

Collapse 54

Chapter 54: Finally Crawled Out_1

This was a massive warehouse, filled with shelves all around. The shelves were neatly lined with fabric, but now everything was ablaze. As far as the eye could see, it was a sea of flames with no exit in sight. Thick, billowing smoke invaded their nostrils, making them cough uncontrollably. Yuwen Hao covered his nose and looked around, only to find that everyone else had vanished.

Is this the dream the disfigured woman mentioned...? The woman had said Zhong Min would appear in her dreams every night, getting closer and closer, until eventually, she killed her. Clearly, he too had been pulled into this dreamscape.

"Zhong Min must be in here somewhere. I need to get out quickly... otherwise, I might run into her," Yuwen Hao muttered to himself as he hurried forward.

The textile factory warehouse was filled with flammable materials; flames licked at almost every surface. Some shelves, unable to withstand the burning, had already collapsed. Covering his nose and mouth, Yuwen Hao wove swiftly through the warehouse. But he had never been here before and was unfamiliar with the layout. Despite moving about for some time, he still couldn't find the main door. His clothes and hair were partially charred, and choking smoke flooded his nostrils, sending him into violent coughing fits.

"No..." Yuwen Hao muttered. I need to find the exit, and fast. Otherwise, he would likely suffocate from the thick smoke before Zhong Min even found him. He knew that most people who died in fires first succumbed to smoke inhalation before being burned to death.

Yuwen Hao darted aimlessly around the warehouse, still unable to locate an exit or encounter anyone else. Just as he inhaled another lungful of thick smoke, choking him half to death, he suddenly heard a familiar voice from nearby.

"Is anyone there? Someone, help!"

It was Qing Huan's voice.

Hearing the voice, Yuwen Hao immediately ran towards it. After only a few steps, he saw Qing Huan crouching in a dead end, a figure slumped on the ground beside him—it was the woman with the burned face. A burning shelf lay fallen before them, separating Yuwen Hao from the pair. Qing Huan was desperately trying to pull the woman's arm. Through the flames of the fallen shelf, Yuwen Hao could see the woman's leg seemed injured, preventing her from moving.

Seeing Yuwen Hao approach, Qing Huan's face lit up. "Elder Brother Yuwen, quick, come help! I can't move her by myself."

They were separated by the burning shelf. Jumping over it quickly wouldn't necessarily cause serious burns, but the question was how to get the woman past the shelf and out of the dead end.

"Elder Brother Yuwen?" Qing Huan asked, tilting his head up at him when he didn't move.

But this woman is the only one who knows where the exit is now, Yuwen Hao thought. With that realization, he resignedly rolled up his sleeves, took a running start, and leaped forward.

The shelf was long; he couldn't clear it in a single jump and landed twice on it during his passage. But thanks to his speed, only the cuffs of his pants caught fire. Reaching Qing Huan and the woman, Yuwen Hao quickly bent down to pat out the flames on his trousers. Still, a patch of his skin was burned, and it stung.

"I'm sorry," the woman winced, clutching her leg. "I've dragged you both into this..."

Her leg looked as if something had crushed it. Her pants were scorched in that area, revealing a large patch of burned skin and flesh.

"I'm fine," Yuwen Hao said, shaking his head. "Can't you walk?"

"If you help me, I think I can manage..." she trailed off.

The burning shelf lay before them. If we try to support her across that, all three of us will probably get our legs burned, Yuwen Hao assessed. He paused for a moment before asking, "Do you remember where the warehouse exit is?"

The woman gave a bitter smile. "How could I forget?"

Good enough. Yuwen Hao crouched down with his back to her. "I'll carry you on my back and jump over. Just tell me which way to go."

"I'll help you get on his back," Qing Huan offered from the side.

Qing Huan had actually wanted to carry the woman himself, but after trying, he found he simply couldn't lift her.

As Yuwen Hao lifted the woman onto his back, he said to Qing Huan, "Just follow us closely, don't get lost... COUGH, COUGH..."

The fire was intensifying. More shelves collapsed in the raging blaze before their eyes.

Qing Huan nodded quickly, then, as if suddenly remembering something, asked, "By the way, have you seen Dr. Gu and the others?"

"No," Yuwen Hao shook his head.

Since Zhong Min hasn't found us yet, she must have found the others, he thought. Either Gu Mian or Huang Yu is probably being hunted right now. We need to get out of here fast, while she's busy with someone else.

With the woman on his back, he took two steps forward, preparing to leap over the burning, fallen shelf before them. Just then, a strange sound came from within the wreckage of the collapsed shelf.

CREAK... CREAK...

CREAK...

It sounded like stiff, deteriorated joints twisting with great effort. Accompanied by this eerie sound, the three of them saw a spot within the collapsed wreckage suddenly bulge upwards. Qing Huan stumbled back a couple of steps, eyes wide as he stared at the bulging spot. He had good eyesight and immediately discerned a human figure.

The figure was on all fours, its movements bizarre, crawling like a spider. Her entire body was burned, revealing large patches of raw flesh. Her neck was stretched out long, as if boneless. At this moment, her grotesque face was fixed on the three of them in the dead end. She twisted her head slightly, emitting a faint, GRATING sound.

The woman on Yuwen Hao's back shuddered violently. "It's... It's Zhong Min..."

Qing Huan had pressed himself tightly against the wall. This was a dead end; they had no way out. Terror was etched on Yuwen Hao's face as well.

Just then, they saw the figure move.

She scuttled towards them like a spider, each advance accompanied by the GRATING sound of her twisting joints. Her lips were gone, revealing a ghastly, toothy gash that stretched to her ears, resembling a grotesque smile.

Zhong Min was about to crawl over the wreckage towards them.

Qing Huan was almost in tears. "What do we do, Elder Brother Yuwen!"

They had nowhere to retreat, able only to watch as Zhong Min drew closer and closer.

Yuwen Hao was terrified too. He shivered, backing away. "I don't know..."

What can we do! What can we do! His mind screamed, but he was completely blank. I absolutely cannot let her catch me! Even burning to death in this fire would be better than her getting her hands on me...

Zhong Min drew nearer still. One of her hands had already crossed the wreckage, planting itself on the ground. Her entire body emitted a SICKENING CREAK... CREAK... sound. A few more steps... and she'll have us, Yuwen Hao thought, closing his eyes in despair.

He heard the CREAK... CREAK... of twisting joints and heard the figure before him suddenly erupt in a CACKLE.

That sound... so close... We're finished—

But just as Yuwen Hao squeezed his eyes shut in despair, he heard the cackle abruptly cease, as if her throat had been seized. He snapped his eyes open in astonishment. On the ground before him, a pair of shoes had appeared out of nowhere. Further up, he saw a distinctive white coat. And looking higher still, he saw Gu Mian's amiable, smiling face.

There was Dr. Gu, crouched beside Zhong Min. With one hand, he was forcefully pressing her head back down onto the burning wreckage. "Oh, my apologies," he said, his amiable smile not wavering. "It must have taken quite some effort to crawl out, hmm?"