

48 Hours 281

Chapter 281 This Is My Forte

Twenty minutes after the group completed the gut-wrenching Multi-Axis Trainer, Zhang Heng and the other players were sent to the next training facility by a minibus. Through the windows, he saw a large, white building flying two flags in the middle—the star-spangled banner on the right and a NASA flag on the left. A humongous replica of a rocket stood majestically beyond the building.

“Kennedy Space Center is located on Florida’s east coast on an island called Merritt Island. It was built in the year 1962, and named Kennedy in commemoration of President John F. Kennedy!” the high school kid chirped excitedly.

“Judging by our surroundings, I think we were at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station just now. The famous Project Mercury, Gemini, and early Apollo Missions all lifted-off from there. The coast enables rockets to launch toward the ocean without endangering lives. At the same time, the air force station is close to the equator as well. The location would give the launch vehicles an extra speed boost, making it easier to reach the velocities needed for orbit. However, the air force station couldn’t house the massive Saturn V rockets, which was why the Kennedy Space Center was built nearby.

“Hold on. Is Kennedy dead in this game?”

“Yes, assassinated in Dallas, 1963. Although he gave the famous speech about choosing to go to the moon, he died before he could witness *it*.”

“Everyone. Do I have to remind you again that this is not a tour bus? Aren’t you supposed to be more concerned about your current situation?” said an anxious Anthony.

“Yes. It seems our main quest is to set foot on the moon or, at least, travel to outer space. Based on what I know, these two matters are just the same to me.”

“Why do you say so?” asked the girl.

She was the only girl on the team, and coincidentally, sat beside Zhang Heng when she got on the vehicle.

“Didn’t you know?” asked the high school kid in surprise, before continuing.

“According to history, Apollo 10 was launched on 18.5.1969 at 12.49 a.m. The captain told us that Apollo 10 was launched three days ago. That makes today the 21st of May.”

“So?”

The high school kid leaned back on his seat and smiled at the girl.

“Well, Apollo 11 was launched on 16.7.1969. Apollo 12 was then launched on 14.12.1969. There were five months between these two launching dates. Considering the time we have for this quest, so...”

“Didn’t you tell us that America ran this project called Gemini?”

“Project Gemini was conducted between Project Mercury and The Apollo Program. It started in the year 1961, and after ten times of sending astronauts to orbit the Earth, the project ended in 1965. To

complete the main quest, we will have to get on Apollo 11.” The high school kid wore this gravely serious look in his last sentence. Suddenly, the chirpy atmosphere in the vehicle changed, and all eyes were on the kid.

“Why? Did something happen? Was Apollo 11 a dangerous mission?” asked the plump man.

“Dangerous?”

The high school kid then pointed at the NASA driver in front of them with a smile.

“Yes. This is, after all, humanity’s first attempt to land on the moon. Ordinary citizens like them could never imagine what it’s like to go to outer space! Even the scientists, engineers, and Nasa’s own astronauts were extremely nervous about the whole undertaking. The whole nation’s reputation was at stake. Now, since we are from the future, we know that this mission was a huge success. One problem remains—how do we get on Apollo 11?”

“How many astronauts did the luna mission carry?”

The girl asked the most important question that everyone wanted to ask. Immediately, the school kid put up three fingers.

“We have all heard of the commander, Neil Armstrong, Lunar module pilot, Buzz Aldrin, and service module pilot, Michael Collins.”

“Only three? There are seven of us here.”

This time, the fat man’s voice had changed.

“Is this your first time participating in a single-player quest with a competitive mode? Do you know what the word competitive means?” Anthony jibed while laughing. “I... I usually play in a group. This is my first time entering a quest alone. The difficulty setting of the solo quests is too high. You know more than half the players here will be eliminated by the end of this quest, right? Since I was young, I have never won any competitive events. When it comes to ranking, I have never breached the middle echelons as well.”

“So, why choose to work alone now?” asked the girl.

“Well... because...”

The fat man stuttered but couldn’t seem to produce a reason. In the end, Anthony had to be the one to reveal his weakness.

“Because you are too weak. You dragged your team’s feet. That’s why they abandoned you. After that, you couldn’t find a team that was willing to take you in. That’s how you ended up alone.”

Though the plump man didn’t admit to it, his pale face was enough to prove that Anthony was somewhat right.

“Lucky us! That means one less competitor,” laughed the high-school kid in satisfaction with both his hands placed at the back of his head.

"You guys are so optimistic. According to history, Apollo 11 landed on the moon successfully, but don't forget Armstrong and his team were the ones who completed the mission. Now, we have to do it. What are the odds of us completing the mission successfully?" asked the middle-aged man with gold-rimmed glasses. Immediately, everyone fell silent. Only the continuous hum of the vans' loud diesel engine droned through the cabin. After a few minutes, Anthony spoke again. "On the bright side, we still have 60 days to train ourselves."

"Technically, 55, because Apollo 11 launches on the 16th of July. Minus the quarantine period before the launch date, it leaves us with only 48 days. Take note that astronauts usually require two to three years of training. If the astronaut would be assigned to deep space explorations, at least five years of training would be needed. Payload specialists and scientists fare slightly better than an astronaut. They only need half a year of training," the high-school kid listed.

"How on earth are you so familiar with all these things? Even if you are well-prepared, you wouldn't just go collect these random cold facts, right? You even know the precise launch date of Apollo 11," said the girl, amused.

"That's because I'm a space enthusiast. This round is my forte."

The high-school kid beamed with confidence.

Chapter 282 Not Fifty

In the conference room of Kennedy Space Center's building number 12, the seven trainees each received a thick training manual from NASA. It was met with varying degrees of reactions.

"This sixty-page stuff is just an index?"

Plump Anderson felt as if he was about to break down. "Learning basic physics of rockets, aerodynamics, orbital mechanics, jet propulsion, astronomy... I get all these, but why in the world are biology, geology, and material science even in here? And I don't understand the title 'electronic engineering.' How can we cram so much in fifty-five days?"

"A gentle reminder – that's just the theoretical part of it," the high-school student said.

"What's after that?" Anderson groaned.

"Physical training, extravehicular activity, space disorientation training, spacesuit training, familiarity training, flight training, and emergency escape training ... anything and everything is possible. Apollo 11 is a fifty-year-old space project. To be honest, I cannot say for sure that these training regimes exist in this era," replied the student, who wasn't looking too happy himself either.

At first, he was the most excited amongst the players. For an aerospace enthusiast, there was nothing cooler than taking to the skies, and getting into space on a spacecraft was the holy grail of it all, not to mention participating in one of the most important events of human history. Although it would be a bit of a fly in the ointment to be planting the American flag on the moon, it was a game and would not affect reality or history. When the young man actually received the manual and saw how much an astronaut had to learn, he had a hard time smiling

“Battle royale?” The hunk named Anthony flashed the other guy a smile filled with sarcasm. “Then, you should go straight to heaven.”

“There’s actually no need to be so pessimistic,” Livingston the intellectual middle-aged man, pushed his glasses into place. “There are three spots available for Apollo 11, which means that in addition to the skills that each astronaut must master, each of us can forgo some of the training. We can perhaps, choose one particular aspect to focus on, and complement each other...”

However, he was interrupted before he finished speaking. The thin and tall young man who looked a little listless said, “Forget it, old man. Every one of us here plays solo except for that fat guy over there. Don’t treat the rest of us like we’re fools.” Yawning lazily, he continued, “Don’t tell me that you didn’t notice captain William Kenhaus holding a little pocketbook in his hand. Every time one of us got off the multi-axis trainer, he would jot something down on it. If I’m right, he’s probably scoring our performance. These scores will probably decide who gets to fly on Apollo 11, and who will become the substitutes. You tell us to forgo some of the training and specialize in certain aspects, but the total of three sixty-points added up is much higher than a single eighty-points.”

The middle-aged man adjusted his glasses again, looking unfazed. “I was just suggesting to increase our chances of survival after launching...”

“Only on the premise that we can get into Apollo 11’s command and service module,” the student chipped in.

“Actually... if you think about it, the chances of us getting selected are still very high,” Livingston answered calmly.

“A fifty-fifty chance. That’s standard, apparently,” Anthony frowned.

“Not fifty!” The student’s eyes lit up as if he suddenly thought of something.

The listless young man fiddled with the pen in his hand. After a short silence from the team, he lazily asked, “What?”

The student looked at the only girl among the seven. She raised an eyebrow in defiance, asking, “What?!”

“Unfortunately for your kind, you might have entered the wrong quest. If this quest’s level is difficult, then it could very well be hell for you.”

“How can you tell?”

“You really don’t know much about 1960s America, do you?” the middle-aged man laughed. “Marilyn Monroe, the Beatles, Bob Dylan... what else is worth mentioning from this era?” the girl retorted.

“Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had come into effect, discrimination in society was unfortunately still rampant, not only toward people of color but also women. That was why the ’60s and ’70s saw the birth of many feminist movements. Very few women were allowed to join the jury; their bank loan approval rate was only half of that of men, and interest was fifty percent higher.”

The student took over the conversation. "Very few people know that in 1960, NASA implemented a project to determine whether women could become astronauts. Twenty-five female pilots were invited to undergo similar tests and assessment as Project Mercury's male astronauts. Thirteen of them eventually qualified."

"What happened to them?" "Although the 13 women received the same evaluation and training as the male astronauts, the officials never declared them as astronauts and didn't arrange for them to enter the spaceflight training. It was said that NASA management believed that female astronauts would waste precious resources and distract the public from the male astronauts. In the event of an injury or death in the middle of a mission, it might give the public a negative perception of the program. So, in 1963, NASA fatefully terminated the training program for female astronauts."

The student paused. "I must also mention that in that very same year, the Soviets sent Valentina Tereshkova, the first female astronaut into space. It's all very ironic," he added.

"So, for me to be selected for Apollo 11, not only do I have to perform a bunch of superhuman feats, but I also have to pray that Captain Kenhaus and NASA's top-brass are forward-looking men, and have no prejudice toward women?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That's just too bloody bad, innit?"

The girl did her best to force a smile. She was sitting near Zhang Heng, but the moment she heard the unsavory prospects of being a woman, she adjusted herself, snuggling up so close to him they were practically touching.

"Three out of five. Looks like our chances are pretty good," Anthony beamed.

"This time, since we don't have much time, I propose we get along with each other. We each have our own specialty; our particular skillsets. May whoever with the highest score earn the right to fly on the mission," the middle-aged man declared as he looked at the only person in the room who hadn't spoken from the start.

Anthony and the high schooler also turned to look at Zhang Heng. Although the listless young man did not look back, he had stopped playing with the pen in his hand.

Zhang Heng had been sitting in a corner, quietly flipping through the training manual. When he heard the statement, he looked up, shut the book, and said in a cavalier tone,

"I refuse."

Chapter 283 Past Dismissal Time

This was Zhang Heng's first time meeting other players in a quest. Before this, it had always been just him alone. He only had to think about his surroundings and the resources at hand to successfully complete the main mission. There wasn't much else to consider.

This time, however, there were six other players in the Apollo Program's training camp with him. No one knew each other beforehand, which meant everyone's identity, skill, or game items they carried were a mystery.

Seven people competing against each other for three spots. Even if they were able to achieve a short-term truce, it wouldn't make much difference in the end. Those who were falling behind wouldn't just sit there and do nothing if their career was at stake. Of course, that wasn't the reason why Zhang Heng refused to go along with Livingston's proposal.

Anyone who had played games that involved killing people knew the importance of character design.

The threats present in this round of the game weren't just external but also internal – between the players themselves. As the game progressed, players not only needed to study the mission in detail but also excel in their physical training. They would then need to size up their opponents, and figure which ones were the potential friend or foe.

Although no one mentioned it, it was undeniable that those who ranked at the very bottom would have no choice but to get rid of the player above them if they wanted to board Apollo 11. Therefore, under normal circumstances, the sooner someone outshone the other, revealing their cards too quickly, the easier it would be for them to be targeted by their opponents. That said, the actual situation at hand differed slightly.

Because only three persons would be selected to fly Apollo 11, it wasn't necessary for the players to get rid of everyone who performed better than them. In fact, players would need to consider many factors before making those choices. The scores, the opponent's strength, relationship, and the opponent's subsequent role in the moon-landing operations all had to be taken into consideration.

It was also the reason why the high-school student shared information he possessed with the other players and the middle-aged man who had attempted to be the team's leader.

Zhang Heng, on the other hand, opted for a different method. Thanks to the Black Sail quest, his temperament and general resolve had turned a tad fiercer and wilder than that of the ordinary person. When he first entered the game, he clearly sensed the other players' inhibitions toward him. Except for the girl who showed interest since the beginning, he could also sense that even the plump man, somewhat ostracized by the group, didn't dare stand too close to him.

It would have been a waste of effort to devote so much energy and time to change everyone's opinions, and it might not make much of a difference anyway. Zhang Heng would rather stick to the image they had of him and would use it to send a message to potential enemies to consider the risks of going against him carefully. Sure enough, as soon as he said that, Anthony and the high-schooler looked at him differently, and Livingston's brows furrowed. Through the course of their interaction, they realized that Zhang Heng could be a lot more difficult to deal with than they initially thought. Livingston, the intellectual of the group, actually posed the question to feel Zhang Heng out, sizing up the man's determination. He didn't expect him to be this unyielding.

Currently, it appeared that among the seven players, Zhang Heng was the one not to be trifled with. And since he had made clear his intentions to disregard the other players, it was going to be difficult for them to gain any useful information from him. He did this as a kind of barrier, preventing them from properly evaluating the threat he posed and reformulating their strategies on the fly.

Only the girl didn't seem surprised. Instead, she appeared thrilled, and her eyes shone with the eagerness of a child.

At that moment, the captain entered the room. "Alright. I believe you've all taken a look at your training manual, and know that you'll have to master everything in it. The bureau for knowledge has specially arranged for experts to teach you. Classes start at four in the afternoon and break at six. You will continue with the second session from six-thirty to eight-thirty. The third class will start at twelve and end at two."

"Excuse me," the student raised his hand. "The third lesson you mentioned; is that twelve noon to two in the afternoon? Shouldn't that be the first class, then?"

"No, you will have other types of training during that period. The third lesson I mentioned is from midnight till two in the morning."

The captain wore an unemotional, hard expression. Looking at the recruits below him with steely eyes, he grumbled, "I believe you all know that we don't have much time left. We need to make the best use of every minute and every second. I hope that that you won't waste what little time we have by asking such stupid questions again!"

Plump Anderson, who had the nick of saying the wrong things at the wrong time, opened his big mouth, "We have classes in the wee hours of the morning? Even our college entrance examinations weren't even this excessive!"

The captain smirked, only to move aside to make way for an elderly man that looked like he could use a shower. With wild, unkempt hair and a greasy collar, he entered the room in a slow but steady stride.

"Professor Steve from the Manned Spaceflight Engineering Program will be explaining Saturn V's structure, and basically... basic rocket science."

"Right now?" Livingston looked bewildered. "Shouldn't we visit the space center first, learn about the current space program, get to know the logistics people we'll be working with? And what food and lodging and such?"

"Don't worry. We have arranged all your meals and accommodation for you. As for the visit, it's scheduled at 0600 hours tomorrow morning," The captain said as he flipped through the pages of what seemed to be a timetable.

"Wait. Didn't you say that the third class of the day will end at two in the morning? Then, we have to wake up by six?!"

"It's 'assemble'."

"I'm sorry?" Anthony thought he had trouble hearing the captain.

"It's 'assemble', assemble at six, not wake at six," the captain corrected himself. "Anyway, I wouldn't want to waste more of your time. What you learn here will determine if you can survive in space. So, do yourself a favor, and work hard. Don't get distracted."

When he was done, the captain took no more questions, and simply nodded at Professor Steve. "Go ahead and start the lesson, professor."

Then, he left the conference room as he closed the door behind him. Right before he exited, the high-school student who had been closest to the door overheard the captain muttering under his breath, "Ugh. These greenhorns..."

The old professor handed out six hundred pages worth of materials to the recruits, then picked up a piece of chalk. "Good afternoon to the lady and all of you fine gentlemen. Glad to meet you. Today, we'll be looking at our first chapter: physics of rocket thrust..."

Forty-five minutes later, the bell that everyone had so badly anticipated did not ring.

Steve might have appeared like a regular old man, a little shaky when he moved and all, but he sure didn't look like he'd been standing for two hours. He didn't even seem the least bit tired, not taking any breaks in between, not even until six o'clock. He just kept going on, and on, and on.

"Who was the one who said that capitalism keeps its student's past dismissal time?" A weary Anderson muttered.

Chapter 284 Are You Sure?

After the class, everyone felt that no different from after completing the Multi-Axis Trainer; their brains spinning nonstop after attending Steve's Rocket Thrust Physics class. Throughout the lesson, Steve mumbled like a machine gun out of control, seeming as if he wanted to spill everything he knew about the Saturn V rocket within an hour.

Ten minutes into the class, tubby was on the verge of crying, not even bothered to pick up his pen cap when it dropped on the floor. This time, someone reacted worse than him. And that person was Anthony. Ever since he received the learning material, he kept wiping the sweat off his brow.

The knowledgeable middle-aged adult passed a piece of paper to Anthony. However, he did not take it from him. Instead, both his eyes were starting the level-three rocket structure in his book. He looked absolutely lost. He wasn't the only one, though, as the high-school kid was no longer Mr-know-it-all, scratching his head and grabbing his hair in silence during the lesson. As for the girl beside Zhang Heng, she had closed her book and was leaning lazily on her seat. Then, she started complaining about the whole thing.

"Psst. All these English jargon... and no translations in the book! Who the hell can understand them?!"

Those who were bold enough to venture on single-player mode were usually multi-lingual and had a good foundation in various languages. With English being the most widely used language around the world, it was naturally everyone's first choice to master. However, each individual had varying language proficiency. Although using English to communicate wasn't a problem for most of them, a situation like this would undoubtedly put their vocabulary to the test.

The high-school kid's English was audibly better than most, and seeing that he was an aerospace enthusiast as well, he could recognize most of the technical terms used during the lesson. However, he still found it hard to absorb everything that Professor Steve was pouring out of his mouth. On the other hand, Anthony was already a state of total confusion. The knowledgeable middle-aged man seemed to be indifferent; the look on his face unchanged since the start.

Nonetheless, the player that surprised Zhang Heng the most was the listless young man. Among the seven, he was the one who had paid full attention, busily jotting down the professor's teachings as he went on.

The girl beside Zhang Heng noticed him staring at the young man. Out of curiosity, she too turned to look at the man sitting in front of her. Professor Steve was talking about the pressure in the J2 engine's chamber and the consumption speed of oxidizing agents. When the girl leaned forward to get a better look, her breasts accidentally brushed Zhang Heng's shoulder, her warm breath on his neck, causing a tingle on his skin.

"Is he serious right now, or is he putting on a show? Perhaps he's silently cursing on his notebook."

The listless young man heard what she said. Unexpectedly, he turned around and smiled frivolously at her, leaving her in an abashed shock. She quickly looked back at Zhang Heng. After a while, she whispered into his ears.

"I don't like him. I don't think he's a good person in the real world. And that uncle over there? I have seen people like him at work. These may look gentle and polite on the surface, but I know of the evil intention reeking within them, just waiting to burst out."

Zhang Heng kept staring at the blackboard, not responding to the girl. "I can see that you are different from them. Though you might look fierce on the outside, I know you're actually a good person..." "You sure about that? Unfortunately, I have killed many people. There were young kids, elderly, young soldiers with wives waiting for them to come home, and even hard-working fishermen that toil away on the shores. To be honest, I've forgotten how many died in my hands. They are both soaked in blood. I'm now numb, and I don't really care anymore."

"All these things happened in the game, right? You only did it to survive, I suppose. In the real world, however..."

"You have no idea what I look like and who I am in the real world. Vice versa, I don't know what kind of person you are in the real world as well. But, I know what you want from me.

"The only thing I can tell you right now is that you chose the wrong target. If I were you, I would stop wasting time on me. One more thing, can you please keep quiet if you don't mind. I know that you don't care about this lesson, but it doesn't mean that others are not interested."

Once Zhang Heng finished, Professor Steve turned around and grabbed his messy hair.

"Erm... so, this is what you need to know for the J2 engine. You can compare it to the F1 engine behind you. Next, we will take a look at the inter-stage rings. It has eight small rocket thrusters. Its function is to separate itself from the second stage of the rocket. It is considered one of the most important sections of the Saturn V launch vehicle..."

In that hour, Zhang Heng finally got to enjoy the silence that he longed for. It seemed like his warning worked on the girl, and she no longer whispered to him, nor did she grace him with any subtle touches of her body. He could finally focus on the complicated subject at hand. It was already 6.20 p.m when Professor Steve finished his first lesson, dragging them on for a good 22 minutes before finally releasing the lot.

“That’s all for today.”

At that point, everyone simply wished that he would just close his book and leave them. Thankfully, the professor said no more, opened the door, and stylishly left the room. Immediately, every player in the room breathed a massive sigh of relief. The grueling ordeal was over for now. Even the young man who had been paying his full attention for two hours found that he reached a saturation point. Sitting through two hours of nonstop physics was tiresome, to say the least.

Anthony stood up from his seat and stretched in exasperation like an exhausted cat. Suddenly, a short, bald man walked into the room and wiped off the notes of rocket thrust physics from the blackboard. He then picked up the chalk and quickly wrote ‘aerospace engineering theory’ on the blackboard. “Hello, everyone. I know we are on a tight schedule, so I’ll skip the introductions. Welcome to aerospace engineering class.”

“Hold on. Did you enter the wrong class?” asked the listless young man.

“Oh. There are seven minutes left. There much to cover, and I think we can start covering the basics first.”

“Problem is, we haven’t had dinner,” groaned the middle-aged man with a bitter smile.

The moment he said that, a meal cart was being pushed into the classroom.

“Don’t worry about it. You can eat while listening.”

Chapter 285 Forming a Team

After enduring two back to back lessons, the meeting room was more of a crematorium’s atmosphere. Each player felt extremely drained and fatigued. Luckily, the bald man did not drag the lesson. At 8.30 p.m. sharp, the captain came to the meeting room and clapped his hands.

“I know that you are tired of lessons. Next up, physical training might just help you unwind your brains.”

This time, all moaned and wailed at the same time. Earlier, all the players wanted to question the captain when he told them that there was a three and a half-hour gap between the second and third class. When they were told that they needed to attend class at midnight, they realized it didn’t make sense to have such a long gap.

As expected, the captain ignored their groans.

“I will see you in seven minutes. The last to arrive will have to do five sets of pull-ups!”

Even before he was done talking, the players scurried out of the classroom to the meet-up point. Shortly after they started running, the girl tripped and fell. The plump man was running in front of her, and turned around to help her up. Suddenly, something crossed his mind, and he quickly retrieved his hand. However, he did stop to show his concern. “Are you okay?” “I’m fine. I must have tripped over something. You go on ahead first.” The girl put on a shallow smile, took off one of her shoes, and leaned on the wall to check her feet. The plump man knew that it was inappropriate for him to keep staring at her legs. So, he gulped, mustered some courage, and asked her, “Do you want me to carry you?”

"You are so nice. I'm fine. You should get to the gym now. Don't fall behind!" the girl replied with concern.

"Sigh... I don't think I can outrun them anyway."

It was rare for the plump guy to get this close to a girl, especially someone as attractive as this one. He was so nervous; he had to wipe off his sweaty palms on his pants.

"Let me help you over to the gym." "Thank you."

The girl then put her arms over tubby's shoulder.

"Zhen Xiong," said the girl softly. "Ah?!"

The plump man was startled upon hearing the girl speak out her name.

"That's my name."

"Oh, oh, oh... Sorry... Sorry!"

His face started flushing, his heart fluttering a little. He had no idea why he even apologized to her.

"My real name is Jia Lai. I'm an employee of JD Corporation in the real world."

"That's one of the top 500 corporations in the world!" exclaimed Zhen Xiong with her eyes wide open.

"No... no... I'm just an owner of a grocery. It's now part of JD's franchise stores. All I did is change the name of my store. I still have to do everything myself. I've only seen JD's CEO on TV before."

"Anyway, I think it's not that easy to manage the whole place. Can I visit your shop next time if I'm in the mood for some snacks..." Zhen Xiong did not look down on Jia Lai; every word she uttered was sincere and truthful. Suddenly, she lowered her voice.

"Bro Jia, do you have a mission failure exemption card?"

"That item costs 800 game points. Nobody would buy something so expensive except for those top-tier factions," Jia Lai replied while shaking his head.

After he figured out what Zhen Xiong had in mind, he was sad and dejected.

"It seems like both of us will be eliminated," she said. "I know my limits and how far I can go. This is the end of the road for me. You, however, are different. There's still hope for you. Don't give up! Perhaps they were trying to scare you when they told you that women were looked down upon in this era. We always say that foreigners value their freedom a lot. Besides, the Soviets have just sent their first female cosmonaut to outer space! I believe America wouldn't want to fall behind them."

"Bro Jia. You are so kind. What did you do to your previous team? Why did they give up on someone like you?"

"It's no use being kind nowadays. In my very first quest, I managed to learn a bit of first aid. My quest also required me to keep delivering items, and soon, I acquired Level 1 in my driving skills. I'm also a good cook, and now, I'm learning Russian. It appears these skills aren't very useful in this quest."

“Who told you that they are useless? Bro Jia, can I put my faith in you?”

Zhen Xiong looked at him in the most serious way possible.

“Of course,” replied Jai Lai without hesitation.

He felt a surge of passion rushing through his spine. “Let’s team up if you don’t mind me dragging your feet. We will move forward together. Either we both get on Apollo 11, or we quit this together.”

“Of course, I don’t mind, but... I believe you can find someone better than me, right?”

“You are right about me joining a single-player game with competitive mode for the first time. Usually, it’s tough to trust anyone in this mode, and I’d rather team up with someone kind instead of those who seek to take advantage of me every chance they get. This advice applies to multiplayer mode as well. I stopped playing this mode since my teammates betrayed me. I don’t want to go through something like that again. So, I’m going to ask you one more time. Look me in the eye and tell me, can I trust you?”

Jia Lai nodded vigorously, staring into Zhen Xiong’s eyes to show that he was sincere. At first, he just wanted to let Zhen Xiong know that he wasn’t messing around, but after a few seconds, a different kind of feeling started blooming in his heart. He started to move from staring into Zhen Xiong’s eyes to her nose and lips. They were curved charmingly, and there was a touch of luster to them. Both of their faces started to move closer to each other. Then, right before their lips touched, Zhen Xiong gasped, pushed him away, then quickly took a step back.

Jia Lai felt lost and quickly explained himself.

“No... no... I didn’t intend to...”

Zhen Xiong bit her lips, lowered her head, and didn’t speak another word. They had arrived at the gym. Jia Lai didn’t know how they even made it there.

“Bro Jia, please go in first.”

“No. You go first. I’m pretty sure the other players are here now. Besides, your leg is hurt. How are you supposed to do pull-ups?”

“We use our upper body strength and waist muscles to do pull-ups. Those have nothing to do with the leg.” “Anyway, you should go in first. After all, we are teammates now; I’m supposed to take care of you. Don’t worry about me.”

“Bro Jia. Just let me be the last to go in. I hurt my leg anyway, and I won’t be able to train. I don’t really care about the punishment as well.”

Zhang Heng and the rest took only five minutes to get to the gym located on the second floor. NASA’s gym was no different than the ordinary gym of the sixties. Compared to modern-day fitness franchises, this one wasn’t that big. Other than the equipment, a half-sized basketball court and a rock climbing wall could be seen as well.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the gym.

Chapter 286 Of Elvis’ Poster and Spacesuits

No more weird equipment was being used for physical training. However, how hard it was made them feel no different from basic rocket physics, and aerospace engineering didn't seem that dry and dull anymore. This time, Anthony performed best among the players, gaining first place in both bench pressing and weightlifting. As for Zhang Heng and the listless young man, they both placed second and third. Judging by the familiar way Anthony stomped along with the equipment, it seemed he was a regular gym buff.

The high-school student didn't fare well in physical training, placed even behind the knowledgeable middle-aged man. Considering that he was about to go through the National College Entrance Examination, it was perfectly reasonable that he would spend every moment he had studying instead of doing rigorous training. He simply didn't have the time, even if he wanted to. Unfortunately, the person coming in last was still the plump guy. Through his sluggish performance, everyone now saw why he was kicked out of his previous team.

Where did he find the courage to insist entering the gym when he could only do half a pull-up? Luckily, Zhen Xiong asked to go last. All too soon, she started regretting her decision. Although she was injured and was excused from this session, the captain said she would have to make up for it in the next. While others were busy training, Zhen Xiong simply sat aside and did practically nothing. Since her leg was injured, she focused solely on upper body strength. It was already 11.50 p.m. when the session was over. By that time, all seven candidates were literally dragging their exhausted bodies and minds back to the meeting room upstairs. It was time to learn how to fly a supersonic jet. Since none of them were aviators, the captain was keen for them to familiarize themselves with the T-38 Talon, a supersonic jet trainer. This time, Zhang Heng included, was too fatigued to do anything. Luckily, living conditions provided by NASA weren't too shabby. Not only did everyone have their own dorm, but it was even equipped with a personal lavatory as well. Their clothes were already neatly arranged in the wardrobe. Usually, Zhang Heng would check his character panel before he slept. However, when he finally entered his room at 2.15 a.m, he was too tired to do anything. All he wanted to do was to lay on the bed and sleep.

Having only three and a half-hours of sleep, it wasn't quite enough to rid his body and mind of exhaustion. The alarm woke him up with a jolt, before he was asked to get a quick cold shower. After that, he opened the curtains and took a good look at his room. He still had no idea how the other rooms looked like, though.

It wasn't a large room, a studio-like space around 40 square feet, furnished with every piece of essential amenities. It included a single bed, wardrobe, table, couch, television, and a fridge. The only thing worth mentioning here was the sixties-era technicolor television, a groundbreaking invention for its time. Of course, the picture quality could never be compared with a modern and slick UHD television. That said, its design was unique, coming in a square box-like structure with a thick frame around it. It looked more like a microwave or a fish tank.

Behind the television was a large poster of the movie, Viva Las Vegas, a romance flick featuring Elvis co-starring Anne Margaret. On the poster, both of them were leaning back while looking at the camera.

As his tired mind began to clear, Zhang Heng took out a clean suit of NASA uniform from the wardrobe. He quickly spotted a note stuck on the bottom of an empty basket placed beside the clean garments. (Put your dirty laundry here.)

Zhang Heng followed the instructions, tossing his dirty uniform into the basket. He was famished, but before he could look for any food in the fridge, he heard the captain speaking loudly outside his room.

“Gather up! You’ll all be visiting the space center today. After that, dinner is served at 1800 hours. You will begin your astronaut training at 1820 hours.”

After the first day of torture, all seven players were prepared to face another day of grueling training. Their faces were stoic when they heard the announcement; not displaying much emotion whatsoever. Either they were numb, or not fully awake yet. The schoolkid was the only one excited when he heard that there would be astronaut training later.

Now, the spacesuit used in the Apollo missions was an upgraded Project Gemini A7L suits. They would be further upgraded in the future for the Apollo-Soyuz mission and Project Skylab. Sci-fi movies made getting in and out of the suit a breeze, seeming as if the astronaut could slip into them without much effort. In reality, it was a nightmare to deal with. Take the A7L as an example; a suit that weighed around seventy pounds. The specialized piece of equipment had five different layers. The layer that closest to the skin housed an advanced liquid-cooling system. Mated to a nylon spandex to ensure comfort, above this was a pressured airbag, allowing the astronaut to freely move its joints before another layer of nylon topped it off. Lastly, the outer skin was a protective layer against the heat. The suit’s helmet and gloves were connected to it by metal rings.

That was not the end, for after putting on the hefty suit, Zhang Heng had to carry a portable life-support system as well, allowing him to breathe in outer space. As mentioned earlier, it was connected to the suit’s cooling system, a radiator of sorts. On the left side of the pack was a tall antenna that supported a two-way voice communication. This was the very reason why ultimate fitness was needed for an astronaut. An untrained individual would find it hard to even move in the shackles of the ‘suit.’

Nevertheless, the astronauts would undoubtedly feel better after they entered a zero-gravity environment, what the suits were created for in the first place. Usually, each astronaut would be equipped with three spacesuits. One of them would be used during the mission, the second during training, and the last was a spare. With his trainer’s assistance, Zhang Heng put on the famous fish-tank helmet. Suddenly, he felt like he was sucked into a vacuum chamber, isolated from the world outside. However, it wasn’t completely silent inside the helmet. He could hear a soft buzzing and the sound of the cooling fan from the life-support. After that, the trainer instructed him on how to use the urine bag, before reading what was on the control module for the life support system located on his chest to him. From there, he could monitor and adjust the liquid and power of the life support system.

This was an entirely alien experience for all seven players. Although it was in no way a breeze to learn, it was definitely better than the boring theory lessons and the energy-sapping physical training. Learning to put on the bulky spacesuit was fun, at least. If not for the extreme rigors and constraints that becoming an astronaut required, blasting to the moon strapped to a Saturn V rocket would be nothing less but a mind-blowing experience for 99.9999% of people. In 2001, one of the wealthiest people on Earth actually paid a hefty sum to become a space tourist, a seat that cost him a whopping twenty million dollars. In total, the lucky tycoon got to spend eight days cruising above mother earth on the International Space Station.

At the same time, Zhen Xiong noticed Zhang Heng always glancing at the clock during the training. It was as if he was waiting for something

Chapter 287 Transitional Quest

Ever since Zhang Heng received the analog watch, his 24 hours had increased to 28. When its hands reached midnight, he would enter a world where time halted no matter where he was. Having tested his theory multiple times throughout the entire month, his extra 24 hours would still apply when he entered the game, thus, accumulated into his total playtime.

Before the NASA quest, Zhang Heng had always played the game himself. From the desolated island to the 18th century Caribbean, all four games were completed by Zhang Heng alone. It wasn't until this game that six other players were paired with him. This situation was a first for him, and he had no idea what would happen at twelve. This was exactly why he chose single-player mode all the while, hoping to avoid unnecessary complications like this.

Usually, Zhang Heng would enter the game at 11.55 p.m. from the real world. There were five minutes until midnight, and according to the game's time flow, five minutes was equivalent to twenty hours.

It had been almost twenty hours since Zhang Heng entered this world. Immediately, he told his trainer that he needed to head to the toilet. However, his trainer gently reminded him that he could pee within the provided urinary bag in the spacesuit, considering it as a training exercise for the times he really needed to relieve himself in space.

Zhang Heng was desperate. He thanked his trainer and insisted that he had to go the toilet by hook or crook. No matter what would happen after this, walking around inside a seventy-pound spacesuit wasn't part of his plan. In the end, his trainer relented, having to spend fifteen minutes to help him get out of it. The moment Zhang Heng freed his right leg, he retook a look at his watch. Only half a minute was left before the clock's hands landed on twelve. It was at that time that Zhang Heng spotted Yin Xiong and tubby looking at him suspiciously. Whether he liked it or not, Zhang Heng having no time to interrogate them, anyway.

The moment the clock's hands hit twelve, everyone in the training room literally stopped in their tracks, their faces frozen in time as well. The world had completely turned into a giant wax museum.

Zhang Heng had expected this outcome all along. Earlier, he tested this theory with his computer. In the still world, it was possible to enter a single-player game. The only caveat was that he would be unable to play any games that required an internet connection. Although he was unable to scientifically explain the phenomenon, the mysterious quest that he just joined was still considered a game. Every game that he previously joined was still running when it was midnight in the real world. The only thing that changed was that his gameplay had become longer. Since there were other players present in this quest, it had proved that the world would still come to a stop come midnight.

However, before Zhang Heng could move a muscle, he heard a notification from the game's system.

(Warning!!! Warning!!! Game-time critical error detected.)

(Submitting critical error...) (Second level clearance has been initiated. Initial analysis: failure to continue. One player suspected of foul play. Contingency plan activated...)

(Parallel quest activated: Apollo Training Camp's transitional quest. Number of players: 1. Goals: none; so far. Time: 240 days. Player, please pay attention!)

Zhang Heng frowned and suddenly heard The Beatles' 'Yesterday' echoing in his ears. At the same time, his surroundings turned pitch black. It wasn't the same darkness as when the lights were turned off, but rather, a blackout situation where all light was utterly non-existent. Zhang Heng usually experienced this at the beginning of every new quest, where the complete lack of external stimuli helped him pay full attention to the announcement. This, however, was the very first time it occurred in the middle of the game. It felt as if the game's online server was being rebooted.

Luckily, the darkness did not last too long. When Zhang Heng opened his eyes again, Paul McCartney was already at, "Oh, yesterday came suddenly..." He found out that he was no longer in NASA's training room. The players around him had disappeared as well. Right now, he was standing on a vast runway. He could hear the deafening roar of jet engines, and suddenly a fighter jet flew over his head with a gust of wind almost knocking him over. From afar, Zhang Heng saw a pretty blond girl waving at him, looking extremely anxious. "Jim doesn't like the newcomers wandering around the place. Let's leave immediately when you are done with him. The people from the lab are still waiting for us."

"Lab?"

"Yes. Your school's students are there now, and you're the only one left behind. Oh... can you please get off the runway? We'll be in big trouble if the tower spots us."

"I'm sorry."

Immediately, Zhang Heng moved away from the runway. He had no intention of risking his life as well. Getting hit by a speeding aircraft rumbling down the runway at over 200 miles per hour wasn't his idea of a good death.

Nonetheless, this wasn't his first time hearing a warning from the game's system. When the second level clearance kicked in, the error wasn't submitted to the system, subsequently removing it permanently from the game's sequential decision-making algorithm. Zhang Heng suspected that this all might somehow be connected to the mysterious old man. Since the old man had chosen him to play the game, he must have known that such issues would eventually occur. It was evident that the second level clearance was used to deal with the problem, but apparently, it did not work properly in multiplayer mode. Hence, the system determined that he was technically cheating.

In the still world, he was the only one who could move, and it was safe to say that he was invincible. Just like the Zavilcha case, Shen Xixi and her team failed to defeat it even after several attempts. In the still world, however, Zhang Heng used only a rudimentary utility knife to defeat the monster. In other words, he could easily eliminate the other six players in the paused world if he wanted to, as well.

It seemed the system had noticed this anomaly, and to protect the other players, it created a transitional quest for Zhang Heng and placed him in there. Due to the rushed decision, no goal had been set up for the quest at the moment. Zhang Heng was wondering if this quest was as dangerous as the Winter War. "What is the time now?"

"Time? Erm... 10.35."

“What’s today’s date?”

“12th February.”

“Which year?”

“Is this supposed to be a joke? It’s 1955! Hmm. Do all MIT students use weird antics like this to get attention? I should remind you that if you are late again, your internship at Louis Flight Dynamics Lab will be canceled!”

Chapter 288 At Home In Foreign Lands

The Apollo Training Camp quest was set in 1969. If the pretty blonde wasn’t lying, it meant there were fourteen years left before the inception of the Apollo Program. If his memory served him right, NASA hadn’t even existed yet back then. However, its predecessor, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) was established in 1915. When Zhang Heng followed the pretty blonde to the lab and saw other interns and the manager, Zhang Heng finally knew what kind of place Louis Flight Propulsion Laboratory (LFPL) was.

Being NACA’s third lab, it was originally named Aircraft Engine Propulsion Laboratory, set up to help America deal with their aviation gremlins since their engines lagged behind their counterparts. In 1949, World War II broke out. Warplanes equipped with European liquid-cooled engines far outperformed America’s air-cooled engines in speed and altitude, and experts soon realized that America lacked the required research labs to come out with better aircraft engines. Thus, in the year 1940, Congress approved funding for its construction at Ohio’s Cleveland Hopkins Airport.

And that was how the aircraft research facility started blooming in America. In 1948, it was renamed Louis Flight Propulsion Laboratory (LFPL) in commemoration of the late NACA’S director, George. W. Louis. Then, in the year 1999, it was again renamed to Glenn Research Center. It became one of NASA’s most important facilities for researching and developing rocket engines. Even though this transitional quest was created specifically for Zhang Heng, thanks to the bug detected by the system, it meant he wasn’t completely booted from the Apollo Training Camp quest. The game had granted him the identity of an MIT grad, and placed him at the Louis Flight Propulsion Laboratory fourteen years before the Apollo 11 project. If his suspicions were right, he would only be reinserted in the main quest after fourteen years had passed.

This outcome was definitely worse than completing the main mission in the still world. Over there, he could easily eliminate all the other players when time stopped, meaning he could complete the quest way earlier than expected. Since the system couldn’t tell if he was cheating or not, it decided to send him to a transitional quest to protect the other players.

LFPL was an important NACA research facility, its employees handpicked from the best and brightest engineers that America had to offer. After NACA’s dismissal, its top researchers were quickly recruited by NASA, whose focus had now shifted to Aerospace Technology. Although Zhang Heng didn’t carry any future space technology with him, it seemed like a good opportunity to start mastering some physics and aerospace engineering,

Even though he couldn’t speed up time and peek into his main quest, LFPL was built right beside Ohio’s Cleveland Hopkins Airport and he could at least hop onto an airplane and fly. At that time, the T-38

Talons used in the Apollo Program hadn't yet been invented. In this era of the fifties, the T-33 Shooting Star was the best of its day. Introduced as a jet trainer, it was the similar aircraft that Zhang Heng encountered on the runway. Before taking to the skies, however, there was a problem he first needed to solve. The system had thrown him the identity of an MIT student and soon, he also discovered why LFPL actively recruited interns. It was all because NACA had embarked on a groundbreaking aerospace project. All that fuss was about the X-15 hypersonic aircraft, an experimental rocket-powered plane that accelerated up to a mind-bending Mach 6.72, six times faster than the speed of sound. The rocket engine enabled the aircraft to climb to an altitude of 107.8 kilometers, effectively passing the Karman Line into outer space. Remained unbroken in the 21st century, it still holds the record for the fastest piloted aircraft ever flown by a crew. In 1955, the X-15 Project officially broke ground, where LFPL played a huge role in its inception. Interns like Zhang Heng were supposed to assist the scientists and engineers working on the project. However, his qualification of a master's degree was in name only, generously granted by the system. Once it was discovered that Zhang Heng knew nothing about physics and engineering, he would most probably be sent back to the university.

Even if things did go his way, who would be willing to teach him anything at such a busy time. He would be doomed to spend his days in the lab before he knew it, seeing the enormity of the project and the amount of work at hand. Before Zhang Heng could figure out a solution to this problem, the pretty blonde was already assigning the interns to their respective engineers. If the engineer wished for a particular assistant, they were welcome to choose as well. Zhang Heng saw two engineers picking interns that they had worked with before.

At the same time, the interns also told the pretty blonde what they wanted and waited for her to assign a task to them. To Zhang Heng's surprise, he saw an Asian man amid the crowd.

In nineteen fifties America, it was rare to see Asians working in a top-tier research facility, especially one that ran such classified technology. Judging by his appearance, the person looked to be of Chinese descent. So, Zhang Heng decided to try his luck and greeted the person in Mandarin.

The person was taken aback when he heard the language. Clearly, he understood what Zhang Heng was saying. However, Zhang Heng had now been transformed by the system, making him look more like a European. That explained why the Chinese engineer was shocked to hear Zhang Heng speaking in perfect Mandarin. "Hello! Can I be your assistant?"

"What is your profession? I'm researching the general theory of three-dimensional flow in turbomachinery. Are you interested?"

"I'm studying economics, in my second year right now."

Zhang Heng was actually embarrassed to tell him the truth. However, he knew that he would not be able to hide it forever, and instead of waiting until tasks were given, he figured that telling the truth now was in his best interest.

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The engineer was taken aback by Zhang Heng's answer and was speechless for a long time. It seemed like one of those bad American jokes, or a subtle racist sentiment. After all, he had constantly experienced racism after studying there for so many years.

"I'm sorry. I have my own reasons for staying in the lab. If possible, I hope to learn a bit of engineering. If you think it's too much trouble, I can always look for someone else.

Since they were conversing in Mandarin, no one around them could understand what they were saying. Hence, Zhang Heng wasn't worried about eavesdroppers. He also knew the engineer would keep his secret indefinitely. Chinese expatriates often chose not to get themselves into trouble, thus keeping to themselves whenever they could. If, however, the engineer refused to take him in, surviving in this research center would become a massive challenge.

"Sure," said the engineer.

Instantaneously, that single word uttered from his countryman washed him with the warmth of home. He felt right at home, at home in a foreign land.

So, with the newfound close-to-heart alliance forged, the engineer walked up to the pretty blonde, telling her he wanted Zhang Heng as his assistant. Apart from him, another MIT girl had also been assigned to the same engineer as well. Everything was soon set in stone, and when they were back at his lab, the engineer shook Zhang Heng's hand vigorously.

"I forgot to introduce myself to you. My name is Wu Zhonghua. I'm Chinese."

"I'm Zhang Heng." It was one of those rare occasions where Zhang Heng revealed his true name. I'm Chinese as well."

Note: Wu Zhonghua is the Qian Xuesen of Air China. Graduating from MIT, he worked at Louis Flight Propulsion Laboratory before introducing the general theory of three-dimensional flow in turbomachinery. Later, he gained recognition as a world-class scientist. Just like many other physicists of that era, he gave up his high-paying job abroad and used the excuse of traveling around Europe with his wife to return to his homeland. Both Wu Zhonghua and his wife were the pioneers of Air China.

Chapter 289 Having Drinks

Life in the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory was probably the simplest one Zhang Heng ever led. The lab's staff, save for the blond HR executive, and Director Jim, who rattled Congress every morning for more funds, were the most decent and passionate researchers Zhang Heng had ever come across. They neither plotted against nor wrangled against each other, and since there was no main mission in the transitional quest, there were no threats to his survival either. Zhang Heng passed his days peacefully and uneventfully.

Every day, Wei Zhonghua would give him engineering lessons, more like a crash course, actually. Knowing his student was lagging behind actual MIT graduates, the engineer spared no expense, imparting everything he knew, whenever he could. Then, at the end of each day, Zhang Heng would buy drinks for the pilots who frequented the nearby pub with his internship salary. In the second month, he successfully boarded an airplane, and in the fourth, awarded the experience of flying subsonic on the T-33. He wasn't far from flying a plane on his own.

However, Wei Zhonghua resigned from NASA not long after that, citing a longing for a school's environment. The man was to head to Brooklyn Collegiate and Polytechnic Institute to teach as a professor. The whole debacle alarmed Glennan, NASA's chairman, and despite his best efforts at persuasion, nothing was going to stop Wei Zhonghua from leaving. Thus, the people in the lab ended up giving Wei Zhonghua a little farewell party. Zhang Heng did not join the party but drove Wei Zhonghua and his wife to the train station in a borrowed Chevrolet.

He was among the few who really knew Wu Zhonghua's true intentions. Even though staying back in the lab would have been more beneficial, it was really just a game, and no matter where, whatever timeline, or how many times he experienced it, someone somewhere would make the same choice, regardless. Knowing these things, Zhang Heng did not even try to convince Wei Zhonghua to stay.

In fact, Wei Zhonghua had already helped him a lot. Right now, although still behind an actual MIT engineering graduate, four months had passed, and from a zero, Zhang Heng was now able to perform tasks required for the research and was very familiar with Wei Zhonghua's research. He had no trouble doing things like collecting data and filling in the finished models. Even if another were to replace Wei Zhonghua, Zhang Heng could continue working in the laboratory by putting on an act, considering he actually knew what he was doing

Zhang Heng watched on as the train carrying Wu Zhonghua and his wife pulled away. Having heard that Wu Zhonghua's replacement was currently being transferred from the Langley laboratory, and wouldn't arrive until tomorrow, he didn't rush back to the laboratory. Except for waiting, there wasn't much for him and the female assistant to do. This could only mean a day off work, and seeing how pleasant the day was; Zhang Heng decided to cruise around Cleveland in the borrowed car he was in.

He bought two vinyl records of Patty Page, a burger, and a corn tortilla, unexpectedly making an achievement worth three points. After that, he fed pigeons in the city park, as he lazily strolled around. It was a beautiful day, not one to be wasted just like that in the confines of concrete and glass. Zhang Heng only returned to the laboratory before sunset. He had just gotten out of the car when the blonde girl rushed over and grabbed hold of

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him.

"Great! We just got ourselves a test pilot. He's in the corridor on the first floor. But something came up in Congress, and I have to hurry over. I'll need you to show him around the lab and the runway."

She sputtered her words, pushing a stack of documents into Zhang Heng's hands. "While you're at that, please pass these to Professor Maggie for me..."

...the black Jaguar XK120 parked not too far away kept honking.

The blonde stumbled, blowing a kiss at Zhang Heng. "When I get back tomorrow, I'll treat you a cup of coffee. It's a date!"

Before he could answer, she pulled up her skirt and ran to the car in her heels.

And just like that, Zhang Heng became the receptionist of the laboratory. Shaking his head, he carried the things to the corridor and saw someone indeed waiting there.

The man looked to be quite young, in his twenties, perhaps. But unlike most youth of this age, he had an inherent brooding quality about him, as if he was always pondering about something. At the same time, his subtle but decisive movements bore the temperament of a seasoned soldier.

That last part was not unusual – many test pilots in the laboratory came from a military background.

When he saw Zhang Heng approaching, he politely got up from his seat.

“How do you do, sir? I’m David, lab intern. You must be the new test pilot. Jane asked me to show you around the place you’ll be working.”

“Thank you,” the man said, offering a hand. “Neil Armstrong, retired navy pilot.”

His voice was deep and firm.

Zhang Heng stopped in his tracks as he held Neil’s hand, freezing for a brief second. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing! Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Armstrong,” Zhang Heng blurted quickly.

“The pleasure is mine.”

“If you don’t mind, I have to get these documents to Professor Maggie before we start the tour.”

Armstrong nodded.

Zhang Heng did not expect to meet Neil Armstrong – the first man to land on the moon. Not now, in 1955, at least. In retrospect, Armstrong had indeed worked for NASA as a test pilot for a certain period. At that time, the legendary astronaut looked youthful, and according to Zhang Heng’s calculations, Armstrong should be only about twenty-five. After completing his Navy service, he had returned to finish his university education. He hadn’t yet obtained a master’s degree in aviation engineering. Later in his life, upon making history on a successful moon mission, he kept a low profile, living a quiet life teaching at a university. He almost never accepted interviews, nor did he write a single biography. In fact, few knew that Armstrong never took a picture of himself on the moon. The widely circulated moon landing photo was actually taken by his crewmate, Buzz Aldrin. Armstrong’s shadow could barely be seen from the reflection of Aldrin’s helmet. The other famous photo, the footprint on the moon’s surface, was also the courtesy of Aldrin.

Unlike his rather rambunctious crewmate, Armstrong was a humble and unostentatious man; only the few who corresponded with him knew what he had to through when he was a young man.

But Zhang Heng was more interested in Armstrong’s piloting skills, a prodigy who obtained his pilot license when he was merely sixteen years of age. Before getting his driver’s license, or even joining NASA, he had already piloted more than 200 different aircraft types. This was one of the main reasons he was chosen to be an astronaut. Zhang Heng was unsure about one thing, though. Would their meeting in 1955 affect the quest fourteen years later?

After delivering the documents to Professor Maggie, Zhang Heng hurriedly went back to Armstrong. "So, did you arrive in Cleveland?"

"Yeah. I submitted an application to the Dryden Flight Research Center at Edwards Air Force Base, but since they are full, I was assigned here for now," Armstrong answered. "If that's the case, we should get drinks after the tour."

Chapter 290 Extensive Preparation Time

It was said that in one second, a cheetah could sprint as far as 28 meters on the grassland, a hummingbird could flap its wings 55 times, 1,620 cubic meters of Greenland's glaciers would melt, and the earth would orbit the sun 29.8 kilometers.

Yin Xiong, however, wondered if a person's character could change so significantly in one second. Blinking, in fact, might have taken even less than that.

If Zhang Heng had that dangerous quality about him, then it must have dimmed so significantly that it was almost imperceptible now.

Yin Xiong couldn't help but wonder if there was something wrong with her eyes.

But things such as a person's temperament were discerned purely by perception and were difficult to quantify. Things like these mystified her, and she didn't have an explanation for it.

Then, later, during training, Zhang Heng didn't look at the clock again, and with the help of the trainer, he successfully completed his first spacesuit training. Throughout the whole process, he was very calm. No one knew he had just spent 240 days in the 1950's United States. When Zhang Heng opened his character panel after the training, he could see a number of changes made to his profile.

Name: Zhang Heng

Gender: Male

Age: 19

Player ID: 07958 Rounds played: 4

Current game points: 737

Possessions: Paris Arrow (D), Evil Wall (D),

Shadow Key (E), Lucky Rabbit's Foot (E), Betty's Shell (E), Hunter's Blessing (F)

Skills mastered: Sailing (level 3), Saber (level 3), Language Proficiency (level 2; eight languages at a basic level), Archery (level 2), Wilderness Survival (level 2), Driving (level 2), Shooting (level 2), Engineering (level 1), Flying (level 1), Piano (level 1), Car Tuning and Repair (level 2), Ski (level 1), Rock Climbing (level 1).

Evaluation:

The player has slightly better luck than most and a higher chance of encountering enemies. Player is protected from shadows, storms, evil intentions, and is an experienced sailor. Skilled with knives,

arrows, firearms, can drive and fly a plane. He is capable of surviving in the wild, has a rich reserve of skills, and considerably adept at combat. The player deserves continuous attention.

'Shadow Moment,' an item that had been with him for a long time and used up until the Zavilcha battle, had been replaced by 'Evil Wall' and 'Betty's Shell.' Both of these allowed their user to escape a particular situation but also had their own limits. All in all, it was a good upgrade.

Skills were where Zhang Heng made the most progress. After being in Black Sail for 3900 days, he finally gained another level 3 skill; in fact, there were two – sailing and swordsmanship, both indispensable for a mighty pirate. With a little more training, Zhang Heng could even consider representing the country for the sailing events in Tokyo's 2020 Olympics.

In addition to that, he spent most of his time learning language. Starting with three; English, Chinese, and Japanese, he now spoke eight. Even though it was just a drop in the ocean of human languages, eight was an extensive range, ensuring he would have fewer communication troubles in future games.

All of the above was everything Zhang Heng gained before entering the Apollo training camp. The level 1 engineering and piloting skills on the character panel had been obtained from the transitional quest he had just completed. On top of that, he picked up aerodynamics and material science, not displayed on the panel since they were still at level 0. He even earned an unexpected 42 game points. Moreover, thanks to his improved theoretical knowledge, his car tuning and repair skills moved up a level, which was a good thing.

Although the system inhibited him from eliminating other players during Still Time, the extensive 240 day preparation period gained him an upper hand over the rest of them. Thanks to that, no one in the training camp could surpass his score.

Of course, at the end of the day, the three people with the best result might not even be the ones to board Apollo 11.

These players, however, weren't passive pushovers who just sit by idly. Should the game be not in their favor, they would definitely look for means to change the game's rules.

Even Jia Lai, the one appearing to be the weakest of the group, would not sit on his hand and blindly accept his fate. Everyone, including Zhang Heng, knew this. It was only because they had just started the game that the amity was kept among each other. Once the results of the first round were revealed, this temporary peace would be broken. Their first spacesuit training ended precisely at eleven-thirty. While more engaging than physical training, the amount of exercise involved was pretty much the same. Lugging around a weight of nearly 70 pounds, each movement was a chore, requiring plenty of energy for the simplest of bends. When the players took off their spacesuits, they were drenched from head to toe in their own sweat. There was no time to freshen up, though. Given only a short break after lunch, they were quickly shoved to the next lesson: diving practice.

Space was a completely different environment from the Earth, the most obvious being gravity. Gravity was everywhere on planet Earth, and all creatures living on it could not escape its bond. So, to simulate a zero-gravity environment on earth, it was necessary to find ways to counteract its effects.

Often, the amazing fantasies of science fiction would tout some sort of covert anti-gravity technology, something that, unfortunately, didn't exist in reality.

NASA would use a large aircraft (nicknamed the Vomit Comet) to create over ten seconds of weightlessness through a parabolic flight. This enabled the astronauts to experience an environment that was closest to space on earth. There were its quirks, however, and besides the strain the aircraft had to endure, they would have to land after every session, making the whole affair an extremely troublesome one.

Water buoyancy, on the other hand, could offset some gravity, creating a sense of weightlessness. Despite a certain degree of realism, it still differed somewhat from an actual space environment. The human body perceived gravity through the otoliths of the inner eardrums. Although one was submerged in water, the otoliths would still be subjected to gravity, meaning that being in the water would not affect a person's ability to determine direction. In space, however, the otoliths would be affected by the lack of gravity. The astronaut's sense of direction would be disrupted, and they wouldn't be unable to distinguish between up and down.

But that was the best NASA could do to simulate space on terra firma.

Unlike the other players who did not look too excited, this training played on Zhang Heng's strengths. Although he had never dived before, he experienced getting stuck on a deserted island in his first game. He had foraged for food on a desolate land and spent half his Black Sail quest at sea. Being in the water felt like his second home.