

48 Hours 141

Chapter 141: A New Beginning

“What?! That... that... ship over there is yours?!” Anne’s jaw nearly fell to the ground. “Don’t tell me that you’ve really found Kidd’s treasure? But that can’t be right. Even if you had money, you still wouldn’t be able to afford an entire frigate, right?”

“That’s a long story. I’ll explain to you some other time. Right now, tell me, how did the cannoneer recruitment go?”

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Although the Jackdaw was a rather spacious vessel, Zhang Heng did not plan to recruit too many crew for their first voyage. Including Anne, he now had a core team of eighteen members. He planned to recruit another fifteen at the beach, including skilled seafarers such as cooks and carpenters. Then he would have Anne recommend seven to eight more people, mainly gunners, so the organizational structure would be relatively stable.

After several trips, and only after the wheels had been oiled, would they hire more. Even though doing it this way meant that it would take a longer time to complete the full complement of crew, it also meant that he did not worry about other small-time groups muddling along. Besides, time wasn’t of the essence for Zhang Heng.

As for the appointment of Anne as their boatswain, Zhang Heng had already approached Billy and the others about it. Women were considered to bring bad luck to a vessel. Unsurprisingly, female pirates, in the 18th century, was still somewhat of an anomaly. Generally, everyone had their concerns but Zhang Heng was resolute about this matter.

Since it was the captain’s first order, no one refused, nor did they ask for a vote.

In the end, after a lengthy discussion, Billy and the others decided to accept the appointment, but only on one condition—Anne’s fighting skills had to be tested first.

The reason behind this request was well-grounded. After all, in addition to managing and assigning tasks to the crew, the boatswain must also lead by example during a battle. If the boatswain was taken down by the enemy in a fight, forget about the crew having the morale to fight after that.

Zhang Heng had no objection to this requirement. He could instantly designate Anne as the boatswain of the Jackdaw, but to convince everyone on the ship would have to be of her own effort. Fortunately for her, although Zhang Heng might be worried about many things, he wasn’t concerned about her fighting abilities.

Looking up the two opponents who were easily a head taller than her, the redhead did not even flinch, nor did she show any signs of fear. On the contrary, she seemed excited.

The rest of the pirates started to gather instinctively to watch the battle unfold. The acting referee, Billy, said to Anne, “This is just a test. You’re not allowed to be heavy-handed. You are also allowed to

surrender at any given time. So, there's nothing to worry about. Next, you can choose one opponent from these two. As long as you can defeat any one of them, we will accept you as our fellow..."

Before he could even finish his sentence, the girl cut him off by picking up the saber on the sand. She swung it around to get a feel of it and flashed Billy a smile. "Let's not complicate things. The both of you can fight me together. Otherwise, it would be meaningless if the fight ends too soon."

When the other pirates heard this arrogant declaration, a massive uproar broke out among them.

Zhang Heng did not have to see the fight, already knowing how it would end. Besides, there were more important matters that needed his attention.

Since becoming a captain, he had a constant nudging at the back of his mind that there were always more things to do. Back on the Sea Lion, his main focus was to learn, observe more, and to speak less. To avoid alarming Orff, he was rarely involved in the affairs onboard. Instead, all he had to do was manage his own time every day. Now, however, he was responsible for an entire ship, and there were a million things bogging his mind down.

The first thing he did was to instruct Dufresne to buy a batch of green lemons before setting out to sea.

During the age of the great sailboats, there was danger lurking at every corner. Among them, scurvy was one of the many things that couldn't be overlooked.

Due to technical restrictions, most of the fresh produce could not be kept on the ship for the long-term. Whether navy or pirate, their staple consisted mainly of biscuits and dried meat, supplemented by a small portion of seafood. In the short term, this was not a problem. But in the long run, if they were unable to get on land, the lack of essential vitamins would lead to a series of health problems.

The least severe of consequences would be fatigue, agomphiasis, aching bones. In more severe cases, however, it often led to death. When Columbus explored the New World, most of his crew died of scurvy, and during Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe, two-thirds of the crew also died of the same condition.

The later generations would come to learn that this was caused by vitamin deficiency, specifically the lack of vitamin-C. Still, in the era that Zhang Heng was in right now, effective remedies weren't discovered yet. Except for prayer, of course.

When he was on the Sea Lion, Zhang Heng had seen people suffering from scurvy. They were weak and sapped, and could only exert half of their strength during battles. That was a strong reminder to him that when it was his turn to lead the crew, the first thing he needed to do was to prepare lemons.

Since the fruit was easy to store—still good for consumption even after a month under normal temperature, it was one of the best sources for vitamin-C. On top of that, Zhang Heng also instructed the new cook to prepare a batch of dried vegetables and fruits to double down on preventing scurvy.

The only lament was that soybeans from China only entered European waters a few decades later. It would have become the easiest source of fresh vegetables that they could find on the ship. Bean sprouts did not need soil to grow. All it needed was a splash of fresh water, and the little plant would sprout like mad. Not only that, but soybean sprouts were also rich in protein and vitamins. Having that in mind,

Zhang Heng entrusted several businessmen on the island with a connection to the East India Company to help him acquire it, but it would take, even at the very least, a year.

With the food problem taken care of, Zhang Heng proceeded to the black-market merchants on the island to discuss matters regarding the splitting of the sales of loot. Generally, the larger pirate gangs on the island would have exclusive partnerships with certain black-market merchants as partners, an established mutually beneficial, win-win relationship.

When the pirates come back with loot, they would hand them over to their respective black-market partners, and the latter would offer them a higher-than-market price. Zhang Heng thought that once he had the Jackdaw, he would earn the favor of many of the black-market merchants. Unfortunately, the actual situation was far from what he'd envisioned.

He visited some of the larger merchants on the island, and although they didn't seem too polite on the surface, it was actually more of an act of courtesy. In fact, the prices they quoted were less than favorable. According to Dufresne, the offers given were only slightly little better than the average newcomer who had only just ventured out to the sea and paled in comparison to the original Sea Lion.

The merchants' answers were basically the same, all sharing the same opinion of the excellent condition of the Jackdaw herself, but expressed concerns over Captain Zhang Heng's young age. Some of them heard about the incident on the beach and felt that hiring a woman to be the boatswain was both immature and sacrilegious on his part, which only confirmed their previous concern.

So, across the board, the consensus was that they wished first to see Zhang Heng and his Jackdaw prove their ability at sea, hoping that he could come back for a renegotiation only after several successful plunders.

Once they were out the door, Dufresne frowned. "Something is not right. In the past, these guys showed great enthusiasm whenever potential pirate gangs showed up on the island. It looks like the rumors might be true."

"What rumor?"

"Because selling stolen goods is such a lucrative business, there are many black-market merchants on the island. That means fierce competition would be rife among them. Sometimes, they would have malicious fallout. To win over the competitors' pirate ships, some of them would go as far as to secretly contribute funds to support wildcard ships with hidden agendas, inciting them to mutiny. If they succeed, they will choose their sponsors as new partners in return. But recently, I heard that the island's black market merchants are negotiating to end this chaotic situation, and they intend to form an alliance."

Chapter 142: An Intruder

Businessmen abhorred competitors, where having competition was equivalent to earning less profit. Whether it was about getting more customers by increasing the buying price or funding ambitious pirates to help them with their quest for the throne, it was undeniable that these things were going to cost them a large sum of money. According to Frazer, they had thought about setting up a business

alliance, but they could not solve the problem of sharing its profits. Without getting a unanimous decision on the profit-sharing proposal, the plan of setting up a business alliance was deemed to fail.

For those unhappy with the proposal, they did what they would usually do. As usual, they increased their buying prices to attract more potential customers in the hopes that they'd deal with them instead. Soon, other black market merchants that stuck to the rules could stand it no more after seeing their business partners leaving them for unethical black market merchants instead.

In the end, everyone realized that the rules did not benefit them at all. Thus, the business alliance that had been set up for only three months fell apart. This incident happened three years ago, still fresh in the memory of the black market merchants. It made no sense for them to try their luck right now. There must be something that they still had not figured out.

"I will go and investigate the incident tomorrow. We need to know what is going on," said Dufresne.

Zhang Heng then nodded, knowing that there was nothing he could do before he could figure out the whole thing. After that, the two of them went to visit the arms dealers on the island. The firearms on the corvette that Zhang Heng took possession of recently was equipped with a shipload of weapons. In total, the vessel carried 50 guns and 60 sabers. For now, they did not need to purchase any more. However, Zhang Heng knew for sure that the ammunition they used would definitely deplete in no time. It was crucial that he stocked the corvette with extra ammunition.

For that, Zhang Heng went to Baal, the arms dealer who sold four blunderbusses and one rifle to Zhang Heng earlier. As compared to other black market merchants, Baal was much friendlier. Not only did he invite the two to enter his house, but he even instructed his maid to make them some coffee. First, he congratulated Zhang Heng for becoming the captain of the Jackdaw. After that, he went straight down to business.

"I can easily get all the other stuff that you want. However, it is quite difficult to acquire ammunition for the 24-pound cannon. Most of our cannons here are six-pounders and nine-pounders. A 12-pound cannon is rare. And then, only the navy would use a 24-pound cannon."

Zhang Heng knew that Baal telling him the truth and wasn't trying to deliberately increase its price. This was a massive problem for him, where his corvette's primary weapon was the 12-pound cannon. However, he had eight 24-pounders equipped on the ship as well. This kind of firepower far outgunned any ordinary merchant ships. All these powerful cannons brought Zhang Heng another big problem. It was not going to be easy for him to buy ammunition for all these. Nevertheless, it seemed that Baal might just be able to figure out a way to acquire them.

"I have some connections in the navy. I might just be able to get you the ammunition you want. That said, I must tell you that I cannot guarantee you that I'll get them. Also, please understand that it's going to cost you a lot."

Zhang Heng agreed with Baal. As for now, the ammunition on the Jackdaw was still sufficient, and he wasn't too concerned. After that, Dufresne started to check out the price of the shells that Baal offered to them. Before becoming a pirate, Dufresne was a quartermaster on a navy vessel, which explained why he knew the market quite well. The conversation between Baal and Dufresne went as smooth as silk considering none of them had any intention to cheat the other.

This was the reason why every single pirate crew wanted to hire someone with useful skills. If it was not for the power play that happened on the Sea Lion, it would have been almost impossible for Zhang Heng to recruit people like Dufresne and Billy.

Arms dealers on the island were a lot fewer than black-market merchants. Hence, competition among them wasn't as fierce. Baal was happy enough to get a regular customer like Zhang Heng. Soon, it had gotten late. Baal wanted to make Zhang Heng and Dufresne stay for a meal, but they rejected him in kind.

Dufresne's wife and kids were living on this island. He could still make it back home for dinner after he got down from the ship. Considering that all their affairs were settled, for now, both of them had no intention to stay any longer.

Zhang Heng assumed that Anne must still be loitering outside and hadn't eaten yet. So, he decided that he should look for her. Once Zhang Heng arrived at the beach, he heard that a crimson-haired girl had defeated a few men who challenged her. In the end, all of them proceeded to the tavern to enjoy some drinks together.

The results did not surprise Zhang Heng at all. This was precisely the kind stunt that Anne would pull, and the only thing she could do to earn the crew's respect. She would have achieved a lot by now if she was not a female. With the events that had happened today, everyone on the ship should agree that Anne was more than qualified as the boatswain of the vessel.

In the end, Zhang Heng decided to leave her alone. Anne had stayed on this island for a long time and caused a lot of trouble as well. She should be fine even though she went for drinks with a group of men.

Zhang Heng then returned to his home through the harbor. Upon arrival at his home, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. He could not help but notice that the door was slightly ajar. Judging by Anne's personality, she would either shut it tight or leave it open as wide as possible. Moreover, he saw that the curtains were drawn as well. Clearly, these weren't the kinds of things that Anne would do as well. Immediately, Zhang Heng drew out his gun. If he remembered correctly, he should not have any enemies in Nassau. At most, Frazer might hold a grudge against him because of Owen. But then again, the Queen Anne's Revenge was not even back in Nassau. There was no way Frazer could suddenly appear out of the blue.

Even if he did know about it, the one he should be worried about was Blackbeard. Even Orff came looking for him first. It did not make sense that he would mess with Zhang Heng, now that he owned a corvette. That was why Zhang Heng could not figure out who the mysterious person in his house was. Perhaps it was just a petty thief?

Zhang Heng didn't let his guard down, unsure if the intruder still lurked in his house. He first used his saber to nudge the door gently. Instantaneously, he jumped into the house through one of the windows.

When he took over the house, Zhang Heng tried his best to fix everything after noticing that one of the windows was extremely loose. Seeing that it could still be used, Zhang Heng decided that he would leave it there for now.

He would have never thought that he could enter his house through this broken window.

Chapter 143: Alliance

Zhang Heng's was in great luck, managing to spot the intruder's shadow the moment he entered the house. It appeared that the person was sitting right by the table. The sound of the front door opening managed to capture the person's attention, who turned around to glance at the door quickly. However, it was too late, for, at the same time, Zhang Heng came in from the window. Before the person could turn around, Zhang Heng used his gun and knocked the intruder out cold.

The night was bathed in a pale glow from the full moon, and Zhang Heng used the light to check his surroundings ensuring that there were no more enemies lurking around. Next, he stealthily tiptoed to the first floor, checking all the rooms. Once he was sure that the house was clear of intruders, Zhang Heng lit up the oil lamp.

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Anne was now back from the tavern. She noticed a lady in her twenties lying on the table, and Zhang Heng was frisking her.

1“Oh, gosh! Did I come back too early? I'm so sorry for interrupting your session!”

Immediately, Anne turned around and was about to leave the house.

“Stop fooling around. Come back here! Do you know this woman?”

After Zhang Heng searched her, he found no weapons or dangerous items on her. He was shocked to see that the intruder was a woman. Though she entered the house without permission, she didn't touch anything apart from the cup of tea on the table. Judging from her skin tone and attire, Zhang Heng guessed she hailed from a wealthy family. Usually, a lady like her would not come to a place as rough as Nassau, let alone breaking into a house. That was why Zhang Heng could only guess that she was Anne's friend.

“I don't know her,” replied Anne with a burp.

“You didn't even look at her properly!”

“That is because I don't have a single female friend ever since I was born to this world,” said Anne while shaking her hands.

Under the influence of alcohol, Anne's face flushed bright red.

“There's only one way left now.”

“What?”

“Let's ask her about it when she comes to.”

Zhang Heng did not hit her too hard because he did not know what her intention was. In less than two hours, the lady regained consciousness. Zhang Heng made use of the time to finish up supper. As for Anne, she was fondling with the makeup mirror that she found on the lady.

“I thought you don’t like things like this.”

“You are right. I don’t like these kinds of things but I remember that my father giving me a mirror when I was 14 years old. This mirror looks quite expensive, actually. I believe that it can be sold for a handsome amount of money.”

“You can have it if you want it,” said the mysterious lady suddenly.

Once she woke up, she found out that her hands and legs were bound. Still, she managed to stay calm. Her behavior did not match her age and family background. Unfortunately, she expressed her kindness to Anne in the wrong way.

“I don’t need someone to give me something I like. I will take it from the person myself!” exclaimed Anne with a burst of laughter as she placed both of her legs on the table with her chair leaned back.

Noticing that Zhang Heng was glaring at her, she instantly removed her legs from the table.

“I believe that you are the captain of the Jackdaw, Mr. Zhang. I have to admit: you are way younger than I thought.”

The mysterious lady then took a good hard look at Zhang Heng.

“Who are you? Why are you in my house?”

“I’m so sorry. Forgive me for breaking into your house without permission. I bear no ill intention. I just want to discuss some business proposals with you. I’m left with no other option because this is a special period for me.”

“Special period?”

“My name is Carina Portman. I’m a businesswoman. I think the people of Nassau prefer to call me a black-market merchant. Anyway, I do business on this island, and I have worked with many pirate ships before. Captain Fuller from the pirate vessel Archer and Captain Randall from the Duke are my customers. Oh, and Elwin from the Flying Fish too. They are all my good partners.”

While talking, Carina was observing the reaction on Zhang Heng’s face. Unfortunately, she did not manage to read anything from him.

“I heard that you had spent a lot of time at sea, and you just got back today. You might not know the island as well as you think. Four months ago, all the black-market merchants were talking about forming a trade alliance to solve the chaotic way of trading on this island. This alliance is coming to an end soon, and so they have come up with a few unanimous decisions. That includes lowering the share ships led by new captains. I believe that you looked for a few back market merchants this afternoon, right? And you are not happy with the outcome.”

“A similar thing happened three years ago, right? I heard that the alliance did not end well.”

“I know what you are thinking. I’m afraid that the alliance won’t be dismissed that easily this time. The old alliance was formed by a couple of powerful black market merchants. So, they were the ones that made the rules. It’s different this time because pirates are invited to join the alliance as well.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not sure if you have heard of the name, Frazer. They say he was highly respected amongst the pirates, being the person to convince other pirate groups to join the alliance. The merchants have increased their buying price in exchange for a long-term partnership. The value that the black market merchants generate can buy up 70% of the loot that all pirates bring back to Nassau. With that being said, the merchants that are not part of the alliance will be unable to buy any valuable loot. All those who initially refused to join the alliance will now change their minds. Right now, there are only a couple of merchants left in Nassau that refuse to join the alliance.”

Finally, Zhang Heng understood the reason why the other black market merchants treated him in such a cold manner earlier. If Carina was telling the truth, then the alliance would have absolute power over the market once it was officially put in place though they would need to pay to buy off the pirates’ loot. One should know that being a pirate wasn’t precisely the most stable and safest of jobs. As time passed, pirates who were promised with a high price became lesser and lesser and, young pirates like Zhang Heng would emerge.

The merchants would then design a new contract for them where they could buy off their loot at a lower price. In other words, the profit they gained would only increase over time. By that time, the alliance would have dominated the entire market, and the pirates would have no choice but to accept the price offered by the alliance.

Chapter 144: Business

“I heard that they are planning to set the price at five different tiers. The powerful and big crews will be placed at first-tier if they are willing to sign the contract with them. As for those medium-sized crews, they would be placed at the third or fourth-tier. A new pirate group like you can only start from the bottom.

“Of course, if you manage to acquire a huge amount of loot and sell everything to them, they would surely increase their buying price. Perhaps you could get to fourth-tier pricing in three years if you’re lucky. I assume that would be the shortest time for you to get there. Surely, this is not fair to your crew,” said Carina as she tried to nudge her slightly swollen wrists that was still tied up.

Upon seeing that, Zhang Heng drew his dagger and cut off the ropes tied around Carina’s wrists and legs.

“What do you mean by business?”

“I want to work with you for the long term. I’m willing to buy all the loot that you acquired from the merchant ships. Don’t worry. My buying price is definitely higher than the price that the alliance can offer you. I can offer you a fourth-tier price right away.”

Carina was confident that Zhang Heng would surely take the deal. To her surprise, Zhang Heng rejected her without even thinking twice.

“I’m sorry. I’m not interested.”

“Why not? Right now, you need a stable partner to trade with you. The price that I offered you is at least 40% higher than the alliance’s price. My offer is only valid for a captain like you. Accepting this deal will help you to secure your position as a captain. Also, there’s nothing for you to lose if you accept the deal.”

“You calculated the money that I’m going to get if I sell my loot to you but you didn’t calculate the risk I will face. Surely, my actions would anger the entire trade alliance if I work with you. In other words, if something bad happens to you, no black market merchants on this island will do business with me.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’ve stayed in Nassau for a very long time. Nothing bad has happened to me so far.”

“Is that right? Why didn’t you join the alliance then? According to your description, you should have had countless trading partners before they set up the alliance, right? What about now? How many captains are still willing to sell their loot to you?”

This was the question that Carina could not avoid. While she was on the way to Zhang Heng’s house, she had made up several versions of the story in her mind. To her, Zhang Heng was just a lucky bloke that happened to get his hands on a navy battleship, thinking that convincing Zhang Heng to work with her would be easy. The moment the two started talking, however, Carina started to realize that she was too naïve in thinking that Zhang Heng would agree to work with her. To her surprise, Zhang Heng’s thought process and how he managed to stay calm did not match his age at all. He was scarier than all the pirates that she dealt with before.

It was at that moment that Carina realized the story she had made up sounded absolutely ridiculous. She was left speechless. The atmosphere in the common area suddenly turned into an awkward silence. All that could be heard was Anne’s loud snoring, obviously uninterested in Zhang Heng and Carina’s conversation.

Zhang Heng then stood up and draped his jacket over Anne.

“There’s no way that I will work with you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

“Well, I’m afraid that you will not work with me if I tell you the truth.”

“Try me.”

Zhang Heng poured two glasses of tea and handed one to Carina.

“Actually... I’m not a black market merchant on this island,” said Carina after hesitating for quite some time.

While she was telling the truth, she took the opportunity to observe Zhang Heng on how he would react to the thing that she was about to say to him. Again, she found out that Zhang Heng was not surprised by her truth at all.

“You know that I’m not a black market merchant? Do I look like a clown in front of you?”

“Not really. How long have you stayed on this island?”

“Two months.”

“It’s not easy to do what you are doing right now since you have stayed here for only a short period. Your attire and behavior were very convincing. Most importantly, you seem to know your way around this island quite well. You wouldn’t have raised my suspicions if your skin color was darker. The black market merchants on this island are required to check their items under the hot sun. That is why they are more tanned than most. Here, you look like someone who hasn’t stepped out from the house much.”

“That’s the reason? Before this, I stayed in New Hampshire. My father was a black market merchant here in Nassau. When I was a kid, he would tell me stories about this island. He would say that this is the land of money, where only the fearless could survive on this island. Of course, I wasn’t interested in what he had to tell me.”

“So, why are you here now?”

“It’s because of my father. Six months ago, he was arrested at New Hampshire, convicted of working with pirates. They threw him in jail and confiscated his ship. Ironically, the port chief and customs officer took a huge bribe from him a week ago.”

“My mother took over his work the moment she knew that he was sentenced. She offended a powerful local businessman by selling a batch of similar products. I did ask someone to help me to bail him out from prison. Unfortunately, the guy demanded an astronomical figure. I can’t even match his number even if I sold everything valuable in my house. That is why I’m thinking of taking over his business to earn more money to bail him out.”

“The moment you came here, the alliance had just been set up.”

“Yes. I couldn’t join the alliance because I’m simply not qualified. I did try to look for several captains who used to work with my father with the hopes of working with them. Unfortunately, his previous contracts are void as my father hasn’t shown up for a very long time. His old friends told me that they couldn’t help even if they wanted to. I was left with no option until I saw your ship this afternoon. All I thought was to try my luck and convince you to work with me.”

“My father left me a ship to move his product. After working as a black market merchant for years, he had established quite a few connections. He told me all those names when I visited him in prison. Besides, he has a permit that allows him free passage through the customs of most of the colonies. Though I can’t access New Jersey right now, I can still sell my stuff at other ports that he used to frequent.”

Chapter 145 - Answer

“What do you guys think?”

Zhang Heng looked for Billy and Dufresne and told them about Carina, believing that it was unnecessary to this matter from his crew.

“The black market alliance is no secret. I talked to a few of my friends this morning, and they verified everything that Carina told you. She’s right about the alliance taking advantage of us. Before the black market alliance was established, the Sea Lion could usually sell their loot at a third-tier price. Right now, although we aren’t as capable as the old Sea Lion, I know in my heart that we have a huge potential to

become one of the strongest pirate crews on this island. In the future, it won't be a problem for us to sell our loot at a third-tier price. Right now, however, we can only sell them at the lowest price possible. I'm afraid our crew isn't going to be too happy about this," said Dufresne.

"First, let's not talk about old pirates like us. All our recruits chose to join us because we have a corvette, and they saw an opportunity to earn more for themselves. When they find out about selling the loot that they'd risked their lives to get for a low price; I'm afraid we might not be able to handle them. If we want to grow bigger and stronger, we will need to start thinking about recruiting better pirates from other more powerful crews. But before we can do that, we must make sure that money is not an issue on our ship," said Billy in the most straightforward way.

"The other pirate crews have started to contact our members. All of them assume that we will not do well in our first voyage and they are trying to convince them to leave us and join them. How much we sell out loot for doesn't seem to be the only problem we face..."

"...and, I look too young for a captain. I lack experience. To make matters worse, the first thing I did after I became a captain was to recruit a female pirate. Everyone must surely think that I'm just another short-term captain," said Zhang Heng, filling in what Billy had to say.

"That's about it. You have to know we all trust you 100%. Not only have you saved our lives, but you also managed to stay calm whenever we are greeted with danger. The journey from Charleston to Nassau was enough to prove that you are more than qualified to become our captain. However, as for others who have not sailed with you before, you can't blame them for not giving you their full trust. What's happening right now is unfair to you. Usually, new captains would have more time to prepare for the next voyage and bond with his crew members."

"Having a battleship placed us in a position of great advantage. At the same time, it has also dragged us into a great deal of pressure as well. On this island, many are simply waiting for us to turn into a joke. If we fail to acquire a good amount of loot during our first sail, we will start facing the problem of people quitting our ship. Not to mention the difficulty of recruiting new crew after that."

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After an hour and a half, Billy and Dufresne left Zhang Heng's room, nodding to greet Anne and Carina before they left the house. Carina was still shaken up, having told Zhang Heng everything last night. However, Zhang Heng informed her that he wanted to discuss the matter with his crew members before giving her an answer.

Instead of returning to the hotel, Carina decided that she would stay for the night to get the answers she wanted. That said, Zhang Heng was genuinely impressed by what she had achieved. Since her youth, she was carefree and worried not about her life. Before her father was sentenced to prison, she was no different from the nobles and ladies hailing from the upper-class. She would attend proms, operas, and constantly had hi-tea with her friends.

Last night, she looked for three stools, put them together, and simply slept on it for the whole night. When she woke up the next morning, her neck was sore to say the least. Eventually, she had to spend the entire morning tending to her painful neck. Once Billy and Dufresne left, Carina instantly ran to the first floor, tidying up her messy attire before knocking at Zhang Heng's door.

“Come in.”

Carina took a deep breath and entered the room.

Zhang Heng’s study was sparsely decorated. Besides a table, a couple of stools, and a newly made bookshelf, there wasn’t much else. There wasn’t even a single book on the shelf yet. When sunlight poured into the room through the window, it landed on Zhang Heng’s shoulder and colored his hair a bright gold. Zhang Heng was using a parallel ruler on his nautical chart when Carina entered the room. He looked no different from the time when he studied in the library.

Carina was shocked upon entering the room. She had seen countless pirates throughout her stay in Nassau and discovered that most of them were rude and uncultured. Sometimes, it was hard for her to communicate with them properly, but to her greatest surprise, Zhang Heng was unlike the conventional pirate. Through the conversation that they had last night, she noticed that Zhang Heng could be reasoned with and was also extremely observant.

If it were not for the gun that was strapped his chest and the scar from a knife on his arm, Carina found it hard to associate him with the typical pirate.

“The time is set. We will set sail in three days.”

Zhang Heng’s voice tugged her back to reality. Immediately, Carina’s heart started to thump faster. This island was different than before. There were only a handful of powerful pirate groups left that had not joined the alliance. Most groups on the island were poorly equipped and severely lacked the workforce to match. In other words, it was unlikely that they would be able to acquire anything valuable. If Zhang Heng rejected her offer, her trip to Nassau would be all but wasted. Not only would she stand a chance to lose her father, but her family might become broke as well.

“My helmsman and quartermaster suggested that I should negotiate with the alliance to increase their prices. They don’t believe that you can carry out your promises. They might say yes to you if your father is with your right now, but you have to know that you lack experience. This is something that you have never done before.”

Zhang Heng’s reply was like a boulder landing on Carina’s heart. Though she had prepared for the worst, she still found it hard to accept that she was seen as a miserable failure. She then slouched on the chair and started to cry her heart out. Two months of effort had brought her nowhere. She thought that the Jackdaw might be able to help her to solve her problem, but it seemed that she was wrong. All she could feel right now was despair.

Of course, Zhang Heng felt sorry for her, though he was left with few other options. Choosing a reliable trading partner was a very delicate decision among all captains. Since Billy and Dufresne placed little hope on Carine, he had to find out for himself if she was really worth his time. To his surprise, though, Carina stopped crying after a minute and lifted her head. There were still tears in her eyes, but the helpless look on her face was gone.

“There must be a way. Is there something else I can do?”

“Yes. If you can prove yourself to my crew, you might be able to get yourself a deal.”

Zhang Heng then pointed to a mark on his nautical chart.

“Do you know what this place is?”

Chapter 146: Setting Sail

It was a beautiful day when the Jackdaw unmoored and left port.

The skies were painted a light blue hue; the sea calm and its breeze gentle. Flocks of seagulls hovered above the masts.

A crowd had gathered at the port to watch the ship's departure, a rarity for a new pirate gang.

In the past few days, Zhang Heng overheard about the happenings on the island. Some of the gambling houses had apparently set up a pool specifically for the Jackdaw's maiden voyage, betting on how much he could loot during his first sail. Most had put their bets on him coming back empty-handed, meaning that many were less-than optimistic about his debut.

After all, a ship's performance and firepower did not represent everything. An excellent captain could win a headwind battle regardless of his equipment at hand, and the probability of an inexperienced newcomer like Zhang Heng losing even in the best of situations was very high.

Today, Billy arrived before anyone else. As the helmsman of the Jackdaw, he was done delegating the ship's tasks to everyone and had completed the necessary preparations for their maiden voyage.

Being the captain, Zhang Heng was last to arrive. Anne came with him as well.

Quite a few gave out wolf calls at the sight of the two walking down the pier together. Discounting the time that Anne was on the Golden Swallow, there had never been a female pirate in Nassau, what more, one that held the important position of the boatswain. Today was to be considered a historical day for Nassau.

Considering that the girl had been living in the same house as Zhang Heng, people could not help but let their imagination run wild.

So, when Zhang Heng and Anne showed up together, all kinds of lewd remarks were spewed. Such was the nature of the human creature. The fact was, the girl had given many of the islanders a sound beating; they knew all too well of how extraordinarily strong she was. Be it as it may, the obscene tendencies of the human mind led them to believe that she must have used her body in exchange for the position on the ship.

James stood among the crowd with raging and envious eyes. He was the first person to be acquainted with Anne, and at that time, she was just the daughter of a wealthy family living with her mother, a lass with whimsical fantasies of becoming a pirate. It was he who had lured and encouraged Anne to run away with him to Nassau. Of course, he knew what the actual situation here was like. He waited until all of Anne's money was spent, to the point that they were driven from pillar to post. He hoped that she would find no way out and eventually marry him.

He had coveted Anne for the longest time, not just her body but also her father's fortune. Although father and daughter were not on speaking terms, James simply needed to wait until things fell into place. When Anne was pregnant with his child, her father would surely be indisposed to ignore his own grandchild.

The first half of this plan had gone smoothly. Even though Anne kicked James in the crotch and ran away from him, he was very confident that like the vast majority of rebellious teenage girls, she would still have to face reality at the end of the day no matter where she ran to. When the penniless red-haired girl could no longer stand the hunger or find shelter from the rain, she would come back to him indefinitely.

Never would he have imagined that halfway through his plan, one Zhang Heng would appear. Not only did the boy let her stay in his place, but he even took care of her meals and living expenses. James did not believe that there would be anyone that kind on this island—unless Zhang Heng had the same motive as he did.

When James found out that he had a competitor, he was both shocked and pissed, naturally wanting to confront Zhang Heng. But when he found out that the boy was a seaman on the Sea Lion, he quickly abandoned the idea. Everyone in Nassau knew the name, Blackbeard. James had to think twice if he could actually endure Blackbeard's anger for harassing his crew.

Eventually, he decided to wait until Zhang Heng went out to the sea before he would sneak up on Anne. He advised her to leave the house and return to him, but the girl did not show any signs that she wanted to. After a few times asking her, James could very clearly feel Anne's resentment toward him, building up, getting stronger with each passing day. The truth was: if not for the fact that both of them had been companions for a long time and had arrived at Nassau together, Anne's kick would have come even earlier.

That afternoon, James had to lie on the footpath for half an hour before he was well enough to get himself up. Although he still had not given his intentions, he knew that in the short term, he didn't stand a chance.

Right now, seeing Zhang Heng and Anne together, James became the loudest among the crowd. But unlike the joyous few who had come to watch, he was so mad he began swearing, which only yielded angry glances from the people around him.

"I already warned you," Zhang Heng lamented to Anne, "that these kinds of things would happen if you walk with me."

Anne could not care less, though. "What's there to be afraid of. If I have the balls to be your boatswain, then why should I care about what other people think? Besides, these guys are only brave enough to run their mouths. None of them can fight worth a damn. When we come back with a full load, their mouths will be sewed shut for sure."

"Are you that confident in me?"

"That's because you have the strongest boatswain on the island."

"..."

Billy and Dufresne were worried that Zhang Heng and Anne would be affected by the jeering of the people on the shore, but when the moment they saw the expressions on the pair, they realized that they had nothing to worry about.

With the anchor cast-off and the sails propped, the Jackdaw slowly departed the port in the gentle breeze. Billy was at the center of the deck when he glanced at Zhang Heng, who was standing at the bow. The latter nodded, before the Jackdaw's helmsman clapped his hands to draw the crew's attention. "I received news from the shore that there a Spanish merchant ship with a load of perfume is on her way to New York. We all know how popular these things are in the New World—which is why we came out to sea immediately. That ship is not far from us. If everything goes well, it will take us less than a week to catch up to her. If we succeed in our quest, every one of us will get at least 100 silver coins. Let's work hard together to take our first victory!"

Upon hearing this, the rest of the crew grinned in eagerness. Nothing could motivate them more than a fat, juicy prey. They could not wait to get the battle started.

Billy was very satisfied with the morale and enthusiasm displayed by the crew. But having been out at sea on so many voyages, he clearly knew that this was only because they were just at the beginning of their journey. As time went by, the endless monotony a seafarer would face out in the high seas would cause many to be restless. As a result, morale on board would fall—especially when they could not locate their target for days on end. Anxiety would begin to set in, and that would mark the beginning of their troubles.

Billy's only hope was that the Jackdaw's first voyage would go well.

Zhang Heng returned to the captain's quarters after setting the course. He took out the necklace that Simon gave him from the drawer.

[Name: Hunter's Blessing]

[Grade: F]

[Function: Increases the chance of encountering prey]

This thing could finally be put to use.

Chapter 147: Switching Targets

The Hunter's Blessing differed from the Lucky's Rabbit's Foot by having a more unusual function, which was why Zhang Heng didn't get a chance to use it yet.

It wasn't before the fourth quest, entering the pirate world and bringing the Jackdaw to begin his own hunting journey that he had any use for this item again.

The necklace was useful to him now, increasing their chances of encountering a target every time they got out to sea. On top of that, the Lucky Rabbit's Foot should also be able to enhance the necklace's effect. However, probability-based game props such as these generally took effect only after some time.

In fact, in the past ten days, the Jackdaw did not encounter any prey worth capturing, and the Spanish merchant ship that Billy talked about did not appear.

The morale on the ship had diminished to a new low, compared to when they first left the dock. Although the crew continued to carry out their duties each day, they were not as enthusiastic as before.

There was even some slacking amongst the men. Nevertheless, as long as everything was kept in check, Billy and the crew said nothing. No matter how outstanding the helmsman or captain was, it was impossible to keep the crew at an excited state forever; unless they had some sort of driving force such as Kidd's treasure.

On top of that, the newly recruited cook and carpenter seemed a little unreliable, where the chef's unimaginative cooking caused a lack of appetite among the sailors. Fortunately, the batch of dried vegetables and fruits that Zhang Heng prepared came in handy. The pirates knew how rare those things were out at sea, and the lemonade was a source of relief that greatly subdued the complaints on the ship.

There were also many problems with the resident carpenter. Here was a guy that claimed a flawless resume and excellent theoretical knowledge, but after boarding the ship, he could not even do the simplest of repairs on a barrel. His skills were far from what he had described during the interview.

Of course, Zhang Heng was mentally prepared for this. There were bound to be all kinds of problems with the new recruits. However, having older men from the Sea Lion was much better than building the team up from nothing. In fact, just two days ago, Billy worked with Zhang Heng to disperse a fight among the crew. Because the experienced seamen quickly found out about the brawl, it was resolved before things got worse. Neither party in the dispute used weapons, and thankfully, the damage it incurred was minimum. In the end, they were only punished to two weeks of deck cleaning.

In general, the atmosphere on the ship was manageable, but on the eleventh day, Billy knocked on the door of the captain's cabin.

"It looks like we'll need to change targets."

The helmsman appeared a little troubled. Situations like this were not uncommon. Most of the information about merchant ships came from the island's information dealers, who collected their intelligence mainly from the boats docked in Nassau. Along the lines of transmission, packets of information would be either lost or mistranslated. To make matters worse, last-minute route changes often occurred. Thus, obtaining information did not necessarily mean that they would surely find the target.

To be able to survive the high seas, neither merchants nor pirates had a definite route. Every so often, when the captains found out that their travel plans were disclosed, they would immediately set up a backup plan and divert course.

"I have one more lead. It's the Duffy, a tobacco carrier. But then again, tobacco is everywhere in the New World; it's price can't match up to perfume. There's good news, though. The Duffy is also on this route, so we won't have to change course. We just need to continue chasing." Billy paused for a moment, attempting to avoid adding more pressure on Zhang Heng. He tried to encourage his captain, adding, "We have only been at sea for ten days. We still have time. Our food and water on board are enough to last us for a month and a half. We will definitely return fully loaded."

Still, perhaps it was due to the helmsman's recent raising of the flag that the Jackdaw's gains in the following week were few and far between. They did not even catch a glimpse of the Duffy's shadow.

They did, however, come across two other merchant ships that didn't even put up a fight. The moment they caught sight of the Jackdaw's black flag, they immediately surrendered.

The pirates' excitement were short-lived, though. The ships turned out to be transporting a less than lucrative cargo. One carried potatoes while the other hauled copper ore. There was plenty of it, but they were worth very little even in the colony. Also, if they moved those things back to the Jackdaw, her speed would be significantly reduced. As a result, the heavy vessel might fail to catch up to her main target.

After much deliberation, the crew decided to give up robbing the two ships. Unfortunately, the failure to plunder anything had turned the seamen anxious. Billy, the representative of the crew, felt it the most and started to blame himself.

He had purchased the two pieces of information from dealers that he was familiar with. He was also the one who recommended this route to Zhang Heng. Ultimately, this caused them to be in the predicament that they were in now. The Jackdaw had powerful guns, but she couldn't find a target worthy of her firepower. Factoring in the time it would take for them to return, they were desperately running out of time to hunt.

So, on the nineteenth day, Billy went to meet Zhang Heng. "This is all my mistake. We shouldn't have chosen this unpopular route. You reminded me of the risks, but I let that perfume ship get to my head. If we had chosen a more popular route from the beginning, we would've made a lot of money by now."

"Billy, this is not your fault. We discussed this together and even had the crew's consent. You're not responsible for our situation right now," Zhang Heng said. "Anyone getting such information back on the island would surely give it a try."

"But this is our maiden voyage; that's the problem," lamented the helmsman who smiled bitterly. "Right now, we don't have a lot of room to make mistakes. I thought the intelligence was good since there is little pirate activity in the vicinity. I really don't know why we still haven't seen the two ships—which is why I'm suggesting that we change course immediately and try our luck on a more popular route. The nearest one from here only takes about five days. If we are lucky, we can still hunt for about a week."

"But that route is also frequented by pirate hunters and the navy," Zhang Heng said. "If you had told me that you wanted to go there when we left port, I wouldn't have said anything against it. But with the low morale on the ship right now, what do you think our chances of winning are?"

Billy fell silent. He knew what Zhang Heng said was true. The helmsman sighed, "We should have taken that copper ship. At least, we could hand out some money to everyone."

Zhang Heng shook his head. "Those things are useless. We are a warship, and our cargo hold is limited. If we want to take anything, it would have to be valuable. Besides, this is our first voyage. Only a big win can boost our reputation."

Billy looked a little confused. Naturally, Zhang Heng, the captain, should have been most anxious. If they returned from their first voyage empty-handed, it would mean that the captain would likely be removed from his position. Right now, however, Zhang Heng did not seem worried at all.

Zhang Heng pointed to a small island on the map. “Based on our course and speed, we should arrive at this spot tonight.”

Chapter 148: Fresh Water Island

Zhang Heng knew better than anyone that the maiden voyage was extremely important for a new captain. Besides, many from Nassau were hoping that Zhang Heng would fail his first sail. He had to prove them wrong. The moment he returned to Nassau, he noticed that a lot of people were paying attention to him. The combination of a mighty battleship and the overly young captain seemed like vulnerable prey to a lot of people.

Once the Jackdaw pulled into shore, Zhang Heng had to consider his worst-case scenario. He did not doubt that Billy and the rest of the old crew members were loyal to him, and after the Kidd’s treasure incident, Zhang Heng knew that all 16 of them would not betray him—for now, at least. That said, he had to consider the possibility of them being manipulated by others.

When they were told that the ship that carried perfume and the Daffy would cross an unpopular shipping line, Zhang Heng felt that it was simply too much of a coincidence. When he thought of how stern the black market alliance was, he realized that his first sail had gone too smoothly to be true. Luckily, he still had a trump card with him. He and Carina were considered as outsiders on the island. Since she hoped to earn little more money to rescue her father from prison, she was devastated when she found out that a black market alliance was being set up on the island. Right now, she needed the Jackdaw to supply her with loot so she could sell them elsewhere. At the same time, Zhang Heng needed someone like Carina to get rid of his plunder as well.

Zhang Heng thought differently from Billy and the rest of the pirates. From the very beginning, he had no intention to work together with the black market alliance. Frazer was not the only problem. A lot of people did not realize how dangerous the black market alliance was. Once these people dominated the market in Nassau, every pirate would lose their rights to negotiate the buying price.

Undoubtedly, it was not that easy to become a captain of a pirate ship. One had to be courageous, valiant, and filled with experience to master the position. The crew believed that their captains would lead them to wealth and glory all around the world. Loot that could not be sold out wasn’t wealth to them. In other words, if the black market alliance dominated the market in Nassau, they were capable of refusing the loot from the captains that they wanted to eliminate. With such power at hand, the black market merchants would continuously have a grip over the fate of the pirates.

This was a situation that Zhang Heng dreaded. Other captains might have already figured this out, but it was hard for them to reject the black market alliance’s offer. Not only would the alliance increase their buying price, they even told the captains that the proposal was only valid as long as they remained captains. That would mean their crew had to think twice before they betrayed their captains as it could cost them tremendous loss.

Undeniably, this could help fortify the captain’s position on the ship. Of course, there were risks to be considered if they decided to take part in the black market alliance, but they figured that they’d only

cross the bridge when they came to it. Fundamentally, being a pirate was always a high-risk occupation; most of them did not care about what happened tomorrow.

Zhang Heng was different from them, though. The existence of the black market alliance interfered with his growth as a captain and here, Carina was offering him another way out. Billy and Dufresne might consider her inexperienced, but Zhang Heng begged to differ. He yearned for a trade partner that allowed him to preserve his rights when trading took place. He needed to know that the loot his pirates acquired could be turned into cold hard cash. Carina was perfect for him, but of course, he still wanted her to prove her worth.

The Jackdaw reached Freshwater Island before sunset, an uninhabited blotch of sand with a landmass of fewer than 20 acres. There were thousands of islands like this in the Caribbean, and most didn't even have a name. The island was named Freshwater Island when Magellan landed here as he traveled around the world. For years, many were confused by the name of this island, as the place was, in fact, devoid of fresh water. Magellan named it Freshwater Island because of a mighty storm that swept through the island. The arrival of the storm enabled his crew to collect enough fresh water for drinking.

After the conditions on the island were made known to many, it became even more desolate. Zhang Heng moored his ship close to the island before rowing to it in a small boat with Anne and Billy. To their surprise, they quickly discovered that someone was here before them. As a result, they did not continue forward. Instead, Zhang Heng made a signal by whistling. Soon, someone emerged from the forest. Zhang Heng was left in shock when he saw who it was. Earlier, Carina told him that she would send a messenger to deliver news to him. He did not expect to see her here in person here.

She did not look too good. Zhang Heng figured she might have been alone on this island at least for a day or two. Even though the boat that dropped her here left her with enough food and water, it was still no less of an impressive feat that she was here all alone. Carina was bursting with excitement the moment she saw Zhang Heng. Considering that the area wasn't a popular shipping route, she could have easily died if Zhang Heng hadn't come to pick her up.

"I have checked everything you've asked me to check. I think you'll be interested in one of the ships. Half a month ago, it departed North Carolina, and it's hauling a full load of spice."

"Spice?"

"Yes. Nutmegs from the Maluku Islands! Surprisingly, they appeared in a New World colony as they are planning to return to Europe. I heard that in London, the price of nutmeg is comparable to gold!"

"How far are we from the ship?"

"I just consulted my ship's captain, and he said that we should be able to catch up to them in about ten days if we continue at our current speed—provided that the wind is at our back."

"Come on then. Follow me to my ship."

Zhang Heng walked towards the boat lying on the beach. Billy was still rather startled after hearing what Carina said.

"I asked Ms. Carina to do us a favor. She used her connections in Boston to tell her if there any ships that are worth our time."

“But... wasn’t she in Nassau?!”

“After we were done talking that day, she traveled back to Boston immediately. I chose to stop at Freshwater Island because this is the island closest to Boston. But, I have to admit that Ms. Carina is really good at what she does. I told her that our time is limited, which means she was only in Boston for less than a day since she managed to meet us here.”

Chapter 149: Limits and Doubts

Two pirates were working together at the gunwale. One of them tossed a wood plank with a rope around it into the sea while the other counted the time. Once the time was up, the pirate stopped the rope and calculated the length of rope that was being released into the sea.

“Current speed is 10 knots!”

Most ships from western countries in the 18th century used this method to calculate their speed. Of course, it was not 100% accurate because the sea itself was fluid and was constantly flowing all the time. However, it was more than adequate. A more precise method to calculate speed wouldn’t be invented until the 20th century.

Zhang Heng stood on the deck in a black shirt, guiding his pirates in adjusting the mainsail according to the wind’s direction. The Jackdaw had just raised the sails on her mainmast and secondary mast. This allowed them to steam ahead at full speed. However, pushing the vessel to her limits also caused the masts to be under a lot of pressure. Knowing that they were at breaking point, Zhang Heng instantly instructed the pirates to pull back the ropes and tie them at the stern. As for Zhang Heng, he acted as the helmsman to ensure that the draft was perfectly adjusted.

After a short moment of creaks and violent vibrations, the ship finally adapted to its current speed. Once everything had smoothed out, Zhang Heng passed the ship’s wheel back to the original helmsman. He then instructed the watcher to continue to observe the draft.

Carina was standing at the side and silently observed every move of Zhang Heng. Of course, her mind was in a raging storm as opposed to her calm looks. When she was in Nassau, she had went around asking about Zhang Heng. She got to know that he was initially a passenger on a merchant ship. After that, his masterful marksmanship earned him a place as one of the Sea Lion’s pirates. They told her that Zhang Heng was not used to living out at sea, suffering severe seasickness on the way back to Nassau. It was during that time that he almost lost his life.

In a year, Zhang Heng worked his way from an ordinary pirate to the boatswain of the Sea Lion. Not too long after that, he led a group of old pirates to leave the Queen Anne’s Revenge. By the time he arrived in Nassau, he was already the captain of a battleship with a large pirate crew under his watch. The swift intensity of his growth cast doubt upon the islanders on whether he had enough experience or wisdom to lead a ship full of pirates.

Before all these, Carina thought the same as well. However, her opinion of him completely changed after the two of them exchanged words. The man standing before her was completely different from the pirates that she had encountered before. He wasn’t supposed to possess such a high level of charm and

maturity at this age. This was what she thought about him anyway. That said, it did not mean others would feel the same way.

She finally got to see how Zhang Heng led his people now that she was aboard his ship. His behavior did not make him look like a new captain at all. When he was greeted with various challenges, he would somehow look for a way to solve them one by one. After spending a few days with Zhang Heng on the ship, Carina was no longer as surprised as she was, knowing that it would be hard for a man with such discipline not to succeed.

Carina used to see Zhang Heng sparring with Anne before the sun came up. She also noticed that he would always seek guidance from a more experienced crewman on the ship. Whenever he had the time, he would head to the captain's quarters and go through a bunch of books left by the ship's previous owner. Before this, the Jackdaw was a corvette, and there were tons of books about warfare lying in the study. Between these books were also manuscripts holding a wealth of descriptions about different places of the world.

He looked at this world with a view from the future, and that helped him to accept that he was not actually in the real world. Though there were still heaps of things that he could not understand, reading those books would definitely help him to blend into this era better. To him, it was fun to learn about foreign cultures and exciting events that happened during this time in history.

On the other hand, Zhang Heng had re-evaluated Carina as well. He found out that she was more decisive than he'd initially expected. He realized why she changed her mind and chose to deliver the news to him personally. She simply wanted to ensure that nothing would go wrong. It also showed that she was serious about this deal. Though black market merchants were a part of Nassau, they lived very different from the pirates. Most of them had families and thrived among the upper society. Their job was simply to buy, sell, deliver and they typically did not participate in raids.

This was to ensure that they could easily cut off all ties with the pirates if things went south. Undoubtedly, it was unwise for Carina to get aboard a pirate ship. Now, that her fate was tied with Zhang Heng, even he had to admit that she had gone all out to win his trust. Carina was born to be a risk-taker. Maybe she would be able to outplay the black market alliance and carve her own path. This, however, wasn't the time for her to think about something that was so far ahead. When she saw there was nothing on the sea apart from the Jackdaw, she started to grow more and more anxious.

This was the 32nd day that the Jackdaw left Nassau's harbor. Half the ship's food and water supply had already been consumed, and there were only some vegetables and dried fruits left. This was Zhang Heng's first time setting out to sea, and it was impossible for him to anticipate every possibility that might happen. The humidity from the sea had caused the vegetables and fruits to go moldy. Left with no other food, everyone on the ship had to go back to eating dried, smoked fish. Still, that would only last about 20 days. In other words, Zhang Heng had to turn his ship back to Nassau soon, or his crew would starve.

Zhang Heng was frustrated, but there was nothing he could do. He had tried his best to have a backup plan for everything, but still faced all sorts of unexpected events. Even the best captain of the Caribbean could not guarantee that he would be able to return with a ship filled with loot every time. No matter what, Zhang Heng needed to win this war.

As time passed, Zhang Heng could feel the changes in everyone's emotions. Not only was it evident among the new recruits, but old pirates like Billy and Dufresne also started to lose hope as well. Carine was no exception. Last night, she knocked at the door of the captain's quarters, telling Zhang Heng that she suspected that everyone from the colony might know about her father getting into jail. There was a possibility that her friend from the customs had betrayed her. The ship that carried nutmeg could be nothing more than a high tale made up by them. In the worst-case scenario, this could even be a trap set by the navy.

"I've thought about it over and over again. It's impossible that our target would have sailed all the way to the New World. There's something fishy going on here. I remember my father telling me that he has two enemies from Boston," said Carina in a nervous manner.

"Now, if this is a trap, why would they make up something that is so ridiculous then?"

Zhang Heng proceeded to the galley and poured Carina a glass of rum.

Chapter 150: Leadership

After Carina emptied down an entire bottle of rum, Zhang Heng finally managed to divert her attention from the ship that carried spices. After a short moment of silence, she eventually switched topics, beginning to spiral into a rant about her childhood. She spoke of an absent father, a mother that was addicted to partying, her mother's lover, an older sister that liked to take her stuff, and a dog named Parker. Everything that she said was in pieces, but it was indubitably filled with emotion.

"I thought that we didn't like each other that much. I thought that my mother would have gone away with her lover when my father was sent to jail. I thought that my sister would have gone to London to learn how to paint better. My family was born broken. I've realized it when I was only six. Everyone, including me... we just bloody mind our own business. The strange thing was that no one left the family when we received the bad news."

"This doesn't make sense to me. We spend our entire lives trying to get out of this hellhole. Why did everyone stay when we had the opportunity to run from it?"

While Zhang Heng was waiting for her answer, she suddenly changed topics again and was now rambling on about the salon. She started complaining about how terrible the dessert was and how the guests around her behaved like hypocrites. After that, she began an incomprehensible mumble before falling into a deep sleep on the table. Zhang Heng decided that he would not wake her and left her to sleep it off in his room. He then left the captain's quarters. Zhang Heng wasn't worried about Carina finding out his secret as the captain's quarters only contained books and nothing else.

There was no one in the corridor when Zhang Heng left the room. He walked for a while but stumbled all of a sudden. Leaning on the wall for support, he closed his eyes. This time, he could feel exhaustion and fatigue engulfing him. The ship was now in a completely different atmosphere from when they just left the harbor. The entire Jackdaw was surrounded by hopelessness.

After the perfume ship and the Duffy incident, almost everyone started to become suspicious about the intel provided by Carina. Even after Zhang Heng told them about the boat that was loaded with spices,

none of them seemed too enthusiastic. As time passed, more and more crew started to groan and complain. Even Zhang Heng himself wasn't as calm as before. If his first voyage ended a failure, things would surely get worse for the Jackdaw. As the captain of the ship, Zhang Heng would be held responsible for every single thing that took place on his vessel. His situation would turn even more dangerous if he returned to Nassau with no loot on the ship.

Everyone on the Jackdaw had the right to complain and be cynical about the voyage, except for Zhang Heng. He couldn't afford to show his crew any negativity. The only person that they could rely on in their helplessness was their captain. No matter what, they would always turn to Zhang Heng, hoping that he would somehow solve their current predicament and guide them to the path of success. His confidence and calmness were the only things that could put everyone's mind at ease.

This crisis had a silver lining, though. If Zhang Heng managed to lead them out of the rut, he would be able to gain massive respect from the new recruits and the old members alike. His position would be legitimized, and they would see him as the true leader of the Jackdaw.

But would he be able to do it?

Zhang Heng did not know the answer to this question. For the few quests that he completed earlier, he just needed to take good care of himself and complete whatever tasks that were given to him. When he was in school, he always preferred to be alone than to mingle around. It was not that he was bad at socializing; he just did not fancy it.

His main goal for this quest was to build his force, a challenge that he had never faced before. From the very beginning, he was involved with Frazer and Orff. Not only did he spend a great deal of time learning different skills from different pirates that served on the Sea Lion, but he also considered a lot about the way Orff and Teach led their people. When it came to this, Frazer undoubtedly provided him with lots of guidance, teaching him that not all captains shared the same characteristics. The only trait they shared was to utilize the people that they led fully.

Just like Edward Teach, he rarely got involved in the things that happened on the ship. However, he still managed to earn a lot of respect from his crew. For three years, no one on the ship had the guts to challenge his authority. One legendary pirate such as Sam, the Black Prince, was known as the best captain in the entire Nassau. Everyone on his ship remained loyal to him to the ends of the earth. And pirates like Honneg was known for his generosity, having a huge following even after he had retired.

Zhang Heng woke up early in the morning and started to think about his signature trait. He could not use fear to rule his people as Teach had, and neither was he a social butterfly like Black Prince as well. Also, he was not as generous as Honneg. In the end, Zhang Heng decided that trust could be his signature trait. He hoped that the people on the Jackdaw would continue to trust him no matter what, especially during a crisis like this. So far, his people would execute all his commands even if they did not know the reason behind his decision. This was made possible by the deep trust they had in him.

Zhang Heng knew that this was not going to be an easy path, realizing that he could not gain their trust just like that. He had to endure several massive crises with his crew to gain their absolute trust. If he managed to succeed, his pirates would be equipped with an excellent ability to execute orders and possess a strong will. It would be hard for their enemies to break them down. Right now, Zhang Heng had to lead them out of this crisis to kickstart his plan.

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“You look tired.”

Zhang Heng heard someone talking to him from the dark. He then opened his eyes and saw Anne standing in front of him with an oil lamp. Because of the eerie atmosphere around them, Anne looked like a ghost poised to haunt Zhang Heng.

“The two of you...”

Anne grew slightly suspicious when she saw the door that was closed behind him.

“Erm... she’s here to talk about the plan for tomorrow.”

“Plan for tomorrow? Aren’t we supposed to go after that ship carrying spices.”

“.....”

Zhang Heng was left speechless. Of the entire ship, Anne was the only one that had never doubted his plans. He was relieved when he saw that she wasn’t that worried. Before he could reply to her, the watcher suddenly shouted at Zhang Heng.

“Ship spotted!!! There’s a ship in front of us!”