

Collapse 461

Chapter 461 Xiao Qiang Needs to Work Hard to Become Qiao_1

Chu Changge, who was beside Fatty, suddenly interjected, "I'm ready for whatever the other players might do."

Fatty, his neck stiff, turned to look at Chu Changge. "So, Brother Chu, when you said that... were those cans of gasoline you bought at the supermarket the other day for the event?"

Fatty was still wondering why Chu Changge would buy and store a few cans of gasoline, as their Spirit Car didn't require fuel.

Now he understood. It was for burning boats—other people's boats, of course.

The sun was slowly setting, and the dangerous night was approaching.

Fatty saw Chu Changge, who was beside him, suddenly raise his hand; a lighter was clenched in it.

Then Fatty heard a CLICK. Chu Changge had flicked open the lighter in his hand. A fingernail-sized flame appeared before him, illuminating his face against the backdrop of the gradually dimming sky.

Fatty stared at Chu Changge's face in eerie silence for a moment. "Do you think you're Zhuge Liang, planning to set fire to all the boats?"

That little bit of gasoline isn't enough to burn much!

"Not quite," Chu Changge said, extinguishing the lighter. "It's just for emergencies. I imagine other players have thought of this too. I bet as soon as the event starts, it'll be a sea of fire."

During a dragon boat race, the boats are most densely packed right at the start or just before it begins, making them highly flammable.

Fatty's face wrinkled up like a steamed bun. "If their boats are burned, those players will either burn to death or have to jump into the water—and the water is full of Evil Ghosts! Dying in this event means real death. I know some people are truly depraved and would do anything to win... even though I hate to think of others that way."

Chu Changge glanced at Fatty, who still clung to his belief in truth, kindness, and beauty. "A few days ago, I was watching the supermarket entrance, and indeed, quite a few people bought gasoline. Of course, they weren't buying it openly; they bought it secretly and then carried it away."

"Those people bought their items when the supermarket was less crowded. When they came out, they were only carrying black plastic bags that concealed the contents. However, if you observed closely, you could make out the outline of what was inside." Chu Changge paused. "Gasoline cans."

"So, at the beginning of the event, when everyone's boats are still clustered together, someone might start a fire?" Fatty frowned.

They wouldn't set a fire that would get themselves caught in it.

Anyone planning to start a fire would likely paddle hard at first, get some distance, and only then light it, ensuring they wouldn't be caught in the blaze themselves.

"Actually, I'm not certain when they plan to set the fires. Perhaps, as you hope, all the players participating in the event uphold the virtues of truth, kindness, and beauty, and they bought gasoline simply to go home and roast chicken," Chu Changge said, adjusting his glasses.

Fatty: "...". He felt that Chu Changge's statement was a bit unrealistic.

Xiao Hong was still shaking her head, sending cool droplets of water splashing onto Fatty's face. He wiped them away. "We should still figure out a plan for what to do if someone starts setting boats on fire..."

Logically, being on the water, burning boats should be the least of their worries.

Anyone who can swim just has to jump overboard and swim to shore; they'd be fine, not even a scratch.

Unfortunately, this wasn't ordinary water. There were ghosts in it. Jumping in here meant you'd probably be lucky if you came out with even one finger intact.

"I have a plan," Chu Changge said, glancing at the sun setting in the west. "But it's getting dark now. Let's go back and discuss it in detail."

Gu Mian and the others had already found a place to stay. This time, they weren't staying in a hotel.

There were plenty of vacant houses by the Liannu River. Those dilapidated, dangerous buildings were uninhabited, so Gu Mian and the others picked a quiet spot, picked the lock, and settled in.

Six months ago, this kind of behavior would have landed them in jail, but now, even if Gu Mian picked the locks on an entire building, nobody would arrest him.

The dilapidated building lived up to its name, exuding a horror film atmosphere.

The four-story dilapidated building had no elevator. The iron stair railings were heavily rusted, with large patches of corrosion exposed where the paint had peeled off.

Spiderwebs filled the corners of the stairs, and the slightest movement would stir up a cloud of dust.

Before the sun completely set, Gu Mian and the others returned to their quiet lodging, an old, sixty-square-meter, two-room apartment.

They were living on the fourth floor. Fatty always felt safer living on higher floors, although he didn't think that way inside an instance.

They had drawn the curtains tightly. At night, when they turned on the lights, they kept the bedroom doors closed and only used the lights in the living room, as it had no windows, preventing anyone outside from seeing light escaping the old house.

At this point, Chu Changge was sitting on the dirty sofa. On the table was a trophy the Doctor had obtained previously—a transparent crystal teacup that provided unlimited refills of rose tea.

In the current situation, with no running water or electricity, this was like a divine artifact for lifestyle players, allowing them to replenish fluids anytime, anywhere. Best of all, it was free.

However, Chu Changge seemed to be treating it simply as a beverage. "In this dragon boat event," he began, "the most immediate danger we face will come from other players. This is especially true for those who know Gu Mian. Of course, their malice towards Gu Mian is far greater than any they might hold for us. But we can't expect to stay out of it, because the five of us are on the same boat. As soon as the event starts, we're tied to Gu Mian's fate, like grasshoppers on a string. If someone tries to kill Gu Mian, we'll inevitably be affected."

Fatty retorted, "Is this what they mean by 'a fire at the city gate brings disaster to the fish in the moat'? Here's hoping our Doctor doesn't start any fires."

"Of course, keeping a low profile is also impossible, because this time, there's a very conspicuous person on our dragon boat team," Chu Changge said, glancing at Xiao Qiao.

This actress, a frequent face on television, was extremely well-known. Even middle-aged people in their forties and fifties who didn't follow celebrities could call out her name upon seeing her face.

Moreover, Xiao Qiao herself was strikingly beautiful and would stand out in any crowd.

Imagine the face you usually only see on a TV screen suddenly appearing next to you one day... and she's rowing a boat with all her might...

Of course, that would attract everyone's attention.

Chapter 462 Did You Find a Girlfriend?_1

Just then, Xiao Qiao, who had been sitting silently at the side, suddenly raised something with both hands. She held the item out in front of them, much like unfurling a piece of clothing. At first glance, it looked like a black sleeve. "There's a way," she said.

She glanced at Gu Mian as she spoke, "I'll cover my head, or you cover yours. Or we can all cover our heads."

What she held was a mask.

It was a rather crude mask. Gu Mian suspected she had cut a few holes in a very stretchy black sock to serve as one.

Gu Mian was speechless. "..."

To be honest, he thought a player suddenly appearing in the crowd with a black sock on their head would be the most conspicuous thing.

Let alone an entire group of people all donning black sock masks.

"It's not Christmas. Why would we put socks on our heads?" Gu Mian immediately rejected the bizarre suggestion.

Fatty, at the side, voiced his doubt. "Do people put socks on their heads for Christmas? I remember socks are for Santa's gifts. Of course, if a girl wished on a sock for you to be her boyfriend, Doctor, then it might be reasonable for you to put your head in a sock..."

"Shut up." Gu Mian reached out, grabbed a pie from the table, and shoved it into Fatty's mouth, leaving him able to only make muffled whimpers.

Gu Mian currently faced three main problems.

First, Xiao Qiao's face.

Second, being identified by players who knew him.

Third, Fatty's in-game nickname.

Fatty was widely known because he frequently appeared on the instance compensation announcements. Moreover, his name often appeared on these announcements alongside "Gu Mian" and "Chu Changge."

As soon as Fatty's nickname was seen, people would naturally associate it with Gu Mian. Although players in a crowded event might not necessarily be interested in a random fatty's nickname, the threat still existed.

Xiao Qiao's face was an easier issue to address. Instead of using a black elastic sock to cover her entire head, simply wearing a baseball cap and a mask could obscure most of her features. However, even if most of her face was covered, there was still a chance someone could recognize her. Before the global game started, Gu Mian had occasionally browsed the web for current events, but he mostly came across gossip and scandal photos of various celebrities. Even if the people in the photos were heavily disguised, they could still be recognized instantly.

In short, every event posed a risk of Gu Mian's identity being exposed, but he couldn't just avoid participating.

Gu Mian wanted to understand the relationship between instances and the real world. His current priority was to find the location of the original "Second World."

Mr. Green, an NPC, likely knew something about this. If Gu Mian participated in the event, there was a high probability he would encounter Mr. Green.

Although he wasn't sure how Mr. Green would appear...

"Speaking of which, Doctor," Fatty said, pulling the pie out of his mouth. He glanced at the calendar hanging on the nearby wall. It had always been there, and Fatty had already flipped it to today's date. The large words "June 1st" were very conspicuous. "Before this game started, quite a few people must have known you, right? But we've hardly run into any of them."

This was actually quite normal.

In countless instances, the probability of two acquaintances meeting was not high.

When the game began, the first instance matched players based on their location. This meant that for the first instance, players who were geographically closer were more likely to be matched together.

That was why he had been matched into an instance with Chu Changge and Fatty.

However, after the first instance, the rule "the closer the players, the more likely they are to enter the same instance" seemed to have vanished. Players were then matched randomly.

Later, Gu Mian and the others had driven out of Lianhua City, making it even less likely for him to encounter anyone he knew.

But this event might be different. The rules were already set: players could use event tickets to directly enter the event location. Perhaps they really would run into some familiar faces during the Dragon Boat Race.

Thinking of this, Gu Mian began to recall the people he had known throughout his life.

But he couldn't recall many.

The few who had left a profound impression on him were almost all dead: his math teacher from his school days, the couple who had almost adopted him, and the little girl from his childhood who always liked to play rock-paper-scissors with him.

There were also people he remembered, though not vividly: roommates from the orphanage, middle school, high school, and university, as well as colleagues from the hospital.

Gu Mian wasn't actually very close with his classmates; he only had vague recollections of those who had shared a dormitory with him.

But come to think of it...

Gu Mian turned to Fatty. "The game's been going on for half a year. You haven't run into any acquaintances either, have you?"

Fatty was different from Gu Mian. It was clear he had traveled extensively before the game began, and his social circle was much larger than Gu Mian's.

"That's true," Fatty said, scratching his head. "I haven't run into any acquaintances, so it's normal that you haven't either, Doctor."

But Gu Mian had a premonition they were about to encounter some familiar faces very soon—at the Dragon Boat Race.

Normally, if acquaintances bumped into each other, they might ask things like, "What did you eat today?" or "Found a girlfriend yet?"

But if they bumped into each other at an event like this...

Gu Mian doubted anyone standing over waters teeming with Evil Ghosts would be worried about whether someone on an opposing boat had found a girlfriend.

"Are you going to cover your face?" Chu Changge asked Gu Mian.

Gu Mian considered for a moment. "I'll just wear a mask."

He could imagine the scene: running into acquaintances at the event, everyone staring wide-eyed. Though Gu Mian wasn't eager to be part of that, whether he'd be recognized wasn't up to him.

Gu Mian was already considering how to deal with these not-so-close acquaintances. As the only person on the wanted list, his appearance would inevitably attract their attention. If he wasn't careful, the Dragon Boat Race could turn into a massive identity reveal.

It was certain that some players now possessed long-range weapons. If Gu Mian's name was exposed, he would very likely become an immediate target.

Even though his white lab coat was a special item that could block a certain degree of damage, Gu Mian knew arrows or bullets would definitely penetrate it. Besides, skilled players might even manage a headshot.

Gu Mian suddenly felt a headache coming on. He had even seriously considered the possibility of preemptively sinking other players' boats.

Just then, Chu Changge suddenly reached out and removed the school badge from his chest. "This can help a player change their nickname and appearance. The appearance change only lasts for thirty minutes, but I think that's enough. Enough for us to row away from the crowded area once the event starts."

"But I might not be able to use this," Gu Mian said. He knew he was different from other players. He took the school badge from Chu Changge's hand and pinned it to his chest.

Immediately, Fatty saw Gu Mian's player nickname change.

It had changed to "Meiren Chu."

It actually worked? Unexpectedly?

Chapter 463 Gu Mian's Ten Thousand Sweet Words_1

The loss of the school badge revealed Chu Changge's real name.

Although the name Chu Changge was quite familiar to other players, it was nowhere near as shocking as Gu Mian's name.

Fatty looked at Gu Mian's changing game alias and said, "Now we don't need to worry about other players recognizing you, Doctor. This disguise can last for half an hour. Who will you transform into?"

Gu Mian stroked his chin.

Transforming into anyone present isn't a good idea; twins always attract more attention than lone wolves.

Thus, Gu Mian considered transforming into either a generic male figure or Xiao Hong. Since he had no experience impersonating a woman and couldn't do it convincingly, he ultimately opted for the male disguise—definitely not because Xiao Hong was too ugly to mimic, of course.

Xiao Hong, meanwhile, didn't notice Gu Mian's thoughts.

From somewhere in the house, she had produced an outdated smartphone and was now frantically pressing its buttons. As a ghostess of the new age, she took a liking to new gadgets, so the outdated phone soon replaced lychee soda as her new favorite.

Gu Mian watched as she randomly pressed a few buttons and opened the camera. The screen immediately displayed her own grisly face.

Xiao Hong seemed quite confident about her face. With no training whatsoever, she grinned and, SNAP, took her first selfie.

Fatty turned away, unable to bear the sight. "She looks as pleased as Punch," he noted.

Gu Mian: "..."

Today was June 1st, Children's Day.

Gu Mian was sure that if it weren't for the upcoming dragon boat event, Fatty would have definitely gone to a children's amusement park and bounced on a trampoline for a bit, just to prove he was still young.

"By the way," Fatty said, looking at Chu Changge, "Brother Chu, didn't you say someone bought gasoline? What should we do if things actually catch fire?"

While their boat was unlikely to be set alight directly, Fatty was unsure how densely packed the players would be during the event. If one boat caught fire, it could easily spread through the assembled dragon boats.

Chu Changge rapped on the table. "First, stay away from the crowd. Fire spreads along conductive materials. As long as we're separate from them, we won't get burned."

"Huh?" Fatty was a bit confused. He could imagine the scene when the event started in a few days: players on the river would surely swarm forward, and it would take considerable effort to maintain a significant lead.

Thinking of this, Fatty frowned.

At this moment, Chu Changge's voice continued, "You don't actually need to exert too much effort."

...

「June 7th came quickly.」

Before Fatty could even properly get into the Children's Day spirit, the Dragon Boat Festival arrived. In the past, it would have been a joyous holiday marked by celebrations and time off, but now it lacked its former liveliness.

Gu Mian set a 6 a.m. alarm on the phone Xiao Hong had found.

The event started at 7 a.m., and he definitely didn't want to wake up naked on a dragon boat.

At 6 a.m., Gu Mian woke up promptly. As expected, Fatty was still sound asleep in bed, undeterred by the alarm.

Gu Mian reached out and shook Fatty awake. Presumably, the other players wouldn't want to see a stark naked, snoring Fatty during the dragon boat race either.

Chu Changge was already awake, and the two girls were also up early, sitting on the sofa. Today's breakfast was frozen wontons.

Since Fatty was always slow to wake up in the morning, and Gu Mian and Chu Changge were both terrible cooks, the responsibility had fallen on the two girls, who, unfortunately, turned out to be just as unreliable.

After being tormented by Xiao Qiao's cooking several times, Gu Mian had decided they should stick with ready-made food in the mornings.

As a result, their refrigerator was stuffed with premade dishes like frozen dumplings and frozen wontons.

Chu Changge was still giving instructions for the event. "Xiao Qiao, make sure your hat and mask are on properly. Try not to make any noise, and don't get recognized. Liu Ruyan, don't go around batting your eyelashes at people. Gu Mian... where's Gu Mian?"

At this moment, Gu Mian was squatting in front of Xiao Hong, making sure she had the Dungeon Entry Ticket. As he was unsure if Xiao Hong could even enter the event, he had specifically bought her an entry ticket for the event as well.

Xiao Hong wasn't a special item, nor was she a player, so Gu Mian was quite worried about whether she'd be able to get in, even with a ticket.

After all, she's important cheap labor.

Gu Mian patiently stuffed the ticket deep into Xiao Hong's pocket to prevent any accidents.

Meanwhile, Xiao Hong wasn't worried about anything at all. She fiddled with the phone in her hand, then raised it and pushed it into Gu Mian's grasp.

Gu Mian looked down and saw Xiao Hong's face on the screen—it was another one of her selfies, a bust shot.

"What's up?" Gu Mian asked, taking the phone and looking at Xiao Hong's picture.

At this point, a sleepy-eyed Fatty also squatted behind Gu Mian, rubbing his eyes and looking at the phone in Gu Mian's hand. "Maybe she wants you to photoshop her photo to look better?" he said. "She probably wants to post it on her Moments... Oh, I forgot, Moments is probably defunct by now."

Really?

Gu Mian looked up at Xiao Hong and saw her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Seeing this, Gu Mian looked down again and started to "improve" the photo.

Gu Mian stared at the grisly face, lost in thought. This is a tiny bit harder than clearing an instance...

The hour before an event should be a tense time for preparation. All players were anxiously awaiting the event's start in an hour, but Gu Mian was calmly squatting on the ground, pondering how to make this photo look better.

After several minutes, even Chu Changge came to stand behind Gu Mian, looking at the phone in his hand.

But this small problem didn't stump Gu Mian. After much deliberation, he finally made his move. He dragged a sticker onto the screen, covering Xiao Hong's face in the photo, then turned the screen to her and coaxed, "See? Much better now, right?"

Xiao Hong stared at the screen for a few seconds, then her lip trembled, and she started to cry.

[How to Treat Suspected Depression in a Ghostess]

[Photoshopping Through the Ages]

[Ten Thousand Sweet Nothings from a Scumbag]

These were the topics Gu Mian and the others were anxiously researching an hour before the event. Luckily, the moment the clock struck seven, Xiao Hong's crying abruptly stopped, replaced by an eerie silence.

The event—had started.

Fatty turned his head, looking around. He found that Gu Mian and the others had all vanished. He himself was now sitting in a small boat on the river—evidently the dragon boat mentioned for the event...

Occasionally, a gust of wind would sweep in from the distance, causing a throbbing pressure in his eardrums.

"What's going on... What happened to the five of us?" Fatty looked around, dazed.

Other players on the river were in the same situation. They looked at each other, apparently wondering why their teammates had disappeared.

Chapter 464 Wang Panzi's Revenge No.1

The wide river was filled with boats, each around two meters long. The boats were lined up side by side, separated by less than half a meter.

Fatty stretched his neck to look around. He saw these wooden boats neatly lined up on the dark green river, extending endlessly in both directions, like athletes lined up at the start of a sprint race.

Each boat had a passenger who seemed to be as confused as Fatty about what was happening.

He saw someone pick up an oar and paddle a few times, but apart from creating a few ripples in the water, the boat didn't move, as if the race hadn't started yet and there would be instructions momentarily.

This is scary. Fatty glanced at the water and nervously pulled his neck back. Gu Mian and the others were nowhere to be found, and there were murderous Evil Ghosts under the water.

There were also players around him who wanted to push others off...

At that moment, Fatty's heart was in his throat. He firmly held onto an oar, observing his surroundings and trying to identify potential enemies before the event officially started.

In the boat on his left was a young girl with a ponytail. She didn't look very strong, and Fatty felt he could lift her with just one hand.

On his right was a young man who looked quite scholarly, wearing a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. He looked just as frail as Chu Changge. Fatty felt he could easily lift him too.

Seeing this, Fatty felt a surge of confidence. He bravely let his gaze travel further into the distance.

His eyes quickly found a familiar face—007. She was only about a dozen boats away from him.

On the boat next to hers was a shifty-looking burly man, who was currently craning his neck and furtively glancing around.

At this moment, 007 clearly also saw Fatty looking around and cast a bewildered glance at him.

Fatty stared at 007 in surprise too. He knew 007 would be participating in the dragon boat race, but he was surprised to be matched up with her.

I wonder if she ever found her parents... Fatty mumbled to himself.

This clearly wasn't the right place to ask her if she had found her parents, so Fatty swallowed his questions. His attention was drawn back to the shifty-looking burly man in the boat next to 007, who was still craning his neck with shifty eyes.

At this, Fatty suddenly remembered Brother Chu's remarks about gasoline, and he grew tense.

Could that guy be one of those people Brother Chu mentioned who bought gasoline? Fatty swallowed, looked at the less than half-meter gap between 007 and the man, and, feeling extremely anxious, began yelling at her.

However, his shouts didn't attract anyone else's attention. Only 007 kept looking at him with a puzzled expression, as if no one could hear his voice.

Fatty called out a few more times and finally confirmed it: others truly couldn't hear his voice. He thought for half a second and reached out towards the scholarly man beside him, but an invisible barrier blocked his hand.

It must be a protective mechanism before the game officially starts.

Unable to do anything else, Fatty resorted to winking and making faces.

007 looked somewhat confusedly at Fatty, who was a dozen or so boats away from her.

Just then, an announcer's voice suddenly boomed across the river, enormous and instantly reaching everyone's ears.

"Dear players, I am the referee for this event."

Referee? Hearing this professional title, Fatty subconsciously thought of Host Green and Coach Che. Their outcomes didn't seem to be very good...

The clear and sonorous voice continued, making Fatty suspect this fellow had secretly taken broadcasting lessons.

"Next, I will announce the specific rules for this 'Dragon Boat Race' competition."

"This competition is divided into two stages. The First Stage is to find your teammates. Four checkpoints are set up along the course, and your other four teammates have been placed separately within these Dragon Boat Race checkpoints. Each time you pass a checkpoint, you will recover one teammate. After passing the final checkpoint, the First Stage ends, and the second stage begins."

"The second stage is 'Minesweeper on Water,' which requires teammate assistance to complete as quickly as possible. Completing the second stage allows you to freely race towards the finish line."

"The event reward mechanism is based on ranking. The shorter the time taken to reach the finish line, the higher the rank, and the more generous the rewards."

"To ensure the game is fair and transparent, this event will feature live data broadcast throughout. Participating players can monitor game data in real-time via the live feed above."

Fatty instinctively looked up. In the sky ahead, there was indeed a semi-transparent screen. On the screen was a long, blue bar graph divided into two sections. The far-left end of this graph showed their densely packed small boats.

"A protective mechanism is in place before the event officially starts. In three minutes, a whistle will sound to signal the official start, and the protective mechanism will be deactivated. Within these three minutes, everyone can name their dragon boat. To help players distinguish them, unnamed dragon boats will be automatically assigned a number."

Name...

Fatty, who had been winking and making faces at 007, stopped abruptly. Countless names instantly flashed through his mind.

007 looked at Fatty in confusion, not quite understanding what he was trying to say. She saw that after hearing about the naming, Fatty, who was a dozen or so boats away, suddenly paused as if thinking about something. But he didn't pause for long and immediately started making faces at her again, as if there was something extremely urgent.

Fatty's hand kept pointing backward. 007 looked back several times; behind her was also the wide river, with nothing but water.

Three minutes passed quickly. 007 watched Fatty continuously contort his face, but she couldn't hear any sound.

Then, a piercing whistle suddenly blared across the river. As the protective mechanism vanished, a torrent of noise instantly flooded her ears. With her excellent spiritual power, 007 immediately distinguished Fatty's voice amidst the cacophony—

"Row backward!"

007 reacted very quickly. Although she didn't quite understand why Fatty was shouting this, her hand holding the oar instinctively paddled backward rapidly.

Immediately afterward, she caught a whiff of a strange smell on the fiercely windy river, and something grazed past the bow of her boat.

She turned her head to look. It was a can, about the size of a baby formula tin, that had been opened. A peculiar-smelling liquid was leaking from it. It had been thrown by the man in the boat right next to hers.

Because 007 had paddled backward a few strokes, the object didn't land on her but in the boat of a girl on her other side.

Next, 007 saw the man frantically paddling, moving his boat forward some distance before throwing another object backward.

007 didn't see what it was, but the flames that suddenly erupted from the boat ahead told her everything.

Chapter 465 Gu Mian's Gorgeous Fan Club_1

The race had just begun, and the distance between the dragon boats had not yet widened.

The strong wind on the river swept the flames, spreading them rapidly. Within seconds, Fatty saw the flames leap from one boat to another. Soon, a dozen or so boats were engulfed, and the fire spread directly toward Fatty's position.

Luckily, he had paddled backward in advance to create some distance from the others, so the raging fire couldn't reach his boat.

Fatty forcefully paddled backward a few more times, watching the approaching flames with a terrified heart.

Besides the howling wind, the sounds of cursing and terrified screams echoed across the river. Those who jumped into the water desperately tried to grab the nearest dragon boats, often causing those boats, and others nearby, to capsize. The scene was horrific. No doubt these affected players hadn't anticipated such a disaster at the very start of the game.

He saw people jumping from the burning boats and swimming toward the unseen shore. But almost immediately, those in the water seemed to be seized and dragged under by something unseen, thrashing briefly before sinking to the bottom. A few strings of bubbles rose to the surface, and then silence.

Everyone knew there were ghosts in the water; falling in likely meant a gruesome death.

Meanwhile, it seemed there was no immediate danger for those still on their boats.

Fatty swallowed hard.

He looked ahead. The unaffected dragon boats had already pulled far ahead, while several burning boats now blocked his path.

Fatty glanced at 007; she hadn't been affected by the fire. At the same time, Fatty noticed a few other boats had also paddled backward right from the start, avoiding the arson. Had they anticipated this?

Thus, these few dragon boats successfully secured last place.

Ignoring the others for now, Fatty and 007 exchanged a look. After confirming each other's safety, they paddled with all their might, trying to catch up with the players ahead.

Chu Changge had suggested retreating first when the race began. His reasoning was that if someone started a fire, the densely packed dragon boats would inevitably catch alight. Only by creating distance from the others could one hope to avoid being caught in it.

While other players would surge forward at the start, retreating would easily separate them from the main pack.

Now, it seemed Chu Changge's idea had been spot on. Fatty was indeed a long way behind the leading players, and no matter how furiously he paddled, he couldn't seem to catch up.

But luckily, he had good stamina, and although he couldn't close the gap quickly, the distance was slowly shrinking.

The howling wind swept across the river surface periodically. As Fatty rowed with all his might, he muttered, The Doctor's gone, and where did that big brother and Xiao Hong run off to? If they were here, it'd be great. Ghosts pushing the boat would be super fast!

Fatty couldn't help but picture two tiny figures pushing a small boat, with a large, laughing Fatty sitting comfortably aboard.

Just then, a boat suddenly appeared in his peripheral vision. Fatty turned to look. It was 007, who had caught up from behind.

Currently, 007 was paddling hard, advancing side by side with Fatty.

The few other dragon boats that had also fallen behind eventually caught up, though they all maintained a wary distance from one another.

At this moment, only Fatty's and 007's boats were moving forward side by side.

"You're here too," 007 said, skipping any small talk about the weather, though it was indeed a pleasant day. "Thanks for earlier. Otherwise, I might be a corpse at the bottom of the river by now."

"No need to be so polite," Fatty chuckled. "By the way, did you find your parents?"

He still remembered that 007's greatest goal was to find her parents. If her story were written down, it would definitely be an inspirational tale comparable to 'Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mama.'

Unaware that Fatty had just likened her quest to that of a tadpole, 007 fell silent for a moment before murmuring, "No..."

Paddling, Fatty asked, "Didn't find them? They weren't at home?"

"They moved. They moved before the game started. When I went back, another family was living there. No one knows where they moved, and I don't either," 007 replied, her voice muffled.

Fatty frowned. What kind of parents move without telling their child? He recalled seeing a few cases of lawsuits between parents and children during his time as a court clerk. They were usually over things like property distribution or elder care. Some were even more extreme, with people shouting in court

that they wanted to sever parental ties... If her relationship with her parents was that strained, not knowing they had moved would be understandable. But from what he'd gathered, 007 seemed to have a good relationship with her parents. After all, when he'd escorted her home, she had talked his ear off about them.

"So... what's your relationship with your parents like?" Fatty asked, still paddling.

007 paused for a moment, then realized what Fatty was implying. She smiled faintly. "It's very good. My mother is very gentle and beautiful. I still remember when I was little, she would take me to parent-teacher conferences, and all the other kids would be so envious of me."

Fatty was a bit stumped. Judging by her words, 007 didn't seem to be on bad terms with her parents, yet she didn't know they had moved...

As the two dragon boats advanced side by side, a soft DING DONG sound suddenly rang out.

The sound was reminiscent of collecting Gold Coins in a video game, causing Fatty to instinctively glance around for anything shiny.

Then, he discovered a machine, about half a meter tall, had suddenly materialized behind him on his boat.

The same thing had also appeared on 007's boat.

They both stopped paddling almost simultaneously and turned to look at the machine.

"The first checkpoint?" Fatty wondered, looking at the machine before him.

The device was shaped like a shoebox, with a large screen on its top surface. The screen displayed a spinning wheel with a small arrow at its apex. The wheel was evenly divided into four sections, each bearing a portrait: Gu Mian, Chu Changge, Xiao Qiao, and Liu Ruyan.

Next to the wheel, a few lines of text appeared—

[Checkpoint One: HAPPY Big Wheel]

[Actually, this isn't really a checkpoint. This time, you'll be directly given a teammate, but you can't choose who. Click the 'Start Draw' button in the middle of the wheel to begin!]

This casual?

Fatty hesitantly raised his hand, his finger approaching the red 'Start Draw' button in the center of the wheel.

Get the Doctor, get the Doctor, get the Doctor... he chanted inwardly, closing his eyes, gritting his teeth, and slamming his finger onto the screen.

The wheel spun rapidly, began to slow after more than ten seconds, and finally ground to a halt.

The moment Gu Mian opened his eyes, he saw Fatty sitting before him, eyes squeezed shut, trembling all over as if having an epileptic fit.

"What are you doing?" Gu Mian asked, silently observing the twitching Fatty.

"Ah, Doctor!" Fatty exclaimed, eyes snapping open in excitement at the sound of Gu Mian's voice. "I told you my luck was pretty good! I got the Doctor right at the start!"

Setting that aside for the moment, Gu Mian pointed to a line of text at the bow of the boat. "What's that?"

Fatty turned to look—"Doctor's Gorgeous Fan Club".

That was the name he'd given his boat.

Chapter 466 Thank You for Your Patronage_1

"Um..." 007's voice came from the side.

Gu Mian turned his head and saw 007's familiar face. She hadn't drawn the lottery yet and was looking somewhat awkwardly at Gu Mian and Fatty.

While looking at her, Gu Mian glanced at 007's boat and noticed a series of numbers on its bow. It seemed 007 wasn't in the mood to name her boat.

"Hello there," Gu Mian greeted her enthusiastically. "Have you found your family yet?"

Fatty then saw a hand reach out from Gu Mian's lab coat pocket, followed by a head... Over the next ten or so seconds, Fatty witnessed a full-grown man climb out of Gu Mian's tiny pocket. It was the relative abandoned by the Holy Daughter.

After emerging, the man squatted quietly at the bow of the boat, apparently looking at the text reading "Absolute Beauty Fan Club."

"I haven't..." 007 also saw the man climb out of Gu Mian's pocket and couldn't help but swallow.

"Wait, Doctor," Fatty tugged at Gu Mian's sleeve. "This isn't the time to listen to 007's story! I paddled backward at the start, so we've already fallen a long way behind the others!"

Gu Mian couldn't help but look down at his clothes. "That's right. The school emblem's half-hour disguise effect has already expired."

He had used the blood-stained school emblem to disguise himself as the Holy Daughter's brother one minute before the event started. He hadn't expected the event to scatter them immediately. Gu Mian had been alone for over half an hour before Fatty drew him. Now, the disguise effect had worn off.

Luckily, there was no one around.

007 spoke up, "You guys go ahead. I'm going to draw for my teammates."

She hadn't started the lottery yet, concerned that someone on her team might recognize Gu Mian. Looking at the lottery wheel before her, 007 frowned. Her teammates didn't seem like pushovers, but she'd had a hard time assembling the team in the first place.

"Alright, we'll head off then," Gu Mian said to 007, then casually pushed the man squatting at the bow of the boat into the water.

Caught off guard, the man hit the water with a huge splash, drenching Fatty's face.

"Is this really okay?" Fatty swallowed. "He won't start a fight with the other ghosts in the water, will he?"

Luckily, the man didn't try to cause trouble. Instead, he went to the stern and began acting as a propeller.

With its new propeller, the "Absolute Beauty Fan Club" shot forward as if injected with chicken blood, causing Fatty, still holding his oar, to exclaim, "Holy shit!"

At that moment, some players diligently paddling their dragon boats happened to glance up. They saw a boat with an incredibly bizarre name, which had been lagging at the very back, now rushing forward at an astonishing speed.

Some players possessed unusual special items that could temporarily enhance their physique, significantly increasing their rowing speed. Others had component-type special items that could give their vehicles a temporary speed boost.

So, even if there were some dragon boats moving at speeds that defied common sense, other players could accept it. However, the dragon boat now catching up from the rear was simply too outrageous.

It was fast and sustained, showing no signs of stopping. It didn't seem like a special item was in use; rather, it was as if some skilled craftsman had installed an engine on the dragon boat.

The dragon boats on the river were now scattered, and this seemingly out-of-control vessel quickly attracted the attention of several people.

"What the hell is that? Can you even cheat in this event?"

"The Doctor's... 'Absolute Beauty Fan Club'?"

"Are they driving that dragon boat like it's a speedboat?"

By now, Fatty's face was contorted by the fierce river wind. He struggled to shout over it, "Doctor, Xiao Hong didn't come this time?"

Gu Mian pressed down his wind-tousled hair and nodded. "Well, she isn't inhabiting a special item, nor is she a player. It's perfectly normal that she couldn't get in even if she had a ticket."

He guessed Xiao Hong was probably having fun in the house where they were temporarily staying.

"Thank goodness she didn't come," Fatty sighed in relief amidst the gale. "Otherwise, if two ghosts pushed the boat together, they'd probably push it to pieces!"

Gu Mian held down his fluttering hair with one hand, the other symbolically gripping an oar. "Even though I wasn't there when the event started, I know the rules. The First Stage has four checkpoints, and we get one teammate at each, right?"

Fatty nodded. "But Doctor, you were a freebie."

Gu Mian: "..."

He continued, "After the First Stage is the second stage: minesweeping on the water. Hmm, as long as we go fast enough, the mines can't hit us, right? Never mind that for now. After clearing the second

stage, we can head straight for the finish line... Speed-wise, with this propeller, we should be the champions, shouldn't we? Assuming there aren't other race divisions."

Just then, their dragon boat swerved sharply, and Fatty, who had been about to nod in agreement, nearly pitched into the water.

Gu Mian looked up. On the overhead screen, "The Doctor's 'Absolute Beauty Fan Club'" indeed traced a wide arc on the river, thoughtfully avoiding the areas dense with other dragon boats. Quite intelligent.

The players desperately paddling their own boats saw the bizarrely named dragon boat not only speeding but also carving a graceful S-curve on the river. Then, it effortlessly overtook the tail end of the main pack—though this part happened out of the other players' sight.

Fatty was looking up at the translucent screen in the sky. He wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but as they passed the main group of boats, some of the vessels on the river seemed to slow down slightly.

He gave a silly chuckle. "Doctor, look! Those other boats seemed to pause for a second when they saw us overtaking them. I know that feeling. It's like when you're playing a video game, glance at the TV screen, and get captivated by a stunning beauty.

But I'm self-aware. Even though I named the dragon boat 'Absolute Beauty,' I know I'm still a little bit shy of being an absolute beauty myself, hehehe."

Gu Mian couldn't help but study Fatty's face. "Just 'a little bit' short, indeed..."

Just as the two of them had overtaken half the dragon boats ahead, a bamboo tube suddenly fell from the sky, landing precisely where the lottery machine had been.

Simultaneously, Gu Mian saw a warning appear on the water surface three meters ahead: [Approaching Second Checkpoint: Borrowing Challenge]

[Please borrow the item drawn from the bamboo tube within five minutes. If you fail to borrow the item within five minutes, you will lose the qualification to gain a teammate at this checkpoint.]

"A borrowing challenge?" Fatty's eyes widened. "This is totally set up to screw us over! We have to borrow things from other players."

As he spoke, he glanced up at the live event broadcast in the sky. Their current area was sparsely populated. Even if they asked other players, those players might not have the required item, or might not be willing to lend it.

"If we draw something like glasses or a coat, it wouldn't be too bad. But if we draw an aircraft carrier, we're screwed."

"Let's draw first," Gu Mian said. He had always had faith in his luck—or rather, his consistent bad luck. Ever since he was young, he'd never drawn anything valuable from a lottery. In fact, he almost always got the equivalent of "Thank You for Your Patronage."

Even from lottery boxes marked "100% Win Rate," Gu Mian had somehow managed to draw the miraculous "Thank You for Your Patronage."

He later heard that particular store went bankrupt due to dishonest business practices.

Chapter 467 Beautiful Xiao Hong_1

Gu Mian felt this was the moment in his life with the highest probability of drawing a rare item; his eyes gleamed as he stared at the bamboo tube.

"Wait, Doctor! How about I do it?" Having been around Gu Mian for a while, Fatty had unwavering faith in his luck.

Although he didn't usually draw anything good, there was always a chance he could pull something like an aircraft carrier out of a hat at a crucial moment. Where would they even find one of those?

Gu Mian paused. He sifted through the bamboo slips in the tube; they were all blank, presumably to prevent him from choosing based on any markings.

"Alright," Gu Mian withdrew his hand and looked at Fatty. "You draw then."

Fatty let out a small sigh of relief. He nervously reached for the bamboo tube, took a deep breath, and shook it hard, much like someone praying to the gods for a good fortune slip.

Immediately, a bamboo slip fell out with a PLOP.

Gu Mian reached down, picked up the slip that had fallen onto the dragon boat deck, and examined it.

Fatty's luck had always been quite good, at least compared to Gu Mian's. So, what he drew this time was fairly common. It wasn't something you'd find on every street corner, but you could probably find one if you walked a few blocks: a beautiful woman.

"A beautiful woman," Gu Mian repeated, emphasizing each word. "Borrow a beautiful woman?"

Fatty had truly drawn something earth-shattering and ghost-wailing. Are they supposed to sail into a crowd of other players and abduct some poor maiden? Besides, who knew if this thing's judgment was even accurate? They could tie up a player who looked like Xiao Qiao and bring her aboard, but she still might not be judged as a 'beautiful woman.'

Fatty spoke rapidly, racing against time, "Doctor, we only have five minutes! Let's hurry and find a beautiful woman among the players!"

Losing the chance to get a teammate in this round wasn't a huge deal. As long as a teammate didn't board the boat, they wouldn't be in danger. At worst, they'd just be imprisoned until the event ended. It was just that having more teammates might be beneficial for the final minesweeping challenge on the water.

Fatty quickly grabbed an oar, ready to paddle at a moment's notice. "Doctor, are we borrowing one or not?"

Gu Mian gazed at the river surface, pondering for two seconds, then stopped Fatty. "We borrow. But not from the players."

"Huh?" Fatty asked, puzzled. Then, noticing Gu Mian's gaze fixed on the water, Fatty seemed to grasp something. He gulped nervously. "You're not thinking..."

The ghosts in the water weren't so numerous as to be packed together.

They mostly congregated in areas with many dragon boats, lying in wait. Currently, players on the various dragon boats were either helping or harming one another.

Most players were in the midst of the second challenge: the item borrowing contest.

The items these players drew were relatively normal: some got pink-striped socks, others a live piglet...

Given that Fatty had previously drawn a live groundhog for a special item, it wasn't surprising that many players also drew live piglets.

Players on different dragon boats were bartering for needed items across the water.

"You give me the pig, I'll give you the socks."

"Never thought a big guy like you would wear pink-striped socks..."

Of course, there were dishonest players too. One player, upon receiving the socks, immediately turned his dragon boat and paddled off. The other boat quickly gave chase.

Rewards in the dragon boat race were based on ranking, so naturally, players needed to deal with those who might rank ahead of them.

A ghost seized the chance when a player was fleeing and their dragon boat tilted, forcefully capsizing it and dragging the fallen player underwater.

"Help! Help!" The man clutching the socks was seized by an Evil Ghost in the water. He thrashed about as he was dragged under.

Witnessing the struggle, the surrounding players gulped. This clearly wasn't the time to play the hero. Everyone could only try their best to keep their own boats steady and prevent them from tilting too drastically.

Just as the other players watched in terror as the man was dragged under, something suddenly shot through the water towards them at high speed.

Before they could get a clear look, the thing seized the ghost holding the man and violently dragged it away.

The man with the socks thus survived. He scrambled back onto his dragon boat and looked behind him, only to find that his teammate, who had fallen in with him, had vanished without a trace. Probably dead.

"What the hell was that?" The man stared at the water, his heart pounding. "That thing was damn powerful."

"It says 'borrow a beautiful woman,' but it doesn't specify a beautiful *ghost* woman or a beautiful *human* woman," Gu Mian mused. "If it had just said 'borrow a beauty,' we'd have no choice but to rush into the player groups and abduct some virtuous maiden." He paused in thought. "A handsome man might also work, I suppose."

He was calculating the time. Fifty-seven seconds had passed. He had dispatched his brother to catch a female ghost. He could only hope his brother's aesthetic sense was somewhat normal.

Suddenly, bubbles frothed up beside the boat. Gu Mian turned to look, just as a snarling, fanged head shot vertically out of the water, held aloft by his brother from below.

Upon seeing Gu Mian, the struggling female ghost serenely closed her bared teeth.

Gu Mian glanced at the words "beautiful woman" on the slip, then at the ghost being held up before him. He shook his head and said quietly to his brother, "Don't find one that looks too much like Xiao Hong."

His brother released his grip and dived back into the water.

The female ghost scrambled to escape.

Fatty watched the female ghost flee. "Is it just me, or did she look a little... aggrieved?"

Before Gu Mian could speak, another disheveled head emerged beside the boat, again held up by his brother from below.

It hadn't even been ten seconds since the previous female ghost had left.

Gu Mian stared silently at its face. "Didn't I say not to find one that looks so much like Xiao Hong? This one looks identical... Hmm, dressed identically too, and even has the same Mind Amplifier around her neck..."

Fatty chimed in, "But this one... this *is* Xiao Hong."

His brother departed again, leaving a drenched Xiao Hong behind.

Ten seconds wasn't nearly enough time for his brother to drag Xiao Hong all the way from where she lived.

Gu Mian didn't quite understand how she had arrived. Taking advantage of a lull, he asked her, "Were you teleported in too?"

He hadn't expected an answer, but surprisingly, the Mind Amplifier uttered a single word: "No."

Fatty was thoroughly confused. "Then how did you get here?"

The Mind Amplifier then transmitted another word: "Swam."

Chapter 468 Unearthly Beauty, Xiao Hong_1

"Ah," Fatty said, his mouth slightly agape. "Yeah, our event is held by the Liannu River. They said players without tickets can't get in, but they didn't say anything about ghosts. And Xiao Hong was even considered an NPC before."

At this point, Gu Mian had already pictured it: Xiao Hong discovering everyone's disappearance, panicking, sprinting out the main gate, then plunging into the river and swimming for dear life. Just as she neared, she'd be conveniently pulled out by the brother—the one who'd been forcefully abducting young women.

Xiao Hong's ghastly face must have surely shocked any passersby.

Just then, another female ghost's head appeared at the boat's edge.

Gu Mian stared at this head for several seconds. It suddenly dawned on him that humans and ghosts might have very different standards of beauty.

Perhaps in the brother's eyes, Xiao Hong was a peerless beauty. Otherwise, why would he have grabbed her in the water?

Although the face before him was hardly something Gu Mian could praise, he still reached out, thinking it wouldn't hurt to try, and grabbed the somewhat terrifying female ghost, attempting to pull her onto the boat.

What if this event's standard for beauties was the same as the brother's?

The female ghost Gu Mian grabbed thrashed like a fish out of water, clearly determined to resist.

Gu Mian tried to soothe her, "I'm just going to pull you up for a moment. I won't do anything else..."

Seeing the hideous female ghost, Fatty gulped. "What else **could** you want to do?"

Fortunately, no other players were around; otherwise, this scene would have undoubtedly scared them away.

As it turned out, the event's standards were quite normal. Nothing happened after he pulled the female ghost onto the boat.

Just as the brother set off for the fourth time to find a beauty, Xiao Hong also jumped into the water.

Dressed in her red skirt, she plunged into the water like a red carp and vanished.

Gu Mian wasn't too worried about her safety. The water is full of ghosts; they probably wouldn't fight amongst themselves.

Fatty looked in the direction Xiao Hong had disappeared. "Doctor, what's Xiao Hong doing? Did she feel cooped up on the boat and decide to go for a swim?"

"I don't know," Gu Mian said, picking up an oar. "Let's paddle towards the area with more players. I don't think we can rely on the brother's judgment of beauty anymore."

Gu Mian was certain that if the brother had been responsible for selecting beauties for the emperor in ancient times, he would have met a very gruesome end.

Although less than three minutes remained, what if they got lucky and stumbled upon a beauty, like a blind cat finding a dead mouse? Of course, the chances of that were minuscule.

"If we don't pass this stage, we'll just be short one teammate. It's no big deal," Gu Mian said while paddling. "Besides, it's not like we're relying on manual labor to row this boat."

"Makes sense," Fatty agreed with a nod. With the brother acting as a super-propeller, they could probably win first place in this event with just the boat itself.

The "Doctor's #1 Gorgeous Fan" boat had ceased its frenetic, mad-dog pace and was now slowly approaching the area densely populated with players.

The players who noticed this finally breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Looks like that boat's special item ran out. I wonder what it was, though? It was so damn powerful!"

"I thought they'd keep up that speed until the event ended! Scared me to death. But looking at the speed of our dragon boats now, we should be able to leave them in our wake soon."

Some players had already passed the second stage, their dragon boats now manned by three teammates.

Three people paddling were naturally faster. The speed of several dragon boats on the river was visibly increasing.

During this time, the brother had fished out several more female ghosts, repeatedly proving that human and ghostly aesthetics likely differed.

After a moment's thought, Gu Mian decided to try the opposite: he instructed the brother to find ugly women instead.

After seeing the "ugly women" the brother found, Gu Mian realized it wasn't fair to blame the brother's aesthetic judgment. The issue was that all the female ghosts in the water were uniformly hideous!

They either had eyes bulging from their sockets or their faces were split open. Even if they had been beauties in life, there was no salvaging their current appearances.

Gu Mian suddenly realized that all those novels about "beautiful female ghosts falling in love with me" were pure fiction.

"Only one minute left!" Fatty exclaimed nervously, checking the time. "Doctor, we're about to be toast!"

So be it then...

Silently, Gu Mian put on a pair of wide, black-framed glasses and wrapped a black plush scarf around his neck, covering the lower half of his face. "We're not far from the other players now," he muttered. "I'd better disguise myself first."

To avoid recognition, Gu Mian had already donned a long trench coat over his white lab coat. With this getup, even people who knew him would have to look very closely to recognize him.

He adjusted the ridiculously unfashionable glasses on his nose and looked at Fatty. "Ugly enough?"

Fatty chuckled. "Actually, you look quite good..."

Just then, the brother's head reappeared at the boat's edge. This time, he was empty-handed. All the female ghosts nearby must have fled.

Gu Mian turned to look at the head by the boat. The brother stared at his disguised face for a long moment, apparently not recognizing him.

Just as Gu Mian braced himself for a "Who the hell are you?!" the brother grabbed the gunwale and said, "Sister."

At that exact moment, Gu Mian sensed another boat approaching at an incredible speed. He swiftly shoved the brother's head back into the water and looked up.

A boat was indeed rushing towards them, parting the water as if equipped with a propeller, and it was aimed directly at them.

"What the hell?!" Fatty exclaimed, staring in alarm at the rapidly approaching boat.

It only took a few seconds for Gu Mian to get a clear look at the oncoming boat.

Of course, the first thing he recognized was Xiao Hong's head. Her unique, unmistakable face was floating in the water right at the bow of that dragon boat.

Xiao Hong was towing the boat towards them as if she were walking a dog.

Gu Mian focused his gaze on the boat. 007!

Fatty stared at the nearby dragon boat. "007 is a beauty, isn't she? She should count, right?"

Even though 007 was pale with fright, no rule stated that a beauty who turned pale from fear ceased to be a beauty.

Fatty grew excited. "Doctor, fifteen seconds left! There's still time!"

Gu Mian was already prepared.

Xiao Hong, reliable as ever, quickly towed the boat over. However, unable to fully control her momentum, the two dragon boats slammed into each other, nearly capsizing.

Gu Mian immediately reached out and snatched 007 from the other dragon boat. "Borrowing you for a sec!"

Before 007 could react, she was disorientedly yanked onto Gu Mian's boat. Instantly, a prompt appeared before Gu Mian—

[You have successfully cleared Stage Two. Please select your teammate.]

Below it were three profile pictures.

Chapter 469 Mocking Up Close_1

At Fatty's strong insistence, the third person on the dragon boat was Chu Changge.

Gu Mian also returned 007 to her own boat. At this point, there were only two people on her dragon boat; perhaps the second stage hadn't started for them yet.

007's only teammate seemed remarkably composed, showing no reaction to his boat suddenly losing control or his teammate being snatched away.

This person wore a black, cloak-like garment that concealed even his face, so Gu Mian couldn't see his expression. Gu Mian could only gauge his mood from his minimal body movements; he merely saw the man turn his body slightly, as if glancing at Chu Changge.

However, the more I look at this person, the more familiar he seems, Gu Mian thought.

Only then did 007 seem to recognize Gu Mian. Her complexion recovered somewhat. "You all are..."

"Second stage, the Item Borrowing Competition," Gu Mian said, glancing at Chu Changge, who had now appeared. "It looks like this stage was a success."

007 opened her mouth, about to ask why her dragon boat had lost control, but she swallowed her words. Instead, she asked a different question, "If catching me means you succeeded, what item were you supposed to borrow?"

Fatty peered over, a sly grin on his face. "A beauty."

007: "..."

Other players closely watching the race had already noticed the abnormal speed of 007's dragon boat. It, too, suddenly possessed an insane speed, like a rabid dog. Moreover, it eventually met up with "The Doctor's Gorgeous Fan Group," which made many players stare in disbelief.

It's like two cheaters holding a secret conference, many thought.

The two boats paused in place for a moment before separating.

The dragon boat with the numerical name resumed its normal speed. The other, strangely named dragon boat, although slower than before, still advanced at a considerable pace.

Gu Mian's group didn't speak with 007 for long before parting ways. During their brief exchange, 007's teammate in the black cloak hadn't uttered a single word.

Fatty had already sidled up to Gu Mian. "Doctor, Brother Chu, did you see 007's teammate? Doesn't he look familiar?"

Chu Changge pushed up his glasses but said nothing.

Gu Mian stroked his chin. "I saw his nickname. It's 'Anonymous' in red. We met him during the last event."

"Right!" Fatty also recalled. "We met him at the Lantern Festival event. He was dressed just like this back then, not even a strand of hair showing. And his voice was really nice! Oh, right, what did he say his name was that time?"

Gu Mian recalled their previous encounter. "Xie Bi'an. He said his name was Xie Bi'an."

They had only met the man briefly last time and hadn't exchanged many words. If it weren't for the man's attire, which exuded an intensely over-the-top dramatic flair, Gu Mian wouldn't have paid him much attention.

"But how did he end up as 007's teammate? A coincidence?" Fatty began to chew on his fingernails. "From what I've seen in TV dramas, people dressed like that are never good news. They're either the tenacious villain who survives until the very end, or they're the ultimate baddie who drags the protagonist down with them in the finale. Doctor, you've got to be careful."

Gu Mian glanced at Chu Changge, who was sitting quietly at the stern. "Do you know him?"

That man seemed to have deliberately looked at Chu Changge just now, Gu Mian mused.

Chu Changge was looking at the guitar case by his feet. Hearing the question, he lifted his eyes and slowly shook his head.

With Xiao Hong and Brother providing free, exploitable labor, an idle Fatty hovered around Chu Changge. "Brother Chu, you know how this event goes, right? We have to pass four stages to gather all our teammates, and then it's minesweeper. Who do you think would be a good pick for our next teammate?"

In reality, there were only two choices left: Xiao Qiao or Liu Ruyan.

I really don't trust Liu Ruyan, who often sneaks into my house to mess with my gas canister. If I get the chance, I'll definitely return the favor and go mess with hers, Gu Mian thought.

Chu Changge still said nothing.

Fatty, seemingly accustomed to Chu Changge's silence, didn't press for an answer. "I wonder what the remaining two stages will be like. But the final minesweeper on the water surface is probably the hardest part."

I'm not getting any real game experience at all, Fatty lamented to himself.

On the translucent screen in the sky, dragon boats would disappear from time to time, presumably having capsized or been burned by other players.

Other players had to think twice before even sticking a hand outside their dragon boat's boundary, terrified of being suddenly dragged into the water by the ghosts lurking below.

But on their boat, even if someone dunked their entire head into the water for a quick wash, their head would remain firmly attached to their neck.

Just as Fatty was lamenting his lack of genuine game experience, the other players were all staring at the real-time race status on the translucent screen in the sky with peculiar expressions.

"The Doctor's Gorgeous Fan Group" had now overtaken most of the dragon boats and was currently ranked in approximately the top ten percent.

Its speed had decreased somewhat but remained remarkably consistent.

Rowing, by nature, wasn't very stable. Other dragon boats, regardless of their ranking—whether near the front or back—had speeds that fluctuated, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, occasionally even stopping for a rest.

Yet, this particular boat maintained an incredibly stable state; even its earlier rabid-dog-like pace had been a consistent, breakneck speed.

It gave off the feeling that it wasn't a dragon boat at all, but rather a cruise ship that had mistakenly entered the race. However, all players had seen at the start that no cruise ships were participating this time.

Countless players watched this boat, which seemed to offer its occupants no real game challenge, with tears of frustration streaming down their faces, desperate to see the true identities of those on board.

Unfortunately for them, the boat just preferred to cruise into secluded areas.

At times, it would trace an alluring S-shape on the water's surface; at others, it would dart about erratically like a headless fly.

Fortunately, this dragon boat didn't trace a 'B'-shaped curve, or the assembled players would undoubtedly have been enraged enough to cough up blood.

Chapter 470 How Could There Be a Ghost Uglier Than Xiao Hong_1

"By the way, Brother Chu," the dragon boat slowed, and Fatty, who had been initially disoriented, had adapted. He sat idly before Chu Change. "What do you think of the name I came up with?"

Fatty jerked his chin towards the bow, where the words "Doctor's Gorgeous Fan Club" gleamed in the sunlight.

Chu Change glanced at the bow but showed no reaction.

Fatty was puzzled. "Brother Chu, you've been very quiet since we got back."

Although Fatty knew Chu Change was typically reserved, today his silence seemed unusual. This prompted Fatty to suddenly ask, "Brother Chu, are you thinking about that teammate, 007? It felt like that person knew you."

Before Chu Change could reply, Gu Mian's voice came from nearby. "What's wrong?"

Fatty turned his head and saw Gu Mian, who had crouched beside Chu Change at some point without him noticing, staring at Chu Change's face. "Your face is so pale."

Just then, the third challenge suddenly appeared before them.

[In one minute, you will enter the third challenge: Red Light, Green Light (One, Two, Three, Wooden Man).]

[Players must complete the game "Red Light, Green Light, don't speak, don't move" with the assigned NPC within five minutes. Failure will result in forfeiting the right to acquire a teammate from this challenge.]

Gu Mian knew the game Red Light, Green Light. One person stood at the front, back to the others, chanting "One, two, three, wooden man!" While "One, two, three" was being said, the people behind could run freely. But when "wooden man" was called, the person at the front would instantly turn around. The others had to freeze and couldn't speak. Anyone caught moving or speaking was out.

Gu Mian noticed a white-clothed female ghost about two hundred meters ahead on the water's surface, her back to them. It seemed the NPCs for this event were all ghosts making guest appearances.

The current objective was likely to tag the NPC shouting "One, Two, Three, Wooden Man" to win.

Meanwhile, Gu Mian saw many red dots appear on the map above. These red dots likely signified the dispatched NPCs. The game couldn't possibly have all participating players trying to tag the same NPC. If that were the case, the NPC probably wouldn't tolerate it.

"Looking at the numbers, not every dragon boat is assigned its own 'Wooden Man' NPC. Several boats' players probably have to tag the same one," Fatty's voice rang out. "This place is so remote, and we're the only boat here, so this NPC can only be tagged by us."

Gu Mian nodded seriously. "She's actually quite lucky. Other ghosts have to be tagged multiple times, and players might hurt them, regardless of how careful they are. But it's different here. She only needs to be slapped once by me."

"Yes, yes!" Fatty agreed enthusiastically. "Doctor, one minute is almost up. I'm ready."

Time passed quickly. Not long after Fatty spoke, Gu Mian heard a harsh, hoarse voice from ahead: "One..."

The ghost's voice sounded as if it had been mauled by a dog.

But this clearly wasn't the time to ask what breed of dog had mauled her throat.

Xiao Hong and her brother were fast, but they couldn't cover two hundred meters in a second. By the time the female ghost uttered "Two," Gu Mian's dragon boat had only advanced five meters.

This seemed intentional. The "Two" hadn't even finished echoing when Gu Mian heard a rapid, machine-gun-like voice from ahead—

"Three!"

Gu Mian was sure he hadn't even properly registered the previous "Two."

Immediately, the female ghost in front whirled around, revealing a rather ghastly face. Gu Mian began to suspect the event organizers had chosen such terrifying female ghosts as NPCs specifically to startle players when they turned.

Indeed, some players fell for it.

The eerie sight of countless female ghosts standing on the river was already unsettling enough, not to mention the visual shock when they turned around...

Even though many players managed to steady their dragon boats, most experienced a jolt of fear the first time they saw a female ghost turn her head.

By now, the players had experienced numerous horrors and weren't so easily scared that they'd jump straight from their boats into the water. Still, the chilling sight made their hearts jolt, followed by a sharp intake of breath.

Some people who shifted even slightly were eliminated immediately.

Some players communicated while the NPC was chanting "One, two, three."

"Five minutes... This ghost keeps turning around. Can we even row to her back?"

"It's only about two hundred meters... I think we can make it."

Gu Mian felt like the ghost assigned to them must have some kind of ailment. She always shouted "One, Two, Three" incredibly quickly but then dragged out the "Wooden Man" part with a long drawl.

He had observed other dragon boats on the river. They could row for at least six or seven seconds each time the NPC called out, but his group barely got two seconds of movement per turn.

Fortunately, their dragon boat was very steady. Even though the female ghost turned her head unexpectedly every time, the three of them on board remained still.

Four minutes passed. Some players had already tagged their ghost and passed the third challenge, but Gu Mian's group was still twenty meters away.

When they were still twenty meters out, Gu Mian had already raised his hand in anticipation.

At ten meters, Gu Mian raised his hand a little higher, as if preparing to discipline a child.

When they were half a meter away, Gu Mian was already standing at the bow, hand poised to strike the back of the ghost's head as she was yelling "One—"

"TwoThree"—the two syllables burst out almost as one.

The female ghost turned her head to see a palm stopped just in time, right in front of her face.

Even though it was supposed to be a game, no one was actually treating it as just a game.

Many had played Red Light, Green Light as children, and mischievous kids would often slap the person in front with all their might.

But now, no one used all their strength to tag the female ghosts. All of them were careful, gently laying their palms on the female ghosts' shoulders, as if brushing away a strand of hair.

Only Gu Mian was different. As soon as the next "One" was called, a resounding SLAP echoed across the area.

Then the female ghost clutched her head and ran off, whimpering.