

Collapse 261

Chapter 261 Xiao Hong Who Was Taken Away_1

Gu Mian, sitting in the driver's seat, announced in an exasperated tone, "We don't have a gas canister at home."

Fatty coughed a few times to cover his embarrassment, then looked at the supermarket entrance before them.

These supermarkets, established by the game, were quite large but had only one entrance and exit, likely for easier management.

At this moment, Fatty began to count on his fingers. "We can't afford to stay in hotels every day; it's too expensive. Besides, not every place is as safe as Hengdian, and some might not even have hotels operating. We'll have to sleep in the Spirit Car..."

"So, we need a large cushion to make the car more comfortable, and a few quilts as well. The car gets too cold, especially at night. I doubt even two quilts will be enough."

There was no air conditioning in the Spirit Car, so they had to rely on themselves for warmth.

Some items bought from the supermarket could be placed in item slots, while others couldn't; all were clearly marked.

For example, Spirit Cars, weapons, and medicines could all be placed in item slots. These items seemed to be produced by the game itself to be sold in the supermarket and could provide benefits within an instance.

However, daily essentials like food and quilts couldn't be placed in item slots. When players entered an instance, they could only hide these items somewhere. Whether they would still be there upon exiting was purely down to luck.

Considering that items not storable in item slots might be stolen while they were in an instance, Gu Mian and the others hadn't bought such things before.

But things were different now. Now they had a warehouse manager.

While contemplating this, Gu Mian looked at Xiao Hong, who was pressed against the car window, staring blankly outside.

When they entered an instance, they could leave items that couldn't be placed in item slots in the car and have Xiao Hong guard it. Surely...she can do it, right?

The exterior of the Spirit Car had been modified. If the loudspeakers on the roof weren't playing the special BGM for the dead, it wouldn't be recognized as a Spirit Car.

As Gu Mian got out of the car, he glanced back at Xiao Hong with some concern. She looks a bit dazed. Hopefully, she won't get stolen along with everything else...

Fatty didn't share these concerns.

To be on the safe side, Gu Mian had parked the car in a slightly more secluded spot, a bit far from the supermarket entrance, so they had to walk a short distance.

Normally, walking this distance wouldn't be a big deal, but the current temperature was unbelievably cold. Gu Mian even wondered if someone peed outside, if their urine would instantly freeze into an icicle.

At this moment, Fatty was shivering uncontrollably. Theoretically, someone of Fatty's build should have better resistance to cold.

But this particular Fatty was cowering from the cold, even grabbing a corner of Gu Mian's white lab coat. His teeth chattered nonstop, and he looked like he was about to freeze to death.

Because the temperature a few days prior hadn't been this terrifying, Fatty's clothes were too thin for the current weather.

Of course, Gu Mian and Chu Changge weren't faring much better; one wore a thin windbreaker, the other an even thinner white lab coat.

Thankfully, these two partners in misfortune had extraordinary resistance to cold. Of course, Gu Mian also felt the extreme cold, but his reaction wasn't as pronounced as Fatty's.

"Let's hurry..." Fatty said, already jogging towards the supermarket entrance.

The cold wind still howled. Just that short walk turned Fatty's face beet red and made his hands stiff. He only started to warm up a little after running into the supermarket.

Upon entering the supermarket, Gu Mian was momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer number of diverse people. With this awful weather, why are there still so many people at the supermarket?

These people had gathered outside the checkout area. It seemed they weren't planning to go inside to shop but had instead formed small groups. They were all looking around, seemingly waiting for something.

The arrival of Gu Mian's trio naturally caught some attention, but those people quickly looked away, resuming their watch towards the checkout area.

Looking puzzled, Fatty quietly asked, "What are these people waiting for here?"

Chu Changge spoke quietly, "Don't forget, there are restrictions for entering the supermarket. Everyone needs to show a 'Game Supermarket Ticket,' which costs fifty Game Coins each. In this situation, to maximize benefits, people join groups. Each time, one person is chosen, given the Game Coins, and they enter the supermarket to buy what everyone in the group needs. This saves money."

He paused before continuing, "It's quite apparent this game practically forces players to form cliques. All else being equal in terms of strength, loners will always acquire far fewer resources than group members."

Of course, there were exceptions. If you encountered a loner who struck it rich thanks to game maintenance, that would be a different story.

Fatty quietly felt the three supermarket tickets in his pocket, which he had specifically gone to the ticket office to buy not long ago.

"Uh..." Fatty hesitated before asking, "If the three of us just swagger in together, wouldn't that seem like we're showing off?"

And there's a whole crowd here watching, people who couldn't bring themselves to buy tickets...

Chu Changge nodded. "It would indeed look like showing off."

Under the watchful eyes of the crowd, it was safer to maintain a low profile.

Gu Mian looked at Chu Changge. "I need to buy some medical supplies and other things. The supermarket has a wide variety, many of which are produced by the game itself, so I need to go see them in person. Are you going in too?"

Chu Changge hummed in agreement. "I have to go in and pick out some things myself."

He didn't specify what he needed to pick out, and Gu Mian didn't ask further. He turned to Fatty. "Are you coming in? It's already a bit strange for two of us to go in; one more won't make much difference."

They could have chosen to wait until the current crowd left before pretending not to know each other and entering the supermarket separately. But that wasn't necessary. Once they finished buying their items, they would make a quick exit anyway.

Hearing this, Fatty quickly moved closer to Gu Mian. "Then let me be the one to show off."

As they headed towards the shopping area, Fatty felt numerous gazes on his back, intense enough to almost burn a hole through it. They must be from that group of players behind us, the ones who couldn't afford tickets.

They were still in Hengdian, and with military personnel still visible everywhere, they didn't need to worry too much about violent incidents.

As long as I run fast enough, robbers won't be able to catch me, Fatty thought as he stepped into the supermarket's shopping area.

The first floor was the daily necessities section, the second floor housed clothing, and the third floor was for food.

Gu Mian recalled that the food area on the third floor had the most expensive items, and it looked like prices there might have gone up again. However, the three of them weren't heading for food; instead, they found the "Bedding Section" on the first floor.

Chapter 262 I Really Am a Milk Mother_1

At this moment, there were quite a lot of people in the bedding area.

It looked like everyone was being tormented by the low temperatures, and with the widespread power outage, relying on air conditioning for heating was out of the question. The distressed players had no choice but to stock up on more quilts to fend off the cold of the night.

The sales clerk in this area looked very happy, as if he was going to make a good commission.

Some players had already chosen their items and left, hugging their purchases. Many others were still hesitating in front of the merchandise displays.

Fatty jogged over a couple of steps and glanced at the price. He was looking at a thin blanket that cost 50 Game Coins, the same as the supermarket admission fee.

"Come to think of it," Fatty said, returning to Gu Mian after checking the price, "didn't they change the instance mechanics? So we get rewards after the Instance Evaluator's assessment? I didn't get any Game Coins in the last instance. Doctor, do you know how to get Game Coins now?"

Judging by the worried expressions of the players at the counter, it was clear Game Coins weren't easy to come by.

Gu Mian rubbed his chin and recalled, "I remember when we cleared the last instance, someone got a D-rating and received 80 Game Coins for it."

"Eighty?" Fatty's face twitched slightly. "My instance rating was also D-. Does this mean many players are only getting around a hundred Game Coins for clearing an instance now?"

It seemed Game Coins were harder to obtain after the instance update.

Chu Changge began, "The change in instance mechanics is intended to encourage player initiative. Before this scoring mechanism, a significant portion of players were passive, basically just following others and completing tasks by luck—just like you."

Fatty gave an embarrassed laugh.

Chu Changge continued, "The new game rating feature tallies a player's activity at the end of an instance. In theory, the more active a player is, the higher their score. Of course, you have to survive until the task is completed to receive a score. Those who die midway are still directly eliminated and lose Game Coins. Players who fail this way receive no instance rating."

"Players who just follow others and do nothing won't get much from this scoring mechanism. So, if you want to gain more resources, you have to be active."

Chu Changge paused here. "To put it bluntly, if you want a high score, you have to court death."

"And you have to court death while ensuring you stay alive," Gu Mian interjected. "Otherwise, you'll die and be eliminated."

Fatty's face fell. "Isn't this difficulty a bit too high..."

Now, players not only faced losing equipment, attributes, and Game Coins upon death in instances, but they also had to actively court death in these horror instances. And as if that weren't enough, they had to ensure they survived while doing so... This was too tragic!

Chu Changge adjusted his glasses. "Of course, courting death is a method tailored for you. There are other ways to improve your instance ratings."

Fatty looked at him expectantly.

"Most of the instances we've experienced are puzzle-solving instances," Chu Changge continued. "Though we've rarely cleared instances by actually solving the puzzles..."

"If you don't want to court death, you need to find suspicious points, analyze clues, use deduction, and ultimately figure out the instance's path to survival. I suspect using this reasoning method would yield a very high score, possibly even higher than Gu Mian's."

"However, I doubt you could deduce much, or even spot the suspicious points in an instance. That's why I recommended the first method to you."

Chu Changge pushed up his glasses after speaking.

Fatty's face twitched. "Luckily, I can still scrape by with compensation..."

Gu Mian patted his shoulder. "That's right. You're lucky you can still scrape by with compensation."

Chu Changge continued, "So, I predict a trend of polarization among players is already emerging, splitting them into intelligence-focused and strength-focused types. Once this division becomes clear, the amount of Game Coins most players can obtain will significantly increase—at least enough to sustain them, if all goes well."

"But right now, we're in a transition period, and it's a very difficult one."

The scoring mechanism, combined with the harsh weather and the sudden cutoff of various resources, was enough to eliminate most players during this transition.

Fatty exhaled. "At first, I thought this was a game where no one would die. Now it seems I was too naive."

How could an evolution game not have eliminations?

"Before I left home today, I checked the tap; the water had already been cut off," Chu Changge said, looking toward the distant merchandise displays. "I suspect other resources will also disappear, though it hasn't been officially announced."

Fatty furrowed his brow. "So, we need to earn more money now, right?"

Just then, coughing sounds came from nearby. Gu Mian looked up and saw a middle-aged man in front of a display cabinet, covering his mouth and looking unwell.

Harsh weather often leads to the spread of disease; the ill effects of the cold were already beginning to show.

Gu Mian took a few steps back. "You two should buy some warmer things. Don't get sick. I'm going to the medical supplies area to take a look."

Fatty nodded obediently and headed to the bedding area.

Chu Changge, on the other hand, said he was going to check out the mechanical supplies area.

Gu Mian followed the supermarket signs to the "Medical Supplies Area."

The medical supplies area in this supermarket was quite large, with ceiling-high shelves on three sides. Few people were here, likely because most stocked up on medicine at home. Of course, another reason for the scarcity of customers was the high price of the items.

The supermarket sales clerks were very human-like; ignoring the three letters above their heads, one couldn't tell they were NPCs.

This particular sales clerk was dozing off by the counter but quickly hastened over when he saw Gu Mian approach.

Most medicines in the game supermarket were unfamiliar to Gu Mian; they were all produced by the game itself. These medicines could also be used in instances.

The sales clerk quietly yawned, then enthusiastically began his pitch: "These medicines can be used both in the real world and in instances. Of course, their effects are much better in instances."

"In an instance, you might lose a hand, a head... or a foot. Our specialized medicine can immediately stop the bleeding. While it can't regrow limbs instantly, just stopping the bleeding is remarkable."

"If used in the real world, the effects are somewhat diminished. The medicines on this wall are specifically for instances; those for real-world conditions are on that wall over there..."

The sales clerk led Gu Mian to another wall of ceiling-high shelves.

Gu Mian followed his gaze.

He possessed the Doctor profession, but it seemed he had rarely fulfilled the role of a healer.

Reflecting on his past conduct, Gu Mian decided to seize this opportunity.

Chapter 263 Scavenger_1

"This is the everyday medical supplies section, offering special pharmaceuticals for various ailments. Would you prefer to look at the everyday medical supplies first, or the instance medical supplies?" The sales assistant, standing before a tall shelf, turned back to Gu Mian.

Gu Mian glanced at the shelf before him, then at the racks of instance-specific medication behind him. "Let's start with the instance ones."

At his words, the sales assistant walked over, reaching the shelf full of instance medical supplies in just a few quick strides.

"Our pharmaceuticals are categorized into four levels: A, B, C, and D. A-grade drugs are the most potent and expensive, but they can be life-saving in critical moments. B-grade drugs are next, and so on. D-grade drugs are the cheapest and have the weakest effects."

"A-grade drugs are on the top shelf, followed by B, C, and D. Right now, we're in front of the D-grade drugs."

While the sales assistant prattled on, Gu Mian had already focused on the shelf before him.

Although the sales assistant said D-grade drugs were the cheapest, their prices didn't seem that low.

Gu Mian was examining a small ten-milliliter vial of elixir. Since everything was labeled, he quickly identified the drug.

[Instance-Grade D-Blood Coagulant]

[Inject near a bleeding wound to cause blood to coagulate briefly. Effective duration: two minutes. The wound will not heal during coagulation.]

[Note: Effects can stack.]

This meant injecting one vial would last two minutes, and two vials would last four. One could even inject a hundred vials to stop bleeding for several hours, assuming one had the money.

This [Instance-Grade D-Blood Coagulant] cost 100 Game Coins, making it the cheapest drug available.

It wasn't very expensive for Gu Mian, but it might be for others. Besides, it only stopped bleeding for two minutes. After the effect wore off, the wound would bleed just as before...

Perhaps in a rare case, a player suffering a fatal wound might only have a few minutes before bleeding out completely.

All in all, it was a mediocre drug, truly deserving its D-grade, lowest-tier classification.

However, there was always an exception.

Gu Mian had another profession: "Doctor."

Although his inappropriate actions in instances had prevented him from using this profession much, he knew it would be useful later, especially with the current harsh environment and scarce resources.

Gu Mian could already picture lines of patients, hand in hand, stretching around the Earth, all waiting for his medical expertise.

As a Doctor, Gu Mian had a professional skill. He hadn't used it much before, but now it seemed it could finally be useful.

[Medical Mastery Lv. 4]

[Increases the efficacy of medical supplies by 400% when used.]

Not long ago, this skill was Level 3. Gu Mian had gained nine Attribute Points in the train instance. Unable to use them on physical fitness, he had dumped them all into this skill. After all, Attribute Points weren't edible.

This skill was a perfect match for the supermarket's medical supplies.

Take the [Instance-Grade D-Blood Coagulant], for example. Its effect was two minutes of coagulation. With Gu Mian's skill enhancing it by 400%, two minutes would be boosted by an additional eight, totaling ten minutes.

Gu Mian rubbed his hands, already scheming about who he could test this drug on to see how it worked with his skill.

"Sir?" The sales assistant gave Gu Mian a bewildered look.

The game had undergone a major update not long ago, right after the first event ended. For some unknown reason, the last event had caused dozens of instances to crash simultaneously.

Many resources were redirected to repairing these instances, leading to changes in the supermarket. Now, sales assistants could no longer see player information.

This left him unsure how to address the player before him, whose expression was inexplicably odd.

He chuckled awkwardly and said, "Since they're D-grade drugs, their effects aren't great. Actually, our items are much more effective when paired with the 'Doctor' profession. By the way, you know the profession instances have opened, right?"

Hearing this, Gu Mian felt a twinge of guilt but quickly feigned nonchalance and nodded. "I know."

The sales assistant looked a bit troubled. "Actually, the game's professions are quite lucrative, especially Doctor. Played well, it can earn a fortune. If there were more Doctors in the game, we wouldn't have to worry about sales..."

"But—"

Gu Mian knew that "but" always heralded a twist.

As expected, the sales assistant continued, recounting Gu Mian's exploits.

"The Doctor profession instance didn't open many times. It should have remained permanently available, until a certain player entered..."

Gu Mian already knew the rest.

He wasn't in the mood to hear someone else tell his story, so he looked up at the drugs on the higher shelves.

Gu Mian had good eyesight and immediately spotted the A-grade drugs on the top shelf.

The A-grade drugs had much fancier names than the lower-grade ones. After a quick scan, Gu Mian's eyes settled on one.

It was a bottle—or rather, a single pill.

Inside the thumb-sized glass vial, Gu Mian saw a single pill.

[Instance-Grade A-Sweeper]

[If taken on the brink of death, the player enters a catatonic state. All vital functions are suspended, and the death process is interrupted (effective only without external threats). Duration: ten minutes. After the effect wears off, the dying player will resume dying.]

[Note: Effects can stack. Maximum intake: ten pills within 24 hours.]

This was a powerful item, practically a temporary reprieve from death. Used tactically, it could allow a player to feign death until the instance ended.

Alternatively, one could use the borrowed time to treat the fatal injury. Time is life, as the saying goes—a concept Gu Mian understood well.

Of course, this item had a hefty price tag.

5,000 Game Coins.

Even for Gu Mian, who barely scraped by, this was an astounding sum.

He couldn't afford it.

Thinking about it, buying this A-grade drug seemed like a bad deal. There was no way to earn 5,000 Game Coins in a single instance. Wouldn't using it in an instance be a net loss? Besides, it didn't even guarantee survival.

Still, every drug had its purpose. Could there be instances where a player absolutely could not die?

If so, wouldn't he, as a Doctor, be in high demand?

Countless thoughts flashed through Gu Mian's mind. He had completely forgotten that his actions in instances had little to do with his profession, 'Doctor.'

While Gu Mian was still mulling this over, Fatty suddenly appeared out of nowhere, pushing a cart loaded with bedding and clothes.

"Doctor, are you done yet?"

Chapter 264 Gu Mian Deliberates_1

Gu Mian was dressed in a white coat, identifiable as a doctor to anyone. His signature chainsaw had been stowed away in Chu Changge's inventory before they entered the supermarket. Now, Gu Mian was just an ordinary doctor, even more ordinary than Gu Tianle.

He peered into Fatty's shopping cart, noticing the man had bought numerous hand warmers and three hot water bottles, with some food items at the bottom. It seemed like he had thought of everything. The cart used to carry bodies was about to become a cozy nest.

Fatty, pushing his cart, approached. "Brother Chu is still on the first floor. He doesn't seem to have finished picking his stuff, so I came here first to find you," he said.

As he spoke, he glanced around. The soaring shelves, stretching up to the ceiling, covered the walls completely. They were filled with expensive-looking medicines.

Fatty winced, seemingly shocked by the price of one of the medicines. He then turned to Gu Mian. "Doctor, are you buying anything?"

Gu Mian nodded. "Yes, to avoid anyone dying from an arrow in the butt again."

He also noticed that besides the 'Slaughter Game' instance, he hadn't learned any other professional skills. Perhaps it was because he hadn't been actively fulfilling his role as a doctor in the instances?

At his words, Fatty scratched his head awkwardly.

Gu Mian eventually chose several D-class medicines and placed them in Fatty's cart.

Five bottles of [Instance Type D - Coagulant], 100 points each.

This item could stop bleeding for two minutes. When Gu Mian used it, the effect would last ten minutes. Of course, he had to test it first.

Three [Life Type D - Blockage]—medical mask-style items—200 points each.

[Shelf life of one month, can block common viruses transmitted through the air]

It was safer to buy this first. Fatty was intrigued by the phrase "common viruses" and even made an ominous prediction out loud: "Does this imply that there will be terrifying plague viruses in the real world in the future?"

Gu Mian glanced at Fatty, a headache forming. "If such a virus really appears, I will sew your mouth shut with a needle."

Three capsules of [Life Type D - Weak Resistance], 100 points each.

As the name suggested, its effect was predictably weak.

[Suppresses a small portion of common viruses, only has a slight effect in the early stages of viral infection]

It only suppresses a small portion of common viruses, and on top of that, it only has a slight effect in the early stages of viral infection. It seems less reliable than cold medicine.

However, Gu Mian wanted to try it. Fatty seemed to be showing signs of catching a cold. He would have Fatty alternate between taking cold medicine and [Life Type D - Weak Resistance].

The clueless Fatty was still smiling, completely unaware that he had become Gu Mian's test subject.

Besides these, Gu Mian specifically bought a small syringe, smaller than a pinky finger and easily portable, because the [Instance Type D - Coagulant] was a liquid that needed to be injected.

Theoretically, he couldn't use the same syringe on multiple patients as it could cause infections, which would be unethical. However, in instances, even if an infection were to occur, it wouldn't affect the real body. Of course, he wouldn't dare to do this in the real world. Most importantly, Gu Mian didn't have an inventory, which made it inconvenient to carry syringes.

The syringes were on the third shelf. They were cheap; each syringe only cost 5 points.

So, Gu Mian's total expenditure in the medical goods area came to 1,405 points.

It was insanely expensive, even though he hadn't bought much. Luckily, Gu Mian had recently oppressed an instance. Along with the instances he had oppressed before, he now had a total of 1,930 Game Coins, enough to afford the items.

The salesperson hadn't expected Gu Mian to actually make a purchase and was even more surprised when he actually put the items in the cart. For a moment, the salesperson even suspected Gu Mian and Fatty might just dump these items at some random counter after leaving the medicine area. Such incidents had occurred before. There were always idlers who picked up a bunch of things and walked around, only to throw them away as soon as they left the section.

Amidst the anxious expression of the salesperson, Gu Mian and Fatty left the area. Before leaving, Fatty sneezed twice, as if in mock respect.

When they found Chu Changge, he was in the sports section, examining an all-metal baseball bat. It looked like it could serve as a weapon. He hadn't bought anything but was carefully observing every counter, looking like a thief scouting the area.

"Brother Chu?" Fatty called out, puzzled. "What are you doing?"

He couldn't possibly be buying a baseball bat to swing wildly in the instances. Chu Changge's stamina wouldn't support him running around with a heavy object for long. Besides, he wasn't a combat-oriented person.

Hearing the voice, Chu Changge withdrew his gaze and looked at Gu Mian and Fatty.

Gu Mian stepped forward to Chu Changge's side. "Didn't you say you were going to choose some things yourself?"

Chu Changge shook his head. "I mainly came in this time to look at the product description labels."

Most of the items in the supermarket had product labels indicating ingredients, origin, recommended selling price, and the like.

So, Chu Changge was here to study the ingredients and origins of the products?

Just then, Fatty stepped forward from behind and hefted the metal baseball bat in front of Chu Changge. "I think I'll get one of these. It might be useful in the instances. Even if I can't use it to smash ghosts' heads, I can use it to smash other players' heads."

After the last instance, Fatty realized that danger could come not just from ghosts, but also from other players. So, he needed to buy something for self-defense.

The trio didn't linger in the sales area for long. Since they had bought everything they needed, there was no reason to stay. Soon, they arrived at the cash register.

After spending 1,405 Game Coins, Gu Mian was left with 525, making him quite poor. Fatty's purchases were slightly cheaper, exactly 1,000 Game Coins; because the food was a bit expensive, he was left with only 900 after paying.

He could just about manage to keep the wolf from the door. Fortunately, they still had Chu Changge as their ATM.

Carrying so many packages, large and small, was quite conspicuous. They couldn't open their inventories in the supermarket area to put things away, so the trio had to swagger out with their bags.

Fortunately, not many people were waiting outside the cash register by this time, only a scattered few. But even these few people shot Fatty stares hot enough to bore holes in him.

Adhering to the excellent traditional virtue of "show off and then run," Fatty picked up his bags and dashed out.

Gu Mian and Chu Changge followed him.

Now, Fatty seemed impervious to the cold outside, huffing and puffing as he ran to where they had parked their vehicle.

Upon closer inspection, the vehicle was still there, undisturbed.

Looking again, Xiao Hong was also there, likewise undisturbed.

What a relief.

Chapter 265 I am the Frozen Bone_1

Xiao Hong was very quiet. When Gu Mian and the others returned to the car, she was leaning against the car window, her eyes staring outside, seemingly looking at something.

Of course, Gu Mian suspected she might want to climb through the car window onto the roof for a joyride.

Today's wind was a bit too fierce; it wasn't a good day for a joyride.

Gu Mian took the driver's seat, while Fatty, carrying his big bag, squeezed in from the back door of the Spirit Car.

Once inside, he immediately pulled a thick down jacket from his bag, wrapped it around himself, and exhaled a sigh of satisfaction.

"Finally, it's not as cold as before," Fatty remarked, his teeth still chattering, indicating he hadn't warmed up yet.

Amidst the clear clacking of his teeth, Fatty continued, "It's such a hardship to be freezing outside in this weather... ACHOO!"

No one here was named Ah-Qiu, and Gu Mian didn't think he was calling out to any 'Ah-Qiu.'

Fatty had just sneezed.

Everyone had a different way of sneezing. Some had to open their mouths wide, producing a deafening sound and splattering saliva everywhere, as if they wanted to devour someone.

Others were more delicate, their sneezes barely audible, with a gentle, almost melodic tone, like a singer who'd accidentally hit a wrong note.

Fatty's sneeze, however, contrasted sharply with his robust figure; it was as dainty as a coy young girl's.

Gu Mian was still thinking about the 'young girl,' when Fatty let out a few more delicate "ACHOO"s.

If anyone present was actually named Ah-Qiu, they might have their soul utterly captivated by Fatty's delicate sneezes.

Just as Fatty pulled out a tissue and pinched his nose, something small and light hit him.

Looking puzzled, he saw it was a box of cold medicine. He recognized this mundane item; it was just ordinary cold medicine, nothing special.

It was Gu Mian who had thrown it.

Gu Mian then tossed a bottle of mineral water to him. "Try some cold medicine first."

This cold medicine wasn't from a supermarket; it was a product from before the global game began. Gu Mian had brought a good amount of medicine when he left home, including this box.

Fatty knew he was prone to catching colds, and falling ill now would be disastrous, so he didn't hesitate. He was about to open the bottle and take the medicine when Gu Mian suddenly raised a hand, stopping him.

Fatty looked at Gu Mian, puzzled.

Gu Mian frowned slightly, seemingly contemplating something. "My class skill increases the effectiveness of medical items fourfold..."

However, Gu Mian wasn't sure if having someone else take medicine counted as part of his class skill.

To be safe, Gu Mian personally took out the pills, put them in Fatty's mouth, and then gave him water to wash them down.

Since Gu Mian had no prior experience in force-feeding water, Fatty nearly choked to death.

After leaving the supermarket, the three of them left Hengdian. They didn't have a specific destination. Chu Changge and Fatty voiced no preferences, and Xiao Hong, being a ghost, was essentially a non-entity in decision-making. She rarely spoke, content to press her face against the car window and stare at the passing chaos.

Fortunately, the car windows were all tightly shut. Otherwise, any unlucky soul who happened to glance their way might be scared half to death.

Gu Mian intentionally drove away from Hengdian, trying to get as far away as possible.

「A few days later, they encountered another roadblock.」

Near Hengdian, the military's preparations meant the roads were mostly clear. Wrecked vehicles had been removed, and traffic lights were gone, making for an exceptionally smooth drive from one end to the other without stopping. But things were different once they left that area.

The roads were choked with vehicles, car upon car creating impassable gridlock. For the past few days, Gu Mian had specifically chosen less congested routes.

Fortunately, the weather grew colder each day, discouraging people from venturing out. Even wrapped in two thick quilts, going outside could chill a person to the bone. This reduced the number of players moving about and, consequently, the number of people entering instances.

Although their Spirit Car could traverse obstacles, it was far too conspicuous. Driving it already attracted enough attention; Gu Mian was reluctant to use its jumping capabilities under the watchful eyes of others.

Today, however, he couldn't find any deserted roads.

After several days, players had somewhat adapted to the falling temperatures and were beginning to venture out, shivering, in search of ticket booths.

They weren't eager to go out, of course. However, staying indoors without electricity and water supply in these freezing temperatures was tantamount to suicide.

Then again, venturing out also risked freezing to death...

Gu Mian parked beside a jumble of haphazardly abandoned cars. At first glance, their Spirit Car didn't particularly stand out.

The Spirit Car blocked the howling wind, but cold air still seeped in through the cracks. Fatty, who couldn't stand the cold, could only rely on his quilt for warmth.

When they were at the supermarket recently, he'd bought a hanging thermometer.

Now, the thermometer, with a ribbon tied into a bow on it, hung from the rearview mirror.

Fatty craned his neck to look. It was minus thirteen degrees Celsius inside the car.

"Terrifying!" Fatty clutched his small quilt tighter, unwilling to even stick his hands out. "It must be even colder outside, right? Probably close to minus twenty?"

The wind hadn't stopped for days, howling incessantly even through the night. Two days ago, a thin layer of snow had even fallen, making everyone wonder if spring would ever arrive.

Just as Gu Mian stopped the car, snowflakes began to drift down again.

Gu Mian paused, then looked out the window. "We definitely can't leave now. Let's stay here for a bit."

Because this area was somewhat remote, the military hadn't extended its control here yet. Everyone Gu Mian saw on the streets looked timid and fearful, as if terrified of some mishap.

Fatty glanced at the date; it was already March 1st.

"By the way," he said worriedly, "if this weather keeps up, people are going to start freezing to death, aren't they?"

While driving these past few days, Gu Mian had seen many people, but none who had frozen to death outdoors.

People weren't stupid. With the weather so cold, they naturally holed up at home, bundled in their thickest clothes and several quilts.

So, even if people did freeze to death, it would happen in their own homes, unseen by others.

It was only in the last two days that more people had started venturing out. Gu Mian figured that after today, they might start seeing 'frozen-to-death bones' on the streets.

If the temperature kept dropping, the 'frozen-to-death bones' in those houses would undoubtedly far outnumber those on the streets.

Chapter 266 The Road to Wealth Starts with Gu Mianmian_1

These past few days, Fatty had been constantly taking cold medicine, but his condition hadn't improved at all.

It escalated from coughing and sneezing to headaches and fever, then he started to get a terrible runny nose.

Could it be that conventional medicines manufactured before the global game started had lost all their efficacy?

Gu Mian didn't dare to delay any longer. After Fatty's condition hadn't improved even after three days of taking cold medicine, he directly gave Fatty the medicine called [Life Type D - Weak Resistance].

This medicine could suppress a small number of common viruses, but it only had a slight effect during the initial stages of infection. Unexpectedly, it actually worked. Less than half a day after taking the medicine, Fatty's symptoms began to subside. After taking another pill the next day, he fully recovered.

Theoretically, Fatty's cold should have already been in its mid-stage, and a D-grade medicine shouldn't have been that effective. He recovered in two days entirely because Gu Mian's Doctor skill took effect, increasing the medicine's efficacy fourfold, which significantly boosted the effect of the low-potency drug.

Once Fatty recovered, he started doing the math and was still muttering about it.

"One pill is 100 points, and the Doctor skill can quadruple its efficacy. That should make it comparable to a C-grade medicine, right? I checked earlier; C-grade medicine in the supermarket costs at least 500 points. We could open a hospital! Charge each patient 200 points and give them medicine with 500 points worth of efficacy. Everyone would definitely stop going to the supermarket and come to us for treatment instead."

Fatty wasn't interested in much else, but he was extremely enthusiastic about making money. "And Doctor, you saw it yourself," he continued.

"That way, we make a profit of 100 points per patient. With thirty patients, that's 3,000 points! The patients also avoid spending 500 points at the supermarket, saving 300 points. It's a win-win for you, me, and them!"

The Doctor profession really is profitable.

No wonder the A-grade medicines in the supermarket are so expensive. You definitely can't afford them just by clearing instances. But if you have a money-making profession, you could totally buy a whole bunch.

Besides, the current harsh weather conditions are practically drumming up support for the Doctor profession.

More specifically, it's practically cheering for Gu Mian, as if frantically signaling him to seize this opportunity and make a lot of money.

This doesn't fit this world's usual MO!

Has 'life' stopped trying to assassinate me and instead become my money-making tool?

Something is definitely off when things are this abnormal. Besides, Gu Mian wasn't in the mood to run a hospital. After all, he was still on the bounty list. If he took in too many patients, and one of them recognized him and backstabbed him, it would be a huge loss.

"I'm not going to entertain your nonsense," Gu Mian said, patting the eager Fatty to stop him. "We're not discussing this right now. If we were to open a hospital, we'd first have to ensure I wouldn't die if someone suddenly stabbed me."

Hearing this, Fatty's enthusiasm for his get-rich-quick scheme died down.

That's true. The Doctor is still on the bounty list, and he can't improve his physical constitution, making him very vulnerable. Many people will be after him in the future, so as a frail Doctor, it's best for Gu

Mian to avoid too much contact with others. No matter how fierce he seems in instances, once everyone else develops, Gu Mian might get knocked down with a single poke.

It's worth noting that Gu Mian's group hadn't had many conflicts with other players yet, apart from that one event. The gang of hooligans who tried to rob them at the very beginning of the game didn't really count, because back then, no one had significantly enhanced their physical stats.

I really don't know what kind of situation Gu Mian will face against other players once the gap between them widens. Just thinking about it is terrifying, Fatty thought.

He sighed, somewhat dejected. "Isn't there any way to improve the Doctor's physical constitution?"

Chu Changge, who was beside them, pinched the bridge of his nose. "There might be."

Hearing this, Fatty was taken aback for a moment, then looked at Chu Changge with anticipation.

Chu Changge took off his glasses and wiped them. "As far as I know, Gu Mian's physical constitution has always been a cut above ordinary people, especially his stamina. So, even if other players are progressing while Gu Mian makes no headway, he can rely on his existing foundation for some time."

After all, not everyone is born capable of carrying a chainsaw weighing over five kilograms and chasing ghosts around without even panting.

Fatty had allocated almost all the Attribute Points he'd obtained so far to stamina, yet he still couldn't match Gu Mian's level, especially when it came to chasing ghosts.

Maybe this game should add a "Courage" attribute?

"Furthermore, Attribute Points in this game are extremely hard to get. Think about it: out of all the instances we've cleared, how many actually awarded Attribute Points?"

Fatty couldn't recall exactly, but his stat panel was right there—it hadn't changed much from his initial values.

"What Gu Mian lacks compared to other players are attributes. That's not an immediate concern; he can still rely on his existing foundation for a while..."

Gu Mian suddenly interjected as Chu Changge was speaking, "And luck."

Chu Changge: "..."

Opening more than ten boxes only to get a single usable special item was just too unlucky. That's why Gu Mian generally avoided playing gacha games that so vividly highlighted his terrible luck.

Chu Changge finished wiping his glasses and put them back on. "But even so, we can't ignore the bonuses from attributes. As time goes on, the game improves, and players become more proficient with instances, Attribute Points will surely become easier to obtain than they are now."

"However, Gu Mian can actually compensate for the deficiency in Attribute Points through other means."

Fatty looked at Chu Changge curiously. "Compensate with what?"

Chu Changge shook his head. "I still need to observe that a bit more, so I won't tell you for now. And regarding physical constitution, Gu Mian isn't entirely without opportunities for growth either."

Hearing this, Gu Mian nodded sagely. "Exactly. If I run twenty kilometers every day carrying a twenty-kilogram sandbag, my physical constitution will definitely improve."

Chu Changge seemed to have a bit of a headache; he pinched the bridge of his nose again. "That's not the kind of method I was talking about."

He paused, then continued, "Enter an instance."

What the heck? Fatty didn't react for a moment, not quite understanding why Chu Changge had suddenly blurted out those three seemingly irrelevant words.

"The abnormality in Gu Mian's stats must originate from this game, and this game is closely linked to instances. Since we can't delve into the game's data itself right now, the only way to interact with the game is by entering instances. Only by entering instances can we understand the reason for the abnormality in Gu Mian's stats and then find a solution based on that reason. If we're lucky, we might even find a solution directly within an instance."

At this point, Chu Changge lowered his hand. "And recently, I seem to have discovered something that might help with Gu Mian's situation..."

As he spoke, he brought his hand out from behind his back, revealing a tag.

Fatty recognized it at a glance. It was the tag from the quilt he had bought at the supermarket. He had cut it off a few days ago, intending to throw it away, but Chu Changge had swiped it.

Chu Changge held up the tag. "I've discovered something very interesting. Look at the place of origin on this tag."

Chapter 267 Gu Mian Desperately Seeking Talent _1

So, when Chu Changge was staring blankly at that baseball in the supermarket a few days ago, he was actually studying its product tag?

Gu Mian shifted his gaze to the product tag in Chu Changge's hand.

There was a "Place of Origin" section on the tag.

However, the place of origin names printed on the tags of supermarket items in this game were a bit absurd.

[Trembling World Textile Co., Ltd.]

Who in their right mind would name their company this? It sounded more like the name of a certain instance...

At this moment, Gu Mian seemed to recall something and quickly pulled out the [One-time Instance Exchange Coupon].

This was a reward—or rather, compensation—he had received after clearing his first instance.

By filling in the name of any instance, he could enter it. To verify if 'Trembling World Textile Co., Ltd.' was indeed an instance, he just needed to fill in its name.

However, he only had one Instance Exchange Coupon. Once used, it was gone, and it was uncertain if he could get another one in the future.

This item was currently an extremely rare special item; it was best not to use it rashly.

At this point, Chu Changge produced another empty small vial. This vial was tiny, about the size of a pinky fingernail. Gu Mian recognized it as the packaging for the [Life Type D - Weak Resistance] medication.

He had bought three pills in total. Fatty had already consumed two, and Gu Mian had naturally discarded the packaging.

Unexpectedly, Chu Changge had picked it up along the way.

Chu Changge now held two small transparent vials. "I've also carefully observed the packaging of medicines bought from the supermarket. These small vials have labels stuck to their bottoms..."

Gu Mian had noticed this as well.

Since many medicines look similar, labels with their names are added for easier differentiation.

Chu Changge continued, "I found numerical indicators on the labels at the bottom of these vials, like serial numbers. This implies that the medicines Gu Mian bought might have originally come in a larger package. The supermarket probably broke down the bulk packaging to sell them individually."

As Chu Changge spoke, Gu Mian also had a thought. "So, these medicines could also have a 'Place of Origin,' right?"

And the 'Place of Origin' for the medicines sold in the supermarket was very likely an instance.

If they could find this instance...

Instantly, Gu Mian already knew which medicines he wanted to loot.

Chu Changge nodded. "From these clues, we can see there are many undeniable connections between instances and reality. Some instances can even influence reality, and such instances must be crucial ones."

"Moreover, these instances likely share mysterious connections..."

He paused for a moment before continuing, "If we want to understand the reason for Gu Mian's data anomaly, perhaps we can start by investigating these instances. It's certainly better than blundering around like a headless fly."

Instances... investigate...

Fatty was momentarily dazed. The way Chu Changge spoke made it sound as if they were ruthless bandits who preyed on defenseless instances.

Chu Changge continued, "However, let's not enter these instances for now. I need some time to consolidate information about these 'origin' instances. Besides, the players accepted into such instances are definitely not to be trifled with. Gu Mian needs to enhance his strength through other means... At the very least, he shouldn't get himself stabbed to death by another player."

"But Brother Chu," Fatty asked in confusion, "are there any ways to enhance a Doctor's strength right now?"

Fatty had no illusions about Gu Mian drawing any incredible special items. Given his luck, it would be a miracle if he didn't draw a self-destructing bomb.

The wind howled outside. Chu Changge's voice was steady, neither loud nor soft. "Gu Mian still can't enhance his physical attributes. So, if he wants to increase his strength, he'll temporarily have to rely on external factors."

Fatty noticed that as Chu Changge spoke, he glanced towards the car window behind Fatty.

Following Chu Changge's gaze, Fatty looked back and saw Xiao Hong's stupefied expression.

Xiao Hong was currently staring at the sparse snowflakes outside the window with a dazed smile. If he were drooling, he would look exactly like an escapee from a mental asylum.

Fatty asked hesitantly, unsure, "Recruit... enforcers?"

Just thinking about it felt thrilling.

At that moment, Fatty even imagined himself as a player trying to assassinate Gu Mian.

Imagine it: a vulnerable, priceless Gu Sanwan right before his eyes. One strike was all it would take to eliminate him and claim all the rewards. But just as he was about to deliver the fatal blow, a ghost would suddenly appear from nowhere and chase him until he fled, battered and scrambling for his life... That would be so thrilling!

Chu Changge pushed up his glasses. "This is the best method for now. Therefore, Gu Mian needs to enter more instances. That way, he'll have more opportunities to recruit enforcers."

"Generally, the disparity in player abilities won't be too significant solely due to Attribute Points. However, there are always exceptions, so we need to prepare for unexpected events in advance."

Hearing this, Fatty couldn't help but interject, "Are you sure it's 'recruiting'?"

Isn't it more like kidnapping?

Fatty still remembered the miserable Mr. Green.

After Gu Mian had forcibly removed him from the instance, Mr. Green had been desperate to get back in. However, Gu Mian had shattered his only chance to return not long ago.

Chapter 268 Gu Mian Desperately Seeking Talent _2

By now, the unfortunate green host was probably still weeping somewhere.

Chu Changge nodded. "We do need their help for the time being, granted they may not be willing to aid us... but Gu Mian should have a way to make them submit."

At this, Gu Mian sounded incredibly righteous, "I never oppress others!"

"Alright," Chu Changge glanced out the window, "we can't drive any further right now. Let's take this opportunity to enter the instance. Gu Mian, seize any opportunity you can. Otherwise, you might be stabbed to death by other players."

Of course, Gu Mian didn't want to be stabbed to death by other players.

Yet, capturing a live ghost was much harder than capturing a dead one.

"Let me get this straight. You're not suggesting that I catch some ghost from the instance and bring it out with me, right?" Gu Mian sounded somewhat frustrated. And even if I wanted to, there's no guarantee I could actually bring one out.

Chu Changge nodded. "Correct. You don't need to capture ghosts. Just do what you usually do in the instance. Just be on the lookout for special items that are related to ghosts."

He stopped to consider for a moment before speaking again, "Like those IOUs from the Nine-headed Baby, or Pursuit Orders. Owning these types of special items can make ghosts surround you."

Though being surrounded by ghosts wasn't exactly something to be happy about...

Chu Changge continued, "Especially things like Pursuit Orders. There's already a ghost hunting you down. It hasn't shown up for quite a while because it's busy doing something else."

Fatty took a deep breath of the crisp air and began to complain, "Brother Chu, you know so much about this, it makes me think you're the ghost that's after the Doctor..."

Gu Mian was a little curious. "What is it doing?"

Chu Changge adjusted his glasses. "Remember that group of people who camped out beneath our hotel before the event started? The ones who were hostile towards us? Fatty caught footage of the ghost entering their tents, and the next day, people from the tents died."

"I was wondering back then, if that ghost's target was you, why would it attack other players? Later, halfway through the lantern riddle event, that cloaked man suddenly appeared and gave us a piece of information."

"He said there was someone with malicious intent following us during the event, and that person was also being followed by something that didn't seem alive. That 'something that didn't seem alive' is very likely the ghost that's hunting you."

"It was then that I suddenly realized something: all the players targeted by that ghost were people who could potentially pose a threat to you."

Upon hearing this, Gu Mian rubbed his chin. So, the ghost that was supposed to kill me not only didn't, but it even took care of everyone who was hostile towards me?

He spread his hands. "I don't think my handsome face made it abandon the dark side for the light."

Fatty couldn't help but spit. "I've never seen someone so shameless!"

Chu Changge ignored their banter and continued, "I suspect that because its mission is to kill you personally, it dealt with anyone who showed ill will towards you beforehand. If you were killed by someone else, it wouldn't be able to complete its mission."

"The reason it hasn't made a move against you yet might be because it's waiting for the right moment. It obviously understands that a rash move could lead to immediate mission failure."

Gu Mian was amused. This ghost is quite self-aware.

Chu Changge glanced at Gu Mian. "Don't laugh. That ghost could pop out and kill you at any moment, whether in an instance or in the real world."

"But let's set that aside for now. Your main threat currently comes from other players, so you still need to continue collecting these ghost-related special items. Once we find a way to enhance your physical abilities, you can stop..."

At this point, Chu Changge paused for a moment before continuing, "...collecting them."

Unfortunately, Fatty was incredibly tactless.

"Done with the grinding, kill the donkey?"

"Brother Chu, you were about to say, 'Done with the grinding, kill the donkey,' right?"

Chu Changge had already closed his mouth, seemingly unwilling to speak to the tactless Fatty.

"Alright," Gu Mian pressed down on Fatty's head, which was the only part of him protruding from the quilt. "Stop wailing. We'll enter an instance soon."

Recruiting thugs will probably be very difficult. I need to figure things out first.

And hopefully, I can use my invincible Doctor skills in the next instance.

At this moment, Gu Mian could already picture a teammate with a half-severed neck waiting for his treatment.

Once pinned down by Gu Mian, Fatty withdrew his head. "Entering an instance is great; it's warm inside."

After speaking, he subconsciously glanced out the window, only to find that the sporadic snowflakes had, at some point, turned into a heavy snowfall. Thick flakes, like goose feathers, were falling from the grey sky, twirling in the fierce wind as they descended.

If the snow continued at this rate, by the time they came out of the instance, the snow on the ground would likely reach their calves.

"Such heavy snow in March..."

Fatty shivered violently as he spoke, and looking at the heavy, feather-like snow outside seemed to make him feel even colder.

A few people were walking hurriedly nearby. The players venturing outside were all heavily bundled, almost wrapped into balls, with not even their faces exposed.

If they did reveal their faces, they would undoubtedly be haggard.

Everyone had assumed this cold snap would only last for a few days. Initially, almost everyone hid at home, waiting for the severe cold to pass.

Unexpectedly, the temperature just kept dropping, showing no signs of warming up.

Only now were people, driven by food scarcity, nervously leaving their homes, wanting to enter an instance.

"COUGH, COUGH—"

A desperate coughing sound suddenly came from not far away.

Listening to it made Fatty wince; it sounded as if the person was about to cough up their lungs.

The three of them looked towards the source of the sound. The coughing came from a middle-aged man, with a woman beside him, apparently his wife.

They were not far from their car.

The man was heavily bundled, though not as much as the woman beside him.

The woman was wrapped up like a cocoon, her figure entirely indistinguishable.

One could, however, make out a bit of the man's original build.

The woman was continuously patting the man's back, saying, "We're very close now. Just a little further, and we'll be there; it'll be warm then."

Her voice was low, but Gu Mian and the others could faintly hear her.

The man, who had been bent over coughing violently, straightened up. Without wasting time, he muttered an affirmative "mn" and pulled the person beside him, quickening his pace.

As they walked, the man covered his mouth with his other hand, seemingly suppressing a few more light coughs.

Vaguely, the three of them thought they heard the man say, "We need to hurry; Ruru is waiting for us at home."

Fatty's gaze remained fixed on their receding figures until the man and woman disappeared into the blizzard.

He spoke with a hint of worry, "Speaking of which, Doctor, haven't we seen a lot of sick people on our way here?"

That was a wild claim; Gu Mian and his group had only encountered a little over thirty people on their journey, hardly enough to be called "a lot."

Proportionally, however, the number of sick people did seem quite high.

Of the thirty-odd people, almost half had coughs, whether severe or mild. Of course, Gu Mian could only determine if they were sick by hearing them cough.

This was because the faces of the players on the street were almost all completely covered.

Of the four traditional diagnostic methods—observation, listening/smelling, inquiry, and palpation—Gu Mian could only manage the "listening" part.

Chu Changge withdrew his gaze. "This should be the flu... If it's more severe, then it's an epidemic."

Fatty shuddered.

Just then, Gu Mian suddenly opened the car door, "Those two people should be heading to an instance. If we follow them, we should be able to find the ticket booth."

Chapter 269 Xiao Gu Mian Selling Match Sticks_1

Gu Mian's group had just arrived and weren't yet familiar with the terrain.

Normally, even if they didn't know where the ticket booth was, they could leisurely stroll around to find it.

But now, that wasn't an option.

The temperature inside the vehicle had already dropped to below minus ten degrees Celsius.

The outside temperature was even more terrifying; they couldn't linger out there for long, or they risked freezing numb.

At this moment, Fatty dropped the blanket he was holding, and trembling, he pulled open the back car door and jumped out.

As soon as he landed, the biting cold wind seeped through the gaps in his clothing, assaulting him from head to toe. Fatty's teeth chattered uncontrollably.

"Q-Quick... let's go..." Fatty struggled to force the words out.

Every time he opened his mouth, icy wind would ruthlessly pour in, making him feel as if a large ice cube had lodged in his stomach.

Xiao Hong was naturally left in the car to keep watch.

Every time Gu Mian left the Spirit Car, he worried Xiao Hong might be spirited away.

They couldn't bring too many items into the instance. Leaving Xiao Hong to stand guard was indeed the best choice, even though this female ghost seemed a bit... off.

At this moment, Fatty, who had jumped out of the car first, was already rushing towards the direction the man and woman had taken.

Just standing outside for a short while had made his feet go numb; he needed to move quickly to generate some heat.

The departing man and woman walked swiftly, soon disappearing from sight.

Fortunately, the ticket booth was quite conspicuous.

Gu Mian, Chu Changge, and Fatty hadn't walked long in the nearly minus twenty-degree Celsius environment when they spotted the ticket booth not far ahead. Fatty, unable to bear the cold, jogged towards it.

Gu Mian and Chu Changge followed close behind.

When they arrived at the ticket booth, the man and woman they had seen earlier were gone.

It seemed they had gone directly into the instance.

It made sense; even inside the ticket booth, it was incredibly cold.

The main door was wide open, allowing the fierce north wind to gust directly into the room. However, it was still slightly better inside, as the walls offered some shelter.

By now, Fatty had already plopped down onto a chair beside the long table in the ticket booth, apparently needing a moment to recover.

Fatty's ears were numb from the cold; he couldn't even feel it when he pinched them.

While he was pinching his ears, Chu Changge, who was beside him, had already collected the tickets.

Fatty pinched his ear hard again, but still felt nothing.

He stopped trying and stood up. "Doctor, let's go in. If we stay here any longer, I'm afraid I'll catch a cold again..."

Theoretically, if someone had just recovered from a cold, they shouldn't fall ill again so soon.

But Fatty's cold was truly unusual. The virus seemed as if it had been strengthened by Earth, making it hard to eliminate. Goodness knew what this virus had mutated into; the possibility of him falling sick again immediately after recovering wasn't small.

Presently, the three of them began matching for an instance.

[Matching instance, please wait]

[Instance matched successfully, matching teammates...]

Gu Mian had stashed all the medicine he'd gotten from the supermarket into the pockets of his white lab coat. He hoped to encounter some rookie teammates this time so he could rescue them when their health was critical.

Perhaps saving people could trigger hidden achievements or skills for the Doctor profession.

However, the teammates couldn't be **too** rookie...

If they were too weak, by the time he arrived, there might only be a corpse left. Even if Gu Mian possessed heaven-defying abilities, he couldn't revive the dead.

Just then, something changed before the three of them.

[Teammate matching successful]

[Instance: Broken Fairy Tale City]

"Speaking of which," Fatty's voice came from the side, "the name of this instance sounds quite inspired..."

Gu Mian nodded in agreement in the darkness, though Fatty probably couldn't see him.

[Content: This is a city like a beautiful dream, where you will encounter fantastical characters. May the beautiful dream last forever.]

[Number of Players: 7]

[Main Quest: Escape from Fairy Tale City]

This instance's description...

"Could we actually encounter Pleasant Goat in this instance?" Fatty's puzzled voice came from beside him.

Gu Mian adjusted the guitar he carried. "Fairy Tale City... we should encounter things from fairy tales, right? Pleasant Goat doesn't seem to be a fairy tale character. Speaking of fairy tales, the ones we might encounter in there should be..."

Alice? Mickey Mouse? Little Red Riding Hood?

"It should be someone like Voldemort," Gu Mian's voice continued.

Fatty gulped. It seems this Doctor has a profound misunderstanding of 'fairy tales,' he thought.

Just as Fatty was mid-gulp, his saliva catching in his throat, the view before the three of them suddenly brightened.

When he came to his senses, Gu Mian found himself standing on a lush green meadow.

There was no sign of Chu Changge and Fatty nearby.

Bright sunlight streamed down from the sky, glinting off dew-covered blades of grass. The air was filled with the fresh scent of leaves, and occasionally, a warm breeze would blow by.

His nostrils were forcefully filled with the scent of grass; for a moment, Gu Mian felt as if he had transformed into a cow grazing on grass.

The current situation was a world away from the previous environment where the biting wind had raged. Gu Mian took some time to adjust.

Green filled Gu Mian's vision.

He tilted his head, looking around. It was all grassland. Not too far away stood a forest, and smoke seemed to be slowly rising from within it.

"Blue sky, white clouds, green land, forests, chimney smoke... standard fairy tale scenery."

"But then again..."

Gu Mian muttered to himself, glancing at the surroundings again. Yes, definitely grassland.

"I remember this instance is called Broken Fairy Tale City, not Fairy Tale Pasture..."

He highly doubted that the surrounding grassland and the nearby forest were part of some city wildlife park.

Anyway, I should head towards the smoke first, Gu Mian thought. I might run into someone, or at least an NPC.

With this in mind, Gu Mian started walking towards the rising smoke.

Speaking of fairy tales that take place in forests, which ones were there again? Gu Mian pondered.

Gu Mian didn't have a deep understanding of fairy tales because his parents, who had likely both passed away during his childhood, had never told him bedtime stories. He only knew a few of the most globally famous ones.

Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White... those two fairy tales should be related to forests, he mused. I really can't think of any others.

He carefully considered fairy tales that might take place in a forest as he slowly walked towards the smoke.

But even if I figure out which fairy tale this is, how would that help? Am I supposed to rescue the protagonist? For example, protecting Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother from being eaten by the Big Bad Wolf?

He hadn't walked for long before he spotted a group of human figures in the distance.

That's right, a group...

Chapter 270 Xiao Gu Mian Selling Nuclear Bombs_1

One, two, three, four, five...

Five little people, reaching only up to Gu Mian's waist.

Indeed, five Little Dwarfs.

However, these five Little Dwarfs looked a bit odd; it seemed they weren't naturally short, but habitually hunchbacked.

Their arms and legs bent unnaturally, and even their backs arched high, like a camel's hump in the desert.

It appears the fairy tale being enacted here is 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'? Although, they seem to be two dwarfs short...

The Little Dwarfs, carrying shovels and hoes, were merry and buoyant, humming songs. It looked like they had just finished their work and were heading home?

Seeing these hunchbacked people jumping and singing, Gu Mian almost feared they'd sprain their backs.

Gu Mian stroked his chin and swiftly took two steps forward, wanting to get a clearer look.

Just then, a RUSTLE RUSTLE sound suddenly came from the bushes nearby.

Gu Mian quickly turned his head to look in that direction.

A little girl wearing a green cloak and carrying a basket darted out from the bushes. The cloak had an attached hood covering her head, and she was looking around as if searching for something.

This costume looked somewhat like Little Red Riding Hood's, but the color seemed off.

Little Red Riding Hood would never wear such a poisonous color.

So, is this... Little Green Hat?

That's quite something.

Instead of Little Red Riding Hood, there was green.

Could it be that this instance is a bad, counterfeit fairy tale?

Whoever created this instance must be colorblind—red-green colorblind.

If Hans Christian Andersen knew his fairy tale had been plagiarized by a red-green colorblind person, he would surely jump out of his coffin in indignation.

Little Green Hat merely looked up. When she seemingly didn't find what she was looking for, she hurried back into the bushes and vanished.

She looked extremely tense, like a fugitive who had just robbed a bank and was on the run. Gu Mian wasn't too familiar with fairy tales, but he had heard the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

This was thanks to a child in the orphanage who loved telling fairy tales. Gu Mian had eagerly listened a few times back then, but the storytelling child was adopted soon after, and Gu Mian had hardly heard any fairy tales since.

In the original fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood wouldn't exhibit the panicked expression of someone fleeing after committing murder and robbery. So, this Little Green Hat and Little Red Riding Hood probably have no connection other than their similar appearances.

But what was she looking for?

Quite strange.

So far, nothing overtly strange had happened in this instance, yet everything felt odd.

Just then, the Little Dwarfs seemed to notice Gu Mian. They immediately gathered around him, eyeing him curiously from top to bottom.

"Sir," the Little Dwarf carrying a hoe was the first to speak, "are you also a guest lost in these woods?"

Despite his short stature, he had the genuine face of a middle-aged man. His skin was a tad saggy, and his nose was ruddy.

Gu Mian felt a bit strange being looked up at by such a face.

Although it was odd to be stared at by a man little more than a meter tall, Gu Mian quickly gleaned useful information from his words.

Also?

Were there others lost in these woods before him?

Stroking his chin, he asked, "Have you met other people lost in these woods?"

The Little Dwarfs nodded in unison.

The Little Dwarf holding a wooden spade replied, "Yes, many. There were many guests dressed strangely like you before. They all left eventually... Oh, and there was one who was special, a beautiful princess. She came here as a guest and stayed for a long time. Yes, her name was Princess Heitang."

Upon hearing the name 'Princess Heitang', Gu Mian almost choked on his own saliva.

Mixing up red and green was one thing, but black and white...

This was probably not the fairy tale world they knew, but a counterfeit one, crudely made by someone with a sick sense of humor.

Gu Mian didn't dwell on 'Princes Heitang' for too long; instead, he analyzed what the hunchbacked Little Dwarf had said earlier.

The strangely dressed people must have been players from previous parties in this global game instance. It was common knowledge that completed instances didn't reload. So, if it became corrupted, it stayed corrupted; the data couldn't be reset as if nothing had happened.

The Little Dwarf holding a spade jumped about. "Dear lost guest, it's getting late. Why don't you stay at our house for the night? Tomorrow, when it's light, we can escort you out."

The Little Dwarfs were very enthusiastic, as if Gu Mian were a beautiful princess lost in the woods.

Gu Mian glanced around. The forest was vast, with some trees seeming to reach the sky. The dense foliage blocked much of the sky, rendering the woods eerie and somewhat terrifying.

Wandering alone in such a forest at night wasn't a good idea.

But something was weird.

Gu Mian remembered seeing dew on the grass earlier. Logically, there shouldn't be any dew if it's nearly dark...

Strange.

So far, he still didn't understand what this instance required them to do. How can they escape Fairy Tale City? Just how large is the area encompassed by Fairy Tale City? Gu Mian didn't know the answers to these questions and realized he needed to interact with the NPCs in the instance first.

The players in this instance had all been separated. He had no idea where the others were or what fairy tale they had encountered.

Unable to find the others, Gu Mian decided to follow the five Little Dwarfs for the time being.

The Little Dwarfs were fervent and sprightly, leading Gu Mian through a small thicket. Shortly after, a somewhat small wooden house came into view.

The Little Dwarf carrying a hammer said excitedly to Gu Mian, "The beautiful princess who is our guest has stayed at our house. She must have soup ready for us by now. Hurry, hurry."

Just then, Gu Mian noticed a little girl standing under a tree not far away. It was Little Green Hat, who had emerged from the bushes earlier.

She was still carrying her basket, as if it contained some treasure.

Little Green Hat seemed to notice Gu Mian looking at her. She offered a shy smile, then turned and ran off in a flash.

A few of the Little Dwarfs also seemed to see Little Green Hat in the distance.

"Ah," one of the Little Dwarfs said, "that's Little Green Hat who lives near us. She has an elderly grandfather at home."

Grandfather? A gender-swapped grandma?

Gu Mian knew many games liked such gender-swapping twists; he hadn't expected this instance to be so trendy.

However, they didn't seem very interested in Little Green Hat and quickly led Gu Mian to the front of their cottage.

"What a lovely house," the Little Dwarfs exclaimed.

Gu Mian suspected they probably said this every day upon returning home.

Just then, the wooden door of the house CREAKED open, revealing a beautiful face from within. "You're back."

This must be the princess.

Although she didn't quite match Gu Mian's mental image of Princes Heitang—he imagined Princes Heitang to be very dark, her face like charcoal with only two shiny black eyeballs visible—the woman before him was not dark. In fact, she was rather fair and quite pretty.

Upon seeing the unfamiliar Gu Mian, Princes Heitang seemed completely unsurprised. She smiled and said, "It's almost dark. Come in."

Almost dark?

Gu Mian looked up at the sky, somewhat surprised. Indeed, it was already dusk. The sun was about to dip below the horizon completely, and night was approaching.

Because the light in the forest had been so dim earlier, Gu Mian hadn't noticed the sky gradually darkening.

Strange. Wasn't it pretty bright just a while ago? How could the sun set in less than an hour?

Perhaps it was because darkness better suited the atmosphere of a horror instance.

「At this moment, the Xingyun Fatty had already met another player, one with the nickname 'The Most Flamboyant Supermodel'.」

No doubt the name was incredibly flamboyant, but this wasn't the time to compete over who had the more flamboyant name.

The fairy tale they encountered is Cinderella... but things don't seem to be going that way.

Fatty and Supermodel, lost in the forest, had met up. They were then found by a fair-skinned young woman who was gathering firewood outside. Hearing she had two sisters and a stepmother, Fatty immediately suspected this was the infamously abused Cinderella.

But the young woman promptly clarified that this wasn't the case and introduced herself as Elizabeth.

Her stepmother was kind to her, as were her two stepsisters. Since their family temporarily had no servants, they sometimes went out to gather dry branches for firewood.

Not the same as Cinderella's plot at all...

The two were kindly taken in by Elizabeth and settled into two adjacent rooms on the second floor. But the two restless souls eventually snuck into one room together.

Currently, Supermodel was nervously watching the sun set outside the window, "Nothing good usually happens after dusk. Besides, don't you feel there's something off about Elizabeth, the one who brought us here?"

Fatty patted his shoulder, "Indeed, something seems off. But our mission is to escape Fairy Tale City. We won't find any clues wandering in the forest, right? We have to interact with the NPCs."

As he spoke, he pressed his ear to the door and gestured for Supermodel to come over. "Look, we can eavesdrop on Elizabeth and her mother below and see what they're discussing..."

Fatty pressed his ear to the door, listening to the sounds from outside. After a while, he frowned slightly. "Hey, listen. Do you hear them? Are they talking about us?"

Supermodel mimicked him, placing his ear against the door. And then, both their faces slowly turned pale...

「Meanwhile, Chu Changge was standing on a bustling street.」

The sun had set, only a hint of afterglow remaining on the land, but the crowd on the street showed no signs of thinning. The weather had turned a bit cold, and everyone was wrapped in thick coats.

Right in front of Chu Changge stood a ragged little girl. She shivered as she held up her basket, earnestly trying to sell him something, "Sir, buy a lighter."

A lighter-selling little girl?

Night had fallen unusually fast.

The sun's afterglow was gradually disappearing. In a few seconds, not even a speck of light remained, and it was already becoming difficult to see the ground clearly.

Chu Changge walked past the shabby little girl, paused for a moment, then intended to continue forward.

But just then, he heard the same words from behind.

The voice, however, had turned cold and resentful, "Sir, buy a lighter."