

AVALON'S QUEST

H.A.

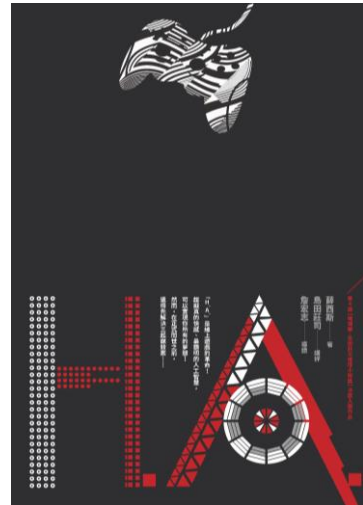
Shortlisted for the 2015 Kavalan Soji Shimada Mystery Award

Full virtual reality has come to the world of online gaming, and the mother of all MMORPGs, a game called H.A., is still sitting on the sidelines. Li Shih-Chuang, the game's Executive Producer, has locked horns with a new production consultant hired from outside, Chu Cheng-Bi. The two decide to let the game settle their dispute: The winner becomes the new producer, and the loser leaves the company.

Li and Chu, together with their own teams, venture into the virtual world of H.A. to start up for a game of detectives and assassins on a global scale. The "assassin" and her two associates have to make targeted hits without being discovered, while the "detectives" must do everything they can to stay alive.

Xerses 薛西斯

Xerses is one of the most exciting young novelists in Taiwan's science fiction/mystery community. Deeply inspired by Soji Shimada's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, Xerses is dedicated to incorporating the finest logical intrigue into her stories. Her novel *Lotus Reborn* won a Bronze Medal in the 2013 Kadokawa Fiction Awards.



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By Xerses. Translated by Josh Dyer.

Prologue

Do you know what death feels like?

The world goes quiet. You no longer hear the wind. You are no longer aware of your body. The transparent sky seems coated with peppermint syrup. Clouds rise and fall in the vaulted heavens. All that is left of you is a pair of eyes suspended in space.

The last thing Chu Cheng-Bi saw was a dragonfly that had landed on the tip of her nose. The intricate lattice of its glassy wings split her world into a thousand shards. Her vision blurred, and she felt she was sinking in a pool of quicksand. All colors slowly melted together until, finally, even the eyes hanging in space disappeared.

Chu Cheng-Bi yanked out her data link and pushed open the capsule door.

Her body was damp with a light coat of sweat, and her mouth felt dry. An unpleasant odor hung in the air, though it was so faint that she hardly noticed. She went into the changing room, and, after patting herself dry, changed back into her original clothes. She checked her messages. One missed call and a message from Anah: "I'm waiting in the main hall."

Outside the capsule room, Sun Cheng-He from the design department waited to escort her out, passing the time by playing marbles on his pad. Seeing Chu Cheng-Bi exit, he switched off the screen and greeted her.

"How did it feel this time?"

"Are you trying to sell this game to Buddhist monks?"

Sun Cheng-He laughed. "What do you mean?"

"After I died I lay there for a full five minutes. Talk about transcending life and death. If that's not enlightenment, tell me what is. Or maybe it's just that *petite mort* thing the French are always talking about."

"No need to talk dirty." Sun Cheng-He laughed, as cheerful as ever. "In any case, it couldn't have been that long. Eight to twelve seconds at most. Once the payment system connects you should see a popup asking if you want to resurrect. It has to be quick, because that's how we make money in H.A."

"My recommendation is that you disconnect the visuals during the wait. It's pretty gross to sit there and watch a dragonfly nibbling on the nose of your corpse."

"If the player is already dead I'm not sure I see the point." Sun Cheng-He laughed before continuing. "I, for one, am glad you died. If you had finished the game without dying I'd have to pack up shop and leave the business."

"Relax. Even in action games I'm only rated S-level."

Sun Cheng-He escorted Chu Cheng-Bi to the main hall on the first floor, where she immediately caught sight of the back of a familiar figure seated in the reception area. Anah looked dressed for a funeral, with his usual stiff black overcoat, and raven-black hair cut just above his shoulders. He and Chu Cheng-Bi were old colleagues, and comrades-in-arms.

"It looks like someone is waiting for you."

"He's a friend."

"All right, I'll leave you here, then."

Sun Cheng-He made some polite parting remarks then returned to his office. Chu Cheng-Bi walked up behind Anah and tapped him on the shoulder.

"You cut your hair."

Anah took out his earphones. They hadn't seen each other in about two months; Chu Cheng-Bi had heard he was overseas on sabbatical. Though he had been in the south, he didn't have a tan. If anything, he was paler than before, even to the point of looking sickly.

"Yup. Everything seems lighter since I cut it. Even my mood."

"That's good." Chu Cheng-Bi smiled. "You always have to look to the future."

They left Building 1. Behind them the silver tower gleamed in the sunlight like a chrome-plated machine, cold, sharp, and silent. Anah swiped his card at a turnstile and a few minutes later a black Rolling-Sprinter pulled into the loading zone. Anah opened the door and waved Chu Cheng-Bi into the car.

The Rolling-Sprinter flew along the roads through the heart of the metropolis.

"So, how was the game?"

"The balancing was very good. The level of detail is staggering, especially the rendering of characters. You can hardly tell who is a real person."

"Maybe they need to make some kind of Voight-Kampff test¹ for the GM tools."

Chu Cheng-Bi turned away to laugh. "No need. I've got my own Voight-Kampff test."

"Really? How does it work?"

"You ask them, 'Are you human?' If they are another game tester, they'll answer with an earnest, 'Yes.'"

"And if they're an AI?"

"Then they stare at you like you're completely crazy." Chu Cheng-Bi smiled faintly. "They're just fish in a tiny aquarium, but they think they're swimming in an ocean."

Of all the characters in the game, Li Shih-Chuang's favorite was undoubtedly the templar Avalon, also known as the Silver Unicorn. He was said to have a touch of fairy blood – hence the long, tapered ears, and the head of soft golden hair. An ornamental horn adorned the front of his helmet. Some said it was there to cover the actual horn that grew from the heads of the fairy folk. This and the silver armor he wore earned him the epithet the Silver Unicorn. The appellation described more than just his appearance – the unicorn was also a fitting symbol of Avalon's lofty and dignified temperament.

Li Shih-Chuang didn't know why he found Avalon so appealing. Perhaps it was because Avalon was the first character his teacher had designed. Perhaps it was Avalon's righteousness and gentle demeanor. Or maybe it was simply that Avalon had left such a strong impression during their first encounter inside H.A.. Li Shih-Chuang had been playing a knight serving under Avalon. The templar had said little, but when he spoke, Li Shih-Chuang payed close attention to his blue eyes. They sparkled like sunlight on the surface of a clean, blue sea, making Li Shih-Chuang a bit dizzy, as if he was about pitch forward into their depths. That was his first impression of Avalon.

¹ The Voight-Kampff test is a fictional test used to distinguish humans from life-like androids, first introduced in the sci-fi novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Phillip K. Dick, better known through the film adaptation *Blade Runner*.

Intermission – Game Rules

1. The Detective and Assassin groups each consist of three players.
2. If all surviving Detectives reach the City of Nine Wolves in the North, the Detectives win.
3. The Assassins must kill the Detectives in the PvE zone where players cannot normally be killed. If a kill takes place in a PvP zone, the Assassins automatically lose.²
4. The Assassins can only carry out a kill while the victim is online.
5. Every time the Assassins perform a kill, the Detectives will have seven days to determine how the assassination was carried out. If they are able to crack the case during this investigation period, the game continues. If they fail to crack the case, the Assassins have won.
6. If any Detectives remain alive when the game ends, the Detectives win.
7. If all Detectives are assassinated, the game ends. The Detectives will still be allowed seven days in which to investigate the final killing. If they can determine how they final killing was carried out, the Detectives win.
8. During the seven-day investigation period, players on both teams must cease all activities unrelated to the investigation. No players are allowed to move toward the City of Nine Wolves, or within any other game area during this time.
9. Detectives cannot resurrect after death.
10. Detectives are forbidden from accessing the gamelogs of any of the six heroes played by either group. Should the Detectives violate this rule, they forfeit the game.

H.A. Referee and Executive Producer, Sun Cheng-He

² PvE denotes “Player vs. Environment.” PvP denotes “Player vs. Player.” These terms designate game areas in which combat between human players is either forbidden or allowed. PvE areas allow weaker players a safe zone in which to build their skills and experience playing against graded AI opponents without fear of being attacked by more powerful players.

Act 1

Feast Day for the Punishment of the Silver Unicorn

“This is the Capsule Room, where they keep all the machines for beta testing. In the back there is a special lab set aside for our project.”

“A special lab...”

“Yes. The servers for H.A. are kept separate from all other products.”

Chu Cheng-Bi raised her gaze slightly towards the cameras embedded in the ceiling. A bell sounded as the cameras captured a retinal image, and a crack appeared in the fortified wall in front of them. A robotic voice spoke: “ID Number 20144, H.A. Special Project Producer Chu Cheng-Bi.”

“Show your fingerprints to register,” Chu Cheng-Bi said.

Lynx and Anah raised their right hands. The reinforced glass wall split and rotated like a set of vertical blinds, revealing a dozen or so openings, each wide enough to admit a single person. They entered the inspection corridors and the results of infrared body-scans appeared on screens in front of them.

“A little heavy-handed on the security, don’t you think?”

Like travelers in customs, they passed through a few more inspection stations before finally entering the 6th floor Capsule Room. Snow-white VR capsules stretched out in front of them, like a row of gleaming coffins stood on end. It was only fitting that the man stationed in front of the capsules should be dressed in a somber black suit.

Li Shih-Chuang glanced at Anah and Lynx. “So, this is your team?”

Chu Cheng-Bi nodded.

Lynx couldn’t pass up a quick jab: “What was the point of all that security if you’re going to interrogate us in person?”

“Have them get changed. If their street clothes are too restrictive they won’t be comfortable in the capsules.”

“Shouldn’t I introduce them first?”

“That won’t be necessary. It’s not my business whom you’ve selected for your team, as long as they’ve signed the non-disclosure agreements. Nothing you see here today can be leaked outside. Understood?”

Chu Cheng-Bi wasn’t pleased with Li Shih-Chuang’s lack of decorum, but if he noticed her anger, he didn’t show it. He motioned her team towards the changing rooms, and turned to her. “You run along, too. You’ll sweat to death if you enter the capsule all dolled up like that.”

It was true, she was dressed to the nines. When she wasn’t meeting with the Board of Directors, Chu Cheng-Bi preferred cocktail dresses, high heels, and heavy makeup.

“Worry about yourself and that funeral director monkey suit you’re wearing!”

Li Shih-Chuang peeled off his coat gracefully, revealing a heavily starched white work shirt.

“Don’t worry about Shih-Chuang. He is quite accustomed to his perversely uncomfortable fashion choices.”

It was only then that Chu Cheng-Bi noticed the two others in the room – most likely Li Shih-Chuang’s team. The tall thin man who had spoke introduced himself with a smile.

“You can call me Ah Yi. And this is Lao Ju. We’re Shih-Chuang’s team, all design engineers. Shih-Chuang and I work in AI, and Lao Ju is a topographer.”

Lao Ju, shorter than Ah Yi by a head, greeted Chu Cheng-Bi with an uncomfortable nod.

Chu Cheng-Bi felt herself relax somewhat. It looked like these two would be much easier to get

along with than Li Shih-Chuang.

"Nice to meet you both. I'm the new producer, Chu Cheng-Bi. My teammates are Anah and Lynx."

Ah Yi smiled playfully. "Li Shih-Chuang told us quite clearly that you are only a producer if you survive the competition!"

Chu Cheng-Bi returned the smile. "That is true, technically."

At that moment, Lynx emerged from the changing room. She had dressed casually, and only needed to swap her jeans for a pair of loose cotton pants.

"Aren't you changing, Cheng-Bi?"

Chu Cheng-Bi pulled off her heels in a huff, looking for all the world like a child beauty pageant star standing barefoot on the tile floor. "I'll be fine like this," she said.

"Put your heels away," Li Shih-Chuang said coldly.

Anah had changed both his shirt and pants. Standing by one of the white capsules he couldn't help but reach out and trace its smooth surface with his hands.

Lynx sighed in disbelief. "What year is this, anyhow? I never thought we'd be using these old-style capsules."

VR-MMO equipment had long-since evolved into an extremely light and portable form. 3D monitors could be installed in a pair of eyeglasses, and the latest ZBOX console fit on a pair of bracelets. As long as you didn't mind looking like a fool, you could enter a fantasy universe on any street corner you wanted.

"These things are straight out of early 21st century movie. What was the name of that one? They put a guy in one of these old capsules and he woke up in a big blue alien body..."

Chu Cheng-Bi knew the movie Lynx meant, but she didn't respond.

Li Shih-Chuang seemed unperturbed by Lynx's remarks. "We don't have any alternative, I'm afraid. We've got too much data to pass through the network. Some of it has to be stored on the consoles."

"For example?"

"For example, to keep things running smoothly we preload most of the maps onto the player consoles. The compact VR units just don't have enough storage."

Chu Cheng-Bi indicated her understanding with a nod. Li Shih-Chuang turned a safety valve and the doors of the capsules opened with the hiss of venting gas. Inside each glass-encased capsule was a cockpit containing a semi-transparent, milk-white control panel. The panels were elegantly designed. The readouts and displays glowed with a soft green light.

"Pretty stylish. Are these prototypes?"

Lynx gave the capsule a gentle push; it slid freely on its four wheels. She was so startled that she reflexively grabbed hold of the capsule with both hands. She noticed there were also wheels on the back. Though it currently stood vertically, it seemed that it could also be used in a horizontal position. Someone playing for more than an hour would surely be more comfortable to lying down, she thought.

"Yes, they are," Li Shih-Chuang answered. "By the time the game hits the market these things will be obsolete. Technology is always improving."

Ah Yi laughed behind them. "What's that joke? Every year someone announces that Moore's Law is good for another thirty years?"

Lao Ju joined in the general laughter and even Li Shih-Chuang cracked a faint smile. Chu Cheng-Bi understood the reference, but didn't get why it was funny.

Lynx raised her eyebrows and whispered, "That's why I hate engineers - they live in their own world. Though I suppose the same could be said about us animators."

Chu Cheng-Bi nodded.

Li Shih-Chuang demonstrated how to open the cockpit, then had everyone choose their own capsule to enter. Chu Cheng-Bi scanned the room. There were twenty-four apparently identical capsules in the room, so she randomly chose one that was nearby.

Once she climbed inside the capsule, the door automatically clamped shut, giving Chu Cheng-Bi a start. She reflexively thrust out her hand to push open the door, but it was already latched tight. The capsule was vented, so there was no danger of suffocation, but she still disliked being so confined.

“Don’t worry. It’s a safety feature.”

Li Shih-Chuang’s voice seemed to come out of nowhere. The capsules must have a telecom system. Chu Cheng-Bi gave the door two more shoves, then gave up. “It’s not like these things are going to blast off,” she thought to herself, “so why all the ‘safety features’?”

Li Shih-Chuang continued: “Everyone please attach your data links. Use the interface on the screen in front of you to join the comm channel.” Chu Cheng-Bi looked up, and indeed there was a glass screen displaying a communications interface.

Within a moment or two Lynx’s voice came over the intercom. “Hello? Hello? Testing. Testing...” Chu Cheng-Bi noticed that the color of the indicators on the control panel had slowly shifted to a delicate purple.

“If you have questions, please ask them directly. I will now teach you to log in to your personal accounts.”

Chu Cheng-Bi followed Li Shih-Chuang’s instructions and “[PASSWORD]” appeared on her screen in fluorescent green.

“I’ve already set up accounts for all of you. All you need to do is set your passwords.”

“You set up new accounts?”

“Yes, for the competition. I erased all the previous beta-testing accounts. Now each capsule has only one account. The account name is set to the serial number of your capsule.” Chu Cheng-Bi looked around but couldn’t see a serial number printed anywhere inside her capsule. She didn’t remember seeing anything on the outside, either.

“How do we set the password?” Anah spoke for the first time.

“It’s simple. These are virgin accounts, so the password field is currently blank. If you were to press ‘OK’ now, you would be directly logged in to your account.”

Anah was about to press OK when Li Shih-Chuang spoke again. “To set your password, just enter something. You’ll need to enter this same password every time you log in. Of course, you can change your password at any time. Your password can be up to 42 characters in length. Numbers, punctuation, and the English alphabet count as single characters, while Chinese characters count as two.”

“Got it.”

Silence followed as everyone set their passwords.

Lynx was the first to finish. “Password protection is kind of retro. I thought everyone used fingerprints and retinal scans these days.”

“That would be fine for a personal console, but these capsules are company property. They get used by a lot of people.”

“What difference does that make?”

Chu Cheng-Bi stepped in to explain: “Current privacy protection laws prohibit public machines from taking fingerprint and retinal scans. Only the government can keep records of your identification data. Even your employer can only store your data for the term of your employment. If you leave your job, they are obliged to delete all identification data from their computers. Of course, who knows if they actually do it...”

“That’s right. So we typically rely on password protection here,” replied Li Shih-Chuang.

“A strong password is often better than a fingerprint scan,” Lao Ju commented.

Anah concurred, “Exactly. It’s far too easy to steal a fingerprint. I know at least twenty different ways to do it – stealing the whole finger is the quickest, of course. Retinal scans present more of a challenge.”

After a few moments of silence, Li Shih-Chuang spoke again: “When I set up the capsules the first thing I did was disable all fingerprint and retinal scanning functions. Seeing as none of you are employees yet, it would be illegal to take your personal identification data.”

Chu Cheng-Bi took this to mean that Li Shih-Chuang didn’t see her as a colleague. Feeling slighted, she snapped in her data link, punched the “OK” button, and entered the world of H.A.. Her dissatisfaction dissolved in an instant: nothing could have prepared her for the transformation that took place before her eyes. A sparkling, star-littered sky had appeared overhead; a crisp breeze sighed in her ears. She could even smell the fresh scent of the soft grass beneath her feet. The capsules here in the lab

were better than ones she had used in the beta-test. The game port for the capsules had higher resolution, making the environment feel incredibly life-like and natural.

As she admired her surroundings, Li Shih-Chuang's voice emanated from above, rudely disrupting her reverie.

"If you draw a circle in the air in front of you, you can call up the controls menu. You can also set up your own signal to trigger the menu, such as a wink." Chu Cheng-Bi was already familiar with this part of the tutorial. She quickly called up the menu and made her usual adjustments to the control settings.

"Up next: character selection," Li Shih-Chuang announced. "Currently there are twenty heroes to choose from." As he finished speaking, the scene before her dissolved, and swarms of white blocks swept into view, assembling themselves like puzzle pieces. Within seconds a massive temple loomed before her.

The scene in itself was not particularly original, but the graphical detail surpassed any other game on the market. As much as she disliked Li Shih-Chuang, Chu Cheng-Bi found it difficult not to admire his work. Once again the scene changed, and she found herself inside a long corridor within the temple. Both sides of the corridor were lined with life-like statues, as if it were a gallery in a museum.

Chu Cheng-Bi was taken aback for a moment. This differed from the character creation interface she was familiar with. She stood at the base of one of the statues. The figure resolved into sharper detail, and color flowed into its features.

The statue had skin so pale it faded to deep blue in the shadows. Its icy blue eyes glistened with a glassy translucence. It wore a long cape and held a crystal scepter in one hand. Suddenly it spoke: "I am Priamus, the Frozen Prism."