

48 Hours 101

Chapter 101: Black Sail VI

As the merchant ship was attacked by the pirates, it sustained some damage. Though nothing severe, it was also a bad idea to ignore them. Quickly, the two newly recruited carpenters were asked to fix the ship.

Once Owen was gone, Marvin could finally breathe a sigh of relief. Wiping away the sweat on his forehead, he said, "That was so close. It's so scary. I really thought that they would have forced me on that small boat. I don't wish to die there. Luckily, the two of us get to remain on board. On the bright side, though we are now part of a pirate ship, we can at least get to live to see tomorrow."

"You looked really nervous on the deck just now. Why? Worried that I might replace you?"

"Huh? No. No. No. I was worried that they might hurt you. All of them are merciless monsters who would kill in a blink! I have to applaud your bravery just now. I don't even dare to look 'em in the eye when I talk."

"Marvin, I'm really curious. What would you have done if I replaced you just now? Will you tell them everything that happened in the galley?"

"What?! How is that even possible? You saved my life. I will never betray you, no matter what!"

"Good. That's what I want to hear because I can assure you that if you tell them what really happened there, that won't be a responsibility you can just shake off like that"

Marvin faked a smile, seeming like he did not believe a single thing Zhang Heng told him.

"Do you know why I stabbed the pirate three times with that small potato knife after I killed him?"

"You... you!"

Marvin finally displayed a different reaction this time. Earlier, he could not figure out why Zhang Heng would keep stabbing a dead horse. Right now, he had finally figured out the intention behind his 'pointless move.'

"It is challenging to wound somebody from their front and back at the same time. However, this double injury could easily be achieved if a second person attacked as well. If you are going to betray me, you can go ahead and tell your story while I tell them my version of the story as well. In the end, the corpse will decide whose story is more believable."

As they were talking, they suddenly heard somebody shouting.

"Victor! Victor! Where the f*ck are you? You ain't getting your loot if you don't come out right now!"

A few pirates were in the corridor and were trying to look for Victor. Zhang Heng quickly stood up and fixed his gaze on Marvin.

“It’s getting late. I should be off to claim my gun right now, and you should go and cook. We’ll deal with the body when everyone is asleep tonight. All we need to do is to toss the barrel into the sea, and that’ll be the end of our troubles.”

After putting Marvin’s mind to ease, Zhang Heng looked for Dufresne, the one in charge of the armory. Upon meeting him, he received a gun and a dagger with a crack on it. He had been entrusted to a new mission even before he could examine the weapons he just got.

And this critical mission was to...

Clean the deck.

On regular days like these, pirates were not very different from ordinary sailors. Frankly, most pirates on this ship had been, in fact, regular sailors before they became what they were. Some of them could not stand their ex-captains, whereas some wanted to go on an adventure. Of course, all some wanted was to get rich fast. Everyone had their own reasons for why they chose the pirate’s life.

Naturally, nobody in their right mind loved to stay in filthy places. Even the sloppy and messy pirates were no exception, and this had nothing to do with the love for cleanliness. There were simply too many things on the high seas that could kill a man. A pleasant and clean environment would surely help to improve morale on board. Besides, a clean ship would surely lower the risk of contracting diseases.

That was why the pirates would clean the ship thoroughly from time to time. This was especially true after a raid, where blood and bodies were everywhere. Zhang Heng and the other five pirates spent a good two hours scrubbing down the deck to make sure every drop of blood had been washed off.

Before sunset, Marvin managed to cook a good meal for everyone as well. The food was surprisingly delicious. It was at that time that Zhang Heng knew Marvin had passed the test. They would allow him to stay on and cook for them.

The value of a ship’s cook was never to be underestimated. The long, endless days out at sea caused unbearable boredom to plague the men. When they were bored, they could cause unnecessary problems. An excellent cook could usually soothe the angsty pirates by feeding them delicious food. Often, nobody would complain when the cook received the same reward as a cannoneer even though they did not contribute to any battle.

Soon, nightfall. The captain and helmsman returned to the Sea Lion with two-thirds of the pirates. The remaining ones had been asked to stay on the merchant ship under the command of Owen. In other words, Owen had become the temporary captain of this ship.

Almost all the pirates were feeling extremely excited tonight. It was a total victory. In comparison, they shed only a small amount of blood to take possession of the entire merchant ship. In total, there were three dead, and five pirates suffered light injuries.

This achievement had called for a grand celebration.

The place was alive with the roar of loud chatter. Glasses clinked, and bagpipes skirled. The name, Victor, arose amongst them, where most were saying that he had secretly returned to the Sea Lion during the battle.

Some even said that Victor still owed them money, and he might have fled the ship in fear. Everyone kept bursting into laughter at the mention of his name.

Suddenly, Owen entered the galley, causing the commotion to die down a little.

“The Sea Lion has just informed me that they have not seen Victor for some time. Who here saw him last?”

Every pirate looked at each other in bewilderment when Owen asked the question. Victor either had to be alive or killed in action. They had never heard of someone disappearing during a fight.

“Could he have fallen overboard?”

“Not possible. I made sure to check the surrounding waters before I hoisted the sails.”

“He is right. I saw him running to the lower decks. He was amongst the first to go down there. After that, I did not see him anymore.”

No one could give a straight answer. That was when Owen turned around to look at his new recruits. When he was still in the kitchen, he saw that there was nothing wrong with them. They behaved entirely differently from the pirates, but it was totally understandable since they were the victims.

“Alright! Who’s managing the booty this afternoon? Meet me in the captain’s quarters in five minutes,” said Owen.

Chapter 102: Black Sail VII

Having settled his dinner, Zhang Heng checked on his character panel. He noticed that it had been updated.

Name: Zhang Heng

Gender: Male

Age: 19

Player ID: 07958

Games completed: 3

Current game points: 777

Items in possession: Shadow Key (E), Shadow Moment (D)

Skills: Piano LV 1. Language proficiency LV 1 (able to communicate in three languages). Modifying and repairing LV 1. Skiing LV 1. Rock climbing LV 1. Archery LV 2. Outdoor survival skills LV 2. Driving LV 2. Shooting LV 2.

Evaluation: Player is protected by a shadow. He knows how to drive, shoot a gun, proficient in archery, and can survive in the wilderness. Player has the ability to protect himself. No other outstanding issues. He is estimated to be able to complete at least seven rounds of the game.

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After three months of practice, coupled with the extra 24 hours he had in the real world, Zhang Heng had increased his rock climbing level from LV 0 to LV 1. Right now, scaling most man-made rock walls wasn't much of an issue for him. As for natural rock walls, however, there were different angles to worry about, and the compound of the rock greatly affected its climbing difficulty.

Shooting and skiing were the two new skills that he learned during his quest. Until now, his shooting was the best skill amongst all the others he possessed, spending only a month to improve it to LV 1. During the night he escaped the base camp with Simone, his hidden potential was showcased as he went up against the mysterious shooter that was almost invisible in the woods. Not only did he win the shootout, but he even managed to increase his shooting skills to LV 2 as well.

That was not the end of it, though. When he was with Simone in Sweden, they would both constantly head to the woods to hunt, where Simone would teach him everything she knew. In other words, Zhang Heng's shooting skill was actually higher than LV 2. The only thing he was unsure of was how far off he was from LV 3.

Besides, he noticed that upgrading from LV 2 to LV 3 was a tall order to say the least. Being at LV 2 meant Zhang Heng could perform those skills better than the benchmark.

For example, Zhang Heng felt that no matter what he did, he could no longer improve his archery skill from LV 2 to LV 3. He would need the assistance of external factors and move above and beyond his capabilities if he wanted to stimulate his archery prowess.

The shootout at the Finnish lakeside was an example of an external stimulant—however, it was merely a chance encounter, and if possible, Zhang Heng wished that he would never have to risk his life like that ever again.

After reading all the information on his character panel, he turned it off. The ocean turned out to increase in ferocity during the night, violently rocking the vessel as high waves crashed into the boat with no respite.

His dinner churned in his stomach, and he felt queasy. This, however, wasn't his first experience on a ship. That said, his journey only lasted half a day, and seasickness didn't present itself in such a short period.

It was a whole new ball game now, having being stuffed inside a tiny room, coming in contact with sweaty pirates who had not bathed in a long time. The foul air in the cramped space soon turned his stomach upside down. The rocking of the boat was no lullaby either.

In the end, Zhang Heng could not hold back and wrenched his guts out, puking out everything he had eaten in a matter of seconds.

“What a joke?! Is this your first time at sea?”

“I'm starting to regret that he joined us.”

Since they had nothing better to do, it was basic instinct for them to look for something to entertain themselves with. Fortunately, there was still kindness amongst them. A pirate of African origin handed Zhang Heng a barrel, asking him to throw up into it. He even brought a glass of water.

“Thank you.”

After turning his stomach inside out, Zhang Heng felt much better. He gave his mouth a quick wash with the drinking water as he thanked the pirate.

“You are welcome. Don’t mind them. They may have a mean mouth, but they have good hearts. You will know I’m telling the truth after you stay with us for some time. My name is Goodwin, the Sea Lion’s cannoneer,” he continued while extending his hand to Zhang Heng.

“Zhang Heng.”

With one hand holding the barrel, Zhang Heng quickly put out his other arm to shake the black man’s hand.

“I saw your performance on the deck earlier. Awe-inspiring stuff, I must say. What did you do before this? A soldier?”

“Yes. Something along those lines. I fought in a war before.”

“Did you win?”

“Not really, but at least the person I cared about survived the war.”

“You are one lucky guy. I was in a war before this, but unfortunately, we lost the battle in the end.”

Goodwin pulled his collar aside, displaying a badly burnt scar on his left chest to Zhang Heng.

“My tribe was defeated by another tribe. They killed my father, mother, and all the elderly during the war. After that, they captured me, my brother, and my little six-year-old sister. They then sold us to a gang of slave traders. We were being shoved into a ship. I don’t remember how long I was down the deep, dark hole. All I can remember was that we were all shackled and we were packed in the worst unsanitary conditions you could think of. I could hardly move and breathe inside the hold. When we arrived at the place they called the New World, there were less than 80 of us still breathing out of the 300 that came. Oh, and my little brother died in my arms.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

The trading of black slaves started in the 15th century, reaching its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries. To carry out their massive expansion plans, the colonial powers needed a tremendous amount of manpower. Clearly, immigrants from Europe weren’t enough, so, the crafty powers that be turned their sights to Africa.

Europe and several other countries competed against each other to build trade centers or fortresses over there. Their goal was to mess up tribal relations. When they fought, they would incite trouble by suggesting that the winning side capture the losers. They then would buy the slaves from the winners. Some would even go as far as to hunt the natives on their own.

The era that Zhang Heng was in right now was the era where a triangular trade thrived. A large number of business people would travel from Europe to Africa to purchase black slaves, consecutively selling to large plantations in America. After that, they would purchase gold, coffee, and cotton from America and send them back to Europe, a venture which raked in massive profits for the prospective merchants.

This culture lasted until the end of the beginning of the 19th century. England, America, and other countries started to ban the slave trade. Although such culture no longer gained the support of the governments, certain quarters still did it in secret. The trading of black slaves officially ended by the 19th century.

“I was working on a coffee plantation in Charleston for eight years. After that, the owner sold me to a ship, and I became a sailor. I was forced to work nonstop and was fed with the least food amongst all the sailors until she found us.”

COMMENT

“Who found you?”

“The Sea Lion. She gives me freedom and accepts me for who I am. The people here see me as their partner and brother. During our battles, we would watch out for each other’s backs. There’s no such thing as slavery here. Everyone is equal, and all of us here are from the same place.”

“Where?”

“Nassau.”

Chapter 103: Black Sail VIII

That was the first time Zhang Heng heard the pirates mentioning the word ‘Nassau.’ He recalled that his main goal for this quest was to set up base at Nassau and establish his own kingdom there. Naturally, Zhang Heng was curious to know more about the place.

Just before he could find out more details about Nassau, he felt like vomiting again. Once again, he held the barrel tightly and belched whatever that was left in his stomach.

“Rest well. You will be fine after a good sleep. I shall take my leave now.”

Zhang Heng realized that he wasn't doing well both physically and mentally. Right now, he wasn't even thinking straight anymore. Initially, he had made plans with Marvin to take care of the body tonight.

In his current state, it would be impossible for him to see the mission through. He felt worse with every passing second as if being tossed into a washing machine. Yet again, something came up to his throat, and he belched once more into the barrel. This whole vomiting business lasted until late that night. Finally, he passed out of fatigue. When he opened his eyes again, he saw a familiar face looking at him.

“You are finally awake! I have made you some fish soup. The fish was captured this morning, freshness guaranteed. Drink it to sustain your body,” said Marvin while placing the piping hot bowl of fish soup next to him.

Marvin seemed to be genuine, looking at him like he sincerely wanted him to recover as soon as possible. Zhang Heng turned to his side, looking at the bowl of fish soup and the biscuits beside it. Instead of gobbling them up, he asked Marvin a question.

“Why are you here?”

“Oh. Goodwin told Mr. Owen that you were gravely ill. So, Mr. Owen asked around to see if anyone was willing to take care of you. Immediately, I volunteered since my schedule is free after I had served meals for two pirates.”

Marvin realized that Zhang Heng had a hard time trusting him. So, he went ahead and took a sip of the fish soup and took a bite of the biscuits to prove that it wasn't poisoned.

“Actually, you don't have to tread so lightly around me. We are literally in the same boat right now. Bruce, Kenny, you, and I are the only ones still alive. Times like these call for us to work together to face whatever storm coming our way.”

Marvin paused suddenly, cautiously scanning his surroundings with wide eyes. He only resumed the conversation after he made sure there were no eavesdroppers.

“This morning, the pirates searched the ship from top to bottom again. They were looking for Victor, their buddy. Thankfully they missed a few spots in the galley. What's our next move? Will they question us regarding this?”

Zhang Heng gulped down the fish soup and looked at Marvin. Perhaps he was mistaken, but he felt that Marvin's acting skills had gotten a lot better. Before this, it was hard for honest Marvin to hide anything from anyone. Now, Zhang Heng could no longer read Marvin's mind from his facial expressions. Could the harsh circumstances have forced Marvin to improve in such a short time?

Zhang Heng clearly knew that Marvin was an unreliable man. Everything that had happened before this led Zhang Heng to believe that Marvin was, in fact, an incredibly selfish person. It was going to be impossible to so quickly change a nature so deeply rooted in him. He cared only about himself. Once a golden opportunity was presented before him, he would definitely not hesitate to betray those who had placed their faith in him.

For now, they both faced equal risks and opportunities.

The dead body inside the barrel was their common problem, with Marvin having to rely on Zhang Heng to get rid of it. With the corpse still on the ship, Marvin would definitely not do anything to harm Zhang Heng.

Unfortunately, things got even worse for Zhang Heng, as he started vomiting again after drinking the fish soup. This time, it lasted a week.

When the week ended, Zhang Heng had lost almost a quarter of his body weight. Some of the crew even believed he wouldn't make it out alive.

Things like this happened all too often when one was out at sea for extended periods. Due to poor hygiene on the ship, the chances of contracting various diseases increased exponentially for those on

board. With the current era's questionable medical knowledge and equipment, the poor patient would most probably die even if there was a doctor on the ship.

Nobody expected Zhang Heng to be resilient enough to defeat his illness. When he was finally healthy enough to walk around on the ship, he was left with a 100-pound skeleton of a body.

"Oh my god! You look like someone who's never been out to sea! How is that even possible? I thought you were out at sea for at least a month and a half?" asked a perplexed Goodwin.

"That's a long story."

With Goodwin's assistance, Zhang Heng got off his bed and walked to the deck. He could finally breathe in the fresh salty air that he had been craving for over a week now. It was a good feeling, making a recovery from the awful illness. Never in his life had it occurred to him that standing under the sun could be such luxury. For the past week, he had been completely stuck inside his cabin, resting up.

He almost forgot what the world looked like.

"Anyway, welcome back, my friend."

Suddenly, Goodwin saw that Marvin was staring at them.

"I just remembered that I hadn't serviced my weapon. We'll talk later."

Once Goodwin was gone, Marvin quickly strolled towards Zhang Heng, seeming worried and unsettled.

"Thank god you've recovered. I have no idea how I managed to survive the past week. My heart would skip a couple of beats whenever someone comes by the galley. That thing we put inside the barrel is long overdue... I can't even begin to describe the stench anymore. If it wasn't for the smell of smoked fish, they would have turned the galley inside out. Just now, I heard one pirate saying that we will reach land in about three days. We are both dead meat if someone finds out about this."

"I understand your concerns. You have been holding out for so many days. Can you just wait for one more day? With my current condition, I am unable to do anything. Let's do it tomorrow night. I promise we will deal with it."

Though Marvin had started to get terribly anxious, he knew that Zhang Heng was telling the truth. The body should have been dealt with ten days ago. Who would have thought that Zhang Heng would be seasick for an entire week! Right now, there was nothing much that Marvin could do.

If only he were brave enough, it wasn't impossible to dump the barrel into the sea on his own.

Unfortunately, he allowed fear to overcome his mind, not to mention his unhappiness of having to bear the responsibility even though Zhang Heng was the one who killed the pirate.

Chapter 104: Black Sail IX

Afterward, Zhang Heng used the two days he had to do some training. His stamina and strength soon recovered thanks to Marvin's nutritious menus. On the second night, he regained enough strength to

walk around on the ship on his own. That said, he still wasn't running on all cylinders, having just recovered from his harrowing illness.

He and Marvin needed to deal with the body tonight since they were about to set anchor at Nassau tomorrow morning. After the meal, Owen visited Zhang Heng to have a little chat. He wanted Zhang Heng to rest further and told him not to worry about the ship's tasks.

Goodwin was next to visit Zhang Heng, rambling away about his previous job on a supply vessel.

After that, Zhang Heng remained in his cabin until midnight. Every single pirate on the ship was on their hammock, settling in for the night. Zhang Heng then waited another hour for good measure, ensuring the pirates were sound asleep before he sneaked out of bed. He tiptoed past the snoring pirates and headed toward the galley.

Marvin had been anxiously waiting for Zhang Heng in the galley, holding a potato, pretending to skin it. The candle above the table had already burnt halfway. At that moment, all he could think of was to get rid of the body as soon as possible. Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching him from outside.

Marvin blurted without thinking twice, "Mr. Dufresne. I'm almost done. I'm sleeping once I wrap up here..."

Midsentence, he lifted his head and saw that the person wasn't Dufresne but Zhang Heng.

"God damnit! Why are you so late?! Many people have come by asking me why I'm working at such an hour. They will soon get suspicious if I don't go to sleep soon," whispered Marvin as he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Which one do you think is more dangerous? Giving excuses about you being in the kitchen or getting rid of the body while everyone is awake?" Zhang Heng retorted.

"I'm not blaming you for coming late. I just think that there might be better ways to solve this problem..."

"The earlier we settle this problem, the lesser the risk of us getting killed by them. Be it you or me; if you are so concerned about your safety, we should really get rid of the damn body right now."

This time, Marvin said nothing and lifted the barrel with Zhang Heng. The two of them hauled it past the corridor and the storeroom. Finally, they arrived in front of the pirates' cabin. Marvin then took a deep breath before he continued forward.

However, Zhang Heng stopped him from doing so. He had just spotted a pirate getting out from his hammock as he rubbed his eyes. Perhaps he had too much rum at dinner and must have been woken up by the need to empty his bladder. Running out of the cabin, he returned shortly after while holding on to his pants. Without a care in the world, he slumped heavily in his hammock and fell back to sleep within seconds.

As they stood silently as possible for a couple of minutes, Marvin felt his heart thumping so fast; it was about to jump out his throat. He had no idea where he found the courage to haul the barrel all the way

to the staircase near the cabins. Each time there was the slightest twitch or mumble from a sleeping pirate, he would suffer a small heart attack, where he gasped and stopped breathing.

Once they were away from the cabin and arrived on the floor above it, Marvin could finally breathe again.

“What should we do now? Should we go to the upper deck?”

“No. There are people patrolling the spot, and the helmsman is maneuvering the ship. They will definitely see us if we get up there. This floor is supposed to be reserved for passengers, and I see cabins with windows that are definitely big enough for us to get rid of the body. Did you go find out what I asked you to before this?”

“Yes. The room that we were in is currently occupied by the pirates, but two rooms have been left empty because the damage there is too severe. The crew doesn’t have enough wood to fix it. Hence, since it doesn’t affect the ship’s operations, they have decided to leave them as it is for now.”

“Great. Lead the way.”

The two caught their breath for half a minute before they moved again with the heavy barrel, with Marvin walking in front of Zhang Heng. After struggling a short distance, they arrived at the second last room in the corridor. They then glanced at each other before Marvin knocked on the door.

And... there was no response. Immediately, Marvin pushed the door open. Just as expected, there wasn’t a soul to be seen. This particular room had been battered by cannonballs during the previous raid. The wall was completely destroyed, leaving it with a gaping hole. The crew had only used a few planks to plug the wall, knowing that there was still some distance between them and the water below.

Zhang Heng and Marvin could feel the cold sea breeze entering the room the moment they stepped into it.

“This has to be the right spot. Let’s toss the body into the sea right now!”

Marvin closed the door right after he put the barrel on the floor.

“Not now. I don’t see any high waves tonight. The pirates on the upper decks could hear the splash if we toss the barrel into the sea right now,” Zhang Heng murmured as he walked towards the broken wall and examined what lay below.

“What should we do then? We can’t wait any longer! This is the last night for us to deal with the body. If we fail to do it, we might...”

“I did not say we aren’t getting rid of it tonight. It will not benefit me if I delay again. Go and look for some rope and tie it around the body. We just need to lower it down slowly to the sea.”

“Great idea! You are a genius! A traveler thinks so differently when compared to people like me. Let look for a rope now,” replied an excited Marvin.

The smile on his face slowly disappeared as the door creaked open. Fear had caused the bones in his body to shudder involuntarily.

"I'm sorry. Am I disturbing your date?" asked the person standing outside the door.

It was an old pirate with a long beard. He was wearing a broken hat, and Marvin could see a row of rotten teeth as he smiled. The old pirate then landed his attention on the barrel.

"So, all the while, our poor Victor has been inside this barrel, huh?"

Immediately, Zhang Heng unleashed his gun and pointed at the old pirate. To his surprise, he seemed unaffected by the threat.

"Trust me, kid. People have pointed their guns at me more times than I could count. Let me tell you what is going to happen next. I will be killed if you pull the trigger. That is a fact. After that, your gunshot will alert the pirates next to this room. If you're lucky, both of you might get an easy death. Alternatively, they could also capture and drop you both a death sentence. Now... I don't know which one is worse. Taking our age difference into consideration, young men, I don't think that is a wise trade."

Zhang Heng was left speechless. That very moment, he realized that the old pirate's sudden appearance was no coincidence. It appeared he had been tracking them for some time and only decided to confront them tonight. On the bright side, it seemed like the old pirate had no intention to side with Victor. Otherwise, they would have been long confronted by a mob of angry pirates by now.

Cornered and left with no other option, Zhang Heng decided to hear the old pirate out.

Chapter 105: Black Sail X

Zhang Heng slowly lowered his gun.

"Wise move."

Next, the old pirate turned around and looked at Marvin.

"Well, I don't mind standing here for a little chat with you guys. What excuse are you going to come up with if someone passes by?"

Paralyzed by fear, Marvin lost the ability to think logically. So, he turned to look at Zhang Heng. Seeing Zhang Heng nodding, he moved aside and allowed the old pirate to enter the room.

"Thank you so much. To ensure the smoothness of our conversation, I would first like to inform you that the person in the barrel is not my friend. To be honest, I personally disliked what he did when he was still alive. But then again, we are all here to become pirates and not make friends. It's impossible for us to like everyone on the ship, right?" the old pirate said while taking his hat off.

"How did you find us out?" asked Zhang Heng.

"I have noticed that you usually stayed calm in most circumstances. You are still young, but it looks like you have been through much hardship. In my entire life, I have only encountered two people who can stay this calm in any kind of situation. One of them is you, and the other is..."

The old pirate paused suddenly, having no intention to elaborate.

“Your friend right here is not as calm as you. When you were sick, it was nice of him to take care of you and all, but things started getting weird when he visited you seven to eight times a day. I also noticed that he is on edge all the time. I always ask myself: what could make a cook, a man who has no other task but to prepare food, be so skittish. Could it be tomorrow’s menu?”

Suddenly, Marvin’s face turned pale, looking to be on the verge of breaking down. He stumbled to the ground on his knees and started to tremble.

“Don’t believe him! I have nothing to do with this! He was the one who forced me to be part of it. The truth is... I have never laid my fingers on Victor. He inflicted the wound on Victor’s back, not me!”

The old pirate was taken aback by what Marvin told him. He then saw Zhang Heng just standing there, staring at Marvin without the slightest expression on his face.

Marvin grabbed the old pirate’s pants and started to wail like a child. After a while, he realized that something wasn’t right and lifted up his head in an awkward manner.

“Don’t worry. Do you think I would have come here alone if I wanted to avenge Victor?” asked the old pirate while patting Marvin’s back.

“What do you want then?”

Zhang Heng was disgusted by Marvin’s awful acting. So, he attempted to steer the conversation back to the supposed topic.

“It’s simple. I just need some of your kindness and a few small favors. As you can see, I’m getting really old. I don’t plan to come back again when we reach land later. It’s time for me to settle down and prepare for retirement. That is why I need someone to help me retrieve some money that someone owes me.”

“That’s it?”

“I dislike taking advantage of others. The person that you just killed is someone I really hate. So, yes. It is that simple.”

“You should have many acquaintances on this ship, right? Why didn’t you ask for their help instead?”

“You need to understand that things have a nick of getting really complicated when money is involved. However, new guys like you are different. If you dare take my money, I have all the ways to make you spit it out. Besides, I like the fact that you can shoot really well. I think this will be a fine deal between us.”

“Seems like you leave me no choice.”

“You are smart, and I like talking to smart guys like you. Please understand that I have to protect myself in this deal as well. Anyway, I can see that you need help getting rid of the body. You can actually hand over the problem to me. I can help you dispose of it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I know what your concerns are. We will arrive in Nassau tomorrow, and when we set foot on land, there will be people tasked to manage all the ship’s items. That includes the food and raw ingredients in the galley. Your secret will be exposed if you don’t deal with your problem tonight. Unless... you know a person who knows the person tasked to manage the stuff on board. That person will inform the men to leave the galley alone. He will also look for an opportunity to dispose of the body. There are only a few on this ship who can pull off such tricks. You guys are in luck. That person happens to be standing right in front of you.”

“After you get your hands on the body, you will turn around and bite us from our backs, right?”

“Just like what I said, I’m planning on retirement. This will be a one-off deal. When all is done, I will be staying out of your life for good. I think you should place your trust in a harmless old man like me than some other stranger.”

“For example?”

“Like our friend, Goodwin. Isn’t he friendly and nice? He has had a sad past, but he still manages to put on a smile every day. Positive vibes have a way of spreading around the ship, and somehow, he appears right when you need someone to encourage you. I don’t like to add fuel to the fire, but I did hear some rumors about him. The friendly cannoneer, Goodwin, wants to replace Orff as the new helmsman.

So far, he has managed to recruit a group of followers. If this matter makes it to the voting session, you will be required to cast your votes as well. There are three other survivors from this merchant ship as well. They will most likely vote for Goodwin.

That would mean he would get another four voters to side with him. And all he needs to do is tell you nice stuff that goes down well with you. I think he got himself a damn good deal.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

This time, Zhang Heng was surprised by what he heard.

“Before the deal is done, it’s my responsibility to ensure your safety on this ship. Let me give you a piece of advice. Do not get involved in this matter. Our captain is capable of many things. Hence, a large number thinks that Orff’s existence is a useless one, and he has done nothing good enough to impress anyone for the past few years. Frankly, that couldn’t be further from the truth. Orff is a wise man, one that would fulfill all his responsibilities if put under a good captain. Anyone who looks down on him will pay the price ultimately.”

“Who the hell are you?” asked Marvin.

“That’s no secret. Right now, I’m just an old man that is getting ready to retire. But, before all this...”

The old pirate put on his broken hat before he finished his sentence.

Looking up, he continued with gleaming eyes,

“I was the captain of the Sea Lion. That ship over there, she originally belonged to me.”

Chapter 106: Black Sail XI

The next morning, there was a noisy commotion among the pirates as they cleaned themselves up.

“Land ho!” shouted one of the pirates loudly as he came running down from the upper deck.

The pirates fell silent for a few seconds, followed by roaring cheers as they ran to get the first glimpse of land. Zhang Heng and Marvin were being pushed out of the cabin along with the happy mob, where they saw the harbor appearing on the horizon.

Throughout their time on the ship, this wasn't the first time they heard the pirates mentioning the place.

There were those who praised this land, cursed this land, paid tribute to this land, and forsake the land. One magical thing about this place was that it seemed to have a curious magnetism, causing those who set foot on it never to stray too far, always yearning to return.

Behold, the city of Nassau, the capital of The Bahamas.

Located in the northernmost part of New Providence, the best harbor in the entire country could be found here. The indigenous people of the island were called the Lucayan, a fishing community that depended on their catch for income. In the year 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the place, before the first Europeans set foot on the island in 1647. They then started to develop it, subsequently making it their home.

“I'm sure all of you here will love this place, especially if you like freedom and adventure! There's no way you will say no to this paradise. The place used to be colonized by Spain, and after that, the English came along,” explained Goodwin.

“What about now?” asked Marvin.

“Right now, it belongs to us, the pirates! Welcome to Nassau, the motherland of pirates. This is the land of freedom!”

Soon after that, the merchant ship and the Sea Lion approached the harbor at the same time. From the ships, the pirates dropped several wooden canoes to the ocean and started to sail towards their land of freedom. Now that they were here, all they could think of was to enjoy themselves to the fullest. Only pirates who had been given tasks remained on the ship to finish up their work.

Dufresne ordered Zhang Heng and a dozen pirates to help with the unloading of the ship's goods. Marvin could not help but feel nervous, turning around to steal glances at the galley from time to time.

“Don't worry about that barrel. Just do what you need to do right now. Come look for me at the tavern once you are done with everything,” the old pirate reassured Marvin as he patted his back once again.

With that, he climbed aboard the wooden boat and headed to the island. Zhang Heng and Marvin had to move all the items from the ships to the trade center of Nassau. It wasn't before that afternoon that they finally finished their strenuous job. To their surprise, the pirate tasked with managing the ship's items did not even go into the galley. The barrel was gone when Marvin proceeded to check it out.

“As a matter of fact, the raid we conducted this time had nothing to do with the two of you. However, it is not right of we just let you off with empty pockets, so, here are 50 silver pesos. It should be enough to cover your expenses for a few days in Nassau. Feel free to look for jobs around. Remember, do not sign any long-term contracts. One of us will inform you before we set sail again.”

Zhang Heng and Marvin left the trade center after thanking Dufresne. The moment they were some distance from him, Marvin urged Zhang Heng to pass him his share of the money. It wasn't hard to read what was in his mind.

When they were walking away from the trade center, Marvin was peeking at the boats parked at the dock. Nassau was, in fact, located close to the American colony. Getting to Boston was just a short journey away, and he knew that being home was way better than cooking for a band of pirates.

The thing was, Marvin had no idea that it would be impossible to make a run from pirates. Unwilling to let the two off the hook, they must have had eyes everywhere since they allowed them to roam around Nassau so freely. Zhang Heng had no intention to remind Marvin about it.

Seeing that Marvin wanted to embark on a separate path, Zhang Heng was more than willing to give him his share of the money – a total of 25 silver pesos.

It appeared that Marvin wasn't about to honor the deal with the old pirate. Now that he had the money for a ticket home, he would not hesitate to do so.

Having no baggage to tie him down, Zhang Heng went to check out the small town on the island. During the 18th century, Europe did a great job of maximizing their production rates. Since the Renaissance had just come to an end, aesthetics of buildings and their decorations had found favor among the elites and nobles.

Unfortunately, this place was in stark contrast to other parts of Europe, where Zhang Heng's first impression of Nassau was that it was a largely disorganized city. There were no theaters, churches, or bell towers, nor did he see any well-dressed folk moving around to attend dance parties as well.

All he could see were rotting wooden huts and dilapidated stone cottages. Nassau was a place filled with palm trees as well. This place increasingly looked like a massive slum to him.

Scantily dressed hookers roamed the streets in search of prospective clients, deliberately revealing more skin whenever a man passed them by. There were urchins running barefoot on the unpaved roads, and it was in places like these that a traveler had to pay close attention to their wallets. Armed pirates terrorized the streets in groups. A few of them were seen exiting their taverns heading for the local gambling den.

There were also the local fishermen and hawkers, lining up along the busy street to sell their produce. Lastly, Zhang Heng saw a young priest talking about his god on a pedestal by the road, relentlessly preaching about how their sins could be washed away.

Though the place might seem impoverished at first glance, there were traces of prosperity and vitality streaming beneath the crowded chaos. The current quest was the longest amongst all the other quests that he had completed. He was required to stay in this world for 300 days.

Combined with the extra 24 hours that he had every day, it meant he would need to stay here for a whopping 3,900 days, more than the all the days in his previous quests combined.

This was going to be a long journey, and he had no idea what challenges lay beyond him. He could only continue moving forward since the game had already begun.

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Zhang Heng organized his belongings and took out the items he had hidden under the wooden plank in the galley. Other than that, he had been given a gun with the words FH engraved on its stock. Its previous owner had probably been reunited with his maker. Besides that, he was given a dagger as well. Judging by its appearance, it should only be able to yield a few pennies if it were to be sold. Then, there were the 25 silver pesos from his reward. This was the common currency of Spain, and was widely used among its colonies.

That was basically all the wealth he had for now, and he even had a debt waiting to be settled. After entering a few taverns, Zhang Heng finally found the old pirate in the fourth one. This tavern was located on the west side of the city, near the giant reef.

The old pirate was watching an exotic dancer as she bounced her curvy body across the stage.

"If I'm not mistaken, I remember that I made a deal with two persons. Where is your friend? When will he come?"

"He's not coming anymore."

"Haha... that is unwise, my friend. I think he doesn't know what big troubles lie ahead of him. I hope Owen captures him and not Phoebe. Otherwise, the word suffering would be an understatement for him."

"When can I start work?"

"You start now. See that shirtless muscular guy on your right? He's Knight Errant's gunsmith. Last year, he borrowed 200 silver pesos from me. With interest, he now owes me 300 silver pesos. Ask him to return the money to me."

Chapter 107: Black Sail XII

Without so much as a warning, Zhang Heng's feet flew across the tavern, before landing hard on a table! The violent landing had knocked him out for a bit, and he was on the ground for a while before mustering enough strength to stand up again.

With his head spinning, came loud cheering in the air and glasses clinking.

In contrast, the strapping man grabbed a glass of beer from the hooker who walked by with a tray.

"I'm sorry, what did you just say? I can't hear you! Speak up, you rodent," growled the muscular man with a loud burp after bottoming up his frothy pint.

Zhang Heng could do nothing about it, having lost quite a bit of weight after his recovery from the illness on the ship. Though fully recovered, his strength was still limited, requiring more time to build it back up. The muscular man notwithstanding, Zhang Heng was way stronger than his current self when he just entered this world.

Gasping and screaming for air, Zhang Heng stole a glance at the old pirate, who sat silently while watching the drama unfold before him. With a plate of barbecued pork and a glass of wine placed in front of him, he chewed thoughtfully, sipping his drink and lavishing at the sight of the boy getting thrashed by the pirate. The 300 silver pesos seemed like the last thing on his mind now.

When Zhang Heng finally mustered enough strength to stand on his feet, a fist came flying at him again. Fortunately, Zhang Heng was quick enough to respond, dodging the attack by inches. Knowing that he had missed, the buff man wiggled his finger with a grunt, taunting Zhang Heng to retaliate.

Without so much as an ounce of hesitation, Zhang Heng drew his gun and pointed it squarely at the chest of his opponent.

No one expected that Zhang Heng would use a gun in this fight, their dissent made apparent by the loud boos of disgruntlement the moment they spotted him drawing his weapon. With the gun cocked and loaded, he squinted, not about to make any sudden moves. No matter how many fists he could block, how many heads he could smash, one puny bullet was enough to send him to the afterlife.

“Despicable!”

Many took the muscular man’s side, and the entire tavern roared in support of him. Zhang Heng was unbothered by this. He wasn’t here to please the crowd. Since there was a quick and effective alternative, why should he hesitate using the firearm? If he knew the muscular guy would so abruptly toss him aside without so much as a word, he would have pointed the gun point-blank at the brute’s head from the very beginning.

Seeing the murderous glaze in Zhang Heng’s unremorseful eyes, the muscular man knew his life was really on the line. He took out his wallet unwillingly, still eyeballing the gun, and handed the money to the old pirate.

“Where is the other half,” asked the old pirate.

“That’s all I have for now. I will return the rest in three months’ time.”

“Fine! By that time, that’s an extra 50 for the interest.”

“Frazer... you old goddamned blood-sucking vampire!”

“Whoa... that wasn’t the language you used when you wanted to borrow my money.”

Frazer then waved to Zhang Heng, signaling him over to the table.

“Job well done, me lad! C’mon over and have something to eat. We’re moving on to the next one after this!”

Right until sunset, Frazer dragged Zhang Heng around hunting the other four pirates who owed him money. Three were willing to return a portion of what they owed. As for the last person, he was with

around 20 pirates. Obviously, Zhang Heng wouldn't make it out alive if he confronted the lot. After assessing the situation, Frazer decided it was an unworthy risk, thus, letting him go. For now.

In total, Zhang Heng assisted Frazer in retrieving 429 silver pesos and even a piece of oil painting that was used as collateral. The oil canvas was Leonardo da Vinci's infamous Last Supper. Without needing a second take, Zhang Heng instantly saw the tellings of a counterfeit painting, with a glaring mistake a kid would notice. There were only seven disciples instead of the supposed twelve. Nevertheless, Frazer was adequately satisfied, deciding in the end that it should be valued at 20 silver pesos.

"Not bad. Better than what I expected. I have to say, you're terrible at close-quarters combat. That guy in the tavern, how did you lose to someone like him? You have a lot to improve, and you have very little time. The real trouble comes later."

"I'm sorry, but I thought this is a one-time deal. You said you'd leave us alone after this."

"Hey, kid. I don't wish to lengthen our deal as well, but I see you are unable to collect all the money in one go. So, it looks like we are stuck to each other now."

"How much more?"

"Soon. You will know when the time is right."

Frazer grinned as he tossed the smallest coin bag to Zhang Heng.

"This is remuneration for what you've done for me today. A total of 42 silver pesos. As I have said, I'm no miser. As long as you can get me back all the money that others owe me, I don't mind giving you a tenth of what I got. This rule will not change. Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. Just come and look for me at the tavern every time you return from the sea."

Frazer did not bother looking at Zhang Heng's after that, merely picking up his newly obtained forgery of the Last Supper and left the place while humming a tune. Zhang Heng was surprised that Frazer even paid him for today.

The art of debt collection was both a simple and a complicated one at the same time. At first, he thought Frazer refused to do it just because he was aging. With that amount of money, hiring muscles to help him collect his debts was a no brainer. Though there was a possibility of him losing all that money to the thugs he hired, Zhang Heng believed that a man the likes of Frazer should be witty enough to avoid it from happening.

Up until now, Zhang Heng had already guessed that asking him to turn into an overnight debt collector was just an excuse for something else. There must be a reason why Frazer had chosen him. Zhang Heng wasn't one to wait for answers, so after doing some thinking, he decided to look for someone that could tell him more about Frazer. It wasn't that he did not enquire anybody before this. Apparently, everyone, even the friendly Goodwin, was not willing to divulge about old Frazer.

This time, Zhang Heng changed his target. He returned to the tavern where Frazer dined at. As luck would have it, the muscular guy from Knight Errant was still there. Sitting on a chair, he slowly enjoyed his pint of beer.

“You again! Shameless bastard! You have emptied my pockets! What else do you want?! You better get lost before I change my mind!! I might just break your head this time...”

Before the muscular guy could finish his sentence, Zhang Heng drew his gun again, this time, placing ten silver pesos in front of him.

“Tell me everything you know about Frazer, and these coins are yours.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me right? I thought you are with him?!”

Beggars were no choosers and considering he was left with nothing, he wanted to take the deal badly. Nonetheless, he was still suspicious of Zhang Heng’s intention.

“To be really honest with you, we are actually not that close,” replied Zhang Heng, who did not bother to explain more to him because he was the one who first asked the questions.

Chapter 108: Black Sail XIII

“Frazer is the most experienced pirate on this island. I heard of his name even before I come to Nassau. Someone told me that he used to work alongside Henry Morgan to raid a Spanish settlement. After stealing all they could, they managed to loot a total of two million pounds in their last raid. After that, the rich bastard, Henry Morgan, was summoned by the queen, banished to jail the moment he returned to his country. As for Frazer, he left Jamaica and came to Nassau. He remained here to recruit potential pirates to join his creed. At his peak, he had 11 pirate ships, hundreds of cannons, and around 700 to 800 pirates under his command.”

“What happened after that?”

“I have no idea. Rumor says he wanted to accept the queen’s pardon secretly. When his band knew about it, everything changed. He was stripped of his title as captain of 11 pirate ships, and all his crew was dismissed. Right now, that old bastard is no larger than an ordinary pirate,” said the muscular man with a grin on his face.

“But, you still owe him money.”

“Alright! I have told you everything you need to know. It’s your turn to keep your end of the bargain, you...”

The muscular pirate suddenly stopped smiling and spat an expletive into Zhang Heng’s face.

“Last question. Where do I rent a house around here?”

After Zhang Heng’s question was answered, the ten silver pesos were placed on the table, and the deal was complete.

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Right now, he was left with 58 silver pesos. Of course, getting a room at an inn was an option. However, the fact that he had to spend over a decade on this island had him thinking that it might be wiser to just look for a proper place to settle down.

The place he chose was a little further from the harbor but closer to the center of the island. The property in question was located near the farming plots, where its perks were serenity and a rental fee that was dirt cheap. Believe it or not, the entire house cost only 160 silver pesos, and it was 17 silver pesos for a two-year rent.

It was no better than a wooden cottage, with rotting wooden boards masking up a potential for collapse. Here in Nassau, places in such a state were everywhere. At a time where piracy was rampant in Nassau, Spain and France would send their military there to ensure things were in order.

Often, this led to large scale skirmishes with the pirates, eventually causing massive collateral involving lives and property left irreparable.

Unsurprisingly, the battle-rattled houses here were worthless.

After Zhang Heng paid the landlord, he proceeded to purchase some essentials for his new nest. The very next morning, he was already up before the sun rose, starting repairs and modifications to the wobbly structure. His long time alone on that island had taught him how to build a wooden framed house with a tiled roof. Armed with the experience, he should be more than capable of mending and fortifying the home.

The subtropical climate of The Bahamas had it at a steady all-year-round temperature of 23 to 24 degrees Celcius. Though it was now spring, it wasn't as cold as expected. Taking off his shirt, he climbed to the roof, subsequently fixing every hole with a hammer and some nails.

A little girl from the house next to his house kept peeking from behind a palm tree. Zhang Heng spotted her and flashed a smile. Startled, the barefooted little girl instantly scooted back home.

Not too long after that, another familiar face appeared in Zhang Heng's sights. It was Marvin. Although only separated for less than a day, he had undergone a tremendous change.

A sleeve had been torn out of his shirt, and he was left with one boot. His face wasn't too awful, just a few cuts on his cheek, dark blood flowing down his lips. It was his body that told a different tale, the festering purple bruises smothering what used to be yellowish skin. He seemed to have been through some very harsh retribution.

"That... can I have something to eat? I've been starving since last night," asked Marvin with a smile on his face, his bloody lips quivering as he spoke.

"Where are your 25 silver pesos?"

"They... they're gone..."

Marvin had initially planned to hop onto one of the boats fleeing this place. Clearly, his plan had failed miserably, with him being beaten to a pulp and all his money robbed off him. He was so embarrassed that he chose to stay silent, refraining from begging for help. Left with no other options, he had to ask around about Zhang Heng's whereabouts.

After living with Marvin for some time, Zhang Heng reaffirmed what a selfish prick, coward, and hypocrite he could be. As they parted again at the trade center, Zhang Heng decided that he would not care about Marvin from now on.

This quest had a different goal as compared to the previous ones that he completed. This time, he was asked to form his own force. Having no knowledge whatsoever about this force that he was supposed to build, at least he was sure of one thing. It would be impossible for him to do it alone.

He needed a team. Since the pirates here valued democracy more than anything, numbers meant everything on a pirate ship. Even a legendary pirate, the likes of Frazer, could lose his title after losing the support of his underlings.

In other words, even a useless prick like Marvin had the right to vote as well. He would most likely be rejected by everyone on the ship since he attempted to flee the island, so he was left with no option but to rely on Zhang Heng. Marvin might be despicable, but Zhang Heng was sure that he would come useful to him someday. Instead of exposing him, he decided to help him out.

“There is some cheese and bread on the table. Help yourself.”

Though sounding impossible, Zhang Heng did indeed hope that Marvin would change for the better after this. Marvin only knew a few souls on this island. In other words, no one would help a stranger like him. Considering that he had betrayed Zhang Heng several times, he should have thanked his lucky stars that he didn't get beaten and kicked out of the house. Zhang Heng's willingness to share his food took Marvin by surprise.

As Marvin hungrily gobbled down his chow, the tremendous hardship he had to face so far flashed through his mind. Tears started to gush out of his red-rimmed eyes like no tomorrow.

“I'm really sorry! This is all my fault! I have wronged you! I promise you that I will change for the better. From today onward, my life belongs to you. I will never betray you again even if someone threatens to slit my throat open!” wept Marvin, who seemed to be deep in regret.

Did the little display of penance manage to move Zhang Heng's heart?

For now, at least, he believed that Marvin must have been genuinely grateful to him. At the same time, he knew that this would last no more than two days. In two days, all the promises he uttered would be excreted from his body like feces. Indeed, he would eventually betray him again when his life was threatened. That was just who he was, from his mouth to his intestines.

Fortunately, Zhang Heng wasn't bothered by it, having never relied on Marvin in the first place.

The moment the barrel was free from the ship, it no longer bounded their fate together.

“Enjoy the food, I'm heading out for a while,” said Zhang Heng while wiping his hands.

Marvin appeared terribly nervous when he heard Zhang Heng was heading out, seeming worried that the truth about what happened to him last night would be exposed.

“Don't worry. This is not about you.”

Chapter 109: Black Sail XIV

Since Zhang Heng was scheduled to settle down here for at least ten years, so it was crucial for him to understand his surroundings better. To do that, he toured the entire Nassau for a few days, conversing with everybody. This included fishmongers in the market to drunkards from the taverns, the prostitutes on the street, shrewd businessmen in the trade center, and pirates that roamed the streets. The conversations could be either constructive or unpleasurable.

Nevertheless, throughout the entire process, Zhang Heng spent a total of 19 silver pesos. It was completely worth it, as it enabled him to peer into the window of life in Nassau.

To the eyes of many, pirates were a band of lawless thugs poised to commit all sorts of heinous crimes. Technically speaking, they weren't wrong, were those who chose the life of pirates were not exactly 'clean' in the first place. This was a reason why outsiders automatically assumed that a city managed by pirates must be made up of sin and chaos.

After digging his feet and feeling the sands around the place for some time, Zhang Heng no longer agreed with this conservative view. With thousands of hot-headed pirates in town ready to pick a drunken fight with anybody, nobody expected the city to be peaceful. This had turned Nassau into a disorderly mess. However, if one was willing to look beyond all the street fighting, there was actually order amongst chaos.

Around 63 years ago, the first batch of European migrants settled on Nassau, soon turning the place into a city and even building a castle for their king. In commemoration of King Charles, the town was christened as Charles Town. Not too long after that, the island's residents realized that city expansion and catching fish was far less lucrative than luring ships to the reef. When these vessels ran aground, they would plunder everything they came across. With the venture raking in massive profit, most men on the island began to turn to piracy. Soon, when that wasn't enough, they headed out to hunt for ships instead of waiting for them.

At the same time, the geographical advantage of The Bahamas attracted other pirates here, where its maze of islands became the perfect camouflage from the navy's prying eyes. It also proved a perfect stop for pirates from the Caribbean to stock up their vessels and in turn, disposing of all their stolen goods as well.

That was how the place called Nassau was born, a name inspired by an English prince. Ironically, it had now turned into a pirate sanctuary.

After years of development, Nassau came up with a unique trading system. Every pirate captain that docked in Nassau would sell their stolen goods to black-market merchants, who in turn laundered the goods and sent them to Charleston, New York, and Boston. Such an operation provided them an obscene amount of profit without them having to risk their lives.

And that was the main source of income for Nassau. Its brothel, casino, and taverns were mostly frequented by pirates. There were also professional appraisers setting shop on the island, responsible for evaluating the value of the plundered goods. Other than that, tipsters on the island would sell whatever information they had about merchant ships to the resident pirates. The fishermen on the island were mostly there to feed the pirates. Lastly, prospective arm dealers and slave traders were active on this island as well, if you knew where to find them.

When it came to the ruler of Nassau, there was none.

However, one organization on the island was responsible for maintaining its law and order. It consisted of black market merchants, pirate captains, and ultra-rich landowners.

Zhang Heng suspected that he had to be part of the organization if he ever wanted to build his own force. Unfortunately, this would prove difficult, to say the least. Excluding the landowners, the rest of the organization's members were considered the pioneers of Nassau, owning swathes of plantations, workforce, and armory.

All he had right now was 20 silver pesos.

The same rules applied when becoming a black market merchant, where one needed deep political connections to smuggle goods abroad. Most black market merchants came with very impressive backgrounds, often using their family's influence to mingle with the colony's governor. A significant amount of money was also needed to bribe the officers manning the harbor. Achieving any one of those things would prove to be a tall order.

That said, becoming a pirate captain was definitely a more viable option. That, however, did not mean that it was going to be an easy task. Legendary pirate captains notwithstanding, a captain with the ability to convince pirates to join their ships would usually require an impressive set of skills.

Zhang Heng knew that it was going to be a long journey ahead of him. He decided not to rush it as he had plenty of time to learn everything he wanted to learn.

Four days later. The Sea Lion gathered its crew and prepared to set sail. This was Zhang Heng's first time setting foot on a real pirate ship.

The barque he was on this time belonged to Frazer once, and it was one of Nassau harbor's best vessels. It carried a proud complement of 30 cannons. 24 were 9-pound cannons while the rest were 12-pounders, powerful enough to defeat most who dared cross their bow.

For this voyage, the Sea Lion was on a mission to plunder a Dutch supply vessel and a Spanish merchant ship. Thanks to Zhang Heng's prompt use of his gun during the raid, he managed to save three of his allies. This move had earned him the respect of many who were aboard. He could have run away to safety like what Marvin did, but had instead rented a house in Nassau.

All signs pointed to him becoming a full-fledged pirate! He was ready.

His heroic stint of saving his mates made him quite the star of the ship, continually receiving nods of approval from the crew. Seeing the opportunity at hand, he requested that Owen help him improve his close-quarters combat skills. Through other pirates, he found out that Owen had the best skills among all when it came to the dagger.

Owen was used to be a navy officer with a bright future. Due to an incident, however, he happened to offend a superior. In retaliation, he was sent to a hostile environment to complete an impossible mission. Out of frustration, Owen killed his superior. He was hunted down like prey, and in the end, forced to leave his hometown, eventually ending up in Nassau as a pirate.

Unlike his counterparts, Owen had the tendencies to be a little too upright at times, a remnant from his days in the navy. As a consequence, he found it really hard to fit in with the pirate community in the beginning. Once the pirates knew him better, however, they were more than willing to become friends.

In every combat, he was always first to charge at his enemies. His valiant ruthlessness was unrelenting, gaining him the highest respect of the pirates. When the previous pirate chief was killed in battle, everyone on the ship unanimously voted him as their new chief.

Chapter 110: Black Sail XV

“You wish to learn the art of wielding the dagger?” Owen asked, surprised. Considering the extreme dangers pirates faced each time they went out to sea, they were mostly hedonists, living from each day to the next. Few made any plans for tomorrow, which was why Owen made it a point to remind Zhang Heng of what he was about to face.

“It’s not something you can pick up in two shakes. It would take at least a good month or two before you see any results at all, not to mention that the drills are very monotonous. Aren’t you already good with guns? Why learn how to use a dagger?”

“I’m terrible at close combat, and the flintlock can only fire one bullet at a time. Reloading is a pain. I don’t want to stand by and watch from the sides each time I’ve fired a shot. In any event, I can defend myself if I learn some fencing.”

“Mm, that’s true.”

The muskets in this era differed greatly from their newer counterparts. Although flintlock pistols were an improvement from matchlock muskets, reloading it was still a complicated process – the shooter had to refill the barrel with gunpowder before shoving down the charge with a long rod. The chances of it misfiring was also terrifyingly high. For that reason, whenever there was a battle, both sides would usually engage in a shootout first before moving on to the more physical sword fights.

However, the vast majority depended on sheer adrenalin and brute strength to get through combat, utilizing neither skill nor talent. Hence, those who had undergone official military training like Owen always had an edge in battle.

“Err, well then... be at the deck at sunrise tomorrow. I’ll teach you some basic moves like swinging,” said Owen. “You can practice your swordsmanship, but don’t you neglect your duties.”

“Thank you. I won’t,” Zhang Heng replied with sincerity. It was not without reason that Owen won the favor and support of the other pirates; he was generous but also upright. Rather than keeping his excellent swordsmanship to himself, he was ready to impart what he knew to Zhang Heng.

The same, however, could not be said of the others. Zhang Heng found the bosun of the ship, an old man named Rothko. According to the crew, he had been out at sea longer than living on land. Wind reading, weather forecasting, and sailing were three skills that he took pride in.

Having such expertise earned him the respect of the captain and the crew, even if he did not participate or contribute much in battles. He dearly valued and treasured his own skills, keeping his knowledge

close to his chest lest others might learn from him and subsequently overtake his job. Zhang Heng wasn't the first to approach him, and like all the others before him, his request was flatly rejected.

Zhang Heng attempted to offer a handsome 500 silver pesos to him, which would be paid within the year, but Rothko still insisted that he would impart his skills only after retirement.

Taking into account the present circumstances, it appeared that Zhang Heng would have to wait a very long time for that to happen. The old man was one tough son of a gun. Even at his age, he had an appetite healthier than most who were younger, and he was not a picky eater either—able to swallow anything given to him. At this rate, Zhang Heng suspected Rothko would continue to linger around long after he'd left the game.

After disembarking the ship for the third time, Zhang Heng looked for old Pirate Frazer in the tavern.

"How are your close-quarters combat skills coming along? Are you ready to be my debt collector?" asked Frazer as he tossed a chunk of peanuts into his mouth.

"No," Zhang Heng answered truthfully.

After two months on the sea, his swordsmanship still remained at level 0. Like Owen had said, it was a lengthy process that required consistent practice and perseverance. The results would only show itself once he was able to integrate his basic moves with combative instincts. At the moment, he was still miles away from his goal.

Thankfully, Owen had already begun sparring sessions with him.

On top of that, the good news was that after such a long period of recuperation, Zhang Heng finally regained his weight, and his strength even exceeded his level when he first entered the quest.

Although no match to those born with divine power, he was already considered a prodigy among the regular crowd.

"Why did you come see me then?" the old pirate asked.

"The Sea Lion was originally yours. Rothko is the oldest crew member on the ship. You must know him pretty well, right?"

"Oh, that old fox? He may not be a man of many principles, but his sailing skills are pretty good, I must say. You'll never find a better bosun in the whole of Nassau," proclaimed a thoughtful Frazer.

"Ah, I really miss those times. There was this once, we came across pirate hunters and we were forced to head into a storm as we were a lot slower than them. Had it been someone else manning the sails, the ship would've been wrecked, and we would all have been dead. But no! Rothko and I worked together to secure the main mast, and, by a stroke of luck, we miraculously returned to Nassau in one piece. I only admire a few people in my entire life, and Rothko is, by the narrowest of margins, one of them. You must drink to that guy's excellent skills."

The old pirate picked the glass of beer in front of him.

Zhang Heng did not beat around the bush and jumped straight to the point. "What do I need to do to make him teach me those skills?"

The pirate looked amused. "You want to learn how to sail? Why?"

"One should always learn as much as he can while he's young, right?"

Frazer grinned. "So, you're going to persuade me with all this nonsense?" He lowered the knife and fork and stared at Zhang Heng with hollow eyes. Only after a while did he continue.

"It would seem you're in luck today. I've found myself in a bit of trouble recently. If you can help me solve my problem, I wouldn't mind telling you how to make Rothko more compliant."

"What is it?"

"There's a fool called Jacob in the city. He just stole a bag of black pearls from me this afternoon. If you can, find him in half a day and get my pearls back. I will meet your requirements then."

"Sounds fair to me," Zhang Heng said as he stood up.

"Oh, I almost forgot to mention that I hired another guy. He started an hour earlier than you, so I can only wish you the best of luck."

...

Zhang Heng left the tavern.

As he stepped outside, he saw a group of kids frolicking by the side of the road. When a food peddler passed them by, a couple of them pretended to have a row. The peddler had his attention diverted while the smallest one among them slipped his tiny hand into the peddler's pockets. As soon as their ruse was a success, they dispersed into oblivion.

This was Nassau, and petty theft was not an uncommon occurrence. Ever since Zhang Heng began renting the hut, he had never left anything valuable inside. Whenever he returned from a voyage at sea, he often caught the urchins sleeping in his place, god knows how they got in anyway. He would eventually rough them up and throw them out every time.

It was not going to be easy to find a pearl thief amongst a jungle of villains, not when all he had was a name for a clue.