

Collapse 571

Chapter 571 Wang Jin Lian and Gu Da Lang _1

The second person to see Gu Mian's return was Fatty. His face appeared behind the window Xiao Hong had slapped open, and he started grinning goofily as soon as he saw Gu Mian. He, however, didn't climb out of the window and down like Xiao Hong. If Fatty were to do that, he would probably splatter into a pile of meat paste by the time he got to the ground floor.

Gu Mian said goodbye to Keke on the first floor. Then, he climbed the stairs with Xiao Hong, who was busily gnawing on her own head. Halfway up, they ran into "Accompany Me Next Year" and "Know My Thoughts," who were both deep in thought in the hallway. The pair looked startled when they saw Gu Mian; it was unclear if they were frightened by his weird costume or Xiao Hong's face.

When Gu Mian got home, the strange headpiece still hadn't come off. In the end, Xiao Hong was plucked off Gu Mian's head by her brother and thrown out the window.

Meanwhile, Gu Mian was deep in thought in the living room, staring at the lychee sodas on the coffee table. Fatty had already joyfully rushed into the kitchen to get busy, intending to prepare a sumptuous dinner. He had specifically gone to the supermarket's seafood section during the day to buy large hairy crabs full of crab roe and scallops, and he had already kneaded the dough beforehand. Soon, the sound of chopping meat filling could be heard from the kitchen. The crabs and scallops had already been put in the steamer, and a delicious aroma was wafting out.

"What's he doing?" Gu Mian glanced towards the kitchen.

Chu Changge, without lifting his head from his book, said, "He said he wanted to make you crab roe soup dumplings. He spent several hours boiling the broth earlier today and says it tastes absolutely amazing."

Although he had never cooked before, Gu Mian knew that making crab roe soup dumplings was quite difficult; just extracting the crab meat was exhausting. At this moment, Fatty had taken out the cooked hairy crabs and started scooping out the crab meat and roe with grunts of effort.

No longer watching Fatty, who was grunting and puffing as he worked hard, Gu Mian focused his gaze on the table full of lychee sodas before him. The lychee sodas had new packaging. The pink pull-tab cans

looked extremely rustic. Without a doubt, all these sodas on the table are Xiao Hong's masterpiece. But this packaging...

"What's wrong?" Chu Changge asked, sensing Gu Mian had been staring at the sodas for a while.

Gu Mian leaned back a bit. "I've seen this new packaging design in the instance I was just in—the amnesia instance." Zhao Shuang's company was on the thirteenth floor, but it only occupied half of it; the other half belonged to a design company. This company seemed to have insufficient storage space, so designs that couldn't fit were piled up in the hallway. Among those piled-up designs, Gu Mian had seen this pink one.

Gu Mian picked up a can of soda and pulled the ring tab. "The stuff in the supermarket really does come from instances." As he said this, he took a sip.

Just then, Xiao Hong, who had been thrown downstairs by her brother, poked her head in through the window. Her eyes, filled with resentment, were fixed on the can in Gu Mian's hand.

In the kitchen, Fatty had already chopped the crab and scallop meat. He mixed it with the previously prepared meat filling, then added aspic jelly and various seasonings, stirring it all together. Several large, thin dough skins had been rolled out and were waiting on the side, ready to be used. The steamer was already on the stove, with a row of new straws beside it. Fatty quickly made several soup dumplings and placed them in the steamer basket. The soup dumplings he made were large with thin skins, each one as big as the mouth of a bowl.

"What a pity I didn't know then," Gu Mian said, looking at the pink ring-tab can in his hand. "If I could have tracked down that design company, perhaps I could have found the supermarket's supplier."

The supplier for the game's supermarket must know some inside information.

By this time, Xiao Hong had crept over to the coffee table and stealthily swiped a can of lychee soda.

"Speaking of which, this instance was very dangerous," Gu Mian said, looking at Chu Changge. "The instance started with a big trap for the players. Everyone who stepped into it would be done for."

Chu Changge pushed his glasses up. "It seems some players did step into the trap."

That's why there were only two names on the compensation list; the rest had died as a result. If anyone but Gu Mian had entered that instance, there likely wouldn't have been a single survivor left. After the death protection mechanism was turned off, the instances seemed to have become even more perilous.

Gu Mian was somewhat reluctant to let Chu Changge and Fatty enter instances again. Other scenarios might be manageable, but if they encountered another instance like the Werewolf game, one of the three of them would undoubtedly die.

At this moment, Xiao Hong, who was right in front of them, decided one can wasn't enough. She furtively swiped a second one, thinking Gu Mian and Chu Changge hadn't noticed.

Just as Xiao Hong was playing thief, the crab roe soup dumplings in the kitchen were ready. Fatty lifted the lid of the steamer basket, and the fragrance of crab mixed with hot steam assailed their senses, instantly whetting their appetites. He carefully pinched the gauze beneath a dumpling, transferring it from the steamer basket to a waiting plate. As he moved it, the entire dumpling jiggled, the soup sloshing within.

"Doctor," Fatty said, beaming as he carried the small plate over to Gu Mian. "Look what I made!"

Gu Mian looked at the dumpling on the plate. Its skin was very thin, almost translucent, revealing the abundant soup inside. Fatty swept an obstructing soda can off the table, placed the dish in front of Gu Mian, and thoughtfully inserted a straw. "Doctor, try it quickly!"

This eager service reminded him of Jin Lian serving medicine to Wu Dalang.

Gu Mian bent over and took a sip. The delicious, rich broth slid down his throat.

"It's delicious."

Indeed, it was. Gu Mian remembered the last time he'd eaten crab roe soup dumplings was back in school. When the waitress brought them, she slipped, and one splattered all over his face. Gu Mian had reeked of food for the entire day.

But now there was a problem: Fatty had made ten soup dumplings, each the size of a bowl's mouth.

"It looks like I've made too many," Fatty lamented. "We can keep them for tomorrow, but they won't taste as good... And I want to make something else tomorrow..." While complaining, he placed a soup dumpling in front of Xiao Hong. She sniffed it and immediately left with her lychee soda, clearly uninterested. Her brother just giggled foolishly to the side; he couldn't be relied upon to help finish the food.

"To avoid waste and so we can eat something new tomorrow," Fatty declared, holding the steamer basket and puffing out his chest as he hatched a scheme, "why don't we send the extra ones to Miss Xiao Qiao and the others!"

Gu Mian didn't know what the women downstairs ate every day. They surely didn't have a chef like Fatty cooking for them.

Neither Gu Mian nor Chu Changge objected to the suggestion, so Fatty took two large plates, still steaming hot, and dashed downstairs.

When she heard a knock on the door, Keke was somewhat suspicious. They were living on the first floor because of her sister, which was quite unsafe under the current circumstances. If someone knocked on the door in the middle of the night, it could be other players from outside. Luckily, the hostel doors had peepholes. After confirming it was Fatty outside holding something, Keke hesitantly opened the door.

As soon as she opened it, she was captivated by the aroma of food. It was the savory aroma of crab. She looked at what Fatty was holding: two large plates, each with two glistening soup dumplings. Tender yellow broth oozed from the top of the dumplings, looking incredibly appetizing.

Fatty handed one plate to Keke, saying, "We made these soup dumplings tonight. The Doctor specifically asked me to bring them to you."

"He specifically asked you to bring them to us?" Keke asked, hesitating.

Upstairs, Gu Mian, who had been unwittingly framed, sneezed.

"Yes." Fatty nodded gravely. I've made a contribution to the development of the protagonist's harem! he thought.

"Eat up!" Fatty beamed, a satisfied smile on his face. "I still need to deliver some to Miss Xiao Qiao." With that, he rushed off.

Keke stood at the door holding the plate, stunned for a long moment before calling out "Thank you!" to Fatty's retreating figure. She and her sister hadn't had a decent meal in a long time. Not just since the game started, but even before the global game began, she'd never eaten anything like this. Although she was very grateful, Gu Mian didn't seem like the type of person who would proactively send someone to deliver dumplings.

Meanwhile, Fatty was already knocking on Liu Ruyan's door. She and Xiao Qiao lived together, and who knew what they were whispering about in their room all day. Although both needed to replenish their energy, their standards for taste were extremely low; as long as it was edible and kept them alive, it was fine. When Fatty knocked, Xiao Qiao was gnawing on a piece of bread she had bought yesterday, like a hamster. As Liu Ruyan opened the door, Xiao Qiao immediately stopped, dropped the bread she was holding, and, drawn by the aroma, made her way to the doorway.

Chapter 572 If You Don't Vote for Me, I'll Take a Break to Play Games_1

Before Fatty could voice the compliments he had carefully prepared for Gu Mian, Xiao Qiao reached out and snatched the plate, looking very interested in its contents.

Fatty's mouth fell open, and he was about to say something when Liu Ruyan interrupted with a sarcastic tone, "You weren't going to say Gu Mian specifically asked you to bring this to us, were you?"

Fatty deflated. That was exactly what he had planned to say, but Liu Ruyan had seen right through him.

Liu Ruyan continued, still smiling, "He's not that kind of person. Now, if you said Gu Mian made too much, thought it was a waste to feed to the dogs, and so had you bring it to us, that might be somewhat believable."

Fatty's words of praise were stuck in his throat; he couldn't say a thing.

It seemed the mission to expand the Doctor's harem was incredibly challenging. Liu Ruyan wouldn't fall for this.

"Still, thank you," Liu Ruyan said, leaning against the doorframe and looking at Xiao Qiao, who was engrossed in the crab roe soup dumplings. "She seems to really like them."

Xiao Qiao did indeed like them.

So much so that the next morning, when Gu Mian opened his door, he found Xiao Qiao crouching outside like a dog.

At first glance, it really did look like a dog crouching at the doorway.

Only when she heard the door opening did she lift her head, her eyes full of anticipation.

Gu Mian rubbed his temples, then squatted down to look at her. "What are you doing here?"

Xiao Qiao was a quick learner, especially when it came to mimicking speech. She looked up at Gu Mian, her lips moving as she asked, "Do you have anything leftover that you thought would be a waste to feed to dogs?"

Gu Mian was completely puzzled, unable to comprehend what she was saying.

However, Fatty, standing behind him, immediately understood. "Crab roe soup dumplings?"

But they had finished them all the day before, and making a new batch was too much trouble.

Eventually, Xiao Qiao left, completely satisfied, with a bowl of pear and snow fungus porridge in hand. It was the breakfast Fatty had just made.

As Xiao Qiao carried the steaming bowl of porridge back, she bumped into Accompany Me Next Year, who was wandering the hallway, wondering what else there was to eat.

Seeing the actress coming down the stairs with a bowl of porridge, Accompany Me Next Year asked curiously, "What's this...?"

Xiao Qiao stopped and looked at her seriously. "This is leftover from Gu Mian and the others; it would be a waste to feed to dogs."

Accompany Me Next Year's eyes widened as she watched Xiao Qiao carry the porridge downstairs.

Finally, Xiao Qiao disappeared from sight.

That steaming hot, fragrant pear and snow fungus porridge didn't look at all like leftovers that were too good to feed to dogs.

Meanwhile, inside the house, Gu Mian and the others, having finished breakfast, were sitting on the living room sofa. Fatty was curiously asking Gu Mian, "By the way, Doctor, you came back late last night and didn't have time to tell us about the Amnesia instance."

Chu Changge and Fatty had already learned from the announcement that the instance Gu Mian entered was called 'Amnesia'.

"Speaking of which, that name is the same as an Otome game I used to play... Is that instance also related to romance?" Fatty, an avid gamer, mused.

It was indeed related to romance. If Zhao Shuang hadn't started dating Sun Zihao, none of this would have happened.

However...

"What's an Otome game?" Gu Mian turned to ask Chu Changge, who was beside him.

Chu Changge shook his head, indicating he didn't know.

Fatty quickly waved his hand. "Let's not discuss that now. Let's talk about the Amnesia instance first."

As he spoke, he looked at Gu Mian. "Doctor, was that instance difficult? I noticed only you and Miss Keke made it out alive."

Gu Mian shook his head slightly. "It wasn't particularly difficult, but the instance had set significant traps. I guess many players stepped into them the moment they entered."

After shaking his head, he began to describe the Amnesia instance to Fatty.

In the Amnesia instance, if all the players did nothing but flee, then everyone would definitely survive.

But once they started looking for clues, they would step into the illusion carefully woven by the instance.

Ultimately, if even one person awakened Zhao Shuang's memory, then everyone in the instance would suffer for it.

Once Zhao Shuang's memory returned, it was essentially a guaranteed wipe for everyone.

However, because Gu Mian, that BUG, was present last time, what should have been a guaranteed wipe wasn't.

After listening to Gu Mian's description, Fatty pondered, "It seems instances harbor a lot of malice towards players... All that tricking and deceiving to lure players into a trap... But Doctor, next time you describe something, maybe you don't need to be quite so detailed about the corpses?"

"I noticed something in that instance," Gu Mian said, picking up a can of lychee soda. "Sunshine Taxi, you remember it, right?"

Of course, they remembered.

Fatty nodded. "That was the taxi company from that instance, right? I remember the taxi company in that instance was Sunshine Taxi."

He also remembered a psycho driver from that instance.

That driver probably didn't die peacefully.

"I discovered that the Amnesia instance also had the same kind of phone booth and the same Sunshine Taxi company. So, I surmise that the Amnesia instance and the Taxi instance are in the same world."

Since he already knew that some instances existed in the same world, Gu Mian wasn't surprised to see the same company in two different instances.

"Later, I found out that there's a place called Sweet Manor in the city next to the one in the Amnesia instance. Sweet Manor is a station name from the 'Bizarre Train Great Escape' instance—one you two didn't enter."

Chu Changge and Fatty listened attentively.

"However, I later asked the NPC for the names of other stations, including Shicha Sea and Crazy Game City, but the NPC said it had never heard of those places. Of course, I had a cell phone in the Amnesia instance, and I managed to sneak some time to search for those stations. I found that, apart from Sweet Manor, none of the other locations could be found."

What did this mean? Fatty wondered.

Gu Mian continued, "Either the Sweet Manor in the Amnesia instance and the Sweet Manor in the train instance have no connection and just happen to share the same name, or they are indeed the same place. In that case, the reason I couldn't find the other stations while in the Amnesia instance is because that train travels between different worlds."

Indeed, searching for something from another world while in the current one would yield no results.

If it really was a train that could travel between different worlds...

Fatty looked somewhat dazed. "It's a pity, Doctor. You didn't know about Low-Dimensional Worlds when you entered the train instance."

Otherwise, they could have used that train to travel to different worlds.

Unfortunately, Gu Mian had smashed the train's control room to smithereens. The train was then unfortunately sent back to the factory for repairs, and he wondered if it had been fixed by now.

"So, now we can at least confirm that the Amnesia instance and the Taxi instance are in the same world," Chu Changge said, pushing up his glasses. "Did you search for other instance locations when you were in the Amnesia instance?"

Gu Mian nodded. "I searched for all the ones I could remember. Most either couldn't be found, or the search returned too many places with the same name."

For example, searching for 'Dajiale Supermarket' yields thousands of results, making verification impossible.

"I think if we enter more instances, we'll find more overlapping locations. Then we can group the instances with overlapping locations into several major categories, with each category representing a world."

Fatty rested his chin on his hand. "Will classifying the instances by their respective worlds help us figure out the truth behind this global game?"

Categorizing them wasn't guaranteed to help, but not categorizing them definitely wouldn't.

"By the way, Doctor, you mentioned seeing this new packaging of lychee soda in the Amnesia instance. I guess the other things in the supermarket are also products from instances. Why don't we go and check the production sites of those things one by one?" Fatty thought he'd come up with a great idea.

Gu Mian stroked his chin. "I remember Chu Changge did that."

Back when the global game had just started, the three of them went shopping in a supermarket. Gu Mian and Fatty shopped normally, but Chu Changge was already investigating the manufacturers of the products. He really was a prophet.

Gu Mian felt that if a 'prophet' profession existed, Chu Changge should apply for it. Fatty was the chef. As for those downstairs... Keke didn't seem to have a profession that fit her. Liu Ruyan's persona was that of a charming and alluring proprietress, which somewhat resembled that of a madam. As for Xiao Qiao... a valkyrie? But this valkyrie might be a bit expressionless.

Just then, Fatty's voice pulled Gu Mian back from his thoughts. "So, Doctor, the next instance..."

Gu Mian knew what Fatty was thinking without him having to say it. It was just the usual 'the instance is so big, I want to go see it' kind of idea.

"Better not," Gu Mian shook his head. "If you die in an instance now, it's a real death. I remember you've died twice in instances before, right?"

One time was in the Doctor-exclusive instance, 'Slaughter Game,' and the other was in a werewolf game.

Players nowadays weren't trying to get stronger; they just wanted to survive. Players with enough Game Coins mostly avoided entering instances. Someone like Fatty, who had no worries about food or drink, had even less need to risk himself in an instance.

Seeing the concerned look on Gu Mian's face, Fatty was deeply moved. "Doctor, you even remember that I died twice! I knew you couldn't bear for me to die..."

But before he could finish, Gu Mian's voice cut in, "If you died, there'd be no one to cook, and I'd have to go back to eating instant noodles."

Fatty closed his mouth, tears welling up in his eyes.

Chu Changge glanced at the dejected Fatty and said, "The Amnesia instance and the Taxi instance are in the same world. Both of these instances are very similar to our real world."

They weren't extreme worlds like Slaughter Game or the Old World, nor were they isolated game-show settings like Crazy Guessing Words or Sweet Lovers.

"We only know of two worlds right now: one is the Second World, and the other is the Old World," Chu Changge continued. "As for the other worlds, we haven't figured them out yet, nor do we know their fundamental nature. Based on the current situation, I guess these two instances belong to the Second World."

Based on the current clues about the Second World, it was indeed the world most similar to their real world. It was just baffling why some worlds were so bizarre—namely, the Old World and Slaughter Game.

"Speaking of which, you're actually from the Second World," Gu Mian said, looking at Chu Changge.

A school from the Second World had descended directly to Earth during the 'College Entrance Exam' event, only to unexpectedly collapse midway and never return. And that place also happened to be where Chu Changge's laboratory stored its failed experiments.

Gu Mian didn't expect to use Chu Changge to differentiate which instances belonged to the Second World. After all, Chu Changge had grown up in a laboratory and had never seen the outside world. The first time he ever saw the sky was the day the old man from the orphanage brought him to Gu Mian.

Thinking about the Old World instance and the Slaughter Game instance, although the worldviews of both were twisted, they clearly weren't from the same world.

The world where the Old World instance is located is called the Old World; Gu Mian had already learned this from Liu Ruyan.

And Liu Ruyan, having come from a twisted world like the Old World, was indeed quite twisted herself.

The name of the world to which the Slaughter Game instance belongs is still unknown...

Gu Mian looked at Chu Changge. "You said every Low-Dimensional World sends out a Guardian. So, the world where Slaughter Game is located also sent a Guardian, right?"

Chu Changge stared at Gu Mian for a few seconds before nodding.

Gu Mian frowned slightly. "Who is it?"

Chapter 573 - Travel Collapse_1

This time Chu Changge was quiet for a while.

The second hand on the wall clock made a full circle before Gu Mian finally heard his voice, "As I've said before, I can't tell who the Guardians are at first glance. I can only figure it out by observing their daily behavior. However, there is one person who can recognize a Guardian immediately."

It was Xiao Qiao. Gu Mian remembered Chu Changge had told him about this.

"Not only can she identify who is a Guardian, but she can also determine which alternate world they come from. A long time ago, I asked Xiao Qiao about this, and she told me..."

Reaching this point, Chu Changge fell silent again for a long moment, then said, "She said the Guardian from the world affiliated with the Slaughter game is... Jiang Yang."

Jiang Yang. Chu Changge had brought up this name before, but only once.

He said Jiang Yang was Xie Bi'an's former name. Jiang Yang used to be a very normal person, but now he wraps himself tightly in a cloak and no longer shows his true face to anyone.

Gu Mian had long known that Xie Bi'an also came from a low-dimensional world, but he hadn't expected him to be from the world where the Slaughter game existed.

Now, that same Xie Bi'an was living in this very building, together with the others from Accompany me next year, though he was rarely seen.

The first time Xiao Qiao saw Xie Bi'an was on the school bus during the college entrance exam event. Although Xie Bi'an was bundled up tightly, she recognized him at a glance.

The first thing Xiao Qiao said after seeing him was, "He hasn't died?" It was as if she firmly believed he should have died long ago.

"You mentioned that Xie Bi'an had an accident a long time ago, which made you all think he was dead... Can I ask what kind of accident it was?" Gu Mian asked.

He was having some trouble understanding. He had known Chu Changge since he was very young. However, Chu Changge seemed to have known Xiao Qiao and Xie Bi'an even before the global game began. Gu Mian really couldn't figure out when Chu Changge had gotten involved with those two.

Chu Changge leaned back on the sofa, as if lost in memory, "That was eight years ago, when you were fourteen."

Gu Mian: "..."

This introduction always made him feel like his dad was telling him the story of his long-deceased mother. Eight years ago was eight years ago; why did you have to mention my age?

"Eight years ago, there was a tragedy in Jiang Yang's family, and all four members passed away... of course, that's what we assumed. We never imagined we'd see him again after the game started," Chu Changge said, leaning back on the sofa.

"What kind of tragedy?"

"Not sure."

If Conan were here, he'd definitely roar, "There's only one truth!" Too bad the little detective wasn't around.

Gu Mian rubbed his chin. "Listening to your description, I get the feeling this matter isn't so simple. It doesn't sound like an accident."

Besides, Jiang Yang's "Resurrection," which turned him into Xie Bi'an, must hide quite a story.

Just then, Fatty, who was beside them, speculated, "Is it possible that the former Jiang Yang really did die, and the current Xie Bi'an is an imposter, some non-human entity? Could he have become a ghost? Is that why he keeps himself wrapped up so tightly—because he's afraid of sunlight?"

Gu Mian gave Fatty a look. "Since when do ghosts fear sunlight?"

Indeed... So far, all the ghosts they'd encountered were quite lively under the sun. If you played some music, they might even start a disco dance.

Chu Changge also dismissed Fatty's speculation, "Xiao Qiao would recognize him even if he turned to ashes. He hasn't been replaced, nor has he become a ghost."

"Ah, this..." Fatty opened his mouth slightly. "But I still feel that man is very dangerous." Even though he appears very friendly and has a pleasant voice.

"If I recall correctly, the first time you saw Xie Bi'an after the game started was during the Lantern Festival event, right?" Gu Mian looked at Chu Changge. "After that, he was present at every event we participated in."

It was unclear if the man was doing it intentionally or not, but he kept running into Gu Mian and his group. Now, they even lived in the same building.

"If Xie Bi'an is a Guardian like Brother Chu, then he should protect the Doctor, right?" Fatty scratched his head.

That's not necessarily the case. Gu Mian still remembered what Liu Ruyan had done when she snuck into his house. Xie Bi'an was unpredictable, making it hard to discern his motives.

"If Brother Chu is really worried, why don't we have Xiao Hong sneak in and strangle him in his sleep?" Fatty proposed an ingenious plan.

Xiao Hong, who had been named, was busily digging into Fatty's homemade strawberry jam. She lifted her head when she heard her name, then immediately went back to her digging.

Gu Mian glanced at Xiao Hong and withdrew his gaze. "Her chances of a successful assassination are about the same as your chances of discovering I'm your long-lost father."

Fatty scratched his head, feeling the analogy was a bit strange.

"By the way, since Xie Bi'an is from the world of the Slaughter game, he should know the name of his world, right? Xiao Qiao also definitely knows the name of her world," Gu Mian mused. "Why don't we go ask them first?"

Xiao Qiao should be easy enough. One sunny noon, Fatty prepared a lavish lunch and successfully lured her over. Without much effort, Gu Mian learned the name of Xiao Qiao's world.

"Twilight Gods World," Xiao Qiao said, stuffing a piece of roast meat into her mouth.

Fatty was quite shocked to hear this name. The name sounded like it belonged to an incredibly spectacular world. He could already imagine countless deities walking the earth, the sky filled with the ashes of war.

How could such a magnificent world produce a simpleton like Xiao Qiao? Fatty fell into deep contemplation.

Seemingly reading Fatty's mind, Gu Mian said, "Perhaps her world primarily embodies the 'twilight' aspect, with less emphasis on the 'gods.'"

"What is your world like?" Gu Mian turned to Xiao Qiao.

Hearing this, Xiao Qiao stopped eating, looked up at Gu Mian, and recited, like a poem, "Our world has reached its end. All life shall greet the twilight. All history shall turn to dust. All civilization shall fade into darkness. Only a new world can bring a luminous future."

Well, good. Completely off-topic. But at least she answered. Gu Mian hadn't initially expected Xiao Qiao to speak at all.

Fatty blinked. "Sounds like an apocalyptic world."

Gu Mian forked a piece of watermelon. "The name 'Twilight Gods World' is quite apocalyptic. If it were changed to 'Gods Resurrected,' it might sound a bit better."

"Changing it to 'Gods Resurrected' would make it sound like a horror story. I'd rather stick with the apocalyptic channel," Fatty said, rubbing his arm, which had broken out in goosebumps.

"We haven't encountered an instance from Xiao Qiao's world yet, have we?" Gu Mian stroked his chin. "I haven't seen any instances based on the Twilight Gods World setting."

Xiao Qiao again mumbled, stuffing another piece of roast meat into her mouth, "Twilight Gods World... not open. No instances."

No instances? Gu Mian looked at Xiao Qiao. What a strange world, indeed.

Chapter 574 - Is it really that pleasing to the eye?_1

"Miss Xiao Qiao's world doesn't sound easy to handle," Fatty pondered. Perhaps it's too terrifying, and hence unsuitable to be an instance?

As he thought, he turned to Xiao Qiao again. "So, Miss Xiao Qiao, could you describe what your world looks like and why it doesn't appear in instances?"

Although he asked this, Fatty didn't really expect Xiao Qiao to provide any useful information.

As expected, they watched her put down her fork, apparently deep in thought.

They waited.

About half a minute later, seemingly unable to describe her world, she picked up her fork again and resumed eating the meat on her plate.

Gu Mian and the other two were left waiting for nothing.

Thus, none of them planned to question Xiao Qiao further. There was still another person from the Low-Dimensional World in this building; they could try asking him.

Fatty cradled a glass in his hands, filled with orange juice he had freshly squeezed. "Doctor, Xie Bi'an hasn't been in his room much these past few days. I've been secretly observing him. He leaves early in the morning and only returns late in the evening. He moves incredibly fast, disappearing in a flash."

To put it nicely, it was secret observation. To put it bluntly, it was peeping.

Fatty had been peeping at Gu Mian for many years and was quite adept at it.

"Is he entering instances every day?" Gu Mian stroked his chin. "There are indeed quite a few ticket booths around here."

Although Xie Bi'an was gone all day, they could still catch him if they were vigilant enough.

「A few days later」

Gu Mian finally managed to corner Xie Bi'an at dusk.

When Gu Mian saw him again, Xie Bi'an looked the same as before, wrapped up like a mummy from head to toe. Even his own parents wouldn't have recognized him.

"Can I help you?" Xie Bi'an, who had been cornered at the inn's entrance, asked in a gentle voice.

Gu Mian had no idea how the man even saw him standing there.

His cloak covered his face so tightly that not even his eyes were exposed. In any case, Gu Mian couldn't see his eyes.

Liu Ruyan suddenly appeared out of nowhere, leaning against a nearby wall and watching the two with an amused expression, as if enjoying a show.

A moment later, Xiao Qiao also appeared. She stood ramrod straight beside Liu Ruyan, her gaze fixed on Gu Mian and Xie Bi'an.

Following Xiao Qiao was Chu Changge. The three of them lined up, looking exactly like esteemed spectators awaiting a performance.

Perhaps not wanting others to hear Gu Mian and Xie Bi'an's conversation, one of the "spectators," Chu Changge, moved towards Gu Mian. "Let's talk outside."

It was unclear whether he was wary of Liu Ruyan or Xiao Qiao.

Gu Mian then reached out, slung an arm around Xie Bi'an's shoulder, and began nudging him outside. "You've been quite elusive these past few days, making me search high and low. Playing hide-and-seek with me, were you?"

By the time he finished speaking, Gu Mian had already nudged Xie Bi'an over the threshold.

Chu Changge followed closely behind them.

Just as Gu Mian was about to say something else, he suddenly sensed that something was amiss with their surroundings.

Xiao Qiao, who was behind them, was craning her neck to watch their departing figures. Unexpectedly, just two seconds after they crossed the threshold, all three vanished.

The three of them disappeared right before her eyes.

Xiao Qiao's mouth fell slightly open. She immediately scurried to where they had vanished, looking left and right, but couldn't find even a single strand of hair.

"Where did they go?" she muttered, looking down at the ground as if trying to stare a hole through it.

Liu Ruyan also walked over. She surveyed the empty surroundings and frowned. "I'm afraid they've entered a special instance."

A special instance? Gu Mian stared at the panel that had suddenly materialized before him.

[Triggered special instance 'Hide-and-Seek Alone']

[Instance Players: 6]

[Detecting insufficient players. Randomly selecting additional teammates...]

[Matching successful.]

[Instance Introduction: 'Hide-and-Seek Alone' is a famous urban legend. The player must fill a doll with sufficient glutinous rice, red thread, and body tissue (usually hair or nails), then sew it shut with red thread and play 'hide-and-seek' with the doll. The original 'Hide-and-Seek Alone' game process was overly complicated, so it has been simplified in this instance. The step where the player acts as the ghost to find the doll has been omitted.]

[Instance Task: The game begins upon entering the instance. The doll acts as the 'ghost,' and players must hide. The first hour after entering the instance is hiding time for players. During this period, the 'ghost' will not move. After one hour, the 'ghost' will begin searching for the player whose body tissue was used to fill it. Once the 'ghost' starts moving, players can still move freely. The task is completed if players are not caught by sunset.]

This instance doesn't seem to involve any complex strategies, Gu Mian thought. Just hide and avoid being caught by the doll.

After the three of them had read the introduction panel, their vision went black.

When light returned, their surroundings had changed completely.

The first thing Chu Changge saw upon opening his eyes was a large bathtub.

It was filled with water, and floating on the surface was a brown, person-sized teddy bear.

Its stomach had been cut open but was now crudely stitched back together with red thread. It seemed the instance had handled the preparations for them.

This was a bathroom. A quick turn revealed a large mirror on one wall, reflecting Chu Changge's figure and the teddy bear in the tub.

He quickly stepped out of the bathroom, his gaze searching for something to tell him the time.

He found himself in a one-bedroom apartment, consisting of one bedroom, a living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. A clock sat on the coffee table in the living room. He picked it up and checked: 7:30.

Looking out the window, he saw it was broad daylight; it was now 7:31 in the morning.

According to the task, they need to survive until sunset this evening.

There are still more than ten hours until sunset...

「Meanwhile」

The other players had gathered.

In the living room of a residential building, three players were assembled.

Their game nicknames, in order, were Huai Xin Zhen Yue, Bai Wu Wu Wu Wu, and Liu Yiji.

Bai Wu Wu Wu Wu was a female player; the other two were male.

All three wore expressions of confusion and fear, as they hadn't entered voluntarily but had been inexplicably pulled into this special instance. Given that players could genuinely die in these instances, their reluctance was understandable. With no other choice, the three could only resign themselves to their misfortune.

"Hello, hello..." Liu Yiji said, turning to Bai Wu beside him after checking her name on the player panel.

This instance hadn't assigned players 'instance names'.

Bai Wu subconsciously replied, "Hello to you too..."

Still reeling from the shock, they were all terrified.

Liu Yiji was the first to compose himself. He looked around and found himself in a four-bedroom, one-living-room apartment. Three of the bedroom doors were open, and they had apparently emerged from these rooms.

Recalling what he had seen in his bedroom, he turned to the other male player. "Zhen Yue, when I first entered the instance, there was a large doll stitched with red thread in my room. Did you have one in yours too?"

The male player named Huai Xin Zhen Yue nodded slightly.

Seeing that the two seemed very familiar with each other, Bai Wu asked, "Do you two know each other?"

Huai Xin Zhen Yue explained, "We were friends before this game started and have always entered instances together. We happened to be near each other when we were selected for this special instance, so we were brought in together."

While Huai Xin Zhen Yue was explaining, Liu Yiji walked over to the open bedroom doors to look inside.

In each room, he saw a long, rectangular plastic tub filled with water. A large doll, stitched with red thread, floated on the surface. These dolls were enormous, almost as tall as a person. Each doll corresponded to one player. The thought that these things would rise and hunt them in an hour sent a shiver down Liu Yiji's spine. He quickly averted his gaze.

At this point, Huai Xin Zhen Yue began to ask Bai Wu, "Did you enter this instance by yourself?"

"No," Bai Wu shook her head. "I came with a friend too. Her nickname is 'Yu Ji Zi Wen,' but she doesn't seem to be nearby right now..."

Yu Ji Zi Wen? Huai Xin Zhen Yue found the name rather ominous. Sounds like she's destined for a grim end. But even if it's unlucky, it can't be changed now, and this isn't the time to dwell on whether the name is auspicious or not.

Since the introduction stated that the first hour was safe, they didn't immediately flee.

Huai Xin Zhen Yue glanced at the wall clock. The hour hand pointed to "7" and the minute hand to "1". "Since we're all here now," he said, "why don't we discuss this instance first? 'Hide-and-Seek Alone'... I've heard of this game before."

This was an instance where death was real. They couldn't just run around aimlessly upon entering.

They needed to analyze the situation first.

Bai Wu nodded slightly. "I've heard of this game too. It seems to be a very famous paranormal game."

Huai Xin Zhen Yue recalled, "The steps for that game are pretty much the same as what this instance describes. You stuff the doll with glutinous rice and nails, sew it shut with red thread, place it in saltwater, and then play hide-and-seek..."

"However, in the original game, a person first plays the 'ghost' and searches for the doll. Once the doll is found, the person stabs it three times with a knife and says, 'It's your turn.' Only then does the doll take over as the 'ghost.'"

But this instance skipped the player-as-ghost phase, having the doll be the 'ghost' from the start.

Players had to flee for their lives immediately.

"Why is that?" Huai Xin Zhen Yue wondered aloud. "Could it be they're afraid players might damage the ghost? Surely no player has that ability, right?"

"After all, this is a horror instance," Liu Yiji's voice came. "Having players act as the ghost searching for the doll wouldn't provide much of a horror experience. Its removal is understandable."

At this moment, Liu Yiji was standing before the one closed door, a puzzled look on his face.

The instance hadn't implanted any memories, so they had no idea what lay behind that door.

Just as Liu Yiji stood there, puzzled, he suddenly heard the sound of a doorknob turning.

He looked down and saw the handle of the door in front of him twisting, as if someone on the other side was turning it.

Then, the closed door was suddenly pulled open.

Liu Yiji, standing right in front of it, jumped back in fright.

The sudden opening of the door also startled the other two in the living room. They hadn't realized there was anyone else in the house.

All three simultaneously turned their gazes toward the sound. Behind the opened door stood a pleasant-looking young man in a white coat.

Chapter 575 - Tears and Snot Flowing Freely, Grumbling Spirit_1

No one expected a player to still be hiding in a room after the instance began.

Even though this person was quite striking to look at, the others were taken aback.

"Holy crap!" Liu Yiji, who had just taken a large step backward, only dared to voice his thoughts after confirming it was a person. "You scared the life out of me!"

Gu Mian touched his own face. He didn't think his appearance was particularly frightening and wondered why these three looked so startled.

He took two steps forward and walked out of the room.

Liu Yiji craned his neck, trying to see into the room Gu Mian had just exited, but just as he caught a whiff of something burnt, the player in the white coat reached out and shut the door.

Liu Yiji opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by Gu Mian. "So, you're my teammates."

There were a total of seven players in this instance.

Gu Mian knew that Chu Changge and Xie Bi'an had both entered this instance. Including himself, that made three. With the three players now in front of him, that made six in total.

One player was still unaccounted for.

After hearing Gu Mian's words, the three people in the room exchanged glances. They all felt this player in the white coat was very strange. At first glance, he seemed like a normal person, but a closer look revealed something unsettling.

But they couldn't pinpoint what it was.

He also carried a guitar case on his back. The case bulged oddly, and no one knew what it contained.

Stranger still was this player's nickname.

Opening his player panel, they found that the nickname field displayed 'Doctor' in a vibrant green.

Huai Xin Zhen Yue was the first to speak. "I've heard from others that players with Professions have their nicknames displayed in green. You must have the Doctor Profession, right?"

Gu Mian nodded. "Indeed. If any of you ever get your neck half-severed, you can come to me. I guarantee I can reattach it..."

He paused before adding, "Of course, if it's completely severed, then don't bother coming to me."

Hearing this, the group grew somewhat excited.

Of course, it wasn't the prospect of having their necks half-severed that excited them.

Now that the instance's death protection mechanism was disabled, players could die in many ways besides being killed by ghosts. For instance, being stabbed in the stomach and slowly bleeding to death in agony, jumping from a high building and dying from a broken rib puncturing a lung, or having one's neck half-slashed and dying from blood loss...

If they could receive medical treatment from a Doctor in such situations, they might be able to survive a little longer. Perhaps they could even hold out until the instance ended. They remembered that the mission for this instance was to avoid being caught by the ghosts before sunset. Time was life, so to speak.

Gu Mian had no idea why the others' gazes had shifted from startled to excited.

"Speaking of Profession instances..." Huai Xin Zhen Yue recalled a past experience. "Before the death protection mechanism was disabled, I was fortunate enough to enter a Profession instance. Liu Yiji, you weren't there that time."

Hearing this, Gu Mian glanced at Liu Yiji's player information.

His nickname was normal, not green, nor was it a Profession name.

It seemed he had honorably perished in that instance.

Huai Xin Zhen Yue continued, "I remember the Profession in that Profession instance was 'Translator.' That instance was extremely dangerous; the other players died one after another. I was the one who survived the longest, but unfortunately, I still couldn't complete the instance mission in the end."

As he spoke, he looked at Gu Mian. "Profession instances are said to be quite dangerous. For you to have cleared a Profession instance, you must be an incredibly skilled player."

Gu Mian nodded in agreement. "Indeed."

Huai Xin Zhen Yue was momentarily speechless. He hadn't expected Gu Mian to be so utterly devoid of humility. Shouldn't a normal person offer some polite demurral, like 'Oh, not at all,' or something similar?

"You truly are modest," Huai Xin Zhen Yue said, an eyebrow twitching.

Gu Mian nodded in agreement again. "Indeed."

This time, the other party was rendered completely speechless.

The truth was, Gu Mian had only participated in a single Profession instance so far.

If he'd encountered a few more, he might now be able to pull out a whole stack of Profession certificates and show them off one by one.

"Alright," Liu Yiji glanced at his pocket watch. It was now seven-ten. In another fifty minutes, those dolls would start moving. "Let's not discuss Professions for now."

As he spoke, he shifted his gaze to Gu Mian. "What... were you doing in the room just now?"

The three of them had quickly exited their bedrooms and gathered in the living room, but this Doctor had stayed in his bedroom for several minutes.

When Liu Yiji had wanted to peek into his bedroom, the Doctor had shut the door, as if there was something inside that couldn't be shown to others.

"I was studying the doll," Gu Mian answered truthfully.

In this instance, those dolls were the 'ghosts.' Gu Mian felt that studying them a bit wasn't going too far.

Liu Yiji opened his mouth but said nothing.

They had indeed observed those dolls too, but the thought that those things would soon spring to life and start killing people made them too afraid to actually touch them. They only dared to observe with their eyes.

But judging by the amount of time the Doctor had spent in the room, he had likely done more than just observe with his eyes.

"Speaking of these dolls," Bai Wu, who had been silent until now, suddenly spoke up. "I have an idea. If we destroy these dolls right at the beginning—say, by burning them or something—will they still be able to come after us?"

The others had actually had the same thought. But no one dared to try it. What if, in the process of burning them, they actually brought the things to life? Wouldn't that be walking right into death's embrace?

At this point, Gu Mian touched his chin and spoke, "To be honest, I've tried it."

"You've tried?" Liu Yiji widened his eyes in surprise.

He finally understood where that burnt smell emanating from the room earlier had come from.

This guy actually went and burned the doll right off the bat?

Gu Mian stated matter-of-factly, "I saw a lighter on the table earlier. I couldn't resist, so I lit it up..."

So that's what you meant by 'I was studying the doll'? Liu Yiji thought.

While Liu Yiji was undoubtedly shocked, Huai Xin Zhen Yue was more interested in the outcome.

He stared intently at Gu Mian. "And then?"

Gu Mian recalled, "Its fur got singed off in one spot. I don't know if it was because it had been soaked in water, but apart from the bald patch of fur, there wasn't any other damage. It just got a bit blackened and charred."

"You've really got guts, burning it right away like that," Liu Yiji couldn't help but exclaim, marveling at Gu Mian's audacity.

Huai Xin Zhen Yue frowned. So these dolls really can't be destroyed.

But Gu Mian's next words made his frown deepen.

"Then I slashed it a few times with a knife."

Liu Yiji's forehead twitched uncontrollably. "You even slashed it with a knife?"

Is this guy even human? He couldn't help but suspect that this person in front of him had a death wish. Did he enter this instance just to die?

"I slashed it several times. It's very soft, but I couldn't cut it open. Not a shred of cotton stuffing came out," Gu Mian said earnestly.

Hearing his description, the few people before him all unconsciously retreated a few steps, a sense of dread washing over them.

「Meanwhile」

Fatty had also learned from Xiao Qiao and Liu Ruyan that Gu Mian and the others had entered an instance.

Alone and learning this news, Fatty started wailing dramatically, like an abandoned wife full of grievances.

He sobbed as he typed in the group chat.

[Fatty]: Doctor, Brother Chu, have you all entered an instance?

But for a long time, there was no reply from Gu Mian in the group chat.

He waited for several minutes before a message from Chu Changge finally came through.

[Chu Changge]: The instance name is 'A Lone Hide and Seek'.

Hide and Seek?

Fatty stopped sobbing.

He remembered having entered a hide-and-seek instance before, called 'Heartbeat Hide and Seek'.

He typed, puzzled.

[Fatty]: Is it ghosts hunting you this time too?

After a while, Chu Changge replied.

[Chu Changge]: It's a plush toy.

So it's not ghosts.

Fatty seemed to come to a realization and muttered to himself, "So it's not ghosts, huh. Well, that's no big deal. The Doctor has killed plenty of non-human things anyway."

Chapter 576 'I Accidentally Sat on a Fish'_1

"So, destroying the dolls is not an option," Liu Yiji said, stepping back as if afraid Gu Mian might pull out a lighter and incinerate him on the spot. "Actually, I just found this in my room."

As he spoke, he pulled a folded newspaper from his pocket and unfolded it. "Initially, I thought I was the only one in the room and wanted to take it as a clue, but since you all are here, let's take a look together."

Liu Yiji handed the spread-out newspaper to Huai Xin Zhen Yue.

Upon careful inspection, Huai Xin Zhen Yue saw the headline was: "Multiple Unexplained Disappearances Recently, Police Suspect Connection with Paranormal Game."

Below was an explanation about "Hide and Seek Alone" and the recent incidents.

Over the past few months, numerous people had inexplicably disappeared, and the investigation found that all those missing had played this horrific game.

Following this report were some other irrelevant news pieces—

"Bizarre spectacle in Lujia Gou village: dozens of sows line up to jump into the river."

"Two men dig up their ancestral grave to impress their boss, planning to feign heroism when the boss can't find it."

"Toy Goose Food Factory worker calls police reporting an alien in the warehouse, walking back and forth."

"Whole African tilapia discovered inside a man: 'I accidentally sat on the fish.'"

Gu Mian glanced over the newspaper cursorily. It was filled with outlandish news pieces that read like an urban comedy novel.

He couldn't help but laugh.

The others, who were seriously perusing the newspaper, looked up at Gu Mian with expressions akin to seeing a pervert.

"I'm sorry." Gu Mian quickly reined in his laughter, putting on a serious expression.

"These were probably players who entered this instance before us," Liu Yiji said, focusing on the list of missing persons, not at all distracted by the trivial reports below. "Considering the number of missing persons... this instance seems to be quite dangerous."

Huai Xin Zhen Yue nodded in agreement. "I suspected that 'Hide and Seek Alone' would be a risky game even before the global game started. I just didn't think we'd be dragged into this instance someday."

"Let's discuss the escape routes for this instance. Is survival all about not being caught by the ghost?" Bai Wu asked, looking up from the newspaper.

"That's the idea, but I suspect the ghost in this instance will do everything it can to find our locations." Liu Yiji furrowed his brows, glancing at the clock. It showed 7:15; a quarter of the safe period had already passed. "Moreover, we don't know if there's a connection between the dolls. If they can communicate, sticking together poses a high risk."

"Let me give you an example," Liu Yiji said after pondering for a moment. "For instance, if we stay together, as soon as one doll finds us, it could inform all the other dolls of our location."

"Indeed," Bai Wu agreed solemnly. "And... I experienced a college entrance exam instance not long ago, where some ghosts could impersonate players! So, contacting other players might expose our own positions too!"

As she said this, she shivered slightly, as if recalling something horrifying.

Hearing this, neither Liu Yiji nor Huai Xin Zhen Yue seemed surprised. "We've also encountered ghosts that could mimic player appearances," Liu Yiji said. "It's just that those ghosts didn't seem to know we had player panels. We could tell if they were impostors by checking their panels."

"No!" Bai Wu broke out in a cold sweat. "Those ghosts I met... could also access player panels. They all had nicknames and ID numbers!"

What?

Both male players widened their eyes.

"That's impossible! Are you sure you didn't see it wrong?"

"I couldn't have mistaken it!" Bai Wu shook her head. "I saw three ghosts with nicknames and ID numbers in the cafeteria during the college entrance exam event. Two of our teammates died at their hands..."

Suddenly, Gu Mian spoke up. "Indeed, I've also encountered those three ghosts. Their names were Liu Xuan, Feng Zitao, and Wang Longxiang."

He remembered these names crystal clearly; they had, after all, contributed three valuable school badges.

Bai Wu nodded vigorously. "Yes, those were the three!"

Seeing that Bai Wu and this Doctor had both encountered those three ghosts with nicknames, Liu Yiji broke out in a cold sweat. "In that case, doesn't it become almost impossible to tell who the real players are?"

"You're right," Gu Mian's somber voice echoed. "Perhaps in an hour, there'll be a ghost with a player nickname among us."

Liu Yiji took a step back from Gu Mian and took several deep breaths to calm himself. "If so, we'd better split up."

The others all nodded in agreement.

Liu Yiji checked the time again. "We have forty minutes of safe time left. I suggest we all hide in different places, and..."

As he spoke, he pulled out a mobile phone, which had been given to them upon entering the instance. It had the phone numbers of the other players. "After we split up, if anyone calls you, you can answer. However, you must not reveal your location, because you won't know whether the caller is human or a ghost."

"Speaking of which..." Bai Wu also fumbled for her own phone. "There's something strange. Initially, I didn't know the Doctor was here too, so I didn't pay it much mind. Now that I think about it, I only have five phone numbers in my contact list."

She lit up her phone screen to reveal her contact list. The names, from top to bottom, were: "Anonymous," "Meiren Chu," "Yu Ji Zi Wen," "Huai Xin Zhen Yue," and "Liu Yiji."

Apart from her own, the name "Doctor" wasn't there.

"Excuse me," Bai Wu asked tentatively, "this 'Anonymous'... is that your contact name, Doctor?"

Of course not.

Gu Mian knew that Xie Bi'an's nickname was the red-colored "Anonymous"; this was Xie Bi'an's number.

As for himself...

"I don't think I got a phone," Gu Mian said, spreading his hands. "Do you all have one?"

The other three nodded in unison.

How nice. Really great.

Gu Mian felt like he was receiving special treatment, but he was already used to it. He had grown up accustomed to such special treatment.

At this, the other three looked at Gu Mian even more strangely. Their eyes quietly shifted to the bulging guitar bag behind him, and they began to wonder what was inside.

"In any case—" Liu Yiji was the first to look away. "We should all run separately! Never reveal your location. Even if other players call to ask, do not disclose your position!"

He continued, looking at Huai Xin Zhen Yue, "Even if I call you, don't tell me your location."

Huai Xin Zhen Yue nodded seriously.

"Alright, let's split up and run now!" Liu Yiji urged, watching the ticking second hand. "The farther we get from here, the better! We can't waste any more time. If we discover anything, we can communicate by phone, but be careful not to fall into traps. We must always suspect whether the person calling is human or a ghost."

With that said, he took two steps back, walked over to the living room door, and pulled it open. "Let's go out one by one. I'll go first. The next person should wait two minutes before leaving. This way, none of us will know which direction the others went."

After Liu Yiji left, Bai Wu was the next to leave.

Her face was etched with worry as she departed.

The third to leave was Huai Xin Zhen Yue. Most players wouldn't want to be the last to depart, as that person would have to stay alone in the room with those giant stuffed toys for two minutes.

Gu Mian, however, wasn't afraid of this, so he let Huai Xin Zhen Yue go first.

As Huai Xin Zhen Yue left, he cast a grateful glance at Gu Mian.

After everyone else had left, Gu Mian went from room to room, beginning to torment the teddy bears. He plucked out their eyes, used a bedsheet to tie one up and hang it outside a window, and emptied the fridge to stuff a soaked toy inside.

By the time he had finished all this, it was already seven-thirty.

In half an hour, the teddy bears would start moving.

Gu Mian didn't continue his mischief. He cast a final, reluctant look at the room, then, like a poet, metaphorically "waved his sleeve, not taking a single cloud," and left.

When he got downstairs, the other three had already vanished without a trace.

Gu Mian first checked the group chat messages and found Fatty wailing about being abandoned.

He ignored the weeping Fatty in the group and directly messaged Chu Changge to ask his location.

After waiting for a few minutes, Chu Changge still hadn't replied; he probably wasn't checking the group chat.

Chapter 577 I've made up my mind! _1

This was a newly constructed residential area with complete facilities.

Gu Mian wandered around the neighborhood for a while before locating a convenience store.

It wasn't even eight o'clock yet, and the convenience store had just opened. There were hardly any customers inside.

Upon entering, Gu Mian immediately spotted cans of litchi soda in their distinctive pink packaging.

This was Xiao Qiao's favorite beverage.

They have litchi soda in this instance too? Gu Mian recalled the soda packaging design he saw in the last amnesia instance. It seems these two instances are in the same world.

Gu Mian picked up a can of soda, paid the drowsy shopkeeper, then left the convenience store.

He held up the can, scrutinizing the printed production address. It was also labeled as from the "Toy Goose Food Factory," the same as the sodas they bought from the supermarket.

He frowned. "This Toy Goose is appearing rather frequently," he muttered to himself.

Gu Mian remembered that the special item "phone that breaks through dimensional barriers" was listed as being developed by the Toy Goose Company.

The special item "a tube of failed experimental reagent" was also produced by the Toy Goose Company.

As was the "Toy Goose Brand Flu Medicine" they found in the Sweet Lover instance. Its origin was clear even without an introduction, judging just by the name.

And just now, Gu Mian had seen the name Toy Goose in the newspaper again.

It was a ludicrous piece of news — "Toy Goose Food Factory worker alerts police of an alien walking around in the warehouse."

As Gu Mian recalled the number of times "Toy Goose" had appeared, he reached for his pocket to pull out his phone and search for information on the company.

It was only when his hand reached his pocket that he remembered this instance hadn't provided him with a phone.

"Careless," Gu Mian withdrew his hand. "I should have borrowed another player's phone."

He looked around. "I wonder if any passerby would be willing to lend their phone to a pitiful Doctor," he mused aloud.

Just then, he noticed a woman ahead, phone in hand, rushing past with a flustered expression. She seemed out of place in the surroundings.

Gu Mian opened his mouth to call out to her, but she was running too fast and vanished in a flash.

He stared in the direction the woman had run off. "Looks like a player," he murmured.

A person's aura is a remarkable thing. Players among NPCs stood out like robbers in a bank or silkworms in a pile of maggots; Gu Mian could identify them instantly among ordinary people.

Gu Mian recalled the list on Bai Wu's phone.

The only player on that list he hadn't met yet was called "Yu Ji Zi Wen." No doubt, that was the woman who had just dashed by.

The woman who had dashed by was indeed the player named Yu Ji Zi Wen.

At this moment, she was consulting her identity card while looking at the map on her mobile, searching for the nearest train station.

When Yu Ji first entered the instance, she was in the bathroom of a school dormitory.

A huge stuffed toy lay before her, its belly ripped open and then haphazardly sewn shut with red string.

Yu Ji didn't waste much time in the dormitory; she immediately ran out of the school, wanting to get as far away from it as possible.

Bai Wu, who had entered the instance at the same time, had called her. After they gave each other a brief rundown of their situations, the two hung up, tacitly avoiding asking for each other's locations.

Yu Ji didn't tell Bai Wu that she was planning to go to the train station.

And she also didn't know where Bai Wu was headed.

"I'm not far from the train station now..." Yu Ji muttered, looking at its position on the map while glancing at the time on her phone.

It was now seven fifty-five. In five minutes, the game of hide-and-seek would officially begin.

This made her hasten her steps.

The farther she got from that toy, the better. Thankfully, this instance did not set any area restrictions, so she could easily hop on a train and make a quick escape.

"As long as I run fast enough, the ghost won't catch up to me" — with this conviction, Yu Ji arrived at the train station.

The electronic screen displayed the departure times for each train.

She quickly scanned the list and headed straight for the ticket counter to buy a ticket for the next departing train.

Only two or three people were queuing at the ticket counter. Within a few minutes, it was Yu Ji's turn. "I'd like a ticket to Songwen, please."

The ticket clerk cast her a lackadaisical look. "Identity Card."

Yu Ji hesitated for a moment before handing over her identity card.

The clerk was quick. Within half a minute, a train ticket was pushed in front of Yu Ji.

Yu Ji quickly grabbed the ticket and her identity card, passed inspection, and briskly walked into the waiting hall.

The waiting hall was crowded, with people pulling luggage everywhere. Some sat in the waiting area, idly scrolling through their phones.

Without pausing, Yu Ji quickly arrived at the ticket gate. Boarding for her train had already begun.

She checked the time again. It was eight-oh-five. The safety period had passed.

The toy is on the move!

Yu Ji looked around the waiting hall nervously.

She was terrified that a toy bear might suddenly pop out from somewhere; even the doll charm on a little girl's backpack held her intense gaze for a long moment.

Fortunately, she didn't wait too long before getting through the ticket inspection.

Yu Ji rushed to the platform; the train had yet to arrive.

She waited nervously. Whenever someone passed by, she would reflexively flinch, drawing puzzled looks from others.

Shortly after, the train approached with a thunderous roar.

Yu Ji promptly dashed into carriage number seven, as indicated on her ticket, startling the conductor who had just opened the doors.

Passengers within the carriage had yet to disembark, and they cast bewildered looks at Yu Ji, who had rushed in.

"Sorry... sorry..." Yu Ji apologized as she shuffled her way through the crowded carriage.

Her seat was in the front row. She didn't struggle for long before finding her spot. Taking her seat offered a momentary respite.

She was aware that having more people around in a horror instance wouldn't necessarily offer more protection, but the sight of passengers boarding still brought some comfort.

As the passengers settled into their seats, the train began to move slowly.

No one was occupying the seat next to Yu Ji. This wasn't unusual; there were often unoccupied seats on trains.

She lowered her gaze to look at her ticket.

The train ride would last five and a half hours, ending at Songwen City. Of course, she had the option to disembark at an intermediate station.

Yu Ji planned on randomly choosing a midway stop to get off. This way, not only would the ghost not know her whereabouts, but she herself wouldn't either.

She pulled out her phone to check the time; it was eight-twenty.

The ghost had been on the move for twenty minutes. She wondered how the other players were faring.

She knew that seven players had entered this special instance. However, when she first entered, there were no other players around, so she had been navigating alone.

As she pondered, Yu Ji opened her contact list. Her gaze lingered on Bai Wu's name for a moment, but she decided against calling.

"We spoke not long ago; perhaps I should wait a bit longer before asking about her situation," Yu Ji muttered to herself. Bai Wu was the only person she knew in this instance.

"But..." she continued muttering while scrolling through her phone screen, "if there are seven players, I should have six contacts. Why do I only have five?"

Moreover, she noticed the name "Meiren Chu" seemed to frequently appear in instance-crash announcements.

Gu Mian, worth one hundred thousand Game Coins, was often seen with Meiren Chu.

However, her mind was completely occupied with survival; she had no intention of pursuing the matter of those one hundred thousand Game Coins.

Then, her gaze fell to the name labeled "Anonymous" at the bottom of the list.

What a peculiar name, she thought, glancing at it a few more times before turning off the screen and putting the phone back in her pocket.

Just then, she felt a sudden sense of unease.

It was eerily quiet; no sound could be heard.

She had taken many high-speed trains before. They were usually filled with the chatter of children or the blare of folksy ringtones from passengers' phones.

This time, she heard nothing.

On careful reflection, she realized that ever since the train started moving, all sound had ceased.

Her scalp began to tingle. She turned her head stiffly to look behind.

It was completely empty.

She rose to her feet, her mouth agape as she stared at the spacious carriage around her.

She was the only one there.

How was that possible!

Yu Ji looked around the deserted carriage with wide eyes. "I could have sworn... I saw so many people board the train with me!"

Panicked, she glanced into the carriages ahead and behind her, only to find them equally empty.

Everyone seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Then, it dawned on Yu Ji.

The ghost had found her.

At that moment, a sound came from behind her—something being dragged, like a heavy, sharp weapon scraping across the floor.

Run!

The thought dominated her mind, and she ran heedlessly forward, trying to escape the sound pursuing her.

But the sound didn't fade; instead, it grew closer...

Finally, when she reached carriage No. 1, her path was blocked.

A securely locked door blocked her way—the door to the driver's cabin.

Yu Ji rushed toward it, frantically banging on the door, but received no response.

Just then, the dragging noise stopped.

Shaking, she turned to see a human-sized toy bear standing before her, dragging a large axe and grinning with a creepy smile.

Chapter 578 Little Dove, when can we truly be happy_1

「8:30」

Gu Mian was in a noodle shop.

He used some of the money he earned from the instance to buy a beat-up cell phone.

The phone was slow to start up but could barely connect to the internet.

He glanced at the advertisement paper attached to the wall next to him. His gaze moved down to the bottom, where a line was written in black marker: "Wi-Fi password: 88888888".

Gu Mian quickly typed eight eights into the password field.

Half a minute later, the phone finally, after a struggle, connected to the internet.

He opened a browser and, after some thought, typed "Fenshan Mountain car accident case" into the search box.

Sure enough, quite a few search terms popped up below the search box.

Gu Mian casually clicked one, and it took a full minute for the content to appear on the screen.

"The Fenshan Mountain car accident case has come to an end. Although the bodies of other missing persons have been found, the only survivor, Zhao Shuang, has mysteriously disappeared..."

"It is reported that all five employees of the company who did not participate in the team-building activity have also gone missing after the incident..."

This instance was indeed in the same world as the amnesia case.

Gu Mian stared at his phone screen.

The worldview of this world was very similar to the real world. Chu Changge had once guessed that it was a Second World.

"But speaking of it..." Gu Mian frowned slightly. "How come after the Old World instance, the next two instances are also in this world?"

He wasn't sure if it was a coincidence or not.

Gu Mian knew that the Old World instance was the core of the Old World. However, he had torn that core not long ago, causing the entire Old World to almost collapse and all other instances to shut down for half a month.

Could it be that the damage to the Old World had affected other worlds, and only this world remained untouched? Is that why he was matched to this world twice in a row?

Of course, these were just Gu Mian's speculations.

To verify, he would have to ask players who had recently entered instances about the worldviews of the instances they were matched with.

Meanwhile, Bai Wu was also holding her phone, staring intently at the screen.

She wasn't playing Tetris; she was searching for past disappearances and deaths caused by "One-Man Hide and Seek."

She was in a secluded alleyway. The entrance was hidden, flanked by brick walls, with a dirt road that never seemed clean running through it.

This alley, situated between two tall buildings, was dark and damp. Rarely visited by anyone, it was always cluttered with garbage thrown down from the buildings above.

Under Bai Wu's feet were several dirt-covered plastic bottles, and further away, plastic bags rustled in the wind.

Outside the alleyway was a shop selling pan-fried buns. A speaker at the shop entrance would blare out intermittently, and the advertisement, "Yang Family's pan-fried buns are truly delicious!" could be heard from far away.

She had no time to be disgusted by the filth; she was focused only on the clues she had found.

"The last time this game caused a large number of deaths and disappearances was a few weeks ago..." she muttered, reading the content on the screen.

"The known death list included Wang Tiankuo, Zhao Hongqing, Liu Yi, and Zhao Ziyi. The missing list included Yuwen Hao, Xia Qing, and Shen Wutang..."

Those listed as dead definitely died in this instance, but those listed as missing weren't necessarily still alive. The missing could have left the instance, or they might have died somewhere undiscovered.

She trembled slightly as she looked at the death list.

This meant that among the last batch of players to enter this instance, four had died. As for the remaining three, it was unknown whether they were alive or dead.

This horrifying death rate.

Could the dolls find players that easily?

It was almost nine o'clock. The doll had been searching for her for nearly an hour, but she showed no signs of being discovered yet.

"It doesn't seem to be that easy to be found..." she murmured.

Just as Bai Wu was pondering this, her phone suddenly vibrated, and a call notification popped up on the screen.

She looked at the caller in confusion.

It was Yu Ji Zi Wen.

They were teammates who had entered the instance together, so it was natural for them to communicate.

But they had just spoken over the phone a short while ago...

After a moment's thought, Bai Wu answered the call.

"Hello? Yu Ji?"

There was no immediate reply from the other end. Bai Wu could hear station announcements in the background; it sounded like the other person was on a train.

After the announcements ended, Yu Ji Zi Wen's voice finally came through the phone, "Hello, Bai Wu, how are you? Are you still safe?"

Bai Wu looked at the narrow alley in front of her. "I'm still safe. There's no sign of the ghost finding me yet. What about you?"

"I've found some clues I'd like to tell you about."

"What?"

"It might be difficult to explain over the phone. How about we meet and talk in person? Where are you now?"

"I'm on the pedestrian overpass near New Century Park." Bai Wu's hand began to tremble, but her voice remained steady.

The other party was asking for her location.

Bai Wu recalled Liu Yiji's words: if a player calls to ask for your location, it might mean that player is no longer... a player.

Yu Ji Zi Wen had most likely been killed by the ghost!

Bai Wu's hand trembled uncontrollably as she gave a fake address, pretending she hadn't seen through the deception.

A voice came from the other end of the phone, "Alright, I'll come find you."

"Okay, I'll hang up then," Bai Wu responded, eager to end the call.

But just then, a not-too-loud, not-too-soft blare from the loudspeaker at the end of the alley suddenly sounded—"Yang Family's pan-fried buns are truly delicious!"

The sound was like a death knell.

Bai Wu hurriedly pressed the end call button.

It must have heard! Bai Wu gripped her phone tightly.

This damned loudspeaker had exposed her location, letting the ghost know she wasn't on the pedestrian overpass near New Century Park, but near this cursed Yang Family's pan-fried bun shop!

She had to leave this place quickly!

With this thought, she sprinted out of the damp alley, heading towards areas with more buildings and better concealment.

She hadn't run more than a few seconds out of the alley when she heard a chilling laugh from behind.

There wasn't anyone around just now. Where did the laughter come from?!

As Bai Wu sprinted, she glanced back and saw a giant plush toy, which had appeared out of nowhere, now blocking the alley entrance, its head turning to look at her.

Where its eyes should have been, there were two horrifying hollows instead.

Bai Wu's hair stood on end. She didn't dare to look back anymore and rushed towards a crowded area.

Meanwhile, Gu Mian was still in the noodle shop.

Chu Changge, amidst his busy schedule, finally checked the group chat, and Gu Mian managed to contact him.

He was now discussing this instance with Chu Changge.

[Gu Mian]: I've discovered that this instance and the amnesia instance I entered last time are in the same world. After the Old World, entering the same world for two consecutive instances, isn't that a bit strange?

[Chu Changge]: Are you suspecting that the damage to the Old World has also affected other worlds?

[Gu Mian]: Indeed, that's what I think. But logically speaking, Low-Dimensional Worlds shouldn't affect each other, right?

[Chu Changge]: Theoretically, yes.

Then it's strange. Could entering the same world twice in a row be a coincidence?

Just as Gu Mian was pondering this, a figure suddenly darted past the glass door of the noodle shop.

Gu Mian wasn't looking outside at all, so he didn't notice this figure.

If he had seen it, he would have definitely recognized it as Bai Wu, who had been in the same room with him just a short while ago.

Gu Mian typed again in the group chat.

[Gu Mian]: Aren't you going to meet up with me?

Chu Changge was acting alone, and Gu Mian was slightly worried.

Although Gu Mian knew Chu Changge was notorious for tirelessly leading others to ruin, often casually pulling someone in to be a scapegoat.

[Chu Changge]: I have some things to attend to.

It seems he doesn't want to meet up.

Gu Mian didn't press further, as a newly popped-up news item had caught his attention.

[Female body discovered at Shibe Train Station. After identity confirmation, the deceased has been identified as Yu Ji...]

Yu Ji?

Gu Mian remembered there was a player in this instance named Yu Ji Zi Wen.

He scrolled down the screen, wanting to see if there was a photo below.

At the very bottom, there was indeed a photo of the crime scene. It was clear that Yu Ji's death had been horrifying; the entire photo was heavily pixelated.

Staring at his phone, Gu Mian said aloud, "So, one is already dead."

The noodle shop owner, who happened to be passing by Gu Mian, overheard his nonsensical rambling and immediately gave him a strange look.

At this moment, Huai Xin Zhen Yue, who was currently hiding and evading, also saw this news and knew that a death had already occurred.

Chapter 579 The Manuscript Keeper is Dead _1

"Yu Ji Zi Wen is dead..." The notification sent a chill down Huai Xin Zhen Yue's spine. He stared at the words, his heart pounding.

It was noon now, and the ghost had already been active for several hours. Just a moment ago, Huai Xin Zhen Yue had been secretly relieved, glad the ghost had remained quiet for these past few hours. If I can just endure this afternoon, he'd thought, I can leave this instance smoothly.

He hadn't expected to immediately see news of a player's death.

After seeing the notification, he cautiously scanned his surroundings. He was in a pitch-black, dilapidated warehouse overgrown with weeds, a hiding spot he had found with great difficulty. It looked as if no one had been there for a very long time.

Besides himself, the warehouse only contained a few scurrying rats.

This place is so hidden... the ghost shouldn't find me here, right? he wondered.

「At this time」

Chu Changge, who hadn't met up with Gu Mian, was still in the small, one-bedroom rental unit.

He had started the instance here. Though he had left after entering, he returned after eight o'clock.

The plush toy in the bathroom had disappeared. It seemed to have set off to find Chu Changge.

But it had never occurred to the doll that Chu Changge would return. After all, the most dangerous place is often the safest.

Chu Changge had been staying here for a long time, while the doll was still fruitlessly searching for him outside.

He was bent over a map, studying it carefully. It was a map of the city he had bought when he'd ventured out earlier.

Standing by the window, Chu Changge occasionally glanced outside, as if comparing directions and locations.

Just then, footsteps echoed in the dimly lit, cramped room.

They came from behind him.

Chu Changge put down what he was holding and turned around.

A man, completely bundled up, stood two meters behind him, staring at him without moving.

Chu Changge observed him for a long moment before finally speaking, "Jiang Yang."

That was Xie Bi'an's former name.

The man seemed indifferent to which name Chu Changge used. He just gave a small laugh. "I heard the Old World almost collapsed."

The laughter, muffled by the black cloak, sounded particularly somber.

Chu Changge didn't respond directly, instead saying something unrelated, "I haven't seen much of you recently."

After he spoke, silence descended upon the cramped rental unit. Neither of them said a word.

If Gu Mian were present, he would have aptly described them as a pair of wary dogs, each sizing the other up, wondering where to take the first bite.

After a long while, Xie Bi'an broke the silence. "You didn't expect me to come back."

Chu Changge clutched the map. "We all thought you were dead."

Xie Bi'an laughed again, his voice a little lighter this time. "I have a question for you. I wouldn't have asked this before, because I knew what your answer would be. But now... Chu Changge, are you afraid of death?"

Gu Mian, meanwhile, was oblivious to the fact that two people were discussing the matter of fearing death behind his back.

He had found a weed-choked area and taken off his guitar case.

There wasn't a soul in sight, only some nearly collapsed, hazardous buildings in the near distance.

The guitar case no longer had its previous weight; it even bounced slightly when he set it on the ground.

He poked the outside of the case. Inside, it felt soft, and his finger easily poked a dent into it.

In front of a public toilet, Gu Mian slowly unzipped the case.

The chainsaw that had been inside was gone; only scorched fluff now peeked out, eagerly squeezing through the opening.

Gu Mian continued to unzip it, and suddenly, a dejected-looking head popped out.

He had stuffed the teddy bear into his case much earlier!

It had taken considerable effort to stuff such a large object into the case.

The fur on the bear's face was half-gone and scorched black, emitting a burnt smell.

Gu Mian gripped the dejected-looking head and yanked the toy out of his guitar case.

His rough handling stretched the bear's head and body completely out of shape. With another forceful tug, Gu Mian finally wrestled it free from the case.

The moment the doll was completely out, its entire body sprang up and down, the expression on its head growing even more dejected.

「Meanwhile, in the ruin not far from there.」

Huai Xin Zhen Yue was pressed behind the door, his mouth agape, watching in stunned silence as Gu Mian manhandled the doll.

He watched Gu Mian unzip the guitar case and, with what could only be described as abusive force, pull out the toy bear that struck fear into their hearts.

Holy shit! Huai Xin Zhen Yue internally exclaimed, pinching his thigh hard to make sure he wasn't dreaming. That player... no, is he really a player?!

He had seen Gu Mian approaching from a distance.

However, considering the possibility that the newcomer might be a ghost in disguise, Huai Xin Zhen Yue had remained hidden in the warehouse, observing him secretly.

He never expected to witness such an utterly deranged scene.

While everyone else was desperately trying to evade the toy bear that hunted them, this guy had actually stuffed it into his backpack!

And he was yanking it! Pulling it! Abusing it!

Even from a distance, Huai Xin Zhen Yue could feel the depressive aura emanating from the plush toy.

Gu Mian, still clutching the doll, had no idea someone was watching him from the dilapidated building nearby.

He'd finally managed to get into an instance where the ghost was present from the very beginning; of course, he couldn't let this opportunity pass.

So, back in the room, Gu Mian had conducted a series of experiments. Discovering the doll was difficult to damage, he had simply stuffed it into his case. I'll interrogate it when I find a way, he had thought.

He looked at the doll he had tossed onto the muddy ground. It lay there limply, as if trying to say, I'm really not a ghost.

Fire couldn't burn it, and a saw couldn't cut through it.

Gu Mian was in a predicament.

He picked up the toy bear, twisted its neck around like a pretzel, then let go. The bear's head began to spin merrily.

Merry as it was, it spun for a long time without revealing a thing.

Frustrated, Gu Mian flipped it over and over. Suddenly, he noticed something printed beneath the fur on the bear's backside.

He parted the fluff on the bear's rear and found the hidden text: "Produced by the Toy Goose Factory."

Chapter 580 Wishing Your House to be Disturbed by Gu Mian at Midnight_1

Was this thing called 'emotion'—impervious to water and fire, resistant to blades and guns—invented by this company?

The Toy Goose Company had been making its presence known ever since the global game began, to the point that Gu Mian was curious about what it was really like inside.

"Speaking of which..." Gu Mian said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a piece of paper the size of a bus ticket. "I have this."

[Instance Exchange Ticket (One-time Use)]

Allows entry to a designated instance and bringing teammates along.

This game probably regretted giving Gu Mian this item more than anything.

Looking at the exchange ticket in his hand, he muttered to himself, "The Toy Goose Company should be an instance too, right? If I write 'Toy Goose Company' on it, I should be able to go in for a tour."

As he said this, the toy bear, whose butt had been sticking up in the air, its face pressed to the ground as it played dead, suddenly turned its head and looked at Gu Mian with a terrified expression.

It moved?

Gu Mian reached out to squeeze its neck again. This time, the toy bear didn't move, as if it were really dead.

Gu Mian looked at its raised rear. "But it seems like I don't need to waste an exchange ticket, since the Toy Goose Company exists in this world..."

In that case, all I have to do is take out my phone and search for the Toy Goose Company's location.

At this, the expression on the toy bear's face seemed to grow even more terrified.

However, they were in the middle of nowhere, with no internet access.

"Careless of me," Gu Mian said, yanking up the toy bear lying on the ground with one hand. "I should have searched for the Toy Goose Company's address earlier."

He dragged the toy bear forward, planning to find another place to mooch off some Wi-Fi.

Gu Mian walked quickly, and soon, both he and the toy bear vanished down the dirt road.

Only after their figures had completely disappeared did Huai Xin Zhen Yue cautiously slip out from behind the rickety warehouse door.

He watched the direction Gu Mian had gone, his face filled with terror.

I don't even know if that guy is human! I can't stay here. What if he comes back and finds me?! Huai Xin Zhen Yue thought, scrambling in the opposite direction from Gu Mian. Before long, he too had disappeared.

Finding a Wi-Fi network to mooch off was quite easy. Gu Mian didn't take long to find a coffee shop and connect to their Wi-Fi from outside. He kept one hand firmly on the toy bear's arm to prevent its escape, while swiping his phone screen with the other.

A quick online search for the Toy Goose Company revealed that its chain stores were spread across the globe, with a presence everywhere. This city was no exception.

However, what this city had wasn't the main Toy Goose Company, but one of its branches: the Toy Goose Food Factory.

The food factory wasn't far from Gu Mian's current location. He estimated it would take about half an hour to get there by taxi.

Of course, there was one more thing to do before heading to the food factory. Gu Mian needed to retrieve the saw he had left in the room.

He moved quickly and soon retrieved the saw, then hailed a taxi on the street.

This was a bustling street, crowded with people. The taxi driver hesitated for a moment upon seeing Gu Mian's peculiar attire.

The man wore a white lab coat but didn't resemble a doctor in the slightest. He carried a guitar case on his back, and even more strangely, he clutched a half-burnt toy bear in one hand. The sight was utterly bizarre.

Gu Mian reacted quickly.

As soon as the taxi stopped, he pulled open the door, shoved the bear into the back seat, then quickly got in himself.

"Where to?" the driver asked, eyeing the peculiar man in the back seat through the rearview mirror.

Gu Mian adjusted the toy bear's sitting position. "To the Toy Goose Food Factory."

It's not a very remote place, thankfully. Otherwise, I wouldn't dare drive him, the driver muttered to himself as he started the car.

「Meanwhile」

Huai Xin Zhen Yue, thoroughly spooked by Gu Mian, had already put considerable distance between himself and the abandoned warehouse.

He found another secluded spot—a cemetery.

If this had been any other instance, he would never have come to such a place. He knew cemeteries were breeding grounds for supernatural incidents. Many of the ghost stories he'd heard as a child took place in cemeteries.

"Anyway, this time we're hiding from the toy bear," Huai Xin Zhen Yue muttered to himself, looking at the surrounding tombstones, a chill running down his spine. It's not like some other ghost is going to pop out and kill me. Besides, the bear looking for me would never think to check here.

Indeed, hiding in a cemetery during a game of hide-and-seek was truly unheard of.

He found a slightly larger tombstone to use as cover and took out his phone, pondering whether to call the other players and tell them what he'd just seen.

After some thought, he decided against it.

He wasn't sure how many of them were even still alive. What if he called and a ghost answered? That would be a thrill he could do without.

It was almost three in the afternoon; in just a few more hours, the sun would set.

Huai Xin Zhen Yue cowered behind the tombstone, praying, Just a few more hours and I can leave. Please, ghosts, don't come and get me...

Gu Mian, meanwhile, had arrived at his destination, faster than he had imagined. The taxi driver, apparently eager to be rid of him, had floored it, getting Gu Mian to the entrance of the Toy Goose Food Factory in less than twenty minutes.

There weren't many people at the food factory's entrance, and the guard in the security booth was dozing off. Looking past the main gate, Gu Mian could see several tall buildings, a huge warehouse, and three or four large trucks parked near the entrance, apparently for hauling goods.

Gu Mian dragged the toy bear out of the car and walked a few steps forward.

The drowsy security guard didn't notice anyone approaching. Just as Gu Mian neared the main gate, he heard a familiar voice from inside. The voice was furious, shouting curses as if in a heated argument—"May Gu Mian haunt your house at midnight!"

He could faintly hear another voice retorting, "How can you be so vicious!"

? Gu Mian wondered.

He took a few more steps into the food factory and spotted a familiar figure. The source of that "heartfelt blessing" was indeed him.

A tall, thin figure in a black suit emerged from within. He was dressed like an office elite, but instead of being in an office, he walked over to a truck and pulled open its door, apparently about to load cargo.

This cargo-loading office elite seemed to sense someone at the entrance and casually glanced over.

That single glance made him freeze, his mouth agape as if his jaw had dislocated.

Then, Coach Che's bellow, startling a flock of birds into flight, echoed: "Gu Mian! What are you doing here?!"

Ever since the death protection mechanism was deactivated, the Fortune-teller hadn't ventured into any instances.

Not until today.

After the death protection mechanism was deactivated, she would expend energy every morning to divine whether it was a suitable day to enter an instance. But for over ten consecutive days, the answer had always been that it wasn't suitable.

Until today. The divination result told her that entering an instance today would bring good fortune.

So, she prepared meticulously and entered the ticket booth to be matched with an instance.

The instance she was matched with was titled "The Marvelous Adventures at the Food Processing Plant."

The premise was that players, taking on the roles of different food ingredients, were 'dropped' into a food processing plant. They needed to outwit the plant's employees to escape. Periodically, the food

processing plant would announce different production tasks, meaning it would produce different food items using different ingredients. Players had one chance within the instance to change the ingredient they represented.

Upon entering the instance, the Fortune-teller was assigned 'tomato' as her ingredient. If the food plant started producing items requiring tomatoes, she would be turned into a tomato and sent down the processing line—which meant certain death.

An ingredient like tomato was commonly used, making it very unsafe. Of course, opting for a strange ingredient wasn't necessarily safer. The Fortune-teller had personally witnessed someone change their ingredient to 'Cambodian Spider.' The plant immediately issued a production task for 'Fried Cambodian Spider.' That particular 'spider' had died a gruesome death.