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Chapter 158 The Struggle of the Ticket Seller_1

Many people knew that not far from Hengdian was a high-level ticket booth. Even so, it took Gu Mian and the others quite some time to find this so-called high-level ticket booth. It was, indeed, somewhat difficult to spot.

Looking at the narrow alleyway in front of them, only a few meters wide with a dusty, pockmarked dirt path, Fatty scratched his head. "Hey Doctor, is this fancy ticket booth really in there?"

"Such a backwater place; I reckon even birds wouldn't crap here. This high-level ticket booth sure knows how to pick a location," Fatty grumbled to himself.

The alleyway branched off from a narrow side street. A few bags of cement were dumped nearby, suggesting an intention to pave it with concrete. But before construction could start, this global game was about to begin, and this dirt path would likely never become a concrete one.

Because it was a dirt road, Gu Mian noticed a large tree at the end of the alleyway. Unlike the ornamental trees lining the main roads, this particular tree was lush with branches and leaves. Its trunk was thick enough for a person to barely wrap their arms around. Gu Mian visually estimated it to be about four stories tall.

Not far from the large tree stood a very new-looking building. Sunlight dappled the new building, creating a picturesque scene.

Gu Mian checked the map in his hand. "It should be that building. Can you see it?"

"I see it," Fatty also spotted the building and nodded. "But isn't it quite different from the ticket booths we've seen before?"

Of course, it's different. After all, it has "high-level" in its name.

The ticket booths they had seen before were old and decrepit. The paint on the external walls was almost peeling off, and the interior facilities were ancient. The large table in the middle of those booths

looked as if it had been salvaged from a garbage dump. But this one in the distance looked very upscale at first glance. Its walls were painted snow-white, reflecting the sunlight.

Gu Mian noted people constantly going in and out of the ticket booth's entrance. Most of those entering wore expressions of joy and anticipation, while most of those exiting looked dejected. The two groups had completely different auras.

"I'm guessing ninety percent of those who go in come out without a ticket," Fatty whispered, sidling up mysteriously.

People occasionally passed them, most looking disheartened as they emerged from the ticket booth. Fatty spoke in a hushed voice, likely afraid of being overheard by these people and provoking a group beating.

"Of course," Gu Mian replied matter-of-factly. "I imagine you have to pass some sort of trial to get a ticket for this event."

And it seems these trials are quite difficult...

Gu Mian thought for a moment, then added, "We might not be able to get one either."

A few people did emerge from the ticket booth in high spirits, apparently having successfully obtained an event admission ticket, but there weren't many of them.

Gu Mian didn't observe from outside for long. He started walking towards the upscale-looking building.

Only when they reached the entrance did they notice a group of soldiers standing inside the ticket booth. Given that this was the only high-level ticket booth near the event, it wasn't strange for soldiers to be stationed there. Gu Mian figured it was to prevent ticket scalping or theft.

Besides, seeing soldiers around Hengdian was no longer unusual. People often saw squads in military uniform patrolling the streets. If nothing else, security around Hengdian was quite good. Quite a few squads patrolled around this high-level ticket booth; one such team passed by them just then.

As Gu Mian and the others reached the entrance, they brushed past one such squad.

Fatty curiously watched the soldiers who had just brushed past him. "Speaking of which, Doctor, I've seen these patrol teams quite a few times today. They probably don't have time for instances, right?"

"I suppose they don't," Gu Mian nodded.

The military was clearly understaffed. During their few days in Hengdian, the trio had noticed the army actively recruiting. Essentially, any young man who applied was accepted. In fact, a few days ago, Fatty himself had been enthusiastically approached while strolling down the street. The timid Fatty was so scared he scurried back to the inn and didn't dare show his face for several days. Under normal circumstances, the army certainly wouldn't recruit so haphazardly, but these were special times.

"The army units here have to protect the event grounds, maintain order, and work overtime on guard duty. Plus, they're probably trying to find time to enter instances in batches to improve their physical conditioning..."

Although the military possessed firearms, if they didn't enter instances to improve, they would eventually be surpassed by other players.

Gu Mian rubbed his chin. "Come to think of it, they really are incredibly busy."

Fatty made a pained expression. "What an incredibly tough situation for them."

While sighing empathetically, Fatty turned his gaze towards the inside of the ticket booth.

The decor of this high-level ticket booth was indeed different from ordinary ones. The walls, table, and chairs were all brand new, several notches above what they'd seen at other booths.

A line of soldiers stood against the walls, eyes wide, constantly monitoring the situation inside the ticket booth.

Gu Mian noticed a familiar face among the soldiers: the young man in a military uniform who had been selling flowers outside a ticket booth earlier. This young man must have been a recent recruit; his uniform looked a bit too large and didn't fit him well. The young man looked as if he hadn't slept the previous night. He was starting to doze off, his head nodding slightly, but he quickly snapped his eyes open again, staring intently at the activity in the ticket booth, clearly not daring to slack off.

Gu Mian didn't dwell on the young man for long. He turned to look at the ticket counter.

There were quite a few people in this high-level ticket booth, most of them there for event admission tickets. A short queue had already formed at the ticket counter, and Gu Mian deliberately went to the end of it.

The person in front of him was a somewhat heavyset middle-aged man. He seemed to notice someone lining up behind him, glanced back at Gu Mian a few times, then turned around again, craning his neck to look ahead.

Those in the queue seemed quite anxious. Gu Mian noticed they were all straining their ears, trying to hear what was happening at the front. Following their example, Gu Mian also strained his ears to listen to the voices from the front.

At that moment, the ticket seller was speaking to the first person in the queue.

"Event admission ticket... High-difficulty instance..."

Gu Mian couldn't hear clearly because of the distance. He saw the person at the front of the queue walk off to the side after the ticket seller finished speaking, apparently heading towards an instance.

Fatty also looked at that person. "Don't tell me we have to clear a high-difficulty instance to get an admission ticket?"

Just then, another young man entered the ticket booth and joined the queue behind the three of them. After this young man joined the queue, he, like those ahead of him, strained his ears and craned his neck to look towards the front.

The queue moved quickly, and soon Gu Mian could clearly hear what the ticket clerk was saying.

"If you want an event admission ticket, you must clear a high-difficulty instance. I'll give you a ticket for a high-difficulty instance first. Once you clear it, you can come back to me to collect your event admission ticket..."

"A high-difficulty instance?" Fatty frowned. "The event description didn't say anything about needing to clear a high-difficulty instance for an admission ticket, did it?"

Gu Mian looked at the cheerful ticket seller at the counter. "I'm genuinely worried we won't be able to get the admission tickets."

More people were now trickling into the queue behind them. Every now and then, people would emerge from an instance, all wearing gloomy expressions. Seeing the expressions of those emerging from instances, the people still in the queue also grew serious, as if afraid they wouldn't be able to get an event admission ticket.

The mood of everyone inside grew heavy, and the atmosphere in the entire ticket hall became oppressive. People felt anxious, and some even began to sigh.

Only the ticket seller at the front remained consistently cheerful. It seemed the ticket seller received some sort of commission based on how many players entered instances from here. He happily attended to one grim-faced player after another, his tone even becoming somewhat jaunty.

The queue moved quickly, and in no time, Gu Mian was at the front.

He looked down at the ticket seller sitting behind the window. The man inside was tearing off a ticket. He seemed very busy, not even lifting his head as he rapidly recited the same lines he'd told the others.

"If you want an event admission ticket, you must clear a high-difficulty instance. I'll give you a ticket for a high-difficulty instance first. After you clear it, you can come to me for the event admission ticket..."

"Can I get a group ticket for a high-difficulty instance? There are three of us," Gu Mian said, looking at the top of the ticket seller's head.

The ticket seller's cheerful voice replied, "Of course, no problem."

Behind the ticket window, the man spoke as he quickly tore off a ticket and stamped it with something. Then, he lifted his head, about to hand the ticket over.

Fatty had been observing the situation at the counter. He saw the ticket seller finally look up, a smile on his face, holding a ticket and seemingly about to pass it out.

However, the moment the ticket seller's gaze met Gu Mian's, he looked as if he'd been struck by lightning, the smile freezing on his face.

At that moment, Gu Mian was reaching out to take the ticket.

Suddenly, the ticket seller's shout echoed in everyone's ears— "Wait!"