

48 Hours 311

Chapter 311 Jia Lai's Answer

Without a second thought, Jia Lai stabbed the burning piece of wood into the coyote's gaping mouth. Shocked and confused, the creature yelped, screaming and howling in pain thereafter. The plump man grunted, and with a frown, he flung the severely wounded animal aside.

After the threat on his side had been neutralized, Jia Lai turned to look at Zhang Heng, only to discover that he had gone up against two coyotes and that the battle had already ended. The thing Jia Lai regretted was that he allowed Zhang Heng to act too quickly. When he turned around, the only thing he saw was two coyotes with their fur burning fleeing into the darkness. Unable to witness how Zhang Heng won the battle, Jia Lai's wish to learn more about his opponent was diminished.

It was at that time that the familiar chop of a helicopter rotor pierced the silence. After a series of accidents, NASA's significantly improved their crisis response, including increasing their potential astronauts' level of protection.

Within five minutes, the helicopter was already hovering above them. Right before it touched the ground, the captain jumped off and shouted, "Are you all okay?" The trio nodded over the dust clouds kicked up by the rotor wash. Even Bruno, having faced the most dangerous battle, was unscathed. At most, he was just a little shaken. The worst thing that happened to him was the coyote drooling all over his face. It smelled terrible. The captain continued, "I didn't expect to encounter coyotes here. There have been no coyotes around here for a long time. Remind me to report to the higher-ups and see if they can throw in some coyote repellent to your emergency backpacks. Don't expect too much, though. By the time they approve, you guys would have been to the moon twice. So... I'll ask you again. Do you still want to continue with the training?"

Jia Lai and Bruno nodded without hesitation. Although they had just experienced a frightening incident, the trio hadn't yet figured who the winner of this round would be. Hence, they didn't want the training to end just like that. So, the captain turned to look at Zhang Heng. "I respect your team's decision," he said. The reply came beyond Jia Lai and Bruno's expectations. Logically, Zhang Heng should have chosen to stop the training right now. Based on his previous results, he could get the final spot easily. Only one possibility remained on why he made such a decision. When the opportunity arose, he would eliminate all his threats in one go. This was to prevent unnecessary trouble during the isolation period.

"Well, we'll see you at the end, then. Oh, and safety is paramount!"

Since all three agreed, the captain said nothing more. He got back on the helicopter and flew off the campsite in another dramatic cloud of dust. Nonetheless, despite the deep animosity between the three, the atmosphere improved a little after fighting off the coyotes together. That said, all three knew in their hearts that this was just a one-time thing.

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When the number of players allowed to complete the quest was reduced to one, there would be no more compromise between them. Perhaps it was due to the coyote incident that caused Jia Lai to abandon his plan. Eventually, when the sun started rising from the east, and the air began to warm up, nothing had happened between them. The three spent the night safely by the fire.

It was in the early hours of the morning. The remnants of the smoldering bonfire were still toasty, which allowed them the minor luxury of a warm breakfast. This should be their last meal in this desert, where they were now less than 30 kilometers away from their destination. If everything went well, the group should arrive in about seven hours. Jia Lai had still not approached Bruno to discuss their plan, and thanks to that, Bruno ultimately gave up on him. He knew this meant Jia Lai never valued their partnership in the first place, deeming him useless from the start.

The thing that baffled Bruno was why Jia Lai didn't seem to be in a hurry, especially in a time like this. He even tidied up his emergency backpack before setting off despite knowing that time was of the essence, and that the destination wasn't too far away.

If Bruno didn't do something about it in these last seven hours, he might never get another chance to strike at them. Among them, Bruno was now the most anxious one. There wasn't much point for that anyway. He had lost his game items, and Jia Lai had abandoned him. Right now, he didn't know how he could kill the other two under NASA surveillance. To execute his plan, he would have to wait for the precise moment.

Just like the day before, the three were on the road again once done with breakfast.

They chose to start their journey at the break of dawn. The sun barely peeked out of the horizon, and the desert's temperature wasn't too high at this time. The cool atmosphere significantly sped their pace up, enabling them to conserve stamina and energy. At the same time, they also received a notification from the system. As a reminder, the system informed them that they had just gained a "Desert Camping" achievement, earning them 2 points each.

Up until this point, game points had been the paramount goal of each player, where powerful guilds had always focused their research on its acquisition. The research results varied, but it was discovered that no matter the technique, the efficiency of earning game points could only be increased to a certain extent. Since every quest was a unique experience and was non-repeatable, it was theoretically impossible to apply one point-maximizing technique to the other.

For example, Zhang Heng once obtained 30 food achievements in the quest, Tokyo Drift. After that, the achievements didn't occur again in another quest. No matter how many American signature foods from the 60s he ate, he could get any more points from it. But in the previous transitional quest, he did get a "Fast Food & Amp Music" achievement by eating a burger and a chicken burrito after listening to a vinyl record.

He was fascinated by the combinations as well, where certain hidden rules guided this randomness. For example, Zhang Heng discovered that the probability of getting game points after successfully surviving a mortal threat was very high. This rule, however, wasn't very useful, for no sane players would risk their lives just to earn more game points. After all, it didn't make much sense if the player died in the game.

That was exactly how Bruno felt right now. His anxiety completely diluted the joy of gaining prospective game points. He then wiped the sweat off his face. Three hours had passed since breakfast, and as the temperature of the desert steadily increased, they were now faced with the return of the tormenting heat. What made Bruno even more nervous, though, was Jia Lai's inaction, unable to fathom why he gave up last night's rare opportunity.

What better opportunity could present itself than striking hard under the cover of complete darkness? Just as those thoughts crossed Bruno's mind, he felt the hot air around him whipping up strangely. So he raised his head to look at the distant skyline. Finally, he got his long-awaited answer.

The captain's voice could be heard blaring over the radio.

"Attention!!! There is a sandstorm inbound! Training has been canceled. Stay where you are, and don't go anywhere. A vehicle will be there to pick you in the shortest time possible!"

Chapter 312 Duel In The Sandstorm

Over the horizon, a yellow sandstorm swept forward at an alarming speed. Zhang Heng made a quick glance. The sandstorm was seven to eight kilometers wide and at least two to three kilometers high, impossible to run from on foot. Even NASA'S helicopters with the best maneuverability couldn't risk taking off and flying into such violent natural phenomena. And with the rather unimpressive speed of the jeep, it wasn't possible to pick the three before the sandstorm arrived. This was why the captain wanted them to stay where they were.

It was the first order of his that wouldn't be heeded. The three knew the sandstorm was the clarion call for the final battle. The thick dust surrounding them would reduce vision to a bare minimum, and under such conditions, NASA's observers would completely lose control of them. No matter what they did, it would literally stay between the three of them. In other words, there was no longer the need to hide their strength. Zhang Heng glanced at Jia Lai from a distance, who also happened to look the same way. Their gazes intersected. At this moment, Jia Lai finally decided to expose the intense murderous rage in his eyes.

"Sorry. I will win this game and survive. If there can only be one winner in this game, then only I can be that person," growled Jia Lai.

The sandstorm was now less than a few hundred meters away, and Zhang Heng quickly took off the innermost vest of his uniform and tied it across his face to cover his mouth and nose. The biggest threat brought by sandstorms were suffocation and blindness, and without protective measures, the large amount of sand carried by the wind would quickly enter and block the respiratory tract, causing the person to choke. As for blindness, they had goggles with them, fortunately. After Zhang Heng completed all the necessary steps to protect himself, he took out a stolen steak knife from dinner at Area 51 the night before.

Moments later, the sandstorm finally made landfall.

Jia Lai was right. From the beginning, Zhang Heng didn't plan to advance solely by relying on his excellent grades. Because there would be a week-long quarantine period afterward, Zhang Heng wasn't interested in testing if NASA provided adequate protection for the mission team. What more, there was a high probability that Jia Lai and Bruno would become part of the support team at the space center. They might get the opportunity to get rid of Zhang Heng at that time. Thus, Jia Lai wasn't the only one using the survival course as a means to get the last seat on Apollo 11. Zhang Heng, too, also planned to use this opportunity to deal with the threats before the quarantine commenced.

However, Zhang Heng completely didn't expect the arrival of the sandstorm. Compared to the waterspout he summoned from the sea, Zhang Heng leaned more towards the fact that Jia Lai wasn't

the creator of the sandstorm. If he were, he wouldn't have waited until the end of the training to summon it. And as strange as it sounded, this wasn't the best environment for the sandstorm to deal maximum damage.

Although they were on relatively flat terrain, there were large boulders and rock formations nearby, which could be used to shelter the winds and sand. It didn't offer the best protection from the storm, but it was sure better than the flat dunes they passed an hour ago. Zhang Heng speculated that Jia Lai should be in possession of an item that could accurately predict the weather. He foresaw the arrival of the sandstorm ahead of time, the reason why he gave up last night's opportunity to strike and ultimately delaying the final battle.

Of course, it didn't rule out the fact that his item might have needed a long time to create the sandstorm. It explained why it only started brewing at the end of the training. Be that as it may, since the sandstorm was here, it was time for Zhang Heng to strike his enemies down as well. As he moved, he turned his back against the storm and tried crouching as low as possible.

Bell once told him that the sand particles would get finer at the upper layers of the storm, thus increasing the probability of suffocating. On the contrary, sand particles in the lower parts of the storm would be relatively large, and by just using a cloth filter, it could prevent sand from entering the nostrils or the mouth. At the same time, he had to watch out for flying debris.

The best way to survive a sandstorm would be to find a reliable shelter and hide within its confines until it passed. Visibility would be reduced to almost blindness, where one could only see up to a meter ahead. Naturally, it was easy to lose one's direction. Zhang Heng, however, was unaffected by these problems. Before the winds became too strong, he had scanned the nearby terrain and located Jia Lai and Bruno's positions. Just as expected, Jia Lai was no longer at his initial position.

Zhang Heng quickly drew a map in his mind. There was a stone about the height of a person less than thirty steps away. It would make for a good sandstorm shelter, and Jia Lai might have moved there. Of course, that also meant the possibility of traps waiting for him. Also, about fifty steps to his right was an unsecured car hood laying on the ground. If used properly, it could help shield most of the wind and sand, and even block incoming attacks when necessary. Zhang Heng hesitated for a while and decided to head in the direction of the car hood. He was afraid that the longer he waited, it would soon be completely submerged under the piling sand. With the power of memory, Zhang Heng began to move to his right. He silently calculated the steps he took in his mind. However, after fifty-five steps, he failed to find the hood. There were two possibilities for this situation. It could have been taken away by someone, or he had moved in the wrong direction.

If it were the latter, it would be more troublesome since he didn't know which direction he was currently facing or how far he had deviated. If he were unsure of his current location, then the map in his mind would be useless to him. If that were to be the case, he would need to give up on looking for Jia Lai and seek shelter immediately.

Getting lost in a sandstorm was no joke. Even if Zhang Heng covered his face with his clothes, prolonged exposure to the sand would still cause indefinite suffocation. By a stroke of luck, Zhang Heng suddenly spotted the silhouette of the hood he was looking for after turning a few steps southwest. At the same time, a shadowy figure appeared behind him.

The sand and roaring wind not only reduced visibility to near-zero but also made hearing ineffective. To prevent sand from entering his ears, Zhang Heng had to wrap it up, further plugging out the sound. In such harsh environments, it was almost impossible to hear footsteps on the sand that came from behind.

Zhang Heng knelt on one knee on the sand, preparing to dig out the half-buried hood. The shadowy figure, on the other hand, had also lifted a large rock, preparing to smash it on Zhang Heng's head.

Chapter 313 Life And Death Situation

During the critical moment, Zhang Heng turned to his side, barely avoiding contact with the rock. He did not see the black shadow behind him, nor did he hear the other person's footsteps. He did, however, notice someone coming from behind. Speaking of which, the sandstorm turned to be a blessing in disguise.

To avoid inhaling in too much dust, Zhang Heng kept his back faced into the wind, It meant the wind blew directly at the assailant as well. The assailant's body would block a part of the wind and sand as he approached, allowing Zhang Heng to sense the changes in the wind. This was how he dodged the lethal attack from his enemy.

On the other hand, the attacker was too slow to react, not expecting Zhang Heng to survive the surprise attack. While he was still stunned, Zhang Heng elbowed him, and he fell to the ground with a thud. Although his face was covered, Zhang Heng easily recognized the attacker as Bruno judging by his size.

This was by no means good news. Bruno's game items were now with Zhang Heng, and it was impossible that he would choose such a radical strategy when he had nothing with him. He even hid nearby to wait for Zhang Heng to get close before attacking. In this instance, Zhang Heng couldn't see his surroundings clearly, and Bruno should be experiencing the same problem as well. So, how did he know that Zhang Heng was coming to get the car hood?

These thoughts flashed through Zhang Heng's mind, and just as he realized that a threat was nearby, a sturdy arm silently wrapped around his neck. Jia Lai had discovered a way to maintain good vision, and when the sandstorm arrived, the first thing he did was to find Bruno.

Bruno knew very well that from the start, Jia Lai's only intention was to use him as bait. What he didn't expect was that Jia Lai kept silent about what he wanted him to do until the very last minute, knowing that it would be difficult for Bruno to say no. He knew that Bruno too, wished that Zhang Heng would die here.

Jia Lai, who had an unhindered and unobstructed vision through the sandstorm made him a terrifying enemy to deal with. There were one too many ways to kill another in the blindness of the sandstorm, and it wouldn't take much effort either. Jia Lai hadn't done anything until now simply because Bruno was still valuable as an effective bait.

According to Bruno, since Jia Lai could clearly see without being affected by the sand, he didn't need to come looking for him, seeing how he could just kill everyone by himself. They wouldn't even know what hit them. Everything that happened after that was proof that Jia Lai's obsessions over Zhang Heng weren't that unreasonable after all.

He failed to attack Zhang Heng, pinned to the ground by his opponent. The hot sand burned his forehead, and the fear in his heart caused it to thump wildly. Bruno thought that he was really going to die this time, until Jia Lai shouted his name, asking him to let him deal with Zhang Heng instead. He finally snapped back to his senses. However, Bruno only glanced at two of them. He then struggled and got up from the ground. Instead of joining the fight, he chose a random direction and ran, disappearing into the sandstorm.

Bruno certainly hoped that this time, Zhang Heng really would die here. If that happened, he would become the only candidate left. He also knew that if he helped Jia Lai kill Zhang Heng, he would be next to die. Jia Lai had the advantage in this sandstorm since he could navigate easily with his superior vision. If left alone, there was no way he could outrun Jia Lai.

Thus, when Jia Lai and Zhang Heng were fighting, Bruno took another route. He decided to escape the area and hide where Jia Lai couldn't find him. Even if Jia Lai successfully killed Zhang Heng and lived till the sandstorm was over, Bruno would automatically be chosen as the final astronaut to board Apollo 11 since he fared better results.

In theory, there was nothing wrong with his choice. Whether a success or failure, it all depended on Jia Lai killing Zhang Heng. However, there were no shelters along the way in the direction he chose to escape. He would likely suffocate to death before the sandstorm blew over.

Jia Lai knew that Bruno was unreliable, and his last-minute escape didn't surprise him the slightest. He knew exactly what he was up to. Jia Lai sighed. Right now, though, there was no time to pay attention to Bruno. To him, Zhang Heng was his biggest threat, and now, he wasn't about to let the opportunity slip. He continued increasing pressure around Zhang Heng's neck. NASA had conducted arm strength tests before, and at that time, Jia Lai's performance was as bad as his other tests. The truth was, his strength was the most superior amongst all the players. Not even Zhang Heng could match up to him. When dealing with the coyote, he easily strangled the beast to death with one hand. It tried it's hardest, but no matter how much it tried to break free, it failed to free itself. Jia Lai was confident that he could suppress Zhang Heng in the same way. Seconds later, Jia Lai's pupils contracted suddenly, and he quickly turned his head around. At the same time, something flashed past his chin.

If he was half a second slower, the steak knife would have penetrated his throat. Jia Lai didn't even manage to see how Zhang Heng did it; his back now drenched in a cold sweat. Nevertheless, he did not loosen his lock around Zhang Heng's neck. With a grunt, he attempted to use his other hand to block Zhang Heng's knife.

Zhang Heng's counterattack came ahead of time. He first clamped Jia Lai's neck with both legs, and at the same time, exerted a burst of strength to his waist. The two then rolled on the sand, and when they finally came to a stop, their positions were reversed. This time Zhang Heng was on top, and the knife in his hand was less than two centimeters away from Jia Lai's right eye.

Zhang Heng didn't practice wrestling too much, but Anne had once taught him this trick to get rid of an opponent's control during close-quarters combat. The two sparred with this maneuver many times. During the Black Sail quest, he did not get it to use it many times, and when he left Nassau, he was already the famous pirate king of the Seven Seas. It was rare anybody wanted to have a duel with him.

This was technically the first time the trick came in handy, and now, it was Jia Lai's turn to hang on for dear life. With clenched teeth, he blocked Zhang Heng's wrist with everything that he had, desperately trying to keep the knife away from his eyeball. It was that time when Jia Lai realized he wasn't the only one who had concealed his strength during the physical test.

Although Zhang Heng had been working out in the gym frequently, and even with NASA putting him through all kinds of physical training, he was still at a disadvantage to Jia Lai when it came to brute strength. Just like his earlier analysis, this wasn't the best time for Jia Lai to attack him.

Nevertheless, although strength wasn't Zhang Heng's forte, his endurance had always been outstanding.

The three had been walking across the desert the entire day and even failed to get proper rest that night as well. To make matters worse, more than three hours had passed since breakfast, and it was safe to say that they weren't in the best physical condition. Due to the difference in endurance, Zhang Heng was the least affected. Slowly but surely, Zhang Heng surpassed Jia Lai in strength.

Chapter 314 To Me, This Is Long Enough

The steak knife moved slowly but steadily towards Jia Lai's eyes; its tip just about to touch his iris. But the next second, Zhang Heng suddenly pulled back the knife and dropped it on the ground beside his feet.

Instead of feeling happy that he'd just escaping death, Jia Lai felt very afraid. Zhang Heng could finally see what was hidden under the sand. It was a rattlesnake, of the most poisonous reptiles that roamed the desert. Unlike other serpents, its venom could produce a special kind of enzyme after it entered the human body, causing necrosis, damage to the nerve fibers, and eventually, brain death once it entered the nervous system.

If the rattlesnake injected enough venom into its victim, and anti-venom wasn't administered in time, the probability of death was very certain. Judging by its tail, the rattlesnake that Zhang Heng pinned to the ground by Zhang Heng should have just matured not too long ago. About a meter in length, its yellow and brown skin camouflaged it perfectly against the sand, causing it to be extremely difficult to spot.

However, under normal circumstances, rattlesnakes weren't supposed to be very aggressive, and they rarely attacked humans. Unless threatened, the first thing they usually did was to flee. Besides, there was a sandstorm now, and it was impossible for the rattlesnake to hunt, lest it might get swept away by the winds. There could only be one possibility for the appearance of a rattlesnake here.

"Did you really think I'd completely believe what you told me? The item you took from Nancy that allowed communication with animals hasn't reached its maximum usage, right?" asked Zhang Heng.

"So, its been on your mind all the while?" Jia Lai was surprised, but then remembered something. "We encountered a coyote last night, and you didn't just leave us there and flee. Was it because you suspected it had something to do with me?"

Zhang Heng nodded.

"Pfft, what a troublesome opponent."

As he talked, Jia Lai was stalling time, hoping to recover his strength. He took in a few deep breaths of air, only to cough violently at the sand getting into his lungs.

“Ahem, okay, this round is a tie, and for the next round... I’ll find a way to kill you in the next round.”

“There will be no next round,” Zhang Heng said calmly. “This is your end. I was waiting for you to use your last trump card. Did you really think you could beat me with your pathetic skills?”

Zhang Heng grabbed the rattlesnake’s tail and cut off its head with the sharp knife in his hand before throwing its lifeless corpse to the side. Then, he pulled out the knife from the sand and started to walk toward Jia Lai. Zhang Heng didn’t look the least tired, a testament to his enduring stamina.

“What kind of monster are you?” the latter bitterly clenched his teeth. “This is my eleventh game and my fifth time playing solo-mode. I’ve met all kinds of players, including some very compelling people, but this is my first time meeting someone who’s this versatile and doesn’t seem to have any weakness. How is this possible? How many games have you completed?” “If you don’t count this round, I completed a total of four games. But for me, these four are long enough for me.”

Jia Lai raised his eyebrows with a look of surprise in his eyes as if he still had something to say. When Zhang Heng walked towards him, he quickly rose from the sand, and at the same time, tossed a stone size of a grapefruit at Zhang Heng’s head while laughing hysterically.

Zhang Heng’s expression remained unchanged. He calmly dodged the stone. As Jia Lai threw the rock in frustration, he took two steps forward, before stumbling to his knees on the sand. Seconds later, Jia Lai discovered something that horrified him. The cloth he wrapped around his face to block out the dust was gone.

Almost at the same time, he swallowed a mouthful of sand, and started to cough more violently. Jia Lai knew how dangerous it was to expose his mouth and nose to the fine sand particles and didn’t care how funny he looked right now. Immediately, he tried to take off his pants to use it as a mask, but Zhang Heng wasn’t about to let him do that.

He used the method that Jia Lai used on him previously. With a swift move, Zhang Heng strangled Jia Lai from his back. At the same time, Jia Lai desperately opened his mouth and gulped for air, but the more he struggled to breathe, the more sand he inhaled. Jia Lai began to panic, getting more and more frightened of what was about to happen to him.

He wanted to break Zhang Heng’s arm, but the lack of oxygen caused his muscles to lose all strength. His mind turned blurry as well, and all he heard was the faint rumble of an engine before he lost consciousness. That was an indication that NASA wasn’t far away, not to mention the captain who was shouting their names at the top of his voice. That said, his calls were soon drowned out by the sound of the howling wind.

Jia Lai never expected to be so desperate to be found by NASA. He exhausted his last bit of strength by opening his mouth and desperately trying to coax out a sound. But Zhang Heng had also heard the vehicle approaching then, and with no mercy, he grabbed a handful of sand and stuffed in Jia Lai’s mouth to make sure he stayed silent.

Zhang Heng patiently waited for two and a half minutes until Jia Lai gradually stopped struggling. When he felt no more resistance, Zhang Heng finally let go of him. Jia Lai's expression in his last moments was frozen in time. His panic, unwillingness, and despair had all fallen into silence. Zhang Heng, too, had been in the sandstorm for almost half an hour and was beginning to feel discomfort in his throat and on his skin.

The sand in the wind penetrated his collars, the seams of his shoes, and through the clothing that covered his face. Like getting hit by millions of tiny bullets, he felt as if the sand was shooting at him. Currently, the wind had also reached a speed of more than 100 kilometers per hour.

Zhang Heng then frisked Jia Lai's body as quickly as he could, taking away whatever game items he had on him. After that, he grabbed the emergency backpack that he threw aside earlier, walked back to where he stood and tried to listen in to the sound of the engine. The Jeep had probably missed them and was now moving away. Knowing that if they left him now, he might just not survive the storm. Hence, he pulled out a flare gun from the emergency backpack and fired a shot at the sky. The red flare pierced through the sandstorm, leaving a long trail of dust on its way up. In addition to that, the loud noise it made when it was fired managed to spread to a good distance as well.

After a while, the Jeep's engine got louder again, and Zhang Heng could see the beam from its headlights through all that dust. Half a minute later, it stopped in front of him. Due to the low visibility, the driver was shocked when he suddenly saw Zhang Heng appearing in front of him. Fortunately, he stepped on the brakes in time. The captain then opened the door to let him in.

"Where's the rest?"

"I didn't see them. The sandstorm was so severe we got separated."

The captain nodded and tapped the driver's seat in front of him.

"Gibson, let's go around this area and see if we can find them."

Chapter 315 Return To The Space Center

The Jeep came to a halt, stalling after circling the area halfway. It wasn't because they had managed to find the other two, but the sandstorm was so severe that the dust and debris soon overwhelmed the intake, clogging it up. At first, the engine seemed underpowered, and the vehicle struggled to move. Not too long after, the engine sputtered before dying completely. In this case, it was impossible to start the engine again. Things didn't go well for the second Jeep too. It was just the matter of which one would stop functioning first. Left with no other option, NASA had to give up on searching for the other players and hunkered down in the vehicle until the storm passed. It was then that a small accident occurred. A flying stone hit the right passenger window and shattered a hole through it. Everyone scurried to block the crack with layers of clothes to prevent sand from flying into the car.

However, nobody expected the sandstorm to last an entire day and night. Hours upon hours passed, and when the wind started to die down, they could finally exit the car. Seeing how it was buried halfway in the sand, those in the car wouldn't survive if the sandstorm lasted any longer, let alone those completely exposed to the elements. Under such an unforgiving environment, it would be almost impossible for missing people to survive.

Even so, the captain chose to contact Area 51 immediately the moment the winds died down a little. He also requested a second rescue party to be sent out to search for the two trainees that NASA lost in the sandstorm.

Before they moved on, the captain sent Zhang Heng back to Kennedy Space Center as he was due for a one-week quarantine before he could get on the rocket. It was essential that he stayed away from his family and colleagues to avoid catching any viruses, colds, or any common diseases.

During this time, and unless absolutely necessary, only staff screened by the medical team could get close to the quarantined astronaut. Considering the odd virus and floating particles in the air, the astronaut wasn't allowed to leave the isolation chamber either. If their spouse or child came for a visit, they had to first undergo a stringent medical examination. NASA even restricted the duration of their stay.

This would ensure the wellness of the astronauts' health could be monitored to the greatest extent. Of course, all the trouble they went through wasn't for nothing. NASA couldn't afford to have the astronauts miss the launch window or postponing the mission because of a runny nose. Thankfully, this problem didn't exist the moment the spacecraft entered orbit. No bacteria or any infectious viruses were in the vacuum of space, and it was rare that astronauts got sick while they were there.

Due to the mysterious infectious disease that ravaged the base, NASA paid particular attention to the quarantine process. Thanks to the unexpected sandstorm, Zhang Heng was quarantined a day less than initially planned. After the medical team conducted a comprehensive physical examination, confirming him in perfect health, NASA's executives couldn't be more relieved.

No one had expected things to move in this direction. Armstrong and Collins' surprising return gave NASA a much-needed boost and even restored Congress' confidence in the moon landing. NASA was in complete shock after seeing how accidents strangely kept happening to this batch of urgently recruited candidates. In the end, only one of the seven survived.

Fortunately, NASA eventually pulled together enough astronauts for the mission. That said, Zhang Heng, who survived, had the best training performance out of the seven, and although not the outcome that NASA had hoped for, they were content with who they got in the end. The selection process had unexpectedly turned into an elimination round. Thus, the final candidate was now set in stone.

Zhang Heng had to spend the next four days in the isolation room.

After entering the quarantine period, the astronauts would no longer be assigned any tasks or training. Of course, a good amount of everyday exercise was mandatory to ensure the astronaut was in the best of health. The astronauts could also use this time to adjust their sleeping patterns to adapt to the work schedule in space. In terms of diet, NASA no longer set any restrictions. In theory, astronauts could request whatever they wanted from the dietician. They were even allowed relatively high-calorie 'junk food' because space food could never be compared to the delicacies on earth. Whatever they could eat on earth now was considered as compensation for whatever the astronauts would miss out while in space.

Of course, this should be in no way compared to the infamous 'last meal' of death row inmates.

After all, it was only eight years since Gagarin entered space for the first time, and now, humankind once again challenged themselves to land on another celestial object. For the Apollo 11 mission team, it was an opportunity to create history. A venture of such great heights, though, didn't come without an equal cost, one that was marred by extremely high risks.

Let alone returning the crew successfully, the entire undertaking was more of a shot in the dark, pun not intended. Despite all the years and hours of ridiculously complicated calculations done by teams of brilliant astrophysicists, no one really knew what would happen the moment the rocket took-off or if the spacecraft could even enter lunar orbit. They also had no idea if the lunar module would land safely on the moon, or if it would even land at all.

Although the process had been simulated thousands of times in the laboratory, nobody could predict what could happen hundreds of thousands of miles away on an alien world. After all, even insurance companies were unwilling to draft up policies for astronauts. Despite the glamorous title, the guarantee that their families would be compensated in the event of their death was now further away from earth than they could imagine.

For this reason, Armstrong and a few came up with a unique way of insuring themselves. They left hundreds of envelopes with their autographs and souvenirs related to the mission and gave them to their wives, relatives, and friends before they set off. If an accident did, god forbid, happen, these signatures would become their last gift to humanity. In other words, their autographs would hold considerable value, and the money from selling the envelope alone should help secure the future of their respective families.

Armstrong also suggested Zhang Heng do the same, to which he declined. After all, there was nobody for him to miss in the 1960's United States. All his kin lived outside the game. Nonetheless, Zhang Heng still helped up Armstrong and Collins by signing a couple of envelopes, even taking a photo with them as well. These items could probably sell for good money when they were no longer alive.

Zhang Heng never thought that doing all these before the mission even began was pessimistic or somewhat of a bad omen. It was all standard practice to plan ahead in the event of failure. After all, even the White House would have already prepared a eulogy for them. Once the moon landing failed, newly elected President Nixon would broadcast it to all Americans.

While expressing his condolences, he would commend them for their courage and fearlessness. It would undoubtedly help with damage control, minimizing the moon landing failure's fallout amongst the public.

But none of these things concerned Zhang Heng, and instead, he used the rare peace and quiet before the departure to check his recent yield. After killing Jia Lai, he received a reward of 20 game points. He got three game items in total: a wooden whistle, a lens, and a marble. Zhang Heng guessed that the lens should be related to Jia Lai's ability to maintain his vision in the sandstorm.

As for the whistle and the marble, it was difficult to identify their functions, judging by their appearance. Coupled with the fork and teeth he got from Bruno, it was safe to say that Zhang Heng got five items in this round of the game. Game items were his high return behind the high risks he faced.

However, he cared more about the little gift from the Area 51 engineer called Einstein. Even though he knew that it was no game item, Zhang Heng could no longer look away from it the moment he opened the box. In it was a truly wireless Bluetooth headset; a pair of Apple AirPods.

Chapter 316 16th of July, The Day Finally Arrives

If Zhang Heng remembered correctly, Apple's Bluetooth Wireless AirPods were released in 2016.

The Apollo quest was set in 1969. Seven years later, Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and Ronald Wayne founded Apple Computer together. As for Bluetooth technology, it was created in 1994 by the famous telecommunications company, Ericsson. In other words, these AirPods were definitely not a product from this era. So, who in the world was the man calling himself Einstein?

Einstein didn't come to see Zhang Heng because life in Area 51 was boring. He had his own agenda when he came to meet the astronauts preparing to set off for the moon. Other than Zhang Heng, he didn't look for Jia Lai and Bruno. Zhang Heng didn't even know if he was really one of the engineers in Area 51, let alone figuring out why he gave him the headset that way ahead of this time.

An important thing to note was that Einstein only gave him one earbud, the one for the left ear. Even so, Zhang Heng put it together with the other game items that he collected. The entire mission to the moon would last only eight days, and there would be little remaining time for Zhang Heng's quest. This meant that when the quest ended, there was a good chance that he would still be at the moon. That could only mean that he had to pack in advance.

Fortunately, NASA allowed their astronauts to bring a small number of personal belongings to space, provided they were meticulously listed down. During the quarantine period, Zhang Heng had visitors. Four days after the sandstorm, the captain returned to the space center and brought back the results of the initial search and rescue. A joint effort between Area 51 and NASA saw them pull together their search assets, and after three days and three nights, Jia Lai's body was found. He was confirmed to have died from suffocation. Bruno, on the other hand, was still missing.

The sudden sandstorm had blown millions of tons of sand hundreds of kilometers away, enough to bury all traces of anything living. Coupled with the high temperature and dryness of the desert, it was a dire task for the search to continue. However, the captain insisted that he would carry on until Bruno's body was found.

In fact, no one thought that Bruno would survive. Public Relations also notified the media of the unfortunate news as soon as possible. Even President Nixon himself expressed his condolence for those who lost their lives during training. At the same time, the president had a brief conversation with the only survivor, Zhang Heng.

Due to the accident, Zhang Heng failed to attend the pre-launch press conference. However, this wasn't bad news for him, and although it wasn't his first time dealing with the media, he hated being bombarded by questions since he couldn't provide information about his family and background. Moreover, unlike Armstrong and Collins, he was just a visitor that was passing by this world. All he cared about was whether he could complete the main quest or not. He didn't need to become famous in this world.

After a six-day quarantine, Zhang Heng put on the right mental attitude and made the final preparations for the moon landing. He had done everything he could, for now, having already eliminated all threats and obstacles along his way. Even so, the mission was set to be a perilous voyage from the get-go, filled with unknowns and uncertainties.

It was July the 16th in no time.

Eight years of preparation (from the implementation of the Apollo Program), the effort of 400,000 individuals, tens of billions of dollars spent, and the nation's top scientists and engineers working day and night to practically create a miracle. It had all led to this, a project that showcased a country's ultimate capability during their most peaceful time with all the investment they could get on hand. All that blood and sweat, all that unimaginable risk, was to welcome the arrival of this day.

Today, the whole world had its attention focused on the Kennedy Space Center, waiting to witness humans' historic voyage; leaving their home planet to explore another celestial object for the first time.

Armstrong, Collins, and Zhang Heng woke up at four in the morning. They dressed neatly, packed their personal belongings, and bid a final farewell to the crowd that had gathered outside the building. Then, with a wave, the three men entered a black Lincoln to Launchpad 39A at Cape Canaveral spaceport. There, they ate their last breakfast on planet Earth. The staff helped them into their A7L spacesuits, and when all the leak checks were complete, they put on their space helmets. Everyone in the area was dressed in their best outfits, and during this process, two photographers followed them around busy clicking away their cameras for whatever it was worth.

To be honest, Zhang Heng did not fancy this feeling at all, especially the annoying shutter clicks. It looked like some kind of weird ritual to him, the three of them being the sacrificial offerings. At the same time, more than half of NASA's senior officers and representatives from the White House shook hands and hugged each one of the astronauts. The expressions on everyone's faces grew solemn. It would indeed be a miracle when the three astronauts of Apollo 11 finally returned to Earth with the star-spangled banner wrapped around them.

Fortunately, the entire media snafu didn't take too long. As everything was ready, ground control issued instructions to the spacecraft soon after.

Armstrong took the lead and pushed the door to the equipment room.

At this time, the spaceport's engineers stood spontaneously in the corridor, applauding and nodding to the three, wishing them a smooth journey. Journalists were already crowding outside the gate with their cameras, and the moment the three astronauts showed up, the cameras immediately came to life. With flashes going off everywhere, it was as if supermodels had just lined up for a catwalk. Everyone was trying their hardest to capture this historic moment.

However, the three didn't linger for too long as Hollywood stars on the red carpet did. They simply waved at the reporters who had been waiting for hours and got into the bus prepared by NASA. They then adjourned to the spaceport. Before this, Zhang Heng was lucky enough to see the assembled Saturn V launch vehicle, a behemoth that cost of 185 million (more than 1 billion US dollars today). Designed by rocket prodigy Werner von Braun, it maintained the record for over 50 years as the most powerful rocket ever launched by man.

It stood at a whopping 110.6 meters, a height surpassing the Statue of Liberty in New York. After being fueled up, the entire launch vehicle weighed an astonishing 2,883,900 kg. The building to assemble the launch vehicle and the Apollo module was completed in 1966. It remained as the building with the largest ground area in the world. The four gates that lead to each area were 139 meters high, each taking 45 minutes to open.

The Saturn V rocket moved to the spaceport a few days ago from the assembly building on a purpose-built Crawler-Transporter. At night, the Saturn V looked like a giant sword made by the gods as it stood majestically over the Cape. Looking up at the massive machine from below, it was hard not to be bewildered by this absolute marvel of human technology.

Chapter 317 To Space

The elevator continued to rise on Launch Umbilical Tower, and the three astronauts got further and further away from the ground. Zhang Heng raised his head and looked toward the distant sky, where the crimson sun rose over the coastline. Light and dark perfectly intertwined at this moment, as if captured in time and frozen on film.

"I hope we'll get to enjoy such a beautiful sight again," Collins whispered from the side. Although the astonishing height of Saturn V gave an illusion that the elevator would never reach the top, it eventually stopped in front of the bridge. The NASA technician opened the elevator door for them and nodded. At the same time, engineers had also completed the final inspections before the launch. The three of them walked across the bridge linking rocket and tower and ingressed into the narrow command module.

Zhang Heng tried his best to keep his spacesuit away from the complicated instruments and cables around him. At the same time, he found his seat, and the door of the command module slowly closed behind him. Only the three of them were left in the spacecraft, where Armstrong and Collins were both weathered and experienced NASA astronauts. They had completed space missions before; hence the two were very calm. But compared to Armstrong's unchanged looks, there was a slight hint of nervousness on Collins' face.

After all, a series of unfortunate events had just happened at NASA. The mysterious infectious diseases, and the crazy attrition of the training camp... all these seemed to only confirm the widely spread rumor of God didn't want humans landing on the moon.' Even with Collins' steady-as-a-rock mental state, it was difficult for him to completely ignore these external interferences. But when the mission started, he quickly devoted himself to it.

Like the original Apollo 11 mission recorded in history, NASA still arranged for Armstrong to be the commander and Collins as the command and service module pilot. As for Zhang Heng, he replaced Buzz Aldrin as the lunar module pilot. Collins was also the only person who did not set foot on the moon during the Apollo 11 mission because one crew needed to be in the command module when the lunar module separated. If Armstrong and Zhang Heng could not return to Earth, Collins would then fly the command module back to Earth alone.

His situation was the best amongst the three, almost having guaranteed that he would come home, provided the machinery did not fail. But he had to pay a price for that safety, and that was him not getting on the moon for the first time. In terms of mission priority, he had a higher position than Zhang Heng, the lunar module pilot. After talking a little more during the quarantine period, Zhang Heng had

become more familiar with Armstrong and Collins. Because the experienced duo returned to the team relatively late, the three did not get the opportunity to train together. This once made NASA's executives worried about the chemistry between the three. Unfortunately, they had no better solutions, and could only create an environment that coaxed them to familiarize themselves with each other during the quarantine period. Thanks to that, Zhang Heng got to confirm something that he was unsure of before.

Whatever happened in the parallel quest wasn't co-related with the normal quest, and Armstrong had no memory of his time working with Zhang Heng at the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory 14 years ago. This could be seen from Armstrong's expressions when the two met again later. Armstrong seemed as if he was looking at a stranger.

Zhang Heng was sad as he thought about it, knowing that this would happen when he returned to the main quest. Fourteen years had passed, and Zhang Heng's appearance hadn't changed one bit. He hadn't aged too. Nobody would have thought this possible to happen to anybody, and besides, how would one coin up a convincing explanation to explain this phenomenon? Regarding what happened after the two were separated, Zhang Heng had more or less read up about it on the internet and books.

Armstrong married college sweetheart Janet Elizabeth Shearon in 1956, and the couple had three children together. Karen, his daughter, was diagnosed with a malignant tumor and lost the ability to speak and walk. Not too long after that, Karen tragically passed away on Armstrong and Janet's wedding anniversary. The incident greatly affected Armstrong, which was why Zhang Heng was quieter when he saw him for the second time. Armstrong was one tough cookie. Through his tribulations, he never once grieved in front of anyone.

He later applied to NASA to be an astronaut. In addition to his passion for flying, he wanted to escape reality, and perhaps only through high-intensity training and work could he temporarily forget the pain of losing his daughter. Subsequently, his marriage did not end well too.

In 1989, Janet left a note for Armstrong at the dinner table, requesting an end to their 38-year marriage. In Armstrong's words:

"Our marriage is like a failed flight. It collapses silently... If possible, I still want to say, I love my wife, I am sorry..." But at this moment, as Armstrong sat in the cabin, he did not think about all these things. He focussed all his thoughts and energy on this mission, a reason why NASA identified him as a stable and reliable leader. In a sense, although Armstrong and Zhang Heng lived at different times, they had many similarities and could see each others' shadows from the other.

There was a tacit understanding between the two at the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory, and they returned to the Apollo training camp 14 years later. Although this version of Armstrong didn't remember what happened before, the subtle sense of understanding between the two hadn't completely disappeared. Armstrong could feel it as well. He and Zhang Heng were seeing each other for the first time, but it felt like a reunion between old friends, and Zhang Heng seemed to know his family situation and his background information very well.

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Mission control in Houston initialized a two-minute countdown before the launch of the Saturn V. Everyone within the radius had all evacuated to safety. Today, over a million people had come from all over the country just to witness the historic launch. Other than that, dozens of TV cameras were rolling, broadcasting the whole process to the entire world. Zhang Heng tugged on his seatbelts for the last time to make sure that he was secure.

The countdown was now down to the last 15 seconds, and internal guidance was activated... Then with 9 seconds left, the ground trembled as five F1 engines of the first stage ignited with a thunderous roar. They were soon at full thrust. Approximately 12,000 kg of rocket-grade kerosene was injected into the engines and burned every second, enough fuel to fill up 15 fighter jets. The fiery inferno at the bottom of the rocket ejected with a cloud of smoke that could be seen from miles away. Then, the ungodly thrust they generated lifted the behemoth Saturn V slowly off the ground.

Chapter 318 Mission Accomplished

Zhang Heng felt like he was experiencing a giant earthquake. Everything around him shook violently, and despite how sturdy the whole vehicle was built, the way each screw clanged and vibrated made them seem like they would fall apart at any minute.

As the rocket lifted off the ground, the powerful acceleration threw its passengers in the command module back into their aluminum alloy seats. It felt as if a gorilla sat on their chests, and even the simple movement of raising an arm became an arduous task. Fortunately, Zhang Heng trained for this very situation in the space center and was no stranger to the massive g-forces their bodies were subjected to while on the ascent.

The numbers on the display board kept jumping at a frantic pace!

135 seconds after liftoff, the central engine shut down. At 150 seconds, the other four F-1 engines around the periphery were cut off. When the first stage was exhausted of fuel, the Saturn V rocket had already reached an altitude of more than sixty-eight thousand meters.

Explosive charges separated the first stage from the interstage ring, and along with the Launch Escape System, they both separated from the vehicle and subsequently fell into the ocean.

The second stage could begin its job. The J-2 engines were ignited, and the entire vehicle increased its velocity from a 'modest' 9,200 kilometers per hour to a terrifying 24,600 kilometers per hour, sling-shooting it into the upper atmosphere in one fell swoop. The entire process lasted for a full six minutes until the second stage ran out of fuel. It was quickly discarded as well. Now that the entire launch vehicle was about a tenth of its original weight, it was the third-stage's turn to engage and keep the vehicle's trajectory. Apollo 11 continued to accelerate, and compared to liftoff, the awful vibrations in the cabin had calmed considerably.

The third stage shut down automatically after burning for precisely 2.75 minutes. The Saturn V launch vehicle carrying the Lunar Module had reached its escape velocity of 28,000 kilometers per hour, successfully entering Earth's orbit.

The moment the announcement of successful orbit was made, mission control in Houston erupted into roars of cheers and applause. It meant that the launch phase was a success and was now over. When the engines were shut down, thrust levels dropped to 0% in just half a second. With a slight jolt, the

pressure on Zhang Heng's chest magically dissipated, and suddenly, he found himself floating above his seat. Thankfully, the seat belts kept him firmly strapped, and he wasn't about to fly off anywhere.

He had read many books and watched countless movies about space, even witnessing the launch of Shenzhou 5, and fully comprehended every step of the moon landing. Now that it was actually happening, and that he was physically in the thick of it, it was an entirely different feeling altogether.

Right now, they were orbiting the Earth at an altitude of 166 kilometers. When their helmets were removed, they floated from their hands like feathers. The view of mother Earth finally came into sight through the porthole of the spacecraft.

Words failed to describe the otherworldly sight presented before them. An azure planet all alone in the deep, dark velvety sky. An arc-shaped horizon looming from the mists of the atmosphere, where thousands of tiny clouds drifted silently over the blue ocean. The ground was like a vast palette with a bright amalgamation of colors. They transitioned from yellow deserts to undulating mountains to dark green rainforests. The scene invoked indescribable awe and a landslide of emotions flooding through the hearts of the astronauts. It was a moment where everyone became speechless and dumbfounded.

Even Zhang Heng, who had been calm and composed all the while, found himself a little dazed, as he gazed at his homeworld from high, high above.

Just then, a series of system prompts echoed in his ear.

(Admire Earth from space – Mission complete...]

[Returning in four days...] [Successfully boarded the Saturn V launch vehicle – 10 game points. Please view the character panel for more details...] (Successfully entered Earth's orbit – 20 game points. Please view the character panel for more details...]

[Successfully maintained continuous weightlessness for more than 500 seconds – 10 game points. Please view the character panel for more details...]

"Isn't it beautiful?" Collins unbuckled his seatbelt and pushed himself with his legs to Zhang Heng's position. "Once you've seen this view, you will never be able to forget it for the rest of your life. Congratulations, David. You are now a real astronaut. But you'll only be able to get your golden brooch when you return to earth."

On the other side of the spacecraft, a rare smile crept onto Armstrong's lips. No matter how many times he had been to space, it was hard not to be completely immersed in earth's beauty from miles above.

Right now, though, there was other important work to be done. Apollo 11 would stay in earth's orbit for a period of time, and the spacecraft would use that time to conduct final inspections. Then, Apollo 11 Saturn would once again reignite its engines and officially begin the journey to the moon.

This step was also known as the trans-lunar injection.

At this point, although Zhang Heng had already completed the primary mission and gained 50 game points, he was still four days away from the return date. So, he had no other option but to remain in space and complete the moon landing mission with Armstrong and Collins.

Soon, it was confirmed that all systems were in order and that there were no problems with navigation. The spacecraft was pointing in the right direction. The third stage's J-2 engines ignited again after 148 minutes, and with its last remaining bit of fuel, the spacecraft officially left earth's orbit.

The Saturn V launch vehicle had now completed its duty.

Next, the skills of the three men on board would be put to the test.

It was a hairy maneuver that involved separating the Apollo Command and Service Module (CSM) from its adapter, turning the CSM around, and docking its nose to the Lunar Module before pulling the combined spacecraft away from the third stage. It meant the pilot in charge would have to pitch up the CSM 180 degrees, make a U-turn and fly the front of the rocket before docking with it. Then, they would have to extract the Lunar Module and discard the third stage, no longer useful at this point.

While a good portion of these perilous in-flight operations would be assisted by mission control on the ground, the entire docking process required manual operation, and even the slightest error could bring catastrophic consequences.

"The next part is all you," Armstrong told Collins.

The latter nodded and took a deep breath.

Collins separated the CSM from the rocket and gave the thrusters a little power. After he was 300 meters away, he completed the rotation. Then, at a velocity of 2 meters per second, the entire assembly reconnected with the Lunar module.

To avoid distracting Collins throughout the entire process, neither Zhang Heng nor Armstrong said a single word, merely observing quietly through the portholes above their heads.

Collins used the gas thrusters and gingerly adjusted the orientation and position of the spacecraft as if picking up a diamond with tweezers. His hands that gripped the joysticks were firm and consistent. In the end, with the slightest tremor on the bulkhead, he successfully connected the claws of the command and service module into the docking ring on the rocket, flawless and without a single error.

Three hours had passed since liftoff. Apollo 11 officially bid farewell to planet Earth and was on its way to the moon that was 300,000 kilometers away.

Chapter 319 Moon Landing

"Err, have any of you seen my gloves?" Collins asked. He was hugging a bowl of pork and dehydrated baked potatoes when he popped out of nowhere like a specter.

"I don't know. But I think it floated past my head a minute ago," Zhang Heng replied.

"And you just watched it fly away like that?"

"It seems so."

"Alright."

"You can go look in the Lunar Module. It probably went in that direction."

“Collins, did you take the wrong toothbrush?” Armstrong poked his head out from the door, his expression grim.

“Did I? I remember putting my name on it.”

“Yes, and you put it on my toothbrush,” Armstrong grunted. “Also, remember to clean the fuel cell. Whose turn is it?”

Zhang Heng raised his hand, “It’s mine.” “I’ll do it,” Collins cut in. “Don’t the two of you have something really big to do today?” he chuckled and patted Zhang Heng on the shoulder. “You must return safely.”

“Don’t worry about me. Neil will return safely,” said Zhang Heng. Collins’ brows furrowed, unable to understand what Zhang Heng meant.

Right at that moment, mission control came over the radio, “Apollo 11, this is Houston. You will enter the moon’s orbit in fifteen minutes. Over.”

“Roger that, Houston. We’ll be ready. Over,” Armstrong answered. He turned to Zhang Heng, “You haven’t had breakfast, right. Eat more. We have lots of work waiting for us once we land on the moon. We won’t have much time then.”

Zhang Heng nodded, knowing anyhow that he wouldn’t be staying long on the moon. He looked at his Tissot watch and saw that only one minute was left before 5:55. According to his calculations based on the game’s time flow, he only had four hours left in this quest.

It was also why he told Collins that Neil would return safely. He himself, on the other hand, would leave the scene and never set foot inside the Command and Service Module again.

Twenty minutes later, the three stopped what they were doing and stood in front of the porthole. The view outside was much clearer, and they saw the surface of the moon in great detail. Right now, Apollo 11 was only a hundred kilometers away from the moon.

The moon itself didn’t emit its own light, but it could reflect approximately 7% of visible light. Through the porthole, they could see craters and ravines that pockmarked the surface of the moon—much like a honeycomb. Zhang Heng knew that it was plagioclase, a type of volcanic rock that resulted from the cooling and crystallization of magma which formed the lunar crust. The lunar mantle was of stronger basalt, containing more iron than the crust. As for the innermost core, molten iron with a small amount of sulfur and nickel made up most of it.

“Alright, looks like we’re at our destination,” said Collins. “We’ll have to separate soon. I hope you won’t miss me too much.”

“Thank you, Michael. When I’m not around, you can eat all the chicken salad you want,” said Zhang Heng.

“I won’t take that as a joke,” Collins pretended to look serious. Then two seconds later, he continued, “Take care, the both of you. I will be waiting here. Let’s return to earth together.”

Armstrong merely nodded, saying nothing.

Zhang Heng spent the remainder of his time preparing for the landing, omitting all the daily necessities, only carrying his game items. He put on his EVA spacesuit and entered the lunar module "Eagle" with Armstrong. Armstrong then closed the hatch behind them.

"Houston, this is Eagle. David and I have entered the Lunar Module. Landing legs are deployed. Everything's in position. Over."

"Eagle, this is Houston. Please confirm that you are using ethylene glycol line 1." "This is Eagle. We are using line 1. Over." Zhang Heng answered.

Then Collins's voice came over the radio. "This is CSM Columbia. All twelve latches are fastened. Switching to manual mode. Eagle will separate at an estimated time of twenty minutes."

"Roger that."

"Wish you guys good luck."

To reduce as much weight as possible, no seats were installed in the lunar module. Instead, Zhang Heng and Armstrong had to stand in front of the control panel. As the lunar module's pilot, Zhang Heng would take on the task of flying it. He would need to gingerly maneuver the Eagle and land it at the designated coordinates.

This would be a massive challenge for him, but it was at times like this that Zhang Heng was at his calmest.

At first, Armstrong was worried that Zhang Heng wasn't trained enough, but when he saw the look in his eyes, he knew that he was ready.

"OK, we are about to begin." After counting down, Collins pushed the button to separate the CSM from the Lunar Module.

"This is Houston. Please remain in flight mode. Eagle, keep an eye on your fuel. Your maximum continuous ignition time is 910 seconds."

"Roger that, Houston." Zhang Heng became extra focussed, as he prepped the Lunar Module for landing.

However, it did not take long for them to run into trouble. The warning light on controls suddenly flashed.

"Executive overflow. We lost radar," said Zhang Heng as he glanced at the warning indicator.

"Roger that, Eagle. Land at your discretion."

"Roger that, Houston," Armstrong answered.

But before the two of them could even breathe, the warning light started flashing again. "Program alarm," Zhang Heng frowned, "Error code 1202. What is this, Houston?"

"Houston to Eagle, 1202, received. Please hold. We are checking."

Zhang Heng turned off the alarm manually. Lo and behold, less than a minute later, the program alarm rang yet again. Then, one of the worst things that could happen, actually happened. The altimeter suddenly froze at 4000 feet. It meant Zhang Heng would have to land relying on his bare judgment and the naked eye. He was practically flying blind.

The situation was not looking optimistic, but the two had no other options. When they descended to about 2500 feet, Zhang Heng and Armstrong realized that they had overshot the predicted landing zone.

Now, as if to mock them in the face, the fuel gauge failed a short while later. Zhang Heng last confirmed that with the fuel left in the propulsion system, the engines could still ignite for about 30 seconds. A large, deep valley appeared in front of the Eagle. With the radar out of service, there was no way for Zhang Heng to gauge how deep or wide the valley was.

He had to make a split-second decision whether to risk a high-speed crash landing in the deep valley or find a way to fly past it.

At this critical juncture, the wireless AirPods that Zhang Heng put alongside the game items suddenly came on by itself. Then a familiar voice said, "Friendly reminder, you have only 23 seconds of fuel left!"

Chapter 320 Enjoy The Victory

Zhang Heng glanced at Armstrong and found him staring at the valley in front of him. It seemed he didn't notice the voice coming from the communication channel. As for mission control in Houston, every line seemed secure, and there wasn't any sign of interference there. Zhang Heng quickly came to realize that he was the only one that could hear the voice.

"You need to make a choice. You have only 19 seconds of fuel left," the voice reminded him.

Zhang Heng looked down again and found that the location was too rough for landing. The valley on the opposite side seemed no less dangerous as well. He also was oblivious to what lay beyond the valley. The surface might be just as rough on the terrain he was flying above right now. If he knew the exact amount of remaining fuel, he was more inclined to bet on this spot, but now, with the hint from the mysterious voice, Zhang Heng finally made up his mind and pointed the spacecraft to the valley. "Very brave choice, you still have 13 seconds of fuel left, 640 feet above the ground."

The voice in the communication channel continued, and it gave Zhang Heng the figures he needed the most. It allowed him to regain control of Eagle's current status after losing the instruments. As the seconds passed, the lunar module got closer and closer to the valley. If the commander were to be someone else, he might question Zhang Heng's decision at a time like this. Commander Armstrong, however, remained silent, deciding to trust Zhang Heng's judgment.

The warning alarm beeped again, and a red light flashed. Since it was noisy and loud, Armstrong instantly disabled them to prevent Zhang Heng from being distracted. The Lunar Module gradually descended, and they were quickly soaring above the valley. Looking down from above, however, they only saw darkness – like a huge mouth, waiting to eat the spacecraft alive.

"...7 seconds of fuel remaining, 315 feet above ground."

Because of the quickly depleting fuel, Zhang Heng decided to shut down the thrusters. He would only reignite them after gliding for some distance. The moon's gravity was only a sixth of Earth's, and even if fuel did run out, Eagle wouldn't just fall to the surface immediately.

The valley beneath them was approaching fast. Fortunately, with the last 5 seconds of fuel left, Zhang Heng finally saw the other side of the valley. It was a very flat terrain, an excellent place to land the spacecraft. So the only question that remained was if they had enough fuel to get there.

After the initial observation, Zhang Heng estimated they still needed to travel for about 1.7 kilometers, and it would take a minute and a half to get there at their current speed. They were now less than 50 feet from the ground and almost touched the cliffs that lined the valley. Zhang Heng had to spend another two seconds of precious fuel to boost the altitude of the Lunar Module.

Now, he needed to adjust the Lunar Module's position and decelerate it during his landing. In other words, he had to make good use of the remaining fuel on board.

Like a shadowy specter, the lunar module glided silently over the valley.

"32 feet..."

Zhang Heng's hand got colder and colder as he grabbed the joysticks. The Lunar Module was headed in the right direction, but they were at a shallow angle of descent, which meant the vehicle could hit the rock wall before it could land. As he flew closer and closer to his landing point, the Lunar Module missed the rock wall by less than 15 feet. Zhang Heng remained extremely focussed, not bothering to celebrate after escaping the close-call. He coasted the spacecraft forward for a short distance before he entered the landing procedure.

Then, he triggered the thrusters, and running on vapors at this point, they lit up, bringing the spacecraft to a stop. The thrusters fizzed out their last breaths, and once all the fuel had been used up, the four landing legs of the Eagle were already on the surface of the moon.

"Houston, this is Jinghai Base. The Eagle has landed," Armstrong reported. Despite crossing a massive hurdle, his tone remained stoic and hadn't changed a bit.

In a jiffy, massive roars and cheers erupted through Mission Control Center in Houston, and everyone ran around in excitement with everything they could grab in their hands. They had good reason to get this elated because, for the very first time in history, a human had landed on the moon!

NASA threw in everything they had just for this day to happen. The doubts and immense pressure they faced from the public meant that they had to put in the double effort and prove themselves worthy. When their dream finally became a reality, the teams couldn't help but tear up. Zhang Heng was pleased, and although he knew that this was just a game, he still felt as if he was part of history now.

"Congratulations, ten out of ten for the perfect landing," the voice on the communicator said. "You will soon enter my favorite session. The Neil Armstrong beside you is about to utter my favorite sentence. This is my favorite scene in our entire human history."

"It's unbelievable, isn't it? Five hundred years ago, most people believed that the Earth was flat. Now, you are standing here on the moon 300,000 kilometers away from Earth. There is no oxygen here, but your spacesuits allow you to breathe. Science and technology forever changed lifestyles and cognition.

Despite that, some people still believe that the Earth is flat... they held a party in North Carolina not too long ago. But this is not important now. Our brain is a good thing, but you can't expect everyone to have a good brain... well.. the point is, technology is great, isn't it?"

"Who are you?" Zhang Heng frowned. "Our encounter in Area 51 wasn't a coincidence, right? Why did you infiltrate our quest? Are you a player? What is your purpose of looking for me?"

The moment he spoke, Zhang Heng realized that the voice belonged to the man calling himself Einstein. It explained why the Bluetooth headset suddenly turned on by itself. Zhang Heng didn't know the origins and identity of Einstein, but judging by the circumstances of their first meeting, he was sure Einstein harbored no malicious intent towards him. Also, Einstein had been an immense help with the landing.

Einstein smiled when he heard Zhang Heng's voice.

"Times have changed. Four hundred years ago, it was alright burning Giordano Bruno to death to prevent him from spreading the heliocentric theory. Our time has come; the older generation is getting weaker. They, however, are not willing to be forgotten by time, wishing to use this game to redeem their past glory. Of course, we all know it's just a lie that they fool themselves with.

"They've lost a long time ago and have been completely defeated. As far as I know, some of them live worse than dogs. This is truly saddening. They should have just killed themselves hundreds of years ago, and perhaps, they could at least die with a bit of decency. Natural selection and survival of the fittest. These are the wise words of Darwin. Victory will always belong to the newer generation. So my advice for you is to choose your side carefully. You don't want to board a sinking ship like the Titanic. Beneath the gorgeous robe could lay a lice infestation . I like you. We will meet again. Finally, enjoy the victory. Not everyone can stand beside Neil Armstrong on the moon."