

48 Hours 91

Chapter 91: Silent Bidding

While everyone else started bidding for the Escape Dagger, Zhang Heng and Ding Si unlocked the tablets that were placed in front of them. This was his first time seeing so many game items all at once. There was a total of 80 pages, where a photo of each game item was displayed followed by its name, grade, and a short description.

By showing all the items on tabs, the buyers would at least have some knowledge about what they were about to pay for. Of course, the auction house would not reveal every single detail. The value of Dreamland of Death, for example, would significantly drop if anyone knew the way to trigger it and killing someone with it. It was a risky business after all when one bid for items in an auction.

When it came to risks, the Escape Dagger, for instance, was an item that came to scrutiny. It's description mentioned everything except for the distance it could teleport. The buyers had to make an educated guess by themselves and would have to accept that it was all fair game if eventually, the Escape Dagger did not live up to their expectations.

Zhang Heng noticed that Ding Si did not look at the merchandise that was listed on the first few pages of the catalog. Instead, he went all the way to the last page. Ding Si put on a smile when he realized Zhang Heng peeking at his tab.

"There are around 200 unidentified game items in this auction. Astute observation is required when checking out the stuff listed at the end of the catalog. Take a look if you're interested. These items are all set at a minimum reserve of 100 game points. However, most of them are F-grade, where only a small portion of them are of E-grade. And if you are extremely lucky, you might be able to spot a C or even B-grade item or two. Two years ago, a guy bought an unidentified game item. To his shock, it was a B-grade item when he identified it! That is what I call by a one-in-a-million exception! Usually, players would make a loss when purchasing unidentified items. It's all a gamble, you know. The players who have listed their items here in this category have done a lot of research themselves. They have to be very sure that the items that they sell here actually cost less than 100 game points each!"

Zhang Heng then flipped to the last page, coming to a list of items with serial numbers written beside them. Players had put down their bidding prices beside some, but most were still available, having nobody bidding on them yet.

"For some people, they have a real hard time deciding on which item to bid on. So, they would usually bid for items that others had bid for. To be honest, this is definitely an unwise move. The bidder wouldn't know when to stop since they have no prior knowledge whatsoever about the item. Say you manage to find the item you really wanted, there is still the option to wait up until the last second and bid on it right before the system closes."

Zhang Heng then thanked Ding Si for sharing all these tips with him. Though information like this was hardly a trade secret, it showed that Ding Si had lots of experience in maximizing profit during an auction. It was kind of him to share all those pointers with Zhang Heng, although it wasn't necessary for him to do so.

“Don’t sweat it. Consider it as my long-term investment in you. Next time, if you wish to purchase a game item, you won’t have to wait until the end of the year to do so. You can always come to Fu Lou and look for us. Our prices are always reasonable!”

Zhang Heng did not impulsively scan through the unidentified items, instead, checking out the game items that were already identified first. He wanted to know how they priced all those items. Basically, an E-grade item would cost around 80 to 100 game points. D-grade items were around 300 to 600 game points. The gap grew wider when it came to C-grade items, usually costing thousands. Of course, prices of C-grade items varied depending on function. If it was an extremely useful item, the prices could go way beyond thousands.

In the end, the Escape Dagger was sold at 2,050 game points.

“That’s overpriced. No doubt, the item is useful, but it definitely does not cost 2,050 game points. I think 1,500 is a more reasonable price. I suppose items that could save lives are usually in high demand. Maybe the person bidding for it needs it urgently.”

After that, the auctioneer presented the second item. He opened up a box made out of Tule wood and displayed the piece of bone inside for everyone to see.

“Moresby Bone. Grade: C. It can be used to cycle time. Remaining use: 2. You can get more information about it after you receive the item. The starting price is at 1,900 game points. Every bid increases the item’s price by 50. The deal will be sealed when the hammer knocks three times. Let the bidding begin.”

There was total silence, where not a single soul placed a bid for at least half a minute. The Moresby Bone was different from the Escape Dagger. Judging by the provided description, it was hard figuring out what it could be used for, and besides, a 1,900 starting price was undoubtedly a princely one.

However, the starting prices of all these items sent to auction house tonight were actually determined by professional appraisers from the committee. That was why no one doubted its value. Their only concern, however, was that they would be unable to fully utilize the item after purchase. After all, these items all cost billions after a yuan conversion. To make matters worse, it was only left with two remaining uses. Even the wealthiest person here would think twice before purchasing it.

“This item is actually quite interesting...” muttered Ding Si while rubbing his chin.

“You mean?” asked Zhang Heng.

Amongst all present here tonight, Zhang Heng was the only one who knew how to fully utilize the bone because he was the one who had asked the bartender lady to identify it. He was also the one who entrusted her to auction it off. Although sifting through the entire catalog, he didn’t see the item listed anywhere. So, he suspected that this must be of the 12 valuable items which required other players to bid on it with their paddles.

“Time-series items are extremely rare, though their starting prices can still be reasonable. However, the phrase ‘cycling time’ does not carry too much information.”

“Are you trying to say that there might be no bids?”

“No. No. No. That is impossible. The rarity of this item itself ensures that someone will eventually bid for it. Right now, nobody is raising their number paddles because they are trying to estimate its value!”

Right after Ding Si finished talking, someone raised their paddle. Soon, there was a second and then, a third person bid for it. However, the atmosphere this time was different from the Escape Dagger bid. Only a few people placed their wagers, dragging on until a few moments before the hammer came down for the third time before bidding on it.

The situation gradually turned awkward as the bidding went on and on, seeming to be a never-ending process.

Ten minutes later, the auctioneer frowned and made a new announcement.

“From now on, every bid costs 100 game points!”

All the bidders had to think twice now. As time went on, fewer and fewer people placed their bids, though the bidding speed had increased. Notably, there were only three people bidding for it right now.

It appeared that the three were determined to get their hands on this item, come what may. When the price had reached a staggering 2,600 game points, one of them decided to quit. Then, when it reached the 2,900 game point mark, another hesitated for a moment before he threw in the towel.

In the end, the hammer price for the Moresby Bone was 2,900 game points.

“This sure is an excellent price for a C-grade item,” Ding Si exclaimed.

This time, he did not give an estimated price for the Moresby Bone. Even a professional like him could not determine its value without looking at its full report. However, Zhang Heng knew that whoever bought the Moresby Bone made no losses.

This item was actually an extremely handy one, being able to create a continuous 60-second time-loop. Within this 60 seconds, no matter what the user did, this 60-second time frame could be rolled back! Technically, its user could stay in a 60-second time-loop forever until somebody deliberately broke it.

Chapter 92: Paris Arrow

Zhang Heng was really interested in the effect of Moresby Bone. The bartender lady identified it for him and he'd also tested it out for himself. Unlike his other game items, it was actually extremely difficult to trigger the Moresby Bone's effect. In fact, a very particular ritual needed to be performed before one could utilize it. Thankfully, it was not that hard to get the materials for this ritual. Around nine hours was needed for the entire ritual to be completed.

If performed successfully, the user would enter the time loop. The realm within this loop was a world of nothingness. Not even death would happen in the realm of the time loop. This was actually the perfect place for one to master their skills. Archery would be a good example. In this realm, the user would not feel hungry, thirsty, or tired. With determination, one could actually train until their archery skills maxed out. However, no one would be able to withstand such a boring routine for too long. Zhang Heng estimated that even a person with a strong mental fortitude would not be able to stay within the time loop's realm for more than half a month.

That was a place void of anything. Zhang Heng wondered how the monster called Moresby stayed inside for tens of thousands of years. Just like entering the realm of the time loop, if the user wished to exit the realm, someone would need to prepare the ritual again. This was why the Alkiz were stuck inside the realm after they exterminated Moresby.

If the old man in the Chinese attire did not break the balance of time, that monster would have probably been stuck inside the time loop for eternity. Despite this, the item kept its value. The premise of being able to live forever inside the time loop itself was attractive enough for someone to bid for it.

Zhang Heng let this item go because he had an extra 24 hours every day. Besides, he was new to the game, and he had just completed three quests. Sure, he could earn game points pretty quickly, but the reward was simply not good enough.

After deducting the 5% processing fee, Zhang Heng received a total of 2,755 game points. With this amount, he was now officially a bidder at the auction house. As he flipped through the catalog again, something captured his attention on page four.

[Paris Arrow. Grade: D. Description: Once the arrow is launched, it would automatically land on the target's weak point. Current price: 410.]

The name of this arrow reminded Zhang Heng about a story he heard when he was still a kid.

It went like this:

During the Trojan War, Achilles was the strongest hero from Greece. Legend said that he was the son of one of the heroes from the Argonauts, namely Peleus, and the Ocean Queen, Thetis. There were many versions of his story. One of them was that his mother, Thetis, was told by the Queen of Fate that she would be killed on the battlefield. So, she soaked her son, Achilles, in the River Styx to turn him into an indestructible hero. As she was holding his heel as she dipped him, his heel later became his only weakness.

When he grew up, he turned into a war hero killing countless enemies during the Trojan War. He was the one who had eliminated Hector, the most powerful warrior from Troy. After that, he was involved in a fight between Apollo, the God of the Sun. According to Gustav Schwab, the author of Gods and Heroes of Ancient Greece, Achilles was killed when Apollo shot an arrow at his heel. The name and description of this game item matched the arrow that was mentioned in the Greek epic poem, Odyssey.

After knowing that players would face unknown danger in the real world, Zhang Heng wanted to arm himself well to make sure that he could protect him and others. The Paris Arrow matched perfectly with his Lv2 Archery Skill. As long as he could aim and launch the arrow at his target, it would automatically aim for the target's weak spots.

This was actually a niche game item, where only players with an archery skill would be attracted by it. That would mean only a few players would fight for it. So, half an hour later, the price of the Paris Arrow had increased by only 65 game points. As compared to other game items, the Paris Arrow was evidently not as popular.

Amid the auction, Ding Si's cellphone rang nonstop, seeming as if he was getting more business by the minute. Zhang Heng was not surprised, as those participating in the auction were here to look for items

that could help them in the game. If what they wanted to buy was in high demand, and they lacked game points, they would frequently look toward the chamber of commerce for help. Some would even sell off game items that they possessed in exchange for more game points.

In that one hour, Ding Si's fingers never left his cellphone, closing one deal after another. However, after leaving the auction house for a short while, he seemed to receive fewer messages when he returned.

"I just closed a big deal. I'm left with very few game points. That would mean my job for today is done," Ding Si sighed in euphoria.

"Congrats!"

The auction was about to end soon and Zhang Heng checked on the Paris Arrow again only to find out that the price had increased to 445. So, he subsequently bid another 20 game points on it.

In the end, he managed to obtain the Paris Arrow for a total of 465 game points.

Other than that, a pair of earrings captured Zhang Heng's attention as well. It allowed the user to gain 100% fire resistance. However, its price had started climbing higher and higher, and in the end, he had to give the item up. As he looked at all the unidentified items in the catalog again, he noticed all kinds of items. A Samsung cellphone and Gucci handbag were listed as well. With only pictures to guide him, it was hard to determine their function.

It was not necessary, though, for him to try his luck on all these items.

However, just as he was about to close the catalog, a picture captured his attention. It was a key. The engraving on its end was extremely familiar to him. Suddenly, Zhang Heng remembered where he had seen the pattern. Earlier, when he activated the Shadow Moment, he stared right into the crow's eyes, and though the picture was a little blurry, he still managed to recognize the crow engraved on it.

Amongst all the game items he possessed, Shadow Moment was the only item with an unknown origin. Who knows, he might just find more information about his Shadow Moment through this key. The Shadow Moment was a D-grade item. That would mean this key was probably a D-grade item as well. Right now, no one had placed bids for it. That would mean Zhang Heng would be able to acquire this item with only 100 game points.

As luck would have it, he managed to obtain the key at its base price.

After the final purchase, he was now left with 2,292 game points. He then closed the catalog having no further intention to purchase any more game items.

The auction was coming to an end and the auctioneer announced the last valuable item.

Chapter 93: Showstopper

Many of the guests already knew what the last item for auction was, but when the auctioneer took it out from the tulle box and presented it before the guests, it caused quite the stir.

“Dreamland of Death. Grade: B. Causes the target to enter a lethal dreamland. Its remaining number of uses is a secret. More details will only be revealed after the auction. The starting bid is 60,000 game points, where additional bids will cost 500 points. After three last calls, the hammer will fall, and the sale is concluded. Get ready to place your bids.”

The elderly auctioneer conducted the auction professionally, maintaining a serious expression on his bony face as he made the introduction in a calm and composed manner.

Right after he had spoken, a voice called out, “Let’s not waste time and just start from 70,000.”

The auditorium broke into an uproar. That was merely the first bid, and the price had already been raised by 10,000 points. This opening was borderline farcical.

Considering Ding Si had already completed his work for the day, he turned himself into a spectator for this bid.

“Currently, there are three most powerful guilds with more than 2,000 players between them. After years of massive expansion and having made a large fortune, they are the only ones who can afford to make such an exorbitant bid. They are probably the ones performing at tonight’s final round of auction.”

Ding Si paused for a moment and then continued, “No one would feel safe knowing that this deadly weapon is in someone else’s hand. The three guild leaders of Silver Wing is the prime example of this case, so this is going to be a very fierce bid.”

The way the events unfolded did not surprise Ding Si at all.

The 70,000 point starting price did not seem to scare away the potential competitors. In less than ten seconds, someone swiftly followed up with a bid, and then another one from the other side. Among the many bidders tonight, no more than three were qualified to raise their paddles. Needless to say, these were the representatives of their respective guilds.

On their own, Grade-B game items were already very rare. On top of that, Dreamland of Death’s usage outshone those of the same grade. During such times, the three major guilds would not show courtesy to each other. In a matter of ten minutes, the price had shot up to a whopping 87,500 points.

At this point, all three guilds began to show a little more caution, and the rate of the bidding gradually slowed. When it reached 89,000, one of the guilds backed out notifying that they were unable to compete. The two bidders who were left, apparently rejuvenated by their competitor’s exit, were in full spirits to soldier on.

Very quickly, the price of the Dreamland of Death escalated, breaking through the 90,000 point barrier. The party with the lower bid suddenly grew silent.

There were many ways to kill that cost far less than 90,000 points, and even if taken from a purely defensive perspective, that price was still too expensive.

Just as the winner of this chess game was about to be revealed, someone sitting in a corner at the back of the auditorium suddenly raised their paddle and said, “100,000 points.”

A furor broke out in the hall.

Many were interested in the Dreamland of Death. Still, everybody knew that it would eventually fall into the hands of one of the major guilds because it required not just desire but also bottomless pockets to be able to win the bid.

Despite the odds, right before the high-stakes show came to a close, a fourth person entered the picture out of thin air, raising the bid price by another 10,000 points!

At this point, coughing up 100,000 points for a B-grade game item was pure madness.

All eyes immediately turned to the showstopper. Due to the stipulated rules, no one was able to see the face of the person. One could only make out that it was a tall woman in black sunglasses. After calling out her bid, she kept quiet and went back to chewing her gum.

Hushed waves of whispers began echoing throughout the auditorium. The players were all discussing the girl, wondering who she was, and where she came from. In the end, it was apparent that nobody knew her identity.

None of the three major guilds were prepared for this unprecedented turn of events, leaving their representatives stumped.

Zhang Heng noticed the strange expression on Ding Si's face and asked, "What is it? Do you know her?"

Ding Si shook his head. "No, I don't. But forty minutes ago, she came to me and exchanged three C-grade game items for a loan of 4,500 game points. That's basically all the credits I have."

Zhang Heng raised his brow. He remembered seeing how Ding Si was in a good mood, saying that he had completed his work in advance.

"Could it be possible that she has also loaned from other chambers of commerce before she could gather a total of 100,000 game points?"

"Theoretically speaking, it's possible. Quite a few chambers of commerce roam the ship, all ready to do business. They probably carry around quite a few points on them. If she made contact with them, she could have gathered this amount. But in practice, it's implausible. There's no way a person could have so many game items for collateral in the first place."

Ding Si frowned. "This is going to be a big problem for the three major guilds. They wouldn't have come for this auction with more than 100,000 points on them. Dreamland of Death may be great and all, but it's not worth the price. The only problem is that if this thing falls into the hands of someone with ill-intentions, all the effort they went through to get here would have been for nothing."

As he was speaking, Ding Si's phone vibrated and he picked it up.

When the call ended, he looked up, astonished. "This is impossible... all the chambers of commerce have run out of game points. Is she really going to win the bid on her own? This woman is incredible!"

On the other side, the three representatives of the guilds were in panic mode. For them, having the Dreamland of Death in their possession was the most secure and ideal situation. Anything less than that, and they would definitely be unable to accept the outcome. Although they were not on good terms with each other, they would still act per the rules.

The worst-case scenario would be for the game item to fall into the hands of some psycho – the tragic incident involving the guild leader of Silver Wing could very well repeat itself.

“The only way to solve this is for one of them to borrow from the other. Then they could defeat that woman. 100,000 points is a steep price. No one wants to be seen as an imprudent idiot,” Ding Si explained. He appeared to be somewhat distracted, stroking the black briefcase on his knees as his eyes stared blankly.

This was the first time Zhang Heng had ever seen him so nervous. The auctioneer had dropped the hammer for the second time and was about to proceed to the countdown.

The three guilds were still negotiating and had not come to an agreement, attempting to request for the auction to be suspended, only to be ignored by the old auctioneer.

The girl in the shades was chewing her gum more rapidly. Three seconds later, the hammer dropped, and the auctioneer announced the results of the auction’s final round.

Shortly, the steward standing at the side carried the tulle box to the woman. She had just spent 100,000 points on a game item she did not even bother to inspect. She simply took the thing and tossed it into her little handbag.

After that, she disappeared from her seat into the darkness.

Just as she was about to leave, Ding Si jumped up from his seat and yelled, “Hurry! Hurry! Catch her!!!”

Chapter 94: Storm

Ding Si was a step too late. In fact, even he had shouted a little earlier, it would have still been pointless. In this exclusive auction transcript, players were not restricted and could leave at any time they wanted. Ding Si knew that it was useless to do that, merely reacting instinctively out of desperation.

The moment the woman in sunglasses disappeared before his eyes, Ding Si grabbed his hair in frustration.

He was not the only one regretting. Someone else on the other side yelled as well, and a young man fainted on his seat. Many disgruntled groans and boos from the crowd quickly ensued.

As Zhang Heng was sitting right next to Ding Si, he too saw very clearly when the woman was about to leave. The high-strung Ding Si opened his black briefcase and pulled out the three tulle wood boxes.

To his dismay, all the game items inside were gone! Instead, in their place were three smiley faces made out of clay, mockingly grinning away as if laughing at his gullibility.

After the outburst, Ding Si deflated, drained of all energy, eventually slumping onto his seat. Tonight, Fu Lou wasn’t the only one deceived, for nearly all chambers of commerce who carried points with them had been swindled by that woman. One by one, tulle boxes were opened, and within them, the mocking smiling piece of clay, a sight that stung the eyes of its bearer.

Zhang Heng's stomach sank, and he was flummoxed. Logically, Ding Si's keen eyes and years of experience should have prevented him from falling for such a cheap trick. Moreover, since they were all in the transcript, the players should have been able to access the information of the game items on their personal screens. Nonetheless, that woman managed to fool everyone's eyes with a few pieces of cheap clay.

When all was said and done, she had managed to plunder the coveted Dreamland of Death from the three major guilds without having to pay a single point.

Surely, all this sounded as coming from a myth of legends, but here, it happened right before his eyes.

In the entire hall, the only person unaffected by the event was probably the auctioneer on the stage. After he had sold the last item, his job was done. He gave a simple closing speech, before taking off his gloves and leaving, completely ignoring the commotion brewing among the guests.

By the time they realized what had just happened, the representatives of the chambers of commerce had already left. The losses they had suffered this time had to be reported back to their respective handlers. At the same time, they would also launch a hunt for the woman back in the real world.

Ding Si disappeared without even saying goodbye. The other players, on the other hand, were either having heated discussion amongst themselves or had left with their companions. Zhang Heng collected the Paris Arrow and the unidentified key from the committee. When he saw that there was not much time left, he decided to leave.

And so, he returned to the lounge.

The light music had been replaced by classy jazz, and the bartender seemed to be in a pretty good mood, humming along with the melody as she fussed over her new project – stirring durian pulp into rum.

"This is a night worth celebrating! You should have a drink – a small self-appreciation for entering the ranks of the rich."

She was the one who sent the Moresby bones to the auction. She knew all too well of its value, of course. Zhang Heng looked at the durian flavored rum and was disheartened, politely refusing her offer of the pungent brew and handed her the unidentified key and necklace from Simone instead.

"Please help me identify these items," he asked of her, then paused.

"Also, hand me another membership card and a Mission Failure Exemption Card."

He had always wanted to buy the Mission Failure Exemption Card since a while ago but was a little hesitant about the membership card. But after considering the fact that he would be here for a while, and the possibility of anything going wrong at any moment, he decided it was best to purchase it as soon as possible.

"I admire guys who know how to splurge," the bartender commended him as she took out a calculator. "The total for this item is 1,407 points."

With the deal sealed, Zhang Heng's game points were reduced from 2,292 to 785. After he had made the payment, he thought of a question and decided to ask while she was still in a good mood. "Did you know that the screen displays wrong information sometimes?"

The bartender raised her brows, clearly taken aback by the question.

Quickly, she blurted out something in response. "That's impossible. The information displayed on the panels is more accurate than your nightly news."

However, having said that, she seemed to be hesitant and added, "But there's a catch. If you have a special game prop, the possibility of that happening can't be completely ruled out. That said, I'm afraid only A-grade game props can pull off such a thing. Why? Did you encounter it or something?"

The incident at the auction tonight was no secret, where Zhang Heng believed that the news of the heist would have swiftly spread like wildfire within the circle of players. Having no need to hide anything, Zhang Heng directly told her, "Someone used clay to fool all the chambers of commerce present on the ship, then used that money to buy the final auction item, in turn snatching it away from the three major guilds."

"This method... sounds very much like that guy's modus operandi. Tsk! He finally showed his face. Guess he couldn't stand the loneliness anymore," the bartender lady muttered, evidently not intending to provide any further explanation. "From now onwards, you have to be very careful when dealing with other players. There have been more and more problems surfacing recently. It looks like another storm is brewing and I'm sure its coming soon."

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This time, Zhang Heng left Desire City much earlier than before. It was only 23:16 when he walked out of the gate. There was still some time left before time stopped, so he decided to take a look at Paris Arrow.

Although he had an arrow, he had been keeping his sf-recurve bow in school lately and so, he had to go back to retrieve it.

Zhang Heng hired a yellow bicycle and rode to the nearest station. At this hour, especially here in the industrial area, the bus stops were practically empty and deserted.

He parked the bicycle by the road, lowering his head and discreetly locking his ride. At that very moment, he heard a loud rustling coming from the green zone by the street. Zhang Heng immediately went into high alert. Quickly, he turned around, clutching the Paris Arrow in his hand as he took two steps backward.

Both Ding Si and the professor repeatedly warned him that it was never safe being in the circle of players. That shocking scam at the end of the auction was like a vivid lesson to him. As a result, he now became a lot more cautious of his surroundings.

"Who is it?!"

The rustling stopped the moment he spoke. Whoever was behind the green zone must have been startled.

After 5 seconds, a shadow emerged from the bush – it was a black stray cat, fleeing into the darkness with its tail tucked between its legs!

Was it all a false alarm?

Before he could investigate, the bus arrived at the station. Zhang Heng put away his Paris Arrow and glanced at the bush one last time before boarding.

Chapter 95: Exam Week and the Gathering

The problem could have all been in his position. Anyhow, Zhang Heng attempted to shoot his Paris Arrow a few times, only to find that this arrow that cost him 465 game points was no different from any conventional arrow. Perhaps, it was something to do with his chosen target. Theoretically, boards, apples, and cups had no weak points, all being inanimate objects. Zhang Heng deduced that the Paris Arrow might only work on living organisms. Right now, however, no suitable target was available for him to test his theory.

Three days later, the necklace and key were identified. Zhang Heng received an express delivery from the bartender, immediately opening it up and taking out one of the cards from it.

[Name: Hunter's Blessing]

[Grade: F]

[Effect: Increases the chance of encountering certain types of prey.]

This item was similar to the necklace that Simone gave him and the Lucky Rabbit Foot that he owned. It was hard to determine if increasing the chances of encountering prey was a good or bad thing. To a hunter, this item would allow them to improve their yield. However, if hunting weren't in the books, bringing this around would cause unnecessary trouble.

After that, Zhang Heng placed the necklace inside the tulle wood box that he bought from the bartender. Then, he looked at the identification report of the key.

[Name: Shadow Key]

[Grade: E]

[Effect: Can be used to transform your target into Shadow Form. Lasts three minutes. Remaining uses: 3]

The price of an E-grade item usually ranged between 80 to 100 points. Earlier, Zhang Heng had spent a total of 100 game points to purchase this item. Albeit a little bit overpriced, this was all very normal. Typically, unidentified items belonged in the F-grade category. E-grade were uncommon. D and C-grades were even rarer. As for B-grade items, it had only happened once so far.

What Zhang Heng was interested in the most was the connection between the Shadow Key and Shadow Moment. Each time Zhang Heng activated his Shadow Moment, he could sense that the crow was trying to tell him something. He had a hunch that if he managed to check out the background of the crow, he would gain a better understanding of this supernatural item.

Right now, though, he had a more pressing matter to deal with.

The issue in question was his final exam. The exam week would officially begin right after the New Year. From the 3rd to the 7th, he was to attend the public course exam. When that ended, it was then a

professional course exam next. It was definitely an intense period where every night, there would be a power cut at Zhang Heng's hostel. Anticipating the time it would happen, he had to finish studying everything before it happened. Otherwise, he would just wring it out in the corridor and study there for the rest of the night.

Even before the new year, the corridors were packed with zealous students. When Zhang Heng went out at 12 a.m, he could always see a group of students cramming hard on their books. Amongst these were Wei Jiangyang and Chen Huadong, where they stole a little time in between their busy schedule to read some manga. In this challenging time, they seemed to have found happiness amid suffering.

Zhang Heng met Shen Xixi twice while he was studying in the study room, but after crossing paths with each other that night, they did not talk much after that. All they did was nod to each other when they met again. On the other hand, Xu Jing, the Loli, had always considered Zhang Heng her best friend. Ever since he used a bow and arrow to scare away bad guys from harassing her, she started to call Zhang Heng her Ironman. And she was not afraid to tell everyone about it.

There was this once when Zhang Heng met her at the canteen. He was around five meters away from her when all of a sudden, she started to shout 'Ironman' at him ever so passionately. Immediately, half of the students in the canteen turned around to stare at her.

After some days, Zhang Heng finally finished his last paper for this term. Alas, his second year in the university was coming to an end. Chen Huadong went as far as taking out his entire pile of photocopied study material and tore them into pieces before throwing them away in the water house. While returning to them, Chen Huadong realized that he left his cup there. Naturally, he turned back to go and get it.

On the other hand, Jiang Weiyang was just as happy. He spent the entire night attempting to memorize notes that were written down with Chen Huadong. Coffee was the pillar they relied on to stay awake throughout the exam. When the exam was over, though, all the sleepiness miraculously disappeared. They both suggested that everyone should go to Food Street to grab some good food and have fun. Since everyone was cool with the idea, Jiang Weiyang proceeded to call his girlfriend to join along.

It seemed like Han Xiaoxiao's dorm wanted to celebrate the end of the exams too. So, Wei Jiangyang had to inform them about the rendezvous point.

However, the atmosphere quickly really awkward when all of them gathered at the same spot. Ma Wei was not the kind of guy that had a smooth mouth with the ladies, nor did he spend much time with them. Basically, he was here simply to eat his food and drink his beer, not intending on sharing a single word to the others. As for Chen Huadong and Xu Jing, they were usually the stimulus of the group. With the chattering duo present, they should be able to get everyone to mingle. Unfortunately, tonight had to be the night where they were both quiet.

During Christmas Eve, Zhang Heng sensed something wrong between Chen Huadong and Xu Jing when he agreed to go to the amusement park with him. After the camping trip, both were always seen together as if connected by glue. Then, all of a sudden, they stopped talking. Right now, they behaved like strangers who had never met.

When it came to the love matters of others, it was inappropriate for an outsider to comment about it. Amongst them, Shen Xixi had the highest EQ. She was typically the go to girl when it came to matters like this. However, it seemed that she was terribly distracted, popping out her cellphone from time to time and checking for messages.

And that marked the end of the first term of the second year in university.

The most awkward incident of the night happened right after the meal. When everyone walked out of the restaurant, they saw a black Mercedes parked at the entrance. This time Zhang Heng took a good look at the driver.

Unlike the rumor about her hanging out with a bald old man, the driver was a young stallion. Judging by his demeanor, he should still be studying as well. Having a somewhat fit physique, it seemed that he spent a reasonable amount of time working out every day. Seeing the whole bunch walking out of the restaurant, the young man stepped down from the car and graciously opened the car door for Shen Xixi.

“There’s something I need to do. I’ll take my leave first,” said Shen Xixi.

She entered the car after the. Han Xiaoxiao wanted to say something, but she stopped midway, only sighing as the car silently rolled away.

“I have asked her in private before. She told me that she has no intention of getting a boyfriend. She told me that she wanted to do something meaningful. I have never seen her defending herself against all those horrible rumors. Initially, I wanted to believe her. Right now, I’m not sure if I should.”

“I will always support her no matter what,” Xu Jing interrupted.

“That is because you are just like her,” said Chen Huadong with a smile.

Seeing that the two of them had their horns locked, they quickly stopped them from doing so.

“Both of you... the winter holidays are coming soon. We won’t be seeing each other for a month. Can we just end this gathering peacefully? Right? Zhang Heng...” said Wei Jiangyang.

He wanted Zhang Heng to support his notion, but he looked distracted by the fact that Shen Xixi left them. Wei Jiang’s heart dropped immediately. The matter between Chen Huadong and Xu Jing was still unresolved, and he saw that something unpleasant was playing in Zhang Heng’s mind. Rumor had it that Shen Xixi and Zhang Heng used to flirt with each other.

But then again, that was just a rumor. He wanted to know what Zhang Heng really thought about it.

When Zhang Heng realized that Wei Jiangyang was staring at him, he quickly turned around and gave everyone a quick nod.

“See you guys next year.”

Chapter 96: Black Sail I

After the exams, the winter holidays were finally here. From today until the 4th of March, the entire university would go on break. Most of the students left their hostels the very next day the exams were over. Wei Jiangyang was the first to leave from Zhang Heng's dorm.

He had planned for a vacation to Qingdao with Han Xiaoxiao, his girlfriend, before heading back to his hometown. After that, Chen Huadong was the second to leave. He brought almost nothing with him except for two hard drives that had tonnes of anime in them.

As for Ma Wei, he wanted to earn some money first before heading back to his hometown and planned to work till the eve of Chinese New Year. As of today, he had taken up a job as a home tutor for four families. He rested for one night before quickly reading up some high-school physics and chemistry.

Zhang Heng, Chen Huadong, and Wei Jiangyang had always respected Ma Wei a lot. From the first day he enrolled in this university, he had never hidden his family's conditions from them. Though they weren't doing well, he never used it as an excuse to exploit anyone. All the while, he worked part-time while studying at to help out his family. If placed in the same situation, Zhang Heng knew that he would never be able to do better. He then gave Ma Wei an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

Zhang Heng bought a train ticket and was supposed to head back to his hometown next week. There was, however, something essential for him to do before he left the place.

At 23:37, Zhang Heng opened up the doors that led to the bar's lounge on the second floor. After greeting the bartender, he looked for an empty seat and set the alarm that was under it to 23:55.

As he closed his eyes, a new journey began.

[Verifying player's identity...]

[Verification complete. Randomly drawing the fourth quest for player 07958]

[Draw completed. Your new quest is Black Sail]

"Pirates from New Providence have threatened all trades that are carried out in this area. Every civilized country in this world considers pirates as a public enemy!"

[Quest goal: You are on a ship. Set anchor at Nassau and build your own force.]

[Quest mode: Solo]

[Time flow rate: 3600]

(1 hour in the real world is equivalent to 150 days in the game. The player will be sent back to the real world after 300 in-game days.)

[Friendly reminder: The game will begin in five seconds. Please get ready.]

....

Just as Zhang Heng was cracking his brain to figure out where in the world this New Providence was, he heard a deafening boom right beside him!

The wall of his cabin had been penetrated by a flying cannonball, crushing the table inside it as well! This was the very first time Zhang Heng experienced such an intense opening. During his last quest in Finland, he was provided with a short grace period of safety right after entering the quest. It allowed him to familiarize himself with his surroundings.

As for this round of the game, he was greeted in kind by a cannonball.

The worst part was, this was just the beginning of his quest. After that, he could hear multiple cannons being fired and people running around frantically along the corridor outside the cabin. Immediately, he took a good look at his surroundings. Earlier, he guessed that this quest wouldn't be set in the modern world the moment he heard the word pirate.

The cabin's furnishing and the clothes he wore looked ancient. From all that, Zhang Heng could deduce that he was on a vessel in old Europe. However, he was oblivious as to what the exact date was. The rise of pirates could be traced back to the Lucan from 14th century B.C. The Ancient Egyptians recorded a fight between them in Cyprus. After that, Viking Pirates who ruled the sea from the 8th to the 11th century became extremely famous as well. Although numbering only a few, their ruthlessness at sea made the pirates an infamous menace. They were definitely not afraid of death.

Back in the modern world, a gaming company even designed a class called the 'berserker,' inspired by the Viking Pirates. In the 17th century, Fujian and Guangdong of China were invaded by pirates as well.

The golden age of piracy took place during the last stages of the Renaissance. More sea routes had been added, and colonies were constantly expanding. This had made it possible for trading at sea to get better. Merchants and traders regularly encountered pirates when they sailed the high seas. Some powerful pirates would even go up against the navy and attack colonies. After that, the navies gradually became stronger, and piracy slowly died down. In the modern world, some small-time pirates still loitered around the waters of Somalia.

After reminding himself of the grim history involving pirates, Zhang Heng did not continue staying in the cabin. Judging by the direction of where the cannonball was from, he deduced he was still in the heat of a battle. Right now, the first thing he had to do was to leave this place. Who knew, a second cannonball might come crashing down on him, and he wouldn't be so lucky this time.

Zhang Heng quickly opened the door, only to bump into a sailor that was holding a box of ammunition. The navy sailor was still relatively young, looking to be in his teens. Fear and anxiety were written all over his face. Immediately, he got up and ran to the deck with the box in hand, not saying a single word to Zhang Heng as he sprinted along.

Then, there was a whistle from afar!

Another cannonball had been launched, landing right on the sailor's chest! Zhang Heng quickly ran over to check on him. Unfortunately, his lungs had collapsed; there was no way he would survive his severe injuries. Before he took in his last breath, he held on to Zhang Heng's hand, eyes filled with a strong reluctance to leave this world.

After going through the war in Finland, Zhang Heng knew precisely how to deal with a situation like this. All he could do right now was repeatedly tell the man that he was going to be fine. Half a minute later, the young navy sailor passed away, his eyes still wide open. Zhang Heng used his hand and closed them

gently, then quickly ran to the deck with a box of ammunition. He needed to know what was going on right now. Right at that moment, a man from the upper deck looked down and saw Zhang Heng.

The man was around 40 to 50 years old. His skin appeared tanned, and he seemed to have spent many years out at sea.

"I have told you guys repeatedly not to leave your cabins! This ship doesn't have enough firepower! It's impossible for us to assign personnel to protect each and every one of you," yelled the middle-aged man who appeared furious.

Zhang Heng was relieved when he heard the man speaking English. He was worried that he might be on a Spanish or Portuguese vessel, and in times like these, things could get messy if he couldn't communicate with them.

Turning around, he showed the middle-aged man the box of ammunition he had. The dead boy's body was not too far away from him.

"Your man was hit by a cannonball! I'm here to help."

The old sailor was surprised by Zhang Heng's actions. However, this was not the right time for a chat. Ammunition was running out fast!

"Quick! Hand me the box!"

Immediately, Zhang Heng climbed to the upper deck. It was then that he saw how bad the situation was. The entire place had been severely damaged by enemy fire, and bodies were strewn all around as well.

He looked to his left and saw the mast of the enemy ship. Right at its top flew the flag of the Black Sail.

Chapter 97: Black Sail II

Sporting a tricorne above of his head, the plump man should be the captain of the ship. He stood on the bridge, observing the enemies with a pair of bronze binoculars. Knowing that his ship was on the losing side, he could not help but feel nervous.

"Father, I think we should surrender. Our ship simply can't go as fast as them. We don't even have a third of their cannons, and we have only 15 guns on board! There's no way we can win this fight. We should surrender while we..." muttered the young man that stood beside the captain.

The captain then glared at his son and shouted at the sailor behind him.

"Where is the ammunition? I need it right now!!"

"We are awaiting your orders, captain," replied one of the old sailors.

"Cannoneers! Light your fuses!"

The moment he gave the order, the enemy opened fire, and a cannonball landed directly on a cannon that was currently being reloaded. The heavy barrel fell off its base and crushed the two cannoneers

behind it. Everyone could hear their agonizing screams. Then, the whole ship fell silent. It seemed that they did not survive. At the same time, the barque flying the Black Sail flag was coming full speed ahead!

“Everyone! Hang in there! All we need to do right now is to damage them! We need to wreak fear into the hearts of those bastards! Let’s hope that they would give up attacking us and look for somebody weaker instead!!! I will reward every single man here with six pounds each when we arrive in Boston later!”

The sailors’ low morale was once again ignited with renewed flames of passion. When the enemies entered their shooting range, all 15 guns were fired at them at the same time. Zhang Heng could clearly see that the sailors lacked shooting practice. Most of their lead landed on the enemy vessel’s gunwale. With an attack like that, it would surely be impossible to put fear into their enemies, let alone damage them. Instead, they were hammered with a vengeance following a more powerful retaliation.

Soon, another nine sailors were killed, and the rest of the shipmates lost their will to fight. No amount of reward money could compel them to further risk their lives in fighting off their enemies. Just as expected, every single sailor on the ship started to drop their weapons. Thus, the captain knew that the battle was lost. There was nothing he could do now except to stare at his nemesis in despair. As he turned around to check on his people, he realized that his son was lying on the deck as well.

The boy was clutching his chest, frantically trying to plug a deep gash, of which blood gushed out like a swollen river. The captain then took off his tricorne, knelt on the ground, and held his dying son to his chest. At the same time, Zhang Heng quickly ran to the captain’s room. The moment he spotted the barque flying the Black Sail flag, he knew they were going to lose the battle. There was nothing he could do even if he decided to join the battle right now.

The ship that he was on right now was just an ordinary merchant vessel from England. In order to make sure that they could haul as much cargo as possible, the vessel was scantily equipped with eight nine-pounder light cannons. A lack of ammunition plagued them as well. As for the enemies, they had at least 30 cannons on their ship. If their goal wasn’t capturing the ship and its cargo on board, they would have destroyed them a long time ago.

Instead of making the pointless move of defending the ship, Zhang Heng ran to the captain’s quarters the moment chaos hit the boat. Usually, this was the most heavily guarded part on a ship. Right now, there wasn’t a single soul in the room. There were some valuable decorations around, but Zhang Heng did not bother taking them. He wasn’t sure if he would get to keep anything when the pirates boarded them. He then saw a wooden table on his right and quickly opened all the drawers. Then, he found what he was looking for.

It was the ship’s logbook, a compulsory record for every vessel to have. It was used to record dates, the direction of the wind, weather, and major incidents. The only thing that mattered to him right now, though, was to find out the era he was in and some basic information of this ship.

Opening up the logbook, he started to read through its records. Three minutes later, he heard a loud boom, followed by the ship violently shaking. It was so intense that it almost caused him to fall to the ground. When it had finally calmed down, he opened the curtains and took a peek outside. The first thing he saw was a giant cannon.

Immediately, he shut the curtains! He knew that he did not have much time here. With both ships getting closer to each other, that would mean a close standoff between two was about to happen soon.

Judging by the merchant ship's lethargic firepower, the battle would surely end faster than expected.

Luckily, Zhang Heng had scanned through most of the important information recorded in the logbook. It was the year 1712. If he remembered correctly, the 1701 war of succession in Spain had caused the entire country to fall apart. Through a series of treaties, England managed to claim several colonies that had originally belonged to the Spanish. And with that, England became the new king of the sea as time went on. At the same time, piracy saw its most active period as well.

This merchant ship carrying an entire shipload of woolen goods was supposed to travel to Boston. After unloading the goods for sale, they were scheduled to ferry a shipment of tobacco back home. As bad luck would have it, they crossed paths with a band of pirates just as they were about to arrive in Boston. Knowing that they had a slim chance of escaping, the captain decided to fight and protect his ship. After all, he was an ex-navy officer.

Zhang Heng could hear the sailors screaming in agony from the captain's cabin. It seemed like the captain's plan had failed miserably. Zhang Heng soon managed to locate the location of New Providence from the map on the table. It was located in the central north of the Bahamas. Nassau, one of its small towns, was located in the north of New Providence. Zhang Heng wanted to study the map in better detail, but there was no time left. The pirates could enter the captain's room anytime now. Quickly, he returned the logbook back into the drawer and left.

Initially, he wanted to return to where he came from. However, he changed his mind halfway and went to the galley instead. He then took out his Lucky Rabbit Foot, Hunter's Blessing, and Paris Arrow and hid them under a plank. As he was leaving, he bumped into two men. One of them was running away from the other.

The one running for his life crashed into Zhang Heng, and both of them fell on the ground! The person giving chase was clearly not a crew of the ship. He wielded a bloody ax and glared at the plump guy that was crying and crawling on the ground. He was ready to execute him. The moment he saw Zhang Heng, he became even more excited.

Having no room for hesitation, Zhang Heng rushed toward him and disarmed the pirate with a hard sidekick. Immediately, the pirate extended his arm, and a fist landed on Zhang Heng. In that split second, he instinctively extended his arms to protect himself. The blow was so powerful that it temporarily paralyzed his arm. As for the pirate, he suffered no injuries. Seeing that he was unscathed, he grinned and drew his dagger from his waist.

Zhang Heng instantly realized that he was in big trouble. Close-quarters combat was never his forte. Judging from the pirate's attack, Zhang Heng knew that it was impossible for him to defeat him from such a close distance.

Chapter 98: Black Sail III

Zhang Heng was forced to retreat back to the galley. As he attempted to dodge the attack, the dagger inadvertently slashed his left arm. Though it was just a flesh wound, Zhang Heng knew that he had to do something quickly before it before the pirate killed him. Another three steps back, and he would come

up to a wall. As for the plump guy, he sat where he was, absolutely overcome by fear. It seemed as if he had lost his mind.

In a life and death situation such as this, a gushing river of thoughts raced through Zhang Heng's mind. However, he soon regained his calm. After all, he had just gone through a vicious war in Finland. Right now, he had the Shadow Moment in his pocket, but it only had one usage left. Zhang Heng did not use it at the beginning of his quest. There was still a long journey ahead of him.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng remembered the time when he went bear hunting with Simone in Sweden. He then spotted a chopping board with a small knife that was used to peel potatoes. Unfortunately, the pirate noticed Zhang Heng eyeballing the weapon.

The very second Zhang Heng was about to move over to grab the knife, the pirate quickly charged at him with his dagger, causing him to move in the opposite direction where he managed to dodge the attack. Immediately, the pirate reacted and changed his course as well.

He aimed his dagger directly at Zhang Heng's chest, but to his surprise, Zhang Heng managed to evade him once again. Instead of hitting its target, the dagger landed on a piece of smoked meat that hung behind him!

This time, the pirate ran out of patience. An extreme frustration boiled within him as Zhang Heng avoided his attack over and over again. He had enough of it. With rage clouding his mind, he pushed aside the smoked meat in an attempt to go for Zhang Heng again.

However, he was greeted with a harpoon this time.

Zhang Heng had long awaited this golden opportunity. Though the both of them had only gotten on the ship recently, Zhang Heng had taken time to explore the galley and look for a good spot to hide his items. Hence, he knew the place better than the pirate. When he was forced to retreat to the galley, the thought of using the harpoon to attack the pirate already lingered in his mind. He simply needed to figure out how to lure the pirate to where the spear was.

Simone once told him that a smarter way to hunt bigger prey was to make them believe that they were the hunters in this hunting game. When the time was right, Zhang Heng would not hesitate to use his weapon to kill his prey.

In that split second, the harpoon penetrated the pirate's neck. The strike was so blindingly fast that the pirate had no time to respond to it. He was killed on the spot instantly. The 'bear' had finally been skewered by the hunter's snare.

With a grunt, Zhang Heng retrieved the harpoon. The pirate took a few steps backward as he staggered and fell. Then he stopped breathing.

Zhang Heng slumped to the ground after he killed the pirate. At the same time, the plump guy who was paralyzed with fear snapped out of his stunned state by the loud noise from the galley. It was then that he found out that the situation turned out very differently than what he'd expected.

"You... won?"

“You do realize that you are still sitting there asking me useless questions, right? The answer is yes. I killed him.”

The plump guy realized that he had just behaved like a coward. When Zhang Heng desperately needed his assistance, he was no better than a petrified dummy.

“I’m really sorry. I was terrified just now. Earlier, I wanted to open the door to see what the racket was outside, but I didn’t expect some pirate to come charging at me. I thought today would be the day I die. Oh right, my name is Marvin. I’m the son of a farm owner in a colony. I’m planning to go back to help my dad in the fields. I think I met you on the ship earlier. You are the Asian traveler, right? Your name is Zhang... Zhang...”

“Marvin, I don’t think this is a good time for a chat. Pirates have now overrun this ship. We will be in deep shit if they find their dead brother here!”

Inevitably, this had turned out far from the desired scenario. Being all alone, Zhang Heng was hardly powerful enough to turn the situation around. Initially, he only wanted to hide his stuff and prepare to surrender. He did not expect that he would encounter a pirate the moment he stepped out the door. To make matters worse, he was left with no other option but to eliminate a pirate.

Leaving the pirate to kill the plump man in cold blood would only encourage the pirate to go after him in a worse way. However, killing the pirate had just stuck a giant bullseye on Zhang Heng’s back. Now, he was in grave danger.

“Huh? What.... what should I do now? I did not kill him... I... I did nothing to him! I just sat there and kept still.”

Zhang Heng was clearly unhappy with what he just heard. He had not expected that the first thing Marvin would do was to exclude himself from the incident. Though Zhang Heng’s primary intention was not to rescue him, it was still a fact that Marvin got to live to see tomorrow thanks to him.

Before Zhang Heng could say anything, however, he heard the sound of footsteps from afar. Half a minute later, two men appeared in the galley. One of them clutched a gun while the other held a British cutlass. Judging from their ragged looks, they were definitely not the ship’s crew.

“I found another two alive! Be good ya’ll! Your captain is dead! Everything on this ship belongs to us now! Ain’t no point playing the hero in front of us!” barked one of the pirates while brandishing his weapon.

Immediately, Marvin nodded his head like a madman. The extras on his body jiggled nonstop as he bobbed around nervously. Sweat dripped off his face like a leaky tap.

“What the hell is going on?!” asked the pirate with the cutlass.

At that, he quickly made a round of the galley and found nothing suspicious. Suddenly, he spotted a giant barrel behind them. The pirate shoved Marvin away and opened the barrel.

All they found was a pile of smoked fish.

“Are you done yet? We are going to miss the celebration if you stay here any longer! Speaking of which, where is Victor? I saw him come this way earlier,” asked the other pirate.

“Honestly, I don’t wish to see him at all. He’s a raving lunatic! Whenever we board a ship, he’ll turn the whole place into his killing field for sure! If it was not for his bravery, he would have been kicked off the ship a bloody long time ago. Let’s go! Time to go gather on the deck!” replied the pirate while sliding his cutlass back into its sheath.

As Zhang Heng and Marvin were escorted to the deck, they saw the other survivors. Amongst the group were the last seven sailors. All of them were shell shocked, dreading the unknown that fate would bestow upon them.

Chapter 99: Black Sail IV

Both pirates walked towards Zhang Heng and Marvin and proceeded to search them from top to bottom. That included their pockets and shoes. They wanted to make sure that they would not miss out on a single valuable item.

After that, Zhang Heng and Marvin were being pushed into the crowd. Marvin fell into a state of panic when he saw the dead sailors beside him. Out of fear, his body shook uncontrollably once again. At that, the pirates started laughing at him hysterically.

Zhang Heng’s wallet and snuff bottle were confiscated by the pirates. However, his Shadow Key and Shadow Moment were still with him. These two items were his trump cards to protect him from life-threatening circumstances. In order to make sure that the pirates wouldn’t get to them, he had to trigger the Shadow Key’s effect to turn both items into shadow form.

His current situation right now was different from the other quests he had completed. At the moment, he was somewhere out at sea. That meant there were only so many places he could run to even if he triggered the Shadow Moment’s effects. An option was to move his shadow on the sea, but he would surely drown once its effects expire. There was a slim chance that he would be saved by passing boats. However, getting devoured by sharks or drying out in dehydration seemed like a stronger possibility.

The passengers on the ship were merely ordinary folk looking forward to a new life in the colonies that they headed to. Instead of a fresh start, they had now become prisoners of the pirates.

Most of them did not behave as pathetically as Marvin, though, Zhang Heng could sense that woe and despair were slowly festering amongst the crowd like a deadly virus. Then, around a minute later, loud sounds of people brawling and gunshots were heard coming from the lower deck. When the commotion died down, a man slowly strolled towards the crowd.

“I must apologize. Some idiots failed to do what they should have done. I needed some time to convince them. Well, the problem is solved now. Let me introduce myself. I’m the helmsman of the Sea Lion. You can call me Mr. Orff.”

Mr. Orff appeared to be about 40 to 50 years old. Apart from a slight bald, he looked to be in remarkably good health. Unlike all the merciless pirates, he seemed to be a more reasonable man.

For that matter, the helmsman was a position that required excellent communication skills. It was the second most important position on a pirate vessel. He had to continuously maintain a good relationship

with the entire crew, where, for the most part, he would act as the representative of the pirates' interests, serving as an essential link to bridge the gap between crew and captain.

Through the helmsman, the crew felt like they had been given a voice to question the captain if they thought they had been mistreated.

Due to that, many saw a glimmer of hope when they saw the helmsman.

"Please! Sir... please let us live! We are just rankless civilians. My wife and kids are still waiting for me to get home," begged one of the passengers.

At that, Orff nodded his head in empathy and drew the gun from his waist. Aiming at a sailor who had given up his arms, he pulled the trigger!

The lead ball penetrated the sailor's head, and he instantly collapsed. Blood splattered all over the helmsman's linen shirt. After witnessing this raw display of brutality, the prisoners were left panicked and distraught. Suddenly, they remembered that pirates would never show empathy to those they captured.

These were a group of bloodthirsty monsters that would not hesitate to kill anyone they saw as unfit to live. That would mean they were capable of killing off every soul aboard this merchant vessel just because they were pissed off by someone.

The gunshot was definitely not a good omen. Marvin was so terrified that he started to pee himself.

"I'm really sorry. I had to do it. This guy killed two of my brothers when we boarded your ship just now. I will never let a person like him off the hook. I might be old, but I don't forget. My creed in life is blood for blood. This is how we work," said an emotionless Orff while putting away his gun.

Every single pirate roared into a loud cheer after he finished talking. At the same time, the captured prisoners were a little less worried. No doubt the killing was carried out so brutally, it was in one way or another acceptable if he did it out of vengeance.

The passengers had forgotten, though, that the sailors were the ones who had protected them from the pirates in the first place. The remaining six sailors surrendered to the pirates earlier than most of the people. Now, to stay alive in this scenario, everyone chose to stay completely silent. Many thoughts ran through their minds. They were ashamed of their cowardice but also glad that they did not participate in the fight earlier.

"Now that the debt is paid, it's time to talk about what matters the most to all of you. As it stands, this ship now officially belongs to us. This includes every single item on the vessel, your wallets, and all your valuables. Now, folks, we are a reasonable bunch..."

We will prepare a small boat for you, and you'll head back to land. Other than that, you can have two buckets of drinking water, some biscuits, and some smoked meat to keep you alive on your journey. Consider yourself lucky as we are within a trade route right now. I heard the weather should be fine for the next two days. If the gods find favor in you, some vessel might just pass along and come to your rescue."

Orff's little speech did little to extend the calm. Instead, new chaos arose. One small boat, two buckets of drinking water, some biscuits, and smoked meat were definitely not enough for 30 passengers! A brief storm would definitely blow everyone to meet their maker. The chances of them dying out at sea were exponentially higher than being rescued by some random passing ship.

Some passengers even started to beg the pirates for mercy. Unfortunately, Orff had made up his mind and was not about to change his decision.

"I know this is a huge risk for you to take, but you have to remember that we are pirates, not philanthropists! If you want to live, figure that out yourself!"

Once Orff was done talking, the pirate beside him launched the small boat on the water. However, the lifeboat was literally a raft of sorts, only able to fit a maximum of 20 souls with zero extra space for food and water.

Suddenly, a muscular pirate walked towards them and made an announcement.

"Are there any cooks or carpenters here? We need two carpenters and one cook. Join our ranks if you are interested in the positions."

Instead of getting on the small boat, people figured they would have a better chance of surviving if they joined the pirates.

"Me! I'm the ship's carpenter. I'm willing to join you," said one of the captured sailors.

"It's my first time out at sea before, but I have made furniture for the people in town. Do you think I can join you guys?" asked another passenger.

"Sure. For now, you will have to become his assistant first."

Seeing the incident before them, the passengers fell into a cloud of jealousy. Many were professionals, and even the most ruthless of pirates would have respected them if they were given a chance too.

"One more spot left! Don't miss out on the opportunity. Anyone else willing to come with us?"

"I am."

To everyone's surprise, Marvin was the one who spoke up.

Chapter 100: Black Sail V

"You are the cook?" asked the pirate while looking at Marvin.

It was no wonder the pirate was suspicious. Marvin's attire was far from what a cook would wear. The son of a farm owner could actually be quite fashionable. The plump man had put on a wig, and his collar and sleeves had floral stitching on them as well. On top of it, he had also adorned a custom-made jacket. As for his feet, only a pair of socks could be seen as his beautiful boots had been confiscated by the pirates earlier.

“My.... my mother has a motel in Canterbury. I help up with the cooking whenever there are not enough people in the kitchen.”

Still, the muscular pirate was in doubt as he looked at the pants that Marvin just wet. Immediately, he realized that he had just screwed up the pirate’s first impression of him.

“I make delicious food. Sometimes the cook on this ship would even ask for my opinions and help. You can ask your friend if you don’t believe me. I was in the kitchen when they found me.

“That is correct,” confirmed both of the pirates who had found Marvin and Zhang Heng.

Marvin then turned around, grinning at the muscular pirate with sensitive and sheepish eyes.

“Give it a try then. But here’s a fair warning. If your food tastes bad or our stomach acts funny after we try it, the rest of my brothers will not forgive you even if I’m willing to do so,” warned the muscular pirate while pointing at his fellow crew.

At that, Marvin quickly thanked the pirate for taking him in.

“Alright! Everyone! All positions have been filled! The recruitment is done. I wish you all a pleasant journey later,” the muscular pirate continued.

Then, a voice came from his back.

“Hold on.”

Immediately, the muscular pirate halted in his steps. He did not notice that Marvin had become extremely nervous after hearing the voice.

Zhang Heng ignored Marvin’s signal and proceeded to speak his mind.

“I wish to join the crew too.”

It was too high a risk to get on the small boat and wait for a rescue that might never come. He would have chosen to get on it if he was the only one, though. That said, he knew that things would become complicated with that many people on the same boat. Besides, his game items were still on the ship. He would not be able to retrieve them if he left with the rest of the passengers now.

“I admire your passion. Like I said earlier, all we need is three people, and all positions have been filled,” the muscular pirate shrugged.

“Hand me the gun,” said Zhang Heng calmly.

Perhaps it was Zhang Heng’s confidence that had compelled him or the encouragement from his friends to hand him the gun. Anyhow, the muscular pirate picked up the weapon and handed it to Zhang Heng, who immediately did a quick check the moment he got his hands on it. After going through the war in Finland, he had become quite knowledgeable about guns.

What he was holding right now was a gun with a flintlock mechanism. As compared to a matchlock, it’s shooting process was much more straightforward. For this gun, the user would use flint to light up the gunpowder. Featuring better range and a smaller recoil, that meant that it was more accurate overall.

The gun with the flintlock mechanism was invented during the 16th century. In the 17th century, it was widely distributed amongst armies in Europe. After that, it played an essential role in the American War of Independence.

However, this weapon was severely outdated for its time and could never compare to the M28 that he used during the Finnish war. Gunpowder and bullets had to be loaded separately, requiring a long time for the user to reload after ammunition had depleted. To make matters worse, it could only shoot up to 80 meters.

Zhang Heng took a good minute to study the gun. Every single pirate, including the muscular one, was starting to get impatient. It was at that moment that Zhang Heng raised the weapon, and without any warning, he pointed it at Marvin.

Left in a shock, Marvin thought Zhang Heng was about to kill him.

BANG!

The gun was fired, and the bullet whizzed by Marvin, landing on an apple that a pirate was holding at the end of the ship.

At the unbelievable shot, the pirates were all awestruck by Zhang Heng's excellent marksmanship. After a while, everyone began cheering for him. Zhang Heng and the apple were more than 40 meters apart, not to mention the ship steadily bobbing up and down in the rough sea. Considering his less than ideal circumstances, it should have been almost impossible to hit any target accurately. Zhang Heng had learned how to operate the gun from Simone and his movements were so fluid that it seemed as if he did not take any aim before firing the shot.

Most of the pirates here were just ordinary people with no particular set of skills. Armed with the sole concept of the strong preying on the weak, they would always respect those who were better than them. Suddenly, one of them shouted out aloud, "Take him in! Take him in!"

Soon after that, everyone else followed suit. The muscular pirate frowned, knowing that he couldn't disappoint everyone just like that.

"Fine. You are a great shooter. No one will be able to say no to you. I don't mind adding one more to our crew. Come with me."

The four of them then followed the pirate to the lower deck.

"They call me Owen, leader of the pirates on the Sea Lion. I don't care what you have done before, or where you come from. You are now part of the Sea Lion. Of course, we can't trust all of you yet, but it's okay. Time will tell. There are some things you need to know before you come aboard. There will be no gambling, no stealing, and no random brawls. That is unless you have somebody to witness your fight. And most importantly, fleeing a battle is punishable by death!"

Owen paused for a moment and took a look at Marvin, who wiped away his sweat as he tried to crack a smile.

"When we plunder other vessels, keeping any loot you found is a big no-no. Unless you have personally killed an enemy, you will get to choose one item from your kill. Otherwise, everything we rob will be

pooled up and distributed equally to everyone aboard. The captain and our helmsman will get double the loot. After that, the doctor, carpenter, cannoneer, and pirate leader will get one and a half times the booty a regular crewman gets. Those who perform well during battles will be rewarded afterward. And if you are injured during a battle, you will also receive a certain amount of compensation. The amount you get will depend on how long you have been on the ship.

Oh. One more important thing. Every single matter on this ship, including the appointment and removal of the captain and helmsman, is to be decided by everyone. Everyone on this ship has the right to say something and vote. That'll be all for now. Any questions?" Owen asked as he looked around.

"I have a question. I'm not trying to avoid responsibility, but does the cook need to join battles as well?"

"Typically, no. However, if things do go south, every crewman has to pick up a weapon and defend the ship! Speaking of which, I need you to look for Dufresne later. He will hand you a gun. I will inform him about your talents," said the pirate to Zhang Heng.

"The rest of you, you all can all go and get your weapons from Dufresne as well. Consider this our welcoming gift. In the future, you will have to pay up if you damage the weapon. We will deduct its cost from your loot during our next raid."