rock pick, but it was so thick that nothing happened.

## Chapter 5.19 Rods and Steel Bars

Fatty and Poker-Face dug through the equipment and pulled out the Luoyang shovel. We had each brought five threaded pipes with us. These days, they were all special carbon fiber poles that were made in a fishing rod factory and were particularly lightweight. Fatty positioned the shovel head and began hitting the salt field. The surface cracked, but the section below was much stronger than we had thought. The salt had actually crystallized after accumulating, so the shovel head couldn't penetrate like it would if we were digging through soil. But the salt surface cracked piece by piece every time it was struck.

I opened my lips that had turned into pickled sausages and asked Fatty, "Remember when we used a stove to melt and dig holes in the ice on the snow-capped mountains?"

Fatty panted a few times. He was prone to shortness of breath as he got older, and it became more and more difficult to breathe in the strong wind here. He pulled out the alcohol stove.<sup>76</sup> "Does salt even melt? Damn, we can't die here. We'd become ham in minutes."

At that moment, the old man also spread out his equipment nearby. He pulled out two steel pipes that were very similar to the Luoyang shovel. One was a drill bit and the other was a handle. It was a hand-cranked ice drill that was used for ice fishing.<sup>77</sup> The old man stood about three or four meters away from us and started to drill a hole in the ground.

Fatty made an expression that meant, "Look at him. That's what a professional would do."

I knew how hard salt was. Even if the area below us was hollow, our stable footing here meant that the salt layer must be very thick and the old man's drill bit wouldn't be long enough. I watched the old man slowly start to drill. After he had drilled down a bit, he took out a threaded steel pipe and connected it. After turning the hand crank for more than ten minutes, he stood up and rested before continuing. We squatted nearby

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<sup>76</sup> Uses alcohol as its fuel source. They are most commonly used in the ultralight backpacking because they're minimalist and compact. Looks like [this](#).

<sup>77</sup> The drill bit can also be called an auger. They look like [this](#) when assembled.



and watched him while smoking cigarettes that tasted more and more salty. I wrapped my scarf around my mouth and looked around in the dark. The salt particles briefly blew into our limited lighting range before quickly disappearing into the darkness. I turned to look at Poker-Face, but his light was moving away into the darkness. He apparently wanted to go exploring.

He ventured much farther than I did, so I was relieved to take a cursory look at the few hundred meters surrounding us. After Poker-Face arrived in Rain Village, he traveled to practically all the mountains around the village. There was even a time when I would only see him a few times a week. But every time he came back, I was excited to see what strange local products he brought back with him. There was one time he brought back a strange fish head, which Fatty tried to eat. It took him three days before he finally finished eating it.

“You know, ethnic minorities have the custom of salt burial.” Fatty said to me while taking the salt on the ground and building a snowman.

“I know what you’re going to say. Don’t. I’m a man who’s achieved a lot and survived great catastrophes. I should have a pepper noodles burial instead.” I said while silently adding, *I should stop talking. I really don’t want to open my mouth. If I eat any more salt, I’ll suffer from high blood pressure.*

“Look at you.” Fatty said. “We’ve worked so hard for so many years. We should at least get a curry burial. But like you said, things have gone very smoothly this time. If it was the old days, we would have definitely encountered something bad by now. This time, we didn’t even meet anything scary. It’s a little weird.”

I squinted, feeling rather bored. The amazing sight of the salt field stretching out in front of us was a spectacle that ordinary people wouldn’t be able to see at all. But for me, this kind of scenery really only excited me for a few minutes. My body and nerves were tense, just waiting for the inevitable danger. I had forgotten that this wasn’t a strange tomb others had designed, just waiting for us to enter. It was merely a cave.

Over the past ten years, I had unconsciously become addicted to danger.

I chastised myself and scratched at the salty ground with my eyes partially closed. I glanced over at the old man's fishing rod and equipment at this time and decided to go over and have a look.

The fishing equipment all looked the same at first glance, but they were actually very different. Crucian rods, carp rods, Luo Fei rods, stream rods, breakwater rods, lure rods, interline rods, raft rods, and boat rods all utilized different materials in different parts of the fishing rod. For people like me who only knew a little bit, anything was fine as long as it had a hook. But it was very different when they were used by a master. For example, some fish only lightly nibbled on the bait, so you needed to feel the slight movement from the fishing line to the pole to determine when to lift the pole up. For something like this, the fishing pole needed to be very light, sensitive, and small. If you used a big thick pole that was six meters long, then by the time the force would be transmitted from the place you were holding it to the head of the pole, the fish would've already run away.

I was familiar with fishing rods because I bought and sold them. Ten years before Changbai, I once went to Japan to look for cultural relics and helped a buyer search for a guqin<sup>78</sup> from the Tang Dynasty. I didn't find it, but I received more than a dozen poles and rods. Like other aspects of their culture, the Japanese were very particular about making fishing rods. They were also divided based on what clans and famous teachers made them. Since they were made of real bamboo, each fishing rod was different and had its own unique characteristics. The Shiguang school was said to have produced a genius who had made a fishing rod that could even catch water dragons. Legend had it that you could catch a lot of things you had never seen before with that pole.

Back then, I really liked the "grip strength" at the end of the pole where you're supposed to hold it. Each master had his own grip strength preferences, and I especially liked the ones the Feng Ye family made because they were light. I sold seven of them when I came back to China, but I couldn't sell the rest. I tried to use them myself, but I couldn't get

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<sup>78</sup> It's a long zither with seven strings that you pluck with your fingers.

the hang of it. They did look really beautiful when I put them in my home, though.

The old man had a rod with a chain-patterned grip, but it was obvious to see that he had improved the rest of the pole himself. I didn't know what kind of ideas he had to make such improvements.

At this time, I saw that the steel pole with the yellow cloth had been placed in the middle of all the other fishing rods. I wanted to stretch my hand out and take a look at it, but I gave up after thinking it over.

Fatty patted me on the shoulder: "Mr. Naive, the old man stopped drilling." I turned to see the old man suddenly lift the pole up and turn the drill bit counterclockwise to pull it out, but there wasn't any water that rushed out of the hole.

"No water?" I asked the old man.

He shook his head, "No, I couldn't go all the way down." When the drill bit was pulled out, there was a big hole in the ground. We shined our flashlights in it, but I couldn't see the bottom at all. I put my ear to it but didn't hear any sound either. I looked at the tip of the drill and saw that there was rock debris on it.

It looked like my judgment was wrong.

We put away the equipment and our miner's lamps. If it wasn't under the salt layer, then where was it? I was about to persuade the old man to go back. Since we had come all the way down, there was a very low probability of catching the fish. We just didn't expect that we wouldn't be able to find the lake at all. It was possible that this was the bottom of the lake, and it had already dried up.

At that moment, I saw Poker-Face's light start signaling us from very, very far away. He seemed to have found something.

## Chapter 5.20

Poker-Face's light flashed three times, two times, and then three more times. This was the lantern language I had invented in the village because the houses there didn't have good soundproofing. This particular signal meant: hurry, hurry, hurry.

I had a storage shed on the hillside by the village that I had bought from Liu Ke, who was a little neurotic. He had two of them and was willing to sell me one. He couldn't hear the sounds of thunder, rain, and waterfalls, but for some reason, my voice was especially loud to him whenever we spoke.

There was a big banyan tree beside the storage shed that I had set a big table underneath in order to dry vegetables.

City people weren't as skillful as those in the countryside. When we played PS4 late into the night and forgot to collect the sun-dried vegetables, I had to climb up and step on the roof to get them.

I couldn't be loud at night because Old Liu went to bed early and woke up as soon as anyone made a noise. I gave the lamp to Fatty and Poker-Face and told them I'd signal when I had filled up a basket so that they could come up and take it.

When I first arrived in the village, the weather was still warm and I was interested in the waterfalls. I used to sit on the roof in the middle of the night and photograph them under the moonlight, so I also needed Fatty and Poker-Face to help me set up the equipment.

Over time, this lantern language became a system. I figured all languages had started out like this. Fatty and I could use the lantern language from across the village to curse the aunt next door for half a night.

We put away our equipment and walked towards Zhang Qiling's light, but after walking for a long time, the light was still so far away.

Something was wrong.

Fatty stopped walking and said, "This isn't fucking right. It's a mirage."

I carefully looked at it. It was indeed a signal I had created, which could only be used to swear across the street and call people to pick up dried vegetables. This signal wouldn't appear anywhere else, so Poker-Face was definitely the one signaling. Moreover, I was familiar with the frequency of his signals. His hand speed was very stable, so the rhythm was the same every time.

"Let's go," I said. "It may not be a terrible accident or trap this time. It just might be really far away."

As the three of us walked on, the old man remained silent the whole way. He was more eager than anyone else, so Fatty had to tell him to relax.

I soon began to suspect that something was wrong because the light signals were coming from that place, but it didn't seem like they were close at all. Sometimes it even looked like they were farther away. Fatty and I looked at each other, and I suddenly realized that the only possibility was that Poker-Face was still moving forward. As soon as we got closer, he would move further ahead.

"Is Little Brother seducing us?" Fatty wondered. "Why can't he stop and wait for us? He's been running for decades and we've been chasing him for more than ten years. He should wait for us for once."

For a moment, I felt touched by Fatty's words. I had been wondering since the beginning what Poker-Face's purpose here was. What did he want to tell me? I kept feeling like there was something to this adventure. I had already reached the age where I could do what I wanted. If I followed that line of thinking, did it mean that his life would continue flowing, and we would gradually fall behind?

I was imagining things. I definitely didn't think he was so philosophical. Poker-Face was a pragmatist, after all. His situation only showed that he was chasing something. He was signaling us with the light to tell us to catch up quickly.

If I couldn't catch up like this, then I should just run. There was nothing I could do about getting old, but at least I wouldn't lose to him now.

"Run!" I said to Fatty. "Look after the old man and try to catch up. If you can't, take your time."

"Why should I look after him?!" Fatty asked angrily. I didn't bother responding and just started running like crazy.

I ran through the salty wind and headed towards the light, adjusting my breathing according to the way Black Glasses had taught me to run. I knew that running at a constant speed was the fastest way to catch up, but I didn't bother maintaining a steady rhythm. I hadn't sprinted at full strength for a long time. When I was in Changbai Mountain, I felt confident at the ease with which I sprinted and jumped, and the speed with which I turned to shoot every time. I suddenly wanted to regain the pleasure of controlling my own body.

I had left Fatty far behind after running for twenty minutes, but the light in front of me was only a little bigger. I was gasping for breath, sweat was seeping through my underwear, and I was steaming all over.

The sweat on my face and neck was soaked in salt particles that began to chafe my skin, and my eyelids began to ache. I closed them tightly and let out a few tears to wash them clean.

I continued running, knowing in my heart that I would be exhausted when I caught up to him.

I didn't know how long I had been running, but the light finally started to get bigger and bigger. I was already on the brink of collapse and my hands and feet were only moving on instinct. Gradually, I heard the loud sound of running water.

I didn't recognize the surrounding environment at all. I clenched my teeth, kept moving my legs, and ran forward. I finally saw Poker-Face kneeling on one leg, holding the miner's lamp, and signaling regularly. I looked in front of him and saw that it was completely dark.

The sound of water was getting louder and louder, and the light from my miner's lamp offset the glare from his. At the same time, I saw him staring into the darkness ahead. It turned out to be a huge lake. The water on the lake was flowing, which was where the loud sound was coming from. He was only a dozen steps away from the lake, and the salt field under his feet stretched into the water like a beach.

I stood still, letting my pounding heart calm down and hoping the urge to vomit would disappear as soon as possible. I squatted down, calmed my spasming lungs, and then walked slowly to his side.

"Is this the lake?" I used everything I had to make this sentence sound as calm as possible.

Poker-Face stood up, "Be careful. The things in this lake are unusual." He pointed to the salt beach in front of him, where a huge mark led right into the lake. It looked like something snake-shaped had just climbed into the lake from the beach.

## Chapter 5.21 Rain Village's Fishing King

I was so shocked that I felt my breath get caught in my throat and I almost choked. I took a few steps forward and squatted down to look at the marks on the ground. They were about the same width as car tires.

"Is this a fucking snake?" I asked. "Did you see it just now?"

"I didn't get close, but it's not a snake. It's a fish." Poker-Face looked at the lake and added, "It's fast."

As Poker-Face spoke, he put his hand on his waist. He didn't have a knife and obviously wasn't used to it. I pulled out my prized Kukri and handed it to him. He took it and stuck the sheath on his hip according to his usual habit. I pulled out my other one and also stuck it on my waist, copying him.

I continued shining my miner's lamp on the lake and saw that there seemed to be a stone wall far to our left. As we walked along the salt beach, we saw that it really was a stone wall covered in salt clusters. It extended out from the shore to the lake like a flood control levee or some kind of path through the water.

"This is the fucking Sudi,"<sup>79</sup> I said. All that was missing was the willow branches fluttering on both sides and the six bridges.

When I swung the miner's lamp around, we could see that the lake on the other side was obviously smaller than this one. This wasn't a perfect Taiji like we had originally thought, but the stone wall was really man-made. I didn't know which master from which dynasty had built it or why.

The current on the water's surface was turbulent and a lot of big waves seemed to come out of thin air, indicating that the water below was colliding chaotically. I went up to the water's edge and tried to scoop some up, but Poker-Face held me back. He pulled out his knife, dipped it in the water, let it drip on his skin a little, and then wiped it off.

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<sup>79</sup> Formerly known as Sugongdi. It's one of the ten scenic spots of Hangzhou's West Lake. It's a tree-lined embankment that runs through the north-south scenic area of the lake.



“Salt water.” He whispered.

I had received a college education, so I knew that there were few toxic minerals associated with salt mines. My stomachache earlier may have been a result of other minerals in the salt, but I wouldn't die. I reassured him and then licked it before quickly spitting it out. The water was really salty, but not too salty. There had to be a fresh water system rushing in from somewhere to neutralize some of the salinity.

I turned around and signaled in Fatty's direction, telling him that everything was alright and that he should hurry up. After a long time, I saw Fatty and the old man approaching, looking exhausted. Fatty pointed at me and scolded, “Mr. Naive, you son of a bitch! You shouldn't be called Wu Xie, you're stinking evil!”<sup>80</sup> What were you running for? If this old man had an accident, I'd have to carry him alone. Luckily, he's quite tough.”

I looked at Lei Benchang. He was exhausted, but when he saw the lake, he started trembling and walked towards it. I figured he never thought that he'd really see the lake one day.

He stood by the lake and then crouched down. Tears started flowing down his face as he bowed his head and cried silently.

I thought Fatty was coming over to get even with me, but when I started to make my apologies, he whispered to me, “The old man can't go on like this. He's too excited. He almost passed out just now. He can't run like this again. If something happens here, we'll be in big trouble.”

I nodded and pulled out my canteen to let the old man have a few mouthfuls of water. By this time, we had been continuously exercising for more than ten hours and our bodies' fatigue had finally reached its peak after all that running. I figured it was time to deliver a fatal blow.

I sat down in front of the old man and turned my back to the lake. “This is it,” I said to him. “We brought you here as promised.”

He nodded. “Thank you.”

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<sup>80</sup> Remember, Wu Xie's name means something along the lines of “no evil”

“Can you tell us the truth now?” I asked as I continued to look at him.  
“Why on earth did you want to come here?”

When the old man paused and looked up at me, I patted him and said,  
“No one is able to lie to me. And I don’t think you did, either. You just didn’t tell us something. It’s ok. Just say it now.”

As soon as he opened his mouth to speak, I grabbed his hand and said,  
“Old man, I can accept others not telling me something. But if you lie to me once, I won’t let you fish here.”

I squeezed his hand as I looked at him without an ounce of compromise. I used enough strength to keep him from pulling back, silently telling him that I wasn’t as weak as I looked.

His tense shoulders slowly relaxed. “I—” he paused. “I came to see my son.”

I looked back at Fatty, and he nodded at me.

“My son is at the bottom of this lake.” The old man said. “I’m going to catch the fish that killed him, and I want to get him too.”

My previous sense of unease was right. The old man slowly told me that his son was one of those who went fishing in the deep pool and got dragged down. His son liked fishing because he liked fishing. He felt proud that he and his son shared a common hobby, but he never expected that his son would die at the hands of a fish.

This made the old man feel so guilty that he couldn’t accept the reality. After a long time, the old man couldn’t let it go and finally decided to face it. He was going to catch the fish that killed his son. This was the reason why he had lived here for so long.

“Old man, life and death are just part of the cycle of life. After so many years, you should also let it go. Why are you so persistent?” Fatty asked.  
“Maybe that fish is already dead—fuck, look out!”

As soon as the words fell, Poker-Face immediately jumped over and grabbed my collar. Fatty was a little slower but managed to grab the back

of the old man's neck. The two of them worked together to pull us up and drag us further up the shore. Almost at the same time, there was the loud sound of water exploding from behind us and a huge wave splashed over us.

"Fucking hell!" Fatty looked at the shore where we had just been sitting. I also looked back and saw a shadow among the wave quickly retreat back into the water.

## Chapter 5.22

It was so fast that it was already too late by the time Fatty's curse fell. Poker-Face ran over, pulled his knife from his waist, threw himself directly into the water, and rushed towards the shadow.

I was only half a second slower than him. I rolled over and pushed off with my foot while grabbing my knife in my left hand and rushing into the water, stabbing the blade down. The water was dark, and the lights on the shore couldn't reach at all. I only felt my knife penetrate into the salty layer beneath the water's surface. Fatty yelled from behind me, "Leave that evildoer to me!" He then slammed into my back, plunging me straight into the dark lake.

When I got up again, I saw that the miner's lamp on shore was shining on the water's surface. It must have been the old man's doing. I wiped the water off my face and saw a huge black shadow swimming in the waist-high water in front of me. It came close to my crotch and then quickly retreated.

Fatty shouted, "Little Brother!"

I crouched down so that Poker-Face could grip my shoulder as he jumped out of the water and stepped on Fatty's shoulder. Fatty lifted himself up and yelled: "Up you go!"

With two people's strength superimposed, Poker-Face sailed over my head and jumped straight into the water in front of me with a big splash. Fatty and I wobbled three or four steps before we finally regained our balance. I saw Little Brother standing in chest-deep water and shaking his hair as the waves slowly subsided.

I knew it had gotten away, so I immediately called the other two and told them to head back to shore.

As Poker-Face re-sheathed his knife and looked at the water silently, I noticed that his arm was bleeding.

The old man was utterly shocked as he stood there holding the two miner's lamps, letting them shine on the water's surface.

"What is it?" He asked.

I shook my head as I rummaged through my backpack for some bandages. I didn't manage to hit it with my knife just now. I only saw the shadow in the water. The fish was very long and didn't seem to be an ordinary fish. If anything, it was more like an eel or some other kind of creature. And its huge size had me wondering if it was a snake. But based on how it swam in the water just now, it didn't seem to be a big snake.

Fatty took a sip of salt water, picked up his equipment, and continued moving farther up the shore. When I asked him what he was doing, he said, "This fat master knows. With that thing in the water, I dare not sleep close to the lake." He went more than ten meters away before he took out various kinds of stoves and began arranging them. It was the end of the year and the temperature was cold. We would soon get hypothermia if we didn't change our clothes.

I gave Poker-Face a look. He must have reached that thing when he attacked it twice just now. I wanted to ask him what it felt like, but he suddenly raised his hand and threw something at me.

I caught it and held it up to the miner's lamp. It was a copper coin about the size of a kumquat. It was all green and corroded, so I couldn't see the words on it clearly.

"What's this?" I asked him.

"Scales."

*I see, so this is what he tore off from the fish just now. It turns out it's a copper coin. Is the fish's body completely covered in these copper coins to form scales?*

*What's this situation? If this fish isn't from here naturally, then was it farmed?*

We waded through the water and walked over to Fatty, who had already taken off his clothes and was starting to assemble his guns. “Damn it. Stupid ass aquatic creature also wanting to be called king. It’s not a fish, but an evil spirit. Looks like our trip has turned into exorcising evil for the people. As soon as I see it, I’ll shoot it.”

When I showed him the copper coin, he paused and looked at the old man, who was still staring at the lake. “Damn it,” He whispered. “This aquatic creature is even wearing armor. This really is an evil spirit. We didn’t run into Benbo’erba<sup>81</sup> did we?”

“The lake definitely isn’t so simple,” I said. “Look at what’s on this copper coin.”

There were some green hairs on the copper coin, which were a kind of algae that came from aquatic plants. It was exactly the same as the old man’s story. I thought it was strange that aquatic plants would grow on fish scales, but I figured the copper coins and scales had been merged together after so many years and these aquatic plants had been growing on the coins.

Fatty looked at the old man and motioned for me to keep quiet. We didn’t want to stimulate the old man any more than he already was. “It appears that what the old man said was true.” He whispered. “Damn it, the evildoer in the water hurt the young and innocent son who still had his life ahead of him. If it still wants to attack us, we simply can’t tolerate it. We’ll have to serve it up as fish head tofu soup.”

I didn’t think this kind of fish existed, but I was still full of doubts. I had been halfway through asking the old man the real story just now, so I had to keep going.

Poker-Face and I also took off our clothes and wrapped ourselves in space blankets. I went to check his wound and found that it was a very neat cut right on his wrist. I was subconsciously worried for a brief moment that I had accidentally hurt him when I followed him out and stabbed down into the dark water. But I knew that it was impossible. I had held the knife

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<sup>81</sup> It’s a “Journey to the West” character. 1 of 2 minions of the Nine Headed Beast. It’s a catfish that stays at the top of the pagoda in the Golden Ray Monastery after a Buddhist relic is stolen. Some info [here](#)

in my left hand because that was how Black Glasses had trained me. If a person in front of me attacked on my right, then I had to slash with my left hand so it wasn't as easy to accidentally get injured in the chaos.

I dragged the old man back and told him to get himself together and finish telling me what happened. The old man trembled a little. He might have initially thought it was unacceptable for his son to die at the hands of a fish, but after really seeing the fish, he realized that it wasn't so simple.

"Guys, this must be what killed my son." He silently put down the miner's lamp. "I finally saw that thing."

"Why didn't you tell us directly before?" I asked him.

The old man was still trembling and not listening to me at all. But even though he was trembling, he started touching his fishing rod and assembled a harpoon.

I wanted to keep asking, but Fatty stopped me and asked me to treat Poker-Face's wound first. Poker-Face had already disinfected it by himself so I helped him wrap it. I asked Fatty if he had ever encountered something like this before. I wasn't afraid of the natural environment, but a wall had been built in the water and there were copper coins on the fish. It showed that this place had been built artificially, but it didn't look like an ancient tomb. What was this place for and who built it?

Fatty loaded the bullets into his guns and said to me, "Don't ask so many questions. Come on, you know the rules. We go in fully armed. I think the answer is just above the stone wall. Let's go up and see what's at the center of the lake. The old man's in a bad state now, but rest assured, he'll tell us everything after I give him a few bottles of wine tonight."

## Chapter 5.23 Stagnant Water Dragon King

I dug through my own equipment. I hadn't used these weapons in a long time and never thought about pulling them out again after I had put them away. In those days, I had blinded my heart and done a lot of things I couldn't accept. These things were related to that time, but here I was pulling them out again.

But there weren't as many entanglements now and there weren't that many people in this world who owed each other. I had seen so many ancient corpses in tombs, but who cared about their lives? In the end, all their grievances and emotions would be lost after a hundred years. Even Wang Zanghai's millennium-long plan was still too difficult to achieve.

The three of us put on sets of clothes that we used to wear for grave robbing and walked to the stone wall. As we pushed through the wind, the salt particles danced in the air, making it feel like we were walking on the Sudi through the heavy snow.

"In recent years," Fatty said, "I always wanted the three of us to have a chance to walk around Hangzhou when it snowed. But I didn't expect it to come true here. Mr. Naive, look at the scenery. Is it better than West Lake?"

I use the miner's lamp to illuminate the lake, which was absolutely dark all year round. We were suddenly attacked by something in the water just now, which was probably because a light source had suddenly appeared. If this was a species of fish attracted to light, then it would be easy. We could lure it in with three miner's lamps and tire it out.

We kept going forward and found that the wind became stronger the farther we got away from shore. I wrapped my scarf tightly around my face. There was nothing of note here, other than the fact that the salt that was caked on the surface of the stone wall was very strong. The stone path on top of the wall was about three people wide, but we went in single file in case something suddenly came out of the water. But the water's surface was more than four meters away from the wall, so it would have to jump pretty high.



When I thought of the fish that looked like a snake, the white dam, the salt snowflakes, and snakes in the water, I felt as if it was another form of “The Tale of Madam White Snake”. If I were writing a novel, I would say that this dam-like stone wall was a giant snake that had been frozen by salt and all its descendants lived in the water. But Fatty was more insightful.

“Huh, do you think we look like Tang Sanzang crossing the Flowing Sands River? A pious old man, a monkey banished from heaven, and the other is—”<sup>82</sup> He pointed to himself and suddenly felt it wasn’t very fitting. “No, this isn’t like ‘Journey to the West’. It’s not a good metaphor to describe me.”

“I think it’s a good metaphor for you,” I said happily. “You love food and girls, so it’s very fitting for you. I’m not upset being Sha Wujing.”

Fatty spit in contempt, “Sha Wujing in the Flowing Sands River. You can be regarded as Bai Longma<sup>83</sup> at most.”

Poker-Face suddenly stopped. I thought he had a problem with being called a monkey, but he held the miner’s lamp up to illuminate the path up ahead. A building had suddenly appeared on the stone wall in front of us.

The building had been constructed on the stone wall, with both sides extending down into the lake. It was supported by stone pillars and covered in salt clusters. The whole building was a three-story pavilion that was completely covered in white. Some of the pillars had collapsed, and the shape of the whole building was somewhat deformed.

I looked at this ancient building from a distance and felt that it was a bit strange. After thinking it over, I found that this pavilion wasn’t built to

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<sup>82</sup> If you don’t remember [Tang Sanzang](#) is a main character in “Journey to the West” who was based on Xuanzang (or Tang Seng), a Tang dynasty Buddhist monk and translator (lived from 602-664) who traveled to India from 629-645. Tang Sanzang has 3 three powerful supernatural beings as his disciples – [Sun Wukong](#) (Monkey King), [Zhu Bajie](#) (part human/part pig) and [Sha Wujing](#) (pious old dude who used to be a general in heaven that pissed someone off and got reincarnated as a man-eating sand demon). Tang Sanzang and the other 2 actually met and recruited Sha Wujing at the Flowing Sands River

<sup>83</sup> Translates as “White Dragon Horse”. Also 1 of the main characters in “Journey to the West”. Wiki info [here](#). From what I can tell, he always tries to help out but fails at it, so he always has to go and get someone stronger to save the day. He also serves as Tang Sanzang’s steed for the rest of the journey.

normal proportions. It was very small—only about as tall as two or three people—and must have been a model or shrine like one of those roadside temples.

We looked at each other. Just as Fatty had said, the answer to this stone wall's purpose ended up being on top of it.

I was a little paranoid as we walked over to it. Maybe the good days I had experienced over the past six months had made me a little afraid of dying. I couldn't help thinking that if the ancients could make landmines, then our tomb-robbing success rate would have dropped a lot. Of course, most people wouldn't plant bombs in their graves.

When I walked up to the edge of the ancient pavilion's attic, I could see a door there that had practically been sealed shut by the salt. Fatty kicked it open, bent down, and walked in. There were two statues on the platform extending out onto both sides of the lake.

The statues had warped so much that they looked like creamy glutinous rice, and it was impossible to tell whether they were Buddha statues or Sanqing<sup>84</sup> statues. Fatty walked to the statue facing the outer lake and knocked on the salt layer with his rock pick a few times, revealing the stone inside.

We went over to help, chipping away at the salt until we revealed a stone statue that we had never seen before. The body was that of a human, but the head was a giant fish head.

The carving was rough and didn't look like it had been done by a skilled craftsman.

We stood by the statue without saying anything for a long time. Fatty eventually murmured, "Brothers, this is the god of fish head tofu soup."

We looked out at the whole lake. Fatty went up to the edge and swept his miner's lamp over the water's surface three times, "Is this lake a giant pot of fish head tofu soup?"

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<sup>84</sup> Sanqing translates as "Three Pure Ones". They're the 3 highest Gods in the Taoist pantheon. More info [here](#)

“Stop talking crap,” I said while thinking to myself, *if this is a pot of soup, then it’s salty enough to kill.*

Poker-Face continued chipping away at the salt layer on the stone statue and I heard him say, “This is a kind of dragon king.”

“Dragon king?” Fatty asked. “Then if it’s not the god of fish head tofu soup, it must be the god of Buddha jumping over the wall.”<sup>85</sup>

I told him to stop messing around and asked Poker-Face what kind of dragon king this was and why the statue was here. Poker-Face looked at the water and suddenly turned to look at the stone statues on the other side. We stepped forward to help him clean it off and found that it was also a stone statue with a fish head, but this one was female.

Poker-Face looked at both of them and then squatted down to look at their bases. We found that the bottoms of the two stone statues were connected to both the ground and each other. It wasn’t two stone statues, but a stone statue connected at the tail.

“This is,” Poker-Face said, “stagnant water—”

He didn’t go on, which made me think that he wasn’t sure. Fatty touched his chin and looked up. “Guys, look at what’s over here.” With that said, he pointed above his head.

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<sup>85</sup> “Buddha jumps over the wall” is a name for a Chinese dish that uses many non-vegetarian ingredients. It’s also known as Buddha’s Temptation. It’s a variety of shark fin soup in Fujian cuisine. Wiki info [here](#)

## Chapter 5.24 Yellow River Corpse Fisherman

We looked up and saw a lot of round, hollowed-out incense burners hanging over our heads. They were twice as big as walnuts, which was probably because there weren't as many salt clusters under the eaves. We could even make out their silver-black metallic luster in the midst of all the salt. When I raised my hand and tapped one of them with my knife, a lot of debris fell out. We all backed up and found that the debris appeared to be the dregs of traditional Chinese medicine.

Poker-Face squatted down to look at them and then stood up and picked one of the incense burners up. We found that there were a lot of hooks on top of the shrine, which was what the incense burners had been hanging from. He sniffed it and then shook it, but didn't seem to know what it was.

Fatty also picked one up and broke the salt clusters off of it. There was an old hollowed-out silver object inside, but it had corroded and stuck together so he couldn't unscrew it. He emptied out the medicine dregs, made sure there weren't any bugs in it, and then put it in his bag.

"What are you doing?" I asked angrily.

"I've never seen this junk before," Fatty said. "Maybe it's worth a lot of money."

"Are we still short of money? How much can you use in a lifetime?" I retorted.

Fatty gave a tut, "Look at you acting like that. Who cares about your stinking money? What I want is this feeling."

I ignored him and looked around, noticing that we could keep walking if we went past the shrine. It didn't appear to be at the center of the lake, so there could be other things up ahead.

I looked around again but didn't see anything. As I kept moving forward, I thought about Poker-Face's story regarding the Stagnant Water Dragon King.

I didn't know any legends about the Stagnant Water Dragon King, but there were several possible explanations based on the name. One was that this dragon king lived in stagnant water, which often referred to water that didn't circulate. The enclosed pool would gradually start stinking and smelling fishy. In the ancient Zhiguai novels<sup>86</sup>, dragons generally needed high-quality water to live in. It was either blessed land on the edge of the world, a deep lake more than three thousand meters deep, had direct access to the sea, or was the center of nine converging rivers. But I didn't know why a dragon king would be in stagnant water. Was it because he was poor?

When I thought about it some more, the dragon king with a fish head definitely wasn't convincing.

Another explanation for the stagnant water was that people would die if they touched it. It didn't even matter if it was poisonous water, submerged water, or boiled water. I couldn't help thinking that a dragon king in boiling water was really just fish head tofu soup, but I had no clue as to the other two.

Poker-Face wouldn't explain it to me, and I wouldn't ask him. It seemed to be a tradition for him to not impart any knowledge to others, which had to be followed even now.

We kept walking for more than ten minutes when the wind suddenly became stronger. It was obvious that it had changed from a crosswind to a fall wind. Fatty shined his miner's lamp overhead, revealing a shocking number of large holes on the dome over the lake.

With the wind blowing out of them, it really made for a rare spectacle.

When we turned all the miner's lamps and Wolf-Eyes flashlights on and shined them above the lake, we could see a lot of caves and waterfalls. The water flowing down from these waterfalls wasn't very fast, which was why the sound had been drowned out by the wind.

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<sup>86</sup> Translates as "tales of the miraculous", "tales of the strange", or "records of anomalies". They were a type of Chinese literature which appeared in the Han dynasty and were among the first examples of Chinese fiction. They dealt with the existence of the supernatural, rebirth and reincarnation, gods, ghosts, and spirits. More info [here](#)

“Some of the water in this underground lake must be coming from these caves. And all the water from the mountain probably comes here during the rainy season. There should be corroded caves above these openings, and some of them should be holes at the bottom of the lake that are connected to the underground river,” I said.

“Then how can the fish in this lake get to the surface?” Fatty asked.

“Maybe the water level here was very high back in those days and the salt field we just passed through was at the bottom of the lake,” I said.

In fact, this was still a bit illogical. Not only had it been the dry season when that strange fish appeared that year, but there had been a rare drought in Fujian. The water level back then was probably lower than it was now. But it seemed like this fish could go on land. Was it because the water had dried up that the fish in the lake had to come ashore in search of new water sources? Was that why it went on land?

Fatty pulled out his phone and took a selfie. There was no signal here, so there was still enough battery power for the flash to work. He took several pictures with Poker-Face and then asked Poker-Face to take a picture of the two of us together.

“If the phones back then were this advanced, we could’ve already become internet celebrities by now.” Fatty said. “It’s a pity we didn’t take one in front of the bronze door, Mr. Naïve. But we could always go back and make it up.”

I chuckled to myself and then urged them to keep going. As we walked for nearly half an hour, I began to marvel at the huge lake. As the flashlight illuminated the water, we found that it was very shallow here and there appeared to be a plateau at the bottom of the lake. It didn’t come out of the waist-high water, but we could still see the white lake bottom from this position.

I didn’t see any fish, which was a bit like seeing a shallow coral reef from the beachside. Our flashlights continued to shine, revealing a huge building on the dam up ahead. The shape was very similar to the shrine we had just seen, but the miner’s lamps and flashlights weren’t strong

enough to see the whole picture. We could also make out another statue of the Stagnant Water Dragon King on the section of stone wall leading up to the building. This time, however, it was facing us instead of the water.

We all stopped, thinking that something must really be inside. What the hell was this place?

The shadow was at least dozens of stories high, and the whole outline seemed to be in the shape of a statue. Fatty and I looked at each other and then looked at Little Brother. The three of us hooked our arms around each other's shoulders, and Fatty used the remaining battery power on his phone to take a group photo with the shadow in the background. As soon as Fatty's phone shut down automatically, we turned and left without any hesitation.

It was no longer my business.

When we walked all the way back to the shrine, I saw that Lei Benchang had followed after us. All his fishing tackle had been set up, and he was gripping the steel bar with the yellow flag in his hand. In other words, it was the corpse fishing rod. He had used a hammer to make a gap in the stone wall, where he put the fishing line and flywheel. Then, he took out a lunch box full of sand from his bag that was also covered in yellow paper.

Lei Benchang lit three incense sticks, knelt in front of the lunch box, and kowtowed three times. He then grabbed a crab from the wet sand inside the lunch box and stuck it to the yellow paper before tying it to the fishing line and throwing it into the water.

"What kind of fishing method is this? I haven't seen it before." I asked.

"A corpse fisherman from the Yellow River gave me this crab." Lei Benchang said. "It's to help me find my son."

Fatty sighed, patted the old man, and went to fiddle with the lunch box. There were a lot of crabs in the sand that were all a modest size. I was

surprised when Fatty shook his head in disgust. *What the fuck?* I thought. *Are you even willing to eat crabs used to catch corpses?*

That evening—in fact, it was almost dawn—we set up a tent on the shore. Fatty made several traps nearby and strung up a warning wire. We boiled some water and prepared to get a good night's sleep. After we woke up, Lei Benchang would start fishing for that strange fish. What he wanted to do twenty years ago was finally coming true.

Fatty brought out the wine. After Lei Benchang became slightly tipsy, he opened his mouth and started telling us the detailed story of what happened to his son that year.



## Chapter 5.25 One Step Away

When it came to telling stories, Lei Benchang was average. His son started fishing with him when he was five years old. He used to be a warm and steady person and hoped his son would like the things he did. His son looked like a black monkey<sup>87</sup> at such a young age because Lei Benchang used to take him on all-day fishing trips everywhere.

His son was very talented and could even fish with a stick and a rope, but this kind of detail wasn't the core of the story. It wasn't clear where his so-called talent for fishing came from, but even the fishermen themselves couldn't tell most of the time. Lei Benchang said that sometimes, it seemed like his son could communicate with the fish in the water and knew what they were thinking.

It was a baffling feeling. Some people simply managed to catch fish no matter what kind of area they were in, even if there weren't any signs.

There was also a type of master who wasn't familiar with fishing so much as he was familiar with the whole body of water. He not only knew where the water was deep and shallow but also where the whirling currents and shallow slopes were. This kind of master was also good at catching fish and could always catch more than others even though they were subject to the same conditions.

Of the two kinds of masters—those who could catch big fish and those who could catch a lot of fish—Lei Benchang's son belonged to the former.

His son was addicted to catching big fish. When he grew up, he took part in many competitions, won lots of trophies, and began looking for big fish in the mountains and rivers everywhere. For some reason, Lei Benchang was very proud that his son had fished in all the big rivers and could tell whether there were big fish in the river systems. When Lei Benchang asked how he knew, his son couldn't explain it. He just looked at it and came to a conclusion.

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<sup>87</sup> Pretty sure he's just saying the kid was tan.

When his son came to Fujian to fish, he had actually brought a few students with him. A lot of rich people who liked fishing heard that his son was good, so they decided to take his class. They would sometimes go out to fish for fun and would ask his son to coach them. Wild fishing was a very physical activity and would enable you to appreciate the local conditions and customs. It was very popular for a period of time during the last century and was similar to how rich people today collected sandalwood.

When his son arrived at the deep pool, he suddenly stopped and told his students that there were big fish in the pool.

They all immediately got their hooks ready, but his son was really the one getting the four fishing rods set up. The other people were merely helping him hold the rods. His son deliberately wanted his students to get a taste of how it felt to hook a big fish. In the end, something bit the hook less than an hour later.

The fishing rod was immediately pulled in a very exaggerated semicircle that almost looked like a paper clip. Then, the line broke and the fishing rod was thrown back. The person holding the rod was inexperienced and ended up hitting his son in the eye, causing it to swell. But before his son could react, he also managed to hook something on his pole.

His son's first reaction was to shout, "So fierce?"

After the fish swallowed the hook, it didn't show any signs of hesitation or fear. It merely snapped the fishing line and then moved on to bite another hook nearby. His son intuitively realized that there was only one fish below, and this fish wasn't afraid of the hook or line at all.

With the exception of shark fishing, it was rare to encounter such a situation.

His son was experienced and fought with the fish for two or three hours, but even more bizarre things happened during that time. The people next to him were still fishing, and all their lines got hooked one right after another. When the fish was fighting with him, it was still eating the bait on the other hooks. He didn't know if it was just hungry or that fierce.

After all four poles had been hooked, the fishing lines began to twist and get knotted together, and then everyone's fishing lines suddenly loosened at the same time.

His son thought the line had finally broken and sighed. Although it was difficult for the line to break, it was still possible if it rubbed against the rock in the depths of the pool.

Not only had all four of them gone through such a big battle, but it was the first time the other three had experienced such a thing before. They laughed heartily, turned their backs to the water, and started discussing how exciting it had been. But in an unexpected turn of events, the line didn't break and the big fish swam up.

The people on shore only saw a huge shadow covered in aquatic plants emerge from the surface of the deep pool. Then, the water exploded and his son was the first to be dragged into the pool. The others thought that his son had fallen into the water and immediately went to save him. After the ensuing chaos, all four people had disappeared and only the four fishing rods were left floating on the water. But the four rods were suddenly dragged into the water a few minutes later, disappearing into the depths of the pool.

When some people went to salvage later, they only found three of the fishing rods. The four men and the last fishing rod had completely disappeared.

After the old man heard the devastating news, he was in denial for a long time. It was only when he went to the place where the accident occurred that he knew his son couldn't have survived. He may have been dragged into an underground river. Unable to accept this reality, he started fishing in that deep pool.

The old man closed his eyes when he said this, and I knew that he wanted to cry. The insurmountable grief in his heart and the twenty years of waiting should have converged into tears at this moment, but he had none left. He just sat there crying silently with red-rimmed eyes. His last tears should have faded away the moment he saw the lake earlier.

I could understand his state at that moment. He had finally seen his end. It had been a very long and lonely road for Lei Benchang, so when he saw the end, all he could do was cry.

I had only experienced it for ten years, so the only thing I could do was admire him and let him drink more hot water. I knew what it was like searching for someone. I used to think that I had the best persistence in the world, but now I was seeing someone who had spent twenty years looking for a corpse. I was finally starting to realize that this persistence was merely a human trait that wasn't all that remarkable.

After that, we got ready to sleep. Fatty was so excited that he couldn't sleep at all, but I was very tired despite my preoccupied mind. Fatty asked me what the huge building might be.

I looked at the top of the tent, thinking about the huge shadow, the shrine's setting outside, and the statue of the Stagnant Water Dragon King. If we thought of it logically, then the ancients at that time must have discovered this underground pool. There were many wandering heroes who followed Xu Xiake's<sup>88</sup> example and went deep into various caves. If they found a strange fish in the underground lake, they might have thought it was the Stagnant Water Dragon King inhabiting it and built temples to worship it. The most likely possibility was that this huge building was the Stagnant Water Dragon King's palace, which was used to placate the dragon king. They would throw food into the deep pool as a sacrifice and pray for the protection of the water and soil.

This strange fish attacked the old man's son when he and his group had their backs to the water, and it was the same when it attacked us earlier. If the fish took the initiative to attack and carefully chose an opportunity, then there was a chance it was quite intelligent. I decided to call this kind of fish the Stagnant Water Dragon King for the time being. The old man might be able to catch it, but it was doubtful whether we could actually subdue it.

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<sup>88</sup> Xu Xiake (1587-1641), Ming dynasty travel writer and geographer, author of "Xu Xiake's Travel Diaries". He traveled throughout China for more than 30 years, documenting his travels extensively. His work was quite systematic in that it provided accurate details and measurements. Some say his work reads more like the accounts of a 20th-century field surveyor than an early 17th-century scholar. More info [here](#)

As Fatty kept talking, I fell into a deep sleep. He woke me up the next morning, but I was confused when I heard what he said. He kept repeating himself and seemed agitated. As I tried to fully wake myself up, it took me a moment before I heard him say, "Lei Benchang is dead."

I frowned, not understanding what he meant. I walked out of our tent and went over to the old man's tent. When I opened the flap, I saw that the old man had been in the middle of assembling his fishing rods. His head was leaning on the rod that he was holding on the ground, but he was completely motionless.

When I went up and touched him, I found that he was cold and stiff and his eyes were still open. I looked at the pupils and saw that they were cloudy and dilated.

The old man was dead.

I looked at Poker-Face standing nearby. He closed the old man's eyes and said to me, "He was seriously ill."

"You knew?" I was surprised and suddenly realized why he had promised the old man at that time. He already knew.

Poker-Face looked at the old man, patted him on the shoulder, and then gently put him down. I watched his movements and suddenly realized that Poker-Face knew the old man. His actions weren't those of someone treating a stranger, but someone treating an old friend he had known for a long time. My hair stood on end and I grabbed Poker-Face's hand, "Who is he?"

"A person who was familiar with me a long time ago. But he's forgotten me." Poker-Face said.

## Chapter 5.26

Poker-Face pulled Lei Benchang's sleeve up and I saw a Miao-patterned scar on his hand that had been burned into the flesh. "This was the mark Chen Pi Ah Si used when he was in Miaojiang."

I looked at it carefully. The scar had faded after so much time had passed that I could only make out a general shape and couldn't tell what pattern it was.

"Do you remember him? Was he Grandpa Si's man?"

"Only people in Miaojiang use such marks," he said. "I was there at that time, but I can't remember who he is. Maybe he held the lamp for me."

I knew that Poker-Face had a very high position under Grandpa Si when he was fooling around a long time ago. I sighed and asked him what serious illness Lei Benchang had, and whether drinking Fatty's wine had killed him.

Fatty was furious, "Mr. Naïve, that wine belongs to the aunt next door! Don't blame me! I consider drinking yourself to death a good way to go. I won't feel guilty about it."

Poker-Face didn't answer me, but said, "It's good that he could come here."

I had basically confirmed that Poker-Face knew the old man was dying when he saw him. An old man had died during our stay in the village, and Poker-Face had also shown him a kind of attentiveness before he had died. When the old man fell asleep in the sun, Poker-Face would often stop and take a look at him.

Fatty said that no one besides the nursing home staff would have much experience when it came to dying of old age. But Little Brother may have experienced many natural deaths throughout his life—whether it was from illness or old age—so he could understand what those people looked like in their last days.

He saw that Lei Benschang had run out of oil and his lamp was dry, so he agreed with Fatty at that time. Instead of having the old man die with endless regrets, we would bring him here and let him get at least one step away from his goal.

Since we had stayed in Tibet for a long time and were familiar with their rituals, we gave Lei Benschang a Tibetan funeral and then buried him in the salt field. Maybe it was a good thing that people like him didn't have a tombstone. Fatty made a cross with the old man's fishing rod and placed it as his grave marker.

"He's not Catholic. Are you trying to convert him?" I asked Fatty over a drink.

"There must be a place for him to go to," Fatty said. "Otherwise, it would be embarrassing if he turned into a zombie and climbed out. By the way, if Little Brother starts being really nice to me one day, you have to remind me that I might be dying soon. I'll have to find a beautiful girl at last. I absolutely can't die alone in bed."

I gave him a blank look and then continued the ritual. After I had handled everything properly, I felt even more depressed. I looked out at the lake and thought of myself.

I had spent so much time looking for people and trying to find my Uncle Three, but I ended up finding these two people beside me instead. And then I spent these past ten years running myself into the ground because of them. I would have been no different from this old man if I had died in front of the bronze door. The only reason the ending was different was because the people around me had sacrificed too much for me.

There were too many such things in this life.

I'd rather the old man had a heart attack at the moment he hooked the fish than die like this.

As soon as I thought this, I saw Poker-Face pick up the old man's fishing rod and finish connecting it. He then put it over his shoulder, lifted up the fish basket, and slowly walked to the dam wall.

I glanced at Fatty, but he merely shrugged his shoulders. "I'll translate for you. Little Brother is saying that we've already received the deposit, so we have to finish things."

The two of us followed after him and quickly arrived at the shrine. I connected the fishing rod and line, picked up the pieces of carp meat, and then stirred them in the dragon coffin fungus. After tossing the line into the water, I turned on the flashlight and pointed it in that direction.

It was dark in the distance, and I knew that was where the Stagnant Water Dragon King's palace was. Fatty would look at it from time to time, still unable to let it go. As the fishing rod shook in the strong wind, the three of us stood there with our hands in our pockets.

Before I could gather my thoughts, I suddenly saw a big splash of water in the area where we had dropped the line.

I immediately squatted down, ready to lift the pole up, and saw a ripple spread across the water's surface.

Was this fish really so reckless? I felt a little sad in my heart as I thought that maybe the old man would have been able to catch this dragon king by himself if he had lived one more day. As I listened to the high-pitched sound of the fishing line being pulled, the rod immediately bent into an arc.

I went up and grabbed it and began pulling it back. I could feel an overpowering force on the other end start fighting me. In less than two seconds, my fishing line broke.



## Chapter 5.27 Hitting the Shit Stick

The fishing line had broken. I had probably been too engrossed just now, for when I turned my head, I saw Fatty staring at me completely dumbfounded. He obviously still didn't understand what had just happened. I was just starting to scold the bastard when the sound of another fishing line being pulled rang out through the air.

I quickly went up and grabbed the rod, which had bent into a very exaggerated arc. Fatty shouted, "Let it go!" I remembered that the reel had been locked, so I released it and watched the fishing line immediately get pulled further out. I stood firm and locked it again, but the force on the other end was much stronger and the fishing rod bowed again. I tried to grab the handle and start reeling it in, but it was useless. As soon as the line tightened, it would immediately break again.

"Keeping letting it go!" Fatty called out again. I did as he said and watched the line get pulled at a crazy speed. I locked it again but knew that this wasn't the way to go. The whole point of releasing and reeling the line in was to tease the fish. What the hell was I supposed to do if the line broke again?

"Help!" I shouted to Fatty.

He scratched his head, "How can I help?"

"The old man must've been prepared!" While I was being pulled around by the fish, Fatty went through the old man's equipment and suddenly let out a loud, "Fuck!" He pulled out a very sharp, long-handled iron hook that was used to pull big sea fish ashore.

Large freshwater fish were often caught with small fishing rods. As long as the fish's physical strength was exhausted, the fishing line would be strong enough to pull it up. It seemed that the old man didn't prepare any other method besides catching the fish this way.

"I'll go down," Fatty said to me. "I'll fight it."

Poker-Face suddenly grabbed my bait bag. When I asked him what he was planning on doing, he pointed to the Stagnant Water Dragon King's palace and then grabbed the second section of a spare fishing rod. He took out a piece of bait and then hit it with the fishing rod like he was playing golf.

When the bait fell into the lake up ahead, my fishing line was immediately pulled to the edge of the ripple where it had landed. I couldn't help thinking that the fish must be very hungry. Poker-Face grabbed the bait and then told me to follow the direction the fish was heading in. While running, he used the fishing rod to hit the bait so that it landed in the water in front of the fish. Step by step, he lured the fish to the front of the Dragon King's palace.

He exerted the force so cleverly that the fishing rod drew various arcs in the air and whistled, but the bait still went flying into the water as a whole without breaking apart.

As we rushed all the way to the Dragon King's palace, I saw the huge salt sandbar under the water's surface again. I immediately understood that Poker-Face was planning to lead the fish to shallow waters, but at this time, the bait had been exhausted.

"Dry food!" I yelled at Fatty.

"There's only bacon and the old man's crabs left," Fatty said.

"Use them all!" I yelled.

As soon as Fatty pulled the bacon out of his backpack and held it up, I slashed it into pieces with my Kukri. Every time I cut a piece, Poker-Face would hit it like a baseball without even letting it touch the ground. Fatty could only watch as the bacon in his hand became smaller and smaller, and the two of us crazily slashed it with a knife and sent it flying with a rod.

As soon as the piece of bacon was finished, Fatty threw another piece directly to Poker-Face, who sent it flying out. The old man's poor crabs soon followed. Once they were all finished, we used a flashlight to

illuminate the shallows and saw that the series of ripples hadn't yet disappeared. Every piece of bacon had fallen into its proper place, creating a perfect chain of ripples.

At the same time, we saw a huge black shadow speeding through these ripples. It was too far away to see clearly, but the shadow was very long and looked just like a dragon.

"It's coming up!" I said overjoyed, "Let's keep going!"

"There's nothing left!" Fatty said.

"There must at least be something!"

"Oh, I had something. But you wouldn't let me bring it when we fucking set off!"

I didn't believe it and touched Fatty's waist, which made him furious, "Fuck off! Am I the kind of person who withholds goods?"

"What else?"

"My dick is the only thing left. Do you want me to cut it off for you?!" Fatty asked angrily.

I clenched my teeth and looked back at the lake. The shadow was still too far away from us, so I needed to lure it a little closer.

Fatty took out his wine and threw it to Poker-Face, who grabbed my shoulder, jumped up, and kicked the bottle out.

This was the last thing.

My mind was going crazy as I looked around everywhere, hoping to find something. But just as my anxiety was reaching unprecedented heights, I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my stomach. I immediately covered it and thought to myself, *this is really bad timing*.

Fatty gave me a furious look and asked, "Little Brother, have you ever hit shit?"

## Chapter 5.28 Final Chapter

I glared at Fatty, knowing what he wanted to do. I held the fishing rod in one hand, stabbed my knife into the ground with the other, and then raised my newly freed hand to grab his collar, “Why are you saying to hit my shit? Did it fucking provoke you or something? Have you ever asked how it feels?”

Fatty yanked my hand off and pointed to the lake. “Cut the crap, there’s no time! Can you do it or not?”

*Fuck you*, I said to myself as I covered my stomach and looked around. I was willing to grab anything from the ground at this point, but there was absolutely nothing. Fatty looked at me and pointed to the ground. “If you can’t shit, I’ll have to dig Lei Benchang up and chop him up to complete the task!”

I turned to look at Poker-Face, but he wasn’t looking at me at all. He pulled my big Kukri from his waist, cut his palm open, and then jumped into the lake.

The water only reached his chest. The wound on his hand was deep and we could immediately see the blood flowing out of it. He slapped the water’s surface while he walked to the place where the fishing line was being pulled. The fishing line in my hand immediately leaned towards Poker-Face.

“Here it comes! Be careful!” I shouted at him, but the fishing line reversed again and then backed off. It swung in mid-air, sweeping back and forth over Poker-Face’s head.

Fatty came to a sudden realization when he saw it. “This fish is intelligent.”

Based on how it previously attacked us on shore, it was a very vigilant predatory fish that liked to use sneak attacks, which made me a little afraid.

I had seen a documentary once of a crocodile launching a sneak attack. If its attack failed, it wouldn't immediately escape but would stay in the same place. The purpose of a beast's sneak attack was to get its prey. It wasn't done out of fear for its own safety.

But this fish seemed to be testing Poker-Face right now, which was completely different from what animals at the top of the food chain would do. Its behavior was more like an animal that hunted, like a wolf.

Fatty jumped into the water, cut his hand with a fish rake, and then went after Little Brother.

I hesitated on whether to solve it by myself up on the wall or take a dump in the water. I made up my mind and jumped into the lake. All my pores immediately shrank as my whole body sank beneath the cold lake's surface. I seemed to lose all my energy for a brief moment, but I felt calmer when I came up again. I drew my knife and cut my hand before grabbing the fishing rod with my bloody hand and chasing after Fatty. I reeled the fishing line in as I went so that it was pulled taut. We could see large ripples where the fishing line entered the water, and I continued releasing and reeling the line in as the fish swam around us non-stop.

"Don't let go." Fatty's flashlight chased the fishing line, but it didn't seem to work as well in the water. We couldn't even catch the fish's shadow and could only see something dark swimming away every time. We would have been very passive if not for the fishing line.

"Let's get closer!" I shouted. The three of us continued moving away from the stone wall and headed towards the edge of the shallows. When my flashlight swept across the area, I suddenly saw that there were more things waiting there. My brain immediately buzzed and I shouted, "Fatty, it's a trap!"

Fatty also came over to look and saw countless shadows lurking in the deep water on the edge of the salt sandbar.

"Fuck, Little Brother, they're fishing for us!" Fatty shouted. "Go back quickly."

Fatty grabbed him, but Poker-Face whispered, "It's fake."

I used a flashlight to take a careful look and found that these shadows appeared to be stone carvings. I looked down at the salt beneath my feet and suddenly realized that it wasn't a natural lake bottom. Instead, it appeared to be the top of an ancient underwater building that was covered in salt. Were these shadowy stone carvings in the water originally the cornices?

Just as I was thinking this, Poker-Face gripped my shoulder and jumped out of the water. He put one foot on Fatty's shoulder and the other foot on my shoulder before squatting down and saying, "Give me the line."

When I moved the fishing rod closer to him, Poker-Face clamped the line with his two long fingers. "Turn off the flashlight!"

"We won't be able to see!" Fatty said.

"I can feel it. Turn off the flashlight," Poker-Face said very calmly. "As soon as I jump, lock the fishing rod and turn on the flashlight."

Fatty and I looked at each other. Poker-Face had spoken, so what else could we do? We did as he said and immediately turned the flashlight off. As I kept loosening and reeling the fishing line in underwater, I could feel the fish immediately start to swim towards us.

The water was so cold that I started shivering after twenty seconds. I could feel the fish getting closer and closer as it swam in a spiral. After another ten seconds, the parts of my body that were in the water were completely frozen, but I could still feel the ripples from the fish's movements start to hit me.

Fatty's "mm-hmm" warned me that it was coming. As I gripped the fishing rod tightly and focused my whole body, I felt Little Brother adjust his movements on my shoulder and tense up.

I didn't feel cold anymore as all my senses started searching for movements in the water. It was almost a second after Little Brother tensed up that he leaped off of our shoulders.

As soon as I felt the weight lift off my shoulder, I pulled the fishing rod out of the water, opened the lock reel, and Fatty immediately turned on the flashlight. I saw Poker-Face holding the fishing line in one hand and throwing himself at a huge fish shadow one meter away on the water's surface.

He immediately landed in the water with a huge splash. Then, a huge fishtail sprang up out of the water and hit Fatty, smacking him directly into the water.

This was the first time that I had seen this fish directly. Its tail was covered in fine scales that were a dark yellow color with black lines on them. It seemed to be a kind of eel that had a tail as thick as a telephone pole.

Fatty resurfaced and yelled, "Fuck, it's a millennium eel!"

The reel in my hand kept spinning as the fishing line continued to be pulled. I could only watch as the shadow kept rolling incessantly, revealing the copper scales that had been molded to its flesh. Fatty wanted to attack it with the fish rake, but I immediately stopped him for fear that he would accidentally hurt Poker-Face. The fish resurfaced again and knocked Poker-Face out of the water. He landed beside me, and I could see that he was covered in fishing line, which was connected to the fish. When the fish dove back down, Poker-Face was immediately dragged into the water as well.

I immediately understood what he was trying to do.

He was going to tie the fish up with the fishing line. This kind of big fish was very difficult to fight in the water, and it was only when its whole body was wrapped up that it would panic. The more it struggled, the more tangled the line would become, making it harder for it to break free.

By this point, Poker-Face seemed to have succeeded. The fishing line had circled around the fish hundreds of times, but he had also become entangled in it and was about to drown.

As the fish struggled violently, I threw the rod away and pulled out my flashlight with one hand. I then went up with Fatty and grabbed the fishing line, but it couldn't be pulled at all. As long as that fish continued to struggle, our fingers would be torn to pieces. Fatty was so enraged that he went up to punch and kick it. "Cut the line!" I shouted. "Little Brother is going to die!"

Just as Fatty took the fish rake to cut the line, I suddenly felt the ground go out from beneath my feet. I had reached the edge of the shallows and fell down.

Both the fish and Poker-Face had also fallen into the deep part of the lake. I moved my hands and feet but became furious when I found myself entangled in the fishing line.

All three of us sank into the dark water together.

The temperature towards the bottom of the lake was lower and there was a strong current that immediately sent us spinning. I turned around and grabbed my Kukri, ready to cut the fishing line. I knew the fish might break free if the fishing line was broken, but we would die at this rate.

I saw a light overhead and knew that Fatty had dove down with a flashlight to save us, but he was too far away. The current had sent us hundreds of meters away and there was an undercurrent of an underground river here. If we were swept away to the underground river, we would die.

I bit my flashlight and pulled out my knife, but a hand reached out from the darkness and grabbed me. I saw Poker-Face floating calmly in the water. He still had the fishing line wrapped around him, but he was looking in a direction other than the fish.

I swept my flashlight through the void and saw a huge ancient building covered in salt clusters looming out of the dark lake bottom. It stretched out on both sides with no end in sight. There were countless carved windows that were frozen and decayed, and numerous flying eaves and columns that were covered in mottled salt clusters. The most surprising thing was that I could see the incomparably clear and colorful carvings,



painted beams, and red columns amidst the salt clusters. They hadn't faded at all.

We floated on one side of it as if we were flying in the air and looking at a hanging temple on the cliff. As my flashlight moved over it, red halo-like lanterns started to appear in the building for some reason. The red lights turned bright and dark, as if there were some monsters inhabiting the building.

The current turned sharply and I found that all the water here revolved around this huge submerged structure. The more it sank, the quicker the current became.

I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I found that after smoking, I couldn't hold my breath as long as I used to. I grabbed Poker-Face's hand and he cut the fishing line. When the two of us broke free, the huge eel did as well. As it quickly swam towards the middle of the building, I finally got a good look at it. I didn't know what kind it was or why it was covered in copper coins, but it really looked like a little dragon.

I looked up in a panic and saw a fishing line stretching down from the water's surface and heading straight into the building. Poker-Face grabbed me with one hand and the fishing line with the other, maintaining our position in the fast-moving current. He lifted me up and climbed along the taut fishing line bit by bit, heading towards the surface.

When we finally came out of the water, I found that this fishing line was Lei Benchang's corpse-catching line. The line was similar to those used for catching big sea fish since it was very strong. I noticed that the steel bar was still wedged into the dam's stone wall. We sent Fatty a signal with our flashlight when we climbed ashore. He came running over from the shallows and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that we were alright.

We were soaking wet and all had injured palms, so we went back to camp and changed clothes. After a while, Fatty said, "This fish must have been put here by the people who built this place. Some say that there may be more than one millennium eel or ten-thousand-year-old turtle. It seems we won't be able to catch this fish if we don't try to figure out what this fucking place is."

I recalled that the underwater palace should have been built on an underwater cliff in the same way as hanging temples. Those bright colors may have been carved from precious stones. It was very common to have a shrine dedicated to the Dragon King on the water, but it seemed like the one here was built by two groups of people. The Stagnant Water Dragon King was probably an ancient eel that usually lived inside that submerged structure. I just didn't know what those lantern lights in the structure were.

But without bait, I really didn't know how to catch the fish again. And after seeing its true face, I didn't even know what we could do if we caught it.

Killing it seemed unnecessary. And unlike the previous times, we really seemed to be provoking it now. Why should we have to kill this fish that had managed to live for so long?

Even if we did catch it, could we really eat eel noodles?

But I was already starting to feel the curiosity that had been lying dormant in my heart for so many years start to swell up violently. I stared at the water in a daze. Could I leave here? The familiar feeling of being addicted to thrilling activities made me terrified, and I kept asking myself, *can I leave here?* I had proved many times that I could give up. And if I could do that, why not give up when I felt it was dangerous instead of giving up when nothing had happened?

After entering the Stagnant Water Dragon King's palace, could I give up any time I thought I should? I didn't go in because I knew I couldn't quit once I was in there.

If this wasn't open-mindedness, then was I lying to myself?

I suddenly realized something after all this time. After blocking off all my curiosity and thoughts, I was reluctant to step into any mystery. It suddenly dawned on me that I had made some mistakes.

“Let’s go.” I clenched my teeth and patted Fatty before looking at Lei Benchang’s grave and picking up my equipment. Poker-Face also started picking stuff up and Fatty gave an “aye-aye”.

“We’re leaving?” He asked. “Just like that? You don’t have to explore the Dragon Palace, but you have to at least fish.”

I lit a cigarette and said, “Who says we’re not fishing? We’ve got to catch that fish. And we have to go to the Dragon Palace and have a look.”

“Then what are you doing now? It’s ok, we’ll definitely have enough bait when you have another stomachache.” Fatty said.

Instead of answering him, I grabbed him and started walking back.

I had actually figured some things out in my head. I still didn’t know what Poker-Face was trying to tell me, but at least I understood one thing.

I definitely wanted to catch that fish, but now wasn’t the time. One day—maybe a few days later, maybe a few years later—the three of us would come to catch this fish and finish the task Lei Benchang had entrusted us with. It was a pity we didn’t complete this adventure, didn’t know everything, and didn’t have content hearts.

After going back, I would think of this underwater building every time I dreamed, just like how I would think of that giant door. The only way I persisted during those ten years was because of the thoughts in my heart, my curiosity, my competitive nature, and my promise.

It definitely made my life more interesting.

I wasn’t running away from anything by staying in the village. Just as Fatty was digesting all the pain, I had to learn to digest everything from my past instead of feeling nothing. That was why staying in the village was my choice. But even if I wasn’t staying in the village, I could still decide whether I wanted to advance or retreat.

I had gone through a kind of reincarnation, from being a young boy to who I was now. What was the next step? When I knew everything, would I become the same innocent Wu Xie again? Was it even possible?

Yes, because humans were the kind of animals that circled around. When I realized that I had returned to my original place but was on a different plane, I was able to treat everyone with the same attitude as before without getting hurt. I could trust others and protect myself at the same time.

There was one thing I had never told Fatty and Poker-Face before, which had always bothered me. But when we went back to the village this time, I suddenly knew what to do.

I took out my old equipment bag, which contained my old phone and old number that I used to use in the past. I charged the phone in front of Fatty and then went to the text messages. The latest one had been sent to me on New Year's Eve from an unknown number.

It was just one short message: East Nanjing Drum Tower, Arctic Pavilion Weather Museum, locker 221. Happy New Year.

I had a strong feeling that this short message was from my Uncle Three.

**EXTRA 6: 2017 CHINESE NEW YEAR SPECIAL  
(aka Blind Tomb Extra)**

## Chapter 6.1 Tick Tick Tick Tick

It was six o'clock on a foggy evening in Beijing. Fatty and I stood opposite the Pangu Plaza as we kept pressing the taxi app because we'd heard that Black Glasses was working nearby.

I felt a tickle in my throat and lit a cigarette. The fog was so thick that I couldn't see the smoke clearly and I wondered how Black Glasses could even see the road. After pressing the app thirteen or fourteen more times, it locked. It seemed to be able to detect malicious intent.

"What kind of chance encounter is this?" Fatty asked angrily. "I'll send him a WeChat message directly."

Twenty minutes later, Black Glasses' car finally arrived. As we quickly got in, I saw that he was wearing a suit. He turned and asked me, "Where to, sir?" He started laughing as soon as he looked at me.

Fatty leaned his head forward from the back seat and pointed a finger at his nose. "How can a blind man drive? Can you even see? How did you pass the test?"

Black Glasses lit a cigarette and smiled. "With the fog like this, would it make any difference if I'm blind or not?"

"Shit, are you that poor?" I asked him. "Come on, you can borrow almost two million from anyone, and it won't be as bad as this."

"There haven't been any grave robbing jobs recently." Black Glasses tapped his phone. "This is a good job with two hundred thousand a month. And I heard that Shenzhen is better, so I plan to go there next month."

"Two hundred thousand? Who are you kidding? You're a fucking DiDi driver.<sup>89</sup> Are you really a DiDi drug dealer or something?" Fatty asked. He took a cigarette that Black Glasses passed to him and then lit it. "Tell me,

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<sup>89</sup> DiDi is an app-based transportation company. Think of like Uber or Lyft. The chapter title "滴滴答滴答" was actually a pun on DiDi and the sound of a ticking clock. Dīdī= 滴滴 (means the DiDi app obviously) and Dīdā= 滴答 (means ticking of a clock or dripping sound of water or a pattering sound). The "Dī= 滴" is like the dripping sound of water and the "dā= 答" means to answer/respond.

there must be something wrong with you. Are you doing a big job? Don't keep it to yourself, share it."

"You're ridiculous. I'm so poor, yet you two are still fucking acting like this. Do you have a conscience?" Black Glasses revealed an expression that seemed to say, "You're so shameless that it's like you're my own sons."

Fatty grabbed Black Glasses' phone, rolled down the window, and then threw it out. "If you're really that poor, then come on. Let's go to my shop and have a drink. You don't have a job, but I do. This fat master will support you."

Black Glasses looked at the phone outside and gave a tut, but still started the car anyways. But instead of going to Fatty's house, he drove around in circles and said, "Do you even have a job now that you're retired?"

"We have lots of jobs." I took a puff of my e-cigarette. Based on his attitude towards his phone just now, I had basically determined that he definitely wasn't just working here. "What the hell are you doing? Is there a tomb around here? But that's impossible. It's all buildings. If there was a tall building hiding a tomb here, it would've been found long ago."

Black Glasses drove five hundred meters forward and then pointed to a place with his chin. "Look at that."

I squinted and looked through the haze outside the window. There was a group of workers conducting maintenance on the central green belt.<sup>90</sup> It looked like they were working on the vegetation. "Do you think those people look like workers who work on green belts?" Black Glasses asked.

As I watched silently, I noticed that the people who were bent over had particularly well-developed lower limbs and shoulders and seemed to be working absent-mindedly. They were surrounded by a plastic barrier that was used to enclose the area around the green belt.

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<sup>90</sup> It's that strip of grass, trees, and/or bushes you see on the median when you're driving down a road or highway.

“Damn it, can they even do that?” Fatty asked happily. “This is fucking high-level gameplay. They’re so casual even when they’re doing it in plain sight.”

“It’s not a tomb down below,” Black Glasses said. “But there is something very interesting down there. Right now, others in the business are looking for it everywhere. I’ve been watching it for almost three months. These two roads here are the right spot.”

“What is it?” Fatty became curious.

“It’s a special concrete block.” Black Glasses said.



## Chapter 6.2 Concrete Block

“Concrete block?” I looked at Black Glasses and said to myself, *what are you doing with a concrete block? Are you stealing the steel bars from it? Is it really the end of the grave-robbing business? Some have become drivers and others are resorting to stealing steel bars.* Fatty was also confused and started scolding him, “Your appendix is constricting your nerves, right? What’s the point of digging up a concrete block? Will you move it home to help pickle vegetables? Why are you still hanging around here watching?”

Black Glasses just smiled and acted like he didn’t want to talk to him. Fatty got angry and opened the door, wanting to get out, “Mr. Naïve, let’s go over and inspect it.” I held him back. I didn’t want to show my face in Beijing right now. If I were to come out—especially on such a controversial occasion—it would be easy for rumors in the industry to spread, and then I wouldn’t be able to explain things clearly.

“The concrete block is worthless,” Black Glasses said. “What’s valuable is how it was buried here. No one can figure it out.”

“Then how do you know that something is buried in this place?” When I asked this, Black Glasses started the car and drove north.

“Some time ago,” he said, “a God-like man appeared in the business. According to the people who met this man, he has a special skill that’s very unusual. He can send things a few miles away with the Five Ghosts Transportation ritual.<sup>91</sup> This concrete block was originally at the gate of Panjiayuan Antique Market. Do you remember that stone block that was blocking the car? It was said that he cast a spell to send it here. As long as someone can transport the cement block back, he’ll take that person to rob a big tomb.”

“So amazing?” Fatty’s eyes gleamed. “Did you see it with your own eyes?”

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<sup>91</sup> It’s a Taoist ritual that uses the 5 ghosts in Chinese folklore (the 5 Ghosts of Luck and Fortune that are also known as the plague gods) to carry and transport wealth from other people’s homes to their own homes. It also has something to do with feng shui. Some info [here](#)

I told myself that this kind of deceptive trick had been exposed many times before. I couldn't believe I was still hearing things like "Five Ghosts Transportation" when we were living in such a scientific age. But when I thought of how Black Glasses was still hanging around here, it showed that he must have been a little convinced. This guy's family had a lot of knowledge when it came to this kind of stuff.

Sure enough, Black Glasses nodded, "Unfortunately, I really did see it with my own eyes."

"Say it, say it." Fatty urged.

Black Glasses glanced at me, "Needless to say, he's at my place now. Come and see for yourself."

Fatty and I looked at each other, and I said faintly, "Glasses..."

"Call me Master. We made an agreement. You have to call me Master on the first and fifteenth day of the month." Black Glasses touched my head, "You have no conscience."

I was super thick-skinned now, so I didn't care. "Damn it, Master, does that mean this person already hired you to rob the tomb? You're hanging around here in order to find more people for him, right?"

Black Glasses turned on the radio and began to listen to it. He didn't answer me, but I didn't care. I knew I was right. "Are you working with him?" I asked. "You moved this concrete block, right? If you have a job, then I won't bother. Find a place where Fatty and I can go soak our feet so you can turn around and continue working."

Black Glasses turned and looked at me, "Don't be so eager to leave. This man's surname is Zhang."

I paused for a moment and then smiled, "I've met plenty of Zhangs. This thing isn't so uncommon now. A group of them even came to my village a few days ago."

Black Glasses continued, "But not everyone surnamed Zhang is that talkative. I'm telling you, since you're already here, you should listen to

what he has to say about this tomb. I've never heard of it before. Besides, he does have unique skills."

I was so annoyed by this point that I wanted to tell him to pull over, but Fatty patted me and gave me a look. I knew what he meant. He wanted to expose this person's scam and embarrass him. Fatty loved humiliating people face-to-face, after all.

I had no choice but to stop talking and let Black Glasses drive us all the way to his courtyard. The word "demolition" was written above the courtyard in big letters, which made me happy when I saw it. "You've made a fortune, Black Glasses. If you demolish this courtyard and sell it, it's enough to buy my whole village."

Black Glasses smiled and said, "It's not mine." We followed him in and saw Su Wan drying clothes in the courtyard. He had grown up a lot and was already a young man with a heroic look about him. When he saw us coming in, he immediately came up and hugged Fatty, "Fat Master, I missed you so much."

Black Glasses pointed to where a man was sitting in a dark room nearby, playing with his cell phone.

## Chapter 6.3 Seven Hundred Word Self-Introduction

I went straight into the room and looked at the man who had his head bowed. He was wearing a big robe that looked like a Tibetan robe but wasn't. He had a huge string of beads in his hand and was looking down at an old phone. When he saw me coming in, he looked up at me in surprise before turning to Black Glasses and asking, "Have you dug out the concrete block?"

Fatty smiled and looked at me. I nodded to the man and asked Black Glasses to introduce me. "This is an expert," Black Glasses said. "Fat Master, the fat king of Panjiayuan Antique Market. And this is—"

"The Wu family's Little Master Three." Fatty interrupted him as he sat down opposite the man, "Surely you've heard of him."

The man in the big robe tapped his cell phone and then looked up at me. I saw that his face was unshaven, and the skin underneath all the dirt looked white.

My name had obviously surprised him a little, but he didn't act like the people I used to see who would jump up and ask me to scan the QR codes on their phones. His eyes lit up for a moment, but I could tell that he didn't immediately believe it.

"Don't believe me?" Fatty was dissatisfied with his reaction and added, "Wu Xie, the third master of the Wu family. Lived by the West Lake—"

The big robe nodded to me slightly and Black Glasses said, "Expert, some of my friends have heard about your affairs and came to visit you specially. You can tell them what's going on with that tomb. They're old hands in this business and there's no one better than them."

"Wu Xie, didn't you wash your hands of this business?" The big robe asked slowly. "Is there anything else you want? You don't need anything, right?"

I carefully observed him. I couldn't see how long his fingers were based on how he was holding them and I couldn't see too many traces of the Zhang family. I didn't know if he was lying. The value of the Zhangs in this business had gone up ever since my legend had spread, after all.

"If I tell you about the tomb, you'll have to go. Otherwise, I won't say anything." Big robe looked at Black Glasses, obviously a little unhappy.

Black Glasses didn't care at all and took a seat nearby. Su Wan handed him some tea that was good for improving eyesight and he took a sip, "You guys, don't pretend to be badasses. Expert, tell us who you are first. We need to be friendly before we do anything."

The big robe looked at me and nodded, "You haven't seen me. My last name is Zhang. Others call me Little Brother Zhang."

I felt a jolt and looked at the man again, carefully examining his face. My sudden change in behavior startled him and he pulled back. "Do you know me?"

I looked at him, trying to see through the beard and dirt on his face. I suddenly discovered that I really felt as if I knew him.

"Did you go search for a Bimo before?" I asked.

His face changed drastically, "You!"

## Chapter 6.4 Pretending to be Badass While Trying to Make Myself Less Embarrassing

I regretted it as soon as I said it. For so many years, I had learned to keep my face expressionless when I was surprised. But hearing that name was really beyond anything I had ever expected.

As a result, I blurted out those words.

When I heard that name, that distant memory almost rushed into my brain like a flood. That kind of memory wasn't as intermittent as my own memories, but more like a steel stamp that squeezed everything out all at once.

Those multi-storied buildings, those vines running across the river, those snakes and colorful bugs.

I didn't have any memories after that. I didn't know if they finally saw the Bimo, nor did I know why they were looking for him.

But one of the people in that memory had suddenly appeared right in front of me. The memory seemed to be mine but wasn't, which made me feel both dazed and dizzy.

Little Brother Zhang was also very surprised. I figured that since he had lived to the present, there weren't that many people in the world who could really scare him.

At least, he was probably like me and thought that nothing could make him feel that there was something in the world that he couldn't control. But my words had obviously undermined that confidence.

I looked at him as I thought about what to do next. If I didn't immediately try to act badass, the conversation would go in a very strange direction. And it wasn't like I could explain those things to people who weren't familiar with it.

I immediately tilted my head smiled—this was a skill I had learned from Black Glasses—and said to Little Brother Zhang, “Don’t think that you’re the only one who knows spells. I also went to Mount Longhu.”<sup>92</sup>

Little Brother Zhang also immediately calmed down and squinted at me. He couldn’t seem to figure me out and his whole body became alert.

Fatty saw that I had gotten the upper hand and was very happy, “This is the correct reaction to seeing our Wu family’s Little Master Three. Good for you. Now, go on and tell us. Come on, where did you hide the concrete block? I’ve played these kinds of tricks back in my day. Don’t worry, I would never expose you in front of the neighborhood.”

Little Brother Zhang completely ignored Fatty as he continued looking at me. “Did he tell you?” He suddenly asked.

I smiled but didn’t say anything.

Little Brother Zhang blazed with anger for about a minute before he suddenly came over and grabbed my shoulder. He pulled me aside and smiled evilly, “He must have told you, right? He remembers me, doesn’t he?”

I didn’t show any signs of weakness and smiled back with an even more evil expression, “Remove your hand.”

Little Brother Zhang laughed, “How about this? I’ll let you join this job and then you can take me to see him.”

In essence, I had never admitted that Poker-Face was still alive. But this person wasn’t completely stupid and Mute Zhang had been popular in this business much earlier than me. It wasn’t surprising that he would know.

“Moreover, I can tell you another secret,” he said. “I can tell you what’s hidden in your Wu family’s ancient house. You have a key that you don’t know what it goes to, right?”

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<sup>92</sup> Aka “Dragon Tiger Mountain”. It’s famous for being one of the birthplaces of Taoism. It’s known as one of the Four Sacred Mountains of Taoism.

## Chapter 6.5 Explode Right on the Spot

The Wu family's old house was a magical place. It was said that Seven Fingers had designed a total of nine doors back then, leaving only a single opening that was this old house. I found the key to all my experiences in it. The key I got at that time and the things I found with it propped up my whole plan.

In those ten years, it wasn't so much a plan of my own making as a culmination of mine, my grandfather's, and my Uncle Three's plan. The two-generation plan had reached its limit and I finally managed to complete the last step.

After I met Little Brother Zhang in my memory, I didn't hear any serious news about him. I didn't know what the three of them had experienced or how they got separated in the end, but now he was trying to use this key against me. He had obviously been out of touch for so many years.

I tried to hook my arm around his shoulder, but he immediately stepped out of reach. "I can touch you, but don't touch me. I have something to protect myself."

I looked at him as he was talking and saw a flash of scales at his neckline. I didn't know what it was, so I merely waved my hand and said to him, "For every lie the Zhang family has told, they had to make up ten more. I haven't bothered with this kind of trouble for a long time. I'm only taking Fatty to find a concrete block and chatting with you to give Black Glasses some face. I can give you a note if you want to see your patriarch, but don't use these underhanded tricks to mess with people."

Fatty dragged a stool over to sit down and helped me, "Brother, you're fucking embarrassing the both of us. Do you know what our nicknames are? The Zhang family's best friends. We'll give you a twenty percent discount since your surname is Zhang. Come on, be honest. What kind of tomb is it that you have to fool people to rob it?"

Little Brother Zhang raised his brow and looked at the two of us before turning to look at Black Glasses. No one could stand in the face of my three-pronged attack, so he smiled and said, "Since you know that I went



to find the Bimo, do you know why I went to find him? Did he tell you the details?"

I really didn't know. In my memory, he and Poker-Face had gone deep into the jungle to look for the clues the Americans were looking for at that time. When the memory had ended, they had just found the destination, but I didn't know what that destination was. I wanted to open my mouth and bluff, but he already knew that I didn't know.

He sat back down and said to Black Glasses, "Your two friends are amazing at deceiving others. They've been to the fields, but don't have much first-hand knowledge. Get me some water and I'll talk to them carefully." He then looked at me and said, "You feel like you've seen and experienced almost everything. You feel like you've gone from heaven to earth. You think that I, a person who has suddenly appeared in this business, can't say anything that surprises you. You just came to see if I was joking, right?"

I tilted my head and looked at him while saying to myself, *go on, keep gloating. I'll cooperate with you.*

He held up a finger, "Have you seen that door?"

There was no denying that the veins on my forehead bulged. This sentence definitely surprised me a little. Although there were a lot of people still spreading things about what was under the Heavenly Palace—I had brought so many people with me, after all—I was still a little surprised when an outsider suddenly mentioned it.

Was Little Brother Zhang the one who accompanied Poker-Face to the door during one of those decades?

Little Brother Zhang had a strong ability to discern people's emotions and showed me an evil smile, "Ah, you *have* seen it. Well, congratulations. You're qualified to chat with me. Let me ask you, what's behind that bronze door? Have you ever been in?"

I had never been provoked so accurately with words, and all I could do was turn to Fatty with a blank expression on my face. But when I saw Fatty, his mouth was practically hanging open to his collarbone.

I glared at him and said to myself, *be a little more subtle, ok?!*

Fatty took a deep breath and then turned to look at Black Glasses, who made an expression that seemed to say, “I told you this man wasn’t so simple.”

I was still thinking about how to answer when Little Brother Zhang took the mineral water Su Wan handed him. Victory was within his grasp, so he continued, “Children, what you know and have experienced is only a drop in the bucket when compared with me. You’re only in your thirties now. You’re tired of this kind of life and were going to retire. My surname is Zhang. Do you know how many lifetimes I’ve lived? Let me tell you, just seeing that door is only the beginning of what you have to experience. If you don’t have this kind of fortitude, give the patriarch back to me. I need him to revitalize the Zhang family.”

“Don’t spout fucking bullshit!” I flew into a rage. For the first time, I had the urge to kill this Zhang. But as soon as I smacked the mineral water from his hand, a green snake flew out from the folds of his robe. It forced me back three steps, but I wasn’t afraid at all. Fatty immediately picked up the chair beside him.

Little Brother Zhang raised his hand and suddenly spoke in Cantonese Mandarin, “Calm down, you’re not Note 7.<sup>93</sup> Why did you suddenly explode? I’ll tell you the situation and you’ll understand where I’m coming from.”

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<sup>93</sup> He’s talking about the Samsung Note 7’s that were known for exploding after they got overheated.

## Chapter 6.6 Little Brother Zhang's Words

The entrance to Black Glasses' living room was a Chinese-style foyer with mahogany chairs on both sides like Juyi Hall<sup>94</sup> and a big plaque overhead that read: "Passing Down Clean-Handed Business to the Next Generations".

The floor was made of Han-style bricks. It was very elegant here when he was rich, but I didn't know where he had spent all his money over the years. We moved to the back room, where there were big old sofas made of cotton cloth. The floor was covered in thread-bare carpets, and there were cushions and Gundam<sup>95</sup> models everywhere. I knew as soon as I saw them that Su Wan had bought them all. He didn't dare take them home and had put them all here.

As soon as the door was closed, the room heated up and became much warmer. I took off my coat and settled onto the sofa, feeling my anger subside a lot.

Su Wan turned on the air purifier and everyone else sat down. When Little Brother Zhang took off his robe, I saw that he was wearing an old unwashed shirt and the snake had coiled back around his waist. His hair and beard were very greasy, and I didn't know how long it had been since he'd washed them. In the dim light, I felt as if I had returned to my dream but was also experiencing a new one.

After being in this business for so many years, I had lost my strong sense of attraction to any sort of mystery. My curiosity was still there, but it was more like a kind of inertia. Even after so many years, I still didn't have a full understanding of the unknown parts that I had resisted, so this kind of torture would appear from time to time.

When I looked at Little Brother Zhang, I had to admit that I trusted him. The memory wasn't mine, but it could still stir up my own real emotions.

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<sup>94</sup> It's from "[The Water Margin](#)", and was where the heroes discussed military affairs and deployed forces. The name was changed to Zhongyi Hall. It's a single-eave Xieshan-style building with smaller halls on the left and right sides. It supposedly reproduced the style and spirit of the 108 heroes.

<sup>95</sup> It's a widely popular mecha anime. Think along the lines of Transformers. More info [here](#)

Little Brother Zhang was very calm as he picked a beer bottle up from the ground and opened it. It seemed as if he had done this countless times before, “First of all, I’m a good person. As you know, it would be good for the Zhang family to explain half of what they do, but I can’t do that. I’ve always talked a lot since I was a kid. Once I started, I wouldn’t stop all night. I think of the Zhang family like a pressure cooker, and I’m just the steam. All the things the others don’t say are left up to me, so when I start talking, don’t interrupt me. Be sure to let me finish.”

Fatty glanced at me, and his eyes seemed to say, “Look at how long-winded this guy is. He’s even giving us a heads-up before he starts talking.”

I looked at my watch. It was still early and I didn’t want to sit in rush hour traffic outside, so I nodded.

Little Brother Zhang gave my watch a disgusted look and then took a sip of beer, “I know a lot about you, Wu Xie. I even know something you’re not familiar with. Let me ask you a question first. Have you been to Marker 87 in Inner Mongolia?”

I shook my head. I had never heard that name before.

Little Brother Zhang continued, “In the early 1970s, a man appeared in a stream in the Daxing’an Mountains in northeast China at boundary marker 87. It was summer, yet the stream was still very cold. He had lost consciousness when he was found, but he had carved 562 sets of numbers with his fingernails. Each set of numbers had 16 digits. The local people sent him to the police station for investigation. After several months, they discovered that he was a member of a geological exploration team who had been assigned to a local project in 1962 called Project 723. He had disappeared at that time because of an accident but suddenly reappeared a few years later. After being discovered, this person remained in a vegetative state. They couldn’t figure out what had happened during the years he was missing. I later collected information about this matter. The place where he was found was very special, so I paid special attention to it.”

He glanced at me and said, “Don’t give me that look, I don’t know why that place is special. In the Zhang family’s ancestral teachings, there are three places in China that we’ve been paying special attention to. For some reason, Marker 87 is one of them. I’ve been there many times, but there’s nothing besides forests.”

“What’s the 16-digit number?” I knew he must have been investigating for a long time, but I just wanted to know the relevant information.

“It’s a time stamp.” He looked at me again. “There are 562 sets of time stamps, and they’re very accurate. Most of them are before the ‘90s.”

I remembered a movie I had seen before and asked, “Did all the major disasters and events happen at those times?”

Little Brother Zhang shook his head. “So far, nothing happened at those points in time. They’re just ordinary times. Only one thing is strange.”

## Chapter 6.7 The Little Things That Happened

The strange thing that Little Brother Zhang mentioned was that almost all the times were concentrated before the '90s, but there was only one date that was very far away from the others.

It was a time stamp for January 26<sup>th</sup> of next year.

“I don't know what happened during those other times, because I didn't find anything peculiar in the news. But I know that this last date must be different because it was separated from all the others by almost thirty years.”

“What's going to happen on January 26<sup>th</sup>? And where would it happen?” I asked.

“I didn't know at first, but I've been thinking over this problem for decades. I have a long-standing and very strong intuition. Whatever is going on with this time stamp wouldn't happen just anywhere. It should only happen in one place.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If what happened at these times was distributed all over the world, then he should have at least put the coordinates down. But he didn't. He only put the time. And it was extremely precise too, which shows that it's very likely that all these things were happening in one place. This enabled me to find the only clue in the absence of other clues. I needed to find a place where special things happened at these times.”

“Just say it. Did you find it?”

“I found it.” Little Brother Zhang flicked his tongue, “It's in Nanjing.”

I twisted the little ring on my thumb. Nanjing was my next destination. After the New Year, I was planning on going to Nanjing to stay for a bit while I looked for my Uncle Three. Was it a coincidence that this young guy—no, this old man—suddenly said this?

Little Brother Zhang continued, “I also found out what happened at those times. I was very surprised since what happened was so insignificant that we wouldn’t care even if it happened several times a day.”

“What was it?” Fatty couldn’t help asking.

Little Brother Zhang looked up with a puzzled expression on his face. “But this matter has become extremely bizarre, you know? That man had carved so many dates and predicted hundreds of little things that would happen in the future, but no matter how small it was, it was a very accurate prediction.”

“What’s the little thing?” Fatty asked again.

“You want to know? You have to take me to see him.” Little Brother Zhang suddenly stopped his story and began negotiating the terms. “At that time, I had completed all the necessary preparations for the plan. As long as he nodded his head, the Zhangs would immediately return to their heyday. I waited for him to nod, but he disappeared in the end. As a result, I waited for decades.”

I narrowed my eyes when I saw his persistent expression, “Is the Zhang family really that good? Your tattoo is a Qiong Qi<sup>96</sup>, you’re a foreigner, and you’re just as afraid of mosquitoes as I am.”

Little Brother Zhang’s eyes seemed to dim a little and he looked at the beer bottle in his hand, “If you know everything, then you should also know how the Zhang family treated him. I just want him to be the Zhang Qiling like he deserves.”

I suddenly came up with an idea and said firmly, “Hey, why don’t you be Zhang Qiling? You royalists might as well go back and play rock-paper-scissors. Whoever wins can be Zhang Qiling and fulfill the great cause of the Zhang family. How about changing his name to Zhang Goudan<sup>97</sup> now?”

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<sup>96</sup> It’s basically a winged tiger. Considered 1 of the 4 evils in ancient Chinese myths and legends

<sup>97</sup> Means something like dog egg.

He looked at me with a face that had turned the color of pork liver, “Zhang Goudan?”

I nodded and immediately made a defensive move when I saw that the blade under his tongue looked like it was going to fly directly at my forehead. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down, “We’ll set that aside. What we really need to discuss is what comes later. Can you remember this? On January 26<sup>th</sup>, something will happen in Nanjing. If my theory is correct, then it’s a small matter. But this small matter was predicted a long time ago.”

We all nodded.

Su Wan was shocked when he heard it. What he had experienced before was already terrible, so he obviously didn’t expect to hear about something more interesting.

Little Brother Zhang continued, “Let me tell you what I was looking for when I went to find the Bimo. You should analyze the relationship between the two events yourself.”



## Chapter 6.8 The Bimo

The Bimo was a shaman of the Yi nationality, which still had seven factions to this day. The Bimo's magic was all-encompassing and said to be very complex. Bimoism had a well-developed system and worshiped more than one god. The Bimo was also a tutor to the Yi slave aristocracy and was responsible for recording and spreading all knowledge.

According to the Yi epic "Leyoteyi"<sup>98</sup>, a seed fell from heaven to the ground one year. After three years and nine seasons, it finally grew into a giant fir tree. But it was a foreign body that looked like a mix between a human and a tree. It was only by seeking the Bimo's heavenly magic that it could bear human fruit, which turned into adults.

I used to think that the heavenly seed recorded in "Leyoteyi" was the meteorite of that year, but I was certain that I already knew where all the fragments were.

But Little Brother Zhang certainly wouldn't go to the Bimo for this kind of matter. In fact, just as I expected, the Bimo's greatest role at that time was to relay news. Back then, none of the Yi hunters could hunt in the Han areas, so they would explore the deep mountains and forests, using the Yi village as the boundary. You could often hear old people refer to some of those places as Rotten Horse Mountain, Snake River, and Dwarf Ravine. It was the hunters who came up with those names. Any time they found unexplained natural phenomena or something they had never seen in the forest before, they would tell the Bimo as soon as they came back.

Poker-Face and his party went to find the Bimo that year because of a "discovery" a hunter had brought back from the mountains. That discovery turned out to be the colorful bugs. The man had obviously sold them to the Americans first, but the Americans probably didn't know what they were looking for.

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<sup>98</sup> It basically translates as "Epic of the Yi Nationality". According to Baidu, there are many different texts in the works, all of varying lengths. In addition to oral transmissions, there are also many Yi people's manuscripts. The different texts can roughly be divided into two categories: detailed texts and sketched texts (basically pictures).

I didn't need to know the whole process. Little Brother Zhang just needed to tell me what the hunter saw in the forest and I would be able to figure out what happened next.

I had experienced a lot of things, so I was able to guess some answers before he spoke. In the past, there were always various accidents that occurred every time I thought I could guess correctly, but after those ten long years, no one could tell me anything I couldn't expect.

I was probably thinking this time would be like all the others, but his answer still managed to startle me.

"That Yi hunter was very strange," Little Brother Zhang said. "He was called Zhige Ah Long. It was a name very sacred to the Yi people and couldn't be used casually. I didn't know why, but I could always speculate. This person was always able to go hunting in places that other people couldn't. This time, he was gone for so long that many people thought he wasn't coming back."

The Yi people were very poor at that time. If they took dry food with them when they went hunting, they often had to turn back after only two weeks. If they were willing to keep going after those two weeks, then they had to be highly confident that they could move forward while hunting for food. If they didn't have the ability, then they would soon starve to death in the forest.

Zhige Ah Long could go past this two-week limit every time, but he would definitely return around the first of the month. This time, however, he had been gone for nearly a year, so most people thought he was dead.

In modern times, people who ended up in no-man's land knew that they would definitely encounter roads or cities at the other end of the forest since humans had already divided the land into grids. But at that time, the no-man's land around the Yi people's village was too wide to explore. It was impossible to determine what lay on the other side of that endless primitive forest. But Zhige Ah Long returned one year later and brought them the answer.

He told the Bimo that he had found an invisible wall in the forest after traveling for a year.

The wall stood in the middle of the forest and couldn't be passed. After following it for a long time, Zhige Ah Long found that the wall seemed to stretch out infinitely on both sides. As a result, he firmly believed that he had reached the "edge" of the world.

Fatty wanted to laugh, but Little Brother Zhang spoke before he could open his mouth, "I didn't believe it at first, either. Until I heard a detail. The hunter saw a lot of remnants of rusty iron birds as he walked along the invisible wall."

## Chapter 6.9 Blind Spot

When I heard the words “iron birds”, I already thought that there was something strange about it.

Grammar was a very mysterious thing. In the field of antique appraisals, one’s familiarity with words and sentences could easily help you identify fakes. This was because every dynasty had subtle differences in grammar, especially when it came to appraising ancient books.

The Mawangdui silks that were unearthed contained some of the original manuscripts of the “Book of Changes”, which was different from the version of the “Book of Changes” that was circulating now.<sup>99</sup> Many ancient books had been copied over the years, so it was difficult to trace them back to their original versions. As a result, relying on grammar could help you determine which version was closest to the original.

Although the words “iron birds” seemed profound and mysterious, modern grammar was rarely used in ancient Chinese prose. It was mostly used in the poems some ancient scholars had written during the Republic and early liberation period, or in some pseudo-prophetic texts that referred to airplanes.

But these two words would never come out of the mouth of a minority hunter. In addition, only an airplane in flight could be mistaken for a bird, since it would never retain its shape if it had wrecked.

So, what were the rusty iron birds? I waited for him to answer.

“You don’t jump to conclusions easily.” Little Brother Zhang paused and looked at me. He seemed a little disappointed at my lack of response.

I didn’t bother saying anything since I knew he had an answer.

As he took another sip of beer, I started to speak, “An invisible wall—if it was really invisible—means that he should have been able to see the

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<sup>99</sup> The [Mawangdui Silk Texts](#) are Chinese philosophical and medical works that were discovered at the Mawangdui site in Changsha, Hunan, in 1973. They include some of the earliest attested manuscripts of existing texts (such as the [I Ching](#), aka “Book of Changes”), two copies of the [Tao Te Ching](#), a copy of [Zhan Guo Ce](#), works by [Gan De](#) and [Shi Shen](#) and previously-unknown medical texts.

world on the other side. The hunter didn't mention anything about it at all, but he did say that he had come to the edge of the world. If he could see the world on the other side, then he should have only said that he saw a wall. He shouldn't have emphasized that it was the edge of the world. If he couldn't see the world on the other side, then the wall definitely wouldn't be invisible or transparent. Something's not quite right."

Little Brother Zhang looked at me in surprise, and I continued, "The essence of lying is to make things fascinating and full of details. You're very engaged when talking about this, which isn't how an objective person would act. Granted, it's possible you've also been deceived. The details of your story are very compact and exciting, but there are very big logical problems. If you're still trying to show off, you'd better wrap it up quickly. I don't want to hear a story."

I looked at him and enunciated each word, "No matter what, don't try to lie to me. Just tell me directly, what's in that forest?"

Little Brother Zhang took a deep breath and said, "I wasn't lying to you. I just didn't mention a detail. When the hunter encountered this wall, his vision was black. He couldn't see the wall at all. It wasn't because the wall was invisible, but because he couldn't see it. It's in an area where people who enter it go blind."

As the hunter kept one hand to the wall and walked alongside it, he touched countless iron birds that were on the ground. They were rusty statues that had been buried in the mud. He immediately knew that they were made of iron because of the special smell. After he left the area, his eyesight gradually recovered.

"A blind spot?" I finally heard something I'd never heard before. I looked at Fatty, who looked at Black Glasses. I suddenly understood why Little Brother Zhang went to find Black Glasses first.

"What's in the blind spot?" Fatty asked. "What's that wall?"

“It’s the outer wall of the spirit hall of an ancient tomb. I even know whose tomb it might be. But no one can enter, because we’ll go blind as soon as we get close to that area.”

## Chapter 6.10 Can Only Use Hearing

I looked at Black Glasses while thinking to myself, *you're not really blind. You just have special eyes that let you see things clearly in the dark. If you're really blind, then you're not so useless.*

"I have a good understanding of this matter." Su Wan said from the side. "I've done a lot of research on eyes. Compared to animals, humans have a visual system that processes things slowly. This is because human eyes can see very minute details clearly, so it takes the brain some time to process them. But Master's eyes are actually very blurred, so his brain can process things faster. This in turn helps him evade things quicker. It's beyond anything normal people can do by merely exercising. So even with his eyes being in bad shape, he can still survive."

Fatty sneered, "What's beyond normal people exercising? He's brainwashed you." With that said, he grabbed three bottles of beer and tossed them to Black Glasses. Su Wan caught one bottle in mid-air while Black Glasses flicked one to me and caught the last one himself.

I felt really happy when I saw that Su Wan's movements were the same as mine. The three of us even had the same gestures as we grabbed the bottles.

Fatty was still unconvinced and took out a box of beer, but I held him down and asked Little Brother Zhang, "Was he there when you went to the blind spot?"

He nodded, "There were three of us."

I was sure in my heart that he wasn't lying, so I asked, "Did that person's snake also go in and lose its sight?"

This was crucial because snakes didn't rely on sight.

Little Brother Zhang looked at me and shook his head, "The only thing that can be used in that place is hearing."

## Chapter 6.11 Human Fragility

Little Brother Zhang smiled when he finished speaking, but his eyes were a little dim. He had thought Poker-Face had told me all this information.

I didn't know why he was in this mood. Maybe he had recalled some scenes like I did earlier.

Snakes had poor eyesight, but they had heat-sensitive organs and a keen sense of smell. I asked Little Brother Zhang to elaborate on how the snakes reacted at that time.

"We don't know," he said quietly. "The snake that was released never came back."

Snake tamers controlled snakes by using vibrations, so they couldn't stray too far away from each other. If the snake didn't come back, did that mean its sense of smell and heat-sensitive organs had failed?

Little Brother Zhang shook his head. It seemed they never got an answer. "It all depended on sound in the end. We came out by listening," he said.

"In that case, Black Glasses is useless. He's not some blind hero who can distinguish positions just from listening. He's just really nearsighted," Fatty said. "You're so anxious that you've gone to the wrong guy. Here's what you should do. Go to the 4S shop<sup>100</sup>, buy six mid-range cars from different brands, remove all their backup sensors, and install them in all four directions on your belt. Then, put one on top of your head and one on the sole of your foot. After that, you can go in with the battery on your back. It's full-proof."

Little Brother Zhang looked at me and asked, "Is he serious?"

I looked at Fatty's face to make sure he really thought it was feasible and sighed, "The distance the backup sensor can cover is too short. At most, it'll keep you from falling into a pit. It can't really help with anything else.

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<sup>100</sup> It's basically like a car dealership. They sell cars, do maintenance, and provide spare parts and information services.



It doesn't matter if the mechanisms are simple. Entering such a place without our sight could be fatal."

I couldn't help but think that humans were really fragile. I had experienced so many things before, but it would all become null and void if I lost my sight one day.

I would become a complete baby.

At this time, Black Glasses finally spoke up, "Those who can see are obviously afraid of not being able to see." He smiled and took off his sunglasses.

His eyes were very dark. Frighteningly dark if I was being honest with myself. The layers of tissue around his eyes had completely disappeared, leaving behind a darkness like that of another world. When he looked at me, I couldn't tell whether he was actually seeing me.

"Are you blind?" I asked, completely shocked.

Black Glasses shook his head, "No, I'm wearing contact lenses."

## Chapter 6.12 Five Ghost Transportation Ritual

I took a sip of beer and looked into his eyes to see if he was joking.

If it was a joke, then it was really in poor taste. Black Glasses looked at the ceiling, and Fatty went over to look into his eyes.

“Fuck me, you’re really wearing them?” Fatty murmured. “You bastard, besides being an express driver, are you also doing live broadcasts?”

I also leaned over, but Fatty stopped me. “Don’t look, there’s nothing to see. Why are you so attracted to his bullshit whenever he does something weird? I swear, you’re bewitched by him.”

I didn’t push it. Fatty’s hands were very strong, and he wasn’t joking at all. He put in a lot of effort to keep me from going over and I felt my heart thump when I looked into his eyes. I didn’t know if the contact lenses were real, but Fatty must have seen something he didn’t want me to see.

I backed down. If Fatty wanted me to see it, he would have definitely let me through.

“People like me must first understand that darkness isn’t so terrible. Without this awareness, it would be impossible to live,” Black Glasses said with a smile. “He didn’t find the wrong person. I may not be the most suitable, but no one is more suitable than me.”

“So, what does robbing this tomb have to do with the concrete block?” Fatty asked.

Little Brother Zhang smiled and looked at the back room. “Do you know the Five Ghosts Transportation ritual?”

Fatty and I looked at each other but didn’t answer. Little Brother Zhang flipped over a tall glass cup on the tea table and then moved a corner of the tablecloth to cover it. He let go and shouted to the back room, “Qianjun, show them.”

I saw the cup under the tablecloth move, and then Little Brother Zhang pulled the tablecloth off. The cup that was originally empty now had a pair of reading glasses inside it.

“Liu Qian?”<sup>101</sup> Fatty looked at the back room. “Shit, did everyone come to do this job?”

The door of the back room clicked open and a Taoist priest with disheveled hair came out. He looked at us and snorted, “Why are you talking nonsense with them? The Zhang family doesn’t need other people’s help.”

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<sup>101</sup> He’s a Taiwanese magician who is credited with being the only Taiwanese magician to perform in Hollywood’s Magic Castle. He’s commonly referred to as China’s most renowned magician. Also goes by Lu “Louis” Chen.

## Chapter 6.13 Qianjun Wanma

The Taoist priest who came out looked at us with a lot of hostility. He refused to sit with us and went to lean against the wall instead. When Little Brother Zhang threw the glasses back to him, he caught them and then crossed his arms in front of his chest, “I don’t understand why you’re telling them so much. If they go to that place, I promise you that none of them will succeed.”

Little Brother Zhang waved his hand, “I told you, the Wang family was able to take advantage of our Zhang family because we believe in ourselves too much. This time, we have to learn from the Wang family. As long as we can get others to help us, we can just change their surname to Zhang.”

“Who the fuck wants to change his surname?” Fatty said to him. “I won’t change my name under any circumstances. What’s the big deal with the surname Zhang, anyways? How many people in China have it? Did you stake a claim to it? Do you think you’re the Emperor Datong<sup>102</sup> who can bestow surnames?”

The Taoist priest immediately became angry and went up and stuck a talisman on Fatty’s face. He then started cursing him, “You’re so shameless! I’ll give you a six-defeat-seven-funeral talisman<sup>103</sup> to break your good fortune and longevity. For the rest of your life, gold will turn into sand and good luck will turn into bad.”

Fatty tore it off. He was butthurt because he felt that even though he was quite unlucky, he had the first-class ability to make money. The curse had hit him where it hurt most. He jumped up and hit the Taoist priest.

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<sup>102</sup> Also known as [Emperor Wu of Liang](#). Baidu says he revised the “[Hundred Family Surnames](#)”, which was an official record of the common Chinese surnames and prefectures of all the noble families. Each noble family had the names, official positions, and blood relations of its members listed in detail. According to that Wikipedia article, Zhang (张) was in there.

<sup>103</sup> Ummm, he’s basically giving Fatty bad juju lol. He’s trying to place a curse on him. All I was finding was that “six defeats” was mentioned in the “The Art of War”. It’s kind of self-explanatory. There are 6 ways to be defeated. The “seven funerals” might have something to do with Chinese funeral customs. They believe the soul of the deceased returns home in the 1<sup>st</sup> seven days after death.

The two of them knocked over a jar lying by Black Glasses' bed that was full of old paintings and calligraphy pieces. Black Glasses and Little Brother Zhang climbed over the sofa and pulled the two men apart. Black Glasses picked up the calligraphy and paintings and said to Su Wan, "Hurry up and put these things away. Don't leave them here."

Su Wan immediately came over and started picking them up.

"You're definitely not the Zhang family! How could someone in the Zhang family get so riled up? What happened to the Zhang family's autistic upbringing?" Fatty had been dragged back by Little Brother Zhang. He shook him off, straightened his clothes, and shouted, "You're two pathetic dogs in heat stepping on a wire and pretending you're electric guitars."<sup>104</sup>

"We're both foreigners, foreigners that have been in contact with the outside world." Little Brother Zhang said. "Zhang Qianjun has been living in the mountains in Shanxi Province. For so many years, he didn't know what happened to the Zhang family. This kind of Zhang family exists all over the country. They live alone in no man's land. It's only when the Zhang family has plans in the local area that they get called on. I'm looking for these family members now. Zhang Qianjun, the people here are friends of the patriarch. You have to be polite."

Zhang Qianjun looked at us reluctantly, as if he didn't believe it.

Fatty looked at his expression and sneered, "Idiot. The relationship between me and your patriarch is as strong as iron. You're so rude that you deserve to be sent to the frontier."

Zhang Qianjun's face immediately turned red. It was obvious that he was upset at being dispatched to the frontier, but he resisted attacking this time and cupped his hands to salute me, "My surname is Zhang. My full name is Qianjun Wanma. It can be shortened to Zhang Qianjun."

If I hadn't seen Little Brother Zhang in that hallucination and confirmed that he was really part of the Zhang family, I was afraid I wouldn't have

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<sup>104</sup> I still don't get it, but Tiffany had this insight: He probably meant that they pretended to be awesome, just like how dogs pretend they're like electric guitars.

believed a word they were saying right now. I didn't know who among the Zhang family came up with a bitter name like Zhang Qianjun Wanma<sup>105</sup>, but I kept feeling that it revealed the sorry state of the border region's literacy.

"He knows the Five Ghosts Transportation ritual." Little Brother Zhang said to me. "After we enter that blind spot, the ancient tomb may be buried very deep under many layers of bluestone. We don't have time to spend half a year digging a grave robbers' tunnel in that place. And if we try to blow up the bluestones, it'll be more dangerous than ordinary places. So, we need him to use the Five Ghosts Transportation ritual to get us in."

Even I laughed this time, "Really? Does the Five Ghost Transportation ritual really exist in this world? Are you sure that cup and glasses just now weren't a magic trick?"

Although I didn't want to admit it, I suddenly felt as if I shouldn't be using Poker-Face and Zhang Haike as a basis to judge all the other Zhang family members. The two Zhangs in front of me might not have read any books, after all.

"By the way, do you know calculus?" I asked Little Brother Zhang, deciding to give it a try anyways.

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<sup>105</sup> Qianjun (千军)= a thousand troops. Wanma (万马)=ten thousand horses. When you combine all four characters (千军万马), you get this: magnificent army with thousands of men and horses (idiom); impressive display of manpower / all the King's horses and all the King's men.

## Chapter 6.14 The Zhang Family and Mortals

Everyone was silent. Su Wan wanted to raise his hand for a moment but lowered his head when he saw the atmosphere in the room. Zhang Qianjun Wanma obviously didn't understand that my question was meant to be a kind of joke, but instinctively felt that the atmosphere was off.

"He's joking," Fatty explained. "What he really means is: I don't believe there's such a thing in this world as the Five Ghosts Transportation ritual, so you might as well elaborate. When did your Zhang family start to make a living like this?"

"I can't explain it clearly to people like you." Zhang Qianjun Wanma said disdainfully. "You know that concrete block? I've already shown my hand. You might not believe it, but some people do."

"Wait," Little Brother Zhang said. "You've spent so much time with the patriarch. Didn't he suddenly disappear in front of you? He knows this trick. Hasn't he ever shown you?"

Fatty and I gave each other an uncomfortable look. It was true that Poker-Face would suddenly disappear from right in front of us, but I didn't know how he did it.

It didn't really matter, though. He disappeared when he wanted to and reappeared whenever he felt like it.

I had heard that the giant Buddha statue at Zhang Qishan's home (the head of the Nine Gates) had also suddenly appeared one day. I even remembered that Poker-Face had suddenly disappeared right before my eyes when we were crawling along the stone road at the Heavenly Palace so long ago. At that time, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me.

"Oh, it seems like you're not *that* familiar with each other," Little Brother Zhang said happily. "Now do you see? You're not surnamed Zhang, so no matter how close you guys are, he won't tell you a lot of things."

Was Poker-Face actually a Taoist priest?

Could it be that every time he disappeared, he wasn't walking away by himself, but was being carried away by magic? I touched my chin, imagining Poker-Face wearing a Taoist outfit. It was an amusing thought, and I couldn't help but think that Little Brother Zhang was messing with me.

I could even detect a teasing look in his eyes that was kind of condescending. It seemed that all Zhangs—no matter what their status—saw themselves as different from ordinary people. Although I had done so many things for them, they still thought of me as a mere “mortal”.

This habitual “mortal” label made me very unhappy.

I wanted to keep talking, but Black Glasses had finished putting everything away and motioned to me from behind Brother Zhang, telling me not to ask.

We went back and forth for a while, before finally calling it quits. In the end, Fatty and I didn't agree to help them rob the tomb. When Black Glasses showed us out, Fatty was still reluctant to give up, “Come on, Black Glasses, what's wrong with you? Why are you letting these two stay in your home? They're obviously liars. Su Wan, your master is old and senile. You're a young man. You have to tell your master to watch out for these kinds of frauds. No, I should call the police.”

Black Glasses ignored him and looked at me, knowing that I had something to ask. “What do they mean? Do you really believe them or do you have other plans?” I asked him.

Black Glasses hooked his arm around my shoulder and chuckled softly, “I'm with them. I stole the concrete block and I put the glasses in that cup. I'm their support. I can't expose them. I have to make them feel that I'm with them so that if we really end up going, they won't guard against me and will only guard against you.”

I frowned at him. “Is this really necessary? Why do you have to play this fake game? Why not just honestly rob the tomb instead of pretending to be a Big Bad Wolf?”



“We want to deceive someone,” Black Glasses said. “If you want to join, you have to help. We can’t make this trip without him.”

“Who?” We asked in unison.

“His nickname is Xiao Canglang,” Black Glasses said. “He’s an unlicensed traditional Chinese medicine practitioner.”

## Chapter 6.15 Traditional Chinese Medicine Doctor

Xiao Canglang was a miracle doctor in Beijing's antique industry. He was about forty years old and had a courtyard house near Wanshou Mountain.

He had bought it long before the government started its strict control. He built a steel structure on the second floor with a sunroom, and it was said that the big jujube tree in the yard was eighty years old. Its branches penetrated the floor of the sunroom and stretched out through the top of the glass ceiling, which meant that the room wasn't sealed and the light would leak in. It was cold as shit in the winter and hot as hell in the summer.

This guy started his career as a traditional Chinese medicine doctor by putting up advertisements on telephone poles. He would sell dogskin plasters<sup>106</sup> and specialized in treating skin diseases and male venereal diseases.

Although the place where he lived now was like a big mansion, he usually wore a green army coat and huddled in the yard to smoke while he played with his dogs. He was really no different from any other hutong uncle.<sup>107</sup>

But the thing was, his dogs were giant German Shepherds. More than a dozen of them would be lying there in the yard, basking in the sun. They might have looked lazy, but no one ever dared talk loudly whenever they entered. There was a feeling that you might be torn to pieces at any minute, and the owner wouldn't even have time to stop them.

Many people had probably assumed that this guy had dark yellow teeth and was covered in wrinkles, but they would be wrong. Although Xiao Canglang wasn't tall, he still looked the same in his forties as he did in his

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<sup>106</sup> Used in traditional Chinese medicine for treating contusions, rheumatism, etc. Basically quack medicine or sham goods.

<sup>107</sup> I think it's like some back-alley dude hanging around doing nothing. You know in the dramas how you just see some older guy(s) idly chilling in an alley or by a door acting like they're hot shit? I think that's what it means.

early thirties. He had pale skin, green eyes, a long face, and a high nose that might have been extremely ugly on anyone else. On him, it just made him look a little attractive.

Although he couldn't resist wearing various gold strings and pendants from the Warring States Period, he seemed to give off a different aura.

As a result, it was said that all kinds of young girls and female apprentices always hung around him. Since he lived such a simple life, it was hard to figure out the truth of their relationships.

After the millennium—about '07 or '08—Xiao Canglang somehow got hired as a chief physician of traditional Chinese medicine and immediately rose to fame.

According to Fatty, he was a complete charlatan. He later started a traditional Chinese medicine clinic in Xicheng, where you could only register on Tuesday afternoons. It was said that the waitlist was several years.

I knew all about this kind of method. Famous Beijing medicine masters, religious idols, and liars from all walks of life were able to survive like this because there were too many rich people who were blinded by the success of their own businesses and became overconfident in their own judgments. They always felt that other people encountered liars and they were the only ones who could detect whether someone was a real doctor or not. They believed that there had to be a few legit doctors among those geniuses in Chaoyang District, but the facts were often more dramatic. As far as I knew, practically everyone was a liar.

This kind of old swindler had deceived himself into believing that he had some status in the underworld, but those kinds of relationships were too complicated. Most of the celebrities, officials, and people in the main circles were in contact with each other, which led to the strange situation that even if he was known to be a liar, he still had to be humored.

I had never been afraid of such people and I also had zero tolerance for liars. If he refused to speak in the same context and insisted on

pretending to be a master, then I would really beat him until he confessed.

I didn't know why Black Glasses was interested in this swindler.

"This man started to play around with antiques after earning some money," Black Glasses said. "He specializes in collecting one thing: traditional Chinese medicine meridian charts and various medical books. But most importantly, he collects folk remedies."

"These things are worthless," Fatty said. "What are you planning on doing with them?"

"It's worthless to us, but for a traditional Chinese medicine doctor, building on the old foundation of an ancient prescription could have many effects." Black Glasses continued, "This kind of work is also strange. He even received a weird list in his collection that could be considered a special prescription."

## Chapter 6.16 Bad Karma

“For what?” I asked Black Glasses in a low voice.

Fatty made an obscene gesture to give me a hint. Black Glasses’ cigarette moved from the left corner of his mouth to the right corner, and then he returned Fatty’s gesture with another one. We both recognized it. The prescription was for hemorrhoids.

“So,” I said, “did your expert get severe hemorrhoids and now he’s stuck lying on his front, unable to go grave robbing with you unless you cure it?”

“It’s used to treat hemorrhoids on the butt, but it has other functions.” Black Glasses whispered.

Fatty frowned and said, “Why is it so awkward?”

I also felt awkward. We were hoping to dig all kinds of passages when we entered the mountains, so would we have to smear that medicine on our bodies to go into some unspeakable places?

But I could probably guess what it was for. I had seen the kind of bugs that were brought out from that place, so it was possible the Chinese medicine was effective against them.

“What do you need me to do?” I didn’t ask him for more information. I had finally realized that he didn’t expect to ask me for help before, but he had probably already started planning everything after I got in the car.

“I want that prescription and the medicine he made. The medicine isn’t easy to make and he’s only collected enough for three or four people. The medicine and prescription are in that Chinese medicine clinic,” Black Glasses said. “Go borrow it.”

Fatty smacked his chest, “Do we still need to do such a trivial thing? You’re a damn fool to look down on us now. Can’t your apprentice do it?”

Black Glasses patted me, “The clinic isn’t so simple. There’s an underboss there who’s in the circle. It’s an acquaintance of yours.” As he spoke, he handed me a photo.

In the photo, Li Cu was wearing sunglasses and walking through the clinic door. His head was turned in such a way that it looked as if he was looking right at the camera.

“Your bad karma,” Fatty said quietly.

I continued staring at the picture. I knew how old he was, but he wasn’t giving off a sense of youthfulness in the picture. Instead, there was only the evil I had planted in this young man’s body.

## Chapter 6.17 Arrival

I kept looking at the photo as we headed back to Fatty's shop. I already knew the result, but there was nothing I could do about it. I could change a lot of things with my persistence and intelligence, but people's hearts were just too hard to change.

I had struggled many times myself when it came to keeping my heart steady. It was a concept that was difficult to express in words, but I knew the process well. I had taught Li Cu, a child, all the shortcuts to this world, but I couldn't teach him a way to forgive the world.

In terms of being a teacher, I was far inferior to Black Glasses.

We spent the night in Fatty's shop. I didn't sleep much, but it was enough. When I got up and did a hundred push-ups, my arms made strange noises. I was never athletic, so I had to keep exercising if I wanted my reaction speed to still be good. But no matter what I did, my physical strength stayed the same. By the time I got dressed, the sun was just rising. I didn't bother waking Fatty up and took a taxi to the clinic.

Since it was so early, the clinic naturally wasn't open yet. There was a breakfast cart set up by the door that was selling jianbing guozi.<sup>108</sup> The tenants living in the alley would buy some when they left to catch the subway. As the early morning fog faded a little, I silently watched and imagined what the clinic would look like.

At this time, I noticed the breakfast seller looking at me.

It turned out to be Qianjun Wanma.

When I walked over, he bowed his head and asked, "Do you want to add ham and sausage?"

"What are you doing here?" I watched him unskillfully make a jianbing guozi.

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<sup>108</sup> One of China's most beloved street breakfast foods, they're deep-fried dough sticks rolled in a thin pancake. It's like a Chinese crêpe. More info [here](#)

“What are *you* doing here?” He countered. “I thought you weren’t joining? He knows you, so leave quickly. We don’t want to startle him.”

I held up the photo Black Glasses had given me. “So you’re the one who took this photo. Look at the angle at which he looked back. He already knew something was wrong with you. Don’t embarrass yourself here.”

Qianjun Wanma glanced at me, “Quit your bullshit. I’m making pancakes. How could he see through that? Hurry up and leave.”

I was bored talking to him, so I started walking towards the main entrance of the clinic. He was shocked but immediately grabbed me, “If you’re not going to join us, don’t cause trouble. Don’t think that I won’t dare do anything to you just because you’re familiar with the patriarch. Here, take your pancake and go home.”

I wanted to break free, but his hands were as strong as an iron vice. I felt like I was going to be squeezed to death. When he put a pancake in my hand, I noticed that his eyes were red and serious.

I sighed in my heart and patted him, “Why do you want to rob this tomb? There are so many ways to revitalize the Zhang family, like having more children and planting fewer trees.”

“We have our own measures. You have no say in this.” Qianjun Wanma whispered before giving me a push.

I didn’t want to cause a scene, so I kept walking down the alley. It wasn’t like dealing with this elementary-school-level Zhang required a lot of brain cells anyways.

Some of these small Beijing alleys were very elegant, and there were places where people put the jujubes out in the sun to dry. “Hutong” was a Mongolian word for “alley”. These kinds of alleys were accessible from any direction and they actually represented a kind of irresistible tolerance in the face of so many people coming and going in this world.

I noticed a kiosk that had been set up in front of an old lottery ticket shop. After walking more than a hundred meters, I also saw a small bookstore.



These two places must have been the watchmen's posts. It kept in line with my style of setting up two points to get a general understanding of what was going on in the alley. I found a wall between these two points and drew a symbol on the bricks on the ground.

After that, I left and grabbed a taxi back to Fatty's shop.

When I pushed the door open and went in, I saw a man standing in the dark shop. Fatty was cooking in the back room, and I could hear the sizzling sound of heated oil.

The man turned out to be Poker-Face.

I paused for a moment, wondering why he had come. He looked back at me expressionlessly.

## Chapter 6.18 Point in Time

I was silent as I ate the scrambled eggs with tomatoes and onions.

Fatty didn't have time to buy any vegetables, so he borrowed some side dishes from next door. He could only put out so much on such short notice, but it was enough once we added the salted peanuts we'd bought from the corner store.

Fatty was drinking silently and Poker-Face was eating very little. Beijing was very dry and comfortable when I first came here, but now I was missing Fujian's humidity.

I turned to look at the equipment he had brought and found that it was almost everything we had. There were three big bags that were worn down and covered in mud after we went roaming around the mountains in Fujian. Even though they looked like snakeskin bags full of potatoes, they were necessary for our trip.

Wang Meng had tried all sorts of ways to get Poker-Face an ID card, but it hadn't been settled yet. I didn't know how he got to Beijing, but he always seemed to have a way.

I vaguely felt that his sudden appearance had something to do with Black Glasses. It wouldn't be surprising considering they had known each other far longer than I did. And considering the fact that Black Glasses didn't desperately ask me and Fatty to help him, he might have already called upon Poker-Face.

After we were done eating, I casually brought up Black Glasses. If Poker-Face knew about it, then we could talk about it. If he didn't know, then I wanted to give him a heads up.

Fatty asked me why Black Glasses was scheming something. To be honest, I knew Little Brother Zhang had a story up his sleeve, but I didn't know if the place he was talking about was really a valuable tomb. Under normal circumstances, this kind of job shouldn't be done rashly. Black Glasses could be regarded as a veteran, so it didn't make sense that he

wouldn't know all the details. That was why I kept thinking that he and Little Brother Zhang didn't tell us everything.

"When it comes to recruiting grave robbers, the recruiters will promise that the tomb they're going to rob is full of gold and there are generations of grave goods there. Even selling one item would be enough for people to live comfortably for three lifetimes. But Black Glasses and Little Brother Zhang didn't do this. After all that talk, it's nothing but difficulties. There are bugs, it's impossible to enter, and people can't see when they reach the tomb. There's no fucking way they can recruit any grave robbers like this," Fatty said. "But if it only had grave goods, Black Glasses wouldn't keep it from us. I honestly feel a little hurt he didn't say anything to us this time. He's cozying up to those fucking outsiders, but not to us."

*There must be more than grave goods there,* I said to myself. In principle, this kind of job shouldn't be done at all.

"Little Brother, what do you think Black Glasses' reason is? Could it be something to treat his eyes?" Fatty asked Poker-Face.

Poker-Face shook his head, opened his equipment bag, and started hanging the stuff on the wall, "He'll die this time."

I paused, and Poker-Face quietly added, "That tomb can't be robbed. Look at your grandfather's notes."

I took a deep breath. I honestly hadn't opened my grandpa's notes for a long time. I didn't have that rookie mentality anymore, so I didn't think about his notes very often.

Poker-Face took out a roll of paper from his bag and silently stuck it on the wall. I saw that it was the genealogical chart that had been sorted out before.

"What's this?" Fatty asked him, but he didn't answer.

I went to the back room, took out my cell phone, pulled up the scanned photos of my grandpa's notes, and looked them over carefully.

Poker-Face left. I didn't know if he went to find Black Glasses, but I ignored it and continued flipping through my grandpa's notes. I hadn't read them for many years, so it was actually like reading them for the first time. As I looked through them and saw the yellow paper in the pictures—I had scanned them because the paper became too brittle—it suddenly occurred to me that Zhang Haike had told me before that there always came a turning point in one's long life. Before this point in time, there were no disadvantages, and any hardships or trials could be surpassed. After that, the seemingly eternal things began to decay and friends would start to die.

When I thought of Poker-Face's words, I suddenly wondered if this time had come. For Poker-Face, was it time for me and all those around me to die?

## Chapter 6.19 Place Mentioned in the Notes

Forty-six years ago, a lot of bodies were piled up at the entrance of an underground river in Guangxi because of a war. One day, the yellow mud there gushed out continuously. After nearly ten thousand years of scouring, the bottom of the underground river had finally become very stable. There was no heavy rain at the time, which meant that the flowing yellow mud was a result of the underground river undergoing geological changes. Maybe a karst in the ten-thousand-meter underground cave had collapsed.

But according to my grandpa's notes, someone sifted through the yellow mud and found that it was packed earth from an ancient tomb. Later, someone went down to the underground river and finally came back up with a bamboo tube. There was a letter inside that said they had gone about two or three miles down before everyone had gone blind.

The torches were still burning, but they couldn't see any light.

I touched my chin as I remembered that Uncle Three had said in the Temple of Seeds that he had encountered a corpse cave near Taiyuan, but they didn't go in at the time.<sup>109</sup> As I looked at the notes, I realized that these events in Shanxi and Guangxi were very similar. I didn't know if what Uncle Three had said at the time was really from grandpa's notes and he had lied to me because he was afraid that I would go there.

This account was really similar to the place that Little Brother Zhang had mentioned, so I kind of knew why Poker-Face said the tomb couldn't be robbed.

There were strange symbols at the entrance of the cave. Grandpa had drawn them in his notes, and I found that they looked like the Zhang family's seal. The marks must have meant that the place was extremely dangerous and inaccessible.

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<sup>109</sup> You all probably don't care, but it's page 30, Chapter 3 of "Cavern of Blood Zombies".

The Zhang family must have tried multiple times but they all failed in the end. This kind of mark probably meant that those Zhang family members who went in didn't come back.

If they couldn't see, then what in the world was making them go blind? I hated myself for not knowing.

Guangxi, underground river, deep mountain, invisible wall, huge blind area.

Why did Little Brother Zhang and Poker-Face go in at that time? The Zhang family had been divided back then, so they must've had a special reason to go to this place at that time.

Was Black Glasses going for the same reason?

Just as I was thinking this, someone kicked my door in. Li Cu strode in, threw a stack of photos on the desk in front of me, and then leaned against the sofa that was pushed against the wall.

I glanced at them and found that they were all photos of Little Brother Zhang.

## Chapter 6.20 Li Cu's Obsession

Any kind of conflict would create a lose-lose situation, especially after Li Cu took refuge with Xiao Canglang. For him, he needed a simple and controllable master. That was why Xiao Canglang's fame had risen so recently. It had all been orchestrated by Li Cu. Xiao Canglang probably didn't even know what was going on around him.

And Li Cu also needed an older backer so that he could avoid all the trouble brought about by his young age. This boy was really too similar to me, but unfortunately, he became obsessed at such a young age. He firmly believed that his father was still alive and wanted to find him so that he could ask him about all the things from that year. I couldn't help him because he wanted to do it on his own.

If it were me, this obsession would have to be let go sooner or later. But he was still young and thought that the future was infinite and there was still time. He thought that my letting go was a sign of cowardice.

Like me, he fell deeper and deeper into the wrong world for the wrong reasons, so his faults were also my responsibility.

To sum it up, Little Brother Zhang and the others didn't need to face Xiao Canglang if they wanted to get that prescription. They needed to face Li Cu. After several years, he was still a rash boy who didn't know how to adapt, but his cleverness made it impossible for me to manipulate him with mere talk.

"Do you have nothing else to do?" I asked him slowly as I looked at the photos.

"I have what you want, right?" Li Cu laughed, "I actually have something that Wu Xie can't get? God has finally opened his eyes."

"It's not what I want, it's what he wants." I pointed to the photo, "You'd better make a deal with him. You're both people who don't give up until you reach your goal. Conflict is a waste of time."

“You taught me before, remember?” He said as he looked at me. “Some people can make deals, while others can’t. I won’t conduct business with you, Wu Xie. It doesn’t matter if it’s you or your friends.”

I sighed. I really wanted to jump up and kick this stubborn child to death, but I was the one who made a mistake before, so I had to bear it. “Give me some terms that you can accept.”

“Tell me, where did my dad go?”

No one would appear in photos once they climbed to the top of the stone mountain in Gutong Jing.<sup>110</sup> We found a stone room in the crevice there, and all those who entered it disappeared. I still didn’t know where they went. I didn’t have the courage to go in and chose to give up, but I didn’t tell Li Cu about it because I knew what he would do.

At that time, I needed him to do something important for me, so I ended up lying to him.

This selfishness was now constantly torturing me.

I didn’t answer him.

“Think it over. Either tell me, or I’ll call the police in the morning if I see these people still wandering around my area.” He stood up and looked at the pack of cigarettes on my desk. “You’ll die early if you keep smoking. If you want to die so badly, take my offer and then die.”

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<sup>110</sup> This was kind of vaguely mentioned in [Chapter 11](#) of “Sand Sea”.



## **Miscellaneous Extras (Read whenever)**

## The Wu Family Extras: Chess Game

Wu Sanxing looked at the chess game in front of him. His upper body was motionless, but he didn't know how many times his feet had changed positions.

Wu Erbai looked at his brother across from him. When Wu Sanxing smiled at him calmly, Wu Erbai thought he looked a bit funny.

Even though his heart was full of anxiety, he still had to keep his upper body and face still and try not to reveal any flaws. Third Brother was indeed shrewd, but based on his character, he wouldn't be able to conceal his intense anxiety.

"Don't think about it too much. Just move a piece." Wu Erbai said. "If I don't checkmate in seven turns, then you're the winner."

"No. It's not glorious if I win like this. I'm not someone who can't afford to lose. Moreover, I just might end up winning in the end." Wu Sanxing said, "I've set a trap, but you haven't found it yet."

"How are you supposed to set up a trap with two soldiers and one minister? I think your trap is too lousy." Wu Erbai looked at the dozen pawns he had captured. The chess pieces were made out of Shoushan stone, which Grandpa Nine<sup>111</sup> had given to their father as a birthday present.

It was said that they had been carved by a master in Suzhou, and the words on them were also written by a famous artist, which made them very precious. But they had developed a patina<sup>112</sup> because they hadn't been used much in three years.

"Don't smash the chessboard if you lose." He felt a little nervous when he saw the patina. If his younger brother broke it, then things wouldn't end well for him, either. Their father would definitely order his dogs to bite them.

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<sup>111</sup> I think that Grandpa Xie here referred to Xie Jiuye's father.

<sup>112</sup> A gloss or sheen on a surface resulting from age or polishing.

Speaking of those dogs, they were all precious in his father's eyes. It was like he didn't even care for his biological sons. *Does he think the three of us are beneath them?*

*Oh, no. I got distracted.*

Wu Erbai took a deep breath. His brother was still sitting in front of him motionless, staring intently at the chessboard with brows furrowed so deep that they were almost tangled. It appeared he hadn't noticed that Wu Erbai's mind had wandered just now.

This was why he didn't like to play chess with his younger brother. Wu Sanxing was stubborn and obstinate, and when he realized he was about to lose, he often took more than ten minutes to make a move. He would stall until it was time for dinner and then say, "Ah, we're running out of time. Let's call it a draw. We'll start a new game after we finish dinner."

But out of the whole family, his younger brother was the only one who could play chess with him. Although his elder brother wasn't bad at it, he liked to defend. Plus, he would immediately admit defeat once he was at a disadvantage, so Wu Erbai couldn't find any pleasure in playing with him.

"How about we call it a draw?" Wu Erbai said, not wanting to waste any more time. He had an appointment with his elder brother to go to the shop and check inventory.

"No!" Wu Sanxing replied. "If you let me win in this situation, it means that I'm the loser."

"Can you be quick about it then?" Wu Erbai asked. "Even a pot of water would boil by the time you make your next move."

Wu Sanxing rolled his eyes at Wu Erbai. "What's the rush? I'm still thinking about setting up the next trap!" With that said, he raised his hand, ready to move a piece. "You're going to be very surprised."

Wu Erbai looked at Wu Sanxing for a moment. He already knew all the possible moves in this game of chess and had anticipated any moves Wu

Sanxing might make. He would checkmate in seven turns no matter what happened.

As a result of this, his attention wasn't on the chessboard. Instead, he was staring mechanically at his younger brother in front of him. The moment Wu Sanxing raised his hand, he saw a hint of an expression briefly flash across his face.

Under the calmness, this expression was almost indistinguishable. Was Wu Sanxing proud, nervous, or depressed? Wu Erbai couldn't tell, but he had still caught the slight change.

Something was wrong. He reflexively grabbed Wu Sanxing's hand, which was about to move the chess piece.

Wu Sanxing was shocked. "What?"

Wu Erbai looked down at the chessboard and slowly looked at all the pieces. Sure enough, he found that one of the pieces had been moved.

"You don't like it if I let you win, but you can accept it when you win by cheating?" Wu Erbai asked. "I don't understand your logic."

"Cheating? I didn't cheat." Wu Sanxing acted like he was all innocent.

"Who cheated? It's not easy for me to think of a good move. Don't point fingers at me."

Wu Erbai let go of his hand, and then touched the chess piece, slowly moving it back to its previous position. "Third Brother, do you want me to reverse all the moves of this chess game for you to see, and show you how this piece got to this position?"

Wu Saxing looked Wu Erbai in the eye and cursed, "Damn, why is it so hard to lie to you? I can't do it anymore. We'll start a new game next time." He shoved the board and messed up all the chess pieces. "You clean this up. I'm going to read a chess book and then go to sleep. I'll definitely win tomorrow."

“Stop. Just tell me. Why are you upset if I let you win? Why do you think it’s fine if you win by cheating?” Wu Erbai looked at the disorganized chess pieces, feeling a little angry. *This kid has become so spoiled since everyone outside treats him like a master. No wonder Dad wants me to discipline him.*

Wu Erbai quickly put the chess pieces back to their original positions. “You can’t possibly mess up the chess pieces. Even if we play mahjong and you somehow mess up the tiles, I can still put them back to their original positions.”

Wu Sanxing stared at his elder brother. He obviously wasn’t expecting him to not let it go and continued staring at him for a long time, unsure of what to do.

He was a ferocious fighter, but he couldn’t possibly beat Wu Erbai to death if they ended up fighting. It wasn’t to say that his elder brother’s fighting skills were better than him, it was just that their dad would kill him if his brother was injured.

Not to mention how cunning his elder brother was. Although you might reconcile with him after you offended him, he would definitely find ways to plot against you during the holidays.

Should he act cowardly? It wasn’t that he didn’t know how, but he had been acting quite arrogant outside recently, so he didn’t think he could do it.

He stared at Wu Erbai, who stared right back at him.

Wu Sanxing’s fierceness was famous in this generation. They said that Old Dog Wu had three sons: the eldest was a dog, the second was a fox, and the third was a mad dog. A mad dog was irrational, and even some of the older generation were wary around this prodigal son who didn’t abide by any rules.

But there was no fear in Wu Erbai’s eyes when he looked at him. His elder brother looked at him the same way he did when he was a bare-naked baby.

They stared at each other for a long time before Wu Sanxing finally compromised and sat down. He then started to put away the chess pieces. "Fine. I admit defeat. I'm a disgrace because I cheated. I'll invite you to dinner some other day."

"I just want to hear your thought process." Wu Erbai said, "Why can't you accept it when I let you win? And why is it okay if you win by cheating?"

Wu Sanxing glanced at him, took the pieces Wu Erbai had previously captured, and then started placing them neatly one by one and in a certain order. He knew that Wu Erbai was the kind of person who had to organize everything.

"Because I'm the one deciding to cheat. Whether I cheat, act shamelessly, or smash the chessboard, I'm willing to do it all so I don't lose. I'm the one doing these things; I don't need to rely on other people. It's enough for me." Wu Sanxing said. "You know Dad has always disliked me. Ever since I was young, he hasn't approved of anything I've done. Our family is now in a mess. You and our eldest brother don't want to have anything to do with the family business, so it's up to me if I want to make a name for myself."

Wu Erbai drank his tea that had already gone a little cold and said, "Dad doesn't want us to be involved in the family business. It's rare that you can do something you like without having to inherit your father's business. Why don't you understand?"

"There are a lot of things Dad has no say in when it comes to whether we should be involved or not." Wu Sanxing said. As he was putting the last chess piece back into its original position, he found that he wasn't angry anymore. Sure enough, you could never be mad at your family for long.

"Well, are you satisfied? Don't you still need to take inventory with our eldest brother? Pick a date, and I'll invite you to dinner. In a few months, you'll leave home to study abroad, and our eldest brother will also have to work somewhere else. We may not see each other for several years, and I'll be the only person who is unemployed in the family. The house is going to feel so empty. I want to invite you both to dinner several times

before you leave.” Wu Sanxing picked up the chessboard and walked toward his bedroom.

Wu Erbai looked at him and suddenly felt that his younger brother was different from what he had previously thought. He always thought Wu Sanxing was an arbitrary man whose behaviors were driven by emotions. Now, however, it seemed that his uncontrollable behaviors came from a fairly controllable heart.

Their eldest brother was controllable both inside and out, his own self-restraint meant that he was controllable on the inside, and his younger brother completely hid the controllability of his inner logic.

Even though their eldest brother could be seen through at a glance, he couldn't (though they could generally predict what was going through his mind). As for the third brother, how he acted and what he thought were two different things.

He was afraid that his younger brother was going to have the most difficult life out of the three of them, and his heart ached for him.

He drank his tea in one sip, and said to Wu Sanxing's back, “Third Brother.”

Wu Sanxing turned around. “What's the matter?”

“If you have an idea that you want to realize by any means necessary, you have to learn to rely on others sometimes, especially your own people. If you think it's best to rely on yourself, then you'd better remember, there are always some people you can seek help from.”

“Understood.” Wu Sanxing lit a cigarette, smiled, and then turned his back.

## The Wu Family Snippets

“Just come with us. It’s rare that we get to go back to our old home. The elders at home also miss us a lot.” Wu Yiqiong looked at Wu Sanxing pleadingly. “Let bygones be bygones.”

“Big Brother, stop talking. If they don’t give us the land we should’ve owned, I won’t bother visiting them.” Wu Sanxing took a sip of tea.

Wu Yiqiong looked at Wu Erbai helplessly, and the latter snorted, “Third Brother, how about we make a deal?”

“Do tell.” Wu Sanxing secretly smiled. *Just as I expected, Second Brother fell right into my trap as well.*

Wu Erbai lit an incense stick and put it in the incense holder. “You know that room in our ancestor’s mansion, the one that was sealed by bricks? Haven’t you always wanted to know what’s in it?”

Wu Sanxing smiled after hearing this. “If I go with you, will you tell me how to enter the room?”

“Deal.”

“I’ll be angry if you’re lying to me.”

“What the hell is going on? What room? Why didn’t I understand a word you two said?” Wu Yiqiong asked Wu Erbai when they walked out of the house.

Wu Erbai grabbed a handful of rice and fed the chickens in his yard. “Unlike me and Sanxing who were always running around, you were too honest when you were a kid. The original owner of our old mansion was very strange. There are some places in that mansion that are invisible to ordinary people.”

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Changsha Mountains.



“You just fell asleep.” Wu Yiqiong was clutching the car’s door handle with all his might.

“I did not,” Wu Sanxing said.

“Where’s the right-side mirror then?”

“It’s where it’s supposed to be.”

“Bullshit! It was hit by a pickup truck just now and fell off!”

“It’s fine. I don’t usually back up anyways.

“You’re always so careless. When are you going to grow up?”

“It’s not a big deal.”

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“Was our sister-in-law fine with you not bringing her along?” Wu Erbai started making tea. “She didn’t look happy to me.”

“She doesn’t like the countryside anyway. It’s just that Little Xie has gone to college, so she’s not used to it. She’ll get better.” Wu Yiqiong said. He looked at Wu Sanxing, who was trying to hitchhike. His old Audi had hit an old locust tree and was still smoking.

“What’s that?” Wu Yiqiong pointed to the old locust tree.

Wu Erbai stood up and walked over to the tree. The bark had cracked, and something strange had been exposed. “This....” He leaned over and pulled out something, “Iron sand.”

“Eh, why is there iron sand in the bark?”

“The old tree is blooming. It was planted by Chang Tieshu.”<sup>113</sup>

“Who’s that?”

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<sup>113</sup> Chang Tieshu is a nickname, and the Chinese characters mean “Chang Iron Tree.”

“He’s the one who sold the house to our old man.”

“We’ve known since we were five that the trees in our house have iron sand in them. In the past, Chang Tieshu planted a lot of trees. He got his nickname because he used to stuff iron sand in the bark.”

“Why did he do that? What’s the point?”

“The idiom ‘the iron tree blossoms’ can mean that things are difficult to achieve. The old man said that he suspected Chang Tieshu was trying to do something really difficult but failed in the end.”

The three brothers walked along the mountain road for fourteen kilometers. By the time they finally reached the village entrance, the sky was pitch black. After they entered, dogs started barking everywhere.

“I’ve said before that the people in this village have no conscience. The dogs here are the only ones that do.” Wu Sanxing said.

Wu Erbai said, “I hope they don’t remember the days when you tied firecrackers to their grandfather’s tail for fun.”

“You’re right. The dogs here are basically our ‘Young Master’s’ grandchildren.”

The three men walked toward a tree near the village entrance. There was a mound under the tree where Young Master had been buried. They looked at each other for a moment, and then Sanxing said, “Hey, Number Four. Numbers One, Two, and Three have come to see you. Try not to have sex with too many female dogs in the underworld. Don’t embarrass the Wu family.”

The three men started laughing as if they had returned to their childhood when there were three kids and a dog.

“Let’s go.” Yiqiang patted them. “We have to clean up the house.”

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Wu Sanxing slept like a log, Wu Erbai was sitting on the edge of the bed with his eyes closed, and Wu Yiqiang was mopping the floor. They were in the only guest room the old mansion had. There were a lot of rooms, but this one happened to be by the roadside. As a result, a lot of people passed by.

The room didn't have any electricity, so Wu Yiqiang had nothing else to do at night. By the time he was finished mopping, the sun was just starting to rise. When he looked around, what he saw sent a shiver down his spine.

"Are you sure you saw two people lying in bed?"

"Yes. You were sitting on the edge of the bed and Third Brother was sleeping in the bed, covered with a quilt. His hands were exposed, but there was another hand sticking out of the quilt. It looked like a woman's hand."

Wu Sanxing said, "Yeah, right. You must have been hallucinating because you were tired."

"I don't think so," Wu Erbai said. "Let's take the quilt apart."

"Where did this quilt come from? What is this?" Wu Sanxing's face was pale.

Wu Erbai pinched the cotton quilt. "This is human oil. This quilt was used to cover oily corpses."

"Oily corpses?"

"A kind of ancient corpse. The fat in the body overflowed when it rotted, so the body was covered with a quilt in order to stop the decay."

"Where did you get the quilt?"

Wu Sanxing pointed to the corner where an old cabinet was sitting. It was full of quilts, some of which had been gnawed on by rats.

“There’s nothing wrong with them. These quilts aren’t ours. They should belong to Chang Tieshu.” Wu Sanxing looked at Erbai, “Second Brother, is this also related to that matter?”

“It should be. Didn’t we pass?”

“Wait a minute, what exactly do you know?” Wu Yiqiong asked.

Wu Erbai said, “A test from the old man.”

“Dad didn’t want to teach you anything, so you don’t know anything about it. He gave the both of us a test to see whether we could join the family business.”

“What test?”

“There’s a hidden room in this mansion. The mansion was constructed in a special way, which enabled this room to remain hidden. We had to find it at night.”

“Eh, there’s such a room in this mansion?”

Wu Erbai nodded. “It took Third Brother three days to complete the task, while it only took me ten minutes.”

“Hey, stop showing off. That’s not what happened,” Wu Sanxing immediately said.

“He’s right. It wasn’t because I was clever, it was just that I had already known this room existed before the test, so I knew where to look when Dad mentioned it. In the end, he didn’t let me join the family business. He said that I was too inclined to do dangerous things since I was too observant.”

“But Dad didn’t know that I knew how to enter the room hours after I had found it; I just wasn’t brave enough to go in.” Wu Erbai said. “After the test, I asked him what exactly was in the room, but he wouldn’t tell me. That was when I decided to look into it and found someone who was bold enough to come with me.”

Wu Sanxing raised his hand. "That was me."

"I entered the room, but I couldn't understand what Chang Tieshu wanted to do." Wu Sanxing lit a cigarette. "Stop thinking about it. You'll lose your mind if you see what's in that room."

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Wu Yiqiong cooked three dishes, but he had added too much salt to them. The elders kept frowning while they were eating, but it didn't matter whether the food was salty or not after they had drunk a lot of alcohol.

As Wu Sanxing drank with the elders, Wu Erbai held a one-year-old baby from an unknown relative, and let the child watch him feed the chickens. Wu Yiqiong took off his apron and grabbed the glass Wu Sanxing had offered him, but his mind was completely elsewhere.

Some of their relatives helped Wu Erbai drag his two brothers home with a lot of difficulty. As Wu Erbai put them to bed, the whole room started to smell like alcohol. He said goodbye to the relatives, closed the door, and then turned to find that Wu Sanxing had already sat up and lit a cigarette. "Well, we're done drinking. Time to fulfill your promise."

Wu Erbai looked at his elder brother. "He drank too much. You know he doesn't drink often."

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Wu Erbai held a flashlight in front, while Wu Sanxing was behind him with a quilt. The two went out and closed the door gently, and then walked into the depths of the old mansion. Seconds after hearing the door close, Wu Yiqiong opened his eyes and sat up. He sat on the bed and waited for the alcohol to settle a little before secretly following them.

Wu Yiqiong had lived in this old mansion for a long time when he was a kid, but he had never realized how terrifying it was at midnight.

The pale moonlight was shining across the rotted paper on the latticed windows and penetrating the corridor, making it look as if a layer of frost had formed.

Second Brother was walking fast, and the flashlight in the distance was becoming dimmer and dimmer, making Wu Yiqiong feel panicked.

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Wu Erbai and Wu Sanxing stood in front of an inconspicuous brick wall. The moonlight shining in from the attic on the opposite side cast two shadowed figures on the wall.

“Tell me, how did you open the wall back then? What are the three things inside the room?” Wu Sanxing asked.

Wu Erbai touched the wall. “Don’t you want to try and guess one last time?”

“I’ve guessed for more than ten years. I don’t have the strength to think about it anymore.”

Wu Erbai smiled, “Then watch carefully.”

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It was a very simple room that was only about a dozen square meters. It was pitch black, the muddy ground exuded a dampness, and there was nothing in the room save for three very large old water jars that were taller than people.

“Where are they?” Wu Yiqiong flicked his lighter open. He had watched Wu Erbai’s flashlight enter the room, so how did they disappear all of a sudden? Did they climb into the water jars?

He climbed up one, braced himself on the edge of the jar with his armpits, and pressed his feet against the outside of the jar while putting the lighter inside. He saw a layer of gray-white ointment that was wrapped around something similar to cotton wool. It seemed to be a

plant. The ointment didn't give off any smell, and it was as hard as a rock when he touched it with his hand.

Wu Yiqiong didn't realize that the door of the room had slowly closed behind him. He jumped off the water jar, puzzled. Even with his lighter illuminating the surrounding walls, he still didn't notice that the entrance had disappeared.

Wu Yiqiong climbed up to the second water jar and pointed the lighter inside. It was still the same, but a big hole had been dug out of the ointment. The edge of the hole had also hardened, indicating that it had been that way for a long time.

He climbed into the jar and stomped on the ointment. Feeling that it was rather stable, he stepped on it with confidence, but the surface immediately cracked. As he dropped into the ointment, he immediately grabbed the sides of the jar.

He tried to climb up, but at that moment, he felt as if countless hands had grabbed hold of his legs and a huge force was dragging him down into the ointment. He dropped the lighter and was instantly plunged into darkness. He was extremely frightened as he clung to the jar's walls. "Help!" he finally shouted.

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In the bathhouse, Er Bai was rubbing Wu Yiqiong's back. "Is it really human oil?"

Erbai nodded, "Yes, it's full of fat from young female corpses."

"How many corpses would they need for a jar?"

"Around two thousand people. People were poor at that time, so their bodies couldn't produce that much oil."

"What's wrapped in the oil?"

Erbai smiled, "I have a general idea, but I'm not sure. I'll tell you after you finish your bath."

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“The oil is wrapped around a kind of grass. According to “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, this grass is said to fall from the sky and can only survive on the ground for one season. Chang Tieshu had been studying the method to make it bloom and produce seeds, but the seeds are too precious, so the experiment is very difficult. He had only found these three trees in his lifetime, and his family went bankrupt because of the experiment. After his death, his family had to sell his house to repay the debt.”

“The grass was about to die, so he immersed it in human oil. He thought that he could take it out and replant it whenever he found a way to reproduce it, but unfortunately, he didn’t find a way before he died.”

“Why would he want to grow this grass? Just to make money?”

Wu Erbai shook his head. “People called it horse-fly grass. I don’t know what it does, but it’s often mentioned in ancient alchemy.”

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The three large water jars were lifted out and put in the square. The human oil and straw were set ablaze as the monks chanted scriptures, and the three brothers watched silently. The fierce flames were like countless red-clothed girls dancing and reveling.

“There must be a lot of things we don’t know about,” Wu Yiqiong thought. “My son isn’t going to believe this when I tell him about it.”



# The First Meeting 1

Outside the delivery room, Wu Yiqiong was restless while Wu Erbai was resting with his eyes closed.

Wu Sanxing scratched his head and touched his face several times, wanting to smoke so bad. He looked even more anxious than his eldest brother. "I'll go outside for a moment since it's still quite busy in the delivery room." He couldn't hold it in anymore.

Wu Yiqiong didn't have the energy to pay any attention to him.

Wu Erbai waved his hand as if to tell his younger brother to go away quickly. "It's best not to come back. You're so noisy."

Wu Sanxing felt like he had been pardoned. He ran downstairs to the hospital yard, lit a cigarette, and took several puffs of it in no time.

To a certain extent, he was addicted to cigarettes and felt so ecstatic when he smoked that it was as if he could fly. He leaned against a pillar as he continued to smoke.

He had originally calculated the time before he came. Based on his sister-in-law's physique, it shouldn't be easy for her to deliver a baby. He had already arrived late, but the baby still hadn't come out yet. He didn't know why it was taking so long. *Will I need to stay here for a whole day?*

It wasn't that he didn't care about his eldest brother, he just hadn't experienced many incidents related to childbirth. He felt that it probably didn't matter whether he showed up or not. He didn't think there was any family in the world that needed all of the relatives to be present when a baby was born.

The main reason was that he knew his father was there. If he didn't show up, the old man might scold him when he got drunk. His father was getting older, so he didn't want to smash things and walk away like he used to do when he was young. It was better to placate his father whenever he could.

*But these people in the hospital really treat the old man very well. They even arranged a meeting between him and the hospital director to talk in the VIP room. If they have such a good relationship, then my sister-in-law should be in good hands. Maybe I should leave.*

*Alright. He felt that he had convinced himself after he finished smoking. I could buy a flower basket for the newborn thing, or I could buy some baby formula. I know where to buy this kind of stuff.*

He went upstairs to the delivery room. He was just scratching his head and trying to come up with an excuse to leave when the sound of a baby crying suddenly came from the delivery room.

“The baby’s here! The baby’s here!” Wu Yiqiong jumped up and rushed to the entrance of the delivery room. He touched the door and discovered that he couldn’t open it. He looked back at Wu Erbai and Wu Sanxing with a dazed expression. “What do I do?”

Wu Erbai looked at him and sighed. “You can’t go in there. Can you calm down a little?”

Wu Sanxing went up and hooked his arm around his eldest brother’s shoulders to pull him back a bit and then said to his other brother, “You’re heartless. It’s not a virtue to calm down at a time like this. Big Brother, congratulations!”

Old Dog Wu rushed out of the VIP room on one side. “The baby is crying really loudly, right? People upstairs and downstairs must be able to hear it crying as well. This child might be easy to raise.”

The door to the delivery room finally opened and a nurse walked out holding the baby.

Wu Yiqiong had been so anxious that he was now in a sluggish state. He wiped his tears and asked, “Mine?”

“Of course it’s yours.” The nurse frowned, unable to believe he had said something so ridiculous. “You have a son.”

Wu Erbai also walked towards the baby. As the group of people pushed Wu Sanxing aside, he looked at the little guy who was being held from a distance. The baby was so small, and his eyes hadn't even opened yet. Wu Sanxing suddenly felt emotional as well.

Old Dog Wu started crying uncontrollably and told Wu Yiqiong to go and see his wife so that she wouldn't feel left out. Wu Yiqiong walked to the ward while holding the baby.

"I'm your Uncle Three," Wu Sanxing said as he followed behind them. Although he knew this baby couldn't see him, he still made a funny face and strange sound to attract the baby's attention. He felt that there was one more thing to make his life happy, which was a rare event.

# Mahjong

Poker-Face never did anything for fun.

I had seen many idlers before, but even the weirdest people had one or two activities that interested them. They would spin two walnuts in their hands when they zoned out, smoke, shift their feet, or even bite their nails.

Few people did nothing when they had nothing to do, but Poker-face was absolutely inactive.

If you put him in a random place, he would be just like a potted plant. Well, even plants would move and grow, but Poker-Face would maintain the same posture all day and night.

This may also be an after-effect of the amnesia, but Fatty and I thought that life without entertainment wasn't life.

People had to learn to do fun things first. We knew that Poker-face couldn't find pleasure doing something fun, but people had an instinct where they would feel happy in an environment where everyone else was happy. Over time, if he knew that playing mahjong could make people happy, then he might also like playing it.

At least, that was our childish idea.

We obviously knew it would be difficult to get Poker-face to play mahjong, but we couldn't possibly threaten him and say that we would beat him to death if he didn't play. No one did that anymore. But people always had weaknesses, so there might be a way if we spent some time thinking about it.

Poker-face didn't have many weaknesses, and he basically listened to no one. He had no respect for the old, didn't dote on children, didn't have any obscene thoughts, and didn't even care about food.

The only thing that could get through to him was bringing up substantive issues that he did care about. But you couldn't tell him that mahjong had something to do with his past; he wasn't an idiot after all.

Fatty found a middle ground. We would tell him that Fatty's mahjong buddy knew something, but in order to please him and get some clues, the three of us would have to play with him. Since the other party was unwilling to play with other people, we had to rely on Little Brother for now.

This reason was far-fetched, but it sounded very convincing once the words were out of Fatty's mouth. Plus, I was standing next to them and emphasized that we were in Beijing and couldn't go around torturing and interrogating people until they confessed. We had to follow the other party's will.

As a result, we taught him how to play mahjong. Poker-face might have been stoic, but that didn't mean he was stupid. I soon realized that he actually knew the basic rules but had probably never played with anyone before. He could only serve as an associate member, but that was enough for me and Fatty.

We called Jin Wantang and booked a table at some board game room in Huawei Xili near Panjiayuan.

Although Little Brother was very cooperative, he wasn't competitive, and he drew the tiles without feeling them. Those who didn't know him would think he was a mahjong master who didn't care what tiles he drew and could just go along with whatever he had.

Jin Wantang was a bit confused at first and thought we were plotting against him. Three rounds later, however, he realized that Poker-face was simply a tile-drawing machine, and so he started to relax.

Although we hadn't played for a long time, Fatty and I were clever and soon got back into the swing of things. We were familiar with controlling and trapping the next player, but Jin Wantang was even better than us. Even after a few rounds, he could calculate which tiles the other three players might have drawn without breaking a sweat.

As a result, Little Brother became the one who would present the other players with opportunities. After five rounds had passed, everyone was basically waiting for him to discard the tiles, so that we could steal them and become the winner.

Jin Wantang became smug after winning a lot and couldn't keep his mouth shut, "Little Brother, I have an idea what tiles you have, so think carefully. I'm here waiting for you to slip up. If I don't chase after you, Little Master Three must have something set up as well, so don't end up letting the two of us get the benefit all at once."

Fatty got angry. "You don't get to decide how he wants to play mahjong. Little Brother, do whatever you want. Hit him where it hurts. Show him what you've got."

Poker-face completely ignored them and quickly discarded the tiles like usual.

After playing like this a few times, I felt that the mahjong therapy wasn't very effective. But Jin Wantang liked playing with us more and more. He won a least three times every round, and I started to wonder whether he was cheating or not.

I slowly started to feel that this mahjong therapy was hopeless, and it might just be better to take Little Brother to a movie. At least he could sleep for two hours that way.

With that thought, we didn't play as enthusiastically as before. But Little Brother did something during this period of time that stopped us in our tracks.

We were already used to the fact that he didn't feel the tiles when he drew them and didn't even bother stealing someone's tiles. As a result, when it was time for Poker-face to draw a tile, Fatty tried to use his thumb to feel what the tile might be. It must have been a very good one because Fatty's face changed, and he slowly tried to take the tile with a big smile.

It was at this moment that Poker-face grabbed Fatty's hand and made him put the tile back. Then, Poker-face flipped two tiles face up in the middle, left two other tiles on the ends face down, and used his left hand to draw the tile into his own rack. He frowned, not moving at all.

For the first time in hours, he changed how he drew the tiles, and we were absolutely stunned.

I looked at him nervously. All four of us stared at his tiles without moving a muscle, and after two or three minutes, Fatty asked him, "Did you win?" Poker-Face nodded.

When Fatty flipped Poker-Face's tiles over, he almost burst into tears. It was as if the little child in your house finally stopped wetting the bed. He shook Poker-Face's hand emotionally, but Poker-face was staring at Jin Wantang.

I suddenly realized what this meant.

*Oh, no!* I immediately grabbed Jin Wantang and ran out the door. It was dark as we rushed down three streets to avoid getting killed.

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***Tiffany's TN Note: The story took place after Poker-face lost his memory. I tweaked some parts about mahjong terms to make it easier for people who don't play mahjong to understand. I mean... I don't really play mahjong, either, but I did some research to get the general meaning lol. Some of the mahjong rules can be found [here](#) for anybody that cares.***

# Men in the Shower Room

[Posted on WeChat 1-17-2014]

I didn't want to play this basketball game, but after Fatty lost the last game, he invited me in all kinds of ways (read: bullied, yelled at, beat, and lured me with money), so I had no choice but to agree to play.

Our opponents were students from Beijing Sport University (BSU). Fatty probably lost to these kids when he went to exercise on their campus. He felt uncomfortable because of the age difference, and he was unhappy that he was called an old fatty so he wanted to seek justice.

Of course, I advised him to forget about it, "Regardless of age or game, you'll win because you play dirtier than anyone else. But basketball requires long-term training. Plus, you have to find at least five people. The people you seek help from are prestigious, so it'll be embarrassing if we somehow end up losing."

But Fatty still insisted on playing because our opponents weren't from a professional league. He said that these brats had just graduated from university, so they only had a couple of years of training. "We can't just adopt a laissez-faire attitude while those schoolgirls cheer for them. It's not respectful to the elders."

As soon as I heard this, I thought, *ah, so winning the game isn't your priority. You simply want to listen to the girls cheer.*

But I liked it, too.

Pan Zi happened to be in Beijing at this time and Xiao Hua, Little Brother, and I were actually feeling quite depressed. So, I agreed to play the game to divert our attention. We bought the equipment and practiced for a period of time. I found that practicing anything technical had a common limitation: there were limits to what normal people could do with their bodies. But this theory didn't apply to Little Brother because he had monster-like abilities. Xiao Hua, on the other hand, was very good at this kind of game from the very beginning.



As a result, the problem resided with the three remaining people. I knew how to play basketball, of course, but even though I was smart enough, I obviously didn't have enough strength for a full game. Fatty often played basketball, but he was only at an amateur level. Pan Zi also knew how to play, but he mostly played streetball and his opponents often had to be sent to the hospital before halftime.

Anyone who knew basketball knew that such a team would lose unless they encountered an opponent who didn't know how to play. We'd definitely lose if we met an opponent who had good teamwork.

It was a tough game in the end, but we undoubtedly won. The other team had a strong guy guarding against Poker-Face, but Poker-Face could still somehow bypass him and get the shot every time. Nevertheless, the biggest reason for winning this game was because the girls were overwhelmingly on our side. After the game, a lot of people went over to talk to Xiao Hua and ask for his number.

My heart was feeling quite complicated and I was somewhat emotional.

When we were washing up in BSU's public shower room, Fatty was so excited that he couldn't stop bragging and provoking our opponent's team captain. Pan Zi scolded him, but Fatty just said that he couldn't help it because he had a young mindset and there were still a lot of hormones running through his body. If he didn't hang out with young people, he'd soon develop Parkinson's.

It had been a very long time since I had taken a bath in a university's shower room, but the one at BSU was frankly a horrible existence.<sup>114</sup> Little Brother's tattoo had practically appeared all the way down to his belly button, so it seemed that sports like basketball required him to use a lot of physical strength. His tattoo, as well as the scars on Fatty and Pan

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<sup>114</sup> The reason why WX describes the public shower at BSU as a "horrible existence" is vague. The following are some facts, which you can interpret as you see fit:

- North China has no private stalls/compartments in public bathrooms. Wu Xie is a Southerner.
- BSU is famous for offering a variety of sports-related programs, so its bathroom is constantly filled with muscular athletes. In this setting, the five of them were naked in a huge, spatial shower room surrounded by muscular adolescents who were also taking a shower.
- BSU's public shower room is known to be relatively dirtier and more crowded with a higher traffic flow compared to the other universities in Beijing. This is because of their program type and the fact that facilities are open to the general public

Zi's bodies, had scared most people away during the time we were in the shower room. No matter how crowded the place was, none of the students dared to come close to us.

"See, I wish we were as young as them. Check out these brats. Every single one of them shows the vitality of life. What a fucking spectacular scene to watch." Fatty sighed emotionally as he washed away the foam on his body

"You sound like an old gay Beijinger who goes to a bathhouse for a scrub because he doesn't have enough strength to do it properly in bed," Pan Zi responded.

"So vulgar! Absolutely ridiculous! Did you not know that I only hang out with cultured people?" Fatty retorted. "There's a group of schoolgirls huddling in front of the building out there. Let's just pretend we're college students today and re-experience our green years."<sup>115</sup>

"Did you even fucking go to college? Green years, my ass. You should call it the green onion years instead." I laughed, "Pretending to be a college student for you is like a pig pretending to be an elephant by sticking green onions up its nose. Your fucking pubic hair has turned grey already. Go dye it before you make any moves."

Xiao Hua and Pan Zi burst out laughing, and everyone else around us also started laughing after they heard our conversation.

I thought that people should admire us for having such a mentality at this age. As the students around us listened to our unscrupulous banter, they should be able to hear the sorrow behind our cheerful words. When I was young, I also envied the kind of life where you swallowed the pain and endured any suffering. But now, I seemed to have gone back to my college days. After a meaningless basketball game, my mind and all the pores on my body were now extremely relaxed and calm. This was what life was all about.

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<sup>115</sup> Green years = College days/adolescent years

Of course, none of us expected that our brief return to our youth couldn't change the ultimate fate awaiting us.

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***Yvette's note: In the timeline, this takes place in September 2004.***

# NPSS Live Stream Extras

## Mahjong

I found a set of mahjong tiles in the warehouse. It was probably from the 1930s, and the tiles were made from beef bones. The craftsmanship of the box was very elegant. It must have been carved by a famous Cantonese woodworker at that time. In contemporary terms, he would be considered a master of arts and crafts.

The mahjong tiles were also very finely carved, but they weren't as exquisite compared to the box. At first, I thought someone had found the box elsewhere and decided to put these mahjong tiles in it. However, the tiles fit perfectly inside the box, so it seemed like they were a complete set right from the start.

Fatty thought that there was definitely something more to this mahjong set because the tiles were made of two beef bones glued together instead of a whole bone that had been carved. Moreover, the color of the patina from the beef bones was reddish, which matched the color of the box very well. We could take one look and tell that it was intentionally designed this way.

We couldn't reach any conclusions after studying it for a long time. As a result, Fatty proposed that we would certainly learn something after we played a few rounds of mahjong.

We went on and took an old square cedar table from the warehouse. Fatty got the table when he was collecting the old goods. One of the table legs was broken, so Fatty took my rubbings, wanting to put them under the broken table leg.

I told him that he had no respect for our business, to which Fatty replied, "More than a decade has passed, and no one wants to buy these items. Do these items have any respect for themselves?" With that said, he put the rubbings under the table leg and lined up the mahjong tiles.

I wouldn't be surprised if Little Brother knew how to play mahjong. People from the Zhang family needed to disguise themselves after all.

Playing mahjong didn't require complicated techniques, so even a five-year-old could sometimes play well. But Little Brother didn't join us. Fatty and I still needed two players, so we called Uncle Two and his employee to come over and check the items out.

Uncle Two looked at the mahjong box and said, "This thing might be more valuable than your shop."

Since we still owed Uncle Two operating expenses, Fatty was worried that he would directly take the items away to pay off the debt, so he immediately said, "What are you talking about, Uncle Two? Is our shop that cheap? You might as well say that this item is more valuable than our lives."

"Your lives aren't as valuable as the shop anyway," Uncle Two said. He weighed the mahjong tiles in his hand before saying to his employee, "Let's play. There must be something to these tiles because they're hollow inside. Let's play one round and see what happens."

"Maybe people used them to cheat back in the day. There were probably iron beads inside them."

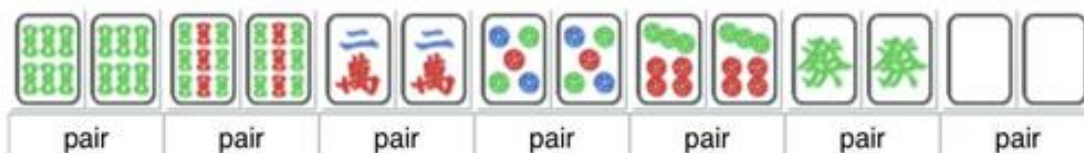
"We'll find out when we play."

So, we started shuffling the tiles.

Once I looked at the tiles I received, it was apparent that I could achieve Seven Pairs if I managed to draw three other correct tiles. When it was my turn to draw a tile, I got one of the three tiles that I wanted, which meant that I would win the game as long as I got to match the other two tiles.<sup>116</sup> I was secretly happy about it, so I asked Uncle Two, "Hey, would you like to bet some money on our game?"

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<sup>116</sup> This is an example of what Seven Pairs would look like. Basically, Wu Xie would need seven kinds of tiles that matched each other to win.



“I’ll be able to tell what tiles you’ve got after we take three turns drawing. With the way you arrange your tiles, you definitely want to do Seven Pairs. Based on the two tiles you just played, it’s very likely that you want to draw dots or bamboo. I suggest you stop whatever you’re about to do.”

I looked at Fatty and thought to myself, *I forgot that this old guy is the god of gamblers. Although he doesn’t like to play mahjong, ever since he was little, he has never lost when it comes to playing chess and board games.*

Fatty gave me a wink, signaling that he would take Uncle Two down. Fatty then played a One Bam Bird tile<sup>117</sup>, but Uncle Two claimed it and declared he got a triplet. After that, Fatty discarded a tile, and Uncle Two claimed it and declared concealed kong.<sup>118</sup> The tiles that Uncle Two now had looked quite good.

I looked at Fatty while thinking to myself, *it’s like you’re working with Uncle Two and giving him tiles as gifts.*

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## Live Stream

Someone bought a unique box made of red sandalwood, which Fatty then bought from a flea market in Xining. We had no idea how it got there, but the item turned out to be genuine.

The only downside was that the materials used in the box were a little too thin. This was a problem because it could actually be regarded as something that would discourage potential buyers. Although its appearance looked really good, it was just difficult to get people to buy it.

Jin Wantang taught me, “You can hold a live stream. People buy things based on the way they look via live stream. Antiques are the kind of things that aren’t refundable once they’re sold. If you hold a live stream, I’ll bring a few customers into your chat room. You, Wu Xie, have quite

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<sup>117</sup> One Bam Bird Tile is basically a tile with a bird on it. Bam=bamboo. There’s a theory/breakdown [here](#).

<sup>118</sup> Kong is a set of four identical tiles. Concealed kong means that the players lay down the four tiles face-down as a set in front of them.

the reputation. After you brag about the item, they'll try to buy it just for the mere possibility of potentially becoming friends with you. Otherwise, you definitely won't be able to sell it."

I thought that he had a good point. I had never tried this kind of high-tech stuff before, so I asked his employee to help me set up the equipment. We started working on it without any hesitation. Wang Meng even bought a new computer because of it. The screen was twice as big as his previous one and was curved. I told him to go away before I started selling the goods live.

Of course, since I was doing it, I definitely wouldn't just sell one item. I told people all of my stories about the past, but none of my goods were sold. A group of passersby came and gave me two cents as gifts.

Just when I was feeling dispirited, I suddenly saw that the Crescent Hotel was also holding a live stream.

I clicked the link to their live stream. Damn. They were having an online auction. I saw that their items were all small; it seemed that the economic slump had also affected them.

I put my real name as my username and immediately called Fatty. He used his phone to get on the live stream and also used his real name.

When the chat room manager saw our names, he began to broadcast, "To the friends who join this room, there are some names we simply don't accept. Please don't joke about it."

Fatty immediately scolded, "Stop talking nonsense. Fat Master is here to give face to you. If you spew out any more nonsense, I'll have Zhang Qiling come in and blow up your live stream."

As a result, both of us were muted.

# Tie Yihan Chapter 1

In late autumn, a group of people trudged along the deep and muddy ancient mountain trail through the freezing cold and snow. A fog-like snow covered the Goryeo border village at the foot of the mountain and stretched on for dozens of li across Changbai Mountain's eastern slope. The distant peaks stood upright under the snow cover and the snow-laden clouds hovered right over the white jade peaks. Sometimes they were torn apart into floating cotton wads; at other times, they would sink like brocade quilts squeezed from the sky. It made people suspect that a heavy snow would start falling from the sky at any moment.

The edge of the ancient trail was lined with old but unknown wild trees whose leaves were like long, narrow daggers. The mountains became cold early on, so they were already withered and yellow. They were covered in broken patches of snow, with only some mottled parts of the trees showing through. Occasionally, some flashes of green evergreen trees would appear in the gaps between the yellow and white, but they also seemed particularly lonely and bleak.

The guards in the team were all wearing the same black chainmail. To make it easier to walk, the leather covers that went over their chainmail had all been discarded. Since there weren't any locks to secure the chainmail as they marched, they all made noises that sounded like the ringing of bells. Through the holes in the chainmail, you could see that this group of people, regardless of their rank, were all wearing brocade silk robes. They definitely weren't ordinary armored guards.

Even though they were walking on such a muddy mountain road, they moved forward steadily and confidently while holding their swords up. They had obviously received strict training.

At the forefront of this procession was Mao Xiang, the commander of the Brocade Uniform Guards.<sup>119</sup> He was a gloomy, middle-aged man with no stubble on his face. This made his resolute face look like it was full of cunning, which didn't seem to fit with his uniform. This third-ranked official now had power in his hands, but he was walking in the mountains

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<sup>119</sup> Brocade Uniform Guard, imperial bodyguard and secret police force of the Ming emperors. Info [here](#).



on the Goryeo border. But he didn't feel slighted or have any complaints in his heart because he knew that this trip to the mountains was far more important to the emperor than any of the shady business that was going on with the court officials.

As Mao Xiang thought back on it now, he was very grateful that he had made such a wise decision at that time. If on that day, he had hesitated for a moment and didn't wait until the emperor rose at night, who would be walking here now? Two months ago at Li Shanchang's residence in Nanjing, the emperor secretly met with someone overnight. If he hadn't personally gone to guard the emperor, he was afraid this job would have fallen into Li Qi's hands.

Of course, this matter wasn't so easy to handle, especially because the only order he received was to "cooperate without asking any additional questions" on the matter. All the way from Nanjing to here, the only thing he learned after listening while they walked and rested was that all of the secrets were in the hands of the white-clothed scholar walking behind the troops.

Thinking about it, Mao Xiang didn't look back, because he knew what he would see when he did. Just like when he first saw him in Nanjing, the white-clothed scholar leisurely walked behind the troops in his white clothes. He looked neither happy nor worried and didn't speak except to ask them to take a break from walking. If it weren't for the tight formation of guards around him, any passers-by would think that this scholar had nothing to do with this group of soldiers.

Mao Xiang was born to one of the Mingghan households.<sup>120</sup> He had walked for thousands of miles and now felt a tiredness in his waist whenever he got up early in the morning. But this white-clothed scholar always looked the same. Not only was he not tired, but he seemed to walk even more easily as they entered the mountains.

"This person is definitely not ordinary." Mao Xiang wasn't the kind of reckless man who would make direct or indirect inquiries. After many years with the Brocade Uniform Guard, he had developed the skills to

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<sup>120</sup> Mingghan was a social-military unit of 1,000 households created by Genghis Khan. A Mongol regiment of 1,000 men could be recruited from this group. Info [here](#).

keep silent and move stealthily. Although he had all kinds of doubts in his heart throughout their journey, he didn't ask any questions. But this route they were taking seemed to give him some food for thought.

Now they had gone deep into the hinterland of the Changbai Mountains. He was afraid it had something to do with the secret letter Beizhen Fusi had sent two months ago, but this secret letter had nothing to do with any of the court officials. Instead, it had something to do with a certain Jurchen border village on Goryeo's border. This secret letter had been sent directly from Li Shanchang to the emperor's own hand, and then a secret meeting was held overnight. Whatever it was, this matter was obviously very important.

Although the Li family was fighting Goryeo at this time, that didn't seem to explain what the emperor was doing. And he didn't bother explaining anything either. Instead, he simply sent them to protect the young white-clothed man on his journey to this mountain. He also repeatedly reminded Mao Xiang that this trip was secret and that they shouldn't alert any party to their movements. Mao Xiang was afraid that this had nothing to do with Jurchen-Goryeo relations, and that it was really related to something in this mountain.

But what was it? Why did the emperor want them to come to this mountain? Mao Xiang looked at the falling snow in the distance and once again asked himself these questions, but he knew that there would be no answer until they reached wherever they were going in the mountain.

While he was thinking, a scout ran out of the forest up ahead. After wading through the fallen leaves and shrubs, he rolled all the way to Mao Xiang's position. This man, Jing Huan, was a trusted junior officer who had followed Mao Xiang ever since he was in the Mingghan. Originally, he had already become a sixth-ranked officer in Nanjing, but because of this errand, Mao Xiang had him transferred back to this division. Jing Huan was also strong and skilled. When he was a child, he used to release the eagles for the Mongols. He was also extremely sensitive in the woods and was adept at using a hook knife. The head of the knife was made in the shape of a hook so that during a fight, you could bypass the opponent's weapon guard and cut their fingers directly. It was a very ruthless tactic, and he was also considered a ruthless character in the division.

## Tie Yihan Chapter 2

Mao Xiang was a little surprised to see Jing Huan appear in such an embarrassing manner. He helped him up and asked, “Why are you panicking? What did you see?”

Jing Huan gripped the handle of his knife, gasping for breath before he finally managed to say, “Just now, I walked around the forest on the west side of the mountain to see if there was a way to avoid climbing the steep slope up ahead. I was surprised to find a border village there, but it’s been destroyed. All the people in it have been burned to death. There are burnt corpses everywhere. It happened some time ago.”

“Border village? What kind of border village is it?” Mao Xiang asked.

The current generation of Jurchen, Hou Liao, Goguryeo, Mongolian, and Han ethnic groups were extremely complicated, and the chaotic people gathered into villages, most of which were divided into ethnic groups.<sup>121</sup> The rare mixed border villages, in which good and bad people mingled together, became black market gathering places for merchants and army deserters. If there was any place that the emperor couldn’t control, it was definitely this kind of place.

“They’ve all been burned beyond recognition. It’s impossible to tell.”

Mao Xiang pulled out a map from the front of his armor. This map had been drawn by Beizhen Fusi three years ago, but the border villages here were like living creatures, with the climate causing the people to move around constantly. The village that Jing Huan claimed to have found wasn’t on the map at all.

“Speaking of burning villages, when we were in Pingwo in Eastern Zhejiang, we did it all the time. Why are you in such a panic now?” Mao Xiang asked him as he put the map away. “You’ve only been a sixth-ranked officer for a few months, yet you’ve already forgotten that you

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<sup>121</sup> [Jurchen](#)= a Tungus ethnic group, predecessor of the Manchu ethnic group who founded the Later Jin Dynasty and Qing Dynasty; Hou Liao=ethnic group that I think branched off from the [Khitan people](#) from the Liao Dynasty; [Goguryeo](#)= Korean ethnic group.

were so ruthless? What, do you think you were born a Hanlin or something?”<sup>122</sup>

“Sir, I wouldn’t dare. It’s just that the circumstances surrounding the burning of this village are really serious. If only a few people had been killed, then this subordinate wouldn’t be so afraid. But this village is really—”

“Speak more clearly. If you dare show fear again, I’ll cut off your tongue,” Mao Xiang said a little angrily. He was extremely annoyed with this kind of situation, because if the scout panicked, then the troops’ morale would become unstable. If they were at war, he would have cut him down on the spot.

Jing Huan’s face was pale, and he was just about to speak, when a voice suddenly came up from behind them, “Officer Jing, please have a word with me.”

Mao Xiang looked back and saw that the white-clothed scholar had already approached them. Ignoring the look on his face, the white-clothed scholar grabbed Jing Huan’s shoulder and pulled him aside.

Mao Xiang wanted to follow them, but the white-clothed scholar immediately turned back and said, “Please stay there. This is no small matter. You should remember His Majesty’s imperial order.”

Mao Xiang had no choice but to stop following them. He saw the white-clothed scholar pull Jing Huan behind a tree and start whispering a few words in his ear. Jing Huan immediately nodded and made some very strange gestures like he was trying to express something. Mao Xiang, who was trying to pick up some of the scattered words carried by the wind, involuntarily leaned closer. Then, he suddenly saw a flash of cold light. The white-clothed scholar had some kind of weapon in his hand which he used to slash Jing Huan’s throat.

Completely caught off guard, the still-talking Jing Huan didn’t even have time to react as his throat was cut open. He covered his neck, turned, and

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<sup>122</sup> Hanlin refers to academics employed as imperial secretaries from the Tang onwards. There was even a [Hanlin Imperial Academy](#).

then fell to the ground with a thud. Mao Xiang was alarmed by this sudden development, but he immediately pressed his hand to his knife and rushed towards them, only to see that the cold light from before was a silver hairpin, which the scholar was shaking out in his hand.

“What are you doing?!” Mao Xiang ran over and took a look, but he knew that it was already too late. Not only was Jing Huan’s throat slit, but the wound was so deep that he had died almost immediately. “If my subordinates do something wrong, I’ll punish them myself, you—!”

The silver hairpin in the white-clothed scholar’s hand was quickly hidden away in his sleeves as he said, “According to the emperor’s orders, anyone who sees that thing will not be allowed to live. Unfortunately, Officer Jing saw that thing, so I had to follow the emperor’s orders.”

“What did he see?”

“If I tell you, then you will lie here as well. You have taken special care of me the whole journey; I don’t want anything unpleasant to happen.” As the white-clothed scholar sighed, Mao Xiang noticed that there weren’t any bloodstains on his body. “But there’s no need for General Mao to grieve. Even if Officer Jing didn’t die by my own hand just now, he didn’t have much time left once he saw that thing.” After that, the white-clothed scholar looked in the direction Jing Huan had come from, “General Mao, please rest here for a while. I’ll be right back. Don’t follow me; otherwise, you never know what misfortune will befall you.” With that said, he leaned forward and then rushed into the forest like a white fox before finally disappearing.

## Tie Yihan Chapter 3

The white-clothed scholar moved very fast and raced into the forest in the blink of an eye.

The woodland was covered in snow and dead leaves that had been falling here for thousands of years, yet the white-clothed scholar traveled without any hindrance. It was like running on a flat road—no, no one could run as fast as him even if they were running on a flat road. All you could see was a white shadow flitting through the trees and bushes, changing direction rapidly between tree trunks as it ran for several miles without slowing down at all.

It was absolutely impossible for Mao Xing to catch up when he rushed into the depths of the forest. The white-clothed scholar slowed down, took a few quick steps, found two big trees that were close to each other, and then kicked off of one to jump onto the branch of the other. Once he regained his balance, part of his white garment almost got hung on the branch. He pulled it back with his hand until it hung quietly under his leg.

This outfit's design really wasn't suitable for entering the mountains; he didn't know why that girl insisted that he wear these clothes. The white-clothed scholar told himself that he had to be extra careful when making his way since this made his stride seem erratic. If he hadn't been carefully controlling the way he walked before, Mao Xiang and the others might have thought that he had taken some kind of drug he shouldn't have.

But it didn't matter now. Ever since hearing the news that Jing Huan had brought, he knew that the day when he would break away from Mao Xiang and the others wasn't far away. Although these Brocade Uniform Guards were well trained, the situation in this mountain was too complicated to rely on them.

He looked through the dead tree branches and saw the burned border village that Jing Huan had mentioned before. Sure enough, it wasn't far away.

"Such an unfortunate soul. The woods here are dense. If he hadn't been eager to find a shortcut for us, he would have never found the village

here and might have lived a little longer.” The white-clothed scholar shook his hand so that the silver hairpin in his sleeve fell into his palm. He then clenched his hand into a fist and stabbed the silver hairpin into the tree branch until only the phoenix figurehead on top was sticking out.

The scholar then hooked his finger into the phoenix’s mouth and pulled, causing the phoenix head to fall off. He then jumped off the branch, and a tiny silk thread stretched out from the hairpin. As the scholar continued to pull the thread, it seemed endless.

Dragging this silk thread, the scholar rushed all the way and soon came to the outer edge of the burned border village. After a pause to gather his thoughts, the scholar told himself that the hardest time had come. He closed his eyes and then cautiously walked into the border village.

As soon as he entered, he smelled a strange and familiar scent.

It was the smell of rot and burned things. Just like ten years ago.

The place where this thing was should be the place with the strongest burnt smell and the largest number of dead bodies.

He pressed his hand to his nose while clinging to the phoenix head thread—it was his only hope of going back—and walked in the direction of the strongest smell.

The ground was covered in potholes and there were burnt corpses lying here and there, but this was a border village, so the ground had been repaired when it was built. His own senses were also very keen. Although his eyes were closed, he could basically feel the surrounding situation clearly. Slowly, he bypassed several obstacles. Of course, he didn’t know what they were, but at this time, he realized that he was very close.

He even heard the buzzing of swarming flies. There must be piles of corpses in front of him.

The village definitely wasn’t big, so Jing Huan should have seen this thing immediately after he came in. That was why nothing seemed unusual when he ran back to Mao Xiang. If he had been any closer, he probably would’ve died before he ran out of the border village.

The white-clothed scholar didn't know how many corpses were in front of him, but he knew that these bodies were already decomposed, and what he was looking for must be at the bottom of this group of bodies.

He thought that what happened ten years ago would be the last time he experienced this in his life, but who would have thought it would happen again?



## **Miscellaneous Extras (read after “Tibetan Sea Flower”)**

## Tibetan Sea Flower 2 Trial Reading

When Dr. Suyu was in Nagqu, he saw Zhang Qiling standing next to Lake Tangra Yumco, which was glistening in the sunlight. Dr. Suyu had noticed him because the other man's robe was bulging and something seemed to be moving inside of it.

After a while, a rabbit poked its head out from Zhang Qiling's neckline and looked at his chin curiously.

"Your pet?" Dr. Suyu asked in perfect Tibetan as he walked over and handed Zhang Qiling some butter tea.

"Food," Zhang Qiling said as he glanced at the doctor.

*Oh.* Dr. Suyu opened his eyes wide—he hadn't been expecting a response like that—and then thought for a while before saying, "Highland rabbits sometimes carry the plague virus."

Zhang Qiling took out a piece of dried fruit from his pocket that the little girl in the pile of corpses had given him just now and fed the rabbit a few bites of it. "Are you planning to cross the mountains?" Dr. Suyu asked. "Do you often take this route?"

Zhang Qiling looked back at the snow-capped mountains on the other side of the lake. He didn't know why he had come here, but these snowy mountains looked very familiar.

"We need a guide," Dr. Suyu continued.

Zhang Qiling glanced at the sky and saw that it was going to get dark soon. He pointed to a group of horses in Dr. Suyu's caravan.

"Deal."

Dr. Suyu was very happy that he had found a guide and immediately began communicating with his colleagues in German. At this time, Zhang Qiling was suddenly attracted by a sound and turned his head to listen.

It was the sound of deer weeping in the wind. He stood up and walked over to the horses.

“It’s Deer Crying Day,”<sup>123</sup> a young Tibetan said to him with a smile. “Do you have something urgent to do?”

Zhang Qiling mounted his horse and glanced at Dr. Suya, who was a little surprised because he hadn’t finished informing his team of the plan, “Are we leaving now?”

Zhang Qiling looked at the clouds on the horizon, “It’s getting dark.” He then turned and glanced at the Tibetan youth. The young man was from another team and was supposed to be heading in the opposite direction. He had a gun slung over his shoulder and seemed to be a hunter here.

“What village are you from?” Zhang Qiling asked him.

When the young man pointed in a certain direction, Zhang Qiling turned to look. He had just passed by that place, so he knew that it was full of dead bodies.

The young man was completely unaware of this and seemed to be very happy. It was the joy of heading home. He said goodbye to Zhang Qiling and then left briskly.

The wind blew again, and the cry of deer came closer. As if from some ancient memory, the horse seemed to recognize the true source of the sound and started to become agitated with fear.

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<sup>123</sup> A period of days in the [Tibetan calendar](#). Should be around spring.

# Tibetan Sea Flower: Three Days Of Silence

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The house was very warm, and people could wake up calmly here even in such severe cold weather. There was no exhaustion to be found after a cold, dark night.

The little lama knew that Zhang Qiling hadn't finished his homework yet. Like usual, he saw him get up early in the morning and go to stand in front of the stone that was in the yard, working on it aimlessly.

Teacher said that the final shape of this stone would be what Zhang Qiling wanted. Zhang Qiling needed to know who he was, and he also needed to understand the concept of "wanting".

The little lama found it very strange that Zhang Qiling was different from others. Other people were born with desires and motivations about what they needed and wanted to do, but this person named Zhang Qiling seemed to be innately unable to understand these two things. If you didn't take the initiative to talk to him, he could stare into space for a whole day.

His senior brothers all said that Zhang Qiling was like a postman who didn't know his destination because someone had forgotten to tell him. But the little lama didn't think so.

The little lama thought that if the postman didn't know his destination, he would be anxious like an ant on a hot pot because he had the desire to deliver things successfully.

Zhang Qiling was just like a Buddha. If he wasn't needed by heaven or earth, he would just be there, not even having the desire to think.

But Teacher said that Zhang Qiling wasn't Buddha.

If you were born with desires and got rid of them, then you were Buddha. If you were born with no desires, then you were a stone.

Zhang Qiling needed to find his “desires”, so Teacher had him work on the stone in the yard. If he had any “desires”, the stone would have a meaningful shape.

It had been over a year, and the stone was getting smaller and smaller, but it didn't have any particular shape.

As a result, Zhang Qiling still couldn't go and see that woman.

2

That woman had spent a much longer time in the temple than Zhang Qiling. It was said that she had been excavated from under the icy layer of Tibetan flowers. The woman hadn't fallen there or been trapped to death but was buried in that frozen tomb.

You could only find a field of Tibetan flowers in Namcha Barwa because it was the only shady mountain pit. There were many dark shadows in the ice layer. It was said to be a tomb of some tribe, but only the lamas from this temple knew of its existence.

He was sixteen years old this year and had been told the secret on his birthday, but he never went to see it.

You could only reach that place every year by going to the mountain in July and trekking for a month. Those dark shadows were deeply buried in the ice, and the Teachers only went in once every ten years. He didn't know what they were doing, but only the wisest Teacher was qualified to know the route to that place.

Ten years ago, the Teacher who went in brought back a frozen body. The little lama had only been six years old at that time, but he clearly remembered what the woman looked like. He heard the Teachers discussing amongst themselves how the woman wasn't dead, but she also wasn't alive either.

She had been placed in a room. All the little lama knew was that she was beautiful, with very white skin that was so unlike Tibetan people's skin.

She had been respectfully carried into the room on felt. She had remained motionless during the whole process and almost appeared to be sleeping.

No one had been to that room ever since.

It wasn't until nine years later that Zhang Qiling came to this temple, and described the woman's appearance.

But the Teachers wouldn't let him see that woman.

One of the Teachers said something that made Zhang Qiling stay here for a year, "You are like a stone. It makes no difference whether you see her or not."

3

"Since you're here looking for this woman called Baima, then you should have some desires. Why haven't you carved anything up to now?" The little lama asked Zhang Qiling who was taking a lunch break after morning class.

In the courtyard, Zhang Qiling sat on a relatively large stone among the shavings he had cut, not answering the little lama.

The little lama was already used to this kind of reaction and continued, "When you initially had the idea to come here, that was when you started having desires. How can Teacher say you're a stone? I really don't understand him."

Zhang Qiling looked at him, still noncommittal. He took a bite of the tsampa<sup>124</sup>, put the things aside, and wrapped them carefully before continuing to work on the stone.

As the little lama kept watching him, a Tibetan in a blue robe came and stood behind him. This person was a craftsman hired by the temple, and the blue robe craftsmen were considered the best.

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<sup>124</sup> A Tibetan and Himalayan staple foodstuff, particularly prominent in the central part of the region. [Wiki link](#)

Their family had passed their skills down to the ninth generation, and the craftsmanship was as good as ever. The craftsman patted the little lama on the shoulder and told him not to disturb Zhang Qiling.

“He walked here aimlessly and then suddenly said the name.” The craftsman told the little lama. “He didn’t even know that it was a name.”

“Why are you here at the temple again? Is there something broken here? Or did another stone fall from the mountain?”

The craftsman said softly, “Teacher asked me to come and restore the beams and stove behind the house.”

“Which house?”

The craftsman looked at Zhang Qiling. The little lama understood, but was still a little puzzled, “Did Teacher finally admit that he does have desires?”

He looked at the strange and irregular shape Zhang Qiling had carved. This shape seemed to be indistinguishable from how it was when he had first started a year ago.

The craftsman pointed to the ground. Under the noon sun, the little lama saw the strange stone’s shadow, which turned out to be in the shape of a person, just like how Zhang Qiling had been sitting on the stone before.

He must have been looking at his shadow every day during his lunch break, and then began working on the stone according to his shadow.

The little lama smiled, genuinely happy for Zhang Qiling.

“How are you doing with your cultivation of Buddhism?” The craftsman seemed to be a little emotional as he asked the little lama.

The little lama chuckled and didn’t respond. The craftsman continued, “Many people say that girls are heartless at first, so no one can hurt them. As a result, the devil sent boys out. When the handsome boys chased after the girls, the girls started to have hearts, and that was when everything in the world could hurt them. So, if we give a person a heart, maybe we make it easier to hurt them.”

That night, Zhang Qiling was taken into the room that had been closed for ten years and saw his mother.

For him, everything at that time seemed to happen so quickly that he was unable to comprehend what was going on.

Baima didn't fully wake up. When the effect of the Tibetan Sea Flowers wore off, she had only three days to live. But she had waited too long for those three days.

Zhang Qiling didn't get any information from her.

He didn't even get to hear his own mother calling for him, not even for a moment.

He also didn't feel the connection to the world that other people said mothers would bring to their children.

The only thing he could feel was that his mother slowly began to breathe. Her pale face only recovered a slight red color, and then turned to nothing in an instant.

Everything happened all too quickly.

Did Baima know this would happen?

As promised, she woke up from a long sleep. She had lost any opportunity to open her eyes, but she knew that when the lamas decided to wake her up, her son would be by her side.

It must have been a flesh and blood child who knew the joys, anger, and sorrows of the world. She could feel her son's warmth, his breath, and his heartbeat. He had really come.

She had exhausted all measures and only won these three days for herself. Although it wasn't enough—it would never be enough—she wanted to see all the fragments and moments of her child's growth.



But three days— three silent days— with only the sound of their heartbeats and breathing were all she had.

Zhang Qiling took hold of his mother's hand. He didn't know why he did it, but he felt like everything was happening too fast, and he was holding on to the last trace of himself in the world. The last thing that he was willing to think about.

No one else entered the room, and not a sound could be heard.

Three days of silence.

“You can't be a stone; otherwise, your mother can't feel your presence.” Teacher said this to him a year ago. “You have to learn to think and miss. The first and last thing your mother will give you will be your heart, which those people have hidden.”

5

Three days later, Zhang Qiling was in front of the stone. He habitually picked up the chisel and began to carve the stone.

Before, he didn't know why he had been carving this stone.

After a few tries, he looked at the chisel in his hand, and suddenly realized what he was doing. Almost at the same time, an unstoppable pain surged up in his heart.

In the heavy snow, he sat down and curled up into a ball.

## Remembrance—Zhang Qiling

A certain year and month.

Zhang Qiling sat in the snow, the old radio beside him working hard in the freezing cold. It was making crackling noises, and he could hear a noisy dialogue coming from its speakers that seemed to be in the Kangba Gelu dialect.<sup>125</sup>

This radio belonged to a man who had been searching for him. Everyone was deep in the boundless snow-capped mountains all around, hoping to find traces of him.

The blue Tibetan robe made him feel comfortable even in the freezing cold. He could see the temple's faint light in the far, far distance.

The snow was getting heavier and heavier, and dusk was coming to an end. The weak light in the distance was still reflected by the white snow, forming a dark blue halo between the snow-capped mountains.

He turned the radio dial and the noisy dialogue disappeared, replaced by a somewhat ethereal piece of music. It was probably some movie's original soundtrack. He listened and patted his backpack. This was another person's favorite piece of music.

He stuffed the radio into the side of his backpack, tightened the Tibetan wooden urn on his back, and walked into the depths of the snow-capped mountains.

A falcon flew by, surprised to see a person walking on the ridge of a snowy peak. Thousands of miles of snow-capped mountains spread out at this person's feet like a python. As the falcon lifted its body into the sky, it showed a shocking desolation.

---

<sup>125</sup> Kangba, or Khampa, is the subdivision of a Tibetan ethnic group. It's also the former Tibetan province of Kham, now split between Tibet and Sichuan

The sound of the radio became quieter and quieter as it got further away, seeming to be more and more ethereal in this desolate space. It was a piece of music called “Sincere Love”.

Returning to the darkness together, accompanied only by the sounds of “Sincere Love” and the fragrance of Tibetan sea flowers scattered in the snow. It was quiet, peaceful, and serene.

\*\*\*

Author’s Note: This is a deleted scene from “Tibetan Sea Flower” and was also originally used as the demo clip of the “Tibetan Sea Flower” donghua.<sup>126</sup> “Sincere Love” is part of the original soundtrack of the movie “Ashes of Time”.<sup>127</sup> I wrote this scene while listening to this music. This scene happened before Zhang Qiling ever met Wu Xie. The person in the urn was a partner of his who died many years ago. That’s right. He had no friends, only partners. It was just companionship; someone he couldn’t share any happiness or pain with.

Even so, he took this person’s ashes out of Changbai Mountain and brought them to his own holy place. It was a place he had once promised to go to together.

He was all alone, no longer daring to even ask for companionship.

This was my first impression of Zhang Qiling. In the heavy snow, he was like a lonely god or beast.

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<sup>126</sup> Animated film. Another term you might be familiar with is “anime”

<sup>127</sup> “Ashes of Time” is a 1994 Hong Kong film that was inspired by characters from [Jin Yong’s](#) novel “[The Legend of the Condor Heroes](#)”. Info on the plot [here](#). The song “Sincere Love” is [here](#).

## The Other Shore<sup>128</sup>

I often had two strange dreams: one was about Fatty and the other was about Poker-Face.

The dream about Poker-Face took place on a snowy mountain where he and I were climbing up in single file. He could always find a more stable route, so I was stepping on his footprints and steadily moving upwards.

The wind was blowing in my face, and when I looked up at the top of the mountain, I could see the snow sloping downward.

I knew that we were in an extremely high place because the air was very thin, but this wasn't very noticeable in a dream. Even the cold wasn't all that noticeable.

I didn't know which part of my memory this dream reflected. Maybe it was the illusion I had created when I was meditating alone in Tibet. Or maybe it was that silent journey we took when I was sending him off at Changbai Mountain.

As I continued climbing, I became older and older and gradually slowed down. He, on the other hand, became increasingly light and active. By the time he started supporting me, we had finally made our way to the top of the mountain.

Then, my perspective changed and I felt as if I had left my body and was flying in the clouds. I saw the two of us standing side by side on the ridge of that snowy mountain. I didn't know whether the sun was setting or rising, but the golden light was spreading all around us. A snowstorm seemed to be going on right under our feet, and even the wind seemed to be coated in a layer of gold as our shadows became elongated.

I could see that I was already an old man with grey hair. My face still appeared as young as I was before, but my hair was all grey. I could hardly stand on my own, so I needed his support to stay upright.

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<sup>128</sup> "The Other Shore" (彼岸) is a concept of nirvana in Buddhism. It's also an acronym for red spider lily. The red spider lily is a native flower in Asia used widely in tragedies/literature to symbolize death.

That old version of me lit a cigarette for himself. In the dream, I knew that this was a journey of no return and that I had already reached my destination. It was no longer possible for me to climb down the mountain now. This was a journey from birth to death, just like how life was.

The whole dream was filled with the sound of an unknown song.<sup>129</sup>

It was too cold here for my body to decay after I died, so I would be preserved for thousands and millions of years. I could sit here and let the snow and wind freeze me solid. Based on my previous experience, after hundreds of years, Poker-Face would see the exact same scene that I was witnessing at this moment.

It seemed that I was seriously ill and that I had chosen this ending for myself. I was surprisingly calm and didn't have any regrets. Although I wasn't able to live eternally like him, I found a way to coexist at the same time and in the same space as him.

Many years ago, I learned that in ancient times, many old people didn't really die before their sky burial.<sup>130</sup> Their sons and daughters would voluntarily break their parents' spines, wrap them in a tiny red curtain, and pile Mani stones around them.<sup>131</sup> They would then walk around the Mani pile, spinning their prayer wheels and waiting for their parents to die. People could drop by the sky burial platform at any time, and the ceremony would proceed whenever the elder died.

Some elders would take three days to die, which often had me wondering what they were thinking during those three days when there was no way back and no chance to regret it. Did they feel sad or scared?

Would I die this way or would there be a better way for me to die? Poker-Face knew so much about death, so in his world, how would he help his old friend face death with dignity?

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<sup>129</sup> You can listen to this song [here](#).

<sup>130</sup> A sky burial is a Tibetan funeral practice in which a human corpse is placed on a mountaintop to decompose while exposed to the elements or to be eaten by scavenging animals. Info [here](#).

<sup>131</sup> Mani stones are stone plates, rocks, and/or pebbles that are carved or inscribed with a mantra or devotional design. They're used as a form of prayer in Tibetan Buddhism. Info [here](#).

I didn't expect it to be this romantic. In this world, there was no other person who would use death as a romantic spice in such a natural way.

If that day actually comes, I hope that my dream will come true. But whenever I woke up, the Asiatic apples still bloomed like they did yesterday and the world remained ice cold. Only the song from the dream still lingered in my ears.

## **Miscellaneous Extras (Read after “Sand Sea”)**

## After Sand Sea

Compared to the past few years, this might be my last chance to write a story in such a casual manner. It's because Guan Gen's story can hardly be polished and described in the first person.

Before I met Guan Gen, I wrote articles for a travel magazine.<sup>132</sup> The magazine was mainly given away at airport convenience stores, so my royalties weren't that great. I still believed that I should write a novel, but there wasn't anything good to start with. Moreover, the contract with the magazine stated that I had to write about thirty articles. My last article was on Kathmandu, so after finishing it off, I left the publisher. I was full of frustration and had nothing to lose, so I decided to head to Namche Bazaar. While there, I attended a seven-year-old girl's wedding. The local girls there get married twice in their lifetime. The groom for the first marriage isn't human, but a carefully chosen fruit called the bael fruit.

It's said that bael fruits are very tough and can be preserved for a very long time. As a result, the first marriage is eternal and the groom is considered the "real eternal husband". The marriage with a real man, however, is full of variables and uncertainty, so it's considered "hypocritical and short". I think it's essentially saying that women in the Newari community think a tree is more reliable than a man<sup>133</sup>—my original words sounded even harsher, but I still wanted to save some face when I met my boss.

I first heard the name Wu Xie in the mouth of this seven-year-old girl. I traced his footsteps from the post office in Nepal to Motuo. All the things I heard along the way made me curious about everything behind this man. He seemed to be looking for something in the Nepali and Himalayan regions. His questions to the locals were very strange, and I was almost certain that the thing he was looking for was in the Himalayas.

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<sup>132</sup> "I" = Lan Ting

<sup>133</sup> More info [here](#).



Although the story I heard along the way was enough to make a good start, I didn't want to steal his story. In the end, I was more interested in what he had experienced than writing a novel about it.

# What Are They Doing? Chapter 1.1 Black Glasses and Wang Meng

[This takes place during Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 8]

After mopping the floor, Wang Meng lifted the bucket full of dirty water and dumped it outside of the shop.

It had been raining for a month, and the West Lake outside seemed like it would overflow soon. He sighed, turned around, and brought the bucket back inside the shop.

Just as he was about to lock the door, however, someone tapped him on the back. He looked behind him and saw a man with sunglasses pointing at the shop's number plate. "Is this Wu Xie's shop?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Outside the building, Wang Meng pushed aside the bottle that Black Glasses had given him and shook his head desperately. "I can't do it anymore. Even if I drink myself to death, I still don't know where they are."

Black Glasses filled Wang Meng's glass with a smile. "Take your time. Think again."

Wang Meng looked at the wine glass and wanted to cry. "Sir, I beg you. I'll check my boss's credit card transaction history for you, and maybe we'll find something. How about that?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Wang Meng put a hand on the willow tree and vomited for a while before his eyes became clearer. When he looked back, he saw Black Glasses scoop up some water from the West Lake. The water level had already reached the shore.

Black Glasses poured the water into a bamboo tube that he carried with him. There seemed to be a living creature inside since something jumped when the water hit it. "What's inside that tube?" Wang Meng asked.

Black Glasses looked at the bamboo tube and smiled. "It's a message someone wants to give Wu Xie. This person had a lot of things to say, but he was running out of time. He entrusted me to bring these words to your boss." Black Glasses lit a cigarette.

"There's a message in the bamboo tube?" Wang Meng found it a little odd, but Black Glasses stopped answering, and suddenly pointed to the Jinbei car parked on the side of the road, "Is this your boss' car?"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Why didn't you take a plane to Guangxi?" Wang Meng asked.

"I don't have an ID card." Black Glasses was reclining in the back seat and flipping through "Guangxi Atlas".

"Can't you go and get one? Who knows how long it will take to get there by car?" Wang Meng complained.

Black Glasses laughed. "Do you think it's possible for a wanted criminal to get an ID card?"

The Jinbei sped along the highway.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Where are we?" Wang Meng parked the car on the side of the road and looked around. It was dark out, and all he could see was farmland. After looking for a long time, he finally said, "Maybe we should've gotten off the highway at that last intersection. What should we do?"

Black Glasses rolled over, ignored Wang Meng, and continued sleeping.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Sir, how can we get to Nanning?” Wang Meng poked his head out of the car window and asked the old man selling watermelons. The old man offered him a watermelon.

“I don’t want any watermelons. How can we get to Nanning?” Wang Meng asked again. The old man handed him the watermelon again, but Wang Meng blocked it with his hand. “I don’t want a watermelon.” It fell to the ground and shattered.

The old man and Wang Meng looked at each other, and all the watermelon sellers on the roadside stood up.

\*\*\*\*\*

A Jinbei drove by slowly, loaded down with watermelons.

Wang Meng was upset, and the bruises on his forehead made him feel like life was so unfair. “Aren’t you a wanted criminal?” Wang Meng asked. “Aren’t wanted criminals supposed to be good at fighting? Why did you just sit back and watch me get beaten? All my money has turned into watermelons.”

Black Glasses smiled and put his arm around his shoulders, giving him a comforting shake.

*Crazy. All of Boss’s new friends are crazy.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The national highway’s toll booth was just up ahead. “I have no money.” Wang Meng looked at Black Glasses, who faintly turned his head to the side and ignored him. Wang Meng cursed, stepped on the accelerator, and stopped next to the toll booth.

He turned around and took out a watermelon from the back seat and handed it over. “Sister, I really don’t have any money. Can you take ten watermelons and let us through? They’re red and sugary.”

\*\*\*\*\*

High-Speed Traffic Police Headquarters.

Wang Meng squatted in the corner. A beautiful female traffic cop walked in, poured him a cup of tea, and placed it on the nearby coffee table. "Sit on the sofa. It's not like you were looking for prostitutes. You just passed the toll booth without paying."

Wang Meng saw two slender beautiful legs moving in front of him. When he stood up and kept his head lowered, the beauty thought he looked funny, and asked, "What's the matter with your friend? Why did he run away?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Black Glasses was carrying a watermelon as he walked alongside the national road. Every time a car drove past, he would stretch his hand out in hopes that they would stop, but no one paid him any attention.

He whistled as he leisurely walked along, suddenly feeling that he was back on the road in Qaidam. At that time, he only had a canteen of water, but now he had a watermelon. Life always seemed to repeat itself.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Sir, take me to Nanning." Black Glasses said to the driver who had parked his black car in front of a roadside restaurant.

The driver looked at him and said, "Forty yuan."

Black Glasses patted the watermelon. "Take this watermelon as insurance, and I'll give you the money when I get to the city."

The driver spat. "Watermelon? Are you insane?"

"This is a good watermelon." Black Glasses said.

"Go away." The driver slapped the watermelon to the ground.

\*\*\*\*\*

Black Glasses hummed as he casually drove the black car away. Five kilometers behind him, a man with a swollen nose squatted silently on the side of the road, holding the broken pieces of a watermelon. Black Glasses had a cell phone in his hand, which was an unexpected gain. He recalled a number and tried to dial it, but all he heard was a robotic voice saying that the person on the other end had turned their phone off.

## What Are They Doing? Chapter 1.2

(1)

“What’s your name?”

“They call me Pan Zi, Master Three. P-A-N, Pan.”

“Oh, that’s an ancient surname. It’s great. Where are you from?”

“I was a soldier. I’m home now, but the farmland back in my hometown is gone. I don’t know what else to do, so I thought I could learn something from Master Three.”

“Have you killed people before?”

“I fought in the Vietnam War, so it was kind of hard not to.”

“Well, stay with me in the future. You don’t need to kill people. You just need to scare them.”

(2)

“Are we going to get caught?” Lao Yang asked beside a wall.

“Isn’t it a bit too late to ask this sort of question? It’s not easy for me to sneak out.”

“Alright,” Lao Yang said. “I’ll let you step on my shoulders. Be smart.” Wu Xie stepped on his shoulders and took a peek. Lao Yang asked, “Well?”

Wu Xie lowered his head, “We made a mistake! It’s a men’s toilet!”

——Childhood Memories

(3)

“Brother Wu Xie, what do you think of this flower?”

“Where did you get it? Your mom asked me to babysit you. You’re going to get me in trouble.”

“The elder sister over there gave it to me.”

— Childhood Memories: Wu Xie and Xiuxiu

(4)

A foreigner drank too much, patted his wallet, and kept shouting at the bartender who was an Irish girl. Lao Yang had been silently enduring it until he found that he had run out of drinks. He tried to tell the man to calm down.

“Go away, you poor Korean man.” The foreigner slapped Lao Yang’s face with his wallet, and the cash inside flew all over the floor. “Do you know how much money I have? You poor wretch, go back to Vietnam.”

“Well,” Lao Yang took out the bank card from his wallet. “I don’t want to resort to violence. Let’s make a bet. If the money in my card is more than the money in all of your cards combined—” Lao Yang looked around and grabbed the Irish girl’s iPad off the counter. “You’ll have to eat this thing. Same goes for me if I lose. How about it?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Lao Yang looked at the ground that was getting further and further away and sleepily listened to the aircraft engine’s roar. That huge scam in the early years also made him feel guilty.

Now, it was just a memory on a piece of paper. He remembered what the paper looked like, but he couldn’t remember what words had been written on it.

He had long realized the beauty of forgetting things.

\*\*\*\*\*

At Hangzhou Xiaoshan Airport, Lao Yang lit a cigarette as he walked out of the taxi waiting area, carrying a backpack over one shoulder.

There were many fans who came to the airport to see their idol, shouting the name of someone who hadn’t been famous when he left China.



He touched the glasses on his nose, looked at the familiar blue sky that somehow felt unfamiliar to him, and bowed his head before walking into the crowd.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lao Yang was in the cemetery, holding a note that had become yellow with age. It took a long time for him to find the tombstone, and when he did, he stood there silently in the cold wind. After some time had passed, he put flowers in front of the tombstone and turned away.

His phone rang, and he picked it up, listening to a woman talking on the other end. "I, I, I know, Mom. I'll be back after a while," he said as he walked away.

(5)

Father's Day.

Wu Yiqiong placed the fried river shrimp on a plate, untied his apron, and then took the dish out. He shouted to the other room, "Old lady, time for dinner."

"Okay, this episode will be over soon." A woman's voice came from the back room.

He shook his head, opened a bottle of beer for himself, sat down, and then glanced at his phone on the sofa.

He cursed silently. *I don't know where this kid has been recently. It's fine if he doesn't want to come home, but he didn't even think to give me a call.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Wu Yiqiong looked at the note written outside the shop.

'The owner is unavailable. The shop is temporarily closed for business.'

There were several reminders next to the note, telling the owner to pay the utility bills. He sighed heavily.

“Old Wu, did you come to see your son? He hasn’t shown up for a long time,” The owner of the neighboring shop said. Wu Yiqiong smiled, shook his head, and tore off the utility reminders. He was in the middle of trying to take the shop key out of his pocket when he found that the lock had been tampered with.

(6)

Wu Erbai put a stick of incense in front of his father’s memorial tablet and fell into deep thought as he stood in front of it.

A seven-year-old German Shepherd was lying at his feet. It was the last dog Old Dog Wu had trained.

Wu Erbai had been raising this dog with the utmost care because he knew that it was the last trump card his father had left them.

\*\*\*\*\*

The German Shepherd unenthusiastically ate the meat in the dog bowl. The weather was too hot, so its appetite had waned.

“You really treasure this dog. What kind of meat do you give him exactly? It didn’t even bother looking at the veal I brought it the last time I was here. If the dog ever gets lost, it will starve to death if someone tries to feed it.” An old man said to Wu Erbai.

Wu Erbai smiled. “I can’t tell you. It’s complicated. It’s not expensive anyways, just hard to come by.”

(7)

“Aren’t you in pain?” The doctor asked.

“I can’t see what you can see, but I can see what you can’t.” The man said with his eyes closed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to have surgery? There’s a thirty percent success rate. It’s a pity not to try. You might really go blind in a few years’ time.”

The man shook his head, put on his sunglasses, and walked toward the door, “I won’t be alive by then.”

(8)

“You’re a Huaguxi<sup>134</sup> opera singer, so why do you also know how to sing Peking Opera?” I asked. “Aren’t you afraid Er Ye will crawl out of his grave and spank you?”<sup>135</sup>

“I didn’t learn opera so that I could perform.”

Xiao Hua checked the carabiners one by one. “Er Ye also taught me how to sing Peking Opera. Huaguxi Opera was originally a cover. If everyone’s an excellent opera singer, then what’s the point of being a grave robber? Er Ye was talented. The gods gave him a beautiful singing voice. He said that it’s difficult to learn other forms of opera once you’ve learned one, but if you sing extremely well, then all kinds of opera the world over are the same.”

“What does that mean?” Fatty asked. “Why does it sound like some sort of martial art secret?”

“What Er Ye meant was that deep down, all operas are the same despite how they appear on the surface.” Xiao Hua pointed at the Yangshi Lei drawing and said to me, “This also applies to ancient tombs.”

(9)

“Why are you so good at singing everything?” Yun Cai filled a glass with homemade bitter wine for Xiao Hua. “Can you teach me?”

“What do you want to learn? Huaguxi, Huadeng<sup>136</sup>, or Changsha Opera?” Xiao Hua asked her with a smile.

---

<sup>134</sup> Flower Drum Opera

<sup>135</sup> Er Ye was famous for singing Huaguxi operas only.

<sup>136</sup> Lantern Opera

Yun Cai said, "I want to learn 'The Hegemon-King Bids His Lady Farewell'<sup>137</sup>." Xiao Hua smiled upon hearing her words.

Pan Zi said, "No. Don't learn that. It's unlucky."

(10)

Yun Cai took off her underwear, made sure no one was around, and then walked into the lake. The bosses should all be having a meeting, so she thought she could secretly take a bath. The cold lake water made her feel calm, and just when she was about to swim deeper into the lake, a woman's voice stopped her. "It's not right to enjoy this all by yourself."

\*\*\*\*\*

Yun Cai helped Xiuxiu untie the two buns in her hair and watched as it flowed down her back like a waterfall, "Your skin is so white, little boss lady." Yun Cai said with envy.

Xiuxiu blushed and looked at her reflection on the lake's surface under the moonlight. Her slim body was like white jade, "What's so good about having white skin. I wish my boobs were bigger."

"Bigger?"

"Yes, otherwise he'll always think I'm a child."

\*\*\*\*\*

"What are the bosses talking about?" Yun Cai was lying on a rock and could hear Xiao Hua's voice in the distance. From the lake, the lights on shore looked very small and illusory.

"Fate, I suppose. Men always want to change their fate, but what they don't know is that they are the ones chasing it," Xiuxiu said as she washed Yun Cai's hair.

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<sup>137</sup> The opera tells the story of Xiang Yu, who was a prominent warlord. On the verge of total defeat, he decided to say goodbye to his wife. She couldn't bear to part with him, so she committed suicide. Xiang Yu was saddened and killed himself as well.

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“Commander Wang, I’ve determined that the movement in the lake is really Miss Yun Cai and Miss Xiuxiu bathing.” Leather Bag secretly said to Fatty.

Fatty pondered for a moment before saying, “This lake is really strange. I can’t believe they’d do something reckless like this. They shouldn’t do that. As their elder, I have to ensure their safety. Go and get the binoculars. I’ll scold them properly.”

(11)

Xie Yuhua woke up from a nightmare and saw the bright sunshine and greenery outside the ward. The most vibrant season in Beijing almost seemed like an illusion. It made people feel that they could get drunk under the beautiful scenery and forget the things they had to deal with in life.

Xiuxiu was by his bedside, peeling an apple with a knife and eating pieces of it. Noticing that he was awake, she cut a small piece off and held it up to his mouth.

——Took place right after Vol 8

## What Are They Doing? Chapter 2

### (1) Black Glasses

Under the scorching sun, a man sat on a rock in the depths of the boundless desert in Qaidam and looked into the distance with a smile on his face.

There was nothing but yellow sand and rocks for hundreds of miles all around him, but he didn't seem to care at all. It was as if this world had nothing to do with him.

Later, he brushed the dust off his clothes, shook the bottom of the canteen, put on his sunglasses, and walked east.

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### (2) Wang Meng

The weather in Hangzhou was hot and humid after the beginning of autumn.

In a small antique shop near West Lake, a man was extremely bored. The owner of the shop had disappeared for a long time.

The turnover these past two months was six hundred yuan, so he took the initiative to give himself all the money for his salary. He was a little worried and anxious about his behavior, but when he thought about it, he felt that it wasn't a big deal if he got fired from this kind of job.

Feeling at ease now, he continued playing Spider Solitaire.

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### (3) Lao Yang

Augusta, Maine.

At night, a Chinese man was washing dishes in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant named "Giant Lights".

His mother was settling the accounts outside. She looked very peaceful and quiet under the dim lamp.

He silently watched her as he put down the last dish and then walked to the window in the back. The Kennebec River was outside, the river breeze making his hexagonal bell earrings move. He took a deep breath and prayed that this tranquility would last.

\*\*\*\*\*

(4) Lao Yang

“Your passport is missing a stamp. Where did you depart from?” The customs officer looked at the man in front of him.

“Really?” The man took the passport. “The stamp is right here. Did you read it wrong?”

The customs officer looked at the passport again and couldn’t help frowning. He remembered that the stamp hadn’t been there before. He took a closer look and then returned the passport. “My apologies. Welcome to Guangzhou.”

The man nodded and smiled before looking at his watch. The day had finally come.

“Do you have any cigarettes, sir? Can you give me one?” A girl with short hair stopped him at the airport gate.

The man looked at her, “What brand do you usually smoke?”

“Zhongnanhai, 5 mg. But it’s fine, I can take whatever you have on you.”

The man pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, took one out, and gave it to her.

“Do you have a lighter?” she asked.

“Isn’t it already lit?” The man coughed and the girl found that the cigarette in her hand really was lit.

“Wow, that’s amazing! Are you a magician?” The girl smiled.

The man looked around and said to her, “Hey, can you take me to a place? It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. My memory isn’t very good.”

“You can take a taxi.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” the man said. “This place is very special.”



# What Are They Doing? Chapter 3 Brother Xiao Man

The treatment of a single dog.

Last year was the most difficult year for the dog farm. During the typhoon, one of the big fir trees on the side of the dog farm fell onto the kennel. Kan Jian took seven boxes of beer and stacked them up to support the kennel. Since then, we couldn't find the time to do an overall renovation.

We still didn't get to fix it this year, so the kennel wasn't protected against the wind and the rain. When I went to see Brother Xiao Man, he was solemnly squatting beside the pillar of beer boxes and looking at me indifferently.

It was as if he was telling me: Your grandpa never treated me like this when he was alive.

\*\*

Brother Xiao Man still liked to get close to me because I smelled like my grandpa, but I could tell he liked Poker-face best. When Poker-face gave him a bath, he was as obedient as a cat.

Fatty also picked a dog from the kennel, but it became as fat as a hippo in less than twenty days.

According to my family's tradition, I should get a Tibetan spaniel to protect me before I turned forty. Uncle Two prepared one for me, but it couldn't protect me at all.

It had the personality of a hamster and went straight to the warmest places on my body. It usually ran around wildly or barked at the TV. One time, Brother Xiao Man slapped it with his paw and it never dared approach the TV again.

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Brother Xiao Man had a big forehead with a well-developed frontal lobe. He was one of the few dogs I had seen with excellent self-control.

There was a TV in the kennel and Brother Xiao Man was the only one that could use the remote control.

He was an old dog now, and I had never seen him interested in the opposite sex. Fatty wanted Brother Xiao Man to have more than a dozen descendants, so he introduced several girlfriends to him, but the big dog wasn't even willing to take a look at them.

Fatty pulled Brother Xiao Man's hind leg and asked, "Is it possible that Brother Xiao Man is a female?"

Brother Xiao Man grimly turned his head, raised his front paw, and put it on Fatty's hand. He squinted his eyes and tilted his head before shaking his head at Fatty in a gesture that seemed to say Fatty should never do it again.

# What Are They Doing? Chapter 4

## (1) Qingming

Qingming<sup>138</sup> had passed, so I temporarily set aside the matters in Beijing. After a round of tomb sweeping, I noticed that there were several new tombs that hadn't been there last year if my memory was serving me correctly.

I had been muddling through recently. I couldn't remember clearly which of my employees were still alive and which of them were gone.

Grandma was still sprightly. She had been saying she wouldn't dare hope to live as long as Er Ye had<sup>139</sup>, but she was gradually approaching it. She had a heart attack earlier this year and thought she wouldn't live past Qingming, but now she could stand up and walk around again.

The elders in my family had all quit smoking, including me. I was trying my best to control myself, so it was only when I went to visit Grandma that I would take the cigarette she handed to me. My parents didn't dare speak up, so I would smoke that cigarette silently.

Another year, another Qingming rain had passed as we were surrounded by smoke and fog.

## (2) Wang Meng

When we were eating, Wang Meng was on a blind date at the table behind us.

We were all anxious when we heard him talking, the three of us silent as we listened to him talking nonsense to the girl.

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<sup>138</sup> Qingming falls on the first day of the fifth solar term of the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar. It falls on 4, 5 or 6 of April in a given year. During Qingming, Chinese families visit the tombs of their ancestors to clean the gravesites, pray to their ancestors and make ritual offerings, which is also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day. [Wiki link](#).

<sup>139</sup> Er Yuehong (aka Er Ye), passed away when he was 102.

When the girl went to the restroom, Fatty and I flipped over the booth seat and began teaching him a lesson. Little Brother stayed where he was and looked out the window

When we returned to our table, Little Brother pointed outside, silently telling us that the girl had just left by herself.

### (3) Liu Sang

Liu Sang looked at the pictures on the computer one by one. They had all been taken with a Canon camera.

He had been eating at the booth in Lou Wai Lou<sup>140</sup> for more than ten days. He positioned himself by the window, waiting for that opportunity that would only last a few seconds.

Over the past half month, the person he wanted to photograph seldom went out and stayed indoors most of the time. As a result, the photos were very blurry and captured a lot of miscellaneous objects.

He sighed and went over to stand in front of the mirror. He pulled out a knife in a reverse grip and practiced swinging it back and forth a few times.

“I’ll get there one day!” He said to himself.

### (4) Ah Tou

Ba Ge Cave, Banai, Guangxi.

I saw the girl who put Uncle Three’s mask on me back then. She had lived here for a year and said she was looking for a dye.

“Tattoos are a declaration of the sovereignty of one’s body. They indicate that the body belongs to no one, only to themselves,” the slender girl said to me. I saw that the number of tattoos on her body had increased.

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<sup>140</sup> Lou Wai Lou is a famous restaurant in Hangzhou, located in the middle of the West Lake. It was once mentioned that Wu Xie’s shop was actually near Lou Wai Lou. Basically, Liu Sang was being a stalker.

She was using gauze to filter the black grass sap as the contents of several pots boiled nearby. They were all emitting the smell of Chinese medicine. When these liquids were finally mixed together, they formed a blackish-blue dye that slowly became transparent and turned into something like grease.

Fatty was sitting shirtless next to us and asked, “Is your ancient method reliable? Will tattoos made with this dye really appear when the body temperature rises?”

The girl dabbed a little bit of dye on her fingers and then slid them across Fatty’s chest. The grease slowly returned to that blackish-blue color.

“Your heart is hot,” the girl said.

\*\*\*\*

***Merebear Notes: If you haven’t gotten to them yet, Liu Sang is a character that first appears in [“Reboot”](#). Ah Tou is the main character of [“A Thousand Faces”](#)***

\*\*\*\*

## What Are They Doing? Chapter 5 – Pan Zi

Pan Zi's father sat on the threshold. The rapeseed flowers had already bloomed outside. They didn't look particularly beautiful since they had grown in the field on the ridge, but the air was filled with their unique fragrance.

Pan Zi squatted on the opposite side, not daring to speak.

They were both silent for a moment before his father sighed. "Kid, maybe you should join the military."

Pan Zi scratched his head. "No. People don't use good iron to make nails, so good men shouldn't be soldiers."<sup>141</sup>

His father knocked his pipe. "Join the military. Three years. I'll find you a wife when you come back in three years."

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<sup>141</sup> It was an idiom from ancient times. There were several interpretations, one of which was that being a soldier wasn't considered a good profession in ancient times. Another was that soldiers often bullied civilians back in the day.

## Master Black Glasses 1: Lucky Chapter

“There are many kinds of techniques we use in the underworld. We take advantage of people’s blind spots. It’s not about the areas that people can’t see. It’s about blind spots that occur when people are thinking. If you can understand these things, then you can easily control other people with words and make them do things that they wouldn’t normally be willing to do.” Black Glasses pushed the cart through the snack aisle in the supermarket. “Which brand of potato chips do you like?”

“I don’t eat snacks,” I said.

“Afraid of getting fat?” He looked at me with a little disdain. “Can’t you change your girly temper?”

“I simply don’t like to eat snacks,” I said, watching him put at least thirty bags of chips in the cart. Based on my preferences, I probably wouldn’t finish half of them before they expired.

He said, “That makes things easier. It’s just like stuffing a duck.” His eyes were locked on a nearby bag of shrimp crackers.

I shook my head, “It doesn’t matter what kind they are, I don’t like snacks.”

“Even better.” Black Glasses put the bag of shrimp crackers in the cart, and then stopped a clerk and asked, “Where can I find the chocolate?”

I had doubts about his intentions. *Why did you ask me to come to the supermarket with you at night? And we’re buying nothing but snacks? Are we going to the mountains to train in the next couple of days? Bringing snacks to the mountains doesn’t feel appropriate.*

I took pride in the fact that I wasn’t a serious person, but when I was standing in front of Black Glasses, I ended up being an honest and reliable man. Everything he did was confusing.

After we put at least sixty boxes of Dove Chocolate in the cart, there wasn't any space left. Black Glasses pushed the cart to the cashier and asked me to pay.

*Great. The snacks cost me more than three thousand yuan. It's a good thing I have money now.*

After I paid, he still didn't leave, but put the cart next to the counter and took me to where the wine cooler was. I wasn't surprised. We had bought sixty boxes of Dove Chocolate, so it was understandable to buy some drinks.

He was picking out some wine when he said to me, "Starting tomorrow, you'll come to my place at nine o'clock every morning. You need to finish all of the snacks in a span of fourteen days. I'll supervise."

"You're not going to eat them?" I wondered. "I don't like snacks."

"I don't like snacks, either, but you have to eat them. And eat them diligently. You need to finish all of them in fourteen days."

I turned and looked at the cart next to the counter. *Sixty boxes of Dove Chocolate... how many boxes do I have to eat every day? Am I going to get diabetes?*

"Why?" I humbly asked, not daring to confront him.

"You need to change your lifestyle. You can't gain weight during these fourteen days." Black Glasses said, "Based on my experience, you need to exercise at least eight hours every day in order to not gain weight, but it's impossible for me to watch you exercise that whole time. With your laziness, it will also be impossible to train you to change your lifestyle. As a result, I came up with this idea. In half a month's time, if you gain even a little weight, you'll need to give up your plans and just be a good little boss."

Black Glasses' facial expression was very serious when he said that, which was a rare sight to behold.



I started to nod, but he waved his hand. "It's useless to nod and make a promise that you'll change your habits. The only thing that matters is the number on the weight scale. Speaking of which, we need to buy a scale." He put the bottle of wine back.

I scratched my head, feeling like I was following my former head teacher.

"You need to let your body get used to eight consecutive hours of consumption." He paused, "Once you start executing your plans, no one can protect you. You can only keep running and hiding. You need to stay focused and have the ability to analyze problems for eight consecutive hours. That's the minimum requirement." After speaking, he smiled. "Eight hours at least."

I knew why he smiled. He walked more than a hundred and forty hours in the desert without stopping in order to bring me the message. I met him in Hangzhou and took the thing from him. I had only spoken a few words to him before I found that he had already fallen asleep on my recliner, and he still had a smile on his face.

## Master Black Glasses 2

Wu Xie was lying on the massage table and looking down at the floor through the face hole when he saw Black Glasses' leather shoes moving in front of him.

"I didn't expect you'd know how to give a massage." Wu Xie said uncertainly. "Why did someone like you learn this kind of skill?"

"Saving it for a rainy day," Black Glasses said, "If you know you'll go blind eventually, it's not strange to do this kind of thing."

"But I don't think you need to learn how to be a visually impaired massage therapist.<sup>142</sup> Don't you have savings that can last you a lifetime?"

"I'm not learning how to be a visually impaired massage therapist. I'm learning how to know the world with my hands." Black Glasses pinched Wu Xie's neck joints. "You think I'm giving you a massage just because you're lying on a massage table, but it's not good to think like this."

"Did you learn music so that you could also save it for a rainy day?"

"Our family hasn't escaped this genetic disease for several generations. Based on this fact, music may be the most beautiful thing I'll be able to enjoy in the second half of my life. It shouldn't be strange to immerse myself in it early."

"I always think your background should be sloppier. I can't picture you doing these elegant things, so I'm kind of surprised."

Black Glasses moved his hands to Wu Xie's shoulder joints. "Liu Tanghua was a brigand in Manchuria, who used to study in England before he became a bandit. He knew how to play the violin and was able to read Shakespeare. I've lived through two eras, so you won't be able to understand my character so easily."

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<sup>142</sup> In some Asian countries, massage therapy is a natural career path for visually impaired people.

After he finished speaking, he sighed and let go of Wu Xie. He then turned around and washed his hands before telling Wu Xie to stand up.

“Why did you stop just when I was starting to feel comfortable?”

“I really wasn’t giving you a massage. I just wanted to check the degree of adhesion of your joints.” Black Glasses lit a cigarette. “The range of activities that your joints can do is only half of mine. It’s not caused by your lack of exercise, but the result of innate joint development.”

“What’s the verdict?”

“No talent whatsoever.” Black Glasses gestured a little. “You’re naturally clumsier than other people, which is why you often make mistakes at critical moments. But since your joints are tight, you’re less likely to dislocate them compared to other people, and you’re less likely to lose mobility after an injury.”

He breathed out a puff of smoke and looked at his watch. “In the first week, you’ll need to learn how to use the strength of your joints, as well as the basic tactics and strategies about how to attack and defend with your limited range of motion. You’ll need a machete that matches the length of your arm. It will be your main weapon to compensate for your joint defects.”

## Master Black Glasses 3

In the end, Black Glasses picked a knife called Cold Steel Kukri for Wu Xie, which he forced him to carry around with him.

Black Glasses said that you needed to use weapons as if you were using your hands. If your knife suddenly disappeared one day, you would notice it immediately.

In addition, you needed to use your knife in any situation that required knives. Whether it was peeling apples or cutting vegetables, doing these things would help you understand the different aspects of your knife.

Finally, you needed to practice to a point where you wouldn't be afraid of cutting yourself when you held the knife in your hands.

Just like the auntie in the meat stall who would rest one hand on the ribs on the chopping board while the other raised the knife to cut. She didn't show a hint of fear as the knife chopped down against her fingers, because the knife was a part of her.

"Now, I'll show how your joints hinder your movement." Black Glasses came to stand behind Wu Xie. "Turn around and look at me."

Wu Xie turned around and found that Black Glasses wasn't behind him anymore. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that at the exact moment he turned, Black Glasses followed the direction of his movements and hid behind him.

This was the most basic prank children played.

Wu Xie reflexively turned around again, trying to follow Black Glasses' movements, but he soon discovered that no matter how fast he turned, he couldn't see him.

After turning three or four times, Wu Xie became dizzy and had to surrender. "You're too agile."

Black Glasses said, "If it was a little darker, you would only be able to hear the sound of my movements, and wouldn't even know where I was. It's

not that my speed is too fast, but your speed is too slow.” He went to stand in front of Wu Xie and turned his back to him. “Now it’s your turn.”

Wu Xie thought it was very interesting. He moved his joints and said, “Go!” As soon as he finished speaking, he violently moved to the side and prepared to hide. He immediately saw Black Glasses turning to the left, so he instantly turned to the right. He took a step and then staggered back after seeing Black Glasses staring right back at him.

“My joints have a wide range of motion, so I don’t need to move my body. I can capture any movement you make just by turning my head.” Black Glasses began to move his shoulders. “So, for someone like you, the first thing you need to understand is that if you rely on your own eyes to confirm something, you’re dead. Before your own eyes can see what’s happening, you have to react first. This reaction depends on all the organs in your body feeling things at the same time.”

After that, Black Glasses stretched his hand from behind Wu Xie’s head and hit the other side of his head as quick as lightning.

Wu Xie yelled in pain, and reflexively looked in the opposite direction of Black Glasses, who immediately hit the other side of Wu Xie’s head that was now close to him.

“Wrong! Don’t use your eyes to confirm my whereabouts.” Black Glasses scolded.

## Master Black Glasses 4

Wu Xie had bumps all over his head, and couldn't remember the last time his head hurt this much.

If he practiced for another hour, he may end up like a watermelon that was flicked too many times, and his brain would become liquid and flow out of his nostrils.

Despite that, he felt that he could basically keep up with Black Glasses' movements now; not by relying on his eyes, but by relying on an almost intuitive feeling.

Black Glasses told him that it was a result of all of his pores participating in the sensation.

Human hair was very sensitive to the airflow caused by something passing around it, but most people could only feel the airflow itself and couldn't estimate the size and direction of the things causing it.

The masters in wuxia novels could catch darts while blindfolded, but such a thing was difficult to do in reality. It required years of hard training and wouldn't achieve success every time.

After systematic training, however, it was possible to distinguish the direction of this kind of airflow, so there was a chance one could form a conditioned reflex of avoidance.

When the two of them sat down to rest, Wu Xie felt that he was on the brink of a concussion. As soon as Black Glasses raised his hand, Wu Xie immediately made a dodging action, and then realized Black Glasses was handing him a cigarette.

"When it comes to being a coward, you're a real champion." Black Glasses smiled. "Good, you've impressed me. Maybe you can turn out to be the longest living apprentice I've ever had."

"How long did the previous apprentices last?"

"Two and a half years."

“And the shortest?”

“Seven days.”

Wu Xie took a puff of the cigarette. “Have you never reflected on it?”

Black Glasses smiled and suddenly attacked Wu Xie on the forehead. Wu Xie landed three meters away and cursed while covering his face.

Black Glasses gave a “tsk” and looked at his watch. “It only took fifty seconds for you to let your guard down. Start over!”

Black Glasses was smoking, and Wu Xie was sitting ten meters away with a big swollen bump on his head.

He looked at the sunset in the distance shining on the grapevines in the courtyard of Black Glasses’ house. The scenery felt like a jigsaw puzzle made of colored glaze, very beautiful and quiet.

“The enemy won’t get tired, so you can’t let your guard down.” Black Glasses said.

“Yeah.” Wu Xie replied. “But I’ll get tired. From now on, I’ll stay at least ten meters away from you.”

“You have problems with your speed and the arc of your joints. If you don’t learn close combat, you can easily be killed by a good pitcher at a distance of ten meters.”

Wu Xie thought of how Poker-face threw the steel pipe and said, “Let’s change the topic—” Before he got the words out, a broken piece of tile flew from Black Glasses’ hand and hit his temple.

Wu Xie got up from the ground and rushed towards the door. Just as he reached it, however, the door opened and Huo Xiuxiu walked in with a basket of snacks. She was surprised and asked, “What happened to you?”

\*

“If you want to make progress, it’s going to be like this. People in this business are weird. Everyone has their own ideas and concepts. It’s really

a world without standards. Fleas can eat frogs. Chess can be played as Go. If you win, you win.” Xiuxiu rubbed safflower oil on the bumps on Wu Xie’s head.

Wu Xie was eating the sachima<sup>143</sup> that Xiuxiu had made and said, “But I feel so insecure.”

“That’s because you don’t accept it. If you accept the fact that your head is going to hurt anyway, what else can’t you accept?” Xiuxiu poked Wu Xie’s bump with her slender finger, causing him to let out a whine. “If it were me, I would practice at home for most of the night, and give myself a head full of bumps. That way, first, my progress won’t fall behind. Second, the master will feel distressed when he sees me like this the next day, and maybe he’ll teach me some tricks in advance. Psychopaths are also human beings. As long as they’re human, you can make them fall for your trap.”

Wu Xie looked at Xiuxiu, whose glowing face showed a cunning beyond her years. This girl would be a real devil in the world. His judgment was accurate and definitely couldn’t be wrong.

“Sister Hua recommended that he teach you. He’s already taken into account the fact that you’re clever but not wise enough. Black Glasses has a lot of ideas that are suitable for you, so be satisfied with what you have. If your master was a person who liked performing dangerous acts, then you’d be fixing your bones right now.”

“Why did you change Xiao Hua’s nickname?” Wu Xie grinned.

The smell of the safflower oil had mixed with that of the sachima, making it hard to continue eating the snack. Nevertheless, Xiuxiu had made it herself, so his personality dictated that he would definitely act like he had never eaten it before.

“I learned it from you.” Xiuxiu said, “He had it coming since he wasn’t willing to take me to Europe with him.”

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<sup>143</sup> It kind of looks like a Rice Krispies treat. It’s made of fluffy strands of fried batter bound together with a stiff sugar syrup



Xiao Hua had gone to Germany. This line of business was in a mess, and he was getting busier and busier.

“By the way, why do you have so much free time to come and see me today?” Wu Xie forced himself to finish the sachima before he curiously asked the question.

Xiuxiu didn't go out very often. People in the Huo family had skin that was different from others, so they didn't like the sun very much. Plus, their skin looked frighteningly translucent under the sunlight.

Before liberation, if such girls weren't in a family system like the Mystic Nine, then they would have been kept inside the house by local families.

“I didn't come to see you. I came to see him.” Xiuxiu pointed at Black Glasses who was behind Wu Xie. She took an account book from the basket. “He has a glasses shop that makes hand-made glasses. He rents the place from my family. I'm here to urge him to pay the rent.”

As soon as she finished speaking, they heard the sound of snapping grapevines. They turned around and found that Black Glasses had stepped on the grapevines, climbed the wall, and flipped himself over it.

# Mafia Game

(The story is told from the moderator's point of view.)

Close your eyes when night falls.

Wang family, you may open your eyes. You can start killing people now.

Wang family, please stop infighting. You can't kill members from your own family.

Wang family, are you sure you're going to kill him?

Understood.

Wang family, you may close your eyes.

Zhang Qiling, you may open your eyes. That's the person who died last time. You're so full of compassion. Do you want to save him?

Zhang Qiling, you look a little unhappy. Who do you want to kill?

Zhang Qiling, you may not kill multiple people at the same time.

Zhang Qiling, you can't leave now.

Zhang Qiling, you can't kill the judge.

Okay, Zhang Qiling, you may close your eyes.

Wu Xie, you may open your eyes. Who do you want to look into?

Okay. I can tell you that this person is from the Wang family. That one is from the Mystic Nine. And that one over there is from the Zhang family. And this is him.

Wu Xie, you may close your eyes.

The morning comes.

Zhang Qiling left last night.

Game over.

# Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 1

"I'm not messing with you. If I had wanted to stop teaching you, I would've given you an even weirder test." Black Glasses was fanning the fire, which started to flare up in the small stove he had made out of stones.

They were surrounded by fields that had been barren for some time. There were knee-high weeds, some of which were yellow and dry, while others were lush. It was obviously the kind of ecosystem where some were quietly eliminated and others survived.

"The test you've given me is already weird enough," I said as I helped add fuel to the fire.

The weeds were a bit wet, and it was so smoky that I couldn't open my eyes.

"I'll tell you a story." He found a stone and sat down on it cross-legged. "I once had this sidekick who always wanted to learn something from me, but there was something wrong with his character. He liked to fight and show off. He was very stubborn and insisted on learning from me, so I had no choice but to give him a difficult test."

"What was it?"

"I told him to stay in a women's bathroom for thirty days without being discovered. He couldn't come out, and he had to eat, drink, and piss in the women's bathroom." Black Glasses took out a lollipop, held it in his mouth, and made a "tut tut" sound. "If he was able to complete the task, I would teach him, and introduce him to this business."

I looked at Black Glasses and thought that he was joking. "You were clearly messing with him."

"I created the test based on his problematic behaviors. He had issues, so he had to prove that he could achieve certain things despite them. He was too outgoing and needed a lot of interaction. He couldn't bear to stay

still and be quiet. He liked to fight and show off because he needed ways to keep venting the thoughts and emotions in his head.”

Black Glasses threw the lollipop into the fire. As the flames scorched the sugar, it started to smell of caramel and make a crackling sound.

“Based on his state at that time, he had to plan extremely carefully in order to stay in the women’s bathroom. This kind of thing should be instinctual. You need to know at any time how long you can live, how long you’ll be hungry, and how long your physical strength can last. How far can you rest this time? Of course, I didn’t want to teach him, so the test was very extreme.”

I touched my chin, thinking about what I would do if it were me.

There were two problems. First, a man hiding in the women’s bathroom was something that was completely impossible to do unless there was a hidden place where you could stay. But bathroom structures were often very simple and could be taken in at a glance. Second, even if he did manage to hide, it would be very awkward since he couldn’t bring thirty days’ worth of food with him. To sum it up, it would have been a distressing situation.

“Did he succeed?” I asked.

Black Glasses laughed and started to add firewood. “He stayed there for seven days. He bribed the man on duty and hid in a locker. He left the locker at night and slept during the day while the man on duty brought him food. When it came to the seventh day, however, he had eaten something bad the day before and had unbearable stomach pain during the day. He broke out of the locker, and was caught and sent to the detention center.”

I nodded, and Black Glasses said with emotion, “If a person has to live in an extreme environment for thirty days, how many details must be paid attention to?”

The scent of buried sweet potatoes slowly started to mix with the caramel. Black Glasses looked at his watch and continued to roast the

sweet potatoes a little longer because the ground was wet. After that, he got up and walked to the lakeside before saying, “Good luck. It’s not that difficult. I’ll leave you to it.”

I guarded the stove where the two sweet potatoes were buried and watched as he got on the boat and left this farming island that was surrounded by a huge lake.

With these two sweet potatoes, I needed to live here for thirty days so that I could pass the lesson.

The lake breeze blew, making me shudder. I immediately got up and shouted to him, “Is it too late to change to the women’s bathroom?”

He waved his hand and shouted from a distance, “You wish!”

## Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 2

I looked at the deserted farming island behind me. It was about the size of a soccer field, and I could actually see the mainland about three kilometers away from here.

I could vaguely see a lot of iron nets sinking in the water close to the shore. It was probably some kind of aquatic farm that had crabs or something.

The whole island was very flat and there was only a small mound in the center. It was only about three or four meters high and looked like a burial mound. The cultivated land was deserted and there were weeds everywhere.

I extinguished the fire, leaving only the hot charcoal to bake the sweet potatoes. After that, I pulled up a few reeds that were by the water and prepared to make a banner on the mound to show my ambition.

After sticking it in, I thought of some guidelines Black Glasses had mentioned to me before, "First of all, don't do meaningless things. You can't predict what changes will stem from those superfluous things in the future."

I pulled the reeds out and wielded them like a sword for a few minutes on the mound. Then I remembered the guideline again and became depressed.

My character wasn't suitable for doing nothing when I was bored. Black Glasses should have taught me in accordance with my aptitude.

I sat down by the fire and began to think about the exam question carefully.

Black Glasses actually didn't teach me anything, he just said that I needed to form a strong desire when I was faced with my fears.

I needed to face my fears first.

*What am I afraid of?*

I warmed my hands, recalling the gloomy, cold, and damp weather I had experienced in my previous adventures. The temperature and dampness here felt the same, and I was afraid my body wouldn't be able to resist the moisture, and I would start feeling sick.

I needed a small nest that was dry and inviolable.

A lot of classic architectural designs that were comfortable and moisture-proof started to surface in my mind. At the same time, I remembered another sentence that Black Glasses had said, "Don't get caught up in any of the particulars of life."

"He's a psychopath!" I grabbed a piece of wood and threw it into the firewood pile. "Telling me that I can't do this and can't do that."

When I dug out the sweet potatoes, the aroma hit me. I blew on one and started to eat it. After finishing it, I threw the skin into the fire and started moving my body.

If that was the case, then I would dig a hole in the ground using the most efficient way possible. In this business, digging holes was a common skill, and I felt more secure underground. I clapped my hands but realized that I didn't have a shovel. I picked up a nearby rock and started digging in the ground a few times, but found that scraping the ground like this may take ten years.

I was struck with a sense of powerlessness and went to the lake to watch the sun start peeking out from behind the misty clouds. I started to zone out.

*I still have one sweet potato. There are twenty-nine and a half days left. The land is really barren and there's nothing here. Am I Wu-ReallyTragic-Xie?<sup>144</sup>*

This place should be in the Taihu Lake basin, so I wasn't worried about food. There were reeds here, and I had the skills to weave, so I could

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<sup>144</sup> Character from Season 3 Episode 1 of "[Gag Manga Biyori](#)", whose name is Hirata Hirao (平田平男), and he introduces himself as Hirata-Really Tragic- Hirao (平田-ReallyTragic-平男)



make some small nets out of them. I figured I could always catch a few fish if I wanted some.

At this moment, I suddenly saw something climbing up from the lake. It was dirt-colored, big, and had feet. I was taken aback for a moment before I felt a shiver go down my spine.

It was a crocodile crawling onto the shore.

*Isn't this Taihu Lake? How come there's a crocodile in Taihu Lake? I stepped back and cursed silently. Is Buddha messing with me? If so, this is a really inappropriate joke.*

When I looked back at the opposite shore, I suddenly had a thought: *What does that aquatic farm keep? Damn, don't tell me they keep crocodiles?*

No wonder Black Glasses wanted to train me in the south. He was fucking ruthless. I assumed the crocodile had escaped from the aquatic farm, for it was only about as long as my leg. *I don't think it'll be able to kill me, but how am I supposed to sleep at night?*

The crocodile started basking in the sun after it climbed up. When I looked around and didn't see a second one, I retreated to the mound. It seemed like it didn't matter whether I felt comfortable or not. What I needed was a safe place to hide.

# Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 3

*My name is Wu Xie. I am currently on a deserted farmland, which is also an island in the middle of Taihu Lake. It's seven o'clock in the morning.*

In the distance, the sun had risen from the lake. There was a faint mist on the water that seemed to glow with warm colors under the sunlight. The sparkling reflections on the distant water started to turn from orange to gold.

My clothes were wrapped tight around me, and my lips were purple with the cold. I had squatted on the mound all night. I wanted to set up a safe hiding place for myself, but I couldn't make it happen. In addition, I found that even after I meditated all night, there was nothing I could do.

To sum it up, the situation was different from what I had expected.

There were no trees or shrubs here. The only thing that was growing was various kinds of weeds and grasses that were of no use to me, but they were taller than the crocodile. In other words, once the crocodile climbed into the grass, I couldn't determine its location.

I started to wonder whether Black Glasses had planted these weeds.

The reeds by the lake in the distance were the best materials. The little crocodile had been basking and relaxing in the sun all day long yesterday— looking kind of cute and stupid— but I was completely defenseless and afraid to approach at all.

After the sun went down, the crocodile returned to the water. It should have swum away, but I didn't have any lighting equipment with me to tell for sure. I couldn't light a torch any time I wanted, and without the sun, I couldn't make a dry ignitor. The bonfire had also gone out in the middle of the night.

It was during this time that I ate my last sweet potato to keep out the cold. Now I was squatting on the mound, unable to feel my body temperature as tiredness and powerlessness fought a constant battle

with my spirit. I was so hungry that I was dizzy, and I felt like things were evolving towards the situation I feared the most—death.

What was even more terrifying was that my desire to pass the test had completely turned into the desire to strangle Black Glasses to death.

No. It should be said that even from the beginning, I didn't want to pass the exam at all. How did he trick me into coming to this island?

"You need to accurately judge how long you can live and how long you can keep your spirit." Black Glasses' voice rang in my ears.

*Fine. Let's do it your way for now.* I tried to judge how tired I was.

When I was still young, I often stayed in internet cafes all night long and would head straight to breakfast before sitting down in the back row of the classroom and falling asleep.

Even without sleep, I knew that I could maintain about eighty percent of my energy until the next evening, as long as I could eat.

Not eating would definitely affect my attention span.

I had no other choice. *The biggest problem I have right now isn't even food. It's that I'm thirsty.*

The sun continued to rise higher in the sky. I would definitely cry if it was a rainy day, but fortunately, the gods had mercy on me.

I waited until my body began to feel warm before slowly standing up and starting to move. Joint pain and muscle numbness indicated that my body had already started to go downhill. I was a little dizzy, which was probably an indicator that my blood sugar was low.

After slowly recovering, I picked up a reed tube and sucked the dew from it. I did that about a dozen more times before finally feeling like my thirst was alleviated.

I thought of the legend of inhaling wind and drinking dew<sup>145</sup>, and suddenly did a Lu Dongbin<sup>146</sup> action, but I felt bored after doing it. It appeared my low blood sugar had also reduced my self-control.

I started to pull the weeds by the portion of the mound that was sheltered by the wind and managed to clear a semicircular area. I left the reeds, the hay, and the weeds out in the sun to dry before going to the lake to collect some rocks.

I felt a kind of farmers' pleasure. The hazy fields all around me seemed as if they came from a pastel painting, and I wondered if it was an illusion.

After spending a long time collecting the rocks, I dried them and then spread them out on the semicircular area I had cleared. I then stepped on the soil, lit the hay, burned the layer of vegetation to ash, and then covered it with another layer of stones. After that, I started spreading the hay and reed leaves upwards.

By about one in the afternoon, I had made a soft bed. The downside was that this bed would absorb moisture and become damp at night, so I would need a bonfire big enough to prevent that from happening.

There were no woods here, so the reed poles wouldn't last long. I needed a charcoal stove that could keep me warm for a long time. I needed water and clay.

When I returned to the shore, I found that the crocodile had appeared again, but something was wrong this time. Now when I looked, there were three crocodiles. At least two more had appeared at some point, and they were a bit fatter.

*There aren't any keepers here? Hey, this is Taihu Lake, not the Nile River!* I muttered to myself, "The people around here are really generous and carefree."

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<sup>145</sup> Taoism believes that fairies don't need to eat or drink, and they just need to inhale wind and drink dew.

<sup>146</sup> Lü Dongbin (796 CE-1016 CE) was a Chinese scholar and poet during the Tang Dynasty who has been elevated to the status of an immortal in the Chinese cultural sphere, worshipped especially by the Taoists. Here's the wiki [link](#)

# Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 4

The Thomas Party were sleeping idly in the afternoon sun.

Thomas was the name of the organization I gave to these five crocodiles. The biggest one was the godfather, Thomas, while the smaller ones were its followers. I really didn't know how to distinguish the three small ones, so I just called them "the gang".

The reason I did this was because I couldn't afford to provoke them, and I was so bored. They had occupied the most scenic spot, which included the lushest area of reeds.

Instead of wasting time thinking about the problem like the first day, I immediately went to the other side of the island and collected the reeds and dirt from there. It was very difficult to move the soil, so I had to mix it with the dry mud from the shore, and then pile it into mud balls before moving it all to the edge of the mound.

Although the steps were difficult, things went smoothly. I thought of building a house out of mud, but it probably went against the principle.

I made a small stove by mixing river mud and dry mud with rocks and then started piling fuel into it. I wove a lot of fine nets in the mud using weeds, and although the nets made of grass roots weren't strong, they could keep the soil from breaking while it was baking.

As I was playing with the mud, I kept humming songs from the movie "Ghost" and imagining that there was a female ghost in my arms shaping the mud with me.

Generally speaking, this kind of thing needed to be dried in the shade before heating, but I couldn't wait that long, and the requirements weren't that high, either.

If the soil became burnt and cracked, I could immediately paste more on so that when the outside mud was still wet, the inside would slowly take shape. This was how people cooked "beggar's chicken".

The stove steadily started to provide heat, and the sun began to set again. My dizziness had been relieved because the glycogen in my body had been used up, and now my body was consuming fat.

Of course, I was still very hungry, but I had been very focused while making the pottery, so I didn't feel any discomfort at all.

The reed ash that I had burned carefully, and the hay I had collected earlier burned too fast, and the fire would soon go out if I left.

I couldn't help but hope that Black Glasses was going to have a miserable life in the future.

He must have calculated these factors. If there had been any woods here, then I thought it would have been very easy for me to get through thirty days, but there was a real lack of sustainable materials that could be used here.

I suddenly wondered if Black Glasses knew where I was going, and whether he had made these training arrangements based on the possible situations that could occur in that place.

But it was impossible that he would know anything about my plan.

Fortunately, I had a lot of wet weeds piled up, so I leaned toward the side of the stove where the fire was strongest and burned them. The weeds with roots were quickly dried and ignited, making the surroundings very dry and warm. I waited until the fire became stable before starting to figure out how to get something to eat.

*Should I go and kill the Thomas Party?* I didn't have any weapons with me, so it would be too difficult. Crocodile skin was very hard, so it wasn't realistic for me to eat it raw using only my nails and teeth. Moreover, the time was approaching when the Thomas Party would soon return to the water.

There weren't any earthworms on the island, let alone other insects. There were only dragonflies and those spider-like things above the water. The strength I'd have to exert to catch these things was much greater than the benefit they would provide.

How about fishing? I needed too many things to fish, but this was Taihu Lake. In the 1960s, people started stocking the lake with crab seedlings, so I should be able to find some Taihu crabs here.

Crab fishing was easier than regular fishing, so I chose strong grass roots and tied them into a ball smaller than a fist. I went to the lake, stripped naked, and tried to catch tiny fish as small as peas. After getting them, I smashed them into a pulp and stuck them on the grass balls. I then tied the balls with my shoelaces and threw them into the lake.

The water temperature was very cold, but the sun was still hanging in the sky. I had to work hard at this time. Otherwise, come tomorrow, I wouldn't be far from my death.

As I was trying to endure the water temperature, I suddenly saw a boat coming from the crocodile farm opposite. There was a girl sitting on the bow, looking at me in surprise as she held a bamboo pole with an iron ring in her hand. I looked at her and realized that maybe she was here to catch the crocodiles.

# Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 5

Honestly, it was a little awkward because my image wasn't very elegant, and I was cold and starving for crabs.

The girl stood on the bow of the ship with a heroic expression, looking as mighty as the female squad leader in the Red Detachment of Women.<sup>147</sup> The bamboo pole in her hand was gripped tightly, and at first glance, you could tell she was the kind of girl who was very energetic.

She had short hair and was wearing plastic overshoes and a short jacket. Her clothes weren't clean, so they must have been old ones for work. It was possible she was a self-reliant girl working at a crocodile farm, which was the type of person I wasn't good at dealing with.

"What are you doing on our island?" As her boat slowly approached, she glared at me. "Don't you know that the water isn't safe?"

"I—" I stammered. *What should I do? Should I say that I'm taking a test here?*

I had to find a way to stay here to pass the test, but the most embarrassing thing was that I really wanted to get on the boat and say, "I encountered a pervert who wanted to kill me." Then I could go back to Hangzhou and have a good rest.

I didn't even really need to go back to Hangzhou. I could follow the girl ashore and find a hotel to sleep in for a night. I could buy some equipment and come back tomorrow since there was no way Black Glasses would find out about it.

It was a pity I couldn't bring myself to do it, because Black Glasses had said that I could quit at any time. He didn't even want me to grow in the

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<sup>147</sup> 100+ member strong all-female Special Company of the 2nd Independent Division of Chinese Red Army, first formed in May 1931. As a combat unit, they lasted only 500 days before it was broken up by Kuomintang troops. Some of them died on the battlefield and a few were captured. Most of the rest returned to civilian life, hidden from view. There was a novel, movie, and ballet made about them. Film info [here](#), ballet info [here](#).



first place. It fundamentally went against my purpose if I played tricks like this in order to pass the exam.

I was still hoping that I could be stronger.

“I’m having a picnic,” I said calmly, trying to make myself look normal.

“Alone? Where’s your boat?” The girl’s boat landed, and I saw a middle-aged woman at the helm behind her. The girl went ashore and looked around the island. There was an incredulous look on her face.

“I’m a good swimmer.” I said, “I haven’t used something like boats for a long time.”

“Oh.” The girl looked at my trembling body. “You’re what they call a psychopath.”

*Will you stop asking me questions if I admit that I’m a psychopath? It’s okay if you think I’m crazy. Just don’t force me off the island.*

The girl shook the bamboo pole in her hand, took a few rolls of something that looked like large tape out from the boat, and carried them on her back. “There are often crocodiles running around out here. Can you change your picnic location?”

*“I’m not afraid of crocodiles,” I said while inwardly thinking, can you show a little concern since you already know there are crocodiles around? How can you say something like this so calmly? Aren’t you afraid I’m going to file a complaint?*

The girl sighed and walked to the Thomas family on the other side of the shore without a trace of fear. The crocodiles saw her and immediately stood up. She shook the bamboo pole and the iron ring quickly caught the godfather’s mouth.

He started to struggle and did the typical crocodile roll while trying to open his mouth, but the girl pressed the bamboo pole and firmly closed it.

When the godfather began to retreat into the water, I saw the young girl pull the bamboo pole, and the iron ring immediately tightened. There was a groove on the bamboo pole, which she slid an iron wire into so that the iron ring was unable to be loosened or tightened any further. Then she threw the bamboo pole away and pasted the tape-like thing around the godfather's eyes.

The godfather immediately fell silent. The young girl bent down and picked up the bamboo pole, and then used it to guide the godfather's head, leading it all the way to the iron cage on the boat. Once it was in the cage, the girl loosened the wire and pulled the bamboo pole out.

"Awesome." I said, "Will this lady catch the other ones as well?"

The girl looked at me, suddenly smiled, and threw the bamboo pole to me. "If you want to have a picnic here, do it yourself."

# Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 6

“Heroine.” I looked at the bamboo pole and weighed it. “I’m not a professional.”

“What’s so professional about catching crocodiles?” The girl frowned. She probably thought I wasn’t a straightforward person. “Hurry up, don’t let them get away. If you don’t want to catch them, then you can leave our island.”

“If I can get on the boat and catch them, I’ll do it.” I had no choice but to catch the crocodiles. This was their place, after all, so I couldn’t argue with her and say that I didn’t want to do it. It would be troublesome if she trapped me just like how she trapped the crocodiles.

The girl sneered. “You wish. Didn’t you say you’re a good swimmer?”

Looking at the girl’s expression, I knew she didn’t believe that I swam all the way here. Of course, who would believe that kind of bullshit? Now she had decided to mess with me.

I weighed the bamboo pole. I was quite determined now and didn’t want her to look down on me. Plus, after seeing what she did just now, I didn’t think it was all that difficult, so I said to her, “Then give me your tape.” The girl tossed it to me.

I walked through the water, made it to shore, put on my underwear and clothes, and then walked toward Thomas’ followers.

The other crocodiles looked manageable to me, but this one looked like it could rip off a chunk of my calf with one bite, so I had to take care of it first. If I managed to send them away, it would actually help me get through the next twenty-eight days.

Fuck. So many things had happened in just one day, which really tested my resilience. Maybe this was also part of the test.

I slowly approached the follower and came at it from the side. After what had happened just now, it was very vigilant and was already at the water's edge. If I failed, it was likely to retreat into the water immediately. Fortunately, the follower was no longer a baby crocodile, so it should have the instinct to repel any attackers.

I posed and swung the pole fiercely like a fishing rod, quickly trapping it. The iron ring hit the follower's face, but instead of trapping its lower jaw, I trapped its upper palate, and the wire slipped into its mouth.

The follower immediately opened its mouth and began to struggle, so I pulled the iron wire behind the bamboo pole and tightened the iron ring. I managed to loop the upper half of the crocodile's head.

The girl laughed in the distance as I dragged the bamboo pole and wrangled with the follower. Since the crocodile kept struggling, the iron ring immediately loosened. The follower escaped and quickly retreated into the lake where it disappeared.

"Hey, what are you going to do now?" The girl asked me. "Why are you so stupid that you can't even catch a crocodile?"

I was somewhat depressed, so I went to trap the three other little gangsters. They were relatively easier. After I wrapped their mouths and tightened the wire, I picked them up and threw them on the boat. I didn't expect that the little crocodiles not only had powerful mouths, but also had sharp claws, and my hands ended up with several deep bloody scratches.

After I caught all three of them and put them on the boat, I said to the girl, "You can return home and come back tomorrow. I'll definitely catch the big one for you."

The girl looked at my bloody hands and seemed to regret it. It was obviously wrong to let a non-professional person like me do such a dangerous thing. She only had to think about the consequences to know that it was very inappropriate.

Of course, I also didn't think it was very reliable for a girl like her to do this kind of work. Although she was very skilled, she might also get hurt.

"It's okay." Ah, I was still as gentle as ever. "See you tomorrow."

I secretly hid her bamboo pole behind me. This was my real purpose. With this thing, I didn't have to roll in the water and freeze.

The sun was about to go down completely, and the sky was a bloody red in the distance.

The young girl showed a different smile from before and seemed to be a little fond of me. She thought for a while, nodded, and then said to me, "Okay, but you need to return the bamboo pole to me first."

## Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 7

“Bamboo pole? What bamboo pole?” I was upset at being exposed, but then I decided to lie anyways. I expected this girl wouldn't dare do anything to me.

“Your body size makes it really difficult to hide the bamboo pole.” The girl looked at me and felt amused. “Give it back to me. I'll need it for after I return to the factory.”

I shook my head firmly. Black Glasses once said that dignity wasn't important when it came to matters of life and death.

Although possessing the bamboo pole may be an act of cheating, I had resisted the temptation to leave the island by boat, so I figured this wasn't a big deal. God would forgive me.

The girl was a little angry, so I retreated back to my mound and said, “Girl, it's better to accept reality. It's getting dark, go back and have dinner.”

The girl rolled her eyes, pushed the boat into the lake, and then jumped on. She sneered at me before steering the boat away.

Her expression didn't show any resignation, and I couldn't help but think that she was up to no good. But it didn't matter. I at least got what I wanted for now.

I watched the boat get further away and then immediately went to the water where I could see my shoelaces floating on the surface. I hooked them with the bamboo pole and lifted them up.

Since a long time had passed, I was afraid the crabs might have run away even if they had been caught before. After pulling it up, however, I found that I was thinking too much. I didn't catch anything at all.

The bait was still on the grass balls, meaning there probably weren't any crabs here.

I was hungry and uncomfortable, so I tried a few more places but still didn't catch anything. The sky was completely dark by this point, so I went back to the stove in despair. I put my wet clothes over the stove to dry and then added hay to the fire.

I used to starve for a long time, so this wasn't a big problem. If the pain couldn't be resolved, then it wasn't pain. I knew that if I slept well tonight, I would feel much better tomorrow morning.

After my clothes had dried, I lay beside the stove, curled up into a ball, and instantly fell asleep out of exhaustion.

I slept right through to the next morning. When I was half-awake, I felt as if Black Glasses kept whispering in my ear, "You must get food today. You must get food today."

The dazzling sun shining on my eyelids was what woke me up. I didn't feel sore all over because of some of the previous training I had done, but my feet were still cold with frostbite.

The fire in the stove had long gone out. I wanted to light it again to keep warm, but as soon as I turned around, I saw a crocodile lying beside me.

It was lying side by side with me, looking at me lovingly.

I immediately jumped up in shock, ran six or seven meters away from it, and then fell to the ground.

Upon closer inspection, I found that it wasn't a real crocodile, but a common taxidermy one.

I turned and looked around. When I saw that the bamboo pole was gone, I realized what was going on. There was no one around. The young girl had secretly put this thing beside me when I was asleep in order to mess with me.

*Bitch. If it weren't for the fact that I have to pass this test, I would go and make you suffer.*

I forcefully tried to pull the specimen apart, wanting to burn it as fuel, but it was unexpectedly strong. I couldn't tear it apart at all. Just as I was getting angry, a bird suddenly landed on the mound.

It had long legs and I didn't know what kind it was. It felt like a protected animal, but all I could see was a roast chicken with long legs.

The bird looked at me with interest and slowly walked towards me. I swallowed my saliva and motionlessly watched it walk a few staggering steps. Then, it suddenly raised its head and spit a fish out of its throat.

The fish fell in front of my feet.



## Master Black Glasses Sequel: Wu Xie's Island Adventure 8

Was eating bird vomit the most tragic thing in life? Not necessarily. The most tragic thing in life was that I was reluctant to eat bird vomit all at once.

At first, I had set my mind to doing something with the bird because I had hoped to have a feast of roasted bird. With the river mud and plant ash here, I was confident that I could have a very delicious barbecue.

But after the bird spit the fish out, it flew down and tried to swallow it back up. The fish hadn't died completely yet, so it could still jump a few times.

I immediately panicked and instinctively went to grab the fish, spreading myself over top of it. The bird saw such a behemoth like me pounce, and immediately jumped back and flew away.

I sat up. I still wasn't very clear about what I had just done, but when I saw the fish covered in mud, the smell of fish soup instantly appeared in my mind.

I looked at the bird flying away, saw it flying very low and unstable, and suddenly realized that it might have eaten too much. After being full, it couldn't fly quickly and landed on the island, vomiting some of its food up.

What an extraordinary and kind bird! Such a tall, rich, and handsome bird!

If I had caught it, it may have spat out four or five more fish, and then I could have had a feast full of fish.

I didn't have any knives, but the teeth of that crocodile specimen the girl had left behind were very sharp. I used its teeth to cut the fish, then gutted the fish and washed it in the lake water. Then I put it on the charcoal stove to start grilling.

The fish was very smelly without any seasoning, and even in my current hungry state, I still felt that it didn't taste good. I ate it very reluctantly, and even though I didn't feel full, I at least felt warm.

I dug a small pit by the lake and put the fish entrails in it before pressing it with stones. Then I used pebbles to form a small dam that was half underwater on the side, and left a hole so the crabs could come in.

I still believed there were crabs around here, it was just that the bait before hadn't been strong enough.

At noon, my persistence was proven correct. The bird's accidental landing had completely changed my situation, and I caught six crabs of varying sizes.

I dug a hole on the edge of the mound, moistened the mud, and kept the crabs in it, but there was a steady stream of them coming in from the dam. I had to widen the pit three times, and stored about half a trouser's worth of water in it. After a total of more than thirty crabs, the fishy odor finally weakened.

I had an extra meal at noon and then grilled three crabs around two o'clock. After chewing and eating, I finally felt full.

It was the same in the afternoon. I tried to use the crab innards to catch more crabs, but it didn't work. It seemed that I had to get a fish again, but now there were so many crab shells, crab feet, and fish bones that I believed it wouldn't be too difficult.

I finally managed to tear apart the crocodile specimen and found sponges inside. I wanted to burn them, but after thinking about it, I decided to use them to warm myself. I held onto them as I fell into a deep sleep.

The sun was warm as I slept very soundly that afternoon. After napping for four hours, my state was mostly restored. When I woke up, the sun was going down. I finally understood the meaning behind a lot of Black Glasses' words.

In this current environment, I obviously should rest in the daytime and do activities in the evening. Even if there were no crocodiles at night, it was difficult for me to get a proper night's rest.

It was better to achieve maximum rest during the day so that I could resist the cold and damp at night.

This was the first strategy I had come up with since coming to this island. This was what managing my own state meant.

I turned my head and stretched my body. Like clockwork, the "follower" was already by the lake. It was the only one left, and I felt like Thomas's follower was a bit lonely. It really was hard to change things like living habits.

I wasn't sure if the girl would come, but I was a man of my word. I twisted my arms and decided to deal with the reptile according to Black Glasses' way of thinking.

## Silence—About Su Nan

When Su Nan was eleven years old, she realized she was different from everyone else.

She hardly followed new trends, didn't like listening to music, and didn't discuss with her peers the challenges their generation was facing.

She spent a year trying to build up her interest in these things, but in the end, she failed and had to face the truth. The redundant information this society produced had evolved into consumable media, which was all meaningless noise to her.

This was certainly undesirable for a teenager. Su Nan could hardly make any friends because she had nothing in common with them.

It was at that age that she began searching for her own happiness.

She simply wanted to know whether there was anything that could interest her and give her a sense of belonging.

This process lasted for about three years. When Su Nan hit puberty at fourteen, the “content” contained in her figure was surprisingly rich. This exacerbated her pain because more and more people around her—including both men and women—seemed to like her. The more this occurred, the more she became disappointed with the world.

“The world's been reconstructed into one that's easy to understand and easy to use. The challenges that people often encounter have all been resolved by the rapid developments that have taken place over several centuries. Humans now lack problems. They need questions that are hard to solve. It's why we're grateful for things like energy crises, AIDS, and global warming, which are difficult to overcome. There aren't many problems like this, but they do manage to unite us humans.”

One day when she was fifteen, she was smoking on the street. There was an eight-year-old boy who was also smoking on the street corner. Su Nan was wearing a T-shirt that had the words “Global Warming” printed on it, which the boy said to her.

Children these days could easily recall concepts they had learned from all kinds of documentaries. They probably didn't understand them, but when the issues were discussed, they could recite the whole story. Su Nan thought about it but ultimately decided not to pay any attention to this eight-year-old boy.

She pinched out the child's cigarette and took the rest of the pack from his pants pocket.

The boy smiled. His smile was like that of someone who was almost forty.

Su Nan saw this smile again on Wu Xie years later.

When Su Nan came out of cram school<sup>148</sup> that night, she found two fingers inside the child's cigarette pack. They were two very long fingers.

Su Nan immediately called the police, but she was so terrified that she was incoherent. It was the Qixi Festival<sup>149</sup> that night, so the streets were crowded. Su Nan threw the pack of cigarettes away and dialed 110<sup>150</sup> with her Nokia phone. Soon, the police arrived.

The policeman had his hat pressed low over his face and he appeared to be a little hunchbacked. Su Nan could still clearly remember that the policeman from that night was pale and very young.

His fingers were very long and as he carefully examined the pack of cigarettes, Su Nan felt that the fingers inside might belong to him.

The policeman asked Su Nan some questions, recorded her information, and then gave her a ride to the police station. Su Nan smoked the policeman's cigarette in the car as she looked at the Qixi Festival passing by outside. She remembered it clearly even now. That eight-year-old boy from before was smoking a cigarette as he passed through the crowd. Su Nan could see that he was wearing a T-shirt that read: Under the Seat.

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<sup>148</sup> They're schools that offer supplementary classes, often in preparation for key school and university entrance exams. Students usually go to cram school after regular school lets out.

<sup>149</sup> It's Chinese Valentine's Day. Takes place on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month. More info [here](#).

<sup>150</sup> It's basically 911 in China (but for police only). FYI: In China, you have to dial 110 for police, 112 for an ambulance, 119 for firefighters.

The little boy pointed to his shirt and Su Nan somehow got the hint. She reached under the seat and felt a small hand, which handed her a can of Coke.

Su Nan held the Coke in her hand, completely stunned. She turned her head and looked out the window. The Qixi Festival crowd was blocking the car, but she could still see the little boy in the crowd make a move like he was opening the Coke.

Su Nan glanced at the policeman, who turned to look at her. Ever since that moment, Su Nan's life completely changed.

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***Note: Su Nan is a character from the "Sand Sea" drama. She doesn't appear in the novel at all.***



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## Extra: The Tenant

Kan Jian was biking up and down the mountains in Hangzhou. It started to sleet when he arrived at Mount Yuhuang, so he had to put his hood up.

He came upon an inconspicuous stone trail that led upwards. It was covered in grass and the top of the trail disappeared into the weeds.

The mountains here weren't that high, so although they looked desolate, there were still many hikers. There weren't any steep or dangerous areas, and benches and trash cans were available within a fifteen-minute hike.

Kan Jian leaned his bike against a nearby tree and climbed up the trail as the sky slowly darkened. There were trees on both sides of the trail that were as thick as a wrist and appeared to be about twenty years old. The trees became even more dense as he kept walking. If this mountain hadn't been in a city and vehicles weren't passing by on the road below, he would've felt like he was back in the primitive forests of Changbai Mountain.

He soon came to a flat trail that had been paved with bluestone. There were several benches on the side, where an old man was sitting and listening to the radio. The radio was playing a local opera that Kan Jian didn't understand. He was certain that it wasn't Yue Opera and thought that it might be Wu Opera.<sup>151</sup> A piece of cardboard with a phone number written on it lay near the old man's feet.

Kan Jian looked at it and realized that it was his own number. He walked up to the old man and said, "Hello, are you the landlord? I'm here to see the house."

The old man looked at Kan Jian, stood up, and told him to follow. As he began making his way into the forest behind the benches, Kan Jian realized that there was an extremely narrow trail there that the forest workers used when they were conducting maintenance.

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<sup>151</sup> Yue Opera is a Chinese opera genre that originated in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. Wiki link [here](#). Wu Opera is a Chinese opera genre that originated in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province. Wiki link [here](#).

Kan Jian followed the old man up and down the uneven trail for about thirty minutes. He was already well into Mount Yuhuang's wild forest by then, but he obviously wasn't alone. There were a lot of plastic snack bags and cigarette butts along the way, which showed that a lot of visitors must have come to this place. He had many ideas as to why they would come here.

After some more time had passed, he finally arrived at the edge of a cliff. The cliff wasn't steep but had a gentle slope leading down to the valley. He looked down and saw that an old yellow cement bungalow was hidden under the cliff. It had a flat roof that was covered in fallen leaves, was about eighty or ninety square meters, and looked prone to collapse.

They carefully slid down a narrow, damp trail towards the bungalow.

There was a layer of cement covering the ground outside the bungalow that was also covered in fallen leaves. The sea-blue iron door was faded and rusted and had a rental advertisement with a phone number spray-painted on it in red.

"Sir, is this your house? Why would you build a house in a place like this?"

"It's my company's." It took a while for the old man to find the bungalow's key on his key ring. After several tries, the lock made an ominous sound and finally opened. The old man took the key off of the ring and immediately handed it to Kan Jian before heading inside and turning on an incandescent lamp.

The room was bare and full of dust. Kan Jian could see that there were many cables and leather hoses laying in the corner. It appeared that the house had previously been used to store cables, but all that was left now was trash.

Kan Jian took out his phone and found that there was still a 4G signal here. He breathed a sigh of relief and realized how omnipotent his boss was, *how the hell did he know that there was a house for rent in a place like this?*



“I’m leasing the house to you privately, so you guys better keep quiet about it. I don’t want to get in trouble if my company finds out,” the old man said in heavily accented Mandarin. “Your boss said that he had to rent the house but didn’t tell me why. What do you guys even do?”

Kan Jian pulled out some cash, counted it, and then handed it to the old man, who put on his glasses and wrote a receipt. “My boss needs a place to photograph sunsets and sunrises,” Kan Jian replied, while Wu Xie’s exact words rang in his ears: *There will be a lot of unpredictable things when I come back to Hangzhou. Wushanju is too big of a target. I need a hidden shelter before I get things settled.*

Before the old man left, he explained the utilities to Kan Jian and told him about some of the precautions to take if it rained during the winter.

Once the old man was gone, Kan Jian walked out of the house, climbed up a nearby tree, and pushed himself up to the edge of the roof. After he flipped himself onto the roof, he carefully inspected the surrounding forests and mountains to see how many sentries he needed to set up and how he should plan out his hunting trails.

## The First Meeting 2

“I’m tired. Let’s take a break.” Old Dog Wu’s legs were shaking a little. He pointed to the flowerbed on the side of the road and asked Wu Yiqiong to help him walk over.

Once he sat down, Wu Yiqiong unbuttoned Old Dog Wu’s collar and then fanned him. “Dad, the weather is so hot. Aren’t you just torturing yourself when you decide to go out?”

“Cut the crap. I’m out here anyway,” Old Dog Wu became angry and said in the Changsha dialect, “Didn’t you know to check the weather forecast?”

“Fine. My bad. How about we go home and come here another day? It seems like there’s not a cloud in sight, so it’ll be scorching hot for a while. The air is also bad, which isn’t good for your health.”

“Can you stop talking nonsense? Can you think properly and make correct choices? If we get on the bus, isn’t it just as hot in there as it is outside?” Old Dog Wu shakily took out a wet towel and wiped the sweat off of himself.

Wu Yiqiong couldn’t help but sigh. He looked around and saw a shop up ahead that was under the shade of a tree. It appeared to have an air conditioner, so he said, “Let’s go there and look around. We’ll let the cool breeze blow over us and then we can take our time exploring.” With that said, he helped Old Dog Wu up.

Old Dog Wu sighed, “If you get to live to a thousand, you’ll know how annoying it is when you’re sweaty.”

When the two people came to the shop under the tree’s shade, the cold breeze made Old Dog Wu tremble. He felt too cold and a little dizzy, so he turned around and got ready to leave. At this time, he suddenly heard some sounds.

He turned around and saw a tiny German Shepherd in a cage in the shop's window. The puppy was looking at him with an adorably silly expression on its face.

Old Dog Wu waved his hand, and Wu Yiqiong helped him walk over. The little German Shepherd stood up in the cage.

German Shepherds weren't companion dogs, so they didn't look likable when they were little. But this little German Shepherd looked very friendly and silly, which made people want to laugh upon seeing it.

"Brother Xiao Man. Little furry ball." He looked at the puppy for a long time and felt really amused.

"Boss!" Old Dog Wu suddenly shouted, sounding quite spirited.

The middle-aged woman who had dozed off inside the shop was awakened in an instant and started cursing. But then she saw that someone wanted to buy something, so she immediately forced herself to smile. "Oh, you want this one? The puppy is fifty days old. Five hundred yuan."

"Give her five hundred," Old Dog Wu said to Wu Yiqiong. He then opened the cage and held Brother Xiao Man in his arms.

## Unknown Story: Queen of the West's Ghost Banquet

I met this writer before I went to Changbai Mountain (as Guan Gen, I met many intellectuals). This writer was a friend of a publishing house editor that I knew. I decided to talk to him because I knew very clearly that my trip was very high-risk. If I died in Changbai Mountain, then some things might never be known.

After being active for so long, Little Brother's memory wasn't very reliable, so if I ended up dying, all those years of hard work would've all been for nothing. I spent a long time trying to convince myself that everything would be fine, but I still couldn't accept this possibility. In the end, I still hoped that some things could be passed down.

At that time, I had a lot of things to do, such as checking the inventory of the shops in Xiling. If the things in the warehouse were left there for a long time, they would pile up, which wasn't good. So, I found a friend in Beijing to keep them for me for the time being. But it was difficult to take care of all the various things.

The warehouse for funerary objects was different from the general warehouse. Not to mention the basic conditions such as keeping the temperature and humidity constant, your things couldn't be left haphazardly everywhere. I rented the warehouse using the name of a gallery. In addition to all kinds of fake oil paintings that concealed hidden compartments, there were also many old Western-style clocks and watches that were piled up in the warehouse. The small funerary objects were carefully wrapped in foam and then hidden in the interlayers of these clocks and watches. There were also a few utensil cabinets hidden here and there. These antique clocks were all about the same length, so I couldn't make a catalog; I could only rely on memory, which was very annoying.

I actually liked this place a lot and would often wind up all the clocks. There were probably about a thousand of them here, so listening to the ticking sounds of those second hands moving at the same time sounded just like raindrops hitting a canopy. It was like the world was full of sound,

but also like there wasn't any sound at all. Most of the time, I could only fall asleep with this sound.

I met this writer in the warehouse. He must have heard about what I did, for when he saw those Western clocks, he looked like he couldn't quite believe it.

I looked at him. He seemed very awkward and uncomfortable. I knew that the person who really asked him to come was the editor backing him. After all, the editor knew that I had many stories to tell.

"What do you want to know?" I asked him as I sat down. I knew what I wanted to say, but it wasn't like I could really tell him everything.

He looked at me nervously, but I could tell that his curiosity was winning out. "I heard that you know someone who's lived in Nepal for a long time and you've experienced many things with him. Now you want someone to write those experiences down."

When I nodded, he said, "I hope you'll choose me to write this story."

## Unknown Story: Queen of the West's Ghost Banquet 2

I looked at the writer, suddenly alert. In my line of work, it was a big taboo to show such clear interest in something. I wasn't used to the other party expressing their intentions so clearly, so I kept thinking he had some other scheme set up.

He took out his notebook and continued to explain, "Mr. Guan, I think I'm a very good writer. I just need a chance. I won't let you down."

I didn't care whether he was a good writer or not, I just needed him to record all the information. I looked into his eyes and knew that his way of thinking was very simple. He believed that he would surely succeed as long as he got the chance, but in fact, the most important thing in this world was to distinguish whether this opportunity was really an opportunity or not.

For a long-term unsuccessful person, their so-called "opportunity" was often wrong. After all, sticking to your own ideas would often lead to more mistakes and setbacks. This writer's face was full of this kind of frustration, but he was still determinedly chasing the opportunities he believed in. This stubbornness somewhat reminded me of the person I used to be.

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing, nor did it make you a failure, to stubbornly stick to your own ideals, but success often came later.

*This is fine. A good recorder should be unsuccessful. In this way, he can cherish the things he records instead of pursuing his own thoughts.*

I lit a cigarette and asked him to sit down. *What should I say to him? What are the most memorable things that come to mind?*

I chased any traces of Poker-Face all over China. On the snow-capped mountains of Nepal, in the process of marching to Motuo, huge white mountains covered the sky, with only a trace of black rocks on them. It

was a reminder that they weren't actually the sky but the god of the mountain.

Poker-Face used to walk through this snowy mountain forty years before I ever arrived here. He and I often walked the same path, but one was forty years ago and the other was forty years later. When the time and space happened to intersect, I often saw a mirage.

One day, when I was at an altitude of four thousand meters or more, the low oxygen made me imagine that there were halos of color around my retinas. An hour before sunset, the gorgeous sky and my damaged retinas made the colors look extremely magnificent. I knew it wasn't real, but I was still stunned anyways.

At that time, I was wandering around the pass of the snow-capped mountains. I looked at the distant mountains and imagined seeing Poker-Face standing on the cliff in front of me, facing the sky full of colorful clouds. This situation must have been exactly the same as the day he left Kangba and walked into the world.<sup>152</sup>

Everything I experienced must have started on that day.

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<sup>152</sup> Mentioned back in Tibetan Sea Flower. Kanbga (also read as 'Khampa') is a subdivision of Tibetan ethnic group/former Tibetan province of Kham, now split between Tibet and Sichuan.

## Unknown Story: Queen of the West's Ghost Banquet 3

If we looked at everything I had experienced in the past from a macro perspective, the time when Poker-Face first left Motuo may have occurred around the time I was born. Several generations of my family had experienced hardships, so when I was born, I was given a simple name. There seemed to be only one simple character that fit with everyone's expectations of what my life should be like.

In fact, since I was young, many facets of my family's character had been revealed. When I analyzed it later, I found that it was because my family wasn't all that simple. Even if this group of people wanted me to live in a simple environment, there were bound to be a lot of unnatural things that couldn't be hidden. These unnatural and subtle influences would cause me to have a lot of doubts about my surrounding environment.

So in my memory, I had been observing everything since I was a child. I figured I always wanted to see a lot of things that others couldn't see because I wanted to find out the reasons for these flaws around me.

Of course, this was the conclusion I came to afterwards. It might be true, or it might just be me looking for a reason.

I looked at the author in front of me. How could I get him to understand the world I lived in?

"Do you know what the Nine Gates is?" I asked him.

He looked up at me and nodded, "I checked some information. It's a gang."

I looked at him, "The Nine Gates is not a gang."

I didn't know how to describe an organization like the Nine Gates, but there was no doubt that it wasn't a gang. If anything, it was a multi-faceted organization that focused more on rules and regulations.



When I was younger, it was difficult for me to see the subtleties of the relationships between the Nine Gates. It sounded like a naturally formed hierarchy of power and wealth, but in fact, the power balance between the Nine Gates was astonishing. In the completely disorderly South, this balance helped avoid many conflicts. But after thinking about it, I was no longer willing to explain too many things to this author. It was because I really didn't have much time.

"Then what is it?" He asked me.

I pretended to smile mysteriously before saying to him, "There are nine gangs."

He paused for a moment, looked at my smile, and then gave a hesitant smile of his own, "Nine?"

Seeing me nod, he added, "Nine different forces are difficult to write about. It takes a long time to explain clearly. Can we reduce it to only a few of them?"

When I shook my head, he asked, "When did you officially enter this line of business?"

I felt a tingle at the back of my head. This was my sixth sense telling me that his question was very risky.

I shook my head again, realizing that my previous thoughts were too naïve. If I wanted him to record all the information I had in mind, then I would need to divulge a lot of very sensitive information, which would be very fatal to me at this stage. I sighed, giving up the idea in my mind.

"Sorry, I suddenly remembered that I have some unfinished business to take care of. Can we talk about these things some other time?" I asked the author.

After constantly restraining my emotions for so long, I was filled with an irrepressible excitement at the thought of having such an opportunity to vent. As a result, it was very difficult to push it all back down again. I had reached the last step. If I didn't record these things, I wouldn't get another chance in the future. This prime opportunity was also because I

no longer had any worries since there was a chance I might not appear in this world again.

The author looked at me without answering for a long time. I noticed that he had that same look on his face from earlier.

“You just need to tell me a story,” he said after remaining silent for a long time. “It doesn’t need to be true. I just need something to hand in to the editor-in-chief, ok?”

“I might just make up a story,” I said to him. “Are you sure that’s fine?”

“All stories are based on reality,” he said. “Go ahead and tell me. I believe your story must be very different from others’ stories.”

## Wang Meng's Diary

I've been in this ghostly place, surrounded by blowing sand as far as the eye can see, for twenty-two days...

To be honest, when Boss said that he was coming back, I felt really happy from the bottom of my heart.

I just didn't expect him to go this far.

Although that Huang Yan guy was a little stupid and Boss was really angry at the time, it wasn't like Boss to suddenly leave without saying a word.

I don't know where that Huang Yan guy is headed, but the team is falling apart and it's making me feel a little panicked.

But Boss always has a calm poker face.

I feel like he's more silent this time than ever before—even I have no way to estimate his true intentions; his thoughts are buried too deep in his heart.

Of course, I also want to ask, but I know that even if I do, Boss won't tell me anything.

Based on what I'm seeing now, it's already exceeded the limits of my imagination.

I believe Boss thinks so too.

But at the moment I cleared the sand away, I saw a strange gleam in Boss's eyes.

At that moment, I thought of Little Brother and even Pan Zi...

Then, I vaguely felt that Boss...seems to have changed...

—Wang Meng XXXX year X month X day

## **Miscellaneous Extras (Read after “Ten Years Later”)**

## The One and Only Pan Zi in Ten Years

After returning from Changbai Mountain, a sense of senility came straight at me. I really felt that I was old. Anyone spending a few years experiencing what I did wouldn't be interested in any worldly disputes. What I did most often was longing. As I sat in front of the stove and listened to the rain, my mind would unwittingly drift back in time. I would fall asleep while thinking about it, but then suddenly wake up again.

Someone told me that if I didn't want to think about it all the time, I should write it down because written words could be forgotten more quickly.

So, I've been writing a lot recently. On the one hand, I wanted to see if he was right. On the other hand, I did a lot of research on memory and found that it was less reliable than I thought it would be. I was kind of afraid of losing it, so I wanted to write everything down before I forgot it.

I was always afraid of remembering the past, but I never actually wanted to forget it.

I wrote a lot of things down one by one, but whenever I wrote about Pan Zi, I often had to stop and slow down.

I could recall a lot of things about Pan Zi—numerous things, in fact. In my mind, he always looked the same as he did when I was a child. But all I could remember now was the black and white photo on his gravestone. He looked old in the photo, which was a fact that often brought me back to my senses: even though I thought he had always been the same, he still aged.

But I sometimes thought that if Pan Zi were still alive and saw that old-looking photo, he'd probably smash the gravestone himself.

I remembered that I had encouraged him to go to school before since he wasn't well-educated. He'd sometimes listen to me and take some correspondence courses, but he had a poor foundation so there wasn't much progress. I also talked him into learning how to cook. Pan Zi was great at making salt and sugar congee, which he often made for me. He'd

also make me some boiled eggs in vinegar dressing. That was the way they ate on the battlefield, and I actually liked it a lot. Pan Zi always felt that Little Master Three was too worthy of these foods, but he didn't stop making them and even made me a few extra sausages while he was at it.

After he passed away, there was a time when I didn't dream of him at all. But I was actually hoping to dream of him because I thought that I was the one who had killed him. I thought that rather than dying in a stone cave, his ending should've been marrying a woman and living a happy life full of arguments and laughter.

Uncle Three still hadn't come back. I figured he was probably gone.

During the Spring Festival and family meals, Uncle Three's seat was always empty. My father usually waited for him at the door until the meal was ready to be served. He always thought that whatever his brother had done out there could be forgiven as long as he came back for the Spring Festival. But Uncle Three never did come back. As the years passed, my father gradually stopped waiting and said, "He's probably gone."

Uncle Three was especially loyal to friends, so did he go and pick up Pan Zi at that time? I thought it would be great if Uncle Three had been with him during his last moments in the darkness. These two people were definitely better off together.

I remembered that over the past ten years, there were a lot of times when I thought that I wouldn't survive. But whenever I was at the end of my rope, I always felt relieved. There were so many things that I really didn't want to do alone. If I died, then I could go find them and they would take care of me. But in the end, I still made my way to the top of the industry. Were they there blessing me?

I had written a lot of things before, but whenever it came to Pan Zi, I always had to stop and write slower. I knew that it was because one day, his name would no longer appear in my writing.

It had been raining for the past few days when I finally made it to that part. I put down my pen that day, no longer very interested in writing any further.

There was a person whom I had been waiting ten years for—someone I could at least say goodbye to one day—and another person who wouldn't appear again, no matter how many decades had passed.

But I wouldn't be sad; I'd just light a cigarette. I was his Little Master Three, after all. The man Pan Zi had followed would never bring his brothers down.

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***Merebear note: Yvette translated this for the 2021 [Qingming Festival](#) (Tomb-Sweeping Day) but the original text was uploaded on November 4, 2015***

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# Break from a Thousand Years of Rain

I've been having long dreams recently.

Last night, I dreamed of a short science fiction novel I read when I was a child that was called "A Thousand Years of Rain".

It was about an astronaut who crash-landed on a barren, mud-filled planet where there was no life. He had to wait a week for rescue.

During this week, he encountered the rainy season that occurred once every thousand years on this planet. He also met a glass-like life form that only appeared during the rainy season: Jelly.

This magnificent jewel-like creature reproduced rapidly in a short period of time but returned to desolation once the rainy season was over.

When the astronaut saw his spaceship coming, he lied about his experience and said that the days he lived there were "all muddy".

Later, the topic of "A Thousand Years of Rain" continuously hovered in my mind. In some of my dreams, it even became another story.

It became a mountain town in southern China. Due to its closed geographical environment and unusual climate, this town had been rained on for a thousand years. No matter if it was sunny or cloudy, the air was always filled with raindrops.

In summer, there were countless rainbows in the air because of the sun and the rain appearing at the same time.

In my dream, this small town had the same hues as Hayao Miyazaki's movies: cheerful greens, bright-colored rainbows, summer bugs chirping, and clear air.<sup>153</sup>

Of course, I know a place that's been rained on for a thousand years should be as plain as a barren planet. But I imagined the plants and trees in this town to be aquatic, and you could even see some fantastic aquatic

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<sup>153</sup> Japanese animator, director, producer, screenwriter, author, and manga artist. Co-founder of Studio Ghibli. Some of his famous works are "Spirited Away" and "Howl's Moving Castle". Info [here](#).



plants on land. This small town had the best drying technology in the world, and the millennium-long rain also supplied endless power.

Everyone worked hard and lived happily. The girls here were beautiful and all had particularly great skin. Many of them had the Chinese character for “rain” in their names.

The storylines in my dreams are always bizarre. The purpose of my visit to this town was weird. An old man from this town told me that the thousand-year rain would stop for an hour, ushering in a short period free of rain. I traveled thousands of miles just to see this break from a thousand years of rain.

I wrote a short script and prepared to shoot a non-profit animated film that talked about what happened during this hour between two millennia. There was a local girl named Xiao Yu<sup>154</sup> and an innocent teenage boy in a white shirt. I hope to have my little dream filmed by 2016.

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***Yvette notes: This is a Weibo post from the author. It explains the origin of Rain Village. It ties back to “Ten Years Later” [Chapter 41](#): “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.”***

***Happy Birthday Wu Xie!***

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<sup>154</sup> Xiao Yu (小雨) translates literally as “Little Rain”.

## Extra: Birthday

I was looking at the calendar on my phone. If it weren't for the message my mom just sent, I would never know my birthday was coming up. Speaking of which, my mom hadn't really been passionate about my birthday when I was in my early twenties. At that time, she seemed more anxious about her own days, but now she finally seemed to come to her senses and began caring about these special days.

I had long forgotten how to celebrate my birthday, but I remembered that I had spent a lot of them in the mountains back in the day. Deep in the mountains, no one really kept track of the date. Instead, they only focused on how many days we had spent there. As a result, when I left there, my birthday had already passed. Under that kind of pressure and confusion, birthdays didn't really matter.

Now that things had settled down this year, my mind suddenly froze when I saw the date. For me, getting older now was merely the sound of the second hand of a clock moving forward. It seemed reasonable to ignore it.

I locked my phone, turned around, and asked Fatty, "Fatty, do you still remember how you celebrated your birthday when you were little?"

Fatty was picking at his feet while holding a cigarette in his mouth, "Birthday my ass. The earth gave birth to me and the sky raised me, I can celebrate the date whenever I want. Shit like that is just for our own amusement, so who the fuck obeys such rules?"

I thought of his age and realized that it was too hard to imagine people from his generation having a strong concept of birthday celebrations. Fatty turned around and asked, "Why? Do you feel lonely?"

"What do you mean?" I didn't know why mentioning birthdays would make one feel lonely.

Fatty released a mouthful of cigarette smoke, "You don't have to use your birthday as an excuse to find whores. I have connections. Sister Wang

from across the street isn't bad. She even makes red braised pork belly at night."

"Sister Wang?" There was a Sister Wang working part-time at Panjiayuan? Across the street from where? We had literally just come back and Fatty was already whoring around? "If you're calling her sister, should I call her auntie? Did you guys meet while square dancing?"<sup>155</sup>

Fatty put down the nail clippers, placed his feet in the footbath, shuddered comfortably, and said, "I'm calling her sister to respect her occupation. Fine, if you really want to celebrate your birthday, what do you want to do? Do you want to get dinner? We can call Black Glasses and Xiao Hua together, my treat. And then after that, we can get a foot bath and massage and go listen to a xiangsheng."<sup>156</sup>

I looked at him. Poker-Face had also gotten tricked into taking a foot bath and was sitting right next to him. They were both leaning back in the wickers chairs as the water steamed around their feet. I sighed, took out my own basin, and poured hot water into it.

"I want to go see a play." The idea had suddenly popped into my head when I put my feet into the basin. "Yeah, let's go see a play."

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<sup>155</sup> It's an exercise routine normally done after dinner. It's popular among middle-aged/retired individuals (usually women). More info [here](#).

<sup>156</sup> It's a crosstalk or comic dialogue; a type performing art. More info [here](#).

## A Day in the Life of Xie Yuchen<sup>157</sup>

At five o'clock in the morning, Xie Yuchen opened his eyes.

He didn't get up until the alarm went off at 5:10.

He had seven places to sleep in this courtyard house<sup>158</sup> and chose a different one every day. On this particular day, he slept on a small bed in the attic. It was cramped there, but it gave him a sense of security. It had rained last night, and since he liked to listen to the sound of it, this was actually the best place to hear it.

There was a living room downstairs, along with a bathroom on the left side. After taking a shower and brushing his teeth, he poured himself a glass of water and sat down with only a towel hanging around his waist. He then used a hairdryer to dry his body and hair.

The room's temperature and humidity remained constant, so his body was soon dried. He used the towel to absorb the last bit of water from his damp hair and then shook it out before turning the hairdryer off. He knew that using a blow dryer was bad for his hair.

There was a velvet-covered lounge on one side, which he leaned back against as he pressed a button on the nearby answering machine and took a drink of water. At about one in the morning, his secretary had gone over his schedule for the day.

Xie Yuchen quietly memorized it while determining that none of the things interested him. But he still had to do them.

After listening, he realized that there weren't many important things to deal with today and breathed a sigh of relief.

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<sup>157</sup> Yvette Note: The pinyin of "A Day in the Life of Xie Yuchen" is "Jie Yu Hua de Yitian". 解 is a heteronym and is pronounced as "Xie" in "Xie Yuchen" but "Jie" in "Jie Yuhua". "Jie yu hua" is actually an idiom that means "an empathetic flower who listens to and understands people"

<sup>158</sup> It's also called a quadrangle. Picture at the end of the chapter.

The answering machine turned off automatically and Xie Yuchen flipped through the items on the coffee table next to his lounge. There was a box of cigars on it. He picked one up, sniffed it, and then put it back.

He smoked, but he wasn't addicted.

At 6:40, soft music from a movie soundtrack began playing in the room as he headed into his dressing room.

The dressing room was a circular area that had a diameter of twenty meters and three huge mirrors in the middle. His figure may have given the designer the mistaken idea that he was someone who valued his style and appearance.

In fact, a man didn't need much clothing. When he walked to an area that was set at a ninety-degree angle, the closet door automatically opened. The inside was full of long-sleeved T-shirts from the same brand. He picked one out. There wasn't anything important going on today, so he didn't want his signature color to make people nervous.

He had worn pink for nearly ten years now and involuntarily turned it into a color that represented his murderous aura, which was the complete opposite of his original intention.

He picked out a black one, put on jeans and canvas shoes, and then stuck a dagger on the back of his belt.

He stood in front of the mirror and ultimately decided that it was still too conspicuous.

As he went all the way through the living room and corridor— this courtyard house didn't have any doors—he didn't meet a single soul. There was no one here except for him. There was another courtyard at the entrance to this courtyard, which was connected by a tunnel.

This tunnel was so complex that it was impossible for ordinary people to get to his private kingdom.

At night, the only living things accompanying him were a pond full of small white fish in the courtyard. A part of the corridor ran right over the

pond and there was a sensor there that would detect his footsteps and start pouring food into the pond. The white fish had been waiting for this moment and began scrambling around the corridor.

When he went into another room, there were more than thirty kinds of cell phones on the table, all with the same number. He chose the thinnest one and then turned to the other side, where a row of sunglasses sat.

He picked out a brown pair, put them on, and then dialed a number on the cell phone.

He took an elevator underground and followed along the tunnel until he reached the other courtyard. At 7:10, he passed more than a dozen cars in the garage. After half a second's hesitation, he went out to the curb, bought a powdered sugar doughnut, and drank a bowl of soy milk.

He picked up a bicycle that was leaning against the wall by the jade shop's entrance, unlocked it, and started riding it on the sidewalk.

At 9:30, he arrived at the cafe below his auction house. His secretary had been waiting at the door and handed him some papers. He read them carefully and then signed them. After having a cup of coffee at 10:30, Xie Yuchen got on his bike again and headed towards Panjiayuan. There were a lot of interesting people there.

When he arrived at Panjiayuan at 11:40, the sound of cooking came from the back room of Fatty's shop. The shop was very small, and the way Fatty used the spatula against the wok sounded like he was striking a gong.

He walked in, only to find that the battle had already begun: Wu Xie was peeling potatoes and Zhang Qiling was fanning the coal stove's fire for Fatty. These people were already familiar with the fact that Xiao Hua would often show up around this time and called out greetings.

Xiao Hua rolled up his sleeves, took off his sunglasses, fetched some water, and began washing the water chestnuts.

All the dishes were ready at 12:30, so Fatty made a phone call. The other end rang just outside the shop and the store quickly delivered the liquor. Lunch was now served.

They ate and drank leisurely until two in the afternoon, by which time the dishes had long gone cold. Xiao Hua helped Fatty inspect some of his inventory in the shop and then played badminton with Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling at three. Zhang Qiling swung the racquet too fast and it soon bent.

At 4:30, the sky was gradually growing darker so Xiao Hua biked home.

He finally arrived at 6:30, his phone ringing just as he entered the tunnel.

He talked on the phone for an hour and then made nine more calls. By that time, it was nine o'clock.

He put down his phone, took off his sunglasses, and went back to his yard. The hot spring pool began filling with water as he changed his clothes. He soaked in the open-air hot spring alone and then ate some fruit for dinner.

At 9:40, he looked around the courtyard and chose the office as his resting place for the night.

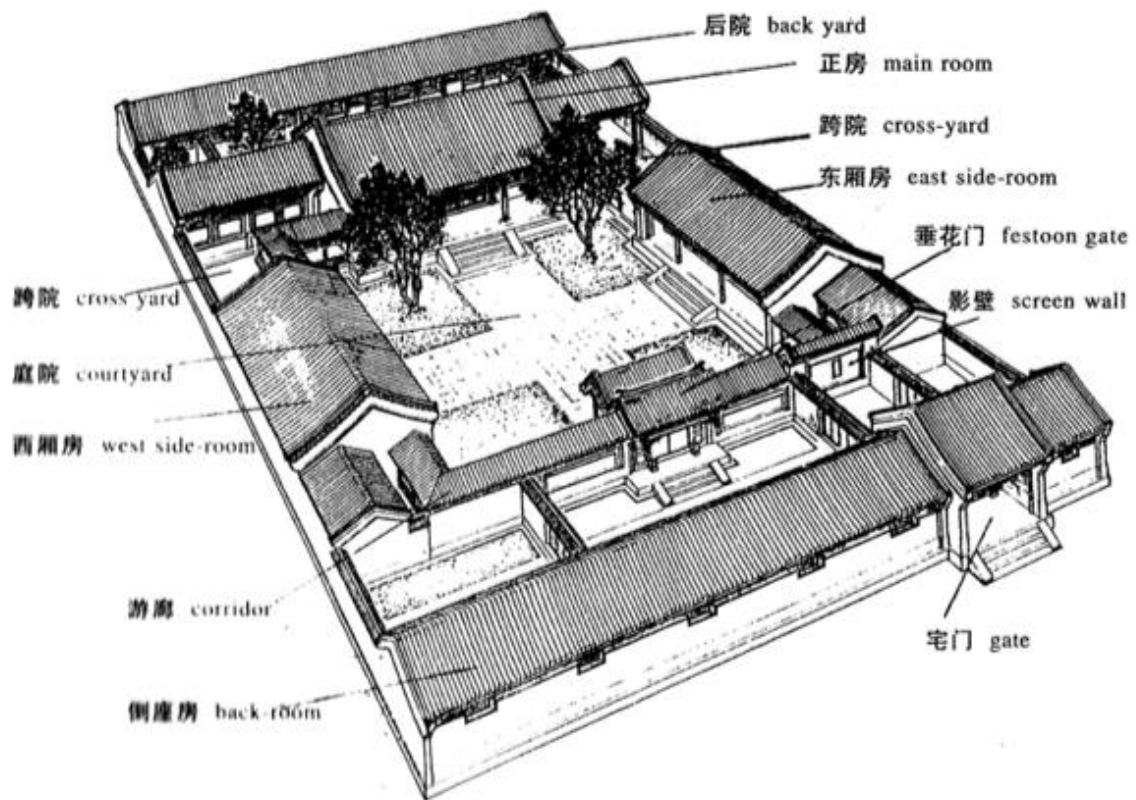
At 9:50, he got into bed and read some Snoopy comics<sup>159</sup> before taking two sleeping pills.

As it started to rain again outside, he remembered that phone call.

He got out of bed, went into the living room, picked up a cigar, and then put it back down again. He turned on his home theater to watch a movie and ended up falling asleep on the couch by eleven.

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<sup>159</sup> Snoopy is Charlie Brown's dog in the comic "Peanuts". More info [here](#).





# Notes from Rain Village

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**[TN Note: Goes sometime before Extras 5 and 6 (The 2016 & 2017 New Years Special)]**

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Fatty came here to see me and brought thirty-four CDs and some smokes. When I told him I had quit, he said that was good and then we all started smoking. Fatty is returning to the city tomorrow, so I'll ask him to bring you a letter.

In fact, nothing has happened during this period of time. The only new thing is that I learned a few days ago that there's a strange fish in the waterfall. The local people have a special way of fishing that's called "waterfall fishing". You have to wear a raincoat and stand under the waterfall. The old man said that the fish below don't have any ears, so they can't hear the roar of the water.

The old man always speaks to me in Fujian-accented Mandarin. He's been my chat buddy recently, so my accent is already starting to sound very Fujian. Next time you come, you can hear me pronounce your names.

Life in the village is actually more difficult than I thought. The humidity is a big problem, the climate is changing, and the water level is falling. There isn't as much water flowing down from the waterfalls as there used to be. The old people in the village are afraid that the rain will stop. They keep saying that if that happens, something will happen in the village. The young people don't care and think it's better if it stops. But there aren't many young people left in the village.

There are several tulou<sup>160</sup> in the village, so tourists occasionally come to this place. I bought several rooms in them and rent them out to these

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<sup>160</sup> Traditional Hakka communal residence in Fujian, typically a large multi-story circular structure built around a central shrine. Little more info [here](#). The Hakka are Han Chinese people whose ancestral homes are chiefly in the Hakka-speaking provincial areas of Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Sichuan, Hunan, Zhejiang, Hainan and Guizhou. More info [here](#).

scattered guests. Fatty told me that Fujian is full of many valleys. He's traveled all over the surrounding mountains and saw tulou hidden in many of the valleys. Walking in the mountains here is like opening a clamshell. You never know when you'll see a pearl.

I guess he's implying that I'm living in a pearl right now.

His vocabulary has increased, and his speech seems to make more sense now that he's getting older.

I made a lot of pork chops, so they're ready to eat. I asked Fatty to bring some back with him. Remember to ask him for them; otherwise, he'll definitely eat them all himself. There aren't many pigs here, so these pork chops taste different every year.

I heard that the fog there is quite heavy. If business isn't too busy, come by and see me more often.

—Wu Xie

PS: Bring more beer when you come next time.

## 817 Special: Barbell Laughter

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**[TN Note: Goes sometime before Extras 5 and 6 (The 2016 & 2017 New Years Special)]**

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It rained a lot in summer. The splashing water from several waterfalls was mixed in with the torrential rain, making people feel that this small village would be submerged. In addition, there was the deafening sound of water coming from the roaring streams. But nature was so uncanny. All the rain, waterfalls, and streams didn't stay in the village. Instead, they would pour down, wash everything away, and then disappear without a trace.

I made tea in the house. After several days of torrential rain, I figured I finally understood why this place was called Rain Village. I also knew that this village was definitely unusual. The gullies and inner layers of the drainage mountain here were different from other places. It was either because of the ancestors' wisdom when it came to labor or because water conservancy craftsmen had been here.

The tea was very fragrant. Fatty felt uncomfortable with the damp. The moisture here was heavy during the summer, so I didn't know whether he was covered in sweat or dew. He had been in a bad mood for a while. I told him yesterday that he was going through menopause and he insisted on pulling me to a bar in town to show me that his figure was still very popular.

Menopause and auras were two different concepts, but I didn't want to argue with him. Watching him go stir-crazy because he couldn't go out on a rainy day made me uneasy, so I found a corner to drink my tea and avoid him.

When he saw that I obviously didn't want to talk to him, he went and sat in a bamboo chair next to Poker-Face. The two of them opened the door and watched the curtains of rain pour down from the eaves outside. The

bamboo chairs were very short, so the two of them sitting on them—one fat and one tall—looked like two uncles doing farm work.

Fatty sat there for a long time before he turned to Poker-Face, “Little Brother, I want to discuss something with you. The village branch secretary came to me the day before yesterday and asked me to get your help with some work. In a few days, the town’s agricultural leader will come down for an inspection. Mr. Naïve’s agricultural business and sideline products are very impressive, so the village branch secretary blabbed about them when he was making his report. As a result, the leader wants to come and see us. If he’s impressed, he’ll set up a pilot project. When the village branch secretary came back and thought about it, he was afraid it would blow up in his face when the leader came. So, Little Brother, let’s think of something, yeah?”

I already knew about this. The village branch secretary was a very active person who ran up and down and got involved in all kinds of franchises. But with our identities, I didn’t want to have any more troubles. I usually just let him be, but I couldn’t help with this kind of thing. I couldn’t imagine Poker-Face introducing a new agricultural product to the leader. But the village branch secretary took hold of Fatty’s weakness. Fatty had lost more than forty times playing mahjong before, so this was his chance to save some face.

“Don’t bother. We’ll withdraw to the town and then you can find some villagers to pretend to be us. You can definitely get it done that way.” I took a sip of my tea.

“It’s an idea, but it’s not necessary. This kind of thing will make us look fucking unconfident in our abilities, Mr. Naïve. Our relationship with the village committee is already so tense. If you don’t set an example, life will be even more difficult. Damn it, can you quit being so lazy? Go back to the smooth and slick little master from before. I’m going to run for director of the women’s committee next year and you can’t stop me.”

“There aren’t many women in this village. You’ll be running for a corn cake office<sup>161</sup> instead,” I said angrily. “Why are you trying to start a business here? Don’t you understand that we’re in seclusion?”

Fatty’s anger had been simmering for a while and now he suddenly exploded, “Seclusion?! You fucking quarrel with the aunt next door every day in seclusion! And the whole village treats us like we’re the Japanese entering the village! It’s like they can’t wait to engage us in tunnel warfare! If we keep this up, we’ll definitely be on the news. And when that happens, the people will definitely treat us like fugitives. We need to be approachable and have a good relationship with them.”

The muscles in my forehead jumped. It wasn’t because I was angry with Fatty, but because I thought of the neighbor next door. There always seemed to be all sorts of bad things every day here. I took a deep breath. Fatty wanted to keep going, but Poker-Face suddenly turned to him.

Fatty was startled and immediately made a defensive move. When he had nothing else to do before, he would watch Poker-Face train his fingers, so now he had a lingering fear.

Poker-Face said faintly, “What you said...”

Fatty took a deep breath and said to him, “In fact, it’s nothing. When the leader comes, just smile and nod.” Fatty suddenly pressed his diaphragm and said in a deep voice, “Ha ha, the leader has worked very hard. Please remember to come here often. That’s it. Just a few words.”

Poker-Face thought for a moment. He didn’t give any sort of indication, but there was still some hesitation.

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The leader arrived a week later, and after he left, our relationship with the village got even worse.

Before the leader came, I had several nightmares in which the old people in the village complained. In the middle of the night, I often heard some

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<sup>161</sup> Also called “Bao Gu Ba”. It’s made from corn and is popular in Southwest China. It’s a delicious Yunnan snack that’s usually ground into a thick paste with sticky corn and then steamed into palm-sized chunks.

strange sounds in the woods outside the village that sounded like laughter and barbells. I often woke up in the middle of the night and only felt relieved when I saw Poker-Face and Fatty sleeping soundly.

Fortunately, it was just a dream.

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ~ ~ ~

# Extra: The Daily Life of the Iron Triangle in Rain Village

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**[TN Note: Goes right before Extra 6 (The 2017 New Years Special)]**

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1.

Zhang Haike and his party were traveling to Fujian and stopped by to visit the patriarch. Their arrival made me a little uncomfortable, although they followed tradition and brought many gifts for their elder.

There were all kinds of medicinal liquor and caterpillar fungus from Hong Kong, and even melatonin.<sup>162</sup> I wanted to make a joke at the time that melatonin by itself wasn't good for their patriarch's brain and now he'd have to wear Zhengyang green ice jade to get better.<sup>163</sup>

They stayed in the village for two days. Fatty really liked Zhang Haike and asked him for all the gossip while several others arranged a genealogical chart. In addition to hearing the appalling stories of the old Nine Gates and Crescent Hotel's real background, I also learned some sporadic clues about my Uncle Three. But since it had been such a long time, it was impossible to string them all together now.

Over the past few days, Fujian was absolutely freezing. My HVAC didn't work right, so even though the heat would come on, the moisture wouldn't be pumped out. Fatty totaled the gifts up and said to me, "There are so many people here. We can't just make them leave after

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<sup>162</sup> Caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis*), is a fungus that grows on insects. It's mainly found in the Tibetan Plateau. It parasitizes larvae of ghost moths and produces a fruiting body that's valued as an herbal remedy and is used in traditional Chinese medicine. It's now considered an endangered species in China because of overharvesting and overexploitation. According to this [page](#), it's taken as a generic immune booster, or to treat a growing list of conditions, including cancer. But its anti-tumor properties have never been tested in a clinical trial. More general info [here](#). Melatonin is most commonly used for insomnia and improving sleep in different conditions (like jet lag or trying to fix your sleep cycle). Some info [here](#).

<sup>163</sup> Since melatonin helps you sleep, I think it's considered a "yin" medicine. I couldn't tell for sure, but I think green jade is considered "yang". Apparently, you can wear jade as "medicine", since the qi of the jade flows into your body, and your body qi flows into the jade. I found some info [here](#).

receiving their gifts, right? We at least need to be friends with them. There are so few people left in their family, and the widows and orphans also need a chance to relax. Widow Li has stopped by several times already. It's going to arouse suspicion if all the relatives have long fingers and eight-packs. It's better to organize some activities."

I looked at Fatty with narrowed eyes and asked, "What do you want to do?"

I shouldn't have bothered asking. Fatty shoved everything off on me little by little. On the third day, I drove them to a hot spring hotel in Liancheng County, Longyan. With all the men lined up for the hot springs, it was like an engineering group's annual party.

I was a little nervous when I was with this group of people since we had an unpleasant history, and I knew that they would never show mercy if we had a falling out. We could be considered friends right now because of our relationship with Poker-Face, but the Zhang family was too eccentric. I didn't want to get to know them any more than I already had.

With the exception of Zhang Haike, hardly anyone spoke.

Almost everyone's tattoos showed up since we were in the hot spring, which made the atmosphere really awkward. I was alone in the corner, debating on whether I should run away or not.

But I also made some new discoveries. I found that the overseas Zhangs' tattoos were quite different from Poker-Face's. When I asked Zhang Haike, he told me that the overseas Zhangs' traditional tattoos would make it inconvenient to move around, so they had more freedom. He just had a translated Sanskrit poem tattooed around his neck: "Wutong trees and midnight rain. They know not the grief right now at parting. Leaf by leaf, sound by sound, they drop on empty stairs until the morn."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> It's Wen Tingyun's poem "Water Clock". I found 2 different translations, which I kind of merged to suit my own tastes lol. Wikipedia one [here](#) and then this person's [here](#).



*You act like you're so artistic with words*, I said to myself. Fortunately, however, it couldn't be seen at ordinary times. Considering we looked the fucking same, I didn't want to carry around that kind of black mark.<sup>165</sup>

In the evening, various group activities such as karaoke and mahjong were arranged. I glanced at Poker-Face to see what his reaction was, but he was still looking at the genealogical chart on his phone with a thoughtful look on his face.

## 2. Old IOUs

After soaking in the hot spring, our group met back up in the lounge. It was still too early to separate for activities. I was dizzy and unwittingly followed Fatty and his group to the hot spring hotel. There was a karaoke room decorated in gold and a large number of champagne mirrors. It had been decorated a long time ago, so many old stains could be seen, and there were a lot of cracks on the sofa. There were some gaps between the gold-colored floor tiles that were greasy and black. A mixed smell of disinfectant and detergent seemed to be coming from the middle of it.

Fatty ordered a fruit bowl and a few bottles of wine and then started ordering songs. Fortunately, the system here was very old, so I recognized all the songs. I felt a little dazed as I saw the song titles. At that moment, I realized that all the songs I remembered were new songs at the time, but now they were a thing of the past. Poker-Face leaned against the corner of the sofa and quickly fell asleep. Zhang Haikē started to let himself go with the third song, singing the chorus of "Wish Upon a Star"<sup>166</sup> with Fatty. I knew that when it came to Fatty, there was one song that he would never order.<sup>167</sup>

As I slowly became sleepy, I took out my phone and scrolled through my friends' WeChat Moments. I saw some photos of Wang Meng in Nanjing.

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<sup>165</sup> Remember, tattoos are highly looked down upon in a lot of Asian countries. People will think you're in a gang or something lol. Wu Xie is upset since Zhang Haikē is still going around looking like him and has this hipster tattoo where everyone and their mother can see it if it shows up. He might not be so embarrassed if it was a cool one like Poker-face's.

<sup>166</sup> It's a song Cecilia Cheung sang in the 1999 movie "[Fly Me to Polaris](#)". Youtube link to the song [here](#).

<sup>167</sup> Per Tiffany: some readers speculated the song Fatty would never order is "[The Most Dazzling Folklore](#)". The lyrics include: "You're the most beautiful cloud in the sky, and I'm going to give it my all to keep you." Cloud here pronounces the same as "Yun Cai" in Chinese.

He sent me a separate photo of an old IOU with my Uncle Three's signature on it.

I continued sleepily scrolling through the WeChat Moments. Wang Meng's was full of game updates and instances that he had cleared. He occasionally took selfies that made him look like he was in an anti-drug documentary. I soon fell asleep amidst Fatty's rendition of Tuvan throat singing.<sup>168</sup> When I woke up the next day, I was lying on the sofa in the private room, surrounded by a circle of hungover Zhangs. Poker-Face was gone. He must have gone back to his room to sleep alone. As I trudged carefully through the group of people, I wondered what had happened last night.

Being a member of the Zhang family must have been really depressing. Was this the only way they could get high? I didn't drink last night and exercised every day, so I felt refreshed when I went back to my room. I checked my phone and saw a group message from Beijing. There had been a commemorative event for the Nine Gates in Beijing last night, and the setting sun in the photo looked especially red.

Fatty got up at noon and had an accident. When I went to the infirmary to check on him, I saw him carrying a cat and saying that he had fought with it for some reason.

I noticed that Fatty's thigh had been stabbed three times and asked myself, *why are you fighting with a cat and why are you hurt in that spot?* I wanted to take him to the hospital in town to get a rabies shot, but Fatty refused. He said that he would be fine even if he were clawed by wolves. Moreover, if he went to the hospital for a mere cat scratch, he would definitely lose face.

In the end, he drank too much that night and came knocking on my door, "Let's go." When I asked him what happened, he said, "I just saw a pile of dog shit on the road and wanted to eat it. It's better to be safe than sorry."

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<sup>168</sup> It's known as khoomei. It's a particular variant of overtone singing practiced by people in Tuva, Mongolia, and Siberia. The performer produces a fundamental pitch and one or more simultaneous pitches over that. More info [here](#)

Fatty fell asleep in a plastic waiting chair in the hospital while getting the shot. I couldn't move him, but I also wanted him to get some sleep so I squatted on the stairs by the hospital entrance. I looked out at the quiet town in the middle of the night and chatted with Zhang Haike. I asked him if he could go through changing his whole face again, but he sighed and changed the subject. He asked me if I knew that Black Glasses was so poor that he became a Didi driver. *Isn't he going blind? What the hell?* I thought to myself.

3.

When Zhang Haike left, Fatty waved his hand in farewell and sent him off to the expressway. I squatted by the roadside guardrail and watched him, feeling like his soul had followed after Zhang Haike. Zhang Haike and I appeared to have such a deep relationship on the surface, so maybe Fatty had the illusion that I had disappeared for a while, and now this old helpless and retired man was just a phantom. Fatty turned back, scratched his head, and asked me what we were doing today. I sighed. It was still too early to leave for Nanjing, so I might as well plan a trip.

## Extra: Wrong Genealogy

In a farmhouse in Fujian, he looked at the genealogy chart nailed to the wall. According to everyone's memories, the generation names were arranged according to their impressions. Although it was obviously incomplete, it looked very real.

He had been staring at the wall for several days. It wasn't from a sense of nostalgia or some other emotion. It was because he clearly realized that this family tree was wrong. Moreover, the way in which it was wrong was very surprising. With the help of his fragmented memories, he was able to understand the omissions bit by bit.

He began to have a terrible thought. He felt as if there should be something separating the two generations in the genealogy chart. He thought for a long time and realized that the only possible difference between the two generations would be another generation. In other words, a whole generation had disappeared from the middle of their genealogy. He didn't know why the Zhang family would turn a grandpa into a father and a grandson into a son.

They had hidden a whole generation.

But since the Zhang family had such long lives, this plot must have been man-made.

Where did the generation go? Why did he remember some fragments of this generation when others didn't remember them at all?

He was lost deep in thought.

## Extra: Get an ID Card

Wang Meng poured himself some wine and looked at his primary school classmate who was sitting across from him. This guy had spent seven or eight years doing all kinds of dirty work in Tengchong. Later, he somehow became a deputy county magistrate and rose to fame in the local area. A few years ago, he married a local girl and bought a house. As Wang Meng looked at his dark skin, he realized that the man had completely integrated into the local society.

“I have something very difficult to ask you.” Wang Meng said. His classmate squinted at him and then looked at the road outside the window. They were eating at a common roadside shop in Tengchong and his car was illegally parked on the curb. “Just say it, what is it?”

“I have a friend from here. He wants to go to Vietnam, but he doesn’t have an ID card,” Wang Meng said. “Can you see if there’s any way to resolve it?”

“How can he not have an ID card? Is he a foreigner? Or is he here illegally?” His classmate frowned.

“He’s from the countryside. His parents have been gone since he was a kid and he never got to study. No one cared about him or bothered to register him. He’s been begging for food and living a shady life.”

“That’s so pitiful. But couldn’t the village committee solve this? What’s his name? Go to his village and report it if you want it to get resolved quickly.” The classmate took a sip of wine.

“His surname is Zhang. He already reported it, but the document was returned. Look at this file and help me help him.” Wang Meng handed over a file folder.

His classmate took out the information and looked at the photos. He was silent for a moment before he looked up and asked, “Are you sure this person has been begging for food?”

## Extra: Get an ID Card 2

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**[TN Note: Goes sometime before Extra 6.18 (The 2017 New Years Special)]**

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“What’s your client’s name?” The clerk asked Wang Meng. “There’s no proof of his previous identity, correct?”

“Didn’t Director Wang tell you? It all burned up in a big fire. There’s no proof of registration in the village now.”

“Why isn’t he here doing it himself? Are you related to him?”

“Why are you asking so many questions? I already spoke with your boss.”

Wang Meng wiped the sweat off his forehead. The clerk gave him a piece of paper and said, “Write his name down.”

Wang Meng thought about it and made a phone call, “Boss, it should almost be done. What’s his name? Is it really Zhang Qiling? Isn’t that just a position?”

There was a grunt on the phone. Wang Meng nodded and wrote the words Zhang Qiling down on the paper before handing it back to the clerk who handled household registrations. The other party looked at it and said, “It’s quite elegant.”

As they started typing the information into the system, Wang Meng waited around. He felt as if he was witnessing a monumental event. After tapping on the keyboard a few times, the clerk gave a tut, “Strange, is there something wrong with the system?”

“What’s the matter?” Wang Meng asked.

“I can’t enter the name.” The clerk had just finished speaking when his desk phone suddenly rang. At that moment, a phone on the next table

also started ringing. Within a few seconds, they could hear all the phones in the office start ringing.

Wang Meng turned pale as he watched everyone in the office rush around frantically.

# Xiao Hua's Annual Party

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**[TN Note: Takes place right before Extra 6 (The 2017 New Years Special)]**

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This happened before Black Glasses took us to meet Little Brother Zhang.

On my first day in Beijing, I went to have a drink with Xiao Hua. He had an assistant named Xia Chi Tang. We arrived very late. Fatty found his friend's rundown dumpling restaurant and Xia Chi Tang bought some stuffed meat buns. We chatted over dumpling soup and beer.

Xiao Hua usually didn't bring his people when he came to see me, but this Xia Chi Tang had been with him for several years. He worked in the auction company.

It was said that the company was going to hold an annual party, so there were too many things that needed to be figured out. Since we decided to visit Xiao Hua so suddenly without an appointment, he brought Xia Chi Tang along.

As we chatted with each other, Xiao Hua sorted through all the lists that needed to be checked. Xia Chi Tang saw that I had a good relationship with Xiao Hua and invited me and Fatty to attend the annual party.

Xiao Hua's auction company was a transporter for the family business. After the Sand Sea incident, the company reorganized and introduced a lot of new people.

When Fatty and I thought of all the schemes that would probably take place at the annual party, and how we wanted to remain low-key, we decided to decline.

"Why didn't you ever think about holding an annual party or something when you were running the business before?" Fatty asked me. "You made your business look miserable."



*All kinds of professions have events every year, but the things they do are different, I said to myself. It's more convenient to work during the New Year.*

And so many people died each year that the head count at the end was undoubtedly miserable. Although they knew what they were getting into, people still had feelings. Those fierce people were also raised by parents, so there was no reason to celebrate.

After working in this business for a long time, I wouldn't do anything knowing that I might die the next year. I would rarely have such stupid thoughts.

After Xia Chi Tang left, Fatty asked Xiao Hua to be careful around him. Xia Chi Tang was at most 1.7 meters tall, with both sides of his head shaved and hair still on top. He seemed two-faced with the way he looked at people with those small eyes set behind drooping eyelids. At first glance, he looked like a glistening butt crack.

Fatty's exact words were: Your muscles feel relieved even though your ass is burning. But before the ache of your waist muscles is cured, severe hemorrhoids had already occurred. This basically meant that this kind of person was really useful, but if he was given too much freedom, he would cause serious problems down the line.

Xiao Hua broke off a few garlic cloves for Fatty but didn't eat any himself. He just didn't like the fact that Fatty had garlic oil all over his hands while he was breaking off the cloves

"How long has it been since you sang? If you don't eat garlic and dumplings during the Beijing winter, you won't look like a native," I said.

"There hasn't been time to sing," he said. "But I do sing two or three songs every year during the Qingming Festival."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Also known as "Tomb-Sweeping Day". Chinese families visit the tombs of their ancestors to clean the gravesites, pray to their ancestors and make ritual offerings. Offerings would typically include traditional food dishes and the burning of joss sticks and joss paper. The holiday recognizes the traditional reverence of one's ancestors in Chinese culture. More info [here](#).

The Hong Family's descendants had later disappeared, but since Xiao Hua had a special relationship with the old man, he went to visit his grave during that time. "Boss Hua," Fatty started probing, "I heard that Er Ye passed you a lot of treasures. Did he give you that one thing?"

Xiao Hua squinted at Fatty and then looked at me, "Do you want to see it?"

# An E-Invite from Little Brother Zhang

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***[TN Note: Takes place after Extra 6 (The 2017 New Years Special)]***

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When Little Brother Zhang sent me an e-invite, I didn't open it for a long time. In fact, I didn't open it until this morning. It was an invitation to the Zhang family's annual party. Zhang Haike and Little Brother Zhang were very patient with their plans to revitalize the Zhang family. They might have lacked almost everything, but they didn't lack time.

They established a company on the mainland this year. Although the project hadn't started yet, the Zhang family's ambition to make a comeback had already come to a head. I just didn't expect that their overseas business had nothing to do with antiques. Instead, it had more to do with shipping and mining. They were gathering the funds to buy mines in Xinjiang, Nepal, and Tanzania next year.

It sounded like Poker-Face would soon become the general manager, take up the position of CEO, find a Ms. Perfect, and take on the heavy responsibility of breeding the Zhang family back to its heyday. But I didn't know if his old goods even worked now.

As far as I was concerned, there was plenty of time for business if the Zhang family wanted to revive. Over the past year or two, they seemed to be returning one right after another. After the Wang family was destroyed, they had become hitmen for other people. But their faith had collapsed, so there was no chance of them coming back.

The Mystic Nine had also completely declined. The white-washed generations couldn't maintain the complex underworld, and those who were still immersed in it had long been scattered like sand. The ones left in the underworld were the hidden Zhang family remnants and a group of young people like Li Cu, who were eager to move up. But it would take those kids a long time to become the new Nine Gates.

The thing from the e-invite that interested me the most was the Zhang family's performance programs. Since they were all so old, their programs were full of a sense of drinking wine with the women in ancient brothels and street performers breaking stones on their chests.

I looked at Poker-Face and Fatty. I hoped to have a good time with these old guys next year and all the years after that. Although we were a veteran team, we were still an irreplaceable legend when we walked together under the fireworks.

## The Ice Bucket Challenge

When I saw Zhang Qiling, Fatty was hesitating on whether to pour the ice water over his head. It was really hot, so he obviously wouldn't get sick, but suddenly attacking Zhang Qiling wouldn't have good consequences.

Fatty gave me a wink, clearly thinking that it would be less risky if I was the one to do it. I suddenly regretted making that bet with Black Glasses. "You guys are far from reaching the point where you would dare joke around with him," was what he had said at that time.

It was undoubtedly frustrating, but mysterious people always had this kind of aura around them. On the one hand, I was afraid of what his reaction would be; on the other hand, I was afraid of ruining his mysterious aura. If his wet bangs ended up plastered all over his face, I knew it would be too hard for me not to laugh.

But Black Glasses and I had bet on a rubbing. He wasn't really into things like that, but he knew I liked that rubbing, so he wanted to take it away from me. He was just that evil, the damned bastard.

*If I die because of this, so be it.* I suddenly felt like I had to do it, so I went over and grabbed Fatty's ice bucket and threw the water towards Little Brother without a second thought. Little Brother's reaction caught me completely off guard. He stood up almost instantaneously and moved out of the splash zone, his eyes immediately sweeping over all of my weaknesses. That indifferent look was enough to make me shudder. But he didn't scream or make any extra movements, either. Sure enough, he had trained himself to always respond to external dangers first. In other words, he didn't think he was safe even though he was here with us.

"He did it!" Fatty was trying to sell me out. "So that's where my ice went! Mr. Naïve, you can't just waste water like this."

"Don't talk nonsense! I dare you to never bathe again!" I was furious.

"Hey now, I bathe for your own good. Has it been too long since we last went into the mountains together that you forgot my beautiful legs and sweaty feet can kill mosquitoes?" Fatty retorted.

Poker-Face's eyes gradually calmed down and we looked at each other awkwardly. I was just wondering if we were so estranged from each other that he would want me to apologize for this, when I suddenly saw him walk towards the ice bucket on the other side, pick it up, and throw the water right at me.

I was stunned. I never expected him to do something like that. I wiped the water off my face, picked up another ice bucket, and threw the contents at Fatty, who immediately struck back. The three of us splashed ice water on each other in the sweltering heat. Although it was terrifying that Poker-Face was throwing the ice water with those indifferent eyes, I knew that I had won my bet with Black Glasses.



## The Zhang Family Log | 001 Zhang Haiyang

Some people from the Zhang family were still out there somewhere.

I wondered if they were still stuck in a hopeless position, walking back and forth in the mountains and the wilderness. They had lived for a long time, but it was as if they had never existed. The whole thing was an unsolved mystery.

I wondered if there were others who had been picked up by someone like me and got to enjoy the beautiful things in life. I still thought it likely that there might be countless wonderful stories like mine that we didn't know about.

The plan to find people from the Zhang family lasted for a long time. I would intermittently get some responses—including both emails and letters—but I didn't know whether they were telling the truth, and there was no way for me to tell, either.

For a long time, I felt as if the Zhang family members I personally knew were the only ones in the world.

Zhang Haiyang<sup>170</sup> was the first to come to Wushanju, almost like he was applying for a job interview.

I was a bit uncomfortable since it made me feel like my distant relative was coming. I had to be polite and appear decent while not knowing what the other person's intention was. Was he here to borrow money, take refuge, sort out the genealogy, or show his superiority?

Zhang Haiyang wore a simple sweatshirt, looked young, and had a buzz cut. It was rare for people in the Zhang family to have buzz cuts and fierce looks. His eyebrows made him look very aggressive.

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<sup>170</sup> Haiyang also means "ocean" in Chinese.



I stared at him for a long time and couldn't shake the feeling that he looked familiar. When I remembered it later, I realized that he looked similar to Hanamichi Sakuragi.<sup>171</sup>

I felt that he wasn't the kind of person I was good at communicating with.

"I'm here to say goodbye." Zhang Haiyang drank my Yuqian Longjing tea and looked around at my shop. "So, this is the temple. Not bad, not bad at all. It's livelier than I expected."

"What do you mean?"

"There are rumors that the place where the patriarch lives now is the Zhang family's temple. I thought the building would look like a church or an old mansion like the Zhang family's ancient building. I didn't expect that it was a shop at a tourist attraction."

"You all know the patriarch lives here?" I was somewhat surprised.

Zhang Haiyang shook his head, "We just heard some things about you sometimes since you did a lot of thrilling things." With that said, he took out a laptop-sized box from his backpack and put it on the table. "This is a first-meeting gift." He opened the box and I saw a bunch of property ownership certificates inside. "These are the houses I've bought over the years. Now that I'm leaving and don't have any children or family, these things should belong to the patriarch. You can count how many certificates there are. When the patriarch comes back, I'll chat with him for a while and then leave."

My jaw dropped and it took me about three minutes before I calmed down enough to close it. I picked up one of the certificates and found that it was a property in Gubei, Shanghai. I quickly put it back down.

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<sup>171</sup> Hanamichi Sakuragi is the main protagonist of the Slam Dunk series. He plays as a Power Forward for the Shohoku High School basketball team. Link [here](#). [This](#) is what he looks like.

I knew that the glory and wealth of the next half of my life were right in front of me, but I couldn't take it. I would burn if I had such a vast amount of wealth.<sup>172</sup>

"What do you mean you're leaving?" I asked him.

"I'm terminally ill and won't survive the year. But I've lived long enough. I want to meet the people of my clan since I hardly get to see them. I also want to see the patriarch. After that, I'll peacefully accept my death."

I was stunned yet again. After thinking about it for a while, I asked "Can people in the Zhang family still get terminal illnesses?"

"There are some diseases that people in the Zhang family won't get, but we'll still get most of them. People in the Zhang family look healthy because we have a healthy lifestyle," Zhang Haiyang said. "We sleep a lot."

"What's the disease?" I could see that he was telling the truth and felt a little sorry for him.

His expression was a little awkward and he looked at his socks before whispering, "Diabetes."

"Diabetes. Can people die from diabetes nowadays?" I was shocked again.

"I also have a brain tumor." Zhang Haiyang patted his head. "It's terminal. My eyes have been affected by the tumor, so I can't see clearly now."

Now I also felt awkward. *Didn't you just say you all have a healthy lifestyle? Why do you have diabetes?*

"I love eating sweets too much, especially ice cream," he explained.

"Oh, it's inevitable since you're quite old." I also looked at my socks and took a deep breath. I didn't think we could continue talking anymore.

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<sup>172</sup> There is a saying in Chinese that people will burn if they are too wealthy. It means that people who are very wealthy will be in great danger because others are envious of them.

*Where's Fatty at? Is he playing basketball or golf with Poker-face? Poker-face hit the golf ball into the tree last time, and no one could dig it out no matter how hard they tried. Would the people at the golf course even let him in?*

"Where were you before you came here?"

"I was in South Korea and Liaodong," Zhang Haiyang said.

I fell silent. I couldn't keep the conversation going anymore. Zhang Haiyang looked at me and didn't come up with any new topics, either.

I looked at the entrance of the shop. If they were playing basketball, I figured it would still take half an hour before they came back. But if they were playing golf, I had no idea when they would be back.

I coughed and decided to adopt my go-to strategy. If the other party didn't want to talk about common topics, then I would directly ask some soul-searching questions.

I poured some water for him, changed to a more comfortable sitting position, and asked, "What do people in the Zhang family think about death? You must spend much more time thinking about it than ordinary people, right?"

"You overestimate us. We haven't lived long enough to seek death. I still want to live like any ordinary person would. But I'm not exactly afraid of death."

"Oh? How so?"

"We're like ordinary forty-year-olds. We don't want to die and can find many benefits to living, but if we really die, we won't be all that sad about it. It's almost an 'Oh, he's finished his work' kind of feeling. It just feels like you've completed your mission in the world. That's it. People aren't so afraid of death."

*Is that so?* Then it suddenly dawned on me that he was right.

“This world isn’t so good that I don’t want to leave,” Zhang Haiyang said. “But it’s also not so bad that I want to leave immediately.”

When Poker-face and Fatty came back in the evening, Zhang Haiyang and Poker-face chatted for a long time. I had no idea what two people who weren’t good at talking would even talk about.

Fatty and I looked at the fish they had caught that afternoon. I glanced at the living room, some of my thoughts too hard to express. Fatty asked what was wrong with me.

“Do you think we should buy a blood glucose meter?” I asked him. “I’ve eaten so much sugar recently that I think my urine smells like fruit.”

“No,” Fatty said. “Your urine smells like fruit because you drink sugar-free cola. The sweeteners in it are completely excreted.”

*Really?* I silently wondered to myself.

That night, I put my hands on the toilet and hesitated for a long time, wondering if I should taste my urine.

For the first time, I experienced the sadness of getting older.

## Extra: Some of Wu Xie's Thoughts

1.

I really didn't want to admit it, but I realized that I had fallen in love with foot baths.

I came to this realization because I always thought of my foot basin whenever I stopped working. I recalled my mother's words: Men always soak their feet every day.

I now felt that what my mother had said was reasonable. I didn't know why, but I never really believed these words before. I just thought that it wasn't possible to feel comfortable soaking your feet.

Now that I thought about it, I had wasted so many years. If I had known it was so comfortable, I would've started soaking my feet when I was eighteen or nineteen.

When I first met Jin Wantang, I should've soaked my feet. When I went to Uncle Three's house to read the silk book for the first time, I should've soaked my feet with him. When I was on the train to the Heavenly Palace, I should've soaked my feet. I really should've soaked my feet during all those important moments in my life.

If this was the case, my life would have been filled with warm banter. If my feet had been in a hot tub of water during all those times that made me sad, then I wouldn't have felt so sad.

2.

Xiao Hua was smiling as he suddenly came over to me and sat down without a word.

The three of us were enjoying our daily foot baths. At that time, I felt that the years had been quiet and I could boast about all the awesome things I did before.

When I talked to Fatty, Poker-Face would sometimes sleep. When Fatty talked to Poker-Face, I would be the one to fall asleep. We opened the

door of the farmhouse and watched the chickens coming in and out. Sometimes the waterfalls would become bigger and the rain would look majestic, so we would watch as the water hit the eaves and formed rain curtains.

Sometimes I felt afraid. I remembered a photo I saw of two centenarians who were watching the rain curtain under the eaves and sitting around all day. The caption of the photo was: They seem to be waiting for something to appear. It's been more than a hundred years.

In fact, there were many legendary stories in my mind that were all related to feelings and mysteries. Why were the old people unwilling to leave when they had lived for so long? What were they waiting for?

But what we were waiting for was Xiao Hua. He didn't say too much, only talked a lot about the past. I knew from his expression that he needed to do something, so I asked him, "What's going on? You came all the way to Fujian without giving prior notice."

"Actually, I was hoping that you weren't here. If you weren't, then I could save my breath and not have to relay the message," Xiao Hua said.

"Relay a message?" Fatty asked. "You still need to physically relay a message in this era? Why? Just go ahead and say it. I'll buy you a basin so you can soak your feet together with us. Trust me, you won't want to go back to Beijing afterwards."

Xiao Hua looked at our feet and then at our walls. Fatty had put up some hanging paintings, but I didn't know where he had found them. "Actually, people from Crescent Hotel came to ask me to pass on a message to you," he said.

I looked at Fatty—I hadn't heard that name for a long time—and said, "You can tell them that I haven't been in the business recently. They don't need to be concerned with me."

"They're here to collect the debt," Xiao Hua said. "Do you still remember that you took something from Crescent Hotel without paying? I was your guarantor at that time and now I've come to collect."

## 2019 Mid-Autumn Festival Extra

During the Mid-Autumn Festival<sup>173</sup>, Zhang Haike wanted to host a family banquet.

My family usually held a small gathering for the Mid-Autumn Festival, so I would stay with them and have dinner. That was our usual routine for the day. There were so many festivals that it was impossible to celebrate them all. It wasn't like I was an ancient person who might not return home alive whenever I went on a business trip, and it wasn't like my family members were spread out all over the country. Since all of my family was in Hangzhou, I got to see them often, which made it hard to act like we were having a touching reunion for the Mid-Autumn Festival.

But the Zhang family reunion dinner was of great importance to Zhang Haike. He wanted to use any means to unite the Zhang family and revive their power, but it was all just wishful thinking. To me, this was just a restoration of the decadent clan system that the Zhang clan used to use. It was useless and just wasted a lot of money and manpower.

But as the actual caretaker of Zhang Qiling, I had an indescribable feeling that I was going to be responsible for the cost of this family banquet, and I'd even have to arrange it. I didn't know why I should be the one to do it, but there didn't seem to be a reason to stop them. I guess this group of Zhang family members was really just too pitiful.

It was as if a lot of poor relatives were coming to Poker-Face. No one else would give them the time of day if I chose to ignore them.

If Poker-Face said something, then it was fine, but he wouldn't say anything. Instead, Zhang Haike kept telling me that as Zhang Qiling's entourage, I should take care of these things. *Fuck that shit*, I thought to myself. *I'm a guardian, not an attendant*. He said that if I did well, I could start the special procedures that would give me the surname Zhang. I could be called Zhang Xie or Zhang Wu Xie in the future. Of course, I could also follow my master and be called Zhang Qixie.

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<sup>173</sup> Traditional moon-viewing festival on the 15th of the 8th lunar month. Also known as the Mooncake Festival. Info [here](#).

I was so angry that day that I thought my liver was going to burst.

I originally thought that the hotel might mistakenly believe that it was a Mid-Autumn Festival activity organized by a pyramid scheme group, so I especially found a small hotel without a large auditorium and no audio equipment. I figured a few random tables of food would be enough. If Zhang Haike wanted to do more, he could pay out of pocket and set up something big in a few days. All I cared about was whether he could gather the scattered group of unemployed Zhang family members without my help.

But since I was really angry, I changed my mind and rented a relatively high-end clubhouse. Instead of having a typical Chinese-style party, I had a standing, buffet-style formal party.

I also rolled out a red carpet and hired a photographer, DJ, and bartender. I set up advertisements and mobile game links, told attendees that they had to wear formal attire, and set up a large screen advertising Wushanju.

In this way, if Zhang Haike did anything else, it would be like the party before the collapse of the financial world or the Guardian Auction House's second autumn party. In any case, at least it wouldn't be seen as a pyramid scheme.

I didn't go. I stayed at Wushanju during the Mid-Autumn Festival and played "Fight the Landlord"<sup>174</sup> with Fatty and a shop assistant. I was sneering as I was playing, knowing that I would definitely beat Zhang Haike this time.

Later, I saw a lot of videos of this family banquet on TikTok.<sup>175</sup> They were all wearing suits and standing at the entrance of the clubhouse, looking lost. Passers-by thought it was a new variety show that was being filmed, so many people took photos and made TikTok videos. When Zhang Haike

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<sup>174</sup> Aka "Dou dizhu". It's one of the most popular card games played in China. It's played among 3 people with 1 pack of cards, including the two differentiated jokers. The game starts with players bidding for the "landlord" position. Those who lose the bid or don't bid enter the game as the "peasants" team competing against the landlord. The objective of the game is to be the first player to have no cards left. Info [here](#).

<sup>175</sup> App for creating and sharing short videos



saw that the situation was good, he stood up on the flower bed and began attracting the passers-by to join the Zhang family.

There was a huge crowd there. Next door was a public square where people were dancing, and on the other side was a live broadcast of the dance for those sitting at home.

Everything was so peaceful, just like the moon today.

Happy Mid-Autumn Festival, everyone!!!!

## [Interlude] 520 Nine Unsent Letters

The first letter is to the dead comrades

That was the day I left with Master Three. From now on, there will be no Pan Zi on the battlefield. My life has been handed over to Master Three. I know what he does, and I know that from now on, I'll be living a life where I walk on the blade's edge. Maybe in my heart, I hope this is true so that I can see my dead brothers sooner...

Brothers,

I'm sorry. Your older brother let you down. He promised to take you home, but he could only bury you here.

I don't know when I can come to see you today. Master Three saved my life, so I have to repay him first. But I, Pan Zi, will come back sooner or later. Brothers, remember to leave a place for me. From now on, I'll carry your lives on my back and continue to live.

Go, brothers! Be at ease and start your journey!

Pan Zi

— — —

The second letter is to Yun Cai

In a place where birds don't shit, looking up at the sky is Fat Master's favorite thing to do.

Yun Cai,

I once said to a woman, "This fat master will never let the woman he likes die first", and then she died in my arms... I thought I would never want to say this to another woman again, but Yun Cai, I didn't expect you to really become a cloud in the sky...<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Yun Cai (云彩) means "cloud"

Banai isn't a big place and this little rundown village isn't very interesting, but I don't want to leave. When I do, I'll never see the clouds here again.

Fatty

— — —

The third letter is to Er Yuehong

Whoever said that opera singers were ruthless didn't know what they were talking about.

Big brother,

Ya Tou has been cooking noodles with you for twenty years, enjoying a lifetime of happiness.

My body and mind are pure. I don't love you for your fame and wealth. I only love you because you treat me like I'm one of your own.

Looking at the red lanterns all over the city reminds me of the day you saved me and I saved you.

You see? I won.

Ya Tou

— — —

The fourth letter is to Aunt Bai

It snowed today. I really want to walk in the snow with you on my back all my life.

Aunt Bai:

This is my first and last letter to you. I don't know how to read, so I asked Qi Tiezui to write it for me today. I don't know if he's going to make up some crazy nonsense.

I'm leaving tomorrow, so don't look for me.

If I don't come back in three days, go marry someone.

Be well, so that Old Six can feel at ease when he sets off.

Old Six

— — —

The fifth letter is to Black Back the Sixth

I never believed in fate, but I had to accept it.

Old Six,

Consider this letter to be like a meeting. When writing this letter, you and I are still friends in this world, but by the time you read it, maybe we'll meet in hell. You'll laugh and say that it's our retribution for doing this. I never believed in fate, but I had to accept it. At present, there's no other way. I don't want you to die at the hands of others, so if you want to blame me, I'll apologize on my way to the underworld. Willing to give up one person in exchange for the Nine Gates... just know that one day, you will understand why I did it. May you go in peace.

Qishan.

— — —

The sixth letter is to Old Dog Wu

I took your dog away because I want you to remember me forever.

Old Dog Wu,

It's been a month since I came back from Hangzhou, and you haven't sent a letter or telegram. I knew you would be like this, so I took your favorite dog with me when I left.

She didn't stop us. We're the same kind of people at heart, so I know that if you choose her, you're actually choosing me.

I'm going to Beijing, so we'll be thousands of miles apart. Me in the north and you in the south.

May we never meet again in this life.

Huo Xiang

— — —

The seventh letter is to Zhang Qiling

When it comes to many things, it's not a matter of whether I want to do them or not, it's just that I can't stop them.

Little Brother,

I walked alone on the road for a long time this morning, looking carefully at Hangzhou in the morning light. Then, I suddenly realized that the last time I earnestly saw the morning here seemed to be a long time ago. For ten years, I have done a lot of things that I couldn't do or wasn't good at before. Originally, many things were done for you, but slowly, they became instinctive. Now I understand what you said back then. When it comes to many things, it's not a matter of whether I want to do them or not, it's just that I can't stop.

It's been ten years. We should be seeing each other soon.

Wu Xie

— — —

The eighth letter is to Black Glasses

Please note: We're sorry, the number you have dialed is not valid.

Black Glasses,

Department of Ophthalmology, Golmud Nursing Home, call 010-116 for appointment registration.

Xie Yuchen

— — —

The ninth letter is to Nanpai Sanshu

Since we can't escape, let's walk hand in hand through the years when you walked alone.

Nanpai Sanshu,

We finally have the chance to show the literary accomplishments that you've suppressed for so many years, even though the theme is to express our deep and restrained love for you. We will definitely cherish this opportunity and use every beautiful technique we can find to describe everything behind your glamour, except for being fat.

We used to be very worried that we would turn on you. After all, you look a far cry from the image of a domineering president. But whenever we see the dark circles under your eyes and your tired and worn-out body, we especially want to rub your head that you haven't washed for seven days in order to fill in the pits and give you some comfort and encouragement. Every time I go to work, I secretly refresh Weibo and see so many people urging you to fill in the pits. I want to send them a handful of your unwashed hair as a threat.

In fact, I don't spend much time with you, but every time I see you, we understand things a little better. It turns out that the world is so hard, and it's been like this since the day we were born. We always shake our glasses and talk and laugh at dinner, but no one will know that you feel helpless and hesitate at certain moments.

I never realized how much energy a person needs in order to bear the love and expectations of so many people, especially someone who doesn't rely on his face to make a living. So, let us accompany you on this journey. Let us replace the tens of thousands of people who love you so that we can accompany you, Nanpai Sanshu.

Little Alien

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***TN Notes: Some of the Chinese fans didn't think this was written by the author since that last letter looks like it was written by a fan. But it's not like I can tell, so here it is.***

## **Miscellaneous Extras (Read after “Restart”)**



## Weibo Extra: Coca-Cola

I had been socializing a lot these days and accompanying guests all the time. In fact, I was more engaged in chatting today, so when I saw that there were more than two hundred missed calls from Fatty on my cell phone, I felt a little panicked. *This bastard has been eating large intestines every day, I thought to myself, has something bad finally happened?*

When I called him back, I heard him yell, “Come back quickly! Something big is going down! I’ve already called all the guys in the shop back. Some reckless guy is trying to take over our shop! Moreover, he’s got some influence!”

*I’m not running a martial arts school, I thought to myself. If someone is trying to take over the shop, just hurry up and call the police.* But many people on WeChat were asking me what was going on and said that they were all there waiting for me so I had no choice but to immediately take a taxi back. Kan Jian, Wang Meng, Saoba, Luo Que, Baishe, Liu Sang, and others—all of the eight villains in the Wu family—were all present and sitting around the table. One could argue that this was the Wu family’s highest level of combat readiness. There was a package on the table that had been opened and there were two bottles of Coca-Cola inside. Fatty stared at the bottles with a serious expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I moved to grab a bottle and drink it but Fatty stopped me, “Don’t. This is a challenge from someone. Look at what’s printed on the bottles.”

I picked one up and looked at it. The following words were printed on the bottle: There is something you need to pay for.

The second bottle said: Which door is the strongest?

I narrowed my eyes and cursed inwardly.

“The person who sent these two Coke bottles knows about our past with Xiao Hua and the existence of the bronze door. They seem to know us

very well,” Fatty said. “There aren’t many in this generation who know about these things; they appear to be an old enemy.”

“Have you checked who sent it?” I asked.

Fatty shook his head, “I checked the nearby shops. All of the Coke bottles were printed like this. In order to provoke us, they spread the goods all around us. This is an elaborate array, which means that the opponent is omnipresent and pervasive. I believe they’re coming to attack so we have to fight back.”

After he mentioned launching a counterattack, everyone looked at the Coke bottles and fell silent for a while. In the ensuing silence, Fatty suddenly reached out, picked up a bottle, and drank it all.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

Fatty shook the bottle, “Sorry, I tend to want to drink Coke when I’m nervous.” As he spoke, he suddenly stopped and stared at the bottle, completely entranced.

## Establishment of the New Mystic Nine

The new Nine Gates was a loose organization headed by the Iron Triangle that had gradually become known among the people.

The key figure was the Iron Triangle's Fatty Wang.

Unlike the old Nine Gates back in the day, the new Nine Gates consisted of thieves in the top three gates, adventurers in the middle three gates, and officials in the bottom three gates.

The upper three gates didn't really recognize the validity of the new Nine Gates, but it was talked about so much that they gradually began to stop rejecting this arrangement. There were even rumors in the underworld that the source of this legend had been deliberately planned by Fatty Wang.

The first clan was still the Zhang family, which was led by Zhang Qiling, commonly known as Mute Zhang. In order to correlate with the old Nine Gates, he was given the title of Zhang Da Yanwang.<sup>177</sup>

Since these gates were divided by age, the second clan was led by Fatty Wang, who was known as Fat Prince in the underworld. He was relatively enthusiastic about the new Nine Gates and wanted to establish it as a formal organization but was later banned by the Lake District's Sub-District Office.

In Fatty Wang's great scheme, the areas to the north and south of the Yangtze River would be divided into the new Nine Gates. With the Iron Triangle at its core, there would be the Five Big Pankou Faction, the Sixteen Villains Faction, the Three Zhang Clans Faction, and so on. But they were all banned in the end.

Since Wu Xie was the youngest one, he was ranked third. He was nicknamed Little Master Three, but he was also a descendant of the old Nine Gate's Wu family, so he was also called Lord Wu or Ancient Boss

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<sup>177</sup> Yangwang= Yama, King of Hell

Three. At the peak of Little Master Three's prosperity, there were more nicknames, but there are too many to mention here.

The upper three gates were led by the Iron Triangle.

The middle three gates consisted of adventurers, but they were really just the brokers and bosses of the institutions that served the whole system. They were also known as the Fan Triangle. (The middle three gates all expressed their disapproval of this).

Among them, the fourth clan was led by Bai Haotian, who also worked at Warehouse Eleven. She was commonly known as Little Bai, the fourth sister. Fatty accepted Bai Haotian as the fourth clan mainly because he wanted to take advantage of Warehouse Eleven's influence. In the new Nine Gate's territory, Warehouse Eleven's storage and logistics capabilities had always been the main focus of Fatty's hope for an alliance.

Since Wu Xie had a high position in Warehouse Eleven and Bai Haotian was their inside man, Fatty felt that Warehouse Eleven should exist as the new Nine Gates' back garden.

The fifth clan was led by Liu Sang, who was also known as Sang Bi, Sang Beng, and Sang Five.<sup>178</sup> He was a real master who had learned the greatest technique in the thunder-listening faction. Although he wasn't good at fighting, he had powerful ears that could listen to thunder to determine where things were located underground. Liu Sang was a follower of Zhang Qiling and later followed Wu Xie. Fatty thought that he was a rebellious person, but he didn't think that Liu Sang's ability should fall into the enemy's hands, so he made an exception and ranked Liu Sang as the fifth gate. Since Zhang Qiling was the leader and Liu Sang was the fifth, Liu Sang said that he was ok with this position. It was probably because it correlated with the legendary inheritance between the first and fifth clans of the old Nine Gates.

The sixth clan was led by Ah Tou, who was commonly known as Sixth Sister. She was a master of make-up and disguises. Since she belonged to Xie Yuchen's faction and was also a fan of someone like the other two

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<sup>178</sup> Bi (逼)=pressure/force/extort. Beng (崩)=collapse/fall into ruins/demise. Wu (五)=five

were, Fatty decided to call the three middle gates the Fan Triangle. Ah Tou was very good at appraising antiques and could identify and forge fake antiques. Fatty was hoping that Ah Tou would deter any counterfeiters in the new Nine Gates.

The lower three gates consisted of officials who actually worked for museums and formal systems. Since they had all experienced an adventure in the sand sea, they were called the Sand Triangle.

Among them, the seventh clan was led by Li Cu. He now worked for the Mountain Forest Rescue Center, specializing in special rescue work such as cave collapses and missing relics. Li Cu was very resistant to being called the new Nine Gates and insisted on drawing a clear line since he was very famous in the rescue system. There were a lot of very expensive commissions for the protection and excavation of cultural relics and the income was very high. He had also participated in the excavation of the Seven Star Lu Palace and the restoration and re-excavation of the sand sea tomb. This work was basically the opposite of what Wu Xie did.

Su Wan was the leader of the eighth clan. He was now a graduate student of ophthalmology and had devoted himself to the study of a few eye diseases. While acting as the medical consultant of a famous expedition team in Southeast Asia, he also studied philosophy. A newly-discovered species was even named after him. He and Li Cu were still good friends, and he became a very attractive person after growing up, which led to constant luck with the ladies.

The ninth clan was led by Yang Hao. In terms of age, Yang Hao was the first in the Sand Triangle, but Fatty despised him so much that he put him at the end. Yang Hao's current situation was unknown, but he had been active in Southeast Asia for the past few years and had multiple identities in Cambodia. There were several surveillance videos showing that he was very strong. In fact, his strength far surpassed those in the middle and lower gates.

It wasn't clear why Fatty had designated the Sand Triangle as part of the new Nine Gates.

Xie Yuchen and Black Glasses both said that they were allergic to the words “Nine Gates” and were unwilling to make such jokes, but Fatty designated them as part of the Five Big Pankou Faction anyways. The Iron Triangle made up the remaining three.

The Three Zhang Clans Faction consisted of Zhang Haike’s Zhang family, Zhang Haiyan’s Zhang family, and Zhang Qishan’s Old Nine Gates family. The Sixteen Villains Faction consisted of eight villains in the Wu family<sup>179</sup> and so on and so forth. But there will be time to elaborate on that later.

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<sup>179</sup> Per Tiffany: The author came up with the term “eight villains in the Wu family” in one of his extras. It basically means Wu Xie’s eight famous employees, but he didn’t specify all eight people’s names. The ones we’re definitely sure of are Kan Jian, Baishe, and Wang Meng.

## Extra: The Zombie Turtle

The turtle was still moving, but I knew that it was already dead.

Twenty days ago, Fatty made a small part of our yard into a feng shui array. He made mountains out of sand and connected them to a pipe to represent water. He then made a counterfeit of the corpse ground written in “The Book of Burial”<sup>180</sup> and created a curse cave in the womb of the dragon veins. A turtle later died in a pond at home, so Fatty buried it in the cave.

“Forty-nine days,” Fatty said to me. “If the turtle doesn’t rot in forty-nine days, it means we can successfully raise zombies here.”

“What are you trying to do?” I asked him.

“I want to raise a zombie turtle. Hey, do you think this zombie turtle will end up jumping or walking?”

“Why are you raising a zombie during the New Year season?”

“Because travel is restricted. I need something to keep my mind busy or I won’t be able to control myself and will end up harming society.” Fatty burned some incense, walked in a circle around the yard, and stuck the incense on top of each “horn” of the dragon vein. Our yard wasn’t that big in the first place, so after he changed the layout, we couldn’t even walk around properly.

From that day on, Fatty was like a kid whose family had just bought a goldfish. He would lie on the threshold every day and look at the cemetery he had built in the yard. He wasn’t afraid of the cold, so he always kept the house door open. As a result, no matter how high we turned the heater up, it was always cold inside. I ended up installing a camera for him, but he never used it.

For twenty days, the camera worked 24/7. Until today. Since half of our old house was considered public property, the neighborhood committee

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<sup>180</sup> Feng shui is based on Guo Pu’s [Zhangshu](#) (“The Book of Burial”) from the Jin Dynasty attributed to Emperor Wen of the Zhou Dynasty (1100 to 221 B.C.)

came over to inspect whether we were following disinfection protocols. When a few staff in white protective suits came in and saw our yard, they immediately ordered Fatty to remove the grave because it might lead to health problems.

So, Fatty removed the grave. When he dug the turtle up, he found that it was already withered and its skin had turned dark purple. But not only did the turtle not decay, it was even moving.

The turtle's eyes were shrunken, but one of its legs was still moving. Fatty put it in a glass cabinet, and then the two of us stared at each other, completely speechless.

"It worked!" Fatty said. "This is our first zombie turtle, so let's hurry up and name it. I'm the dad and you're the mom, so should we join our two surnames together? Oh wait, there's also Little Brother to think about. How about Wang Wuzhang?"

I cringed. "You might as well just call it Frankenstein."

*Did he really make a zombie?* I asked myself.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked Fatty. "If you can't handle this thing, it might become a curse."

"You're not seeing its value. It'll be a great help to us in fully understanding our opponents. We need to take this opportunity and understand the nature of this phenomenon," Fatty said. "Come on, let's do a Tik Tok video first and gain some fans."

Right after Fatty finished speaking, the turtle's legs moved again. The turtle moved a few inches forward and then its head suddenly fell off.

But even though the zombie had been decapitated, it still kept crawling forward.

Fatty and I looked at each other in dismay. I poked the turtle's decapitated head with a chopstick and found that it was all dried up. But its hind legs continued moving with increasing vigor.



“He can really dance,” I said.

Fatty showed a puzzled expression and then flipped the turtle over. At this time, Poker-Face woke up and saw us playing with the turtle. I suddenly had a feeling that he might be the one moving it, so I immediately gave him a questioning look. Poker-Face raised a finger, made a shushing gesture, and headed into the bathroom with a blank look on his face.

*I immediately understood. This guy gets quite mischievous every three or four years. Didn't he recently get selected as a representative to attend the community meeting? Maybe some of the old aunties taught him how to have fun in life.*

*Wait, maybe he just thinks we're being too noisy and wants us to keep our voices down.*

Fatty was still observing the turtle when suddenly, a black line crawled out of the base of one of the turtle's legs. “Horsehair worm?” Fatty clicked his tongue a little dispiritedly. “It's not the legs that are moving, it's just a worm.”

I found it a little strange because I knew that horsehair worms didn't infect turtles. I looked back at Poker-Face and saw him make another shushing gesture as he brushed his teeth.

*If it's a prank, it certainly wasn't taught by the old aunties, I thought to myself.*

## Extra: 0305 Birthday Special

When I woke up, there was a lot of liquid around my mouth. It was salty, but I didn't know what it was.

Uncle Three was sitting on a rotten tree stump next to me and I was lying on the leaf-covered ground. I sat up and found myself in the woods, but I could also hear the sound of the sea. It seemed like this place was a forest by the sea.

I didn't know why, but I was very calm. When I saw Uncle Three, I didn't have the feeling of finally being able to see someone after a very long time. Nor did I feel angry or excited. I just felt puzzled.

"What's wrong with me?"

"I fed you a grave-robbing fruit," Uncle Three said to me. "You must carry on my legacy and continue going on adventures."

"What grave-robbing fruit? Are you a ghost now?" I asked him as I wiped the liquid from my mouth. I couldn't explain how it tasted, but I felt that I might have tasted something powerful.

"It can give you special abilities based on your characteristics," Uncle Three said to me. "Little Xie, you're gifted. I'm curious what kind of ability the fruit will give you."

*Gifted? Gifted, my ass. Isn't this a comic book setting or some kind of fantasy cartoon? But Uncle Three didn't look like he was joking. Is this a metaphysical thing then? Or is it some kind of special technique of the Zhang family?*

"Do you feel anything special?" Uncle Three asked me.

I looked at my hands. "What kind of special feeling do you mean?"

"Those who eat the grave-robbing fruit will naturally know what they can do. It comes from the initial feeling. For example, you might suddenly feel that you can jump very high, or that you can take parts of your body off."

I tried sensing my body, “I feel a pain in my chest when I breathe. Is this my superpower?”

“A pain-in-the-chest fruit? You can feel such pain anywhere and at any time?”

*I can acquire this power without eating anything, I said to myself. I’m old enough to feel pain everywhere. Even my dick might give me pain when I’m peeing.*

“How does a grave-robbing fruit normally work?” I asked Uncle Three.

He touched his chin. “They say it depends on your characteristics. For example, I also fed Fatty one just now. Guess what his fucking ability is?”

*Fatty ate one, too?* I wondered. “A detonator fruit? Did he acquire the power to turn any tubular object into a detonator just by stroking it?”

“Then does he not need to use the bathroom ever again?”

“I’m sure people can trigger this kind of ability themselves whenever they want. There’s no way it’s passive,” I said to him. “Let me tell you something, Uncle Three. You don’t call a passive ability a superpower. You call it a curse.”

“Take a guess at what ability Zhang Qiling gained after he ate the grave-robbing fruit.”

“The ability to be silent?” I meant both staying silent and having a silence spell that could make everyone else around him silent.

Uncle Three fell silent. He thought for a while, sighed, and then told me that I didn’t understand my friend enough. “After Fatty ate the fruit, he gained the ability to turn all conversations into dirty jokes. So, his fruit is called the Dirty Fruit.”

At this moment, Fatty suddenly appeared behind me and sat down on another tree stump next to me.

“How did you appear so suddenly?” I asked him.

“I’ve been standing behind you for a long time now,” Fatty replied. “Did you not notice?”

“No?”

“Oh, maybe your harem is so huge that you didn’t notice me. Apologies!”

I became furious, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I was just showing you my fruit’s power. How do you like it?”

“What’s the use of such a lousy, rotten ability?”

“Hey, don’t say that. There’s no such thing as strong or weak abilities when it comes to this fruit. It all depends on how you cultivate it. The richer your imagination, the stronger your power will be. I’m planning to do a talk show abroad. Do you know how much a talk show host makes?”

I rubbed my face. *Is he trying to save our industry by doing talk shows? This is like saving the nation in a roundabout way<sup>181</sup>, but it’s in a whole other dimension.*

“I have to admit that it’s difficult at first, but victory comes with perseverance, Mr. Naïve. Only persistent research can yield results.”

“Where’s Little Brother?”

Uncle Three stood up, “You can’t leave this forest until you become familiar with your abilities.”

“Why?”

“Because the power I acquired after eating the fruit is to lie passively. I can generate random lies as I talk without even thinking about it. But I took a suppressant, so you only have one hour to hear the truth. If you leave now, you can’t hear the truth from me even if you come back within the hour.”

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<sup>181</sup> “Save the nation in a roundabout way” is a theory propounded by Chinese collaborators during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945) to justify their capitulation.

“Oh, so you can tell the truth for an hour.”

“Correct.”

“What’s the Ultimate?”

“Shitty brat! I’m giving you face but you’re not respecting it!” Uncle Three suddenly burst into a rage and slapped me.

I looked at Uncle Three as he stared back at me. I took a deep breath and said, “Just keep lying to me then.”

“What do you mean?”

I immediately became irritated, “If being abusive is your way to avoid telling the truth, then just keep lying to me!”

Fatty pulled Uncle Three back a bit and then said to me, “Keep trying, Mr. Naïve. If you keep trying to learn your ability, you’ll eventually know what it is. Come on, keep using your senses to try and feel it. Look for something special in your body that you can perceive. It’s something that you’ve never sensed before.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, telling myself that I should just leave this place and get away from them. But at this time, Fatty stopped me and asked, “Do you know what’s at the top of a man’s hierarchy of endurance?”

“What?”

“One day on the mountain, one thousand years in the world.”<sup>182</sup>

I opened my eyes, held my head in my arms, and ran away with a roar.

*If this is a dream, please let me wake up. Right now!* I shouted in my heart.

And so, I woke up.

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<sup>182</sup> “One day in the mountain, one thousand years in the world” is an allegory taken from “Zhi Lin” by Yu Xi (307–345 AD). It implies that time brings a great change to the world and Wu Xie’s generation is over.

I picked up my cell phone, which had landed on my face last night. I had been reading too many web novels these days, so I always ended up having weird dreams.

I sat up and saw Uncle Three sitting next to me. "I fed you a grave-robbing fruit," Uncle Tree said to me. "You must carry on my legacy and continue going on adventures."

I suddenly realized that the ability of my grave-robbing fruit was to make everything that had already happened into a dream.

My mind suddenly became chaotic. I thought of A Ning, Pan Zi, Yun Cai, and everyone else who had left me. *Is there a limit to my ability? Is this possible? Can I actually wake up again and turn everything into a dream?*

I completely ignored the rest of what Uncle Three was saying as I stood up, covered my ears, and began running again.

*Please. Let me wake up. If I can wake up again and turn everything into a dream, when should I wake up? Should I wake up at that moment when I passed by Poker-Face downstairs at Uncle Three's? What about the moment when I saw the sunshine after I got out of the Seven Star Lu Palace? When? Where? When should I wake up?*

I woke up in an anxious state. It was noon, I was in Wushanju, and the sky was overcast. Fatty was packing his things and getting ready to head back to Fujian because travel restrictions were slowly being eased.

It appeared I didn't get to travel back in time, so I got up, counted to three, and forgot this dream.

I was already a hardened adult who had to face the future, so it was a waste of time to be swallowed up by pain.

Fatty came up the stairs while humming a little tune.

"What time is it?" I asked him.

"Sex o'clock." Fatty jiggled his fat, naked upper body as I looked at him in horror.

## Extra | Jadeite

Fake jadeite was now considered part of the production line. Although the jadeite market wasn't as hot as before, the fake industry that was left over from the flourishing age was quite developed.

Fatty had a bracelet full of green imperial jade, which a rich woman had given to him a long time ago. At that time, Fatty was said to be a handsome and gifted scholar who had just gained a little weight. The two of them went to the Sino-Vietnamese border together and bought the bracelet in Vietnam after crossing the border.

Because he thought it unlikely that the Vietnamese would go so far as to have fakes and it was really too cheap (only six thousand US dollars), he didn't worry about being deceived.

Fatty wore that bracelet all the time and showed it off everywhere. At the hottest time, it was said that someone offered him twelve million yuan for it, but he didn't sell it.

When I looked at the bracelet, I felt that it wasn't quite right because the green was too vibrant. But it was just that I simply thought that Fatty wasn't destined to be a very wealthy man.

Another doubt I had was that the better the jadeite was, the more it was raised and the more transparent and glossy it was. But Fatty's looked like it was getting more and more oily. Fatty just said that he had oily skin and the jadeite was definitely high quality.

But aesthetically speaking, I felt that the bracelet was very sketchy.

Fatty always thought that this bracelet was his pension, but after I expressed my thoughts, he became uneasy and went to Beijing to find an agency to inspect it.

Sure enough, after it was inspected, it turned out to be jade that had been pickled and injected with glue.<sup>183</sup> It was totally worthless.

Fatty came back and lay on the couch for three days without moving much. His heart must have found it difficult to bear the pain.

I told him that we didn't need it in the first place. We would definitely have enough food money until we died. There was no need to be worried or afraid, we had our own wealth.

Fatty suddenly got up and told me that he had been unhappy with my Uncle Two for a long time now since he always threatened us with the money we owed. This time, he wanted to make use of this \*\*\*\* to defeat Uncle Two's power and prestige.

So, during the next argument, Fatty suddenly pointed at Uncle Two and said, "Uncle Two, I told you not to play this game with me. We aren't short of money. Have you seen this bracelet? Even if I smash this ten-million-yuan bracelet, I won't feel distressed because there are so many other things in my home. I just don't want to sell it."

With that said, Fatty took off his bracelet and threw it on the ground, trying to smash it to pieces. But he didn't expect that the glue-filled bracelet would bounce off the ground and hit Uncle Two in the face.  
Hahahaha

(End)

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<sup>183</sup> Pickling in this sense is a process in which the "jade" materials are soaked in a strong acid solvent to allow these strong acids to dissolve the impurities in the material and make the particles that are too coarse inside become smooth. Then it's dyed and injected with glue. Info [here](#).



## About Dirty Faces

This is a simple deduction of some of the Zhang family's behavioral patterns.

If a person is very mobile, then their body temperature will inevitably rise. In order to lower one's body temperature, the body will produce a lot of sweat, but long-term perspiration and a high temperature will lead to dehydration and hyperthermia. As a result, the Zhang family's method of attack was to be very swift. In fact, their first priority was to defeat the opponent as quickly as possible.

They would mobilize all the energy in their body at the fastest speed possible and then imbue their muscles with the greatest strength so that their nerves and speed would achieve the fastest response. With the help of specially trained ligaments and joints, those in the Zhang family could perform actions that ordinary humans could never achieve in a very short amount of time.

The effectiveness of their attacks was probably the most unforgettable thing in my memory because they were so fast, effective, and fearless. In fact, they were too fast, too powerful, and too precise, especially Poker-Face. According to Black Glasses, it was because Poker-Face's heart and blood were more extraordinary, so he had to make up for the ordinary Zhangs who had reached their limits.

As their body temperature rose, the Zhang family's tattoos would gradually appear. These tattoos would start from their chests and gradually spread all over their bodies. Black Glasses said that some Zhang family members had tattoos on their faces. There was a possibility that these people would betray the Zhang family so they were marked at a very young age.

I didn't know whether this prediction came from the heavens or not, but these people were regarded as outcasts since childhood and most people wanted them to die as soon as possible. As a result, they were almost always given deadly missions to complete.

When they killed people, their tattoos would appear on their faces, making them look like evil spirits.

Many people believed that this was the Zhang family's dirty face<sup>184</sup>, but the two weren't the same at all.

Even though they had similar uses, dirty faces were terrifying masks that were created using the human skin mask technique. They most definitely weren't facial tattoos.

These masks had absolutely no religious connotations, but they were definitely frightening to see at night.

These masks were something that the Zhang family members would bring with them when they had to do dirty work.

Imagine a scene where you go to a hotel and see a room at the end of the corridor that has a seal across the door.<sup>185</sup> You know that something must have happened in this room, but you don't want to think much about it.

Your room happens to be right next door to this room. When you first saw the seal on the other room's door, you wanted to show it off to your friends, so you took a picture of the door and then went into your own room.

After that, you wanted to send it to your friends, but then you suddenly had a bad feeling. You couldn't help thinking that taking this kind of photo was a little creepy and scary.

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<sup>184</sup> Not sure if you read "A Thousand Faces" or "The Southern Archives" yet, but it's mentioned there. Dirty faces are masks that are only used to cover the face and intimidate the opponent (like when they were doing dirty missions such as assassinations or raids). They usually derive from the most terrifying image that the mask maker can come up with. The purpose is to intimidate the opponent from the very beginning. This [introduction chapter](#) Yvette did has a good explanation.

<sup>185</sup> Something like this:



As a result, you didn't post it to the group chat nor did you tell your friends about it. You were worried that the more you talked about it, the more afraid you would become.

So, you took a shower, opened your luggage, and started organizing everything.

When you finally lay down in bed and took out your cell phone, you had already forgotten about the photo you had taken of the neighboring door. You started looking through your photo album, which contained many short videos that you downloaded to study carefully. At this point, you scroll to the photo you took before.

There's nothing unusual about the door, so you just delete the photo without clearing out the recycle bin. Then you go to sleep.

After a few busy days at work, you're tired and don't care too much about anything. But every time you return to your room, you see the neighboring door. The seal looks brand new, so whatever happened in this room must have occurred within the past six months.

You feel uncomfortable. Over the past few days, you've heard all kinds of rumors.

In any case, you're sure of the fact that something strange happened in the room next to yours.

Finally, you finish the work you came here for and are planning to leave tomorrow. You take a relaxing hot bath and prepare to have a restful evening. At this time, you turn on your cell phone again and look at all the reference photos you've taken during this period of work. You delete the useless ones and then scroll through the large number of group photos and delete the ones that are out of focus.

After sorting through everything, you go to the recycle bin to look at all the deleted pictures because you're cautious by nature and are afraid of deleting any important information by mistake. If everything looks fine, you'll empty the recycle bin. One by one, you look through the photos that are about to be completely erased.

At this time, you suddenly scroll to the photo of the seal on the neighboring door that you took on the first day here.

Although you're scrolling through quickly, you instinctively realize that there's something wrong with the photo, which is inconsistent with the memory you have of taking it before.

The photo has changed.

You already have a somewhat ominous premonition in your heart, but your hand seems to have a mind of its own and has already scrolled back to it. You can see that the door of the room that was originally closed in the photo at that time is now cracked open in the photo you're currently looking at.

And in that crack, you can see the shadow of a figure standing behind the door.

The seal wasn't broken; this figure just seemed to be peeking out.

At this time, you try to recall whether it had been like this when you took the photo at that time and whether that figure was actually the shadow of a clothes hanger inside the room. But your hair is already standing on end and you're thinking, *damn it! This is why they say don't photograph things indiscriminately!*

You keep scrolling past the photo and coming back to it but find that the crack in the door and the figure are both still there. You put down the phone and turn on all the lights in the room, but unfortunately, the lights in this hotel are rather dim. This kind of light makes you feel cold all over, but you hear hotel staff talking in the corridor—they must be making their rounds—so you gather up your courage, open the door, and take a look at the room next door.

The door is closed and the seal is intact.

The hotel staff is cleaning things in the room opposite yours, and when they see you look at the neighboring door, their expression seems a bit strange. But you're too embarrassed to say that you're afraid, so you close your door and go back into your room.

You go back to the bed and lie down, but a strange thought suddenly pops into your head at this time. In the photo, the figure in the crack in the door was backlit. In other words, there was a light in the sealed room next door. The only way the shadow figure could be backlit was if a light was coming from behind it.

You open the photo, look at it carefully, and find that the light isn't coming from inside the room but from the building across the way. The curtains in the room weren't drawn, so the shadow figure in the crack was backlit.

At this time, you realize that the windows in this hotel aren't sealed shut and can be opened. Suddenly curious, you have the urge to go to the window, open it, stick your head out, and look at the window next door.

You know this is courting disaster, but you can't restrain your curiosity any longer. You start walking towards the window, but you suddenly find that there's a strange face pressed up against your window, looking at you. This strange face appears to be leaning over from the window next door.

After listening to this story, you should think of the face that appears in your mind as a dirty face. After all, dirty faces represent something that you're extremely afraid of in your heart. But when you put on the dirty face, you become one with the things you fear deeply and even your personality will change.

Most people will become murderous and extremely wanton.

Every Zhang family member is said to have a dirty face, but for them, it doesn't mean much. Many people just regard it as a festive event and part of the coming-of-age ceremony. But I'm very curious about it, especially because the overseas Zhang family places a relatively higher value on dirty faces. The reason for this is very complicated, but I can talk about it in detail later.

So far, I have only seen a dirty face once, and that was merely the mask itself. I didn't see anyone wearing it, but the shape looked both terrifying and strange.

I really want to know what Poker-Face's dirty face looks like.

Black Glasses said that some people's dirty face isn't a terrible monster but another person's face. Dirty faces are very diverse, so it's difficult to guess and imagine what they might look like. I thought about it that night and broke out in a cold sweat, but when I thought about it again, I wondered if I was old enough to just let it go.

The above information is a brief overview of dirty faces. After this, I'll continue to collect dirty faces and try to figure out the meaning behind them one by one.

# Fireworks

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*[TN Note: Read after “Notes in Rain Village: Part 2”]*

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I stood at the window and ate roasted peanuts while watching Fatty organize fireworks in the courtyard below.

Fatty had bought several boxes of fireworks that would shoot off sixteen rounds each. To be honest, since there were mountains around us, we might cause a wildfire and end up being arrested if we weren't careful when setting them off. It would be more appropriate for us to play with sparklers instead.

When we were looking for aquatic plants before, we agreed that the lake we found was the perfect spot for setting off fireworks. That was why Fatty was currently loading fireworks into the back of the van.

Everyone was busy this year. We had all planned on going to Hangzhou for the Chinese New Year but everyone couldn't make it for various reasons so we planned to meet up for the Lantern Festival instead.<sup>186</sup> As a result, only Wang Meng drove over to see us.

After Fatty and Wang Meng were finished, they started scolding me and Poker-Face, “It's past midnight. Can't you guys hurry up?”

Fireworks in other places started to go off in the sky. I put on my clothes, went downstairs, and saw that Poker-Face was also dressed. He pointed to our homemade wine that was sitting off to the side.

Yuanshanjinger.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> [Chinese New Year](#) is also called the Spring Festival. This year, it started on February 1<sup>st</sup>. The [Lantern Festival](#) is on February 15<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>187</sup> Yuanshanjinger “远山净儿” (lit: purity in the distant mountains)

He didn't want to drink; he was just reminding me that maybe I would want to.

We got in the van and drove on the dark road, numerous fireworks filling the night sky as we approached the lake.

By that point, I had already finished half of the wine. Text messages kept popping up on my phone sending blessings for the new year but I turned it off when Wang Meng asked me to send him a red envelope.<sup>188</sup>

In a daze, I looked out of the van window at the bright fireworks soaring high into the sky.

I looked at Fatty, who looked at Poker-Face—the two of them seemed to have come to some kind of agreement—before saying to me, “You can smoke one cigarette today.”

I took the cigarette and lighter that Fatty handed over to me, opened the window a crack, and looked out at the small lake. There were many small fishing boats, fishing lanterns, and fireworks reflecting off of the water's surface.

I held the cigarette between my lips, not quite sure how to describe what I was feeling.

But I didn't expect Poker-Face to have another lighter in his hand, which he used to light my cigarette for me. He was very swift, so by the time I came back to my senses, I found that the cigarette had already been lit. I reflexively sucked in a mouthful of smoke, afraid that if I didn't take advantage of this, he wouldn't give me a second chance.

I laughed and Fatty immediately looked at Poker-Face as if to say, “You see? I knew he was suffering.”

I was just about to thank them when Fatty said, “Don't smoke it too fast. We're going to use it to light the fireworks later.”

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<sup>188</sup> Monetary gift in a red envelope given during holidays or special occasions. Info [here](#).



I didn't know why, but I was very happy. Maybe it was the wine or maybe the scene just now was a little absurd.

*Let's set off some fireworks.*

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 1

1.

Wang Meng swept the floor and looked at the clean courtyard with a hint of sadness.

Although he was considered a partner now, there was a strange loneliness since he didn't have his own business.

In the end, after various ups and downs, there were a total of eight people—the boss's friends and assistants, some part-timers, and him—working together on Wushanju's accounts.

Because of the boss's recent achievements, these eight people strutted around and used their powerful connections to intimidate people. And they did a good job, too. That was why they were called the "Eight Villains of the Wu family", and he was their leader.

Thinking of this, Wang Meng became happy again and said to the empty courtyard, "I'll raise my cup to toast the bright moon and drink for eight people's success."<sup>189</sup>

Only the magpie in the eaves looked at him.

2.

Kan Jian looked at the letter the boss wrote to him.

"You're a very smart child. You don't have to act simple and honest all the time just to win everyone's favor. When you reach a certain age, you can let everyone know your intelligence."

The boss had sent this to him on his birthday, all the way from Fujian. The boss's letters were always so profound and philosophical that Kan Jian's eyes couldn't help but become moist whenever he looked at them.

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<sup>189</sup> He modified Li Bai's poem "Drinking Alone in the Moonlight" (月下独酌). One translation of the poem is [here](#).

He put down the letter and said to the owner of the optical shop, “Boss, I want a pair of glasses that make me look smart.”

The boss looked at him and handed him a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

Kan Jian put them on and made a gesture in front of the mirror, feeling a bit like a Kingsman secret service agent.<sup>190</sup>

“Boss, am I really smart?” He asked.

The shop owner felt a little baffled but handed him another pair, which turned out to be a pair of small, round fortune-telling glasses.

Kan Jian took them while thinking to himself, *hmm, these look very smart, just like Master Black.*

He put them on as he walked out, feeling that he had become very smart.

3.

Baishe was sitting on the edge of the swimming pool. A little boy who was sitting beside him suddenly looked at him and asked, “Since you can swim so well, why don’t you join the Olympics?”

“I’m just a good swimmer,” Baishe responded. “But I’m really slow.”

“What do you mean you’re a good swimmer?” The little boy was curious.

“That is...I’m like a fish in the water.” As Baishe spoke, his eyes were trained on the little boy’s mother on the other side of the pool. The little boy seemed to accept his explanation, so Baishe asked softly, “Your mother hasn’t been looking for your father recently, has she?”

“They’re divorced,” the little boy said calmly. “Mom said she wouldn’t forgive dad.”

“Do you think your mother is lonely?”

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<sup>190</sup> Reference to “Kingsman: The Secret Service” movie. Info [here](#).

The little boy looked at Baishe, pulled a note from his pocket which had the number 42 written on, and then handed it to Baishe.

Baishe found it a little odd, "What's this?"

"Mom has forty-two suitors," the little boy said. "You're number forty-two. "

Baishe was surprised, "That many?"

"Yep!" The little boy answered.

"Is it possible to cut in line?" Baishe asked.

The little boy lowered his long eyelashes for a moment before asking, "Do you play Minecraft? Help me fight the last Shadow Dragon and I can bump you up to twenty-three."

Baishe narrowed his eyes and thought hard for a while before saying, "Deal."

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 2

1

Liu Sang checked the weather forecast. He could already see the cumulonimbus clouds up ahead, which meant that it would probably start storming around nine o'clock that evening.

As his car slowly approached the rain, he looked at the dozen GPS devices in the car and speculated on which village the thunderstorm would fall in.

Fortunately, it happened when he drove into Pingli town.

He was very experienced so he knew that the rain would fall for about eight hours, and the thunder would disappear after one hour.

He parked on a mountain road right outside the town and crawled into the back seat of the car.

He lay down, listened to the rain, and quickly fell asleep.

He had to be in a heavy downpour in order to fall asleep completely because that was the only time all other sound would be muffled.

To him, these sounds were like excessive trash that left devastation in their wake, but the rainstorm could temporarily wash everything away. It had to be a real rainstorm, though, in order cover up all the sounds within a few kilometers.

He slept soundly.

As far as he could remember, he had only had a good night's sleep a few times.

It was that person who had taught him to fall asleep like this. He wondered where they were now.

2

Wang Guo was watching the news as it rained heavily outside.

This was Longmen Town, where the first generation of directors made films and gained some fame, so there were some scenic spots around town.

A woman in the town had died—well, was murdered actually.

During this period of time, it had rained heavily and only stopped for one day. It was on that day that they had found the woman's body.

Wang Guo always felt that it was strange that this woman had died between two rainy days.

It almost seemed like there was some meaning behind it.

Wang Guo was a policeman here. All of his classmates were big-time policemen in major cities who handled big cases but he had come back here because of his parents.

But in an unexpected turn of events, there was a murder in his hometown.

His wife served him dinner, which he hurriedly ate in a few quick bites. He knew that he had to get back to the station quickly.

3

Wang Meng closed the shop and locked it.

It was another quiet day. As he stretched, he found that his waist felt a little uncomfortable.

He was at that age where he would start feeling aches all over his body.

At this time, he noticed a middle-aged man standing by the door.

Wang Meng knew him and immediately felt his face fall.

The middle-aged man—in fact, Wang Meng wasn't so young himself anymore—came over and the two people started walking side-by-side, as if they had a tacit agreement.

“About your father...” the middle-aged man said to Wang Meng. “He’s getting out soon. You should go and pick him up.”

“I have nothing to do with him,” Wang Meng replied.

The middle-aged man lit a cigarette. “You haven’t answered the prison’s phone calls. His mind isn’t very clear anymore. What will he do if you don’t pick him up?”

“Die on the side of the road.” Although Wang Meng said this, he still obviously felt a little soft-hearted when it came to his father so his expression was a little uncomfortable.

The middle-aged man tried to hand Wang Meng a piece of paper but Wang Meng didn’t take it. In the end, the middle-aged man had to force it on him.

“I won’t take care of it for you this time,” the middle-aged man said to him. “If you really want him to die, don’t show up.”

Wang Meng stopped and looked at the note. It had the address to the prison written on it, along with the corrections officer’s phone number.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 3

1

Liu Sang woke up. It was early morning the next day and the sky was already clear. He pulled up the radio on his cell phone and listened to the morning news.

When he opened the car door, the air was still very humid but cool.

He looked at a photo that had been stuck to his car. It had been placed between his phones.<sup>191</sup>

He hesitated for a moment before memories of that year came flashing through his mind.

The radio began broadcasting news of the recent murders that occurred during the rainy season. All of the victims were female.

As he listened, he used a knife to carve the final stroke of a Chinese character onto his steering wheel.

Five people.

*Have you finally gone off the deep end?* Liu Sang thought to himself. *What have you been going through all these years?*

2

Outside the prison, Wang Meng watched the door open with a blank expression on his face. A rickety, white-haired old man walked out on trembling legs.

As Wang Meng stepped forward, the old man looked at him without a trace of recognition in his eyes.

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<sup>191</sup> Per Tiffany: In [Restart Part 1, Chapter 17](#), it was mentioned that Liu Sang kept a bunch of phones lined up so that he could check the weather forecasts of the coastal towns.



He didn't remember him anymore. Wang Meng honestly didn't expect his condition to be this bad.

"Your father is finally released from prison after serving his sentence. All of his things are here," the corrections officer said. "He doesn't recognize you anymore, so if you want to rebuild your relationship, you may need to find a better doctor. The chances aren't good."

"How many years has it been?"

"It was discovered more than four years ago. His condition progressed very rapidly, probably because his personality is a bit problematic and he's been very inactive," the officer explained.

After he finished speaking, he went back through the iron door.

Wang Meng looked at his father, and his father looked at him.

"Let's go," Wang Meng said to him.

The old man didn't react.

Wang Meng hesitated for a while before grabbing the other man's sleeve and pulling him towards the car little by little.

After finally getting him to sit in the passenger seat, Wang Meng got into the driver's seat, set the GPS, and headed back to Wushanju.

3

Wang Guo walked into the autopsy room and was met by the medical examiner, who was an old man.

The body was lying on the autopsy table.

"I'm afraid you can't take this case," the old man said to him.

"Why?" Wang Guo asked.

"I don't know if I'm allowed to tell you," the old man replied.

“Let’s just say you gave me the report yesterday,” Wang Guo said.

The old man removed the covering from the female corpse’s face and pushed her long hair aside. Wang Guo didn’t know what he was supposed to be looking at until the old man said, “Look at her ears.”

A plant root was stuck in the female corpse’s ear.

It was a rose branch.

As the old man carefully pulled the thing out of the corpse’s ear, Wang Guo could see that it was covered in blood and the end was sharpened.

“This thing pierced her brain through the ear and then she drowned,” the old man said. “But it would take a while to die from this thing alone.”

“Is it in both ears?”

“Yes, but the other side is different. I’ve already taken it out. The outermost rose on that one is still preserved.”

Wang Guo touched his chin and fell deep into thought.

“It’s actually very difficult to stick something into a living person’s ears,” the old man said. “People usually struggle so it’s necessary to keep their head from moving. If you look at her forehead and the back of her head, you’ll see traces of clamps from a workman’s bench. The murderer used fixed clamps to keep her head from moving and then stabbed those things into her ears. He was very persistent. I don’t know what it is, but ears must hold some kind of significance for him.”

Wang Guo narrowed his eyes in thought.

“You’re not afraid of corpses?” the old man asked.

“When I was interning, I encountered a big case that I worked on for three months,” Wang Guo said. “Why am I not allowed to take this case?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow.” The old man sighed and looked around before adding, “The equipment here is too old. To be honest, this kind of case isn’t suitable.”

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 4

1

Li Cu watched Yang Hao light a cigarette. He went up and tried to grab it but Yang Hao grabbed his hand and stopped him.

The two men looked at each other for a moment before Li Cu yanked his hand back and shook his arm out.

This strength...Yang Hao had practiced well.

“It’s not much money this time,” Li Cu said to him. “Among the things you’ve learned, there’s no such thing as free service, right?”

“I’ll temporarily increase the price,” Yang Hao took the cigarette out of his mouth and released a mouthful of smoke, “when you call for help.”

Li Cu looked at him and smiled.

Su Wan was off to the side, making a phone call, “There’s nothing better? I don’t need insurance. My parents don’t need the payout if I die. I need someone with rich experience. Yes, yes, I know I’m the team leader but there’s no rule that the leader can’t hire another leader.”

Su Wan hung up the phone and said to the two of them, “Their vehicles aren’t any good. The A-pillars<sup>192</sup> won’t be able to withstand the impact if the the vehicles roll over. We’ll have to change cars.”

Li Cu looked at the other people gathered by the side of the road. The motorcade had converged here, and many people from the civilian rescue team were busy loading and unloading the equipment.

“These people regard saving people as a hobby,” Yang Hao said.

Su Wan sighed, “You’re still saying that?”

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<sup>192</sup> Pillars are the vertical or nearly vertical supports of a car’s window area—designated respectively as the A, B, C or D-pillar, moving from front to rear, in profile view. So the A-Pillar is either one of two support posts that are positioned on either side of the windshield. More info [here](#).

Yang Hao turned around and flicked his cigarette butt into the sand. He used so much force that the sparks from the cigarette butt flashed like a streaking bullet, forming an afterimage in the air before hitting the sand in a shower of dying sparks.

Then, he peed in the desert by the side of the road, watching the sunset in the distance.

2

In Wushanju, Wang Meng looked at his father sitting in a chair with a blank expression on his face.

He was sitting at the cash register, looking at his unresponsive father with a very complicated feeling in his heart.

If his father still remembered him, Wang Meng knew he certainly wouldn't be able to get along with him because he could never forgive his father for what happened with his mother.

But his father didn't recognize him now. It seemed that the part he had hated so much had disappeared because his father's personality had changed.

He turned back to his computer, where he was registering Wushanju's online shop. It had always been a business venture he wanted to start.

Now that the online store was successfully registered, he needed to upload a product for testing.

He wasn't very good at using the system yet, and his computer was also new. There was only his father's photo ID card in the picture folder from when he had taken him to re-apply for an ID card after he was released from prison.

When he uploaded it, he clicked on his father's ID photo, wrote "Dad" as the name of the product, marked it with a price of 99,999,999 yuan, and then clicked upload.

The system was well made. As soon as he refreshed the page, the first product appeared in Wushanju's online shop:

Dad: 99,999,999 yuan.

He was very satisfied. Now all he had to do was take some beautiful photos of the things in the shop and upload them.

Actually, this was a very tedious job.

He got up and went to the back to take a dump. Although the doctor told him not to play with his phone while squatting like that, he still started flipping through a bunch of short videos anyways.

Then, he suddenly saw a notification pop up in the online store's mobile app: Goods have been bought.

Wang Meng paused. Within seconds, another message popped up in his e-wallet: 99,999,999 yuan has been deposited.

Wang Meng couldn't believe it at all and looked at it carefully. *That's right*, he thought to himself with a sneer. *It must be some kind of new scam.*

He opened his e-wallet and saw that the latest deposit really was 99,999,999 yuan.

Wang Meng rubbed his eyes and looked again.

There was no doubt

It was 99,999,999 yuan.

He swore, "Fuck me."

Then, another notification popped up on the online store's app: The customer has confirmed receipt of the goods.

Wang Meng, feeling puzzled, pulled up his pants and went outside, only to discover that his father's chair was empty and his father was gone.

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Author's Note:

These "What Are They Doing" chapters will consist of a lot of short stories which may or may not be related to each other or the main story.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 5

1

Wang Guo stood in front of a middle-aged woman.

Although he said middle-aged, he knew that the woman in front of him was actually around sixty years old. She just took care of herself really well.

The woman across from him kept chattering on about Gu Xiao Juan.

“Before her accident, there was nothing strange. Well, she always said that she heard some strange noise, and she was always looking for it,” the woman said. “But we couldn’t hear it. We didn’t know what was wrong with her, but ever since she was a child, she could hear strange things with her ears.”

Wang Guo silently wrote this down in a notebook: She could hear strange sounds before she died.

Gu Xiao Juan was the deceased.

She was the one who drowned between the rainstorms and had rose stems thrust into her ears to the point that her eardrums were completely destroyed.

“You all couldn’t hear it? Not even a little bit?”

“Nope, not at all. But she said that it was really noisy. She even looked it up online and found that some people’s ears can hear different noises compared to that of other people. She said that she was one of those people.”

“Ok, so, she was looking for that noise before she died? Did she find it?”

“She thought that the noise was nearby.” Here, the middle-aged woman showed a puzzled expression on her face. “She went to look for it in a nearby alley. She listened to the walls and even looked at the gutters. I think something was wrong with her ears.”

Wang Guo nodded and asked the woman to help identify the alley where Gu Xiao Juan had been looking for that noise.

The woman pointed to the area across the street from her shop—she was the landlord and Gu Xiao Juan had lived upstairs—where a few three-story buildings sat. Their exteriors had been blackened and corroded by rain and there was a small alley between the two buildings.

Street lamps had been installed on the walls on either side of the alley.

It was evening now, and the street lamps were on.

“Was...was she molested by someone?” The middle-aged woman suddenly asked Wang Guo.

He smiled but didn’t answer. Instead, he walked towards the alley.

2

Wang Meng sat in front of the policeman and showed him his account.

“Are you here to show off your wealth?” The policeman asked. “If so, get out.”

“No, sir, my dad is missing. He has Alzheimer’s. I thought he wandered off at first but now I think something happened to him. Like I just told you, I really received the money so I think he didn’t wander off. Just think about it. Where did this money come from?”

“You’re obviously here to show off your wealth. Get out.” The policeman looked at him coldly, “Otherwise, I’ll arrest you.”

Wang Meng looked at the policeman and wanted to continue arguing but found that he couldn’t.

It had been a day since he received the money and discovered that his father was gone. His father still hadn’t come back, and there was no explanation for the money.

He went onto the website and asked about the account that deposited the money. They said that it was another local e-commerce merchant,



but when he went to their address, he found that the building was completely empty. It had about fifteen cement floors, each of which was completely empty.

He returned to Wushanju, sat on the steps, scratched his head, and looked at the online shop's app on his phone. Suddenly, he saw a new post appear on the buyer's online shop.

He immediately clicked on it and saw a photo.

It was a picture of his father, who was completely encased in bricks with only his head exposed. He was looking at the camera and appeared to still be alive.

The accompanying message said: "It was very fun. Thank you, shop owner. I will come again."

Based on the expression on his father's face, he appeared to be in a lot of pain. Wang Meng's hands began to tremble as soon as he saw this and he immediately sent a private message to the person: "Brother, who are you? Why are you doing this? It's all a misunderstanding. Please take the money back and give my father back to me."

The other person replied within seconds: "If you report this to the police, things won't be fun anymore."

Wang Meng continued to beg him but the other party was silent.

Wang Meng was covered in a cold sweat as he looked at the other person's strange username:

7 👍

What did this mean? Wang Meng touched his head, took out his cell phone, and called Kan Jian.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 6

1

Wang Guo walked towards the small alley. From the outside, it looked quite deep and kind of scary. There was a set of stairs at the end which led up into the mountain. Since the buildings had been constructed on the mountain, this town could be regarded as a mountain town.

He could see doors set at random intervals further along the alley walls. Once he entered the small alley, he found that it actually wasn't as deep as it first appeared to be. There were many kinds of flowers and plants that the elderly had planted, along with the families' fuse boxes hidden all along the walls.

As Wang Guo walked further into the alley, he looked around aimlessly.

He strained his ears to see if he could hear that noise the middle-aged woman had mentioned but he couldn't hear anything.

After walking for more than a hundred meters, he reached the end of the alley and saw a doorway.

It seemed to belong to an impoverished elderly person. There were many such people left behind here.

He turned and walked back towards the entrance of the alley, not knowing what he was looking for—cigarette butts, maybe, or possibly even footprints.

He wanted to find something unusual.

As he got closer to the entrance, he suddenly stopped—there was a woman in a dark green raincoat with headphones around her neck squatting in the alley. She seemed to be looking for something.

He didn't remember seeing her when he walked by just now.

He walked towards her but she didn't seem surprised at all, as if she had been aware of his presence for a long time now.

When Wang Guo opened his mouth to ask her a question, the other person said, "I'm a man."

The other party turned around and Wang Guo found that, sure enough, the person was a man with long hair.

Wang Guo wanted to ask another question but the other party interrupted him, "It has nothing to do with you."

Wang Guo paused. Indeed, what he wanted to ask was, "What are you doing here?"

It was like the other person was able to read minds. As soon as Wang Guo started to activate his vocal chords, the other person would immediately answer him.

Wang Guo thought for a moment. This time, he wanted to ask something but the other party spoke before he could even think about it, "Your heartbeat is too loud. Go away."

Wang Guo was feeling a little upset so he took out his police badge and held it up in front of the other party.

As the other party looked at his badge, Wang Guo said, "I'm investigating a case. This is the crime scene. What are you doing here?"

"Is that the case that happened on the day between rainstorms?" The other party asked.

When Wang Guo leveled him with a cold look, the other person said, "There's something wrong with your heart. You'd better go to the hospital for an exam. Hearing the sounds of your heartbeat is making me uncomfortable."

2

Wang Meng and Kan Jian sat on the steps of Wushanju.

Kan Jian listened to Wang Meng's story and checked the account again and again.

The two were silent for a while before Wang Meng asked, “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“As a smart person, I don’t know whether to believe this or not,” Kan Jian said.

“Normal people wouldn’t.” As Wang Meng spoke, he lit a cigarette, took a puff, and promptly choked.

“Do you want to inform the boss?” Kan Jian asked.

“I can’t reach them now.” As he spoke, he dialed their number but only got a lot of white noise in response.

There was a very faint tapping sound that could be heard in the midst of that white noise but he didn’t know where it was coming from.

“After they set off and got to a certain place, this is the only sound that comes through. It almost seems like someone is knocking on a rock.”

Kan Jian sighed. He seemed very sullen.

When he first met Wu Xie, Kan Jian had asked him a personal question, “How can I get others to accept me as quickly as possible?”

Wu Xie told him that he could make himself appear less intelligent.

He did as Wu Xie said, and it actually worked quite well.

He no longer knew whether he was really smart or not after pretending for so long but now the boss was telling him that he could be smarter.

Because change could be more impressive.

But the first thing he encountered after deciding to become smarter was really tricky. He thought he could start off simple before trying to tackle something difficult but that didn’t look like it was going to happen.

Wang Meng hit his head against the door frame and groaned in pain, “What do I do? What do I do?!”

Kan Jian held him down and then said with a very clever expression on his face, "There's only one way, but it's a bit risky. Are you willing to try it?"

Wang Meng nodded, "My dad has been encased in bricks. I'm willing to try anything."

3

In front of Wang Meng's computer, Kan Jian uploaded Wang Meng's photo to the online store.

The name of the product was marked: Wang Meng.

The price column was still empty, and he looked at Wang Meng questioningly, "How much is appropriate?"

"99,999,999?"

"He just bought one. He won't want it at the same price. What do you want me to do?"

"Then how much would you say?"

"Three yuan and twenty cents?"

"So little? My dad has Alzheimer's and he's worth 99,999,999 yuan yet I'm not even as good as a bottle of mineral water?" Wang Meng asked.

Kan Jian thought for a while before typing in 100,000 and clicking submit.

The new product was uploaded and appeared in the online store in an instant.

Then, Kan Jian handed Wang Meng a knife and a slingshot.

"You go sit in the same chair your father was sitting in when he disappeared. I'll keep watch." As Kan Jian spoke, he pointed to a nearby pillar. "If someone comes to pick up the goods, I'll shoot them in the head with my slingshot. Don't worry. No one except for Teacher Zhang can escape from this distance."

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 7

1

Did Wang Guo's heart feel very uncomfortable recently? He found it a little odd that the other party was telling him something like that.

The other party continued, "My name is Liu Sang. You don't have to thank me."

After he said that, he moved to walk out of the alley but Wang Guo immediately stopped him.

"This is a possible crime scene and I'm investigating the case. You're an outsider so why are you here? And how could you tell that this alley is related to the recent case?"

"As a policeman, if you have any real doubts, you can just have me assist in the investigation," Liu Sang said to him.

Wang Guo looked at the other man and found that he wasn't afraid. Ordinary people were usually afraid when they saw the police but this person didn't seem to be ordinary at all.

"If you don't have any doubts, then I'm going to get some dinner," Liu Sang said. "You can't find anything here. Don't waste your energy."

Wang Guo didn't let him go.

Liu Sang looked at him.

"Either let me assist in the investigation or let me go."

Wang Guo looked at this long-haired city boy and smiled. "No, there's actually another option. I'll treat you to dinner."

2

Shaxian delicacies.<sup>193</sup>

Liu Sang looked at the duck legs and four bowls of fried noodles in front of him.

“I don’t eat these things,” Liu Sang said. “If you invite someone to dinner, shouldn’t you at least find a restaurant where you can order stir-fried vegetables?”

“What’s wrong with Shaxian?” Wang Guo handed him a bowl of fried noodles and a pair of chopsticks.

Liu Sang grabbed the bowl and looked at it, “If you eat three bowls of this stuff, it’s not surprising that your heart has problems.”

Wang Guo ignored him and asked directly, “Are you the murderer?”

“Are you crazy?”

“Well, I didn’t think you were,” Wang Guo said. “So are you a reporter then?”

“I’m your father.”

“Are all city people so bad-tempered?” Wang Guo lit a cigarette. The three bowls of fried noodles had already been eaten. “You must have a story. How about we exchange some information?”

“Why do you think I have a story?”

“Because you looked like you really wanted to assist me in the investigation just now.” Wang Guo looked at Liu Sang, “Don’t look down on me just because I’m in this small county. I graduated from one of the top four Public Security Universities. It took me a long time to find that alley but once I entered, I saw that you were already squatting there. Doesn’t this mean you have a better source of information than I do?”

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<sup>193</sup> Refers to a style of cuisine from Shaxian District, Sanming, Fujian, China. It has both Fujian characteristics and northern Central Plains characteristics. Main dishes can include: Signature Peanut Sauce Noodle, Salted Duck Gizzard, and Fried Pork Dumplings. [Here’s](#) a menu I found.

Liu Sang did originally want to assist in the investigation but it wasn't necessary now. As long as he could find the local police station, all he needed to do was squat in the corner and listen in on all their conversations.

Of course, it wasn't as clear as it would be if he were listening from inside.

Liu Sang looked at him and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're here for the murder case, right? The deceased was probably robbed in that alley. Before her death, she always thought that there was a strange sound coming from that alley, but it's not a sound that normal people can hear."

"The frequency at which human ears can hear is about twenty to twenty thousand hertz," Liu Sang said. "If the sound exceeds eighteen thousand hertz, in many cases, in addition to talent, special training is needed." After saying that, Liu Sang added, "Your phone is going to ring."

Wang Guo was still wondering what he was talking about when his cell phone suddenly rang.

Wang Guo gave Liu Sang an incredulous look and then picked it up.

He listened for a while and then looked at Liu Sang, who said to him, "I'm going too. If you take me there, I'll share all the information I know with you."

Wang Guo continued to look at him and then looked down at his phone.

"I can hear everything, including the sound you make in your throat right before you're about to speak. People have a habit. Right before they speak, they take a breath and the air that flows down their throat simulates what they're going to say. Most people do this at least once before they speak. If you're skilled at listening, you can tell what they're going to say before they even open their mouths. This is an unconscious action. You can't change it," Liu Sang said. "The same is true for cell phones. Before it rings, the circuits inside have already started to



operate. If you master the mysteries of sound, most things in this world are open to you.”

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 8

1

Li Cu drove at the back of the motorcade, probably the third from the end of the line.

Yang Hao was in the passenger seat with his feet on the dash, chewing gum and looking out at the sand dunes passing by.

They were still in the Gobi. If they kept going a bit further, they would reach pure sand. The team had an oil truck with them, which meant that they intended to deflate the tires on their vehicles and go directly into the desert.

Su Wan was in the back seat, calling his teacher to ask for leave.

“Yes, it’s my adopted mother’s adopted son. He was hit by a cement truck and has a cerebral edema. He just woke up but my adopted mother is in Spain so I have to take care of him. If you don’t believe me, just listen to what he has to say.”

Su Wan handed the phone to Li Cu, who pretended that his tongue was swollen as he said, “I need him to take care of me.”

Su Wan pulled the phone back, “So, I can’t come back to do the experiment. I’ll bring you a pack of cigarettes next week to make up for it.”

Su Wan hung up the phone and asked Yang Hao, “Bro, do you have any gum left?”

Yang Hao spat out what was in his mouth and handed it to him.

Su Wan sighed, “You’re not so young anymore. Can’t you be more mature?”

Yang Hao stuck the chewing gum on the outside of the car door and said, “Let’s be serious. When are you going to visit that shrine in Fujian?”

2

Wang Meng sat in the chair, scrolling through his cell phone.

Kan Jian crouched on the pillar, holding a slingshot and looking at Wang Meng below.

Eight hours had passed.

No one came to pick up the goods.

Kan Jian felt a little sleepy so he jumped down, walked up behind Wang Meng, and patted him on the shoulder.

“Brother Meng, let’s eat first. I’m hungry.”

But as soon as he patted the other man, he found that the texture under his hand felt wrong. He immediately grabbed Wang Meng and turned him around, only to find that Wang Meng had become a scarecrow.

The workmanship was really good. You couldn’t even tell from the back that the real one had been replaced.

Shit.

Kan Jian immediately rushed to the computer and opened his account to take a look.

One hundred thousand yuan had already been deposited.

Kan Jian’s face turned deathly pale and he smacked himself in the face while thinking, *what just happened?!*

3

Wang Meng woke up and found that it was dark all around him.

He was sitting on a chair and there was a small coffee table in front of him.

The table was very old and looked like it was made from cheap European wood.

There was also a strange lamp sitting on it.

The whole space around him was very large but covered in darkness. The desk lamp was the only source of light, illuminating everything that was just described.

Wang Meng stood up and looked around. It almost seemed like there was an endless void all around him but when he looked at the ground, he found that it was concrete covered in waterproof paint that had almost worn off.

This should be an old warehouse.

A line of words had been written on the lampshade.

“Go left.”

He took a closer look before approaching the desk lamp and lifting it up. But when he pulled it, he found that there seemed to be a cord under the lamp that was connected to some kind of machine.

In the darkness far to the left, another desk lamp suddenly lit up and the lamp in his hand went out.

Wang Meng turned his head and found a bicycle and an old-fashioned Xiali<sup>194</sup> where the other desk lamp was now lit.

It was far but the intention was clear.

He felt cold all over.

He realized what this was.

The bike...the Xiali...this was the scene he had witnessed when his mother was in a car accident when he was a child. At that time, he had been ten

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<sup>194</sup> [Xiali](#) is the 2nd best selling small car in China

meters behind his mother, unable to do anything but watch as she got knocked down by the Xiali.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 9

1

The car was silent. Li Cu was driving. He was actually the most qualified person to answer this but he didn't know how.

"Is there any trust between the three of us?" Yang Hao had asked. "If not, you can go without me."

Silence still reigned in the car. Su Wan tried to ease the tense atmosphere by saying, "Bro, you and Pear are in different camps. I think you guys just need a little bit of time, yeah?"

"Romeo and Juliet were in different camps. The three of us were originally in the same camp but the both of you threw me to the other side." Yang Hao continued, "Me coming back and sitting in this car is already generous enough."

"I know what you've been through but you don't know what I've been through," Li Cu said.

"No, you don't know what I've been through, Li Cu. You can't even imagine," Yang Hao argued. "You may have had a hard time, but you definitely don't know what I've been through because you weren't there."

Li Cu continued to remain silent as the car drove on. After the three of them sat there in silence for a while, Li Cu finally spoke up, "Fine, we'll set off after we save these people."

Yang Hao laughed, "What, did my comments rile you up so much that you're finally willing to go?"

Li Cu looked at Yang Hao, "I'm not the same as I was before. I won't drag people down with me, nor will I be provoked into making a decision."

"So, you trust me just like that. Don't you think I have another purpose for being here?" Yang Hao asked.

Li Cu spat out the chewing gum in his mouth and also stuck it on the outside of his car door. “Are we not the same kind of person? I’ve put myself in your shoes. I’ll admit defeat if you got in this car for some kind of scheme.”

“Why? Because we’ve known each other since we were kids?”

“Because it’s too exhausting to be wary of your own brothers,” Su Wan said from the back.

Yang Hao and Li Cu shuddered at Su Wan’s sentimental words at the same time.

2

Baishe was holding a bouquet of flowers and standing downstairs at the company where that child’s mother worked.

He stood there for an hour without leaving or daring to go up.

In the end, he threw the flowers into the trash. The bouquet was so big that it took him a long time to shove them in.

As he was calling for a taxi to come pick him up, he saw a lot of people looking at him. He bowed his head and got into the car but ended up hitting his head on the roof because he was so tall.

He cried a little bit and then opened the window and lit a cigarette. The driver gave him a look, which he returned before saying, “You smoke, too. I smelled it when I first got in.”

The driver also lit one leisurely.

At this time, Baishe received a WeChat notification. When he opened the app, he saw that the kid had sent him a message.

“200 yuan in a red envelope and I’ll show you what my mom looks like right now.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> You can send money over WeChat in “red envelopes”.

Baishe lowered the phone, tempted to delete the kid's number. This kid was a little scary. He had heard on the news that some children were tempted to secretly take intimate photos of their mothers and sell them for money.

Cell phones made it so convenient nowadays.

"You'll definitely be shocked," the kid kept pushing.

Baishe thought for a while and suddenly realized that if he didn't stop this kid, the little boy would continue to do these kinds of things.

But stopping him required evidence; otherwise, no mother would believe that her child was like this.

And maybe, just maybe, this would be a way for him to start a normal conversation with the mother without coming off as a pervert.

Baishe continued to think about it for a while before sending a red envelope with two hundred yuan.

The kid accepted it within seconds.

After a while, a picture was sent over.

Baishe was secretly excited. Even though he had good intentions in his heart, his despicable desire betrayed him. He really wanted to see the photo.

He clicked on the picture to open it and saw a woman lying on a bed. Her body was completely decomposed and covered in maggots. It looked like she had been rotting there for at least a month.

But the scariest thing was that this wasn't a prank photo. Baishe recognized the woman at a glance—it was the boy's mother.

Although her skin had turned green and fatty liquid was oozing out of the corpse, it really was that kid's mother.

"Transfer 5,000 yuan and you can keep watching her change," the kid continued.



Baishe felt cold all over as he carefully confirmed that the body wasn't photoshopped.

The last time he had seen the child was when he played Minecraft with him a month and a half ago. But now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen the child's mother during that month and a half.

He had always been too afraid to go upstairs.

Was it possible that his mother hadn't been at work and no one was actually upstairs?

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 10

1

When Wang Guo and Liu Sang got out of the car, Liu Sang could see a bunch of people surrounding the footpath between the fields in the distance.

There were crime scene technicians and policemen, along with police tape surrounding the scene.

It was close to the main road so a bunch of people were watching. The traffic cops tried to get the crowd to disperse but it didn't seem to have much effect.

Wang Guo lifted the police tape and walked closer. Everyone was familiar with him but they all gave Liu Sang questioning looks.

"It's against the rules for me to bring you here so don't talk," Wang Guo said to him.

Liu Sang nodded—he didn't want to talk either. There were too many people here and everyone's heartbeats had converged, making him feel a little nauseous.

"You promise you're not a reporter?"

"I'm not," Liu Sang confirmed.

"Since there aren't any private detectives in China, what kind of detective are you a fan of?"

"I already told you in the car that I have reasons for being interested in this matter. You'll only hear them in exchange for bringing me on-site or providing me with useful information."

Wang Guo looked at him and said, "You know, there's a story where someone like you appears. They're a highly intelligent detective and we policemen are all just a foil to make them stand out more. I bet you're like this."

Liu Sang sighed, “No, I’m not Conan.”<sup>196</sup>

As they were speaking, they had already reached the coroner and Liu Sang could finally see the body in the field.

It was another female corpse. She was lying in the mud with something sticking out of her ear that looked like another rose stem.

The coroner looked at Wang Guo and then at Liu Sang before saying, “It’s exactly the same. There are no signs of sexual assault. She was drowned and her eardrums were pierced.”

Liu Sang squatted down. The female corpse’s face was in the mud so he couldn’t see what she looked like. He glanced at the onlookers and then closed his eyes.

Countless people’s heartbeats were all intertwined, but as long as he paid attention, he could distinguish the individual heartbeats one by one.

After all, everyone’s heartbeats were different.

As he listened, he found that the female coroner’s heartbeat wasn’t normal. He raised his head and looked at her, only to find that she was looking at Wang Guo.

Wang Guo didn’t seem to notice and just squatted down to look at the corpse, scratching his head in thought.

There was nothing special about the other people’s heartbeats. It seemed that the murderer wasn’t like other serial killers who liked to watch the scene.

At this time, he suddenly heard a strange sound coming from the female corpse’s body.

He paused and listened carefully, only to realize that it was an extremely weak heartbeat.

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<sup>196</sup> Conan is from the super famous and long-running Japanese manga/anime “[Detective Conan](#)”.

“She’s not dead!” He cried out.

After saying that, he went right up to the female corpse, turned her over, and started administering CPR. Everyone standing nearby was startled by his outburst and immediately moved to grab him. “You’ll destroy the scene like this!” The coroner shouted.

“She’s not dead!” Liu Sang shouted right back. “She needs first aid!”

Every time he pressed down, he could hear the blood in the woman’s body start to flow faster. This woman had a strong will to survive. Wang Guo held the coroner back and said, “Trust him. He’s like Conan.”

As the female coroner stared blankly at Wang Guo, the female corpse suddenly twitched and spat out a large mouthful of muddy water.

Liu Sang looked at the coroner and said, “Coroners have also learned how to save people.”

The coroner immediately came over to help but couldn’t resist saying, “I checked just now. Her pupils were definitely dilated.”

Liu Sang let go—he could already hear the woman’s heart beating— and let the female coroner take over. The EMTs on the side were about to leave but now they all rushed down to help.

The onlookers were talking excitedly amongst themselves, but at this time, Liu Sang heard a curse come from the rice field not far away.

The curse was very faint and sounded like it came from the opposite direction of the crowd. Liu Sang looked in that direction and saw that it was an endless rice field.

Someone was hiding in the field.

Liu Sang grabbed Wang Guo, “The murderer is nearby.”

Wang Guo stood up, “Where?!”

Liu Sang dragged him into the rice field and said to Wang Guo, “Shut everyone up and don’t say a word.”

Wang Guo shouted to the people behind him, “Nobody talk at all or you’ll be arrested for obstructing official business!”

It took a while for the crowd to gradually quiet down. Although they didn’t know what was going on, the other policemen also told the onlookers not to say anything.

Liu Sang stood in the rice field as the wind blew through the rice seedlings. The person must have been very far away because he couldn’t hear their heartbeat.

He probably heard the curse just now because the person was unable to control their emotions and let it slip out a little louder than they meant to.

*Where are you?*

Liu Sang walked further into the rice field, quickly followed by Wang Guo. He sank into the mud with every step but he still continued on for more than a hundred meters.

Wang Guo wasn’t carrying a gun but he did have a stun gun on him, which he was gripping tightly in his pocket.

At this time, Liu Sang heard a very unusual sound. Although it was harder to hear with the wind blowing, it wasn’t a heartbeat or a nature sound.

He came to an abrupt stop—he knew that something was near him but he didn’t know what it was since it wasn’t a heartbeat.

Wang Guo looked around as Liu Sang closed his eyes and turned in a certain direction. Almost at the same time, the two of them saw a man covered in mud stand up in the direction Liu Sang was facing. He was only about one meter away from Liu Sang and had a smile on his face as he asked, “How did you find me?”

Liu Sang was caught by surprise when he realized how short the distance was between the two of them. Then, the other person suddenly pulled out a screwdriver and tried to jam it into Liu Sang’s ear.

But at this time, Wang Guo came up and pushed Liu Sang aside. As a result, the screwdriver ended up stabbing Wang Guo's collarbone.

Wang Guo kicked the man, who fell, got up, and started running. As Wang Guo immediately went after him, Liu Sang got up and started chasing him as well.

The people on the footpath saw all of this and also started chasing after them.

Wang Guo and Liu Sang had only been running for a few steps when Liu Sang suddenly heard a painful twitching sound come from Wang Guo's heart. He grabbed Wang Guo and pulled him to a stop. The other man clutched his chest and shouted, "We need to hurry up and chase after him! Don't stop!"

"Ambulance!" Liu Sang shouted. "Someone's having a heart attack!"

Wang Guo looked at Liu Sang in confusion, "I'm not having a heart attack! Hurry up and catch him!"

Liu Sang looked at him and said, "Three."

Wang Guo paused, "What?"

"Two," Liu Sang continued.

Wang Guo touched his chest, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

"One," Liu Sang said.

Wang Guo suddenly felt his whole heart twitch. As he curled in on himself, Liu Sang grabbed him and slowly lowered him to the ground while shouting, "Heart attack!"

The EMTs in the distance finally heard him and rushed over with their medical kit. Around three minutes later, Wang Guo was given emergency medicine.

Liu Sang looked at Wang Guo being carried away on the stretcher and then glanced to where the murderer had disappeared in the distance.

When the murderer had escaped, Liu Sang could finally hear the sound of his heartbeat and quickly memorized it.

*Keep running*, Liu Sang thought to himself.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 11

1

Liu Sang sat in his car, silently eating a baked sesame cake.

It was raining heavily outside.

The car was parked in a parking spot in front of the hospital so that he could look at the entrance. There was no shortage of people in the hospital even when it was raining heavily. Humans and diseases were truly inseparable from each other.

The weather forecast, which was still being broadcast on the radio, stated that the torrential rain was going to continue for another week or so.

He didn't know what happened to the victim after that.

He also didn't know how Wang Guo was doing.

That was why Liu Sang was waiting here. He hoped that Wang Guo could survive because their deal wasn't done yet.

At this time, a man knocked on the car window.

The man didn't have an umbrella and was standing directly in the rain—he looked like a policeman.

He seemed to have seen him at the scene earlier.

As Liu Sang rolled down the window, his ears were assaulted by the sound of the rainstorm. The other party raised his voice to be heard over the rain and said loudly, "Wang Guo wants to see you."

Liu Sang put down the half-eaten sesame cake, pulled the hood of his raincoat up, got out of the car, and followed the man into the hospital.

2

Wang Meng cautiously walked up to the bike.



The Xiali...the bicycle...

The lamp over here was a floor lamp, and in its light, he could see that the bike had been bent all out of shape.

He looked around in confusion, his hands shaking a little bit.

Although he didn't want to remember it at all, he couldn't seem to forget the image of his mother falling to the ground.

That moment had happened way too fast.

Although the car came to an abrupt stop when it hit the bicycle, his mother was sent flying three meters away.

Just like on TV, it didn't look like a strong collision at all.

He thought that his mother would immediately stand up and start yelling at the driver but she wasn't moving at all.

Wang Meng watched this all from among the crowd.

His mother had come on a bicycle to pick him up and take him home. He was the only one left in the kindergarten since all the other children had already been picked up by their parents.

Wang Meng often had to sit alone at the classroom door because the teachers couldn't wait around for his mother to come and pick him up. They had their own families too so they couldn't wait there endlessly.

But his mother couldn't help it. His father gambled so she had to work very hard to pay back the money.

As a result, Wang Meng had a special bench at the kindergarten's entrance where he would sit and wait for his mother to pick him up.

The family next door who sold radish cakes helped the teacher keep an eye on him so that the teacher could go home first.

Wang Meng sat on the bench, watching all the people in front of him come and go.

When his mother came, he would stand up, put the small bench in the unlocked reception office, and walk towards her.

Maybe that was why Wang Meng was always able to sit there motionless ever since he was a child.

That day, his mother came so late that he was left sitting there until it was almost time for the radish cake shop to close.

This was the first time Wang Meng felt scared.

In fact, he was fine when the teacher was with him, when the grandfather in the reception office was with him, and when the aunt and uncle from the radish cake shop were with him.

He never felt sorry for himself because his mother was better than anyone else's mother.

So, he often thought to himself, *it's ok to wait for her.*

Wang Meng couldn't remember what he was thinking when he saw his mother lying motionless on the ground, but up to this point, he had never cried whenever he thought of this scene.

He drowned the memories of his mother's incident in the sluggish monotony of Minesweeper, but after he became an adult, his father was released from prison after serving his sentence for gambling and swindling money, and then Wang Meng saw this scene again.

It was like he had suddenly returned to that moment—the exact moment when he had just finished putting the bench away, breathed a sigh of relief, and started walking towards his mother.

As an adult, he suddenly found that his face was covered in tears. The feeling he had been suppressing in his heart for all those years suddenly burst out like a flood, and he realized that he was crying.

But no sound came out of his throat.

He yelled hoarsely and squatted on the ground, his whole body trembling as he tried to let that cry break free.

But he just couldn't do it.

3

Wang Guo's voice was still very low as Liu Sang approached his room.

Wang Guo looked at his wife and labored to point to the bananas next to him that had been sent by his colleagues.

Liu Sang shook his head, "Don't bother others. You did this to yourself so save it."

Wang Guo's wife was a very quiet person. The two must've had an arranged marriage—which was somewhat strange nowadays—but his wife seemed to be very capable as indicated by how clean the hospital bed was.

Wang Guo whispered to him, "The doctor said I would've died in ten minutes. Thank you."

Liu Sang nodded, "Eat more vegetables."

Wang Guo smiled with difficulty, "I thought rice was also a vegetable."

"If you can joke around like this, then hurry up and tell me what you wanted to say and then get some rest," Liu Sang said.

"We have to catch him before the rain stops," Wang Guo said.

"You can't leave the hospital," Liu Sang argued. "This matter has nothing to do with you."

Wang Guo nodded, "No one else can catch him, either. It all depends on you."

There was the sound of thunder outside.

Liu Sang looked out of the window, "You have to tell me what you know."

Wang Guo shook his head, "You have to tell me why you're here first."

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 12

1

Li Cu and the others got out of the car and looked at Ghost City<sup>197</sup> in front of them.

Yang Hao leaned against the car, pulled out his e-cigarette, and took a puff. His e-cigarette was the kind that emitted a particularly large amount of smoke, which filled the air.

Li Cu walked forward and saw the wrecked car in front of him. It was pressed up against an inverted chisel plow,<sup>198</sup> which was one of many that had been placed on the ground to prevent poaching and protect the surrounding geography.

Any vehicles that came here could only travel on a fixed route but this family obviously didn't take the usual path so their tires ended up getting punctured by the chisel plow's blades.

There were more than a dozen teams that patrolled here, along with underground surveillance equipment, so even though it seemed like there wasn't anyone in the wilderness, they could still use the technology to clearly monitor everything.

But half an hour after hearing the family leave the car and walk forward, the technician suddenly lost all signals.

Li Cu, who was wearing a skull-patterned bandanna and a long-sleeved cooling shirt with angel wings on it, walked up to the side of the car and looked inside.

It was a family car driven by a couple with a child.

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<sup>197</sup> Ghost City (sometimes called Ghost Town) is a collection of [yardang](#) land forms in the middle of the Jung'gar Desert of China's north western region of Xinjiang (basically a part of the Gobi Desert). It's called Ghost City because the wind sounds like howling ghosts as it moves through the large rocks and kicks up sand and dust that blocks out the sky. Info [here](#) and a bunch of pics [here](#).

<sup>198</sup> A chisel plow is a popular farming tool used for deep tillage. Its main purpose is to loosen and aerate your soil. It has plowing blades widely spaced apart on a frame that's usually pulled behind a tractor. Could look something like [this](#) but in this context, it's inverted so the blades are facing up.

The car was a rental but the inside was very nice. He could see some plush toys inside, which must have been acquired at the amusement park in the city.

Everyone else got out of their vehicles one right after another. The family had been missing for twenty-four hours, and the surveillance equipment around the area had not been able to detect any traces of them.

“There’s only one possibility,” Su Wan said to them from inside the car. “They were pulled into the sky by something.”

“Have you ever been caught and lifted into the air by any birds?” Li Cu asked him. The three of them were stumped by the difficult situation.

“There’s a high probability they’re dead,” Yang Hao said to them at this time. “People don’t move when they die so they won’t be detected on any surveillance equipment.”

“It’s only been twenty-four hours. It would be hard for them to die considering they have food, water, and it’s not that hot here.”

“One of them could have killed the other two and then committed suicide,” Yang Hao said. “The biggest indicator is the car. The driver—likely the man—could have deliberately caused the car to crash here. You might as well have someone check to see if there were any problems in their family.”

“Do people with family problems usually drive to a place like this together?” Li Cu asked.

“My parents would take me to the U.S. when they were fighting,” Su Wan chimed in. “They probably thought that going to a place like this would ease the tension and make things better.”

“If the woman didn’t like places like this, then it was more of the man’s wishful thinking,” Yang Hao said. “The man probably said something like, ‘I drove you all the way here so what are you still dissatisfied with? I’ve done enough. Why are you still dissatisfied?’ Then the woman probably said, ‘I know. I appreciate you trying to solve this problem but you obviously don’t know what I really want.’ At this point, the man didn’t

understand at all and said, 'Huh? We came here to Ghost City. Didn't you want to travel?'"

Li Cu and Su Wan both looked at Yang Hao, wondering what he had gone through.

Yang Hao continued, "If a person doesn't realize that what he thinks is a good idea is actually insensitive or torturous to others, then the more he wants to solve a problem, the more he'll screw it up. In the end, the man probably took a spare shovel out of the trunk to kill his wife and child but the wife escaped and ran away with the child. He chased them for a few miles, caught up to them, hit them with the shovel, and killed them both."

"Why isn't the wife the killer?"

"Well, the odds are too low. First of all, it's very difficult for mothers to kill their own children unless they're suffering from a mental illness. Second, if she wanted to kill her husband, then she'd have to do it in one blow while they were still in the car. Otherwise, she maybe not be able to kill him once he starts to run away. If you're trying to kill someone in Ghost City, then you have to know that it's better to kill them with one hit. Otherwise, things will become very troublesome. But now all three people are likely dead and it's not because of the collision. So, my conclusion is that the man is the culprit."

There was silence in the car.

Of course, Li Cu didn't believe Yang Hao's theory. Although it was possible, it wasn't the case here.

The woman had put a lot of stuffed toys in the car. Regardless of what she had been thinking, most people who set up this kind of space were usually looking forward to the journey. Of course, he also had to admit that he didn't know how to read people.

Wu Xie's face suddenly flashed through his mind, making him frown for just a moment.

“They asked us to come here because something strange must have happened,” Li Cu said. “If it was a simple murder, they wouldn’t have come to us.”

The three of them looked at the rescue team standing off to the side, waiting for them to start issuing orders. One man walked over to Su Wan and asked, “Leader, what should we do now? Based on the data, they left in this direction.”

“Let’s go and take a look,” Su Wan said.

He looked in the car again and then asked Li Cu, “Under what circumstances would you leave the car and hike into the Gobi Desert in this environment? Isn’t this choice a bit risky and not in line with modern people’s cautious nature?”

“The three of them left together, indicating that they thought it was dangerous to stay in the car.” As Li Cu said this, a gust of wind blew past and kicked up a bunch of sand.

2

Wang Meng was still squatting on the ground. It took a long time for the pain to subside but when it finally did, the soothing relief left him with no strength at all. As a result, he continued to squat there, feeling no other emotions.

This was his superpower. It enabled him to sit between the bike and the Xiali with a blank mind.

If some pervert was secretly watching his every move from the darkness, then they would realize that the reality in front of them was different from how murders were normally depicted.

Because your prey would probably just sit still for eight hours.

In the end, a loud honk suddenly came from the nearby Xiali.

It startled Wang Meng so much that he leaped to his feet in fright.



The Xiali's car horn kept going off, the sound deafening in this quiet environment.

Wang Meng walked over to it. Since his emotions had just erupted, he wasn't afraid of death nor did he feel any fear in his heart.

He walked over, opened the car door, and saw that the key was turned to the first position so that only the car's electrical system was on (generally, turning the key did one of three things: powered the vehicle off, turned on the vehicle's electrical system, or started the ignition). He turned the key and shut the car's power off.

The sound of the horn immediately stopped.

He pulled the car key out, threw it into the darkness in the distance, and moved to sit down again.

But at this time, the car's headlights suddenly came on.

The lights were so bright that they illuminated a large area across the way.

Wang Meng looked over there and saw that the ground was covered in gray plastic squares that were about one meter squared. They were densely packed together and covered an area the size of about two basketball courts.

It was kind of like a huge gray chocolate bar, but it was divided into countless smaller pieces.

Wang Meng looked at it and couldn't help but feel that it was very familiar.

Then, it suddenly hit him.

This was a giant Minesweeper field, the kind that you would see on a Windows computer. It was made of plastic and spread evenly on the ground.

What was going on? Was this an art exhibit or some kind of an escape room?

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 13

1

Wang Guo's wife went out to chat with the nurses, but it was actually just an excuse to give them some space to talk about the case.

Liu Sang sat in a seat by the window sill. Yes, this old hospital had a window sill.

About four or five meters outside the window was an old building. There were many plants on the residents' balconies there. From here, he could see that they were full of flowers.

It was still raining heavily outside.

Wang Guo looked at Liu Sang, who said, "The method used by the serial killer you're facing now first appeared seventy years ago."

Seeing that Wang Guo obviously didn't understand, Liu Sang continued explaining, "At that time, twenty-eight people died. Then the killings stopped."

"Do you have any information?"

"I do. If you want to see it, I can send it to you via WeChat," Liu Sang said.

"A serial killer from seventy years ago is likely already dead. Plus, the person we saw today should be a young man. It's not the same person."

"It was yesterday. You were saved a day ago," Liu Sang corrected him.

Wang Guo was a little surprised. He thought about it for a while but found that it was painful for him to think. Frowning, he said to Liu Sang, "Keep talking, I won't interrupt you."

Liu Sang continued, "I have a friend who is considered a fellow apprentice. One day, he told me that he accidentally discovered that his grandfather was a serial killer. He was very upset after discovering the

secret, but his grandfather was already very old so he didn't know what to do."

Wang Guo looked at him.

"I encouraged him to ask his grandfather about it," Liu Sang said. "That way, he could at least give an account to the victims."

He looked down at his hands, "He disappeared after that, and I never saw him again."

Liu Sang looked up at Wang Guo, "Coincidentally, his grandfather always killed people during rainstorms."

"So when the case happened, you felt that it had something to do with your friend," Wang Guo said.

"All the victims were people who had a wide range of hearing," Liu Sang said. "They could hear very high-frequency sounds, which is a gift. Their ears were pierced, which means that this gift was rejected."

"Is this related to your ears?" Wang Guo asked.

"You can't hear that kind of sound, but for those who can hear high-frequency sounds, it's a kind of torture," Liu Sang explained. "So, people like us will definitely find the source of this sound and try to deal with it. Otherwise, we won't be able to rest. This is how he lures the victims to secluded spots near their homes and then murders them."

Wang Guo hesitated for a moment, "Based on what you just said, do you think this murderer is your friend?"

Liu Sang looked at Wang Guo, "Surprisingly, no. When I saw that person up close today, I realized that it wasn't him. I don't know who the man in the rice field is."

Wang Guo was even more confused now.

"Don't worry," Liu Sang said. "He can't escape. When you catch him, you can ask him about it in more detail."

Wang Guo narrowed his eyes and looked at Liu Sang suspiciously, “You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“It’s your turn to talk,” Liu Sang said to him. “The rain will stop soon.”

2

Baishe was standing downstairs at the place where that mother lived.

Looking at his cell phone, he felt cold all over.

He summoned up his courage and walked upstairs. It was a five-story building with no elevator.

That mother lived on the top floor.

Baishe reached the top floor and began knocking on the door. After several knocks, the door opened a crack and the kid’s face appeared.

When Baishe looked at him, the kid stared right back.

“What are you doing here?” The kid eventually asked.

“Open the door,” Baishe said.

“You want to come in?” The kid asked strangely.

Baishe saw that the door’s chain lock was engaged and wanted to kick the door open, but the kid opened the door very easily and let him in.

As soon as Baishe entered, he immediately smelled an indescribable stench.

“Mom, someone’s here,” the kid suddenly shouted.

Baishe covered his nose and saw that snacks were littered all across the living room—apparently, no one had cleaned at all—and the kid was playing video games.

Just as he started walking towards the bedroom, he heard a woman’s voice say from inside, “Who is it?”

It was the mother's voice.

Baishe froze.

He then turned to look at the kid, who was making a shushing gesture at him.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 14

1

Liu Sang went back to his car, picked up the unfinished sesame cake, and started reading through the notes he had just written.

How was the murderer able to find the victim? It should have been difficult to find people who were able to hear high-frequency sounds in their everyday lives.

But the murderer was in the vicinity of the victim's home and used high-frequency sound waves for a long time before he was able to find the opportunity to lure her out.

This showed that the murderer not only knew that the victim was capable of hearing high-frequency sounds, but also knew where she lived.

This kind of scheme must have taken a long time, so the fact that an acquaintance committed the crime couldn't be ruled out.

But murders using the same method had happened in other places one right after another.

This meant that the killer was on the run.

Starting from Boshan Town seventeen hundred kilometers away, all the way to here, the victims appeared to be irregularly distributed. But they all appeared during intervals of heavy rain.

It was impossible for a murderer to go to a place and immediately become acquainted with the people there, let alone find people with high-frequency hearing.

First of all, the interval of time between these cases didn't allow for it. Moreover, the number of people with high-frequency hearing was actually very small.

That basically meant that they weren't acquaintances.

So, the murderer must've had his own very skilled way of finding people with high-frequency hearing.

Wang Guo gave him some information about the case. For the police, that preliminary information fell into the category of suggested coordinates when looking for a needle in a haystack, but for Liu Sang, it was actually very useful.

The first victim worked at KFC. After getting off work, she passed by Jiefang Road—the town's main street—and then turned right when she reached the intersection of Nanjia Road. She then went all the way to the South Gate and crossed a bridge called Nanjia Bridge.

After crossing the bridge, she turned right and entered a small intersection, which was the small street where she lived. That small street was called Shaoxiang Road, and it was barely wide enough for a car to drive through. If another car was coming from the other way, you would need to find another route to take.

The whole journey was about 1.3 kilometers, and the victim biked to and from work.

The second victim worked at a local hotel called Great Macau World, which was a local place that focused on catering to one's more sensual tastes. The victim also crossed Nanjia Bridge on her way home, but then she had to cross through the rice fields they had been at before in order to reach the village where she lived.

Of course, Nanjia Bridge was one of the two bridges in town that almost everyone crossed every day, so there was essentially no way to analyze it as a key feature of the case.

Liu Sang drove to the vicinity of Nanjia Bridge and found that this was a town where it was easy to park. There were food stalls set up below Nanjia Bridge's arches. As long as the river didn't overflow, this was the place where migrant workers would gather. Liu Sang parked next to the food stalls and walked under the bridge's arches.



This kind of small-town bridge generally had three arches: the middle arch was for the river to pass through while the two small arches on both sides were for people to walk through. This was so that people walking on both sides of the riverbank could pass through to the other side of the arch without having to go to the top of the bridge and then make their way down the other side.

It wasn't raining much, but it was still early so the food stalls hadn't been set up yet.

He walked under the bridge's arch and took off his headphones.

On the side was the rushing river, which sounded very majestic due to the heavy rain that had been falling recently. There was also the sound of the rain outside, accompanied by the sound of raindrops hitting the water's surface.

This was a place where there was a lot of white noise.

He began to contemplate.

The murderer was probably carrying around a cell phone that played high-frequency sounds. If someone passed by him on the side of the road and heard the high-frequency sound, they would feel uncomfortable and try to avoid it. Noticing this, he would then immediately start following them.

This town was very special: the business district was generally on this side of Jiefang Road while most of the residential areas were on the other side of the river. In other words, everyone in town had to cross the two bridges in order to get to and from work.

The murderer killed during the intervals when the rainstorms stopped, but it should have been impossible for him to directly find a target during those intervals.

So, he must have already found a good target long ago. In fact, there should be more than one target. In other words, he must have found the first and second victims very early on and already knew where they lived.

There were three people with high-frequency hearing in this small town, which was already a lot.

When there was finally a break in between the rainstorms, the killer's mental state would become murderous and he would appear to kill the targets.

As for what the murderer's current mental state was, Liu Sang didn't know. But if his conjecture was correct, then the murderer may have already found the third victim and was already preparing to kill them.

So, when did this murderous mental state start?

Did it start from the beginning of the rainstorm, or did it suddenly start when the rainstorm stopped?

There was also another strange point—if a rainstorm ran its course without interruption, then there would be no victims.

In other words, the murderer would kill only when there was a particularly strange rainstorm—that is, when it was interrupted in the middle and then continued.

But how did the murderer know whether the rainstorm had stopped completely or was just paused so that he could decide whether he wanted to kill or not?

Liu Sang had absolutely no clue, but if it were him, he would know for certain whether the rain had stopped completely or was just paused by listening to the sounds of the clouds in the sky.

This was because the sounds of the clouds for those two states were completely different.

So, the murderer's ears should be the same as his.

Those who had particularly good ears and practiced honing their hearing skills all had a similar characteristic—there was something wrong with their heartbeat. Otherwise, the better their ears, the more they'd be able to hear their own thunderous heartbeat. As a result, these people's

heartbeats had to be very slight at ordinary times, and their clothes had to be specially made to isolate the sound of their heartbeat.

This was also the reason why Liu Sang couldn't fight with others too much.

If the other person was also someone with particularly good ears, then they would never be caught. They were actually very easy to find, because as long as Liu Sang drove through the town, he would be able to hear that faint heartbeat. But as long as Liu Sang got close, the other person would definitely run away.

It was only during a rainstorm when the both of them would be the same as ordinary people.

Thinking of this, Liu Sang put on his raincoat and began wandering around the area.

Although he wasn't entirely sure, this bridge had to be a key point because both victims had previously crossed it on a daily basis for a long time.

If he was the murderer, he would definitely choose to act when people got off work. That way, if he managed to find a target, he could immediately follow them to their home.

One of them had been on foot while the other had ridden a bike.

There was no way to catch up with a cyclist on foot.

So, the murderer either had a bicycle or an electric-powered vehicle. It had to be one of the two instead of a regular car because cars couldn't follow someone onto Shaoxiang Road.

But what kind of two-wheeled vehicle could it be?

Liu Sang knew that the bicycle chain would be well-lubricated if the murderer was riding on a bicycle. Otherwise, they would be tortured by the sound of the chain when riding it.

So, if someone was on a bridge and driving a two-wheeled vehicle, what kind of behavior wouldn't attract people's attention?

As long as you stopped on the bridge, you were sure to be noticed since you'd be blocking the pedestrians.

After all, the area where people could walk was separated from the area where vehicles could drive. Someone could remain very inconspicuous if they stood on the bridge and leaned against railing because it would look like they were simply waiting for someone.

Bicycles were parked nearby.

Liu Sang passed through the bridge's arch and arrived at an old street next to the bridge. There was an open factory there, where many electric-powered vehicles and bicycles were parked.

There were many people in that factory. It seemed that this was a family factory area, where many families were working.

Just as he was about to walk in, his cell phone suddenly rang—it was Wang Guo.

He didn't answer, because at that moment, the rain began to stop.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 15

1

Wang Guo looked at the phone. He had called thirty times but no one answered.

His wife looked at him, feeling at a total loss. Wang Guo was holding the new autopsy data that had just arrived.

Then, Wang Guo gave up and looked at his wife.

“I have to find him.”

“You can’t. If you leave the hospital right now, you’ll have to be brought back in an ambulance.”

“I’ll go slow.”

“I’ll find him for you.” Wang Guo’s wife stood up, her eyes red-rimmed.

“It’s too dangerous for you to go.” Wang Guo looked at his wife.

“It doesn’t matter,” she argued. “If something happens to him, it’ll weigh on your conscience for the rest of your life.”

Wang Guo sighed; he knew his wife’s character well.

The two had an arranged marriage and hadn’t seen each other much before they got married. Their families had forced them into it, and neither could do anything about it.

As a result, they didn’t have any children. Like him, his wife had also been a top student, but after returning to their hometown, she also had to follow the town’s rules.

This woman’s character was relatively rigid. After so many years, she had developed feelings, but she was probably unwilling to admit to herself that she had fallen in love.

The affection between a husband and wife was still considered love, so it didn't really matter whether they had romantic feelings for each other or not.

Wang Guo felt his heart soften and said to her, "No, I'll be uneasy the rest of my life if something happens to you."

His wife looked at him, completely blindsided by this sentence.

When Wang Guo slowly started to get out of bed, his wife went over to help him. "Ask Xiao Wang and Xiao Li to come here," he said to her. "They'll drive. I'll sit in the car and have them buy a radio ad to play on repeat when the traffic station is broadcasting. We'll get all the radio stations to broadcast it."

"What will the ad say?"

"There's more than one murderer. That's all."

2

Wang Meng squatted in front of the huge grid, thinking about what was going on here.

There was no doubt about it—this was Minesweeper; he could see it clearly as soon as he got closer. But even though he knew how to sweep for mines on the computer, he didn't know the logic behind doing it in reality.

At this time, an LED screen suddenly lit up on the side. The screen, which was about as tall as a person, had originally been sitting in the dark in the distance. After it lit up, Wang Meng saw that a red timestamp had appeared on it.

00:00

"Sir, we can talk it out!" Wang Meng shouted. Since there was a lot of space here, his shouts burst into a chorus of echoes. "Big Brother, I don't know what I did to offend you, but we can talk it out. I don't want the money."

Just as he finished speaking, a voice suddenly came from the ground right beside him.

“Say ‘Little Seven, Little Seven’. Use your voice to activate service.”

Startled, Wang Meng turned his head and saw that a cell phone was lying on the ground nearby.

The phone was on, and when he walked over, Wang Meng realized that it was receiving an incoming call. The person’s voice he had heard just now turned out to be the phone’s ringtone.

By the time he walked over and picked up the phone, the caller had already hung up.

When he turned the phone on, he found that there was a WiFi signal but no cell service.

He tried surfing the internet, but nothing worked—this WiFi signal was probably an intranet signal.

That phone call just now was an intranet call made with special software.

There was only one app on the phone, which had a red fingerprint-like icon that read: Little Seven Escapes.

Wang Meng looked around and then clicked on it.

An animated mouth appeared and then started moving, “Welcome to Little Seven. Just say ‘Little Seven, Little Seven’ and tell us your needs.”

Wang Meng said, “Little Seven, Little Seven. What’s going on?”

The phone made a Siri-like prompt and then the artificial voice said, “You have been sold. You can only be returned if you complete the task. Otherwise, you will remain here.”

The artificial voice said each word one at a time.

Wang Meng paused for a moment, wondering about the task, but instead of asking about it, he casually asked, “Where is this place?”

“You are on the ground floor of an abandoned military facility. All the people in the world who know about this military facility have passed away. No one knows about it now.”

“This thing is in Hangzhou?”

“This thing can be anywhere,” Little Seven said.

Wang Meng wasn’t smart enough for this. He pondered over this statement for a while but found that he couldn’t make anything of it.

After about two minutes, Little Seven said, “Hello, Little Seven’s battery power is limited. If you do not hurry up, Little Seven will not have any power before you complete the task. There is no charger for Little Seven here.”

Wang Meng turned the phone over, looked at the bottom of it, and found that it didn’t even have a charging port.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, he looked at the Minesweeper field in front of him and asked, “What should I do now?”

“Do what you do best, play Minesweeper! But be careful. If you do trigger a mine, there really will be an explosion.”

“What? What mines?” Wang Meng asked.

“The name of the mine is Bouncing Mary.<sup>199</sup> As long as you make one mistake, all the bouncing Marys that have not been discharged will bounce up and explode, and you will die.”

When Little Seven finished saying this, her words were accompanied by the sound of fake applause.

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<sup>199</sup> I wasn’t finding anything for Bouncing Mary mines so I think the author either made it up or he meant to call them Bouncing Betty mines. Bouncing Betty mines (also called S-mines) are [bounding mines](#). When triggered, these mines are launched into the air and then detonated at about 1 meter (3 ft) from the ground. The explosion projects a lethal spray of shrapnel in all directions. The S-mine was an anti-personnel mine developed by Germany in the 1930s and used extensively by German forces during World War II. Info [here](#).



“Why should I play this Minesweeper game? I don’t have to,” Wang Meng said.

But as soon as he spoke, Little Seven’s animated mouth suddenly laughed coldly.

Then, a video appeared on the cell phone’s screen. Wang Meng’s father was in the video, stuck in a brick barricade with only his head exposed. The camera slowly zoomed out, and he could see a strange thing sitting in the space opposite his father.

It was a Xiali car. It was on a slope, and there was an iron block sitting on its hood.

“It is time. If you do not complete the task, the handbrake will be released automatically, the car will slide down the slope, and the iron block will hit the old man’s head. The iron block and car together weigh seven tons. His head will shatter like a watermelon. So awful.”

After Little Seven finished speaking, the timestamp on the LED screen suddenly started counting.

00:01

00:02

Wang Meng stood there frozen.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 16

1

Kan Jian covered the phone as Wu Xie on the other end fell silent.

“You mean, he was taken by a mysterious person to play Minesweeper?”

*I'm a smart person now, Kan Jian said to himself, so I have to be confident.*

“Yes, boss,” Kan Jian said. “Based on what I can see from the buyer’s review, he appears to have been bought to play Minesweeper.”

“He has 99,999,999 yuan in his account?”

“Yes, boss,” Kan Jian said.

Hmm.

Wu Xie on the other end of the line seemed to be deep in thought. The computer in front of Kan Jian was turned on, and the online shop’s page was showing the buyer’s review of Wang Meng. Two photos had been uploaded. The first one showed Wang Meng curled up beside a Xiali car.

The second photo showed Wang Meng standing in the dark holding a cell phone. There was a glowing white grid behind him, which seemed to be a giant Minesweeper field.

“What’s the basis for your statement just now?”

“It’s my own deduction, boss. You see, he likes playing Minesweeper a lot, and there’s something like a big mine field in the photo. His father is also there. When he woke up, he found himself next to a Xiali, which must have been the car that kidnapped him. He must have been taken out of the trunk and then lured into playing Minesweeper. It seems he was captured just like in those ‘Saw’ movies.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> The “Saw” movies are a horror franchise consisting of 9 movies and additional media. The first eight films primarily revolve around the fictional serial killer [John “Jigsaw” Kramer](#), while the ninth movie revolves around

“Then why is the killer in the cell phone called Little Seven?”

“The buyer’s name is Seven.”

“Don’t you think such a killer is a little childish?” But Wu Xie also seemed to hesitate before murmuring, “Seven?”

*Childish?* Kan Jian suddenly suddenly felt unsure about his deduction.

“Boss,” he continued, “I’m worried about Brother Meng. Are you going to save him?”

“Maybe you can put me up for sale?”

“I don’t dare, boss. I’ve already put one person up for sale and now I’ve lost him. I plan to put myself up for sale if Brother Meng doesn’t come back tomorrow. I’ll charge 9,999,999 yuan and give you the money, boss. If I don’t come back, remember to take care of those brats at the foster home.” Kan Jian was actually very anxious.

After a short silence, Wu Xie sighed and said to someone next to him, “Is it so expensive to be a perverted killer nowadays?”

“We shouldn’t earn money this way,” a voice that sounded like Fatty’s said.

Wu Xie turned back to the phone and said to Kan Jian, “Don’t do anything. I’ll investigate and deal with it. Can you send me all the photos?”

Kan Jian hung up the phone and broke out in a cold sweat when he saw the group of photos he had already prepared on his computer—there were photos of Teacher Zhang, Master Black, and Master Hua.

He had just been planning to load them all to the online shop’s inventory, but fortunately, he didn’t make his own decisions. As expected, he was indeed a little smarter.

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a copycat killer. Rather than killing his victims outright, Jigsaw traps them in situations that he calls “tests” or “games” to test their will to live through physical or psychological torture, believing that if they survive, they will be “rehabilitated”. Info [here](#).

Meanwhile, in another time and place, there was a window with a lot of glass in front of Wang Meng.

The light streaming in through the glass formed many mottled square-like spots on the ground.

But it wasn't sunlight; it was the lighting effect caused by the lamp behind the window.

This window wasn't on the wall but stood abruptly in the middle of the room. Behind it was a very bright fluorescent lamp, which must have been a work lamp that came from an industrial factory. It looked very old.

This place must have been an abandoned factory. Except for this area, everything else was pitch black. Even the light at the replicated scene of his mother's car accident had gone out just now.

In the middle of this spot stood a table.

He remembered this scene—when his mother died, his father was in a factory, gambling at this table.

Everything they owned should have been lost here.

Wang Meng was standing on a small stool by the hospital's public phone, calling the factory and looking for his father.

After his mother died, he kept calling. He didn't know what else to do so he continued calling from there.

The phone was an old rotary phone.

His mother passed away in the middle of the night, but there was no one in the hospital so he stayed there and continued making calls.

Finally, someone answered the phone. The person said a few words and then shouted to someone behind them, "Your son is on the phone."

Then the phone was set down.

He could hear the sounds of gambling on the other end of the line.

No one came to pick up the phone, but he could hear his father's voice shouting excitedly in the background.

Then, the call got disconnected. But because the phone on the other end hadn't been hung up, no more calls could get through.

Next to the gambling table was a coffee table with a telephone on it.

To this day, the phone had not been hung up. The receiver hung below it, being pulled by the telephone line.

Wang Meng walked over and hung up the phone.

He felt a sudden stab of pain, but now he wasn't afraid anymore. Instead, he was wondering, *what the hell is going on here?*

It had been too long, and the hate he had felt for his father was so intense. But this kind of thing couldn't bother him anymore.

The phone had barely been hung up a minute when it suddenly started to ring. He froze for a moment before picking it up.

A child's voice came over the phone.

3

"Is that Boss Bai?" The woman behind the door asked. "Hey, come on in. The door's unlocked."

Baishe stood at the door, telling himself that the voice clearly belonged to the woman.

He looked at the kid again, but the kid just shook his head indifferently, as if telling him not to go in.

Baishe's whole body started to break out in a cold sweat, but he still walked towards the door anyways.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 17

1

Liu Sang walked into the depths of the factory area.

In a place like this, the so-called factory area was a small workshop in the garage with about four or five workers. Lathes, milling machines, and other types of machine tools were hidden in these residential buildings.<sup>201</sup>

The factories here were all receiving and distributing orders. Small orders that the big factories wouldn't accept, as well as small orders that needed to be matched with larger orders would all be sent to these factories.

They were the capillaries of the manufacturing industry, the end of the limbs. Many workers were elderly people who were idle at home, and there even a bunch of middle school students from poor families who were doing odd jobs here.

At the same time, there were many small restaurants, hair salons, and people on pedicabs pulling goods by the entrance.

For Liu Sang, this kind of place was a nightmare.

Any place in the world was full of countless noises for him, but the sounds in this place were the most complex.

With his raincoat wrapped tightly around him, he steeled himself and listened to everything going on around him.

He needed to filter out all the noise and listen to everyone's heartbeats; it was the one thing that couldn't lie.

Everyone was always lying about something, but Liu Sang could bypass their flesh and listen directly to what was going on below the surface.

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<sup>201</sup> A [lathe](#) is a machine tool that rotates a workpiece about an axis of rotation to perform various operations such as cutting, sanding, knurling, drilling, deformation, facing, and turning. A milling machine removes material from a work piece by rotating a cutting tool (cutter) and moving it into the work piece. [Milling machines](#), either vertical or horizontal, are usually used to machine flat and irregularly shaped surfaces and can be used to drill, bore, and cut gears, threads, and slots.

He looked at a young woman standing at one of the kiosks—she had two heartbeats. She looked very young and was lovingly picking out snacks with her boyfriend.

She didn't know that she was pregnant.

The middle-aged man on the scooter in front had his attention focused on the young woman's body, the blood pumping from his heart surging towards his lower body.

The proprietress at the door on the left was surrounded by a lot of mosquitoes. More of them were flying out of the alley, indicating that she had just come from there. Her husband was constantly replying to someone on WeChat. His heartbeat fluctuated between fast and slow, which meant that he was nervous for a while before becoming relaxed for a while—he was chatting with his mistress.

Of course, Liu Sang had also heard some special heartbeats before, which sounded like huge mountains.

He heard this kind of heartbeat in the crowd right now, and when he looked at that person, he found that the other party immediately noticed his gaze and looked back at him.

This kind of person was probably surnamed Zhang.

That serial killer—if he was here—must be waiting for his prey. As he waited, his heartbeat was probably quietly thrumming with both anxiety and excitement.

That man's heartbeat was so quiet that it could very easily be drowned out in a place like this.

Of course, Liu Sang's cell phone was in his pocket, playing high-frequency sound waves.

When the other person heard the sound waves, their heartbeat would immediately change.

People couldn't help their emotional reactions.

As Liu Sang slowly went deeper and began to enter various alleys, the surroundings suddenly started to quiet down.

But people couldn't hide, because this was the season where mosquitoes would flock around people, even in the dark.

When he walked into a nearby alley, he took a few steps and knew right away that someone was following him—he could hear the sound of mosquitoes swarming at the corner behind him.

He had a taser hidden in his sleeve, but he continued walking deeper into the alley instead of confronting the person. He could see an elderly person listening to the radio, and further inside was a very deep alley full of deserted old houses. It looked like they were going to be demolished.

2

The deserted old houses were all made of wood. Liu Sang entered the alley and found that it was extremely narrow, with all kinds of doorways lining either side. The doors were wide open, and inside were small, empty yards full of weeds.

The small alley had many intersections, and when he walked into a blind spot, he could see a dark shadow following him.

The shadow was moving very cautiously, so Liu Sang slowly calmed his heartbeat.

Going off of vision alone, these two hadn't really met yet, but Liu Sang knew that in the eyes of both parties, there was nothing here—no houses, no shadows; it was just the two of them. He had to deceive the other party into believing that he was defenseless.

The man started walking inside the alley.

Liu Sang knew that he had deceived the other person because there was no hesitation in the other's steps, only haste.

The other party wanted to get close to him as soon as possible.



Liu Sang was covered in a cold sweat, but at that moment, he suddenly heard an extremely weak heartbeat behind him, coming from the darkness almost an arm's length away.

He had hardly noticed this heartbeat before.

Liu Sang's ears were extremely talented, but he had never encountered this kind of situation before. He froze for a moment and then slowly turned his head, finding that a person had appeared in the darkness behind him at some point.

The person was standing right behind him, too close for comfort.

3

Kan Jian was sitting cross-legged in Wang Meng's chair. He was really worried about Wang Meng, but the boss had told him not to act rashly.

But he had to do something.

He noticed that as long as things were loaded to the online shop's inventory, they would appear in the same space as the buyer's show.

So...

If he couldn't put people up for sale, could he put some other things up for sale and send them to Brother Meng?

He looked at the explosives and homemade shotgun in front of him.

But after thinking about whether to put them up for sale or not, he realized that they may not pass platform review.

In order to send some equipment in, that pervert had to be able to buy it.

Kan Jian thought hard.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 18

1

There was nothing in the Gobi.

The sandstorm was getting bigger and bigger, and everyone was wearing goggles. Yang Hao couldn't even smoke a cigarette.

The other teams were busy making phone calls; there was no time to wait.

In this climate, if they couldn't manage to find them, those people would basically die.

Li Cu was silently thinking to himself, *no matter how big the sandstorm gets, the search will be meaningless because visibility will be close to zero.*

And their team would also be in a dangerous position.

Many people might wonder how dangerous the wind could be, but it was a well-known fact that a strong wind could pick up rocks and toss them around. These flying rocks could hit a person on the head and end up killing them.

Li Cu was thinking about whether he should call the team to retreat when he noticed Yang Hao looking at the sky—there seemed to be something there?

“Isn't sand getting up your nose?” Li Cu asked him.

Yang Hao continued looking at the sky and said, “There are three black spots up there.”

2

Wang Meng looked at the cow in front of him, feeling at a total loss.

On the cow's body, the following words had been spray-painted: Brother Meng, there's equipment in the cow's belly. It'll poop it out in a day.

Wang Meng sat at the gambling table and looked at the cow.

It had been a child's voice on the old phone just now, probably a recording. He hung up before he could finish listening to what it had to say.

Then he sat at the table in a daze.

He was in a strange state where he wanted to think but his brain refused to do any work.

In the end, he decided to take a passive approach regarding this matter. He didn't know what the other party was trying to do, but they obviously wanted to open his old wounds.

If it was the boss who was going through this, he probably would have gotten angry. But Wang Meng simply quieted down and sat down.

This was the power of sitting. He knew he had to come up with some kind of plan but his mind was blank.

*Maybe I can follow the lamp's wires,* he said to himself. But after taking a closer look, he found that the wires went underground.

He didn't know how long he had been sitting there when a cow suddenly walked out of the darkness.

It was very obvious that this was Kan Jian's doing. He must have put the cow in the online shop's inventory, but why send him a cow?

Wang Meng walked over—the cow looked at him, and he looked at the cow.

But...this might just be a solution. *Kan Jian, ah, Kan Jian. When the cow poops, there better be a flashlight inside.*

3

Wang Meng waited for a long time until the cow finally pooped, but unfortunately, there wasn't a flashlight.

There was a satellite phone inside, which showed that Kan Jian was thoughtful, but there was no signal here.

There was also some dry food.

Wang Meng was very silent, because the dry food had been dug out of the cow dung but he didn't have anywhere to wash his hands.

There was also a specially modified pistol.

It had an effective shooting range of about three meters, and there were six or seven bullets with it.

There was also a letter.

And ten thousand yuan in cash.

But the most useful thing was probably the folding slingshot.

Unfortunately, the bullets for that didn't come out.

The cow looked at Wang Meng, who patted its stomach and asked, "Anything else?"

The cow looked at him in disgust before walking away.

4

Three-year-old Liu Sang looked at his mother, who touched his head.

"Men must be strong," his mother said. "Don't be weak like your mother."

Liu Sang looked at her expressionlessly, as if he didn't understand what she meant.

His mother's eyes were red-rimmed as she said, "When you grow up, forgive your mother." As Liu Sang nodded, his mother continued, "When it's time for dinner, call your auntie and ask her to pick you up. Then tell her that your mom hasn't woken up for a long time, which is strange. Ok?"

Liu Sang nodded.

“Then, mom is going to bed,” she said to him. “Sit there and paint obediently. Do you remember auntie’s phone number?”

Liu Sang nodded.

When his mother hugged him, Liu Sang felt her sobbing.

Then she turned, went into the bathroom, and closed the door.

“Good night,” Liu Sang said softly while facing the bathroom door.

Then, he started painting.

In his pencil case were the sleeping pills his mother was planning to use to kill herself.

He had replaced them all.

Soon, he heard his mother’s furious roar come from the bathroom.

She came out and looked at Liu Sang.

“Take them out.”

Liu Sang looked at his mother. She knelt in front of him and said, “Give them to me.”

“I ate them all,” he said to her.

He didn’t actually eat them, but his mother looked at him without suspicion, immediately picked him up, and rushed him to the hospital.

Liu Sang’s consciousness gradually blurred.

His memories were very confusing when it came to whether he had a mother or not, but this scene always appeared in his dreams.

He woke up slowly.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 19

1

Liu Sang woke up. The heavy rain was beginning to fall again, the sound of it quite majestic.

He seemed to be in an abandoned factory. There was a large window on the side made up of many lattices through which light was streaming in from the outside.

The rain was hitting the large window, chaotically flowing down the hundreds of pieces of small square glass that made up the window.

Liu Sang originally liked this state.

His head was throbbing and he could feel a bloody scab on his temple.

Did he just get knocked out?

Fuck.

He vaguely saw a man straddling a chair across from him, his head propped up by his hands which were resting on the back of the chair.

He had short hair, single eyelids,<sup>202</sup> was very thin, and was holding Liu Sang's headphones in his hands.

Liu Sang could also see a lot of roses outside the window, swaying in the heavy rain.

“Are you the psycho killer?” He asked the man.

It was hard for him to hear the man's heartbeat now.

---

<sup>202</sup> Some people have visible eyelid creases, known as double eyelids. Some were born without eyelid creases, which are called single eyelids. Double eyelid surgery is quite popular in many Asian countries (according to google).

As the man lit a cigarette, Liu Sang continued his questioning, “What’s your relationship with Tu Dian?”<sup>203</sup>

“We’re his eggs,” Single-Eyelid said before yanking his T-shirt collar aside and showing Liu Sang his collarbone.

There was a tattoo on his collarbone with the Roman numeral for 17 on it.<sup>204</sup>

“I’m the seventeenth one.”

Liu Sang looked at him, “Why kill people?”

17 laughed, “Don’t you feel like the whole world is covered in something, an uncomfortable electric wave with a gel-like atmosphere where nothing can be seen or felt clearly?”

When Liu Sang continued to look at him silently, the other party continued, “I’ve been very distressed. No matter what I do, nothing will change so I’ve been looking for a doctor.”

2

As the rain continued pouring down heavily, 17 went into Tu Dian’s office. Tu Dian, who was wearing a white lab coat, turned to look at him.

3

17 sat in the McDonald’s restaurant and silently looked at his diagnosis sheet.

The word “kill” was written on it.

It was raining heavily outside, and there was no one in the restaurant except for the waiter who was staring at the door in a daze.

4

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<sup>203</sup> Wait, as in “[A Thousand Faces](#)” Tu Dian?!!!

<sup>204</sup> The roman numeral would be XVII but the author uses “17” throughout the text so I’ll just do that as well.

Liu Sang looked at 17 and said, "Call him and let me talk to him."

"Flies don't contact their eggs once they lay them," 17 said. "You are indeed different from ordinary people. He said that you're the only one he can't influence."

Liu Sang knew that there was another person in this room because he could vaguely hear their breathing.

Yes, Tu Dian's voice was very clear in his memory.

He was a strange creature that lay eggs in others. His pleasure came from leading people into the abyss of their lives.

This description of him laying eggs was actually coined by Liu Sang himself.

Tu Dian's voice had a strange charm to it that would enable people to hear their own inner voice.

"17?"

"Well, it's the number of his works. I'm not a masterpiece." 17 laughed, "What do you think of me?"

"Very boring." Liu Sang said, not hiding his true feelings at all.

17's expression turned cold, obviously very unhappy with this statement.

5

The cow dung on Wang Meng's hands had finally dried.

He cleaned everything up as best he could and started organizing.

Satellite phones weren't smartphones, so there was only a small green LED light glowing in the darkness.

The cell phone's battery was running out of power.

He didn't know what to do with that lump of cash.



Why give him money? Wang Meng really didn't understand what Kan Jian was thinking.

He opened the letter and started reading:

*Brother Meng,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. You must read it very carefully because it contains the detailed plan I came up with.*

*You are still in the seven-day no-responsibility return period.*

*Just think about it. You need to let the buyer think that you're a poor-quality good so that they'll return you.*

*But be careful.*

*The return clause states that the integrity of the goods isn't guaranteed upon return.*

*So, we have to figure out how to cancel the transaction through the online shop's rules.*

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 20

1

Before the execution, Tu Dian silently looked out the window.

The education officer<sup>205</sup> watched him from the door as the execution team stood waiting for orders in the motorcade outside.

When the education officer opened the door, a prison guard put handcuffs and ankle shackles on Tu Dian.

Then, the prison guard glanced at the education officer, silently turned around, and walked out.

The education officer knelt down in front of Tu Dian.

“Why don’t you want to escape death?”

Tu Dian looked out the window—there was a fly buzzing around outside. He remained silent for a while before saying, “It’s a full stop. People like me must have a full stop.”

“Don’t you want to keep helping others?”

“My death is the greatest help to you,” Tu Dian said.

On the education officer’s wrist was a tattoo of the number 5.

He seemed to understand what Tu Dian was saying.

“You don’t have any regrets?”

“Of course I do. There are evil people who refuse to be educated. They are more terrifying than I am,” Tu Dian said. “There are still many people like them in the world with bottomless abysses in their hearts, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

---

<sup>205</sup> In hopes of reducing recidivism and helping prisoners adjust to life post-prison, they can receive legal, moral, cultural, and technical education while serving their sentence. I’d say the education officer is kind of like their teacher.

He looked at the education officer, "I believe everyone has an abyss in their heart, but they just stare at it and refuse to jump. In order to help them, I simply go over and give them the push they need."

"Those you say you can't help...are you not able to push them down as well?"

"They are the abyss itself," Tu Dian said. "The laid eggs have fallen into the abyss. Even if they hatch, they can't fly up. It's a pity, but there's nothing I can do no matter how much I regret it."

The prison corridor leading to the road where the police cars were waiting outside was called the "Departing Gaze Corridor".

As Tu Dian walked slowly, he said to the education officer, "Spread news of my death to the world. I will never truly die."

The education officer nodded.

Tu Dian suddenly paused as if he thought of something, and then said, "If you miss me and want me to come back in another form, you'll need to find someone. This person is another me, but you all will have to guide them. They'll lead you to greater heights."

The education officer looked at Tu Dian, who said leisurely, "Their ears are very good, but I can't remember what they look like."

2

Ah Tou was drinking coffee when she saw news of Tu Dian's execution in the newspaper.

There were flies on the glass outside the cafe.

Meanwhile, Xie Yuchen received Tu Dian's urn.

"Should we put it in the ancestral hall?"

Xie Yuchen looked at the urn and thought for a while.

3

Che Galiba<sup>206</sup> looked at Kan Jian. As the eldest of the Eight Villains of the Wu family, he felt nothing but disgust in his heart.

The dog farm was covered in flowers, arguably making it the most beautiful dog farm around.

Many people told him that it was better to keep dogs and flowers separated because flowers weren't good for dogs.

Che Galiba smoke a cigarette, looking at him indifferently.

He preferred flowers over dogs because taking care of dogs was work while growing flowers was life.

“Well, in those days, their ancestors smelled corpse odors, so why would you think that they can't be around flowers because pollen isn't good for them?” Che Galiba took a puff of his cigarette, “Dogs have some knowledge of the world so it's better if they take care of themselves. After all, humans are the most unreliable creatures.”

Of course, Che Galiba preferred dogs over people.

“Speak up. What's the matter?” He asked Kan Jian. “Didn't the boss say that each company is responsible for its own profits and losses? I won't lend you any money.”

“I need twenty minutes to explain everything clearly.”

Che Galiba shook his head, “You've got three minutes.”

“Brother Meng sold his father, then I sold Brother Meng, and then I sold a cow from my hometown.”

Che Galiba opened the dog door on the side, behind which was a small lawn with six large dogs.

---

<sup>206</sup> I think this might be the Che Zhong guy from Sand Sea Part 4 (the one with the little palm-sized puppy that saved Wu Xie and knew his grandfather and had his stomach pumped to remove all those snake eggs). I googled around and he's apparently also the guy from the Sand Sea drama who appears in [episode 30 around the 18 min mark](#) to guide Li Cu and the squad to Gutong Jing. Che Zhong might be an alias but idk). [Pic](#) of him from the drama.

The large dogs immediately rushed over. All six dogs didn't like Kan Jian and looked at him with puzzled and annoyed expressions on their faces before they all started barking at him.

"Uncle Che—" Kan Jian started to explain.

But at this time, his cell phone suddenly rang. He glanced down at it and saw that Baishe was calling him.

He declined the call, but within a second, Baishe called again.

Kan Jian picked it up and said, "I'm not free."

"Help! Save me!!" The other party shouted.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 21

1

Baishe was hiding in the bathroom. Outside was a shadowy human figure sticking close to the frosted glass.

The thing had to be dead and highly decomposed, but it could still talk.

A violent stench filled the whole space.

Baishe's tall body was curled up in the bathtub. He found that she must have soaked in the bathtub during the early stages of decay because there was a layer of thick, sticky, foul-smelling green liquid stuck to the bathtub's surface.

Too frightened to worry about it right now, Baishe quickly called Kan Jian for help.

2

In the video call, Kan Jian and Che Galiba could see the shadow through the frosted glass trying to push its way through the door.

The frosted glass wasn't very strong and had started to crack, but as they watched, it seemed as if the whole piece of glass was falling out of the door frame.

"Get me out of here!" Baishe shouted. "Come and save me!"

The camera suddenly switched to the front-facing view, revealing Baishe's terrified face.

"Didn't you say this is your one true love?" Kan Jian asked.

Baishe immediately became furious, "We're different species! Fuck, the glass fell off! Shit!!!!"

Apparently, the glass had finally fallen out of the door frame and the thing finally made its way inside.

Baishe fell silent, staring blankly in front of him.

Kan Jian quickly took a screenshot of Baishe's face and then switched apps to start typing.

Che Galiba stared at him in shock, "You're still in the mood to order takeout?"

"This isn't takeout. There's only one way to save him."

Kan Jian clicked on the online store's inventory list, quickly loaded Baishe's photo to it, set the price as three yuan, and then submitted it.

Then he cut back to the video call and shouted to Baishe, "Hang in there! Someone will kidnap you soon."

Baishe didn't respond; he was so scared that he was about to vomit.

3

After Liang Yanyan finished shopping, she carried everything to the coffee shop where Ah Tou was drinking coffee.

Although many years had passed, it was still the same coffee shop.

Shen Qianjue was sitting across from them, next to Zhang Haiqi and another tall girl in black.<sup>207</sup>

The black-clothed girl and Liang Yanyan looked at each other, both tensing up in alertness.

"Guests?" She asked Ah Tou.

Ah Tou asked her to sit down, "Well, they're not really guests. We talked for a while and what they had to say is quite interesting. Please listen to them."

---

<sup>207</sup> Shen Qianjue is that chick who went to the grassland with her partner and supposedly backed out. She talked with Wu Xie over the satellite phone. Her name was first mentioned in [Chapter 17](#) "Looking for the Dead in the Sea of Lights" (what I've been calling Restart Part 3). Zhang Haiqi is first mentioned in the "Southern Archives". She's Zhang Haiyan's (aka Little Brother Zhang's) godmother and raised/trained him. She made her first real entrance in [Chapter 44](#) of the "Southern Archives".

Shen Qianjue politely greeted Liang Yanyan.

“Why us?” Ah Tou asked. “I don’t want to get too involved.”

“Think about it,” Shen Qianjue said. “There are some things that men can’t do.”

“What the hell are we going to do?” Ah Tou asked.

“Have you ever heard of ‘Rotating Moon’?”<sup>208</sup> Shen Qianjue replied.

4

Wang Meng was riding the cow in the dark, using the cell phone to light the way. The cow’s eyes seemed to be better than his considering how it walked forward calmly even though he couldn’t see anything at all.

Herbivores had to eat constantly to maintain their nutrient supply, which meant that this cow was obviously hungry and looking for food.

But there was nothing here.

He leaned on the cow’s back and used the cell phone to read the online shop’s rules.

Although he couldn’t access the internet, he could still see the files offline.

There was no way to initiate any return unless the customer was dissatisfied with the goods.

But how could he make the customer dissatisfied?

It all depended on why the other party wanted to buy him.

He didn’t know why they bought him, but if he thought about it, they technically bought his father first.

---

<sup>208</sup> Rotating Moon was mentioned in the extra [“The Yueshang Thirteen”](#).



When he thought of this, he suddenly became anxious again. It had been a day, but he didn't know what had happened to his father.

At this time, the cow suddenly let out a cry. He looked up and found that he had reached a dead end.

A very long brick wall had appeared.

It was the same kind of wall that his father was trapped in.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 22

1

Liu Sang tried his best not to look at the darkness on that side, but his body language betrayed him.

The other party realized right away that he knew there was another person hiding in the darkness.

“Can you hear it?” 17 asked.

“It’s more conjecture than anything,” Liu Sang said.

When a person saw something flowing in the darkness, his logic would tell him that the darkness wasn’t pure darkness.

The same was true for ears—when you heard an unnatural sound in a certain direction, you would know that someone was hiding there.

Even the sound made by a mouse or a bug would be very easy to distinguish.

“We were delayed because of you,” 17 said. “I’m fine because I don’t have to do this, but ‘it’ isn’t fine. You should be able to tell that ‘it’ is feeling very uncomfortable right now.”

“Is killing me the only way to make ‘it’ feel better?”

17 laughed, “Do you think we can just kill anyone we want?”

“I can hear high-frequency sounds. Isn’t that why you choose your targets?”

“No,” 17 said.

“Then tell me, what’s the difference?”

“You aren’t afraid.” 17 looked Liu Sang in the eyes, “In fact, you’re actually a little eager. You don’t want to live at all. Do you think serial killers are people who go out and do good deeds?”

“You’re killing people who are afraid and want to live. Don’t you think it’s a little too easy for people with your skillsets?” Liu Sang wondered.

“Compared to them, I’m more difficult. Why not challenge yourselves?”

17 touched his chin and thought about it for a moment, but eventually shook his head, “The first lesson we learned is to accept ourselves. If you can feel pleasure by abusing the weak but want to pee your pants when facing the strong, then you shouldn’t force yourself.”

Liu Sang laughed; this was indeed one of Tu Dian’s theories.

17 took out a piece of paper and said to Liu Sang, “However, now that we’ve met you, we have to start a special game. Here’s a letter he wrote to you.”

2

One day before his death sentence was carried out, Tu Dian sat on death row, spending the day writing letters.

This was a benefit for those death row inmates facing special circumstances. On this day, he could write as much as he wanted, and the government would have to bear the cost.

Of course, it was difficult since few people in this world could remember addresses nowadays.

Tu Dian wrote bit by bit on the paper. Many death row prisoners sent numerous letters to human rights lawyers and various political figures the day before their execution, and some of them were even exempted from the death penalty because of it.

But Tu Dian didn’t need to. Instead, he wrote:

*Hello friend,*<sup>209</sup>

*I’ve prepared a very fun game for you.*

---

<sup>209</sup> I don’t think it’s important but the “hello” was in English in the raw.

*This game was originally intended for another person. I met them earlier than you, but I think they've completely failed me.*

*This is a game that will enable you to understand me better. The logic of the game is very simple.*

*It's a choice between saving yourself at the expense of others, or being like me and saving others.*

*I have a lot of children who are hiding in the world. If you can't control your curiosity and investigate some of the things they've done, you'll definitely meet them, and then you'll see this letter.*

*If you don't stop them, they'll kill a hundred people.*

*They won't stop until these people are dead.*

*Moreover, these people are the ones who should live the most. If you investigate, you'll find that most of the dead are those who have survived a disaster or gone through terrible experiences and finally found peace.*

*Just think of how desperate they were when they died. Many of them made great sacrifices to survive, but the end result is that they lost their lives to us for no reason.*

*My children lurk around these people until one day, they find an opportunity to strike.*

*You can stop them, but the only way is to become like me. Otherwise, you'll watch these hundred people die.*

*When we were kids, I told you some information that you may have forgotten but need to remember.*

*That information contains the reason why I became like this, as well as clues on how I would act.*

*When you see this letter, the game will start on a larger scale.*

*During the process of the game, you need to study me slowly.*

*We'll meet again in hell.*

3

17 watched as Liu Sang finished reading the letter and then said to him, "Now, let's play the first round. My partner and I are going to kill someone next; I need to quell its restlessness. You need to stop us before we can. We move very fast, so you only have half an hour."

Liu Sang had a headache; he didn't know whether it was from Tu Dian's letter or the previous beating.

"It'll be rush hour here soon," 17 continued, "which means that you can only catch up to us if you can predict in advance where we'll do it."

"We learned everything from Professor Tu Dian, so please think of him and remember him. Otherwise, you can just wait here for tomorrow's newspaper."

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 23

1

After saying that, 17 pulled off his sweatshirt, revealing his naked torso underneath.<sup>210</sup>

He was very thin, and Liu Sang could see that there were a bunch of holes close to his heart that had a lot of wires coming out of them.

All around the holes were sores caused by wounds that hadn't healed for a long time.

There were two tubes coming out of these holes that led to an instrument strapped to his armpit.

It was an artificial heart outside of his body.

Liu Sang suddenly realized why the other person's heartbeat was so special.

This man didn't have a heart. His life was maintained by this instrument, which worked differently than an ordinary person's heart. It didn't use much power so it only sounded like the movement of the heart's thin membrane. It did make other sounds that were basically high-frequency currents, but they weren't too loud. In fact, they were quite similar to the sounds that cell phones normally made.

"Wherever I go, those with good ears will become very irritated," 17 said. "It's because my heart bugs them."

17 took the heart out from beneath his armpit and then slowly held it closer to Liu Sang's ear.

Liu Sang was suddenly overcome with an intense feeling of suffocation.

The sound of the artificial heart crept him out.

---

<sup>210</sup> It was def a T-shirt in Chapter 19. This man be changing clothes mighty quick haha. Must want to impress Liu Sang. Let's just assume he pulled off the T-shirt along with the sweatshirt.

2

Mop went back to Wushanju and lit a cigarette.<sup>211</sup>

He was very surprised to find that no one was in sight.

He sat down in Wang Meng's usual seat, feeling really drunk.

A long time passed, but the boss didn't appear.

Wang Meng's sneakers, which he usually wore when he ran around West Lake, were sitting next to the chair. Mop flicked his cigarette ash into the sneakers.

He then touched Wang Meng's computer mouse. As the screen saver disappeared, a photo of Wushanju popped up.

Wu Xie was standing in the middle. Mop looked at Wu Xie, lost in thought for a while.

At this time, a fly flew over and stared at his arm.

He looked at the fly but didn't chase it away.

3

Wang Meng walked along the brick wall, noticing that there was a lot of graffiti on it.

It seemed to be a few years old and was covered in a bunch of machine factory slogans. Wang Meng felt that these things gave it a bit of character.

At this time, he suddenly heard a groan come from the darkness in front of him. Because his father had rhinitis, Wang Meng immediately recognized that this was his father's voice.

---

<sup>211</sup> Mop (pinyin is Tuo Ba) shows up in Chapter 15 of "Graveyard of a Queen" and is in the drama "Ultimate Note" (I think his first appearance is [episode 9](#) at 26:06 but I was fast-forwarding really quickly so he might have appeared before). Pic [here](#).

He dragged the cow over and saw what appeared to be an iron gate set into the wall.

When he walked over, he found that it really was an iron gate, and there was another dark, open space behind it.

It seemed that this wall had been built in the middle of a huge factory, effectively dividing it into two parts.

So, if you wanted to enter the left or right side of this factory, you had no other choice but to pass through this gate.

His father's voice had come from the darkness on the other side.

Wang Meng's cell phone light wasn't enough to penetrate the darkness. He glanced at the wall but found that he couldn't see the top of it—this was probably a huge factory with a ten-meter-high ceiling.

“Dad!” Wang Meng shouted.

At this time, the darkness on the opposite side suddenly lit up. Wang Meng looked through the gaps in the iron gate and saw that there were seven or eight floor lamps inside. They were all lit up and there was a table beside each lamp.

Those were all gambling tables.

In the middle of these tables was a solitary brick wall that was about three meters by three meters in size. His father was encased in it, lips chapped and totally immobile.

On that wall, the following words were written in white paint: You can make an exchange.

Wang Meng stared in shock for a moment before noticing a pair of handcuffs hanging on the iron gate in front of him.

The chains of the handcuffs had been welded to the iron gate, and the two cuff loops were hanging open on either side.



Che Galiba drove as Kan Jian sat in the passenger seat next to him, touching his chin as he thought about what to do next.

Che Galiba kept trying to call Baishe's phone, but it seemed like the calls were being blocked.

They quickly arrived at the address Baishe had given them. When Che Galiba got out of the vehicle, two big dogs known as Er Hei and Wu Huang<sup>212</sup> had already jumped out of the bed of the pickup truck.

Then, a teacup dog named Lucha<sup>213</sup> started barking anxiously.

It was too high for it to jump down.

This was a male dog with a bad personality, but it was quite intelligent and had been raised in a Taoist temple, so it had a peach wood collar and a Taoist bun.

When Che Galiba lowered it down to the ground, it snorted proudly and then bared its teeth at the two big dogs, who immediately started following it forward.

Che Galiba went up and held it down, pointing in the right direction which turned out to be the complete opposite of where the dog had been going.

Lucha hesitated and then rushed towards the stairs that Baishe had gone up earlier.

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<sup>212</sup> Er Hei directly translates as "2<sup>nd</sup> Black" and Wu Huang as "5<sup>th</sup> Yellow". It's probably their order of birth and fur color.

<sup>213</sup> Lucha means "green tea".

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 24

1

Wang Meng put the handcuffs on the cow's two horns.

He knew what the other person had been trying to do—if Wang Meng handcuffed himself to the gate, then he could exchange himself so that his father could get out.

But the other party must not have realized that he had a cow.

Once the confused cow's head was stuck to the gate, Wang Meng backed up and scared the cow.

The cow immediately started pulling back, causing the chain connecting the handcuffs to pull taut. The iron bars on the gate started to bend from the force of it, but the gate still remained shut.

Eventually, the handcuffs fell off the horns and the cow shook its head and walked away angrily.

Wang Meng gave the gate a hard kick, but his legs lost their strength and it felt as if he had broken a few bones. The gate still remained shut.

Wang Meng looked at the handcuffs. The cow's two horns were big so the handcuffs hadn't needed to be tightened around them at all. This meant that his hands could easily fit inside them.

He looked at his father, who was already very weak.

He put his hands in the cuffs and then tightened them. The cuffs had a one-way locking mechanism so they couldn't be loosened once they were tightened.

He was now firmly handcuffed to the iron gate.

Then he began shouting, "Come on! Come out and play!! Come and play with me!"

2

Baishe was walking in the dark, full of despair. Not only had he lost his cell phone, but the only light he had on him was the dim light from a portable charger. Fortunately, his underwater vision was superior, so he could see a bunch of vague outlines. The first clear thing he saw, however, was a cow slowly walking towards him.

He watched the cow angrily pass him by.

He was very confused by this, but he was too tired to care. *Forget it*, he said to himself. *Let the world burn.*<sup>214</sup>

Then he continued walking on for a while until he saw Wang Meng leaning against an iron gate and shouting, “Come and play with me!”

*I must be dreaming*, he thought to himself.

He quickly turned around and continued walking in the other direction.

3

Kan Jian turned his head to look at the three dogs and Che Galiba.

“Why am I the one playing the striker?<sup>215</sup> Didn’t we bring the dogs to play the striker?” At this time, Kan Jian was standing at the door to the bedroom. The bedroom door was closed, and there was a strong stench coming from inside.

The three dogs and Che Galiba looked at him steadily.

“The status of the Eight Villainous Dogs of the Wu family is higher than that of the Eight Villains,” Che Galiba whispered. “We’ll cover you.”

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<sup>214</sup> This is a reference to a black comedy movie called “[Crazy Alien](#)”, starring Huang Bo and Shen Teng. I think they mistake the alien for a monkey and try to train it, but when it gets its powers back, it beats them up. They’re so tired and wounded by the end that they’re just like “screw it, I’m tired. Destroy the world for all I care.”

<sup>215</sup> A striker, also known as a forward and attacker, is a soccer player who plays nearest to the opponent’s goal and whose primary role is to score goals for their team.

The kid in the living room was still playing video games, so absorbed in the games that he was completely ignoring Kan Jian and the others.

Without hesitating, Kan Jian pulled out his slingshot, raised it up, and slowly pushed open the bedroom door.

The violent stench practically slapped him in the face, causing his eyes to burn.

He slowly squeezed in through the gap in the door and saw a bed sheet that was completely green.

There was something that looked like black cotton wool on the sheets, but nothing else.

The glass in the bathroom door had been knocked out of its frame, and when he looked inside, he immediately saw a person sitting on the closed toilet seat.

The person was green. Kan Jian glanced behind him and saw the three dogs and one man looking at him from the gap in the bedroom door, indicating that support was close.

Kan Jian slowly approached the toilet.

At this time, Lucha made a snorting noise as if his nose had been stimulated by some scent. Then, he turned his head and looked at the kid in the living room.

The kid had turned his head and was looking at them.

Lucha looked the kid in the eye and began to slowly bare his teeth and make threatening noises. The kid also started to make the same sounds, as if he was imitating the dog.

Che Galiba looked back, immediately realizing that something was wrong.

4

Liu Sang looked at the alarm clock in front of him and saw that the countdown had already started.

As he kept his eyes trained on the alarm clock, he slowly dragged the chair over.

Both of them were gone.

He had to hurry.

He finally reached the alarm clock, used his legs to bring it closer, and then crushed it.

Then he fell on the glass shards, grabbed one, and began cutting the rope tied around him.

Soon, he cut the rope off and freed himself.

He rolled over and got up.

One person's heart was inaudible at a distance while the other person's was very frantic.

This 17 person wasn't going to be easy to deal with because he wouldn't live long anyways, so he didn't care about the consequences of his actions.

And that artificial heart looked like it was an obsolete foreign product that had been found in imported garbage a few years ago.

He stumbled out of the building and saw a bunch of roses growing in the cracks of the wall outside.

He froze for a moment, feeling that he didn't understand something.

But there was no time, so he ignored the feeling and rushed out.

In fact, when he walked into that alley earlier, he heard Wang Guo's advertisement playing on the old man's radio.<sup>216</sup> He just didn't expect that the other person's heart would be like that.

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<sup>216</sup> That was a while ago back in chapter 15 so here's a reminder: Wang Guo said there were 2 murderers.

He also didn't notice anyone approaching at the time, which he couldn't understand. It should have been impossible for someone to sneak up on him.

Liu Sang went to the place where he was attacked earlier, and after looking at the surrounding environment, he realized that his speculation was right—the other party had turned off his heart, and in those few seconds, he relied on the inertia of life to move slowly through the darkness.

Liu Sang's cell phone was gone, so he rushed to the entrance of the alley where the old man was still listening to the radio. At this time, he saw Wang Guo standing at the entrance with two subordinates. The other man was very weak and had to lean against the wall as he looked at Liu Sang.

When he heard the broadcast earlier, Liu Sang had already sent his location to Wang Guo.

He had tried to stall for time just now, but it wasn't enough.

"How many cars do you have?" Liu Sang asked.

5

Liu Sang was in his own car while one of Wang Guo's men was in another car.

The two people were on opposite sides of the bridge, facing each other.

"Come on!" Liu Sang shouted.

As soon as he stepped on the accelerator, the other man also stepped on his accelerator. The two cars flew towards each other and collided directly on the bridge.

All of the passers-by stood there stunned as the line of cars on both sides of the bridge came to a stop.

Liu Sang reversed the car, turned the wheel, and crashed into the front of the car next to him.

The car on the opposite side began to do the same thing.

Soon, the two cars caused a six-car collision, effectively blocking the whole bridge.

Liu Sang was dragged from the car and beaten.

He looked at Wang Guo, who was standing in the crowd and holding his phone, which was playing a high-frequency video.

The fact that that person wanted to play a “game” at this time and mentioned rush hour traffic meant that it had something to do with this bridge.

*We can't let the victim cross this bridge,* Liu Sang thought to himself.

At this time, he suddenly received a slap to the ear, which caused his whole brain to buzz.

He immediately started to push the crowd away; it seemed that someone in the crowd was taking the opportunity to manipulate things from behind the scenes, and having a good time while they were at it.

He looked up and finally saw the culprit—it was a young man with an indifferent face, but his heart was beating like a cheerful fawn.

Liu Sang couldn't be beaten here; he had other things to do.

The young man was clearly waiting for his chance to kill again while the crowd was chaotic, but his excited heartbeat betrayed him.

Liu Sang immediately lunged at him and headbutted him to the ground.

The action caused his hair to come loose. He soon gained the upper hand.

When Liu Sang stepped forward, the opponent covered his face, but Liu Sang punched his nose once, twice, three times in quick succession.

The other man's nose was broken, as well as Liu Sang's fingers.

When Liu Sang stood up again, no one dared to approach him.

He sat on the roof of his car and looked at the people around him. The crowd was becoming denser than before, which meant that there was nowhere to go.

The buzzing in his ears slowly subsided, which was a good thing.

Liu Sang closed his eyes, planning on using his ears to their fullest.

His master had given him a horribly cheesy name for this skill: Open Heaven's Ears.



# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 25

1

The people in town were playing basketball. A few snot-nosed brats were playing well, and some of them were wearing jerseys with NBA stars' numbers on them.

Liu Sang didn't know their names. His health wasn't all that great, and he was never into such games.

His master, who was sitting next to him, suddenly asked him, "What do you need to play basketball?"

"It's all about height," Liu Sang said. He still hadn't hit his growth spurt, so he didn't know how tall he would be in the future.

"What about people who aren't tall?"

"They need to be able to jump high?"

There was a guy on the court who wasn't very tall but jumped very high with every shot he took.

And every time, the ball made a beautiful arc in the air.

There were girls watching on the sidelines; people who could break through their own limits were far more attractive than someone with a talent advantage of more than two meters.

But in fact, jumping high was also a kind of talent.

"So you're saying you can hear far because your ears are good?"

"Isn't that it?" Liu Sang raised his head and asked his master.

"No, playing basketball ultimately depends on your brain. Your height and jumping height are just tickets." His master looked at an old man on the court—he was too old to play forward or center, but he was still playing

as the point guard, passing the ball to the kids on his team. “The same goes for ears.”

Liu Sang didn’t understand.

“If your ears are good,” his master continued, “then training them is only a ticket. Hearing so many noises is useless. The only way to make this ability meaningful is if you can use it, but that depends on your brain. In the future, you can use it to make money. You have to understand that it doesn’t matter how much you hear, but whether you understand what you hear.”

Liu Sang didn’t understand it at that time, and the brutal training that followed didn’t help him to understand it either.

How he finally understood that truth was something he couldn’t even remember.

2

Wang Meng continued to shout loudly as his father—who was still encased in that brick wall—woke up and looked at him in confusion.

At this time, the ground where the brick wall was located suddenly began to turn, and soon, Wang Meng could only see his father’s back.

He found that his father was naked and his body was covered in tubes.

Beneath his father’s body was a pool of urine and feces.

Wang Meng immediately became furious and started banging his head against the gate, “You fucking bastard!!”

Soon, the wall rotated back around and stopped.

Wang Meng realized that those tubes were giving his father an IV drip containing nutrients and anesthetic. When his father woke up, the anesthetic in the tubes must have stopped.

He waited, not knowing what would happen next.

But nothing happened.

Five minutes later, the brick wall began to turn again as if it was on a timer.

It almost seemed like some kind of show display.

Wang Meng trembled all over. Compared with the pain, trampling on one's dignity like this was totally incomprehensible.

Another five minutes passed, and the wall turned again.

This time, Wang Meng saw the other party's intention.

The brick wall had been built with mortise and tenon joints, which meant that as long as a brick was pulled out, the whole wall would collapse into pieces.

The key brick was close to his father's hand and had been marked by the other party with a playing card.

The other party wanted him to see this.

"Dad, can you hear me?" Wang Meng shouted. At this time, he suddenly thought of his boss.

*What would boss do at a time like this? Emotions are useless in this situation. I have to calm down.*

His father didn't respond. In fact, after getting out of prison, his father didn't respond to most things. It had probably been too long since anyone had called him dad.

His father didn't recognize him.

"Dad, I'm Meng Meng! I'm Meng Meng!" Wang Meng shouted.

Hearing the words "Meng Meng", his father suddenly reacted and looked up at Wang Meng.

Wang Meng continued shouting at him, "Move your left hand around and see if you can feel a brick with a playing card on it."

His father immediately showed a frightened expression and shook his head, "I can't play cards. I can't play cards anymore."

Wang Meng looked at his father, feeling both frightened and stunned.

When he was a child, he felt sick whenever he heard the words "playing cards" because they reminded him of creditors. Those two words meant that no matter how hard his mother tried, it was all in vain.

She worked three jobs and tired herself out until she got hepatitis, but it was all pointless in the end.

Because of playing cards.

Wang Meng stood there stunned for a moment before saying, "I'm not asking you to play cards. There's a brick under the card. You just need to touch it, pull it out, and then you can move."

His father immediately shook his head again, "I can't play cards, I can't play cards. I won't draw a card, I won't draw a card!"

The brick wall continued to turn, and Wang Meng realized that this plan wouldn't work. After thinking about it for a moment, he decided to lie to him, "It's not a card. If you touch it, you'll find that it's a piece of paper. If you touch that piece of paper that's stuck to the brick, you can pull the brick out."

Seeing that his father didn't respond, Wang Meng shouted, "Did you hear me?!"

His father was startled by the sudden shout and began to cry.

Wang Meng saw his father's crying face and felt extremely disgusted.

His mother was a strong woman. If not for his father who always cried and apologized and begged for money, his mother would have been able to leave that hell.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 26

1

Wang Meng had never felt so confused before.

As he stood there watching his father crying like an innocent man, he had a sudden fierce desire to turn around and leave.

But his hands were firmly handcuffed to the iron gate, and the handcuffs were reinforced. Even if they weren't reinforced, they were much stronger than the ones in TV dramas that could easily be broken.

A normal person wouldn't have the power to break free from this kind of thing. Unless, of course, they were special.

Maybe this was the other party's intent.

What are you crying for? Do it. Do what you promised to do. Why are you crying? It's pointless to cry!

Wang Meng yelled at his father, but as a result, the other man just started crying even harder. He seemed to choke and then started convulsing.

*Die.* The thought suddenly rose up in Wang Meng's heart. *At this point, just die.*

But his father coughed up the phlegm blocking his throat and began to breathe heavily.

Wang Meng found that when he was yelling, his hands shook so hard that the handcuffs tore his skin open.

It was only at this time that he became aware of the pain. He looked at the wounds and immediately calmed down.

*I can't act like this,* he said to himself. If he succumbed to such despairing feelings, he'd wind up just like his father, a man who could do nothing but

have a break-down and pretend to collapse in order to steal the family's money.

Wang Meng took a deep breath.

*I can't be like him.*

Slowly, he managed to calm himself down.

*Emotions are useless. Focus on doing something.*

Humans were practical creatures. When encountering the worst situation possible, they would always choose the step that was beneficial to themselves and then work on that step to get out of the predicament bit by bit.

The most important thing was to make a choice.

He looked at his father carefully, and then said to him, "You can play cards. You can play cards today."

His dazed father raised his drool-covered chin and looked at him dully.

"You can break even today," Wang Meng said to him. "Today's fortune is good so you can break even."

His father looked at him and immediately shook his head, "I can't play cards, I can't play cards."

"Come on," Wang Meng goaded him. "You've already lost so much. It's time for you to break even. Just feel around. There's a brick with a card on it. Pull out the brick and there will be two decks of playing cards in there." Wang Meng took out the cash Kan Jian had given him, "I'll lend you the money. This is what your wife saved for your son's tuition fees, but you can take it first."

His father looked at him in confusion, but still shook his head, "No, no. People will die, people will die."

"Are you so afraid of your wife? Are you not a man?"

“No, no.”

“This is the last time,” Wang Meng said. “How about this? If you win, you win. If you lose, we won’t call you.”

His father suddenly froze—this statement had obviously caught his attention. He suddenly started moving, and after feeling around for a while, the brick wall started to collapse. Once the whole wall fell apart, his father was finally free.

When he fell, all the needles connected to the tubes in his body were pulled out.

Wang Meng saw that he was holding the brick with the playing card in his hand.

His father was lying on the pile of bricks, seemingly unable to get up. Wang Meng looked at his father, knowing that no matter how much time had passed, he would never change.

2

Li Cu looked at the little black spots in the sky and saw that there were exactly three of them.

Were those three people floating in the sky right now?

Was this an alien abduction?

The three of them looked up for a long time before Su Wan rubbed his back and said, “Ah, so comfortable.”

“What should we do?” A rescuer standing next to him asked. “We’ve prepared diving suits and cave equipment but nothing to fly up into the sky.”

Yang Hao looked at a tall rock on the other side that was about seventeen stories high and then started walking towards it.

“What’s wrong?” Li Cu asked.

“There’s something on it,” Yang Hao said.

Li Cu also saw it at this time—there seemed to be some man-made things on top of the rock that looked like human clothes.

And this rock was just below the three black spots.

It looked like they’d have to climb up if they wanted to know what was going on.

Yang Hao reached the foot of the rock and started climbing with his bare hands before glancing back at Li Cu with what looked to be a challenge.

Li Cu took off his backpack and walked over to him.

“Shit, bring it on!”

The two people started climbing up bare-handed.

By the time Su Wan noticed that the two of them had started climbing, they were already halfway up.

He thought for a moment before walking to the base of the rock and looking up.

*Isn’t there a saying that poor children reach maturity earlier than others in order to take care of their families? He wondered. How can these two be so childish?*



# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 27

1

Baishe was walking in the dark.

He still had a lot of green mucus on his body and the stench was making him shiver all over. He needed a hose or something to wash it off.

As he walked, he saw an arrow appear in front of him.

It was a styrofoam board arrow about as long as an arm with Wang Meng's picture stuck on it.

The arrow was pointing in the direction he had just come from, which was the same place where he had seen Wang Meng just now.

It seemed to be telling him to go back.

Baishe decided to ignore it; instead choosing to step over the arrowhead and continue walking.

As he walked, he suddenly heard what sounded like a radio broadcast come from somewhere in the darkness up ahead, as if there was a radio here.

Turning in that direction, he listened to the radio and approached slowly.

"Is anyone there?" He asked.

No one answered, but he soon felt that he had reached the place where the radio broadcast was coming from. Using the dim light from his portable charger to take a look, he found that he was standing in front of a square table with a radio on it, and there was a person sitting next to it. But it was so dark that he couldn't see clearly.

Baishe slowly walked over and saw that the person was actually an old man. The old man was obviously alive because he reached out and turned down the radio a little after he felt Baishe coming closer.

Baishe slowly walked up to the old man, who merely looked at him and said, "Your friend is behind you. Why aren't you going back?"

"Who are you? Where is this place?" Baishe asked him.

"Me? I was the person who built this place back then. I was the chief architect. At that time, the factory gave me an impossible task. In fact, ordinary people couldn't figure out how to build the structural support for this factory for a long time, but we came up with a solution for the cement," the other party said. "But no matter how brilliant it was, it was abandoned in the end."

"This is a factory?"

"Yes, it is."

"Are you trapped here, too?"

Instead of answering, the old man motioned for Baishe to sit down. Baishe looked over and saw that there was a small bench sitting beside the old man's table.

"Do you like to gamble?" The old man asked. "I'm worried that no one will make this bet."

2

"We made the exchange," Wang Meng shouted into the darkness. "Now what? What happens now?"

No response came from the surrounding darkness. Seeing his father slowly get up from the pile of bricks, he quickly shouted at him, "Look! Look around! Do you see any words? Any hints?"

His father ignored him and instead raised his trembling hand with the brick and the card stuck to it, as if he wanted to hand it over.

Wang Meng took the brick, turned it over, and saw that the card was a Queen of clubs.<sup>217</sup>

There was nothing on it; no hint whatsoever.

“It’s not here. There must be a hint somewhere else,” Wang Meng said.

His father stood there motionless for a moment before walking back to the pile of bricks and sitting down.

The position of the handcuffs on the gate was such that Wang Meng had to kneel. Feeling a little tired now, he knelt there and carefully tried to calm himself down.

*Think, think.*

At this time, the sound of rattling dice suddenly came from out of the darkness, as if a dice cup was moving around on a gambling table.

Wang Meng’s attention was immediately drawn to the darkness behind him, and so was his father’s.

3

Liu Sang’s ear strength had reached its limit.

It wasn’t actually a matter of how well he could hear but more of whether he could distinguish all the sounds or not.

Humans were very skilled at processing visuals, but an auxiliary sense like hearing wasn’t something that was easily recognizable.

Liu Sang, however, was different. In his ears, everything became like a code of the truth of the world.

There were countless sounds of fingers pressing on smartphone keypads, voices sending WeChat messages, thrumming pulses, and continuous heartbeats.

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<sup>217</sup> Per Tiffany: people in some regions refer to the letter “Q” (Queen) as Century Egg (梅花的皮蛋) when it comes to poker.

There was also the sound of stomachs digesting and bowels moving.

It was like his soul was standing beside everyone, looking at them all unwaveringly.

Tu Dian didn't know that he had reached this level.

At this time, he suddenly heard something, but it wasn't on the bridge—it was underneath.

It was a faint, heartbeat-like sound, too weak to be heard if his ears weren't working at this level.

This sound was hidden amidst the noise of the flowing river water.

He jumped off of the car, causing everyone standing nearby to immediately scatter. He rushed to the bridge railing and saw that a boat was about to pass through the bridge's arch.

"There's a ferry here. Why is there a ferry when there's a bridge?"

When he directed this question to the person beside him, they were so frightened that they immediately answered, "This boat is going to the village. It travels from the village upstream to the next village over, but it only makes one trip a day. In fact, you can drive across the bridge, but it's cheaper to go by boat."

Liu Sang immediately climbed over the bridge railing and jumped into the river, shocking Wang Guo who was watching nearby.

The current was so fast that Liu Sang quickly realized that he had been too hasty jumping into the water like that. But he gritted his teeth and began swimming upstream towards the side of the boat.

4

Wang Guo's wife was discussing her husband's condition with the doctor at the hospital.

A young kid who must have been around eighteen years old suddenly came knocking on the door. Wang Guo's wife touched her ear, feeling a headache coming on.

"Wang's team was chasing a thief on the bridge," the kid said to Wang Guo's wife. "He's had an accident. You should go and take a look."

Wang Guo's wife froze for a moment before immediately standing up.

"There's a car waiting outside," the young kid said.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 28

1

Baishe sat down. Remembering that his hands were covered in mucus, he quickly wiped them clean on the ground.

The old man didn't seem to care about the stench at all and asked him, "Do you really love her?"

"Who?"

"The one that's stuck to you," the old man said.

Baishe thought about it for a moment before saying, "Um... I think... I don't know. Who the hell are you anyway? Where is this place?"

"I bought you online," the old man said. "You were very cheap. It almost wasn't worth the transportation costs. This place is my warehouse."

Baishe obviously didn't understand what this meant and paused before asking, "Where's the exit?"

The old man continued as if he hadn't spoken, "But you aren't the main thing that I wanted to buy. I took you mainly because I find the situation you're facing quite interesting. You're not the protagonist, but you can still play a role."

After speaking, the old man turned something on—it was an old TV that was sitting on the ground. When the TV came on, Baishe saw a gambling table appear on the screen.

The TV was actually a surveillance camera that was monitoring the gambling table over on Wang Meng's side.

"I want to make a bet with you," the old man said. "This is your friend, and this is your friend's father. Their lives have been completely ruined. Do you want to bet that they'll have a good ending or do you want to bet that they'll have a bad ending?"

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just a bet,” the old man said. “If you win, you can leave here.”

2

“Can you forgive your loved ones for making mistakes?” Ah Tou stood by the river, which ran through the whole city and brought a bit of coolness with it. “They ruin your life with their unreasonable vices and completely rotten behavior.”

Liang Yanyan lit a cigarette. “Are you still thinking about that? It’s the kind of question that’s difficult to answer. Everyone has their own aspirations and personalities.”

The two women fell silent.

It seemed that when all humans came into this world, they were faced with a very urgent and fleeting existence so they had no time to choose and simply went wherever there was a path.

After they arrived, they would find that the door they had just passed through actually had different attributes, with their own life difficulties and instructions attached to it.

“There was a boy, when he was about eleven years old, who realized that his family was a disaster. He made the decision to cut off his emotional ties with them and then worked to complete his goal step by step. His father was a drunk who often beat him, so he began exercising in secret. One day, when he was fourteen, his father started to beat him so he pushed his father onto the coffee table and broke his nose. His father didn’t mess with him for half a year after that. Later, they even had a good relationship, and this matter was never mentioned again. He envied others’ relationships with their fathers—that kind of attachment—but he knew that he didn’t have it and never would, because the bridge between him and his father had been built on that punch. But before his death at the age of eighty, he realized that he could no longer feel the pain of lacking that thing. In truth, he found that he didn’t care anymore. What you wanted at the age of fourteen may not be what you wanted at the

age of eighty. In fact, at eighty, he was more worried that his grandson wouldn't be able to get into a good university, and that he would have to pay high property taxes," Liang Yanyan said. "Do you know what this means?"

"What?"

"Throughout your whole life, you won't have only one self. Although you live on continuously, you aren't alone. You are the culmination of several different versions of yourself. You may be able to predict what your next self needs and likes, but you can't predict who you'll become in the end."

"Hmm."

"So, even if your current self forgives that scumbag in your family, that version of you who used to put up with them will never be able to forgive them. The only thing is, if you forgive that person now, you and the version of your self who suffered at that time are no longer alone."

"Is this forgiveness a betrayal of my past self?"

"Well, you must complete your revenge before you transition to your next self; otherwise, you'll miss a good opportunity. Hatred is not such a lasting thing. I especially don't believe that my future self can take revenge for me. I only believe in my present self."

As the two people faced the wind coming off of the river, someone took pictures of them, thinking that they were street style models.<sup>218</sup>

3

Wang Meng watched his father walk towards the dice cup on shaky legs.

At this time, the cell phone suddenly rang. He glanced down at it and saw that it was a Bluetooth call.

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<sup>218</sup> Street style is a specific fashion style originating from the British fashion culture. Magazines and newspapers commonly feature candid photographs of individuals out and about the city wearing urban, stylish clothing. It's often based on individualism, rather than focusing solely on current fashion trends. More info [here](#).



He picked it up and heard Baishe's voice come from the other end, "How much cash do you have on you?"

"I'm not lending you money," Wang Meng said coldly.

"Bro, I'm looking at you right now. You have to place your bet. I'm betting that you have a happy ending."

"What are you talking about?"

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 29

1

The small ferry could hold more than twenty people, but it was actually a modified concrete boat.<sup>219</sup>

After Liu Sang climbed onto the boat, he found that everyone was looking at him. Among the crowd of people, he could hear the extremely subtle sound of that artificial heart.

But he didn't see 17 at all.

He walked into the ship's cabin like a water ghost as everyone continued to stare at him. After following the sound, he found that it was coming from under a seat.

He looked down at the seat and saw that a bag was sitting underneath it. He pulled it out and opened it—the artificial heart was sitting inside.

The heart was still running, making that slight asthmatic sound.

*Shit, it's a diversion!* Liu Sang said to himself.

"You have to think like Tu Dian," 17's voice seemed to say in his ears. "Otherwise, you won't know what we're going to do next."

Think like Tu Dian.

2

Liu Sang followed Tu Dian along the path through the field.

Tu Dian was a young man; Liu Sang only reached his waist.

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<sup>219</sup> [Concrete ships](#) are built of steel and ferrocement (reinforced concrete) instead of more traditional materials, such as steel or wood. The advantage of ferrocement construction is that materials are cheap and readily available, while the disadvantages are that construction labor costs are high, as are operating costs. (Ferrocement ships require thick hulls, which results in either a larger cross-sectional area that hurts hydrodynamics, or leaves less space for cargo.). Reminds me of a concrete Jon boat. Pic [here](#).

They were in an endless field full of unripened wheat. There was food in a bag somewhere, along with a watch.

They had to find that bag if they wanted to eat; otherwise, they'd die in this endless field.

Liu Sang knew that Tu Dian couldn't hear anything since he was a normal person, but Tu Dian was very calm and didn't appear worried at all.

Liu Sang couldn't hear anything. The only thing he could hear was the sound of the wheat rustling in the wind.

This was a test.

Tu Dian found a random spot in the wheat field, lay down, and said something.

Liu Sang stood beside him.

But Liu Sang had his own ideas—when Tu Dian came back to his senses, he found that Liu Sang had already walked away.

3

Liu Sang began to smile bitterly as he sat on the boat's deck with the artificial heart and rested for a minute.

He bet that Tu Dian never would have thought that he would totally forget what the older man had said.

Tu Dian must have thought that he left a deep impression on everyone.

But only Liu Sang was different—the only thing that left a deep impression on him in that moment was the memory of the majestic heartbeat of the Himalayas.

Liu Sang didn't remember most of what Tu Dian said in the wheat field and during the last summer that they saw each other.

He only remembered most of the unimportant things. He figured the most profound memory he had of Tu Dian was what the other man had said about his grandfather.

4

The car was driving along the village road. Wang Guo's wife was unconscious in the passenger seat while the young man was driving with a gas mask on. He glanced at his watch, seemingly very cheerful.

5

Liu Sang stood up and told the boatman to dock right as his cell phone rang.

It was Wang Guo.

"One of the killers surrendered himself," he said to Liu Sang.

6

Xie Yuchen was building a Lego structure.

It was an ancient tomb, and the work had been going on for several years.

"Is this tomb really that important? You've been trying to restore it for so long," his secretary asked him.

"It's because you can't see after you enter it. You have to completely memorize all the information, but instead of remembering the map, it's better to remember the spatial structure."

"Do you now fully understand what Ba Ye calculated back then?"

"Yes," Xie Yuchen said. "Ba Ye asked the Xie family to have someone with good ears. Unfortunately, I didn't pay attention to it at that time. The family chose a person who went to learn those skills, but they ended up choosing the wrong one. This person didn't obey the terms of the agreement."

"Did Ba Ye say what would happen without this person?"

“If the Xie family isn’t prepared for this, then—” Xie Yuchen suddenly stopped and said, “Actually, it doesn’t really matter.”

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 30

1

Liu Sang received a call from 17, who had turned himself in. He was sitting on the bank, his physical strength almost completely exhausted. Fortunately, he knew that he could quickly recover with a short rest since his total amount of HP wasn't much to begin with.

Although 17 sounded very weak on the phone, he still involuntarily chuckled.

“What are you playing at?”

“Are you having fun?”

“Won't you die without a heart?”

“Would you only have one copy of such an important thing?” 17 continued laughing. “You wasted twenty minutes, which means you didn't think like Tu Dian at all. Otherwise, how could you be so stupid as to think you could guess our next move?”

“What the hell are you playing at?”

“You still have ten minutes. Did Wang Guo not tell you who our next target is?”

Liu Sang looked up at Wang Guo on the bridge, who was anxiously making phone calls.

“What did you do to him?”

“His wife is in my friend's hands. This is how we divide the work. I turn myself in while he goes to kill people. I'm in charge of playing games with you while he's responsible for the rewards. Do you understand?”

“With only ten minutes left, I've already lost. Why are you turning yourself in?”

“Of course this isn’t the end of it,” 17 said. “There’s still time for you to get to the police station. I made a deal with Wang Guo that he would give you the chance to be alone with me. You have to pull all the tubes out of my heart. But before I die, I’ll give you a phone number. If you call it, my friend will stop.”

“You want me to kill you,” Liu Sang muttered.

“Yes, give me relief. Pull out these horrible tubes and give me relief,” 17 said. “Otherwise, someone will die because of you.”

As he laughed again, Liu Sang could hear just how much those tubes had caused him to suffer.

Liu Sang remained silent for about a minute, at which point 17 said, “If you don’t come, I’m afraid you won’t be able to make it in time.”

Noticing that Liu Sang continued to remain silent, the other party said in a cheerful tone, “You won’t give up, will you? Surely Tu Dian didn’t pick the wrong person? You’re not just an ordinary person, are you?”

Liu Sang looked down at his hand—it had been trembling violently just now but had finally calmed down.

“In reality, things don’t always turn out the way you planned,” Liu Sang said. “There are always miracles.”

2

The young man dragged Wang Guo’s wife out of the car.

They were in a wheat field, and no one was around. He dragged the woman to the edge of the field and then carefully took out the foil-wrapped roses from his clothes.

She had to be awake. If she wasn’t, then it wouldn’t be as much fun.

He took out another bottle of medicine, which was a muscle relaxant.

He looked at his phone, but there still wasn’t a call—it seemed like he could proceed.

Laughing, he squatted down to wake the woman up but suddenly found that her eyes were open and looking at him coldly.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said to her. “It only hurts a little.”

Wang Guo’s wife suddenly rolled over, jumped up behind the young man’s back, and wrapped her hands around his neck like a snake.

The young man was completely stunned.

“Wait a minute, we can talk.” As the young man said this, his whole face immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

“So you’re the one who made my husband work overtime every day?” The woman said. “You’re young. Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“What?” The young man didn’t understand what was going on.

Wang Guo’s wife twisted her hands and broke his neck.

3

When Liu Sang and Wang Guo’s wife met for the first time in the hospital, Liu Sang listened to her heartbeat in surprise.

Although not as strong as he had heard before, he knew right away that this woman was different.

“Sister Zhang?” Liu Sang called tentatively.

At that time, Wang Guo’s wife looked at him with a very stern expression and made a shushing gesture.

4

Liu Sang looked at his steady hand.

“But it won’t end that way.” 17 was still talking on the phone—it seemed he didn’t know the real situation yet and still thought he had the upper hand. Liu Sang hung up the phone, probably shocking the other man.



“Idiot,” Liu Sang muttered to himself.

Wang Guo was still anxiously making phone calls. There were so many people who didn’t know. Liu Sang looked up at the sky, where the dark, oppressive clouds were gathering again.

Seventeen... just how many people were there?

5

“Help me buy a factory building that’s big enough. Yes, very big.” Xie Yuchen said over the phone as he looked out the window—it was raining heavily in Beijing and many people were running around wildly outside as they tried to avoid getting wet.

Only his voice could be heard in the room.

“No, not a production plant. An abandoned one would be best, but it has to be big enough.” He glanced back at the Lego structure he had built.

“It would be better if any outside light is sealed off so that it’s completely black and no light can enter. I’m going to build something inside.”

“I can give you the blueprints, but you won’t understand what I’m going to build if I don’t explain it to you.”

“Yes, I’m looking for the best designer. It’s going to be a one-to-one scale model for training.” Xie Yuchen suddenly felt a slight pain in his wrist and moved it a bit. “That’s right, money isn’t an issue. It was involved in a homicide case? That doesn’t matter.”

A photo of the factory was sent to his phone. When Xie Yuchen looked at it, he saw a lot of roses.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 31

1

Qi Tiezui spent more than ten hours carefully writing down the fleeting years in detail. By the time he was finished writing his life down, the brush was practically bald.

He stared at the brush in a daze. At this time, his field of vision had narrowed down to only the tip while the rest of his surroundings remained in darkness.

He put down his brush, knowing that the blessings of his life had been written in this book.

Then, he walked into the yard, shakily sat down in his rattan chair, and closed his eyes.

2

Li Cu and Yang Hao sat at the top of the rock, sweating profusely.

They both glanced up at the black spots in the sky. There was no doubt about it, those black spots were three people floating in the air.

At this height, it was easy to make out the human silhouettes.

“What’s going on?” Yang Hao asked.

“I have no idea.” As Li Cu spoke, he pulled out his walkie-talkie and said to the others below, “Who brought the drone?”

3

Baishe was on the phone, explaining the situation to Wang Meng.

“I met an old man who said he bought us.”

“Are you here, too?”

“Ah, yes. I actually passed by you just now.”

“Then why didn’t you help me?”

“I thought I was dreaming. But let’s discuss that later. Right now, I need to tell you what’s going on. Your choice right now is very important.”

Wang Meng sighed in disgust, “Who’s the old man?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just listen to me; your choice is very important.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve bet that you and your dad can make it out of this factory alive. A happy ending, understand? I made a bet with the old man. If I win, the three of us can get out of here alive.”

“What if we lose?”

“If we lose, the three of us will be stuck here forever and starve to death. We’ll never be able to get out of this place. It was built to replicate a particularly terrifying ancient tomb. It’s a maze, so we won’t be able to get out.”

Wang Meng paid careful attention to the other man’s accent and felt that the person on the other end of the line must really be Baishe. And Baishe’s tone was serious.

“Then explain it me.”

“Are you willing to gamble?”

“You know I hate gambling the most.”

“You have to. There should be three or four gambling tables in front of you. I can’t see them clearly on the monitor, but I can see you. Those are the kinds of games your dad used to play when he was younger. You have to gamble with your dad and convince him that he was in the right when he was younger. What happened to your mom wasn’t his fault.”

Wang Meng remained silent. After several minutes had passed, he finally asked, “What do you mean?”

“Your dad was locked up in prison, living in guilt the whole time. The prison warden made him gamble with cigarettes, but he refused to gamble again. He was beaten by the prison warden and suffered a brain hemorrhage. That’s why his Alzheimer’s progressed so rapidly. Your father won’t gamble anymore unless you can make him believe that you don’t blame him for what happened to your mother and your family before.”

“And then what?”

“Then let him continue to gamble with you. You have to let him win and then make him lose it all. After that, you have to trick him into finding someone to borrow money from. If he says that he wants to find someone to borrow money from so that he can win the money back, then we win.”

Wang Meng remained silent for a long time before asking, “Why? Can you ask the old man why? Why does he want me to do this kind of thing?”

“He’s crazy. Why bother asking for his reason?”

“A madman also has to have his reasons for doing things. Now, why does he want me to do this?” Wang Meng asked.

“There’s a time limit. You’d better hurry.”

Wang Meng watched his father look at the dice cup, but instead of touching it, he took a few steps back.

“Baishe, tell him that I choose for the three of us to starve to death here.” With that said, Wang Meng hung up the phone.

4

“It’s a temporary measure! Just a trick!” Baishe yelled into the phone, but Wang Meng stopped answering his calls.

The old man looked at him with a smirk on his face.

“He’ll figure it out.”

“It’s hard,” the old man said. “Your friend is stubborn. Some people in this world are like that. My hobby is to watch these determined people fight to the death. They’re the type who declare themselves victorious upon death.”

“What’s the fucking point in doing this? You might as well do it to me as well. I’ll do everything you ask,” Baishe said.

“You’re too soft. It won’t be much fun watching you give in,” the old man said.

“You know he’s ridiculously stubborn. He’s the type who will kill himself there. But if you knew this from the very beginning, then what’s the point in putting on this show?”

“Because it’s interesting. People are endlessly changing. I like to watch the moment when they go through these changes. Once a stubborn person breaks, they can do anything,” the old man said. “He’ll either hang there to dry, figure out a way to get out of this situation, or give in completely.”

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Author’s note: These “What Are They Doing” chapters are episodic stories that are not linear in time.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 32

1

Wang Meng woke up slowly. He had fallen asleep while leaning against the iron gate.

He had tried countless ways to escape before falling asleep, even going so far as to try and get his father to help him. His father came over, but there was nothing he could do.

He even tried shooting the chain with the gun, but the modified gun's power wasn't strong enough to break the thick chain connecting the handcuffs together.

His position was very painful because at this height, he could neither squat down nor stand up straight.

At this time, he suddenly felt a very painful twinge in his lower abdomen. Even though he knew it was very indecent, he still urinated anyways.

After he was done relieving himself, he raised his head to check on his father—the older man was lying under one of the tables and seemed to have fallen asleep. Wang Meng could see that his lips were very chapped. Earlier, he had been asking his father to find something that could be used to open the gate, which must have consumed a lot of energy.

Those chapped lips were a symptom of dehydration. He looked at the gambling tables but didn't see any water on them.

He knew that after a while, he'd have to poop. His bodily functions were always very healthy so there were bound to be more indecent situations later.

He would hold it back as long as he could. If he was lucky, he could hold back to the point of constipation and suffer less shame.

At this point in time, it had been one day since he refused to compromise. He hadn't had a drop of water and he knew that his father was definitely

in a worse state than him. The intense thirst and hunger were starting to make him face the reality of the situation they were in.

When he hung up the phone before, he didn't really know what it was like to die of starvation or thirst. But now that he was starting to feel it, he began to wonder if he could bear it.

He had turned off the cell phone initially, but now he pressed his lips together and turned it back on, only to find that Baishe had made countless calls.

He tried calling back but found that his phone couldn't connect to the other man's Bluetooth.

Wang Meng thought for a while and came to the realization that he had made a big mistake.

During that period of time when the phone had been turned off, Baishe's cell phone must have run out of power. This meant that he had missed the biggest opportunity to gain some information.

He remembered his boss's words: emotions are ineffective.

Why couldn't he be as calm as Boss? It was true that when he was being emotional at the time, he really wasn't afraid of death. If he had starved to death at that very moment, then so be it, but now his burning stomach and chapped lips were making him very uncomfortable. This kind of discomfort seemed to shake the hatred in his heart.

It was easy to foresee that as the pain increased, the hatred in his heart would become less and less important.

He began to feel extremely anxious as the urge to poop continued to increase, only now realizing that it wouldn't be dignified to die here like this.

When Wang Meng refused to compromise at that time, he had felt that he would never waver. In fact, he even wanted to smash the cell phone to pieces. But he never expected that his resolve would be shaken so quickly.

He needed to hate in order to persevere. He glanced at his father, still unwilling to convince the older man that his mother's death had nothing to do with him, that he didn't have to feel guilty, and that it was totally fine to gamble. But his inner hatred wasn't as strong as it was before.

*Give me something to fuel my hatred.*

He thought about his mother, but her image was hazy in his mind. He clenched his teeth and tried to think harder—his mother only had him. He was the only one who could convey that kind of hatred on her behalf now.

Wang Meng suddenly smiled and glanced down at the pistol, realizing what he should do. He had used two bullets earlier, which meant that there were five bullets left.

The bullets could only be fired one round at a time, so he pointed the muzzle at his temple and found the right position.

Although the gun didn't pack a big punch, it should still be able to penetrate the skull at such close range.

But first, he had to kill his father. Otherwise, he would suffer here as well.

Wang Meng slammed into the iron gate to wake his father up. When his father looked back at him in confusion, Wang Meng said to him, "Dad, come here."

It took Wang Meng's father a little time to understand what was going on, but when he finally walked to the iron gate, Wang Meng held the gun up to his father's head.

His father didn't understand what was going on, but all Wang Meng said to him was, "Don't move or it'll hurt a lot."

His father looked at him without moving an inch. Wang Meng took a deep breath and poured all of his strength into his fingers.

"We'll write it off all in one stroke! Our whole family has come to nothing!" Wang Meng roared before pulling the trigger.



# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 33

1

Baishe, whose tall body was kneeling in front of the monitor like a child, almost fainted as he watched Wang Meng on the screen.

Wang Meng stood at a deadlock for a full minute before finally lowering the gun.

Baishe immediately collapsed on the ground, pressing his hand to his racing heart. It felt as if the world had nearly collapsed just now.

He slowly turned his head to look back at the old man, who was also watching the monitor intently.

*If I find something to knock the old man out with, will things work out?* Baishe wondered. But the old man said that without him, no one could leave the factory.

“You see? This is the best part, when a stubborn person meets reality and begins to fall apart,” the old man said to Baishe.

Baishe looked at the screen and saw that Wang Meng was standing there like a walking corpse.

“I don’t think there’s anything good about it.”

“You must have never been tortured by a stubborn person in your life. Have you ever met someone you wanted to help, but the other person just didn’t want it? Even when all of their actions were wrong, they still wouldn’t accept your help. For them, turning back wasn’t an option. They would rather destroy everything instead.”

Baishe thought it over for a moment before saying, “Whenever I encounter this kind of situation, I usually just let them die.”

“Sometimes this person is your closest relative,” the old man said. “It’s really aggravating.”

“If they chose this path, then let them bear the consequences themselves.”

“There are some people you just can’t bear to watch destroy themselves because of their own stupidity. This is because they are relatively important to you. It’s just like how you can’t ignore your friend here,” the old man said. “At that time, I realized that when people like this destroy themselves, they’ll regret and collapse in the face of their own stupidity without anyone around. They destroyed themselves just like that because the people who had tried to help them were long gone and let them be. Will they regret it when they find out that they made all the wrong choices and wasted their lives? Will they regret that not only did they waste their lives, but they also gave up the help that countless people offered?”

“Do they?”

“When someone is around, they’ll pretend to be cool and accept the result for the sake of saving face, but it’s when no one is around that I want to see how those people regret their choices and fall apart.” The old man glanced at the monitor, “Your friend’s little scene was very good. After all, ending your own life is usually the first choice for stubborn people like him. It’s just that if he doesn’t succeed, then the next thing he’ll face is utter despair.”

Baishen looked at the old man and suddenly asked, “Don’t people suddenly become very flexible? Aren’t there cases where they’re suddenly not stubborn?”

“There is no such possibility.”

“It is if they’re desperate enough.”

“If there’s a person who can change his personality like that, then it means that his stubbornness is just a strategy and his heart is calm. Your boss is one such example,” the old man explained. “His personality is just one of his cards. He can play whichever card he wants and completely control his emotions, but this Manager Wang is obviously not on the

same level. He does have strong principles in his heart, so I want to see how he handles such a situation.”

Baishe looked at the old man, who motioned for him to take a closer look.

Baishe glanced back at Wang Meng on the screen, only to see that Wang Meng was banging his head against the iron gate.

“The ultimate pain actually comes from the principles in their hearts. These principles aren’t really difficult in nature. They have no power when compared with the lack of strength and food, but they leave a very painful feeling in your heart,” the old man said.

“People are ridiculous,” Baishe answered awkwardly.

“Manager Wang has to look for some clues in religion if he wants to break through his predicament,” the old man continued. “This is the character given to him by fate, the character that gives him pain. Ever since he was born, he was doomed to be unable to understand this, but this just might be an opportunity.”

Wang Meng’s head was covered in blood and he had no strength.

Baishe prayed silently in his heart, *Wang Meng, think. Use your brain.*

## What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 34

Wang Meng thought for a long time about what he could do, but his mind was blank and he couldn't come up with anything.

He remembered that when he talked to the boss before, the boss had told him that there should always be a way.

Of course, this way had to come from your remarkable preparation. If you were all alone and unprepared, then that was basically equivalent to being a naked thief locked up in a cell with an easy-to-pick lock.

He looked to see if there was something on his body—even a handful of melon seeds would do. He could always find a way to turn them into a lock-picking tool.

But there was nothing. He could try to pull his fingernails off, but that would be too unbearable.

He had to make the most of his resources.

But he was too stupid. Every time he tried to think deeply, his mind would go blank.

He was just an ordinary person after all. In a situation like this, even ordinary people wouldn't be able to do anything.

His only options were to continue suffering or commit suicide.

Wang Meng arranged everything he had been carrying earlier, looked at it for a while, and then threw the dry food to his father.

The older man could get a little water out of it when he digested it. Although it smelled like cow dung, it could still save his life.

Otherwise, there was nothing else he could do.

Wang Meng cried for a while and slammed his head against the iron gate while muttering to himself, "Emotions are useless, emotions are useless."

All they did was consume your energy and make you waste your most precious time and opportunity on the pain.

In essence, it was instinct to think that there was a God who would save you.

Instead of putting your hopes on some external force, it was better to put them on yourself.

But Wang Meng found that he couldn't do it. As countless emotions kept flooding his mind, he looked at the pistol and started to have strong suicidal thoughts again.

As it turned out, ordinary people were like this—they were unable to make the most accurate decision at such a time.

Even though he knew that it was wrong in a logical sense, he still kept crying.

Wang Meng tried to force himself to face the situation for the sixth time, but he was still defeated by his emotions.

He picked the gun up again, not wanting to think about it any longer. All he wanted to do was end this matter quickly.

He pointed the gun at his temple and pulled the trigger this time without an ounce of hesitation.

*Click.*

It didn't fire.

The immense fear and pain made him shout at that moment, but the gun didn't go off.

He froze for a second before pointing the gun towards the ceiling and pulling the trigger again.

This time the gun went off, startling both him and his father.

Wang Meng looked at the gun and suddenly realized that the misfire just now was entirely a matter of luck. In fact, he should have died just now.

He was shaking all over and his whole body was covered in goose bumps.

But at this time, his mind went completely blank.

He stared at the pistol for a long time before suddenly realizing that there was something in his heart.

Something that didn't exist before.

This kind of thing changed his whole person.

All of his emotions immediately disappeared. He looked at the situation in front of him and suddenly understood what the boss meant when he talked about controlling your emotions.

It was a kind of awareness.

It took surviving a disaster to achieve this kind of awareness.

*I'm dead, but I'm not dead.*

*Although I can't freely come and go in death, I've seen the moment of death.*

*I'm dead, and what's happening now is just a temporary continuation of a coincidental life.*

Wang Meng began to recite these sentences in his mind. In fact, the meaning of these sentences was very vague, and only he himself knew what they meant.

He was starting to understand that he had thought his judgement regarding his father was vital when it actually wasn't.

Wang Meng stood up and said to his father, "Dad, push the table over here. Let's play a game."

When his father merely looked at him and shook his head, Wang Meng said to him, "It's ok. You're just playing a game. No one will blame you."

The first step was to make things predictable.

At this time, Wang Meng grabbed his thumb, wondering how he was going to break it. If he did that, he would be able to get the handcuffs off.

As things developed and became more predictable, the second step would be to slowly increase the unknown factors and make things unpredictable.

He didn't understand the first two lessons of Wushanju's self-help crisis training at the time, but now he suddenly understood them.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 35

1

Baishe looked at Wang Meng. From this angle, he could only see Wang Meng talking to his father.

While Wang Meng was thinking over the whole situation, he found that as long as his mood was stable, he wasn't as stupid as he originally thought.

He had finally come up with a good strategy—give in, but don't give in completely. If there was any chance to launch a counterattack, he would do it immediately.

He took the money and handed it to his father. "Use this to play."

Wang Meng was a little relieved when his father shook his head. But even if he knew that his father had made such a determination countless times and had become better for a while, what did that matter now? He knew what his father's weakness was.

Everyone knew what his father's weakness was.

How were you supposed to get a person who quit gambling to go back to the gambling table?

"Did you know?" Wang Meng said. "The day before yesterday, your colleague, Old Liu, won back all his money. He lost more than you did."

His father looked at him, not directly but secretly peeking over his shoulder.

"He won twelve big games in a row and won it all back. Now he's more relaxed and his wife is no longer nagging him. His wife still doesn't believe it and thinks that he stole it from somewhere. They say that you will be the next one to win everything back. You've been unlucky for so many years. Don't you think it's time?"



“My wife is dead. She’s dead. Gone,” his father said. “Gambling killed her.”

Wang Meng wanted to continue persuading him, but when he heard his mother being mentioned, his throat suddenly seized up like he was being choked by a pair of invisible hands.

His father turned away from him as he stood there speechless, leaning against the gate’s railing as he tried to regain his courage.

In the end, he finally managed to choke out, “That’s because she was unlucky. She couldn’t wait for your luck.”

His father looked back at him before suddenly rushing over and slamming into the iron gate, looking at Wang Meng with a furious expression on his face.

2

Baishe was startled by the sudden movement on the screen, but at this time, he suddenly heard the sound of a horn come from somewhere in the darkness.

When the old man glanced in the direction the sound had come from, Baishe asked, “What’s that?”

“The deliveryman has brought the other item that your colleague uploaded to the store’s online inventory,” the old man said.

“Do you have to buy everything?”

“It’s interesting. Your colleague is trying to find a correlation with what’s happening here. It’s a very clever idea.”

“You like to see change.”

“Of course, change is the most fascinating thing in the world.” As the old man spoke, he took out a remote control and pressed a button on it—a light suddenly came on in the distance.

In the light’s glow, Baishe saw a green corpse crawling on the ground.

He froze for a moment before quickly taking a step back, “Shit.”

The old man frowned as he watched the body crawling closer and closer to them.

“Did you expect this kind of thing to happen?” Baishe asked him.

“There are snakes in this corpse,” the old man said. “Didn’t your boss tell you that there are also wild hei feizi?”

Baishe obviously hadn’t listened very carefully at the time, but the old man kept talking anyways, “But shouldn’t the deliveryman have killed it when it was delivered? When did he become so careless?”

With that said, the old man pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. “What should we do?” Baishe asked.

“Look at what’s different.” When the old man said this, Baishe noticed that the corpse was groping around on the ground, as if it couldn’t see anything.

“Anything outside of our little area here is blind,” the old man said. “Snakes are useless.”

“Don’t snakes rely on infrared rays?”

“It’s useless to rely on anything. Otherwise, wouldn’t you have brought night vision goggles?” The old man asked.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 36

1

Kan Jian was covered in green liquid. He didn't expect that after pretending to be a female corpse and being bought, he wouldn't be able to see anything.

There was no discomfort in his eyes, but no matter how wide he opened them, he couldn't see anything at all. He knew that it wasn't because he was surrounded by darkness but because something was wrong with his eyes.

But he couldn't show any non-corpse-like movements, because if someone happened to look at him, they would notice that he wasn't a female corpse but a living person.

What was he supposed to do? Such a predicament made it difficult for him to come up with any ideas.

Of course, he didn't have any way to deal with the predicament just now. As it turned out, the kid was also being controlled by a black-haired snake, but it was a female one that had a certain degree of control over the kid's body.

The Wu family's dogs were always wary of the hei feizi, which was one of the main reasons why they had won back then.

Lucha, who was hidden in the front of his shirt, became restless and wanted to crawl out, but stopped moving when Kan Jian softly hissed at him.

One man and one dog became the best partners. Now the next step was to prove that he was a smart person.

2

Liu Sang was in his car, adjusting the weather apps on his countless number of cell phones.

Wang Guo's wife walked up to his window.

Liu Sang didn't look at her as he asked, "Are you here to kill me so I won't talk?"

"You're not going back to that town, are you?" She asked.

"I won't if that's what you wish." When Liu Sang said this, the woman looked at his ears.

"According to our rules, even if I let you go, I have to silence your ears," Wang Guo's wife said. "But there's no need for that. Hurry up and go."

"I can't say goodbye to Wang Guo first?" Liu Sang asked.

The woman made a "get moving" gesture, so Liu Sang simply nodded.

As Liu Sang drove, the weather forecasts on the countless refurbished phones revealed his next destination—he knew that this matter was far from over.

3

Liu Sang and his master stood by the basketball court.

It was still that same year.

They were still watching the game on the basketball court.

"The more you become aware of, the worse your memory will be," his master said.

"Why?"

"At the end of an hour, you'll probably only remember one thing and forget all the other details," his master said. "If you remember too many things—especially when your ears take in as much information as your eyes—then the world you remember will most likely be a world of sound."

"I think that's fine. I prefer sound anyways."

“When these memories are connected, you’ll find that all your memories are indexed by sound, and the world you see with your eyes will be unfamiliar. No matter how you try to familiarize and integrate yourself with it, it will definitely be unfamiliar.”

Liu Sang remained silent.

After a long time, he said to his master, “Tu Dian doesn’t bother trying to learn from you at all. Why did you take him in? He clearly doesn’t want to learn.”

“Well, he has his own plan.”

“What plan?”

“It’s a very, very long-term plan. He wants to do something, but it won’t be finished for a long, long time. There was a historical figure who was like this. I think he wants to be like them.”

Liu Sang didn’t understand.

“Tu Dian wants to destroy something, but he can’t do it with his current abilities so he’s making a long-term plan,” his master explained. “Well, as you know, there are several families in Changsha who have been preparing for many years to accomplish one thing—solve the curse that’s been haunting their families for generations. It’s an ultimate goal that will lead them to a place below a big mountain. But ever since he was born, Tu Dian seems to have wanted to destroy this plan that his family and this group came up with. He just likes to see everyone’s hard work go to waste. He’s been like this ever since he was born.”

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 37

1

“You’re trying to deceive me.” Wang Meng’s father crashed into the iron gate, his head covered in blood as he reached out to grab Wang Meng’s clothes, “It’s a lie! My wife can’t come back from the dead.”

Wang Meng was startled by the impact of his father hitting the gate, but at that time, he finally dislocated his thumb.

“Then what about your son? That money’s enough for your son to finish college. As things stand now, your son can only start working after he graduates from high school,” Wang Meng gasped out, the pain in his thumb quickly masked by the pain in his heart. He removed the handcuff from his hand while using his body to conceal his newly freed hand.

“Son...son...Meng Meng...” his father muttered to himself.

Wang Meng continued, “If you don’t have enough money, I’ll lend you some. Let’s play first and talk later.”

His father looked up at him, clearly at a loss as to what to do.

Wang Meng’s heart was full of disgust as soon as he saw it. His father was too soft-hearted to endure the constant coaxing, as evidenced by the confused look on his face, which was actually a sign that he was wavering.

“If you were really thinking of your child, you should have worked more and done overtime. But instead, you got off work early and went to play cards all night long while your child worked on his homework at school every day. How many times did you forget to pick him up?” Wang Meng continued. “Stop pretending. If you ever really cared about your son, you wouldn’t have done such a thing. Now, let’s play some cards. Everyone knows how you really feel.”

“Raise a child to protect against old age, raise a child to protect against old age,”<sup>220</sup> his father suddenly said. “I’m old so my son has to take care of me.”

Then his father said something astonishing, “I can’t gamble in prison. If I gamble and my son finds out, he won’t support me. My son is just as kind-hearted as his mother so he’ll support me. I won’t make him angry.”

Wang Meng looked at his father. It wasn’t surprising that such words came out of his father’s mouth, but he was still shocked to hear them.

“So you didn’t love your son at all. Otherwise, after his mother died, how could you have the heart to make him wait for you at school again and again until the wee hours of the morning while you were out playing cards?”

“His birth wasn’t planned,” his father suddenly said. “Children are too troublesome. At that time, it was just easier to pretend that he didn’t exist. But he can support me now, so I can’t offend him.”

“Your son has led a prosperous life. This is the money he gave you,” Wang Meng said while looking at the money. “Since he gave it to you, you can go ahead and gamble with it.”

“My son is well-off?”

“Yes.”

“Is this his money?”

“You can spend it. Your son has made so much money that you won’t be able to spend it all before you die.”

“No, he wouldn’t give me money if he knew that I was gambling. I killed his mother.”

“No one will tell him,” Wang Meng said.

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<sup>220</sup> It’s a Chinese idiom basically meaning that you have kids so that they’ll support you when you’re older.

“No one will tell him?”

“That’s right. No one will say a word.” Wang Meng looked at his father, who was looking back at him in confusion.

“You have to promise. If he finds out, I’ll wind up starving to death on the side of the road,” his father said again.

“You are his father. He won’t let you starve to death. Your kind-hearted wife didn’t let you starve to death even after what you did to her. She always forgave you.”

For the first time, a relieved smile appeared on his father’s face. “Yes, he’s just like my wife. I don’t need to be so nervous.”

Then, his father took all the money.

All the movies always had a scene where there was a final reconciliation, but it seemed that such a thing didn’t exist in reality.

Wang Meng, after watching his father take the money to the gambling table, hit his head on the iron gate again, dislocated his other thumb, and then freed himself from the handcuffs.

He didn’t feel any pain as he popped his two thumbs back into place.

His father had actually been manipulative and took advantage of others’ kindness. Wang Meng even knew that his father didn’t lose every time. But when he won, he never brought the money back home with him.

His father had played the role of a weak, obedient, stupid, and weak-willed person, but he had actually been exploiting his mother the whole time.

Wang Meng’s mother always said that he was a good guy at heart; he just happened to have some bad friends.

He also knew that his father wasn’t some heinous villain and that this kind of bad behavior wasn’t on par with that of a standard villain.

But it was on such a low level that it was simply disgusting.



With both of his hands free now, Wang Meng watched as his father started to gamble. But Wang Meng didn't succeed in making his father believe that he didn't need to feel guilty, because he found that his father hadn't felt guilty from the start.

If there was any trace of guilt, it was very weak.

The next thing he had to do was create an opportunity for himself.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 38

1

Baishe watched Wang Meng on the monitor, but from this angle, he couldn't see that Wang Meng's hands had been freed.

The old man was next to him, watching with interest. "That's enough," Baishe turned to him and said. "He's not being stubborn anymore. What happens next is bound to be boring. You can end this whole thing early."

The old man continued to stare at the monitor as if watching a very good entertainment program.

"What's so interesting about this?" Baishe continued to ask.

"There needs to be a moment of enlightenment," the old man said. "Otherwise, your friend will beat his father to death before he leaves here. That will be a bad ending, and you will lose."

"He won't kill his own father," Baishe said.

"He will if I tempt him. In fact, after so many years of pain, he must have a few fantasies in his heart. He probably imagines that bad people like that will wake up and see the error of their ways, but what he doesn't understand is that some people are just born like this." The old man continued, "In fact, without such low-level people in this world, there's no way for everyone to live properly."

"What do you mean?"

"The lines for things such as morality are based on the person with the lowest morality, the worst in the group. If his father wasn't here, then the worst person in this room would be me."

"It's not you right now?"

"Of course not. I only hurt people like you who are able-bodied and pretentious. I've never hurt anyone who was good to me or weaker than me, so I'm not the worst one here," the old man explained. "As long as

there is one person in the crowd with the worst morals, people will forgive others who are equally corrupt but have a little more merit. This is the core reason why this world isn't good."

Baishe looked at the old man, who continued explaining, "People don't really know how to look at the essence of one's character. They only focus on ranking others by weighing and differentiating the different qualities that they see. When it comes to weighing the pros and cons, it doesn't matter even if those qualities are relatively poor."

Baishe thought it over for a while. He knew that he was different compared to most people because he was someone who believed that all the bad guys were idiots. He didn't rank the bad guys, but he also agreed with what the old man was saying.

"He won't kill his father," Baishe said again.

"It's possible if your words are manipulative enough," the old man responded.

2

Baishe looked in the direction of the female corpse—it was still lying on the ground but crawling forward in the wrong direction now. A light followed the female corpse the whole time, and Baishe knew that someone was watching the corpse in the dark so as to ensure that it wouldn't climb out of the blind area.

3

Wang Meng's father had already lost some money but Wang Meng wasn't paying attention to him. He forgot that Baishe had told him if he was supposed to let his father win or lose.

But that wasn't important right now. He needed to find an opportunity for himself. He no longer hated his father. Although a vile and despicable man, he was still his father. But the sin would be unforgivable if he was just an ordinary criminal who had deceived Wang Meng and his mother.

*If I wasn't your son, what would I do to you?*

Wang Meng imagined using those bricks to smash his father's head in bit by bit.

Emotion could occur among those who weren't blood relatives and result in long-lasting feelings. Naturally, it was also possible for emotions to die out among close relatives. Everyone was merely brought together by some coincidence.

But his blood was stopping him. He could feel that his blood ties with his father were pulling at him, trying to numb his feelings and make him accept this reality. There even seemed to be a voice whispering in his ear, "Look at him. He has dementia. He's been punished. He's not the same person he was back then."

"Let it go. He probably only has a few years left anyways."

No, the dementia punished others, not himself. Dementia was a punishment for those who had to take care of him. It didn't punish him.

As Wang Meng was thinking, he suddenly heard the sound of footsteps. Then, an old man came walking out of the darkness on the other side of the iron gate.

The old man was the one who had been chatting with Baishe. When he saw Wang Meng, he smiled. Wang Meng quickly covered his freed hands with his clothes.

The old man was holding a hammer in one hand and pulling a gurney behind him with the other. Lying on the gurney was a comatose Baishe.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 39

1

Wang Meng looked at the old man, his heart beating wildly.

He had already adapted to the present environment and pressure, but now the pressure had suddenly increased again. People like him especially hated these kinds of situations.

Why was it necessary to keep increasing the pressure when it was already very difficult to adapt to it in the first place?

Whenever the bosses encountered such cumulative pressure, they appeared to be immersed in enjoying the moment. But he just couldn't do it. He wanted to go back to his computer and play Minesweeper.

He wanted to get away from the pressure.

But that was impossible. Boss said that the pressure came from your external environment. If you felt like you had the opportunity to get away from the pressure, then it was simply because you were lucky and the pressure hadn't caught up to you yet. In most cases, however, the pressure wouldn't let you escape.

"You can shoot me, but that gun doesn't have enough firepower. Unless you hit me in the eye, it won't be fatal and I'll beat your friend with this hammer," the old man said in a very leisurely manner.

Wang Meng could see clearly through the iron gate as the old man pulled Baishe in front of him, put Baishe's hand on the gambling table next to him, and then slammed the hammer down on one of his fingers.

"Of course, even if you don't injure me, I'll still have to hurt your friend."

The finger immediately became deformed as the bones broke.

"He specializes in being a skilled swimmer," the old man said. "His fingers aren't that important." Then he slammed the hammer down again, smashing Baishe's middle finger this time.

Wang Meng tried hard to keep a straight face because he already knew deep in his heart that it was hopeless. Any pleas to the old man would be absolutely useless, so he decided to tell a joke instead, “I agree, that fickle man is only good for swimming.”<sup>221</sup>

Ignoring him, the old man put down his hammer and said, “Let me give you a warning: the next words out of my mouth are not a bluff. I’ll give you ten minutes to make a decision.”

“What do you want to say?”

“Aren’t you going to ask who I am?” The old man asked him. “Don’t you want to know why I did all of this?”

“People like you always have your reasons. I’m not interested,” Wang Meng said. “I want to go back to work.”

*Come here. Come close enough to where I can reach out and grab you. I’ll pluck your eyeballs out.*

“Well, it seems that you’ve grown up.”

“And it seems like you want to ponder over something. I’ll rest for a bit while you finish thinking it over.” Wang Meng closed his eyes, feeling extremely tired.

The old man sighed, ignoring Wang Meng’s flippant tone, and said, “Before you give in, you can make a choice. I can kill your father for you without you having to do it. I can also tell you that your father had another lover back then. The money he sometimes won was given to that woman.

“She’s the one who pushed your father to gamble,” the old man continued. “She’s living very well right now and has long forgotten about your family. Of course, your father was the one who liked to pretend that he was the son of a wealthy family, which caught that woman’s attention.

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<sup>221</sup> I think he was trying to make a pun. The characters for fickle are (水性杨花) while the characters for swimming ability are (水性).

She thought that your father was rich. He started gambling in order to continue maintaining his status and face in front of her.”

Wang Meng looked at the old man, who continued speaking, “You’ve met that woman. You called her Aunt Lu when you were a child. Does it ring a bell?

“As long as you allow me to kill your father, I’ll kill this woman as well,” the old man said. “By the way, her son is very successful. He’s a Ph.D. student at Stanford.”

Wang Meng continued to stare at the old man, who finally started walking towards him. But the old man stopped more than an arm’s length away from him before continuing his monologue, “If you think back, you should be able to recall many clues hinting at the relationship between your father and Aunt Lu.”

He vaguely remembered some things as the old man added, “I have a video of Aunt Lu. Do you want to take a look? I interviewed her. She can give you all the details of what transpired back then. Actually, she’s in this room right now. You can ask her face to face.”

At this time, there suddenly came the sound of a gunshot—Wang Meng had fired the gun. The shot hit the old man head-on, the force of the impact knocking him to the ground.

Then, Wang Meng started to take off his pants.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 40

1

Unfortunately, the gun really wasn't that powerful—after the old man fell to the ground, he covered the place where the bullet had hit him, groaned a few times in pain, and then started to get up.

Wang Meng stretched his arm between the slots in the iron gate in order to shorten the distance, aimed at the old man's eyes, and fired again.

But even at this distance, the bullet missed its mark and only clipped the side of the old man's head.

Wang Meng pulled his hand back to reload the gun—it was so small that it could only hold two rounds at a time—but by the time he was done, the old man had already stood back up.

The first shot still packed quite a punch, as evidenced by the painful wince the old man gave as he touched the wound. He then picked up the hammer and walked towards Baishe.

The shot had obviously left him feeling very disappointed.

Wang Meng pointed the gun at the old man and said, "Stop. The next shot will definitely seriously injure you."

The old man tore open his shirt, revealing a civilian bulletproof vest underneath.

"I bought it online," he said to Wang Meng. "Although it's for civilian use, your gun isn't powerful enough for the bullets to pierce through it."

"The next shot will definitely seriously injure you," Wang Meng repeated.

The old man looked at Wang Meng and found that his expression was very determined. And although he was shaking all over, his voice was very firm when he spoke.



This surprised the old man because it showed that Wang Meng really believed that the next shot could seriously injure him.

But no matter how he looked at it, such a thing was totally impossible.

Deciding to err on the side of caution, the old man stopped moving and asked Wang Meng, "How do you know that?"

"I won't tell you how. All I'll say is that if I shoot, you'll be seriously injured. Now let us go. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones." Wang Meng's shaking slowly stopped.

The old man looked at Wang Meng. When he first started to observe him, he found that the younger man was especially suitable for entertainment. After all, this kind of person usually grew very slowly, and when they encountered any setbacks, they would turn around in circles or try and escape from reality.

Such people generally didn't grow by leaps and bounds and instead needed to experience a lot of pain before they gradually became a little more useful.

But based on Wang Meng's words just now, the old man couldn't help but have a bad feeling.

First of all, Wang Meng emphasized that the injury would be serious. This was a particularly important detail because it showed that Wang Meng clearly knew that the shot couldn't kill him but would cause him serious injury.

This showed that his words were both logical and calculated instead of a mere bluff.

But based on the current situation, there was no evidence to infer that what he was saying was true.

Although the old man remained cautious, he was beginning to have fun again. But just as he was about to speak, Wang Meng said, "When I count to three, you'll let us go. Otherwise, I'll shoot."

“What makes you think I believe you?”

“I don’t need you to believe me,” Wang Meng said. “Three.”

This was obviously the most stressful time in Wang Meng’s life, but he didn’t have time to let his imagination run wild. Whenever he used to hear the boss’s stories about how much pressure he had been under when facing that whole conspiracy and setting up traps to catch their opponents, he used to think that the boss was amazing.

What kind of man could be so awesome? Wouldn’t such a man be kept awake in the middle of the night because he knew just how awesome he was?

But this sensation he was feeling right now was totally different from what he had imagined. He knew that while he might be able to act like Boss at this time, it just wasn’t the same.

This cool persona was merely the calm and quiet of a desperate person.

At this time, the old man suddenly felt that something was wrong. A wise man like him had an extremely keen sense of danger, so he was able to sense the threat.

People like Wang Meng could give off a dangerous air.

While the old man secretly found it amusing, his instincts still pushed him into retreating. But Wang Meng saw that subtle movement, and as soon as he counted to two, he immediately pulled the trigger.

At this distance, the cow dung and compressed biscuit crumbs in the gun’s barrel sprayed out like buckshot, hitting the old man directly in the face.

This was the method Wang Meng had come up with when he reloaded the gun for the second time.

A single shot might not hit the target, but if cow dung and compressed biscuits were placed directly into the barrel, you could get the same effect as a shotgun at this distance.

A direct shot to the eye could very likely cause blindness.

As long as something hit your opponent's eyes, they could be knocked out of commission.

And he had plenty of cow dung at his disposal.

When the old man fell to the ground, he immediately rolled over and crawled away, quickly blowing a whistle he had been carrying.

2

In the darkness behind Wang Meng, a man had been lurking the whole time. This was the old man's assistant. He was a lean, middle-aged man who was gripping a screwdriver in his hand.

Upon hearing the whistle, he knew that the old man was in danger so he began walking towards Wang Meng. Wang Meng had his back turned to him, appearing somewhat shocked by his own actions just now.

The middle-aged man was walking so fast that it almost seemed like the screwdriver in his hand was about to pierce the back of Wang Meng's neck.

But at this time, he suddenly heard a strange whistle in the air. He immediately moved back as an iron ball flew past the spot where he had been walking just now.

Kan Jian was in the darkness on the opposite side. He had finally managed to escape the blind spot by following the sounds of gunfire and saw the scene just now.

The middle-aged man hid in the darkness as Kan Jian pulled a few special marbles from his pocket, loaded one onto his slingshot, and then fired it into the air.

The marble, which was made of aluminum-magnesium, hit the ceiling in an explosion of sparks and lit the whole place up, startling Wang Meng in the process.

Kan Jian located the middle-aged man in the darkness almost instantly and fired a handful of iron marbles at him.

It was absolutely impossible to escape this kind of concentrated attack. After being hit, the middle-aged man covered his face with both hands and tried to jump back, but ended up falling down instead. He quickly got back on his feet and hid in the darkness again.

Kan Jian looked at the surrounding darkness and said, “Our cow was poisoned when it ate Biba fruit<sup>222</sup> when it was younger, so whenever something that smells like Biba fruit appears, it becomes furious.”

The middle-aged man, who had taken advantage of the darkness to quickly circle behind Kan Jian, listened as the younger man continued speaking, “It’s also very familiar with my scent, so it will come as soon as it smells me. You better be careful.”

The middle-aged man had been trying to sneak up on him but froze as he suddenly felt that something was wrong behind him. When he turned to look, a cow rushed out of the darkness and flung him away with its horns.

“The marbles that hit you just now had exploding beads full of Biba fruit,” Kan Jian said. “When they hit you and burst, they covered you in the strong scent of Biba fruit.”

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<sup>222</sup> Biba fruit ([semecarpus anacardium](#)) is commonly known as the marking nut tree, phobi nut tree, and varnish tree. It’s a native of India, found in the outer Himalayas to the Coromandel Coast, and is closely related to the cashew. The fruit is composed of two parts, a reddish-orange accessory fruit and a black drupe that grows at the end. The accessory fruit is edible and sweet when ripe, but the black fruit is toxic and produces a severe allergic reaction if it is consumed or its resin comes in contact with the skin.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 41

1

Kan Jian was covered in blood, the cow was covered in blood, and even Lucha was covered in blood.

Although the cow was the first to successfully launch a sneak-attack on the middle-aged man and seriously injure him, the older man still fought them to a draw.

But in the end, the middle-aged man left to protect himself. The decisive sneak attack actually came from Lucha, who unexpectedly jumped out of Kan Jian's shirt collar, pounced on the middle-aged man's neck, and took a big bite.

Lucha licked his wounds and looked at the surrounding darkness warily. He obviously knew that he had made a huge contribution and was acting like the scene just now was nothing.

Kan Jian's hands were shaking. He knew that he still had three or four iron marbles left in his pocket, and when they ran out, all he'd have left to use were his teeth and his fists.

His slingshot was also a powerful weapon to use in hand-to-hand combat, but that was more for when things became desperate.

Lucha remained alert for about ten minutes before he finally started to relax. Seeing this, Kan Jian immediately stood up and ran over to Wang Meng, who was leaning against the iron gate.

The old man was gone.

As Kan Jian approached, Wang Meng said to him, "He must be blind now, or at least his eyesight will suffer a lot."

Kan Jian, noticing Baishe on the other side of the iron gate, knocked on the iron bars a few times. Baishe didn't wake up, but Kan Jian could see that the other man was breathing steadily.

Wang Meng's father was hiding under the gambling table with his head in his hands.

Kan Jian kicked the iron gate a few times but it refused to budge. Seeing that it was useless, he placed Lucha in his hand and then stretched his arm through the iron bars. As soon as Lucha jumped from his hand and landed on Baishe, Kan Jian said to him, "It's electric. This gate is controlled electronically. There must be a switch somewhere."

Lucha didn't understand, but he still began smacking and scratching at Baishe's face with his paws. A few minutes passed before Baishe finally regained consciousness and sat up. As he moved, a handkerchief slipped off his body, revealing a remote control that was tied to his chest. A piece of paper stuck to the remote had the following text written on it: Happy ending.

Not understanding what was going on, Baishe picked up the remote and found that his hand hurt a lot.

He climbed off the gurney and approached the iron gate with the remote control. The iron gate, sensing the remote control's close proximity, immediately opened.

Kan Jian and Wang Meng walked in, and the three of them looked at each other.

"Is this a happy ending?" Baishe asked. "Can we leave now?"

"Lucha can smell them. No matter how complicated this place is, we can still get out," Kan Jian told him.

"But this villain seems like the type to keep his word," Baishe said.

Wang Meng wasn't so sure. His last shot was so ruthless that the other party might have flown into a rage out of embarrassment.

It seemed unlikely, but if that were the case, then the other party was just a stupid villain not worth mentioning.

Baishe glanced back and saw Wang Meng's father.

Kan Jian moved to help his father up, but Wang Meng quickly grabbed him.

Seeing Kan Jian's questioning look, Wang Meng thought it over for a moment before releasing his hand and asking Kan Jian to help him out.

Wang Meng looked at his father. The older man was an incorrigible soul, hopeless from the very beginning.

"Don't worry. Pu'er, Wulang, Zhengshan Xiaozhong, and Che Zhong are all on their way.<sup>223</sup> They followed me and Lucha's scent. They can also find us here." As Kan Jian spoke, he walked over and picked up the money he had originally given to Wang Meng.

His harmless father trembled, so frightened that he didn't even dare to look at them.

Wang Meng told himself that for the sake of his friends, this had to be a happy ending. He looked at the surrounding darkness, knowing that someone must be watching them to see if he would lose the bet in the end.

In order to win and ensure everyone's safety, this had to be a happy ending.

What a pity. This dark gambling room was exactly where his father belonged.

Emotions were useless.

The hatred in Wang Meng's heart was like a straight line, but at this time, a thought silently crossed his mind.

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<sup>223</sup> So all 3 dogs' names are tea related, just like Lucha (green tea). I decided to stick with the pinyin for all three as well. Pu'er= [Pu'er tea](#), a variety of fermented tea traditionally produced in Yunnan Province, China. Wulang= [Oolong tea](#) (the characters 乌龙 can also mean black dragon), is a traditional semi-oxidized Chinese tea produced through a process including withering the plant under strong sun and oxidation before curling and twisting. Zhengshan Xiaozhong= [Lapsang souchong](#) is a black tea consisting of *Camellia sinensis* leaves that are smoke-dried over a pinewood fire. FYI, I guess Kan Jian (i.e., the author) is back to calling Che Galiba Che Zhong now?

For a bad person who pretended to be good and pretended to want a happy ending, how would it feel if they were unable to take off their hypocritical mask for their entire life?

If they liked to act, then they could just do it in the most tiring way.

Suddenly feeling very intrigued, Wang Meng pulled himself from his thoughts and looked at the surrounding darkness. He now understood what kind of “fun” the old man was looking for. He even imagined that he could see the old man smiling. Yes, even if the old man was blind now, he was surely smiling.

2

Li Cu and Yang Hao were sitting at the top of the tall rock, unable to do anything as the three black spots slowly disappeared into the sky.

“What should we do?” Yang Hao asked.

Li Cu, who was wearing sunglasses now, turned to look at him. “Which teacher should I call for help?”

“If you call Old Black, the money will be divided,” Yang Hao said.<sup>224</sup>

“And if I call Teacher Xie, he’ll just take the whole thing over. Then we’ll have nothing to do,” Li Cu said.

“Call Wu Xie. He’s busy so he won’t be too talkative,” Yang Hao said.

Li Cu remained silent for a moment before saying, “No.”

At this time, Su Wan’s voice came over the walkie-talkie, “Call Fat Master, please.”

3

The sun was shining brightly outside. After seventy-two hours of hard work, the group of people led the cow and the dog out of the warehouse.

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<sup>224</sup> He means Black Glasses.



Che Zhong was indeed nearby, but he was having trouble finding the warehouse—this was a small town with too many people so the scents were all mixed together.

The warehouse had a family factory area on one side and a flowing river on the other side. A bridge over the river acted as one of the main traffic routes for the town.

A bunch of beautiful roses were growing next to the warehouse.

After Che Zhong met up with the others, they headed back to Hangzhou. Wang Meng looked out of the car window, watching the idyllic scenery passing by.

Beautiful.

Everyone in the car was discussing who the old man was.

There was a good chance he was Seven Fingers, but Seven Fingers had been around since the Republic era, back when the Nine Gates was at the peak of their prosperity.

Was the old man really that old?

“We can think of Seven Fingers as a mere bystander. When Qiu Dekao wanted to obtain the secret of immortality and pulled the Nine Gates into the whole mess, Seven Fingers must have secretly been observing everything. Say, do you think that Seven Fingers was able to understand the secret of immortality because he could see everything clearly as a bystander?”

“Boss said that people are unable to bear the secret of immortality.”

“Seven Fingers may not be human anymore,” Kan Jian said. Then he suddenly seemed to remember something and asked, “By the way, have I become smarter?”

Baishe and Wang Meng looked at him, the latter’s mouth twitching as he said, “It’s hard to say.”

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 42

1

Che Zhong had his own veterinary clinic, which was a legitimate animal hospital that treated more than just pets. But the vet who saw to the dogs really was the best in town.

Kan Jian's cow and dog were sent there to recuperate. Che Zhong looked at Lucha and said to him, "Don't eat too much. It's not good for you."

Lucha obviously had a love for the delicious dog biscuits at the clinic, so instead of being calm, he looked at the door restlessly.

"In order for them to recover faster, we give them a lot of delicious food," Che Zhong said to Kan Jian. "But when we go back to the dog farm, they lose their appetite and won't eat anything."

"People are also picky when it comes to food," Kan Jian said. "How can we expect dogs to be any different??"

Che Zhong patted him on the shoulder, "Stop by the hospital and get yourself checked out. I'm heading home."

"Then I'll visit them next time," Kan Jian said.

Che Zhong nodded. "Bring some canned food. They don't like guests who show up empty-handed."

Kan Jian smiled, feeling especially happy.

The boss said that if Che Zhong accepted you, then it meant that you really were smart. It seemed that Che Zhong really did accept him.

2

Wang Meng went up to the ATM and inserted his card, wanting to check his account balance.

Sure enough, that large sum of money was gone, leaving only his pitiful savings behind.

Of course, it wasn't as pitiful as it was back in the old days. After all, the shop's business was still pretty good, especially his side business selling water.

But compared to the rich man he was before, now he was just an ordinary member of the Moonlight Clan.<sup>225</sup>


*The old man is very powerful, Wang Meng thought to himself. It seems that he can directly access the bank's system and reverse the transaction.*

Wang Meng didn't care; he no longer wanted to deal with this matter.

He pulled the card out, went back to the shop, and looked at his father sitting in a chair. He then sat down in front of the computer and turned it on, only to find that it was in the same state it had been in when he first left.

The username was still there, along with a flashing notification on the website indicating that there was a message waiting in the inbox.

It was a message from that username.

Wang Meng paused before clicking on it—the other party had sent him a .

There was nothing else there. He checked his personal email, but the boss hadn't sent him anything new. Unless he was busy, the boss would usually send an email to check up on the shop's business.

If there was no email, then the boss was probably in a very dangerous situation. After thinking it over for a moment, he felt that someone like Seven Fingers might come back and retaliate.

In that case, he needed to be prepared.

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<sup>225</sup> The Moonlight Clan is a large group of people who expend their entire salary before the end of each month. The term is derived from a lunar cycle (i.e., living paycheck to paycheck). Info [here](#).


His thoughts suddenly turned to the boss. Although the boss constantly lived his life under a lot of pressure, he still laughed and faced the future with ease.

Wang Meng finally understood that the price of being a legend was that you couldn't slack off, even for a day.

He opened his other email account, which was only used when something big happened in the shop and the boss authorized him to handle it completely. People who received emails from this account could regard the contents as having been arranged by the boss himself.

The account had an email group consisting of eight people—the Eight Villains of the Wu family.

He sent an email to this group, calling everyone to gather together so that they could hold a strategy meeting at Wushanju that evening.

After sending it, he glanced over at his father, who looked back at him and suddenly made a  gesture at him.

Wang Meng immediately broke out in a cold sweat and went to tug on his father's face.

The skin was real.

“What are you doing?” Wang Meng asked his father.

“There was someone at the door just now who did that,” his father said.

Wang Meng looked towards the door—people were walking by outside, but he didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

3

Baishe got his fingers bandaged at the hospital. As it turned out, they really were broken.

When he reached the hospital door, a young nurse came up and asked if she could add him on WeChat. He shook his head and refused.

“I don’t want to fall in love right now.”

4

There was a new document on Xie Yuchen’s desk.

After he finished his phone call, he picked it up and asked, “Where did this come from?”

“Little Master Three faxed it over,” the secretary said.

Xie Yuchen opened it and saw that it was a document about Seven Fingers. “Seven Fingers only appears once every period,” he said to his secretary. “Wushanju should be safe now. He’s never appeared twice in a period.”

“Who the hell is this person?” The secretary asked. “I’ve read a lot of information about him. It seems that he’s lived longer than a typical human.”

“No one knows whether he’s an individual or an organization, but he has the same interests and hobbies. He likes to see how fate brings people together, and watch how they change. He also likes to gamble. He bets on human nature using the person’s own life.” As Xie Yuchen spoke, he suddenly remembered his own encounter with Seven Fingers. “Every generation meets him, but I’m afraid it’s not a wise choice to gamble with Wu Xie’s people when it comes to human nature.”

“Does Wang Meng belong to the next generation? He’s not all that young either. I thought he was in the same generation as us.”

“Well, I’m honestly not sure how he decides.” Xie Yuchen set the file down. “It’s an amazing feat to be able to injure Seven Fingers.”

“This is a new situation. Won’t he retaliate?”

“He won’t. If he did, he would’ve already been caught. It’s because he only appears once every period that he’s so difficult to catch.” As Xie Yuchen spoke, he looked out the window and added, “Don’t tell Wang

Meng and the others. Let them be nervous and stressed until their hair falls out.”

5

Su Wan also climbed to the top of the rock, and then the three of them looked up at the sky.

“The black spots are gone. Is it still necessary to wait?”

“Has the equipment arrived yet?”

“It’s still on the ferry. They said that the express delivery can’t come this far, so it’s still on the ferry.”

“When will the ferry arrive?”

“At sunset,” Su Wan said.

The three men looked back at the sun and saw that it was indeed setting.

They stared at it for a long time, watching as the sun turned red against the backdrop of the Gobi, creating an extremely spectacular sight.

# What Are They Doing 2022 Chapter 43 This is Not the End

Wang Meng held a meeting that night to discuss how he had been sold and kidnapped. Baishe also told them how Seven Fingers believed that there was a hei feizi in the female corpse, but he was surprised that it hadn't been taken care of before it was transported over.

Kan Jian told them that this was the consequence of not communicating properly, because the deliveryman must have known that he was a living person. But Baishe and the old man were too far away from him, and his acting skills were so good that the old man ended up misunderstanding.

The appearance of hei feizi in the city was also a very ominous sign. So many ancient countries had been destroyed by these snakes that they started to wonder if Hangzhou would turn into a city of living corpses. The Eight Villains of the Wu family not only had to guard the shop, but also had to act as guardians (self-proclaimed) of Hangzhou. As a result, they started to believe that it was their mission to take care of this.

They hadn't yet come to a conclusion on where the hei feizi came from, or whether Seven Fingers was the one who brought it into the city.

They liked this city a lot. Everyone who had been wandering around for many years had ended up coming here, hoping to do something for this shop and this city.

The discussion quickly turned to deciding which part of the city everyone should buy a house in so that they could protect those areas, and whether it was possible for Wushanju to have a housing supplement.

\*\*

The equipment Li Cu was waiting for never arrived, so all he got from this trip was a story of a family of three making their way to one of the oil wells in the desert and getting rescued. The three black spots in the sky could no longer be seen. The three young men scolded each other in the

car on their way back. Li Cu's finances were tight, so he used the coldest tone to peacefully convince the landlady to delay his rent.

What were those three black spots, UFOs? Li Cu believed that they were human, but how was it possible for three people to float in the air like that?

With no income, Li Cu contacted the museum and finally began to discuss the excavation and protection of the Stagnant Water Dragon King Temple. He also asked if he could get a certain salary and bonus as a member of the advance team.

\*\*

Liu Sang kept looking out the window during the meeting. After many years, he was still worried that the people who survived such calamities would be infected by Tu Dian's disciples. He hoped that the various bosses in this family could concentrate on dealing with their own problems so that all he would have to do is act as a fly swatter.

He looked at the Eight Villains. Tu Dian must have put a pawn down in Wushanju, but Liu Sang hoped that the egg wouldn't hatch. Wu Xie had a special charm where he made people feel that their many wounds that couldn't be healed weren't a big deal in the end. It was possible Wushanju wasn't a place where Tu Dian could easily invade, but Liu Sang couldn't take care of Boss Xie's side. He only hoped that Master Black would constantly check to see if there were bad people around him and get rid of them. After all, it was better to kill the wrong one than to let it go.

\*\*

The girls were carrying various-sized bags as they went to meet up in the country. Their plans were about to begin.

\*\*

For Xie Yuchen, this whole thing was just a small issue.



Although Seven Fingers' eyes were injured, there were no hospital records to be found. He even had his doctor friends make some inquiries—God only knew how he knew so many doctors—but the only one they found was the middle-aged man. His body, which was seriously injured, was found in a hospital in Hangzhou. Seven Fingers shouldn't be able to continue working for the time being. The middle-aged man turned out to be a member of the Wang family, who was now scattered among the people.

Wushanju sent someone to investigate and report on the whole incident. The investigation found that the hei feizi in Hangzhou had originally come out of a handbag that had been sitting under that kid's bus seat. A DNA comparison showed that there were four snakes, so Lucha led all the Tea Team dogs to catch and kill them. The bag had been brought into the city by the middle-aged man. Since he had worked so closely with Seven Fingers, he must have ulterior motives for the older man, but that wasn't important right now.

There were often some mysterious people who entered his company, but he could instinctively sniff out the stench of Tu Dian's disciples. These people worked very hard in order to get close to him, so Xie Yuchen would put them into positions that required daily overtime. Most of these people ended up leaving when they realized that they couldn't see the boss no matter how hard they worked.

Everyone was the protagonist in their own story. As long as life continued on, it wouldn't be easy for everyone.

Many people believed it was better to try and tell their life story a little more brilliantly.

Every time Xie Yuchen looked out of the window, it was pouring down rain. All those events were just faint WeChat notifications popping up on his phone.

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Author's Note: "What Are They Doing" is an endless series, and the idea of it is like a title page story.<sup>226</sup> As long as the main story continues, the setting and characters will continue simultaneously. When I'll come back to it and which characters will be the focus is all up to God.

These are some very light-hearted stories. Compared with the five masters, everyone's daily life is relatively comfortable. But the rare trials and hardships and occasional responsibilities won't push them over the edge.

This series is an appetizer.

The main dish will come another day.

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<sup>226</sup> Per Tiffany, there's usually a relatively short story at the beginning of most Japanese comic books before the real main story begins. That sort of short story is the "title page" the author is referring to.

# Zhang Family Research Report 1

This is a simple report, which is based on all of Poker-Face's behaviors as the ideal model of the heavenly gift. We'll try to infer the purpose of the heavenly gift by examining Poker-Face's behavioral trajectory.

What we currently know is that the heavenly gift is very brutal in erasing one's memories. Basically, every time Poker-Face is bestowed the heavenly gift, most of his memories disappear. Due to various reasons, he'll start to remember some of them later, but the chances are very small.

I do have one unconfirmed theory: Poker-Face will be able to communicate with human society in a relatively normal manner whenever his memories are fully restored. We only have a few records of the heavenly gift occurring, the clearest of which was before Poker-Face entered the snowy mountain. He told the Deren that he would lose his memory after coming out. Assuming that the desire to enter the snowy mountain is generated by the heavenly gift, then it's plausible to believe that the person concerned will be unable to resist this behavior, no matter how long it lasts, and after the urge ends, they will quickly forget all the memories tied to this behavior for a period of time.

This kind of forgetting is imprecise and brutal, so when it starts, the person will often forget everything. It's very similar to how you don't want to delete words paragraph by paragraph, so you simply select all and press delete.

When asked about it, Poker-Face said that the person concerned couldn't perceive that they had received the heavenly gift, but one of the obvious signs was that there was a sense of being out of touch with the world. He was traveling all the time, thinking that the destination he was going to was where he wanted to go, but in fact, this idea had long since ceased to be his own. After happening a bunch of times, this special sense of discomfort enabled him to realize that he had experienced the heavenly gift in a short period of time.

Every time his memories are erased by the heavenly gift, Poker-Face will go through the process of finding himself again. But if he receives the heavenly gift during this process, he will be reset to zero and have to start all over again.

Even so, Poker-Face still left enough marks for himself when his memory was intact, all of which indicated that he had been to those places before. Since Poker-Face went to those places during the heavenly gift period, and the marks he left during the non-heavenly gift period were different, we can draw some conclusions.

The first is that his amnesia in Guangxi must have been the result of receiving the heavenly gift. He lost his memory after completing something there, so that meant that Guangxi was related to the heavenly gift's purpose.

What was in Guangxi? Most likely the Zhang family's ancient building. So, the amnesia in Guangxi must be related to the Zhang family's ancient building. We'll make a note of this first: the heavenly gift made Poker-Face do something in Guangxi, which was probably related to the Zhang family's ancient building.

In some records, many people say that the heavenly gift is random and affects the world through the butterfly effect, but I disagree. According to them, if you suddenly cough up phlegm after receiving the heavenly gift and then spit it out, this phlegm will set off a butterfly effect. But such a simple thing could be done even without the Zhang family's heavenly gift. Even a puppy could do it. That's why I believe that the heavenly gift isn't random and probably has some kind of logic to it.

Of course, there are some records that say researching the logic behind the heavenly gift may be discovered by the heavenly gift itself, and it will make Poker-Face kill me in order to protect itself.

But I'm still fine, so I believe that the heavenly gift isn't that petty. I also believe that what the heavenly gift does is a big deal.

It's also been said that the Zhang family Poker-Face represents is just like a maintenance worker. For example, if there's an accident in the snowy

mountains, he'll get an order to go and resolve it. It's the same with the Zhang family's ancient building. If an accident occurs there, he'll get an order to go and fix it. He's basically a plumber.

I also think this is pure nonsense, but even such nonsense comes from a magnificent imagination.

The world we live in seems to be whitewashed as very safe, but in fact, there are gaps everywhere in the world. This disguised layer is weak in some places, so Poker-Face has to keep repairing it.

But what happens if you don't fix it? Will demons from other planes descend upon the world?

Is he like a practitioner who uses enchantments to put up protective barriers?

Of course, this is also nonsense because it can be explained using simple mathematical logic: there were so many people in the Zhang family back then, and the frequency of the heavenly gift was very high, so there must have been a lot of breaches. But with Poker-Face being the only one left, it would be physically impossible to deal with all the breaches, and the demons would have already descended upon the world.

According to Poker-Face's understanding, he feels that the heavenly gift isn't a normal state of consciousness. It has a purpose, but its purpose is incomprehensible.

It took me a long time to understand what he meant when he said it was incomprehensible.

For example, if you're hungry and want to eat, you'll hunt and gather. But this kind of behavior is totally incomprehensible to a person who will never be hungry.

Because it doesn't need this kind of thing.

The heavenly gift may be a method for some higher being to eat, and its food is just that: experiences. This is what it needs, and we simply cannot understand it.

It's just like reading a book. We are actually consuming some experiences—other people's experiences, fictional experiences, etc.—into our brains by using our eyes.

But who knows? These are all just wild theories I came up with. Next, I'll look at the distribution of marks to try and determine which places the heavenly gift made Poker-Face go to. Maybe I'll make some new discoveries by then.

## **Miscellaneous Extras (Read after “Southern Archives”)**

# The Profile Of The Members In Perak

(This is Wu Xie's POV)

People in the Zhang family always acted in a secretive manner. It was rare for them to have someone like Little Brother Zhang who had his own legends in the South Sea. It was because of how he acted in the South Sea that many legends about the plague god were all related to his behaviors.

According to his own personal account, Zhang Haiyan had worked on sixty-eight cases during his thirty years in the South Sea. At that time, his only partner in Malacca was another man named Zhang Haixia. All sixty-eight cases had been solved perfectly and became known in history as the "Sixty-Eight Winning Streak".

Little Brother Zhang was clearly much more reliable back then compared to how he was now.

Based on his performance when acting alone, I couldn't imagine what kind of change would enable him to have such a steady output given his unpredictable character.

Later, I focused on finding information about his partner, Zhang Haixia. He was an unknown figure, but he played a very important role.

I carefully collected any information about that person. Even though things had happened a long time ago, I was able to piece together the scattered information and figure out that the person behind Zhang Haiyan had a huge mysterious charm.

Zhang Haiyan acted like a completely different person when he was with Zhang Haixia.

Later, I suspected that the hidden key to the Sixty-Eight Winning Streak was Zhang Haixia.

According to the remaining volume records, I've collected eleven major cases, four of which were related to Dingwu Qihuang. They were called



the “Four Cases of Qihuang”. The other cases were relatively independent.

The time it took to close these eleven cases varied. The shortest time was about ten days, while the longest one lasted for more than five years.

Most of these cases were interesting, but I prefer to talk about a smaller, more South-Sea-style case first. This one had a cheesy name called “Perak Stilt Houses”.

The incident took place in Perak and the beginning of the story is very interesting. The corpse of an eleven-year-old girl named Nuruhuda was cut into pieces. The murderer was considered a lunatic because her body parts were repeatedly thrown away sixty times after he cut her corpse up.

I need to clarify that the little girl was cut into fourteen parts. Theoretically, the body parts could be thrown away fourteen times at most. But according to witnesses and the murderer’s own confession, there were sixty places where he dumped the body parts. This didn’t add up. What had he been throwing away those other forty-six times?

Zhang Haiyan and Zhang Haixia searched the places where the body parts had been thrown away. In addition to the human limbs, they found that there were many house components packed into the same sacks.

At that time, the stilted houses in Malaysia were very simple thatched houses that used roughly processed tree branches to elevate the houses.

The sacks they found were filled with thatch, wooden boards, and parts of wooden pillars. Zhang Haiyan and Zhang Haixia found it very strange.

When they asked the murderer about it, he insisted that the house components and the little girl were the same thing, so when he mutilated the little girl, he also mutilated parts of the house.

Everyone thought he was crazy, but when Zhang Haixia was sorting out the house components, he found that the cracks were leaking grease.

Zhang Haixia put all of the components together and found that they formed a quarter section of a house. It was a corner of a thatched house near the roof. In the process of doing this, he noticed that there was a lot of hair in the thatch of this house. The hair and the thatch appeared to have grown together.

He thought about it carefully and realized that the house components weren't fixed with ropes or nesting structures, but completely merged. The hair was growing in the folds of these wooden structures. The hair was yellow, which was the same color as that of the little girl's hair.

There were countless pieces of evidence and various speculations.

Zhang Haiyan believed that the final possibility was that parts of the thatched house grew out of the little girl's body. For unknown reasons, parts of the house grew out of the little girl's body, which corroded the original house's components and replaced parts of the house.

But after Zhang Haixia studied and thought about it, he felt that things might be the opposite. This little girl grew out of the house like some kind of mimicry of evil.

The two people argued for three days.

If that was the case, the location of that house was very important.

According to the murderer, the house was in a very large village instead of in the depths of the rainforest like we might have thought. But the murderer couldn't remember where the house was, nor could he remember why he suddenly cut the girl into pieces.

After Zhang Haiyan and Zhang Haixia reconciled, the two people began to look for that thatched house in Perak.

I don't know if this story has been exaggerated, and the way they dealt with this incident later is unclear, but I can always write about it in detail later.

The stories that took place in the South Sea were very strange, unusual, and very interesting.

I don't know where Zhang Haixia went since there weren't any records of him in the end. When I asked Zhang Haiyan about it, he seemed to be at a total loss. He only said that the incidents happened a long time ago, so he couldn't remember them clearly.

Zhang Haixia is like a black hole, and the only person who can help me understand things about him is Zhang Haiyan.

For some reason, I feel that Zhang Haixia and I have some things in common. What happened to him in the end?

I'm very curious about whether his ending has any reference to my own ending.

# The Research About The Southern Archives

The archives system is a special system that was called “volumes” in ancient times and “archives” later. The names are different, but the function is the same.

If there’s such a thing as the Southern Archives, then there’s definitely going to be the Central, Eastern, Western, and Northern Archives.

The emergence of the archives system surfaced when the Zhang family was sorting out their system.

The appearance of Little Brother Zhang and the gradual development of his past deeds made the division of labor between the Southern Archives and the entire archives system gradually clear.

To give a simple example, the Western Archives was set up in Motuo, mainly to deal with matters in Nepal and Kangbaro. It was essentially the Zhang family’s monitoring and collection agency for local information.

The Central Archives was eventually rebuilt by Zhang Qishan, mainly to monitor the Mystic Nine.

The later generations named it the volume system. It was unknown how these systems were named within the Zhang family, but let’s just call them “volumes” for now. The Zhang family used this system to live on the dark side of Chinese history.

In addition, Little Brother Zhang contacted the remaining forces of the Zhang family and built the latest archives in Hangzhou. They called it the Hangzhou Archives.

They were ready to start business and wanted to build a Fei Kun Balu<sup>227</sup> Temple first, but this behavior was successfully banned by West Lake District Urban Management.

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<sup>227</sup> It’s a Poker-Face temple. Mentioned in Chapter 14 of the Potluck Case

I actually always wondered where the Zhang family's income came from. Although they didn't spend much money, it was really annoying for me to raise this big family.

This may be the biggest mystery in the Southern Archives research.

—The words are written on the first page of Wu Xie's research notebook about the Southern Archives.

## Notes About Our Leisure Time

I helped organize the Zhang family's annual party. Since we would have to pass through Shanghai after departing from Yangcheng Lake on our return trip, I had the sudden idea of taking the Zhang family members to Disneyland.

I had been thinking about how to be a good event organizer the whole time and was at my wit's end. We didn't have a good time while eating at the crab restaurant I had selected.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, they ate way too fast, so this activity didn't really feel like an activity. But it was also difficult for me to explain how long it should take for people to eat crabs or what kind of mood they should be in when eating crabs.

After they finished eating, they were waiting to hear what the next activity would be. The atmosphere was very heavy, which made me feel like they were actually a group of leaders who were testing my ability to receive people. So, I decided to take them to Disneyland.

After I brought them into the theme park, I left them to their own devices. I went and squatted down near the shady jungle restaurant where all the exhausted rough guys had also gathered.

*My mentality at the time was: I've brought the fresh-out-of-the-jungle Tarzan to the human world. I've brought the T-Rex to Columbia City. I have to see what happens and let myself have some fun.*

But the truth was that people from the Zhang family understood the ways of the world. Disneyland may have been a relatively unfamiliar place to them, but it didn't mean that they didn't know what to do here.

I knew that I would definitely be rejected if I offered to show them around. I also knew that I definitely wouldn't have to organize next year's annual party unless they still didn't have any income by then.

I hoped they could either make enough money to organize annual parties themselves or make enough money to leave Hangzhou.

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<sup>228</sup> Yangcheng Lake is famous for having crabs.

After a long time, I fell asleep in that cool, shady place. When I woke up, the fireworks display had just begun and Qianjun Wanma's clothes were draped over me.

I stood up and found that there was already a different group of people around me. Many children were already asleep at this time and various strollers had been lined up next to me. I cautiously left the area to go and watch the fireworks display.

I saw the people from the Zhang family in the crowd. Little Brother Zhang and Zhang Qianjun Wanma were wearing Mickey Mouse headbands and talking to each other. There was a little girl next to them who was also wearing a headband, but hers was the kind that glowed.

I turned my head to look for their patriarch in the crowd, but couldn't find him amid the flashing fireworks going off above us.

The end of the Hangzhou Archives' first annual party was marked by the sound of the theme park's paging system announcing a missing person.

## Ways To Make A Living

Zhang Haike and I were sitting in the corner of a Starbucks. He came to Hangzhou on a business trip, so he was quite busy.

The overseas Zhang family's properties in Hong Kong had been preserved to this day. The story of how they became wealthy was like something we'd only see in a TV show. The Zhang family didn't invest in real estate with any specific purpose in mind, but after many years and several financial crises, anyone who invested in real estate in Hong Kong became incredibly wealthy decades later.

The overseas Zhang family had no obligation to financially support the main branch, but the Zhang family's power system wasn't maintained by money anyway.

But during this time, if someone were to provide the living expenses of these people, the overseas Zhang family should have priority over me.

Zhang Haike and I were starting to look different. It was obvious that he hadn't been trying hard to look like "me" for the past few years, but we still looked like brothers when we were together. He even looked a little younger than me.

"I can make some investments in Hangzhou. It'll save us some trouble if they can support themselves. Meanwhile, you can rest assured that people from the Zhang family won't be so poor as to have to beg for food."

*Bullshit. Look at how your patriarch is doing now,* I thought to myself.

I knew that they all had abilities to make some quick money, but times had changed. The rural mountainous areas and ancient forests were gone and antique trading was very strict now. If they didn't go down to the tombs and find goods, then they would have to deal in general antique trading, which wasn't as easy as before.

Moreover, the post-90s generation had gradually taken the lead, so old-school social networking methods had been replaced by WeChat internet



merchants. Even those who sold stinky tofu in physical stores would find it difficult to survive, let alone sell antiques in physical stores.

“Your thinking makes sense.” Zhang Haike nodded after listening to my thoughts. “Then, how about I invest in an online store?”

“Can’t you invest in something that I won’t need to worry about so much?”

Zhang Haike thought for a while. His phone kept ringing with notifications and I wondered who he was talking to. He glanced at it and his expression turned somewhat sweet.

“Are you in love? If you don’t solve my problems, I’ll have your patriarch order everyone in your clan to castrate themselves.”

Zhang Haike put away his phone, his expression turning serious again. “The Zhang family’s ancestral teachings don’t allow anyone to fail,” he said to me. “They’ll surely fail if we ask them to run a business. Plus, I heard that they insisted on building a temple and receiving incense money<sup>229</sup> before, which shows that they have a strong sense of autonomy. They prioritize whatever they want to do because it’s important to them. How about this? I’ll go back and think about it for two weeks and then give you an answer.” With that said, Zhang Haike stood up and walked away. He seemed to be in a hurry to meet someone.

I found it strange. People said that when old men were in love, they loved fiercely. But his behavior was just too extreme.

I wondered what was going on. I took out my phone and looked at his WeChat moments, but he had set his account so that people could only see his posts for the past three days. As a result, anything before that was gone.

*Well...*

But he was right about something. These people did whatever they wanted to do.

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<sup>229</sup> When people go to temples, they put money in an offering box to show respect to the gods.

I texted him and asked, “How about we set up an online temple for them?”

## About the Western Archives

We have ascertained that the Zhang family has several factions. The core faction is the Zhang family in the northeast, where the main branch and side branch of the family live together. But there are strict barriers and strict class divisions that separate the family. There are also many branches located outside the country. Among them is the South Sea Archives, which is a typical foreign organization managed by the family. Since the South Sea Archives is more well-known, people have traditionally considered there to be four archives: the central one, the northern one, the western one, and the eastern one. But these archives weren't given names. The north was where the Zhang family was located, the east was managed by the overseas Zhang family, the south was the South Sea Archives, and the west was the Chama Sect, which was operated by a group of lamas and those outside of the family. In fact, the Central Archives didn't exist. The Old Nine Gates essentially took care of the duties the Central Archives would have taken on.

For the convenience of understanding, we can think that the Western Archives mainly manages two things: the Tibetan sea flowers and the patriarch's memory.

The Chama Sect carried out a lot of activities in Nepal, India, Bhutan, and Tibet. Due to its religious characteristics, it was still a system of inheritance, and it also maintained a relationship with the Kangbaluo people.

The Western Archives basically played a non-offensive role. It was generally believed that the Western Archives was originally the first place where the Zhang family studied the meteorites. The Western Archives was obviously very important to Poker-Face, but it was difficult to express what role it played in the Zhang family.

I knew that the western assets included a temple, a group of Chama businesses, and three sugar factories in Bhutan and Nepal. The Kangbaluo people were very capable, but they were not from the Zhang family.

Even so, the Western Archives' disposable property made for an astronomical figure. I had seen tons of old gold in their cellars and hundreds of priceless Buddha statues, each of which was a national treasure-level masterpiece that could shake the market. The income of the three sugar factories over the past few hundred years was also amazing. The Chama businesses probably owned hundreds of properties and pieces of land.

Every time I saw those lamas, I wanted to call them sugar daddies.

Although there were no legal attributes, logically, these properties belonged to Poker-Face.

Of course, the lamas didn't sell any of them. Instead, they just continued to hoard them. For them, Buddha statues were just Buddha statues and gold was a gift to Buddha, not property.

Most of the Western Archives' cash was used to support local animal husbandry and education. Even though the Chama businesses and temple belonged to the same system, they actually had nothing to do with each other and didn't communicate with each other at all.

Compared with the South Sea Archives' bankruptcy, poverty, and existence in name only, the Western Archives was the glory of the Zhang family's industry.

In the various temple records, there were also some of the previous patriarchs' experiences, which were one of the main sources I used when I was conducting research on the Zhang family. I still remember the quiet atmosphere as I checked files in the meditation room on the snow-covered plateau, but that was so long ago. I probably won't get such an opportunity again.

# The Yueshang Thirteen

With regards to “Yueshang”<sup>230</sup> and “Rotating Moon”, these words frequently appeared in the Western Archives’ records after 1920. According to Zhang Haike, these documents expressed the Western Archives’ vigilance and concern regarding a large number of strange events that occurred in southern China at that time.

It was not uncommon for there to be an overlap of this kind of information between archives, but at that time, the Southern Archives was already swamped and the Western Archives had also encountered very complicated problems. As a result, these strange events were eventually swallowed in the long river of history.

Out of all the other archives in China, only the Western Archives is still currently in operation. Based on a previous agreement I made with them, documents would be sent to me on a regular basis. Poker-Face would also read them, but it didn’t seem to be a big deal. The situation in the west was also coming to an end and the old people were passing away one by one. Although the south was ambitious to rebuild, it appeared nothing had come of it yet.

This was a kind of helpless desolation. All that history was about to disappear into the void of time and space, which would make it impossible to trace back. As a result, I worked harder to organize all the files I could get my hands on.

There were too many people worth remembering in these small pockets of time and space, but like a curse, it seemed that the fate of this family was to forget.

So, when I saw the words “Yueshang” again, I finally became interested. This was because it was probably an organization related to the Zhang family.

I had very few clues to go on. All I knew was that Yueshang was founded around 1920, its members were all women, and there were thirteen of

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<sup>230</sup> Yueshang (月上) can mean something like “on the moon”. Baidu says it’s usually a name or nickname for a girl.

them in total so they were called the Yueshang Thirteen. Zhang Haiqi was probably one of the leaders, which was the earliest clue I had.

I also knew that not all of its members were from the Zhang family. The latest clue I found said that a woman with a phoenix tattoo appeared among the Yueshang Thirteen. I was completely shocked when I read the description of her appearance because I thought I might know this woman.

She was a long-lost friend.

Yueshang's plan from the very beginning was called "Rotating Moon", but no one knows what the specific plan entailed.

Whatever it was, I instinctively felt that this plan was very important. This was because I had detailed records of Little Brother Zhang's experience but Zhang Haiqi didn't reveal anything about "Rotating Moon" to him during that time.

They experienced thrilling adventures in which they faced death countless times but Zhang Haiqi didn't reveal anything at all.

It's difficult for me to understand why Zhang Haiqi didn't disclose anything—did she think that it was unnecessary to talk about it, did she just not want to talk about it, or maybe she couldn't talk about it?

Then, one night, I suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

Maybe this plan had nothing to do with men.

Maybe this was a top-secret plan only related to women that had been going on for so many years.

Moreover, judging from various clues I had found, it seemed that someone had been investigating Yueshang. The reason I thought this was because based on my experience, the information the Western Archives sent to me this time looked like it had been deliberately released by someone in the hopes that I would see it.

Naturally, I wouldn't respond. If they wanted to spy on me so badly, I hoped that they would give me more sincere clues that would attract my attention. In other words, I was tired of these spies and their desire to exploit my capabilities at investigating and revealing the mysteries behind large conspiracies.

These thirteen women paid particular attention to a respected old Shanghai gang. The context behind their scrutiny was probably the first batch of people from Anhui's Grain Boat Gang, which accounted for a large proportion of Shanghai's underground culture in the last century.<sup>231</sup> It appeared these women were implementing a plan.

"Rotating Moon"...what was it?

We all know the laws regarding the moon's rotation—since its rotation and revolution speed are matched, that means that we can only see its front side forever.

In other words, its back is always facing away from us. If we hadn't been able to launch moon-orbiting satellites, we would have never been able to see it.

But the so-called concepts of front and back are just wishful thinking on our part. It's only natural that we regard the side that humans have seen for tens of thousands of years as the front while the opposite side is regarded as the back.

"Rotating Moon", which I feel carries the meaning that people will never be able to figure out what the secrets are, is an extremely confident plan with a strange amount of certainty that absolutely no one knows about.

Just like the Zhang family in its heyday.

But it has nothing to do with me. This is the legend of another group of people.

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<sup>231</sup> I think "Grain Boat Gang" was another name for Shanghai's infamous "[Green Gang](#)", which was prominent in criminal, social, and political activities in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They mostly focused on opium, extortion, gambling, and prostitution.

# Fei Kun Balu – Zhang Chuntao From The Zhang Family

The southernmost Fei Kun Balu temple<sup>232</sup> in China is located in Hainan Province.

In fact, I could easily determine what era the Fei Kun Balu temples were from by looking at the characteristics of the Fei Kun Balu statues.

If it was a temple that was relocated by ethnic minorities, then the statue would be close to the image of a Taoist god. If the statue was built following Poker-face's activities, it would have his obvious features and expression. Based on this, I could confirm whether Poker-face had actually been to that place or not.

There was also a pattern where if Poker-Face had been to the Fei Kun Balu temples or done any activities around the temples, then there would be inscriptions in the temples recording the stories about Fei Kun Balu's manifestation.

Many details would be included in these stories, so if you were familiar with Poker-face, you could tell right away that those stories might have truly happened. This was a powerful clue that let me know he had been there.

Poker-face must have been to the Fei Kun Balu temple in Hainan. It was still a very special period in time when he went there. The fishermen<sup>233</sup> who lived around that area would dive into the water and hunt for pearls with their bare hands. The water was so cold during winter that they would vomit blood after they came ashore. That was when they had low-quality local wine to help them recover.

Although this kind of local wine was of low quality, it was indeed a miraculous medicine that helped relieve hypoxia. It appeared that Poker-

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<sup>232</sup> The information about Fei Kun Balu Temples can be found in [Daomu Biji Extra 7.14](#) (Little Brother Zhang and Zhang Haiqi infiltrate a wedding procession at Potluck Capital).

<sup>233</sup> The Chinese text wrote "Xu people (胥民)", but "Xu people" was just a name for fishermen who lived in Hainan at that time. Most of them lived on boats.



face needed to go diving somewhere, so he ordered a lot of this local wine. The amount of alcohol he asked for was staggering; it seemed that he planned to go diving for at least a few months straight.

Since all of the local wine was sold, the fishermen stopped hunting for pearls that year. This resulted in a sharp decline in the production of pearls that year, which made their price become exorbitantly high. The price went so high that the fishermen were able to live a good life for almost ten years, so they built a Fei Kun Balu temple.

This was probably the only time that Poker-face was honored for his contribution to the economy.

No one knows where Poker-face went diving in Hainan, nor do they know what he was looking for.

Nowadays, the Fei Kun Balu temple in Hainan is still a popular place for worship. Moreover, two percent of the incense money is transferred to an old bank account that has existed since the end of the Qing Dynasty. Its latest activity occurred when someone made a new passbook in the 1970s.

No one knows who is running this account, but after doing some rough calculations, the amount of money in it should be astronomical. The account holder's name is Zhang Chuntao. Although the account has existed for a long time, no one has ever used the money in it.

Many Fei Kun Balu temples have illustrations of Zhang Chuntao. He is portrayed as a little immortal on the side, a tiny fat man who is holding an abacus and a watermelon.

Poker-face has no memory of this person so his existence is a mystery to me.

This is all of the information I have about him.

I would like to record these things down, and I have always wanted to meet him.

# Zhang Yueshan

The following records are from unverified archives collected by a researcher surnamed He<sup>234</sup> who had been studying the Zhang family.

This person had been gathering information about the Zhang family during the late Qing Dynasty or in the early years of the Republic of China. He had probably encountered a situation similar to mine.

There were many mistakes and omissions in his records, but this was because some of the Zhang family's information could only be speculated.

As a result, I marked these inquiries as doubtful in my notes, which meant that they contained information that was unverifiable.

The contents from the first volume that I marked as doubtful are as follows:

Few people from the Zhang family could marry people outside of their family. To be more precise, they could marry people outside of the Zhang family, but it was difficult for them to have children. As a result, when the Zhang family first started, the number of people from the side branch was smaller than that of the main branch.

When a child was born in the side branch, there was a certain probability of them inheriting the same amazing abilities as those in the main branch, turning out to be ordinary people, or only gaining half of the abilities. Nevertheless, there was a very small chance that the child would have abilities exceeding those of the people from the main branch. If that were the case, they would then be recognized as belonging to the main branch

Of course, this would surely have an immense impact on the order of the Zhang family so the number of people from the side branch was strictly controlled.

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<sup>234</sup> He Jianxi from the story "[The Southern Archives](#)".

When the children from the side branch were “released into the wild”<sup>235</sup>, a great number of them would encounter accidents. It was very brutal.

Of course, the children from the main branch would also be “released into the wild” so everyone’s treatment was fair. The children from the main branch, however, possessed abilities that far exceeded those of the children from the side branch.

So essentially, the researcher believed that this was some kind of behind-the-scenes method used to control the number of people from the side branch.

Of course, Poker-face’s experience of being “released into the wild” took place during the start of the disintegration of the Zhang family, so what he went through might not accurately describe the actual situation.

In principle, the people in the Zhang family couldn’t marry outsiders, but they could do so if their missions required it.

Before the Zhang family started to fall apart, the researcher speculated that many people from the side branch were not willing to become a part of the main branch.

This was how the “shan” and “hai” generations<sup>236</sup> came to be. These two groups of people were deliberately separated, and many of them were siblings. This also indicated that there was a period of time when many children from the side branch were born.

In order to dissipate the power of the side branch, the two groups of people were separated and prohibited from seeing each other. In other words, it was very possible that people with the character “shan” or “hai” in their names were siblings or relatives.

The above text is purely speculation.

The Zhang family could also adopt ordinary people and turn them into Zhang family members by heating up their blood. This process was equivalent to training and taking medicine, but the exact procedure is

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<sup>235</sup> The information about “release into the wild” can be found in “Tibetan Sea Flower”, [Chapter 43](#).

<sup>236</sup> The information about “shan” and “hai” generations can be found [here](#) in “The Southern Archives”.

unknown. Moreover, it brought about particularly adverse consequences for the Zhang family since it piqued common people's curiosity.

I have personally experienced one of the Zhang family's rituals. There was a person named Zhang Yueshan, who had the character "shan" in his name. I wasn't sure if he was recognized as a member of the main branch, but he had a child after getting married.

The child was brought to Fujian because Poker-face needed to name him and let the child pay respects to his ancestors. The whole thing was sudden and confusing and they ended up performing the ritual in a hasty manner at the back of the kitchen. He held the child in his arms and smeared a drop of wine on his forehead, thus ending the ritual. It was just that he encountered some problems when naming him. The Zhang family's naming system was lost, so the name that should have come after "shan" and "hai" was unknown.

This meant that Poker-face had to give him a name, which was something I couldn't participate in.

When the child cried—which he did a lot—we could see that the little black tattoo on his arm was in the shape of a small fish. Although it was just a simple design to see if any of his hot-blooded behaviors could trigger the tattoo to appear, he must have felt uncomfortable since he was still so young.

As he grew up, the small fish would gradually be painted and expanded into a Qiongqi or a Qilin.

Poker-face was probably stumped trying to come up with a name for him. We didn't know what name he gave to the child in the end, but I did give the child a red envelope with a lot of money in it.

This child would definitely become an extraordinary man in the future because he cried with so much enthusiasm at such a young age.

This was a good thing for the Zhang family since they had been so close to collapse for so long, but we knew that this was a very special case.

I told Zhang Yueshan that when it was time for the child to be “released into the wild”, he’d have to come to the restaurant and work part-time for me.

This child was one of the few Zhang family members who was actually younger than me so I took a photo of him and put it on the customer wall in our restaurant. Maybe this child would take our place in the future and save the world or something. If that were to happen, I would have something to boast about. Of course, I would have to work hard to stay healthy because I heard that people from the Zhang family went through a very long period of puberty.