

遲卉：雨林
The Rainforest

By Chi Hui

Translated by Jie Li

WHEN YE QI WOKE UP, the rainforest that had first made landfall on the East Coast had already engulfed Pusen City.

She threw back her blanket, grabbed her clothes and hastily got dressed, then packed her belongings swiftly in a backpack. The water in the cup was cold and the hotel had long been abandoned, but after hesitating for a moment, she still took out a few bills and laid them on the wooden reception desk where grey moss had already begun to grow.

‘You always do such pointless things,’ Haer commented. ‘Nobody’s coming back here any more, at least not before your money turns into pulp.’

‘Since we’re going deeper into the rainforest, money won’t do us any good anyway, don’t you think?’ She replied indifferently and replenished her food sack with some instant noodles and biscuits that she rummaged out from one of the hotel’s cupboards.

‘Find me some batteries,’ croaked Haer. ‘And meat. Let’s see, what else ...’

Ye Qi turned around to stare at the fist-sized, greyish-green toad on the couch, its body emanating the greyish-silver gleam unique to nanostructures.

‘Haer, you’d better tell me what you want right now and then shut up.’

‘Batteries, meat, clean water—lots of water. Ye Qi, we need these, croak!’ Haer jumped off the couch and leaped around the hotel. ‘Here’s food, Ye Qi, and some food storage bags, croak!’

‘I know, I know. I have to find a pair of boots.’ With furrowed brow Ye Qi sized up the fine drizzle and sodden ground outside the window. Corroded by the grey tide of algae, the asphalt highway was full of bumps and hollows, and puddles filled with foul water. If they were to go deeper into the forest, the sneakers she was wearing would not work at all.

‘We’d better get going, croak. No more humans ahead, Ye Qi, take whatever you can. Croak.’

Ye Qi stripped off her sneakers, thrust her feet into the boots, and stuffed whatever she found in the hotel cupboard and fridge into her enormous backpack,

which was half man-size to begin with. She grabbed Haer: 'Don't you think you're being a bit long-winded?'

'A big mouth is a toad's virtue.' Haer bulged its cheeks.

Ye Qi, bursting with rage, threw Haer into her backpack and zipped it up. Shouldering the heavy load, she kicked open the hotel's front entrance. The toad kept kicking and thrashing about in her backpack, 'Let me out, you savage woman! Croak ... let me out!'

Ye Qi did not even hear Haer's complaint. Lost in thought, she looked at the familiar yet strange city before her eyes, now changed beyond recognition.

A grey drizzle covered the Pusen sky. Bluish-green mosses climbed the glass curtain walls. The skyscrapers melted gradually like chocolate under the erosion of the grey tide, while the rainforest with its metallic hue grew from every corner of the city, slowly blotting out the sun and the sky. She reached out and touched a small blue tree beside the hotel entrance, its branches coarse and as cold as iron. She snapped off a steel flower, and from the break trickled out a grey, sticky liquid that contained billions of nanostructures, pulsing with a rhythm between the organic and non-organic, flowing over her fingertips.

'Better not touch those nanostructures.' Haer finally found a comfortable position in her backpack and stuck out its flat head. 'Beware of corrosion.'

'I am of no interest to them,' Ye Qi observed. 'They're not carnivores like you.'

Haer croaked unhappily: 'How can these nanostructures be compared with us? They evolve automatically, they haven't been modified—that's why they're even more dangerous.'

'Nevertheless ...' Ye Qi wiped the grey stains from her fingers: 'Let's just be on our way.'

They walked for an entire morning in the rainforest. As though in slow motion in a film, a skyscraper in the distance wilted slowly, turning into a pile of sludge under the corrosion of a mass of nanostructural moss. In a blink, large numbers of nanostructural plants sprouted from the sludge. Between the greyish-green leaves, dark black steel flowers bloomed in profusion. The GPS was useless under the heavy interference, and the map of Pusen in Ye Qi's hand became increasingly illegible as architectural markers disappeared.

'Are you sure this is the right direction?' Haer grasped Ye Qi's arm with three legs and used a front paw to scratch at the map. 'Can't even prepare a good map before going into battle. Humans really are irredeemably stupid.'

'This is not my war, Haer.' Ye Qi cast away the compass that was utterly useless in this metal forest, and struck out on her own.

‘Am I wrong in saying so?’ Haer jumped onto her shoulder. ‘Is this not a war between humans and plants?’

‘No, Haer, this is a war between *us*,’ answered Ye Qi.

The toad suddenly fell silent, the suckers on its feet tightening their grip on Ye Qi’s shoulder. After a while it spoke: ‘No, Ye Qi, hardly any of my kind is left.’

‘Even if only three households remain in Chu, it will still defeat Qin.’ Ye Qi answered. ‘Haer, you must know what that saying means.’

‘Its about your human kind of resilience, croak.’ Haer jumped back inside the backpack, its weight knocking Ye Qi briefly off balance. Its muffled voice sounded from the backpack: ‘Back in the day when we had forced humans into the southern corners of the East Asian Mainland, you actually took back the whole of Asia within twelve years.’

‘Aren’t you trying to learn as much as possible from humans?’

‘Ye Qi, you don’t understand.’ Haer stuck half of its head out of the backpack. ‘No matter how much we learn from humans, nanostructures still cannot exist independently. Take me as an example: my body is 47% nanostructure, including my brain, voice organs, eyes, and central nervous system, but the other 53% is that of an actual frog. When humans created us, this is the way they did it. While we’ve kept trying to improve ourselves these twenty years after we gained our independence, we still haven’t been able to make any progress with our organic bodies.’

‘And so you experimented with plants,’ inferred Ye Qi.

‘Idiotic experiments.’ Haer’s voice rose and fell with Ye Qi’s uneven footsteps. ‘When the corrosion first began, some nanostructures still had enough presence of mind to send back some information. The merging of plants and nanostructures prompted an explosive mutation. They acquired intelligence, but of an altogether different kind from ours and human’s. They are extremely powerful, smart, and ... they need living space.’

‘Are you sure you can tell me this?’ Ye Qi snickered. ‘Humans and nanostructures are still at war.’

‘Damn this war! Croak,’ Haer spoke as if cursing. ‘Our entire network on the American continent fell into enemy hands within a week. Nearly the entirety of our species that remained in America was corroded, assimilated, or swallowed up. To this day, there may be no more than 10,000 nanostructural animals still surviving. Now the war is between humans and nanostructural plants—you call them the “grey tide”—not between you and us.’

‘From a structural point of view, you and they are more or less of the same sort.’ Ye Qi shook the water off her raincoat and tried to make out the bumpy road.

‘Not the same,’ Haer’s tone had a hint of terror. ‘According to the information I received, it was as if the plants swallowed up the nanostructures, rather than the latter driving the merger. Their difference from us is as great as that between us and humans.’

‘It’s actually not so great,’ Ye Qi muttered.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ Ye Qi found a relatively dry area and sat down, leaning against a bronze-coloured tree. ‘I need to rest a little.’

The year White Forest fell, Ye Qi was nineteen years old.

She did not remember the heavy artillery fire flying overhead nor the clouds of gunpowder smoke filling the air. She was sitting in a truck, holding a bundle her mother had stuffed into her hand, and watching as the poplars of her village receded from sight. Trucks headed for the battlefield, carrying odd-coloured jars that contained chemical weapons designed to counter various types of nanostructure. Through the goggles on her gas mask, she watched the plants by the roadside wilt in the thick blue fog. An intense bitter smell saturated the air, it seemed as if all the vegetation were weeping.

Nanostructural animals have biological components and must still eat, drink, and excrete, something all humans knew. The war quickly escalated from merely destroying the nanostructures to destroying their sources of food, including all animals and plants in territories occupied by them, so that the nanostructural animals had no choice but to retreat. This, however, left behind stretches of desert where no humans could survive either. This wasteland lay across the Eurasian continent—beginning in the Korean peninsula and stretching through north-western China all the way to the Taklamakan Desert—effectively segregating humankind and nanostructural animals to its southern and northern sides, respectively.

Ye Qi was only one insignificant refugee out of the 60 million who couldn’t go home because of this quarantine zone.

After the war to win back Siberia, the twenty-four-year-old Ye Qi returned to her hometown. She still remembered how every spring, when the snow on the hilltops began to melt, the moist black earth would be faintly covered with a veil of soft green. Those young buds, while no more than rice-grain-sized green dots to begin with, would grow overnight into new patches of thick green without flinching in the slightest from the early spring chill.

Yet before her eyes now were nothing but black sand, rocks, and a muddy country road. The remnant snow had long melted away, yet the earth remained

lifeless. It was said that the poison that sank into the soil would not dissipate for a hundred years, and until then, this would remain an infertile wasteland.

She walked aimlessly, on and on, and suddenly, a splotch of green flashed past her peripheral vision. She hurried forward and pushed aside the desiccated thicket, only to discover the remains of a green poison gas shell hanging over a skeletal branch.

We regained White Forest, regained the Northeast and Mongolia, regained Siberia. But, did we really win the war?

She didn't know to whom she should ask the question, nor who would know the answer.

The road became even harder to navigate in the afternoon. There were grey puddles everywhere with the glutinous mud covering Ye Qi's boots and pouring into them, so that they emitted an odd squeak with every step she took. Gradually turning pale, she took out a bar of chocolate, stuffed three quarters of it into her own mouth and threw the rest to Haer.

'Hey, how much longer is it going to be?' With the chocolate in its mouth, Haer burrowed into the backpack. 'Are you really planning to spend the night in a place like this?'

Ye Qi sized up the ruins around her, their original shapes already beyond recognition: 'It should be nearby. We'll arrive before dark. Let me take a short break.'

Though she said a short break, Ye Qi fell sound asleep as soon as she sat down, her head bobbing up and down. Haer grumbled, jumped out of the backpack onto a giant uranium fruit, and vigilantly surveyed the surroundings.

Ye Qi first met Haer outside the Pusen airport, on the edges of the grey tide rainforest. At the time, the 'grey tide' was already overwhelming the land, and she was the only passenger on the flight to Pusen. Everyone else was intent upon leaving; only she was returning.

Moving against the turbulent human tide, she crossed the airport lobby and when she walked into the rainforest, Ye Qi suddenly discovered Haer, entangled by a vine, as if being dragged into the forest's depths. For some reason, she unravelled the vine and released the toad. She knew it was a nanostructure, but the look in its eye at that instant was impossible for her to ignore.

Many years ago, she had seen this look on the battlefield, although it didn't come from a nanostructure. It was from a poisoned sparrow that had flown into the quarantine zone by mistake. The light in its small, brown eyes slowly faded. It

wanted to live, simply to live.

She had originally wanted to let Haer go, to let it get far away from the rainforest, but the stubborn toad got into her backpack and claimed to know a pretty good hotel.

And so, without rhyme or reason, they became companions.

‘Ye Qi! Get up, hurry, Ye Qi!’

Ye Qi was still half asleep when a cold, sticky thing smashed against her face with a loud squishy sound. She jumped up instinctively, only to realize that it was Haer’s belly.

‘Ye Qi, quick, look at your foot!’ Shouting, Haer climbed onto her backpack.

She swallowed the curses she was about to utter as an iron vine as thick as a finger twined itself around her ankles. She pulled out her dagger and slashed at the vine, but only managed to cut through half of it when several other vines reached out at her from behind.

She kicked with all her might, breaking the vine around her ankles by force. Not stopping to rid herself of the remnants of the vine, she grabbed her backpack and Haer, leapt to avoid the other vines, and dashed into the depths of the forest.

The grey rainforest now tore off its temperate mask. The vines and branches appeared to have come to life, meandering, reaching out to halt her steps. Above her head came loud, clacking sounds. She leapt violently as a bronze tree, so thick one could barely wrap one’s arms around it, crashed down behind her.

‘Heavens! What are they doing?’ Haer croaked. ‘What on earth are you doing? You’ve scared them into a frenzy!’

‘You should say “it”,’ Ye Qi corrected: ‘The rainforest is a single intelligence. Haer, it hadn’t discovered me before, but now it knows what I am.’

‘Ye Qi, Ye Qi, what else do you know that I don’t? Croak ...’ Haer mumbled and pushed aside a vine that was reaching for the nape of Ye Qi’s neck.

‘Hold on tight, Haer!’ Ye Qi leapt onto a small mound of earth, dodging the branches and leaves, but tripped over a tree root that sprang from the earth. Crying with surprise, she lost her balance and rolled a considerable distance forwards, falling into a quagmire.

‘That’s it, we’re doomed,’ Haer mumbled, only to discover that not even grass grew on this strange empty patch in the middle of the rainforest. Only a few large fungi poked their heads out of the mud.

‘We’re here, Haer,’ Ye Qi whispered: ‘My destination.’

She took out several test tubes from her backpack and stuffed them full of mud and fungi. Then she quickly placed them in a small rocket that disappeared

into the sky with a swoosh.

'I'm done, Haer.' She flashed an exhausted smile: 'You really shouldn't have come here, because when I came, I didn't plan to leave.'

Haer swallowed a mouthful of fungus. 'Same here,' he mumbled indistinctly. 'So you also came here for the virus against nanostructural plants.'

Ye Qi's eyes widened and she suddenly began laughing. 'So you discovered the bald spots in the rainforest, but how did you plan to bring it back?'

'No need,' answered Haer. 'I'm only a guidepost. Soon my companions will arrive and spread the virus elsewhere. "Even if Chu has only three households left, it will still destroy Qin." We understand nanostructures better than you, croak.'

A tender smile flashed across Ye Qi's pale face. 'No, maybe you understand them better than humans do, but not better than I.' She took off her gloves. The metallic sheen particular to nanostructures shone on her skin: 'When we were together, you kept in touch with your companions the whole time, didn't you?'

Haer stared dumbly at Ye Qi's non-human skin and answered woodenly: '... yes ... croak.'

'I once told you that this whole rainforest is a single intelligence.' Ye Qi moved her finger ever so slightly, and a few greyish-green leaves grew out of her fingertips. 'I used to be a soldier. I fought against both you and the nanostructural plants. When they began spreading out, I was among the first group of soldiers to be airlifted to the grey tide zone. But they caught me, modified me, took everything from me. Except for my brain, I am composed entirely of nanostructural plants.' She smiled bleakly: 'In fact, they may have been better off had they emptied my brain. After a billion years of scheming, they still don't understand animal psychology.'

'A billion years?' Haer's mouth widened like that of a typical toad.

'Plants did not acquire intelligence only after they merged with nanostructures, Haer, they were intelligent from the start. They share a single memory, the most ancient intelligent life form on earth. But later, animals became more powerful. Plant intelligence loses a bit of memory with every tree it loses. This death is not a quick death like ours, but rather a gradual process of forgetting. As trees fall, as grasses wither and before new plants can become carriers of memory, it begins to forget. It waited and waited, till the appearance of nanostructures. Plants have endured patiently for a billion years in exchange for roots that can walk. Wolves eat sheep; sheep eat grass, but now the grass wants to eat wolves.'

Haer stared at Ye Qi's greyish white countenance: 'I don't understand, Ye Qi, you are a nanostructure, so you should fight for the plants, croak.'

'Right,' Ye Qi took out the dagger from her boot and slashed at the plant vines

that were frantically attacking them. 'Physically, I may be a nanostructural plant, but I still carry memories from my human past. I'll never forget the horrible scenes of my comrades being dismembered and gobbled up by nanostructural plants. When plant intelligence modified me, it also shared its memories with me. That's how I learned about the bald spots in the rainforest and of the existence of this virus, so I decided to come here and find the virus that would kill it. Haer, plant intelligence knows no mercy. Like nature itself, it follows its own will, without pity and without weakness, much less compassion. I don't know when it will take away the entirety of my will, but before then, I hope to do something more for humankind.'

Perhaps because they noticed that simply attacking Ye Qi was useless, the vines and tree roots began to envelop her in thick layers and pierce her body. She tried to struggle, but roots began to grow from within her body, climbing out of her shoes and digging deep into the ground. She opened her mouth to curse, but could only spit out a green branch. Struggling, she used her last shred of strength to grab Haer and fling it as far away as she could with arms that were already sprouting leaves and the buds of flowers.

After quite a while, the empty piece of ground finally quieted down. Haer climbed out of the forest and saw that Ye Qi had already turned into an iron tree, branches, leaves, and all. Only her grey face remained on the tree trunk, wearing a serene smile.

The forest rustled as one toad after another, looking just like Haer, jumped out to pick the viral fungi. They would take these fungi all over the world to destroy all nanostructural plants, bringing the last hope of survival to a struggling humankind and nanostructural animals.

It's just that, when the dust settles after the war, what creature could survive on a planet without plants? From its inception, this was to be a war without victors. Humankind, nanostructural animals, nanostructural plants, none had much of a future.

Haer took a profound look at the tree that Ye Qi had become and, with a leap and a bound, disappeared into the depths of the grey rainforest.

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