

Collapse 281

Chapter 281

It's worth mentioning that Fatty, whose mind rarely spun, was actually doing some thinking today.

Having learned his lesson from Elizabeth's precedent, Fatty felt it was very unreliable to trust anyone else now.

So, without even listening to Little Green Hat's task, he wanted to drag the supermodel away and escape.

However, their ideas were diametrically opposed.

The supermodel seemed to believe Little Green Hat was an Angel sent by heaven to save her. Of course, no matter how hard Fatty stared at the top of that green hat, he couldn't see any halo or similar adornment.

As a result, the two parted ways.

Although Fatty didn't accept Little Green Hat's task, he was directly ordered by Little Green Hat "not to stay near the person performing the task."

Fatty hesitated for a moment, then parted ways with the supermodel, waiting nearby for her to complete her task.

While waiting, he kept tugging at the wolf skin on his body, afraid it would fuse further with him.

However, the supermodel who went to do the task disappeared for the entire day, and Little Green Hat also vanished.

Fatty waited and waited, but the supermodel who went to do the task didn't return.

Instead, Chu Changge arrived, along with an uninvited guest...

It was now deep in the night. Fatty, teary-eyed, was pinned to the ground by Xiao Qiao, who had appeared out of nowhere, looking like a virtuous woman about to be violated.

The last time he saw Xiao Qiao was in the driver's license instance.

But Fatty didn't recall this female celebrity displaying such ferocity back then.

"I've already told you my conjectures about this instance," Chu Changge said, looking at Fatty pinned to the ground. Moonlight glinted coldly off his glasses. "You've already started to fuse with this instance. Once the fusion is complete, it means true death. You'll never be able to go back."

Fatty was pressed firmly to the ground. By slightly turning his head, he could see Chu Changge standing beside him.

It was still deep in the night. Although the forest was somewhat dark, the moon had finally emerged.

Moreover, the trees in this area seemed malnourished and were therefore quite sparse.

Moonlight shone down on the relatively open ground.

He noticed Chu Changge seemed to have something tied to his arm.

"It's a piece of torn cloth I found in this instance," Chu Changge said, noticing Fatty's gaze. "If I didn't have this, I, having no connection to this instance, would soon be rejected from this place."

Even Xiao Qiao, who was pinning Fatty down, had a silk scarf-like item tied around her wrist.

However, she had hidden it in her sleeve, making it very hard to spot.

These two scoundrels seem to have conspired beforehand! Fatty thought. They had pinned him down the moment they arrived, making him unable to resist.

Fatty struggled to turn his head, looking at the battered knife in Chu Changge's hand.

[Rusty Fruit Knife]

If I remember correctly, this seems to be the piece of junk Chu Changge got from his first instance. Though it's called a fruit knife, it probably can't even cut fruit...

"Why do you still have this piece of junk... Wait, don't tell me you're planning to use this to cut off the clothes fused to me!" Fatty recoiled violently.

He wanted to offer some token resistance, but to his horror, he discovered the young woman pinning him down was immensely strong. Being pressed down by her felt like being trapped under a massive cauldron; he couldn't move an inch.

"I don't have a habit of carrying weapons," Chu Changge said, gripping the rusty fruit knife. "And we absolutely cannot use any items from this instance. Otherwise, even if we manage to separate the clothing, the flesh cut by the knife might also risk being assimilated."

Cutting flesh... Cutting flesh with a dull knife!

Fatty's mouth twitched violently several times, almost as if he were having a seizure.

It'll be painful... But it's still better than dying in this instance.

Thinking this, Fatty, still pinned down, gritted his teeth. "Go on, do it. I won't resist."

Xiao Qiao's clear voice came from above him. "You can't resist anyway."

It was the truth, but hearing it made Fatty want to cough up blood.

Xiao Qiao also seemed to have some reservations about the rusty knife in Chu Changge's hand.

Fatty was still bracing himself, eyes shut tight, waiting for the dull knife to cut his flesh, when a cold wind WHOOSHED by, making him shiver.

"Your knife is too rusty..." he heard Xiao Qiao's voice from above and couldn't help but nod silently in agreement.

But her next words made Fatty, who had been silently agreeing, freeze— "It would be better if I just ripped it off. You hold him down."

Rip it?!

Fatty twisted his head in horror, staring at the woman pinning him down as if she were a demon.

But Chu Changge shook his head, refusing outright.

Brother Chu really wouldn't resort to such violent methods. Fatty was a little touched.

But just then, Chu Changge suddenly said, "I can't hold him down."

Fatty silently turned his head back and tugged at his collar. This world is so cold.

"Don't worry," Chu Changge's voice came from behind him. "You have a lot of fat, and only a small part of you has fused with the wolf skin. You won't bleed too much."

At that moment, Fatty only felt a chill run down his spine.

Even though he was wearing clothes, he felt as if he were naked. Especially when Chu Changge's voice sounded; every time he spoke, Fatty suspected a rusty knife would suddenly stab through his kidney.

"There's no anesthetic here, so you'll have to bear with it..."

Here, Chu Changge paused again. "If you want to scream, go ahead and scream."

After all, screaming loudly in this instance wouldn't attract Evil Ghosts or similar entities; it would only attract other players.

Fatty's stomach pressed tightly against the ground.

The wolf skin had fused with a part of the skin on his back, so there was no need for an incision on his front.

He desperately gripped a handful of weeds with one hand and stuffed the other into his mouth, from which muffled, intermittent sounds escaped. "You... can start now."

Then, his back suddenly felt a sharp cold.

Chu Changge lifted the wolf skin off Fatty's back.

The parts where the wolf skin had fused with Fatty's skin were small: one area was on his left rear shoulder, and the other was on the side of his waist.

Although there were only two spots, being cut with a dull knife was excruciating, especially without anesthetic.

The person being cut would feel the knife continuously sawing at their flesh, a tiny bit at a time, each cut bringing immense pain.

It was somewhat similar to the ancient punishment of Lingchi, or death by a thousand cuts. Fortunately, Fatty didn't need to have all the flesh flayed from his body.

Xiao Qiao pinned Fatty down with one hand on the nape of his neck and the other on his back, a flashlight now clenched in her teeth.

Although Fatty's legs could still move, there was no way he could manage to kick Chu Changge, who was performing the 'surgery'.

When the first cut landed on Fatty's back, the other two present heard him suck in a sharp breath of cold air.

Blood welled up.

The dull knife slowly sawed through the tissue beneath the skin, its efficiency almost like grinding.

Fatty let out pathetic sobs. Chu Changge heard him sniffing several times, yet surprisingly, he still had the strength to speak.

He spoke between sobs.

"Brother Chu... c-could you tell me... about you and the Doctor... from before? S-so I can distract myself... *sob*..."

Chu Changge remained silent for a moment, then began to speak.

"When we were in kindergarten, everyone disliked Gu Mian. No one wanted to play with him.

"There was only one girl who really liked him; she was always pestering him...

"Later, there was a time when many kids were bullying Gu Mian together. To cheer him up, the little girl played Rock-Paper-Scissors with him, saying whoever won could give the other a kiss."

"And then what?" Fatty whimpered.

"...Later, Gu Mian's face was swollen from all the kisses."

Chu Changge heard Fatty let out what sounded like a laugh, then, laughing and crying at the same time, Fatty asked, "And then what?"

"She died later on."

Fatty cried even harder.

Chapter 282 Princess Heitang and the Five Little Dwarfs with Gu Mian_1

007 never thought she would feel the chill of the night wind on her face again.

Severe pain radiated from her shoulder.

Upon waking up, she instinctively looked at her arms, which were sagging down but tightly bandaged. The end was tied into a somewhat ugly butterfly knot. She looked at the knot and managed to smile, even though it looked somewhat awkward.

Fresh, bright red blood was seeping onto the bandage, but not too much.

The pain in her shoulder was particularly noticeable. She remembered her clothes being fused with a part of her back shoulder, which seemed to have been cut off as well.

However, her arm that should have been in severe pain seemed to feel nothing...

Only then did 007 look at the person carrying her on his back.

It was him.

The Doctor with the guitar bag; 007 had seen him twice. She remembered this man either pretending to be a ghost at the edge of the forest or performing on the street...

Although, selling lighters might not count as performing.

Gu Mian felt the movement from the person behind him. He turned his head slightly to see 007's face resting on his shoulder. She was awake, her eyes wide open.

"Awake?" Gu Mian shifted 007 slightly.

This girl was too light; carrying her on his back gave Gu Mian the impression that she wasn't much heavier than his chainsaw.

"Hmm," 007 buried her head slightly, speaking in a soft voice, "Thank you."

Although she didn't know what had happened while she was unconscious, she knew for certain that nothing like a "comatose girl forcibly skinned by a perverted doctor" scenario would occur. If it weren't for this white-cloaked figure, she might still be silently waiting for death in the forest, or she might have already been assimilated by this instance... But now, she was still alive.

The nights in this instance were extremely long.

007 didn't know how long she had been unconscious; regardless, when she woke up, she still saw the nocturnal forest scene.

Moonlight enveloped the entire forest. The tall trees were layered with white light, as if coated in frost.

Even though the cold wind was still howling, 007 felt an unprecedented warmth. Her body, previously frozen stiff, seemed to come back to life, a current of warmth spreading through her, like hope.

Gu Mian did not say much, which left 007 somewhat at a loss.

She was carried on Gu Mian's back for quite a while before she spoke, "Did you give me painkillers? I'll pay you..."

"No, I cut the nerves in your arm."

007: "..."

Following his professional ethics as a Doctor, Gu Mian asked another question, "Does your shoulder hurt?"

007 shook her head, fighting back tears. Although it still hurt, it was much better than before.

The throbbing muscles and blood vessels were still vivid in her memory. The mere thought made her uncomfortable. She couldn't even imagine how much courage it must have taken for her to peel off her own skin back then.

She paused for a moment, then said, "You used a hemostatic on me, didn't you?"

Otherwise, the bleeding from her arm wouldn't be so minimal.

Gu Mian nodded slightly.

Frankly, this girl's way of speaking made him quite uneasy. In all the instances he'd entered, this was the first time he'd met someone so polite to him, using the formal "you" with every address. It practically made him feel like he was from her parents' generation. To save himself trouble, Gu Mian had actually considered chopping off 007's two arms. He hadn't done it in the end, but being addressed so respectfully now still made him feel a little guilty.

He had bought five [Instance-Type D-Coagulant] potions. If injected near a wound, this medicine could coagulate the blood for a short time—effective for two minutes. When Gu Mian used it with his skills, the effect extended to ten minutes. But 007's two bare arms couldn't really be considered "wounds." If she had suffered a fatal injury like a slit throat, Gu Mian could have given her a shot of hemostatic, but for two skinless arms, even twenty shots would have been useless; the surface area was too large.

Fortunately, Gu Mian also carried [Hemostatic Spray]. The spray bottle was even printed with the large characters: "Evil God Product – Guaranteed Quality." Mr. Green had given it to him, saying someone had entrusted him to deliver it to Gu Mian. As soon as Gu Mian got it, he'd sprayed half a bottle, using it to stop a young man's bleeding in the last event, and it seemed he'd wasted quite a bit... He hadn't realized it at the time, but now he found this stuff was really useful. The [Hemostatic Spray] could cover a very large area. For someone like 007 with such extensive bleeding, a few sprays followed by bandaging would almost completely stop the blood flow. And Gu Mian had noticed that the supermarket didn't stock spray-type hemostatic medicines, nor did there seem to be any drugs for large-area bleeding, making this bottle quite rare.

Just then, 007, who was lying on Gu Mian's back, suddenly spoke, "Sir, you've noticed it too, right? This instance is different from the ones we've been in before. So, when you were wearing that little girl's clothes earlier, was it because you didn't want to leave the instance too soon?"

She hadn't failed to notice Gu Mian's nickname. It was rather strange. She didn't feel comfortable calling Gu Mian "Green Doctor," so she had settled on "Sir" for now.

Gu Mian himself deeply detested this title that made him sound old. However, he couldn't very well force a pitiful patient to call him "Big Brother" or something similar.

He suddenly asked, "How old are you?"

007 didn't expect Gu Mian to suddenly ask this and subconsciously answered, "I'm twenty..."

Twenty?

Gu Mian asked, "Still in school?"

007 suddenly tensed up completely. After a long moment, she quietly replied, "No..."

After that, she fell silent.

Gu Mian said nothing and simply continued to carry 007 forward.

He was looking for the NPCs in this instance. Chu Changge had told him to pay more attention to special items related to ghosts within the instance and had also mentioned things like interacting more with NPCs. Gu Mian's data was very strange, and there seemed to be some connection between these game instances. Perhaps he could obtain some information about his data anomaly from the NPCs.

But Gu Mian's hopes were dashed. At least in this instance, they were. He found the NPCs in this instance very odd and couldn't get any useful information out of them.

The stooped Little Dwarfs, the suspicious Princess Heitang. Previously, Princess Heitang had claimed that when she arrived in the forest, the Little Dwarfs were already living in the wooden house. The larger furniture in her room, she said, was all newly acquired later. But Gu Mian had discovered that the furniture in Princess Heitang's room was also very old. If it were newly acquired, shouldn't it be much newer? Moreover, the Little Dwarfs' furniture was very strange. It showed signs of being cut, as if larger pieces of furniture had been sawn apart and then reassembled into smaller, irregular items. That's why they weren't uniform. Gu Mian had played many jigsaw puzzles. He realized that if the Little Dwarfs' small furniture pieces were disassembled and then put back together, they could form larger pieces of furniture. The assembled large furniture matched the set in Princess Heitang's room. This implied that a long time ago, the wooden house had been filled with large furniture, pieces designed for normally-sized people. But later, the normal people inside gradually stooped, shrank, and were assimilated, eventually becoming Little Dwarfs. That was why the large furniture was dismantled and remade into small pieces suitable for that group of stooped Little Dwarfs. Those Little Dwarfs had once been players too—players of normal stature. Including Princess Heitang. She too had likely been a player before, one who had been assimilated long ago and had developed some level of intelligence, becoming an NPC. Gu Mian had no doubt that if he were to gulp down that bowl of meat soup in the dilapidated little wooden cabin, he too would gradually stoop and shrink. Any player who drank the soup, unless they immediately cut out their own stomach, could forget about leaving the instance...

Undoubtedly, there had to be an "Origin" in this instance. An Origin NPC, one who had deceived the first batch of players to enter this instance. This Origin NPC definitely played a crucial role in this instance, perhaps even being its core. Maybe he could get some answers about the data anomaly from this core?

"Because I didn't have the money," the person on his back suddenly mumbled.

It took Gu Mian a good while to realize she was talking about the earlier subject of her schooling. What a strange person...

Gu Mian took a few more steps forward, intending to find the next NPC. Following the trail might lead to some clues.

Just then, a deafening scream suddenly erupted from not far ahead.

Gu Mian recognized it—it sounded like Fatty's scream.

Chapter 283 The Crazy Organizer_1

A blunt knife cutting into flesh was truly painful.

Fatty, tormented by Chu Changge for quite some time, eventually resolved to let Xiao Qiao do it.

Xiao Qiao took advantage of his distracted state and with one swift pull, forcefully ripped the wolf skin that had grown on Fatty's body.

Since she did it when Fatty wasn't expecting it, his shriek of pain was particularly loud.

Chu Changge bent down and used his coat to cover Fatty's wound.

"It won't hurt," Xiao Qiao held him down tightly, her expression excessively tender, "Just blow on it and it won't hurt."

The night wind was rather obedient.

As soon as she finished speaking, a gust of wind blew by, making Fatty's wound hurt even more.

With tears streaming down his face, Fatty lifted his head to look at the actress, whose acting was universally criticized.

No one could really blame her for her shoddy acting.

Even when she was off-camera, she still wore an unnatural expression, looking like she was struggling to control her facial muscles.

It was as if she had peeled this overly stunning face off someone else and plastered it onto her own.

Thinking back to Xiao Qiao's earlier skin-peeling action, Fatty couldn't help but shudder violently.

At that moment, Chu Changge, who was nearby, suddenly straightened up and turned to look in the direction from which the wind had blown.

The strong wind pulled his hair back and made his clothes flutter wildly.

Chu Changge seemed indifferent, his brows furrowing as he stared in the direction the wind was coming from.

Over there, a large expanse of branches and leaves swayed, and the shadows of the trees danced and quivered on the ground.

A gigantic moon hung quietly over the rustling forest, shining with a silvery glow.

Fatty swore that he had never seen such a large moon in his life, but it was quite beautiful...

Xiao Qiao also straightened up, looking in the same direction as Chu Changge. "Someone's here," she stated.

Fatty, trembling as he lay on the ground, muttered, "Are you guys dogs? How can you smell someone from just a gust of wind?"

Gu Mian, walking against the wind, happened to overhear Fatty's comment about dogs.

Carrying 007 on his back, he glanced at Chu Changge, whose back was to him, then at the long-haired woman beside Chu Changge, who also had her back to him. He couldn't help but wonder, "What are you all looking at?"

Chu Changge was the first to turn around.

He immediately noticed 007 on Gu Mian's back but didn't ask any questions. Instead, he said, "Nothing."

At this point, Xiao Qiao also turned around.

Upon seeing Xiao Qiao, 007, on Gu Mian's back, widened her eyes slightly. "It's you..."

It was the woman who had tricked the witch out of her shovel and then casually tossed it aside. She occasionally wore a blank expression, as if relaxing. 007 had only seen her profile at the time and found her somewhat familiar. It wasn't until now, seeing her full face, that 007 remembered this person frequently appeared on television.

Xiao Qiao flashed a friendly smile at 007, albeit a somewhat eerie one. "You recognize me, too."

Apparently, she thought 007 was one of her fans.

Gu Mian was a little puzzled. He hadn't expected to be randomly matched with this universally cyberbullied celebrity twice. He had to admit, it was a strange kind of fate. Or perhaps, on the flip side, it was because he shared her infamy?

As though he had sensed Gu Mian's confusion over their fate, Chu Changge shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not a random pairing this time."

Not a random pairing?

This instance was dangerously different, unlike any they had encountered before!

The players selected for this instance were particularly special, and it seemed there were many acquaintances among them...

Even before Gu Mian could ask, Chu Changge continued, "We should prepare ourselves. Some of the instances have undergone mutations. This particular instance is one of them."

It would consume the players that entered it, just like the previous event. Theoretically, such an instance should not exist.

Hearing Chu Changge's words, 007 stared at him, slightly stunned.

Gu Mian remembered that this global game was originally intended for human evolution.

But now, with natural disasters occurring worldwide, resources virtually depleted, and supplies scarce, Earth was being ruthlessly harsh.

Even if it wanted to force humanity to evolve, it shouldn't have been so brutal.

And now, there were instances that consumed players...

Chu Changge continued, "If I'm not mistaken, going forward, there will be more and more mutated instances, and the players within them..."

He didn't finish his sentence, but everyone present understood what he meant. In the future, players in mutated instances were likely to die for real.

Previously, they had speculated that the global game might have two Organizers: one aimed at evolving humans through instances, while the other considered humans as fertilizer to feed the instances.

This mutated instance was probably dominated by the latter Organizer, the one intent on causing humanity's extinction.

However, the prospect of dying for real in instances didn't faze Gu Mian.

He always faced real death every time he entered an instance anyway.

Gu Mian felt 007 stiffen slightly on his back. Then, her voice came from beside his ear, "So, in the future, we'll be matched into instances with real death?"

Just like today?

Facing actual death?

Chu Changge glanced at 007, then nodded slightly. "The Organizer is eliminating humans. You'd better prepare yourself mentally."

007 suddenly seemed anxious.

Gu Mian didn't know what she was worried about.

Fatty was still lying on the ground.

Seeing Fatty there, Gu Mian put down 007, walked over to him, and roughly yanked open the blood-soaked cloth that Chu Changge had carefully bandaged.

Two wounds.

Then, Gu Mian took out two tubes of reagents. "Let's stop the bleeding first."

He then inserted the needles beside the wounds.

Fatty, who had already suffered so much, was pricked twice more by Gu Mian's needles and couldn't help but groan.

After groaning, he asked seriously, "So, this game has two Organizers now? One righteous and the other evil?"

Chu Changge suddenly spoke, "Which one do you refer to as 'evil'?"

Fatty replied, as if it were obvious, "Of course, the one that takes players' lives."

"No," Chu Changge shook his head. "There is no absolute good or evil in this world..."

He continued, "What you consider 'evil' may be beneficial to others."

Fatty was somewhat perplexed. They're taking lives, what benefit could there possibly be?

Chu Changge was about to speak but glanced at 007, who was leaning against a tree not far away. He avoided calling Gu Mian by name in front of others, using his professional title—Doctor—instead. "What you consider 'evil' is beneficial for Doctors."

Fatty's mind seemed to explode.

Right!

Due to his initial impressions, he had naturally assumed the Organizer that wanted to kill players was evil. But on further consideration...

Previously, only Doctors truly died in these instances. But once the other Organizer came into play, it directly caused instances to mutate, making all players potentially face real death within them.

Moreover, once instances that led to certain death began to appear, the Doctor profession would be in high demand. And currently, the world's only Doctor is Gu Mian!

Gu Mian's name was still on the wanted list. But once instances involving certain death appeared, even if his identity was exposed, many people would protect the world's only Doctor.

Although the methods were a bit crude... this was clearly an Organizer that completely favored Doctors!

Chapter 284 Violent Death_1

Gu Mian had never imagined he would receive the treatment of a web novel protagonist.

But the current situation was truly bizarre.

The Earth had always seemed bent on his demise, so its sudden change of heart was highly unlikely.

At that moment, another gust of wind swept past. Chu Changge turned his head again, looking in the direction it came from.

The wind tonight seemed unusually mischievous.

The strip of cloth on his wrist rustled, and the wind caught his clothes, puffing them into a sphere before whistling out through the gaps.

The moon hung high in the night sky, as if all moons in fairy-tale worlds ought to be this colossal and bright.

Clusters of craters on the lunar surface cast patches of shadow, like strokes of ink on a luminous canvas, their interplay creating a strange beauty.

Then, Chu Changge spoke slowly, "In this instance, there is at least one Origin NPC. It's the culprit responsible for the assimilation of players."

Perhaps 'culprit' wasn't the most accurate term. After all, it was just the NPC's designated role.

"Do you still want to stay here?" Chu Changge suddenly uttered, a seemingly random question.

Fatty looked at him, puzzled. "Whether we stay in this instance isn't up to us, is it?"

Fatty glanced at Chu Changge, but his attention was immediately captured by the colossal moon behind him. Earlier in the night, thick clouds had obscured the moon, and not a sliver of its light had reached them.

But now, in the latter half of the night, the moon had fully emerged from the dark clouds. It blazed with a fierce radiance, illuminating even the forest—once a swathe of oppressive darkness—and making it appear as dreamlike as a fairy-tale world.

No, this **was** a fairy-tale world... just not the kind they were familiar with. This was a bizarre fairy-tale world...

Gu Mian looked up at the moon.

The little match girl's basket was still slung over his shoulder. However, the journey had been so rough while carrying 007 that the three lighters inside had long since fallen out, lost somewhere along the way. They would have fetched a good price, too.

The clothes he'd snatched from the girl were still there, now a crumpled mess stuffed into the basket that had once held the lighters—a truly pathetic sight.

Thanks to this tattered basket, Gu Mian still had some connection to this instance, preventing him from being summarily ejected.

Still, he sensed something approaching.

It wasn't the intermittent, chilling wind, but something more intimately connected, more attuned to this instance.

Such a strange feeling.

Years of being singled out by life's hardships had honed Gu Mian's sixth sense to an extraordinary degree. His perception of danger was exceptionally acute, so he knew that what approached them now wasn't 'danger,' but something else, something peculiar.

This was a sensation Gu Mian had never experienced before, yet it felt somehow familiar.

Just then, the others also seemed to sense something.

The howling wind had abruptly, almost imperceptibly, died down. The swaying branches and leaves had fallen still. Beneath the pitch-black sky, it seemed as if nothing moved.

A glance revealed a scene of absolute beauty: the round moon, the silvery frost, the silent forest. Yet, an incredibly ominous air pervaded it all.

Soon, they heard an unusual sound.

Chu Changge narrowed his eyes, staring in the direction of the sound. "It's here."

The sound of footsteps came from the distant, dense forest.

The steps were unhurried, accompanied by the continuous CRUNCH of dry branches underfoot. Fatty strained his eyes, peering into the forest whence the sound came, but he saw nothing.

Before long, the footsteps drew nearer, until they were almost upon them.

Gu Mian finally saw the visitor clearly. Or perhaps, it wasn't human at all.

No life, no aura... and no face.

Only the pen clutched tightly in its right hand lent it a vaguely human air.

The colossal moon at its back seemed to complement its featureless face perfectly.

Fatty murmured, "Is this the... Origin NPC Brother Chu mentioned?"

Why would it suddenly appear?

Just then, Xiao Qiao's voice reached his ears, her tone utterly certain. "Yes."

Fatty glanced at her instinctively. Xiao Qiao, an actress who usually paid little heed to her expressions, had now completely abandoned all facial control. Her face looked as if it might detach from her skull and SLAP onto the ground at any moment.

The newcomer finally spoke.

"I am An Tusheng, the 'Tu' as in 'butcher'."

It had no mouth, yet it produced sound.

The voice emanated from all directions, as if every tree in the forest had come alive, each vying to speak for it. The ethereal, omnipresent sound made 007, who sat by a tree, feel a wave of dizziness.

She frowned and looked up. Even the moon in the sky seemed to have sprouted a mouth, echoing, "I am An Tusheng."

No one spoke. An Tusheng continued.

Of course, that it could speak was only Gu Mian's assumption, considering that the pancake-flat round face had no facial features, let alone a mouth that could open.

"I am not the fairy-tale author you are familiar with, Hans Christian Andersen. I am a different kind of existence, one that was forced to develop into what I am now."

Hearing this, Fatty shuddered violently for no apparent reason.

Gu Mian stared at the almost flat face before him.

All I need to do now is rush forward and saw this 'Butcher Tu' in half, Gu Mian thought. Then everyone here can leave this instance immediately. But a strange feeling in his heart stopped him.

It had to be said, this Origin NPC was quite verbose. Everyone present listened as it inexplicably began to narrate a story—or what could be considered a story, at least.

"I was born amidst fear, joy, and regret.

"When I was born, all around me was pitch darkness, yet I was enveloped by countless emotions. I began to explore slowly.

"Gradually, from these emotions, I learned many things: happiness, anger, regret, sorrow, and so much more. But I could never truly grasp them. Until later, I discovered something far more vibrant.

"Those were the stories of everyone."

When An Tusheng reached this point, the chill Fatty felt intensified.

The wind had long stopped, yet he felt an even more terrifying, bone-chilling cold.

Not far away, 007 also seemed to realize something, and her face began to pale.

"Each person is a bizarre, fantastic world. I explored their stories, constantly craving fresher, different experiences.

"But it wasn't enough. Far from enough...

"Perhaps because my longing was too intense, the heavens gifted me a pen. And so, I began to write my own stories."

Chu Changge listened in silence. Moonlight glinted off his glasses, a sharp, cold gleam.

This instance wasn't always like this, Chu Changge thought. In fact, it mutated long ago.

"I continually kept those vibrant people, making them characters in my tales. My story kept expanding. As you can see, it has become so... prosperous..."

Gu Mian also understood something. This instance, I'm afraid...

It's developed a spirit. A soul, Gu Mian realized.

Though inconceivable, the truth lay before them.

Before, it might have been a world teeming with zombies, or a hospital haunted by Evil Ghosts, but none of that mattered now.

This instance had developed a "spirit."

An Tusheng was the soul of this instance.

It forcefully erased everything that existed before and stubbornly began to write its own story.

It forcibly severed the game's control, attempting to keep all the players by its side.

This was unheard of, unprecedented, Fatty thought.

If it weren't for the throbbing pain in his back, Fatty would have almost thought he was dreaming.

The initial shock of learning that future instances might involve real death was already immense. Unexpectedly, an even more staggering revelation had followed.

An instance could develop a soul? What a joke!

This should just be a set of data, Fatty thought. A pitiful string of code that could be erased at any moment.

An Tusheng seemed to understand what Fatty was thinking. It laughed.

The faceless smile was deeply unsettling, as if one's own brain had suddenly started laughing for no reason.

"Anything can possess life, even a set of data, a string of numbers.

"The very meaning of life's existence is to bear the emotions of others.

"As long as someone bestows sincere emotions—be it hatred or anticipation, sadness or joy—and as long as someone remembers it, keeps it in their heart, and never forgets, that is existence. That is being alive.

"That is why I possess life.

"And I appear before you today because I was entrusted by another to tell you something..."

As An Tusheng spoke, it suddenly paused. Fatty's mind jolted; he had a feeling it was about to say something unpleasant.

And he was right. "You understand, some things are different from me. They can only carry a fragment of emotion. If that emotion is forgotten, then they will be eternally lost in darkness, until..."

"An Tusheng!"

Before it could finish, its speech was interrupted by a very loud voice, its pitch even changing slightly due to the urgency of the interruption.

The voice came from the forest; no one could see who was speaking.

007's forehead throbbed. She couldn't make sense of the current situation. Who was that speaking from the forest? And what on earth did An Tusheng mean?

Just as the altered syllables of "An Tusheng!" reached their ears, the scene before them began to distort.

Gu Mian had seen this many times; it was the precursor to exiting an instance.

But this time was very strange. They hadn't done anything to this instance, yet it was automatically ejecting the players?

Even the Instance Evaluator hadn't appeared.

Gu Mian hadn't quite understood An Tusheng's final words. The first few sentences were clear enough, but that last one, the one that was interrupted...

As he pondered, he looked up again, through the distorting space, at the faceless being still standing before him.

In that instant, he seemed to hear a voice seeping from An Tusheng's very core: "There's no time left."

What followed was an extreme distortion of space. It was as if everything was being twisted like taffy, then shattered into fragments.

Gu Mian suddenly felt his head go numb. When he came to his senses, he was already back in the ticket booth.

Beside him were Chu Changge and Fatty, who had exited with him.

This departure from the instance had been rather abrupt.

For some reason, the Instance Evaluator had never appeared, not even after they left the instance.

It was as if the Evaluator had no idea they had ever entered the Fairy Tale City instance.

Nearby, Chu Changge was still frowning. He, too, had noticed the unusual nature of the previous instance.

"No evaluator... was it because our instance data was erased?" he murmured, looking towards the ticket booth's entrance.

Outside, the blizzard raged on. The snow had accumulated to a terrifying depth; Gu Mian estimated it must be up to their knees by now.

Of course, this wasn't the time to be assessing snow depth.

He came back to his senses. The erasure of data also meant no rewards.

But that wasn't what concerned Gu Mian.

A "spirit" had emerged within the instance. This "spirit" had told them some incredible things and then secretly erased the data of their entry into that instance.

No matter how he looked at it, the whole thing was bizarre.

Chapter 285 Gu Mian and Antivirus Software_1

The snowdrifts outside were already knee-deep.

The door to the ticket booth was still wide open, yet although there was no wind or snow inside, it was still piercingly cold.

Fatty paused for only a moment after stepping out before his body began to shiver involuntarily.

Soon after, he realized that the real-world temperature seemed even lower than when they had entered the instance.

Just as Fatty clamped his mouth shut, trying to warm his teeth that felt as if they had frozen solid, an unfamiliar male voice suddenly came from not too far away.

"Excuse me..."

Outside, the heavy snowfall made even walking difficult. Currently, only Gu Mian and his two companions were in the ticket booth. The voice belonged to the instance's ticket seller.

Gu Mian looked toward the sound.

A young male ticket seller sat behind the window, a badge hanging around his neck. Gu Mian could vaguely make out a series of numbers on it, likely an employee ID of some sort.

The ticket seller was flipping through a booklet, his expression suspicious.

The expression was awfully familiar to Gu Mian; it reminded him of his middle school teachers taking attendance.

The ticket seller was flipping through the booklet in his hands. After turning just a couple of pages, a strange expression appeared on his face. He then looked up at Gu Mian's group of three as if he had seen a ghost.

By then, Gu Mian had already guessed what the ticket seller held.

It was most likely the instance record for players who used this ticket booth, and this particular ticket seller couldn't find the record for the instance they had just exited.

Truth be told, this ticket seller usually paid little attention to players; one might even say he was completely indifferent.

It was merely because he had just taken down the unsightly "Gu Mian and Dogs Not Allowed" sign from the entrance when these three had suddenly appeared, catching him completely off guard.

That's why he was now concerned about which instance the three had entered.

The miserable ticket seller had never even considered resisting.

He had heard many tales of brave predecessors who had attempted to resist, but without exception, none had succeeded.

Over time, a perverse, unspoken understanding began to circulate within the ticket seller community:

"Gu Mian is like **, either resist or enjoy."

Since this global game promoted positive energy, the two rather discordant characters "***" could only be censored this way.

Everyone knew they couldn't resist. But as for enjoying it... that was also impossible.

Seeing that the trio was still standing at the instance exit, the ticket seller swallowed his humiliation and continued to flip through the instance records in his hands.

This was just a low-level ticket booth. Even if an instance originating from it collapsed, it couldn't be downgraded much further; it would merely mean a deduction in his own service points.

However, the ticket seller was astonished to discover that after these individuals emerged, no instance had reported a data collapse.

Other ticket sellers had previously encountered situations where "Gu Mian came out, but the instance didn't crash."

However, that was only a temporary reprieve. The instance hadn't crashed at that exact moment, but it had collapsed without any warning shortly after the three of them departed.

Having learned from these precedents, the ticket seller was keen to check their record.

But he couldn't find it. He absolutely could not find any record of the instance these three had just been in...

He had clearly watched them enter an instance and then emerge from it. How could there be no instance record?

Thinking this, the ticket seller looked at the three individuals with doubt and opened his mouth, "Excuse me..."

Gu Mian looked over.

The ticket seller swallowed his bitter saliva of humiliation and carefully asked, "Which instance were you three in just now?"

He had to find out!

Gu Mian stared at the ticket seller behind the window.

He was extremely interested in the booklet in the ticket seller's hand. The ticket seller behind the window evidently realized this too. He flinched and quickly hid the booklet by sitting on it.

I really shouldn't have piped up! he silently screamed, pressing down on the instance record book beneath him.

But outwardly, he couldn't show any lack of fortitude.

At this thought, the ticket seller straightened his spine, adopting an air of unyielding integrity.

However, in the end, the ticket seller didn't manage to obtain the information he wanted.

It was because the largest of them, Fatty, put on an "I'm about to freeze to death" expression, successfully drawing the attention of his two companions.

At this, Gu Mian and Chu Changge hurriedly led Fatty away.

This left the young ticket seller alone in the whistling wind—along with the instance record book beneath his backside.

When Gu Mian's group returned to their Spirit Car, the surroundings were very quiet.

The carjackers they had anticipated were nowhere to be seen. Xiao Hong was still silently pressed against the car window, waiting for them—of course, Gu Mian only saw this after opening the door.

Thankfully, the interior of the car wasn't visible from the outside. Otherwise, they might have discovered several corpses of people who had died from extreme fright.

After getting back into the car, Gu Mian first took out two thermos flasks from Fatty's bag.

All electricity was unusable.

But the supermarket still had hot water. Not only hot water, but also thermos flasks advertised as having permanent heat retention.

Of course, both the hot water and the thermos flasks cost money.

Fatty had filled two thermoses with boiling water during his last visit, which came in handy now.

Chapter 286 Gu Mian and Antivirus Software_2

Gu Mian tore open a packet of ginger sugar powder, poured it in, then screwed the lid on tightly and shook the thermos vigorously.

Gu Mian noticed that as he shook the thermos, Fatty, whose face had previously been frozen, now showed a startled expression.

Only when he finished shaking did Fatty stammer, "You know, Doctor, it could explode if you shake it like that..."

Gu Mian said nothing.

「」

By the time Fatty had fully recovered, half an hour had passed.

To escape the cold, Gu Mian had deliberately driven the car into a pitch-black parking lot.

The wind wasn't very strong here.

Notably, there were actually people in this parking lot.

After they drove in, the trio saw a few beams of light in the dark parking lot, and the roar of engines reached their ears.

Several cars had been started.

Each car that had started was packed with people.

Fatty looked at those cars, his expression uncertain. Are they using the car's AC for warmth? he wondered.

It was indeed freezing outside.

Just walking a short distance made their toes go numb.

Chu Changge also looked at the cars that had started. After a closer inspection, he commented, "The cars that have started are mostly large vehicles, like minivans and SUVs. And look at the other cars around; many of them have their doors ajar, as if their owners had been here recently but left in such a hurry they didn't even close them."

Fatty, wrapped in his blanket, nodded. But what did all this mean?

Chu Changge seemed to notice Fatty's confusion. "This suggests that the gasoline in all these cars might have evaporated completely," he explained. "Some people might have a habit of storing gasoline in barrels, and that gasoline wouldn't have evaporated. So, these people gathered..."

Fatty understood.

Those who still had gasoline gathered, looking for large vehicles that could accommodate them all, then started the heaters.

Those without gasoline had come here hoping to turn on their car's heater, only to find their fuel tanks empty. They had to leave immediately; it was too cold to stay outside any longer.

For some reason, Fatty suddenly felt a sense of desolation.

If I hadn't met the Doctor, I'd probably be out there silently enduring this cold right now. No, wait, I'm still enduring the cold now, but... this is different...

As Fatty sipped his hot brown sugar ginger water, wrapped in his blanket, his thoughts began to wander. Even though our car doesn't have a heater, I don't feel any worse off than those people with their heaters running...

Gu Mian's car, with the three of them inside, had naturally attracted the attention of others.

But those people had no time to pay attention to anyone else; their own fuel shortage already had them at their wits' end.

By now, Gu Mian had driven the car a bit further from the other vehicles and parked.

Fatty was wrapped in three thick blankets and had gulped down a large thermos of steaming hot brown sugar ginger water. He felt quite content and was beginning to doze off.

Just then, as Fatty was drifting off, he heard Gu Mian ask, "Who was An Tusheng talking to when he said that?"

Fatty's drowsiness vanished instantly. He widened his eyes, staring at the person before him.

The bright headlights of the Spirit Car shone through the windshield, illuminating Gu Mian's profile.

There was no discernible expression on his face. The shadows cast by his brow bone and the bridge of his nose perfectly concealed his eyes, making it impossible to read his thoughts.

Fatty looked at Gu Mian's half-lit face, then surreptitiously shifted back a little, almost drawing level with Xiao Hong behind him.

Once he had moved closer to Xiao Hong, he hesitantly asked, "Which comment?"

He looked as guilty as a thief.

Seeing this, Gu Mian suddenly chuckled. "I was just asking casually. Why are you so nervous? Though I always feel like you two are up to something strange behind my back, it's surely nothing bad, right?"

Fatty had seen Gu Mian smile many times. But for some reason, I find his brilliant smile right now rather terrifying—even more so than the leering grins of some Evil Ghosts in certain instances.

Beside them, Chu Changge suddenly pinched the bridge of his nose.

Fatty turned to look at him. Chu Changge's face was almost swallowed by the shadows, but Fatty could at least see his lips moving. "About that last instance," Chu Changge began, "Gu Mian, what are your thoughts?"

He had changed the subject directly, using a rather crude method.

Unexpectedly, Gu Mian picked up on it. "The fact that an instance can generate a 'spirit' is indeed surprising. As for the two organizers you mentioned earlier... let's call them Organizer No. 1 and Organizer No. 2 for now."

"Organizer No. 1 is the one that initially launched this global game. It's harmless to players, and its goal is human evolution... However, if I may be so bold, I'd add another objective: to kill me. And even though this might overstate my importance, I feel this speculation is very reliable."

"Organizer No. 2 is the one that appeared later, taking charge of events. Perhaps it will also take over instances that guarantee death? Organizer No. 2 is clearly opposed to Organizer No. 1. But, judging by An Tusheng's situation, it seems Organizer No. 2 doesn't have the direct authority to meddle with instances. Maybe it's secretly modifying them?"

Chu Changge nodded. "Correct. There's a key point in the Fairy Tale City instance: after An Tusheng awakened, someone gave him a 'pen.' That's why he gained the ability to rewrite the instance, which led to the entire instance's mutation."

And this 'pen' couldn't possibly have been given by Organizer No. 1. So far, Organizer No. 1 seems unaware that any instance has undergone a mutation.

Moreover, that organizer always acts in the players' best interests and would never tolerate a situation where players are slaughtered.

And after his mutation, An Tusheng suddenly appeared before them, said some incredible things, and bluntly stated he was acting at someone's behest.

But before he could finish those incredible words, a mysterious voice interrupted him.

Gu Mian recalled that the 'Fairy Tale City' instance had eight players.

The three of them took three slots. Adding 007, the 'strongest supermodel in history' Fatty had met, and Xiao Qiao, that made only six. Two players hadn't appeared.

So, did the voice that interrupted An Tusheng belong to the remaining two missing players? Or was it another NPC?

"And also, Doctor..." Fatty suddenly spoke in a low voice, "have you noticed something?"

Noticed what? Gu Mian wondered.

Gu Mian looked at Fatty, who was clutching his thermos tightly.

He seemed to hesitate for a moment before continuing, "That An Tusheng, he forcefully modified the instance data, didn't he? No, perhaps it wasn't even data anymore in that instance... If the game discovers this mutated NPC, what will happen to him?"

Gu Mian tilted his head, thought for a moment, then flashed Fatty another brilliant smile. "Like me?"

Gu Mian is smiling a bit too much today, Fatty thought.

He shivered violently, pulled his head further into the blankets, and said no more, his entire being exuding an air of 'what can be understood intuitively need not be said.'

Beside them, Chu Changge remained silent for a moment, then said, "Anything not part of the plan is destined to be forcibly erased."

Gu Mian glanced at him. "Why do I always feel like you're talking about me...?"

He had faced far too many assassination attempts from life itself, ever since he was a child.

So much so that I often fantasize that I'm a virus, and the assassins life sends after me are just diligent antivirus programs. It's just that this antivirus software is a bit weak; it's been trying to kill me for over twenty years and still hasn't succeeded. And this current global game feels like the antivirus software using its ultimate, last-resort move. Though it might be somewhat different, overall, it's pretty much the same...

Chapter 287

At this moment, Chu Changge, who was beside him, spoke up, "Gu Mian, you just mentioned that the Number Two Host cannot directly intervene in instance affairs but could secretly cause instances to mutate... I guess that by now, Fairy Tale City isn't the only instance that has mutated."

Fatty shrank back a bit.

The mutated instances had developed souls. This made them unrestrained by the game, allowing them to freely slaughter players who entered them.

These mutated instances were silently devouring players, carefully concealing themselves.

Chu Changge continued, "Although there isn't just one, there won't be too many either. Theoretically speaking, souls should be exceptionally rare right now."

Gu Mian precisely caught the words "right now" in Chu Changge's statement.

If they're exceptionally rare right now... does that mean they won't be so rare in the future?

"In a nutshell," Fatty took a small sip of the ginger sugar water from his thermos, "Doctor, we did get some information in the Fairy Tale Town instance. To get more useful information, I'm afraid we'll have to enter instances a few more times."

They couldn't guarantee that every instance would yield information useful to Gu Mian.

They would have to slowly gather clues.

All Fatty could do now was pray that the other players in the game evolved more slowly; otherwise, Gu Mian would soon face the awkward predicament of being stabbed to death by other players.

The cold wind still whirled outside the dark garage.

Scraping against every crevice, it produced a horrifying, chilling howl.

Fatty's attention was already drawn to the wind outside; he remembered that every time a storm was about to arrive, such terrifying and unsettling wind sounds would precede it.

Gu Mian glanced at the thermometer.

Minus nineteen degrees Celsius.

Too cold.

No electricity, no air conditioning, no underfloor heating.

Electricity cards were sold in the supermarket, but who knew how many people could afford them.

It would be extremely difficult for people to survive in this kind of temperature.

Indoors, it was slightly better. Even if a house was bare, its four walls could still block the howling cold wind.

But if one went outdoors wrapped in two quilts, they would instantly be chilled to the bone by the biting winter wind. The cold infiltrated every nook and cranny.

Luckily, some players had enhanced their bodies, but that was far from enough. They could only hide inside buildings and wait for the cold snap to pass.

But would winter really leave?

At this moment, Fatty had a somewhat dazed expression. He remembered it was already March; strictly speaking, March was no longer considered winter.

In the distance, people in a few idling cars were huddled together for warmth. Even with the heaters on, the temperature inside the cars was grim. They could only press close to one another to feel even a little warmer.

Under the light, Gu Mian watched the people huddled together in those cars.

He saw someone inside sneeze heavily.

If the temperature continued to fall, the saying "frozen bodies will litter the roadsides" would become more than just words.

Fatty also looked very worried. "I'm really afraid I'll suddenly freeze to death in my sleep one day."

He didn't want to become an ice sculpture.

Hearing this, Gu Mian grabbed another quilt and wrapped Fatty up tightly. "Don't die, Fatty..."

Fatty was a bit moved.

But this feeling quickly vanished.

Gu Mian's voice continued, "If you die, your body will be difficult to dispose of."

Fatty silently swallowed his tears and pulled his small quilt tighter.

For the next few days, the temperature neither continued to drop nor did it rise.

Blizzards came and went intermittently. The sun didn't show itself at all during this time, remaining hidden behind layers of dense clouds.

The snow was already thigh-deep, and even vehicles with fuel couldn't get through.

Gu Mian's Spirit Car could barely push forward, and only with extreme difficulty.

So, the three of them temporarily holed up in this small town. Gu Mian found an abandoned, dilapidated building with no windows left and parked the Spirit Car inside it.

Its first floor had originally been all shops; a "Blue Sky Appliances" sign still hung over one of the storefronts.

This dilapidated building stood right across from a shopping mall, looking starkly out of place amid the otherwise bustling surroundings.

Fatty speculated, "This building was probably a 'nail house.' When the mall next door was being built, they must have already notified all the surrounding property owners. The holdout owner here probably waited until the developers bought up all the other land, then pulled a fast one by turning hostile and jacking up the price, thinking the mall would have no choice but to buy them out, no matter the cost."

Gu Mian looked at the small, dilapidated building before him, which already seemed structurally unsound.

But unexpectedly, the mall developers were so unyielding that they simply let this eyesore remain, showing no intention of compromise.

Chu Changge glanced at Fatty. "You seem to know a bit about everything."

Fatty gave an embarrassed smile. "It's because I, Fatty, have drifted around a lot, so I've tried my hand at quite a few professions..."

The temperature inside their Spirit Car was consistently maintained between minus eighteen and minus nineteen degrees Celsius, a temperature at which it was extremely difficult for humans to survive.

Even so, many players braved the blizzards, leaving their homes and painstakingly making their way to the ticket office.

On their way to the supermarket, Gu Mian and the others even came across a frozen young man.

His eyes were wide open, his gaze shifting faintly as if he were still conscious, but his body was rigid. It looked as if he had frozen solid on the path before collapsing.

Chapter 288

When Gu Mian and the others found him, his body was already lightly covered with a layer of snow.

He wasn't dead yet.

So, Xiao Hong, who wasn't afraid of the cold, had resolutely shouldered him from there all the way to a distant ticket booth. Although she left him unattended after dumping him there, it was still better than being left to freeze to death in the snow. Our little ghost girl, Xiao Hong, finally did something good, albeit under Gu Mian's direction...

Because there were no rewards or compensation from the previous instance, Gu Mian still only had 525 Game Coins. Fatty wasn't doing much better; he only had 900 left. Fortunately, Chu Changge was trending towards becoming a packrat. When Gu Mian checked his status panel, he discovered Chu Changge had unknowingly hoarded over three thousand Game Coins. For the past few days, the three of them had been surviving on Chu Changge's stash, which also served to warm up the perpetually frostbitten Fatty.

Until mid-March, the weather showed no signs of improvement and remained as cold as ever. The sun hardly made an appearance. The accumulated snow on the roads hadn't melted, making travel extremely difficult. Helpless, they decided to stay put and participate in a few more instances.

Gu Mian had initially wanted to find an inn. A room with walls was certainly more comfortable than their car, which had nothing. The Hengdian area had inns open to other players. However, this small place lacked sufficient foot traffic, making an inn unprofitable. Furthermore, without a military presence to maintain order, few dared to conduct business here.

The not-so-brave Fatty constantly droned on about entering an instance, because once inside an instance, it wouldn't be so cold.

Today, Gu Mian and the others returned to the same ticket booth they had used before; it was the closest one to them. Although the ticket seller inside probably recognized them by now, it didn't really matter.

However, this time, as Gu Mian reached the entrance of the ticket booth, he saw a brand-new sign hanging there: "Gu Mian and dogs are not allowed."

Gu Mian was speechless.

Of course, he wasn't going to let something like this stop him.

Fatty stood before the new sign, staring at it for a good while before following Gu Mian into the ticket booth.

Inside, the familiar face with wide, bell-like eyes watched them, seemingly surprised they hadn't left yet.

Gu Mian, unperturbed, bought a team ticket and then led Chu Changge and Fatty to initiate matchmaking for an instance.

As they were about to enter the instance, Fatty felt a pang of regret; he had wanted to gaze a little longer at the ticket seller's bell-like eyes.

Before long, the three of them successfully matched into an instance.

[Matching instance... Please wait.]

[Instance successfully matched, matching teammates...]

[Teammates successfully matched.]

[Instance: Heartbeat Hide and Seek]

For some reason, Gu Mian felt that this instance's name exuded an air of... cheerfulness...

[Description: This is the abandoned 'Lost City.' Legend says that many years ago, numerous people who ventured into this place vanished.]

[Number of players: 10]

Gu Mian continued reading. Below was the instance task. However, the description for the instance task seemed a tad too short.

[Task: Survive in the city until midnight.]

No, this isn't just 'a tad too short'... This is way too damn short! They call it hide and seek, but there are no rules, no role assignments. Are we players supposed to figure out roles ourselves once we're in the instance?

However, Gu Mian soon realized he had overthought it.

A faint light entered his eyes. Looking around, he found that he was already inside the instance. Because it was also nighttime within this instance, he hadn't realized it immediately.

He was currently standing on a wide road. It was clear the road had been in disrepair for many years; the asphalt was cracked with several huge fissures, from which lush green grass almost seemed ready to sprout. On either side of the road were shops that had been abandoned for a long time. Some shops even had half of their eaves collapsed, presenting an incredibly desolate scene.

This was a deserted city.

Where were Chu Changge and Fatty?

Gu Mian looked around. He saw four other people standing beside him. They were all surveying their surroundings, apparently still adjusting.

Closest to him was a rather dark-skinned young man who looked a bit like a high school dropout who had joined a gang. However, he seemed very amiable. He always smiled when looking at people, his eyes radiating kindness—if it weren't for the large, grotesque scar on his neck, Gu Mian might have genuinely thought he was a good person.

Gu Mian was an intern doctor; one glance told him this scar was most likely left by an axe. It was clear the wound had been very deep; the doctor who performed surgery on him back then must have exhausted all their skills to snatch him from the clutches of death.

His nickname was [Bai Qiong]. For some reason, Gu Mian felt it suited him quite well.

A little farther away was a pretty girl. She was a high school student with short hair and neat bangs. Her eyes were beautiful, as if veiled by a layer of mist. Even in the somewhat dim night, Gu Mian could see a light shining from her eyes—definitely not the eerie glow one might see in a fish's eye. She was currently observing her surroundings, curious yet apprehensive.

Her nickname was [Keke].

Behind the girl stood a long-haired young man with glasses. He was currently looking around with a smug grin, as if certain of victory... He actually seemed rather deluded by his own perceived grandeur. Since this long-haired young man was quite far off, more than three meters away, Gu Mian couldn't see his nickname.

The last player on this side was a woman with her hair tied up high. She stood at the very edge, holding something that looked like a fruit knife, and would occasionally let out a cold chuckle.

Gu Mian was speechless.

He didn't know why, but he had a nagging feeling that some of his teammates this time might be... complete morons.

Meanwhile, Chu Changge and Fatty were nowhere to be seen. Including Gu Mian, there were only five people here. What happened to the ten people they were promised?

As Gu Mian was perplexedly scanning his surroundings, he suddenly noticed what appeared to be dark figures flickering in the distance ahead. It wasn't unusual to see mysterious shadows appearing in Mysterious Dungeons.

Gu Mian took a couple of steps forward and stared intently at the dark figures. He discovered it wasn't some supernatural ghostly figure, but Fatty, who was energetically jumping up and down and waving at him. Looking more closely, Chu Changge was also next to Fatty, looking in their direction.

That was strange... Was there really a need to separate them so far apart when entering a single instance?

Gu Mian took a few more steps forward, intending to go over, but as he moved, he suddenly found himself unable to advance. It was as if an invisible sheet of glass blocked his path, preventing him from moving even an inch further.

At this moment, the others on his side also noticed the figures over there. They walked over with puzzled expressions, but all of them were, without exception, stopped by the transparent barrier.

Bai Qiong was the first to speak. He frowned and asked in confusion, "What's going on? Are we playing hide and seek in two groups?"

By now, everyone had gathered together, and Gu Mian could finally see the nicknames of the two players he suspected were morons.

The long-haired, bespectacled young man was called [Nine Lives]. Perhaps because his demeanor was so cringeworthy in its self-importance, even his nickname struck Gu Mian as being full of hot air.

And the other woman, the one clutching a fruit knife and smirking coldly, was called [Manjusaka]. Her name also seemed to fit her disposition.

Gu Mian's nickname, naturally, also caught their attention. A nickname in that particular shade of green was quite a rare sight.

Before anyone else could ask, the high school girl, Keke, stared at the top of Gu Mian's head and asked curiously, "Is this your profession?"

Gu Mian looked at the high school girl with curiosity. Could it be that she had seen green names before?

Indeed, Keke continued, "I've seen players with other professions before, and their names were also green."

So that's how it was. Everyone looked at the vibrant green word "Doctor" above Gu Mian's head with dawning comprehension. It seemed he was a healer who needed protection. Although a Doctor might not be of much use in an instance, he still needed to be properly protected.

Chapter 289 Where is it_1

Gu Mian stroked his chin pensively.

His green "Doctor" nickname was due to the brooch given by the Evil God.

He initially thought he was the only one who received this nickname-changing brooch, but he didn't expect that others with occupations also had green-font nicknames.

Does this mean that as long as you have a profession, you will own this green leaf brooch specially made by the Evil God?

The high school girl, Keke, seemed very curious about the green text above Gu Mian's head, her eyes wide as she stared at the top of his head.

At this time, Nine Lives, a teenager with a small braid and glasses who seemed somewhat delusional, also came over.

He curiously glanced at the guitar case Gu Mian carried on his back and quickly looked away.

This thing was just too conspicuous. In fact, others had also sneaked a few glances, not quite understanding why this doctor would carry such a heavy item.

Everyone knew that this instance wasn't named "A Hundred Thousand Whys."

So no one asked any bizarre questions like, "Why are you carrying a guitar?" or "Is there really a guitar in the guitar bag?"

Bai Qiong was the first to look away from Gu Mian, turning his gaze towards the figures in the distance.

It was late at night, and the people on the other side were too far away from them. They had to strain their eyes to see the situation there. Fortunately, the street lamp above was still on, though its light was very weak.

Bai Qiong stretched his neck slightly.

That ferocious scar ran from the middle of his collarbone all the way to behind his ear. The uneven skin reflected the faint light, looking especially horrifying.

Nine Lives, the long-haired teenager, subconsciously kept his distance from this person who looked as if he'd been struck with an axe.

Although he looks a bit delusional, he still has the subconscious instinct to seek advantages and avoid harm. This person doesn't look like a good guy, no matter how you look at him, even though he always has that gentle expression on his face...

Manjusaka also stood not far away, not approaching any further. This woman, who enjoyed sneering while fiddling with a fruit knife, had kept to the periphery since entering the instance. She still hadn't integrated with them, radiating an air of superiority, as if thinking, I disdain to associate with you foolish humans.

Right now, only Gu Mian and Keke were beside Bai Qiong.

Moreover, Keke, the high school girl, seemed to have been attracted by the green text above Gu Mian's head.

Bai Qiong evidently also realized that Nine Lives and Manjusaka were keeping their distance. He managed a strained smile and raised a hand to cover the horrifying scar on his neck, though he couldn't conceal it entirely.

Gu Mian noticed Fatty's mouth seemed to be opening and closing continuously. He must be shouting.

But they couldn't hear any sound from their side.

They weren't that far apart... Could it be that the transparent barrier is also blocking the sound?

Gu Mian frowned as he thought.

No game rules, no role assignments... Right from the start, our group of ten was split into two, and even sound is blocked. How are we supposed to play this game of hide-and-seek?

Just then, without any warning, he suddenly heard a loud voice from above.

"Heartbeat Hide-and-Seek Instance, game rules."

Gu Mian looked up, but there was nothing above him except the dark sky.

The voice was somewhat jumbled, as if shouted from hundreds of loudspeakers simultaneously. The entire city seemed to echo with this cacophony.

The others also looked up one after another; of course, they too only saw the pitch-black sky.

The voice continued.

"Heartbeat Hide-and-Seek Instance, game rules."

"Factions are divided into two groups. Five players will be 'Hunters'; the remaining units will be 'Survivors'."

As soon as this announcement was made, the players below erupted into an uproar.

Fatty looked up at the sky, an incredulous expression on his face. "So, five will be 'humans,' and five will be 'ghosts'?"

He had played many rounds of hide-and-seek since he was little, but he had never seen such a role distribution before.

Why so many 'ghosts'?

This is very unfair to the players playing as 'humans'.

Chu Changge looked at the five figures in the distance. He didn't complain but instead analyzed, "We have five people on our side, and they have five people on theirs."

Chu Changge was always very cautious. He never mentioned Gu Mian's name in front of other players. If he had to refer to him, he would use "Doctor" or "he" instead.

Fatty understood. "So, you mean the instance will randomly pick one of our two groups to be the 'humans,' and the other group will be the 'ghosts'?"

The implication was clear: it could also be the other way around.

Regardless of which group was chosen as 'humans' or 'ghosts,' the two groups would be in opposition.

"Yes," Chu Changge nodded. "It's just that the number of 'ghosts' seems a bit high..."

The voice from above continued to echo.

"Heartbeat Hide-and-Seek Instance, game rules."

"Players are divided into two groups. Five will be 'Hunters,' and the remaining units will be 'Survivors.'"

"Next, a group will be randomly chosen to become the 'Hunters.'"

So, it really is like that.

Chu Changge looked up at the five silhouettes in the distance. The game will randomly pick one of our two groups to be the 'ghosts'...

Fatty heard the other players around him seemingly holding their breath. They obviously understood the importance of faction assignment in this instance. It seems a bit safer to be a 'ghost,' doesn't it?

The selection process wouldn't take long; it might even have been predetermined.

Before two seconds had passed, the voice from above spoke again.

"The 'Hunter' group has been selected. 'Hunter' members include 'Doctor,' Nine Lives, Bai Qiong, Manjusaka, Keke."

Chapter 290 Where is it_2

It was settled; the ghost was in Gu Mian's group.

Chu Changge frowned. So his group with Fatty are the hiders?

Suddenly, the other players around them started fussing, seemingly complaining about their luck, or maybe something else.

But Gu Mian's group let out a collective sigh of relief, as they seemed to think being a ghost was a safer role.

The voice continued.

"During the game, the 'Survivors' need to hide. If they're physically caught by the 'Hunter,' they'll face punishment. Every player will be equipped with a cell phone and can only call one designated rival player. Please choose a cell phone..."

"Physically caught" probably means actually grabbing them with hands; simply seeing, touching, or even pummeling them wouldn't count as "catching."

As soon as the voice finished speaking, a row of cell phones appeared in front of Gu Mian and his group—exactly five. These cell phones looked like models from over a decade ago, not touchscreens but with keypads.

Strange, what's the significance of these phones? To facilitate communication between the two groups?

Nine Lives was the first to strut forward, fluffing his hair in a self-assured manner. "The point of the game is that the phone can only call the opponent? I doubt they'll obediently tell us their location." As he spoke, he randomly picked up a phone and turned on its screen.

The faint glow was especially noticeable in the dark night.

Gu Mian tilted his head to look at the lit-up screen of the cell phone. In the middle was a line of small characters that read—"Safe Life 658." Below, there was also a "dial" button.

Seems like this "Safe Life 658" is the nickname of an opponent player, and it sounds like the nickname of a middle-aged uncle or aunt... rather unusual.

At this moment, Gu Mian also reached out and grabbed a phone.

Upon turning on the screen, three large characters appeared—"Ji Bie Li."

Looks like a dominant man's name.

The high schooler, Keke, also grabbed a phone; her screen glaringly read "Chu Changge."

Gu Mian hesitated for a moment, then, bending down slightly, he asked Keke in a creepily uncle-like tone, "Can I take a look at your phone?"

Keke seemed a bit startled by Gu Mian's odd tone. She took a while to react before raising her phone and handing it to Gu Mian.

But just as the phone was being transferred from Keke's hand to Gu Mian's, the name on the screen changed.

The phone screen remained lit up.

So, Gu Mian plainly watched as the characters "Chu Changge" disappeared from the screen and were replaced by "Ji Bie Li."

At this moment, Gu Mian was holding a phone in each hand, and both screens displayed the glaring characters "Ji Bie Li." These characters seemed to form a gaping mouth, mocking him relentlessly.

It seems the one-on-one relationship applies directly to the players, not the phones. So, no matter whose phone you use, you can only call the player you're matched with.

While Gu Mian was puzzled and the other players were frowning, the thunderous voice again rang out from the surrounding darkness.

"It's 20:55 now. The game is about to start. 'Survivors,' please start hiding. In five minutes, the 'Hunter' will be allowed to move freely."

This time, it announced the beginning of the game.

As soon as the voice stopped, the people on the other side seemed free to move.

All at once, they scattered, running faster than crazed rabbits.

Only Chu Changge and Fatty maintained their calm.

Gu Mian saw Fatty from the other group attempting to run toward them, seemingly trying to have a close chat with him. But after only a couple of steps, he ran headfirst into an invisible glass barrier and was now hopping around, clutching his nose.

Gu Mian: "..."

Luckily, Fatty didn't stay baffled for long. Finding he couldn't get across, he quickly followed Chu Changge and slipped away.

Now, on this dark main street, only Gu Mian's group of five, the designated ghosts, remained.

They were confined within a small circle; for the time being, they could only move within this area and had no way to escape.

If a ghost suddenly jumped out and killed them now, that would be a fantastic plot twist. As Gu Mian thought this, he handed the phone back to Keke, taking the opportunity to sneak a peek at the others' phone screens.

Bai Qiong was paired with Fatty, and Keke with Chu Changge. These two were paired with acquaintances of Gu Mian.

Nine Lives was paired with "Safe Life 658," which Gu Mian already knew. Manjusaka was paired with "Nickname Already Taken"—quite a unique name. As for himself, he was paired with a player named "Ji Bie Li," who sounded male.

At this moment, Manjusaka, who was holding a fruit knife, suddenly backed away several steps. She had originally been at the edge of the group; now, she retreated even further, outside the group.

Manjusaka's high ponytail swayed gently in the breeze. She gripped her fruit knife tightly, staring coldly at the other four as if trying to discern something extraordinary from their faces.

Gu Mian had seen many characters like this in various TV dramas: the aloof ice-queen type who disdained speaking to mortals, only to eventually be conquered by the male protagonist's charm. Unfortunately, such a character archetype seemed rather odd when transplanted from the TV screen to the real world. Besides, she wasn't exactly a beauty.

Nine Lives, who also had a ponytail, was the first to speak, "What are you doing, always being so jumpy?"

Manjusaka remained cool-headed. "No instance is ever completely safe. So far, I haven't encountered an instance without Evil Ghosts... I suspect there's something horrifying in this instance too..."

However, the rules didn't explicitly state whether there were ghosts in this instance or not.

But using even a little common sense, one would know this instance couldn't just be about them having a happy game of hide-and-seek.

"I believe... ghosts lurk within this instance," she continued, "and they... are very likely hiding among us."

A cold wind chose that moment to blow past, sending a chill down the others' spines. Manjusaka might be right.

If the ghost is an outsider to this game of hide-and-seek, then the game itself loses its meaning.

Moreover, the game rules didn't specify any penalty if a Hunter fails to catch anyone, which strongly suggests there might be no penalty at all! Therefore, there's a high probability that the real ghost is disguised as one of the Hunters, who face no punishment, and will seize the opportunity to kill other players.

Although Manjusaka's words made a lot of sense... But...

Gu Mian suddenly asked, "So, are you saying this instance assigns player nicknames and game IDs to ghosts?"

Only those two pieces of information are visible to non-friends. Gu Mian had already checked everyone else's information; nicknames and IDs were all present and accounted for. The instance shouldn't have such measures in place.

Manjusaka fell silent, seemingly stumped by Gu Mian's question.

Keke frowned in confusion. "Indeed, we all have nicknames and IDs. Ghosts shouldn't have those... Perhaps the ghost in this instance is hiding among the Survivors, waiting for a chance to kill?"

Nine Lives scoffed, "The people on the other side aren't fools. They'd definitely be on alert if they found someone without a nickname or ID. I didn't notice any particular reaction from them earlier."

This was indeed puzzling. If the ghost wasn't hiding among the Hunters, nor among the Survivors, then where could it be?

After a moment of silence, Manjusaka spoke up again, "Are you all planning to act as a group?"

Bai Qiong frowned. "I intend for us to stick together. What about the rest of you?" When he frowned, the hideous scar on his neck seemed to twitch, making him look even more terrifying.

Keke quickly nodded. "I also want to stay with everyone."

After a moment of hesitation, Nine Lives casually ran his fingers through his hair. "I remember the instance evaluates and rewards based on scores. If we stick together, our scores definitely won't be high, and we won't get much of a reward."

The job of a Hunter is to hunt everywhere, not to huddle together like timid turtles.

As he spoke, Nine Lives withdrew his hand. "This instance doesn't seem too dangerous for our side, so I choose to go solo."