

Iyashikei 41

Chapter 41:

“Han Fei, sorry to trouble you some more.” Spotting Han Fei, Director Jiang came to welcome him. “Mainly it’s because your acting skill is too good for us to let it go to waste. Due to budget constraints, the project employs many new actors. Most of them are fresh in the field, unfortunately not many of them can truly master their roles.”

“I don’t mind it personally but won’t a last-minute amendment to the script ruin the flow? Every single minute is crucial in a movie. If additional scenes are given to me, perhaps the characterization of the main characters wouldn’t be so rounded.” Han Fei was truly concerned about the quality of the film.

“The script will be changed regardless.” Director Jiang said sincerely. “Our writers have a long discussion about it. Out of concern to the victims’ families, we decided to edit some of the scenes.” Director Jiang was strict with his actors but he was respectful towards the victims and their surviving families. After all, it was not his goal to take advantage of them.

“The movie is based on a real event. Indeed, we’ll have to consider the feelings of the actual victims’ family.”

“You’re right.” Director Jiang patted Han Fei’s shoulders. “Hurry to make-up then. For your information, we’re going to add some everyday scenes to flesh out Wei Youfu’s character.”

Han Fei moved to a room down in the basement. It was the crew’s temporary dressing room. Han Fei chose the innermost corner and sat down. The stylist handed him the clothes similar to those worn by Wei Youfu and set for him Wei Youfu’s hairstyle. While the stylists busied with his make-up, Han Fei picked up the newly-edited script and read it silently.

The door was pushed open. “Why are we here again? We’ve already wrapped up the shot, haven’t we?!” A young man about 180 cm stormed into the room. A woman about 30 trailed behind him.

“Who could have predicted that the victims’ family would suddenly change their minds. They’re now outside the set. The scenes have to be reshot because of them.” The woman carried a bag and held several documents and the script.

“Why did you choose this script in the first place?” The young man turned his anger on the woman. “There’s no budget and, other than myself, all the other actors are practically unheard of. This film is going to ruin my accumulated reputation.”

“This is the agency’s decision. There are not many films in this genre, thus lesser competition. It can get popular if done well.” The woman mumbled softly, afraid of being viewed as combative by the star. She added plaintively, “Furthermore, Jiang Yi is a good director. Even though he has not produced any blockbusters, the critics always rave about his films. Ah Cheng, please just follow along this one time.”

“It’s easy for you to say.” The young man called Ah Cheng was about to argue further when a commotion came from outside the building. It sounded like a heated argument. Ah Cheng and his manager’s interest was instantly piqued and they went to watch the show. Han Fei, whose make-up was done, showed zero interest. He went to find Jiang Yi instead. He wanted to finish his parts and return home as soon as possible. Instead of small arguments, Han Fei’s focus was on how to apprehend the serial killer and avenge the victims. Han Fei had reached a new level of Zen. This was all thanks to the contribution of that Iyashikei game.

Soon the ruckus sounded inside the building, the victims’ families appeared to have barged into the set. Having no other choice, Director Jiang led Han Fei upstairs to a different set. This was where they shot the indoor scenes. “The aim is for the audience to see that Wei Youfu and the other victims were once like them. They led their own peaceful lives. We would add some scenes of everyday life to Wei Youfu’s character so that the audience could empathize with him further when his family’s lives were violently taken away.”

“Understood.” For others, this might pose a challenge but not for Han Fei. After all, Han Fei had met Wei Youfu in person. He remembered every single one of Wei Youfu’s expressions. The man radiated kindness but after being wrought by pain and despair, his loss would rake at people’s hearts. “I will do my best.”

After heading into the set, Han Fei inputted the information he had on Wei Youfu slowly into his mind and body. He detached his own consciousness.

He just finished an OT until midnight. His body was haggard with tiredness as he reached home. His eyes dulled with fatigue but underneath it, there was a glint of satisfaction from a day well spent. He plopped himself down on the sofa. Picking up and staring at the picture of himself and his wife, his gaze softened with love. Wiping the frame tenderly, he formulated a surprise for his wife. In a few days, there would

be a new and eye-grabbing wedding photo decorating the house. He turned to the wall as if seeing the new picture there. At that moment, his phone rang. He answered it. His old father's streams of nags made him smile silently. Even at his age, his aging father could still make him feel like a child.

"I know, I know. Don't just worry about me, you have to take care of yourself too..." After hanging up, Han Fei turned to the bedroom. This would lead to his death scene.

"Youfu!" Before Han Fei heard the 'cut', an old man's voice came from the stairwell behind the camera. The placard fell from the frail old man's hands as he wandered numbly into the set. "Don't go in there, Youfu..."

Han Fei stopped moving. He remembered this voice, it belonged to Wei Youfu's father. Turning around, Han Fei's eyes met those of the old man holding the placard. The expression on the old man's face was devastating.

"Who let the families into the set?!" The set director and floor manager went to grab at the old man. They worked together to pull him away.

"Wait a minute!" Han Fei quickly rushed over. "There's no need to use force. You might accidentally injure the old gentleman." He guarded the old man behind him. "I'm sure we can talk this out peacefully."

"What is there for us to talk about? Everything has been discussed beforehand and now they decide to intervene with the shoot?! If this is not blatant contract breach, then what is?" Ah Cheng leaned against the door and grumbled, ignoring the warning gaze his manager shot at him.

"Preposterous!" The old man tightened his grip on the placard. "We only agreed to this because you came to us with the promise that you'll help promote this incident and help us find the murderer! But what have you done instead?! The film is filled with purposeful fabrication and lies!"

"We are film makers and not the police, why would you even expect us to help you catch the murderer? In any case, you've all signed the contract." Ah Cheng was much taller than the old man, he looked down at the elder man with derision. "We've already finished shooting most of the movie and now because of you people, do you know how many things we need to change? Our tapes, my time, do you know how precious they are?"

"I don't care, you people are the ones who violated the contract first!" The old man shouted due to agitation. Hearing the voice, a few other people rushed up the stairs holding placards. They were all families of the victims.

"What is really happening?" Han Fei was confused. He had no idea the situation was so contentious.

"Since most of the movie has been cut and edited, we decided to release the trailer. They must have seen it." Jiang Yi sighed. He lowered his voice, "I really do wish to respect their wishes but that won't fly with the sponsors. In reality, the killer is still out there but the sponsors want a happy ending because they believe that will draw in a bigger crowd at the cinema."

"What do you mean by a happy ending?"

"They ordered the script-writers to force an ending." Jiang Yi was quite helpless too. "To put it simply, in the end, the main character luckily escaped from the murderer's pursuit and managed to turn on him. The killer was thus successfully apprehended by the main character."

"Since this movie is based on a real story, then we shouldn't manufacture a false ending, that is disrespectful to the audience and to the victims." Han Fei turned to glance at the old man. Even after so many years, the gentleman still visited the police station yesterday to demand updates. The loss of one's loved ones weighed on one's heart for life.

"There is nothing we can do. For now, we can only hope that both parties can calm down and reach for a compromise." Jiang Yi shook his head and his face lined with worry.

"It'll be fine." Han Fei's eyes narrowed, hiding the sharp sting residing at the bottom. "This movie will have an ending and we shan't wait too long for it."

Chapter 42:

Han Fei spoke so softly that Director Jiang barely heard him but then again, the director's attention wasn't on him to begin in. The victims' families barged into the set to interrupt the movie production, if this was not handled well, it could be a PR nightmare.

“We’ve been spending the past decade trying to forget these painful incidents. The fact you’ve decided to shoot this movie has already torn our wounds open for the world to see.” A 40 plus middle-aged woman pointed her finger angrily at the crew. “But because you said the movie could help attract more people’s attention and it might help persuade people to come forward with new clues that we agreed to let you turn our most despairing memory into a capitalist venture! But what have you done with it?!”

She raised the iPod that she carried and raised the volume to the max. The screen then proceeded to play a short video. In the video, the young police officer played by Ah Cheng did a bad mimicry of Sherlock Holmes. Instead of analysing the clues, he spent most of the movie chasing after the female main character. At the end of the trailer, his love interest sacrificed herself so that the young police officer could have the chance to turn the table on the murderer. The trailer ended with the officer wailing awkwardly with the girl dying in his arms. The trailer focused on the blundering romance between the two fictional main characters instead of the actual victims and the crime solving.

“This is what you’ve turned our pain into? You are insulting the torment that we’ve borne for the past 10 years!” The woman shouted loudly before she broke down into tears.

“I’m so sorry for letting all of you down, as the director, I owe everyone an apology. I will try my best to edit the scenes, but I hope you can understand the difficulty on our part. Even though the movie is based on real events, we can’t just copy the events and move it onto the big screen. I beg that you grant us some creative license. The two main characters are necessary to string the story together to give it a good flow, I wish you all can understand that.” Jiang Yi explained but the real reason was because the sponsors of the movie demanded that the two main actors be given more screen time than the victims. The sponsors were Han Guang Cinema which represented Ah Cheng and You Long Culture which represented the female main character. To be blunt, they couldn’t care less about the victims or their families, they just wanted to promote their stars.

“Fine but don’t you think you’ve gone too far with the creative license by manufacturing a fake ending? How could you say the case has been solved when the actual murderer hasn’t even been captured yet?!”

“You people should be thankful that we are willing to tell your stories. If you continue to cause trouble, we’re going to call the cops!”

“Fine, call them then! We’ll see who will sue whom!”

“Please calm down. There’s no need to involve the police.”

The shouting went back and forth. Neither side refused to back down and the verbal argument soon turned physical. The victims’ families raised their placard and refused to budge from the set. Ah Cheng who stood at the front was riled up due to the families’ complaint of his scenes, he took that as a personal insult. It was hard to tell who made the first move but during the process, Wei Youfu’s elderly father was shoved to the ground. The old man knocked into the production equipment that lined the cramped set. As the equipment clattered noisily to the ground, it was like the horn for a full-on fight. The victims’ families exploded and they surged forward to knock Ah Cheng back.

Ah Cheng was an idol. This was the first time he was so humiliated. The make-up on his face blurred and someone left a footprint on his branded shirt. “Motherfucker, nothing is going right today. You people will pay for this! How dare you come after me?!”

“No, young man, how dare you instead! Yours is supposed to be a serious role but you treat it with such frivolity and levity. Your performance is a disgrace to the law enforcement!”

“From what we saw, all you ever did was go on dates, pose for cameras and nothing else. It is clear that you do not understand the gravity of the case you are given! You are too green for this role! You shouldn’t be casted for it!”

The families’ words jabbed at Ah Cheng’s heart and it lit the man up even further. The assumed insult became an actual affront. “Bunch of ruffians! You know what, this is karma. Your families deserved to be...” Ah Cheng uttered in fury. Halfway through it, he realized he had crossed the line but it was already too late. One could not take back words spoken.

As her grief got trampled on, the middle-aged woman closest to Ah Cheng reached for the idol’s hair. Her eyes were red with tears and anger. She was so vexed that she could barely speak.

“Let go!” Ah Cheng was tall and muscular. He easily knocked the woman away. He just about to crawl up from the ground when someone kicked at him. Unable to control his fury anymore, he grabbed the pail of fake blood that sat beside him and threw it forward.

“BANG!” The iron pail crashed into a man’s back. The sound alone caused a few of the crew members to wince in pain. The empty pail rolled down the corridor. Both sides now quieted down and turned to the

centre of the crowd. Han Fei, who was now drenched in blood, had moved to shield the middle-aged woman. Viscous blood slid down his face. His eyes shot chills into people's hearts.

"Is that enough?" His deep voice echoed down the corridor. Han Fei stepped on the trail of fake blood and walked towards Ah Cheng. "They are not wrong. You do not have the skill to play a police officer. For me, your acting is like trash." It was direct and the tone brooked no argument. Han Fei's bloodied face stared right at Wu Cheng. At that moment, Ah Cheng found himself too frightened to speak. He could not even formulate a sentence. "To solve this case, many people have sacrificed their life and time, your performance is a disgrace to their effort."

Han Fei danced on the edge of the knife every night, one false move and he'd die. He was very familiar with the case's cruelty and gore. The horror was more than the term 'human jigsaw case' could describe. Leaving Ah Cheng stunned, Han Fei turned to the victims' families. He knew every single one of their names, he had seen them in pictures before.

"Son, are, are you alright?" The middle-aged woman asked in concern. If not for Han Fei, she would be injured by the heavy iron pail.

"You are Gu Hwa's elder sister, Gu Yu, right?" Han Fei's expression softened.

"Yes, but how, how did you know?"

"I know all of you and I share in your pain." Han Fei said slowly, "I hope you can hear me speak a few words. When Director Jiang said that the police have reopened the human jigsaw case, he wasn't saying that to placate you. That is the truth."

"The truth? For the past 10 years, we've heard the same thing from the police."

"But I guarantee that the killer will be captured this time!" Han Fei wiped away the blood from his face. "Before that, if this movie continues to manufacture falsehood, then I will join in your protest myself!"

He looked at the families and he thought of the ghosts inside Room 1044. Lastly, he said without any trace of performance, "Please trust me, I will give you all a satisfactory ending."

Chapter 43:

The victims' families looked at Han Fei who stood in the pool of fake blood. They had all calmed down. 10 years of waiting could be long or short.

Long was the time, the families themselves were growing old, their stamina was not as good as before. They worried that once they departed from this world, no one would search for the truth on their dead families' behalf anymore. Short was also the time. 10 years were not enough for them to get over their loss. Whenever they thought about the tragedy, they would wake up in cold sweat.

"Okay, we believe you." Wei Youfu's father was the first to break the silence. "No matter you're saying this just to comfort us or you mean it for real, at least I know that you are actually doing something about it." The old man remembered meeting Han Fei. The latter came with Li Xue to follow up on the investigation. The old man patted Han Fei on his shoulder and said, "Be careful." The other family members put away the placards and followed Wei Youfu's father away from the building.

After they all left, Jiang Yi rushed to Han Fei's side, "Han Fei, are you alright? Does your back hurt? Where's the prop team? Go get a new change of clothes for Han Fei!"

"I'm fine." Han Fei did not mind the fake blood, he had experienced much worse.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't expect things to escalate to this level."

"Director Jiang, this small injury doesn't matter to me, but there is something I have to tell you." Han Fei glanced at Ah Cheng who was just getting up from the ground, "You can't push out the movie in its current state. If you insist on it, I will not only quit, I will join the families' protest." Once Han Fei said that, the crew looked at him in shock. They assumed Han Fei said those things just to appease the family members, they had no idea he was being serious.

"You're kidding?! I thought you were just saying that to console them." Jiang Yi grabbed the new set of clothes from the prop manager. He passed it to Han Fei but the latter did not accept it.

"You'll always be my teacher because you taught me at Xin Lu Acting Academy, but sir, is this really the kind of movie that you want to make?"

“Han Fei, you’re still too young to understand this. Sometimes, we have to learn to compromise.” Jiang Yi noticed the change in Han Fei’s tone so he asked, “You’re not being serious about quitting, are you?”

“I used to care very much about acting but now I realize there are many things much more important than that.” Han Fei removed the stained jacket. “I’d advise sir to continue the shoot after the case is solved. If you insist on pushing it out now, it’ll end up as a soulless commercial flick. Is that really what you want, sir?”

“Hey, who the hell are you to give these grand lectures?” Ah Cheng cut in. The more he thought about what he had suffered, the more agitated he became. “Do you think you’re some kind of superstar? You’re just an extra, please recognize your place!”

“Superstar or extra, I pride myself as being an actor.” Han Fei looked at Ah Cheng calmly.

“An actor? What movies have you been in? Mind giving me a few names so I can look them up and learn from them?” Ah Cheng did not dare to look into Han Fei’s eyes so he turned his eyes away with a condescending scoff.

“We’re all in this together, there’s no need to argue among ourselves.” Jiang Yi acted as the peacemaker.

“Please do not lower me to his level. An extra like him thinks he is above the rest of us? Didn’t he threaten to quit? Fine, let him quit! Does he really think the world revolves around him?” Ah Cheng was one to bear grudges. Han Fei just called his acting trash. He definitely had not forgotten that.

“Shush! If not for Han Fei, your pail of blood would have landed on that woman! If she went to the media, it’s over for us. Your company will have to lose a lot of money for damage control.” Jiang Yi was very familiar with this circle but it was also because of this familiarity that he refused to let Han Fei go. He knew very well that Han Fei was the best actor in the whole crew. After lecturing Ah Cheng, Jiang Yi approached Han Fei. “The case has been unsolved for 10 years already, who knows when it’ll get solved, if ever. I can wait but can the sponsors? There are more than 100 mouths in this crew to feed. Han Fei, I know you don’t like it but we have to face reality.”

“This man is mad, he is so into his character that he really thinks he is the old crook’s son!” Ah Cheng groused with impatience. “He threatens to join the protest if we do not change the script? Have you lost your mind? Or you’re related to the case itself?”

“You’ll soon find out whether I’m related to this case or not.” Han Fei shot a gaze at Ah Cheng who hid in the crowd. Ah Cheng shivered involuntarily.

“So you’re really related to this case?” Ah Cheng broke out in cold sweat. He felt like his life was in danger under Han Fei’s scrutiny. He stammered, “Are, are you the murderer? You’ve killed 7 people?”

“Han Fei, I hope that you’ll join us for the rest of the shoot. I promise you we will abide by the families’ request to edit part of the script.” Jiang Yi ignored Ah Cheng. To be honest, his patience for Ah Cheng was stretching thin as well. If not for the pressure from the sponsors, he’d swap for a different actor to play his role.

“The general direction of the movie is wrong, no matter how many edits we make, as long as the direction is not changed, it’ll still end up a horrible film.” Han Fei changed into a clean jacket. “Director Jiang, you gave me the chance when no one was willing to so I sincerely hope this film can reach its greatest height. I do not wish for it to end up as another forgettable flick. Trust me, the case will have a big breakthrough soon. By then, you’ll be able to give this movie a perfect ending, one that will be satisfactory to both the victims and their families.”

“You’re just an extra, who gave you the power to order us around like this? You hold just a niggling role in this film. If you do not learn some humility, you’ll never survive in this business.” Ah Cheng’s manager stepped forward to reprimand Han Fei. Then she turned to comfort Ah Cheng.

“Stop arguing!” Jiang Yi raised his voice. He really did not need more bickering at that moment.

“Jiang Yi, I know he is once your student but how can you treat us so differently?” Ah Cheng said pointedly. “Don’t you forget, I’m this movie’s main character. This movie can lose any other actor but it can’t work without its main character.” Then Ah Cheng waved at his manager, “Let us go.” Ah Cheng left the set. He told others that he was taking an early leave but to be honest, he was a bit scared of Han Fei and he did not want to stay there anymore.

After they left, the manager caught up to Ah Cheng and she asked worriedly, "Ah Cheng, are you sure it's okay for us to take off like this?"

"Don't worry, I'm just scaring them. When they realize they can't proceed without me, they'll come groveling for me to return. Then I'll demand more benefits before I even deign to step back into that set again." A vicious expression decorated Ah Cheng's face. "But that damn extra. I'll have to figure out a way to squeeze him out from the crew. He really thinks he's untouchable?! I'll show him."

Hearing the confidence in Ah Cheng's voice, his manager fidgeted worriedly, "Ah Cheng, what if they don't come back for us?"

Chapter 44:

"Impossible, other than myself, who else could they hire as the main character? This crew is so poor, do you think they have the money to hire another actor?" Ah Cheng said confidently, "This time I'll need Jiang Yi to personally come and beg me before I would even consider returning to the set." With this happy thought in his mind, a smile turned up on Ah Cheng's face. The manager cleverly did not continue this conversation. They hopped into the car and drove away.

To be honest though, back at the set, no one really cared about Ah Cheng's departure. Everyone was focused on Director Jiang and Han Fei. Director Jiang was the director, he was the one who would decide the direction of the movie. Even though Han Fei held only a side character, his acting skill had greatly impressed everyone present. Furthermore, if not for Han Fei, the conflict between the crew and the victims' families would exacerbate to a horrendous level. Han Fei had single-handedly helped the crew solve a giant problem on his own.

"Han Fei, I can see your point, and honestly I admire your determination and fire, but a small compromise like the ones I suggested will not violate your principle. I'm sure you can see that."

"This is not a matter of principle." Han Fei shook his head and prepared to leave. "Sir, you'll understand why soon enough." Watching Han Fei walk away, Jiang Yi and the crew felt a great regret. The floor manager who was once frightened by Han Fei even rushed after the man to persuade him to stay. Even though Han Fei was not a big superstar, from the way everyone treated him and Ah Cheng, it was clear whom the crew respected more.

“Now I understand why he isn’t famous even though he has such great acting skill.” The female actor who played Wei Youfu’s wife looked at Han Fei with lamentation. “His idealism is touching but his insistence on it will inadvertently make him enemies.”

“To have such a level of acting skill at his age and with his determination and personality, if Han Fei is given a chance to prove himself, he will soar. Someone like Wu Cheng who needed their agency’s support to achieve just a meagre success is not comparable to Han Fei.” After Han Fei left, Jiang Yi shared his opinion with the rest of his crew.

“Director, cough, cough. We still need to depend on Ah Cheng’s company to finish this film.” The cameraman pretended to not have heard Jiang Yi’s last statement.

“We’ll call it a wrap for the day. The shooting will temporarily stop. We’ll use this downtime to discuss the script.” Jiang Yi started to organize the messed-up set.

“Director Jiang, shouldn’t we give Ah Cheng a call too?”

“Why should we? I only gave him the main character role because of his company. It’s perfect since he volunteered to quit.” Jiang Yi glanced at the stairwell where Han Fei took to leave the building, “Actually, I have a better candidate for his role, alas...”

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Some blood stains remained on Han Fei’s face and head. He looked quite haggard. As he exited the set for Flower of Sin, a series of snickering came from the opposite street. A very handsome male actor walked out from the set of Secret Urban Romance surrounded by his troupe. They appeared to have purposely come out to watch the show.

“Brother Zifeng, that is Han Fei. I heard that after he left our agency, he had no choice but to be a nameless extra for other movies.”

“Now, why would he do that? Wouldn’t it be easier if he just stayed behind the camera?”

“The moment he joined the crew for the Flower of Sin, people came to create trouble and the progress of the whole shoot was impacted. I’ve interacted with this person before. He is honestly not a bad person but his luck cannot be worse.”

“That is a good thing for us! Of all the films predicted to release around the same period as we do, Flower of Sin is our only competition. Now that this walking disaster is with them, the number one box office will be ours.”

The few from the Secret Urban Romance purposely came out to watch the catastrophe when they heard the commotion on the street. When they saw the state Han Fei was in, they could barely hide the grins on their faces. Human beings were sinful creatures who would stoop so low as to savor their kin’s downfall. In this way, they were worse than ghosts. Han Fei had experienced many similar events since he was fired. He had heard so many snide comments that they barely left a scar on his heart anymore. If anything, he felt like laughing at their juvenile nature. The streetlights of the old city lit up the streets. Light danced between darkness. A group of people in the halo of light mocked and chuckled, Han Fei slithered alone into the darkness.

The phone in his pocket suddenly vibrated. Han Fei stopped at a dim corner and answered the phone.

“Li Xue?”

“Han Fei, you’ve struck gold this time!”

“There’s been progress in the human jigsaw case?” From Li Xue’s tone, Han Fei could hear her excitement.

“My teacher went through the original case files and found someone named Jiang Jiang among the suspects. This man was not the killer but he has been recorded to have interacted with all the victims! He showed up at the entrance of the puzzle hobbyist shop and the camera caught Wei Youfu giving him a donation. He also encountered a drunk Gu Hwa at midnight, it was Jiang Jiang who helped send Gu Hwa to the police station. He bumped into Zhang Lingfan, the livestreamer outside the mall and was berated for quite some time by the young woman...”

“Jiang Jiang was a drifter who came from a different city, he stayed at abandoned shacks which littered the countryside. He survived by collecting recyclables and trash. The man was mentally challenged but

he was a harmless, honest man. He was often bullied by other homeless people and his small income was always stolen.

“Jiang Jiang was a very nice person, he was kind. He never resorted to stealing, when he picked up things that he believed were not trash, he would hand them to the people in uniform. But he’d always confuse normal guards and police officers, so he was often swindled by wicked guards as well.” Li Xue spoke very fast, thankfully Han Fei was able to catch up with her. “The big change in his life happened 11 years ago. There was a private orphanage at Northern Street. The director’s wallet was stolen when he was away on duty. There wasn’t much money inside but it contained all of his documentation.”

“The wallet was found by Jiang Jiang?”

“Correct, Jiang Jiang found the wallet inside a trash can. Since he had no money to use the train, he stayed beside the trash can until the train station worker noticed him and flagged him down. After the orphanage director got his wallet back, his heart went out to Jiang Jiang. Even though Jiang Jiang was a bit too naïve, he was honest and reliable. So the director offered him a cleaning job at the orphanage. Alas, it did not last for long. Even though Jiang Jiang kept the orphanage spotless, his personal hygiene left much to be desired. Due to complaints from the other staff about his body odour, Jiang Jiang was let go. The problem was, after Jiang Jiang left, a child at the orphanage claimed he’d run into ghosts at night.”

“Ghosts?” Li Xue’s words grabbed Han Fei’s attention, “What kind of ghost? Have the police interviewed that child?”

“The child has gone missing but we did locate another child who once shared a room with him. This child told us something very scary.” Li Xue slowed her voice. “Their beds were placed at opposite ends of the room so they could see easily under the other’s bed. The missing child kept saying there was a ghost hiding under his roommate’s bed and the ghost would only appear at late midnight after everyone was asleep.”

“You suspect this so-called ghost was a revenge prank manufactured by Jiang Jiang?” After playing Perfect Life, Han Fei’s analytical skill was as good as a junior detective. “But the police would have investigated Jiang Jiang. He was so obvious a suspect.”

“You’re right. The police did investigate Jiang Jiang but the investigation went nowhere.”

“Why? He had an alibi?”

“Because he’s dead.” Li Xue sent a picture to Han Fei. “This Jiang Jiang was the first victim in the frozen body case.”

“He was the drifter murdered by the Meng Siblings?”

“We have no proof that they are the killers, but you did mention to me that these two cases might be related so we pulled information related to the frozen body case and we came up with something unexpected.” Li Xue sent Han Fei another photo. This was taken at an abandoned bungalow. A strange painting was covered under Jiang Jiang’s tattered mattress. A black house was shielded inside a black forest. Headless children surrounded the house.

“At the time, based on this painting, the police suspected Jiang Jiang might be a deranged murderer and he had been able to hide it behind a harmless front. They believed he was murdered by his enemies. But after hearing what you said, I realized these black trees, the black house and the headless children fitted the hints you gave me perfectly! The painting was not a sign of Jiang Jiang’s wickedness but something else!” Li Xue’s voice picked up pace from excitement. “Once we considered the possibility that Jiang Jiang might not be a killer but another victim, we looked into possible motives as to why he was killed. Jiang Jiang was a homeless guy, there was no reason for anyone to target him. He had no valuable asset. However with this painting as evidence, I suspect the killer murdered Jiang Jiang to silence him. He might have seen the murderer in action! In fact, he probably encountered something worse!”

“I know what you mean. You think Jiang Jiang approached Wei Youfu and the rest not to harm them but to save them!” Only at that moment, Han Fei realized how close the relationship between the human jigsaw and frozen body case was.

“Do you know what is the scariest thing?”

“What?”

“There is a high chance that the human jigsaw case’s killer purposely told Jiang Jiang about his plan to murder those people. He got his kick out of watching the kind man being scolded, disgusted and ignored! Perhaps in the killer’s eyes, Jiang Jiang was kindness manifested in human form. It was ugly, homeless and mentally impaired.” Li Xue’s voice dropped with heaviness. “Jiang Jiang had not done one

bad thing in his life. He approached Wei Youfu and the other victims to warn them but he was chased away with disgust and derision. Other than Wei Youfu, no one was willing to stop to listen to him.”

“If a crazy homeless man came to me on the street and told me that I’d be killed, I’d probably be offended as well. The killer was manipulating the human weakness. He knew Jiang Jiang’s words would not be believed and he enjoyed watching the kind man being trampled on.”

“Indeed, the killer trusted that everyone would treat Jiang Jiang as a nutcase but someone did something unexpected and that person was Wei Youfu!” Li Xue finally reached the key point, “Earlier, you have me focus my investigation on the puzzle hobbyist shop. I went through all the old records. At the shop, other than the staff, the person who interacted with Jiang Jiang the most was Wei Youfu. Wei Youfu was willing to reach out to Jiang Jiang and Jiang Jiang wanted to save him. The latter kept giving Wei Youfu hints. Eventually I think Wei Youfu caught on. A few days before Wei Youfu was murdered, we spotted some discrepancy in his actions. There were two times when he went alone to a nature preserve situated at Xin Lu countryside.”

Chapter 45:

“From the information that we have, the reason Wei Youfu went to the nature reserve probably had to do with Jiang Jiang. Wei Youfu might have obtained some information about it. The nature reserve could very well be the black forest in Jiang Jiang’s painting.

“The nature reserve was adjacent to Xin Lu’s Yan Mu Mountain. To gain entry into a government reserve is not easy, we’ll need more powerful evidence to persuade the superiors. Thankfully, with my teacher’s help, we found something crucial.” Li Xue’s voice was buzzing with emotion.

“What is it?”

“We need to be thankful that the murderer has underestimated Wei Youfu and Jiang Jiang!” Li Xue said confidently, “The nature reserve is huge. To locate a house in it is like finding a needle in the haystack, we need to know its more specific location to get a warrant. The fact that Jiang Jiang could draw out the dark forest, the black house, and the group of headless people meant that he most likely knew about the place’s location. I believe the murderer might even have led this kind drifter to his lair to pressure him, to make him go even crazier.

“On the other hand, Wei Youfu was just a normal office worker, he had no detective experience but the two of them managed a miracle. Jiang Jiang, who was mentally-challenged and could barely string together a sentence, successfully dropped enough hints to garner Wei Youfu’s attention. Wei Youfu believed the words of this supposedly ‘mad’ man and went to investigate it twice. When kindness met kindness, it transmuted into something more, in this situation, it became the most crucial clue for us to solve this case!

“When Wei Youfu went to the nature preserve for the first time, he probably did not find anything. However, the day after he visited the reserve for the second time, he was murdered. Coincidence? I think not. I believe he got very close to that black house already! It was why the murderer, who had been watching, was pressured to make his move!” Li Xue’s voice slowed down, “Han Fei, is there anyone around you?”

Han Fei looked around and answered, “No, I’m the only one here.”

“Good.” Li Xue took a deep breath. “Before the killer is captured, what I’m going to say next is strictly confidential, understood?”

“Yes.”

“When we looked into the case file, we realized after Wei Youfu was killed, his computer and phone were wiped. Since that was the case with all the other victims, at the time, the police did not think much of it except that it was a sign of the killer’s caution. They had the forensic tech recover the data in the victims’ phones and computers but found nothing. However, when the police searched through Wei Youfu’s house, they found a piece of clothing stained with mud inside his secondhand car. At the time, the police were not mindful of it, they assumed it had nothing to do with the case. However, they did bag it for evidence.

“The piece of cloth probably has disintegrated with time but we did get our hands of its evidence photo. The cloth had blocks of colors and lines on it. It looked like part of a bigger print. Through the latest pictorial recovery program, we managed to reconstruct the full print. Then by using the data screening device, we sifted it through the internet’s pictorial database. Turns out the print was a cartoon character famous about 10 years ago. We thus had reason to believe the piece of cloth came from a child’s shirt that had the print on it. We went through the database again and found this.” Li Xue sent Han Fei a picture. It was a child’s shirt from a bootleg brand. The picture was pulled from a clothing retail site’s archive.

“Is that enough to persuade your superior to send people into the nature preserve?” Han Fei’s tone was concerned. He felt the evidence was not that concrete, after all, any child could have worn this shirt back then. It was not pertinent enough.

“One picture might not be enough but how about two? Now take a look at this. This is the surveillance picture of the missing child from the orphanage. This was taken at the orphanage where he was last seen.” Li Xue sent Han Fei another picture, and seeing it, Han Fei sucked in a cold breath. The child was wearing the shirt with the same print on the day of his disappearance!

“We cannot be sure the cloth in Wei Youfu’s car came from this child but it is too much of a coincidence, don’t you think? Wei Youfu had just returned from the nature reserve, so he had to have picked up the piece of clothing there. And then the very next day, he was brutally murdered. There are too many coincidences to be ignored! We have reason to suspect there is a kind of relationship between the killer and the nature reserve.”

Li Xue and the police had done all the analysis they could, the next logical step would be to canvas that actual crime scene, which was to enter the nature reserve. “I’m not going to reveal the actual mission details to you. What you need to do now is to take care of your own safety. Stay at home and wait for the good news.”

“Li Xue, I have a question for you.” Before Li Xue hung up, Han Fei thought of something, “Assuming the human jigsaw killer was living inside the nature reserve, then the death of the missing child from the orphanage should be related to him as well. After all, there was where Wei Youfu found the piece of child’s clothing. right?”

“You have a point, continue.”

“Then is it possible that the ghost mentioned by the missing child was the actual human jigsaw killer?” Standing in the shadows, Han Fei’s brain spun quickly, “The human jigsaw killer had adopted the 8th victim, Jiang Jiang’s painting also showed that there were many headless small characters around the black forest. Assuming the small characters were all children, who do you think had such free access to so many abandoned babies and orphans without being picked up by the system?”

“It could be someone from the orphanage... Wait... You suspect the director?” Li Xue gasped.

Actually, Han Fei thought of this because he tied it to the ditty sung by the 8th victim— “Big brothers, big sisters sent far away; little brothers, little sisters, their ranks wasting away.” There was more than one child at the place where the 8th victim stayed. To look after so many children, the person needed a certain level of babysitting experience.

“Furthermore, Jiang Jiang came into contact with the director because the former found the latter’s missing wallet. Based on what you said earlier, the killer enjoyed the rush from watching kindness being trampled on. The director knew very well that Jiang Jiang was an incredibly kind person.” Han Fei’s brain linked up the clues. “Do you think it is possible that the director hired Jiang Jiang not out of appreciation but because of the flawed image of kindness he saw in Jiang Jiang? He wanted to claim Jiang Jiang as his own toy?”

“That is highly probable. I’ll need to give my teacher a call, to do some investigation.” Li Xue hurried and hung up. Han Fei stood still in the dark corner of the street, the information about the case flashing through his mind.

Chapter 46:

Han Fei was no detective, he sensibly left the more dangerous case-solving to the police. His role was to only provide some clues now and then. Knowing that the case was progressing, Han Fei felt better.

After stopping for some food, Han Fei headed home. At the door, before he walked in, he looked around to confirm he was alone. ‘Every day I’m under such tension that I’ve even started to develop these strange habits.’

He closed the door and switched on the television. Some life breathed into the small room. After taking a comfortable warm bath, Han Fei sat down on the couch. Pumping a dumbbell with one hand, he read a criminology textbook with another. “When a person’s criminal psychology develops until it initiates changes to his personality, it means that the person’s criminal personality has stabilized. It will take extremely complex, detailed and complicated work to correct such a fixed personality...” Studying was a long process. Han Fei thought that should his actor dream fall through, at least he could become a good police officer.

At 11.50 pm, Han Fei connected all the wires and crawled into bed with the gaming helmet. “I still cannot communicate with the victims in Room 1044, but after what we’ve been through, at least they have temporarily dropped their extreme hostility towards me. That is a good thing.” When midnight

arrived, Han Fei put on the gaming helmet. As the blood dripped, the robotic voice rang in his head. "Welcome to Perfect Life where you are free to choose your own perfect life!"

Opening his eyes, Han Fei glanced around the eerie living room and he groaned, "Fine, where are the choices then?"

The wall clock pointed at 00:00. Han Fei picked up the cleaver and turned towards the innermost bedroom. Of the entire Room 1044, only that door remained firmly closed. Han Fei still did not possess the courage to knock on it. The 7 victims would only retain their sanity when they were separated. When they combined together, they'd turn into a monster dominated by pain and despair. "Now that I've completed all the New Player Missions, a jaunt outside the house seems inevitable."

Han Fei opened the mission interface. The original New Player Missions had disappeared. Instead a new mission replaced them—Visit and greet your 5th floor neighbours.

"From the name alone, it does sound like a plausible mission in an Iyashikei game." Han Fei chuckled awkwardly. "According to Meng Si, there is a crazy woman on the 5th floor named Xu Qin whom I can befriend. Since I'm going to do this mission anyway, I might as well take this opportunity to get to know her." Before playing this game, whenever Han Fei encountered someone he was not close with, he'd avoid them like the plague but after starting the game, he became quite a social butterfly. "What kind of present should I bring since I'll be visiting her for the first time?" Han Fei glanced at the cleaver he was holding, "Hmm, I guess it'll depend on how the meeting goes."

After the decision was made, Han Fei switched on the television. He wanted to try and see if he could lure his roommates out. If his roommates could provide him with a new mission, then he wouldn't have to leave this safehouse. Han Fei stared at the grainy screen for 3 full hours. He flipped between all the non-channels until 3 am but there was still no sign of his roommate.

"Looks like I'll have to go out for the mission after all." Han Fei picked up the cleaver and checked his inventory. "The landlord's ring can be used to detect ghosts and the landlord's keys should enable me to open all the doors. The problem is none of the keys are marked. I'll have to try them out one by one. The landlord's diary is still blank. Temporarily, I have no idea what it's for. Lastly, the 3 cigarettes..." Han Fei clicked on them and 3 cigarettes materialized in his palm. "The landlord's 3 children laid down these 3 cigarettes for him after his death. They are labelled as consumable. I wonder what purpose they serve. They are additional rewards from the increased difficulty to the sleeping mission. Assuming the rewards are proportional to their difficulty, then these cigarettes should be quite powerful."

Han Fei rummaged through the kitchen and found a lighter. When he was cornered, he'd light one. After preparing everything, Han Fei hurried to the anti-theft door. He looked through the peephole and opened the door after he was sure there was no one lying in ambush. Throughout the whole process, Han Fei made zero noise. The corridor was dim. The whole experience placed him right into a horror film. 'My New Player Period of Protection is over, there might be more malicious ghosts around, I have to be extremely careful.'

To prevent the door from fully closing, Han Fei dragged a chair from the living room and used it to stop the gap. That way, when he needed to rush back, he didn't need to waste time opening the door. Other than that, if a curious neighbour came to visit when he was away, they could enter the house freely. Honestly, Han Fei wished his roommates could make more friends.

Taking a deep breath, Han Fei slipped away from Room 1044. This was the first time Han Fei left Room 1044 after his protection period was over. He could feel some conspicuous changes to the apartment building. His body felt like he had waded into a sticky dark ocean and his mind was slowing down. Han Fei stayed close to the wall as he moved up to the fifth floor. He made sure to hide at the blind spots. Han Fei had not been to the 5th floor before. He moved very slowly. He used 1 whole minute to move from the 4th floor to the 5th floor.

When he arrived, he stopped to first observe his surroundings. There were 4 units on the 5th floor. One of them was open and a black figure stood before the door. At 3 am, inside the quiet corridor, a person stood quietly before an open door that might or might not lead to his house. This whole scene screamed suspicion.

Han Fei halted his movement. However, the black figure appeared to have spotted Han Fei regardless. When Han Fei next blinked, the black figure disappeared. 'What was that?'

The figure disappeared but the door was still open. Now Han Fei was afraid that once he crossed the open door, he'd be dragged into the room. Standing at his vantage point, Han Fei was unable to see into the door. That heightened his sense of unease.

'Xu Qin lives at Room 1052, and the figure stood before Room 1051 earlier...' Han Fei nudged his gaze to Room 1052 and his small courage depleted some more.

The door to Room 1052 was covered with the character 'Death', and black brown blood trickled out from underneath the door.

Chapter 47:

‘Death covers the door and blood leaks out from under it, is this really someone I should befriend?’ According to Meng Si, Xu Qin, the tenant of Room 1052 was a bit kooky but she was a nice person.

Initially Han Fei had a certain anticipation of what Xu Qin would be like, he assumed she’d be a big sister type of character, but after he saw her place, he realized Meng Si’s assessment of Xu Qin was in comparison to the other tenants in the building. Among the group of mad murderers, ghosts and monsters, even the smallest goodness in Xu Qin would be greatly amplified.

Currently, Han Fei was caught in a tough spot. He had to complete at least one mission before he could leave the game, however, his more familiar neighbours could no longer provide him with available missions. Thus, his only choice was to wander to other unexplored floors. He knew the risk inherent in this, there was no telling if he’d return alive. ‘The new mission forces me to explore unknown territory. After all, when I first exited the game, I remember the system urging me to speed up my exploration progress.’

Staring down the dark corridor, Han Fei gripped the cleaver tightly and made his first move. ‘Since there’s no escape, I’ll have to push forward.’

Just as his feet left the stairwell and landed on the corridor, a metallic clang came from underneath him. It sounded like the chain on the building entrance had been removed. ‘That sounds like the steel door at the first floor. Does this mean someone has left or entered the building?’

The voice-activated lights on the first floor came on. Han Fei leaned close to the banister and adjusted his line of sight to peer downwards. A shadow appeared on the wall of the landing between 1st and 2nd floor. The shadow resembled someone crawling on the ground. ‘This does not look good.’

After he saw the strange shadow, Han Fei decided to retreat to his home for now. But just as he was about to turn around, the robotic voice echoed in his mind. “Notification for player 0000! You have entered the corridor at 3.04 am and triggered the hidden mission—Do not Turn Your Head Around!

“Hidden Mission: There are many random missions hidden in this open world game. The greater your luck, the higher the chance you have at triggering these rare missions.

“Do not Turn Your Head Around (One of the Corridors’ Hidden Missions): Within the next 15 minutes, no matter what happens, do not move backwards or turn around, if you do, you will die.”

When the voice finished, Han Fei’s heart frosted over. His body froze to the spot and the muscle around his neck tensed.

‘How is it that I’ve triggered another hidden mission?! Didn’t Huang Yin say that hidden missions are supposed to be extremely rare?! I’ve already triggered two at a mere level 3!’ Holding his breath and tuning his ears, Han Fei’s Adam Apple trembled, ‘I can’t turn my head back or move backwards in the next 15 minutes or I’d die?! This mission is too literal, there’s no wiggle space for me at all!’

Holding his posture, Han Fei stopped between the 4th and 5th floor. He knew for a fact that a crawling person was heading upstairs and he also knew that a shadowy figure was stalking the 5th floor. Both would pose great threat to him. His breathing stuttered. The mission requirement forbade Han Fei from moving backwards so if something really did come after him, the man had no choice but to move upwards and forwards. However, Han Fei also knew that the higher the floor, the more dangerous it was. Even a ghost as powerful as Weep had his arms torn off after he wandered too far upstairs. ‘What should I do? Is now the time to light one of the cigarettes?’

Wearing the jade pendant given to him by Meng Si, Han Fei sought out the lighter from his pocket. He had no idea what would happen after he lit the cigarette but he’d to be ready for everything. The voice-activated lights ceased flickering but Han Fei could hear unsteady footsteps coming from downstairs, it sounded like a toddler learning how to walk.

Han Fei prayed that his passive effect from the Hide and Seek skill would come into use as he sidled close to the wall. The skill would lower his presence but unfortunately, there was no usable cover in the corridor. It would take a blind person to not notice him. The footsteps from downstairs approached. Han Fei’s heart hiked up his throat. The mission requirement prohibited him from going backwards, but unless necessary, Han Fei was not going to head upstairs either, because the higher he went, the further he’d be from his safehouse. Standing in the corridor alone, deep in the middle of the night, with the footsteps echoing around him, Han Fei’s heart started to race irrationally.

His fingers tightened around the cleaver subconsciously. The footsteps continued to reverberate in his ears until all of a sudden, the footsteps disappeared. ‘Where did it go?’

Han Fei resisted the rising urge to turn around to check. He held his stance but seconds later, change occurred in the corridor.

Creak... The chair that he used to block against the door of Room 1044 had been removed. Someone then slid the door to Room 1044 gently shut!

The moment the door clicked into place, Han Fei felt a bond snapping. A chill climbed up his ankle to his chest. His calves shook involuntarily.

Tik tok, tik tok. Something viscous dripped onto his back. Han Fei could feel a presence stopping just behind him. He took an involuntary step forward. Just as he did so, two sets of footsteps echoed in the corridor.

'That's only 1 minute. I still have 14 more minutes to go...' Han Fei tried to still himself but no matter how strong his heart was, he could not stop his body from reacting to the horror. 'I shan't panic. As long as I keep my head looking ahead for the next 14 minutes, the hidden mission will be completed. Once I achieve that, I'll exit the game immediately.' Biting on the tip of his tongue, Han Fei used pain to balance out the fear. 'The thing probably has no intention to kill me yet or they'd move in for the kill already. They're probably savoring my torment. That will help buy me some time.'

"Huh?" While Han Fei contemplated his next move, a very familiar voice came from behind him. "My friend, fancy seeing you here." The voice evoked a sense of warmth and friendliness. It reminded Han Fei of an old friend but no matter how hard Han Fei raked his mind, he could not put a name to the voice. "Wait, you're trapped here also? How did you get here in the first place?" The voice began again. However, Han Fei still did not turn around.

Even though the voice sounded familiar to Han Fei and the tone was exceptionally cordial, Han Fei knew that the chance of him meeting an old friend in this game was zero. After all, he suffered from social anxiety, he had no 'old friend' to speak of! Therefore, the voice must belong to a ghost, one who was trying to trick him to turn around.

The ghost standing behind Han Fei probably did not expect its prey to be such a social pariah that he'd have no acquaintance whose identity it could assume to pull off this masterful disguise. It continued to converse with Han Fei in a convivial tone. To buy more time, Han Fei quickly got into character as well. He cleared his throat thoughtfully as if the name attached to this 'familiar voice' was already at the tip of his tongue.

Chapter 48:

An actor ran into a con artist, they both pretended to know each other and continued this 'unexpected reunion' inside the corridor. Han Fei chatted for half a minute with the ghost behind him.

He acted more natural and sounded more at ease but he still did not turn around. There were a few times when his head almost looked behind him but every time he stopped at the last moment. Gradually, it wore down the ghost's patience. 'We're already on such friendly terms but you still refuse to even look at me, you're toying with me, aren't you?'

The familiar voice faded away. Han Fei though kept up his act. He called after the 'friend' but got no response. It was then that his expression shifted, 'I got found out?'

At that moment, Han Fei's ring emitted a piercing chill. The ghost behind him had shed its disguise. The chill continued to intensify and that made it difficult for Han Fei to gauge the ghost's ability. His body moved forward to put some distance away from the threat but the ghost stuck close to him. To make things worse, Han Fei could feel a rising weight dragging down his body. It was like something heavy had been draped over him. As the chill surged through his body, Han Fei was assaulted by a rancid smell. This was the first time he encountered this stench, it smelled like decomposition. A whiff of it and his stomach started to churn with disgust.

Tik tok, tik tok... The sticky liquid dripped onto his back. Han Fei felt something wound around his neck. After the ghost realized words were unable to trick Han Fei, it decided to opt for brute force. Air stopped in his throat. Han Fei's face turned red. Deja vu overwhelmed Han Fei. Something felt very familiar about all this. When he first logged into Perfect Life and was scared witless by his roommates during the Sleeping Mission, he ran out from Room 1044. He escaped all the way to the first floor. At the time, the voice-activated lights at the first floor suddenly went off, submerging the corridor into darkness. Then something emerged from the darkness to strangle Han Fei. Now Han Fei realized it was not his roommates who came after him that day. The culprit back then should be this ghost who was behind him at this moment. It was again trying to strangle Han Fei!

'Why is it so important for this ghost that I turn around? Am I going to take its place once I see its face?' The more Han Fei thought it, the more concrete the supposition became. During his first gaming instance, he logged off instantly once he got the chance. He was too frightened to think of the consequence. He had logged off right in front of a ghost! Something that he was clever enough not to do

later. 'If this ghost behind me is really the ghost from back then, then it most likely knows that I am a living human. In that case, the chance of it to take me down as its scapegoat is very high.'

His neck was twisted out of shape but Han Fei's mind had never been so clear. 'It knows that I am a breathing human and it has witnessed me log off the game, so no matter what, I'll have to deal with this ghost eventually. Why not now then?!'

Even though Weep had seen Han Fei log off the game before, Weep was just a child and Han Fei perfectly masqueraded his disappearance with his acting skill.

To deal with this kind of extremely cunning ghost, the best solution was to feed it to the other ghosts. Han Fei was unable to move backwards so leading the ghost back to Room 1044 was out of question. Furthermore, Han Fei did not forget that small detail. Before the ghost came after Han Fei, it closed the door to Room 1044. That meant that it knew about the danger within that room so it would not have willingly followed Han Fei into his safehouse. Since Room 1044 was not an option, Han Fei had to rely on the other ghosts in the building. While he still had some strength in him, Han Fei moved upstairs. His breathing became more difficult. Han Fei used everything he had to reach the 5th floor, he intended to plead for help among his neighbours on this floor.

"Xu Qin..." Stepping on the trail of blood, Han Fei stumbled towards Room 1052. He gripped the door handle and croaked out Xu Qin's name. Xu Qin was unfamiliar with Han Fei so the chance of her coming to his rescue was very low but Han Fei had no better choice. Han Fei knocked on the door repeatedly, it made a lot of noise but the voice-activated lights appeared to have malfunctioned. They did not light up at all. This once again proved Han Fei's speculation. When he first logged into the game, he had encountered something similar.

The cold twined around his finger. Han Fei realized he had underestimated the ghost behind him. Based on the chill coming from the ring, the ghost was as powerful as two jigsaw case victims. But the scary thing was the cold was still growing in intensity.

"Is someone home?!" Han Fei slammed on the door. Now was not the time to be polite. If he did not raise a ruckus, he'd die. Normally, he wouldn't have done something like this but now his aim was to muddle the water. He wanted to attract the attention of other ghosts to help share his literal burden. He made a loud commotion on the 5th floor but none of the 5th floor tenants showed up. However, the sound of lock clicking did come from the other floors.

Han Fei's airpipe was closing. At the last moment, his eyes wandered to Room 1051. There was a black figure that originally stood before the door but it had disappeared. However, the door to Room 1051 remained open. Moving swiftly, Han Fei nudged towards Room 1051. The room was too dark to make out anything. The space gave off a surprisingly thick warning of malice. It was so obvious a trap that the trapper did not even make any effort to disguise it.

'Meng Si did not mention Room 1051 to me in her description of the building, so this place shouldn't be this scary!' This was a point of confusion but Han Fei did not have time to take things slowly anymore. He moved towards Room 1051. Just as half of Han Fei's body leaned into Room 1051, the ghost behind him screeched. Its 10 pale fingers latched onto Han Fei's neck like fish hooks as it tried to drag Han Fei out from the room. Pain bloomed around his neck. Just as Han Fei thought his neck was about to snap, the jade pendant that swung around his neck cracked and shattered. An icy burst of air erupted from the pendant. The fingers that gripped Han Fei's neck were temporarily forced back and Han Fei successfully entered Room 1051.

Darkness swallowed everything. As Han Fei entered Room 1051, the darkness appeared to have thickened as if it was a living thing that could consume all the light. The ring pulsed with chill. A pair of blood red eyes opened inside Room 1051.

Han Fei shivered as he stared at the eyes in the dark but he waved at it and said in a friendly tone, "I live just below you. This is my first time coming to visit. I feel so bad to come empty-handed so I carried a ghost with me."

A strange balance was formed. The ghost behind Han Fei did not leave but it did not lurch into Room 1051 either. The thing inside Room 1051 did not make immediate move towards Han Fei because it appeared cautious of the ghost behind Han Fei as well.

Chapter 49:

Neither party made their move. As time progressed, the fear in Han Fei's heart dwindled. In a few more minutes, he'd complete the hidden mission. Once that was over, the situation would have another tectonic shift. The landlord's ring gave Han Fei a frostbite.

Room 1051 was swaddled in darkness. The blood red eyes appeared to materialize out of thin air. Han Fei was unable to tell what their owner looked like, but he felt acutely the dangerous presence given off by the creature. It was more than just a chilling presence, it carried a unique form of malice with it, specifically a glutinous desire. 'My neighbour from Room 1051 wants to eat me?'

Han Fei had raised a loud commotion earlier. Strange noises came from the other floors. The ghosts behind and in front of Han Fei became agitated as if worried that other ghosts and monsters would come to join this party. Heavy breathing came from behind Han Fei. The syrupy liquid once again dripped onto his back. Five stick-like fingers reached into Room 1051 as the ghost behind Han Fei attempted to pull Han Fei out. But once its fingers crossed the threshold into the room, the 'darkness' morphed into a thick liquid and surged towards the entrance. The hand failed to land on Han Fei for it was held in place by the condensed darkness that originated from inside Room 1051.

'The tenant of Room 1051 can melt into its surrounding darkness.' Han Fei thought back to the black figure he saw earlier. It had no face and it did not wear any clothing. It was just a human outline. 'There really are all sorts of tenants inside this building.'

A low growl emitted from behind Han Fei. The latter did not turn back to look. He tried to minimize his presence as the two ghosts got caught in the conflict. 'Fight, yes, please fight each other and leave me alone!'

Horrible noises kept coming from behind Han Fei, but the situation before him was dangerous enough to keep him from turning his head around. 'There's only 5 minutes left.' Studying the timer on the mission interface, Han Fei's heart raced but, on the surface, he was as still as water.

When there was 3 minutes left, the tenant of Room 1051 finally decided to do something. The room itself came alive. The thick darkness yawned like a giant maw and sucked both man and ghost into the room!

Bang! Hearing the door close behind him, Han Fei's heart skipped a beat. This was something unexpected! All traces of light disappeared. With how dark everything was, it felt like Han Fei's power of sight was taken away. 'The ghost behind me has been dragged into Room 1051 as well?'

Han Fei felt extremely unsafe. He moved his body closer to the wall. Soon his shoulder came into contact with something. It did not feel tough like a wall but was soft like a person's stomach. 'Someone is standing beside me? The person is so tall that his stomach is at my shoulder? No, wait. It's more likely that this person is hung from the ceiling!'

The only source of comfort for Han Fei was the shared struggle of the ghost behind him. He could hear the ghost making endless groans and hisses. In this complete darkness, the ghost's vicious wails

provided comfort to Han Fei. At least, he knew there was another outside presence inside the room with him. Chill winds swept through the room. Darkness slammed against the wall like waves. Han Fei prayed for the ghost behind him. 'Please hold on for another 3 minutes!'

Han Fei's eyes were fixed to the timer at the mission interface. 'The clock is still ticking. That means that the ghost behind me hasn't been defeated. That is good news...' Just as this thought bubbled up in his mind, Han Fei heard a piercing scream come from behind him. The darkness in the room lightened but the ghost behind him sounded like it was heavily injured. 'Don't leave me so soon, I was just praying for you!' Han Fei panicked. The horror of the room was beyond his expectation. Unable to see anything, and with a horrible smell assaulting his nostril, he felt like he had stepped into an abandoned morgue. The sound of fighting and screaming from behind him abated. Only 10 seconds had passed.

'Are you still there? Please hold on a little bit longer!' Han Fei really panicked now. The tenant of Room 1051 appeared to have limited movement. It was weak outside its room but was disproportionately strong when it was inside it. The sound of fighting soon turned into frantic knocking and finally the sound of nails clawing on the door. The ghost behind Han Fei had given up on him, it just wanted to escape now.

Even at that moment, Han Fei still did not turn his head around. He had no idea what was happening behind him. But from what he heard, things were not looking up. If the ghost really slithered away, then he'd be left to deal with the tenant of this strange room alone. While the tenant's attention was still on the fleeing ghost, Han Fei sidled to the side. The viscous darkness turned almost palpable. The ghost behind Han Fei radiated a piercing chill. They were no longer fighting over Han Fei. Compared to Han Fei, the owner of Room 1051 had a bigger interest in the ghost behind him. The ghost realized that as well which was why it desperately tried to escape. The ghost never intended to enter Room 1051 in the first place but it was blinded by its greed to claim Han Fei. When the door closed, it was already too late.

Icy presence flared up from behind Han Fei. Without knowing it, Han Fei had managed to stumble his way to the entrance. At that moment, the ghost behind him exploded with all its energy.

Bang! A loud voice came from the front door. The door opened for a gap. Han Fei had no idea that was the case but he did notice a bit of light stream into the room. The ghost caught the opportunity to escape but the darkness in the room bound around it like shackles. While the two were caught in the intense fight, Han Fei silently moved his way to the door. His arm reached for the door handle. 'This is my chance!' Han Fei pushed against the door. Just as his body tipped towards the light, the invisible darkness enveloped his body, encasing him to the spot. 'It won't let me leave?'

The ghost behind him and the tenant of Room 1051's fight was drawing to an end. The ghost behind Han Fei just wanted to escape. The neighbour from Room 1051 did not possess the energy to hold two individuals back. The gap grew bigger and more light diffused into the room. The ghost behind Han Fei no longer cared about its prey. Seeing the light, it quickly slithered towards it.

At that moment, Han Fei's hand that held the door suddenly pulled back, tightening the gap. Witnessing this, the ghost behind Han Fei screeched beseechingly as if questioning Han Fei's motive.

"You're not leaving without me!" The darkness twined around Han Fei's body. He knew he was not going to leave this place without outside help so he shouted, "Don't you need me to be your scapegoat? Bring me with you! My old friend won't abandon me like this, right?"

Chapter 50:

After Han Fei bought enough time, he could log off the game but the ghost behind him could not, so the threat it faced was real. At the last crucial moment, the ghost behind Han Fei decided to abandon its prey. It even gave up a small part of its body to distract the tenant as it tried to slip out the door. Han Fei did not get the answer he hoped for, so he too made a drastic decision. The hand that held the door pulled back and slammed it close.

"Ah!" The ghost, who was close to escaping, did not anticipate Han Fei's action. It was angered beyond belief, the whole building could hear its screech. It had even surrendered parts of its body to create the opening to leave but its plan was disrupted by the most harmless party. To make matters worse, it was certain that Han Fei had already decided to bring everyone down with him. If the young man was unable to escape, then no one was going to leave this room. After losing its body, the ghost behind Han Fei weakened greatly. It could no longer fight on equal ground with the tenant of Room 1051.

"Bring me with you!" Han Fei ordered again. His voice though grated on the ghost's nerves. Ignoring the attack from Room 1051's tenant, it reached for Han Fei's neck. "Are you still a human?" A ghastly voice hissed through gritted teeth. The ghost behind Han Fei moved to kill. It had never been so angry.

"Even if you kill me, you won't be able to leave this place so why don't you cooperate with me?!" Han Fei's eyes lingered on the mission interface. No matter what, he had to hold on. "I still have a trick up my sleeve! Remember the pendant that injured you earlier? If you help me break the binding around my body, I can use it to help us escape this place together!" Meng Si's jade pendant already shattered so Han Fei was clearly spinning a yarn. But as an actor, both his tone and expression lent his words plenty of credibility.

The ghost behind him did not wish to die in the darkness. Unlike the other ghost in this building, it still retained some rationality. Because of that, it too still had the weakness of being a 'human'. After it made some calculation, the ghost decided on the most rational choice. The hands that closed around Han Fei's neck slowly loosened. The hook-like fingers reached before Han Fei. The hands closed to grip at the invisible darkness. A spine-tingling sound came from inside the room. The ghost's hands held nothing but the sound of flesh tearing echoed inside the room.

The darkness that encased Han Fei was torn apart. But just as Han Fei was about to gain his freedom, the ghost behind him suddenly bumped against him and sent him tripping into the living room. Both parties were scamming either other. The ghost never believed Han Fei's words to begin with. It just wanted to use this chance to push Han Fei away from the entrance so that it could escape without hindrance.

Han Fei landed on the ground but he still did not turn around. He stared at the mission interface and tightened his teeth. 'The mission is going to be over soon. I can prepare to log off now!' There were only several seconds left to the mission. Everything was coming to an end. The ghost that followed Han Fei used its last reserve of energy to ram into the door. The tenant of Room 1051 lashed out to pull it back. Han Fei, who was ignored by both parties, resisted the pain and crawled closer to the entrance so that the next time he logged in, he'd be near the exit. The timer was almost up. The ghost once again surrendered a large part of its body before it was able to reopen the gap on the door.

"It's my bloody luck to run into you. I hope you'll survive so I'll have the chance to repay you for your kindness." The ghost hissed viciously at Han Fei and then its shrunken body slipped through the door. But to everyone's surprise, once the ghost exited the room, it wailed horrifyingly.

At the same time, Han Fei's hidden mission was completed. Han Fei, who did not turn back for a whole 15 minutes, finally could move his head around. The door to Room 1051 was slowly opened. A person who shared Han Fei's frame laid unconscious on the ground. It had no face and a stained knife was stuck into its bald head. Han Fei finally saw the ghost which he had 'befriended'.

The death of the ghost did not bring Han Fei any comfort, if anything, his fear reached another level. A pale arm plucked the knife out from the ghost's head with ease. A woman was currently standing outside Room 1051. Her fingernails and pupils were both red. Capillaries popped on her fair skin. She wore a bright red jacket. Her lipstick was so red that her mouth looked like it was dripping blood. Curtains of black hair fell on her shoulders. Her pale fingers held the bloody knife gingerly. There was a morbid beauty about her.

“Baby, it’s time to eat.” The woman’s voice was magnetic and beautiful. However, somehow it did not match her age. Then the woman pulled out several trash bags from the adjacent room and tossed them into Room 1051. The binding on Han Fei disappeared immediately as several black shadows pounced at the trash bags. The plastic bags were instantly torn apart. Animal guts and unknown ingredients splattered everywhere.

“I’m sorry if they’ve frightened you.” The woman glanced at Han Fei. “This room is where I keep my pets. I used to store my unused cooking ingredients inside Room 1051, somehow the room fed on their energy and came alive. It started to request feeding. I decided I don’t mind its company. Some people keep cats or dogs, while I have these.”

The woman stepped on the shadows on the ground. She then leaned over to use the knife to saw off the headless ghost’s head. She hugged the faceless head tightly and a blissful expression lit up her face. With a kick, the rest of the ghost’s body was sent into Room 1051.

Witnessing this, Han Fei’s eyes twitched. Suppressing his fear, he crawled up from the ground and uttered in a natural voice, “I’m your neighbour from downstairs. This is my first time coming to visit so I don’t know what to bring, but from your expression, it looks like you appreciate my gift.”

The bloody pupils turned onto Han Fei. The woman’s red lips curled into a soul-rending smile. “I haven’t received such a thoughtful gift in a long time already.” The woman opened the door to Room 1052. “Even though we haven’t officially met, you already know me so well. As a thank you, why don’t you stay for a meal?”

“Sure, I would love to try your cooking.” To forge another neighbourly relationship, Han Fei decided to forge ahead for now.