

## Iyashikei 21

### Chapter 21:

Han Fei did not accept the mission immediately for it was still not the time. He just logged in and had not achieved the requirement necessary for a quick exit from the game. If he was captured by Weep, death would probably become a luxury.

Ignoring the notification in his mind, Han Fei helped Meng Si back to the living room couch. “Granny, don’t worry. I promise to figure out a way to save Chen Chen.”

“I am also worried about you. I really do not want to repeat the mistake of sacrificing other people’s happiness to save my own family again!” The old woman was under great distress. Her face scrunched up in duress. Han Fei heard the hint in the old woman’s words but pretended not to understand any of it. “You have just saved my life. This is the least I can do for you, granny.” Seeing the sincerity on Han Fei’s face, the old woman slowly lowered her head. She seemed to be taking a trail down memory lane. Her eyes watered with guilt. “You are a good kid. Wait here a moment. Granny has something to give you.”

The old woman headed into the locked bedroom. She rummaged inside it for a while before coming out with a mottled jade pendant. “Granny does not have anything precious. This small pendant was given to me by my mother when I was young. When I used to travel alone at night, having this pendant around would make me feel much safer.” The old lady handed it to Han Fei. “If you do not accept this, I will never agree for you to take on such a dangerous task.”

Realizing how adamant the old woman was, Han Fei had no choice but to accept it. Once his hands touched the pendant, the robotic voice returned. “Notification for Player 0000! You have just obtained a Grade G Item—Meng Si’s Protective Talisman.

“Meng Si’s Protective Talisman (Grade G Normal Item): A protective talisman given to Meng Si by her mom.”

The item description was short and Han Fei did not really understand the function of the jade pendant but to his knowledge, jades were mostly used to ward off evil spirits. Han Fei felt quite undeserving to get such a precious item from Meng Si. “Granny, thank you so much. Is there anything else that I can do for you? I feel like I need to do more to deserve a present as treasured as this.”

"It's okay. There's really nothing else."

"But I feel so bad for taking such a cherished gift without doing anything. Just try to think of something. I'll help if I can." Han Fei wished to get another mission from Meng Si. "I notice that the lights are off again, is it because the fuse is burnt? I can help you fix it!"

"No, it's not broken. I purposely kept the lights off because only candlelight can show Weep's shadow."

"Then how about I help you clean up the room! Sweeping, mopping, I don't mind the chores!" Han Fei used action to prove his words. He helped the old woman clean places that she'd normally had a hard time to reach. He gave off the presence of a kind, hardworking, friendly young man. Meng Si's affection towards Han Fei increased. The old lady's eyes softened as she watched Han Fei bustle around the house. She smiled like she was looking at her own grandson. "Stop stressing over the chores. Why don't you come and sit with me? All of my children have left home for work. They haven't returned in a long time already. This house has been quiet for so long."

"Notification for Player 0000! Friendliness level with Meng Si has reached Amicable! Grade G Normal Mission, Accompany and Listen has been triggered! Will you accept it?" Han Fei was waiting for this moment so naturally he accepted it. He pulled over the chair and sat next to the old lady. Meng Si started with everyday complaints but eventually her story trailed back into the past.

"There used to be a young woman who adopted three kids. The eldest was the most honest but quite unexceptional. Everything about him was mediocre. She picked up the second child from the hospital. He was an abandoned baby. His face was slightly disfigured but his mind was especially clever. He was the gentlest and kindest among the three brothers. The youngest was the naughtiest and had the complete opposite personality from his elder brothers. Whenever he was bullied, he would punish his bullies right back. Because of that, he got into many fights. The woman always lectured him and the child never once answered back but the woman knew her child never heed her lesson because in his mind, he did nothing wrong.

"Every time after he was lectured, the youngest would run out the door. During his runaways, he'd go to vent his frustration by burning ants and dismembering earthworms. He'd sit and watch them suffer. Actually, whenever her youngest child ran away, the woman would quietly follow behind him. Out of the 3 brothers, she loved her youngest the most and was naturally the most worried about her.

“Her second child was the cleverest but he was not a show-off. The woman knew he could easily score the highest in his class, but he’d purposely lower his marks to reach the median. The youngest child though was completely different. He would always fight for number one. He was a natural born fighter. He was tough on others but toughest on himself.

“The days passed by and the 3 children eventually grew up. The woman thought she could retire and let her children off into the work but something unexpected happened. Her second and youngest sons fell in love with the same woman. Of the 2, it was the second child who got the woman’s hand. Until now, the woman cannot understand how it was the second child with the face disfigurement who would get married first. She had nothing against it, she just thought his facial disfigurement would delay him in the love department. Clearly, she was wrong. In any case, the woman was happy for her son.

“When her second child returned to his maternal home to prepare for the wedding, her youngest kept himself busy in the kitchen. He single-handedly slaughtered all the chickens, ducks and fish needed for the wedding feast. He locked himself up in the kitchen and refused to come out to greet the guest or even his elder brother.

“After the wedding, everything appeared to return to normal. Her youngest son’s temper softened but the woman could sense that something was wrong. Soon after that, the woman found the dead body of a crow inside the cargo of the cold transport truck her eldest used to transport the ingredients for her dessert shop. Her eldest son did not think much of it but the woman knew something was off. Someone else had used the truck behind her eldest son’s knowledge. The dead crow was in all sense of the word, a bad omen.

“The woman started to pay attention to the little details. She would notice bird feathers, animal fur and even blood stains inside the truck. Every time she would clean them up but soon after, these things would reappear inside the cargo. She checked the GPS location taken by the truck and realized the system had been tampered with. The records had all been wiped clean. To figure out the truth, she asked a friend for help to install a small tracking device under the truck cabin.

“The woman realized the truck would always make a detour to a specific location after making each round. On one night when the three brothers were not home, the woman decided to trail the truck. She followed the direction and arrived outside the city. At an abandoned bungalow, she saw her three sons wrestling on the ground.” At that point, the old woman’s voice caught. “She also saw, there was a dead body not far away from her three sons.”

The old woman gripped her chest as if she was in pain. Her story ended then.

Han Fei was truly shocked. He thought that out of the 3 brothers, there was only one killer, but turns out all 3 of them knew about the murder! They were all accomplices!

When Han Fei and Li Xue visited the eldest son, this seemingly innocent, harmless man had perfectly swindled both of them.

Chapter 22:

Han Fei knew the old lady's story was modelled after her own. She was revealing to him her life story. The kinder a person, the greater the guilt they had to bear on their conscience. The guilt could progress to become an actual illness that crawled deep in one's heart, causing ache when it was brought up. Seeing the state the old lady was in, Han Fei did not know what to say.

Human nature was so complicated. A person who lived her life in kindness might end up as an unwilling accomplice. Meng Si's hands tightened around her chest and she ended her tale right then.

Through the conversation with Meng Si, Han Fei noticed something noteworthy. This old lady in the game did not seem to retain the knowledge that she was already dead, that was quite curious. The Frankenstein monster, formed from the victims of the human jigsaw case, carved the pain and despair during their dying moments onto their souls. It was the reason behind their loss of rationality and madness. The pain and despair overshadowed their other memories, leaving behind only the recognition that they had been cruelly murdered.

The situation with Meng Si was the complete opposite. She was kind and well-natured. She could remember details from her youth but did not seem to have any recollection of her death.

They were both from the world of the departed but Han Fei suspected this difference in them was due to the disparity in their dying state. Those who died from tortured death, those who harboured hatred and pain against the world would end up crazy and mad in the game. But people who had died due to other circumstances, like this old lady, managed to retain their human rationality after death. Perhaps at the moment of death, Meng Si did not carry much hatred, only regret and lamentation. In any case, this was just Han Fei's speculation. The game was pretty much still an unknown to him, he would have to explore further.

“Notification for Player 0000! You have completed Grade G Normal Mission Accompany and Listen! Friendliness with Meng Si increases by 10! Friendliness Level with Meng Si has reached the required standard! Congratulations for gaining Meng Si’s friendship! Now you have learned how to form a peaceful neighbourly relationship!”

Han Fei moved his character profile to its last page and he noticed a new addition entitled Life Blueprint. Meng Si’s name appeared under the tab called Neighbours.

“Meng Si (Slight Regret): The old lady has a kind heart. She feels like she owes this world, and many people in her life. She has a selfless personality trait.”

Staring at the character information, Han Fei was confused, ‘What does the ‘Slight Regret’ affixed to the old lady’s name mean?’ He tried to tap on the term, and the robotic voice answered in his mind. “Most citizens in this world have regret in their hearts. They could originate from a lingering wish, a complication they are unable to let go or a past that they wish to return to.

“Regrets are delineated into 3 levels, Slight, Regular and Extreme. Regret at different levels will have different manifestation styles.”

Hearing the explanation, Han Fei’s confusion deepened. ‘Is this how the NPCs are differentiated in this game, according to their regret levels? No, wait. The system only said that most citizens in this world have regrets in their heart, that does not encapsulate all the characters found in this world! This world is populated by ghosts and all kinds of psychos! They probably have their own other categorization system.”

In other words, after gaining Meng Si’s friendship, Han Fei was clued into the level delineation of normal citizens, but to know the level delineation among ghosts and psychos, then he would have to befriend at least one of them first.

The 3 hours flew by so fast. Han Fei put on the old lady’s jade pendant and moved to the door. The ring from his finger gave off a constant chill. From that Han Fei knew that the child had not wandered too far. He probably still patrolled around the 3rd floor corridor.

“Granny, I suspect the child will guard this place forever unless we do something about it. I will open the door in a bit to lure him away. Then you will have to rush into the opposite house to find Chen Chen. Do

not hesitate for even a moment.” Han Fei was worried about the old woman. After all, she was in her 70s already, she was not as agile as he was.

“Okay.” To save her grandson, Meng Si would give it everything she got.

“On the count of three, I will open the door. You have to wait until the child leaves with me before you come out.” Han Fei took out the ring of keys from his pocket and searched for the key to his house.

“Ready? One, Two, Three!”

The door pulled back and Han Fei shot out like an arrow. Once he stepped into the corridor, his finger was instantly frozen. A child’s weeping drifted into his ears. He charged up the stairs and saw from behind him, a startlingly white child was crawling after him!

Han Fei took 3 steps at a time. When he reached the 4th floor, he felt a weight drop down on his back. ‘It has crawled onto my back?!’

The chill spread from his back to his neck and finally his cheeks. Han Fei refused to let himself be distracted. He rushed to the front door of his home and plunged in the key. He turned the key with all his might. He kept his head looking forward!

The chill caressed his cheeks. Just as the lock clicked, a child’s face peeked out from behind Han Fei’s shoulder and paused right before his face!

The two faces were only several cm apart. Han Fei’s hair stood from fear. Any person would have screamed in terror but the man gritted his teeth and continued to push the anti-theft door open.

To stop him, Han Fei’s neck was strangled out of shape. His breathing became difficult. The child wanted to pull Han Fei back downstairs while Han Fei was determined to collapse into his room. The door fell open and Han Fei tumbled in. He slammed against the solid ground. The child now sat on his shoulders. The pair of small hands covered his eyes.

A spine-tingling wail echoed in his mind. Han Fei tried his best to ignore it as he crawled towards the innermost bedroom. He remembered that was where the Frankenstein monster had disappeared to.

The extra point in stamina he earned from his recent level up was the deciding factor. He eventually reached the bedroom and knocked repeatedly on the door. The door vibrated. This haunted house had not been so 'lively' for such a long time already. "Wei Youfu!" The bedroom door opened with a shower of dust. A cold draft howled out from within. The hands that closed Han Fei's eyes slowly loosened.

Han Fei finally saw there were 7 individuals sitting facing away from him by the bedside. The bedroom was like a morgue, it was dark and eerily frigid. At that moment, Han Fei did something that even the ghost did not expect. With the child on his shoulder, he crawled into the bedroom and closed the door behind him!

In the darkness, the child's crying became more piercing. Han Fei could not see anything. He shivered and explained matter-of-factly, "This child is so lonely. I figured since we have so many people at home, he would enjoy making friends with all of you."

When the pressure on his shoulder disappeared, Han Fei immediately opened the bedroom door and rushed out without a second's hesitation. The child on his back disappeared. Han Fei noticed the child's crying remained inside the bedroom. He slumped to the ground and sighed in relief, "That was so scary."

When the child reached out to strangle his neck, Han Fei thought that was the end of it.

He checked the bedroom door to make sure it was locked. Then Han Fei ran back to the living room. "The system did not announce the completion of the hidden mission. Has something happened to the old lady and Chen Chen?"

## Chapter 23:

In the entire building, Han Fei only managed to befriend one person. If something happened to Meng Si, then the effort he used to gain her friendship would all go to waste. 'I've already entrapped Weep, so theoretically speaking, Room 1034 should be perfectly safe. Or is Chen Chen not there?' With the cleaver in hand, Han Fei ran back to the third floor. The door with the talisman was fully open but there was no sign of the old woman.

"Granny? Chen Chen?" Han Fei poked his ring finger into the room. He did not feel anything. In other words, the house was safe. After a brief hesitation, Han Fei slowly sidled into Room 1034. Room 1034 was covered in talismans, the ground, the walls, the ceiling and even the tattered furniture. The whole

place was sealed behind layers of talismans. “Isn’t this a bit much? Even my own place does not look like this!”

Han Fei made his way forward carefully. “Something’s not right. The child that I brought back home does not seem that strong. He should not require such a heavy ward. There has to be something else inside this house.” Even though the ring did not emit any response, Han Fei decided to retreat for now. But when he nudged backwards, he realized with a shock the front door had been shut without his knowledge. Instantly he was covered in cold sweat and his body froze. ‘What the hell?’

He just trapped the child in his room but now he was trapped himself inside Room 1034. The irony was not lost on Han Fei. ‘What should I do now? Have Wei Youfu bring the child over for hostage exchange? But the problem is, the Frankenstein monster won’t listen to my orders! Furthermore, the child is probably dead by now.’ Standing where he was, Han Fei tried the door handle with dire hope. The door was not locked but he was unable to open it.

‘This is such a nasty trick. You already have the upper hand of being a ghost and you still resort to traps like this.’ After 10 seconds standing by the door, Han Fei finally calmed down. ‘The landlord’s ring still has not responded. This is probably the only good news at the moment.’

There was a dirty thing inside the house but it did not expose its presence. It purposely hid itself. Han Fei knew that he was stuck here unless the power beyond decided to let him go, which seemed unlikely. His mind started to spin as he scanned the room around him. ‘The windows are completely boarded and covered in talismans, so the windows aren’t going to be my exit. However, this room is right underneath my own. If I make a big enough commotion, it should elicit a response from my roommate.’ His eyes wandered over to the kitchen and Han Fei’s gaze fell on the stove. ‘The gas supply is probably dead since the place has been abandoned for so long already. Even if I can manage an explosion, I’ll be the first to die in the fire.’ Han Fei screened through all the possible solutions in his mind but was sorry to realize he seemed to be inadvertently trapped.

‘I can still quit the game but the problem is, the next time I log in, I’ll still end up here.’ Since there was no other option but forward, Han Fei decided to inspect the house further. Han Fei fingered the jade pendant Meng Si gave him and slowly inched towards the living room. He did not dare to make too much noise and kept his movement as soft as possible. The house with the talismans was surprisingly large. Bits of white rice littered the ground. Ceremonial urns were placed at the corners and Han Fei even came across many torn paper dolls. The torn dolls had painted-on faces with vibrant colors. It looked eerily out of place.



'What has happened in this room? Why is the child called Weep?' Thinking about these things, Han Fei pushed the bedroom door open. The rusted axle creaked noisily. When Han Fei planned to step into the bedroom, a blindfolded child hugged him from behind.

"I caught you!"

"Chen Chen?" Han Fei stared at the blindfolded boy. He then turned to look inside the bedroom. Meng Si was unconscious on the ground. Her tattered jacket was covered in children's handprints.

"I finally caught you!" Chen Chen exclaimed happily. Han Fei raised his hand and swiped the back of the boy's head. "Is now the time to play?" Pulling down the blindfold that covered Chen Chen's eyes, Han Fei finally noticed the problem. There was no pupil in Chen Chen's eyes. Two scarily white eyes stared at Han Fei. "I caught you! It's your turn to be the ghost! It's your turn to be the ghost!" Chen Chen repeated that proclamation and his voice turned louder. His boyish voice echoed inside the room like someone was repeating his words.

Han Fei reached out to close up Chen Chen's mouth but he realized with consternation that even after doing that, the boy's voice could still be heard reverberating through the walls. To make things worse, the ring on Han Fei's finger gradually chilled!

'The ghost is coming!' The horrid presence came from everywhere. Han Fei guarded Chen Chen and the unconscious Meng Si behind him. He turned his head to look around.

"It's your turn to be the ghost, it's your turn to be the ghost..." The ceremonial urns tipped over and sticky handprints appeared on the walls. The torn paper doll faces appeared to smile at him. Soon Han Fei saw a pale hand reach out from inside the closet. It was followed by a pale, small face.

Footsteps came from the supposedly empty living room. A round head peeked out from behind the television. A girl with a ponytail crawled out from behind the couch. The house was coming alive. From behind shoe rack, inside the kitchen, under the bed, behind the curtain, underneath the mattress, one after another child with blanched faces and eyes devoid of pupils crawled out from their hiding places.

Han Fei's breath caught in his throat. His knees weakened. He barely managed to stay upright even as he leaned against the wall. These ghosts appeared to be the missing children from the neighbourhood. There were so many of them that Han Fei's scalp numbed!

The air in the room froze as the children turned to look at Han Fei. This hair-raising scene already stopped Han Fei's heart. The children's voices gradually faded away until a horrid crying started to ring out inside the house. Han Fei turned to the source and saw a shadow squatting by the corner of the living room. The shadow was small, but it was clear that he was different from the other children.

'This is the real Weep?' The other children streamed into the bedroom. Every single one of them carried a blindfold with them. Their white eyes followed Han Fei's pupils as they repeated the same phrase, "It's your time to be the ghost."

Han Fei did not answer. At that moment, a child leaped at Han Fei. His sharpened nail aimed at Han Fei's eyes! 'Those who refuse to put on the blindfold will have their eyes gouged out?!'

Pairs of small hands grabbed onto Han Fei's clothes to lock him into place. Han Fei could only watch as the nails widened in his sight. Everything seemed to be over but just as the pain was about to arrive, the jade pendant around his neck snapped crisply. A burst of chill energy exploded from it.

The boy who was about to pull out Han Fei's eyes was sent flying. He hugged his broken fingers and started to cry. The other children were so shocked that they let go of Han Fei.

'It was the granny's pendant that saved me?' Han Fei lowered his head and saw that the jade pendant around his neck had cracked. It probably could be used one more time before it snapped into pieces. 'What to do now? The talisman can't protect me forever! I need to find a way to leave this place as soon as possible!'

Harrowing sobs drifted into his ears. The shadow had slipped into the bedroom. It represented the chill and darkness of the whole house, this was the real Weep!

While the children parted for Weep, the latter stared at Han Fei quietly. He picked up one of the fallen blindfolds and offered it to Han Fei. Meng Si's pendant could only be used one more time. Han Fei knew rejecting Weep would not change his situation. His every nerve tensed and he knew this was the most crucial moment. Han Fei did not reach out to accept the blindfold but he did not reject the offer to play hide and seek either. After some thought, a cruel and evil smile appeared on his face. Squatting down, Han Fei leaned his face towards the shadow, "A normal hide and seek is not fun, how about we up the ante?"

Shoving his hand into his pocket, Han Fei's slightly demented expression colored with wicked obsession. His eyes brimmed with unbridled excitement, "In the rules of a normal hide and seek, a designated ghost is tasked to find everyone else but today, how about we do something different? All of you ghosts will come and find me, a single person!" With an upward curl of his lips, Han Fei's face was practically sticking to the shadow. "I will use my life as the wager. If you can find me within an hour, then my life will be yours. But if you fail, then you have to do 3 things for me."

His eyes burned with venom and madness. The chilliness from the jade pendant had not completely faded. At that moment, Han Fei looked like he belonged among the ghost kids. The room gradually silenced. After who knows how long, the shadow nodded. He led the other children out from the bedroom. Han Fei picked up Meng Si and Chen Chen. He placed them at the front door. The smile on his face grew demented. His body shook as if he could no longer contain the elation within him. "If you fail to find me inside this house, then feel free to explore the houses of the other tenants. That is a free hint I'm giving you!"

After all the children and the shadow turned around, Han Fei walked to the front door. He tried the handle again and as expected, the door did not budge.

"Such an interesting bunch of kids." Han Fei commented in a derisive tone. "Remember our bet. Give it your all!" With the craziest and maddest expression, he cackled maniacally, "And the game... starts now!"

Opening the menu, Han Fei clicked on the button to quit the game. The world turned red and spun. When Han Fei opened his eyes again, he quickly yanked the gaming helmet off. His body was soaked in sweat. Han Fei scratched his head madly and his eyes were bloodshot. "Oh My Fucking God, what have I done this time?!"

Chapter 24:

Han Fei exhausted the acting skill of his life within that few short minutes. He kept urging himself to get into this new character but even so he could not stop his physical body from shaking!

Han Fei had that bit of hope left but he knew the chance of that occurring was small.

‘Weep is a scary character. When I looked into his eyes, I felt like he was looking into my soul. If I showed even a trace of flaw or cowardice, he would most likely kill me on the spot.’ Thinking back what he had done, Han Fei shivered from fear. ‘This feeling of having my life dangled in another person’s hands is horrible. If I can survive this night, I need to level up as fast as I can and collect as many items as possible.’

Han Fei gritted his jaw in determination but moments later, helplessness and despair draped over him. The chance of surviving that night was miniscule. If he logged into a room filled with ghost children, he had no confidence to escape with his life intact. ‘Tomorrow night should be my last time playing the game.’

Studying the gaming helmet on the table, Han Fei did not know what to say. He was just a normal person, naturally he had fear of death. With his nerves pulled taut for so long, the strain drained Han Fei once he exited the game. However, he found himself unable to fall asleep. He was just a young man, he had a whole life ahead of him. He’d always assumed there was plenty of time to achieve his life goals but at that moment, he realized how ubiquitous death featured in a person’s life. ‘I assume there will always be a tomorrow but now I realize that is not a constant. Should tomorrow not arrive, how will I assign the last 24 hours of my life?’

His anxious nerves refused to settle down. Han Fei logged into a music streaming site and selected a few relaxing songs. No matter how advanced technology became, music would always provide sanctuary to the soul. Night passed by without leaving behind a trace. As dawn arrived, Han Fei took out his phone and scrolled through his contact list which was only half a page long. Han Fei was an orphan, he did not have a happy or even normal childhood. Seeing others pampered by their parents, he’d remind himself to stay strong and power on. There was no one to help him in life but himself. He had not experienced romantic nor familial love before. The world was not kind to him but he wanted to face it with laughter and joy. He liked the sound of people laughing. The laughter was like drops of water, providing sustenance to his lonely and parched soul. This was one of the main reasons he wanted to be a comedy actor.

Ending the music, Han Fei looked out the window at the rising sun. The world resuscitated with light.

“Dawn has arrived.” Opening the window, Han Fei rearranged the gaming helmet to its reserved spot. He could not change what had happened so instead of worrying about the past or the future, why not treasure the present?

He was reminded of a quote by Charlie Chaplin— Today, I only do what brings me joy and happiness, things I love to do and that make my heart cheer, and I do them in my own way and in my own rhythm.

Han Fei entered the bathroom to prepare for the day ahead. He looked at himself in the mirror. To his surprise, he saw no trace of despondency.

“In the face of death, many troubles appear so unimportant and frivolous. Is that the power of this Iyashikei game?” Han Fei changed and exited his home. It rained yesterday night so the air was particularly fresh. He inhaled deeply and was about to step forward when he heard children crying. The young man, who, at that moment, was particularly sensitive to children crying, startled involuntarily as he turned to the source. Two children were standing under a large tree, mumbling something between sobs.

“Don’t cry, what happened?” Han Fei walked over and consoled the two kids.

“Xiao Guai is stuck on the tree and can’t get down!” Han Fei tilted his head up and realized Xiao Guai was a small kitten. The kitten mewled piteously, evoking the sense of compassion in others.

“Help me take this.” Han Fei removed his jacket and climbed up the tree. ‘It feels like my body is lighter and my movement more agile. Will the improvement in the game affect my status in real life?’ Han Fei managed to get the kitten down from the tree after much coaxing. “Take good care of it. Do not let it run away again.” The two children nodded while hugging the kitten. It was a cute picture.

Seeing the smiles on their faces, Han Fei was weirdly reminded of Weep. ‘They are all children, so how come the difference between them is so big? Is it possible that Weep was once an innocent child like these two?’

Patting the dust away from his clothes, Han Fei left his neighbourhood. Not long after his departure, Zhao Ming, Zhang Xiaotian and Li Xue walked out from behind a well-hidden car parked at the neighbourhood corner.

“Will a twisted supervillain help two children save their pet cat?” Zhang Xiaottan commented hesitantly.

“Don’t let your guard down! Have you forgotten what the captain said? Supervillains are all experts at manipulating the human mind! This is probably just one of his disguises.” To be honest though, Zhao Ming was having second doubts. No matter how you looked at Han Fei, he did not scream supervillain or at least the kind of supervillain they had in mind.

“How is he a supervillain? He looks nothing like the supervillain I’ve encountered.” Li Xue stood at the back. Her words immediately caught Zhao Ming and Zhang Xiaotian’s attention. “Although to be fair, I’ve only encountered one supervillain in my life. I was on the escort team tasked to send the man to prison. It was just to escort one person but the whole street was cordoned off and it involved the cooperation from many different departments.”

“Sister Li, you’ve seen an actual supervillain before?! What does he look like?” Zhang Xiaotian asked with curiosity.

“I didn’t get the chance to see his face. He was locked inside a specially-made safe box. His whole body was shackled. I only remembered there was a butterfly tattoo on his exposed right hand.” Li Xue shrugged. “Stop asking me, you should know these things are confidential. We better turn our attention back to Han Fei.”

“Sister Li, since you do not think Han Fei is a supervillain, why did you volunteer to join us on our surveillance mission?” Zhang Xiaotian was confused.

“It’s because I’m afraid that you two will do something stupid and harm an innocent person.” Li Xue then walked away. “Neither of you have sleuthing and tailing experience, so please stay far away from me.”

The three officers dressed in casual outfits stayed silently behind Han Fei. They hoped to witness a flaw in this “supervillain’s” disguise but they got nothing. Along the way, Han Fei stopped to help many people. He was kind, gentle and loving. He exuded such selfless love that you’d think he was a saint reincarnated.

His action fitted the system’s danger rating perfectly. If this kind of person did not score a 0, then something was definitely wrong with the system.

Chapter 25:

Going to the supermarket alone, going to the movies alone and going to eat steamboat alone. When night fell, Han Fei found himself walking by the lakeside alone. The sun dropped down the lake surface. The streetlights casted shadows on his body.

“Han Fei? What are you doing here alone?” Li Xue in casual gear jogged over.

“None of my scenes are arranged today so I came out to appreciate the beauty of this city.” As time neared midnight, Han Fei’s heart palpitated. Whether he’d survive his next gaming instance was completely up to luck.

“I saw you at a steamboat shop alone at the mall earlier. I wanted to come over to say hi but you left right after you finished the meal.” Li Xue stopped next to Han Fei. “When you’re in a bad mood, you should go partying with friends. Clear your mind and relax.”

“I... have no friends.” Han Fei admitted before adding, “But I do have a great neighbour.”

“Have you always been alone?”

“Yes.” Han Fei confessed. Studying Han Fei by the lakeside, Li Xue was reminded of a quote by her superior. Those who strove for idealism often end up at the outskirts of society. The lake breeze ruffled Han Fei’s bangs. He stared at the intelligent city centre across the lake. The glimmering lights lit up the place like fireworks but glow was unable to reach the two on the other side of the shore. Li Xue and Han Fei idled by the shore while Zhao Ming and Zhao Xiaotian hid inside a bush about 20 metres away from them.

“How come it feels to me Li Xue cares quite a bit for this Han Fei? Do you think someone that brooding will be likeable by girls?” After squatting for some time, Zhang Xiaotian whispered.

“It depends, if he has Han Fei’s face, then the girls will think he’s broodingly handsome; but if he has your face, then the girls will see you are being broodingly creepy.”

“Are you looking for a fight?”

“I’m just telling you the truth.” Zhao Ming did not continue the argument with Zhang Xiaotian, instead he pulled out his phone to call Captain Wang. “Captain, we’ve tailed Han Fei for a day already. He has completely turned my perspective of him, he couldn’t have been our perp.” Zhao Ming and Zhang

Xiaotian's suspicion of Han Fei lowered aplenty. They were touched by Han Fei's unplanned acts of kindness.

"Is it because you've been discovered by him? As you know, people like him are good at putting up appearances." Captain Wang said with hesitation. He asked, "Where is Li Xue? Tell her to answer the phone. Despite her blatant disregard for the rules, I have to admit she is a very good detective."

"Sister Li? She's now chatting with Han Fei by the lake shore."

"What?"

"I think they're discussing topics about life..."

"Did I ask for that?! Is that the point here? Didn't I order you people to tail him in silence? What the hell are you doing? Get back to the station immediately! Now!"

Li Xue received a sudden text on her phone but she made no move to reach for it. After a while, her phone started to vibrate incessantly.

"Isn't that your phone? Aren't you going to answer it?" Even Han Fei heard the buzzing.

"Sorry. I'll talk to you next time." Li Xue accepted the call and walked away from Han Fei.

The night darkened. Han Fei stayed by the shore alone until 10 pm before he left. Walking through the familiar streets, Han Fei appreciated the sights before he reached his rental home. He ordered a quick supper and looked through the recordings of the shows he had participated in on the internet.

"I always have such big smiles before the camera, but was I really happy then?" Time ticked by soundlessly. Han Fei, who had some to drink, sat by the table quietly. He set up the cables adroitly and then held the gaming helmet up by both hands. Seeing the time ticking on the corner of the computer screen, Han Fei had no idea what to think. He forced himself to snap out of it. When midnight arrived, he put the helmet on. His vision darkened and his body felt like it had sunken underwater. Then everything turned blood red.



“Welcome to Perfect Life where you are free to choose your own perfect life!”

Before he even opened his eyes, Han Fei got a whiff of a horrible smell. He stayed put and carefully assessed the chill that came from his ring finger.

‘The ghosts are right beside me.’ Things could not have been worse. Han Fei tried his best to calm down because he knew the next few minutes would decide his life and death. Fluttering his eyes open, the moment his pupils focused, a demented excitement gushed out of Han Fei’s eyes. He was about to use his acting skill to accentuate the personality he had given himself. Scanning around, he confirmed he was still inside Room 1034 but the room had changed a lot since the last time he was here.

All the furniture was ruined. Wooden chips littered the ground. The closet was upended and the bed frame was shattered. The mattress and bedding were shredded. Children’s handprints were everywhere. Looks like the children had literally turned the house over trying to look for him. A chilling presence kept emitting from the landlord’s ring but the presence was flickering. Han Fei lifted his finger to follow the intensity of the frost. He turned to the direction where the chill was the strongest. Weep was standing on the ceremonial urn by the corner. The presence radiated off the shadow was weaker than before. Both of his arms were missing and they were regenerating at a very slow pace.

At this point, Han Fei understood 2 things.

One, Weep went insane after he failed to find Han Fei inside the house. He probably went to the other apartment units and got into conflict with Han Fei’s other neighbours.

Two, Weep’s loss of arms and fluttering presence meant that there were one or more ghosts which posed a greater threat than Weep inside this building!

He did not mean for his ‘hint’ to cause such a serious consequence. After losing both of his arms, Weep stood on the heavily damaged ceremonial urn quietly. Tattered paper dolls scattered around Weep but none of the other children was in sight.

“You only wanted to find someone to play with you but they tore off your arms instead, how can people be so cruel? This is so unfair.” Han Fei voluntarily walked towards Weep. “Who did this to you? Perhaps I can help you.”

With plain 'malicious' intention, Han Fei squatted down before Weep. He studied the boy like he had found a new and interesting toy, "Don't cry. What happened?"

Han Fei said the same thing that morning but the situation was completely different. Instead of a kind big brother, the man who knelt beside Weep now was more like a beast, eyeing his prey.

Han Fei was sticking to his evil persona but he knew better than to push his luck. For example, Han Fei did not point out directly that Weep had lost the game. He did not bring up the wager of the 3 things now Weep had to do for him either.

The shadow turned his head towards Han Fei. His eyes scanned Han Fei.

The tenants of the building referred to him as Weep but this Han Fei tried to understand and stop his tears. Furthermore, he did not seem to be afraid of him. Weep did not quite believe in this possibility but his conviction started to shake. This man before him might be a presence more evil and scarier than he was. He might be a ghost wearing human skin.

## Chapter 26:

The suppressed madness and barely contained hysteria, the red eyes seemed to be radiating malice. The small body swayed slightly. After losing both his arms and friends, the weakened Weep leaned away from Han Fei.

"Hmm? Why did you move away?" Han Fei half squatted and studied Weep who stood by the corner. A trace of sadness appeared in his eyes. "Don't you want to be my friend? We could play so many games together, we..." Before he finished, Han Fei heard a click come from behind him. He turned to look and saw the front door open. When he turned back, the shadow already disappeared, leaving behind only a shattered ceremonial urn. "You do not even wish to speak with me?"

Standing up, Han Fei's face colored with sorrow. He gathered the pieces of urn at one spot. "My name is Han Fei. I live just above you. When you feel like playing, feel free to come find me." Han Fei did not leave immediately but searched through the house as if looking for Weep. Pushing open the doors, he eventually found the fainted Meng Si and Chen Chen beside the ruined bed. Picking up the two, Han Fei finally walked out from Room 1034.

He closed the door behind him and the chill caressed his face. Han Fei then realized how strenuous the whole affair was on his body. His body and mind had been stretched to the limit. He expected the worst but when that did not happen, it took all his acting training and mental constitution to not let any relief show. Han Fei was confident Weep could easily dispatch him even in his injured state should Han Fei show any weakness. The release from tension was so sharp that Han Fei's body ached with pain.

Sucking in a deep breath, Han Fei found the key on Meng Si. He opened the door and dropped the two back in their house. Closing the front door, Han Fei switched on all the lights in the room. The robotic voice rang in his mind.

"Notification for Player 0000! You have completed Grade G Hidden Mission, Find Chen Chen! Friendliness with Meng Si increases by 30! Obtained basic reward—1 Free Skill Point!

"Warning! Obtaining different completion rates for hidden missions will give different rewards! You have not only found Chen Chen but also rescued him back to safety. Mission completion rate is 100 percent! You gained double the EXP! You also gained a unique skill—Personal Skill, Hide and Seek.

"Hide and Seek (Personal Passive Skill, cannot be upgraded): You are a master at hide and seek. When you are in hiding, your presence will be greatly lowered. Others will easily look over you; When you are looking for others, your senses will intensify and can more easily notice details that otherwise you'd miss.

"Notification for Player 0000, you have reached level 3! Obtained 1 Free Attribute Point!

"Notification for Player 0000, since you've reached level 3, the chat system has been unlocked!"

Looking at the mission interface, Han Fei finally calmed down. Even though the mission was incredibly dangerous, the reward was quite lucrative. His level increased and he even obtained a unique skill. The skill description might not look like much but it was incredibly useful to Han Fei, especially in his current stage. He could use it to avoid detection and increase the chance of finding useful clues, it was a godlike skill at early parts of the game. Han Fei allotted the Free Skill Point to Acting, making his Acting Skill Intermediate Level 3; and the free attribute points to stamina. He still believed his stamina was too low. He was too weak.

"I heard the system mention that the chat system has been unlocked. Does that mean there are other players in this hellish game?" Opening the menu, Han Fei found the option for the chat system at the lowest corner. After clicking it open, he was stunned. There were 999 chatrooms in this game and each of them had their own code. But the strange thing was all the chatroom was greyed out and he was denied entry.

"I've already reached level 3 so why can't I join any of these chat rooms? Are none of these chat rooms meant for me? They are formed by other players? But are there really other players in this game?" Han Fei glanced at his Id—0000. That did make it seem like he was the only player in this game. After a brief rest, Han Fei climbed up from the ground, 'Now that I've completed the mission, I only need to stay here for 3 hours and then I can explore the game freely.'

Han Fei picked up Meng Si's keys. He used it to open the door earlier. He was about to return it when something stopped him.

'There's no telling when Meng Si or Chen Chen will wake up. This is the perfect opportunity for me to inspect their house.' Han Fei glanced towards the locked bedroom. 'Should I do this or not...?'

The key was in his hand. Han Fei looked at the door for a long time before he decided to return the key. Meng Si was his only trustworthy friend in the game at the moment, he did not wish for cracks to appear in this 'friendly, neighbourly relationship'. Han Fei placed the keys back into the old lady's pocket. When he pulled back his hand, the robotic voice in his mind said, "Notification for Player 0000! You did not violate Meng Si's trust! Friendliness with Meng Si increases by 10! You have gained her complete trust! She now treats you like family!"

When Han Fei heard that, he immediately realized that Meng Si was already conscious. The lady was sneakier than she presented herself. After saving Chen Chen, his friendliness level with Meng Si increased by 30 and now it increased by another 10.

Han Fei who knew everything did not expose Meng Si. Looking like he was none the wiser, Han Fei picked up Meng Si and Chen Chen. He then went to the bathroom to grab a towel to wipe away the grime from Chen Chen's face and arms. After half an hour, the old lady finally 'awakened'. She groaned weakly. When she saw Chen Chen, she was very excited and she thanked Han Fei profusely. The sense of appreciation was not faked. That was affirmed by the fact that the mission reward was an increase of 30 points in her friendliness level.

“Han Fei, I really don’t know how to thank you. I really did not think someone would go through such big risks to help people they’ve just met a few times.”

“Granny, you’re the first person to welcome me when I moved into this building. You invited me to dinner and even warned me to be careful of the things inside Room 1044. I remember all that you’ve done for me.” Han Fei scratched his head with embarrassment. “I do not have much family and friends. When I first came to your house, it felt like home. You made you realize how warm a home can be.”

Han Fei helped the old lady back onto the couch. “Granny, you should rest and I’ll return to my house. If you need my help in the future, just go upstairs to get me. If possible, I do wish that we can be as close as family.”

Perhaps it was Han Fei’s final proclamation that struck the softest part in the old lady’s heart. When Han Fei prepared to leave, the old lady slowly stood up.

“Han Fei, actually I’m not as kind as you think I am. I have been hiding a horrible secret and it has been eating me alive” The old lady admitted with guilt. She took out her keys and wandered over to the locked bedroom. “I know you’re curious about this room. Come and follow me.”

#### Chapter 27:

“I’ve not told anyone about this secret before and it is the biggest mistake I’ve made in my life.” Meng Si unlocked the door and led Han Fei into it. The bedroom was small. There was a single bed and next to it was a giant freezer.

“Remember the story I told you about the woman and her adopted three kids? Well, that woman was me.” Guilt and conscience had been tormenting the old lady. It was not until she survived a brush with death that she decided to tell the truth. “That day, I followed the truck’s trail to the city outskirts and saw them fighting next to a dead body. Listening to their insults and words, I only then realized the peace that they shared was merely a show staged for my sake.” The old lady’s twig-like hand gripped the black cloth. “Something was not right with my youngest son even when he was young. From burning ants, he slowly escalated to torturing stray cats and dogs. It was like he was unable to vent his frustrations like a normal person and he could only release the pent-up tension through these demented actions.

“Both my eldest and middle son knew about his abnormal personality. They had privately chatted with him many times. They hid this from me so that I would not worry about it. My eldest helped my youngest sign up for psychiatry counselling when he was still in university and my middle child helped clean up the dead animal bodies. His older brothers had been covering his tracks but kindness and patience were not going to change him.

“Tragedy eventually struck. That day my youngest killed a drifter squatting at that abandoned bungalow. The first to notice the problem was my middle child. He was used to burying the dead animals on his younger brother’s behalf but when he realized this time it was a dead human, he was stunned. In the heat of the moment, he declared his youngest brother the spawn of the devil and someone like him should not have been born in this world.

“Kneeling before the dead body, my youngest did not show much remorse. He even told his second elder brother excitedly that he could soon prove that he was not sick. He had already found the butterfly hiding deep inside his brain. He’d die to capture that butterfly.”

Retelling this story, the old lady’s voice started to tremble. She silently peeled the black cloth off.

‘Butterfly deep inside his brain? Did Meng Si’s youngest son suffer from some kind of mental illness? Or was it a hallucination?’ Han Fei had a belief that things were not that simple.

“My youngest always claimed that there was a butterfly that resided in his brain. He could feel it but could never locate it. The butterfly would lead his way forward. Whenever the butterfly flapped its wing, he would be taken over by the desire to kill. As the desire grew, the closer he came to that butterfly. According to him, the butterfly had the most beautiful colors he had ever seen.” The woman groaned as she tried to pull the freezer open. When it did, the cool air oozed out.

Han Fei glanced into the freezer. All he saw was a layer of rotten, old books. “Granny, why would you store books inside the freezer?”

The old lady did not answer, instead she reached into the freezer to retrieve one of the books. Underneath it was a frozen human face. “These books belonged to my youngest and the man underneath the book is the drifter from that horrible day.”

Putting the book aside, the old lady knelt beside the freezer. "I watched as my children fought and injured each other. My heart broke, because it was all my fault. I didn't raise them right." Guilt, self-blame and pain dwindled the old woman's voice, "I rushed forward to stop the fight. When they saw me, they were shocked. Even my youngest, who was the feistiest, stopped."

"While my two elder sons argued about whether to call the police, I tried to persuade my youngest to surrender himself. Throughout the process, he did not utter a word. At the last minute, when his brothers decided on phoning the cops, he told us something that had all of us gobsmacked. He said there has been someone else directing his murders. However, he was unable to give us the person's name. He said once he did, we would all be in mortal danger. He even told us that there would be a series of murders that was to happen soon in the old city. Everything was to search for the butterfly in his brain."

"As his family, we wanted to believe him but this was a murder! In the end, my elder two sons decided to give him one week's time for him to prove the real culprit's existence."

"In the meantime, we had to find a place to hide the dead drifter's body. The abandoned bungalow was a hot spot for squatters and drifters, if the body was left there, my youngest child's crime would be exposed too soon. Therefore, we used the cold truck to move it into the freezer. I couldn't remember much of what happened next. There seems to be a loss in part of my memory. I only remember my three children leaving me to guard over this body until my youngest comes back to surrender to his crime."

The old lady clearly did not remember her death. This was probably caused by the game.

'The youngest son claimed that he was induced by someone else to kill and the string of murders in the old city he mentioned coincided perfectly with the timing of the human jigsaw case. But how did he manage to predict that?' Han Fei knew that out of the 3 brothers, 2 of them were still alive. There had to be more to this story. 'From my perspective, none of the 3 brothers sounds trustworthy.' Han Fei's eyes moved and they landed on the book that once covered the dead man's face. The book was called *Butterflies of the Soul*. It was written by Santiago Ramón y Cajal, the pioneer of neuroscience study in the last century. The following quote was embossed on the cover. "Like the entomologist hunting for brightly coloured butterflies, my attention was drawn to the flower garden of the grey matter, which contained cells with delicate and elegant forms, the mysterious butterflies of the soul, the beating of whose wings may some day... clarify the secret of mental life."

'Butterflies of the soul? Am I a butterfly soaring through the world of hell reconstructed in this game?' Han Fei knew nothing about the game. For now, he merely wanted to survive. Han Fei's most immediate concern was to level up and not to figure out the mysteries of the game.

"Granny, your youngest son has to be punished for his crime. You helping him with the cover up will only make him worse. In fact, more people might have become his victims because of it." Han Fei slammed the freezer shut. He had decided to apprehend Meng Si's youngest son. Perhaps that would bring deliverance to the old lady.

"The victim lost his life but his killer has escaped from his due punishment, no matter the reason, I find that incredibly unfair." Han Fei felt he was close enough to Meng Si to voice his mind. "The freezer has not just frozen a dead body, but it has also frozen a few generations of happiness and bliss. I believe it is time for you to let go."

Studying the old woman kneeling by the freezer, Han Fei was reminded of his roommates upstairs. His eyes wandered off down the distance. 'This game is called Perfect Life but no one in it has a life that even comes close to being called one.'

## Chapter 28:

Picking up the book, Han Fei tried to place it inside his inventory but he failed. The system did not provide any explanation either. 'I feel like there has to be a reason why the youngest son, Meng Changan has left these books behind.

As Meng Si exposed the secret in her heart, her suppressed guilt and anxiety poured out as well. It looked like the weight of the world fell on this frail old lady.

"Granny, you have to get back up. Chen Chen still needs you. No matter what, he is an innocent party in all of these. He shouldn't have to shoulder any of the pain caused by the adults." As naughty as Chen Chen was, the boy was never really looked after even back when he was still alive. He was killed alongside her grandmother. Honestly, he was the most innocent victim of this whole tragic story.

After helping the old lady off the ground, Han Fei carried Chen Chen into the bedroom and placed him on the bed. "Granny, I will come visit you more often. If you have any trouble, you can come find me, we can discuss it together." Han Fei's plan was to turn Meng Si's house into his own safehouse. He'd come



to stay here for a whole 3 hours after logging in and while he was here, he'd try to snag random quests from Meng Si or Chen Chen, this arrangement was perfect.

But Meng Si clearly did not envision that to be Han Fei's plan because she gasped in surprise, "You're still willing to help me even after knowing my darkest secret?" To be fair, Meng Si had already paid with her life for her mistake, and Han Fei was not there to judge her. Now he just wanted to survive in this hellish game.

"Take care of Chen Chen and do not let him run away again. For him, you'll have to stay strong." After saying that, Han Fei searched for paper and pen and moved to the next topic. The reason he worked so hard to gain the old lady's friendship was because he needed Meng Si's trust. This was the crux of his intention. Han Fei did not know much about this world and he needed someone to provide him with the necessary information. Meng Si had stayed here for a long time already, she was the perfect candidate.

"Granny, as you said, the building manager has not shown up for quite some time already, I'm afraid something has happened to him. I need to go up to the 10th floor to check on him."

"It's too dangerous up there. I'd rather you stay here." Meng Si persuaded Han Fei against it.

"But if we stop ourselves due to fear, the danger will one day extend to reach us either way. I'd rather be the active party than the passive one." Han Fei picked up the pen. "Granny, you've stayed here for a long time. Can you tell me about the taboos we have in this apartment building?"

Seeing the determination in Han Fei's eyes, Meng Si ceased her persuasion. She thought about it and said, "Room 1044 that you stay at is in itself a taboo, so is Room 1034 on this floor. Normally the neighbours will stay away from these two rooms and they will hurry past them."

"Are there places in the building which are more dangerous than these two rooms?"

"Yes, there are." The old lady nodded. "Something is not right with the entire 9th floor. Other than the floor manager, every tenant that ventured up there had disappeared. There is a problem at the landing between 7th and 8th floor as well. According to rumors, if you go there after midnight, you'll end up arriving at a completely different location and see some special things."

“Have you been there before?”

“Of course not, I wouldn’t be here if I have. These are merely rumors.” The old lady was a cautious one. “Other than that, something strange has happened in Room 1084 on the 8th floor. A tenant has once run into a young woman there. When the building manager was still around, he’d warned me from going to the 8th floor alone. The 7th floor, to my knowledge, is unoccupied. The original tenants of the 6th floor have moved away and some non-locals have moved in. I rarely interact with them and I’ll stay away whenever I hear them.”

“Wait, them? There are several of them staying on the 6th floor? And they came from outside the neighbourhood?” Han Fei was reminded of the man who came to ‘welcome’ him that day. The man first appeared on the 6th floor.

“Yes. Other than these, there are other smaller taboos. For example, when you go through the corridor at night and someone calls your name, do not turn back no matter what. Do not answer any knocking at night because the tenants here normally won’t come visit at night. There is one last thing. If the voice-activated lights start to flicker when you’re in the corridor, you have to be careful because it means that something is coming...” The old lady gave Han Fei many things to be alert about and Han Fei jotted them all down.

“Granny, for as long as you stay here, is there any neighbour that you got along with? The kind you’d befriend?” Han Fei wanted to get to know more neighbours. He knew how limited a person’s strength was.

After giving it a long thought, the granny shook her head. “There is none that I’d befriend but if you really have to pick one, I personally think the tenant at Room 1052 on the 5th floor is not so bad.”

“The tenant at Room 1052?”

“Yes, her name is Xu Qin, she’s crazy.” As if worried that Han Fei might get the wrong idea, Meng Si added in a way of explanation, “She might not make sense at times but she has not actively harmed anyone before. One time, Chen Chen accidentally ran up the stairs and it was she who brought him home.”

“Okay, I will try to get in touch with her.” Han Fei was not scared back by the knowledge that the girl might be crazy. After all, compared to his murderous roommate, a crazy woman, who would not harm others, was like an angel.

“She has a pitiable background too. If you can, do try to help her.”

“Hmm, okay.” Of the entire building, there were only two tenants whom he could possibly befriend. Han Fei felt quite disappointed but he did not show it. After 3 hours of exchanging notes, Han Fei drew up a map. He marked out all the known taboo places on the map.

‘My final goal is to enter the building manager’s Room 1101 and find out why he has dragged me into this game. If possible, I’d take over anything he had left behind as well. But before that, I should try to reach out to the tenant of Room 1052 and try to get more people on my side.’ Patience is a virtue, Han Fei understood that well. This was not a game where one could rush, after all, one’s life was at stake here.

When it was about 4 am, Han Fei departed from the old lady’s home. He sneaked into the stairwell and made sure to keep his presence unknown.

“There are some additional blood red stains on the walls and children’s handprints on the banisters and steps. Looks like Weep did go berserk yesterday night. The child probably got into quite a bit of trouble because of me.”

When Han Fei returned to Room 1044, the place looked like it had been hit by a tornado. “Was Weep here yesterday night? Aiz, why can’t everyone just co-exist in peace? We’re neighbours after all...”

Chapter 29:

After returning to Room 1044, instead of leaving the game, Han Fei stayed to clean up the room. “I still haven’t completed both the New Player Missions for sleeping and showering.

“It’s time to go. If I continue to be this stressed, I might go insane from playing this game.” After experiencing the deepest fear, Han Fei realized the beauty of normal, everyday life. This Iyashikei game had done its purpose of helping him learn to stop and smell the flowers. Opening the game menu, Han

Fei was about to log out of the game when he realized the previously all greyed out chat rooms had one that was currently lit up. Among the sea of greyness, the brightness of the button to join Chat Room 444 appeared so out of place.

‘Does this mean I can access this particular chat room now?’ Han Fei confirmed that the time was 3.59 am. At this twilight hour, this change happened. Reaching out to click on the button 444, the robotic voice rang out in his brain, “Are you going to enter Chat Room 444?”

“Yes.”

“Please select whether to keep your Id anonymous.”

“Yes.” Han Fei selected that option without much thought. In this place where ghosts and murderers roamed, it was far too dangerous to show his Id. After entering the chatroom, Han Fei waited for several seconds but no one spoke. He hesitated for another few seconds before he punched in the message, “Is anyone around?”

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): ‘There’s still someone online at 4 am? Brother, you must have more than one liver to sustain such a lifestyle.’

‘I have more than one liver?’ Han Fei pictured that image and it grossed him out. He could not tell whether this was just a figure of speech or something else. Trying not to expose too much information about himself, Han Fei was very careful. In contrast, this other player was so flagrant with the display of their player id. They must be an old player... Or they had gained access to the function of changing one’s in game Id. Either way, this player was definitely more experienced with the game than Han Fei was.

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): ‘Brother, you still there? You must have gained plenty of EXP from playing until so late. What level are you at now?’

In spite of the casualness of their tone, this player was clearly trying to dig up more information about Han Fei. The latter’s brow furrowed as he replied, “You must be a high-level player too since you’re also still online now. What is your current level?” Without revealing anything, Han Fei kicked the question back to the other player. Granted the other player could have lied, but the lie would still tell Han Fei plenty of information. From the number given by this experienced player, Han Fei could gauge the

current maximum level of this game. This was the art of speech, the psychological battle between expert players!

Han Fei was focused as he stared at the chat. After all, this was the first time he encountered another player in Perfect Life!

In spite of the horrid nature of the game, this player was able to chat with Han Fei with such nonchalance, this further confirmed Han Fei's belief that this was a long time player.

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'I joined this project as a medical consultant. I just reached level 14. My level is low because I can only play at night since I need to work during the day. I'm sure my level is much lower compared to hardcore players like yourself.'

Reading Huang Yin's reply, Han Fei sunk into deep thought. He merely asked for the player's level but they had volunteered their real life career and gaming habits. 'Is he trying to confuse me with an influx of information? As an old player, he should know that I'm fishing for information. Why would he be so generous with them? Is this another fake front?'

Anonymous Player: 'Level 14? You have levelled up quite fast then, how did you gain so much EXP so fast?'

Han Fei did not think the person would reveal his levelling trick but he was proven wrong. Huang Yin's reply soon came.

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'My gaming life started in the hospital since I was a doctor in real life. However, I had to start from the internship level. I just focused on completing the daily missions like helping the doctors with their chores, doing night patrols of the wards and wooing the nurses. Without even knowing it, my level is already at 14. This game is honestly quite addicting. The vexing details in real life are absent and it gives one a feeling of control over one's choice of life.'

Seeing Huang Yin's message, Han Fei's frown deepened. 'Is this person serious? In this game, a hospital has to be more dangerous than an apartment building. And he still has the nerves to patrol the wards at night?!' The images of human organs black market, gory surgeries appeared in Han Fei's mind. All the doctor's white coat was dyed red while Huang Yin pushed a cart stuffed with fresh organ harvest as he made his rounds in the wards.

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'This game is a sandbox with plenty of freedom. I am personally a casual player. Brother, what kind of perfect life you've chosen for yourself?'

Staring at the message, Han Fei did not know how to answer. He had no idea what kind of life the game had given him, after all, he had not even ventured out from this apartment building yet. Han Fei knew nothing of the world-building of the life he inhabited but he did not want the other player to know he was actually a new player. He didn't want to make himself out to be an easy prey. After all, this was a hellish game where the winning philosophy was the survival of the fittest!

Anonymous Player: 'I'm also a casual player. So far, I've spent my days visiting my neighbours, and watching television with my roommates. Sometimes, the kids in my neighbourhood will invite me to join them in their games. They're all my friends.'

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'Wow, that does sound like a perfect life. It must be nice to have a group of friends in game!'

Anonymous Player: 'That is true!'

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'We should add each other as friends since we both play at night and we're both casual players. Many testers are playing this game but most of them have forgotten about the main objective of this game because they are too busy exploring the game's more cryptic gameplay.'

Anonymous Player: 'Cryptic gameplay?'

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'Yea, but that's just what I heard anyway. This game is based on human nature so it is supposed to be as complex as one too. According to the other players, human nature, and this game by extension, is like an iceberg. The parts which are shown on the surface are just a small part, the deeper, more cryptic parts of this iceberg are hidden under the deep and dark sea.'

Chapter 30:

Anonymous Player: 'Then so far has anyone found this cryptic side of the game?'

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'Including this time, Perfect Life has conducted 6 CB already, endless players have ventured very far into the game but none caught sight of this so-called cryptic world.'

Anonymous Player: 'If you ask me, this whole thing does have a hearsay ring to it.'

Huang Yin (Tester Account Player 0999): 'By the way, do you mind if I come over to visit you in game? What is your name? It's fated for us to be friends since we've managed to encounter each other considering there are literally 999 chat rooms.'

Anonymous Player: 'You are welcome to visit me any time. I'll be glad to introduce you to my friends. My name is...' Han Fei was about to key in a fake name when he realized Chat Room 444 got grayed out once more. Turning around to look at the wall clock, Han Fei noticed it was now 4.01 am. 'This chatroom is only accessible between 3.59 am to 4.01 am? Why is there such a unique time restriction?'

In any case, Han Fei leaned back and went over the whole conversation he had with Huang Yin, 'This person does not appear like they're playing the same game as I do.' Sitting on the couch, Han Fei stared at the haunted television set. 'If Huang Yin is telling the truth, then it is very likely that I am in this game's cryptic world while the other players are on the surface world. The players between these two worlds can only interact through the chat rooms during the twilight hours. Of course, there is a possibility that this Huang Yin is faking everything. There might not be an actual living human behind this person. Huang Yin could have gleaned this information by scamming and murdering other players.' Nothing was impossible in this hellish game, caution was the only way to survive.

'Huang Yin's Id is 0999. Perhaps I can look into that after I log off the game.' To prove his suspicion, the most direct way to do it was to approach Huang Yin in real life. 'If only he can provide me with a solution to leave this place.' Standing up, Han Fei walked to the boarded-up window. He looked through the gap. 'The sun still hasn't come up. It feels like there is only nightfall at this place.' After checking his surroundings, Han Fei logged out from the game at his home. Actually Han Fei's initial plan was to log out from Meng Si's home. The next he logged in, it would be at the old lady's home. He'd be safe there. But after giving it some thoughts, Han Fei decided to keep his ability to essentially quit this 'perfect life' a secret from the other in-game characters.

Clicking on the exit button, his eyes turned red. Han Fei removed the gaming helmet and crawled towards his computer. He keyed in all the new information that he had gathered into his note files. 'I should purchase all the books Meng Changan has read, that will help me enter his inner world more

easily.' Over these past few days, the biggest purchase Han Fei had made was on books and lectures. With the threat of death, even studying became so much more interesting. After making his order, Han Fei started to search for information on Huang Yin.

He tried many websites but all the tester's information for Perfect Life was confidential. Even if he knew the person's Player Code and Id, he was unable to dig up any information. 'If Huang Yin is really that person's name, he'll exist in the law enforcement's citizenry database. Li Xue will be able to access it but I'll have to figure out a reasonable excuse to get her to help me.'

Han Fei's reflection stared back at him through the computer screen. He sat next to the walls with the dead victims glaring soullessly down at him. If one walked into the room, one would not expect this young man to be an actor. The dawning sun rose but Han Fei moved to pull back the curtains. He had gotten so used to darkness that the light hurt his eyes. After a simple breakfast, Han Fei took out his phone to call Li Xue.

"Do you mind helping me investigate someone?"

"Are they living or dead?"

"I'm not sure, I only know that their name is Huang Yin and they're a doctor." Han Fei added, "They might be related to the latest immersive game out on the market."

"Is this person related to the human jigsaw case?"

"Perhaps."

"Then give me a minute." Li Xue ended the call. After a few minutes, she called back, "I found someone that matches your description. Huang Yin, male, Xin Lu City's Andrology Clinic's new vice president, a graduate from the country's best medical university. He took over his father's clinic at the young age of 30. He resides at the core district of the intelligent city centre. He is known for his gaming hobby, as evidenced by the shocking statement that he gave several years ago on a dating show. The host asked him to choose between gaming and his girlfriend. He answered that he'd give up his girlfriend without much hesitation. Perhaps because of that, he is still single today."



“Sounds like an interesting character.” Han Fei connected this new information to the Huang Yin he met in game. They did sound like the same person. After thanking Li Xue, Han Fei hung up and exited his house. He took the train that connected the old city and the intelligent city centre. Ignoring the charm of the city centre, Han Fei hurried to Xin Lu City’s Andrology Clinic. Han Fei decided to visit this man in person so he asked for an appointment. The response that he got from the nurse was quite inexplicable—Huang Yin was unavailable because he was currently attending Deep Space Tech’s gaming convention.

If this 6th CB was successful, Perfect Life would enter OB. Their advertisements could be seen everywhere and their promotion activities were held almost every day until the OB launch. However, why would a doctor abandon his day job to attend a game’s promotional event?

Han Fei did not quite get it until he arrived at the event venue. He could finally understand why this event would attract a gamer’s attention so much. Deep Space Tech had booked the entire international business centre, they used six 3d exhibition halls and 12 interactive booths to promote the game. After stepping through the entrance, you’d think you have stepped into a different world. This was an era where human imagination and creativity were the selling point. Mature technology matched with crazy inventions, be it heaven or hell, human beings could construct them in real life.

“How am I supposed to find him among the crowd?” After registering, Han Fei came to the 12th booth which was the least crowded. Even though his social anxiety was recovering, shuffling through the crowd, Han Fei still felt slight attacks of vertigo. He staggered from the crowd and stood to catch his breath near the emergency exit.

“Perfect Life is a casual Iyashikei game that will comfort your soul and ease your tension. Here, you will find plenty of laugh out loud scenarios, and heart-warming familial life waiting for you. With hope and bliss as our central tenancy, we strive to bring positive energy into every player’s life...”

Hearing that familiar opening, Han Fei shivered and his face blanched. Throngs of passionate gamers flooded the place, Han Fei appeared so lonely standing to the side.

“Brother, are you feeling okay?” A hand patted Han Fei’s back and then passed him a bottle of mineral water supplied by the event.

“Thank you.” Han Fei turned to the person. A handsome uncle in a sharp suit stood next to him. The suit the man wore cost about half of Han Fei’s yearly income. It was clear that this man was part of the successful elites.

Han Fei asked, "I'm fine but why are you dressed so formally at a gaming convention?"

"I actually hate dressing like this but I was supposed to attend a date arranged by my family today. Normally I'd escape to work but today, they sent the girl directly to my workplace."

"So you came here just to avoid meeting her?"

"Of course not! I'm here because I like gaming, it's that simple!" The man was friendly and bright, the complete opposite of Han Fei. "Looks like this is your first Perfect Life convention. Come! I'll show you around, you'll soon fall under its charm!"

"I don't want to trouble you. I'll just saunter around on my own."

"It's no trouble at all!" The man reached for 2 virtual reality glasses from the counter, "I see myself as a personal ambassador for this game, it is the best game I've played in my life! I don't mind making another brother in the game! Come! Put these on. When you're done with the convention, just return it to the counter by keying in my name. Oh, right, the name's Huang Yin."

"Huang Yin?" Han Fei's expression shifted for a moment before it returned to normal again.