

Collapse 401

Chapter 401 - You Haven't Watched for One Year_1

Under the pitch-black sky, three people, three corpses, and a guitar case were gathered in silence.

It was a bizarre scene; if a police officer happened to pass by, they would undoubtedly haul the three of them off to the station without hesitation.

Guo Jimei hesitated before stepping forward to approach the three corpses. Their faces looked particularly eerie in the darkness, but Guo Jimei mustered her courage for a closer look.

It was Yuan Qinghua, Pan Yue, and Zhang Pingfan.

At this point, Keke also stepped forward, positioning herself in front of Guo Jimei and looking down. "I didn't expect Zhang Pingfan to be here too..."

As she spoke, she looked up at Gu Mian. "When you arrived, were they all already dead?"

Gu Mian crouched down, looking at Zhang Pingfan's body. Not long ago, Xu Xingcheng lay here, but now Xu Xingcheng was lying somewhere else.

He looked up at Keke. "When I arrived, only Yuan Qinghua and Pan Yue were here, and they were already dead. Zhang Pingfan's body was in a room in the adjacent building. It was pitch-black inside, so I dragged him out."

As Gu Mian spoke, he pointed towards the tallest nearby building.

Hearing this, Guo Jimei looked at the ground. Although it was dark, under the flashlight's glow, she could still see drag marks on the dirt road.

Guo Jimei took a step back. "So... Zhang Pingfan was also killed. Now it's just the three of us and Meiren Chu left!"

"Although I don't know why Yuan Qinghua would do this..." Guo Jimei looked at Yuan Qinghua's corpse and took a deep breath. "I'll use my Decisive Vote on Meiren Chu this round. If we vote out Meiren Chu, the game will end!"

As she spoke, she raised her hand to look at her watch. A pen fell from her pocket, making a clear sound.

Keke crouched beside the corpses, listening to Guo Jimei's voice from behind her. "It's two fifty-five now. Just five more minutes, and we'll win!"

"Yes, we've finally survived," Keke responded happily. She heard Guo Jimei behind her apparently bending down to pick up the pen, followed by a RUSTLING sound.

Keke stared at the three corpses on the ground. "But Meiren Chu wouldn't suddenly appear to take one of us down with him, right?"

But then, a long silence followed.

No one answered her.

Neither Gu Mian in front of her nor Guo Jimei behind her.

The atmosphere suddenly grew somewhat eerie.

Keke paused, then looked up at Gu Mian in front of her.

Gu Mian wasn't paying attention to her; instead, he was looking at Guo Jimei behind her.

"What's wrong?" Keke frowned and looked back. The first things she saw were a pen and a palm-sized notebook—the Prophecy Book.

Guo Jimei held these two items, apparently having just used them.

She stood in the dark, her bangs obscuring her eyes, revealing only the lower half of her face, which was expressionless.

Gu Mian slowly stood up, looking at Guo Jimei, who stood motionless in the darkness. "What's wrong?"

Guo Jimei stared intently at the Prophecy Book in her hands.

Gu Mian saw her right hand go limp, and the pen dropped to the ground.

Immediately after, Guo Jimei suddenly raised her head. Her eyes were wide as she stared wildly at Gu Mian, her voice eerie. "Gu Mian, Meiren Chu isn't the ghost, is he?"

"Although I don't understand the first part... it clearly says 'Commoner' at the end of his identity."

As she spoke, she abruptly thrust the Prophecy Book in her hand forward.

Gu Mian then saw the words on it:

[Name: Meiren Chu]

[Identity: Experiment, Chu Changge, Guardian, Student, Commoner]

"See? Meiren Chu isn't the ghost at all!" Guo Jimei said, a somewhat twisted smile spreading across her face. "It's you, isn't it? You're a master deceiver. We've all been completely fooled by you."

"Keke, this round, let's... No, actually, it's not necessary. I have the Decisive Vote. Whoever I vote for this round will be eliminated," Guo Jimei said, raising her hand and looking at Gu Mian. "So, this round, I'll vote for you directly. Look, it's less than two minutes until three o'clock. You're about to be out."

Seeing Guo Jimei's somewhat crazed expression, Gu Mian reached out and touched the guitar case beside him.

Just then, Keke, who was crouching on the ground, suddenly stood up and looked towards the nearby building. "Meiren Chu is over there! I'll go get him!"

Guo Jimei looked over in surprise. Sure enough, Chu Changge was standing there in the darkness. But then he retreated a few steps and was completely swallowed by the shadows.

"Wait!" Guo Jimei tried to call out to Keke.

But Keke seemed not to hear her at all and quickly vanished into the same patch of darkness where Chu Changge had disappeared.

"Keke..." Guo Jimei stared at Keke's disappearing figure, stunned for several seconds.

But before she could look away, a scream pierced the air from the adjacent building.

It was Keke's scream.

Guo Jimei stared in that direction, shocked. "What's going on?!"

Immediately after, she saw a staggering figure run out from the darkness. It was Keke.

Keke was clutching something in one hand, while her other hand was pressed tightly against her neck, blood spraying from between her fingers.

Guo Jimei quickly ran over. "Keke! What happened to you?"

Keke, stumbling badly, suddenly collapsed. Even so, she desperately clawed her way towards Guo Jimei.

Guo Jimei quickly knelt beside Keke, her eyes wide with shock. "What's going on?!"

Keke released her grip on her neck and grabbed Guo Jimei's clothes with a blood-soaked hand, gasping, "It was... Meiren Chu... He killed me!"

Guo Jimei saw the blood gushing continuously.

"Impossible!" She stared wide-eyed at the Prophecy Book in her hand. "Meiren Chu is clearly not the ghost! It can't be him!"

"It... is him..." Keke suddenly struggled to sit up, extending her other hand—the one protecting the object she had run out with.

Guo Jimei looked. It was a phone.

She had no time to wonder where the phone came from. She had to check its contents immediately. It was another video.

The background was a pitch-black room, illuminated only by a small flashlight. Two people were in the frame.

It was a living Zhang Pingfan and Meiren Chu, standing face to face.

Guo Jimei quickly turned her head in shock to look at Zhang Pingfan's corpse. Zhang Pingfan had contact with Meiren Chu before he died?

Just then, a voice suddenly blared from a nearby loudspeaker:

"The third night has ended. Voting will begin shortly. All players must select their voting target within one minute."

The video had started playing automatically and was only about ten seconds long.

Guo Jimei watched the video: Meiren Chu drew a knife on Zhang Pingfan...

So, Meiren Chu killed Zhang Pingfan first? Is that why Yuan Qinghua and Pan Yue died together when Yuan Qinghua killed Pan Yue?

Guo Jimei's eyes widened, then she shook her head. "No, Meiren Chu is not the ghost! The Prophecy Book said he's not the ghost!"

But Commoners can't kill!

Yet the video clearly recorded him killing Zhang Pingfan, and he just attacked Keke!

If he attacked Keke, he should have been punished by now, right? Guo Jimei felt dazed, her mind in chaos, not knowing who to believe.

Just then, footsteps approached from ahead.

Guo Jimei stiffly raised her head to see Chu Changge emerging from the darkness, a blood-stained knife in his hand.

Keke looked at Chu Changge in terror, weakly struggling a few more times. "It's him... It's him!"

But after a few more words, she closed her eyes and died.

Keke was dead, yet the man who had emerged from the darkness remained completely unharmed.

Guo Jimei's mouth fell open, her mind barely able to process anything.

Why! He's not supposed to be the ghost!

As Chu Changge drew closer, Guo Jimei subconsciously wanted to flee.

But as soon as she moved, she found her clothes firmly clutched by Keke's dead hand.

She looked down. The video on the phone was replaying from the beginning, once again showing Meiren Chu drawing his knife on Zhang Pingfan.

The sight of Keke's corpse and Zhang Pingfan dying in the video assaulted her vision.

The second hand on her wristwatch ticked relentlessly. The minute was almost up—less than ten seconds remaining.

The man with the knife drew nearer and nearer.

The approaching knife glinted, dazzling Guo Jimei's eyes. As she dazedly watched Zhang Pingfan fall in the video, for a fleeting moment, Zhang Pingfan's face seemed to morph into her own!

"I vote for Meiren Chu!" Guo Jimei finally clenched the Decisive Vote in her hand and cried out, her eyes squeezed shut.

The world fell silent for a moment.

But it wasn't long before the anticipated announcement rang out.

This was the final verdict that would determine their fate.

"The third round of voting has ended. Two votes were cast this round, with one player abstaining. The player receiving the most votes in the third round is—"

"Meiren Chu, two votes. Due to a player's use of the Decisive Vote, Meiren Chu is eliminated."

Gu Mian took a few steps forward to stand beside Guo Jimei.

Guo Jimei looked up at him blankly. "It's over."

She then looked at Chu Changge in front of them.

Gu Mian saw Chu Changge freeze the instant Guo Jimei cast her vote. Then, a crisp CRACKING sound came from his body.

It was the same sound as when Li Wentao had died. Chu Changge's body began to distort, and finally, he collapsed to the ground.

Guo Jimei stared blankly at the collapsed Meiren Chu as the distant voice began to announce the final results:

"The third round of the game has ended. Two players were killed, two players committed suicide, one player died due to a rule violation, and one player was voted out..."

What?! Upon hearing this, Guo Jimei's eyes shot wide open.

Wasn't Li Yibai the only one who committed suicide?

Keke, Pan Yue, and Zhang Pingfan were clearly killed by the ghost! Why did it say only two players were killed by the ghost?!

And then, a chilling voice continued, echoing in her ears:

"The fourth round of the game begins. Two players remain: one Commoner and one ghost."

Then, she saw Gu Mian, who was beside her, look down and offer an apologetic smile. "Sorry, it's not over yet."

Chapter 402 - Coo Coo, the last - is gone _1

"Are you only coming out now that the grass on my grave is a meter high?"

Immediately after Gu Mian and Chu Changge exited the instance, they heard Fatty's long-unheard voice. He sounded as if the grass on his tombstone had already grown tall.

It was completely dark outside by now. Gu Mian guessed that the ticket booth's desk had likely been sullied by Fatty's drool.

"I waited for you for so long! Just a few hours felt like two months," Fatty said joyfully as he ran over to them.

He looked Gu Mian up and down with a cheerful expression, a stark contrast to the ticket seller behind the window, who looked as if he wanted to commit suicide on the spot.

Fatty happily touched Gu Mian's white coat. "Doctor, you made it out alive! It seems the ghost won."

Gu Mian nodded slightly.

The game had essentially ended without suspense after the third round of voting, when only one person and one ghost remained.

Apparently seeing no need to continue, the instance punished Guo Jimei directly after Chu Changge's death.

So Gu Mian watched as Keke, Chu Changge, and Guo Jimei died one after another. He emerged as the victorious survivor of the instance, even though he was the only one left in the end.

"Let's go back to the Spirit Car first," Fatty said, leading the way. "Doctor, I was quite worried about you. After all, in this instance, death might not only come from the ghost but also from the game rules... I was terrified that only Brother Chu would come back."

Gu Mian glanced at the puddle of drool on the nearby desk. So, you were so worried that you took a nap on the table?

As Fatty stepped out the door, he said, "This instance wasn't bad, quite a cause for celebration..."

But his words seemed to have jinxed it. Just as he finished speaking, an announcement appeared on the game panel.

How odd, Gu Mian thought as he looked at the announcement. I didn't do anything, right?

He hadn't even killed anyone. Not even Guo Jimei—she had been dealt with directly by the instance.

[ANNOUNCEMENT]

[Due to a loophole in the regular instance "Close Your Eyes (VIP Version)," allowing numerous "actors" to be present within the game, the instance will be shut down for immediate rectification. The reopening date is unknown.]

"Actors?" Fatty, of course, knew what this meant. It was a term often used in games, like when a spy from the opposing team infiltrates your team in a 5v5 game.

"I know Brother Chu can act, but who else was acting?"

Gu Mian coughed as he walked. "Let me think. 007, Yuan Qinghua, Keke, and Chu Changge... you four were definitely a team. And Fatty, you would have definitely been part of the acting troupe if you hadn't died in the first round."

Chu Changge said nothing, continuing to walk forward.

Fatty gave an awkward smile. "I did die too early... But how did the two of you ghosts and two civilians coordinate everything, especially with Yuan Qinghua being the real ghost?"

As they strolled forward, Gu Mian began to explain, "From the first round, Fatty, you were killed by Yuan Qinghua, right?"

Fatty nodded slightly. "She made me understand why so many people have to hold a pig down when they're slaughtering it—it fucking hurts."

Gu Mian continued, "Back then, the four-person team hadn't been formed yet. Yuan Qinghua was just killing indiscriminately."

Fatty sighed, full of regret. "I missed the chance to sacrifice myself for the Doctor. What a pity."

Gu Mian's forehead twitched as he continued, "Chu Changge, you were making moves from the start. I saw you standing on one of the buildings. Li Wentao happened to pass by a window of another building, so you used the school badge to disguise yourself as him, leading Pan Yue and Keke astray and causing an innocent civilian to be voted out in the first round.

"In the daytime of the second round, you tracked Yue Nu and saw her playing a video in a classroom, even deliberately appearing within camera range. Then you negotiated with 007 to have her kill Yue Nu and appear in the video, which led to 007 being voted out in the second round. I don't know why she agreed to such an unreasonable request.

"007's extra fourth vote was cast by herself. She voted herself out to ensure it didn't implicate me. Moreover, you and 007 had arranged her place of death, ensuring you could take Li Yibai there during the daytime in the third round, triggering his death.

"Furthermore, you took the watch Xu Xingcheng used to store his identity slip, so you knew long before anyone else that Xu Xingcheng was participating in the game, not Zhang Pingfan. But the others didn't know.

"Civilians can't kill other players, but civilians *can* kill non-players."

"So, you killed the non-player Zhang Pingfan and recorded a video, then had Keke show it to Guo Jimei to mislead her. I'm guessing you did it in the school's basement. That's why we saw you looking for something down there; you were searching for a suitable room to do the deed."

When Gu Mian reached this point, Fatty sucked in a sharp breath. "Brother Chu, your methods are that ruthless?"

Gu Mian continued, "In the final round, you used Yuan Qinghua to move Zhang Pingfan's corpse to the construction site. You had her kill two people nearby to avoid Guo Jimei suspecting Xu Xingcheng's identity, so you swapped Xu Xingcheng's corpse with Zhang Pingfan's."

At this, Chu Changge suddenly looked up. "You saw that?"

Gu Mian nodded. "I knew something was off when I saw Yuan Qinghua kill those two people."

In the last round, after inspecting the corpses of Yuan Qinghua and the others, Gu Mian had seemingly left the area. But he hadn't really left; he had gone into hiding to continue observing.

So, he saw Chu Changge drag Zhang Pingfan's body out from a nearby building and then drag Xu Xingcheng's body into it.

"However," Gu Mian resumed, "I'm not sure how you reached an agreement with Keke. During the second round, when everyone was looking for clues, Keke choosing to pair up with Li Yibai was also to make it convenient for you to act against Li Yibai, wasn't it? Plus, she was constantly preventing Guo Jimei from using the Prophecy Book."

Fatty was stunned, looking at Chu Changge with newfound awe in his eyes.

Chu Changge came to a halt.

They were almost at the Spirit Car.

Xiao Hong, in her red dress, was restlessly pressing her face against the rear window of the Spirit Car. Seeing them return, she bared her teeth in a grin.

Gu Mian heard Chu Changge speak slowly, "The reason I reached an agreement with Keke is that she needs something from you. She wants to tell you in person next time you meet."

Needs something from me?

Gu Mian remembered Keke's expression at her death. Willing to go to such lengths for a favor for a stranger... that request must be very difficult to fulfill.

He thought of the Hide and Seek instance where he had first met Keke. In that game, a female player named Ji Bie Li had tried to take advantage of him but ended up being strangled with a headphone cord.

As he thought, Gu Mian furrowed his brows. "I think she was also the one who killed Ji Bie Li back then."

Chu Changge nodded. "As for 007, you had saved her life before, so when we approached her, she agreed without hesitation."

After nodding, he turned to Gu Mian. "Gu Mian, you should have noticed by now how serious the situation has become.

"In this instance, Fatty, Keke, Yuan Qinghua, 007, and I all died. Only you managed a narrow victory.

"You must realize that this instance was specifically targeting you."

Gu Mian nodded slightly.

The fact that Guo Jimei became a player was proof. The instance went to the extent of turning an NPC into a player just so she could use special items. In the end, when Guo Jimei used the Prophecy Book, it almost led to his downfall.

Speaking of which, Gu Mian suddenly remembered something. He looked at Chu Changge. "Did you promise Yuan Qinghua something?"

Why else would Yuan Qinghua have said that before she died?

Chu Changge shook his head. "No."

What a dry answer.

Xiao Hong on the Spirit Car had been baring her teeth in a grin while waiting for them. For some reason, Gu Mian thought Fatty seemed somewhat afraid as he climbed back into the vehicle.

Chapter 403 - Rou Jia Mo and Paper Money 【Third update】 _1

After getting into the vehicle, Fatty clutched Gu Mian's clothes nervously. "So, Doctor, in the end, you were the only one who made it out of that Doctor instance alive."

Gu Mian nodded. "Not only that, but many of the players who wanted to cover for me ended up voting for themselves. For example, 007 got his own boyfriend killed. Then there was Yuan Qinghua, with whom I apparently had an ambiguous relationship; she used herself as a firecracker to take down two people with her. Also, Keke injured herself just to fulfill a minor request and then put on an Oscar-worthy performance. Even Chu Changge sneakily cast a vote for himself at the end." That explained how Chu Changge ended up with two votes.

Hearing this, Fatty nodded pensively. "From that perspective, among the six of us who entered the instance, Yue Nu really had it rough. She was the only one not on our side, and she died completely bewildered."

Gu Mian glanced at Fatty's small hand gripping his clothes. "Weren't you also bewildered when you died?"

Fatty choked for a moment, then said, "Looks like I can't die so early in the next instance. I should try to take an arrow for the Doctor or something."

Meanwhile, Yue Nu was also keeping a close eye on her game panel. The "Close Your Eyes" instance was quite special. Even though she had died in it, as long as the civilians won in the end, she would still receive the final reward. However, instead of a victory message, she received a notice about an instance overhaul.

She stared at the word "Actor" on the notice, her mind somewhat blank. "Could it be," she wondered aloud, "that one of us instance players is helping the ghosts? Who could it be?"

Chu Changge and Fatty suffered some losses upon their deaths in the instance. This included some Game Coins and one of Fatty's special items. The "Miniature Notebook" Fatty had snatched from Gu Mian was dropped when he died. It was an essential tool for games like Close Your Eyes, but now the instance had claimed it.

At this moment, Chu Changge's voice suddenly interjected, "Gu Mian, there are more and more anomalies in the game now. What are your plans moving forward?"

Gu Mian remembered Chu Changge asking him this very question a long time ago, but the situation hadn't been as pressing back then.

Gu Mian stroked his chin. "I'm thinking of catching Mr. Green again to ask about the situation..." As he spoke, he glanced at Xiao Hong. She seemed to have a good relationship with Mr. Green, but she never spoke, and the Mind Amplifier on her chest always emitted some irrelevant sounds, making it impossible to have a serious conversation with her.

At this point, Fatty had already started preparing the bedding.

This time, Gu Mian had obtained a rather special item from the instance—

****Ghost Card****

Description: An Identity Plate from the Close Your Eyes game, a symbol of the victor.

Function: Between 20:00 and 3:00 the next day, the holder of this Identity Plate will have their presence greatly reduced and can roam freely in the darkness of night.

It truly is a great tool for pretending to be a ghost and scaring people. Of course, it would also be good for scaring actual ghosts too.

As Gu Mian thought this, he slipped it into Fatty's pocket. "This should probably ensure you're not the first to die in the next instance."

Fatty sniffed. "What an absolutely amazing Doctor."

Hearing Fatty's sniffles reminded Gu Mian of Coach Che. "I ran into Coach Che in this instance. Do you remember him? The one whose three Spirit Cars I wrecked in the driving license instance."

Fatty nodded. "I remember it vividly. He was in this instance too?"

"He said he was there to collate data. However, he knew about NPCs becoming players and advised me to leave the instance quickly. Apparently, he'd also worked as a cameraman on a dating show before. I always have a feeling that these NPCs know something they can't reveal. If only they would crack under severe interrogation."

There was also the matter of Yuan Qinghua; Gu Mian honestly couldn't recall promising her anything. It was quite a headache.

"Doctor, that idea of yours is too dangerous," Fatty said, having finished preparing the beds and placing hot water bags in them. "It's freezing outside. Let's get under the covers first."

Gu Mian usually slept in the tent on the car roof, but with an infectious disease currently rampant in the real world, it was no longer convenient for him to sleep there. As Gu Mian pondered how to conduct harsh interrogations, he slipped under the covers and happily closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, Fatty was gone. Xiao Hong, on the other hand, was still plastered to the rear window, looking cheerfully oblivious. Gu Mian genuinely felt it was unfair to Xiao Hong, a ghost, to be cooped up in the Spirit Car all day. Then again, letting her out to scare people didn't seem like a good idea either...

At that moment, Chu Changge's voice came from the front passenger seat, "He went to buy food."

Gu Mian had initially worried that Fatty might get robbed going out alone. But not long after, he saw Fatty trotting back with a bag of food. He had worn a barrier mask when he went out.

The moment Fatty got into the car, he pulled two warm, meaty buns from his large cloth bag and handed them to Gu Mian. "I can't believe the supermarket sells this kind of stuff in the morning! Too bad you need a ticket to get in. Going every day would be too extravagant."

Gu Mian took one and bit into it. The rich aroma filled his mouth; it felt like ages since he'd eaten anything like it.

At this time, Fatty's expression suddenly turned grave as he said, "I've noticed there are fewer and fewer people outside now. They must all be scared of the infectious disease and hiding at home."

Chu Changge was still studying a map. Before entering this instance, he had drawn one indicating the pandemic's severity in different areas. He pointed to the map. "For safety, let's first take the route with the lowest population density out of the city, and then avoid urban areas as we travel. Have you two thought about where you want to go?"

Gu Mian had never planned to tour the world, so he hadn't made any travel plans. Fatty was even more clueless about a destination.

However, their aimless journey was soon interrupted. Gu Mian hadn't expected to run into 007 by chance. By then, they had already left the densely populated city and arrived in a relatively sparsely populated area. It seemed many people had the same idea; Gu Mian often saw groups of people wandering in desolate places.

The day they met 007 was not a particularly auspicious one; it happened to be the Qingming Festival. So, when Fatty heard 007 say he was going to visit his parents that day, he instinctively asked, "Should we buy a couple of stacks of joss paper to take with us?"

Chapter 404 - Dreaming Back to the Qing Dynasty_1

Gu Mian never expected to run into 007 on this auspicious day, and of all places, in front of two large, grey-black buildings.

This bizarre place was remarkably familiar; Gu Mian had spotted it from a great distance. Chu Change also noticed it.

Fatty, on the other hand, had no idea what was so familiar about these two buildings. It was only after Gu Mian had parked the Spirit Car beneath them that he slowly realized and asked, "Doctor, are we planning to spend the night here?"

One couldn't blame him. Fatty hadn't seen the exteriors of these two buildings before, as he was the first one to die in the 'Close Your Eyes' instance.

That's right; the two buildings in front of the Spirit Car now eerily matched the two buildings from Gu Mian's memory of the 'Close Your Eyes' instance. They were almost exactly the same. Even the person standing in front of the buildings was disturbingly familiar.

It was nighttime. Gu Mian saw a tiny silhouette standing under the massive moon, looking upwards, motionless.

On closer inspection, it turned out to be 007.

007, it seemed, had also noticed the arrival of the Spirit Car. The disguise on Gu Mian's Spirit Car wasn't particularly elaborate; therefore, anyone who had seen it before could easily recognize its make. She evidently recognized it. 007 retreated a few steps, as if wanting to move away from the eerie Spirit Car that had appeared on the night of the Qingming Festival. But then, as if noticing Gu Mian inside the vehicle, she paused.

By now, Gu Mian had already stopped the car and stepped out onto the pavement with his Saw.

Watching Gu Mian exit the vehicle, 007 stared at them for a few seconds and then walked over, saying, "What a coincidence, running into you guys again."

Gu Mian also glanced down at 007. "This is our third meeting, isn't it? Though the second time was just a short while ago."

Actually, this is my first time seeing 007 in the real world, he thought, and the circumstances are oddly fitting.

He looked up at the two buildings in front of him. The two grey-black structures looked incredibly oppressive in the darkness, separated by an electric fence in the middle.

This familiar scene, this familiar face... isn't this the very place where we were on the first night in the 'Close Your Eyes' instance? Gu Mian almost suspected he had been transported back into the 'Close Your Eyes' instance. What on earth is happening?

By now, Chu Changge and Fatty had also exited the Spirit Car. Chu Changge was looking up at the two buildings.

Meanwhile, Fatty frowned, saying, "Why does this place feel so... creepy? Like I could just die at any second."

Fatty's intuition was spot on; he had indeed died at this place the last time.

007 clearly wasn't skilled at making small talk, especially during the festive Qingming Festival. She couldn't exactly ask, "Are your ancestors resting well?" or anything of the sort.

She didn't say anything else but jumped straight to the point, "I didn't expect to run into you guys here."

Gu Mian wasn't one for small talk either. He didn't waste words on this peculiar woman who could literally tear the skin off her own arm. He asked, "Have you been standing here for a long time?"

007 frowned. "Actually, I was on my way home to see my parents..."

Fatty, remembering it was a holiday, suddenly had a lapse in judgment and blurted out, "Would you like to buy some joss paper to take back with you?"

007 choked. "No... they're still... alive."

Hearing this, Fatty blinked, taken aback, then awkwardly pulled his head back. "Oh, my bad."

007 shook her head slightly. "It's okay. I was on my way, but I passed by this place in the afternoon. It was just too familiar; I couldn't help but notice."

At this point, Chu Changge also suddenly spoke up, "Indeed, it's exactly the same."

Fatty was somewhat perplexed. "What do you mean, 'exactly the same'?"

Gu Mian turned on his flashlight, pointing it at one of the buildings. "Fatty, you died early on, so you probably don't know where we spent the first night in the previous instance. Let me tell you, it was in this building."

Hearing this, Fatty's scalp tingled. "What? How could that be?!"

Gu Mian shone the flashlight on the dark building. "I didn't expect to find a building here that's exactly like the one in the instance... 007, did you go inside and check?"

007 nodded slightly. "I went in for a look this afternoon. The layout inside is almost the same as in the instance." As she spoke, she glanced at Fatty. "But there were no bodies."

Fatty's scalp prickled, and a chill ran down his spine. "Since you both say so... could it be that our instances are held in the real world?"

Looking at the two buildings, Chu Changge shook his head slightly. "I'm afraid not. The terrain around these two buildings is a bit different from what was in the instance. Plus, if we had died in the real world, we wouldn't have been resurrected."

Gu Mian agreed with Chu Changge. "Moreover, the worldviews of some instances are completely inconsistent with the real world."

"For instance, the Slaughter instance."

"Or the Fairy Tale City instance."

007 sighed. "Ever since the Fairy Tale City instance, I've felt that this game was somewhat unusual. And now, I've encountered a building identical to one from an instance."

Why would buildings from instances appear in the real world? Could it be that this global game was designed using the real world as a blueprint?

Gu Mian also scratched his chin. "I suspect that if we look into it further, we might uncover even more similarities. For instance, the school not far from these two buildings."

At this point, Fatty suddenly interjected from behind Gu Mian, "Doctor, I have a thought. Do you think the game's instances might be adaptations of real-world events? If you think about it, we've experienced several instances that felt very much like real events."

Indeed, there were a few instances that were very down-to-earth. But there were also many that were completely impossible within this world's framework.

At this point, Chu Changge turned his head. "We could go take a look nearby, especially for a school."

That's right. Gu Mian turned. In the last instance, they had spent most of their time in the school, and its basement seemed to hold quite a few mysteries.

Hearing this, 007 swiftly grabbed Fatty, who was nearest to her, her expression tense. "We can't go! I checked the map earlier. There is indeed a school nearby..."

Gu Mian glanced at Fatty, who had been grabbed by 007.

She continued, "But the area around the school is densely populated. The current infectious disease outbreak is severe, especially in crowded places. Going there could be dangerous."

Gu Mian wasn't worried about that, though. They had virus neutralizers in the Spirit Car, so driving in should be fine. Besides, they could wear their specialized masks inside.

At this point, Fatty patted 007 on the shoulder in a token gesture of comfort. "Don't worry, we've got the Doctor! Don't you remember who severed your nerves in the instance last time?"

007: "... " The memory was still painfully fresh.

Before leaving, Gu Mian turned back to ask 007, "Won't you come with us? We might uncover unprecedented secrets about the instances."

As expected, 007 couldn't resist temptation. She eagerly let Gu Mian tempt her into the Spirit Car.

It was only when the Spirit Car arrived in front of the school that 007 was overcome with regret.

Gu Mian heard her repeatedly murmuring from the backseat, "I'm so stupid, really..."

Ignoring 007, who was berating herself, Gu Mian used the Spirit Car's headlights to look at the school entrance. Four large characters were carved on it—"Wensong College".

Gu Mian remembered the school in the instance was called "Songwen Academy"; it had likely been altered.

Then, amidst 007's self-recriminating mutters of, "I'm so stupid, really..." he drove the Spirit Car onto the school grounds.

Chapter 405 - The Advancing Yuan Qinghua _1

Such an incident occurring on Earth would naturally lead to the suspension of classes at the school.

The somewhat dilapidated school was completely deserted, with the gleaming car lights sparingly livening up the campus.

Gu Mian looked around in the light.

The place indeed resembled the layout in the instance.

Fatty leaned against the car window, looking outside, "I died too early, I don't remember what the school looked like in the instance, do you guys remember?"

007 looked out the window and took a sharp breath, "Almost the same..."

The subtle overlap between the instance and the real world—was it a premonition of sorts?

"Maybe we can really find some secrets about this global game here."

As she spoke, she subconsciously glanced at Xiao Hong, who had been pressed against the rear window with the back of her head facing 007.

When she first got into the car, she had been startled by this long-haired figure in red, as her appearance was eerily similar to the female ghost in red in the instance.

But Fatty quickly reassured her, saying she was a friend.

However, this friend didn't seem quite right, having kept her face pressed against the rear car window, making it impossible for 007 to see her face throughout the journey.

In actuality, it was Gu Mian who had pressed Xiao Hong's head against the window, fearing that if Xiao Hong faced 007 directly, it would cause a panic.

The Spirit Car slowly advanced through the school grounds, the beams of light cutting through the darkness, heading deeper.

Fatty, slightly dazed, looked outside, "If everything that happens in the instance is a replica of past events, will we someday encounter our own past?"

Chu Changge interrupted his sentimental musings, "Right now, we still can't determine whether there's a direct relationship between the instance and reality."

By this time, Gu Mian had brought the Spirit Car to a slow halt.

He remembered that there was a basement entrance nearby.

After stopping the car, Gu Mian turned around to look at the others, "I remember the entrance to the basement is near here. Do you want to go take a look?"

Fatty, who died too early and was clueless about everything, obediently nodded even in the darkness, "Wherever you go, Doctor, I'll go."

Chu Changge kept his mouth shut; Gu Mian took it as a silent agreement.

007 pondered for a few seconds and nodded as well, "We might as well, since we are already here..." As she spoke, she turned to look at Xiao Hong in the back of the Spirit Car, "Is she not coming with us?"

Gu Mian gave a small smile, "She's quite timid. Let's just let her stay here by herself."

007 let out a breath. Wouldn't staying here alone be even more terrifying?

Worth mentioning is that there actually was a basement underneath Wensong College.

The structure of the basement was similar to the one in the instance.

And in one of the musty classrooms, Gu Mian found a vintage photograph.

It was the same one that Chu Changge found in the instance. The photo from that instance couldn't be taken out, but unexpectedly, they found the same one in the real world.

There were twelve people in the photo, six males and six females.

In this picture, the face of that girl was not blurred; it was the brightly smiling Yuan Qinghua.

Gu Mian turned the photo over. A date was printed on the back.

June 12, 2013.

The date was exactly the same as the one on the photo from the instance.

Aside from this photo, they did not find any other useful items.

When Gu Mian and the others returned to the Spirit Car, it was already 3:00 a.m.

007 looked at the time and sighed, "Ever since experiencing the 'Close Your Eyes' instance, I feel uneasy every time it hits 3:00 a.m."

Gu Mian understood 007's feelings all too well; she herself had been voted out at 3:00 a.m.

Although he hadn't seen 007's dying moments, he had seen others die from being voted out. It was really quite painful. If a description of that method of death were written in a web novel, it would likely get censored.

Speaking of which, 007 looked at Gu Mian in the dark. "Actually, I'm pretty envious of you, having so many friends to help you... I still don't understand why they insist on you winning, but thankfully we're on the same team. Otherwise, I shudder to think how I'd be sabotaged."

After finishing, 007 sat in the car deep in thought, probably reminiscing about Yue Nu, who was sabotaged and died.

Gu Mian coughed a few times.

If he had lost, he would truly have died, but 007 was unaware of this.

At this point, Fatty had leaned close to Gu Mian. "Doctor, are you saying this photograph was in the instance too?"

"Yes," Gu Mian nodded and pointed. "This is Yuan Qinghua, the only real ghost in the instance. Her face was blurred in the photo from that instance."

Fatty had died too early and did not even get a glimpse of Yuan Qinghua before his death.

So Gu Mian had to point her out to him.

It appeared Yuan Qinghua did exist in the real world...

Gu Mian frowned as he thought, "Could the game really be collecting ghosts from the real world to put them into an instance? And then create a similar instance map?"

At this point, Fatty, who was nearby, spoke up, "Doctor, if what you say is true, and dead people become ghosts and all flock to the instance... wouldn't that make the instance hell?"

"Let's go to the office," Gu Mian said, putting his hand on the steering wheel. "Chu Changge, do you remember that office where Yuan Qinghua took us to steal files? I want to see if there are any files on Guo Jimei and Li Yibai."

Chu Changge silently nodded.

Gu Mian moved quickly and had a sharp memory. He swiftly led them to the office and, with a chainsaw, quickly sawed open the fragile lock.

The similarity between the instance and reality was truly uncanny!

Even the placement of the files was exactly the same.

It didn't take long for Gu Mian and the others to find a stack of files, and they began to rapidly flip through them.

Unfortunately, throughout the entire stack of files, they couldn't find any on Li Yibai or Guo Jimei, but they did come across the familiar name "Yuan Qinghua."

However, Yuan Qinghua's file was from 2013, and next to her name, two words had been written in red pen: "Deceased."

Fatty compared the photo he had found in the basement with the portrait photo in her file. "They're exactly the same."

Yuan Qinghua... she had indeed existed and had already died in 2013.

Then how did she end up in the instance? Are ghosts from the real world really pulled into instances?

Gu Mian closed the file, preparing to take all the records pertaining to Yuan Qinghua's class with him.

Just then, a flashlight beam illuminated the open office doorway, followed by a loud shout, "Who are you?"

Fatty was so startled his hand trembled, and he immediately looked towards the door.

A middle-aged man, already half-bald, stood at the door glaring angrily, his glasses reflecting an eerie gleam.

Looking at his demeanor... and that pitifully sparse hair... he must be a teacher, right?

Gu Mian was a practiced liar, especially when the situation called for it. He passed the file in his hand to Fatty beside him. "We're a student's parents. We just rushed over from out of town but couldn't find our child, so we thought we'd look through the office files."

The middle-aged man stood at the door, looking suspiciously at the group, then noticed they were indeed only flipping through files.

He looked at the three men and one woman in front of him and, adopting a serious tone, asked, "Who are you looking for?"

Gu Mian hesitated slightly, then said, "Yuan Qinghua."

The teacher's eyes immediately widened, as if he recalled something. "But she... she died a long time ago!"

Gu Mian squinted his eyes.

Not only was Yuan Qinghua recorded in the files, but even an older teacher remembered her.

It seemed there was some subtle connection between the instance and reality.

Just then, the balding teacher noticed the group photo of twelve people in Fatty's hand. He walked over and took a look. "Yes, Yuan Qinghua is in this... Huh? And Wang Yushu?"

Wang Yushu?

Gu Mian quickly picked up the name, "Who is he?"

Chapter 406 - New Copy of Love 【Three changes】_1

"A great writer, a great man of letters. He used to be in the same class as Yuan Qinghua."

The teacher looked with a touch of wistfulness at the boy in the upper left corner of the photo.

Following his gaze, Gu Mian saw a skinny boy wearing glasses. He looked extremely shy; even his smile for the camera was bashful.

"When I was teaching him, I thought he was unremarkable. His grades weren't good, and he had such a timid personality. But unexpectedly, after graduation, one of his books made him famous, and he became a great writer. He wrote many bestsellers, and his classmates all envied him... His books should still be in the Central Library, but it's a pity the library is closed now..."

"However, he also died later... Writers, well, they're always prone to melancholy. He was later found dead in his own room."

At this, the teacher fell silent, seemingly unwilling to say more.

Even 007 was confused now.

Buildings identical to those in the instance had appeared in the real world, and the NPCs in the instance were people who had once existed in the real world. However, only Yuan Qinghua and Wang Yushu from the photo had truly existed.

There was no record of people like Li Yibai, Guo Jimei, and Pan Yue in the files. It was truly puzzling.

At this point, the teacher spoke again, "The people you're looking for are all gone. Hurry up and leave, hurry up and leave."

Fatty looked at him curiously. "You're a teacher, right? Why would you come here in the middle of the night?"

The bald-headed teacher waved his hand and said, "We still have some out-of-town students who haven't been picked up by their parents. They're all in the dormitory, and I'm responsible for looking after them... I saw a car approaching from a long way off and thought you were here to pick up students. I didn't expect you to come into the office..."

Gu Mian and the others had no choice but to leave the office and return to the Spirit Car.

By the time they returned to the Spirit Car, it was already five o'clock. Xiao Hong still had her face pressed against the rear window, prompting 007 to glance at her a few more times.

Just then, Fatty sneakily pulled a roll of files from his clothes. "Doctor, I swiped it!"

Gu Mian took the files from Fatty. "Great job."

Fatty scratched his head and chuckled.

007 looked at Fatty and saw the corner of a Ghost Card when he pulled out the files.

She certainly recognized it; it was the prize for the ghost faction's victory in the previous instance, a life-saving tool.

But Gu Mian had given it to Fatty.

007 was slightly taken aback, then said, "You two are really close, huh."

Fatty looked over, a little puzzled. "By the way, I don't see anyone with you. Don't you have any friends with you?"

Hearing this, 007 paused for a moment before replying, "No..."

Meanwhile, Gu Mian had already finished looking through Wang Yushu's file. The student file only contained basic information like name and gender; aside from the home address, there was nothing particularly noteworthy.

Gu Mian decided to check Wang Yushu's home address first.

Although Wang Yushu had been dead for a long time, his house might have been sold, or perhaps his parents were living there.

By now, 007 had also looked over Wang Yushu's information. Her head drooped as she said, "Let's hope we can find some clues related to this Wang Yushu."

Gu Mian glanced back at 007 and saw that she was already drowsy.

"How long has it been since you slept?" Gu Mian asked, puzzled.

Someone strengthened by instances would never get this tired from just one sleepless night.

Hearing Gu Mian's voice, 007 startled awake. She shook her head slightly and said, "More than three days, I think... I wanted to spend more time traveling, so I could see my parents sooner."

As she spoke, her head drooped again.

Seeing this, Gu Mian asked, "Where's your home?"

007 kept her head down and spoke softly, "My home is in Yingchuan... When this game started, I was working a temporary job away from home. I've been on the road ever since it began. But because transportation methods were unavailable, I had to walk, which was very slow. Sometimes I'd ride a bicycle, but there weren't many unlocked ones by the roadside..."

Her voice was very soft, as if she could fall asleep at any moment.

Walking from here to Yingchuan would probably take several more months.

Gu Mian rubbed his chin. "I'll take you. Driving, even with stops, it should only take about seven days to get there."

"Ah," 007 looked up, suddenly alert. "Won't that delay you guys?"

Fatty came over and patted her shoulder. "Nope. We were originally just a directionless trio..."

As he said this, his gaze drifted to Xiao Hong at the very back. "...A quartet now."

Xiao Hong was still pressed against the rear glass, seemingly asleep, though everyone knew ghosts didn't need to sleep.

Immediately after, Gu Mian saw 007 perk up and praise him effusively, "You're such a good person."

Gu Mian: "..."

And just then, a massive library suddenly entered Gu Mian's line of sight.

The cylindrical building stood starkly in the night. On its front, Gu Mian saw five large characters: "Central Library."

At that moment, Gu Mian slammed on the brakes. Fatty, whose head slammed into the back of the driver's seat, clutched his head and looked up. "Doctor, what are you doing?!"

Gu Mian looked at the library right beside them. "Why don't we go in and refine our souls a bit?"

Fatty had a bewildered expression.

Gu Mian, of course, wasn't going in to idly read leisure books because he had nothing better to do.

He raised his chainsaw, sawed open the main entrance of the Central Library, and barged in. "Let's find this Wang Yushu's great work."

The huge library was pitch black inside, making it inconvenient to search for anything.

Fatty fumbled for and found a card slot by the main door, inserted an electricity card, and then flipped the light switch.

The entire library instantly lit up.

Bookshelves lined the walls of the extremely spacious library, and a massive square shelving unit, also laden with numerous books, stood in the center.

007 looked at the brightly lit library and raised her eyebrows. "So this is how you guys use electricity? I'm usually very reluctant to waste even a little."

She was very frugal with her Game Coins, unwilling to waste even the smallest amount.

Fatty chuckled. "This is also to make things easier for the Doctor..."

007 couldn't bring herself to agree. She took a couple of steps forward and started searching for Wang Yushu's books, beginning near the entrance.

Gu Mian had initially worried that Wang Yushu might have used a pen name or something similar, but before long, a book bearing the three characters "Wang Yushu" caught his eye.

The book was placed very high up. Gu Mian had no patience to go drag a ladder from some obscure corner, so he directly had Fatty, who was beside him, give him a boost to get the book.

Soon, Gu Mian had a book about three centimeters thick in his hand.

He looked at the cover and saw four large characters written on it: "Second World."

It turned out Gu Mian's luck was always astonishingly good.

Just as he was about to reach out and open the book's cover, the game panel simultaneously appeared for everyone present.

It was a special instance!

Chapter 407 - Gu Mian and His Three Useless Teammates _1

[[Triggered special instance 'Angel Redemption']]

Angel Redemption?

This name sounds quite spiritual.

Gu Mian had to admit that he was indeed proficient in the art of redemption. This instance seems to be well chosen for him.

At this time, 007, standing next to him, stared at the panel and said, "This is my first time encountering a special instance. I've heard it's quite challenging..."

Fatty mumbled from the side, "I'm different. Right after encountering the Doctor, the first instance I matched with was a special one."

Hearing this, 007 looked over. "That unlucky?"

Just then, more words popped up on the panel.

[Instance Participants: 4 people]

Four people...

Seeing this, 007 subconsciously counted the people present—exactly four. "So, only the people here can enter the special instance?"

"No," Fatty shook his head vigorously. "It wasn't like this before!"

[In this special instance, the death protection mechanism will be turned off]

Reading this, Gu Mian paused.

Protection mechanism off?

The only protection mechanism in this game is that if you die in an instance, you won't die in real life. But now it says the protection mechanism will be shut down...

Fatty, beside him, was already exclaiming, "What the hell!"

It felt like being struck by lightning.

Gu Mian remembered Fatty exclaiming the exact same thing the first time they matched with a special instance after meeting him.

But back then, Fatty's tone was, at most, shocked. This time, it was pure terror.

After all, the possibility of actual death in an instance was something... Gu Mian had grown accustomed to.

But when it happened to others, they couldn't remain as calm as him.

Fatty was practically jumping up and down. Even 007 looked shocked. "When it says the death protection mechanism will be turned off... is it what I think it means?"

Gu Mian nodded. "Presumably so."

He was worried about Fatty's well-being while thinking, This special instance is rather strange. It actively shut off the protection mechanism, yet no instance mission has been dispatched...

And just as he was thinking this, the next line of text finally appeared.

[Players will enter the instance in batches. Please be patient.]

[First player to enter the instance: Doctor]

It was the familiar green font color. That forgiving color almost blinded Gu Mian's eyes.

But before he could even complain about why the instance mission hadn't appeared on the page yet, he vanished from where he stood.

The book in his hand fell to the ground with a THUD.

Fatty, bewildered, stared at the spot where Gu Mian had disappeared. "The instance mission hasn't appeared yet, right? And the Doctor is already gone?"

Three people and their panels remained. Only Gu Mian had disappeared.

007 and Fatty looked at each other, then turned to Chu Changge as if hoping he would offer some explanation.

At this moment, Chu Changge also turned his head to look at Fatty. "This instance is targeting us."

"Targeting... us?" Fatty shivered. "So, is this what they call 'to catch the thieves, first catch the pawns'?"

Exactly. Gu Mian wasn't protected by the death protection mechanism to begin with; this rule was irrelevant to him.

But for the remaining people...

An eerie atmosphere spread among the three of them.

007 didn't quite understand why Fatty would say something like "to catch the thieves, first catch the pawns," but she understood that their situation was critical.

Fatty opened his mouth. "Although I don't really want to be a burden, in this situation, wouldn't it be safer to stick close to the Doctor?"

Chu Changge looked at his panel. "Why do you think this instance is having us enter in batches?"

To separate them.

There's no need to separate everyone; just separating Gu Mian from them would suffice.

Sure enough, the next line on their game panels read—

[Second batch to enter the instance: Meiren Chu, Fat Kid Surnamed Wang, 007]

Before Fatty could utter another sound, the three of them also disappeared from the spot.

「The library was brightly illuminated, with only an electrical card left alone in the slot.」

The surroundings suddenly darkened. The wooden door, gently pushed by the wind, made a CREAKING sound. On the table, an open notebook rustled as the wind flipped its pages.

The sky outside was orange. It was late evening.

An ancient pendulum clock swung back and forth, indicating it was six o'clock in the evening.

Fatty's head felt a bit groggy. The heavy smell of wood shavings, mixed with the scent of paper books that had been gathering dust for years, assaulted his nostrils.

He lifted his head and looked around. He was completely alone.

This appeared to be a bookstore. Old wooden bookshelves were piled with miscellaneous books, looking as if they might collapse at any moment. Fatty had no doubt that if he so much as leaned lightly against one, a bookshelf possibly older than himself would immediately fall apart.

In front of him was an old, cracked desk. On its right corner sat a pen holder with a few pens in it. Beside the pen holder was a desktop telephone.

Just as he was staring at the telephone, wondering about it, a strange voice suddenly reached his ears.

"Hello, I'm here to return a book."

Fatty turned his head to look.

A tall woman had appeared at the entrance at some unknown point.

She was tall and gaunt, her head almost touching the doorframe. Her face was withered and pallid. She held out a black book towards him, its cover hidden from view.

The woman wore a tattered garment that resembled a ragged sack, yet it was surprisingly pristine white, creating an unsettling contrast.

The setting sun stretched her shadow long, making it look like a monster sprawling across the bookstore floor.

"Okay, okay..." Seeing the woman standing motionless at the entrance, Fatty hesitated for a moment before getting up and walking over to take the book.

「Meanwhile, Gu Mian found himself in a small, twenty-square-meter dark room.」

The room was truly bare, with not even a window, as if they were afraid he might escape through some nook or cranny.

Gu Mian had tried using a chainsaw to cut through the wall, but it was useless.

He didn't know how thick the room's walls were. After digging for more than two meters without finding an exit, he had no choice but to give up.

Fortunately, this dilapidated room had one saving grace—an entertainment facility: a computer.

A computer that could play games even without an internet connection.

Gu Mian was already sitting in front of the computer, operating it. "This crappy game is alright, except it lags like hell when saving."

When the game started, a line of text appeared on the screen:

[You can leave the instance after completing the game]

Seeing this line, Gu Mian immediately sat down and started playing. He quickly figured out the game's mechanics.

Similar to many horror games, this one was played from a first-person perspective. The player explored a creepy location, with a health bar in the top-left corner of the screen. When the health bar depleted, it meant death.

Fortunately, it had a save function. However, like many games, one had to reach specific save points to save progress, and there were several such points on the game map.

It's just like in the real world, where you need to find a ticket booth to enter an instance.

After dying, the player character would respawn at the last saved location.

The game's premise was that the player had fallen from a cliff and suffered amnesia...

Although Gu Mian had no idea why the player would climb a cliff, or how they survived the fall, now wasn't the time to complain about such things.

Right now, he should be bravely charging out of this small dark room to save his teammates, who were probably scared to tears.

Unfortunately, Gu Mian had no idea where the other three were.

As he mused over this, he saw the words "You have successfully saved" pop up on the screen.

Each save point only had five save slots. Exceeding five saves would probably mean overwriting earlier ones.

Chapter 408 - The Instance You are in is less than 100 Meters_1

Playing first-person horror games for extended periods always left one feeling dizzy.

Fortunately, it was still dusk in the game, so the light was somewhat brighter.

At that moment, Gu Mian was controlling the protagonist, who was standing on a dilapidated street.

The location was a village by a cliff. The village was massive, with a style somewhat resembling Western medieval aesthetics.

Half-collapsed buildings were everywhere, their ruin possessing a strange artistic quality.

The village looked like it had been abandoned for many years, completely devoid of people.

Gu Mian explored the terrain, controlling his character while murmuring to himself, Perhaps, like me, the others have also entered a small, dark room and are controlling their game characters?

Or, to take the thought a step further...

Gu Mian stared at the computer screen in front of him.

Since it was a first-person perspective, only a desolate street was visible ahead.

Perhaps they've also become characters in the game? If they turned into ghosts, that could be a real problem...

Meanwhile, Fatty was anxiously pacing back and forth in his bookstore.

He realized he couldn't leave the dilapidated building at all; an invisible barrier blocked his way, preventing him from taking a single step outside.

"Unheard of! Unseen!" Fatty could only lean against the main door, watching helplessly as the sky outside gradually darkened.

The world outside was so vast, so free, yet he couldn't take a single step into it!

Fatty was so agitated he wanted to curse. What kind of instance traps a player in a dilapidated building with no way out?

Recalling that the instance's death protection mechanism had disappeared, he grew even more anxious. I wonder how Doctor and the others are doing...

Fatty had already switched on the pendant lamp. It was constantly swayed by the wind from outside, its movement making Fatty's heart flutter with unease.

He looked at the desktop telephone on the table. Though it was there, it had no numbers on it, and even pressing the redial button yielded nothing.

But there has to be a way to leave this place, right?

With this thought, Fatty turned his gaze to the old bookshelves in front of him.

Why not start by checking these books? Maybe one of them contains a spell to leave this wretched place.

As he thought about this, he took a few steps toward the bookshelves.

But just then, a familiar and eerie voice suddenly came from behind him, "Hello, I'm here to return a book."

Fatty's neck stiffened as he slowly turned his head to look at the main door.

There, in front of the wide-open door, a woman stood. He didn't know when she had appeared.

Her face was wan and sallow, her figure emaciated. She held a book in her gaunt hand, extending it toward him.

The scene eerily overlapped with what he had witnessed not long before.

If the sky outside hadn't already darkened, Fatty would have almost suspected he had traveled back in time.

His body stiffened, an unnatural expression on his face as he looked at the woman. "I remember you... you were here just a moment ago?"

The woman didn't answer, still extending her withered hand. Fatty, however, didn't dare to go forward and take the book.

He leaned against the bookshelf behind him, warily watching the person before him.

For a moment, neither of them moved, standing rooted to the spot.

But the silence didn't last long. A few seconds later, that eerie and shrill voice once again issued from the woman's throat.

"I'm here to return a book!"

"I'm here to return a book!"

"I'm here to return a book!"

Her body contorted wildly as if she would burst into the room at any second.

Startled, Fatty rushed forward and snatched the book from the woman's hand.

Once he took the book from her hand, the woman stopped. Fatty watched her turn mechanically and walk off into the darkness.

"Shit!" he shivered, watching the woman's retreating figure. "This place is so damn creepy."

Why is this person repeating the same thing over and over...

Just as Fatty was swallowing hard and staring in the direction where the woman had vanished, the telephone on the table suddenly rang.

He turned his head in shock.

Who would call him in this instance?

The ringing of the telephone sounded exceptionally chilling in the dark night. Without much hesitation, Fatty quickly strode forward and answered it.

Then, a familiar voice emerged from the receiver, "This is Chu Changge."

Hearing this familiar voice, Fatty's eyes instantly welled with tears. "Brother Chu, where are you now?"

"I think we're all in the same situation. I'm trapped in a bookstore and can't get out. I found two unmarked phone numbers on a bookshelf. The first person who answered my call was 007; she's also stuck in a bookstore and can't get out."

Hearing this, Fatty nodded, even though he knew Chu Changge couldn't see him. "I'm in a bookstore too, and I can't get out at all. Plus, there's this crazy woman who keeps coming to return a book."

Chu Changge paused on the other end, then asked, "Did she say this—"

"Hello, I'm here to return a book."

The eerie tone burrowed into Fatty's ears, the sound particularly bone-chilling in the cold night.

He slowly twisted his neck to look behind him. Indeed, the voice was coming from right behind his head.

An emaciated woman stood at the door, staring blankly ahead. Her withered hand was raised, holding a black book.

"Hello, I'm here to return a book."

Fatty heard her say it again.

The top right corner of the screen displayed the time: 7:30 PM. The sky in the game had completely darkened.

Gu Mian had used the preceding time to sneak into a few buildings, searching for game clues. Despite the village being deserted, there were still quite a few good items to be found.

Gu Mian had found a lighter and a page torn from some unknown book.

He had also saved the game a few times along the way.

At this moment, Gu Mian was using the lighter—an in-game item—to illuminate the white paper in his hand. It was clear the publisher of this book had been quite generous, as only a single line was printed in the center of the page—

"May the Angels forgive all sins."

Gu Mian stared at this line of text. Speaking of which, the vibe of this instance seems a bit like the 'Slaughter' game. I wonder if there will be some deeply moving story at the end.

Of course, whether there's a story or not isn't very important. I remember there seemed to be an Evil God Statue in the 'Slaughter' instance.

He looked at the words on the paper on the screen and said aloud, It's so unfair. Even the game character has an inventory, but I don't.

After night fell, the screen's clarity visibly diminished.

It had to be said, the game was incredibly realistic. The dry grass on the thatched roofs and the tattered cloth snagged on fences swayed in the wind. The uneven dirt road kicked up dust. Although he couldn't hear any sound, Gu Mian felt as if a gust of wind was truly rushing towards his face.

It was worth mentioning that so far, not a single ghost or monster had appeared in the instance, even during the incredibly eerie night.

If the others are really in this game, they should be quite safe in an environment devoid of ghosts or monsters.

Gu Mian quickly retracted this naive thought, because he saw, in the darkness not far away, a tall monster dragging iron chains, slowly heading in his direction.

Gu Mian looked at his inventory: a lighter and a piece of paper. There seemed to be nothing that could compare to a chainsaw.

He quickly turned tail and fled. I take back what I just said! They'd be safer if they aren't in this game... But where on earth are they?!

Meanwhile, Fatty had also found two phone numbers on his bookshelf. By now, he had already finished his conversation with Chu Changge and was currently talking to 007.

"Three times! That woman has come three times now! Each time, it's the same sentence, the same action. Why does she keep repeating the same thing so many times?"

On the other end, 007 was silent for a moment. "That woman has visited me twice too, repeating the same thing both times: returning a book... Also, I just tried to use a special item to leave the bookstore, but I couldn't use it."

Fatty was slightly taken aback. "Is this place restricting our use of special items?"

"No," 007's low voice came through. "It's not a restriction; they're simply unusable."

She paused here, seemingly considering how to explain. "I have a special item that can teleport me one hundred meters directly ahead. But when I tried to use it, a prompt appeared saying it couldn't be used. The reason was..."

007 paused again.

After a long moment, Fatty finally heard her voice come from the receiver, as if she were repeating what she had seen—

"The area of the instance you are currently in is less than one hundred meters."

Chapter 409 Gu Mian and His Three Useless Checkpoints _1

Fatty was stunned upon hearing this.

What does it mean that the current instance radius is less than a hundred meters?

Anyone who had to run eight hundred or a thousand meters for school would know that one hundred meters isn't very far; a quick run would cover it in only tens of seconds.

But now 007's special item was indicating that this instance's range was less than a hundred meters?

That doesn't seem right.

Where the hell are we?

007's voice came through the receiver, "Since we can't leave our rooms, the instance range might just be the room itself. This means our movement will be limited to this small area until the instance ends. However, since we've all seen that eerie woman, it indicates we should be in the same area and not far from each other."

As he listened, Fatty peered outside through the door.

At least from here, the outside world looked expansive.

The bookstore was on a street. Directly across was a collapsed two-story Western-style building. Not only was the building opposite ruined, but basically all buildings within Fatty's line of sight showed signs of destruction.

Only the grass sprouting from the soil was thriving; sheep would probably love this place. It was obvious that no one had lived here for many years.

The only other person they had seen was that eerie woman who kept repeating the same thing.

"Speaking of which..." Fatty seemed to realize something and looked up at the electric light overhead. Gripping the receiver tightly, he asked, "In a godforsaken place like this, would there still be electricity?"

There was a moment of silence from 007 on the other end. "You realized it too? This place looks like a long-abandoned village. Theoretically, there shouldn't be any electricity."

Fatty looked away from the electric light. "But the three bookstores we're in all have electricity. So... are we in some kind of special place?"

007 agreed with this idea. "Exactly. By the way, can you open the books that woman returned?"

Fatty looked up at the three black leather-bound books he had placed on the table. There were no titles on the covers. "That woman gave me three identical books. When I got the first one, I tried to open it and take a look, but I couldn't."

Chu Changge had mentioned these books to him before.

During Fatty's earlier call with Chu Changge, Chu Changge had told him that the woman had already visited him four times, meaning Chu Changge had four such books by then.

Of course, he couldn't open any of them, just like Fatty.

And it was clear that 007 was in the same situation.

"I can't open my books either. This instance is indeed very strange. Although no ghosts or similar things have appeared so far, and it seems quite safe for us in here—which doesn't fit the pattern of special instances being extremely dangerous... I think the danger in this instance likely comes from that woman."

Wind howled as it swept through the street. Fatty watched the grass swaying outside. "I also think that woman is very suspicious. By the way, can you contact the Doctor?"

Gu Mian was the first to enter the instance and still hadn't contacted them. Fatty was a little worried.

007's voice came through, "No, I can't reach him either. It seems he's not in the same situation as us. Perhaps he can move around freely?"

Hearing this, Fatty's imagination ran wild, wondering where Gu Mian could possibly be right now.

Just then, 007 suddenly said, "There must be clues in our rooms. I'm going to check the bookshelves... I'll hang up now. If we keep talking, Chu Changge might not be able to get through if he calls you."

Fatty nodded at the receiver. "Okay."

The call from the other end disconnected immediately. Fatty then turned his gaze to the bookshelves. I need to look for clues here too. I'll have to go through all these books one by one. God knows how many years it's been since I last read a book.

Muttering to himself, he straightened up and walked towards the bookshelf.

The books on the shelves were from completely different categories.

There were novels, biographies, and a pile of untitled, miscellaneous books about who-knows-what.

Fatty, feeling completely clueless, pulled books from the shelf and quickly flipped through them. Not long after he started, the phone suddenly rang.

Fatty subconsciously glanced at the doorway to see if the strange woman had appeared again before moving to answer the phone.

Chu Changge's voice came through the phone, "I found a few books about games—video games."

Hearing this, Fatty was momentarily stunned, then looked up at the bookshelf in front of him.

It seemed he also had a few books about games on his shelves, also untitled.

Some of these books were about a certain game's rules, some were about health data, and one was about the game's background. He had glanced at them a few times before setting them aside.

Fatty hadn't expected Chu Changge to ask him about these books.

He immediately asked, "I have some here too. Is there anything special about those books?"

The sound of pages turning came from the phone.

Fatty heard Chu Changge flip a few pages before he spoke, "I've compared the rules and data in these books. They seem to be about the content of the same game. And the background—although I can't leave here, the background description in that book is very similar to this environment."

Fatty was quick to understand. He immediately grasped Chu Changge's meaning. "Brother Chu, are you saying we might actually be inside a video game right now?"

He heard Chu Changge "Mm-hm" in affirmation from the other end.

That can't be right!

"This instance doesn't need to stuff us into a video game; it could just replicate the game's background and mechanics. Putting players into an instance... and then putting players who are already in an instance into a game—that's completely redundant, unless..." Fatty's rarely used brain began to work at lightning speed.

At this moment, Chu Changge spoke softly, "I originally thought that someone repeatedly coming here and doing the same thing might be due to time reversing. But the grandfather clock clearly shows that time hasn't reversed. Plus, we are currently inside a game..."

"Think about it: in a horror game, where would you see someone endlessly repeating the same action?"

Fatty was stunned.

Where would I see someone endlessly repeating the same action?

Endlessly repeating the same action...

Endlessly repeating the same action?

For a moment, countless scenes from horror games he had played flashed through Fatty's mind. It seemed he had never seen anyone endlessly repeating the same action.

No, wait!

Fatty suddenly remembered—when he controlled his character, he would often repeat the same action!

At the same location, endlessly repeating the same action!

Thinking of this, Fatty's scalp tingled. He then clutched the receiver and blurted out, "Don't tell me we've become save points!"

Chapter 410 - The Inevitable Relationship Between Gu Mian and the Dog_1

Just as Fatty considered this horrifying possibility, he suddenly heard another familiar voice coming from the phone—

"Hello, here to return a book."

The same voice again!

In that instant, Fatty suddenly realized why the instance didn't directly duplicate the game's content but, instead, took the extra step of inserting them into the video game. It was because someone among the players was playing this game on a computer! If the three of them were save points, then the one actively playing the game could only be Gu Mian!

Listening to that familiar voice from the phone, Fatty wondered, so that creepy woman was actually the Doctor?

At this thought, the terrifying image of the woman in Fatty's mind suddenly seemed a bit more amiable.

Chu Changge looked towards the doorway.

The emaciated woman stood there at the entrance, her withered hand extending to offer a black-covered book.

Just like the previous times, he walked over and took the book without hesitation.

Including the previous four, this was already the fifth book.

This time, the woman at the door didn't leave immediately.

On Gu Mian's screen, four words appeared: *Save successful*. He stared at them for a moment.

He had just escaped from a grotesque monster and immediately went to the nearest save point to save his progress.

He had always been extremely unlucky, often getting disconnected right after acquiring an item while gaming. This had led him to develop the good habit of saving frequently. He noted the system message: *"This save point is already full. If you want to save again, you will need to overwrite one of the existing saves."*

So far, I've only found three save points, he then mused. It seems this game only has these three...

The save point Gu Mian was currently at was located near a crossroads.

So far, he had found three save points: one at his current location by the crossroads, one on a filthy street, and the last one next to a large, dilapidated residential area.

These save points looked identical. All were very small storefronts, only about two meters wide at the entrance, and pitch-black inside, making it impossible to see anything.

Still, Gu Mian mused, still looking at the *'Save successful'* message on the screen, these three save points each have their own distinct personalities.

The one he was currently at always saved smoothly, never lagging. Clicking 'save' would result in success in less than two seconds, like an obedient puppy.

Gu Mian particularly liked saving here, so this save point quickly filled up its five save slots.

The one on the street, however, had been laggy from the start. It often took several seconds, sometimes even over ten seconds, to save successfully. Gu Mian would have to click frantically multiple times to get it to work, but at least it would eventually save.

The final one, next to the residential area, was downright rebellious. The first time Gu Mian tried to save there, it failed. It took over ten clicks, mashing the button repeatedly, before a save was finally successful. It was as uncooperative as a courtesan refusing a client; this save point was truly out of control.

Just then, Gu Mian noticed another line of text appear on his computer screen:

[This save point has reached its maximum of five save slots and cannot continue saving. Use a lighter to destroy all data at this save point to regain five save slots.]

[Use Lighter?]

At this moment, Chu Changge saw the woman at the door suddenly raise her hand. She was holding a lighter.

CLICK.

Fatty thought he heard something through the phone that sounded like a lighter igniting.

He clutched the phone and asked in confusion, "Brother Chu, is the Doctor with you? Is he holding a lighter?"

No one responded. The other end of the line fell silent.

If not for the sound of the wind howling through the receiver, Fatty would have thought Chu Changge had hung up.

This eerie silence persisted for a long time, with only the sound of the wind leaking from the phone. Fatty called out his name a few more times, but there was no response.

A huge wave of fear suddenly shot up from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Gripping the phone tightly, Fatty asked nervously, "Brother Chu? Brother Chu? Are you still there?"

After a long pause, a voice finally came from the phone again: "I'm here."

Hearing the familiar voice, Fatty immediately let out a long sigh of relief and relaxed. "You didn't say anything! I thought something had happened. What was going on over there?"

Chu Changge paused for a moment before speaking. "I think our only danger comes from Gu Mian."

By now, Gu Mian had left the save point at the crossroads, the lighter still clutched in his hand. I still need this thing for illumination, he thought. Without a lighter, the visibility in this game will drop considerably. It's surprising that a game with such low visibility could devise the clever idea of using a light source to destroy save points.

Still, this was the first time Gu Mian had encountered a game that allowed you to destroy an entire save point.

Other games either provided countless save slots at a single save point or allowed you to overwrite saves freely.

This game, however, was different. It actually let you destroy the entire thing. That design choice was highly unreasonable.

It's as if it desperately wants the save points to be completely annihilated. Gu Mian frowned at the thought. What benefit is there for the game in completely destroying a save point?

Gu Mian mumbled to himself, his thoughts turning to Chu Changge and the others.

The time in the top-right corner of the screen read 7:50 PM.

He had been in this game for nearly two hours.

In those two hours, he had explored almost the entire game map but hadn't found any trace of his three teammates.

Not only had he failed to find them, but he had also encountered a monster bound in leg chains.

Given that the character he controlled didn't seem skilled in combat, Gu Mian could only flee. During the escape, however, the monster still managed to graze him, causing a slight decrease in the health bar in the top-left corner.

"This is so strange," Gu Mian thought as he maneuvered his character through a field of ruins. "Never mind where Chu Changge and the others went. I've searched the entire map, but the plot hasn't progressed at all. I haven't found any secret rooms or the exit. Was my search not thorough enough?"

The only distinctive feature in this game was its three idiosyncratic save points.

As Gu Mian pondered, he spotted the save point next to the residential area.

This was the most difficult one to save at.

Seeing this save point, an idea suddenly struck Gu Mian. He controlled his character to walk forward and selected 'save'.

Unexpectedly, saving at this point went incredibly smoothly this time, as if it had undergone a complete change in temperament.

Meanwhile, 007 had just taken the book from the woman's hand.

Fatty had already learned the current situation from a phone call: the woman standing before 007 was, in all likelihood, the game character Gu Mian was controlling.

Furthermore, it seemed Gu Mian could directly destroy them—the save points.

007 stared at the woman before him. Countless thoughts flashed through his mind, but how could he possibly inform Gu Mian that the three of them had become save points? How could they possibly communicate with Gu Mian?

While 007 was wrestling with this conundrum, the woman at the door had already turned and left.

At that moment, Gu Mian was heading towards the next save point.

Gu Mian mumbled to himself, "I'm playing a game. My three teammates have disappeared, and I can't find them anywhere. There are three save points in this game, and each one has its own personality..."

"If these save points really are them transformed," Gu Mian continued to muse, "then I'm truly screwed."