



Shisi's *Little Mushroom*

BOOK ONE:
JUDGMENT DAY

translated by: Xiao

LITTLE MUSHROOM

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ISBN 978-1-7365009-8-9 (print)

ISBN 978-1-7365009-9-6 (ebook)

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Published by Peach Flower House, LLCTM 2022

PO Box 1156

Monterey Park, CA 91754

Visit www.peachflowerhouse.com



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BOOK ONE: JUDGEMENT DAY

"YOU'RE JUST A TINY LITTLE MUSHROOM"

THE CAVE WAS dark and damp, with only weak fluorescence from the plants providing illumination.

Tangled vines clung to the cliff face. Deep green, purple, and inky black, they resembled snakes tied into large knots.

A black insect with six stiff wings and three proboscises barged into the cave, its flight path erratic.

In the next second, a massive dark purple bulge suddenly appeared amidst the tangled vines and swiftly split open, mouth-like, before snapping shut around the flying insect.

The vines gradually began to wriggle, and the part that had bulged out retreated bit by bit until it returned to its original state.

Within the cave was a sound like that of flapping wings. A drop of mucus, translucent strands trailing in its wake, fell from the ceiling and plopped onto the sticky moss below. The moss began to subtly squirm, and the drop of sparkling mucus vanished into the ground as it was rapidly absorbed.

In a corner lit up by the fluorescence of green fungi, a tide of white poured forth from the crevices in the rocks and soil, blanketing a large area. It was a snow-white mycelium. It grew, spread out, and extended hundreds of millions of tendrils, then crept towards the center of the cave, gathered together, merged, and elongated to form a figure. A single foot stepped upon the thick and delicately soft moss and sank down into it, leaving only a snow-white ankle visible.

An Zhe looked at his ankle. Though his human body was sustained by a skeleton, muscles, blood vessels, and had mobile joints, it was not flexible

due to the human skeleton's limitations.

Layers of keratin formed round and translucent fingernails; these were vestigial remnants originating from the sharp claws of beasts.

He lifted a leg and took a step forward. The damp, springy moss pressed down by his foot gathered together again after he left, looking like earthworms standing erect.

This time, he stepped on something different—a skeletal human arm.

In the darkness, An Zhe looked at the skeleton.

Fungi and vines had already taken root in the depths of its bones. Deep green vines wound around the hip and leg bones, while colorful small mushrooms resembling flowers in bloom grew upon the ribs.

Fluorescent mushrooms emerged from its empty eye sockets and sparse teeth. The green glow they gave off was like fine shifting sand, very blurry in the misty cave.

An Zhe looked at it for a long time. At last, he bent down and picked up a backpack made of animal skin that had been laying next to the skeleton. The contents of the backpack were unaffected by moisture. There were a few articles of clothing, human food and water, and a blue electronic chip half the size of a human palm that was engraved with a string of numbers: 3261170514.

Three days ago, this skeleton was still a live human.

"3261170514," the young human rasped brokenly as the weak green fluorescence illuminated the contours of his face. "My ID number. This is my ID card, and only by having it can I go back to the human base."

An Zhe asked, "Can I help you go back there?"

The human smiled, and the fingers of his right hand dropped to rest at his side. The chip tumbled from his hand and disappeared in the uneven moss. As he leaned back against the crags, he lifted his head and pressed his left hand to his chest, where a huge wound had opened up. Pale splinters of bone pierced through his chest, exiting from his back, and the surrounding skin had already festered. Part of it was pale gray, with cottony flesh covering the surface of the bone splinters, while the rest exhibited a blackish green hue and released a continuous drip of dark liquid in time with the rhythm of his breathing.

After taking a few breaths, he said softly, "I can't go back anymore, little mushroom."

His shirt was dyed through, his skin looked pallid, his lips were chapped, and his body trembled at irregular intervals.

An Zhe looked at him, unsure what to say. In the end, he only murmured this young human's name. "An Ze?"

"You've just about learned the human language now." The human looked down at his own body.

Apart from pus and blood, he was also covered with snow-white hyphae, which were part of An Zhe's body. The hyphae meandered along, adhering securely to the wounds on An Ze's limbs and torso. The mushroom's original intent was to stanch the dying human's bleeding, but the hyphae also instinctively absorbed and digested the fresh blood that flowed out at the same time.

"You learned so many things just by eating my genes, huh? The pollution index here is indeed very high," the human said.

Fragmented scraps of knowledge unfolded within An Zhe's mind. After a five-second-long conversion, he understood that the pollution index referred to the speed at which genes transformed. Now, human genes were flowing into his body along with An Ze's blood.

"Perhaps... once I'm dead and you've completely eaten my body... you'll obtain a lot more things." An Ze looked at the cave ceiling, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Then it seems that I will have done something meaningful as well, although I don't know if it will be good or bad for you."

Without saying anything, An Zhe moved his entire body towards An Ze. He hugged An Ze's shoulders with his newly-grown human arm, and many hyphae flowed forth and piled up next to An Ze to support his sagging body.

The only sounds in the quiet cavern came from the dying human's gasping breaths.

After a long time passed, An Ze finally spoke up again. "I'm someone whose life had no meaning.

"... I don't have any outstanding qualities whatsoever, so it's very normal that they abandoned me. In truth, I'm very happy to not go back to the human base. Just like the wilderness, they're both... places where only

people with value can live on. I've wanted to die for a long time already. I just didn't think I'd encounter a gentle creature like you before I died, little mushroom."

An Zhe didn't really understand the meaning of those words such as 'value' or 'die'. He only caught that phrase once more: human base.

As he leaned against An Ze's shoulder, he said, "I wish to go to the human base."

"Why?" An Ze asked.

An Zhe lifted his left arm slightly and made a gesture with his fingers, seeming as though he wanted to grab a bit of the air, but he grabbed nothing at all.

It was just like his body.

His body was empty.

A massive void had formed in the innermost depths of his body, impossible to fill and impossible to heal, and in its wake was an infinite hollowness and panic that clung to him day in and day out.

Sorting out the words of the human language, he slowly said, "I lost... my spore."

"Spore?"

"My... seed." He didn't know how to explain.

Every mushroom would have spores in its lifetime. Some would have countless spores while others would have just one. A spore was a mushroom's seed. It would grow out of the lamella, be dispersed by the wind to any random place within the jungle, take root wherever it landed, and turn into a new mushroom. Then this mushroom would also grow up little by little and have its own spores. Raising its spores to maturity was a mushroom's sole lifelong mission, but he had lost his only spore when it was far from maturing.

An Ze slowly turned his head, and An Zhe could hear his bones click like an old piece of human machinery when he did so.

"Don't go there." The human's raspy words sped up. "You'll die."

An Zhe recited that word once again. "... Die?"

"Only humans can enter the human base. You won't be able to escape the Judges' eyes." An Ze coughed a few times, then drew a labored breath. "Don't

go... little mushroom."

Confused, An Zhe said, "I..."

The human abruptly grabbed An Zhe's hyphae with great force, and his harsh breathing became more hurried.

"Listen to me." After violently trembling and gasping for breath, An Ze slowly closed his eyes. In a very soft voice, he said, "You don't have any attack power or means of defending yourself. You're just... a tiny little mushroom."

Sometimes, An Zhe deeply regretted telling An Ze about wanting to go to the human base.

If he hadn't told An Ze, An Ze wouldn't have spent his final moments on deterring him. Perhaps he could have listened to An Ze tell a story, or perhaps he could have taken An Ze away from this dark cave for one last look at the fluctuating aurora in the sky. But An Ze's eyes would never open again.

The brief memory disappeared into the air, just like how An Ze's life suddenly disappeared from this world. In front of An Zhe, there remained only a snow-white skeleton.

But he had to go against An Ze's wishes regardless.

He slowly uncurled the fingers of one hand.

A brassy cylindrical bullet shell made of metal quietly lay upon the delicate skin and pale lines of his palm. It was very heavy, and there were some incomprehensible but definitely unusual grooves on its surface. He had found it at the place where he lost his spore, and ever since then, he hadn't let go of it.

Supposing there was still a one-in-ten-thousand chance that he could get his spore back, then this one-in-ten-thousand chance lay with the bullet shell, a human creation.

With a soft sigh, he put the bullet shell in the animal skin backpack An Ze left behind, then bent down and picked up the clothes that An Ze had once worn: a light gray long-sleeved shirt stained with blood, hardened black overalls, and black leather boots.

After doing all of those things, he walked towards the cave exit. As he walked, the slightly baggy clothes rubbed against his skin, and tiny electric currents traveled from the nerve endings hidden beneath the skin to his core. An Zhe, who taken human form for the first time, was unused to it, and he frowned as he rolled up the loose shirt's sleeves.

The vines that had accumulated along the long and winding cave's walls jostled each other, but when An Zhe passed through, they receded like the tide and settled on the cave ceiling.

Three turns later, a moisture-laden wind blew in. The mushroom pushed aside the withered vines dangling in front of the cave mouth, and vast swaths of mushrooms, his kindred, stretched out as far as the eye could see. They seemed to extend up to the sky, and everything was quiet, with not a sound to be heard. Dim daylight shone in from between the cover of the mushroom caps, and the gray sky twinkled, a lustrous volatile green. An Zhe smelled rainwater, fog, snake slough, and decaying plants.

It was still evening. He sat down beneath the cap of the light gray mushroom nearest to the cave entrance and took out a yellowed map from his backpack. The map was covered with blocks of color that varied in shade, which indicated the degree of danger in the different areas. An Ze had once pointed out to An Zhe the approximate location of the cave they were in. It was the darkest part of the entire map, which meant that it was a region that boasted six-star danger level and pollution levels, and it was named "Abyss". On the map, the area containing the Abyss had also been marked with many strange symbols, so An Zhe checked them one by one against the legend in the lower right corner. The marks meant that within the Abyss were scattered dense growths of mushrooms, cannibal vines, cannibal shrubs, simple mammalian monsters, hybrid mammalian monsters, common reptilian monsters, poisonous reptilian monsters, winged monsters, amphibious monsters, hybrid polymorphic monsters, humanoid monsters... and so on. At the same time, within the Abyss, there were also geographic features such as canyons, hills, mountains, abandoned human cities, and the remnants of roads.

The top of the map corresponded to north, and his gaze traveled all the way up. On the upper right of this colorful map, there was a pure white area

marked with a bright red star, and the area's name was written to the right of the star: Northern Base.

The green lights in the sky intensified, and the color behind it darkened little by little into pitch blackness. At midnight, An Zhe managed with difficulty to recognize the stars in the sky. He knew the brightest one was called Polaris and could be used to navigate by.

So he pointed the upwards-facing arrow on the map's upper left corner towards Polaris and walked out over decaying wood, fallen leaves, hyphae, and soil, one step at a time.

Although it was nighttime, it wasn't dark. In the sky, those shifting green lights—humans called them the aurora—illuminated everything up ahead, and all An Zhe could see was mushrooms.

Yellow ones, red ones, brown ones, all with massive caps. Small ones that clumped thickly together on the mountain rocks. Round puffballs that lay scattered on the ground and would, after maturing, release fog-like clouds of spores.

Upon landing, these spores would split open upon the damp fallen leaves and soil and grow into spherical puffballs just like their mother.

There were also mushrooms with no caps, consisting of only white or yellow stems that were either grouped together or radially separated. These swayed in the wind like seaweed.

But this was not a world of only mushrooms. Vines, mosses, shrubs, cannibal flowers, and twisted trees quietly concealed themselves in the night. In the jungle of plants, dark shadows and strange shapes—either animals or fusions of humans and animals—ran, howled, and fought. Animals fought against animals, animals fought against plants, and plants fought against plants. High- and low-pitched howls beat against An Zhe's eardrums, and the rocks and soil were mixed with fresh bloodstains of various colors. He witnessed a pine tree bend down its trunk to devour a long snake with jet-black scales and two tails. He also saw a massive toad extend and curl its bright red tongue around a flying bat that had human arms growing out of its back. Five minutes after swallowing the bat, a pair of black wings grew out of the toad's bumpy and slimy back, soft and furled. This was only one

out of ten thousand sights the mushroom had seen, and he had long ago become used to them.

Right at that moment, a gray animal with four eyes and a body covered with scales, feathers, and fur walked over. Its head resembled both a crocodile's and a massive wolf's, and seven teeth protruded from between its lips. It approached An Zhe and sniffed him with its blood-red nose.

Unmoving, An Zhe quietly stayed next to a mushroom and breathed evenly until he had been sniffed all over.

The huge monster, seeming to have gained nothing, turned around and lumbered off.

An Zhe realized that nothing would notice him even if he was using a human form—perhaps because mushrooms could be found all over the place here, lacked nutritional value, weren't aggressive, and sometimes even contained toxins. So he and they seemed to be creatures from two different worlds, peacefully coexisting.

Perhaps An Ze had been correct. He *was* a tiny little mushroom.

“ARE YOU GOING BACK TO THE NORTHERN BASE?”

AN ZHE WALKED for a very long time.

Many nights and days later, the distance he had traversed on the map was merely the width of a human pinky nail, while the remaining distance to the Northern Base was the length of an entire finger. Since he had no human means of transportation, he didn't know exactly how much longer it would take for him to get there.

At last, he noticed the damp and gloomy smell fade away and felt the soil beneath his feet firm up.

That evening, the sun sank down behind the distant unbroken chain of black mountains like a crimson eye blinking. The sunlight gradually disappeared, and as the dusk sky and aurora rose together, An Zhe tried hard to make out the writing and symbols on the map.

The dried-up river he had just walked across marked a border of the "Abyss", and after this border was a place named "Flatland 2". Flatland 2 had a three-star danger level and two-star pollution level, and it was home to large arthropod-class monsters and rodent-class animals. The land, no longer filled with mushrooms, was dominated by common low shrubbery instead.

Indeed, the Abyss's uneven terrain, the commonly-seen rifts, and the entangled shadows of towering trees that appeared late at night were all gone. One could take in the view of this place with a single glance—a flat and boundless twilight.

But An Zhe felt uneasy.

Flatland 2's dry air seemed unsuited for the survival of mushrooms and he could not find any soil from which he could absorb nutrients, so he could only recover his strength via human methods such as sleeping.

Thus, he walked for another very long time before finally finding a shallow depression in the ground where short green and yellow grasses were sparsely growing. He sat down with his arms wrapped around his knees and curled up in a suitable posture.

A mushroom usually spends the vast majority of its life sleeping, but this was the first time An Zhe fell asleep in a human posture.

A mushroom's sleep usually consists of staying quietly in a single place and waiting for time to pass, but it seemed that human sleep was different. Not long after he closed his eyes, infinite darkness came flooding forth like the tide, and An Zhe's body became light.

Or to put it another way, it seemed like he was losing his body bit by bit.

At some point, the whistling wind entered his ears. It was the sound of the wind in the wilderness, which used to be his favorite thing.

But those sounds were now meaningless, for he had lost its spore when it was rolling around in a patch of wilderness it liked. There were some human voices amongst the wind. He couldn't remember those syllables very well, only recall a tiny portion of them. Even when turned into human language, they were fragmented phrases that he couldn't put together—

"Very... strange, very..."

"... How is it?"

"Take... samples... this place."

In the following moment, an indescribable pain radiated to every part of his body. The feeling was very light, but also very deep. A void appeared in his consciousness, unable to be filled for ever and ever, and he knew he had lost his most important thing from then on.

Fear spread throughout his body in that instant. From then on, fearing the sound of the wind, he lived in the cave.

His heart pounded, and a wave of fear suddenly washed over him—the same kind of fear as when he lost his spore.

An Zhe's eyes flew open, and he promptly realized that he was dreaming. Only humans could dream. In the following moment, he stopped breathing

entirely.

He knew the source of that fear. A black creature stood in front of him.

Two blood-red compound eyes glowed faintly. An Zhe tensed up all over, and his gaze traveled down the huge creature. It had three pairs of slender and sharp sickle-like forelimbs, each as long as an adult human, that gleamed with a luster as cold as moonlight.

After realizing what it was, his body shuddered with a distant feeling that stemmed from the trembling of the first ancestor thousands of years back—the feeling that, as a mushroom, he would die from being bitten by termites.

Perhaps the predators in the "Abyss" would not spare a mushroom a single glance, but the arthropod-class monsters of Flatland 2 may view them as a rare delicacy.

Just as this thought occurred to An Zhe, he unconsciously rolled to one side!

With a dull sound that made even the earth tremble, the arthropod monster's sharp forelimb stabbed into the soil next to him—where he had just been lying.

An Zhe snatched up his backpack, turned over, and got to his feet before sprinting to the nearby shrubbery as the arthropod monster's rapid footsteps resounded in his ears. When the sound grew somewhat softer, An Zhe looked back. Beneath the aurora, he clearly saw the thing in its entirety at last. It was a massive black monster resembling an ant that had been magnified a few thousand times.

Luckily, its body looked overly cumbersome. The speed at which humans could run was superior, so as long as he could run into the shrubbery up ahead—

He stumbled.

In that instant, the monster's shadow enveloped him. Amidst the keen whistling of the wind, its forelimb swung towards his arm.

An Zhe's shirt sleeve suddenly became empty, causing the fabric to droop and the monster to cut nothing at all.

It paused, seemingly surprised by that.

At the same time, hyphae stretched out and grew again inside An Zhe's sleeve to form a complete human arm once more.

He dropped to the ground and rolled, narrowly avoiding the monster's next attack, then pushed off the ground and threw himself into the low shrubbery where two hardy shrubs shielded his body.

But that wasn't enough for him to escape this monster's eyes. An Zhe took a few hurried breaths, and his body began to transform. The outlines of his arms, fingers, and all other extremities became undefined and something heaved below the surface, turning more hyphae-like as he prepared to escape via a more agile means.

Right at that moment—

"Bang!"

A streak of white light flew through the air and struck the joint connecting the monster's head and thorax like a shooting star.

After the dull sound of the impact rang out, the white light silently exploded with a flare of red mixed in.

An Zhe lay in the shrubbery and watched, eyes wide open, as the huge thing broke into two parts and crashed to the ground.

The impact sent leaves flying into the air, falling over An Zhe.

The monster's head landed not more than half a meter away from him, its blood-red compound eyes still looking in his direction.

In the past, An Zhe had seen creatures in the "Abyss" who could still move even after being cut into thirds. Just as he thought to get a little further away from it, he suddenly heard sounds nearby.

"That was the last uranium shell. After harvesting the carcass, we're going back to the base." The man's voice was rich.

"Arthropod-type carapaces aren't cheap. I didn't think we'd end up snagging some." Another male voice, reedier than the previous one.

After a short exchange, they stopped talking, and the sounds of their footsteps traveled over. It was the sound of thick-soled leather boots treading on the sand mixed with the rustling sound of friction.

Humans.

After An Ze's death, An Zhe had not seen any humans for a long time. He furtively raised his head from the shrubbery.

The shrubbery rustled. He heard the first speaker quietly urge, "On your guard!"

In the following second, three pitch-black gun muzzles were aimed in his direction.

An Zhe looked at the men.

His muddled recollection of the night he lost his spore inexorably came to mind, but An Ze's existence had shown him the kindness and goodwill of humans. He thought over his current predicament, then said, "He-... hello."

Beneath the aurora's illumination, the scene before him could be taken in at a glance: three humans clad in dark gray clothes, all male. Wrapped around their waists were wide brown belts with magazines for their guns tied to them. The man standing in the middle towered over the other, shorter two.

He had been the one speaking just now about uranium. His voice was very calm as he asked, "You human?"

An Zhe hesitated briefly. Thinking of the weapon that blew up the monster at its midsection, he said, "Yes."

"What're you called? What's your ID number? What about your teammates?"

"An Zhe. 3261170514. We got separated."

The man looked down at him with a frown. He had thick and dark eyebrows, clear black eyes, a high nose bridge, and thick lips. Unlike the wild beasts of the Abyss, the combination of these facial features didn't make An Zhe feel a sense of peril, so he pursed his lips and returned the gaze.

Three seconds later, one of the men at that man's side—a short and dark-skinned man—loaded the gun once more with a click, the action full of implied threat. He looked at An Zhe and said, his voice low and words fast, "Take off your clothes."

An Zhe stood up from the shrubbery and undid the first button on his gray shirt, then the second, revealing the skin at his neckline. His skin was a smooth, milky white that looked a bit like the color of his hyphae.

Then he heard the third man whistle. That man had pallid skin tinted with a red flush and blond hair as well as many wrinkles on his face, which were signs of human aging. The man's eyes, gray-blue and turned up at the corners, were looking straight at him.