

Sixty-six meters under
Xinyi (Vivian) Gu

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When the fourth bowl is poured out, the sun causes a major heatwave to scorch the planet with fire. The incorrigible wicked refuse to repent while they blaspheme the name of God.

1

Yan hunched down under the shadow of a garbage pile and sniffed the dust on the ground. Getting up and putting her feet upon the buckling concrete road, she caught vertigo. Maybe it's from the hypotension of standing up too quickly, or maybe from the fine particles exuding from the trash. The dizziness amplified her discomfort from standing on the pavement, the sensation that she's been blasé about all her life. With rusted robot components deeply embedded in them like post-apocalyptic reliefs, the texture was rugged and uneven. Hands in her pockets, she rubbed the lovely tiny card stolen from the neighbor girl's jacket ten minutes ago while wandering alone in the clamorous street. She can blend in the pedestrians perfectly—wrapping herself in a grey cap and a wide cotton scarf, the ideal outfit for any time of the year. The chatterings on the streets were mainly about the gradual alleviation of global warming; some bragged how they would be reclamation warriors and bring the wealthy down as soon as the landmass reemerged. The homeless were rummaging through trash cans for sustenance to occupy their vacant bellies. A magnificent billboard, written *Thirsty Night: Shanghai* in bold highlight, nailed her head for a second. She hastened her pace to the shop where people sardined in and out, stopping at the takeaway window, which was merely a tiny square hole, probably leading to an unlit room in the sidewall.

"Hello...Excuse me...." Yan said softly. The dark hole responded with silence.

After a while, Yan raised her voice, "...hey? Is anyone here?"

Sixty-five years ago, summer sea ice floating on the surface of the Arctic Ocean disappeared entirely.

An androgynous, metallic voice pierced through the awkward stillness from her back. Yan glanced around and found a VR game store across the street. An aging homeless man sat before a free-trial machine at the gate; his half-white head carried a bulky headset while he waved his trembling hands strapped with sensory gloves. A colossal screen projected the scenery of misty oases and glaciers, the light scattering through to taint his curly beard.

Fifteen years later, in 2050, Antarctica and Greenland completely melted, average sea level rose by more than 66 meters.

"O-o-p-s, sorry! What can I get for you, ma'am?" A red flashing spot showed up.

We lost our homeland. Peculiar natural disasters and wars over resources played synchronously...

"I will have the...hmm...okay Long Island Iced Tea, please." Yan took a peek at the menu.

The world launched a radical plan to stop the souring situation and brought peace to humans once again...

"Of course, can I see your ID please?" A robot's arm stretched out and spread its palm. Yan handed the card to it while holding her breath.

Welcome to "Sixty-six Meters Under II," a virtual reality game that offers an alternative timeline in which you can modify the history to prevent the apocalyptic disaster...

"Thank you. The total would be 139 RMB. May I scan your QR code...Awesome!"

Save the world and good luck, Soldier. Press to enter the game.

The mechanical arm served a sealed bronze cup covered with ice crystals and unlocked the lid.

"Here you are, look forward to meeting you next time." The red spotlight twirled and vanished.

"Thanks." Yan carefully held the pricy liquid in her crossing hands and sipped. Ice pricking her tongue, she tasted salty particles mixed with sour lingering inside her mouth.

Yuehong had nagged countless times about the "Club," "Bar," and "Wine," the revelers, only the stupid rich guys would be willing to consume and enjoy mindlessly. Nevertheless, Yan felt that she

just held some particular envy towards them. Finishing the drink up, now, Yan wished to tell Yuehong that such water tasted like herbs boiling in the swill. She never stepped out that far of the "pigeon hole," never walked on the street by herself—one last party she accompanied was to celebrate the coming end.

2

I will be the faithful son of a distant land

And the ephemeral lover of matter

Like all poets who run with their dreams

Although I have to walk on the same path with martyrs and clowns

Leaning against the wall, Yan flipped over the poetry collection of Haizi, Yuehong's most precious keepsake. Haizi was a famous poet living in the old world of China, died young, and should felt honored to be Yuehong's favorite writer. Yuehong, a transgender prostitute, was her foster "mother" who wanted to be a real woman and was attracted to men. They've been living together for fourteen years since "she" picked Yan, a defective infant abandoned at birth, back home.

"Why would I like him?" Applying her shiny blue lipstick before a steel tub, then Yuehong tossed "her" dramatic blonde wig. "Cause his poems reminded me of sunlight, simply because I want to live in the life he depicted. Run with dreams. God, that's so romantic!"

"Oh really? Then why would he kill himself at the age of twenty-five?"

Yuehong rolled her eyes and yelled contemptuously, "girl, why don't you write something fantastic and then teach me. He brought an end to his life poetically."

Yan dissented and thought otherwise. Don't you smell the despair and pain spilling out from line to line?

Yan couldn't step out from home during the daytime. Therefore she spent most of her time studying how to read and write from the books Yuehong collected from the junkyard. Children don't get to school here. An illiterate like Yuehong often forced Yan to read Haizi's poems repeatedly, often in an abusive way. Passionate elocution of each line was required.

She dropped the book at the feet of a homeless child and walked westward, where Yuehong had depicted the amazing train line across the sea to downtown. An endless track ripped through the tall grass towards the waterland; clumps of clinging gray clouds, like the shed skin of some prehistoric creature, drifting in the ocean. It was a vast expanse of dead seaweed, and the corpses were warnings to other living creatures that a silent catastrophe was impending.

Wading through the damp high grass, Yan crouched down on the rail and closed her eyes.

Yan knew that without Yuehong, she could barely survive. She would either starve to death in the streets or be arrested by a bounty hunter and handed over to the state, tortured in experiments, and then soaked in a sealed tank. She was cursed and destined not to live under the light.

Hearing the sound of the grass rustled against the train carriages, she regretted:

Facing the Ocean, Spring Warms Flowers Bloom. I've never witnessed a flower blooming before, but after all, it's good to see Yuehong again.

3

Staring at the little unconscious creature in the tank, much like a dirty piece of cloth floating in the water, Fang placed the chopsticks' ends horizontally on a rest and was caught up in contemplation.

An unprecedented epidemic struck the world in 2051: the melting of the glaciers revived an ancient strain of virus dormant under the heavy ice lairs for billions of years. People with genetic

facial deformities became the hosts of this super virus, spreading the contagion without actually getting harmed themselves. Without symptoms, it would spread through the air to countless people, and there was no cure to prevent the other patients from death five weeks later. It seemed as if nothing could be done to stop the devil from erasing humankind. The population plummeted by 30%.

The former governor sent an army to arrest thousands of suspected virus containers, and they were secretly executed. Burning the corpses nearly used up what little remained of the fuel sources, and tons of ashes roaring, dissolved in the infinite salty waves. Humans have paid an enormous price, sacrificing countless people for the continuation of humanity.

Until he acceded as the following leader, the central CDC had finally discovered that people who had blindness, harelip, minor ear deformities carry a unique gene that makes them the perfect hosts for the virus. From then on, survivors with grief and indignation started to curse the group with facial defects. Such vent carried hunters and official documents to deprive "inferior" lives—essentially from the slum.

Fang always held a belief: for the good of all the citizens. A great leader will never discard his faith, no matter how treacherous the pathway is.

"Bang! Bang!"

The stiff tank shattered abruptly as a piece of flimsy plastic, and Yan fell out on the ground. A man wreathed in a black cloak dropped to the floor from the roof and swiftly rolled Yan up while pointing a gun at him and forcing him to abandon the weapons and leave that prisoner alone. The man scorned the guards as bumbling kids trying to play tricks over him, shooting them down and lifting the girl on his shoulders.

"Fang, our esteemed governor, how could you be that reassured and chewing noodles while reckoning to murder a child?"

"Well, gentleman, I believe your observation is flawed. It's going to be a huge threat to the whole world. Please do not risk your life to—" Fang was unexpectedly calm.

"Liar! They're innocent and poor people, and, instead, you're the malign force that stigmatizes the vulnerable minority, threatening the whole world. Your kingdom was built on the bones of impoverished people who were trapped in 'Pigeon hole' for generations, like captive animals."

"I made a hard decision. But the country needs a balance; the resources were in shortage since sixty years ago. The population blew up while the percentage of starving children burgeoned. I can't randomly select people to die."

"Therefore, you misguided people to blame the disabled for spreading the disease simply because of your superficial and narrow-minded prejudices." The man was wild in anger.

"Put your weapon down!" While they were arguing, fully equipped special service agents stormed in.

He pulled off his hat, then rose a hand to grab the rope, and flew upward through the roof while gazing at Fang's shocking expression.

"I've got something on you, Fang."

4

"Silly Yan..." someone sighed, "Why would a smart lady like me raise such a dumbass daughter?"

Yan sobbed hoarsely, "Yuehong, I failed. Can you tell me what I am supposed to do? I can see no hope—"

"My dear, you're always so brave and tough. Remember that day when I found you dumped under the bridge. So skinny and weak, yet you stayed alive in such a hopeless place. I promise you will overcome it and fight to survive." Yuehong's silhouette was tender and warm.

It turned out that while she was lying on the track, the detection equipment had noticed her long before she crossed over and switched the path. When the wind blew away her scarf, the train guards

saw a worm-like curly flesh clinging on her left side face while completely plugged her ear hole.

They arrested her at once. Yan's "well-scheduled" death by rail was promptly derailed.

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"She's having a fever, Xiao." A moist hand stroked her forehead.

"Luo, pass me that package." A deeper voice echoed somewhere further.

Yan thought that her limbs were parted since she was unable to move a bit. Head was pounding and fire-burning. She could barely trace any soberness while moths tumbled and darted in her ribcage.

5

An uneven rock ceiling, a lean man, was quietly reading... Haizi's poetry collection, the one she gave to the little boy.

"...just as all the poets who run with their dreams..." The man read it aloud; the voice was blank and devoid of emotions.

"Have you ever thought about why you guys live in the 'pigeon hole' declined?" Xiao asked, eyes still were sticking between lines.

"I...I don't understand. What do you mean by 'decline'? And who are you?" Yan's mind was blurred and confused.

"Fifty-four percent of slum citizens were garbage collectors. Eleven percent were managing prostitution, twenty percent drag dealers, fifteen were homeless."

"My name is Xiao; the world is perishing." The man introduced himself.

The boy turned over and smiled at her, and his eyes were washed pale. He was precisely the homeless boy on the street, but, indeed, he had a shelf to stay on.

"Your eyes..." Yan hesitated to say. The boy remained sitting quietly next to Xiao.

"Machines are cheaper than workers and don't need to eat, rest or complain. Few factories are willing to hire workers. The unemployment rate has increased, and workers moved farther from the city, where resources were scarce, and opportunities were sparse. Years later, the downtown started to pull the trash out of the precious land. People who lost their jobs found hope in the piles of trash—unless there was something to feed the babies. This is the history of the slum."

Xiao looked up at her and continued, "Since the radiation leakage, some babies were born with mutations. And later came the pandemic. Wiping humans off the face of the planet. When Fang was inaugurated, this country was chaotic and full of violence."

"To stop revolts and appease them, Fang and his committee made a special effort in developing the entertainment industry to divert the general public's attention. Internet softens dignity, carnal pleasures weaken resolve, and drinks cripple tenacity. They'd rather indulge in that perfect illusional world and die in the whore's bed. Fang's 'kind' support destroyed your hometown and fellows."

"Help me. We wanna unveil the conspiracies, impeach Fang, and save the sufferings." Half of Xiao's face was obscured in the shadow, but his eyes were surging with determination.

"Why would I help you? And what part of me do you think can be devoted to this revolution?" Yan seemed unconvinced by his powerful words but clenched her fists. "I'm unlike these ordinary people. I'm cursed. I might infect you with horrible viruses."

"No, you are not. It's their fault for misunderstanding you and people who lost their lives before. Fang lied and convinced this country that people with deficiencies were the culprits of the pandemic. People believed in Fang since he brought peace even though playing the dirty card. He made up this deception to control and restrain the population. I'm sorry." Xiao averted her piercing look and said faintly.

"This... can't be true. You must be joking with me. I would say it's a fantastic script though I don't fancy it." She bowed her head, her shoulders shaking, but her hands were trying hard to push them down, pretending she was unruffled.

"I'm unable to think of any reasons why I would lie...to you. Also, Fang covered up the fact: vaccines have already been produced but are limited to a minor group of people."

"You know I'm serious, aren't you?" Xiao closed the book and gave it to Luo.

"...okay, just tell me what to do. After all, I have nothing to lose." She looked up with two hollow eyes, and lips framed the words distractedly.

Xiao seemed relieved and finally cracked a smile to her, "Look, my colleagues will need your support for a few experiments. We will force the governor to clear all of the blame on people with facial defects and provide them with the same rights as well as any support to the slum."

Xiao and Luo carefully disguised Yan: putting a soft mask on her face, she transformed into a little boy, but she still recognized Yan's eyes in the mirror. Xiao dressed as a tall bent man with a big beard and took her out on the street. Glancing at him, Yan recalled a blurry figure of the homeless man playing the VR game. Anyway, they look very much alike. She didn't think a step further and was shocked by what she saw.

Streets neatly lined up, pathways were swept by cleaning robots, and they apologized every time for blocking pedestrians' way; dim-sum bakeries, Italian restaurants, libraries, Cheongsam stores crowded... However, Yan bowed her head down and made herself inconspicuous since the governor wanted her, yet Fang would never realize that she was actually pretty close to him.

Yan noticed there were graffiti sprayed "Stop Stratospheric Aerosol Injection!" "We are embracing the coming Ice Age." "Freeze Fang!" A few cops were repainting the walls to cover them up. She lowered the voice and asked Xiao, "What's stratospheric a... injection?"

"It's a geoengineering project. Part of the government's plan." Xiao answered concisely. He pulled Yan's hat and led her entered a café. Straightly went through the store, they were standing in front of a wall.

"First, we have to decipher a particular gene and prove that you have no harm. Come on in."

"Xiao, I don't think I am ready for this...I am not prepared."

"Breathe, follow me." Xiao patted Yan's back.

In the past month, Yan joined Xiao's secret organization, and she felt destined to dedicate her life to this job. Yuehong probably witnessed that she made friends, real companions. She had found something to live for. Now, it is the final battle.

"...shall we wake him up?" Yan and Xiao, at this moment, were crawling on the ceiling above Fang's bed.

"Well, it seems unnecessary now. He is awake." Xiao jumped down and rapidly held Fang down by the neck with his left arm.

"Do not move or make any sounds unless I ask you to respond. Blink twice if you understand." Fang followed his words with an innocent expression.

Yan stumbled and gradually slid down the column.

"What do you want—" Fang said while staring at Xiao, but his head was suddenly against something cold and hard. He stopped himself.

"Free the people in the slum. You know what I am saying." Xiao pushed the gun harder and put down the arm.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this. Let me tell you: after my death, no one will believe in you. Cry on my funeral—I will forgive you."

"Do you still remember her? We've collected the evidence, and the report of this girl's gene will break your lie. After that, all the world will know you are a killer."

Fang gazed at Yan, who stood behind Xiao and raised his eyebrows.

"It seems like you guys know everything. Good job." Fang seemed appreciated, whereas his eyes were frozen. "And so what?"

Yan was nervous, and the excitement made her hands tremble. Now, she was free.

"Commit the crimes to the country and sentence your life in prison. Otherwise, I will kill you now and then reveal the truth."

"Not that one. What do you want from me?"

Xiao paused for a minute and gnashed in a fury, "Shut off those god damn machines!"

"Hahaha... that's correct. Girl, he cheated you. Don't you ever doubt even once for his real purpose?"

"He doesn't care about you and those...poor rats. He just wants me to stop SAI—"

Yan got perplexed by Fang's words and Xiao's silence. He admitted.

Subsequently, Fang's painful scream was cut short in Xiao's hand. A bleeding ear dropped next to Yan's foot. Xiao chopped off the governor's left ear with a knife.

"The injection has reached the highest efficiency, but over-injection has the opposite effect. Sunshine and heat will soon be completely blocked out from the planet. You know we will all die during the transition to the glacial age."

"The earth will resume to warm up as long as the injection stops. Besides, other countries won't approve of that, and your efforts will be in vain."

"We will never stop until all the SAI projects terminate!" Fang's words, which honestly revealed the future obstacles, irritated Xiao. A seemingly desperate future unavoidably shook a man with such a determined mind.

Fang didn't let the opportunity slip away: he grabbed the gun and punched hard in Xiao's right eye. In a second, Fang's fist sank into his belly. Xiao cried out in anguish, yet he instinctively rushed to fight back.

Standing aside and observing the tussle, Yan reached for her sidearm and pulled the trigger pointing at them.

"Whoosh!" Fang bent down and kissed the floor.

"Nooooooo!" Xiao yelled and kneeled on the ground, as he was the one who got shot. "We failed because of you. You ruined our plan, which would save thousands of people. But, wait... what's your name?"

"Go ask my mom. Her name is Yuehong."

"This time, I am gonna pick the side by myself." She whispered in Xiao's ear. His eyes opened wildly, reflecting Fang's clumsy feet. Flat on the ground, their bodies twisted to form a Yin-Yang symbol.