

盗墓笔记

「一部五十年前发现的千年古卷」
「最好看的盗墓小说」



南派三叔 著
邛笕石影

上海文化出版社

7

柒



Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol. 7: Stone Shadow in Qiong Cave

Written By: Xu Lei

Translated by: MereBear

Summary:

Back in Beijing, our appointment with one of the previous generation of the Mystic Nine meant hitting the auction. Due to mistakenly “Lighting the Sky Lantern”, we had to escape with the jade seal being auctioned. But the subsequent exchange of news surprised both sides!

The mysteriously missing archaeological team, Poker-Face’s unusual identity, the videotapes received many years in a row... all the secrets end up pointing to the same place! In order to get answers, Wu Xie and Poker-Face split up and lead separate forces to Sichuan and Guangxi. What kind of past does the Zhang family’s ancient building constructed in the Yangshi Lei style carry? Is there someone else manipulating things behind the scenes? How will Wu Xie face the tomb that almost destroyed the previous generation of The Mystic Nine? Bloodthirsty hair, moving iron clothes, strange murals... the last step before the end of the puzzle— the answer to all the questions— is just behind this stone wall!

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Circle Around.....	1
Chapter 2 Old Archives	6
Chapter 3 Handwriting.....	10
Chapter 4 Found	15
Chapter 5 Auction	28
Chapter 6 Auction Part II.....	33
Chapter 7 Granny Huo	38
Chapter 8: Feast for Collectors	47
Chapter 9: Memories (Part I)	52
Chapter 10 Memories (Part II)	56
Chapter 11 Lighting the Sky Lantern.....	60
Chapter 12: Wreaking Havoc In Heaven	67
Chapter 13 Huo Xiuxiu	71
Chapter 14 Yangshi Lei (Part I).....	78
Chapter 15 Strange Description.....	84
Chapter 16 Archaeological Teams, Buildings, and Mirrors.....	86
Chapter 17 Seems to be an Old Friend	88
Chapter 18 Qilin Who Carries Everything (Part I)	94
Chapter 19 Living Together.....	99
Chapter 20 Qilin Who Carries Everything (Part II)	105
Chapter 21 I Have the Fish.....	111
Chapter 22 Delve Deeper into the Secret.....	115
Chapter 23 Qilin Who Carries Everything (Part III)	118
Chapter 24 The Story of Letters.....	122
Chapter 25 The Largest Grave Robbery in History (I)	128
Chapter 26 The Largest Grave Robbery in History (II)	131
Chapter 27 The Largest Grave Robbery in History (III)	136
Chapter 28 The Strangest Thing in the World	141
Chapter 29 Reverse Psychology.....	151
Chapter 30 Get Down to Business	156
Chapter 31 Grave Robbery.....	159

Chapter 32 Yangshi Lei (Part II)	164
Chapter 33 Plans	168
Chapter 34 Parting at Sichuan	171
Chapter 35 Running Water	177
Chapter 36 Nest (Up Top)	182
Chapter 37 Nest (Down Below)	185
Chapter 38 Double Lines	187
Chapter 39 Small Hair	197
Chapter 40 Strange Thing	201
Chapter 41 Hair	206
Chapter 42 Flower Drum Opera	214
Chapter 43 Burrs	221
Chapter 44 Parasite	226
Chapter 45 Tips from Guangxi	235
Chapter 46 Strange Blood on the Iron Plate	242
Chapter 47 Completion of the Relief	248
Chapter 48 Secrets	252
Chapter 49 Hints	256
Chapter 50 Entering the Mechanism	261
Chapter 51 Hanging	271
Chapter 52 Black Hair	274
Chapter 53 Snake Bite	279
Chapter 54 Password	284
Chapter 55 Unlock the Password	288
Chapter 56 Success	297
Chapter 57 Death Error	311
Chapter 58 Calm down	314
Chapter 59 Despair	322
Chapter 60 Fear the Face of Reincarnation	326

Chapter 1 Circle Around

Because we had been away for quite a long time and had to go back to our respective homes, we made a plan when we got back to the village— Fatty was responsible for preparing the equipment, and I would continue collecting data.

After returning to Hangzhou, I began implementing my plan.

When we originally decided on our plan of action, I didn't know how to collect this information. After careful consideration, however, I decided to start with the formal channels in order to understand Poker-Face's origins. My previous investigation proved that people in our line of work didn't know him very well, so there had to be a record of him joining the archaeological team in the 1980s. Back in those days, everyone involved in such projects had to be clean. I wondered if I could find clues in Changsha's old archives, like his relationship to that organization, or maybe find one or two people who knew him, or some kind of clue. So that's where I decided to start.

But personnel files kept in the city archives were kept confidential, and the old files couldn't be taken out without a red-letterhead document.¹ This archaeological team had been set up in the early 1980s, and something had happened that was now a classified secret, so it wouldn't be so easy to see it. The best way to find the archives was to start with the research institute that had sent the archaeological team at that time. More than twenty years had passed since then, but that really wasn't that long ago, so the archives should still be there.

I didn't know which institute in Changsha it was, but there weren't that many back then. It was also possible that there may have only been one institute related to archaeology. At that time, most of the team members

¹ An official document with the name of the issuing government agency printed in red at the top, circulated to relevant bodies.

were students, so it was very likely that they were from the same university department, which shouldn't be difficult to verify.

As expected, after several searches, I found an old research institute that matched my search criteria. It had been merged into another research institute, and the former site was now on the campus of a famous university that was about to move. When I looked it up, the outside was full of large characters that read "demolition". I figured the land had been sold to a real estate company, so I would probably only see a piece of flat land here in a few months' time.

If there were clues and the research institute had actually been merged, then the files might have also been merged into the new one. That meant there was also a greater chance that they had remained in the university archives. I knew the organization very well, and I didn't believe there would be people who would pay attention to archives from more than twenty years ago.

But it wasn't easy to obtain information about this matter. I asked my connections, made several inquiries among Uncle Three's circles, and finally found a person working in the research institute. The young man's surname was Du and his full name was Du Juan Shan, which I found very interesting.² I sent him two cartons of Chinese cigarettes, and when I asked about the situation, he said that the office location had changed, but the files were all in the school. The research institute was part of the university, so many of the researchers were lecturers. He said he could take me in; although the door was inconvenient, the security was relatively lax inside. But he told me not to get my hopes up, since it would be difficult to check the old files.

I didn't delay and headed there that evening. The university's old building had been renovated from a hospital and the archive room was located on the first floor of the auditorium. With a floor area of over a hundred square meters, it was as big as a warehouse. It didn't take much effort for me and Du Juan Shan to walk down the low, narrow corridor. There were no lights

² It's either Azalea Mountain or Cuckoo Mountain, take your pick

below and it was extremely dark. I used a flashlight to take a look and saw that there were rows of wooden shelves inside that were full of portfolios wrapped in kraft paper. They were all in varying states: thick, thin, intact, broken, and lying both vertically and horizontally. Most of them were covered with a layer of dust and smelled like damp paper.

Du Juan Shan told me that the files frequently used after 1995 had all been removed and the rest wouldn't be moved for years. I figured no one would bother going through them whenever it was time for them to be destroyed.

I looked at the situation and felt a bit depressed.

The temperature in Changsha in August was quite high, but it felt cooler at night. In addition to the shade, the coolness was very comfortable. I bit my flashlight, fanned my hands a few times, and started rummaging through the old wooden shelves.

I knew there was a library management department at Qinghua University, but it was strange to think that there was anything to learn about managing a library. After seeing the size of this archive room, however, I realized that people who could manage these things could also be considered geniuses. Any ordinary person's eyes would probably glaze over whenever they looked at these bookshelves, and this was just a small archive room in the research institute. If the national archive had a trillion files, how many people would have to deal with it?

Fearing that I might cause him trouble, Du Juan Shan had been watching from the side and helping me look, asking about some of the details in order to help me filter.

Because of special reasons, China's archival system was perfectly detailed, so as long as the documents were in place, they could definitely be found according to certain rules. It was a pity I was like a headless fly right now. I only knew the approximate year and didn't even know how many members of the archaeological team there were. I had no other choice but to flip through every copy.

I still didn't find anything even after searching for a long time. My idea was to search by year because all the files here were sorted like that. As long as I found similar investigation files between 1980 and 1985, then I could also obtain the participants' information from them. Changsha was located in Chu, so although there were a relatively large number of archaeological activities, the overall number wasn't much, and only a shelf was full of their files. But after going through the archives for that five-year period, I still didn't see any files related to the Xisha archaeology team.

I found it strange, so I asked Du Juan Shan if there were any other places it could be.

He shook his head and said that this was the only place, unless the file was in the confidential archives. If it wasn't there, then it could have been specially destroyed.

I thought such a thing was unlikely. Even if the archaeology team's information was classified, it wouldn't have been kept secret to such an extent.

He comforted me and said, "It's a common occurrence. Maybe it's like you said. The fact that the archaeological team disappeared after that would be a major event, so maybe the archives were disposed of for the sake of confidentiality."

My heart was a little depressed as we put the portfolios in order, but I had anticipated that things wouldn't be so easy.

I bitterly walked out of the archive room, knowing that I had wasted two cartons of cigarettes for nothing. Unfortunately, I had no idea what to do next. If this way didn't work either, then it was just as Poker-Face had said—he was a person who had no connections with the world.

At that moment, I suddenly noticed a staircase in front of me, which continued downwards. It appeared there was another floor under the archives, but there was an iron gate at the top of the stairs that was locked

with a thick rusty iron chain. I could see that a seal of unknown age had been pasted on the edge of the door.

“What’s that place down there?” I asked.

“It’s the archives before the 1950s. During the Cultural Revolution, they were locked up for fear of the rebels making trouble. No one has opened it for more than thirty years.”

“Really?” I took a look with my flashlight and saw that the rusty chain had clearly been cut off and was left there for show. If I hadn’t looked carefully, I wouldn’t have noticed.

Chapter 2 Old Archives

Even though the chain had been broken, there was a layer of old rust and it was covered in spider webs. Obviously, this hadn't been a recent event.

"Hey," Du Juan Shan was also surprised. "What's going on?"

"It's okay. It just means you're wrong. Someone has been in there sometime during the past thirty years." I said, shining my flashlight through the iron gate to get a better view down below. The stairs were piled with debris, and in addition to the dust, there was an old musty smell permeating the air.

"You don't want to go down, do you? Look how dirty it is." He said.

I was also hesitating on whether it was necessary to continue or not. It didn't seem to have anything to do with my purpose for coming here. There could be a million reasons why the chain was broken, or maybe it hadn't been locked at all. But even if there were extraordinary reasons, it was none of my business. When I thought of this, I gave up.

Just as I was about to leave, I reflexively swung the light one last time and illuminated the seal on the gate.

It may have been the residual effects left by the rubbings we saw back in the jade mine, but I had to take one last look. It may have also been the fact that the position of the seal was a bit odd. It was too low and a bit conspicuous, so I inadvertently glanced at it.

Whatever the reason, I froze as soon as I saw it. The old seal was firmly attached to the door and hadn't been broken.

"Strange. Look at that," I said to Du Juan Shan. "It looks like this seal was pasted on later."

He leaned over to look at it and agreed that it was strange: "Maybe the institute discovered that this iron chain was cut so they sealed it."

“That’s even stranger. Why not just replace the lock and chain? What’s the use of the seal?” As I said this, I went to look at the words on the seal. “Do you think anyone brave enough to break the chain would be afraid of some seal?”

“There’s nothing valuable down there. Maybe they thought the contents down there weren’t worth the cost of buying a new chain.”

“It makes sense.” I thought it was a little funny. There was a truth that owning something didn’t necessarily mean owning the value of it. Not only did these old files not hold any value to people in the present, but they might also require a lot of money to deal with them, which was why they were still lying here.

The words on the seal were “July 6, 1990, XX University Institute of Archaeology Sealed.” I had dealt with rubbings before and had good instincts when it came to handwriting. The calligraphy on the seal was well written but must have imitated a common calligrapher because I felt like it was very familiar.

Looking at the above date, the seal should have been placed in 1990 during the time Wen-Jin had disappeared, and shouldn’t have anything to do with them. I sighed and thought to myself, *well, my hopes are completely shattered. I’ll have to go back and start over.*

I told Du Juan Shan to lead the way. He didn’t want to stay here too long since it wasn’t a good thing, so he was relieved to hear me say we should leave.

The two of us left the same way we had come and everything went well. The civilized world was much easier than ancient tombs, and I wasn’t worried about being seen at all. A hundred guards weren’t as tough as zombies.

When I returned to the hotel, I felt very uncomfortable. After all that work, the road ahead of me was much narrower. If I couldn’t find any clues in the files, what else could I do?

It was a bit inconceivable the more I thought about it. Why wasn't there a file? Was it really as Du Juan Shan had said? But it was so unlikely. In fact, if the Xisha incident had happened, the files would certainly be there. They couldn't be packed into a single portfolio, so if they had been destroyed, then half a row of file racks would be empty. But the files had been tightly packed and didn't look like any had been removed.

I suddenly thought that maybe my presumptions were wrong. There were students in the archaeological team, yes, but they may not have been related to that university. The students may have been working as interns, so maybe Wen-Jin wasn't from that institute.

I felt much better once I thought this. I turned on the computer again and started to look for information from other research institutes before the merger had occurred. I copied them down one by one, ready to find someone to ask tomorrow. I had plenty of time anyways, so it was better to check one by one, lest I regret it.

After making my list, I lay on the bed and ran through it again, wondering what my next step should be. Some of the divisions were strict and some were lax, so I had to start with the easiest.

Looking at the information I had copied down, I suddenly felt a sense of unease. It was as if I cared a little too much about the information in this notebook. I carefully skimmed it and found that the word "research institute" appeared repeatedly, which made me feel a little off. Even after thinking about it carefully, I still couldn't figure it out.

Was it OCD? I laughed, then suddenly started shaking all over as the seal flashed through my mind.

Institute... research institute... research institute...

Seal: XX University, Institute of Archaeology.

Fuck. I suddenly realized why the words on the seal looked so familiar just now.

It turned out to be my own fucking handwriting.

Chapter 3 Handwriting

Damn it. My scalp was tingling and I started shaking all over as I thought, what's going on? A university in Changsha has a seal from 1990 with my handwriting on it?

No! I had to be wrong!

This can't be happening. But I knew very well in my heart that when it came to handwriting, I had a professional instinct that had been honed by looking at tens of thousands of rubbings. I could never be deceived.

It had to be a coincidence. I had studied Shou Jin Ti³, so maybe that person had also studied this kind of font, which was similar in verve.

I wracked my brain and gave a hundred reasons, just like a man trying to find an excuse for himself after cheating. At the end of the day, I felt ridiculous, because I knew I could never fool myself with these excuses.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was already midnight. It was unrealistic to call Du Juan Shan out at this time, but there was no way I would be getting any sleep tonight. Besides, the door was outside the archives and could be opened without a key, so I tidied up, called Wang Meng, and set out to the university again to have a look.

After taking a taxi, the doorman wouldn't let me in without a work permit from Du Juan Shan. Those who had studied at universities were used to this, so I went back to the nearby canteen and bought a bag of Chinese food. I easily got in after mixing in with the other students and went back to the old auditorium, recalling the route from memory.

The school's lights were out and only the street lamps were lit, which made the surroundings extremely dark. But I was in a hurry and didn't care at all. I

³ Slender Gold Script

walked all the way to the underground archives and went directly up to look at the words on the seal.

Of course, the seal hadn't run off and was right there.

My heart was pounding like I was taking a peek at the women in a public bathhouse, and I hurriedly shined the flashlight:

July 6, 1990, XX University Institute of Archaeology Sealed.

This time, I could see clearly and my mind wasn't bogged down. Every character and every stroke were vivid, and I could feel the cold sweat slide down my cheeks.

It was really my handwriting.

I was so stunned that I almost collapsed.

Ordinary people could recognize their handwriting as long as the interval wasn't too long; not to mention the line of work I was in. There was no doubt about it, this was definitely my handwriting.

How old was I in 1990? Thirteen? Fifteen? Did I know about Shou Jin Ti at that time? Hell, I probably didn't even know about Shou Hou Ti.⁴ What was going on here?

"For me, it's all over, but for you, nothing has started."

Uncle Three's words rang in my ear, and the long-lost feeling of a splitting headache began to hover at the back of my mind again.

I took a deep breath, wanting to dispel these things so I could start reorganizing these fragments in my mind. Previous experience told me that it was useless to be depressed at this time. It was difficult to calm down once you were agitated, so you had to calm down first.

⁴ Pretty sure it's a pun since "shou hou ti" is basically Slender Monkey Script. Or maybe he means something like chicken scratch? Idk

I also remembered that in the video Wen-Jin sent, there was a man very similar to me crawling on the floor in the nursing home in Golmud. But Wen-Jin didn't have time to explain it to me at that time. "They are not simple," Uncle Three had said. I thought he was just being emotional at the time, but now it seemed really suspicious.

What happened to me, and how should I explain it? On the surface, it seemed like there was more than one me in this world. This kind of seal was written in this place twenty years ago, and at about the same time, "I" was filmed in the old house in Golmud...

My heart was in turmoil, and I had no clue at all. This was even more troubling than what had happened to Uncle Three.

I took my flashlight and looked at the space behind the seal. Assuming that "I" had pasted the seal there, then there was obviously a purpose. I at least needed to be sure if the "me" who wrote the seal had anything to do with this research.

This basement— which they thought hadn't been visited in thirty years— had not only been visited but was also involved in such strange things. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of situation it would be in. It appeared I would have to go down and see what was going on.

The ensuing darkness resembled the entrance of an ancient tomb. I had a terrifying experience in Golmud, so I was feeling a little scared, but this was Changsha city, and there was a community police station not far away. The civilized world had always been reliable, so it wasn't like the plot of the campus ghost stories would appear. I wiped my sweat and went to pull the chain, feeling a little depressed. If I had known a clue was here, then that bag of Chinese food would have been enough. Why did I have to bribe that Du Juan?

The iron chain weighed twenty kilograms and was extremely rusted. The noise was so loud that I was sure I'd be discovered. I imagined that the person who locked the door at that time had to be a real man. I had already

pulled at it two times when I suddenly had a bad premonition— such a thick chain wasn't keeping something locked up inside, was it?

But I immediately got rid of that idea. How could that be possible?

After I carefully pulled the iron chain out and put it aside, my hands were completely covered in rust. I then broke the seal and took a deep breath as I walked down, getting choked to tears by the rising dust.

The stairs below were a mess and piled high with old desks and chairs. As I walked down, I saw the same kind of door as the archive room above. It was unlocked, so I took a look inside. It was a room exactly the same size as the one above, but the inside wasn't filled with files. Instead, it was filled with debris.

I felt a little disappointed after taking a look around. This wasn't the old archives Du Juan Shan had mentioned, but a warehouse for old objects. And looking at this rubbish, maybe the objects were piled here when it was built since there was such a thick layer of dust.

I used my flashlight to look around and pulled my T-shirt up to cover my nose and mouth. The musty smell was really choking my nose and making me uncomfortable.

I also saw a trace of messy footprints on the ground, but there was a layer of dust on them. "I" obviously didn't make them a short time ago, so they must have occurred when things happened that year.

The footprints merged into one pair, and I could see that two or three people had been walking very erratically, but had headed straight into the warehouse.

I followed the footprints and looked around at the debris, but I couldn't tell what they were. After going a few steps further, I could just barely discern that they were big wooden boxes.

When I saw these boxes, a story popped into my head. In the National Archives warehouse, several wooden boxes were found, all of which contained Dunhuang scriptures. They were delivered at the time of payment, but no one had counted them in the early days of the founding of The People's Republic. As a result, they were kept here until the time of relocation. I couldn't help but wonder if there would be such treasures in this warehouse.

But after looking at the box's size, I noticed that it was very big. Based on my own strength, it was unlikely I could find out what happened in this warehouse that year. Not to mention the fact that it was also too messy and dirty here. Even if I found some clues, I didn't have the strength to remove them for further investigation.

I followed the footprints to the end of the warehouse where there was less debris. I noticed a large square box covered with something, and the footprints went straight to it. I squatted down to look and found that they didn't actually stop in front of the box, but went underneath it.

"Boss, this box must have been pushed over later." Wang Meng said.

That meant it was blocking something. It was inevitable that the angle between the box and the corner of the wall would create a space, but what was there to block? I turned to Wang Meng and said, "Come on, push it away."

"Eh?" Wang Meng's face turned green. "Boss, this..."

"Just do it!" I said. He gulped before carefully pushing the box. It was so heavy that his face turned the color of pork liver, but he finally managed to push it aside. I took a look with my flashlight and saw a lot of files in the back corner.

Chapter 4 Found

They were really old files that had been gnawed apart by rats and were covered in droppings. I picked one up and found that it must have been an old document from that time because it was completely grey with age.

If someone flipped through it, however, they would definitely see differently. I told Wang Meng to look carefully to see what was suspicious.

He crept around the pile of documents and soon found something. I went over and saw that there were several piles of documents lying neatly on the ground. Four piles had been put together side by side to form a square.

Wang Meng said: “Boss, do you think this person was too tired to stand and read the documents here, so he used these to make a stool?”

I nodded. Indeed, I could almost picture the situation. The man must have sat on the file stool at that time so that he could look at everything more carefully.

I turned in a full circle to see which direction the man had been facing when he was sitting down. At this time, I found that if he was facing the back, the nearby rack could be used to hold a flashlight. As I recreated the situation in my mind, I put my flashlight up and looked down at my feet. After removing the dust, I saw several old cigarette butts in front of me, as well as a pile of documents.

A folder here weighed at least four to five kilos, so it was impossible to carry scattered documents in your hand. The pile of documents in front of me may have been used by him as a table, and what he had been looking at was placed on it. Smoking while reading... this son of a bitch was quite laid back.

But it was still useless. We were surrounded by documents, and it was impossible to speculate what he was looking for. Maybe he found the documents he wanted and took them away.

As if I were under a spell, I made a few moves to open the document. I couldn't help thinking of the handwriting on the seal and an unexpected thought occurred.

Leaving aside the rest, if the seal was really written by "me", what would I think of the document?

I asked Wang Meng to pass me a folder, then opened it and put it on the "table" in front of me. I then picked it up and flipped through it. I recalled my usual habit of folding the pages I had read with my right hand while I thought about them. Whenever I reached a certain thickness, I would put them aside and straighten them out.

This was one of the habits I picked up, because whenever I did rubbings, the whole table usually ended up full of paper and was very messy. I liked to keep these messy things a certain distance away from me so that I could distinguish them from the other documents, but they still had to be within easy reach.

I looked around to see if there was a place close by where I could put things. At this time, I saw a pile of papers sitting on a box by my right hand that fit the bill.

At this moment, my heart thumped and I was a little hesitant. If I was right, wasn't that proof that I was the one who had been reading things here?! But after a moment's hesitation, I brought the paper over to me. Who cared? I had already died once anyways. What was there to worry about with this sort of thing?

I put the stack of documents on the pile in front of me. The first one was a form that looked like an allowance budget and had several names on it. The maximum allowance was 447.92 yuan. I wasn't very clear about the wage system at that time, but such a high allowance was definitely astronomical back then. This was the kind of allowance that was generally given to the Soviets, but I wasn't interested in it. I noticed a line in the corner of the

form: “Expatriate allowance form for the archaeological project at the Zhangjiapu site in Xisha, Guangxi.”

Shit, this was it!

I flipped through but all the pages had been messed up, and the ensuing pages were just an extension of the form. There seemed to be some names, along with the stamp of the archaeological research institute at the end. I saw a date by the stamp saying it was a file from 1956.

It was followed by a handwritten data summary. None of it was typed, and it was full of handwritten records that included room numbers, length and width of the rooms, schematic diagrams, and other scrawled notes. Because of what had happened just now with the seal, I subconsciously looked at the handwriting and found that it had been written by strangers. There were a lot of different handwriting styles, so it was obvious that more than one person had done the recording.

I leafed through it quickly and didn’t see anything different until about fourteen or fifteen pages later.

It was a floor plan of something, but it wasn’t a modern professional plan or one made with brush strokes.

I looked carefully and realized what it was. This was a “Yangshi Lei”⁵ from the Qing Dynasty.

“Yangshi Lei” was a substitute name, but it was actually a family of imperial designers of the Qing Dynasty who were surnamed “Lei.” Even though they were in charge of almost all the design work for the royal buildings, the craftsmen at that time had low standing. Even the world’s best family of craftsmen was still unknown in the eyes of ordinary people. Most people in modern times also didn’t know that such a family existed. Only those of us who were engaged in architecture and landscaping knew how great the “Yangshi Lei” was. Throughout China’s five-thousand-year history, “Yangshi

⁵ Yangshi Lei means “Thunder Model”

Lei” had only existed for two hundred years, but one fifth of China’s world cultural heritage was made by “Yangshi Lei”, which was something to be admired.

After the summer palace was completed, the “Yangshi Lei” suddenly declined. Some people speculated that this was related to the Qing dynasty’s inability to build huge buildings, but the “Yangshi Lei’s” decline was actually very strange. I didn’t know what great changes took place, but I had read a report before that the “Yangshi Lei” had quickly and abruptly abandoned its official position overnight.

After their decline, the descendants of “Yangshi Lei” sold a large number of ancestral “hot sample drawings,” which were the crystallization of Chinese architecture. Some of them were lost to overseas and non-governmental organizations, but the domestic authorities had a considerable number of them, so they were still relatively common. In our department, those who studied landscaping and planning were all too familiar with this, so that was why I recognized it when I saw the drawing.

This plan probably had something to do with the Zhangjiapu site, meaning the site should be from the Qing Dynasty and may have even been the work of “Yangshi Lei”.

This was a duplicate, so the original copy must have been placed in a museum.

I was somewhat interested in these things, so I looked at it carefully. The drawing depicted a large courtyard, which should be part of a mansion. By looking at the scale and the numerous vertical and horizontal lines, I could tell that it was quite large, and based on the structure, it should be a residence.

“Yangshi Lei” was a royal designer, so there were few opportunities to design houses. The owner of this house must have been a high-ranking official or someone with a lot of connections.

I looked to see if there were any small letters marking the name of the house, but didn't see anything.

The last few drawing plans depicted the same images, and most of them were "copycats". "Yangshi Lei's" design was extremely detailed, so all the angles, individual buildings, and disassembled sections would be recorded. These "copycat" images even had the feng shui, physiognomy, and even the giant longitude and latitude grid map of the whole ground.

I flipped through them and saw that there were more than ten pages.

There was a document index page at the back, which showed how many pages were originally in it. I took it and checked it against the contents, and felt my heart clench. Based on the page count alone, there were six pieces of paper missing.

If I had guessed right, that person may have taken them away at that time. What I had now wasn't the key, but even so, it could be considered a great breakthrough for me, who had no clue.

I sorted out the documents in my hand and looked around. I knew that there wasn't anything more to harvest here, so I called Wang Meng over from where he had still been searching.

After calling him several times, I went over to him and asked him what he was doing. He pointed a flashlight at the corner of the warehouse and asked me, "Boss, what's this for?"

I looked up and saw that a cage welded with iron bars was placed behind the debris.

We walked over and saw that the cage was half a person high and rusted. Wang Meng took a look with his flashlight and saw a broken bowl: "Is it a dog cage?"

I shook my head. The bars of this cage had been welded tightly, and it wasn't necessary to hold a dog like that. Maybe it was the leftover bits and

pieces of steel that were left when the building was renovated. I knew this was beyond my control so I immediately told Wang Meng not to linger. I was in a hurry to check on something.

We followed the same route straight back to the hotel. He went to take a shower while I went directly online and started checking the information I had found.

First, I looked for information about the so-called “Xisha Zhangjiapu Site Investigation” but found nothing. When I thought about the 1950s, I figured it was unlikely that something like that would be uploaded to the Internet. Even if there was something, I figured it would only be a few words, so I went on to check the place names.

People in my field didn’t care much about Guangxi. Although there were ancient tombs there, the climate was quite different from those in Hunan, Shaanxi, and Shanxi. After staying there for three days, you’d first have to drink medicine before going out in the field, and that wasn’t even mentioning entering the local virgin forest. The local conditions and customs— and even the ethnic distribution habits— were different, so it wasn’t a place where normal people could mix. In the old days, the Central Plains people would only go there if they really had no other way out.

I was quite surprised by this search result, but the formation of the local mountains was too different. Although many Han people from the Central Plains used to set up Yin and Yang mansions there according to their feng shui customs, the concept was completely different. That was the kind of place where up-and-coming grave robbers would go. I had even heard that some people were robbing big tombs in Guangxi by digging them directly with excavators, which was more unusual than the Southern School’s technique.

The resources on the internet were limited, and I was sweating so heavily that I actually got up to check the air conditioner and lower it. After calming down, I took a shower. I was so lost in thought as I was washing up that I ended up coming out with no underwear on, which startled Wang Meng.

My thoughts were very confused and everything was too scattered. With my current wisdom, it was obviously difficult for me to think through all the problems in such a short amount of time.

The “Yangshi Lei’s” design plan was a good clue, but it was very popular in the world and didn’t have a complete index. As a result, looking for clues from this kind of angle was like looking for a needle in a haystack. No, it was even more unreliable than that.

I fell asleep that night while thinking. My mind was all jumbled up and I felt groggy when I woke up in the morning. I washed my face with cold water to wake myself up and then scanned all the documents and sent them to some people I knew.

As I called on several relatives again and went through the motions, I was thinking about who I could find to ask about it. At this moment, I suddenly thought of my grandfather’s old friend who had liked me very much when I was a child. He was called Lao Wang Tou. This guy and I were colleagues in the landscape design institute before, and we specialized in ancient architecture maintenance. I bought some wine and small dishes and went to visit him.

I hadn’t seen him for many years and thought the old man probably had the same temper as before, so I didn’t stand on ceremony and directly told him the truth.

Lao Wang looked at the pattern with his head tilted and said after a few seconds, “Are you sure this is a residence for people?”

After listening to the old man’s words, I asked him what he meant. He said, “You’ve studied architecture for so many years, can’t you read it? Look at the lighting in this house.”

I said to myself, *I can read design drawings, but I can’t understand “Yangshi Lei” because it isn’t drawn by national standard software.* After a brief look at it, I suddenly realized that it had nothing to do with the design. The problem was the layout of the house. I leaned down to confirm the north,

south, east, and west corners. After a gentle nudge in the right direction, my mind started buzzing with excitement. There really was a problem.

This house was designed in such a way that almost all the rooms under the eaves couldn't get any sunlight. Moreover, there wasn't any reflected light. It was possible that even when the sun outside was high in the sky, the interior of the building would be very dark.

"This..."

"This is a dark house."

How could "Yangshi Lei" design such a house? After this second push, I found that the house had been very cleverly designed so it would deliberately avoid light. Although doing so didn't guarantee that no light would get in at all, it could at least be confirmed that the layout was intentional.

Could the people living in this house not see the sun? Were they vampires? What bullshit.

I suddenly thought of "Sunglasses Kid". Could the people in this house be sensitive to strong light just like him? Or was it the emperor's whim to build a house to hide cats?

"Have you ever seen such a house before?" I asked the old man. He frowned and shook his head: "It's the opposite. This house is uninhabitable. I do know of a place in ancient times that had similar requirements, but it wasn't as strict."

"Where?" I asked.

"Yizhuang."

"Yizhuang? Such a big house is full of dead people?"

That was definitely impossible. Yizhuang wouldn't have been built on such a large scale. I could clearly tell that this house had many different structures and must have been an ordinary residence in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

"Where did you get this?" The old man asked me.

I naturally couldn't tell him the truth and just said that I got it from the market. The old man was obviously quite interested, so he asked me to transfer it to him and let him study it carefully.

I obviously didn't want to, but considering that it was of little use on my side, I asked him if he could make some inquiries in the industry to help me find out more about it. If there was any progress, then it would be fine to give it to him for nothing.

This was quite a genuine gift, and the old man readily promised not to mention it. He tried every means to keep me there that night and invited me to drink.

The old man lived alone and was relatively lonely in his later years. Before coming here, I had thought of spending some time with him and talking with him, so I ended up staying. The two of us drank half a kilo of wine, and he and I talked about "Yangshi Lei" at great length.

He told me that "Yangshi Lei" was actually a family of craftsmen in the late Ming Dynasty, and by the Qing Dynasty, the first generation of people entering the palace was Lei craftsmen. At that time, Kangxi rebuilt the Hall of Supreme Harmony⁶, and on the day the upper beam was to be placed, Kangxi led the civil and military ministers to pay tribute in person. The girder was old, however, and its eye didn't align properly, so it couldn't fall into place. The Chief of the Ministry of Industry looked up in astonishment, fearing that there would be a mistake in the upper beam's auspicious moment, so he hurried to find Lei and awarded him the crown service. Lei grabbed his axe sleeve, climbed up the beam, and lifted up his steel axe. They only heard "boom, boom, boom" three times before the wooden beam

⁶ Aka Taihe Hall

“slammed” and fell steadily. The drums and music instantly joined together, and the military and civilian officials shouted “Long live” three times. Emperor Kangxi’s dragon heart was greatly pleased and he wanted to reward Lei for his accomplishment. He immediately summoned Lei and gave him the position of Retainer of the Ministry of Industry and Design. As a result, people started singing a ballad that went “There was Lu Ban, now there’s Long Ban.”⁷ Under the Emperor’s orders, awarded the crown service at that palace”. Since then, the “Yangshi Lei” had been on the rise. During the time when Lei’s son, Lei Jinyu, was active, he was already the leader of the Yangshi Lei class and it was said his craftsmanship was even more superb. It could imitate Western precision clocks and watches, and integrate Western machinery with Chinese tradition. In addition to large buildings, he also made many strange and ingenious things in the palace.

I also knew a lot about “Yangshi Lei” and wasn’t interested in it, so I asked the old man if he knew how it had declined.

The old man said that no one knew. There were many theories, and it was said that the last “Yangshi Lei” offended the queen mother by saying that the Qing dynasty was weak and unable to build large buildings. But there was also another theory, and he didn’t know whether it was true or not.

The old man had drunk a little too much, and when I said I wanted to hear more about it, he became serious and lowered his voice: “We all know that the rulers of the Qing Dynasty weren’t Han-Chinese. They were a nomadic people who placed roots on the other side of the Shanhai Pass.⁸ After the Mongolian emperors died, the bodies would be transported to places outside the Shanhai Pass to be buried. Legend has it that when the Qing rulers entered Shanhai Pass, Prince Regent Dourgen didn’t know how long the Qing regime would last, so he shipped all the jewelry and property he had and ordered it to be buried outside the Pass. The emperor was also

⁷ Lu Ban was a famous carpenter born way before Lei. “Long Ban” means “retainer”, which is referring to Lei.

⁸ Throughout Chinese history, Shanhai Pass (山海关, often simplified as “关”, meaning “The Pass”) served as a frontline defensive outpost against ethnic groups that weren’t Han-Chinese. The rulers during the Qing Dynasty were Manchu people, and it was safe to say they lived outside of Shanhai Pass. The Battle of Shanhai Pass was a decisive battle leading to the formation of the Qing Dynasty in China. Since they successfully breached the frontier, the action of that is then called “enter the Pass” (入关).

buried outside the Pass, and it was only when the situation became stable that the Dongxi tombs were built inside the Pass. But it's said that this was only a cover because the royal family was always paranoid. The Dongxi tombs were fake, and it was actually the eunuchs and maids that were buried there. Most of the Qing emperors were buried in secret places outside the Pass after their death. 'Yangshi Lei' had so many strange patterns, but we don't know what they were for. I think they were used in the imperial tombs outside the Pass. Although 'Yangshi Lei' didn't take part in the construction of specific imperial tombs, most of the internal designs stemmed from this style. When the late Qing Dynasty was declining, they would naturally be persecuted. Fortunately, the situation was chaotic at that time and the court had no time to take care of that many things in the area. Otherwise, I'm afraid that would be the end of 'Yangshi Lei'."

I was stunned: "The Dongxi tombs are huge in scale. How can they be fake?"

"This is the power of Qing Dynasty rulers, rather than deliberating over every imperial tomb, it's better to make a huge fake goal to attract everyone's attention. I figure that if there is such a group of imperial tombs outside the Pass, it must be in Changbai Mountain or Xing'an Mountain."

My heart thumped and I immediately thought of the Jurchen characters and huge underground mountains I had seen in Changbai Mountain at that time.

"But this is all rumor and can't be verified." The old man said, "You see, Genghis Khan's tomb hasn't been discovered yet. The possibility of exploring the tomb outside the Pass is too low. Even if there were a hundred of your Uncle Three, I'm afraid he still wouldn't find it in his lifetime."

This was also true, and I nodded as I unavoidably broke out in a cold sweat. I really hadn't heard of this. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty had ransacked inside the Pass for many years, and many researchers had found that the weakness in the late Qing Dynasty wasn't normal. I didn't know if the emperor had actually buried any property at that time, but if he did, it may be a larger group of tombs than the mysterious Mongolian imperial tombs.

When the old man said this, he drank some more and soon became delirious. I took my leave and immediately went back to the hotel. I researched the lighting on the Yangshi Lei house, but I didn't find much.

I figured it would be a protracted tug-of-war after this, so I thought I'd go back to Hangzhou first. I was now in charge of Uncle Three's business, so I couldn't let it decline, and thought it should still be there when he showed up. What I didn't expect, however, was that the old man would come to me in the morning with two people.

Both of them were about the same age as him. One was surnamed Ruan and the other was surnamed Fang. Once they made their introductions, I realized they were all three famous brokers in Beijing, Changsha, and Shanghai.

When they came up, they shook hands with me warmly and said many compliments, which I found puzzling. We sat down in the hotel lobby, and the old man cut to the chase and said, "These two have come up with a high price for your 'design'. Although you didn't take any money yesterday, the price they offered is a bit high. I wasn't sure if you'd change your mind."

The old man was also quite rich, so if he said the price was high, it must have been outrageous. The man surnamed Ruan immediately reached out and said a lot of complimentary things. He was clearly an expert and very old school.

In antique trading, stall trading wasn't like "bargaining". Once you shook hands and moved a few fingers, there was a fixed way to communicate.

Since the price he offered was really high, I stretched my hand out and shook it. It could be argued that it went beyond the scope of the "Yangshi Lei's" value, but after staying at Uncle Three's and seeing the real deal, I wasn't surprised by the price he offered. What did surprise me were the calluses on the old man's hand. The second section of his fingers was full of them. This was called "coffin callus", and was made when the coffin boards

would grind against the fingers as the coffin was being lifted up. Even if this guy wasn't a master grave robber, he had to have experience.

I was very calm during all of this and felt as if I had the air of a great master. I said, "If I sell it to you at this price, the experts will think I've cheated you, and it won't be good for my reputation. Besides, I still have use for this thing, so I really can't give it to you. Tell your client that you're sorry and you had to give up."

He stretched out his hand and tried to compete— obviously wanting to increase the price—but I raised my hand and refused. I was holding the tea cup in my hand, which was called "duan". Doing this was equivalent to a break in negotiations, and showed them that I definitely wouldn't sell it.

The two men looked downcast, and then one of them said, "Then make a direct offer. To be honest, my client really likes this stuff. If you have a price in your heart, just say it."

I said to myself, *If I want to drive the price up to a million yuan, can you handle that?* I couldn't help but think that his client probably knew something about this design, so I curiously asked, "What's the use of this thing?"

"We don't know either." He said, "If clients like it, we have to find it for them. We generally can't ask too many questions."

At this moment, the old man winked at me. I knew his thoughts were the same as mine, and he just wanted to see if I could come up with something. He quickly said, "You two go back and talk to your clients face to face. Money is a small matter. I also want to be involved, so that I can have an explanation when others ask about it."

The two men looked embarrassed, however, and said, "I'm afraid we can't see that person."

Chapter 5 Auction

I couldn't help but wonder at the embarrassed looks on their faces, so I asked what they meant.

The old man knocked a few times on the table, and then the two men revealed something interesting. It turned out that the client behind this business had a very strange status. They only knew that she was a woman surnamed Huo, and others in the circle called her Granny Huo. Other than that, they didn't know any more details. Although this woman was mysterious, she was very famous. She was even nicknamed "Huo Xiang" ⁹, which meant that everyone knew she existed, but no one had ever seen her.

The old man had obviously heard of her and took a deep breath: "Oh, a big shot. In the Changsha Mystic Nine, Granny Huo from Baishajing was the only woman. She had a son who went to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek, but during the Cultural Revolution their old background was revealed and the Huo family disappeared. I met this Huo Xiang once. She's the Huo's third daughter. It was really a chance meeting." As he spoke, he took out a business card from his pocket. "Gentlemen, this is my card. Please let them know that Zheng Zhong from Xishan would like to meet and talk. I won't take up too much of their time."

The two men nodded: "If there's a connection, you can try it. We'll let the two of you know if there's any good news." With that said, they didn't want to stay any longer and took their leave.

I found the old man's old-fashioned approach amusing. *Is all this necessary? And passing over a card, do you think you're a gangster?*

The old man immediately explained, "That's the Mystic Nine for you. People will bend over backwards for them in order to jump-start their careers. Anything to keep food on the table. This Huo Xiang Granny Huo is probably over eighty, and her husband is extremely arrogant. She usually lives in

⁹ Immortal Huo or Sorceress Huo, take your pick

seclusion and only deals with antiques. If she doesn't like you, I'm afraid she won't talk to you at all. Besides, I have to remind you that your grandfather Old Dog Wu was said to have a lot of dealings with her. I don't know whether they were good or bad, but to be on the safe side, you'd better not talk too much."

When I learned this, I didn't take it to heart. I merely thought the plot of this martial arts novel was ridiculous. It wasn't like we were filming a drama or something.

After that, I went back to Changsha. The old man said it was inconvenient for him to accompany me, but I was a descendant of Old Dog Wu. I was going as a representative of the Wu family, so I couldn't show my weakness in front of others and needed to take a few people with me to show some style. If I were to go in front of Huo Xiangyu alone, it would be embarrassing and I would certainly make a fool of myself with my ability. At that time, it would have a big impact on my reputation.

What the old man said really made sense. Although I had rich experience in the field, the "human heart was far more sinister than ghosts and gods." I didn't know the rules of these underworld events, and really couldn't handle it alone.

But to tell you the truth, there weren't many people I could bring from Uncle Three's group, so there wasn't any need to think about it. I only had Wang Meng, but he was worse than me, and would only cause trouble. He also wasn't an insider, so it wasn't fair to drag him into the water. Lao Hai?¹⁰ No, that old boy was a wily old fox and definitely wouldn't do things that weren't good for him and had a high risk. Pan Zi was the most suitable candidate, but he had decided to retire. After so many years of life and death, it wasn't easy to have a good end, so I decided not to spoil it for him.

¹⁰ Lao Hai is that antique dealer Wu Xie sold the jade shroud to from the Cavern of Zombies

Of course, there was one person who was the most suitable, but he was so unreliable that he was bound to bring me trouble. I really didn't want to think of it, but I didn't seem to have any other choice.

After discussing it with the old man, he said, "The man you mentioned is a minor celebrity in Beijing so I don't think it will be a bad thing. Moreover, everyone knows his temper. If something goes wrong, it's totally normal and we'll have an excuse. I think he's a suitable candidate. But are you sure you can get him to come?"

My heart said that Fatty had nothing else to do, so I immediately called him for help. Fatty was in a panic when he was idle, and promised that he was an expert in negotiation and that I should leave it all to him. When the time came, I would have the face to stand in front of Granny Huo. He then asked when I would come, and invited me out to drink first.

As soon as Fatty said this, I immediately regretted my decision. His words were only half believable, and based on his past behavior, I suddenly felt that things might get worse.

But I couldn't go back on my word after I called him, and there was no other way. I had to leave it to fate.

To make a long story short, three days passed quickly. Fatty and I met in Wangfujing, Beijing and I was surprised to see Poker-Face following him. The two of them wearing suits— one fat and one thin, one tall and one short— were quite eye-catching.

Accustomed to seeing them in casual attire, I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. Poker-Face had a well-proportioned figure and no facial expression, but he looked very smart in his suit and was extremely eye-catching. Fatty's suit, on the other hand, didn't fit very well. The tie looked like fried dough sticks and the suit was obviously one size too small. I don't even want to mention how poor it was.

"Is this a joke?" I said helplessly, "Which shop made this suit for you? I'll burn it down."

“It’s not the tailor’s fault. I’ve been eating well recently. This suit was just right a year ago.” Fatty was also uncomfortable in it. “I have a right to wear whatever size suit I want. That old woman has to let me in, even if I want to wear children’s clothes.”

“Well, if you’re so sure, then you go on ahead.” I didn’t have any plans to keep talking nonsense with him and felt more and more that the Wu family’s reputation may be destroyed by my hands today.

The place we agreed to meet with Huo Xiangu was called Crescent Hotel, which was an old hotel left over from old Beijing. I thought it was just a common place, but Fatty told me that people who dealt in antiques in Beijing all knew that Crescent Hotel was the place where real connoisseurs stayed. Compared with here, Liulichang and Panjiayuan were mere stalls. All these transactions were conducted in the hotel’s third-floor theater. In the past, this was the place where eunuchs traded with foreigners, and the entrance and exit all required formal attire. Therefore, in sticking with this tradition, no matter how rich you were, you could never get in wearing only a pair of underwear.

This was the first time that I had ever been here, and I was a little nervous. From the lobby to the elevator, and up to the third floor, my eyes were full of Chinese-style interior screens with carved windows and doors. Fatty had been here before and was very familiar with it. He called a man over and introduced me to him: “This is the little master of the Wu family from Changsha.”

The man was wearing glasses and was over sixty years old. He looked at me and didn’t show any expression: “Would you like to sit in a private room or the lobby?”

Fatty asked me what time the appointment was. I looked at my watch and saw we still had half an hour. Just as I was about to speak, the man saw Poker-face behind me and his face instantly changed.

I thought he knew Poker-Face, but when I was about to start asking questions, I saw a man come out from behind Poker-Face. He must have followed us in. The man was dressed in a black suit with a pink shirt underneath and no tie. He was very relaxed. The man went up immediately and asked, “Young Master, the usual?”

The man didn’t speak, but looked at me and stopped. I suddenly felt that he was a little familiar.

Chapter 6 Auction Part II

I lived in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, so I honestly didn't have a lot of chances to meet acquaintances in Beijing. At this moment, my mind was stuck, and I couldn't remember who this man was, but I smiled reflexively. The man had obviously stopped like me and was looking at me with a very surprised and puzzled expression on his face before he also smiled.

Fatty looked at the both of us in surprise. He claimed to be a local celebrity all the time, and we all hung out with him, so he obviously didn't expect that I would be recognized here.

The both of us smiled pervertedly¹¹ at each other for a long time, but neither recognized the other. Honestly, when I looked at him, I felt as if I had seen him somewhere before. But on closer reflection, that was all it was. I simply felt that he was familiar.

This had happened to me before. In the past, there was an elder sister in our circle, known as Sister Six, who often appeared in the newspaper's Jianbao and Guqu columns. I didn't know her and only saw her picture on the internet. When I saw her sometime later at a party, I was stunned and asked where I had seen her before. I really couldn't remember, but her husband eventually became angry.

But this guy didn't look like he often appeared in the newspaper. I couldn't even be sure if what I was feeling was really a sense of familiarity.

The two of us shared a look, but we really couldn't remember and were both a little embarrassed. The old fellow with glasses was amused. These old Beijingers were slick and had seen all kinds of things. He gave us a roundabout: "Do the two young masters know each other? Let's not stand here blocking the elevator door. When you meet someone you know, you'll remember."

¹¹ Tiffany said the author legit put "pervertedly" in there so it had to be included ofc. Wu Xie always cracks me up.

As he said this, he invited the other party in. Pink Shirt shook his head as if it was inconceivable, looked at me thoughtfully, and then turned and walked into the inner hall. He had only taken a few steps when he looked back at me again.

After that, the old man came back to greet us again and took us in the other direction. It was the norm in these old circles to have us sit further away from that man. He took a seat, so it made sense to be polite and not commit any taboos. If I really couldn't think of it no matter how hard I tried, then there was no use worrying about it. It wasn't like I'd have to fight him immediately if I discovered that he was a creditor or an enemy who killed my father.

All the rules had to be followed at the foot of the Imperial City because no one knew all the ins and outs of the other party. It was only by following the principle of seven points for flattery and three points for success that one could be in an invincible position. The same was true for officials and waiters.

When I entered the inner hall, I found that this really was a restaurant that had been converted from a theater. There were two floors in the hall: the lower floor had loose seating and the upper floor had private rooms. The middle of the hall was hollowed out up to the ceiling, and there was a stage there. I could tell that not only was Peking Opera performed here, but more traditional programs were usually performed as well. Many old Beijingers here liked to listen to these things in such an environment. In the old days, the streets were filled with money to spend on such things, but now they had become something that the newly rich often enjoyed.

The stage was empty right now, but I noticed that there was something on it. Fatty glanced at it and said, "It's better to meet up with Granny Huo sooner rather than later. It looks like there will be an auction today."

"An auction? Auction of what?" I wondered.

“What else can be sold in this place? This is the most high-end place in the northern capital city of Beijing. Compared with this place, Hong Kong Jiaxide is a stall!” Fatty grinned. “But there are a large number of items here that you generally can’t see on the market; the kind of things we can only hear about. I guess this Granny Huo is also here for the auction today, and meeting with us won’t delay her other business.”

Fatty’s tone had changed completely. He had been speaking in a very strong Beijing accent ever since he entered the door just now, as if he were in a movie. What was even more strange was that my tone had changed as well. No wonder my tongue felt so weird. I said to myself, *this place and the guys here are really fucking strong*. It was probably because it smelled like old Beijing as soon as you came in. You got sucked into the plot before you knew it, and when you were held up by others, you really regarded yourself as a dude in Beijing city from that time.

I was afraid this was also a learning experience. When the auction began, the Beijing host would pick up a sheet and hold it, and the bidders would be unable to resist raising their hands, even if they didn’t want to.

The three of us were taken to the nearby window and sat down. I looked over subconsciously and saw that Pink Shirt had gone straight upstairs, which looked different from our level. Fatty asked me, “What’s up with you and him? Love at first sight?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t figure out why. Where the hell had he and I met? I would have to think about it when I got back home. Fatty ordered the cheapest tea, which cost eighteen hundred yuan per pot, with a ten percent service charge. Fatty turned the cup upside down, saying that this wasn’t tea at all, but Yang Guifei’s¹² saliva. Shit, the tea dregs should be packed and taken back to soak in wine.

¹² She was the highest-ranking imperial consort during her time and known as one of the Four Beauties of ancient China. She was the beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang during his later years. Here’s her wikipedia [page](#)

Poker-face was quiet and seemed like a very competent bodyguard, but for some reason, the more I looked at us, the more I felt that we looked like goons working for a big boss.

We chatted while we waited there, and unknowingly smashed three plates of sunflower seeds. Fortunately, they were free. As we looked at the groups of people coming in the door, I found that Fatty's face was a little uncomfortable and he looked a little distracted. His eyes often glanced away and he looked strange, so I asked him what was wrong. "Damn it, this is an interesting day," he said.

"What's wrong, did you see a beauty?" I asked. I had only seen a few middle-aged women, although they were well maintained.

He glanced at those in the upper box and the others at the lower tables and said: "Do you know who I saw just now?"

"Who?"

"Liuli Sun," Fatty whispered.

"Who's Liuli Sun?" It didn't sound familiar.

"You've never lived in Beijing, so you don't know. It's a big family that runs an investment company overseas. In the past, he used to trade liuli beads but then mysteriously became a wealthy master. His home is full of treasures, so in his eyes, ordinary things are completely despicable. He only appears when there's a genuine high-level treasure, and he's recently become a trend indicator in Beijing City. When he goes to any auction now, it basically means there are top-notch goods. Damn it, he hasn't shown up for two or three years. Why is he here?" The fact that Fatty couldn't sit still in his seat piqued my interest.

I turned to look and saw that Liuli Sun was over sixty years old. He had a white head of hair and was playing with two walnuts in his hand as he strode to the second floor. I couldn't help but feel a slight yearning for that second floor.

Fatty continued, "It's not only him. During the entire time I've been watching, all key members of this industry have arrived. We were right, there's bound to be a good show today. It may even be a rare one-in-a-hundred years event. No, I can't stand it anymore, I have to find an auction brochure to see what the fuck is being auctioned today." With that said, he was about to get up again.

I was just about to remind him that our business wasn't to watch the auction, but the man who had shown us our seats came over and whispered, "You three, Madam Huo is here. Please go upstairs."

Chapter 7 Granny Huo

When the man said this, he made a gesture of invitation while bowing. His posture was very respectful and his expression was very positive, but I saw no signs of flattery. He held this position, leaving us with no time to discuss and plan since we had to get up and go immediately.

Fatty and I looked at each other, and my heart said, *shit*. We had been looking at the door the entire time but didn't see any old lady come in. It appeared she had been on the second floor before we came in and was waiting for us to come up. Maybe she could even see everything we were doing here.

I didn't know where I had heard it before, but I knew her purpose was to demoralize us. It was probably an old antique dealer trick and I couldn't help but feel even more nervous. Although I was only a little boss of the second generation, I was the eldest grandson of the Wu family and the young master of Uncle Three's shop. I had never been treated so disrespectfully, and no one had dared do this kind of thing to me. As I thought about the man's straightened waist and back as he bowed, my heart was unconvinced.

Fatty was naturally upset, and immediately frowned. He shook out his small suit and winked at Poker-face. "Little Brother, get in line. Let's give Mr. Naïve's comrades a good thrashing." The three of us stood up and followed the man to the stair entrance with our heads held high.

Compared with the first floor, the second floor had some western decorations, which was also a characteristic of old Beijing. It was full of private rooms facing the central stage on one side, where there were tables for eating and watching the plays. There were automatic mahjong machines on the other side that faced the street.

We walked halfway down the circular corridor and came to the door of a huge private room. The entrance was a large screen door carved with flowers and was much bigger than the hotel's door. Two young men in casual clothes were standing upright on either side of the door, looking like

soldiers. There was a carved sign of elmwood on the lintel that read “Caihe Hall.”

“Her bracelets are often wound by the lotus stems, the water may stain her makeup. Heedless of the wet sleeves, she sees only the fragrant green leaves. The name of this room comes from Liu Xiaochuo’s ‘Seeing a Beauty Picking Lotus from Afar’.”

The waiter read the poem aloud like a tongue twister and had hardly finished when he said, “You three, this is it. Please go in.” Then he immediately left.

I said to myself, *this waiter is extremely meticulous*. Just now, we were respectfully asked to come here, which made it difficult to refuse. Naturally, he did that to force us to keep the appointment, so he didn’t have to explain why we were delayed even though we arrived on time. When we arrived, he left immediately because he didn’t know what would happen next. If he left as quickly as possible, then he wouldn’t see or hear anything, much less have to worry about right or wrong.

These were typical characteristics of people mixed up in a complex venue and had become a habit for them. It appeared the hierarchy here was very complex.

While I was thinking all this, the two men had already opened the door. There were three or four layers of coral bead curtains, so we lifted them to walk inside and immediately smelled the fragrance of Tibetan incense. Tibetan incense was a Buddhist product and also had the effect of keeping one in good health. It appeared the host had high taste.

There was a large space inside, with a high ceiling, crystal chandeliers, copper-colored ceiling fans, and carved copper-green lotus flowers on the pillars. Seven or eight people were eating around a large, round table. A screen was placed where the stage could normally be seen, temporarily blocking it.

As soon as we came in, the people at the table stopped eating and looked at us. We saw two middle-aged women, three children, and several middle-aged men. My attention was naturally focused on the two women, but as soon as I looked at them, I found that they weren't Granny Huo. Although they were middle-aged, they were too young.

Fatty and I looked at each other, then at Poker-face. We didn't know what to say. Did she go to the bathroom, or was this another deliberate attempt to mess with us? That arrogance was too much! Or did this old woman have skin like Madonna?

Thinking that the other party was an old lady, I put up with it and looked at them and said, "Excuse me, is Madam Huo here?"

Just after asking, I heard someone behind the screen say, "This way."

The voice was very delicate. I was stunned and looked at Fatty again, but he gave me a push and whispered, "Take it easy. Don't look at me all the time. I'm your attendant now."

Once I thought about it, it seemed that Fatty was already in character, so I repeated the following mantra in my head a few times, *I'm a gangster. I'm a gangster. I walk with the wind. I walk with the wind.* This was a psychological trick to get me pumped up and it really worked. The soles of my feet were hot and I really felt full of energy, so I raised my head up and went behind the screen.

To tell you the truth, I was actually a little nervous, but this kind of tension wasn't the same as what I felt in a tomb. It was hard to say whether it was "nervousness" or "uncertainty" because I wasn't the type of person who got into these kinds of situations often. I had no idea how I was supposed to behave and could only deal with it with a kind of "arrogance" in my heart.

After a few steps, I saw the person behind the screen. The space behind it was also very large, and I could see a small carved table with a tea set on it. Of the three people seated around it, I immediately saw an old woman with

silver hair drinking tea. She was dressed in a purple Tang costume and her face was white.

This wasn't the kind of white you got from being sick. In fact, it would be considered really amazing if it was on a young girl. The phrase I immediately thought of was "white as snow", but this old lady didn't even have a trace of the color spots you'd normally see on old people. Instead, she was completely white, with white wrinkles and silver hair. My first impression was that she had been carved from jade, and I immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

Only her eyes were black, and they were very striking compared to the whiteness of the rest of her face. When she looked at us, I couldn't help staring straight into her eyes. At that moment, I almost thought I was looking at a forbidden woman.

There were two people next to her: one was a young girl and the other was a middle-aged woman. The girl didn't even look at us as she quietly chatted with the woman. I couldn't clearly see what she looked like, but both women were also very white. This kind of white on them was very comfortable, however, especially the young girl. Her side profile looked very delicate and pure, with a temperament like jade, but vaguely giving off a charming feeling, which was very comfortable.

At that time, I was unable to respond to the situation, so Fatty gave me another jab in the back. I was shocked and immediately smiled, "Madam Huo, I'm Wu Xie. Hello. I'm not disturbing your rest, am I?" I reached out and wanted to shake hands with her.

This was my habit when talking business, and I didn't realize it was wrong until I reached out—this greeting was too philistine. I immediately drew my hand back and took advantage of the opportunity to pat my hair down.

The move must have looked very ridiculous. I cursed in my heart but pretended to be calm. The old lady looked me up and down, took a sip of tea, and said indifferently, "Indeed, you're a bit similar to Old Dog Wu.

Others told me, but I still didn't believe it. It turns out that this smelly dog really had offspring."

I smiled bitterly and sourly thought, *did you really have an affair with my grandpa?* I didn't know how to answer, so I simply smiled.

The old lady continued to look at me. Seeing that I only knew how to smile without answering, she sighed, "You look more like him when smiling. You must be a nasty piece of work." She took a sip of tea and didn't ask me to sit down. She then asked, "Do you want to sell or not? Why do you have to see me for such a simple thing? Maybe your grandmother asked you to meet me and see how her old friend is?"

Ouch, her mouth was so sour that acid must have been bubbling up. Grandpa, I didn't realize you had left such an impression. When you were young, you really made some "history."

But at the same time, I felt a little upset. This didn't seem like the tone of a tea talk at all. *Not asking me to sit down, do you want me to finish and leave?* She obviously wasn't treating me as a guest, and how the hell was I supposed to answer that question? This was totally a cross-time feud that was at least half a century old. I didn't know what had happened between her and my grandparents, but this Huo Xiangu was really too much if she was still holding a grudge after all this time.

I scratched my head and thought hard before saying, "Don't get me wrong, I'm here for business. In fact, I haven't seen my grandmother for a long time, and she's been staying at home ever since grandpa died."

"It's because she had poor eyesight and married a short-lived man." The old lady snorted coldly, "You said you're here to talk business. Are you ready to deliver the goods, or do you want to bargain again?"

I thought for a moment about what I should say. Should I cut to the chase, or beat around the bush for a while? On second thought, if the old lady really wanted to make things difficult for me, I was afraid she'd talk and

reminiscence too much. It would be difficult to be civil when the words were so harsh. It would be better to get straight to the point and come clean.

I immediately said: “In fact, that thing means little to me. I just want to know why you paid such a high price for it. I’m looking into something that may have something to do with the situation. If you tell me, I’ll sell it—”

Before I had finished speaking, Fatty gave me a push from behind, and mumbled very quietly: “It’ll be stupid to squander any money-making opportunities.”

I paused. It wasn’t a small sum of money. I had put all my productivity into the field these past few times but had nothing to show for it. This was a windfall, and I could solve a lot of problems with it. I could at least pay off the utilities in my shop. I immediately changed my mind and said: “—never mind, I’ll sell it to you cleanly.”

The old lady looked at Fatty. I didn’t know if she had heard him, but she didn’t say anything besides, “Do you want to know about this house designed by Yangshi Lei?”

I nodded, “Yes.”

The old lady leaned back in her chair and thought for a moment, “Yes, I can tell you. But it’s not up to you to ask. Have your grandmother ask me.”

I paused. Fuck, what kind of call was this? I immediately said: “Madam, let’s not joke around. We don’t need to disturb my grandmother for this matter.”

“A joke? You can ask around. I, Huo Xiang, never joke about business. Your grandmother and I are childhood friends. We haven’t seen each other for decades. Living pathetically in Hangzhou... how can it be a joke that I ask her to come and see me?” She said primly. “We’re done. Go back and discuss it with your grandmother. If she refuses to come forward, I won’t think you’re serious about it. If she doesn’t want to come, you needn’t come again either. I like that drawing, but I don’t need it either.”

I had no idea what to do as soon as I heard this. I felt a little depressed, but I couldn't be angry. I could only blame my grandpa for cheating— or whatever he did— which caused me such a disaster. I knew very well in my heart that this old lady wasn't easy to deal with. She wanted to embarrass me from the beginning, and maybe this was the reason why she agreed to see me.

The old lady had a sly character. She relied on her experience and flaunted her old age to pressure me with my elders. She must have been a hot young sister before, which was really my grandpa's favorite type.

I thought about it, but there was nothing I could do when an old lady was cheating me. I was sweating so much that my eyes couldn't help but look at Fatty. As if he didn't see her, he gave me a wink and whispered, "If she's being unreasonable, you can too. Sit down first."

As soon as I heard this, my heart did a somersault. I didn't save any face and sat down on the stool in front of the old lady.

Her brow furrowed and my heart became even more tense, but my mouth refused to admit defeat. "Madam, this matter is very important to me. You can't play me like this. If you do, then I won't give up, and the three of us will follow you later. If you want to go home, we'll follow you there. And we'll continue to follow you wherever you go."

As I spoke, I looked up to see her reaction, but it wasn't what I had been expecting. Her face was suddenly a little ugly and she ignored my explanation as she immediately scolded me, "Who let you sit down? Stand up!"

I was speechless. I didn't think she would turn against me, but now that I had decided to be unreasonable, I wasn't a quitter either. I immediately shook my head: "If you don't promise me, I won't stand up!"

"Ah Xue, call Xiao Zhang and Xiao Li to throw these scoundrels out." The old lady immediately got angry.

I couldn't understand her sudden anger, but when she said this, the middle-aged woman and the young girl looked at us. The young girl glanced at the old lady and then stood up, apparently to go do as she was told. Fatty immediately remembered his duty and stepped forward: "What's the matter? My young master is only sitting on your broken stool. What's so strange about this stool? If he farts will it be fragrant? Old lady, we're in the twenty-first century, and the law doesn't punish scoundrels. If you look for someone to kick us out, it'll show people how narrow-minded the Huo family is. My young master respects the elderly, but I'm really a rotten rascal. If I smashed this place while fighting your bodyguards, I'm afraid it would harm your family's reputation. If it hurts you, it's even worse, right?"

The young girl laughed and said, "You don't know. This isn't a place where you can sit if you want. If you sit, the consequences are—"

The old lady suddenly motioned with her hand to stop the young girl from going on. I watched as her face gradually softened and was replaced by an indescribable expression. "Let them sit if they want. Let them sit," she said coldly.

When I looked at her expression, I suddenly had a foreboding feeling in my heart. Was there a spring under this stool that would eject me later? *No*, I thought, *I can't do this. I've come too far*. I came here on business, so I could endure it for a while. I was thinking about how to ease the atmosphere and said, "Madam, I really mean it. Please don't fool me. I don't know about your grudges with my grandmother. If my grandfather did something wrong to you, why don't you slap me?"

The old lady didn't look at me, but looked at her watch and said to me, "You're so stubborn, Master Wu. But don't ask me now. Even if you ask, I won't tell you anything. Just sit here until 4:30. If you can, I won't be hard on you anymore."

"Sit here?"

“Yes, just sit here alone. Don’t worry, you won’t be bored.” The old lady said, looking at the area downstairs. Suddenly, we heard a bell ringing downstairs.

I suddenly had a more ominous feeling. The old lady didn’t look at me but turned her face to the stage downstairs. Then, the curtains throughout the whole building were pulled one by one, and it became dark all around. The huge chandelier in the center was turned on, and the magnificent lights and shadows moved. Under this kind of light, the old appliances, carpets, and curtains suddenly became very dim and gorgeous.

Then, the people down below started to stir. The young girl on the side let out a cry of joy and asked the old lady “Has it started yet?”

The old lady nodded: “Here we go. Look, we’ll have a good show today.”

Chapter 8: Feast for Collectors

As I looked at the tables and display stands being set up on the stage below, I immediately knew that the auction I had just seen on the notice downstairs was about to start. The dark environment and noisy voices suddenly made me feel a little guilty. Seeing the old woman's blank expression, I had a premonition that I might have done something stupid, and it must have something to do with this auction.

A thought flashed through my mind, but I couldn't seem to catch it. I only felt like the stool under my ass seemed to be made of thorns and started to feel uncomfortable.

My self-esteem had me pretending to be calm, but based on my current level, it was difficult to completely hide my anxiety from the circle's bigwigs. It might have been better to stand up at this time and admit defeat. I was very conflicted, but after thinking it over, I decided to save face and wait.

I looked at how Fatty was holding up and noticed he also seemed a little nervous. This wasn't his territory, and it seemed that he was also feeling a little guilty. But on second thought, we went through a mountain of daggers and a sea of flames, so what could happen here? At the very least, we wouldn't lose our heads if we were driven out of here.

With this thought, I immediately relaxed and smiled at the old woman while thinking, *you underestimated me too quickly. I've been on the border of life and death several times. This scene is nothing.*

I sat up and looked at the unfolding situation attentively.

The stage had been quickly set up with an auction table and a display base. A staff member came on stage with a microphone, while others were setting up lights. These people were all wearing waiters' uniforms, and it appeared the auction wasn't being handled by an auction company. It was a private internal auction, and everyone in the industry was playing here.

Fatty had told me just now while we were waiting that the most notable thing about the auction here was that he didn't recognize any experts or scholars, and the emphasis was on the strength of one's vision and connections. Since most of the things sold here couldn't be evaluated, and no one had ever seen them, you didn't have a benchmark for how much to bid. You might feel that it could sell for five million yuan, but if the other party could find someone willing to offer ten million, then you couldn't do anything about it.

In other words, if you wanted to play here, you first needed to know what was being sold and how much it was worth before you could speak. That required getting a response in a very short period of time, so it could be said that this was the place where Beijing's antiques dealers played most heartily.

Moreover, the most frightening thing was that this place could also sell fakes. You had to be a person who could judge things at a glance because fakes that could blend into this place were probably beyond the scope of normal fakes. In popular terms, it was a kind of thing called "original single goods". This was still a recent concept on the internet, where a batch of goods was genuinely produced by real factories but hadn't been shipped. Instead, the factories bypassed the brand manufacturers and sold them themselves. As a result, there was an awkward situation where the quality details were exactly the same as the genuine one, but it wasn't actually the genuine item.

Of course, the original goods in the collection industry weren't the surplus of ancient factories, but what counterfeiters had copied with extremely superb technology to look exactly like the real thing. This thing was definitely a fake, but you couldn't find its flaw through any appraisal. Such things had appeared in today's antique world, and the cost was also very astonishing. It was possible to make only one in a thousand, so it was necessary to find a way to maximize the profit of this excellent product.

As a result, it was bound to appear in the most high-end market.

It was almost impossible to distinguish this kind of fake, and the only way was to rely on intuition. One was the seller's intuition about whether there were tells in the person's manner and psychology, and the other was the sixth sense of dealing with this kind of antique. In addition, there were also a few people who could judge based on some of the artistic details. Blue-and-white porcelain was one example. The whole porcelain was perfect, but some artists could see the problem from the brushwork. After all, the ancient porcelain masters put on the blue-and-white glaze, and that kind of verve couldn't be imitated by today's meticulous masters. But this aspect of the problem was often difficult to prove because the quality of art was in the eye of the beholder.

To sum it up, the auction here could be said to be a top-level feast of insight, where anything and everything could happen. This time, Fatty had seen several emperors in the collection circle, and Granny Huo was also here. Obviously, the flies smelled something fishy here, so there had to be something great. Thinking about it also had me a little excited.

The noise below soon grew louder and louder. The equipment was adjusted, and a female MC wearing a cheongsam tested the microphone, and then said to all those around: "The auction is about to begin. We ask that you leave the room. We will close the door soon. The venue will be quiet. The attendants will start distributing the auction lists and the attendance book."

The female MC had long hair that went past her shoulders, and I could see that her waist was very thin and her legs were very long. She really felt like a lady of the Republic by wearing the cheongsam. It made me feel even more impressed that a beautiful woman of this quality worked as an MC here.

I remembered the two knockers on my grandfather's old house that were gilded lion-headed knockers of the Song Dynasty. These two knockers were different from other knockers in that they were carved into a ring of ancient jade and were double-layered. In other words, they had been carved through. The jade ring hollow was also carved with jade rings, and the inside was carved with even more rings.

As soon as knowledgeable people saw the knockers, they knew that they were priceless, and were probably worth several times more than the whole house. They had been specially designed by grandpa to tell others about his own power: you see, I directly made the knocker from such expensive things, and I'm not afraid of it being stolen or broken. That shows that the goods in this house are definitely more expensive than this knocker.

Friends who wanted to find cheap goods didn't dare enter when they saw these knockers. In doing business in China, we still had to pay attention to appearances.

I couldn't help but think it was unsurprising that my shop was so depressing, considering I hadn't decorated it for several years. Maybe I should make Wang Meng try on a cheongsam next time.

The noise downstairs was getting louder and louder, and I saw some people leaving the theater one after another. The second floor was a circular structure where countless rooms similar to ours formed a ring. When I faced the center stage down below, I saw that many screens on our side and opposite had been removed, and many people had turned from their tables to the stage.

I looked carefully and saw Pink Shirt in a box on the left side opposite us. It seemed that he was alone and playing on his cell-phone. When Fatty pointed and showed me the box directly across from ours, I noticed it was just as big. He said softly, "Liuli Sun."

That position was a little far from us, and I couldn't see clearly. At that time, I noticed that all the other boxes had similar decorations, along with a thin carving table and several chairs. But no matter how many people were in the box, everyone was sitting on the chair on the left. Only the chair on the right—the seat I was sitting in— was unoccupied. I couldn't help breaking out in a sweat.

Just as I was distracted, someone helped move the screen behind us. A waiter came up with a tray lined with red cloth, upon which was a hardcover

booklet. As soon as I saw him, I found that he was the one who originally came to invite us up. He stepped in front of Granny Huo, and when he saw me, his face suddenly turned green and he was clearly shocked.

It took him a long time to react before he finally managed to ask, "Madam, is your friend in the wrong seat?"

The old woman looked at him: "What? You haven't seen such a spectacle for a long time, so it's unbelievable anyone dares to sit here? It's been more than ten years. No one's dared to sit in this position since old Changsheng sat here. But the items today only appear once in a hundred years, so it's not surprising if people are willing to risk their lives for them. You should add another roster for this Master Wu and wait on him so that you can have a long look."

"Yes ma'am!" The waiter gave me a startled look and immediately turned around. Soon, the same roster was in my hand, and I was presented with a pot of the best tea and four plates of very delicate snacks.

I remembered this pot of tea cost more than seven thousand yuan and was surprised. When I asked him with my eyes, he said, "Boss, this is on the house. Take your time and call us immediately if you need anything." Then he quickly left.

I looked at Fatty, finding it all puzzling and unsettling. He winked at me and told me not to be afraid. As he was saying this, he couldn't wait to look at the roster and had already opened it. After flipping through two pages, I saw his mouth twitch.

Chapter 9: Memories (Part I)

When I immediately grabbed it and took a closer look, I found that there were only two pages in the beautiful cover. The first page was a welcome message, and the second page had a large photo pasted on it. It was of a seal with a square base that had been carved into complicated shapes. It was a very deep lusterless cyan and looked a little familiar.

There were a few lines of handwritten text below it, numbers detailing the size of the things in the photo, and a line of small characters at the bottom: Gui Niu Longyu Yuxi¹³, from Baiyanping, Guzhang County, Hunan province.

The carvings on the seal were very complicated, and I could make out several main shapes. There were several towering evil spirits, and the other parts had scales, but I wasn't sure whether they were fish or dragons. I couldn't see anything strange in the photo even after looking at it for a long time.

I took a deep breath. This thing was a bit big, unlike ordinary people's seals. And looking at the style of the "knob"¹⁴, it should have been from the Warring States period. That was the only time when private seals started appearing. I had seen them on the market three times before. All of them had been animal knobs, but a seal with a ghost knob had never been seen before.

Private seals from the Warring States Period were very rare, but they weren't the best. A small one- or two-centimeter seal could be bought for a hundred thousand yuan, but the square seal here was four centimeters in size and had a peculiar shape, so it was probably an official seal. I was particularly concerned about its name, however, because it was called "Longyu Imperial Seal".

The name must have been given by the seller because the dragon character he mentioned was very important. Once there was a dragon on any seal, it

¹³ It's a Ghost Knob Dragon Fish Imperial Jade Seal

¹⁴ The wording is kind of weird but it's basically the head of the seal, like what you hold onto.

gave rise to the question of whether it was a royal seal or a regular imperial seal. Either way, it was something that could be counted in history, and even a small imperial seal was priceless in this world.

In our country, all unearthed cultural relics automatically belonged to the state. On the surface, it appeared that cultural relics before the Qing Dynasty weren't allowed to be sold, but they could be collected. Moreover, if collectors destroyed their collections, they would be sentenced. In other words, in China, antiques dating back to the Qing Dynasty were like ticking time bombs. If you had them, it was better not to let others know since it wouldn't end well once they found out.

This seal must have been something grave robbers stole. That meant this wasn't a normal auction, but an auction of stolen goods, so now we were all breaking the law in this semi-public auction. If this thing was really valuable, then the authorities may react outrageously. Let me give an exaggerated example. Say we went back twenty years, and you came across an auction like this. If you started shooting an AK-47 at the people on the second floor, you may be praised for serving justice.

I had done a few things that were quite out of line before, but I was in the city of Beijing right now, and right at the emperor's feet. It was common for the average person to conceal any number of small bad things, but with such a big thing taking place, the boss of this restaurant must have grown up eating bear bile. I suddenly thought of Granny Huo's background and thought, *shit, she didn't call the police, right?* I'd have to run when the cops arrived, and that meant she wouldn't have to tell me about the Yangshi Lei house.

On second thought, that wasn't right either. She didn't want me to sit in this seat at that time, as if the person sitting in this position would have special treatment.

Basically, it seemed like this was the only item being sold today, so all these people had come prepared to win. Thinking that, I looked at Pink Shirt, who wasn't far away. He was no longer playing with his phone, but arrogantly

sitting on a western-style sofa, and staring at the ceiling with his arms crossed.

I closed the roster and handed it to Poker-face, who had been playing the role of a cold-faced bodyguard very faithfully. Fatty may have given him a supplementary lesson before coming, but he looked completely indifferent compared to Fatty and me. He didn't look at the roster but put it aside.

Fatty turned pale and whispered to me, "Did you recognize it? It seems we're in the right place."

Although this imperial seal was very powerful, I didn't particularly like this kind of thing, so I wasn't as excited as Fatty. I whispered to him: "Don't distract me, you son of a bitch. I keep feeling like things are going to be bad. You have to take care of this for me. In case we can't, we'll have to withdraw."

Fatty was shocked: "Why are you still thinking about it? Didn't you see what this thing is?" As he said that, he immediately brought the roster back to me and opened it. "Take a closer look at it. Where have we seen this thing?"

"What?" Although I also felt that it was a little familiar, I didn't think about it because of the old lady's strange attitude. After Fatty mentioned it, however, I went to look at it again.

With just a glance, that kind of feeling appeared again. I had apparently seen something similar to this imperial seal before and had thought about it more than once.

I thought about the previous goods and cultural relics I had seen before, but this wasn't one of them. The more I tried to recall, the more panicked I felt. It seemed as if this memory touched something in my heart that I didn't want to face.

When the memory finally surfaced, I involuntarily broke out in a cold sweat. That moment... it was at the bottom of Changbai Mountain, in the depths of

the Heavenly Palace. The person who had been holding it was now standing behind me despite walking into the huge bronze door in the thick fog.

No way, I said to myself, what's going on?

How did this thing appear here?

I didn't know what it was used for, but Poker-face had been holding it, and I was very impressed. To be honest, it was smoky at that time, and there was some distance between us. I wasn't sure whether the seal on the photo was exactly the same as the one he had taken, but even if they were different, there had to be a connection between the two seals.

Chapter 10 Memories (Part II)

Although I wasn't entirely sure that it was the same thing, the color and carvings on it were at least very similar. I figured that even if they were different, they had to be of the same class.

I once wondered if that was the ghost seal mentioned in King Lu's book. Poker-face wouldn't have been posing with it in front of the bronze door unless it had a special function. I didn't expect to see anything similar here.

Shit, I said to myself, *it would be better to catch up as soon as possible*. When I finally remembered, I gave Fatty a wink. He lowered his head and I whispered to him, "Go and ask who the seller is."

Just as Fatty nodded, Granny Huo coolly took a sip of tea and said quietly from the side, "Don't ask. If the seller here doesn't want to be known, then no one can ask."

"Well, old lady, you're not looking down on us, are you?" Fatty asked. "Although I haven't mixed with this Crescent Hotel, I can be regarded as a man with a face of one acre in Beijing. Let me tell you, it's not just boasting. With my personal connections, I can really find anyone in Beijing."

Granny Huo didn't look at him: "The boss here was a dignitary when the Manchu Dynasty in Beijing had an emperor. It has been passed on for hundreds of years and handed down for several generations. Nothing has ever happened. If you can really find out, your young master will have to go to the Yongding River tomorrow to fish you out. These days, the price of collecting corpses is very high. I think you should save some money to deal with things later."

Fatty was angry and immediately wanted to go out to prove it to the old woman. I knew that what she said was true, and wasn't an exaggeration, so I quickly grabbed him. Moreover, Fatty was the one who said malicious words. Even if he had been caught up in the moment, if he really went out and asked, he definitely wouldn't come back until he had some information.

Maybe he would also grab a fellow to torture and extort a confession from in order to earn his face back, and something might happen. The auction was about to start, and I didn't want to cause any trouble, so I said to him, "Give her some face."

Actually, Fatty was giving me face, and even though he was still muttering, he didn't say anything more. As I watched the scene gradually quiet down around me, another thought occurred to me. The easiest way to meet the seller might be to buy it, but was it feasible?

There was only one item for sale here. Everyone had a clear purpose and was a big boss, so I figured the price was beyond mere competition. If I bought the seal and breached the contract, the liquidated damages alone would make me bankrupt. Moreover, this was a black market. If I broke the contract, I might even have to cut off a finger or dig out an eye or something, which would ruin my life.

Even if we did manage to buy it, we might still be left hanging. In this kind of black market, the seller may keep the whole process confidential. And even if he sold his things, he may not show up. At most, he might send an agent to sign the contract with you. Moreover, I figured that the auction process here was different from normal ones.

For today, we could only take it one step at a time. We'd first determine who bought it and then take a long-term view. The unease in my heart had turned chaotic and I had a hunch that something was going on here.

They were moving in an orderly fashion down below, and it wasn't long before everything was arranged. I saw that a glass cabinet had been placed in the middle of the stage and the imperial seal from the roster was placed inside, but I couldn't see it clearly. The cheongsam woman began to speak: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now going to start taking bids. Have a good look. If you can't get it, there won't be a next time."

As she said this, a man wearing a sleeveless waistcoat came out from the side. He had two thick arms and was holding a long bamboo pole. There was

a hook on the head of the bamboo pole and a ring on the top of the glass cabinet. The man used the hook to lift the glass cabinet as if he were fishing. He then hoisted the bamboo pole up, lifting the glass cabinet into the air as if he were hanging clothes with a clothes fork.

The man's hands were very steady as he held the bamboo pole up to the second floor. They didn't even shake at all as he walked along the outer edge of the balcony galleries.

No one spoke as they looked at it a few times while maintaining a distance of about an arm's length. It arrived at the next room in less than half a minute, before eventually arriving in front of me. Fatty immediately leaned over and I also craned my neck to see. It was very close and I could finally see it clearly. I immediately noticed that this thing was made of the same stone as the meteorite jade that made the jade figures.

For a moment, I really wanted to snatch it and tell them to run, but I was able to resist the idea.

It was soon pulled back and returned to the center of the stage, and then the same guy started to lift up bells with his bamboo pole one at a time. When it was her turn, the young girl next to the old woman picked it up and placed it beside the old woman. Those in the other boxes also took one, but I didn't. I figured only those who participated in the auction had bells, so I didn't care too much.

I thought the auction was going to start soon, but at the last minute, the man unexpectedly forked something up to me.

It was a small lantern that was the size of a small watermelon and had a small candle inside. The cloth was blue and very dark, and at first glance, it was clear that this lantern wasn't used for lighting.

When that thing appeared, there was a small commotion in the area that suddenly turned into an uproar. I noticed that all eyes were now focused on me.

I was stunned as Fatty inexplicably took it and put it next to me. As soon as he put it down, a burst of warm applause suddenly broke out from the whole venue.

I looked at Fatty and was even more confused. One of the men came up from behind and picked up the lantern to hang on the hook of a nearby pillar. Granny Huo whispered from the side, "Won't you give your admirers your regards? In this restaurant, no one has dared to light this sky lantern for a long time. You're giving your old Wu parents some face. In the future, everyone in this circle will know who you are, young master of the Wu family."

I looked at her and didn't understand what she meant, but I seemed to have heard the words "sky lantern" somewhere before.

She looked at me with a sneer and continued: "However, I'm afraid the old Wu family will be burned down by the lantern you've lit today."

Chapter 11 Lighting the Sky Lantern

After she said this, I shivered and immediately understood what would happen next. It suddenly occurred to me that Grandpa had mentioned this concept in some anecdotes I heard a long time ago.

The so-called “lighting the sky lantern” was an old saying in casinos. In fact, it should be called “lighting a lamp”. It was a gambling technique where if someone at the gambling table was found to have bad luck, everyone would bet against him. If he bet big, you would bet small. If he bet idle, you would bet on the gambling house. Essentially, you weren’t betting on your own luck, but the bad luck of others. This person with bad luck was your “lantern.” Some people were born with bad luck and would lose every bet, so they would be invited to “light the lantern” in order to make a small loss and large gain.

According to the theory of probability, this actually wasn’t true, because it didn’t recognize the theory of luck. But lighting the sky lantern was absolutely effective.

Any gambler knew that after losing the first hand, he would probably lose the rest of the time. That was how wonderful the world was.

Among the circle of rich people in the south of the Yangtze River during the Qing Dynasty, the word “lighting lamps” wasn’t elegant enough, because the number of games was huge and unrestrained, and those with poor luck often lost everything in one night. Moreover, that kind of person often liked to be angry with others. The kind of “you don’t like me, I don’t like you, you haven’t started betting yet you’re already running your mouth” kind of situation. As soon as he got up, “Wang’s second son, don’t show off in an ostentatious manner. I’ll light your lamp today.” The other party had to add something to scold him back, “You light a lamp for me, and I’ll light a sky lantern for you! I’ll show you who’s boss!”

In the long run, this was directly called lighting the sky lantern. In fact, this terminology was quite appropriate, because a lantern was a torch that

burned itself to the ground, much like how those people gambled and lost everything in one night.

This was later extended, and the term was used outside the industry. When it came to auctions, however, the meaning changed. I remembered my grandfather told a story about their boss in the Mystic Nine, who made a name for himself in Beijing. He chased his wife by lighting a lantern while both buying and selling. I had almost forgotten the story and only remembered it when the old woman gave me such a hint.

Lighting the sky lantern during the auction seemed to mean that no matter what the item was— or how much it cost— the person that lit the lantern had to buy it at the highest bid.

In these second-floor boxes, there were two main seats: one on the left and one on the right. The right seat was considered the lantern seat, so whenever someone sat there, he was saying, “No matter what’s sold in this round, or how much money is finally taken, I will automatically add one vote.” This was equivalent to saying that no matter how anyone else played, you would have the final say on that thing.

This was generally a way for nobles to pick up women and was very common in the Qing Dynasty. Political marriages were made regardless of money, so after the government was in power, money was a small matter. As a result, princes and princesses liked to come here after the monarch. Sometimes the two princesses didn’t see eye to eye, so the winners on both sides had to fight for the lanterns. This wasn’t to see who paid the highest price, but whose boyfriend could hold up. There was no time limit for battling lanterns, but the lights could be removed. If one side removed the other’s lights, it would really be a disgrace. At that time, such a thing was even more painful than death for those trust fund babies.

It was a very cruel affair to hang a single lantern because you had to carry it at least until the auction was over. No one knew what price it would fetch, so the only chance for other auctioneers to get the item was to blow the lantern off and bid desperately to raise the price to such a high level that the

lantern lighter couldn't afford it. Once this happened, the item would belong to the one who made the last bid, and the person who ordered the lantern had to pay a price for his own behavior. Sometimes it was money, sometimes it was body parts like fingers. In short, the price was extremely painful, because the backstage boss had to make it clear to everyone that this wasn't fun and games. Therefore, those who wanted to light the sky lantern had to weigh their options. It wasn't something that could be played with money.

Fortunately, those that made the lantern lighting rules were also afraid that bidding would be astronomical. Every business person knew that it was only when the price was within a reasonable range that things could be established. If a pair of slippers was a hundred million yuan, then things would go wrong and no one else would come to play with you. Moreover, those who blew the lantern off and successfully got the goods in their hands may not be able to pay the price quoted at that time, which meant they lit themselves up and wouldn't have anything to show for it. So, their bid still had to be within the scope of rationality, and it was unlikely the price would be completely frivolous. At the same time, there was a price range, each price increase had a ceiling, and the auction also had a time limit. Thus, by the time the auction ended, the winners were in extreme pain but could still afford it. This was also a safety measure because if you dared outbid the prince, the king would directly send his troops to destroy the shop.

There was only one piece being sold at the auction today. When the boss of The Mystic Nine lit three lamps, he burned his harvest for half a year. It was easy to assume that the one he was chasing thought that lighting three lamps would be regarded as a famous event in the Forty-Nine Cities, so if he lit any more lamps, how would she marry him when he had spent all his family's money? As a result, they refused to let him light any more lamps and successfully proposed marriage the very next day. My grandfather said that the greatest characteristic of a smart woman was to know exactly what she was doing.

But the auction this time was only selling a single item of the highest quality, and Granny Huo was determined to win. I was afraid she wouldn't let it go

until the end, and even burning through all my family's money still might not be enough.

At this time, I covered my head and entered a trance. Cold sweat was pouring from my body like rain, and something in my stomach was churning and burning hot all the way to my lungs. I quickly took a sip of tea and suppressed the cold sweat, telling myself this was a big play this time.

What to do, what to do? Should I withdraw? How much is this rascal willing to risk? Will I have my little finger cut off and sent back to my house for money? What's the probability of success for me, Fatty, and Poker-face? Will we be able to temporarily escape? Fuck, will I be chased and killed by the underworld?

Countless thoughts chaotically swirled in my mind, but before I could sort out even a single thread, a man started walking around the area while banging a gong. The whole venue instantly went silent.

The auction had officially started.

I didn't listen to what the cheongsam woman said at all. I only dazedly heard that the lowest bid was a hundred thousand yuan and the highest bid was a million yuan. My brain buzzed and I couldn't hear the ensuing information clearly.

I watched the whole process in a daze while my mind was in chaos. I didn't know what was going on for a full hour, and it was Poker-face who suddenly woke me up. He suddenly put his hand on my shoulder, which made me shiver.

When I looked back at him, he wasn't looking at me, but expressionlessly looking downstairs, as if everything here had nothing to do with him. He was just like a cold-blooded bodyguard. I suddenly thought that Fatty might have taught him too well, but his hand was gripping my shoulder so hard that he obviously had some intention.

I didn't know what it meant. Was it because I was fooled and he was reassuring me? Or maybe it was just a reflex for him to give me a pinch? Whatever the reason was, I suddenly calmed down.

The scene was quiet, as if the bidding had stopped. I turned to look at Fatty. He didn't know the meaning of the sky lantern so his spirit was completely immersed in the atmosphere. He wiped his sweat with a towel and seemed to be excited.

After a pause, I picked up the tea and asked him what the situation was. He said: "Damn, almost a hundred million!" I immediately choked and spit out a mouthful of tea, spraying him in the face.

He took no notice at all, and simply wiped it with his hand and continued: "It's time for a break, and when the second half comes, I bet another two million gets added. Goddamn it, this Fat Master has learned a lot today." He pointed to the presiding cheongsam woman, who was counting the records in the middle of the stage. "This girl is divine. You ring the bell in order to place a bid, and at first, all the bells rang and everyone was chasing the price. The scene was a mess, but the girl didn't listen wrong a single time. In less than half a second, she knew immediately which bell rang and which one rang first. She has a fairy's ears. If she wants to get married, her husband definitely won't dare call her a mistress." He pointed to Pink Shirt again. "This guy is also very good. He's been playing with his phone the whole time and hasn't even raised his head. He rang the last bell just before the break. It seems he's determined to win and doesn't even want to compete." He then pointed to Granny Huo, "The old woman didn't do anything once. It looks like she's going to play big after adding extra yards."

I secretly cursed. There really wasn't any morality in this circle. They weren't going easy at all. They saw me light a sky lantern, and it never crossed their minds to pity me or show mercy. But it didn't matter anymore. I couldn't come up with a tenth of the price anyways. A billion and a hundred million were all the same to me, so I'd lose face in the end. Even if they were merciful and decided not to cut off my hands and feet, and only made me pay a million yuan, I still couldn't afford it.

I didn't have to think about it anymore, because I didn't have that much money anyways. The safest way was to bide my time and run.

I whispered the meaning of lighting the sky lantern to Fatty, who was incredulous and nervous. "What should we do? Damn it, I thought the old woman was being too calm. It turns out that we're the ones paying for the item all along!"

I whispered, "What else can I do? This time the old woman deliberately wanted us to look bad. This is a big disaster and I don't see any clues. Let's forget it. It's important to save our lives. Think of something and we'll find a chance to run away."

"Run away?" Fatty paused, still a little reluctant to give up. "It isn't that serious. What can we do right under the emperor's feet? We were also fooled by the old woman. Besides, we only watched the first half. Maybe there will be a good show later. It would be a shame if we didn't finish it."

"Good show? Damn it, we'll have a good show if we don't leave." I said angrily, "If it's not serious, we'll flee and find other opportunities in the future. But if it's serious... shit!"

"Well, then I'll go and see if we can sneak out." He nodded and looked at the cheongsam woman, "If it's really not possible, we'll jump to the platform and take the woman and goods hostage. The girl has such good ears that she should be worth a lot of money."

Just then, the cheongsam woman on the stage suddenly paused, looked up, and glanced in our direction with her brow wrinkled.

I looked her in the eye and my heart thumped as I thought, *no way, can you hear us?* I quickly made a small gesture to Fatty, and at the same time secretly pointed to the cheongsam woman below.

Fatty laughed: "You're really serious? No matter how clever her ears are, they won't be like that. She must admire you a lot and is looking at you secretly."

As he said this, he lowered his voice and whispered, “Sister, we’re going to run away later. Can you hear me? If you can hear me, come and catch us. Any later and you’ll be too late.”

Just as he finished saying this, I saw the cheongsam woman glance at us with an even stranger look on her face. Shit, I had a bad feeling. It was as if she could really hear us. I was busy telling Fatty to shut up, but it was too late. She suddenly started talking and pointed at us. The man standing nearby immediately looked at us and rushed up the stairs.

Fuck, I muttered darkly, she really heard! Fatty was also astonished and didn’t know what to do as he looked at the people rushing up. Between one thought and the next, Poker-face flashed like lightning from my side and jumped straight down from the second-floor balcony.

His behavior left me stunned, and screams could be heard everywhere. I saw him make it to the ground and turn over swiftly before I heard another round of exclamations. I turned to look and saw Pink Shirt had one hand holding the railing of the gallery, while the other hand was in his pocket. He also jumped down and landed in front of Poker-face. On the other side, Fatty gave a loud roar, grabbed a stool, kicked down the screen, and rushed at the hotel staff who rushed in. The scene was a complete mess.

Chapter 12: Wreaking Havoc In Heaven

The situation downstairs wasn't clear for a while, but Fatty's side had already started a big fight. The tables were all turned over and the dishes were all smashed. The four guys who rushed into the room first were knocked down by Fatty in an instant, but he was also injured. The other side saw that Fatty was so fierce that they dared not lean forward any more. One of them rushed out of the door and shouted, "Security! Security! Call the security guards up!"

The old woman off to the side was shocked to death by our actions, and the young girl was so scared that she turned pale and hid behind the middle-aged woman. I looked around and thought, *which side should I help?* I looked downstairs and saw that the drop was quite high. I was afraid I couldn't jump down like that, so it was safer to follow Fatty and fight the security guards.

Just as I was groping around looking for a weapon, I suddenly saw the old woman's two bodyguards rush in and stand between me and them. The old woman said, "Are you crazy? Do you know what will happen if you offend the boss here?"

I couldn't control the situation now that it had already started, and I was also a person who had no scruples when it came to fighting. I had been full of resentment earlier, but now I was angry and said, "It's like you said. This hotel has been open too long and the boss is too stable. Someone has to give him some stimulation. Let's be good people and send Buddha to the west. Today we'll give the bosses here some stimulation." At this point, I took a sip of tea and threw the cup down.

I was just about to get up and join the melee, but I suddenly remembered my appointment with the old woman. I immediately looked at my watch and found it was already 4:25. I suddenly felt a rush in my heart and asked Fatty, "Can you hold on for another five minutes?"

Fatty was stuck in the doorway and directly knocked the last man down with a head-butt before inexplicably saying: “Huh? Fuck, do you have to go to the bathroom or something?”

I copied Fatty’s tone and answered, “We’ve been sitting here for so long, and have been through a lot of trouble and mockery. We can’t give up all our efforts. Just for five minutes, then we’ll let Granny see what perseverance is.”

Fatty was happy: “Mr. Naive, you’re such a chicken shit when we’re in the tombs, but who knew you were actually quite dashing when it comes to dealing with people? You remind me of when I was younger. Well then, I’ll show them what I’m capable of and let you show your perseverance.” With that said, he closed the balcony door and propped all the tables and chairs against it.

Someone soon knocked against the door outside, so Fatty leaned against it and began staring at his watch.

My heart beat faster. This time, I knew I had really made a name for myself, and I figured the next thing would make my grandfather roll over in his grave. I looked downstairs and saw the chaotic mess. A man who rushed up was knocked down by Poker-face, and Pink Shirt was protecting the front of the glass cabinet. The two men looked at each other but hadn’t yet come to blows.

The good thing about fighting in such a place was that there was no way to call the police. The auction itself was illegal, and the only way to settle the dispute was by determining who was a better fighter. But Poker-face couldn’t use his skills in such a place. If the other party was a zombie, it wouldn’t matter how hard he hit them, but for these living people, it was impossible to break their necks one by one. I believed he was showing them mercy, so we shouldn’t have any problems getting out of here. If Fatty and I jumped from here as soon as the time came, we would only suffer a minor injury or two.

I felt better when I thought about it, but just as I was trying to breathe a sigh of relief, the old lady suddenly said to the two bodyguards, "Pull him from the stool."

As soon as I heard this, I froze and saw the two young men coming at me. I shouted, "Granny, you can't cheat!"

"Since you've smashed this place, why can't I beat you up? Who's playing dirty?" Granny Huo pointed at me with her hand, "Do it!"

I cursed in my heart and immediately called to Fatty: "Protect me! Protect me!" All while squeezing the stool with my hands and pushing my ass back in the seat.

As soon as Fatty saw my situation change, he swung the stool up to rush toward me but clashed with the Huo family. Those few middle-aged people who had been eating outside grabbed Fatty, and they all started wrestling with each other. By this point, the two bodyguards had reached me and grabbed my sleeves.

I tried my best to break free and immediately grabbed the nearby railing. When they pulled my arm, I bit them, making sure to keep my ass on the stool. After making a scene for a while, the old woman became impatient and cried, "Leave him, and grab his stool." They immediately tried to grab the stool by my crotch, but I quickly clamped my legs shut to protect the stool.

They grabbed my thighs and nearly tore them apart, but Fatty finally arrived. He tore off his clothes and rushed out of the crowd. As soon as he came up, he squeezed all of us with the pressure of Mount Tai.

The two bodyguards were supposed to be quite skilled, but they were suddenly pressed down by such a heavy force, so it was difficult to break free in such a short amount of time. Even I was squeezed under the two and almost suffocated.

At the same time, the blocked door finally burst open, and several security guards rushed in with batons, already in a furious state. The scene was as chaotic as a children's fight.

My intestines were green with remorse. I really didn't expect this kind of change would happen in a mere five minutes. Several security guards rushed directly to Fatty and hit him on the head with their batons. Fatty roared and turned back to protect his head with his hands, blocking the sticks falling like rain. He shouted, "Fuck! Is it time yet?" As soon as he had finished speaking, his throat was beaten with a stick and he screamed repeatedly.

I stretched out my hand to look at my watch, but I couldn't see it at all. Seeing how Fatty had been hit by the security guard, I didn't care about whether the time was up or not, and shouted, "It's time!"

"Damn it!" Fatty gave a loud roar and rushed out to topple several security guards. As soon as the weight on my body was loose, I immediately turned to the person who was pressing on me and kicked out with one knee. I then stood up and grabbed Fatty. "Let's go! Let's go downstairs!"

Fatty's eyes were red as he patted my hand. "What a joke!" He grabbed the slender carving table on one side and cursed the security guards: "Fuck your grandfather, the tiger doesn't show his true power. I'm addicted to payback and I'm at peak performance today. I'll take you head on, and see which of you thinks life is too long!"

Chapter 13 Huo Xiuxiu

Fatty brought the carving table up and swung it to the left and right. The two men didn't react in time and were immediately smacked away. The sound of the table hitting flesh was terrible, and the two men fell to the ground and were silent.

I thought of Fatty fighting the sea monkey in the undersea tomb. Sea monkeys couldn't be killed because their rough skin and thick meat protected them, but people could. I immediately worried about somebody dying and shouted at Fatty, "Easy!" But he was completely deaf to my plea and practically rushed at the security guards. The security guards were also mentally prepared and simply swung their batons up to meet Fatty's swing. Fatty didn't hide at all; he clenched his teeth and let his head get knocked six or seven times while he smacked them to the ground one by one. Soon, they were all laid out, and the carving table cracked.

After all that noise, the scene quieted down. Fatty gasped and looked at the Huo family who had just encircled him. Everyone retreated a few steps until their backs hit the wall. He looked at the broken bowls and chopsticks on the ground and took out half a bottle of Maotai they had just drunk. The bottle was broken, but there was still a little on the bottom that hadn't been spilled. He took a sip, spat out the glass fragments inside, and motioned with his hand to me, "Let's go!"

I grabbed a stool, Fatty put the carving table on his shoulder, and I nodded to Granny Huo on one side: "Madam, I'm leaving. I'll visit you another day." I followed Fatty, kicked away those groaning on the ground, and walked out of the box and downstairs.

Truthfully, I didn't know the pleasure of fighting before, but it was really exciting to knock all those people down and then walk away as everyone watched with frightened eyes. I immediately understood why so many people liked to be villains.

When I came downstairs, the glass cabinet with the seal had been broken and the thing inside had been taken out. Poker-face was looking at the seal carefully and had no intention of leaving. Pink Shirt was getting up from the ground, clutching his neck and coughing. It appeared he had already been beaten once.

When we walked past him, however, we saw him coughing, smiling, and looking at us as if he were very happy. I went up to the stage and told Poker-face to take the seal and get away quickly. As soon as I turned around, I saw Pink Shirt approach me and say, "Hey, Brother."

Fatty and I looked at him. Fatty lifted the table and Pink Shirt immediately waved, "Wait, wait!" He took a business card from his pocket, handed it to us, and pointed to the imperial seal. "I won't stop you. Here's my contact information. When you want to sell the stolen goods, call me."

Damn it, I said to myself, *definitely not a serious person*. Fatty actually went up and took the business card, and Pink Shirt made a gesture of invitation. I was so anxious that I pushed them aside and rushed out.

When we left the entrance of the hotel, the outside was full of waiters and security guards. Even the security guards in the parking lot had come. They all made way when we pretended to smash the jade seal, and then we fled.

Our physical strength was a little overdrawn. After running for several blocks, we were so tired that we were panting and our feet were weak, but we could see someone following us from a distance. These people had mixed social backgrounds and were all very skillful. Fatty said that it had to be more than that. Liuli Sun's group also wasn't easy to handle, and they hadn't made any moves just now. They must have been waiting for the Huos and the hotel staff to take us out.

As we stood there gasping in front of a newsstand, Fatty said that we should split up, but I disagreed. I wasn't familiar with Beijing, not to mention Little Brother. I was afraid I'd have to check the homeless shelters every few days just to find him. And they wouldn't dare attack us now because we had the

goods. If we were separated, those who didn't have the goods would certainly suffer.

"What do you suggest then?" Fatty frowned. He had calmed down now and muttered, "This Fat Master has great accomplishments in Beijing, so they'll know a little about me. We can't go back to my shop. After all that, it seems that we'll have to go south."

"We need to find a place to rest and see how serious the situation is." I said, "We can find a hotel first."

"Fuck the hotel, isn't that just waiting for someone to catch us? It would be nice to have a dilapidated temple. The best way to escape is to live under bridges and overpasses. There's no difference." Fatty said.

I looked at Poker-face and wanted to ask him what he thought, but on second thought, it was definitely useless to ask him. This guy was only clever when it came to tombs. In terms of living capabilities, he definitely fell under level nine of the disability system.

While hesitating, I suddenly heard a car horn honk nearby and turned to look. A Hongqi car¹⁵ was parked on the side of the road with its window rolled down. It turned out to be the young girl that had been beside Mrs. Huo. She made a face at us and told us to get in the car.

Fatty and I looked each other in the eye and immediately knew there was a chance. I said, "We'll talk about it when we get in the car."

The three of us climbed over the guardrail and got in. As soon as the door was closed, the car started, and the young girl said to the driver, "Go back to Gongzhufen. We'll go to the compound."

Fatty squeezed in beside the girl and said, "Sister, can we go somewhere far away from here?"

¹⁵ It's basically a marque

The girl said, "Don't worry, even if they have ten nerves, they won't dare enter that place." She looked at me and smiled, "Brother Wu Xie, my name is Huo Xiuxiu. I haven't seen you for a long time, but you're still the same."

"Have you met me before?" I asked curiously.

"Of course. What, you still don't remember who I am?"

I looked at her again, but my mind was blank. When I thought about the name again, Huo Xiuxiu was clearly the offspring of the old Huo family, but why was her surname Huo? Was the old Huo family matriarchal? Looking at their background, it seemed unlikely. After thinking about it, I really couldn't remember at all, so I had to be honest and shake my head.

"Well, forget it." The young girl pouted and suddenly stopped talking. "It's really sad."

I looked at Fatty and was a little puzzled. He was about to make a few remarks, but there was suddenly a loud noise. The car jolted and almost stopped, and then all the glass on Fatty's side instantly shattered.

I nearly passed out when my head hit the nearby window, but before I could react, I felt another shock behind me. The car was knocked off the ground and bounced a few times before landing firmly. The rear window shattered behind me.

"Fuck, do you know how to drive?" Fatty had a small cut from his chin to the corner of his mouth. It was only superficial, but it must have been painful enough for him.

I rubbed my head and looked behind us. A van had rear-ended us and a Crown car had hit the side of the van. The people in the van were getting out one after another, and the Crown's driver was furiously cursing in the Hebei dialect.

My head buzzed. I wanted to push the door open and get out of the car to see the extent of the collision, but the door was locked. I then saw that the people who got out of the van started pulling steel pipes from behind them.

“Oh, it seems they like their car very much.” I gasped.

“No, it’s Liuli Sun’s people. Shit, that’s fast.” Fatty pointed behind them, and I could see Liuli Sun watching from behind the crowd. “It seems the auction isn’t over yet. There are still people who want to bid.” He smacked the driver’s seat and shouted, “Can the car still go?”

After asking this, the car immediately started. The driver obviously wasn’t a fool either. The people around us rushed over when they heard the noise. One of them jumped onto the smashed trunk and grabbed the back of my neck, trying to drag me out like the thugs in movies did.

But Fatty dragged the unlucky man halfway into the back seat of the car. The car knocked over several people and rushed out of the crowd. The unlucky guy was beaten so bad that his own mother wouldn’t even be able to recognize him, and then he was thrown into the street. Unfortunately, the car crashed into the side of the barrier at almost the same time, but it was the hood that was hit this time.

“Fuck, are you driving without a license, or did you use to drive fucking tanks?” Fatty was furious.

“The wheel axle was bent just now.” The driver was also very depressed, “I can’t control the direction.” He wanted to back the car away from the barrier, but it didn’t work.

The people behind us rushed up, and Fatty gave a big curse upon seeing how hopeless it was. He and Poker-face kicked open the doors and went out. When I got out with Huo Xiuxiu, Fatty asked her, “Is there any weapon in the car? A sabre or something?”

“Who do you think we are?”

Fatty patted his head: "This Fatty, how could I get in your stupid car?" As he said this, one of the men had finally arrived. There was no time to keep complaining. Fatty blocked a steel pipe with both hands, head-butted the man who had rushed in front of him directly, grabbed the steel pipe, and then stepped on the man's hand and snatched the pipe away. Then, the other men rushed up.

There were seven or eight people in the van and five in the Crown car, making for a total of more than ten people. There were only three fighting forces here, and the driver was still desperately trying to get the car to start. Huo Xiuxiu shrank behind us and didn't hesitate to dial a number on her phone, but there was nothing she could do to help right now.

When I was in junior high, I used to take part in group fights. But the fights at that time were too childish, and they basically depended on momentum to frighten people. Earlier, I was able to keep calm in the face of the security guards, but now I was scared stiff seeing the steel pipes.

I involuntarily took a step back and noticed two men heading for Poker-face. One of them swung the steel pipe at full strength and smashed it towards his head. His skull would burst if it connected, but Poker-face immediately grabbed the steel pipe without any buffer. It was approaching at such a high speed but instantly became still after it was grabbed. The guy must have felt like he had smashed himself on a steel bar. Then, Poker-face pulled the steel pipe and the man lurched forward. At the same time, Poker-face's elbow moved forward and smashed into the man's head, causing him to pass out.

The other man's steel pipe came in from the side, aimed for Poker-face's waist. Poker-face took the first man's steel pipe and blocked it directly. The steel pipes struck and sparks flew out. The man was immediately shaken and the steel pipe fell to the ground.

The scene was chaotic. If it were a normal situation, no one would dare come forward again, but everything happened so fast that the people behind didn't know what had happened. Three more people rushed up and

one of them came directly towards me. Without so much as a word, the steel pipe swung towards me.

I reacted almost reflexively and dodged. The steel pipe almost scraped against my nose, but my foot slipped on the grass in the median and I crashed into the bushes. I immediately turned over and was shocked to see the man rush towards Huo Xiuxiu. If the young girl was involved because of us, I wouldn't be able to face Granny Huo. I rushed towards them with a roar but was hit in the back with a pipe. I didn't know who hit me, but my chest throbbed and I almost fainted from the pain.

As soon as I heard Huo Xiuxiu's screams, I immediately hugged my head, knowing that that was where the next blow must be headed. *Shit, these gangsters.* I didn't expect to hear a roar coming from behind me. Looking back, Fatty had two steel pipes in his hands and his face was injured. He smacked the guy's head who hit me just now like he was beating a drum and then shouted at Poker-face: "Little Brother, capture the king first. I'll hold on here so you can make your way over to him. Take the rebel army's general's head!"

Poker-face was surrounded by at least six people, and Fatty immediately looked directly at Liuli Sun, who was watching the battle in the distance.

I thought I would see Poker-face carve a bloody path to stop Liuli Sun, but he did something unexpected that shocked all of us.

Chapter 14 Yangshi Lei (Part I)

Liuli Sun may never understand how the steel pipe flew from forty meters away and accurately hit him on the head.

I thought I would see Poker-face killing the interceptors and then appear in front of the old man like a ghost, but he didn't. He chose the fastest and most economical method.

The distance was far, and I didn't know how it played out, but that kind of steel pipe with that degree of force... I didn't think it would be good. Fortunately, it nailed him on the forehead, since a blow to the back of the head may have split his skull open.

At first, those people didn't know what had happened until the ones around Liuli Sun started shouting. Everyone slowly stopped, and when they saw their boss lying on the ground, they immediately didn't know what to do. It was only when the man behind Liuli Sun held him up and let out a yell that they all retreated and got back in the van to leave.

Within a minute, everyone ran off, leaving only the crowd of onlookers and a few of us. Fatty's head was covered in blood, and one side of the car was smashed flat in the front and concave in the back. It was full of dents left by the steel pipes, and there were even several shoes on the ground.

I watched the van and Crown car speed away, feeling as if I were dreaming. At this time, a sharp pain in my back began to break through my haze and I almost fell down.

Fatty took off his shirt, covered his head, patted me, and then helped me lean against the car. "We can't stay here. Girl, ask your driver if the car can still run. We'll have to stop a taxi if we can't get it to start. There might still be a lot of Old Liuli's people here among the onlookers."

“It’s possible to drive, but the traffic cops will stop me when I cross the intersection.” The driver said. He also didn’t escape the melee and his eyes were badly bruised.

“Taxi, bus, whatever. I don’t want to deal with the cops.” Fatty was especially reliable at this time.

Huo Xiuxiu was still off to the side making a phone call. When she hung up, she said to the driver, “Xiao Li, you handle the car here.” She then said to us, “Follow me.”

Fatty hid the steel pipe in his suit and took the seal out from under the car seat. I didn’t know when he had hidden it. We followed Huo Xiuxiu into the crowd of onlookers, and everyone immediately got out of the way. We ran to a side road and followed a path through numerous blocks.

There were a few people behind us who didn’t even try to hide. I felt a bit like a dying zebra in Animal World that was watching a vulture hovering around it. Fortunately, another Hongqi car was parked on the road up ahead, and there were two jeeps at the front and back that were painted a color that gave a sense of security.

As we got in the car, Fatty said, “Girl, why didn’t you plan this earlier?”

“I didn’t expect them to be so impatient that they wouldn’t even look at the situation.” Young girl was sitting in the front seat and started to shiver a little, but I could see that she restrained herself. She took out a lot of napkins and handed them to Fatty. “My grandmother and I can’t bring a team of soldiers out any time we want.”

“Does Liuli Sun know your grandmother?” Fatty asked.

Young girl nodded. Fatty shrank back when I wiped his wound and said, “This old boy dares to risk opposing the Mystic Nine. It seems that he really needs this thing.”

“Maybe he just wants to take it and give it back to the hotel owner.”

“Liuli Sun is a rich man. He’s so rich, in fact, that he doesn’t know the concept of money. If he wants to get something, he just has to buy it. Robbery isn’t his strong suit, but now he’s forced to resort to it. He must be afraid that if you take this thing away, he won’t be able to get it even if he has enough money.” Huo Xiuxiu looked at the seal tucked in Fatty’s clothes. “What the hell is it? This is what people like him want?”

Twenty minutes later, we entered a mysterious compound. There were many Hongqi cars parked in the residential area, and there were several courtyards inside. We got out of the car and went to a health center in the compound to get our wounds treated.

I had a large black bruise on my back where the steel pipe had hit the hardest, and Fatty’s head was cut. It looked scary, but it was actually just a scratch from the thread of the steel pipe. He was good to go after disinfecting it and putting a band-aid on.

After the treatment, Huo Xiuxiu led us away. We walked through the compound and found that this piece of land was really big. After walking for half a day, we went into an alley that gave off a feeling of a winding path leading to a secluded spot. All kinds of old towering trees grew out of the courtyard on the side, as if we had entered some temple. I didn’t expect that there was still such scenery hidden in a small district in Beijing.

We strode all the way to the end of the alley and walked through an inconspicuous door. There was a large courtyard inside, where we could see Granny Huo sitting and drinking tea. She had obviously come back before us and had been waiting for a long time.

There was a persimmon tree in the courtyard, with a well under it and some rare plants nearby. I felt as if this place used to be the residence of a well-to-do family. The three of us casually went in, and Granny Huo asked if Xiuxiu was injured. After Xiuxiu told the story again, Granny Huo turned to us and said, “Fortunately, our Xiuxiu wasn’t injured. Otherwise, I’d have to skin you.” After she said this, she told us to sit down.

I smiled and jokingly asked: “I won’t have to light a lamp after sitting this time, will I?”

She gave me an angry look: “I, Madam Huo, don’t play the same trick twice. And I don’t need to deal with you anyways. I’m willing to give up the bet to find you so that my reputation doesn’t suffer. I’ll take care of our business while your heads are still on your necks.”

Fatty and I looked at each other, and I thought, *shit, the old woman is assuming we made a big mistake and wants to break off our relationship.* Fine. If that was the case, we’d each take what we needed and I wouldn’t have to associate with such a perverse old woman anymore. It was better to make a quick decision, so I cut to the chase and said, “Would you like to tell us?”

“Don’t you just want to know why I’m willing to pay such a high price for your Yangshi Lei drawing?” The old woman stood up, made a gesture for me to follow, and then said, “I wouldn’t say this if it was someone else, but you’re also a descendant of the Mystic Nine and not an outsider. However, the other two must wait outside.”

This decision didn’t require any second-guessing, so I winked at Fatty and Poker-face, who nodded. I followed the old woman through the side door of the nearby house. As soon as I entered, I found that it was a collection room full of antiques, and there were no furnishings except for the rows of shelves. Although it looked like an old house, I felt a tingle on my face and static electricity in the air as soon as I entered, which meant that the room was temperature and humidity-controlled.

All the collectibles were wrapped in newspapers. The old woman took me to the innermost row of shelves, where I saw a steel wire strung up on the wall. It was for hanging calligraphy and paintings, but now it was covered with Yangshi Lei drawings.

I counted a total of seven. There was a gap between two of them, making it obvious that one was missing. It had to be the one I had.

“This is the eighth Yangshi Lei drawing.” Granny Huo said, “Since you know Yangshi Lei, you should know what it is.”

I nodded. I was a little surprised to find that this was actually a Yangshi Lei masterpiece, and the seven drawings were actually the designs of a multi-storied building.

The structure of each floor on the seven sheets of paper was very clear. Moreover, this wasn't a common building. Its bottom floor was the largest, and then it became smaller and smaller with each layer. It looked like a tower at first glance, but because each floor had the structure of a building, it was much larger than a tower. It actually looked more like the Mayan Pyramid of the Sun. Other than towers, few ancient buildings were generally built so high, but I could see that the top part was actually structured as a tower. It was only the bottom three layers that could be called floors.

“This is Daoguang's twenty-five-year design. The designer should be Lei Siqu.” Granny Huo said, “I have seven pieces here. They are the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh floors under the building. You should have the lowest floor.”

“Is there anything strange about this building?” I asked. At first glance, they all looked like very common types of Yangshi Lei, although the buildings had the same backlight design as the one in my possession.

“It may not matter to others, but it has special meaning to me.” Granny Huo fiddled with the designs. “The name of this building is Zhang Jialou.¹⁶ In the 1970s, the designs for this building began to appear abroad and were brought back home. You already know that Yangshi Lei were royal designers, so it was impossible for them to design buildings for the common folk. But if you look at the drawings here, they're completely designed like a residence. There's obviously a story between this Zhang Jialou and either the Daoguang emperor or Yangshi Lei. At that time, I had a daughter who worked in the Cultural Bureau, which had a project related to this building. At the end of 1978, they found this building in Guangxi. I remember that it was January

¹⁶ Zhang Jialou can mean “Zhang family's building”. Just to warn you, I'll be using “Zhang Jialou” a lot.

fifteenth when my daughter set off for Guangxi to participate in an archaeological excavation. It was her first time out of town, and it was to last several months.”

She turned to look at me with a hint of sadness: “I wanted to take this opportunity to exercise her abilities, so when she came back, I was very happy to talk with her. I didn’t expect that when she came back, her character had suddenly changed.”

When I heard the words “Zhang Jialou”, I felt a jolt and immediately thought of the ancient building at the bottom of the magic lake. I wanted to speak but didn’t know what to say. When I heard her last words, however, I began to focus again.

“Changed?” I asked.

“Yes, after she went to Guangxi, her character became very strange. She used to be very cheerful, but after she came back, she was very gloomy and basically stayed in her room all the time. I didn’t know what she was doing, but when I secretly checked on her, she was always drawing something.”

Generally speaking, this kind of situation happened because she was lovelorn, so I figured she must have just been drawing her boyfriend’s face.

Granny Huo continued, “At first, I thought that she was in love, but later, I found that that wasn’t the case at all. When she was on a business trip, I went into her room and looked at the pictures. I realized that something wasn’t quite right.” She paused, “All the drawings were pen sketches of a building. A very strange building.”

Chapter 15 Strange Description

“I have very strong instincts when it comes to many things in this industry. The building she drew... when I looked at it, I felt as if something was wrong. It had an odd shape, looked very uncomfortable, and had an evil air.” The old woman continued, “I thought she was crazy about the project, so at that time, I had a good talk with her. But when I talked with her, I felt as if something was off and that she was behaving abnormally. It’s a hard feeling to describe. She was nervous and not particularly focused. I later described her behavior at that time to others, and a friend summed up a description that made me feel very much like this was the case: ‘It seems like another person is hiding in her room, and she doesn’t want me to find out.’” The old woman took a sip of tea.

This was a very strange description. We usually used words like “nervous,” “anxious,” and “inattentive” to describe a strange state, but this description was very specific.

“Was she hiding her boyfriend in her room?” I couldn’t help but ask. At that time, Granny Huo, the mother of an adolescent girl, like all mothers, was very concerned about her daughter’s changes. I could understand how she must have felt.

“Our compound isn’t accessible to ordinary people. If she was hiding someone in her room, we would definitely find out. Moreover, when she went out, I went into her room more than once. It would be obvious if anyone was hiding inside. I was very worried and wanted to know what caused the change, so I sent someone to follow her. But it was at this time that she never came back. After she left home, she hasn’t been seen since.”

“Is she missing?”

The old lady sighed deeply and nodded before continuing: “In order to find her, I started sending my own people to investigate. I checked through the Zhang Jialou archaeological project in those days, but I only found that the project was very secretive and didn’t look like it was conducting ordinary

archaeological activities. Even with my connections, I couldn't get the information smoothly. And my daughter suddenly left no traces behind, as if she had never existed in this world. I spent countless efforts and got nothing. I don't know what happened after they went to Guangxi." She paused. "Over the years, I've been collecting anything related to this project. For more than twenty years, I've collected these drawings from the market one by one, up until this seventh one. I only hope to use these drawings to find this building and see what happened to them in my lifetime."

Looking at her expression, I immediately remembered Uncle Three's expression when he told me about Wen-Jin. My premonition was getting stronger and stronger, and I felt that things were suddenly connected. My mind began to get a little confused, but it wasn't normal confusion. It was just that everything was suddenly connected and I was sort of overwhelmed.

"Being sad... in fact, I'm used to it. I just want an answer before my old bones are buried. I just want to know whether she's dead, or if she's alive, how she's doing. Otherwise, I definitely won't close my eyes." She said. "So, it's not about the money, kid. Do you understand?"

I subconsciously nodded, and she made a gesture to show me out: "You can take your friends away. As your grandfather's friend, I'll give you a piece of advice. During this period of time, you'd better leave the country. I'll have to ask you to keep your word and send your Yangshi Lei to me."

I nodded, but I didn't want to go. I suddenly found that I had more questions that I needed answers to. Of course, now I had to test my ideas, so I asked, "Madam, is the place where they found the building in Banai, Guangxi?"

The old woman looked at me and her face changed: "Have you heard of that project?"

"Actually, I just came back from Guangxi." I said, "I met some strange things there that involved an archaeological team and a strange building."

Chapter 16 Archaeological Teams, Buildings, and Mirrors

Faced with the old woman's strange expression, I gave a brief account of my experience in Guangxi and also told her how I got my Yangshi Lei drawing.

After hearing this, the old woman sighed, "This is also a coincidence. I couldn't find it, but I didn't expect the last one would be in that place. If you hadn't found it, I'm afraid I never would have found it in my lifetime."

I nodded. I hadn't known whether these old files would be preserved for decades, but even if they were still there, it was getting close to the time when they were regularly destroyed. If I hadn't seen it by mistake, it would have really been unique. It was obviously fated to be.

I thought for a moment and then continued, "If so, then I think the archaeological team I found in Guangxi should be your daughter's."

She nodded: "I've been to Guangxi myself, why didn't I find these things?"

I said to myself, *I made Father Pan Ma open up. It all depended on Poker-face's piece of rotten iron. If not for Brother Chu's breakthrough, I wouldn't have found any information over there either.* It wasn't surprising her staff didn't find anything considering the secret was under the lake.

But this wasn't what I cared about, because I clearly remembered Pan Ma's story. The archaeological team had been killed and replaced. In this way, her daughter probably became the bones we fished up.

I didn't know whether I should mention this matter to her or not. It wasn't out of fear of irritating her— I believed the old woman wasn't that vulnerable— but I was afraid of affecting her mood.

At the same time, many fragments in my heart started to connect. I seemed to have gotten some strange clues, which I immediately wanted to prove. If I was right, then I might have finally cracked this thing wide open, so I

immediately asked her, “If you can, can you give me some of the information about the archaeological team you found at that time? I couldn’t find it in the reference room, and the matter I’m looking into may also have something to do with your daughter. I’ll immediately send someone to deliver the Yangshi Lei.”

“I have a large portfolio of those materials, but most of them are useless. You can ask me what you want to know now.” Granny Huo’s eyes suddenly softened a lot. “What are you looking for, and how did you find that piece?”

“It’s a long story. Please answer some of my questions first. If they are what I think they are, then we may be looking at the same thing.”

The old woman looked at me and still seemed to be a little confused: “Ok, ask.”

“You should have checked your daughter’s whereabouts. Is her disappearance related to an archaeological activity in Xisha?”

As soon as I finished speaking, the old woman’s face changed: “How did you know?”

I didn’t give her a chance to ask another question before I immediately asked, “If I’ve guessed right, the rules in your family are that all girls should have the surname Huo, yes?”

She was a little surprised and nodded, “Why?”

“Then, isn’t your missing daughter Huo Ling?” I calmly asked. “L-I-N-G, Ling?”¹⁷

¹⁷ There are many characters pronounced as “Ling”, so Wu Xie was just trying to make sure they were talking about the same person. The raw had “王 (Wang)—令 (Ling)—玲 (Ling)” and Tiffany said those 1st two characters kind of merge to make the last “Ling” character.

Chapter 17 Seems to be an Old Friend

Seeing her expression, I immediately knew that I must have guessed right. I internally sighed and thought, *we've come full circle*.

In fact, I had already realized it earlier. The name Huo Ling wasn't very common, but I always thought that Granny Huo's daughter had the same family name as her father. In other words, I thought Granny Huo became the head only because there were no males in her generation, and the next generation of the family would take the husband's surname. Unexpectedly, the Huos were a matriarchal clan.

As soon as she had mentioned that her daughter suddenly disappeared during the archaeological activities, I immediately thought of Uncle Three's Xisha archaeology team. At the same time, I immediately thought of how Granny Huo's surname was Huo, and among the missing people in Xisha, someone was called Huo Ling, a daughter of the Huo family. In addition, Chen Wen-Jin was the leader of the Guangxi archaeology team, so all the various pieces of information pointed to one thing.

In any other circumstances, I may have merely thought it was a coincidence, but in the midst of all these connections, I suddenly realized that there was something wrong. I just wasn't expecting it to be what I thought it was.

The fact that Granny Huo's family was suddenly involved in this matter may have seemed like a coincidence, but it was actually inevitable. However, Granny Huo may not have been involved as deeply as I was.

In this case, Huo Ling was a descendant of the Mystic Nine, just like my Uncle Three. Plus, with Xie Lianhuan, that made three of them. What exactly was the composition of the Xisha archaeological team?

As soon as I thought about it, my thoughts diverged even more. I found that not only was Huo Ling a Huo, but Chen Wen-Jin also seemed to have the same surname as Chen Pi Ah Si. Was Chen Pi Ah Si surnamed Chen or was he called that for other reasons (to be honest, I thought his appearance was a

bit like a nine-piece tangerine peel)? But he wasn't that old decades ago, so Chen Pi Ah Si must have been related to the Chen family.

Chen Wenjin, Chen Pi Ah Si.

Huo Ling, Granny Huo.

Uncle Three, Old Dog Wu.

Xie Lianhuan, Xie Jiuye.

Was this a coincidence?

Xie Lianhuan and Uncle Three were two people with deep ties that had been in place long before things began, so it wasn't surprising that they had both appeared in the same archaeological team at the same time. During the whole incident, however, I always thought Huo Ling was an outsider, but it actually turned out that she was a descendant of the Mystic Nine. Was it a coincidence?

If she was a descendant of a mountain climber from Shanxi or a mountain hiker from the south of Lingnan, maybe it could have been explained because of archaeology. After all, how many ancestors had some kind of background before they came into contact with this line of work? But she was also part of the Mystic Nine and a direct descendant of the same family—

There was a problem. There was definitely a problem.

It suddenly occurred to me that Poker-face wasn't someone who was easy to deal with. Out of a team of ten people, five people's backgrounds were a mystery, and it seemed that the remaining members' backgrounds weren't so simple either. When Uncle Three told me that this team had been formed by accident, it didn't appear to be true either.

Several possibilities immediately flashed through my mind: the archaeological research institute of that year might have been owned by the

Mystic Nine and was originally used as a cover for their business. Or, was it that these people's descendants all chose archaeology as their profession, and then happened to meet because of the geographical relationship in Changsha? Or, most likely, was there "some project" that these miraculous underground families were carrying out in the name of archaeology while really committing criminal activities under the official cloak?

My heart was racing as a large piece of the puzzle was suddenly put together, but I was at a loss as to what to do next. I scratched my head. I didn't want the joy of an epiphany to disappear so quickly, but I heard Granny Huo ask me, "How do you know these things?"

I shook my head: "My grandfather didn't mention you much in his later years. When it comes to how I know, it's a long story. I think it's really fate for us to meet today. If we don't take a moment to talk, I won't have the chance to tell you something about your daughter."

The old woman's eyes suddenly flashed and she looked at me incredulously: "What did you say?"

I sincerely said, "I think we should sit down and have a good chat. I'm afraid we'll have to talk for some time."

Her face turned cold and she said, "Boy, don't talk nonsense. This old woman has other tricks up her sleeve. If you dare mess with me, I won't let you walk out of this door."

I didn't have the heart to talk back to her, but I said to myself, *we aren't in a historical costume drama.*

"I'm not talking nonsense," I said. "When I'm done with my story, I bet you'll want to tie me down even if I try to leave."

She looked at me as if she couldn't fathom what approach I was trying to take. She immediately motioned for me to follow her, so I left the house with her and went all the way to the backyard. I didn't know where to go, which caused the old woman to glare at me: "This way!"

Fatty and Poker-face were still waiting in the yard, where Fatty was idly staring at what looked like orchids. I felt it was inappropriate to leave them like that so I said to the old woman, "My two friends also know those things. If you let them come in with us, there are some places they can supplement."

The old woman obviously didn't care too much about the details and nodded. I whistled at Fatty and followed her into the living room.

The living room of a typical courtyard house was very large, and this one didn't look like it had been renovated very much. Everything was very old and looked a bit plain, but people in the business knew that such a courtyard house was now expensive in Beijing, especially for those who were fastidious. The house must have been renovated; otherwise, there wouldn't have been so much leather. The renovation technique was antiquated, however, which usually cost a lot and also showed that the house had a historical background. I even saw something similar to carved beams and painted buildings on the lintel that looked a bit like the Forbidden City. Fatty stared at it in admiration.

I was only a little surprised and didn't have the time for flattery. After taking a seat, I immediately told her the whole story of what I had experienced before.

The old woman was a little impatient because some of the details in the beginning had nothing to do with her family, but she kept listening. I spoke for a full hour, keeping the part where Huo Ling became a forbidden woman very brief. After hearing this, the old woman didn't respond, but her face was rather gloomy. I thought she would be very excited, but her reaction was actually quite calm.

Maybe she's stunned, I thought. Granny, I originally planned to keep these things from spreading as far as possible, because I don't know what's going on behind the scenes. But seeing you like this, I'm immediately reminded of my Uncle Three. Although I don't know you very well, I know your pain is

real, so I don't have the heart to keep it from you that your daughter is likely dead. She was killed when she was in Guangxi.

The old woman didn't speak and merely frowned at me.

"I believe the one who came back from Guangxi wasn't your daughter. The reason why you feel like she changed was because she was actually someone else in disguise. When you talked with her, she gave you the feeling that another person was hiding in her room because she was the one hiding." I said my conclusion in one breath, "This person who came back from Guangxi hid herself in Huo Ling's room. She was an adult, so as long as she avoided doing anything familiar with you and avoided a lot of conversation, you wouldn't have a chance to recognize her." I said.

"Wait!" Fatty spoke from the side, "Shit, are you saying that the Huo Ling of the Xisha archaeology team was a fake, and wasn't actually Huo Ling?"

I nodded and said that she definitely wasn't the only one. I didn't know how many people in the Xisha archaeological team were from the Zhang Jialou project in Guangxi, so even Wen-Jin could have been a fake. Shit, this was confusing.

"Why would they do this?" Fatty wondered, "What's the reason?"

"There are obviously two forces in the game, and one of them replaced its own people with another force in this way," I said.

Uncle Three was really lucky in those days. He and Xie Lianhuan had really been on a ship with criminals.

Granny Huo ignored me and had a very strange look on her face. She took a sip of tea and paused before asking me, "Throughout everything you just mentioned, there has always been a person with a Qilin tattooed on him beside you. Where is this person now?"

I paused and thought to myself, *aren't you worried about your daughter? Why would you suddenly ask about this instead?* I suddenly didn't know how to react.

Fatty was a bastard and beat me to the punch. He immediately patted Poker-face and said, "Of course, I have such a nice thing with me. Isn't this him? Why, pretty girl, do you want him to be your escort?"

I immediately bared my teeth at Fatty and told him to pay attention to the atmosphere.

Unexpectedly, the old woman seemed shocked when she heard this. She immediately looked up and stared at Poker-face for a second. Then, she stood up and walked over to him.

"Is this him?"

We nodded. I suddenly felt nervous when I looked at the old woman's expression and was afraid she'd shout, "Son, I missed you so much!"

She trembled a little and said to Poker-face, "Let me see your hands." She grabbed his hands and only took one look before she stepped back with a livid face.

I thought, *not good, is there a grudge between them?* Unexpectedly, the old woman knelt down, and Huo Xiuxiu— who had been waiting nearby— knelt down as well, even though she didn't understand what was going on.

Chapter 18 Qilin Who Carries Everything (Part I)

The solemnity on Granny Huo's face and the heaviness and determination with which she knelt down couldn't be more sincere.

She was an old lady who could call the wind and rain in Beijing, a member of the Mystic Nine who was all-powerful in the industry, an elder in her twilight years, and the matriarch of a rich family. Any one of these identities could easily crush us to death, but she knelt down so rightfully and decisively that it seemed as if this was the only action that could reflect her piety.

My surprise was no less than that of the others. In the few seconds it took her to kneel down, it seemed as if a hand was suddenly pressing on my shoulders, bending my knees. It wasn't easy for me to resist the urge to kneel down. I didn't know if this was due to my servility or because the atmosphere was too weird.

At that moment, I suddenly had a feeling: Poker-face and I may be too different, and I may never understand his world.

Fortunately, this feeling was fleeting under Fatty's stirring words. He was also startled, and sat there stunned for a few seconds, before a sentence popped out of his mouth: "No, is this old lady a zombie?!"

Then he realized that it was impossible and looked at me with raised brows. I just barely recovered from the shock and immediately said, "Granny Huo, what are you doing?" I rushed to help the old lady up, only to find that she looked solemn and was unwilling to rise. Huo Xiuxiu beside her was completely stupefied. She had probably never seen her grandma like this before. At that time, she didn't know what to do, so she continued to kneel down with her.

Strangely, Poker-face didn't do anything either and just looked at her like a statue.

This wasn't proper, and I didn't have any experience in dealing with such a scene. I didn't know what to do and helplessly looked to Fatty. Fatty was also at a loss, but his reaction was faster than mine. He immediately went up and helped me force the old woman to get up.

Her eyes never left Poker-face, and after helping her to sit down, Fatty said, "Granny, have you never seen such magnificent fingers that they make your legs go soft, or what? It's the twenty-first century, we can't afford such old courtesies. If you act like this, you might not be afraid of knee pain, but we're afraid of losing a few years of our lives."¹⁸

She ignored him and looked at Poker-face as she asked, "Do you still remember me?"

Poker-face shook his head, and Fatty said, "Not to mention you, he even forgot his fat grandfather some time ago."

The old woman bit her lower lip: "Yes, you certainly don't remember anything. If you did, then you might not have come to see me."

I asked, "Granny, do you know each other?"

She quieted down and said, "I know more than that. As soon as I heard you talking about him, I understood what happened to my daughter."

Fatty and I looked each other in the eye. The old woman seemed extremely tired and bogged down, and then she suddenly burst into tears: "It seems that Mama's hurt you. Retribution. Old Dog Wu's son and nephew hurt and killed each other, our children disappearing one after another... it's all retribution. In our business, we can't escape the cycle of justice after all."¹⁹

I was extremely curious and felt that things were getting better and better. I wanted to ask her questions but didn't know where to start.

¹⁸ Per Tiffany: There is a saying in Chinese that if an elder knelt in front of a younger person, the younger person will lose a few years of their lives (probably just trying to scare them into respecting their elders).

¹⁹ The first sentence that Granny Huo uttered was directed at Huo Ling since she was aware that her daughter was probably dead.

“Grandma, the Mystic Nine has been handed down for so many years and many children are thriving. You say it’s retribution, but I don’t think it’s quite like that. Some coincidences could be accidents. You don’t have to be so fatalistic,” Xiuxiu comforted her.

Granny Huo shook her head: “In fact, there’s no such thing as the Mystic Nine. After liberation, we still had fantasies. Then, things came one after the other. At first, we wanted to hold each other together, but later, it was good to be able to keep ourselves afloat. In those years, we once swore that those who followed us and ate our food belonged to our family. How many were harmed by us, and how many turned to harm us? In the old society, there was still morality and justice in this business. Black Back’s²⁰ knife could protect a whole street. In those years, there was nothing left. We never thought that people could be so bad.” She said. “When even people like us started to hurt people, I knew it was the end of the Mystic Nine.”

I didn’t quite understand what she meant, but I could guess the time period she was talking about, so I asked, “What’s going on?”

She looked at Poker-face and suddenly fell silent.

The silence was very awkward. I knew that she was probably thinking, so I didn’t dare interrupt her and refrained from urging her on for fear of her becoming vexed and rebellious.

After a long silence, she slowly said, “Boy, you’ve been very sincere towards me, but you’re the offspring of Old Dog Wu. At that time, we swore that this thing would all rot in our stomachs. Of course, this pledge isn’t so important now, but I don’t want to say it either. Unless he wants to know.” She said.

My breath hitched, and I scolded in my heart, *how is it this again?* At times like this, Uncle Three, Grandpa, and now this old woman were all like this. They appeared to have a huge chip on their shoulder but were unwilling to mention the secret. What kind of mess did they get into?

²⁰ Black Back the Sixth was a person who ranked sixth in the Mystic Nine.

I looked at Poker-face to see how he reacted, and Granny Huo looked at him too. The emotion in her eyes was very complicated: "Do you want to know?"

Poker-face looked at her but didn't answer. I glanced at him, urging him to ask quickly and not miss this good opportunity, but he looked at me and shook his head.

Everyone was a little surprised. "You don't want to know?" the old woman asked.

Poker-face's eyes were as cool as water: "I don't believe you."

She looked at him and her face changed. "Oh," she cried, "Why?"

Poker-face didn't answer her, but turned to me and said, "Take me home." With that said, he walked out without looking back.

I was caught off guard and had no choice but to follow him out. I walked all the way to the middle of the yard and Fatty immediately followed. I could imagine the old woman's stunned expression. Fatty was also puzzled, and probably wondering why Little Brother's character had suddenly changed.

Before we had taken a few steps, I heard someone calling "Wait!" Looking back, I saw that Huo Xiuxiu had caught up with us and said, "Wait, wait."

I looked back at Granny Huo, who had gone back to the inner room. Huo Xiuxiu gave Poker-face a strange look and said: "People from Crescent Hotel and Liuli Sun's own people are both outside right now. If you leave here, you definitely won't have a moment's peace. My grandmother said that she would help you find a safe place for old time's sake. You can temporarily take shelter there and lay low. We'll keep in touch. She still has a lot of things to ask you."

"Is your grandmother also interested in my stolen item?" Fatty raised the seal. "As Little Brother said, we don't believe you."

Huo Xiuxiu said: “My grandmother has never been uncompromising. You should follow her advice. It’s good for everyone. And where can you go now?” She paused, blinked at us, and pointed to Poker-face. “In fact, I think I may know a little about him.”

Chapter 19 Living Together

Huo Xiuxiu was right. Without Granny Huo's umbrella, we would be in a very difficult situation for some time to come.

I didn't have any time to think about how to deal with the mess we left behind. I was the only one out of the three of us with a prominent industry background, which meant I might be the only one able to help calm the situation down. In my worldview, I believed that in a legal society where we really had no money, there were ways to come to a compromise. But once I reflected on it, I realized I was a hypocrite. I had never experienced such a thing before, and maybe it was more serious than I had expected.

I sometimes felt that the three of us were like those ignorant children who gambled in the movies, relying on their own skills to go to the adult world to make trouble. In the end, their parents had to cut off their fingers to make amends, and it was only then that they realized that their troubles were beyond their own worldview. At that time, it was useless to say "How could this happen? I don't want to." I was faintly worried that this disaster had gone beyond what I could imagine.

As a result, I was immediately moved by what Huo Xiuxiu said.

On the other hand, I thought Granny Huo's attitude was very coy. We had now entered a very chaotic and unmanageable situation. Originally, I just wanted to ask about the Yangshi Lei, but I ended up dredging up some old woman's past. The things that followed seemed to be complicated and connected together, and I felt like Granny Huo was playing hard to get. She might've had some things she couldn't comprehend right now, so if she wanted to understand them, she would follow up with us.

Keeping us safe was a detour for her and a delaying tactic for us. It was definitely good for both sides. She could reflect clearly on her own thoughts, and we also had time to react and find out how much trouble we had run into.

Fatty and I had almost the same idea. He was the most realistic and knew that he couldn't go back to his shop anyways, so he agreed first. We'd at least have a place to discuss what to do next, so I agreed right after.

I thought she would find a house for us in the compound, but she brought in a different driver and replaced the Hongqi with a humble Passat. We left the compound with our heads down and didn't dare look out at the street. Remembering that Huo Xiuxiu had hinted at it before, I asked her what she knew about Poker-face, but she wouldn't answer. All she would say was that it was loaded information and I had to give her something in exchange. She told me not to worry, and that we would catch up this evening.

We drove around from Gongzhufen to Dongsì, before coming to a very inconspicuous place in an alley, where a very magnificent old house appeared.

"Fuck, which Qing emperor lived here?" When we got out of the car, Fatty looked at the white jade wall outside the old house and exclaimed, "There are pillars outside this wall and it's not even an outer wall. Which mansion is this part of?"

"I don't know, I was still in Changsha when my grandmother bought it." Huo Xiuxiu invited us in and I found that it was completely deserted. The yard was very large, and the main structure was a typical courtyard house, but it was much bigger than normal ones and had a lot of rooms.

There were so many weeds in the garden that I really didn't believe that I was still in Beijing.

"It used to be an office building," Huo Xiuxiu said as she pointed to a room on the second floor. "You'll live there. It's cleaner."

Fortunately, the floor by the door had been renovated, and although the renovation had clearly been done a while ago, the firmness wasn't a problem. The walls were full of ivy, which had been left untouched for a long time. They were already covering the doors and windows, so Fatty cut them

down with his knife, and then we entered. The dust inside was very thick and there wasn't any furniture.

"Sister, this place seems to be used for tests of courage rather than for people to live in." Fatty said.

"My grandmother said it would be nice to have a place to sleep for those who have offended the Crescent Hotel, rather than for you to sleep on the main road." Huo Xiuxiu took a bag of things from her purse. "Here's some toothpaste, cups, and towels. I grabbed them from my grandma's home when she ordered me to bring you here. Use these first and I'll send someone to bring you bedding. I live like a princess since I'm from a rich family, so I don't need to fend for myself. I'll bother you to clean up here."

Fatty made a gesture of eating: "What about eating? I'd be embarrassed to call KFC here. The person who'd deliver it would be scared to death."

"When I send the bedding, I'll send over a hot kettle and instant noodles. The bathroom is on the first floor. The toilet is dry, but there's running water in the yard. At first, it may be rusty but it won't last long. You can't leave, so just stay here for a few days. My grandmother will help you figure it out." She looked at the seal and Fatty immediately shrank back: "Girl, this is your three brothers' last line of defense, equal to our underwear. If you want to peel it off, you have to wait until your grandmother comes up with a result. For now, we still have to wear it."

Huo Xiuxiu gave a snort: "Disgusting, who wants your underwear?" She looked around and sighed heavily, "Then, I'll go prepare some bedding for you. See you tonight. I'll bring you some wine."

"Oh, my dear sister." Fatty was about to burst into tears. "Then come early. Brother will be waiting for you."

Fatty and I watched her skip away happily before we closed the gate, breathed a sigh of relief, and collapsed to the ground. The tension we had felt just now was a totally conditioned reflex, but now that it was only us, we could really relax.

Fatty looked around and said, “Do you think the old woman’s playing tricks on us?”

I shook my head: “Not really. This place seems really safe, so it would be wise to stay here tonight. If there’s anything wrong, we’ll discuss it tonight and leave first thing tomorrow.” As I said this, I looked at Poker-face, “You just said you don’t trust the old woman. Why? I don’t think she’s lying.”

Poker-face stood by the ivy-covered window and looked at the desolate courtyard outside. I waited a long time for his answer before he replied, “Just a feeling.”

Fatty said, “Actually, I feel the same way. The old woman’s first reaction when she saw Little Brother seemed genuine, but then she was a little incoherent, as if she was deliberately circling around the topic and trying to buy some time to think about something. I always thought that Little Brother had lost his memory and was confused, but I didn’t think he was as smart as me. It’s true that people are divided into groups.”

I thought to myself, *the fact that you’ve lost your memory doesn’t mean you’re an idiot. What is Fatty going on about?* I was shocked by the situation at that time and didn’t notice anything special, but once they said it, I was also a little concerned.

“That old woman is cunning. When Little Brother wanted to go, she still hadn’t come up with her countermeasures, so she had to take the risk of protecting us first. Little Brother’s move is a provocation. It turns out his heart is quite poisonous.” Fatty gave Poker-face a thumbs up.

Poker-face didn’t respond.

Fatty whispered to me, “This guy has been even more quiet lately.”

I also thought the same thing. I sighed and said, “Anyways, I believe the old woman will come up with a statement in the end. Let’s not delay this good opportunity and think it over. Maybe the old woman will change her mind and drive us out tomorrow.”

“Yes, but before that, we have to clean up a little; otherwise, this place really can’t be lived in. If we’re not hacked to death, we’ll get lung disease, and it’s unlikely the old woman will compensate us. Hey, Mr. Naive, you’re an only child, and don’t know how to do anything, right?”

I really didn’t do much housework, but I believed cleaning was easy for people with a normal IQ, so I said, “I’ll help.”

I tore a towel apart, used half of it as a rag, went to the yard to run some water, and began cleaning the floor. Poker-face also had no right to stare blankly, and Fatty pulled him over to clean the window.

We explored the other rooms and found that there was some abandoned furniture left, so we moved it all to the second floor. The many desks, stools, washstands, and so on were wiped clean one by one.

The house was no longer messy, which brought a sense of nostalgia.

We were sweaty, but seeing those rooms cleaned made me proud. I didn’t know being a housewife could feel so good.

Fatty was good at housework, which I found surprising. He said he once had a girlfriend and wanted to learn everything in order to please his future father-in-law. He was dumped in the end, but he never forgot those skills.

Fatty had a lot of stories to tell, which made me feel like he knew a little bit of everything. But he came up with different reasons every time, so I didn’t particularly believe his words.

I said to him, “If that’s the case, you could open a cleaning company when you retire, and I could help advertise your business.”

He laughed and agreed, saying that he would clean old houses. Between stealing tiles one day, and table legs the next, he’d definitely be richer than he was now.

After that, he took out the seal that we had stolen. “We have some time now. Let’s see what we’ve got. We probably won’t get to tomorrow.”

The sun was shining through the window, so we put the seal on the floor where the light would hit it. We were immediately stunned when we saw liquid seeping out of the seal.

Chapter 20 Qilin Who Carries Everything (Part II)

Fatty complained, "Little Brother, I asked you to clean the window, not this. If I had known you were so hard-working, I would've given you the floor just now."

Poker-face shook his head, touched it, and then smelled it. I found that the water he had touched was green.

"Faded? No way." Fatty took a deep breath. "Fuck your grandmother, is the lacquer painted on it fake?"

My heart thumped. If that was true, then his mother's blood would be rotten. Judging from the waiters' cautious actions towards us at the auction earlier, this thing was definitely genuine. But accidents could still occur. If this thing was a fake, then it was a fraud on the part of the auctioneer. If he insisted that the thing at the auction was genuine and became fake in our hands, then we wouldn't be able to wash our reputations clean even by jumping in the Yellow River.

Just as I was going to take a closer look, Poker-face said no and told us not to touch it: "It's poisonous." I looked at his hands and saw that the place where he had touched the liquid had developed a large two-layer red spot that was spreading to the palm of his hand.

I was freaked out, but Fatty clapped his hands and said, "Oh, I know! I heard that Americans sometimes use a chemical substance on antiques in order to prevent theft. People will have a reaction and pass out after touching it. Why, then, was I fine just now?"

"You wrapped it in your clothes so it may have been blocked. It absorbs moisture and dissolves."

The red rash on Poker-face's hand didn't continue to spread and he didn't show any signs of fainting. In fact, he didn't seem to care very much at all. Fatty wrapped the seal in a towel and went down with him to wash it.

After they were done, the seal looked even more exquisitely carved. When we looked at it in the sufficient sunlight in the courtyard, many details that we couldn't see clearly just now immediately appeared. I found that the craftsmanship of the jade seal was so exquisite that it had to be a masterpiece. Even if it wasn't an antique, it was definitely a work of art.

I felt relieved and told myself that everything was alright.

Now that we could carefully examine the seal's knob, I found that it was in the shape of a Qilin stepping on a ghost. The Qilin was holding his head high with his chest out and stepping on a three-headed ghost, whose claws were caught in the Qilin's claws. But after taking a closer look, I found that the Qilin was also made up of a lot of little ghosts. The carving was extremely clever. The whole shape wasn't like the Qilin stepping on a ghost, but the ghost combining to form the Qilin. And these ghosts had scales on their bodies, which made them look like entwined snakes.

Ghost knob dragon fish jade seal... ghost knob was worthy of its name, but where was the dragon fish? I only saw snake-like lines, but when we looked at the imperial seal from another angle, we immediately found that the Qilin's shape had changed into the shape of countless dragon fish. It was only by looking sideways at those little ghosts that the meaning of dragon fish could finally be seen in the tangled shapes.

Amazing!

As someone who had done some research on Chinese traditional crafts, I immediately knew that this thing was extremely valuable. In the antique market, appearance, creativity, workmanship, and background were all very important. Usually, just one of the four elements was considered very good and valuable, but this thing had almost reached the limit in all aspects. In all honesty, the price offered at the auction hadn't been high, and if we hadn't

made trouble, I figured the final transaction price would have been astronomical.

With that thought, I broke out in a cold sweat. If I was the seller and this thing had been stolen, I definitely wouldn't spare that person. But at the same time, I felt that we had taken such a powerful thing so easily, as if their protection measures were too trifling.

The whole form of the Qilin felt very similar to Poker-face's tattoo, but I knew it wasn't the same. Qilins were almost all the same, after all.

Fatty was drooling and said, "You have to count the fish and ghosts. If their number is very special, it's even more remarkable." At this point, he began to count. After only a few counts, he gave a cry of "Ah" and said, "No, there's something wrong with this thing's appearance."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"This ghost has lost a head." When he showed it to me, I saw that the very fine carved lines were suddenly broken off, but because the whole carving was too complicated to count one by one, I couldn't see the details at all.

I looked at the whole thing again and saw that the lines in not only one spot, but three other spots were faulty. Strangely enough, the faulty places were very smooth, as if it had been done on purpose. Fatty drew a picture and found that the three places were where the three fingers pointed to the abdomen when the imperial seal was used.

"Have you ever heard of a pair of flower shirts in old Beijing?" Fatty suddenly asked.

I shook my head and Fatty said, "The flowers on both sides of the waistcoat are connected, and when the waistcoat is buttoned, the two sleeves of the jacket are clouds and the waistcoat is a crescent moon. As soon as the

waistcoat is unbuttoned, the cloud is still on the jacket sleeves, but there's a full moon on the chest. It's called Yin Qing Yuan Que."²¹

I shouted: "What, why don't you just say it plainly?"

Fatty said, "What I'm saying is that these three ghost heads are actually three rings. When the person wearing the three rings grasps the seal, the position of the rings is right on the fractures. Grasp it just right, and the seal will take shape. It's clever, really fucking clever."

I grabbed it, and said to myself, *although it's clever and similar to the ghost seal, how can we prove it?* I started to ask Poker-face: "You—" but when I thought about it, he must have forgotten all about it, so it was pointless to ask.

Poker-face didn't seem to have any special interest in it either, but Fatty couldn't put it down and seemed to want to swallow it into his stomach: "Shit, this time we're going to make a lot of money. Mr. Naive, if we're going to sell this thing, who do you think can make the offer?"

I thought about it, and suddenly had a bad feeling: "It's really hard to say."

We were suddenly startled by several loud honks outside. Fatty immediately wrapped the seal up again and said, "Well, Young girl is back. Let's not think about it. We'll keep this thing here. Sooner or later, someone will tell us to sell it to them." As he said this, Fatty was very clever and climbed onto the beam to stuff the seal into the cracks in the brick.

It really did turn out to be Huo Xiuxiu coming back, and she was followed by several people who took various sized bags upstairs. She said that they were all sleeping bags and other things we might need. Fatty reacted quickly and immediately asked about the wine, as if he hadn't been looking at the seal a few minutes ago.

²¹ It sounds better in pinyin so I left it that way. But it's basically something like Clouded, Bright, Waxing, Waning Moon.

Huo Xiuxiu took out two bottles of unlabeled wine: “The best Erguotou you’ll ever drink.”

“You’re bragging. Erguotou still has the best?” Fatty asked.

When those who followed Huo Xiuxiu said their goodbyes and left, she ended up staying. She took out a large fast-food bag from her purse: “Fried peanuts.”

As I watched the men leave, I was surprised and asked, “You’re not going back?”

“How miserable would you be if I went back? This old house, three old men, and Erguotou... all you need is a hemp rope, so when you’re done drinking, the three of you can hang yourselves together.” She said.

“With you hovering over us here like a female ghost, we’d have to hang ourselves.” Fatty retorted.

I asked, “Does your grandmother know you’re here? Won’t she wait up for you?”

“Brother Wu Xie, are you really forgetting, or playing dumb? Don’t you remember my temper?” Little Sister blinked. “My grandmother doesn’t know, but she won’t look for me either. I was brave enough to fly from Changsha to Beijing by myself when I was eight years old. She can rest assured that I’ve gone through my wild phase. Moreover, I’ve come here this time to exchange secrets with you. I have to get some good insurance.”

It was strange. I really didn’t have any impressions of her, but this little sister’s behavior was very eccentric, so I couldn’t show any weakness; otherwise, I’d look very foolish.

I asked her, “Do you really want to talk? I thought you were joking. What do you have to say, and how can I believe that what you say is true?”

“You can try me.” She laughed.

“Try you? How?” I didn’t know what information she had.

Fatty joked softly: “Mr. Naive, is this little sister trying to seduce you?”

I gave him a nudge to stop talking nonsense, and she said, “Well, I’ll tell you one thing. After you hear it, you’ll immediately know that I’m qualified to exchange information with you.”

I felt more and more interested and nodded to see what she had to say.

She looked at me and said mysteriously, “When I was a child, I saw a videotape by chance. After watching it, I was very confused and asked my grandmother about it, but she said nothing and only scolded me. So, I began checking into the matter myself. After listening to what you said to her, I found that the things we investigated seemed to be related. You should believe me.”

Fatty and I looked at each other, but we didn’t say anything. I had already mentioned this matter when I talked with Granny Huo earlier, so it was easy to fabricate it.

When she saw that we didn’t respond, she sighed and said, “I have the fish.”

Chapter 21 I Have the Fish

“I have the fish.”

This was the text I had found on a missing person’s website when I was searching for the names of the archaeological team on Yongxing Island.

Earlier, when I told the old woman about my experience, I didn’t mention this sentence because it was a minor detail that didn’t need to be disclosed. Huo Xiuxiu said each word very leisurely, and there was a hint of banter and pride in her voice. I was a little surprised when I heard her say this. I realized in my heart that she might really know something; otherwise, she wouldn’t have said those key words.

It appeared she had also checked the names of those people on the internet and seen the website, so it was at least true that she had investigated these things.

With regards to this little sister, my heart was surprisingly calm. I found it very strange that I wasn’t curious or doubtful towards her, but it may have been because she was younger. I even felt that my experience in this business was better than hers. Looking at her proud little eyes, I smiled and thought that there was nothing to be proud of.

“Well, I admit that you also investigated this matter, but that website is too easy to find. It doesn’t mean you know something I don’t know. I saw this photo several years ago.”

Little Sister looked at me with the same expression and said, “You’re wrong, I didn’t say I found those words on the photo from the internet.”

I paused and felt that there was something in her words. At first, I was a little stunned by the intensity of her eyes, but I soon responded and realized that her smile wasn’t merely a child’s pride.

I wondered why she looked at me with such confidence. I didn't act very passive, and I didn't feel like I gave off a weak aura, but her eyes didn't waver at all. It seemed that she was a hundred percent confident that she could persuade me, but what she was using to convince me wasn't as powerful as that.

I made a judgment and decided that it was unlikely that she was bluffing because that would be very low-class. In other words, if she wasn't bluffing, then she thought her proposal was very powerful, and I just wasn't understanding what was so powerful about it. While thinking all of this, an intense thought suddenly popped into my head, and I told myself that that couldn't be right.

"Sister," I blurted out, "did you make that missing person post with the photo? Did you write this sentence?"

"Well, that's good," she said proudly. "You said just now that you searched for those names, and I knew you would find that photo."

"You—" I suddenly didn't know how to respond. Damn it, I always thought that the publisher of that thing should be someone at least a few years older like Uncle Three, but it unexpectedly turned out to be this little sister.

She took out a cartoon notebook from her pocket and handed me a black and white photo from inside. It was the photo with the words "I have the fish" written on it. It was exactly the same as what I had seen on the internet and should be the one that was scanned and uploaded.

This was the first time I had seen the original photo of them, and I felt a sense of nostalgia.

"Look at this again." Xiuxiu took out another photo and handed it to me.

At first glance, I recognized that it was a photo of Huo Ling when she was young. It was a full-body image of a young girl who was just a little older, dressed in the clothes peculiar to that era, with a ponytail and the printed words "Celebrate Youth Day" beside her. I could feel a ripple in my heart.

She looked like a charming fairy and gave off the same kind of feeling as the Xiuxiu in front of me.

“This was taken in Wangfujing during the May Fourth Youth Festival when my aunt was eighteen.”

“What?” I was surprised.

“Look at this one again.” Xiuxiu took out another picture, which was a newspaper photo, showing a liberation truck decked in a flower ball. I didn’t know what Beijing festival it was, but I could recognize the background behind the truck. It was the intersection where the previous photo of Huo Ling was taken and I could see the same road sign.

“This was what I found in the Beijing Museum. It seems to be another photo taken at the same intersection in 1984. According to the height of the liberation truck and the shooting angle at that time, I deduced the height of the road sign and then inferred my aunt’s height through the road sign. At the same time, I found out what shoes my aunt was wearing and calculated her barefoot height at that time, which was about 1.68 meters. Look at this again.” She handed me another color photo, and I immediately saw that it was the dock where the ten of them had taken the picture in Xisha, but there was no one on the dock, and the view was also empty. There was a sand dune in the background, and a phoenix bicycle off to one side that was leaning against the cable pier.

“I found the dock that year and photographed it from the same angle. Using the cable pier on the dock as the standard, I calculated the height of the pier by using the bicycle. I also found the shoes she was wearing at that time and tested my aunt’s barefoot height in this photo, which was about 1.60 meters.”

“Eight centimeters short.” Fatty frowned.

“I included the shoes as factors because there were very few kinds of shoes at that time. This calculation method has been proven and the result is very accurate. If you include shoes, the height of the people in the two photos is

basically the same, but if you remove the shoes and calculate accurately, you will find that a young girl has actually shrunk eight centimeters during puberty.” Xiuxiu said, “They’re actually two different people. Your theory is correct!”

I breathed a sigh of relief, and Xiuxiu said, “I haven’t shown these to my grandmother yet, but it seems that my aunt is really dead.”

“Little Sister is quite quick.” Fatty looked at the photos and was amazed. “This is high-tech.”

“I’m a cultured person, unlike you guys,” Xiuxiu said smugly. “Now, am I qualified to make a deal with you?”

Chapter 22 Delve Deeper into the Secret

I didn't immediately say I didn't believe her, but I knew that I almost did.

"To tell you the truth, what you said earlier really makes me want to kiss you. You know, when I looked into it myself, the more I searched, the more I found out that this thing was very chaotic. It made me feel like I was going crazy. After hearing what you said earlier, I realized that there are still a few idiots like me out there. It's really comforting." Young girl looked like an adult as she continued, "As you said before, should we have a drink?"

"Why are you so invested in this?" Fatty was a bystander who didn't seem to believe it, "Just to find out about the video?"

Huo Xiuxiu nodded and said: "For a teenage girl, seeing that kind of video would obviously change her outlook on the world."

Fatty raised his eyebrow and looked at me. "Yes, like you mentioned, only adults should look at it. That kind of tape must be put away; otherwise, it could be seen by children and poison teenagers."

Huo Xiuxiu gave him a pat: "I knew this fat man was lecherous and would think this, but it's not as dirty as you think."

"If you talk like that, Buddha will be very unhappy." Fatty said.

I realized that the young girl really wasn't so simple, so I interrupted the two of them and asked her, "Seriously, did you really check their backgrounds? Just for this video?"

She nodded, "And there are some real advantages. Although I've only found things that skimmed the surface compared to what you've found, and I haven't experienced as many life and death situations as you, I have an advantage that doesn't exist for you: first, my grandmother isn't dead; second, I can enter and leave many places that ordinary people can't. I also know many people who have access to old files. I won't say that I've found

more information than you, but there must be a large part that you don't know."

I became interested: "Oh, so, you'll just exchange this information with me?"

"It doesn't matter to me, but it seems to be very important to you. All I have to do is listen to what you say, so I don't think you have any reason to refuse." She smiled slyly and showed her white teeth. "If the information you tell me is crucial to me, I'll give you a kiss," she said cheerfully as she looked at me with stunning eyes from where she was sitting on the ground.

I looked at her and felt that although she was crazy and clever, she spoke in a very clear and coherent manner. I sighed deeply in my heart. The girls of the Huo family were very strong, and ordinary men wouldn't be able to handle them. No wonder grandpa finally chose grandma. Such a small young girl had the sexy charm of a mature woman and a very special temperament that made me want to believe her. She would be the death of many men when she grew up.

I took a sip of the Erguotou and had a sudden flash of inspiration. I told myself that I had to be careful, so instead of giving her a positive answer, I said, "I don't particularly believe that the contents of the video can make a girl like you so interested. You have to tell me what's in it first." I wanted to see if her intentions were true.

She turned a blind eye and bluntly replied, "It's my aunt. It's what you said about Huo Ling."

"He checked his uncle and you checked your aunt? Why are you all like this? Is there no family privacy?" Fatty asked angrily.

I felt excited and motioned Fatty not to interrupt: "Is it a video of your aunt combing her hair?"

She shook her head: "No, my grandmother confiscated the video, but I won't forget the contents of it, and you'll know it's true as soon as I say it.

Well, I know less than you do so I can't give too much for free. Brother Wu Xie, are you willing to exchange?"

I gave Fatty a look, and he nodded and said to her, "Give me another hint, Little Sister, I've got the basics. I'll give you a kiss. What's in the video?"

Huo Xiuxiu blinked her eyes: "My aunt and several other people are crawling on the ground."

Chapter 23 Qilin Who Carries Everything (Part III)

The atmosphere became very strange. I looked at Huo Xiuxiu and felt like there was a little fox in front of me.

Indeed, as soon as she said it, I immediately knew what kind of situation she was talking about and understood that she wasn't bluffing. Even I believed that she may have truly grasped something I didn't know. But under her stare, I had an illusion that this wasn't the focus at this time.

Huo Ling and several other people were crawling around on the ground, which matched what I had seen on the tape. It seemed that old Granny Huo had a videotape from Golmud. What was this all about?

After a standoff, I suddenly felt a little humiliated. Three old men were drinking Erguotou while a young girl came to exchange news with us, but we kept doubting her over and over again. Compared with her courage and boldness, the three of us seemed cheap and unable to let things go. At this time, we either continued pretending to be cool, or we readily agreed. It was too shameful to think about it.

I sighed and nodded, "Yes, I believe you. But I've already told your grandmother almost everything. The rest are all small details, so you might be disappointed."

Huo Xiuxiu was excited and said: "I'm not afraid. In fact, to put it bluntly, it would be nice if we had information to exchange on this matter, right?"

I nodded, and she said: "When I came, I had already thought about what you said just now. The whole thing is very complicated. We could start from scratch, but the information between us is like a crossroads, so maybe we can start with something else." She looked at Poker-face. "Let's start with him. I'll tell you about him, and you'll tell me about the ancient tomb on the snowy mountain you mentioned."

Fatty and I exchanged glances. Fatty coughed and said, “We agree. Then, you go first?”

She looked at me: “Are you really men? You always want to take advantage of me.”

Fatty wanted to argue, so I stopped him and said, “It doesn’t matter when I say it, so I’ll go first.” So, from the beginning to the end, I recounted our adventure in the Heavenly Palace.

I said it very carefully, because I had already said it roughly before at the old woman’s side, and to give a brief account was a waste of time. It took me about half an hour to finish. During that time, she didn’t interrupt at all and listened attentively. Maybe it was because there was a beautiful audience, but I spoke in a mesmerizing tone. Fatty gave me a thumbs up and said that I had a gift for storytelling.

After that, she remained calm for a long time, as if she were deliberating on something. Fatty called her twice before she recovered. She breathed a sigh of relief and looked at Poker-face: “This elder brother is so powerful; it’s no wonder my grandma had to kneel down. I thought I’d lost face today, but now I feel that it was right.”

“Why, what’s the inspiration?” Fatty asked her.

She shook her head: “I’m a little confused right now. When I try to think of something, it doesn’t seem to string together. Maybe I’ll reach a conclusion later.”

Fatty looked at me and smiled, “She’s just like you, the female version of Mr. Naive.”

“It’s your turn.” I reminded her.

After a pause, she took a deep breath. “Well, let me think about what to say.” She thought for a moment, “It has to start with a nightmare.”

“Nightmare?” The corner of Fatty’s mouth twitched.

“Actually, it should be said that it was my grandmother’s dream,” she said.

Then, Huo Xiuxiu began to tell her story.

I started to gloat over her concentration, but after she started telling her story, I reacted almost the same way she did. I was very surprised because the things she experienced were also very complicated and were hardly beneath my own experiences. Moreover, her distinct female characteristic of cutting to the chase instead of pondering over the situation was even closer to reality than I was.

It was true that everything originated from a dream, but the origin had nothing to do with the content of the dream, because up to now she didn’t know what kind of dream it was. The reason why she became interested was because her grandmother always talked in her sleep when she had this nightmare.

Six or seven years ago, Huo Xiuxiu was still a young girl. In her own words, no one looked twice at her in a miniskirt. She was Granny Huo’s favorite child, so every summer she’d come to Beijing from Changsha and stay. At that time, Granny Huo would take her to buy a lot of things, and they’d go to Houhai and the Summer Palace, or go out of town to eat snacks in Wanping.

However, no matter how close they were, Granny Huo had a habit of sleeping alone at night. No matter where they stayed, the young girl wasn’t allowed to sleep with her grandma.

At that time, the old woman lived in a courtyard house with a bedroom so large that it could sleep more than twenty people. As the young girl grew up, she was very curious why her grandma would sleep alone, but she didn’t dare ask. The young girl slept in the same room with the nanny at night.

One time, she woke up in the middle of the night and found that the nanny wasn’t with her. In that old house, it was dark outside, the room was very large, the moonlight was dim, and all the shadows were creepy. Children’s

minds were at their most imaginative during times like these, and the young girl immediately turned pale with fear.

She called a few times but the nanny didn't answer. She immediately began to shake, and when she thought of her grandma, she jumped out of bed and immediately ran to her grandma's room, wanting to hide in her arms.

When she lifted the curtains of the old-fashioned bed, however, she found that the bed was empty. She paused, and suddenly began to sweat. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something hanging on the shelf above the bed.

Looking up, she saw the most terrifying scene of her life— her grandmother hung on the bed frame above the bed in a strange pose. Her eyes had turned white and her hair was curled, as if she were asleep.

She was so scared that she peed her pants and sat on the ground, petrified. She didn't know how long it took, but she suddenly heard her grandmother talking.

At first, she thought she was being called, but after listening carefully, she found that that wasn't the case. Her grandmother was sleep-talking.

Her grandmother said, "There's no time."

Chapter 24 The Story of Letters

When I heard that, my back was cold and my hands shook. After a long time, I managed to ask, “Why was your grandmother like this? Was there anything strange about her?”

“The nanny found me later. It turns out she had gone to the bathroom. After that, I was afraid of my grandma until I got older and she told me that this was how Huo women practice soft kung fu. You have to sleep hanging so your bones achieve maximum flexibility. She’s been sleeping like this since she was nineteen, so now she can’t sleep in a bed at all. She has bone spurs in many places, but it doesn’t hurt if she hangs like that.”

“Damn, then your grandfather must have practiced for quite a while before his wedding night.” Fatty said.

Huo Xiuxiu ignored him and continued: “Because it traumatized me, I kept thinking about the words she spoke.”

Judging from her own account and my observation of her, she was a girl who had her own outlook, thought independently, and was a critical thinker. As a result, she was still bitter about her grandmother’s sleeping posture and sleep-talking at that time. Of course, this kind of bitter feeling didn’t exist at that time. The reason why she felt that this sleep-talk had some unusual meaning was because she heard the same phrase many times after this.

As she grew up, she began to believe that her grandmother, who seemed as strong as a rock, had a huge knot in her heart.

This knot was such a big secret that her grandmother probably wouldn’t disclose it until she died. But Huo Xiuxiu was sure that it had something to do with that sentence.

“There’s no time.”

What did she mean, there’s no time?

It was hard to say whether it was curiosity, the wheels of fate at work, or what she said about hoping to untie the knot in her favorite grandmother's heart, but she began to pry into the matter. To my surprise, the young girl showed amazing skills in researching this case. The clarity of her thinking and her grasp of things weren't proportional to her age.

"The girls in our family are usually beautiful and smart, and the boys are handsome but often stupid." She explained, "I don't know why. Maybe it's because the girls are brought up by their grandmas from childhood. My brother only knows how to play around all day long. He's not serious at all."

"Checking up on your grandma and aunt isn't a serious matter, either," Fatty added.

She thought for a moment, probably feeling that what he said was right, and then sighed, "In short, after checking everything, my grandmother's knot became mine."

She started to seriously look into this matter probably four years ago when she was fifteen years old. There were no clues besides the sentence "there's no time". If it were me, I probably wouldn't have been able to start at all, but she had a breakthrough that I couldn't imagine.

She initially wanted to find her grandmother's diary, but unfortunately, not everyone was in the habit of keeping one. Her grandmother used to have very little information written down, unlike my family. My grandmother was from a good family (yes, my grandmother), so her educated sons and grandson were more or less bookish. Even when Uncle Three didn't speak, he could pretend to be at least thirty percent scholarly. The Huo family's style was more utilitarian and business-like. Women had to fight, go into the tombs, take care of their husbands, and teach their kids. They didn't have time to practice calligraphy and write articles. Therefore, Granny Huo's

temperament in those days was definitely not on par with Lin Daiyu's²² and there certainly wouldn't be too many words left behind.

But Huo Xiuxiu didn't give up completely and found many old letters that were kept in file boxes. She read several boxes worth with the mischievous idea that she might be able to peep through her grandma's love letters. Unfortunately, all the letters were basically business contacts and had nothing she wanted to know.

But she did find something strange.

She found that since 1995, a special package arrived every year in the second half of March. In those days, a notice was sent to the household first, and then you had to go to the post office to pick up the parcel. Because the Huos had a different status, several people filtered through everything and then filed it. Most of the packages were opened and checked, and the contents were filled in on a form that would be written on the back of the package. Xiuxiu noticed something strange on the forms.

On the ones from 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999, the contents of the packages were all videotapes, and the person who received them was always her grandmother.

In other words, in March of those years, someone would send a videotape to her grandmother.

However, her grandmother was a very old-fashioned person who only went to the theater. It was inconceivable that she would have anything to do with such a thing as a videotape.

There was no doubt that Xiuxiu was very interested in the whereabouts of these videos, so she began to pay attention, and through various opportunities, she was finally able to find those tapes. (I remember that I had the same experience before, but that was looking for the third-class film

²² One of the principal characters of Cao Xueqin's classic novel "Dream of the Red Chamber". She's portrayed as a well-educated, intelligent, witty, and beautiful young woman of physical frailness who is somewhat prone to occasional melancholy. Wiki info [here](#)

my father got from his friends in Hong Kong. Later, I found out that I didn't love erotic pictures, but the excitement of the tapes themselves.)

To this end, she even made very detailed plans, such as when her grandmother would go out and what she'd do when she saw the tape. For this reason, she saved two months' worth of allowance to buy a video recorder and set it up at home.

At last, she found the tapes under the floor of her grandmother's wardrobe. She picked out a tape, quickly went to the living room to transcribe it, and then put it back. During the whole process, she felt like a secret agent.

After that, she chose a time to go to her friend's house and watch the tape.

The content of the tape, as she said, seemed to be a surveillance video. It was a very dark hut and several people dressed in white were crawling on the ground. The whole tape ran for more than thirty minutes and she recognized her aunt, Huo Ling.

It was as if her own aunt had no soul as she crawled around on the ground. It was really horrible.

She knew about her aunt's disappearance from an early age, so when she saw the tape, she was scared out of her wits. She didn't know what the situation was, or what was wrong, but she instinctively knew that it was very bad. Her grandmother seemed to have some hidden secrets, and they were so terrifying that she couldn't let them go.

But she didn't dare ask her grandmother what was going on, because she knew nothing good would come of it. Yet she didn't dare tell others either, and in the following month, she was in a constant state of panic.

Maybe it was because she and I had really similar personalities, but after she slowly calmed down, a desire for the truth began to torture her. People

whose fate was influenced by Taiji²³ were so curious that others may find it hard to believe.

After that, she continued to investigate, but there were no results until she took a very clever, but risky approach.

It took her several months to imitate her grandmother's handwriting and write a reply to all the addresses in those old letters.

The letter was written roughly as follows:

Everybody,

I have dreamed of that thing again recently, and for many years, this nightmare has been lingering. I wonder, are we safe? I'm old and have half a foot in the grave, but I hope to see you again. There's one thing I didn't say back then, but now that I think about it, it may be the key. I hope we can meet face-to-face and talk, just old friends catching up.

These letters had spanned nearly half a century, and the latest one was sent a long time ago, so the addresses were generally unavailable now. But Huo Xiuxiu said that she felt as if those places where business was conducted were all rural areas or small county towns which saw little change, especially the rural areas. Even if the address had changed, the geographical area wasn't large and people were familiar with each other, so as long as the letter arrived in the village, someone would send it to the addressee.

After the letters were mailed, she took the initiative to take charge of the mailbox at home, making others think that she was in love and waiting for her boyfriend's letter. In fact, she just wanted to filter the letters out first. There was no reply in the first two months, but after the third month, there had been sporadic replies, which were basically incomprehensible.

²³ The Absolute or Supreme Ultimate, the source of all things according to some interpretations of Chinese mythology

She always insisted on checking the mailbox at five o'clock every morning and never stopped.

In the fifth month, the letter finally arrived.

There was only one line:

Let bygones be bygones.

She knew immediately that this was a clue, and this man must know the situation. Looking at the address, the letter came from a small shop in Liulichang, Beijing, so she immediately packed up and went to the shop.

It was a rainy day, and the entire City Gate was covered in rain hats. Liulichang was sparsely populated, so many shops had closed early. When she knocked on the shop door and entered, she saw an old man in the inner room. He looked at her and smiled, revealing a golden tooth in his mouth.

Huo Xiuxiu said, "The old man's name is Jin Wantang. Does it ring a bell?"

Chapter 25 The Largest Grave Robbery in History (I)

I had a very clear image of an old man with a golden tooth embedded in my memory because the person who pulled me into all this was such a man.

As soon as she said this, I felt my heart stir. There weren't that many coincidences in the world and it was obvious she was saying the old man whom she had met, Jin Wantang, was the one who came to my shop to look for silk books. He was the first overlap in both of our experiences.

It turned out that the old ghost was called Jin Wantang. I seemed to remember the owner of the shop next door also mentioning it before, and there was a strange feeling in my heart.

I never paid attention to this old man, and in fact, I also wanted to look into it in the beginning, but this kind of person's whereabouts were uncertain. I didn't have any experience or contacts at that time, what happened later had nothing to do with him, and I couldn't even remember the old man's appearance or any details that could stimulate my memories of him, so I always thought that his showing up was a coincidence.

Of course, he came to look for my grandfather and would only say that he was introduced by Lao Yang, and that the silk book had been dug up by friends. It seemed unlikely that these words alone— and the countless troubles they had caused me—were accidental, but it was very strange that what had happened afterwards had nothing to do with him. If this was a plot, it would be too abnormal.

Although I couldn't determine if his appearance was accidental, intentional, inevitable, or the workings of fate, it became a fact that he entered my shop that day, and I could never turn back.

I nodded to her and asked, "Does he know anything?"

Huo Xiuxiu shook her head: “He’s white, clean, and knows nothing. But the letter did come from him. He and my grandmother had only business relations. Later on, he got greedy and tampered with an item. My grandmother found out immediately and stopped working with him.”

At that time, Huo Xiuxiu thought it was very strange. If it was about such a small thing, why did Jin Wantang have such a reaction after seeing the letter? He was an old fox who knew what kind of power the Huo family wielded. He didn’t know if Huo Xiuxiu had come to settle accounts or spy on him, so he wouldn’t say anything.

But Huo Xiuxiu was very patient and ran to his store almost every day, nearly annoying Jin Wantang to death.

At the end of that year, Jin Wantang was also unlucky. A small eight-blade Han Dao was caught in a shipment. It was made of jade and was checked into customs. It was originally a small case, but when the jade Han Dao was evaluated, the value was too high and it immediately turned into a major case. Even his savings accumulated from a lifetime of grave robbing weren’t enough to make it go away.

At that time, Huo Xiuxiu seized the opportunity and made a deal with him. With her family’s connections, she threw him a lifeline and secured his shop, finally capturing his weakness.

After hesitating for long period of time he finally told Huo Xiuxiu everything over the phone one night.

It turned out that the deal back then wasn’t an ordinary transaction, and may even go down as the largest grave robbery in China’s history.

With the Huo family’s means at that time, if they put their mind to it, they’d surely seek retaliation until there was nothing left. But Jin Wantang was fine after this activity, because the Huos and several other parties, were all weakened and had no strength or mood to pursue anything.

To those people, the memories of that ordeal were really horrible

Fatty's eyes glistened when he heard this, and he couldn't help sitting upright and saying, "Bullshit, the biggest grave robbing activity has to belong to our trip to the Tarim Basin."

Huo Xiuxiu shook her head: "We're not talking about your run-of-the-mill grave robbing. The deal went beyond the ordinary concept of tomb raiding."

Fatty said, "Oh" and stopped making any more noise, because this so-called "big deal" must have been beyond our level.

I asked, "When you say beyond the ordinary concept, do you mean they didn't rob an underground tomb, but one flying in the sky?"

"Of course not," Huo Xiuxiu said.

"Come on, damn it, what makes this deal so special?" Fatty asked.

Just as Huo Xiuxiu was about to speak, Poker-face finally spoke up: "They didn't rob the tomb for money, but for another living person."

Chapter 26 The Largest Grave Robbery in History (II)

Huo Xiuxiu was rather surprised: “Do you know about this?”

Poker-face shook his head and leaned against the wall, looking out the window at the shadow of the vines. Moonlight dappled his face, making it look even paler than usual.

“Then how do you know they weren’t in it for the money?” Xiuxiu asked.

Poker-face said quietly: “Historical inevitability.”

Huo Xiuxiu looked at me, probably not used to Poker-face’s attitude. I actually wanted to tell her that it was an honor for him to even talk to her. Since he had been leaning there, I thought he wasn’t listening at all.

But I understood what Poker-face meant. When money reached a certain amount, there was no point in increasing it again. If it was the largest grave robbery in history, and the motive was still money... that would truly be a tragedy for our profession. There were still many things worth more than money in the world. Hadn’t it been said before that there were two big bosses bombing each other’s ancestral graves in order to rob each other?

The inevitability of history, the biggest conspiracy in the world, the largest war, and everything else in the world always had some “inevitability” behind them. I just didn’t know why he suddenly felt that this was the case.

I explained it a little bit, and Huo Xiuxiu thought it over for a moment: “You men are more sensitive to this kind of thing than us women. We girls certainly don’t feel anything about any history.”

I told her to keep going and stop dawdling, so she took a sip of Erguotou and continued.

Jin Wantang participated in the “biggest deal in history” because of his discerning eyes. At that time, in the miscellaneous academic circles in Beijing, he was famous for his discerning eyes and knowledge. From a Harbin’s cigarette case to a woman’s bodice, a more knowledgeable expert didn’t exist. It was said that his father entered the pawnshop business when he was six years old and left when he was seventeen. After liberation, he worked as a laminating worker in a factory, and was so poor he left Lao Jin with nothing when he died. But in his daily life, through countless little bits of experience accumulated from childhood to adulthood, his father deliberately taught him various skills in appreciating the major masterpieces of calligraphy, painting, jade, copper, embroidery, wood, and porcelain. In his own words, he spent the first half of his life achieving a kind of harmony between man and nature through antiques.

As a result, when he was dragged to Liulichang in the early 1960s to play, he actually found that the old depressed alley was actually a treasure.

With a fire in his eyes, he started from two yuan and a few old books. Two changed into three and three earned five. Within two years, no one thought that he could thrive in such a depressed collection market, but an old book brought in a net worth of ten thousand yuan. His skills in the category of ancient books had also entered a higher realm.

Of course, as he was making money, the speculation and government crack-down also appeared. Fortunately, Jin Wantang inherited his father’s extremely cautious nature and stopped at the right time. His net fortune of ten thousand yuan had never been discovered.

The business couldn’t continue, but he still retained his public reputation among the people via word of mouth. He became famous, and soon, his reputation even reached those abroad, earning him some foreign friends. Large institutions, large families, and university research institutes invited him to make evaluations and appraisals. At that time, the scenery was boundless and the big deal came at the height of his life.

The Huo family took the lead. At that time, he and the Huos had been cooperating for some time, so he didn't think anything was unusual and readily agreed.

According to his recollection, he told Huo Xiuxiu that he estimated the number of people involved in the whole "business" at that time was more than two hundred. But there were also those who weren't directly involved that collected data and bought equipment. He estimated that they numbered in the thousands. In those days, getting better Soviet equipment required numerous connections.

But this wasn't enough to highlight the peculiarity of the operation. The reason why Jin Wantang thought the deal had to be very special was because the leader was very unusual. This wasn't an exclusive operation, and there were a large number of participants. It was said that altogether, there were nine people.

My heart thumped when I heard this. Huo Xiuxiu was just like a skilled storyteller and paused here while showing an expression of "you thought of it, too?"

I rubbed my face and said, "Is it possible?"

Xiuxiu said: "I didn't believe it at first, but the facts are obvious."

Nine people...

Naturally, I immediately thought of the Mystic Nine. But they weren't an organization. The Mystic Nine was just an extremely loose title given to them by others in the industry. It wasn't planned by any marketing company, so the possibility of them doing the same thing at the same time was very low.

For example, the Tathagata Buddha, the Jade Emperor, and Jesus Christ claimed to be the three major religious leaders, but they had their own pedigrees. It was reasonable for the Tathagata Buddha to assemble the

Guanyin Bodhisattva and the Eighteen Arhats to fight, but it was impossible for the Tathagata, the Jade Emperor, and Jesus to fight together.

In fact, the business handled by each faction in the Mystic Nine was different. Although the difference between them wasn't as obvious as Jesus and Tathagata, it was clear in the circle. In fact, it was virtually impossible for the nine families to join hands.

I could only think of the most extreme possibility for why they would all work together. Although this possibility was very small, it was the most feasible— a powerful outsider had intervened in the matter.

For example, in a Hong Kong and Taiwanese film, a certain warlord heard that four celebrities were very powerful, so he called them all forth. As a result, the four celebrities all sang indiscriminately on stage with their own styles, hearts full of pain. Maybe there was also an outsider who heard that the Mystic Nine was very good and called them all together.

But the Mystic Nine were scattered all over the country, and some of them were wanderers. As the saying goes, officials can't overwhelm beggars. If an outsider wanted to gather everyone together, there would probably still be some people who wouldn't buy into it.

Huo Xiuxiu nodded and said: "I was very surprised when I heard the news. Probably no one in the circle knew that the famous but constantly fighting governors of Changsha's nine gates had such an unprecedented alliance. I also agree with your analysis that there must have been external forces calling the shots; otherwise, such an odd situation wouldn't be possible. But what you said isn't entirely right. That foreign power must've had a spokesperson in the Mystic Nine who did the job of arranging everything with the brokers. I just don't know who could get this group of local overlords to willingly sit together and obediently cooperate."

I told myself that there was definitely no way to prove it now, but in the 1960s, there was indeed someone in the Mystic Nine who had such qualifications—the leader of the Mystic Nine, Zhang Fo Ye.

I didn't know if he was still alive at that time, because he was a few generations older than the people below. If it wasn't him, it might have been one of his descendants.

I felt a little bitter that Grandpa didn't tell me about this matter, and his notes didn't record anything either. It seemed he didn't want anyone to know about this matter and didn't even want to recall it. Was this the core of the whole thing?

But because of the difference in seniority, the Mystic Nine was very different from how they were before liberation, and the new generation became famous early. For example, my grandfather and Granny Huo were still in their prime, but because of the impact of liberation, everyone's situation was different. I didn't know how much energy was spent to gather these people together. At that time, Black Back was already a beggar, and some people were too old to travel long distances and were replaced by the next generation. As a result, I could foresee that this team— with their uneven qualifications, experience, and physical strength— had laid the groundwork for the hidden danger of disaster from the very beginning.

It was the turn of 1962 and 1963. A huge team of horses quietly entered the mountainous area of Sichuan. Jin Wantang was among the team and trembled in fear as he left Beijing. There were old and young, and all kinds of people mixed in with good and bad intentions. The Mystic Nine were divided into groups, and each had clear boundaries.

Chapter 27 The Largest Grave Robbery in History (III)

Jin Wantang was a cultured man, who had neither strength nor courage to work in the field. He had only half his life left when he entered the mountains, and it was impossible to force him to do any further work, so he could only stay in the camp. Other people started searching everywhere and brought things—mostly silk books and bamboo slips—back at regular intervals, asking him to identify and classify them. He didn't know what the tomb's background was, and he didn't dare ask. He could only infer something from what he was allowed to identify.

First, he was sure that there appeared to be more than one ancient tomb here because the batches of silk books and bamboo slips that he identified were preserved differently, and the contents inside were all-encompassing. They included letters, ancient books, and silk writings, whose many recipients had different names. He felt that there had to be a huge cluster of ancient tombs here, and this group of people was digging up a large area of them.

Second, he was the only one in the whole team who did classification and identification, and all the stolen things were basically documents and ancient books. It seemed that their ultimate goal was the ancient books that could be found in this cluster of ancient tombs.

Third, the number of people in the team often decreased, and people often fought in the camp. Judging from the contents of the quarrels, accidents often occurred while working and they were accusing each other of shirking their duties.

The restoration and identification of ancient books took a lot of time, but what he didn't expect was that the business he thought could be completed in a month or two lasted for three years. For three years, he had been constantly identifying those ancient texts that were difficult to understand, speculating on dynasties and uses, and trying to translate their meanings.

The whole team seemed to be under a great amount of pressure, with almost no communication between them, and everyone doing things desperately in silence. He was so anxious that his teeth began to fall out and his weight changed from 150 kg to 70 kg. If that day didn't come, he might have died there.

On the day of the Dragon Boat Festival in the third year, this huge, depressed, and isolated life was suddenly broken. Suddenly, no ancient books were sent to him. He finally didn't have to squat down in tents every day to do those extremely boring jobs.

This sudden liberation initially made him uncomfortable, but two days later, his anxiety began to slowly ease. He had time to get out of the tent and wander around the camp. At that time, he discovered that he was in a really beautiful place.

They were on a flat piece of land rarely found in mountain areas. If they were near any villages, this flat area would have surely been reclaimed as farmland, but now it was full of towering trees. It showed that they were either far away from human beings, or getting here was very inconvenient. Looking at where the sky met the distant mountains, one could see that there were four huge, lofty snow-capped mountains connected to one another. Yunshan was surrounded by fog and looked holy and flawless. Before the snow-capped mountains, there were other towering mountains that were green and lush. That kind of green wasn't the green of Longjing shallow grass south of the Yangtze River, or the emerald green of Beijing, but the deep green of ink. All the colors in the whole region showed the extremely vigorous vitality of the plants.

The air in the mountains was extremely fresh, and he suddenly felt as if he had been reborn. It was like an epiphany, and the darkness he had been enveloped in for three years was swept away.

After that, his body gradually recovered and he began to take an interest in the things around him. He began to recover a lot of normal sensory thoughts and found that there were no traces of anything being dug up in the nearby

area. He speculated that the ancient tombs didn't exist, but if they did, they weren't on this piece of flat land. The surrounding mountains were very steep, however, and the probability of there being large-scale ancient tombs was very small. It would be like an axe splitting a knife.

Since there was nothing to do, and he was curious, he secretly followed a group of people far into the mountain one day. After climbing up the mountainside, the slope suddenly turned into a vast stretch of bare cliffs. Part of the mountain above seemed to have been cut vertically with a knife. All the radiations were cut off, leaving an almost completely uneven vertical rock surface. A strange forest had grown in the stone crevice above, and a small waterfall fell from the top of the cliff. It hit the huge leafy canopy below and splashed everywhere.

This was the kind of cliff that often appeared beside rivers. The famous cliff carvings along the Yangtze River had also been carved on a cliff like this. Since this probably used to be the channel of a big river, there were crags everywhere, but now the river had changed course and dried up. Sure enough, when he looked ahead, he saw that the cliffs continued for more than ten kilometers and stretched completely out of sight.

He saw countless ropes and lasso devices on these cliffs, and much like the legendary cliffs rich in bird nests, they were full of people. At the same time, he also found that many ropes were being dismantled, as if they had completed their historic mission. He immediately understood where the so-called ancient tombs and ancient books had come from.

The Shu people mostly practiced Buddhism, especially in Sichuan, where various religions flourished. It was said that many people sought immortality here, as if they had been called by the heavens. At a certain time, they would climb the cliff without any food and only some water, find a cave or fissure, climb in, and cut off the rope—thereby cutting off their own escape—and conduct the final practice there. If they didn't succeed, they would starve to death.

Many people expressed their determination to become immortal by using such decisive means, especially on the local mountains which were full of popular legends. Most of these people would take some ancient alchemists' books with them, and as the generations passed, the bones of many dynasties would often accumulate in these caves. These people had probably found the ancient books by climbing up the cliffs one by one.

Although some of the ropes had now been removed—indicating that they had found what they wanted—it seemed that they weren't going to leave yet. What else were they doing?

He looked at the part of the rope that hadn't been dismantled but was reinforced. He felt that other than the ancient books, there had to be another story behind this.

Unfortunately, Jin Wantang couldn't continue being curious when he arrived at this place. He didn't have the skills to climb the cliff to have a look, and he didn't have the courage to ask for specific details. After that, he had a very easy life. It was during this period that he, like some people who suddenly reacted during the reform and opening-up period, began to have his own ideas. He suddenly felt very regretful, why didn't he keep a few copies of the broken ancient books? Even if the quality wasn't good, they were still valuable. He was the only one here who had the eye to appreciate the ancient books, and it was easy to hide one or two of the better ones.

He knew that offending the Mystic Nine would have serious consequences, but the yearning and greed for a more comfortable life settled like maggots in his bones, and he regretted it badly.

This was often the case with people. Afterwards, they would constantly think about what they should or shouldn't have done at that time. In fact, if he were to return to that time, he probably still wouldn't have the courage.

But God gave him a second chance this time. In June of that third year, there was a big accident. There was a sudden noise and a large group of people came out of the mountain at noon, hurriedly carrying a dozen stretchers.

The people on the stretchers were covered in blood and the camp was thrown into chaos.

Later in the evening, a large roll of silk books practically soaked in blood was delivered to him. Three days later, he saw Granny Huo and the other members of the Mystic Nine for the first time, all looking solemn. The group of people wanted to watch him start the final appraisal.

He only took one look at the large volume and saw that it was a silk book written by Lu Huang in the Warring States Period.

Chapter 28 The Strangest Thing in the World

The silk books on top were soaked in so much blood that either someone's head had been cut off and the blood had sprayed, or many people were injured. Later, it was proven that the books had been brought out by six people. Four of those six were now dead, and the remaining two were lying outside a tent, their situation uncertain.

Lu Huang silk books were extremely difficult to decode, and there were very few left in the world. Jin Wantang knew at a glance that the batch he was given fell under this category and would be impossible to solve overnight. He could only recover the approximate text and write it in modern Chinese characters. As for the meaning of the code, it probably couldn't be solved for another ten years.

He felt suffocated by the depressed atmosphere, but he had already relaxed enough after a long rest, so he soon entered the zone. After ten days, he recovered all the silk books that were in good quality and quantity.

Since his mind was extremely clear, the regret of not "stealing" stirred in his heart again while he was working, and on the eve of completing his task, his anxiety reared its head.

Lu Huang's silks and rubbings were priceless, and if the rubbings were clear, they would fetch a small fortune. It was completely normal to steal them. But after watching the tense members of the Mystic Nine and knowing that some people had paid for it with their lives, he felt like taking one might bring great harm to him. And there was also the moral dilemma. But if he didn't take it, he might not get his reward for joining the team since he was on a thief's boat. Even if he could, it wouldn't be equal to three years' worth of labor. He was afraid he wouldn't have another chance if he didn't take it.

He hesitated and hesitated, and finally, his body made the decision for him. While he was hesitating, his hand unconsciously moved and secretly slipped a piece of the Lu Huang silk into his sleeve. By the time he realized it, he had already done the deed.

Fortunately, no one found out.

He made up his mind. Now that he had done it, there was no reason to return it. In the evening, he hid under the covers and carefully sewed the silk book to the soles of his cloth shoes (because there were three people in a tent). After much deliberation, he felt that there couldn't be any problems. These things already had defects, so nobody would know if one was missing. There was no reason he would be discovered, so he slowly relaxed.

But after doing this, like some kind of fable, he suddenly had another thought: stealing one was still stealing, so it would be better to steal another.

So he did the same thing the next day, but this time, something happened. He didn't expect that once he completed his work, it would be his last day there. The silk book was hidden in his sleeve, and he was preparing to go back to the tent to continue hiding it when someone suddenly came to tell him that arrangements had been made for him to leave the mountain that night and return to Beijing.

This was what he didn't expect. He thought that there would at least be a few more months to go, but it was undoubtedly gratifying to hear that he could leave the mountain, so he readily agreed.

No one came to see him off. Granny Huo was very kind to him in Beijing but hadn't given him much thought during this period of time. He thought the old woman wasn't in the mood to take care of these things now, so he went back to his tent to pack up. To his surprise, a thorough body search was waiting for him there.

It was Xie Jiuye's idea. He said, "I won't prevent your petty theft, but in the end, you'll never take away the things you stole."

Jin Wantang still remembered the embarrassment he felt that night. When he heard that he was going to be searched, a cold sweat soaked through his clothes in an instant. He immediately thought of various ways to get around it, but the timing was too tight to do anything.

At first, the man who searched him was quite polite, which gave Jin Wantang his only buffer. He first took off his shoes and left them very close to those of the man next door. Then, he opened his things one by one so that they could check them. At the same time, he thought of countless excuses, but it was too late. He opened something and one of the guys went up to check, while the other guy asked him to follow him to another tent to be searched. Pretending to be indifferent, he deliberately put on the shoes of the man next door and went out with him, thinking he could throw away the silk book in his sleeve on the road. Unfortunately, he was discovered on the spot.

After that, the man became less friendly. His bedding and clothes in the tent were torn apart, every corner of the tent was checked, he was stripped of his clothes, and even his shoes were cut off. Fortunately, he had changed his shoes in advance, and the silk piece he had hidden in them wasn't found.

After that, he was turned over to the Mystic Nine, which was where he met the tenth person outside of the nine members.

It should be noted that in Jin Wantang's narration, this person was a very critical, but very strange presence.

Jin Wantang hadn't seen him before, but he had heard others call him the leader.

Speaking of which, the entire Mystic Nine rarely appeared in the camp. In the past three years, Jin Wantang had very few opportunities to see them. When they had first traveled here, he could only see them from a distance, and couldn't tell who was who. This was the first time he had seen them up close, and it was only now that he had learned there was a leader in addition to the nine of them.

The leader was under thirty years old and was discussing something with another person. The thing that left the biggest impression on Jin Wantang at that time was that the person's fingers were unusually long, but he didn't have the presence of mind to observe carefully. He was so nervous that he

lied that he was a first-time offender. This was the first time he had committed a crime, and it wasn't for the money, but because he was interested in silk books and wanted to solve the code.

The leader looked him in the eye, came over, pressed Jin Wantang's head with his two strange fingers, and suddenly exerted his strength. Jin Wantang felt as if his skull would crack and almost went crazy from the pain, but the young man remained expressionless and kept pushing his fingers.

Then, the leader began to ask him questions. Jin Wantang wanted to keep lying but found that he couldn't think at all under the severe pain, and the lies were full of loopholes. Under the unbearable pain, he lost all hope and gave up the truth about the shoes.

The acute pain that came from the Touwei acupuncture point was a symptom of neurasthenia and extreme brain fatigue, and squeezing the Touwei point may cause temporary difficulty in thinking and the illusion of fatigue. When people wanted to seek relief and peace from their extreme fatigue, they would be unable to maintain their insistence on lying. Research by the CIA also showed that physical torture wasn't as effective as psychological torture, so fatigue became the main means of extorting confessions in many places. On TV, I often saw interrogation rooms bombarded with lights and faces, and in China, the use of acupoints to extract confessions was also an ancient practice.

After he finished speaking, Jin Wantang thought he would die. Fortunately, Granny Huo felt that he had been reliable in the past and might be useful in the future, so she finally interceded on his behalf. It was also because the Mystic Nine seemed to be planning something huge and didn't care too much about his affairs. As a result, the leader asked Granny Huo to handle the matter. In the end, he was made to waive his right to any remuneration, and then he was driven out naked.

He went back to the tent, dressed in his torn clothes and shoes, and roughly repaired them. Then, someone came and kicked him out, telling him that he couldn't say anything. After that, he left the mountain despondently.

After arriving in Beijing, he was still uneasy for several years, but then the Mystic Nine got worse and worse. He kept a low profile and was eventually able to calm down. After that, he heard one report after another, saying that after he left, there was another big event on the cliff. The Mystic Nine suffered numerous casualties and was weakened.

So, when Granny Huo's letter arrived, he was scared to death and thought that the old story had been brought up again.

Huo Xiuxiu asked, "Who do you think the leader was who forced the confession?" As she said this, she gave Poker-face a meaningful look, "Does any of this sound familiar to you?"

I kept silent, but Fatty also looked at him. The moonlight outside the window was covered by dark clouds, and the room was almost completely dark.

I understood what Xiuxiu was getting at, but I didn't want to speculate at this time, because it couldn't be confirmed.

Fatty hesitated for a moment and then asked, "Did Jin Wantang himself make any speculations about this?"

Huo Xiuxiu said: "He thinks this man was called the leader because he clearly had a lot of power. It's not right to say he had nothing to do with the Mystic Nine, but he obviously wasn't one of the nine members despite being called the leader. The situation may have been like this: one of the nine members was elected by the others to take charge of the overall situation."

When I looked at Fatty, he shook his head: "No, the Mystic Nine was only ranked in the circle, not anywhere else. Zhang Fo Ye was so old at that time that it was impossible for him to be present at the scene. Even Zhang Fo Ye himself needed a very big starting point to command these people. This person must have been even more incredible considering how young he was. Especially since it's impossible for the younger generation to command their elders. If they were choosing a leader, it should've been Chen Pi Ah Si."

I nodded, but once I thought about it, it still didn't add up: "It's impossible for the younger generation to command their elders, but the Zhang family's Fo Ye had an especially high status at that time, and his children wouldn't be ordinary. Although the leader was part of the younger generation in the Mystic Nine, he might have had a very prominent position in their social class. It might not have been his ability and seniority, but the interests of the party represented by his identity and status at that time."

"Yes, if it's as you say, then there's even the possibility that this person wasn't necessarily Zhang Fo Ye's son. He may be what you said earlier, a special envoy of some foreign force?"

"Bingo!" Fatty said, "Well, let's sum it up. The old woman and her friends took part in a failed but massive grave robbery. Then, decades later, her daughter and her friends' children also participated in a very mysterious archaeological activity, and then her daughter disappeared. Then, at some point, she began to receive a videotape containing images of her daughter. What do you think this is?"

"Someone wants to tell her that her daughter is still alive," I said.

"Or, it's a warning," Xiuxiu said.

"But based on our experience, these videos should have been sent by Wen-Jin," I said. "Why would she do that?"

"We'll look into it later," Xiuxiu said.

"We?"

"See, my intelligence is actually very crucial to you. Of course, your intelligence is also very good, so we should work together, big brothers."

Fatty and I looked at each other without saying a word. He lit a cigarette and said, "Shit, I won't talk about Mr. Naive since he's old, but you're young. You're wasting your life. God didn't give you life to do this kind of thing."

Xiuxiu didn't look at Fatty but looked at me: "We're similar. We have a need to understand things, right?"

I didn't want Xiuxiu to be like me, but I didn't know how to convince her either. In fact, I knew that people like us couldn't be persuaded, and I wasn't in the mood to think about it right now.

I suddenly remembered what Wen-Jin said to me at that time. She didn't mention sending a video-tape to Huo Ling's mother.

Of course, she didn't have to tell me that. In fact, she only told me what I needed to know so that I could find an excuse to stay away from this matter.

As I thought of the video she had sent me, of A Ning, of the situation at that time, and of the old woman, an idea lingered in my mind.

"Do you still remember those videotapes we received?" I interrupted Fatty and Xiuxiu, who were throwing ideas back and forth, "The purpose of sending these tapes wasn't the content of the tapes, but the tapes themselves." I had found that key and address in the one sent to me.

"The content of the tape is only confusing to possible interceptors."

"Hmm?" The two of them quieted down.

I continued: "Granny Huo wasn't familiar with the video, and she was the mother of a daughter who had been missing for several years. She must have been confused when she saw the contents of the video and wouldn't have any other thoughts about the real meaning behind it."

"But the Huo Ling in the video was a fake."

"She didn't know that. But that's not important. What is important is that Wen-Jin sent her something several years in a row. If it's what I think, there must be something hidden in those videos and they have to be disassembled." I looked at Huo Xiuxiu, "Little Sister, didn't you say you wanted to cooperate? Come on, show some sincerity."

“Do you want me to steal the tapes?”

“It’s not stealing. You’re her granddaughter. You can pretend that you only saw it by accident and thought it was a porno. It’s common to do these kinds of things at your age.” I said. “The most she can do is beat you up or deduct your allowance.”

She looked at me and said, “No, I can take things out unnoticed. I don’t think my grandmother will know since they’re there every day. But if you take them apart, she’ll definitely find out. She isn’t the kind of person who can be fooled so easily.”

“This isn’t the time to worry about it,” I argued. “Wen-Jin wanted to send a message to your grandmother several years in a row, so it must be very critical. If your grandmother discovered the information, then things might not have come to this.”

She thought it over for a moment and nodded, “Fine, we’ll see what’s inside first, but if there’s nothing inside, I’ll strangle you.”

“When can you do it?” I was constantly afraid of having a lot of dreams whenever I slept now, so I knew it was better to handle these things sooner rather than later.

“There’s no rush. Since I haven’t lived with my grandmother for a long time, I have to have a reason to get close. If I suddenly show up, she’ll doubt my intentions. I have to find a good time since she seldom leaves the house.” She said. “You have to trust me.”

I rubbed my face and knew that she was right, but I wasn’t interested in talking about anything else. All my attention was focused on those videos.

After several sips of erguotou, I lay down on the floor and took a few deep breaths to try and release myself from that tangled state of thinking.

Before, I thought that I could give up looking into these things as long as I could find out Little Brother’s story, but now it seemed that everything was

related. No matter what approach I took, I just ended up falling into the same mess again.

Fatty patted me, and Huo Xiuxiu sighed: “Sometimes, I feel like I’m reading a book from back to front, starting from the ending, looking forward bit by bit, and then guessing the details.”

I took a deep breath. She was right, that was exactly what it felt like. I couldn’t help touching the bottle, and Xiuxiu said: “I should really grab onto you and start crying.”

Fatty didn’t care, and expressed his disdain for people like us with a “che.” Huo Xiuxiu was about to argue with him when we suddenly heard the gate in the yard below creak open. Then, a flashlight swept through the window.

Fatty jumped up in excitement and looked out through the ivy. Huo Xiuxiu and I also leaned over. Before we could see who it was, Huo Xiuxiu gasped, “No, my grandmother is here!” As she said this, she immediately looked around.

When I asked, “What are you doing?” she said, “I can’t let my grandmother know I’m looking into her. You mustn’t say anything. I have to hide!” She kept looking around in hopes of finding a good hiding place.

The whole house was devoid of furniture. Let alone hiding, there wasn’t even any cover. At this moment, Fatty called out, “Up, up to the roof.”

It occurred to me that there was a skylight overhead. Fatty smiled darkly and leaned toward Xiuxiu. “Come on, sister, I’ll hold you up,” he said.

“No need!” Xiuxiu suddenly smiled, turned around, jumped on the table, and then leaped onto the beam as silently as if she were doing acrobatics. I didn’t even know how she got up there, but I saw her body doing some strange contortions. The young girl had a good figure, a soft waist, and beautiful movements.

But as soon as she went up, Fatty started cursing anxiously. I was surprised to see her grab Fatty's seal and whisper, "It's here, hidden in such an obvious place. It seems you don't want it. Can I take it?"

Fatty was insistent: "Don't! Don't! Noble Lady, you're too evil."

Xiuxiu grinned. When she heard the footsteps approaching, she threw the seal down and Fatty caught it like a tiger. After that, she reached the skylight with the same strange acrobatic movements, leaned forward, and went out. She turned back and said, "This noble lady isn't interested in such a thing. See you tomorrow." And then she just disappeared.

Fatty and I looked at each other. As soon as we heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, he sat down and lovingly put the seal aside. "These evil Huo women are really hard to serve. First it was the evil granddaughter, and now it's the evil old lady. We're about to become emotional caregivers at this point."

As I looked at the door, I hissed that Little Sister was quite useful to us, but she couldn't be exposed. After a while, the door was pushed open, and Fatty and I couldn't help but stare. Huo Xiuxiu came in, followed by several people carrying several sets of bedding and wine. She gave us a very surprised look and said: "Hey, did you buy your own bedding? Didn't I tell you not to go out?"

Fatty looked at me and I looked back at him. Even Poker-face sat up straight.

Our faces instantly turned white.

Chapter 29 Reverse Psychology

The three of us looked at each other, and then simultaneously looked at the skylight overhead, speechless with surprise. I frowned as I wondered what was going on. There was a brief moment where I felt as if I understood, but then I got confused again and scolded myself, *I must be crazy!*

As I looked at Huo Xiuxiu, who was real and definitely not an illusion, I could tell that things weren't good. Poker-face got up, jumped on the table, flipped over the top beam, opened the skylight, and went out.

Fatty and I also stood up, but we knew we couldn't copy him, so we watched from below. Huo Xiuxiu leaned over and looked at the skylight before asking, "Are there mice?"

I wasn't sure why, but we both involuntarily took a step back. She looked surprised and a little puzzled, and the people who came in with her didn't know what was going on either. She looked at the skylight curiously and then put down the items she was holding.

We could hear Poker-face walking on the roof, and after a short time had passed, he came back and dropped down into the room. When I asked him what the situation was, he shook his head, "She's gone."

Fatty grabbed his hair and immediately exploded: "Oh shit, what the fuck? Are you kidding me? What's going on? Has God rewound our lives?"

I had already calmed down and suddenly realized a possibility. I looked at Huo Xiuxiu and said: "Little Sister, are you playing with us? It's not nice to tease."

"What are you talking about?" Huo Xiuxiu frowned, "I'm kindly bringing you bedding. What kind of play are you trying to put on?"

"Weren't you just here? You suddenly said that your grandmother came, so you left through the skylight, immediately went downstairs to join the

others, and pretended to arrive just now. If it's not a trick, what is it?" I asked.

Huo Xiuxiu opened her mouth wide: "What the hell? I've been here?"

I told myself it had to be true since this young girl really looked the same as the other one. I was just about to yell when Poker-face grabbed me and whispered, "It's not her."

"What?" When I turned my head, he said, "It's impossible to jump to the ground so quickly from the roof and not even be out of breath." With that said, he reached his hand out to Huo Xiuxiu's ear and touched it. "Her body temperature didn't rise."

Poker-face's judgment was generally correct, so how could we explain it? I didn't know how to react at all, and when Huo Xiuxiu asked what was going on, Fatty told her what had just happened.

After listening, Huo Xiuxiu didn't believe us at all, but she gradually started to when Fatty repeatedly stressed to her and showed her what the previous "Huo Xiuxiu" had brought.

The atmosphere in the room was very strange, and we didn't dare light the lamps for fear of being discovered. The moon was out of sight again and it was very dark and spooky. I had never felt like this before.

One of the young people who came with her muttered: "Could it be a fox?"

"Fox?"

"There's a story in my hometown that a family was going to hold a wedding, so they went to the mountain to pick up the bride. They took a long mountain road to pick her up, and when the bride got out of the car and took a few steps, everyone suddenly exclaimed. The groom looked back and saw another bride getting out of the car. The two brides were exactly the same, and even the wedding dress was exactly the same. Everyone was stunned and didn't know what was going on. Later, they called the police,

but the police didn't know what to do either. An old man said that one of them definitely wasn't human, and there was only one way to tell them apart— they'd have to use a taser to shock them. Normal people would definitely fall down, but if it wasn't a human, then it would be fine. As soon as the policeman picked up the taser, one of the brides flew away at a speed too quick to be human. The old man said later that it might have been a fox."

I had goosebumps as I thought to myself, *how is that possible? This guy's story is really vivid.* Fatty looked at Huo Xiuxiu and asked us, "Who has a taser?"

"How dare you!" Huo Xiuxiu glared at him.

I shook my head. It had to be nonsense. In order to get them to stop talking garbage, I said, "Discounting the atmosphere just now, it's definitely not an evil spirit. I don't think one would be so boring, which means that that person must be human. We've been set up, damn it."

Looking at the current Huo Xiuxiu, I started to feel that although the girl just now was very similar to her, she was still different in some aspects: "That person must have worn a mask to trick us."

"Shit, can they really look so similar?" Fatty didn't believe it.

"If it's someone you're familiar with, certainly not. That kind of perfect mask is fiction. But we're not familiar with Xiuxiu, and we've been so nervous the entire time. Our attention wasn't on Xiuxiu so this person could muddle through as long as they were roughly similar." As I spoke, I remembered that this was the flaw Uncle Three had told me about.

Poker-face nodded in agreement and Fatty looked at Xiuxiu: "Yes, I noticed that the chest of the one just now was fuller than this one's. So, who was that young girl? Why would she do that?" To Xiuxiu he said, "Only the Huo family knows we're here, right? Is it possible any of you divulged the secret?"

Fatty had always been a skeptic.

Xiuxiu was a little unhappy when she heard this, but she showed a rare initiative and immediately made a phone call, as if she was asking her grandmother for instructions. She had only spoken a few words into the phone before she asked us, “Did you take anything from someone when you came out from Crescent Hotel?”

Fatty was just about to shake his head but then he froze. He immediately touched his pocket and took out a business card, which was the one Pink Shirt had handed him. He looked at it and handed it to a young man behind Huo Xiuxiu who put it under his nose and sniffed it. He frowned: “This is probably it.”

Huo Xiuxiu took it and sniffed it: “You guys are so slack, daring to take something from someone so casually in that situation. There’s a special scent on it. If they have a trained dog, you can’t escape anywhere. As soon as our car came out, he surely knew that you were riding in it and followed us all the way here.”

“It’s that guy?” When I thought of Pink Shirt, I felt that it wasn’t quite right. I walked a few laps around the room and wondered if he had sent the girl. Why would this person be interested in our past? Was he also an insider? But it was difficult to explain that girl’s actions. What she said was very reasonable, so if she was only setting us up, how could she know so much? Even the most brilliant novelist couldn’t make up such a perfect story in such a short amount of time. All these actions were very superfluous.

No, either something was wrong, or there was a very complicated reason behind it. But we had only just recently wreaked havoc, so how could someone set us up like this?

Or maybe there was a very complicated fight between the Huo family and the other Beijing giants, and we had just walked right into the middle of it? But the conversation with the young girl just now was all about the Mystic Nine and us. If it was infighting, then why mention these things?

I couldn't understand it and kept muttering to myself. Huo Xiuxiu eventually said, "Forget it, it's already happened. We'll change places immediately. Bring your things and come with us."

I let out a sigh, thinking that this life of cohabitation was so unstable. Why did it have to be so hard? As soon as I went to follow, however, I saw that Fatty and Poker-face remained motionless. I paused and didn't move either.

Xiuxiu asked, "What's the matter?"

Fatty said, "Don't pretend. This fat master may not recognize someone's appearance, but I would never forget a woman's figure. Who the hell are you?"

Chapter 30 Get Down to Business

In the second it took me to understand, Xiuxiu's face suddenly changed and she gave Fatty a cold look. I thought she would try to justify it, but she suddenly cried out, "Grab it!"

It was a man's voice.

I didn't have time to be surprised as three men immediately jumped forward. But they didn't come at us. Instead, they went for the area where we had placed our bedding.

I immediately understood their intent —that was where Fatty had placed the jade seal. I shouted, but Poker-face had already reacted and kicked the seal out from the middle of them. I quickly caught it and the three men instantly turned around and pounced on me. The room was too small and too close for me to hide, so I was instantly overwhelmed by them, but I threw the seal to Fatty at the last moment.

He was already prepared and managed to catch it. Thanks to the opponents' extreme agility, I hadn't completely fallen down yet before they jumped over me and rushed at Fatty. I tried to grab their legs but didn't manage to stop them. Looking at the wall behind Fatty, and seeing he had no way out, I immediately told him, "Throw it to me!"

Fatty scolded, "Throw my ass", and swung the seal up as a weapon. The person closest to him was thrown to the ground, and the other two rushed at him and tried to knock him over. Fatty immediately rolled with them and all three people hit the wall. Fatty threw the seal out and Poker-face grabbed it.

The three men found that their plan of attack wasn't working, so they grabbed Fatty while "Xiuxiu" got up and rushed towards Poker-face. When I got up and grabbed him from behind, I felt him go soft, as if he didn't have any bones. As he went limp, he slipped out of my arms and punched me on

the bridge of my nose. I was immediately stunned but managed to tackle him as I fell down.

He staggered but didn't fall to the ground. At the same time, I suddenly saw him pull a strange dagger from his sleeve, which seemed to be an antique. Holding it in a reverse grip, he rushed towards Poker-face. I immediately shouted "Be careful!" only to see that Poker-face was no longer in his original position. At the same time, a lightning-quick shadow flashed through the air and instantly knocked the man out with his knee.

Fatty's opponents were also beaten to death and he came out unscathed, even though both sides had put up a good fight.

I knew that the real malicious one was this guy, so I didn't feel an ounce of pity for him as I helped Poker-face subdue him first.

When "Xiuxiu" got up from the ground, his whole body suddenly stretched out in a strange posture. He suddenly got bigger, his shoulders widened, his height increased, and the mask was torn from his face.

When I looked at him, I immediately recognized Pink Shirt. He was gasping as he laughed: "It hurts way more getting hit when shrunk to that size. No joke."

I looked at his strange condition and felt my back break out in a cold sweat. I had seen this kind of situation before. It was the kung fu art of bone contraction. In the past, Poker-face had used it when he was posing as a bald man in the undersea tomb.

At this time, we heard a lot of footsteps on the stairs and immediately turned around.

Shit, there's backup outside! I had a bad feeling and Fatty immediately shouted, "You go first! Don't let them get ahold of you."

I gave Pink Shirt a vicious look and quickly withdrew, trying to think of the best way to retreat. Would I have to climb the skylight?

At this moment, however, I saw him re-sheath the dagger and wave his hand to the two men holding Fatty. They immediately released their hands, and the other three men got up from the ground, holding their nosebleeds and pushing each other. When the door opened, we warily turned to look at it. Granny Huo came in, followed by Huo Xiuxiu. Neither of them looked surprised, and Little Sister even stuck her tongue out at us.

Pink Shirt rubbed his joints, smiled, and then came up to me and patted me on the shoulder. He turned and nodded to Granny Huo: "Yes, you have a good eye." Then he pointed to Poker-face and said, "This guy belongs to me."

Chapter 31 Grave Robbery

A kerosene lamp was hung in the room, the light very dim. Huo Xiuxiu helped me and Fatty stop our nosebleeds, while everyone else stood where they were. Poker-face went back to his original spot and stood, while Fatty held the seal tightly in both hands. The atmosphere was really awkward.

Granny Huo ignored Pink Shirt and merely stared at us. I could see that her waist bones were very good, and despite her age, her face wasn't red and she wasn't out of breath after coming up the stairs. In contrast, Pink Shirt relaxed completely and also found a spot to lean against the wall. The two thugs beside him were pitiful and covered their injuries as they silently limped out of the house.

I initially felt puzzled, but after looking at this strange scene, I gradually understood what was going on. It appeared this pink cross-dresser was in it with the old woman. And based on what he said, this whole thing was a test. Were they really fucking testing us?

I couldn't help feeling angry after being teased for such a long time. I absolutely hated the feeling of being ensnared in a trap, so I asked her directly, "What kind of game are you playing, Granny Huo?"

She didn't answer but merely looked at me with a smile. I asked again, but she ignored my question and simply said, "You're a little like your grandfather when he was younger. No matter the circumstances, you always think of the good first, then the bad. That's why you're still standing where you are instead of choosing to do something first to give yourself an advantage."

I was a little uncomfortable as I looked into the old woman's eyes and wondered what this had to do with me. She went on to say: "If it were me, I would rush outside or subdue the person first. Only then would I talk to them to see what their purpose is. But when you saw me come in just now, you immediately stood there and didn't do a thing. If I had made other arrangements, isn't it right to say you'd have no chance now?"

I understood a little of what she was getting at, but I couldn't help but ask myself, *why is she giving me public relations advice?* Fatty said from behind me, "Granny, you're mistaken. Do you think your numbers give you an advantage? Shit, there are twice as many of you, but the three of us will still come out on top. Do you understand? If you really want to give it a try, the three of us are at full power. These greenhorns can't handle us."

The old woman glanced at him and sighed, as if it were a little ridiculous to say this to us, "Well, I'm not here to talk about this. Relax, I don't want to do anything to you."

"You're tough enough even when you don't want to do anything." Fatty pointed to the blood on his collar. "If you want something, does that mean you're going to kill us?"

Granny Huo went to the window and looked out. "This old house was originally a branch of our family in Beijing that specialized in dealing with rule breakers. People in the old society believed in ghosts and gods and were afraid of them. Over the years, not many people were buried under the grass in the courtyard below, so if you die, there will be plenty of places to choose from. But rest assured, I have no interest in killing you." She paused and looked at Pink Shirt off to the side. "I was testing you just now, but I did it to show him. My eyes can't be wrong."

Pink Shirt smiled at us. Fatty was a little irritated: "What eyes? Do you want the three of us to be cross-dressers, too?"

Pink Shirt burst out laughing and said, "Please, I won't let you cross-dress even if you wanted to."

"Fuck you, looking down on me and thinking I don't have the potential to be a cross-dresser." Fatty said angrily. He was just about to keep arguing when he thought it over again, unsure how to respond.

Pink Shirt came up to me and said, "Let me introduce myself, my name is Xie Yuhua. I'm the head of the Xie family of the Mystic Nine. Our families are

related, so we're distant relatives.²⁴ When I was a child, I remember we used to play together. But you weren't the gregarious type, Wu Xie. You were introverted and came from out of town, and we didn't know each other well, so you don't remember me."

"Yes, you even forgot about me." Huo Xiuxiu said from the side, "You can't even tell who's real and who's fake. You're worse than this Fatty. It's so upsetting. I even wanted to marry you when I was a child."

I looked at Huo Xiuxiu and then at Pink Shirt, and suddenly had an "aha" moment.

I had previously thought Pink Shirt looked very familiar, but I couldn't remember where I had seen him before. It turned out that I was searching in the wrong parts of my memory. He wasn't a business client, casual friend, or even a drinking buddy. He was a child I had met when I was six or seven.

Fuck, not only could I not remember something from so long ago, but that hadn't been a good time to try to remember either. Despite that, I was still able to find a trace of familiarity from his face, which showed that he hadn't completely changed.

Xie Yuhua... it was a really strange name. I couldn't even remember my face at that age, let alone the name of a kid who I only saw once or twice a year. But I did remember there was a kid at that time that everybody called Xiao Hua.

But the Xiao Hua in my memory didn't align with this guy at all. Not only their appearances, but the person standing in front of me and the Xiao Hua from that time were two different people. Was I wrong?

I asked him, "Are you Xiao Hua?"

²⁴ Fun fact from Tiffany: Wu Xie's grandmother is Xie Jiuye's cousin. Xie Jiuye introduced her to Old Dog Wu. Xie Jiuye had sensed a storm coming in the Mystic Nine and thought he could be a matchmaker, so he could win Old Dog Wu over and ask for his help later in the future.

He looked at me and smiled vaguely, and Huo Xiuxiu laughed and said, “Yes, you didn’t expect that, did you?”

I froze again, feeling a little nervous: “But, I remember that Xiao Hua was a girl. Am I wrong?”

“You remember correctly. At that time, I was really a ‘girl’.” Pink Shirt said. “When I was a child, I was learning opera from Er Ye, singing both Hua Dan and Tsing Yi. Many people couldn’t tell, and thought I was a girl.”

I frowned. I couldn’t imagine that the young girl in my head, fresh and lovely as if she were walking out of a poster, was actually a big man. Now, looking at his prominent Adam’s apple, I suddenly felt dizzy as I asked Xiuxiu, “What you just said to us—”

“It’s all true. Of course, the only difference is that my grandmother knows the whole thing.” Xiuxiu said. “After I sent the letter, someone called my grandmother. She observed me for a period of time and then caught me.”

“People in this line of business are very cautious. If you receive a puzzling letter, you will also call to ask what’s going on.” The old woman said. “I will admit, however, that your theory is correct. When I received the videotape, I was indeed blindsided, but I’m not old enough to think that it’s just a video.”

“Then, did you find what was hidden in those videos?”

“I told you before that the Yangshi Lei patterns were bought from abroad... that was a lie.” The old woman said. “I found those patterns in the videos. I always thought they were clues my daughter sent me to help me find her. It’s also the reason why I hadn’t given up until now. Although I know now that it’s not my daughter, I can only find out what happened to her by following this information.”

What kind of patterns did Wen-Jin send? I was a little confused. I thought there would be more specific information from the video, but I didn’t think it would be this.

However, Huo Ling disappeared during the archaeological team's research of the building. If the videotapes contained her daughter's image and the building's drawings, it would make the old woman feel that this was a strong clue.

Fatty asked, "What does this have to do with you testing us?"

Granny Huo showed a very complicated smile, while Pink Shirt on the side seemed to have received some signal. He immediately patted me and said to us, "Well, I don't want to waste time either. Let's get down to business. There will be plenty of time to catch up." He gave Huo Xiuxiu a wink and she began to take out rolls of things from her bag. I saw that they were all Yangshi Lei patterns, the same ones I had seen in Granny Huo's house.

All the drawings were wrapped in very high-grade kraft paper, with plastic wrap on the outside and dipped in a layer of something similar to tung oil. It appeared these types of drawings were very vulnerable when they were taken from the temperature- and humidity-controlled room. I didn't understand why they brought these things. Did the old woman lose interest and want to sell them to me?

I thought it was a little strange, but I didn't ask questions as Xiuxiu's henchmen carefully spread all the drawings out on the floor.

The old lady, who had stayed silent during this whole process, finally spoke: "This son and I are going grave robbing soon." Granny Huo patted the pattern and said, "I need your help. If you promise, I'll make sure you don't have to worry about Crescent Hotel. And there are other big benefits."

Chapter 32 Yangshi Lei (Part II)

I looked at the drawings and understood their intentions, “Are you going to find this ancient building?”

Pink Shirt nodded and I frowned. I still remembered what the old woman had said to me. They probably hadn’t found the exact location of the building yet, so why were they suddenly going?

“Have you found the location?”

Pink Shirt looked at the old woman, as if to ask for permission, and she nodded and said, “Tell them.”

Pink Shirt told Xiuxiu to turn on the lights and then said, “Yes, because your experience in Guangxi inspired us.”

With that, he took out a complete drawing of the building and showed it to us.

Fatty slipped the seal into his clothes and brought the drawing closer. I found that it was a diagram of the entire “Zhang Jialou” structure, which had been reconstructed using modern software and the Yangshi Lei drawings.

When I looked at the picture and smelled the familiar ink, I immediately remembered the times when I had stayed up all night drawing in university. Life was pretty simple back in those days, but now that this thing appeared in such a place, it made me really uncomfortable.

Pink Shirt said, “This is the structural diagram that we asked someone to restore based on the Yangshi Lei patterns. You may not understand the details, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll explain.” He began to explain the symbols for the others, but I was so familiar with these things that I naturally didn’t need to listen. Within a few seconds, I already had a general understanding of this building.

It can be said that the whole thing was a stocky and solid wood and stone structure that was typical for that time period. I had seen the Yangshi Lei pattern of each floor hastily before so I wasn't very familiar with it, but now that they were using the drawing software to recreate all seven floors on a piece of paper in a familiar way, the shape of the building was almost clear at a glance.

Xiao Hua pointed to some of them and said, "Look, this is the top of the building. Isn't it the Zhang Jialou you saw at the bottom of the lake in Banai?"

I didn't need him to point it out as I had already discovered it myself, but I was still surprised and quickly nodded while thinking, *no way*.

He said, "When I heard you say Zhang Jialou, I knew this would be the result. And when I heard you say iron corpse, I was even more certain. Zhang Jialou is underwater, and part of it is buried under the mountain. Look here again." He pointed to several parts of the drawing. "You can see that the first and second layers of the prototype are very different from the following layers. The first and second layers are more like towers than buildings, while the parts connecting the first and second layers and the following layers lack a lot of design."

"What do you mean?"

"The first and second floors of the Zhang Jialou are separated from the remaining floors. They're aboveground and lead to the remaining floors buried deep in the mountain through tunnels. Because of the size of the project, I believe those floors should be hidden in the mountain near the lake. We just have to find them."

"We? You have so much experience that you should be familiar enough with it."

Pink Shirt said, "This is definitely a big tomb. You won't come back empty-handed. It's always been our practice to divide the tomb equally when working together."

“At this point, you think I still care about money? You shitty bastard, I can tell at a glance that it’s too dangerous.” I said. “Is there even a chance of coming out alive?”

“Are you so unsure of your skill?” Pink Shirt asked. “The places you went to before weren’t good either.”

I told myself that it was different. I knew the danger in those places, but many things happened before I went, so my trips were inevitable. And even after going on one adventure after another, the answer to the puzzle was still drawing me in deeper and deeper. I had made it to this point, but I really couldn’t muster up the courage to do it again.

Most of the time, even if you yearned for something, you would slowly lose momentum if you delayed too long. Even though I knew this place might be very critical and may be an indispensable piece of the puzzle, my first reaction was to refuse.

Pink Shirt saw that I was being difficult and looked to the old woman, who said, “Don’t refuse so quickly. Think it over. As long as you find the building, I’ll immediately tell you everything.”

“You can tell me first,” I said.

The old woman shook her head. “You’re Old Dog Wu’s grandson. I don’t trust your character. It’s your family’s tradition to go back on their word.”

I shook my head: “Sorry. You don’t trust me, and I don’t trust you.”

The old woman sighed and said, “Even if you say you won’t go, you’re only representing your own thoughts. What about you?” She unexpectedly looked at Poker-face.

Fatty immediately said, “The three of us are of one mind and will advance and retreat together. We definitely won’t be provoked by you. But like Mr. Naïve said, your sincerity isn’t enough.”

The old woman smiled, "It's not an issue of money, but whether you want to go or not."

I told myself that Fatty was merely stirring up trouble. I wouldn't easily agree this time, but just as I was about to shake my head and refuse again, I heard Poker-face suddenly say, "I'll go."

I was surprised, and as soon as I glanced back, I saw Poker-face looking at us. Fatty and I looked at each other and couldn't believe our ears. Just as I was about to speak, the old woman said, "Ok, one is coming."

I was a little angry and couldn't respond. At that moment, it felt as if things were out of my control. I wanted to refuse, but I immediately realized that I had no right to say no, and it was up to the others to decide what they wanted to do.

I felt very uncomfortable as the old woman asked Fatty and me, "How about you?"

"I'll go too!" Fatty said immediately. I was angry beyond belief and looked at him incredulously. Fuck, who said that the three of us had one mind just now? Fatty immediately leaned in and whispered in my ear: "Damn it, Little Brother already agreed. If you don't, he'll change hands and then it'll be difficult for you to find him."

Shit, if I thought about it, saying no at this time was tantamount to just quitting the game.

"How about you?" The old woman looked at me and asked again. "Hurry up and decide, we're running out of time."

"All right," I said, "But I'll say this first: if it's too dangerous, we'll quit."

The old woman clapped her hands and Pink Shirt said, "Then welcome to the group. I'll tell you where we're going. We leave in three days."

Chapter 33 Plans

As Xiao Hua introduced the whole plan to us very quickly, I felt dizzy and overwhelmed in both mind and body. I listened a little reluctantly at first but didn't really pay attention to what was said towards the end.

It was hard to say what kind of feeling it was. Maybe frustration? For example, when you were having a good chat with others and a group of people suddenly rush in and say to you, "Hello, let's go and play the day after tomorrow." You don't even have time to think about whether you have time the day after tomorrow. Then they add that if you go, they'll give you a lot of money. But you have to decide immediately; otherwise, the opportunity will be given to others. Then the countdown begins.

At that time, your friends agree one after another and under such circumstances, you can't think at all. Then they start happily discussing where to play and you calm down.

Fuck, in hindsight, this was exactly like a shitty scam.

After they left, I looked at the picture Xiao Hua left behind and asked Fatty a few questions to find out where they were going.

The first thing I understood was that it wasn't one team this time, but two.

One team would go to the lake in Banai, Guangxi, while the other team would go to Sichuan. Both teams would have to be connected, however, and neither was in charge of the other. They would have a communication system set up, and through various means, the two teams would be able to exchange information.

When I asked why, Fatty said Xiao Hua didn't know, but the old woman said it was very necessary. There had to be some kind of connection between the two places and both sides had to cooperate.

They were obviously going to Guangxi for the ancient building. Xiao Hua said they had determined the building should be located in the mountain, maybe even enclosed in the whole mountain. They wanted to find the gap that we came out of before, enter through there, and hopefully find the location of the ancient building that way.

On the other side was Sichuan. I immediately thought of the place where Jin Wantang said the largest grave robbery in history had taken place. Indeed, it seemed that everything was inextricably linked. Fatty decided to go to Guangxi because he missed Yun Cai, and said that this time, he would bring a lot of gifts to see if he could get engaged.

I didn't even want to think about it, so I looked at Poker-face sitting there staring at the sheets of paper. I took a deep breath and walked over to him. "Why?"

He looked up at me without any expression on his face.

"Before agreeing, you should discuss it with us," I said. "I think they tricked us today."

He looked down at the drawings and said, "It's none of your business."

"I..." I was so angry I almost exploded, but I immediately deflated when I saw him looking intently at the drawings. It was obvious he wasn't staring at them in a daze but researching.

When I looked into his eyes and felt a sudden distance, I suddenly realized that Poker-face had gone through some changes. I actually wasn't a stranger to this sense of distance, because it was the aura he had before he lost his memory. It had disappeared after he lost his memory and suddenly seemed to have returned.

Did he recover his memory? I felt a stab in my heart, but it didn't seem to be the case. If he had really recovered his memory, he would've disappeared suddenly without a care for anything else.

I sighed. I was afraid of provoking him again and just wondering what to do when he suddenly got up and walked out.

“What’s going on?” Fatty was startled and jumped up.

Poker-face walked to the door before suddenly stopping and looking at us, “Who has the money?”

Fatty and I looked at each other and walked over. I asked, “What do you want?”

“I’m going out to buy something.” He said quietly.

Fatty and I looked at each other again. I couldn’t describe how I felt, but I suddenly wanted to smile. I didn’t know whether it was a wry smile or an inexplicable one. Fatty hooked his arm around Poker-face’s shoulder, “Well, you poor thing, I’m finally starting to think you’re a normal person. Come on, let me treat you. Where are you going, Lane Crawford or the zoo?”

Chapter 34 Parting at Sichuan

In the end, we still didn't go out. It was the Huo family who stood resolute in the face of our burning desire to go out and buy something. They persuaded us to go back, saying it was too dangerous to go out now and if we wanted to buy anything, we could just make a list for them to pick up tomorrow.

The next day was procurement day. Xiao Hua came over to ask us to list all the things we needed and then left to go shopping. Fatty's demands hit them hard, but after the equipment was delivered in the evening, we found out that Poker-face had hit them the hardest. Among his goods was a box that was valuable at first sight.

Xiao Hua said, "Grandmother said that you'd need this."

Poker-face opened it and took out an ancient blade. Its size and shape were very similar to the one he had previously used.

A cold light flashed as he pulled it out of its sheath. It was a very special color, but the blade wasn't black and gold like his old one.

"I picked it up from our collection. Would you like to try it out?"

Poker-face weighed it and put it into his bag. Fatty was jealous. "Shit, why don't you give us one?"

"This kind of blade can't be used by just anyone." Xiao Hua said. "It's too heavy."

Most of the other equipment had been used before and Fatty said the machete wasn't very satisfactory. The cutting edge was too thin and would probably break while cutting trees, so a thick-backed mountain-cutting knife would work better.

Fatty wrote my list for me so I didn't even bother looking at my stuff. I felt very resistant as I rested nearby and watched them pack up their equipment.

After that, we had some down-time while Xiao Hua and the others made preparations. Xiuxiu brought me a TV, so I usually watched it while we recuperated in the house.

Poker-face was testing out the blade, adjusting to its weight since it was still slightly different compared to his old one.

I had nothing to do during this period of time besides think about everything. I tried to add the latest information to my previous theory to see what changes had occurred.

If we temporarily called the behind-the-scenes entity that had forced the Mystic Nine to carry out the “largest” tomb robbery in history “it”, then after “it” obtained numerous Lu Huang silk books, “it” may have cracked their secrets earlier than Qiu Dekao and carried out a series of activities. These activities may have all resulted in failure, so in return for their success, all the members of the Mystic Nine had been given something that seemed insignificant now but was very important at the time— a powerful backer. In the Cultural Revolution’s storm, although these people would have been condemned to death even if they had kept a low profile, their families and financial resources were preserved.

Their children were regarded as a wealth of talent, and most of them entered the cultural relics business. It was hard to say whether this tendency was formed naturally or because there were some hidden rules. Although there was no substantial evidence, this “it” was bound to play a very important role.

I even suspected that Qiu Dekao’s method of uncovering silk manuscripts in those days was brought out by someone— or a group of people—related to “it” and secretly revealed to him.

Fatty said that in those days, when the people advanced and the country retreated, the social atmosphere began to open up. Many things that were once celebrated, such as the role of trade unions and neighborhood committees, became more and more degraded.

Courageous people began to start small businesses, and the contract responsibility system linked to output began to be established at that time.²⁵ At the same time, foreigners also began to outsource to China, and new things replaced the old in an all-around way. The system in which “it” operated may have collapsed during that period.

Just like today’s enterprises, although the organization had collapsed, the project still existed. Strong people would take it with them and continue to find the next investor.

Maybe one person (or a group of people) had some kind of relationship with “it” and used “its” power to cooperate with Qiu Dekao to carry out “projects” that hadn’t yet been completed.

The “Zhang Jialou” and “Xisha” archaeological activities must have been the products of this period. It could explain why the two events’ scale was much smaller than that of the Mystic Nine, and even “Uncle Three” was needed to prepare the equipment. At the same time, it was hard to say whether the descendants of the Mystic Nine lurking in the cultural system were intentionally assembled or not.

Times changed, and nearly twenty years later, the economy started to compete with politics. The Mystic Nine’s power disintegrated, but due to their actions in the early days, they formed their own solid basis in many places: the Huo and Xie families married Beijing officials, our Wu family established a firm foothold in old Changsha through “Uncle Three’s” efforts, and the other families had either completely whitewashed their backgrounds and switched to official positions, or simply disappeared completely into society.

At this time, it was hard to say whether this “it” really existed, but based on Wen-Jin’s performance, it seemed to be true. Like other things in society, “it” had merely become more secretive and low-key.

²⁵ A practice in China, first adopted in agriculture in 1979 and officially established in 1982, by which households are held responsible for the profits and losses of an enterprise

I was very hesitant to tell Granny Huo about Huo Ling, but I was familiar with her persistence, and could even empathize with it. My previous thought was: "I had no right to decide anything for anyone. I should tell others everything and let them make their own choice." But after going through so many experiences, I now felt that it was better not knowing some truths. Knowing and not knowing was only a matter of a few seconds, but it could change your entire life. Sometimes not knowing wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Unfortunately, there were some roads you simply couldn't turn back on once taken. Those who were resolute could cut off their feet, but their hearts would continue to move forward.

After we agreed to Granny Huo's request, we exchanged some details. On one hand, I felt a little uneasy and nervous to be separated from Poker-face and Fatty, but the old lady made a very reasonable point that even Poker-face agreed with. Any objection from me was useless or would be seen as a withdrawal, which was impossible. Fatty ignored my feelings and hurried back to see Yun Cai.

On the other hand, I was physically and mentally exhausted. Taking the same route as Poker-face was extremely dangerous, and I felt anxious just thinking about it. I was a little worried about the two of them, but I remembered what it was like in that cave. If it hadn't been for me, maybe they could have escaped unharmed. Looking back on everything that had happened in the past, I was a burden in almost every circumstance, so I had no right to get mad. Fortunately, the old woman estimated that they would be back in a week at most.

The old woman, Fatty, and Poker-face decided to leave for Banai three days later, and Xie Yuhua and I left for Sichuan two days after that. Although our route was safer, the equipment needed was very special and had to be ordered from abroad, which gave me an ominous feeling.

The next few days were very pleasant since I couldn't go out and could only drink old wine and bask in the sun. I would feel anxious from time to time,

and would only feel relieved after carefully considering everything. But if I didn't think rationally and only thought about this matter, I always felt that there were some problems that I hadn't noticed. I didn't know whether it was intuition or a psychological effect.

Fatty asked Xiuxiu to buy us playing cards and we "Big Two"-ed²⁶ all day for the next few days. Little Sister was especially interested in us and came to play every day. Fatty put the imperial seal in his pocket as soon as she'd arrive, and the two people would start bickering, which I found annoying.

Three days later, they set off and left me alone in the big house. It seemed especially empty, and when it became dark during the day, I was glad for Xiuxiu's company. We talked about a lot of things when we were young, and many scenes that I couldn't remember completely began to surface in my mind. In fact, there were only one or two meetings between us in those days, and it was only an hour before we became reacquainted with each other. We suddenly both felt very sad, thinking that when we knew nothing but "eagle catching the chick"²⁷, the adults in the room were trapped in such a complicated vortex.

Sometimes I felt that a person's growth was a process of losing happiness, not the opposite.

The house at night was even more terrifying and I stayed up for two nights, hardly able to sleep. I always felt like someone was gasping in my ear and ended up scaring myself to death, so when the equipment was finally ready, I practically leaped out of the old house.

It took another four hours at the airport before Pink Shirt went through the shipping formalities. I noticed that the name on his ID card was Xie Yuchen, and when I asked why he had two names, he said Xie Yuhua was a stage name. In ancient times, actors weren't allowed to use their real names when going out because acting was such a cheap profession and they didn't want to harm their parents' reputation. In addition, other people wouldn't accept

²⁶ Big Two is a Chinese card game. It's similar to crazy eights

²⁷ Basically, it's a kid's game like Duck-Duck-Goose or something

that the person singing Hua Dan had a real name like Goudan²⁸ or something. Xie Yuhua was the name given to him by his master when he was learning to sing opera, but unfortunately, this name was very domineering, and now his real name would soon be forgotten.

I thought it was very reasonable and suddenly thought, *is Poker-face a stage name? If he also sings opera, I bet he'd be expected to play a hag or something.*

I slept like the dead on the plane. Every time I had gone on these adventures, there was a local connection that picked us up, so I seldom paid any attention to it. In the meantime, Fatty sent me an MMS, and I found that it was a selfie of him and Yun Cai. It seemed that they had arrived at Agui's house, and Fatty was grinning from ear to ear. After that, we went to the airport to pick up the goods and saw the so-called special equipment for the first time.

They were all steel structures similar to "ribs", and looked like some kind of animal bone chest made of iron. They were more than half a person high and could be disassembled. "What the hell is this?" I asked Pink Shirt.

"This is our nest," he said.

²⁸ Dog egg

Chapter 35 Running Water

I didn't know what he meant by "nest" and thought that maybe I had misheard and what he had said was "slot" or some other word.²⁹ It started to rain at this time, and the people were busy at the delivery office. We didn't want to wait long, so I helped load the goods onto the pickup truck without asking any questions, and then we drove into Chengdu in the rain.

The pickup truck was smaller than my Jinbei car and its wheels were only the size of a washbasin. Once it got going, it even tended to drift. Xiao Hua told me to endure it until we got to the city. The mud road at the back of the mountain was soon replaced by yellow dirt that was still hard to drive on. I told myself that it was really in line with this kind of work. No matter how flashy you were in the market, you had to be like a thief when you got to the property. In the hustle and bustle of the business, this line was like a seesaw, and it was rare for everyone to be able to balance it.

Chengdu was a wonderful city. When I was in college, some classmates came from here and talked about Sichuan's beautiful women and snacks, which made us drool. One word that best described this place was "comfort", but I was afraid I wouldn't have the chance to enjoy it this time.

The truck took us into a small alley in the north part of the city, where the main entrance of Sichuan University could be seen from the street. The inside was full of old yellow cement houses and their appearance seemed to have undergone the transformation of the old city. They were embellished in several places, which made the old buildings seem usable but congenial. But when you looked carefully, an old house was still just an old house. There was a small guesthouse at the end of the alley that was lacking the usual signboard. The only thing it had on the door was a simple board with the word "accommodation" written in red letters that was stirring in the wind.

²⁹ Phonetically they sound similar, cháo= nest and cáo=slot/trough/manger/ groove

We stopped the truck and walked in, bypassing the shabby front desk (if that thing could be called a front desk). I suddenly found myself in a bright corridor lined with very elegant European decorations. The floor was all solid wood and both sides of the corridor were covered in oil paintings. Xiao Hua told me that this was their base in Chengdu. The guesthouse wasn't open to the outside world, and if anyone were to ask, there wouldn't be any rooms available at all. The signboard was just a cover, and this place was actually full of people from all over the north and south.

We went to our room, took a bath, and relaxed. That evening, a local Sichuan Tangkou man took us to eat Korean steamed buns and stroll through the old streets. We had butter hot pot as a midnight snack, but it was my first time eating it at night and I ended up gargling six or seven bottles of beer to get rid of the spicy feeling. The back of my head soon felt numb and I almost passed out.

The most interesting thing was that I couldn't find the toilet in the restaurant. I asked a girl, but maybe I had drunk too much and my words were slurred, because I said "Here's the toilet" instead of "Excuse me, where's the toilet?" The girl immediately became angry and cursed in the Sichuan dialect: "Fucker, I'm not a toilet!" Xiao Hua busted out laughing.

This was a typical tour-style experience, and I got to enjoy the local sights in the fastest amount of time. Plus, since I was a guest and Xiao Hua was the host, he had to quickly take me around his usual haunts.

We left Chengdu early the next morning and got on the freeway without saying a word. It was during this period of time that I realized that I enjoyed this kind of long journey. I wasn't sure why, but even though Xiao Hua didn't deliberately talk to me or anything, I didn't feel as if the atmosphere was strange or awkward

Maybe it was because our backgrounds were so similar, but I felt as if he was a reflection of myself.

Like this, we closed our eyes and slept, or stared out the window at the mountains, the clouds, and the sun. The scenery changed slowly, the mountain got higher and higher, the road narrower and narrower, and every time I woke up, I found the scenery around me was more and more rural. That night, we stopped and switched to a Jeep with better cross-country performance, officially entered the mountain path, and drove another night in the dark.

When I woke up from the bumpy ride the next morning and went to get out of the car for some fresh air, I immediately noticed the four legendary snowy mountains.

“Mount Siguniang,”³⁰ the driver said in his Sichuan dialect. “The Eastern Alps.”

I was standing on the edge of the mountain road, one step away from the abyss. The view in front of me was excellent. I looked at the green mountain ahead and the huge snow-capped mountain behind it, marveling at how the dark green and snow white had never been so harmonious. Maybe only nature could create this kind of different, but complementary scenery.

Clouds filled the air, making people tremble with the beauty of it. But this kind of beauty didn't have a domineering feeling; it gave off a more feminine and mysterious feeling. *Siguniang Mountain, what are you thinking as you stand there alone?*

I couldn't help but laugh at my sudden lyricism. I had been to many beautiful places with Fatty before, but when I first saw them, I was always knocked down by Fatty's witticism. It was rare to be separated from him, and this time, the feeling was so different. Maybe I was more suitable to writing something melodramatic instead of being a grave robber.

“This is the elder sister, this is the second and third sister, and that one is the younger sister. The younger sister is the tallest and most beautiful, more than six thousand meters high.” The driver continued, “We call it ‘Four

³⁰ Siguniang= Four girls/young women

Girls'. This area is full of Qiang and Tibetan people, and there are many Qiang people where we're going. Remember not to sit on their doorsteps or touch their tripods."

"What's a tripod?" I asked.

"Every Qiang family has a shimi, which is a tripod-shaped assembly on top of which an earthenware jug or iron pot is placed. Below the tripod is a ten-thousand-year-old fire that's never died out. The fire is very sacred and was given to them by their fire god. I had a friend once who spat into the fire and..." Xiao Hua finished brushing his teeth and said, "I bought more than a hundred sheep before I was able to bring him out."

"Have you been here before?" I was a little surprised.

He smiled at me: "It's a long story. It's my own business, nothing you want to know about."

I looked at his expression and felt that he was being unreasonable, but I took a deep breath of fresh air and felt that it wasn't bad to be like that so early in the morning.

The last leg of our journey required a motorcycle. We called several local people to borrow theirs, talked about the price, and moved all the things out of the car. We arrived at the village nearest the highway, looking for surplus labor that hadn't gone out of the village seeking work. We pretended to be photographers and hired three or four people, asking them to help do some moving and carrying. We then chartered several motorcycles to transport everyone to another village in the mountains.

When Granny Huo had come here in the old days, it was really deep in the mountains and forests, but now it was much better. Although we also experienced a lot of troubles, on the third day after arriving in Sichuan, we finally reached the cliff they had mentioned. It was only half a day's walk from the nearest township. Fatty and Poker-face must have still been on their way to the mountains in Banai, Guangxi.

Apart from the climate and local conditions and customs, this feeling was very similar to that in Banai, which also made me feel a little calmer. We used mules to carry all the equipment with us and walked along the foot of the cliff. We soon found some caves densely dotted along the cliff, one right after another. “Some of the holes are covered by those trees, but there are more holes above.” The local people told us that this kind of mountain cliff full of holes was everywhere around here, and they called the holes shen xian zhu.³¹ I didn’t know if it was actually written like this, but it sounded a bit weird.

I asked Xiao Hua, “How is it? Do you know which cave they found the silk books in back in those days?” Xiao Hua shook his head and said, “Granny Huo didn’t come up here herself in those days, and even if there were any marks left, I’m afraid they’re all gone after so many years. All she knew was that it should be in the middle, and the position was very high. We’ll have to look for them.” At this point, Xiao Hua asked the others to put down their equipment and start drawing and numbering all the caves that could be seen along the cliff wall.

“Look?” I glanced up at the cliff and felt a little dizzy as I thought, *how am I supposed to find anything here? How can I climb up and down all day?* Moreover, I suddenly had the feeling that these holes were very familiar. With so many of them, how could they look so similar to the meteorite from the Queen of the West’s country?

³¹ Immortal boring (like an insect that bores a hole)

Chapter 36 Nest (Up Top)

My previous experience with the Queen of the West made me very resistant to recalling the memories. There was a kind of physiological rejection, so when I associated the scene before me with the previous one, I suddenly felt that the rock wall had become ugly. The black-and-blue stone and the holes in it made the whole mountain look like the corpse of a rotting and perforated behemoth. And the green moss was like pus and fungus on the corpse. I didn't feel like this before.

Fortunately, it was only a moment before Xiao Hua's Sichuan buddy interrupted my thoughts. Under his guidance, several locals removed the ropes from the mules and tied them to a piton, which was a small piece of rock-climbing equipment that could be inserted into a crack in the rock and would stick instantly.

We had a complete set of climbing equipment: safety belts, descenders, safety locks, rope slings, safety helmets, climbing shoes, magnesium powder and powder bags. The world's earliest climbing association may have come from the Soviet Union, but these items were all made in Switzerland and looked very reassuring.

Xiao Hua didn't fully comply with the regulations, however. He took off his coat, and while only wearing his harness, hung a rope around his waist and started climbing with his bare hands. He was very thin and had no obvious muscles, but for some reason, watching him climb was just like an acrobatic show. He did a lot of movements I dared not think of, such as hanging one-handed on the protruding cliff rock, using the strength of his waist to send his foot to a tree far away, and hooking his foot on the tree and hanging upside down. If he couldn't reach the rock higher up, he would turn over on the cliff very quickly, hold his body in place with the instep of one foot while hooking his other foot's heel on a spot level with his head, and then pull up instantly. He did it cleanly and even with a special aesthetic feeling.

The most amazing thing was his speed. I truly realized what it meant to move like a ninja.³² All his climbing was extremely fast— even faster than walking— except for those areas where he encountered difficulties in climbing. But even so, it took him nearly four hours to climb to the top of the cliff and when he reached the top, I could hardly see his position clearly. It wasn't until he dropped the rope that I was sure he had really made it.

All the people below applauded heartily, and I couldn't help expressing my admiration as I told myself that this guy must have studied "Journey to the West" when he was learning opera.

We used the rope he dropped down to us to hoist all the equipment up through a pulley system. Seven ropes were thrown down from the top and became seven "ladders" to assist rock climbing. I didn't know how these ropes were going to be used, but when I thought about Xiao Hua's skill, I suddenly realized that they were probably for me.

I didn't feel ashamed. If anything, I just felt scared. If I were allowed to climb up and stay, maybe I could accept it, but if I had to keep shuttling up and down these ropes... fuck. I really couldn't guarantee that I could persist for so long without falling to my death.

After that, several Sichuan guys set up the so-called "nest". It was made of steel-like claws that could hold a sleeping bag, and many of the fixed rings on the bag and claws were connected by six metal rings. The claws were hung from the cliff with their palms facing inward.

After looking at it, I finally understood why it was called a nest. This thing would enable us to sleep on the cliff, and sure enough, it couldn't be called anything besides a nest.³³

Xiao Hua's assistant told me that this was an instrument invented by the Finns for bird photographers to photograph eagles on cliffs. Since it was hard to observe eagles in their natural habitat, they made these claws, and

³² The characters are Fei Yan Zou Bi = to leap onto roofs and vault over walls (usually associated with martial arts) so I took some liberties

³³ It's called a portaledge if you want to get technical but the raw calls it a nest.

with the sleeping bag, they could live on the cliff for several months without falling. There were so many holes in the cliff that it would take us at least a week or two to look for them all, and the cliff was so high that it may take ordinary people a whole day just to get up, so we could only stay on it.

The nest would be placed at the top of the cliff, where there was more light, less moss, and no dampness. The last step was to hang me up.

I had a little experience rock climbing, so I wasn't too embarrassed this time. It was just that when I got to the middle of the cliff and looked down, I only saw the trees' green canopies and felt a little dazed. I thought of the fault at the edge of the snake marsh, and a lot of things flashed through my mind. I couldn't help but wonder at my change. If I had been in such a place before, I would have felt my legs go soft, but now I could remain calm.

When I got to the top of the cliff, I saw the setting sun. We were really at the peak, with almost no place to stand and only some low trees and shrubs present. Under the yellow light of the setting sun, the lofty but gentle snow-capped mountains around us became mysterious, while the surrounding cliffs and valleys formed an ethereal white mist. The shadow of the backlit mountain was already dark, and coupled with the smoke from the mountain village and everything else, it formed a strange artistic picture.

Xiao Hua was sitting on a stone with his feet dangling in the air above the abyss. He looked at the snow-capped mountains with a solemn look in his eyes.

Chapter 37 Nest (Down Below)

I had a special tacit understanding with Xiao Hua. Maybe it was because our backgrounds were so similar, or because there was an unexplained bond between the Xie and Wu families, but I didn't feel embarrassed or out of touch with him. On the contrary, I could understand how he was feeling now, so I also sat down quietly.

The wind brought by the setting sun already had a hint of coolness. This was a completely different world that you could only understand if you sat here. There was no way down and no other places to go. The only thing you had around you were a few rocks and an unfathomable abyss on both sides as fog slowly condensed under your feet. I sat and looked around at the hundred-meter-high isolated peak. The similar peaks in the distance suddenly gave me a wonderful illusion, as if I were an immortal or a fairy. As long as I put my feet together, I could fly from the top of the cliff, step on the sea of clouds, step over the isolated rocks on the thousand peaks, and fly to the top of the snowy mountain.

I immediately understood the people who strove to be immortals. At that time, they climbed onto this mountain rock and saw the scenery in front of them. Under the general charm of this extreme heaven, it was indeed possible to cut down the only escape rope and trap themselves on this cliff.

There was nothing to say that night. Time was urgent, only two sets of equipment had been ordered, and we didn't want to make too much noise when we were working. Xiao Hua said that we were enough for the time being. We had two days to do the initial search but couldn't proceed until Granny Huo and her group arrived at the lake in Banai and got everything ready.

Old Granny Huo firmly believed that the other half of Zhang Jialou was buried at the bottom of the lake. The bottom of the building was buried along with the remains of the Zhang family's ancestors. In order to conceal their identities, these people would have their right hands cut off before

they were embalmed, and then the coffin would be sealed with molten iron. The Zhang family was so mysterious that the practice had been handed down for hundreds of years without it being circulated. Where did they come from and what were they doing in this world? Why did they have to seal the coffin with molten iron after death? Were they really monsters like Granny Huo had said? After death, would there be extremely abnormal and dangerous changes in their bodies?

No one knew why the Yangshi Lei built this completely dark Zhang Jialou hundreds of years ago for them to store their remains. How did they reach a consensus with the emperor at that time?

I remembered that the Yangshi Lei pattern had a huge, lonely coffin in the center of the ancient building's last floor, and that floor must have been where the Zhang family's earliest ancestors were located. In the late 1970s, the destination of the archaeological team's first mission was there. What would Poker-face see there?

If it had been the me from before, I would have been eaten up by intense curiosity. Now, however, I felt that the things there were probably something I didn't want to see and wouldn't be anything good.

That night, I hung in the claw "nest" on the cliff with the safety rope tightly buckled to my waist. As I lay in my sleeping bag, a small lamp hung above me, reflecting a bright area in the shape of a fan. Xiao Hua had gone to bed early, and I could see several people's fires a few hundred meters below us. Their voices drifted through the air like a ghostly whisper, but I couldn't hear them very clearly. This kind of atmosphere made me feel sleepy. It was something I never thought I would encounter before, but I didn't struggle for long before I fell asleep.

Frankly, I felt so calm that I thought it was concerning, and right before falling asleep, I suddenly realized that I had really changed.

Chapter 38 Double Lines

For the next two days, I lived like a gecko or one of the Qiang herbalists who lived here. Since nothing major happened, I'll make a long story short.

I started from a novice climber with only some basic experience and slowly became able to crawl on the cliff independently with the help of those ropes. We searched from top to bottom, hole to hole. The specific process was actually very interesting, but I can't describe it. In general, the holes weren't very deep and many of them were merely mountain cracks. Once we looked at them, we could see that they were actually only one arm deep, and there weren't that many holes that could accommodate us. But even so, we still found mutilated bones in many of them. Some of them were still clearly visible, but most of the bones were scattered and had apparently been pecked clean.

When I first thought of their decision to cut off the rope, I thought it was admirable, but after seeing those scattered skeletons, I now thought it was ridiculous. I didn't know how they had felt in their last moments— maybe a few had hallucinated because of hunger, which was probably the best result they could get for their efforts.

To my surprise, we found the cave where they had discovered the silk books the very next morning. The reason why we knew it was this one was because there were obvious signs of artificial reinforcement around the cave. It was only half a person high and deeper than all the other holes, but we could still see bones sitting at the bottom.

Maybe it wasn't appropriate to say bones. The body had a complete human form, but it wasn't exactly a mummy either. The only reason the bones could maintain their human form was because the skeleton was wearing an iron coat.

This kind of thing was a blessing from folk monks. It was said that this custom was used in ancient Shu to control various desires. I didn't know

much about it since I wasn't a folk expert, but I figured it must have been really hard to climb so high with this broken iron on his back.

The iron coat was very much like a chain rack, but it was made of old iron which had rusted into a whole piece. The bones inside had long scattered, and only the outer shell maintained the body's pre-death posture. The black cave walls around the bones were full of hollows that had been smashed out. It seemed that all the silk books that were put here had already been completely looted.

I didn't know who he was, but the dried bun on the skeleton's head had almost no strands of white. He must not have been an old man. Where was he from? What stories did he have? What was he thinking before he died? Whenever I saw a corpse, I always wanted to know these kinds of things.

Because our two bodies blocked almost all the light at the entrance of the cave, Xiao Hua turned on his flashlight. Xiuxiu had revealed to us that there had been a huge accident in the later part of the excavation, but nothing here looked like that. Moreover, since the project was so huge, did so many people join just for a hole like this?

Although they needed to search all the crags here at the time, they didn't need the Mystic Nine to go out in full force. This unprecedented operation must have been led by one person, who determined that the situation required it. Their conclusion that they needed to gather the Mystic Nine should have been correct.

That meant that what we were seeing in front of us was definitely just an illusion.

Sure enough, we found many strange cracked mud marks on the rock wall behind the ancient corpse, and when we scraped them off, we suddenly saw cement.

This rear wall had been made with cement-mixed rock, but it should have been impossible to see cement in such a place. It was obvious they had completely sealed the place before they withdrew.

“Has Granny Huo ever told you about this?” I looked at the cement, which made me a little worried. Did this sealing method mean there was something dangerous in there that had to be locked up? But the old woman didn’t tell us or even mention that it was blocked.

“They were the first to withdraw in those days, so sealing this place was probably done by the other families after they left.” Xiao Hua said. “If she wants to get something done, she won’t play such a trick.”

As he said this, he took a stone from the side and smashed it into the concrete wall twice. The wall didn’t move, but a lot of cement on the surface was smashed to pieces. We found that the color of the cement inside had changed, revealing a dark red color.

I say red, but it was actually a kind of yellow that was inching towards dark brown, much like rust water. I picked up a piece of debris and smelled it, but didn’t notice any peculiar odors.

Although I wasn’t sure, I immediately realized that this may be blood. The old woman had told us that big changes had taken place when they explored here, and this blood proved that we were right. But the way the blood appeared like this made me feel a little concerned.

I had seen similar bloodstains before in the slaughterhouse when Uncle Three and I went to buy New Year’s goods one year. This kind of old blood was actually more depressing than fresh blood.

But as Xiao Hua continued to smash and more and more cement was broken, I found that something was wrong. The entire inside of this cement slab was this color, and the deeper the color went, the closer it was to real red. I didn’t know whether it was a psychological effect or not, but I started to smell blood.

Xiao Hua was also surprised. He smashed several more times, dug out several stones, stopped, and then cursed, “Damn it.”

I looked at the smashed pit and saw that all the cement inside was red, as if it had been stirred with plasma.

It was impossible to shed so much blood if someone had been injured or was dead. Moreover, the blood had soaked into the cement. There wasn't any reason I could think of for why it might have penetrated so deep.

"Could it be that they mixed dog blood in the cement to ward off evil and other things?" I asked Xiao Hua.

He turned the cement blocks on the ground over and said: "The deeper we dig, the more the cement is soaked in blood. But there's not much on the surface, which shows that the blood is seeping out from the inside." He touched the blackened cement. "There's no oxygen in it, and the iron in the blood hasn't been oxidized, so the color hasn't faded."

"Seeping from the inside?" I wondered what the reason was. I suddenly had a foreboding feeling as I imagined a tomb full of blood zombies.

Xiao Hua continued to chip away at the wall with a stone. Although the blood-soaked cement wasn't very hard, there were more and more crushed stones behind the outer layer that had been completely smashed. These crushed stones couldn't be smashed, so we hoisted the stone hammer and other equipment up from below and began to break the stone away bit by bit.

This mixture of cement and stone was equivalent to today's roadbed concrete and had excellent compression resistance. We could only smash the cement through the gaps between the stones and knock them down slowly. In the cramped space, the two of us quickly started sweating like pigs and both accidentally hit the other's fingers and heads because of mistaken cooperation, which made us even more miserable.

I didn't know how long it took, but it was dark outside when I suddenly broke open a stone and immediately found a bone sticking out of the cement.

Xiao Hua and I took one look at each other and immediately quickened our pace. After we threw the stone aside, a strange skeleton emerged.

It was a completely decomposed body, but it also wasn't rotting. We had only dug a little bit, but we could see the skull and an arm bone. The rest of it was still in the concrete, but from what we could see, the bones were yellow and almost broken to pieces. We were certain that it was a human body, but it was a little different because the bones were covered in a strange layer of "hair". Once we looked carefully, we found that the mold-like "hair" was stuck on it. It was enough to make one's back tingle.

After looking at it closely, I immediately pushed Xiao Hua away from it and stepped back myself. I didn't know why, but I immediately went on alert once I saw that hair.

It really looked like "hair", but if you pulled it, you would find that the hairs and bones were connected. Almost all the bones had them, and it seemed as if the hair was growing from the bones themselves. It was very brittle and broke into small pieces upon touching, so it must have been stuck to the bones by the decaying corpse's fluid at that time.

Xiao Hua put on gloves, picked up a hammer, and began to knock on the skull embedded in the concrete. After two hits, the skull cap was cracked open and the head of the hammer's nail was used to dig out the skull fragments. We used a flashlight to take a look inside and saw that the skull cavity was also filled with the same hair-like things.

"Not good." Xiao Hua let out a tut.

I immediately realized that it definitely wasn't because of any accident that they suffered heavy losses here. It appeared they had met something strange.

I thought it was a bit odd before that such a strong team didn't cause "great changes" even if it had encountered a very clever trap. The Mystic Nine wasn't just any group of ordinary thieves, after all. Even if one or two people were killed, they would immediately find ways to escape with their skills and

experience. But there were still times when it was useless to be good at your craft.

I was a little scared. If that was the case, then opening this hole was very dangerous. I didn't know what was going on in the cave, but there had to be a corpse behind it. And it would be troublesome if we kept knocking and a Forbidden Woman crawled out. In addition, I didn't know how the hair had gotten into this corpse's head.

I told Xiao Hua about my worries, and after thinking about it, we decided to put on our clothes, put on two or three layers of gloves, then put on goggles and wrap our bare faces around with bandages like burn victims. We had to make sure we didn't leave any flesh exposed before we continued digging.

I didn't even sweat since it was all absorbed inside my layers, and within ten minutes all my private parts began to protest. I had to scratch while carefully digging around the body like I was in an archaeological dig.

As expected, the second skeleton was found almost immediately and was practically melded together with the first one. Then, the third skeleton was immediately revealed, and it was in the same position as the second, also holding the first skeleton. Like the first skeleton, these bones were all covered in that "hair".

We continued digging towards the back, which was all stone now. It was clear the cement hadn't been poured this far back, because there was no large-scale equipment for pouring cement on a cliff. If it had been poured manually, the cement couldn't be pressed into the depths of the hole. This made digging very convenient, and we managed to dig out more bones from behind the second and third skeletons. What made us curious was that all the bones were melded together. At first, I thought they were fighting, but when I dug, I realized that they were pushing the person in front forward, as if they wanted to push the person out.

I suddenly felt as if I could imagine the scene from that year: the people outside were pouring cement in, and the people inside were pinned down

by the stones. They shouted no and tried to push the people in front out, but countless hairs spread along the cracks of the stones and engulfed them. They wailed. The crushed stones made them unable to move forward at all and they writhed in pain and despair. The cement was driven in from the outside like the boiling oil used to besiege towns in the wars from centuries past. The pressure collapsed the surrounding stones and crushed them, and their blood gathered together and flowed through the surging cement.

This was no longer an indescribable scene of death. Those old fellows had died so unexpectedly in the end. It was no wonder the Mystic Nine was so afraid they wouldn't even talk about it. Xiao Hua frowned at me, grabbed the bandages that covered his head, and brushed his sweaty hair back with his fingers. "You're right," he said. "This didn't happen after Granny Huo left. They closed the entrance of the cave immediately after the incident occurred. Only then could there be such a thrilling scene. She should know about this, so why didn't she say anything?"

"Not necessarily." I said, "Maybe after she left, the rest of the team still didn't give up and were trying to solve the problem."

Xiao Hua shook his head: "Do you know how long and hard it would be to install a cement filling system on such a cliff? After the accident, they hadn't escaped from the hole, but the cement had already begun to flow, which shows—"

He hesitated, and I immediately understood what he meant: "This was a premeditated situation. The cement pouring was an insurance policy. They expected such risks, so they had everything ready before going in. If something happened to them inside, they would be trapped."

"They volunteered." Xiao Hua looked at the bones. "It makes me feel a little better."

"But look at them like this, if they were here voluntarily, why are they in such a state? They're like candied fruit, one stuck to the other." I said.

"What do you think?" Xiao Hua shined his flashlight at me.

“For example, there are six people in a narrow cave who suddenly encountered something. They faced the threat of death and ran instinctively to the entrance of the cave, but the cave had already been filled with lumps of cement. At this time, they should have been scattered and solidified one by one in the cement. Everyone’s actions would be different and the distance between them would also be different. They shouldn’t be connected one by one as they are now.” I said. “Besides, they’re all grave robbers. I figure that if they knew they were going to die at that time, they would give up very early and not make such drastic attempts to survive.”

Xiao Hua shined the flashlight on the bones, and after a moment of silence, he said slowly, “It makes sense. So, you mean to say they didn’t volunteer? But with such a big setup and so much cement lying outside, how could they not know what it is?”

I said to myself, *not necessarily. From this matter alone, there are too many plausible explanations.* For example, these people were coerced or did it to send something out. But this couldn’t explain another thing.

After thinking about it, I felt that there was only one possibility to explain these two things happening at the same time. I said to Xiao Hua, “Why do you think the old woman neglected to tell us that this place was sealed with cement?”

“I don’t know, maybe she thinks it’s disgraceful or...” Xiao Hua shook his head. “Well, I admit it’s hard to fucking explain, but I know her purpose is very strong, so she won’t be messing around or cheating us. If she knew this place was sealed with cement and didn’t tell us, then we’ll stop our plan and she won’t be able to carry out her plan. She can’t do this.”

“Yes.” I nodded, “She didn’t tell us, so obviously, the only reasonable explanation is that she really didn’t know. But she was involved in things here and couldn’t have been unaware, so there’s only one explanation.”

“What do you want to say?”

“These bones... these people.... are not Mystic Nine people.” I said, “Shit, after the Mystic Nine left, another person came here, went in, touched the trap, and was sealed inside. It wasn’t that long ago, which is why the blood is still red.”

“Oh, you mean we’re not the first people here after the Mystic Nine?”

“Probably. And look at the battle array of these people,” I picked up a piece of cement, “Cement filling isn’t something the average person can do, but a very large team with a strong background would be able to.”

Xiao Hua leaned against one side of the cave wall and sighed: “Moreover, they knew there was danger here and put the cement bags here in advance. Then, these people must have something to do with that year.” He looked at me. “Some people don’t give up.”

“Yes, some people don’t give up.” I nodded, and we stood there in relative silence. These people’s bones were twisted and broken, and they had all rotted here indistinctly so we couldn’t get any more information from them. I felt sick. What would cause so many people to make such meaningless sacrifices again and again?

After a moment’s silence, Xiao Hua said, “No matter what the situation was, they still failed. We have to continue our unfinished business. And they touched the trap after the Mystic Nine touched it, which shows that the mechanism isn’t temporary. We won’t be able to escape if we encounter it. There must be something in this hole that’s related to this hair, so we have to be more careful.”

My imagination ran wild: if my cranial cavity grew hair and the tip of my hair pierced through my brain, then my brain would become a tangled mass of soap and unknown grease that you would find in a sewer. I would rather die. Fortunately, I quickly let this ridiculous idea slip away.

Xiao Hua handed me a hammer and told me to keep digging. We would have chatted, but he and I were no longer interested in talking at this time.

We soon dug up several more skeletons, and found that the area behind them was full of stones but no more bones. We had been going for three hours, digging out stone after stone.

I suddenly had a little doubt and couldn't help but think that if the group who closed the cave blocked the whole thing, then what we were doing now was pointless. But after thinking about it some more, I didn't believe it. I had no other choice now. No matter how long I had to dig, I had to keep going.

In fact, at the end of the day, I didn't know how many hours I had been digging. I was physically exhausted and extremely sleepy, but Xiao Hua didn't ask for a rest and I was embarrassed to mention it. While I was in a daze, the stone in front of me suddenly collapsed with a crash, taking the upper part of the wall with it, and revealing a dark hole.

I was still holding the "KeyStone" hammer in my hand, and it took me a long time to realize I had dug through. Xiao Hua and I looked at each other, then he raised his hand and shined the flashlight into the hole. The cave behind the stone wall extended all the way back out of sight, and we could see porcelain jars twenty meters away on the ground. They appeared one after another and extended all the way to the end of the tunnel.

What was creepy was that when we illuminated the jars with our flashlights, we found that there was a melon-sized spherical object in each one, along with some hair. These spherical objects looked like small heads that were growing out of the jars. I could see that the whole cave was thickly dotted with them, and I couldn't help but break out in goosebumps.

Chapter 39 Small Hair

Xiao Hua lit a flare and threw it in to illuminate the whole area in front of us. We could see the black “hair” all over the ground and it seemed to cover everything, including the walls. After we had quieted down, we found that the whole cave was chilled. The sweat on our bodies cooled quickly, causing our pores to shrink and goosebumps to rise up.

At the same time, I saw that there were small alcoves all over the walls that were full of things. Most of them could be identified as bamboo scrolls, but some of the alcoves had apparently been cleaned out already and were empty. I figured that the most important silk books Jin Wantang had translated must have come from here.

There were a large number of bamboo scrolls along the “corridor” of the cave, and many were placed on both sides, making it look like a secret library corridor.

The cave was so deep that our flashlights couldn’t reach very far. I estimated that the distance was at least three hundred meters, which was frighteningly deep.

This scene reminded me of a dragon kiln I had seen in Longquan, but it hadn’t been this long. The two of us stood at the mouth of the cave, suddenly unsure of what we should do.

The inside was as cramped as the outside, so we’d have to crawl in order to get in. Xiao Hua tried to climb in, but I quickly grabbed him. I knew that kind of jar. I had seen it in Tamutuo before. These jars looked very similar to the ones that had heads, and if it were true, then it was very likely that those bugs were in them.

When I told Xiao Hua this, he looked at the iron-clad body behind him and said, “So, that iron garment may not be for Taoist training, but a protective garment against these insects. Maybe the craftsmen who set up these jars wore them at the time.”

I nodded as I pointed the flashlight in front of me. As expected, I found that the open space in front of me was full of red corpse-eating bug carcasses. Their shells were broken and scattered all over the place, which made me feel uncomfortable.

Xiao Hua shined his flashlight on a jar. The hair in it was really frightening, and it was hard to convince myself that there wasn't something else in there.

"How did you say they got in back then?" I asked. "They didn't step on these jars, did they? That's disgusting." Moreover, the jars were placed very neatly and didn't look like many people had trampled on them.

Xiao Hua shined his flashlight on the wall and ceiling, smiled at me, and then said, "It was too easy for them to get in."

He was smiling a bit like a thief, and I didn't know what to make of it. He pulled out two arm-length rods from our equipment pile— I didn't know what material they were made of— picked them up, took off his gloves exposing his sweaty hands, and made his preparations. Showing off his excellent flexibility, he put both of his palms together and turned them in a circle.

I didn't know what he was going to do, but I didn't think of stopping him. He picked up the rod, suddenly propped it up on the ground in front of him, turned like an acrobat in the narrow space, and then vaulted and stepped in one of the holes on the side of the cave wall.

Before I could react, the stick he held on the ground loosened and pulled back, dancing like a shadowy flower in the air. At the moment he lost his balance, the stick reached the hole in the cave wall on which he was standing and bounced him again, pushing him to the other side of the cave with an action that was so amazing, one could say it was inhuman.

I felt my jaw drop as I saw him repeating this process, and I couldn't help thinking that the rod was like a magic wand. In a very short amount of time, he quickly flipped and jumped across the cave wall, looking similar to a fairy

with his effortless movements that were like rolling clouds and flowing water. In a few seconds, he had left me behind.

“Professional.” This was the word that suddenly popped into my head. Compared with grandpa and Chen Pi Ah Si, who would carefully touch the walls bit by bit to find the trap mechanism, this amazing stunt was undeniably on a different level. It was definitely the most efficient and safe method when it came to grave robbing.

After some time had passed, I heard a loud roar come from further in and his flashlight beam shot out across the distance. It appeared this tunnel wasn't as deep as I had originally thought.

“How is it?” I asked, creating an echo in the cave.

“It's not as hard as I thought, you can come easily!” He called back. “There's a cave in here.”

“Easy my ass, what should I do?” I was so angry that I couldn't even make the first move.

“Wait a minute, I'll think of something. Don't move.” Xiao Hua's voice sounded like it was coming from inside the cave. “I see something strange.”

His voice echoed constantly in the tunnel and sounded muffled because his face was covered in bandages.

“What is it?” I immediately asked.

After a moment of silence, his voice came floating faintly through the tunnel: “I don't know, it's hard to say. It seems to be made of iron.” As he said this, I heard a metal tapping sound start up from inside.

“Describe it.” My curiosity was suddenly piqued and many strange images appeared in my mind.

“Uh...” He hesitated. “I don't know how to describe it.”

“What’s so hard to describe?” I shouted impatiently. “Round, square, long, flat? What size is it?”

“It’s a huge iron plate, like a cymbal. There are many strange lines on it.” Xiao Hua said. Listening to his voice, it was clear his attention had been completely captivated by that thing.

“What’s so strange about it?”

“Brother.” Xiao Hua’s voice dropped slightly, as if in disbelief. “This thing is spinning. It’s turning by itself.”

Chapter 40 Strange Thing

Turning by itself? I couldn't imagine what it looked like, and I was so impatient to see it that I cried out, "Find a way to get me over there."

"Wait, I think something's wrong." He suddenly cried out. Then, everything went quiet.

"What's the matter? Don't keep me in suspense." I scolded him.

But Xiao Hua didn't speak this time, and only my voice echoed back at me.

If it weren't for the terrible situation in front of me, I would have definitely run past recklessly. Compared with before, this kind of fake suspense made me feel even worse. I waited for a while, and then yelled at him again, but Xiao Hua still didn't answer me. All I could hear was the sudden metal tapping sound coming from inside.

I wanted to curse him out, but I thought of our legendary childhood friendship— even if we weren't too familiar now— and realized it wasn't good to get angry right now. I used a hammer to impatiently knock on the stone as I continued to call out to him.

After making several calls, the metal tapping sound inside was getting louder and louder, as if it was destroying something.

"What are you doing?" I was starting to get nervous.

Xiao Hua still didn't answer. The sharp "dangdang" sound was the only response I got, as if he was hitting the "iron plate" with something hard. The sounds echoed constantly in the cave, and whether they were loud or not, they still stung my nerves and irritated me.

It suddenly dawned on me that something was wrong. There was no reason he wouldn't answer me. He was an adult, after all, so he wouldn't play such childish tricks in this kind of situation. Maybe he suddenly couldn't speak

and was knocking on the iron plate to ask for help? Did something happen to him a minute ago that I couldn't hear?

But the iron plate was being struck so hard that it was obvious by the buzzing sound alone that it was being hit with a lot of strength. It was messy, but not urgent, and it didn't sound like he was asking for help, but trying to smash it.

I finally gave a loud shout, but there was still no reply. I immediately turned around and climbed to the entrance of the cave, picking up the walkie-talkie and calling the men below. They had been asleep and were confused, but as soon as I mentioned the situation, the Sichuan guy said he'd come up immediately. As I put down the walkie-talkie, I realized that I still had a problem. It took me more than four hours to climb up, so if something had really happened, Xiao Hia would be dead more than ten times over. And it would still take me at least two hours even if I pulled the Sichuan guy up, so that wouldn't work either.

I climbed back into the hole again. The noise inside grated my nerves, but I continued to shout. In this kind of environment, my voice was also very loud, so it was impossible for him to not hear me. But he still didn't answer. I was worried and couldn't but think of Uncle Three and Xie Lianhuan.

Fuck! I had told myself I wouldn't repeat their mistakes. This was really too tragic. What the hell was going on?

I wondered how I would face the Xie family if Xiao Hua died or had an accident. Would our Wu family be nicknamed the "Xie Family Reaper"?

Shit! Shit! Shit! I looked at the weird hair in the jar in front of me. My mind was a mess and I couldn't think, but at that moment, I suddenly saw the nearby alcoves that had been dug out of the wall for the ancient books.

I looked at my gloves and hiking shoes and then at the wall, suddenly thinking of a way to get through. My instincts told me, however, that this method was definitely a bad idea and would likely get me killed.

But the harsh knocking sound disturbed my judgment, and those instincts were immediately lost in my boundless anxiety. I took a few deep breaths, tried my best to keep the heat down, and carefully stepped away from the pile of collapsed stone.

As soon as I put my foot down, the broken shells of the dead corpse-eating bugs broke under my feet. I took a deep breath. Those little balls of hair, as if sensing my presence, suddenly looked more monstrous under the flashlight's glow.

My method was actually very ugly. The cave walls were full of alcoves where the ancient books had been placed and I didn't want to touch the disgusting hair balls below, so I had to lie prone against the cave wall and step in the alcoves.

It didn't seem difficult at first, but the problem was that I had no way out and I couldn't stop halfway. In such a cramped environment, my bowed body was pressed up against the cave wall and I had to rely on the strength of my fingers to grasp the alcoves and move forward, which was a great test of physical strength. If the height of the cave was high enough to let me stand up straight, it would have been much easier.

The harsh metal tapping sound distracted me and caused me to collapse, but I thought about it some more and went up and tried again. I found it wasn't as difficult as I had initially thought, especially when I reversed my original position so I looked like a version of Jesus nailed to the wall suffering appendicitis pain. If I was careful to keep my balance, I would have a chance to have a short rest.

I took a deep breath and went up to the wall. With the first breath, I didn't give myself the chance to shrink back and actually managed to climb more than ten meters. My speed was relatively fast, but I didn't know whether the action looked gorgeous or not.

After more than ten meters, my fingers were exhausted and I had to rest before moving on. I held the flashlight in my mouth and saw the hair-covered things under me.

The distance was much closer than before, and the inside of those small balls seemed larger than the outside part. I had been trying to convince myself that the hair on top was a new kind of mushroom, but from this distance, it seemed that it was really hair. And it was very straight and shiny hair, too.

What would grow this? I felt sick and creeped out. If you saw so many hairs spread in such a patch in the wild, you may not even have the courage to look at it. Moreover, I had more nightmares about hair than anyone else.

In spite of my nausea, I had a very anxious impulse to pluck away the hair and see if it was really a head underneath. At this distance, as long as I dropped my hand down, I could lift it up.

I couldn't stand it anymore, so I inhaled and turned around to continue. Since I had taken a break, it was kind of hard for me to move faster after that, so I used my fingers to move forward bit by bit. The mysterious hair down below was now just a few feet away from me. Some of the alcoves were so small that I could only step in with a toe, and I soon started to show signs of cramping.

Fortunately, I was so nervous that I could almost completely block out the harsh metal sounds and focus all my attention on my fingers.

I didn't know how long it took, but when I looked back, I couldn't see the place where I had entered. I couldn't use the flashlight like this either, so I figured I was halfway through.

The knocking sound was still going strong.

I relaxed a little bit, thinking that Xiao Hua shouldn't have encountered something deadly. I was sweating all over and wanted to find a place to rest, but when I turned my flashlight, I suddenly felt like something was wrong.

I had looked around with my flashlight several times, and each time I saw hair and dark cave walls on both sides. But this time, something momentarily blocked my flashlight's beam.

When I turned back, I suddenly noticed something different in the darkness more than ten meters away from me.

That thing was taller than a person but definitely wasn't human. I couldn't understand what I was seeing. If I had to describe it, I could only say that it was a huge mass of hair standing there.

At first, I thought it was a Forbidden Woman, but I immediately knew it was impossible because I didn't smell the fragrance. But there had to be something in this "hair" because the whole cluster stood there giving off a feeling like there was a living creature inside.

But the thing didn't move and just stood there. The hair had a very unusual luster under the flashlight's glow, which made me tremble all over.

Chapter 41 Hair

Two thoughts immediately popped into my head: *what the hell is this thing and why didn't I notice it just now?* If this thing was already here, then maybe it was simply what those little balls under me looked like when they grew up? If not, then this thing was alive and would be a little troublesome to deal with.

The metal tapping sound was particularly clear and I looked around thinking, *is this not a distress call, but a warning?* My heart was thundering in my chest as I looked for a way out, but there was none. If this thing had caused Xiao Hua's misfortune, then I was in an even worse state. He could at least knock on things to express his distress, but I could only hit the wall with my head.

But even though I was extremely flustered, my mind was very clear and I wasn't confused. I didn't wait for that thing to tell me what it was and casually pulled out a bamboo scroll from a nearby alcove.

Shit, it weighed five or six kilograms. I was used to playing with rice paper sheets used for rubbings and was a little awed by the heavy bamboo scroll. I swung it up and smashed it into the mass of hair.

Bamboo scrolls were just bamboo slips tied together. After so many years, the silk thread had long decayed into mud, so even though the scroll retained its shape when I grabbed it, the bamboo slips fell onto the hair like scattered flowers as soon as I tossed it out.

As the bamboo slips fell to the ground, it was very obvious that there was something substantial in the clump of hair.

I watched warily, thinking that if that thing moved, I would immediately jump down and run out first, regardless of what I stepped on.

But it didn't move. It was the kind of immobility that was genuine, just like a dead thing.

I stayed on guard for a while, my heart very hesitant. I hoped it would move so that I could escape, but if it didn't move, it might be harmless. Maybe it was just a stake set up here long ago that happened to be covered in hair. If so, that meant that I would have to go past it.

After listening to my harsh breathing for a while, I composed myself, stopped hesitating, gritted my teeth, and kept moving. Within a few steps, I was getting closer and closer to that thing.

Just imagine yourself in the dark, seeing a large mass of weird hair standing there, not knowing what's inside. Your body's shaking and the flashlight moves around in the dark, illuminating things from time to time. Such a strange feeling was very uncomfortable. In the end, I had to force myself to stop looking at it so that I could focus on remaining pressed up against the wall and trying to move past it as soon as possible.

My mind was numb during the whole process, but I felt my hair stand on end and the back of my neck tingle. I clenched my teeth and silently laughed at myself: *when I get through this level, I'll really be numb.*

As I inched forward, however, I suddenly felt a chill and had to stop and calm down for a moment.

The back of my neck was really tingling and after moving for a while, the feeling increased instead of decreasing.

I felt cold and suddenly realized that it wasn't my imagination.

Fuck, that thing was behind me now! My whole body immediately started trembling violently and all my attention became focused on the back of my neck. I could almost imagine what would happen next: as soon as I looked back, my head would be buried in a mass of hair.

I didn't know what made the decision for me, but I immediately slammed my head back, trying to knock it down so that I could run away. There was a muffled sound, and I felt a sharp pain on the back of my head, along with a buzzing in my ears—the thing behind me was as hard as iron.

I had hit it hard without much thought, but the pain was indescribable. The hit stunned me and I immediately blacked out. My hands loosened and by the time I reacted, I had already rolled into the pile of hair.

As I struggled to get up, my hands were covered in hair and the clay jars under my feet made a creaking sound. My flashlight fell out of my mouth and rolled into the pile of hair, but I didn't dare look for it. I could feel my hands pressing on those little heads and the hair becoming tangled in my fingernails. It felt as if I was touching lumps of cleaning rags, and a copious amount of liquid squeezed out under the pressure of my weight.

I didn't have time to feel sick in the chaos and immediately started running. It was completely dark in front of me, with the exception of Xiao Hua's flashlight shining like a beacon at the end. My feet were uneven when I hit the ground, but I didn't care. I ended up crushing a few jars and cut my ankles several times as I made my escape. I knew I must have been bleeding, but I couldn't feel any pain.

As I rushed to the flashlight, I noticed that there weren't any jars in front of me. I rolled and found myself in a small stone room where the harsh metal sound was ringing in my ears.

This kind of scene was simply hell. I called out a few times: "Da Hua!" Only to find that I was calling his name wrong. I still couldn't stand up straight here, but I got up and hunched over as I looked around. I saw Xiao Hua's flashlight in a nearby alcove, but I didn't see him and didn't know where he was.

At the same time, a strange thing caught my eye.

It really was an iron plate. It was the size of a round table and placed in the center of the stone chamber. Upon seeing it, I knew it was extremely ancient. There were strange patterns carved on it, and as Xiao Hua had said, it was actually spinning. The irregular sound of tapping metal came from the inside of the iron plate, just like a huge bell.

At the same time, I also saw that the bottom of it was connected to the rock, and there was a dull sound coming from underneath. The power of the iron plate was obviously coming from inside the rock.

But what about Xiao Hua? Where could he hide in this cramped place?

As I picked up his flashlight, I felt a sharp pain in my foot. I gritted my teeth and pointed the flashlight back where I came from, but couldn't see whether the thing was coming or not. As I listened to the irregular knocking sound, I asked myself, *is Xiao Hua inside this plate?*

The iron plate was very big, but there weren't any holes in it that I could see.

In order to verify, I took out my hammer and knocked on the iron plate while looking for a hole. To my surprise, as I struck it, the sound of the next knock changed immediately, as if it were responding to me.

"Fuck!" I was furious. *What kind of bullshit is this? How did you get down there?!* I immediately turned around to look for the hole, but the whole iron plate was perfectly fitted.

I took a deep breath as the sound of broken pottery came from the dark tunnel. It appeared that thing was coming. I limped around to try to find something to plug the entrance, but my search was fruitless. Worried, I could only continue to look for the hole on the iron plate while yelling, "Tell me how to open it!"

I had only yelled a few times before I suddenly found that the bottom of the plate where it was connected to the rock was moving, as if I could grab the edge and pull the shaft out.

I immediately knelt down to grab it, but the edge of the turning plate caught me on the shoulder and I was forced to quickly move forward and lift it up.

It was extremely heavy at first but loosened when I raised it a palm's width. I managed to lift the whole plate up and pull it out of the iron shaft below. The iron plate immediately stopped rotating. When I stopped to gasp for air,

I saw that the black iron axle was hollow, and there was an oval-shaped hole in it that led to the bottom, almost like a tube.

The knocking sound continued, and I could feel the vibrations passing along the axle to my shoulder. Xiao Hua was obviously down there, but I was unwilling to go down. I was about to yell a few more times but was suddenly surprised.

The voice I called out with was very quiet and not the volume I wanted to use at all.

I swallowed. I didn't know when my throat started to feel uncomfortable, but when I tried calling again, I found that the muscles in my throat couldn't exert themselves, and my voice was very strange. I couldn't yell or shout at all.

I bit my lip, thinking that this was a bad sign.

It didn't feel like my throat was blocked, just that my muscles and vocal cords were paralyzed. Although I could breathe just fine, I couldn't make any loud sounds.

I tried to hold my voice back and cried out hoarsely a few times before I realized that something was wrong. This wasn't all in my head... I was really speechless.

I didn't notice when this had started. It turned out that it wasn't Xiao Hua being difficult, but something wrong with the environment here. What could paralyze our vocal cords?

Was it because of the hair I just ran into? When I thought this, I really felt as if there was hair in my throat, and immediately felt nauseous. But it was obviously impossible because Xiao Hua didn't touch the hair and still seemed unable to speak. Maybe it was something in the air that was making me suffer this speechlessness.

No wonder he kept knocking, but what now? I didn't really need a lot of strength to hold this iron plate up since there was obviously a weight-bearing device under it. As long as I lifted it up a little bit, the weight-bearing device would start. But as soon as I let go, the iron plate may either get stuck or slowly press down, and Xiao Hua may be trapped because of an error in judgment.

Although I had a gut feeling, I couldn't take such risks when I was alone. I didn't understand why Xiao Hua would make such a mistake, but I didn't have enough time to think about it now. Even if I went into the hole immediately and the iron plate pressed down, I would probably be trapped like Xiao Hua. For now, I could only see what was going on below.

I heaved the iron plate up until it was almost to the top, then loosened my hold a little bit. Sure enough, the iron plate didn't fall down immediately, but "thumped" and then dropped down bit by bit, just as I had expected.

I rubbed my shoulder and looked back at the tunnel. When I saw nothing there, I immediately leaned over and shined the flashlight down the shaft hole.

I immediately saw the complex mechanism below, which consisted of many intersecting black iron chains that were still shaking. They were covered in many unspeakable lint-like things. Strangely enough, I found it difficult to get down from here, because the space between the parts was very cramped. I didn't know if Xiao Hua could pass through them even with his size and bone contraction skill, but I didn't see him.

I stood up and pushed the iron plate to the top again. I couldn't make any sound by this time, so I had to put my hand into the shaft to knock.

The iron wall inside was illuminated, but Xiao Hua still didn't appear. The knocking sound didn't change either. I was so angry but I couldn't even scold him as I thought to myself, *he's not only dumb but deaf and blind too!*

In the end, I steeled my heart and pulled out a pack of bamboo slips. Regardless of whether they were valuable or not, I threw them straight

down. This seemed to work. The knocking stopped almost immediately and I used my flashlight to shine down, hoping to catch even a glimpse of Xiao Hua.

Sure enough, a silhouette appeared among the shadow of those chains and parts. At the same time, I heard a muffled sound. It wasn't the sound of someone calling out, but the sound of very heavy stones rubbing against each other.

I suddenly had a bad premonition and felt like something was wrong. I was certain that the shadow in the shaft definitely wasn't Xiao Hua.

At that moment, the metal knocking sound rang out again, but it didn't come from under the iron plate this time. Instead, it was coming from the other side of the tunnel.

Feeling puzzled, I turned to listen and immediately saw that the clump of hair had appeared in my flashlight's beam of light. The strange knocking sound was coming from it.

If I encountered something horrible now, I was confident that I could handle it calmly. But when I encountered something that couldn't be explained, I really didn't know how to face it.

What was going on here? The sound just came from below. I couldn't have heard wrong. But how did it change places so quickly?

I looked at the clump of hair, unsure of how the sound came out. I couldn't handle both it and the other thing in the shaft, so I let the iron plate go. As it slowly fell and started rotating again, I raised my hammer, wiped my cold sweat, and got ready for a big fight.

Without Poker-face and Fatty around, I didn't have much confidence in myself. Plus, my feet were injured. All I could think about was my own ending. If I died this time, Fatty and Poker-face would surely sigh with emotion at my grave and say "This guy can't do without us." It was at this moment that I really regretted separating from them so easily.

But based on this clump of hair's walking speed, I wasn't totally without a chance.

The abrasive knocking sound actually wasn't the same as the one below, probably because the knocking was different and slightly less harsh. As I watched the thing move slowly and almost imperceptibly closer, a fire simmered in my heart and I wondered whether I should take the initiative to attack.

But as soon as I calmed down, I found that there was something wrong with the sound. After listening carefully, I was stunned to hear something miraculous.

The metal knocking over there turned out to be the rhythmic drumbeat of Flower Drum Opera!

Chapter 42 Flower Drum Opera

I had heard a lot of Flower Drum Opera in Changsha, so I was completely blindsided. After listening for several minutes, I became even more certain that it was really Flower Drum Opera.

I immediately understood. *Fuck, don't tell me this is Xiao Hua? Is Xiao Hua trapped in this mass of hair?*

If there was a monster here who could only sing Flower Drum Opera, then I might as well kill myself. But then, what was that thing that was knocking under the iron plate? How did Xiao Hua become like this? Was he messing around, or were these hairs growing out from him or something?

I looked between the iron plate and the mass of hair and decided to leave it alone and wait calmly. The hair seemed to have noticed and finally stopped knocking.

As soon as it quieted down, the cold and cheerless feeling of the cave seeped into my bones. It felt a bit like that moment when you walk out of a club at the height of the party. I immediately felt a little ridiculous, but I clenched my teeth and waited until the hair slowly walked to the opening of the stone chamber.

The large clump of hair stuck in the mouth of the cave gave me goosebumps, and I had to swallow down my panic. I then saw a rod sticking out of the hair wave in front of me and point to the side.

I recognized that it was the one Xiao Hua had used to reach the alcoves as he walked along the wall. I followed the direction the stick was pointing in and saw a depression on one side of the rock wall.

The depression was very large, and I noticed that there were several others about the same size beside it. As I walked past, I saw a strange mass lying inside that looked like it was made of iron. I glanced at the clump of hair and saw him wave the stick in a signal for me to hurry up.

I dug the iron out of the hollow and found that it was extremely heavy. I shook it out and discovered it was an iron garment.

All the parts were connected with iron plates like fish scales, and there was a layer of dried oil on it that could be torn off like molting athlete's foot. I ripped the layer off and found that the contents were actually well preserved.

I looked back at the clump of hair again and he waved his stick again, as if telling me to put it on.

Well, I said to myself, this just went from a horror to a comedy.

It took me a lot of time to study the iron coat, but fortunately, it wasn't particularly complicated and didn't take a lot of effort to put on. The degree of corrosion inside was much worse than the outside, leaving me with a rusty face and smelling a very strange odor. Moreover, it turned out to be totally enclosed and there weren't even any eye holes.

I was in complete darkness and didn't know what to do when I felt a pole poking at me from outside the iron coat. I held my hand up, firmly gripped it, and let him start leading me out, just like a blind man being led in one direction by a stick. We soon walked back into the tunnel and onto the hair.

The iron coat was unexpectedly heavy and I couldn't even stand up using all my strength. I understood that the slow speed was actually a necessity. Fortunately, the weight represented the thickness of the iron coat. The Chinese really did like this kind of solid feeling.

After entering the passageway and walking on the hair, the soles of my feet felt very uncomfortable. But I was wearing solid iron boots, so I had extra confidence as I placed my feet down.

We stopped and walked repeatedly, the rhythm always controlled by the stick in front of me. It took us more than half an hour before the feeling of walking on hair disappeared and we stepped on stone again. Then, I felt the

rubble start to appear and we arrived back at the entrance of the hole we had made.

The stick still wasn't satisfied, however, and continued to lead me forward until I crawled out and heard the birds outside. It was only then that I realized that I had reached the entrance of the hole in the cliff wall.

There was a subtle change in the taste of the air, the rocks, the forest, and the mist. When the stick stopped moving forward, I took a deep breath and wondered if I could take off my iron clothes now. At this moment, I heard a very ugly voice say: "Are you stupid or just thoughtless, causing me to walk back and forth so much?"

He sounded like a man who smoked a cigar a day. I moistened my throat and found that I could speak too, but maybe I had a lung capacity problem or something because even I couldn't understand what I replied with.

After listening, he said, "Take off your helmet."

I leaned against the cave wall and used all my strength to take off my helmet, feeling liberated.

It turned out that we were at the entrance of the cave, and the night sky outside was lit up by the bright moon. A cold silver light was sprinkled on the cliff and the trees outside. The Chengdu guys hadn't come up yet, but I could see a rope shaking tautly on one side, so they were obviously working hard.

The clump of hair was lying on the ground opposite me, looking like a wax gourd covered in mildew. It was honestly a little funny. I cleared my throat and spit before I could finally speak clearly, "What's the matter with you? How did you become like this so suddenly?"

He said, "Don't ask yet, help me get these hairs off and burn them with a torch."

When I had first come up the cliff, I had a specialized small torch for mountain climbing that could be used for warmth and to send signals. But it

was really just a large lighter. I took it out and shook it, then lit it and moved toward him.

I didn't know whether it was because of the high temperature or something else, but the hair shrank back as soon as the lighter got close to it, and then curled up with a "cheep" sound and turned to ashes. It only took me a few minutes to burn all the hair off his chest, and then I moved to the other spots.

I didn't know if it was my bad sense of humor, but I thought it was very funny after burning it a few times. So much hair burning so pleasantly... it was no wonder Uncle Three said before that human beings had the tendency to play with fire, especially after seeing that it could burn filth. Even dirty things could be burned to charcoal and ashes.

After burning him to the point he was like a hairless chicken, I finally got it done. He took off his helmet and I saw that his head was completely covered in sweat. He then pulled off his own iron garment, looking like he was emerging from a cocoon. I smelled the strong scent of blood and saw that the inside of his iron coat was covered in red.

"It really wasn't easy. In order to bring you back, I walked back and forth with this bloody thing." His voice gradually recovered. "Big brother, could you be smarter in the future?"

I said to myself, *I was trying to save your life, you can't put the blame on me.*

When he pulled out some bandages from his bag and took off his clothes, I saw a frightening wound on his ribs.

"What the hell's going on?" I asked. "How did you get hurt like this? You weren't in there that long."

Xiao Hua clenched his teeth as he cleaned the wound with water from his canteen. "There's something tricky under that iron plate," he said.

It was clear to see that Xiao Hua's physical strength was extremely overdrawn. His face was pale, he looked thin, and the wound was even more ferocious.

I helped him stop the bleeding with a Yunnan Baiyao powder mixed with other things, and he told me what had happened while enduring the pain.

The process was more dramatic than I originally thought, and I felt a little silly after hearing it. After he saw the iron plate, he immediately found something under it and tried to lift it. At that time, the metal knocking sound started up from underneath. The irregular sound made him feel very strange, as if a living creature was underneath.

At that moment, I started shouting at him and he found that his throat was very uncomfortable. At the same time, he also thought that I was being kind of annoying (he actually said it directly) so he ignored me and wanted to explore below to see what was going on. He supported the iron plate with the rod, hooked his foot to the hole, and twisted his body like a snake, only to find that the tunnel below was too complicated to navigate because of all the iron chains and gears.

There appeared to be water flowing in the stone that was making these gears rotate, but he couldn't see where the main shaft was rotating from at this time.

The metal tapping sound was deafening down in the shaft. When he lit a small light to illuminate the surroundings, the sound suddenly stopped. Then, he felt a strong gust of wind before a sharp pain suddenly flared up in his ribs. He immediately rolled over, climbed out of the hole, and found that he had been hurt badly.

It was only at that moment that he realized he couldn't speak. In such an urgent situation, he wanted to use the same method to come back, but when he walked into the passage, he found that the hair near him had all stood up, as if attracted by the scent of his blood.

He was unable to speak or come out, and his wound was bleeding profusely, so he had to go back to find something to use to signal to me. He didn't expect to find those iron clothes, but he put them on and started walking back. He had only made it halfway before the hair was all coiled around him. Fortunately, the iron clothes were very strong.

He couldn't see me because there weren't any eye holes, but he felt my presence. He wanted to touch me and ended up scaring me half to death. What made him even more frustrated was that when he was on the brink of exhaustion, he heard me rush into the iron plate room.

He knew I would probably make the same mistake as him, so he had to come back. As a result, he was physically exhausted and wasted so much blood.

"There may be something wrong with the air in there, something that can paralyze our vocal cords." He said. "I'm going to tell the people below to send up some gas masks. If my vocal cords get messed up, I won't be able to sing opera and many girls will be sad."

I felt very upset after listening to his story. I really didn't think it was my fault, after all. If I had to say I made an error in judgment, it was that I didn't trust his abilities enough. If it was Poker-face, I honestly would have stayed put.

Speaking of which, this person's character was really a bit similar to mine. He didn't talk much and I didn't know what he was thinking.

"So, what's down there? If it's so powerful, is it just a zombie?" I asked.

"Definitely not. There shouldn't be any zombies in this place." He said. "But it's not surprising that there are some dangerous things in such a strange place, so we'll have to be more careful next time."

I nodded. I thought about what he had said just now and found it a little strange. He said that the hair had reacted to his blood, but why didn't the hair react to the bloody cuts on my hands and feet?

Was it because I was manlier, so it wasn't good enough?

After thinking about it, I looked down at my own wounds and shivered. There were still a few scattered hairs on my hands.

I immediately went to wipe them off but found that they were stuck and couldn't be removed. And when I tried to pull them out, I suddenly felt a sharp pain. I took a closer look and found that the hair was actually growing out of my wounds.

When I tugged the strands, the wound opened up a little bit, and I saw that the flesh and hair inside were all tangled together. I almost passed out, but pulled myself together and immediately took off my socks to check my feet. The places that had been cut by the broken pieces of porcelain were full of black burrs.

Chapter 43 Burrs

I didn't know whether these hairs were simply stuck to my wound or really growing from inside, but I was very uncomfortable either way. I had a strong, uncontrollable urge to pull the hairs out, but as long as I did that, the whole wound would hurt. The pain went very deep, so the hair had obviously reached far into the wounds.

This situation probably stemmed from the aftermath of my fall, when the broken jars had cut me and brought the hairs into the wounds. I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the hair out, but it wouldn't budge even after the flesh inside had come out. Moreover, I found that the deep part of the wound immediately started itching, as if the hair was burrowing in further.

Xiao Hua was also creeped out when he saw my wounds. I thought about what he said about the hair sensing his blood and creeping up on him, and realized that it was very likely that the hair was actually alive. If it was really growing in my wounds... I imagined it crawling all over my body, along my veins and nerves, and immediately wanted to chop my hands off.

If I died and someone opened my cranial cavity and discovered that my brain was full of hair... such a strange scene could only be made into a horror movie.

Xiao Hua calmed me down, pulled out his dagger, and used a small torch to sterilize it before telling me to lie down. He sat on my shoulder, stepped on my wrist, and then asked me, "What do you think of Xiuxiu?"

It was a weird question that would even stump others, but I immediately knew he was trying to distract me. Instead of waiting for an answer, he immediately focused on my palm and I felt a sharp pain come from that area. As the hot dagger pierced my wound, I focused all my attention on not passing out.

Xiao Hua moved very fast, and I was sure that he would be unaffected no matter how bad the inside of my wound was. The sharp pain lasted little more than thirty seconds before he finally let go of my hand.

Blood flowed from my wound, but the hair was gone. Xiao Hua showed me the tip of his dagger, where a small pottery chip the size of a fingernail lay. Something that looked similar to flesh was stuck on it, and I could see that the hair, pottery chip, and flesh were practically intertwined.

In the light of the fire, it was obvious to see that the hair was growing from the pottery chip and actually passed through the muscle tissue.

“It must have grown from this piece of pottery, but it seems to have stopped growing.” He said.

“Stopped? How do you know?”

“See for yourself.” He showed me the pottery piece. “Although the muscles are wrapped in hair, all the hair filaments have grown out of your body, not in.”

I looked at it, and sure enough, it was just like a hair transplant where the part that was inserted into the scalp had no root and was just a fixed point. But since the hair had obviously passed through my muscles, it must have grown after the pottery was embedded in my wound.

“Is it poisonous or not? You’d better help me get it all out first.”

He remained silent but had a strange look on his face as he stretched the pottery piece out to the inner part of his bloodstained iron garment and put it down. Not long after that, the hair suddenly twisted slightly and slowly started probing in the direction that had the most blood. When it reached it, it began to curl up.

I thought to myself, *what kind of hair is this? It’s basically just a thread-like leech.*

He looked between it and my wounds, completely baffled.

“This thing is very sensitive to blood. If I didn’t have this iron garment on just now, my wound would be full of hair. But if these hairs are so bloodthirsty, then they should have started growing along your veins and burrowing further in after entering your wounds. But it’s obvious to see that the hair in your wound is growing outwards like it wants to escape from your body.”

“Escape?” I was surprised.

He took my hand, pulled it over the iron garment, and then squeezed my wound, letting a few drops of blood drip down onto the hair. We immediately saw it twist away and quickly retreat.

I looked at it and felt a little confused. *What the hell is going on?*

“Now I know why Granny Huo wanted me to bring you with me.” He said.

Xiao Hua’s expression was full of emotion and I wondered what that meant.

He said, “Your name didn’t come up randomly. Your blood is very special.”

“Very special?” I remembered what Old Master Liang said at the bronze tree and asked, “Do you mean I consumed Qilin blood?”

“I don’t exactly know, but Qilin blood is only one possibility. It’s still a mystery how this blood is produced.” He said. “I didn’t expect you to have this kind of constitution. Were you born with it, or did you get it later?”

My heart said it should be later, but I never noticed a problem with my blood before I went to the Seven Star Lu Palace. I always had a normal physical exam at school, but I also didn’t encounter these things when I was a student.

He heated the dagger again and continued to treat my other wounds for me while saying: “Granny Huo must certainly know. It seems she’s got it all figured out. But why didn’t she tell me?”

I also mentioned this detail in my narrative to her at that time, but I didn't know if the old woman had really arranged for me and Xiao Hua to come here because of it. I wasn't entirely sure of it myself, since my blood wasn't as good as Duan Yu's Six Meridian Divine sword, and I couldn't even really rely on it.

"What exactly is Qilin blood?" I asked him as I thought of Poker-face's blood. As soon as I asked, the dagger jabbed into my foot and I almost flinched back in pain.

After a while, he picked out a piece of something to show me and said, "I don't know. I've just heard a lot of legends about it. It's said that some people have studied how this blood came about, and everyone is different. My father said that one possibility may be through osmosis. People who take traditional Chinese medicine for many years will have a faint smell of it all over their bodies. Similarly, people who smoke for many years find it hard to remove the smell of smoke. If you bathe with insecticide every day, you can achieve the same effect."

I couldn't help but think that it was basically fumigation, but the method he was talking about was similar to incense. Ancient people also used this to treat body odor, and it had been said that Yang Guifei used to bathe in traditional Chinese medicine every day to treat her body odor. In the Qing Dynasty, there was a concubine named Xiang Fei, who was said to have an extraordinary fragrance because she had been brought up in flower petals and other spices since she was a child. But Poker-face and I didn't have any peculiar smell, and I didn't believe that a small amount of Qilin blood would have such great efficacy.

"I've also heard of another possibility. Do you know what the druggists say?"

I shook my head. I sold antiques, so I wasn't familiar with medicine or anything like it.

He washed my wounds with water from his canteen, wrung out the blood and sweat from his undershirt, and then covered my wound before saying,

“In ancient times, some alchemists used to keep medicine people or herbalists— most of them were crazy or slaves—and used to experiment on them with pills. Because many elixirs had strong toxicity, alchemists would feed them small doses of poison every day in order to build up their body’s resistance. These people took a variety of drugs, so their physique was very abnormal. And it was especially true for their blood, which was very different from ordinary people’s.”

“My father isn’t that messed up.” I retorted. “I grew up eating rice. Don’t try to tell me he used arsenic for cooking and mercury for soy sauce.”

Just as I said this, I felt another sharp pain in my foot and almost flinched back.

“Anyway, this is very good news for me. I believe Granny arranged it on purpose. If you and the black-faced god both have this kind of blood, then it’s very reasonable that the two of you should be used separately. Their army is using the big guns, and I get to use the small one here. And you obviously have a good mind, which makes up for your lack of physical strength.” He pressed my foot.

“Your physical strength doesn’t look that fucking good to me, either. The most I can say is that you can climb and jump.” I said angrily.

“Ever since Chinese tombs entered the era of a complete burial system, the first order of business in grave robbing was to have a nimble and flexible body. It’s not that common to encounter terrible scenes like what happened today.” At this moment, he looked back at me with a strange expression.

“What’s the matter?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “I wasn’t careful and accidentally nicked your vein.”

Chapter 44 Parasite

His expression was full of innocence and even a little bit of sick pleasure. I was so shocked that I didn't react for a while, and it took me a full second before I thought to pull my leg back and see what he had done.

At first glance, I only saw my wound. There was blood, but the amount didn't seem to match what I would expect from a nicked vein. I moved my ankle a little bit, but there was no discomfort except for the pain from the wound itself.

When I looked at him doubtfully, I found that he was staring back at me quietly. I didn't know what the situation was, and I couldn't figure out which vein he had nicked.

I continued looking at him helplessly and saw him slowly reveal a mischievous smile. Just as I was feeling even more confused, he suddenly said, "I'm joking."

"Joking?"

He laughed and patted me on the shoulder before handing over the water so I could wash the wound myself. "Your life must be very boring."

I slowly started to understand what he meant. I wasn't angry. In fact, I actually thought it was pretty funny myself and thought, *what qualifications do you have to teach me? It doesn't look like you've lived a happy life either.*

But this did make me feel better about him. Although I didn't think there was a problem with him at first, our two backgrounds were so similar that I could understand what kind of person he was most likely to be (or forced to be) under that kind of life experience. I was sure that even I would have such a character if I had to go through that.

This was the only similarity I had found out of all the people I had met up to now in the grave robbing business. Fatty, Poker-face, Pan Zi, Uncle Three,

and all the others did things in an extremely utilitarian (not totally utilitarian) manner, but they didn't have the artist's mind of "doing something that has nothing to do with real life, which nobody can understand."

Xiao Hua's joke was a little illogical and completely meaningless, which was why I couldn't react at first. Grave robbers usually always said something practical, not something like this, so his joke made me realize that he was different.

Maybe it was because he was an opera singer.

I was reminded of a funny story I had heard before about the Mystic Nine's Er Ye. The extremely heroic and childlike Er Ye was probably the most lovable person in the Mystic Nine.

After treating the wound, I put countless band-aids on it, which made my whole foot look like a post-modern art piece. As I was putting my socks back on, I saw him staring into the depths of the hole. He motioned me over to take a look and I found that the hair had started to spread to the mouth of the cave, apparently attracted by Xiao Hua's blood.

I asked him what he wanted to do next since I was afraid he couldn't move. If I had known what we were going to do here, I would have taken the lead and sent him to the cliff first.

"We won't go in for the time being." Xiao Hua said as he rubbed his wound. "Granny and the others should have some news soon. There's no need for us to go in now, so we'll just wait for the news to come."

There was no way to tell the age, workmanship, or function of the iron plate at the end of the cave, let alone the "problematic thing" Xiao Hua had mentioned. But the situation inside the cave was already clear at a glance, so there was really no need to go in again.

I thought of what the old woman had said about the two teams needing to cooperate with each other. I didn't know what kind of cooperation method she had planned, but I kept feeling a vague uneasiness in my heart.

It took his Sichuan guy another two hours to get up. He hardly looked human by the time he reached us, and he was completely shocked to see the ground covered in blood. Once we explained the situation, he helped hoist Xiao Hua back to the top of the cliff. After that, he went down again to prepare more medicine and food.

In the next few days, I felt like a bird man. There was only an inch-wide bit of space separating the nest on the cliff from the surrounding abyss. We could hardly make any movements, and once we did, it was the strongest physical exercise in the world.

Xiao Hua's concentration was very good. He either played games on his phone or just looked at the snowy mountains in the distance. Watching the fairy-like scenery at the top of the cliff while playing Tetris gave me a very distorted and surreal sense of beauty.

But I didn't lose to him either. I leaned against the cliff as the strong winds blew and enjoyed the scenic view. As the top of the lush green canopies below moved like green waves, we sat there in a daze. Xiao Hua talked about the past, and I couldn't help but think that we were like the two fools in "Waiting for Godot".³⁴ The only troublesome thing was going to the toilet. It completely destroyed all the aesthetic feelings and was always a life-threatening experience.

During this period, the Sichuan guy at the foot of the cliff would go to the nearby village once a day and see if anyone had called with some news. There was nothing the first few days, but on the third day, a huge envelope was hoisted up the cliff.

³⁴ It's a play by Samuel Beckett in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, engage in a variety of discussions and encounters while awaiting Godot, who never arrives. More info [here](#)

We opened it and found that it was full of papers and photos. The first one was a picture of Fatty, Yun Cai, and Poker-face. Fatty was wearing shorts and making a Huang Jinrong³⁵ pose by the familiar stream, while Poker-face sat on a stone to one side. Yun Cai and Fatty were posing together and it looked like Yun Cai was wearing an ELAND women's dress that Fatty had bought her. Her purity was also a little sexy, which was very consistent with Fatty's perverted tastes.

Fatty wrote one word on the back of the photo: Jealous?

I cursed, looked at Xiao Hua wearing his bloody bandages, and thought, *fuck, I joined the wrong team.*

Many of the remaining photos were taken when they entered the mountain, and it looked like Agui was still in charge of showing them the way. When I saw the old woman sitting on the mule like it was an imperial chariot, I thought she looked remarkably like Empress Dowager Cixi. I couldn't help thinking of Chen Pi Ah Si and wondered if he was miserable in his old age. If these people hadn't become so entangled in this whole thing, their quality of life in their later years would have definitely been higher than that of the rich.

I turned to the next picture and saw them arriving at the gap in the rock where I had pulled them out before. It was at the foot of the mountain and full of shrubs, so they were lucky to find it. All their equipment was piled up near the hole, and Poker-face was dressed in cave-exploring clothes, seemingly prepared to enter.

After that, there were only pictures of the inside of the cave, and if people were in the shots, it was purely accidental.

Xiao Hua seemed impatient and quickly flipped through the photos until he came to one marked with a red pen.

³⁵ It's a female model, whose info can be found [here](#)

When he took it out, we saw that it was a stone tunnel like the one I had climbed out of before. The color of the wall under the flashlight was very bleak, but we could see that Poker-face was in front. It looked like he was trying to get out of the way so the people behind him could take pictures of what he was blocking. It turned out to be a stone slab with a circular pattern similar to an astrolabe³⁶ embossed on it.

The picture was very clear, and I immediately found that it was the pattern we had seen on the iron plate at the end of the hair-covered hole. There were a lot of small patterns carved around the iron plate, and the remaining photos were all close-ups of them.

Xiao Hua looked at them and sighed, obviously unsure of what they meant. I asked him to turn the photo over so we could look at the back, and sure enough, someone had written a few lines.

When I saw the photo, I immediately understood that Poker-face's actions were related to ours, and their destination was actually related to ours too.

The words written on the back of the photo confirmed my theory but didn't give us any more clues.

[Walk seven hundred meters from the entrance and you'll encounter the first obstacle. The key to solving it should be with you. I don't know your situation, but please try your best to analyze it.]

So very clear.

From this, we could infer that after re-entering the mountain crack I had come out of before in Banai, they may have discovered the path to the ancient building Granny Huo had identified using the Yangshi Lei. But there may have been an obstacle, which was what they had photographed.

³⁶ An ancient astronomical device that equates to a handheld model of the universe.

I couldn't tell whether it was a door, a stone wall, or even a stone slab. But I had no doubts that the pattern on this plate matched the pattern on our iron plate. There had to be a connection between the two.

If, as the old woman had said, the other floors of Zhang Jialou were inside the mountains, then the people who built this hidden ancient building, the Yangshi Lei who rebuilt it, and the master who installed the iron plate on the cliff thousands of miles away would surely have countless connections. Moreover, the story surrounding it may be unimaginably complicated.

We clipped the key photos on the steel bars of our "nest" and observed them carefully one by one.

I was almost certain that the relief on the rock wall was the iron plate, and the circular relief was the iron plate itself.

The patterns carved around the iron plate were worth examining more closely. Based on the carving method, the relief sculpture on the whole cliff wasn't a high-quality product. In other words, it had little artistic value and many lines weren't even finished. This relief sculpture was definitely just a blank without any careful polishing.

In terms of style, it had very clear characteristics of the Qing Dynasty, which should be closely related to Yangshi Lei. But if it was a design presided over by Yangshi Lei, then it was a bit perfunctory and the design was definitely more functional than decorative. It seemed that the rock wall blocking the path wasn't so simple.

We arranged the photos in order, starting at the twelve o'clock position.

The relief from the first photo was a strange animal.

I could basically recall most of the animals depicted in Chinese traditional reliefs, such as the pixiu³⁷, lynx, and so on, but this animal here was very

³⁷ Winged lion

rare. Although it was still abstract, I recognized it immediately— it was a “Hou.”³⁸

There were two different things that came to mind when I heard the word “Hou.” One was the grandfather of Qilin, while the other was a kind of “drought demon” that was a very special zombie. Qilin were regarded as a mythical beast in ancient times but were generally believed to be ranked second compared to dragons. “Hou” on the other hand, were the ancestors of Qilin and took dragons as food, so they stood at the top of the food chain.

The “Hou” in the relief sculpture was bound by a strange thing and connected to the relief sculpture on the iron plate below.

The relief sculpture in the second photo and the Hou in the first photo seemed to be linked together. The whole design was a single piece, but I could see that it was necessary for decoration. There were a few people depicted as well, but they didn’t have right hands.

There were a total of nine people missing their right hands, and the photographer provided both a distant and close-up view of them. They were all stripped to the waist and their lower bodies were made of tile pants. They appeared to be running away, but not in a panic.

I was very familiar with this kind of thing and couldn’t help showing off whenever I saw good things. I pointed to the people, “There’s no carving, and no trace of repeated corner trimming. These people were basically carved in one stroke. Even so, the dynamic shape of the characters is strewn at random in front of and behind the wall, meaning a top craftsman was wielding his knives. Although he didn’t take it seriously, his skills over the years allowed him to carve out the verve he wanted with any number of knives.”

³⁸ Also called a denglong, looks like a lion with 2 long ears and can roar very loudly. It’s said to be the son of the Dragon King.

Xiao Hua wasn't paying attention, but still asked, "Why didn't he take it seriously?"

"The ancient craftsmen are divided into two types," I replied. "One is skillful and proficient in various engineering techniques, which is called palm case. But these people usually only do delicate work and wouldn't do the rough work of polishing stones. The other is what we call a pure manual craftsman. These people had special skills, but they worked all day long and depended on physical strength and craftsmanship to eat. These people were artisans, not artists, so they weren't very strict with themselves. Those who could be lazy would definitely take advantage."

I had just determined that the relief sculpture on this rock wall was functional, so based on this, there was only one way to motivate the craftsman to go all out— he had a very difficult employer.

Xiao Hua nodded and motioned for me to continue.

The next photo had been placed at the six o'clock position, so the carving was a bit difficult to understand. It was still a group of people, but it obviously wasn't the same group that was escaping just now. They had all their hands and were obviously depicted with different clothing. I could tell at a glance that they definitely weren't of the Han nationality.

This group of people was quite large, they all had long blades in their hands, and they wore strange crowns on their heads. The craftsman used overlapping compositions here, so it was impossible to count how many people there were. Based on their postures, they seemed to be lying in wait.

I found it hard to understand. Generally, all the pictures in an overall composition were individually created to express a singular meaning, but the relief here had three pictures very naturally connected together. It was hard to say whether there were two meanings.

With things like this, the last relief was very important, so I immediately went to look at the last photo.

The relief in this one surprised me. It wasn't that the sculpture was very strange, but that there wasn't a sculpture at all. There were only three deep holes arranged in a plum blossom shape.

The four main designs were all seamlessly connected by a large number of decorative lines, with an iron plate relief in the middle. It almost looked like an odd clock.

When he saw this, Xiao Hua raised his eyebrows at me. I didn't know what he was thinking or what he wanted to say, but all he asked was, "What do you think?"

I snorted. I still couldn't let it go. Were these patterns interrelated or independent of each other? If they were related, then I did have a small idea.

Chapter 45 Tips from Guangxi

If the reliefs carved around the iron plate were expressed in a straight line, then the left side of this large relief was a “Hou”, the middle had several people who were fleeing, and the right was a group of ethnic minorities wearing strange clothes. There were three holes at the bottom of the carving.

What interested me the most was the orientation of what was going on inside the picture. Based on the content, the Hou was still in pursuit even though it was locked on the iron plate.

The people in the middle didn’t have any right hands and were facing away from the animal, but the group of ethnic minorities facing the fleeing people had to be an important detail. In other words, the ethnic militia and Hou had formed a front-to-back battle array against the people in the middle.

This could be interpreted any number of ways. My first instinct was that this was a fight between two parties: one animal and a group of people who were killing the people with missing right hands.

Based on the drawings, this seemed like the most reasonable interpretation, but what was the significance of such a thing? I really couldn’t figure it out.

I was almost certain that such a specific relief sculpture was definitely conveying something and couldn’t be pure decoration. Decorations were generally dragon and phoenix patterns that could be reproduced indefinitely and would easily give people a sense of unity.

But if this interpretation wasn’t logical, then there were still some things to consider. For example, was this an ambush?

Ethnic swordsmen were lying in wait in front, while the men without right hands were responsible for being the bait. But if the other party was a Hou—I didn’t believe this kind of creature really existed—then these swordsmen would all be burnt to ash if they couldn’t kill it in a second.

Relief sculptures were generally exaggerated. It was possible they couldn't explain what they encountered at that time, so they applied a mythical image to it.

But speculating like this wouldn't get any results, so I took a closer look at the details on all the reliefs. They were very clear thanks to the professional SLR camera, but a closer look only led to more disappointment. The relief sculpture had no details at all.

If we assumed that they weren't continuous and each relief had its own meaning, then it was even more difficult to analyze.

I could only look at it and shake my head, unable to make anything of it. Xiao Hua leaned back and said, "This is a bit like a thousand-mile lock. It seems we may have to go back to the iron plate before we can get some answers."

I silently nodded. I had heard that a thousand-mile lock was a ruse and not a real lock, but it was still a very effective preventive measure. In order to multiply the operating cost of a thing, it was best to separate all the factors that made it successful. For example, the door was in the South Pole and the key was in the North Pole. In Norse mythology, slain demons were often cut into numerous pieces and scattered across the world. In this way, conspiracy theorists would have to travel for centuries to revive the fiend.

But since there was an opening mechanism, this ancient Zhang Jialou couldn't be a tomb. I figured it was more likely to be related to a system of mass graves, where every few generations, the Zhang family's dead would be moved into the ancient building in accordance with their ancestral teachings.

The only problem was that I didn't know how this matter was related to Yangshi Lei. The surname Lei and the royal surname Aisin Gioro were clearly written on the Yangshi Lei drawing, but there was no reason to pay for this mysterious "Zhang Jialou" to be built.

Poker-face was facing a clever mechanism that sealed the stone, and the trick to opening it should be in these four figures. It was possible the iron

plate here was the decoding plate to uncover the information contained in these four figures, but we really wouldn't know how until we looked at the edge of the iron plate.

After several days of recuperating, our physical strength finally recovered. Xiao Hua's wound had stopped bleeding long ago, and there weren't any big risks to going back, so we started making preparations. Considering that the tunnel was a huge problem and we couldn't shuttle back and forth frequently, we prepared a week's worth of food and water. We were also afraid that the air circulation in the tunnel would be too slow, so we set up an exhaust fan at the entrance of the tunnel using a threshing machine our Chengdu friends borrowed from the village. We also bought a large bundle of electric wires to connect to the tractor battery under the cliff.

To be honest, I wanted to get a few barrels of gasoline and burn the whole tunnel to the end, but it was easy to burn through oxygen in a narrow cave, and the lack of air would make it difficult to burn. I learned these kinds of things when I studied architecture before. Plus, if we used a blower, it would turn the tunnel into a high-temperature kiln. This wasn't a particularly stable rock structure, so it was possible we'd end up burning it down.

Xiao Hua was unable to perform his unique skill of climbing the wall, so we climbed back to the entrance of the cave and looked at the iron clothes. We found that Xiao Hua's iron clothes already had black hair on the wrists, and the bloodstains were all covered in hair as well. This stuff was a fucking fungus.

I shook out the one I planned on wearing and found that it was fine. The place that had been stained with Xiao Hua's blood had been infested, but none of the other places were.

Xiao Hua said that I had nothing to fear with my blood, and I should be fine even if I walked in as I was. He would wear the iron clothes and I could ride on his back.

But the iron garment was extremely heavy, and it was absolutely impossible for him to carry me on his back. In addition, the height of the cave was so low that no one could stand up straight, let alone carry someone. To sum it up, Xiao Hua came up with a plan: I would put on a gas mask, then the iron suit, and go in first. While walking, I would nail a piton on the roof of the cave and hang a sliding rope. In this way, once someone pulled the rope, whatever was hanging on it would slide forward. He was very light, so it would be easy to hoist him over like this.

When I heard this, I knew there was no other way to go about it, so I got to work. The pitons from below were brought up, and Xiao Hua dressed me in the iron clothes. He seemed to find the whole thing amusing and patted me several times, which made my iron clothes bang. With his encouragement, I walked into the cave feeling as if he was as unreliable as Fatty.

I used a rock hammer to nail a piton into a crack in the rock wall at the top of the cave. I had studied structural engineering and knew the way the triangle would be stressed, so I planned to nail three or four in one place. That way, even wrestlers wouldn't have a problem.

It took me about three hours to finish everything. My hands were numb by that time, but thankfully no crisis occurred. At the end of the tunnel, the iron plate was still spinning, and there was even a slight metal tapping sound coming from the bottom of it. It wasn't as sharp as a hard knock, but more like something was hanging there, getting blown by the wind and hitting the iron door.

When I took off my iron clothes, I found that I was completely drenched in sweat, like I had taken a bath. I pulled Xiao Hua in, set up a lighted miner's lamp, piled a bunch of firewood at the entrance of the cave, and poured gasoline on it to prevent the hair from attacking. We put the food and liquor we had brought in on the iron plate, and immediately began to compare the plate with the photos.

We didn't lose our voices this time since we were wearing gas masks, but the things were very heavy and uncomfortable to wear after a while. Xiao Hua suggested that we make a quick decision.

The stone wall carving depicted in the photo actually did match the iron plate, and all the patterns were exactly the same. But there weren't three holes carved on the stone wall around the iron plate like there were in the photo.

The iron plate continued slowly rotating clockwise. Xiao Hua knew that there were many similarities between architecture and machinery and asked me, "What should we do?"

I told myself that a general mechanic had to first find out how it worked, so I asked him to help me. The first thing I did was to push the iron plate clockwise to see if I could speed up its operation. When I did that, I found that it rotated faster. It became obvious that the mechanism wouldn't be activated when it was pushed clockwise, so I started pushing counterclockwise. That was when I found that something was wrong.

At first glance, I felt that the iron plate had a very strong resistance. But even though the resistance was extremely strong, it wasn't immovable. If anything, it felt as if it were tightly wound up. I pushed with almost all of my strength and managed to push the iron plate backward. At this time, a series of dull clinking sounds like iron chains moving came up from under the iron plate.

Unfortunately, I was only able to push it about fifty degrees before I immediately lost my strength. No matter how strong Xiao Hua and I were, the iron plate couldn't be moved past this point.

I knew it wasn't because we were stuck on something, but because we weren't strong enough. I took a deep breath, let out a loud roar, and held my breath as I pushed forward, but all this did was make me look ridiculous in the gas mask. I eventually slipped and lost my balance. Xiao Hua wasn't strong enough by himself, so the iron plate immediately turned clockwise.

“We need a cow.” Xiao Hua gasped out as he leaned against the cave wall.

I had almost twisted my ankle and it hurt like hell. I couldn’t help wishing that Fatty were here so I wouldn’t be made to do this kind of physical labor.

But we didn’t ask the people below to come up and help. The feeling just now didn’t mean that our strength wasn’t enough, just that this iron plate had no pivot point. It was bare, and the pattern on it had been polished so smoothly that we couldn’t get a good grip on it at all. If there was a lever, then maybe the situation would be different.

I took out those long poles to see if there was any place to insert them.

But after searching for half a day, I found that there wasn’t a single place on the whole iron plate to insert them. Although it was full of patterns, the patterns were very fine and couldn’t hold the poles in place.

It reminded me of the time I tried to open a water bottle, but couldn’t because my hands were too oily.

The simplest way was to increase the friction on your hands and twist it open with towels. We didn’t have towels here, but our clothes would do just fine.

In the end, we went to take off our clothes. We checked the material first to see if there were any rough parts, and at this moment, Xiao Hua suddenly found something strange. He pointed to my clothes: “What’s this?”

I looked down and saw that my clothes were all black from where I had pushed against the iron plate just now.

“Paint rubbing off?” I cursed and looked at my palms, finding that they were also black.

It wasn’t paint, but something like cinder particles. I couldn’t help but wonder if the plate had been smeared with cinder before.

I used a flashlight to take a look at one of my palms and pinched the substance. I found that it wasn't cinder, but some kind of granule that would become very flaky after I rubbed it with my hands. It seemed a little familiar.

I used my flashlight to take a look at the iron plate but still couldn't tell that it was covered in a layer of this stuff. When I scratched it a few times with a sharp object, however, I managed to scrape off a piece. I crushed it in my hand and let out an "ah ha" before turning to Xiao Hua and saying, "No, this is blood."

Chapter 46 Strange Blood on the Iron Plate

“Blood?”

“Yes, it’s definitely blood. Someone poured a lot of blood on the iron plate, and more than once, too. It looks like once the blood dried, more was poured over it until multiple layers were formed. I don’t know how many times it would take to accumulate this much.” As I spoke, I looked at the lines on the iron plate and immediately realized what was going on. “Look at these groove lines. I’ve seen something similar before. These are blood guiding grooves. This isn’t an ordinary iron plate, it’s a sacrificial plate.”

In order to test my theory, I immediately took out my canteen and started pouring water on the iron plate. I poured it very carefully and saw that the water’s color under the flashlight’s beam looked a bit like some mysterious ancient liquid. As I poured it from the center of the iron plate, it soon flowed along the grooves and rapidly expanded.

Once I saw how the water flowed, I was almost certain that these grooves had been designed by someone. The flowing water passing through the grooves had a strange and harmonious aesthetic feeling.

It was as if the current was a living creature as it cut a wonderful figure on the iron plate. Strangely enough, the water didn’t fall onto the ground once it flowed down the side and raced along the lines around the iron plate. Instead, it flowed to the bottom of the iron plate along the side and continued flowing along the pattern on the bottom, converging towards the shaft.

It was because of the water’s viscosity. Blood had more impurities and a higher viscosity, so it would flow more beautifully against the bottom of the iron plate.

“That’s just how things were done back then.” Xiao Hua had seen the world and wasn’t surprised at all. “Do we have to drench it in a lot of blood?”

I touched the iron plate, unsure. The old dried blood that was now wet from the water had started to dissolve. It was still relatively fresh, so it must have been shed when the Mystic Nine came here before.

Grave robbers didn't speak of taboos like blood sacrifices, and it wasn't auspicious to bring blood into a place like this even though it wasn't an ancient tomb. If the Mystic Nine had drenched the iron plate in blood when they entered here before, then there had to be other ways. We didn't have any other clues right now, so maybe we'd have to give it a try.

I thought that maybe there was some kind of mechanism under the iron plate that could be activated by blood.

It wasn't all that difficult to deconstruct. This mechanism probably used the blood's viscosity in the grooves as a medium. I believed the ancient technology could do it. As long as the lines were cleverly designed, the flow rate of water or other liquids would be completely different.

I was going to send Xiao Hua out and get him to ask the people below to get us some blood, but he touched the dissolved blood and suddenly asked, "Wait a minute, what kind of blood is this?"

"What do you mean what kind of blood?"

"It's easy if it's pig or dog blood, but it'll be difficult if it's human. Moreover, the amount of blood can't be solved by one or two barrels. It would be a huge project to get so much blood up here."

When I thought about it, I agreed that using human blood would be troublesome. The Mystic Nine wasn't abnormal enough to use it, and I didn't think the ancient mechanism could distinguish the subtleties between the different types of blood. Moreover, Xiao Hua and I weren't full of blood. If we needed to, we could maybe fill up a cup between the two of us.

I thought about it some more and told him that pig blood and human blood were similar, so we should try pig blood first.

Xiao Hua shook his head and said, "Too much trouble." He thought for a moment, and then said, "We'll bring a pig up here directly."

It sounded like a good idea. First, there were so many hairs outside that if we transported buckets of blood in, they would be stimulated. I really couldn't predict what would happen at that time, so it was better to transport a live pig in. Secondly, a live pig would ensure that the blood wouldn't coagulate. But after carefully examining the scene, I realized it would be quite a performance to lift a pig up such a high cliff.

When we sent the request, the people down below were immediately dumbstruck. After contacting us several times to confirm, the radio went silent. They obviously had no idea what we were doing. Xiao Hua asked them to do it immediately, and then said we'd have to wait. It wasn't until the next day that we heard the pig on the radio and knew we were good to go.

It was normal to have pigs in the countryside, but it was a hassle to subdue them and transport them to the remote mountains. Even these guys found it very difficult.

Xiao Hua and I spent a great deal of effort to lift the pig up to the entrance of the cave. It was a hefty thing, but luckily it was too scared to even put up a struggle.

When the two of us untied the pig and stuffed it into the hole, we smelled an unbearable stench. The pig's feces hadn't been washed clean, and the acrid stench was unbearable, but we were too impatient to care that much because of the delay. We tied the pig to the ropes and carried it in as if it were goods.

Back in the hole again, we started our preparations. We used the sharp edge of a shovel to scrape away the accumulated blood on the iron plate, revealing its original appearance and making the lines on it clearer.

After checking everything, I found that all the patterns on the iron plate looked to be in the shape of a flower, and some parts had obvious traces of

being repaired. The whole iron plate was very old, but the bumps and rust spots on it were relatively new, indicating that someone had done a repair job on it fairly recently.

Xiao Hua looked at the area above the plate and found that a stone hook had been carved on the cave ceiling. It was as thick as a forearm, and we knew after one look that it was used to hang something up. The two of us put a rope through the stone hook and hoisted the pig upside down.

It appeared the pig had only just started to recover, for it started struggling and squealing incessantly. The sound was extremely harsh, and I was afraid the thin rope stretched like a string would end up breaking.

Since the cave ceiling itself wasn't that high, the pig hung very close to the iron plate, where it could be bled directly. Xiao Hua looked at me and took out his knife, and then handed it to me and said, "Come on?"

I paused and said, "I've never killed a pig before."

He blinked and smiled, "You've never killed one so you think I have? This knife is very sharp, just slash it across its neck quickly."

"Then why don't you do it?" I replied angrily

"I can't do it." He said, "Not everyone can use a knife to kill an animal that's about the same size as himself."

"Fuck, do I look like the type of person who can do it? Do I look like a butcher?" I scolded. But Xiao Hua looked at me unquestionably with eyes that said he'd never do it.

I took the knife and looked at the pig. Before, I really hadn't been expecting to be the one to kill it, but it turned out that Xiao Hua was a mixed bag. I didn't think it was a problem for him to kill a pig, but why was it my turn?

The pig screamed like it knew it was about to be slaughtered, which I found annoying. After two aborted attempts, I broke down a little and felt that I definitely wouldn't be able to do it. I asked, "Why not let your men do it?"

"The local people here all say there are ghosts in the cave, so it's impossible. They're absolutely terrified to come up." Xiao Hua said. "Why are you delaying?"

"You have no right to say that to me." I looked at the pig with a bitter smile. I thought it would be nice if Fatty was here, but I didn't know if he would be able to kill his own kind.

After a momentary standoff, neither of us would yield to being the so-called butcher, so we had to bring the Sichuan man up from below again. Xiao Hua's guy was a tough character, and could also be ranked number one when he hacked people in Chengdu. When we talked about the situation, he also refused and said: "Pig blood vessels are very thick, so the blood will spray out when the knife goes down, and then it will be everywhere. You need a blood-letting tube." After saying this, he found a wine bottle, drank the wine inside, pulled out his machete, and cut off the bottom of the bottle. He then cut the neck of the bottle into a sharp point, got up, and stabbed it into the pig's neck.

As the pig let out a cry, the blood immediately started flowing out of the bottom of the bottle, and onto the countless patterns on the iron plate.

I felt sick and couldn't bear to watch it anymore. Most of the corpses I had seen before were all rotten and gross, but I had never felt as disgusted as I did now. The whole process of killing the pig was enough to make my heart tremble.

Five minutes later, the pig had stopped struggling and was extremely weak. Its blood followed along the patterns, dyeing the whole iron plate we had scraped clean black and red again. The process of the blood flowing along all the patterns on the iron plate should have been very paradoxical, but I

didn't look closely. What had me a little worried was the fact that the iron plate hadn't changed at all, and was still spinning the same as before.

Xiao Hua said that the function of this iron plate was to guide the blood to flow into the underlying mechanism. Although the iron plate was full of blood, it would take some time for it to flow into the lower part.

Sure enough, after another three or four minutes, the rotation of the iron plate suddenly changed a little, seemed to get stuck a few times, and then stopped.

Xiao Hua and I immediately took precautions to prevent any traps from starting up. We listened as the dull sound of ancient iron chains rubbing against each other under the iron plate moved to the four walls of the cave.

I was stunned as I listened to the noise rapidly move to the surrounding cave walls, and couldn't help thinking, *fuck, are the walls full of traps?*

If that were true, it meant that the iron plate was driven by a large machine, and the mainframe definitely wasn't so simple. Some very big changes would definitely take place since that much movement wouldn't be needed if you were only powering something under a hundred kilograms.

The accident happened just as I was about to warn everyone. There was a sudden change in the alcoves on the three walls where the ancient bamboo slips had been placed. All the bamboo slips were pushed out, and then strange "things" slowly emerged from the bottom of the holes.

Chapter 47 Completion of the Relief

The alcoves in the three cave walls in front of me were suddenly filled up, and the three walls became a single one, while the things protruding from them looked like part of some relief sculpture.

The whole process happened so fast that we could do nothing but silently and cautiously watch as the changes around us took place. In a single moment, all the holes grew “things”, which immediately formed into a strange picture. The whole process was extremely shocking.

I even had a vague impression that something was going to rush out of the wall.

After using a flashlight to shine on the things sticking out of the alcoves, we found that they had all been carved out of the same stone as the wall, and each carving was different. At first glance, I could see that they were all part of a relief sculpture.

When I stepped back to the entrance of the cave and looked at it as a whole, I immediately understood what was going on. Originally, this cave wall had been carved with a relief sculpture, but it had been knocked out until there was nothing left.

And these alcoves were holes that had been dug in the relief sculpture, just like puzzle pieces. One piece was dug here, one there, and all the excavated parts were actually embedded in the depths of the holes. When activated by the mechanism, the holes would be pushed up by the machine inside and filled in, causing the whole picture to appear.

It was truly ingenious. With such a setup, there should be some information concealed in the relief, but the most critical parts were hidden and could only be seen after the relief was restored.

But I was speechless as I stared at the cave wall. Except for the key parts, the rest of the relief had been knocked out, and it was easy to see why the cave wall appeared so rough.

At almost the exact same time, Xiao Hua and his buddy came to the same conclusion. No one paid any attention to the pig anymore. We all walked towards the wall and looked at the parts that had been pushed out.

After a difficult analysis, we found that the relief sculptures on the iron plate were different from the carvings. The most obvious ones were the carvings of human hands. They were all very small and indistinct and were obviously the hands of the troops from the panoramic view of the iron plate. Some of the carved lines were difficult to make out, but there were still some clear details. I could see a part at the top where an eye was engraved and figured it had to be part of a face. But the eye wasn't human and I didn't know what kind of face it was.

Since there was a panoramic view and a carved face, it had to be a relief sculpture of either a narrative or a scene. As soon as I thought this, I suddenly remembered the photos that had been sent from Guangxi. Those reliefs and the ones here seemed to be somewhat similar in detail.

I immediately wanted to ask Xiao Hua but saw that he had already taken out the photos for a comparison. After comparing several details, we found that we were on the right track. Among the three reliefs around the disc pattern in the Guangxi photos, we found the same details in the reliefs right before us.

Those hands were the right hands of the people facing the ethnic minorities in the photo I saw before. And the eye was exactly the same as the "Hou's" eye in the photo.

It appeared that the relief on the Guangxi mountain wall in the photo was the original relief on the cave wall here. The two were exactly the same.

So that's what happened, I said to myself. Although the reliefs here had been carved one by one, the carving techniques were very superb and the

knife edges were very round. It was obviously a fine work of meticulous carving. I had already determined that the relief from the Guangxi photos seemed to be the perfunctory work of an expert, so it was very likely that the Guangxi relief was a copy or imitation of the prototype here.

But what was the significance of such a setup? If it was as Xiao Hua had said and the relief sculpture on the other side of Guangxi was actually a clue meant for here, then what was it?

I tried to figure it out by comparing the photos with everything around me, hoping to find something strange. But after looking at it for half a day, I found nothing inspiring.

I looked around again and found that if I turned my back to the hole, then the “Hou” was on the wall to my left. If those reliefs hadn’t been knocked out, then the shape of the “Hou” must have been quite spectacular. On the cave wall in front of me, I could see the figures that were missing their right hands, while the ethnic minorities lying in wait were on the cave wall to my right.

The three holes in the photo seemed to represent the holes behind me since they were in the exact same order.

None of us spoke as we all looked between the photos and the whole cave wall very carefully. I sat down and took a sip of wine, feeling like something was off.

I found that the patterns in the photos were very simple and not at all complicated. It obviously wasn’t a kind of very fine relief sculpture, but simple carvings made it difficult to see if any special information was there.

I turned my attention to the iron plate and immediately understood the problem.

There were numerous complicated patterns on the iron plate, but there were also two large patterns that formed a cross on it. The top of the cross

had a nipple-shaped protrusion at the twelve o'clock position that was very large.

The pictures of the iron disc had this protrusion at the Hou's position, while the one in front of me was at the hole's position. If this projection represented the direction of the iron plate, then that meant the iron plate was pointing in the wrong direction.

When I called Xiao Hua over to take a look, he also frowned. "It seems that the one in this photo is a schematic diagram, which tells us how to place everything here. This iron plate can rotate, so if it's pushed to the same position as the photo, it will probably trigger the next mechanism." I said.

Xiao Hua touched the iron plate, looked at the photo, and seemed to think it was a very reasonable conclusion. "Is it clockwise or counterclockwise?"

"Generally speaking, it should be counter-clockwise. But we started the mechanism with pig's blood just now, so its direction may also change. We'll have to test it out." I started to go up, but Xiao Hua grabbed me this time and said, "It's better not to turn it again."

Chapter 48 Secrets

Xiao Hua compared the two again and told me his idea, “The reliefs around us are only set up in four directions, but the iron plate can rotate. Even if we didn’t have these photos, it’s easy to deduce the position of the iron plate without checking. If this is a secret hint, it’s too easy to test. And there’s no combination.”

I frowned, still not really understanding what he was saying. He continued, “For example, in our safe deposit box, there are at least three passwords you need to open it. One of the three passwords will have up to ninety possibilities, so the complexity of the passwords is enough. No matter what this iron plate is, if it’s combined with the relief around it, then there are only four possibilities for the code. Any three-year-old child could easily try it out.” He paused. “If that’s the case, then it’s useless. For example, if the password to your safe is only one digit that can only be one through four, then it’s not a safe because it’s not secure at all.”

I flicked the photo with my finger and immediately understood that he was right.

Xiao Hua continued, “We assume that the technology at that time could only make a lock with a one-digit password that’s only one to four digits. If that were the case, how would you make this lock have an effective safety function?” He looked at me. “Do you know the law of contraction?”

I shook my head. Xiao Hua’s tone was calm, as if he were an old artist telling others about a play. “When you don’t have enough choices, reduce the number of times you choose. It’s just like dismantling bombs. When you only have red, yellow, and blue wires to cut, then you can only cut one at most, and the wrong cut will cause it to explode. If we’re right, we’ll probably only have one chance to turn this iron plate. If we’re wrong, it’ll probably activate the traps here, and I don’t know what the consequences will be.”

As he spoke, he looked at the tunnel, “You can’t just try it without full assurance and preparation. There’s already been a tragedy here, and it’s likely to happen again.”

I was a little stunned when I heard this. I suddenly felt like I didn’t know him at all. “Do you often use this tone to solve problems?”

He shined a flashlight on the bloody iron plate and said, “In the Xie family, we have to do things meticulously. That’s how I was taught since I was a child.”

The Mystic Nine’s Xie Jiuye was indeed famous for running a tight ship. I thought about it and wondered what kind of rules the Wu family followed when doing such things. My grandfather seemed to be famous for his popularity, which didn’t really sound appropriate in this situation.

“Well, Little Master Nine, what should we do now?” I plopped to the ground.

Xiao Hua said, “We have to think from the beginning. There’s a reason for everything. It’s definitely necessary to set up such a delicate mechanism here. Let’s think about it, Little Master Three.”

After hearing this long-lost address, I didn’t know why, but I suddenly felt a little melancholy. We both glanced at each other and smiled. It seemed like the two of us really did carry a lot of similar burdens.

As we quieted down, I found and ate a packet of beef jerky from the food I brought and then said, “What do you think? How did the descendants of the Zhang family use the mechanisms here? Let’s think about it this way. For example, you’re a descendant of the Zhang family and your father died. You’ll bury him in the Zhang family’s building in Guangxi. Let’s simulate the whole process.”

Xiao Hua said, “I would definitely burn him secretly and then tell them that I already put him in there. My family wouldn’t do anything extra.”

“But suppose it’s the Zhang family. What’s the situation?” I asked.

Xiao Hua thought for a moment, “In the beginning, I would definitely get an explanation. The elders of the family would take me to a secret place and tell me that we have a family tomb. I have to bury my father in the tomb, but the tomb has very strict anti-theft measures. We must first go to Sichuan’s Siguniang Mountain to find a cave where we can get the key to open the tomb.”

“It doesn’t make sense. If that’s the case, you won’t be able see the hint on the relief on the other side of Guangxi. You should go to Guangxi first, find the tomb, find the hint on the relief, and then come to the cave here to find the key.”

“Is the hint on that relief sculpture: Please take photos here and bring them to Sichuan’s Siguniang Mountain?”

I didn’t think it was funny at all. I was just about to give him a bitter smile when I suddenly had a niggling suspicion and thought of something.

“Photos? Yes, photos.”

I immediately grabbed the Guangxi photos, squeezed them in my hand, adjusted my thoughts, and then thought, *oh, shit*.

This was a very typical preconceived mistake. People would always take the current realistic details as the basis for their judgment, and ignore the various factors of time and place. We had always believed that the relief sculpture on the other side of Guangxi was meant as a hint for here. But at that time, there was no photographic technology in the world.

So, in other words, there wouldn’t be a situation where we would be sitting here looking at the Guangxi photos. The most they could convey at that time would be a painted copy or simply using their own memory. And whether it was copying or remembering, there would always be a loss of detail.

In particular, forgeries and other copies of paintings were likely to spread to the public, so if copying could convey any information, it would be very unsafe. As an ancient tomb with such complicated anti-theft measures, it was impossible to make such a mistake. Moreover, how would they ensure that future generations would take drawing tools to the tomb? Was it true that all the Zhang family members were trained in drawing skills and techniques from an early age, and had to bring a full set of drawing tools with them whenever they held a burial?

If that was the case, then this photo didn't just contain a picture. Whatever it was trying to convey should be outside of the picture. For example, when the Zhang family saw the relief sculpture, they might suddenly realize the secret. Another example would be the cartoon "The Sheep Below is Dead." When others saw the picture, they would only see two pigeons and a dead sheep, but those who knew something would immediately understand the tricks in the picture.

It was useless to pay attention to the photos. Instead, we had to understand the meaning of the images depicted in the photos.

Chapter 49 Hints

When I mentioned this, Xiao Hua asked if I could tell what dynasty everything here had been made in.

“It’s hard to say since this isn’t a typical historic site,” I told him. “If it’s the site of an ancient tomb or temple, then it’s easy to tell what dynasty it belonged to because the carved buildings contain a lot of cultural details. But if you find a blacksmith’s shop, then it would be very difficult to date, because there would be too few places in the shop that carried cultural information. It might be easier if the blacksmith was part of a large ancient city, though.”

All the various things here—including the patterns and lines on the stone carvings on the walls and iron plate—lacked the characteristics peculiar to a certain dynasty. It was almost impossible to judge which era they had been built in. I didn’t think too much about it either, because I had subconsciously linked them to the Yangshi Lei.

There were iron tools here, which had officially appeared for the first time in the Spring and Autumn Period. But due to the existence of meteorite iron, it was difficult to determine the age of everything here solely based on these iron tools. Since the Yangshi Lei was involved, however, it must have been used during the Qing Dynasty, even if it hadn’t been established then.

I had always believed that I, an undergraduate student of the People’s Republic of China, would never fail to do what Yangshi Lei did. “Do you think you can see anything from any of the dynasties here?” I asked.

“China’s tomb culture was constantly developing, so all kinds of exquisite mechanisms have very clear characteristics of the times. The more developed the dynasties, the more technological leaps would appear. For example, cliff coffins in the Han Dynasty developed into hanging coffins in the Tang Dynasty. And because the Liao people are located in a cold place in the north, the ancient tombs and graves there have many toxins and are lined with stones. In the Qing Dynasty, the introduction of foreign

technology enriched the development of exotic techniques and even made mechanisms that could restore themselves without making a sound. If we knew when this place was built, we could probably eliminate several possibilities.” Xiao Hua said. “To give an extreme example, this definitely isn’t a modern tomb, so there won’t be lasers to worry about.”

Indeed, I had also heard grandpa say something like this. But I thought it was too risky to use this tactic here. Since I had experienced many things before, I understood that when it came to thousand-year-old mysteries, the only thing I could be sure of was that the ancients couldn’t be underestimated.

My grandfather had also given me another example. When he was in a Northern Zhou Dynasty tomb one time, he saw a very strange piece of pottery. It was a long jar that had finger-shaped holes at the top and looked more like a musical instrument. He thought he had found a vessel used for “filtering”, but when he picked it up, he found that it was very heavy. As soon as he turned it upside down to see what was inside, a lot of small stone hands stuck out from the holes in an arc. The hands on one side were spread to the left, while the hands on the other side were spread to the right.

They looked like a peacock spreading its wings to form a fan.

With such a display, his eyes naturally focused on the middle of the fan. He saw a black Buddha statue in the center row of holes, and together with the hands spread out on both sides, it looked like a thousand-armed Guanyin³⁹ embedded in the bottle.

He was transfixed because all the openings in the jar sprouted “things” at the same time, and immediately became such a sight. The process was so shocking that he thought the bottle was a living creature.

When he ended up having to flee later, he lost it and never saw it again. But he liked and missed it so much that he wanted a modern craftsman to duplicate it. None of them could do it, however, because they couldn’t set

³⁹ Guanyin is the Buddhist bodhisattva associated with compassion

the mechanism inside the pottery that had already been fired in the kiln. Even if it was forced in, it still wouldn't work.

There shouldn't have been such exquisite craftsmanship in the Northern Zhou Dynasty. Grandpa said that this showed that there were always some people in each dynasty who were completely ahead of their time. The more unpredictable the tomb was, the more unconventional the place was, and you would be more likely to see such things.

But since we couldn't determine what dynasty was here, I didn't bother saying so much to Xiao Hua. We had to continue thinking and trying to understand the odd things in the photo.

But what did these figures mean? Because they were so random, it was much more difficult than simply finding graphic information from these photos. If the people in the Zhang family knew something, it would be almost impossible for us to guess.

In addition, there was hardly any information on the mysterious family, so we were basically facing a dead end.

When I thought of this, I immediately began to admire the designers of this mechanism. If this was a grave robbery prevention measure, it was truly successful.

I remembered that my grandfather had said there were several levels of anti-theft measures, and all large tombs often had such characteristics.

The first was that it couldn't be found, the second was that it couldn't be opened, and the third was that it couldn't be taken away. This Zhang Jialou had reached the extreme at almost every point. It was no wonder everyone had been at a loss for so many years.

But if we thought like this, there was nothing else we could do but leave here and try to collect as much information about the Zhang Jialou as possible. With their degree of secrecy, even if there was some information, I

was afraid it would take more than half a year. And there was no telling whether the information would be useful or not.

This thought made me very depressed. I was the kind of person who would be full of energy as long as there was a little hope, but once my consciousness determined that the matter was impossible, I would immediately collapse. Xiao Hua also fell silent after hearing me out.

We had lost a lot of time since the Guangxi information had been sent to us, but there really weren't any clues. I was feeling a little desperate, as if even if we tried in vain for a few more days, we could only send a letter back and tell the old woman, "Sorry, we can't do it. Why don't we go back to Beijing and take a bath and see if there's another way?"

I didn't mind, but I kept feeling like I'd lose face for the Wu family by doing so (although the Wu family had no face left). Moreover, I knew Xiao Hua wouldn't give up so easily.

After a moment's silence, he said to the Sichuan man, "Please send a letter for me and tell them that the photo can't be decrypted. We'll take our own measures, so they'll have to wait for a while."

The man nodded, but his face changed a little bit, "Boss, do you want to do it yourself? Do you want to call Mister?"

Xiao Hua shook his head: "No, I can handle it."

The man nodded and went out. I pulled the rope to send him out and asked Xiao Hua, "What are our own measures? What else can we do now?"

"Change your way of thinking. All the tricks are fantastic and skillful, so if you can't solve them directly, you can use a more barbaric method."

I still didn't understand. He took a sip of wine and said, "If you can't restore a Rubik's Cube, what's the simplest way?" He made a snapping gesture, "Cut all the colors off the Rubik's cube and reassemble it according to your own way."

“Eh, you mean you want to—”

“I want to unlock it from the inside.” He said, “I’ll enter behind these cave walls and see what the structure of this mechanism is.”

Chapter 50 Entering the Mechanism

We took the dead pig down and then washed the whole iron plate with water. Soon, we could hear the sounds of the mechanism moving and the chain system shaking in the cave wall. The relief on the wall slowly shrank back and then the iron plate paused a few times and started turning slowly.

Xiao Hua and I repacked some cold fireworks, short-handled shotguns, wine, and other self-defense and lighting items. We then lifted the iron plate and propped it up with some iron bars, revealing the hole.

Xiao Hua's injury from before still left me with a lingering fear. There had to be something tricky down there, so it was very dangerous to go down now. He didn't make any rash moves either, but first cut off one of the pig's feet, tied it with a rope, and threw it down the hole.

We lowered it bit by bit like we were fishing. Once it had reached a place deep in the hole, we left it hanging there, but there was no response.

He put a piece of the iron garment on his chest and back, tested his mobility, and then went through the hole first. He was so fast that I only saw his flashlight quickly go down and disappear once he got to the bottom.

I didn't dare speak. My back was covered in a cold sweat, and I waited for five or six minutes until the flashlight down below lit up again. It flashed twice, signaling that it was safe for me to come down.

I took a deep breath, dropped the equipment bag down first, carefully put my head into the hole, and then tried to fit my body through.

I was "fatter" than Xiao Hua, but I managed to climb down the chains until I reached the bottom. I found that the space below was so cramped that I couldn't even stand up, and my head touched the ceiling even when sitting.

The structure of the "mechanism control space" at the bottom of the iron plate was very complicated and had reached the point where I couldn't even

describe it. But when I came down, I could clearly tell how the whole mechanism operated.

There were a lot of iron teeth on the bearing, which could be opened by rotating the iron plate. Countless iron rings were connected to intricate chains, which led to some unknown place on one side of the stone chamber.

I predicted that if the number of rings rotating the iron plate was different, then the iron chain hooked by the open iron teeth would pull a different chain, and the starting mechanism's control would be different.

In the lower part of the stone chamber, a water wheel had been inserted into a wellhead below. I could see that the water coming from the rock vein was turbulent. The rotating water wheel was driven to the bearing through gears and chains, so the iron plate could rotate by itself for years. I didn't see anything that could have cut Xiao Hua at that time, but I could see countless lint-like things hanging on the chains, which seemed to be old grease.

The mechanism's control room was like a well, but slightly larger underneath. There was a strong smell of blood, but no traces that I could see. We also didn't see the troublesome thing that Xiao Hua had mentioned before.

But not seeing it didn't mean it wasn't there. We squatted down carefully, searched everywhere, and found that there really wasn't a living creature hanging around.

Maybe it had been some kind of trap, and both Xiao Hua and I had seen wrong. He also looked puzzled, but we were both relieved.

I gave him a look, silently asking him what to do next, and he pointed to one side with a flashlight. It turned out that the wall of this well had three crevices that were five or six meters high and only one person wide. A single glance showed that they had been cut to look like a very narrow corridor. All the iron chains were divided into three groups, with each leading straight into the three crevices.

I shined my flashlight into one and found that the inside was very deep, but it was so narrow that a person could barely squeeze through. When I looked about three or four meters to the top of the crevice, I saw a bunch of stones hanging from iron chains. There were ceramic jars like the ones we had seen in the Queen of the West's country sitting underneath the stones.

This was the mechanism's "trap". If we made a mistake, the stones would surely fall and smash the pottery jars. Once that happened, the red corpse-eating bugs in the jars would definitely make us suffer.

The first few stones had already fallen down and smashed a lot of the ceramic pots in front of us, revealing the hair inside. This must have been from the last time someone came here and accidentally activated the trap.

I could vaguely make out countless stones neatly hanging behind them, which seemed to stretch into the darkness at the end of the crevice. They were too numerous to count, and the clay jars piled up on top of each other made my throat suddenly dry.

The other two crevices were exactly the same, and the iron chains inserted into all three seemed like the tentacles of a monster.

"This kind of structure shows that this mechanism has three channels. Even if we get through the first channel, it won't help. It'll be a long-term project if we honestly and diligently work on the traps. Looking at the height of these iron chains, the lowest ones should be the first trap mechanism." I said. "This thing is a bit like a door lock."

The control room for the first trap mechanism should be at the end of the crevice where the lowest chains passed through. We'd have to go through it to reach the control room.

It was a very clever design. I could see countless copper nails or rods embedded in the rock walls on both sides of the crevice. They were all rusted into green flowers and seemed to be for people to walk on. But as I looked at their strange arrangement, I knew there had to be something fishy

about them. There might be a trap or something underneath them, and it would be your own bad luck if you stepped on them wrong.

Moreover, all the nails were located in places suitable for landing. It would be difficult to avoid them if you tried to climb over. Even Xiao Hua at peak performance couldn't do anything in such a narrow space.

I turned to him and asked, "Monkey King, what should we do?"

Xiao Hua looked up and down and then left and right to see if there was a way to avoid them, but all the details had obviously been well thought out. The old copper nails reached all the way to the top of the cave wall, and he couldn't come up with a good idea.

I pointed to the one-ton stones hanging above and the very strong chains holding them. I didn't know if we could pass through them.

Xiao Hua lit his flashlight, gave a "tsk", and then said, "It looks feasible, but look at all the copper nails here. Surely if they considered this, wouldn't they consider the stones? In my opinion, nothing in this channel can be touched. There must be something wrong with it. The people who built this place were completely different from ordinary craftsmen. They were proficient in the ways of ordinary grave robbers and wouldn't leave us with such obvious opportunities."

"If you don't walk from the top, then you'll either have to climb the copper nails on the wall or step on these clay pots. There's no other way." I said.

There are only a few directions we can go in, I thought. Can we still get behind the walls?

Xiao Hua sidled into the gap, carefully leaned forward a bit, and gently touched the copper nails with his hand. He then squatted down, picked up a piece of the broken pottery, and retreated.

There were a lot of black stains on the inside of the pottery piece, which should be traces left by the decayed human head. He put the pottery piece

on the ground and told me to step on it. When I did, it immediately broke. The structure of these pottery jars was very simple and thin, which made it impossible to step on them.

“This is fucking unbelievable.” Xiao Hua said. “They didn’t intend to let anyone pass at all.”

“Then how did they set it up at that time? Was there a secret passage for the craftsmen or something? What if it needs to be repaired?”

“I don’t think there’s any after-sales service for this thing. In ancient times, mechanisms were usually driven by sturdy stones and iron chains that even earthquakes couldn’t damage. If there’s a path, it has to be along these nails. But now we have to find out which ones are safe and which ones are risky.” Xiao Hua said. “The designers here weren’t ordinary people, so their ideas won’t be ordinary either.”

I had never experienced this kind of feeling before. As I looked at the mechanisms in front of me, I kept feeling like they weren’t that complicated and mysterious, but there really wasn’t a way to check. Compared with the mechanisms that Wang Zanghai made to show off his artistic skills, the ones here were practical and effective without any flaws. This was the kind of thing that real masters designed, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of frustration.

I once again wished that Poker-face was here. I was suddenly starting to realize that it wasn’t my own good luck, but the two people around me who solved so many problems. I had really been taking it for granted.

After a moment’s hesitation, Xiao Hua sighed with a solemn look on his face and said to me, “There’s no other way but to confront the situation. Let’s see if our ancestors will bless us.”

As he spoke, he pulled out a bundle of rope from the equipment bag and handed it to me. When I grabbed it, he put the other end over his head, took out a whistle-sized purple bottle from his small bag, pulled out the plug, and

smearred a kind of black powder on his hands. I could immediately smell the traditional Chinese medicine even through the gas mask.

“What are you doing?” I had a bad feeling.

“This is a traditional Chinese medicine made from charcoal ash that’s used to absorb sweat. It can also rejuvenate you.” He said. “I want to climb over.”

“You’re crazy!” I said. “The jars here are so fragile that they’ll break when touched. If you want to die, don’t drag me into it.”

“Standing on them might crush them, but lying on the ground might not necessarily break them. As long as I disperse my weight through various pressure points, I could even pass through if it was filled with light bulbs. But it does require hard work.” He said.

As he spoke, he took off his shoes, turned around, and lay down on the ground.

I thought he was going to lie down on his stomach, so I was even more surprised when he ended up lying face up. I saw that his back and butt muscles were exerted so cleverly that his whole body was already sticking to the ground and moving into the crevice.

This was a flexible way to rely on the back muscles and move forward with your hands, almost like a form of yoga. Xiao Hua moved very fast, looking like a snake as he crawled on the ground. I knew that it definitely required a huge amount of physical exertion, and I saw how his lean but powerful muscles were trained, but I had to admit that the movement was very ugly.

“Are you sure?” I asked. He couldn’t see behind him after all, and this method depended on luck.

He gave me a look, “If I’m not sure, are you going to come and do it?”

When I shook my head with a wry smile, he gave me a blank look and then relaxed. He took a few deep breaths, said a few words I couldn't hear, and started to move toward the depths of the crevice.

When Xiao Hua pressed up against the first jars, he and I both paused. I clearly heard the pressure on the jars and the sound of them rubbing against the ones below them. They seemed to be accompanied by the crisp sound of those thin pottery pieces about to be fractured. I held my breath and watched him slowly move up. The sound increased, but Xiao Hua didn't hesitate as he moved his whole body bit by bit onto the pottery jars.

At that moment, my back felt numb. I was glad that after going through so much, I began to skip past fear and went straight into a state of high tension. I held my breath and watched his every move.

Soon, he was very far away from me, and I could only see him moving in the dark crevice with the help of the flashlight's beam. It was a very strange feeling, as if we were escaping from prison through some old cable duct. He would place the rope to one side as he crawled so that I could use it later to go in.

Five or six minutes later, he was already about thirty meters deep. I couldn't see clearly with my flashlight, but his flashlight was shining up ahead. Although the jars made a lot of frightening noises, they were all false alarms. I slowly started to relax as I listened to the heavy echoes of his panting. "Take your time," I called into the gap. "We're not in a hurry at the moment, and no one's urging you to rush over there. Rest when you're tired."

A moment later, his gasping voice came floating out from the crevice and he cursed, "You fucking rest in a place like this." With that said, he flicked his flashlight up and illuminated the stones above him. If these things were to fall down, they could smash him directly into minced meat.

"Maintaining your strength is important. The more impatient you are, the more prone you are to make mistakes." I said, "Those things won't fall so easily."

“This isn’t a technical job. As long as I lie down and there’s no accident, I don’t need to concentrate too much. If I focus too much on my back, there will be problems.” He continued, “I’m afraid that something will go wrong, like some jars have broken by themselves, but didn’t crack. When I press on them, they could crack open, or there could be other trap mechanisms inside them. These things depend on luck. Whether I’m quick or slow, the end result is still the same. I’d rather save the waiting process.”

His voice was very calm. I seemed to have had many similar thoughts before and didn’t know whether it was an excuse or a special mentality of people like us. I immediately felt that Xiao Hua’s heart was really similar to mine.

“Then there’s nothing I can do to help you. I’m sure you don’t want me to help you recite sutras here.”

“Wait until something happens to me. For now, you can sing a little song to ease my tension.” He said slowly.

This kind of joke wasn’t funny at all and actually made me think that he was still secretly worried. I was a little scared when I thought that he was a normal person, and not a god or a monster. He had the same emotions and weaknesses as me, so he would also be nervous at such times. Maybe it was the norm in this business.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be able to run even if you die. You can sing enough on your own.” I shouted back to him.

Xiao Hua didn’t answer me again but continued gasping as he continued to climb forward. He probably thought I was all talk, and couldn’t make any concrete contributions. I also knew that speaking was very exhausting and distracting under such circumstances, so I kept silent.

The flashlight continued to go further until all I could see was the light. The only sound remaining was his gasps echoing back, which was like listening to a requiem. I found myself getting a little distracted.

After a while, he said again, "That's not true. I think you'll go to heaven, while I'm about to go in the opposite direction. If something happens later, you should turn your head and go. I won't blame you."

As I listened to these ominous words, I really wanted him to stop talking nonsense. When the King of Hell heard this later, he would find it difficult to be kind, and oh how terrible that would be. But before I could say anything, I heard him say, "Hmm?"

"What's the matter?" I immediately came to my senses.

"There's no stone hanging above here." He replied. When he shined his flashlight up, I could no longer see his position or where he was shining it.

"What is it?" I asked nervously.

He swept it back and forth a few times, "It's very high, so I can't see it clearly. It seems like the skin of some animal, which definitely isn't a good thing." As he said this, he seemed to be adjusting the flashlight's brightness, and the light gradually gathered and became stronger. This action made the pottery jars below him emit a series of clinking sounds. I immediately said to him, "Be careful! Calm down! If you're panting like this, you'd better get control of yourself first. There's nothing to be worried about, but still."

When he heard the echo of my voice, he seemed to be stunned for a moment. He looked above him and then asked, "Panting? I'm not panting. Isn't it you?"

"I'm not panting to catch my breath," I said. "Besides, I'm not moving. Why would I need to catch my breath?"

He paused, then momentarily flicked his flashlight at me across the long distance. "Don't mess around," I said. "it's fucking creepy in here."

"I'm not." His voice had cooled down.

I saw his flashlight begin to sweep through the gap and realized that something was wrong. We both quieted down, and I began to sweat as I tried to listen to where I had heard the panting.

Since there was an echo, it must have come from this crevice. I had thought it was Xiao Hua gasping for breath, but if it wasn't him, then what was that noise?

Chapter 51 Hanging

Neither of us spoke, and I was able to hear the “panting” sound again. After listening carefully, I felt that it wasn’t panting, but more like a sucking sound. But the sound was dispersed, so I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. The bottom of the crevice looked clear and there was nothing lying on the cave wall, so the sound had to be coming from above. But there were so many iron chains and stones there that it was very difficult to see anything.

I pulled out the short-headed shotgun in my bag, took out some adhesive tape, and quickly tied the flashlight to the shotgun. I looked at the area repeatedly, but I couldn’t see anything.

There were still cold fireworks in the bag, so I pulled a few out and threw one up. It hit the cave wall and sent sparks flying everywhere.

As a result of this, Xiao Hua neither advanced nor retreated. The cold fireworks were so bright that I was instantly blinded, and there was the pungent smell of burning metal in the air.

I looked at the chain above and quickly pulled out another one. I then pulled out a thin piece of iron wire from the bundle of explosives and tied it to the tail end of the cold firework in the shape of a hook. In this way, even if it couldn’t be hung on the chain, it could still hang on the higher cave wall when it fell.

When the first firework went out, I rubbed my eyes and immediately went to throw the next batch. At this time, however, I suddenly found that the panting had stopped and the whole crevice was quiet.

I broke out in a cold sweat.

Xiao Hua’s flashlight was suddenly covered by something, and I watched in a daze as something seemed to fall down from above.

I reflexively shined my flashlight into the crevice and saw a flash of red. On the cold fireworks that had just fallen, there was a blood-red thing lying on the ground.

It was as thick as my wrist and was curiously staring at the cold fireworks. Its whole body was colored a painful-looking red.

It was a cockscomb snake.

Other than the cold sweat that seemed to be pouring from my body, I wasn't surprised. There were jars from the Queen of the West's country, after all, so it was perfectly normal for these snakes to be here. But to my dismay, the thought hadn't even crossed my mind before. When I saw these jars, I should have immediately been aware of this possibility.

Despite my flashlight's beam, the red cockscomb snake basically ignored me and coiled around the cold fireworks. Then, it suddenly raised up and emitted a few gasps.

I immediately understood what the sound was. It must have heard Xiao Hua's breathing and began to imitate it. This snake was able to copy the most frequently used sounds that other creatures made.

As I listened to the sound in the quiet space, I managed to calm down a little. Damn it. At this point, there was only one thing I could do. I pulled the bolt back on the gun and aimed at the cockscomb snake's head. But when I looked at it, I found that I couldn't fire.

If the pellets sprayed the nearby copper nails and triggered the mechanism, then we'd both die.

I watched as the snake sniffed the cold fireworks, ignoring our flashlights and the noises we were making. I struck the cold fireworks in my hand, hooked them around the iron teeth of the bearing off to one side, and immediately rushed to the other side. As the fireworks burned fiercely, the strong smell started to spread.

Come on, come on, I thought to myself. Come on out. The taste here is fresher.

The smoke burned and gradually died down. I pointed my gun at the position of the fireworks and waited for the cockscomb snake to slither out. But when I looked at the fireworks, I found that something was wrong.

The bright flames lit up the whole dark room, revealing a man-shaped thing covered in black hair. It was leaning out of the mouth of the well, and half covered in water.

Chapter 52 Black Hair

What was it?

Before I could get a good look at it, however, there was a splash and the thing suddenly jumped out of the water and came at me.

Thank God my conditioned reflexes were good. It was so fast that I couldn't even believe it. I immediately rolled to the side, and the whole thing hit the rock wall behind me.

This was the first time I found that my body was faster than my nerves, and I realized it was because of what I had experienced recently. No matter what kind of thing it was, I must've seen something much tougher before and already learned how to kill it.

As soon as I fell, I immediately got up again. If it had been the me from before, I would've gone to see what it was. This time, however, I didn't know what was going on so I didn't bother. Even though I really wanted to turn around, I quickly went back to the bearing instead.

At this moment, I heard a strong blast of wind come from the place where I had just stood, and that thing immediately came rushing at me again. If I hesitated even a little bit, I would definitely collide with it.

But even if I hid well, the situation was extremely unfavorable. Before I could get up, I found that my waist had run out of strength after rolling two times. I immediately ran forward, pivoted, brought the shotgun stock up to my armpit, and pulled the trigger.

It had a strong recoil, but I had learned that before at the bronze tree in the Qinling Mountains. Now that I was mentally prepared and experienced, I threw my hand out along the recoil, instantly threw it on my shoulder, and fired another shot behind me.

All the movements were almost instantaneous. When I heard something tumbling behind me, I knew I must have hit it, but I didn't know how effective it was. I ran around the bearing and back to the channel, tossed the gun in my hand, and opened the equipment bag. I pulled out the other two guns, stuck one on the wall, loaded the other one, and then lay down on the ground and turned around.

I had imagined that it was almost on my back by now, in which case I could blow it away with one shot. But at that moment, I found that there was nothing behind me.

At almost the same time, I saw the iron chain above my head shaking, and then the cold fireworks went out.

The whole room instantly became dark, and I instinctively rushed forward. I had no time to exclaim in horror before I felt a sharp pain behind me and something caught me on my back.

I was thrown to the ground by the impact, and my foot immediately twisted.

During these few seconds just now, I had almost realized my full potential. I had even felt as if I could handle it. But it was still just an illusion, damn it. My heart was so electrified—almost desperate even—that I felt like I was going to die.

Between one breath and the next, my feet suddenly left the ground and I lost my grip on the gun. I tumbled and rolled into the wellhead under the bearing and then fell into the water.

It was completely dark after entering the water, but I immediately hit the water wheel below. The current was so fast that it immediately carried me away, but I bumped into something with a jerk. It was an underwater chain.

As soon as I grabbed it, I felt around and found that there was a lot of space under the wellhead. But there were a lot of intersecting chains strung up like a net that encompassed the whole area.

The thing immediately moved to follow after me, but I had entered the water first, and the strong current made it pause.

I knew that no matter what it was, it would be impossible for it to kill me quickly under the water. My back felt like it was on fire, but I held my breath and quickly took out two cold fireworks. I stretched my hand out of the water, lit them, and threw them out.

As the fire's dazzling white light descended towards the water, I saw a vague shadow in front of me.

I immediately kicked my leg out. Even though I had twisted my foot earlier, I actually didn't feel any pain as I pushed it against that thing's crotch.

I felt like I was treading on a thick tire, but the thing didn't have much leverage underwater. I immediately kicked out and used it as a stepping stone to rush back to the surface.

It was surprisingly bright outside of the wellhead. I shouted as I used everything I had to climb up. I finally managed to flip myself out of the wellhead, but before I could get up, the water exploded again and the thing climbed back up.

At that moment, I finally saw what it was.

It almost looked like an ape, but I could tell that it was a person. They were extremely thin, but their body was covered in the hair we had seen in the cave before. Their nails were extremely long and seemed to be the color of ash. This guy looked like he'd been here for years.

What scared me the most was his eyes. I couldn't see them at all because the sockets were full of hair.

His movements were very strange and unhuman-like as he came up and quickly descended on me. This time, I didn't have the strength to escape, so I had to use my remaining strength to light the only cold firework I had on me and use it as a weapon.

Unfortunately, it didn't have any effect. The creature practically fell on me with one leap, and a claw caught the edge of my ear, immediately creating a very deep bloody mark.

I couldn't think at all. I was maddened with disgust and turned my hand to punch the thing in the face. But it was like hitting a lump of steel. The next time I swung the cold firework, I smacked the thing on the head, knocking it all over the place. I didn't think it would work, but I found that the thing suddenly backed away.

At that moment, I saw that its hair was all twisted and I suddenly remembered that these fucking hairs were afraid of my blood.

I touched the blood on my ear and immediately threw it at the thing. As it shrank back, a strange feeling overcame me and I shouted, "Kneel down!"

But instead of listening to me, it suddenly stood up, climbed to the top of the chain along the bearing, and began to climb into the crevice.

As soon as I saw this, I knew it wasn't good. I immediately turned around and grabbed the short-headed shotgun that was nearby. I took aim at the creature, shot it down, and followed up with another shot to stun it. I ran to the crevice, only to find that its collarbone was actually attached to a chain, and the other end led into the water.

I immediately went up, grabbed the chain, and wrapped it around the teeth on the bearing. The rotating shaft immediately pulled the chain and dragged it up. I didn't expect that the creature was so powerful that the chain only pulled for a few minutes before the whole axle stopped. But the creature was still pulled to death by the chain and couldn't move for a while. I took out a few bottles of wine from my equipment bag, threw them at the creature, flicked my lighter on, and then threw it over as well.

The fire immediately started to burn, spreading so fast that the creature's whole body was engulfed in an instant. It soon lost its strength and the wheel axle continued to rotate until the chain was wound up. The fire went out as the creature was dragged under the wheel's axle.

After the alcohol had burned everything away, I discovered that it was actually an ancient green corpse under the mass of hair. Its mouth was wide open and its eyes were empty as it lay smoking in the water. The smell of burning hair filled the air, making me feel sick.

As my legs began to shake, I breathed a sigh of relief and touched the injury on my back. I was afraid the skin had been torn open to such an extent that I would feel my spine.

As soon as I was distracted, I saw the green corpse's head suddenly move. I picked up the gun, thinking that it was still alive. Several bubbles suddenly appeared on the water's surface, and then it spit out a red thing from its mouth and threw it on my neck.

In the flash of red light, I saw that it was a red snake. It wrapped around my neck, raised its head to the corner of my mouth, and went in for the attack.

Chapter 53 Snake Bite

I didn't even feel scared. It just felt as if my face was cold. But when I pulled it off, my face was burning in pain and I could clearly feel the marks where the fangs had sunk in.

I covered my cheek, unable to believe it. At that moment, I felt a numbness start to spread from the wound.

I remembered when A Ning had died. It had felt so sudden and unrealistic at the time, and I didn't expect that I would die at the hands of the same thing.

The numbness soon spread throughout my body. When I saw the thing coiled there and looking straight at me, I suddenly realized that something was wrong.

This thing wasn't a mere animal, damn it. Was it intelligent?

I slowly retreated, thinking that I had to tell Xiao Hua about the situation here before I died.

I took a few steps back, trying to find the crevice in the wall. I went to shout, only to find that my tongue and throat were all numb. I fell on our equipment bag and touched a piece of pottery.

It was from when Xiao Hua and I had tested its load-bearing capacity earlier.

I picked up one of the pieces and wrote a few words, but I didn't know what I had written. I felt the snake come at me again, but I had no strength to concentrate. Everything was fading away.

My last thought was, *A Ning will surely make fun of me if I've also been bitten to death by a snake.* I wanted to laugh.

But just as everything was about to disappear, I suddenly heard a strange sound.

I felt violently dizzy, and right when I was about to lose consciousness, everything seemed to stop.

I don't remember what state I was in at that time, but I clearly remember the severe dizziness, which made me unable to think. I was only awake for a moment, and I remember thinking, *how the fuck am I not dead yet? This pain is killing me.*

After a long time, I felt someone come up to my side, and the dizziness slowly disappeared. When I woke up, I found Xiao Hua and his Sichuan buddy beside me.

I couldn't feel anything besides my head. I couldn't even do anything like talk or move my eyes. I could only see them through the seam of my partially opened eyes, and it was a long time before I gradually recovered.

I didn't know why I didn't die.

As they helped me up, Xiao Hua looked at my face and said, "You're lucky. If we didn't save you in time—"

"I'm lucky?" I wondered.

"Something bit your face, probably a snake. Looks like the venom was stuck in your mouth and barely entered your bloodstream through the bite. In the future, your speech will certainly be even worse."

I touched my cheek and was surprised to find that it was taped. I quickly checked my neck and was relieved to find that everything was fine.

"The snake?" I asked.

He looked around, "It should still be here, but I scattered all the herbs I usually carry with me around. It should be safe here. You've been passed out for two hours. Don't talk, or the wound on your face will scar." He handed me the water again and made a gesture. "Drink some water and turn your face to one side, otherwise it will leak out from the bite wound."

I did as he suggested, feeling very surprised. In those two hours, I felt like I had fainted for at least several days. How was it such a short amount of time?

After looking around, I noticed that I was still lying in the place where I had passed out. Since I hadn't been moved, it really had only been two hours.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I'm fine. I didn't meet the snake. When I came back, I saw you lying here, and then—" he pointed to the other side where the charred green corpse lay, "—I saw that. I didn't know you could fight so well. I thought you were dead."

"If I die here, the Xie and Wu families will be even." I coughed a few times. He asked me what was going on and how it had happened.

I briefly recounted the story, and then noticed that one end of the rope was tied to the rotating bearing nearby. It was hanging straight and taut in the air, and I didn't know where the other end was tied to. This was a simple single-rope pathway that stretched through the crevice. It seemed that Xiao Hua had successfully reached the other end and set up this rope-way.

He apparently didn't rush to check on my situation after I fell into a coma, but continued to climb inside instead. He reached the end of the crevice, completed his task, and then came out to see if I was dead or not.

I couldn't help but feel a little upset. I didn't know whether this could be considered a ruthless or firm mentality, but he obviously didn't feel burdened by it.

I had finally found a difference between the two of us.

But since I didn't have the physical strength and didn't want to break our tacit understanding, I didn't bother expressing this emotion. I knew that when it came to this industry, the habit of desperately rescuing your companions didn't exist. There seemed to be a kind of prior agreement

where two people decided to save themselves if both parties were in danger. It was actually very fair if you thought about it.

It was true that Xiao Hua was uncertain about my situation at the time, and even I would hesitate to go back and rescue someone if I were him.

I couldn't help thinking of Fatty and Poker-face again. If they were here, the black-haired corpse would've had his head cut off before he could scratch my back. Or I would have seen Fatty rush out from those pottery jars and screw everything up. But I would have been saved.

At that moment, I felt an extreme sense of insecurity, more than I had felt before. Although we were three people now, I was really only responsible for myself. It was a very disconcerting thought. At the same time, I suddenly understood why Xiao Hua hadn't been grateful but angry at me for going into the cave to save him.

He was used to solving his problems by himself. Before he did these kinds of things, he had already accepted that there wouldn't be any backup or help. He wouldn't blame anyone for his own death, nor would he blame himself for others' death.

Was this the Mystic Nine's mindset? I felt a chill in my heart.

"This rope is so long that no matter how taut it is, our weight will pull it into a downward arc, and the fixed place where the two ends are knotted will be under a lot of pressure. I don't know if the rope will break halfway after we start climbing." He looked at me staring blankly at the rope and continued, "I tied the rope at a very high point in the room at the end of the crevice, so the pressure will be more concentrated on this side. Like this, as long as someone is watching, we'll know in advance before the rope breaks."

"You sound fucking professional," I said. "What did you see inside? What's the machine's operating room like?"

"Well," Xiao Hua's face looked a little strange, "I can't describe it. I've never seen anything like it."

His expression told me that I had to look at it myself to know what it was. I sighed and went to stand up to see how I was fairing. But just as I moved, I felt my elbow press onto something. I looked down and saw that it was that piece of pottery from before.

At the same time, I saw something crooked written beside the pottery piece.

I remembered that I had been trying to write Xiao Hua a message with it before I fell into my coma. I was very disoriented and had no idea whether I had written the information clearly, but now it seemed that I had indeed written something.

I looked at it subconsciously and suddenly froze.

There were a lot of crooked words on the ground, but it had only felt like a few at the time I was writing them.

I took a flashlight and found that it was a long set of numbers.

189652802200059

“What is this?” I asked Xiao Hua.

“Aren’t they your last words?” Xiao Hua asked. “I thought it was your card number and password.”

“My last words?” I was confused and thought to myself, *I didn’t know what I was writing at that time. Why would I write these numbers?*

But based on the handwriting, I had done it in one stroke. And the strokes were very consistent, too. It was so untidy that I couldn’t tell that it was my handwriting, but I realized that I was really the one who had written it.

This must have been written when I was about to lose consciousness. But why these numbers?

Chapter 54 Password

I felt very puzzled. I couldn't think of any reason why I would write this down. I looked at the last few numbers, which were familiar to me and embedded in my memory.

02200059

This was the password for opening the box containing the copper fish, which was said to have been translated from a silk book. I still didn't know what use it was, and it had only appeared a few times. I sometimes thought about those things and whether they were very important. But as Xiuxiu had said, it was like reading a novel from back to front. I didn't know the cause and effect of these numbers.

But the most important thing was that at the moment I lost consciousness, I wasn't thinking about these numbers at all. I was wondering if I should write something to Xiao Hua, but it definitely wasn't this.

Was there something wrong with my brain? I felt very strange and uncomfortable.

After I stood up, Xiao Hua discovered the injury on my back. He shook his head and bandaged me silently, while the Sichuan guy opposite us said, "It seems that Granny Huo will have to wait a few more days while Young Master Three takes care of his injuries."

"No," I said. "I can stand it. It'll just leave a few scars at most." I wasn't sure why I suddenly said that. I felt like I didn't want to stop and recuperate so that I could hurry up and face the things I had written down. I knew that if I thought it over carefully, I'd definitely learn something I didn't want to.

Before Xiao Hua could argue with me, I moved my hands and feet and felt that my body wasn't seriously affected. I limped to the bottom of the ropeway to see how strong it was.

“Are you alright?” Xiao Hua felt like something was wrong with me, and gave me a strange look

I didn’t answer him but merely gave him a perfunctory smile.

“It won’t be a big problem to go in,” he said, “but there might be snakes falling from above, so you have to be careful.”

“There won’t be many snakes here, otherwise we’d be dead. Don’t you have medicine?” I remembered that sulfur had also been used in the Queen of the West’s city to repel the poisonous snakes. “Wiping it all along the rope is very effective for this kind of snake.”

Xiao Hua felt even more puzzled but didn’t ask again. He immediately started teaching me how to use the rope.

This kind of rope-way was very difficult to climb. In fact, there were only two ways to go about it: walk on it like a steel wire or hang upside down on it. Obviously, we could only choose the second option.

We had mountaineering equipment, so we could buckle ourselves to the rope and save our strength. If we wanted to rest, we could let our hands go and let the equipment bear our weight.

Xiao Hua went first because he was the lightest. He moved very quickly as he smeared the snake-repellent medicine on the rope.

Ten minutes later, he dropped down on the other side and waved his flashlight twice.

I stepped on the burned corpse’s hairy body and climbed onto the bearing while Xiao Hua’s buddy helped me fasten the mountaineering buckle to the rope.

The wound on my back was burning, but the herbs Xiao Hua gave me contained an anesthetic so the pain wasn’t intolerable. I clenched my teeth, composed myself, and then started climbing.

Climbing took less effort than I expected, but the main problem was the rope shaking. If I made slightly bigger movements, the rope would start shaking to a large extent, so I couldn't move forward in a continuous motion. I could only go a few steps, stop, go a few more steps, stop, and wait for the shaking to stop.

The flashlight was gripped in my teeth and shone on the feldspar hanging above the gap. The ancient stones were solidified there, and even though I couldn't see any higher, I could faintly feel the old chains.

I tried not to think about anything.

No snakes fell down, and I quickly climbed to the place where Xiao Hua had found something strange earlier.

When I focused the flashlight's beam and looked at it, I found that there was a place in the middle of the crevice where the feldspar didn't hang down, but many leather-like things did. I had been to a leather processing factory before, so after looking at the color, I was almost sure that those skins were air-dried and very old.

I didn't stay too long but continued to move forward. More than ten minutes later, I saw Xiao Hua's flashlight shining at me from a very close distance. "Be careful when you come down." He said to me.

When I turned to look at him, I saw him standing at the crevice's exit. The flashlight's beam swept under him and I found that his feet seemed to be wet.

After carefully unhooking and jumping off the rope, I immediately slipped and fell into the water. It turned out that the end of the crevice had a pool.

When Xiao Hua helped me up, I discovered that the water didn't even reach my knees. The ground wasn't flat, and the whole area was actually a funnel-shaped slope. I could see that the ground in the center of this stone chamber was very deep, while the surrounding area was very shallow. At the

same time, I also noticed that there was something huge under the water in the center of the stone chamber.

The water was very clear but frighteningly cold, and I had to grit my teeth to endure the piercing sensation. I waded down carefully until the water reached my waist and I could get a clear look at the thing.

It was really an indescribable object. I could only be certain that it was made of bronze, but it looked like a huge hornet's nest at first glance.

The irregular surface not only had ancient detailed patterns but also had numerous holes, all of which were connected by iron chains that led to underwater holes in the rock walls. The iron chains that were connected to the bearing were also connected to several holes in this strange nest.

"Shit," I couldn't believe my eyes, "this is an old password module."

Chapter 55 Unlock the Password

“These chains extending from the bearing affect the mechanism’s controls inside. Only one chain starts the correct decoding, while the others all represent errors.” I counted a total of five chains extending out from there.

I was very surprised because I had never thought that there would be such a mature modular technology in ancient China. The most famous type was movable type printing. Modular technology could be used many times beyond any geographical limits, so the mechanism here could obviously be used anywhere.

I immediately thought of Poker-face. The Zhang family’s ancestors had set up such a clever mechanism considering Sichuan and Guangxi had different geological conditions, weather, and various factors on both sides. It was necessary to ensure that the interconnected mechanisms set up on both sides were stable enough and wouldn’t be damaged over a thousand years.

Since the entire mechanism was for their own children and grandchildren, it didn’t matter which part went wrong first. Any error could cause their death.

If you were an ordinary craftsman, you could only use clever techniques to design mechanisms suitable for both sides according to the respective conditions of the two places. But it was impossible to use such a thing in ancient times because the craftsmen at that time couldn’t figure out what would happen hundreds of years later. As a result, the mechanisms designed according to their respective geographical environment ended up being two completely different things.

But modularization was different. It ensured that you would have the same effect wherever you put it, no matter the environment. This was why KFC tasted the same wherever you went. Movable type printing ensured that a set of typefaces could be used repeatedly and were of high quality.

“So what?” Xiao Hua didn’t understand.

“The ancients had the habit of considering problems from a practical nature,” I said. “For example, with the former printing press, a book had to be engraved with a full page, and it couldn’t be used after it was finished. An ancient publisher was very upset with this and invented movable type printing so that he could fire half of the carvers and keep only a few of the best ones. No one modularizes for the sake of it; the ancients did it in anticipation of a great deal of repetitive work.”

If the craftsmen here used modules, then the only reason I could think of was that they didn’t want to design mechanisms separately for all the links. As a result, it was very likely that all the mechanisms here and those in Guangxi used the same things as this hornet’s nest. If Poker-face knocked on the stones, he might see the same thing as us.

The designers of Zhang Jialou designed everything and made these mechanisms ready before they even chose the building site. In this way, they only needed to select the right place, then smash a few holes and install these modules.

“I kind of know what you mean.” Xiao Hua obviously understood my way of thinking better than Fatty would have. “Fuck, you’ve gotta be shitting me. Are you saying that Zhang Jialou is moving?”

I nodded. “The biggest advantage of modularization is that it can be removed and taken away. If you look at the Yangshi Lei and other traces, the chains here are iron, but only this thing is bronze. It shows that throughout history, the Zhang family’s ancestor’s coffins had been placed in more than one location. The so-called Zhang Jialou will definitely be their final resting place.”

Xiao Hua gave me a meaningful smile, “I found another reason why Granny Huo asked me to bring you. To some extent, you’re also a little knowledgeable shit.”

I grinned, thinking that these words made it sound like he didn’t want me to be here before.

I squatted down and shined the flashlight at the thing, “I think Yangshi Lei is just a contractor. They helped the so-called Zhang family build the Zhang Jialou to house the coffins, but they didn’t participate any further.”

“The designer Lei Siqui’s old age was a matter of the Empress Dowager Cixi’s era. The Jinshan and Yinshan Mountains of the Great Qing Dynasty had already been spent. Lei Siqui’s family was large and had a wide range of friends. Whether they were sponsored by friends or took private jobs, they may have helped the Zhang family build a new ancestral grave.”

“Yes, based on how these ancient buildings were constructed in very strange and inaccessible places, maybe the Zhang family had to find the best craftsmen every time they built their ancestral graves.”

“So, if they were at the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, then they might’ve had ties with Wang Zanghai.” Xiao Hua said.

I nodded. It was very likely so long as the family really had such a profound history. And I believed that with the development of transportation, the two places got further and further away from each other. Maybe in the beginning, the cave where the “key” was placed was only a mountain away from the Zhang family’s mass burial site, and then it gradually became a province. After that, it became the distance between Sichuan and Guangxi. If the descendants of the Zhang family were still there, they would probably move abroad next time.

This also explained another one of my doubts: I had been unable to determine which dynasty the things here belonged to. If our theory was correct, then years of renovation meant that some things would leave behind traces of several dynasties, which would basically be impossible to determine.

“Forget about that. If you’re so good, can you guess which of these chains is correct?” Xiao Hua asked me. “Or, do we just have to try one by one? There are five iron chains here. If we pull them wrong, we’ll activate the trap

above and the pig will be shot into a hedgehog or something, but we'll be fine here."

In theory, all we had to do was pull all five chains and go out. But I didn't know what kind of trap had been set up. If a boulder fell down and sealed us inside, it would be certain death.

"The general password right now will have error restrictions. Only if the errors exceed a certain number of times will there be a penalty program. But the ancients weren't so kind, and this place hasn't been used very frequently. So, once a mistake is made, it may be fatal. We have to know exactly which one to pull."

"What's the matter, Professor?" Xiao Hua said as he looked at me. "I think I can open a class called 'Academic Grave Robbery in the Mystic Nine.' Let you give a few lessons."

I thought it was kind of funny since I was sometimes really good at being a teacher. This was especially true whenever I thought about something because I always wanted to say it out loud immediately so that others could feel the same way. Fatty's thoughts were impulsive and there wasn't anyone else who accompanied me to analyze things, but Xiao Hua could. As a result, I said a little more than usual. I used to think it was embarrassing, but I didn't think it was a big deal now after I had done it so often.

I looked at the whole hive, lost in thought. After a moment I asked him, "How do you make your rules?"

"How did you put it? Modularization? As you said, I've never seen such a thing before. In general, we find the traps that haven't been triggered yet and then destroy them. Our rule is to see how the mechanism's control works. So, if we do it my way, we'll have to knock on this hornet's nest."

The whole bronze ball was completely sealed and couldn't be opened. Moreover, it was full of water and we didn't have much time to take risks. And that wasn't even mentioning the fact that after opening it, we might completely destroy the operation inside. It would be just like that time when

I was a child and opened my alarm clock and found that the gears had fallen all over the floor and couldn't be recovered.

Xiao Hua helped me light the way as I tried to immerse myself in the water. I looked at the chains, noting that they were exactly the same. Presumably, neither the mechanism nor the correct chain had been used frequently.

“What do you think? All the dead people we saw above died at the hands of those hairs, and there was no sign of any trap being activated. If that's the case, either the Mystic Nine did nothing but steal those ancient books, or the traps weren't very destructive.” Xiao Hua said.

I knew what he meant, but I didn't dare assume anything right now. “We can't just guess. What if they really didn't do anything?”

“Impossible, I know the Mystic Nine and those other people. Unless they met something very, very horrible here and were scared out of their minds, they wouldn't let anything difficult stop them. But to scare them so bad... I can't imagine what would do that. The most direct evidence is that there's so much blood on the iron plate.”

Every time I thought about it, I kept feeling like something was wrong, “It doesn't make sense. There have to be some terrible measures in place for such a tightly designed mechanism. The ancient password isn't too complicated. If someone can make mistakes again and again, he'll soon be able to figure out the correct one, and it would be meaningless to set up such a tightly designed mechanism. But what you said is also reasonable. If it's just an ordinary control mechanism, the Mystic Nine wouldn't be scared away. Granny Huo said that there were great changes and heavy losses here. If there are only a few snakes or some bugs or some darts falling from the rocks, it wouldn't be impossible for them to handle such things on a large scale.”

Xiao Hua nodded: “For example, the black-haired corpse you burned, or even the hair outside. If it's of that nature—”

“What happened to me in the Qaidam Basin would happen. They may have even burned the black hairs in these jars, then carefully moved them out one by one, sealed them into glass boxes, and packed them to the National Museum. So, any actual threat isn’t a threat to them. Even if a dinosaur killed more than a dozen people here, they would immediately shoot it to death. But almost everything in this cave is intact, so it’s clear to see that they didn’t use any barbaric methods. Why?”

“What’s your conclusion?” Xiao Hua was a little impatient.

“I can only assume some details now. For example, why didn’t they get rid of those jars full of black hair? They had so many people, so much time, and whatever weapons they wanted. They still didn’t do anything with all this, so there’s obviously only one possibility: they didn’t think it was necessary.” I said. “Our elders, these old men, never took these jars seriously.”

I could roughly imagine the scene at that time. They ignored the black hairs, and the jars didn’t show any signs of damage, which indicated that the incident they finally encountered had nothing to do with either one of those things.

By the same token, Granny Huo had said that what had happened here to cause them such heavy losses wasn’t a real threat, and shouldn’t be considered an accident.

Something that could make the Mystic Nine lose on such a large scale wasn’t physical, but spiritual.

The misfortune they encountered must be something they couldn’t understand. There was no defense without understanding.

“They must have prepared everything and then activated the mechanism, thinking they could handle it,” I said. “But whatever happened was too strange and different from what they were expecting.”

Xiao Hua was still confused so I gave him an example, “If you activate the mechanism and then a random arrow flies towards you, you can use a shield

to block it. If a zombie is coming towards you, you can sweep it back with an AK-47. However, if something happens that you simply can't understand, you can't do anything about it. For example, say you activated the mechanism," I paused, "and then you disappeared and never showed up again."

I had heard before that a very strange disappearance occurred in the mountainous areas of Zhejiang. A group of forest rangers disappeared in the mountains, so the government sent people up to look for them. When three more people disappeared, the armed police and masses were mobilized. Others soon disappeared, never to be seen again, and blanket searches yielded no results. The old man in the mountain said that they were taken away by Mountain Granny. Eventually, the troops withdrew and went away.

At that time, if there really was a Granny as big as Ultraman, the grand mountain tours would've been wiped out. It was only with unexplainable events like this that it was possible to get people with abundant money and power to flinch.

"Of course, the actual situation may be even more bizarre," I continued. "Jin Wantang had said that many people who were carried down were covered in blood and all of them ended up dying. But we haven't confirmed it with the old lady, so we don't know the real situation and can't deduce more."

"All right." Xiao Hua smiled. "You said so much just to tell me not to rush in and touch the mechanism. I agree. But this doesn't help our situation, and now you've made me too afraid to even try."

The cold water was stinging the wound on my back and I couldn't bear it any longer. I took a few steps back and could feel the burning pain behind me. The anesthetic was obviously beginning to wear off. At this time, I saw more than a dozen thinner chains extending out from the hive.

These chains were obviously connected to the final trigger mechanism and led to more than a dozen small holes in the cave wall. I believed that as long

as some of the thick chains were pulled, some of these thin chains would surely be linked.

I looked at both sides and immediately realized what to do. It was actually very simple.

For a mechanism, there were only two choices: A was the correct step and the control to start the reward; B was the wrong step and the control to start the punishment.

There were three iron chains here that would be pulled by the bearing on the other side of the sequence, which was equivalent to a three-digit code. Then, the machine frame in this hive would move, pulling the thin iron chains that extend into the cave walls and starting the reward and punishment.

It was very simple. Most random tugs would be wrong and only the right tug would lead to the right sequence. Therefore, as long as we cut off all the thin iron chains, we could carry out endless experiments. We would pull the wrong sequence most of the time, but if we knew which ones were wrong, we could immediately find the correct one.

Although the sequence of one to five numbers was still somewhat cumbersome, this kind of physical work was nothing when compared with modern combination locks.

Xiao Hua flipped me off when I told him. I couldn't believe he didn't expect it, so I simply patted him on the shoulder.

The next step required physical strength and careful work. We numbered all the thin chains first, and then carefully broke them with a hacksaw, marking both ends of the chain to avoid confusion.

Then, we tried pulling them one by one in order, exactly the same as what I had said. The result was that most of the thin chains were pulled in the same sequence, with a total of twenty-three thin chains. The order of the pulling punishment was four, five, eight, twelve, and twenty-one.

In the end, we finally discovered a different order from this punishment sequence.

Xiao Hua recorded it, then reattached the chains with mountaineering buckles and tried again.

My heart leaped into my throat as I looked at the thin iron chain instantly being pulled. Then, we heard an ancient heavy sound coming from the cave wall.

It lasted for five or six minutes and then stopped. Xiao Hua and I looked at each other. We were both alive and nothing had happened, meaning we had succeeded. There must've been some changes in the stone chamber above.

Chapter 56 Success

We packed our things, stumbled back to the stone chamber, and immediately saw the changes that had taken place.

On some of the alcoves in the stone wall where the ancient books had been placed, I could see that part of the relief had been pushed out, while other parts hadn't.

The whole rock wall turned into a very strange jigsaw puzzle, where some places were pieced together and others weren't. It still basically had the alcoves.

"Is this the correct answer?" I muttered to myself.

Xiao Hua sat down on the ground, unscrewed his canteen, and took a few sips. "It's a waste of time. The answer seems surprisingly simple."

"What does that mean?" I asked as I took a closer look.

He remained silent. I wanted to keep analyzing it, but I found that I had lost my strength and my brain had completely stopped functioning.

After a long silence, he rubbed his temples and said, "It's no use thinking about it again. At this stage, it has nothing to do with us. This is probably the only result we can obtain from the Guangxi tips. Let's go back over our process and see if there are any flaws. If not, then we should hand over the baton."

I knew what he meant: we had the "clue", but the place where the clue was executed was thousands of miles away. It wasn't here, so it was useless for us to think about it anymore.

I also sat down, and the two of us slowly thought about the whole process again. In the end, we agreed unanimously that the problem wasn't that serious.

“If this is still wrong, it can only be said that they’re unlucky.” Xiao Hua took out his camera and started taking pictures, capturing almost every detail in the whole stone room.

I kept to the side, immediately relaxing my guard. I felt as if this was easier than all the other trips I had made before. In this way, the work would soon come to an end.

“Fuck, why do these Zhangs want to make things so complicated?” Xiao Hua asked.

“It’s not complicated at all. If you think about it, you’ll find that this is the only way. If we were back in ancient times, we certainly wouldn’t have any idea what to do about it. You would have to draw all these things down and send them from Sichuan to Guangxi quickly. At that time, these two places were very deep in the mountains and there was no road. Do you know how long it would take to go back and forth?” I said. “It’s impossible to do it in a year. Besides, there were tigers, bandits, and robbers... shit, Guangxi was basically a no-man’s land. It was a place of exile for the Nanman and there was a Qiang Village, so it was impossible to enter Zhang Jialou at that time. What’s more, you shouldn’t forget that this tomb was moving.”

“So, the Zhangs themselves were also very dangerous? Maybe several of their precious descendants died on the road. Why did they have to bury all their ancestors together and then keep moving the tomb?”

“I think it was because of necessity.” I sighed.

The photos were imported into a computer, faxed to Banai using a public phone line in the nearby town, and then the man over there quickly delivered them to Granny Huo’s hands.

I didn’t know what they would feel when they saw these photos, but it was probably similar to what we felt when we first saw theirs.

Then, there was a long wait.

We had nothing to do. I stayed hanging in mid-air in the nest, chatting with Xiao Hua and looking at the four snow-capped mountains in the distance. Those dreamlike clouds at dusk, with the fair air and humid wind were just like a fantasy.

Xiao Hua was obviously more accepting of me now. We talked about a lot of things, from the time when we were young, to after our separation, and the things we had learned to play. Sometimes we laughed a lot, while at other times we were quiet with emotion. Since our two backgrounds were so similar, even our personalities were very comparable. But my grandfather was devoted to whitewashing the business, while Xiao Hua—because of his family relationship—had to inherit his family.

“God is fair. Everyone thinks that the Xie family is an upstanding family, but no one realizes that it’s like a curse. After Xie Lianhuan died, my father died soon after, and several of my uncles died one after another. Then, my grandfather finally left and I was suddenly the only one left in the whole family. Those women who split up or remarried were left to me to deal with. It was a mess.” Xiao Hua was drinking as he leaned against the cliff. “You said you’ve been away since you were young, so you have no experience with such things. This is actually a blessing. After my grandfather died, the Xie family couldn’t even whitewash our business since there wasn’t anything left. My mother tried hard to maintain the family’s face outside, but I was only eight years old when I came out as the little boss.” He paused. “I have all the experience you don’t have, but you must believe me when I say that those experiences are very, very uncomfortable.

“When the Xie family fell, it was like everyone abandoned ship and countless people came to cause trouble. Fortunately, my grandfather was very cautious in doing things and had already prepared for it before he died. He arranged for me to go to Er Ye to study drama, which was a sign that the elders accepted the younger generation. The Xie family—and our connections in the industry— allowed me to survive from the age of eight up until I was twenty-six years old. It was all thanks to my grandfather’s planning before he died, and Er Ye’s protection.” He said. “You might not

know, but I want to remind you that if you leave this circle, don't bother trying to enter it again. The people here are not good."

"Are you a good person or one of the bad ones?" I asked.

"What do you think?" He looked at me and sighed. "Do you think a good man, upon hearing that his childhood playmate's life and death was uncertain, would still ignore it and finish his own business first?"

"I thought it was one of your rules. Plus, we're not all that familiar with each other."

He smiled wryly. "Yes, it's a rule my grandfather set. He was too clever and could calculate everything, so I didn't dare think he was wrong. Do you know how many times I did such things before? I often wondered if I didn't listen to my grandfather and went back immediately, would those people still be alive?" He also smiled. "You can't have friends once you think like that, because you know you can't go back and save them. If you became friends with someone and this happened, then you'd be sad. So to prevent that and be able to abandon others with ease, I decided I couldn't be friends with anyone. It sounds a bit melodramatic, doesn't it?"

I didn't know how to answer him, so I just chuckled a few times.

"But these were my thoughts when I was a child." He said. "Now that I'm older, I've figured a few things out." He sighed and raised the wine bottle and motioned to me, "So, Little Master Three. With me here, you have to take care of yourself."

I returned the gesture, feeling less bitter in my heart. It was true that I had often felt that way and occasionally sighed with emotion, but there weren't many things that could be changed.

In this way, we chatted and bantered back and forth, and after five days, we finally got feedback from Guangxi.

We received more photos than we had initially sent, and I immediately saw how they worked.

Poker-face had copied us and scraped off the entire relief surface on their stone wall. Originally, the relief sculpture on the outer layer of the rock wall was carved on a layer that looked like stone. Someone wrote on the back of the photo that it was a mixture of egg whites and horse manure that had been pasted on a flat boulder and then embossed with the designs.

This explained why the relief sculpture looked as if it had been made so hastily. The material couldn't be carved on too much.

After the relief was removed, only a few places were actually carved out of the huge rock. Those parts couldn't be scraped off, and once we compared them, we found that they were the same as the alcoves in the wall here.

Moreover, the carved fragments on the boulder looked like buttons that could be pressed. They pressed the corresponding fragments one by one according to the photos we had sent, and then I saw a photo of Fatty standing in front of the separated boulder with bare arms and a thumbs up. The boulder had split down the middle and a gap had opened that was wide enough for people to pass through. The back of the photo read: Well done.

Xiao Hua and I high-fived, but we immediately found that behind this group of photos were more photos of a stone wall.

The message on the back was even more concise: 400 meters behind the first stone wall, there's a second stone wall. Please keep up your efforts.

There were a lot of relief patterns on these photos.

Xiao Hua and I smiled bitterly, but this time we didn't have any doubts. No matter what was in the picture, we didn't have to unravel it. We just had to go down the corridor of the second mechanism and do it again.

If it was a novel, maybe something would've happened in the meantime, but this time was really much easier than I thought. We prepared better this

round and got the arrangement of the second set of reliefs on the second day. During the three days it took them to open the third stone wall, nothing else happened.

After they unlocked it, we got their feedback. According to the number of chains on this mechanism, I knew this was the last hurdle. Once they entered, they should finally see the Zhang Jialou. We packed everything up in the stone room and took one last look at the reliefs. I couldn't believe it was really over.

I had never been so relaxed, nor had I ever felt so fulfilled. From childhood to adulthood, everyone thought that I was a person who wouldn't do great things. This time, however, I proved that I had done it. The sense of achievement really felt great. I finally understood why some people were so persistent in their pursuit of success.

Xiao Hua was also very happy. The big stone in his heart had been put down and now all he had to do was wait for news from their side.

We were sure we didn't need to stay here anymore, so we went to the bottom of the cliff. If there was good news, we'd go back to the village or simply go to Guangxi and wait to celebrate in Banai.

I thought about what the old woman had promised me, but I didn't rush to cash in on it. On one hand, I was injured all over and didn't have the strength to think about these things. On the other hand, I didn't want to appear too utilitarian. But I still wanted Xiao Hua to bring it up and tell me.

But that was obviously impossible. On our second day of rest, Xiao Hua didn't have anything to say at all. I finally couldn't help but ask him first.

He was leaned up against the cave wall, playing with his cell phone. When I suddenly asked him, he showed a rather apologetic expression, "I'm sorry, I forgot. I don't really care much about it myself."

"I can tell," I said. "Seeing as I saved your life, please give me a good word."

“If I must.” Xiao Hua put his phone back in his pocket. “But why do you want to know the truth of this matter so badly? In my opinion, it’s better not to know.”

I didn’t want to explain too much, so I ended up scolding him. “Just tell me what’s going. I’ll tell you what happened to me when I’ve heard it all.”

“All right.” Xiao Hua said with a smile. “Xiuxiu should have told you about the seemingly earth-shattering thing our grandfathers did here?”

I nodded, and Xiao Hua continued, “Then that saves me a lot of trouble. Let me think about where to start.” He scratched his head. “In fact, the whole thing should have been started by Zhang Da Fo Ye. You also know about that?”

Zhang Da Fo Ye was the head of the Mystic Nine. I had heard some anecdotes about him before, but I didn’t know if Xiao Hua wanted to tell me about them, so I just shook my head.

Xiao Hua said, “Then I’ll probably tell you, that you—” he paused, “don’t be surprised by what you hear. It’s basically true.”

The Zhang family and Zhang Da Fo Ye were from the north and migrated to the south at some point. But the origin and background of this family in the north were very mysterious. First, it came from a large mountain clan in the Jilin area, but people in the north didn’t know anything about them.

Even Zhang Da Fo Ye himself was confused about his origin. He said that when he was in the north, his family’s ancestral teachings were very low-key. He only knew that their family background wasn’t honorable and that this branch of theirs seemed to have been driven out hundreds of years ago by another large family surnamed Zhang.

Zhang Da Fo Ye had told this story himself at the wine table. It sounded very hackneyed now, as if he also thought it was a legend.

Maybe hundreds of years ago, in the area of Jilin, there was a very mysterious family of grave robbers living in seclusion in the mountains. They were indifferent to the rest of the world and carried out a strict policy of intermarriage. Except for the chosen stewards, everyone else lived in a gathering place in the remote mountains and didn't associate with outsiders at all.

Later, one of them fell in love with the daughter of a hunter and impregnated her. The family was so angry that they were about to kill the fetus in the woman's womb, but she refused and finally chose to leave the family. The man was tortured, deprived of the family's unique characteristics, and then expelled.

The man and the hunter's daughter left that place and came to the city of Jilin. Fortunately, he was clever and patient, and they relied on his grave-robbing skills to gradually raise a family.

Since they were afraid of their family's surveillance, they lived a very low-key life all their lives. This later became their family's ancestral teachings. After several generations, the family had gradually become a very large hidden force in Kanto.

It was said that the second generation of that descendant once went back to the place where their parents were driven out. They wanted to find their grandparents but found that their ancestral home was in ruins and they didn't know where they had gone. But in those ruins, they found the secret of why their ancestors were isolated from the world.

It was said that they had found a huge cellar, which had been built by this family. It contained numerous iron coffins that held all the family's ancestors.

It was frightening under the cellar, but the coffins on the lowest floor—i.e., the oldest ones—had been removed. It was obvious that the family had left in a hurry, and didn't have a lot of time to escape. Without exception, these remaining coffins all appeared to be in a strange state.

They burned down the cellar to cover up the secret, but it still became a family legend.

A few decades ago, during China's most turbulent era, Zhang Da Fo Ye—as the largest local power in Changsha—participated in the revolution when the new and old regimes alternated. As someone in this business, he was highly skilled in martial arts, possessed special skills, and had great appeal. All of this enabled him to establish himself in the center of power. Zhang Da Fo Ye's alias at that time isn't known, but in short, his position was very high (at least in the primary power group).

In such a high position, it was only natural that he would come into contact with some key figures.

A certain leader just so happened to learn the secret from him. At that time, he may have said it as a joke in a small gathering, but the leader listened to it and was very curious.

After the revolution was over, everyone grew older year by year. Zhang Da Fo Ye retired to the countryside, thinking that he would finish his life in this way. But one year, he suddenly received a secret invitation and ended up seeing the leader again.

The leader at that time was already in his twilight years and Zhang Da Fo Ye could obviously tell from their conversation that this person feared aging and death. The leader asked him to look for his ancestors' secret.

As a result, Zhang Da Fo Ye had to search through his family's records. He even used his connections to search through numerous county annals and finally found some clues. No one knows the specific process he used, but he found clues on this side of Sichuan's Siguniang Mountain, which led to the "largest grave robbery in history."

The leader's health deteriorated very rapidly at that time, so they had to carry out the very risky exploration even though the time wasn't ripe. As a result, the largest grave-robbing operation in history eventually turned into

the Mystic Nine's greatest disaster. At that time, their backbone was almost destroyed and the best members died.

The project was under the direct command of the leader, so another deputy had been put in charge. But that year, both the deputy and leader died one right after another, and the whole project ended automatically. Few people knew about it.

I remembered the photo I saw from Uncle Two that year. The man in the photo had such a high status that I couldn't believe it, but now it really seemed to be true.

"Fortunately, the project was so confidential that no one knew such a thing had happened after those two people died. In the ensuing turmoil, the Mystic Nine fell out of power and many old people died one right after another. It could be said that the golden age of the old Changsha tomb robbers had come to an end. Since then, the situation had been calm and everyone thought the matter was over. Granny Huo, Xie Jiuye, and all the others consciously began to sweep it under the rug to try and get rid of the shadow. At the same time, in order to boost business and divide into regions, the large families began to marry and cooperate with the government." Xiao Hua said. "But they didn't expect that this matter would continue. As soon as they entered the government's door, their children were already watched and nurtured. As you know, this initial military group's power was very deep, and while using them, the second and third groups had already taken shape.

"It seems that they had actually completed a thorough investigation and selection in the mid-1970s when Huo Ling and your Uncle Three's generation were under twenty years old. I believe your father, your Uncle Two, and your Uncle Three all know about this. It was terrible at that time and young people were very fanatical. While the old power was declining, the new one had actually started to operate."

Xiao Hua called the leader of that year "Force A," and said that they didn't give up the secret exploration. After the leader died, Force A's successor

accepted the Mystic Nine's disappearance on the surface, but in fact, Huo Ling and the others who worked in the archaeological team had already started on the next project. Moreover, their target during that time had shifted from Sichuan to Zhang Jialou, and the relationship between Yangshi Lei and Zhang Jialou was also discovered.

Force A believed that when Zhang Da Fo Ye's ancestors left Jilin, they probably took their coffins to Guangxi, built an ancient building in the mountains, and hid the "secret" in this Zhang Jialou. As a result, Force A used the emerging forces of Huo Ling and Chen Wen-Jin to form an archaeological team and sent them to Guangxi to explore.

"These are the things we speculated before we met you." Xiao Hua said. "Before, we always thought that the archaeological project had dealt a huge blow to Huo Ling, making her seem possessed. Maybe she went to Xisha to unravel the knot in her heart, and then something big happened. Granny Huo couldn't figure it out. At first, she thought that her daughter had died at the bottom of the sea. Around the end of the eighties, she actually gave up and accepted it. She was tired of things here and wanted to leave China and immigrate to Canada. But at this time, someone suddenly sent her some videos."

Xiuxiu had already mentioned this before, but I didn't want to expose her, so I kept silent and listened again. "There was an image of Huo Ling on the video. She seemed to be held captive somewhere. Granny Huo always thought that someone was blackmailing her, threatening her daughter in order to keep her in the country. As a result, she continued to look for the ancient Zhang Jialou. You know, that kind of thing is a very, very sad thing for a mother."

"So, the old woman said she wanted to know why her daughter disappeared, but was actually being threatened into continuing to look for the ancient building? That's why she paid a high price to buy the Yangshi Lei drawings?"

“Yes!” Xiao Hua said. “But your presence disturbed everything because you brought us some big news.”

Assuming that Force A had sent the videotape, then they might not have even known that the archaeological team they controlled had actually been replaced.

“What you discovered in that Guangxi lake tells us that there’s a force hidden even further in the background of this whole thing. So far, you may be the only one to have found out about Force B.”

This Force B was very mysterious, but it had made extraordinary moves. When it appeared, it used a very malicious trick to kill everyone in the archaeological team. Then, it replaced them with its own people. The whole process took place in a remote mountainous area at a very fast speed.

Obviously, Force B was well informed of Force A’s situation and made preparations early. As a result, those who replaced them didn’t immediately find out anything about the people around them and Force A also didn’t know that their team had been replaced by Force B.

Xiao Hua said, “After hearing the news, Granny Huo’s burden disappeared. You know her character. Vengeance will be swift and merciless. Now it’s time for her to fight back against these two forces who killed her daughter and tricked her for so many years. She’s going to find the Zhang Jialou first, get the contents, and then force the people behind the scenes to show themselves.”

“This is very dangerous.”

“Yes. That’s why the rest of her family left the country when we came here. The old woman’s playing for real this time.” Xiao Hua said. “I’m sorry, but now you know why she chose you as her helpers instead of her family.”

I wasn’t particularly afraid when he said this, since these things were all illusory, after all. “Then, who do you think this Force B is?” I asked.

“Force B definitely opposes and cooperates with Force A secretly; otherwise, it wouldn’t need to be so secretive. I heard you say that Xisha must have been the ultimate power struggle between these two forces, which was why it was so complicated. Maybe your Uncle Three was kept in the dark to some extent.” Xiao Hua said. “You’ll only understand what happened there if all the parties confess, but they’re almost all gone now.”

I lay down on the ground, silently agreeing with him. Fuck, I didn’t know what was going on. Uncle Three and Xie Lianhuan represented the opposing forces of Qiu Dekao and the Mystic Nine respectively. Were the others Force B in Force A’s skin? At that time, which side did Poker-face represent?

Xiao Hua stood up and said, “In short, the best is yet to come.” He looked at the alcoves on the wall and shined his flashlight on them, bored. “When they start bringing the things out, it’ll really be fun.”

I nodded and was about to curse some more, when I suddenly saw Xiao Hua pause, as if he had found something in the alcove. He frowned and lowered his head to look at it carefully.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

He frowned, bit his lower lip, reached into the alcove, and then fiddled with it. I heard a series of noises come from the cave wall, and then another relief sculpture appeared from inside.

Xiao Hua lifted up a piece of gravel and showed it to me, “Shit, was this piece stuck?”

As I walked up, my heart was already pounding and I thought, *damn, what’s going on?*

“We opened and closed it too many times. A stone fell and got stuck in the seam, preventing this relief from coming out.” Xiao Hua said.

Shit. I immediately took a deep breath and stepped back. There had originally been four buttons in total, but when I looked at the cave wall now,

there were five. Shit. In other words, the team in Guangxi was originally supposed to press five buttons, but they had only pressed four. But based on Poker-face's photo, the rock wall had still opened. The password was wrong, but the rock wall still opened. What happened when they entered?

Chapter 57 Death Error

My whole body suddenly broke out in a cold sweat and I felt an indescribable fear. When they opened the door at that time, they certainly thought it was foolproof and would definitely be very relaxed. It would really be unfortunate if they suddenly encountered any of the traps. And it was all because of my mistake here.

It was like I had killed them.

Even if Poker-face survived, as long as any one of them died, it was my responsibility.

I couldn't face it.

Xiao Hua responded much faster than I did and immediately jumped onto the pulley and went out of the cave. I listened to him shouting outside to deliver the news, but I knew it was too late. It had been at least three days since they entered. If something were to happen, it should have already passed.

The relaxed mood collapsed and dispersed in an instant. It felt like that moment in school where you cheated off someone during an exam and found out that the subjects were different only after handing the papers in.

I also walked out of the cave. The two of us fell into a dazed state as we sat there trembling on the cliff in terror.

Xiao Hua sent a message to the people down below, asking them to check on the situation immediately and give us feedback. But it would take at least two days for the message to reach the other side and come back.

I originally wanted to find something to comfort us, but I knew that things were very serious as soon as I thought about it. I couldn't even calm my own heart down.

The anxiety was indescribable as I sat there wanting to do something, but knowing that it was useless and everything was my fault. This kind of dark fire burning my body made it impossible to calm down.

But there was nothing to do but let it burn. Our anxiety continued on into the evening, burning up our energy until we were exhausted and looked like we were about to collapse.

On the third day, we received feedback with only a few words: “We’ve lost contact with them.”

There was a loud buzzing in my head.

I couldn’t stay any longer. Xiao Hua and I came down from the cliff and returned to the nearby village to communicate directly with the people in Banai by computer. As soon as our stuff arrived, they also realized the password was wrong and immediately sent someone in, but there was no response.

Now they had taken urgent measures and were ready to send someone in to check while we continued to wait for news.

I couldn’t sleep that night. I didn’t know if it was because I hadn’t slept in a bed for too long or because of my anxiety. The next day, there was still no news, and even the people who went in to check didn’t come out.

I buried my face in my hands, knowing there couldn’t be any good news.

We continued waiting as the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth days passed. By the end of the week, I knew something had happened, but I kept asking the other party to give me news every day anyways. The whole situation was desperate.

Xiao Hua patted me and said, “Don’t lie to yourself. Something must have happened inside.”

I had never been so overwhelmed. If it was a normal situation, I could calm myself down because I had Poker-face and Fatty around me. But now I was suddenly all alone.

I thought of the many times I had been trapped and in danger with them. Whether it was in the Seven Star Lu palace, at the bottom of the sea, or in Changbai mountain, I had never felt so anxious. But now....

I couldn't stay here any longer and immediately made a decision—I would go to the Guangxi site.

Chapter 58 Calm down

In the car leaving Sichuan, I gradually calmed down and began to analyze the situation.

Xiao Hua wasn't wrong. I was going to Guangxi now and I was alone. Even if Granny Huo's men dared to let me go in and die, I had little chance of rescuing them.

Their team—including Fatty and Poker-face—was full of experts, so if they were trapped, how could someone with my ability rescue them? But I had to get a group of people at least equal to them in skill if I wanted to save them. This kind of person couldn't be found in a short amount of time.

The news that Granny Huo had an accident was enough for us to mobilize the Huo family, but things in this business were often different below the surface. There had to be conflicts of interest within the Huo family, and this was the perfect opportunity for those people to take advantage of. It was hard to say what they would do first, but the situation would be even more complicated if the news was made public. Not only would no one sincerely support the rescue effort, but some people might even obstruct it.

As a result, Xiao Hua's plan was to suppress it first. It needed to be done in a roundabout way, but it was just like he said. I was merely an ordinary person without Fatty and Poker-face around me, and this matter was beyond my scope. In fact, if I thought about it carefully, it was really the case.

When I was thinking about my plan in the car, I found that I had no clue. In the past, I would immediately think of Fatty, but now I searched through all the contacts in my phone and found that there was no one who had anything to do with this matter except for Pan Zi.

And Pan Zi, who retired to the countryside... should I bother him?

But I really couldn't wait any longer. I had experienced those dangerous situations before and knew how important time was. I could understand the

Xie family's cautious nature, but Old Dog Wu's loyalty and open-mindedness were also flowing in my veins. I made up my mind. This time, I was really throwing caution to the wind.

In order to save time, I phoned Pan Zi before flying to Changsha.

Pan Zi sounded a little surprised on the phone. I told him about my situation and said that I needed to get together a team and hoped he could help me.

I thought he would agree immediately, but he hesitated for a moment before saying to me, "Ok. When you come, I'll meet you at the airport."

I had a strange feeling in my heart. Something wasn't quite right and I wondered if there were any changes on his side.

I felt uneasy the entire way back as I thought of how his voice had sounded. It didn't seem like his usual tone, and I couldn't help but wonder if something had happened in his life.

When I got to Changsha and left the airport, I saw Pan Zi standing by the car. I was shocked when I saw him. I could hardly recognize him at all.

The soldier of fortune had white hair and looked several years older than before. Although his back was still strong, that first glance was really jarring.

I looked at him and couldn't think of anything to say. "Little Master Three, you look good." He gave a reluctant smile, took my bag, and put it in the trunk of the car.

I got in the passenger seat and found that it was a used car that was much worse than the one he used to drive. Although Pan Zi had always dressed in a rustic way, after seeing him this time, I felt that his vitality was gone. He was no longer the Pan Zi I saw before, the man who could stand up after having several holes pierced through his body.

As the car struggled out of the airport, I asked him, "Where's the original car?"

“Sold. I borrowed this car from my friend.” Pan Zi said. “The car was originally given to me by Master Three. He didn’t come back, so the goods in the shop were all snatched and sold by the people below. All the local rats came to demand repayment of their debts. I sold them and paid off some debts. I can’t let those villains speak ill of Master Three.”

I was struck dumb. After the accident, I really hadn’t cared about Uncle Three’s shop at all.

“Didn’t you say you found a woman? Where’s sister-in-law?” I asked.

“Women.” He gave a wry smile. “With my character, fuck, I’m not qualified to want a woman. I don’t want to harm someone’s daughter.” He looked at me and said, “What about you? Listening to what you said on the phone, you’re still doing that stupid shit. What’s going on?”

I shook my head, “It’s still the same mess.” I told him the story again and then asked, “Based on your experience, how much does it cost to form such a team?”

“Right now, it’s not a question of money. You have to give each person at least ten thousand if you’re hiring outsiders or however much you want. But these people are useless. A useful person makes their decision not only on how much money you pay but also your background.” Pan Zi said. “Everyone considered Master Three’s status because they knew that he could make them money. But you can’t do it now. These motherfuckers can’t be stopped at all. When the time comes, you won’t be able to trust them.”

“What can I do about it? Little Brother and Fatty are both in there. I don’t know what the situation is. If they die in there, I’ll be damned.” I sighed, feeling very uncomfortable as I remembered what Pan Ma had said.

Pan Zi didn’t speak, but lit a cigarette. “I’ve already realized it, what with our profession, but damn, I can’t die.”

“How is Uncle Three’s shop now?” I asked. “Can you handle it? Find a few capable guys?”

“Shop? Fuck the shop,” He cursed. “It’s all rotten. That flock of birds forgot how good Master Three treated them, and now look how they’ve returned the favor! There are only a few people that still have a little conscience. Wait a while, I’ll ask some of them out to dinner and see if they’ll help.”

I was rather surprised. Although I had heard about what happened under Uncle Three before, I didn’t expect it to reach this level.

“Why did it suddenly become so bad? Not a lot of time has passed after coming back from Tamutuo.”

“People’s hearts are disgusting.” Pan Zi said.

We drove to a farmer’s house in the suburb first, where Pan Zi returned the car to his neighbor and said we would take a taxi later. Then, he took me to the house he rented, which was surrounded by family homes. I looked at it and sighed with emotion, “It’s too bad. What’s the difference between this and living on the street? Under these conditions, not even prostitutes will visit.”

Pan Zi smiled wryly, “Shit, it’s just me anyways. So what if it’s like this? It’s not like it’s your house.”

“Why not buy one?” I asked.

“Can’t afford it. I always thought that Master Three would still be here, and I would go live in a nursing home with him when I got old, so I didn’t save much money. Who knew this would happen?” He pulled out a bench from under the flat bed and set it down for me.

I kicked aside the garbage can filled with lunch boxes and sat down. That was when I noticed Uncle Three’s memorial shrine off to one side.

“We still don’t know what exactly happened to Uncle Three. Isn’t it unlucky for you to do this?” I asked.

“It’s because I don’t know that I’ve put in an early effort. What if Master Three can’t eat there?” He replied while handing me a bottle of beer.

I unscrewed the cap and examined the details around me. I noticed that there wasn’t a TV here, and there was only a broken radio beside the bed. Pan Zi’s clothes were hanging very neat and tidy off to one side. I could see that they had been carefully ironed, which was probably a habit from when he was a soldier.

When he looked at me, he lost his smile. “I’m a simple man. Even if you look again, you won’t find any silk flowers. For people like me who got mixed up on the knife’s edge, I’m very happy to wake up naturally every day and find that I’m in the city where no one has killed or been cut down.”

“Then you have to have some fun,” I said. “What do you do every day? Look at the four walls?”

“Who said that I have no fucking entertainment? I eat pickles and drink beer at the window while looking at the women in the hair salon below. I live more comfortably than fairies.” Pan Zi apparently didn’t have a second stool and sat down on the bed while taking out his cell phone. “I’ll call them now. But Little Master Three, I have to warn you that these are different times. I used to be uncompromising, but now we’re asking for help. Be prepared. When you hear them speak later, their words may not be so pleasant.”

I felt uneasy when he said this. I wasn’t the type of person who could stand cold dishes very well.

Pan Zi started calling. There were several times where he only managed to say that I was here and looking for help before he was immediately hung up on. Some of them simply couldn’t be reached. There were only two or three that agreed to dinner. After the battle, Pan Zi looked at me and said comfortingly, “It’s ok. Three people are willing to come, which is much better than I thought.”

That night, I met the three men at the International Trade Center hotel. When I looked at them, I realized that I actually knew all of them. When

Uncle Three was around, these were the grave robbers who had the best relationship with him. I had even called them all uncle at some point.

They all nodded after the meeting, but I found that they didn't stand up at this time.

I took a deep breath and looked at their expressions. They didn't seem very reluctant, so I gradually relaxed. Pan Zi ordered some dishes, chatted with them for a while, and then got to the point.

At that time, we had set a script that we had worked out in advance. We didn't say how horrible the Zhang Jialou was, just that it might have a good haul.

While they were lost in thought, I said, "Uncles, it's difficult to meet such a big opportunity in this bad world. I want to borrow a few of your guys and create a team to do a job."

I looked at their faces, only to find that they were all showing difficult expressions.

"Little Master Three, is this a tomb robbery?" A person asked me. I remembered this guy was called Uncle Qiu.

I thought about it, "Sort of. Not really."

"A rule in this business is that you have to throw something out before you plan a grave robbery. How do we know whether what you said is true or not? You know this field is full of uncertainty. You haven't been in this business very long, have you? Even if I were to sell you face, my brothers wouldn't listen to me." Uncle Qiu said.

After that, the other two both nodded, "Little Master Three, it's not easy for everyone to muddle along now. It's not so convenient to send a brother since everyone has to pay for it."

“Master Three already made the down payment.” Pan Zi replied. “Having been brothers for so many years, you can be regarded as having watched Little Master Three grow. Why sound so distant?”

“Master Three prepared Master Three’s money.” Uncle Qiu said. “You also said that he’s Little Master Three. Is he Master Three’s son? If that’s the case, then Master Three’s money is your money. But unfortunately, you’re not his son. Isn’t that right? We’ll explain everything. I took the money and spent it, but it has nothing to do with you.”⁴⁰

When he said this, he looked at Pan Zi again. “Even Little Master Three can’t control the money. What are you playing at Pan Zi?”

The guy’s voice got louder as he spoke, and the two people beside him urged, “Lao Qiu, you know Pan Zi’s temper. Don’t talk like that.”

Pan Zi sneered but didn’t say anything, so Uncle Qiu continued, “Little Master Three, let’s give Master Three face here and call you Master. If you really want to think about this, it’s better to do it. Give us the lease to Master Three’s shop in Hangzhou and we’ll go with you. It’s your luck if you can retrieve your things. If you can’t, it’s your own bad luck.”

“Fuck you!” Pan Zi burst out. “Shit, why are you willing to come out today, thinking about Master Three’s shop? Let me tell you, I may have no money now, but I’m a son of a bitch who’s slaughtered more people than you have fingers. You try and touch Master Three’s ancestral property and I’ll kill your whole family with a knife.”

When Pan Zi exploded, Uncle Qiu obviously feared his temper and knew that he could really do it. He stared at him while another uncle said, “Oh, come on, we’re all brothers here.”

Uncle Qiu stood up and slapped the table while saying, “Well, you’re certainly ruthless. You can go to hell along with that guy Uncle Three’s

⁴⁰ Basically, Pan Zi is saying these guys owe Uncle Three money and can repay that by helping Wu Xie and the dude’s like “nope, you’re not his son so I have no obligation”

ancestral property.” He glanced at me and said, “Little Master Three, I’m sorry. I was trying to be charitable and came here to tell you a few things. But in light of your Uncle Three’s absence, who the fuck are you in Changsha City? You’re even worse than a fucking dog. I’ll release the message tomorrow. You won’t get a team even if you have money. I’ll be waiting for you to come begging me on your knees!”

With that said, he shook his hands and left. The other two saw that they couldn’t eat anymore and hurried after him, leaving the two of us alone at the table.

I was completely blindsided and didn’t know what was going on. It took me a long time before I eventually felt sick.

Pan Zi had obviously experienced a lot, so it didn’t matter to him. He took a deep breath to calm down and then said to me, “Now you know how these people are.”

Chapter 59 Despair

That night, Pan Zi and I drank twenty cans of beer. We lay on the lawn outside the hotel and looked at the gray sky without saying a word.

I knew that Pan Zi had been hit hard during this period. With Uncle Three gone, the whole business situation had turned out like this. It was really disgusting and devastating. Everything that had been painstakingly worked out before had suddenly turned into something different.

But I didn't have much time to consider this. On one hand, I still didn't know whether Fatty and Poker-face were dead or alive. On the other hand, I felt very depressed and anxious as my hopes were completely dashed.

I stayed at Pan Zi's farmhouse that night because my wallet and other things had been left in Beijing, so I didn't have any money. I asked him if there was any other way.

He sighed and thought for a moment before saying, "The people under Master Three are unreliable. Tomorrow, I'll help you ask others in the business to see if they're interested."

"Is there any chance?" I asked. If there wasn't, then I had only one move left: call the police. Although the ending would be very bad, at least there'd be a chance to save them.

"It's hard to say. I didn't expect much, because the Wu family's master going to other people for help already told them that the Wu family had lost its power and prestige. Plus, what Wang Ba Qiu said just now... it's very difficult to come back from that. But we can always try." Pan Zi said.

Sure enough, he went out the next morning and came back at noon with takeout. When I asked how it was going, he shook his head and gave me a wry smile. I saw a lot of bruises on his arm and asked him what was wrong. He said that when he went to another small shop, he met Wang Ba Qiu's

men and had a fight. In the afternoon, he went to several other places to ask.

I looked at his expression and realized that he had almost no hope. When I patted him and told him to forget it, he said, "Don't worry, Little Master Three. Even if it's really not possible, I'll go with you. It'll be easier if you have fewer people."

I thought it over and realized that two people going into such a place wouldn't even be able to carry the equipment. Pan Zi's injuries had accumulated up to now and his condition wasn't the same as it was before, so I was really reluctant to let him go. His original task had ended and this had nothing to do with him. I couldn't bear to drag him in again.

But I knew Pan Zi's temper, so I couldn't tell him directly. When he went out in the afternoon, I wrote him a note telling him that I had found someone who could help me and not to worry. After that, I left.

When I walked out of Pan Zi's house and reached the roadside, I really didn't know where I was going. I wanted to go to the police, but if I thought of all the things we had done that could get us arrested and shot, I might as well not bother trying to save them. Then I thought that maybe while I was anxiously running around, they had already come out. Maybe they had saved themselves, and the past few times we had asked for updates were just a false alarm?

But no one could deceive themselves for long. I thought about going back to Hangzhou and finding Uncle Two for help, but I could almost imagine his reaction. He would definitely lock me up and tell me that it wasn't economical to save them.

But where else could I go without going back to Hangzhou? Should I go to Guangxi? But if I went alone, I wouldn't be able to get to the lake. I might even end up dead on the mountain.

I eventually decided it would be better to go to the airport. I wouldn't be able to hide it if Pan Zi came back and saw me, so I tried to stop a taxi. But

the damn suburb was dusty and full of construction work, so it was impossible to stop one.

I walked along the road for several stops before I finally saw one. But just as I was about to go up, my cell phone suddenly rang.

Thinking it was Pan Zi, I pulled it out of my pocket with my heart in my throat. I didn't think he would come back so early unless he had some good news.

But when I took a look, I found that it was a text message from Xiao Hua.

I opened it and read through it.

"I heard that you're in Changsha. I know your predicament. If you've really made up your mind to do anything to save them, please go to the following address. I've prepared something for you. Sorry, it's the best I can do."

The text message was followed by an address in Changsha.

I didn't understand what it meant, but Xiao Hua had obviously heard about me even in Beijing. It turned out that the Mystic Nine had eyes and ears everywhere. At this time, I was extremely confused and had no other choice, so I got in the taxi and gave the driver the address.

The car arrived very quickly at a nondescript residential building that was very easy to find. I thought it might be the same as the place in Chengdu we stopped at before that had the beautiful interior.

After knocking on the door and opening it, I found that the room was very dark and a thin woman had appeared. She was wearing very traditional Chinese clothes and I could hardly tell whether she was actually a man or a woman at first. "Who are you looking for?" She asked.

I didn't know how to say it either, so I showed her Xiao Hua's short message. "Master Hua," she said. "I see."

Then she let me in.

As soon as I entered, I smelled the musky scent of a stuffy room. The room was very clean, but it seemed that the window hadn't been opened for a long time and the light was very dim.

I looked around and saw a huge makeup mirror on one side of the room, along with a lot of cabinets and things that looked like wigs.

I told myself she shouldn't be a prostitute. If Xiao Hua's gift was to let me find a prostitute and forget my worries, then this one was too strange. I saw the woman take out a box from the back room and put it in front of me.

"This is what Master Hua wants to give to you."

It was a thin ceramic box the size of a moon cake box. I gave a hesitant smile, opened the box very carefully, and then froze.

It was filled with brocade that had a thin layer of something that looked like a dumpling skin on it. But when I looked carefully, I realized that it was a human skin mask.

Although I had seen Yi Rong⁴¹ before, this was the first time I had seen a real human skin mask. And it turned out to be the same texture as food. I thought it was a joke, but I didn't know what it meant.

"What does this mean?" I asked her, only to find that she wasn't paying attention to me at all. When I pinched the skin and found that it was actually quite strong, I took it from the box and flattened it out in front of me. After doing so, I broke out in a cold sweat. I recognized whose face it was.

It was my Uncle Three's face.

⁴¹ Refers to changing one's appearance. The most commonly used method is to wear a mask. According to Baidu, in the old days, the face mask was made of iron or wood, which was generally very ugly.

Chapter 60 Fear the Face of Reincarnation

I understood what Xiao Hua meant. At that moment, I finally understood everything. But I still couldn't believe it.

He had prepared a human skin mask for me that looked like my Uncle Three. He didn't want to show me the art of Yi Rong, he wanted me to wear it.

I suddenly admired him a whole lot more. He was thousands of miles away but still knew the situation here and could make the most accurate decision. He knew that no matter how hard I tried to find old connections, the whole thing couldn't be undone. Uncle Three's power in Changsha had completely collapsed and turned into numerous small interest groups that nobody could command.

The only way was for Uncle Three to come back.

But he couldn't come back, so what now?

We would create an Uncle Three.

But for some unknown reason, I suddenly felt a chill spread from the soles of my feet as I looked at this human skin mask.

I started to tremble, but I didn't know whether it was because of fear, panic, excitement, or some other emotion. In fact, there were countless emotions in my body competing against each other at this moment, and numerous scenes were flashing through my mind. Some were of my Uncle Three, some were what I imagined would happen when I faced everyone after becoming Uncle Three, and some were when I was alone. At the same time, Poker-face and Fatty's faces kept popping up.

Fortunately, it was just for a moment. As my palms began to sweat, I immediately calmed down and started to think about the problem. After a few seconds, I understood my choice.

There was no other choice.

“How do you wear this?” I asked the girl.

“If you’re willing to wear it, I’ll help you put it on. The whole process takes four hours and can last for four weeks. Have you thought it over?”

It was enough as long as I could rescue them. “Is it realistic?”

“After I help you put it on, you can judge for yourself.” With that said, she pointed to a nearby reclining chair, indicating that I should lie down.

I did as she asked, and she immediately put the human skin mask on my face. At that moment, my ears suddenly rang with Uncle Three’s words:

“Some masks can’t be taken off if they’re worn too long.”

(To be continued)

End of Volume 7: Stone Shadow in Qiong Cave