

48 Hours 291

Chapter 291 Dangerous Mechanical Tick

Being an astronaut was one of the most complicated jobs a human endured. When Project Mercury first started, NASA recruited a total of 100 experienced pilots as astronaut candidates. Only seven were selected in the end. During the early stages of human space exploration, nobody really knew what would happen the moment they left the confines of planet earth. Theoretically, the list of mishaps could be endless, since space was infinite, and all they had were their guts and an overpriced tin can. Ground control was thousands of miles away, and there wasn't anyone up there they could rely on. As an astronaut, they had to be prepared for every instance of an emergency, fixing problems that weren't even in their manuals. It was a job that required not only bravery but also ingenuity. That was why the astronauts' training was essential to them.

Their entire day during training was filled with a tight training schedule, enough activities each day to drive anybody crazy. Even breathing had become somewhat of a luxury. However, training did get interesting at times. The anti-gravity simulation on the parabolic flights allowed their bodies to float freely in the air. They also got to try astronaut food for the very first time. The dehydrated ready-to-eat meals weren't nearly as good as the over-the-counter burger, but still decent and palatable.

The last activity was Zhang Heng's favorite. He was in his spacesuit when he dived into the swimming pool, seeing the light piercing through from the surface to the bottom. A stream of air bubbles continuously shot out the snorkels of the divers beside him. He could hear the whoosh of air blowing from the vent inside his helmet and the low rumble of the occasional air bubble outside. Once wholly immersed in the water, Zhang Heng felt as if he'd entered a world of complete silence, and although he knew that he hadn't yet encountered space, he had to admit that he enjoyed the feeling a lot.

Of course, these were just the highlights. The training was exhausting and a dull affair most of the time. Pushed into a regime fit to recruit a secret agent, the trainees had their limits put on trial, and even some of them were even broken. Not too long after that, the teaching-to-the-test classes and high-intensity physical training started taking a toll on the lot. Even Jia Lai had lost some weight as well. The saddest part was that he knew the lumps of fat would return once he left this quest. However, theory class and physical training weren't the worst part of the course, for NASA had this machine that was capable of torturing one's very soul.

Known as Johnsville Centrifuge, the machine could accelerate from zero to two hundred kilometers per hour in seven seconds. It was everyone's worst nightmare. During training, the candidates were supposed to keep conscious under the pressure of tremendous G-forces while the machine sped up. Seeing how this machine worked, the Multi-Axis Trainer didn't look so bad anymore.

Lastly, the most horrifying machine award had to go to the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle. This must be NASA's ugliest and most dangerous invention. From its exterior, it looked like a giant mechanical tick and was used to simulate moon landings. NASA themselves admitted later that the Lunar Lander Training Machine couldn't accurately simulate an actual moon-landing. It did not show what it was like to exit the aircraft. Most of the time, the clunky machine would put its pilot in grave danger too.

Inside a modern virtual simulator, operators could calmly discuss and analyze the reasons for their spacecraft crashing. The Lunar Landing Training Vehicle was different, however, were only two

outcomes were possible once the pilot stepped into the machine that literally took off the ground. They could either successfully land the craft, or if they failed, god forbid, it would explode once it touched the ground. Right before the explosion, the pilot would best be quick to eject, if burning in rocket fuel and oxidizer wasn't their choice for death.

According to statistics, NASA once produced four Lunar Landing Training Vehicles as an experiment. Three were destroyed during training sessions. In other words, it had a shocking failure rate of 75%.

"I wish someone can tie the machine's inventor to it and let them have a taste of their own medicine," grunted Jia Lai under his breath.

No matter how much they complained, though, the captain had already summoned the first person to the machine.

"The first person to go is Anthony."

Anthony raised his eyebrows, not the least willing to get on the bonkers contraption as well. However, after going through a month of intensive training, he had tried all kinds of weird machines and was able to muster up enough courage. Besides, the captain was still grading them, and Anthony wanted to leave a good and bold impression on him. After all, physical attributes weren't the only factor that contributed to the assessment; the mental side of things was just as important.

Although he had a bad feeling in his heart, Anthony relented, deciding to obey the captain's command as he boarded the aircraft. While fastening his seatbelt, the staff did a quick checkup on him.

"The wind is acting up today. Be careful," the staff warned.

"Am I... supposed to say my last words right now?"

"The lever is under your seat. Pull it if you see your life flashing before your eyes. Once you pull it, you will be ejected out of the machine, and your parachute will bring you back to the ground safely."

"Understood."

"Let's begin if you are ready," the captain's voice echoed through the intercom.

The Lunar Landing Training Vehicle started wobbling around dangerously like a drunk man the moment it lifted off the ground. Luckily, it soon stabilized and reached its expected altitude.

"1100 feet. Exceeding minimum altitude," Anthony could be heard saying.

"Roger that. You can attempt to land now," replied the captain.

At the same time, the rest of the players kept their eyes on the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle. From where they stood, it looked like a colossal flying tick, with an unsightly, exposed metal frame and four tiny legs sticking out its bottom. The front part of the aircraft was exposed and they could see Anthony nervously fumbling with the controls. Piloting the vehicle required great reflexes and skill, essentially like trying to balance a unicycle on a tightrope. Without a doubt, this was one of the toughest parts of their training, not to mention that the wind wasn't on their side today. It would greatly increase the difficulty of landing the sensitive and erratic craft.

“He’ll kill himself if something goes wrong,” the listless young man said all of a sudden.

The other players glared at him in silence.

“What? Don’t tell me the thought hadn’t crossed your minds. We knew his day would eventually come, am I right? One less competitor ain’t a bad thing. Note to all; I’m referring to all of you here: I have never seen him as a worthy opponent.”

Although whatever he said wasn’t pleasant to the ear, it was hard to argue with him. He might seem like a useless teenager, but throughout the month he spent at NASA, he had managed to surprise everyone with his excellent airmanship and theoretical knowledge, second only to that of Zhang Heng. Although the results weren’t released yet, he should have no problem getting selected as an astronaut. As for the rest, they started to think about what would happen after the results were released. Maybe the time had come to see the other players as enemies.

Anthony was still struggling to land the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle slowly. However, the rest of the players no longer paid their attention to him. They were backing off as if avoiding impending doom that was about to strike at any moment.

“You’re coming down too fast! Slow down! I repeat. Your landing speed is too fast. You need to slow down. Pull up and try again!”

Anthony was sweating nonstop, flicking switches, and vigorously adjusting the sticks in an attempt to bring the craft under control. Unfortunately, it seemed like the machine had lost its bearings and began wobbling violently in the sky. At the same time, it was coming down really fast. Then suddenly, it seemed to lose all power and dropped from the air like a stone. Within a few seconds, it crashed to the ground in a massive fireball. The players ducked to the ground as flames and heat washed over them with the shockwave.

The next thing they saw was a cloud of black smoke rising to the sky.

Chapter 292 My Favorite Part

The medical team on standby rushed as quickly as they could to the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle’s crash site, but the sweltering heat and thick veil of smoke kept them from doing their jobs.

Judging by the dire situation, they were all just doing the best they could. No one thought Anthony would survive the blaze. The fire brigade arrived promptly, taking only five minutes to put out the flames. Sadly, the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle was beyond salvage, and all that remained was a smoldering heap of metal and debris. And in the pilot’s seat, an equally scorched corpse was present as well.

“The morning’s training is canceled. Everyone, standby in your dormitories,” said the captain, an unusual, somber look accompanying his face. “Don’t let this get out to anyone, especially the journalists. Later, at noon, an expert will give each of you a psychological assessment. Also...” He paused and looked at the players. “...whoever wishes to quit can tell me now.”

The players kept mum. It was obvious that quitting was not an option. Even in the face of such a tragedy, even if everybody died, nobody was going to quit as long as the mission wasn’t completed. That was simply who they were.

Although what that young man said wasn't exactly pleasant, Anthony's death was, in actual fact, a good thing for everyone else. Right now, none of them really knew what to feel.

The players returned to their dorms as the captain instructed. Zhang Heng grabbed a carton of milk from the refrigerator and poured himself a glass. As soon as he picked it up, there was a knock on his door.

He opened the door and was greeted by Yin Xiong standing outside his room.

Since the day he warned her, the two had no more private conversations. Yin Xiong naturally teamed up with Jia lai, and the other players were fine with it too since both were the underdogs of the group.

"What is it?" Zhang Heng asked.

"Can we talk inside?" Yin Xiong did not look too good. The smile on her face was forced, and there was an undertone of panic in her voice.

"There's no need for that," Zhang Heng said. "We can talk here."

The girl chewed on her lower lip. "I know what you think of me, but what can I do? Since the start, I didn't have a choice. It chose me, I didn't choose it. I received an invitation out of nowhere to join the game. I had to work hard to survive, just like when I graduated from college. I just wanted to do my best like everyone else, support my family, and be an ordinary person. But then, my superior stopped me in the pantry one day, telling me that he'd make my life in the company hell unless I became his secret lover... "...that is the cruel truth of the world, isn't it? The weak can never choose," Yin Xiong laughed at herself. "Sometimes I really wish I was a man. Maybe then, I wouldn't have become what I am today."

She looked up at Zhang Heng. "I'm not lying. I can see that you are different from the others, so I'm not here to take advantage of you. I'm here to tell you to be careful of Jia

Lai."

"Why? Isn't he an ally of yours?"

"Don't be deceived by his appearance. He's the most secretive among us, a hell lot more than everyone thinks... I..."

Suddenly, the door to the room on Zhang Heng's right suddenly opened. Jia Lai poked his head out. "Oh, there you are. I was just about to look for you. Didn't you say your refrigerator's run out of coke? I've still got some here. Want any?" As he spoke, Jia Lai snuck nervous glances at Zhang Heng.

Zhang Heng was the most inscrutable player among them. Always on his own, he was an obscure character, rarely interacting with the others. Moreover, he was strong and performed above and beyond in his training. Some people even wondered if he was, in fact, an actual astronaut. Although his menacing aura was not as telling as before, Jia Lai was still instinctively intimidated.

Yin Xiong did not continue what she was saying. She gave Zhang Heng a good look, then drew a smile on her face for Jia Lai. "Alright, I'm coming!" She hadn't even left for five minutes when there was another knock on Zhang Heng's door.

This time, the middle-aged man was standing outside. Livingston pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, saying, "I think we all need to talk about what just happened. I've already notified the others and we'll be gathering in my room in fifteen minutes. Do you have any questions?" "No."

"Very good, see you later."

This was the first time Zhang Heng entered another player's residence. Livingston's place was slightly smaller than his but the layout was the same. The only difference was, in the place of a TV, there was an antique radio. The other players were already there when Zhang Heng arrived.

The high school student and the listless young man occupied the only two chairs in the room. Jia Lai and Yin Xiong were on the bed, and the couch was still unoccupied. Livingston then gestured Zhang Heng to the sofa.

Once Zhang Heng was seated, Livingston closed the door and walked to the center of the room.

"Alright, I'll get straight to the point. I don't think Anthony's death was an accident."

"Why say that?" asked the listless man as he noisily cracked a peanut open and popped it into his mouth.

"Don't tell me you didn't see it. Anthony followed all the instructions to the dot. When he realized that the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle was out of control, he pulled the lever under the ejection seat. All of these happened a few seconds before the whole thing crashed and blew up."

"Why wasn't he ejected then?" Jia Lai asked.

Livingston looked around the room. "Good question. I believe some of you here can answer that for me." "Oh, this is my favorite part!" the listless young man clapped.

"I remembered you saying that one day, he might just kill himself by accident," the student suddenly blurted.

"So?"

"How did you know that this would happen?"

"Because I'm smarter?" shrugged the listless young man. "You can't possibly believe that. With my scores, I can board Apollo 11 without killing anyone. Out of all the people in the room, save for that cool guy over there, I'm probably the last person you should suspect." "Seems to be that way," Jia Lai muttered. "Excuse me?" the listless young man turned around, as his gaze hardened.

Jia Lai instantly shrunk back, looking away almost instantly. He seemed to have an instinct of a scared animal.

"I think he's saying that since the results are not out yet, there are still many uncertainties." Livingston wiped his glasses. "For all we know, you could be lying."

Chapter 293 Psychological Evaluation

"I'm bluffing?" The listless young man chuckled in amusement as he reached into his pocket for a pack of Camels. He lit up a stick, then looked squarely at Livingston. "Speaking of which, among us, he is

obviously the master of deception. He was so concerned, he gathered everyone together. If I'm not mistaken, your grades are closest to that idiot, Anthony. Then, there's also that schoolkid over there. The three of you compete against each other for the final spot. Now is the best time to strike, get rid of one, and exponentially increase your chances of entering the top three. No matter how you look at it, that seems to be the case."

"No, I will definitely be in the top three," The school student argued, but he somehow did not sound too confident.

"Heh, is that another one of those battle royale theories?" the listless young man snorted. "Forget it. Having good aerospace knowledge doesn't necessarily give you the upper hand in this game. Just look at our lone wolf over there. I've already gotten my private pilot's license in Australia three years ago." The listless young man looked at the middle-aged man standing in the center of the room. "As a research engineer, your theoretical knowledge is inferior to his for sure. In fact, even the dead guy is way ahead of you in physical training. In my humble opinion, you have almost zero advantage in this competition. With Anthony dead, the first to benefit is our friend with glasses, and the second is... you."

The listless young man blew out a smoke ring, then continued, "And to be honest, I don't get what's the point of this little meeting. Each of us here wants the other dead. Isn't it all common sense?"

Livingston answered calmly, "But the problem is, today, the killer killed Anthony, and tomorrow, he may use the same method to kill the rest of us. You don't want to be in the Johnsville Centrifuge knowing that it wouldn't stop spinning. Instead, it just goes faster and faster until your prostate and tonsils are pulled out of your body."

"I... I have something to say," the high school student suddenly spoke up again.

"What is it?"

The high school student pointed to the listless young man. "Last night, I saw him leave his room and sneak out of the space center."

"Last night?" Livingston raised an eyebrow. "By the time we finished our third class, it was already two in the morning." He turned to the listless guy and said, "Why didn't you use the opportunity for some shut-eye? Why did you go out?"

The listless young man shrugged. "That was my own prerogative. It's got nothing to do with any of you."

"You won't answer that because you must have rigged the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle. Our schedule for this week had been bumped up, and the last time the captain roll called, he changed the order of the names. Now that I think about it, your name was called last this time."

Livingston pushed his glasses up his nose. "It's already a hazardous machine on its own. If the ejection seat fails, it means losing the only of escape in an event of an emergency. Whoever who flew on the machine could have easily died. But this was no targeted murder. You didn't target Anthony. You just used the vehicle as a means to get rid of one unlucky bastard."

"That brings us back to the first question – why would I want to do it? I'm not worried about the scores. So why would I need to get rid of a player?"

"I don't know. Perhaps, you simply wanted to eliminate a threat before anyone else did it. Or maybe you wanted to create chaos. After all, as you said, we weren't too suspicious of you when we first met. But..." Livingston turned to look at Yin Xiong and Jia Lai. "...a random murder like this would benefit you more. You both come last. It doesn't matter who dies; you will benefit nonetheless."

"Wow. If that's the case, then we'd have to kill a lot more people," Yin Xiong sneered. "Besides, I'm only one place below Anthony and I've never passed a single flight test. How could I have known how to tamper with that machine? If Anthony managed to land the machine successfully, then wouldn't I be sabotaging myself?"

To protect her ally, Jia Lai, who had avoided causing trouble all the while, she told Livingston, "If I remember correctly... you seem to have paid close attention to the weather in the past two days. The wind played a major part in today's crash."

"Great, so other than our lone friend here, the rest of us are all suspects, huh?" the listless young man mocked.

"I think... no one should be ruled out," Jia Lai said. "David has the highest scores among us. Even though he has no reason to kill anyone, he's also most likely to be the most skilled killer. We cannot rule out the possibility that someone might have bribed him with points or items to kill Anthony off."

Zhang Heng said nothing in response to the allegation. He had not spoken a word throughout the entire discussion, listening intently to what the other players were saying instead. He could sense that plump Jia Lai seemed to be more aggressive than usual tonight. Concerning what Yin Xiong told him earlier, Anderson behaved really suspiciously too. The listless guy obviously felt a little uneasy after the high school student ratted about him sneaking out of the space center, but he quickly covered it up by acting indifferent.

Not to be discounted, the schoolkid himself was also questionable. He and now deceased Anthony were direct competitors. In fact, Zhang Heng also noticed another small detail – when the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle crashed, he was the only one who looked unsurprised. As for Yin Xiong, Zhang Heng had always kept her at arm's length. She was definitely not as weak and vulnerable as she appeared to be, which was also why he did not let her into his room even though she looked awful just now.

Lastly, there was the middle-age Livingston. He had had working hard to play the role of team leader, meticulously analyzing the cause of Anthony's death, and subsequently pointing his accusations at the listless young man.

With emotions peaking, fingers pointing and heads rolling, the meeting this time bore no fruit. No one knew the exact cause of the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle malfunctioning, and NASA's experts were expected to arrive soon to conduct a psychological evaluation on all six of them, mainly to assess if witnessing the accident caused the trainees to experience negative emotions and whether these would affect the subsequent mission to the moon.

Soon, the captain received the results of the evaluation, and to his surprise, the emotions of the six trainees did not fluctuate too much.

Chapter 294 Huge Shock

At first, the captain was concerned that Anthony's death would throw the candidates into irrational fear and post-traumatic stress disorder. After the evaluation results were released, it seemed he might have just overthought the whole thing. Considering that time was of the essence, training resumed that afternoon itself. According to the original schedule, flight training was supposed to be slotted after the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle training. Nonetheless, this part was going to be different from all the other regimes that they were through so far. This time, the instructors would no longer be guiding them.

After a month of intensive training, this would be the players' first solo flight. All the while, NASA had been paying a lot of attention to the Space Training Academy. Ordinary pilots and spacecraft commanders had many similarities, both required to continually monitor the aircraft, weather, fuel, flight path, and the all-important mission. With the enormous amount of information at hand, they would have to come up with different decisions in the shortest time possible.

Once a problem arose, the players were required to diagnose and deal with it accurately. At the same time, Concurrently, they would keep radio contact with ground control at all times, making their workload immense. Great focus and diligence would be required of the candidates, which was why flight training was the most crucial part of the entire course. Most players dedicated all their time and effort to make sure that they would ace their flight training.

Anthony had just died from an 'accident' not too long ago. Before the authorities hunted his killer down and NASA releasing the investigation results, one could only guess the reason behind his untimely death. The most important thing was that none of them knew how the mysterious killer killed him. Other than the young man accused of leaving his room last night, none of the players left their rooms. It was the same thing during lunch, where they all knew each others' whereabouts. Technically, the suspect couldn't have tampered with the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle without anyone noticing

When Anthony's turn arrived, the other players were gathered around the captain. Since Zhang Heng knew that he would end up first place, he did not pay attention to the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle but observed the other players instead. He spotted nothing out of the ordinary at that time.

A supernatural force, perhaps?

Considering those who entered this quest were players themselves, there was a high chance that they carried powerful game items with them. For now, this was the most plausible explanation for Anthony's death. This meant several new possibilities in the case. Zhang Heng could understand why the knowledgeable middle-aged man wanted to look for the murderer as soon as possible. As long as the case remained unsolved, everyone would be carrying a Damocles' Sword on their heads. To complete their main quest, they would have no choice but to weed the killer out.

The severe accident that had just occurred caused a nervous and ominous atmosphere to hang over Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. Everyone tiptoed around with a cautious tone about them, checking all the equipment thrice, just to be sure. For the next stint, the technicians had just done the second round of ground checks for the aircraft, making very sure everything was airworthy. After that, Zhang Heng put on his custom made flight suit, helmet, and oxygen mask. He then hopped into the cockpit. For the other players, this might be their first time flying a jet trainer, but during the transitional quest, Zhang Heng had flown this particular type many times himself. When he took the T-38 out for a spin

earlier, the instructor was impressed by his performance, unable to stop complimenting him when he landed.

Zhang Heng's Level 1 flying skills may not match up to that of professional pilots, but they were sufficient for him to pass the current quest. This was especially true after he spent a long time honing his airmanship, where all he needed right now was more flying experience. The young man and school kid in front of him had completed their sorties. As for the rest, they no longer seemed to be worried about their safety as well. Zhang Heng was third to get on the plane. Once the seatbelts were fastened, he pulled the safety pin of his ejection seat; for good measure, of course. He then turned on the flight display and flipped a row of switches. Subsequently, the radar and gauges came to life, and he did a radio check. The pre-flight checks were done, and he was ready to start the engines.

The moment he held the start button, the engine whirred to life, beginning from a low hum and increasing to an almost deafening high-pitched whine. The aircraft was now configured to fly, and after making sure that everything was in check, Zhang Heng signaled ground with his hand indicating that he was ready. Immediately, they ran to the plane, dismantling the ladder and removing the chocks. Once the ground power was disconnected, Zhang Heng released the brakes and gave it a little throttle. The T-38 rolled out of the hanger slowly, taxiing to the runway. It was still a windy afternoon, albeit a lot better than the morning's gusty weather. More importantly, the skies had cleared, and it was the perfect time to fly. At 13:45 sharp, Zhang Heng requested to take-off from the tower. The moment he was cleared, he pushed the throttle on his left to full, and the airplane screamed and shuddered as the engine spun up. Then, the aircraft started barreling down the runway, pushing Zhang Heng back into his seat with massive force. The moment he reached 220 knots, he pulled the stick back, and the T-38 lifted its nose off the ground. Zhang Heng took a quick look at his instruments, making sure that he was on a steady climb and that the aircraft headed in the designated direction. He was required to fly out to sea and find a corvette named Miller. Once he spotted it, he would turn around and return home. The mission wasn't all that complicated, really. All he needed to do was to ensure that he didn't miss the target. All too soon, everything worked as intended, and Zhang Heng could relax a little. He looked outside the glass canopy, enjoying the stunning view earth had to offer from above.

He had to admit that this game changed him a lot. Half a year ago, he would never have thought that something insane like this would happen to him. Even second-generation rich kids could only imagine drifting like Takumi Fujiwara on a twisty mountain road. Now, Zhang Heng was speeding in a fighter jet over America's territorial waters.

At 13:52, he contacted tower again, informing them of his altitude, speed, and heading, at the same time, checking the aircraft's fuel consumption. All gauges were within their designated parameters, and nothing was out of ordinary so far. The sunlight outside the window was dazzling, bathing the cockpit in bright light. In less than ten minutes, the aspiring astronaut managed to locate the corvette. At 13:59, Zhang Heng communicated with the tower for the third time. He told them that the mission was complete, and he was now turning home.

Around four and a half minutes later, the jet aircraft suddenly jolted violently. There was, and a loud rattling and grinding, and through the glass canopy, he spotted the left engine in flames. Seconds later, a loud alarm started beeping on the instrument panel. At the same time, air traffic control could be heard over the radio. "David, what is going on?"

“I think it might be a bird strike; hit a seagull or something.”

Immediately, Zhang Heng killed the flaming engine. “David, can you make it back to the base?!”

“Let me try,” grunted Zhang Heng while glancing at the altimeter.

From the beginning, he managed to keep his calm through the frightening anomaly. All those long hours spent flying and training with Armstrong were precisely to prepare for situations like this. He still had one engine left, and if all went well, returning to base should be a textbook maneuver. Just when the jet began to stabilize itself, another loud explosion rocked Zhang Heng to the bone. It was the right engine this time, and now, except for the muffled sound of the wind, the cockpit was silent.

Chapter 295 Following Closely

And that was Zhang Heng’s last contact with the tower before all communications were lost. Base instantly sent out a rescue team to his last known location.

This was the second major accident on the same day, and even the steady and calm captain started to feel nervous. Undeniably, the risks were astronomical when it came to astronaut training. The Apollo 1 incident was a tragedy that NASA would remember for the rest of their days. During a launch test, the command module of a test article caught fire suddenly with three unfortunate astronauts inside. The hyperbaric oxygen atmo caused the fire to spread a lot faster than expected, and tragically, all three astronauts were charred to oblivion when ground control eventually got to the rocket.

This catastrophe caused the Apollo Program to be delayed for 20 months. After that, many other accidents continued to plague space exploration. This was, however, the first time they witnessed two people losing their lives while training on the same day. Once communications were dead, the tower had no way to know Zhang Heng’s current situation. For a twin-engine aircraft, an experienced pilot would usually be able to coax the plane back home even if one engine suffered a critical failure. Alternatively, the pilot could land the aircraft as soon as he could. However, if both the engines failed, the aircraft would lose altitude quickly, seeing how the heavy trainer wasn’t a very good glider.

In such a situation, Zhang Heng’s best chance of survival would be ejecting and parachuting to the ground safely. Ever since Anthony’s ejection seat failure, the players did not have much faith in the aircraft anymore. Not too long ago, Livingston gathered everyone in a meeting, looking for Anthony’s murderer. Logically, that should have pressured the killer into not acting again within such a short period. Nobody expected the murderer to go as far as to kill Zhang Heng within a few hours of Anthony’s death.

It appeared that this time, the assassin targeted someone they expected least. Until now, Zhang Heng’s scores always came in first for astronaut training. Killing him would indeed empty one of the seats on Apollo 11. However, the other players also believed that the killer wouldn’t benefit much even if Zhang Heng was eliminated. Other than the fact that he looked like a guy who shouldn’t be messed with, killing the person in first and third place made no difference. Seeing that space was the ultimate goal here, everybody hoped that their crewmates were reliable. It wasn’t a solo mission, anyway, and the three had each others’ lives in their hands. Logically, the killer should have targeted the second and third place instead of the best man for the job.

There was only one person who could have had the motive to kill Zhang Heng.

“What’s going on? Why are all of you staring at me like I’m the killer?” the listless young man asked while snorting.

“You said that you had no reason to kill Anthony because he wasn’t a worthy opponent for you. This time, you must have found your reason,” said Yin Xiong. “What do you mean by that?”

“You realize that you are now in grave danger. Most players hope for your elimination. Now that David is gone, chances are you’ll get first place in astronaut training.”

“So what?”

The listless young man rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“You and David are the only two pilots with a solid foundation on flying. With us losing David, we’ll have no choice but to choose you as our pilot.”

“I like how you think. If I had a choice, I’d like you to be my moon-landing partner.”

“Dream on.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be so rude to my future commander. If you are unhappy with me, I would like to invite you to my room for an ‘in-depth’ discussion,” the listless young man sneered with an emphasis on the words, ‘in-depth.’

“Now that you’ve got what you wanted, can you tell us how you did it? You knew the sequence of the people who would get on the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle, which prompted you to mess with the machine a night before it happened. We just need to know how you messed with the plane. How did you cause a twin-engine failure? David is a better flyer than you. How had he not found something wrong with the engines before takeoff? Besides, wasn’t Mark between you and David earlier? What kind of game items do you possess?”

“What if I don’t tell you? Are you going to bite me?”

“It’s true that we need someone to fly the ship. However, we shall cross that bridge only when we get on Apollo 11. Before that, we shouldn’t place our lives at the mercy of someone’s whim. Besides, I’m pretty sure that you don’t have it as well.”

Livingston cleaned his glasses before continuing

“To protect ourselves, you must show us your game items and tell us the way to activate and deactivate them. Otherwise, we’ll have to take it from you by force. By that time, we might take other things as well.” “Hehe... uncle, you sound a lot tougher than you look. Unfortunately, you asked the wrong guy. I wish I could tell you how I made them crash. I wish I could tell you how I killed that idiot, Anthony. The truth is... this is my last time repeating myself... this is so stupid. Listen, I didn’t kill them. I don’t care how you look at me. I didn’t do it. At the same time, I can’t say that I hate the fact that they both got killed. That’s all there is to it.”

“We’re wasting our time. He’s full of lies. We should restrain and search him,” the schoolkid suggested.

“I agree,” seconded Yin Xiong. “I will kill whoever that lays their hands on me. I will make sure of it. I ain’t kidding.”

The listless young man's face had darkened to a somber facade, and the other players could see the furious rage burning in his eyes.

"Why? If you didn't do it, why can't we search you? Just like what you said, you are the most qualified pilot among us after David. If you can prove that you had nothing to do with their deaths, you can just sit aside and watch the show. Don't you want to complete the main quest yourself?"

"I will not display my trump cards. Not before the game ends."

Everything then came to a halt. They thought twice about roughing someone up. Livingston had some concerns as well, considering this was an air-force base after all. Even though they outnumbered the listless young man, it was still hard for them to exert such force in such a high-security area. Suddenly, Jia Lai who had been quiet all the while spoke up as he pointed at the beach.

"Ah... is there something wrong with my eyes, or is that David on the speedboat?"

Chapter 296 Miracle

The rescue team was shocked to find Zhang Heng on a cruise ship. He was bathing in the sun with a man in trunks who seemed a lothario, the few women in bikinis standing close to him a testament to his influence. It appeared the man was the captain of the ship. At that moment, he stared at Zhang Heng as if he was looking at a god.

Twenty minutes ago, Zhang Heng found both of his engines failing on him. An airplane without its engines was like a bird without wings, and the aircraft started falling out of the sky the moment they flamed out. The numbers on the altimeter were dropping quickly, and he knew there wasn't much time left. Running out of options in a crippled airplane, Zhang Heng pulled the eject handle.

And just as expected, nothing happened. During a critical time like this, the life-saving ejection seat suddenly stopped working just like that. This was precisely what happened to Anthony in the Lunar Landing Training Vehicle earlier. Zhang Heng didn't expect to be the mysterious murderer's second target. He would have to save the gripes for later. This wasn't the time to think about these, a time where life was quickly slipping away from his hands.

Many people assumed that crashing at sea was better than land, thinking that a water landing was safer than the hard ground. The truth was, the impact from the speeding plane on the water surface was no different from ramming head-on into a concrete wall. When that happened, even the most experienced pilots would not survive the crash. If the engines couldn't be restarted, there wasn't much the stricken pilots could do to save themselves. Thankfully, Zhang Heng possessed a game item that might just save his life: Betty's Shell.

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Until today, Zhang Heng had never thought that he could use this game item so unconventionally. In this life-threatening situation, there was nothing else he could rely on except for Betty's Shell, used to escape his enemies and speed up his ship. Throughout that period, he also realized he could control the storm better. That said, whatever he was about to do to save himself was insane. Not only would he need to invoke a gigantic storm, but he would also need to control it in the most precise way possible.

When the left engine stopped working, Zhang Heng realized that things weren't as simple as he thought. While attempting to fly with only one engine, he began to prepare a backup plan. Then, when the right engine failed, a massive storm cloud had already appeared in the sky. It expanded so quickly that he could literally see it changing by the second. The temperature variance increased amid the newly formed clouds, and water vapor molecules rose rapidly. The convection became more and more intense, and in the end, the evaporated vapor hyper-cooled and started to shrink. At the same time, gas molecules under the cloud kept on filling up the empty space. All these things combined were the perfect recipe for a tornado.

In that split second, the aircraft was violently sucked into the vortex. Zhang Heng felt like he was back into the Johnsville Human Centrifuge, where everything around him began spinning into a blur. Never had he thought the training simulations would be put to use even before he launched to space. Pressure within the tornado was extremely low, and the air was thin, and despite the conditions, the oxygen mask allowed him to breathe normally. With the tornado spinning faster and faster, the suction near the center got more energetic as well. This greatly helped in reducing the descent rate of the malfunctioning plane.

Zhang Heng paid close attention to the altimeter, calibrating the size of the tornado based on the altitude and descent rate of the airplane. His goal was to do a smooth and soft water landing. However, it was no easy feat to achieve. Any small mistake made, and he might be thrown out of the vortex or sucked higher up. Thankfully, none of that happened, and eventually, he managed to guide the plane out of the tornado. The airplane glided on the water for some distance before coming to a complete stop.

Once the ordeal was over, Zhang Heng received an achievement.

(The man who entered a tornado.)

This achievement earned him 15 game points. When he exited the plane, he received another achievement.

(Successfully maneuvering an aircraft on water.)

Considering how difficult the feat was, the system rewarded Zhang Heng a generous 25 points, although not the highest he had received in one go. He would, however, never attempt such a thing again, even if the system threw him 100 points. 500 meters from where he landed, a cruise ship witnessed Zhang Heng emerging from the twister and landing on the water.

It was the first time the captain witnessed something so unbelievable, a person surviving two catastrophic events at the same time. This explained why he saw Zhang Heng as a god later on. Those things were undoubtedly miraculous, powerful enough to change someone's belief. Zhang Heng thanked the captain after receiving a towel and a set of clean clothes. With the assistance of the two bikini-clad ladies, he managed to get out of the hefty flight suit. Feeling literally 20 pounds lighter, he got into his new clothes, slightly oversized since they belonged to the captain. The nice thing was that they were clothes meant for a holiday, and after the ordeal, he actually felt comfortable and snug.

Bathing in the warm sunlight, Zhang Heng could finally relax again. While waiting for the arrival of the rescue team, he and the captain managed to talk a little. Although his mind was still on the events that

had happened earlier, he had to admit that the 'accident' was something completely unexpected. Judging from the killer's decision to murder Anthony, it seemed the killer wished to eliminate the ones closest to his grade or ranked lower than him. By doing that, he would be able to push up his ranking. If that were to be the case, it meant the murderer's next target should be Livingston or the schoolkid. The listless young man might be a target as well. If the killer made Zhang Heng the target, no one would benefit from it except the young man. And it also didn't explain Anthony's death. Although unpleasant to hear, the listless young man was not lying. The truth was that he did not have a motive to kill Anthony.

All too soon, Zhang Heng realized that he had just complicated the whole thing. No matter who the killer was or for what reason, all that was needed was killing the listless young man, and its safety would be guaranteed.

Both of them were the only experienced pilots of the entire team. Putting the safety and lives of the crew in mind, no matter who the three Apollo 11 astronauts were, they would definitely want Zhang Heng or the listless young man on board. Zhang Heng had no intention to wait for the killer to pick his target, though.

This time, he wanted to strike first to guarantee his safety.

Chapter 297 Note

Although a fighter jet worth millions had crashed at sea and sank to its bottom, NASA was relieved to see Zhang Heng returning in one piece.

Two deadly incidents had occurred on the same day, and if another accident were to take place, it would certainly catch the unwanted attention of the public even if had nothing to do with the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle. In fact, ever since Congress approved the Apollo Program, public opposition had been gaining traction by the day.

Taxpayers started to question the sensibility of the astronomical expense required to fund the program, or whether the so-called 'space race' and moon-landing were simply political dick-measuring among the superpowers. Political significance seemed to far outweigh the project's practical relevance, where all that money could have been used to improve the livelihood of the common man. Such funds could have been easily used to increase unemployment benefits, decrease interest rates, and even help colored communities in a time where they faced great oppression.

Then, there was the press. Media would have had a field day, unceasingly pursuing NASA and the players if they caught wind of the accidents. Fortunately, unlike Anthony, Zhang Heng miraculously survived.

The moment he reached the shore, he did not meet with the other players but was instead, sent directly to the infirmary. Although Zhang Heng appeared to be unscathed on the surface, the medical team still ran full physical tests on him just to be on the safe side. When they confirmed he was in good health, they brought him to a conference room where an inquiry had been set up to investigate the cause of the accident. It was more like a discussion session, where a team of investigators listened as he related his experience. This included reigniting the engine, measures the pilot had taken, and the condition of the fighter at the point of failure. They even questioned him about how he escaped.

Because he was found on a cruise ship, Zhang Heng made no attempts to hide the truth and told the investigators everything, including the part where his jet was sucked into the tornado. He did, however, leave out the part about using Betty's Shell to control it. Trying to be as transparent as possible, he told of how the tornado spat him out, subsequently granting him a safe landing on the water.

The whole story sounded more like a ridiculous myth to the investigators' ears, and although Zhang Heng's narrative couldn't be completely ruled out theoretically, their professional experience told them that the chances of such a remarkable thing happening were just too small. Equally small was the probability of both engines failing in midair at the same time, and the part about the jet being caught inside a tornado was even more far-fetched. Before the investigators called upon him, they had done their homework – at that time, the waterspout was just off the coast and many around the area had seen it. Moreover, the stories of eye-witnesses on the cruise ship matched Zhang Heng's statements precisely.

So, as incredulous and impossible as it sounded, the investigators had to accept the only explanation they had at the end of the day.

Moreover, they also paid particular attention to the faulty ejection device. The fatal incident that morning that cost Anthony his life was directly related to the ejection seat failing to launch on the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle. Less than a few hours after the first incident, the ejection seat on the T-38 malfunctioned as well. Naturally, a suspicious connection hung between the two.

NASA had already sent divers to recover the jet-trainer, intending to conduct a detailed investigation when it was brought back ashore. On top of that, they even looked into the possibility that Zhang Heng might have intentionally damaged the plane himself.

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By the time the interrogation was over, it was already dark. Zhang Heng was informed that until the final report was out, he was grounded and wouldn't be allowed to fly. He didn't object the decision, knowing that it was somehow a blessing in disguise. Staying on the ground would ensure his safety, and before the culprit was caught, he did not wish to endure the same ordeal again.

After a hearty dinner, Zhang Heng returned to aerodynamics class.

He only just sat down when he received a note. On it was a simple sentence – You suspect Bruno too, right? Meet me in the corridor tonight at three.

Bruno was the alias of that listless young man. Yin Xiong passed Zhang Heng the note, but Livingston had actually written it. As Zhang Heng received it, Livingston nodded at him covertly. Zhang Heng wasn't surprised. Two consecutive 'accidents' had taken place on the same day – one successful and the other a failure. The other players would surely worry about their lives, desperate to find out who was behind all this.

For the moment, it appeared that everyone had reached a consensus that Bruno was the most likely suspect, and that they weren't about to let him decide their fate. So they decided to take action.

That basically meant that Bruno would be prematurely kicked out of the game. Even if he wasn't the culprit, the players wouldn't want a potential threat staying on either, not especially after that argument. Never mind the fact that many were vying for his spot in the first place. Since Zhang Heng managed to survive, they did not really need Bruno around.

The four players joined forces and planned to ambush Bruno. That meant he had almost no chance at winning. Livingston had also invited Zhang Heng to join the cause. Of course, it wasn't because he valued Zhang Heng's strengths but to keep him from ratting to NASA about the ambush.

It was, undoubtedly, a very wise decision.

With two serious accidents happening in one day, and from the manner of questions being asked, it seemed that the investigators too, suspected the accidents could have been premeditated.

They couldn't risk such things happening again, not even if it looked like a genuine accident. Lives and reputation were at stake here, and with the recent public backlash, it couldn't have come at a worse time. Only through complicity could the secret be kept under wraps.

Zhang Heng didn't take too long to decide, agreeing to go along with Livingston's suggestion.

Regardless of whether Bruno was the murderer or not, getting rid of him would definitely benefit Zhang Heng. Even if the other four players restrained themselves, he would still have to find a way to kick Bruno out to protect himself. Since they were all on the same side, Zhang Heng had no reason to disagree, something that Livingston had previously expected. In the subsequent physical training session, Livingston got up close to Zhang Heng quietly, explaining briefly about the plans tonight. To avoid alarming Bruno, the pair quickly separated after the message got across. Livingston even made it a point to gather everyone, informing them that the discussion would continue tomorrow at noon.

Bruno, on the other hand, seemed displeased with the suggestion. Even so, he approached Zhang Heng after training ended. He tried to explain that he had nothing to do with the jet trainer's accident and, at the same time, wished to be an ally of his. Bruno clearly knew that he had fallen out with the other players and sorely needed support.

According to him, he and Zhang Heng were the ones with the highest scores, and working together would exponentially increase the success rate of qualifying for the moon-landing mission.

Zhang Heng only said that he'd consider it. When the hour hand on the clock struck three, he opened the door as promised.

Chapter 298 Elimination

Zhen Xiong (changed from Yin Xiong), Jia Lai, Livingstone, and the schoolkid were all waiting in the hallway, remaining as silent as possible and even making sure the doors were closed gently. Once Livingston saw that everyone was present, he produced a lighter from his pocket. He lit it up and placed it near the copper lock on Bruno's door. A few seconds later, something magical happened before their eyes. The lock which was supposed to be made out of solid copper melted in the lighter's flames!

It was typically impossible to melt copper in such a matter of seconds, what more with a mere lighter. That left only one explanation for this magic trick. The lighter had to be a game item. However, Livingston seemed to have no intention of explaining how it worked. The moment the lock melted

down, he quickly kept away the lighter. The schoolkid opened the door next and entered the room with the others. Once everyone was in the room, Zhen Xiong swiftly shut the door. At the same time, she stuffed a towel she was holding into the keyhole to prevent any sound from escaping out.

Soon, they realized that all that stealthiness was pointless. Although they made little noise while melting the lock, light sleepers would still be awoken by the shuffling of footsteps, especially with that many entering the room at the same time. To their amusement, Bruno was still fast asleep despite the less-than-graceful entrance. Livingstone hurried to his bedside and tapped his face a few times. Surprisingly, he didn't respond. All he did was grunt, turn himself around, and continued sleeping. After that, Livingston turned on the lamp beside the bed, picked up a bottle from the ground, and examined it under the light.

"What are these? Sleeping pills?" asked the schoolkid curiously.

Livingstone didn't answer. Instead, he pulled a pill from the bottle, opened the capsule, and poured its contents out on his palm. However, after attempting to smell it, he still failed to determine what the substance was.

"Can I take a look?" asked Zhen Xiong while extending her hand.

"Of course."

Livingston handed the bottle to her. Shen then examined it carefully, sniffing it, then dipping her thumb into the powder to taste it. "It tastes like LSD."

"LSD is a hallucinogenic substance. Its scientific name is lysergic acid diethylamide. Once consumed, the user would experience powerful hallucinations. It's really difficult to describe the effects. Some say you can hear strange sounds and see kaleidoscopic colors moving around you. Your perception of your surroundings distorts and deforms; all these happening in your mind, of course. I was once tricked into tripping on LSD when I was at a club. According to what I know, it should be highly addictive."

"Huh? So, what are you trying to say?" asked a confused Jia Lai.

"He's saying this stuff right here is a drug," said Livingston.

At the same time, the schoolkid took the initiative to tie Bruno up. It was at that time, they realized that Bruno was actually not asleep. His eyes were actually open all the time, albeit so small that no one realized it. At the same time, there was a smile on his face, as if he was completely oblivious to his surroundings.

"This man is an addict. No wonder he always looks so weak," Jia Lai scoffed.

"Let's put that aside first. We need to focus on something more important. Search and see if he's carrying any game items with him," instructed Livingston.

To prevent anybody from secretly taking possession of the items, they agreed to pair up and keep an eye on each other. 15 minutes later, they were done with searching Bruno and his room. They even went as far as to look in the water tank of his toilet. In the end, they found two game items in his room. One looked like a fork, and the other one looked like the fang of an animal that probably belonged to a

big cat. As of now, these two were considered as unidentified items. They would have to wait until Bruno regained consciousness before they could question him.

Unfortunately, the effect of the LSD lasted quite a long time. Bruno came around at five, quickly realizing that he wasn't in the best state. Rage overwhelmed him right away, and he swore that he would kill Livingston. However, when Livingston placed the bottle in front of him, Bruno swiftly calmed himself down.

"You refused to let us search you because of this thing, right? You knew all too well that NASA would never allow an addict to travel to space, huh?"

"I have told you time and again that I'm not the darn killer. You are looking at an innocent person. Oh, wait..."

Bruno then stared at Livingston.

"Maybe, you are actually the one behind all this! You are trying to divert everyone's attention to me. By doing that, you'll get away with whatever you've done!"

"Don't you think it's a little too late to divide us? We will have to solve this problem first, no matter what. I will now ask you some questions and I hope you can answer me truthfully."

"So what if I answer you truthfully? Does that mean you won't tell NASA that I have been on LSD?"

Bruno stared and shook his head in disbelief at the other four players before going on.

"Sooner or later, you will regret what you have done to me! Hasn't it occurred to you that it doesn't matter who the killer really is? The real killer is using this opportunity to eliminate players that threaten him the most. It seems I'm the first one."

After that, Bruno turned his gaze to the school kid and warned him gravely.

"You. You will be second."

His statement managed to make the student rethink the whole thing. A hesitant look now appeared on his face.

"Don't allow his words to sway your emotions and thoughts. If you want to get to a higher rank, you have to get past him first. With him out of the game, it's nothing but good news for you. That's something that will never change, I'm afraid. Right now, we need to focus on finding the real killer. Anything else on your mind; we can discuss that later. Agree?"

Nobody disagreed with Livingston's decision.

Seeing how he had everyone's support, Livingston pulled a chair and placed it in front of Bruno.

"I know that you must hate me a lot right now. I have to admit, I was the one who planned the whole thing tonight. However, it's only because you are the most suspicious among us. But... I must also admit that your deduction made perfect sense. If I were to be the murderer, I would kill the player that threatened me the most. I'm fair, and so I'll give you a chance to prove you're not the killer. By doing

that, your point will automatically be validated. Even though you will still be kicked from the game, you won't be the most suspicious person anymore after you leave. Isn't that what you wanted to see?"

"Heh. Save it. I'm no three-year-old kid. I know exactly what you want. Rest assured, I'll make sure not to give you what you want. You'll never know who the real killer is. Therefore, you better pray you're not the next target."

Bruno was strangely calm at a time when his resolve was put on trial before his teammates. He knew that once the other players found out that he had been consuming contraband, it was the end of him. He also made it clear that he was not about to work with Livingston's investigation.

Chapter 299 Result Is Released

Without cooperation from Bruno, it was hard for them to continue with the investigation. According to the plan, Livingston was supposed to threaten Bruno by killing him to force him to cooperate with them. Now that the LSD incident was exposed, Bruno knew that he would not be able to complete the main quest. It was no different for him to live for a few days less or a few days more. That was why he had no intention to cooperate with the investigation. At a time like this, even violence would be ineffective against him. Besides, it was now unnecessary to kill him and make it look like an accident since they caught him red-handed consuming LSD. However, if they handed him to NASA right now, they would no longer be able to question him.

After an entire night of messing around, Livingston still did not get the answer he wanted. In frustration, he stood up from the chair, went to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and started splashing water on his face.

"What now? Does that mean we have found the killer?" asked Jai Lai.

Jia Lai was waiting for Livingston to come out from the bathroom. Both his legs were getting tired after standing for so long.

"I don't know," Livingston replied while using a towel to dry his face.

"Uh... What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just like what you see. He could be our killer or not. We can never get him to confess. It will be a waste of our time if we carry on with the investigation."

Livingston was exhausted after staying up for the entire night.

"So... that's it?" asked Jia Lai with both of his eyes wide open.

"Unless you have a better idea, that is."

Livingston took a look at his watch.

"We only have half an hour before morning training. We need to figure out a way to put an end to this."

"Erm... What should we do now?"

"Clean up the room and hand him over to NASA. There should be some traces of LSD traces left in his blood. It's enough to eliminate him from this round of the game."

“What should we do with his two game items?” asked the schoolkid.

“We still don’t know their function, and we will not be able to identify them before this round ends. In other words, we can’t use them. So, let’s look for somebody to hold the items for us. We can discuss talk about the allocation right before the game ends.” “Who’s gonna take care of them? You?” asked Zhen Xiong

“Do you guys have any better suggestions?”

“The least suspicious person among us is David. I think he would be the best candidate to keep them for us.”

Initially, the schoolkid wanted to volunteer as the keeper, but when he heard Zhen Xiong suggesting Zhang Heng, he had to admit that it was still the best option for them right now. It was also the only solution that everyone could accept.

“I don’t have any opinions.”

Livingston then handed the two items to Zhang Heng. “Be careful. These two are still unidentified. There could be side effects. You shouldn’t carry them on you all the time,” reminded Livingston.

Zhang Heng nodded and used a towel to wrap the two game items carefully. All of them then waited until 6 a.m. for the captain to show up. They then handed him Bruno with his bottle of LSD. At that time, the captain was numb when he heard that a NASA astronaut was involved in drugs. For the past 24 hours, two fatal accidents had happened, and now, he was presented with a drug scandal. Such mishaps and misgivings were unprecedented throughout NASA’s entire history, and only half a month was left before they needed to launch Apollo 11.

It was too late to stop the project. The government had invested 20 billion dollars accounting for 0.57% of the American GDP at that time. 20,000 organizations, 200 universities, 80 research facilities, and 300,000 people were involved in this project as well. Anything short of a meteor crashing down on the United States, nothing would stop the project from soldering on, considering the fierce competition with the Soviet Union. So, despite the challenges, the morning’s training carried on as usual. During the break, the captain announced the results.

Without a doubt, Zhang Heng ranked first place. The worst he received was a B-. Other than that, he received A’s for another three subjects. As for this Multi-Axis Trainer and Psychological Evaluation, he received A+ for both as well. NASA commended Zhang Heng, adding that he was born to be an astronaut. He was equipped with an extraordinary mental state and relentless spirit. In terms of physical attributes, there was still space for growth. All he needed was time. For now, he was definitely getting on Apollo 11. Jia Lai’s results contrasted drastically in comparison to Zhang Heng’s. He got the last place for all training completed so far. The comment that the evaluation team gave him was pretty straightforward. Whether it was his physical or mental state, he was not ready for space. If he did not want a horrible accident broadcasted across the screens of the entire world, it was best for him not to take on any space jobs.

The others’ rankings were very much expected by everyone. Bruno was placed second, and the schoolkid came after him. Following those two was Zhen Xiong. Her mental state was excellent, but unfortunately, she wasn’t in a good physical state. Her gender was undesirable, as well.

Now that the results were released, competition between the players became even more apparent now. The team of seven was now reduced to five. In other words, chances for them to fly on Apollo 11 had significantly increased. Among them, the schoolkid was the happiest. Supposedly, his result was ranked behind Anthony and Bruno. Since the two of them were now out of the game, he had managed to enter the top three places. If he can live until the takeoff of Apollo 11, he would be able to complete the main quest.

There were only ten days left until the official launch. The schoolkid realized that he had to keep an eye on Jia Lai and Zhen Xiong since the two of them had partnered up. Under this one-versus-two situation, he wasn't confident that he would win the fight. So, he decided that he wanted to partner up with someone as well. He could forget about Zhang Heng because no one would target him. Other than the fact that he scored well in all the subjects, he could help to increase the success rate of landing on the moon. Besides, he managed to survive the assassination and return to the base unharmed. No one knew how he did it.

Under such circumstances, he would not attack anyone as long as no one messed with him. That would mean the schoolkid was left with one final option. Whatever that Bruno said earlier had affected him a lot. He suspected that Livingston was actually the real killer, but after analyzing his current situation, he realized that Jia Lai and Zhen Xiong needed two slots but not one. That would mean they would target him and Livingston. As he stood on the same spot, the schoolkid felt that it wouldn't be too bad a thing if Livingston was indeed the killer.

Chapter 300 Only The Living Have The Right To Worry About Tomorrow

After the results were released, the players started to grow more cautious of each other. It resulted in an awkward happening during lunch hour. The remaining players were so worried that their food was poisoned that none dared take the first bite. At the same time, the players were clearly divided. Zhang Heng was still alone, whereas Livingston and the high-school kid decided to partner up telling themselves that they would both pull through. Although not the best partnership, these two were definitely more robust than the Jia Lai-Zhen Xiong duo. Still, despite everything, nobody could figure out the identity of the real killer. Suspicions among the players were rife, and the matter had turned into a hugely destabilizing factor.

Since there were now fewer people in a team, it meant everyone was a step closer to victory. At the same time, the players would also have to bear greater risks. The opportunists would surely strike first in a time like this.

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"What's with the rush?"

The schoolkid hesitated a little after hearing Livingston's plan.

"I know that your mind is constantly bugged about whether I killed those two players or not. Since we are now partners, I can tell you confidently that it wasn't me. If you are not lying, then we better pray that Bruno is the killer. Otherwise, the culprit must be either of those two in our opponent's team."

"The worst part is, we don't know how it was done. Judging by the two accidents, we know that their items must have an ability that could affect an aircraft. We will have zero-gravity training tomorrow

morning, and we have to get on a plane for the parabolic flight. If you don't want any 'accidents' happening to us, I think we should deal with the threat as soon as possible. By the way, how many times have you joined a single-player game with competitive mode? Still have those wild imaginations in your head?"

"This is my second time. The first time, I was in a far more dangerous situation than what we are in. Many players were killed in an earthquake in my previous game. In the end, the survivors were even fewer than the minimum amount of players required to complete the game."

"You are really lucky then. In my previous game, two of my real childhood buddies had to fight each other to grab the last spot. Since they used fake names and their looks had been modified, they didn't recognize each other until the final moment."

"Did they work together to eliminate other players?"

"It was too late for that. There wasn't enough time to work out a plan. Besides, the others weren't that weak as well. Even if they worked together, they weren't confident enough that the plan could be executed successfully. When one of them hesitated, his friend struck and killed him, grabbing the last slot for himself."

"Huh!"

The schoolkid was shocked by the dramatic ending. To conceal his surprised face, he quickly moved on with the conversation.

"I don't sympathize with them, you know. I'm just worried about NASA's employees. After all, one too many accidents happened on the same day. I'm pretty sure the authorities are starting to suspect that it's all a deliberate act. Oh, and the public isn't painting NASA in the best light at the moment. The media has also been focusing a lot on NASA's accidents recently, doubting they can safely get our people on the moon. If we act on your plan right now, you think it might affect the Apollo Program..."

"Only the living have the right to worry about tomorrow. Don't worry about Apollo. In such times, NASA has no option but to carry on with the project. They will try their best to prove the world wrong, and all. What we need to do now is to eliminate the rest of them and get ourselves on Apollo 11."

"You're right. I couldn't agree more. We'll go according to your plan during the fire drill," the schoolkid nodded.

After a month training and studying, the players were already familiar with Kennedy Space Center's surroundings. Hence, the schoolkid managed to make his way to one of the storerooms during his break. The small-ish room located on the seventh floor stored the base' daily rations, and security there wasn't too tight. Usually, a single administrative officer would watch over the place. It wasn't too difficult to sneak in without alerting anyone. After the accidents, NASA increased the security of the entire facility. Although the store wasn't of great importance, they placed a guard there anyway to ensure nothing untoward would happen again. However, that didn't stop the schoolkid from breaking in. He took out a small piece of glass, and after a few tries, he managed to turn the sunlight's reflection to the guard's face. He then placed it outside the wall and waited for him to pick it up. The startled guard immediately got up, approaching the curious shiny object with caution.

It was at that time that something magical took place. Right after the guard picked up the glass, his mind went completely blank, and he plopped to the ground with a gaping mouth, stunned and oblivious. Relieved, the schoolkid emerged from the back of the wall, took a quick look at his surroundings, and hurried into the storeroom. After a while, he walked out hiding something under his shirt. Once he picked the glass from the ground, the guard returned to his normal state.

“Great. I have been looking for this thing. I’m glad you found it. Thank you so much!” the schoolkid exclaimed, with an ear-to-ear smile beaming over his face. The guard was still in a daze, unable to remember what happened after he picked up the glass. As a NASA employee, he quickly recognized the schoolkid as one of the astronaut candidates. So, he nodded at him and returned to his post. After getting the items he wanted, the schoolkid quickly ran back to the training center. He arrived at the training center right before the fire drill started, ending up beside Livingston and gasping for air. Many people were looking at him.

“Are you trying to tell everyone you’ve just done something behind their backs?”

“Easy for you to say. Try running from the canteen to the storeroom to the training center in such a short time! I’m nowhere on time. I think I did a good job, though. Managed to figure out how to make the captain team us up without raising our opponents’ suspicion?”

“We don’t have to say anything. They are weaker than us. Logically, they should be the ones worried, not us.”

Before Livingston could finish, Zhen Xiong pointed at Jia Lai and asked the captain a question.

“Kenhaus, can you put us in the same team?”

“Reason?”

“I’ve teamed up with the others during our previous sessions. Anderson is the only person I haven’t teamed up with. I would like to team up with different people so I can familiarize myself with the way others do things.”

“Very reasonable. Request granted.”

Zhang Heng had no intention to get involved in their fight. Hence, he asked to team with the trainer. Thus, everyone now had their partner with them. Everyone also knew that this part of the training wasn’t going to be as simple as they thought it would be.