

Collapse 291

Chapter 291 Mysterious Call_1

The girl with the fruit knife, Manjusaka, obviously wasn't eager to team up with them either.

Her high ponytail swayed back and forth. "Dying in here doesn't harm our real bodies, and even if death means losing items..."

At this point, a cold gust of wind suddenly blew into her mouth, successfully silencing her.

Even though Manjusaka had clammed up, Gu Mian could still largely guess what she had intended to say.

"Since I don't have anything useful on me anymore, it doesn't matter how I die."——Something along those lines.

While Gu Mian was still mulling over Manjusaka's unspoken sentiment, he was unexpectedly singled out.

Manjusaka's voice carried over, "Of course, if I have to bring the Doctor along, it's not out of the question. As long as he's not too weak, I can protect him."

Gu Mian, having been singled out, was momentarily stunned. Did he just hear someone offer to protect him?

The atmosphere suddenly became strangely tense.

Nine Lives and Manjusaka had stated their intention to act alone. Even with Manjusaka wanting to take the team's relatively rare Doctor with her, Bai Qiong didn't try to stop them.

This scar-faced man, who looked difficult to get along with, had an unexpectedly gentle demeanor. He stood beside Keke, looked at Gu Mian, and said in a calm tone, "Doctor, would you like to go with her, or stay with the two of us?"

He wasn't trying to coerce or entice him; he was genuinely asking for Gu Mian's opinion.

Seeing his earnest inquiry, Gu Mian also thought seriously for a moment before speaking, "To be frank, I'm also considering acting alone."

Upon hearing this, Nine Lives chuckled first. After laughing a few times, he said, "If I'm not mistaken, players with professions who want to develop their professional skills... probably need to sacrifice other things, like forgoing physical enhancements to upgrade those professional skills."

He had guessed correctly.

Gu Mian's professional skills indeed required Attribute Points to upgrade. If he used points on them, he couldn't use them to strengthen his body.

Nine Lives continued, "Although our final rating might be lower if we stick together, it's safer for you. Don't get hung up on the final rating. Someone with a profession who doesn't team up with others will likely be taken down easily."

His words were blunt but logical. That was indeed the case.

By now, Manjusaka had retreated to the very edge. She glanced at her phone screen. "There's less than a minute left. Have you all decided how you're going to proceed?"

The current time was displayed on her phone screen.

Gu Mian also glanced down at his. It was 20:59. In one minute, it would be 21:00, and the hide-and-seek game would officially begin.

Bai Qiong thought for a few seconds before looking up. "How about this: Keke and I will go together. Doctor, are you sure you want to go alone?"

Gu Mian nodded slightly. "Yes, I still want to act alone. Honestly, I'm a pretty unlucky guy. Whatever misfortune occurs, it seems to hit me first before affecting anyone else. It's very likely that anyone following me will also become unlucky."

While Gu Mian was speaking, Nine Lives, standing not far away, showed a dismissive expression, as if his face read, How much unluckier can you possibly get?

Bai Qiong said nothing more, simply nodding to show he respected Gu Mian's choice.

A minute passed quickly.

Once the restriction was lifted, Manjusaka was the first to walk away. Moments later, her figure disappeared into the darkness.

Nine Lives glanced back at Gu Mian, Bai Qiong, and Keke. Then, he too walked away at a steady, unhurried pace.

The two of them headed in opposite directions.

Bai Qiong nodded at Gu Mian, then led Keke, who was beside him, away into the distance.

Soon, Gu Mian was the only one left.

The dim moon hung in the sky, providing little actual illumination.

The city's power was almost entirely gone; only the streetlights still glowed. Their light was incredibly faint, flickering as if they might go out at any moment.

The dark city was shrouded by an even darker sky, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

However, there were numerous buildings available for hiding.

At this moment, in this quiet and eerie city, five people were hiding in the darkness, their hearts pounding with fear.

There were also five Hunters, forced to wander the city in search of their prey.

There might be other things lurking as well...

Seeing that everyone else had departed, Gu Mian lowered his head to look at the phone in his hand. The screen displayed the name "Ji Bie Li" in large characters.

He didn't immediately try to call this unusually-named player. Instead, he put the phone provided by the instance into his lab coat pocket and then took out another phone.

[Mobile Phone Crossing Dimensional Walls (Mirror)]

This was a special item he had obtained in a previous instance.

[Function: Each phone can be used to make five calls.

If the player is in an instance when dialing, the call will connect to a randomly selected important NPC within that instance.

If the player is not in an instance when dialing, the call will connect to a random game player with the strongest compatibility.

Please note: This item can only be used to call players or NPCs who possess a phone.]

Compared to Gu Mian's Saw, this phone was rather impractical, so it had been left in a corner collecting dust. However, the phone had the advantage of being compact. Gu Mian, who didn't have an inventory, brought it with him into almost every new instance, even though it wasn't very useful...

Chapter 292 Mysterious Call_2

But today, it might serendipitously come in handy. If it works well, he might be able to clear the instance in ten minutes.

"Now that I am inside the instance, if I use this mobile phone, I will surely get through to another NPC that has a phone."

Gu Mian mumbled, "Speaking of which, ghosts count as NPCs too, right?"

"If the ghost really is hiding among us players, then it must have a mobile phone. If I dial a number on this phone, then the player who answers it must be the ghost!"

Finishing the instance in ten minutes might not be a dream after all.

Gu Mian didn't waste any time.

He swiftly pressed the dial button on the bottom right. Immediately, a strange BEEP came from the earpiece.

The sound dragged on, echoing in the dark street.

"BEEP—"

The greenery in the median strip gently swayed, casting grotesque shadows under the streetlights. Faint rustling noises sounded from a corner, as if a rat was emerging from its hole to scavenge for food.

But none of these noises disturbed Gu Mian.

He listened intently to the sound from the earpiece. As soon as the call connected, even if the other party said only one word, he could instantly recognize their voice and find the ghost.

As long as the call gets through.

"BEEP—"

The eerie, drawn-out BEEP once again filled Gu Mian's mind.

He remained focused, waiting.

Then, a different, rapid BEEP suddenly sounded. It seemed to be the signal that the call was connecting.

Gu Mian immediately perked up his ears.

Even the wind on the street seemed to turn cheerier, as if celebrating his discovery. Gu Mian was on the verge of laughing.

Following the rapid BEEP, a dull, gloomy female voice suddenly burst from the earpiece.

"Hello..."

Gu Mian recognized this voice!

"Hello, the number you dialed is not in service. Please check the number and dial again..."

Before the Global Game started, he often heard this mechanical female voice when he dialed a wrong number. He never expected to hear it again today.

Gu Mian's lips twitched slightly, and he hung up.

He hadn't expected this outcome...

The number being out of service meant there were no NPCs in this instance he could call. It also meant all the players with phones were real players; no ghost had infiltrated them to role-play.

Of course, it was also possible the ghost had immediately discarded its phone after they separated.

Gu Mian didn't know the situation with Chu Changge and the others.

But if one were to dispose of a phone, wouldn't it be more convenient to do it while alone?

Leaving that aside for now, Gu Mian figured the ghost in this instance wouldn't anticipate a player possessing something like the *Dimension-Piercing Mobile Phone*. So, even if it was hiding among the players, it wouldn't have immediately thrown away its phone after they separated.

This meant the real ghost was, in all likelihood, not among the players but hiding somewhere in this city.

And there was no way of knowing how many ghosts there were...

What a headache!

Gu Mian put the *Dimension-Piercing Mobile Phone* back into his white lab coat and pulled out the phone the instance had provided.

"Since my own phone can't get through, I'll try the one the instance gave us..."

Though, he didn't expect Ji Bie Li to answer the call.

After all, they were on opposing sides, locked in a life-or-death struggle. Gu Mian really didn't understand why this instance designed a phone communication element. They were fundamentally not on speaking terms.

With these thoughts in mind, he pressed the dial key on the phone.

The wind was still blowing cheerfully. The season in this instance seemed to be late autumn. Each gust brought down a shower of leaves. Gu Mian, standing under a tree, was immediately covered head to toe in dry, yellow leaves.

"BEEP—"

That eerie BEEP started sounding from the phone again.

After several BEEPS, the other end still hadn't picked up, nor had they hung up...

Gu Mian had been prepared for the call to be rejected, but he truly hadn't expected them to neither answer nor hang up.

A moment later, the same familiar female voice relieved the awkwardness of the unanswered call.

"Hello, the party you are trying to reach is currently unavailable. Please try your call again later..."

Alright then.

Gu Mian could only lower his hand, hang up, and stuff the phone back into his lab coat.

He had been standing there for quite a while.

The other players had already left. He was the only one remaining, having made two unanswered calls and endured the cold wind for over ten minutes.

Shortly after Gu Mian put the phone back in his pocket, another cheerful gust of wind blew past, carrying a leaf from a nearby tree that landed squarely on his shoulder.

He brushed the leaf off his shoulder and looked up at the tree beside him that kept shedding its leaves.

Just as he raised his head, he suddenly spotted a distant silhouette.

The silhouette stood quite tall.

It was on the rooftop of a three-story building, standing almost at the very edge.

Gu Mian tilted his head slightly, observing the distant dark figure.

He was sure that none of the ten players present would have the leisurely inclination to climb to the top of a tall building to take in the view.

This dark figure is definitely not a player. Could it be an Evil Ghost existing in this instance?

It stood there rigidly, as if ready to jump off at any moment.

Perhaps it became a ghost after falling to its death... but could one really die from falling off a three-story building?

As he pondered this, Gu Mian took a few steps in that direction.

Only after taking a few steps forward did he realize there had been a sign above his head all along: "SCHOOL AHEAD, PLEASE SLOW DOWN."

At this time, Nine Lives, a long-haired teenager, had already arrived inside the school.

This was an elementary school. The student desks were only about a meter high, and the space beneath them wasn't large, making it difficult for an adult to hide.

He walked through, checking classroom after classroom.

The school buildings weren't tall, only three stories high. It was the first time he had seen a school built with so few floors.

But this wasn't the time to grab the designer by the collar and ask why they had designed such a short school.

"Being short has its advantages. At least it's easier to search," Nine Lives muttered to himself, pressing the dial key on his phone again.

His call was directed to a player nicknamed "Safe Life 658."

He had already dialed many times, but the player on the other end kept hanging up. It seemed they had no intention of communicating.

Chapter 293 Different Spirit_1

The instance was divided into two camps. One was the "Hunter," the other the "Survivor."

For some odd reason, the instance had given each side a cellphone for communication. Although it was limited to one-on-one calls, substantial advantages could be gained if they decided to communicate.

However, the advantage was primarily for the Hunter. If they connected a call, the best-case scenario for them was to trace the Survivor's location through clues and capture them on the spot.

This outcome was obviously not something the Survivors wanted.

So, Survivors rarely accepted incoming calls, let alone initiated one.

Nine Lives certainly couldn't blame the player named "Safe Life 658" for not picking up his call.

He gazed at his screen for a moment before pocketing his phone.

The mobile phone was an item provided by the instance and could only be used here, so it couldn't be stored in the item bar.

He then pulled out a flashlight he had prepared earlier, adjusted its brightness to the lowest setting, and illuminated the first floor of the school building.

It was pitch black; no streetlight could penetrate inside. Players venturing in could only rely on their flashlights.

Since game instances were typically shrouded in darkness, flashlights had become essential for players.

Nine Lives began to walk slowly across the first floor.

The school building had two staircases, one at each end. Next to each staircase was a restroom, notorious hotspots for paranormal activity.

Entering the girls' restroom wasn't something a decent person would do, especially a schoolgirls' restroom.

But Nine Lives wasn't interested in maintaining his gentlemanly image right then. He peeked around the restroom entrance like a pervert, even squatting to peer through the gap beneath the stall doors for a long time before confirming no one was hiding inside.

He decided to just observe from the doorway.

He'd experienced 'door-slamming traps'—where a door slams shut behind you after entering a room—many times. Often, a ghost that had been lying in wait for who knows how long would suddenly leap out from some obscure corner, its face as white as if it had rolled in a flour vat, letting out a shriek that scared players witless.

While this description might sound comical, if you were unlucky enough to see a ghastly white face with a gaping, bloody maw lunging at you in the dark, any amusement would instantly vanish, replaced by overwhelming terror.

Nine Lives would rather catch no one than encounter such a terrifying face in the darkness.

He quickly finished searching the first floor.

After confirming he was alone on that floor, Nine Lives headed for one of the two staircases.

The school was eerily quiet; even the wind had died down. The slightest sound would be amplified tenfold in the corridors. His soft footsteps echoed on the dark stairs; the silence was terrifying, yet also somewhat reassuring.

At least he knew nothing else here could make a sound.

At the staircase landing, Nine Lives cautiously peeked upward. Seeing nothing unusual, he continued up the stairs.

Although he was a Hunter and didn't need to worry about being caught by other players, this instance might contain terrifying spirits, so he had to be ready to flee at any moment.

Of course, if he encountered a player from the Survivor Camp, he had to pounce and capture them bravely.

Distinguishing between a human and a spirit in the dark was very difficult.

Fortunately, Nine Lives wore high-prescription glasses, allowing him to see clearly whether distant figures were human or ghost.

A person with 1,000-degree myopia would still have 1,000-degree myopia in an instance, so glasses were indispensable.

As Nine Lives, wearing his 1,000-degree glasses, slowly ascended the stairs, he suddenly heard a strange sound from above.

It was the sound of someone dragging a chair across the floor. It lasted only a second before vanishing, as if the person making the sound was being stealthy, not wanting to be discovered.

Nine Lives was already on the second floor. He heard it clearly: the sound came from the third floor, directly above him.

Someone's hiding on the third floor of this building?

Nine Lives paused, thinking for a moment. He glanced out a nearby window; the grounds outside were still empty. No one had entered the school yet.

Without hesitating long, he continued upward, skipping the second floor.

Ever since this game introduced instance ratings, droves of players had recklessly pursued high scores. If you weren't active enough in an instance, your final rating would be extremely low, and the rewards minimal—almost as if you hadn't even entered the instance.

Nine Lives was one of those players keen on high ratings.

So secretive. If it were a spirit, it wouldn't be this cautious. It's highly likely a player from the Survivor Camp... Nine Lives thought as he quickened his pace, reaching the third floor swiftly while trying his best to remain quiet.

Soon, the third-floor corridor came into view.

To avoid alerting anyone on this floor, Nine Lives deliberately turned off his flashlight.

Streetlight filtering through the windows provided just enough illumination to make things out.

Each floor had six classrooms.

He had come up the east staircase; the sound he'd heard should be nearby.

He tiptoed and first checked the men's and women's restrooms nearby.

The stalls were empty—at least, no feet were visible beneath the stall doors.

After checking the restrooms, he straightened up.

The third floor remained utterly silent, as if the sound from before had never happened. But Nine Lives was certain he had heard that unusual sound.

Capturing just one person would qualitatively improve his final instance rating and yield far more rewards.

Thinking this, Nine Lives strode towards the nearest classroom.

He moved quickly, searching two classrooms in no time.

It didn't take much effort. The classrooms were exceptionally clean; a quick scan from the doorway was enough to see if anyone was hiding inside.

Then, under a desk in the back row of the third classroom, he spotted a huddled, dark shadow.

Not only was it huddled, but it was also trembling.

The trembling was so rhythmic and intense that even the desk was shaking along with it.

He was certain it wasn't a spirit.

No spirit in the world would likely be scared into such a state by a player.

Nine Lives frowned. Is this person an idiot? Trembling so violently, are they afraid people *won't* spot them?

The only exit was already blocked by him; the person inside couldn't escape. Only then did Nine Lives take out his flashlight and shine it inside.

「At this moment, Gu Mian had arrived at the foot of the school building where he had previously seen the figure on the roof.」

He looked up at the roof again, but the figure had vanished at some point.

Chapter 294 The Sound of Descending the Stairs on the Rooftop_1

Gu Mian knew the shadow hadn't fallen from the rooftop. He had looked around for a long time and couldn't see any bodies splattered to pieces from a jump. Of course, Gu Mian didn't particularly want to see what a splattered brain looked like anyway.

This area was quite open. The main entrance of the teaching building had long since been removed. Wind gusted through the gaping doorway, whistled out through equally empty window frames, and created a faint, scraping sound. Gu Mian switched on his flashlight, shining it on the building before him. It was pitch-black inside. The flashlight beam barely illuminated a small section; vast swathes remained stubbornly cloaked in a darkness the light could not pierce. Dark and silent, it felt like a pool of stagnant water, undisturbed for years.

Gu Mian adjusted the flashlight beam and stepped onto the stairs of the doorway.

However, just as he did, a loud THUD suddenly shattered the silence. It sounded like a cement bag, filled to bursting, had suddenly been thrown from the rooftop, slamming onto the ground with an enormous crash. The THUD seemed to explode right at Gu Mian's feet, as if whatever fell from the roof had landed there.

Hearing the noise, Gu Mian immediately whipped his head around to look at the ground beside him, even pulling his foot back slightly. It was dead silent a moment ago. That sudden racket is enough to scare someone to death!

He saw that the ground beside him was empty.

Gu Mian was sure he'd turned his head fast enough. If something had truly fallen, it couldn't have vanished in the instant he turned. Even with wings, it wouldn't have gotten far.

Could an invisible object have fallen?

He tentatively poked the ground beside him with his foot but felt nothing invisible.

Strange. Such a loud noise, yet nothing fell? Is this just to scare players, or is it a hint that there's something on the roof?

As he thought, Gu Mian looked up at the rooftop again. The sky was inky black, and no other colors could be discerned. The shadow that had seemed poised to jump was long gone from the edge of the roof. Only the wind scraped against the railing, causing the trash hanging there to rustle... or perhaps it wasn't trash.

This dilapidated school building was only three stories high, so Gu Mian had a clear view of the rooftop's decaying railing.

He averted his gaze. Falling from three stories might not be fatal, but isn't this railing a bit too shoddy? This is supposed to be a school, after all...

At this moment, Nine Lives, who was on the third floor, was also startled by the loud noise. He was blocking the classroom doorway, intending to drag out the person inside. But just as he took half a step, the tremendous noise erupted from behind him, making him jump and even let out a small, involuntary cry. The huddled, shivering figure inside the classroom was even more terrified. By the time Nine Lives composed himself, the person within was still whimpering faintly, the words "Don't catch me," or something similar, barely audible. It sounded like a middle-aged man.

After the loud noise, Nine Lives instinctively wanted to look back. The sound clearly indicated something had fallen from upstairs. Behind him was the corridor, with a large window set into the wall directly opposite him. If he turned to look out, he could see what was on the ground.

But Nine Lives immediately resisted the urge to look back.

There's an escaper right in front of me. To prevent any mishaps, I should catch him first before doing anything else...

With this thought, he didn't even turn his head, ignoring the sounds from outside and continued into the classroom.

But just as his first foot landed, another strange sound reached him. This time, Nine Lives couldn't ignore the sound. It came directly from the staircase at one end of the corridor. It sounded like someone walking on the stairs, and they were getting closer.

Who's coming up?

He hesitated, stopping to listen carefully to the sound. Just then, he suddenly realized the sound was very close; a few more steps and whoever it was would reach the third floor.

No, that's not right! Even though this is the third floor, in such a quiet environment, if someone were moving on the first-floor staircase, the sound would be audible. But this sound was already very close when it started; it definitely wasn't someone coming all the way up from the first floor! He remembered not having searched the second floor, so there might be players there. If a player on the second floor had been drawn out by the earlier noise and started climbing the stairs, that would be logical. But... if a player on the second floor was drawn out by the noise, they should have gone downstairs first to check what fell. They definitely wouldn't come upstairs! So, the one coming upstairs now... Who is it?

Nine Lives held his breath, straining his ears to listen to the sounds outside.

Just then, he suddenly discerned that the footsteps on the stairs weren't ascending, but descending.

Recognizing them as descending footsteps, Nine Lives let out a small sigh of relief. But before he could fully exhale, he frowned in the darkness, puzzled.

Descending footsteps... Did someone just go down from this floor? Was there someone else on this floor just now? No... Something feels very wrong. Going downstairs... Downstairs?

Suddenly, Nine Lives shuddered violently. No! If they're going downstairs... why do the footsteps sound like they're getting closer?!

Nine Lives' scalp tingled. Ignoring the other person in the classroom, he bolted for the door and sprinted frantically in the opposite direction of the sound, not even pausing to catch his breath.

The middle-aged male player hiding under the table clearly didn't want to die either. Seemingly realizing something, he scrambled out from the classroom after Nine Lives and fled in the same direction.

While escaping for his life, Nine Lives' mind was racing.

The teaching building is only three stories high, and this is the top floor. Hearing descending footsteps that are getting closer... means something is coming down from the rooftop! It's approaching the third floor! A heavy object falling from the roof, footsteps descending from the rooftop... Connecting these things... Damn it, is the ghost in this instance some kind of crazed killer? Nine Lives cursed inwardly as he sprinted.

He was fast. In no time, he'd outpaced the other player, who was clearly out of shape, and bounded down the stairs, rushing out of the teaching building.

The footsteps haven't caught up yet; they must be chasing that unlucky fellow I left behind.

Nine Lives breathed a sigh of relief. Just as he was about to flee the school grounds, he suddenly realized something was amiss. The ground around him was completely empty. There was no gruesome, splattered body like he'd imagined.

Why? He had clearly heard that enormous THUD when something hit the ground... The sound of a fall, but no body. What was this implying? Was it a hint for players to pay attention to the rooftop?

As he pondered, he looked up at the rooftop. Along the railing, some cloth-like things seemed to be hanging, fluttering in the wind.

Those were unlikely to be useless. Should I go up to the rooftop to look for clues? But that ghost could return at any moment!

There was no time for further thought. The sounds of frantic escape from behind were drawing nearer; the player he'd left behind would be down soon, and that thing would follow!

Nine Lives gritted his teeth, dove into the densest nearby patch of bushes, and held his breath.

I'll take the gamble. Bet I can find some clues before that ghost returns. This is the best chance, especially since the other player is luring the ghost away...

He pressed himself tightly against the dirt, trying to let the bushes conceal him completely, keeping his head down and not daring to move a muscle.

Chapter 295 Overflowing with Charm_1

The sound of the man's hurried escape sent ripples of panic and urgency through the air. Just like that, he quickly left the area in front of the shrubbery Nine Lives was hiding in.

Immediately after, the entity that was chasing the man caught up.

Despite having come face to face with such entities many times in past instances, Nine Lives still couldn't get used to it.

An evil, chilling presence slowly approached.

There was no sound at all.

Yet, as Nine Lives lay with his head buried in the ground, he felt an unparalleled fear, as if a resentful pair of eyes were glaring at him.

He tried to keep his trembling body under control, minimizing his movements as much as possible.

Luckily, the terrifying entity didn't linger long. It was only a moment before the sinister feeling dissipated.

It had moved on, chasing its prey.

Hidden in the bushes, Nine Lives heaved a quiet sigh of relief. It seemed like the entity had directly overlooked him—he felt incredibly lucky.

Even though he was inwardly marveling at his good fortune, he didn't make any rash moves. Instead, he remained prone in the bushes for some time, never even lifting his head.

After what felt like an eternity—when he was sure the entity had completely left—Nine Lives hesitantly lifted his head to survey his surroundings. Seeing that there wasn't a single ghostly apparition in sight, he hastily crawled out of the bushes.

"Goddammit," he muttered to himself as he brushed off the dirt clinging to his clothes. "I'm supposed to be the Hunter here. Hiding feels so out of character..."

If there were ghosts in this instance that would chase players, why on earth were the participants playing hide and seek amongst themselves?

Why not simply make the ghosts the hunters and have them chase the players around? Simple enough, right?

No time to ponder such questions now.

He emerged hastily from the bushes and walked up the steps at the entrance of the building.

"That ghost could return at any moment. I need to be quicker... The thing on the rooftop..." As Nine Lives muttered lowly to himself, he instinctively looked up.

A ghastly white face appeared in his line of sight.

Gu Mian would have sworn all he'd done was casually poke his head out from the rooftop, but the player below had suddenly sprung into action, hopping around like he'd seen a ghost—jumping even more excitedly than the liveliest frog Gu Mian had ever seen.

Of course, once Nine Lives realized the pale face belonged to the doctor player, he quickly regained his composure. In fact, he felt an overwhelming urge to punch the doctor for startling him.

By now, Nine Lives had made it up to the rooftop, where Gu Mian had been waiting.

Gu Mian had watched as the not-entirely-mature-looking, long-haired young man doggy-paddled into a bush by the teaching building, causing the entire bush to tremble along with him.

When he came out, Gu Mian poking his head out again had given him another scare.

Gu Mian had expected him to fly off the handle and confront him, but instead, the comparatively immature-looking player merely cast him silent, reproachful glances.

The unknown fabric still fluttered on the railing. Nine Lives had noticed these objects when he was on the ground floor.

"You've been on the rooftop for a while, haven't you?" Nine Lives asked Gu Mian, his eyes fixated on the railing.

He had no idea how long this doctor-looking player had been on the rooftop. It seemed like he had arrived before Nine Lives. If he had been on the rooftop when the falling noise rang out, he might have witnessed a "murder"!

Perhaps he knew some useful clues!

In response, Gu Mian touched his chin. "Not very long. Roughly around the time you dove into the bushes."

"What?"

Nine Lives thought he had misheard. "When did you get here?"

If the doctor had arrived just as he was diving into the bushes, it meant something astonishing: while the entity was chasing other players, this doctor was climbing the stairs inside the building!

While the entity wasn't chasing him then, it was still quite audacious to brazenly climb the stairs, knowing an entity was present...

Who could roam so freely in a building with an anomalous entity in it?

Gu Mian spoke again. "Just now, when I was on the first floor, I heard what sounded like another player being chased. So, I seized the opportunity to..."

Seized the opportunity?

Nine Lives felt the usage of those words was rather inappropriate. But then again, he couldn't think of a better term to describe the situation.

This doctor's way of thinking definitely seemed a bit off. It seemed best to minimize contact.

As these thoughts whirled in his head, Nine Lives glanced once more at the strip of material hanging on the railing.

It was a very thin piece of clothing. Its thinness caused it to drape into a strip that resembled a piece of torn cloth.

Just as Nine Lives took a few steps forward to get a closer look at the clothing, Gu Mian suddenly halted him. "I've already checked that piece of clothing," he said, pulling out a piece of paper. "There's only one pocket, which contained this."

Curious, Nine Lives took the piece of paper. It was a supermarket receipt.

It was very dark, so he had to bring the receipt close to be able to read the small print.

[Dajiale Supermarket Receipt]

[Bele Cucumber Chips*3]

[Yuanle Yuan Milk Ice Cream*1]

[Kang's Mineral Water*1]

[Lewang Rice Vinegar*3]

That was all.

"This is..." Nine Lives furrowed his brows. Are we supposed to find Dajiale Supermarket?

And then locate the items listed on this receipt?

But what did that have to do with hide and seek? This instance was truly puzzling.

Out of caution, Nine Lives quickly rummaged through all the clothes hanging on the rooftop railing one more time, but still found nothing.

He glanced disappointedly at the receipt in his hand.

Was this the only clue?

Finding a specific supermarket in a small city wouldn't be easy. Not to mention the possibility of there being supermarkets with similar names. This was going to be difficult. Extremely difficult.

Gu Mian also looked at the receipt in Nine Lives' hand. "Don't lose hope," he said. "The central theme of a hide-and-seek game is 'searching.' Our current clue is also guiding us to 'search.' So, the main objective remains unchanged. If you put the same effort into finding this supermarket as you do into searching for other players, it should work out. Of course, a tank is more eye-catching than a baby stroller."

Nine Lives looked up, surprised.

He noticed that this player, the doctor, seemed to be naturally slipping into the role of a kind, understanding older brother.

As a doctor, a character with less-than-ideal physical abilities, this player seemed incredibly laid-back.

Nine Lives paused, then spoke, "I thought that as a doctor, you'd be extra cautious, maybe even rely on others for protection. I guess I was wrong."

Not only did the doctor not seek protection from others, he even casually climbed up to the rooftop on his own in a building where an entity was present.

"It's just that, as a player focused on developing professional skills, you're likely not as physically strong as other players," Nine Lives mused. "So, it would be better if you stuck with someone... Even if other players can't help much, at least you'd have someone to run away with..."

At this, Gu Mian saw Nine Lives, who was in front of him, flick his own ponytail with a rather flamboyant gesture. "Would you be willing to let me lead you when we run away?" Nine Lives asked.

Chapter 296 Newborn Hope_1

Of course, in the end, Gu Mian did not accept the proposal of being dragged along by this flirtatious player.

"To be truthful, I have two friends in this instance, but they're not in the same faction as I am," Gu Mian said. "I need to find them first."

What Gu Mian meant by 'finding' them was certainly not capturing them on the spot.

Nine Lives lowered the hand that had been toying with his hair. "That's really a pity. I guess even if you find your two friends, you won't take the opportunity to capture them, right? Such camaraderie is really precious in an instance like this... Well, since that's the case, I hate to meddle in other people's affairs. Let's part ways here. This is the right way to use this idiom, right?"

This flirtatious guy was rather talkative. He seemed worlds apart from the trembling figure hidden in the bushes just now.

Gu Mian saw Nine Lives glance towards the bottom of the building after he finished speaking, as if to confirm whether the spirit had returned.

After confirming that there was nothing downstairs, he turned back to Gu Mian and waved the receipt in his hand. "Do you want this receipt?"

Gu Mian shook his head; he had already memorized its contents, and holding onto it wouldn't serve any other purpose.

Nine Lives walked away very quickly, his legs moving as if on wings. In no time, he was downstairs and then rapidly disappeared from Gu Mian's sight, apparently heading for the Dajiale Supermarket on the receipt.

Gu Mian did not linger either.

He quickly searched the remaining school buildings. After finding nothing, he prepared to head to other locations.

But where to go first was a question worth considering.

In the dark night, Gu Mian stood at the school gate with his guitar on his back, pondering for a while before heading down the street.

Finding five specific people in a small city was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Fortunately, this city had long been deserted. Lively people had disappeared without a trace, dense weeds grew through the cracked roads, and derelict buildings still stood on this wasteland.

Now, as long as he could detect a hint of a living human, he could trace it to the hiding players.

And at that moment, Gu Mian captured such a hint.

Both sides of this street were lined with small convenience stores, stationery shops, and the like. The doors of these shops looked like they hadn't been repaired in years, but Gu Mian noticed that one of them seemed to have been forcibly broken into.

He quickly searched the stationery shop, which hadn't been patronized for many years. He found that the paper and pens inside had been roughly treated. A notebook, from which pages had been forcibly torn, lay on the ground.

It seemed someone had entered this stationery store not long ago and had handled the stationery here quite roughly.

They only touched the paper and pens. It looks like they wanted to record something, or maybe draw a map of this city? Gu Mian stroked his chin.

It seems other players have also realized there are spirits in this instance.

Do they want to draw a map for an easier escape? Or have they found a clue that requires pen and paper for calculations?

Gu Mian didn't linger in the stationery store. He left immediately, but before going, he also tore a few sheets from a notebook and pocketed a pen.

Since other players had taken some paper and pens, it indicated that these items might have considerable use in this instance.

After taking these items, Gu Mian continued along the dim street. Just then, he suddenly felt a vibration from his pocket.

His phone BUZZED.

The phone provided in this instance had no other use; setting an alarm with it was out of the question. So, this vibration could only mean one thing: the player corresponding to him had called.

Gu Mian took out his phone.

The screen was faintly lit. The three large characters 'Ji Bie Li' were displayed in the center, looking as if they could pop out at any moment.

How strange. The player being hunted actually took the initiative to call the player hunting him?

Gu Mian had tried calling a few times before, but the other party had mercilessly hung up each time, not giving him any chance at all.

But now, this player was acting completely out of character by calling?

This is highly unusual; something must be up. I need to be careful, Gu Mian thought.

As he pondered, he pressed the answer key and accepted this rather peculiar call.

「Meanwhile」

"Safe Life 658" was gasping heavily in a small alley.

He was a member of the Survivors' Faction and had just been hiding in a school when he was nearly caught by another player. If it weren't for the timely appearance of the spirit...

The timely spirit had helped him escape a situation where he was about to be caught by a Hunter. But then the spirit started chasing him. Being chased by a spirit was worse than being caught by another player; if the spirit caught him, his death would likely be rather horrific.

Luckily, the spirit wasn't relentless. Just when he was exhausted and had to stop, he suddenly found that the terrifying presence that had been following him had disappeared.

Because he was too engrossed in escaping, he wasn't sure how the spirit behind him had vanished, as if it had just disappeared into thin air.

"When I was escaping in the school building just now, I saw someone in a white coat... probably from the Hunter's Faction. Why didn't he seem scared of ghosts?" Safe Life 658 panted heavily, propping himself against the wall, and looked up as he murmured to himself.

A gigantic office building stood not far in front of him.

Safe Life 658 looked at the office building, and his face lit up with excitement as if he saw a new glimmer of hope.

Chapter 297 Camp_1

It's her! Yisheng Ping'an thought with a start.

He spotted another survivor standing by a window of an office building.

At the start of the instance, the players from the Survivor Camp didn't trust each other, so they split up right away.

Everyone's minds were racing. When the hide-and-seek rule was announced, they all began to suspect that a supernatural entity might be hidden among the players, biding its time to strike.

Only a guy with glasses and Fatty seemed to know each other from before; they didn't separate.

Apart from those two, the other three, including Yisheng Ping'an himself, scattered in different directions, showing no intention whatsoever of teaming up for the instance.

That supernatural entity was just chasing me, Yisheng Ping'an thought. There's no way it could suddenly appear in the office building across the street! Unless it can teleport.

But if the supernatural entity in this instance could teleport, it wouldn't have bothered chasing me for so long; it would've just teleported right in front of me.

Yisheng Ping'an mumbled to himself, So, Ji Bie Li is highly unlikely to be the supernatural entity in disguise...

It would be best to gather together now. Not that it would guarantee safety, but at least it could boost our morale, right?

He looked up at the office building in front of him and started walking towards it, intending to meet up with Ji Bie Li, whom he had just seen.

However, Ji Bie Li didn't stay by the window for long. She seemed to be on her phone with someone and quickly moved away from the window.

Don't walk so fast... Yisheng Ping'an thought, quickening his pace as he saw Ji Bie Li leaving.

But just then, he saw another figure appear at the window Ji Bie Li had just passed!

Something is following Ji Bie Li!

Yisheng Ping'an's heart jolted. Without getting a clear look, he quickly slipped into a nearby corner and peered cautiously at the window.

The inside of the office building was pitch-black, but because the person was standing by the window, their appearance was quite visible.

Yisheng Ping'an finally realized that the person following Ji Bie Li was neither a Hunter nor a supernatural entity. Could it be another survivor?

He recognized that face.

This person was the guy with glasses who had been with Fatty earlier.

Fatty always kept a distance of three meters from the other players, so Yisheng Ping'an hadn't seen Fatty's nickname. However, he remembered that the glasses guy's game name was "Meiren Chu."

Yisheng Ping'an looked at the office building window in confusion. He's also a survivor, right? So why is he sneaking around behind another survivor? And where has Fatty, who was with him, gone?

Just then, he noticed Meiren Chu, who was passing the window, suddenly turn his head slightly and glance in his direction.

A wave of terror instantly surged through him.

He quickly ducked his head back, pressing himself tightly into the corner, not daring to show his face again.

After a long while, he finally dared to peek out again.

When he looked back towards the window, Ji Bie Li and Meiren Chu were gone; there was no sign of anyone.

Yisheng Ping'an breathed a small sigh of relief.

He furrowed his brows, conflicted. That Meiren Chu was definitely following Ji Bie Li! Why would he track another survivor? This guy is dangerous...

At this point, he had abandoned the idea of going to the office building to meet up with Ji Bie Li.

Yisheng Ping'an cringed. Who knows what kind of freaks I've been matched with as teammates. It's safer to be alone... I should just continue hiding by myself... But that woman seemed to be on the phone just now. Was she calling someone from the Hunter's Faction?

Communicating with the Hunter's Faction was obviously disadvantageous for them, the survivors.

But why would Ji Bie Li call them?

Is there some compelling reason for survivors and Hunters to communicate?

Yisheng Ping'an grew more conflicted and instinctively glanced again at the window where the two figures had just passed.

But just then, he suddenly saw something else in that window—a twisted human figure!

His scalp tingled fiercely, and he yanked his head back again.

How could... that thing be following Ji Bie Li and Meiren Chu? How is that possible!

Of course, Yisheng Ping'an recognized that twisted shadow!

Not long ago, he had been chased by this terrifying humanoid until he was scared out of his wits.

That thing was behind me just a short while ago. Why is it in front of me now, and how did it even get into that tall office building?!

That's definitely not possible at a normal speed.

Could it really teleport?!

It can suddenly appear anywhere.

On the streets, in office buildings, in schools, and... behind me.

A sudden chill ran down his back; he felt as if some terrifying entity had fixed its gaze on him.

Yisheng Ping'an slowly, tremblingly, turned his head. There was nothing behind him, only a dilapidated mud wall with peeling plaster, its corner stained black.

He sighed in relief, then slowly shifted, trying to control his trembling body.

If this supernatural entity is so powerful, then forget about us survivors; even if you added the five Hunters in this instance, all ten of us would be wiped out!

Is this an unbeatable supernatural entity? Does it not give players a single chance to live?

No, the game wouldn't create an instance where players are unilaterally sent to their deaths. No matter how dangerous an instance is, there should always be a way for players to survive.

Chapter 298 Camp_2

Could there be any clues in this instance that they hadn't discovered? Only by finding this undiscovered clue could they survive the relentless hunt of the spirits?

The players should communicate and share clues with each other.

A Lifetime of Peace looked up at the distant office building again. I need to notify Meiren Chu and Ji Bie Li that they're being targeted by the spirits so they can escape quickly!

But I can't just run up to the office building and tell them directly.

There's a terrifying spirit in that building, after all!

Going up would be putting myself in danger.

And the mobile phones provided by the instance can't even be used to communicate with players from the same camp...

A Lifetime of Peace was troubled for a moment.

But then, a thought struck him. Right! I can call my corresponding Hunter, Nine Lives, and have him tell any other Hunters he meets. Maybe he's with the Hunters corresponding to Meiren Chu or Ji Bie Li!

That way, they could be informed through the Hunters that the spirits were tracking them.

This method would take a lot of time, though, and there's no guarantee Nine Lives is with other Hunters, or if those Hunters correspond to Meiren Chu or Ji Bie Li.

Still, even if time is tight, it's better than doing nothing.

With this plan in mind, he pulled out his mobile phone, gritted his teeth lightly, and dialed the number.

「 」

Meanwhile, Gu Mian was on a call with Ji Bie Li.

Not long after leaving the stationery store, he received Ji Bie Li's call. Gu Mian had now reached another street. It was once a bustling hotspot full of mobile phone shops, leading Gu Mian to suspect that the instance's mobile phones were perhaps taken from here.

He stood at the entrance of Mobile Phone Street, silently listening to the voice coming from the receiver.

Unexpectedly, Ji Bie Li happened to be the nickname of a female player—at least, the voice was female. As for whether she had used a voice changer, I have no idea.

I never expected this survivor would dare to call me directly. I had already resigned myself to not exchanging a single word with Ji Bie Li in this instance.

"I discovered something," Ji Bie Li said. "Initially, I didn't understand the significance of the mobile phones in this instance. But after this discovery, I suspect they're meant to facilitate communication and clue-sharing between our two camps."

Ji Bie Li skipped the pleasantries. She launched into a string of words that, while sounding very reasonable, held no real worth, leaving Gu Mian deeply impressed by the power of such rhetoric.

"What is it?" Gu Mian didn't bother with trivial questions like 'who are you' or 'where are you,' and cut straight to the chase.

He wasn't interested in listening to more of such seemingly methodical yet utterly useless blather.

While talking to Ji Bie Li, Gu Mian continued to inspect the mobile phone shops on the street.

The shops had mobiles of every kind and color, all neatly arranged on the counters. The owners apparently hadn't thought to take these colorful items with them when they left.

The shops also had every type of charger and earpiece, all covered in a thick layer of dust. Inhaling it would make a person sneeze powerfully.

Many things could be hidden behind the mobile phone counters, and while listening to Ji Bie Li, Gu Mian went from shop to shop, checking behind them.

As far as I know, Fatty is excellent at hide-and-seek. Without other capable teammates by his side, he would likely find a relatively safe place to hide, passively slacking off and trying to coast through the instance.

Chu Changge, on the other hand, acts on a whim. It wouldn't be out of character for him to abandon Fatty in some corner to do whatever he pleased.

It has to be said, those two are rather well-matched in certain aspects.

Gu Mian was trying to ferret out Fatty, who weighed one hundred kilograms, from behind these mobile phone counters.

Ji Bie Li's voice continued from the receiver, "It's something I witnessed not too long ago..."

She paused. "Probably around fifteen minutes ago."

Gu Mian glanced at the time. It was exactly nine-thirty.

Fifteen minutes ago was nine-fifteen. At that point, the hide-and-seek game had only been going for fifteen minutes.

I remember that's around when I spotted the ghostly figure on top of the teaching building.

Could Ji Bie Li have seen something then too?

"As soon as the game started, I went into a stationery shop first, drew a map of all the places I had passed... then quickly fled in a direction away from you all, until I hid in a hotel called the Baodu Hotel. I was hiding in a room called 'Fengqing Pavilion' on the second floor."

I didn't expect this person to reveal her hiding spot right away, Gu Mian thought, slowing his search behind the mobile phone counters.

Ji Bie Li must not be hiding in the hotel anymore, or she wouldn't be so bold as to tell a Hunter her hiding place.

Gu Mian listened carefully to the voice from the receiver.

He could hear Ji Bie Li's breathing becoming somewhat ragged, and faint footsteps came through the receiver. It sounded like she was walking briskly somewhere.

Could she be doing some kind of strenuous activity?

"I was at a window on the second floor and happened to witness a chase between a survivor and a Hunter. Behind the hotel is a small alley. I saw two people run into the alley, one chasing, one fleeing. Both were players. As for which camp they belonged to, I don't need to elaborate, do I?"

Of course not.

I figure a Hunter wouldn't be the one screaming and running from a survivor. Nor would a survivor be reckless enough to actively hunt a Hunter.

"They didn't chase each other for very long. Then the spirit appeared..."

Ji Bie Li paused slightly. "I didn't see when it appeared, but when I noticed it, it was already very close to the Hunter."

"Only a fool would play hide-and-seek at a time like that. Upon discovering the spirit, the two players reacted quickly—they ran."

"However, the Hunter from your camp wasn't thinking straight. She probably wanted to split up and escape, but she didn't react in time. Instead, she turned and ran in the direction that was originally behind her—which was right where the spirit was."

"It seemed like she finally realized her mistake, but by then, the spirit was extremely close. It was too late to turn back, so she just braced herself and sprinted headlong in that same direction."

After saying this, Ji Bie Li stopped.

A few seconds later, her voice, now tinged with amusement, continued from the receiver.

"It was strange. The spirit didn't hesitate to chase after the survivor from our camp. The Hunter was closer and would have been easier to catch, but the spirit didn't even look at her."

Gu Mian pondered for a moment before speaking, "Are you suggesting that the spirit in this instance doesn't attack us Hunters?"

Ji Bie Li continued, "Otherwise, how could one explain why it didn't go after the Hunter, who was an easier target? I think the spirit in this instance might also be constrained by something, like the instance rules. I thought about it over and over again, and suddenly remembered a strange rule from when we first entered this instance..."

"'The factions are divided into two groups; five players are selected as Hunters, and the remaining units are Survivors.' That sentence?" Gu Mian interrupted, stroking his chin.

Ji Bie Li's surprised voice came through. "You discovered it already?"

"I felt something was off when that sentence appeared," Gu Mian said. "Two groups. One group includes 'five players,' while the other group is described using 'other units.' Doesn't that clearly indicate that your Survivor Camp has more than just players in it—that there's something else?"

Ji Bie Li was stunned.

She was so taken aback by Gu Mian's matter-of-fact tone that she was at a loss for words.

After a moment's pause, she continued, "Since you discovered early on that spirits would be constrained by Hunters, why haven't you done anything to constrain the instance's spirit?"

Gu Mian replied with his usual matter-of-fact tone, "I need to find two people first..."

Ji Bie Li felt as if smoke was beginning to billow from her head.

Chapter 299 Necessary Connection_1

Ji Bie Li couldn't believe that the Hunter she was connected with was so unreliable.

She couldn't help stopping in her tracks, her mouth slightly agape, yet she didn't utter a single word.

It took her a while before she found her voice again:

"Since we know that the ghost in the instance is part of the Survivor Camp, this means that the key to our survival lies with you Hunters. As long as you catch the ghost lurking in this city, all of us players will be safe."

Reaching this point, Ji Bie Li paused, and then continued, "I know the people you're looking for are from our Survivor Camp, probably someone named Meiren Chu and another individual called Fatty."

It took Gu Mian a while to understand who Ji Bie Li was referring to as "Meiren Chu."

Wasn't that Chu Changge, who was equipped with the [Blood-stained school badge]?

Once players equipped this item, their nickname changed to "Meiren Chu." There were rumors that if one managed to remove all the blood stains from the badge, its power would increase, but Gu Mian and his companions had yet to find something that could clean the blood off the badge.

It seemed Fatty was always careful to stay more than three meters away from other players. He probably thought his in-game nickname was too conspicuous. After all, it was a name that had been repeatedly announced.

Ji Bie Li's voice came through again, "In fact, you don't have to go looking for those two. We can first focus on dealing with the ghost in this instance."

As she spoke, she quickly began ascending the staircase.

She was inside a skyscraper stretching over thirty floors. It was the tallest building within her sight.

Normally, such tall buildings would have elevators, but it seemed the city's power supply had been cut. Only the street lamps still cast a faint glow. Consequently, the elevators in this building were out of service.

Of course, even if the elevators were functioning, I wouldn't be foolish enough to take them instead of climbing the stairs. After all, elevators are hotspots for paranormal activity. If I were stuck in such a confined space when a ghost suddenly appeared, there would be nowhere to run.

Fortunately, her physical condition had been enhanced considerably. She wouldn't feel tired climbing a few floors, but ascending more than twenty floors in one go was still a bit much.

As she continued to climb the stairs, she quickly resumed speaking:

"I suspect that the key to improving our ratings in this instance isn't the hide-and-seek game between players, but the Evil Ghost hiding among us. As long as all players join forces to deal with the Evil Ghost, everyone's rating will surely be high. If we can make the other Hunters understand that the rating gained from teaming up against ghosts is far higher than from hunting other players, then your two

friends in the Survivor Camp won't be in danger, and they won't have to worry about the Evil Ghost in this instance finding them."

Gu Mian stopped in front of a storefront. "So, you're suggesting that I inform the other Hunters about this?"

Ji Bie Li fell silent.

Gu Mian continued, "With this arrangement, you'd have it pretty easy."

He understood that Ji Bie Li didn't want to deal with the other Hunters directly. She also knew that the other Hunters wouldn't be easily persuaded. If they not only ignored her words but turned around and captured her, the loss would be immense. It would be a case of losing the lady and the soldiers—a terrible bargain. That wouldn't be worth it at all.

Ji Bie Li's somewhat flustered voice came through the earpiece: "Since you're a Hunter, the other Hunters can't pose a threat to you. But it's different for me. If I confront them directly, I could be caught and eliminated."

Gu Mian frowned, his flashlight still on, casting a bright beam into the dark night.

At that moment, the light shone through the glass door of a storefront, illuminating the counter inside. He could vaguely make out the shadow of something behind the counter, quivering slightly.

He took a step forward and said, "I think your speculation might be incorrect."

Ji Bie Li was silent for a moment. "Where is it incorrect?"

"As I told you earlier, the ghost in the instance should belong to the Survivor Camp. This is the premise for Hunters being able to restrain the ghost. But have you considered this: if the ghost belongs to the Survivor Camp, it cannot harm other survivors or Hunters."

Members of the Survivor Camp cannot hunt Hunters, nor can they hunt other members of the Survivor Camp.

If the ghost were in the Hunter's Faction, then it hunting players from the Survivor Camp would be perfectly logical. But since it also belongs to the Survivor Camp, why would it pursue other players from the Survivor Camp?

Ji Bie Li was stunned by his words.

Her mind raced, and she finally sensed that something was amiss.

Right, if the ghost also belongs to the Survivor Camp, then it has no reason to hunt other survivors. Is it merely trying to scare people?

As she pondered this, Ji Bie Li furrowed her brows and said softly, "Perhaps the ghost isn't bound by camp restrictions when it kills?"

It actively avoids Hunters because it's afraid of being caught. But for players in the Survivor Camp, it wouldn't have such concerns. So, the ghost only pursues survivors.

"Let me ask you," she heard his voice come from the receiver, "have you personally seen the ghost kill anyone? Or found any player's corpse?"

Without even needing to think, Ji Bie Li blurted out, "No. Isn't it just that the instance started too recently, and the ghost hasn't had time to kill anyone yet?"

Chapter 300 Necessary Connection_2

"Since we haven't seen a corpse yet, we can't rule out the possibility that the ghost, being a Survivor, is unable to kill people," Gu Mian said.

Ji Bie Li stopped in her tracks and thought carefully for a moment. "If it can't kill, then why does the ghost chase the Survivors? Could it be some sort of illusion?"

Gu Mian shrugged. "Only the ghost itself would know."

Although he knew she wouldn't see his shrug.

Then he heard Ji Bie Li's voice from the receiver, "What you said makes sense. I'll continue observing. But the fact that ghosts can be restrained by you Hunters is undeniable. So, I hope that if it comes to a critical moment, the Hunters will be able to take action."

Gu Mian nodded. "Naturally... By the way, are you currently in an office building over thirty stories high?"

Hearing him say this, Ji Bie Li almost dropped her phone.

She immediately covered the mouthpiece of her phone and looked around, searching for Gu Mian, who she suspected was secretly observing her.

But after scanning her surroundings thoroughly, Ji Bie Li couldn't find any sign of prying eyes. She took a deep breath and put the phone back to her ear. "Why do you say that?"

"We've been on the phone constantly. During this time, you seem to have been doing some rather strenuous activity. I initially thought you were running or walking quickly. However, you then said, 'I will continue observing.' In this city, the most convenient place to observe would be that office building. It's quite far from me, but because it's so tall, I can see it," Gu Mian said, looking at the distant building. "Also, you seem to be constantly climbing stairs. Only a building with that many floors would require such a lengthy climb."

Hearing this, Ji Bie Li suddenly laughed. "I'm almost afraid to keep talking to you. I suspect if we continue, you'll know exactly which floor I'm on."

Gu Mian looked at the distant high-rise building. "I don't need us to keep talking to figure it out. You're somewhere between the twentieth and twenty-fifth floor, right?"

Ji Bie Li's smile froze.

She glanced up at the floor number posted on the stairwell wall: twenty-first floor. A sense of foreboding suddenly welled up in her heart. "How did you know?"

How on earth did this person deduce that?

Gu Mian stared at the distant building and said, "It was nothing much. A short while ago, I saw a furtive figure with a flashlight pass by the nineteenth-floor stairwell window and head upstairs. She was moving very quietly, as if afraid of alerting someone... Hmm, she's a Hunter."

Thanks to that fool Manjusaka randomly waving her flashlight around inside the building, otherwise Gu Mian wouldn't have known which floor Ji Bie Li was on.

Hearing this, Ji Bie Li suddenly held her breath.

She strained her ears, listening intently for a moment. Indeed, she thought she could hear faint, almost imperceptible sounds coming from below.

Run!

Without thinking too much, she quickly hung up the phone and bolted upstairs.

Not much time had passed since the instance began. God knows what would happen if a Hunter caught her. She couldn't afford to be eliminated immediately and suffer the fate of losing her equipment, Game Coins, and Attribute Points.

But why would a Hunter know she was in this office building!

She had been very careful when she came up, only ascending after confirming no one was following her. Even after going upstairs, she hadn't dared to use her flashlight and had been extremely cautious when passing windows.

Why would a Hunter be trailing her!

But this wasn't the time to consider these things. She had to find a floor to hide on first. Presumably, the Hunter following her wouldn't know which floor she was hidden on...

Seeing that she had hung up, Gu Mian pocketed his phone.

He withdrew his gaze from the distant office building. Players these days, huh, one more cunning than the next.

After this thought, he shifted his gaze to the area behind the counter of the shop in front of him.

A dark figure was trembling behind the counter.

He unceremoniously entered the phone store and forcefully pulled out the person hiding behind the counter.

Unexpectedly, the one trembling so fiercely wasn't any Survivor, but the high school girl Keke, who was a Hunter like Gu Mian.

The beam of his flashlight shone on her face. Keke trembled again and gave an embarrassed smile. "I'm sorry, I'm just so scared. Even as a Hunter, I don't dare to run around recklessly in the instance. It was Mr. Bai Qiong who told me to hide here first..."

Gu Mian silently released the rather short high school girl. He remembered she hadn't seemed nearly this timid when the instance first started. How could she be shaking like a sieve now?

Besides, Bai Qiong and Keke had teamed up from the start, but now only Keke was visible.

Was Bai Qiong collecting clues nearby?

Sure enough, not long after Gu Mian had pulled Keke out, a man with a hideous scar across his neck appeared in his line of sight.

This player, who looked like a young man from the real world, still projected an air of friendliness, like a villain who had done countless evil deeds before turning over a new leaf. He looked somewhat astonished as he saw Gu Mian beside the counter. "Doctor? You found this place too?"

Gu Mian noticed something a bit off about Bai Qiong's wording.

"I found this place too?" Gu Mian touched his chin. "Did you two discover some clues that led you here?"

Bai Qiong nodded. As he did, the scar on his neck seemed to writhe with the movement. Most of it was a raised, shiny scar that glistened under the flashlight beam, looking quite terrifying.

Bai Qiong, however, didn't seem too bothered by it. He nodded and continued, "We found a string of phone numbers in the duty log of a phone company's service center. It was strange; there was nothing else in the center, just this string of numbers. It was probably hinting at something. I initially wanted to use the phone provided by the instance to make the call, but those phones can only connect one-on-one with Survivors. That's why the two of us came here."

He paused for breath before adding, "I told Keke to hide here first while I went to find a phone that could actually make calls..."

Looks like he found one.

Gu Mian wasn't in a hurry to ask about the phone, though. He glanced at Bai Qiong and asked, "Have either of you encountered any Survivors since the game started?"

Both Bai Qiong and Keke shook their heads.

Gu Mian asked again, "And judging by your reactions, you haven't encountered any ghosts either, right?"

Keke looked somewhat surprised. "There are ghosts in this instance?"

So they hadn't, then.

Bai Qiong wasn't overly surprised. He continued to shake his head. "We haven't encountered anyone or anything from the beginning until now. You're the first player we've met."

Gu Mian nodded. "What a coincidence."

Bai Qiong asked curiously, "What's the coincidence? Have you also not encountered any other players apart from us so far?"

Gu Mian shook his head. "No, not only have I encountered other players, but I've also encountered a ghost."

Keke was left speechless.

Gu Mian thought for a moment, then continued, "So far, I've encountered a total of four players."

"Two of them met each other, and then they immediately ran into one of the instance's ghosts. Both were chased off, scared out of their wits..."

Of course, if Nine Lives were present, he would definitely take issue with the phrase "scared out of their wits" and would probably try to change it to something like "making a glorious and strategic withdrawal."

Although both "fleeing, scared out of their wits" and "making a glorious and strategic withdrawal" mean running away, the latter at least sounds a little more impressive.

Gu Mian continued, "Besides those two who were chased by the ghost and fled, scared out of their wits, I also know of two other players. They had also just met each other when they were immediately chased by a ghost, also fleeing for their lives..."

This was what Ji Bie Li had told him.

"The data from these first two pairs suggests that whenever two players meet, a ghost immediately pops up. So, I previously speculated that there was a necessary connection between players meeting and a ghost appearing—until I met the two of you here..."