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Chapter 221:

The situation was only to get worse for the hairdresser, he realized that. The eyes hidden underneath the hair darted about. The hairdresser glanced at the dumpling store he just exited. 'I can't go there, the boss there hates everything humanoid. If I go there in my current state, it'll be the first to come out to kill me and make me the fillings in his dumplings.'

'Other than the dumpling store, the only place I can shake them off is via the Cattle Alley.' The hairdresser's eyes filled with blood. He had just escaped from that death trap, he did not expect to return to it so soon. The hairdresser swore to himself that if he survived, he would murder Han Fei and all the ghosts who helped him. The clothes of hair became dry and frayed. The hairdresser's old and ugly body was exposed. At his very limit, the hairdresser suddenly tossed the case at Han Fei. He already noticed that Han Fei who appeared the least like a ghost was actually the main commander.

The blood in the case rained down. Resentful spirits escaped from the wooden case. Han Fei ignored all of them, he only cared about the table knife inside the case. The knife looked normal but Han Fei could recognize it. Xu Qin had once loaned him that very knife. Seeing the layer of human skin sheath on the hilt, Han Fei was reminded of many things, 'So she hasn't removed the human skin doily after all.'

As the souls escaped from the wooden case, the hairdresser rapidly aged. He hid his lingering spirit inside the sea of black hair. "The woman you're looking for is dead inside the Cattle Alley, you'll never find her!" After leaving behind that awful curse, the hairdresser's body was fully absorbed into the clothes. Then the clothes split open and black hair shot out everywhere. They slithered down different directions.

"Trying to leave?" If this was a normal situation, the hairdresser would have been able to escape but Han Fei had predicted this. He pocketed Xu Qin's table knife and then turned his focus to the paper doll. During the fight, the paper doll inserted part of its body into the hairdresser's soul. It was still connected to that shred of paper.

"Chase!" Han Fei's ultimate goal was the Ziggurat. The Ziggurat would instantly separate all the ghosts that entered it but the rules did not work on cursed objects. Therefore, Han Fei needed Xu Qin. For all sorts of reasons, Han Fei needed to find Xu Qin!

Holding the knife by its hilt, Han Fei had the anaconda leave his body. Actually if the hairdresser continued to fight, Han Fei's body would be poisoned by Yin energy. Unfortunately, the hairdresser was bluffed by Han Fei's brazenness. The anaconda was within his body for less than 30 seconds and with all the stamina points Han Fei had gained, even though he had received some damage, it was still bearable. Han Fei and the other neighbours followed behind the paper doll and entered deep into the alley.

Before this, Han Fei would only stick to the shaded sidewalks, this was the first time he had travelled down the middle of a road. The alleys criss-crossed like a maze. There were bags of rubbish and they stink to high heavens. Mud stained with blood splattered everywhere. Mottled walls were painted with grotesque paintings. He would occasionally come across some closed doors. If not to search for Xu Qin, Han Fei would never enter this maze-like alleyway. The road split into more and more forks. Even with Han Fei's impressive memory, he couldn't help the feeling of being lost because all the alleys looked the same.

'Where is the man going?' Han Fei didn't want to have to deal with extenuating problems so he wanted to kill the hairdresser while he could. To his credit, the hairdresser was clever. He kept changing his location as if knowing Han Fei was chasing him. The deeper they went into the alley, the stranger the environment became. It was cold, quiet and eerie. The deeper part of the alley appeared to be a different world from the outside city. This was quite similar to actual Xin Lu. The intelligent city centre was bright lights and human activities while the countryside was old and abandoned buildings.

After who knew how long, the paper doll suddenly stopped. They reached another fork in the road. The two smaller alleys led to different locations. The alley on the left had a stone lion which was missing its head. The alley was filled with the smell of blood, even the dirt on the ground was red in color. The alley on the right was suffused with the smell of decomposition. Something like a dead carcass was dropped at the corner and maggot-like worms crawled out from inside it.

Both of the alleys were not inviting, both led to incredible danger. 'The hairdresser's presence disappeared here, which alley would he choose?' There was no footprint on the ground, the hairdresser left no trace. He had decided to hide at this place when he made his escape.

"Should we split up?" Drake asked with uncertainty. That was the only solution but it was very dangerous to do that in an unknown location. After giving it some thought, Han Fei shook his head. "What if there are more forks in each of the alleys? There is only one paper doll and we need it to find the hairdresser."

All the neighbours stared at the red doll. The doll that had Xu Qin's face stood for a long time before it moved towards the right alley which contained the animal carcasses.

“Follow it!” The paper doll contained Xu Qin’s curse. It seemed to sense something before making this decision. Darting ahead, Han Fei only cared about finding the hairdresser to shake Xu Qin’s location out of him. However, when he stepped into the right alley, a wall of stench hit him and it almost knocked out his senses. At the same time, the robotic voice announced in his mind. “Notification for Player 0000! You’ve unlocked the hidden map, Cattle Alley. You’ve triggered Grade F Hidden Mission—Cattle Alley!”

“Cattle Alley (Grade F Hidden Mission): Human love, fear and hope is no different from that of animals. They are like the sun, coming from the same source. If you don’t believe me, I can prove it to you with the sensation of fear and death.

“Mission requirement: Survive.”

There was no time limitation, no specific goal. This Grade F Mission only required Han Fei to do one thing—Survive. When Han Fei heard that, a very bad feeling rose within him. He had never received such a succinct mission requirement before. This kind of direct mission often contained extreme danger.

‘I believe I heard the term Hidden Map, Cattle Alley is also a Hidden Map?’ Han Fei looked around and realized he was enveloped by the thick stench of decomposition. He only had the red paper doll with him, the rest of his neighbours had disappeared. Han Fei turned to look behind him, the original fork had vanished, instead it was replaced by an alley that seemed to lead indefinitely into the darkness. ‘It’s okay, at least I still have the red paper doll and Xu Qin’s pet with me. This is not yet the worst.’

Optimism was how Han Fei managed to survive for so long in the cryptic world. Only those who never gave up had the chance to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Holding the paper doll in the middle of his palm, before Han Fei could even open his inventory, he heard heavy breathing coming from the alley behind him. The sound did not appear like it could be made by humans. It sounded more like a hungry beast who had finally stumbled upon a prey.

Han Fei did not stay to find out the origin of the sound. His body started to move away from it. There was no hiding spot in the alley. It would be too late when he came face to face with the threat. Han Fei already reacted the first moment he could but he was still too slow.

Accompanied by a strong, acrid smell, a monster with a pig’s mask walked out from the dark alley. It was much taller than a normal person. Its exposed skin was covered in wounds and bite marks. The terrifying

thing though was the lower half of its mask was torn and the exposed chin had porcine features. There appeared to be another pig's face underneath the pig's mask.

The grinder used to mince meat was embedded into its back. The monster's oil and blood-stained body were wrapped in chains. Its large palm was holding a bone-splitting cleaver.

"Meat, meat, meat!"

The eyes underneath the mask zoomed in on Han Fei. Like a raging boar, it picked up in speed to charge at Han Fei.

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The cleaver cut into the wall and the chains jangled noisily. Before the pig-faced monster arrived, Han Fei had already moved several metres away. The pressure the monster brought upon Han Fei was indescribable, he had not come across an enemy as harrowing as this in a normal horror game. It was too real. That oppressive suffocating pressure, the stinging scent of blood and decomposition, the monster instilled in Han Fei's mind that resistance would be futile.

"Meat! Meat! Meat!" The monster grunted something that sounded like meat repeatedly. Han Fei could no longer tell if this was a man who had been morphed into an animal or it was an animal who was wearing a human skin. Han Fei was already quite drained considering he had travelled from Happiness Neighbourhood and had just finished a fight with the hairdresser. However, no matter how tired he was, he did not dare to stop.

'That might not be the only monster at Cattle Alley, before it attracts the attention of more monsters, I need to find a place to hide.' Fatigue slowed Han Fei's movements but his mind was always clear. 'The only saving grace is that I can quit the game anytime, that works in my favor.' Because of that, Han Fei had the confidence that at least he would survive this night.

Unable to shake his pursuer loose, Han Fei had to figure out a different way to solve this quandary. Fighting it head on was suicide. 'The mission does not provide me with a time limit or completion method. Only by escaping Cattle Alley alive that I'll complete the mission? Or is there a hidden meaning to the simple order of survive? Is it for me to understand the meaning of life and death, existence and its transience?'

The book Cattle Alley, written by Spider, appeared in Han Fei's mind. To get into character, Han Fei had read all of Spider's books several times. He could access their contents whenever he wanted. 'The world in Spider's eyes is different from how a normal person would see it. It is a place detached from reality. In this world, every human's internal desire and thought will be manifested in actuality. When the desire crosses a threshold, they will no longer be seen as humans but monsters in human skin.

'These monsters will only bring tragedy with them. Therefore the Spider chose to seclude himself, he trapped all of his personas inside the House of the Butcher. When seen from that perspective, there is at least a location at Cattle Alley which will be free of monsters and that is the House of the Butcher where the Spider will be. Perhaps I might even run into the real Spider there!' To escape from the monster, either Han Fei had to leave Cattle Alley or he had to search for the House of the Butcher, currently Han Fei only had these 2 choices.

Bang! The horrible smell carried on the wind came from behind him. Han Fei who was deep in his thought stepped subconsciously to the side without even turning his head back. The cleaver the monster yielded flew past his left shoulder and pinned into the wall before Han Fei. A deep crack appeared on the wall covered in blood and moss. If the cleaver had cut into Han Fei, god knows what would have happened. The footsteps were still several metres away. The heavy cleaver eventually got pulled down by its own weight. It landed heavily on the ground. The first thing that crossed Han Fei's mind was to pick up the cleaver. He would take it with him or store it in his inventory, there was no way he would leave it for the monster. However, just as his fingers touched the hilt, a wail exploded in his mind!

The wail then gushed all through his body like waves. It gave Han Fei not even a chance to breathe.

"Notification for Player 0000! You've found a Grade G Cursed Object—Cleaver!"

"Cleaver (Grade G Cursed Object): There are all sorts of cold steel hidden at Cattle Alley, each blade possesses their unique lingering curse and resentment!"

"Notification for Player 0000! Each Midnight Butcher has their own specialized blade, perhaps you'll be able to find one suitable for you here!"

The robotic voice pulled Han Fei's rationality back. The inventory would only accept cursed objects that had approved of Han Fei. In that case, Han Fei would have to carry the cleaver with him. But then the cleaver would slow him down with its weight and Han Fei would have to suffer its curse as well. Han Fei

now understood why the monster was audacious enough to throw its weapon at Han Fei, it was because the monster knew Han Fei would not be able to use it against it!

‘It might look like an animal but its brain is still incredibly bright!’ Stopping to examine the cleaver meant that the distance between Han Fei and the monster closed even further. ‘I still can’t log off now! If I do, I’ll still log back into the chase. I have to find a safe environment for myself first!’ Gritting his teeth until they bled, Han Fei raced for his life but his speed conspicuously slowed down. Fatigue was catching up with him, as did the monster.

“Meat! Meat! Meat!” The pig-faced monster was inspired by the close proximity to its prey. The eyes underneath the mask were red with bloodlust. It waved the cleaver wildly as if aiming for another throw.

‘Why would such a monster exist in this place?!’ Running for his life through the complicated maze, Han Fei inadvertently lost his way. He couldn’t remember how many forks he had passed, much less pinpoint his exact location. He only knew that the stench was getting more palpable and the dead carcasses on the ground grew more numerous. He’d trip if he was not careful.

‘I can’t do this anymore...’ His lungs were burning and his breaths were catching. Han Fei felt like his body was about to shatter. ‘I need to find a place to log off.’ Han Fei was coming up to another fork. He opened his menu and prepared to log off when he turned into the fork. But before he arrived, he saw something baffling. At the corner of the alley, there was a boy about 5 hiding underneath a dead body among the pile of trash!

The boy saw Han Fei at the same time. His bright eyes filled with anxiety and fear.

‘Why is there a child here?’ The role of livestock and humans was reversed at Cattle Alley. The boy was like a stray kitten who had lost its mother. He hid under his mother’s body and his body was frozen solid in fear. He felt only fear towards the world beyond his hiding place. Without his mother’s protection, it was certain that he would die.

Han Fei did not act out of place just in case the monster behind him discovered the boy. He continued to race ahead like how he had been doing. However fate played a joke on him. As he forced himself to pick up speed, the footsteps behind him slowed!

Han Fei turned back to look. The scary monster slowed down. Gripping the cleaver, it turned to the trash pile at the corner. The dead bodies were shaking unnaturally. It was because the boy who was hiding under his mother's body was trembling too much out of fear. The gigantic hands grabbed at the carcass by its arm. The monster easily shoved the mother's body to the side. Then its bloody eyes focused on the boy cowering underneath the pile of trash. Saliva dribbled down its chin, the cracked mask did nothing to hide its hideous face.

"Meat! Meat! Meat!" Hearing the grunts, Han Fei also stopped. He was conflicted. The monster was now distracted by the boy so it was the precious chance he needed to escape. But if he did, the boy would have a horrible death. His knuckles were white, Han Fei was no match for the pig-faced monster. Furthermore, he couldn't be sure if the boy was a trap laid by the monster or not. Even if it was not a trap, the boy would already be dead to appear in this world. Helping him would get Han Fei nothing. To survive in the cryptic world, Han Fei had to see things from the worst possible perspective. After all, in this place where despair fermented, there was no place for light to shine.

The bloody hands clutched the cleaver. Rancid saliva dripped down the ugly face. The monster had abandoned Han Fei because he had found an easier prey. Squatting inside the trash pile, the boy was frozen in fear. His face was pale as he kept curling into the trash pile. His small hands grasped at his mother's dead body. He couldn't run and he had nowhere to hide. The ending was decided. It would only end in cruelty and gore. The cleaver was raised high. Just as the cleaver was about to fall, urgent footsteps came from the alley!

Han Fei who had escaped suddenly charged madly at the pig-faced man!

"Get over here!" Grabbing the black anaconda, the ghastly ghost face on Han Fei's body laughed. Han Fei covered in Yin energy charged at the monster!

When the boy saw Han Fei return, his face was still colored in fear.

The pig-faced monster easily deflected Han Fei's attack. It grabbed at Han Fei's shoulder and with a squeeze, dislocated it. Han Fei stared fiendishly at the boy. "Run!"

Crawling out from the trash pile, the boy hurriedly ran down the other side of the alley. Han Fei's arm was already twisted out of its socket. The immense pain fried his nerves. The pig-faced monster was consumed by gluttony. It bit Han Fei's shoulder. Blood squirted. Han Fei knew it was pointless to evade so he allowed the monster to chomp at him. He could hear the sound of the teeth crushing the bones.

Pain overwhelmed Han Fei's senses, but he still did not exit the game. His eyes followed the escaping kid. He needed to buy time for the boy.

Blood soaked through his clothes. Han Fei used his working arm to chop the monster's neck and then poked at the monster's eyes. Even under duress, Han Fei managed to blind one of the monster's eyes. The angered monster slammed Han Fei into the wall. His bones were crushed. After Han Fei slid to the ground, he quickly rolled to the side to avoid the incoming cleaver. His vision was blurred as blood muddled his vision. But Han Fei still had not exited the game.

He held his arm that had lost all senses and stood up in the middle of the alley. The battle was one-sided, it was visible from the size alone. This was a slaughter, not a battle. The pig mask was drenched by blood. It stared quietly at Han Fei as if wondering why the prey which had tried so hard to run earlier would now stubbornly stand in the middle of the road to block it from proceeding. It did not ponder this question for long because hunger eventually took over all thoughts. It needed to consume the prey before him.

"Meat! Meat!" The monster growled as it pounced at Han Fei! Han Fei adjusted for a counterattack. The slam into the wall injured his calf. He knew he couldn't flee anymore.

Han Fei was tortured by the monster. The pig-faced monster acted like a predator messing around with the prey before delivering the fatal blow. Han Fei's mind was blurring. His arm was incapacitated. Bone was peeking out from his shoulder.

As the monster took another bite at him, the pain jolted Han Fei's bloody eyes open, he could no longer see the boy inside the alley.

'I must have been mad to pick a choice like this.' Coughing out a mouthful of blood, after having the black anaconda slither into hiding, Han Fei exited the game before his consciousness departed.

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Once he removed the gaming helmet, Han Fei careened to the ground. His heart was pounding. His sight was blurry perhaps because his brain was still under too great of a stimulus. His breathing was uneven as well. Pain originated from all parts of his body. He could not summon any strength. Lying on the cold

hard ground, Han Fei had to wait a long time before his eyes focused again. ‘What have I put myself through just to save an NPC?’

The pain in the cryptic world was as real as they came. Han Fei honestly had no idea he managed to hang on until the boy escaped from the scene. ‘Perhaps the best solution is to run to my own safety but ultimately humans are different from animals.’ Han Fei did not regret his decision. If he was placed in the same situation, he’d do it again. The cold hard floor eased Han Fei back into reality. He started to ponder a more serious problem. ‘What should I do when I log in next?’

Cattle Alley was a hidden map, it was rife with dangers. There were traps everywhere and at least one pig-faced murderous monster. In the game, Han Fei’s calf was injured, his shoulder was bitten until his bone was showing, and one of his arms was seriously broken. He would have trouble walking, much less running for his life. With such odds, how was he supposed to survive at Cattle Alley?

‘The pig-faced monster is dominated by hunger and there is no humanity left. Theoretically it wouldn’t stay at that one spot to wait for me to return, it would be too hungry. So when I get online next, there is a very great chance that it has gone somewhere else looking for food. If that’s the case, then I have a chance at survival. First, I need to find a place to recuperate. There are still books and items about emergency rescue in my inventory, they should be of use.’ When Huang Yin first arrived in the cryptic world, he had left Meng Si with many presents as repayment for her bowl of porridge. At the time, Han Fei took all the books and items related to medicine from Meng Si. He knew that one day they would come in handy, he just did not expect it would be in this kind of manner. ‘Thankfully, I’ve already read through some of them while I was at Happiness Neighbourhood.’

Every hard work would be repaid eventually. This encounter strengthened Han Fei’s resolve to pick up more skills like diving, rock-climbing, pharmacy and so on. ‘Other people play games because they are too tired from studying but I am busy studying because of the game I’m playing.’

He glanced at the wall of evidence. Before he encountered Perfect Life, Han Fei was an extra, and acting was everything to him. But now it was different, other than a big improvement to his acting skill, Han Fei had begun to dabble in management, criminology, sleuthing, martial arts and anti-surveillance. He used to think that he was a poor student. But now he slowly realized that it was because his potential hadn’t been unlocked back then. ‘Perhaps Brother Huang is stuck in the same quandary as I was. I might be able to help him become a better version of himself in the future.’

When he got some power back in him, Han Fei crawled up from the ground. He opened the fridge to find some food to eat. Then he crawled into bed. The warm bed appeared to possess a magical power that could heal his heart.

Han Fei was woken up at 8 am by his alarm. This would be the first day Thriller Novelist officially started its shoot. After a quick shower, Han Fei left his rental. When he reached the ground floor, the police were already waiting. He didn't want to trouble them anymore but the officer told Han Fei that the Butterfly might strike during the movie shoot so they had to be there to protect him. Unable to persuade them otherwise, Han Fei decided to cooperate with the police. Riding an unmarked car, Han Fei arrived at Fu Gui Meat Packing Plant.

For the first day of work, everyone was prepared and inspired. The feeling of anticipation infected everyone, from the actors to the workers. When Han Fei arrived, Bai Xian and Lee Ran were already in the set. They had a very busy schedule. After this shoot, they had other responsibilities to attend to.

"It's hard to set a time where everyone can gather together, so I hope everyone can bring out their best performance and do not leave behind any regret." Director Zhang already arrived at the plant with the rest of the crew at 6 am. He personally inspected the set and props. It was clear that this senior director treated this project seriously. However, even with all the planning, incidents started to happen after the shot began.

First, there were many NG scenes because Xiao Tong who played the student was unable to get into character; then Candy who played the Dreamer was bitten by an unknown bug in Spider's room and she wept uncontrollably from the pain. That was not all. Even the set which had been inspected multiple times worked against them. Cracks appeared inexplicably on the reflector boards, the fully-charged camera died after a few minutes of shooting. There were many strange incidents such as these. This shoot about a supernatural movie appeared to gain supernatural colors itself.

After noon, they were set to shoot a scene where Spider dropped from reality into his mental world. This fall was represented as death in Spider's book. In the midst of a mental breakdown, he tripped and fell from the 4th floor. His body knocked against the branches of the trees as he fell. Before he hit the ground, he believed he saw another version of himself on the 4th floor.

Ego, superego and id, reality and imagination were delineated in Spider's mind. This suggested that his brain activity was different from a normal person. Such an abstract scene was a test for any actor and director. Director Zhang's plan was to shoot everything in real life. He would find a stunt actor to be Han Fei's double and jump down from the 4th floor into a safety net. Zhang Director did not like to rely on technology to create virtual scenes, he was one of the few directors in the business to still rely on non-virtual technology. The stunt actor that Director Zhang found was very famous in the circle, he was someone Director Zhang specifically sourced from outside the district.

Everything was ready. But during the shoot, the experienced stunt actor faced an unexpected problem. He did not jump towards the set safety zone and as a result, his body was scratched by the tree branches. Director Zhang had considered this beforehand. He had the spare stunt double take the original stunt actor's place but the man committed the same mistake as well.

For stunt actors, a small mistake could be fatal. Therefore, they had to rehearse their actions more than several thousand times in their minds but even with so much caution and planning, the two stunt actors committed the same mistake. When Director Zhang went to check on the two actors, the two stunt actors reported something horrifying. They both said that when they jumped out from Spider's room, they felt like something suddenly reached out to grab their ankles.

If only one of the actors said that, it wouldn't be so worrying but now two of them said the same thing. The two of them did not know each other but they gave the same excuse.

"Can it really be that cursed?" Someone spread the incidents among the crew, initially no one trusted it but after it reached everyone's ears, the morale was clearly shaken. Someone suggested for Director Zhang to use virtual reality but Director Zhang refused to believe in the presence of ghosts. He personally led Han Fei to Spider's room to inspect it.

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"Do you think there are ghosts in this world or not?"

"I don't know but if there are, there aren't any at this place. Just some humans playing tricks on us." Han Fei followed Director Zhang into Spider's room. They walked towards the balcony and started to examine everything.

"Director Zhang, we were right there when the two of them jumped, we did not see any hands!" The Prop Manager complained with a bitter expression. If the accidents were caused by faulty props, then they would have to own up to the responsibilities.

"Let me check the recording." Director Zhang checked every frame of the uncut videos. No matter which angle he examined it from, there was no so-called hand that came close to the stunt actors. He rewound the tape and he did notice that both of the actors would have this similar tic of turning their head to the

side to look before they jumped. It was as if someone was calling them. Walking to the edge of the balcony, Director Zhang looked down the same direction the two actors did and he found nothing.

“Well, this is strange.” Director Zhang had the film crew back into the room to continue filming and he took out his phone to contact a new stunt actor. He made a few calls but unfortunately there was no available actor at such short notice. The latest one could arrive was after late afternoon.

“Shall we move to take the next scene first?” Bai Xian walked into the room. He heard the discussions from outside and offered this suggestion.

“If we do not finish these dangerous shots in the day, it’ll be more dangerous to do them at night.” Director Zhang said worriedly but there was no better option available. “Alright, we’ll take the scene where the 9 of you witnessed the first death. Is Xiao Tong ready yet?”

Bai Xian sighed helplessly. “He was often hailed as the genius new actor, but the performance by Han Fei that day appeared to have left a deep scar in him. They are of the same age and Xiao Tong believes they shouldn’t have that big of a difference between them. He had been trying hard to seek breakthrough to his acting.”

“Does he think that is so easily done? But it’s a good thing that he was stimulated to achieve self-improvement. In any case, go and get him. His character is actually not that complicated.” Some directors focused their movies on the plot, others relied on special effects, while most of Director Zhang’s movies focused on the characters, therefore he valued the actors that played them a lot.

While Bai Xian chatted with Director Zhang, Han Fei stayed outside at the balcony. He closed his eyes and pressed the switch in his mind. His personal emotion and consciousness sunk within himself. He started to parse the words that were written in the author’s books. The script was edited by the writers, embellished by the psychiatrist, the raw material though was personally penned by the Spider. Every character, every plot, every story was how Spider viewed the world. The real Spider was hidden inside his literature.

The meat packing plant next door had been fully reconstructed. If one ignored the expanse of abandoned buildings around it, Han Fei would be looking at the same scenery Spider once observed from his room. His fingers caressed the yellowed pages, Han Fei wanted to get into the character of the Spider but his mind was filled with his encounter from yesterday night. Inside the real Cattle Alley, there were mounds of dead carcasses and it resembled a maze that one could never escape from. Any turn at the fork would send you into the jaws of the pig-faced monster. They were guided by hunger, they...

At this point, a jolt of pain gripped Han Fei's mind. He reached his hands to press against his temple.

Skin was sliced open, bones were chopped as the murderous monsters waved the cleaver they held. As the sharp blades came at the innocent body, the cracked mask revealed a pig's face dominated by hunger. The red eyeballs bulged outwards, Han Fei got a glimpse of the monster's expression under the mask. The monster had a facial feature similar to that of an animal but that malicious expression was only made possible by a human mind.

"Did the monsters inside Cattle Alley look that way from the start? Where did they come from?"

Turning the pages, Han Fei entered Spider's heart. "They wear pig's mask. Perhaps it is because they've worn the mask for too long that even after they remove the mask, they still look like monsters. I often see people gorging themselves on some kind of food. The 'food' dribbled with golden fat, it was delicious, fragrant and sweet. The old man in the building called it time while the ghost under the bed called it kindness.

"When the 'food' could no longer be found, they started to slice off the flesh from each other's body. They munched on the fattest parts, ignoring their bodies which were being hacked by others. Sometimes, I find this world too simple to understand but at the same time, I find myself slipping into another world. The two worlds overlap in my eyes, they are like night and day. I can no longer decide which world I belong in. I find myself lost in the alley. I notice more and more of my friends putting on the masks. It is understandable because once you do, you won't feel anymore pain other than hunger.

"The scale bearing the two worlds starts to tip. My body leans towards one side. I can't tell whether it is because I've learned to embrace one of the worlds or the other world has decided to abandon me."

Spider's writing was very symbolic, they sounded like the ramblings of a mad person. If Han Fei had not been to the cryptic world himself, he wouldn't have understood the words either. 'Those pig-faced monsters are once humans! They were morphed into monsters after wearing the pig's masks for too long!' At this point, a question surfaced in Han Fei's mind, 'In that case, why would they force themselves to wear the mask? Is it possible that only the mask-wearers will not be attacked inside Cattle Alley? But that doesn't sound right either. The book mentions quite clearly that the pig-faced monsters will slice off the flesh from each other's bodies!'

Han Fei found the concept unfathomable but if he was given a chance, he had to get himself one of the masks.

Putting down the book entitled *Cattle Alley*, Han Fei had fully immersed himself into the role of the Spider. He joined the other actors. Han Fei who performed with his full ability could only be described as terrifying. Common problems like forgetting lines and faulty camera angles did not exist. He shot all of his scenes in one single cut. Even Director Zhang who was famed for his strictness could not nit-pick any problem. The actors who were in the same scene as Han Fei were under a lot of pressure. If there was an NG due to a singular mistake, they could laugh it off but if they were the cause of every single NGs, then even the most tolerant director would find it difficult to smile. Before this, the 8 actors underestimated Han Fei somewhat but now, whenever they were supposed to be in a scene with Han Fei, they would quickly get into the necessary emotions and rehearse their lines multiple times. Due to Han Fei, the efficiency of production was brought up as well.

As the sun set, the crew took out the spotlights. When the wind chime rang inside the author's room, the third stunt actor finally arrived. Director Zhang personally inspected all the safety equipment and then told the actor about the sequence of action as well as the cinematic effect that he needed. Then the actor was sent to the 4th floor balcony. Different from the previous 2 times, Han Fei and many other crew members came to watch. They wanted to see for themselves if the supernatural rumors were real or not.

Han Fei walked towards the balcony and turned his back to the camera. Then the shot ended to have the stunt double take Han Fei's place. He wore the same outfit as Han Fei. He climbed onto the balcony ledge and made the final preparation. All the cameras were in place. When he received the signal, the actor took a deep breath and his head turned involuntarily to the side. Then he jumped towards the designated location. The angle and positioning were perfectly fine but when the actor was supposed to push himself off the ledge, the actor clearly reigned in his force at the last moment. That meant that the actor landed metres before his supposed spot.

"Why did he do that?" Three consecutive stunt actors faced the same problem. The sky was darkening. The crew was reminded of the rumors at this building as well as the mystique surrounding the Spider.

"Is he okay? Is the injury serious?" Director Zhang hurried to check up on the actor. The man was not hurt but he seemed to be psychologically traumatized. When he turned back to look at the building, his face was white with fear. "Director, when I was supposed to jump, it felt like someone had reached out to grab my ankle." When he said that, the room was silent as the crew turned to look at Director Zhang. The 3 actors came from different backgrounds and they did not know each other but they gave the same explanation. It was as if there was some kind of force preventing Director Zhang from recording Spider's story.

“Director...” Bai Xian walked over. “How about we try virtual technology? With the technology nowadays, the scene might end up even more realistic than the truth.”

“If it is realer than the truth, then it is not the truth anymore.” Director Zhang sighed. He was about to turn to discuss this further with the Prop team when Han Fei walked over. “Do you wish to advise me to adopt virtual technology too?”

“No.” Han Fei stared silently at the 4th floor room and said, “Let me do the stunt myself.” His voice was soft but when he said that, everyone turned to look at him.

“What?! Of course not! No way!” Director Zhang rejected him without needing to consider it.

“My stamina is as good as most stunt actors and I have experience in doing stunts.” Han Fei was not lying. In Jin Sheng’s memory world, he had jumped down from the 4th floor to the air-cond machine on the 3rd floor and that was without any safety precaution. Han Fei was more qualified than most actors at doing stunts. The other actors were shocked by Han Fei’s proclamation. They now finally understood how this young actor without any background managed to claw his way up the industry. There were some ‘actors’ that refused to put in effort to study their lines but this young man was volunteering to do stunts that even stunt actors had to consider twice before attempting. What was professionalism? This was professionalism!

“We do not have much light left, Director, please let me give it a try.” Han Fei wanted to know what the 3 actors saw and he needed to rush home to play the game. He couldn’t waste time on the set anymore. After seeing Han Fei perform a few stunts, Director Zhang finally signed off his permission. To be honest though, he was breaking out in sweat internally. There was nowhere in the contract that specified Han Fei needed to do something so dangerous. Han Fei was the first actor to volunteer to do something like this. In his long years of working, this was the first time Director Zhang authentically admired an actor.

Han Fei already memorized the sequence. After all the safety equipment was inspected for the 4th time, Han Fei proceeded with the shoot. There was no stunt double, he walked into Spider’s room. In fact, he was Spider in that very moment. The boundary of reality blurred. Just as his soul was about to descend into the mire of madness, Spider killed off the self that tied him to reality. He sent his main persona deep into his mind, to begin a game of life and death with his other personas.

Stepping on the ledge, Han Fei slowly opened his arms. He felt no panic or fear. Han Fei was Spider. After getting the signal from the director, Han Fei readied to make his plunge but right at that moment, something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. He turned his head slightly and noticed there was a mirror placed on the 3rd floor. It looked like there was a different version of Han Fei making the jump as well. Han Fei was not affected by what he saw, after all, he had seen much worse. The image in the mirror raised not even a weak ripple in his heart.

And the man leaped!

The soul descended and the consciousness broke away. The body was swatted by the branches and the howl of the wind yelled into the ears. Even in that situation, Han Fei's expression was similar to that of the author. There was no fear on his face, only a smear of melancholy.

The cameras captured this perfect scene, Han Fei shocked everyone present. He managed something that even the stunt actors failed and he did it better than all of them. Some of them even saw the Spider's shadow on him. Pain but never despair; there was sadness in his eyes but also a shining belief that refused to be broken.

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The physical body fell and the new consciousness coagulated. Han Fei was suddenly hit by a sense of familiarity. This was exactly how he felt when he put on the gaming helmet and booted up the game every time. 'The world that Spider had once glimpsed, the scenarios he painted in his book, the mental world his personas inhabit, that is the cryptic world?'

The black box can only be hidden in 3 places, inside people's hearts, inside people's brains and inside people's nightmares. Han Fei had no idea why that knowledge materialized in his mind. He tried his best to control his body and followed the director's instruction. He safely fell through the branches and landed on the safety net. When his body was cushioned by the net, Han Fei turned subconsciously to a spot on the 4th floor like something was calling him. There was a humanoid figure with a white face standing behind one of the windows.

When his body bounced off the net and Han Fei took another glance at the 4th floor, the thing had already disappeared. The safety net was lowered as Director Zhang and the other crew rushed over.

“Han Fei, are you alright?” “That was perfect! That was the best shot we’ve ever had!” “That expression when falling shocked me! Just what was going through your mind then?!” “It was flawless!” Amidst the hubbub, Han Fei kept his eyes on the 4th floor. It was not until Director Zhang grabbed his arm that he recovered. “Han Fei, your hand is so cold, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, as long as the cut is useful. I do not wish to make any more jumps.” Han Fei crawled up from the net and rubbed his hands together. He did not once frown when performing the dangerous stunt but just a glimpse of that thing caused his hands to go cold. This was his body acting on instinct, his heart appeared to stop pumping as he locked gaze with that mysterious figure. The reason behind the previous stunt actors’ mistake was still not clarified but no one cared about it anymore because Han Fei had provided them with something better. The other actors surrounded Han Fei. Even the well-respected Lee Huaiming gained new respect for Han Fei. He had not seen such a professional actor in a long time already.

“With the advancement in technology, acting has become less tiring than before, that should be a good thing but I realize the new actors have something lacking in their performance. It’s not that their acting is not good, it’s like there is a lack of authenticity.” Lee Huaiming looked at Han Fei with admiration. “Before I met you, I couldn’t figure out what they were lacking, but today I finally see it.” Han Fei wanted to stand up but Lee Huaiming stopped him. “You need to rest, I anticipate working more often with you in the future.”

“Ol’ Lee, when I asked you about that earlier, didn’t you say you’re already considering retirement? Why the sudden change in decision now?” Bai Xian handed bottles of water to Ol’ Lee and Han Fei. He patted Han Fei on his back. “Your leap will propel you into stardom.” He then added jokingly, “Brother, you’ve placed a great pressure on me! I planned to use this character to aim for the best actor award but now, it feels like I’m weighing down the production progress.”

“Please don’t say that.” Han Fei waved his hands humbly. He did not think he had done anything beyond what he should do, which was to play the role of Spider to the best of his ability. However, perhaps due to his experience in the cryptic world, Han Fei’s best of ability might represent a different threshold from others.

After the first important scene for Thriller Novelist was completed, the movie moved from reality to the mind world, recording the duel between the 9 different personas. After chatting with the other actors, Han Fei went to a corner and used his phone to call Li Xue. He told her everything that he saw when he fell. The police had already set up a perimeter so no matter what that thing was, he would not be able to escape from the plant unnoticed. The first day of the shoot was overall successful. Even though there had been many strange occurrences, the result was good.

Han Fei needed some time to travel from the Northern Countryside to the old city. He was desperate to go home to play the game so after the shoot, he did not stay to participate with the police arrangement. With the accompaniment of a plainclothes officer, he returned to the old city. Compared to the things he needed to deal with in the cryptic world, the troubles in the real world were nothing. Han Fei stopped for dinner and then opened his computer. He found a professional suturing video and started to watch it. As he ate, he took in the knowledge. Han Fei was making use of every single second he had. He might need to perform the suturing on himself that very night. 'Tissues like muscles which have low tensile force can be fixed with Figure-of-8 suture. When closing the wound, one must be careful with the force applied to prevent damage to the muscle... Hmm, this shop's beef sauce is not bad, it's perfect to go with alcohol. Unfortunately, I'll have to play tonight so I can't enjoy any drinks.'

When Han Fei was unemployed, he felt like the days went by like years but now, he had the impression there were not enough hours in a day. Before he knew it, it was already midnight. 'The monster would be out searching for food due to hunger, it wouldn't be around me anymore.'

Taking a deep breath, Han Fei connected all the wires and put on the gaming helmet. Blood fell and the city covered in darkness froze. Han Fei stopped to feel that sensation, it was indeed quite similar to what he felt when he dropped from Spider's room earlier.

Opening his eyes, the horrible smell rushed into his nostril. The pain caused Han Fei to grimace immediately. Biting on his teeth, Han Fei knelt weakly to the ground. His body leaned to the side against the trash pile. The torn open shoulder was ghastly to the sight. If he did not deal with it soon, the wound would fester.

'Thankfully, the pig-faced monster is not here anymore...' Han Fei was about to sigh in relief when sudden footsteps came from the mouth of the alley, 'My luck is at a high 9 points, I wouldn't be that unlucky, would I?'

Before the thoughts in Han Fei's mind coalesced, he saw a woman wearing a pig's mask walk out from the corner!

The large body was pulsing with veins. The apron around her waist was strung with a row of human teeth, they were like trophies from the prey she had hunted. Han Fei's skull numbed. He was too incapacitated to struggle, much less run.

'The effect of hide and seek is working, that's why she hasn't noticed me inside the trash pile yet.' Han Fei considered the option of playing dead but he had no confidence to be able to trick the animal's sense of smell. These monsters should be very sensitive to the presence of living food.

With the wall as support, Han Fei struggled to stand up as pain and fear tormented him. Just as he was about to collapse in despair, a small door not far from him opened. There were occasional doors in the alley but most of them were locked. Han Fei tried to kick some down the day before, but they refused to budge.

'There's someone inside the house?' The door opened just in time as if waiting for Han Fei to arrive. Before his brain made the decision, his body was already moving towards it. The last energy was used to topple over the door and into the room. A black anaconda slithered out from the darkness. It silently slid the door close and then laid weakly beside Han Fei's feet.

"You've been waiting for me? You've been hiding here since I left?" Touched by the creature's concern, Han Fei reached down to hug the black anaconda. The action tore at his wounds and he hissed from pain. "I thought you were just a scaredy thing, but I see that I was mistaken. I officially apologize to you."

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The black anaconda coiled beside Han Fei's leg, it could feel the praise from Han Fei. Even though it was weak, it wagged its tail happily. The female butcher was still close by. Han Fei did not dare to speak lest it attracted her attention. He listened to the sound outside the door. After the heavy footsteps and awful smell faded away, he sighed in relief. 'I've managed to survive after all.'

Hugging the anaconda's surprisingly gummy body, the man and pet relied on each other inside the dangerous Cattle Alley. Both of them were reminded of Xu Qin. "Based on the hairdresser's comment, Xu Qin should still be somewhere around Cattle Alley, perhaps we'll finally find her here." With Xu Qin's face in his mind, Han Fei no longer felt that afraid. He took out the paper doll from his inventory. The face that resembled Xu Qin slowly turned towards a fixed direction. The paper doll probably sensed the location of the actual Xu Qin. After all, Xu Qin had once soaked her blood onto the doll and infused her curse into the doll.

'I better deal with my injuries first before I go looking for Xu Qin. After I reunite with Xu Qin, we can try picking off the straggling pig monster.' Struggling up from the ground, Han Fei held the wall and looked around. Only now he had the chance to examine the house he had sought refuge in. Han Fei had no idea what happened to the black anaconda after he logged off but the snake was lucky to have found a place

like this. The cracked bluestone garden tiles were covered in dried blood. Perhaps due to the overabundance of 'fertilizer', the small garden was overgrown with plants that Han Fei couldn't recognize. Han Fei crossed the garden to push open the wooden door of the lobby. The room did not have any human trace. Inside, situated at the centre of the room was a coffin. The coffin lid was chopped through by knives and axes. There was no dead body inside the coffin, instead it was filled with many bloody clothes.

'A ceremonial tomb?' The blood stains on the clothes had oxygenized, the owner of the clothes should be dead for a long time already. Han Fei wished to explore the place further but his physical condition did not allow it.

"Come, help me bite on this end of the needle." Han Fei hid inside the innermost corner of the room and then took out the suturing set from his inventory. Replaying the tutorial video in his mind, Han Fei started to operate on himself. He had practiced suturing on dead bodies at Happiness Neighbourhood before so he was not that worried. Biting a piece of fabric to silence any possible screams, Han Fei's hands sewn the thread through his own skin. His handiwork was cleaner than most doctors. With the snake's help, Han Fei used about 10 minutes to complete the simple suture. The lines on the wounds were crooked at places but at least the bleeding had stopped.

'That solves one problem but what about the bone dislocation?' Han Fei tore off the clothes, found some twigs in the garden to make a simple crutch to stabilize his left arm. When he was done with everything, the man whose color had drained from his face collapsed next to the coffin.

'The food that Xu Qin cooks can rapidly recover my Life Points and they come with many different special effects. After we return to the Happiness Neighbourhood, I'll need her to cook more for me so that I can take them with me.' In the cryptic world, Han Fei's body recovered faster than normal. However, the man did not really quite grasp the rules of this world yet. Then again, this was not really his fault. Han Fei had been too busy surviving to test out other things. Han Fei took a quick rest inside the dilapidated room. However, it was not safe inside the room as a few minutes later, he could hear footsteps passing the door twice. Perhaps a pig-faced monster was patrolling the nearby area.

'The doors at Cattle Alley are mere decoration for those pig-faced monsters. They can barge in any time they wish, the original owners of this place were probably killed by them as well.' After regaining some strength, Han Fei climbed up from the ground. He reached his movable right arm into the coffin. He found a clan record book underneath the pile of clothes. The names were crossed off in red, it looked quite frightening.

‘Each of the name crossed out represents a life lost?’ At the last page of the book, Han Fei came across the only name that was not crossed out—Wang Sheng. ‘Could that be the boy that I saw yesterday?’ He placed the book in his inventory and to his surprise, it triggered a system mission. “Notification for Player 0000! You’ve found a mission object—The Wang’s Clan Records!

“The Wang’s Clan Records: The existence of this book proves that Cattle Alley was once a place of vibrant lives. Find out how the place turned from Human Alley to Cattle Alley, it might prove helpful to your escape.”

The hint provided by the system was quite cryptic. Han Fei had no idea what good the book was for so he kept it for now. Exploring the rest of the house, Han Fei noticed a lot of nail scratch marks on the bedroom walls. The marks on the cement walls were mixed with blood. It suggested that each bedroom once housed a crazy person. Even if they scratched until their nails bled, they needed to escape from this place. ‘None of the houses at this alley appear to have windows, each of the houses is like an isolated box. Once the door is closed, no one knows what happens inside the building.’

Han Fei entered one of the bedrooms and being surrounded on all sides by scratch marks, the feeling of claustrophobia grew. The small room had witnessed immense pain and despair. ‘Who was trapped here? A man or a monster?’ None of the furniture inside the room was undamaged. Han Fei frowned as he searched for useful items among the broken paraphernalia. When he glanced under the bed, his eyes narrowed. At the corner of the bed, there was a hand that was chopped off cleanly at the wrist. The decayed hand gave off a horrible smell. The skin was dark from decomposition but even so the five fingers were still tightly clutched around a fractured bone-paring knife.

‘A knife?’ Cold steel was a unique presence at Cattle Alley. All the blades inside this hidden map appeared to be cursed. ‘Could this be an ownerless cursed object?’

Taking out the paper doll as insurance, Han Fei had the black anaconda dragged the knife out from the bed. With great unwillingness, the snake wiggled towards the hand. When it was about to reach the hand, the large body shivered as if it was stimulated by imminent danger. It slithered back to Han Fei’s side. No matter how hard Han Fei tried to persuade it, it refused to go near the hand anymore. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be able to consume everything?’

After consoling the snake, Han Fei resisted the pain and used his dislocated left arm to reach for the knife. His thought was simple. His left arm was already half-incapacitated, even if it was fully incapacitated, it made not much of a difference. He needed to preserve his unharmed right arm. His fingers slowly approached, Han Fei planned to use the system to determine whether the knife was still usable or not. But when his fingertip touched the blade, it was like 10 pairs of hands kneaded harshly at

his brain. Indescribable pain squeezed at his soul. Han Fei was close to fainting. His instinct was to pull the arm back but his body was out of control. He could not even put this simple order into motion.

Even using all his might, the only thing he could manage was to open his eyes. Inside the scratched room brimming with terror and pain, 6 Lingered Spirits dripping in blood stood around Han Fei. Their faces were merciless and their bodies misshapen. Part of their souls was trapped inside the bone-paring knife.

‘All the knives at Cattle Alley are trapped with souls.’ The pair of hands intended to tear Han Fei apart. They could no longer be reasoned with. ‘They appear to be a family. Are they the original owners of this place?’

At the brink of death, Han Fei couldn’t afford to hesitate, he took out the clan records from his inventory. The tattered book fell to the ground and it flipped open to a random page. The 6 Lingered Spirits’ attention was temporarily distracted. Han Fei grasped that opening to scan the 6 faces closer, he noticed one of them looked like the female carcass which shielded the boy in the alley.

“Wang Sheng! I’ve saved Wang Sheng!” Han Fei shouted since he had nothing to lose. The pain in his brain lessened as the 6 spirits pounced at him. They appeared to wish to see something from within Han Fei’s mind. Several seconds later, the 6 spirits stopped attacking Han Fei. They phased out of Han Fei’s body and returned to the bone-paring knife. At the same time, the robotic voice announced, “Notification for Player 0000! You’ve found a Broken Grade G Cursed Object—Knife!”

“Knife (Broken Grade G Cursed Object): This blade was responsible for the death of a family of six, it was meant for a massacre.”

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Staring at the broken knife, Han Fei was still in shock, he had just escaped a brush with death. Taking in a deep breath, he knelt down beside the severed hand. Han Fei knew that the broken knife was very dangerous but he was unwilling to leave just like that. ‘When I first interacted with the pig-faced monster’s cleaver, the system told me that each Midnight Butcher had to have their own blade and perhaps I might be able to locate my own blade here. From this hint, to access the hidden profession of Midnight Butcher, I need to acquire a blade of my own at Cattle Alley.’

Most of the blades at Cattle Alley were wielded by monsters, even ownerless blades were hard to control due to the spirits that inhabited them. However, this bone-paring knife presented a unique opportunity for Han Fei. Because he had saved Wang Sheng's life, the spirits inside the knife did not appear to be that hostile towards him anymore. 'I guess this is what they mean by you reap what you sow.'

It was incredibly hard to find a usable blade at Cattle Alley, made the wrong choice and you'd be dead. However, Han Fei appeared to be presented with an opportunity. After he made all the mental preparation he could, Han Fei reached out for the bone-paring knife again. Noting this, the black anaconda slithered backwards and used its tails to cover its eyes. When his fingertips touched the bone-paring knife for the 2nd time, the chilling presence travelled up his arm into his brain, causing Han Fei to tremble. 'The 6 spirits did not come out to harm me!'

With this good start, Han Fei was imbued with more courage. He slowly pried open the dead fingers and eventually held the bone-paring knife in his grasp!

"Notification for Player 0000! You've successfully obtained a cursed blade at Cattle Alley, will you activate the official Profession Mission to unlock the hidden profession, Midnight Butcher?"

"Yes." Han Fei chose quite easily. The biggest reason he came here was to do that.

"Optional Mission 1: Use the blade you're holding to kill a life, it can be any life, a human, a ghost, or an animal.

"Optional Mission 2: Use the blade you're holding to save a life, it can be any life, a human, a ghost, or an animal."

Han Fei was presented with two completely opposite missions, to kill or to save. 'If I choose the later, what counts as saving? For example, can I beat up Xu Qin's pet and then heal it afterwards?' If he did not complete a mission tonight, Han Fei wouldn't be able to log off and he'd be trapped in the game forever. 'Sigh, I don't think that'll work. Xu Qin's pet is not a human, not a ghost and definitely not an animal, not even the system can categorize it. Furthermore, it just saved me, how could I hurt it?' After giving it some thoughts, Han Fei chose the first mission, to kill something. Compared to healing, killing was much easier.

After accepting the first mission, Han Fei tried to store the bone-paring knife into his inventory but just as he had that thought, pain jolted his arm. The 6 Lingerings inside the blade still hadn't fully approved of Han Fei. 'Who knew it'd be so difficult to acquire a blade I can call my own?'

It was easy to find a blade in the cryptic world but to find a blade that could harm a ghost, now there was where the difficulty set in. Han Fei placed the blade inside his pocket. He did not charge out from the building in a bloodlust to go after a prey, instead he decided to stay inside the house for 3 hours first. However, his plan was disrupted when 10 minutes later, the footsteps returned to the door. The pig-faced monster appeared to have sensed something in the air and returned to patrol around the area.

'Sheesh, what a stubborn creature.' The footsteps became more insistent, the person appeared to be narrowing their search area. The black anaconda beside Han Fei coiled with anxiety. 'I can't stay here anymore, the owner of the footsteps will eventually find me if I do.'

His body had recovered enough to move. When the footsteps reappeared again, Han Fei held his breath. After the footsteps faded away, he led the anaconda away from the house and turned down the direction opposite from where the footsteps went. With the experience from before, Han Fei did not move in a hurry this time. He slowed his footsteps to ensure that he made no noise. When he reached the first fork, the heavy footsteps returned. The pig-faced woman with the human teeth string around her waist appeared, she seemed to be patrolling this area for a long time already. This time she stopped before the door of the old house that Han Fei just vacated.

Bang! The cleaver fell heavily on the door. With a merciless smile on her face, she gleefully made quick work of the wooden door. Saliva dribbled on her chin as she picked up Han Fei's scent which lingered inside the house. The veins on her arms popped as she waved the cleaver wildly. The wooden door collapsed and she charged into the house with a roar.

The scene caused cold sweat to bead on Han Fei's forehead, there was no place that was 100 percent safe at Cattle Alley. Han Fei did not stay to observe, he left in a hurry. But at that moment, the robotic voice in his mind suddenly came with this announcement, "Profession Assessment 1: Detailed-orientated, and quick decision maker, you possess remarkable instinct, sharp mind and a reasonable store of good luck, you are suitable for many professions, including the Midnight Butcher."

'Every choice that I made after the mission started, and not only the choices that were made visible by the system, would influence the end result?'

Since he had just escaped from danger, Han Fei did not dare to be too careless. He crossed through the complicated alleyways and tried to memorize the paths as best as he could. Han Fei wanted to do something no one had ever attempted, which was to use his super memory to chart out the map of Cattle Alley in his mind. Only by doing this that the chance to find the exit would drastically increase.

While avoiding the monsters, Han Fei tried every door that he came across. Following the direction provided by the red paper doll, Han Fei dragged his wounded body to perform an extreme mission. After passing 3 forks, with the black anaconda acting as his scout, Han Fei managed to evade encounters with 2 pig-faced monsters. When he entered the 4th fork, he heard a cat's meow inside the deadly silent alley. The sound was soft but Han Fei heard it clearly. He turned to the trash pile at the corner. A black cat was pressed under some dead bodies and its leg was punctured by a rusted iron fence. The more it struggled, the deeper the fence link pierced into its flesh.

'Is this a trap? Or someone was drawing pleasure from the torment of this poor creature?' The cat's meowing could attract unwanted attention so it would be wise for Han Fei to leave immediately. However, something popped up in his mind. The mission that he accepted earlier said that as long as he used the knife to take a life, his mission would be completed. Here, he was presented with an easy way to finish the mission. 'Completing the mission though shouldn't be the most important, the most important factors are the choices that I make along the way.'

Han Fei had the black anaconda scout ahead. After ensuring there were no other creatures hiding inside the trash pile, Han Fei raised the cursed knife and chopped at the fence link. When he helped the injured cat from the entrapment of the fence, the cat dashed away with a speed that did not look like its legs were injured.

'If this was a trap laid down by someone, when they couldn't hear the cat anymore, they would come to inspect this place, that means I need to leave in a hurry.'

Putting the knife away, he just took a few steps when the robotic voice commented, "Profession Assessment 2: You who have chosen to kill, have rescued a cat. Perhaps deep inside your heart, you know that someone who could be cruel to animals will be cruel to humans too."

Chapter 228:

Midnight Butcher was an extremely rare profession in Perfect Life, thus, it was understandably hard to obtain this profession. One had to overcome layers of challenges to become a Midnight Butcher and that showed the actual value of this profession. The unlocking difficulty and the strength of a profession

was proportional. To become a Midnight Butcher, one had to go to the hidden map to complete a very hard hidden mission, no player in the normal version of Perfect Life would be able to accomplish that. 'What exactly is the purpose of these profession assessments? It feels like the system is grading me, to see if I fit this profession or not.'

After letting the black cat go, Han Fei did not stay for long. He memorized the location of this fork and continued on his journey. 'The mission given by the system looks deceptively simple, it only requires me to kill something with a blade. But somehow I have a feeling that even if I did do that, the system might not afford me the profession of Midnight Butcher. I have to say, this system is rather useless, cunning and has a tendency to toy with its host.' If he did not know about the history of Cattle Alley, Han Fei would have done things completely different but as fate would have it, he did find out about Spider from real life. In fact, to play Spider, he even went to Spider's former home to experience Spider's life. As he continued to submerge himself into Spider's life, whenever Han Fei came to a problem inside Cattle Alley, he would ask himself this question often: What would Spider do?

Ignoring the influence from the other 8 personas, Han Fei would only consider things from the main persona's perspective. 'The Cattle Alley is created into existence to record the world in Spider's eyes. It was his first book and it is only wise to follow the man's mindset when I am literally living in his world...' Han Fei was mulling over things in his mind, he hadn't left the fence for that long when the anaconda slithered close to him as if it could sense something. 'Hmm? What's wrong? I didn't hear any footsteps.'

But out of trust in the anaconda, Han Fei halted and took careful steps back. After waiting for a long time, and seeing no change in the surroundings, Han Fei and the black anaconda moved forward again. However, as they did, the blood in the air conspicuously thickened. The muddy alley was splattered with blood and unknown stains, it was sticky to the touch. Even if Han Fei was very careful, his shoes squelched noisily with each step. 'The ground and walls are covered in still-drying blood, a violent battle has occurred here not too long ago.'

Out of concern for safety, Han Fei intended to turn around and take another road but the red paper doll suddenly stood up in his palm. It seemed to suggest that Xu Qin was not too far ahead. 'These blood stains are related to Xu Qin?' As this thought bubbled up in Han Fei's mind, he couldn't stop himself from taking steps forward. Inside the dangerous Cattle Alley, this name symbolized an inexplicable sense of security for Han Fei and the black anaconda. To soften the sound of his movement, Han Fei took small steps.

The smell of blood and stench in the air was suffocatingly strong. After Han Fei turned another corner, his eyes narrowed. An impossibly large pig-faced monster collapsed on top of a pile of garbage. A giant hole was punctured through its stomach even though its chest was still rising and falling. The mask was

cracked and splintered. A baby-like sobbing could be heard coming from underneath the mask. The sobbing was weak which suggested that the time of the monster was not long anymore.

‘Who or what did this?’ Han Fei’s pupils narrowed, his calves tensed and he took out the bone-paring knife when he saw the dying monster. He needed to kill a life to complete the profession mission and now he was presented with a perfect chance. The pig-faced monster was weakened and heavily injured. It could barely even move. A better chance wouldn’t come Han Fei’s way. ‘The hole on the stomach is caused by tearing, Xu Qin’s choice of weapon is table knives, in other words, the thing that injured it wasn’t Xu Qin but something else.’ Han Fei’s hand that held the knife trembled as he slowly approached. The family of six wanted revenge, their hatred was palpable, making the blade sharper than usual. Han Fei inched forward, his mind contemplating every possible detail that he could have missed.

‘The monster wasn’t injured by Xu Qin and the blood was in a spray pattern. The whole alley is coated in broken flesh and blood. That suggests that it was chased here by something. The culprit was torturing it out of pure joy. A predator that likes to torment its prey will let its prey go just like that?’ Han Fei hadn’t even reached the injured monster when he saw a wooden door next to the monster being pushed open. Another pig-faced monster which was almost 3 metres tall and had an eye blinded walked onto the scene. The lower half of its mask was damaged and its ugly porcine face was peeking through. It held a heavy cleaver in its right hand and his left hand dragged along a string of human heads bound together by a thick rope.

‘It’s him?!’ Han Fei’s eyes burned with fury instantly. The wounds on his shoulder and arm were all thanks to this pig-faced monster! Han Fei fought with all his might and even so, he only managed to blind one of its eyes. ‘It appears to have gotten stronger?’ Han Fei’s eyes glowed dangerously. ‘I will complete a mission if I can kill that dying monster, unfortunately there is another condition before I can leave the game and that is to stay in the game for more than 3 hours. So far, I have not reached that time limit yet.’

When Han Fei saw the new arrival, a risky plan surfaced in his mind. He would use his knife to deal the fatal blow to the dying monster and when the mission was completed, he would log off the game. If not for the gaming time requirement, he would have sneaked up to the back of the pig-faced monster already. ‘Since I still can’t quit the game, even if I manage to steal the kill, I will have a hard time escaping with my current physical condition.’ Han Fei was like a snake waiting to strike as his eyes stared at the back of the pig-faced monster’s back. He was the man who would save the injured cat but he was also the man who would not hesitate to eliminate monsters who had lost all humanity. ‘What I need now is an opening.’

The pig-faced monster dragging the human heads walked out from the house and looked around. Then he stepped harshly on the other monster’s open wounds. It hoped to hear the other monster squeal

louder to attract more attention. After several stomps, blood soaked through the trash. The monster had a pig's face but the blood was as crimson as human blood, as if telling Han Fei that these monsters were once humans too. The wounds tore open and the monster on the ground slowly lost the struggle. Its pupils dilated and its fingers loosened.

Putting down the string of heads, the other pig-faced monster seemed dissatisfied with its kin's weakness. With a hiss, it raised the cleaver high. It aimed to decapitate its kin's head and then trap its soul inside the cleaver. 'Even the pig-faced monsters will kill among themselves? Or this particular pig-faced monster attacks indiscriminately due to the cracks to its mask?' Han Fei watched everything unfold quietly. His eyes were devoid of emotions. The murderous intent was perfectly hidden by his masterful acting skill.

The cleaver was raised high. A chilling laughter came out from the monster's mouth. As the cleaver came at the monster's neck, the monster which had previously stopped all struggling suddenly nudged its body to the side. The heavy cleaver lodged into the monster's scapula. As the blade got stuck inside the monster's bone, the pig-faced monster yelled shrilly!

Its body arched like a fish as it took out a hidden dagger that was stuffed inside its open stomach. The five fingers closed around the dagger and then it stabbed mercilessly at the other monster's chest. This happened too suddenly, no one expected the dying monster to launch a counter attack. The standing monster immediately let go of the cleaver but it was still one step too late. The dagger pierced through its chest and clawed out a long wound. The monster on the ground was too weak or else this ambush would have punctured the other monster's heart.

As retaliation, the ambushed monster picked its kin up from the ground and slammed it angrily into the wall. The two immensely large monsters tore at each other inside the alley, the whole ground was shaking. The monster with the gaping stomach knew it was no match so it howled as loud as it could. It wanted to attract as much danger as it possible could. It wanted to drag the 'man' who killed it down into hell with it. After a final struggle, the monster finally had its head chopped off. Its dagger was shattered by the cleaver as well. The moment the dagger shattered, 4 wailing souls were sucked into the cleaver.

The already scary looking cleaver had a few more new scratches appear on it and the presence it gave off was even chillier. The hatred winding around it deepened. Kicking its kin's head aside, the single-eyed monster clutched at the wound around its chest. It spat at its kin's dead body. As if feeling that was not enough, it smashed a few times at the monster's non-responding carcass. Regardless, venting his anger was not going to help close its wounds, if anything, the drastic actions tore open its wound further. It leaned against the wall and prepared to leave, dragging the cleaver with it. Blood dripped to the ground, it did not notice that a pair of cold eyes had been following it.

'I think I've found the perfect prey.' Han Fei silently eased out from his hiding spot. He moved towards the monster's decapitated head and reached out to remove the thing's pig mask.

Chapter 229:

To play the character of Spider, Han Fei had read the book Cattle Alley multiple times. Spider had detailed description about the mask inside the book. The pig's mask was very unique in the sense that many people slowly became monsters after wearing the mask for too long. It was suggested that wearing the mask would take away all the pain other than hunger. Initially Han Fei believed that wearing the mask would prevent one from being attacked by other pig-faced monsters but what happened earlier proved that hypothesis wrong. 'Must one wear a mask to become a Midnight Butcher?'

The mask on the decapitated head was heavily fractured, it could barely cover the face underneath it. Holding the mask, a desire to put it on surged through Han Fei. He couldn't tell where that urge came from. It was as if the mask could evoke the bestial side within him. There was a voice in his mind that coaxed him, telling him that after he put the mask on, he would become an actual member of the Cattle Alley. He would no longer be targeted and the other pig-faced monsters would not make him their main target anymore. This mask was the only thing that delineated the difference between prey and predator.

His breathing turned heavy as Han Fei moved the mask closer and closer to his face. Finally the mask stopped an inch from the tip of his nose. 'I appear to possess the ability to resist the voice from the mask.' After raising his acting to masterful, Han Fei had a switch in his mind that could control his emotions. He locked his memory and emotion deep within his mind, turning his fore-conscious into a blank canvas, that way he was able to resist any temptation temporarily. The heavily fractured pig's mask wished to summon the beast inside Han Fei's heart but Han Fei's heart was empty, perhaps only an intact pig's mask would be able to lure out the thing residing deep within Han Fei. However, that thing would be not a beast but probably a ghost that no one had ever seen before.

'I might need this thing in the future but not now.' Han Fei put the mask away. He glanced at the desecrated body on the ground and turned to follow the other pig-faced monster using the blood trail. When he walked past the dead carcass, the system rang again in his mind, "Profession Assessment 3: I've read this in a fairytale, let sin fight with sin, those with kindness shouldn't even dirty their hands." Han Fei had no idea whether this assessment was good or not. In any case, there was only one thought in his mind then, which was how to kill that single-eyed pig-faced monster.

Even though Han Fei had been there for only 2 nights, he had gotten quite familiar with Cattle Alley. The smell of decomposition and blood no longer affected him anymore. Han Fei could maintain sharpness of his mind at this location where even the air was dirty. Without putting on the mask, Han Fei forced himself to acclimatize to this place. The wound on Han Fei's calves was still stinging with pain so he could not run. On the other hand, the pig-faced monster wasn't moving too fast either because it suffered a wound close to its vitals. These two individuals kept a safe distance from each other as they travelled down the alley.

Even with the injury, the single-eyed monster did not take any pitstop. As if sensing that it was getting weaker, it needed to locate a sanctuary to recuperate immediately. It had a very fixed destination in its mind, it had been moving towards the northern side of the Cattle Alley. Han Fei followed behind it quietly. To his surprise, the red paper doll was pointing him down the same direction as well. 'Why would both of them be pointing at the north side? What exactly is over there?'

In real life, Fu Gui Meat Packing Plant was in the northern countryside of Xin Lu and the living compound was to the north of the plant. As they moved further north, other than the increase in number of carcasses, there were also chopped cursed objects. The blades in Cattle Alley appeared to be able to strengthen themselves through slicing up other cursed objects. The smell of blood deepened, it was almost heavy enough to coagulate into a mist. Every breath Han Fei took left a rusty scent in his lung. 'Earlier, I've only been exploring the outskirts of Cattle Alley.'

Han Fei used his photographic memory to not only memorize all the paths he took but also all the available hiding spots along the way. 'Where exactly is this monster going?' Han Fei had no idea of its destination but he realized the paper doll was reacting more and more intensely. The face similar to Xu Qin revealed a horrifying expression, the doll was smiling. Moving deeper into the alley, the place was finally engulfed by a blood mist. Han Fei studied the blood mist around him and was reminded of the grey fog inside Yi Ming Private Academy's manager mission. One was made from negative emotions, the other malice and blood. The sounds of footsteps became more numerous, the density of monsters gathered here was much higher than outside.

The thought of exiting the game pushed forward in Han Fei's mind but the paper doll was reacting too strongly, Xu Qin should be not far away now. Han Fei continued to follow behind the single-eyed monster. However, after he climbed over a wall covered in bloody vines, something unexpected happened!

The monster suddenly stopped, as if sensing danger, it raised the cleaver defensively. The only eye stared into the mist. Initially Han Fei did not notice anything but when he moved closer, he could hear clearly the sound of munching and engulfing. The person who made the feasting noise did not keep their presence unknown. It was as if they only had hunger left in their mind. When it heard this harrowing

voice, the paper doll's smile turned brighter. If not for Han Fei clutching it, it would have run ahead already.

The black anaconda behind Han Fei slithered in anxiety too. It wanted to move ahead but it was afraid of the pig-faced monster. Carrying the snake on his back and holding the bone-paring knife in his right hand, Han Fei believed that the opening he had been waiting for had finally arrived. The wounded monster hissed warningly. It waved the cleaver wildly as the single eye pulsed in its head.

At the same time, the crunching sound deep inside the alley suddenly stopped. Moments later, the blood mist was stirred as five slender, pale fingers holding a table knife reached out from the mist. The heels clicked. A woman covered in blood and wearing half of the pig's mask on her face appeared inside the alley. Licking away the trace of blood from her lips, the eyes underneath the mask leaped over the pig-faced monster and instantly landed on Han Fei. Then the lips that were redder than the blood mist hooked into a smile.

Chapter 230:

The woman's unique beauty was seductive and intense, it carried an alluring scent of blood with it. One would die and bleed for a glimpse of her face. With a curl of her lips, she managed to make the blood mist around her pale in comparison. The ugly and horrid half of the pig's mask formed a great contrast to the fair and flawless skin. It left a deep impact on anyone who came across it. The single-eyed monster saw the smile on the woman's face too. Its growling weakened. The red eye reflected the woman's beautiful image. The crooked mouth leaked with blackish red blood as it exposed uneven teeth stuck with rotting meat. It took a step forward but realized the woman's gaze still hadn't wandered over to it. Then something dawned on the monster, it turned to look behind it.

Just as the monster turned its neck around, the woman in the mist suddenly picked up speed without any warning. With the blood mist coiling around her, and the darkest curse mixed into it, the table knife that was as thin as a butterfly wing flew forward in a red straight line. The line appeared sharp enough to cut through the whole dirty world.

Bang! The heavy cleaver barely managed to block the table knife, the giant rebound caused the woman to tumble backwards but then that did not deter her. Her body twisted with manoeuvres that were humanly impossible. The table knife in her hand split into many different knives. The pig-faced monster had no idea where they came from. It had only blocked the woman's first cut but the knife flickered backwards to bloom in a steel flower. The blades cut at the black veins that run through the pig-faced monster's arms. Blood squirted out like streams as the woman landed gracefully on the ground. Holding

the table knife, the way she studied the pig-faced monster was like how a chef would look at his ingredients.

Different from the pig-faced monster's brutal and mad attacks, the woman's attack was calculated and accurate. She only aimed at the monster's weak points. Based on the cuts she delivered, it appeared like she planned to flay the creature alive. This was probably how the best chef kept their ingredients as fresh as possible. She prepared her ingredient and only delivered death at the last possible moment.

With one eye blinded, a wound on his chest, the 3 metres tall monster was a bumbling fool before the woman, it was more like a piece of fatty meat on the chopping block. The blood moisturized the air around the alley. The blood mist thickened further. The monster's movement slowed down eventually. It realized that it was not a match for the woman, not when it was already injured. If it continued this battle, death was only a matter of time. With a retreat plan in its mind, its action leaned more towards the defensive.

When the pig-faced monster forced the woman back one more time, it turned around and ran without hesitation. The woman though was very receptive and agile. Only by running at full speed that it would have a chance at survival. The monster who killed for purpose was now being hunted. The brain which was dominated by hunger now worried that it would be served on the dining table and became the food to ease other people's hunger. With its full attention on the woman, the monster did not notice that there was a pair of emotionless eyes which was following the vein on its neck from the dark corner of the alley.

The trundling footsteps approached. Han Fei who laid in ambush had been waiting a long time for this. Han Fei never claimed himself to be a kind and forgiving person. In the cryptic world, forgiveness would only be repaid with cruelty. If you hoped for kindness, this was not the game for you. Therefore, if you had to go after someone, you had to make sure that the prey was dead by the end of it. There shouldn't be any mercy, because if mercy was given, the person would only return seeking vengeance.

That was the mistake the pig-faced monster had made. The brain which was consumed by hunger caused it to make this rookie mistake. If it had waited at the spot for Han Fei to return, then it would have killed Han Fei easily, unfortunately it did not take advantage of that opportunity. Now that the table had turned, Han Fei was not going to make the same mistake it made. When the pig-faced monster was fighting the woman, Han Fei was already gauging the distance between himself and the monster. He had simulated the action that he was supposed to take next multiple times in his mind as well.

Han Fei had considered every kind of circumstance. He adjusted his breathing, and silenced his breath. He disappeared into the pile of dead carcasses that littered the alley. The heavy footsteps came closer and closer, accompanied by the stinging smell of blood and decomposition. The pig-faced monster raced into the fork in the alley. It didn't have the time to care about the opening wound on its chest. Its guts poured out and the monster trampled over them. Blood carved out a trail in its wake. Resisting the pain from its body, the only thought in its mind was, Run!

With its attention understandably taken by the woman behind it, the pig-faced monster forgot to assess its surroundings. How could the brain which operated on mere hunger comprehend human cunningness? When the pig-faced monster neared the fork which seemed perfectly safe, a figure suddenly lunged out from the thick darkness!

Han Fei calculated the time perfectly, everything was well within his plan, including the pig-faced monster's reaction to his appearance. He even predicted how the monster would react when it first saw him. "Die!" The black anaconda already crawled into the ghost tattoo. Ignoring the possible damage to his body, Han Fei's murderous intent gushed forward like a wave. It could no longer be contained!

The body empowered by the ghost tattoo radiated thick negative energy. Han Fei leaped into the air and made the monster's thick neck his target. With his eyes fixed on the fatal spot, Han Fei flew at his fastest speed and plunged the bone-paring knife into the monster's neck!

"Ah!" With veins bulging on his arms, Han Fei pumped the knife deeper into the monster's flesh. He wanted to sever the head off fully but he was still too weak to manage that. The bone-paring knife was stuck half-way through the monster's neck. The large pig-faced monster raised the even larger cleaver. This reaction was within Han Fei's calculation as well. Since he knew he wouldn't be able to pull out the bone-paring knife easily, he let go of the hilt and left the blade inside the monster's neck.

The bone-paring knife was the home of a dead family of six. The souls who were murdered by pig-faced monsters naturally had an intense hatred towards them. The shattered bone-paring knife wasn't sharp, the sharpness came from the hatred. As long as the blade was left inside the monster's body, the hatred from the blade would continue to weaken it. The monster who only had fleeing in its mind did not expect an ambush from a former enemy in the shadows. The butchers in Cattle Alley normally worked in solitude but the duo that it encountered today appeared to be working in perfect tandem.

The wound on its chest was tearing open, its one eye was blinded and now there was a blade stuck in its neck, no matter how sturdy the pig-faced monster was, it would be reaching its end soon. Its running speed gradually slowed. When the blood mist surrounded it, the eye underneath the mask showed fear for the first time. "You too know the meaning of fear?" Han Fei already finished the work he set out to

do. He rapidly retreated. Crimson fog swallowed the alley. Stepping on the monster's blood, the woman in half mask arrived like a beautiful death.

She moved very fast. The pig-faced monster could barely put up any resistance as the woman continued to lay more wounds on its body. The joints connecting its arms and legs were being sliced through. The monster's cleaver fell to the ground with a thud. The woman appeared to be cutting along the vein of the muscles. Even during the heat of battle, she managed to find the gap between the tendons and joints easily. She was truly a master butcher. Who knew how many living creatures she had butchered to perfect a skill as masterful as this?

There was an arresting beauty to her slaughter. It was like a painting done in blood. Han Fei hugged the black anaconda which had slithered out from the ghost tattoo and was mesmerized by what he saw. The woman in half a mask paced in the bloody rain. She flitted like a butterfly around the monster, flaying through skin and slicing through flesh. The pig-faced monster was still squealing in pain but there was nothing else it could do.

'This whole scene is so maddening and cruel but how come all I can see is an indescribable beauty?' The woman attacked the pig-faced monster before it was about to spot Han Fei. She did not want the monster to get close to Han fei but she did not allow herself to get close to Han Fei either. This strange behaviour confused Han Fei. As the pig-faced took its last breath, he walked out from the darkness and voluntarily approached the woman. But to his surprise, hearing his approach, the woman stopped her butchering. She rapidly retreated and wreathed herself in the blood mist.

With the single-eyed monster's disintegrating body between them, Han Fei and the woman stood on opposite ends of the alley. After a moment of hesitation, Han Fei called out that name. "Xu Qin?"

The woman did not shake or nod her head. She merely pointed at her mask and signalled for Han Fei to stay away. The woman appeared to be in a state of madness. Even at his distance, Han Fei could feel the heavy scent of blood and malice that came off her. Her dress was soaked in blood and her eyes under the mask were filled with curse. She was at the edge of losing control. This reminded Han Fei of what happened before. The curse could bring Xu Qin power but it would also take away her true self. Only by endless consumption that she could retain her rationality.

Han Fei knew the difficulty Xu Qin faced but he still took steps forward. It was very simple reasoning that he had. When faced with a problem, two heads were better than one.

Seeing Han Fei approach, the woman folded herself deeper into the mist. She pointed to the mask again. The mask appeared to have grown out of her face.

“You’re not letting me get close because of the mask?” Han Fei took out a broken mask from his pocket. He turned to the woman in the blood and raised the mask to his face. “If that’s the problem, then I will join you. We’ll be monsters together.” Pressing the switch in his mind, Han Fei silenced his own memory and emotions. He was ready to put on the mask. But just as the mask was about to touch his skin, the blood mist surged towards him and a sharp blade flicked the mask away from his grasp.

Seeing the shard of the mask in his fingers, Han Fei raised his head. The woman in red dress had materialized before him.