

48 Hours 271

Chapter 271 Missing Its Target

Zhang Heng ran into the dormitory building and looked at the lifts. Only one of the two available elevators were operating during the holidays, and it was now on the ninth floor. Considering it might stop on other floors on its way down, Zhang Heng decided to take the safer option on the other side, the stairs. Having no idea how much longer Shen Xixi and the imposter could last, every second counted. It took him only 47 seconds to climb to the 11th floor where his room was located.

When he pushed the door open, a sweat-soaked Ma Wei was sitting at his desk, a blank look plastered on his face as he held onto a wallet. He mumbled, "How could this be? I remember very clearly that I brought it with me when I left. I even bought two buns in the afternoon. How could it have returned before I did?!"

This was the most baffling thing he had ever experienced in his entire life. After his tutoring session ended, and he was about to go home, he realized that his wallet and bicycle were missing. He had frantically searched nearby, and yet, found nothing. Now, he was dizzy and confused.

Then, when he returned to the dormitory, his old bicycle had magically parked itself downstairs, and his missing wallet was already on his desk. Not only was the money still in there, but there was also even an extra forty yuan in it. Ma Wei felt his emotions heaving like a wild roller-coaster ride. Surprised and thrilled, he was at the same time bemused at the inexplicable happenstance. In his stupor, he didn't even notice Zhang Heng entering the room. By the time he looked up, Zhang Heng was already rushing out the door. From the corner of his eye, Ma Wei spotted him holding the SF recurve bow. "Are you going to practice archery? But it's so late..."

Zhang Heng picked up his bow, arrow, and telescope from his wardrobe, and instead of greeting his roommate, he hurried into the bathroom next door. With the telescope, he searched for Shen Xixi and the imposter through the tiny ventilation window and saw that they were running from the lake toward the parking lot.

He chose a small photocopy shop located between the parking lot and the man-made lake. It was also the closest location to the male dormitory. Making his way there as quickly as he could, he climbed up the sycamore tree next to the shop, the perfect spot for an ambush. At this point, Shen Xixi and imposter weren't too far away from him.

However, the two girls didn't notice Zhang Heng. All they cared was to run for their lives, focused on avoiding the black liquid that was quickly advancing on them. Zhang Heng took in a deep breath and pulled out the Paris Arrow from his quiver. The imposter had mentioned before that most supernatural beasts had a so-called Achilles' heel. As long as they figured what it was, they could kill even the most powerful and invincible of monsters.

The Paris Arrow was also a legendary item associated with the Achilles Heel. Zhang Heng had returned to the dormitory just to retrieve it. Although it wasn't his first time using this game item, he had only employed before it as an enhanced arrow with automatic angle correction. This was the first time he was using it against a supernatural creature and had no idea how effective it would be.

Zhang Heng armed the bow with the Paris Arrow. With his Lv. 2 archery skills, he swiftly locked on to the target without much difficulty. It wasn't until Shen Xixi, and the imposter ran past him that he released his finger.

However, something unexpected happened. Not only did the arrow not find the black liquid's weakness, but it also missed its target entirely.

Zhang Heng had been practicing archery for the longest time now, and practiced within a ten-meter range, even if it was a moving target, he could at least hit the eighth ring. In fact, there was no chance he would miss such an easy target. On top of that, the black liquid was a lot larger than his regular bullseye targets, and it was technically impossible for him to miss his mark. Judging by his extensive experience, he knew that it was a good shot the moment the arrow left the bow. Ironically, it was as if an invisible force had shifted the arrow's flight path. Zhang Heng saw with his own eyes as the Paris Arrow deviated, flying past the creature before disappearing into the darkness. Except for Zhang Heng, the shooter, the other two people, and the creature didn't even notice the existence of the arrow.

Zhang Heng's frown deepened as he looked at a fleeing Shen Xixi in the distance. Even if he caught up to them, chances were that he could do nothing against the creature. It appeared that it was immune to physical damage. So, after giving it some thought, Zhang Heng decided to find the Paris Arrow. He remembered that it had deviated in a southwesterly direction. Zhang Heng leaped off the tree and headed there. After around a hundred meters, he found his arrow sticking out of the ground.

Zhang Heng felt a little flummoxed. That creature's weak spot couldn't have been the dirt on the ground. Even if it was, there was a lot of soil under the tree back there; the Paris Arrow had no reason to fly all the way here. There could only be one explanation for this — before the Paris Arrow could hit the monster's weak spot, it had already used up all its kinetic energy. However, Zhang Heng was somewhat of an archery veteran, and he could accurately shoot up to two hundred meters. Even if there was wind resistance, there was no way it would only go as far as a hundred. On top of that, the angle the arrow penetrated the ground at a bizarre angle. It was at that moment that something suddenly clicked in his mind, and he looked up at a structure not too far away.

It was the school library, a seven floored concrete building. If the arrow's target were the building, then it would all make sense. It had suffered a loss of kinetic energy as it converted into gravitational potential energy. Still, it wasn't enough to send the arrow to the target, so it fell midway and plunged into the ground.

Nonetheless, it had completed its mission in a way, pointing Zhang Heng in a particular direction. Although he didn't know why that creature's weak spot was in the school library, he knew that the answer to tonight's crisis could be hidden within it.

Zhang Heng pulled the arrow out of the ground, replaced it on the bowstring, then carefully treaded to the dark library ahead of him.

Chapter 272 Three Arrows

Zhang Heng was more familiar with the library than the dorm room he had lived in every day. He would either spend his time there or the gym during the extra 23 hours he had. Since a regular of the place, he made a copy of the door's key, usually entering through its employee-only entrance. He would first head

to the basement to turn on the main power before entering the elevator and pressing the button to the seventh floor.

Unsure if the thing he was looking for in the library of even a living being, he quickly came across an idea. The library was located in the middle of the university, and since it went up to seven floors, it was perfect as an observation point for the entire area. From the top floor, there was a birds-eye view of the whole university campus. If the thing that entered the library was indeed a living being, it meant that whatever he did before entering was no longer a secret.

If the creature didn't spot Zhang Heng entering the library, it would have known by now since the electricity had been turned on. By turning on the entire building's power, he hoped to confuse the creature, where it would have to figure out which floor he was on. Meanwhile, Zhang Heng would use the stairwell to move to the next floor.

Since the Paris Arrow's landing spot proved that whatever he was looking for was on the top floor, Zhang Heng decided to start his search there. When he arrived, the entire place was pitch black the moment the door was opened. Utilizing the familiarity of his surroundings, he located the switch for the LED light above without much problem. However, it didn't turn on after the switch was flipped. Alarm bells started going off in his head, and he immediately became extremely cautious. The Paris Arrow had further confirmed that there was a high possibility that his target was on this floor.

Immediately, Zhang Heng wound the string of his bow. Right now, his biggest problem wasn't the thing he was looking for. The Paris Arrow had already helped him locate the whereabouts of the clue before its energy depleted. The problem was that he was now away from the black liquid, and having no idea where it was, in no way could he reshoot it.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng heard a rustling sound. Although hushed, it sounded extra crisp in the empty library, and he deduced that it came from the back of one of the book racks. Since it wasn't too far from him, he approached the shelf with the bow in hand. Cautious of booby traps, he decided to take the longer route, moving around the tall rows of books to get to it. Just as he was about to close in on the source of the sound, what seemed like a masked person charged at him all of a sudden!

Zhang Heng was well prepared to handle attacks from such close proximity, and with the Paris Arrow on his bow, he couldn't miss the target. After completing a few quests, Zhang Heng's heightened awareness had allowed him to take aim at his mark in a split second. Right before he could release the arrow, though, the bow unexpectedly twitched a little. In the end, the arrow flew past the person and landed on an English book.

After that, Zhang Heng quickly turned his body to avoid the attack from the masked person. Before he could check his enemy out, Zhang Heng promptly pulled out another arrow from his quiver and reloaded his bow. He then aimed at the shadow that was heading towards the exit.

This time, the arrow hit the person's calf, causing him to lose balance and falling to the ground. Seeming to be severely injured, and judging by the loss of mobility, Zhang Heng took the opportunity and shot a third arrow at the shadow. Without warning, the wall on the person's left melted.

Now, Zhang Heng had reencountered the black liquid.

This time the liquid engulfed the masked person, sucking him into the wall. Zhang Heng chose not to pursue it this time know how perilous it would be. Whether the elevator or the stairwell, he wouldn't stand a chance against the black liquid in such a confined space. Besides, there wasn't much time left before the hour hand would strike twelve.

After looking at his watch, Zhang Heng held his bow and stood guard, ensuring that creature wouldn't return to the library again. He then turned around and walked towards the masked person and took off the mask. It was actually a girl, and she seemed to be a student at this university. Both her hands were tired, and there was a sock stuffed in her mouth. She seemed to have just encountered something terrifying, and the moment Zhang Heng untied her, she started to cry, running to hide under a table near him. She was clearly panic-stricken and was trembling uncontrollably.

Zhang Heng picked up her student card that had fallen to the ground and saw that she was called Li Shengyue.

"You are safe now. The creature is gone."

Zhang Heng put aside his bow and handed back Li Shengyue's card.

It wasn't until a minute later before she snapped out of her fear. She snatched the card defensively from Zhang Heng.

"Zhang Heng?!"

Li Shengyue was surprised to see that her rescuer turned out to be Zhang Heng.

"Wait. You know me?"

"I don't know you, but I know that the creature was here for you."

The events that had taken place tonight had gone beyond the realms of everything she knew. She began shaking each time the thought of what happened crossed her mind. Despite the stammers and stutters that she couldn't control, she still tried her best to narrate whatever she knew to Zhang Heng.

"After the finals were over, they moved up the library's closing time to six in the evening. In the afternoon, I wanted to come here to read, and I saw a kid around seven to eight years old standing outside. He told me that he wanted to enter the library to read some comics. However, he couldn't get past the turnstile and seeing the librarian wasn't around, I unlocked the turnstile and let him in. I saw him heading to the comic area on the second floor. So, I told him to look for me on the seventh before he exited the library. "While I was reading, he came up, walked toward me, and asked me a question. He asked if I knew a certain Zhang Heng. He also told me that this person is a student here. I told him that there were thousands of students, and I couldn't possibly know every single person here. Immediately, his face darkened the moment he heard what I said.

"I have never seen such a terrifying face on a kid. He had the look of a killer in his eyes! After that, he didn't say a word and left me alone. I was struck by fear, and I lost the mood to read. Around ten minutes later, I decided to leave the library, and I descended to the second floor to look for him. However, he wasn't there anymore.

“In fact, I searched the entire library, but he was nowhere to be found. I thought he must have followed someone out, and just to be safe, I hung around until the closing of the library. Before I left, I went to the toilet. That’s when I saw something in the mirror. I saw...”

Li Shengyue’s voice was trembling.

“You saw the wall melting into black liquid?”

Li Shengyue nodded vigorously.

“The black liquid dripped on my shoulder and slithered onto my face. I felt that I was suffocating, and my survival instincts kicked in, telling me to get out of this place. When I tried to move my leg, I found that I was paralyzed. It was an awful feeling! Soon after that, I passed out. When I woke up, I found myself tied up here.”

Chapter 273 Neutral

Zhang Heng sent Li Shengyue back to her dormitory. It was at that time that he received a message from Shen Xixi telling him that the black liquid had given up on pursuing her all of a sudden. She also asked about his current whereabouts and situation. Before Zhang Heng could reply to her, he received a friend request.

The person’s name was, ‘Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (# 0)’

Zhang Heng promptly rejected the friend request. Two seconds later, he received another request from the same person. This time, it came with a side note.

[No one can reject me twice. No one!()*•w•)]

Zhang Heng read it, and once again, rejected the friend request.

Almost instantly, the person sent Zhang Heng another request. This time, the side note was different.

(Someone smart like me knows that you will reject my friend request again. Am I right? Hehe. (ZV**)]

This time, Zhang Heng accepted it and sent a reply.

(Whatever you just did is completely meaningless.)

(No. It’s not meaningless. Wait! Hold on right there! Don’t block me. I asked for your contact from Shen Xixi. There’s something important that I need to tell you.)

(Eh?)

(You’re cold-blooded, and you’re definitely not a real man. However, I’m surprised that you stuck to your promise. I’m glad you didn’t run away. Have you killed that thing?)

(That has nothing to do with you.)

[Hehehe! I’m just showing my concern. Do you know how dangerous the situation was just now? We were so close... so close to meeting our maker tonight. This is the golden opportunity to eliminate that creature. Shen Xixi asked for your whereabouts just now. If I tell her that you’re the one who saved us, I’m pretty sure you’ll gain an extra fan.]

(Your stomach no longer aches?)

(I feel better now, but there's still some lingering pain r_1. I'll go to the clinic for a checkup tomorrow.)

Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O') sounded serious. Soon after that, she sent another message to Zhang Heng.

[Don't worry, don't worry. I know that you don't like to show yourself. I told her that I don't want you to know I'm a player, and I've asked her to hide in the park first. She still doesn't know that you're a player. Oh right. I told her that we knew each through an online game. Don't forget that you asked me out for hotpot! (*° v°)]

After that, Zhang Heng replied Shen Xixi and told her that everything was fine. She then informed Zhang Heng that the creature had fled. As of now, she couldn't figure what had happened as well and reminded him to be extra cautious of his surroundings. If a similar thing were to happen again, he could contact her immediately, and she would assist him in the shortest time possible.

Zhang Heng thanked her for the offer; his gratitude genuine. Until now, Zhang Heng had met several players, where most of them were friendly and courteous – just like Ding Si and the professor who had both given him some useful advice. However, there were limits to their kindness, only imparting information after having ensured that their own interests were protected.

A player who was willing to risk her life to save others like Shen Xixi was indeed hard to come by. For those who had been oppressed for a long time, they wouldn't just simply pursue their long-desired justice or rescue someone weaker than them. Instead, they would turn from being the victim to the oppressor. After getting their revenge, they would use their influence to bully the weaker ones. What they had always hated wasn't how unfairly they had been treated, but rather, hated that they weren't the ones who had brought that injustice to this world.

What made Shen Xixi such a unique breed wasn't because she didn't go down the path of darkness, but because she was willing to use her precious game items to rescue ordinary humans. It was no easy path to take. It was a miracle that she was still alive and even gather a group of like-minded players. After all, they were countless players in the system, and some were just as kind and righteous as Shen Xixi. However, the reality of the situation differed from fairytales. In fairytales, the righteous would somehow always defeat evil, and light always overcame darkness. In reality though, a strong sense of righteousness and moral outlook meant that the player's chances of survival would be lower since more risks would have to be taken.

Those who had chosen to walk this path were either dead. or had given up due to the unbearable hardships they had to face. The fact that Shen Xixi kept walking on the noble path was enough to prove that she had strong determination, leadership, and charisma. As for Zhang Heng, he was a completely different species altogether. According to D&D's Alignment System, Zhang Heng was to be considered 'neutral.' He had a mature set of beliefs and would live his life according to his principles. No temptation from this world could shake his solid foundation.

At times, he would help those who were stuck in a tough situation, but he wouldn't do it all the time, not like Shen Xixi. She would even risk her life to save strangers. Unless the person was dear to him, he would never risk his life for someone he didn't know. In other words, Zhang Heng and Shen Xixi were

two completely different people. However, that didn't stop him from admiring her. He was also willing to provide whatever help he could offer if Shen Xixi were to be in trouble. After all, it wasn't a bad thing to have more people like Shen Xixi in this heartless world. If Wang Yu and the other players who supported Shen Xixi didn't exist, Zhang Heng wouldn't mind revealing his true identity to her. After replying Shen Xixi, Zhang Heng put his phone away and glanced at his watch. There was only a minute left before midnight. His private time was about to arrive soon. That said, Zhang Heng had no intention to let go of that creature. Clearly, it was targeting him all the while. Even though it was now injured and its weakness exposed after getting hit by the Paris Arrow, Zhang Heng knew that it would become extremely troublesome to deal with if he didn't take the opportunity to kill it now.

Besides, his university was exposed, and he didn't want to live in fear for the rest of his life. He didn't want to live with the constant thought at the back of his mind that the walls around him could melt and consume him. Before he went after the creature, he first returned to his dormitory to greet Ma Wei. After that, he grabbed something with him before he left the hostel. It was midnight the moment he entered the elevator to ascend to the first floor.

Zhang Heng had his bow with him when the doors of the elevator opened. He swiftly ran past the dorm aunt, who was in a sweatshirt and cotton slippers. She waved a U-shaped lock midair and yawned at the same time. Zhang Heng was familiar with a world where time could be paused for him. Although still somewhat curious, he had lost the initial excitement when he first came into this world where time stopped. To him, this world without time was like a wax museum filled with ultra-realistic figures.

This time, there was something important that he needed to do.

Chapter 274 Caught You

Zhang Heng followed the blood trail from the library to an orphanage. The whole tracking process wasn't as simple as one thought it would be. Although the shadowy figure's calf was injured, it did not need to rely on legs to flee Zhang Heng since the black liquid allowed it to travel from wall to wall. However, moving within the confines of walls was no good feeling, and from time to time, it would need to stick out its head for a breath of fresh air.

Each time the figure emerged from the wall, it would leave a few drops of blood on the ground. The creature's blood was unique, and it was easily identifiable. Thicker than the blood of an ordinary human, it was darker, almost black, in fact. Not to mention the putrid stench it gave off. Still, it was no easy task to track droplets of blood in such a massive city.

Zhang Heng strung his recurve bow to his back. With a flashlight in one hand and phone in the other, he opened the Gao De map application and studied it. Discounting what it did at the library, the creature usually avoided showing itself in crowded places. It always targeted the city's weakest bunch, the lower rungs of society. This meant many people had never seen it before. Now that it was injured, it would be even more cautious of its surroundings. With the electronic map, Zhang Heng eliminated places that had a high volume of people at this hour. For example, the main road and the food street that operated until late at night. Picking a couple of secluded areas, he then singled out spots with the highest possibility where the creature would go. From there, he would follow the order and zone in on the selected areas until he found the special blood on the ground. A search like this would be tedious and time-consuming since he was the only one looking.

However, all he needed was to look for five spots with blood on the ground, and he could figure out the location of the shadowy figure. After that, everything should become less complicated. Of course, some time would be needed to pinpoint the exact places on the map. After searching the boarding school and nearby hospital, he found no traces of the creature or that it had been there. The last place he would need to search was the orphanage in front of him. Including the day, Zhang Heng hadn't closed his eyes or rested for more than 30 hours. Hence, he didn't rush there and instead, headed to a nearby grocery store for some coffee. As usual, he left the money on the cashier's desk and walked out.

Zhang Heng felt a lot more alert after the dose of strong coffee. Making sure to leave no trace, he wiped his saliva and fingerprints off the bottle with a piece of tissue, then threw them into a dustbin half a street away. The coffee's extra boost of energy got him moving again, and he climbed over the gate of the orphanage.

At such late hours, most of the orphanage's staff had gone home, leaving only a few guards, caretakers, one doctor, and four nurses who were on duty. It seemed to be another routine night, with the guards playing cards in their mess like they always did. The doctor was preparing for an evaluation in his office. As for the nurses, one was dozing off, with the other three busy playing Honor of Kings. The first floor housed the emergency, and duty room. There was also an observation room, a children's restaurant, staff mess, and a multipurpose hall, but these places were completely empty right now. Seeing that the first floor was of no concern, Zhang Heng quickly ascended to the second floor, where most of the dormitories of the orphans were located. After scanning the caretaker's mess and activity room on this floor, he found nothing. So, he moved his attention to the dormitories. At a corner in the west, Zhang Heng noticed a bed that had been isolated by the orphans. It appeared the orphans were terrified of the person who lay there, and although mere meters from the rest of the beds, a vibe of great segregation could be felt.

Right now, the other orphans were already asleep in their own bunks, but Zhang Heng saw nobody on the isolated bed. As he lifted the blanket, he saw a used medical bandage stained with blotches of black blood, confirming the creature was now in this orphanage. Stepping back to look at the nameplate hanging in front of the bed, the bed supposedly belonged to a child called Zhang Jinli. The staff of the orphanage hoped that the child would someday grow up to become a polite and well-mannered person, just as his name suggested. Unfortunately, their wish didn't come true.

In the picture, Zhang Jinli looked sullen and grumpy, with his eyes giving off a death stare. He gave off the vibe of a crazed murderer, a temperament unfit for someone so young. Considering the terrifying things that he had done, the picture was considered cute. "Gotcha," whispered Zhang Heng in a low voice while taking down the picture. After Zhang Jinli had been wounded by the arrow, he returned to the orphanage and snuck into the emergency room to steal some bandages. He didn't linger on the bed for too long, knowing that in his haste, he must have left a lot of evidence. Nonetheless, Zhang Heng deduced that it would be highly unlikely that he'd leave the orphanage now. After all, the wound on his leg was quite severe. Although Zhang Jinli was absent from his bed, Zhang Heng remained calm and didn't panic. He swiftly continued searching, and in the end, he found him in an examination room.

The boy had hidden himself behind an ultrasound machine with his body curled up.

Heng walked up towards him, then unwrapped the bandage that was hastily wrapped around his leg. The wound from the arrow was deep, and some kind of black blood oozed from it. In such a state, Zhang

Jinli was fragile and vulnerable. Also, with time now paused, he could no longer control the black liquid or kill innocent people. Not even a finger of his could be lifted. Right now, the terrifying creature was nothing more but a motionless, delinquent child.

Zhang Heng could have opted to kill him right now. This would be the first time Zhang Heng killed someone in a still world. Although the Mannerheim and Black Sail quests bathed him in a baptism of bullets, he was still uneasy whenever he took a life. However, his conscience wouldn't bother him if it was the right thing to do. Besides, the kid that he was about to kill was probably not human anyway. He swung the knife, about to strike, but stopped short of Zhang Jinli's throat.

Zhang Heng frowned, seeing the hatred and insecurity that Zhang Jinli harbored toward this world in his eyes. He was different from Li Shengyue; having no fear whatsoever in his eyes. In other words, he controlled the black liquid willingly. The wound on his leg and black blood was also enough proof that he was the one who attacked Zhang Heng and Sheng Xixi in the school.

There was still one thing bothering Zhang Heng. According to Li Shengyue, Zhang Jinli was at the university that afternoon which meant he had left the orphanage. That said, with his ability to travel within walls, it wasn't that hard for him to leave unnoticed. If he had left since the afternoon, it would be impossible that nobody realized the absence. However, when Zhang came across the orphanage's staff, none of them seemed the least nervous that an orphan had gone missing for a long time now.

Chapter 275 Time To Take A Breath

Zhang Heng lowered his utility knife and sliced through Zhang Jinli's thumb until flesh and blood were seen. In this unnaturally still world, living beings defied the laws of physics, and no blood flowed out from the small cut on the boy's thumb. Now, Zhang Heng could finally see the color of his blood.

Surprisingly, his thumb's blood was in a different color from the blood on his leg. It was red. To be safe, Zhang Heng scraped away all the dried blood on his leg, and found that only the top layer was black. It was still the regular red blood underneath it. From here, he confirmed that Zhang Jinli wasn't the creature and was just an ordinary child from the orphanage. That said, he figured that the kid might be connected to the creature somehow, willing to shoulder the blame, conceal the bandages under his blanket, and even take an arrow to his calf. Even an adult would think more than twice before attempting such brazen feats.

However, the child had no idea the price he would have to pay for helping the creature. If Zhang Heng hadn't been paying attention to the staff's reactions, he would have killed Zhang Jinli by now. After that, Zhang Heng kept his utility knife away, remembering that his real target was the monster and not some cynical orphan. If Zhang Jinli was the one that assaulted them, where was the black liquid then?

Almost 20 hours had passed since he entered the world where time stopped. In two hours, the hour hand in his watch would complete a full cycle, and factoring in the time needed to return to the dormitory, he was only left with an hour and a half to look for the monster. Right now, Zhang Heng had searched the entire orphanage building. Other than Zhang Jinli, he found no one else suspicious.

If his target left the orphanage after it treated its wound, it would be bad news for Zhang Heng. He simply didn't have time to search another area. He knew, however, that the creature must have had a

purpose for choosing the orphanage. Orphans, like Zhang Jinli, rarely had the chance to interact with outsiders. Mostly, the kids simply didn't trust them due to personal reasons.

Since no orphans had left the orphanage, only one possibility could explain the whole situation. Zhang Heng entered the records room beside the B-super room and looked for the adoption records. He then picked the names of the orphans that had been adopted recently. Initially, he thought that he would spend a long time checking out the records, but when he saw an attached picture, he was left in shock. It turned out he recognized the person.

Zhao Xiaotian was his name, given by this orphanage upon his arrival. The kid in the picture was someone Zhang Heng had met before. It was the one he rescued after witnessing the wall consuming an old woman on the street. During that time, Zhang Heng attempted to save the homeless woman but only managed to save her grandchild in the end.

After the harrowing incident, he made a police report at the local station. He left the kid there as well, knowing that he was now in safe hands. According to the law of the day, if the police failed to locate the kid's relatives, they would be immediately sent to an orphanage. Zhao Xiaotian had been sent here about a month ago. Coincidentally, Zhang Heng spotted him at the amusement park a few days before Christmas Eve, only to think that he misrecognized someone. Besides, he forgot about him completely when Hayase Asuka and her pursuer exited the horror house.

In retrospect, Zhao Xiaotian's true identity was actually shadowed by doubt. Whether it was information that Zhang Heng gave the officer or his assumptions, both of them believed that Zhao Xiaotian was the old lady's grandson. The boy had presented himself as the victim throughout the entire incident, but yet, there was no solid proof of his relationship with the old lady. Generally, those who lived on the lower strata of society were close-knit, generously helping each other out in hardship. It was perfectly normal considering a stranger as a family member.

When the black liquid engulfed the old lady, Zhao Xiaotian simply stood there and watched silently. He did not cry or scream. At first, Zhang Heng thought that the boy must be in shock, but now, he looked at it in another way. Perhaps the kid was enjoying the scene of the old woman getting consumed by his masterpiece. Shen Xixi once told Zhang Heng that the creature would only target people of a lower class.

To get close, Zhao Xiaotian realized that he had to be accepted as part of their community. With his young age, they would let their guard down without much thought. Most homeless wouldn't think of Zhao Xiaotian being a threat, considering what little they already had. It was the perfect camouflage, a wolf in sheepskin. Without anyone knowing the boy's real identity, he could take his time and pick his dinner.

Now, Zhang Heng had a question in mind. Where could Zhao Xiaotian be? According to the records, the boy had been adopted by a middle-aged couple that couldn't bear child, and they lived in a humble Sihuan neighborhood. Even though a lead was in hand, Zhang Heng didn't rush there immediately. Up until this point, Zhao Xiaotian was the most cunning nemesis he had ever encountered. A master at eluding its enemy, Zhang Heng had already made three wrong decisions thanks to him.

When they first met, he made Zhang Heng believe that he was a victim. Then, during the library incident, he attempted to turn Li Shengyue into a scapegoat. There was too little time for Zhang Heng to deal with him in the library and in a split second, Zhang Heng had to shift his bow to aim at the true

target. Now, at the orphanage, Zhang Jinli volunteered to help Zhao Xiaotian confuse Zhang Heng. Even Zhang Heng had to admit that it was a complicated strategy.

Zhang Heng believed that Zhao Xiaotian's framing of Zhang Jinli wasn't the end of the saga, but the beginning of his retaliation. There were surely more evil plans up his sleeve, and if Zhang Heng stepped into his trap, high chance he would be thrown in jail for murdering someone innocent. Though Zhang Heng had some powerful game items on him and a wealth of experience, this place was, after all, not 18th century Nassau. A single person couldn't go against an entire country. Even if he managed to escape the authorities, he would need to live in the dark for the rest of his life.

Zhao Xiaotian had an exceptional understanding of human society. All the while, he hunted in extreme caution and managed to stay under the radar of the authorities and the public. He even knew how to take advantage of the law of the day to benefit himself. The only thing he didn't realize was that Zhang Heng had an extra 24 hours each day. Based on Zhang Heng's understanding of him, once Zhao Xiaotian marked his target, he would stalk it and control it. It appeared he was somewhat of a sadist, fond of watching his prey struggle and fight for their lives. Unfortunately, he messed with the wrong people this time.

After that, Zhang Heng studied the orphanage's blueprints again, and this time, he found something new. The walkway on the second floor was 50cm shorter than the one on the plan. A window which was supposed to be there was also gone. In other words, the wall's original structure had changed.

"I think it's time for you to come out and take a breath."

Zhang Heng didn't wait for an answer and proceeded to the construction site next to the orphanage. Around ten minutes later, he returned with a huge demolition hammer in his hands.

Chapter 276 Closure

A red Volkswagen Polo pulled up to parking lot No.6. The bartender turned off the engine and got out of her car as her khaki-colored martin boots crunched into the snow-laden ground.

Spanning more than eleven square kilometers, Nanhaizi Park was considered one of the largest wetlands among the suburbs. It was a colossal area equivalent to four Summer Palaces and used to be hunting grounds of royalties who once lived there. Apart from having a wide range of foliage, wild Pere David's deer also made the wetlands their home. Considering that it was quite a distance from the city, it wasn't a place frequented by many, not to mention that it was now two in the morning. No one in their right mind would come to such a remote location at this hour.

Other than the red Polo at the sixth parking lot, not a single living soul could be seen. The bartender, however, wasn't afraid or anxious about the place. She slipped a cigarette into her mouth from the half-smoked pack of Marlboro's. She lit it and immediately took two long drags, before placing the fag between her fingers and tapping her phone with her thumb.

"Come out. There are no cameras here."

Five minutes later, Zhang Heng dragged a suitcase out of the woods with him.

"Why do you need 20 game points to deal with a dead body?"

“Please. I had to look for a replacement while I drove all the way out here to help you deal with this. It’s a long drive. Don’t forget that fuel costs money. Besides, you are about to extract game items from the body, right?”

The bartender popped the trunk of her Polo, pulled out a plastic sheet, and laid it on the ground, then signaled Zhang Heng to bring the body over.

“It’s this guy,” she said while opening up the bag. “You know him?”

“When the adults have a party in the house, they would usually attract the kids next door.”

She took two last puffs from the cigarette and tossed the butt aside, then pulled a pair of medical gloves from her pockets.

“Zavilcha. If I’m not mistaken, he was supposed to be a monster from an old Slavic fairytale. His name is almost forgotten these days, even in Russia. At first, parents used the story to scare their kids into returning home before sunset. They were also forbidden to play with kids they didn’t know or follow them home. That’s because Zavilcha would use his evil abilities to manipulate the walls in his house and consume those children.”

As she spoke, the bartender brought out her toolkit and pulled out a scalpel from it.

“You are actually quite powerful. This creature was weak, and it didn’t have any combat power as well. However, its evil intention was the key to his skills. In a city filled with tall buildings, it can easily defeat you if you pay all your attention to its intentions and ignore its true form. According to what I know, Zavilcha is very good at hiding himself.”

The bartender lifted Zavilcha’s leg as if she was going to add it to her soup.

“Oh, right. You want to snap a photo or something? Once I cut him up, his body is no longer... perfect.”

“Ugh. No, thanks. I don’t have weird fetishes.”

“Okay, then,” shrugged the bartender.

With swift and precise moves, she cut off Zavilcha’s second toe and place it into a Tulewood box. Black blood oozed out of the severed limb.

“As usual, I will give you the identification results in three days. After that, I will deliver the item to you. Don’t worry about the orphanage and his foster parents. I’ll deal with them. This will be the best 20 game points you’ve ever spent.”

The bartender stowed everything in the trunk and took off her gloves.

“Okay. It’s a wrap. I’m heading back to the bar. Are you coming with me?”

“Sure, if it’s no trouble for you.”

She started the engine, and Zhang Heng opened the door of the passenger’s side.

It had been a long night. Hunted by the creature called Zavilcha, they both crossed paths at the library for a short moment. Then, at the stroke of midnight, Zhang Heng started to hunt him down with his

extra 24 hours. The entire debacle had lasted for a grueling 20 hours, and it wasn't until he used the sledgehammer to demolish the wall at the end of the second floor that he finally found his target. After confirming that Zhao Xiaotian was the assailant, Zhang Heng slit his throat without any hesitation. However, he wasn't sure if it was enough to kill him. To evade the authorities, Zhang Heng shoved the body into an extra-large suitcase and brought him to the remote wetlands. There were no walls around Nanhaizi Park, which meant Zhao Xiaotian could no longer use his ability to attack Zhang Heng. Considering that his throat had been slit, he could do nothing even if he was still alive. Once the extra 24 hours were up, Zhang Heng contacted the bartender lady to negotiate the fee for taking care of a dead body. The moment the price was right, she drove to the park and did what she was paid to do. And this was the end of the whole thing. With only 20 game points, Zhang Heng could rest his case of getting attacked by someone hiding within the confines of solid walls. As a bonus, he had also solved the case of the missing homeless on the streets. "Do you want to have some tea? My treat."

The bartender set up her navigation system and took out a bottle of Dongfang tea from the glovebox.

"You've been reserving this tea for yourself, huh?"

"I have a vacuum flask with me."

A simple statement like that proved that no matter how cool the youngster, how rich an executive manager, how carefree the hipsters, or how powerful the deities were, they would have to start thinking about preserving their lives one day.

After hearing what the bartender said, Zhang Heng grabbed the tea from her and gulped it down since he was thirsty. A ton of unanswered questions still lay within his heart. Whether it was Zavlcha or Moresby, it seemed like something big was changing in the world he lived in. If these creatures were living among humans for a long time, what made them gather all of a sudden? Was it the game, or was it some other factor? So far, all the creatures that Zhang Heng encountered were weak and hungry. How did they end up like this? Were there new creatures that were stronger, and would eventually replace them?

Unfortunately, the bartender was in no mood to answer any questions. The moment the red Polo was on the move, she stuck her earbuds into her ears to the tune of Guo Degang's Xiangsheng

Chapter 277 Betty's Shell and Evil Wall

Now that Zavlcha was dead, Zhang Heng could finally enjoy his holiday. The bartender sent him back to his dormitory, where he slept until the next afternoon. Upon waking up, he texted Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O'), telling her to inform Shen Xixi that the monster was dead.

Almost instantly, Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O') agreed. Then, the curious girl began asking his whereabouts and how the fight with the monster went. She even asked if he had recorded the whole thing, or if he acquired any game items, or had fun...

Zhang Heng didn't know what to do with Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O'). He didn't even know her name. They first met outside the bar's toilet, and unintentionally, ruined her plan. Not too long after that, he met her again at the shopping mall in a Kumamon suit, trying to prank him and Hayase Asuka. Even though she tried to convince Zhang Heng that it was merely payback for what he did, he had other

ideas. He thought Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O') did it to satisfy a peculiar fetish of hers. Too bad her prank didn't work in the end.

After the failed plan, Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O') transformed herself in the image of Ma Wei and asked Zhang Heng to fix his bicycle. It was at that time that she wanted to come up with another prank. Alas, she failed again. If the monster hadn't appeared then, Zhang Heng planned to use his 24 hours to find out more about her.

Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O') was surprisingly decent when Zavielcha appeared in front of them. Instead of running away when the wall consumed Zhang Heng, she decided to stay back and help him. After that, she even followed his instructions to protect Shen Xixi. If Zhang Heng's promise was to be believed, he was supposed to forgive everything that she did.

One last thing bothered Zhang Heng, though. Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O') knew that he was a player. She shouldn't bring him too much trouble, for now at least. So far, Zhang Heng had played all the quests in single-player mode, and as far as he knew, he made no enemies so far. Besides, he had no valuable game items on him as well, technically eliminating him as a target even if people knew he was a player. As for Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O'), it seemed she was connected to the mysterious woman in shades at the auction. The information she had with her would interest a lot of people.

Zhang Heng didn't answer Why Do You Always Look Unhappy (#'O')'s questions, putting his cellphone aside. Now, he would attempt to live a regular life. Other than studying and the everyday workout, he even added a little social activity to his life. For that, he went hiking with members of the photography club that didn't return home and joined a few activities organized by the rock climbing society. Being a member for a while now, he rarely showed up. At the same time, the results of his final examination were out as well. Things were definitely more convenient now than his senior year, where all he needed to do was go online and check for himself. The best thing was that he could view them privately, thus saving him any potential embarrassment if the results didn't shine.

Thanks to the extra 24 hours each day, every compulsory subject that he took ranked among the top five, except for English, that was. Thankfully, and to his surprise, he garnered a perfect score for Advanced mathematics, discounting five marks that had been deducted because he skipped a class. Since many of the elective courses were essays and open papers, their scoring was more subjective. His worst was getting the twelfth place in happiness studies. As for critical thinking, he got a full score, but somehow, Zhang Heng found it to be useless. Even if a perfectly logical reason for an argument was to be found, it was almost always impossible to persuade a person devoid of logic in the first place. It was a reason why netizens could never be convinced during an online argument. In the end, it would simply fizzle out with everyone thinking it as banter and trolling. As for his English results, they were directly related to the band-six results, and he had to wait until February. With his current English proficiency, it shouldn't be a problem reaching a score of 609. Even without the additional points from the assignments, his final exam was enough to gain proper credits.

The two unidentified items he had left with the bartender were mailed to him earlier. He excitedly opened the package, feeling as if he'd just received a delivery from Taobao. [Name: Betty's Shell]

(Grade: E]

[Effect: Consumes your anger to summon a storm at sea. Lasts for 15 minutes. Storm's level depends on the user's anger level.]

This was an item acquired from the Black Sail quest. When he returned to the real world, he had attempted to contact Betty, the Celtic god, but to no avail. He had a bad feeling about it all, and due to Betty's weakened state, they communicated only shortly each time. From there, he discovered that Betty, just like all the other characters in the game, didn't know she was in a game. He received further confirmation when she actually chose him to help her recruit more worshippers.

Zhang Heng's experience in Black Sail told him that all the quests he entered so far were a copy of real-world history. Considering Betty's state when they met, there was a high chance that she was now dead or had disappeared since a few hundred years had passed. This shell was the only thing she left behind, and the game's committee placed it in the Black Sail quest. Now, for the other game item, Zhang Heng had freshly gotten it from Zavlcha. Having a 'unique' look, Zhang Heng wasn't sure about carrying it with him all the time.

n

[Name: Evil Wall]

(Grade: D]

[Effect: Reconstructing a wall's structure. Form can be swapped from solid to liquid. Remaining uses: 4]

The first thing Zhang Heng did was test its effect, and to his surprise, it worked better than he initially expected. Having experienced Moresby, Zhang Heng knew that game items extracted from monsters would be weakened, and the Evil Wall was no exception. Although impossible to be used in the same way as Zavlcha, it was surely a handy tool to get through forbidden zones or escape a labyrinth. Of course, as in the manner of all things, it came with its own weakness.

It could only be used when there were walls around and would work perfectly in a city but was useless in vast open spaces with no concrete walls in sight.

All in all, Zhang Heng was satisfied with the two game items he acquired.

Chapter 278 Apollo Training Camp

Although Spring Festival was still two weeks away, the bar was already warming up, with New Year decorations strung generously over the windows and walls. On the second floor, the bartender had already plastered the lounge with little red trinkets for the upcoming celebrations.

Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows, "A fortune dog?"

"It's the year of the dog – when in Rome, do as Romans do." The bartender chewed on a piece of gum while tinkering with her new concoction, a New Year's special.

Today was the first day of February, and the lounge appeared empty as it always was during the first half of every month. Due to quests being randomly drawn, the players would be like anxious students that were about to sit for their year-end exams, keen for that little bit of extra time for some last-minute revision. Traffic at the bar often surged at the end of the month.

But Zhang Heng's winter vacation had already started last month, and it would go on until the beginning of next month. Having booked a ticket home in advance, he was set to leave in a few days. Although he could locate other game checkpoints in his hometown, he wasn't as familiar with them as he was with Sex and the City. Not to mention that he needed to wipe off any trace of his decade-long life as a rugged pirate.

For those reasons, Zhang Heng decided to use up the month's game frequency in advance. However, this meant that his plan to return to the previous quest would have to be delayed. "Happy New Year."

Zhang Heng sat down at the booth, then set the alarm and placed it in front of him.

"Happy New Year and have a good trip," replied the bartender. She didn't look up from her work, but rather, dropped some dry ice into the cocktail glass with a pair of tongs. Soon, white steam filled the rim of the glass and gently poured out like a waterfall. About fifteen minutes later, the alarm rang, and Zhang Heng felt a familiar dizziness. Then, the system prompt played in his ear.

[Player identity verification]

[Verification approved. The fifth quest is randomly selected for player 07958.] (Extraction completed – Current Quest: Apollo Training Camp]

[But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas? We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.]

It is for these reasons that I regard the decision last year to shift our efforts in space from low to high gear as among the most important decisions that will be our best to organize and measure our abilities and skills. Because we are willing to accept this challenge, we will not want to delay it, and we must win."

[Mission Objective: Try looking at earth from a different angle]

(Mode: Single Player; Competitive mode)

[Time flow rate: 240]

(One hour in the real world is equivalent to 10 days in this game. Player will be returned to the real world after sixty days) Friendly reminder: The game will begin in five seconds. Please get ready.

The message for this quest sounded unprecedently rich. It simply couldn't be helped because the Apollo project was simply too famous. When he heard of Mannerheim Line and New Providence, it had taken him a while to register the information. After all, most weren't too familiar with the Winter War and Nassau's pirates. No one, however, hadn't heard of the Apollo Project.

Being the first man to land on the moon, Armstrong carved his name along with mankind's grandiose ambitions in the history books of human space exploration. He was as famous as Gagarin, the first human to journey into outer space. Although the space race had its origins from a bitter and

complicated political rivalry, it was undeniable that it played a considerable role in the advancement of engineering, technology, and exploration beyond the confines of planet Earth. Many of these technologies, first tested in space by the military, were gradually converted to civilian use. Satellites, once a top-secret military project, had changed the way humans lived, now indispensable communication tools. More importantly, this period in history demonstrated extraordinary bouts of courage and humankind's relentless spirit of exploration. It also inspired China, India, and other countries to venture into space. The quest's background introduction was an excerpt from Kennedy's distinguished moon-speech in 1962.

For now, though, Zhang Heng's focus was on the words 'single player with competitive mode'.

Unlike most players who preferred to play in a team, Zhang Heng had finished all his quests solo. However, in the previous four games, he was always the only player, not to mention that the missions were also always in single-player mode.

Now, with the addition of the word 'competitive,' did it mean that he would encounter other players? The five seconds given for preparation was brief, to say the least. Before Zhang Heng could speculate the matter further, the game had already begun. The first thing he saw was a beam of blinding white light washing upon him. Zhang Heng pushed the spotlight above his head away and saw that he was standing in a sealed room. Next to him were six other people, dressed in the same blue uniform he was wearing.

Zhang Heng looked down and saw a NASA logo on the left of his chest, and on the right was his black identity card with an English name on it – David.

Unsurprisingly, the organizing committee had always done a good job of protecting players' privacy. In a quest where more than one player was present, they would ensure that each one received an alias. And if he was right, his appearance would also be altered to a certain degree. Since he didn't have a mirror on hand, he couldn't say for sure how he looked right now.

Nevertheless, Zhang Heng could feel that he was still in his own body, and his strength and agility seemed to be where it was. That was good news.

For now, he didn't have the time to observe the other players; his attention drawn to the large, peculiar instrument laid before him.

"- Aerotrim (multi-axis trainer) is designed to simulate a situation on a three-axis gimbal that can be rotated in any direction. This contraption will help you familiarize yourself with unforeseen situations that you may face in space. Once the pilot is strapped in, it will start to spin. If you still don't understand it, imagine yourself as a cat getting spun around in a drum of a washing machine. Your task is to stabilize the instrument before you pass out."

Standing opposite them was an instructor, also in a blue uniform. He looked at the seven trainees before him, then declared, "Our first victim, Anderson."

All seven candidates lowered their heads and glanced at the identity card on their chests. A slightly overweight man named Anderson looked devastated.

“Aww, come on! Ain’t this a little too harsh for our first time? What the hell is this thing anyway? Does it come with a manual?”

Chapter 279 Dinner and the Multi-Axis Trainer

The portly fellow named Anderson spoke in mandarin. Although speaking in a hushed tone, the players could clearly hear what he was saying. He looked at the people around him with pleading eyes. “Err, you... anyone has an idea how to work this damn thing?”

The only answer he received was silence.

The Apollo Program was in operation from 1961 to 1972, and it had been around for fifty years. It was an early space project, where at that time, the United States had just completed the first human spaceflight program, the “Mercury” project, successfully sending astronaut Alan Shepard into space. Back then, training facilities were very different from the current ones.

Those interested in astronaut training would have perhaps heard of centrifuges and neutral buoyancy laboratories. Still, a facility with a piece of multi-axis training equipment was rare – it was also Zhang Heng’s first time encountering such a contraption. From the instructor’s description, it seemed that the machine was an uncomfortable experience. Very. Those who paid attention would have noticed that he employed the term ‘victim.’

Since Zhang Heng confirmed that there was nothing wrong with his hearing, it could only mean that the training wasn’t going to be easy. Considering that everyone had just entered the quest, they still hadn’t quite made sense of the situation that they were really in.

Typically, the first person chosen from a line of new recruits would undoubtedly be in the most disadvantageous position. Thanks to the guinea pig of a tubby man, the players were never more eager to gauge how the instrument worked and see first hand how severe the simulation would be. Lab rat Anderson was probably the only one who didn’t think that way. When he saw the instructor, already at the ready, looking a little impatient, he knew he couldn’t put it off any longer. He had no other option. Realizing that no help was coming, and with no other players willing to take his place, he dragged himself to the instrument and sat down.

An assistant quickly fastened Anderson into the seat, then retreated to the control panel before the nervous trainee could protest.

Sweat soaked the chubby man’s collar, and he gulped. “I... Can I...”

“Whatever it is, save it for after the training,” the instructor interrupted coolly before signalling the assistant to flip the switch.

Accompanied by a loud mechanical grinding, multi-axis training device whirred to life and began to rotate. Zhang Heng and others now understood what the instructor meant by ‘like a cat thrown into a washing machine.’

The chubby man strapped into the seat looked terrified as the machine began to rotate on its axis, tossing and turning his body in the air. That, however, was only the beginning. Half a minute later, the instructor said, “Speed up.”

Anderson was so dizzy that he lost all orientation, unable to recognize his bearings. It was a hundred times more exhilarating than being tied to the front of a roller coaster, not in a good way, of course. He had already forgotten his reason for being there, and now, his instincts had taken over. All he wanted to do was to get through with the torment as quickly as possible.

However, things only got worse for the poor soul. The instrument didn't stop, and instead, the tumbling became more and more intense.

When Zhang Heng saw this, he took two steps backward. At that moment, everyone's still had their attention locked on the training device. No one noticed Zhang Heng's discreet movements, except for a girl in glasses who also retreated with him.

The man on the multi-axis training device could no longer control himself. The muscles on his greenish face suddenly lost their tension, and a large stream of vomit came spewing out of his mouth.

Those who were in the front were showered with a rain of gastric juice and half-digested food. The unluckiest person there had his mouth ajar, deep in thought about what he should do when his turn came. He didn't expect to taste the bile even before he got on.

The assistant noticed that the chubby trainee had gone completely unconscious. Worried that Anderson would choke on his own vomit, the machine was promptly turned off. Quickly, a team of medics on standby rushed to Anderson, unbuckled him, and ferried him off the seat.

As the staff was cleaning the instrument, the instructor had already started rolling the call again. "Next, Anthony."

The player named Anthony didn't look any better than Anderson, and although a person had already gone before them, the ones waiting got even more anxious when they saw the toll it took on the poor man. Fear and dread began to seep among the freshies.

Compared to the chubby trainee, this Anthony guy was in excellent shape and obvious gym buff. With arms taut in bulging muscles, he was probably a very good fighter, which gave him plenty of options on the table. Fleeing for one's dear life didn't sound so humiliating after all. His eyes swept across the room, falling on the staircase and door above it. Nonetheless, after a moment of hesitation, he conceded to fate and sat down on the training device as an honest man would.

This wasn't his first quest, and he was no rookie either. Since he wasn't too sure about the situation he was in, the risk of escaping the room was just too significant. What more, their primary mission was to go to space. Space exploration had always been a massive undertaking, and other than the astronauts themselves, the entire venture required teams of scientists, and an enormous budget, to name a few. The Multi-Axis Trainer may be tough on the toughest of bodies, but it surely wasn't deadly, and the trainees could find no reason to resist getting on the machine.

Anthony obediently went through the pleasure of subjecting his body to a violent tossing and churning. He performed slightly better than Anthony, persisting for a good half-minute before vomiting only after leaving the machine.

"Livingston," The instructor soldiered on, indignant of the previous trainee's condition as he called out the third name.

Livingston was the oldest among the group, looking to be in his mid-forties. Donning a pair of signature gold-rimmed glasses, he seemed very gentle, unlike Anthony. He gave off the vibe of the textbook nerd, one of those permanently belonging in the category of intellectuals. He wore a wry smile on his face. After wiping some vomit from his glasses, he handed them to an assistant.

“Great. At least we’ll soon find out what everyone had for dinner,” muttered the girl who retreated with Zhang Heng. Her statement illustrated how helpless the players felt as they understood that nobody was about to escape the ordeal.

The roll call went by very quickly. Those who went on came knew that they should come down fast, especially after seeing the middle-aged man. When the multi-axis training instrument accelerated, he begged for it to stop. The instructor relented and asked his staff to turn off the instrument.

When the middle-aged man came down, he could barely stand up, albeit able to control himself until reaching the bathroom, where he hugged the toilet, retching and emptying out the contents of his stomach. When the other trainees saw this, they didn’t try to prove who the tougher man was. The moment they felt queasy, they asked for it to stop. At least, in this way, it could save them some embarrassment. Instead of going easy on the very-sickly looking team, Zhang Heng noticed that the instructor’s frown had only deepened.

Finally, out of all the seven, Zhang Heng was the only one who hadn’t mounted the multi-axis trainer yet.

Chapter 280 Unprepared

“David, let’s begin if he is ready.”

Zhang Heng witnessed the few before him getting on the machine, and when his turn arrived, it was a completely different feeling from what he expected. He noticed a small monitor in front of him on his right, set in an offset position. There were also two joysticks on his left and right. The machine seemed to be a crude contraption and looked simple enough to operate. However, the moment the Multi-Axis Trainer was turned on, he quickly realized how hard it was to stabilize his seat. Precise maneuvers were needed to control the power and angle, and just as he was starting to familiarize himself with the controls, the Multi-Axis Trainer sped up. Zhang Heng felt as if he was rudely tumbled around in a blender at full speed. As the machine rolled on its axis like a modern-day zorb ball, he started fiddling with the control sticks in an attempt to get upright. To be honest, he had no idea if they even worked. When he looked around him, all he could see was a kaleidoscopic blur of colors. The lights on the ceiling appeared for a moment and somebody’s legs, the next. In milliseconds, the pipes on the walls were in front of him. The scenes flashed and repeated multiple times as the machine mercilessly dragged its helpless victims along with the ride. And the worst part was that the dinner in his stomach also started churning vigorously.

Apart from the vomiting plump guy who was still in the toilet, a few players who just recovered from their harrowing ordeal had started taking pleasure in Zhang Heng’s misfortune. After all, they obviously didn’t do well, and with dissatisfied hearts, naturally hoped that those who went after them would fail as well. After a while, the man with the gold-rimmed glasses snapped out of his daze.

“How long has it been?”

Everyone started looking at each other when the question was asked. They had just returned from a nightmare, and although they glanced their surroundings from time to time, their attention was mostly on the instructor.

Suddenly, a loud announcement could be heard.

“Two minutes and fifty-two seconds. It passes our average time and beats our worst record by twice.”

The firm sounding lass had short hair and looked to be extremely experienced. Clearly, she was now interested in Zhang Heng, having laid eyes on him since he took a step back from the fatso on the verge of puking. “Thanks for the reminder,” the overweight man grumbled. After getting fixed up by the medical staff, he had regained consciousness. However, puking all over his mates wasn’t going to do him well, and before he could even make friends, many already held a grudge towards him. Alienating an earthling in a space program might sound ridiculous, but so was the nature of humanity. Right now, he stood as far away from the crowd as possible, nervously wiping away the beads of sweat on his forehead that just wouldn’t stop flowing.

“What does that guy do? A pilot? An acrobat?” asked Anthony.

“Who knows? I think he has the look of an assassin,” the girl replied gleefully.

While they were talking, Zhang Heng finally asked to stop the Multi-Axis Trainer. When both of his legs finally touched the ground, he was greatly disorientated, grabbing the rails of the staircase to stop himself from falling over. Living life as a pirate for ten years, he was forced to brave countless storms on Jackdaw. Hence, he could balance himself better than most people, the reason why he lasted longer on the machine. After a while, though, he took to the toilet just like everyone else.

When he came out, the six candidates were already gathered together at the same spot. “To prevent any of you from forgetting my name, I’m going to introduce myself again. My name is William Kenhaus. You can call me Kenhaus or captain. It’s entirely up to you. As you know, we’ve just launched Apollo X three days ago. We plan to orbit the Apollo Lunar Module around the moon for some initial testing. The data gathered will help us to better prepare for our first moon landing in the near future. So far, everything is working as intended, and if all is nominal, the crew should return to Earth in five days. After that, we’re up.”

The captain paused for a moment, cleared his throat, then continued.

“Apollo XI will send humans to the moon. However, we face one problem right now. A week ago, a few of our astronauts got infected by a new disease, and although our medical team tried their best to contain it, many caught the bug and are severely ill. In their current state, it would be impossible for them to carry out the mission. The main crew, their backup, and even the support teams assigned to fly and operate Apollo XI were infected as well. In other words, we don’t have enough people for the launch.”

Zhang Heng and the other players listened intently to the captain. According to the history of NASA in the real world, no highly infectious disease had ever broken out in the space center. Seemingly, the developers of the quest were trying to insert it into this critical event. It was exciting to see how the whole thing was going to turn out with the addition of a new and unforeseen variable.

“Anyway, we are in need of personnel to run Apollo XI. The mission director attempted to talk to the president into delaying the whole mission, but his proposal was unfortunately denied. Sputnik, Gagarin, and the Soviet Union are way ahead of us in space technology. Right now, the score is 2:0. We have to win this time, no matter the cost!

“I personally prefer to recruit very experienced pilots to become astronauts, but the president and mission director personally recommended all of you. I, for the life of me, cannot fathom why they would choose you lot. From what I see, you are worse than my grandma who fought in World War II! Since this is a direct order from the commander in chief, I have no choice but to follow it. So, I will need you to put away your sorry asses and buck the hell up. “From today onwards, I’ll be responsible for your training. If you are lucky, the crew of Apollo X might return on time. If they manage to recuperate from the journey, they will be assigned to fly Apollo XI. If that happens, touch wood, all of you here will only have to be the backup crew for the mission. You’ll be glad that you don’t have to die in space. Okay. Any questions?”

Every player tried to digest the pile of information pouring into their ears as fast as they could. the moment they opened their eyes and saw their uniforms, most already knew what the mission was like. After listening to the captain, they now understood their current circumstance. Most of those present had completed several quests, and technically, experienced all manner of challenges the game would throw at them. However, this was the first time they were asked to fly to the moon since entering the game. Never in their wildest dreams would they expect to be strapped onto a rocket, blasting themselves all the way to the moon.

As the gravity of the situation dawned on them, grounding their feet ever closer to mother earth, they saw more anxiety in each other’s eyes than when they hopped on the Multi-Axis Trainer.