

TOR BOOKS TRANSLATED BY KEN LIU

The Three-Body Problem (by Cixin Liu)

Death's End (by Cixin Liu)

INVISIBLE PLANETS

Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation

Translated and edited by KEN LIU

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transformation. For more on how Chinese science fiction reflects this aspect of the Chinese experience, see Chen's essay, "The Torn Generation," at the end of this book.

A native of Shantou, Guangdong Province, and a graduate of Peking University, one of the China's most elite colleges, Chen speaks the Shantou topolect as well as Cantonese, Mandarin, and English (the spelling of his English name ["Chan"] reflects the Cantonese pronunciation). A language virtuoso, he has written speculative fiction stories in Classical Chinese—a feat akin to a contemporary English writer composing a story in the language of Chaucer—as well as Cantonese and Modern Standard Chinese. The linguistic divisions and diversity of his native land provide both backdrop and metaphor for his novel *The Waste Tide*, which I'm translating into English. "The Flower of Shazui" is set in the same universe as *The Waste Tide* and offers a glimpse into that world.

THE YEAR OF THE RAT



It's getting dark again. We've been in this hellhole for two days, but we haven't even seen a single rat's hair.

My socks feel like greasy dishrags, so irritating that I want to punch someone. My stomach is cramping up from hunger, but I force my feet to keep moving. Wet leaves slap me in the face like open hands. It hurts.

I want to return the biology textbook in my backpack to Pea and tell him, *This stupid book has eight hundred seventy-two pages*. I also want to give him back his pair of glasses, even though it's not heavy, not heavy at all.

Pea is dead.

The Drill Instructor said that the insurance company would pay his parents something. He didn't say how much.

Pea's parents would want something to remember him by. So I had taken the glasses out of his pocket and that goddamned book out of his waterproof backpack. Maybe this way his parents would remember how their son was a good student, unlike the rest of us.

Pea's real name is Meng Xian. But we all called him "Pea" because one, he was short and skinny like a pea sprout, and two, he was always joking that the friar who experimented with peas, Gregor "Meng-De-Er" Mendel, was his ancestor.

Here's what they said happened: When the platoon was marching across the top of the dam of the abandoned reservoir, Pea noticed

a rare plant growing out of the cracks in the muddy concrete at the edge of the dam. He broke formation to collect it.

Maybe it was his bad eyesight, or maybe that heavy book threw him off balance. Anyway, the last thing everyone saw was Pea, looking really like a green pea, rolling, bouncing down the curved slope of the side of the dam for a hundred meters and more, until finally his body abruptly stopped, impaled on a sharp branch sticking out of the water.

The Drill Instructor directed us to retrieve the body and wrap it in a body bag. His lips moved for a bit, then stopped. I knew what he wanted to say—we'd all heard him say it often enough—but he restrained himself. Actually, I kind of wanted to hear him say it.

You college kids are idiots. You don't even know how to stay alive.
He's right.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. It's Black Cannon. He smiles at me apologetically. "Time to eat."

I'm surprised at how friendly Black Cannon is toward me. Maybe it's because when Pea died, Black Cannon was walking right by him. And now he feels sorry that he didn't grab Pea in time.

I sit next to the bonfire to dry my socks. The rice tastes like crap mixed with the smell from wet socks baking by the fire.

Goddamn it. I'm actually crying.



The first time I spoke to Pea was at the end of last year, at the university's mobilization meeting. A bright red banner hung across the front of the auditorium: "It's honorable to love the country and support the army; it's glorious to protect the people and kill rats." An endless stream of school administrators took turns at the podium to give speeches.

I sat next to Pea by coincidence. I was an undergraduate majoring in Chinese literature; he was a graduate student in the biology department. We had nothing in common except neither of us could find jobs after graduation. Our files had to stay with the school while we hung around for another year, or maybe even longer.

In my case, I had deliberately failed my Classical Chinese exam so I could stay in school. I hated the thought of looking for a job, renting an apartment, getting to work at nine A.M. just so I could look forward to five P.M., dealing with office politics, etc., etc. School was much more agreeable: I got to download music and movies for free; the cafeteria was cheap (ten yuan guaranteed a full stomach); I slept until afternoon every day and then played some basketball. There were also pretty girls all around—of course, I could only look, not touch.

To be honest, given the job market right now and my lack of employable skills, staying in school was not really my "choice." But I wasn't going to admit that to my parents.

As for Pea, because of the trade war with the Western Alliance, he couldn't get a visa. A biology student who couldn't leave the country had no job prospects domestically, especially since he was clearly the sort who was better at reading books than hustling.

I had no interest in joining the Rodent-Control Force. As they continued the propaganda onstage, I muttered under my breath, "Why not send the army?"

But Pea turned to me and started to lecture. "Don't you know that the situation on the border is very tense right now? The army's role is to protect the country against hostile foreign nations, not to fight rats."

Who talks like that? I decided to troll him a bit. "Why not send the local peasants, then?"

"Don't you know that grain supplies are tight right now? The work of the peasantry is to grow food, not to fight rats."

"Why not use rat poison? It's cheap and fast."

"These are not common rats, but Neorats™. Common poisons are useless."

"Then make genetic weapons, the kind that will kill all the rats after a few generations."

"Don't you know that genetic weapons are incredibly expensive? Their mission is to act as a strategic deterrent against hostile foreign nations, not to fight rats."

I sighed. This guy was like one of those telephone voice menus, with only a few phrases that he used all the time. Trolling him wasn't any fun.

"So you think the job of college graduates is to fight rats?" I said, smiling at him.

Pea seemed to choke, and his face turned red. For a while, he couldn't say anything in response. Then he turned to clichés like "the country's fate rests on every man's shoulders." But finally he did give a good reason: "Members of the Rodent-Control Force are given food and shelter, with guaranteed jobs to be assigned after discharge."



The platoon has returned to the town to be resupplied.

In order to discourage desertion, all the students in the Rodent-Control Force are assigned to units operating far from their homes. We can't even understand one another's dialects, so everyone has to curl his tongue to speak Modern Standard Mandarin.

I mail Pea's book and glasses to his parents. I try to write a heartfelt letter to them, but the words refuse to come. In the end, I write only, "I'm sorry for your loss."

But the postcard I write to Xiaoxia is filled with dense, tiny characters. I think about her long, long legs. This is probably my twenty-third letter to her already.

I find a store to recharge my phone and text my parents at home. When we're operating in the field, most of the time we get no signal.

The shop owner takes my one yuan and grins at me. The people of this town have probably never seen so many college graduates (though right now we're covered in dirt and not looking too sharp). A few old men and old women smile at us and give us thumbs-ups—but maybe only because they think we're pumping extra money into the town's economy. As I think about Pea, I want to give them my middle finger.

After the Drill Instructor takes care of Pea's funeral arrangements, he takes us to a cheap restaurant. "We're still about twenty-four percent away from accomplishing our quota," he says.

No one answers him. Everyone is busy shoveling rice into his mouth as quickly as possible.

"Work hard, and let's try to win the Golden Cat Award, okay?"

Still no one answers him. We all know that the award is linked to the bonus paid to the Drill Instructor.

The Drill Instructor slams the table and gets up. "You want to be a bunch of lazy bums all your life, is that it?"

I grab my rice bowl, thinking that he's going to flip the table.

But he doesn't. After a moment, he sits down and continues to eat.

Someone whispers, "Do you think our detector is broken?"

Now everyone starts talking. Most are in agreement with the sentiment. Someone offers a rumor that some platoon managed to use their detector to find deposits of rare earth metals and gas fields. They stopped hunting for rats and got into the mining business, solving the unemployment problem of the platoon in one stroke.

"That's ridiculous," the Drill Instructor says. "The detector follows the tracer elements in the blood of the rats. How can it find gas fields?" He pauses for a moment, then adds, "If we follow the flow of the water, I'm sure we'll find them."



The first time I saw the Drill Instructor, I knew I wanted to hit him.

As we lined up for the first day of boot camp, he paced before us, his face dour, and asked, "Who can tell me why you're here?"

After a while, Pea hesitantly raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"To protect the motherland," Pea said. Everyone burst out in laughter. Only I knew that he was serious.

The Drill Instructor didn't change his expression. "You think you're funny? I'm going to award you ten push-ups." Everyone laughed louder.

But that stopped soon enough. "For the rest of you, one hundred push-ups!"

As we gasped and tried to complete the task, the Drill Instructor slowly paced among us, correcting our postures with his baton.

"You're here because you're all failures! You lived in the new dorms the taxpayers built, ate the rice the peasants grew, enjoyed every privilege the country could give you. Your parents spent their coffin money on your tuition. But in the end, you couldn't even find a job, couldn't even keep yourselves alive. You're only good for catching rats! Actually, you're even lower than rats. Rats can be exported for some foreign currency, but you? Why don't you look in the mirror at your ugly mugs? What are your real skills? Let me see: chatting up girls, playing computer games, cheating on tests. Keep on pushing! You don't get to eat unless you finish."

I gritted my teeth as I did each push-up. I thought, *If someone would just get a revolt started, I'm sure all of us together can whip him.*

Everyone else thought the exact same thing, so nothing happened.

Later, when we were eating, I kept on hearing the sound of chopsticks knocking against bowls because our hands and arms were all trembling. One recruit, so sunburned that his skin was like dark leather, couldn't hold his chopsticks steady and dropped a piece of meat on the ground.

The Drill Instructor saw. "Pick it up and eat it."

But the recruit was stubborn. He stared at the Drill Instructor and didn't move.

"Where do you think your food comes from? Let me explain something to you: the budget for your food is squeezed out of the defense budget. So every grain of rice and every piece of meat you eat comes from a real soldier going hungry."

The recruit muttered, "Who cares?"

Pa-la! The Drill Instructor flipped over the table in front of me. Soup, vegetables, rice covered all of us.

"Then none of you gets to eat." The Drill Instructor walked away.

From then on that recruit became known as Black Cannon.

The next day, they sent in the "good cop," the district's main administrator. He began with a political lesson. Starting with a quote from *The Book of Songs* (tenth century BC) ("rat, oh, rat, don't eat my millet"), he surveyed the three-thousand-year history of the dan-

gers posed to the common people by rat infestations. Then, drawing on contemporary international macro-politico-economic developments, he analyzed the unique threat posed by the current infestation and the necessity of complete eradication. Finally, he offered us a vision of the hope and faith placed in us by the people: "It's honorable to love the country and support the army; it's glorious to protect the people and kill rats."

We ate well that day. After alluding to the incident from the day before, the administrator criticized the Drill Instructor. He noted that we college graduates were "the best of the best, the future leaders of our country," and that instruction must be "fair, civil, friendly" and emphasize "technique," not merely rely on "simplistic violence."

To close, the administrator wanted to take some photos with all of us. We lined up in a single rank, goose-stepping. The administrator held up a rope that the tips of all our feet had to touch, to show how orderly we could march.



We follow the flow of the water. The Drill Instructor is right. We see signs of droppings and paw prints.

It's getting colder now. We're lucky that we're operating in the south. I can't even imagine making camp up north, where it's below freezing. The official news is relentlessly upbeat: the Rodent-Control Force units in several districts have already been honorably discharged and have been assigned good jobs with a few state-owned enterprises. But among the lucky names in the newsletter I don't recognize anyone I know. No one else in the platoon does, either.

The Drill Instructor holds up his right fist. *Stop.* Then he spreads out his five fingers. We spread out and reconnoiter.

"Prepare for battle."

Suddenly I'm struck by how ridiculous this is. If this kind of slaughter—like a cat playing with mice—can be called a "battle," then someone like me who has no ambition, who lives more cowardly than a lapdog, can be a "hero."

A gray-green shadow stumbles among the bushes. Neorats are

genetically modified to walk upright, so they are slower than regular rats. We joke among ourselves that it's a good thing they didn't use Jerry—of *Tom and Jerry*—as the model.

But this Neorat is on all fours. The belly is swollen, which further limits its movement. Is the rat preg—ah, no. I see the dangling penis.

Now it's turning into a farce. A bunch of men with steel weapons stalk a potbellied rat. In complete silence, we slowly inch across the field. Suddenly the rat leaps forward and rolls down a hill and disappears.

We swear in unison and rush after it.

At the bottom of the hill is a hole in the ground. In the hole are thirty, forty rats with swollen bellies. Most are dead. The one that just jumped in is still breathing heavily, chest heaving.

"A plague?" the Drill Instructor asks. No one answers. I think of Pea. If he were here, he would know.

Chi. A spear pierces the belly of the dying rat. It's from Black Cannon. He grins as he pulls the spear back, slicing the belly open like a ripe watermelon.

Everyone gasps. Inside this male rat's belly are more than a dozen rat fetuses: pink, curled up like a dish of shrimp cocktail around the intestines. A few men are having dry heaves. Black Cannon, still grinning, lifts his spear again.

"Stop," the Drill Instructor says. Black Cannon backs off, laughing and twirling his spear.

The Neorats were engineered to limit their reproductive capacity: for every one female rat born, there would be nine male rats. The idea had been to control the population size to keep up their market value.

But now it looks like the measures are failing. The males before us died because their abdominal cavity could not support the fetuses. But how could they be pregnant in the first place? Clearly their genes are trying to bypass their engineered boundaries.

I remember another possible explanation, something Xiaoxia told me long ago.



Even though I'd had Li Xiaoxia's phone number in my handset for four years, I never called her. Every time I took it out, I lost the courage to push the CALL button.

That day, I was packing for boot camp when I suddenly heard Xiaoxia's faint voice as though coming from far away. I thought I was hallucinating until I saw that I had butt-dialed her. I grabbed the phone in a panic.

"Hey," she said.

"Uh . . ."

"I hear you're about to go kill some rats."

"Yeah. I can't find a job . . ."

"Why don't I take you out to dinner? I feel bad that we've been classmates for four years and I hardly know you. It'll be your farewell meal."

Rumor had it that luxury cars were always parked below her dorm, waiting to pick her up. Rumor had it that she went through men like a girl trying on dresses.

That night, as we sat across from each other eating bowls of fried rice with beef, her face devoid of makeup, I finally understood. She really had a way of capturing a man's soul.

We wandered around the campus. As we passed the stray cats, the classrooms, the empty benches, suddenly I missed the school, and it was because of memories I wished I had made with her.

"My dad raised rats, and now you're going to kill rats," she said.

"In the Year of the Rat you're going to fight rats. Now that's funny."

"Are you going to work with your father after graduation?" I asked.

She was dismissive of the suggestion. In her eyes, the business of raising rats was not all that different from working on a contract manufacturing assembly line or in a shirt factory. We still didn't control the key technologies. The embryos all had to be imported. After the farm workers raised them, they went through a stringent quality-control process, and those that passed were exported, implanted with a set of programmed behaviors overseas, and then sold to the wealthy as luxury pets.

All that our country, the world's factory, had to offer was a lot of cheap labor in the least technology-intensive phase of the operation.

"I heard the escaped rats had their genes messed with," Li Xiaoxia said.

She went on to explain that just like how some contract manufacturers had tried to produce *shanzhai* iPhones by reverse engineering and messing with the software, so some rat farm owners were trying to reverse engineer and mess with the genes in their rats. Their goal was to raise the ratio of females and the survival rate of babies. Otherwise their profit margin was too low.

"They say that this time the rats didn't escape," she continued, "but were released by the farm owners. It was their way of putting pressure on certain branches of the government to gain more hand-outs for their industry."

I didn't know what to say. I felt so ignorant.

"But that's just one set of rumors," she said. "Others say that the mass escape was engineered by the Western Alliance as a way to put pressure on our country in the trade negotiations. The truth is ever elusive."

I looked at the young woman before me: beautiful and smart. She was way out of my league.

"Send me a postcard," she said. Her light laugh broke me out of my reverie.

"Eh?"

"To let me know you're safe. Don't underestimate the rats. I've seen them . . ."

She never finished her sentence.



From time to time, I feel many bright eyes are hidden in the dark, observing us, analyzing us, day or night. I think I'm going a little crazy.

By the bank of the river, we discover eighteen nests—low, cylindrical structures about two meters in diameter. Several physics majors squat around one, discussing the mechanical structure of interweaving

sticks. On top is a thick layer of leaves, as though the makers wanted to take advantage of the waxy surfaces of the leaves to keep water out.

"I've seen primitive tribal villages like this on the Discovery Channel," one of the men says. We all look at him oddly.

"It doesn't make sense," I say. I squat down, considering the trails of tiny paw prints that connect the nests to one another and the river, like an inscrutable picture. *Do the rats have agriculture? Do they need settlements? Why did they abandon them?*

Black Cannon laughs coldly. "You need to stop thinking they're people."

He's right. The rats are not people. They're not even real rats. They're just carefully designed products—actually, products that failed quality assurance.

I notice something strange about the paw prints. Most seem smaller than usual and only lead away from the nests. But in front of each nest there is one set that is bigger in stride length and deeper, with a long drag mark down the middle. The bigger trails only go *into* the nests but don't come out.

"These are"—I try to keep my voice from shaking—"birthing rooms."

"Sir!" A man stumbles over. "You have to see this."

We follow him to a tree. Underneath there's a tower made from carefully stacked rocks. There's a sense of proportion and aesthetics in the pattern of their shapes and colors. From the tree, eighteen dead male rats hang, their bellies open like unzipped sacks.

A light layer of white sand is spread evenly around the tree. Countless tiny prints can be seen in the sand, surrounding the tree in ever-widening rings. I imagine the ceremonial procession and the mystical rituals. It must have been as wondrous as the scene in Tiananmen Square, when the flag is raised on National Day.



"Oh, come on! This is the twenty-first century. Man has been to the moon! Why are we using these pieces of scrap metal?" Pea, his head

now shaven so that he looked even more like a pea, stood up and protested.

"That's right," I echoed. "Isn't the government always talking about modernizing defense? We should have some high-tech toys." Others in the barracks joined in.

"AT-TEN-TION!"

Complete silence.

"High-tech toys?" the Drill Instructor asked. "For the likes of you? You college kids don't even know how to hold a pair of chopsticks straight. If I give you a gun, the first thing you'll do is shoot your own nuts off! Now pack up. We're mustering in five minutes for a twenty-kilometer march."

We were issued the following kit: a collapsible short spear (the head could be disassembled into a dagger), an army knife with a serrated blade, a utility belt, a compass, waterproof matches, rations, and a canteen. The Drill Instructor had no faith we could handle anything more advanced.

As if to prove his point, at the end of the practice march, three of us were injured. One fell and sat on the blade of his knife and became the first to be discharged from our platoon. I don't think he did it on purpose—that would have required too much dexterity.

As we neared the end of training period, I saw anxiety in most eyes. Pea couldn't sleep, tossing and turning every night and making the bed squeak. By then I had gotten used to life without TV, without the Internet, without 7-Eleven, but each time I thought about the idea of impaling a warm, flesh-and-blood body with a carbon fiber spear, my stomach churned.

There were exceptions, of course.

Whenever one of us passed the training room, we could see Black Cannon's sweaty figure practicing with his spear. He assigned himself extra drills, and constantly sharpened his knife with a grindstone. Someone who knew him from before told us that he was a quiet kid in school, the sort that got bullied by others. Now he seemed like a bloodthirsty butcher.

Six weeks later, we had our first battle, which lasted a total of six minutes and fourteen seconds.

The Drill Instructor had us surround a small copse. Then he gave the order to charge. Black Cannon went in first. Pea and I looked at each other, hesitated, and brought up the rear. By the time the two of us got to the scene, only a pool of blood and some broken limbs were left. They told me that Black Cannon alone was responsible for eight kills. He chose to keep one of the corpses.

At the meeting afterward, the Drill Instructor commended Black Cannon and criticized "a small number of lazy individuals."

Black Cannon skinned his trophy. But he didn't properly cure it, so the skin soon began to rot and smell and became full of maggots. Finally his bunkmate burned it one day when he was out.



Morale is low.

It's not clear what's worse—that the rats have figured out how to bypass the artificial limits on their breeding capacity, or that they have demonstrated signs of intelligence: construction of structures, hierarchical society, even religious worship.

My paranoia is getting worse. The woods are full of eyes, and the grass is full of whispers.

It's night. I give up on trying to sleep and crawl out of the tent.

The early winter stars are so clear that I think I can see all the way to the end of the universe. The sound of a lone insect pierces the silence. My heart clenches with a nameless sorrow.

Sha! I turn around at the sound. A rat is standing erect on its hind legs about five meters away, like another soldier missing home.

I duck down for the knife in my boot sheath. The rat crouches down, too. Our eyes remain locked. The second my hand touches the knife, the rat turns and disappears into the woods. I grab the knife and follow.

Normally I should be able to catch it in about thirty seconds. But tonight, I just can't seem to close the distance between us. From time

to time, it even turns around to see if I'm keeping up. This infuriates me.

The air is full of a sweet, rotting smell. I take a break in a small clearing. I feel dizzy. The trees around me sway and twist, glistening oddly in the starlight.

Pea walks out of the woods. He's wearing his glasses, which ought to be thousands of kilometers away in his parents' possession. His body is whole, without that hole in the chest from that tree branch.

I turn around and see my parents. My dad is wearing his old suit, and my mom is in her plain dress. They're smiling. They look younger, their hair still black.

Tears roll down my face. I don't need logic. I don't need sense.

The Drill Instructor finds me before I die of hypothermia. He tells me that I have enough tears and mucus on my face to fill a canteen.



Pea finally said something meaningful. "Living is so . . ."

He didn't finish his sentence. Tiring? Good? Stupid? You could fill it in however you wanted. That was why I said it was meaningful. Compared to his old way of talking, this new style was forceful, to the point, and left plenty of room for imagination. I admit it—all those literary criticism classes did teach me something.

For me, living was so . . . unbelievable. Half a year ago, I never imagined that I would get to bathe only once a week, that I'd be sleeping with lice in the mud, that I'd fight other men my age for a few stale *wowoton* biscuits, that I'd tremble with excitement at the sight of blood.

Human beings are far more adaptable than we imagine.

If I hadn't joined the Rodent-Control Force, where would I be now? Probably wasting my time on the Internet all day, or maybe staying at home with my parents so we could sit around and drive one another nuts, or maybe carousing with a gang of social misfits and wreaking havoc.

But today, when the Drill Instructor gave the order, I was out there, waving my spear like a real hunter, chasing rats with their furs of all

different colors. The rats were stumbling on their hind legs, designed more for cuteness than function, and screamed in their desperation. I heard that rats certified for export were given further surgical modifications so they could vocalize better. I imagined those rats screaming, in English, "No!" or "Don't!" and then looking down as the spear impaled their bellies.

Eventually the platoon developed an unwritten code. After a battle, every man handed the Drill Instructor the tails of the rats he had killed so a tally could be made. The records were supposed to influence what jobs we'd be recommended for after discharge.

They knew just how to motivate us; this was just like final exams and posting scores.

Black Cannon got the most commendations. His kill figure was probably already in the four digits, far ahead of anyone else. My own record was below average, barely passing, not unlike in college. Pea was at the very bottom. If I didn't help him out now and then by handing him a few tails, he would have zero kills.

The Drill Instructor pulled me aside. "Listen, you're Pea's friend. Straighten him out."

I found Pea behind a pile of leaves. I made a lot of noise to give him a chance to put away the pictures of his parents and to wipe away the tears and mucus on his face.

"Homesick?"

He nodded, hiding his swollen eyes from me.

I pulled out a photograph from my inner pocket. "I think about home, too."

He put on his glasses and examined the picture. "Your parents are so young."

"This was taken years ago." I looked at my father's suit and my mother's dress, still new looking. "I guess I'm not much of a son. All these years, all I've done is make them worry. I never even helped them take a new picture." My nose felt itchy.

"You know about macaque monkeys?" Pea asked. It was impossible to follow Pea's thoughts. His mind was like a wire mesh, and ideas traveled across it by jumping. "Scientists discovered mirror neurons

in their brains, too. So like humans, they can understand how other monkeys feel and think. They have a mirror in their minds for empathy. You understand?"

I didn't.

"Empathy. You can always say something that gets me right where I need it. So I think you must have an excess of mirror neurons."

I punched him lightly. "You calling me a monkey?"

He didn't laugh. "I want to go home."

"Don't be stupid. The Drill Instructor would never give permission. And it will look terrible in your file. How will you ever find a job?"

"I just can't do it." Pea stared at me, speaking slowly. "I think the rats didn't do anything wrong. They're just like us, doing the best they can in this world. But our role is to chase them, and their role is to be chased. If we swapped roles, it would make no difference."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just put my hand on his shoulder.

On the way back to camp, I bumped into Black Cannon. He smirked at me. "Playing therapist for that sissy?"

I gave him the finger.

"Be careful that you don't drown along with him," he called out.

I tried to use my mirror neurons to understand what Black Cannon was thinking and feeling. I failed.



The Drill Instructor stares at the map and the detector, looking thoughtful.

According to the detector, a large pack of rats is moving toward the edge of our district. At the rate we're marching, we should be able to catch them in twelve hours. If we can kill them all, we will have completed our quota. Yes, we'll be honorably discharged. We'll have jobs. We'll go home for New Year's.

But there's a problem. Regulations say that Rodent-Control Force units may not cross district borders for kills. The idea is to prevent units from overly aggressive competition, stealing kills from one another.

The Drill Instructor turns to Black Cannon. "You think we can contain the battle so that the whole operation is within our district?"

Black Cannon nods. "I guarantee it. If we end up crossing district lines, the rest of you can have all my tails."

We laugh.

"Fine. Let's get ready to leave at eighteen hundred hours."

I find a landline public phone at a convenience store. First I call my mom. When she hears that I might be coming home soon, she's so happy she can't speak. I hang up after a few more sentences because I'm afraid she'll cry. Then I dial another number before I can stop myself.

Li Xiaoxia.

She has no idea who I am. Undaunted, I recount our entire history until she remembers.

She's now working at a foreign company's Chinese branch: nine to five, plenty of money. Next year she might go overseas to take some classes at company expense. She seems distracted.

"Have you gotten my postcards?"

"Yeah, sure." She hesitates. "Well, the first few. Then I moved."

"I'm about to be discharged," I say.

"Ah, good. Good. Stay in touch."

I refuse to give up. "Do you remember how when we parted, you told me to be careful of the rats? You said you had seen them. What did you see?"

A long and awkward silence. I hold my breath until I'm about to faint. "I don't remember," she says. "Nothing important."

I regret the money I wasted on that call.

Numbly I stare at the scrolling ticker on the bottom of the static-filled TV screen in the convenience store: "The rodent-control effort is progressing well." "The Western Alliance has agreed to a new round of trade talks concerning the escalating tension with our country." "Employment opportunities for new college graduates are trending up."

Well, even though the rats have now bypassed the limits on their reproductive rates, our quota hasn't been adjusted in response. It

makes no sense, but I don't care. It looks like we'll have jobs, and the export numbers will go up again. It doesn't seem like what we're doing here matters.

It's just like what Xiaoxia said: "They say that . . ." "Others say that . . ." It's just rumors and guesses. Who knows what really happens behind closed doors?

No single factor means anything. Everything has to be contextualized. There are too many hidden relationships, too many disguised opportunities for profit, too many competing concerns. This is the most complicated chess game in the world, the Great Game.

But all I can see is my broken heart.



For the last few days, Pea had been going to the bathroom unusually frequently.

I followed him in secret. I saw him taking out a small metal can with holes punched in the lid. He carefully opened it a crack, threw some crackers inside, and murmured quietly into the can.

I jumped out and held out my hand.

"It was really cute," he said "Look at the eyes!" He tried to appeal to my mirror neurons.

"This is against regulations!"

"Just let me keep it for a few days," he begged. "I'll let it go." His eyes looked like the baby rat's, so bright.

Someone as nervous and careless as Pea was no good at keeping secrets. When the Drill Instructor and Black Cannon stood in front of me, I knew the game was up.

"You are sheltering prisoners of war!" Black Cannon said. I wanted to laugh, and Pea was already laughing.

"Stop," the Drill Instructor said. We stood at attention. "If you can give me a reasonable explanation, I'll deal with you reasonably."

I figured that I had nothing to lose, so I came up with an "explanation" on the fly. Black Cannon was so furious when he heard it I thought his nose was going to become permanently twisted.

Pea and I worked together the whole afternoon to dig a hole about

two meters deep into the side of a hill. We lined it with a greased tarp. Pea didn't like my plan, but I told him it was the only way we could escape punishment.

"It's really smart," Pea said. "It can even imitate my gestures." He gave a demonstration. Indeed, the little rat was a regular mimic. I tried to get it to imitate me, but it refused.

"Great," I said. "Its IQ is approaching yours."

"I try to see it as just a well-engineered product," Pea said. "A bundle of modified DNA. But emotionally I can't accept that."

We hid downwind from the hole. Pea held a string in his hand. The other end of the string was tied to the leg of the baby rat at the bottom of the hole. I had to keep on reminding Pea to pull the rope once in a while to make the rat cry out piteously. His hands shook. He hated doing it, but I made him. Our futures were at stake here.

My whole idea was founded on guesses. Who knew how these artificial creatures felt about the bonds of kinship? Did adult rats have any child-rearing instincts? How did their new reproductive arrangement—one female mating with multiple males, each of whom then became "pregnant"—affect things?

One male rat appeared. It sniffed the air near the hole as if trying to identify the smell. Then it fell in. I could hear the sound of its claws scratching against the greased tarp. I laughed. Now we had two rats as bait.

The adult male was much louder than the baby rat. If it really had a high IQ, then it should be issuing warnings to its companions.

I was wrong. A second male rat appeared. It came to the side of the trap, seemed to have a conversation with the rats in there, then fell in.

Then came the third, fourth, fifth . . . After the seventeenth rat fell in, I worried that the hole wasn't deep enough.

I gave the signal. In a second, men with spears surrounded the trap.

The rats were building a pyramid. The bottom layer consisted of seven rats leaning against the side of the trap. Five rats stood on their shoulders in the next layer. Then three. Two more rats were carrying the baby rat and climbing up.

"Wait!" Pea yelled. Carefully he pulled the string and slowly separated the baby rat from the adult rats carrying it. The minute the baby rat dangled free of the adults, the adult rats screamed—and I heard sorrow in their voices. The pyramid fell apart as the spears plunged down, splattered blood beading against the plastic and rolling down slowly.

In order to rescue a child who was not directly related to them, the rats were willing to sacrifice themselves. Yet we exploited this to get them.

I shivered.

Pea pulled the baby rat back to him. Just as the baby was about to complete this nightmarish journey, a boot came out of nowhere and flattened it against the earth.

Black Cannon.

Pea jumped at him, fists swinging.

Black Cannon was caught off guard, and blood flowed down the corner of his mouth. Then he laughed, grabbed Pea, and lifted his skinny body over his head. He walked next to the trap, filled with blood and gore, and got ready to toss Pea in.

"I think the sissy wants to join his dirty friends."

"Put him down!" The Drill Instructor appeared and ended the madness.

Because I came up with the plan, I received my first commendation. Three times during his speech, the Drill Instructor mentioned "college education," but not once sarcastically. Even Black Cannon was impressed with me. He told me when no one was around that all the tails from this battle should be given to me. I accepted, and then gave the tails to Pea.

Of course I knew that nothing would make up for what I took away from Pea.



Farm fields, trees, hills, ponds, roads . . . we pass like shadows in the night.

During a break, Black Cannon suggests to the Drill Instructor that

we divide the platoon in half. He will choose the best fighters and dash ahead while the rest follow slowly. He looks around and then adds, meaningfully, "Otherwise, we might not be able to complete the mission."

"No," I say. The Drill Instructor and Black Cannon look at me. "The strength of an army comes from all its members working together. We advance together, we retreat together. None of us is extraneous, and none of us is more important than any others."

I pause, locking my gaze with the furious Black Cannon. "Otherwise, we'll be no better than the rats."

"Good." The Drill Instructor puts out his cigarette. "We stay together. Let's go."

Black Cannon walks by me. He lowers his voice so that only I can hear. "I should have let you roll down the dam with the sissy."

I freeze.

As Black Cannon walks away, he turns and smirks at me. I've seen that curling of the lips before: when he warned me not to drown along with Pea, when he stomped on the baby rat and lifted Pea over his head, when he sliced open the bellies of the male rats.

Black Cannon was next to Pea that afternoon. They said that Pea left the path because he saw a rare plant. But without his glasses, Pea was practically blind.

I should never have believed their lies.

As I stare at Black Cannon's back, memory surfaces after memory. This is the most difficult journey I've ever been on.

"Prepare for battle," the Drill Instructor says, taking me out of my waking dream. We've been marching for ten hours.

In my mind, the only battle that matters in the world is between Black Cannon and me.

It's dawn again. The battlefield is a dense forest in a valley. The cliffs on both sides are steep and bare. The Drill Instructor's plan is simple: one squad will move ahead and cut off the rat pack's path through the valley. The other squads will follow and kill every rat they see. Game over.

I sneak through the trees to join Black Cannon's squad. I don't

have a plan, except that I don't want him out of my sight. The forest is dense, and visibility is poor. A faint blue miasma permeates the air. Black Cannon sets the pace for a fast march, and we weave between the trees, among the fog, like ghosts.

He stops abruptly. We follow his finger and see several rats pacing a few meters away. He gestures for us to spread out and surround them. But by the time we get close, the rats have all disappeared. We turn around, and the rats are still just a few meters away.

This happens a few more times. All of us are frightened.

The miasma grows thicker, filled with a strange odor. My forehead is sweaty, and the sweat stings my eyes. I grip my spear tightly, trying to keep up with the squad. But my legs are rubbery. My paranoia is back. *Things* are watching me in the grass. Whispers in the air.

I'm alone now. All around me is the thick fog. I spin around. Every direction seems full of danger. Desperation fills my head.

Suddenly I hear a long, loud scream in one direction. I rush over but see nothing. I feel something large dash behind me. Another loud, long scream. Then I hear the sound of metal striking against metal, the sound of flesh being ripped apart, heavy breathing.

Then silence, absolute silence.

It's behind me. I can feel its hot gaze.

I spin around, and it leaps at me through the fog. A Neorat as large as a human, its claws dripping with blood, is on me in a second. My spear pushes its arms against its chest, and we wrestle each other to the ground. Its jaws, full of sharp teeth, snap shut right next to my ear, the stench from its mouth making it impossible for me to breathe. I want to kick it off me with my legs, but it has me completely pinned against the ground.

I watch, helplessly, as its bloody claws inch toward my chest. I growl with fury, but it sounds like a desperate, loud scream.

The cold claw rips through my uniform. I can feel it against my chest. Then a brief, searing moment of pain as it rips through my skin and muscles. The claw continues down, millimeter by millimeter, toward my heart.

I look up into its face. It's laughing. The mouth forms a cruel grin, one I'm very familiar with.

Bang. The rat shudders. The claws stop. It turns its head around, confused, trying to find the source of the noise. I gather every ounce of strength in my body and shove its claws away, then smash my spear against its skull.

A muffled thud. It falls against the ground.

I look up past him, and see a bigger, taller rat walking toward me. It's holding a gun in its hands.

I close my eyes.



"You can all have a real drink tonight," the Drill Instructor said. He revealed a few cases of beer next to the campfire.

"What's the occasion?" Pea asked happily. He grabbed a chicken foot out of the big bowl and gnawed on it.

"I think it's somebody's birthday today."

Pea was still for a second. Then he smiled and kept on gnawing his chicken foot. In the firelight I thought I saw tears in his eyes.

The Drill Instructor was in a good mood. "Hey, Pea," he said, handing Pea another beer, "you're a Sagittarius. So you ought to be good at shooting. But why is your aim at rats so awful? You must be doing a lot of other kinds of shooting, am I right?"

We laughed until our stomachs cramped up. This was a side of the Drill Instructor we never knew.

The birthday boy ate his birthday noodles and made his wish. "What did you wish for?" the Drill Instructor asked.

"For all of us to be discharged as quickly as possible so that we can go home, get good jobs, and spend time with our parents."

Everyone went quiet, thinking that the Drill Instructor was going to get mad. But he clapped, laughed, and said, "Good. Your parents didn't waste their money on you."

Now everyone started talking at once. Some said they wanted to make a lot of money and buy a big house. Some said they wanted to sleep with a pretty girl from every continent. One said he wanted

to be the president. "If you're going to be the president," another said, "then I'll have to be the Commander-in-Chief of the Milky Way."

I saw that the Drill Instructor's expression was a bit odd. "What do you wish for, sir?"

We all got quiet.

The Drill Instructor poked at the fire with a stick.

"My home village is poor. All of us born there are stupid, not much good at schooling, not like you. As a young man, I didn't want to work the fields or go to the cities and be a laborer. It seemed so futile. Then someone said, 'Go join the army. At least you'll be protecting the country. If you do well, maybe you'll become a hero, and then you can return home and bring honor to your ancestors.' I'd always liked war movies and thought it exciting to wear a uniform. So I signed up.

"Poor kids like me knew nothing except how to work hard. Every day, I trained the longest and practiced the most. If there was a dangerous task, I volunteered. If something dirty needed to be done, I did it. What did I do all that for? I just wanted an opportunity to be a hero on the battlefield. It was my only chance to do something with my life, you know? Even if I died, it would be worth it."

The Drill Instructor paused, sighed. He kept on poking at the fire with his branch. The silence lasted for a long time.

Then he looked up and grinned. "Why are you all quiet? I shouldn't have ruined the mood." He threw away his branch. "Sorry. I'll sing a song to apologize. It's an old song. When I first heard it, you weren't even born yet."

He was not a good singer, but he sang with his whole heart. The corners of his eyes were wet.

"... Today all I have is my shell. Remember our glory days, when we embraced freedom in the storm? All life we believed we could change the future, but who ever accomplished it ... ?"

As he sang, the flickering shadows from the fire made him seem even taller, like a bigger-than-life hero. Our applause echoed loudly in the empty wilderness.

"Let me tell you something," Pea said. He leaned over, sipping from a bottle. "Living is so ... like a dream."



The loud noise of the engine wakes me.

I open my eyes and see the Drill Instructor, his lips moving. But I can't hear a word over the noise.

I try to get up, but a sharp pain in my chest makes me lie down again. Over my head is a curved metallic ceiling. Then the whole world starts to vibrate and shake, and a sense of weight pushes me against the floor. I'm in a helicopter.

"Don't move," the Drill Instructor shouts, leaning close to my ear. "We're taking you to the hospital."

My memory is a mess of random scenes from that nightmarish battle. Then I remember the last thing I saw. "That gun ... was that you?"

"Tranquilizer."

I think I'm beginning to understand. "So what happened to Black Cannon?"

The Drill Instructor is silent for a while. "The injury to his head is pretty severe. He'll probably be a vegetable the rest of his life."

I remember that night when I couldn't sleep. I remember Pea, my parents, and ...

"What did you see?" I ask the Drill Instructor anxiously. "What did you see on the battlefield?"

"I don't know," he says. Then he looks at me. "It's probably best if you don't know, either."

I think about this. If the rats are now capable of chemically manipulating our perceptions, generating illusions to cause us to kill one another, then the war is going to last a long, long time. I remember the screams and the sounds of flesh being torn apart by spears.

"Look!" The Drill Instructor supports me so that I can see through the helicopter cockpit window.

Rats, millions of rats are walking out of fields, forests, hills, villages. Yes, walking. They stand erect and stroll at a steady pace, as though

members of the world's largest tour group. The scattered trickles of rats gather into streams, rivers, flowing seas. Their varicolored furs form grand patterns. There's a sense of proportion and aesthetics.

The ocean of rats undulates over the withered, sere winter landscape and the identical, boring human buildings, like a new life force in the universe, gently flowing.

"We lost," I say.

"No, we won," the Drill Instructor says. "You'll see soon."

We land on a military hospital. Bouquets and a wheelchair welcome me, the hero. A pretty nurse pushes me inside. They triage me quickly and then give me a bath. It takes a long time before the water flows clear. Then it's time to feed me. I eat so quickly that I throw it all up again. The nurse gently pats my back, her gaze full of empathy.

The cafeteria TV is tuned to the news. "Our country has reached preliminary agreement with the Western Alliance concerning the trade dispute. All parties have described it as a win-win . . ."

On TV, they're showing the mass migration of rats I saw earlier from the helicopter.

"After thirteen months of continuous, heroic struggle by the entire nation, we have finally achieved complete success in eradicating the rodent threat!"

The camera shifts to a scene by the ocean. A gigantic multicolored carpet is moving slowly from the land into the ocean. As it touches the ocean, it breaks into millions of particles, dissolving in the water.

As the camera zooms in, the Neorats appear like soldiers in a killing frenzy. Crazed, each attacks everything and anything around itself. There're no more sides, no more organization, no more hint of strategy or tactics. Every Neorat is fighting only for itself, tearing apart the bodies of its own kind, cruelly biting, chewing others' heads. It's as if some genetic switch has been flipped by an invisible hand, and their confident climb toward civilization has been turned in a moment into the rawest, most primitive instinct. They collide against one another, strike one another, so that the whole carpet of bodies squirms, tumbles into a river of blood that runs into the sea.

"See, I told you," the Drill Instructor says.

But the victory has nothing to do with us. This had been planned from the start. Whoever had engineered the escape of the Neorats had also buried the instructions for getting rid of them when their purpose had been accomplished.

Li Xiaoxia was right. Pea was right. The Drill Instructor was also right. We are just like the rats, all of us only pawns, stones, worthless counters in the Great Game. All we can see is just the few grids of the board before us. All we can do is just follow the gridlines in accordance with the rules of the game: Cannon on eighth file to fifth file; Horse on second file to third file. As for the meaning behind these moves, and when the great hand that hangs over us will plunge down to pluck one of us off, nobody knows.

But when the two players in the game, the two sides, have concluded their business, all sacrifices become justified—whether it's the Neorats or us. I think again of Black Cannon in the woods, and shudder.

"Don't mention what you saw," the Drill Instructor says. I know he means the religion of the rats, Black Cannon's grin, Pea's death. These things aren't part of the official story. They're meant to be forgotten.

I ask the nurse, "Will the migrating rats pass this city?"

"In about half an hour. You should be able to see them from the park in front of the hospital."

I ask her to take me there. I want to say good-bye to my foes, who never existed.