

Thriller: The Game

Detective Fu woke up with a pounding headache and instinctively reached to his bedside table to grab a glass of water he always kept there, but found nothing but air. He had been to a government dinner gala last night with his wife to celebrate the chief of police's retirement, but he didn't remember coming home. He suddenly noticed his arm. Tattooed on it were the numbers 24/24. He spun around to look where his wife slept – no one. In her place was a note, "Since you're so curious about your investigation, welcome to the game."

Fu's phone rang.

"Go to the window," said a digitized voice. The phone went dead.

Fu jumped up and went to the window. Looking down, he saw that the third level courtyard was empty except for his wife who was sitting on a balcony at the far end. At that moment, there was a gunshot and his wife fell over the ledge down to the street below, out of sight. Before Fu could react to anything, he saw that the number on his arm had changed to 23/24. Frantically, he ran down, but when he arrived at the scene there was no body, no blood and no witnesses.

His heart is now in the middle of nowhere. Suddenly, a sound of clashing glass burst out. He collapsed and the sharp pain rushing through his arms and legs drove him back to consciousness.

A small pool of black shadow right before him caught his attention. It was not broken glass, but a flowerpot which somehow dropped from the courtyard with the soil spreading all over the place.

"The smell... It is not soil; it is cinnamon powder!"

The sweet smell rolled out from the powders like a stream. He stood up and the dizziness nearly cause him to collapse again. He followed the smell along the street. The agreeable aromatic smell did not scatter and disappear, instead it went even stronger and soon mixed with another appetizing smell.

"Something baked with cinnamon powder..." A dim light flash in detective Fu's mind but interrupted by a gloomy sound burst from his stomach.

"Mama, I'm hungry!" A little boy passing by looked up his mother with his dark blue eyes.

"Lunch time already?" Detective Fu walk into the restaurant where the smell seems to lead.

"Ah! Detective Fu! Good day isn't it? Come in! As usual?" A young, good-looking waitress lead him to a table near the window and went to the kitchen. It was not long before she returned with a pie on her hand.

"Apple pie with cinnamon powder! Here you go!" The girl with a pink pimple on the right cheek gave Fu a smile that could lighten up the day.

He took a slice and chew it up slowly. “So it’s apple pie with cinnamon powder. No wonder...” the light in his head bloomed again, “...Ann, my beloved wife and the worst cook I have ever met. Every meal is merely a waste of materials. But things changed when...when was that...Eh, after we have little Fu! Oh my poor son, oh those charming dark blue eyes...Ann can suddenly make the best apple pie in the world! The fragrance welcoming me and our little Fu every night! What a perfect life if wasn’t that accident that took the life of our dreariest...”

Detective Fu looked out the window, the boy and his mother left a store and disappeared at around the corner. He caught a glimpse of his arm and the number changed to 22/24.

“No! Wait!” Detective Fu cried. He jumped up, trying to drop the money and rush out as fast as he could. After searching all his pockets, he found no cash, no card, nothing except a key and a phone with no signal! He felt like an idiot.

“Detective Fu, how’s the meal?”

“Ah... I... I...”

“24 dollars in all. As usual, bills will be sent to your office. Enjoy your day!”

With a blank mind and embarrassment, he didn’t even know how he got out of that restaurant.

“Wait, the boy!” He rushed towards the corner where they disappeared: everything was as usual! Bakers were baking bread, shop keepers were promoting their products, people were crossing the street.

He leaned against the wall, opened his mouth to grasp for air. Memories seemed to surge back bit by bit, “...the accident took away our dreariest boy. I would never have the chance to hear that voice and see those eyes again. Ann went crazy, living in dreams as if our boy was still alive. The accident... I’ll never forgive... Wait, what accident?”

Glaring at the glass wall of the skyscraper in front of him, the reflection of himself became bigger and bigger: long, black coat with polished shoes. He passes his figures through his hairs and heard a lady calling him.

“Mr. Fu. The chief is waiting for you in his office.”

“Chief? What chief?”

“Come on. You know it’s not a good idea to keep him waiting.”

They walk through the hall and got into the lift. The lady pressed floor 24.

“Don’t be so nervous! The chief is in good mood today, you’ll be fine.”

“I’m not...”

“Oh, come on. You always play with your ring when you are nervous.”

“How...”

“Well, not that hard to be a detective when you work with a police chief all day long.”

The door opened and the lady lead him to the oval office at the end of the hallway. Men and women in uniforms and suits are walking by, passing documents and making phone calls.

“You can wait inside, the chief will be here any minute.” Followed by a heavy sound from that thick wooden door.

“I was here. I was here once, or maybe twice? Last time...Last time was for my boy...Yes! I begged the chief to let me investigate my boy’s death...and...then...then,” a sense of chill ran through his spine, “...the party!”

Piece by piece, puzzles now seemed to glue together into a corner of a huge picture. He clearly recalled that day when he was invited personally to this office by the chief.

“Take a seat!”

“Thanks.”

“I am sorry for the loss of your son. Really, as a father myself, I can’t imagine this...this horrible thing. I understand that you eagerly want to look into the case yourself?”

“Yes, sir. I have to. For my son, my wife, and... for me.”

“Yes, yes. I understand. But this may not be that simple...”

“Why? Due all respect, sir, but it's just giving me the permission to have access to....”

“You know you have made a lot of enemies throughout the years, right?”

“You mean...this may be a revenge?”

“I mean this may not be easy.”

“But...”

“Ok, look! I’m on your side, ok? I am on your side! I have sources that indicate someone might know something about it. Here, take this invitation!”

“Invitation? For what?”

“A dinner party two days later to celebrate my retirement,” the chief’s voice suddenly went low and deep, “Full of government officials, businesses tycoons, I’ll say it’s a pool of information.”

“I...”

“But you’d better be absolutely sure about this, child, Absolutely sure! If I give you the permission on this, I’m sending you into the lions’ den. If anything goes wrong, you can’t mention me. Sorry, but you are alone.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good luck then. Oh, and, eh, this meeting is off the record. You never met me today. You were here to complain about an unfair traffic ticket in office 2424. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Like the storm on the sea, emotions waved through detective Fu as he stood in the middle of the oval office. His mind was running like a full-speed motor, “If I’m at the gala yesterday night, this shouldn’t be the chief’s office anymore, then why...” He quickly turned to the door and opened it: nothing but silence as if nobody had ever been here.

“What the...” By instinct he wrapped up his sleeve and looked at the tattoo: 21/24. He stepped out the building like walking on clouds. The chief was a dead end with more confusions.

“The restaurant!” The waitress who seemed to know him was his only hope in finding out what was going on.

He walked on the street like a zombie but well-dressed. Suddenly, a huge noise burst out, breaking the serenity and he felt a sudden shake of the ground for several seconds. Before he could even realize what had happened, the sound of screaming, shouting, crying filled his heart and mind.

“A bomb? That direction... Oh my god, the restaurant!”

He ran against the surging crowd and stopped with shock. He couldn't believe the coal-like pile was once a restaurant and the one he just had lunch in. With dense clouds of smoke raising up continuously, everything around was soon covered by grey fog. Detective Fu closed his eyes, unwilling to believe all these. Under the light of the ongoing fire, the number turned 20/24.

He shambled off down the road, trying his best not to collapse before getting home. He knelt on the door steps, using every bit of strength to plug his key into the key hole. He sprawled on the ground. Fear and sandiness finally started to occupy him from every cell in his body.

“Is this what you want from me? Now happy?” The last line of defense collapsed and Detective Fu burst into tears. Huddled near the bedroom door, he couldn't help but to fall asleep in cold and desperation.

The freeze woke him up when sunlight started to break through the dark skyline. He licked his dry lip and crawled up, trying to reach for water but could not find a drop of it. He took an empty glass and put it on the bedside table. He took off his ring and dropped it into the cup.

He took a deep breath and sighed. He had always been dreaming to be someone like Sherlock Holmes and his favorite line had always been:

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

The gear of his mind began to wheel, he slowly turned towards the closet and searched for the gun he kept in the bottom drawer. He took out the gun, checked the bullet box, placed the muzzle right beside his head and pulled the trigger. He felt no pain and saw the window frames beginning to warp

He woke up but failed to open his eyes under the sharp white light. Applauses surrounded him as he was trying to move his stiff body.

“Congratulations!”

“Congratulations! We did it!”

“Congratulations Dr. Fu. You made it!”

“Congratulations bro! Amazing!”

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Dr. Fu finally get used to the light and looked around. Cheers and happy faces filled the room and he found himself sitting on a machine bed. A nice-looking young girl with a pink pimple on the right cheek came near with a sweet smile.

“The results turn out to be a great success, Dr. Fu. A significant breakthrough in VR technology!”

“Where... Wait? VR?”

“Yeah! The problem of creating a ‘real’ scenario and injecting designed memories to the player have been overcome in this test. You did it!”

“What do you mean...”

“Give him some time, folks,” a woman interrupted the conversation, “Oh, darling, you look exhausted! Why don’t you take a few minutes to clear up your mind and join our celebration in the oval lounge at the end of the hallway. Guess what? I have made your favorite apple pie. Come everybody, party time!”

The room was in silence again. Dr. Fu scratched his head and tries to put the pieces together, “Four impossible murders. No human can do this! No! The only possibility explanation, although improbable, was that someone outside the space created the world and hid the information of the killer and the murder before I even got in there. The moment I woke up in that story, the killer disappeared. I could never catch the killer because the killer was myself all the time. I am in line with the creator or I am the creator! The only way to get out is to realize that I am the killer and the game stops. That’s why I’m here.”

Dr. Fu was finally in relief. He was surprised that the game can go this far that he himself could not tell the reality. He jumped down from the machine bed and walked towards the door, calculating the huge profit he may get if this technology could be put into market. He saw his reflection in the glass wall alongside the corridor: long white coat with polished white shoes. A sweet smell flew from the room at the end – apple pie with cinnamon powder. He smiled and speed up to the unclosed door. He pushed the door and found nobody nor anything inside. On the wall hang a huge picture: a normal bedroom with a ring in a glass on the bedside table.

Fu’s phone rang.

“Go to the window,” said a digitized voice. The phone went dead.

A tattoo appeared on his arm: 25/25.

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