

Collapse 721

Chapter 721 - The Terror of Discontinued Updates_1

Luckily, the ghost did not choose the path where they were hiding.

But it chose the opposite path, which was not within the surveillance area...

Ningmeng Busuan watched as the ghost turned at the crossroads, disappearing from the photo's view.

Now, both they and the ghost were in an unknown area.

This was very dangerous.

"Should we go back immediately?" Hao Laoshi asked, looking hesitantly at the photo. "I feel unsafe out of the photo's range."

"No," Wenqin Tan Jiu said, shaking her head. "The path the ghost chose is right opposite ours. If it hasn't gone far when we return, won't it easily spot us as soon as it turns around?"

The current situation was tricky.

They wanted to quickly return to the surveillance zone, but they couldn't take the same path back, fearing the ghost would see them.

"How about taking a detour?" Ningmeng Busuan suggested. "We can go back to the crossroads where the ghost first appeared. It's a bit further, but relatively safer."

"Is a detour really safe?" Hao Laoshi hesitated. "Detouring outside the photo's range is very dangerous, right? The ghost is out of our surveillance area. Who knows if we might suddenly run into it?"

"Returning on the same path is indeed faster, but risky. Of course, taking a detour is also risky..." Wenqin Tan Jiu frowned, finding it hard to decide for a moment.

"Make a decision quickly," Hao Laoshi urged, somewhat anxious. "The ghost has been gone for almost a minute. I'm really afraid it will circle around to our vicinity."

Time was indeed of the essence.

Wenqin Tan Jiu made a decision. "Let's go back the same way. We saw the ghost moving quite fast; it should have gone far by now."

Ningmeng Busuan considered for two seconds and agreed to this decision.

Once the decision was made, they set off to return immediately.

Not much later, they arrived at the crossroads where the ghost had turned.

They didn't dare to stay there and ran as quickly as they could to the other road.

Only when they reached the middle of that road did they dare to stop and rest.

Hao Laoshi looked at the photo of this road. "The ghost just passed by here. It shouldn't come back for a while. Let's quickly take a photo of the road ahead."

There was only one photo left in the instant camera.

After taking the photo of the next road, they would finally have a small trump card.

They wouldn't have to worry about the ghost suddenly appearing and killing them. Even if the ghost got near, they could react in advance based on the photo.

Ningmeng Busuan held the instant camera and moved forward. "The mission is to survive for three days. We haven't even gone through one day, and three people are already dead."

"Fortunately, we found a way out this time," she continued. "I wonder if we can survive the next two days with these few photos."

Although they had a trump card now, she was still worried.

That trump card could easily be compromised; they had far too few photos. It would be much better if they had more.

They really shouldn't have burnt those photos on the coach...

Ningmeng Busuan had an ominous premonition.

It was very likely people would die in the next two days. She wondered how many of them could survive to the end of this instance.

By this time, they had reached the next crossroads, and they paused there, looking forward.

"After this shot, our surveillance area will be large enough," Wenqin Tan Jiu said, looking at the road ahead. "Then we can return to the center of the surveillance area to rest."

Hao Laoshi, who had less energy than the young people, bent over. "After running for a day and a night, I really have no strength left. Even if the ghost suddenly appears and chases me, I won't be able to move a step."

"I hope we get to rest for a longer period," Ningmeng Busuan said, raising the instant camera, aiming it at the road ahead, and pressing the shutter.

The flash shone bright, and a second later, the photo began to emerge from the camera.

Ningmeng Busuan stepped back and quietly waited for the photo to develop.

At this moment, Hao Laoshi was hesitating, considering asking Xu Xingcheng about Gu Mian's whereabouts.

Just as he was thinking about how to start the conversation, the photo in Ningmeng Busuan's hands began to develop.

Hao Laoshi heard Wenqin Tan Jiu let out a small gasp, as if she had seen something strange.

His attention was immediately drawn to Wenqin Tan Jiu.

The two women were staring intently at the photo, their expressions grim.

What happened? Did they capture the ghost?

However, their expressions didn't seem like they had captured the ghost.

Hao Laoshi also took a few steps closer to look at the photo.

The newly taken photo was different from the others. It was completely dark, with nothing visible, as if it had been taken at night.

"What happened?" Wenqin Tan Jiu frowned at the photo. "Was it not shot properly?"

"An improperly shot photo should be completely white, not black," Ningmeng Busuan said, shaking her head. "Is the film defective?"

Regardless of the reason, this photo was useless. They could no longer see the invisible ghost on this road.

"We've only photographed two roads." Ningmeng Busuan's face was etched with despair. "The coverage isn't sufficient. If the ghost suddenly appears at one end, it will be able to see us."

Moreover, the area between these two roads was a crossroads, so they couldn't hide near there either.

The other two roads leading from the crossroads hadn't been photographed; it was impossible to hide there.

"What should we do?" Wenqin Tan Jiu rubbed her temples forcefully. This situation was making her head spin.

"We can only choose between these two photographed roads and hide in the middle of one... But if the ghost passes by the end closer to us, it will undoubtedly see us..."

Just as Ningmeng Busuan was pondering their options, Hao Laoshi, who had been quietly looking at the photograph, suddenly retreated several large steps and exclaimed, "Don't you think..."

What?

The others all turned to look at him.

Hao Laoshi retreated even more, almost ready to turn and flee. "Don't you think this photo is black because someone blocked the camera when you were taking the picture!"

Someone... blocked the camera?

The two women, who were discussing strategy, felt their scalps tingle and their hairs stand on end.

As soon as Hao Laoshi uttered these terrifying words, he immediately turned and fled.

Ningmeng Busuan and Wenqin Tan Jiu didn't just stand there stunned either.

They also turned and bolted.

Chapter 722 - No Updates Interrupted!_1

Soon, Hao Laoshi's conjecture was confirmed.

They heard a rustling sound from behind. There was no one else here but them; it had to be the ghost!

The ghost was indeed here!

Hearing the sounds from behind, Ningmeng Busuan ran desperately forward.

Hao Laoshi, who had just claimed he had no strength left to run, was now leading the pack as if he'd had a shot of adrenaline.

"The photo! Look at our second photo!" Wenqin Tan Jiu shouted at Ningmeng Busuan.

Ningmeng Busuan glanced at the photo in her hand while running. Their second photo only vaguely showed their surroundings, but she could faintly discern a blurred figure in their current location—the image of the ghost. The figure seemed to be reaching out, as if to grab someone in front of it.

Ningmeng Busuan's pupils contracted. Who is it trying to grab?

The sounds from behind them provided the answer.

They heard a dragging noise from behind. The two women turned to look and saw Xu Xingcheng, who was at the very end of the group, being dragged by the ghost onto a different path. Almost instantly, Xu Xingcheng was dragged down that path and vanished from sight.

The two women didn't dare to look any longer and turned to flee.

Xu Xingcheng's death bought them a little breathing room, and the remaining survivors continued their desperate flight.

Still shaken, Hao Laoshi glanced back. He remembered Xu Xingcheng was Gu Mian's teammate; he never expected Xu Xingcheng to die just like that.

"What do we do? We can't stay on this path, can we?" Wenqin Tan Jiu asked Ningmeng Busuan as they ran.

"The ghost already knows our plan. It will definitely pay more attention to this path now. We probably won't be able to use the photos to avoid it anymore," Ningmeng Busuan said, a hint of despair in her voice. Their glimmer of hope had been instantly extinguished.

"The most important thing now is to shake off this ghost! Let's split up!" shouted Hao Laoshi from the front.

They quickly decided to split up at the upcoming intersection.

But before they could reach the intersection, Ningmeng Busuan saw in the photo that the ghost was catching up.

"It's too late! The ghost has caught up!" she cried, on the verge of a breakdown.

After killing Xu Xingcheng, the ghost hadn't paused; it came straight for them.

Ningmeng Busuan watched the ghost drawing closer in the photo. She couldn't gauge the actual distance between them, only sensed that it was extremely close. A chill ran down her spine, and fear began to creep through her entire body. She knew the ghost was right behind her.

Wenqin Tan Jiu beside her felt the same. Her hair stood on end, and she sensed a malicious presence clinging to her back.

Despair flooded their hearts. They should have known it would end like this. The moment they knew their path to survival was destroyed, they should have realized they might die here. This instance no longer had a path to survival; everyone was going to die...

The two of them felt the chill behind them draw nearer, until it was almost pressing against their backs.

It's over, they thought.

Wenqin Tan Jiu felt a sudden weight on her shoulder, as if something had settled there. She turned to look at her shoulder but saw nothing. Then, a tremendous force yanked her backward.

In what she thought were her final moments, Wenqin Tan Jiu shrieked in terror, "Help!"

Ningmeng Busuan glanced back at Wenqin Tan Jiu, who was being dragged away by the invisible ghost. She desperately wanted to help but was powerless. All she could do now was flee for her life.

I'm sorry, Ningmeng Busuan thought, turning to sprint away, her heart heavy with sorrow.

Her sorrow, however, was short-lived, interrupted by the sudden appearance of two people ahead. She stared, dumbfounded, at the two bicycles that had suddenly appeared. On them were the unreliable-looking doctor and his spectacled teammate.

She hadn't expected those two to still be alive.

Hao Laoshi up ahead seemed to have snapped. Seeing the cyclists, he stopped running, even turned, and pointed back. "The ghost is there!" he declared with self-righteous bravado. He sounded so righteous, as if he were a hero leading reinforcements, rather than a traitor guiding the enemy into the city.

What's the point of telling other players where the ghost is now? Does he expect them to pull out a gun and shoot it? Ningmeng Busuan thought he'd gone mad.

But something even crazier was about to happen.

Upon hearing Hao Laoshi, the doctor on the bicycle actually looked excited. Then, he started pedaling towards the ghost.

WHOOSH! Gu Mian sped past Ningmeng Busuan.

Ningmeng Busuan stood agape, momentarily forgetting to run.

She turned back, stunned, to watch the doctor cycling towards the ghost. Is this what he meant by holding off the ghost? A suicide mission? Using his own life to hold off the ghost, buying them time to escape?

Realizing this, she immediately started running again, hoping to use this brief window to escape the ghost's pursuit.

But she noticed Hao Laoshi ahead had given up running. He'd plopped himself down on the road and was fanning himself with his hand, watching the events unfold in the ghost's direction like a nosy old man on the roadside, thoroughly enjoying the drama and hoping for more.

"Run!" Ningmeng Busuan screamed at him.

Hao Laoshi had been running all day and felt like he'd drop dead in the instance if he ran any further. Seeing Gu Mian arrive, he simply sat down by the road and didn't budge.

Ningmeng Busuan didn't dare follow his example and ran with all her might. As she ran, she kept checking the photo.

Suddenly, she noticed the ghost's actions in the image had changed. Before, the ghost had been dragging Wenqin Tan Jiu, its movements slow due to the burden. But now, the ghost was retreating at a terrifying speed, like a rabid dog whose tail had been stepped on. And from its gestures, it looked like it was no longer dragging anyone.

Ningmeng Busuan quickly looked back. Wenqin Tan Jiu had indeed been released!

Wenqin Tan Jiu was now scrambling towards her. Behind her, the doctor in the white coat charged relentlessly forward on his bicycle.

What's going on? Ningmeng Busuan was stumped.

The ghost not only let Wenqin Tan Jiu go but also turned and fled? What exactly happened?

Wenqin Tan Jiu was equally baffled. The photo wasn't with her. Panting, she reached Ningmeng Busuan. "You've stopped—is the ghost gone?"

"Yes..." Ningmeng Busuan said, staring at the photo in her hand with a peculiar expression. "The ghost...fled."

"Could it be? When I struggled free, did I trigger a path to survival?" Wenqin Tan Jiu mused, convinced she had broken free on her own.

"No, I don't think so," Ningmeng Busuan shook her head. "Didn't you see that doctor on the bicycle?"

While struggling, Wenqin Tan Jiu had been too frantic to notice anything else. Only now did she look back, just in time to see Gu Mian's figure disappearing into the distance.

"He... isn't that our teammate?" Wenqin Tan Jiu stammered, gaping in the direction the ghost had fled. "Has he gone mad?" Why would he charge towards a ghost?

Ningmeng Busuan calmly analyzed, "The moment he arrived, he went straight for the ghost. I think the ghost let you go and fled because of him. I believe he's found another path to survival, a way to counter the ghost. That's why it's avoiding him like this."

Chapter 723 Thanking the leader of Yinmo_1

Ningmeng Busuan guessed the Doctor had found a way to survive, so the ghost wanted to avoid him. But she soon realized the ghost's evasion was excessive. The ghost hadn't just dropped Wenqin Tan Jiu;

its running posture had become much more conventional. It no longer used its frightening short-range teleportation. Instead, it sprinted like an exam candidate, swinging its arms and dashing madly down the road.

Yes, it definitely looked like it was fleeing.

The ghost was running along the path they were photographing, so Ningmeng Busuan could clearly see its movements. It was moving fast, already halfway through the second photo's frame. They couldn't see Gu Mian in the photos; they could only look ahead, hoping to catch a glimpse of his back. But they saw nothing. Gu Mian had long since sped away on his bicycle.

When they took the third photo, the ghost had blocked the lens, so the image was initially pitch black. Now that the ghost had moved, they could see the scene in the third photo. By then, the ghost had already dashed into the third photo.

Wenqin Tan Jiu, having narrowly escaped death, watched the ghost's frantic escape and furrowed his brow. "Is there something off about this ghost?" His face still bore abrasions from being dragged by the ghost moments before, but he paid them no mind, his attention entirely on the photos.

"I think so too..." Ningmeng Busuan said hesitantly. "This ghost didn't seem to run this hard when it was chasing us, did it? Even if the Doctor found a way to survive, a method to counter the ghost, it wouldn't run like this, would it? It's as if it'll die if it doesn't run fast enough."

They had never seen a ghost flee so shamelessly. It was quite an eye-opener. The ghost's frantic escape somewhat mirrored their own earlier desperation.

"Players can't kill ghosts, and neither can a way to survive," Wenqin Tan Jiu said, his expression growing more puzzled as he watched the ghost race into the middle of the third photo. "Why do I get the feeling this ghost seems a little scared?"

Ningmeng Busuan nodded. "I feel it too..."

Hao Laoshi, who had been sitting nearby, stood up and approached them. "It's more than a little scared. It looks terrified to me."

Both Ningmeng Busuan and Wenqin Tan Jiu looked at the approaching Hao Laoshi.

Ningmeng Busuan remembered Hao Laoshi's strange behavior earlier. She frowned and asked, "As soon as you saw the Doctor, you pointed out the ghost's direction to him, as if you knew he'd found a way to counter it."

Hao Laoshi knew there was no such "method to counter ghosts." The ghost was fleeing purely because of Gu Mian. But he couldn't expose Gu Mian's identity, so he said nervously, "I saw him approaching so aggressively, I could tell at a glance he knew the solution to this instance."

Ningmeng Busuan was skeptical of Hao Laoshi's explanation. She turned to the player named Meiren Chu beside her. Meiren Chu came with the Doctor on a bicycle; he must know what way to survive the Doctor found.

Ningmeng Busuan asked, "What's the way to survive you found that scares the ghost so much?"

Of course, Chu Changge couldn't say they had no way to counter the ghost, and that the ghost was scared because Gu Mian had a chainsaw in his guitar case. He pushed up his glasses and remained silent.

Hao Laoshi warily edged away from Chu Changge, afraid the man might suddenly snap and start throwing him around.

Seeing Chu Changge's silence, Ningmeng Busuan didn't press further. Anyway, they've found a way to survive now; they can leave this instance safely.

Wenqin Tan Jiu, standing nearby, was still worried. "This ghost is too abnormal. It's very cunning. I think it might be pretending to be weak, trying to lull us into letting our guard down before killing us."

That was a possibility. These ghosts always liked to toy with players, appearing suddenly to kill them just when they thought they were safe.

"You're right. This ghost is indeed a bit abnormal," Ningmeng Busuan said, her eyes fixed on the ghost in the third photo. "The ghosts I've seen don't flee like this. It's indeed possible it's toying with us. I think we should stay prepared to run."

She sighed. Is the ghost playing games with them? Making them think they've found a way to survive, only to ambush and kill them? She thought of Yu Ji and Su Lian, who had died before her eyes, and then of Jin Ye Bai's horrific corpse. Ningmeng Busuan knew this ghost was strong and cunning. She began to worry about the Doctor's safety. The photos only showed the ghost's form; they didn't know where the Doctor was.

Just then, Wenqin Tan Jiu, looking at the photo, suddenly exclaimed, "Look, it stopped!"

Ningmeng Busuan immediately looked down at the photo. The ghost, which had been sprinting, was indeed still. It had curled itself into a ball, squatting beside the roadside shrubs.

"An ambush! It's an ambush!" Wenqin Tan Jiu shouted. "It wants to ambush the Doctor!"

Hao Laoshi also looked at the ghost huddled by the greenery. He felt Wenqin Tan Jiu was overthinking it. The ghost might just be trying to hide. After all, ghosts are invisible. If it stayed quiet and hidden in a corner, Gu Mian would have a hard time finding it.

Ningmeng Busuan was also worried. "So, it was all an act before...?"

Meanwhile, Gu Mian, still cycling, also noticed the silence ahead. Have the ghost's footsteps disappeared? Did it float away?

Gu Mian stopped his bicycle and looked down at the Big Data Search in his hand. The screen was still crowded with arrows, but this time, none were moving significantly, making it impossible to determine which one was the ghost in this instance.

I should have known better than to search for such a broad term as 'ghost,' Gu Mian thought, dismounting. He had initially wanted to search for "Photo ghost," but considering it might not be named that, and a wrong search couldn't be quickly redone, he had opted for the safer term "ghost." He hadn't expected so many arrows to appear.

Since there are no arrows indicating large movements, it hasn't floated or flown away. It must be hiding nearby, Gu Mian pondered. But he couldn't see the ghost. The brother figure provided by the Goddess should be able to pinpoint the ghost's location, but the disc needed to summon him was currently with Chu Changge, so Gu Mian couldn't call upon him.

But that's okay. If the ghost doesn't move, I can. When I move, these arrows will also move. The arrow closest to me must be the one that moves the most, Gu Mian thought, then took several steps forward.

He noticed that as he moved, an arrow on the left side of the screen shifted significantly. He stepped back to his original spot, and the arrow returned to its previous position. Gu Mian moved back and forth a few more times to confirm: the arrow on the left was indeed the closest one to him.

He turned in that direction and pulled out a camera. It was Fatty's special item. It could photograph invisible ghosts, but it could only be used once a day.

Gu Mian held the camera, a sinister smile spreading across his face as he aimed it in that direction and pressed the shutter.

Chapter 724 Wishing Everyone a Happy New Year_1

Ningmeng Busuan had been through plenty of instances, but she had never seen a ghost with such a sad expression before.

Previous ghosts all bore ghastly faces, charging at people to bite them, terrifying anyone who laid eyes upon their pallid countenances half to death.

But this ghost was a bit different. She lowered her head and looked at the photograph in her hand.

The ghost in the photo was sprawled on the ground, struggling. It seemed as if something was pressing down on it, restricting its movements.

Despite the ghost's futile struggles, it appeared pitiful, feeble, and helpless.

"This..." Wenqin Tan Jiu, standing nearby, was also staring at the photo with an odd expression. "What's going on?"

Just a moment ago, this ghost had been lurking nearby, seemingly ready to ambush the Doctor.

How, in the blink of an eye, had it ended up convulsing on the ground as if it were having an epileptic fit?

It looked rather comical.

The photo only showed the ghost's body. On a street invisible to them, Gu Mian was struggling to hold down the invisible ghost on the ground; Fatty's camera lay on the ground nearby.

The pinned-down ghost thrashed like a fish out of water until Gu Mian finally sat down on it. After this intimate contact with Gu Mian, it let out a helpless cry and finally stopped moving.

Ghosts are invisible, so Gu Mian couldn't see its expression.

However, a street away, Wenqin Tan Jiu and Ningmeng Busuan could see the ghost's appearance through the photograph.

It lay on the ground, eyes rolled back, seemingly having lost all hope in life.

Ningmeng Busuan and Wenqin Tan Jiu exchanged a bewildered look. Both of them had witnessed this ghost's terror and seen firsthand how it killed people.

Its current state and its murderous demeanor from before were like night and day.

"What's happening?" Ningmeng Busuan looked at Wenqin Tan Jiu in confusion. "What happened to this ghost?"

Wenqin Tan Jiu was also unclear about the situation. He shook his head, a bit puzzled, "I have no idea. Maybe the Doctor found the lifeline and managed to restrict it."

"Really..." Ningmeng Busuan looked at the ghost's hopeless face in the photo. Was the ghost really restricted by the lifeline? It didn't quite feel like it.

But regardless, the ghost was now restrained.

Thinking of this, both of them let out a long sigh of relief. They didn't completely lower their guard, though, continuing to keep a wary eye on the ghost in the photo.

Surprises were common in instances.

Who knew if this ghost would suddenly leap up the next second and continue chasing them.

Hao Laoshi, beside them, was a stark contrast. He was slumped on a step, completely relaxed, even sporting an enigmatic smile.

Ningmeng Busuan glanced at Hao Laoshi then refocused on the photo she was holding.

Meanwhile, a street away, Gu Mian was manhandling the invisible ghost beneath him.

He felt it all over and located its head.

Gu Mian touched the back of the head beneath him. He intended to have a friendly conversation with it, but he worried that speaking to the back of its head wouldn't be sincere enough.

So, he placed both hands on its round skull and twisted hard.

A CRACK echoed from beneath his hands, as if something had broken.

Hearing this, Gu Mian straightened the invisible head and withdrew his hands, satisfied, "Good, now you can see my sincere eyes."

In the photo, this scene was rather terrifying:

The ghost, which had been sprawled on the ground looking utterly hopeless, suddenly seemed to go mad. Its head rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, its bloodshot eyes staring directly at the camera lens.

Seeing this terrifying action, Ningmeng Busuan's hand, holding the photo, trembled, "It... it still wants to kill us..."

Even the ghost felt wronged hearing this.

"Alright, your head is straight. Now we can communicate." Gu Mian sat atop the invisible ghost, staring sincerely at the air beneath him. "I know you're a good ghost. You'll definitely answer my questions earnestly, won't you?"

The air beneath him remained silent.

Gu Mian paid it no mind and continued, "This is the Second World, and the corresponding key NPC is... right, it's No. 1."

He looked down at the patch of air beneath him, "So, pal, tell me if you know this person."

Gu Mian had coined "Good Brother" as a term of endearment to close the distance between them.

Fatty had once told him that if he wanted to have a deeper conversation with a ghost and open its heart, he needed to be a bit kinder and give it an affectionate nickname.

Gu Mian thought "Good Brother" was very affectionate, sounding as if they were kindred spirits.

But the ghost beneath him made no sound.

Gu Mian merely felt a slight tremor from the air beneath him, which then escalated into a full-blown shiver.

Could it be that the nickname wasn't affectionate enough? Gu Mian pondered for a moment before trying out other endearments like "Dear Ghosty," "Handsome and Kind Mr. Ghost," and "Ghost Sweetheart."

Unexpectedly, "Ghost Sweetheart" began to tremble even more violently, as if having an epileptic fit.

Gu Mian's patience finally ran out. He dropped his pretense, revealing his ugly, villainous true nature.

He reached out and throttled the invisible ghost's neck, "Are you mute? Can you speak? Can you speak? I'm asking you, can you speak?!"

Ningmeng Busuan and Wenqin Tan Jiu, intently watching the photo, saw the ghost first convulse as if having an epileptic fit, then its eyes rolled back, and its mouth fell open. Its initially pale face turned purplish-blue within seconds, as if it couldn't breathe.

"What on earth is happening?" Both of them were completely clueless.

Experience showed that most ghosts responded to coercion, not coaxing.

Under Gu Mian's "gentle" ministrations, the ghost finally made a sound.

"I... I don't know..." it choked out, its voice shrill and grating.

"Finally, you spoke." Gu Mian then let go and smiled. "I thought you were mute."

The invisible ghost shed tears of humiliation.

Gu Mian, of course, couldn't see its humiliating tears.

Upon confirming that the ghost wasn't mute, he continued to press, "If you haven't seen No. 1, you must have seen one or two other NPCs, right? Do you recognize any other NPCs?"

It would be best if it could name an NPC similar to Mr. Green, which would provide more clues about this game.

Unexpectedly, the ghost was a complete know-nothing, only frantically muttering, "I don't know," "I don't recognize anyone," and "Never heard of them."

It was like it had gone mad.

Its mad ramblings were occasionally interspersed with cries of "Help!"

It was unclear who it hoped would come to its rescue.

Gu Mian looked around. Theoretically, when a ghost fell into his hands, the instance should be on the verge of shutting down.

But now, even though he was literally sitting on it, there was no sign of the instance halting for maintenance.

Perhaps this ghost truly knew nothing. The instance was quite certain it couldn't divulge any useful information, so it had confidently thrown it to Gu Mian.

After all, constantly crashing for maintenance didn't look good.

This was truly a case of letting things rot because they're already broken.

This was awkward.

Gu Mian silently regarded the invisible ghost beneath him. He didn't know whether to beat it or not.

By now, Chu Changge had joined Ningmeng Busuan and Wenqin Tan Jiu, also looking at the photo in their hands.

The ghost in the photo was shaking its head frantically, its mouth moving as if saying something.

The ghost had been pushed this far, yet the instance showed no signs of stopping. It seemed nothing could be gotten out of this ghost.

Chu Changge thought, This was understandable; after all, not all ghosts in instances knew anything important.

When the global game first started, if Gu Mian captured a ghost, the instance would still try to rescue it. Now, it was just left to its fate.

Since the game developers weren't intervening, it looked like this instance would proceed normally to its conclusion.

Just then, Chu Changge noticed that the ghost in the photo suddenly reached into its chest, seemingly searching for something.

Chu Changge wondered, A weapon? If this ghost pulled out a handgun and shot Gu Mian in the head, the NPCs would celebrate as if it were New Year's.

But the ghost didn't pull out what everyone was dreaming of.

It merely pulled out a neat stack of A4 paper. The top sheet bore a line of large, black printed text.

The group in front of the photo peered closely at the stack of A4 paper.

The words on the cover read: "Instance Ghost Labor Protection Contract."

Chapter 725 About me writing the Autumn Festival plot during the Spring Festival_1

At the start of the global game, NPCs happily roamed in instances, completely unalert.

"We can't possibly encounter danger in the game," everyone thought.

Then, a man whose gender was listed as "?" appeared.

He immediately destroyed the first instance he was matched with. Although this attracted the NPCs' attention, not many paid it much mind.

Everyone considered it reasonable for the game to have flaws. That instance must have had design defects, which was why it collapsed.

But then, the second instance crashed.

Coincidentally, this man of indeterminate gender was also in this instance.

Some began to grow wary, while others still believed it was mere coincidence.

Clever supermarket manufacturers immediately seized the business opportunity, urgently launching a type of tag they anticipated people might need. Subsequent instances collapsed one after another, proving their decision savvy; these tags eventually sold out.

Initially, when an instance collapsed, the game operators would try their best to salvage it. But as more and more instances collapsed, the game's rescue measures became increasingly passive, until they finally threw in the towel.

The spectating NPCs realized the gravity of the situation.

"If I don't step up now and condemn the game operators' passive attitude, then when that fiend Gu Mian enters my instance, no one will stand up for me."

The NPCs united to protest.

In response to popular demand, the game operators recently launched the "Instance Ghost Labor Protection Contract."

NPCs could sign this contract with the game operators by paying a certain price. The contract would guarantee the personal safety of its signatories. It also ensured that if Gu Mian attacked them, the game operators would promptly shut down the instance and eject the source of danger.

Accompanying this labor protection contract was the "Instance Accidental Injury/Death Insurance."

Forcibly closing an instance would inevitably cause some damage, requiring funds for repairs. However, with the accidental death insurance, if an insured's instance was damaged due to Gu Mian, the game operators would provide most of the compensation. This greatly reduced the pressure on the victimized NPC to earn money to repair their instance.

It was said that an NPC with the surname Che, upon hearing the game had launched the "Instance Accidental Injury/Death Insurance," lamented his cruel fate and the injustice of heaven, then ran off crying.

Of course, Gu Mian knew nothing about this.

He just heard the ghost beneath him rustle out something paper-like and croak in a hoarse voice, "I have a Labor Protection Contract!"

What Labor Protection Contract?

Before Gu Mian could react, a translucent game panel appeared before him—the same panel he was familiar with, as it popped up every time an instance collapsed.

But the content on the panel was slightly different this time.

[Detecting a Labor Protection Contract signatory in danger! The game will forcibly close said signatory's instance and expel all players from the instance within ten seconds.]

What in the world is this? Gu Mian looked as if he had eaten shit.

Meanwhile, the panel had already begun its countdown.

[8, 7, 6...]

A few seconds later, Gu Mian reappeared in the ticket booth.

The ticket seller didn't seem to notice Gu Mian's return. He was behind the counter, holding a microphone and talking to someone, "...Is this Sunshine Insurance Company? No, no, no, I don't want to buy Instance Accidental Death Insurance. I want to ask if you have insurance for ticket sellers. For example, if someone were to threaten my personal safety with a saw, could you send someone to protect me...?"

Just as he said this, he finally saw Gu Mian, who had just emerged from the instance.

The man in the white coat was smiling warmly at him, revealing a row of gleaming white teeth.

This display of teeth startled the ticket seller so much his hand trembled, and the microphone CLATTERED to the floor.

「...」

"Spit it out! Spit it out now! They're not cooked yet!" As soon as Gu Mian reached his doorstep, he heard Fatty's roar from inside.

He opened the door, and an uncooked mooncake flew out, SMACK!—right on his forehead.

Nearby, Chu Changge retreated two steps to avoid a similar blow to his own forehead.

Gu Mian silently removed the mooncake from his head and looked into the living room.

Xiao Hong was hanging from the opulent chandelier in the living room, holding a mooncake in one hand and chewing something with relish.

Below, Fatty was frantically jumping on tiptoe, trying to snatch the uncooked mooncakes from Xiao Hong's hands.

In the kitchen was Xiao Qiao, who was always stealing things. She was currently sneaking furtively towards the oven, reaching for the half-baked mooncakes inside.

What a delightful welcoming committee, Gu Mian thought.

Ultimately, the welcoming ceremony concluded with Xiao Hong and Xiao Qiao each receiving a beating from Gu Mian.

Due to the antics of these two, it was past seven in the evening by the time Fatty finished baking the mooncakes.

"It's a bit late, but it's perfect for eating mooncakes while admiring the moon," Fatty said cheerfully, placing a plate of freshly baked lotus seed and egg yolk mooncakes before Gu Mian.

He then took out some oiled paper, wrapped several portions of mooncakes, and said, "I'll take some down to Miss Keke and the others."

With that, he trotted off happily with the mooncakes.

Nearby, Xiao Qiao and Xiao Hong had already started fighting over the previous batch of red bean paste mooncakes. In the scuffle, they knocked the specially made "Sister Mooncake" from Brother's hand.

Fatty had specially made a mooncake for Brother, with "Sister" patterned on it. Brother had been treasuring it, never expecting them to knock it away.

So he too joined this war between the girls.

Gu Mian had no inclination to bother with them.

He picked up a lotus seed mooncake and took a bite. It was delicious.

Chu Changge didn't seem to care for them, merely taking a couple of perfunctory bites.

"By the way, before we were kicked out of the instance, you also saw that 'Labor Protection Contract,' right?" Gu Mian asked, watching the ongoing battle.

"I saw it. It seems the game has introduced something new," Chu Changge said, setting down his mooncake. "I suppose it's similar to real-world insurance. If an NPC who has signed the contract unfortunately encounters Gu Mian, the game operators must take countermeasures."

Is encountering me such an unfortunate event? I'm actually very likable, alright.

"This Labor Protection Contract won't be something everyone has, will it? If that's the case, we won't be able to get information from NPCs anymore," Gu Mian mused. "The moment they see me, they'll just whip out this contract, shout 'I have a Labor Protection Contract!' and the instance will immediately kick me out."

What a tragic state of affairs.

"It probably won't come to that. I think this contract only activates when the signatory is in actual danger. In the instance just now, didn't you pin that ghost to the ground and choke him? He only took out the contract when he was on the verge of being strangled to death," Chu Changge said, pushing up his glasses.

That did seem to be the case.

Gu Mian nodded, holding his mooncake. It seems that from now on, I'll have to use gentler methods to gather information from ghosts, he thought to himself.

Chapter 726 mostly a beauty is gone_1

After the Mid-Autumn Festival, the next important holiday was the Spring Festival.

Fatty, who had just finished making mooncakes, had already started researching dumplings.

"The Spring Festival is coming up! I need to quickly figure out what kind of fillings to use for the dumplings," Fatty said, sitting on the couch with his head propped in his hands, looking very troubled.

Gu Mian was wiping his beloved saw with a towel. "There are still four months until the Spring Festival, you know."

"With four months left, Doctor, you should have plenty of time to prepare my lucky money. Last Spring Festival, you gave me a red envelope with fifty cents! Fifty cents! That's a full ten times less than Brother Chu's. This year, you have to treat us equally. Don't shortchange your Fatty," Fatty said, theatrically wiping a tear from his eye.

Gu Mian retorted, "You're the one who picked that red envelope."

Xiao Hong, who was nearby, seemed to know that red envelopes were a good thing. She had been dozing off, but upon hearing the words "red envelope," she instantly perked up. She scrambled over to Gu Mian, patting him down everywhere in an attempt to find one.

Seeing this, Fatty quickly stepped forward and pulled Xiao Hong away. "Don't be lewd with the Doctor!"

Not finding what she wanted, Xiao Hong got bored and went back to dozing.

Xiao Qiao, who was in the kitchen stealing food, saw Xiao Hong's actions. Shouting, "Share the good fortune!" she rushed over, grabbed Gu Mian, and started patting him down frantically. This infuriated Gu Mian, who kicked her out of the room.

After kicking Xiao Qiao out, Gu Mian cradled his saw and contemplated how to deal with ghosts in instances. I can't use the saw for interrogations anymore; it'll scare them.

"Ah," he sighed. "This damned labor protection contract."

"Brother Chu mentioned that in the last instance, after a ghost pulled out a protection contract, the instance kicked you all out," Fatty began.

"Yeah," Gu Mian said, stroking the saw in his hand. "I hadn't even taken out my saw. I just touched the ghost's neck, and the instance kicked me out."

What a crappy labor protection contract, specified by some stupid insurance company! It'd be great if that company went bankrupt.

Gu Mian cursed inwardly for a while before starting to formulate his next plan.

"Since I can't use force for interrogation, I'll have to adopt a gentler approach. But what kind of gentle approach would be suitable..." Gu Mian mused, becoming troubled.

"I have an idea!" Fatty raised his hand. "Doctor, I think the ghosts and NPCs in the instances all really want to beat you up. Why not make a deal with them? For every question they answer, they get to give you a beating. I'm sure a lot of them would be happy to take that deal."

Thanks a lot. You're a real pal, Fatty.

"How about this," Gu Mian countered, turning the tables, "I'll bring you into an instance to make a deal with them. For every question they answer for me, they get to beat you up. As the saying goes, 'a blow to the child is a pain in the father's heart.' I'm sure they'd be delighted to see my heartache, wouldn't they?"

Fatty's eyes widened. Clutching his backside, he fled in terror.

After Fatty left, Chu Changge appeared.

He emerged from his room holding a sheet of A4 paper. "I don't think all ghosts have signed the 'Instance Ghost Labor Contract.' Just like real-world insurance, signing it costs money. Some don't have the money, so they don't buy insurance; others think they're lucky and won't have accidents, so they don't buy it either."

He's right.

With so many instances, I'm bound to find a couple of ghosts who haven't bought insurance. When that time comes, I'll fleece them for all they're worth.

Chu Changge continued, "Moreover, this is a ghost contract, so it's invalid for NPCs. Next time you enter an instance, try targeting NPCs specifically, like Mr. Green or Coach Che."

Gu Mian nodded.

However, some instances don't have NPCs, which is a bit troublesome.

But that's not a huge problem. As long as I enter enough instances, I'll eventually run into an NPC.

"I'm worried that the game developers might also launch NPC insurance services in the future, so you should take advantage of the current situation and clear a few more instances," Chu Changge suggested.

Gu Mian thought so too.

He decided to clear a few more instances in the coming days.

「As for the next couple of days...」

He was a bit tired from the last instance and decided to take it easy and enjoy a leisurely life first.

Over the next few days, Gu Mian went grocery shopping at the supermarket, fished in the park, and occasionally ate Fatty's small desserts. Life was quite comfortable.

That was until he ran into Mr. Green begging by the roadside.

Gu Mian didn't recognize him at first glance because Mr. Green's trademark green hat and clothes were gone. Dressed in rags, he was squatting by the supermarket entrance; one might have mistaken him for a beggar.

Before Gu Mian had entered the Death Filming instance, Mr. Green had "run away from home," leaving them only a small farewell note.

Who would have thought that just a few days after his departure, he'd ended up in such a state?

"Well, if it isn't Host Green," Gu Mian said, walking up and poking his hatless head. "What happened? Haven't seen you for a few days, and you've gotten so pathetic?"

Mr. Green had been robbed.

The poor Mr. Green, on the very second day after running away from home, had run into a group of extremely vicious players. They robbed him of everything he had. After looting him, they even complained that his clothes were too small for even a woman to wear.

He had wanted to resist, but he didn't dare.

Looking at this group of extremely vicious players, he even started to miss the kind Doctor Gu Mian.

Fortunately, this group left after robbing him and didn't entertain the idea of cooking and eating him.

Wrapping himself in a curtain, Mr. Green went out to the main street. He wanted to ask the supermarket salesclerks for help, but he felt it was too embarrassing, so he just squatted by the supermarket entrance, hesitating.

He never expected to run into Gu Mian passing by.

Seeing how pitiful Mr. Green looked, Gu Mian, in a burst of magnanimity, picked him up, took him home, and tossed him to Xiao Hong as a plaything.

Xiao Hong, not being the sharpest tool in the shed, had long forgotten that Mr. Green was her former boss. Upon getting her hands on Mr. Green, she immediately hung him from the ornate chandelier in the living room and started playing 'swing' with him.

Mr. Green's eyes welled with tears, but he didn't dare resist. Even being hung from the ceiling and swung like a pendulum was better than being homeless on the streets.

Fatty, standing under the chandelier, clapped his hands and exclaimed in admiration, "What an inspiring story! My former superior, who used to make things difficult for me in every way, has now become my plaything. If this were on a web novel site, it could be stretched into a million words!"

Chapter 727 You've Become Lovers Now, Let's Chat_1

Happy days are always short-lived.

Gu Mian barely rested for a few days before heading back on the road to conquer instances.

Fatty cried, insisting on joining him in the instance, but Gu Mian swatted him away. "What will I eat if the cook dies?"

Fatty felt that Gu Mian valued him, so he puffed out his chest and left to prepare the next meal.

Chu Changge was taken along by Gu Mian this time.

Aside from Chu Changge, Keke also wished to earn some Game Coins.

Hence, the three of them proceeded to the nearby ticket booth and entered the instance under the despairing gaze of the ticket seller.

[Instance Name: My Virtual Girlfriend/Boyfriend]

Pretty nice. It sounds like they're going to assign us partners.

[Number of Players: 5]

[Instance Content: Are you tired from being pestered about marriage by your relatives? Are you frustrated in your search for a partner? You deserve to have this virtual girlfriend/boyfriend. This product comes with six options to choose from. Please select the boyfriend/girlfriend most suitable for you based on their character and appearance!]

This kind of reminds me of the Sweet Lovers instance. I wonder if there are NPCs similar to Teacher Sweet in this one.

[Task: Have a virtual relationship with your chosen character for three days. Task completed at the end of three days.]

After reading the task description, Gu Mian's surroundings changed instantly from a ticket booth into a bedroom.

He was now sitting on a bed holding a cell phone.

Chu Changge and Keke were also there. One sat at a desk not far from the bed, while the other sat on a beanbag on the floor. They both held phones as well.

Gu Mian looked down.

The screen displayed an app called "My Virtual Girlfriend/Boyfriend," which was open and on the character selection screen.

The interface is pink and cutesy. It's obviously a love game.

However, there wouldn't be any real love games in a horror instance.

Gu Mian closely examined the introduction of the five characters on screen.

[Character One: Song Meng]

[Gender: Female]

[A current university student from a poor household who works part-time during holidays to support herself]

This has the vibe of a harem anime.

There was also a picture attached: a girl with short hair, wearing glasses, possessing a very scholarly look.

[Character Two: Zhao Tiankuo]

[Gender: Male]

[A junior high school dropout and delinquent who loiters around the streets and barely makes a living by stealing. He has a serious tendency towards violence. A careless move could see the relationship turn into one between a suspect and a victim.]

He has a scar on his left cheek, possibly from a knife. He looks difficult to deal with.

[Character Three: Ai Zitao]

[Gender: Male]

[A conservative office worker with no initiative who likes to cultivate plants and never starts a conversation. Said to be the type most likely to be a psychopath.]

The attached image is of a bespectacled young man. His emotionless face is somewhat similar to Chu Changge's.

[Character Four: Xia Yutong]

[Gender: Female]

[A social butterfly at school who is on very friendly terms with many people. When in a relationship with her, always be aware of the color of the hat on your head and whether Old Wang is hiding in the closet.]

The picture shows a beautiful woman with long hair. She's the most attractive of the six.

[Character Five: Feng Cheng]

[Gender: Male]

[A high schooler with low self-esteem. Technically, underage dating is prohibited, but it's fine since this is a game.]

Feng Cheng has an ordinary face and sparse hair, likely from staying up late to study.

There's a "Select" button underneath each character's introduction. It looks like we have to use this button to choose our partner.

Keke had already finished reading the introductions of all five characters. She looked up at Gu Mian and Chu Changge. "These five characters... are they ghosts?"

Since dating is the primary task, it's highly probable these five love interests are ghosts.

But what would their murder methods be? Would they crawl out of the phone and kill people?

Gu Mian imagined the scene and found it ridiculous.

Just as Keke asked her question, Chu Changge noticed that the name "Song Meng" had turned gray. Then, a line of text appeared at the bottom of the app: "Character One: Song Meng has been selected by player 'Wind Blows Butt Cool'."

Five characters and five players. It seems two players can't choose the same love interest.

Right after, the name "Feng Cheng" also turned gray, chosen by a player called 'Moonfall Crow Cries'.

Those two players certainly know how to choose. They picked the two who seem most normal.

Now, only three selectable characters are left: the violence-prone Zhao Tiankuo, Xia Yutong, who likes to 'make hats,' and the suspected psychopath Ai Zitao.

This is a bit awkward.

There are two male characters and one female character left. But our group also has two men and one woman.

Keke went silent for a few seconds before sheepishly asking, "You guys want to pick first?"

"You first," Gu Mian looked at her.

After hesitating for a bit, Keke selected the 'reliable' office worker, Ai Zitao. Thankfully, she chose a male. Otherwise, Chu Changge and I would both have ended up in same-sex relationships.

Gu Mian and Chu Changge were left with a man and a woman to choose from.

One of us is sure to be cuckolded, and the other will end up in a gay relationship. Gu Mian decided to pass this hot potato to Chu Changge, letting him choose first.

Chu Changge didn't feel bothered at all. He adjusted his glasses and accepted the green hat with indifference.

The only one left was the violence-prone Zhao Tiankuo, so Gu Mian took the remaining one.

Zhao Tiankuo has violent tendencies, making him the most dangerous character to select. There's a chance of sudden 'domestic abuse.' Keke thought.

She began to imagine Gu Mian being subjected to domestic abuse—a frail Gu Mian pushed to the ground, clutching his Saw and weeping.

The thought gave Keke chills.

Gu Mian had no idea what Keke was imagining. He focused on the phone.

After selecting a character, the screen switched to a chat interface, similar to WeChat's, except the chat box was pink. The app only showed the character he had selected; no one else was listed.

The top of the chat showed a system notification — "You're now a couple. Start chatting!"

Gu Mian: "..."

It seems this app is for developing relationships through chatting.

He stared at the screen for half a minute. The other person didn't send a message, and Gu Mian had no intention of sending one either. After exploring the app's features, he put the phone in his pocket and looked around.

This was a very ordinary-looking apartment with one bedroom and one living room.

Looking out the window, he could see a road not too far away. The street was bustling with people, and vehicles continuously zipped by.

The people outside had normal skin tones and weren't eyeing each other suspiciously. This confirms it's not Paradise or the Old World.

"Can you tell which world this is?" he asked Chu Changge.

Chu Changge, who had been looking at his phone, glanced out the window. "It's not the Second World."

Chapter 728 Damn it, I'm a man_1

Chu Changge could sense his own world, so he knew this wasn't the Second World.

Gu Mian guessed this was probably Exile World.

Exile World was the world designated "2" among the seven, with a low degree of alteration, quite similar to Earth.

The 'brother' whom the Holy Daughter had introduced to him belonged to this world.

This time, Gu Mian had brought his own brother along as well, but unfortunately, all the latter could do was call out for his "sister," providing no valuable information.

At that moment, his brother peeked his head out from the CD, looking at Gu Mian's phone screen, much like a parent checking if their child was secretly dating. Gu Mian pushed him back in.

Gu Mian's love interest hadn't sent any messages yet. Chu Changge's phone, however, was constantly ringing with messages from his chat partner.

So Keke and Gu Mian both leaned in to look at his screen.

[Xia Yutong]: Hello, are you Chu Changge? Nice to meet you, I'm Xia Yutong.

[Xia Yutong]: From today on, I am your girlfriend. If you have any problems, you can tell me. I will help you solve them.

[Xia Yutong]: Naturally, if I encounter anything interesting, I will share it with you as well. I hope it brings you happiness.

[Xia Yutong]: Why aren't you replying? Are you not around? I'll chat with you later.

So this is Xia Yutong, the 'hat-knitter'? She seems very enthusiastic; she must be actively 'knitting a hat' for Chu Changge right now.

Chu Changge didn't reply immediately but stared at the phone screen, deep in thought.

Keke checked her phone. Her virtual lover hadn't sent any messages yet. "The instance mission is to date these virtual entities for three days," she said. "I suppose they must be ghosts, but I have no idea how they kill people."

"I don't know if these people are fictional characters or if they actually exist." Gu Mian fiddled with his phone, trying to exit the dating app, but he couldn't.

He couldn't exit. It seemed the phone's only function was to help them date.

"This world seems normal. It probably has internet. We should find a computer and search for information about these five people from the app," Gu Mian suggested, scanning the room with his eyes.

He couldn't find what he was looking for in the room. He then searched the desk drawers and found some spare cash.

"Let's find an internet cafe first," Gu Mian said, glancing at the clock hanging in the living room—it was 12:07 in the afternoon. "Let's see if we can find any information on these five people."

They were in an old residential complex.

They wandered around the complex for a while before finding the main gate. Across the road from the complex gate were several shops, their signs faded from years of exposure.

So far, Zhao Tiankuo, the 'domestic abuser,' hadn't sent Gu Mian any messages. Keke's virtual partner, however, had made a move.

[Ai Zitao]: Hello.

That was it, just two words and no follow-up.

The game described Ai Zitao as: 'An old-fashioned, indecisive office worker who enjoys tending to flowers and plants and never initiates conversations. It's said this type of person is most prone to psychopathy.'

Just from the introduction, you could tell he was a man of few words.

Keke didn't dare to ignore him the way Chu Changge was ignoring his match. She immediately replied with a "Hello" of her own.

But after her reply, Ai Zitao didn't send a new message for a long time.

Seeing no further response, Keke didn't press the conversation. She figured saying too much could lead to mistakes; it was better to gather more information on these characters first.

Keke clutched her phone. "Speaking of which, besides the three of us, there should be two other players in this instance, right?" she said. "I think one is called 'Wind Blows Butt Cool,' and the other is 'Moonfall Crow Cries.'"

Who knows where those two are? They were quick enough to pick their partners, though.

"They are probably like us, trying to find information on these characters online," Gu Mian speculated. "Their starting point shouldn't be too far from ours, I imagine."

Just as Gu Mian said this, his phone suddenly buzzed. A message from Zhao Tiankuo.

He glanced down at his phone and saw a strange greeting:

"Babe, why don't you initiate a chat with your bro?"

Gu Mian: "..."

So Zhao Tiankuo thinks I'm a woman, huh?

Gu Mian immediately typed back a righteous clarification, "You creep, I'm a guy."

Keke, who was watching him type, fell silent when she saw his message.

A new message arrived just a few seconds later.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: Hehe, babe, you really have a sense of humor.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: Gotta go for now, babe. Bro's a bit busy. I'll hit you up later.

Looks like this 'bro' is pretty busy. Probably out picking pockets on the street again.

"There's an internet cafe up ahead," Chu Changge said from up front.

Gu Mian looked up and saw a "Longteng Internet Cafe" across the road. The shop wasn't large and looked rather run-down.

Gu Mian didn't bother replying to the creep. They quickly headed to the internet cafe and got a computer.

The cafe was quite crowded. As soon as they entered, the thick smell of smoke hit them, making Keke cough a few times.

"The five characters in this dating game are Song Meng, Zhao Tiankuo, Ai Zitao, Xia Yutong, and Feng Cheng. Right now, we only have their names. With just names, I'm afraid we won't find much useful information," Gu Mian commented as he opened the computer's search engine. He typed Song Meng's name into the search box.

As expected, a jumble of unrelated results appeared.

There are so many people with the same name in the world. There must be at least eight hundred, if not a thousand, people named Song Meng.

The search engine returned many results for Song Meng, ranging from eighty-year-old men to thirteen-year-old children.

He searched the other four names as well but found no useful information.

"We can't figure out if they're real people with just their names. We need to get more information out of them," Gu Mian said, looking at Chu Changge. "Your girlfriend seems the most enthusiastic. She's more likely to reveal information, so you should chat with her."

Chu Changge was silent for a few seconds, then quietly pulled out his phone.

Gu Mian watched as he started typing: "Where do you live? What's the name of your school? Are there any distinctive landmarks near you..."

Seeing what Chu Changge was typing, Keke fell silent again.

Sensing something was amiss, Gu Mian quickly snatched Chu Changge's phone. "I forgot you don't know how to date."

He still remembered how, during their school days, a girl had subtly confessed her feelings to Chu Changge. Chu Changge hadn't understood at all and had instead started giving her a lecture on the law.

Remembering this, Gu Mian decided not to count on him and took matters into his own hands.

He deleted all the words Chu Changge had typed and began to compose a new message.

"I'm so sorry, Xiao Meng, for taking so long to reply. I didn't mean to delay; I just... I didn't know how to respond.

"I saw your picture. You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. So beautiful it made me a little nervous. When you messaged me first, I was a bit overwhelmed and didn't know what to say.

"It took me a long time to work up the courage to send this. I'm really happy you're my girlfriend."

After sending this message, Gu Mian ran outside the internet cafe to take a picture of the sky and sent it over.

"My mood is as clear as today's weather. Do you feel the same?"

Chapter 729 Oh no, I forgot yesterday was a special day_1

Soon, Xia Yutong replied.

[Xia Yutong]: I'm not as beautiful as you said; you're flattering me too much, it's a little embarrassing.

[Xia Yutong]: I hadn't received your reply, so I thought you didn't like me. I was worried for a long time. My mood is just like yours now, as clear as today's sky.

Xia Yutong also sent a photo.

The photo showed a clear blue sky with a few white clouds drifting by.

Aside from the sky, there was no other information in the photo.

Gu Mian began to type again, "What are you doing outside? Did you come out specifically to take a picture of the sky for me?"

[Xia Yutong]: I'm on my way to the cafeteria. I'm going to have lunch. After lunch, I have to work on my thesis. I can't chat anymore.

[Xia Yutong]: Bye, my dear boyfriend.

That nickname is truly unsettling.

Gu Mian hurried back into the Internet cafe and searched for an affectionate nickname to use for his girlfriend. He quickly learned one and responded to Xia Yutong, "Alright, my little goof."

At this point, a pale hand reached out from his pocket and knocked his phone away.

Fortunately, Gu Mian was quick-witted and nimble-handed enough to catch it; otherwise, Chu Changge's 'girlfriend' would have gone flying.

Keke felt a peculiar numbness wash over her, especially after Gu Mian typed out the words "my little goof."

"Chu Changge, use your computer to check if there are any schools nearby. Keke, give me your phone." Gu Mian smoothly pocketed 'Chu Changge's girlfriend' and then extended a mischievous hand toward Keke.

"Are you going to chat with Ai Zitao?" Keke took out her phone and handed it to Gu Mian.

She remembered Chu Changge's girlfriend, Xia Yutong, was an avid cheater. Gu Mian, by comparison, was even worse.

He was simultaneously chatting with three love interests, indifferent to whether they were male or female. Utterly perverse!

Keke suspected that if a player could choose multiple love interests, Gu Mian would undoubtedly select all five characters at once.

"I didn't get any information from Xia Yutong just now, and Zhao Tiankuo is too busy to chat with me. So, I can only try with Ai Zitao now." Gu Mian took Keke's phone.

Keke and Ai Zitao had only exchanged a simple "hello." Neither of them seemed keen on chatting.

Gu Mian remembered Ai Zitao was described as a reticent, old-fashioned office worker, so it wouldn't be good to appear too enthusiastic.

He thought carefully for a moment, then began to type, "You've been quiet. Do you not like me?" His tone seemed to perfectly match Keke's delicate and seemingly harmless Lv Cha persona. However, Ai Zitao didn't appear to be falling for it. Gu Mian held Keke's phone, waiting for a long time, but Ai Zitao didn't reply.

As expected, people who wear glasses and have such an aloof demeanor are hard to communicate with.

At this moment, Chu Changge, who also wore glasses, spoke up, "I've searched. There are two high schools and one university nearby. The university is called Zhao'an University, about five kilometers away from us."

"Let's go check it out first. Xia Yutong is a university student; maybe we can meet her there." Gu Mian also pocketed Ai Zitao—that is, the phone Keke was using to chat with him.

Keke asked, "Are these love interests real people?"

"Not sure yet," Gu Mian said, starting towards the exit of the Internet cafe, "so we have to go and see."

Keke felt a headache coming on. She rubbed her temples. "Following a normal line of thought for this instance, players should be using the chat to probe for the ghost's location. Once they pinpoint the ghost's exact whereabouts, they should get away quickly."

But things were now heading into unpredictable territory.

Gu Mian was already eager to meet the ghost offline.

Meanwhile, the other two players in the instance had also entered the game as a team.

These two thought like normal people. They were wracking their brains, trying to figure out the ghost's information to avoid contact as much as possible.

In a bustling shopping mall, Moonfall Crow Cries frowned at his phone. "Do you think these characters are real? Or are they just a set of data within the software?"

"A set of data can't just crawl out of the phone and kill people, can it?" Wind Blows Butt Cool said with a bitter smile. "I think they must be real."

"If that's the case, we have to figure out where they are and then stay away from that place," Moonfall Crow Cries said, his gaze lowered. "But my chat partner stopped talking to me. He said he was going to take a nap; otherwise, he'd be sleepy during his afternoon classes."

Wind Blows Butt Cool was also chatting with his love interest. "Song Meng also said she's going to work. She needs to earn money for her tuition fees."

"She's not coming to work at this mall, is she?"

"Let's leave this place first," Wind Blows Butt Cool said, immediately standing up, looking uneasy.

The two found a less crowded public square and sat on a bench to continue their discussion.

"Besides us two, there are three other players in this instance. I think we'd better find them. There's strength in numbers, and we can discuss a survival strategy for the instance," Moonfall Crow Cries suggested.

Wind Blows Butt Cool said bitterly, "I'd like to, but I have no idea where those three are. Searching aimlessly will definitely get us nowhere. We'd be better off using our time to chat with our virtual partners; maybe we can get some clues from them."

"But neither of our virtual partners are talking anymore." At this, Moonfall Crow Cries seemed to recall something. "Speaking of which, it's strange. Both of our virtual partners only chatted for a line or two and then stopped. Is it because the instance just started?"

"Perhaps the way to survive this instance is hidden in the chat messages? Do we need to chat with them more to find the way out?"

While thinking, Wind Blows Butt Cool sent another message to Song Meng: "It must be tough working while you're studying, right?"

There was no reply.

He couldn't very well use a harsh tone to force her to reply, so he could only wait idly.

"I remember this Song Meng needs money, right?" Moonfall Crow Cries suddenly spoke. "She stopped chatting with you because she has to work to earn money. I just checked; this software has a feature for sending red packets. If you sent her some money, do you think she might chat with you more?"

"Huh?" Wind Blows Butt Cool examined the software and found that there was indeed a function to send red packets.

"Do I need to top up first?" He searched again but couldn't find a top-up option.

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Even if there was a way to top up, he didn't have the money. Unless it was with Game Coins, he mused. But Wind Blows Butt Cool wouldn't dare casually send any red envelopes—virtual gifts—to her. What if a gift cheered her up and she wanted to see him immediately? What then?

"Anyway, let's keep our distance from schools for now," Wind Blows Butt Cool analyzed seriously. "My chat contact, Song Meng, is a university student, and yours, Feng Cheng, is a high school student. If we see a school, let's steer clear. Don't go near one. For now, try not to be too aloof or too enthusiastic with them. Let's just see how things play out."

"So, are we still going to look for the other three players in the instance?" Moonfall Crow Cries asked.

Wind Blows Butt Cool shook his head slightly. "That depends on luck. If we're lucky, we'll run into them without searching. If we're unlucky, we won't find them even if we try."

"Alright," Moonfall Crow Cries agreed, though he actually wanted to find the other players. More people mean more ideas; they might figure out a way to survive much faster.

「Meanwhile, Gu Mian and his two companions had arrived at Zhao'an University.」

It was noon, and with no classes in session, many students were heading to the food street outside the school gates for lunch. Gu Mian's group simply blended in with them and entered the campus.

Xia Yutong had said over half an hour ago that she was going to the cafeteria for lunch. The school's cafeteria was quite conspicuous; as soon as Gu Mian and the others entered the main gate, they spotted the three-story building with a "Campus Restaurant" sign. Students bustled back and forth, most carrying takeout meals, likely heading back to their dorms to eat.

"She said she was going to the cafeteria for lunch half an hour ago, so she's probably finished by now," Gu Mian said, gazing at the Campus Restaurant's entrance. "Even if she is at this school, she might not still be in the cafeteria."

But since we're already here, it'd be a waste not to go in and check, he thought.

The cafeteria was bustling. Just inside the entrance was a large Malatang stall, where students were selecting ingredients with small basins. Further in, there were stalls for clay pot milk tea, roast duck, and roast goose, but none of these caught Gu Mian's attention. He quickly scanned the first floor but didn't find the person he was looking for. Then, he rapidly searched the second and third floors, also finding nothing.

"Xia Yutong's character profile said she has good interpersonal relationships. Maybe we can ask these students if any of them know her?" Keke suggested.

She knew it wasn't a great idea. It would be time-consuming and might not yield any results, but it seems we don't have any other options right now, she thought.

Gu Mian patted his guitar case. "I have a way to find her quickly."

"What is it?" Keke asked curiously.

"I'll slash you a few times. You lie in a pool of blood and scream, 'Xia Yutong stabbed me!' Then Xia Yutong will be caught by others and brought here." Gu Mian paused, then, apparently thinking this was too cruel to Keke, added, "Slashing Chu Changge would also work."

As he spoke, he glanced towards Chu Changge. Unexpectedly, Chu Changge seemed to have anticipated his thoughts and had already silently retreated several meters. Keke also backed away quietly.

Just as Gu Mian was about to continue persuading them, a phone in his pocket suddenly rang.

Someone sent a message? Let me see who it is, he wondered.

Gu Mian took out his three phones and checked them one by one. It was a message from his "romantic interest," Zhao Tiankuo.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: I'm back. You must have been anxiously waiting for me, little thing.

Gu Mian was indeed very anxious. Finally, someone's messaging me!

He immediately typed his reply: "What were you doing? You haven't messaged me for so long! Were you chatting with someone else?"

[Zhao Tiankuo]: How could I? You're my only treasure; there's no one else.

"I don't believe you. You need to tell me exactly what you were doing just now and show me proof. Otherwise, I won't believe it," Gu Mian typed, starting to act unreasonably.

He's being this provocative? Keke thought as she read their messages. She remembered that this Zhao Tiankuo was a domestic abuser and worried that Gu Mian, being so unreasonable, would actually provoke him into violence.

But Zhao Tiankuo showed no signs of his violent tendencies just then. He even explained patiently to Gu Mian.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: I went to collect some debts. The boss lent out some money that he couldn't get back, so I had no choice but to go myself.

"I don't believe you. Where's the proof?"

[Zhao Tiankuo]: You're impossible! Luckily, I took a picture. I'll send it to you right now to prove my innocence.

Then, he actually sent a photo. Even the thumbnail looked gruesome.

Gu Mian clicked on the image, and Keke leaned over curiously. The photo appeared to have been taken in an old garage. A person, curled up, took up most of the frame. They were bound with ropes, their entire body covered in bruises, as if beaten with a blunt object. A patch on their forehead was a bloody, mangled mess, with fresh blood still trickling down.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: See? Now do you believe me? I came to collect a debt, and this guy started crying to me about how he had no money. I don't fall for that crap. These people who borrow at high interest are cunning. They hide their money so well even a rat couldn't find it. If you don't beat them half to death, they won't tell the truth.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: Didn't scare you, did I?

Gu Mian typed worriedly: "That photo is terrifying. You're beating someone else today... you wouldn't hit me in the future, would you?"

[Zhao Tiankuo]: Of course not! I don't have a violent bone in my body. I'm only like this for work. I could never bring myself to hit you.

As if I'd believe that, Gu Mian scoffed internally.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: By the way, little thing, I still don't know your name.

That's strange, Gu Mian mused. Chu Changge's chat contact knew his name, but this guy doesn't know mine. The brooch must have blocked my name.

After a moment's thought, Gu Mian typed: "Just call me Mian Mian."

[Zhao Tiankuo]: Your name is lovely. From now on, I'll say it to myself every night before I sleep.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: I still haven't seen what you look like. Send me a photo, let me see.

An idea sparked in Gu Mian's mind. "Why go to all that trouble? Why don't we just meet in person? Tell me where you are, and I'll come find you."

Then I can just grab this ghost, and I won't have to go through all this trouble trying to wheedle information out of him through chat, he schemed.

But Zhao Tiankuo didn't take the bait.

[Zhao Tiankuo]: Heh heh, can't wait to meet me already, huh? Unfortunately, I'm busy right now. Wait a little longer. I'll see if I can make some time to find you in the next day or two.

Gu Mian smiled happily. "I'll hold you to that. Don't you dare go back on your word."