

Collapse 681

Chapter 681 Praise for the Wildlife Conservation Act_1

Outside the dilapidated tile-roofed house, the sound of a slow, heavy gait echoed.

The people inside held their breath, daring not to move, their eyes transfixed on the aged door.

The light inside the room was dim, making it difficult to see the surroundings. In the darkness, every sound was magnified severalfold. Each step of the eerie footfall felt like a needle stabbing into their hearts. After what seemed like an eternity, the halting footsteps finally receded into the distance.

Only after confirming that the thing outside had truly left did August finally open his mouth to gasp for air.

"That was close! If we hadn't run into this room in time, we would've been caught by the ghost." Song Tang clutched his chest. Even though the footsteps had vanished, he didn't dare speak loudly. His voice was barely a mosquito's hum.

"Those footsteps just now must have come from that ghost in the forest," August also lowered his voice. "It was looking for us. Fortunately, it's not fast."

"Who'd have thought we'd encounter a ghost as soon as we entered the instance," Si Huanian said, leaning against a table to recover his strength. "What's going on with this instance? Not only did they give us no hints, but they also threw us straight into an encounter with a ghost right at the start."

August's brow furrowed. He was also quite baffled by the current situation.

Initially, they thought it was just a somewhat special instance, but encountering a ghost right at the beginning of an instance was unheard of.

In a normal instance, a ghost would only begin to kill after players had collected a certain number of clues.

Therefore, most players died in the middle or later stages of an instance.

But this instance threw them face-to-face with a ghost right away. Why? Could it be that this instance simply wanted to slaughter players?

Of course, there was another possibility.

That, in such a short amount of time, someone had already discovered key clues for this instance, which was why the ghost had appeared.

August suddenly recalled that, back by the forest, the male player with glasses had shouted for them to run. At that time, everyone had only heard footsteps and hadn't seen anyone, but that male player seemed to have discovered something, immediately confirming that the presence in the forest was not human. Perhaps he had found some crucial clue.

As he thought about this, he looked towards that player. He saw the man standing in a dark corner, putting something into his pocket.

"Did you discover something?" August took a step forward, looking directly at the player in front of him, whose screen name was Meiren Chu.

"No." Chu Changge didn't intend to talk much with this player.

Song Tang also remembered Chu Changge shouting 'Run!' back at the forest. He too stepped forward to stand beside August. "You must have discovered something to tell us to run. If you found a clue, don't keep it to yourself. This instance is unusual. Analyzing clues together increases everyone's chances of survival."

As he spoke, he advanced a few steps further, his eyes fixed on Chu Changge's pocket as if attempting to discern what he had just stowed away.

007 shifted her position to block his view. "Personal belongings. None of your business."

Song Tang looked up at the female player blocking his view. He had noticed at once that she was a player with a Class—a Beast Tamer.

The other female player beside her was also a player with a Class—a Fortune-teller.

This was Song Tang's first time encountering players with Classes. He hesitantly withdrew his gaze. "Did the four of you enter this instance together?"

"Yes," 007 answered, offering no further details.

"Both of you are players with Classes, so you must have Class skills!" Song Tang said anxiously. "Why not have the Fortune-teller divine how we can leave this instance first?"

If I could divine that, I'd be a ghost myself!

The Fortune-teller clutched her Pendulum tightly. "I don't have that ability."

"But you should at least be able to divine a general direction, right? Like, where there might be clues, or which places are safer..." Song Tang pressed, extremely anxious.

"Alright," August suddenly cut Song Tang off. "Our priority now is to figure out why this instance has no hints. Is it a bug, or is this just how the instance's mechanics work? Of course, it's also possible this instance wants to hunt us down and slaughter us all. Speaking of which..."

August suddenly turned to 007. "You must know something. Before we entered the instance, I heard you shout 'Split up!' not far from the supermarket. It was as if you'd already anticipated we would enter the instance together."

007, of course, wouldn't reveal the truth.

This instance had been prepared by Earth specifically for Chu Changge and Xiao Qiao; everyone else was just innocent collateral damage.

Earth wanted to eliminate Chu Changge and Xiao Qiao.

007 couldn't guarantee how these three players would react if they learned the truth.

Upon learning the truth, there was a high probability they would develop murderous intent towards Chu Changge and Xiao Qiao.

"Since the instance only wants to kill these two, if we kill them, the instance will be satisfied and might mercifully let us go"—they might think along those lines.

Any player desperate to survive would think that way.

They couldn't be blamed for it. But if these few really did develop murderous intent, then there would only be one solution...

"Why aren't you speaking?" August narrowed his eyes at 007. "Are you hiding something from us?"

The atmosphere in the dimly lit room grew tense, with an undercurrent of hostility, as the two groups of players subtly squared off against each other.

Sensing the atmosphere turn sour, Si Huanian quickly tried to smooth things over. "Let's not be like this, everyone. This instance is too strange. We need to stick together. Mutual suspicion won't do us any good at a time like this."

Chapter 682 Praise for the Wildlife Conservation Act_2

As she spoke, she patted August on the shoulder. "Both you and Song Tang need to calm down."

After patting August's shoulder, Si Huanian turned her head towards 007 and the others. The light was too dim for her to see their faces clearly, so she could only make out their rough outlines.

"You five, don't overthink things. We mean no harm..."

Wait a minute?

Si Huanian suddenly stopped speaking.

Five?

Looking at the five dark figures before her, a huge wave of panic surged within her.

There was... an extra person in the room.

Chu Changge was the first to react. He grabbed 007, who was closest to him, and rushed out.

The Fortune-teller also reacted quickly. She smelled a foul stench from behind her, as if something was approaching. The instant she caught a whiff of the stench, she immediately grabbed Xiao Qiao, who was in front of her, and ran in the direction Chu Changge and 007 had fled.

The remaining two, August and Song Tang, also reacted.

They scrambled out of the room.

As Song Tang stepped out of the room, he dared to glance back and saw a humanoid monster covered in pustules, its facial muscles torn and distorted.

Seeing the horrific monster in the room, he didn't dare linger and bolted outside.

It was also dark outside. The moon and stars were obscured by dark clouds. They sprinted down an uneven path. The town was eerily silent, like a monster that made no sound.

The two of them ran for several minutes, only stopping when they could no longer see the silhouette of the house.

Leaning against a tree, they panted heavily. They had reached the town, surrounded by long-abandoned buildings. It was a dilapidated, abandoned town.

Song Tang stared blankly in the direction they had run from, his mouth agape. "Si Huanian... Didn't Si Huanian follow us?"

August also looked back at the winding, pitch-black path. "She probably got separated from us. Weren't the others separated from us too?"

"Never mind her for now," August said, straightening up. "Let's find a place to hide. We're too exposed here."

He looked around. Dilapidated buildings were clustered densely around them. Most of their windows were shattered, and the interiors were pitch-black, as if terrifying Evil Ghosts lurked within.

They didn't dare enter these houses again.

"This instance is too strange. It threw us into a deathtrap right from the start. That other team of players is also very odd. I suspect this instance might have something to do with them," August said, scanning their surroundings. "Let's find a storefront with a wider entrance first. That way, it'll be easier to escape if we have to. What do you think?"

As he spoke, he looked at Song Tang, as if seeking his opinion.

But Song Tang didn't respond, merely staring wide-eyed at the top of August's head.

August instinctively looked up. A drop of liquid fell from the tree, landing right in his eye.

His vision instantly turned crimson. Through a gap in the leaves above his head, he saw a pair of crimson eyes staring fixedly at them.

Run! August tried to run.

But for some reason, his feet wouldn't move an inch.

He looked down and saw a withered, ghostly hand shoot out from the ground, gripping his ankle tightly.

How can this be...

August stared at his ankle in shock.

How can there be so many ghosts...

Just how many are there...

At that moment, a ghostly claw was snaking up his ankle, and he saw half a decaying head emerge from the earth.

Song Tang had long since fled.

He was all alone now.

Looking at the monster emerging from the ground, August shivered violently. "I... I can only use that..."

Song Tang, who had escaped earlier, ran to a small hut and cowered, trembling all over.

"How can there be so many ghosts in this instance! Why... why..."

Trembling, he looked in August's direction.

However, a dilapidated old building blocked his view.

Thinking about the scene from moments ago, he swallowed hard. "August... he's definitely a goner. I wonder where Si Huanian is. I hope I can find her and meet up with her..."

What he didn't know was that Si Huanian hadn't run out of the small house with them.

She was still inside.

In the pitch-black room, Si Huanian was the only living person still standing. Everyone else had fled, but she remained motionless.

She stared blankly at the figure in the darkness, her mouth agape in astonishment.

"You're..." She took two incredulous steps forward.

The pustule-covered monster opened its maw at her.

Then, a woman's screams and horrific chewing sounds echoed through the night.

Chu Changge's group of four hadn't run far when they stopped in front of a row of abandoned shops.

007 was still vigilantly scanning their surroundings. "Be careful. Ghosts could appear at any moment."

The Fortune-teller was bent over, hands on her knees, resting. "There are far too many ghosts here! We won't survive much longer!"

Moreover, this place was a deathtrap.

They had no way out at all.

Despair filled the Fortune-teller's heart.

What could they do?

Were they going to be trapped here forever?

Waiting for some unknown ghost to kill them?

She might as well just end it all now.

Just then, Chu Changge suddenly spoke up. "I think I have a way for us to leave this place."

Hearing this, a glimmer of hope appeared in the Fortune-teller's eyes.

Chu Changge continued, "Mr. Green said there's a train that connects seven worlds. If we find that train, we can escape this place."

He knew Gu Mian had once entered that train instance and caused it to cease operations. He wondered if the train had been repaired by now.

"But a world is vast. We'll probably be killed by ghosts before we even find the train. Besides, we don't know this place at all," 007 said with a frown.

No, there was someone who knew this place very well!

As she thought this, she looked towards Xiao Qiao.

But the sight made her scalp tingle.

She saw a gaunt, pale, stark-naked figure standing behind Xiao Qiao. It contorted its body bizarrely, like a crazed dancer. 007 saw its malformed arm wrap around Xiao Qiao's neck.

"Xiao Qiao!" 007 cried out urgently.

The Fortune-teller also wanted to do something, but it was too late.

The gaunt figure had already pressed itself against Xiao Qiao's back. Its malformed arm tightened slightly.

CRACK!

The Fortune-teller's face paled, and she retreated a few steps, barely daring to watch what would happen next.

However, the expected scene didn't unfold.

The sound had come from the pale arm. Its two white, slender limbs now hung lifelessly, as if dislocated at the joints.

A piercing ghostly shriek suddenly echoed through the area.

"What just happened?!" 007 exclaimed in utter astonishment, watching the ghost's frantically retreating figure.

For a moment, she even thought Gu Mian had arrived.

The Fortune-teller also watched the direction the ghost had fled, her face full of confusion.

Chu Changge pushed up his glasses, looked at Xiao Qiao who stood there unharmed, and said, "Wildlife Protection Law."

Chapter 683 Happy Joint Burial_1

[Wildlife Protection Law]

[Introduction: "The moment it is stuffed into your mouth, the Wildlife Protection Law becomes effective!"]

[Function: Fill in the player's name under the 'wildlife' section of this law. That player will immediately be added to the wildlife protection list. Under the effects of the "Wildlife Protection Law," all pursuit and harm directed at that player will be restricted for a short period. Each player's name can only be entered once.]

[Supplement: The player who enters another's name is the Legislator. The higher the Legislator's deterrence, the stronger the effect of the "Wildlife Protection Law" and the longer its duration.]

There are a total of ten slots in the "wildlife" section.

You can fill in the names of ten people at once. Once all ten slots are used, this item becomes useless.

Gu Mian had already written their names when he discovered that Chu Changge and the others had been pulled into the instance.

At this moment, he was standing by the window on the fifth floor of a building, discerning his direction.

"This should be the Seventh World, shouldn't it?" Gu Mian said, holding his guitar case.

He had been dragged in here before he could use his Dungeon Entry Ticket. Gu Mian initially thought Earth had gone mad and pulled him into another special instance. However, to his surprise, after arriving, he found that this place strongly resembled the descriptions of the Twilight Gods World.

As for why I ended up here...

The Fortune-teller had once made Gu Mian a long string of Xingyuns. Adhering to his principle of not letting anything go to waste, Gu Mian also folded the secondary ticket of the Dungeon Entry Ticket into a Xingyun for the Fortune-teller.

Later, he brought the long string of Xingyuns back for the others in the house to choose from. Fatty chose the most colorful one and gave it to Chu Changge, saying it was to save his luck from being "tainted by bad influences."

Thus, the secondary ticket that could pull players into an instance ended up in Chu Changge's hands.

Gu Mian guessed that Chu Changge had used the secondary ticket not long after entering this instance.

Probably thinking that four people were too lonely, so he summoned me to join them for a group burial.

"This secondary ticket is so unreliable!" Gu Mian muttered, straining his eyes to look into the distance, trying to locate Chu Changge and the others. "Instead of landing me next to the user, it dropped me in this godforsaken place. There's not even a ghost of a person around."

But soon enough, he would see a ghost.

Gu Mian spent several minutes by the window without spotting anyone, so he decided to go downstairs and search along the road.

But as soon as he turned his head, he locked eyes with a pair of vicious eyes behind him.

A woman was hanging from a ceiling beam, her eyes bulging grotesquely from the pressure of the noose.

Her head, caught in the noose, was tilted slightly downward, her bulging eyes full of venomous hatred, fixed on Gu Mian.

Gu Mian silently raised his head and met her gaze.

A few seconds later, he pulled her down from the noose.

「A few minutes later」

A figure in a white coat, dragging a long-haired woman, walked slowly along the rugged path.

The scene, set against the backdrop of the surrounding environment, seemed somewhat eerie.

With the addition of the woman's shrill screams, the picture became even more bizarre.

Gu Mian, dragging a ghost, slowed his pace. He quite liked this ghost's piercing screams, so he decided to bring her along.

The female ghost's voice was piercing; her miserable shrieks could be heard from eight hundred meters away.

These screams seemed to be constantly signaling to others: "Gu Mian is here!"

"Chu Changge and the other three must be able to hear this signal too," Gu Mian said, looking confidently at the female ghost he was holding. "They'll be able to find me if they follow this sound."

He muttered to himself while tugging at the poor female ghost's hair, "Scream louder."

A few strands of the female ghost's hair were yanked out, and the miserable cries in the area immediately grew sharper.

Gu Mian looked with satisfaction at the female ghost being dragged along the ground. "Looks like she can scream for a long time. Excellent. It only costs one female ghost to transmit information for two hours."

When this ghost stops making noise, I'll just find a new one.

Thinking this, Gu Mian continued along the road.

Perhaps because the female ghost's screams were too horrifying, no other ghosts came to bother Gu Mian for the time being.

"I wonder where the four of them are," Gu Mian said, looking around. "And what kind of sh*tty instance is this? They didn't even give us a name or the instance's objectives upon entry, and no rewards either. So stingy."

The sky was dark here, and there were no streetlights.

Surrounded by dilapidated buildings of varying heights, it was clearly a dead city. Aside from the female ghost's screams, the silent city was devoid of any other sound.

There was not a single light in the dead city.

Gu Mian had arrived in a hurry and hadn't brought a flashlight, so he couldn't see the road ahead clearly.

This bumpy dirt road hadn't been repaired in a long time. Knee-high weeds had grown on both sides, dense and forming large, interconnected patches, looking as if four burly men might leap out from them at any moment.

Gu Mian rather hoped Chu Changge and the other three would jump out from there.

But that seemed a bit out of character for them.

"I'm not sure how Xiao Qiao has managed to survive in such a shabby place," Gu Mian said, looking at the dilapidated buildings around him. "Or is she living in a relatively safer area? But then again, is there really any safe place in this world?"

Dragging the female ghost, who was still dutifully transmitting the "Gu Mian is here" signal, he mused, "Speaking of which, this world really doesn't seem to have time. I didn't find any clocks in that building earlier."

Xiao Qiao once said this world was on the verge of collapse. Is that related to this absence of time?

And Mr. Green seemed very concerned about the Seventh World. Is this world really that important?

How important can a world on the brink of collapse be?

Gu Mian continued walking forward silently, thinking, "If Mr. Green values this world so much, why did he help me get in touch with the train instance?"

Isn't he afraid this world will collapse directly under the influence of my bad luck?

The female ghost was still diligently sending out signals.

But everything around remained silent.

No one was drawn by her voice.

It seems Chu Changge and the others aren't nearby. Gu Mian stared into the darkness ahead. Where on earth did those guys run off to...?

Just then, he spotted something in the middle of the dim road ahead.

Gu Mian dragged the ghost in his hand forward a couple of steps until he was in front of the object.

He bent over slightly to look at the thing at his feet—

A bloodstained finger—an index finger.

It appeared fairly fresh.

He reached out and picked up the solitary finger lying on the dirt road.

Gu Mian examined the severed end of the finger.

The severed surface was uneven, with a section of finger bone protruding from the flesh. The flesh on the exposed bone had already air-dried and didn't look too gruesome.

The finger seemed to have been severed by a blunt instrument; the bone had been forcibly shattered.

One could only imagine how bloody the scene must have been when this finger was severed.

What's going on?

He frowned, pinching the severed finger. It was already somewhat stiff; it had probably been cut off a few days ago.

The owner of this finger was clearly a living person.

What in the world is happening?

Gu Mian couldn't figure it out. "Weren't there supposed to be no living people left in the Twilight Gods World? Could this have been left behind by other players? Did Earth pull other players into here before?"

He stared at the now-stiff index finger in his hand, a peculiar feeling welling up inside him.

Gu Mian hesitated for a few seconds, then stuffed the blood-stained severed finger into his pocket. "This might be some kind of clue."

A dead city, a living person, a severed finger—everything here reeked of the bizarre.

"I need to find those four soon," Gu Mian thought as he continued walking. "I wonder how long the effects of the Wildlife Protection Law will last."

This thing can only protect a person once; names can't be entered repeatedly.

Thinking this, Gu Mian quickened his pace.

But at that moment, a sound came from the road ahead.

Even though the female ghost was still shrieking at high decibels, Gu Mian still heard a rustling sound from the darkness ahead.

Who is it? A ghost or a human?

He quickly took a few steps forward but only saw a black shadow flit past.

Gu Mian stared in the direction the black shadow had vanished, momentarily stunned.

Chapter 684 Do You Also Want to Ride the Children's Swing?_1

Thanks to the Wildlife Protection Law, Chu Changge and his group were no longer under attack by ghosts.

They were journeying through an abandoned town.

A short while ago, Chu Changge had explained to them the function of the special item, the Wildlife Protection Law, and revealed its holder.

"The Wildlife Protection Law is in Gu Mian's hands. Since Gu Mian let us use it, it must mean he knows we've been pulled into an instance, right?" the Fortune-teller asked, looking at Chu Changge in front of her.

"He must know," 007 responded, sweeping her high-intensity flashlight around. Her inventory held numerous tools useful for instances, including the flashlight, which she had been reluctant to use before for fear of revealing their location.

Now that they knew Gu Mian had activated the Wildlife Protection Law, Xiao Qiao even snatched the flashlight and cranked it up to maximum power.

The intense light from the maxed-out flashlight illuminated the surroundings as if it were daylight; the group could even spot half of a pale, reflective face hidden behind a tree.

Ignoring some of the spectral imagery, 007 pondered, "The greater the user's intimidation value, the longer the Wildlife Protection Law lasts. I presume if an ordinary person used it, it would only protect 'wildlife' for ten-odd seconds."

Even if it was just for ten-odd seconds, this was still an incredibly powerful special item.

The item allowed ten names to be entered, meaning it could individually help ten people by blocking a ghost's attack for about ten seconds.

Special items obtained from instances that could restrain ghosts were exceedingly rare, almost unheard of. In a life-or-death situation, every second was precious.

In a chase between humans and ghosts, ten-odd seconds could determine a player's life or death.

But Gu Mian was a cheat; it couldn't possibly be just a mere ten-odd seconds for him.

"In Gu Mian's case," the Fortune-teller began hesitantly, "the duration should be about half an hour? Or maybe an hour?"

007 clutched the flashlight, sensing the conversation veering in a strange direction. Gu Mian's 'duration'... She coughed a few times to cut off the Fortune-teller's speculation. "Time in reality and in instances aren't equivalent. A single day in reality often equates to several days in an instance. Gu Mian activated the Wildlife Protection Law in the outside world, so we don't know how the difference in time flow would affect the Law Code."

Just then, Chu Changge suddenly interjected, "It's also possible he activated the protection law here."

007 was startled. "What do you mean?"

Chu Changge pushed up his glasses and took out a colorful, crumpled voucher from his pocket. Upon closer inspection, there was a space to fill in a name, and the characters 'Gu Mian' were clearly written there.

Chu Changge stated, "He must have been in here for quite some time."

The Fortune-teller instantly recognized the counterfoil.

Not long ago, Gu Mian had suddenly shown up to squeeze her dry, making her craft numerous good luck charms.

The raw material for one of those good luck charms was this very thing.

She hadn't expected this good luck charm to end up with Chu Changge.

"A Dungeon Entry Ticket counterfoil?" Knowing that Gu Mian had unfortunately been dragged into this place, the Fortune-teller's joy was palpable. "Well done, Chu Changge!"

Looking at her ecstatic expression, an unknowing observer might think Chu Changge had dragged her mortal enemy into this godforsaken place.

"This is truly the most useful good luck charm I've ever made." The Fortune-teller, beaming, offered a fair assessment. "It seems the good luck charms I make aren't entirely useless after all."

007 had begun to scan their surroundings. "Even though Gu Mian has also entered this place, he doesn't seem to be nearby."

After some maneuvering by Xiao Qiao with the flashlight, the area was now as bright as day.

If Gu Mian were nearby, he would have found them by following the light by now.

"Besides, given his personality," 007 analyzed, "if he were looking for us, he wouldn't search methodically. He'd more likely create some kind of commotion, allowing us to follow the sound directly to him."

007 began to deduce Gu Mian's method for creating a commotion. "He'd most likely blow something up to create a loud noise..."

It seems she still hadn't recovered from the "Audience Stand Explosion Incident" in the Circus instance.

"But Gu Mian wouldn't carry explosives on him. Given his luck, if he did, the explosives might suddenly go haywire and blow him up... He'd probably improvise with whatever's available, maybe catch a ghost and force it to make a sound to signal his location to us."

The Fortune-teller also agreed with 007's assessment. "That indeed sounds very much like Gu Mian's style."

But the surroundings were eerily quiet, without a single sound.

The Fortune-teller couldn't help but worry that Gu Mian had been teleported countless miles away.

"Let's follow the road," 007 said, looking at the small path ahead. "If Gu Mian is looking for people, he'd probably stick to the main roads. We might run into him if we follow this path."

At this moment, Chu Changge spoke unexpectedly, "If we had a vehicle, perhaps we could find Gu Mian sooner."

007 paused for several seconds before it dawned on her. "You're not thinking of riding my kiddie ride, are you?"

Riding a kiddie ride around a place like this was quite a surreal image in itself.

The kiddie ride could be used in instances. But since each use consumed a large amount of money, 007 couldn't afford to use it many times. Moreover, she was usually broke in instances, so she couldn't use it even if she wanted to.

Furthermore, this thing would blast a loud, idiotic children's song every time it was used, practically announcing to the ghosts, "I'm over here!" 007 never dared to use it in instances.

But now, things were different.

They were under the protection of the Wildlife Protection Law.

Although they didn't know how long it would last. A few hours should be possible, right?

Thus, the four of them climbed onto the pathetic kiddie ride.

Chu Changge took the lead.

He sat primly on the kiddie ride's seat, his glasses reflecting an eerie glint under the flashlight's beam.

007 managed to squeeze onto the seat as well. Looking at Chu Changge sitting so formally beside her, she was speechless.

The seat of this kiddie ride was probably only meant for two small children. Usually, it was quite spacious for 007 alone, but with two people on it now, it was very cramped.

There was no room for the Fortune-teller and Xiao Qiao to sit. Fortunately, there was a footboard at the back of the ride. The two of them stood on the footboard, holding onto the back of the seat, carefully trying not to fall off.

The Fortune-teller divined a direction.

And so, the group began their bizarre journey, accompanied by the cheerful strains of "Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, Jingle All the Way." Four people, one kiddie ride. What a stunning sight.

If Gu Mian happened to pass by at this moment, he would definitely stop them, confiscate their 'vehicle,' and issue a twelve-point penalty.

The Fortune-teller stood precariously on the footboard, feeling the wind rush against her face.

Listening to the idiotic children's song emanating from the kiddie ride, she asked with genuine sincerity, "Is this really a horror instance?"

If Gu Mian was nearby, he would definitely be lured by this delightful song, right?

Listening to the noise from the kiddie ride, 007 felt a sense of unease.

She looked at Chu Changge beside her. "This will easily attract ghosts, right? What if the Wildlife Protection Law expires, and we've attracted a swarm of them? Won't we be in even greater danger?"

Chu Changge looked at her. "We don't have time. We must find Gu Mian immediately."

No time left?

007's brow twitched. Is Chu Changge in such a hurry because something is about to happen?

Speaking of which...

007 thought back to what happened before, in front of the dense forest. "Back then, in front of the woods, did you notice something?"

At that time, they hadn't yet seen the owner of the footsteps, but Chu Changge had decisively concluded that it was a ghost.

What exactly had he discovered?

August had asked this question too, but Chu Changge hadn't provided an answer.

007 had initially thought Chu Changge would brush off the question, but to her surprise, he actually answered.

His gaze was somewhat vacant. "I saw something familiar."

Something familiar?

Seeing that familiar thing, he had immediately judged the footsteps were from a ghost.

The Fortune-teller was also listening intently, ears pricked. She ventured a guess, "Was it something belonging to a dead person?"

"Sort of," Chu Changge replied.

"Seeing something familiar belonging to a deceased person here..." The Fortune-teller mused. "Could it be that people from the real world become ghosts and come here after they die?"

Chu Changge didn't answer further.

007 also fell into deep thought.

「Meanwhile, Gu Mian had followed the shadowy figure to a building.」

The dark shadow was incredibly fast; by the time Gu Mian had followed it here, he had lost it completely.

"That shadow," Gu Mian muttered, standing at the entrance of a derelict photo studio, "it really resembled..."

He had seen the dark figure dart into the photo studio's entrance and vanish.

It didn't seem aggressive; it was merely guiding me here.

Familiar figures, missing time, a rhythmic alarm...

Gu Mian felt as if he had glimpsed the secrets of this world.

"So, this is what this world is like," he murmured, tying the female ghost's hair to the doorknob to prevent her from escaping.

Then, he stepped through the doors of the photo studio.

The long-abandoned photo studio was thick with dust.

Old, broken tripods littered the floor.

Several cameras lay in disarray on the ground, shrouded in a thick layer of dust.

There don't seem to be any useful clues here.

Gu Mian wandered around the dust-filled photo studio a few times before finally approaching the counter.

The counter was glass-topped. Beneath it, numerous customer photos were piled up, mostly in white paper bags marked with names and contact details.

He squatted by the counter and began to rummage through these photos.

This was a photo studio, not an artistic portrait studio, so most of the photos were one or two-inch headshots, the kind used for ID cards or documents.

With a complete lack of public decency, he tore open other people's photo envelopes to examine them.

Gu Mian examined a thick stack of photos but found not a single clue.

He was getting impatient and started to only open the ones that looked somewhat special.

Just then, a thick, yellowed paper bag at the very bottom caught his attention.

Gu Mian reached out, pulled out the heavy paper bag, and tore open the seal.

Inside was a stack of two-inch headshots.

He pulled out the topmost sheet of photos and looked down.

When he saw the face in the photo, Gu Mian froze for a moment.

For a second, he thought he was looking at his own headshot.

The person in the photo bore about a sixty percent resemblance to him. At first glance, it was easy to be mistaken, but a closer look revealed the differences.

Gu Mian then recalled the ghost in the Deathly Visage instance mentioning "another Gu Mian in the crematorium."

Could the crematorium that ghost mentioned be in this world?

He pulled out the next photo.

Good heavens, the person in this photo bore an even stronger resemblance to him, and it wasn't the same individual as the previous one.

Seeing this, Gu Mian pulled out all the remaining photos from the bag.

He saw that the person in every photo looked incredibly similar to him, yet each was a different individual.

What in the world?

Gu Mian put down the photos in his hand. "My brothers and sisters?"

Chapter 685 Definitely.....Still Reading Novels the Night before Qixi_1

In the dim photo studio.

For a while, Gu Mian stared at the stack of photos in his hand, then put them into the pocket containing the severed finger. I'm not sure if these things can be taken out. If they can, I'll have Mr. Green look through them to see if there's anyone he recognizes.

Gu Mian remembered that his goal was to find his four lost companions.

He didn't linger there for long.

Gu Mian went to the entrance, untied the hair from the doorknob, and continued his journey, dragging the ghost woman along.

As he proceeded, he analyzed, The paper bag containing these photos doesn't have a name, just a number. 46—that's the number in the name field. What does that mean? Fourth grade, class six? But the people in the photos look like they're past elementary school age; they're at least adults. Or could it be... the forty-sixth batch?

Gu Mian thought of Chu Changge, who was born as an "experimental subject."

So, are these people who look so much like me also some kind of 'experimental subjects'? If '46' means the forty-sixth batch of experimental subjects, that would make sense. Could I have been born as an experimental subject too? What a baffling world. Gu Mian desperately wanted to encounter more high-level NPCs to extract some information from them.

But now was not the time to be thinking about high-level NPCs.

Gu Mian quickened his pace, hoping to find the four who had come here sooner.

He tightened his grip on the ghost woman's hair. If that shadow just now was really him... then we're in big trouble.

The kiddie ride on the other side had already started playing its fourth nursery rhyme.

Chu Changge and the others still hadn't seen any sign of Gu Mian.

Instead, quite a few ghosts were attracted to this high-end kiddie ride. They reached out their hands eagerly, seeming to want to hop on for a spin, but were all dissuaded by the Wildlife Protection Law.

It's worth mentioning that as they rode, they passed Song Tang, who was hiding in the darkness. Huddled in a corner, Song Tang didn't even dare to poke his head out when he heard the eerie nursery rhyme.

In this context, even a warm and comforting nursery rhyme sounded incredibly creepy.

Why is there this kind of music in an instance full of ghosts? So creepy! Listening to the nursery rhyme, Song Tang hid himself even more thoroughly, still pinning his hopes on the instance. He hoped it would discover a BUG sooner and, preferably, send him out immediately after finding it.

Chu Changge, the wealthiest of the four, focused on inserting Game Coins into the kiddie ride.

The Fortune-teller and Xiao Qiao concentrated on the footboard beneath their feet, paying no attention to their surroundings.

007, who hadn't slept for many days, was yawning in her seat and consequently didn't notice Song Tang cowering in a nearby corner.

The group on the kiddie ride gradually receded into the distance.

But then, 007 saw an unexpected figure.

The sudden apparition jolted most of her sleepiness away. 007 quickly propped her head up to look where the figure had appeared.

The spot was now empty, as if what she had seen was merely a hallucination.

"Stop for a moment," 007 said immediately.

Chu Changge stopped feeding Game Coins into the machine.

The cheerful kiddie ride came to a halt on the uneven path.

"What's wrong?" As the kiddie ride stopped, the Fortune-teller also jumped off the footboard and stretched her limbs; the repetitive motion had made her legs somewhat numb. "Did you see Gu Mian?"

"No," 007 said, shaking her head, her face pale. She looked at the others with a strange expression. "I just saw a very familiar figure."

Hearing this, the Fortune-teller was taken aback. "Who? A friend from your real world?"

"Sort of," 007 nodded hesitantly.

The Fortune-teller frowned. "Is your friend dead?"

"No, not dead... should not be dead," 007 said, closing her eyes, her expression conflicted. Her voice lacked confidence by the end.

"Could he have died without you knowing?" the Fortune-teller asked, hesitating for a few seconds before a thought struck her. "With that expression, don't tell me you saw Gu Mian's ghost!"

"Impossible," 007 replied, somewhat impressed by the Fortune-teller's wild imagination.

"Ah," the Fortune-teller said, somewhat confused. "Chu Changge found items belonging to his deceased acquaintances here, and you, 007, saw a familiar figure. This basically confirms that this world has a connection with reality, right?"

"We also speculated earlier that people who died in the real world might become ghosts in this world. It now seems that this speculation is very likely correct," the Fortune-teller stated her deduction.

But 007 looked uneasy. She glanced at the Fortune-teller, who was lost in her deductions, and then at Chu Changge, sitting on the kiddie ride.

I hope I was mistaken...

She took a few more steps towards the area where the figure had flashed past and suddenly noticed something on the ground.

She bent down and picked it up.

It was a finger.

A bloodstained, slightly decaying finger.

007 didn't examine it immediately. Instead, she scanned the empty space in front of her again, making sure there was nothing else, before returning to the kiddie ride.

"Did you find anything?" the Fortune-teller asked 007 curiously.

007 shook her head slightly. "Let's get on the ride first. We'll talk after we leave this place."

The figure from before had given her a very bad feeling, and she didn't want to linger there.

So, they all climbed back onto the kiddie ride and departed.

Only after they were moving did 007 show the others what she had found.

The Fortune-teller looked at the somewhat rotten finger. "This... it looks like a living person's finger, doesn't it? It must have been on someone not too long ago."

There were many abrasions on the finger, and the severed end was uneven, as if cut with a dull blade.

"It does look like a living person's finger," 007 agreed with a nod. "It looks like it was severed about ten days ago. Could there have been living people here ten days ago?"

"No," Xiao Qiao, who was on the footboard, stated flatly. "No living people. Impossible."

"Could it be a ghost's finger then?" The Fortune-teller stared at the finger intently for a moment. "No, that's not right. The ghost hands I've seen before were all hideous. This finger, though a bit rotten, still looks quite... well-formed. Not like a ghost's hand."

At this, she looked at 007. "It couldn't be the finger of that familiar figure you saw, could it?"

007 seemed dazed for a moment, lost in thought.

Perhaps because it was carrying four people, the kiddie ride consumed a vast number of Game Coins.

By now, Chu Changge had exhausted his funds.

Xiao Qiao and the Fortune-teller also contributed their Game Coins.

But their combined Game Coins were far less than what Chu Changge had possessed. Half an hour later, under the weight of four people, the kiddie ride finally conked out.

Seeing the kiddie ride stalled in the middle of the road, 007 looked a little embarrassed. "It never used up Game Coins this fast when I rode it alone."

"We'll have to walk from here," Chu Changge said, his gaze shifting from the kiddie ride.

"Speaking of which, we've been on this ride for several hours now, haven't we?" the Fortune-teller remarked, looking at the oppressive, dark buildings around them. She carried a timing device, but for some reason, it had stopped working after they entered this world, so she could only rely on intuition to gauge the time. "We haven't run into Gu Mian for so long; isn't that a bit odd? Don't tell me he was transported to the other side of the world?"

"This town is bigger than we imagined," Chu Changge said, gazing ahead. "Finding someone isn't easy."

They had actually passed many crossroads, each time relying on the Fortune-teller's divination to decide which way to go.

Now, the Fortune-teller tossed her small stick onto the ground again.

The stick still pointed straight ahead.

The Fortune-teller looked at the pitch-black road ahead. "The Wildlife Protection Law has been active for so long; I'm really worried it's going to fail any second now... Speaking of which, Gu Mian has been in here for a good part of the day too, and he still hasn't found us. Don't tell me he's been chasing us from behind all this time?"

If he's behind us, and we're moving forward on the ride, wouldn't we just get farther and farther apart? the Fortune-teller mused, her imagination running wild.

"You have to trust your divination," 007 said, looking at the wooden stick that pointed straight ahead. "The divination indicates Gu Mian is in that direction."

"I hope I'm not mistaken," the Fortune-teller said, lacking confidence.

Just then, she noticed the tattered hem of Chu Changge's clothing.

The Fortune-teller stared at the hem of his jacket, which looked as if it had been gnawed by a dog, and was momentarily stunned. "Were your clothes torn by a ghost?"

"I left markers on the road," Chu Changge replied, shaking his head slightly. "If Gu Mian is really behind us, he'll see the strips of cloth I left."

"That's a great idea," the Fortune-teller said, glancing at her own substantial black coat. "Your clothes alone might not be enough. Cut mine."

As she spoke, she extended her hand toward Chu Changge. "Lend me the scissors."

Chu Changge looked at the Fortune-teller's outstretched hand and silently passed her a rusty fruit knife.

The Fortune-teller stared at the rusty fruit knife Chu Changge handed her, finally understanding why his clothes looked as if they had been gnawed by a dog.

Nearby, 007's expression grew even more troubled.

She frowned, her thoughts drifting elsewhere.

The Fortune-teller struggled to cut off a strip of cloth. To ensure it wouldn't be blown away by the wind, she went to a nearby bush, intending to tie the strip to it.

But just as she reached out, a ghostly hand suddenly shot out from the bush and grabbed her wrist.

Then, the Fortune-teller saw a face hidden in the bushes.

Due to the effect of the Wildlife Protection Law, the ghost's hand immediately withdrew after merely touching her, and the face in the bush shrieked and fled.

Clutching the strip of cloth, the Fortune-teller stumbled back several steps and finally blurted out a curse.

"Look!" she exclaimed, staring in shock in the direction the ghostly figure had fled, barely able to react. "Wasn't that Si Huanian?"

Chapter 686 Those who are still reading novels at Qixi Festival definitely don't have partners!_1
Sihuania died and turned into a ghost.

People who die in this world immediately turn into ghosts that may even attack other players.

The four of them quickly accepted this premise.

The Fortune-teller watched silently as Sihuania departed.

She had just seen Sihuania's mangled body, as if something had gnawed on it. The expression on his face seemed frozen at the moment of death, filled with shock and resentment.

"The shadow you just saw, was it her?" the Fortune-teller asked 007, turning her head.

007 closed her eyes, her expression full of worry. "No, it was someone else. Not one of those three players."

"Let's get out of here," Chu Changge said, also looking in the direction Sihuania had gone. "Keep moving forward. We need to find Gu Mian as soon as possible."

He spoke as he started walking forward along the road.

The Fortune-teller clutched the long strip of cloth in her hand and followed.

007 still held the slightly decayed finger in her hand. She glanced at the pitch-black surroundings; this place was like a monster, its maw wide open, ready to devour them.

She didn't look for long before pulling Xiao Qiao, who was beside her, forward.

"This world is truly bizarre! Players who die here turn directly into ghosts. In all the instances I've been through, this is the first time I've seen such a thing," the Fortune-teller said, tightly gripping the cloth strip in her hand.

"And you've all encountered people you knew," she continued, looking at Chu Changge and 007. She saw that 007's face was clouded with worry, an expression she rarely showed.

And though Chu Changge maintained his usual deadpan expression, his quickened pace betrayed him.

"We'd better hurry," Chu Changge spoke again. "I feel like the protection is gradually weakening."

The Fortune-teller turned to look at Chu Changge, only to find him staring at her wrist.

Following his gaze, she looked down and saw five bluish-purple finger marks where Sihuania had touched her.

Seeing the finger marks on her wrist, her scalp tingled.

"This world has no concept of time." Chu Changge looked up at the sky. "Even though we've been here for several hours, the sky hasn't changed. It's still the same as when we entered the instance. I suspect the protection in this world is weakened, and its duration might be affected."

Hearing this, everyone quickened their pace.

The Fortune-teller clutched the finger marks on her wrist, feeling a numbness spreading from the spot.

Previously, under the protection's effect, ghosts couldn't harm them. But this time, Sihuania had left finger marks on her wrist.

This meant the protection's effect was gradually disappearing.

If they didn't find Gu Mian before the protection completely vanished, they would likely die on the spot.

In this world teeming with ghosts, surviving even half an hour without external protection would be a miracle.

"If the protection fails, we can't keep wandering outside; we'll be living targets," 007 said, looking around. "It's best to find a relatively high place to hide and wait for Gu Mian to find us. The view from a high place is also good; if Gu Mian is nearby, we'll easily spot him."

The Fortune-teller nodded in agreement. "I still have some special items on me. If ghosts discover us while we're hiding up high, these can hold them off and buy us time to escape."

007 knew Chu Changge's usual way of doing things; she knew he would most likely choose to keep moving forward in this situation. Chu Changge gave the impression of someone who didn't much cherish his own life.

But unexpectedly, Chu Changge actually agreed with their opinion. "Alright."

007 was stunned for a moment, not expecting Chu Changge to be so keen on surviving.

Having gotten his agreement, the Fortune-teller began to observe the nearby buildings.

The tallest building within sight was a high-rise of over ten stories far in the distance.

But that place was truly too far, so the Fortune-teller could only choose something nearby.

She casually tossed her small sticks and then said, "How about that one on the left? It's nine stories high, and there's no entrance security downstairs."

Just as she was speaking, she suddenly felt something strange on her shoulder. She subconsciously turned her head and met a pair of blood-red eyes.

"Run!" 007 grabbed the Fortune-teller and pulled her forward, breaking into a run.

Now there was no need to go to the tall building the Fortune-teller had chosen; they had to shake off this ghost first.

Fortunately, the Wildlife Protection Law hadn't completely failed; otherwise, the Fortune-teller might have been splattered on the spot.

The group ran frantically, only stopping to rest slightly after confirming the ghost wasn't pursuing them.

"Don't stand here," the Fortune-teller said, pulling herself together. She headed towards the nearest high-rise building beside them. "Let's find a place to hide first."

The other three also quickly approached the high-rise.

Just as they reached about five meters from the building, the Fortune-teller suddenly saw something lying on the ground at the building's entrance.

007 and Chu Changge, who were behind her, had clearly seen it too.

"Don't go over there!" their urgent voices came at the same time.

Then, the Fortune-teller was yanked back by 007.

As she was being pulled back, she saw two charred figures standing behind a window of the high-rise in front of them.

She stared blankly at the two figures behind the window, so shocked she almost stopped breathing.

Only after being pulled to another hidden spot did the Fortune-teller come back to her senses. Her mouth half-open, she looked at 007. "People who die in this instance turn into ghosts, right?"

「At this moment, Gu Mian was dragging a smaller ghost down the road.」

The previous female ghost's throat was ruined; she couldn't scream anymore.

So, he'd spent some effort finding a smaller ghost, one that wouldn't take too much energy to drag along.

This was an underage ghost.

Kids are just so full of spirit. A couple of punches to the face, and it'll scream for two hours straight, Gu Mian mused.

Its voice was even louder than the previous female ghost's.

He saw a high-rise building of more than ten stories in the distance and thought about going up there to take a look.

A ten-plus-story building offered a view of a great distance; perhaps he could spot Chu Changge and the others.

Thinking of the figure he'd seen earlier, Gu Mian quickened his pace.

And just then, he suddenly heard a discordant sound.

It was the roar of a car engine.

He heard the sound of tires rolling over the ground drawing nearer. In the blink of an eye, it went from the distance to right behind him, followed by a harsh screech of brakes.

What the hell? Ghosts can't drive, can they? Could it be Chu Changge and the others? Have they found them so quickly?

But Gu Mian didn't recall seeing any vehicles in this place.

He looked back in surprise, but before he could clearly see who was behind him, he heard a familiar form of address—"Doctor!"

I must be hearing things, Gu Mian thought. Otherwise, how could I be hearing Fatty's voice here?

By then, he had turned around completely. The first thing he saw was Fatty, cleaver in hand, getting out of the car and running towards him, tears streaming down his face.

"Doctor!" Fatty wailed as he ran over. "I thought you'd been dragged into a different instance! I figured if no one was going to save Brother Chu and the others, that would be terrible. So, I steeled myself, put my name on the Dungeon Entry Ticket, and entered the Train instance. I wanted to find them. I was even thinking, if I died here, I'd have to trouble you, Doctor, to dig a couple of small graves for Brother Chu and me. No need to make them too big, wouldn't want to tire you out..."

Gu Mian silently turned his head to look at Coach Che, who sat in the driver's seat with a face full of despair. "So, in the Train instance, you ran into Coach Che, who was looking for a new job."

Fatty, while still sniffing, didn't forget to praise Gu Mian. "Doctor, you're truly prescient! I begged Coach Che for ages, but he wouldn't agree to come with me."

So how did he end up here then? Gu Mian wondered.

Fatty continued to explain, "After the train stopped, the conductor kicked him out, yelling something like, 'You unlucky oaf, don't stay on my train!'"

"So I asked Coach Che to drive his Spirit Car to find Brother Chu and the others. I'd borrowed Miss Xiao Qiao's Big Data Search before to find some clothes Xiao Hong had hidden, and I forgot to return it to her. After I got in here, I used the Big Data Search to find Brother Chu—it showed he was in this direction, so I headed this way."

"When I got nearby, I suddenly heard a ghost screaming. I thought, could the Doctor be here too? So I rushed over to check, and it really was you, Doctor!"

The Big Data Search was a special item of Miss Xiao Qiao's that Fatty often borrowed to find Gu Mian's clothes, which had a habit of vanishing into thin air.

"Is the train station very close to here?" Gu Mian grasped the key point; otherwise, Fatty couldn't have arrived in just a few hours.

Fatty shook his head. "Not very close. We floored it and drove for about two hours to get here. Luckily, there are no traffic police, or we'd have a car full of tickets."

"Keke and Miss Liu Ruyan wanted to come with me too," Fatty said, brandishing the cleaver in his hand. "But I have a Ghost Card, so ghosts generally don't notice me. I was afraid they'd be in danger if they came. If we not only failed to save anyone but ended up losing two more, that would be awful, so I didn't write their names."

What a good Fatty, Gu Mian thought, affectionately patting Fatty's head.

"Doctor," Fatty said, his expression turning grave despite the head pat, "there's something I have to tell you."

As he spoke, he took out something that closely resembled a mobile phone—it was Miss Xiao Qiao's special item, the Big Data Search.

Fatty frowned deeply. "I entered Brother Chu's name on this... Doctor, you know this thing doesn't give an exact location, just an arrow pointing in the direction you need to search. After I entered Brother Chu's name... Doctor, you should see for yourself."

He handed the Big Data Search to Gu Mian as he spoke.

Gu Mian took it and looked at the screen.

At the bottom of the screen was a name field where "Chu Changge" had been entered.

Above it was a map with arrows.

When used to find something unique, the screen should only display one arrow, indicating the direction of the item to be found.

Searching for Chu Changge should also only show one arrow.

But, on the screen Gu Mian was looking at...

It was densely packed with arrows.

Chapter 687 Nobody Would Still Be Single After Three Years, Right? _1

And, they are moving.

The 'Chu Changges' are moving.

"When I first left the station, the arrows were all pointing in this direction," Fatty's voice trembled slightly. "Even though I don't know why there are so many arrows, I still came over here."

"It wasn't until I got close to this area that I noticed the arrows starting to scatter, moving in all directions." Fatty tightened his grip on the kitchen knife in his hand. "Doctor, what does this mean? Why are there so many arrows?"

So that's how it is.

Gu Mian looked intently at the screen showing Big Data Search results for a while before handing it back to Fatty.

This unique object, the Big Data Search tool, could only be used once a week. Once Fatty filled in Chu Changge's name, he wouldn't be able to search for anyone else for a while.

Otherwise, he could also try entering the names of 007, Xiao Qiao, and the Fortune-teller to see if their search results would be similar to Chu Changge's.

"I think I understand why this world lacks the concept of time now." Gu Mian looked at the Big Data Search tool in Fatty's hand.

The Fortune-teller had prophesied "death and resurrection." Group chats and friend slots had vanished. These events, along with the densely packed, moving arrows, were all explaining the rules of this world to Gu Mian.

Fatty opened his mouth, wanting to ask something, but then he suddenly saw a familiar figure standing under a building not far away.

The surroundings were dark, so Fatty could only make out a general outline. Even so, the silhouette was enough for him to recognize the person.

He widened his eyes and tugged at Gu Mian's sleeve. "Doctor, look there, isn't that... isn't that..."

Fatty looked at the figure standing under the building, instinctively feeling that something was off.

Gu Mian also turned his gaze in that direction.

He saw a familiar silhouette standing in front of a two-story building not too far from the roadside.

The silhouette seemed to sense their gazes and immediately darted into the two-story building behind it.

Fatty stared blankly at the place where the figure had disappeared. "So fast? Something seems strange..."

As he spoke, he uncontrollably took two steps forward but was pulled back by Gu Mian.

Although Fatty had a Ghost Card, Gu Mian still added his name to the Wildlife Protection Law as well.

Only after adding Fatty's name did Gu Mian move toward the direction where the figure had been standing.

Fatty followed in a daze.

Thinking about the dense arrows on the screen and the odd, familiar silhouette they had just seen, he had a bad feeling.

The two had already reached the two-story building.

It was a small restaurant. The sign above the entrance was so battered that its original name was illegible.

The double glass doors were also cracked and hung loosely on the doorframe, looking as if they were about to collapse.

The doors were wide open, giving a clear view of the lobby inside.

Directly opposite the entrance was a large counter. A fortune cat lay upon it, covered in a thick layer of dust. Behind the counter, a tall shelf messily displayed a few bottles of finely packaged liquor.

Gu Mian stepped into the restaurant.

The kitchen was on the right side of the first floor. Gu Mian glanced around; there was nothing special.

On the left, there were a few askew tables, indicating that no one had been here for a long time.

The first floor could be surveyed at a glance.

There was no one else here.

Gu Mian thought, That shadow might have vanished into thin air, just like the one that darted into the photo studio. But it could also be hiding on the second floor.

He looked at the stairs leading to the second floor, reflected for a moment, and eventually stepped onto them.

Fatty tightly clung to Gu Mian's sleeve, his steps heavy. He barely dared to climb the stairs, fearing he would see something he didn't want to on the second floor.

"Doctor," Fatty raised his head to look at Gu Mian's back as he climbed the stairs, "you recognized who that was too, didn't you?"

Gu Mian stopped in his tracks and nodded without turning his head.

Fatty seemed to have guessed something. He stood on the stairs, pursing his lips. "Even though I don't know why things turned out like this, I think that person might not want to be seen by you... Just now, it was merely peeking at us from over here. As soon as it realized it had been found, it immediately hid. Doctor, let's not go up..."

Gu Mian did not take Fatty's advice.

He continued to climb the stairs.

Fatty gritted his teeth and followed.

The two quickly arrived on the second floor.

Like many restaurants on Earth, the second floor consisted of private rooms.

A hallway faced the staircase, with rather rudimentary private rooms on either side.

There were five private rooms in total on this floor.

Gu Mian walked towards the one nearest to him and pushed open the door.

The interior was laid bare. It was a dim room with a large, round dining table. Chairs lay fallen on the floor, the tablecloth was torn in half, and a waist-high dish-and-chopstick cupboard stood in the corner.

Gu Mian quickly scanned the entire room, looked under the table hidden by the tablecloth, and even opened the cupboard to inspect inside.

Nothing was there.

He left the room to check the others.

All four rooms presented much the same scene, devoid of any presence.

Fatty felt relieved. Maybe it has already left...

By this point, Gu Mian had already opened the door to the last private room.

The situation in this room was similar to the rest, all in disarray.

After checking under the table, Gu Mian walked over to the dish-and-chopstick cupboard and reached for the door handle.

It didn't open.

It was as if someone inside the cupboard was holding the door shut.

Fatty looked at the firmly held cupboard door, his expression uneasy.

Uncharacteristically, Gu Mian didn't resort to his chainsaw to force the door. Instead, he gripped the handle and pulled outward again.

Without leverage inside the cupboard, it was difficult to resist the pull from outside.

After a few tugs, Gu Mian was victorious.

With a BANG, the cupboard door was pulled open.

A black shadow dashed out from inside and ran towards the exit, knocking over Fatty who was standing by the doorway.

However, Gu Mian quickly extended his hand and caught hold of the person who had almost escaped.

The caught person struggled for about half a minute before giving up.

Fatty had already scrambled up from the ground. When he clearly saw the person before him, he instinctively retreated a few steps, leaning against the table behind him.

He hadn't been mistaken just now.

Looking at the person Gu Mian had caught, Fatty was shocked and opened his mouth to cry out their name.

But Gu Mian was faster.

Looking at the terrifying, completely distorted face in front of him, Gu Mian spoke her name.

"Xiao Qiao."

The effect of the Wildlife Protection Law was gradually wearing off.

But the Fortune-teller was in no mood to bother about that at the moment.

She was still immersed in the scene she had just witnessed—two charred figures standing behind the window of a building.

The intense palpitations she felt in that instant made her immediately recognize one of them.

It was herself.

"Am I... already dead?" The Fortune-teller's gaze was somewhat vacant. She looked at the person beside her, hoping for an answer.

But no one answered her.

The Fortune-teller could only hear the THUMP-THUMP of her own heart; its insistent beat seemed to tell her she was alive.

It was then that the Fortune-teller remembered the familiar people and things mentioned by Chu Changge and 007.

She spoke in a daze, "The ones you saw, weren't they also your dead selves?"

"That's right," Chu Changge was the first to break the silence. "When I first entered here, I saw one of my unique items under a tree, already so corroded it was hardly recognizable."

But Chu Changge had recognized it at first glance.

"At that time, it was still in my inventory; it shouldn't have appeared there. That's when I realized I was already dead."

Chapter 688 The Wise Seventh World_1

"That's an illusion, right?" the Fortune-teller tightly clenched her hand. "It's an illusion created by this world..."

"No," Chu Changge said, looking up at the dim sky. "I had heard that Twilight Gods World was on the brink of collapse. I never thought this world would prevent its own apocalypse in such a way."

"What are you talking about?" The Fortune-teller looked at Chu Changge, not quite understanding.

Just then, Xiao Qiao suddenly spoke, "Our world has reached its end. All life will usher in the twilight, and all history will turn to dust..."

Chu Changge was very familiar with this passage. Xiao Qiao had once relayed it to them while munching on grilled meat. This passage certainly wasn't something Xiao Qiao came up with herself; with her intellect, she couldn't have. It must have been something she heard from someone in this world before. Xiao Qiao always had a habit of repeating others' words, especially those that sounded profound and mysterious.

This passage also implied that Twilight Gods World was on the verge of destruction. When Xiao Qiao left here for Earth, this world was already nearing its "end."

But it had somehow held on for so long without collapsing. Chu Changge already knew why this world had managed to endure.

"The loop," he said, looking at the dim, chaotic sky. "This world has prevented its own destruction through this loop."

It's like a person who knows he will die tomorrow. So, he forcibly initiates a loop, keeping himself forever stuck in 'today.' Whenever time reaches 23:59, it forcibly jumps back to the beginning of 'today.'

This world, knowing it was on the brink of destruction, forcibly initiated a time loop.

That was also why... they saw their own dead selves here.

The Fortune-teller seemed to understand something as well, her eyes widening. "So, what we're seeing are 'ourselves' from the previous loop, who died?"

Their entry into this world coincided with a loop.

"We enter this world, then we all die. Then time jumps back to before we entered this world, and then a new 'us' enters... it keeps repeating in this loop, right?" 007 thought of some horror movies; he hadn't expected to have such an odd experience himself today.

"Yes." Chu Changge lowered his head. "The previous versions of 'us' who entered this world had all died."

Chu Changge's words plunged the Fortune-teller into fear. "So, the current 'us' are also repeating this loop of death? We will eventually die, while a new 'us' will come to this world after we die... No, what if someone is still alive? What if someone survived in the previous loop? Wouldn't they encounter the current 'us'?"

"Xiao Qiao once mentioned an alarm sounding at regular intervals in this world. I believe that wasn't an alarm, but rather the sound of the world starting to collapse," Chu Changge said, looking at the Fortune-

teller. "After that sound, the Evil Ghosts go insane, the world starts to collapse, and we can't possibly survive that situation."

"Also, if I really managed to survive into the next loop, what do you think I would be most likely to do?"

Hearing Chu Changge's question, 007 backed away slightly. "If you truly managed to survive until then, I think you would probably wait for an opportunity to kill the next loop's Chu Changge and take his place."

"That's right," Chu Changge adjusted his glasses. "I would use any means necessary to replace the other 'me,' because I want to survive."

"So," 007 recalled the twisted face that had peeked out from the dense forest, "the ghost in the forest... was it you?"

Chu Changge nodded. "I think the 'us' from each loop all discovered the world's loop, and they are all trying their best to survive.

"That 'me' was probably taking a massive risk to return to our 'birthplace' after discovering the loop, attempting to kill the next 'me' there and take his place."

But he died in the end anyway, becoming a wandering ghost in this looping world.

"You really want to survive, huh," 007 mused, picturing the Chu Changge who had almost become a monster.

He could imagine the risks that Chu Changge had taken to return to their 'birthplace.' Perhaps by then, everyone else had already died, leaving only him. He had dodged the rampant Evil Ghosts and returned to that forest, hoping to survive. But he ultimately died there, his hopes dying with him in this world.

Thinking about the message she'd heard from her own voice on the radio, the Fortune-teller leaned against the nearby wall. "So, that was a message from the 'me' who died in this world..."

She raised her head to look at Chu Changge. "Can 'we' break this loop this time?"

Gu Mian is also in this world, she thought. He's such a special person; surely he can lead us to break this loop.

"No," Chu Changge said, seeing through the Fortune-teller's thoughts, his eyes downcast. "I don't know, because we don't know if Gu Mian was also involved in the previous loops. If Gu Mian had also come to this world in those previous loops, that would be true despair. Because in those loops, Gu Mian couldn't prevent our deaths, and even witnessed them firsthand."

007 looked into the distance. "The versions of 'us' who died must have also made countless efforts. You can tell from the fingers scattered everywhere. Chu Changge, were those your fingers?"

Chu Changge silently nodded. "This world continues to loop, and each time 'we' enter this world, 'we've' made different choices.

"The 'us' who struggled to survive, upon realizing they no longer had a chance to live, decided to pass their hopes onto the next loop's version of 'us.'

"As their lives approached their end, they desperately explored this world, hoping to leave a chance of survival for their future 'selves.'

"You've also discovered that this world corrodes many things. When we turned into ghosts, the clothes on our bodies were corroded beyond recognition. Even special items couldn't escape being corroded.

"The world loops. Even if 'we' left our marks somewhere, those marks would disappear after the world loops again.

"The only thing not corroded by the world is 'ourselves.'"

Chu Changge looked at the finger in 007's hand.

"And so, 'I' used a part of my own body, trying my best to pass information to the next loop's version of 'myself.'

""I' severed my fingers, exploring this world until my life ended, leaving warnings in dangerous places for the next loop's 'us'—telling them not to come, telling them it was dangerous here."

The "warnings," of course, were Chu Changge's fingers.

"I think 'you' were also passing information to the next loop's 'you' in your own ways, but most of that information was corroded.

"In some loops, 'we' might have found a way to pass information to Gu Mian's radio. So, 'we' left messages there, possibly even leaving some clues about this world.

"But the radio's signal is very erratic, so only 'our' last words came through."

Chu Changge turned his head slightly. "The severed fingers and the messages in the radio are signals that previous versions of 'us' passed to future ones. They had hit a dead end, in desperate situations, but they still passed on hope to those who would follow.

"They desperately explored this world, just to give future versions of 'themselves' a slightly better chance to live.

"They died in this world filled with despair, yet hoping that future versions of 'themselves' could survive. They probably also feared that their deaths would sadden those outside, so they tried their best to leave warnings in this world.

""Let the future 'me' achieve what I could not.' They died holding onto such thoughts."

The Fortune-teller's vision blurred, as if tears were welling up.

"These signals, passed down, are pleas from the previous 'us' to the present 'us.' They are pleading for 'us'..."

Chu Changge paused, then looked up at the others. "To survive."

Chapter 689 The Correct Usage of a Beast Tamer_1

"And what if we find ourselves cornered this time as well?" 007 looked at Chu Changge, waiting for his answer.

"Then be prepared to die at any moment," Chu Changge's gaze swept over them. "Just like the previous versions of ourselves who died here, sacrificing themselves to pave the way for those who would come after. At least it gives them a chance to survive, to leave this place alive."

"We would die, but we would leave behind a path."

If those who came after could indeed survive and leave this place, it would fulfill the wish of those who came before.

"Paving the way for the future, just like previous versions of ourselves who died in this world..." the Fortune-teller repeated his words.

She found it hard to accept. She was **her**. Even if a "Fortune-teller" truly survived and left this world later, that person would no longer be **her**.

Those who had died in this world understood this principle as well.

They knew that even if someone else managed to survive and leave this world later, the survivor would no longer be them.

The dead could not be resurrected. A future self was not truly oneself.

Even so, they still resolutely made sacrifices, painstakingly clearing a rough path for those who would follow.

Even though this path had no visible end, even though this path might never reach a destination.

Still, they stumbled and struggled, leaving their hope behind in this world.

"If we find ourselves in a desperate situation, we can only sacrifice ourselves to serve as a warning for the future versions of ourselves who arrive here," Chu Changge reiterated.

A thoughtful look crossed 007's face. She looked up at the dark sky. "Maybe we will also become path pavers, disappearing somewhere in this world. Perhaps, soon, new versions of us will appear. Like us, they too would feel grateful for the sacrifices of their predecessors.

"Our stories end with our deaths, but Gu Mian should be able to continue on, perhaps filled with sorrow...

"Fortunately, the world is in a constant cycle. There will always be hope for those in the future. Perhaps, one day in the distant future, a future Gu Mian can save the future versions of us. But that will be their story."

As she spoke, she looked at Chu Changge. "You said that if we find ourselves in a desperate situation, we should be prepared for sacrifice. I want to know, what exactly counts as a desperate situation?"

Indeed, from an ordinary person's perspective, their current situation was already desperate.

Entering an instance you can never leave is a truly desperate situation.

"Theoretically speaking, when the Protection Law completely fails, we would already be in a desperate situation," Chu Changge said, adjusting his glasses. "But Gu Mian has also entered this place, and he's looking for us."

With this said, Chu Changge looked at the people in front of him. "Do you believe in him?"

"I do," 007 nodded.

The Fortune-teller also straightened her posture. "I do too."

Even the not-so-bright Xiao Qiao nodded her head in agreement.

"Since you all believe in him, then no matter what situation we find ourselves in, it won't be regarded as desperation. Because we always have hope in our hearts; we believe he can find us.

"So, this time, let's live with hope. Let's not despair over the present, nor place our hopes in some distant future. This time, we must strive to live until the very last moment of our lives."

For a moment, 007 felt as if she had been transported back to one of the nights just before her college entrance exams.

A passionate lecturer stood on the stadium's grand stage, delivering a fiery speech that ignited the students' spirits.

Now, Chu Changge had taken the place of that lecturer. His tone was steady, neither enthusiastic nor impassioned.

Yet, his words gave them the confidence to continue living.

"Let's try our best to survive until the world begins to cycle again... If we still haven't found Gu Mian by then, we can only accept our fate," 007 said, pursing her lips.

The sounding of the alarm signaled the beginning of the world's collapse.

Once the world began to collapse, it would forcibly enter a cycle to prevent its own complete breakdown. Xiao Qiao had once said the alarm would last for several minutes.

In those few minutes, Evil Ghosts would swarm, the world would crumble, and if they still hadn't met Gu Mian by then, only death would await them.

"I don't know how much time we have left until the world collapses..." the Fortune-teller said, anxiously looking at the small stick on the ground.

She used this time to perform divination a few more times; the stick's direction remained unchanged, pointing straight ahead.

Gu Mian was in that direction.

But she didn't know how far he was.

The Fortune-teller looked at the towering building ahead. If we could get to the top of that building, she thought, perhaps we could see Gu Mian in the distance.

Just then, Xiao Qiao, as if sensing something, suddenly said, "It's almost time."

What?

007 turned her head to look at Xiao Qiao.

Xiao Qiao merely let her gaze drift to the distance. "I feel like the alarm is about to sound again."

She had heard the alarm countless times in this world and was naturally sensitive to its impending arrival.

The Fortune-teller looked at Xiao Qiao in astonishment.

"How soon?"

The sounding of the alarm meant their chances of survival were virtually nil.

Xiao Qiao furrowed her brow. Because she was born in this abnormal world, her perception of the outside world wasn't very keen, and she was even more oblivious to the passage of time. "I'm not sure. Maybe ten minutes? Twenty minutes?"

The Fortune-teller couldn't help but curse under her breath. She hadn't expected 'almost time' to mean **this** soon.

If they didn't reunite with Gu Mian within this timeframe, they would be done for.

The Fortune-teller looked down at the stick on the ground, pointing straight ahead.

They had originally intended to wait here for Gu Mian, but it seemed that was no longer an option. They had to move forward immediately.

But now, the four of them were completely penniless. They could no longer use 007's kiddy ride car, and they didn't know how far Gu Mian was.

This short amount of time was probably not enough for them to find Gu Mian.

Knowing this, the group immediately set off, breaking into a run.

Quite a few ghosts were attracted by the sound of their running, but the Protection Law still had some effect and prevented their attacks.

The Fortune-teller said urgently, "What we don't know now is if Gu Mian is also heading in our direction. If he's going the wrong way, we'll only get farther apart. If only we could let him know our location!"

At this moment, she desperately wished she had bought a few bundles of fireworks at the supermarket. If she had fireworks now, couldn't she directly signal their location to Gu Mian? She couldn't be blamed for her lack of foresight; who could have imagined needing to set off fireworks in an instance?

As the Fortune-teller was pacing anxiously, she suddenly thought of 007. "007, what's your occupational skill?"

007 looked at the road, devoid of any living beings. "I only have the most basic skill, Beast Taming. It requires at least one animal."

But in this world, there wasn't even a single living bird, let alone other animals.

But the Fortune-teller's eyes lit up. "I have one!"

007 watched as she produced a huge dog. It was at least one and a half meters long and looked quite spirited.

Before 007 could react in surprise, the Fortune-teller thrust the dog at her. "It's a companion pet for my occupational skill, called the Greedy Mad Dog. It's used for finding things. However, I can only use my skill periodically. I just used it to find something a short while ago, so I can't activate it again right now. But you can!"

The Fortune-teller had once released this dog in the junkyard instance to find a clown mask.

She had never imagined this dog could be useful in other ways.

"You're a Beast Tamer; you can ride it and command it to charge forward." The Fortune-teller's eyes glowed eerily in the darkness. "It runs very fast. You go first. When you find Gu Mian, bring him in this direction."

007 hesitated for half a second, then nodded.

One person riding a dog was already outrageous enough; naturally, all four of them couldn't ride one dog.

Right now, it was most crucial for her to find Gu Mian first and guide him in the correct direction.

The Fortune-teller threw the small stick once more, pointing ahead. "Command it to run in that direction. Gu Mian is over there."

Without further words, 007, worried the dog might not support her weight, decided against riding it. Instead, she grabbed its collar, hoping to use its strength to increase her speed.

She then gave the dog her command.

The Greedy Mad Dog truly shot off like an arrow loosed from a bow.

007 hadn't expected the dog to be so fast; it immediately dragged her to the ground.

But even though she'd fallen, 007 didn't let go.

The others behind saw 007 being dragged forward by the Greedy Mad Dog, and in the blink of an eye, she vanished from sight.

Then, the Fortune-teller's face began to drain of color.

This was the side effect of using the Greedy Mad Dog.

All the stamina consumed by the Greedy Mad Dog was borne by the Fortune-teller. An ordinary person would already find it difficult to endure such a strenuous run, especially since the Greedy Mad Dog was also pulling 007, consuming even more stamina.

The Fortune-teller's face turned pale, and she swayed, unsteady on her feet.

Fortunately, Xiao Qiao was beside her and supported her.

Chapter 690 Almost A Thousand Chapters Now_1

By this time, Gu Mian had already settled into the passenger seat of the car.

Fatty also jogged back and hopped into the car, panting. He sat in the back seat, leaned over the backrest of Gu Mian's seat, and said, "Doctor, that Miss Xiao Qiao just now..."

Gu Mian, holding his Big Data Search, asked, "Have you ever watched a horror movie?"

Fatty didn't understand why Gu Mian was asking this. "I've seen some."

Gu Mian patted Coach Che, who was in the driver's seat, signaling him to drive towards the nearest arrow on the screen. With a depressed expression, Coach Che started the vehicle.

With Coach Che doing the hard work, Gu Mian didn't need to drive. Over the roar of the engine, he explained to Fatty, "Have you ever seen the movie *Triangle*?"

Fatty recalled the plot of the movie, a dazed look on his face. "I had some guesses before, but hearing you say it so definitively, Doctor, it still feels a bit unbelievable."

"There's nothing unbelievable about it," Gu Mian said, looking at the screen of his Big Data Search. There were too many arrows on the screen, and he couldn't distinguish which one was the living Chu Changge, so he could only check them one by one. "This world is a standard Ouroboros timeline. Time here forms a loop, and everything keeps repeating."

"Chu Changge and the others are right in the middle of this relentless cycle."

Coach Che was a skilled driver; by now, they had already reached the nearest arrow.

Gu Mian saw a familiar black shadow standing by the roadside.

It lingered for only two seconds before disappearing.

Gu Mian noticed that most of this shadow's fingers were missing.

"Not this one." After staring at the empty spot for a while, Gu Mian averted his gaze and gestured for Coach Che to proceed to the next arrow.

Then he continued explaining to Fatty behind him, "The Xiao Qiao we just saw was from a previous timeline. That Xiao Qiao died in the past."

Fatty recalled the sight of Xiao Qiao turning into a monster.

He looked gloomy. "So the previous Miss Xiao Qiao and Brother Chu are both dead?"

"Correct," Gu Mian nodded. "And they've died more than once."

They might have died hundreds, perhaps thousands of times.

The densely packed arrows on the screen almost overlapped, too numerous to count.

They hadn't originally belonged to the Ouroboros timeline but were forcefully thrown here by Earth. This made it impossible for the time reset to erase them; those who died became monsters, permanently stuck here.

The car approached another arrow.

Gu Mian saw another deceased Chu Changge.

Silence fell in the car.

Coach Che drove on to the next destination.

Fatty felt a little breathless. There were simply too many arrows on the screen. Searching like this, who knew when they would find the right person?

It was such a waste of time.

But they had no other choice. Gu Mian had no skills for finding people, and the Big Data Search—the only tool they could use—showed countless Chu Changges. They had no clear direction.

Gu Mian also knew they were pressed for time. "We'd better find them fast. I suspect this world isn't looping for no reason; it's probably using the loops to avoid something."

He looked out the car window.

Outside was a desolate, dead city.

It was quiet here. The only sound was the wailing of the Evil Ghost tied to the back of the car, dragged along by the speeding vehicle, crying out loudly.

"This world has no living creatures; it seems to be on the brink of extinction. Xiao Qiao also mentioned their world was entering its twilight." Gu Mian frowned. "I guess this world started looping to prevent its own demise."

"The alarm is most likely a precursor to the world's end. I think when the alarm sounds, the loop won't be far behind."

Therefore, Gu Mian had to find all four of them before the alarm sounded.

Once the alarm rang, the ghosts all over the world would go berserk. Combined with the world collapsing, no ordinary person could survive.

By now, Coach Che had driven past arrow after arrow.

Without exception, all they saw were people who had died in the past.

"Unless something unexpected happens, this world will keep looping to prevent the apocalypse," Gu Mian said, looking down at the Big Data Search in his hand. "It probably doesn't want any more complications and is single-mindedly trying to prevent its own destruction."

"But Earth tossed Brother Chu and the others here," Fatty said, staring intently at the road ahead, trying to spot any living people. "Earth wants to use this world to kill Brother Chu and the others. Even if it fails, luring you in, Doctor, would be excellent. If you came in, you might just obliterate this Seventh World. Earth would probably be thrilled with that outcome."

In any case, Earth always came out ahead.

The Seventh World was the one losing out. It had been quietly trying to save itself, not even participating in any instances, yet Earth had dumped four people into it. Then, these four had lured Gu Mian in.

Its future was sure to be glorious.

It must be utterly speechless right now.

"Doctor, I have a question," Fatty's voice suddenly came from the back. "Even if we save Brother Chu and the others this time, what about next time? And the time after that? The world keeps looping, and new versions of them will be refreshed. Will future Brother Chus still die?"

Probably.

Unless this world is completely destroyed and the loop stops.

This thought made Gu Mian turn to Coach Che, who was driving with a gloomy expression. "You don't have a cell phone on you, do you?"

Coach Che was momentarily stunned by Gu Mian's sudden question, then, as if realizing something, he shook his head. "I'm miserable enough already! Are you planning to rob me too? I literally have nothing valuable left on me!"

He was telling the truth.

In the last instance, Gu Mian had almost taken money from his pants.

Only after Coach Che's denial did Gu Mian pull a mobile phone from his white coat pocket.

[Trans-dimensional Mobile Phone]

This device could be used to call an important NPC in an instance, provided that NPC had a communication device.

Mr. Green once said there was a super high-level NPC in this world, but they only existed in legend.

That legendary NPC was probably the only living being in the Seventh World.

Using the Trans-dimensional Mobile Phone here, the only person he could call was that super high-level NPC.

Hopefully, that NPC has a communication device.

Gu Mian stared at the phone in his hand for a moment. During that time, Coach Che drove past several more black shadows, but they still hadn't found the real Chu Changge.

"The NPC of this world definitely knows some clues. If possible, I hope to learn the location of Chu Changge and the others from him," Gu Mian said, looking at the phone as he pressed the dial button. "He might also know how to stop this world's loop, but he probably won't tell me."

The phone went, "BEEP. BEEP."

Gu Mian wasn't sure if the so-called high-level NPC had a communication device.

This call might be completely pointless.

Unexpectedly, the call was answered quite quickly.

It was as if the other party had been waiting for this call.

"Hello"—Gu Mian heard a voice from the earpiece, both familiar and unfamiliar.

Damn it, it's the intelligent version of Xiao Qiao.