

48 Hours 301

Chapter 301 Fire

Having a fire in space was one of the last things any astronaut would want to encounter.

After the Apollo 1 accident, NASA took a number of drastic measures to improve fire safety. They reoptimized and refitted the spacecraft's interior by replacing all flammable materials with self-extinguishing ones, insulating the piping and wires, correcting wiring problems, and changing the atmospheric pressure in the cabin-the gas in the cabin was converted from pure oxygen to an oxygen-nitrogen mix. The combustible nylon spacesuit was also exchanged for a safer fiberglass model. To top it all off, NASA fortified the astronauts with intensive firefighting training.

Fires in the spacecraft were very different from the ones on earth. Without gravity, the hot air generated by the burning flames wouldn't rise, but instead, wrap itself around the fire, forming a low oxygen, high-temperature layer.

Because of the lack of oxygen, the flames would spread very slowly, forming a ball as it went along. The temperature of the fire would be lower than it would be back on earth.

Generally, many alarms would start sounding the instant a fire was detected in the spacecraft. The astronaut would then need to put on an oxygen mask, determine the source of the fire as quickly as possible, and cut off any nearby power supply. Meanwhile, the other crew would put out the flames using a fire extinguisher. In a case where the fire was uncontrollable, they would isolate the burning compartment and retreat to another part of the ship. Then, they would have to turn off the air circulation fan.

All that was followed by the infamous explosion on Apollo 13 on the second day after its launch. Fortunately, the seven astronauts on board remained extraordinarily calm and reacted expediently as they moved to the lunar module. Amid the tireless support from mission control, the moon landing plan was aborted. The crew orbited it instead, managing to 'slingshot' themselves back to earth safely. It was the greatest miracle in the history of human spaceflight.

Of course, that was something to talk about in the future.

NASA's firefighting simulations were carried out in the closed environment of a mock spacecraft, a simulator of sorts. Of course, no actual fires were lit. Instead, it was replaced by a red warning light. Participants in the training were required to follow a set of procedures, and in theory, the trainees shouldn't face any real danger.

Based on the order on the list, it was Livingston's turn to take the lead. He glanced at the highschool student standing next to him, and both of them entered the spacecraft.

There were two parts to the simulator, each corresponding to the service module and the lunar module, respectively. The two moved to the innermost cabin, ready to begin the first part of the training.

When the alarm sounded, however, they did not retrieve the oxygen mask as required by the manual. Instead, the student quickly took off his clothes to reveal a row of bags tied to his body.

The bags did not contain water, but a pale, yellow liquid – gasoline he had stolen from the storeroom.

He quickly tore them up and poured the fuel on the cotton bag that was used to simulate combustibles. "Perhaps you can tell us now how we are supposed to hide the smell of this thing. Do we lock the door, then complete the remote detonation?"

Livingston did not answer until the student finished emptying out the gasoline. Instead, he retreated quietly to the side of the door, took out a match, and said, "I told you about my two childhood friends who were also players in my last single-player quest. To compete for the final spot, one had to kill the other. It was a tough choice... very, very tough..." Livingston paused for a moment. "What I didn't tell you is, I was the one who did it."

"What?" Sensing something wasn't right, the student turned around and saw Livingston standing at the junction between the service module and the lunar module.

Then, he threw the match he was holding to the ground. It landed on a gasoline-soaked cotton bag. With a mighty cackle, a raging fire quickly broke out. The high schooler reacted instinctively and ran for the door, but Livingston had already shut the entrance to the service module. The schoolkid was now trapped in a raging inferno.

The fire alarms in the service module began blaring wildly, but in the backdrop of a growing fire, it sounded more like an insult. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the student frantically pushed the door as hard as he could. It budged slightly, but just as there was a glimmer of hope, Livingston drowned it out again. Through the gap, the student saw him taking out a lighter, aiming it at the lower half of the hatch.

The lock on the hatch melted quickly when the flames of Livingston's lighter touched it. In a few seconds, he turned it off, and once the temperature cooled, the melted hatch and floor, creating a hardened seal.

Confident that his victim was now welded in, Livingston stopped what he was doing. This time, there was no way the student could muscle the hatch open, no matter how hard he tried.

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you the truth. I don't know how to mask the smell of the gasoline, then complete the detonation remotely. I just don't have that kind of tech on me."

"Have you gone insane?! How would killing me benefit you in any way? You plan to compete with those two?" yelled the student, beads of sweat dripping down his face. With the assistance of the bags of gasoline, the flames were growing fast, already licking his back and scalding his suit. The fear on his face intensified as his face scrunched in agony. He even cried and begged for Livingston to open the hatch up.

The latter was, however, unmoved. "Who says I'm fighting two people?" Livingston cocked an eyebrow. "I have allies, but too bad it ain't you. Oh, by the way, you can scream all you want, but these two simulation chambers are sealed tight. Those people outside won't hear a thing."

"How are you going to explain my death to NASA? Are you only thinking about going to the moon, or are you doing this to help someone? You're not that kind of person, are you?" the high schooler cried, his eyes wet and nose dripping with snot.

Livingston took a few steps away from the spreading flames. He could feel the heat from the other side of the hatch. "You brought the gasoline into the simulator yourself. From the moment I got out of bed

until now, I haven't been out of sight. You are the only one who disappeared for some time after lunch, so they'd all think that you set off the fire on your own accord. As for a reason, I don't know. Perhaps the recent training was too intensive, stressed you out and all. Those accidents finally pushed you to your limit, and perhaps... you just snapped? I simply proceeded to the lunar module for the second part of evacuation training as required. By the time I found out, it was too late; you'd already shut the middle hatch."

"Do you think NASA won't suspect you?"

"I don't care. As long as there's no clear evidence, they'll still need us to the moon for them." Livingston covered his mouth and nose with his hand to keep himself from inhaling the thick, noxious fumes. Looking at the watch on his wrist, he calculated how much time the schoolkid had left. The smoke in the lunar module was getting thicker, now too thick for him to stay any longer.

Livingston cleared his throat, straightened his face, and ran to the exit as he put on a panicked expression.

"Help! Fire!!!"

Chapter 302 True Ally

"Is it necessary for the fire drills to be so damn realistic?" asked a confused Jia Lai.

All too soon, they saw thick smoke from behind Livingston. Immediately, the captain's face changed, puzzled how a training routine could start a real fire. He rushed to the lunar module but discovered that the fire had already consumed the service module whole. Five seconds later, he exited the simulator and contacted fire and rescue. This was never supposed to happen, not to the point where a trainee burned in the cabin, at least. It took five minutes for the fire and rescue team to arrive at the training center.

Livingston told everything he knew to the captain. Despite his legitimate sounding story, the captain still found it hard to trust him. However, it wasn't his job to investigate the case, and he would have to leave the matter for the investigation team to deal with. Whatever Livingston told him didn't make any sense. Why would the student set the service module on fire? Why the iron hatch to the module was unable to be opened during the critical moment? No matter how he looked at it, the captain couldn't see any foul play involved.

Hence, he didn't pursue the matter further. Livingston underwent a similar procedure as Zhang Heng after he survived the plane crash. The medical team first gave him a thorough check-up. If his health checked out, they would send him off to the investigation team. As of now, the entire NASA was in a crazed frenzy after having to deal with all the 'accidents.' Never did they have to deal with such a predicament since the first day they established, and now, the entire program lay in limbo. Nervousness and panic lingered in the air. Those stubborn old politicians against the space program were nothing compared to whoever that caused these 'mishaps.'

On the other hand, Jia Lai was overjoyed seeing Livingston's fallout with the student. He was initially worried that they would hatch a brutal plan to eliminate him but he never expected them to turn against each other in the end. Their newly formed partnership was now dissolved. Hence, the rescue team quickly confirmed the death of a young man in his teens. Now, only four people were left in the race to get on Apollo 11. Livingston was currently under NASA investigation. They clearly suspected that

he had something to do with the death of the schoolkid. Although Zhen Xiong's scores were ahead of him, NASA might just remove her from the project due to her gender.

In other words, there was a high chance Livingston would get to complete the main quest. Meanwhile, Jia Lai did nothing to conceal the look of happiness on his face. Now that a teammate had just burned to death, he was supposed to be sad, or at least attempt a solemn face. However, the happy surprise flooded him with excitement, and he was unable to contain it. The smile on his face caught the captain's attention, who then glared in disdain.

Zhang Heng knew that Jia Lai's behavior left a bad impression on the captain. Social skills were one of the hidden tests in the astronaut selection program, and after all, nobody wanted to squeeze into a cramped space with an unpopular figure. Considering Jia Lai's current situation and test results, he was apparently happy with the outcome. Compared to Jia Lai, Zhen Xiong managed to hold back her emotions well enough. Although pleased that her chances to board Apollo 11 had increased significantly, she showed none of her joy through her expressions. She even attempted to put on a sullen face when the student's body was wheeled out for an autopsy. As a bystander, Zhang Heng was shocked by the outcome. Judging by how the situation unfolded, it was clear that the student's killer was his ally, Livingston. Even he had to admit that Livingston just committed the perfect crime. It was, however, perilous to murder a fellow astronaut at a time like this. Livingston had an advantage, though. Zhang Heng knew the investigators would be unable to extract any substantial evidence from Livingston. He knew how calm and meticulous he always was, and after the death of the schoolkid, Livingston wasn't about to place himself in a tight spot where he had to deal with two opponents alone. These circumstances made Zhang Heng believe that someone must have been helping him all along.

There was a high chance that Zhen Xiong was his secret ally. Zhang Heng observed that the two somehow didn't interact much with each other. During the fire drill, Livingston had never targeted Zhen Xiong and Jia Lai. He had always been aiming for the schoolkid. Apart from tricking him into breaking into the storeroom, he also needed to guarantee that they would both end up on the same team. Zhen Xiong had made it possible for him to pair up with his target. From the surface, it looked as if Zhen Xiong teamed with Jia Lai so they could be safe from Livingston and the schoolkid. Since Zhang Heng made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with their fight, her suggestion would automatically put Livingston and the schoolkid on the same team.

In other words, Livingston's covert ally had to be Zhen Xiong and not Jia Lai. This explained why Livingston targeted the schoolkid. Between the two, he must have evaluated that Zhen Xiong was the harder one to deal with. Since he appeared to be able to see the bigger picture, he would definitely partner up with his greatest threat to ensure his interests were secure. Partnering up with Zhen Xiong to eliminate the two weaker players also seemed a less risky option.

Jia Lai was destined to fail, somehow still dreaming that he would be chosen for Apollo 11. Following the schoolkid's death, his sad ending was soon set in stone, and eventually, the three players selected to fly the mission were Zhang Heng, Livingston, and Zhen Xiong.

Zhang Heng felt that the outcome was an acceptable one. In terms of results, Livingston ranked third among the other players, besides being an engineer who worked for a research facility before. In some

basic subjects, he was actually better than Zhang Heng. As for Zhen Xiong, she scored nothing remarkable for her physical and theory tests. Also, NASA was gender-biased toward males. That said, she performed considerably well in the space disorientation simulation. Her results should be good enough for her to qualify as an assistant on Apollo 11.

However, one question still boggled Zhang Heng's mind. Who attacked him before Anthony's death? He had suspected Zhen Xiong and Livingston, but with their less than stellar flying skills and spacecraft simulator results, it was unwise to make him their first target. Zhang Heng felt he was missing something, something crucial.

After the last class ended, Zhang Heng returned to his room. He stopped in his tracks when he saw light coming out of the open door. Sensing something wrong, he crept up slowly as the sound of water running from the faucet could be heard from the bathroom. Pulling out the butter knife in his pocket, he gingerly pushed the door open. A man with a towel wrapped around his waist was standing in front of the mirror, humming and shaving his beard.

Suddenly, goosebumps sprouted all over Zhang Heng's body. "No need to be so nervous. I'm just here to greet my commander. Are you going to kill your fellow astronaut before completing the main quest?" asked Bruno with a smile while raising both hands.

To be honest, Bruno never looked better. Only around 20 hours ago, he was caught red-handed consuming LSD. Now, he seemed calm; the anger and panic that was in him were all but gone.

Chapter 303 Final List

"I can understand how surprised you must be right now. Just give me some time, and I'll explain everything," Bruno continued while staring at the butter knife that was touching the skin of his throat. "If you wish to explain anything at all... I suggest you start with the plane crash." Zhang Heng pulled the knife back.

"When did you find out about it?" said Bruno, who seemed shocked at the revelation.

"It's a question that's been bothering me for a long time. After that 'accident,' everyone looked suspicious to me. Other than you, not one else had the right motives to kill me. Let's face it. Only three players can complete the main quest. Logically, even if there were secret partnerships, they wouldn't have made me their first target. You're the only one who could gain the most from my death. I have to say... you had us all fooled with your LSD. Not only did it give you a good alibi for leaving the space center at midnight, but you also managed to distance yourself out from that shit storm brewing within our team."

Bruno grinned. "I made a mistake there. Nancy warned me that you're most probably the hardest to deal with in the entire team. Because of your existence, my situation became even riskier. The only way for me to feel safe again is to eliminate you. That's enough of a reason for me to kill you. After Anthony's death, you couldn't have expected to be next to die, not so soon anyway. Then, to my surprise, you somehow managed to escape. It was at that time; I realized that I had to come up with an alibi. Hence the LSD incident."

"The drugs were fake?"

“No. That was real LSD. Couldn’t afford the risk. One of you might just identify it. Besides, it wasn’t easy acting like I was high. About the drugs, yeah, you’re right about me. I’m an addict. Two hours ago, I popped an LSD pill. Right now, I’m feeling a hell lot better. Before I joined this great game, I couldn’t have imagined how I would live in this boring world without the help of LSD. It’s the 60s and 70s, man! LSD swept through America. Even members of Queen, The Beatles, and The Rolling Stones were users. Since I’m in this timeline, there was no way in hell I would give up the chance to taste LSD! However, the question was, how did I pass my blood and urine tests?” “Game items?”

“Oh, I almost forgot about that. You guys took away two of my game items. However, you made a common mistake. You really think those are the only items that could grant you supernatural powers?” Bruno grinned.

“What are you trying to say?”

Zhang Heng’s interest was aroused. Speaking of game items’ supernatural powers, Zhang Heng had something like that with him right now; the extra 24 hours he had every day. It was a gift from the old man he had encountered in the real world. It happened anyway, without relying on any game items. The conditions triggering and ending it seemed to be fixed.

After completing a few games, Zhang Heng had become more curious about the old man’s identity. They both had a conversation in a coffee shop where time stopped. The old man claimed that he gave him the extra 24 hours because he wanted him to play on his behalf as an agent. If he was an agent, then there must be other agents around the world as well. They too, would have had different supernatural powers being granted to them.

Bruno was in a good mood tonight. Perhaps the LSD’s effects hadn’t completely worn off. Instead of stopping, he continued blurting out everything he knew to Zhang Heng.

“I met her before at a foreign student party. I saw her walking toward me. I was pretty sure she was there for me specifically because nobody else in the room could see her.”

“Or maybe you were just high and you were seeing things?”

“Nah. She was real. As real as us. No. Hold on... she’s more real than the boring world I live in. I’ve got to admit, although I hit up quite a bit of drugs that night, I never doubted her existence. What happened after that... was proof I didn’t lose my mind.

“Among my many friends, some call themselves brothers. There was one guy who called himself my brother, but I knew he secretly hated me. I knew exactly who he was, and after all, I just snatched his girlfriend from him. I got sick of her a week later. So, to make me pay for what I did to him, he called the cops on me. At a party one night, a dozen police officers raided my room. We tried our best to destroy all the drugs we had, but we were still forced to get tested at the hospital.

“I studied in an extremely famous school in Australia. If something like that got exposed, they’d surely kick me out. After being in Australia for so long, I was supposed to graduate the year after that. My family, you know, being conservative folk, won’t be too happy if they knew I got expelled. They might just stop giving me money if they knew I’ve been on drugs. Guess what the test results were? I was the only one at the party who was clean.

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"The funniest part was, I was so high I couldn't stand up on my own when the police arrived. From that day on, I knew that no matter how many drugs I took, no medical equipment could trace it. Not in my blood, urine, or saliva. It was and still is a miracle! A true miracle!"

Zhang Heng was speechless. Bruno's encounter was very similar to his. However, the way he acquired his supernatural power was rather... well, he looked charming, thankfully. This was probably the dream every addict wished for. Zhang Heng didn't want to dwell on the topic, and again, pushed the butter knife a few centimeters into Bruno's throat.

"You messed with my plane and tried to kill me. Now, here you stand before me. What makes you think I can't just kill you right here?"

"No. I believe you have all the means to kill me, but I don't think you will do it," said Bruno, still smiling even though his neck had started bleeding. "Why?"

"You don't want to lose a good astronaut on your team, right? Losing me will cause Apollo 11 to be delayed. By the time they get back on track, none of us will complete the main quest. Since I'm here, it means the final three astronauts have been decided..."

Before he could finish, they both heard someone knocking at the door.

Chapter 304 Enjoying The Process

"It seems that Nancy has eliminated that fatso. Don't worry about Livingston. I left him a big gift. With me right now is solid evidence, proving his connection to the schoolkid's death. He thought he was just going to answer some simple questions from the investigators. He'll be surprised to see the FBI waiting for him. In other words, he's been eliminated from this round of the game. Only three of us are left now. I suggest we improve our relationship before we set to the moon. All in the name of ensuring the mission is completed without hiccups, of course. You can start by returning my items to me."

"Is that right? I don't think so. Thanks to you, I now remember some things that happened not too long ago. I missed something important and interesting. Want me to enlighten you?"

"Why not? We have lots of time, anyway."

Bruno plopped on the couch in his bathrobe and touched his throat with his hands. Although Zhang Heng did not voice his intention, Bruno knew that he wasn't about to be killed when he saw Zhang Heng put down the butter knife. At that, Bruno seemed to be pleased, and he relaxed a little.

"What day is today?"

"I've no idea. We have only two weeks left before Apollo 11 launches."

Bruno shrugged.

"I'm not talking about the time we have left for this quest. I'm asking about the date in the real world."

"Why ask?"

“Hey, have you ever thought of this? After the useless fatso’s team abandoned him, why didn’t he look for a new one willing to accept him? Why choose to embark on such a high-risk quest instead?”.

“Well, you did say that his previous team abandoned him. It clearly shows that there must be something wrong with him. He couldn’t find...”

Suddenly, Bruno paused mid-sentence. He noticed that something didn’t quite fit. If Jia Lai’s team had really abandoned him, he still had an entire month to find a new one. It made no sense that he would give up looking for a reliable team before starting a new round of the game. Bruno began dreading that something terrible would happen to them soon. At the same time, Zhang Heng opened the door and saw Jia Lai standing outside his room; the plump man still looking sluggish and cowardly. After Zhang Heng opened the door, Jia Lai poked his head in like an ostrich, scanning around with his eyes wide open.

“You’re here! That’s nice.”

Then, he turned around to look at Zhang Heng.

“You first or me first?”

Zhang Heng moved aside and allowed Jia Lai into the room, who then thanked him again.

“Where’s Nancy?”

Seeing that the conversation had moved toward Nancy, Bruno didn’t feel too good.

“Are you referring to Zhen Xiong? She’s with her little pet now,” Jia Lai replied with a smile.

When Bruno saw the strange smile on Jia Lai’s face, his heart sank. Jia Lai, however, simply ignored him and turned his attention to Zhang Heng. “Do you know how your engines died?” “Huh?”

“Nancy has a C-grade game item that allows her to communicate with small animals within a certain area. She has the ability to give them some simple commands. With that, she commanded a flock of birds to fly along your flight path. Unfortunately for her, she used up her last usage for the item attacking me tonight,” said Jia Lai.

After that, he walked toward the table and pulled out two pieces of tissue, wiping the blood off his hand.

“Did you kill her?” Bruno asked as he gulped.

“No. No. No... but I’ve got to admit that I was tempted. However, I didn’t want to get into any trouble. NASA has enough on its plate. I don’t want to add to their problems.”

Although Jia Lai appeared to be extra considerate, it did nothing to alleviate Bruno’s anxiety and fear.

“I didn’t kill your partner, but you don’t seem too happy about it.” Bruno curved his lips and tried to put on a smile.

“I realized something when I felt like killing her. Right now, there are only four of us left. If I were to kill her, it means I’ll have to let you live. I’m not sure if that’s the right decision. I also know she’s been lying and taking advantage of me the whole time. She was trying to hide your turbulent relationship with

Livingstone. But that's is the true nature of women, isn't it? Forever in a state of fickle-mindedness. Can't really blame her for that."

Jia Lai moved a chair and placed it in front of Bruno.

"There's something I still can't figure out. She flirted around with almost everyone here. Even the high-school kid had a taste of her. Being her partner, however, she didn't even allow me to touch her hand. The more she did that sort of thing to me, the more excited I felt. I've dreamt for a day like this time and again. When she exposed herself in front of me, I saw the fear on her face, and she knelt and begged me for forgiveness. She even said she was willing to do anything as long as I forgave her. Unfortunately, when that day arrived, I had lost all interest in her..."

Jia Lai paused for a while.

"...But soon, I realized that my interest wasn't lost after all. I was subconsciously enjoying the whole process."

As he talked, he extended his arm to tap Bruno's shoulder.

"I know people nowadays care about the results more than anything else. Of course, I'm not against it. After all, I want to be among the three to complete this quest. But then again, at times, I feel that people care about the results so much that they forget to enjoy the process of getting there. Don't you think it's a waste?"

"What are you trying to say here?" "It's simple. After all, Zhen Xiong and I are good friends. Even though she didn't invest too much in our friendship, I'm still willing to give her a chance."

Jia Lai took out a ballpoint pen and a bloody piece of paper from his pocket.

"So, this is the situation. There is still one available seat on Apollo 11, and I have to choose between the two of you. I'm trying to be as fair as possible, so I gave her 15 minutes to come up with a plan that can help me kill you without raising NASA's suspicion. Now, I'm going to give you five minutes to come up with a plan to kill her. After that, my independent friend right there will choose one for me to execute. He'll be the one who decides who will live on for this round. Any more questions?"

Immediately, Bruno ran and grabbed the pen in front of him.

Chapter 305 The Final Drills

Four days had passed since the last tragedy. Because the incidents involving the five astronaut candidates were so bizarre and complicated-four were eliminated, in which three of them were killed, the investigation team was stretched a little too thin. NASA had meant to keep the happenings under covers until they could come up with an answer to deal with them. But the very next day, it was already all over the media. And the more the news spread, the more nefarious the stories became. A group of people even named the series of accidents as 'the moon landing curse', claiming what NASA was doing triggered the anger of God, ultimately leading to all these disasters.

During the past few days, massive crowds had marched in protest outside the Kennedy Space Center and Congress.

NASA was forced to hold a press conference to explain the situation. The remaining three astronauts who attended the conference were bombarded with questions for forty-five minutes. The reporters present kept throwing out elaborate questions, some of which were trick questions with hidden traps.

However, the three candidates were prepared for this situation like this, and their answers were all airtight. Once the interview was over, Public Relations immediately led the three men to the lounge at the back of the building.

When the door was shut and all noise outside was isolated, they were finally alone. Only the three of them were in the room, and Bruno immediately served Zhang Heng and Jia Lai with a glass of water. He said in a somewhat subservient manner, "Brother, have a drink."

Jia Lai laughed. "A fat guy like me prefers coke."

"Then I'll get one for you right away!" Bruno smacked his chest.

"There's no need for that. We're going to the moon soon. It's better for us to lay low until then." Jia Lai's voice had a hint of concern. "Have you had LSD recently? We'll need you to pilot the Lunar Module. You should be able to do that, right?"

"No problem. It's won't be a problem at all. I haven't touched that stuff for a long time now, and I've never been soberer," Bruno said.

In the end, Jia Lai's so-called 'opportunity' and 'choice' did not exist at all. He had already decided earlier on to keep Bruno and kill Zhen Xiong... not because she lied to him but because she was more difficult to deal with than Bruno. So, Jia Lai had killed his opponent early in the game in the highest respect, leaving the not-very-threatening Bruno to be the final member of the moon landing trio.

They were less than ten days away from the launch of Apollo 11. Considering that there was still a one-week quarantine period before the launch, the team had two days to do whatever they liked. As for training, there were only the final survival drills left.

This was to ensure that in case the spacecraft landed in a hostile environment, the astronauts would be able to survive until rescue arrived. During the Gemini Project, the astronauts were required to go through rescue training and intensive five-day survival course in three harsh environments – the tropics, desert, and water. NASA even sent the team of astronauts to Iceland and the Amazon for secret training.

However, due to time constraints this time, the survival training courses had been pared down. In fact, water survival training was completed in the swimming pool, and training in the tropics was simply omitted. Desert survival, however, was carried out as planned, though pushed to the back of the schedule in case the team hadn't completed the others. Moreover, only two days were allocated for that.

Compared to the previous training sessions, the three remaining candidates were not burdened by the need to outperform the other. That was because no matter what their results were, the astronauts for the mission had already been confirmed. So, in the eyes of Jia Lai and Bruno, training was no different from a vacation.

Just then, someone walked into the lounge. It was the captain, and he was accompanied by a person.

Jia Lai and Bruno did not pay much attention to the second person because they figured that he must be an employee in charge of the survival training. Zhang Heng, on the other hand, appeared startled.

The captain did not introduce his companion. Instead, he went straight to the point. "You have received forty-five days of training, and you have mastered the various skills required of an astronaut. Throughout this journey, you've experienced many things, and fortunately, you've all persisted till the end. I am proud of your hard work and your efforts, and now, relish the opportunity to put your mark on history!"

Jia Lai and Bruno shared a look, grinning with excitement seeping out of each other's eyes. Being the final winners of the game finally sank in, and knowing they would successfully board Apollo 11 to set foot on the moon, the both couldn't hide their delight. Especially considering everything that had happened before, and how Jia Lai went from being last on the least to be among the final three. Now that the dust had settled, he no longer needed to pretend and hide his innermost thoughts.

Among the three, only Zhang Heng remained unmoved. He looked at the man standing quietly next to the captain, and it evoked some memories.

Then, Jia Lai and Bruno heard the captain continue his announcement. "This afternoon, we will begin our final training. I hope that every one of you will take it seriously. These results will contribute significantly to determine who the final candidates are."

"Wait a minute. Final candidates... What do you mean?" Jia Lai looked worried.

"We're already the final candidates, aren't we? The three final astronauts piloting Apollo 11-that's the three of us, no?" Bruno's eyes had become wide and wild. "You once told us a new infectious disease caused you to lose a significant number of astronauts, and the returning Apollo 10 crew have strangely been unable to recover. So, we should be the only three ones left, right?"

The captain kept a straight face as he answered, "Yes, that's right. We've tragically lost many astronauts because of that mysterious infectious disease; to be precise, nearly all of them. That said, some of them managed to recover." The captain looked to the man standing next to him. "Neil Alden Armstrong, former Apollo 10 commander, has passed the observation period a week ago and is now undergoing therapy to the road of recovery. He's in good condition and is confirmed to be fit for Apollo 11."

"Wait..." Bruno looked horrified as the shocking truth dawned on him. "That means only two spots left for us?"

"More accurately, there's only one. We're very fortunate that Captain Michael Collins, Service Module pilot, has been recovering well," said the captain. "But don't worry. Those who are not selected can join mission control and be part of the support team. You'll still be able to participate in this great voyage."

Chapter 306 Cruel Elimination Rate

The moment Jia Lai heard it, his face fell into a darkened heap. Who would have thought that such a cruel twist of fate would strike them so suddenly? They had worked so hard in eliminating the other four players, almost losing their lives, at one point. After barely making it out alive, they managed to shove their way into the top three places. Nobody expected that Armstrong and Collins would recover in time

to rejoin the mission. Naturally, it came as great news for NASA who had been under increasing public scrutiny.

These two were a very different breed from Zhang Heng and the team. Neil Armstrong and Michael Collins were considered as some of NASA's most experienced astronauts. They underwent years of intensive training and were the brightest and most qualified the United States had to offer. Before being assigned to take charge of Apollo 11, Armstrong flew Gemini 8 in 1965 to orbit the earth. As for Collins, he was an important part of Gemini 10, having performed a couple of spacewalks while on it. Their return gave NASA a much-needed adrenaline shot. To the three players, however, it was nothing but awful news.

In retrospect, the system never mentioned how many of them got to complete the quest. The person who had told them that about the details was actually the schoolkid, and since the information was based on NASA's history, all the players accepted his statements without much question. At the beginning of this quest, the captain mentioned that no available NASA astronauts were fit enough to go to space at the moment. All they needed to do was to pay attention to the three astronauts who returned from the Apollo 10 mission. As it turned out, their speedy recovery had directly affected the progress of the quest. Despite the cruel twists of fate, the system had actually been rather generous towards them.

Just like the other astronauts infected with the mysterious ailment, the three crucial astronauts from Apollo 10 didn't seem like they were about to recover anytime soon. This further confirmed that only three players were allowed to board Apollo 11. Because of that, Jia Lai decided that he wouldn't kill Bruno, worried that they would lack the personnel needed to fly the mission. Unfortunately, fate pulled the cruelest joke it could on them, leaving some thinking that it would have made no difference even if it was revealed earlier. The difficulty of choosing three players out of seven had just increased to picking one out of three.

Earlier, Zhang Heng had been living in total oblivion of his competition. Of course, if he knew that only one would be allowed on Apollo 11, he would have definitely not chased down the first place in class. Not right now, at least. Bruno, on the other hand, had to be the saddest among the three. He never thought Jia Lai would be chosen to carry on instead of Zhen Xiong. At that time, he was so happy he could complete the quest that all his sorrows seemed to have disappeared altogether.

Woefully, the good tidings didn't last long. After going through all that trouble of eliminating the rest, they would now have to fight each other to clinch the last and only spot on Apollo 11. Considering that his game items were all lost, Bruno had now ended up in the last spot even before the mission began. After hesitating a bit, though, he quickly drew ties with Jia Lai. Zhang Heng wasn't the least bit surprised at the unholy alliance. He was unsure if Armstrong still remembered what had happened fourteen years ago, but even if he did not, he somehow knew he had what it took to be the last one standing. His results were the best among the three anyway, not to mention that he never once allowed emotions to get in his way. Professionalism had always been his first priority when he carried out a mission, and Zhang Heng was confident that Armstrong would eventually select him as a member of his crew. Whether it be Jia Lia or Bruno, they would still have to find a way to kick him out if they wanted a chance at completing the quest.

To achieve that, Bruno teamed up with Jia Lai. The best outcome for him would be Zhang Heng and Jia Lai dying while fighting each other. If Jia Lai won the fight, however, NASA would surely turn away from him when compared to Bruno's caliber.

As for Jia Lai, he quickly got back on his feet after shaking off his anger and disappointment. A one in seven passing rate was the most stringent he'd ever encountered, not to mention it was his first time playing this 'single-player with competitive mode' round. This was lower than the average passing rate. However, complaining about it now was useless. Compared to Bruno, he could see the bigger picture. He saw two paths he could take, either kill Zhang Heng and Bruno to become the only player left or kill Armstrong and Collins to free up two spots for Zhang Heng and Bruno.

Both options had their pros and cons. When it came to the success rate, of course, Armstrong and Collins were clearly the better options in helping him complete the main quest. However, Armstrong and Collins were also easier to kill since they wouldn't expect to be targeted by anybody. Then, there was another major concern. Would the other astronauts return to NASA after Armstrong and Collins were killed? Would Zhang Heng and Bruno work with him to assassinate them? To Zhang Heng, killing Armstrong and Collins would bring him no benefit.

Whichever way it would go, Jia Lai didn't have much time to think, having only ten days left before the launch of Apollo 11. The challenge he faced next was to survive the wilderness. Ultimately, he decided not to wait until the training was over or to keep guessing if the other astronauts would return to NASA. He would simply leave his fate in his own hands. In such times, the most reliable person would be himself.

Jia Lai believed the two other players shared the same idea as well, which was why he didn't bother discussing how to eliminate Armstrong and Collins with Zhang Heng. He knew Zhang Heng would most likely not fall for his trap. During all the previous training sessions, he had deliberately made himself appear as weak as possible so the other players would let down their guard. This time, he had no intention to hold back anymore.

The three didn't say a word to each other on the plane. On the other hand, the captain just wouldn't stop going on about the various survival skills needed for the wild, wild, wilderness. So, a few hours later, they arrived at their landing spot in the scorching Nevada desert. A few employees were already waiting for them.

Chapter 307 Area 51's Einstein

Spanning a total area of more than 500,000 square kilometers, The Great Basin Desert is North America's largest desert. It occupies Nevada, more than half of Utah, a small part of Idaho, Oregon, California, and Wyoming.

Speaking of the desert, the first name that crosses the mind has to be Las Vegas.

In 1888, the place was a tiny town. It wasn't until 1905 that a large number of gold miners flooded into the area when gold was discovered. However, like the other gold-rush towns, the gold mines became empty after a brief period of excitement. Las Vegas soon returned to its previous rural state. Its actual rise was during the Great Depression, where the state legislature passed a bill to legalize gambling. It turned the sleepy desert town into a dazzling city filled with hotels, nightclubs, and casinos.

Unfortunately, Zhang Heng and the other two players were not here to tour Las Vegas, landing instead at the Area 51 Air Force Base. Constructed more than a decade ago, it was located on a lake bed in Nevada, only 130 kilometers from bustling Las Vegas. In the decades since its establishment, the United States had always infamously denied its existence. At the same time, to prevent curious eyes from prying into the covert test site, the Air Force bought another 9,000 acres of land around it and slapped it with a no-fly zone.

Area 51 was initially used to develop Lockheed's U-2 high-altitude reconnaissance spy plane. After its completion, other top-secret projects also kick-started from this base, and it wasn't until 2013 that the United States officially recognized the existence of Area 51.

This also shrouded Area 51 with a layer of mystery. Many believed that the so-called 'Green Man,' a frozen corpse of an alien, was stored among the base's confines. Every newly elected president would come to visit this place after their inauguration. There was a growing community of extraterrestrial and UFO enthusiasts, swearing that they had caught sight of a short, gray creature with a large head moving nearby.

However, Zhang Heng and the other two players obviously didn't have such luck to catch a glimpse of UFOs and extraterrestrials. The person who greeted them was no green alien, but an ordinary-looking man in charge of the air force base. After exchanging handshakes with the team, he informed them that the simulation environment had been set up, and training could be carried out at any time.

It was rare for the commander to show his humane side. When he saw that it was already sunset, he decided that he would move the training forward to tomorrow morning. So, after dinner, the three were given the opportunity to move around freely. However, they were only allowed to move around very few designated areas, and no matter where they went, there was always someone watching. The person in charge of hospitality apologized for the uncomfortable restrictions, reiterating that nothing was deliberately done to go against them. They were simply following the most basic security protocol.

Zhang Heng and the team nodded, indicating that they understood the situation. But seeing how tight security was, it would be almost impossible for them to do anything secretly while on the base. At least they would be safe until tomorrow morning. It was a rather pleasant outcome, where it might also be the last peaceful night they would get to enjoy. After dinner, Jia Lai looked at Zhang Heng and nodded politely.

"See you tomorrow."

When Jia Lai was done, he was in no mood to do any walking under the supervision of security personnel. So, he returned to his room. When Bruno saw him leaving, he too got up quickly and followed him until they reached his place. In the end, though, he watched as Jia Lai slammed the door in his face, almost hitting his nose.

Bruno felt awkward. Jia Lai had made it clear that he didn't trust him, having no intention to discuss tomorrow's plans with him. He felt like a tool, being used for someone's own gain. His judgment was sadly accurate. Bruno was interested to know Jia Lai's plan in advance, just to see if there were any parts of it he could take advantage of. It would be better if he killed Zhang Heng and Jia Lai at the same time. Now that the door was closed before him, Bruno had no choice but to return to his room.

So, Zhang Heng was the only one left in the cafeteria. He quietly finished his last spoonful of baked beans. The sky outside the window had darkened a lot, and with dry, gusty winds kicking up the yellow sands, the crimson sun soon fell below the horizon of the dunes. Even in the presence of an existential threat, at the impending life or death battle, it was hard to ignore such a magnificent sight. "Such magnificent desolation, isn't it?" a strange voice came from behind.

"Sorry?" Zhang Heng turned around and saw a middle-aged man dressed as an engineer. He seemed to be an Area 51 researcher. Seeing that he had caught Zhang Heng by surprise, he smiled. Instead of continuing the previous topic, he asked, "You are an astronaut from NASA, aren't you? I heard that you are going to the moon."

"My name is David."

Zhang Heng introduced himself, then put down the knife and fork he was holding as he extended a hand.

"We are the crew of Apollo 11. Well, technically, only candidates..."

"I'm Einstein."

The middle-aged man shook hands with Zhang Heng, who immediately raised his eyebrows. Zhang Heng had never seen how Einstein looked when he was young, but when the middle aged-man mentioned his name, Zhang Heng realized that they actually bore some resemblance.

The middle-aged man released his hand and smiled.

"Just kidding, you know the nature of our work. We signed a non-disclosure agreement before we came here. We can't reveal our real names. Let's talk about you instead, Mr. David. Are you satisfied with the place?"

"You seem to be doing very well." "You too. As recently as sixty years ago, no one thought that humans could fly the skies in a big iron bird. Ten years ago, no one believed that humans could leave earth and go to outer space. Even today, many still don't think that humans have the ability to set foot on another celestial object..." Einstein paused. "...but all this happened, with the help of mathematical formulas, great engineering advancements, and repeated experiments. Humans have completed those seemingly impossible things, time, and again. Isn't this a modern miracle? No disrespect to the one who led the Jews to their promised land, but I have to say, technology is the greatest power in this world."

It was a typical remark of an engineering student. In a way, though, it was difficult to argue with him.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted your meal. When I heard that NASA's astronauts are here, I had to come and meet you folk," said the middle-aged man as he shrugged. "No one comes to this place usually. Anyway, it was nice meeting you, Mr. David." "I'm also glad to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Einstein."

"Okay, I shall not interrupt your siesta. I wish for you to succeed in your training and get on Apollo 11. I will listen to the broadcast when they talk about you landing on the moon."

The middle-aged man ended the brief conversation. With mug in hand, he turned and walked out. It was now completely dark outside.

However, as Einstein was almost at the exit, he stopped again. Turning around, he said, “Oh yeah, I almost forgot. I have a small gift for you. Consider it as a token of our first meeting. I left it in your room. I hope you like *it*.”

Chapter 308 Venomous Snake

Zhang Heng kept thinking about the man he met earlier named Einstein, and wondered if it was merely a coincidence that he mentioned the words ‘magnificent desolation’. Those were the words of Buzz Aldrin, describing how he felt when he first set his eyes on the moon’s surface as he exited the Lunar Module.

But he couldn’t find the man again. The name ‘Einstein’ was obviously fake, and for now, all Zhang Heng knew was that he was a researcher in Area 51. However, no thanks to the extremely secretive nature of Area 51, unless Einstein sought Zhang Heng out, they would never meet again.

Einstein appeared and disappeared in a jiffy, very much like the evening sandstorms.

Early the next morning, Zhang Heng paid close attention to Jia Lai’s and Bruno’s expressions. From the look on their faces, he concluded that nothing special must have happened the night before. The man who called himself Einstein was nowhere to be seen, but whoever the man may have been, Zhang Heng set the matter aside first since survival training was coming up.

The results of the training would eventually decide which of them would be the final candidate to board Apollo 11. Things, however, didn’t turn out the way NASA expected

After breakfast, Zhang Heng and the two crewmates changed into their spacesuits. Area 51 sent military trucks to ferry them to the training location. When they reached the training range, a mock-up Lunar Module awaited them on the yellow sands to replicate the command and service module separation sequence as they returned to earth.

The Lunar and the Command Module simulators were built on a one-to-one ratio, and every last screw on them was configured precisely like the actual vehicle. Equipped within it were all the items the astronauts needed to survive the wilderness.

The truck pulled over in front of the simulation module and dropped off the three trainees. It was only after they entered the simulator that the truck left.

Two kilometers away from the range, the captain and NASA personnel were observing the situation with telescopes. NASA had learned their lesson from all the previous accidents, and they placed an emergency rescue team on standby in the vicinity. Helicopters and off-road vehicles were also on the ready, not to mention that Area 51 Air Force Base wasn’t far away, and they agreed to send assistance when necessary.

Fingers crossed, with the beefed-up precautions and preparations, there shouldn’t be any more accidents.

To say that the modules were cramped would be an understatement, and comfort was probably a concept as far as the moon itself. In fact, the entire spacecraft had been so carefully designed that every gram it weighed was into careful consideration. Take modern rockets, for example. Every additional 1kg of weight would require an additional 50kg of fuel. To ensure the spacecraft would have sufficient

escape velocity, the launch vehicle needed to have adequate thrust, and the spacecraft's weight was usually kept as low as safely possible.

Once its functionality and safety were verified in the best way, it was deemed necessary to sacrifice a part of the piloting experience. Nonetheless, three men waiting to rip each others' throats apart while squeezed and squashed together into the tiny module sounded a little ironic.

This was especially true for Bruno, whose breathing had turned rapid; his mind seeming drifted and preoccupied. Jia Lai and Zhang Heng, on the other hand, appeared to be much calmer. Especially the latter, whose breathing rhythm had hardly changed.

The thick bulky spacesuits that were on them smothered out of whatever little room they had left, and even if they wanted to, nobody was going to carry out whatsoever plans they had been brewing. After waiting for god-knows-how-long, during which the three trainees remained in solemn silence, the captain announced through the radio that they could begin the training.

Jia Lai, closest to the hatch, climbed out first, followed by Bruno. Zhang Heng was the last to leave the module. When his feet touched the soft, sandy ground, he unlocked his helmet and removed it. Immediately, the surrounding sounds and air flooded his senses, and he felt as if he had returned to the outside world. When he looked up, he saw nothing but desolation all around them. Except for some sparse bushes, only one monotonous hue colored his vision.

Right away, they were faced with an awkward problem-how were they getting out of their spacesuits? Since the suits were explicitly designed to be used in space, they became a cumbersome problem upon landing. Lugging such heavy equipment around would severely restrict their movement and consume considerable energy.

Hence, after the command module landed, the first thing the astronauts were asked to do was to remove the suits they wore.

Even after all that training, it would take a good while if you relied on yourself to remove the suit. If you had a companion to help you, however, it would greatly hasten the entire process. The problem right now was that the three of them were competing against each other, and none were about to lend any assistance, even when it came to such minor favors.

Eventually, Zhang Heng was first to speak up, telling Jia Lai, "I'll help you."

A look of surprise flashed across the latter's face. He nodded, feeling grateful. For a split second, Bruno regretted his inaction. He and Jia Lai were nominal allies and he should have been the one to step up and offer help. Zhang Heng, however, beat him to it. Too bad that NASA was watching them with hawk eyes, and it wasn't the best idea to get rid of an opponent right now.

So after Jia Lai got out of his suit, he helped Zhang Heng to do the same. In the end, Bruno, too managed to get rid of the shackle of a suit and put on an ordinary NASA ordinary.

In the meantime, Zhang Heng returned to the simulation module, getting some food and water from the cargo trunk along with other useful instruments that he may have any use for. The three requested for help as they were trained, and reported their approximate location to the control center. After that, they began constructing a makeshift shelter.

Zhang Heng had already done this countless times in his first game. The difference this time was, he didn't have to go around scavenging for materials since NASA had kindly taken into account the various environments the astronauts faced upon landing, preparing everything they could think of in advance. All they had to do now was to carry out all the materials from the Lunar Module and assemble the shelter accordingly.

Even Jia Lai had to admit that Zhang Heng had the disposition of the most ideal crewmate, a calm, reliable, all-rounder. But for an opponent, that surely couldn't be a good thing. It would mean that he was going to be significantly more challenging to kill. It was essential that an opponent of such caliber would have to be killed with a single blow, or he would certainly come back for him. Such an opponent would give him no second chances.

Fortunately, Jia Lai had always been a patient one, or he wouldn't have pretended to be the harmless puppy at the beginning of the game. He waited until Zhen Xiang and Bruno teamed up before getting rid of the rest of the players. Only then did he show his true colors.

He was exactly like a venomous snake, always on the lookout for the best time to strike.

So, at the beginning of field survival training, Jia Lai seemed to be very cooperative. After the other two requested for help, he actively joined the construction of the bunk. It took the three about fifteen minutes to complete it. As a finisher, they installed a canopy to shelter them from the blazing sun above their heads.

As a requirement for the training, none of them had breakfast. Zhang Heng distributed the food he had retrieved from storage to the other two. Although starving, Jia Lai didn't rush to finish his meal, giving Bruno a cold, hard look instead.

The latter understood what Jia Lai meant and, with a bitter expression, opened the bag of dehydrated food, mixed it with water from a sealed bag, and ate a spoonful.

Chapter 309 Desert Survival Training

Breakfast was bacon pieces and cinnamon bun paired with a drink of Tang. There was also pea soup and tuna salad, standard Apollo-era space meals.

These were mainly dehydrated and semi-moist foods, some of which required heating and some in their natural state (mostly nuts). There was no problem with them nutritionally, but tasted barely passable.

The space food of later generations was greatly improved, having benefited from the advancement of food preservation technology. In Zhang Heng's era, NASA would provide astronauts with an option of more than 180 types of food and beverages. You could even have chocolate ice cream on the International Space Station (of course, a very extravagant thing even for now), which helped a lot in keeping the astronauts' morale high throughout their months-long stay and lonely tours above our planet.

For now, however, Zhang Heng and the other two candidates wouldn't get to enjoy this privilege. The storage hold in the service module contained enough food for three astronauts for eleven days. If all went well with the mission, excluding the moon landing and returning to earth, the remaining food

should last them six to seven days, just enough for the astronauts as they awaited the arrival of the NASA rescue team.

However, considering possible communications equipment damage and other unforeseen emergencies, Zhang Heng and crew weren't allowed to stay where they 'landed' as they waited for help to come.

So, after breakfast, the three performed simple some navigation, divided the food and water among themselves, and continued the training session. They packed the supplies into backpacks and moved to the next target location – also the toughest part of the survival course.

The target location was 80 kilometers away. Even if they walked without taking a break, it would take them at least 20 hours. What more, summer was coming, and the desert temperatures far exceeded 40 degrees Celsius in the day.

Under the scorching sun, the body would lose water very quickly, and if not replenished in time, it could easily become dehydrated. Fortunately, even though forced to traverse the hellish landscape, Jia Lai, the more overweight one of the group, didn't lag behind. For Zhang Heng, a man who had experienced worse situations than this, it was all another day's worth of work. He was the most physically fit among the three, and with Level 2 wilderness survival skills, the current situation was not much of a challenge for him.

The truth was, the NASA provided emergency backpacks and supplies in the service module had saved the trainees a lot of trouble. After all, NASA wasn't training them to be survival experts. Under normal circumstances, astronauts were only trained to follow the manual's emergency procedures, make good use of the resources at hand, conserve strength as much as possible, and finally, complete the task within the specified time.

The most the astronauts had to go through was a more than a strenuous stretch of workouts, pretty much like basic military service.

However, after walking in the desert for an extended period, moods began to fluctuate.

Not only did the dry and arid environment test the body to its very limits, but also inflated everyone's emotions in the worst way possible, especially when the three of them were hiding something. On the surface, they were all facing the same situation – all aiming for the final spot. But the fact was, even if Zhang Heng did nothing, he could have simply survived on his own, relying on his outstanding performance to become the final candidate for Apollo 11.

In contrast, Bruno and Jia Lai were more passive, especially so for Jia Lai. Thanks to the strategy he adopted at the beginning of the game, he ranked at the bottom of the three. He would really have to use this final training session to get rid of his two opponents.

Jia Lai, however, didn't know what Zhang Heng was thinking – whether Zhang Heng planned to ace survival training and get on Apollo 11 on his own merits, or risk it and eliminate his threats which were Jia Lai and Bruno.

After all, only one week was left until the end of the quarantine period, and there was no way one's safety could be guaranteed for sure.

The main problem was that Jia Lai didn't know what kind of person Zhang Heng was. In the past month, Jia Lai didn't just pretend to be weak to lower the guard of those around him, but also so that he could covertly observe everyone.

The time and energy he spent on each person were different. For example, Jia Lai didn't bother studying the brawny man and the high-school student, while Zhang Heng was one of the few he paid most attention to.

Until today, though, he still severely lacked understanding about Zhang Heng. Zhang Heng, the lone wolf, was the most mysterious player among all the others, and Jia Lai couldn't tell what he did for a living in the real world or what his past was. In fact, Jia Lai wasn't even sure how old Zhang Heng was, not to mention that he had a poker of a face to read.

This was the most difficult part for Jia Lai. Since he had no idea what kind of person his opponent was, it was challenging to devise a strategy. When there were still three spots available on the Apollo 11 mission, Jia Lai maintained an amicable relationship with Zhang Heng. Now, he had no other choice but to effectively get rid of his competitor.

Upon the edgeless desert, three lonely figures moved slowly across the sand dunes. Bruno pulled at his collar. Having drank countless times from his water canteen, he still couldn't shake off the anxiety building in his heart. He looked up at Zhang Heng, who was walking in front and noticed that up until now, he had been striding at the same pace all along, seemingly oblivious to the environment.

On top of that, Jia Lai, who was walking behind him, had been very quiet. This made Bruno very uncomfortable, and he was feeling the pressure. Since breakfast, there had been this ominous feeling in the air, as if something awful was bound to take place. But then, nothing happened throughout the entire journey, and the unsettling feeling was now more suffocating than the scorching weather.

At noon, they came across a rock face where they could hide from the cold of the night, and decided to rest up there for a while to make lunch. Per how he'd been trained, Zhang Heng gathered stones from the ground and formed an arrow with them, pointing the rescue team in the direction they were traveling in.

It wasn't after a thirty-minute break that they got on the road again.

At dusk, Jia Lai and Bruno's breathing had grown heavy, their clothes now soaked in sweat. The parts of their skin that had been exposed to the sun were red and raw. Despite the many protective measures, a lot of sand still managed to get into their clothing, and like an abrasive, it constantly rubbed against their skin as they walked, making every step a painful and uncomfortable challenge.

The ten-hour long journey drained them of whatever strength they had. Zhang Heng, the team's leader, decided to take a break when he noticed that the other two couldn't go any further. So, he found a suitable place to set up for the night.

He collected some dry leaves and branches, then set up a bonfire to heat up the food. At least, the three exhausted men would be able to enjoy a warm dinner.

All these caused Jia Lai to be uncertain. So far, Zhang Heng had done everything by the book, abided by the training regime, and accorded every request of the captain. Was he really planning to win the last spot with only his scores?

Chapter 310 Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

Sand and stones dissipated heat quickly, and desert temperatures between day and night were at different extremes. In fact, the temperature difference between the noon and early morning could be in excess 30 degrees Celcius. One could either roast under the scorching sun or freeze at the drastically falling temperature at night. Also, to avoid the many venomous snakes and insects that made the desert their home, Zhang Heng chose a relatively high terrain to start a fire. Besides, fire also prevented larger and more dangerous predators from approaching them.

However, danger didn't always originate from the surroundings. Zhang Heng, Jia Lai, and Bruno were all sitting around the bonfire. This should be the best time for them to make up for the lost stamina during the day, but none of the three dared close an eyelid. This was, without a doubt, the best opportunity for them if they wanted to get rid of each other. During the day, NASA kept a hawk's eye on them from a few kilometers away, and it was difficult to carry out any dangerous maneuvers without being noticed. Although unknown if any NASA personnel stayed awake after nightfall, one thing was for sure. Visibility was significantly reduced in the dark. Even if the observers put in their best efforts, it was difficult to see everything from that distance.

The flames of the bonfire danced in the night, accompanied by crackling wood and flying embers. Nothing else moved apart from that, and it wasn't after a long time before somebody spoke in a low voice.

"Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. Though wise men at their end know dark is right,

Because their words had forked no lightning they

Do not go gentle into that good night."

"Dylan Thomas... it's a poem he wrote to his critically ill father," Zhang Heng said. "I always thought it was from the movie 'Interstellar,' replied Bruno as he yawned and rubbed his eyes that could barely keep open. Throughout the day, he used up most of his energy, and after dinner, he could feel the fatigue kicking in. However, he didn't dare close his eyes even for a minute.

"I liked that movie a lot, and this poem as well. It's relatable to our current situation, eh?" Jia Lai added. "Each time we participate in a new round of the game, we face the risk of elimination and loss. Let's not talk about what happens after we lose. Everyone knows one thing, though. We mustn't give up until the very last moment. After all, we don't want to be forgotten by the world."

"Uhh, to be honest, I don't care if anyone remembers me or not," Bruno shrugged. "When I thought that I would never be able to host a future party in my Australian mansion or driving my Porsche 911 to pick up hot college chicks, or my younger brother taking my share of my inheritance.... hell, of course, I don't want to lose. After all, who knows if I would have such good luck in my next incarnation

“So what about you? What is the driving factor that gets you through these rounds?” asked Jia Lai as he shifted his gaze to Zhang Heng. “Since everyone isn’t resting, let’s talk to each other. There’s not much time left for us anyway.”

“I don’t know. For now, I’m just trying to figure out why these games were created in the first place,” Zhang Heng nonchalantly commented as he poked the bonfire before him with a twig.

“Yes, we all want to know who hosted this game, what its purpose is, and when it will stop and how to beat it eventually... but then again, we don’t always get answers to all our questions, right?”

Jia Lai’s eyes flickered in the fire as he stared blankly, and no one knew what went on in his mind. For a moment, Zhang Heng even thought that Jia Lai was about to strike.

Suddenly, Bruno’s nervous voice broke the awkward silence. “Yo, guys, look! What is that?!”

He just had just gotten up and was about to visit the nearby bushes to empty his bowels. Right after he unzipped his pants, something flashed before his eyes in the nearby darkness. Unsurprisingly, Bruno was freaked out. His fight or flight instincts kicked in, and he instantly panicked. He didn’t even bother clearing out the rest of the by-products in his stomach, running and stumbling while trying to pull his pants up.

Zhang Heng and Jia Lai stood up immediately when they heard the strange rustling, looking at each other in surprise. Clearly, this unexpected situation had nothing to do with any of them. Zhang Heng picked up a burning wood from the bonfire and pointed it in the direction where Bruno was running from. It was then that he saw mysterious silhouettes above the dunes not far away from them.

“What the heck is that?”

Bruno squinted.

“It should be a mountain coyote.”

Zhang Heng observed quietly for a while. In the novice quest, he learned many techniques to identify animals from Bell. It happened to come in handy now, where Zhang Heng’s mind automatically fell on information about mountain coyotes.

A coyote subspecies native to the North American continent, the mountain coyote, could be found across the United States. The species could be seen in Washington State, the Cascade Mountains in eastern Oregon to the south through the Great Basin, the Sierra Nevada Highlands, and all the way to northern Mexico.

Most of the time, however, these coyotes thrived in forests, swamps, and grasslands; places that were abundant with food and water. It was rare running into a pack in a desert, and to make matters worse, they looked to be starving as well. The creatures appeared to have not hunted for a few days. Otherwise, the three players who had stayed close to the bonfire all the while would have never been targeted.

Zhang Heng was unsure if the NASA observers had noticed their predicament, but even if they did come to the rescue, it would take a good amount of time. The mountain coyotes were already on the prowl, stalking and surrounding their victims. It was one of those creatures that feared no man, and as humans

continued to encroach into wild territory, there were often sightings in the suburbs. That said, although these creatures were usually solo hunters, they had now unexpectedly appeared in a pack.

Even Zhang Heng wouldn't want to deal with five coyotes alone. Of course, he could turn around and run. Although most likely unable to outrun the coyotes, he should have no problem running faster than Bruno or Jia Lai. Then, something suddenly crossed his mind. Instead of leaving the campfire, he kicked two pieces of burning wood as thick as a forearm to Jia Lai and Bruno.

Jia Lai hesitated for a while, but eventually picked up the burning wood on the ground. He instinctively turned around and ran, but in his haste and anxiety, he tripped and fell, eating a mouthful of sand on the way down. When he raised his head, a coyote was already above him, growling and baring its massive fangs.

Bruno was nearly scared to death, but he also knew that he could count on no one in a time like this. That said, he should have been grateful that Zhang Heng and Jia Lai didn't choose to eliminate him now. Fortunately, Bruno was also an experienced player who had completed several rounds, and though his game items were gone, the skills he mastered hadn't left him. So, in a split second, he wrapped his elbows around the coyote's neck so that it couldn't bite him. Quickly, he got up and pinned the coyote to the ground.

On the other hand, Jia Lai was a lot calmer under the attack of the coyotes. He stood there and watched them with an icy stare. And just as the canine's hind legs slammed the ground, preparing to pounce, Jia Lai jumped, strangling the unexpected coyote with lightning speed.