

48 Hours 151

Chapter 151: Let's Begin

The loud shouts of the watcher alerted most of the pirates who were fast asleep. Most of them scooted out of their cabins to the deck in a frenzy. Some of them were even undressed. Zhang Heng and Anne were already out on the deck. With a pair of binoculars in hand, the captain watched the approaching ship from afar.

"So? What about it?" asked Billy.

"We've got abysmal visibility tonight. I can't see it. I'm not sure if that's the ship that we are going after," said Zhang Heng while handing the binoculars to his helmsman.

The weather today didn't seem to cooperate. It was a dark, foggy, moonless night. The stars that usually lit up the night sky were nowhere to be seen as well. It was actually a miracle that the watcher even managed to spot the ship. That said, that was all they knew about the approaching vessel. There were only four hours left till dawn, and Zhang Heng had no intention to take any risks.

Firing his cannons now was equivalent to a gamble, where even the best cannoneer would find it hard to land one hit in ten shots. It was unnecessary to waste ammunition just like that. Every failed shot that they fired would cost them a lot more money to replenish the armory, and even if the cannoneer was somehow lucky enough to hit the ship, they might not be able to move all the spices back since their surroundings were pitch black.

"Let's follow him for now. Be careful not to get within its sights."

Billy and the rest of the pirates were fine with Zhang Heng's decision. If Carina was right about this ship, their target had at least a dozen six and nine-pound cannons. Although the Jackdaw far outgunned them, it was still unjustified in attacking at night. It would be a safer and wiser decision for them to wait it out till day broke.

Soon, Zhang Heng assigned more watchers to keep an eye on the ship, grouping two into a team to ensure that they would their target wouldn't slip away. As for the rest of the crew, Zhang Heng instructed them to return and to rest to prepare for tomorrow's raid.

However, most of the pirates were not sleepy anymore. Most were ready to return to Nassau after spending an entire month on this ship empty-handed. Just as they were about to give up on the operation, they saw hope again. For those that couldn't sleep, they harnessed their weapons and began to sharpen them.

15 minutes later, it appeared that the watcher from the other ship had discovered that the Jackdaw was tailing them. Immediately, they sped up to attempt to escape the Jackdaw. Billy and the rest of the pirates were lit with excitement when they saw their prey trying to shake them off. Until now, the black flag of the Jackdaw hadn't yet been flown. Besides, considering that the visibility around the area was extremely low, there was no way they would figure out that a pirate ship was tailing them.

That could only mean one thing. The merchant vessel was carrying something precious. Even if it wasn't spices, it could be something else that was equally valuable. After trying to get away from the Jackdaw for a while, they realized that they couldn't shake them off. Instead, the two vessels had now crept up to each other.

By then, the merchant vessel discovered that a navy battleship was the one after them. Considering that they were armed and heavily loaded with cargo, they could only move at a modest four to five knots at the fastest. There was no way that they could outrun the speeding Jackdaw. So, in desperation, they decided to slow down and arm all their cannons, preparing to open fire.

Under normal circumstances, they were no match to the battleship. However, the night had become their best cover, and besides, luck was the critical factor in this fight. If they managed to land their cannonballs on the Jackdaw's armory, they might just be able to turn the tide around.

The crew of the merchant ship knew that this was their last chance to attack their pursuer. Once the sun was up, there was no way that they could beat them anymore. To their surprise, Zhang Heng slowed down the Jackdaw as well. She still followed them closely but kept outside their shooting range. Despair hit the merchant crew when they realized that time was quickly drifting away from them. There was nothing else they could do about the Jackdaw, as they could not fire, nor could they flee.

At the same time, the Jackdaw made her final preparations for the upcoming war. The helmsman carefully executed every order given by Zhang Heng, ensuring that there was at least a nautical mile between them and their prey. Similarly, the merchant ship attempted to fire, but alas, it failed miserably. Eventually, they gave up and decided to stop the pointless attacks.

When the sun came up, Zhang Heng confirmed through his binoculars that the merchant ship was hauling a grand load of nutmeg. From the size of the ship, their flag, and the number of cannons, it almost precisely matched the information provided by Carina. All of a sudden, the sorrow and despair of the Jackdaw's crew was replaced by an elated sense of happiness. Finally, they got to reap what they had sowed. This boosted the pirates' spirits in an unprecedented manner. Zhang Heng was at the bow with Anne and Billy to discuss the final battle plan.

"First, we will fire at them twice. Our primary targets are their masts and main deck. We need to make sure that they lose their mobility and kill as many as their crew as possible. We do not want to damage the structure of the ship. The spices will become worthless if water floods into the hull. Once they surrender, we'll close in and start organizing our people to plunder them."

It was at that time that Carina finally woke up. With a terrible hangover looming over her head, she remembered bits and pieces of what she told Zhang Heng last night and was worried that Zhang Heng's impression toward her had changed for the worse.

"Your identity is somewhat sensitive around here. You should head to the captain's quarters and stay there. Remember to close the windows. You don't want anyone from the merchant ship to spot you."

Zhang Heng needed her help to sell off all the spices that he was about to loot later. It was risky enough for her to get on the Jackdaw and chase down the merchant ship. She was sincere enough about sealing the deal, and Zhang Heng had no doubts about it. There was no reason for her to reveal herself to the merchants on the ship later. If she was exposed to the customs officers, she would be left with no other

options but to become a pirate. Carina did not insist on lingering on, clearly understanding the decision Zhang Heng made. She quickly thanked him and left the deck.

“Ask the cannoneers to get ready. It’s time to fight,” proclaimed Zhang Heng to Billy.

Chapter 152: First Battle At Sea

The moment the sun rose, the boom of cannons firing broke the ocean’s silence. The one that fired first was the merchant vessel called the Happiness. However, they lost whatever hope they had when they saw the Jackdaw raising its black flag. To make sure that the cargo on their ship was safe from plunder, they had deliberately chosen a less popular shipping line to travel on and was mum about their route so far.

Their voyage was smooth for about a month, with no encounters of any pirates whatsoever. Just when they thought that they were out of the red, the Jackdaw spotted them. Alas, their effort was all but wasted.

With help from the sunlight, they could finally see the true form of the Jackdaw. Some of the crew instantly knew that they were going to lose the battle, losing their last straw of hope once they confirmed that the ship in pursuit of them was indeed a battleship. The unfortunate incident in Charleston was now widespread amongst the colonies. Two governor-generals and a high-ranking officer were killed on that night. At the same time, the entire Charleston suffered the relentless attacks from cannons. This could be one of the most severe incidents happening in the New World. There were even hushed whispers that the navy lost a corvette that night as well.

As compared to what happened in Charleston, few paid much attention to the corvette. When the merchant ship’s crew saw the Jackdaw, they started to realize that this ship could actually be the lost navy corvette. Undoubtedly, the combination of pirates and a heavily armed corvette had the merchant ship’s crew believing that this might genuinely be the end of their road.

That said, those who decided to commit their careers to the ocean were no cowards. Though they knew that they could not outgun the Jackdaw, they would instead take their chances and try to defeat it regardless. After all, the ship’s cargo was valuable enough for them to protect it with their lives.

Unfortunately, most of their shots missed their targets with only one cannonball managing to fly pass the gunwale. Pumped up with adrenalin, the newly recruited cannoneers were eager to return fire.

“Captain, do we attack now?!”

“Hold your horses for a little while more.”

Now that Jackdaw had entered the Happiness’ effective range, they should be able to return fire. However, accuracy wouldn’t be that great, where the cannons would lose their effectivity once they were too far away from their targets. If the distance was right, though, the Jackdaw could easily destroy a merchant ship with one volley of shots. This could prevent them from turning the battle into an endless exchange of fire. Before getting closer to them, the Jackdaw had to endure the attacks from their enemy. The good thing was that it should be strong enough to do so.

Soon, the Happiness was poised to launch the second wave of attacks. This time, their experienced cannoneers managed to land a few accurate shots on the Jackdaw. Three cannonballs landed on the gunwale, and another landed on the mainsail. Fortunately, this did little to damage the vessel, allowing her pirates a little room for relief.

The third wave of cannonballs were incoming. This time, the Jackdaw had gotten really close to the Happiness. Their offense had managed to put a few holes on Jackdaw's deck, however, with a cannonball managing to find its way to a spot unprotected by iron plates. Seconds later, seawater started to gush into a cabin that was located at the lowest deck of the Jackdaw. Immediately, the carpenter grabbed his tools and started to fix the leak.

At that moment, more and more of the Jackdaw's crew urged Zhang Heng to return fire. Even Billy could not help but stare at his captain. Still, he did not say a single word. Zhang Heng had participated in quite several battles while he was serving on the Sea Lion. This was his very first time orchestrating his own battle. Back then, he simply needed to protect himself and eliminate all enemies that got close to him, and once his flanks were clear, he could lend a hand to his allies as well.

He was only required to pay attention to the continually changing circumstances when he helped to take down the Scarborough. Also, in an ordinary battle, all he needed to do was to pay small attention to a number of things that happened around him, similar to his battles in the Soviet Union.

Right now, he was commanding an entire battleship. He needed to figure out how to win the battle at the lowest possible cost. Undeniably, the Jackdaw had way more potent firepower than the Happiness. However, the Happiness had more experienced cannoneers. If only he could pull closer to his enemy, it would be hard for the Jackdaw's cannoneers to miss their target.

That was why Zheng Heng took the risk of getting closer to the Happiness. During the fourth wave of attack, some of the pirates on the deck were injured. Even Zhang Heng's arm was sliced by a ricocheting splinter. Still, he remained his calm, continuing to observe the enemy through a pair of binoculars. He could see that their cannons were being reloaded at an incredible speed and were now about to launch their fifth wave.

Finally, Zhang Heng broke the silence and gave his crew a new command.

"Slow down the ship! Hard to starboard!"

The crew had been anxiously waiting for Zhang Heng's command, and the moment they got the order, they used the shortest time possible to retract the sails to cut some speed. As a result, the maneuver managed to dodge the fifth wave of cannonballs. At the same time, the Jackdaw pulled up to the Happiness' side.

In this era, chase guns were mounted on the bow and stern of some sailing ships and would only be used in an emergency. Side cannons were still their primary weapons. That was why the sailors from Happiness had to make sure that their hull faced the target before they could launch an attack. Once they were locked in a state of battle, it would be hard for them to maneuver the ship.

As of now, the pirates on the Jackdaw held massive grudges against the Happiness after enduring four waves of consecutive attacks. The moment Zhang Heng permitted them to open fire, the pirates mercilessly lit their cannons and fired with everything that they had. Though half their shots missed

their mark, the other half of the cannonballs were more than sufficient to cause massive damage to the Happiness.

One of the 24-pound cannonballs managed to hit their secondary mast. Two sailors were crushed to death by the falling pillar. After witnessing the Jackdaw's overwhelming firepower, the sailors on the Happiness were in a state of panic. However, some were still adamant about returning fire. Unironically, they were overwhelmed by the constant onslaught of cannonballs that were launched at them.

Even so, if Zhang Heng hadn't ordered his pirates to adjust the cannons to a higher trajectory, they would have destroyed the Happiness during the second wave of attack. Just as expected, the sailors on Happiness finally accepted that they could never defeat the Jackdaw. More of their crew would die if the battle were prolonged.

In the end, they chose to surrender.

Zhang Heng was not as excited as the pirates on his ship because he knew that they were just about to encounter the real danger. According to the intel given by Carina, there were about 30 sailors on the Happiness. The worst part was, there were also 20 young navy officers on board as well. Clearly, the crew on the Jackdaw were outnumbered.

Chapter 153: The Return

It had been 55 days since the Jackdaw left the harbor, and all kinds of rumors were being spread around Nassau. Some said that they encountered a great storm, causing them to lose their way. Others talked about how they saw the navy capturing them, destroying their ship, and killing her entire crew. Some even claimed that they had crossed paths with mermaids, whose songs had bewitched the poor sailors in jumping into the sea.

All these rumors shared a common theme: the Jackdaw was never going to return to Nassau. The amount of food and water that Zhang Heng loaded was no secret. A month and a half had already passed, and even if they did not encounter any mishaps, they would have run out of food and water by now.

Situations like this were common among newly formed pirate crews. The reason Zhang Heng managed to capture so much attention was that he owned a corvette, and had the audacity to recruit a female pirate. Those who gambled on the Jackdaw not returning to Nassau were filled with excitement. As for the bystanders, they were disappointed by the Jackdaw's fate. They would rather have the ship return empty-handed and see Zhang Heng getting stripped of the captain title by his own crew.

On the other hand, James remained true to himself. He proceeded to the tavern to have a drink once he received the news that the Jackdaw was gone forever. Somehow, he felt joyous that Zhang Heng was killed as he had taken his Anne away from him. However, when he thought about her, the smile on his face disappeared. He had used a great deal of effort to convince Anne to come to the New World and even spent a ton of money on her as well. Unfortunately, everything had gone to waste. Suddenly, James felt that the rum he was drinking had become devoid of taste.

The only person on the entire island who felt sad for the Jackdaw was Harry. He was drowning in sorrow for the past few days. Without Anne around, he soon dominated the few streets that were around him. Although kids were giving him money, he still felt that life had become pointless since Anne was no longer here. With hands in his pockets, Harry kicked around the pebbles on the road while he walked. He could not help but miss the moments when he got beaten up by Anne.

Anne's fists were filled with power and fury when she beat Harry up. According to Harry, every single punch that Anne delivered carried a particular message for him. He claimed that he could feel his chest burning with passion each time she stuck him. Unfortunately, he would never get to see her again. He let out a long, exasperated sigh, one that did not match his age. The two kids that followed him started to suspect that their boss had gone insane.

It was at that moment that the three saw someone running from the harbor to the casino.

"The Jackdaw is back! They are back! Hahaha! I didn't lose my bet!" screamed the person in excitement while running.

Of course, the three were shocked when they heard that the Jackdaw was back in Nassau. Everyone around here had accepted the fact that the Jackdaw was never going to return forever. Naturally, they should have come back a long time ago. Thus, according to some experienced pirates, this was a clear sign that they were dead as they had failed to return on the expected date. None of them thought that the Jackdaw would be able to defy all logic and made it back in one piece.

Immediately, Harry ran to the harbor as fast as his legs could carry him. There was already a crowd gathering at the pier, eager to see what was going on. Due to his small size, Harry managed to squeeze through the crowd and was soon in front of everyone. He saw a boat approaching the harbor. However, his heart fell when he saw that the person standing on the deck wasn't Anne but a woman that he had never seen before.

The people gathering around had probably grown numb of seeing so many females popping out of the Jackdaw. Nevertheless, nobody really cared about Zhang Heng's personal life. They were more concerned about the loot acquired from this trip. The few pirates who sent the woman to the harbor returned to the Jackdaw without saying a word. The first thing Carina did was to look for the captain of her ship. She told him something, and right after that, they quickly gathered all their sailors to their boat. They said nothing even though the crowd erupted into a bombardment of questions.

Their unusual behavior only drew more questions. Finally, someone in the crowd recognized the woman as Carina, the black-market merchant. Before the Jackdaw set sail, she had attempted to strike a deal with certain captains and black-market merchants from Nassau. In the end, she chose not to join the black-market alliance. Many thought that she had left Nassau for good after the failures. Nobody expected her to strike a deal with the Jackdaw.

After that, the crowd saw that the Gentle Breeze, a merchant ship, had moved closer to the Jackdaw. Once a wooden plank connected both ships, the pirates started to move hundreds of crates to the Gentle Breeze. There was some distance between the harbor and the Jackdaw; hence the crowd could not see their contents. All they knew was that they were moving a great number of items to the Gentle Breeze. Soon, they discovered that Carina previously sought a merchant in Nassau who provided loans.

She remained in his house for about an hour, with the merchant personally sending her out as she left his place.

In the evening, Carina boarded the Gentle Wind and left Nassau. As for the pirates on the Jackdaw, they remained on the ship. Zhang Heng sent a few old pirates, ones who knew how to keep secrets well, to purchase some alcohol and food for the Jackdaw's crew. He hoped that the food and drink would calm them down as they were not allowed to leave the ship for now. There was an unwritten rule in Nassau; pirates were not supposed to touch the ships of black-market merchants. Besides, the loot that they acquired this time was too valuable. Zhang Heng did not want to risk having his pirates telling others about it.

Though anything that happened after the trade had nothing to do with the Jackdaw, Carina was definitely not wealthy enough to buy all those items from the Jackdaw. She was forced to use two of her properties in New Hampshire and the Gentle Breeze itself as collateral to get a loan from the businessman, where half of the money would be paid to the pirates on the Jackdaw. Zhang Heng, on the other hand, would have to wait until she sold all the goods before he could receive the other half of the money from her. This would be entered into the Jackdaw's public fund.

That was why Zhang Heng had to continue to ensure the Gentle Breeze's safety. Zhang Heng and Carina were now considered allies, and indeed, this wasn't going to be a one-time deal. Zhang Heng would need her to continuously help him sell all his plunder. He had learned his lesson from the Kidd's treasure incident where if he were to let his pirates return to the island, everyone would soon know that the Gentle Breeze was carrying a large number of valuable spices.

Chapter 154: Who Wants to Try?!

Though Anne did not mind sleeping with others, Zhang Heng insisted that she sleep in a separate room. The room initially belonged to the quartermaster of this ship and was around six square meters, a space that was more than ample for a person to sleep in it.

Anne unbuttoned her shirt and lay on the bed, allowing Zhang Heng to change the bandages on her back. As of now, there were no doctors on the Jackdaw, and there was nothing the captain could do about the situation. The truth was, all the pirate ships in Nassau lacked doctors on board. Many who were not even in the medical profession were forced on pirate boats just because they had a slightly better common sense than the regular peasant. Out of desperation, some pirate crews would travel to other places to kidnap doctors.

Still, at least half of the pirate fleet did not have a doctor on board. To make matters worse, the doctors in this era were not equipped with proper medical knowledge. Though surgeons were one too many in this era, they had no idea about the concept of disinfection, which was why Zhang Heng preferred to carry out the procedure himself. Anne sat up after Zhang Heng helped her to change into a new set of bandages. Unsurprisingly, she was unabashed of undressing in front of Zhang Heng.

"You've done well!"

Zhang Heng was referring to what happened on the Happiness earlier. Worried that the enemies would find out that they outnumbered them, Zhang Heng brought those who were still battle-worthy to board

the Happiness. He even went as far as arming his cook and carpenter and asked them to stand guard on the Jackdaw's deck.

When he led 30 pirates aboard the Happiness, he could somehow feel their hesitation and unwillingness. When they were asked to hand over their weapons, every single one of them attempted to stall for time. They had a feeling that the captain was up to something no good.

Once the pirates disarmed their enemies, Anne volunteered to bring some people with her to check out the goods inside the hold. Unfortunately, there was an ambush awaiting them over there. The young navy officers on board were extremely unhappy that pirates attacked them and had exchanged their clothes with the sailors on board. They hid inside the cargo hold.

Anne led a total of six pirates. Naturally, they did not expect an ambush, and that they would have to fight for their lives. Thanks to her lightning-quick reflexes, Anne quickly ducked to the ground the moment she realized that they were about to be ambushed. The pirate that was right behind her was not as lucky. The navy sailor pointed a gun at him and pulled the trigger! In a blink of an eye, Anne swiftly sprung up and slashed her sword to slice one of the men standing in front of her. At the same time, she pulled out her dagger and stabbed another the chest of another one.

Still, that did not mean she was out of danger. They were outnumbered, and the ambush had caused the pirates to panic. Anne was now in a death trap. Though she managed to eliminate two navies in the shortest time possible, the rest of them quickly regrouped and started to attack her. Seeing someone aiming at her, Anne promptly lowered her head, managing to dodge the speeding bullet by the skin of her teeth. Unfortunately, she felt a bright hot pain on her back. Somebody had slashed her from behind. The sneak attack did not bring her down, though. Instead, it angered her further, causing her to turn around, and with a shriek, she killed her attacker with no mercy.

Within half a minute, she managed to wipe out another two navy officers and injured another without so much as batting an eyelid. The young navy cadets who were still in training had never seen someone as ferocious as Anne. After witnessing her raw brutality, none of them dared to attack her anymore. It was then that the five pirates who came with Anne charged into the cargo hold. Though they still outnumbered the pirates, the navies were left with no option but to surrender all weapons. Anne had completely annihilated their morale.

The sailors on the deck heard gunshots ringing from the cargo hold. As everyone here wanted to make use of whatever opportunity they had to fight for their lives, Zhang Heng knew that this was not the time to talk about the intricacies of humanity. Worried over Anne's safety, he immediately drew his gun, ran to the captain of the Happiness, and pulled the trigger on him. Zhang Heng's quick decision managed to silence every captured sailor.

Initially, they thought that Zhang Heng was too young to make the tough decisions, expecting him to panic during a critical moment like this. When they saw Zhang Heng killing the captain without any hesitation, they immediately gave up any thoughts of fighting back.

Right after Zhang Heng gained control of the deck, he ordered five pirates to assist Anne. However, before they could even get to the hold, Anne came back up to the deck with her back drenched in blood. She tossed 12 decapitated heads on the deck and said, "Who wants to challenge me?!"

The siege had ended.

Ultimately, this was the final nail in the coffin, and the entire crew of the Happiness gave up all hope of retaliation. None of them dared to move an inch while the pirates moved all their goods to the Jackdaw. After that, Zhang Heng ordered them to take enough food and drinking water from the Happiness to ensure that they could return to Nassau in one piece.

This battle had ensured that the pirates on the Jackdaw would stay loyal to Zhang Heng come what may. They changed their impression Anne had changed as well, especially the five pirates who went to the cargo hold with her. They now looked up to her in fear and admiration at the same time. As they were returning to Nassau, the five pirates told everyone about what actually happened in the cargo hold. Of course, bits and pieces were added to make it sound a tad juicier and more dramatic. Most pirates on board were simple-minded fools. Before their departure, a large number of them had told Zhang Heng that they were unhappy about Anne's appointment as the boatswain. After this incident, however, none dared to complain about Anne anymore. In other words, everyone thought that Anne was more than qualified to become their boatswain. The price for that recognition? She was bedridden for three full days.

The wound on her back was very severe, and she had wholly severed her back muscles. Luckily, the battle was short, and Zhang Heng treated her wounds the moment she got back on the deck. Thanks to the proper medical treatment, her speedy recovery enabled her to walk around the boat right before they arrived in Nassau.

"Since when have you become so polite? I'm here to help you, not to give you trouble. I need to act like a boatswain since you granted me this position," said Anne while putting on her clothes.

"I know that you are good at fighting. You should have retreated to the deck when you realized that you've been ambushed."

"It would be hard for us to take control of the hold if we let them have the slightest taste of success. Also, the captured sailors on the deck would surely retaliate."

Zhang Heng was surprised that Anne could see a bigger picture.

"Did that run through your mind at that time?"

"No. I just thought that it would be deeply embarrassing to flee a battle on my first day as a boatswain."

"....."

Chapter 155: First Come, First Serve

The Jackdaw had been moored at the harbor for three days. During that period, many pirates requested to get off the ship but Zhang Heng denied all of them. If a similar thing were to have happened back then, the crew would have definitely ganged up and force the captain to let them get off the ship.

Everyone was silent when Dufresne came over to hand everyone their profits. All the new recruits were glad that they made the decision to join the Jackdaw. None of them would be stupid enough to disobey

Zhang Heng and lose their right to be part of this ship. However, this whole staying-on-the-ship thing could last only three days.

After three days of curfew, the pirates were at their wits' end and decided that they had enough. Even if someone pointed a gun at their heads, it would not stop them from leaving. None of them would listen to Zhang Heng and Billy, where some pirates started to launch lifeboats and rowed to Nassau. Out of desperation, some even jumped into the ocean, attempting to swim ashore. After all, the Jackdaw wasn't anchored too far from land.

Based on Zhang Heng's calculations, the Gentle Wind should be safe by now. So, he did not stop his pirates from leaving the ship. Sensing freedom, they squeezed every bit of strength possible and rowed as fast as they could to get to Nassau's harbor. The bystanders were excited to see that the Jackdaw's crew was finally allowed to leave their ship. Everyone was eager to know how well their first voyage went.

Instead of stopping at the harbor once they landed on Nassau, all the pirates ran to where Gatsby, the moneylender stayed. Noticing a group of pirates running to his place, Gatsby quickly asked his guard to move a table in front of his house. He also carried a gunny sack with him.

When they arrived at Gatsby's place, Dufresne handed him a paper containing the signatures of Zhang Heng and Carina. He then read and checked it three times before placing it into his pocket. This was the most exciting moment for all the pirates as they were about to receive their share of the money. Each pirate on the Jackdaw stood to get at least 40 Spanish gold coins, an amount equivalent to 320 silver pesos. It was way more than what they had expected. For the ones with specific tasks on the ship like the cook and the cannoneers, they were given an extra 160 pesos each.

Zhang Heng received a total of 120 gold coins. As the captain of the ship, he was eligible to receive double the profit. Also, he was one of the seventeen who took over this ship in Charleston. Hence, all seventeen of them received another 40 gold coins.

Technically speaking, this ship was the first thing that they plundered from the navy. However, it would be unwise for them to sell this battleship for cash. So, Zhang Heng came up with a unique way to compensate all seventeen of them. For three years, they were entitled to an extra share of the loot. This rule would not change even if Zhang Heng wasn't the captain of the Jackdaw in the future. However, if the elders decided to leave the ship or were killed during a battle, they would no longer be able to receive the extra share.

As the boatswain and bravest pirate on the Jackdaw, Anne received a total of 80 gold coins. Since she was now wealthy enough to purchase her own property, she did not need to rely on anyone anymore. After that, she handed out 40 golden coins to Zhang Heng.

"Just like what I've promised you. I'm going to give half of my share to you since this is my very first yield."

This was the promise that Anne made when she first met Zhang Heng, one that he had already long forgotten. He was surprised that she still remembered it. Throughout her stay with Zhang Heng, she hadn't cost him too much money, and considering that the rent for the house had been paid, all he

bought for her was a set of utensils. Truth be told, Zhang Heng probably spent a total of two gold coins on her. It was not a big deal for him.

When he looked into Anne's eyes, he realized how much it meant to her for him to take it. Left with no other option, Zhang Heng took the coins from her.

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Soon, the news of the Jackdaw returning to Nassau with a ship full of valuable goods spread throughout the entire city like wildfire. Naturally, a large number of people were shocked by this. A mere two months ago, most of the island's residents looked down on the crew. Most thought that the captain was too young to lead a pirate group. Even those interested in joining the crew decided to wait for them to return from their first voyage before officially joining them. The same people were now regretting their decision.

When a pirate from the Jackdaw lost 20 gold coins in a night during a gambling session, it motivated the people of Nassau to form their own pirate crews. However, most of them did not have a proper ship, a reliable crew, and even their captains were randomly chosen. Naturally, they wanted to set sail to earn their fortune. Unfortunately, most of them would not end well. There was nothing to worry about if they returned to Nassau empty-handed but for those managing to return with loot on their ships, they would have to worry about pressure from the black-market alliance. By that time, they would quickly realize that earning good money was no easy task.

Nevertheless, Zhang Heng allowed his crew to take a month's break. If there were one word to describe the Jackdaw's first sail, it would be 'perfect.' That said, the pirates on board had earned a considerable amount of money. The bad thing was that they were no longer motivated to set sail again in search for more fortunes. The only thing that ran through their minds right now was to look for a way to spend whatever money they had in their pockets.

So, the Jackdaw's pirates literally poured into the brothels and casinos in Nassau. Expecting them to improve themselves at a time like this was close to impossible. On the other hand, Zhang Heng made use of the time to deal with something that he had in mind.

That evening, Zhang Heng, Anne, and Billy visited a restaurant called the Mermaid. They saw a couple of pirates from the Jackdaw in there. Most of them were very drunk, and a few attractive ladies were keeping them company. When they saw Zhang Heng, Billy, and Anne, they erupted into loud cheers and urged the trio to join them for drinks. In the end, Billy talked them out of it and made them go home.

After that, the three of them executed their plan. Anne and Billy entered the restaurant from the front and Zhang Heng walked to the alley behind the restaurant. He then took out the watch that he bought yesterday and took a look at it. Two minutes later, a slender man with a mustache pushed the waitresses aside and scooted out of the restaurant's backdoor, constantly turning behind him as he ran.

Unexpectedly, something tripped him, causing him to lose his balance and he fell into someone's vomit. As he turned around, he was greeted with a gun on his nose. Not too long after that, a middle-aged man stormed out of the restaurant angrily. They both crashed into each other, causing the middle-aged man to drop his glass of liquor. He had come out of the restaurant to teach the man a lesson.

2The slender man was excited when he saw the man running out of the restaurant, seeming as if he recognized the person coming at him. Unfortunately, his excitement only lasted for a short while because Zhang Heng pulled out his second gun and pointed it at the man.

“I’m sorry. First come, first serve.”

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Chapter 156: Information Broker

The little bearded man’s name was Hank, an information broker who had something of a reputation on the island. He was well acquainted with quite a few captains who frequented Nassau and, therefore, was able to amass a lot of information. Many pirates had bought tip-offs from him.

When Billy was on the Sea Lion, he had gone along with Orff to see the guy. It was also then that he came to know Hank. They even shared a few drinks together. Having a good relationship between them, Billy had elected to employ Hank’s services for the Jackdaw’s first voyage.

Although Hank may look unremarkable, he had his particular specialty, having done business on the island for such a long time.

He would assess the value of the prey, the information’s level of detail and credibility, then combine them to estimate the overall quality of the intelligence.

It was very much like the tip-off about the ship carrying perfume, which scored high in terms of value and source credibility. The information only lacked in minor details but was enough to be regarded as a high-quality tip-off.

COMMENT

This was also why Hank demanded such a high price—two Spanish gold coins. To ensure that the information would be reserved exclusively for the Jackdaw, Billy spent ten Spanish gold coins to buy out the information. The transaction meant that other than the Jackdaw, Hank could not sell the information to any other pirates.

After that, Hank confirmed that the Duffy, the tobacco ship, was also on the same route, which put Billy at ease. Having secured two leads, he was very confident about the Jackdaw’s first voyage.

However, everything that happened after went utterly unexpected. If it wasn’t for the female merchant Karina boarding the ship halfway, providing crucial information about the perfume vessel, what would have awaited Jackdaw would be the cruel reality of returning empty-handed.

While Bill was no wily old fox like Orff, he was no fool either. When the perfume ship was nowhere in sight, he was already suspicious. But then again, these things happened all too often. Even so, he could not immediately dismiss the second tip-off simply because the first one was fruitless. What would be the point of buying the backup piece of information then?

The direction in which the events developed confirmed his misgivings. With two tip-offs consecutively falling through, Billy realized that he had been duped. What he could not understand was that he had a

pretty amicable relationship with Hank all these years, and the Jackdaw had no quarrel with him either. Why would the information broker do this to him then?

Today, the three had come to the Mermaid Restaurant to get to the bottom of this.

Hank immediately knew who was behind the door. Recently, Zhang Heng had become the most famous person on the whole island. When the Jackdaw first appeared on the banks of Nassau, Hank came running out to join the crowd too. As an information broker, expanding his network was an essential part of the job. So, he was no stranger to the Jackdaw or her new captain.

The information broker scrambled to his feet, not even bothering to wipe off the dirt on his shirt. The man clad in black stood in front of him, and smiled thinly.

Hank nervously blurted, "I was very clear when I sold the information to you. I cannot guarantee that every lead is absolutely valid. Even the most credible information could suffer unexpected outcomes. The target could divert its course halfway, encounters with other pirates, then there's the weather... look, if you don't believe me, you can ask your helmsman. I did reiterate about these risks, you know..."

Hank took in a deep breath and then continued, "Of course, I deeply regret your experience, but fortunately, you suffered no losses in the end, right? How about this. Let's all take a step back; I'll return your money, and this whole thing will just be water under the bridge, eh?"

Zhang Heng said nothing in reply. Just then, Anne and Billy came in from the back door of the tavern and cornered Hank in.

Seeing that the situation was not in his favor, the information broker quickly added, "Err... also, the next time you go out to sea, I can give you some valuable tip-offs for free. I guarantee that there will be no more accidents this time."

Hank leaned against the cold stone wall, trying his best to remain calm. In the past, people had hounded him down because the information he provided was inaccurate, but he had always been shrewd enough to deal with the situation. While there were only a handful of information brokers on the island, and they usually competed against each other, they would also stick together if the need arose. Once, an information broker was killed, and when they discovered the murderer, no one sold any information to the pirate ship the murderer belonged to. In the end, the pirate ship was forced to change their captain.

Hank looked at Billy. He had been on the island for a long time, so there was no way he had never heard of that incident. As a helmsman by profession, he should be informing his own captain of the possible consequences of harming information brokers.

However, Billy did not respond, still staring daggers at him.

Then Hank saw the female redhead pirate drawing out the dagger on her waist. She smiled at him slyly.

The next thing he felt was a sharp coldness in his chest. When he looked down, he saw that his linen shirt had been torn open, and the dagger was deep inside his flesh, missing his heart by only two centimeters. The redhead only needed to push the blade a little deeper, and it would be the end of him.

Hank was really alarmed this time. He never expected this bunch to completely disregard the rules. The information broker's voice cracked as he mumbled in pain, "You... how much do you want as compensation? At least give me a number."

"We don't want any compensation," Zhang Heng finally spoke. "But we need you to answer a few questions. Truthfully, of course."

"What do you want to know?" Hank asked wearily, his eyes squinting as blood dripped down his shirt.

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An hour later, Zhang Heng and his companions left through the alley.

Anne sheathed her dagger as she frowned. "Malcolm. Anyone of you knows who this guy is? What's his problem with us?"

"Malcolm is the second-best trader of the black-market alliance. This man comes from a rather powerful family in the New World," explained Billy, who had a better knowledge of the island than the other two. "Do not underestimate him simply because of his background. Malcolm arrived in Nassau about four years ago. When he first came to the island, he had nothing, save a cargo ship. His family located far away in New York could only provide him easy passage through the customs, but when it came to the matters in Nassau, he was on his own. He practically started from scratch. Today, he has established good relations with at least a dozen pirate ships. Last year, Black Prince Sam even started to work with him, making him one of the more closely followed characters of the black-market alliance."

Chapter 157: Invitation

"So, how does our failed voyage benefit Malcolm?" asked the redhead.

"Not everyone on this island supports the establishment of the black-market alliance, especially the smaller, less powerful pirate gangs. But because of their size, no one would pay attention to what they have to say. We are the only ones on the island left who are strong enough but have not joined the alliance—many are watching our every move, which was why we had such a hard time negotiating the price. The black-market alliance doesn't mind increasing the buying price for a single pirate group. Still, if they were to do that, they'd be violating their own rules, and it would also set a precedent for others to ask for higher prices. So if our first voyage turned out badly, I'm sure that there would be no such trouble."

Anne was absolutely bewildered and distressed by this scheme. When she was done listening, she said, "So, very simply, if we work with Carina now, then we'll have nothing to do with the black-market alliance, right? This means that there won't be any more of this sabotaging bullshit in the future, right?"

Zhang Heng piped in, "I'm afraid that may not be the case. This is exactly the situation that the black-market alliance doesn't want to see. We returned with a full load, yet chose to sell our loot through a channel outside of theirs. They watched a batch of precious goods leave the island but did not profit from it—the thing they can't tolerate the most especially since they offered us a much higher price than they normally would for the older pirate groups. All the more, they need to make up for this loss from the new pirate group. There's a good chance that they won't turn a blind eye to our misdemeanor."

“Huh? How despicable! We decide for ourselves how we want to deal with the loot we earn. What does that have anything to do with them? Speaking of which, ever since this stupid alliance was established, Nassau has been under a dark cloud. There’s been an awful atmosphere around here. Why don’t we just go over there now and kill them all?!” the redhead growled, obviously irritated.

“That’s not a good idea,” said a familiar voice from behind them. “They have the support of some of the most powerful pirate gangs. You are at a disadvantage. It’s not wise to make a move in a time like this.”

The three of them turned around, only to see an old pirate walking out of the bakery next door. He was wearing a new outfit and looked rather cheerful, except for the same old grey tricorne on his head. He also carried with him a bag of freshly baked toast.

“Well, well. If it ain’t Frazer. How dare you show up in front of us?” Billy’s tone turned icy as soon as he heard the voice.

Back on the Sea Lion, Frazer constantly went against the group of old seadogs, nearly costing their lives. As soon as they came ashore, they ran to the tavern that their captain often frequented, only to find nobody there. Billy never thought that the old captain would make such a grand appearance now.

“Billy, you know that this is nothing personal. We both share the same goal—to liberate the crew of the Sea Lion from Orff’s and Kid’s lies and barbaric rule. Forgive me for being straightforward, but that little trick you guys pulled was simply not good enough. Thus, I had no choice but to solve the problem in my own way.”

The old pirate shrugged and admitted, “Yes, I did make use of you. Of course, you have every reason to be angry, but if things go according to my plan, I can ensure that you guys won’t be in trouble later. I know you don’t trust me, but, at the very least, you trust Owen, right? That kid’s performance on the ship was stellar. He really did care for you guys. It was genuine. When he becomes captain, he will make sure that justice will be served for you.”

Billy sneered. “You’re right, but that’s provided we can live to see that day. If Zhang Heng hadn’t come to an agreement with Orff, we would’ve been gone even before we arrived at Charleston. I won’t believe your lies anymore, Frazer. Not another bloody word of yours. Your eyes are only on the profit. When it comes to that, there’s no too big of a sacrifice, right?”

“In reality, I’m not as cold-blooded as you think. I know you have your grievances against me. So, take this as me making up to you for all the harm that I’ve caused you.” Frazer then reached into his shirt pocket.

Seeing that, Billy and Anne instinctively drew their weapons. Seeing the situation heating up, he used his other hand that was holding the bread to gesture at them to calm down. With the other, he pulled out an invitation card and handed it to Zhang Heng.

“I admit that there was an oversight on my part. I knew that you were good, but I never thought that you’d perform better than expected. If I can choose again, I would surely recruit you instead of using you as bait. Unfortunately, we can’t change what’s happened, right?” The old pirate sighed deeply. “You’re no less talented than Kidd, and have a group of fine seamen with you. The only thing stopping you from becoming the most powerful pirate gang is time. That’s where I come in. I can help you acquire the time you need.”

The old pirate paused for a minute before continuing. "After much persuasion, Malcolm realized that the way he dealt with you before this was a mistake. He is willing to apologize for what happened, and, at the same time, renegotiate the terms of the deal with you. There will be a dinner party at Terrance's mansion in seven days. Malcolm hopes to meet you there."

"So, you were the one behind the black-market alliance all along, huh," Billy hissed.

"You people overestimate me," Frazer replied gingerly. "Redmond and Malcolm's men have learned their lesson from the failure of the first alliance. Now, they've set out to explore and establish a new alliance, or to be more precise, the previous alliance was premature; nothing more but a guinea pig. By using that, they were able to practice and accumulate experience while testing and observing the reactions of each party on the island. That's why the new alliance seemed to be so well established. Now, they've prepared for three whole years. When the news was spread a few months ago, they were very near to its completion.

"As for me, it was all just a coincidence. Even without my help, they could still look for others to help them contact those pirates. At most, it would cost them more time." Frazer suddenly turned dead serious. "You guys have never met Malcolm before, and do not know how scary he can be. He is the most dangerous person I've met in my entire lifetime. I suggest that you take this opportunity to mend your relationship with the black-market alliance. The Jackdaw's hunting ground is on the ocean, and the black-market alliance is in control of the land. There is no conflict of interest between the two of you. If you could just sit down and talk things through like gentlemen, I'm sure there's no reason to go against each other."

Chapter 158: Anne's House

Zhang Heng was unsurprised that the black-market alliance started to panic after knowing that the Jackdaw's first voyage was a victory. When they found out that Zhang Heng had been working alongside Carina to sell off all his loot, they instantly knew that they had lost the right to negotiate with him. Naturally, they would want to look for a way to solve their problem.

Frazer was right about the Jackdaw needing time to grow. At the same time, this applied to the newly born black-market alliance as well. Redmond and Malcolm were both black-market merchants that wanted to make the maximum profit they could from the pirates. All these while, they were hoping to establish some sort of order in Nassau to end the chaotic trading era. Through a series of carefully executed plans, they managed to convince enough people to support them. Right now, most of the influential pirate crews were on their side. At the same time, some went against them.

What they were doing right now had gone against a long-standing principle of Nassau, one that its people held dearly to their hearts. This principle was the spirit of adventure. Many small-time pirates were unhappy with the current proposal offered by the black-market alliance. As compared to the organized black-market alliance, these were considered a leaderless group of weaklings with no sense of camaraderie, and therefore, were no threat to the alliance. Once the black-market alliance crossed the unstable period, these small-time pirates would be left with no option but to accept whatever deal that the alliance threw at them.

With Zhang Heng's success, all of them saw a ray of new hope. The Jackdaw was the only pirate crew that had elected to not partner up with the black-market alliance. Things were no longer just a problem between the Jackdaw and the black-market alliance.

This was both a good and bad thing for Zhang Heng. Whether he liked it or not, he and the Jackdaw had become the center of attention in Nassau. They had eyes on them at any given time of the day. Hence, both parties could only solve this problem through legal channels. Undeniably, Zhang Heng would benefit more than the black-market alliance if they managed to solve their grievances. As long as the Jackdaw was growing, the black-market alliance would continue to be under enormous pressure. To Zhang Heng's surprise, Malcolm from the black-market alliance looked for him sooner than he expected.

"I just did a quick check. A banquet will be held at Terrance's mansion in six days. Malcolm has invited some of the most powerful individuals on this island. That would include celebrated captains and wealthy landowners. Malcolm apparently organized the banquet as a thank-you for their continuous support of the black-market alliance. This banquet should be safe for you to go."

As the helmsman of the Jackdaw, Billy did everything he could to make sure that the ship and her captain wouldn't be taken advantage of. Once Zhang Heng received the invitation, Billy proceeded to investigate the matter, telling him about his findings the next morning.

"Thank you for everything you've done," said Zhang Heng,

Anne yawned as she sleepily came downstairs after Billy left the house.

"Are you planning to attend the banquet?"

"Yes. Malcolm wants to know what kind of person I am. At the same time, I want to know what exactly the black-market alliance is planning as well."

"Ah... I have seriously no idea what goes on in that mind of yours. If it were to be me, I would just kill all the enemies that stand in my way. Why waste time and reason with them

As she went on, Anne walked to the dining table and spread some jam on a piece of bread.

"I wish it was that simple. Hey, let's not talk about this. Did you manage to find a house that you like?"

"Harry scouted the area for me, and guess what? I've finally found a house that perfectly matches what I want! It's very near to the harbor, and two restaurants located on the next street are only a 15-minute walk away. They are even open at night. There's even an empty plot of land behind the house where I can practice my fencing skills. The house costs only 200 silver pesos. Harry said he can help me lower the price even more. I'm planning to buy the house this very afternoon if the price is right."

"Congrats!"

Zhang Heng knew that buying her own property meant a lot to her. The reason why she ran away from her wealthy family was that she wanted to pursue freedom. Throughout her childhood, she had always witnessed her mother slogging like a maid for her father. After that, she swore to never rely on the mercy others like her mother had done her whole life. That was also why she was adamant about giving half of her loot to Zhang Heng, not wanting to owe him anything.

From the very beginning, Anne told Zhang Heng that she was only going to stay at his place temporarily and promised to move out as soon as she earned enough money. The moment she received her share of the money, she quickly searched for her own place on the island. Her dream finally came true.

“From today onwards, no one can stop me from putting my legs on the dining table! And no one can force me to finish my soup as well!”

“.....”

Initially, Zhang Heng wanted to help Anne to move over to her new house. Unfortunately, he was told that some of his pirates had started a brawl in one of the brothels. As the captain of the Jackdaw, it was Zhang Heng’s duty to head there and solve the problem. Luckily, it was not as serious as he thought it would be. There was indeed a fight, but there was no loss of life, albeit an unlucky pirate who got stabbed in the thigh. When Zhang Heng arrived at the brothel, the man’s wound was already wrapped up in bandages.

It turned out that both parties were fighting over the same woman. Initially, the woman had been booked by a group of pirates from a ship called the Hunter, but when the Jackdaw’s pirates doubled their price, the prostitute changed her mind and decided to serve them instead. Due to bruised egos on the side of the Hunter’s pirates, both parties ended up bludgeoning each other.

Incidents like this were prevalent in brothels. The solution was equally simple, where all they needed to do was to pay them a small amount of money to prevent conflict from happening. However, the pirates from the Hunter knew that the Jackdaw had returned with a windfall. Hence, greed had motivated them to demand a huge ransom from the Jackdaw’s pirates. When they refused to pay up, the Hunter’s pirates stopped them from leaving the brothel since they outnumbered them.

The Hunter’s captain stood up and adjusted his collar. It seemed like he was about to say something to Zhang Heng. However, Zhang Heng could not bother to listen to what he had to say.

“Let my people go!”

“No problem! I’ll let them go after you pay 20 gold coins as compensation for my men’s medical fees.”

“It seems that peacefully resolving this matter is out of the question. Old rules it is then.”

Immediately, Zhang Heng drew his saber from his sheath. The Hunter’s captain was taken aback, seeing how ruthless the Jackdaw’s skipper was. If both sides failed to resolve a matter peacefully, the captain from one party could either choose to duel with another captain or allow their pirates to battle each other in groups. Those were the old rules that Zhang Heng mentioned earlier. It would seem that Zhang Heng chose to mano-y-mano with the captain. If it were 20 years ago, the Hunter’s captain would have accepted the duel. Unfortunately, he was now an old man and was unfit to fight anymore. There was no way that he could defeat Zhang Heng.

“We outnumber you! Why should I fight with you?” snapped the captain of the Hunter.

At that statement, he noticed his pirates glaring at him in the most condescending of ways. Usually, a fearless pirate would never reject another pirate’s request for a duel. He had just turned himself into a coward in front of everyone.

“Group fight? Are you sure?”

Calmly, Zhang Heng put away his saber and looked at the goons that stood around them.

“I will pay three silver coins to anyone able to defeat a pirate from the Hunter. Who’s with me?”

Immediately, everyone in the brothel stood up.

Chapter 159: Happy That You Stayed

The conflict ended with the pirates from the Hunter leaving the brothel without a single coin. To thank the brothel’s patrons, Zhang Heng bought them all a round of drinks. He left the place, earning praises and respect for his generosity. Once this matter was settled, Dufresne asked Zhang Heng to head to the arms dealer’s house. It seemed that the arms dealer had managed to get his hands on the ammunition for the Jackdaw’s 24-pound cannons. Dufresne wanted to discuss the number of cannonballs that they would need with Zhang Heng. He also wanted to talk about recruiting a new cook for the ship as well.

It was now sunset, and Zhang Heng finally returned home. Anne was no longer there when he opened the door. He then went to her room to look for her, but she was nowhere to be found as well. After the incident in Charleston, Marvin had decided to stay on the Queen Anne’s Revenge. No one knew where they were at the moment. Now that Anne had moved out too, Zhang Heng was left alone in this empty space.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng felt something missing in the house. On a typical day, Anne would complain that she was hungry at this hour. Right now, there was all but silence. Unconsciously, Zhang Heng had gotten used to Anne’s voice around the house.

He missed her tough masculine antics.

He missed her coming home to him after fighting with someone outside.

He missed her long rants about other pirates looking down on her.

The truth was, Zhang Heng wasn’t prepared for her eventual departure. Buying a house had always been Anne’s dream. As she was one step closer to her goal, she gradually lost the reason to continue staying in Zhang Heng’s house. Just this morning, the two of them were talking about how she could do whatever she wanted when she had her room. And Zhang Heng was genuinely happy for her. Somehow, the two avoided the topic of their separation.

...

Zhang Heng finished his dinner alone that night. Before he went to bed, he read the journal that he took from the Jackdaw. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, he was woken by a curious rustling in the house. Immediately, his eyes popped open, and he grabbed the saber lying next to him. In all possibility, it was an intruder breaking in. Considering the Jackdaw and the black-market alliance were not on good terms, Zhang Heng knew that he had the potential to make enemies. Logically, Malcolm wouldn’t have sent someone to kill him since the black-market alliance hadn’t officially considered him as their enemy. Besides, a man of Malcolm’s stature would surely not resort to using such a despicable method to eliminate Zhang Heng.

To prevent himself from becoming a gunshot victim, Zhang Heng swiftly lit the oil lamps in his house. He then lay flat in front of the door and attempted to listen to the footsteps outside his room. When the sounds in the hallway stopped, Zhang Heng instantly stood up and opened the door. He was hoping to surprise the intruder with his saber. However, the shadowy figure in front of him was quick enough to dodge his attack. Instead of retreating, the intruder's fist was raised and was poised to attack.

The intruder was bolder than Zhang Heng expected. He wanted to dodge the intruder's attack, but quickly realized that it was too late to do so. The intruder landed a hard punch on his chin. He was thinking of slashing the intruder at the same time but held back. Soon, the conflict turned into an intense fight in the dark. After a while, Zhang Heng noticed that the intruder's moves were too familiar. He had sparred a couple of times with Anne and was familiar with her movements. He was also pretty sure that Anne knew that she was fighting him. However, she had no intention to stop her brawls anytime soon. He could feel her getting more excited with every breath.

The moment Zhang Heng hesitated for a short while, he was hit in the chest twice and was forced to recollect himself to handle Anne's relentless attacks. The battle abruptly ended when Anne jumped on him and pinned him to the ground. To Zhang Heng's surprise, his sword skill had been promoted to LV 2 once the fight was over. He was left speechless when he received the notification. On the other hand, Anne was gasping for air, and her face was flushing as well.

"You lost!"

"....."

"Why are you not talking?"

"You came back in the middle of the bloody night just to fight with me?!"

"Of course not. I'm here to inform you that I'm not buying the house."

Anne let go of Zhang Heng's arm, slid her butt across his belly, and got off from him.

"Why? Wasn't that your lifelong dream?"

"I thought it was. When I was young, my father was the one who provided me with food and a place to stay. On the contrary, my mom had to constantly please his whims and demands. At that time, I thought I could freely live the way I wanted if I had my own house. So, that became my main goal when I came to Nassau. Completing my goal meant that I was finally independent."

"You have done some awe-inspiring things in this era."

At that point in history, women were perceived as the weaker of the sexes. Hence, their social status was way lower compared to men. Though Zhang Heng had helped her a lot in Nassau, the fact that she managed to gain the respect of the men around her was indeed unprecedented.

"I don't want to leave this place. Buying the house means that I can finally live freely. However, if I can't live the life that I want even after buying the house, it would be pointless. That's not freedom to me. I mean, it's good to have my own house and all, and I would very much enjoy putting my legs on the dining table and not being forced to finish my soup. But, my true freedom has nothing to do with all that. I want to be able to choose the life that I wish to lead."

Once she was done talking, she pushed Zhang Heng to the floor, ripped off her top, and climbed on him.

“I like you! I don’t care whether you like me or you have your eye on others. I don’t care if or when you’ll leave me. Maybe this love that I have for you will disappear someday. By that time, I will reserve the right to leave you.”

In the dark, Zhang Heng could see her eyes alight with the flames of passion. After hesitating for a short while, Zhang Heng caressed her body with his hands. He gently ran over the scars littering her soft skin.

“Are they ugly?” asked a bashful Anne.

“No. They are beautiful.”

Zhang Heng was dying to tell her, to be not so cavalier about her life and so blindly charge at every enemy that came at her. Nevertheless, he chose to stay mum in the end. Knowing her personality through and through, Zhang Heng knew that it was pointless telling her things like that.

“I’m glad that you’ve decided to stay.”

Chapter 160: Terrance’s Mansion

Zhang Heng finally got a few days off for himself. It appeared that news about the brothel incident had spread throughout Nassau. Whenever anyone wanted to mess with the Jackdaw’s pirates, they would have to first consider if they could beat Zhang Heng’s wealth. From then on, his conflicts lessened dramatically, and he didn’t need to waste more time dealing with troubles like that.

These days, Zhang Heng would spend most of his time sparring with Anne. He would also tend to a vegetable farm that he had started as well.

Zhang Heng was glad that he was now living in a tropical country. All the tomatoes, carrots, and cabbages that he planted in the ground were all ready for harvest when he returned from his voyages. Proper care wasn’t even required as the weather here would take good care of his vegetables while he was gone for a month or two.

As compared to training for combat, Anne was not interested in farming. Most of the time, she would sprawl lazily on the chair outside the house and watch Zhang Heng tend to his crops. The incident that night was akin to a rock dropping into a lake. There were ripples at first, but calm quickly returned after a little while.

Anne did not change the way she treated Zhang Heng, not to mention that she did not look as if she was in love as well. The only thing that changed was the frequency of Anne’s sparring requests. Perhaps it was her very own way of showing her love to him.

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Five days later, Zhang Heng visited Terrance’s mansion with Anne and Billy. Although it would seem that he faced no potential threats there, it would still be inappropriate for the captain of the Jackdaw to go there alone. Malcolm didn’t organize his banquet in the town of Nassau. Instead, it was located on a plantation somewhere near the center of the island. The land belonged to him, and that was his place of residence as well.

Unlike the wooden houses on the northern shores, Malcolm's mansion was made out of stone, and it was designed with an adaptation of Baroque architecture. However, stones were not available on New Providence Island. Malcolm had to import those stones from somewhere else. One could only imagine how much a single stone would cost. He even went as far as hiring two Italian architects, taking three long years to build the mansion. This was his first time exposing his mysterious abode to outsiders.

"Well... it appears that this guy has done very well for himself over the years!" exclaimed Anne while staring at the giant statues of Apollo and Daphne in front of the mansion.

"This is exactly why he organized this banquet. He wants to let everyone know that they too can earn big bucks if they work with him."

Zhang Heng had Malcolm all figured out in his mind.

"I think he's managed to achieve his agenda," said Billy.

He turned around, only to see every guest standing with their mouths wide open as they stared in awe at the large statues. A man appearing to be a butler stood at the entrance at the mansion and checked the invitation that Zhang Heng brought with him.

"Welcome to the Terrance mansion. I wish the three of you a pleasant time."

After that, he rang the bell that he was holding. At the ring, three maids clad in black approached them. They seemed really young, about 16 to 17 years of age.

"Hello. My name is Daisy. I will be serving you tonight, and I will do my best to fulfill everything that you need."

"I don't think I need a servant. Besides, I don't like people following me around."

The maid looked taken aback by Anne's snappy comment. There was still a smile on her face, but it was evident that it was forced. Once the butler noticed the small commotion, he walked towards Zhang Heng right after he checked the person's invitation in front of him. He saw that Daisy had started panicking.

"Greetings. May I know what is going on here? Are you dissatisfied with Daisy's company? I can get you someone else right away."

Just when Anne wanted to say something, Zhang Heng interrupted her.

"Everything is good. We are thinking of asking Daisy to show us around the mansion."

"I believe that you will definitely like this place. However, I don't think you can finish exploring in a day because this place is massive. Besides, our special performance is about to begin. I would like to recommend that you enter the banquet hall first. There will be free time for you to walk around after the banquet is over. Feel free to tell your maid if you wish to stay here for the night."

Zhang Heng then nodded his head and thanked the butler. He started to walk towards the brightest building that was not too far away from him. Anne was smart enough to know why Zhang Heng interrupted her just now. Once they were away from the entrance, Anne talked to the servant.

“Will you be punished if we rejected your services just now?”

Daisy did not respond to Anne’s question. Instead, she undid the back of her dress, and shockingly, it was scarred from top to bottom, probably the result of continuous whipping. Seeing what the maid had to endure, Anne became so furious that she was about to draw her dagger and kill the person responsible for the torture.

“Better not try anything stupid here. I don’t like this too. Once the women are sold to the household, they are being treated as property. No one can say a word, no matter what Malcolm does to them. You are going to make them suffer even more if you insist on avenging them. We are simply guests, and we will leave this mansion after tonight. They are the ones who would have to remain here,” said Billy in a hushed tone.

Daisy was grateful for Billy’s explanation. Left in fumes of frustration, Anne put away her dagger. Soon, the three arrived at the ballroom, and Daisy opened the doors for them. If the outer part of the building was luxurious, the structure’s interior could only be described as resplendent and magnificent. A vast chandelier hung from the center of a massive dome with more than a hundred candles alight on it. The candlelight was as bright as day, displaying an intricately decorated wall that was covered with ribbons. A soft Persian carpet lined the entire floor.

“How nostalgic! I feel like I’m back in Scotland,” cooed a landowner who was behind them.

Throng of guests were invited to the banquet. However, there were two kinds of people here. One was the conventional businessmen. They were deeply impressed by the lavish decorations and sculptures inside the ballroom. They only stood there and observed without touching anything. On the other hand, there were pirates. This lot had their hands all over the valuables in the ballroom. Of course, the thought of looting these items came across their minds. They knew that it would earn them a handsome fortune if they could sell them off.