

1761



Tang Fei

Translated by Xueting Christine Ni

A

61

He was fleeing; he slid the SIM out of his phone, snapped it and ground the pieces under his foot before throwing the handset into the westward torrent of the river. Using a mirror in the supermarket bathroom, he cut open the epidermis of his neck and dug out the social security chip. Then into the back of his thigh to find the extrasensory jammer and the low-frequency capillary sanitizers which lay along the arteries. He wrenched them all out, and hurled them all in a bundle through the window and into a passing rubbish truck. Relying on natural instincts, he dived into the maze-like world of the Metro, and found his refuge on a long stretch of disused walkway.

All of this, I saw.

I watched him remove everything that could be used to track his location from about his person and throw them away, forming beautiful trajectories against the dusky scarlet clouds of the northern sky.

Like the others, he naively believed that by removing these tracking devices, they would never have to worry about being traced, that they would truly be invisible in this metropolis. Provided there is no incident, I would let them live on in this kind of illusion.

If several years pass without them harming man or beast, I would remove their names from the watch list. Their illusion would no longer be an illusion. They could lead the ordinary lives they thought they already had.

No one would know they were Neumodded. Like damaged products that have been refurbished in accordance with strict quality control, they would be discretely replaced on the shelf. And I, unbeknownst to the products, am that quality controller.

I watched him dash into a disused suburban subway. It isn't much safer in DiXia than above. He was very alert, picking his place on an unoccupied platform on the periphery of the station, sleeping in a hidden recess where the tracks join the platform, setting up a fake bed two to three metres away from his actual sleeping place, even setting up simple booby traps: the kind that can be found in encyclopedias, using found tools like rat traps and beer cans. Virtually every moment, this man is taking the highest of precautions. The occasional shadow that strays into his territory, some by accident, others for opportune gain, would invariably trigger his defenses or be frightened

away by the flash grenades he'd formulated. Those who choose to live in DiXia, usually don't want trouble; or I should say, they'd already had a big enough dose to last them a lifetime.

The camouflaged infrared sensor constantly streams images. This is how I watched him making his nest in the darkness. I've even begun to admire him.

He is only a basic Neumodded, having undergone just a small, routine operation. His files state very clearly: slight lowering in sensitivity of the NE/5-HT receptors in the cerebrum. Among the several hundred monitor screens in the surveillance car, about 60 to 70% of subjects tracked have had that operation.

Yet he is like no other.

A born fugitive, he is agile, decisive, cunning and crafty.

Nearly all Neumodded want to hide the fact they have been modified. But not all of them can confine themselves to a life in DiXia.

It was remarkable, removing every single implant from his body. Even though the Neumodded know that implants would render their location traceable, exposing their movements, very few go through with that. When I saw him come out of the supermarket, his trousers stained with blood, I froze in shock. It is said that before wars were all nuclear, old soldiers would open their wounds up, extract bullets from within, and stitch up the holes, all without the aid of anesthetics. I had never believed those tough guy legends were true, until that instant.

Was it really necessary to go to this length? I have monitored countless Neumodded, yet only this one has chosen the life of a fugitive. It's as if he's not only running from his past, running from his Neumodded status, but in doing so, running from humanity and civilization. I've started to become attached to him, and perhaps more than a little fascinated. I have to admit, I spend more time on him than on the other subjects, even if it wasn't that obvious at first.

Theoretically, I am responsible for several hundred Neumodded. Every monitor in the surveillance car constantly broadcasts their every action: the main computer is programmed to immediately alert the nearest controller or hospital, if there is a problem. In order to prevent the Neumodded from using interference devices or hacking the machine (and someone before had succeeded in doing so), the company employs human controllers to monitor the screens. Controllers select a random subject every hour to follow in forensic detail.

Things getting out of control were sometimes inevitable, hence the "belts and braces" approach. It gets tedious. The ways that people run and hide are more or less the same. But I like this job, leaping from one subject's life to another's, but watching from the outside, objectively. Until I saw him.

By the time I became aware of this attachment, it was too late. Every day, I spend over half my time, totally focused on watching him on his screen. I tried to change my position, but no matter

where I am, out of the several hundred screens, my attention would be involuntarily be drawn to his. Even if I intentionally move it away, it would drift back to him before long.

Oh yes, his number is 17.

I don't know his name.

It's difficult to work out how he learned all these survival tricks and strategies: setting up snares, using old batteries and junk he found in rubbish to make those flash grenades. He wasn't born with these skills and had no net tutorials to rely on. His files say that he doesn't have that background. Through careful observation, and putting these observations into practice, he seems to have acquired the skills that would ensure his survival. There is a kind of process there, but something remains hidden.

In the beginning, he was dreadful. He woke up from the operation into utter confusion, exhibiting extreme reactions to stimuli, staring malevolently at a passerby. He looked at people with a horror that words could not describe. I have never seen such a gaze from another living thing. A gaze that seemed to pierce through the world of the living, all the way to hell. It was as if he were confronted with tens of thousands of megabytes of information from humanity's history, his whole face twisted under the weight of all this data. Whenever I replay those clips, I focus the camera to his face, zoom in and zoom in, until those eyes fill the entire screen. Those beautiful brown irises, the molecule-scatter ray penetrating the stroma, shining onto the black pigment and into the pupils. Those mysterious, pitch black pupils. In what distant deeps or soaring skies were those retinas burned so deeply?

That data is unavailable.

Even if the image is so zoomed in that the pigment inside every cell of the iris is visible, the visuals cannot tell.

What exactly does he see? Or think he sees?

I want to know.

The pedestrian he glowered at was startled. I was just about to stun the subject, my finger curling round the trigger—this was the first time I'd had to take extreme safety measures against a Neumodded—but he suddenly leapt up and darted away, half stumbling, half crawling. His escape was pathetic to watch, collapsing into every possible thing he passed. About fifty or sixty metres into his run, he began to recover. I wrote my analysis on the form, my conclusion concurred with that of the mainframe: the Neumodded's condition was stable. Continue observation.

Not long after that, he found his hideout in the abandoned metro station, and sank into the world of DiXia, the hole where hoodlums go to disappear. He has adapted very well, for a newcomer. He has no physical prowess, by any account, nor does he have weapons or money, yet he manages to stay out of anyone's control by his sheer wits.

Once, deep in the night, he stalked the city's top eating places, in search for some high-calorie food, rather than the usual left-over junk in discarded paper bags. He came across a leather coat at the entrance of a car park. The coat was huge, not his size, but would make a warm blanket for the winter. Just as he pulled the coat on, a tramp, towering two heads taller appeared behind him. "That's my leather coat," he said to 17.

"Oh, and you just happened to lose it?"

"I left it outside the bar, took it off before a fight. The little bastard took a lot of punches." The big fellow pressed towards him slowly.

"Outside the bar"? 17 eyed him quickly before stating emphatically, "This coat's not yours."

He shifted his gaze to everything he could possibly focus on, avoiding looking directly at the tramp.

"Kid, you lookin' for a fight?" His companion was losing patience.

17 raised his gaze slowly to meet the tramp's. Instantly his eyes became vacant, his body trembled in pain, but he bore it, or should I say, he seemed to welcome it, as if something had entered his body. He face looked lost: the empty look that one only assumes when one puts all their focus, spirit and energy into one single thing. During the last few playbacks, I grasped the bewilderment and dejection that crossed his face. On the whole, it feels as if this person has shifted away from any dimension where he was physically present.

The tramp clearly didn't notice this change, nor did he sense the strange scent of danger emanating from 17. If I were him, I would have.

To the tramp, 17 was just another luckless vagrant, who looked skinny, weak and way under his weight class. So he made the first move. He took a swipe at 17's collar. 17 couldn't dodge it, and he was pulled in close. The tramp was about to rip the coat off his back, but all of a sudden, his arms went limp and fell to his sides.

The tramp started to howl, dropping 17, and collapsing into a heap, both hands shielding his left knee.

"Bastard, hand that over." He attempted to snatch something from 17. This time he wasn't after the jacket, but the humming photon interceptor in 17's hand.

17 stepped back to get out of his range.

"How did you know about my knee?"

Had the vagrant not mentioned it, it would have taken extensive digging for me to find out that he had a bionic actuator. This kind of prosthetic is usually highly stable and wouldn't normally glitch, unless there was interference on the exact wavelength from a nearby device. Which was

precisely what 17 was holding.

The giant had asked the question I wanted an answer to. How did 17 know his attacker had an actuator in his knee, and happened to have an interceptor set at the same frequency as the actuator? The tramp couldn't figure it out, but his puzzlement didn't stop the pain. His huge bulk completely folded up, he begged 17 to switch off the interceptor.

"It only works within 500 metres: look, I'll test it myself." 17 glanced at the device in his hand, his expression complex. There a mixture of pride, and concern. I would guess it was his first time using it. "Don't come any closer."

17 backed away at a near run, and once out of range, turned to face his attacker. With the device now deactivated, he carefully approached the tramp who now sat slumped on the ground. His hulking mass was no longer threatening, but 17 still avoided looking at him, a slightly guilty expression passing his face.

He held out his hand to the tramp and mumbled something which the vagrant didn't seem to hear. 17 was obliged to repeat it, his averted gaze filled with a few more degrees of shyness. "Give me his number." He yelled.

The tramp was stupefied. He probably had no idea he'd be counter-robbed. "What number? Whose number?"

17 held up the photon interceptor. "Every DiXia doctor gives their patients a contact number. The one who did your knee would have done the same. Like their patients, unlicensed doctors live a vagrant's life to avoid constant danger. The contact number lets you put in a request for the doctor's location at any time. The doctor can consent or decline, according to their circumstances at the time. Apart from this, the number has charging functions, when you top up to a certain amount of money there will be discounts and offers on medical fees. It keeps doctors' and patients' fates tied very closely together."

"He didn't give me a number, really, he didn't give me any contact details. I'm telling the truth."

The big man said that his doctor isn't on the move, keeping his practice at the same place. He seemed as though he was going to keep the location a secret, but his eyes flicked to the interceptor in 17's hand, hesitated for a moment, and he made a choice between further suffering and betraying his doctor.

"You know why I'm asking." The hint of a smile emerged on 17's slim face.

"Yeah." The big tramp nodded and gave him the address of the underground hospital.

The next day, 17 found that underground surgery, or at least the address the tramp had given him. It was more of a puzzle than an address: according to the tramp's spoken instructions, the location was on a overhead walkway on a fly-over in the Port District. There was nothing on the walkway. This area is mainly deserted during the day. 17 stood in the blazing sun, staring at the rust-mottled railings in a daze, feeling a little exposed. He hasn't been in sunlight for a long time.

A soft graphene ladder rose up from the base of the walkway, climbing up until it hung on the railing to the right of 17. This was a kind of invitation. 17 stepped over the railings and grabbed hold of the rungs. The ladder slowly retracted, taking 17 into the structure suspended underneath the walkway. Incredible.

An underground surgery hidden in plain sight, slung below an overhead walkway in a part of town where you never looked up.

The automatic doors close behind 17, almost clipping my sensor.

"How did you find us?" An old man emerged from the shadowy depths of the room.

No, not actually an old man. It's hard to tell someone's age from their outward appearance, especially when their face has been operated on. Everything from the elusiveness in his gaze to his crooked gait spelled out "old, an age that connoted "harmless". 17 lowered his head and gazed at his shoes.

"A tramp told me."

The old man eyed him and detected the trace of embarrassment on his face.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"I want a spectrometer scan." 17 took out a tidy pile of money from his pocket.

The old man took it. "Of what?"

"My brain."

The main computer was already on red alert. The red light on the top of the surveillance car was flashing urgently, flooding the entire interior of with a glaring red, making it resemble a murder scene. My blood pressure soared, my arteries about to explode. For some time after I'd unplugged the alarm, it still reverberated in my head, but even that was better than having to go through the damned post-report checking procedures.

Until then, no Neumodded has ever requested a brain scan. What did he want to know? What was the problem? Every day, I check his behaviour against strict criteria; all calculations show that his statistics fall within the boundaries of normal. The operation was a definite success. Several days of trailing him proved that he was recovering well.

What happened? I wanted to know what it was that he wanted to know. They say to never let the opponent get the upper hand, but 17 wasn't my opponent. At least until now.

Does he want to undergo reverse operations, and cancel the effect of the previous one? According to the Neumodded Monitoring Code, the monitor must take extreme measures against the subject in this situation.

So what on earth are you trying to do, 17?

I stared at a screen that was really no larger than my hand, not missing a single detail. Carefully manipulating the position of the sensor's camera, adjusting it to the exact angle I wanted. I was staring so hard my eyes nearly bled.

The old man said as he switched off the scanner. "The results are out."

In that instant, I almost felt my heart, synchronized with 17s, leaping out of our mouths.

"Nothing abnormal. Only this, you see," The old man pointed at the shadow over the occipital lobe on the cerebral hologram, and said "the number of neurons here is unusually high: your brain needs a much higher oxygen intake than normal people, so you've been feeling exhausted, and have difficulty breathing. Just don't do any extreme sports. Like fucking." The old man smirked. He obviously liked this part of his job. "Only joking."

"I'm into animals, anyway." 17 replied to the floor, before squeezing out a wry smile. "Only joking."

The old man chuckled, suddenly he rushed towards 17, pressed down on his shoulders. 17 was quick to retaliate. They struggled for a while, their faces almost touching. "What happened to your eyes? Can't you look at people?" The old man extracted a hand, grabbed 17's chin and forcibly pointed it towards his own face.

17 twisted his head left, but it was twisted back by the doctor's hand. He closed his eyes, shrieked and begged the old man to let go.

"You can take it for a little while. Don't you want to know the answer to that question?"

As soon as he heard this, 17 calmed down. He seemed to use all his might to lift those eyelids that seemed so heavy, a drop of sweat trickled down his face. He opened his eyes, and slowly and turned his gaze towards the old man.

Then came another scream, it was hard to tell whether it was caused by pain, horror, or both.

They looked at each other, faces almost touching. Two men so intimately losing themselves in each other's gaze. Fixed in the posture of two barons from an opera classic, but with none of the humour or romance.

17 was trying his hardest to move his body backwards, as if he wanted to merge into the wall behind him, to escape this invisible monster. He was obviously in a lot of pain. Veins pulsed explosively on his forehead, he gritted his teeth, but eventually, he shut his eyes, and the doctor moved away. When 17 opened his eyes again, I zoomed in. The entire screen filled up again with that pair of milk chocolate brown irises. Those wondrous capillary lines. I had never examined a person's eyes so closely. It felt mysterious that I could see his eyes so intimately, but could not see a thing that they saw.

"What did you see?" I hovered close to the screen, the tip of my nose almost touching it.

"It's alright. Everything's fine." The old man's voice came out of the speaker.

I leant back, zoomed the camera out to a normal distance. In the upside-down room, the old man had already returned to his previous position. He spoke nonchalantly, as if nothing had happened before.

"Tomatoes and Parma cheese."

"What?" 17 was bemused.

"Eat more of these things, and spaghetti bolognaise. Nothing to worry about. Your body needs more glutamic amino acids and calcium ions. To put it simply, they're good for your brain."

"Got it..." 17 hesitated.

"I saw the microsurgery wound. It's very visible under the microscope. Don't worry, I can confirm it was a routine modification." The old man was soothing the concerns 17 hadn't voiced. A profound understanding of human nature is also the professional remit of an underground doctor.

"So, I'm totally fine?"

"You can't be any more normal." The old man shrugged.

Explosion. Shrapnel. Both figures were thrown across the floor. Documents, receipts, small items and pieces of wallpaper were hurled through the hole torn by the charge, falling under the walkway.

A masked figure emerged from the smoke and dust. Hanging upside down, the image resembled a mirage. Facing the surgery, he lifted both arms, curled his body into a ball and somersaulted at high speed towards the walkway. All performed in one smooth balletic act, which you couldn't help but admire. The graceful agility and imaginativeness of this exit. By the time we reacted, it was too late. The masked figure had been carrying a gun. And he had fired a single shot into the room.

It all happened too quickly.

17 stared at the blood that flowed over the back of his hand in a stupor. The old man had collapsed into his arms. The bullet seemed to have hit his heart. The killer was an excellent shot.

With blood gushing out like that, it looked as though the doctor was beyond saving. The old man grabbed hold of 17 with an energy that seemed to come from a final urge to survive; there was a mumbling which could hardly escape his throat. 17 started up: he knew he had to put distance between himself and the incident. Just as he freed himself from the old man, there was a flurry of footsteps. From a door he hadn't seen before, a pack of burly male nurses rushed in, and immediately surrounded the old man.

"I didn't do it. I was a patient." 17 steps to the side.

They ignored him, carrying the old man into the next room, and beginning emergency rescue procedures. I could tell they were experienced. Fortunately, the old man's heart was crooked, and the bullet only found a main artery. Any hospital would stock Cell Regeneration Serum, which would rapidly repair the damage. I looked back at the nurses, only to find their faces ashen, and their bodies slumped in despair.

"You've got CeReg, right?" 17 threw a glance at the freezer.

"It's no good."

"Why not?"

"We don't know his blood type. So we don't know which type of serum to use."

"But his Social Security Chip! He's still got one."

"All the old man's records, his name, age, blood type. All fake," one of them informed him hesitantly.

"He got a hacker to ghost him," another of them added.

Yes, any sensible underground doctor would find a way to change or delete their personal details. The mere thought of this info being stored by the state archives would be like sitting on a bed of needles. It wasn't just DiXia's doctors, but many who have forsaken the light have also forsaken their identity under the sun. For them, even death is better than being caught. Your true identity must, under no circumstances, be discovered.

"Can't you do a cross-matching to find out?"

"There's no time." The male nurse burst into tears.

I watched him. Forgetting day and night. At first, it was for work, then it was out of curiosity, and now--I don't know. Watching through the tinted windshield of the surveillance car, or from of the monitoring screen, a day at a time. Despite this, I still don't understand, how things had got to this stage.

They gambled with life.

They won.

The old man was saved.

This is only one version of the story. One among the many different narratives that have spread across DiXia. 17 didn't use weapons, nor did his body "glow with a halo that subdued all before him". He was just as stunned as everyone else, just as helpless. The only difference is that he seemed to know something, yet couldn't be sure. He acted as if he was compelled to blurt out the old man's blood type, compelled to act like he knew. And in turn, everyone else had been compelled to believe him and act on it.

"B, RH minus P," 17 yelled at those nurses. I replay the moment again and again. The way he shouted it out. I rewind it and fast it forward, infatuated with his expression. In that instant, his face revealed some kind of pain, but also a mysterious resolve.

What did this expression mean for the masses? Did he show the air of calm and self-possession they hoped for?

That isn't important. What is important is that the blood type he shouted was correct.

The story of 17 soon spread. DiXia thirsts for blood and legend. Many flocked to find him. They wait at the places where he might appear, intercept him, politely or rudely. The first two were just curious, they wanted to see him with their own eyes, or soak up a bit of good luck. And then someone couldn't help but ask questions, probing ones, and 17 would choose which ones to answer. He knew those questions were important, and that at least they didn't come out of malice or boredom. He told those people where to find food, long-lost belongings, explained to them that actions from enemies that hurt them many years ago were merely due to misunderstanding, and were worth forgiving, he dissipated conflict, and helped them shape their lives.

He knows things, that no one except the perpetrators know, or things that even they were unaware, but no one knows how.

No, he is not a psychic.

He explains this to those people. No, he's not a prophet. But it's no use.

Within 48 hours, 17's existence became known to the entire DiXia. They relentlessly watch at junctions he might pass, brazenly relaying him messages by hook or crook via unsuspecting acquaintances. The more extreme ones go into 17's territory, carrying weapons.

I saw with my own eyes some hardened villain who came looking for him, whose eyes brimmed with tears the moment he saw him. Some follow him silently, protecting him from the shadows. Women give him clean clothes; children bring him stolen fruit.

He explained to them again and again, it was purely coincidence. If they have a good memory, they would know that he too has made mistakes. He has a 35% probability of getting it wrong. But apart from him, no one remembers the failures.

I don't know how all this happened, how things have careened down this path. The disconcerting thing is, deep down, I don't feel these people are being foolish.

When you come face to face with another frail human being just like you, and you throw him a question that has tormented you half a lifetime, when his downcast gaze slowly rises meet yours, and you look into those beautiful brown eyes, eyes that surround you alone, like the warm sun, the kind of wholesome sunlight that can only found in the Finance District; and then you feel his agony, and his resolve to withstand it, to hide those thistles and thorns below that pale skin. His eyes penetrate you, and you realize that he is alone in a darkness that drowns even himself, like the chaos before the Big Bang, time and space cease to exist, along with everything we know, there is only him. The only thing left is that gaze, the way it penetrates everything, detached and yet at the same time, full of yearning. Then you realize... you finally realize, that he is suffering for you, suffering for your petty distress.

When you are facing all of this, would you not, in a heart beat, like the people of DiXia, fall in love with him?

I would.

The tenth day after the shooting at the surgery.

News came that the old man is recovering quite well, and that he wanted to see 17. So, 17 came.

The surgery has been restored to the way it was. The old man, in bed at his own home, looks quite well. Maybe it was an illusion, but when the sensor connected to the room, I thought I saw the old man darting a quick glance at it.

17 directs his gaze to the "empty" corner of the room and waves his hand in front of the old man's eyes. "Doctor, are you all right now?" Having asked that, he smiles at himself.

"Has anyone been bothering you?" The old man's demeanor seems graver still than the first time.

"Your friends came round asking me what the assassin looked like."

"Yes, they told me, you fobbed them off."

"I said it was a masked figure. It's the truth." 17 defended himself.

"You'd better stick to that line. My problem, I fix it myself. You fix your own problems. Everybody's got problems, but they fix it themselves." The old man stops and flicks a glance over to

the sensor from the corner of his eye. “This time is an exception, though. You saved my life once, so I’ll give you one piece of advice. You must remember it. This is advice that can save your life.”

“What is it?”

“Never ever tell anyone the truth. When you came here the first time, you didn’t tell the truth; of course, neither did I. Even if you told the truth, I wouldn’t have. But now, things are different.” The old man looks at the wound on his chest, flicks the switch by his bed, changing it to walk mode. Reacting to the commands from the old man’s brain, it carries him into the depths of the surgery. “Come in. Let’s talk.”

Another set of doors 17 hadn’t noticed slide open quietly. The bed carries the old man in and disappears.

17’s facial expression shows more fear than puzzlement. He is afraid of what the old man will tell him, even before he knows what it might be. But still he follows him into the room.

The sensor transmits the image of him entering the room. His back. Shadows crawling up his pale neck, about to swallow him up.

This is when I lose him.

As it flies into the room, the sensor loses power, falls to the floor, and is crushed to powder by the closing titanium alloy doors.

Restless noise explodes across the screen, then leave it in darkness.

Out of habit, I change my line of sight over the wall of monitor screens.

The pathetic thing is, no matter where I direct my vision, across the several hundred glowing screens, that small black one pierces my eyes like a needle.

I should have realized this would happen much sooner. All high-end hospitals have anti-bugging systems. This doctor must have been someone in the medical circles, to attract a professional sniper, and to keep his calm even after being shot. If an old man like this solemnly tells you something, this thing must be very important. Important enough to be discussed in total secrecy.

I stare at the little back screen in a daze, biting my lips viciously. This is the first time I’ve lost contact with 17. Even though currently there are only two streets between us. Through the glass of the surveillance car, I can see the overpass where the underground surgery hangs. But I can’t see him, can’t hear him, don’t know what he’s doing, nor can I go and seek him out. What is he seeing, what is he saying, what is he doing? I don’t know. A minute ago, his every expression was imprinting on my memory.

The emptiness, this immense, unfulfilling, insatiable emptiness. My palms fill with cold sweat.

17's screen flicker and flicker again with his image, along with snippets of conversation between him and the old man. I leap up, rummage for my pills, which I take in a dry gulp, and wait for them to take effect, suppressing the overactive neurons in my head, even though it's a full hour before my next scheduled medication time.

Waiting.

Waiting for me to regain the ability to function as a whole.

Waiting to become normal again.

The pills slowly do their job. The optical and audio illusions fade and things become more bearable.

I begin to think, find a way to solve the problem. The bug has to work in conjunction with the subject's DNA, but there's no sample of 17 to hand. To wait for a droid delivery from the company, would be at least 15 minutes. If the conversation lasts that long...

Someone is knocking on the car. It takes me a while to notice and react. I open the window.

The tea-coloured glass glides soundlessly and elegantly into the body of the car, like an inverted theatre curtain.

From the curtain emerges the downcast eyes and face of 17, so close that I can almost feel his breath. My left eye begins to twitch uncontrollably.

He says, "I know you."

I make a nonplussed gesture with my hand. "What does that mean?"

"I know everything about you." A distinct smile floats onto his lowered head.

I smile too. "Oh? And what do you know?"

17 bends down, putting his lips to my ears and whispers something very slow and deliberately.

I tremble all over. It is a long time before I can open my mouth to say, "What do you want?"

"I want you to let me in, so I can explain properly."

I open the car door. I have no choice.

I can only let one of the several hundred subjects I have been covertly monitoring, in, and sit next to me.

I have no other choice.

Not just because I love him, also because of the secret he whispered in my ear.

“61, I know you’re a split-brain”.

B

17

Yes, I became a fugitive, destined for a life of vagrancy, misery, never to know another day’s peace. I threw away my mobile, tore out my implants, and now hide out on a disused subway line, becoming just another of the nameless wandering ghosts of DiXia.

And it started with a joke.

On my twenty-second birthday, I got a position at Club 27. Although it was called a “club”, it was a public welfare organization, whose aim was to help the manically depressed find happiness again, through the benevolence of human care. They were opposed to the use of “unethical” technologies such as ECT, antidepressants and DNA editing.

At the time, I didn’t really appreciate the founder’s goals. For one reason or another, I just really needed to feel like part of a group, and if there was money to be made, then all the better. My job was very simple, to keep the patients company. I was to chat with them and talk about “fun things” with them. Before I formally started my work, there was a training period, to teach us how to chat. Every day, I had to tell our coach a joke.

My coach wasn’t bad at all. Apparently she’d been a patient there, who re-discovered her place in life through the help of the organization.

She was really inspirational. Every time I saw her, it was like watching a Mao-era propaganda movie. I almost used that as a topic for chatting with the patients.

That morning, I came up with a new joke. But the coach didn’t seem to like it.

“So this is the joke you are going to tell me today?” The coach’s plump face hovered directly above my head, the fat flesh on her usually sunny face hung so low that I felt it could have flowed off the bones and dripped onto me at any moment.

Maybe the coach thought I was making insinuations at her. But it wasn’t until that night that I knew how much I would pay for that joke. A group of people broke into my room in the middle of the night. I was on the sofa. Before I could react, my nose was filled with a mixture of the smells. Formaldehyde. Vanilla ice cream. The distinct smell that comes with artificially grown cow hide. It lasts for ages, and somewhere in the middle of it, I lost consciousness.

Before I woke up, I had a very long dream. It was black, furry, warm and moist. You’d say, oh please, use some other adjectives, but how else can I describe it. Except for a word that conveys an absolute nothingness beyond empty, oblivion, void, or, to use a verb: falling.

But none of them is quite right. My dream was black and furry and warm and wet. I have never had such a dream, so can't give a name to it. My dream didn't take me anywhere, or show me anything. Nothing happened. It was just there, and then I woke up.

Ha! I was on the street. I had some cuts and bruises. I must have been worked over pretty well whilst I was out. The coach must really have had enough of me, to have said goodbye like this. I was a little upset. Because I couldn't amuse her with my joke, even though the tests showed she had recovered from her depression.

It was dawn, not many people on the streets. The lamp posts were still glowing. Not long after, the shops began to open, and in rapid succession tourists came to occupy the arcades. The whole world comes to see this. The last remnant of the Floating City, with its old-fashioned, crammed architecture that had been deemed unsafe, and a public transport system with zero convenience ratings. Apart for the nanoprint machine on the street corner, it was like being completely transported back to the twentieth century. It was a good season. The snow had just melted, the fog had yet to arrive, and the continuous wall of graffiti was clearly visible in the post-winter sunlight. Yes, graffiti, neon lights, and of course body mod parlors and Tattoo festivals. This city absorbs all sounds, all words, all impulses that are hard to put a name to, like a giant radioactive beast. And then regurgitates it, reconstructing it as an unimaginable whole, the causes and effects of which become indistinguishable. There isn't another city like this in the entire world. There was another Tattoo Festival soon. When that day arrives, the whole street would be so packed as to be totally impenetrable.

The faces, filled with yearning, pressed tightly against the body of strangers, visible hot breaths occasionally streaming out of the crowd, looking up at the dancing mirages in the air, imploring to be basked in them, like a kind of blessing.

A bunch of happy little idiots.

I drew back my thoughts, and carefully stretched out my body, hearing the clicking in every joint, and surveyed my surroundings. I hadn't seen the sky and streets at this hour for a long time. Soaked in the quiet mercurial light, they looked solid.

I hadn't felt like this in ages. I had almost forgotten what quiet felt like.

A nanoprint repairman walked hurriedly past me. Blue uniform, hat of the same material, black round-toed shoes, medium build. I didn't really see him. When he walked out of my line of sight, I felt something weird. Like the unsettling premonition people often get when they are about to lose something. I replayed the scene of the workman walking past me in my head and felt as if something was added to it.

"Hello, young man." A middle-aged jogger waved at me from across the street. His enthusiasm infected me. I waved back with both my arms but couldn't utter a word.

It was as if someone had grabbed my head and repeatedly rammed it against a wall, or giant waves were hitting me one after another. An unknown giant object had crashed into my eyeballs and hit my brain. I couldn't breathe. I waved my arms in futility. The old man turned his head and returned a full and warm smile—when someone told me about this later, I laughed until I cried.

That's when they first appeared, though it's probably more accurate to say that I fell into a sea of them, coming out of nowhere, giant "screens" seem to emerge from the sky, layer upon layer, surging and leaping, the smallest one was half the height of a person, the content contained all sorts of pictures and texts, before I could see all the information on one field, the next one leapt out to cover all the others that came before. I felt trapped, drowning in this tidal wave of uninvited electronic data.

(It was like accidentally clicking on a malicious link, and countless webpages leaping out.)

I closed my eyes, squeezing the muscles so tightly that they were almost cramping. I was scared that those crazy webpages would force open my eyelids and slam into my eyes.

My head was about to explode. I doubled over to hold it, my whole body collapsing on the ground.

I was relieved to see the screens quickly disappear, and the pain they brought gradually fading, too.

What happened to me?

Were these screens, these Infofields just my imagination or were they real?

Maybe the world we exist in had always been made up of virtual scenes simulated by the brain? Had the people at the club moved my consciousness into a simulated life? These were the only ways I could understand how those Infofields could leap out of the sky like real objects.

How could I be sure that the current me was the real me, and not a virtual image made up of code? If this was virtual, then the level of virtual simulation was very high and very close to reality. From the racing of my heart, to my body temperature to the feel of my injuries, including the terror I was feeling that was like falling into a cave of ice. It was impossible to differentiate from reality.

I did what any normal person would do under these circumstances. I went nuts and vandalized the public facilities. I found the nanoprint machine. With most of humanity's material needs now dependent on these tiny robots I couldn't think of anything realer. No matter how high tech they are though, breaking them was still easy. There's at least a hundred ways I could think of, and I used the most crude. I opened the case and tore out the circuits.

I stood on the same spot and waited. If this was virtual, then some yellow security light would leap out on the video screen, to remind me how close my antisocial personality ratings are

to exceeding the limit, how close I am to being placed on the list of dangerous individuals, also providing the location of the nearest police officers coming to arrest me, as well as the best routes for escape.

None of this happened.

No flashing lights. No alarm.

There were still policemen though, but by the time they got there, I was long gone. What the security camera recorded would have been a blurred figure with its back towards the camera, its face covered. Of course I covered my face. I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

In the city archives, my records would still be clean.

Without a doubt, I was in reality.

Only here, does evil go unpunished.

So, I didn't really have to go to DiXia. For damaging a nanotech machine, the punishment would probably have just been a little time in community service. But something didn't feel quite right. It was instinct that drove me underground. I think you would understand, -considering those violently surging, relentless windows of data.

In my mind, there was something very wrong.

Yes, it's true that there is probably only an indistinct chaos in the depth of the human brain, deep down everyone is cross-wired, everyone is mad. But what happened in my mind, was far beyond madness. I would rather that something had been done to me, than be truly mad. The mad are so lonely.

The most frightening thing in this world, is being mad in a different way to everyone else.

In the darkness of the metro, the Infocfields don't appear. I wanted to work something out from this clue. I failed.

But the darkness has its own way of telling you things.

About five or six days in, I'd gone through all the food I could find. Don't ask me what I found: you don't want to know. I had to go above ground to try my luck. Two o'clock in the morning, I bypassed an automatic street lamp, and found a Chinese restaurant that looked quite good. I shooed away a couple of stray cats, opened the bin, what a treat. It may have looked like shit, but the freshly cooked vegetables, fish and meat dishes thrown away together still smelled mouth-watering. That scent alone left me feeling energized from head to toe, I'd hit the jackpot.

"Kid, do you know whose territory this is?"

I turned around, and guess what I saw.

To a casual observer, I was standing under the streetlamp facing another lost soul, just like me, but those Infocfields rushed at me like a tsunami, almost overflowing my vision. I could see nothing except them. Yes, this time was painful too, but you get used to pain.

“Didn’t you hear me, little bastard?” So he was an older man. Of course, I heard him. If it wasn’t for the Infocfields, he probably wouldn’t have been my match. I reluctantly let go of the food and backed away.

I was meticulous in not let him notice that I couldn’t see.

Footsteps drew near. A foul stink rushed towards me. Without thinking, I ran down several streets without stopping: it wasn’t until I saw the traffic lights at a junction that I realized I could actually see again.

That night, I got nothing. I returned to my hideout trying to suppress the hunger in my stomach and lay down exhausted. When my spine touched the ice-cold floor, it quivered, I suddenly had an idea. Because I ran away in a panic, I had not realized that when I turned my head to run, the Infocfields disappeared. Remembering how they appeared and disappeared over the last few times, I found a basic pattern: they appear whenever I run into people. To be more precise, when I am looking at someone. When my line of vision moves away from them, the fields disappear. The delay is less than a second.

I also remembered, that although I could only capture a very small amount of information in them, the content seemed to be completely related to the person I was looking at. In other words, at the same time as I am looking at a person, I also “see” all the information related to them. They are all displayed to me in the format of these windows, which open and overlap each other continually. They not only cover up the older fields, but also my normal vision, and to a large extent disrupt the my ability to deal with what’s in front of me. Such an enormous amount of information was far beyond the receptive capacity of the retina, the visual part of my brain and all neurons connecting them. This is why the surge of windows cause me agony.

If someone else told me this, I’d think they were mad.

The best way to test my hypothesis was to look at someone. One at a time, to consciously control the appearance of the Infocfields, and then to observe.

There was no better ground for experimentation than DiXia.

My earliest test subjects were my fellow vagrants who accidentally ran into me. I concealed myself in dark corners and waited patiently for them to appear. I only needed a little light. They would hesitantly approach the light, and in the dull rays, show their faces. The names they had abandoned, their lovers, happy memories, shameful ones, debts accumulated together with things they themselves had forgotten, appeared before me in rapid succession, chaotically sweeping past my brain at high velocity. Most of it was gone, before I had a chance to take it in, but I seemed to

vaguely feel it, like smoke from the tips of a flame. I couldn't read it, but I could feel it.

After several observations, I proved my hypothesis. I can browse other people, skim-read them. Whether I wanted or not. Most of the time, I didn't want to.

How can I explain it? It's sort of like, one day you discover that the strangers you went to a music festival with, whose names you don't even know, have suddenly spilled into your bedroom and made you their soul mate.

Yes, that verb, spilled.

But it wasn't all bad. I got some new skills out of the blue. When the need arises, things I have never done before naturally come to me, as though I'd done them many times before. Of course, the body and muscles need to learn these processes by practice before the brain could command them to do them accurately.

For example, where to find nutritious food that doesn't go off, how to avoid getting caught by the city patrol, how to build a comfortable nest with rubbish you find, how to set traps, and make basic defensive weapons. By scanning the homeless, I inadvertently took in a lot of their survival skills.

Of course, there was information that wasn't so useful. Like how to identify the gender of dolphins. Why bicycles can stand upright. The effect of genetically modified crops on the soil. The league of a hundred genre fiction writers of the last century.

This all sounds exciting, but what does it entail?

When I see someone, not only are their biometric readings, personality makeup, all their memories and dreams completely exposed to me, all the knowledge they have ever learned, everything they knows, can be accessed by me.

If I could get over this damned headache and master how to manipulate these Infocfields, then everyone in the world would become my moving pawn.

Why am I not excited?

Firstly, I'll never be able to handle this agony, never be able to figure out how to control these leaping fields, I don't know how to focus and gather the information. Besides, even if I could? So what?

I am not interested in saving humanity or even myself. If I could lead a tramp's life adequately with these skills, I'd be satisfied.

I like this rotten darkness.

The world is a mess. Curled up in the cold and wet of this cave-like DiXia, darkness is the only thing that surrounds me, I even feel its warmth. The only warmth I need.

The warmer it is, the heavier it gets, the heavier it gets, the sweeter it feels. It's hard to break away from it.

Why should I open my eyes?

The story would end here. If it wasn't for 61.

I know he's watching me. I've known all along.

He doesn't know I know, nor does he know I've been watching him all along too—with his eyes.

The night outside the Chinese restaurant when I got so scared I nearly pissed my pants, I didn't go home empty handed. That night, I ran into 61.

I was running frantically along the backstreets of a bar, until I ran out of steam. I was leaning against a lamppost to catch my breath, when I saw a car in a dark alley, just out of the corner of my eye. The window was half open and I saw him sitting in the driver's seat, head tilted back, taking a nap. His lips were slightly open. He was clearly very young, but had the look of middle age.

The screens began to spring up, and I fled.

This was how we first met, brief and sudden, because one of us slacked for a moment.

He shouldn't have let me see him. That way, I wouldn't get suspicious if I saw the same car again. Next time I saw him ducking into the car with a sandwich. This time, I scanned him. I only had a moment, but luck was on my side, I grasped some key information.

His name is 61, he is 27 years old, and he works for Club27 as a security controller.

He was sent to monitor me, among others, using infrared molecular sensors. Oh, and he really likes this job.

I didn't understand why the club wanted to track me, but the answer wasn't hard to find. The answer was in the security controller's memory. As long as I had enough time to read it, I could find the answer. If I was lucky, I could uncover the ins and outs of the whole business.

Enough time, enough opportunities, and enough stamina to withstand the agony in my head.

There is nothing easier than tracking your tracker. As long as you pretend not to know anything and continue to let him track you. You don't have to do anything. He'll follow you.

Very soon, I became familiar with the routines of the security controller. He spends most of his time in the surveillance car behind one-way windshields. The car is parked on a street not far from me. Every day, about five o'clock in the afternoon, he would go to the bar, order a hamburger with chips, and two bottles of beer, and then unwind there for half an hour.

Four-fifty in the afternoon, I walk into that bar and find a seat. Even if he saw me, he would dismiss it as a coincidence. A few minutes later, he came in and found his regular seat. I looked at him. The only time of the day he wasn't snooping on others, he was being spied on himself. He was totally unaware of this, eating his meal alone peacefully, emanating an air of calm. His uncoordinated hand movements were even endearing. In a second, the fields opened, refreshing at super speed. The information was no longer in waves, but giant, concrete slabs, dense, heavy, viciously crashing onto my retina, I could almost see the sparks they caused, and the bloody pulp that was my brain. I bit my lips, to stop myself from screaming, gripping the table, white-knuckled.

61's Infocfields were different from others', the quantity being several times higher.

I was like a dog trying to chase a space shuttle, pathetically pawing at the rapidly zooming windows.

I couldn't even see the fields themselves, let alone read their content. I could only feel their weight and speed. And catch a few little bits of information.

61's childhood, his favourite colour, what happened in high school.

Why would I want to know these things?

Sweat trickled down my neck. I felt dehydrated. I no longer had the energy to face the barrage of data. There was something very unusual about this guy. Too fast, too much. I couldn't work it out.

I gave up.

As with so many other things, I gave up halfway.

Shifting my vision, all the Infocfields now safely fell to the floor. I was panting and shaking all over.

There was a distinct difference between the information acquired by chance and the specific data I'm looking for.

If I was willing to spend the rest of my life on this person, then I might find what I'm looking for. This was a question of probability, and I didn't want to gamble with my life. So, I gave up.

I can do "giving up" with my eyes closed.

I staggered out of the bar as if I'd drunk it dry.

Around this time, I also began to feel my body rapidly weakening, I couldn't run for long, I couldn't lift things. My sight was deteriorating, too. Sometimes I got so tired just foraging for food. Despite this, my appetite grew, and I found myself in a constant state of hunger. As the weather got warmer and warmer, my limbs still felt cold, till I had to put on every rag of clothing I'd scavenged just to stop from freezing.

Only the darkness was warm. But it wasn't enough. For some unknown reason, I'd picked this kind of life, including the way it would end.

I lay on cardboard, the damp of the ground seeped through all the wastepaper and old clothes into my bones. And suddenly, I thought of 61.

To know that there was someone always watching you was a bizarre feeling.

If he wants, he could repeatedly watch your every move. Zoom into every subtle change in your expression. There was something very wrong with this guy called 61. His windows were opening much faster than the average rate. The strangest thing about his fields was that they actually felt different from other people's, and almost all of them had an incompleteness. Some of them contained contradictory information. It's like he's thinking with two brains.

I couldn't help but think there must be a connection between the content on these incomplete and dense slabs of data, the stark contrast between the contradicting ones, and the way he watched me.

I could feel tiny fragments of his memory: him looking at me on the screen. Me curled up on the cardboard, staring at something in the darkness in a stupor.

Yes, that's me. Small and withered, with a pair of light brown eyes that could be extinguished at any time.

Back then, I was ready to welcome the embrace of death. My only enjoyment, was scanning 61, and retrieving his memories from my mind in the dark. Sometimes I felt shy, about the way he watched me, if only 61 would behave himself.

Robbing the leather coat was an accident. I read that the guy had an artificial knee, I switched on the interceptor that disrupted the actuator and successfully put the enemy down. I was very lucky to be able to pull the right trick out of my trivia-filled head at the right time. Heavens know why I didn't give up then. Finding the underground hospital via that poor guy, I ran into a shooting, and was again lucky to be able to read the doctor's blood type and save his life.

This was coincidence. To be able to get the right information out of this unquantifiable sea of data at the right time. It was almost impossible. But I did it twice. If I could do that, I didn't want to pursue the reasons too deeply.

But things were getting complicated. One by one, people found me. They asked me questions. Questions about them. Hoping I would have an answer.

Who's my mother?

Where did the cargo end up?

Did I really kill someone?

Did he betray us?

Where's the money hidden?

Which one should I choose?

What's the success rate of this operation?

Is the shadow I see on the fly-over south of the city every night a ghost?

What is the ultimate mystery of the universe?

I should have known that the DiXia would be the home of so many questions, every one like an undercurrent. When I met the first stranger who stopped me with a question, I couldn't help laughing. I roared with laughter. I thought of 61 who was watching the monitor. He must be laughing with me. They expect someone who hasn't even worked out what's going on in their head to answer their questions.

I told them I don't know. They said yes, yes you do know. You saved that old man. I told them I might be able get it right, they said yes, yes you will. You saved that old man. I told them I could only try, they said, thank you. Please try, help us like you helped that old man.

I couldn't help but laugh, but didn't know why my eyes felt sore and puffy, like a weeping that should have happened but never did. You just can't turn those imploring faces away. They have been locked up by their troubles for too long. If I take one look, however brief, those sad windows hurt me. But you just can't turn those earnest faces away, especially when they couldn't even see their sadness themselves.

For most of these people, even if I get the answer right, I can't help them. This is what I tell them. They say it doesn't matter, we just want the answer.

They just want the answer. So I lift my eyes, and I read.

Every time it finishes, I feel like I'm falling from the sky. As I gained more experience, the process seemed to feel a little less dangerous each time. One day eventually, I would land safely. My recovery from reading extended from a half an hour at the beginning to half a day, I would be in a complete in a state of dehydration. The good news is, people look after me. I'm not sure when but they began to gather around me and care for me as one of their own. They followed me around all day. Some people are not even there for answers. They just want to be by my side. When they find a chance to look after me, they darted at it without hesitation, as if it's an instinct.

The funny thing is, I haven't even seen the faces of lot of them properly. Except for scanning, my eyes were becoming increasingly poor at the job of actual sight.

Something was wrong. I want to know if my answer is correct, but I know it's no use asking them. Perhaps I can ask 61. He would be able to see more clearly than I can.

Once, in my dream, I went to seek him out, I open the door of the surveillance car, sit next to the driver's seat, and then ask him questions, just like these people have asked me.

I ask, 61, what did you do to me?

Even if it was a dream. I could still feel 61's eyes watching me from somewhere outside his body.

61 watches me sleep. 61 watches me wake up.

I read his memories, I see him watching me sleep, see him watching me wake up.

I open my eyes.

Someone was nudging my shoulder, urging me to hurry and wake up, he said, the old man wants to see me.

I open my eyes. This is not a dream...

The moment I entered the secret room, my skull felt numb. The doctor's bed spun 180 degrees and rushed towards me. I imagined the old man looking at me.

"Interference," he said to me.

I nodded.

"You're going blind." The old man announced my future in the same tone of voice.

I put my hands in my pockets. It's very cold here. There are no chairs.

"You've got something to say?" he asks me.

"The first time I saw you, I thought you had just the right face to announce such misfortunes."

"Did you already know you were going blind?"

"No. That's why I came to see you. I wanted to know what happened to me. Do you want to tell me now?" I lean against the wall.

"Humph, others seek answers from you. But you come to me. You don't even know about yourself." The old man sneered.

"Listen, thank you for telling me I'll be blind in a few days, but I'm starving now. I need to go and eat." I was about to walk out of the house.

"A month ago, someone performed microsurgery on your brain, the effect of which was to stop the conducting of stimuli in your optical nerve. Who did you piss off? They were also worried you might cause trouble, so they didn't cut the optical nerve, but edited a section of your DNA, which stops the synaptic function of the nerve membrane. The chemical transmission of an

impulse from one neuron to another, is like one of them passing a ball to another, the next neuron must hold out its hand to catch it. The post-synaptic membrane is like this hand. What they did was to try and freeze the action of a neuron's hand, so it can't catch the ball. Doing it this way makes it more discreet: you won't go blind immediately. You may not even know what made you lose your sight."

"If I can't catch it with my hand, I'll do it with my feet". It was a clumsy joke along the lines of his analogy. What did he expect me to do? Cry? Break down?

The old man doesn't speak.

"Your silence gives me hope that you've got have some good news. Can you cure it?" I mock.

"There are people who can do it, if you've got enough money. The question is, do you want it?"

I couldn't help looking at the old man. In an instant, electric sparks. I felt the opening of his windows.

"What do you call those things?" he asked me, narrowing his eyes.

"Infofields."

"I've been in Club27. They offer operations for all sufferers of depression who had no hope of being cured by their little chats, or more conventional psycho-technological treatments. Maybe out of social responsibility, probably out of the pride in their 100% cure rate. I was one of them. They cured me and released me back into society. And then these "Infofields" appeared out of the blue. What you have experienced, I have: the terror, the pain. I nearly died. Because I'm an optimist, I wanted to get back into society, to offer help where it's needed in the depths of DiXia, and you know how that works out. But on the third day, like a miracle, they disappeared. So I lived. When I met you, I felt a strange inkling. After the spectrometer scan, I knew you'd been through the same optical nerve transmission interception operation, but I didn't know about the Infofields. No device can detect them. It was only when they told me what happened after I passed out that I knew.

"So the Infofields weren't what the coach and her cronies intended?" I asked.

"The interception was them. The Infofields were not." the old man said.

"I didn't think it was them either, those people... lack imagination." I nodded in agreement.

We both laughed.

I breathed in and plucked up the courage to ask. "So what exactly are they?"

"If I say to you that some things have happened in your consciousness but you are not conscious of them, you'd think I was bullshitting. It's widely believed that under the conscious is the preconscious, and underneath that what Freud called the "Unconscious of eros and thanatos".

But a hundred years before him, there had already been a hypothesis on a different system of the unconscious. The appearance of Infofields, proved this theory. This system of the unconscious manifests itself in sight: when the light stimulates your retina and triggers the chain of nervous impulses in your brain, your visual system would carry out complex calculations on the data it receives. Through a series of multi-staged processing of the image produced by the light on the retina, a three-dimensional perception of the outside world is emitted. In the multitude of unconscious coding and processing, you are aware only of the final result. You are born with an information-processing mechanism that turns the vibrations on your eardrum from sound to the instinctual knowledge that these are words someone is trying to say to you. All this happens beneath consciousness.”

“You mean, what we see, is actually much, much more than we are conscious of, but the conscious only feeds back a very small part of it?”

“This very small part is more than enough for human usage. It’s the result of evolutionary selection.”

“And the Infofields?”

“Oh, that’s the rest of it. It’s there, only we’ve never been conscious that we see them.”

“What exactly are they?”

“The information inherent within us as individuals, that accumulates with age and experiences.” The old man suddenly sighed in dejection. “I don’t know...don’t believe a word of what I just said.”

I almost collapsed. “What?!”

“The Infofields are only my theory. Although I’ve spent my whole life studying them, I was only able to see them for three days. Can you think about the ones you see?”

It’s like he said. Carefully avoiding looking at the content, I could tell that the format of the text and images are the same, all the information is related to the person they come from. At least the ones I’ve read.

Imagine a world like this, where everyone walks around carrying with them information that can be seen but not perceived. All this information congesting all the space around us. Yet even this dimensional space around me may not be the three-dimensional projection my sensory organs are telling me.

“Howcome I can see them?”

“When you came the first time, I did a little experiment while you weren’t looking”. The old man’s voice sounded a little odd, but soon recovered. “It’s really nothing. I used pico-tech.”

“And?”

“To use our previous metaphor, your neurons have caught the ball using their feet. Your body can no longer produce the protein that transmits impulses in the receptor, but has opened up another rarer path of transmission, usually meant for support and supplementary functions, another kind of slow-functioning receptor. These receptors usually combine with Protein G, and operate via cAMP and phosphorylation of proteins. The reaction is slow, but it can magnify the microsignals between messenger receptors by a thousand. When they suppressed the composition of transmission proteins in the neuron, they stimulated the low-speed receptors, elevating them from amateur extras to playing the lead. This is possibly why you can see the Infocfields.”

“This is the story of a volleyball player who loses the function of his arms, and trains himself to master control of the ball with his feet, becoming a footballer. It’s a true story of unstoppable resolve triumphing over a physical handicap. My old coach at the club would have loved it,” I commented. “But I’m going to be blind very soon, aren’t I? How can a handicapped athlete kick the ball blind?”

“You may go blind, but you’ll still be able to see.”

Having heard the old man’s words, I thought he was mad, or perhaps I was. I let my body slide slowly down, to the ice-cold floor.

“Yes, sit tight. What I’m going to say next could take a while.” The old man approved. He really did take ages.

He began “Do you know of the Superconscious?”

“Experiments of the last century found that animals, including humans who lost their sight after suffering damage in the specific region of the visual cortex, were not necessarily completely unable to see. Although their sight was blank, they were still receiving stimulus in some manner. Impulses from the outside world were still being filtered by what remained of their capabilities of assessing their surroundings. For me, the interception of impulses actually opened up my awareness of the Infocfields.”

“Blindness is not a problem. The important thing is to learn to how to see, or should I say, how to inforead. The Infocfield is an enormous information stream with its own vast quantifying units, displaying itself in images and text. As demonstrated by my plight and failure, the brain still doesn’t know how to receive this much information, let alone sort through it selectively. This must be achieved through conscious practice, like going through physiotherapy after getting a prosthetic limb.”

I tried to process this. After all, the old man had said these were just his conjectures and probings. He had only seen the Infocfields for three days, but if I needed help, he would help me.

I said all right. The old man asked me to recount to him in detail all the encounters I’ve had

with the Infocfields, which I did. He was silent for a long time. But I wasn't surprised. I was pretty much beyond surprise, after my experiences. I was very lucky to have saved this old man's life, and very grateful that now, and in the future, he would be there to help me.

That day, we spent an age in the room, the old man taking great pains to ensure I had a firm grasp and a proper understanding of my new sense. We must have been in there for a long time; I was dizzy from lack of oxygen in the air. Although many puzzles were solved and the mysteries within them revealed, I did not feel relieved. I wasn't sure if I was capable of utilizing or even comprehending this knowledge.

"It's not just your sight that's the problem. Your brain is using four times as much oxygen as the average person: this will greatly affect your other organs and their functionality. Your body will weaken more over time. This is why..." The old man paused prudently, in order to hold my full attention. I leaned in, my ear towards him, ready to receive his prescription. "...you must have someone by your side."

C

17

Rays of sunlight fell like knives: white hot, ruthless and raw. I descended the rope ladder, trembling, waved at the male nurses at the entrance of the underground hospital, to signal that I've touched down in safety. If they hadn't sedated me, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to leave the hospital.

I look down again, the anxious faces on craned necks have gone. I lie on my stomach on the walkway, unable to move, like a lost swimmer who had been struggling to reach the shore.

The old man said I must have someone by my side. I need someone to take care of me, someone to see the world on my behalf. I looked around me, the night was just creeping up the horizon. The wind was moist, mingled with the scents of the sea and the port. The abandoned industrial site, now dappled in the colour of rust, appears in my eyes, to be a picture of grace and serenity. No people, no deluge of data, no information streams. Objects in their own place. Every atom and molecule showing themselves in a manner my five pedestrian senses understand them. This is beauty.

However, I am going to lose them all really soon.

And then, I will completely lose all the sights I have known for all so long. Only the windows, the infostreams, or the void.

The old man said I need someone: I need to borrow his eyes, and then I'll live. Even now, I know that there is a pair of eyes watching me, in their strange, relentless way.

The car is parked at the corner of the street. A hand came out of it with a lit cigarette; it

remains there for an age. It seems the smoker is merely content for the cigarette to be lit. I head down the fly-over, take a turn to another street towards the car. This way, I am directly facing the car and can see the person inside.

From 61's point of view, I am just taking a casual stroll, and happen to walk past. He probably never thought anyone would become aware of his monitoring. Slowly, I approach. From less than three metres away from the car, I look up at him.

Almost, immediately, an Infofield leaps out. Perhaps it's been waiting for me all along. This time, I don't let myself get drowned in the flood of information, nor do I struggle to dig for information that might relate to me. As the old man deduced, the data we can read is limited by the brain's capacity to process information; most of it is omitted. But some Infofields would pause for longer, or appear at a higher frequency, to render themselves to be read more easily. This is highly likely to be linked to the desires and inclinations of the individual being scanned.

The information they long for you to know.

So, this is what you want to tell me. I lower my gaze.

As I predicted, 61 lets me in the car.

This is what people are like. You tell them their secret, something they have keep deep within their hearts, secrets that have tormented them for years, and they will trust you.

They want to trust you.

I told 61, he's a split-brain, born without the Corpus Callosum, the fibre bundle that connects the left and right hemispheres. Technically, he doesn't have a cerebrum, that whole mind we use daily. Just left and right hemispheres, doing their own thing. This explains his bizarre hand gestures and the way he looks at people. They let him live and trained him to do this job. Still, his hands can only master actions they have been trained and practiced in doing.

Both hemispheres working at the same time also means that he doesn't have a conventional sense of morality. His attributes are a perfect match for this job. For 61, this was the only place that would give him a job. He hopes to earn enough money to get an osso-data processor implant. The advert says that this implant will connect two halves of an artificially grown brain to the corresponding halves of the patient's own grey matter, providing a split-brain patient with two complete and functioning brains.

He has dreamt about this implant. His desire for it grows stronger every day. That's why I could scan the Infofield with billboard clarity.

"How are you doing, 61?" I lowered my head and addressed the floor of the car. Very soon, I would no longer need to avoid people's faces.

"I'm all right."

“We don’t need to introduce ourselves. I know you’ve been tracking me, so you know what’s happened to me, probably better than I do.”

“The club performed some mind-reading operation on you.”

No, you are too naïve. 61. What they did to me isn’t what you think. “Do you know I’m going blind?”

He froze, I felt his breath stop too. For an instant, I suddenly came to the belief that this individual might be willing to take care of me. “The club played a nasty trick, maybe it was just on the coach’s orders. Do you want to take care of me?” The words fell out of my mouth.

The left hemisphere of his brain must be in chaos right now. But I feel too exhausted to beat around the bush or play mind games.

“I’m going blind very quickly: my body is becoming weaker and weaker. If I don’t have anyone, I’ll die on the streets. You just need to keep the oxygen flasks stocked up and give me injections of calcium ions and glutonic amino acids.” I paused for breath, also to slow down my speech. “You have two choices, abandon everything and come with me, or abandon me.”

He was trembling.

He must be frightened to death. What can I expect a total stranger to do? To love me more than this world?

Perhaps. I decided to try again.

“You know what I can do, right?”

This time, he spoke. “You can answer questions.”

My lips started to tremble. Did he really think I was psychic? “Listen, I over-exaggerated before. I’m really tired today. I went to the doctor’s. He told me a lot of things. It’s ok, maybe I’ll explain to you properly later—maybe I won’t. But the important thing is...” I reached for his shoulders, he voluntarily moved his body towards me. I took hold of him, very tightly. “The important thing is... I was being too dramatic before, you can still continue to do your job, monitor other people, but take me with you.”

61 became silent. He needed time to think. But I was already burnt out. Stretched to my limit. I let go, opened the window, and let the wind blow away the despair in the air. From this side, I could see the park across the river. In the misty fog, the lights looked particularly dim that day.

I realized that it was the Tattoo Festival. They are getting ready for it, misting the air with nutrified water, to help the ink spores grow.

“Oh, today’s the Tattoo Festival.” My own voice comes from somewhere far away.

A month ago, I wouldn't have felt like this. Like an old man.

61 coughs. "Can you answer one question?" His body is now rocking back and forth anxiously.

"Please ask."

"There was a time, when twenty or so homeless kids in the eastern suburbs asked you to have a word with a landlord, to let them keep their shanty town up. How did you persuade the guy? What did you say to him in the anti-bug chamber?"

"Oh, that guy was getting into much deeper trouble, and I offered him a more reliable suggestion."

61's gaze paused on the side of my face. "But actually you weren't 100% sure?"

"I deduced, the key thing is that I have a lot of information, which allows me to work things out. Why else do you think he would believe a crazy old stranger who's been living a subway? When the bodyguard held me back, I shouted something to him that he really wanted to know, something that has always been troubling him."

"Which was?"

"When he was little, he loved the work of a novelist, who excelled everyone else in his eyes. But one day, he reads that this novelist wrote a short story with someone. He could never understand why the novelist deigned to collaborate with someone of lesser skill to produce an ordinary piece of work. The question clung to him and has always plagued him. He just didn't understand."

61 nods. He doesn't ask about the writer's motive in the collaborative short story. This made me admire him more. He understands the point of this story. The point is that if I had access to the secrets of the local gangster's heart, I would have a good answer to the question. He believes me.

The engine starts, making an annoying noise. I lean back in the seat and close my eyes.

61 turns the wheel, and the car speeds down the motorway.

We slide into silence. The gigantic, tender silence that belongs to all exhausted dusks. At this moment, I feel both cold and warm: a place inside me, I'm not sure where, feels ticklish. I notice a slight lethargy. That mysterious sense of oppression, is flying away. I feel I can do anything. My fingertips feel numb, but my senses feel very acute. Sight, hearing, touch, they all feel as if they are exceeding their previous functionality. It's as if I'm entering a new world.

The cannons sounded across the river. I open my eyes. Night has come.

Multicolored fireworks are blossoming in the sky. Countless excited silhouettes below. Men and women almost half naked, opening their bodies to scattered petals floating and swirling in midair, exposing even more of their flesh to meet the ink spores in the falling firework ash.

When the spores encounter skin, they will immediately pierce the derma, and squads of nanobots will complete the tattooing process, trailing dyes behind them. As to the pattern, this is entirely dependent on algorithms, completely up to the nanobots inside the spores. But it's OK. The dye and the nanobots degrade in three days, leaving not even a trace of a trace. And those people who are madly screaming to be tattooed, will have completely purified bodies, new as freshly born babes: that is why people are obsessed with the Tattoo Festival.

Three more sky flowers bloom. These beautiful botanic night scenes only exist for an instant, but in that instant, they blossom with all the splendor of time. In the next moment, their pink petals fall like snow, carried by the sea breeze, the whole city trembles in ash. Pedestrians now occupy the whole city. Our car is marooned in the midst of these euphoric half-naked bodies and can only move forward with the pace at which they are chasing the spores. Another breeze sent a petal flowing through the car window, landing on my arm. I try to brush it away, but too late. The spore has entered my skin. Nearby, the sky erupts with another fire blossom, screams of joy coming from below. I look up at the night sky, it's beautiful and serene like black velvet. I rub my eyes, and turn over my hand to observe. There is so much dye in that single spore, spreading across my whole arm in just a moment, my whole arm, my whole body, the whole night. It all becomes velvet black.

"When you look at other people. You can see what they can't see. Can you tell me about what you see?"

"Later, if there's time."

"Have you ever scanned yourself?"

"You mean, in a mirror?" I asked. "Maybe tonight, I can try; after all, it's not as if my eyes have anything better to do."

I try to remember the last joke I told my coach. The one I got blinded for. The funny thing is, I paid such a big price, but the content of that joke? Seriously, I can't remember a thing. But it doesn't matter, I'm about to see a ready-made joke.

I fumble, find the rear-view mirror and flip it down. I point my face to the mirror in my imagination.

I will see myself. Every little drip and drop of the past, all my desires and longings, all that I love and hate, all the gnawing regrets, all the potential and possibilities, all my future realities and achievements.

I take a deep breath, lift my blind eyes, and face myself in the mirror. Here they come, gushing into my vision like water from a spring. Blacker than black, emptier than empty. Every Infocore the same. Nothing. Even light has been engulfed.

This is me. A darkness that can never be illuminated, transcended or redeemed.

Tang Fei is a writer and commentator. Member of the Shanghai Writer's Association and the SFWA, having published such works as include *Paradise in the Clouds*, *The Person who Saw Cetus* and *The Anonymous Banquet*. Since 2013, ten of her works have been translated and published around the world; her novella *The Panda Keeper* won Best Microfiction at 2019's Smokelong Quarterly, *Wu Ding's Journey to the West* won the Silver Prize for Most Popular Deduction Fiction at the Speculative Fiction in Translation Awards, and *The Robe* won Best Short Story at the Yinli (China Reader's Choice) SF Awards. Apart from writing, she also dabbles in other art forms such as literary criticism, poetry, installation art and photography. Her commentary pieces have been published in *The Economics Observer* (China), *Hong Kong* and *Shenzhen Literary Review*.

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