



深海狂想曲

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CHINA LITERATURE



Deep Sea Embers chapter 1

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Chapter 1 “A Thick Fog That Day”

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The dense fog outside the window was so thick that it obscured the outside world, leaving only a dim, chaotic light to cast an eerie silence over the apartment.

Zhou Ming lay exhausted at his cluttered desk, surrounded by scattered debris. In his diary, he recorded that on the seventh day, nothing had changed, and he remained confined in his apartment by an inexplicable force that sealed the windows. The room felt disconnected, as if severed from the rest of the world.

Unable to contact anyone due to the electricity being cut off since the beginning, and with no running water, Zhou Ming was isolated. Oddly, the lights and computer still functioned, but he couldn't determine why. He even removed the cord from the wall to inspect it, but found no explanation.

As he immersed himself in his diary, he suddenly jerked upright at the imagined sound of a breeze from the window, only to realize it was a mere illusion. The fog outside persisted, and the only change was the futile evidence of his attempts to force open the glass, with wrenches and hammers still resting on the windowsill.

Zhou Ming regained his composure and resumed his writing with an uncharacteristic calm:

“I am trapped with no means of escape. I’ve tried everything, from dismantling the roof to tearing at the walls, but nothing works. The walls are impenetrable, and I feel like a mouse caught in a box with no exit. The only exception is the door, but what lies beyond is even more troubling.”

Zhou Ming paused and examined his writing before flipping back to previous pages filled with aimless thoughts and agitated scribbles. He had never been one to keep a diary, but now, with endless time on his hands, he had taken to recording his thoughts to stave off madness.

The situation felt like a surreal nightmare where everything defied the laws of nature. But after exhausting all possibilities, Zhou Ming understood that this was neither a hallucination nor a dream. He was trapped in an abnormal world, and he was the only normal thing remaining.

Taking a deep breath, his gaze settled on the room’s sole door. Constructed of cheap softwood and coated with a thin layer of white paint, its handles were worn smooth from years of use. The door hung slightly askew, a testament to its age. This was his only hope for escape, and he knew he had to attempt it.

If the confined room resembled a cage, then its most menacing feature was the door that could be opened at any moment, luring the captive towards a predestined path. However, Zhou Ming had no inclination to venture outside, as there were no familiar hallways, sunlit streets, or bustling crowds to greet him. Instead, an unsettling and unfamiliar landscape lay beyond the door, presenting him with an inescapable quandary.

Nevertheless, Zhou Ming knew that time was against him. His food supplies were nearly depleted, and his bottled water was almost gone. If he didn’t step through the doorway, his final hope would evaporate. Perhaps the answer to the supernatural enigma he faced resided on the other side of the door, if he searched thoroughly enough.

Taking a deep breath, Zhou Ming penned the concluding paragraphs of his diary:

“Crossing the threshold is now my sole option. At the very least, the peculiar vessel on the other side has provisions to sustain me, and the preparations I’ve made over the past few days should enable my survival there. It may be limited, but it’s better than nothing.”

“To whoever discovers this diary in the future, if I don’t return, please don’t disregard my words as mere fiction. It may seem eerie and surreal, but a man named Zhou Ming genuinely found himself imprisoned in this desolate and isolated moment in time.”

“I have endeavored in this diary to depict the anomalies I encountered and documented all my attempts to escape. To any future ‘latecomers,’ please remember my name and the events that transpired here,” Zhou Ming wrote before closing the diary and placing his pen in its holder. He rose slowly from his cluttered desk, knowing it was time to depart before desperation and inertia overcame him.

Rather than proceeding directly to the door that led to the unknown world, Zhou Ming approached his bed. He understood the need to be in the best possible mental state to confront the bizarre realm beyond the door, and he was not currently in that condition.

Though unsure if sleep would come, Zhou Ming recognized that lying in bed and clearing his mind was preferable to venturing into the “other side” mentally exhausted. Eight hours later, he awoke to the sight of the persistent fog shrouding the view outside his window. The day and night sky carried a haunting, oppressive ambiance.

Disregarding the scene outside, Zhou Ming consumed his remaining rations within eight minutes and then stood before the dressing mirror in the room’s corner. The man reflected back at him had unkempt hair, a weary face, and an almost imperceptible presence. Despite this, Zhou Ming refused to look away, intent on etching this image of himself into his memory.

After several seemingly eternal minutes, he whispered to his reflection: “Your name is Zhou Ming. At least on this ‘side,’ your name is Zhou Ming. Always remember this and never forget it.”

With that, he turned and left.

Upon reaching the familiar door, Zhou Ming inhaled deeply before placing his hand on the handle. He carried no additional supplies or defensive equipment, as the door prohibited it. Instead, he relied solely on the knowledge acquired during his prior excursions.

As he twisted and clicked the handle, the door swung open to reveal a churning black mist beyond. The mist, a dark, grayish-black hue, seemed to have a life of its own. Regardless of his perception, the sound of crashing waves filled the air, along with the briny scent of the sea as he crossed the secure boundary of his room.

Any brief disorientation vanished as he stepped onto an expansive wooden deck, deserted and under the shadow of a towering mast beneath dark, stormy clouds. He found himself on the open ocean, surrounded by endless dark and rolling waves.

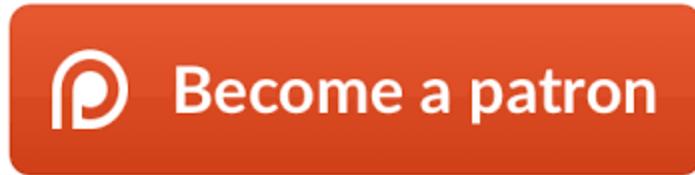
Glancing down to inspect his altered body on this “side,” Zhou Ming discovered it to be more muscular than he recalled. Though skeletal in appearance, it was well-suited to the elegant captain’s uniform he donned and the antique black flintlock pistol hanging at his waist. However, his attire was of little significance. The primary concern was determining if this was truly the “him” he recognized.

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Chapter 2 “The Captain of the Vanished”

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Zhou Ming had traversed the door to the “opposite side” before, and his memories of the first time remained vivid. He had initially gathered the courage to investigate this new environment for answers but found none. Although he still didn’t comprehend the oddity of the ghost ship connected to the door, repeated visits had provided him with some basic understanding of the vessel.

As with previous instances, Zhou Ming quickly overcame the disorienting effects of crossing over. He then examined his body for the first time since arriving and ensured that the gun at his waist remained in place. He observed that everything was as it had been during his last visit.

“It seems my body will ‘seamlessly switch’ each time I pass through the door... If only I could position a camera on this side to witness the process. That way, I could confirm whether this body changes too when I return. Sadly, objects from the two ‘worlds’ aren’t interchangeable...”

“Oh well, at least I know I did enter the fog and didn’t just collapse unconscious in my apartment, as the recording on that side shows.”

He realized that talking to himself on the open deck might seem strange to an onlooker, but who was there to ridicule him? No one else inhabited this ghost ship, and speaking aloud was his way of proving he was still “alive.”

Feeling the salty breeze against his unfamiliar blue and black uniform, Zhou Ming sighed softly and turned to face the door. He placed his hand on the doorknob, pushed it inwards, and the grayish-black fog reappeared – the same one he had entered. Beyond it lay his familiar apartment, where he had resided for so long.

Instead of crossing the threshold, Zhou Ming closed the door and pulled it towards him, revealing the captain's quarters. The dimly lit cabin featured exquisite tapestries adorning the walls, a shelf with various ornaments, a large mapping table at the center, and a burgundy carpet beneath.

That's how the "door" functioned. Pushing it open led back to the apartment, while pulling it opened into the ship's captain's quarters.

Entering the captain's quarters, Zhou Ming habitually glanced left toward a tall mirror mounted on the wall. Reflected in it was his current appearance: a tall man with thick black hair, a short, well-groomed beard, commanding deep-set eyes, and a regal demeanor. Although over forty, his robust appearance concealed his true age and could easily cause one to mistake him for a younger man.

As Zhou Ming loosened his collar and made a goofy face in the mirror, he couldn't help but think his new appearance didn't match his affable personality. Instead, he resembled a sinister serial killer.

As he made faces, he heard a clicking sound from the mapping table's direction. Unsurprisingly, the goat-headed wooden sculpture on the table slowly turned to face him. The once lifeless figure seemed to animate at that moment, its obsidian eyes embedded in the wooden face shimmering with light.

Despite the initial panic that flooded his mind when he first encountered this bizarre sight, Zhou Ming merely grinned. He knew what was coming, and as anticipated, a solemn and raspy voice emerged from the wooden mouth, asking, "What is your name?"

With composure, Zhou Ming revealed, "My name is Duncan, Duncan Abnomar."

Upon hearing Zhou Ming's response, the voice from the wooden goat head shifted instantly – from somber and raspy to warm and friendly. "Captain, good morning to you," the voice greeted cheerfully. "I'm pleased you remember your name. How are you feeling today? Did you rest well last night and have pleasant dreams? Today is an ideal day to set sail – the sea is calm, the wind is favorable, and the temperature is agreeable. Plus, there are no bothersome naval fleets nearby. You know how raucous a crew can become, Captain..."

"You're being too loud," Zhou Ming grumbled at the goat head, feeling a chill despite his prior encounters with the creature. With a stern glare, he added, "I prefer silence."

The goat head promptly acquiesced, recognizing Zhou Ming as their captain and loyal first mate, second mate, lead sailor, ordinary sailor, and scout. "Yes, of course, Captain. I understand your fondness for quiet. Silence offers numerous benefits, as seen in fields such as medicine, philosophy, and architecture."

Zhou Ming winced as a headache began to pound at his temple, provoked by the goat head's continuous chatter. "What I mean is, I'm ordering you to be quiet," he commanded firmly.

The wooden sculpture finally silenced upon hearing the word "order," accepting Zhou Ming's authority as captain.

Relieved, Zhou Ming approached the mapping table and sat in the chair. With no crew present, he assumed the role of captain on this eerie ghost ship.

Duncan Abnomar was an unfamiliar name to him, and the crude surname was particularly distasteful. Zhou Ming had no idea why he knew this information. It was something his new body seemed to have known since crossing over. "What else do I know?" he wondered, feeling uneasy. All he could gather was that Duncan was on an extended journey, but most other details remained elusive, leaving gaps in his memory.

Although he felt part of a grand sailing scheme, Zhou Ming knew little about it or its destination. The ship's actual owner, the real Duncan Abnomar, appeared to have died long ago, leading Zhou Ming to question the nature of his situation.

It felt as if he had an imprint, akin to a memory of something he had never experienced. Zhou Ming couldn't shake the notion that he was meant to command this ghost ship, despite having no clue of his purpose or how he landed in this predicament. The bizarre and unsettling feeling made him wonder if he would ever find the answers he sought.

Moreover, Zhou Ming's instincts warned him that something was amiss with Captain Duncan's identity, especially considering the supernatural occurrences onboard, such as the talking wooden sculpture. However, he had little choice. The goat head and even the ship itself would periodically verify his identity. This measure seemed sinister, as the real owner had likely intended.

Compounding the problem, the goat head on the mapping table resembled a malevolent gargoyle from ancient tales, heightening the ship's ominous ambiance. Zhou Ming shuddered as he tried to decipher his predicament and determine his next move.

Despite the drawbacks, Zhou Ming discovered that the ship was quite agreeable as long as he tolerated the name Duncan Abnomar. He couldn't help but think that none of the objects on the ship seemed particularly intelligent anyway.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Zhou Ming, now known as Duncan, concluded his brief reflection and shifted his focus to the chart on the mapping table. With a steady hand, he unfolded the worn parchment and scrutinized it carefully, hoping to find any information that could clarify his current situation and the ship's destination.

The chart lacked any recognizable routes, markers, or landforms – not even an island was depicted on its coarse and sturdy parchment surface. Instead, large patches of gray-white blobs continuously swirled and undulated,

concealing the original routes drawn on the chart. Amidst the chaos, one image remained clear – the silhouette of a ship shrouded in dense fog.

Though inexperienced in traditional sailing techniques, Duncan (Zhou Ming) knew that the chart before him was not a standard navigational tool. Its disordered and cryptic appearance suggested it was something extraordinary.

Like the wooden goat head on the table, the chart appeared to possess supernatural properties, but Duncan had not yet determined its intended purpose.

The goat head, which had been silent on the table for a while, suddenly demanded Duncan's attention as he concentrated on the chart. It began producing clicking noises, reminiscent of wood rubbing against wood. Initially subtle, it soon escalated to the point where it could no longer be ignored, vibrating intensely.

“Alright, speak up.” Duncan worried that the trembling object might set the table ablaze if it continued.

“Yes, Captain — I reiterate, today is an excellent day to set sail, and the Vanished eagerly awaits your orders as always! Shall we raise the sails?”

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Chapter 3 “Frontier Trek”

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Duncan found himself under the unsettling gaze of the wooden goat head, its rigid, black visage seeming to convey a sense of expectation within its obsidian eyes, despite being incapable of showing emotion.

This had become a familiar experience for him, as the figurine had consistently urged him to “set sail” with each visit. The whispers from the silent ship only added to his discomfort and unease, which was why he always opted to leave and return to his apartment instead of spending more time in this disconcerting place.

Duncan pondered his predicament in silence for a while, identifying two critical issues that needed resolution before he could set sail:

The first challenge was his solitude on the ship; operating the massive vessel alone was simply impossible. As a wind-sailed ship, Duncan estimated the Vanished to be between one hundred fifty to two hundred meters in length. Navigating it would require the expertise of several dozen experienced sailors or a hundred novices.

Aside from the formidable professional demands, another significant obstacle stood before Duncan, hindering his journey – his lack of skills in operating the ship. Despite the excitement he felt, he simply had no idea how to navigate a vessel of this size.

Duncan considered asking the goat sculpture for guidance on using the ship's steering wheel, but the prospect of enduring its endless chatter made him feel apprehensive and overwhelmed.

However, he didn't have to ask, as fate or some supernatural force prompted the goat head to initiate the conversation: "Captain, are you troubled? If you are worried about the Vanished, rest assured that the ship is always ready to embark on a journey with you to the ends of the earth. Or is it the fear of an ill-fated voyage? I have some knowledge of divination. What do you believe in? Celestial omens, incense reading, and crystals are all viable options. Speaking of crystals, do you remember..."

Duncan struggled to contain his desire to throttle the head right there. Angrily, he responded, "I'll evaluate the situation from the deck first. You stay quiet and remain here."

"Understood, Captain. However, I must remind you that the Vanished has been aimlessly wandering for far too long. It is crucial that you take control of the situation soon to set the voyage back on course..." The goat head stated before returning to its usual position with the sound of wood rubbing against wood.

In that moment, a sense of peace washed over Duncan. He took a deep breath and felt the throbbing pain in his head gradually fade. Picking up the flintlock handgun from the table, he left the captain's quarters.

Duncan had found the antique-looking flintlock gun while exploring the ship and decided to carry it with him. He also wore a one-handed sword at his waist, giving him a feeling of security as he moved about the vessel, even though he hadn't encountered any living beings during his days of exploration.

Talking "items" excluded, of course.

Duncan's irritable mood was somewhat alleviated by the salty sea breeze caressing his face. Unconsciously, he looked up at the sky, but all he saw were thick clouds extending as far as the eye could see. There was no sign of the sun, moon, or stars, only an ever-present black cloud hovering over

the endless ocean. He wondered if “normal” weather had ever existed in this world.

Duncan glanced back at the captain’s quarters and noticed a line engraved on the beam above the door. Though he couldn’t recognize the letters initially, as soon as his eyes focused on the line, he understood its meaning: The door of the lost.

“This ship has a fitting name,” Duncan murmured to himself, “with a door labeled ‘The lost...The Vanished’.”

He then strode toward the stairs at the edge, which led up to the upper deck at the stern. This section of the wooden platform provided the widest viewpoint and housed the black steering wheel used by the helmsman.

Duncan’s face contorted into a frown as an inexplicable sense of urgency washed over him upon seeing the black steering wheel, something he had never experienced before.

Suddenly, an unexplained gust of wind swept across the deck, seemingly reflecting the unease in Duncan’s heart, causing the previously calm sea to churn with waves. While the massive “Vanished” remained unaffected by the sudden wind and waves, Duncan couldn’t help but be on guard. In the next moment, he was stunned as he stared ahead at the ship’s bow.

Within the chaotic and unclear sea, a vast expanse of white unexpectedly appeared before him, leaving him amazed and wide-eyed. This whiteness encircled and isolated the entire world, resembling a precipice connecting the heavens and the earth. This strange phenomenon reminded him of the same mysterious fog that filled his apartment.

To make matters worse, the Vanished was autonomously moving towards the fog!

Though Duncan couldn’t be sure of the nature and contents of the white expanse, he instinctively sensed danger and was steadfast in his desire to avoid entering it.

Reacting instinctively, Duncan rushed to the wheel's location, driven by a desperate need to do something. Unfortunately, an overwhelming sense of helplessness consumed him as soon as he reached the helm – he still didn't know how to navigate the ship.

Unexpectedly, a familiar voice echoed from the copper pipe beside the wheel. The pipe connected to the captain's quarters below, where the goat head resided. The voice sounded agitated and frantic, which was out of the ordinary.

"Captain, there's a border-collapse ahead, and we're approaching the boundaries of reality! I urge you to change course immediately!" cried the voice.

As Duncan listened to the goat head's panicked voice, his frustration mounted, and he was on the verge of yelling in anger. He knew that if changing course were that simple, he wouldn't be standing there feeling so powerless. After all, there was no one else to help him in this predicament.

Suddenly, a realization struck him, deepening his despondency. He painfully acknowledged that the masts looming in front of him were nothing more than poles, entirely devoid of sails. The possibility of adjusting the course now seemed entirely out of reach.

In a moment of acceptance, Duncan rested his hand on the steering wheel, willingly letting go of his resistance. The strange and dangerous situation had sapped all his willpower, leaving him with no energy to fight the persistent nagging that had plagued his mind for days.

As Duncan lingered in his state of emptiness and despair, something extraordinary happened on the ghost ship.

His mind was abruptly filled with the thunderous sound of a mighty roar. It was as if tens of thousands of cheering men stood on the shore, bidding him farewell on his maiden voyage. In that instant, he experienced the peculiar sensation of no longer being alone, but instead surrounded by diligent sailors on board, shouting commands in the captain's name. To add to the

surreal experience, he could hear the iconic merry pirate song playing in his ears!

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me

We pillage, we plunder, we rifle, and loot

Drink up, me 'earties, yo ho

We kidnap and ravage and don't give a hoot

Drink up me 'earties, yo ho...

As his mind grappled with the bizarre events unfolding around him, something even stranger caught his attention – a green flame flickered at the corner of his eye. Glancing down, he realized it was emanating from his palm, which gripped the steering wheel of the Vanished. Before he could fully process what was happening, the small, ghostly flame began to spread across his entire body!

His flesh and blood transformed as if part of a sinister ritual, turning hollow and ethereal. His uniform became tattered and worn, as though submerged in the sea for centuries. He was no longer human, but a ghostly captain with coursing flames in place of blood and a skeletal figure symbolizing unending death.

Despite the dramatic change, Duncan felt neither pain nor loss. Instead, his perception seemed to expand as the spectral flames continued to sweep across the ship. They spread from the helm to the deck and then over the mast, forming intricate, woven sails that brought the vessel to life. The ship now seemed infused with a new, supernatural energy that filled him with a sense of awe and wonder.

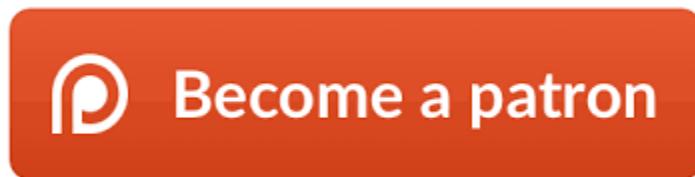
With the ghostly fire now powering the ship, The Vanished finally set sail again, embarking on its long journey toward an unknown destination. As the sails filled with wind and the ship sliced through the turbulent waters, Duncan couldn't help but feel a surge of exhilaration and adventure coursing through his spectral veins.

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Chapter 4 “Ship of the Spirit World”

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It became apparent that Duncan didn’t need a crew as long as he, as the captain, was steering the ship. With him at the helm, the Vanished could set sail at any moment.

Though initially startled by the eerie green flame and its peculiar behavior, Duncan’s fear was eclipsed by his desire to maintain control. As a result, he held onto the wheel with a steadfast grip, refusing to let go.

Duncan was no fool. He understood that the green flame was a benign “force.” The matter of regaining his body could be addressed later. For now, the flame was providing him with the crucial assistance he desperately needed.

After the exuberant outburst, the cheers gradually subsided, and Duncan found himself in a state of absolute clarity. The ship had become an extension of himself, and even without the experience of a seasoned captain, maneuvering the Vanished to his liking was no longer a problem.

Initially, he experimented by turning the wheel, and the “force” within his mind supplied him with tangible feedback – confirming that the hull was indeed moving in the intended direction.

However, the Vanished's turning speed seemed insufficient, as evidenced by the goat head's screeching cry through the copper pipe beside him:
“Attention! We’re nearing the boundary of reality... we’re about to enter the spiritual realm! Captain, we need...”

“I’m handling it!” Duncan yelled, interrupting the goat head’s outcry.
“Instead of making noise down there, why don’t you come up with something helpful?”

The goat head went silent for a moment, but just as Duncan thought it had finally stopped, the copper pipe suddenly echoed with a hoarse and somewhat creepy cheer: “FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!”

Duncan: “.....?”

Reality seemed to collapse around Duncan. He had already accepted being on a ghost ship, becoming a ghost captain, and even being engulfed in ghostly green flames, but cheerleading? That was too much. The goat head had always given him a sinister and eerie feeling, like an evil gargoyle, but now this unnerving figure had transformed into a rah-rah, pompom-waving cheerleader? Unbelievable!

Despite the absurdity of the situation, the swiftly approaching fog left Duncan no time to dwell on it. Although the Vanished had begun to turn more quickly, it was no match for the encroaching fog. Soon, the fog had entirely enveloped the ship’s surroundings.

At that moment, something undeniably eerie transpired in the environment. The sky darkened, and the once-blue seawater became marred with tendrils of black, entwining themselves like a hairnet. Soon, the once-blue water had transformed into a sea of black, as numerous shadowy figures emerged from its depths.

The goat’s loud and eerie cheering had suddenly ceased, replaced by a symphony of spooky voices in the background. “We have entered the spirit world!” the goat’s voice now blended with the others. “But the Vanished isn’t entirely lost. Captain, take the helm before we sink deeper into the abyss. If we stay on course, we can still make it out!”

Duncan snarled menacingly, his voice crackling with green flames. “The problem is that I don’t know where to go!” he exclaimed. “I’ve lost my sense of direction!”

“Intuition, Captain, intuition!” The goat head’s voice came through the copper pipe again, urging Duncan to rely on his intuition rather than the markings on the chart.

“....” Duncan was drained of any remaining energy to argue with a malevolent goat-headed figure. As the statue instructed him to trust his instincts, he decided to embrace impulsiveness.

Just as the last remnants of intuition flickered before the mist obscured his vision, Duncan grasped the steering wheel with both hands and turned it with all his might toward what he believed was the correct direction.

From top to bottom, the Vanished emitted a prolonged series of groaning noises from its hull as it sailed in an arc across the dark sea. Suddenly, amidst the howling winds and swirling fog, Duncan’s eyes caught a fleeting glimpse of something emerging.

Duncan could make out that it was a ship, a white one that appeared to be smaller than the Vanished, with a dark chimney protruding from its hull. To his dismay, both vessels were headed straight towards each other on a collision course!

Duncan’s mind was filled with a barrage of curse words as he muttered to himself, “Oh, holy mother of chicken dinners! I’m going to sink into the spirit world for sure!”

After wandering through this peculiar realm for so long without encountering a living soul, what were the odds that he would meet his end by crashing into the sea? It seemed like a cruel twist of fate.

.....

As the wind howled and the waves raged, the Boundless Sea unleashed its terrifying power upon the world. Faced with this immense and

uncontrollable force, even the mightiest of beings would feel insignificant. Unfortunately for the White Oak, it was now being pushed to its limits, as its steam turbines strained to fight against the inevitable fate of sinking to the depths of the sea.

Captain Lawrence Creed, with his gray hair, stood resolutely in the wheelhouse of the White Oak. However, the sturdy walls and glass windows around him failed to instill any sense of security. Instead, he could hear the grating of mechanical gears grinding against each other, causing him concern as he clutched the wheel. To make matters worse, the thick fog, combined with the massive waves, filled him with a deep sense of dread.

Despite being one of the most advanced steamships in the world, the White Oak's machinery could only guarantee survival under normal sea conditions. Beyond the murky fog lay the border of reality, a realm of unknown where malevolent deities were said to lurk.

"Captain! The pastor can't hold on any longer!" cried the first mate mournfully from the side.

Lawrence could hear a slightly muffled echo in the first mate's voice, which signaled that something was terribly wrong. When he turned to look at the prayer table, an ominous purple-black flame had erupted from the incense, and the honorable cleric who had accompanied them on their journey was foaming at the mouth. The man was clearly unwell, with a nosebleed and shivers, and he appeared to be struggling against some malevolent force that was invading his soul.

"Captain!" cried the first mate again, but Lawrence interrupted with a swift order.

"Temporarily close the Holy Emblem Marker. We're diving into the spirit world!" Lawrence ordered quickly.

The first mate was momentarily stunned, and despite having spent half his life at sea, he seemed unable to believe his ears. "Captain?!" he exclaimed in disbelief.

Lawrence spoke with a commanding voice, “Sink into the spirit world. We can spend ten minutes there and avoid the most dangerous part of the border-collapse. This will give our priest a chance to recover. Obey my orders, NOW!”

The first mate’s jaw moved as if to protest, but he gritted his teeth and complied, “Yes, Captain!”

The crew began to carry out the orders with quick and precise strides, allowing Lawrence to catch his breath and focus on the bigger picture. The sense of protection from the holy relic began to recede following his order, and they quickly sank into the “spirit world,” a space between reality and the deep sea.

Although it was dangerous to do so, there were historical cases of ships returning from the spirit world. As a member of the Explorers’ Association, Lawrence had read numerous texts on the subject and various “survival guides” written by survivors, which proved it was possible.

However, Lawrence knew that luck was fickle and that the spirit world was a place where even the bravest explorers had disappeared without a trace. The dangers of that place were unpredictable, and the slightest mistake could lead to a fatal outcome. But he had no choice. He had to take the risk and save his ship and crew.

Later on, all he had to do was deliver the troublesome “Anomaly 099” from storage to the authorities of the city-state of Pland. After that, he vowed never to become entangled with this affair again.

The situation couldn’t possibly worsen any further.

Lawrence repeated this phrase to himself in an attempt to find solace, but his hopes were shattered as he spotted a three-masted galleon larger than the White Oak. Suddenly, the opposing vessel surfaced out of nowhere and hurtled towards them like an unstoppable behemoth, leaving Lawrence in a state of utter shock.

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Chapter 5 “Intertwined”

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Without a doubt, every person on the White Oak would describe what they saw as an unforgettable experience permanently etched in their memories.

As it emerged from the dense fog, the three-masted warship was a magnificent sight – old and majestic in every aspect. In a time where steamships were prevalent, this medieval galleon appeared as though it had leapt out of an ancient oil painting. Its wooden hull was embellished with blazing green flames, and its sails were so dominating and spectral that they sent chills down one’s spine, conjuring a haunting sensation of the supernatural.

“We’re going to crash!!!” cried out a crew member. Even though they showed bravery in the midst of peril, this circumstance was overwhelming for their human spirits to bear.

Amidst the ensuing chaos, with most of the crew running around in a frenzy, a handful of them decided to stay put and grasp onto anything they could find for support. In the meantime, a few started to pray and chant to either the storm goddess Gomona or the lord of death Bartók, hoping for divine intervention.

Nonetheless, not all crew members gave in to panic. The first mate had his eyes locked onto the captain, in whom he placed his complete faith. The

hazards that came with the boundless sea were always looming, and in critical moments like these, the captain's expertise was the decisive factor in the crew's survival. With more than three decades of experience, Captain Lawrence was undoubtedly their most promising hope.

To the first mate's disappointment, the captain's expression conveyed only apprehension and astonishment. Despite the impending danger looming over the White Oak, the elderly captain appeared oblivious to it, fixated intently on the approaching galleon, to the point where he nearly broke the wheel. "It's... it's the Vanished," he muttered in disbelief.

"Ca... Captain?!" The first mate was taken aback by the mention of the name. Like every seafarer, he had heard several tales from older and more superstitious sailors. "What did you just say?! That..."

"The Vanished!!!" Captain Lawrence seemed oblivious to his first mate's exclamation and kept his gaze fixed ahead. By the time he regained any modicum of control, the White Oak had already collided with the Vanished!

Almost all sailors let out screams, but the expected shattering collision did not occur. Instead, the burning green ship with its ghostly nature directly merged with the White Oak, entwining the two vessels. This naturally elicited wide-eyed astonishment from the crew, who were still quivering from the impact.

Captain Lawrence also observed this strange occurrence, but when his eyes landed on his first mate, the man had transformed into an ethereal body as the flames enveloped him. As for the priest near the prayer table, the flames did not consume the cleric, but instead rebounded off the shimmering white blessing that protected him.

Subsequently, the flames consumed the old captain, and a potent feeling of exhaustion, compliance, and terror overtook his entire being. This activated the protective sea charm he had prepared beforehand, enabling Lawrence to retain some degree of sanity as he passed through the hull and cabins of the moving ghost ship.

Inside, there were ancient wooden pillars ablaze with green fire, decaying ropes and barnacles, and a vast storage room containing all sorts of peculiar items that should have remained buried deep beneath the sea. However, everything changed as he entered the captain's quarters of the Vanished. The room was opulent by any standards, but the wooden figurine of a goat's head ruined any sense of wealth with its ominous presence.

The goat head contorted its body, its glowing eyes fixated indifferently on Lawrence as though it were observing its prey.

Eventually, Lawrence could no longer bear the intense stare and flinched away. That was when the two captains came face to face. As one might expect, Duncan was tall and had a cursed appearance, still gripping the steering wheel of the Vanished with his imposing ghostly presence.

The elderly Lawrence realized that this was the end. Resigned to his fate, he closed his eyes and understood that the Vanished had come for its treasure, and they were that valuable prize.

"You don't have to take everyone away. Take me and spare my crew," he spoke with a tremble in his voice but enough bravery to make any parent proud.

However, the towering ghostly figure remained silent and cast a curious gaze at the diminutive mortal captain who dared to bargain with him.

"They all have wives and children!" Lawrence cried out in desperation.

Finally, the fiery undead reacted, and its jaw began to move as if it were speaking. Unfortunately, the deafening whistling wind around them drowned out the words in the ears of the mortals.

"What did you say?!" Duncan bellowed. "The wind is too strong for me to hear!"

In the next moment, a deafening noise pierced Lawrence's ears, blending with the wind and the cries of the sailors outside. Finally, it was over. The

green flames vanished beneath the afterglow of the light, and the remaining hull of the Vanished dissipated into the murky fog behind the White Oak.

Gasping with relief, Lawrence hastily checked his body and discovered that everything had returned to normal. The flesh that had burned off had regrown, and the priest lying next to the prayer table was still breathing heavily. They were all alive!

“Captain! The ship, the Vanished, is gone!” The first mate yelled with a booming voice.

Lawrence was preoccupied and took a moment to respond. “Did... did he let us go?” he asked with a hint of uncertainty.

The first mate did not hear him clearly and requested him to repeat his words. “Captain? What did you say?”

“That Captain Duncan...” Lawrence murmured unconsciously, but then slapped himself as if he had let slip a forbidden word. He quickly turned to face his first mate. “Quickly, conduct a roll call of the entire crew! I want to know who’s missing from the White Oak!”

The first mate promptly nodded and was about to execute the command when Lawrence added another sentence. “And make sure to verify if there is anyone extra on the ship!”

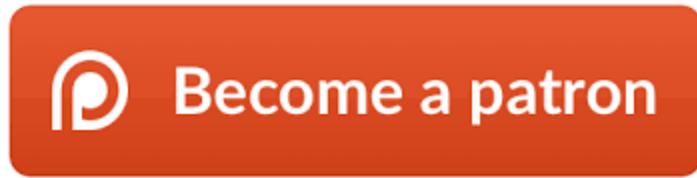
The first mate was taken aback by the second half of the order but quickly understood, his eyes filled with intense fear. He kept murmuring the storm goddess’s name under his breath as he pivoted towards the deck and sounded the gathering bell.

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Chapter 6 “Missing Cargo”

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As the sailors gathered with the sound of their noisy footsteps, Lawrence and his second mate rushed ahead to assist the priest to a more secure location. Peering through the window, the elderly captain realized they were still enveloped in thick fog, far from safety. However, the disappearance of the eerie ghost ship provided some relief for the time being.

Now, he needed to determine precisely what the Vanished had taken from the White Oak or what remained. This had to be done swiftly.

He was unwilling to risk allowing the ship to re-enter the real world without first ensuring that all potential dangers had been eliminated. Certain items, if brought back, could cause catastrophic damage in the real world. On the other hand, he also recognized the potential irreversible impact on his crew if their stay in the spirit world was prolonged.

Eventually, the commotion from the deck above jolted him from his contemplations. Glancing up to inspect the holy cleric and the incense burner, he inquired with an anxious tone, “Mr. Ron, how secure is our current situation?”

The priest coughed uncontrollably, appearing unwell. He then retrieved a compass from his chest pocket and drew a sacred symbol in the air with his

finger, muttering a spell silently. The arrow on the compass spun until it eventually came to a stop at a particular position.

“We seem to be hovering somewhere between the surface and the spirit world, with a slight proximity to the real world. As a result, the influence of the depths is minimal,” the priest explained. However, he appeared perplexed after examining the compass arrow. “It’s strange. Despite the artifact being deactivated, we’re still completely stable here. We’re not sinking at all,” he added, grunting with effort.

Lawrence chuckled wryly, attempting to lighten the mood with a bad joke. “Perhaps the collision with the Vanished knocked us onto a safer route,” he remarked, shaking his head.

The priest grinned in response but was quickly overcome by another bout of coughing. “Captain, that joke was terrible, even for you,” he wheezed. “Nonetheless, we must report what has occurred today to the Church. The appearance of the Vanished is a significant issue. Although there have been sightings of it in the past, we have never been able to confirm it as we have today. Bless the goddess for keeping us safe. Captain, you and your crew must prepare yourselves psychologically for our return to Pland. None of you will be able to sail again in the near future.”

The first mate reported back without waiting for the captain’s inquiry, “There are no individuals missing or anyone new aboard, sir. I personally inspected the sailors who had gathered on deck and went down to the boiler room to check on the mechanics who were still working there. All of them were able to correctly articulate the names of the gods they worship.”

Lawrence was taken aback by the news. While it was good news, he couldn’t believe things had gone so smoothly. “Not a single one?” he asked in surprise. “What about the holy relic?”

The first mate responded promptly, “The holy relic is operating as usual, sir. The navigator is preparing incense and essential oils for burning. We are awaiting your orders, Captain.”

Lawrence was in disbelief and couldn't help but mutter, "Did it really spare our ship?"

"The winds of fortune seem to be in our favor, Captain," remarked the first mate, spreading his hands. "We were fortunate enough not to lose anyone, and it's possible that the ghost captain was just passing by, and our encounter was purely accidental."

Lawrence shot a skeptical look at his first mate. "Do you truly believe that?" he asked. "If good luck truly favored us, we would never have crossed paths with it in the first place."

Midway through his sentence, a sudden rush of footsteps could be heard outside the cabin, followed by the door swinging open. A sweaty sailor rushed in with a look of terror on his face.

"Captain! Anomaly 099 is missing!" he exclaimed.

The cabin fell into an immediate hush, and everyone exchanged uneasy glances. However, Lawrence couldn't help but feel a sense of relief upon hearing the news.

"This is great news," he thought to himself. "We have finally identified the problem with the ship."

Lawrence quickly composed himself and exited the cabin with his first mate at his side. He needed to verify the situation personally, so he led the way to the deepest part of the steamship.

Before long, a unique cabin came into view.

The door to this cabin was adorned with intricate occult symbols etched into the black iron frame. It appeared as if the entire structure was designed to keep whatever was inside safely contained, like a closed-off cage.

Lawrence carefully examined the symbols on the door to ensure that they were undamaged. He then gazed upward towards the "relic room" located one level above this cabin. The layout was deliberately designed to prevent

the contents of Anomaly 099 from contaminating the rest of the ship and pulling them down into the depths of the sea.

Despite the protective measures in place, it was under this very arrangement that the critical cargo, which the White Oak had been tasked with escorting, had gone missing.

After taking a deep breath, he forcefully pushed open the heavy iron door to reveal a brightly lit sealed room. Gas lamps hanging from four columns provided full illumination with no blind spots. However, to Lawrence's dismay, the "goods" that should have been present were missing. The only remnants were a few crisscrossing chains and ashes scattered on the floorboards.

The lead deckhand's voice sounded from behind: "Based on the seal requirements of Anomaly 099, the room was continuously illuminated, and every two hours, a crew member was responsible for reinforcing the chains around the 'coffin' and scattering ashes on the floor. However, due to the chaos caused by the appearance of the ghost ship, the crew member assigned to the duty failed to enter the room in a timely manner. As a result, it took us nearly seven minutes to realize that Anomaly 099 had vanished."

"Seven minutes alone wouldn't have been enough time for that entity to break the seals and become a threat. The seals were put in place for a reason and aren't just decorative. Even in the worst-case scenario, the 'coffin' would have only been able to move around in the room." Lawrence furrowed his brow and continued, "We are certain that it's missing and has left the ship...and it's not the sailor's fault."

The deckhand appeared unsettled and inquired, "Are you suggesting that the Vanished is responsible for the disappearance of Anomaly 099?"

Lawrence's voice deepened as he replied, "Yes, that's what I'm saying. It's likely that the 'captain' of the Vanished took Anomaly 099 with him."

He paused for a moment and let out a soft sigh. "We should be grateful that the Vanished only had its sights set on that particular anomaly and didn't harm any of us."

The deckhand met his captain's gaze and looked around the now-empty sealed room. With hesitation in his voice, he asked, "But...how are we going to explain to the authorities that we've lost such important cargo?"

Lawrence remained composed and placed a reassuring hand on the deckhand's shoulder.

"The Vanished can be classified as a natural disaster, and as such, we have maritime insurance to cover such incidents," Lawrence replied.

The deckhand appeared surprised and asked, "But will the insurance company cover the loss of Anomaly 099?"

"If they refuse to pay, then we'll turn to the Explorers Association and ask for a new bounty on the Vanished," Lawrence stated firmly.

The deckhand looked hesitant and started to say something, but Lawrence cut him off before he could finish. "I know what you're going to say, but sometimes we must adapt to the circumstances and make the best of what we're given. Now, let's get back to work."

"Captain, aren't you a little..."

"Oh, shut up."

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Chapter 7 “Doll”

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Duncan eventually released his grip on the dark, weighty wheel to inspect himself after confirmed with the goat head that the Vanished could navigate the treacherous waters on its own. His body had regained its form, and the deck had returned to its original state with no remnants of the green flame.

Nevertheless, he felt an inexplicable sensation that much had changed since he last grasped the helm of the Vanished. The green flame had connected him to the ship itself, and the floorboards beneath his feet now felt like an extension of his body.

With his eyes slowly closing, Duncan explored his newfound connection. He could still hear the eerie whispers of nothingness emanating from the Vanished, the recently kindled white embers flickering in the captain’s quarters, and the relentless pounding of the waves against the hull. However, he also sensed something new – a presence of dark shadows watching him.

As he tried to locate the source of this unsettling feeling, the shadows quickly retreated and vanished without a trace. Duncan was left with a disconcerting sense of foreboding about the unknown forces that had emerged.

After opening his eyes, he let out a soft sigh and conjured the ghostly sails on the mast, solidifying his role as the ship's captain. Once he took control of the wheel, there was no turning back.

"Captain, we are ascending from the edge of the spirit world and will soon return to the real world," the voice of the goat head spoke directly into Duncan's mind, rather than through the copper pipe used for communication on the ship. Fortunately, the creature was no longer annoying when discussing important matters. "Our luck has been favorable. Despite descending to the depths of the spirit world, the ship remains unaffected."

The real world, the spiritual world, the deep sea, and subspace that seemed to be even deeper than the previous three... Duncan didn't know what these strange words were exactly, nor did he know their true meaning, only that they were popping up in his head and indicating what was happening in this world.

Nevertheless, one thing was certain in Duncan's mind. Whenever the goat head called him "Captain," the attitude from the gargoyle figurine would change. Though subtle, it changed. In fact, Duncan was confident that if he revealed himself to be "Zhou Ming" right now, a man from another world, the goat head would still obey his orders regardless of the truth.

Despite his confidence, Duncan ultimately decided not to test his theory or ask the goat head about the spirit world, deep sea, and subspace. He had become more comfortable in his situation and no longer felt anxious or insecure.

The presence of other "people" in this world, as well as other ships and civilizations, gave him hope and sparked some vague ideas for his future plans.

Duncan murmured to himself, "The ship we saw was powered by mechanics, whereas the Vanished resembles a traditional galleon warship from a bygone era." He pondered for a moment before continuing, "However, it's not purely mechanical in nature. There are cabins on board that serve an unknown purpose. What's intriguing is how these cabins are

arranged, almost like a sacrificial site, with unusual patterns and symbols etched into the walls.”

Duncan’s thoughts were interrupted by a sudden realization. “Goathead,” he muttered to himself, unsure of the actual name of the entity he was addressing. “When I was exploring that ship earlier, the man who seemed to be the captain yelled at me. Can you remember what he said?”

“The wind and waves were too loud for me to hear anything,” replied Goathead, unperturbed by Duncan’s use of its nickname. “And no, I didn’t hear what he said to you either,” it continued.

Duncan furrowed his brows, pondering the missing words. “I got the sense that he was trying to convey something important to me,” he said thoughtfully. “His expression was almost as if he was resigned to his fate and ready to face a tragic end with me. Whatever he wanted to say must have been significant for him to call out to me in that moment.”

“It’s typical for humans, including sailors, to react in that way in your presence, Captain. So, there’s no need to worry. As the saying goes, a tree doesn’t have to listen to the cries of a grasshopper.”

Duncan was taken aback by the matter-of-fact response. “So, it’s common for humans to want to die with me?” he asked, almost tripping over in surprise.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Duncan regretted saying them out loud. It was an inappropriate statement that could expose a flaw in his identity as the “captain.” However, the goat head seemed completely oblivious to the strangeness of Duncan’s behavior and continued to act as if nothing was amiss.

“It’s only natural for them to fear you. Anyone who sails on the Boundless Sea should fear you, just as they fear the gods of old and the shadows of subspace. Speaking of shadows, did you know that a brilliant engineer, agronomist, or foodie once said something...” The tone of the goat head now sounded proud as it spoke.

Sensibly, Duncan chose not to pursue the topic further because he was concerned that he might not be able to keep up with the goat head's endless chatter. Besides, he didn't want to risk increasing his annoyance exponentially by engaging in the conversation.

"By the way, what is that outside the captain's quarters?" Duncan smartly changed the subject, asking with amazement as he noticed something peculiar outside.

What he saw outside was a wooden box that was more than a man's length. The craftsmanship was exquisite, with riveted and gold-plated reinforcements. Intricate patterns, resembling hieroglyphic symbols, were etched on the surface. There was no doubt that this box was not on the Vanished before!

After a moment of silence, the voice of the goat head sounded again, "I'm not sure, but it could be some sort of treasure..."

"Treasure?!" exclaimed Duncan, momentarily stunned, as he circled the box twice. "Although it resembles a coffin, it's far more intricate than any ordinary one... Hold on, when you say 'treasure,' do you imply that this object was 'acquired' from that ship?"

The goat-headed figure spoke in a serious yet praising tone, "Well done, Captain. A fruitful expedition often results in acquiring some treasure upon the Vanished's return."

Duncan's jaw dropped in shock, aghast at the idea of success. He had no intention of taking anything from the other ship in the first place!

Upon further reflection, Duncan recognized that expressing his thoughts would conflict with the "captain" persona he aimed to embody. Moreover, the mechanical ship had disappeared into the thick fog. Recalling the white-bearded captain's intense glare and his foreboding comments about perishing together, Duncan decided he would prefer to take his chances with the mysterious box.

As Duncan neared the suspicious coffin, he observed that the lid was slightly open, as though it had been accessed before. Despite his apprehension, he cautiously placed his hand on the wooden container, driven by the desire to comprehend how the ghostly vessel had managed to bring this object aboard.

With more ease than expected, Duncan's hand raised the lid after applying only gentle pressure. The sight within left him astounded.

"A person?" he gasped incredulously.

Gazing into the wooden chest, he saw a breathtaking young woman with flowing silver-white hair that resembled liquid mercury. Her beauty was immaculate, and she radiated a sense of regal detachment, adorned in a stunning purplish-black gown.

Upon closer inspection, however, he realized that she was not a person but a doll!

Further scrutiny of the doll's unnatural joint structure solidified Duncan's suspicions.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 8

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Chapter 8 “The Sun”

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Initially, the doll appeared so delicate that Duncan struggled to distinguish it from a real human at first glance, and he couldn't shake the feeling that it might come at any second. However, he soon realized that this was just an illusion, and the doll remained completely unresponsive to its surroundings.

After observing the doll carefully for some time, Duncan finally concluded that it was unlikely to suddenly surprise him, which was a bit of a relief.

Nonetheless, he furrowed his brow and turned to the goat head beside him, asking, “What are your thoughts on this situation?”

The goat head quickly replied, “It is probable that the previous ship was transporting valuable cargo.” Despite previously claiming ignorance about the mysterious wooden coffin on deck, the sculpture seemed to possess a wealth of knowledge about maritime affairs, dwarfing Duncan’s understanding. “The symbols on the box suggest that it is linked to the divine, and the presence of chains securing it implies that it was sealed at some point. Transporting a sealed object on the Boundless Sea is a treacherous undertaking, indicating that the ship we encountered likely had a compelling reason for doing so.”

Duncan’s eyes flickered with surprise at the mention of the coffin being sealed. If the coffin had indeed been sealed before being brought aboard the Vanished, then it meant that whatever was inside had been unsealed already. Otherwise, he would not have been able to remove the lid so effortlessly.

“Ordinary and fragile individuals might find this situation perilous, but it poses no threat to you if it could be sealed using a specialized technique,” the goat head remarked. “Captain, you are far more formidable than this anomaly.”

Duncan was momentarily taken aback and felt a knot form in his stomach at the suggestion that he was more dangerous than the eerie coffin on board. It was disconcerting, to say the least, especially since the one flattering him was a malevolent and unnerving goat-faced gargoyle figurine.

Duncan let out a heavy sigh, realizing that he needed to be more careful in acquiring knowledge. He furrowed his brow and gazed at the doll once more before coming to a decision. “I should cast this back into the sea,” he concluded.

As he made his decision, Duncan felt a twinge of reluctance in his heart, especially when his eyes fell upon the doll once again.

Duncan’s reluctance was not due to the doll’s beauty, but rather its uncanny resemblance to a real human, like the sleeping beauty in the story of Snow White. Who could bear to discard something so lifelike? Nevertheless, this momentary hesitation only served to fortify his determination.

As a pragmatic and prudent individual, Duncan knew that he could not leave such a potential danger beside him, particularly in a world filled with abnormal and peculiar things. What if the doll was one of those anomalies? Having the goat head was enough; he did not need to add another perplexity to his list of problems.

With a sense of determination, Duncan placed the lid back onto the coffin and took out a hammer to secure it firmly with nails, taking all the necessary safety measures.

Once he had finished securing the coffin, Duncan carefully pushed it, along with the doll inside, to the edge of the deck.

“You may dispose of your loot as you see fit, Captain, but allow me to offer a respectful and humble suggestion: you needn’t be so cautious. The

Vanished has not added any new treasures to its trove for quite some time now..." the goat head remarked in Duncan's mind.

"Silence!" Duncan snapped, abruptly ending the goat head's commentary before kicking the coffin forcefully.

The heavy box wavered precariously at the edge of the deck before plunging into the sea below, creating a resounding splash upon impact. Although Duncan had taken precautions to ensure the box was out of sight, he remained uneasy until he had confirmed that it had disappeared completely from view. After glancing around the deck, he noticed that the fog had mostly dissipated, indicating that the Vanished had disconnected from the "spirit world" and returned to reality. Letting out a sigh of relief, Duncan finally felt at ease.

Duncan scanned the surrounding area eagerly for any sign of the steamship. Based on his calculations, it had not been too long since the two vessels had encountered each other, and the steamship should still be visible. However, despite his best efforts, he could not spot even a faint outline of the steamship.

Duncan pondered silently to himself, "Could this be due to the strange sea or is it related to the so-called 'spirit dive'?"

Duncan mused to himself for a moment, but his attention was quickly drawn to something else. He noticed a glimmer of light in the depths of the clouds above the sea, which had not dissipated despite the fog clearing.

It felt as though a heavy veil had been lifted from his world, and the surface of the sea now shimmered brilliantly like the morning sun. This sight stirred a deep emotion within Duncan's heart. Ever since he had discovered the existence of "this side," he had been confined to his apartment and had not seen the sun for what felt like an eternity. Now, he was finally able to welcome the sun with open arms once more.

However, it was not to be. The anticipated warmth of the morning sun failed to materialize, and instead, Duncan was left staring in shock at a golden sphere that left him completely frozen in place.

Contrary to his expectations, the light was not dazzling. The sun appeared as a round, radiant yellow orb, but encircling it were two concentric rings of intricate runes, giving the impression of a shackle binding its prisoner.

Duncan spoke softly, his voice low and somewhat cold as he asked, “What is that?”

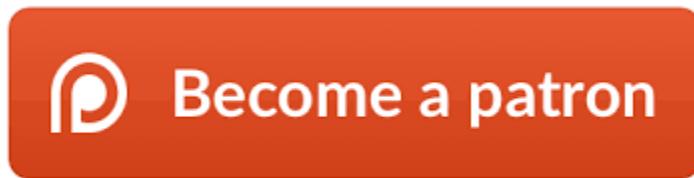
“That is the sun, Captain, of course,” replied the goat head in its usual calm manner.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 9

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Chapter 9 “Return and Return”

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Lost in thought, Duncan gazed at the sky, unable to gauge the time that had passed. Eventually, eye soreness forced him to look away. Despite closing them, the “sun’s” image persisted, burning in his retina, and he accepted that it wasn’t what he’d anticipated.

Duncan’s gaze instinctively shifted towards the captain’s quarters’ door, realizing he could return to the apartment he had occupied for years. However, he dismissed the idea quickly, as nothing awaited him there. What purpose could he serve in the confined thirty-square-foot space, enveloped by thick, hazy, gray fog?

In reality, the place Duncan regarded as his familiar “home” was merely another isolated vessel – metaphorically, of course.

During the prolonged silence, the goat head’s voice broke in again, interrupting his desolation: “Captain, where do we sail next? Do you have any navigational plans?”

How could Duncan have any sailing plans? Despite his eagerness to develop a perfect plan to explore the world and start his next journey, he lacked the faintest idea or knowledge to plot a course on the map.

The thought of piloting the Vanished had only crossed his mind a few hours earlier. Still, he contemplated the idea before replying, “Do you know where the ship that collided with us came from?”

“You mean those city-states? Which one are you thinking of?” The goat head’s voice conveyed surprise and caution. “I recommend avoiding the shipping lanes controlled by those city-states... at least for now. Even with your reputation as the great Captain Duncan, the Vanished isn’t as formidable as it once was. The patrolling garrisons will surely resist your passage.”

Duncan fell quiet, wondering what the genuine “Captain Duncan” had done to incite such hostility.

Moreover, the goat head’s euphemism suggested to Duncan that the ship was never as well-kept as he’d initially thought. Perhaps fear of returning to port in the civilized world was the main reason the ghost ship had sailed for so long.

Duncan felt anxious. He needed to understand this world and connect with the “civilized society” out there for his survival or to solve the mystery of finding his way back “home.” He must find a way to end his ceaseless wandering. However, civilized society didn’t seem to welcome him. His mere presence could trigger a twenty-five-man raiding party, banishing him to the abyss.

Frustrated, Duncan longed for a book on the Vanished to quench his knowledge thirst. He couldn’t believe there wasn’t a single record of such a remarkable ship.

Sailors usually had entertainment means, like reading or watching movies, to alleviate the stress of long voyages. Was it possible that the “real Duncan” was... illiterate?

Duncan casually voiced his thoughts, unable to contain his curiosity. To his surprise, the goat head answered without hesitation: “Books? Reading at sea is a dangerous activity. Shadows hiding in the depths and those in subspace all wait for the mortal mind to falter. The ‘classics’ from the church are safe

to read, but they're so dull that deck scrubbing is preferable... But Captain, haven't you always been disinterested in the church's teachings?"

Duncan was stunned by the goat head's reply. How could reading a book at sea be life-threatening? And why were only the church's scriptures deemed safe? What sort of danger existed in the Boundless Sea?

His curiosity about this world intensified, leaving him with more questions than answers. Nevertheless, he resisted the urge to inquire further and moved to the ship's side, gazing out at the vast horizon.

Despite the sun's eerie reflection on the rippling water, the shimmering sea was undeniably captivating.

"I would appreciate your advice," Duncan said cautiously to the goat head. "I'm growing tired of this aimless journey. Maybe it's time to think about a new direction..."

As he spoke, an unusual sensation stirred within him – a feeling of connection between him and the Vanished. Suddenly, something collided with the ship, producing a loud "bang" from the stern.

Duncan's brow furrowed as he instinctively drew his flintlock handgun and pirate saber. Without hesitation, he dashed to the source of the noise and discovered something lying silently on the deck – the ornate wooden coffin with the strange doll inside, once again.

Approaching the coffin, Duncan felt an increasing sense of unease. He observed that the box was still damp from being submerged in seawater. However, what disturbed him more was that the nails he had used to seal the lid had been pried open.

After several tense minutes of alertness and confrontation, Duncan made up his mind. Clutching his flintlock gun and saber, he used the blade's tip to forcefully push the partially cracked lid aside.

As the lid creaked open, the gothic doll appeared, as lifeless and beautiful as before. Duncan stared at it for several seconds before speaking in a deep,

serious tone, hoping to command attention: “If you are alive, then rise and speak to me.”

Despite his efforts to awaken the doll, it remained lifeless and motionless. Duncan’s frustration showed as he furrowed his brow, but soon he softened his tone.

“Very well, I guess I have no choice but to return you to the sea,” he said, his voice gentler this time.

He quickly closed the lid and secured it with even more nails and determination. To guarantee the coffin wouldn’t open again, he used iron chains found in a corner and fastened them tightly around it.

Duncan clapped his hands in satisfaction after ensuring the coffin was properly secured. He nodded approvingly as he circled the box several times.

“I’d like to see you escape this time,” Duncan muttered to himself.

Without hesitating, he kicked the box forcefully, sending it rolling back into the sea. As he watched it drift away, he sighed with relief, ready to leave the unsettling experience behind.

But his calm was fleeting. He suddenly whipped his head around, alerted by an unexpected noise.

“Perhaps I should have attached a cannonball to it,” Duncan mumbled, still slightly unnerved by the peculiar encounter.

As he turned away, he heard the wooden sculpture’s voice in his head.

“You were quite harsh on that lady,” Goathead said.

Duncan shook his head incredulously and retorted, “How can you call a cursed doll a ‘lady’? Please, don’t speak.”

“I agree that the doll looks rather eerie, but no curse on the vast sea can rival the Vanished and its great Captain Duncan,” the sculpture commented.

“In fact, that ‘lady’ is quite gentle and harmless, Captain.”

Duncan: “...”

Why did the goat head seem so proud of the Vanished’s curse and Captain Duncan’s notoriety?

Sensing Duncan’s sour mood, the goat head quickly changed the subject, saying, “Captain, if I recall correctly, you asked for my advice earlier. Specifically...”

“Let’s talk about it later. I need a break,” Duncan replied wearily.

“Navigating the Vanished in the spirit world has sapped my energy, so please, don’t speak for a while.”

“Understood, Captain,” the goat head responded obediently.

Duncan returned to the captain’s quarters and settled in front of the mapping table, where the chart remained.

Suddenly, his gaze fixed on something, and he froze.

Duncan observed a subtle change in the chart: the previously shifting grayish-white patches had vanished, and the sea surface around the Vanished was becoming clearer. It appeared as though the map was updating in real-time as the Vanished traversed the waters.

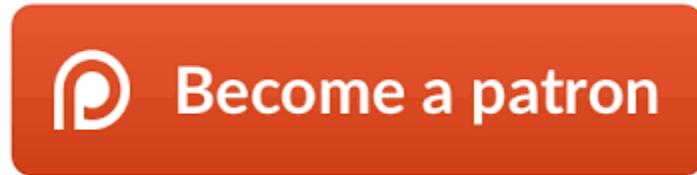
This revelation captured Duncan’s full attention. However, his focus was abruptly disrupted by a signal from the Vanished, indicating contact with an unknown object deep within his soul. This was soon followed by a loud bang that echoed from the deck.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 10

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Chapter 10 “Not So Elegant Anymore”

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After Duncan threw it into the sea, the wooden box resurfaced and found its way back onto the Vanished. Duncan maintained his composure despite the eerie turn of events, possibly due to his time on the ghostly ship, recent harrowing experiences, and the unsettling goat head that had been plaguing him. Regardless of the reason, Duncan seemed to have developed a certain resistance to the supernatural occurrences in this realm. In fact, he had suspected that getting rid of the “cursed doll” wouldn’t be so easy.

Upon opening the lid, he saw that the iron nails and chains were gone. As expected, the gothic doll was still nestled in the red velvet lining, seemingly undisturbed. However, Duncan noticed that the corners of the doll’s skirt showed traces of seawater, and a faint ocean scent wafted from inside the coffin. Despite the doll’s strange habit of returning, it hadn’t displayed any harmful behavior so far.

After observing the doll for a while, Duncan smirked and voiced his curiosity before leaving it alone on the deck. Although cautious, he trusted that the many living creatures on the ship could handle any potential problems. Besides, he had some preparations to make.

Duncan headed to the lower deck, where the ship’s armaments – including cannons, powder kegs, and iron balls – were stored. As he examined the ancient items, an idea struck him: could the cannons be reloaded and fired

automatically at his command? He also wondered if the freshwater tanks could refill themselves and if the ship's damaged areas had the ability to self-repair. However, Duncan quickly realized that he knew too little about the ship and its capabilities, particularly its deeper, more sinister areas, which he found too eerie and daunting to explore in the limited time he had.

Armed with cannon shells, he returned to the stern of the deck and examined the motionless doll in the coffin. "Did she move at all?"

The goat head spoke up, its voice sounding like it had been stifled for too long, saying, "Not at all. This lady is as quiet as she seems, and you should trust my judgment that she poses no harm to you. Her repeated appearances on board might suggest a connection to the Vanished. As a great horticulturist once said..."

"Quiet," Duncan interrupted the goat head, cutting off any further ramblings.

"Okay."

Duncan ignored the nagging annoyance in his veins and gazed indifferently at the doll in the coffin. He wondered if she truly couldn't move or if she was just pretending to be asleep, but regardless, he was determined to find out.

Solid cast iron was especially heavy, and when executing traitors on a ship, a single cannonball strapped to the leg was the best way to ensure the seasoned sailor became fish food.

With this in mind, Duncan took eight iron shells and loaded them into the coffin, making sure there was no room for maneuvering. He could no longer describe the doll as elegant; her repeated appearances on board had made her quite creepy.

Duncan struggled to seal the lid this time, but eventually managed to do so with great effort. He then pushed the coffin to the edge of the deck and, with a powerful spinning kick, sent it flying into the sea for the third time.

Unlike before, he watched with satisfaction as the box sank to the ocean floor.

The goat head's voice suddenly interrupted Duncan's thoughts, asking, "Captain, have you had a change of heart? If you regret discarding the loot, the Vanished can still use its anchor to salvage the box again. Although the anchor isn't designed for that purpose, it says it can try..."

"Quiet," Duncan said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as he dismissed the goat head's suggestion.

"But I've noticed that you've been standing at the edge of the deck for quite some time."

"Be quiet."

"Okay."

Duncan let out a deep sigh. He couldn't bring himself to admit to the sycophantic sculpture that his toe was hurting from the spinning kick. Despite the painful sting still present in his shoe, he maintained a serious and majestic demeanor as a captain overseeing the waters for several more minutes. Whether or not Duncan truly resembled a proper captain was up for debate, but he was confident that no one would dare mock him for it.

Upon returning to his quarters and waiting in silence for a few more minutes, Duncan estimated that the timing should be just right. He made his way to the location where the windows were situated. This spot was below the stern area, allowing him to peer through the opening and observe what he desired.

"Captain, may I ask why you are engaging in such peculiar behavior?" the goat head inquired, unable to contain its curiosity.

Duncan kept his gaze fixed upon the surface of the sea and replied without lifting his eyes, "I'm curious about how that 'cursed doll' keeps reappearing."

“Well, it’s because she’s a cursed doll. That’s the reason.”

“I appreciate your unwavering stance, but I believe that even if she is a cursed doll, there must be some kind of process involved in her returning to the ship. I suspect she may also be capable of communication but is choosing not to. If I can understand her reasoning, then perhaps we can put an end to this charade and have a conversation with her.”

Listening to Duncan’s explanation, the goat head fell silent for a couple of seconds, as if considering the idea. “Captain, I sense that your energy has grown stronger. That’s a good sign! You haven’t been in a good mood since you woke up from your slumber. As your loyal first mate and second mate...”

“Be quiet.”

“Okay.”

Once the goat head had fallen silent, Duncan refocused his attention on the sea’s surface.

It seemed that the “coffin” had truly sunk into the depths of the sea...

However, having learned from his past experiences, Duncan exercised extra patience this time. He silently calculated the time and carefully observed, waiting for the right moment. And then, just as he had anticipated, the doll reappeared within his line of sight.

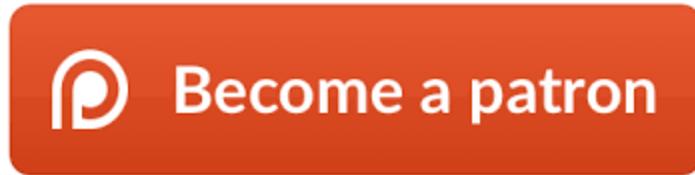
As a wave crashed against it, the delicate wooden box resembling a coffin had transformed into a makeshift boat, with the gothic doll using her arms to paddle against the rough waves. It was a truly impressive sight to behold, and Duncan found himself momentarily at a loss for words.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 11

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Chapter 11 “Alice”

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Duncan swore he would never forget this sight for the rest of his life—a striking coffin undulating in the eerie and treacherous sea, and a mysterious gothic doll paddling the sides and riding the waves like a seasoned surfer.

And, most importantly, the doll didn’t seem very happy!

This was creepy from any angle. Should Duncan be surprised that the doll was moving? Or should he be amazed by her audacity to use a coffin as a rowboat or surfboard? Regardless, the persistence and determination of the doll to return aboard were something to behold. He had to give her credit for that.

Before Duncan realized it, the doll had managed to come aboard, and this time he witnessed the full spectacle of how she did it. By clinging onto some protruding wood from the stern, the doll was able to hoist herself up with the coffin magically floating up beside her. Ignoring the weight alone, the agility required for such a feat would challenge any acrobat.

Not letting this opportunity slip, he quickly rushed back to the deck.

Apparently, the doll hadn’t realized she had been caught red-handed and continued to organize her things. With a wave of a finger, the coffin gently floated down beside her feet. With that done, she began to fix her now dripping dress and crawled inside the box feet first.

But halfway through the climb, she stopped after hearing an audible click of a gun being cocked, followed closely by a pirate sword that came up to her chin.

The doll's movements froze instantly. She tried to stiffly turn her head, only to be met by a cold stare from a green-flamed ghost captain.

“Humph, I caught you now, dolly~”

The doll visibly trembled in front of Duncan's eyes and wanted to shrink away to avoid his gaze. However, all that came of the nervous wreck were nothing more than the clinks and clacks of joints too scared to move.

Then her head fell off...

In front of Duncan, a beautiful head rolled next to his feet with tangled silvery hair entwining itself around the face. Oddly enough, the doll's body continued to move by grasping blindly into the air while pleading: “Help... Help... Help...”

It's no exaggeration to say that Duncan's heart had stopped beating – although he doubted his heart existed right now due to his ghostly form. Nonetheless, watching a headless doll continuing to move still unnerved him.

Finally, after mustering willpower and calming himself, Duncan used his brain to assess the situation. From what he gathered, the doll was more afraid of him than he was of her. This instantly eased the tension in his posture, now that he knew the “Great Captain Duncan” still had an effect on cursed objects.

Putting the gun away while still holding the sword, Duncan picked up the doll's head with his free hand. Sure, he knew it wasn't technically a living thing, but just holding a talking head was enough to give him the creeps. It was just too strange, no matter what he told himself.

But, he restrained his inner urge to toss the head overboard and looked it in the eye: “Do you want me to help you put it back on?”

“Yes... Yes... Yes...”

“Alright, you do it yourself.” Duncan nodded and casually tossed the head into the other party’s hand, which was still grasping haphazardly at the air.

Surprisingly, those hands were incredibly skillful and dexterous when playing catch. Once safely in her own arms, the gothic doll first sorted her silvery hair – somewhat messy from all the rolling – then snapped it back onto her neck with a clean, audible click.

The entire process was seamless and flawless, indicating that it wasn’t the first time the doll had performed this maneuver.

Immediately after that, the doll’s previously stiff face came to life, blinking her long, fluttering eyelashes before exhaling a long sigh: “Phew~ I’m alive again....”

Duncan: “....”

No matter how he thought about it, Duncan felt like he should mutter some curse word in frustration, but upon recalling his “Captain Duncan” persona, he promptly abandoned the idea—being exposed before this doll gave him nothing but bad vibes.

“Very good, now come with me. It’s time we talked about why you keep coming aboard my ship.” As he spoke, he dispersed the ghost flames enveloping his body and returned to his original appearance.

Actively transforming into his “ghostly form” had become second nature to him. Nonetheless, it was far from what one would call skillful since this was the best he could do besides steering the Vanished.

The cursed doll obediently stood up from the coffin and was immediately surprised to see Duncan regain his human form: “You... are you not a ghost?”

Duncan glanced at her sideways: “When necessary, I can be.”

The doll didn't speak, only holding her head as if the awe in her eyes would make it pop off again.

Duncan didn't know why the cursed doll would have such a reaction, but he wasn't going to challenge that misconception. Anything to help his image as the infamous ghost pirate ruling the Boundless Sea.

Turning away without looking back, he began to head for the captain's quarters, allowing his connection with the Vanished to inform him of what was happening. The gothic doll was initially hesitant to follow, but that didn't last long once the "coffin" floated up from the floorboards and moved with her.

Under the watchful gaze of the wooden goat head, the ghost captain and the cursed doll sat across from one another at the mapping table – the former relaxing in his reclining chair while the puppet fidgeted uncomfortably, with the coffin floating behind her.

There was no denying that the gothic doll was a true beauty on the surface level, but whenever Duncan looked at her figure, all he could see now was the incredible image of a surfer riding the waves with a coffin....

Sighing at his own silliness, he resumed his cold and imposing facade:
"Name?"

"Alice."

"Race?"

"Puppet Doll."

"Occupation?"

"Doll... Why ask me this?"

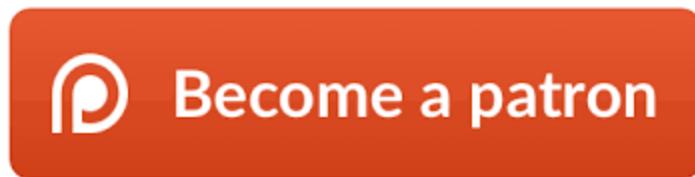
Duncan thought for a moment: "For some basic understanding."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 12

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Chapter 12 “Ghost Captain and Cursed Doll”

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As the two supernatural beings sat across from each other, separated by the large mapping table, the atmosphere between them (though neither of them might be human) was arguably harmonious.

The puppet lady who called herself “Alice” still appeared slightly nervous. Although the ghost captain in front of her had promised temporary safety, it didn’t change the fact that the cursed doll was visibly uneasy in front of Duncan’s naturally intimidating face. Moreover, her uncomfortable fidgeting and grasping of her skirt revealed her unease.

On the other hand, Duncan remained momentarily silent, only observing the “lady” in front of him.

A doll driven by an unknown force, a “supernatural individual” who was not of flesh and blood but could walk and speak like an average person. If placed in his hometown, Alice would undoubtedly be abducted by some mad scientist and dissected for knowledge.

Duncan didn’t know what kind of category a doll like Alice belonged to in this world, but through exploring it over the past few days, he had gathered enough information to make an educated guess. In this realm, there were indeed “supernatural existences” and phenomena that science couldn’t explain. As for the doll sitting in front of him...

Duncan surmised that she likely belonged to a unique category of beings considered peculiar even in this already bizarre world.

His guess wasn't without supporting evidence, such as the mechanical steamship that had collided with the Vanished. From what he had observed, the sailors were well-trained and experienced. Even in the midst of great fear, many of them had not abandoned their posts. Moreover, he hadn't overlooked the strange rune markings inside the other ship, which bore a striking resemblance to those on Alice's coffin.

In other words, the purpose of such an advanced ship was most likely to serve as an escort... or "guard" for Alice, the cursed doll.

Duncan adjusted his posture and stared intently at the uncomfortable Alice with his serious expression—there was no doubt that he had an extraordinary "guest" on his ship.

However, from another perspective, this puppet doll lady didn't seem to be a malevolent character, and she certainly lacked courage. After all, he hadn't even said a word, and she had already dropped her head in fright. If that wasn't the mark of a scaredy-cat, what was?

"Excuse me..." Perhaps the prolonged silence and gaze had become too oppressive, but Alice finally couldn't take it any longer and broke the silence, "And..."

"Where are you from?" Duncan withdrew his intimidating gaze and asked in a more relaxed tone.

Alice appeared visibly taken aback. As if pondering the meaning of Duncan's question, she took several seconds to respond by tapping her finger on the coffin: "From here."

Duncan's expression instantly froze in bewilderment: "..."

"Of course, I know you've been lying in this box before," he coughed awkwardly, "but what I'm asking is where you're coming from—the

location, understand? Do you have a hometown? Or something that can be called a place of departure?"

Alice considered the question again and shook her head calmly, "I can't remember exactly."

"Can't remember?"

"Where do you think a doll comes from?" Alice folded her arms across her chest and spoke earnestly: "Most of my memories involve me lying in that box during transport. Occasionally, I can sense the vague presence of people walking around or guarding the box... Ah, I also remember overhearing whispered conversations among the men guarding my box. From what I gathered, they all sounded fearful and nervous about the subject..."

Duncan raised an eyebrow, "Talking about something? What were they discussing around you?"

"It's just mundane, trivial stuff."

"But I am curious," Duncan said earnestly—he believed it might really be nothing more than bland, trivial things, but that's precisely the information he needed. Anything to help him gain a better understanding of this world.

"...Fine then. The most commonly heard name is Anomaly 099—they seem to use this name when referring to me and my wooden box. But I don't like it. I have a name, Alice. Besides the occasional conversation about seals and curses or something, most of their words are a blur to me. I'm always asleep in my box, so I didn't bother paying attention to what was happening outside."

The doll spoke at a leisurely pace, and then, as if suddenly remembering something, added: "But what I have heard recently is still clear in my head. It must have been before I came to your ship, and the voices of those talking outside the box frequently mentioned a place, the city-state of Pland, which seemed to be their destination... perhaps my destination too?"

“The City-State of Pland?” Duncan’s eyes narrowed in thought and mentally noted the name.

He had finally learned something useful again. However, he didn’t know when this valuable information would come in handy.

Then he lifted his head and looked at the puppet lady in front of him again: “What else?”

“Besides this, I spent most of my time sleeping, Mr. Captain,” said Miss Puppet with a serious and composed expression. “When you’re locked in a large coffin-like box, surrounded by muffled whispers, what else can you do besides sleeping? Am I supposed to do sit-ups or something?”

The corners of Duncan’s mouth twitched.

He couldn’t deny the doll exuded an air of dignity and elegance when her head was properly attached, but the things she said were more in line with her image as a surfer riding the waves – blunt and forceful.

He needed to quickly build a new mental image of Miss Alice, lest he be caught off guard by her manner of speaking again.

But on the surface, he still maintained the image of the composed and regal Captain Duncan: “So, apart from being groggy in the wooden box, you know nothing about the outside world? Not the changes in today’s times, nor where the port city is?”

“I’m afraid so, Captain,” Miss Puppet Doll nodded solemnly, and then her eyes widened slightly as if she had thought of something frightening. Then, looking nervous, she asked, “So... are you going to throw me off the ship again? Because I don’t have much value anymore?”

Before Duncan could respond, he heard Alice speak again, “Fine, I understand this is your ship after all, but can you please stop stuffing cannonballs into the box this time? Seriously... Eight iron balls are just too much...”

It was evident that the doll lady wasn't in the best of moods and was actively restraining her displeasure at the way she had been treated.

Duncan was also quite embarrassed by the last remark, mainly because he had assumed Alice to be like those cursed objects from horror movies. If he had known she could converse like a normal person, Duncan swore he would never do something as disrespectful as stuffing eight cannonballs into that box.

However, Duncan had a thick skin, and being the unabashed person that he was, he ignored the accusatory words and continued the conversation. "I haven't decided whether to toss you overboard or not yet; after all, you always seem to find a way back on board. I am curious, though, why do you insist on returning to the Vanished? I can tell you're afraid of me, and you're afraid of the ship. If so, why not stay away from the danger?"

"Is this ship called the Vanished? Alright, you caught me. I am indeed a little afraid of you and the ship. But compared to this, isn't the depths of the open sea more dangerous?" Alice calmly met the ghost captain's gaze.

From her perspective, the tall and imposing man was enveloped by an endless, murky darkness, which overlapped with the actual image of the cabin and created a seemingly distorted picture of two overlapping realities. However, compared to the horrors lurking within the "depths" of the Boundless Sea, she would much rather choose the former instead of the latter.

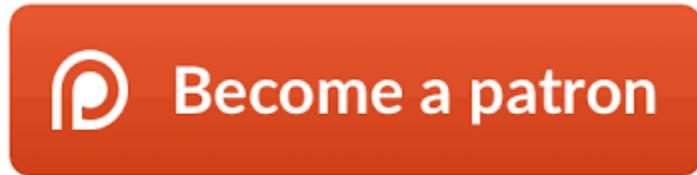
"In this world, is there anything more frightening than the deep sea?"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 13

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Chapter 13 “Bed Neck”

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The deep sea was indeed a source of fear.

Although Alice was a doll, she could express her emotions through her face in ways that were difficult to explain. So, Duncan had no doubt that he could detect the fear in her eyes and discern the truth – there must be something far more dangerous than himself lurking beneath the water.

In retrospect, this also made him more curious about what was out there. What was the land like? Or what was considered normal?

However, the doll before him didn’t have the answers. From what he suspected, her hazy memory was likely due to the seal placed on the coffin. Following that clue, the “cursed doll” must be deeply feared by civilized society.

“Again, you don’t remember where you came from, and you can’t remember what you’ve been through in the past, right?” He asked again to confirm.

“I don’t remember,” Alice replied very seriously, “I’ve been lying in this big box for as long as I can remember. Though I don’t know why there is always a group of nervous people around me, as if I would suddenly emerge. But honestly speaking, your act of nailing the box shut is quite nice in comparison. Although you did place eight cannonballs afterward, at least you didn’t pour lead into it.”

This time, Duncan ignored Alice's irrelevant remark and continued to ask, "Where did your name come from? Who gave you that name? If you really never left the box and never had contact with anyone else, why do you have a name? Could it be that you gave it to yourself?"

Alice suddenly seemed stunned.

She appeared lost, remaining in a daze for over ten seconds, which made Duncan worry there was a self-destruct mechanism inside the doll. Thankfully, Alice eventually came back to her senses: "I... I don't remember. I know my name is Alice, but I didn't come up with the name myself. I..."

She muttered in confusion and subconsciously supported her head with her hands, which alarmed Duncan. He quickly shouted before it was too late: "Alright, if you don't remember, that's fine, just don't pull your head off..."

Alice: "..."

After this, Duncan asked many more questions, but unfortunately, most of them were fruitless.

As Miss Doll herself had said, she spent most of her conscious time in that "coffin," maintaining a state of alternating sleep and partial awareness of her surroundings. In the end, her knowledge of trivial matters could hardly piece together the outline of the world.

But even so, Duncan wasn't without gain—in his conversation with Alice, he identified at least a few things:

First, there was a power structure in this world called the "city-state." A term that repeatedly appeared in the doll lady's narration and constituted almost the entirety of her journey was a place called Pland.

It seemed to be a thriving place, and sailors mentioned that it "held importance on many shipping routes" through their conversations.

Secondly, Alice also had the name “Anomaly 099,” which appeared to be an “official” title given to her by the civilized world. As for “Alice,” it seemed that no one else knew this name except for the two of them.

Lastly, Alice had been transferred from one city-state to another, and from the looks of it, she didn’t seem to be the only “abnormal” being moved in such a way. Apparently, the guards had occasionally mentioned other “seals,” which Duncan could confirm by the presence of similar runes etched on the walls of other storage rooms on that steamship.

Based on these clues, Duncan could boldly speculate that such transfers were a necessity in this world. As for why they were required, he didn’t know. But one thing was clear – the civilized world didn’t want entities like Alice to escape and wreak havoc.

He wondered what was so terrible about Alice that they had to go to such lengths. She was undoubtedly a cursed doll, but what made her so dangerous? If anything, she seemed to be a complete coward.

Frankly, Duncan was quite disappointed by not getting more information from this conversation.

He thought he had finally found a way to help him understand the world, but he didn’t expect the lady in the coffin to be as confused as he was.

However, when his gaze swept over Alice again, who was still sitting quietly on the wooden box, the disappointment subsided somewhat.

At least, he now had someone else to talk to on the Vanished—though she appeared to be a doll and would occasionally drop her head off in a horrifying manner, and she had more secrets than even she herself knew. Nevertheless, it was far better than conversing with the irritating goat head sitting on the mapping table.

And speaking of eerie dangers... which aspect of the Boundless Sea and the Vanished suggested safety?

Even from the perspective of others, his own identity as “Captain Duncan” seemed more dangerous than the average supernatural being.

Duncan exhaled and unconsciously softened his stern expression to a more approachable one: “I want to know what you will do if I throw you off the ship again.”

Alice blinked, “Are you still going to stuff cannonballs into my box again?”

“No.”

“What about the nails?”

“Uh... No.”

“Then what about lead?”

“No... I mean, if I don’t allow you to stay aboard...”

“Then I’ll row back on my own,” Alice said as she sat gracefully with a calm face, “I don’t want to be swallowed up by the sea, and at least this ship provides a place to stand.”

Duncan was so taken aback by the doll’s candor that he didn’t know whether to consider her honest or thick-skinned. After some thought, he came up with a response: “You could be a bit more vague next time...”

“You already know the answer anyway, don’t you?” Alice smiled and said, “But if I do come back, I might find a way to hide in the cabins from you instead, and I won’t foolishly run to the deck. I’ve been awake for a while now, so I’ve gained some experience...”

Duncan interrupted her: “My senses extend across the ship, right down to the waves hitting its hull. I can tell where you are at any moment.”

Alice’s words were suddenly cut short: “Uhhh...”

Duncan continued with a composed face, “And I can also choose to destroy you directly and use a more thorough method to prevent you from pestering

my Vanished and me further.”

Miss Doll here didn’t seem to have considered this possibility and started to widen her eyes until her neck made a snapping noise....

The headless doll frantically caught her head mid-drop, then with an annoyed face, Alice reattached it before Duncan continued.

“However, I suddenly find it’s not bad having an extra crew member on this ship. I can arrange a place for you here.”

“You should’ve said so earlier! I was so scared that my head popped off again!”

Duncan finally couldn’t suppress a twitch: “So what on earth is going on with your neck?”

Alice made an innocent face: “I don’t know! I usually don’t have many opportunities to ‘come out and move about.’ I didn’t know my body had such issues...”

Duncan stared at Alice for several silent seconds before confirming there was no deceit in her words: “It seems lying in a coffin for so long isn’t good for your spine and neck.”

Alice: “...”

Duncan’s mood suddenly improved upon seeing his ability to leave the doll speechless.

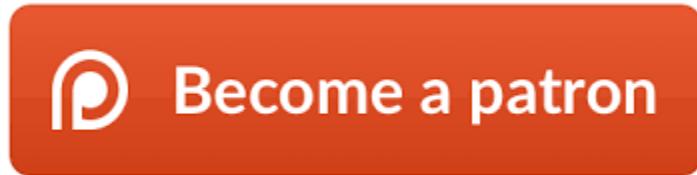
“Well, all in all, we now have a new crew member on the Vanished. Come with me, and I’ll arrange a resting quarter for you.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 14

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 14 “Harmless Crew Member”

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The Vanished was large, almost surprisingly so. As a sail-powered vessel, its size seemed to exceed what was necessary for its purpose.

However, its vast size did mean larger storage spaces, more cannons, sturdier structures, and a more stable position against wind and waves — all of which made it suitable for facing the most challenging voyages.

But at the moment, Duncan had no plans for such a voyage, and the unexpectedly large ghost ship only brought him a sense of loneliness. This feeling might have been lessened if he had an extra crewmate to talk to.

Regardless, there were plenty of unused “guest rooms” for the doll to occupy.

Footsteps echoed in the eerie corridor as Duncan led the gothic doll down the wooden staircase to the lower cabin of the aft deck, located directly below the captain’s room. Structurally, this area should be considered the “upper living quarters” of the ship, somewhat brighter and tidier than the dark, spooky lower decks.

Finally, Duncan stopped in front of a crew cabin and casually pushed open the slightly ajar wooden door.

Several single cabins like this one were on board, with simple furnishings. However, they had been unused for so long that it was difficult to find any

traces of previous occupants.

These were some of the first things Duncan discovered during his initial exploration of the Vanished's upper levels. At the time, he didn't give them much thought. But now, as the ghost ship's de facto captain and aware of its ability to sail autonomously, a question arose: Since the ship didn't need a crew at all, who were these crew cabins intended for?

The single rooms in the upper cabins were clearly meant for higher-ranking sailors, such as the first mate, second mate, and lead deckhand. Meanwhile, the lower areas contained bunk cabins for the general crew. Alongside the ship's multi-person dining quarters and recreation room, these facilities were designed for "people."

Duncan furrowed his brow, realizing that the ghost ship must have had a history before it started sailing the seas alone. At the very least, it once had a crew.

What had happened in the past to make the ship what it was today? Where had the original crew gone? Was the real "Captain Duncan" the ship's owner from the beginning? What did the peculiar goat head know?

"Captain?" A questioning voice suddenly came from behind, interrupting his thoughts.

Duncan had momentarily forgotten about Alice's presence, having grown accustomed to solitude.

"My name is Duncan. You can call me Captain Duncan—of course, you're free to address me simply as Captain." Duncan quickly straightened his expression before turning to meet the lady's gaze. "This empty room will be yours from now on. Go inside and take a look."

"Ah, okay!" Alice nodded. First, she peeked into the room over Duncan's shoulder, then turned around to grab her floating box, and finally walked inside on her own.

Seeing Alice's "coffin," which always seemed to be with the doll, Duncan couldn't resist commenting, "Do you always carry that box around with you?"

"Yeah," said Alice matter-of-factly, "where else would I put it?"

"But this box was your seal. I thought you would be more cautious around it," Duncan frowned. "Now it seems you can't do without it."

"It's the people who sealed me, so it's not the box's fault," Alice said as she sat on her coffin and patted the lid. "Are you going to come in and take a seat?"

Duncan shook his head, "No, what do you think of this room?"

"Ah, it's very nice," Alice looked pleased as she surveyed the simple furnishings as if they were exquisite decorations. "Is that a wardrobe? I don't have any clothes to change into and probably won't be able to use it... But it's nice to have a cupboard. Oh, and there's a table for me to put things on in the future, though I don't seem to have anything to put on it... Maybe I can use it for my head when I need to comb my hair. It's more convenient to reach all the angles..."

"It's good that you're satisfied." It was odd to watch a gothic doll making such mundane future plans. "You can rest for a while and get used to the environment. I'm heading back upstairs first. Also, don't go downstairs to the lower deck. You can move freely on this floor and above. If you need something, look for me in my captain's quarters. If I'm not there, talk to the goat head on the mapping table. He's my first mate."

Alice nodded as she listened, but when she heard the last two sentences, her eyes widened in surprise: "Goat head?! That pitch-black wooden carving?!"

"Looks like you've noticed it."

"I noticed... But you say it can talk?! And it's your first mate?" Alice looked astonished. "I thought it was just... incredible!"

“You’re a doll who can talk and move,” Duncan pointed out expressionlessly, “and you still think a talking goat head is incredible?”

Alice appeared taken aback by his comment. Glancing down at her own hands, she muttered as if she had just realized this fact: “Ah, now that you mention it...”

Duncan shook his head and turned away: “That’s about it. Take your time here, and if you need something, come look for me.”

“Okay, Captain.”

After leaving, Duncan went straight to his captain’s quarters and sat down in front of the mapping table.

“Ah! Captain! It seems you’ve settled the lady in nicely,” the goat head said, “As I mentioned, she’s a gentle and harmless lady who won’t cause any harm to your journey and can provide some conversation to relieve boredom. I see you’ve decided to keep her aboard. Are you planning to give her a task? The Vanished doesn’t require many crew members. The deck cleans itself, and the cannons are maintained automatically. The water tank also takes care of itself... Perhaps she can manage the kitchen? You haven’t been too happy with the food on board... Ah, speaking of food, it appears we need to restock some ingredients. The jerky and hard cheese in the warehouse might be a bit old. Although a rugged seafarer wouldn’t be picky about food at sea, the esteemed Captain Duncan must...”

Duncan felt his patience wearing thin, and he was once again convinced of one thing: with this chatty goat head around, he genuinely needed a “normal conversation partner” like Alice!

“Quiet,” he glared at the goat head, and only after it had closed its mouth did he continue, “you were quite restrained when Alice was present. I was starting to think you’d learned to stay silent.”

“One mustn’t interrupt when the captain is meeting with a new crew member. It’s a maritime rule. Even if I am your loyal first mate, second mate, and lead deckhand...”

Duncan cut off the goat head before it could finish (in fact, if he didn't interrupt, the goat head would never stop talking): "Keep an eye on the doll in the next few days."

"Ah... Yes? You want me to watch the lady? Are you still uneasy about her? I understand. Being cautious is a necessary trait for a good captain..."

"She has many secrets yet to be uncovered. It could be that she doesn't know them herself, or perhaps... she's deliberately hiding them from me. Regardless, she's a cursed doll with the code name 'Anomaly 099'; that much is certain." Duncan said calmly, "The people from the other ship went to great lengths to prevent Alice from roaming freely. Now that she's part of the crew, I need some time to confirm her harmlessness, even if it's only in regards to the Vanished."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 15

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Chapter 15 “Contacting the Flame”

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Since taking the helm, Duncan had gained real control of the Vanished and could sense any movement on the ship. However, out of caution, he instructed the goat head to monitor the “cursed doll” at all times.

Duncan was aware that he wasn’t an expert in the field of occultism, and a walking, talking doll was beyond his understanding. While Alice’s actions appeared harmless thus far, he wondered if she might have some sort of invisible “effect” on her surroundings – something he wouldn’t be able to detect. The goat head was likely more adept in this regard.

Furthermore, Duncan realized he couldn’t keep an eye on everything all the time. Although he had chosen to survive on this “side,” there might come a time when he would need to return to the world “opposite” the door.

With this in mind, Duncan’s eyes narrowed as he glanced at the edge of the mapping table where the goat head sat. Its obsidian-carved eyes revealed nothing when they met his gaze.

Did the goat head know when he returned “through the door” to his single unit apartment? What happened on the Vanished when he wasn’t around?

This sudden question slightly irritated Duncan, but he didn’t let it show under the empty gaze of the goat head. Instead, he focused his mind on Alice’s room to sense her actions.

He didn't possess a voyeuristic interest, nor could he actually see what she was doing. Rather, he could receive a vague impression of her movements and whether she was causing any harm to the Vanished.

Ultimately, beneath her elegant and beautiful appearance, Alice was a cursed doll – a dangerous entity referred to as “Anomaly 099” by the ordinary people of this world.

Sensing that Alice was still in her room, likely studying the furnishings and finding a place to rest, Duncan felt relieved. His relief was short-lived, though, as the goat head spoke up again: “Captain, what are your next plans? If you’re bored, your loyal...”

“Quiet,” Duncan glared at the goat head before placing his hands on the edge of the table. He concentrated on the image of himself holding the steering wheel above, allowing the ghostly green flame to materialize.

With his body transformed into a spirit form by the blaze, the surging fire spread across the table, engulfing the entire room and extending to the upper deck. Eventually, it covered the masts and formed a sail-like blanket.

As numerous sails of varying sizes adjusted their angles to catch the sea breeze, the massive three-masted sailing ship gradually accelerated across the vast open sea.

Satisfied with his accomplishment, Duncan turned his attention to the map chart in front of him, which was still shrouded in a grayish-white fog. However, the silhouette representing the Vanished was clearly moving, pushing the haze away.

After some contemplation, he focused his attention on the mapping chart. Using the green flame as an extension of himself, he quickly formed a “connection” with the map and discovered something – this chart was an extraordinary item with more features than he had initially realized.

As an experiment, Duncan willed the image on the parchment to zoom in and out around the Vanished. He realized it functioned more like a visual

radar screen than a simple map, though it only displayed areas previously explored by the Vanished, leaving the rest obscured by a murky white fog.

Maintaining an indifferent exterior despite his excitement, Duncan extended the green flame as far as he could, nearly merging his consciousness with the ship and sensing every part of the hull and deck.

Could this be the power of the “captain”?

Duncan considered what else he could achieve with this ability.

First and foremost, I must master this green flame to survive out here.

As for the “next arrangement” the goat head mentioned...

Glancing at the chart, Duncan realized his next step.

Since I don’t know much about this world, I must expand the map by exploring.

He didn’t fear being robbed, as “Captain Duncan” seemed to be a notorious figure in this world. If anything, ships would likely avoid him rather than seek confrontation.

Withdrawing the flames back into his body, Duncan rose from the mapping table, no longer in his ghostly form. However, the translucent ghostly green sails of flame remained, suggesting he could selectively control which parts transformed into spirit form. He also discovered that the power source for the green flames was not himself, but the Vanished, further confirming their separate existence.

Duncan moved away from the mapping table and focused on the door leading to his personal apartment in the other world. To study his newfound powers, he needed a quieter environment. However, he first had to ensure someone would oversee the ship’s voyage while it mapped the region.

He looked at the goat head: “You take the helm.”

“Huh?” the wooden figurine appeared stunned for a moment, “But Captain, you...”

“I have something to do. Don’t bother me during this time.” Duncan dismissed the goat head’s concerns and issued his command.

He realized that the entire Vanished was connected to the captain’s quarters like veins to a heart – including the goat head. This meant the goat head could also sense the ship’s activities like Duncan. In fact, Duncan suspected the wooden figure might function as a “control system” for the ghost ship, similar to an AI autopilot on a modern vessel in case of emergencies.

Not being the ship’s builder, Duncan couldn’t fully understand how it worked, but this was his best guess. Additionally, the goat head often claimed to be the first/second mate and lead deckhand. If it couldn’t provide assistance in this capacity, Duncan would consider it useless, perhaps replacing it with Alice.

A minute later, the goat head finally replied in an irritatingly cheerful voice: “Uhh, alright Captain. You can rest assured that your loyal...”

Duncan ignored the response and waved him off. Heading for the door to his apartment, he stepped through the murky fog, closed the door behind him, and concluded his exploration for the day.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 16

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Chapter 16 “Traveling Through the Spirit World”

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The door shut behind him, obscuring the empty stare of the goat head from his view. Nonetheless, Duncan could still feel the presence of the Vanished at the back of his mind – akin to the shifting rudders, the adjusting sails, and the steady motion of the ship on the water.

As anticipated, the goat head had temporarily assumed control and started to fulfill his duties as the first mate.

However, the agility and speed of the Vanished could not rival that of Duncan when he was at the helm. Despite this, his main objective was to continue clearing the fog from the navigation chart. It might be slower, but that didn't matter.

After ensuring that nothing dreadful was occurring with the goat head and goth doll, Duncan finally allowed himself a sigh of relief and surveyed the familiar captain's quarters.

This private sanctuary on the ship was the most luxurious of all the rooms. It featured a soft, comfortable bed, a large classic wardrobe, and a shelf on the wall opposite the door. Unfortunately, the shelves held no books, only a few pens and writing tools on the main desk near the window – the same area where Duncan had previously found the gun and pirate saber.

Approaching the writing desk, he set the weapons down and opened the drawer containing a box of gunpowder and pellets.

Also stored here was a small brass compass he kept among other items. As usual, the needle beneath the glass spun erratically, as though influenced by some chaotic force field when he picked it up. In addition, there was a phrase inscribed on the bottom metal casing: "We are all lost souls."

Seated while fiddling with the compass, Duncan started to assess the new information he had collected that day. This quiet contemplation persisted until he casually ignited a wick of green flame on his fingertip. Gradually, as intended, the hand nearest to the glow became ghostly, verifying his hypothesis that he could alter only parts of himself at will.

Then another thought struck him. If he could extend the flame across the Vanished, could he do the same for other objects not directly connected to the vessel? Picking up an old ink pen from the table with his free hand, he carefully dipped the metal tip into the greenish flame. Contrary to expectations, the pen did not catch fire. Instead, a faint shade of green spread over its surface, giving the Victorian-era pen an eerie luminescence.

Unlike when he had manifested flames across the sails and rudder, Duncan received no feedback from this experiment.

Silently noting this observation in his mind, Duncan concluded that the green flame didn't burn like conventional fire and had no temperature or impact on ordinary objects. But this led to another question: what would happen if he tried burning items from outside the Vanished? Would the flames react?

Duncan considered this for a moment, then thought of the goth puppet doll. Technically, she was not part of the Vanished.

Would she be affected by this ghostly fire?

However, he quickly dismissed the idea of burning the doll. Regardless of whether Alice was a cursed doll or a human, she was an autonomous being with consciousness and will. Such an inhumane act was against Duncan's moral principles.

Duncan then tested this discovery on various items in the room to determine if they had supernatural properties, until he remembered he still had the brass compass.

The item lay silently on the table, its needle beneath the glass shell spinning wildly as usual. Yet, Duncan could have sworn the pointer froze for a split second when he directed a “malicious” gaze at it.

Duncan: “.....”

Did this thing just react to my gaze?

Initially, he had been somewhat fearful of the compass; it bore the handwriting of the “real Captain Duncan,” and he was concerned that the deceased ghost captain might have left some power or “trap” to deter thieves. But now, having seen a reaction to his gaze, he decided to proceed despite the potential risks.

Reaching out to grasp the cold metal casing, Duncan placed his finger with the green flame’s candlewick on it. Instantly, the compass ignited with ghostly fire, countless phantoms flickering within the glow. Then, it stopped. The previously erratic needle now pointed to a specific direction on the vast open sea.

Duncan’s heart raced with excitement. At that moment, he could clearly sense the “feedback” from the compass, confirming it as an “abnormal item” that his ghostly fire could control. But before he could explore this connection further, a sudden and intense “force” swept over him!

He felt his body shake momentarily before everything became a blur. The room’s furniture vanished, and the surrounding walls and ceiling disintegrated like snowflakes on a brief winter day. All that remained was endless darkness.

Astonished, Duncan stood in the center of the void, his heart pounding. His first instinct was to reach for the musket gun and sword by his side, but they were gone. Instead, he found himself clutching the brass compass.

Blinking in confusion, countless wisps of thin light threads suddenly surrounded the compass, intertwining with the darkness. Before he knew it, dots of starry lights appeared, scattered haphazardly across the landscape like a celestial Milky Way.

The scene was truly breathtaking, akin to the birth of a galaxy.

At that moment, a myriad of emotions welled up within Duncan: wariness, unease, but no sense of imminent danger. In fact, he found peace here, a long-lost sensation since being trapped in his strange predicament.

Suddenly, his gaze was drawn to a cluster of stars that seemed unstable, on the verge of vanishing into the darkness.

Duncan didn't know why, but he felt compelled to reach out and grasp that star.

Then, an immense force pulled him, hurling his entire figure toward the stars at breakneck speed. The web of light surrounding the compass was left behind, and the star river blurred from his view.

During the rapid flight, he instinctively wanted to tighten his grip on the compass – the source of all this – only to realize it was gone. But just before colliding with the fading star and seemingly no escape, a faint glimmer at the edge of his vision caught Duncan's attention.

It was a shadow that materialized nearby. It appeared so natural that it never occurred to him it could be anything else, but as the shape became clearer, it resembled a bird in flight with its wings outstretched. Before he could discern any further details, his vision went dark...

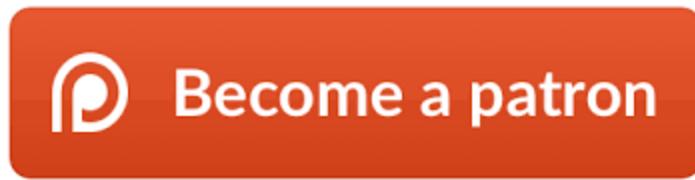
When Duncan finally regained some semblance of consciousness, he found himself back in reality, lying on the floor, feeling chilled and weighed down from the mysterious, supernatural experience he had just endured.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 17

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Chapter 17 “Cave”

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Cold, damp, and the repugnant odor of decay intermingled with the sound of chains scraping against the ground, a multitude of bizarre sensations flooded Duncan’s mind, yet he was unable to open his eyes. He felt as if his soul had been split into two parts, one remaining on the Vanished, and the other trapped in an entirely unfamiliar vessel, as difficult to control as a worn and broken tape recorder. The chaotic sensations rampaged through his nerves, leaving his limbs numb and dulled.

This unsettling feeling persisted for several minutes before finally fading, allowing Duncan to awaken from his extended stupor and regain some mobility.

As he opened his eyes, Duncan surveyed his surroundings.

He found himself in a crypt-like space, with torches burning and embedded into the distant stone walls. The flickering light from the flames illuminated the horrific scene around him. Duncan saw numerous bodies – or rather, mutilated corpses – heaped together atop mud and rocks. Most were in a state of decay, which explained the pervasive stench of rot.

Aside from what he saw, his ears detected faint sounds: droplets of water falling from the cave’s ceiling and the distant noise of sewage water flowing like a river somewhere within these tunnels. Based on these clues, this cave must be connected to some sort of sewer system.

Duncan blinked in confusion, trying to make sense of his situation. Disregarding the strange environment, he needed to verify if this was even his own body. Glancing down at his right hand, he saw five unfamiliar, emaciated fingers. As for the compass he had been holding earlier, it had vanished entirely.

As he looked around to recall the events that led him here, memories of the starry sky and strands of light washed over him like a tidal wave. From what he remembered, the shadow at the end resembled a bird, but there was nothing like that next to him now.

It seems that bird didn't come into reality like I did.

Duncan clenched his fingers into a fist, trying to suppress his unease. Once done, he manipulated his new hand until a faint green flame emerged from his fingertip.

It's worth noting that this ghostly fire was much weaker than what Duncan was accustomed to. Nonetheless, it alleviated his fear of losing this newfound power, which he had barely learned to control. Moreover, his connection with the flame felt odd; he was acutely aware that another part of his soul remained on the Vanished, sitting at the desk with the brass compass still in hand.

Experiencing the sensation of having divided bodies was peculiar, but Duncan had a vague understanding of what was happening: a portion of his spirit had been projected or extended to another mind across an unknown distance and embedded itself in this foreign body.

This must be related to that brass compass! Is this the power of that “item”?

Duncan had his suspicions, but he didn't let the matter consume him. After confirming that his main body on the Vanished was safe, he began to assess the situation with this secondary body.

Firstly, he was no longer at sea, but on land – the very land he had been desperately searching for over the past week.

Secondly, this ominous cave didn't appear to be a safe place, and the scattered bodies didn't resemble a typical burial scene.

The vessel I now inhabit... What misfortune did it encounter to end up in such a hellish place?

Drawing a deep breath to muster the strength to sit up, Duncan suddenly noticed something odd about this body's functions. Glancing down at the source of this anomaly, his eyes widened at the sight of a massive, gaping hole in the chest where the heart should be!

“..... What the hell?!”

Even though he was usually nonchalant about many things, Duncan found himself breaking out in a cold sweat at this discovery. Goosebumps rose on his skin until he realized something even more terrifying: how was he still standing and able to curse?

“Is this... a corpse?”

After a few moments, Duncan gained a better understanding of the situation and calmed down.

He had no reason to panic. That reaction was merely reflexive. After all, he was a ghost captain on a cursed ship with an eerie goat-headed gargoyle figure. If that didn't scare him, then this shouldn't either. It wasn't the first time he'd seen someone lose an important body part – like Alice, who frequently misplaced her head.

With these tumultuous thoughts racing through his mind, Duncan managed to regain his composure surprisingly quickly. Flexing his arms and legs to acclimate to the new body, he started moving towards the corpses scattered around the cave.

“I knew it...” Duncan observed that these corpses also had hollow chests, their hearts missing.

Take the nearest body, for example. It was a middle-aged man with a gaunt face, likely a beggar who had been dead for some time based on his sunken eye sockets and decaying flesh. Nonetheless, the despair and struggle evident in his facial expression indicated how horrifying the experience must have been for the victim.

As he continued forward, Duncan noticed two other bodies that stood out. Unlike the others, who primarily had their hearts removed, these victims had been brutally bludgeoned on the head with a stone.

This observation sparked an idea in Duncan's mind – perhaps these two had chosen to end their own lives to avoid the agony of having their hearts extracted.

Admittedly, the sights in this cave were a bit too intense for ordinary people, and even Duncan felt slightly overwhelmed by what he witnessed.

After inspecting all the corpses, he located a relatively clean stone in a remote area to sit down, giving himself time to gather his thoughts and compose himself.

Clearly, this place was the scene of a grisly murder, but given the cold, methodical manner of the killings, it was likely the work of not just one murderer, but an evil ritual orchestrated by a cult.

Duncan summoned the ghost flame again, sensing the connection between himself and his “main body” back on the ship. He didn’t know how, but he was aware that this projected state could be severed at any time by his own will. However, that wasn’t his intention. Even if it was just to gather information about this land, it was worth it.

After a brief rest and an awkward moment when he noticed air escaping from the hole in his heart, Duncan quickly pulled himself up to investigate the darker recesses of the cave. He had yet to locate the source of the chain-rattling sound he’d heard earlier, which suggested there might still be living people around, or at the very least, prisoners...

Of course, recklessly rushing in to assess the situation wasn't safe, but Duncan didn't care – he had a gaping hole in his heart already, after all.

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Chapter 18 “Underground Sewage System”

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Before leaving his temporary refuge in the cave, Duncan gathered some rags from nearby corpses and fashioned them into makeshift clothing.

This wasn’t due to an inability to handle the cold, but rather to conceal the gaping hole in his chest. Although the mortal wound didn’t hinder Duncan’s ability to “live,” it was disconcerting to walk around partially exposed. At the very least, he sought psychological comfort from not hearing the wind whistle through his heart…

Moreover, it made sense to interact with living humans without a massive hole in his chest, lest they mistake him for an undead creature and try to decapitate him. After all, that’s how most zombie movies played out, right?

Having addressed the “wound” with a temporary solution, Duncan cautiously left the dark, damp cave and entered a passageway connected to a sewage system.

The tunnel was deep, damp, and dimly lit, but hidden ventilation holes suggested that workers occasionally ventured into the space. This made the stench slightly more tolerable.

Soon, he encountered his first point of interest – oil lamps and torches hung at regular intervals on both sides of the brick wall. Most notably, they had been used recently, indicating that this wasn't a long-abandoned underground facility.

After following the designated path for a considerable distance, Duncan arrived at a fork in the road that led to a lower level. Pipes continuously discharged waste into the main waterway, implying that this spot was the convergence point for the sewer and residential homes.

“.....”

He paused for a moment, questioning why anyone would subject themselves to such surroundings. The brick walls and sewage water were not only repulsive to the senses but also likely harmful to one's health. Yet, there was a positive aspect. The construction of such an extensive sewage system indicated a large, technologically advanced settlement.

This realization gave Duncan the resolve to withstand the sensory assault. He sought information about this world, and now he was gaining valuable insights.

Duncan continued with renewed enthusiasm but soon stopped when he noticed something built into the wall.

It was a glass lamp, more specifically, a gas lamp. Unlike the previous oil lamps, this one was encased in a sturdy metal frame and embedded in the walls. The light it emitted was also considerably brighter than its predecessors.

Duncan leaned in to examine the object, concluding that the energy source was indeed gas flowing from an opening within. However, it differed from the gas lamps he knew from his world. The design was unique, and the glass bore several slender rune symbols, reminiscent of those on Alice's coffin. He deduced that these runes were not added later but formed during the manufacturing process.

Though the runes varied, their aura was akin – both sacred and ritualistic.

Duncan stepped back, surveying the sewer tunnel ahead. From this point forward, the lighting consisted solely of gas lamps positioned at regular intervals, instead of oil lamps and torches. To him, this seemed excessive. For a seldom-visited underground facility, save for essential maintenance, why would workers install so much equipment in the area? It hardly seemed cost-effective to maintain or acquire.

This observation led Duncan to believe that they were trying to fend off something concealed in the shadows or entities inimical to human civilization.

With this thought, he advanced cautiously, continuing his exploration until he stumbled upon another peculiar sight.

A deep, dark red painting was nestled between two lamps, rendering this section of the tunnel dimmer than the rest. Despite the low light, Duncan could make out the image – a pair of hands raised in worship of a spherical orb above.

“The false sun will eventually fall, and the true sun god will rise from blood and fire! The life of all belongs to the sun, and the sun governs all!” Duncan quietly read the inscription below the unsettling painting, staying motionless until a sound once again caught his attention – footsteps.

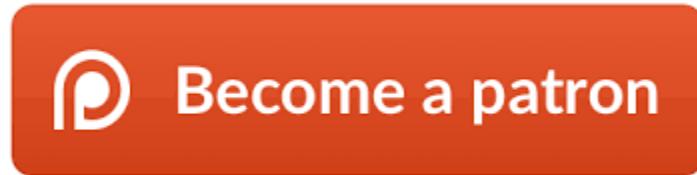
In no time, he found himself face to face with several figures in burqas approaching from ahead. Their faces were concealed by hoods, so Duncan couldn’t see their features. Nonetheless, he had no intention of evading these enigmatic individuals in the narrow tunnel.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 19

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Chapter 19 “Underground Gathering Hall”

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At that moment, Duncan appeared as he did when he first left the cave – thin, scrawny, and clad only in rags. However, the fact that he didn’t flee and stood there grinning seemed to shock the hooded figures.

“A sacrifice has escaped!” One of them yelled after a brief pause.

“Quick! Stop him! Don’t let him run!” Another shouted, starting to run towards Duncan, who they assumed would bolt.

“Don’t let him run! A sacrifice has escaped!” They kept repeating this, despite Duncan not moving at all.

As a result, Duncan’s nonchalant stance in the middle of the tunnel created an odd and awkward atmosphere that contrasted with the situation. This didn’t go unnoticed by the hooded people, who realized how strange it was midway through their approach. Regardless, they didn’t stop and quickly surrounded him.

“Should I have run? The mood is already like this...” Duncan scratched his nose, as if he should have played along to match their zeal.

Disregarding the cold joke that could chill a ghost, two of the black hoods cautiously eyed the supposed escapee and whispered to each other.

“Why did one manage to escape?”

“Could it be that the Church’s hounds discovered this hiding spot... But he doesn’t look like he was released...”

“Regardless, let’s take him back first. This sacrifice doesn’t look right... We need to dispose of him quickly.”

“Let the emissary decide.”

Duncan was utterly perplexed by this group’s background, let alone what the “emissary” they mentioned meant. However, considering what he had seen on his journey and the word “sacrifice,” he could roughly surmise the truth.

Unsure of the appropriate reaction to be seen as a “normal sacrifice” and unwilling to cooperate with their “performance,” Duncan wasn’t too worried given his temporary body.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked after observing for a while.

The hooded figures were clearly startled by the composed question from the “sacrifice.” Although their faces were hidden behind black masks, Duncan could sense their surprise.

“You’re not qualified to ask us questions. Take him away!” One of the hooded men barked harshly.

A few black-robed figures stepped forward, intending to restrain Duncan. However, he preempted them by taking the initiative: “No need, I’ll follow you.”

The hooded individuals exchanged glances, likely finding the “sacrifice” before them to be excessively calm and composed for what’s in store for him. Nonetheless, the lead figure gestured for silence, saying, “That’s for the best. You can’t escape anyway... Come with us, and you might even be granted glory and dignity.”

Several of the group encircled Duncan to prevent any escape attempt, leading him deeper into the sewer system’s winding channels.

The pungent odor of wastewater intensified as they ventured deeper, yet the hooded figures seemed unfazed by the filthy, mold-covered walls. Had Duncan not already been a lifeless shell, he might have recoiled in horror when he stepped on something slimy and viscous.

“Is this the City-State of Pland?” Duncan casually inquired, as if he belonged with the group.

“That’s obvious...” One of the cloaked figures replied absentmindedly, but then did a double take and stared at Duncan as if he had seen a ghost.
“You’re remarkably composed, boy. Do you know what’s going to happen next?”

“I can hazard a guess.” Duncan replied with a wide grin, “The true sun god... right?”

Several of the cloaked individuals stopped in their tracks, seemingly astonished by how nonchalantly the intended sacrifice had mentioned their deity.

“Wait, does he also worship the Lord?”

“No way. He’s clearly an escaped sacrifice...” Another hooded figure whispered before glancing at Duncan. “You’re quite cunning, but don’t think that will save you from your fate as a sacrifice... The Lord has determined your destiny, and you’d better accept it.”

Duncan chose not to argue. He knew their reaction was due to his unanticipated calm demeanor. Perhaps they suspected he was feigning it to avoid being sacrificed. Regardless, Duncan was unconcerned with their opinions since he couldn’t move his facial muscles anyway. Necrosis had claimed this shell, so his apparent indifference was to be expected!

“So, you believe the current ‘sun’ in the sky is a false sun? That it will eventually plummet to the ground?” Duncan started gathering intelligence.

“Of course the false sun will fall!” This topic clearly agitated the cultists, who fervently responded. “Even the Church’s minions must concede in

their historical records that the sun in the sky is a warped and hideous object that emerged after the Great Calamity. What truly sustains life and order in this world is the Sun God, but that wretched... wretched counterfeit has supplanted our Lord! Sooner or later, that vile object will plummet from the heavens!"

In unison, the surrounding cultists echoed their leader, "Sooner or later, the false sun will fall, and the true Sun God will be resurrected through blood and fire! The surplus seawater will be banished into the void by our Lord's might, and the earth will return to an era of bountiful fertility and stability!"

As Duncan listened to the cultists' chanting, his mind raced. He knew that fanatical cultists like these couldn't be reasoned with and that the information he obtained was likely distorted and filled with falsehoods. Nevertheless, he could glean certain truths from their claims.

The "sun" appearing in the sky is a counterfeit, and the real sun has been replaced.

They firmly believe that the true sun symbolizes a fallen deity that will eventually "rise again through blood and fire."

They also spoke of the excess seawater in the world receding, heralding an age of prosperity and stability. What exactly do they mean by this?

The cult members quickly regained their composure after reciting their religious mantra. After all, they still had a sacrifice to escort.

"Have you noticed how eerie this 'sacrifice' is?" one of the cultists asked the leader.

"Something feels off about him... I'm uncertain."

"Could it be that this sacrifice spent too much time in the lightless underground when he previously escaped, and now his mind is controlled by something else?"

"If that's the case, our Lord's power will purify him."

Duncan caught their whispered conversation, particularly the mention of the “lightless underground.” However, just as he wanted to extract more information from them, the black-robed man at the front of the group stopped.

“We’ve arrived,” said the black-robed cultist in a low, chilling voice.

Duncan wished he had pursued the topic more quickly, but the sight before him was even more captivating.

They had reached the heart of the sewer system, a junction leading to a vast underground chamber, where numerous black-robed cultists had gathered.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 20

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 20 “Offering”

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The enormity of the sewer system had far surpassed its singular purpose of managing “urban sewage,” at least in Duncan’s eyes. For instance, the omnipresent gas lamps with runes and the reinforced structure that provided shelter for the cultists made him question the true intention behind the underground facility.

Regardless of the original design goals, one fact was clear: this vast, hidden complex had become a breeding ground for evil, concealed from the world above.

Although the cult professed to worship the sun, their actions only inspired dread and unease.

In the subterranean central hall, at least hundreds of black-robed individuals gathered, with a tall, stoic figure on a raised platform addressing the congregation. This leader was distinguishable by his golden mask, which emitted an infernal, fiery glow, rather than the hoods worn by the others. Behind him stood a noteworthy object: a tall, metallic totem crowned with a burning fireball.

“We’ve captured an escaped sacrifice!” announced one of the black-robed members responsible for bringing Duncan in, seeking the leader’s praise. “The darkness has addled his mind, but may our Lord’s greatness grant him salvation!”

The golden-masked leader scrutinized Duncan, his expression inscrutable, before speaking with a hint of surprise: “The sacrifice escaped?”

Unfazed by the attention, Duncan observed his captors and the peculiar totem in the background. These symbols might have seemed strange to ordinary people, but he quickly recognized them as imitations of the sun – not the odd “ball of light” currently in the sky, but the true sun he remembered from his world.

The cult leader didn’t find it strange that the sacrifice wasn’t panicking or screaming, as those who became lost in darkness often seemed to lose their minds, like souls drained of intelligence.

“Inspect the area where the sacrifices are held,” the priest instructed one of the nearby believers.

He then acknowledged the “escort” with a nod and commended him: “You have performed a great service for our Lord. May eternal glory shine upon you when the world is illuminated by His light!”

This seemingly innocuous praise was enough to encourage the rest of the black-robed assembly to chant gloriously to their sun deity. As they did so, some of them pushed Duncan onto the stage where the masked priest stood.

“Lost soul, can you sense the frigid, inky darkness lurking within this world’s cracks?”

Duncan couldn’t comprehend the fanatic priest’s words, so he simply remained silent and observed, which seems to work as the priest didn’t react aggressively and continued speaking with passion:

“Cold and darkness are the afflictions the false sun has brought upon this world. Under its reign, dark oceans ravaged all, leaving only scattered remnants of land for the living to inhabit and struggle. Yet, the world is unforgiving, concealing shadows of the old era within the underground darkness, poised to strike when the opportunity arises. If this continues, all of humanity will be tainted by evil...”

“How can we withstand this perpetual torment? How can we endure the twisted, absurd world created by the false sun?”

“We cannot! We yearn for our Lord’s return. May the true sun god descend upon our world once more. May he cleanse the darkness with blood and fire, restoring order and prosperity to our land!”

Roused by the masked priest’s fervent words, the atmosphere in the hall shifted. The congregation chanted in unison, their voices filled with zeal: “May the real sun god return to earth! Rising from blood and fire, he shall purge the darkness with his light!”

“May the true sun god descend to earth once more,” the priest repeated on stage, reaching out to Duncan. “Today, our Lord will awaken further from his slumber. The blood of this lost soul will soothe his wounds and bring us one step closer to the false sun’s downfall!”

“Present the offerings!”

Several black-robed individuals hurried to escort Duncan to the stage, but he took it upon himself to climb up. Despite the limitations of his current body, he managed to use its limbs to scale the platform quickly.

Once there, he locked eyes with the masked priest, who maintained an air of mystique. However, the unusual behavior of the sacrifice took the priest aback, leaving the hall eerily silent.

Duncan seemed oblivious to the change in atmosphere, having just gathered valuable information about this world and anticipating witnessing more rare events before his body was “disposed of.”

“So?” Duncan asked with curiosity, rubbing his hands together. “What now?”

Masked Priest: “...”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Duncan frowned awkwardly due to the tense muscles on his face. “I said, what’s next?”

At that moment, the priest finally snapped back to reality. Though separated by a mask, there was a brief flash of confusion in his eyes. He spoke softly, “The darkness has indeed clouded your mind, but fear not, the supreme and holy sun will end your suffering... Bring the sacrifice to the totem!”

Two black-robed figures promptly approached and grabbed Duncan by the arms, leading him to the totem topped with the burning fireball.

Though Duncan didn’t resist, his captors gripped him firmly, applying so much pressure that he felt his shoulder bones begin to dislocate. However, his focus shifted back to the priest as he approached.

The masked priest brandished a peculiar dagger, resembling a twisted, dead branch. It shimmered with a black light, akin to the obsidian material used for the goat head’s eyes on the Vanished.

As the chanting resumed, Duncan knew it was almost time to sever the “soul projected” state he was in.

“O exalted and divine Sun God! Kindly accept the offering upon this altar! We present to you the heart of this tribute, and may you grace our world through blood and fire!”

Duncan instantly halted and gazed at the priest, his eyes reflecting the disbelief of witnessing a fool.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 21

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Chapter 21 “Announcement, The Ritual Went Smoothly”

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Now Duncan finally grasped the origins of the tragic murder scene in the cave and the motives behind the cultists' heinous actions.

As the masked priest neared him with the foreboding dagger, a dark flame suddenly ignited, engulfing the menacing metal.

This remarkable incident aroused Duncan's curiosity. He deduced that the dagger might possess supernatural properties, and the priest could be an extraordinary person, wielding exceptional powers similar to his own. This posed a new question – what part do such individuals have in a civilized society?

When the blade penetrated his chest, Duncan neither winced nor screamed, only noticing the muffled sound of ripped cloth. Fortunately, he experienced no internal burning...

Yet, peace did not prevail at that moment. Behind him, close to the totem, the fiery orb began to produce an unsettling crackling noise, resembling a firework soaked in oil. Duncan then detected a chilling, madness-infused “presence” radiating from the totem – an undeniable supernatural event.

The abrupt change in the “symbolic sun” instantly captured the attention of the nearby worshipers, who murmured among themselves until the disturbance subsided. This unforeseen development was clearly not part of the ritual, as proven by the two hooded figures holding Duncan, who let

him go and fell to their knees in fear. The masked priest, on the other hand, gazed at the intended victim with bewilderment in his eyes.

Aware that his disguise was compromised, Duncan forced a weak smile and touched the dagger lodged in his chest. Within seconds, a wisp of ghostly green flame emerged and surrounded the blade.

Duncan promptly obtained the “feedback” he desired from the knife, but it was faint and insubstantial, as though the power within the blade had been derived from a more potent source.

This insight was sufficient for Duncan.

Grinning, he nonchalantly declared, “I have two things to say.”

Suddenly, the priest sensed the bond between himself and the obsidian knife severed by an external force.

“First, I have a big heart—as you can see.”

With his clothes already torn and further damaged by the dagger, Duncan revealed the enormous hollow cavity in his chest, effectively shocking the supervising priest with this disclosure.

“Second, refrain from presenting spoiled food to your Lord.”

Effortlessly shoving the priest backward with his sturdy exterior, Duncan observed that the dagger’s original owner seemed weaker after he had encased the ghostly green flame around it.

Recovering from his astonishment, the priest’s initial panic swiftly transformed into fury, making his body quiver. Waving a condemning finger at the intended sacrifice, the masked priest roared, “This filth has risen from the dead! He’s undead! How dare an abhorrent creature like you desecrate a sacred ritual like this! Wretched filth, which audacious necromancer is responsible for this deceitful act?”

“I’m uncertain of your meaning,” Duncan remarked casually, glancing at the obsidian knife. Receiving another faint sensation from the blade, he was

suddenly struck with a fanciful idea, “However, I’ve just conceived an ingenious plan to quench my curiosity.”

With that, Duncan swiftly raised the obsidian knife and directed it at the masked priest. He spoke loudly, ensuring all the hooded figures could hear:

“O sun god, most exalted and sacred! Receive this sacrifice before you! I offer you this heart, and may you rise from blood and fire!”

In the following moment, the flames on the obsidian knife intensified, and the same eerie, disconcerting presence emanated from the totem. This time, however, the target was the masked priest, who, sensing the imminent danger, attempted to flee the platform.

Nevertheless, the glowing knife, wrapped in red and green flames, flew from Duncan’s hand and struck the priest’s heart directly. As the cult leader screamed in pain with the blade in his chest, the heart was instantaneously reduced to ashes.

The blade returned to Duncan’s hand effortlessly, having expended its remaining energy.

The ritual demanded two individuals on the altar, one of whom must provide their heart as a sacrifice. Since Duncan’s hollow body lacked a heart, the only alternative was the priest, who did have one. Duncan had not expected such a flawless result.

Looking at the totem behind him, Duncan narrowed his eyes and muttered, “It appears it doesn’t matter who holds the dagger, as long as the words are precise... You’ll accept the offering either way, right?”

Of course, the fireball on the totem remained silent, but the cultists surrounding the altar burst into chaos. Amid the screams, their outrage at the unfolding events surpassed the fear incited by their leader’s downfall.

Several cultists closest to the altar were the first to respond, invoking the sun god’s name and rushing at Duncan with weapons prepared.

This development disrupted Duncan's strategy. He had planned to recite another incantation, dedicating the hearts of everyone on the altar to the sun god. However, upon seeing some cultists brandishing revolvers to shoot him, he abandoned the idea. With a defiant motion, Duncan detached from the projected state without hesitation.

Let these fanatics persist in their madness. He's returning home to the Vanished.

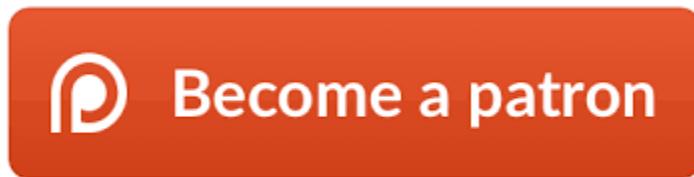
Meanwhile, on the vast ocean, rhythmic footsteps echoed across the deck of the Vanished. It was Alice, the puppet doll in her long gothic dress, approaching the captain's quarters. She wanted to ask Duncan some questions and recalled the captain mentioning he was in the room.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 22

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Chapter 22 “Crew Member’s Article”

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Pausing before the captain’s quarters, Alice studied the dark oak door in front of her and noticed the words scrawled on the frame: Door of the Lost.

It wasn’t surprising to find such a phrase written on a ship like the Vanished, but Alice couldn’t help but frown unconsciously. Not due to the content, but because she wondered why she could recognize “words” in general.

Alice had no memory of learning how to read or of any form of “learning.” She couldn’t recall where she had gained the experience of moving about and conversing with people. So where did all this knowledge come from? A doll that had been slumbering in a wooden coffin shouldn’t know anything!

This question had never occurred to Alice until today. Somehow, after speaking with “Captain Duncan,” the idea of “curiosity” had taken root in the doll’s mind, which was meant to function peacefully and undisturbed forever.

Upon reflection, this shift seemed to have emerged after Duncan inquired about the origin of the name “Alice”...

The doll couldn’t determine whether this change was good or bad, but she disliked the sensation of uncertainty and confusion. Hastily shaking off the discomfort, the doll adjusted her mindset and gently pushed on the door handle.

But the door wouldn't move.

Alice hesitated for a moment before trying again, only to find the door as unyielding as if it were made of solid steel.

As she prepared to make another attempt, a hoarse, low voice emerged from the captain's quarters, reminiscent of decaying wood: "The door is open, Lady."

It wasn't Captain Duncan's voice, which startled Alice, but she quickly regained her composure and pulled the door – this time it opened effortlessly.

She then remembered that the last time she was here, Captain Duncan had also pulled the door open for them both.

It seemed that "life knowledge" was still only knowledge, not actual experience...

Chastising herself, Alice cautiously peeked into the captain's quarters, which was empty except for the goat head statue on the mapping table.

"Please come in, Lady. The captain is preoccupied, so you can wait for him here until he's done," the goat head spoke more courteously than Alice had anticipated. "Also, try not to peek inside like this in the future. Some overly sensitive individuals on the Vanished may misconstrue it as disdain.

Placating them afterward will be bothersome, and what if your head were to fall off again? I don't have hands, so retrieving it for you would be quite challenging..."

The wooden statue really could talk!

Although Captain Duncan had mentioned that the goat head on the mapping table could speak, Alice was still taken aback to hear it for herself. After a moment, she replied, "Uh, okay, but my head doesn't come off that easily. Besides, didn't I manage to reattach it myself? But wait... Did you say overly sensitive ones? Are there others on the ship?" Alice quickly focused on this point, becoming both amazed and anxious simultaneously.

“Is it so strange to hear? It requires significant manpower to operate a ship as large as this one. Do you think the great Captain Duncan would scrub the deck by himself?” The goat head’s explanation actually seemed reasonable.

Although Alice felt something was off with her not-so-bright head, she eventually nodded after a minute. “What you said makes sense... So where are the others on the Vanished?”

“There is only one loyal first mate of the captain; the rest are a group of individuals with less intelligence than a rock, so you don’t need to worry about communicating with them. They have no interest in interacting with people,” the goat head interjected without waiting for Alice to finish.

“However, as a newcomer to the ship, it’s normal that there are many rules and customs you’re unaware of. As Captain Duncan’s most loyal first and second mate... I will teach you some common sense that will enable you to survive on this ship. After all, the captain won’t demean himself by explaining such things to a newcomer... Are you ready, Lady?”

Alice absentmindedly listened to the goat head’s words and even forgot her initial purpose for coming. Eventually, her mind became so overwhelmed that she could only nod subconsciously: “Ah, uh, ok-okay?”

“Excellent, here are a few rules that the crew of the Vanished must know, which will help newcomers adapt more quickly and accept the blessings of the great Captain Duncan and the Vanished...”

The goat head was clearly pleased with Alice’s response, as its prideful tone grew more pronounced.

“First, Captain Duncan is the absolute master of the Vanished. He is always right. Even if reality contradicts Captain Duncan’s words, his judgment prevails.”

“Second, crew members may only move within areas permitted by the captain. No one is ever allowed in areas he has forbidden.”

“Third, if you trespass into a restricted area and are fortunate enough to survive temporarily, you must remain there until the captain retrieves you.

Otherwise, only death awaits the foolhardy. You are absolutely not permitted to return without authorization.”

“Fourth, the Vanished always sails on the correct course. Do not question the captain’s plan. If the scenery surrounding the Vanished differs from what you anticipated or the ship descends into a ‘deeper’ part of the sea, it’s simply part of the normal voyage.”

“Fifth, the captain will occasionally leave the ship, but he will certainly return. During his absence, the Vanished will continue to sail as planned. Additionally, crew members are forbidden from approaching the helm station at the stern during this period—the rudder system is unstable when the captain is away, and the cables there will strangle any daredevil attempting to ‘usurp’ control.”

“Sixth, on the Vanished, there are essentially only six rules for the crew.”

“Seventh, the door to the captain’s quarters only opens outward.”

The goat head appeared to have recited this “common sense” to new crew members numerous times, as it was delivered naturally and seamlessly. Alice needed a moment to register the conflicting information: “Wait. Mr. Goathead, you just said there are only six rules...”

“Sixth, on the Vanished, there are basically only six rules for the crew,” the goat head promptly repeated its words.

Alice wondered if something had gone awry: “But you just mentioned a seventh rule...”

“Seventh, the door to the captain’s quarters only opens outward,” the goat head responded matter-of-factly.

Alice stared at the goat head with a baffled expression. After some additional doubt, she eventually accepted that this must be how things operated on the Vanished: “Don’t you think it’s contradictory?”

“There is no contradiction,” the goat insisted. Listening to its determined response, Alice reluctantly let the question go after meeting the goat head’s obsidian black eyes.

There are some things better left unspoken, even a doll knows that!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 23

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Chapter 23 “Bird”

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Alice may not have known much about this world, but she was at least aware, through whispered conversations from her guards, that she should be cautious of “supernatural things.”

In the case of a clearly irrational event existing in reality, the first rule of safety was to analyze the situation while maintaining a safe distance.

Since the goat head mentioned there were only six crew rules, Alice would accept that. As for the seventh, she saw no reason not to remember it too.

However, she still had some doubts: “Earlier, I tried pushing the captain’s door open. Why does it only open outward, and why is this emphasized in the rules?”

The goat head stared silently into Alice’s eyes. After two full seconds, he spoke so sternly and concisely that it was startling: “Sometimes, it can open inward.”

“That...”

“If you see the door open inward, don’t go in. Only the captain on the entire Vanished is qualified to do so.”

Alice was taken aback by the goat head’s extremely serious demeanor. However, his tone changed abruptly: “Alright, the necessary introduction

for the new crew member is over. Now let's discuss something else... Oh yes, Miss, why did you come to the captain's room? If you are unfamiliar with the ship's facilities, there is no need to bother the esteemed Captain Duncan. But if you want someone to talk to, you've come to the right place. I'm skilled at finding topics and know countless fascinating stories about this ship... Are you not interested in its grand exploits? I can also introduce you to the most famous dishes on the Boundless Sea, and I have some knowledge of cooking too..."

Alice attempted to interrupt the goat head's lengthy monologue several times, but it was too late when she realized something was amiss.

Anomaly 099, the puppet Miss Alice, encountered the second greatest horror on the Vanished today, besides Captain Duncan.

Simultaneously, in the bedroom separated by just one wall, Duncan quietly listened to the sounds coming from the mapping room.

He had just awoken when the conversation started, so he refrained from interrupting. Fortunately, otherwise, he wouldn't have heard about the "crew codes" and his bedroom door opening outwards.

So... The ship's "real Captain Duncan" would also push open the door to the captain's cabin and head towards some mysterious "world"? And this had happened often enough that the goat head considered it a matter of course?

This information was good for Duncan, as it meant he wouldn't have to worry about returning to the other side later. This way, it wouldn't seem strange when more crew members arrived.

But on the other hand, Duncan couldn't help but feel concerned about the "6+1" crew code that the goat head had deliberately mentioned.

The crew codes seemed perplexing at first glance, appearing grotesque, perilous, and even contradictory. However, their true purpose was to regulate the crew's behavior on board, ensuring their survival in a dangerous environment.

Duncan furrowed his brow, attempting to determine his position within these codes. As the adjudicator of some of these risks and apparently enjoying the greatest freedom on the ship, he was undoubtedly significant. But that was under the assumption that he was the real Captain Duncan.

This uncertainty troubled him the most.

He then recalled his own exploration of the Vanished and the fact that he had been wandering the cabin freely. The goat head never reminded him of the crew code and seemed to regard him as the authentic Captain Duncan.

Considering this, the hazards mentioned by the goat head might not necessarily apply to him.

Duncan exhaled softly, continuing to eavesdrop on the conversation, only to wish he could mute his hearing just half a minute later.

The absurd battle between the foolish doll and the irritating goat head began; who would outlast the other? First, Alice's nonsensical babbling about the wind and waves; then, the goat head's annoying retorts. Despite his thirst for information, Duncan knew such an assault on his consciousness would do him no good.

However, just as he was about to leave his bedroom to intervene, he hesitated. Having recently completed a miraculous soul journey, he needed to process and organize the wealth of information he had gathered. Why should he interfere when both parties seemed to be enjoying themselves? This provided him with an excuse to stay in his bedroom without paying attention.

Silently apologizing to Miss Doll, Duncan shifted his focus to his right hand, only to freeze.

The brass compass, slightly larger than a pocket watch, had vanished without him noticing!

Duncan's eyes momentarily reflected his distress, as this was the first time he had let his guard down since arriving on this eerie ghost ship – a

potentially fatal mistake.

The next second, he flicked his finger to produce a puff of green flame. He intended to use his connection with the ship to search for any hidden abnormalities in his bedroom. However, as he rose, a faint connection suddenly emerged from deep within his heart. Instinctively, he looked up and saw several illusory feathers floating down from the air.

Astonished by this discovery, Duncan gazed more intently and realized what it was – a phantom figure swiftly materializing from the void. About three seconds later, the black phantom had transformed into a snow-white creature.

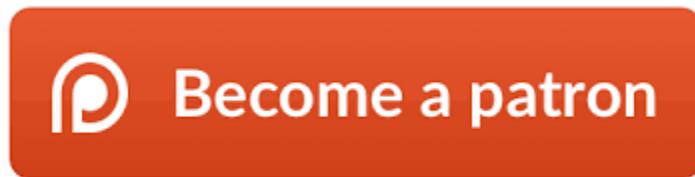
Specifically, it was a dove with the missing compass hanging from its neck. Beside the bird's feet lay a new obsidian knife, resting quietly.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 24

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 24 “Dove?”

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Duncan gazed at the white dove, his face a mix of astonishment, which the bird appeared to mirror with an equally bewildered expression.

Discerning a bird’s expression wasn’t easy, but Duncan somehow felt he could. The slightly reddened bird eyes held a certain wisdom, and the twin green irises seemed to reflect his image.

“A... Dove?”

After hesitating for several seconds, Duncan finally whispered something under his breath.

“Why a dove? Why did a dove suddenly appear? Why is my brass compass still around this bird’s neck? How did that dagger come into play?”

In short, a thousand questions could be condensed into one: Could something normal happen just once on this abnormal ship?!

As Duncan’s thoughts swirled with confusion and frustration, the dove, which had been there for some time, appeared to “wake up.” It nodded its head, took two steps forward on the table, extended its neck towards Duncan, and emitted a loud “googoo” sound.

Duncan stared silently, somehow recalling the image of a classic pirate captain from his memories. “Having a bird on my shoulder fits the image,

but isn't it usually a parrot... So what's with the white dove?"

The bird seemed to overhear the comment, nodding its head again. Then, to the captain's chagrin, the dove spoke in an odd, feminine voice: "Teleportation complete!"

Any murmurs or thoughts vanished instantly from Duncan's mind. Nearly choking on his own saliva from the shock, he stared at the white dove with a baffled expression and a feeling of *déjà vu* reminiscent of his first encounter with the goat head.

However, this wasn't his first day on the Vanished. After the initial surprise, he quickly regained his composure, conjured a puff of green flame in one hand, and eyed the bird warily: "Where do you come from?"

The dove cocked its head, one eye fixed on Duncan, the other on the ceiling: "Incorrect address. Please verify the address or contact the system administrator."

Duncan: "...?"

His momentarily stunned expression belied a greater shock surging through his heart!

The dove had uttered something... alien to this world. Nobody here should speak like that – not Alice, not the goat head, and certainly not the hooded cultists from his soul journey. The phrase should only be familiar to someone like him, "Zhou Ming," an Earthling!

However, the bird seemed oblivious to the change in Duncan's eyes and expression. It pecked at its wing for a quick grooming before pacing around the table, eventually approaching the obsidian dagger wielded by the cultists. Then, in the same peculiar, feminine voice, it said: "Grasp this solar tomahawk and embrace the glory of battle!"

Duncan leaped up from his desk, causing the chair beneath him to topple over and crash loudly onto the floor.

The reason? The phrase was from another world!

Perhaps due to the loud noise, Duncan received a concerned inquiry from the goat head: "Captain, are you alright?"

Still focused on the dove on the table, he replied calmly, knowing the goat head wouldn't intrude into his personal quarters: "I'm fine."

"Miss Alice is here to see you. Would you like to..."

"Meet with her first."

"Yes, Captain."

Duncan sighed heavily, then glanced back at the door leading to the mapping room. Immediately, the barrage of trivial conversations resumed between the wooden statue and Alice, the latter repeatedly attempting to leave only to be halted by the former.

He vowed to apologize to the doll later, but for now, this Earthling had more pressing matters to address.

Taking a seat again at his desk, Duncan intended to try communicating with the dove when he suddenly observed a detail he hadn't noticed before – a faint strand of fire extended from his right finger, connecting to the bird's wing.

This discovery furrowed Duncan's brow. Contemplating the meaning behind it, he flicked his right hand as an experiment. Instantly, the bird vanished and reappeared on his shoulder, pecking his hair while emitting a googoo sound!

Intrigued, he flicked his finger again to test his theory. As expected, the dove disappeared and reappeared on the table. This time, though, the compass around the bird's neck glowed green.

Duncan frowned, "... Is it connected to this brass compass?"

There was undoubtedly a link between the dove and himself, an even closer connection than that between him and the Vanished. This might also explain why the bird “knew” the “phrase” from Earth that only he was aware of. The question now was, why had this dove appeared?

Pondering the situation, Duncan’s thoughts eventually centered on the mysterious brass compass.

From experimenting with the ghost fire until now, everything had originated with this compass. Be it the previous soul journey into the corpse, the item’s disappearance, or the dove’s arrival, all events could be traced back to this compass.

Determined to uncover the reason, Duncan reached out to examine the item.

The dove seemed unbothered by his touch. However, instead of feeling the expected metallic hardness, his finger passed through the compass, touching the feathers beneath!

The dove hopped about in response to the tickling sensation, exclaiming excitedly: “Today is KFC Crazy Thursday, half price...”

Suppressing a twitch in the corner of his eye, Duncan attempted the gesture several more times. He ultimately concluded that the compass was firmly bound to the dove.

Or perhaps the compass’s true form was the bird itself?

Duncan couldn’t confirm his suspicions at the moment, but for now, he needed a justification for keeping the dove on the ship.

After brief consideration, he decided to give the bird a name first.

“I’ve got to give you a name,” he said, tapping his finger lightly on the table, “I assume you can understand me, right?”

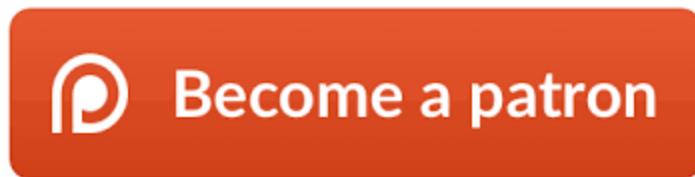
The bird cocked its head, and the two small, bean-sized eyes gazed at Duncan inquisitively, “Ai?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 25

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 25 “Communication is Impossible”

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The dove tilted its head, seemingly sensing that Duncan hadn’t understood her clearly. She quickly repeated the name more loudly than before: “Ai!”

Duncan finally grasped what the bird meant: “So, your name is Ai?”

The dove nodded proudly and strutted around the desk, cooing, “Googoo!”

Duncan couldn’t help but rub his forehead, finding it odd to communicate with the dove. In his opinion, it was even more awkward than speaking with the goat head. “Do you know how you were born? Or rather... how did you end up here?”

The dove pondered for a moment before they both glanced in opposite directions: “Aiya, the page you’re looking for is missing. Try refreshing it?”

Duncan: “...”

It was nearly impossible to understand what was going on in the bird’s mind. However, one thing was certain – the bird was sentient in its own way and communicated earnestly. The issue was whether they both shared the same understanding of what “communication” truly meant.

Duncan persisted in his attempt to converse with the dove named “Ai.” Throughout their discussion, the bird occasionally provided relevant

answers to his questions. Unfortunately, most responses were disjointed and unrelated.

Ultimately, little progress was made, leaving Duncan frowning: “What kind of messed-up thing is this....”

Unperturbed by the human’s displeasure, the dove nestled down on the table and began roosting, intermittently nagging for V50.

Duncan disregarded the bird’s chanting and instead gently rubbed his fingertips together. Observing the glowing green flame on his fingertip, he became certain of one thing – he could control the compass and dove, which together formed an “anomalous item.”

To test his theory, he increased the flame’s intensity. Sure enough, the fire surrounding Ai intensified, and the compass pointer began to slow down, as if attempting to point in a specific direction.

Despite being engulfed in flames, Ai remained unresponsive, simply preening herself in the ghostly fire and awaiting instructions.

Before the brass compass could be fully activated, Duncan chose to extinguish the flames and summarized his conclusions:

“First, the compass remains functional... It’s just that there’s now an additional peculiar ‘medium.’ For the time being, I can’t be certain of the effect this dove will have, and I shouldn’t embark on another soul journey until I’m fully prepared.”

“Secondly, there’s undoubtedly a connection between the dove and me, which becomes more apparent when the fire is involved. To some extent, I can control the dove... perhaps even exert more influence than just control....”

“‘Ai’ clearly possesses her own will and acts according to her thoughts. Consequently, my commands aren’t absolute for her, which sets her apart from the other items on the Vanished.”

“Capable of speech, possessing some ability to think, and able to judge problems independently... This dove’s nature seems more akin to the goat head than typical anomalies...”

Duncan reviewed the known information before finally shifting his attention to the cursed obsidian black dagger.

After brief contemplation, Duncan picked up the item, previously used by the priest in the underground sewer. The cold, solid touch confirmed its reality.

Once assured it wasn’t another illusion, Duncan released a bit more ghost fire, causing the flames to envelop the blade. From the lack of feedback, he determined that the extraordinary power within the ritual blade had indeed dissipated.

As he had previously assessed at the sacrificial site, this object wasn’t genuinely an “anomalous” item, but rather an extension of extraordinary power or a temporary vessel “infused” with energy artificially.

Though Duncan didn’t know the “anomalies” system, he surmised that this blade might not be a rare item—more like a mass-produced product.

“Is this what you brought back for me?” He looked at Ai and asked.

The dove stared directly into Duncan’s eyes with her reddish-bean irises, not responding.

Duncan: “...?”

He asked again, but the dove remained motionless, as if it had suddenly turned into an inanimate sculpture.

Duncan frowned at this unusual change, but just as he was about to use ghost flame to see if he could forcibly awaken Ai, the bird sprang to life, hopping twice in place and exclaiming, “Take this solar tomahawk, take this solar tomahawk, take this...”

“Okay, I understand. You don’t need to answer every question,” Duncan quickly waved his hand to silence the dove. He rephrased, “Do you know how you brought this dagger here? Or, more precisely, can you transport ‘physical objects’ through the space tunnel?”

The dove thought for a moment before pecking Duncan’s finger: “The whole place is full, and the chicken pieces are free of charge.”

Duncan: “I... I’ll pretend to comprehend.”

He sighed, feeling he had reached the limit of communication with this bird.

Then he rose from his desk and faced the door leading to the mapping room. He could still hear the ongoing conversation between the goat head and Alice outside, with the former discussing the seventeenth recipe for kelp stew.

At that moment, Duncan felt compelled to rescue his only (and most normal) crew member.

Additionally, he had spent too long in the bedchamber. It was time to show his face and reassure the goat head.

But before leaving, he hesitated, glancing at Ai, who was scampering around the table again.

Should I take this dove out, too? How will I explain her to them?

Duncan hesitated for a mere two seconds before decisively grabbing the dove and placing her on his shoulder.

If he planned to be active on the Vanished for the foreseeable future, Duncan needed to be more transparent about certain secrets. Besides, concealing a talking, walking bird on the ship would never end well. How would the other crew members perceive him if they unexpectedly discovered Ai one day?

So, he might as well openly bring the dove out and claim it as his new “prize”—he didn’t have to explain anything to the goat head in the first place. After all, the ship’s first mate would fill in the details on his own, regardless.

As for the peculiar stories that might arise from Ai’s occasional appearances (which the locals in this world would find baffling anyway), there was no need to explain those either.

The goat head and Alice could figure out a way to account for it.

With the plump dove on his shoulder, Duncan confidently straightened his posture and calmly walked out of the bedchamber.

“Authentic fine herbal tea, authentic fine voice, welcome to watch...” The dove proudly puffed out its chest as well, proclaiming its arrival as if announcing its presence.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 26

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 26 “Starless Night”

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Frankly, Duncan found it challenging to maintain his composure, regardless of how thick-skinned he was, when the dove spoke over his shoulder.

Why couldn’t he have a typical parrot like those pirate captains from the movies? If not, a monkey would suffice!

But he had already opened the door to the mapping room, making it impossible to turn back.

At that moment, the goat head was happily recounting the twelfth legend of fish stew in his repertoire when Duncan interrupted his boisterous chatter.
“Ah, Captain! You’re finally out. I must tell you; Miss Alice is such a delightful conversation partner. I haven’t had such an enjoyable conversation in years, you know...”

Duncan blatantly ignored the goat head’s loud rambling and turned to face the victim sitting across the table, who had placed her head on the table with her hands firmly pressed against her ears.

Duncan: “...”

“She took her head off herself,” the goat head explained without waiting for Duncan to speak, “though I don’t know why she did it...”

How potent is the goat head's nagging to make a cursed doll decapitate herself to avoid the sound waves?!

As Duncan was stunned, the goat head also noticed the peculiar bird brought out by the captain. Its obsidian black eyes stared intently at Ai: "Huh, Captain, on your shoulder is..."

"Her name is Ai, and she's my pet from now on," Duncan said with minimal detail to avoid possible loopholes.

"Your pet?" The goat head clearly hesitated for a moment, then acted as if it had reached a decision: "Ah, I did sense your departure from the Vanished earlier... You took a spirit walk? This must be the loot you brought back from your journey into the spirit world."

Spirit walk?

Duncan immediately recalled the image of the compass in his mind upon hearing this new term. Considering he had just experienced a soul projection, this must be something the real Captain Duncan commonly did. Nodding indifferently, he said, "I went out for a stroll."

The goat head eagerly followed up with praise: "Ah! Truly worthy of the great Captain Duncan, even a simple spirit walk can bring back treasures. Is this a dove? If it can become your pet, then it must be extraordinary. You even hung your compass on it. Is this... of course, your decision and judgment are always correct. But what is special about this dove? Is it..."

Noticing a key point in the goat head's flattery, Duncan realized the compass must be an important treasure to the real captain. Otherwise, this statue wouldn't have placed such emphasis on the item.

But there was nothing he could do now. The compass was "bound" to the dove, and... according to the ghost fire's feedback, the dove seemed more like the compass's true form than the other way around!

Thinking quickly with an unwavering expression, Duncan was trying to come up with something to say when Ai suddenly leaped off his shoulder

and flew in front of the goat head, flapping her wings.

“Want to charge Q coin or no?” The bird pecked the statue and asked.

Duncan: “...”

“An intelligent anomaly?!” The goat head was also astonished by the bird’s speech, “This dove can talk?!”

Duncan promptly gave a subtle reminder: “You can also talk.”

“Like words, like words, like words...” The dove Ai paced around the table, speaking to no one in particular.

Duncan snapped his fingers as he saw this, and with a sudden flicker of green flame, the pacing dove on the table vanished in the blink of an eye, reappearing on his shoulder.

“Yes, it’s an intelligent anomaly, and it is under my direct control,” Duncan nodded to the goat head, “any issues?”

The goat head hastily replied, “Ah... Of course not, of course not, there’s no problem at all. Everything is as the great Captain Duncan wills it.”

Ignoring the goat head before the conversation could drag on, Duncan turned to face Alice. Patting the doll on the shoulder, he said, “Wake up, wake up.”

Alice’s body stirred at his touch. As if awakening from a long nightmare, she began to stammer: “Cap... Cap... Cap...”

Duncan: “Put your head back on first.”

Realizing what he meant, Alice hurriedly reattached her head with an audible click. Only then did her speech return to normal: “Ah, Captain, you’re back? Just now it seemed... Mr. Goathead finished?”

The statue on the table immediately chimed in: “No, we were just about to discuss the legend regarding the fish stew. The next topic is...”

“Quiet,” Duncan ordered sternly.

“Okay.”

Alice visibly shuddered as the goat head attempted to continue. It was evident she had been traumatized by the experience and showed fear in her eyes. In fact, Duncan strongly suspected that Miss Doll wouldn’t want to step into his quarters again for quite some time.

With that in mind, he finally got back to the main subject, “What did you need?”

“I...” Alice’s expression was somewhat blank, as if her original reason for visiting the captain’s quarters had been forgotten amidst the conversation with the statue. Then, a few seconds later, she recalled: “Ah, yes, I wanted to ask if there’s a place to take a bath on the ship. I got soaked with seawater earlier, so my joints are a bit uncomfortable...” By the end, Miss Doll’s face had turned a shade of embarrassed red.

In retrospect, Duncan also felt a bit embarrassed about the situation. After all, he had thrown the lady overboard several times.

Unchanging in his tone: “Is that all?”

Alice sat demurely in her chair, “Yes... that’s all.”

“Fresh water is an extremely valuable resource for many ocean-going ships, so bathing is a luxury that requires restraint,” Duncan began solemnly but then suddenly smiled, “However, you’re in luck. The Vanished is no ordinary ship, so fresh water isn’t an issue here. Come with me. There’s a bathing area in the cabin below the middle deck. To get there, you’ll need to go through the upper deck first.”

Alice promptly stood up—she really didn’t want to spend another second in this room with the goat head.

“You continue to take the helm,” Duncan ordered, glancing back.

After his explanation, the pair soon emerged onto the main deck, where the night sky was unusually clear. Unlike in the past, when the world was always gloomy with dark clouds overhead, this time, he could see as far as the eye could see.

For example, there were no stars or a moon in the sky. Instead, there was a gaping crack of faint, glowing grayish-white stretching across the world from end to end. If he had to describe the sight, it would be like someone had sliced open a wound across the heavens and left it there.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 27

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Chapter 27 “Insufficient Reserves of Common Sense of life”

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In a way, the starless, moonless sky marked by a single scar had a more profound impact on Duncan than the confined “sun” encircled by rune rings.

No matter how unusual the sun appeared, it still illuminated the world below—a single star among billions in the galaxy. As long as this connection persisted, it implied that this world was somehow linked to Earth, his home world. However, with no celestial bodies in sight, he couldn’t even determine the distance between this place and Earth, if there was any.

Duncan kept his concerns to himself, gazing at the glowing crack with countless unanswered questions: Where were the other planets? Did they exist in this realm? Or was the world beneath him a celestial body situated within a cosmic vacuum, so far from other stars that the night sky was completely black and devoid of stars? What was the pale scar stretching across the sky? Could it be a rift in space? A tangible celestial structure? Or simply an illusion hovering over the treacherous waters?

“Captain?” Finally, a voice roused Duncan. It was Alice, stammering and sounding anxious, “Are you okay? Is the weather about to change? Is a big storm coming? I’ve heard seafarers mention this outside my box...”

“... It’s nothing,” Duncan said softly, then withdrew his gaze from the sky, repeating, “it’s nothing at all.”

“Then we...”

Duncan stepped forward, his expression composed as if nothing had occurred: “Let’s go. I’ll take you to the cabin. You can wash up there later if you need to.”

Once again, the world had demonstrated its strangeness to outsiders, and there seemed to be no end to it.

Duncan realized that countless shocking sights likely awaited him in the future, and if he reacted to each one, astonishment would consume his life.

If there was any lesson he had learned from his decades on Earth, it was this: if a problem exists, find a way to solve it, as it won’t vanish on its own due to denial. Just as the grotesque sky before him wouldn’t transform into a starry one due to his doubts.

No matter how bizarre and unexpected the phenomenon was, it was an undeniable fact that everything existed here. His lack of understanding was his problem, not the world’s. However, as the captain of the Vanished, he had time—plenty of it.

Alice was unaware of the reason behind the captain’s silence, only noticing that the atmosphere around Duncan had suddenly become somewhat somber. But upon reaching their destination, this oppressive feeling abruptly dissipated.

They arrived at a bathroom specially prepared for higher-ranking seafarers on this classic ship. Under no circumstances were ordinary sailors allowed inside due to the harsh living conditions on the vessel. After all, ancient sail-powered ships were ill-equipped because of their limitations, often plagued by spoiled food and inadequate medical treatment. If not for the industrial age, such harsh challenges would persist as a plague on seafarers.

But ironically, on this ghost ship that everyone feared, such poor living conditions had been resolved entirely. The freshwater tanks automatically refreshed themselves, and there were no signs of spoilage in the warehouse.

The only remaining concern was the crew's health. A ghost captain could never fall ill, and Alice's spinal issue was unrelated to the ship.

"The pipe next to the bath connects to the freshwater tank. You can fill the container over there to wash. However, due to the ship's limitations, there's no hot water. Keep that in mind."

Duncan proceeded to show Alice the other facilities and even took the opportunity to discuss the mundane experiences he had encountered over the past few days.

"I'm fine as long as I can rinse some of my joints." Alice wasn't fussy. She examined the bathroom's contents with curiosity and nodded, "I'm just a puppet; I don't have any desire for hot baths."

Duncan nodded in understanding. Then, with a hesitant voice, he asked, "By the way, do you know how to take a bath? Have you ever had this... 'life experience'?"

Alice paused for a moment before replying in a heavy tone, "It should be... fine? I'm only removing my joints to rinse them. I'll put them back right afterward...."

Duncan: "...?"

The two looked at each other, both seemingly at a loss.

"Have you considered how to reassemble yourself after taking apart your joints?" Duncan broke the awkward silence, aware that Alice had never done this before and needed a reminder. "I can't help you with that."

Alice: "Now that you mention it..."

"I strongly recommend against frequently disassembling your joints," Duncan advised seriously, "even if your body structure allows it."

Alice appeared puzzled: "Why?"

“It’s easy to lose them if they’re taken apart.” Duncan finally voiced his primary concern. Unlike cursed dolls in movies that never worry about losing body parts, a real animated doll must be cautious. He recalled a childhood toy and how carelessness could quickly result in lost parts that became difficult to find.

On that note, he added, “Your cervical spine issue is serious enough.”

Alice envisioned the scenario for a moment and immediately drew her neck back: “Ah, okay, I understand... I think I know what to do....”

“That’s for the best,” Duncan said, looking concerned. Before leaving, he told her, “I have a lot to do, so try not to get into too much trouble.”

“Okay, Captain, thank you, Captain,” Alice replied cheerfully. But as Duncan was about to exit the cabin, she suddenly spoke up, “Oh, right, Captain...”

Duncan stopped and slightly tilted his head, “What else?”

“Captain... I suddenly feel like you’re not so scary after all.” Alice carefully chose her words while looking at Duncan’s back, “Mr. Goathead said you are the most fearsome captain on the Boundless Sea, the elusive scourge of all shipping routes, but...”

“But what?”

“But I find that you’re quite conversational and somewhat like a caring parent...”

Duncan didn’t turn around as he asked, “Where did you get the concept of family from? Do you have a family?”

Alice hesitated for a moment before slowly shaking her head: “It seems I don’t.”

“Then don’t bring up the topic of parents anymore. Stay on the ship obediently, and I’ll make arrangements for your living conditions.”

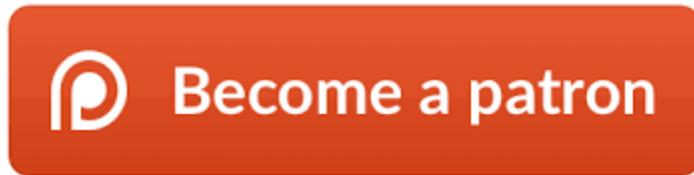
“Oh, alright, Captain.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 28

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 28 “The Pale Night”

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Unlike in novels, real life was quite different.

Do cursed dolls require joint maintenance?

Could frequent joint disassembly cause Alice to suddenly fall apart while walking in the future?

Has the bacon and dry cheese on the ghost ship expired?

Can superheroes who battle evil forces during the day find sleep at night?

Do the villains who fight superheroes go shopping at the supermarket?

Stories never address these questions; instead, characters always appear perfectly dressed in every scene.

Duncan sighed, realizing that surviving on this ship would demand more than just determination.

He also had to consider many practical issues, particularly as the crew increased while the supplies required for living remained constant.

Fortunately, the ship had an unlimited supply of fresh water, but only fresh water. The ingredients in the food warehouse did not automatically replenish after consumption. Nevertheless, he wouldn't complain since the

bacon jerky and hard cheese hadn't spoiled after being stored on board for over a century.

In addition, there was an insufficient supply of alternative clothing for Alice. Though the cursed doll hadn't mentioned it, Duncan believed this was inadequate. At the very least, he needed more items to pass the time during downtime.

While the Boundless Sea was vast and rich in resources, it wasn't easy for the Vanished to obtain new supplies. There was no port where they could dock for repairs and provisions, let alone establish contact with civilized society.

Aimlessly drifting on the sea was an inefficient means of exploration. To gather information about this world, they needed to access land; this was Duncan's most profound takeaway after "walking through the spirit world."

Aside from that, for his own physical and mental well-being, he had to try connecting with the "city-states" and civilized societies of the world. Otherwise, he worried he might genuinely become as twisted and gloomy as a real ghost captain.

Thinking of this, Duncan glanced at Ai, the dove perched obediently on his shoulder, grooming her feathers. His attention was drawn to the compass hanging around the bird's neck.

The dove tilted its head to look at its "master" and coldly said, "Set up the base! Expand the pores! Hey, do you know how to operate or not?"

Duncan fell silent for a moment. Although the bird usually spouted unrelated nonsense, occasionally she would say something helpful, as she did just now.

Even though spirit walking carried the risk of uncertainty and accidents, such as "Ai" tagging along when returning, Duncan knew he must attempt it again soon. He needed to gather intelligence and verify and master a useful skill.

If she could bring back the ritual blade, could she bring back more? What rules and restrictions govern what this bird can carry? Can this process be controlled artificially?

After some thought, Duncan decided to ask the bird directly: “Do you know how you brought that dagger back?”

The dove considered the question for a moment and replied in a serious tone, “Insufficient crystal mines.”

Duncan: “...”

He decided to abandon communication with the bird for the time being, finding it too much of a headache. Besides, what could be better than personally testing the theory during his next trip?

.....

Inside the cabin, Alice eventually figured out how to use the pipe to fetch water and learned to wash with the cold water. As a doll, she wasn’t bothered by the chilly temperature.

Before jumping into the tub, Alice decided to greet everything in the cabin.

She patted the enormous oak barrel, knocked on the supporting pillar, tapped the floor with her toes, and tiptoed up to pull the ropes and hooks hanging from the ceiling.

“Hello, my name is Alice,” she cheerfully greeted the inanimate objects, just as she had the goat-headed gentleman earlier, “I’m going to live on this ship from now on.”

Though nothing in the cabin responded, Alice remained unfazed.

The goat head had told her that the Vanished was a living vessel, including all its contents.

Even though none of them seemed to possess true “intelligence” like the goat head, or the ability to communicate, this didn’t stop Alice from treating

the entire Vanished as a “neighbor” who deserved a greeting.

Both the Vanished and Alice were living objects.

Satisfied with her polite and proper greeting, Alice felt her mood lift. She then removed her ornate dress and awkwardly climbed into the oak barrel filled with water.

The first step was to take off her head and rinse it, given the weak joints around her neck. In Miss Doll’s mind, removing her head was a reasonable choice.

...

The late, pale night finally descended upon the City-State of Pland, bringing an end to the city’s hustle and bustle. It was time for the residents of this prosperous “pearl of the sea” to sleep.

Yet, in the quiet darkness, the night watchman remained vigilant, guarding and protecting the slumbering citizens.

Atop the “Big Clock Tower,” the city’s tallest building, a tall young woman with long grayish-white hair stood by the window overlooking the city.

The woman’s features were stunning, but a noticeable scar across her left eye marred her beauty. Taller than most men in the area, she was clearly well-trained, with healthy, proportionate muscles beneath her armored dress. The sword at her waist, inscribed with wave-like runes, symbolized her faith.

Behind the woman, the constant sounds of machinery filled the air: steam engines, grinding rods, and pumping pistons. These mechanical marvels powered the magnificent clock tower that oversaw the entire settlement.

Judging by the noise, the large and intricate machine was functioning well, and no evil forces were invading the sacred steam core tonight.

Still, a faint unease lingered in Inquisitor Vanna’s heart. She felt that something terrible was about to happen, and she was powerless to stop it.

Footsteps on the stairs caught her attention. A priest carried a copper incense burner to replace the used one hanging on the guardrails. Once finished, he ensured the incense smoke drifted smoothly into the air and around the gears before whispering the storm goddess's name.

Turning to face Vanna, he said, "Good evening, Your Honor. Are you personally taking the night watch again?"

"I've had a bad feeling these past few days, especially tonight."

"Bad feeling? In what way?" The priest looked up, his eyes heavy with concern. "Did the storm goddess send you an omen?"

"Not a clear one," the young female inquisitor shook her head. "I just have this vague sense... that something is approaching the city."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 29

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Chapter 29 “Those Who Protect the City”

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The gods of immense power resided in the foundations of this world, observing their followers’ deeds with a transcendent gaze through their connection. In exchange for this advantage, devoted believers acting in the name of their god could gain insight into the future and its course.

This form of observation was not restricted by time or space, and it carried the risk of being eroded by subspace. However, for the committed and faithful believers, this perilous and potent force enabled them to defend the delicate light of civilization in the vast ocean.

For this devout inquisitor, a similar premonition had recurred in her dreams for numerous days.

She envisioned the Infinite Sea, tainted by a layer of ink with thunderous sounds emanating from the depths. Then, with a resounding shattering noise, the ocean tore apart, exposing a frightening chasm reaching the sea floor. From within emerged an enormous burning ship, ascending from the depths and heading towards the city of Pland—her home.

In Inquisitor Vanna’s life, an “omen” of this magnitude had appeared only twice.

The first instance happened during her childhood when she awoke from a nightmare drenched in blood, only to lose her parents in a cultist attack. This event left a permanent scar on her face.

The second occurrence transpired four years earlier when she foresaw a dark sun rising from beneath the city. That vision led her to eradicate the largest Sun God cultist stronghold hidden within the city.

Now, she received her third premonition—a fiery ghost ship reemerging from the ocean’s depths, ushering an indescribable giant into the world.

Thus, she had deceived her fellow priest that night. The omen wasn’t vague at all; it was so vivid that it had kept her awake for days.

The priest hesitated for a while before speaking again: “But you didn’t receive any negative feedback from the lord?”

“... The goddess doesn’t always warn you of all the dangers, and sometimes the trials are the test,” Vanna said softly, “let’s change the subject. What news do you have about the Explorers Association?”

The priest immediately nodded, “Our liaison within the association has just made contact using the relic inside their headquarters. However, the communication device on the ship seems to have malfunctioned, so we haven’t been able to speak with the captain yet. We can only confirm that the ship is approaching Pland’s coast at a normal speed.”

“... They vanished from the holy relic’s perception, then reappeared unexpectedly off-course. We also can’t communicate with the crew who were assigned to transport an anomalous object.” Inquisitor Vanna’s brow furrowed at this information, as her intuition, honed from years of experience, raised numerous red flags, “I recall the ship is named the White Oak, correct?”

“Yes, White Oak, captained by Lawrence Creed, a member of the Explorer’s Association. He’s a seasoned sailor. Due to the cargo they’re carrying, the ship had reported to the Church beforehand at City-State Lansa,” the priest recounted what he knew. “By the way, the accompanying cleric aboard the ship is a registered priest of the Deep Sea Church.”

“Fellow brothers of the Church... Let us pray the situation isn’t too dire,” said Vanna solemnly, “in summary, the ship’s situation is suspicious. The

entire route from Lansa to Pland is within the ‘stable zone’ under the Explorer’s Association’s control, yet the ship disappeared from the holy relic’s surveillance... I suspect the White Oak briefly left the fabric of reality or even... ventured where it shouldn’t have.”

“Notify the port guards to watch for the ship. No one is permitted to disembark from the White Oak upon arrival until a thorough inspection is conducted. Have the security forces been informed?”

“Don’t worry, your uncle... the Admin has directed the officials to secure the area around the port and raised the alert level. Until the level is lowered, all ships entering and departing Pland will be on standby at the west dock.”

“That’s good. Uncle has always been cautious,” said Vanna, her tense expression finally softening, “We just need to ensure the general public remains uninvolved in this matter.”

The priest gazed into Vanna’s pale gray eyes, selecting his words carefully:
“Do you believe... the ship might already be ‘tainted’?”

“It’s uncertain for now, but even if a ship that has left the real world returns shortly after, it rarely comes back unharmed. It’s possible that some items onboard have inadvertently transformed into ‘abnormal’ objects, or the crew’s minds have succumbed to madness. In the worst case, the genuine sailors may have been replaced by something entirely different...
Regardless, any ship that has encountered the supernatural must be treated with caution.”

“Alas... May the ship and its crew be safe,” the priest couldn’t help but place his hand on his chest and invoke the name of the Storm Goddess, “may the Storm Goddess protect those who bravely challenge the sea.”

“May they all be well,” Vanna murmured softly. Then, lowering her eyes, she whispered a blessing followed by a warning, “But if they are unfortunate enough to not be ‘well,’ we must also be prepared.”

“Yes, I understand,” the priest responded solemnly.

As Vanna was about to shift her focus back to the city beyond the window, hurried footsteps suddenly echoed from the stairway.

The next moment, a guardian wearing a silver-rimmed uniform with a dagger insignia across the chest rushed over. “Inquisitor! We’ve discovered the underground sacrificial site of the cultists in the sewer! We also apprehended a group of sun god worshippers!”

Vanna’s expression immediately turned grave: “The Suntists? Hold on, you mentioned a sacrificial site... Not a hideout? How dare they conduct another sacrifice?!”

“Yes, it was the location of the sacrificial ritual. We found evidence of sacrifices having taken place,” the guardian quickly explained. “We also discovered numerous victims in a crypt near the site—most of them sacrificed by having their hearts removed. But something seems off about the site.”

Vanna noticed a blend of bewilderment and confusion on the guardian’s face. Without hesitation, the female inquisitor grabbed her heavy sword, blessed by the Storm Goddess, from its resting place and strapped it to her back. Gesturing towards the stairs, she commanded, “Lead the way. I will personally investigate the situation.”

“Yes, Milady!”

The sound of the massive sword clanging against Vanna’s metal pauldron echoed through the stairwell. Upon reaching the entrance, two steam walkers were already parked in the square outside, poised and steaming for her to mount their spider-like bodies.

Vanna didn’t hesitate and leaped onto the nearest walker’s carapace. The enormous machine resembled a steampunk contraption found in a book but was much more sophisticated and well-designed after generations of refinement.

Pure technological creations were often inadequate in addressing “Anomalies” or “Visions”; however, a devastating fire would surely

eliminate any heretic hiding in the shadows. Naturally, this spider-tank hybrid was unsuitable for use in the sewers due to space limitations. Nonetheless, serving as a blockade at the exit fulfilled its purpose. After all, a hail of 8mm bullets, blessed by the divine, would ensure any fleeing heretic met their end.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 30

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Chapter 30 “One Hell Of A Messed Up Scene”

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As Inquisitor Vanna contemplated the challenges ahead, the two drivers maneuvered the massive mechanical spider, which retracted its long metal legs into its abdomen, allowing the wheels underneath to glide it through the city streets.

Sun god worshiping cultists posed a significant threat to modern civilization—unfortunately, they were just one of many such plagues.

Malicious forces from the depths of subspace constantly targeted the human world, and there were always foolish mortals willing to succumb to these ominous powers. Amidst the collusion between ancient gods and mortals, twisted artifacts, forbidden heirs, and remnants of corruption from bygone times lurked within the city-state, ceaselessly attempting to undermine societal order.

Among these threats, the followers of the Sun God were the most concerning and troubling for Pland’s protectors.

These cultists were not just a random assembly but rather the product of a lost history from the ancient world. What made them even more dangerous was their structured “faith,” similar to Vanna’s own Storm Church.

This faith centered around the “Era of Order” under the ancient sun, a self-contained belief system complete with its own “true solar calendar,” which modern society did not recognize. These heretics considered themselves the

descendants of a long-lost civilization, believing that this once-great society would be restored someday.

As an Inquisitor of the Storm Church, Vanna had little interest in the cultists' heresies but couldn't ignore the Sun God followers' tenacity and unity. Their ability to persist despite countless setbacks over the years demonstrated the threat they posed to the city.

Nevertheless, their resurgence in Pland took Vanna by surprise.

Following the devastating blow dealt four years prior, the Sun God followers had been so severely weakened that, according to several investigations, they likely relocated their core members to nearby island cities. Some were even believed to have ventured further north to the Frost Port city-state, leaving behind only the most stubborn and least qualified for the cult's inner circle.

These remnants hid in the sewers, relying solely on their underworld knowledge and the meager twisted blessings granted by the Black Sun to evade capture. Over four years, their numbers dwindled, and they clung to the little they had left for survival.

But now, four years later, they had suddenly regrouped and even dared to risk exposure by conducting a sacrificial ceremony in the assembly hall. What emboldened them?

Or rather, was something significant about to transpire in this city-state? What could possibly justify the heretics taking such a risk, potentially leading to their complete annihilation?

The vibrations and noise from the steam core operating within the mechanical spider's body eventually forced Vanna to set aside her wild thoughts for the time being. The task force had entered the industrial zone, where massive steam and hydrothermal pipes spanned the factory buildings. These pipes resembled colossal blood vessels, connecting buildings through the sky and showcasing human ingenuity in this modern era.

However, the scene evoked some unpleasant memories for Vanna. The weather was similar to that fateful night years ago, when it should have been peaceful for the city's slumbering residents. Instead, it was a night of bloodshed and nightmares. Her uncle had escaped the fire with her on his back, and the streets were overrun with the walking dead. To this day, Vanna felt sick at the mere thought of the nauseating stench of chemical grease oozing from the pipes...

Eventually, the smooth road ended, giving way to an abandoned area on the city's outskirts, filled with potholes and uneven terrain. The two mechanical spiders could no longer rely on their wheels, so they extended their long legs to traverse the bumpy path.

It didn't take long for the squad to reach an abandoned sewer entrance where a team of eight was already on standby. They had cordoned off the surrounding area to prevent unauthorized personnel from approaching the entrance.

Vanna greeted the team before following the person in charge directly into the depths. After navigating winding corridors and slime-covered paths, she arrived at the secret meeting hall, where more guardians and priests were already working diligently to purify the area.

She observed a makeshift altar in the center of the assembly hall, its wooden stage charred as if from fire. Atop the platform stood a burnt, but structurally intact, blasphemous totem erected by the Sun God Cultists.

Nearby, about a dozen cultists were crouched on the ground with their hands bound, trembling in fear and muttering heretical prayers. With the ceremonial site destroyed and the Storm Goddess's attention focused on this location, their prayers held no power.

Not far from the altar, the victims' remains discovered in nearby caves had been carefully placed on rune-painted linen cloths. Morticians were examining each body, performing their duties as expected.

Meanwhile, the church's priests walked around the altar, swinging incense burners on copper chains. As the white smoke rose into the air, it turned an

ominous black when it neared the altar. This process slowly diminished the pollution and weakened the grip of the Black Sun.

“Inquisitor, please come here. This is what we have found,” said a young guardian, pointing to the corpse nearest the altar. “Please be careful. The ground here is not very clean.”

Vanna approached the corpses and, after inspecting one of them, she involuntarily furrowed her brow.

A cultist wearing a golden mask lay before her—likely the priest responsible for the sacrificial ritual at the blasphemous altar.

A ghastly hole was in his chest.

“What’s going on?” Vanna’s frown deepened. “Did this fanatic get too excited at the end of the ceremony and sacrifice himself? I haven’t heard of cultists who worship the Black Sun engaging in such a practice.”

“This is precisely what’s strange and baffling about this situation – he didn’t sacrifice himself,” said the guardian who brought Vanna over. Shaking his head with a slightly puzzled expression, he continued, “According to the captured cultists at the scene... their ‘emissary’ was sacrificed by one of the sacrifices themselves...”

“Sacrificed by a sacrifice?” Vanna raised an eyebrow, “What kind of absurdity is this?”

“It does indeed sound absurd,” the guardian admitted, spreading his hands helplessly. “In fact, by the time we arrived, most of the cultists here were already in a semi-delirious state.”

“Already in a semi-delirious state?”

“Yes, their sacrificial rituals evidently went horribly wrong. Many of them were afflicted with madness, and most had even begun to attack and kill each other. They all seemed to perceive one another as if they were... some sort of ‘monster’ possessed by a dreadful entity. It was their frenzied chaos

that alerted the patrolling watchmen nearby, leading to the exposure of this site... Only a few remaining individuals were lucid enough to answer our questions when we apprehended them. Those who did claimed that the emissary had been sacrificed.”

“Overcome with madness? Attacking and killing each other? And viewing others as possessed monsters?” Vanna’s expression instantly turned serious, “Have you checked? Is this the result of being tainted by the Black Sun?”

“There’s no trace of external contamination; it’s more of a spontaneous madness—the factors causing the madness are rooted within their own minds,” said the guardian. He then pointed to a young woman in a long black dress walking among the cultists, “Ms. Heidi has arrived. If it’s confirmed that these cultists aren’t tainted by the Black Sun, we’ll have to consider using hypnosis to address the issue.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 31

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Chapter 31 “Residue”

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Vanna shifted her attention to the woman dressed in black, who was assessing the mental state of the cultists. She received a subtle nod in return.

The woman seemed to be in her early twenties, but her composed demeanor gave her an air of maturity beyond her apparent age. Her long black hair was neatly tied in a bun, which further contributed to her mature appearance. Her pale blue crystal earrings added to her captivating and alluring presence.

“Is Heidi here because City Hall sent her?” Vanna inquired of the young guardian beside her.

“No, Ms. Heidi happened to be nearby when the incident occurred and came over as soon as she heard the news. Is something amiss?”

“No, it’s nothing. Although Heidi works for City Hall, she also has a long-standing collaborative relationship with the church. Be sure to include her as a person on site later.” Vanna dismissed the thought and refocused on the pressing matter. While examining the heartless cult priest, she casually asked, “What else do these cultists have to say? What happened at that time?”

“Their accounts were hard to piece together, but we did get two cult members mentioning that the regular ritual had concluded when they captured an escaped prisoner. The emissary then decided to make an

exception and conducted a second ritual for the sacrifice...” The guardian recounted, “These two cultists were standing farther from the altar, so they weren’t aware of the specifics. They only mentioned that the sacrifice had its heart pierced but didn’t die. Instead, the intended victim turned the tables and designated the priest as the sacrifice by invoking the sun god’s name...”

“...A person chosen for sacrifice reversed the ritual and sacrificed the officiating attacker?” Vanna’s expression conveyed disbelief. However, she held back her frustration, aware that her subordinates were completely loyal to the church. “How could such an absurd thing occur? If that were true, wouldn’t it imply that whoever speaks faster can determine who will be sacrificed during the ritual? It’s nonsensical.”

“I concur it doesn’t make sense. The officiating priest holds a commanding position during the ceremony. There’s no way a feeble, ordinary person could overpower their captors under such circumstances with just a sentence. Furthermore, our examination of the priest revealed that he had been corrupted by the ‘depths,’ a truly ‘baptized’ individual. Additionally, the other cultists claimed that he was still clutching the blessed ritual dagger when he died...”

The young guardian shook his head as he spoke before moving toward the corpse next to him.

“However... observe this: this is the ‘sacrifice’ that supposedly ‘killed’ the priest.”

Vanna looked at the indicated corpse, which had clearly been lifeless for some time, as evidenced by the advanced decay. Yet, it was precisely this degree of decay that piqued her interest.

The body was that of a thin young man, too thin to be healthy. The gaping hole around the heart area heightened her suspicion.

“He’s been sacrificed...”

“Yes, this is a sacrifice that had already been offered. Based on the evidence at the scene and the confessions we collected, this ‘sacrifice’ may have lost his life long before being placed on the altar.” The guardian’s voice grew somber, “So... the actual situation at that time was that a reanimated corpse, in plain sight of everyone, walked up to the altar and killed the priest in charge.”

“...Necromancy?” Vanna pondered, “No, the power of the Black Sun severely limits necromancers, and the walking dead wouldn’t be able to approach the totem... Could some anomaly have controlled this corpse?”

“Did you check the lighting around here?” She abruptly looked at the guardian beside her, “Within five hundred meters, is there an underground area that’s completely dark?”

“We checked, and there was no pitch-black crypt — even the cultists understood the dangers of darkness, so they were very careful to ensure every area was lit with torches and lamps. This includes the caves used to dispose of the bodies.”

Vanna stayed silent for a moment, then crouched down to examine the corpse more closely. Struggling to make sense of the situation, she searched for signs of external influences by lifting the body’s eyelids and peering inside with her powers.

Suddenly, a shimmering flash overtook her vision – a spark of faint green fire leaped out of the empty eye socket. Before she could react, the flame drifted into the air and vanished.

Vanna’s eyes instinctively recoiled as she regained her composure. Without hesitation, she quickly drew the dagger from her waist and sliced her index finger that had made contact. Next, she thrust the rune-engraved dagger into the corpse’s forehead, igniting the body in flames with her divine power.

In less than a second, she completed this series of actions. As the corpse was consumed by fire, she stood up and took two steps back. With practiced efficiency, she retrieved the blessed holy oil from her waist, bit off the cork, and doused her wounded right hand. The holy oil performed its function, as

the flesh and blood immediately began sizzling, with large plumes of white smoke rising from it.

Intense pain surged through the inquisitor's heart, yet Vanna maintained a stoic expression as the other guardians swiftly drew their weapons and decapitated the "sacrifice."

They had been trained for this. Without hesitation, the closest guardian tossed a potion containing seaweed extract and silver powder into the fire, triggering a series of explosive bursts that heightened the flames. In mere moments, the body was reduced to ashes by the chemical explosion.

The nearby officials also took note of the disturbance and unsheathed their rune steel swords, forming a circle around Vanna. Some even pointed large-caliber revolvers at the remaining cultists. As for the two priests present, they each produced a sleek, smaller yet equally lethal gun adorned with inscribed runes. As they chanted the storm goddess's name, the clerics and their guns emitted a soft glow.

"Inquisitor!" The young guardian wielding a steel sword rushed to Vanna's side, "Are you alright? Just now..."

"There is some residual power in that 'sacrifice.' It was able to bypass all of my goddess-given defenses." Vanna raised her right hand, observing her blessing take effect as the flesh writhed and began to regenerate.

"Something isn't right here. Not only is the Black Sun involved, but another potent force as well." The inquisitor swiftly determined the next steps, "Transfer all the evidence to the church. We will conduct further inspection and interrogation under strict supervision. Arrange for additional priests to come here and thoroughly cleanse this area... Is there anyone else here besides us?"

A nearby guardian promptly responded, "Yes, we had previously rescued a group of 'designated sacrifices' in a nearby cave. They are currently sheltered in the adjacent pipe room."

“Escort them to the church as well. Even though they are victims, it is too risky to release them now. Conduct a thorough examination over the next few days before allowing them to return home.” Vanna quickly instructed before adding, as if recalling something, “What about Ms. Heidi? Is she alright?”

“I’m here,” a composed female voice answered. The “psychiatrist” in the black dress approached leisurely, “Don’t worry, I didn’t react in time just now. Would you mind explaining the cause of the commotion?”

“...Like many classic tales, these cultists have unleashed something far more malevolent.” Vanna glanced at the “psychiatrist” before continuing, “I strongly recommend that you seek examination by the church as well, and if you plan to hypnotize the cultists later, do so only with additional protection... there is a presence here that shouldn’t exist, at least a lingering remnant remains....”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 32

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Chapter 32 “Breakfast On The Vanished”

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As night gave way to day and the pale scar in the sky gradually vanished, Duncan stood at the stern of the deck, gazing upward so as not to miss a single detail of the transitioning sky.

From his observations, the scar first became translucent and ephemeral, like a slowly dissolving dream, followed by the gray-white light blending into the horizon until it disappeared entirely. Throughout the process, the scar’s position remained unchanged.

Could this imply that the scar in the sky was not a distant astronomical object, but rather an “imprinted” illusion projected from the Boundless Sea?

Alternatively, could it be that the planet (assuming it was indeed a planet) was in sync with the scar? Or did the scar actually move, but appeared stationary due to the limitations of human perception?

Numerous theories crossed Duncan’s mind, but he was prudent enough not to accept any as truth. Until backed by ample evidence and reliable experiments, they were merely conjecture.

Then, the “sun” started to rise.

Golden light first appeared from the sea, followed by an immense, luminous structure that slowly emerged from the water.

The sun ascended majestically, its movement guided by the gentle rotation of surrounding runes. This awe-inspiring spectacle seemed to produce a low, powerful, echoing hum within Duncan's mind. Yet, when he attempted to concentrate on it, the sound abruptly disappeared.

Furrowing his brow, he questioned whether he had experienced an auditory hallucination. However, the memory of the sound was so vivid that he couldn't disregard it.

Was that... the sun's announcement to the world as it rose? Or merely another of the many illusions the Boundless Sea created?

Nobody could address Duncan's uncertainties, and the vast, enigmatic sea maintained its secrets as always.

The dove nestled comfortably on Duncan's shoulder, as usual, before suddenly standing and flapping its wings energetically. "French fries! French fries!"

Duncan couldn't help but chuckle, glancing at the odd bird. For the first time since their meeting, he found solace in the dove's presence, as it reminded him of home.

"It's unfortunate we don't have fries on board," he said while casually stroking the bird's beak before making his way to the captain's quarters. "But you're right about one thing – we need sustenance."

Shortly after, the captain of the Vanished prepared a traditional breakfast fitting for a ghost ship's crew.

Lacking a proper dining table, Duncan used the map table instead. The usual fare comprised the meal: jerky, cheese, and water, which had sustained him for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in recent days.

As he carefully positioned a dining napkin around his neck, the goat head sat across from him. Duncan executed this ritual meticulously. Of course, Alice, who had come early to greet him, sat to his left, while Ai, the dove, perched on the table to his right.

This peculiar arrangement brought Duncan a sense of contentment, despite his determination to embrace his role as a ghost captain. The goat head symbolized his darker nature, the dove embodied wisdom, and as for the cursed doll, he would eventually devise an appropriate way to define her place. Regardless, having companionship for once was a welcome change...

However, one minor issue remained – the food on the Vanished.

Duncan sighed, looking down at his plate. Unlike the lavish banquets depicted in Hollywood pirate movies, the real-life dining experience on a ghost ship was severely lacking.

As he cut the cheese with his knife and tasted it, the gritty texture nearly made him gag. He then prodded the dried jerky with his fork, finding it almost inedible due to its extreme toughness.

Alice watched the scene with curiosity before asking, “Captain, is today’s meal the same as yesterday’s?”

“And tomorrow’s,” Duncan replied, looking at the cursed doll. “Would you like to try?”

Alice hesitated, then picked up a piece of dried jerky. After a quick bite and some crunching noises, she spat it out in disgust: “It’s not delicious at all!”

“You can’t really eat it anyway. Do you even have a stomach?” Duncan raised an eyebrow and looked towards her abdomen. “I’m more surprised you actually dared to try the food.”

His gaze returned to the unappetizing food on his plate, his mood growing increasingly somber.

The only edible items on the ship were dried meat as tough as firewood and excessively salty, along with gritty-textured cheese that needed water to rehydrate in his mouth. He had tried boiling the meat and cheese together with water, but it did nothing to enhance the taste.

The bright side was that these foods weren't poisonous or oddly altered, but they were far from appealing. Duncan had every reason to believe the cheese and jerky were much older than he was. He had never before encountered cheese with a texture like grit or jerky that could be used as a weapon.

While he didn't need to worry about scurvy on this ghost ship, Duncan still longed for a healthier diet – or at least food that was as young as he was!

The concept of resupplying the ship and exploring the world resurfaced in his mind, but he recognized that those objectives were not achievable in the near future.

With a sigh, Duncan continued to cut the “firewood” on his plate, his actions resembling those of someone seeking revenge.

“Insufficient crystal ore reserve?” Ai suddenly poked her head over, pecking the jerky, which produced a metallic sound.

Duncan raised an eyebrow, glanced at the dove, and casually crumbled a corner of cheese before tossing it her way. After another peck and a swallow, Ai suddenly went stiff and dropped lifelessly, as if poisoned.

The amusing display lasted no more than five seconds, but during that brief period, Ai became quite upset. Flapping her wings frantically, she dashed toward the nearest shelf and declared in an incensed voice: “I would rather starve today than eat that...”

Duncan felt a pang from the truth in her words. The remark might have also offended the goat head, which had remained silent until now. Having reached its limit, the statue began making creaking wood sounds.

“Go ahead and say it,” Duncan conceded, lifting the ban with his order.

“Yes, Captain,” the goat head responded, relieved to be able to speak. “I've been curious since yesterday. This bird you brought back is called Ai, right? Why can't I understand what she's saying? Like that phrase about charging Q coins, what does it mean?”

Duncan raised an eyebrow, surprised the goat head had waited until now to ask this question. What restraint!

“You don’t need to worry about it; her thought process is unusual, so there’s no need to understand,” Duncan said, not pausing in his food-cutting task. He recited the excuse he had devised during the night. “It seems she communicates with people in a language only she can understand. If you listen to her more often, you might be able to make educated guesses about what she’s saying.”

“Is that so?” The goat head pondered the idea. “But I always sense there’s some logic hidden in her words... as if there’s a complete, self-consistent set of patterns behind her language. Did you discover Ai during your walk in the spirit world? Could she be some sort of projection from its depths? You know as well as I do that the deeper you go, the more likely you are to encounter projections from misplaced time and space. This could include a lost civilization, a fragment of the future, or even a world entirely different from our own.”

Duncan’s cutting momentarily paused, barely noticeable to the naked eye, before resuming as he replied flatly, “Then I hope you can decipher the logic behind Ai’s language soon.”

The goat head’s casual conjecture, though it contained potentially revealing information, inevitably provoked Duncan’s thoughts.

My soul ventured closer to the depths of this world... The deeper I go, the more likely I am to encounter projections from space and time, perhaps even from different timelines.

Duncan hadn’t seen any “scenes from different timelines” during his spirit walk, but the goat head was correct about one thing – Ai had come from a different place.

So... did “Zhou Ming” of Earth bring this dove into the world, or did she originate from the deeper parts of this world, as the goat head suggested?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 33

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Chapter 33 “Fish”

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Following an unsatisfactory breakfast, Duncan’s mood failed to improve. In fact, he grew increasingly irritated due to the inadvertent revelation made by the goat head statue.

He glanced at the dove, sauntering on a nearby shelf, and noticed his thoughts growing more and more outlandish.

Duncan had always assumed the dove – abundant in “earth words” – existed only because he possessed the soul of an Earthling, which had activated the brass compass during their spiritual journey.

But what if that wasn’t the case?

What if, as the goat head suggested, the dove was merely a phantom emerging from an even “deeper” place within the depths? Could its presence around Ai be mere coincidence?

If this were true, wouldn’t the earth words uttered by the dove be unrelated to Earth’s “Zhou Ming,” but rather a reflection of this world’s own history?

This hypothesis deeply unsettled Duncan.

“Need me to wash the dishes?” Alice interrupted his thoughts, having risen from breakfast. Sheepishly scratching her head, she continued, “I think I

should find something to do now that I'm aboard the ship; otherwise, I'll feel like a freeloader..."

"But you don't eat at all," Duncan reminded her. "It's good that you're thinking about it, though. Take the dishes to the water room and discuss it with the sink. If it doesn't mind, you can go ahead and wash the dishes."

Having said this, he stood up without waiting for Alice's response, adding before he exited, "I'm going to inspect the deck. Unless necessary, please don't disturb me."

The dove, which had been roaming on the shelves, then alighted on Duncan's shoulder and left the room with him, leaving Alice alone with the goat head.

"Is the captain in a good mood?" After some hesitation, Alice cautiously inquired of the statue.

The goat head answered in a deep voice: "The captain's mood is like the weather of the Boundless Sea—don't try to predict it, just accept it."

Before the goat head could continue its monologue, Alice quickly interjected, "Anyway, the captain mentioned discussing it with the sink earlier... How do I do that?"

"Simple. Start washing things, and if you're splashed with water, it means the sink doesn't like you. By the way, do you know how to wash dishes? If not, I have some theoretical experience..."

To prevent matters from escalating, Alice hastily collected the tableware and rushed out the door, exclaiming, "No need, I'll learn on my own. Thanks, Mr. Goathead! Goodbye!"

Silence reclaimed the captain's quarters, leaving only the black goat head statue on the table, staring blankly in the direction everyone had departed.

"How wonderful it would be to have legs..." The statue sighed at its own misfortune.

Then, its gaze returned to the chart before it, where the fog surrounding the Vanished continued to dissipate steadily. Entrusted with steering the ship by the captain, the goat head was determined not to disappoint.

Under the skillful control of the helmsman, the vast and sentient ghost ship adeptly adjusted the angle of each sail as it cruised through the waters. Throughout this, the goat head never ceased humming its pirate tune:

Raise the sails, raise the sails, our sailor ye be leaving home.

Wind, waves, from death we be only a plank awhey.

Cast the anchors, hoist the masts, tie the ropes, ahoy that ship! We're coming for yer treasure!

Stay away from the fish, farther away from thy fangs, us sailors want to live!

Stay away from ye mers, further away we sail! Peace to our souls!

Meanwhile, Duncan had made his way around the supply room and kitchen once more before finally arriving at the center of the ship.

Despite his numerous searches of the storeroom, the ship only ever provided cheese and jerky.

The silver lining was that he didn't have to consume maggot-ridden biscuits like the sailors from medieval tales. The downside was that there weren't even maggots on this ghost ship.

Temporarily setting aside his earlier outlandish thoughts, he escorted the silent Ai to the edge of the deck and gazed out at the Boundless Ocean.

“...Regardless, I must find a way to restock supplies on the Vanished. While I can't expect a high quality of life on a ghost ship, I can't let myself descend into ghostly barbarism either...”

“At some point, Alice will also need a change of clothes, and there are no suitable garments in the cabin aside from tattered rags.”

“Furthermore, the Vanished has been adrift on these waters for far too long. The goat head’s knowledge of people on land may be outdated. Take the revolver guns used by the cultists from the underground sewer, that alone indicated that the world has progressed and advanced...”

“A century ago, this ancient ship might have been invincible, but who knows what’s changed since then? Perhaps the Vanished’s only remaining advantage is its reputation, and reputation doesn’t solve problems in naval combat...”

He then glanced at the dove perched on his shoulder.

“Perhaps... if I rest a bit today, we can attempt another spirit walk.”

“Googoo?” Ai tilted her head, finally making a sound typical of an ordinary dove.

Duncan smiled at her behavior, and suddenly caught sight of a glimmer from the corner of his eye. Intrigued, he instinctively looked down to see what was swimming below the water’s surface.

After a moment of disbelief, he facepalmed in realization.

“My goodness! How could I have been so slow-witted... this is the sea! There are fish in the water!”

The sudden implications of this discovery sent Duncan’s spirits soaring. Establishing contact with land and resupplying the ship wouldn’t happen overnight, but fishing could!

He was fed up with the jerky and cheese!

Brimming with enthusiasm, Duncan recalled the heavy fishing rod stored below deck. As for bait... would the jerky and cheese suffice?

And so, everyone on board found a task they could undertake: the cursed doll washed dishes, the loquacious goat head focused on steering the ship, and the captain of the Vanished busied himself running between the cabin and deck.

It wasn't long before Duncan returned with three hefty fishing rods and some "bait" from the food supplies. Inexperienced with the process, he clumsily secured the rods to the side of the ship, attached the bait to the hooks, and cast the lines overboard. He also positioned an empty bucket nearby to serve as a seat while he waited.

In truth, Duncan had never fished at sea before, though he had limited experience fishing in a pond back in his hometown. Regardless, he had plenty of time to learn. And if he succeeded, it would be well worth it.

Fishing provided a way to relax before the next spirit walk and an opportunity to address the ship's food shortage – a win-win situation.

Gradually, Duncan's mood returned to normal as he waited for fish to take the bait. The waiting grew monotonous, especially since there were no signs of an approaching storm.

Before he knew it, the man had slipped into a state of half-dreaming, half-wakefulness.

In his dream, he stood barefoot on calm seawater, a warm, familiar sun shining overhead. Naturally, this sun was the "normal" sun he remembered from before.

His attention was then drawn to the sound of water splashing nearby. A school of small, golden fish, each about the size of his palm, swam around him. They spit bubbles into the air and wiggled their tails, seemingly swimming in mid-air.

They encircled him, affording Zhou Ming a perfect view of their large, bulging eyes, delicate scales reflecting a wavy pattern, and mouths opening and closing. He couldn't help but think they were both beautiful and... incredibly appetizing.

Yes, they must be very, very delicious.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 34

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Chapter 34 “Harvest”

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Duncan was abruptly awakened by the sound of waves crashing against the ship. As he opened his eyes, he scanned the deck, seeking the fish from his dream. Their appearance was elusive, leaving only a vague, slender silhouette and the notion of their delectable taste.

Do fish swim in the air?

Duncan blinked, momentarily disoriented as reality and his dream seemed to merge. Seeing the fishing rods without any catch, he felt disappointed, recognizing what had transpired.

He quickly gazed out at the sea, noting the swelling waves and the deteriorating weather, with a storm looming overhead.

“Perhaps fishing today isn’t such a good idea...”

He mumbled, contemplating whether to stow the fishing rod. However, just then, a sudden movement caught his attention – one of the rods had begun to bend!

Any fisherman would identify this as a sign of a catch. The grinding sound of tension, the screeching noise of wire being pulled – all culminating in this moment!

The fish was here, and it was a big one!

Casting aside the thought of taking a break, Duncan's excitement surged. He seized the bending rod with both hands and braced against the ship's side to avoid falling over.

"Didn't I say it! How can I return empty-handed!"

Duncan yelled with exhilaration as he strained to reel in his enormous catch. The struggle was arduous, and it seemed he was losing the battle.

Finally, in a burst of inspiration, the spectral captain summoned a plume of green fire on his hands, which spread to the fishing rod. The fire coursed along the line and into the water, unveiling a green silhouette of a massive creature swimming around the ship.

From above, the shadow looked more like a throbbing mass of flesh than a fish, nearly covering the entire sea surface within a few hundred meters of the Vanished. However, Duncan paid no heed to the peculiar creature lurking below the water. He was focused on reeling in his catch.

At last, the moment came when the tension in the rod began to slacken, indicating the "prey" had grown weary, and it was time to strike.

It wouldn't be much longer now...

...

Alice was startled by the uproar outside the cabin. The ship quaked violently due to the fierce struggle between Duncan and his catch, causing furniture to clang and crash around. Grateful for her gripping ability, she clung to the nearby railings for support.

"What's happening?"

Initially, Alice thought the noise was caused by a collision, but she soon realized it originated from the items themselves – they seemed to be conversing with each other. Unfortunately, she couldn't comprehend their language.

Sensing that something might be amiss outside, Alice decided to inspect the deck. Despite stumbling and nearly being struck by a runaway barrel rolling down the corridor, she reached the stairs and forced the door open.

Massive waves assailed the vessel...

The sky appeared dark, almost pitch black, and the foreboding clouds created such a dense, oppressive atmosphere that it was challenging to gaze upon.

The doll was uncertain if this weather was typical for the Vanished. All she knew was that she had to find Captain Duncan soon or face remorse. Thankfully, locating him required little effort as he stood at the edge of the deck.

...

Despite the wind and pounding waves, Duncan, on the verge of success, considered the harsh weather a mere nuisance. He was now employing the ghost fire, and through the feedback from the rod, his prey had stopped resisting. Just a bit more effort, and he would pull this catch out of the water!

“Come on, you!” He exclaimed jubilantly.

With another forceful tug, a colossal fish, half his size, landed on the deck, thrashing and splashing on the wooden surface. However, instead of elation, he felt dismay at the sight.

“..... It’s so ugly.”

Indeed, the enormous fish had a repulsive appearance. Rather than a smooth, sleek body, it had rough, bumpy skin and sharp, threatening fins that were splayed out. The eyes were white, hollow-looking orbs evocative of ghouls and zombies in a horror film.

For some reason, Duncan experienced an unnerving feeling that the fish was glaring at him, challenging the man who dared to catch it.

But in the next instant, the fish convulsed violently, and its eyes burst, spewing blood in all directions. Then it was dead. No more thrashing or flapping as if tasered. The grotesque creature lay motionless, with only a pool of blood indicating it was alive just moments ago.

Duncan was taken aback by this turn of events. Then, recalling that most deep-sea fish cannot survive on the surface due to water pressure, he understood why the fish's blood vessels had burst, resulting in its swift death.

As he stood there, still bewildered, a crackling sound caught his attention. Intrigued to identify the source, he was surprised to see a number of smaller "peculiar fishes" landing on his ship!

They resembled the large fish but smaller, measuring about half a meter in size. Like the bigger catch, they were all bleeding profusely from their eye sockets and appeared close to death.

Astonished, it took Duncan a moment to respond: "Jeez, buy one get a dozen?"

...

From Alice's viewpoint, the doll observed the intense battle unfolding before her eyes with apprehension.

Initially, she saw Captain Duncan standing at the edge of the deck, gazing down at the immense shadow concealed within the water. Suddenly, a tentacle – thicker than the Vanished's main mast – emerged from the water. It featured numerous menacing eyes along its length and countless sharp teeth beside the eyeballs. At that moment, Alice believed the ship would undoubtedly be ripped apart by the creature lurking beneath the surface.

In her panic, she gasped, wanting to warn Duncan to dodge. However, before she could act, the tentacle had already initiated its downward strike.

But instead of panicking or showing anger, Captain Duncan merely grinned, like a fisherman anticipating an abundant catch. It was then that their gazes

locked. The monstrous tentacle and Duncan engaged in a stare-down, as if two predators were competing for dominance.

To the doll's surprise, the eyes on the tentacle exploded, with blood spraying across the ocean. This was followed by the writhing and flailing of the creature concealed in the depths.

Whatever Duncan had done, it harmed the dark entity hidden in the water, causing it to sever its own appendages. Seconds later, the repugnant and detestable creature crashed onto the wooden deck and came to rest at the captain's feet.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 35

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Chapter 35 “Calm and Normal”

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Alice watched as the severed tentacle landed on the deck and rolled to a stop at the captain’s feet, its vitality quickly draining away. Simultaneously, the gigantic creature coiled beneath the water’s surface before diving and disappearing from sight. Its swift departure could even lead one to believe it was fleeing from them.

Alice then observed the heavy, somber clouds that had covered the sky clearing at a surprisingly fast rate. What was more fascinating, though, was the shape they assumed, resembling the shadowy creature in the water, as though they were a reflection of it.

Her wandering thoughts were soon interrupted by the crackling sound of flames at the edge of the deck. As she turned in that direction, she saw the captain, his appearance returned to its usual pleasant demeanor rather than the green, fiery figure he had been. He gestured for her to come closer with a wave of his hand.

“Look, I caught a big fish!” Duncan said, nudging the lifeless, grotesque creature on the deck with a rosy grin.

“Big... Big fish?” Alice replied hesitantly, glancing down at the mass of flesh and bloody eyes on the floorboards.

No matter how she tried to associate the idea of a fish with the creature, it didn’t seem to fit with its sharp, menacing teeth and multitude of glaring

eyes. To make matters worse, Duncan's kick caused several of the eyes to blink, startling the doll.

"Yes, big fish," Duncan reiterated cheerfully, dancing like an excited child.
"You see, it took quite a bit of effort to get this thing on board."

Despite being a puppet, Alice felt as if there were "muscles" in the corners of her eyes that twitched at what she had just heard. She attempted to voice an objection but was at a loss for how to correct the captain's assertion regarding the "fish" at his feet.

Although it had taken on the form of a fish after being severed, the dark, pockmarked skin remained revolting.

In addition, there were numerous "smaller fishes" scattered around the deck.

Alice was at a loss for words as she gazed at the bizarre scene with wide eyes. The inexperienced doll didn't know the meaning of "doubting life," but if she did, this would surely fit the bill. From a monster's tentacle transforming into a multitude of fish, everything about this situation was baffling!

Perhaps her momentary confusion was too evident, as Duncan quickly picked up on Alice's unease. "What's wrong?"

"I..." Alice began, but as she was about to speak, she suddenly remembered the rules concerning the goat head.

On the Vanished, Captain Duncan's authority is absolute, and his words are regarded as "facts" — if reality contradicts Captain Duncan's statements, then the captain's judgment takes precedence.

"No problem!" Alice quickly changed her anxious tone and shifted the subject, "By the way, Captain, that storm earlier was terrifying..."

"Storm? You mean that wave?" Duncan asked, looking skeptically at Miss Doll. "That wave was indeed large, but far from being a storm... but then

again, have you ever seen a storm before?"

Alice: "...You're right."

If Captain Duncan referred to the storm that engulfed nearly the entire sea as a "wave," then it must be a wave. If he called a massive tentacle with eyes and fangs a "fish," then it must be a fish as well. Her own perceptions and thoughts didn't matter.

"...I get the feeling you're a bit uneasy right now. Are you okay?" Duncan still detected something off in Alice's tone and grew increasingly concerned, "Is it seasickness? But can you even get seasick?"

"I'm fine. The ship just shook a bit earlier..." Alice gazed at the captain before her with a worried expression. She wasn't sure whether to feel comforted or more fearful of this man, "By the way, what do you plan to do with these 'fishes'?"

"Is there any doubt?" Duncan burst into laughter, "I'm going to eat them, of course!"

Alice's face momentarily displayed shock: "...Eat?"

"What else? Didn't you think the food supply on the Vanished was too bland?" Duncan clearly sounded pleased with himself, "I'm going to fillet one right away. We can stew, grill, or even salt-dry the smaller ones..."

He enthusiastically detailed his plans for the "fishes." Although he spoke confidently, in reality, he had no idea if he would succeed in his culinary endeavors. After all, he had been relying on instant noodles all his life. Asking someone like that to cook such a challenging dish was a tall order.

But there's no way to know unless he tries, right? As long as it doesn't upset his stomach, anything goes.

Despite Duncan's excitement about his catch, he still maintained some level of caution. A fish that ugly would naturally raise suspicions of being

poisonous. The safest course of action would be to find a hapless test subject to try it first.

Of all the potential candidates, the goat head in the captain's quarters came to mind first. Unfortunately, he quickly dismissed that idea. Then he glanced at the cursed doll opposite him. Alice wasn't a suitable choice either since she had no stomach.

Finally, his eyes landed on the dove perched on his shoulder, who tilted her head in response.

Ai didn't resemble a typical creature, but if there were any crew members with flesh and blood on this ship, she appeared to be the only one left.

Moments later, Duncan left the deck with his "harvest"—lunchtime was approaching, and he was eager to enhance the food quality on the Vanished.

After a brief hesitation, Alice followed him to the captain's quarters. She hadn't planned on seeking out the goat head so soon after experiencing the first mate's nagging. If possible, she wanted to avoid going in there again.

But the day's events were so peculiar that she felt compelled to consult with the experienced Mr. Goathead to determine if this was a typical occurrence on the Vanished.

She hadn't violated the crew code. Asking about the situation shouldn't be off-limits.

After hesitating for a full ten seconds, Alice finally mustered the courage to push open the door to the captain's quarters.

To her surprise, the goat head had already turned towards the doorway and was staring intently at her, as if it had been waiting.

"What's happening outside?" The goat head asked in a highly concise manner.

Alice sensed something was amiss with the other's unusual behavior. Quickly closing the door reflexively, she approached the mapping table and

recounted everything she had witnessed. Once finished, an unsettling and eerie silence filled the room.

Despite the wooden statue's inability to convey facial expressions, Alice could tell that the situation had exceeded the "first mate's" control.

Tension rising, she subconsciously leaned forward: "Isn't this a typical event on the Vanished? Could it be that the captain actually..."

"Everything is normal for the Vanished," the goat head finally broke the silence and replied. The tone of his voice suggested that he had resolved some inconsistency in his reasoning. "Listen, the Vanished is always normal, and the great Captain Duncan is as well!"

"That... I only thought that based on your reaction..."

"Things have gone beyond my expectations, but that's due to my limited imagination and knowledge." The goat head's words resumed their usual rapid pace, "Yes, the great Captain Duncan—he is even more exceptional and powerful! There is nothing unusual, Miss Alice. Remember, everything is as it should be on the Vanished! Allow the captain to do as he sees fit and refrain from discussing the matter... Just keep this in mind from now on: There are fish in the kitchen of the Vanished, and fish are a delicious ingredient."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 36

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Chapter 36 “The Day and Night Cycle”

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Cooking such a massive fish for lunch proved to be no easy task.

The process was not only technically challenging but also physically demanding.

Duncan’s passion and determination to enhance his diet fueled his motivation to tackle the task wholeheartedly.

After an arduous battle in the kitchen, he successfully removed the bone spurs from the neck of the unsightly monster fish. He then clumsily divided the fatty body into several portions, setting aside the meatless head.

This brought a lot of amusement to him as he contemplated what others would think if they saw a ghost captain cooking in the kitchen. Would they be shocked and faint? Or would they gape in astonishment and scream?

These thoughts crossed Duncan’s mind as he separated the flesh from the bones, making him chuckle at the absurdity while also motivating him to pursue his dream of inviting friends to the ship for an enjoyable afternoon of conversation and camaraderie.

After cleaning the catch, Duncan preserved most of the fish in a barrel of sea salt, which he stored in the warehouse. He planned to marinate and air-dry the smaller fish later.

Sadly, no alcoholic beverages were available on the ship, which would have provided additional preservation options.

While having fresh fish daily was certainly a treat, Duncan understood that fishing was a matter of luck. He couldn't rely on consistently catching enough to maintain his supply, nor could he always effectively preserve the surplus.

He was also uncertain about the age and preservation methods of the stored jerky and cheese, so he preferred not to take any chances with his hard-earned catch. Dried fish was a far better option than century-old jerky and cheese.

Duncan added the tenderest fish pieces to a simmering pot with some jerky, intending to stew them until the meat fell apart.

Any experienced chef would be appalled by his unconventional approach, as the most delicate parts of the fish should be lightly fried to enhance their natural flavor. Duncan was aware of this, but he opted for thorough cooking to ensure the meal's safety.

Consuming unknown seafood carried risks, such as parasites or inherent toxicity. By cooking the fish to a near-mush, Duncan minimized these hazards. He wasn't eager to find out whether a "ghost captain" would be susceptible to such risks.

Having spent almost the entire afternoon, Duncan finally prepared his long-awaited "lunch" – a bowl of fish soup. However, before taking a bite, he cooled the dish and offered it to Ai the dove.

Naturally, doves don't eat meat, but Ai was no ordinary bird.

Duncan's curiosity needed satisfying, and he had many things to test on the Vanished.

Regarding potential poisoning, Duncan had a plan. Firstly, he thoroughly prepared the ingredients, with Ai's tasting being more of a formality. Secondly, if Ai's condition did worsen, he could use the green fire to revert

her to spirit form. In this state, decomposing and reconstructing her body would be effortless, rendering any toxins harmless.

Ai tilted her head to observe Duncan's gesture, and after confirming that the piece of fish was for her, she pecked at the table and glanced towards the ceiling. "Are your melons ripe?"

Duncan: "Just tell me if you'll eat it or not."

Ai flapped her wings and mimicked Duncan's tone, "Just tell me if you'll eat it or not!"

Then, she lowered her head and pecked at the already cold fish. Surprisingly, she consumed the food at an incredible speed, which was quite unusual for a bird!

After eating, Ai stretched her neck energetically and hopped around on the table with a contented air: "Tasty! Tasty!"

Duncan looked stunned before he sighed inwardly about the bird's behavior.

After a while, he relaxed and started to enjoy the meal with his pet, which turned out to be as delicious as he had imagined.

.....

As the setting sun approached the city's edge, the towering chimneys, pipes, and towers of the City-State of Pland were bathed in the warm golden glow of the evening.

The Storm Cathedral's chimes, the hissing of steam valves releasing pressure after the factory closed, and people returning to their homes for the night all signaled the transition from day to night. They knew the influence of the "depths" was approaching, but the effects were mitigated by staying home and keeping to brightly lit places – gas lamps blessed by the clergy effectively dispelled the malice lurking in the shadows.

Regardless, the Holy Storm Cathedral continued to watch over the city-state of Pland during its most vulnerable time. Although occasional anomalies

appeared within the city's boundaries, they were usually minor and harmless.

Unfortunately, there would always be fools drawn to darkness even under the vigilant eye of the church. These were society's deplorables, yearning for a "glorious" age yet to come.

Fortunately, in city-states where order prevailed, these subversive individuals typically hid in the shadows. On this particular night, several black-hooded figures were doing just that – huddling in a forgotten corner of Pland's abandoned sewers, cursing their luck.

"Curse those church hounds..." A weak and disoriented thirty-year-old man lay on the ground in tattered clothes.

"We've lost many of our comrades, and the emissary died during the ceremony..." another said in a hoarse voice, "how could the sacred ceremony suddenly go out of control..."

"It's because of that sacrifice. He's clearly a heretic..."

"Everyone, listen," a black-robed figure suddenly gestured for silence and strained to hear, "it's the sound of the twilight bell and the steam whistle."

"...It's almost night," the black-robed figure who cursed first murmured in a low voice before glancing at a fellow "comrade" lying motionless on a sheet. They were all in terrible shape, but one was far worse than the rest, "Damn it... I hope he survives this night."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 37

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Chapter 37 “Life And Death Cycle”

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“He’s still alive...” murmured one of the cultists hesitantly. He glanced at the “comrade” lying on the ground and noticed the man’s eyes, half open and half closed, devoid of focus.

“He’s alive only for now,” whispered another cultist, “and the twilight bell has tolled. He mustn’t die in this chamber. The Lord’s favor will grant him a serene rest in the darkness.”

The man on the sheet twitched his fingers in response to the comment, clearly aware of his own dire state. He didn’t want to die like this, but death had latched onto his shadow, and for now, his beloved “fellow sun-worshippers” regarded him as a “latent threat” to be removed from their sanctuary.

A heavy silence weighed on the air due to this agonizing decision. But after an indeterminate amount of time, the black-robed man who had previously cursed the Storm Church shattered the quiet: “Let’s wait a bit longer. At least... a person won’t transform immediately after they stop breathing.”

“Then we shall wait,” the soft-spoken, black-robed disciple agreed after glancing at the struggling, dying sun-worshipper. “But why did he suddenly

fall ill? Are you certain this is normal?”

“I know him... He owns an antique store in the city’s lower sector. It only sells fakes though, so business is poor,” said a reticent believer beside him. “He was already unwell before this, so he’s probably experiencing a recurrence from spending so much time with us in these sewers. The shock today likely exacerbated it.”

Upon hearing the explanation, the black-robed believer with the soft voice finally relaxed slightly. Though not a distinguished “priest” like the emissary, he had gained considerable experience from years of being a convert, making him more or less an “authority” on a wealth of occult knowledge. For instance, he knew that hidden perils always accompanied a botched ritual like today’s. The only mystery was who had become a “vessel” for such danger.

If not for the restraining belief that “all sun-worshippers are siblings” – and the fact that a few fervent believers still surrounded him – he would have already cast this unfortunate, sick man into the darkness outside.

After a prolonged silence, the black-robed believer took action and retrieved a pale golden amulet from his pocket. He placed the item on the dying “comrade’s” chest.

“What are you...” inquired a curious believer next to him.

“I acquired this amulet from the Emissary at great expense,” he declared earnestly, “may the Lord’s radiant grace shield our brethren and him from the encroachment of darkness.”

The two believers beside him immediately applauded. Then, filled with reverence, they began to chant while pounding their fists against their chests: “All who revere the sun are brothers and sisters....”

.....

As the sun dipped entirely below the horizon, the starless and moonless sky reemerged before Duncan. The pale fissuring scar stretched across the sky,

casting a cold glow over the Boundless Sea, while the Vanished sailed the waters.

He sighed while standing at the stern.

Despite his efforts, he could never find the stars beyond the pale radiance.

However, compared to the last time he had witnessed this starless night, his mood had improved significantly. He was adapting to life in this peculiar world and had even savored the delectable fish he had caught.

As an optimistic man, he appreciated even slight improvements in his life, especially when nature offered more gifts than he had anticipated.

At this rate, even if he couldn't establish a stable connection with land for now, he could at least enhance the living conditions aboard the ship.

Lost in thought, he turned to the dove perched on his shoulder and casually suggested in a playful tone: "What do you think... wouldn't it be easier if I did something more fitting for a pirate captain? Like, finding a busy shipping route and engaging in some piracy...?"

The dove cocked its head, and its two beady red eyes darted around unfocused: "Doesn't sound like it, doesn't sound like it, doesn't sound like it..."

"Guess you're right. It's not in my nature," Duncan smiled, "and doing it isn't as simple as saying it. At the very least, I need to find a shipping route first."

He had no clue how far the Vanished had strayed from the mainland's shores. Sure, they had encountered the White Oak carrying Alice previously, but Duncan believed that was a one-time event. There was no way shipping anomalies occurred daily.

Just then, a voice from the side interrupted Duncan's train of thought: "Captain, are we going to pirate other ships?"

Duncan looked over to see Alice sitting on a high plank, gazing at him with curiosity.

Bathed in the pale, fractured light of the sky, the Gothic doll in a black dress exuded the tranquil elegance found only in old-world paintings depicting nobility.

Duncan was momentarily taken aback. Amid the recent chaos, he had nearly forgotten how graceful this doll could appear when sitting still. For an instant, he was captivated by her beauty and aura.

Unaware of the captain's thoughts, Alice inquired again, "Captain, are we going to pirate other ships?"

Undoubtedly, this question tarnished her image somewhat.

"Do you like piracy?" Duncan asked with a smirk.

"No," Alice shook her head, "it sounds boring."

"But you were 'pirated' by me to board this ship," he reminded her.

"...True," Alice contemplated for a moment, nodded, and then asked once more, "So are we going to be pirates now?"

"No," Duncan waved his hand and leisurely walked toward his personal quarters, "I also find piracy rather dull. Taking a stroll seems more fitting for a post-dinner activity."

Duncan returned to the captain's room alone and briefly instructed the goat head to take the helm using his psychic powers.

He had already resolved to embark on a second spirit walk that night.

But unlike the previous time, he would test this ability with the dove as his companion.

A cluster of green sparks danced around Duncan's fingertips as he conjured the ghost fire. Simultaneously, the bird that had been wandering around the

table vanished and reappeared on his shoulder.

Sensing the connection between Ai and himself, Duncan slowly steadied his breathing and recalled the “sensation” he experienced when activating the brass compass – he intended to communicate with the dove using this approach.

The ethereal green flame transformed into a slender thread and wrapped around Ai’s wings at his command. In the next instant, the white dove burst into a blazing ball of fire!

As the white dove’s feathers transformed into an illusory form, they rose and flapped like a miniature phoenix, continuously shifting without maintaining a solid shape. Meanwhile, the compass hanging around Ai’s chest activated, snapping the glass lid open as the pointed dial spun wildly and numerous occult runes materialized in the air. Just like the first time, the needle abruptly halted, pointing directly toward a specific direction.

The surrounding scene crumbled away within seconds, revealing the familiar dark tunnel and mysterious streams of light that filled Duncan’s vision. Without needing any guidance, he allowed his heart to seek the next “target” suitable for contact.

Suddenly, his awareness was drawn to a cluster of starlight in the distance.

He couldn’t be sure if this was the “Captain Duncan’s intuition” referred to by the goat head, but he decided to follow that instinct since it felt right. Regardless of who was behind the starlight, at least for now, that individual was destined to encounter the great Captain Duncan.

...

In the abandoned sewers on the outskirts of the city-state of Pland, the sun god cultists who had narrowly evaded the church’s guardians silently rested in their hideout.

The world above had succumbed to a deep slumber, while the underground realm harbored only a faint cluster of lights to protect the forsaken. Despite

their fearsome and sinister exterior, these cultists were still human, and as long as the sun did not rise, they remained vulnerable to the terror and unease the darkness brought.

Finally, amidst the tense and uneasy atmosphere, their dying companion drew his last breath.

“May the sun continue to shine on your soul in the darkness,” uttered the black-robed disciple in a low voice. He then waved his hand to signal the others, “Take him...”

Regrettably, his words halted as he struggled to comprehend what was unfolding.

Before everyone’s eyes, the lifeless corpse began to breathe once more.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 38

Chapter 38 “Offline”

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The black-robed believers in the room all watched this in shock and disbelief. They had no idea the person had actually died already. In their view, the fellow compatriot only looked like he's passed out for a split second before making a full recovery.

“Thank you Lord for your protection!” A younger black-robed believer finally reacted and couldn't help but praise excitedly, “You survived! I thought you would...”

“Wait! This isn't right! Back off!” The low-voiced believer who was most skeptical suddenly raised a hand to halt his brethren to back off. At the same time, he glared daggers at the newly awakened man, “His breathing clearly stopped for good, I am not mistaken... something is not right!”

Duncan finally adapted to the surrounding environment after the initial daze. He could see the group nearby, and for the first time, he's thinking WTF due to how familiar the environment was.

The spirit world should be random, and when he chose the target, he was completely following his intuition in the chaos. The fact that he ended up in the same place with these cultists are beyond lucky at this point.

Then he noticed the strange looks coming his way and the black cloak on himself. After two seconds of silence, he now understood what's happening.

Last time he was sacrificed by the cultists, and now he's actually a “cultist”.

Talk about being fated.

“..... Something is not right!”

Just then, a low, hostile voice interrupted Duncan’s chaotic state of mind after “awakening”. Following the noise, he was immediately met with a pair of vigilant eyes gleaming warily at himself.

Duncan was stunned over the hostility, then realized he might have possessed a corpse like the last time.

Oh wow, I just did an undead rising right in front of these cultists!

After connecting the dots, the nervous tension from these black robes made a lot of sense then. Quickly working the brain to come up with an excuse, he was ready to explain when a burst of fragmented memories vaguely surfaced from within. It’s his name, how he joined this cult, and why he drank the blood of the innocent to gain the sun’s blessing...

Duncan didn’t know how long he fell into that sluggish state, perhaps for only a second, but he felt sorry for this body’s original owner. No doubt, it’s a hateful yet pitiful life story.

Then it dawned on him. Unlike the first spirit walk, he was able to read the life story of whoever he possessed!

A new ability? But why? Is it because this corpse is still fresh? Or is it because of Ai’s connection this time?

Not dwelling on the discovery, Duncan slowly got up from the floor. He knows, whatever the reason it might be, this was not the time to relish on the issue. There are still the nervous-looking cultists in front of himself that needs handling.

With Duncan’s movement to get up, the cultists also backed off with one raising a blade in a defensive position: “Don’t move! Tell me, what is your name?”

“..... Ron,” Duncan replied naturally, “Ron Strian.”

“His name is Ron.” A young black-robed believer on the other side immediately confirmed to the leading cultist.

However, the wary cultist did not let his guard down and continued to stare daggers at Duncan. Then chanting a spell using a devoted voice: “In the name of the sun, may the glory of the Lord shine, and in the name of the sun, may the blessings of the Lord come!”

Listening to the sudden insanity of the cultist on the other side, Duncan just stood there in stunned silence until a burning sensation locked onto his chest. He subconsciously pulled out the thing under his shirt and found it to be a golden talisman of the sun. It’s radiating a strange heat from the surface.

Then without warning, the talisman suddenly burst into flames that’s full of malice.

“The glory of the Lord is eating him!” Seeing this scene, the cultist who had just recited the prayer reacted instantly and shouted, “His soul has been replaced! Kill this heretical filth!”

The other cultists moved noticeably slower, but they did not hesitate to draw the short swords from their waist to attack. “Kill him!”

While Duncan watched the black cultists attack him, another shadow had suddenly appeared in the corner of his eyes. It’s a ghostly green undead bird flapping its wings across the ceiling while emitting a strange scream from its beak.

The cultists were naturally attracted by this “undead bird” and looked upwards, but this was a mistake on their part. In real-time, their bodies started to overlap with the shadows, fading and blurring between reality and darkness until they were frozen to the spot.

With great horror in their eyes, they watched as the undead bird eventually circled around them to land on Duncan’s shoulder. Then, with even greater shock, the sun amulet – still burning yellow in the man’s hand – had snuffed out to be replaced by a ghostly green flame like the undead bird!

Pleased by what he's done, Duncan gradually came up to the frozen cultists and said the most terrifying words possible: "If only you had pretended not to know anything."

The next second, the figures of the cultists flashed violently in mid-air like fireworks at a party until they too were gone from existence.

"Aiya, the page is missing. Try refreshing?" Ai randomly chirps this while still in her ghost form.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 39

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Chapter 39 “The Captain’s On Land”

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Duncan couldn’t comprehend the reason behind the cultists vanishing before his very eyes. He was only aware that it was Ai’s doing.

After confirming that the cultists were indeed gone, he slightly turned his head and inquired of the dove on his shoulder, “Where did you send them?”

Ai fluttered her translucent, ghostly wings before responding, “They’ve been banished to the shadows!”

Duncan furrowed his brow. Having become accustomed to Ai’s manner of speaking, he ventured a guess, “You mean you banished them to some sort of parallel space? Or transformed them into an intangible state?”

The dove glanced upward, fluttering her eyes innocently at Duncan, “Googoo!”

Ai was now pretending to be a regular dove again...

Regardless, Duncan felt confident he had already uncovered the truth.

After patting the dove on her head, he surveyed the dimly lit shelter, noting a square room reminiscent of the sewer he’d traversed during his first spirit walk, flickering oil lamps on the walls, and sheets on the floor for resting.

There was no trace of the sun god cultists—they had vanished entirely from this world. Still, upon closer examination, Duncan sensed their eerie presence. Though he couldn't see or touch them, he heard their anguished screams echoing like phantom cries.

Ultimately, Duncan's theory was confirmed. Amidst the oil lamp's flickering light, he noticed a faint scratch mark, as though a blade had scraped the wall where light and shadow intertwined. But when he blinked, it disappeared...

This marked the cultists' final contact with the real world. Regardless of where they had been sent, they wouldn't return.

Sighing heavily, Duncan chose not to dwell on the matter and exited the hideout after accepting the consequences of his actions.

Outside the forsaken hideout, he encountered a corridor narrower than the sewer tunnels he'd previously traversed. It forked into two paths: one leading deeper underground and another ascending.

Based on his fragmented memories, Duncan quickly surmised that the path upward would take him to the surface. He eagerly anticipated exploring the world above.

Fresh air soon caressed his hair, accompanied by the distant hum of factories and the faint sound of waves crashing against the reefs. Excited, he hastened his pace.

"The era is calling! Era is calling!" Ai flapped her wings, returning to her normal form with a cheerful chirp.

Duncan halted and reminded the dove, "Don't speak casually outside anymore. Doves don't speak human language."

Ai considered his words and energetically flapped her wings, replying, "Aye, captain!"

Duncan marveled at her proper response, unsure whether it was intentional or coincidental. Regardless, he quickly moved on.

After all, an entirely new world awaited him!

But before venturing further, Duncan needed to discard the conspicuous black robe he wore. Appearing in public dressed like that would surely attract the attention of law enforcement officers.

Additionally, he needed to avoid the night watchmen. Pland enforced a strict curfew, and anyone wishing to be outside at night required a legal document granting permission. As a former cultist, Duncan obviously lacked such authorization.

Despite the fragmented memories inherited from a deceased body being disordered and hazy, Duncan managed to piece together enough information to form a plan.

Before reaching the final exit, he removed his robe, revealing ordinary clothes underneath that wouldn't raise suspicion. Though tempted to burn the robe, Duncan decided against it, as the resulting smoke would draw unwanted attention. Instead, he rolled it up and concealed it in a hidden corner.

Duncan recognized that the Sun Amulet he carried could cause trouble, but its potential value was too great for him to discard. He intended to return it to the Vanished for further testing and analysis.

Having tidied his appearance and no longer resembling a frantic, fleeing cultist, Duncan proceeded up the tunnel.

He was struck by the solid, stable ground beneath his feet, bathed in a pale shimmer.

Upon catching his first glimpse of the city, Duncan's eyes widened in amazement. It was just as he had imagined: buildings and infrastructure stretched as far as the eye could see, a testament to human civilization!

Duncan couldn't help but laugh silently, gasping for air.

However, he quickly composed himself and began walking, aware that this was no place to linger.

Cultists, too, had their own "normal lives." Apart from a few "priests" who wholly embraced their roles as scourges upon civilization, most were simply people who had been deceived from the beginning. A good example would be vulnerable individuals like elderly people without families, impoverished lower-class citizens, or inexperienced youths were all prime targets for cult recruitment.

As for the body Duncan now occupied, the unfortunate Ron had been an ordinary man who owned an antique shop in the city's lower sector. Struck by misfortune and fate, Ron was diagnosed with a terminal illness, which ultimately led him down a dark path.

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Chapter 40 “Landfall”

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Vanna jolted awake after a disturbing and tumultuous dream that night. The sun had set, but the pale white glow of the fissuring scar, known as the World’s Creation, continued to illuminate the night sky through her window, casting a tranquil and serene ambiance.

However, Vanna couldn’t shake the horrific image from her mind – a massive ship filled with the tormented screams of the damned, intent on crushing Pland with its enormous, fiery presence.

As the ship descended, she also witnessed a blazing sun rising from the city’s depths – not the rune-bound sun familiar to the world, but the celestial star body spoken of by the sun heretics hidden in the sewers.

During that nightmarish dream, the Church of the Storm stood still on one side, observing the catastrophe engulfing her home. No guidance was provided for its followers, only hollow bells and unanswered prayers...

Vanna quietly rose from her bed and approached the window in her pajamas. Gazing down at the city, she saw only peace and serenity. Yet, her unease and anxiety grew, knowing it was deceptive.

Moments later, the young inquisitor turned her attention to the dresser. Inside one of the drawers lay the curved ritual dagger of her faith, symbolizing the Storm Goddess.

Vanna's eyes lingered on the blade for a few more seconds before she could no longer resist. Cutting a small line on her fingertip, she let a droplet of blood emerge before invoking the Storm Goddess's name, seeking guidance.

However, she only heard the vague sound of waves crashing in her ear. The "psychic induction" she had easily accessed before was now unresponsive. It was as if an immense, invisible barrier had suddenly severed her connection to the Storm Goddess.

Vanna's brow furrowed in response to this disconnection.

The disruption of the bond between believers and gods was uncommon but not unknown, as the relationship between subspace and the real world was intricate. However, the Storm Goddess Gomona should have been the exception, given the Boundless Sea.

This was why the Storm Church had become the dominant religion in this world.

"Could the problem lie within me?"

Vanna instinctively doubted her own condition, but when she looked at her fingertip, the wound had already healed. This demonstrated that the Storm Goddess's blessing remained.

"There must be a connection between my dream and my inability to hear the goddess's voice."

"A ghost ship engulfed in green flames... ghost ship..."

Vanna's mind rapidly processed and compared the arcane knowledge she had acquired, and her eyes suddenly grew serious.

Though she wasn't an expert in sea navigation and had minimal exposure to the outlandish, superstitious tales prevalent among sailors, even in conventional religious texts, a particular ghost ship held a unique position.

This ominous ship, returning from subspace, was captained by the fearsome man who caused the thirteen islands of Witherland to be consumed by the border collapse a century ago: Duncan of the Vanished.

Vanna hastily stood up from the dresser, eager to confirm her suspicion. However, she realized the late hour and that the cathedral's archive wouldn't be accessible at night.

From a security standpoint, it would be wise for Vanna not to discuss the details of the dream with others just a few hours after experiencing it. After all, doing so could create a link with "Captain Duncan," providing an opportunity for him to return from subspace.

The most reliable and secure approach would be to wait patiently. Once the sun rises and regains its prominence in the world, any connection established by the dream would weaken and fade. At that point, she could consult the archives for relevant information or seek advice from the church's archbishop.

In any event, she must do everything in her power to prevent that legendary ship from reaching Pland. As its guardian and resident, it was Vanna's duty to do so.

...

A tall, slender, dark figure swiftly moved through the empty streets of the downtown area, leaving only a fleeting glimpse of his shadowy silhouette.

Though the buildings and streets were unfamiliar, Duncan knew precisely where to go, thanks to the memories he "consumed" from possessing this body.

This delighted him, as he had not only managed to make landfall but also gained ample information about this world's technology through his perfect disguise, rather than a decaying corpse.

To be honest, the health of this body was not particularly good. However, his ability to spirit walk allowed him to disregard the body's condition, so

he had no complaints.

The distant barking of dogs at the end of the alley prompted Duncan to halt his progress and seek refuge between the nearest two buildings.

He wasn't sure if these were patrol dogs led by the church's night watchmen, but it was better to err on the side of caution.

Eventually, the noise subsided, and the steam pipes quietly released their exhaust into the night.

Duncan emerged from his hiding spot and carefully surveyed the streets for potential threats. Relying on his memory, he stayed on the left side, aware that the house on the right often attracted attention due to its inebriated occupants.

Navigating through a row of modest two – or three-story buildings, he finally arrived at a neglected old building with a grimy sign hanging out front. The building had clearly been mistreated, as the windows were filthy, making it nearly impossible to see inside – but it was home nonetheless.

“Ron Antique Shop,” Duncan murmured softly, “what a straightforward and unassuming name...”

Upon finishing, he searched for the key based on what little he remembered. After rummaging near the entrance, he found the spare key concealed beneath the windowsill.

The body's original owner had taken precautions to avoid detection, such as possessing a key that could identify him as the proprietor of this antique shop.

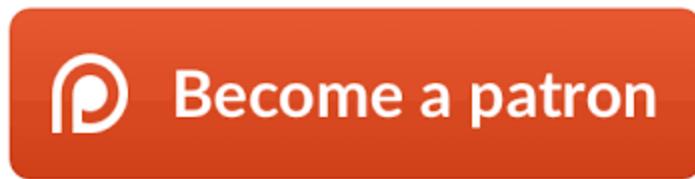
Swiftly inserting the key into the lock, Duncan slipped inside with minimal noise and closed the door behind him. Despite his best efforts to be discreet, the old wooden door produced a rather loud slamming sound in the quiet of the night. Fortunately, he was now inside, safe from prying eyes...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 41

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Chapter 41 “Inside the Antique Shop”

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The interior of the antique shop was just as Duncan had surmised—cluttered, decadent, and seemingly unprofitable. Simply observing the amount of dust that had accumulated near the window, it wasn’t difficult to imagine the hardships the owner must have faced.

Duncan first noticed a table against the wall, displaying large vases, sculptures, and totem-like items of uncertain significance. The wall behind this table featured a shelf used for arranging smaller merchandise in the store. Opposite the entrance, a long bar counter served as a reception area for guests. However, instead of being stocked with products, the shelf behind the counter showcased only some dusty picture frames and small ornaments—likely sentimental keepsakes of the owner.

Adjacent to the counter, a dimly lit staircase led to the second floor. Duncan recalled this area because of a concealed door beneath the staircase, which opened to a cluttered warehouse at the back of the shop.

It was challenging to envision how someone could make a living in this dilapidated shop and still have the means to support the sun god religion.

Duncan approached the counter to investigate further. As he carefully stepped on the creaky wooden floor, he paused and noticed a wall-mounted lamp.

It was an electric light bulb.

Duncan's brow furrowed in realization.

The lamp's wrought iron frame and grayish shade were unfamiliar, but the structure of the tungsten light bulb was unmistakable.

Was electricity so widespread that even residents in the less affluent parts of town could afford it? Then why were there gaps and oil lamps in the underground sewers? Some areas even used torches...

Significant questions arose from this contradictory information, particularly regarding the underground sewer arrangements.

Duncan had assumed that the use of gas and oil lamps was due to the world's technological constraints, but that was evidently not the case. Instead, it was a deliberate choice by the city's management.

Searching his fragmented memory, Duncan tried to find the related knowledge. Unfortunately, the only answers he received were that "it's common sense" and "urban planning is as such."

This knowledge was either censored, explaining why his current body didn't know anything, or it was so basic that it left no notable impression on the cultist's mind.

Feeling momentarily perplexed, Duncan reached out and turned on the electric light. With a click, the bright light instantly illuminated the area near the staircase and counter.

There was also a switch on the opposite wall controlling the lights in other sections of the ground floor, but Duncan decided against using it for the time being.

Given the late hour, a single light in a closed antique shop could be dismissed as the owner taking a nocturnal walk. However, lighting up the entire establishment would undoubtedly draw unwanted attention.

With the dim light near the staircase, Duncan's gaze first fell upon a wooden figure, less than half a meter tall, adorned with peculiar red and

blue facial patterns. Beside it were antique vases that appeared to be ceramic. Though these items looked worn and aged, their exorbitant price tags told a different story.

The original price was 420,000, with a 36% discount...

Duncan quickly averted his gaze and surveyed the store. Based on his evaluation, he doubted any of the items were genuine, and if any were, he would resort to suicide by smashing his head against the Vanished.

The items couldn't be more counterfeit. In fact, Duncan was convinced no ordinary person would believe this shop sold authentic antiques. The oldest artifact in the entire store might well be the weathered signboard outside the door...

Still, Duncan wasn't taken aback by the existence of such a store in this area. If the owner knew he was peddling fakes, then why not? And if customers were aware they were buying forgeries, even better, right? This was the less affluent part of the city, where commoners resided. Who could afford real antiques anyway? The signboard hanging outside the shop was simply a formality, and only those in the know would visit.

Regardless of the unremarkable life this body led before death, Duncan had a singular concern: could he use this place as a "foothold" to traverse between the Vanished? He needed a secure location to transport supplies using Ai's ability. If this shop could offer shelter from prying eyes, it would be ideal.

Duncan went behind the counter and took a seat to sift through the memories in his possession. He pondered whether the plan would work and the potential dangers involved.

Firstly, the original owner was indeed a sun god believer, but merely at the lowest level. He was a mere foot soldier, insignificant. Due to the city-state authorities' crackdown on cult activities in recent years, participating in the organization's events had become increasingly difficult.

Even better, the “middle man” responsible for connecting him with higher-ups had been killed during the previous spirit walk Duncan undertook, effectively severing any ties between him and the other cultists. They wore masks during gatherings, so no one had seen his face.

However, if Duncan had to identify a hidden danger that troubled him, it would be the rationale behind the sun cultists’ rampant human sacrifices.

Four years ago, the city-state of Pland confronted the sun cultists as they attempted a mass sacrifice at the city’s core, allegedly to resurrect their Sun God.

The city would have been devastated had that happened. Fortunately, the authorities and the Storm Church thwarted the heretics beforehand. Yet, Duncan understood that the event was merely a precursor to something far more dreadful.

He held no affection for Pland, but this city was too crucial to allow its destruction at the hands of fanatics.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 42

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 42 “Book’s Knowledge”

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The city’s curfew was not conducive to exploration, so Duncan remained in the antique shop all night—his excitement at setting foot on land drove him to tirelessly investigate the entire building.

There was no doubt that the original owner of this body was a cultist, but he was also an ordinary person. He needed communication with others, interaction with civilized society, and sustenance to survive. In short, he needed to engage with the rest of the city.

Interaction implied clues, and clues enabled Duncan to tentatively deduce what was required to survive in Pland. He needed to keep in mind aspects such as the general level of technology used by the citizens in their daily lives.

Eventually, Duncan discovered a small amount of cash in a hidden compartment behind the counter on the ground floor, using the memories he had absorbed. This included a variety of coins, which were common in most city-states, as they were jointly certified and issued by the governing body of the government and the Chamber of Commerce of the Boundless Sea.

These coins were called “Sora,” and there were over two hundred of them, sufficient for a family of three to live for a month in the city’s less affluent area.

It appeared that even with a dismal business, the original owner managed to maintain his standard of living while donating most of his wealth to the cult. At the very least, a steady flow of customers supported the revenue.

After inspecting every room, from the living quarters to the warehouse at the back, Duncan eventually returned to the master bedroom on the second floor. There was a picture frame containing a black-and-white photo of a family of three—a young couple in plain clothes and a little girl around four to five years old, all smiling at the camera with an artificial background behind them.

Duncan picked up the frame and examined it closely. Vague clues soon surfaced from his memory.

The original owner of this body was not in the photo. Could they be close relatives of this body? They must have been very dear to him...

As Duncan gazed at the young couple, he seemed to sense a faint feeling of longing emerging from the depths of his memory.

However, the rest of the information about these people remained a blur to him. It appeared everything else concerning this family had faded away following the original owner's death.

Setting down the black-and-white picture, he wondered about the cost of such an item for a commoner until his eyes fell upon the neatly made bed. Uncertainty then filled his heart.

Would a cultist, completely devoted to the sun god's belief, have time to tidy up and clean on the weekend?

The storefronts on the ground floor had clearly been neglected, so how could the beds upstairs be so immaculate and well-kept?

Stepping out of the room, he headed to the smaller room across from the stairs. Here, the bed and desk were equally tidy.

As he sifted through more memories, Duncan was certain that the original owner of this body hadn't returned in the past few days. In other words, someone else had visited during that time.

Did someone else live here? A loved one?

Duncan furrowed his brow slightly, and as he searched for clues, he eventually examined the items on the desk. Among the pens and papers, he found a book with beautiful floral letters for its title – The Art of Steam and Gear: General Textbook III.

Duncan frowned, now certain that someone else also lived here. Curious, he picked up the textbook and flipped it open. Immediately, he saw an illustrated page detailing engineering and steam mechanics. The book's owner had left numerous notes on the pages as reminders, a must for any academic student.

The slender and beautiful letters led Duncan to assume the notes were written by a young maiden, as he wouldn't write this neatly despite being a teacher himself.

This discovery caused his forehead to throb from overthinking. However, as he delved deeper into the cold and lonely colors of the fragmented memories, Duncan eventually caught a glimpse of what he sought—a girl with dark brown hair standing in a warm, colorful background, someone Ron evidently cared deeply for in this world.

Duncan quickly shook off the discomfort and continued reading. He didn't concern himself with the technical details, instead focusing on the editor's introduction and conceptual discussion of each chapter.

At last, he found the line he'd been seeking:

“..... Flames, or more accurately, flames produced by burning oils and mineral crystals from the deep sea, serve as the cornerstones supporting and protecting our society and civilization...”

“Modern civilization’s prosperity and order rely on fire and steam... Clean and convenient electricity cannot replace fire’s exorcism effect, nor can it maintain the stable, long-term operation of large machines... Experiments have demonstrated that steam is the most stable form of power when influenced by subspace...”

“In this section, we will discuss three typical steam core architectures and explain their mechanical principles and design ideas...”

Duncan’s eyes slightly froze as he recalled the various forms of lighting in the sewers and streets.

So, was this the reason behind the “odd” situation? To resist or fend off whatever danger lurks in the darkness?

Inexplicable emotions filled Duncan’s heart as he continued to read the intricate drawings and notes left in the owner’s handwriting.

It was a machine beyond his comprehension, and it was certainly not the “steam engine” he knew from his past life.

The intricate gears, the exceptionally complex cylinders, and the pipes and valves connecting various components far surpassed the concept of a steam engine. It seemed more like a fantastical device, both contradictory and grotesquely beautiful.

This was the “heart” that supported the advancement of today’s world civilization...

Lost in thought, Duncan carefully returned the book to its original place.

As an earthling, and even as a teacher, he couldn’t understand the steam-powered mechanisms in the book. They were developed to an extreme, centuries beyond anything Earth had conceived.

Nevertheless, a vague enlightenment surfaced in his heart: the development of civilization in this world appeared to have taken a very different path than he had anticipated.

To survive in a world surrounded by crises, the mortal kingdom had also adopted a peculiar stance. Yet, no matter how strange the world might be, as long as it could still be called “civilization,” it would possess its own developmental structure and logic.

The gas lamps burning in the sewers, the electric lights illuminating the shops, and the steam engines depicted in books—condensed by the wisdom of countless people—all faintly revealed a sense of... resilience.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 43

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Chapter 43 “Good Morning Mr. Duncan”

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After returning the book to its shelf, Duncan inspected the other items in the room. Apart from two notebooks in the desk drawer, there was nothing else of value, indicating that this small bedroom was seldom used.

The content of the notebooks, filled with topics on steam mechanisms and engineering principles, as well as sporadic complaints about teachers and classmates, made it easy to deduce that the owner was a young girl who was still attending school.

Duncan eventually went back to the master bedroom after ensuring everything in the other room was returned to its original state. He needed more time to sift through his memories, which he did by sitting at the edge of the bed.

After some time, he stood up and approached a nearby cabinet. Relying on muscle memory, he opened the cabinet door and a drawer, rummaging around until he found what he was searching for: several bottles of low-quality spirits and half a box of analgesic and nerve-relieving tablets, all left behind by a cultist named “Ron.”

The previous man had suffered from a severe, irreversible illness, and these cheap spirits and painkillers were the only things that provided relief. However, such remedies could not prolong his life.

Having lost all hope, the man turned to the Sun Sect after hearing a preacher claim that the Sun God's healing power could cure all worldly afflictions, including his own. This is how Ron became a cultist.

To some extent, the cultists kept their word.

Through a bizarre and gruesome ritual, they managed to transfer the life force of an innocent person into the body of one of their followers. Duncan was unaware of the principles behind this ritual or whether it genuinely cured the incurable, but according to fragments of memories, "Ron" did improve after the ceremony. It was the primary reason the original owner of this body donated a significant portion of his family wealth to the cause – he had experienced the allure of the forbidden.

But Duncan was not concerned with the dealings of the deceased cultists.

Reaching further into the drawer, he deftly located a well-maintained revolver and a box of ammunition.

The City-State of Pland permits citizens to bear arms, but only with proper legal procedures for purchasing and carrying. A fraudulent antique dealer in the lower district of the city would likely lack the resources and credibility to obtain a gun permit, making it highly probable that this weapon was illegally acquired. Regardless, legal or not, the gun now belonged to Captain Duncan.

Just then, a soft noise caught his attention – the sound of a key scraping against a door on the first floor.

"You have a new message!" Ai chirped inopportunely as Duncan peered out the window.

"Quiet," he whispered to the bird while gripping the gun, "stay in this room and wait for my command. And keep quiet when others are around."

Ai promptly flapped her wings and flew to a nearby cabinet, responding, "Aye, captain!"

As Duncan hurried out of the room and approached the top of the stairs, he heard quick footsteps ascending, followed by a young girl's urgent voice: "Uncle Duncan? Are you back?"

A moment later, a girl with long dark brown hair, wearing a long brown dress and a white shirt, came into Duncan's view.

The young girl appeared to be around seventeen or eighteen years old, slender and petite, with her hair seemingly touched by morning dew. Her appearance wasn't striking, but she possessed the youthful beauty characteristic of her age, which was evident in her surprised expression upon encountering Duncan at the stairway.

He didn't respond, merely standing silently on the second floor, partially concealed by the dim light filtering through a narrow window opening. Eventually, he spoke with an uncertain tone, "What did you just call me?"

"Uncle... Duncan?" The girl's face registered surprise, and she gripped the handrail, her body tensing. She tried to discern her uncle's expression in the darkness, "Is something wrong? Did you drink again? You've been gone for days... and when I saw the light outside..."

Duncan absorbed this information like a sponge. According to his memories, this girl should be his "niece" and his only living relative, at least according to the original owner's memories.

What had gone wrong? Why would this girl, who theoretically shouldn't have known his secret, call him "Duncan" so naturally?

"Nina," he said as the name sprang from his lips, "were you at school yesterday?"

"I've been living at school these past days," the girl under the stairs responded, "I thought you'd be gone for at least a week, like before. So, I packed my things and moved in with my classmates... Mrs. White, the dormitory manager, agreed to my request. I only came home today because I left a book behind... Are you okay, Uncle? You seem off today..."

“I’m fine, just a bit groggy from sleep.”

Duncan responded naturally and descended the stairs to the first floor. A preposterous theory was brewing in his mind, and now he needed to confirm it.

As he and Nina crossed paths, they made eye contact. However, it wasn’t until Duncan reached the bottom of the staircase that the girl asked, “Uncle Duncan, are you going out later? Will you... stay home for a few more days?”

“...Depends on the situation,” Duncan kept his back to her, uncertain of what might happen, “I’m just going to check the front door. If nothing happens, I’ll stay home for a few days.”

“Oh, okay. In that case, I’ll go buy groceries. We don’t have many ingredients at home...” The girl quickly said and energetically dashed upstairs, displaying the youthful vigor of her age.

By then, Duncan had already approached the shop’s entrance. Taking a gentle breath, he pushed open the door and looked up at the signboard overhead. It was still old and dirty, but the words had changed as if they had always been this way: Duncan’s Antique Shop.

Duncan frowned and slowly approached the grimy glass window to examine his reflection. It was indeed a different face, not that of the stern and somber ghost captain, but of a weary middle-aged man with a beard and deep-set eyes. This was Ron’s face, the cultist who had perished in the sewers.

Eventually, the bustling city sounds interrupted his inspection. The lively atmosphere around him began to stir. First, the crisp sound of doorbells as doors opened along the street, followed by bicycle bells and the chatter of passers-by.

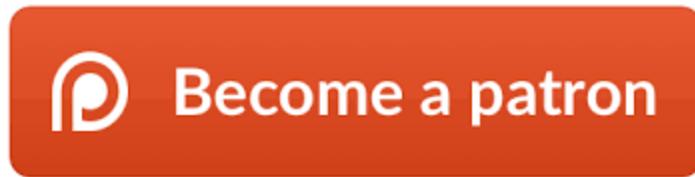
“Good morning, Mr. Duncan. Have you read today’s newspaper? The Storm Church seems to have destroyed a major cult hideout!” Eventually, someone passing by the front of the antique shop even greeted him.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 44

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Chapter 44 “Ordinary People’s Breakfast”

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A newspaper cost twelve pesos, equal to a modest breakfast or one of the most affordable desserts in the city square.

With this in mind, Duncan held a few coins and purchased a local newspaper from a newsstand. The owner, a middle-aged man engrossed in reading, gestured towards the newspaper as self-service without looking up.

Curious, Duncan glanced at what the man was reading – an analysis of the previous lottery. Just another hopeful player with unrealistic dreams of a vibrant life.

Then, he looked down at the newspaper he had just acquired. The front page featured a headline that caught his interest: Numerous cultists apprehended while several citizens rescued...

The “Inquisitor’s” photo on the front page, to Duncan’s surprise, depicted a relatively young woman with a prominent scar on her left eye. Despite the scar, her beauty stood out among her subordinates, and she was taller than the average man.

The inquisitor donned a form-fitting lightweight armored suit and wielded a two-handed sword reminiscent of the cold weapons era. She resembled a fierce female knight from medieval paintings, but the massive steam-powered robotic machinery behind her subordinates contradicted this

image. With cannons mounted on the side, the machinery was both intimidating and impressive.

Duncan found himself captivated by the image.

The news of the cult's rally site being destroyed was a relief for him. Now, without the fear of exposure, he could watch the criminals responsible for sacrificing lives being arrested and facing justice without any psychological burden. Moreover, he had acquired new information.

Female inquisitors specializing in cult matters, heavily armed steam-powered robots, church military forces equipped with both cold and hot weapons...

The elusive information on the Vanished was now accessible for a mere twelve pesos.

Duncan realized that during the time the Vanished had been adrift over the past century, times had changed.

Regardless of comparing “who was superior,” the mortal civilized society represented by the City-State of Pland had evolved into a kind of... golden age.

However, the street corner was not the place to read a newspaper. Rolling up the valuable paper, he remembered that a “niece” named Nina was waiting for him at the antique shop.

Rather than aimlessly wandering the city alone, a local with a trust advantage would undoubtedly be a better source of information.

As for the Vanished, Duncan wasn't concerned. Even in the state of spirit walk, he could clearly sense the ship's situation, his other body's condition, the goat-headed figure steering the vessel, and Alice's behavior in her room.

Moreover, the original crew's code of conduct included the explicit rule of “not disturbing the captain while in their private quarters.” A few days' absence due to spirit walking shouldn't cause any problems, right?

As time went on, Duncan noticed his control over this unique “mental projection” improving significantly. Perhaps, eventually, he could even actively control both bodies simultaneously without concern.

A pleasant aroma suddenly wafted from the side, catching Duncan’s attention. He looked around and found himself gazing at a recently opened pastry shop across the street.

This was the poorer part of the city, where high-end dessert shops were scarce. However, that didn’t mean there weren’t any sweets catering to those at the lower end of society. As luck would have it, Duncan still had a few coins in his pocket, totaling twenty pesos, more than enough to purchase a piece of cake.

After some hesitation, he visited the cake shop and bought the most ordinary bee honey cake. The packaging material used by the store was a rough-textured, thick paper.

Unexpectedly, Duncan felt unusually cheerful today as he made his way back to the antique shop.

Strolling through the streets, conversing with people, making purchases, and returning to one’s lodging.

Such simple activities finally gave him a renewed sense of being alive in another world. It was mundane and straightforward, yet a daily routine he had missed in recent days.

Life on the Vanished was tolerable; the goat-headed figure could be irritating at times, and Alice was an enjoyable companion. But this experience on land was different—a completely revitalizing experience.

In no time, Duncan arrived back at the antique shop. Before entering, he glanced up at the signboard again for confirmation—a row of letters spelling out “Duncan’s Antique Shop” remained.

The door chimed as he pushed open the wooden slab he called a door, announcing his arrival and prompting hurried footsteps from the stairs.

The long brown-haired girl appeared, wearing a concerned and anxious expression.

“Uncle Duncan, where have you been?” She asked hurriedly, “You said you were going to check the front door, but you vanished in the blink of an eye... I thought you had gone to the tavern or gambling house again...”

Duncan was taken aback by her genuine concern. It was the kind of worry that only a family member who deeply cared for a loved one would express. Even if that person was a drunken gambler tainted by the sun cult’s violent acts, it didn’t matter here.

“I just went for a walk and bought something along the way.” As he spoke, he placed the cake and newspaper on the counter to prove he wasn’t lying, which seemed to reassure the girl.

“Uncle, wait a moment; I’ll bring breakfast down here. You haven’t eaten yet, right? I made corn beet soup...” Before Duncan could respond, Nina vanished up to the second floor, only to return with a large tray laden with a modest assortment of food for two.

Duncan observed as the girl efficiently set the table for him. He wanted to help, but Nina’s diligence left no room for his assistance. In the end, it left a bitter taste in his mouth, as he knew what this implied: a girl, the age of a high school student, must have been forced to adapt to an environment beyond her years due to her “uncle’s” negligence....

“Let’s eat,” Nina said once everything was ready, glancing at Duncan as though she had repeated the phrase countless times. “Dr. Albert mentioned that having breakfast regularly and maintaining a good mood can be more beneficial in the long run than spirits... and even better than painkillers.”

Duncan remained silent in response, simply gazing at Nina, whose face appeared restrained and tense. It was evident that the girl hoped this breakfast would go well, and he happily obliged by sliding the cake box towards her.

“What’s this...?” Nina’s eyes widened in surprise and bewilderment.

“It’s a cake from the new shop around the corner,” Duncan casually explained, “You’re growing and should have something more nutritious for breakfast.”

Nina stared in astonishment. Eventually, she asked skeptically, “Uncle, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Of course I’m fine,” Duncan replied with a relatively natural expression, “I just remembered it’s been a while since I bought you a cake.”

“It has been over a year...” Nina mumbled, then broke into a giggle. Picking up a kitchen knife, she said, “We can each have half then. Dr. Albert said you need nutritious food too.”

Duncan found the exchange somewhat odd, but after a moment of silence, he agreed: “Alright....”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 45

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Chapter 45 “History”

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Experiencing events from multiple perspectives was fascinating – the Vanished drifting in the open sea, the goat head’s incessant chatter and guidance of the ship, and the cursed doll Alice wandering around the vessel, exploring various cabins.

He was Captain Duncan, master of the legendary Vanished, a roaming, walking maritime catastrophe. Yet, he was also currently sitting in an antique shop, enjoying a peaceful breakfast with Nina, his so-called human niece.

As if sensing his gaze, Nina, who was eating cake, looked up curiously:
“Uncle Duncan, aren’t you going to eat?”

Duncan glanced at the food on her plate: “Is it enough?”

“Yes, it’s not good to eat too many sweets.”

“Hmm.” Duncan nodded and took a bite of his own slice. Instantly, his taste buds were enveloped by the rich sweetness of honey and the smooth texture of the soft, fluffy sponge. However, more than the flavor and texture, he was surprised that his stomach could digest the food!

Clearly, unlike Duncan’s original body, this second one he inhabited had been revived through his intervention. Ron’s soul may have perished, but

the flesh remained alive. It could breathe, bleed, and eat like a regular human being.

However, there was one aspect the ghost captain wasn't entirely sure about.

He was aware that his body here must be plagued by a severe illness, as this was the most dominant memory and emotion he had acquired from inhabiting this body. The spirits and painkillers in the drawers attested to this fact.

Had his intervention cured the illness? Or had the body healed itself after being revived by his arrival? Perhaps, the health of this body was still deteriorating, and he was merely unaware of it due to his spirit walking ability?

Duncan became pensive while pondering this and then suddenly asked, "Don't you have school today?"

Nina lived in the city's lower sector, where economic conditions were poor in this household. Nevertheless, education was universally available in the city-state of Pland, thanks to the support of the church and city hall.

Coincidentally, her major was mainly focused on steam engines and engineering, a challenging and vital area of study for both the church and factories.

Owing to this specialization, Nina's tuition had been partly covered by her uncle, while the rest was funded through city scholarships. Fortunately, the girl didn't disappoint. According to her uncle's memory, she consistently achieved excellent grades in all her classes.

"I don't have classes this morning," Nina confirmed, "only two history classes in the afternoon. Besides, I have to inform Mrs. White later today that I won't be staying in the dormitory for the next few days..."

Duncan suddenly stopped scooping soup and looked at Nina with a serious expression, "Don't you think staying here and taking care of someone like

me will cause delays in many aspects of your life? If you stay at school, it might be more beneficial for your studies.”

Nina was taken aback by the concern in her “Uncle Duncan’s” voice but quickly became angry instead, “You shouldn’t talk like that! You’re just sick. You’ll get better if you follow the doctor’s advice and take the medicine. Mom and Dad entrusted you to me...”

“It was your parents who entrusted you to me,” Duncan corrected the girl immediately and adjusted his language, “You were only six back then.”

“But now I’m seventeen,” Nina puffed up her face and stabbed the fork into the last piece of cake on her plate, “Your ability to care for yourself is worse than mine. If I were to move out, it wouldn’t take more than three days for you to turn this room into a mess. Besides, I can also help out with the store. At least I can clean the dirty windows and floors. I can barely see through the glass anymore...”

Duncan listened helplessly to the girl’s “lecture” since he didn’t expect his words to elicit such a strong reaction from her.

But gradually, he couldn’t help but laugh again.

He sensed a warmth in this girl named “Nina”... A warmth bathed in sunlight.

“Alright, it was just a passing thought,” he said, shaking his head before stirring the soup bowl with his spoon. “The afternoon is history class... How are your studies going in that subject?”

“Uncle Duncan, are you really alright?” Nina’s eyes widened in surprise, “You’ve never been... Well, at least in the past two years, I’ve never heard you ask about my studies.”

Duncan was about to explain when the girl cut him off by continuing, “We’ve been discussing ancient history lately, and Mr. Morris is telling us about the events after the Great Annihilation... Honestly, it’s quite

fascinating. Ancient history reads much like the stories you find in fictional books, far more captivating than modern history.”

Duncan pondered her words and inquired further, “Sounds like you’re studying well? I’ll test you then. What is the concept of the Great Annihilation?”

Uncle Duncan was acting very strangely today. Although the girl couldn’t tell why, Nina didn’t dwell on the issue. The straightforward girl was simply glad that her uncle’s mood had improved and wasn’t his usual morose state.

So, with a proud smile, she began to tell Duncan what she had learned:

“The Great Annihilation occurred about 10,000 years ago. Although for unknown reasons, ethnic minorities with unique cultural traditions such as the Elves, Dwarves, and the Orcs recorded inconsistent dates in their own calendars, generally, archaeologists agreed that the Great Annihilation happened at the end of the Age of Order ten thousand years ago...”

Duncan listened attentively but found himself with a slew of questions in his mind.

Elves? Dwarves? Orcs? What had been going on here? So there hadn’t been just one intelligent race on land? And the elves... had they been the same type of race he was familiar with? Had there been another city-state living in an industrial steam age as well?

He couldn’t help but conjure up some very peculiar images in his mind until Nina’s voice interrupted again:

“... There are certain inconsistencies in the accounts of the Great Annihilation across various city-states, but the common aspect is that the Order Era before the Great Annihilation was a far more prosperous, stable, and secure time than today. Back then, there were enormous continents with a smaller ocean than what exists now. There was also no ‘reality border’ like there is now between land and sea...”

“The era following the Great Annihilation is called the ‘Deep Sea Age’, which continues to this day with no indication of ending. The most remarkable characteristic of the Deep Sea Age is that the vast sea covers nearly the entire world, with less than 10% of the land remaining from the old era. Currently, all of the city-states are on various islands, with ships traversing the ocean as the primary means of communication between each settlement.”

“In the early days of the Deep Sea Age, the remnants of the Old World suffered severe losses, with entire civilizations nearly brought to the brink of destruction. Among the many powers that emerged afterward, the ‘Ancient Kingdom of Crete’ is the first and most notable within the historical records. Its legacy lasted for only a century before its collapse, but its influence on future generations can still be felt today. The primitive and rudimentary classification of anomalies in the world laid the foundation for our more refined system today.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 46

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Chapter 46 “Anomalies and Visions”

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Based on Nina’s account, Duncan began to grasp the profound transformations that had occurred in the world and came to understand that the original world was not as bizarre and hazardous as it had become.

Historical records indicated that the world before the Great Annihilation was a thriving and secure haven.

At that time, the ocean had not yet become the “Boundless Sea” that currently covered ninety percent of the world’s surface, nor were there any of the perilous “Anomalies” and “Visions” that now pervaded the world.

Although people today considered their world “normal,” Duncan perceived this “normality” as distorted and peculiar.

Regrettably, he could not ascertain the precise details of the “Great Annihilation.” The archaeological community had made efforts to uncover clues, but the disparities among states and races made it difficult to reach a definitive conclusion. All they knew was that the current Deep Sea Age, a time of water and insidious danger, had emerged from the tumultuous haze that followed.

Nina, of course, was unaware of the ghost captain acquiring knowledge through her words; she simply believed her uncle wanted to test her.

This interaction delighted the girl, as they hadn't shared such warm moments in a very long time, particularly because her uncle would revert to his irritable state as soon as the spirits and painkillers wore off.

So, before her Uncle Duncan fell ill again, she wanted to showcase her progress, hoping to prolong his good mood for another day or two.

“Mr. Morris is quite fascinated by the history of the Kingdom of Crete and is among the foremost experts in this field. He informed us that, while the ancient kingdom only lasted a hundred years, it was the first civilization to rise from the ruins after the onset of the Deep Sea Age and confront anomalies and visions. Their research continues to shape our progress in the world today, particularly in the classification of ‘anomalies’ and ‘visions’ ...”

“There’s a classification of ‘anomalies’ and ‘visions’?” Duncan asked, raising his eyebrows and carefully steering the conversation in his desired direction.

This subject had intrigued him from the start of their conversation. Contrary to his initial assumption that all supernatural occurrences were labeled “anomalies,” there was another category called “visions,” which seemed to be distinct.

Nina nodded, recalling her classroom lessons, “Old Mr. Morris taught us that the simplest way to differentiate between anomalies and visions is by their scope.”

“Anomalies generally have a small scale, often confined to an object, animal, or person.”

“Anomalies can also be intentionally relocated due to their limited area of influence – typically affecting only one person at a time. With this knowledge, we can transport anomalies elsewhere for containment or isolation. In rare instances, we might even harness benign anomalies using tools or other means.”

“Visions, on the other hand, have a much larger scale than anomalies, with the smallest vision being the size of a house and the largest ones encompassing entire cities. In exceptional cases, the size can be almost unfathomable.”

“A significant number of visions cannot be moved by humans; they are either fixed in one location or act according to their own volition, and their impact far exceeds that of anomalies. Generally, visions can affect so many targets within their effective range that they are virtually synonymous with ‘natural phenomena,’ which is why they are called ‘visions’.”

“Unlike anomalies, nearly all ‘visions’ cannot be sealed or controlled. They exist in the world like the natural order, operating unhindered by external forces. As most visions are dangerous, the only option is to avoid these hazardous areas and stay out of their range...”

“Thankfully, the most perilous visions typically remain stationary, and the pioneers of the past have helped us identify these dangers so that we can safely maintain our distance from them...”

Nina spoke with great seriousness, and then, as if suddenly recalling something, she quickly added: “Ah yes, our teacher also emphasized that these distinguishing methods and characteristics are only ‘usually effective’ and not absolute. Anomalies and visions are unpredictable, so no matter how people summarize their experiences, there will always be anomalies or visions that defy definition. Furthermore, they can sometimes shift between the two categories.”

“For example, in the new City-State calendar – in 1830, the city-state of Renza experienced a rogue anomaly called Fungal, forcing local church officials to pay a high price to exile this uncontrollable anomaly to a nearby island, which was identified as a vision in 1835. Then, in 1844, the great Saint Palatine sacrificed his life on the fungal island and used his own urn to eliminate this threat. Nowadays, this urn containing Fungal, renamed Mushroom Urn of Palatine in honor of the great saint and his sacrifice, is sealed underground in the City-State Lansa’s cathedral as a relic...”

Duncan listened closely to Nina's account, with his thoughts fluctuating wildly.

In this brief breakfast conversation alone, he had obtained more information than he had during the many days he spent on the Vanished! Once again, he confirmed that communicating on land and establishing an outpost within the city was the most efficient method for gathering intelligence about this world.

A society that has advanced to the industrial stage must devise ways to condense its basic knowledge of societal functioning into its education system. Otherwise, it would be challenging for the rest of the community to keep up. As a result, Nina could never comprehend the wealth of knowledge she possessed. Duncan appreciated her kindness and naivety for that reason.

“So... Mr. Morris concluded the last lesson by saying that when dealing with ‘anomalies’ and ‘visions,’ there is only one truly and eternally valid rule: ‘No matter how many laws we summarize, there will be anomalies or visions that do not conform to the law in the world.’

“This rule, also referred to as ‘Eternal Zero’ by scholars, is by default at the top of all books and papers in the field.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 47

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Chapter 47 “Before The Statue”

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Once breakfast was over, Nina stood up and began clearing the dishes. Her practiced hand movements made it obvious that she had been doing chores like this for a long time. It was likely that the clean and well-maintained bedrooms were also her handiwork.

Duncan had plenty of reasons not to help, being an uncle who had been seriously ill, indulged in decadence, and devoted most of his energy to a corrupt cult. However, he wasn’t that person anymore. Feeling the urge to help, he took the large tray from Nina’s hands: “I’ll help you carry this. It’s bothersome seeing you run upstairs like this.”

A stunned look appeared on Nina’s face. She wanted to say something but stopped when Duncan began to walk away.

Hurrying to catch up, she said, “Uncle, be careful, the doctor said your current condition is not stable...”

“Doctors... Dr. Albert?” Duncan responded, his back to her as he walked upstairs. From the fragments of his memory, he knew that Dr. Albert was the physician in charge of his illness, “It doesn’t matter, we don’t even know what my illness is. The most he can do is prescribe painkillers for me.”

“..... Then you should listen to the doctor’s advice,” Nina protested as she followed Duncan to the second floor and all the way to the kitchen, “at least

he knows how to keep one healthy...”

In the middle of Nina’s speech, the sudden flapping of wings interrupted her, causing both of them to turn their heads. They didn’t see what it was, as it flew by in a blur, but they could tell the direction it went.

“Uncle Duncan, something just went into your room!” Nina exclaimed, rushing after it, “It could be the neighbor’s cat...”

“Aigh, don’t....”

Duncan only managed to utter half a sentence before he saw Nina push open the door, revealing the white dove hiding in the master bedroom.

Ai was perched on top of the cupboard, holding a French fry in one claw and stuffing it into her mouth when the door suddenly swung open. This created an awkward scene as two humans stared at the unexpected bird.

“Ah... googoo?” Ai quickly corrected herself and flapped a wing to feign innocence.

Duncan’s eyes twitched when he noticed the open window. It was evident that the dove was responsible, having a direct view of the pier across the rooftops.

She had actually gone to the dock and returned with French fries....

“A dove?” Nina finally regained her senses and exclaimed, “Uncle Duncan! You have a dove in your room!”

“I can see that,” Duncan said with a grimace, “I don’t know it.”

Ai promptly discarded the fries and flew over, landing on Duncan’s shoulder and shaking her head to refute the denial.

“Fine~ It flew in this morning,” Duncan sighed, “it might be someone else’s pet, but it isn’t very bright, so now it’s refusing to leave after I fed it.”

Ai listened and let out a loud googoo noise.

If not for the presence of an outsider and Duncan's previous order, she would have certainly shouted "Ah yes yes yes" by now.

Nina didn't doubt her uncle's words in the slightest. With wide, curious eyes, she leaned in cautiously: "That... do you want to keep it? Can I keep it?"

The girl's eagerness was evident on her face. Ai, with her pristine white feathers, was undoubtedly an enchanting bird, so it was no wonder Nina was captivated by its charm.

Duncan pretended to hesitate for a moment before nodding: "Yes, but only if the pigeon is willing to stay. It may fly away at some point, and you can't complain when that happens."

Nina smiled happily, "Great! I knew Uncle Duncan was a reasonable man!"

.....

In the central prayer room of the Storm Cathedral, City-Bishop Valentine, dressed in a black priest's robe, stood solemnly before the statue of the Storm Goddess.

He was a tall, thin man with sparse white hair and calm, water-like eyes. At the moment, he was discussing an important matter with Inquisitor Vanna, who had sought his counsel early in the morning.

"..... If what you saw in your dream is accurate, then indeed, that is the Vanished," Valentine said after hearing the full story.

Though the statuses of bishop and inquisitor were equal in rank, it was common for the latter to seek advice from the former since clerics were more knowledgeable in their studies.

"So it is the Vanished?" Despite already suspecting the answer, Vanna couldn't help but sigh at the bishop's confirmation, "I thought..."

"You thought it was just a legend, right? The kind of ghost ship that nervous sailors boast about during their tavern visits?" Valentine knew what Vanna

intended to say and quickly interjected, “The existence of the Vanished is an established fact recognized by all city-states and churches. It is not a legend, but something documented in the archives.”

“I know the Vanished did exist at one point, and that we can even find the ship’s blueprints in the city archives. However, all those details are limited to when it was still a vessel sailing in the real world, when Captain Duncan was still human...” Vanna spoke gravely before her expression became more cautious as she glanced at the statue behind the bishop. “The point is that the ship was clearly documented as having crashed into subspace a century ago. Thousands of refugees from the thirteen islands of Witherland witnessed the ship and their homeland being swallowed up by the border’s collapse and plunging into the shadows. In the decades since, although there have been occasional eyewitness accounts of the Vanished reappearing in the real world, no concrete evidence exists, and many scholars doubt the ship’s ‘return’...”

“Is it truly possible for something swallowed by subspace to reemerge in the real world?”

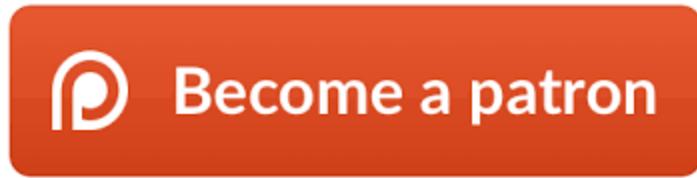
“..... To date, nothing but the Vanished has ever returned to reality after being lost in subspace; that is a fact. Even in the case of the Vanished, there are only sightings after the fact; that is also a fact. Scholars from various fields question the ship’s return, as you mentioned, but that’s not the crucial issue...” The old man’s gaze suddenly fell on Vanna, his face taking on a serious tone, “The key question is, what is it that makes you so afraid?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 48

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Chapter 48 “Awareness”

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In front of the statue of the Storm Goddess Gomona, the sacred candle burned peacefully while the soft skylight filtered through the stained glass dome above, casting a divine halo around Bishop Valentine as he spoke the final word.

Vanna hissed sharply as a thunderous boom erupted, interrupting the senior’s words. The goddess’s blessing was taking effect, granting her power, which manifested as the sound of crashing waves in her ears.

“The Vanished are historically documented, and the omen from your dream is a verifiable fact provided by the goddess. Despite all this guidance, you still doubt the ship’s existence when your initial response should have been to find a solution. This means your subconscious is actively evading the threat before your eyes.”

“Inquisitor Vanna, it seems that ship is already influencing you with its powers.”

Vanna felt a thin layer of sweat on her forehead, but the “veil” that had confused her all night had lifted, granting her the clarity to realize the bishop was right.

“When was I affected by the Vanished? When did it happen?!” she mutters.

This was a common feature of many nightmarish visions and anomalies: inducing cognitive confusion until the individual fell into complete denial. It was an intelligent being's way of self-protection; by denying something, one could avoid further corruption.

As an inquisitor experienced with supernatural powers, Vanna was familiar with this concept, but she never thought she would succumb to this "psychological trap" given her strong willpower.

"I don't know when I was affected," she admitted openly.

In front of her fellow devout bishops, Vanna did not hide the vulnerability she had revealed this time. It was normal to experience psychological disturbances due to anomalies or visions, and shame and concealment would only exacerbate the issue.

"I came here immediately after waking from the ominous dream. I didn't speak to anyone, nor did I touch any books or relics. I cannot pinpoint when I became tainted."

"But you just demonstrated deliberate avoidance of the omen you received in your dream... So, the corruption must have occurred earlier than that," the bishop scrutinized Vanna's face, as if observing her shifting eyes and breathing patterns might unveil the secret. "Have you encountered anything unusual recently? That could have been from the Vanished, directly contaminating your subconsciousness beforehand."

"Recently..." Vanna furrowed her brow, then suddenly remembered the "sacrifice" that had fallen during the Black Sun ritual. That time she had witnessed a flash of green flame shoot from the corpse's eye, which had resulted in her losing a finger.

Her eyes widened in shock: "The day before yesterday, I led a team to clear the Black Sun sacrificial site in the sewers. Did you receive my report about the unidentified corruption I found there?"

The bishop shook his head: "... No, you returned to your quarters directly after turning in the cultists."

Vanna was taken aback by this revelation, “Did anyone else involved in the operation that day report on this?”

“Nothing, the church received no report about your discovery. All the reports we had concerned the Dark Sun heretics.”

Under the watchful gaze of the Storm Goddess’s statue, the bishop and inquisitor exchanged a nod of understanding.

“It appears we have identified the moment when the corruption first made its presence known,” the bishop sighed softly, his expression calm yet somber, “In the name of the goddess, do you swear that your memory of that night remains intact and unclouded?”

Vanna took a deep breath and declared, “In Gomona’s name, I vow that everything I say and remember is the truth, and nothing but the truth.”

The bishop nodded, then turned to light the special incense arranged at the rear. With a serene and divine tone, he said, “Proceed, Inquisitor Vanna. The goddess now watches over us. No corruption shall tarnish this chamber.”

During the subsequent confession, Vanna recounted every detail she could recall about the events in the sewers that night. She held nothing back, and with the support of the unique incense in the room, her memories were so lucid that it felt as though she was reliving the experience with flawless clarity.

She still remembered the green flame that flickered in the sunken eye socket when she pried it open, and how the guardians and clerics fell silent afterward, even though they had performed the cleansing ritual on themselves. Everything was as she recalled, but what transpired next was the eerie part that had been concealed. Instead of their typical boisterous behavior when bringing prisoners back to the church, everyone at the scene had exited the sewers as though they were possessed. They moved like puppets through the streets in the dead of night.

Vanna felt a chilling sensation as she reflected on the events. If the other side had intended to kill everyone then, it would have been effortless.

“The ghost flame infected your soul, rendering the physical purification you performed in the sewer ineffective. That’s how you all were deceived. You should have sprinkled holy oil on the ground and created a temporary sacred space to invoke the goddess’s power through your prayers. That would have purified your spirit and cleansed the corruption.”

“It’s my fault,” Vanna admitted, her voice heavy. “I should have been more vigilant and alert.”

“It was a mistake, not a fault,” the old man shook his head. “You possess great strength, but as an inquisitor, your experience is limited. Fortunately, we have now rid you of that influence, which means the corruption from the ‘corpse’ was not too potent. It only managed to manipulate you psychologically, so the source must have been severed that night.”

At this point, Bishop Valentine paused as if considering something: “The guardians who accompanied you at that time will likely return to normal in a few days, according to the incense’s feedback. Our concern should be the future.”

“The future...” Vanna echoed the bishop’s final words, her expression gradually turning serious.

Indeed, this matter was far from resolved. The vision of the omen in my dream foretold a looming storm. The event last night was merely the beginning.

“The Vanished has been missing for many years, with most people believing the ship to be lost in subspace forever. However, it seems that is not the case. Captain Duncan’s fixation on the real world is far from over...”

Bishop Valentine recounted his findings slowly as he turned and gazed up at the statue of the Storm Goddess.

“A century ago, the Vanished disappeared into the depths of subspace. Although concrete evidence is lacking, numerous eyewitness reports

suggest that a massive storm in the nearby waters was responsible for its descent... The storm, that's under our Lord's domain."

Vanna furrowed her brow, "Do you think Captain Duncan intends to exact revenge on the goddess?"

"It's difficult to say. While it's possible that the ghosts returning from subspace seek vengeance, gods reside in the heavenly realm above our own. There has never been a case of something ascending to higher planes beyond reality, only descending. However, if Captain Duncan aims to take revenge on our Lord's earthly emissaries, the danger would be immense. Our church's influence may extend across the world as we represent the Storm Goddess, but the most likely target would be here in Pland. We are the terrestrial heart of our faith, and the Holy Cathedral of the Storm is not easily located out at sea without prior knowledge."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 49

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Chapter 49 “Double Trouble”

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The gods resided in a distant realm, separate from the mortal world, a dimension believed to be the foundation of existence. Contrary to common sense, this “foundation” was situated not at the base, but at the zenith of all dimensions.

The ancient Kingdom of Crete depicted the structure of the world in their surviving texts:

The world’s foundation was positioned at the pinnacle of all that was known, protected by eternal truth and order. The gods, as inhabitants of this realm, were immortal simply by residing there.

Descending from the divine kingdom, the mortal world was where all living beings took birth. Nourished by the gods’ lingering influence, mortals thrived in the relatively stable and abundant reality we know today.

Below the mortal realm lay the spirit world, a domain inhabited by ghosts and spirits that slowly drifts away from human understanding. Here, the gods’ blessings waned, allowing twisted and grotesque forces to hold sway.

Further down, beyond the reach of any higher god, an abyssal sea existed, inhospitable to any life form. Ruled by bizarre powers, this realm mirrored the void.

Yet, beneath the abyssal sea, the depths of subspace lurked within the shadows of all things. Here, the extremely dangerous ancient gods from a forgotten past dwelled, bearing the malevolence of those lost in the void.

As recorded by the ancient Kingdom of Crete, the gods defined the criteria governing all life. However, such a rule was not all-powerful. As one descended deeper into the lower realms, the higher gods' power diminished, and the malevolent beings of subspace began to challenge and vie for dominance.

This was the structure of the present world: order and light at the top, darkness and chaos at the bottom. Two opposing forces using the mortal reality as their battleground.

The knowledge was a gift from the ancient civilization that pioneered the Deep Sea age 10,000 years ago. Since then, numerous scholars have investigated the "hierarchical structure," finding no flaw in the model. Today, this theory is universally recognized as the "World Standard Model."

In this Standard Model, mortals may descend into deeper realms, but few could return to the "shallower" ones. Among the rare instances of those who do, none have ever shown the desire to overthrow the divine foundation of their world.

For this reason, the return of the Vanished from subspace was considered the most outrageous vision—it contradicted the world's understanding of the Standard Model.

However, the existence of the Vanished aligned with the classic assertion about anomalies and visions: nothing lasts forever.

In any case, neither Bishop Valentine nor Vanna believed that the ghost captain had the power to take revenge on the Storm Goddess. Even if he had the intent, he lacked the capability.

The basis for their belief? The "foundation" and the mortal world were not continuously connected. Up to this point, no scholar had discovered evidence of a direct link between the foundation and the mortal world. Even

the gods could only indirectly extend their influence through projection, metaphor, and other means. As for a ghost ship—how could it possibly find the means to strike at the higher realms?

Since seeking vengeance on the Storm Goddess herself was an unattainable objective, the only alternative left was to target her followers in the mortal realm.

The Grand Storm Cathedral, the central hub of their faith, functioned as an “ark” that sailed in solitude across the Boundless Sea, leaving no traces of its journey. Moreover, the Pope’s crown aboard the ark wielded the power to manipulate storms on behalf of the deity, rendering it an undesirable target unless the Vanished were willing to risk being engulfed by the waves.

This was where the city-state of Pland enters the picture. Stationed at sea, this island harbored a strong ambition to interact with the outside world. With over eighty percent of its residents being devout followers of the Storm Goddess, it made for an appealing target for retribution.

Vanna theorized that the ghost captain was pursuing vengeance for its own demise since the Vanished had been cast into subspace amidst a storm a century ago. She couldn’t conceive of any other reason for the ghost ship’s abrupt return to reality. All signs seemed to point to this hypothesis.

Nonetheless, Vanna was curious about the ghost captain’s true intentions.

Pondering, she inquired of Bishop Valentine, “Do you believe the Vanished are linked to the recent activities of the Black Sun’s followers in the city-state?”

After a brief pause, she added, “In my dream last night, I witnessed the burning sun and the Vanished appearing together in Pland. The concurrent arrival of these two disasters could be a divine warning...”

“A reasonable supposition,” the bishop responded, “but we mustn’t forget that the corrupted ‘sacrifice’ killed the Black Sun priest at the underground site, and that individual was a baptized emissary of the Black Sun. Judging

by the evidence, the Vanished and the Black Sun's followers appear to be adversaries.”

Vanna grew quiet, contemplating the bishop's insight. She found no grounds to refute his assessment.

“Regarding the cultists we captured, I obtained some intelligence from the city-state of Lansa this morning...” the old bishop resumed after a moment of silence.

“A tip?” Vanna inquired, taken aback.

“The sun heretics have not only resurfaced in Pland but have also been active in other city-states lately. Reliable reports indicate that they've been using the ports of Renza and Moco as transit hubs to converge elsewhere,” the bishop revealed, now sounding troubled. “The authorities there have managed to apprehend a few of them, and during the interrogation, the heretics referred to the ‘sun's fragment.’”

“Sun fragment... Are you referring to the supposed remnants of their sun god after its disintegration?” Vanna was shocked by the news, “Do they think that a fragment is concealed here in Pland?”

“It appears so. We don't know how the heretics discovered this information, or if it's merely a ‘revelation’ stemming from their insanity. Regardless, they are now firmly convinced that a piece of their lord's remains is hidden within our city. They likely plan to revive that dark god.”

“Those maniacs...” Vanna couldn't help but exclaim indignantly, “How many lives have they ruined in their attempt to resurrect that dark and sacrilegious sun!”

“We refer to their god as the Black Sun, but in their eyes, it symbolizes the ultimate order. We can't expect such irrational individuals to feel remorse for the blood they've spilled,” Valentine shook his head, “They are unwaveringly devoted to their cause's righteousness, and there are only two ways to handle such people: subdue them or eliminate them.”

Vanna's mouth twitched at her colleague's candid response: "It seems we'll be quite busy in the days to come."

"The vast sea has never been peaceful, and the city-states lie within it," Valentine recited, "just as captains must face the storms in the oceans, we must confront the storms brought on by the world's fools. Inquisitor, brace yourself. The city-state of Pland is about to face its most significant challenge yet!"

"Two challenges," Vanna corrected the bishop, "besides the Black Sun followers, we also have a mysterious and terrifying ghost captain to contend with. If the Vanished and the Black Sun aren't working together, our troubles have multiplied."

Bishop Valentine let out a slight groan: "Perhaps there is another way. Based on the situation in the sewer, maybe the Vanished will clash with the Black Sun believers?"

"Then it only means our troubles have merged into one monumental crisis, Bishop Valentine," Vanna said, eyeing the old man in front of her who had clearly begun to think differently, "I can't imagine a worse combination of bad news than that. Nothing good can come from two threats occurring simultaneously."

Valentine sighed and conceded that Vanna was right.

"In any case, have our clerics and watchmen collaborate with the city police. We must apprehend the sun heretics who have infiltrated the city-state and eliminate this threat before the other arises," Vanna proposed to address one issue so they could concentrate on the ghost ship, effectively minimizing the danger posed by both. "As for the ghost ship, we don't know its next move, so we'll leave it be for now. However, have everyone monitor the sea surrounding the city..."

...

"I'd like some more ketchup..." Duncan signaled to Nina across the table, "I can do it myself, just pass me the bottle."

Nina promptly handed the ketchup over, “Alright, Uncle Duncan.”

It was now noon, and Duncan and Nina were having lunch in the small kitchen on the second floor. The meal in the antique shop was simple – a local salty pancake served with tomato sauce or hot sauce. Additionally, they had a serving of vegetable soup that wasn’t exactly delectable. Nonetheless, both diners were content with the moment since such a scene hadn’t been a frequent occurrence in their lives for quite some time.

Duncan was genuinely growing fond of this place.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 50

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Chapter 50 “Public Vision”

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After lunch, Duncan watched from a distance as Nina tidied up the table by herself. He wanted to help with the dishes, but his niece quickly dismissed the idea, stating that “Uncle isn’t in good health and the doctor said to avoid cold water.” In the end, the pirate captain could only lean on the stairwell and read the newspaper he had purchased that morning.

This type of everyday scene, which most people took for granted, somehow instilled a peculiar sense of tranquility within him. However, before he could fully embrace it, Nina’s voice came from the kitchen: “Uncle Duncan, is there any interesting news in the newspaper?”

Glancing at the paper, the first thing he noticed was the date “August 14, 1900 in the New City State Calendar,” followed by a report about the church inquisitor leading a team to arrest dozens of cultists. This was likely the most significant front-page story in the entire paper.

“It says that the inquisitor led her team to apprehend dozens of sun heretics,” he mentioned casually, “and it notes that this was the largest heretical gathering that the church had successfully dismantled in the past four years. The paper is also urging the public to be vigilant about nighttime safety and to identify any heretical believers in their midst.”

“Ah, I heard about that on my way here too!” Nina placed the washed bowl in the cupboard and quickly proceeded to wipe the table, “It’s terrifying. My teacher said those cultists who worship the sun even sacrifice living

people to their god... I can't believe there are such insane individuals following such an evil cult."

Duncan was at a loss for words momentarily. No matter what he said, it would feel odd. He couldn't exactly inform his niece that he had recently experienced the thrill of being sacrificed and then retaliating against the cultists.

One thing was clear from Nina's reaction, though: she was evidently unaware of the fact that her "uncle" had become a sun heretic. To the unsuspecting girl, her family had merely grown more irritable due to illness and the constant consumption of alcoholic painkillers.

Perhaps in the future, a cultist named "Ron" might indeed reach the point of no return and drag his last living relative into the endless abyss. But until now, this has not happened, nor does it seem possible in the future at this point.

"Uncle? Why did you suddenly stop talking?" Nina, curious about the silence behind her, voiced her concern, "Are you feeling unwell again?"

"No, I just got a little distracted," Duncan shook his head, "what you said is true; their actions are indeed insane... The newspaper also advised the public to be vigilant and promptly report any suspicious individuals. During this time, try to avoid going anywhere other than school and home."

Nina nodded but then let out an "ah" as if she had just remembered something: "But... I already made plans with my classmates to visit the museum in two days..."

"Museum?" Duncan asked casually, "Which museum?"

"It's the Oceanographic Museum near our school at the edge of the upper city," Nina explained, "and I've heard they recently added exhibits of offshore mineral specimens... Is it okay?"

"If you want to go, then go." Duncan thought for a moment before nodding his head, "Since there are patrols of church guards and city-state police

everywhere, those cultists won't be bold enough to make a move in the next two days."

Nina grinned happily, "Mmm!"

"Are you going to school this afternoon?" Duncan inquired further.

"Mhmm, I have history class in the afternoon, and I don't want to miss Mr. Morris's lecture," Nina nodded, "he's a renowned expert in the field of history... But it's odd that a distinguished gentleman like him isn't teaching at the university in the upper city. Most students at our public school don't appreciate history, so they often doze off during his lectures..."

Duncan shook his head calmly, "I can't answer that for you."

That was preposterous. He knew nothing about Mr. Morris, the history teacher. Nina had only recently entered his life, so how could he have that information? Moreover, the memory fragment from the body he occupied certainly didn't contain any related details. A sickly cultist would only care about staying alive.

After lunch, Nina didn't linger long at the antique shop, as she had afternoon classes to attend. She quickly gathered her belongings and cheerfully headed to school on foot, navigating the cobblestone streets.

It took about an hour to walk from the antique shop to the school. At her pace, Nina should arrive without being late.

Public transportation was available in the city—steam-powered streetcars that anyone could ride. Unfortunately, at six pesos for a ticket, the fare was beyond the means of a humble student without a job.

Nina's excuse to Duncan was that walking was better for her health. However, Duncan knew that wasn't the whole truth and even considered buying her a bicycle. He had seen many people riding bikes during his trip to the newsstand.

In a society with advanced steam machinery, bicycles were an affordable industrial product for ordinary people. Nonetheless, they were not cheap for lower city residents who spent most of their income on daily expenses.

Duncan didn't know where his current identity would lead, but watching Nina disappear around the street corner, he felt an urge to be kinder to her.

He couldn't pinpoint the reason for this feeling—perhaps it was gratitude for the vegetable soup and salty pancakes—but it would pain him to see such a kind and diligent student lose her way in life.

"I should start thinking of ways to earn money in this city-state," he mumbles.

With various thoughts swirling in his mind, Duncan set down the newspaper and slowly walked to the end of the second-floor corridor. Through the open window, he gazed at the city streets, lost in contemplation.

In this world, "anomalies" and "visions" had long coexisted with civilization. Neither the church nor authorities had concealed this reality from the public.

Take Nina, for instance. As a high school student, she had access to information about the supernatural, including more than just basic knowledge. Although her understanding wasn't all-encompassing, it wasn't far off, as she was familiar with the list of anomalies and visions.

Duncan lifted his head and stared at the sky, thinking about that list.

Vision 001, Sun.

The massive celestial body of light that emerged after the collapse of the ancient kingdom of Crete.

Its sphere of influence was boundless, encompassing the entire world while operating autonomously. Humans couldn't interact with it. Yet, it functioned within the parameters of what was defined as a vision.

Historical records indicate that on the day the ancient kingdom collapsed, the sea churned as city-states crumbled, and all the core members of the first dynasty perished heroically in the darkness, their blood staining the ocean. From that point on, Vision 001 emerged, marking the end of one dynasty and the beginning of a new era in a world shrouded in darkness.

The ancient kingdom of Crete, the inaugural city-state civilization founded by survivors at the dawn of the Deep Sea Age, endured for only a hundred years. Yet, it bequeathed countless legacies as a gift to future generations.

In the ancient language, “Crete” signified “eternal night.”

It was a night that persisted for a century.

All of this information could be found in Nina’s history textbook.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 51

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 51 “Double Trouble”

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This world had undergone some amazing historical changes through the eras. With the “Great Annihilation” as a turning point, even the fundamental laws of the world were distorted in the subsequent tide. Therefore, the Era of Order that came before it could be regarded as two entirely different “worlds”.

Even so, there were always those persistent few who tried to sort through the historical materials passed down through the ages. Sadly, despite their best efforts, the fragmentation was too extensive to the point it became nearly impossible to reorganize the truth from the false. At that point, no one knew what the world was like in the Age of Order.

Fortunately, not everything was lost. Since the ancient kingdom of Crete, record keeping had been relatively well maintained. Although city-states rose and fell throughout the ages, civilization continued to thrive with the linking chain never broken. To credit this feat, many scholars looked to the miracle illuminating the sky at that time, known as Vision 001 (sun).

This was the largest known vision to influence humanity up to that point. In fact, many scholars debated whether the sun was actually a vision or a natural phenomenon due to its size and perpetual existence. But since the survivors of the ancient kingdom of Crete referred to the sun as Vision 001, the naming stuck and had not changed.

Clearly, not all visions were terrible and harmful, and Vision 001 had brought security to the world for at least half the day, with anything below sea level suppressed by the light. It was through this suppression that civilization managed to develop up to that day.

According to the information left by the ancient kingdom of Crete, after the opening of the Deep Sea Age and the century before the appearance of Vision 001, the entire world had been enveloped by night, illuminated only by the dim glow from the “World Creation” in the sky. Consequently, there was another name for that ancient kingdom – the Kingdom of Eternal Night, a name representing the environment they had to live in.

Duncan stood before the narrow window and stared thoughtfully at the world under the sun.

The world before the Great Annihilation... What exactly was it like?

Did the sun shine on all things in this world before the century-long night?

Most likely yes. No matter how many inconsistencies and contradictions the city-states had in the ancient records, one thing was common in their description: the Age of Order was a bright, safe, and prosperous era.

In any case, that prosperous and bright period had passed, and the vast sea of that time was illuminated by Vision 001, which was known to the world as the light source during the day.

That made a lot of sense then if what he suspected was true. It was likely the reason why those Black Sun cultists were so despised by the public – calling the “false sun” some blasphemous thing when it was providing the only light to the world. No wonder the public wouldn’t tolerate their existence. It was the same as attacking civilization.

In a way, those cultists were unfortunate souls abandoned by the times. If the circumstances were different, they might have been the ones in the right.

Of course, pity was one thing. Duncan wouldn’t be delusional enough to think their ambitions could be realized at all, nor did he believe that some

sacrifice would truly bring about the burning of a fusion star upon this world. After all, there wasn't a single star in the night sky when he last checked. This world was clearly separated from what he knew as outer space.

Duncan returned to his room, closed the door, and beckoned Ai to come down from the cabinet.

"Who is calling the fleet?" The dove chirped after landing on his shoulder.

Instead of ignoring the bird, Duncan went over to the bed and found the sun emblem he had hidden in the corner. Then, after another thought, he approached the drawer where the spirits were stored and took out two bottles – something attached to the underside.

"Drink less." It was Nina's handwriting on the note, and it appeared to have been posted a long time ago.

Duncan faintly smiled at the message and closed the drawers behind himself. It had never worked before on the real Ron, so of course, it wouldn't work now with Duncan.

"If you can, try to bring them to the Vanished," he said to the dove and displayed the items in his hands to the bird.

Ai immediately flapped its wings and made a proud chirp: "Fedex free shipping!"

Duncan nodded, allowing himself to lie down in a comfortable position before going back.

He had been away from the Vanished for too long. Although nothing should have happened to that ship without his attention, he was the captain. It wouldn't have looked good if he kept locking himself in his room.

Besides, there was nothing Duncan needed to do on this side for now. Nina had left for school, and she had other plans already after class. On top of

that, they had discussed it, and she would stay in the dormitory for another night.

With such an opening, it was perfect for him to test his theories of shuttling items through the spirit world and controlling both bodies. The latter should have been feasible according to his own perception.

Duncan softly inhaled and readied himself. First came a wisp of green flame burning around his shoulder, then with a crackling sound, Ai transformed into her undead bird form and popped open the compass lid hanging around her neck.

The familiar sensations flooded into Duncan's mind like always – twinkling starlight and speeding through his mind in the space tunnel – and before he knew it, he had found his consciousness descending upon the Vanished in the captain's room.

But before he made contact, Duncan did as he had planned and forced a “brake” on his ghost fire, effectively preserving a part of his mind on the body inside the antique shop...

Meanwhile, in the captain's bedroom, his main body had slowly opened its eyes and examined the room. It was the familiar furnishings of the ship and the battering of the waves against the ship's hull, just like he remembered.

Slowly pulling himself up from the chair, he touched his body, and instead of only feeling one body, he got the sensation of two at once!

This outcome slowly drew a smile on Duncan's face. Just as he had thought. He could now remotely split his focus and control the second body with a single mind.

Not waiting, he promptly took this newfound ability for a test drive.

On the second floor of Duncan's antique shop in the city-state of Pland, the “antique shopkeeper,” who had been lying quietly on the bed, suddenly shot open his eyes!

The expression remained a little stiff, like a zombie observing the room from side to side, but sure enough, he was able to manipulate his arms and legs like a rusty machine.

If this scene had been seen by some outsiders, it would surely have frightened them silly and prompted them to call the city police, saying there was a man possessed by evil spirits.

Then again, such a claim wasn't wrong!

Duncan had a tough time physically moving the remote body there, but after many attempts, he finally managed to sit up from the bed!

But the next second, the distant picture in his mind suddenly started to spin wildly because he had fallen to the floor...

Duncan sighed, "Well, it looks like I'll have to practice for a while longer."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 52

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Chapter 52 “Captain’s Not Home”

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Controlling two bodies while doing entirely different things was a rather novel experience for Duncan. At the same time, it was also an extremely difficult challenge for him.

From a certain perspective, Duncan believed he couldn’t be called a normal person anymore. Even so, it didn’t mean the feat came without burden. After half a day of struggling and tossing around, he eventually managed to barely crawl the second body inside the antique shop back onto the bed.

But judging by the feedback from the depths of his consciousness, mastering this dual-minded skill wouldn’t be too far off. After that, it would only be a matter of time and familiarization until he became comfortable doing this daily.

After setting things in order and leaving a sliver of his attention inside the antique shop, Duncan finally breathed a sigh of relief. It was his first point of contact with human civilization. Losing such a significant base of operation would have severely set him back.

“Successful transmission!” Just then, a series of flapping wings came from the side. Ai had returned with a proud look on her chest as she landed on the table – there was also the pale gold sun emblem and two bottles of spirits she had brought back.

A smile slowly crept onto Duncan's face, followed by a broad grin at what this implied.

Feasible! It was feasible to let this bird carry "cargo" between the spirit world! On top of that, it wasn't limited to ordinary items either!

With a satisfied mood, he got up and took the items to check each and every one of them for any weirdness. The sun emblem still carried the faint power he inserted before, and the two bottles of spirits were blessings to his nose once he popped the corks.

Smirking like an idiot, Duncan glanced down at Ai who had already begun to pace around on the table.

Efficient, quality, and free shipping – he was starting to love this nagging dove.

The pigeon also noticed the "master's" gaze and immediately trotted up to Duncan's side, pecking at the table with its beak and shouting: "Friend fries! Make some French fries!"

"There are no fries on board for the time being, but I don't think it will be a problem very soon," Duncan happily lifted the bird up with his hand and met those mung bean-sized eyes, "I wonder what the upper limit of your ability is? Is it limited to inanimate objects? And what about lost baggage? Do you lose baggage? Guess we will need to test this some more..."

The bird thought for a moment and leaned back on its neck: "Lost bag? Oops, page is missing..."

"..... Shhh, that's what I'm afraid of, your name always gives me a sense of unreliability." Duncan's confidence sizzled out a bit after hearing that last remark. The success of the first trial run had him all riled up, but Ai's constant illogical chirping did not give anyone comfort. At the very least, he wouldn't be at ease until he gave this "supply line" several attempts.

With a plan for the next step in mind, Duncan got up from his chair and walked to the door leading into the mapping room. However, he stopped

just shy of the door knob as he flexed his limbs and muscles. After confirming he had full control of everything without any sluggishness or exhaustion, he found his body no different from when he first left it.

Was this also the special power of “Captain Duncan”? Or was it... because he was in essence half a ghost now? He wouldn’t get tired?

He pondered this possibility but found no evidence to support this theory. However, in any case, it didn’t seem to be a bad thing. His body didn’t need much “maintenance,” which meant he could more safely allocate part of his energy to other aspects of life.

Duncan was a very candid person, or rather, he was adept at putting aside unsolved mysteries for the time being. After thinking it through, he reached out, twisted the doorknob for good, and stepped into the adjacent mapping room.

Captain Duncan had returned.

“Name?” The goat head asked rigidly, using its hollow gaze.

“Captain Duncan,” Duncan glanced at the wooden statue, “I’m back.”

“Ah! The great Captain Duncan is back on his loyal and magnificent Vanished! Sorry, Captain, you had been spirit walking for a while, so I needed to confirm it again... After all, this is the rule you set yourself. How do you feel? What’s your mood? How is the body? What was the harvest for this long spirit walk? Did you find something interesting? Would you like to share this trip with your loyal first mate? Have you noticed I omitted my other titles? Miss Alice said this would make things more streamlined and that you might prefer this arrangement....”

“Quiet, my good mood just got ruined by your incessant yapping.” Duncan waved dismissively at the goat head, “What happened while I was away from the ship?”

“Ah, Captain Duncan’s sternness and humor are as always. The ship is well, with everything perfectly in order. I, your most loyal first mate, have done

as you entrusted in steering the ship. In addition, Miss Alice visited twice, but neither was a big deal. One was about the ropes; the other was about the anchor..."

Duncan had intended to go check up on deck when he heard the goat head's report. With a question mark over his head, he asked, "Why is she fighting with ropes and anchor?"

The part about Alice running around exploring the ship had appeared on his radar during the spirit walk, but he hadn't expected it to be so lively as to warrant a note.

"Oh, the truth is Miss Alice did it out of kindness," replied the goat head at once, "she thinks it is terrible to have nothing to do on the ship, so she wanted to help – like tidying up the ropes and maintaining the anchor is what she came up with. However, I forgot to tell her the cables are ticklish while the anchor needs a nap..."

Duncan: "..."

"Captain, are you angry?" Duncan's sudden silence made the goat head tense up. Shaking its head back and forth, "Actually, it is no big deal, if I might add. All new crew members need time mingling with the old sailors aboard. Right now, they're currently in the fighting phase. Once that's passed, the progress she will make in integrating will be superb. In fact, she's quite popular aboard with the others..."

Halfway through the goat head's defense, a series of rushed footsteps interjected, followed by the loud banging of the door with Alice running in: "Mr. Goathead, why are the shells in the ammunition room rolling around and not letting me..."

Duncan shot a silent look at Alice, who had spotted the ghost captain with her awkward, stiff posture.

"Fine, this is the third time," sighed the goat head on the mapping table, "this time she is fighting with the cannon shells... I admit that Miss Alice's run-in on the ship may have been a little too lively..."

Alice shrunk her neck (probably reinforcing the joints) and looked nervously at Duncan, “Captain, you’re back...”

“Mhmm,” Duncan nodded with a calm face, “it looks like you had a good time on the ship when I wasn’t around?”

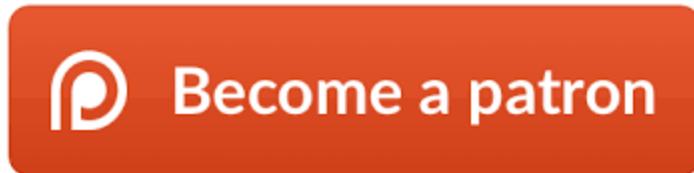
Alice: “...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 53

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Chapter 53 “Heirs”

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During his “departure” from the Vanished, Alice’s activity on the ship had slightly exceeded Duncan’s expectations.

He had always felt that the gothic doll was an elegant and decent lady like those found in old oil paintings. Although she liked to surf the waves with her wooden casket box and talk a lot of nonsense, the positive outweighed the negative. But now, the idea of her staying put and acting like a doll no longer seemed possible.

“Captain, you’re not angry, are you? I can explain...” The sudden tense atmosphere in the room made Alice feel a little nervous as she cautiously glanced at the expressionless Duncan.

“I know you were trying to help, just unsuccessfully,” Duncan looked at Miss Doll with a somewhat helpless face, “but since you also know that many things on this ship are ‘alive,’ can you confirm it with me or my first mate beforehand the next time you want to do something?”

Alice immediately nodded her head and loudly agreed, “Okay, Captain, no problem, Captain!”

Then she promptly turned her attention to the goat head and muttered in a low voice, “Is there such a thing as being unsuccessful in helping?”

The goat head replied in a rare and concise way: “There is now.”

“Okay, if you really want to help, go check the dried fish hanging on the deck or go to the kitchen to tidy up the ingredients in storage to make space. In the future, we may have the opportunity to replenish the food on the Vanished,” Duncan sighed and said this to Alice, “Leave the artillery and ammunition alone below deck. They don’t have the same full intelligence as my first mate, and those dangerous things will only respond instinctively to external stimuli. In any case, I don’t want those cannonballs suddenly blowing up thinking they’re being attacked by mistake. If they do, I can only sweep you back together with the broom and dustpan.”

When Alice heard this, her neck promptly shrunk as she promised not to do it anymore before fleeing the room. This made Duncan chuckle a small laugh because things were getting more interesting. Instead of a dead and lifeless ship, he now had a doll to liven things up—a proper home, per se.

“From the looks of it, your mood is quite good, Captain.” The goat head spoke from the side again, “Ah, you have something in your hand... What is that? Is it the harvest of your spirit walk? Like that knife last time?”

Duncan glanced at the sun emblem he was holding and displayed it for the goat head to see. He had left the spirits in his room and was planning to study this item here.

“It’s loot,” he nodded, “just like the ritual knife last time.”

“Oh! As expected of the great Captain Duncan! You always manage to return with a full load of loot, and an extraordinary item with wonderful power at that... Hold on, is that a sun amulet?”

“Do you know this thing?” Duncan raised his eyebrows, “That’s right, sun amulet, a few daring cultists stuffed this thing onto me so it was hard for me to reject their graciousness.”

“I... I knew a little...” The goat head seemed to be wary of the emblem because he had started hesitating, “The madmen who followed the ancient sun regarded this object as a holy relic. They believed that casting metal into the shape of the real sun and quenching it with human blood could infuse the power of the sun into the runes, and through this method, it was

possible to mass-produce supernatural items with diminished effects... This amulet was a status symbol for those sun followers. It could also be used to identify their fellow brethren to avoid heretics from sneaking into their ranks..."

"To distinguish between fellow believers and heretics, huh... There was indeed such a feature," Duncan understood now, "Although I personally felt that this feature was of little use."

"What happened to those daring cultists?" The goat head seemed to grow worried when he said this, "Most of them were paranoid and ignorant fanatics, and even the worst pirates were not willing to deal with such fanatics who chased after ancient things. If they dared to offend..."

"They are no longer in this world," Duncan said, controlling his expression as he watched the goat head's tone change, "and it seemed that you didn't like these people who called themselves 'Sun Believers', did you?"

After dealing with the goat head for such a long time, Duncan had actually roughly figured out the behavior of this strange "first mate". As long as he was in charge of the ship, the odds of the wooden statue committing mutiny would not exist, hence his increasing confidence in doing as he pleased.

"Who would like crazy people who followed the real sun of ancient times? The 'light' and 'order' they aspired to had long since ceased to be tolerated by this world." The goat head answered Duncan's question as usual, "Everything in this era is bathed in the sunlight of this era, the Vanished is so, and the demons lurking in the deep sea are so as well. Nothing, perhaps aside from those cultists, would want to resurrect that real sun at this day and age..."

Speaking of this, the goat head suddenly paused before speaking with a hint of emotion: "But then again, ninety-nine percent of those cultists were actually just a bunch of brainwashed fools. They didn't even know what they were following and worshiping. They regarded the so-called 'sun heirs' as prophets and saviors, and the ancient world described by those heirs was to them a kingdom of heaven. But in my opinion, the sun heirs

did not treat those fanatical believers as people... They are no different from heirs of the Deep Sea.”

“Heirs of the sun? What did that mean? And from the sounds of it, there were also heirs of the Deep Sea? What was that?!”

Duncan’s heart raced with astonishment at the new word he had just heard. Fiddling with the sun emblem in his hand, he pretended to remain frank and unfazed despite feeling giddy with excitement: “Sun heir? I didn’t meet them during my spirit walk.”

“That’s normal. The heirs of the sun would not dare to make an appearance in the civilized world. Even if they disguised themselves as human beings, the hyenas of the Storm Church would pick up the stench of heresy from their shadows in no time. In the end, they are all just heirs. As the residue of the ancient past, those inheritors should have behaved and stayed in the gutters of history. Alas, the sun heirs were the most troublesome bunch of all the types out there.”

For the first time ever, Duncan had suddenly discovered it wasn’t so bad to have a nagging goat head statue around. Sure, the yapping could get annoying fast, but the occasional useful information was nothing to scoff at!

After some further roundabout “inquiry” of the goat head, Duncan had quickly grasped many new pieces of information he hadn’t gotten from the city-state of Pland.

There seemed to be another type of creature in this world called “heirs,” and none were tolerated by civilization as a whole due to them being remnants of the ancient past.

Although the number of believers who worshiped the “real sun god” was huge, it sounded like most were just insignificant pawns brainwashed by their ignorance. Meanwhile, the real ruling class of this cult was in fact the so-called sun heirs. They were the masterminds of all those crimes, remotely controlling the act from some far-off place unknown to the world. The purpose? Collecting energy by making sacrifices.

Lastly, and most important for Duncan at that time: the goat head had complete contempt for those cultists and sun heirs masterminding everything from the shadows.

So what did this imply? Simple. The Vanished, or “the real Captain Duncan,” and these guys who called themselves “heirs” were not in the same camp... They should even be counted as hostile.

Going by all these points, Duncan was fairly sure his decision to tell the goat head about his encounter with the sun cultists was a smart move. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have found out all these things since Nina’s textbooks didn’t contain this knowledge.

Eventually, Duncan had left the captain’s room and started strolling around the deck in deep thought.

So these heirs were likely products dating back to the Age of Order if what the goat head said was true. The surface world had the sun heirs, and the deep sea had its own heirs as well....

Without realizing it, he had unconsciously walked up to the side of the ship where he was confronted with the open blue sea.

The ocean... Wasn’t just filled with fishes?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 54

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Chapter 54 “The Underground Church”

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In the end, Duncan hadn't figured out what an “heir” was.

The goat head had remained vague about this aspect, and it seemed that it didn't know the details of these ancient things that roamed at the edge of the civilized world either. As for Duncan, he could only summarize a few concepts due to the limited number of clues.

As products of ancient times, they had hated the modern world and possessed strange and dangerous powers while hiding in the shadows. Except for the children of the sun, other “heirs” seldom appeared in the civilized world, remaining a threat to those who explored the borders.

And among all this intelligence, there was another fascinating point: the heirs of the sun seemed to be able to disguise themselves as human beings, and only the transcends of the Church could distinguish the children of the sun from ordinary folks.

Thinking of the recent changes in the city-state of Pland and the resurgence of sun believers who had become active, Duncan had no choice but to suspect the worst.

Behind the high-profile activities of the cultists... had they been ordered by an heir? What were those ancient and strange beings trying to do in the city-state of Pland?

Standing at the edge of the deck, he stared down at the turbulent sea that housed the other heirs beneath his feet. They were also ancient beings threatening the crossing of ships on these waters.

Without a doubt, Duncan was both wary and curious about these deep-sea things.

He believed that although he hadn't dealt with these things yet, he would eventually encounter these strange creatures sooner or later as long as the Vanished continued to wander the sea. Therefore, it wouldn't hurt to make preparations beforehand.

Whether it was gathering intelligence or further developing his own powers like unearthing the potential of the Vanished, arrangements had to be made for the future.

Of course, he wasn't afraid of the dangers lurking in the deep sea; after all, nothing had happened yet after drifting on water for so long. He could more or less guess that the heirs were just one of the countless strange threats lurking in the dark.

He had pondered on the deck for much longer this time and found that the most important thing he needed to worry about now was whether the "supply channels" would be affected—those deep-sea heirs wouldn't affect his fishing, right?

Although the pigeon Ai had the ability to transport supplies, it wasn't yet possible to determine its carrying capacity and reliability. Not to mention the city-state of Pland was an orderly place, meaning he had to pay for the supplies out of his own pocket instead of pillaging from another ship. Who knew when he could secure the needed funds?

Coupled with the abundant hunting in front of him the last time he fished, Duncan knew very well that the living improvement of the Vanished was ultimately inseparable from the gifts of nature.

If those "heirs" did get nasty, they might actually start affecting his harvest.

.....

The bright gas lamps that radiated light had expelled the darkness of the church's underground facilities, and the deep-sea runes inscribed in the long corridors had exuded reassuring power to those walking its halls. They had been the main source of protection for the clerics there, an invisible giant net of sacred blessing from their goddess.

Vanna had been quite fond of walking through the hallways because the serene atmosphere always lifted her mood. As an inquisitor of the faith, she knew all too well that Goddess Gomona didn't only preside over the torrential storm as her domain but also the power of peace and calm in sealing away evil.

Just as there were different faces of the sea, calm and storm were just two mirror images of one coin. This could be seen in how the church had been constructed there – the surface level represented the storm, while the underground represented the calm and serenity.

Of course, there were other gods in this world with two different characteristics as well. Take the God of Death Bartók, who also wielded the power of life, or the god of Intelligence, who also represented foolishness. Ordinary folks might not always know about this aspect, but high-ranking priests and officials definitely did. As an inquisitor, Vanna had extensive knowledge in this area.

On top of that, she also knew that because of the two-sided nature of many gods, highly controversial and even near-heretical ideas had been spawned over the years. Scholars had claimed that the world was two-sided – that in a certain dimension, there was a “barren world” where the sea and the land were completely mirrored.

These outrageous speculations were, of course, based entirely on conjecture and wouldn't be recognized by the public. Even the famed Bishop of Pland, Mr. Valentine, had scoffed at the idea when he heard it.

In the old man's original words, it had been enough of a headache that there was a subspace at the bottom of the world. Those folk theologians should

have stopped hanging more stuff below subspace.

Vanna suddenly shook her head, allowing her uncontrolled thoughts to refocus.

Beneath the quiet cathedral, the human mind could easily become distracted by other thoughts because of how overly peaceful it was. This effect reached everyone, including well-trained clerics of the church.

But on the other hand, this special environment did have its uses.

For example, having some fanatical and crazy cultists speak during interrogation.

Coming to a stop at the end of the hallway, Vanna faced several doors leading into various “interrogation rooms.” At the same time, a statue of the Storm Lady stood quietly in the foyer between the entrances.

This statue was different from the one above the surface. The main lobby one had her hands opened wide as if accepting the prayers of all; meanwhile, the one underground had her hands folded into her chest, quiet and gentle like she was there to listen to the woes of its visitors. But no matter which statue it was, the face remained covered with a light veil – this symbolized the unknowability of the gods.

The Maiden of Tranquility had been known as the other side of the Storm Goddess, suppressing bodies of water beneath the surface and providing shelter for the city-states.

Vanna respectfully bowed before the Tranquility Maiden, then turned and pushed open the door of a nearby interrogation room, shattering the silence.

Inside was a spacious but dimly lit room with a large table at the center. Ms. Heidi, dressed in her skin-tight long black dress, had just risen as Vanna entered. Opposite the doctor, a sun heretic had been quietly seated in a chair with restraints.

However, restraints were no longer necessary as the captive appeared to have had his soul sucked out during the interrogation. With disoriented eyes and a limp body leaning against the handrail, there was hardly any sign of strength left in his flesh, only an empty husk of whatever the person had been before losing his way.

“Oh, Inquisitor, you’ve arrived just in time,” Ms. Heidi had greeted her fellow lady with a smile, “I’ve just finished a ‘course’.”

Vanna’s eyes had shifted to Ms. Heidi’s medical kit – filled with needles and various frightening tools typically found in surgical rooms – she couldn’t keep her expression from twitching. “Honestly, I still struggle to associate your sessions with ‘treatment’...”

“These are the standard tools for psychiatrists... Alright, I admit that I probably use them more often than the average doctor,” Ms. Heidi said with a shrug. “But can you blame me? I’m employed by City Hall and often called upon by the church. The ‘patients’ I see are never normal people, especially these cultists. Some swinging crystal and hypnosis wouldn’t work unless I dose them with three times the amount of ‘midnight mixture’.”

“..... I suspect the reason you only inject three times the dosage is that the largest syringe in your kit can only hold that much,” Vanna had voiced her thoughts without holding back. Shaking her head to refocus, she continued, “But it doesn’t matter as long as you can pry open their mouths... tell me, what did you learn?”

“Ah, right, the findings are both plentiful and strange,” Ms. Heidi replied immediately, “I heavily hypnotized several cultists and used some special means to confirm one thing.... It is highly likely that these cultists who participated in the sacrifice ritual didn’t go crazy after the ceremony spiraled out of control...”

“Didn’t go crazy after losing control?” Vanna frowned immediately. Although she had known from talking to Bishop Valentine that the complexity of the matter would exceed expectations, Heidi’s words still surpassed her assumptions, “What does this mean?”

“I searched their memories and discovered the minds... or their cognitive logic had been damaged by an external force even before the failed ritual. The effects caused them to filter out certain aspects of their memories... Hmm? Vanna, you don't seem surprised at all?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 55

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 55 “Soup for Dinner”

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The unanticipated expression on Vanna’s face did not go unnoticed by Heidi, and the “psychiatrist” quickly deduced something was amiss due to her long collaboration with the church.

After briefly hesitating, she carefully inquired, “Judging by the situation... is this incident a major one?”

Vanna nodded, “A significant problem.”

Heidi pondered for a moment and responded promptly while packing her medical kit, “I have tomorrow off, so for the time being, I may not be able to...”

“Ms. Heidi, you might already be involved in this matter,” Vanna gazed intently at her friend, “I apologize, but everyone present at the scene, including me, was exposed to some form of cognitive contamination. The mental issues you discovered in these cultists likely affected each of us as well. However, thanks to the goddess’s protection, we managed to avoid severe contamination. That’s the primary reason we could awaken from it.”

“... Damn, I knew this kind of thing would eventually happen to me,” Heidi stopped packing the medical kit and facepalmed. “I really should have heeded my father’s advice to follow in his footsteps as an antique appraiser or maybe taken my mother’s suggestion and become a history teacher at the local public school... That would be far safer than dealing with cultists.”

“Relax, at least your current job provides a comfortable living standard in the city’s upper areas,” Vanna shook her head, disagreeing that this life was terrible. In contrast to her typical stern demeanor, the inquisitor’s tone was much more amicable towards Heidi since they were close in age and had been friends for many years. “Why don’t we discuss your findings instead? It might help the church and city hall better understand the situation.”

“... It’s quite straightforward, a blatant deviation from the norm,” Heidi sighed, recounting the clues she had uncovered from the cultists’ subconscious. “On the night of the ritual, a sacrifice spiraled out of control in front of the sun totem and overpowered the priest. But according to numerous clues found at the scene, the ‘sacrifice’ was actually a ‘corpse’ that had already been killed, am I correct?”

Vanna nodded, “That’s right, I remember it vividly.”

“Then the question arises... Since this sacrifice had already been offered once, why didn’t any of the cultists present recognize him? Why didn’t even the priest himself recognize the sacrifice before him?”

Vanna’s brow furrowed at the inconsistency, “... The cultists present witnessed the once-killed sacrifice reappear before their eyes, yet nobody detected the anomaly... It’s evident their memories had been altered, and their cognition distorted beforehand.”

“Exactly, Vanna, we didn’t notice this glaring contradiction back then, did we?” Heidi smiled ruefully and spread her hands, “In fact, just an hour ago, I hadn’t realized I’d taken this matter for granted until you mentioned it.”

Vanna remained silent for a moment, then approached the cultist, who was still disoriented from the double dose of neurodrugs and potent incense.

Vanna suddenly turned and asked, “Is the post-ritual violence among these cultists also a result of their cognitive disarray?”

“Yes, I ‘saw’ fleeting images in their memories,” Heidi replied, “and these images seemed to leave a powerful impression on them, convincing them that everyone else at the ceremony was possessed and controlled by

malevolent spirits or something similar. They didn't believe they were attacking and killing their comrades, but rather that they were driving out evil spirits inhabiting their fellow cultists' bodies..."

"This is primarily a warning from their souls – cultists are believers too, and they receive 'blessings' from the dark sun behind them. When a vast and peculiar danger arises, these blessings are very likely to detect something," Vanna analyzed rationally, "Thus, their frenzied hallucinations partially unveiled the truth. Regrettably, these untrained ordinary people couldn't comprehend the warnings' meaning, leading them to collective madness."

Heidi looked at Vanna solemnly, and after a few moments of hesitation, she finally spoke cautiously: "So... what's behind this? Is it something more sinister than the ancient sun?"

Vanna pondered for a moment and shook her head slightly, "Don't investigate further, Heidi. Your involvement in this matter is minimal, but if you delve deeper, some irreversible connections might be established as a consequence."

"Well, if you insist. I value my life greatly, so I'll trust your judgment," Heidi said, picking up the packed medical kit. "I genuinely want to give myself a break... Don't worry, I'm not fleeing. In two days, the Oceanographic Museum will have an exhibition. I'm quite intrigued by what they'll showcase."

Vanna nodded, "A trip to the Oceanographic Museum is an excellent way to unwind, and the goddess's blessings also infuse those exhibits."

Heidi smiled and approached the door, but just as she was about to push it open, she hesitated and turned back to Vanna with concern: "I mean... has the contamination truly subsided?"

"Don't worry, it has indeed subsided," Vanna reassured her with a helpless wave of her hand, "we merely got entangled in some 'residual' remnants. You've spent so much time in the underground church that any corrupting influence would have been purged by the goddess's power by now."

“Then I’m at ease,” Heidi sighed with relief and finally exited the room, “see you next time, Inquisitor Vanna.”

Vanna watched her friend leave the room, leaving only herself and the sun heretic inside the incense and nerve potion-infused interrogation chamber. However, unbeknownst to the steadfast and devout inquisitor, her current image, reflected in the cultist’s eye, wasn’t quite so sacred. Looming behind Vanna’s tall figure was a hazy, nearly transparent apparition with a green, fiery flame burning overhead, lending the woman an almost sinister appearance.

.....

Duncan sat without expression in the mapping room as he observed Alice the doll before him – she had brought a tray of gleaming utensils and a large bowl of steaming fish soup.

Apparently, after becoming more familiar with the environment aboard the Vanished, Miss Doll here had devised a new plan to “contribute to the captain in her own way.”

“Dinner?” Duncan scrutinized the doll curiously while also inspecting the setup on his table, “What prompted you to do this?”

“I was tidying up the kitchen storeroom when I came across a bucket of... ‘fish,’” Alice smiled and appeared proud, “I may not be able to help with many tasks on the ship, but cooking should always be manageable. So from now on, I can take care of the cooking.”

“It’s commendable that you have this mindset,” Duncan wasn’t sure how to assess this peculiar doll, but in the face of Alice’s genuine smile, he couldn’t bring himself to refuse her kindness and dampen that enthusiasm. “But as a doll, do you know how to cook?”

“I can learn. It seems quite straightforward,” Alice declared confidently. “The most basic step is to consult Mr. Goathead. He shared a lot of cooking knowledge with me earlier...”

Duncan expressionlessly glanced at the goat head beside him and then at Alice.

A wooden carving, a doll made of an unknown material, and now they dared to explore the culinary arts when neither of them even possessed a digestive system? The mere thought of it was terrifying.

He didn't know what emotion suited the situation, but he simply picked up the soup spoon and stirred the fish in the bowl.

At least it smelled right...

However, his hand froze the next moment upon seeing a lengthy silvery-white hair dangling from the spoon.

“Your hair has fallen in,” Duncan stated flatly.

“Ah, I didn't drop my hair in,” Alice quickly waved her hand, “I dropped my head in... But don't worry, I retrieved it right away, and I didn't need anyone's help!”

Duncan: “...?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 56

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 56 “Dive”

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In the end, Duncan couldn’t bring himself to eat the bowl of fish soup because of how unsettling it was.

After all, just picturing that Miss Doll’s head had once tumbled into the soup pot gave him chills. This couldn’t be considered mere apprehension anymore; it bordered on the realm of curses and death sentences.

Seeing the spoon placed back down, Miss Doll appeared slightly hurt. She anxiously clutched the hem of her skirt with both hands and asked, “Captain, are you angry?”

Duncan gazed at the doll wearily, “If there’s something on the ship that bothers you, you can tell me directly...”

“Huh? I’m not...”

“In that case, try to stay out of the kitchen in the future...” Duncan said casually, but he soon noticed Alice’s growing frustration. He quickly rephrased his words after shaking his head, “Never mind, your intentions are good. In fact, I appreciate your efforts. But cooking... If you’re not skilled, accidents can happen. Take it slow and get familiar with everything first.”

Alice’s spirits immediately lifted, “So, I can try again later?”

Duncan held his breath momentarily before finally nodding, “Just be careful...”

He also pondered: the cursed doll clearly couldn’t stand idling around on the Vanished. Perhaps she genuinely had some innate drive compelling her to contribute to the ship’s operations in order to feel at ease. She was a sentient being with a mind and personality, and for that reason alone, Duncan couldn’t impose his decisions on her without becoming overbearing, like a movie villain.

In comparison, it was better to let Alice help in the kitchen than to have her struggle with ropes, anchors, and cannonballs—at least the pots and pans on the Vanished were relatively safe.

He glanced down at the fish soup beside him, and honestly, it tasted quite ordinary. Though the seasoning on the ship was limited, the preparation was entirely adequate.

So, what more could Duncan expect from two beings who couldn’t consume human food?

“Um... Captain, would you like me to do something else for you?” Alice’s voice came from beside him, interrupting Duncan’s thoughts. “I also learned how to grill fish and prepare fried fish fillets from Mr. Goathead. There’s some ready in the kitchen...”

“No, I’m not hungry,” Duncan shook his head. The truth was, his body didn’t require much food. He maintained three meals a day solely to preserve his “human” routine. With Alice’s soup today, his appetite had been sufficiently quelled. Rising from the chair, he said, “I want to take a walk around the cabins.”

“You’re going to the cabins?” Alice was taken aback, and then, as if recalling something, her expression turned tense. “Could you... check ‘below’ while you’re there?”

“Below?” Duncan frowned.

“It’s the deeper cabins—the areas I’m not allowed to enter,” Alice explained, “I always hear creaking sounds coming from down there. Sometimes it sounds like someone is whispering under the floor. Would you mind checking it out? There might be something happening below...”

Duncan’s curiosity was piqued by the slightly anxious look on Miss Doll’s face.

The depths of the Vanished... It was a place he hadn’t explored yet!

Unlike the upper areas, the deepest parts evoked a sense of danger and unease. At the time, he hadn’t yet “taken the helm” and hadn’t mastered the power of the ghost fire, so his previous explorations had halted after the first few levels. He had plans for further exploration in the future, but it seemed those plans couldn’t keep up with the changes.

Just then, the goat head’s voice suddenly sounded from the side: “Ah, it seems the bilge is a bit restless. Captain, would you like to go down and take a look?”

Before Duncan could respond, the goat head had already started rambling: “Think about it. You haven’t checked the lower levels in quite some time. The bilge needs the captain’s attention too, you know. After all, it’s been submerged in the Boundless Sea for so long... Would you like to bring your lantern? It’s in the usual place, just behind the door... You’ve been busy with the upper levels, so the guys down below are getting restless. You don’t even know how irritating they are becoming. Ugh, I’m a lover of peace and quiet, and I can’t stand the creaking noises in the middle of the night...”

Duncan silently glanced at the goat head, which abruptly fell quiet.

Honestly, after hearing the goat head’s words, the idea of going down there became even less appealing. It sounded as though the lower levels had been more deeply influenced by the Boundless Sea and were the most likely places for something dangerous to occur!

However, the conflicting thought lasted for less than a second.

Sooner or later, he would need to further explore the other structures on the Vanished, and the sooner, the better... Leaving unknown dangers unaddressed was not his style.

The Vanished was vast, incredibly long, and featured numerous layers and sections in its cabin depths. As a result, Duncan's knowledge was limited to the upper areas: the deck, the upper cabin, the ammunition depot below deck, the artillery area, the storage rooms, the freshwater reserves, and a portion of the crew quarters. All of these were above the waterline; anything below would effectively be within the realm of the Boundless Sea.

He was already the ship's captain, and the Vanished was his foothold in this world, acting as his base of operations. He could ignore everything else and turn a blind eye, but this ship was crucial to his survival. Furthermore, he now had a better understanding of the ship's potential. In a crisis, the Vanished would be his lifeline.

Besides, the goat head also mentioned the bilge needed the captain's attention.

The "captain" hadn't visited the lower cabins for far too long... If this continued, it seemed something bad might happen.

Duncan promptly stood up and went to the door to retrieve the lantern mentioned by the goat head.

It was an old lantern with a narrow hexagonal prism-shaped copper frame and a glass lampshade embedded within the copper, giving it a somewhat mysterious appearance. The wick-like structure inside the lampshade added to its intrigue.

He didn't express curiosity or attempt to ask the goat head for guidance. After a brief moment of silence and contemplation, he tried to activate the green ghost fire from within and infuse it into the lantern.

A cluster of bright green flames immediately sprang to life and burned inside the lampshade, casting a unique, steady glow around the area.

An eerie atmosphere permeated wherever the lantern shone, but Duncan felt an inexplicable sense of calm and control while standing in the light. It was as if he could faintly sense his power spreading with the light, and wherever the light reached, the terrain's details would be clearly reflected in his mind.

Ai, the dove, suddenly flew over and landed on Duncan's shoulder.

She had transformed into her illusory undead bird form—although Duncan hadn't actively “activated” the bird, it still passively completed the “transformation” under the lantern's illumination.

This gave Duncan more ideas about what this might imply.

It appeared to diffuse his own power into the surroundings with minimal loss while maintaining a “force field” that combined the functions of detection, warning, and even control. This feature was obviously quite suitable for long-term exploration in unfamiliar or dangerous areas.

“Captain... Can I go with you?”

Duncan turned to see Alice standing behind him already. The doll was eyeing the lantern curiously, an eager expression on her face: “I haven't been to the lower level yet! Mr. Goathead said I couldn't go down without your permission...”

Duncan briefly considered before giving a faint nod, “Alright.”

He didn't know what awaited in the lower part of the cabin, but it was also part of the Vanished. Under the premise that he had successfully “taken the helm,” the bilge shouldn't be too dangerous, and with Alice accompanying him, he might be able to rely on her assistance.

The goat head remained on the mapping table and didn't comment on the arrangement. From its point of view, it was quite normal for the captain to inspect the Vanished, and the same applied to having a helper.

Night had gradually fallen outside the cabin, and the cold radiance of the world's creation shone down on the sea, illuminating the empty deck of the

ghost ship and the translucent ghost sails rustling in the wind.

With a lantern in hand and his flintlock rifle, Duncan walked with Alice across the empty deck and through the uppermost cabin to where the staircases were located—this was the spot where Duncan had stopped exploring the last time he was here.

“It’s so dark down there,” Alice stood at the stairwell, looking somewhat nervously at the dim environment below, “isn’t there a light down there? Everywhere else is lit with some oil lamp that never goes out...”

“There is,” Duncan said while raising the lantern up to eye level. The green flame’s power gave him the awareness of what was happening in the lower cabins, “It’s just that the lights are black instead of being bright.”

“..... Huh?” Alice was taken aback momentarily and didn’t react for a while, “The lights are black?”

Duncan didn’t reply, only walking ahead with the lantern serving as his light source and signaling the doll to follow, “Don’t be surprised; after all, we’re below the surface of the sea.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 57

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 57 “Cowardly Alice”

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The captain’s words had been like a chilling night breeze sweeping through the shadowy staircase, prompting Alice to instinctively wrap her arms around herself as she trailed closely behind Duncan. Eventually, she understood what the captain meant when he said, “the lights are black.”

There were, in fact, lights in the lower cabin—in terms of structure and layout. The cabin she observed had the same support columns as the one above, with oil lamps dangling from their sides. However, the flames within the lamps didn’t illuminate the area; instead, they made the surrounding space darker than the distant areas.

Indeed, the closer one was to the oil lamp, the darker the light became. It was as if the lamp itself was absorbing the light and shrouding everything in darkness.

Alice gazed at the cabin for a long time, struggling to find the right words to articulate her confusion, “This... doesn’t make sense...”

“An abnormal doll is telling me this is irrational?” Duncan shot a glance at Alice, questioning her seriousness. “Beneath the water level of the Boundless Sea, rationality is a thing of the past. This abnormality is the new normal.”

As he said this, his expression appeared nonchalant, as though the eerie situation had long become standard for him. But what was the truth? In

reality, Duncan was just as unsettled.

“That’s right, that’s right...” Ai chimed in, perfectly timing her speech to support the captain’s explanation.

Ignoring the chatter of the dove on his shoulder, Duncan cautiously surveyed the cabin he had never entered before. He adjusted the angle of the lantern in his hand to get a better view, hoping to gain an understanding of the situation.

Beneath the waterline of the Vanished, the cabin lights were “inverted.” The closer one got to the lamps, the darker it became, as if reflecting a reversed world. However, his lantern functioned normally, so the rule didn’t apply to it.

Was there a reason behind this oddity? Was it merely the influence of the Boundless Sea, or did it combine with the Vanished’s unique characteristics to create this phenomenon? Was the “bright environment” within the cabin itself real? If the oil lamps were extinguished, would the area become brighter once more?

For a moment, Duncan felt the urge to test his daring theory by using his power to extinguish the oil lamps. But sanity quickly reined him in, reminding him of the potential consequences. Experience had taught him that everything in the world had a purpose, including the eerie black lamps.

Then, a thought struck him. In the city-state of Pland, it was believed that the light of a burning flame could ward off dangerous evils. However, Duncan now formulated a new hypothesis. The actual element that repelled evil wasn’t the light produced by the flame, but the fire itself. And under specific circumstances, light and darkness could be inverted. In that case, shouldn’t the only trustworthy aspect be the flame itself, since it alone remained constant?

“Captain?” Alice’s voice suddenly emerged from the side, filled with anxiety and concern, “Do you notice anything unusual here?”

“No abnormalities,” Duncan replied calmly, his expression unaltered as he strode forward at a leisurely pace.

As he strolled past the light-absorbing lamps dangling from the support columns, Duncan noticed piles of ropes strewn at their bases. They could have caused a troublesome tripping accident, but the ropes had slithered out of the way on their own to clear a path for the captain.

A thought crossed his mind: light and shadow are the illusions of the deep sea, and reality cannot be trusted at sea level. The only reliable thing is the flames themselves, forever guarding the wealth of the Vanished with unwavering loyalty.

He observed the gently burning lights with newfound appreciation and nodded to convey his approval and gratitude.

In response, the oil lamps throughout the entire cabin blazed with life, their flickering casting the hall into even deeper darkness...

Duncan: “...”

He instantly regretted his initial assessment, realizing he had essentially shot himself in the foot.

Alice approached from behind and carefully surveyed their surroundings. She spotted large wooden barrels and crates stacked in the corners of the cabin, as well as enclosed rooms and corridors that led to dead ends.

Whispering, she said, “This seems to be a storeroom as well... Was this once a cargo ship?”

“If it were a cargo ship, the cargo wouldn’t be stored so deep inside—there’s a concept called handling cost,” Duncan casually replied, shaking his head. “These are supplies for the Vanished’s ocean voyages, intended for consumption during its lengthy journeys.”

Alice blinked, “Ocean supplies?”

Duncan didn't bother explaining and proceeded to examine the nearest cargo.

In some of the barrels, he found a dark brown, viscous substance resembling grease but without the overwhelming stench of crude oil. It was likely some form of fuel for the ship, which had been stored here for an extended period. Duncan even suspected that the fuel had been "stockpiled" before the Vanished became a ghost ship, perhaps for lighting and protection. Since the ship had turned into a ghost vessel, much of the cargo hold's contents had become essentially useless.

In another section of the stacked barrels, Duncan discovered something familiar – cheese older than himself and bacon hard enough to crack rocks.

Duncan quietly resealed the lid.

Many of the areas at this level were filled with reserve materials. Although a significant portion of them seemed obsolete by modern standards, it was enough to confirm his previous assessment of the Vanished. At least during the initial stages of its construction, the ship had been designed for a lengthy exploratory voyage. The compartments were all shielded to prevent the spread of fire and infestations. Such a design wouldn't be necessary if the journeys were brief.

Now, however, this once ambitious plan for exploration had vanished, along with its sailing crew. All that remained was a natural disaster known to humanity as a plague of the sea, the Vanished...

Under these circumstances, Alice and Duncan continued to forge ahead. After passing through several more distinct storerooms, they entered a new corridor featuring a staircase that descended to yet another level.

"I feel like... it's becoming increasingly gloomy..." Miss Doll wrapped her arms around herself and whispered to the captain, "Did you hear the wind? How can there be the sound of wind within the cabin?"

"I heard it too, but don't be nervous; it's normal," Duncan casually replied, glancing at the doll again, "Why are you so timid? You're known as

Anomaly 099. You shouldn't be afraid of things like this at all.”

As he spoke, he also recalled the information he had obtained from Nina previously. In this world, numerous lists of “anomalies” and “visions” were accessible to the public. These lists aimed to help people avoid dangers they might encounter in daily life or identify unusual behavior in their surroundings. Naturally, such lists were never exhaustive, frequently leaving out the most dangerous and unique variables from the general public’s knowledge.

He had attempted to inquire about Anomaly 099 with Nina, but the girl had never come across the number in any textbook.

This indicated that Alice’s “cursed doll” either harbored a special secret, resulting in an information blockade by the church and authorities, or... it was due to her being too dangerous and needing isolation from the minds of civilized society. Regardless of the reason, it couldn’t be anything innocent or harmless.

However, upon hearing Duncan’s remark, this enigmatic doll only shrank back, adopting a nervous expression: “Just because I have a higher number doesn’t mean I’m braver. I am Anomaly 099, not Courage 099...”

Duncan sighed, thinking that the doll might not be the bravest out there, but she was undoubtedly the most cowardly. It was fortunate no sailor had witnessed Alice’s anxious and frightened demeanor; otherwise, her reputation would be ruined...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 58

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 58 “Bilge”

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Duncan had always been curious about what made the Gothic doll so unique and perilous that sailors dreaded even her name.

Indeed, a self-propelled, sentient puppet was quite eerie on its own, and the sight of her sporadically sprinting around without her head was startling. However, in Duncan’s opinion, this level of eeriness wouldn’t warrant a place on the high end of the Anomaly list.

According to Nina’s own account:

Anomaly 196 – Blood, a hazardous anomaly contained and sealed within the underground sanctuary of the Church of Pland. Its form is equivalent to the blood volume of an adult male. It possesses the ability to flow independently and actively seeks to replace the blood of any nearby suitable “host.” To prevent its escape, it must be stored in twenty-two blood tanks at freezing temperatures. However, if someone bleeds within ten meters of the storage location, the seal will instantly fail, and the individual will be swiftly attacked by Anomaly 196.

Crucial notice – this anomaly disregards any defenses provided by a Saint and will fatally harm its hosts as a consequence.

As one of the most dangerous anomalies managed by the Pland city-state, information about Anomaly 196-Blood is always publicly accessible. This

allows authorities to quickly locate and address the anomaly if it were to leak into the urban area.

Duncan was unfamiliar with the notion of a “saint,” but the term seemed to imply some sort of highly potent transcendent being. Perhaps Inquisitor Vanna, who appeared in the newspapers, was a saint with powers as a transcendent being—and how many Saints like her could confront Anomaly 196 within these city-states?

This was merely an anomaly nearing the end of the hundreds, almost reaching the two hundred mark. The fact that Alice ranked 099 suggested she posed a far greater threat than Blood.

Although, according to Nina, there was some ambiguity between the numbering of anomalies and visions, and different anomalies and visions could not always be directly compared in terms of weakness or strength. Nonetheless, top anomalies and visions generally possessed a higher risk or exhibited more peculiar and uncontrollable “traits.” In many instances, they had caused sufficient damage to influence a particular historical event, thus securing their place among the high-ranking anomalies.

In any case, one needed only to understand that a ranking within the top hundred signified danger or an exceptionally challenging characteristic. But this cursed doll named Alice...

Duncan instinctively glanced back at Alice, who was genuinely trailing behind him and offering an innocent smile in response to his attention.

It seemed improbable that she could discern her own perilous nature. Perhaps there was information stored within the historical archives at Pland. But would they grant access to an antique dealer from the lower parts of the city?

Duncan contemplated the idea’s viability as he stealthily continued through the cabins. His exploration, illuminated by the green flames from the lantern in his hand, gradually revealed more of the surroundings. The twisted, distorted appearance of everything was eerie and psychedelic.

Everything seemed like a mirror image of what it should be under the green glow's illumination.

For outsiders, this might likely cause headaches and seizures. However, for Duncan, he found his mind growing calmer and clearer in response to the ship's feedback. He was now regaining control over parts of the ship that had initially eluded him, which also helped calm the restless objects below.

"You truly fear the bottom of the sea. Even if it's just you venturing down to these cabins," Duncan suddenly said to Alice, who clung closely behind him.

"I... I didn't expect it either!" Alice tried to maintain her composure, "Back then, I only thought this was part of the ship. I didn't realize going below deck meant going below sea level! I'm just a puppet!"

"You don't even have a digestive tract, yet you still study cooking. Don't use your doll nature as an excuse," Duncan remarked casually, "and you'll have to compensate for your lack of knowledge later on the ship."

Alice sighed in frustration over his comment before Duncan interrupted, "Why are you so terrified of the deep sea anyway? Or rather... Why are you so scared of 'submerging in the sea'? I understand that the deep sea is dangerous and many people fear water like you do. However, your behavior seems more extreme than I initially thought – simply imagining being underwater scares you senseless. Hey, stop clutching your dress's frills. If they tear, there's nothing on the ship to mend them."

"Oh," Alice quickly loosened her grip slightly but then unconsciously grabbed the button instead, "I... I hadn't considered this issue. I'm just scared. Isn't it okay to be afraid?"

Duncan chose not to respond to the doll's question and refocused on what lay ahead. The stairs here led deeper into the ship, likely down to the lowest point where it met the water. It was just as dark as the previous areas, but when he raised the lantern for a better view, the two could faintly discern the silhouette of a door.

This finding made the ghost captain furrow his brow because this staircase was peculiar. Unlike the stairs they had ascended, this one was isolated on the ship's opposite side, which was illogical from a design standpoint.

Moreover, they had been walking for an unusually long time. Although the Vanished was a large and lengthy ship, the distance they had covered didn't add up.

Lastly, why would a door be situated at the end of a staircase?

Duncan hesitated but picked up the lantern and proceeded anyway, as he disliked the idea of unknown variables lurking in the shadows.

Alice was even more reluctant about this bizarre discovery, but ultimately, she followed from behind. In her opinion, compared to standing alone in the darkness at the top of the last staircase, she was better off accompanying the captain and owner of this ghost ship.

Soon, they found themselves standing before a mysterious door. Duncan raised his lantern to reveal the surroundings and quickly noticed the words atop the doorframe: "Final Door."

"What does this mean?" Alice read the words, a mix of confusion and curiosity on her face. "Final Door... Shouldn't the inscription around the doorframe indicate its function instead?"

"It seems to be a reminder," Duncan mused, removing his gaze from the doorframe and placing a hand on the doorknob. "If you enter and find another door, don't touch it."

Alice nodded nervously, watching Duncan take the final step and push open the "last door of the bilge."

A peculiar pale glow welcomed them as they entered an open space.

"This... This..." Alice's eyes widened in shock and disbelief. "Captain! The bottom of the ship is damaged! It's damaged!"

She shouted loudly, only to be disregarded by Duncan, who was equally shocked and stunned by the scene.

The lowest level of the Vanished was fractured!

As far as they could see, immense cracks were etched into the fabric of reality, making the room appear fragmented and chaotic. Despite this, Duncan could still clearly discern the “scenery” beyond the bilge.

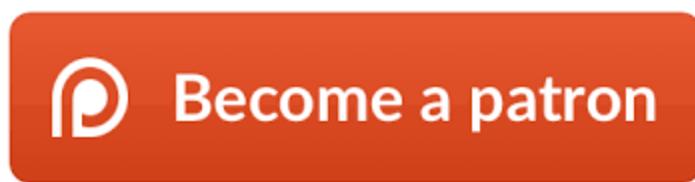
It was not the deep, dark, vast sea he had envisioned, but rather a pale, indistinct void intermingled with countless lights and shadows flickering throughout the emptiness.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 59

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 59 “This Door Leads To The Vanished”

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The entire lower section of the Vanished had been fragmented, with the area beyond the shattered cabin engulfed in a void of darkness and shimmering chaos.

“Could this be the true ‘bilge structure’ of the Vanished? If so, what lies beyond this broken cabin? And could such a sight be discovered beneath the Boundless Sea?”

Duncan cautiously took two steps forward on the largest floating plank, making sure that the exit behind him didn’t disappear as he did so.

“Captain...” Alice’s anxious voice echoed again as the doll hesitantly peeked part of her head out from the doorway in terror, “This... this is normal, right?”

Duncan’s heart was less certain than the doll’s; after all, she could blindly trust the captain, while he had no one to depend upon. However, confronted with Alice’s apprehensive demeanor and the “crew rules” mentioned earlier by the goat head, Duncan stifled his disquiet and maintained his usual poised facade.

“Don’t worry,” he said lightly, “the Vanished is a ship beyond your imagination.”

“Indeed, it is unimaginable...” Alice said in awe. Duncan’s composed demeanor seemed to reassure her to some extent as she observed the shattered and fragmented space that was once the ship’s lowest level, “Captain, it doesn’t seem like there’s water outside.”

Duncan considered her question before raising an eyebrow, “You think this is the underwater portion of the Boundless Sea?”

Alice looked surprised: “Huh? Why are you asking me that?”

Duncan appeared nonchalant: “Because you have experience.”

“Isn’t it because you threw me overboard...?” Alice said instinctively, only to correct herself halfway through the sentence, “I don’t think so... The sea should be filled with water. Even if the Boundless Sea isn’t right, there must be water beneath the ocean. But this looks like...”

“A void filled with chaotic streams of light,” Duncan shook his head, finishing her sentence. Approaching the edge of the floating wooden platform he was standing on, he looked down at the flowing streams of light, “The bottom of the Vanished... is not within the Boundless Sea.”

Alice was taken aback by the revelation: “Huh? So where is this place?”

Duncan didn’t answer her. The truth was, he didn’t know either. However, he had a vague suspicion in his mind.

“Could the ship be sailing in several different dimensions simultaneously?! On the surface, the Vanished sails through the Boundless Sea of the real world, but in reality, various parts of the ship existed in different dimensions simultaneously? This could also explain why the deeper one goes into the Vanished, the more eerie and gloomy the surrounding cabins become. Perhaps the strangeness and gloom are not actually originating from the cabin itself...”

“If that’s the case, what exactly is this chaotic space if it isn’t the Boundless Sea? It doesn’t resemble the spirit world, nor does it look like the dark

space tunnel experienced during the Spirit Walk... Could it be that it is a 'deeper,' hidden dimension?"

With numerous conjectures and suppositions occupying his mind, Duncan slowly reached to his side and drew the pirate sword from his waist. Instead of using his own body, he decided to test the waters with the blade, unsure if something malicious would snap at him like a predator attempting to lure him in.

But in the next moment, his eyes widened slightly in surprise at what he witnessed.

The tip of the sword had vanished, only to reappear at the next floating rubble further away.

Duncan furrowed his brow and tried a different direction, only to observe a similar phenomenon.

Now he finally understood.

These seemingly fractured areas were actually interconnected in space, and the ostensibly fragmented bilge structure remained whole!

Straightening his back with newfound confidence, he glanced around to ensure nothing else was out of place before exhaling a long sigh.

These "cracks" were, in essence, merely optical illusions. Although the foundation differed, the final result was the same to their senses.

But what caused this? Was it overlapping spaces? Or a distorted projection from a higher dimension to a lower one?

Duncan tapped into all the reliable and unreliable knowledge in his mind to attempt to explain the bizarre occurrences here.

Meanwhile, Alice observed with puzzlement as the captain made odd movements at the edge of the floating wooden platform before asking, "Captain... are you performing a special appeasement ritual... to pacify the cabin?"

Caught off guard, the man quickly sheathed his sword and replied, “That’s right...”

“Oh, that’s incredible!” Alice’s eyes lit up, “Do you want to perform a pacification ceremony for all the fragments here?”

“..... One is enough,” Duncan maintained a straight face as he continued to deceive her, and then quickly diverted her attention before the inquisitive doll could probe further, “Let’s go.”

As he spoke, he ensured the lantern was functioning properly and held it close. After this, there would be no turning back, yet nothing happened...

Just as he had experimented with his sword earlier, Duncan had directly “skipped” the process of crossing the gap.

Alice watched in astonishment as the captain proceeded without any issues. Despite seeing that it was safe, she remained apprehensive. In a burst of courage, she suddenly charged forward and leaped with her eyes closed. Naturally, this led to her crashing straight into an unprepared Duncan, who had the wind knocked out of him.

Picking himself up after the tumble, he stared expressionlessly at the headless doll scrambling around behind him – Alice’s head had fallen off again during the chaos and had rolled about ten meters away from her body.

“So... Sorr... Sorry...”

“You behave and wait here for me. I’ll come pick you up afterward,” Duncan sighed, wondering to himself why he had brought this troublesome doll down here. “Have you considered attaching a screw to your neck...?”

Alice’s head didn’t seem to hear Duncan’s second remark when she began to stammer in shock, “The-Ther-There... There’s a d....”

Duncan furrowed his brow and turned his head to look in the direction that Alice’s head was urgently indicating with her eyes.

A dark wooden door stood silently at the end of the debris.

“A door... There is actually another one!”

Duncan had considered whether this classic situation from old horror movies would occur. But when he finally faced it, his heart still leaped in fear.

By this time, Alice’s headless body had also stumbled over. Unable to tolerate the nonsense any longer, the pirate captain quickly grabbed the doll’s head and handed it back: “Was there such a door there before?”

Alice reattached her head with a “pop” and answered, “I don’t remember one. I think it only appeared after we came over.”

Duncan snorted dismissively and cautiously approached the door with the lantern in hand.

In truth, he no longer needed the lantern for illumination in this peculiar cabin. The chaotic glow from the cracks provided enough light to see most of the outlines, but that wasn’t why he kept the ghost lantern activated – it was for his safety and protection.

The newly appeared door seemed ordinary enough on the surface, and it shared a similar style and material with most cabins on the Vanished.

“This door leads to the Vanished,” Duncan read the words atop the doorframe, which appeared to be made of copper.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 60

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 60 “Opposite Side Of The Door”

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Alice’s voice suddenly rang out from the side: “Umm? Captain, are we departing? Shouldn’t we examine this door? Even if you don’t open it...”

“There’s nothing left to see. We’ve reached the end of the bilge,” Duncan replied nonchalantly.

However, a faint tapping noise made him pause.

Duncan quickly turned his head toward Alice, who had stumbled and was frantically searching for the origin of the sound. Eventually, her fearful gaze settled on the dark wooden door: “The noise seems to be coming from behind this door...”

Duncan stood still, staring intently at the door as the knocking occurred once more. It was soft, but unmistakably real. Stepping back to maintain some distance, he had no desire to become a casualty of whatever lurked behind that door.

After a brief yet intense internal conflict, the ghost captain decided to approach the door again once the sound had subsided.

Holding the ghost fire lantern up to his face and drawing his sword, Duncan carefully searched for any clues about the cause. That’s when he noticed the door hadn’t been fully closed. In the right corner of his view, there was a small gap, about a centimeter wide, through which he could peek.

It appeared as if someone had closed the door in haste, rather than with intention.

Unable to ignore this chance, Duncan leaned in and peered through the opening, making sure his blade was ready to strike anything that might attack.

What he saw, however, was beyond anything he could have anticipated.

It was a small room, with aged, wrinkled wallpaper suggesting it hadn't been renovated in years. The furniture was disheveled, and the lone bed in the corner, accompanied by a computer table, seemed all too familiar...

But more importantly, there was a tall, slender figure scribbling something at the desk. The man wore a white shirt and had unkempt hair, revealing the hardship he had endured.

Duncan's gaze lingered on everything behind the door – the familiar bed, desk, and books – and most significantly, the familiar "him" who was writing in the old diary he usually kept in the drawers. Sensing his presence, the other him, known as Zhou Ming, abruptly looked up and rushed to the door, staring directly at Duncan.

The eerie, silent staring contest persisted for several seconds until the other him started pushing forcefully against the door. His actions suggested he was attempting to escape, yet the door remained as unyielding as a brick wall. Consequently, the other him tried to break the lock with a tool, striving in vain to widen the gap.

Ultimately, the man within the door surrendered and slumped down, deflated. Duncan couldn't hear what the other "him" was saying at that moment, only indistinct muffled noises. Nonetheless, he understood all too well what the other man was attempting to do because he had experienced it all firsthand.

Gradually, Duncan's gaze fell upon the doorknob on his side of the Vanished. All he needed to do was twist and push, and perhaps, just maybe, it would open...

However, instinct intervened and prevented Duncan from taking that final step.

Somehow, this decision frustrated the man trapped inside the room, who began shouting and pounding on the door again. His voice couldn't be heard, of course, but then the other him suddenly bent down and started writing something on a piece of paper to show Duncan.

Through the gap in the door, Duncan saw a series of hastily written words: "Save me! I'm stuck in this room! The windows and doors won't open!"

Duncan immediately burst out laughing. It wasn't anger, sadness, or even an urge to save "himself" that he felt, but amusement at the predicament of the trapped Zhou Ming.

In the next instant, the pirate sword in Duncan's hand abruptly thrust forward, impaling "Zhou Ming's" body.

The latter was pierced by the blade without surprise. As he opened his mouth and screamed, Duncan neither flinched nor retreated but pushed harder with his pirate sword to ensure it went through.

"If you can't write earthly words, then don't use this trick."

Ai, the dove who had been silent until now, suddenly flapped her wings and let out a hoarse chirp: "This is an illusion. What are you hiding?"

The next moment, the figure across the door rapidly melted away like a wax statue until it completely vanished in a play of light and shadow. Similarly, the familiar room also faded, revealing its true nature to Duncan's eyes: a dark, ancient cabin filled with dust and decay.

As for the sword in his hand, it offered no resistance, having struck only air.

Was this "extra door" merely concealing another cabin behind it?

Duncan continued to scrutinize the scene, but this time, no matter how he looked at it, it seemed to be just an ordinary cabin.

But... was that cabin truly “real”?

Duncan leisurely withdrew the sword that had probed through the gap, then exhaled a sigh of relief before taking a half-step back.

The bizarre encounter he had just experienced was still etched deeply in his mind, and he couldn’t determine if it was a simple illusion or something more. Regardless, one thing was clear... Something strange and dangerous lay behind this door.

If the illusion reflected on the opposite side of the door was based on his own memories and perception, then the danger it presented was greater than that of his own “Captain Duncan” persona. That would be a nightmare if true.

No one in this world should know what that room looks like, nor should they know of the existence of the individual known as “Zhou Ming.”

But the “thing” beyond the door knew...

Suppressing his anxiety through a series of deep breaths, Duncan thought he was right to make this choice. The door was too dangerous to be opened under any circumstances.

“Captain...” Alice’s voice suddenly roused Duncan from his contemplation. As he looked up at the doll, he quickly noticed her concerned and frightened expression. “Captain, are you all right? What’s behind that door? Why do you look so serious?”

Duncan shook his head, “Don’t look behind this door; there’s nothing here for us. We’ve reached the bilge’s bottom and can return now.”

As he spoke, the man attempted to tug the door shut for good, but the wooden structure wouldn’t budge, as if it were an immovable, slumbering beast.

“Huh? Ah... Okay!” Alice didn’t pay attention to the captain’s efforts to close the door. Initially stunned, her mood quickly shifted to happiness.

“Let’s head back quickly. This place is quite eerie, to be honest. It’s giving me the creeps...”

Duncan snorted nonchalantly and guided Alice to the “Final Door” leading to the stairs.

In truth, the spookiness of the place made him eager to leave as well.

Afterward, their journey back up was uneventful: they passed through the crumbling bilge, the illuminated cargo compartment, and the shadowy staircase and corridors, eventually reaching the cabin above the waterline.

While Duncan didn’t give their return much thought, Alice felt her entire body relax the moment she stepped on deck, as if an invisible shadow had been lifted from her shoulders.

“Captain, are you tired?” Alice inquired cautiously, noticing the concern in the man’s eyes. “Would you like me to make you something to eat? You didn’t have a proper dinner...”

Duncan halted his thoughts and turned to face the worried-looking doll, who resembled Nina when she was concerned.

Realizing he was dampening the mood, he quickly relaxed his face and pushed away the cloud hanging over his heart.

“Just don’t add anything strange to the pot this time.”

“My head isn’t a strange thing!”

“Especially your head.”

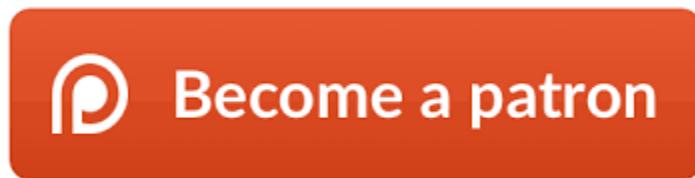
“...Woohoo.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 61

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 61 “Unstable Navigation”

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Duncan believed he had spent the entire night exploring the ship, but upon observing the night’s darkness, it seemed that he and the doll had only spent a few hours. Nonetheless, the experience left a lasting impression on his mind.

“What could be behind that door...”

Eventually, they arrived at the captain’s room. Throughout the journey, neither had spoken much – Alice was preoccupied with what she planned to make in the kitchen, while Duncan was engrossed in examining the items around the deck.

As far as he could recall, the layout here was almost identical to the design in the lowest level – lengthy and continuous from one end to the other. However, he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that he was overlooking something, as if there were a hidden passage or room inside the decrepit cabin he was unaware of.

“Does the goat head know about that door? Does he know where it leads? And should I ask him myself?”

As Duncan reached to open the door, Alice took the initiative to charge in first and spew the adventure she just had with the captain.

“Mr. Goathead! I went to the bilge with the captain! The ship is incredible underneath! The bottom cabin is in shambles, and there’s a peculiar door at the end!”

Attempting to remain silent, the ghost captain pretended to pack his belongings and eavesdropped on the discussion.

“Oh Miss Alice, I knew you would be amazed! Do you comprehend the greatness of the Vanished as a ship? It can traverse various dimensions simultaneously without compromising our safety!”

Duncan’s heart jolted at the revelation. As he had suspected, the ship was indeed navigating through multiple dimensions and not confined to this plane of existence!

Simultaneously, he quickly devised to keep shut since Alice was brimming with so much curiosity. If he remained quiet and went away, it might just lead to some unexpected findings.

With a poker face, he casually stated, “You two continue your conversation; I’m going out for a walk. Goathead, since Alice is already a member of the ship, you may share anything with her as long as the subject isn’t too sensitive.”

Alice beamed as soon as she heard this, and the goat head didn’t object either, immediately agreeing: “Of course, Captain, your loyal first mate will always welcome a new member...”

With that settled, Duncan opened the door and exited the captain’s room. But the instant he did so, the cunning man focused his mind and connected with the Vanished on a spiritual level. This allowed him to secretly observe the pair without any risk of being discovered.

Concentrating, the vague perception grew clearer until he saw Alice seated on a stool opposite the talking goat head.

It seemed the girl had forgotten her fearful demeanor during the entire trip and even neglected to mention her offer to prepare the captain’s late-night

snack. Naturally, the man himself wasn't concerned about that detail.

Meanwhile, Ai the dove perched herself on the nearest mast while her owner engaged in the despicable act of eavesdropping. The bird was insightful enough to act as a lookout in case someone tried to sneak up on him like a mischievous accomplice during a heist.

"... That door looked quite intimidating, and the captain wouldn't let me approach..." Miss Doll had already moved past the part about the lamp light being inverted and began recounting the enigmatic door.

"That's understandable. Neither you nor I can touch that door. Don't make that face. I know I don't have any arms or legs. When I say touch, I mean it in another sense... interact, control, oversee, do you comprehend? That door is untouchable in every sense of the word... you didn't try touching it, did you?"

Alice appeared startled by the goat head's unusually stern tone. After a moment of hesitation, she exclaimed: "What is that door, then?"

This part captivated Duncan's attention completely. However, the goat head was cunning enough to remain silent for a full minute before responding: "You truly didn't touch it?"

"I didn't touch it!" Alice answered hastily but then hesitated once more before continuing, "But... But the captain leaned over and peered inside. There was a narrow gap, so he thrust his sword through the crack at something..."

As the doll spoke, Duncan felt the entire ship tremble, accompanied by the faint moaning of the wind against the sails. There was also the groaning sound of wood and ropes, but the sources were indistinguishable. Clearly, the result of the goat head being shocked while steering the Vanished!

"What did you say?! There's a gap in the door? A crack?!" It wasn't necessary to use his spying powers to discern the goat head's shock and bewilderment.

“That... That’s correct...” Alice seemed intimidated by the forceful words, “the door was slightly ajar, not fully locked, perhaps about a finger’s width on the side...”

“And the captain peered through the gap? And then what? He thrust his sword... did he change in any way at that moment? Did he act strangely or fall into a trance?”

“No,” Alice answered immediately, “the captain merely had a serious expression when he withdrew his sword. He then escorted me back up here, seemingly preoccupied. I offered to cook him something because of that. Oh, right, I was about to head to the kitchen before...”

“Forget the kitchen! Do you know what’s behind that door?”

“Ahh... What’s behind that door?” Alice’s voice was still filled with astonishment and slight confusion. She had never witnessed the goat head being so serious and urgent before, which greatly concerned her.

“Behind that door is subspace...”

Duncan, who was strolling around the deck, stopped dead in his tracks.

“Behind that door is subspace?”

He was utterly dumbfounded, and justifiably so.

“Could it be that the lowest level of the ship is actually navigating through subspace?! But based on what the goat head insinuated, this mode of travel isn’t stable at all. In that case, is the gap in the door not meant to be there? Should it be completely sealed? Or is it... that something on the other side forced it open...”

Duncan hadn’t given it much thought earlier, but recalling the unusual resistance from the door, a chilling notion struck him.

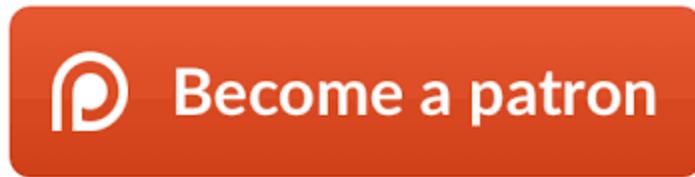
Perhaps... when he attempted to close the door earlier, something on the other side was pulling against his hand, preventing it from being shut...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 62

[A+] / [A-]

Chapter 62 “Overlap”

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The startling discovery that the Vanished had been traversing subspace all along plunged Duncan into an unusual low mood.

He had always been aware that the Vanished was quite peculiar and perilous, but he had never envisioned that the ship could be so extraordinary. Although his knowledge on the subject was likely inferior to that of Nina’s history teacher, he understood that subspace was the most hazardous phenomenon in this world. It was enough to keep saints awake at night, make gods cautious and fearful, and cause sailors to never dare utter the word “subspace” during their voyages.

If everything holds true, the dim, crumbling cabin across the door might be a seal put in place by the real Captain Duncan. Perhaps that area had already been corroded by subspace and beyond repair?

Duncan instinctively glanced downward, as if he could see through the deck and into the ruined cabin below. At this moment, he no longer felt secure, but rather like someone standing on a powder keg ready to explode. That small gap was the fuse, and once fully opened, the explosion would ensue.

However, after a brief period of intense anxiety, Duncan calmed down upon recalling another piece of information divulged by the goat head.

Based on the wooden figurine’s frantic expression after hearing Alice’s story, Captain Duncan was expected to act strangely and distressed, as if

something terrible had occurred. But so far, nothing had happened. He was unharmed even after thrusting his sword through the door's crack.

Admittedly, claiming he was unharmed might be overly optimistic. When he saw the illusion, Duncan did experience slight panic and considered opening the door, but that was merely a psychological shift and not the result of any supernatural force influencing his mind.

Duncan lowered his gaze to his hands, repeatedly reassuring himself that everything remains normal.

Here, he was Duncan, captain of the Vanished.

In another space-time, he was Zhou Ming, an ordinary middle school teacher trapped in a fog-shrouded single apartment room.

Perhaps... the goat head was overreacting? It was only a crack in the door, not a fully open passage to subspace.

With his conviction restored, Duncan looked up and observed the swaying masts and groaning ship as it battled the waves. The controller had failed to properly steer the Vanished on the correct course.

"First Mate, take control of the rudder and manage the sails properly!" he commanded the goat head through their mental link.

"Ca... Captain?" The goat head's voice rang out, tinged with panic, "Ah, yes! Yes, Captain!"

Duncan remained silent, knowing there would be more from the goat head: "Captain, I just heard Miss Alice say... the door at the bottom of the bilge opened a crack..."

"Yes," Duncan replied softly, "I checked."

"You did check, and Miss Alice said you confirmed the situation beyond the door..." The goat head appeared to be weighing the pros and cons of its inquiry, "Currently, do you feel... I mean, slightly disoriented? Beyond that door is..."

“Subspace, I know,” Duncan interrupted, not allowing the goat head to finish, “do I appear to be mentally unstable? Stop being evasive.”

“Of course, you don’t seem unusual in any way!” The goat head quickly responded, “Perhaps I was overly anxious, as this kind of situation has never occurred before. Ever since you steered the ship back, the barrier between the Vanished and subspace has remained stable. I... I didn’t anticipate any changes, and it’s not that I doubt you.”

Steer the ship back? From where?

Duncan shrewdly picked up on the detail disclosed by the goat head and swiftly deduced a portion of the truth. Pretending to be nonchalant, he said, “From what I can tell, the crack in the door remains stable, but I don’t discount the possibility of it widening. I’d like to hear your thoughts.”

“... It’s already good news that it’s stable, Captain,” the goat head replied, its expression fraught with concern. “As for my suggestion... truthfully, I don’t know what to do. You left the door, and you’re the one who closed it with your own hands. You never shared your plans with me, nor mentioned any changes. You always handled the bilge personally...”

“... I see,” Duncan responded immediately, “then you don’t have any advice in this regard.”

It appeared that the goat head wasn’t fully aware of the door in the bilge either. It only knew that it led to subspace, was dangerous when opened, and that the real Captain Duncan had left it behind. But where could he find a “real Captain Duncan” at this point?

“Captain...” the goat head’s voice echoed in his mind again, “what is your next plan?”

Plan? What plan? Should he head for land now? That wouldn’t happen with Captain Duncan’s notorious reputation. The entire naval fleet would likely attack him upon entering coastal waters.

Duncan rolled his eyes and glanced up at the sky in exasperation. At that moment, the dove descended from the mast and landed on his shoulder. It cheerfully chirped, “This is a trap! Abandon the ship and escape!”

“Escape? Run to where...” Duncan muttered subconsciously, but then quickly realized something, “Wait, can you hear me talking to the goat head?”

He had been communicating with the goat head through the ship’s spiritual connection, so how did the bird follow up with such fitting words?

The dove flapped its wings and gazed down at its feet: “Stop complaining, you idiot. I have my ways!”

In that instant, Duncan found himself curious about the taste of dove soup.

However, he hadn’t forgotten that the goat head was still connected. Refocusing on the matter at hand, he promptly replied, “You do your job and leave the door to me. Nothing has changed.”

“Aye, Captain!” The Vanished’s wavering demeanor stabilized, and the sails were readjusted to continue the journey.

Once he had ended the conversation, Duncan approached the edge of the deck and watched the waves crash against the ship’s hull. During this time, he contemplated his to-do list.

Naturally, monitoring the bilge had been added, but merely observing wouldn’t alter the situation. He required more knowledge, greater power, and perhaps... assistance from the outside... like from the city-state of Pland?

Nina would return from school tomorrow, and her “Uncle Duncan” would need to be present at the store. Before that happened, he had to learn to fully control both bodies, or else he would be stuck switching his primary consciousness back and forth. Additionally, he needed to arrange for supplies to be transported from Pland to the Vanished, testing this further through Ai’s capabilities.

Then his eyes were drawn to the reflection of the “World Creation” on the water.

“The World Creation?!”

Duncan was momentarily taken aback as a vague sense of familiarity washed over him.

Looking up, he began to ponder. It was the same faint, luminous scar he had seen before, but now he saw it from a fresh perspective. The pale glow wasn’t merely a haze of light, but rather a myriad of intertwined and overlapping streams of light, reminiscent of... what he had observed in the shattered cabin of the Vanished.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 63

Chapter 63 “Return To Port”

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Is the scene inside the bottom of the Vanished the World Creation?

If the bottom of the ship is indeed the subspace, then is the World Creation also part of the subspace? Or at least there is some connection between the two?

But in the end, conjectures and speculation are only that, speculations. He had no evidence of this being true.

The scar was too far away to make any experimental comparison, and even if he looked through a telescope, it wouldn't provide any more detail than what he knows now.

Duncan spent a long time afterward just standing on the deck and letting the sea breeze blow against his face. The guy wanted to think about things, but more than that, he wanted to make sure everything was back in order.

The news of him touching the “door” had unsettled the Vanished, and even now, there's a notable tremor happening across the ship and its habitants.

“Relax, this is nothing to worry about.” Duncan tapped the nearest armrest and said in a calming voice.

This time, he got clear feedback: the tension from the ship gradually subsided, and the ropes and sails had stopped shaking.

From the looks of it, the ship has reaffirmed the captain remains the captain and not something else.

Duncan eventually returned to the entrance of the captain's room after doing that, but instead of gently pulling the door open like usual, he used a bit of force and pushed it inward.

As expected, the swirling grey fog was still there when he did this.

Ai didn't stay on the ghost captain's shoulder then; instead, she suddenly flapped her ways and flew to the nearest mast and cried out: "The road ahead is broken! The road ahead is broken!"

That earned a curious glance from the man himself, but in the end, he still stepped through and returned to the familiar bachelor apartment.

Here, he's Zhou Ming, the regular normal human of Earth. He still had on his familiar shirt, his familiar trouser, and a body far weaker than Captain Duncan's.

Afterward, he examined the room for any differences. From what he could tell, everything was as he had left it. Not even the layer of dust had changed from the some areas.

Then Zhou Ming mindfully turned around and faced the door behind himself – he wanted to test something.

Assuming there's another person behind the door, Duncan took on the same position as the fake did behind that door down at the Vanished. Then leaving only a slit, he peered through, expecting a surprise somehow.

This foolish act left Zhou Ming's heart pounding. Even though it's unreasonable to assume anyone would be there or that a ghost captain would suddenly stab a pirate sword through the crack. Nevertheless, the thought of this happening still brought exhilaration to the guy.

Yet, there was only the billowing swirling black fog outside of his room.

While Zhou Ming became relieved that he didn't get stabbed, a strange sense of loss still plagued his heart. It's stupid of course to think this way. Who in their right mind would want to be stabbed? But he just couldn't help it.

Shaking his head vigorously to shrug off the idiotic desire, he slowly got up and came to his desk. There's the scrap paper he scribbled on, the diary he used, and the computer screen in the middle that's still running despite the power being cut off.

Nothing's changed....

Zhou Ming exhaled, but suddenly, his expression froze.

There is a change!

His gaze had fixed onto the corner of the desk where there's a lifelike model of the Vanished just sitting there....

A stroke of lightning blasted Zhou Ming in the head. Crumbling into the chair as he gasped for air from the shock, the man took several good minutes to get over this discovery.

Once he's confirmed there was no mistake in his memory about this model ship never being here before, Zhou Ming hastily snatched the item up with his hand and examined the darn thing.

This realistic-looking "ghost ship" was only about half a foot long, and the thing didn't weigh any different from an ordinary model. However, the details were so refined that he could clearly see the ropes and buckets strewn across the deck...

Compared with the real Vanished, the only difference was its size.

Abruptly, Zhou Ming appeared to have thought of something. Lifting the ship up to eye level, he carefully buckled open the door leading into the captain's room at the stern with his finger.

He could see the miniature mapping table, but there was no wooded figurine of the goat head nor the sight of Alice.

A surge of weirdness gripped Zhou Ming at why he would think this. It's outrageous to think a model ship would have Alice inside it, but then again, wasn't the ship model's appearance outrageous in itself?

The guy stayed in this state for a long while afterward to ponder the next step.

He didn't know how the ship had appeared on his desk, but it was clear that the connection between his cordoned bachelor's apartment and the "world across the door" was more profound than he had imagined.

The change may have occurred after he "took the helm" or peered into subspace through the crack in the door. Regardless of the reason though, one thing's certain, he's still getting feedback from the other bodies across the door. This meant there was no threat to him yet from the change.

Just like that, he sat in the chair for who knows how long until his eyes caught a glimpse of the shelf to the right.

He had bought this cabinet years ago, but even until today, the guy never found the opportunity to fill it up aside from some decorative crystals.

Figuring there was no better timing, Zhou Ming held the Vanished up and carefully placed the "model" in one segment of the shelf. Done with that, he took two steps back and examined his "achievements" with a weird sense of satisfaction.

How this thing came to be in his room was still a mystery, but during his days of entrapment, he's got a new hobby of decorating this empty shelf.

.....

A loud and melodious whistle broke the calm on the sea this morning. Vanna, who had arrived in the port early, immediately came to the observation deck to oversee the start of the operation.

The authorities had emptied the place in advance so there was no worry of innocent bystanders getting dragged into the mess. Instead, heavily armed policemen and clerics from the church were patrolling the dock with twelve of those spider steam walkers acting as blockades to the roads.

Soon enough, the intended target had begun to approach the coastal waters.

It's a large mechanical steamship, the White Oak.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 64

Chapter 64 “White Oak’s Encounter With Duncan”

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The White Oak has returned—after a long period of disconnection and deviation from course, the advanced steamship belonging to the Adventurer’s Association has finally returned to the city-state of Pland.

Inquisitor Vanna didn’t need to give further orders. As soon as the whistle from that vessel blew, the personnel on the dock immediately took action.

The staff guiding the ship to dock had arrived and began to signal the White Oak with lights and flags, while the Church’s Guardians went to activate the deep-sea relics that had been placed all over Pier No.1 the night before: a large number of bronze “boundary tablets” with the name of the storm goddess Gmona inscribed on the base, and sacred grease and spices were strewn along the floor to connect all the tablets together. This arrangement would effectively seal off the area and become a “holy ground” under the goddess’s gaze.

Farther away were the policemen sent by the city hall. These ordinary folks weren’t capable of dealing with the supernatural; therefore, their main job was limited to blocking off the intersections with those steam spiders. Ordinary guns didn’t have much effect in dealing with the dreadful and invisible curses, but blowing apart a physical monster that might jump off the White Oak was plenty good enough.

Eventually, Vanna’s gaze crossed the dock and fell upon the White Oak that had blown a second whistle after drawing close enough to assess the situation aboard.

“It doesn’t look too bad Inquisitor. The White Oak has carried out its instructions, and it seems that the ship is still controlled by humans.” One of the priests standing next to Vanna murmurs in a slightly relieved tone.

“Things aren’t certain yet. Many people affected by visions and anomalies will appear no different from ordinary people until they mutate.” Vanna shook her head to dismiss the thought of success, “Send out the second set of signals and have the inspection crew board it. I want all guns pointed at the ship in case anything changes.... Do not hesitate to open fire if it does.”

The order from was quickly conveyed to those beneath, and since the White Oak’s communications device had been damaged, the people on shore could only communicate with the ship using lights and flags. After a complex set of lights and banners again, the bow of the White Oak lit up three lights, followed by the dropping of a rope ladder on its side.

Seeing this, the speedboat from the dock was promptly driven over using a steam mechanism. The inspection team had been comprised entirely of Guardians from the church, including eight combatants and a priest commander who lit the incense aboard to ward off evil while also sprinkling spiced grease around the waters. As long as the commander remains well and continues to chant the holy name of the Storm Goddess, no anomaly should be able to escape their findings. Supposedly anyway.

After all this was done, the priests and guardians on the speedboat swiftly climbed the rope ladder with ease.

This all fell into Vann’s eyes, who had remained on a wary lookout the entire time inside the watchtower.

It was perilous to let a ship that had been lost at sea “return home”, especially when its objective was to transport anomalies across the ocean. So, first, it mustn’t be allowed to dock and inspected by a team at a safe distance. But that’s not enough to enable the crew to disembark though. Instead, the second round of inspection must be followed to ensure the vessel itself hasn’t been mutated into something else entirely. This second step also allowed the team to perform a purification operation across the entire vessel to ensure nothing lurked in the darkness. Once done, everyone

– including the inspection team – is to be kept on close observation by the church for several days to a week. This of course also included the White Oak since vessels are not excluded from corruption.

Now, if any of these links were to go wrong though, the White Oak and its crew would likely be buried out at sea where the Storm Goddess's embrace awaits to receive their poor souls.

This cold, even cruel law, does not come from anyone's malicious intent but the “way of survival” that human society has so far explored.

Of course, there are also those city-states that are unwilling or fail to enforce these strict tangent rules. For that failure, their names are now concentrated in the first two volumes of the secondary school history textbooks, which are required for the final exam.

Time passed minute by minute, and everyone awaiting the signal from the guardian team aboard the ship was tense and uncomfortable. There could only be two signals from this – the first being an all-was-okay from the psychic link of the clergies sitting inside the port chapel, the other a detonation of nitroglycerin on the dinghy to sink the White Oak.

A big ocean-going vessel like the White Oak wouldn't have survivors if it did get deeply polluted by subspace. So, destroying the vessel wouldn't bring guilt to those watching.

As Vanna crossed her arms and gently tapped the metal arm wear during this arduous wait, a sudden chime of the chapel bell caught everyone's attention, followed closely by three long whistles of the relief pipes on both sides of the bell tower.

The priests in the church have received a secret message from the inspection team, and the church bells and whistles were the announcements that it's safe to dock the White Oak for a special situational report.

This undoubtedly sent a wave of relief through Vanna's veins. There's no better news they could ask for.

As for having a special situational report... The lady was not surprised at all. In fact, it would be strange that there wasn't after the ship bizarrely disappeared from the preplanned route.

More church guardians began to board the ship once the docking procedure had been completed. Vanna didn't dally around either and led a group of highly trained priests over. She swiftly jumped over the long springboard to step onto the deck, where a gray-haired, burly captain awaited her arrival.

The old captain looked a little haggard, apparently having overworked himself in a state of high tension. However, after seeing the inquisitor of the church approaching, the old man immediately raised his spirit and took the initiative to greet the lady.

"Hello Captain Lawrence, I'm Inquisitor Vanna of the Deep Sea Church." Vanna did not like the redundant etiquette and chose to get straight to the point, "Let's skip the formality. First of all, I want to apologize for the reception and hope you and your crew will understand the strict inspection demanded of the authorities and church."

"Of course, Your Excellency," Lawrence nodded at once. He had wanted to say "Miss Inquisitor," due to the lady looking no older than his own daughter, but quickly changed the wording to a more respectful title, "I had expected this, after all... We lost contact for so long."

Vanna nodded, "Tell me briefly what happened to the White Oak. I want to know how you lost contact with the authorities and how you reappeared on an unplanned route. And what about the good you are tasked with escorting, Anomaly 099?"

As soon as these words came out, the expression on Lawrence's face was suddenly full of frustration and nervousness. Sighing, he subconsciously glanced around before lowering his voice into a whisper: "You may not believe me when I say this, but we... met the legendary Vanished..."

In front of his own eyes, the stern and authoritative lady inquisitor suddenly got stiff like a stunned statue. Even the serious expression somehow appeared iced over like a frozen popsicle.

Lawrence couldn't tell what that expression meant, but he got the inkling suspicion that this would've been how he looked when they crashed through the ghost ship.

"Inquisitor...?" The old captain asked cautiously, "You..."

"Captain Lawrence," Vanna jerked back to attention like she's awoken from a daze. Staring dead into the eyes of the old sailor, "Repeat that again?"

"You may not believe me when I say it..."

"I'm referring to the second half."

"We met the legendary Vanished..."

"I believe you."

This time it was Lawrence to be stunned: "That..."

"You may need to stay on the docks for a few more days, Captain," said Vanna with a serious face, "this matter is very, very serious. You and your crew, hold on.... You encountered the Vanished, yet all your members survived?"

The expression on the face of the lady suddenly got a bit ugly like there was doubt and wariness in her eyes. This didn't go unnoticed by Captain Lawrence, who promptly explained the situation: "Yes, my crews and I are fine, but the Vanished took away Anomaly 099. That is the doll in the coffin. I suspect the ghost ship came specifically for that puppet coffin."

"The Vanished stole Anomaly 099?" Vanna frowned, then asked, "What about after that? It just let you go?"

"Ye-Yes..." Lawrence also became nervous and vaguely realized something, "Your Excellency, is lately the city..."

"..... It doesn't hurt to tell you; after all, it seems that your 'contact' may be more serious than ours now," Vanna sighed as she shot a grave look at the captain in front. "Captain Lawrence, you may not be the only person

who has dealt with the Vanished recently. Let's find a quiet place. I need to know more."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 65

Chapter 65 “Alice guillotine ”

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A temporary sanctuary was eventually set up for White Oak’s captain after he disembarked.

The smell of incense wafted through the room that had been adorned with amulets depicting various storm runes. On top of this, priests had also set up bronze boundary tablets on all four corners to create a barrier. They also brought the Storm Code, a biblical book from the cathedral to the sanctuary – it’s the eye for the defense against evil.

After this was all done, Captain Lawrence entered the room with Inquisitor Vanna.

“I hope you don’t mind our arrangement here,” Vanna said lightly, maintaining the conservatism and courtesy that a high-ranking priesthood should have, “all for safety.”

“Of course, everything is for safety. What I lack most now is security,” Captain Lawrence immediately nodded understandingly. After looking around the room at the sacred things, he felt slightly relieved and lost some of the fatigue over his head. “With all these things around, I believe any ordinary corruption would be destroyed the second they step inside...”

“That’s most likely. Now, why don’t we begin from the start? Here, you can tell me everything about the Vanished.” Vanna nods in agreement and waves for the captain to begin, “Let’s start from where you saw the ship.”

Captain Lawrence relaxed and began going over the tale of the terrible event: “It is like this...”

Captain Lawrence left nothing out in front of the inquisitor lady. He even went into clear detail about what he had for breakfast that day and what time the sailors on the ship had eaten. Those of whom he couldn’t remember or weren’t aware of was also ordered by him to write inside the captain’s log for this moment.

An experienced captain knows: many anomalies are preceded by seemingly ordinary signs that individuals would disregard as the norm until it’s too late. Therefore, the professional thing to do would be to review and write down everyone’s experience to compare, and if the details didn’t add up, that’s how one would know where to look.

Vanna listened carefully to the thrilling encounter until her brow furrowed up because the situation was more serious than she had imagined and more bizarre than she could ever believe.

She had thought that Captain Lawrence’s so-called “encounter” was just a face-to-face, or at best, a passing by the ghost ship from some distance. But instead, the captain described a direct head-on collision with the ghost ship and even nearly turned into an ethereal form themselves! The mere fact that they all came out alive was nothing but sheer luck!

“Your Excellency?” Seeing that Vanna hadn’t responded for a long while, the old captain grew uncomfortable and waved at the lady to return to reality, “What is your opinion on the Vanished? Did that ship really attack us because of anomaly 099?”

Vanna glanced at him, “Isn’t that what you’ve always thought?”

“I... I’ve always thought so, but now I’m not so sure,” Lawrence sighed, “especially since you just said that the ghost captain recently extended his power to the city-state of Pland... I always felt that things would not be so simple.”

“No one can guess what the ghost captain thinks,” Vanna shook her head, “and all we can do now is conduct the most thorough inspection of the White Oak to prevent the ship from carrying any ‘intrusions’. You and your crew will also suffer some grievances for the next while since we cannot allow any of you to have contact with anyone outside of the church. This arrangement will continue until the investigation is over.... this includes family visits.”

Captain Lawrence bowed his head in compliance: “Of course, I can understand.” Then he paused before asking something else on his mind, “So... about the theft of Anomaly 099...”

Vanna knew what the captain was worried about.

The eerie horror of the sea vision was a threat hanging over the heads of all civilization. Still, before considering these long-term and vast threats, the captain was foremost an ordinary folk who needed to support his family. In addition, he has lost Anomaly 099 from piracy. There’s no way an average person like him could shoulder this burden.

“Rest assured, the matter will be explained by the church to the city-state authorities and the Adventurer’s Association,” she said quietly. “The appearance of the Vanished is an undeniable force, and the loss of Anomaly 099 is not your responsibility. Even if it was a church ship responsible for escorting, the result might be the same.”

The expression on Captain Lawrence’s face visibly relaxed.

But there was still another word in Vanna’s mind that she didn’t say: in the final analysis, “anomalies” in itself wandered on the edge of being sealed and out of control. As a result, plenty of city dwellers would lose their lives due to this reasoning. In the face of such a dynamic imbalance, no one could be certain of anything.

“In addition...” Captain Lawrence suddenly grew hesitant before forcing him to ask, “I want to inquire, what is so special about the Anomaly 099?” Speaking of this, he paused and then quickly added: “Of course, when I undertook the escort job, I had received a note with the information

regarding how to seal 099 and the emergency disposal method, but I never got any information regarding its background and origin. You know it too. It is an anomaly within the one hundred figures, the less normal folks like I know about it, the better. But 099 has already been abducted by the Vanished. Therefore, according to regulations, it should be counted as completely losing control. So..."

"That's fine. It's okay to tell you now," Vanna nodded before Captain Lawrence finished. "Since Anomaly 099 is no longer within the control of civilization, the next step is to release the relevant information to the Adventurers' Association and ability users within the various city-states. You are a member of the former and the last to be in contact with 099. You are entitled to the information."

Speaking of this, she contemplated for a while to sort through the information in her possession: "Anomaly 099, the doll coffin. Its appearance is a gorgeous wooden box like that of a coffin with a sleeping doll inside. The doll has silver hair and wears a purple dress, and the body shape resembles that of ordinary humans."

"The anomaly was initially found in the cold sea of the north. The puppet's appearance inside the coffin is extremely close to that of Queen Ray Nora, who was beheaded and executed by the rebels half a century ago. However, there is no evidence of a real connection between the two."

"The anomaly does not have a tendency to think, has no consciousness, but is very likely to actively perceive the outside world and exert its influence outward."

"You should be aware of the sealing method for 099 so I won't repeat that part. As for the danger it poses...."

"First of all, the puppet coffin tends to 'settle'. Once it is stuck in a certain area long enough, it will regard the area as its territory. From then onward, it will be difficult to transfer 099 to other places while gradually expanding its influence to the surrounding area. The seal on it will also weaken sharply, becoming more to losing control. It's also a common feature for a

considerable number of anomalies. It's the main reason we hired you to move 099. It's to prevent excessive growth.”

“Secondly, in the event that the puppet coffin is out of control, all humanoid units, including elves, dwarves, orcs and the likes, will be targeted within a certain range of its surroundings. The specific criteria for targeting are not clear. All we know is that the victims will immediately lose control of their freedom of movement like a puppet pulled by a string. Without exception, they will unconsciously bow down in the direction of the coffin, just like someone worshipping a queen. Once this action is completed.... The victim will be immediately beheaded.”

“The decapitation cannot be avoided, cannot be protected, cannot be exempted, and there is no point in applying a blessing or wearing armor on the victim. The only condition for being selected is at the whim of the puppet. The victim will directly become decapitated after bowing. Only then will the puppet stay quiet for four to six hours. Afterward, it will look for the next target and repeat the cycle. Until now, no normal person has survived its selection.”

“The puppet coffin also has the characteristics of moving on its own during the out-of-control state. It's extremely fast, extremely powerful, and will break free of capture in various unbelievable ways. On top of all that, the coffin itself is also extremely powerful. The longer it's on the loose, the further the damage it will cause.”

“Of the several runaway events on record about the doll coffin, only one saint has ever survived the ordeal. However, that saint also happens to have the bloodline of the northern frost city-state. We cannot be certain it is the saint's strength that prevailed or that it is the puppet coffin's forgiveness characteristic acting up.”

Listening to the young Inquisitor's calm and indifferent narration, Captain Lawrence felt his hair standing up little by little.

His first thought was: the money of the city-state authorities is really not easy to earn! No wonder the reward for escorting Anomaly 099 is almost five times that of the escort of an ordinary anomaly. This kind of total

disregard for defensive measures and only needs the puppet's attention on you is impossible to dodge!

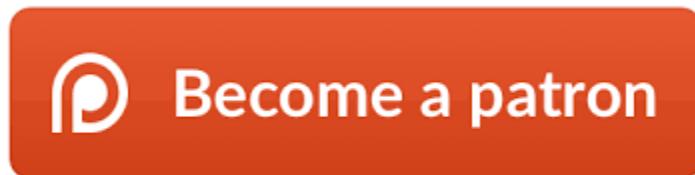
At the same time, the voice of Inquisitor Vanna voice rang again to interrupt his train of thought. "For the puppet coffin's terrifying ability, the Church gave it a special name when documenting Anomaly 099, which is named after the torture device used by the rebels to execute the Frost Queen half a century ago: Alice guillotine."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 66

Chapter 66 “Good Morning On The Vanished”

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“Alice! Take care of your head!” The beautiful morning on the Vanished began with the captain’s angry roar on the deck.

Duncan stood outside the captain’s room, his finger pointing to the head of the doll hanging from a nearby beam. He’s twitching in the eye as he watches the headless doll getting up in a panic to retrieve the hanging head.

With a crisp “click”, Miss Doll reconnected her head back on and promptly trotted over: “Hehe...”

“Don’t hehe me! What are you doing hanging your head above my door in the morning? Don’t tell me you’re acting as the scout. There’s a dove for that.” Duncan stared at this cursed doll, which unfortunately knocked a few years off the captain’s lifespan. Seriously, who wouldn’t be scared silly at having a decapitated head hanging outside their room in the morning?

“I washed my hair in the morning...” Alice shrank her head down and replied meekly, “My hair wasn’t drying fast enough so I wanted to hang it higher so it can catch some wind....”

Duncan: “...”

Alice peeks up after getting no response, “Captain... Are you angry?”

“You... are right.” After holding his breath in, Duncan could only blurt this out while restraining the muscles in his cheeks. He had to admit. From the perspective of Alice’s lifestyle, putting her head up in a higher place like

the mast was indeed a good idea. Besides, other items on the ship were doing weird stuff, like taking a nap or the bucket rolling to the back for a sun tan. Nothing was normal on this ship, and it's about time the man got a bigger heart.

In this respect, Alice had adapted quite well to life on the ship. This would be called "mingling" in if he had to put a word to it....

"Captain, you're not angry!" Alice immediately laughs because she has a good grasp of the captain's temperament by this point. She's still in awe of the man, but she's no longer afraid of him like on the first day and even dares to bargain for benefits, "Then Captain, can I still hang my head...."

"No, anywhere but outside the captain's room." Duncan shot a sideway glance at the doll, "I don't want to wake up in the morning and find a crewmember's head welcoming me at first light."

Alice could only honestly bow her head: "Oh, okay...."

Duncan still looked at her skeptically like he didn't believe it's not going to happen again.

"Captain?" Alice grew a little timid by the attention, "Why do you keep staring at me...?"

"I just suddenly thought of a question," Duncan said as he pondered, "you're suffering from hair loss, right? So then... do you grow it back?"

Alice was stunned, her expression becoming that of a broken recorder. It took a long while until her eyes suddenly jerked to attention at the captain's implication, "I... I... I didn't think about it at all! Captain you..."

The last few words of her sentence were borderline crying. In the end, she couldn't actually bring herself to say it aloud because "Captain, are you a devil?" would surely warrant a knock on the head. On top of that, she didn't want the goat head to go on a nagging spree regarding this later.

Duncan didn't care what Alice forced back down. Instead, his attention was on something else entirely: "You see? Although you can walk and jump like a normal person, but your body is that of a real puppet doll. You don't eat or drink, and joints can fall off anytime. In this case, wouldn't your hair be a non-renewable resource? The more you wash, the faster you will become bald.... Wouldn't combing also worsen the condition?"

Alice was about to really cry, "Captain, why would you think of such a terrible thing..."

Duncan: "Actually, I've always wanted to ask you this question after eating that bowl of fish head soup."

Alice was so taken aback by the soup description that she openly sniffled to pull the snot back: "But I cooked fish soup..."

Duncan puts on a front of truth and justice: "Didn't you use the fish's head in the soup? Then why isn't it fish head soup?"

Alice: "Captain is right...."

Just like that, the beautiful morning on the Vanished began with everyone's mutual recognition of reasonableness.

Miss Doll left in a trance after the morning exchange. She seemed to suddenly have a lot on her plate about the future and what it foretold. Meanwhile, Duncan's mood was as giddy as it came because he had just pulled the most devilish prank on the ship. Of course, the guy also partook in his usual breakfast in the mapping room – the chopped cheese and spirit he brought from Pland – which weren't much but still delicious considering what's on the Vanished.

"Captain, what happened to Miss Alice? I noticed that she had absent-mindedly returned to her quarters and slammed the door twice on the way in... Is she preoccupied with something?" The goat head asks after sensing the oddity with the doll.

“She’s facing a major life challenge, and I don’t think you’ll have to worry about her fighting the items aboard the ship for a while.” Duncan brought the wine glass up to his face and grinned mischievously, “But I’m curious about one thing...”

“Huh? What are you curious about?”

“Does a cursed doll really become a bald doll once their hair falls out?” Duncan begins an honest discussion with the wood figurine, “Shouldn’t a supernatural item have supernatural powers to ensure its maintenance? Unfortunately, I couldn’t dive further into the topic with Alice when she ran away.”

Goat’s head: “...”

The silence drew an intrigued look from Duncan, “Why aren’t you talking?”

After a period of being at a loss for words, the goat head finally lets loose, “You are truly the most terrifying natural disaster on the Boundless Sea.... Such a question is something I can never ask.”

Duncan shrugged and got up from behind the mapping table.

“I’m going to leave again,” he said to the goat head and snapped his finger to summon a wisp of green flame. Immediately, Ai the dove flew down from the shelf and landed on the man’s shoulder, “As usual, you are in charge of the helm while I’m away.”

“Of course Captain. As your most loyal first mate, I will not disappoint!” The goat head agreed without hesitation and soundly pumped with energy, “But Captain, you’ve been lately... a bit keen on spirit walking. Is there something on land that interests you?”

Duncan didn’t respond immediately but paused to ensure he’s got a good excuse, “I recently discovered after a century of development, the world is more interesting than imagined.”

It won't expose him for lacking knowledge by going this route, and it gave him ample reasoning to explore the land side more often in the future. If necessary, the excuse could also be used as the reason for returning the Vanished to civilization.

Most importantly, the answer fits with the image of "Captain Duncan", the infamous ghost captain and the biggest natural disaster on the Boundless Sea.

The goat head didn't explode like the man expected but instead took the decision for granted. "Oh, you're absolutely right Captain. After all these years, those city-states should've come up with something to intrigue you. I can see why you would want to relieve your boredom.... In this case, should the Vanished be prepared? Which city-state are you planning to invade? Pland? Renza? Or the one further north?"

Originally Duncan was still pleased to hear the support, but as the goat head went on and turned his excuse into a full-blown invasion plan, his heart instantly sank and pulled the break. "When did I say I want to invade a city-state? Something interesting has emerged. Wouldn't it be a shame to destroy it?"

"Ahh... right, my suggestion is too reckless. "The goat head immediately changed his attitude about the whole thing, "I thought you were going to drive the ship over there in the future... of course, the idea must be voided now since there's no plan of that. In fact, this way is also very good. No matter what, those city-states do have some strength. Simply driving the ship over there is a bit risky...."

"In the future, don't mention invading a city-state." Duncan looked at the goat head and added another layer of insurance, "We have been derailed from the world for over a century, and now I want to regain control of the changes in civilized society, which may involve many long-term changes. Don't make superfluous plans until I have a clear order."

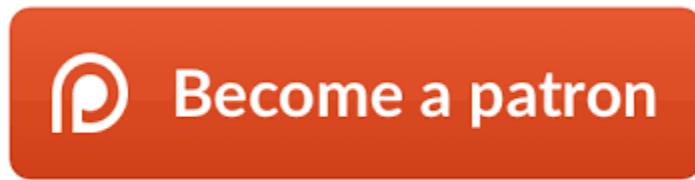
"As you command, Captain."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 67

Chapter 67 “New Contact”

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The goat head was a dangerous fellow, and Duncan knew it from the beginning—not only because it was an unknown anomaly but because it had been loyal to the real Captain Duncan and still plays and thinks according to the rules of old times to this day.

From the perspective of the goat head, the city-states on land are meaningless, the mortals in the city-states are stupid and ridiculous, the weak city-state fleets are all food, and plundering and hunting them... was the natural “everyday” objective of the Vanished.

Duncan didn’t know how long it would take him to adjust the goat head’s habits, but he knew the process had to be subtle — and it was the safest way to change himself and the ship.

He took one last look at the goat head that was quietly waiting at the sailing table. Upon confirming that the other party had taken over the sails and rudder system of the Vanished, he then pushed the door into his bedroom.

This afternoon, Nina would return to the antique shop, and before that, he had to let Ai the dove complete his test projects.

Once the door to the captain’s chamber was closed, the goat head quietly watched the direction of the departing captain. Only after an unknown amount of time did the wood statue sigh before softly muttering to itself: “He really didn’t get affected by subspace.... Oh Vanished, Oh Vanished, what did you fish up back then....”

.....

Duncan had returned to the familiar dark tunnel with the shimmering strips of starlight. On one end was the Vanished's connection, the other the antique shop inside Pland. From how it looks, he no longer had to actively control his mind to be connected to both sides after practicing for so long. Even now, the man could remotely control the body inside the shop for simple daily activities.

This was obviously a good thing. An antique shop owner who spends more than half the time "sleeping" in the store would obviously be suspicious. Even if merely standing at the doorway for a minute or two would dispel a lot of unnecessary attention.

Instead of immediately "teleporting" his main consciousness to the city-state of Pland, Duncan held out in the dark tunnel and carefully perceived the changes in the space before eventually shifting his sight to the side.

In the vast darkness, Ai had transformed into her undead bony form that was sprinkling with green fire in her flight. However, he's more focused on the vague shadows hovering around the area of the bird.

Among the shadows were the Sun Talisman previously brought to the Vanished, a quaint and old short dagger, a piece of cheese, a round cannonball, and a hard salted, dried fish.

These are "test items" that he prepared before he set out to further test Ai's ability of carrying items and the changes that might occur during the process.

The short dagger was found in the cabin, once probably belonged to some sailor – it was a mindless ordinary item. The cheese was taken from the galley and had the property of not perishing, and the shells came from the ammunition depot, while the dried salted fish was one of the harvests from the last fishing venture. Actually, the fish hadn't been fully dried yet but was nevertheless hard as a rock after two days of bathing in the sun.

Duncan stared at Ai, who was hovering around these shadows, and nodded slightly in approval: “So this is how you carry the items.”

Ai flapped her wings and let out a light, sharp cry: “Sit firmly, sit firmly!”

Duncan smiled and gathered his spirit, ready to project the main consciousness forward.

But at the moment of concentration, he suddenly saw a strange glimmer appear at the end of the stream that was pointing towards the city-state of Pland.

Duncan immediately stopped, looking in amazement at the light that flickered among the countless dim stars—the light seemed to be there, only to turn from dim to bright at the moment of his concentration. It’s as if the star could sense his presence and answered his call.

What is that thing?

Duncan tried to lean towards the glimmer in doubt, and with just a thought, he had already crossed the vast darkness and shot towards the light. Only then did he understand this “connection”. It was similar to his body on the Vanished and antique shop.

This is..... another spare shell to be chosen?

Duncan couldn’t help but have such a conjecture in his mind, but he quickly shook his head to dismiss the idea – the shimmering star in front of him was far superior in scale to those points of light representing the “body”. Such a large light... It was not so much a shell to be chosen but rather a huge object that has established a connection with oneself.

Without hesitation, he made up his mind and stretched out his hand to cautiously touch that star...

In the next second, a huge and unfamiliar “perception” suddenly flooded into his mind – he couldn’t see the things around him, but the sense of the sea breeze blowing against his body was quite evident. There was also the

sound of people talking all around, but the noise was so muddled that he couldn't discern who was talking or what topic they discussing. It's similar to someone eavesdropping through a thick drapery.

Duncan had a vague awareness he must be perceiving through some sort of behemoth structure; otherwise, he wouldn't be having so much trouble making out the words. However, there's also the possibility of an outside force interfering with his connection. Regardless of what the answer was, the ghost captain caught enough of the words that it was a tense and solemn atmosphere on the other side. Eventually, he finally managed to make out one name that repeatedly came up – the White Oak.

Taking his hand back from the light stream, Duncan watched the star that's showing a shadow of a ship in the tear with a look of surprise.

The White Oak... The name seemed a little familiar, but I can't quite remember when I heard it.

Duncan thought hard to recall the name. Finally, through much effort and rummaging, he understood it must be the same ship that had collided with the Vanished from before.

Immediately afterward, he also remembered the newspaper he had bought in the city-state of Pland. At that time, a section of the paper had mentioned the incident about that ocean-going ship being missing for several days but would soon make port....

For a while, Duncan didn't know what to make of this and fell into a daze because this was the White Oak, the ship responsible for escorting Anomaly 099.

The old captain who had tried to talk to me seems to have finally reached Pland, and apparently the ship has made a connection with me.

Could it be that the connection was established after the original "spirit world ship collision" accident? Because the flames of the Vanished at that time extended to the White Oak?

Duncan had a faint conjecture in his mind, speculating on the various attributes of his ghost flame while also wondering if his connection to the steamship could be of any use.

After drifting aboard Vanished for so long, he valued every connection between himself and the civilized world.

Now it seems that although the White Oak has docked, it was still in a certain state of blockade and surveillance. As for those nervous people humming around to make so much noise, they should be the “professionals” of the city-state who specialize in dealing with extraordinary visions.

Clearly, a ship that had been lost at sea was dangerous for the people of the city-state, and the experience of close contact with the Vanished may also be a major pending matter.

Duncan had enough awareness to know the sort of reputation his ghost ship held.

After thinking about it for a while, Duncan cautiously stepped back and did not continue to touch the light in front of him.

As the number one boss on the Boundless Sea, he did not intend to deal with the city-state’s protectors without knowing the details of the “power users” in their roster. Also, keeping the White Oak as an anchor for future use was better than exposing it now and being destroyed.

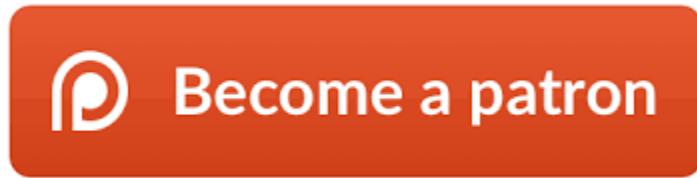
At that time, maybe he could finally talk to the old captain calmly instead of that messy brief encounter smothered by the wind.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 68

Chapter 68 “Reliable Dove Express”

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A cool sea breeze suddenly blew across the deck, causing Captain Lawrence, who had just walked outside, to rub his arm subconsciously—he didn’t know if the feeling of goosebumps was due to the cool sea breeze or what the young inquisitor had told him.

Anomaly 099, the puppet coffin, after losing control, not only has the ability to move and the tendency to get out of trouble, but could also continuously expand its sphere of influence towards any target within its range. The consequence was the unconditional decapitation of the victim, and the only ones that could resist were saints....

To think for the past half a month, he and his crew have been dealing with this dangerous anomaly – even though the escort journey has never been dangerous except for the final encounter with the Vanished, he still feels a little scared in retrospect.

However, it was just fear on his part since that’s all in the past now.

As a member of the Adventurer’s Association and a veteran ocean explorer, his job was to work with the Boundless Sea. However, unlike fishermen who only operate in safe offshore areas, he has spent most of his sailing career dealing with Anomalies and even Visions.

When undertaking an Anomaly delivery job, the authorities or churches would inform the transportation crew in advance of the dangers. This part was often the shortest part of the entire commission contract, usually with

only one message: this task is fatally dangerous, and the specific details cannot be divulged.

Every captain who earned a living by traveling between city-states knew what he was facing, and more than half of them would eventually be entangled by this deadly career in their later years.

For Captain Lawrence, many of his colleagues of the same age have retired by now, either trapped in incessant nightmares or suffering from mental problems caused by various degrees of curses. In some cases, disabilities are also included due to a long voyage or worse....

Of course, equal compensation was rewarded for such a dangerous job. Unlike commoners scraping by in the city-states, captains of a ship would never have to worry about their retirement funds. Unfortunately, that's the least of a captain's worry because the occupational diseases are abundant.

Captain Lawrence had no delusions of being a nobleman. He did this mainly to earn money on top of his passion for exploring the sea. But like most people, the passion of youth doesn't always earn one a healthy lifestyle, and now.... he's starting to feel his enthusiasm and passion burning out.

While my mental health is still normal, while the Boundless Sea hasn't yet entangled my fate yet, it's best I find time to retire.

Lawrence sighed slightly, turned, and slowly walked back towards the captain's room.

The priests' search and questioning of the entire ship were not over yet, and he could not abandon the White Oak until then. Afterwards though, he and his crew would be transferred for isolation and observation, as well as a series of psychiatric tests by the authorities.

His gaze eventually swept over the familiar onboard facilities around him after coming aboard.

It's an excellent new ship with only five years of service. Honestly, Lawrence seriously felt reluctant to retire so early on, but.... it's either early retirement or the likelihood of spending his life in the insane asylum.

.....

In the city-state downtown, in the old antique shop, the middle-aged man lying on the bed back on the second floor had slowly come to. In his view was a moldy ceiling reflecting into Duncan's field of vision.

"Phew..." Duncan exhaled softly, feeling the perception from this body quickly clearing up and stabilizing. After two to three seconds, he braced those arms and pushed himself up.

Ai also flies over then, her beak chirping loudly: "Honey, welcome home. Do you want dinner first or a bath first, or perhaps...."

Duncan was about to stretch his limbs when he cramped up over the last word. Without hesitation, he slapped the dove as punishment: "Why in the world would you say something like that?!"

Ai was obviously an extraordinary bird because she didn't get fazed in the slightest. Briskly flapping her wings and chirping loudly: "Boowww, a punch for a nosebleed, a nosebleed for a crooked nose, a crooked nose and nosebleed for a sauce shop...."

Duncan didn't know if he should suffocate this dove at this point because his brain honestly couldn't keep up. Then turning to look at the table, he saw the various test items he had prepared from the Vanished: sun talisman, dagger, cheese, a cannonball, and a salted fish.

Everything's here, and it doesn't look like Ai had any sort of packet loss during the transfer.

This bird is more reliable than I thought.

Duncan stepped forward and visually checked each item for any damages and found none. This improved his mood and even changed his annoyed

look on Ai, who was still acting silly on the bed and spouting dumb things.

Ai: “Old treasonous bastard will be butchered. On guard you sly dog!”

Duncan: “...”

Realizing he was the dumb one for even thinking about praising the bird, he sat down on the chair and checked the goods some more with his ghost fire for an in-depth review.

The first was the Sun Talisman, which has not changed – as an supernatural item that has been completely transformed and controlled by the ghost fire, it still lingered with a flicker of his power.

The dagger, which did not possess supernatural attributes, did not look any different. Except for the ancient style, its blade was still sharp, and the scabbard was well-maintained.

Afterward, Duncan’s gaze fell on the piece of cheese that had come out of the Vanished’s kitchen. The cheese was not acting strange or smelled rotten. It’s still edible according to his judgement.

Now then, it was the cannonball’s turn. He was curious about this one because he knew this metal ball was one of those active items aboard the ship.

Duncan tapped the iron shell and attempted to get feedback – nothing came.

On the Vanished, he knows certain objects had a “mind” of their own, while some are a collective hive with multiple subunits. This cannonball was part of those subunits so his experiment here was to see if the shell could connect with the main hive back on the ship. Since there’s no feedback, it could only mean the shell has become no more than a lump of metal.

Duncan mused over this discovery and started expanding his idea.

If I start taking back shells to the Vanished, would they also be recognized as a sub-unit of the ammunition depot on the Vanished?

If yes, then that means I can replenish the ammunition aboard. But what criteria must I meet?

I know the cannonballs I used to sink Alice's coffin didn't return so there must be a range limit.

And what about upgrading the artillery system? Cannonballs are from the last century, meaning they're likely outdated by now. Can I use more advanced shelling?

Actually, if I can replenish the ammo aboard, wouldn't that mean I can also add new facilities and equipment to the vessel? For example, I might not even need to use cannons anymore and instead replace them all with something higher-tech!

I can also improve the living conditions aboard! Maybe a new bed or a sofa?

Duncan couldn't help but salivate on the possibilities.

The more he came into contact with the modern city-state of Pland, the more he felt that the Vanished needed to be improved upon. Glamor from a century ago doesn't mean anything in modern times. Sure, a ghost ship's weird and terrifying power would bring fear to any sailor, but it had no electric lighting, no processing chips of a computer, no missile systems, and most of all, no boiler for hot showers!

Oh right, there's also no French fries aboard for Ai.

Duncan silently glanced at the dove, who had jumped out onto the windowsill staring off into the distance.

Sensing the attention, Ai looked back with those mung bean eyes and chirped: "Buy some fries from the dock???"

"Shut up, don't mention fries." Duncan rebuffed the bird before turning his attention to the last item.

The salted fish was a pure and natural processed item gifted to him by nature. It tastes good, smells good, and belongs to the items outside of the Vanished.

After experiencing the spirit walk, this salted fish didn't seem to change much either.

Let's have Nina turn it into a stew this evening.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 69

Chapter 69 “City-State Life”

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After inspecting all the test items, Duncan now has a further understanding of the bird’s transportation ability and the capacity she held.

Ai could transport several different items simultaneously, including organic, inorganic, supernatural, and ordinary things. The type of goods would not affect the stability of her power, and the transportation process would not affect the goods’ nature.

The transportation ability also doesn’t seem to consume much of her “energy” either. Whether it was the ritual dagger at the beginning, or a bunch of things at once, the bird was still bouncing around as ever. Of course, this may be because the total amount of “cargo” she has transported so far was too small and didn’t hit the bottleneck.

Regardless, further testing was still in order regarding Ai’s “weight” and “volume” limit.

Duncan summarized the currently known information one by one, and only after confirming that everything was in place did he breathe a sigh of relief.

He knows that the tests done so far are still very much imperfect, and many possible variables have not been carefully considered. Moreover, even from the perspective of “test subjects”, the samples he selected are too small to accumulate valid data.

In the future, he will select more types of different weights and volumes. Only then could he call the data reliable.

Duncan was very cautious in this regard, and this caution wasn't without reason – because he has a very bold plan... or idea in mind.

Since Ai could teleport items between land and the Vanished intact without limiting what type of items they are, then... wouldn't she be able to ship people as well?

Like, someone that's not so human? For example.... Alice?

Duncan knows that a single person's strength is limited. With only his ability to walk in the spirit world to link the ship with the city-states, it would just be a matter of time before he encounters a problem of insufficient manpower. However, if there's a helper around, the situation would be much better. As it so happens, Ai's ability has given him a lot of room to work with.

Of course, Alice was not a good candidate. This numbered anomaly called 099 – although elegant and mysterious when sitting quietly – was in essence a useless and cowardly doll that could hardly do anything right.

Remembering that his only crewmember available to him was an individual who could actually stew her own head during cooking was enough to make any man sigh in agony.

The positioning of the Vanished as a world-class enemy was truly a headache. Let's say he did go out and recruit more sailors. What then? The ones that would dare apply would probably be villainous crooks themselves. You know, the type that goes pirate robbing on Monday and Wednesday, then demon sacrificing on Tuesday and Friday, and then finally guerrilla warfare with the church on weekends...

But that's a plus in retrospect. At least those crooks would easily mingle with the goat head, who's constantly yapping about invading a city-state.

"..... Aigh, Alice is at least honest and obedient," Duncan sighed and stood up, muttering to himself, "If I properly train her, she can grow up properly too... probably."

Even if she can't be a helper, it is good nevertheless to let that doll see the world. After all, it won't be good to keep her so clueless and lacking in common sense.

After sorting out his thoughts, Duncan began to pack up the things he had brought with him – he would not return them to the Vanished for the time being,

There aren't many places to hide things on the second floor of the antique shop, and Nina was always there to clean up his room. So having some random items around would surely be suspicious, especially when one of them was a century-old cannonball. But after a short contemplation, Duncan found some suitable places to hide them. The sun talisman could be kept on his body, the salted fish would go directly into the kitchen, and the cannonball and dagger were even easier to dispose of.

Without delay, Duncan took the two most suspicious items downstairs and directly placed them in a corner next of the counter. This was an antique shop, and having more or less old relics lying around and piled up couldn't be any more normal. Well, calling this an antique shop was a compliment since almost everything on the first floor are counterfeits....

As for the last one, the cheese he grabbed from the Vanished's kitchen, Duncan also found a good place for it – in the trash.

After dealing with all this, Duncan patted the nonexistent dust on his hands and smiled with a very satisfied grin over the arrangement.

Then he glanced at the sky outside, where the “sun” confined by the double rune ring was hanging high in the sky.

Nina would return home later today, before which he plans to go out to learn more about the city. It doesn't seem like there's any business today anyways.

Since the weather was a little cool, Duncan changed into a dark brown coat and groomed his somewhat messy hair before going out. This was his way

of making this old and tattered body look a bit more refreshed after being tormented by drugs and alcohol for so long.

Once out and walking, Duncan didn't need to wait before the sound of flapping wings came from the second floor. It was Ai who flew down to land on his shoulders while pressing her head triumphantly against his: "To the Erxian Bridge, then take the Chenghua Avenue..."

Duncan shot a sideway glance at this bird. He had initially planned to keep the dove home to watch house; after all, when going outside, having a bird on his shoulder was too eye-catching and weird. What's more, his connection with the bird would allow him to summon the dove whenever he likes. Of course, taking her along wouldn't mean a thing, but now, Ai had taken the liberty of using this opening to tag along on her own accord for a car ride.

Looking at the triumphant appearance of this bird, Duncan finally smiled helplessly and sighed: "... Forget it. Follow if you like it."

With this arrangement, the pair took the main road opposite to the antique shop and continued until the man overheard the crisp sound of a bell ringing.

Looking over, Duncan could see a double-decker bus with a brown and blue striped paint job driving along the main tracks until it stopped next to a station not far away.

It was the common form of public transport in the city-state of Pland, a vehicle powered by a steam engine. By spending a fare of six pesos – affordable by most lower-sector citizens of the city – one could ride the bus according to the preplanned route as long as one wished.

From what Duncan could discern according to the map displayed along the pole sign up ahead, this bus route went around the city and then eventually up into the higher sector, only stopping and making a round trip at an area called the "Crossroad".

Duncan had an image of this “Crossroad” from the memory fragments. This neighborhood was regarded as the “junction” of the city, the most prosperous commerce area with decent housing arrangements. Many lower residents regarded this neighborhood as their dream goal in life, while many middle-class citizens who could not afford such an expensive upscale arrangement would also try their best to live as close as possible to that spot since it had almost everything in terms of facilities – theaters, museums, and several upscale restaurants.

Nina’s school was also near the Crossroad, and the museum she mentioned wanting to visit was also located in that area.

Duncan thought for a moment, then quickly walked to the station and got on before the bus started again.

There was hardly anyone on the bus as he checked, only partially full with the first floor entirely devoid of passengers. However, there was the driver in his seat and the dark blue uniformed conductor standing ready to take his fare. The young woman had simple makeup and a short haircut, but that friendly smile was as genuine as it came until she noticed the dove on Duncan’s shoulder.

“Sorry, pets are not allowed on board. It’s the rule,” the young woman said uncomfortably, pointing up to the bird on Duncan’s shoulder, “including doves.”

Duncan looked at Ai, who flapped her wings innocently and tilted her head to look at him.

“Go to the roof of the car.”

“Coo, coo.” Ai flapped her wings and flew out of the car, “cooing” all the while in protest.

The young conductor lady appeared almost speechless at this weird display of man and bird communicating together.

“Is it okay now?” Duncan waved at the conductor, who seemed to be in a daze over his actions and pointed to the roof. “You shouldn’t mind a bird riding on the car roof, right?”

Only then did the conductor react: “Ah... Yes..... The fare is six pesos for a pass.”

Duncan reached into his pocket and pulled two coins for the blue ticket, then found a window seat and sat quietly to enjoy his first car ride in the world.

Accompanying the vibration and mechanical friction was the engine starting up, followed by the ringing of the bell in the front for the time of departure. The scenery gradually receded outside the window as Duncan comfortably leaned back in his seat.

Steam is a good thing, civilized society is a good thing, scientific and technological progress is a good thing....

If I get a chance, I must get myself a seating like this as well on the Vanished. The old wooden chairs are not comfortable at all. Oh right, I mustn’t forget a boiler. It’s just not right doing without a hot shower.

As soon as his thoughts were spreading into other areas, the guy suddenly felt a short rumble in the car as it came to a crawl, eventually to a stop.

“You coming on? There are seats still!” The young conductor pushed open the window near the front and shouted outside.

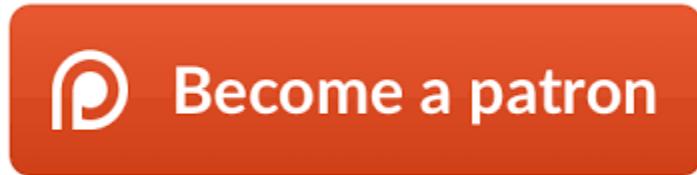
Duncan was startled and chuckled dumbly at himself. Apparently he’s still a stranger to this world because he had forgotten how lively life could be in a typical city.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 70

Chapter 70 “I’m One Of You”

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How do ordinary people survive in a world with supernatural visions, where the lands are blocked by endless oceans and where anomalies and city-state are constantly engaged in endless fighting?

Duncan still lacked knowledge of the world, but at least in the places he saw, the ordinary folks of this place still lived in an environment of relative stability and order.

They worked, they studied, they rested, they run their own shops, they mingled, they go out on their days off, they go to the theaters and restaurants, they go to the parks and ports, they visited museums, they gossiped with their neighbors after dinner, they did everything a person would when living a not so exciting but nominally secure life.

Duncan sat in his seat, curiously observing everything around him as the ordinary folks went about their daily lives. From what he perceived, they’re not much different from those on Earth aside from the supernatural bits.

The bus stopped again upon approaching the Crossroad, and this time many passengers boarded.

Duncan continued to stare curiously out the window at this location. There are plumes of steam coming out of the chimney chutes, as well as crisscrossing pipes connecting the various buildings along the streets. But suddenly, the man was alarmed when an inexplicable surge of heat rose from his chest.

Glancing down, he realized it had come from the sun talisman hanging around his neck!

Naturally, Duncan was stunned by this discovery. Out of reflex, he touched the spot covered by his shirt and felt the temperature with his fingers. It's not only hot but actually slightly vibrating.

He didn't know what was going on, but it was clear that the talisman resonated with something nearby—through the connection he had established with the item, he quickly locked onto a figure outside the car window speeding through the crowd.

The person wore an ordinary black coat that gave no sign he was any different from the passersby; however, Duncan's certain the talisman was pointing at him.

Without hesitation, he immediately got up from his seat and marched towards the exit while sending a mental message to Ai. The bird immediately jumped off the bus roof and landed on the man's shoulder.

The conductor standing near the door watched in amazement, and only after Duncan got off the bus did she mutter: "How did he train that dove..."

But then this little episode of daily life quickly receded from the conductor's attention as the wave of passengers boarded the steam bus: "This spot to buy tickets. Children also need to buy. Hey, this kid is taller than one meter.... Four years old? This can't be four years old. Look, he must buy a ticket if he crosses this measuring line!"

By now, Duncan had already marched into the crowd and entered an intersection while tracking that black coat.

The suspicious individual clearly had a purpose in how swift and agile he moved through the dense collage of people. In fact, it didn't take more than a minute for Duncan to lose sight of the black coat.

Thankfully, the resonance from the sun talisman remains, and the feedback from the item told the antique shop owner which direction he needed to go.

Duncan thought quickly as he followed the guidance.

There is no doubt that the black coat is suspicious, and this talisman must have sensed something to react so strongly... Perhaps, it perceived a homologous power from the “real sun god”.

From the goat head, Duncan had already learned that the talisman had the function of identifying and blessing fellow citizens who followed the black sun. However, under normal circumstances, only the faithful could use this function or perceive the guiding effect of the talisman.

Duncan had usurped control of the item with his ghost fire, but at the time, he thought that his flame had destroyed most of the talisman’s abilities, but now it seems... the recognition ability of this thing was still there!

It’s just that this recognition ability was now being used at his own discretion....

Guided by the talisman, he gradually left the main road crowded with passersby and gradually walked into a deserted path after three turns.

Here, Duncan saw the suspicious figure again—the person was speeding past the intersection ahead, seemingly oblivious to the addition of a tailing tracker behind himself.

Then the talisman on his chest grew a little hotter again, and the resonance became clearer as well.

Duncan quietly drove the ghost fire inside, reading the information from this sun talisman with his mind.

It felt subtle—even though the item had no thinking properties, Duncan could feel the excitement from the talisman conveying through himself. It’s telling him where the other believers are to the point that Duncan wants to remind the thing to be more reserved. For real, not long ago, this sacred relic still belonged to a heretic of the black sun. It doesn’t need to be so excited to rat its former creators out.

At the same time, Duncan became more and more confident that he was approaching a secret meeting place where many followers had gathered. This proves his theory that the gathering in the sewer was no more than a small slice of the bigger pie.

He didn't know what the cultists were trying to do now, but he did know one thing – they knew more about the ancient history of this world than Nina's history teacher.

To understand the deeper secrets of this world, it was necessary to contact the forces of the transcendent realm. The authorities and church would be difficult to approach, but cultists on the other hand are much simpler to mingle with....

If anything, he could just beat them up if they refused!

It's then his train of thought came to a halt. In front of him was a dead end, and the sneaky black coat had slipped into a nearby alley. On top of this, more "siblings" were coming up from behind – at least that's what the talisman sensed.

Duncan silently pulled up the lapels of his coat, hiding half of his face in the collar with the process. Almost the next second after the action was done, a series of footsteps could be heard from the nearby buildings.

One after another, figures appeared.

It was about a dozen people wearing attires no different from any common citizen. Like an assassin wouldn't walk outside in broad daylight, these cultists wouldn't hold a sign claiming to be heretics either. Nevertheless, the constant heat and directional signal from the sun talisman was all the convincing Duncan needed to confirm their identity.

While he examined the group, the group was also eyeing him warily until a young tall, and thin man whispered something to his companion on the side.

"This is private land. What are you sneaking around here for?" The tall and thin man spoke. He seemed to be trying to create an impression that they're

all good-abiding citizens, and Duncan was in fact the suspicious trespasser.

Duncan murmured inside that he was really not cut out to be a spy because he didn't know what lie he should make in this situation. But then a naughty idea popped up in his head. What if he acts stupid and refuses to leave? Would these cultists attack him? Or would they pretend to be thugs and mug him?

"Didn't you hear me?" The tall and thin man frowned and said impatiently. At the same time as his voice fell, the figures around him quietly took half a step forward, faintly forming an encirclement, "I'm talking to you..."

Duncan shrugged his shoulders, casually touched the sun talisman from his chest, and said sincerely: "I'm one of you."

Let's mingle in first. Maybe I can get something out of them. No need to waste this chance.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 71

Chapter 71 “Gathering In The Gutter”

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There were a few seconds of silence the moment Duncan took out the sun talisman. Eventually, the tall and thin-looking boss suddenly lowered his voice and said urgently: “Put that away! There might be eyes of the church nearby!”

Does this talisman really work? Is this thing so convincing among the Sunists?

Duncan became happy in his heart, but he still maintained a mysterious posture of covering half his face. Then speaking lightly after putting away the talisman: “If the church does have an eye here, they would be more attracted to a large group like you guys gathering together instead of my talisman.”

As soon as his voice fell, a bearded man on the opposite side subconsciously spoke: “No, our group will only attract the police at most since we won’t disturb the social order...”

“Shut up!” The tall, thin leader immediately hushed the underling with a glare before returning his gaze to Duncan, “This is a necessary caution; after all, this city is very unsafe now. You come closer and don’t make any superfluous movement.”

While Duncan calmly walked towards the opposite side, the other party continued to keep a vigilant eye on him. Only after they’re close enough did the thin, tall guy ask: “Are you a local believer in this city?”

Duncan thought for a moment and nodded: “Yes.”

The original owner of the body did live in the city, and he now lives in the city, and on these easy questions, he decided to tell the truth.

His plan was simple: find a way to fish in troubled waters and blend in among these cultists. This way, he could catch any news that might arise and perhaps ask more questions without exposure. Of course, in the worst-case scenario, he could always let Ai transform and bird them up!

The tall and thin man didn’t notice the dangerous thoughts running wild in the “compatriots” heart, “As far as I know, the Storm Church attacked the local branch several days ago....”

“That’s right. The assembly in the sewers several days ago was a disaster. The ceremony got out of control, and we lost a lot of people as a result. But I escaped.”

Duncan said this without psychological burden because it’s technically the truth. Even so, the ghost captain could clearly feel the tense atmosphere around him from these people after his announcement. Hurrying to correct his careless remark, “There were three others like me who escaped, but we were separated afterward. I can no longer get in contact with them anymore. Then I met you through the sun’s guidance.”

The tall and thin man snorted noncommittally, and then his gaze fell on the guy’s shoulder: “What is that?”

“My pet,” Duncan said casually, “can’t you see? It’s just an ordinary dove.”

Ai bent her head at the right time and made a loud “cooing” sound.

“This dove is so loud...” The tall and thin man seemed to finally relax his vigilance, probably subconsciously thinking a guy who’s been taught to abide by the rules from the church wouldn’t have the habit of running around in the city with a bird pet. “Follow me. It’s not safe to talk outside.”

Duncan immediately breathed a sigh of relief in his heart. Finally, his plan to fish in troubled waters seemed to have worked.

Then he followed the cultists and went deeper into the alley.

The alley ran longer than Duncan had imagined, leading to this city's most decrepit slums. Then after passing through another old steam-releasing pipe system, through sewage paths, and winding into a low, dilapidated complex of buildings, Duncan finally got his first glimpse of what it truly means to be impoverished in this world.

He thought the shop where he and Nina lived was already at the bottom of society, but now, what the antique shop represented could only be called lavish in the lower sectors.

Most of the dilapidated houses lining the road are lifeless and looked abandoned for some time, but a few did seem to give off a small life presence through the windows. Likely some homeless folks hiding in this forgotten part of the city had taken residence, and they're now watching these uninvited guests who intruded upon their turfs.

But in the end, these lifeless eyes were quickly retracted—the dozen or so intruders were obviously enough to make any homeless folk cower in fear.

“See, this is the most prosperous city-state on the Boundless Sea, Pland,” the man in black who first caught Duncan’s attention muttered. “It’s the same everywhere you go. Whether it’s the other human settlements or the elves’ Wind Harbor that they call the promised land of peace and justice, it is all like this in the slums. How much of this world’s light can actually reach these souls you think?”

Duncan didn’t reply to that comment but glanced up towards the steam-spewing pipes coming down from the upper sector of the city and industrial area – everything around the pipes was giving off an unpleasant stench of chemicals and sewage.

Though he didn’t live in this city for long, Duncan had no trouble understanding why urban cancerous cells like these cultists would pop up

again and again then.

Silently giving the indignant man in black a nod, Duncan decides to keep his opinion to himself instead of lashing out.

Regardless of what the reason being – seduced by the sun cult or persecution by life – the fact remains that these twisted heretics are kidnapping innocent civilians from these slums to sacrifice in their sick rituals.

As a “foreigner” who didn’t know enough about the world, Duncan had no right to judge them too much for the time being. However, from a former sacrifice’s perspective, his opinion of these cultists could only be very negative.

In silence, he finally reached the stronghold of these cultists.

The base was located in the underground parts of an abandoned factory. Somehow, these cultists always seem to know which gutter to use as their gathering place to avoid detection, or perhaps there are just that many sewers in this prosperous steam city to tap.

Anyways, after climbing over a collapsed brick wall fencing the property and opening an iron gate to the basement, Duncan was quickly ushered in and down into an open-styled room.

It was a warehouse type of place, or it could have been a mechanical room at some point. Regardless of what it was meant to function as, the basement had been emptied out, and only the plumbing system remained on the ceiling. There are still some gas lamps hanging on the walls, but those could no longer be lit – dark spaces are dangerous – so the cultists avoided any area that their greased torches couldn’t reach. Eventually, they arrived before a larger group of cultists already waiting for them.

Duncan observed the individuals gathered here in the wide basement with some surprise, and likewise, the cultists were also watching him with wary and caution. To them, Duncan was a stranger and must be kept on watch with vigilance, which they acted on by surrounding him.

Frowning at this stance: “What, you must search me again after coming inside? I didn’t know there was such a rule.”

“If you are really a spy from the church then a body search is useless.” The tall thin man rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a cloth strip to hand over to Duncan, “Relax, merely a more rigorous verification process. This is all for caution. We have lost far too many compatriots over the past few years due to various reasons. Take it and recite after me.”

Duncan glanced at the object handed over by the other party and saw that it was a dirty strip of cloth. At first glance, it looked no different from a torn fabric of an old shirt stained by blood.

Is this another prop for the suntists to verify their fellow believers?

Duncan was a little surprised in his heart, lamenting that this was really a group worthy of being hunted by the professionals from the church. Day in and day out hiding in the dark crevices of society has honed their skills to a level where they are watching out for spies and outsiders at every minute.

“In the name of the sun, may the light of the Lord shine...”

Duncan immediately got a familiar sensation after hearing that chant – just days ago a cultist had said something similar to him and also handed a talisman over!

Without anyone noticing, he quietly seeped a spark of green flame into the seemingly ordinary strip of cloth in his hand. Only after doing this did Duncan follow the chanting prayer with a straight face, which naturally remained quiet to the praying mantra.

Finally nodding after a brief period of unresponsiveness, the cultist appeared pleased and smiled while retrieving the cloth, “Welcome back to the glory of the Lord, my fellow brother.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 72

Chapter 72 “The Information From The Meeting”

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To be fair, these cultists are actually quite cautious.

They didn't believe the strange “compatriot” just because Duncan took out the sun talisman, nor did they easily believe him because he explained what happened on the sacrifice grounds. Instead, they observed Duncan's words and deeds along the way and even conducted an additional verification procedure to confirm the stranger's identity after arriving at the assembly hall – they had done their best in terms of being cultists in hiding.

But all of their screening measures assumed Duncan was a “normal human being”. That's a mistake and likely a serious one.

The tall, skinny little leader retrieved the inconspicuous strip of cloth from Duncan, seemingly completely unaware of the change in the power of this sacred object. Then, pointing to the corner of the assembly hall:
“Compatriot, rest over there first. You are not the only new face here.”

Duncan nodded and walked to that inconspicuous corner while paying attention to every face in the basement.

Unlike what he had seen in the sewer grounds before, he was surprised to find that none of the Sun worshippers wore the iconic black robes that were unique to their religion but dressed like ordinary citizens despite some still wearing black clothes.

He asked the cultist beside him curiously: “Don't we need to hide our face?”

The cultists he questioned looked surprised: “... Do you native believers in Pland hide your faces when you meet?”

Duncan immediately frowned slightly: “You are not from Pland...”

“We came from Lunsa,” another believer next to him said calmly. After confirming that the stranger in front of him was really a member of the sun faith, the followers here were obviously letting their guard down.

“Everyone here only managed to settle down last week, but before we could contact the local branch, the attack happened...”

“Everyone here is from Lunsa?” Duncan was a little surprised as he realized why there were so many suntists in the city despite the big event several days ago.

“Mhmm, most of us are compatriots from Lunsa, but there are also other members from other city-states that gathered at the calling.” Another believer next to him joined the conversation, “Alas, you have more or less heard about the situation here, so I won’t repeat it. For the past four years, those damn hounds from the Storm Church have been fighting our cause.... It must’ve been hard on you all who stayed behind in Pland. Thankfully that’s in the past now.”

Duncan nodded noncommittally and then heard the believer he questioned before speak again: “This dove on your shoulder is real... unusual.”

Twitching out of his eye, he knew Ai’s presence would draw a lot of attention, but the ghost captain didn’t expect this level of a draw.

Acting casually: “This is my pet. It can help me do a lot of things.”

Despite the bland appearance, the thoughts in his mind were already running wild at what he had gathered: a large number of Sun followers were pouring into the city-state of Pland and they’re planning something big!

To think my little scheme of fishing in troubled waters is actually paying off!

At the same time, he also understood why the cultists attending the rally here did not hide their faces. Unlike the local natives, these outsiders didn't need such an arrangement. They already knew each other from the start and mostly came from the same city-state. Moreover, they lacked the experience and discipline that came about in Pland due to the constant purging from the Storm Church.

In retrospect, dressing casually also had its benefits. If the meeting did get bombed by the authorities, these folks could just make a run for it through the crowds and blend in. By then, who could tell who's who?

Then suddenly, Duncan detected a gaze shooting his way. Immediately looking over, he locked onto the owner according to his intuition – a petite girl with short black hair standing more than ten meters away.

The girl wore a black dress embellished with white lace, her face was beautiful and calm, and she looked about the same age as Nina. However, the most striking thing was not any of the details mentioned, but the dark red ring with a delicate silver bell hanging from the neck. This trinket gave the girl a cute but particularly strange appearance.

The girl naturally turned her gaze elsewhere once the man looked over—she shifted silently to avoid eye contact, but it was obvious the girl knew she's been caught!

Why is there such a young kid in this gang of cultists?

Duncan couldn't help but wonder in his heart. He got this strange inkling sensation that, unlike the cultists here, the girl didn't belong in this environment.

While thinking about it, the sound of the door shaft turning suddenly interrupted the noise, followed by the thin, tall cult leader ordering the exit to be closed and for them to gather at the center.

Duncan collected his thoughts and paid close attention to the changes on the scene. Eventually, the man at the center spread his arms to showcase a familiar item in his hand.

It was a pale golden sun mask—precisely the same mask worn on the face of the cult priest who presided over the sacrifice ritual during Duncan's first spirit walk.

"Honor to the glory of the Lord, we shall now silently recite the mantra under the Lord's gaze," said the tall, thin man in a reverent tone. "Bow down to this blessed mask, and may the shelter of the heirs of the sun support me and guide my brothers and sisters."

The surrounding worshippers immediately chanted the name of the real sun god in unison while making a fist-praying gesture to the forehead. This was their way of worshipping the golden mask, not the wearer.

After the recital, the tall, thin man solemnly puts the mask on as expected. Of which, Duncan immediately noticed the change in the air and the person's temperament....

Something's coming!

He couldn't say what this feeling was as if another character had descended upon the mask and its wearer. Regardless, a powerful consciousness was projecting its power through the golden mask, similar to what Duncan was doing with this specific shell.

"May the glory of the Lord endure forever! May the ways of the Lord come to the world!" The surrounding believers exclaimed in unison over the new arrival.

This strange heavy atmosphere wasn't that new to Duncan. He had seen the priest wear this mask in the sewer before, but unlike this time, that shell he used was dead and already deceased. On top of that, he had missed the summoning ritual, which might explain why he didn't get the same pressure as now. Perhaps there's a reason for calling these priests the "Emissary" instead of mere formality and rank.

Maybe a communication device?

After connecting the dots on this interesting item, Duncan's eyes changed from curiosity to a glowing desire to own it.

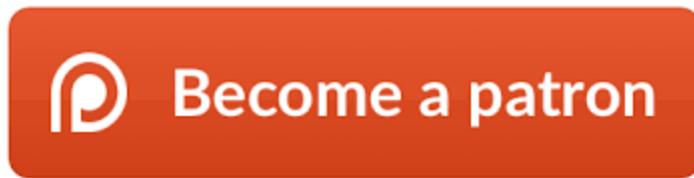
Maybe that mask and I are fated....

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 73

Chapter 73 “Incomplete Memory”

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Duncan quickly withdrew his gaze from the golden mask to blend in like an ordinary believer once things started rolling. This was so he wouldn't attract further attention since he hadn't heard anything useful yet.

Then, when he lowered his head to act inconspicuously, Duncan suddenly got that strange sensation of being stared at again.

The man frowned slightly in annoyance. Then searching around, he again found the source, and like before, it was the child wearing that strange bell collar around the neck, averting eye contact when he looked over.

Now, this got the guy wondering.

He's sure they didn't know each other. In the memory of the original owner of this body, there was no information regarding this child.

Why is a follower of the sun god looking my way so frequently?

Is it because of Ai on my shoulder? She's that much of a chic attraction?

He thought about this possibility, but then the cult leader interrupted that train of thought by speaking in a somewhat echoing and divine voice that demanded attention. Talk about a transformation.

“The prayer is over. The Lord has witnessed our piety and awe. Grace has shone on our souls, so my brothers and sisters, be gratified that we have persevered for one more day in this difficult and dark world. We're one day

closer to seeing the day when our sun is reborn and recasted upon this world!"

The "priest" wearing the golden mask then spreads his hands and casts his gaze at the corner where a certain person stands.

"But before proceeding with today's gathering, I would like to welcome two of our compatriots who were once trapped by darkness in these difficult times. Thanks to the guidance of our Lord, they've been reunited with us... Go ahead my fellow faithful, introduce yourself."

Two compatriots?

Duncan suddenly remembered that the leader mentioned he was not the only new face around these halls. For some reason, the ghost captain's attention shifted to the little girl wearing that black frilly dress.

"You can call me Shirley." The girl took half a step forward and spoke frankly, "My parents are both followers of our faith. Unfortunately, they were killed by the minions of the Storm Church four years ago. I have been hiding around the Crossroad all these years without managing to make contact with our siblings.... It's great that you're all here now."

Her voice was not loud to the point of being quiet and well-behaved. In fact, Duncan could never match the girl with the picture of a bloodied cultist willing to sacrifice innocent lives.

"Welcome back among us, young sister." The leader nodded, then turned to face the surrounding worshippers, "Shirley's parents were killed by the purge four years ago, and we have found her parents' names on that year's list. Next is another compatriot that joined us today."

The ringleader's gaze finally fell on Duncan.

"Duncan, I live in the Lower Sector," he had already prepared for this, so he wasted no time in the introduction. "A few days ago, the Storm Church attacked a sacrificial ground me and my local siblings created. I am the only survivor left."

He said this briefly but sincerely, like someone that didn't want to recall a terrible memory. Since the news of the Storm Church's raid had made the news, the cultists had no reason to doubt his story.

Seemingly pleased by the smooth introduction, the ringleader began again by nodding and adding: "This is a tested compatriot. After experiencing the cruelty of those hounds from the Storm Church, he is still trying his best to return to the Lord's embrace. We also found the blessed keepsake of our faith on him, so his words are credible."

Some of the cultists sighed over the tragic story, and some nodded in approval. Duncan on the other hand, only wanted to get things moving by putting on a blank face and reciting the multiplication table backward.

"The brief introduction is over," the leader finally got onto something interesting, "and now to update you all on the situation."

Duncan's ears immediately perked up.

"..... At present, there are still a large number of compatriots gathering in this city. This includes ordinary faithful like us and powerful emissaries and priests overseeing the whole mission. Fret not, our powers are gradually growing, and the day of re-order is fast approaching..."

"But it is undeniable that the minions of the Storm Church have caught onto our presence. They and the crooks inside city hall are making entry stricter and investigating foreigners entering Pland. At this point, several of our siblings have already been captured by the police. Be warned. We must succeed in our objective. Do not let your guard down, be wary, be on watch, and look out for the hounds from the church. It is fine to slow down the progress in collecting the sacrifices. The heirs of the Lord know about our plight, and they have issued a decree that they will personally take care of the remaining half of the sacrifice pool if we can't solve it...."

The surrounding cultists all reacted like they'd been greatly moved by the news and started praising the sun god. Duncan, on the other hand, wasn't so pleased. He didn't forget the mass carnage in that sewer, and it seems that

the mastermind – whatever Sun Heirs or Sun Children – will personally take charge and participate?

“... At present, our main task is to determine the specific location of the sun fragment. Remember, our goal is always to bring the real sun god back to life, and finding the lost sun fragments is the most important part!”

Duncan’s heart shuddered

Sun fragments? What is that stuff?

Can a stack of sun fragments make the Spear of Arden bigger?

The bird on his shoulder suddenly grew agitated, which manifested in Ai issuing a low cooing sound from the throat and bobbing her head up and down.

Duncan naturally could tell what the bird wanted through the ghost fire connection. However, there’s no way Duncan would allow Ai to start crying out something like “slaughter the enemy with the solar tomahawk” in the middle of a cultist gathering.

“Shhh,” he hushes the bird in a mumble. Then caressing Ai’s head to soothe the girl, the guy knew this was asking a lot from a yappy mouth.

“Are we able to determine the approximate location of the sun fragment? Is there a way to detect it?” Then another cultist spoke up to ask the question they all wanted to know.

“The sun fragment is currently asleep and cannot be detected by any means.” The leader shook his head in disappointment, “But the Lord has sent down guidance, telling us the nearest fragment is currently hiding in Pland. Out of consideration for our new compatriots that have joined today, I will explain the full situation again.”

“According to the information available, the fragment should have first appeared eleven years ago and has likely caused some kind of large-scale vision in the city. It could be a large fire, an abnormal heatwave in the entire

neighborhood, or the spontaneous combustion of the collective human body. Whatever the scenario, we must investigate the matter now.”

“The city-state authorities have detailed information about the phenomena of transcendence events over the years. Our job now is to gather these clues to deduce where our next lead lies.”

“But beware, all inquiry must be done with caution and planning. Although the authorities have always been lax in the management of the lower city, the hounds of the Storm Church sometimes have a particularly sensitive sense of smell when it comes to us... They are already on their toes.”

While the leader explained the current situation to the surrounding congregation, Duncan’s mind was spinning rapidly, and paying special attention to the part about “eleven years ago”. It’s not because the sun fragment made an appearance that year, but because that’s the year Nina lost her parents....

From what he recalled, Nina’s parents died in a fire.

Is it just a coincidence? Is there such a coincidence?

Duncan tried to sort out the messy and broken memories in his mind to little avail. Nevertheless, there were two crucial images he picked out from the chaotic picture: the original body owner ran out of the fire while carrying his dying niece. Behind them were the burning embers of an indistinguishable building, and the phantom-like streets were packed with crowds of frenzied civilians running for their lives....

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 74

Chapter 74 “There’s A Spy!”

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In the end, Duncan couldn’t dig up any more memories from his mind.

Although Ron – the original owner of the body – had indeed worried about Nina, years of illness and abuse of alcohol and drugs had seriously damaged his cognitive ability. Therefore, when the guy breathed his last breath, many of those not rarely-seen warm memories were gone, lost forever with the passing of the soul.

Nevertheless, one thing’s certain, there was a fire eleven years ago in the lower sector of the city. It took Nina’s parents and changed the child’s life forever.

This may be a coincidence, but how many coincidences exist in this world? The sun fragment descended on the city-state of Pland. It caused the raging fire that burned a huge area of the city and killed many innocent people as collateral damage, thus causing a certain child to be orphaned as a result. Then a few years later, Ron, the uncle of said niece, became a degenerate due to illness and became the very suntists that likely summoned the sun fragment...

When there are too many coincidences, then it’s no coincidence. Perhaps a hand was twisting the knobs and pulling the strings behind these fateful events.

During his long contemplation, a loud and clear voice suddenly interrupted Duncan: “I have inquired about the matter from the locals in the past few days. According to their knowledge, there was no famous fire eleven years

ago.... However, some of them did mention a factory leak of poisonous gas from the storage tank. The gas spread across several blocks and caused a lot of people to hallucinate and go crazy. The event was also published in the weekly newspaper back then as well.”

Duncan looked up in surprise and saw that it was an ordinary-looking female who spoke.

However, before he could seriously consider what the other party had said, the cult leader’s gaze had already turned to him: “Compatriot, you happen to be a local here. Do you know the situation in this regard?”

Duncan was startled and suddenly realized that he had become the focus of the scene – for this group of outsiders who were trying to gather intelligence, their own local who “lived in the lower city of Pland” was undoubtedly a good source of intelligence!

Noticing a few sights coming from the surroundings, he thought about it for a moment: “I didn’t live here eleven years ago, so the specifics are not clear. However, the leakage of the factory has indeed been mentioned...”

While elaborating, he looked at the female believer who had just spoken: “Eleven years ago, there really wasn’t any fire in the lower city?”

“At least as far as I’ve gathered,” the cultist nodded. “According to what I’ve heard, there hasn’t been a major fire in the lower sector of Pland in the past twenty years... There were small fires such as kitchen mishaps, but that is obviously not considered in the scope of our search.”

Duncan blinked and said nothing.

He clearly remembered that Nina’s parents had died in the fire eleven years ago! The memory fragments in his mind even have the image of “himself” rushing out of the fire with Nina!

What went wrong? Is it because this body went deranged when I inherited it? Or is it because there’s no fire in the lower sector of the city? Or.... it’s just that this cultist in front of me didn’t get the right information yet...

A faint doubt grew in his heart because the matter involved Nina and “himself”. Then as he was processing what to do, a faint voice came again from that Shirley child: “The factory leak from eleven years ago... Did it happen in the sixth block?”

“Sixth block? Mmm..... I believe so,” the female believer nodded. “It is said that the incident caused quite a big stir back then because many people were left with health conditions. As a result, many lower city residents still remember it to this day.”

A few believers next to him nodded and echoed what they heard, which reinforced the story since that’s what they uncovered as well.

“The factory leaked...” the leader in the center of the assembly hall suddenly broke the silence, and the deep and majestic voice resulting from the mask echoed following his words. “The chemical leak could just be a cover-up by the authorities. The fact that it happened eleven years ago is too big of a coincidence. We will continue investigating this direction and see if the story points to the sun fragment.”

The worshippers at the scene immediately nodded in support.

“Although the sun fragment is slumbering, its awakening day is fast approaching. Four years ago, our brethren’s in Pland attempted to awaken the fragment with a rite, but they were foiled by the interference of the Storm Church. But fret not. The efforts were not in vain. On the contrary, the blood spilled that day only deepened the sun’s connection with our world. So now, we must pay close attention to the news and rumors on the streets. If anything unusual happens, it may also point to the sun fragment. Do you all understand?!”

While the worshippers bowed their heads and respectfully accepted the order, Duncan, on the other hand, noticed another key point mentioned by the leader: Four years ago!

Duncan only knew the Storm Church destroyed a major stronghold of the sun cultists, but he never knew it was related to the sun fragment!

As the ghost captain organized the new information he had just gained, a strange pungent smell suddenly penetrated his nostrils and drew the man back to reality – it smelled like burning sulfur that's been mixed with various chemicals.

The next second, the surrounding cultists also smelled this pungent and unmistakable scent, causing most of them to scan around for the source. However, the masked leader standing at the hall's center instantly reacted. He pulled out the same type of sun talisman from his pocket and raised it high to unleash a globe of translucent flame!

“Vile filth... The flames have been deceived!” The leader glanced at the burning sun talisman and voiced his anger, “There is a heretic lurking among us!”

The hall instantly flew into an uproar, and Duncan's first reaction was that he had been exposed. Although he didn't know how he got exposed, but the sun talisman carried by the leader seem to be able to identify the spy in their mix.

Thinking of this, he sighed faintly and was ready to release the dove's undead form when he heard another sigh from the opposite side.

It was the girl called Shirly who sounded regretful: “I knew that Dog's spell is unreliable. The disguise only lasted for three hours.”

Before the words fell, a pitch-black flame suddenly exploded around the girl's side!

The flame was born out of thin air, with the shape of fire but dark as a shadow. It first spread from one of the arms to the shoulder until it covered one-third of Shirley's entire figure. Eventually, the eerie black flame condensed on the ground like an oozing fluid and reformed into a pitch-black demon dog physically connected to the girl through a chain!

The undead hound was over half a person tall, and its body appeared to be spliced together from countless twisted bones of other animals. Of course, there was no flesh, but it had wriggling black flames wrapped around the

bones like skin. However, the most eye-catching part wasn't its main body, but the head! Those bloodied red eyes were so full of malice and hunger that it looked like it would devour its prey merely by visual contact!

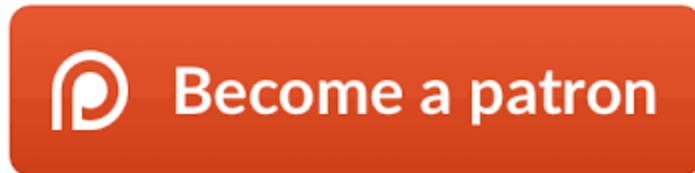
"Dark Hound... A summoner of the Annihilation Sect?!" The leader in the center of the assembly hall was furious when he saw this scene, "What is the meaning of this?! Are the worshippers of death declaring war against the sun's follower?!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 75

Chapter 75 “A Beatdown!”

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Looking at the way things are panning out, Duncan, who was ready to generously announce he was the spy, immediately retreated. Like the rest of the people here, he's also curious about what the girl has in store.

Intuition told him the girl in the black dress must have a plan; otherwise, she wouldn't be so bold to expose herself.

Also, Duncan didn't miss the two names mentioned by the cult leader: Dark Hound, and Annihilation Sect.

The Dark Hound was obviously referring to the giant black skeleton dog summoned by the girl. The Annihilation Sect needed no further elaboration that it's an organization too dangerous to be registered at the city hall.

How many more strange dark sects are still nested in the gutters of this world?

While Duncan's thoughts were spinning, the girl who summoned the dark hound had begun to fight by tightening her grip around the chains. She's guarded in her posture, and that sarcastic smirk indicated the girl's not fretting in the slightest: “Annihilation Sect... too bad for you, but I'm not with them. Unlike you mongrels who must work for some evil god to sleep peacefully, I only do things for myself!”

“You can't deceive us with that statement. Only the Annihilation Sect knows how to summon the deep sea creatures! I advise you to stop resisting, heretic! This is the territory of the Sun! Even the curses of your

dark hound cannot protect you!” The leader in the center of the assembly hall glared at Shirley and threatened, “Speak, what are you planning?! Annihilation and Sun are not aligned, but we have never been hostile. Why do you disguise your identity and blend into our sacred assembly?”

“I just wanted to get some information out of the not-so-bright heads of you mongrels.” Shirley grinned mischievously as a series of rattling sounds came from the chains connected to her body. Those chains were clearly alive in the way they squirmed with her chuckle. “Also, I said it already, I am not from the Annihilation~!”

But before Shirley could finish speaking, a series of crackling sounds had popped around the hall, setting the oil lamps into a burning frenzy. Before she knew it, small fireballs had risen from the torches and floated into the air, circling around and forming an entrapment around herself as the target.

It’s pretty obvious the experienced cult priest had used the delay he made to unleash this spell.

“Surrender yourself, heretic,” came the threatening voice under the golden mask, “the power of the sun god has sealed off the entire assembly ground from the outside. I know the abilities of you heretics from the Annihilation Sect. You borrow powers from the mouth of those demons you summon. I admit the Dark Hound under you is terrifying, but it’s of no consequence if you can’t borrow power from the deep sea!”

Duncan wondered if he should intervene and help the girl called Shirley. It’s nice to see two dark forces bite each other, but if he did ignore this, he would be letting the information go from this windfall.

“Give up resistance and take refuge in the realm of the sun god. Tell me everything you know, and the merciful Sun will forgive your sins... Get on your knees, young sister... You can’t cast your spells here...”

However, in the face of the death threat, Shirley remained unfazed, like someone that’s deaf to the hypnotic voice of the golden mask. “Maintaining this forcefield must take a lot out of you, right?”

The sun priest snorted coldly: “Hmph, the power my lord gave...”

Before his voice fell, the girl in the black dress jumped without indication!

Raising her right arm that's embroiled in black fire, Shirley whisks herself into a spin for momentum as the Dark Hound on the ground becomes a weaponized spinning hammer of bones. The hound sent numerous cultists flying from the initial charge, but most of all, the hound sent the priest smashing into the opposite wall with a deafening crunch upon impact.

It's obvious something had snapped inside the cult leader because that body instantly went limp. In fact, there weren't life signs left in the mask wearer.

Duncan: “...”

He really didn't expect this.

Talk about fast. Without waiting for the other cultists to react to their leader's death, Shirley raised her arm again with that iron chain of bone hammer and spun it into a terrifying arc. After several louder crushing snaps and knocks, the entire hall had become a splat of mangled flesh and blood.

This time, the surviving cultists finally came back to their senses. Regardless of the shock in their hearts, everyone roared and rushed at the perpetrator. They threw daggers and swords through the air, and in response, Shirley unleashed a series of curse words and more attacks: “GO TMD your lord! You damn bastards!”

The giant hound broke through the air, this time not even letting the victims fly out and ripped them to shreds with his jaw and claws. Round and round Dog went, and death and screams continued until several thumping gunshots rocked the room....

The Sunists, with revolvers, finally found the gap they needed after so many of their comrades died. They were the cautious bunch and brightest since they kept their distance right from the beginning.

Brass bullets pierced the air there. Two landed on the metal chain and ricocheted off with sparks. The rest burrowed into Shirley's flesh, causing the girl to wince at the pain.

"Uhhh..." Stumbling unsteadily for a while, she appeared weakened and ready to drop when the sound of iron whistled through the air again. "Dog! Help me block out the pain!"

The Dark Hound, slashing at the cultists on his own now, lets out a deafening roar. The next second, one of those gun-shooting cultists was directly blasted off from the shockwave and made a head-first impact to the nearest pillar, effectively becoming a mini version of Alice.

Duncan silently took two steps back as the undead hound continued his rampage. He didn't want to interfere yet and lowered his presence – one for information, the other was that he didn't want to get blood splattered on his new outfit. If he went home today and Nina saw the mess, he would never hear the end of it.

As for the one individual utilizing the meteor dog weapon, Duncan doubted the lady needed his help now...

She's in good shape.

In fact, the whole battle lasted no more than a minute, just enough time for Duncan to recite the multiplication table twice. Then just as the girl clutched the chain connecting her with that hound called Dog, she froze and caught a glimpse of Duncan hiding in the corner.

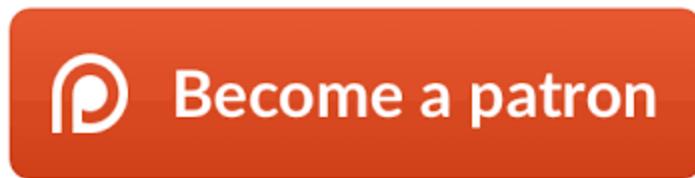
Despite being stunned and confused by the calm appearance of this eccentric "cultist", Shirley did not hesitate and flung Dog at the final target with unabashed hostility.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 76

Chapter 76 “Doggies Heart Reading!”

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Seeing Shirley murderously marching towards him, Duncan couldn't help but sigh and bemoan how trouble always lands on top of his head.

He wasn't afraid to be fair. The guy understood his own combat experience, which was next to zero, but the tough childlike girl didn't strike him with panic at all.

First of all, he has his personal undead dove who's plenty good at delaying death – the sphere of influence Ai projected could grow faster than any gun bullet. Therefore, if Shirley did toss the Dark Hound known as Dog over, he's sure Ai would intercept the projectile mid-air.

Secondly, he controls the ghost fire that wields powers capable of controlling even the Vanished. An undead skeleton hound could hardly compare, right? If anything, Duncan could always envelope himself in the fire and transform.

Finally, and most importantly – this avatar wasn't his main body anyway.

Although from a physiological point of view, this avatar seems to be alive, but in essence “it” was still just a corpse driven by ghostly forces. Duncan does not need this body to remain physiologically intact to drive its activities, just like the previous “avatar” in the sewer that had already died by having its heart ripped out.

In fact, he suspects that even if the current avatar get's chopped up into eight pieces, he could still control the fleshly blocks and go home....

The only thing to worry about was how he would explain that to Nina about her uncle's skeletal miracles after being smashed by a meteor hound...

Just like that, he calmly watched the black-dress girl come up to him while carrying the iron chain in her hands. Meanwhile, the strange and terrifying Dark Hound slowly followed behind its mistress's elusive steps.

Because of the previous fierce battle, the girl's arms and cheeks were stained with blood, which completely destroyed the quiet and well-behaved temperament she gave people at the beginning. Instead, she's now projecting an eerie and dangerous vibe.

"You're not afraid, how weird," Shirley stopped about three meters in front of Duncan, frowning at the "Sun Cultist" who didn't appear scared or nervous. Raising her chain quietly in a near-threatening manner: "You giving up?"

Duncan thought for a moment before replying, "If I say I'm not with them, will you believe me?"

As he spoke, he silently rubbed his fingers together in his pocket and summoned up a spark of green flame that flowed between his clothes and skin. This would act as a suit of armor in case the girl jumped at him without talking first.

Shirley naturally didn't buy the answer and showed a WTF are you kidding me face. "You think..."

Before she could speak, Dog the Dark Hound next to her cut the girl off and said in a deep, hoarse voice: "I believe it."

"Ah... Huuhh?" Shirley looked at her familiar dumbfoundedly, "Dog, did you hit your head? This...."

"Hold on," Dog shook his skeletal head before staggering over to one corner and started vomiting.

The extraordinarily loud sound of puking slurry echoed in the blood-stained basement, and the terrifying demon from the deep sea unleashed what could only be described as a mixture of pungent black flames and acid that hissed upon contact with the concrete flooring.

Duncan watched this scene unfold with an expressionless face while wondering if he had just found the shortcoming to this “Shirkey’s” combat style – the human could withstand the fight, but the dog couldn’t take it from being flung around so much.

So, the atmosphere became quite awkward and embarrassing for the next three minutes. Only after Dog stopped puking did Duncan speak up again: “Are you okay?”

Dog immediately lowered his head and coiled that bony tail behind his hind legs: “Thank you for your concern, I hope my embarrassing display didn’t stain your eyes. Do you have any other order? If not, we’ll leave first...”

Before Duncan could respond to what Dog said, Shirley exclaimed first: “Dog, are you really okay? Did I really break your head just now?! You don’t usually talk to humans so politely....”

Duncan had begun to catch onto the truth. Deepening his gaze at the murderous-looking Dark Hound, he mused with amusement on what to do next. “Do you know why I am? Do you know me?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Dog repeated without daring to make eye contact, “I really don’t know... But you’re definitely a great being, there’s no doubt about that...”

Duncan frowned and pressed, “I don’t look like a human in your eyes, do I?”

Dog hesitation flared up again before cautiously answering, “You... like... not...”

Duncan withdrew his gaze and turned to Shirley this time.

The girl in the black dress was making a disbelieving face. Whatever hostility she had for Duncan had dissipated, replaced by a thick layer of shock and wariness.

This girl's personality appeared reckless but obviously not stupid. After her "pet dog" continuously shows such abnormal behavior, even the most reckless personality would calm down at this time and realize something was terribly wrong.

While quietly tightening the chains between her and the Dark Hound, she quietly took half a step back and stared at Duncan for any signs of sudden movement: "You just said you are not with them..."

"Yes," Duncan spread his hands, "you may not believe me, but also mixed in to inquire about intelligence..."

"I believe it," Shirley said crisply.

This time it was Duncan's turn to be a little taken aback. He suddenly found the impression he had of this girl to be changing. At first, her image was that of a well-behaved child with a violent and bloodied side. Now, he's also mistaken about Shirley's reckless tendency.

What kind of family does this girl have to produce such a personality?

With strange questions running through his heart, Duncan found himself a little overwhelmed by the contradictions. Eventually, he put it behind him and pressed forward: "Why did you keep looking at me during the rally?"

"It's Dog who kept paying attention to you," Shirley replied reluctantly but still honestly cooperated, "I followed his lead and grew curious..."

"Dog? You mean your Dark Hound?" Duncan frowned and glanced at the pitch-black bony hound, "I just heard that priest mention the Annihilation Sect. Is it the church you worship? Are you part of the Annihilation Sect?"

"I'm not with them!" Shirley immediately rebukes the notion with strong emotions, "It's their business to worship the Deep Sea. Me and Dog met

under certain circumstances!"

Duncan's gaze now fell on the chain between the girl's arm and the Dark Hound.

According to the information obtained, worshipping the Deep Sea allows a follower to summon up a demonic creature from the nether. This was the main reason that Sun Priest assumed Shirley came from the Annihilation Sect. Although the consequence of that judgment was the unorthodox attack of a meteor dog hammer, this information should be acceptable and correct.

The only wrong thing about all this would be this problematic and eccentric girl in front of him.

She seems to be very resistant to being associated with cultists—even though she owns a Dark Hound from the Deep Sea.

"It's okay if you're not," Duncan shook his head and waved to drop the question, "then why are you here, and what are you investigating?"

Shirley pursed her lips, seemingly not wanting to answer the question. However, the nervous signals constantly released by the hound beside herself made the child understand she must. Otherwise, the consequences of lying or staying mute in front of this ordinary-looking middle-aged man would be dire.

"I..."

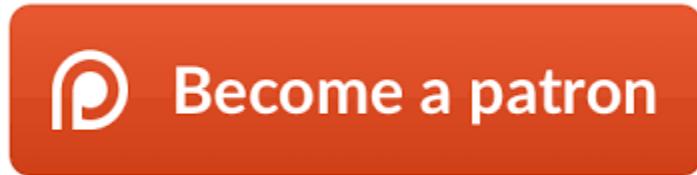
At the moment when she was about to speak, a loud popping sound suddenly exploded in the basement, and a fiery fireball flew over from the side!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 77

Chapter 77 “Thoughts On The Fire”

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A pop exploded in the basement, followed by a blazing fireball suddenly flying over from the side. The sneak attack would've been fatal if not for Duncan being aware of this ahead of time – he had already raised his hand without thinking.

A little burning sensation came from the fingertips. Then, in the next second, the ghost fire that spewed out flew into the fireball with a recoiling and deflagrating momentum. Once infected, the attack was no longer threatening but had transformed into a ball of pulsating green.

This opening didn't escape a certain Dark Hound there. Immediately without hesitation, Dog jumped backward and ripped open a grizzly crack of darkness and fog in the rear. Using this escape tunnel, he directly jumped in and dragged Shirley in using the black chain's momentum. Meanwhile, the girl herself hadn't forgotten to spit out the bullets she ate from the fighting. And just like that, the child and her dog had disappeared from the room and into the weird rift were now closed.

Duncan was naturally taken by surprise at how quickly the pair made their escape. It's definitely practiced and well-performed. He had to give them that.

I still have a lot of questions that I haven't asked yet! And this is all because of a sneak attack from a cultist....

Duncan's mood fell into a subtle gloom as he shifted his gaze in the assailant's direction. The masked priest was leaning crookedly against the

corner pillar, barely breathing with a raised arm in the air. Apparently, that was the last draw of power from that vessel.

“I better get into the habit of finishing off my foes. It won’t do if stuff like this happens during my fights....”

Duncan gloomily approached the priest, who didn’t die properly with the green fireball silently floating above his palm. With every step he took, the torches closest to him would flare up into a pyre of ghostly green, the sign that they’d been overtaken by the power emanating from the ghost captain.

For this, a glint of fear finally struck the priest’s eyes. Like everything else in the basement hall, his own connection to that black sun had begun to wane.

“You... You are no ordinary heretic. What the hell are you...” The masked priest asks with shock and fear.

Following the last usurpation of the torches, the ghost captain stopped only a foot away from the survivor and stared down: “I didn’t get to finish when you interrupted me. That is very rude of you. Did your mother not teach you manners?”

As he spoke, the ghost captain finally noticed the state of the sun priest and how wrong he was to blame Shirley for not doing a proper job. Half of the guy’s chest had caved in, with various rib cages smashed and likely pierced a lung or two.

Without question, if left untreated, the individual would die in no time and doesn’t need an extra stab to kill.

Why the priest didn’t die yet was likely the effect of whatever mystique entity hiding behind him. But even so, that power holding the person above the death line had reached its limit. Duncan could clearly see the life force rapidly leaving the priest’s body as they spoke.

“It seems that the blessings of the sun god are not very reliable,” Duncan shook his head and sighed with a lamenting face, “Your Lord has left you.”

The ghost captain may have sighed casually like he was merely stating the facts. Still, the careless remark had the unintended effect of stimulating the dying priest into a frenzied rage.

“I offer myself to the Lord! May the holy cloth purify the heresy before you!” The priest shouted and raised a filthy blood-stained fabric he pulled from the pocket. This was the guy’s last-ditch effort to drag Duncan down with him, a double suicide of only the most insane and corrupt.

Duncan, however, only watched this final crazed act with indifference. Although the priest did startle him with that sudden gesture, but after getting a closer look at the item, his whole body instantly relaxed.

Why? Because the strange cloth strip that got raised high was none other than the very thing they used to verify Duncan’s identity after coming inside. Whatever sacred power the cloth had belonged to the ghost captain now.

Just as predicted, the holy relic remained quiet and unresponsive, causing the cult priest’s maddening face to slowly crumble.

After a few more seconds of dazedness in those eyes, the dying man abruptly flew into an incessant coughing fit of blood, “I offer this body to the Lord....”

“Let me guess, this is what you wanted to do, right?” Duncan couldn’t stand this sight anymore and pointed at the blood-stained fabric.

In the next second, a cluster of dark green flames exploded and ignited the holy relic and spread across the crazed man’s body.

“No, no, no... It shouldn’t be like this... The Lord will not turn his back on me, the Lord... the Lord will punish you hereti... WHO ARE YOU?!”

In the raging fire, the voice of the cult priest gradually died down until its completely mute. Whatever supernatural power that supported the guy’s life was now extinguished, as well as the body that burned to ash in the raging green pyre.

This brought another unexpected frown to Duncan.

Honestly, this was not the first time the ghost captain had seen a corpse. The sacrifices he found in the underground cave before had already hardened his nerves. What he didn't like about this was that his flames also burned the cultist to ash. He only wanted to destroy the blood-stained cloth out of prudence of caution, so he made sure to not overdo it. The surviving clothes and golden mask were evident he didn't misjudge his own strength.

This.... why did this cultist get burned by my ghost fire too when I didn't order it to?

Duncan crouched down and examined the residue in confusion.

According to what he could see, the greyish pile of soot looked no different from the usual stuff. At least not distinct enough where he could see a difference.

Slowly, a bold idea popped into the ghost captain's mind.

Can it be.... Mortals blessed by a specific god will also be considered a supernatural object?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 78

Chapter 78 “Changing Shifts and Reporting”

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Duncan’s pondering was naturally fruitless because he didn’t know where to find a second breathing Sunist to test his deductions.

This kind of thing depends on fate and plenty of luck.

Pulling himself up, Duncan scanned the room and paced in a circle, causing the green torches to sway at his every step.

Believers who believe in their gods and receive a blessing may be seen by the ghost fire as a “supernatural object”, then... what about ordinary people?

Does it have other effects than lighting up a room when lit on a mortal? If not, how much blessing must a god give the mortal before they are spiritually changed? Will it also work on the good god disciples?

Duncan calmly glanced at the ghost lights in the room and formed a faint and eerie smile.

“But they are still people....” Stopping here before his theories got out of hand, Duncan didn’t want to cross a line of no return in his worldview.

This flame was a powerful force that could warp even the most dangerous of entities in this world. If he didn’t keep reminding himself of this fact, he might actually lose awareness that he too was human and shouldn’t think any less of his fellow man. Otherwise, what difference would he have from

those monsters that treat others as mere sacrifices? That's a bridge of depravity he doesn't want to cross.

Exhaling softly to get his mind back in order, Duncan waved his hand to dismiss the green fireball that was floating in the air. Afterward, the environment in the basement quickly returned to normal as well, giving the guy a proper picture of the carnage that just took place in the hall.

More importantly, it also gave him room to think of what to do next.

The eccentric girl named Shirley was gone after using some special means of escape, and now he doesn't know where to look. A regrettable outcome since he still had a lot of questions he wanted to ask.

But no manner, instincts told Duncan they would eventually meet again. He was in search of information, and Shirley was also in search of information. Since their goals aligned, there's no way they wouldn't bump into each other. Besides, that Dark Hound called Dog didn't seem to be the type of character to stay quiet.

As for the mess here, Duncan had no interest in helping with the cleanup duty.

He picked up the golden mask and casually cleaned the soot off with his sleeve. This would make a fine trophy aboard the Vanished for further investigation.

"But it's a little bit too big to carry around...." Duncan muttered, then weighed his options, "In any case, an expert would probably recognize the item immediately. It may even draw the Storm Church's attention knowing they have some weird detection means."

I better not bring this back to the antique shop then. Even if I hide it, Nina might find it during her cleaning. By then, I won't be able to explain the mask's origin. Best to send it to the Vanished right away.

With that thought in mind, Duncan shifted his gaze over to Ai, who had been resting on his shoulder, and cocked his head to signal her to move it.

Reading his thought, the dove promptly chirped a counteroffer: “Big hammer is eighty, small hammer is forty!”

That irked Duncan a bit since he never thought about bargaining with his own pet: “Just work the overtime. When we get back, I’ll figure out a way to make you some French fries aboard the Vanished. I want to see if you can bring the mask back on your own without my company.”

The dove immediately flapped her wings and drew a circle in the air like some overjoyed pixie. “I wanted to refuse, but the offer you gave is too tempting!”

Then before the sentence was done, Ai had already transformed into her undead form and carried off the mask into the void. Duncan was still connected with the bird, of course. Right now, Ai’s energy signature had appeared inside the captain’s bedroom aboard the Vanished.

Damn, the delay is less than a second! SHE’S FAST! TELEPORTATION?

Duncan just sighed in his heart at how capable the bird was. Then before the ghost captain could think more, the boney undead bird had returned following a whisk of distorting air.

“Teleportation success!” The bird flapped her wings and chirped triumphantly.

In the following minutes, Duncan confirmed no blood had caught onto his clothes or the crime scene. He had never touched anything since entering for fear of leaving a fingerprint, so the extra precaution wasn’t necessary. Then carefully prying open the iron door with his clothes as a cushion, he returned to the outside following the stairs.

By this hour, the sun, bound by the double rune ring, had gradually begun to set on the horizon, soon to be replaced by the giant crack in the night sky. This signaled Duncan to call it for the day. Nina would return home soon, and it wouldn’t be good to snoop around at night and act all suspicious.

Besides, the kid's "Uncle Duncan" had just gotten better, so he needed to act the role of a good uncle did he not?

Quickly leaving the abandoned factory behind and taking the same route, the man soon found himself walking through sewage-smelling alleys until he heard the faint sound of traffic. He could still catch the last bus down to the lower sector if he hurried.

But Duncan stopped.

At the intersection not far ahead, he saw four men in uniform standing there. The first two wore dark blue police uniforms with epaulets on their shoulders. In contrast, the last other two wore slightly ecclesiastical black outfits in the shape of trench coats. However, the latter had another conspicuous thing hanging around their waists: a lantern decorated with runes, apparently used for night patrols.

This left Duncan stunned for a moment until he understood they were changing shifts for the night and not out to get him.

The police maintain order during the day, and the guardians protect the peace at night. This was a unique scenery to this world during the interchanging of day and night.

Knowing he hadn't been caught, Duncan casually marched over like a regular person. The less weird you behave, the less likely you would be suspected.

Eventually, a church guardian carrying out the handover finally noticed the figure coming toward them. Then raising a hand out in a stopping motion: "Citizen! It's getting dark. Go home as soon as possible. It's not safe outside."

"Gentlemen! I'm here to make a report," Duncan said sincerely as he walked over, quickening his pace during the last bit. "I heard a lot of movement in the abandoned factory over there. There were a lot of sneaky guys coming in and out of there earlier..."

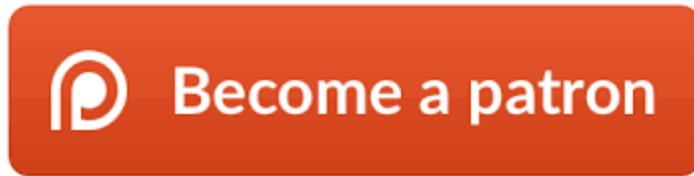
Speaking of this, he paused and added: “I read in the newspaper before, saying that everyone should actively report suspicious gatherings and abnormal noises around them...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 79

Chapter 79 “Flickering Light”

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Deep within a vulgar old alley far from the abandoned factory, an inconspicuous rundown house suddenly lit up after the oil lamps came to life.

Under the flickering lights, one could see the arrangement of the household: simple and old furnishings, a moldy ceiling, and faded and peeling wallpapers.

“..... The World Creation is out,” the girl named Shirley exhaled softly after checking her companion’s exhausted appearance. “Good thing we made it back home before nightfall; otherwise, we may have to die in some smelly old gutter like a dead dog.”

The skeleton hound immediately raised his head and objected: “Just say it, don’t bring dogs into the conversation.”

“Oh, you can still talk? I thought half your life went out the window when you jumped into the shadow rift.” Shirley narrowed her eyes at her friend and commented sarcastically, “You going to explain yet? Why did we suddenly run away and use the most dangerous shadow diving method at that! Didn’t you say countless demons of the Deep Sea would love to chew you out?”

“No matter how many demons there are in the Deep Sea, I can still avoid and dodge them. But just now...” Dog finally sounded like he’s regained some energy and faced Shirley’s accusing gaze, “You should be glad I

reacted so quickly when that guy turned his attention away from us. Otherwise, we might not even have that chance to flee!"

Shirley frowned and slowly kneeled down to eye level with her companion: "So what's going on? Why are you so scared like this? That guy named 'Duncan'... did you meet him before? Is he some big shot from the Annihilation Sect? Or is there some demon standing behind him?"

The Dark Hound, who seemed to recall some extremely terrifying picture, clattered its bones and muttered: "I haven't seen him before, and I don't know him."

Shirley cocked an eyebrow in confusion: "Why are you so afraid if you never met him before?!"

"Even if I haven't met him before, as a Deep Sea demon, I can 'see' a shadow more terrifying than death behind the guy!" The Dark Hound suddenly got all serious as those hollow red eyes glowed with force, "Behind the shell of that human is a vortex of light and shadow. Just staring at it is enough to TMD make me lose my sanity. How can I not be afraid of something like that?!"

Speaking of this, Dog paused as if to organize the language best needed to describe his feelings to Shirley. After a good minute of silence: "When it spoke, I could hear a thousand voices overlapping one another. It was roaring at me, a mishmash of death and life. You don't get it Shirley. The only time I ever saw anything like that was when I got an audience with the Deep Sea Lord! But the Lord doesn't move, and this person did!"

Shirley felt her hair rising now due to the emotions transferred through her connection with Dog. Muttering as a shudder ran down her back: "Why didn't I feel anything back there then.... I thought he was quite nice...."

"That's why I sometimes envy you humans' with that inefficient and dull perception. The barrier of ignorance is truly a treasure this world gave your kind. Even in the face of distortionary madness, you humans can still smile and die happy." The Dark Hound suddenly deflated and lay back down again after exclaiming his own grievance, "Just stay blind. This way, the

world will keep looking nicer. Poor puppy I am not so lucky. Every couple of days, there would be something so scary that a dog will drop dead at a glance....”

“..... How can the world have such a TMD cowardly demon like you?” Shirley couldn’t resist shooting a disappointed look at her friend before getting an idea. “But when you say it like that, I think we shouldn’t have run back there... if the guy is really as powerful as you claim, wouldn’t it be better to cling to his legs?! He spoke so nicely to us and clearly had more questions for us to answer. Maybe he could’ve helped us deal with the suntists as well. I’m quite good at acting cute, you know? Who knows....”

However, before the girl could finish speaking, the loud rattling of the chains startled her. Next, the loud exclaiming anger of the Dark Hound blasted the ears: “Put away your crazy idea immediately! Your level of madness is almost enough to open the subspace channel!”

Then Dog paused before continuing with a warning: “Listen, never make deals with something that would bear the skin of a human. Those types are the most cunning and sinister of them all. They may have a peaceful conversation with you, but that’s only the appetizer before the feast. Don’t judge everything by the surface, okay? If you had told him everything, do you think he would’ve allowed us to leave?”

It seemed that the harsh tone from Dog had finally taken effect on Shirley. Sounding like a child that’s made a mistake before the adult, the girl mumbled in a moping manner: “I get it. Why do you sound like an old mother now....”

Dog huffs and retorts: “That’s obvious. I raised you!”

Shirley snorted, then looked out the window where the sun’s light had disappeared, replaced by the firm darkness of the night. Without another word, she inched closer to the windowsill and dragged Dog over by the belly.

“What are you doing? Can’t you at least let a dog rest for a bit? I’m exhausted from all the fighting today....” Dog protests and bemoans.

“The one who mainly fought was me, okay?” Shirley glanced out at the murky glass without much emotions, “I’m checking the situation outside... The street lights had just come on.”

“This is the slums after all, you can’t expect the authorities to ensure every street is maintained properly. It’s good enough that they actually came on after dark to repel the evil spirits.” Dog muttered, then glanced at the oil lamp on the dining table, “Let’s turn off the lights here. Oil is expensive.”

Shirley pursed her lips: “... I’ll snuff it when I go to bed, otherwise it’s too dark in the house.”

Dog grumbled but didn’t comment.

In the city-state, the city managers and architects strictly planned the location of each street light to ensure coverage on every dwelling. This was the most basic device for repelling evil, and the most effective.

But even the most prosperous cities have forgotten corners. For example, the slums where Shirley and Dog lived. There are far fewer gas street lights in the slums, which are older and more dilapidated than even the lower sectors. Sure, it’s good enough to ensure safety during the day, but at night, such an arrangement was obviously not reassuring enough.

So, the occupants here would resort to oil lamps and grease candles as precautionary measures. At the very least, until the street lamps came on if they were late.

Of course, there was another important reason why many poor households used oil lamps and candles -they could not afford the relatively high cost of electricity conversion. Electric lights are bright, clean, and safe, and in a safe and secure urban area, it has long been the first choice for lighting every home. But in this dilapidated house of the slums.... The only sense of security for Shirley and Dog remains to be that swaying flicker of light from the old oil lamp.

“... Do you still want to remain active for the next while?” Dog’s hoarse and rattling voice came again through the dim lighting.

Shirley: "Mhmm."

Dog: "You mean making trouble for those sun mongrels, right?"

Shirley: "Not trouble, getting intel."

Dog: "It's not much different. From how they sounded, they aren't very clear on what happened eleven years ago either. They are asking the locals about it...."

Shirley: "This is because the group today happened to be from Lunsa. There may be a harvest next time."

Dog: "Okay, if that's what you want."

Shirley: "Dog, you focus on knitting me a better camouflage first. Don't leave me exposed halfway through like today."

Dog: "I just hope we don't run into that terrible guy today. I suspect the reason why our presence got exposed early was due to such a strong 'interference' on the scene..."

Shirley: "Okay, okay, if that's what you want to think..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 80

Chapter 80 “Home Visit!”

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Before the last rays of light dissipated, Duncan saw the familiar façade of the antique shop again.

The gas street lamps on both sides of the road had long been lit, and the slightly yellowed lights illuminated the signs and gray walls in front of the door. By the glow from the windows inside, it's clear that Nina was already inside and waiting.

Strictly speaking from Duncan's point of view, he and Nina have just met. Still, for some reason, he got this inexplicable warm feeling in his heart knowing someone was waiting for him at home.... But also, a hint of regret....

Is this apologetic emotion because I haven't returned on time after going out?

Duncan stepped forward and pushed open the door of the antique shop. With the crisp ringing of the bell, he immediately picked up on the rushing footsteps of someone running down the stairs.

“Uncle Duncan!” Nina stopped at the corner of the stairs like a gush of wind, her eyes full of surprise and joy, “I thought you were again today...”

“I went around the city and lost track of time until it was already getting dark.” Duncan shook his head, “I'm sorry, but I was actually going to pick you up from school at the Crossroad, but then I had an accident.”

“You went to the Crossroad?” Nina widened her eyes in surprise and bewilderment. Then eyeing her uncle up and down to confirm the man’s not drunk or under the effects of drugs, “Pick me up… from school?”

Her Uncle Duncan showed a strange and familiar side again, which left Nina unsure of how to react.

“I’m just a little curious about your current situation at school,” Duncan said casually. “Anyways, you don’t have to worry about me going out to drink or hang with ‘friends’ in the future. If I come back late, it’s because I have business to attend to, understand?”

Nina dumbly watched her Uncle Duncan enter the house and close the door behind himself. Even afterward, all the girl could do was nod unconsciously without uttering a single word.

“It’s getting late,” Duncan said to Nina, who was standing at the top of the stairs, “Have you eaten?”

“Uuhh… Not yet,” probably because she was still not adjusted to her uncle’s changes yet, Nina sounded hesitant and unsure. “When I came back, I saw that you weren’t home, so I didn’t know if you would come back tonight. That’s why I haven’t cooked yet.... But I bought some bread, I was going to...”

“Bread alone isn’t nutritious enough. Let’s go, there’s some good stuff in the kitchen,” Duncan was about to climb the stairs when he cocked a smirk, “I’ll cook today.”

Uncle is going to cook?!

Nina seemed to have heard something straight out of a novel, that’s how shocking the idea was. Then as the two crossed paths on the stairs, the young lady suddenly noticed Ai on Duncan’s shoulder. “Uncle, this dove has been with you?”

“Yes, it’s pretty clingy,” Duncan said casually, “I named it Ai.”

“Ai? What a strange name for a dove...” Nina scratched her hair as she followed up to the second floor. Eventually, curiosity got the better of her as the man closed in on the kitchen, “Did you buy anything?”

“Actually, it’s just a salted fish,” Duncan found the salted fish he put in the kitchen cupboard and showed it to Nina. His face couldn’t be prouder when doing so. “Don’t assume it’s bad based on its looks. The taste is superb inside a soup.”

“Fish?!” Nina’s eyes widened in surprise, “What day is it? Fish is so expensive, isn’t it normally...”

But as the girl exclaimed, her eyes suddenly caught sight of the fish’s appearance. It’s an ugly thing, which left the young lady bewildered and blinking. “What kind of fish is this? How have I not seen it before?”

Duncan knew that Nina would react this way.

Of course, it’s not that the city-state’s inhabitants haven’t seen fish before. Although the Boundless Sea was dangerous and full of shadowy creatures lurking under its depths, that doesn’t mean they couldn’t fish in the relatively safe shallows near the islands. On the contrary, it’s a valuable resource that’s highly prized among its citizens.

Under this premise, the profession of “fisherman” will of course also exist.

However, the world’s oceans are not like the earth, and even if there are safe waters, they are only “safe” compared with the deeper depths. So, even if it’s offshore fishing in this world, it is still a dangerous and thrilling job requiring the fishermen’s greatest wits.

In this case, Nina hadn’t eaten fish in years. Even before her uncle fell ill, a commoner like her had little chance of seeing fish served to the table.

“Don’t fret about its specie. Just wait and enjoy the catch.” Duncan didn’t want to dwell on the matter because he too didn’t know what kind of fish this was. Instead, it’s better to focus that energy on preparing tonight’s dinner.

This strange fish was not small. Even when dried, the sizable body could be sectioned off for several meals afterward. For example, the head could be turned into soup, with the rest of the body hanging on the cupboard for further air drying. This would create a more flavorful profile with time.

Uncle really started cooking.

Watching the familiar figure getting busy in the kitchen, Nina felt like she was in a dream.

The young lady didn't really care what happened to the strange fish her uncle took out, nor did she care about tonight's dinner. Compared with these trivial things, the changes that happened to her uncle are the strangest and most worthy of her attention.

The sound of knives clashing against cutting boards was heard, the gas stove was hissing, and the broth in the pot was bubbling.

Nina hadn't heard these noises in how many years?

Then a hint of hesitation appeared on her face after recalling something. After several minutes of being troubled inside: "Uncle, tomorrow.... Mr. Morris is coming for a home visit."

"Home visit?" Duncan looked stunned for a second, "Mr. Morris... as in your history teacher?"

Nina nodded: "Yes."

"The teachers at that school even make home visits?" Duncan threw the processed fish into the pot and glanced back at Nina in surprise while he put the knife away, "I thought this was the 'specialty' of those schools in the upper sector only."

"The school... indeed doesn't have that requirement," Nina said carefully while paying attention to Duncan's attitude, "But Mr. Morris is special. He... pay extra attention to his students."

Duncan didn't speak for a while because this exceeded his expectations.

He had considered dealing with the church, the police, and even the city-state navy and military if the worse occurred. Still, he never envisaged in his plan that an old man teaching history would visit him from the public schools.

Why is reality always so unexpected?

“Uncle?” Nina grew a little worried after seeing Duncan didn’t respond, “Are you unwilling? Then I can tell Mr. Morris… In fact, I told him today. I told him your health is not very good, so I can’t accept a home visit this time. He didn’t say anything at that time…”

Duncan watched Nina’s somewhat nervous reaction and found a flood of emotions hidden behind that behavior.

From the looks of things, this is not the first time Mr. Morris requested a home visit. How many times has Nina refused using the same excuse?

“…… He’s teaching history, right?” Duncan suddenly asked again.

Although she didn’t know why her uncle asked this question again, Nina nodded: “Yes.”

“This is a good opportunity. I happen to want to meet a professional historian,” Duncan laughed, “when is he coming over tomorrow?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 81

Chapter 81 “Memory Deviation!”

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The arrival of a scholar who ran to a public school to teach history for some reason was an unexpected situation for Duncan and an opportunity. Best of all, the individual seems to have an exceptional relationship with his niece Nina.

Nina didn't know why her Uncle Duncan suddenly agreed to the home visit. But nevertheless, she's not going to bash a good thing. It's been a very long time since they managed to share a happy moment like this.

“It's time to eat,” Duncan beckoned his “niece,” who was in a daze, to sit at the table. He had cooked up a pot of fish stew and warmed up the bread Nina bought this afternoon. There were also some onion rings and fries he found in the grocery bag, but that's not really something he's interested in. “Remember to get up early for school tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay, Uncle Duncan.” Nina agreed and obediently came to the table.

The aroma of fish soup had already drifted up from the table, so the smell hit the young lady as soon as she sat. With a disbelieving look at her uncle: “It's so fragrant... Uncle, when did your cooking become so good?”

“Can this also be considered good?” Duncan couldn't help but smile. Compared to Alice's headless cooking, Nina's evaluation definitely fell into line. “Could it be that I was very bad at cooking?”

“That can no longer be described as very bad. You used to cook according to the standard of being passable as long as it doesn't kill the person. Every

time you would pull me over to test the poison with you....” Nina muttered, recalling the bone-chilling experience of the tastes that hit her tongue in the past. “Once you made a dish so unpalatable that you couldn’t eat it yourself, you had to throw it in the trash. Then afterward, we ran over to the family restaurant next door to solve the lunch problem. When we returned, we saw the neighbor’s dog lying beside the trashcan and vomiting nonstop. Since then, that dog would run away whenever he sees you...”

As the young lady continued, her voice unexpectedly grew weaker: “Actually, forget what I just said. You never did like it when I mention these things....”

Duncan was silent.

In the remaining memories of this body, there was nothing of that sort mentioned by Nina. In fact, those fragments only contained the happiness they shared. Guess there were also a lot of weird and silly interactions that dissipated following the man’s death. Duncan would need to be more careful when touching such subjects.

As Nina silently broke a piece of the hard bread and dunked it into the delicious broth, Duncan took this opportunity to reach out and rub the child’s hair.

“Uncle?” The girl looks up in surprise.

“Don’t worry. Your uncle’s research on the new dish was successful.” Duncan said solemnly like he meant it.

The two exchanged a long look with each other as if to confirm whether the other was lying. Then out of the blue, the girl broke out into a hysterical laugh: “Uncle, you look so funny!”

“Don’t make fun of adults,” Duncan shot a sideway glance at Nina while smirking mischievously, “Oh right, I intend to tidy up the store in the coming days. So if you see any strange objects lying around that you don’t recognize, don’t touch them until I come back.”

He's preparing for the next shuttling of items between the two places as he develops Ai's ability. Unfortunately, there are bound to be items he couldn't hide from Nina's eyes, so it's better if he gets her vaccinated for the changes in advance.

Nina didn't suspect anything and quickly nodded as the ghost captain continued: "I also plan to add an extra hand in the store to look after things. This is in case I go out during the day, so don't get surprised if you find a stranger in the store, okay?"

This time, he was paving the way for Alice's arrival.

There are still many things to consider before letting the puppet doll enter Pland. Like making sure Alice's supernatural existence wouldn't cause harm to the surroundings or covering up those joints so others wouldn't realize she's a puppet. But most importantly, he needs to figure out how to keep that head screwed on properly without falling off randomly.

Nina looked at Duncan in surprise: "Uncle, you're even hiring a new clerk to help with the store? That's a big deal.... Have you chosen someone yet? What kind of person are they?"

Duncan thought for a moment, trying to filter out a long list of not-so-good adjectives out of his head until he grimaced. There are really not many positives he could say.

"That's uhhh.... a hard-working young lady." In the end, the only word he could use to describe Alice in a positive light was "hard-working".

Then he saw the expression on Nina's face change subtly.

The girl was eyeing her uncle up and down until she couldn't hold back: "Young lady? Uncle, are you..."

Duncan had experience in this field, so he knew exactly what the niece was thinking. Immediately knocking the table to reimpose his status as the elder: "Focus on dinner! Quit thinking about other things!"

Nina immediately held back her laughter and made a “scream” inside. The nosy inner fairy was running amok right now. However, that giggling delight was promptly replaced by a widened eye surprised face after tasting the fish: “It’s so good~!”

Duncan laughed while breaking some of the bread to feed Ai. “Then eat more. There’s still some more in the kitchen.”

Just like that, Nina and her Uncle Duncan shared a warm and happy dinner that hadn’t been possible inside this antique shop for many years.

And after everything was cleaned up after dinner, Duncan stopped the girl again, who was about to return to her room for rest.

He had something to confirm.

“Nina, I have something I want to ask you.”

“Huh?” Nina grew curious, “What’s the matter?”

“Do you remember… things from when you were a child?” Duncan deliberated on where to start and recalled what he had heard from the cultists. “The stuff that happened when you were six.”

Nina frowned over the odd question. She didn’t know why her uncle suddenly mentioned the old incident eleven years ago.

Eleven years have passed, and she was only six years back then, so her memories aren’t the greatest. As such, her heart didn’t feel too much sadness when mentioning the tragedy back then.

“I was young and can’t remember many things, but I do remember it was a mess… There were panicking adults everywhere. Some say there was a factory leak near the Crossroad. Others claim there was a collective frenzy in the Lower Third Street. Some even claimed it happened in the Upper Sector too… Most of what I know was retold to me by the adults later on…”

Duncan thought for a moment and locked eyes with Nina's: "Then do you remember a fire? I fled from that big fire with you. Your parents... they were in that fire..."

He only tentatively mentioned it, but he didn't expect Nina to suddenly widen her eyes and react so strongly: "Fire? Uncle, you really remember that there was a big fire at that time?!"

"..... Of course I remember," Duncan knew that something was really wrong based upon Nina's reaction, "Is it wrong that I remember there's a fire?"

"I also remember that there was a huge fire," Nina said quickly, a little excited even. "But when I told the adults around me, no one could remember it. They all said I was scared and imagining things. There was no place to catch fire... Then later, when I grew older, I even went out of my way to find the original newspaper..."

Speaking of this, she stopped and slowly shook her head with a strange expression: "But even the newspaper didn't mention any fire... All the records say that there was a leak in a factory. The chemicals caused widespread hallucinations..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 82

Chapter 82 “The Fire That Exists Only In Memory!”

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Nina went back to her room and slept.

In this world, most people go to bed early and get up early because the time after the sun recedes is dangerous. The shimmer of the World’s Creation could make the world warp to its peak, and even if there are lights in the city, people must still face the night with caution.

Duncan didn’t feel the slightest bit sleepy tonight though. He turned off the lights in the house and came to the window in his shirt, casually admiring the night view of the city-state of Pland while reminiscing about his conversation with Nina after dinner.

Nina remembers a fire, and the rest of his body remembers when they fled from that collapsing building. That night, the streets were in a frenzy, with cries and screams of fear shrouded in the fog. Yet, only the two of them remember that dreadful flame in this modern day.

Nina had spoken to other adults about it of course. However, they all dismissed it as a deranged memory after a child experienced some traumatic event. This was reinforced by the newspaper from eleven years ago claiming there’s only a factory leak at the lower sector near the Crossroad.

Duncan frowned slightly, musing over another suspicious point he found – that was “himself”.

According to Nina’s recount, “Uncle Duncan” doesn’t remember the fire. Only she does. The girl even mentioned it to Uncle Duncan (although it

should be “Ron” at the time) when she was a child. However, like all the other adults, her Uncle Duncan dismissed the idea of the kid being scared and hallucinating.

Where did things go wrong? Why did Nina’s uncle not remember the fire at all, yet I can clearly find the corresponding image in the depths of this body? Is that Ron lying to his niece all this time? Or was the memory unsealed because I took over this body?

Duncan unconsciously tapped his fingers on the windowsill, silently mulling over the timeline.

According to what he gathered from the Sunists:

Eleven years ago, the sun fragment first appeared in the territory of the city-state of Pland, causing a large range vision to occur inside the city limits. That’s also the year Nina became orphaned. Even though many civilians were affected, no one seemed to remember the fire besides from Nina.

Since then, the sun fragment has been dormant with no signs of further activity.

Then moving forward to four years ago, the followers of the sun god tried to awaken the sleeping sun fragment again. That incident got extinguished by the newly promoted Inquisitor Vanna and dealt a heavy blow to those cultists. Since then, the church of the sun was effectively expelled from Pland following that massive purge.

However, that doesn’t mean the failed ritual didn’t have an effect. On the contrary, the energy gathered from the dead had stirred the slumbering sun fragment.

At that time, the “uncle”, who Nina had depended on since being orphaned, contracted a strange disease. The illness eventually tormented the man to the point that he would resort to any remedy, including joining the ranks of the sun cult as a minion.

Moving further forward to a time not long ago. The news of the active sun fragment began attracting suntists to re-gather in the city to hold a sacrificial ceremony. That's when Duncan happened to step in and get involved.

Throughout the timeline, many things seem to be faintly connected, but all lack key evidence to prove.

But the most suspicious thing remains to be the event from eleven years ago when the sun fragment caused a huge vision.

Did the city-state authorities erase the truth of that accident and erase the traces of the fire? And then for the sake of maintaining order, the whole thing was publicized as a collective hallucination caused by a leak in the factory?

But that doesn't explain why the fire doesn't exist in many people's memories at all – unless the authorities have gone to great lengths to reshape the memories of all involved.

And there is another point. In this world, anomalies and visions are open to the public. So even children know the existence and harmfulness of supernatural things. The authorities are obviously aware of this and have always adhered to the policy of announcing dangers in advance to ensure that citizens have a sense of self-preservation. So if it is really just a fire caused by supernatural powers... why do they have to hide it?

Unless..... There is a more significant issue behind the fire, so much so that even the disclosure of news can cause some domino effect of spreading.

Duncan frowned suddenly at thinking this.

Or there is another possibility....

The phenomenon is strange in nature. In many cases, the harm it causes is not only limited to the physical level but even distorts human cognition and the information written down on paper. What if.... What if the sun fragment

had contaminated everything from civilians to the very top of the city government?

A part of Duncan felt like he was going a little too far in his theories. As a novice in the field of supernatural events, his imagination lacked credible support. But on the other hand, he also couldn't stop driving toward these theories.

People's memories, the authorities' records, and even the archives written a decade ago could be distorted and replaced. Of course, something like that would've been dismissed by him right away in the past. However, he couldn't be a stronger believer in this phenomenon.

Why? Because the place where he was located now was called "Duncan Antique Shop", a business that specializes in selling counterfeits to the locals.

With a gentle sigh, Duncan lowered his head and looked through the second-floor window and onto the street illuminated by gas lamps.

Now there was only one question left – why does Nina remember the fire when everything else said otherwise. This was crucial and the key to solving the big question.

.....

Upper Sector of Pland, in a mansion belonging to the managing official.

Vanna jerks awake from a terrible nightmare.

But this time, the nightmare was no longer related to the Black Sun like it usually does, nor did it point to the Vanished returning from subspace. Instead, she dreamt about what happened when she was a child.

That foggy night where it's filled with blood and smoke, all she could remember were the horrendous screams of panicking mobs trying to flee from the pursuing shadows. All Vanna could do as a helpless child of twelve was watch it all burn.

Knowing she would not get any rest tonight, the inquisitor pulled herself up from bed and came before the dresser where a mirror stood. Looking at her own reflection, the lady was clearly not feeling well until she whispered the storm goddess's name. Once done, a wave of peace and clarity returned to the female inquisitor.

"At least I'm not dreaming of that ship now..."

As soon as her voice fell, the lady suddenly heard footsteps from the corridor where a knock promptly came from the door: "Vanna? Vanna, are you having nightmares again?"

It was her uncle's voice – the most admired administrator of the city-state.

"I'm okay." Vanna steadied herself and sorted her clothes a bit before opening the door.

Dante Wayne, a gray-haired and not too burly man, stood at the doorway and watched his niece with concern.

Having lost an eye in an incident, the man now possesses an eyeball made of ruby with delicate gold patterns inside the eyeball. The hideous scars from eleven years would've scared any unfamiliar adult, let alone a child. Still, Vanna knew how kind and fair her uncle was at heart despite the stern face.

"Yaaa, I had a nightmare," she rubbed those eyes, her tone a little helpless, "I didn't expect to wake you up."

"Don't fret about it. I'm old. I'm a light sleeper." Dante Wayne continued showing a concerned face, "Dreaming of childhood again?"

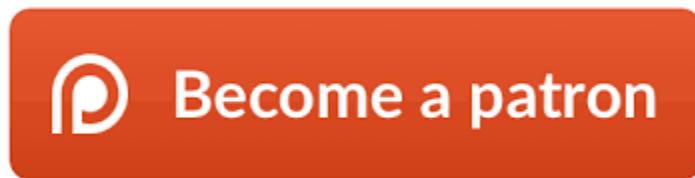
"Mhmm, that incident again."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 83

Chapter 83 “The Entanglement”

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Vanna’s mind finally calmed down somewhat after her uncle brought an herbal liquor over. The power of medicine and alcohol always did help with a person’s tension regardless of the era.

“You get nightmares every time you stay home, and it’s always about that event from your childhood.” Dante Wayne’s voice came from behind the inquisitor, who had come out to the balcony and observed the city.

“..... As an inquisitor, this is an unwanted sign of weakness,” Vanna mutters. She was more than a head taller than her uncle, but the lady never minded showing her true side in front of this elder who effectively raised herself. “I am distressed.”

“..... Did you talk to Heidi yet?”

“She recommended four types of brain surgeries and two nerve puncture treatments,” Vanna sighed, “Given the years of friendship we have, I didn’t beat her.”

“..... That’s definitely something she would say, after all, she doesn’t deal with normal people that often.” Dante Wayne shook his head, “Actually, I didn’t expect that after all these years, you were still trapped by the nightmare of that night.”

“I thought I had come out of it too.” Vanna rubbed her temple, “Maybe it really has something to do with this big house. As soon as I return here, I will dream about what it was like... Maybe I should consider holding

another exorcism ceremony for this house, otherwise I will keep thinking this house carries the shadow of that disaster...”

Uncle Dante contemplated the suggestion and didn’t raise an objection. “Is there still that fire in your nightmare this time?”

Vanna nodded: “Yes, there are fires everywhere. You escaped from the fire with me on your back. I even remember clearly that we fled the city from the factory’s pipeline, and a burning building nearby was gradually collapsing in the fire...”

Speaking of this, she stopped and landed her gaze on her uncle: “... You don’t remember the fire, do you?”

“Not only do I not remember, nobody else does.” The serious-faced administrator slowly shook his head, “I only remember the leaked gas pipes and those cultists who went berserk... There were many parties that night, but only one seemed to remember seeing the raging fire.”

Vanna didn’t speak for a while and fell into deep thought. Then after an unknown amount of time, she suddenly said softly: “Except for the ‘fire’ incident, my memories and yours are consistent... I didn’t understand anything back then, but now I know very well that this must be some kind of supernatural force exerting influence. Even after becoming a saint, I still can’t dispel that influence.”

“There could only be two answers. The one responsible is so powerful that they left an imprint on your soul for life, or the source of the influence of that incident remains hidden somewhere in the city. I have been investigating this matter for years, but unfortunately, there has been little progress thus far.”

Dante Wayne’s tone ended with a hint of apologies. Not only for being unable to solve his niece’s distress but also for failing to investigate an old case as the highest government official.

The “Great Chaos” eleven years ago left a scar that’s far too deep, both physically and mentally on everyone involved.

Vanna knew that this matter was not only her own phantom at work, but also a plague on her uncle's heart. Not knowing how to comfort others well, the inquisitor could only try to divert the topic: "I remember that a lot of cultists were arrested back then. Judging from the assessment count after the engagement, that incident was even larger than the 'Black Sun' incident four years ago."

"Yes, thousands of people were arrested, so many that I wondered how it's possible for so many cultists to hide inside Pland unnoticed." Dante Wayne sighed, "And there is more than one sect involved... There are the Suntists who follow the black sun, Annihilators who worship the Nether Lord, and even those Ender missionaries who worship subspace itself... These maggots in the gutters all emerged that night, deranged and wreaked havoc."

Vanna stared at Dante with more intent now: "But according to the results of the subsequent interrogation, none of the saboteurs arrested by the authorities can be called the 'mastermind'. No one even knows why they caused chaos that night. It was as if they were all detonated at the same time and went into collective madness."

Dante didn't speak for a while for he too believed it was not normal. Then he noticed the look coming from his niece: "The reason for your irritability should not just be because of that nightmare is it? Suddenly mentioning these things is related to the recent unstable situation in the city-state?"

Vanna did not evade the question: "There is indeed a certain connection. The suntists converging on Pland are searching for an 'anomaly' called the sun fragment, and the Vanished has reappeared in the real world almost simultaneously. Everything is pointing to us here, reminding me of the chaos from eleven years ago."

"..... I have ordered all ports to strictly check the movement of people and communicated with the other administrators of neighboring city-states. We've already cracked down on many cultists and effectively cut off their means of flowing into Pland because of these measures. All that's left to do is to wait on what the church does. The supernatural area is the specialty of the guardians."

Speaking of this, the middle-aged admin suddenly stopped as if to ponder his following words. But after a moment of hesitation, he decides it's best to say it: "As for the matter of the Vanished, I can't help much in the transcendent realm, but in the worldly aspect, I have an idea."

"Secular aspect?" Vanna frowned, "Wait, you mean..."

"Lucretia Abnomar, captain of the pioneer exploration ship Bright Star, and Tyrian Abnomar, the pirate leader of the Northern Seas and captain of the Sea Mist," Dante said unhurriedly. "It is true that the Vanished is a ghost ship beyond the understanding of reality, but as long as it has been a member of the real world, the real world will have an anchor related to it. I wonder how Captain Duncan's son and daughter will react to their father's reappearance in the world."

Vanna's eyes slowly widened. She was used to using simple and crude methods to directly deal with her enemies, so she had never considered anything related to the Vanished from this perspective. But soon the lady frowned: "But I heard those two hardly deal with the city-state authorities... They are rulers of their own turf on the Boundless Sea and maintains a cold relationship with the city-states."

"This is normal, after all, they are the children of that ghost captain. The Bright Star and the Sea Mist are the two escorts of the original Vanished. Although they parted ways a hundred years ago, in the eyes of most city-states, they are still the embodiment of curses and dangers. It is not so much they alienated the civilized world, but rather the civilized world actively avoids them."

Vanna frowned and appeared wary at her uncle's plan: "Then do you expect them to come and help Pland against their father?"

"It's just an idea, but it's worth a try." Dante grew serious, "After all, we all know that the Bright Star and Sea Mist parted ways with the Vanished more than a century ago. That happened before the event on the Thirteen Islands of Witherland. Rumor is that some ship captains witnessed the Sea Mist battle the Vanished in the northern seas half a century ago. At that point, the

Vanished had already become the legendary ghost ship. This may explain the attitude of the two captains towards their father.”

“More than half a century ago... At that time, the Sea Mist was still the flagship of the Frost Queen. That Captain Tyrian was probably just being ordered to protect the city-state,” Vanna said slowly while pondering. “But you are right. At least this proves that the Sea Mist has a record of confrontation with the Vanished.”

But she still had some doubts, which she voiced after a few seconds of thought: “What if the Bright Star and Sea Mist ignored Pland, what then?”

“That’s why this is just an attempt,” Dante said quietly, “and I’ll spread the word and find a way to get the news into the ears of those two captains. After that, we can only wait and watch for their reaction afterward.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 84

Chapter 84 “Captain Duncan’s Offspring”

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Even ghosts were once members of the real world, and the Vanished was no different despite the fact that it crashed into subspace a century ago. It's built by real craftsmen from the material world, and Captain Duncan was also a human being before turning into a shadow of subspace.

For ordinary seafarers, everything related to the Vanished must be veiled with a layer of “curses” and “freakiness”, as if the terrifying ghost captain was a creation directly bred from subspace. No one will think about whether a natural disaster wandering on the sea has any personal joy or anger, nor about his interpersonal relationships. In their minds, “Captain Duncan” symbolizes a natural phenomenon, an existence without a trace of origin.

Fear builds walls in human hearts, and walls blind the souls to the truth on the other side. But as an inquisitor specializing in confronting of this fear, Vanna knows how to discern the true parts from a series of legends, exaggerations, and whispers.

The terrible captain of the Vanished... when he was still a human, before the events of the Thirteen Islands of Witherland, also had his best friends and family members. He also had loyal sailors and adjutants under him. He also needed to go to the port to maintain supplies and deal with the city-state authorities.

He couldn't have been born a mobile natural disaster.

Captain Duncan also had two children, the eldest son Tyrian Abnomar, and his daughter Lucretia Abnomar. They are both alive due to a curse that prolonged their lifespan.

Like their father, the two children also commanded their own powerful ships that hovered on the fringes of the civilized world. As within expectation, they weren't exactly kind to the civilization either. They're cold, vaguely antagonistic to the point sailors wouldn't even dare to link the pair to the infamous Captain Duncan. Nowadays, only the most well-learned and knowledgeable are aware of the family relationship.

On the other hand, despite their frosty relationship with the city-states, the two captains weren't hostile either.

The Bright Star, helmed by Ms. Lucretia Abnomar, was a mighty, pioneering exploration ship passionate about exploring the world's limits. Rumor has it the ship has even reached the very edge of the known world, where she witnessed unimaginable wonders.

No one knows exactly what she was looking for on the edge of the world. Still, on rare occasions that she did report back to the adventurer's guilds through a messenger, the stories told reported were worthy of being turned into books and a medal of honor. Of course, no one would consider it an honor if it meant becoming a living curse. Nevertheless, this was proof of goodwill that she was still on the side of humanity.

Tyrian Abnomar, on the other hand, was less fleeting and distant than his sister. The man was closer to the human world and definitely more dangerous. More than half a century ago, he served the Frost City-State of the Northern Seas, and now he's the most powerful pirate captain sailing these icy waters.

This moody captain controlled nearly half of the main shipping routes of the Cold Sea. With the Sea Mist as its flagship, he commanded more than a dozen warships under its banner. But in reality, he had already surpassed a simple pirate and grown to become a semi-official power outside of the city-states.

As for how this Captain Tyrian went from being a general under the Queen of Frost to becoming a pirate head, people had different theories –

Some say he was the mastermind of the Frostbite Rebellion half a century ago – the man who personally put the Frost Queen on the guillotine. Then using the looted wealth from that city-state, he built up his powerful pirate crew.

Another version was the opposite: a few scholars believe that Tyrian Abnomar fought for the queen until the last moment during the Frostbite Rebellion. That he became a pirate out of spite for the other city-states and menaced the shipping route out of obsession with avenging the queen.

Vanna didn't know how much of the speculation in this chaotic world was true or false, and considering the personalities of the two captains, they should not be interested in explaining their affairs to the world. But one thing was certain: the reappearance of the Vanished was definitely a major event for them that needed attention.

After all, the siblings had betrayed the Vanished with their respective ships more than a century ago, and now their furious father had returned from subspace.

Of course, as Dante Wayne said, this was just a spare card. It's great if the card comes in handy, but one couldn't rely on such a card.

.....

When the bell tower of the neighborhood church rang, the special rhythm of the whistle also broke the silence of the night, signaling the city residents to be awake and go about their day.

Nina got up early to prepare breakfast today. Therefore, Duncan's nose was already hit with the aroma of mushroom sauce and bread before he managed to dispel the drowsiness in his body.

Sitting at the dining table.

“Do you want a bicycle?” He asks after noticing a bunch of people riding along the streets outside the window.

“Bicycle?” Nina was stunned for a moment and waved her hand, “That’s so expensive... and I don’t need it.”

“It’s easier to go to school,” Duncan said, “you don’t have to worry about money. I’ll figure it out.”

He had thought about it seriously already. Although this antique store did not look good, but judging by the accumulation and rotation of goods in the warehouse and the cash stored in the shop, it should actually have stable weekly sales. Definitely more than enough to feed two people.

As to why Nina’s so strapped in her spending, that’s entirely due to the former uncle donating over half of his wealth to the cult. The remaining got squandered on spirits and medicine.

Now that this depraved living was over, it’s only proper that Nina got a better living standard.

Of course, he doesn’t know how to run a store, and the few purchase channels he knows in his memory are also a little vague. Nevertheless, he would manage somehow if he slowly adapted....

The key was to get Nina accustomed to her “uncle” becoming a reliable elder again.

“But that’s so expensive...” Nina lowered her head and muttered, then bit into the hard bread.

Duncan wanted to say something to that when his voice got interrupted by a knock from the first floor.

“So early... who could it be when we’re not even open yet?” Nina was stunned for a moment when she heard the knock. Getting up, she hurried downstairs, “I’ll go down and check!”

Watching the fleeing girl, Duncan broke a piece of bread and threw it at the dove who was pacing around the table: “You say... in addition to opening a normal store, what other way is there to make money relatively fast.... Do we need to open a logistics company?”

The bird suddenly jumped two steps to the side, flapping its wings angrily: “But it is not amusing to me!”

Then she began to yap nonstop, “That bastard is furious and picked up the Demonic Snake Spear to sacrifice Elder Tang to the stake! I will karate chop with a spinning dragon kick! There will be blood on his head! FULL SCREEN AHEAD!!!”

Duncan’s whole person was dumbfounded: “...”

He could not understand a single thing the bird just spoke after Nina left there. But he couldn’t blame Ai for bursting out like this. She must’ve been a mess inside at holding back her urge to speak.

Then before the dove could yap some more, Nina’s voice suddenly came from the first floor. This time, the young lady’s voice sounded a little nervous: “Uncle Duncan! Th-There are two policemen here to see you...”

Police? Two of them came to see me this early in the morning?

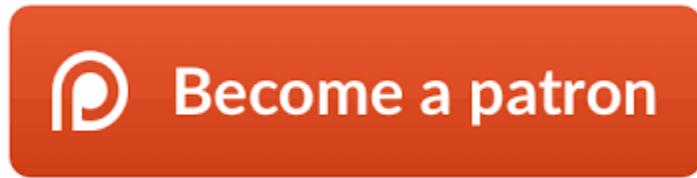
This time it was Duncan’s turn to be stunned. Immediately ordering the bird to stay put and out of sight, he hurried downstairs where he saw Nina looking over his way nervously. Two policemen were standing at the doorway.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 85

Chapter 85 “Reward”

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Duncan affirmed his composure and walked towards the two policemen at the door.

He had nothing to fear in any case. The guy did not do any sabotage, nor did he have any conflict with the authorities. Although Captain Duncan was infamous around these parts, but what did the mobile natural disaster of the Boundless Sea have to do with this honest antique store owner?

If there's anything to be suspicious about, it would only be the fact that he attended the cultist gathering before running off to report it!

Wait a minute..... report?

Duncan suddenly remembered this stubble and immediately got a vague guess as to the reason why the two policemen came to his residence. Now he's even more confident in his footsteps, but that obviously didn't translate to Nina's nerve.

“Uncle, you must answer the policemen's question honestly...” the young lady urgently murmurs as she brushes shoulders with her uncle.

Duncan suddenly faltered and casts a strange look at his “niece”: “Is that the image I have in your heart?”

Nina returned the look with a face that was even more exaggerated. It's the same type of expression that happens when an alcoholic swears he won't be

drinking again. “.... Then what else could the police come for this early in the morning?”

Duncan: “...”

He sighed helplessly and finished the distance to the door with a big, bright smile. “Good morning gents. What can I do for the both of you?”

“Mr. Duncan,” the older of the two policemen began with a polite and businesslike tone, “we found this place according to the registered address. The tip you reported to the patrol officers yesterday has been confirmed. On behalf of City Hall, we thank you for your contribution in helping with the maintenance of order. We’re also here to hand you your reward.”

When the words fell, the young officer next to him stepped forward and handed over a paper envelope that looked quite thick.

Nina had widened her eyes from the sidelines after seeing the parcel.

Duncan had guessed as much. However, he didn’t expect the reward money to be directly brought to his door like this. Not being shy, he accepted the package and was surprised when he saw the words “435 Sora” imprinted on the disposable wax seal. That’s a generous amount for any residence in the lower sector.

“So there’s a bounty reward...” Duncan squeezed the paper parcel and relished in the thickness of the banknotes, “I wasn’t even thinking about it at the time.”

“Of course there is a bounty. The admittaturs pay great heed to the fight against the evil lurking inside the city-state, especially in recent times. All valid reports are rewarded generously, so do keep that in mind.” The younger officer chuckles with amusement at the shop owner’s lack of awareness, “Not to mention the clues you provided are... very special.”

Hearing this, Duncan’s heart couldn’t help but jerk with attention. Acting casually like he’s only curious: “By the way, I didn’t dare to go over there and take a look for myself, but what exactly happened?”

The two officers exchanged a look with each other and then actually stepped inside the shop. Nina didn't miss this and promptly closed the door behind everyone.

"We did not go to the scene ourselves. The matter was dealt with by the guardians. However, according to the information that came through the proper channels... the situation was terrible," said the younger officer, who had not yet fully learned the businesslike tone of his senior. "You were right to not take a look. If you had gone, you would've likely fallen into severe danger."

Duncan was stunned for a moment before quickly coming back to attention.

This was the lower sector, where sewage and toxins flow from the upper sector. If heretics and evil were to take up residence, it would surely be in these shabby and winding alleys.

Although the neighborhood where the antique shop was located could already be considered a decent place in the lower sector, it still doesn't change the fact that it's part of the lower sector. Slum or no slum.

On the other hand, even if we did not consider there may be cultists lurking among ordinary folks in the lower sector, a person who "reports to the authorities and collects a bounty" was very likely to be the target of vigilance here anyway.

The officers who are familiar with the local situation certainly know this; therefore, the reminder here was a routine habit and a deed out of good intentions.

Duncan thought about it and felt that the reminder was right as well.

This place was indeed prone to cultists—he still has the sun talisman in his pocket.

"Thank you for the reminder," he thanked the two sincerely. Although the ghost captain didn't know what the average standard here was, but at least

the two in front gave a good impression. “Do you want to take a break here?”

“No need,” the older officer waved his hand and turned toward the exit, “we still have patrol duty that must be attended to.”

The young officer promptly followed as well: “If you still encounter clues in the future, please report it to the authorities. The security of the city-state affects each and every one of us.”

“Of course,” Duncan squeezed the paper bag in his hand and formed a genuine smile, “I have always been a good citizen who cares about the order of the city-state.”

Once the two men wearing the dark blue uniforms were out of sight, Nina immediately turned back to look at her uncle, who was already counting the money bills inside. “Uncle... Is this really a reward from City Hall? You actually... really...”

The girl opened her mouth but found it awkward to speak the next part. “You can really do good things.”

Duncan knew what Nina was thinking and chuckled at her troubled mindset: “It was when I was coming home yesterday. Your uncle I have always been enthusiastic about public welfare.”

Nina: “...”

“But I was surprised to have such a huge bounty reward.” Duncan didn’t wait for Nina to speak to mutter his inner greed while looking down at the banknotes, “This is faster than making money from the shop....”

There was another sentence he didn’t say: According to the information he had before, there were still many cultists from various city-states hiding in the city.

That’s all money!

Nina took a good moment to return to her senses: “Uncle, what did you say?”

“Nothing, forget what I said,” Duncan said casually and waved the topic off. “Weren’t you going to school today? Don’t be late. By the way, when is Mr. Morris coming for the home visit?”

“In the afternoon, I only have one class in the afternoon,” Nina said, as if thinking of something, “Uncle, are you still going out today?”

Duncan nodded, “Mhmm, but I’ll be home before your history teacher comes.”

When Nina heard this, she immediately looked suspiciously over his way: “Uncle, what are you going to do?”

Duncan smiled extraordinarily brightly: “Your uncle is going out hunting today.”

He already got an idea in mind. Since the sun talisman was so easy to use, plus the authorities are so willing to offer up a bounty, so why not take advantage of this point? He’s going to make trouble for these suntists anyway. No reason not to kill two birds with one stone.

Nina was a smart girl. Even if she doesn’t know the full story, she could already guess what Duncan meant by “hunting” in this case. With a wrinkled forehead: “... Uncle, it’s not right for you to do this. You also said yesterday that you want to properly operate the shop. If you want to rectify the situation with the shop, then you need to recruit an assistant first...”

“I know, I know, but there’s no contradiction in running a shop and helping with the city’s security, is there?” Duncan waved his hand to reassure his niece, “Let your uncle here worry about the shop. You focus on school first.”

Yet, instead of doing as told, Nina promptly grabbed a chair and sat down next to him with a firm face.

“Nina?”

“Uncle, it’s so dangerous.” Nina looked up and stared at her precious uncle.

Duncan: “Uhhh... actually...”

“I’m going to keep an eye on you,” Nina sat there stubbornly, “just now those two gentlemen already mentioned how dangerous it is as of late.... It’s one thing that you accidentally encountered the matter. How can you actively go out to search for such dangers?”

Duncan was taken aback by the seventeen-year-old girl’s statement because she really does care for him. Though the way was stubborn and crude, but it was from the heart.

“I don’t want a bike.” Nina lowered her head and muttered quietly.

“Go to school.” Duncan sighed and stepped forward with a smile, then ruffled Nina’s hair.

Nina looked up in surprise.

“You’re right, it’s dangerous,” Duncan said seriously, “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll wait here in the store for you to come back.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 86

Chapter 86 “A Better Solution”

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Nina went to school, and as she had done many times in the past, the girl once again believed her uncle's promise that he would stay home until she returned.

Maybe she has long been unconvinced, but she still insists on holding faith.

Duncan stood behind the window on the first floor of the antique shop as he watched Nina's trotting figure quickly make a turn around the corner and disappear from his field of view.

Uncle Duncan would wait for her to come home at the store, as he promised.

“Ai, come here.” As soon as the thought flashed in his heart, a green flame stream streaked through the air and materialized before Duncan.

Through the connection established by the ghost fire, Duncan could clearly perceive the position of the dove and the state she's in. Although it was not yet possible to fully share the five senses, this level of perception could already do a lot of things.

Duncan lowered his head and stared into Ai little mungbean eyes: “You are actually very smart. Not only can you fully understand my words, but you can also do many things, right?”

The dove immediately flapped its wings proudly: “Loyalty, loyalty!”

“Then I have a bold idea right now. I want you to try it.” Duncan smiled, then took out the sun talisman that had now become a “cultist approach alarm” from his pocket.

He carefully wrapped the badge with a cloth to prevent it from being exposed to ordinary people and then tied it to Ai’s back with a strip of fabric.

“Go fly around town, and when the badge heats up, search for the place that resonates. Preferably directly to the building,” Duncan explains his intent, “I will keep track of the location from my end... Right, first fly around the lower sector and the Crossroad. Don’t go to the upper sector yet since I’m not familiar with that area. I can’t determine the address based on the positioning alone.”

The dove flapped her wings and tilted its head: “Make some fries?”

Duncan grimaced: “If you can locate one place, then I will bury you with fries.”

Without saying a word, the bird flapped its wings and rushed out the gate as if afraid the owner would regret the agreement.

The ghost captain watched with a smile as the bird flew away in the sky. With his tracking ability of Ai improved, the man could clearly perceive the dove’s movement through the ghost fire. Then by matching the approximate location in his head to a map, Duncan should be able to pinpoint anything they find along the way.

Exhaling softly, he leans back against the counter to comfortably wait. He promised Nina that he wouldn’t go out “asking for danger”, so it’s only natural he kept his promise. However, he never said anything about not writing report letters to the authority from his home.....

To be fair, this was a better solution since Ai could cover more distances and increase the range by wandering the city. Of course, this method also had disadvantages, and that was not being able to gather intel from the cultists.

But Duncan didn't care much about this regret. According to the experience of attending the last rally, those cultists who could easily be found were actually a group of minions that were disposable by those in charge. The big fish would need to be uncovered differently, hence why the ghost captain would change the plan.

Also, let's not forget Ai had more ability than just flying around with a sensor – her job was express delivery....

Imagine finding a big fish who was unprepared. Ai could swoop in and transport the foe onto the Vanished. By that point, haha.... There's no escape for the poor sucker by that point. Duncan could take his sweet, sweet time interrogating the prisoner.

Then to top things off with a cherry, he hadn't experimented with transporting live humans yet... Duncan wouldn't kidnap random people off the street for his own gains, but he wouldn't have any qualms about experimenting with ruthless cultists that committed mass murder.

When necessary, even pure trash could be suitable "consumables".

Duncan leaned back in his chair and relished in his own ingenuity. The only problem now was to consider how he would explain this to Nina why the authorities would issue so many reward bounties to her uncle.

As the man dwelled on the matter, another idea suddenly popped up: is there such a thing as banks in this world that's developed into the industrial age?

This was the inevitable result and a necessary condition for developing the world's economy.

Although this world's banking system should be far less convenient and widespread than on Earth, the minimum account function should still be there.

And of course, the original owner of this body did not have a bank account. The man hadn't done well in life so it's pointless to do so. What's more, the

bank services are usually reserved for those living in the upper sector since those like Nina's family had little spare funds to speak of. Even so, banks are technically open to all walks of life regardless of one's status.

As it so happens, there's a bank at the Crossroad that he could visit.

Making up his mind, Duncan intends to make a visit within the next two days. His activities are going to expand rapidly at this rate. It's crucial he got the foundation down before things really gathered steam. Besides, giving a bank account number in the report letters would mean he could skip leaving his personal address directly on the papers.

Of course, whether this was feasible will have to be tried later, after all, the original owner of his body has little experience with the city-state security department (or strictly speaking, much positive experience), but Duncan thinks it was reasonable enough.

In this dangerous world, anonymous reporting should be a normal choice for many enthusiastic citizens working under caution.

As for today... he's going to stay in the antique shop and relax. He still hasn't personally opened up this business yet, so it's about time he got to it.

Duncan stretched and got up from behind the counter, then slowly came to the main door where he flipped the sign to the "open" side against the window glass.

.....

Near the Crossroad, inside the dilapidated and abandoned factory, guardians of the church had already pulled up a blockade around the area when Inquisitor Vanna arrived with her blessed sword strapped to the waist. She's being accompanied by two storm priests as they descend the stairs to the basement floor.

Here, everything remained the same after they received a report and discovered the rally, which was promptly cordoned off until now.

In the huge basement, the disgusting smell of blood was particularly thick. Mix this smell with the pungent sting of burning chemicals and decapitated parts of the dead strewn along the floor, such a scene would terrify even the strongest of hearts. However, the female inquisitor wasn't one of those weak souls. She's focused and frowning because there's no traces or clues of the attackers here.

It was a one-sided crushing battle. The assailants far outweighed these cultists, who were basically ordinary folks. Also, the attack appears to be sudden and abrupt with many of the cultists unable to resist or react in time.

Who is responsible?

Wild transcends with whom these cultists have a personal feud?

Or another powerful heresy order?

Perhaps some kind of out-of-control bloody sacrifice that has gone berserk?

The young inquisitor was lost in thought.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 87

Chapter 87 “Vanna’s Investigation”

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Only the cultists’ bodies were left in the rally, and no evidence could be found to prove the attackers’ identity, making the investigation very difficult.

But one thing’s certain, it was definitely not ordinary people who carried out this attack based upon the pungent and peculiar smell remaining in the air – it’s the trace of the flames that had been contaminated.

Vanna carefully examined the oil lamps left in the basement. Beside her, a priest had taken out special powders and potions from the kit to analyze the lamps for residues that should not appear in the real world.

Fire had always been the most remarkable thing in this world.

It’s the visible order, the handwriting of the gods when they make contact with the world, the evidence that “civilization still exists”. When the flame burns, everything changes and leaves its mark.

Therefore, if there has been a supernatural-level battle here, the flames should carry some corresponding traces left in there.

After the priest began to get busy, Vanna returned to the middle of the basement to examine the corpse of a sun heretic who had fallen there.

“Nearly every bone in the body has been broken as if they had been directly hit by a raging bison. It’s hard to imagine what kind of weapon could have caused such a result,” a coroner said next to her.

“Blunt force strike... A brute force that could break dozens of bones at once?” Vanna frowned slightly, “What is it? A hammer with a diameter of one meter?”

The coroner shook his head: “Unlikely... Compared to these, the ashes over there at the end are more suspicious.”

Vanna came to the end of the basement and saw the “ashes” mentioned by the other person.

There is a complete set of clothes scattered on the floor, and the grayish-black ashes scattered between the clothes indicate this should’ve been a person before they died.

“There is no doubt that it is some kind of supernatural power at work. Judging from the traces, it may be a kind of abnormal flame,” Vanna judged based on the quick assessment. Then turning back to the coroner behind herself, “It is difficult for a normal flame to turn someone into ashes while preserving the person’s clothes.”

“The wall shows signs of impact, and this cultist seems to have been hit by a huge force as well before being burned by the flames,” said another cleric at the scene. “This cultist was the only one in the whole scene that shows visible signs of being killed by supernatural forces and a power we have never seen before.”

“In addition, we have also found a spot in the corner that has been seriously corroded by an unknown element. Unfortunately, we did not find any residual physical substance that might point us to its origin. Perhaps it’s also the effect of a supernatural power.”

“It could be a spell cast by a person, or it could be an anomaly,” Vanna said casually, “Was this discovered by the citizen’s report?”

“Yes, an enthusiastic citizen heard the strange noises in the abandoned factory and reported it to the officers and guardians nearby. They were in the middle of exchanging shifts for the night.” The priest beside her nodded, “These cultists are very cautious. They erased the traces of their

activities after entering the city-state and successfully lurked in the lower city. If it were not for this attack, they would probably be able to continue without our detection.”

“It only means that there are more dens like this hidden in the shadows,” Vanna comments in a heavy voice. “The gutters and alleys of the lower city are the focus of investigation this time...”

Just as she was halfway through her words, a guardian suddenly barged over from the side, holding something in his hand: “Inquisitor, look at this!”

Vanna immediately looked up and saw the guardian holding a small tray containing several slightly deformed copper bullets.

“We found two revolvers that had been fired at the scene. These bullets should be from those guns,” the guardian reports. “And the blood on the bullets is most likely from the attacker!”

Vanna’s eyes fell on those bullets and confirmed her peer’s assessment. The tip was all deformed and contracted... but unlikely the result of hitting flesh less each of these bullets landed on bone.

Such precision would be difficult....

On top of that, how did these bullets, which had clearly hit their target, get left behind on the scene?

Vanna thought carefully and came up with two possibilities: either the attacker operated on himself to remove the bullets before departing, or the attacker had a special physical ability to “drain” the bullet out of the body by relying on their muscles.

Whatever the possibility, one thing was obvious. This powerful assailant took out all the cultists here without delay despite being shot several times, then calmly removed the bullets after the incident.

Vanna looked down at her own hands at the thought. She could do something similar like that, but it’s precisely because she could that she

knows how difficult it would be for mortal flesh.

“The one who killed these cultists should be a physically strengthened transcendent, and the weapon used is some kind of large blunt weapon,” Vanna turned her head and said to a retinue. “The other side has rich combat experience, is strong-willed, and is extremely powerful. Considering the weapons used, the figure should also be very tall and a master of the flame. From preliminary judgment, the perpetrator is hostile towards the sun heretic. For the time being, we cannot determine whether they are on our side or not...”

“Inform all guardians and policemen at all levels to pay attention to those who meet the above characteristics. If a suspected target is found, give priority to reporting. Do not act rashly until contact is made with the main supervisors.”

The guardian who served as the retinue immediately lowered his head:
“Yes, Inquisitor.”

Vanna exhaled softly, then sketched in her mind what the attackers at the scene of the rally might look like: a two-meter-tall man wielding a giant mace or hammer. The person is calm and fluent in martial arts and can summon a flame to do their bidding.

That's pretty much how it should be.

.....

Back inside the antique shop.

Duncan had just sent off the second client with a smile on his face after opening this morning. The client was a rather chubby lady who appeared pleased by her purchase since she was a regular of the shop. Today, she had taken a fancy to a pair of vases intended for the new neighbor.

Obviously, the vase was not an authentic antique but an import from the wholesale market with a manufacturing date of last week.

After throwing a few crumpled bills into the drawer, Duncan sat back behind the counter, feeling a little calmer in his impetuous mood.

At least for now, opening this antique shop was a fun novelty for him. The profit of six coins could hardly be enough to satiate Duncan's appetite. It's better to stick with reporting cultists and reaping the bounty afterward.

Duncan divided his energy and paid attention to the situation on Ai's side then. The bird had arrived at the fourth block; unfortunately, no reaction had come from the sun talisman thus far.

Of course, this was to be expected. Although many cultists are pouring into the city-state of Pland, they are not to the extent that they could bloom everywhere. Besides, the job was not easy by nature.

Hunting requires patience.

Duncan leisurely enjoyed this quiet time, dividing his energy to pay attention to the movements of the dove while occasionally shifting to the situation on the Vanished. He would also control his main body on the ship and walk around while watching Alice fiddle with the items aboard. Such a life wasn't so bad if he looked at things positively.

At this moment, a crisp and pleasant sound of bells suddenly came from the direction of the doorway, interrupting his cranky thoughts under his leisure.

"Welcome," Duncan said casually as he looked up at the door, where an old gentleman with gray hair had entered.

It was a well-dressed old gentleman with a new and neat dark brown coat, polished leather shoes on his feet, a black cane of unknown material in his hand, and a meticulous bowtie.

It's not like the wardrobe of someone that would appear in the lower city, but more like the folks up at the Crossroad where the middle class would attend.

Duncan had no idea about the so-called “decent people” of this world, but he could tell at a glance that this old gentleman was not an ordinary customer.

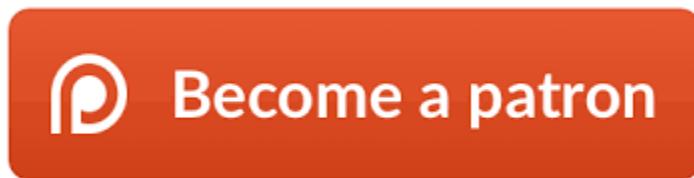
“Do you have something fancy in mind?” He laughed like a real antique store manager. “Take what fate befalls you.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 88

Chapter 88 “There Is 1 genuine Item”

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The old gentleman curiously glanced around after entering and took the environment in: old furnishings, murky windows, and cheap shelves with random “antiques” strewn randomly along the cabinets, the perfect representation of what this business dealt with.

Likely aside from the money collected thus far, there’s nothing but fakes in the whole store!

But even so, the old gentleman, who was dressed well for the lower city, remained interested in what he saw. That was until Duncan’s voice came from the direction of the counter and interrupted his thoughts.

“A humorous way of selling,” the old gentleman chuckles, “to take away what one is destined for... ignoring the items involved, that’s a beautiful phrase in itself.”

“Actually, fate and destiny aside, you must also have money.” Duncan smiled back, “Fortunately, the things here are not expensive. Do you want anything?”

“Eh... I’m not here to buy anything,” the old gentleman sounded hesitant, “actually...”

Due to this opening, Duncan had cut in and played salesman: “One doesn’t have to buy. Just having a look is good too. Anything that catches your eye?”

The old man's face couldn't help but show a trace of helplessness: "This... everything here are counterfeits."

"Yes," Duncan said with a reasonable look, "why would anything here be real? I don't even have security in place for the store. That's so the thieves would lose more than they gain by robbing me."

The old man's cheeks noticeably twitched over that explanation. He probably didn't expect that the antique store's owner could have such a calm attitude when saying something so blunt. After choking for several seconds: "That..."

"Those that are good at persuading themselves will take this as an antique shop and get a pleasurable experience. Those that can't will take it as a grocery store to look for good deals. Unless you're good at deceiving yourself, who would honestly believe they've found a gold brick inside a garbage heap? Look at that bowl over there. For a simple few coins, you can enjoy a moment of pleasure that only those with immense wealth can experience. What's there to complain about? The bowl? That's the crystallization of our modern industry, you know."

The old man listened to Duncan's crooked reasoning and found himself too stunned to respond. For the longest time, he kept looking back and forth from the man and bowl until he broke out into a chuckle again. Then his sight noticed something shining next to the counter, which caused his expression to freeze and turn serious.

Duncan was seriously immersed in the pleasure of doing business when he noticed the change in the old man's expression. But before the shop owner could react, the old man had already stretched the hand over and grabbed onto something.

"This thing..." The old gentleman had pulled out a well-preserved dagger in the middle of a debris pile.

It was an old item from the Vanished that Duncan had hidden here—one of only two genuine items in the entire antique shop.

The other was the cast iron cannonball placed deeper in the pile of debris.

Duncan wanted to divert the old man's attention at first, but then he noticed the light coming from the fella's eyes. It's the look of a professional who found something worthy of their time.

Duncan frowned at the thought and eyed the dagger with a perplexed gaze

It's actually not a big deal if he sold the dagger. It's not a supernatural item like some of the other things aboard the Vanished, nor does it corrupt those who use it. In essence, the dagger was no different from the bowl he just mentioned.

"This thing..." repeated the old gentleman, who had raised his head to meet Duncan's face, "Is it also a 'good' in the store?"

This gentleman said that very tactfully, but the implication was quite obvious: Why is there a real thing in your pile of trash? A mistake on the job or what?

If Duncan couldn't figure out this old gent was a person of a specialized profession then it would be him that's a fool by this point. Retracting his smile, the crummy shop owner puts on an air of mystique: "See, didn't I say you might find something you are fated to have?"

Then he cleared his throat and got serious: "Most goods in the store are discounted, except for a few, such as this one in your hand."

The old gentleman immediately glanced back at the shelves and confirmed the majority of the items were in fact products of modern society. The prices are marked in the hundreds of thousands like some real antique, but after the discount by the cross with a marker, it's only a few coins. This caused the new customer to become increasingly more amused and interested in this seemingly dilapidated antique shop.

However, before the old gent could ask for the price of this dagger, the bell hanging from the doorway rang again.

Duncan looked up and saw Nina's figure.

"Uncle Duncan I'm back!" Nina didn't raise her head when she entered and shouted like its common practice, "Has Mr. Morris arrived yet?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Duncan glanced inside the store, "I'm entertaining..."

Before he could speak, he saw the old gentleman in front of him coughing dryly to interrupt, "My name is Morris."

Duncan: "...?"

"Mr. Morris!" Nina immediately exclaimed in surprise after noticing her teacher's presence. Then like every student who bumped into their teacher after school, she became visibly antsy and straightened her back, "Good afternoon!"

Duncan looked at Nina, then back at the old man in front of himself, then repeated that gesture three more times before going haywire.

"I had wanted to introduce myself from the beginning," the old man spread his hands helplessly, "you kept interrupting me so I wasn't able to."

Nina had come back to her senses then and promptly noticed the dagger in her teacher's grasp. Hurrying forward: "Teacher, don't buy it! Everything in our store are fakes!"

Duncan shot a weird look at his niece, complaining how overly honest she must be inside to oust her own uncle in a situation like this. Although with the level of knowledge this history teacher has, Mr. Morris would likely be able to figure out that much out on his own regardless of the young lady's warning or not.

On the other side, Mr. Morris shook his head after hearing Nina's warning, then raised his hand to place the dagger on the counter: "This one is real."

Nina was stunned: "... Ahhhh?"

“This dagger most likely came from a century ago, and it was one of the favorite tools of seafarers in the city-states of Pland and Lansa at the time. But due to the bankruptcy of the central forge and the vulnerability of the items at sea, few remain in existence today. The ones that did survive are in very bad condition....” Morris said while carefully picking up the dagger and drawing the blade from the scabbard. “I... I’ve never seen one so well preserved. It almost looks like it was still in use not long ago. The blade is sharp and glistening with light. I can’t find a single flaw in the blade’s body....”

“It also has an original scabbard too,” Duncan added. “If you look closely, you’ll see that it even has an original buckle on the back of the scabbard.”

When Morris heard this, he quickly examined the scabbard and accessories attached to it. The surprise in his eyes couldn’t be ignored because it was literally beaming: “This... I really didn’t notice just now... Oh, heavens! It’s like this had just come off of a sailor yesterday! If I weren’t so confident in my own knowledge, I would suspect this is an amazing imitation.... But it even has the flawed patterns at the handle...”

Speaking of this, he suddenly began to doubt himself: “Is it really not an imitation?”

Upon hearing this, Nina quickly waved her hand: “Uncle can’t imitate something this real....”

Duncan twitched from the corner of his eye while watching his niece: “Go upstairs and do your homework!”

Nina was stunned for a moment: “I don’t have homework today...”

“Then read a book!”

Nina stuck out her tongue and walked towards the stairs in small steps, but then glanced back at her teacher before going up the rails: “Mr. Morris, don’t forget that you are here to visit...”

“Of course, I have a lot to talk with Mr. Duncan,” Morris radiated a smile, “you go upstairs and read first. Don’t worry, I won’t snitch on my own student.”

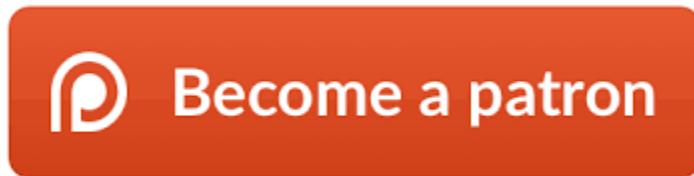
Nina shot both men a suspicious look like she did not believe either of them but then knew better than to die on this hill.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 89

Chapter 89 “Nina’s Abnormality”

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Duncan scratched the back of his head in confusion as Nina briskly ran up the stairs while giggling: “What is this kid so happy for...”

Then he heard Mr. Morris’ voice coming from the counter: “Honestly, you are very different from what I had in mind, Mr. Duncan.”

“Big difference?” Duncan raised one eyebrow, “What is your impression of me?”

As he spoke, he walked around from behind the counter and flipped the open sign at the door to closed. Then moving a chair over, he gestures for the guest to take a seat since it’s improper to leave the teacher standing for a family visit.

“Thank you,” Morris nodded in thanks. After sitting down, the old gent looked in Duncan’s direction with a gentle and elegant smile, “We haven’t met before, but I’ve heard about you from other sources... About Nina’s family situation. Forgive me for being rude, but as far as I’ve heard, Nina has an alcoholic uncle who is addicted to gambling and has a hot temper. Everyone tells me she’s living in a dysfunctional home. As a result, Nina doesn’t have any friends at school, nor do the other students want to deal with her.”

Duncan was brewing some coffee on the side when his hands froze over Morris’s last sentence. Then realizing he was acting out of character, the store owner unhurriedly completed the word and returned to the counter

with two cups of coffee, one offered to the old teacher. “I hope you don’t have the bargain stuff here. The best coffee in the lower city is all like this.”

He sat down opposite the old man with the dagger acting as the dividing line between the two.

“Strictly speaking... these rumors are true,” Duncan said slowly. “I had an illness previously, alright, a rather severe illness. I relied on strong spirits to numb my nerves when the painkillers didn’t work. It was during that period that I fell into decadence. It appears my condition has affected Nina’s adolescence life more than I previously thought.”

Morris carefully observed Duncan for a long time before he spoke thoughtfully, “Is that so? But I don’t feel like you’re someone who has just come out of decadence. More like a gentleman who has never fallen into decadence to begin with. And your wit, your humor, it’s not like that of someone who’s been influenced by alcohol.”

Speaking of this, he took a sip from the cup without making any evaluation of the coffee but rather on Duncan himself: “I believe I’m a good evaluation of others in this regard.”

“Maybe it’s just that I’m adjusting my mindset relatively quickly,” Duncan laughed, his tone extraordinarily calm. He had to admit that this old man did see people accurately, but he did not believe a local historian could see through to his secret. “Nina is almost an adult, and I am her only guardian. I have to show some responsibility at some point.”

“..... Regardless, that’s a good thing for that kid if that’s your view.” Morris gave Duncan a deep look, “She’s in a critical stage of her studies. While many say that they can only go to the factory to tighten bolts after graduating from the public schools, I disagree. Knowledge in itself is a valuable asset, and when it shows its light at some point in one’s life, it will be astronomical to their success.”

The old man said, shaking his head: “Unfortunately, most of the parents I have dealt with do not agree with this notion. Their attention is always on

having their children graduate as soon as possible and finding a job afterward.”

Regarding this topic, Duncan almost got a type of familiar kinship: like any teacher, Duncan also had his fair share of saying similar things to the parents of his students back on Earth.

But soon, he retracted this kinship mentality and shook his head slightly after remembering the living conditions of this world. “Because this is the lower city, Mr. Morris. Your view is indeed wise and visionary, but most people here will only worry about the ability to pay next month’s bill. You can’t ask folks to have long-term visions under such conditions.”

“Indeed, many people are limited by the great difficulties of life.” The old teacher sighed like he was pained by the situation, “Sorry for soaking up your time like this. I’m sure you have your own woes as well.... However, my worries appear unnecessary after getting to know you.”

“Worries?” Duncan frowned, “Did something happen to Nina at school recently? Have her grades regressed?”

“Her grades have always been good, but lately... She’s been distracted.” Morris weighed her vocabulary to not cause panic, “She tends to mentally wander off in class and sleep during the study sessions. Then in the previous chemistry class last week, she accidentally set a lab table on fire. This has never happened before... at least never with her.”

Speaking of this, the old teacher paused and added: “Her grades for the first two terms did not drop by much, but if she continues in this state, it will be difficult to say if she will graduate with honors. I agree that options are limited to those graduating from the public school system. However, assembling machines in the lower city factories and maintaining the steam cores at the churches of the upper city are totally different things. As Nina’s guardian, I ask that you pay closer attention to her studies.”

“Nina has been distracted from class lately?” Duncan frowned, “She didn’t tell me about it...”

“A girl of this age certainly won’t tell you much,” Morris shook his head. “I thought at first that something bad must’ve happened at home, or something her ‘alcoholic uncle’ had done recently that affected her mental state. But now, it appears the reason is entirely different.”

Duncan didn’t speak for a while, only trying to recall if there’s any abnormality in the child’s behavior in the past couple of days.

Then before he could get anywhere, Morris’s voice came again: “You know her best. Has anything abnormal happened to Nina recently? Such as not resting well, or her health deteriorating?”

Duncan pondered for a long time to only spread his hands out: “... To my shame, I can’t think of an answer.”

He couldn’t figure out the answer because he hadn’t even known Nina for a week ago! How would he know what changes occurred recently?

Morris didn’t seem too surprised by Duncan’s answer, probably because he had lowered his expectations for “Nina’s uncle” according to anecdotal rumors before he arrived. Speaking habitually: “You should pay more attention to her, especially for girls this age, material support alone is not enough.”

As soon as Duncan heard this, a thought suddenly appeared in his mind: “Could she be in love?”

Frankly speaking, this idea was more or less based on “Zhou Ming’s” experience as a people’s teacher...

Morris showed a somewhat strange expression after hearing this with an even weirder look in those eyes: “It’s an all-girls school....”

Duncan thought about it and looked serious: “Girls’ school is also possible.”

Morris’s eyes widened slightly.

This old gentleman, who has always been fascinated by academics, was shocked!

“Oomph, don’t mind me, I’m just speaking hypothetically,” Duncan knew as soon as he saw the old man’s reaction that this topic might be a little over-the-top. Quickly moving on to avoid this embarrassing situation, “I’ll talk to Nina properly… she should be willing to tell me.”

“Ah… Oh, of course,” the old gentleman finally came back to his senses due to the shock. “As far as I understand… Nina is a very good and honest child. If you talk with her, I’m sure she wouldn’t resist too much.”

Duncan nodded: “Is there anything else that I should be aware of?”

“Aside from being distracted, there’s nothing else that I’m aware of,” the old man thought about it and shook his head. “I actually came today mainly to talk about this matter and to learn of her real family situation.... Speaking of this, Nina’s parents are...”

“Eleven years ago,” Duncan said, “the official record of the incident was a leak at a chemical plant in the sixth block.”

“I see,” the old gentleman sighed, “I remember the accident as well. Back then, my daughter and I happened to be at the Crossroad when the commotion started. It caused quite a stampede of fleeing bystanders due to the chemical leak. Afterwards, the investigation also said that many cultists took the opportunity to rampage across the lower city that night....”

Duncan’s heart jumped at this. Then forcing himself to act calm and casual: “Was there a fire in the lower city that night?”

“Fire? I don’t remember any fire,” Morris frowned, “I believe you must’ve been mistaken.”

“…… Looks like I’m misremembered,” Duncan said with a smile and pressed his temple, “I really should stay away from alcohol.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 90

Chapter 90 “The Antique Shop’s First Big Sale”

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Duncan had expected Morris’s reaction. The reason he asked was only to confirm the question.

As he had previously known, ordinary people like Morris had no idea that a fire existed – the only ones who knew were Nina and his own memory. Or, strictly speaking, until he took charge of this body.

The topic was quickly skipped over with no further questions from Mr. Morris. Afterward, the two continued to talk about various subjects regarding Nina’s studies and how she was doing in class.

Through the conversation, it could be seen that the old gentleman cared a lot about his students, but due to Nina’s uncle’s previous depraved lifestyle, the meeting got postponed to this day.

And when the “business” of today’s visit finally got finished, Mr. Morris’s attention unsurprisingly fell on his second concern.

The old man eyed the well-preserved antique dagger on the counter, and the eagerness in his eyes could be seen by anyone: “This thing... do you want to sell it?”

Duncan immediately smiled: “This is an antique shop.”

Antiques in an antique shop are of course meant to be sold.

He's thought it through. Although this dagger came from the Vanished, but if you think about it, there seems to be no hidden danger in selling it. There are many things on that ghost ship, and not all of them are related to the supernatural – like this dagger for example. If thrown elsewhere, it was just an ordinary antique... So why couldn't he sell it?

Compared with the pile of fakes in the store, the warehouse on the Vanished was a good means to get money!

As soon as his train of thought smoothed out, Duncan suddenly found the world growing wider. Then he realized something incredible – he was actually sitting on a treasure trove! Those things regarded as garbage on the Vanished, like chipped copper coins, or iron scrap metals tossed in a corner, are all treasures in the eyes of these historians!

Morris didn't know what scheming thoughts were turning in the head of the antique shop owner. His attention was all on the well-preserved dagger in front of him at this time. After a long period of hesitation, the old gent cautiously spoke: "How much?"

Duncan: "..."

Heaven and earth just became narrow again. Why? Because he did not know how much to set.

Even if he inherited the memory of this body in its entirety, he still wouldn't know what price to set for this antique. This store had never sold a single real thing since its opening.

Without question, he first ruled out the option of charging two or three thousand solas. Even if the dagger were real and exceptional, it's no more than a hundred years old according to the details Morris revealed. Besides, it's not like the dagger was unique. There are others out there, albeit in a worse condition, but it's still out there.

Secondly, Morris was Nina's history teacher. If he butchers him up knowing how fond the old gent was of the dagger, it would inevitably leave a bad impression for the girl. Earning a small profit at the price of ruining the

niece's image before the teacher was stupid. Any parent would know better than to test that theory.

Eventually, Duncan could only shake his head and smile. He's given up and decides to toss the problem over: "You make an offer Mr. Morris. You are Nina's most respected teacher, and I really can't make a price like I would for an ordinary customer."

Morris pondered the issue seriously, but not for long though.

"Three thousand... Three thousand and four hundred solas, this is my estimate," Morris finally spoke. He seemed to have considered the number a little before settling on it, "Mr. Duncan, you may think that the price is too low, but take into account the age of the dagger and its historical positioning... This kind of non-unique collection is very discounted in the market. Of course, it's condition is exceptionally good, which is rare, but not all collectors are interested in this..."

The old gentleman seemed to be trying to explain his reasoning for this number, and Duncan listened intently as well.

In the lower city, the total expenses of the average family of three in a month are around two to three hundred solas. That's under the premise they wouldn't have any leftovers, and the savings would be very little even if they did. Therefore, the dagger was almost equivalent to a family's income for one and a half years!

Duncan honestly didn't know if he should lament on how an antique shop could hit it so big in one day, or if he should lament the striking gap of buying power between the ordinary people and those living in the upper city.

Or perhaps he should sigh at how rich this old gent was....

"Deal," he exhaled softly and said to the old man with a smile.

There's no need to haggle and waste time for them both.

In any case, this was a lot of money for Nina and him now—even more than the bounties of reporting those cultists.

Not long ago, he was still thinking about the way to make money, but now he found that this matter seemed to be less urgent.

The world sure was impermanent.

Contrary to the shop owner's frank attitude, Morris on the other hand felt that Duncan had agreed to the deal too easily. He even felt apologetic for not going higher. "Actually... You are taking a loss at this price. By normal estimate, the dagger should fetch another ten or twenty percent.... But...."

The old man scratched his nose and seemed to be a little embarrassed: "I spent a bit too much on collecting in recent days, so my hands are a bit tight on money right now...."

The old gentleman was even more candid than Duncan imagined.

"I think it's a good price, and the difference in the middle should be because of fate," Duncan says with a smile, and then as if suddenly remembering something, he got up and walked behind the counter. "By the way, I have a giveaway to celebrate this big sale."

Morris watched curiously at the shop owner until he saw the small amethyst pendant being pulled out from a small compartment behind the counter.

The old man's eyes were sharp, and he immediately noticed the label of a certain glass workshop on the item, which hadn't been removed yet.

Morris: "..."

"A pendant with a calming effect. The crystal has been blessed with the guiding light of dispelling curses and illusions. Ancient hypnotists used this to protect their spirits from the dangers lurking in the dream world."

Duncan pushed the pendant over with a serious expression, "It has protected generations of owners in the past, and now it is yours by fate...."

Morris hesitantly pointed to the label: “But it says that it is produced by Johnny Glass Workshop...”

“I know, I forgot to take it off,” Duncan peeled off the label with an expressionless face, “this is a giveaway. There’s no way I would have so many real antiques in this shop to giveaway, right?”

Morris was stunned for a moment, then he couldn’t help but laugh: “Ha, you’re right on that point. Thank you very much for the ‘giveaway’. With this thing... I hope my daughter will nag me less.”

He said as he accepted the pendant, and then touched fiddled with his pocket and pulled out a checkbook: “I didn’t bring as much cash with me when I came out. This cheque can be cashed at the local branch at the Crossroad. Is this alright with you?”

Duncan smiled: “Of course.”

As he said this, his gaze fell on Morris’s booklet.

He’s already had his doubts about this history teacher when Nina mentioned the guy, and now, that doubt grew even bigger.

Whether in terms of the wardrobe or daily words used during their conversation, the old gent was clearly not ordinary. He’s too sophisticated, a characteristic trait not commonly found even in the upper city. A scholar of that caliber could easily get a job at the only university in this city.

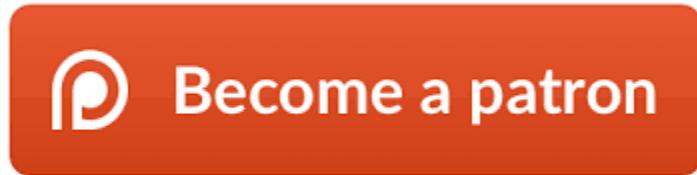
Even if other factors are not considered, there’s also another obvious problem: can an ordinary public school teacher so casually spend a person’s annual income in one a single purchase?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 91

Chapter 91 “Chaotic History”

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Duncan decides to get direct since he doesn't want to beat around the bush after they've hit it off. Of course, the wording left a lot of wiggle room to avoid being dishonest and rude.

“Actually, I'm a little curious about how a scholar like you would stay in the public school at the Crossroad? With your talent, I'm sure plenty of other jobs would love to hire you.”

“..... You're not the first to ask that,” Morris seemed to have long been accustomed to the questions of others in this regard. “Actually, it's nothing special. I'm old and tired, and there are plenty of youngsters who could better use the few resources at hand. Instead of competing with the new generation, I rather spend my remaining years helping to raise the young.”

The old man's explanation was probable but not entirely the truth. Duncan could tell so he didn't press for more since that would be rude. “But I heard Nina say her classmates don't pay much attention in her classes. Isn't the knowledge of the ancient kingdom of Crete a bit too far back for the average folks?”

“Even in the deepest and darkest gutters, as long as the spiritual mind is still thinking, ‘history’ will always be valuable,” Morris shook his head in disapproval. “It is with the history of the past thousand years that we have been able to get to where we are today.”

“Of course, Mr. Duncan, you're right that very few people in these parts will want to listen to my tirade... But even if I can only teach one student

who will listen, then I will feel like my efforts are not in vain.”

Morris said unhurriedly and then seemed to realize he had gone on a tangent. Forming an apologetic smile: “Sorry, professional habits, I’ve started preaching again.”

“It’s okay. I think it’s a valuable ‘preaching’ experience,” Duncan waved his hand immediately, “and it’s been a pleasure to talk to you. I’m an antique dealer, and you’re a history expert. So from a certain perspective, we’re peers of the same industry.”

I’m also a teacher on Earth....

“Seriously, if from the impression of walking into this antique shop only... I would really question the part of us being peers,” Morris spread his hands, “but now I kind of believe it. You at least have one real thing in here.”

Duncan’s face was very calm, but his heart was already shouting he had more than just one product. In fact, the pirate captain had already drawn out the warehouse plans for the eighth franchising branch!

Continuing to maintain a smile and indifferent posture: “I heard Nina say that you are actually better at ancient history, especially the history before and after the ancient kingdom of Crete?”

“Strictly speaking, there is only after, no before,” Morris immediately corrected. “The ancient kingdom of Crete is the beginning of civilization in the Deep Sea Age, and before the Old Kingdom was the Great Annihilation, which was the melting point of civilization. No one can say what the world was like before that point in time because all we have to go on are contradictory texts circulating in the wilderness.”

Duncan mused: “The spark breaker of civilization... Is like a ‘horizon limit’ that runs through the river of history...”

“Horizon limit?” Morris apparently heard the word for the first time and became perplexed by the metaphor.

“A concept. If you put it on the ‘Great Annihilation’ event, you can think of it as an invisible wall of time. All the information on one side of the wall cannot be transmitted to the other side of the wall, whether it is an optical observation or the causal connection of things, all of it is cut off in front of that boundary with no means to understand the other side.”

“Quite an interesting concept!” Old Mr. Morris’s eyes widened in astonishment, “Crossing the limit of the horizon in history... A wall of time... Indeed, a very apt statement! Mr. Duncan, forgive me for my initial contemptuous impression of you.... You are more professional than I could’ve ever imagined. Are you also a study of the ancient records?”

“No, I have to say I’m not affluent with the ancient records. I’m merely more flexible in terms of my thought pattern. Sometimes I would conjure up some wonderful metaphors like now,” Duncan modestly explains, knowing he should act ignorant in times like these. “But I do have questions about what happened during the Great Annihilation event... You just mentioned that the history before then is usually not recognized by scholars? That there are many contradictory records in the ‘wild’? What do these records look like?”

“It’s just some wild stories passed down through the ages... But I did study some.” Morris pondered what he should say before going slowly, “For example, the city-state of Pland has a record of a manuscript from the year 1069 of the new era. The original is lost so we can’t prove if it’s true, but the manuscripts do describe the following before the Great Annihilation:

“The world is a sphere, floating in the vast sea of stars. There are countless celestial bodies dotting the night sky with three moons circling the world. Humans occupied three continents, one of which is frozen year-round. To combat the harsh environment, the people built a device called the ‘dome’ to envelop the entire continent. The dome provides warmth, provides light, provides the eternal spring fueled by the seawater....”

Morris paused after saying this, then gave some thought to the reaction from Duncan. Once the old scholar felt like it was okay, he continued:

On an island near Cold Harbor, explorers found a record carved into a slab of rock, which also described the world before the Great Annihilation. Scholars eventually cracked the old wording, but the information left everyone puzzled.

“The slate describes a homeland called the ‘home star’. Due to the world drying up, the people of the world boarded a ship called the ‘Abinix’, which can cross the sea of stars using the fuel and gas it captured from the stars. The journey lasted more than 47,000 days and nights until it was suddenly swept up by a huge vortex. The ship disintegrated under the force, and its descendants somehow survived by relying on the sea.”

“Of course, these records are not as bizarre as the legends left by the elves of Wind Harbor.

“Elves have a thousand-year lifespan, and their history should be the most detailed and reliable among all the short-lived races. But for some reason, their history is the most fragmented and bizarre of all the known texts. Many of their files have even been twisted into unreadable lost contexts, which were forcibly sealed due to the pollution they carried. Nowadays, the only information we have to go upon are oral poems narrated by the elves.

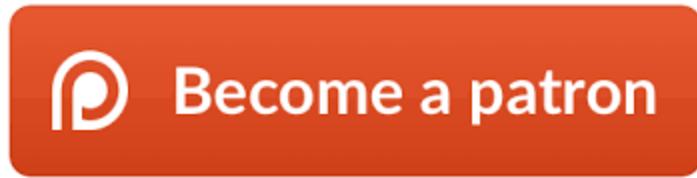
“The world is a dream, a dream created by the great demon god Sasroka. Then one day, the demon god suddenly dreamt of a flood sweeping across the world. In his panic, Sasroka awoke from his dream and leaked the dream into reality. The elves were swept away from reality due to the flood.... As result of the tragedy, the elves could never return to their peaceful homeland and has settled down in the Deep Sea Era after the flooding.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 92

Chapter 92 “Endless Guesses”

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Morris sighed. “When those of us who dig into history and spend our lives researching the world’s mysteries, we would always be stumped by the wall of the unknown.”

The old man had a thick layer of exhausted frustration on his face as if he had travelled for most of his life doing exactly what his peers had done to no success.

“The history before the Great Annihilation is fragmented and contradictory, and the records between each city-state are like bizarre stories with no connection.... Because of that, nobody can conclusively say which is the truth.”

Duncan did not speak for a while and went mute. Unlike the old man’s sighing mood, he, on the other hand, just went through a baptism storm.

As a “foreigner” who has experienced the information age of modern Earth, he could already guess what those things are in the wild histories.

The dome covering the entire continent may likely be an artificial ecological device to replicate a desirable environment for its residences. As for the seawater fuel segment in the story, probably some sort of hydro-fusion engine to run the machinery.

Now for the giant ships sailing across the stars, that’s even easier to figure out. They’re likely a group of colonization starships that occasionally stops

at a star system to extract gas and alloys from the planets to sustain its supplies.

Now that leaves the elvish tale of the demon god and dream world... From dreams to the sea taking over reality... Duncan couldn't figure out what this was for a while, but it sounded like a fantasy concept from a magical world, something completely different from the technological worlds he had heard from the previous two stories.

As Morris said, if all they had to go upon were those fragmented historical texts, then it's no wonder nobody could decipher the truth.

"Perhaps you are right. There is a 'horizon limit' on the key event to the Great Annihilation," Morris's voice came from across the counter again, interrupting Duncan's train of thought. Rubbing the forehead as he spoke in a low tone, "We cannot observe the 'event' on the other side of the horizon, so the history before the Great Annihilation is a concept for us that can never be traced."

It's then Duncan's brain got a bold and new idea over how distressed the old man appeared, which he said aloud: "Then.... what if these records are all true?"

Morris raised an eyebrow and looked at Duncan with some surprise: "Oh?"

"What if all these records are true, and the history recorded by each city-state or race is really what they know the world as before the Great Annihilation?" Duncan rubbed his chin and said thoughtfully, "Maybe our ancestors 10,000 years ago really came from completely different homelands and had completely different civilizations? The Great Annihilation trapped these exiles from different worlds on this sea, and the records are the results of those descendants who managed to survive before the knowledge was lost in time?"

Now that he's on a roll, Duncan didn't pause and went on a tangent: "The essence of the Great Annihilation may not actually be the end of the world, but a 'great teleportation'?"

Morris appeared shocked at how wide his eyes had become: "... The conjecture of the Brock Bendis school? World Drift Theory? This is a relatively unpopular genre to study."

He was amazed, but now it was Duncan's turn to be confused. The ghost captain didn't expect others to come up with this idea before him.

"I only have little tidbits in this regard. Years of experience and occasional reading, but I do like this theory."

"I also like it as well. Although it's unpopular." Morris shook his head, "But like all other conjecturing theories, we don't have evidence, so it's just a theory."

"Other schools also have some interesting theories. The Clark school for example assumed the distorted history is due to subspace corrupting the truth, while the Villentium school believes the world was a myriad of isolated lattices before the Great Annihilation. And then there's the Bologna city-state, the people living there does not believe the world existed at all before the Great Annihilation. Instead, they claim the historical texts are merely illusions created by the shadows in subspace to fool the world...."

"Allow me to say something forbidden Mr. Duncan, but even heretical cults have their own version and understanding of this world. Take the preaching Enders that worship subspace as their religion. Their version is that the world's end is already upon us, that history is only catching up upon the world from the rivers of time. The cryptic and chaotic records we know of? They're all because of subspaces corruption, polluting the truth until everything is torn apart. Once the corruption is complete, that's when the whole world will fall into subspace..."

The more Duncan listened, the more shocked he became. After a long time, the man subconsciously shook his head to get himself in order: "I didn't know that there were so many strange assumptions..."

"Ordinary people don't dabble in this field, so it's not common to hear such stories. What's more, anything related to history is inherently dangerous due to its relation with the occult," Morris said. "But one truth remains: if

thousands of scholars spent hundreds or even thousands of years groping on a certain field with no resolution, they must've formulated all the possibilities already.”

Duncan slowly understood what the old man meant. These people do not lack imagination or vision to see beyond the fog, but rather they lack the fundamental foundation and evidence to support their theories.

“..... Isn’t there any evidence left? Like any at all?” Duncan asked with a look of bewilderment, “Is there not a single physical trace to go upon? There must’ve been some clues to track, otherwise there wouldn’t be so many wild histories out there.”

“So far, it has not been discovered,” Morris said slowly. “10,000 years, plus one dark age after another in between with countless city-states rising and falling, if there was something, it would’ve been lost and destroyed along the way by now. What can be passed down are manuscripts of unreliable sources, or second-hand oral stories like in the elvish states.”

Duncan didn’t know what to say until he eventually compressed the emotions into one single sigh. “Studying the ancient history of this world is really difficult.”

“Yes, we have to not only face the fragmented ages of history but also the status quo of nothing to grasp upon,” Morris sighed. “With limited resources on each island, no city-state can fully invest its resources in such a field. And if there is something to be excavated, it’s very likely been dug up by now on land. What can’t be excavated is likely at a place that mortals like us can’t reach.”

“Like the bottom of the sea?” Duncan said suddenly.

“Under the sea? Ha, what a frightening and bold statement,” Morris laughed with amusement. “But indeed, that is something a lot of historians thought about when they have nothing but desperation left.... There are likely pieces of evidence at the bottom of the sea, perhaps mountains of artifacts from other civilizations. It would explain a lot of mysteries we have now. Sadly, no mortal can dive into the depths of the sea.”

Speaking of this, he paused for a moment: “But this does give rise to another hypothesis... Although the idea hasn’t evolved into a school yet by other scholars, but many people have speculated that the ‘old world’ is actually hidden in the ocean. More precisely, located in the depths between the deep sea and spirit world.”

“Why do you say that?” Duncan’s interest got piqued by this idea.

Morris thought for a while and explained: “Because many broken ancient records mentioned the world before the Great Annihilation had a ‘starry sky’, and we all know, the starry sky is the interfacing layer between the deep sea and the spirit world.”

Duncan almost choked himself to death due to his own saliva: “Ahem... wah?”

“Are you all right?” Morris was taken aback by Duncan’s strong reaction, “This shouldn’t be so shocking...”

“I’m fine. I was too deeply drawn into your story that I accidentally choked.” Duncan quickly waved his hand to let the old man continue, “The starry sky is between the deep sea and the spirit world, of course I know, of course I know...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 93

Chapter 93 “This Is Common Sense”

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Duncan quickly adjusted his expression and state of mind so that he did not look like a “foreigner” that lacked common sense. Yet, his mind could no longer remain calm for his heart was churning up a storm.

Why? Because this world’s sky had no stars. The starry stars mentioned here are in the world between the ocean and the spirit world, a strange and freaky phenomenon that couldn’t even be fathomed by those on Earth.

For this so-called “common sense”, Duncan could only curse in frustration.

To be fair, for the short period of coming to this world, the ghost captain had done a lot. He’s driven the Vanished into the depths of the spirit world and entered the chaotic lower cabins of the ship connecting to subspace. Yet, he’s never seen the “starry sky” between the deep sea and spirit world... this happens to be his blind spot so far.

Stars..... hiding in the depths of the sea... What a weird and bizarre situation if it's true? Is the so-called “starry sky” mentioned by Morris the same thing as the “starry sky” I know? What is the form of the place where the spirit world meets the deep sea? Is there a deeper, darker ocean? Or is it just a special spatial structure named after the ocean?

For some reason, Duncan suddenly thought of the girl named Shirley and her inseparable pet and weapon called “Dog”.

Dog was a creature of the shadows known as Dark Hound in this world, a demon creature summoned from the depths of the nether.

Duncan couldn't imagine the physiological structure of such a skeletal hound, but judging from its appearance, it was clearly not an "aquatic creature" ... Going by that, he could boldly speculate that the so-called "deep sea" may not necessarily be a body of ocean.

It could be an extremely vast and bizarre space that's wrapped up by the starry sky.

As Duncan sketched the spatial model in his mind, Morris finally started to notice the absentmindedness of the antique shop owner. Asking curiously: "About astrology, do you also dabble in the field?"

"I... have some interest," Duncan pulled the corner of his lips up, finding it amusing that the world would have something like astrology when they lacked stars in the sky. "But the starry sky is hidden in such a deep place... it's not easy to explore the topic."

"Of course, the field is extremely dangerous to explore, but not impossible. We too can use some indirect scientific means to observe the projection of the starry sky thanks to the advancement of technology. Like the spirit lenses used by a navigator. Ever since the city-states improved its design, those who go mad from repeated use has gone down by huge margins." Morris breaks out into a delighted laugh at the topic. It's been a long time since he got someone willing to discuss such things with him so he's in a very good mood. "You know, a century ago, the profession of a navigator was always the deadliest job on an ocean-going ship... In fact, I've always wanted to collect a set of the earliest spirit lenses to study, but sadly, I never got the chance to."

Duncan was blinking dully then. He didn't care what the old gent was spouting there, instead he was only interested in a new question that popped up as a result: in this world, how do navigators guide their ships if there are no stars up in the sky?

Turns out the answer remains the same after some more back and forth – by relying on the stars. Instead of looking up though, the ships looked down at the waters with the spirit lenses. By observing the reflecting stars from beneath the depths, they could effectively achieve the same results using the

scientific instrument. However, that doesn't mean the job didn't come with risks.

Before the 1800's of the new calendar, those who acted as navigators would often lose their minds or die from corruption. That's the cost of constantly peering at the deep sea where foul shadows lurked.

"You are such a learned person." After discussing many more questions, Duncan finally couldn't help but sigh sincerely. "Nina is lucky to have a teacher like you."

"I'm also glad to see her having an uncle like you," Morris nodded reservedly, "Now that all my doubts are gone, I can feel at ease knowing she's in your hands. You are a competent guardian and a man of wide interests with a strong thirst for knowledge. Seriously... I haven't had such a nice conversation with someone in a long time."

The old man said, sighing slightly as well: "My current life is good, quiet, and peaceful. I didn't have the same problems when I lived in the upper city, but it does get boring at times without people to talk to at the same level. Even my fellow coworkers at the school rarely chat with me because of the subjects I like."

"I'd love to be your audience," Duncan smiled when he heard this, "I'm particularly interested in history."

"I can see that," Old Mr. Morris chuckled comfortably and then glanced in the direction of the window, where he became shocked by the hour. "Oh goddess, look at the time. Have I actually been here all afternoon?"

"If you don't mind, it's okay to stay here overnight too," Duncan said casually. "You can try my cooking skills."

"..... I should be able to catch the bus back to the Crossroad," Morris glanced at the sinking sun and declined Duncan's kindness. "Thank you for the invitation, but I think I'd better get home. The city has not been peaceful lately, and not returning all night will worry the family."

“You’re right, then I won’t keep you....” Duncan thought for a moment and got up to send the old teacher off, “I’ll call Nina down first.”

As soon as Morris wanted to say something, Duncan had already turned to the second floor and summoned the girl, “Nina! Mr. Morris is going home, come down and see your teacher off!”

Footsteps promptly came from the stairs. Wearing casual clothes now, Nina first greeted her teacher before glancing at the sky outside the window. Showing a surprising face: “You two actually talked for this long?!”

“We had a great conversation,” Morris said with a smile, “and your uncle is a man with a wide range of interests and the willingness to learn.”

Duncan kept a serious look to the side and nodded silently.

The so-called conversation was in fact actually the old gentleman unilaterally speaking on his own while Duncan pretended to listen intently at times. Of course, the antique shop owner wouldn’t divulge something like that.

Nina gave her uncle a suspicious look but then quickly corrected her attitude and tugged at the man’s sleeve in a squeamish fashion. “Did you talk about me?”

“Just a little bit about your school studies,” Morris may look old, but his hearing was pristine so he didn’t miss the girl’s whisper. “Your uncle will tell you. Don’t worry, I didn’t complain about you.”

While speaking, the old man picked up the cane that he had put aside when he entered and confirmed his new prize in his arm – the old dagger. Once done, he bid the uncle and niece a pleasant farewell before slowly strolling out of the shop.

After confirming they were alone, Duncan locked the door for good. In his view, more business was unlikely to come through the door today. Besides, he just made a lot of money. There’s no reason to work so hard anymore.

“I’ll take you to buy a bicycle tomorrow,” he says with a smile.

“Huh?” Nina didn’t react at once, “Why...”

“I got a bonus from City Hall and landed another big sale today. I think we can live a more comfortable life now....” Duncan rubbed his chin in thought, “A bike will come in handy, so it’s time we got you one.”

“Big business,” Nina finally returned to her senses, “Ah, you sold that dagger to Mr. Morris?”

“That’s right,” Duncan nodded, “for more than three thousand Solas.”

Nina: “...!?”

The girl, who had a good concept of money, was taken aback by this number. Showing a skeptical and wary face, “But what am I going to do? My teacher only came for a visit and you’ve sold him an item for three thousand solas! When word gets around, everyone’s going to be talking about us!”

Duncan raised an eyebrow and wondered why she was so worried: “Then our store will be famous, right?”

Nina: “Are you serious?”

Spreading his hands out: “You can’t expect us to give something so valuable away for free, right? It’s rare that our store has something real for once.”

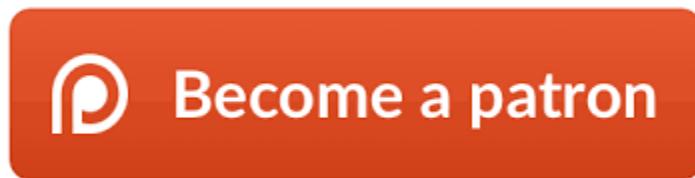
Nina jabbed her arms against the waist and bulged that cheek up, clearly displeased by the reply. Then as if deflated, she turned the gloom to a cheery smile.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 94

Chapter 94 “Nina’s Weird Dream”

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It was getting dark on the street.

After seeing Morris off and tidying up the storefront on the first floor, Duncan finally had time to tell Nina about what her teacher had said during the home visit.

After all, this was actually the main reason why Mr. Morris came to visit today—although the two of them did go off-topic after chatting later.

“Have you been not resting well lately? Or is there something wrong with your health?” At the dinner table on the second floor, Duncan asked with concern while spreading butter on slices of bread, “I heard from your teacher that you have been like this for several days.”

Nina was obviously a little nervous as she probably guessed what had been talked about. “I’m just a little tired...”

“Then it seems that what Mr. Morris said is true,” Duncan carefully observed Nina’s expression, “Physical reasons? Or is it because of something else? If you have something on your mind, you can tell me.”

Speaking of this, he paused, then added: “Of course, there may be some things at your age that you don’t want to tell adults like me, and this is normal. You are growing after all. Everyone should have their own ideas and personalities, which I respect. Still, you must remember that asking for help when needed is not shameful. Tell me if I can help, and we will find a solution together.”

He tried to make his words seem reliable and kind, which was not easy with all things considering. A drunken gambler that was so ill that he fell into being a cultist could hardly be called reliable.

“I... I’m really okay, really!” Nina seemed a little uncomfortable with such a kind uncle, but deep down, she didn’t resist such a change. Waving her hand up vigorously, “I’m only feeling tired lately, and when I’m awake, I feel sleepy like I’m dreaming.”

“Dreaming?” Duncan frowned, suddenly thinking of something, “Nightmare? Was it a dream of the fire when you were a child?”

Perhaps because he was paying attention to the sun fragments and the unsolved case eleven years ago, he suddenly had this idea that Nina would be related.

“No, not when I was a child.” Nina shakes her head.

“What is it then?”

“I always dream of... dreaming that I am standing in a very high place, like a tower in the city, and the streets below my feet are dark and full of ruins.” Nina recalled, slowly diving back into the images she had, “The ruins and ashes are like a huge scar running along the center of the city. It goes from the Crossroad up to the Upper City. I felt trapped and wanted to run, but an invisible wall kept blocking my way....”

Nina suddenly shook her head to dispel the nasty feeling: “It’s always like this in the dreams. Technically, it’s not all that frightening if I look back at it. There wasn’t anything chasing me or something like that. I only got scared because of the huge scar running across the city. Then whenever I get too stressed, I would jerk awake from the dream until it repeats again....”

Duncan listened carefully to the girl’s description and slowly frowned.

What Nina described... It is really not the fire she experienced in childhood, nor the scene I remember from this body.

It's more like a running picture of a different Pland from another space and time.

If it were on Earth, Duncan would only regard this as a strange dream resulting from stress and workload, but in this strange and abnormal world, being haunted by the same nightmare spelled something worse.

“When did you start having these dreams?” Duncan asked with a serious expression.

“About a week or two ago? Or maybe earlier… I can’t remember,” Nina took a sip of the vegetable soup, her voice a little slurred, “I didn’t pay much care to it at the time....”

After hearing this, Duncan wanted to say “you should have told me earlier”, but then remembered that Nina’s “uncle” was still a rotten person addicted to some deplorable activities back then. An unreliable person could never be of help, so he swallowed the words back down.

“Have you consulted a professional yet? Like a doctor?”

Nina raised her head: “You mean a psychiatrist?”

“Yes, psychiatrist.” Duncan thought about it and immediately nodded.

In this world, “psychiatrist” is an indispensable profession. There are too many things watching the city-state at night. From the shadows lurking in the depths to the heretical heirs of the chaotic religions, all of which wanted to harm the mortals. However, the most problematic are the psychological kind – nightmares, hallucinations, and cognitive deviations from reality. The only field that tackles this was psychology, and in this world, it’s not a profession that sits you down and has a nice chat, they also use supernatural powers at times to correct the distorted mindset.

Nina’s frequent strange dreams should also belong to the “disease” these psychiatrists pay attention to.

“I haven’t,” Nina said sullenly, “their fees are expensive... I was just having weird dreams.”

“But these strange dreams have begun to affect your life,” Duncan said seriously, “and continuing to dream about these strange scenes may be a dangerous sign. You must have learned this in school, did you not?”

While saying this, he was also quick to add inside his heart – there must be something wrong with Nina’s continuous strange dreams. In any case, since he already lives here in a strange and abnormal world, he must be wary of the “elements” of these supernatural fields.

As it so happens, he also wants to meet the “professionals” of this field using this opportunity. It would be good to learn how they treat those who are ill so he could copy...

Nina was obviously still a little hesitant, but in front of Duncan’s serious expression, she finally lost the battle. “That... then we can go to the community church on the weekend and ask the storm pastor to do a blessing. The cost is very small for that, and if it doesn’t work, we can find a special psychiatrist afterward, okay?”

Church? Storm Priest? Those who follow the Storm Goddess Gamona?

Duncan found this arrangement to be very good. He also wants to meet a priest serving the gods too.

“Okay, that’s settled then.” He nodded immediately, “Just because you’re going to the museum on the weekend, we’ll stop by the church when you get back.”

“Hmm!”

After dinner, Nina and Duncan both went back to their rooms, the latter being accompanied by Ai’s lazy figure lying on the windowsill.

The dove had been flying outside all day and had returned without harvest.

“Hurry, destroy, tired...” Ai mopes and rests her head down like a pig when her master saunters over.

“You really worked hard,” Duncan knew that it was indeed a tiring day for this bird, so he readily untied the cultists’ sensor from her back. Soothing Ai’s feathers as he spoke, “This is indeed not going to be easy. They are hiding deeply now that the Storm Church is watching.”

The dove rolled her eyes and flapped those wings in protest.

Amused by the childish behaviour, Duncan taps the bird’s head as a tease: “Even so, this still has to be done... Of course, flying for a full day is indeed a little too intense, so I will arrange a combination of work and rest for you.”

He decided to do the search for cultists in the city a long-term project at this stage. Although after doing today’s “big business”, he’s no longer in urgent need of money, but removing rats from the city was still a meaningful act in itself.

Besides, he might actually hook a big fish somewhere down the line. The grunts won’t mean much in the equation, but the benefits of catching a sun heir were too tempting to not try. And on top of that, he’s quite concerned about the sun fragment incident from eleven years ago. It’s giving him bad vibes.

On the second hand, there seems to be a wild loli and dog running about in the city-state. The other party was constantly making trouble for the suntists. If he goes by that trail, he might run into the pair again if luck would permit. There are a lot of questions he had for those two regarding the deep sea and the starry sky mentioned by Morris. Who better to answer this than those who dabble in the power of the deep sea?

Noticing the serious expression on Duncan’s face, Ai sighs extremely humanely upon realizing there’s no way out of work.

“Aiya,” the bird’s tone was full of sorrow, “there is already a sad thick barrier between us...”

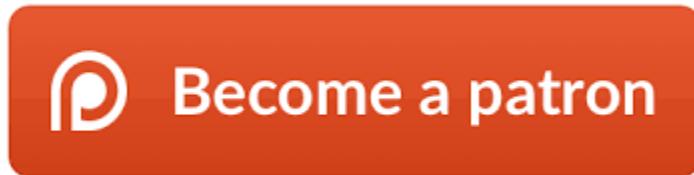
Duncan: "... Your vocabulary is quite rich!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 95

Chapter 95 “Infiltration”

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Another handful of sun heretics who had infiltrated Pland by smuggling aboard a ship has been intercepted by the church today. For this reason, Vanna's been busy interrogating the prisoners until late into the evening.

“Inquisitor Vanna,” the slightly emaciated regional bishop saluted the young inquisitor, “may the waves shelter your soul.”

“May the waves shelter your soul too,” Vanna replied to the bishop, then walked to the chair on the side with a somewhat tired step. “This is already the second batch of sun heretics thrown into prison, right?”

“Yes, we caught a dozen of them at the port three days ago already. They were promptly detected and stopped when they tried to kill a citizen. This new group is the second batch. They aroused the alarm of a meter reader during a dark ceremony in the apartment building,” the regional bishop nodded with a slightly worried look in his eyes. “To think so many cultists managed to infiltrate our city already... Fortunately, we found out early, otherwise their dark ritual would've caused devastating damage to the people.”

“Pland is a transportation hub on the Boundless Sea, and the calm of the past four years has paralyzed a lot of people's awareness.” Vanna nodded in agreement, “But... It is not certain that we discovered their intents early or late. Those who came before the alarms went off might've already dug themselves deep inside a hole to avoid exposure.”

The regional bishop glanced at the inquisitor's expression, hesitated for a moment, then asked, "I heard that many people have also been arrested in other areas?"

"Yes, in almost every city sector," Vanna did not hide the truth. "Now in the underground cells of almost every church are captured heretics. From several to dozens.... But most of them are mere minions that had hardly any training. The priests have so far mostly been able to evade capture."

Vanna's tone unconsciously became serious when she spoke at the end. She's also leaking worry on her face due to what's to come.

Ever since the operation of these heretics trying to find the sun fragment became known to the authorities, the church had reacted quickly and launched a full-scale search across the entire city-state. Whether it be the slums or high-end communities, they've searched it all. The only parts they struggled with were the sewers and unknown sectors.

"Every day there are results, but we still couldn't find out who's pulling the strings, which gives me a bad feeling about the deteriorating situation."

Vanna explains her woes in front of the regional bishop, "With such a large invasion force, it is impossible to operate without a high-ranking commander behind them. Yet, we still don't have a clue as to who's behind it."

The regional bishop pondered for a moment and slowly spoke: "According to the results of the current interrogation, these minions only obey the orders of the 'emissaries', and the so-called 'emissaries' are a group of low-level priests who directly got their orders through the sun masks they wore. Could the sun heirs already be lurking inside the city?"

"The sun heirs lurking inside a human state? Logically speaking, that's unlikely," Vanna's brows furrowed slightly at the idea. "Although they have great power, they also have obvious 'traces of existence that can't be hidden. The filthy and foul stench they produce would've been picked up by the patrolling guardians. Theoretically, the routes we set should have no blind spots."

“It’s just a guess in the end,” the regional bishop shook his head, “I also know how difficult it is for the sun heirs to hide their presence from society. But those low-level ‘emissaries’ do carry a sun mask. Even if they are not directly controlled by an heir, they must be maintaining contact to a certain extent... After all, mass-produced holy relics are not cheap. The cost would put a dent in anyone’s pocket.”

Vanna rubbed her chin in thought after being reminded about the cost factor: “According to the interrogation record, those heretics are mainly inquiring about the supernatural event from eleven years ago, right? They believe it has something to do with the sun fragment?”

“It seems so,” the regional bishop nodded. “Although they do not know the source of their intelligence, they seem convinced that the sun fragments caused the ‘chemical plant riot’ in Pland eleven years ago... I remember you too were...”

The regional bishop stopped partway due to the striking scar on Vanna’s left eye. Slightly lowering his head in shame for being so inconsiderate: “I’m sorry, I was careless.”

Subconsciously brushing her hand against the scar, Vanna shook her head to dispel such emotions: “It’s okay, just a scar. You’re correct though, I did witness the riot personally so there’s no need to hold back.”

“I’ve learned that there was also a group of sun heretics among those who rioted back then. We are sure of this after arresting hundreds of saboteurs.” The regional bishop now sounded heavy in his voice, “But the infiltrated heretics don’t seem to know anything about the events eleven years ago.... If they are part of the same cult, wouldn’t they have at least some information on what happened? Don’t you think it’s weird?”

“Eleven years ago.... Either the branch in Pland acted without permission and didn’t communicate with the others, or the sun fragment’s appearance was a complete accident back then. Regardless of which, nothing good could come of it. There’s also the possibility that it’s the handiwork of a third force who remained in the shadows, and that the sun heretics are merely a pawn that got used.” Vanna conjectures using what little

knowledge she knows, “And according to the records we have, those captured ‘ saboteurs’ back then were all in a state of madness and delirium. I’m more inclined to believe they were under the influence of a powerful force that’s not their own.”

“..... Chasing twisted and dark things, only to be dominated by said dark forces before being tossed aside like firewood during the chaos....” The regional bishop sighed at how incredibly sad and foolish those pawns were, “What a miserable life.”

Vanna didn’t add anything to that, only standing quietly while staring out the window. From where she was, the lady could observe what was happening at the port from a distance. The blockade and cordonning have ended by now, and many of the piers were reopened during the day except for Pier 1. The reason was that it housed the latest steamship, the White Oak, which was constantly being monitored by the priests.

Vanna eventually retracted her gaze from the port after remembering something else: “I heard the notice for Anomaly 099 has been issued to the port area?”

“Yes, it just arrived this afternoon. Would you like to take a look?” The regional bishop said as he took out the folded documents from his possession, “For some reason, it came a little later than expected.”

“Show me,” Vanna reached out and took the document, “and it’s normal to be a little late considering what’s involved. Anomaly 099’s out-of-control state is very special after all. Considering the fact that it went missing during a direct confrontation with the Vanished, the bishops of the other city-states must weigh the wording and information carefully before releasing the document. Merely knowing about the matter might create a direct connection with that ghost ship if we’re not careful.”

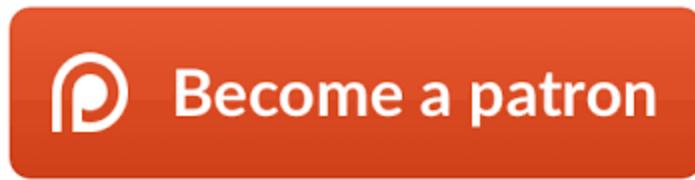
When the lady mentioned the word “Vanished”, the oil lamp closest to Vanna suddenly flickered, followed by a subtle crackling sound of which shouldn’t be.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 96

Chapter 96 “Peering”

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Sitting inside the captain’s room of the Vanished, Duncan slowly opens his eyes after transferring the bulk of his consciousness over. Glancing around the room, he found nothing astray. It’s the familiar furnishing, the same glistening glow of the setting sun shining off the golden mask on the table, and most importantly, the same white dove plopping down at the shelves like a lazy dog.

So why did he return? Simple, the man’s trying an experiment – what could he do with the shell back in the antique shop while only a small portion of his mind controlled the body? The answer came quickly once he went outside and met an old street neighbor. They exchanged some pleasantries of the weather, said a few words about the recent events, and then bid farewell due to the late hour. Of course, the shop owner’s actions were rigid and sluggish, but who would care about the behaviors of a drug-addicted gambler known to be ill?

Pleased by the results from the experiment, Duncan smiled and returned his full attention to the ship where he picked up the golden mask. There are a lot of things he could do in Pland, but there was not enough sunlight to do it all in one day. He could try it during night time of course. However, that would surely draw the attention of the authorities. Best not to try that method.

Now back to the mask at hand. It’s heavy, likely cast out of pure metal.

Looking at the golden thing, Duncan began to ponder the possibilities. Was the thing made of pure gold? If so, should he sell it for a lot of money?

Sure, he's currently free from the burden of financial pressure, but who said he couldn't use the fund at a later date? Nobody ever complains about having too much money, and he wouldn't either.

Those cultists are like sheep with multi-purpose uses. They provide him with intel about the world, their existence reported for bounties, and their supernatural items like this mask refined for further exploitation....

"The sun cultists are so full of treasures, hoho...." The ghost captain rubs his chin like a devious businessman.

Ai, who was strolling about on the shelf now, suddenly stopped and stared at the crude behavior. Sharply crying out in her female voice: "Can you not be so inhumane? Can you not be so inhumane?"

"You are not qualified to talk about me, you blasted bird!" Duncan shoots an accusing finger right back at Ai, who was bobbing her head up and down in disgust.

Then rubbing his fingertip to summon up a spark of green flame, the ghost captain returns his attention to what he had in mind. First, he's going to clean out whatever taint the mask has before doing some tests. However, right as he's about to carry out the act, a mysterious and ethereal voice seemingly echoes out from within his heart.

"Or it might connect them to the Vanished~"

Duncan's body froze into a cinderblock, shocked by the sound that came out of the blue.

He turned and faced the bird next to himself: "Did you hear anything?"

Flapping her wings, Ai proudly sang her woes like a barb in a tavern: "Listen~ the voice of the sea is crying ~ oh heavens, thou shalt hurt us again ~."

“Stop, stop, stop... I shouldn’t have asked you at all!” Duncan quickly glared at the dove to make her stop. He totally regrets ever trying to communicate with the likes of this bird.

Shirking off his discomfort, the ghost captain carefully searched from within for the brief “connection” he got during the interaction. It was all darkness at first, but soon, he saw a glimmer of light emerging from the front. Grabbing onto this to not let it evade his grasp, the man pulls himself forward using the power of the ghost fire. He couldn’t see much at first, only the chittering chattering voices behind an oval-shaped mirror found commonly in homes of this world.

This was about as far as he got before something blocked him. There’s an invisible veil blocking his consciousness from advancing. Then it hit him. It’s not that he lacked the ability to enhance the connection, but rather Duncan didn’t have a medium to possess like the other shell inside the antique shop to station his mind in reality.

Understanding the problem, Duncan came to the mirror and casually touched the mirror with his flame.

The ghostly green flowed outwards, rippling through the silver surface to form a new layer atop the mirror. In the next second, the shimmering stopped, and now he could see behind the muddled image of the mirror with clarity!

Overtaken by curiosity, Duncan leaned over and peered into the room illuminated by lights. There’s an unusually tall lady standing near the window and reading something using the afterglow of the skylight. Based on her lax stance, it doesn’t appear she had noticed the spooky presence currently observing her from the rear.

.....

Vanna’s gaze remained firmly on the document she was currently reading, confirming the content verbatim.

This was a jointly discussed and drafted document by the bishops of each city-state. Then personally reviewed and approved by His Majesty the Pope sitting in the Storm Cathedral using the spiritual resonance they shared. The whole process had no room for mistake and was sheltered under the watchful gaze of the goddess to ensure the texts weren't corrupted.

Such a special document served only one purpose: to inform every voyaging ship that sails the sea a superior anomaly has escaped the control of the civilized world.

This was necessary.

The anomalies that are out of control on the boundless sea will not disappear forever in the eyes of the world. Although the deep sea would eventually swallow everything, it never swallows the "anomalies" that fall into it. Instead, those who are out of control would wander on the fridges of the civilized world more bizarrely and dangerously like wolves wandering around the pastures, chasing and threatening the safety of voyages. Almost every year, seafarers would die due to these out-of-control anomalies.

And as the custodian and sealer of said anomaly, every church has the duty of informing the captains who may encounter such danger. No one would think it was damaging to the church's reputation because this was one of the primary responsibilities of the church to begin with.

Timely notification of the out-of-control situation may be able to save a ship that unfortunately encountered an anomaly one day in the future or have the possibility of resealing and containing the danger.

Under normal circumstances, such a notice would be sent to the port unit within 24 hours of the out-of-control incident, but this notice involving "anomaly 099" was a little later than normal.

Why? Because this event involves not only Anomaly 099 – the puppet coffin, but also Vision 005 – the Vanished. There's a strict criterion for such a high-profile case. It's dangerous to know too much in this world less they want to draw the attention of said danger through the knowledge.

Vanna's face sank as she read the document word by word, confirming whether the phrasing in the paper conformed to the sacred and invisible structure of prayer and whether it could avoid the gaze of the infamous ghost captain.

And on the window glass beside her, in the gap between the light and shadow that neither she nor the regional bishop could perceive, Duncan was leaning his head out at the contents of the document and became shocked.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 97

Chapter 97 “Who is making the list?”

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After a little recollection, Duncan finally remembered where he had seen this face—this was the prestigious female inquisitor of Pland, Vanna Wayne!

Her name and picture appeared in the newspapers.

Why am I seeing such a scene? And why is the person a follower of the storm goddess? Is there a hidden connection between her and me? When did it get established? How come I didn't notice it before?

Countless thoughts popped up in Duncan's mind for a moment, but the next second, the messy thoughts were interrupted by something that swept into his line of sight – the document Vanna was reading.

The content was written in a rigorous format, with the sacred symbol of the storm goddess printed on the paper. The first sentence at the beginning was as follows: I hereby inform the captains and accompanying priests and guides that Anomaly 099, the puppet coffin, has recently gone out of control. The most holy and wise have witnessed the cursed thing being lost in the storm, and the characteristics are hereby as listed....

Duncan's eyes slowly widened as he gazed over Vanna's shoulder. The document described various details relating to Alice. Like where she originated from, what curses she possessed, how she was conceived, and the nickname Alice Guillotine...

Eventually, his gaze locked onto a bit about the White Oak being attacked. He wanted to read more, but Vanna's tall stature blocked off the important bits from view.

"One side, just move a little bit to one side..." Duncan cursed inwardly and kept repeating the phrase.

Still unaware of the snooping ghost captain, Vanna suddenly felt a wisp of cold breeze blowing around her earlobe. Out of reflex, she subconsciously looked to the window where she had left a crack open for air. The lady's not afraid of course. The flames from the oil lamps will dispel any malicious shadows at night.

"Go ahead and store it. The wording by the head bishops is very good. It's safe to begin distribution." She hands the document back to the cleric.

The regional bishop nodded, then stepped forward to take away the document. Turning on the electric lamp in the room to brighten the darkness, the cleric asks: "Are you going to rush back to the central cathedral tonight?"

"Bishop Valentine is still waiting for me to discuss things," Vanna bowed her head slightly, "The city is restless lately. We may need to conduct a large-scale prayer service to strengthen the protection around the state."

After saying that, she glanced up at the chandelier hanging from the roof where the light bulbs were shining. Sighing at the image: "Aigh.... if only electric lights have the same effect of dispelling evil spirits like a flame. Their range is so much farther..."

"I know Milady," the regional bishop spread out his hands, "it's a pity that electricity is not sacred."

Vanna shook her head and said nothing to comment. It was time she left, which she did by bidding farewell to the cleric and striding out of the lounge.

After Vanna left and the cleric dispersed, only the burning oil lamp remained near the window, flickering and burning eerily with a green tint to the orange. Then it faded, returning to the common yellowish orange.

Duncan had retracted his connection away from the mirror and dispelled the layer of green film. He's seen enough. In the last second when Vanna turned around, one line instantly caught his eye: Vision 005 – the Vanished.

"So the classification of the Vanished is indeed that of a 'vision', and the rank is so high too..." He returned to his desk and muttered thoughtfully until another question wandered up. "But then again, why is the ship's ranking so high?"

According to Nina's textbook, the ranking of anomalies and visions are based upon the rules left behind by the Kingdom of Crete from ancient times. But what are the determining criteria? How do they interpret the threat? Does historical importance play a factor?

Initially, Duncan never thought about these issues, but now he's got a lot of questions that need answering.

This number... Is it in the order of discovery?

If it is arranged in the order of discovery, then the Vanished shouldn't be this high. There are plenty of other things that came before the ship. In theory, 005 should've been occupied long ago.

But if the ranking isn't due to the time of discovery, then what's the key factor? The danger it poses? Wouldn't the ranking be in need of constant change then? Such a big constant task would be too constantly. That couldn't be it.

Although Duncan lacked credible knowledge, the textbooks mention that in most situations, most upper numbers are more dangerous and frightening than the lower ones.

Now this brings up a very interesting question worthy of note: if the existing list was a relatively stable and easily unchanged ranking board,

then its arranger must be no different than a prophetic figure. The person must be able to predict the “ranking” of almost every anomaly and vision. Not only to accurately assign the position when discovered but also to leave “empty spaces” between each number on the table for future discoveries.

Duncan definitely had a lot of interest behind those making a list, but the curiosity soon died down for the time being. The reason being? He didn’t expect Alice’s name to be so famous!

“I’m going out for a bit.” Duncan casually said to the dove on the table and strode out of the captain’s bedroom.

The goat head in the charting room heard the noise and immediately turned his head with a creak. After seeing it was Duncan who came out, he routinely asked: “Name...”

“Duncan Abnomar. Stop asking me about that. Where is Alice?”

“Ah, captain...” The goat head wanted to habitually do his balabala again but was blocked with a snarl. Creaking his neck to answer, “You looking for Miss Alice? She might be counting her hair in her room...”

“Counting her hair?” Duncan was stunned, “What new problems have she added... Forget it. I’ll go check on her myself. You keep sailing the ship.”

After saying this, he didn’t wait for the other party to respond and turned for the ship’s deck, leaving behind the goat head, who appeared taken aback by the captain’s swift departure.

“I haven’t even had time to say more...” After holding back for a long time, the goat head mutters depressingly, “Did my ability to find a topic weaken...?”

As soon as his words came out, a crack swooned open from the captain’s bedroom, and out came Ai the dove. She’s swaggering around the mapping table like she owns it.

“Five bucks for a talk?” The bird tilts her head and blinks those red beady eyes.

“Okay, okay, I’ll take anyone who can chat with me!” The goat head happily agrees. He hasn’t had a decent conversation and was dying to talk.
“What do you want to chat about? Can you speak normally? I keep getting the feeling...”

“Make some fries.”

“Huh?” The goat head couldn’t keep up, “No, I mean, do you have self awareness...”

“Make some fries.”

“..... If you’re going to talk about cooking at sea...”

“Make some fries.”

“Can you say anything else?”

“Make some fries.”

Goat head: “...”

Duncan did not pay attention to the silly noise behind in the room and promptly went down to the cabins below deck. Eventually, he found his way over to Alice’s room and knocked: “Alice, it’s me.”

A stammering voice soon came from the other side: “Ple-Please... Please come in...”

As soon as Duncan heard this, he subconsciously raised an eyebrow and pushed the door.

The doll in the gothic dress was sitting at the table next to the bed, her face directed at a mirror while being held up by her hands at the table. “Cap-Captain... goo-good evening...”

Duncan: “Put your head back on first before talking.”

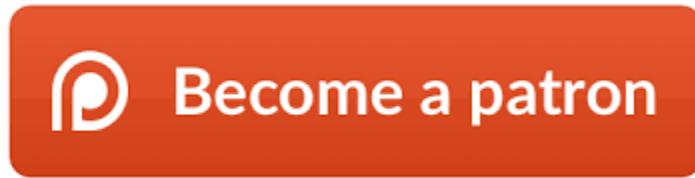
“Oh, okay.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 98

Chapter 98 “Alice doesn’t know anything”

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Imagine this picture: You are on a creaking ghost ship. You push open a wooden door in the deepest part of the corridor with dim lights flickering in the background. Then in front of you is a headless doll in her gothic-styled dress smiling at you in the creepiest fashion. No matter how one thinks about it, such a scene would be enough to scare someone to death....

If Duncan didn’t know Alice well enough by this point, he would’ve surely pulled his gun at this instant.

Alice didn’t know how evil she had just made the atmosphere. Obediently pressing her head back to her neck, the girl quickly regained her agility and greeted Duncan with a bright smile: “Good evening captain! Are you looking for me?”

Duncan then made up his mind and eyed the doll up and down suspiciously: “What are you doing here? Why does the goat head say that you’re counting your hair inside the cabin?”

Alice moved her neck from side to side, then gently smoothed out her slightly messy hair with those fingers before making a slightly embarrassed face: “It’s just... to see how much hair is left.”

Duncan looked at the doll like a retard not comprehending. Eventually, he noticed something on the edge of the table: it was a spool that had come from who knows where, and between the combs were several silvery-white hairs. The source of which was obvious...

Duncan was expressionless: “...”

Alice noticed the captain’s gaze and immediately explained with a serious face: “Look, this one is called Miffy, this one is called Perley, this one is called Phemia, and this one, the name is...”

Duncan finally exclaimed: “You even gave a name to every hair you lost?!”

“As a memento,” Alice looked solemn and sad, “didn’t you say I’m a doll? Us puppets don’t grow hair on our own... In case it all falls off one day, I’m holding onto them to reminisce about the good times when I had them...”

Duncan got dizzy due to the puppet’s weird logic. He even forgot the reason for coming until he finally snapped out of it. “I didn’t mean what I said. You don’t have to take it to heart.... No wonder you kept to the cabin during these two days. You’ve been naming the hair that came off each day?”

Alice nodded harmlessly: “Mhmm.”

Duncan tensed his face and sighed for a while: “Fine, I’ll look for a puppeteer in the city to get a solution. You can stop this....”

Alice was taken aback: “You’re going to tie people up and take them aboard the ship?”

Duncan glared at her: “... I’ll buy you a few wigs to spare! It’s unbefitting for the Boundless Sea’s mobile natural disaster to kidnap a puppeteer.”

“But a mobile natural disaster penetrating into the human city to buy wigs is not very befitting either...” Alice muttered subconsciously, but just halfway through the muttering, she quickly swallowed it back in. “Ah, I won’t say it, hehe...”

“Don’t be silly,” Duncan suddenly felt vexed at lowering himself to the doll’s wavelength. Then waving his hand after remembering his purpose for coming, “Forget it, your sudden distraction caused me to get sidetracked. Sit down Alice, I have important things to speak with you.”

Alice knew this was no joke based on the captain's serious expression. Quickly retracting her fawning smile, she sat on her wooden coffin box and put the spool away.

Duncan sighed. For some reason, he always seems to lose his composure before Alice despite being able to keep a calm composure against more shocking entities: like confronting the goat head when he first came to this world, or possessing a sacrificial body with a hole through the chest, nothing ever fazed him. Yet, before this silly and borderline goofy doll, his sanity would always hover at the edge of collapse and non-collapse.

If he thought about it, this was probably due to Alice's style. It's really hard to fend against such a character.

Raising a finger to make a hooking gesture at a chair, the wooden seat promptly creaked over and stationed behind Duncan's legs for him to sit.

“Ray Nora, what is your impression of this name?”

“Rey Nora?” Alice blinked, her face unpretentiously confused, “I haven't heard of it... Sounds like a woman's name? And there is a sense of elegance and nobility... Your acquaintances?”

“Theoretically, it should be your ‘acquaintance’, but you say you don't know... Very well, I believe you.” Duncan was not so surprised by Alice's answer and continued, “What about the Frostbite City-State? Are you familiar with the name? Any impressions?”

“Frostbite City-State? I heard the name when I was in the box. It seems to be a city-state on the cold sea, and there is a place called Cold Harbor there. They said the harbor acted as the gateway from the cold sea to the central sea.” Alice recalled in thought, “But I don't know the specifics, so I have only heard the name.”

“What about ‘Alice Guillotine’?”

The puppet looked even more confused: “Alice I know, that's my name, but what is the guillotine?”

This situation was basically what Duncan expected after asking several questions and getting similar responses.

Alice was confused about all this, just like she said on the first day of their meeting. She didn't know her past, the truth behind Anomaly 099, about the Frostbite city-state, and she hadn't heard of the Frost Queen who died half a century ago.

Even if her appearance was exactly the same as that of the Frost Queen.

No matter though, he merely wanted to see the sort of reaction by mentioning these key words to Alice.

So... maybe my focus should not be on the doll but on the “coffin”?

Duncan's eyes slowly sharpened, and his attention fell on Alice's gorgeous heavy wooden box.

The ornate coffin that once housed the doll was still in the room, and Alice now sat firmly on it.

Alice loved her suitcase, using it as a stool and locker and sometimes sleeping in it—despite the normal beds in the room.

“You open the box and let me see,” Duncan said.

Alice felt a little puzzled but quickly jumped down from the box and opened the lid for the man to peer inside.

The wooden case was lined with soft red velvet, and in the corners were some random items sprawled around: a comb, a spool that's wrapped with her hair, a small mirror, and a few metal trinkets.

“I found these from the ship, in another cabin...” Alice explained carefully, pointing to the items in the corner of the box. “I asked Mr. Goathead, and he said these were ownerless things. I... Can I keep them? I think they're beautiful...”

Duncan looked at the old trinkets.

Perhaps a century ago, someone on this ship would've worn these things on themselves. But now, they're clearly items devoid of ownership, merely evidence that this ship once belonged to the material world.

"Keep them, they're yours." Duncan nodded, but then his gaze suddenly noticed a small object in the pile of items. Reaching in to pick it up, "This thing..."

It was a tiny hairpin, delicate and not like something that would appear on the Vanished. It resembled a silver-white feather, and it was dotted with little broken wavey patterns along the edges. Although it was still as new as it had been from a century ago, this item was clearly not of this era in design.

Duncan frowned. For some reason, he felt a faint longing when he saw this hairpin...

There was even a name that he almost blurted out despite not recalling the exact wording.

Duncan blinked in astonishment over his own reaction. He didn't know what was going on with this feeling that suddenly emerged from the bottom of his heart, but gradually, he understood.

Just as he knew the name "Duncan Abnomar" the first time he came to this ship... He had just come into contact with the remaining "echoes" in his body again!

He looked down at the hairpin in his hand, wondering how such a delicate and small thing could "resonate" with the biggest natural disaster on the Boundless Sea. But soon, Alice's voice woke him up from his thoughts: "Captain? Captain, you..."

"I'm sorry, but I can't give you this hairpin," Duncan said to Alice, but then he quickly realized the wording was wrong and too cold toward Miss Doll here. Quickly adding, "I'll go to the city-state and buy you some new ones later—they're all old."

“Really?!” Alice suddenly showed a surprised expression, “Captain, you are so wonderful!”

“Don’t get too happy just yet.” Duncan shook his head and casually placed the hairpin away, “we’re not done yet... Alice, the next thing I want to tell you is something about your origin. You need to listen carefully...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 99

Chapter 99 “The First Step to Testing and Mastery”

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After confirming that Alice did not respond to all the “keywords” and was completely unaware of the information about the ability to “decapitate”, Duncan decided to tell the confused cursed doll what he came across from that little spying venture.

Because he already had a faint speculation at this time: maybe the key to the anomaly of the abnormal 099-puppet coffin wasn’t the doll Alice herself... but rather it’s her “coffin”.

Gently swaying with the waves of the Boundless Sea, Duncan went over the various details he had learned from the document with Alice. The poor lady was so scared that she had squirmed into a corner by the end of the bed.

“Do you have to be scared like this?”

“But... it’s really so scary!” Alice’s whimpering voice sounded like she’s ready to cry after listening to some horror story, “What indiscriminate beheading, what range of death will stop, what continues to expand the scope of territory... this, this, this... I don’t know any of that!”

“I believe now that you really don’t know,” Duncan glanced at the frightened shivering lady who kept squirming, “but this is indeed information about the Anomaly 099-puppet coffin.”

Alice held her head and stared at Duncan like she’s ready to pop that neck:
“Then...”

“So I now have two theories. First, the above ‘decapitation’ may be your unconscious ability. You are in essence, an anomaly after all, so your power is most likely a passive range effect. Even if you were asleep before, it didn’t change the occurrence and remained active without your knowledge.”

Duncan said, slowly getting up from his chair and came over to the ornate wooden box. Touching it with the tip of his longsword.

“Second, the ‘decapitation’ power of the puppet’s coffin may not come from you as a puppet, but from your ‘coffin’ instead.”

“The coffin... You mean my box?” Alice’s eyes slowly widened, and her gaze subconsciously fell on the wooden box next to the bed with Duncan’s movements. “You mean...”

“The full name of Anomaly 099 is ‘Puppet Coffin’... In other words, you and your wooden box add up to the complete ‘anomaly 099’. When I first met you, I subconsciously thought that you were the ‘dominant part’ because I didn’t know the full name,” Duncan rubbed his chin and said while thinking. “Now that I think about it, the main focus of the name actually lied with the second half?”

Alice blinked, her head grinding with thought until she facepalmed: “Oh! That’s because I came with this box!”

Duncan eyed this silly and careless puppet with an exhausted face: “... You didn’t have to say it so proudly.”

Alice didn’t seem to hear the ridicule in Duncan’s tone and glanced down at her wooden box. With a slightly worried voice: “If this is true... does that mean my box has been beheading others? But I’ve lived inside it for so long. How come I never felt any sense of danger or evil? I don’t feel any special power while sleeping in it either....”

“That’s obvious. You are part of the entire anomaly 099 package. How are you supposed to reference your own condition with others?” Duncan

frowned, “And check your neck. I suspect the reason your head keeps popping off is because of you constantly sleeping inside that box!”

Alice suddenly felt that the captain was right. With a complicated expression: “But if what you say is true, why hasn’t my coffin affected anyone aboard the ship yet? Wouldn’t my ability have activated by now?”

As soon as she said this, the lady met Duncan’s gaze and promptly realized she had messed up. Thankfully the doll lived on the ship long enough to know the ghost captain wouldn’t hold it against her, otherwise she might start panicking at this moment.

Duncan stared at the doll silently, waiting for Alice to shrink into a smaller mass before faintly saying, “The only humanoid creature on this ship besides you is me. Do you mean...”

“Of course not!” Alice almost jumped and quickly flailed her hand while saying, “Ignore my quibbles, I mean this box....”

“I didn’t say what I was going to do with you.” Duncan looked at her helplessly, “You’re now the Vanished’s crew, so I’m your protector on the Boundless Sea. You don’t have to be so afraid. Can you sit properly first? It looks like I’ve done something to you with the way you’re acting.”

While Alice obeyed and came out of the corner, Duncan, on the other hand, got filled with other thoughts because of the doll’s questions – like why doesn’t her ability activate after staying on the ship? Considering the amount of time she spent on the Vanished, the cycle of beheading should’ve begun by now, yet the ability appears missing.

What was suppressing the doll’s power, the Vanished or the captain himself?

Duncan looked down at his hands.

He knows that he has a very incredible power, which not only allows him to completely occupy the life of a cultist named “Ron”, but even enough to

make Alice, an anomaly in the upper rank, to tremble at first glance. Such a magnificent flame yet he still doesn't fully understand it.

On the other hand, the Vanished was the fifth highest vision in the Boundless Sea—a “vision,” not an anomaly.

This means that as long as something was within the scope of the ghost ship, there would be a “field” that's in effect 24 hours a day, constantly exerting its influence on all targets within the range.

With the suppression of the captain + ship, Anomaly 099 would naturally become harmless. However, what if he took Alice to Pland according to plans.... What then? Will the situation spiral out of control?

With such a risk, he must figure out a series of things – is the subject of the effect Alice the doll or her wooden coffin box? Is it the captain himself who's providing the suppression effect, or is it the ghost ship Vanished who's causing it? Will the coffin and doll go berserk if separated, or will it absolve the beheading effect entirely?

Duncan had a large list of questions in his mind as he contemplated what's plausible and what's not. Gradually, various schemes began to formulate in the man's mind, but at the end of things, he found one thing that frustrated him: he lacked many of the necessary conditions for testing.

The Vanished wasn't a qualified testing ground because the power of the ghost ship interferes with the accuracy of the results. He doesn't have a suitable test target either aboard.

Duncan raised his head and looked at Alice, who was sitting obediently on the edge of the bed—the doll lady was looking at her beloved wooden box with some sadness. It didn't take much to guess what she thought since all her tangled emotions were printed on that face.

As if noticing the captain's gaze, Alice suddenly broke the silence and whispered, “From the day I was conscious... I've been living in this box. It's my bed, it's my home, it's my shelter, and I feel safe when I sleep in it.”

Duncan didn't speak and quietly observed the doll in front of him.

"I now know why those humans are so afraid," Alice reached out and gently stroked her wooden box, "They're afraid of us."

"I was planning to take you to the city state of Pland the next time I walked in the spirit world," Duncan said in a deep voice, "I need a helper over there."

Alice's eyes seemed to light up for a moment, but then they darkened: "Ah, this might not work..."

"I've postponed the plan, but not canceled." Duncan's expression and tone didn't change much, "We just need more time to confirm... 'your' power and master the conditions for this 'decapitation' effect. Know that the city-states have the knowledge and means to seal a variety of anomalies through various tricks. If they can do it, we here on the Vanished most certainly can do more."

Alice glanced at Duncan suspiciously. From the captain's calm and deep gaze, she soon realized that this was not an empty word of comfort.

"You have a plan?"

Duncan thought for a moment, raised his fingertips, and lit a cluster of faint flames.

"First of all, we may need a little fire."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 100

Chapter 100 “Fiction And Reality In History”

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“Captain, are you sure this is really okay?” Alice looked nervously at the “small flame” in Duncan’s finger, causing her two hands to grasp the lace decoration on the side of her clothes, “Please don’t burn my room down...”

Duncan held the ball of fire while looking for a place to start, but at seeing the way Alice was behaving, he sighed and took a moment to explain. “My ghost fire is completely under my control, don’t you believe me?”

When Alice heard this, she flailed her hand up in the air: “I believe, I believe...”

Only then did Duncan withdraw his gaze and focus his mind.

With the conditions now on the Vanished, it was impossible to fully test Alice’s “coffin”. However, this does not mean he cannot do some “preliminary research” first. Now that he has become more adept in the control of the ghost fire, he has vaguely touched upon some doorway to use this to explore the secrets inside supernatural things.

He still didn’t dare to use this flame on Alice of course, but if it was to study her wooden box... that’s another story.

After some preparation, Duncan slowly reached out. He extended a cluster of flames from his fingertips to the surface of the ornate box, letting it sink in like some illusory reflection.

First it covered the outside, then the inside, followed by the green flame seeping straight into the wood until the very box transformed and reconstructed into its skeletal structure!

“AH, Captain, Captain, it’s burning!”

The puppet shouted in amazement, but her cry did draw a response due to Duncan focusing his attention on control. The man kept a firm eye to ensure nothing went wrong at this stage because a part of his consciousness was about to enter the item.

Gradually, calm and silence took over the ghost captain’s environment until even the endless sounds of waves and wind disappeared from his ear. His mind entered a vast “place” unlike anything he had conquered in the past through the channel he created.

If he had to coin an analogy, using the flame to control the sun talisman gave him the feeling of easily filling up a cup of water. In this case, with Alice’s coffin, it’s like pouring his mind into a large lake. The volume couldn’t even be compared.

Is this the gap difference between an artificially mass-produced supernatural item and an anomaly ranked in the upper numbers?

Duncan realized something in his heart, and in this flash of thought, he suddenly sensed the connection of his flames reaching a peak – the transmission of power became smooth as a river as turbulent “memories” flooded into his mind!

There were sounds of waves battering against unfamiliar coastlines, cold winds blowing against high walls, and the distant and frozen landscapes of shadowy crowds gathering together.

Duncan’s vision zipped across the air, flying dozens of meters to take an aerial view of the whole place. From above, he saw a strange and unknown city, and at its center was a stage with crowds of onlookers gathered around it.

Duncan also heard numerous whispers and chatters with his ears. It's noisy and jumbled due to all the voices. However, there's no question in the ghost captain's mind that these voices aren't from the crowds of shadows beneath him but rather an echoing murmur that encompassed the entire city. It gives off an ominous and oppressive vibe.

Then suddenly, Duncan jerked to attention at a tension grabbing at his rear. Swinging around, he suddenly found himself standing on the ground, staring at a towering thing in the center.

It's a guillotine—a sharp-bladed instrument for beheading its victims.

Through the bit of historical knowledge in his mind, Duncan realized where he must be right now.

The Frost Queen, who had been executed by the rebels half a century earlier, was tied and standing before him.

She had the exact same fact as Alice...

Duncan didn't know what to make of this. He understood they weren't the same people, only in appearance, yet he felt ill watching this picture knowing what was to come.

"Your time is up, Frost Queen." The cold and distant voice yells out from behind the stage as if raising the curtain to the show.

In the next second, Duncan saw two phantoms rapidly appear next to the guillotine. The two shadows came to the Frost Queen in an attempt to bend her knee. Yet, the queen's figure did not move like the two phantoms were weak children.

Now the jumbled noise around the stage grew even louder and more turbulent, followed by the crowds of shadows swaying like they were upset at the outcome.

"QUIET!!" The same cold voice that yelled before spoke again, this time more enraged than commanding. "MAINTAIN ORDER IN THE

EXECUTION GROUND!!!”

More phantoms emerged around the guillotine. They forced the Frost Queen to bend her knee and lock into that cold torturous apparatus this time. With this, the cold glistening blade of sharp death began to rise as the locks and cogs turned.

Duncan frowned. Although he knew this was just an echoing memory, he still subconsciously took a step forward when looking at the face of “Alice”...

But it’s with this gesture that the Frost Queen turned her head slightly. She’s looking straight at the ghost captain as if they’re acting in the same time and space.

“Whoever you are, please don’t pollute history.” The queen says softly but with power.

Duncan stood frozen in amazement and heard even more shocked outcries from around the guillotine, “Who are you talking to?!”

The Frost Queen had already retracted her gaze then, returning to her cold demeanor. “Do it before the sun sets.”

The guillotine blade fell with that sentence.

Instantly, boundless darkness surged from all directions, tearing apart the illusion that had replayed the historical event in detail. Duncan knew what was happening with this past echo, and sure enough, his connection “here” was rapidly fading. But even so, his ears could still grasp onto a few vague and broken sentences at the end.

“..... The Frost Queen is dead, and we have cut off the channel for the Vanished to return to the real world...”

“..... Ray Nora vainly tried to build the second Vanished... She colluded with the shadow of subspace. The evidence is conclusive, so her death is well deserved....”

“..... The new administrator will soon restore order, and all materials related to the ‘Abyss’ exploration plan will be destroyed... However, active whistleblowers still have a chance to be forgiven...”

“Full pursuit of the rebel ship Sea Mist and the defecting navy... Dead or alive doesn’t matter... Wait, what is that sound... Quickly run. This place is going to collapse!”

Exclamations, shouts, the sound of buildings collapsing in the surroundings, and the roaring waves rocked his ears....

In that moment, Duncan abruptly broke out of the boundless darkness like someone desperately surfacing from a deep dive. The last connection had snapped, signaling the end of the historic show and his return to reality.

Opening his eyes, Duncan’s first sight was Alice plucking her head off and snapping it back on for fun: “...?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 101

Chapter 101 “Open-minded Alice”

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Duncan looked at Alice expressionlessly as if he were staring at a retard.

The striking calm gaze of the Frost Queen from half a century ago was still entrenched in his mind, but the afterimage that should have been confusing was now attacked by Alice, a mentally disabled puppet. Forget the silliness. The mere fact that she was plucking on and unplugging her head from the neck was enough to drive anyone mad.

Eventually, Duncan’s sanity snapped: “... What are you doing?”

“Ah! Captain!” Alice reacted later than she should. Quickly plopping her head back on, “Oh, I think there are a few hairs caught in my neck join, so...”

Duncan’s face turned deadpan: “If you keep pulling your head off like that then you better start thinking up new names for your hair.”

“I already came up with some! If they fall, they’ll be called Williams and...”

It took Duncan a lot of effort to control his urge to yell and refrain from throwing the doll out of the cabin.

After a few seconds, he let out a long sigh and gradually calmed down.

To be fair, Alice’s appearance does bring a bit of joy to the lifeless ghost ship, but sometimes it’s just too much silliness... Even the goat head

couldn't keep up with the puppet's rhythm sometimes, so forget about Duncan, who could barely make the ins and outs of this one's brain.

Who knows, the doll's head might be solid wood inside....

Duncan's gaze swept over Alice, recalling back to the echo he saw in the past.

He could be sure that it was the legendary Frost Queen Ray Nora that he saw, and the source of the lapse came from the puppet coffin.

But what is the essence of those pictures?

Is the "coffin" consciously telling me something?

Are they passively recorded "images"?

Or is it the memory of Anomaly 099?

Is it a real fragment of history, or is there an "illusion" that's been distorted and corrected to a certain extent?

He thought about the calm gaze the young queen made when facing him, then recalled the plea as well..

"Whoever you are, please don't pollute history..."

To whom is this phrase addressed?

Is it really me?

Do her words cross over space and time itself?

Or is it just a part of the illusionary echo that reacted when I tapped into it?

And that voice asking the queen who she is talking to, who is that?

This succession of reactions was so real that it would give shivers to anyone who experienced it.

As for the end of the “echo”, those sounds coming from the darkness also made Duncan particularly wary.

Queen Frost was executed by the rebels, and one of her “crimes” turned out to be the “vain attempt of trying to let the Vanished reenter the real world” and “building a second Vanished”. There was also a “hidden abyss” plan, which seemed to be the reason for the rebellion... But these things, he had never heard the goat head mention before!

That statue on the mapping table would often recite some “great deeds of the Vanished” to him. Such as how many ships were swallowed on which route or how much commotion it caused in which city-state – although eight out of ten of his words were unreliable. If a city-state ruler did “collude” with the Vanished, then there’s no way the goat head would have omitted that story. That blabbermouth wouldn’t be able to hold it in if something that big did occur!

Unless the incident is false, a crime made up by the rebels to the queen.

“Captain? Are you all right, Captain?”

Alice’s voice suddenly came from the side, interrupting Duncan’s cranky thoughts.

Duncan exhaled softly, forcing down the chaotic thoughts in his mind before turning to face the doll. He couldn’t ignore how similar Alice and the Frost Queen looked, but the air and temperament were nothing alike.

“It’s okay. I just saw a little ‘record’ saved by the coffin.” He shook his head to dispel the strange emotion.

“Record?” Alice’s eyes widened in curiosity, “What kind of record is it?”

“The scene relating to the decapitation of the Frost Queen half a century ago,” Duncan said lightly, “I met her—she’s exactly like you.”

Alice immediately subconsciously touched her neck over that remark. The puppet lady didn’t know whether to feel nervous or not. After a long

struggle, she finally spoke without holding back: “Could it be that I am really the Frost Queen? After being beheaded, I did not die, but was affected by supernatural powers and became what I am now?”

Duncan thought for a while and replied truthfully: “If you don’t speak, don’t move, and just lie quietly in this box, I would agree with your theory. However....”

Alice was quick to pick up on the sentence and raised a brow. However, she quickly put this doubt behind her and turned to face the coffin. “Then did anything change after you burned it with fire? Did you manage to control it?”

Duncan shoots a sideway glance at the wooden box and confirms the deep connection has faded, but the traces of his flame does remain. It’s similar to what he has with the sun talisman, more complex and subtle though. Simply said, he had no idea how to control Alice’s wooden box. In fact, he doubts there’s even an option to control this thing.

Nevertheless, one thing’s certain: this coffin was very stable and.... “tamed” now that it’s a part of the Vanished.

“I’m not sure. Maybe we need further testing to know if it’s safe. More testing is needed to determine if the ‘decapitation’ effect comes from the coffin or from you.” Duncan shook his head, “But for now, I feel it’s ‘fit’ to leave it alone and assume its like the other items on the ship.”

As he spoke, he turned his head to look at the puppet beside him.

“The key now is you. Do you feel any different?”

Alice pointed to herself in bewilderment: “Me? I don’t. Why do you ask that?”

“You and your wooden box are one. Both together adds up to make Anomaly 099. Now that I usurped the authority of the coffin with my flames, I may have affected you to a certain extent.” Duncan looked at Alice very seriously. He knew that the doll was slow to react, so he

gradually got used to telling her the words needed, “Move your body, tell me if something is wrong.”

Alice reacted consciously and quickly got up to check herself. Ran around the room twice, doing some jumping jacks, and finally hooked her finger in a summoning manner at her wooden box.

The box did not move.

“It... It’s not obeying!” Alice was shocked and finally found the big problem, “I normally only need to flick my finger to make it float!”

Duncan’s heart jolted at this discovery—he did seem to feel some response from the coffin when Alice flicked her finger, but...

The coffin was awaiting his orders then.

Raising his eyebrow, Duncan suddenly felt a little embarrassed: “Maybe... it is due to being in contact with my flame. The coffin has already regarded me as a higher ‘master’.”

Alice jerked around to make a dumbfounded face at the captain, then her expression visibly turned aggrieved like a child that had its precious toy ripped from her.

“But it’s okay. I can lift my restrictions on it.” Duncan found it more awkward when he saw the pitiful face of the doll and quickly waved his hand. “It will still obey your orders.”

Alice was stunned, then turned her head to hook her finger at the wooden box again. This time, she finally got the response she desired.

The puppet lady immediately smiled and allowed her precious coffin to fall back to the ground before throwing herself into a hug with the lid: “Great! I thought you wouldn’t obey me in the future anymore!”

Duncan almost couldn’t control his expression at the swift change in emotions. “Sometimes... I really envy your open-minded attitude to life.”

Alice looked up, confused by the captain's sentence.

"Forget it, just be happy." Duncan sighed, "Are you sure there's nothing wrong with you?"

"No," Alice examined herself, "there was nothing uncomfortable at all, and... it feels like it's better than before?"

"Better than before?"

"I can't quite say what, but I think... my body is relaxed? Peace of mind?" Alice thought for a moment, trying to find words to describe her feelings. "It's a bit like the feeling of reassurance when I used to lie in the box, but now I feel just as reassured standing outside the box..."

The puppet thought while talking and then flailed her hands up before the man could analyze the issue. "It doesn't matter. It's not a bad thing anyway!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 102

Chapter 102 “Goat Head’s Nemesis”

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Duncan had to hand it to this gothic-styled doll. Alice not only calmly accepted the fact that her box had been transformed into a part of the Vanished, she also tossed the idea of her being the Frost Queen to the back of her head in no time flat. It’s a level of open-mindedness that Duncan cannot match.

According to Miss Doll, she was so calm because it was beyond her control. So whatever happened in the past did, and she’s not going to dwell on the issue since she’s here now.

“I’m staying on this ship now anyway, and I’m not going to leave in the future. It’s not a big deal for the box to become part of the Vanished. As for the matter with the Frost Queen, that’s even simpler—I don’t even know her.” Alice sat back down on the lid of her wooden box with a pleasant smile on her face. “I don’t know if I’m her, and I don’t know what kind of person she used to be. Regardless, it was half a century ago... Let bygones remain bygones. It’s just history now.”

“It’s good that you have a big heart.” Duncan just looked at Alice’s lilac eyes, then slightly nodded after a long silence.

In the end, he remained hesitant about mentioning what the Frost Queen said to him during the execution scene.

After all, even if it was mentioned, this puppet most likely knows nothing.... It’s good that she’s so carefree instead.

“Let’s leave it here. We now have a preliminary understanding and control of your ‘coffin’. Whether the decapitation effect is from you or the coffin, that will need to be tested further at a later date.” Duncan exhaled softly, “I’ll go first.”

“Uhh, captain, you go slowly~.”

Leaving Alice’s room, Duncan returned to the deck, where he gradually came to the Captain’s quarter. He’s sorting through all the things he learned and needs some time alone.

He originally wanted to find out whether the “decapitation” power of Anomaly 099 was controllable, but in the end he failed to solve this problem and accidentally touched upon the incident from half a century ago... The Frost Queen, executed by the rebels, accusations of collusion with the Vanished, and a mysterious hidden “Abyss” plan, these things swirled in his mind and wouldn’t disappear.

And in addition to these, there was another thing that concerned him

Duncan reached out and took something out of his arms.

It was a small hairpin shaped like a silvery-white feather surrounded by waves.

In any case, it doesn’t look like something that a rough male seafarer would have.

In addition, he kept getting this vague nostalgia when staring at this hairpin... It seems to have a special meaning for the once real “Captain Duncan”.

Duncan’s mind had questions, but he knew that the goat head could not answer the matter.

Putting away the hairpin, he entered the mapping room, where the goat head was diligently controlling the ship. To Duncan’s surprise, the dove Ai,

who was supposed to stay in the bedroom, was with the statue and standing atop of the thing's horn while chirping merrily.

"When did you two have such a good relationship?" he asks curiously.

The bird flapped its wings and did not open its mouth, but the goat head with his obsidian eyes clearly showed a glint of desperation: "O great Captain... Can you get some fries the next time you take a spirit walk?"

Duncan was stunned: "... Why are you starting with the whole make some fries thing?"

The goat head voice almost trembled as it grimaced: "Please, bring some fries back... if not to keep the bird's mouth shut...."

Duncan looked at the combination of bird and goat with complexity. After a good minute of confusion and amazement, he suddenly chuckled in amusement: "So you finally met your arch nemesis?"

"I went through seventy-six topics! Seventy-six! I exhausted my lifelong learning experience, gone through thousands of years of history, and issued poems of wonders, yet all I ever get in response is make some fries from this dove!" The goat head exclaims in agony, his voice quivering with defeat. "How do you ever communicate with this bird?"

"Simple, just talk to it less. If you don't talk to it, it will quickly quiet down," Duncan spread his hands out, "I guess you can't."

The goat head thought for a moment and sighed: "... Then I guess it's better if we stick to making some fires."

Duncan was noncommittal and only beckoned for Ai to come over. Fluttering her wings, the dove landed on his shoulder and casually chirped in delight. Nodding at the bird for doing a good job, the ghost captain returns his attention to the goat head: "The ruler of the Frost city-state from half a century ago, Frost Queen Ray Nora – do you know anything about her?"

“Frost Queen? The one that was executed by the rebels half a century ago?” The goat head was stunned for a moment, “I’ve heard about it, and it seems that we fought with them decades ago… But aside from this, there’s nothing else to say. Why did you bring this up all of a sudden?”

Duncan calmly peered into the goat head’s eyes and knew there were no lies in the “first mate’s” words.

Goathead really didn’t know about the Frost Queen, and the Vanished had no connection with the Frost city-state.

Not only was there no contact, but the Vanished even clashed with the guards of that city-state—just as it clashed with ships from other city-states and other shipping routes.

In that case, it can only mean the rebels made up the story of the Frost Queen colluding with the Vanished. The entire crime is fictional nonsense.

Of course, it may be too early to draw this conclusion, after all, the event did occur over half a century ago. There may be twists and turns buried within history that no one knows about. The first mate may be telling the truth, but that doesn’t mean the truth represents the entire picture.

Duncan doesn’t intend to overturn the case for the Frost Queen from half a century ago. He just wants to know about the Vanished and Alice.

“Did you know? Alice’s appearance is exactly the same as the Frost Queen, and the so-called Anomaly 099 is most likely born after the executed Frost Queen became cursed by the Boundless Sea,” he said casually while teasing the dove on his shoulder with his fingers. “And the main ‘crime’ of the Frost Queen when she was executed by the rebels was collusion with the Vanished.”

The goat head appeared taken aback, a sight rarely seen thus far.

“Colluding with the Vanished?! Do the foolish humans have to make up such a ridiculous reason for even betraying their monarch?” After a few seconds, the goat head finally broke out laughing. He obviously thought it

was ridiculous, “Don’t blame me for laughing Captain, those humans are just too stupid and weak. I wouldn’t put it past them to blame the Vanished if they go out and drop on their head!”

Speaking of this, he paused before continuing, “But you say that Miss Alice looks a lot like the Frost Queen? This is really... incredible! If Miss Alice was really transformed from the Frost Queen... that’s a lot of irony in the story.”

“Yes, if they really have this connection, it is ironic.” Duncan leaned back against his chair using a comfortable position. “The Frost Queen had never been in contact with the Vanished during her lifetime, yet she was charged by the rebels using collusion as an excuse. Now, half a century later, Alice really did become the crew of the Vanished, the very crime those rebels placed on her head.”

“No wonder you rushed to find Miss Alice when you came back. Turns out you found some key information regarding Anomaly 099.” The goat head immediately began to flatter the ghost captain, “It’s really worthy of the great Captain Duncan to return with a heaping mountain of booty! This reminds me, a navigator once said, or maybe a....”

Duncan immediately glared at the goat head to halt the rambling. Then taking the bird off his shoulder, he places Ai down next to the statue: “You two talk.”

Goat’s head: “...!?”

.....

In the central cathedral of the city-state of Pland, Vanna handed a document she had just signed to her entourage: “Send this document to the Western Church – this is the last search warrant.”

The young guardian took the file and bowed: “Yes, Inquisitor.”

Vanna exhaled softly, cracking her neck due to the stiff job of reading all day with the paperwork. She’s feeling more tired than wielding the

greatsword she used to behead those heretics.

“I hope there won’t be any more trouble tonight.” The young young lady inquisitor couldn’t help but grumble while stretching her waist.

As if in response to her mutter, a slightly urgent and sharp bell suddenly rang from the direction of the main building!

The guardian, who didn’t have time to leave yet, stopped and glanced at the window in the direction of the main church. “How come the hour clock is ringing at night... what could’ve happened?”

“It’s the summoning bell,” Vanna quickly discerned the message based on the rhythm and timing of each ring. “Seven consecutive short rings, it’s coming from the ‘Tomb of the Nameless King’... Could it be the discovery of a new anomaly or vision?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 103

Chapter 103 “Tomb of the Unknown King”

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The bell rang three more times before Vanna arrived at the main cathedral, where she was promptly met by Old Bishop Valentine. The old priest wore his status's black wardrobe and silently prayed to the Storm Goddess Gomona's statue.

“Inquisitor Vanna,” Valentine said in a deep voice, “the Cathedral of Storms has sent an order to summon the listeners.”

“Sent directly from the Storm Cathedral?!” Taken aback, Vanna hurried over to the statue and immersed herself in the lamp's glow, “Isn't the bell ring for a discovery of a new anomaly or vision?”

“If it was a new discovery, the bell would not have rang three times in a row.” Valentine shook his head, “It was the gravekeeper on the other side of the ‘Tomb’ who sent us the news. There's movement from the unknown king. Although it was unclear what message he was trying to convey, it appears though... the existing list is changing.”

As he spoke, the old bishop turned his head and quietly stared into Vanna's eyes.

“This time, we need to send a listener into the tomb to get direct instruction from the unknown king. The current rotation is with us, which means the Storm Church will be providing the candidate among the faithful. It's not decided who will enter yet, but you and I are on the waiting list.”

Vanna fixed her mind and asked calmly, “When do we leave?”

“Now,” Valentine nodded, motioning for the lady to follow. They headed behind the statue, where a door with sacred symbols was already open and waiting. Inside revealed a deep and long passage. “The psionic passage is ready.”

Vanna first bowed to the statue, then followed the old bishop forward. The two devout followers passed through flickering lights in this long passageway until they eventually arrived at their destination. Here, a special secret room has been erected.

Unlike the cement and brick structure of the main body of the cathedral, this small chamber was made entirely of stone piled up together to form the wall and the roof. At the center was a sunken fire pit that burned with a crackling flame. However, there was no fuel to speak of, only a flame that seemed to be conjured up from thin air.

There was no furniture to speak of either, only the subtle sound of running water from nowhere. Every wall around them seemed to be wet to emphasize this detail, and even the floor had tiny streams of water flowing along the stone cracks. This gave the impression that this chamber was not some room in the cathedral, but rather... a waterlogged cave at the bottom of the sea.

This would not be the first time that Vanna had come here. As an “inquisitor” of the city-state with a status equal to the bishop, she also has the right to use the “psionic passage” here. This seemingly inconspicuous room was the “portal” that connects the psionic channel.

In every city-state’s central cathedral, similar facilities are hidden away during their construction. Every recognized religion in this world had something similar. In this case, the priests of the Storm Goddess called this chamber the “flooded caves”. Of course, there are other names out there too. For the death priests that worship the God of Death and Life, they built something called the “burial chambers” with a more gloomy and oppressive atmosphere. Regardless of the naming and style though, they all served one purpose: to send the occupant’s spirit into an extensive interconnecting network of the soul. This way, no matter how far or wide one was from the other, they could still communicate through the Boundless Sea.

A miracle blessed by the gods. If not for this ability to communicate across vast stretches of water, the world as they knew it might not be here today. Back then, sailing across the sea wasn't so easy, and ships would often sink or lose their way.

The door of the secret chamber slowly closed, and the dark and heavy metal barrier made a dull and heavy sound as the intricate runes intermingled and meshed together to form a seal. No living creatures could leave or enter after the seal completes.

Vanna and Valentine stood together by the fire pit in the center. They bowed their heads, gazing at the leaping holy flame as they chanted the Storm Goddess's name.

The illusory sound of water continued to come from all sides at first, then it grew, and grew, until droplets became waves, and waves became tsunamis!

At the same time, mists had overtaken the entire chamber following the flame's increased ferocity. There was no visibility to speak of anymore, only plain white of churning gas and water.

Vanna closed her eyes knowing the next step – she needed to allow herself to be submerged in this water.

The cold touch quickly dissipated as her consciousness receded. By the time she opened those eyes again, she was no longer inside that watery cave but in a vast square that was cordoned off by crumbling stone pillars. She could see beyond the square of course, but all there was were muddled, chaotic sparks in the horizon. As to what they represented, who knows. At least Vanna didn't have a clue.

Focusing her mind after the brief distraction, Vanna saw that there were already many figures standing in the square. All of them were black phantoms with only silhouettes visible. Despite not seeing their faces, the familiar aura coming from each figure confirmed to the lady they were devout saints of the Storm Goddess. People like her who wielded great power over in the other city-states. Some were even stationed in the constantly moving main Storm Cathedral out on the Boundless Sea!

“It seems that we are the latest to arrive,” a dark phantom approached flickeringly. Vanna didn’t need to wait for the shadow to introduce to know its Valentine. “I was also the last to arrive during the last meeting....”

“Do the saints of the other city-states live in the secret chamber...” Vanna muttered, “Every time the news of the summoning comes out, they would always somehow get here minutes before us...”

“Ever since Saint-Folsson wrote ‘first’ in the register of the assembly hall twenty years ago, they have all begun to compete in arriving early.” Valentine shook his head, “Seriously, it’s incomprehensible... The goddess will not drop special attention to the individual because of this anyway.”

Vanna couldn’t agree more with Valentine’s logic. Then out of the blue, a sudden boom came from the end of the crowd, interrupting everyone’s thoughts and conversation.

Vanna and Valentine looked up simultaneously and were surprised to find the ground at the square center rising. The broken old stone brick was rippling like a wave of water. Within the layers of ripples, behemoths were growing rapidly upwards. First it was the pale spires, followed by sloping stone walls and quaint columns.

Almost instantly, the object was completed before Vanna’s vision—a huge building made of pale boulder blocks.

It was a dull “palace”, an ancient building constructed during the lost eras. It had a pyramid as the main body with several obelisks and towers around it. No other city-state in the world was of this style, and its low and oppressive atmosphere did not at all resemble a building for the living.

It wasn’t so much a palace but a mausoleum.

In fact, it was indeed a mausoleum—a mausoleum belonging to some ancient and powerful civilization.

Like everyone else, Vanna’s gaze involuntarily fell on the bottom of the huge pyramid. Under the gaze of countless eyes, the mausoleum’s door

finally slowly opened.

The heavy pale stone gate retreated to the sides, and an extremely tall figure slowly walked out of the mausoleum.

It was the gravekeeper of the tomb for the unknown king.

In Vanna's view, it was difficult to say that "he" was still a living human.

The gravekeeper's body was wrapped in layers of bandaged fabric, half charred a pitch black and the other half hanging with chains of runic shackles. Some of the shackles had even penetrated into the flesh to become one with the gravekeeper, effectively becoming bones and nerve endings. This ancient being was like a terrifying mummy from ancient Egypt, but more warped and cursed in appearance.

Although it was not the first time seeing this important "gravekeeper", Vanna still subconsciously took a second to inhale deeply to get her muscles to ease up.

Then she saw the "gravekeeper" walking straight towards her.

The candidate has been chosen.

Without hesitation, the being passed everyone in the square until he stopped in front of Vanna. Through the black bandages and runic chains, the lady could tell the gravekeeper was watching her with that single exposed red eye.

"You, can enter the tomb." The gravekeeper spoke, his voice hoarse as if coming from a corpse. Then he raised his right hand, which seemed to be charred by fire, and grasped onto a quill that flew out of the tomb with a parchment in tow.

"Make a note of what you hear." The gravekeeper commanded succinctly.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 104

Chapter 104 “Notes”

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Looking at the quill and parchment handed to her by the gravekeeper, Vanna took a small breath to allow her emotions to settle down.

“How long can I go in for?” She raised her head and asked the gravekeeper with firm eyes.

The mummy-like figure lowered his head slightly and gave off an air of something that was neither dead nor alive. “A moment, or eternity....” The icy cold voice says.

This answer implies that the message to be conveyed from the tomb was short and singular. At the same time, it could also be very dangerous and cause the listener’s death.

Vanna nodded lightly and withdrew her gaze from the gravekeeper. There’s no need to hesitate now that it’s come to this. The lady marched towards the huge mausoleum with only the decaying rattling of chains behind her to signal the gravekeeper’s following.

In front of the large slab of stone representing the entrance, Vanna stopped and gazed upwards to take in the desolate atmosphere. It was not the first time she had seen the tomb during a psionic assembly, but this would be the first time she had the privilege of seeing it up close as a listener.

Vision 004, “Mausoleum of the Unknown King”. This ancient tomb located in a strange gap between time and space was not a vision controlled by the Storm Church, but rather an ancient thing that’s guarded and shared by the

various Orthodox Church in rotation. From outside appearances alone, it was a mausoleum styled after the ancient kingdom of Crete. The available evidence from multiple texts also supports this theory; however, no one knows exactly who was responsible for building this place.

What was known by the people though was that the owner would occasionally convey messages to the outside world through this ritual. As seen here, the ritual would begin by sending a gravekeeper out to pick a listener. If there wasn't a suitable candidate present in the square, a random person would then be brought in from the outside world at will.

In the age when Vision 004 had not yet been tamed, such "random callings" had taken the lives of hundreds, if not thousands. That was until a saint appeared a thousand years ago.... The brave soul not only broke the terrible cycle of death, he also returned alive to announce the first gift of the unknown king: the original ranking list of anomalies and visions.

Then through repeated attempts and failures, the various churches finally figured out the sequential pattern Vision 004 uses. After that, this once-lethal phenomenon had become something of an asset, a relatively safe means to gain intel that would otherwise be impossible to get without huge sacrifices.

"Enter the mausoleum and prepare to listen." The low, hoarse voice of the gravekeeper came from behind her, pushing Vanna forward out of her stupor.

The sound of the stone door gradually closed behind the inquisitor, and the aura of the gravekeper dissipated as well and reintegrated into the tomb. Vanna's alone now. Whatever happens, it's up to her to figure out.

Pale flames burned on both sides of the corridor leading into the tomb. As Vanna walked along the illuminated path, her gaze swept across the walls and could vaguely make out the words that were clearly carved through fingernails.

"Go straight forward, cannot turn back."

“Do not ask the gravekeeper for the identity and name of the tomb owner.”

“Do not run, do not shout, do not pray to any god.”

“Be humble and reverent, but do not bow down.”

“After entering the tomb, do not speak.”

These were records left by the countless past “listeners” over the years. In ancient times, the vast majority of those who entered this graveyard would die, with only one percent living long enough to leave behind these messages. Vanna knew every single line by heart for they are something every saint of the church must learn. Precious gifts from her predecessors.

But then Vanna suddenly came down with a curious question after reading these lines. She’s heard of the warnings, but what about the other messages by those who have fallen into despair? They must’ve left something behind as well in desperation, right?

Human nature is a complex thing. Before the major churches successfully controlled Vision 004, the gravekeepers brought hundreds of people here, if not thousands, without the world’s knowledge. Among them were mere commoners without training. There’s no way an ordinary citizen could withstand the cursed madness of being trapped inside a vision.

Yet, she only saw the messages of those with a noble and resolute soul.

Vanna was a little confused in her heart, but in the end, she did not call the gravekeeper to divulge her doubts.

In theory, she could talk to the gravekeeper if she dared to, which does not violate the “rules” of the mausoleum. However, that doesn’t mean there aren’t risks involved. As the number rule in this world, never assume predictability regarding the supernatural.

Heaving a long sigh to settle her mood, the lady marched forward until she was at the end of the corridor. A wide and quaint burial chamber appeared in her eyes.

In the huge pyramid-like room, the pale stone walls sloping on all sides are carved with indistinct patterns. Two rows of black-brown metal braziers are also distributed on both sides of the entrance, each burning with pale white flames that gave off a hazy grey smoke. However, there weren't any coffins like one would expect of a tomb, only a throne made of stone with its owner sitting on it.

It was a headless body, which seemed to be a tall male based on the figure size. His limbs were firmly bound by chains, his arms and chest covered with thick black hair like that of animals, and his feet were deformed and twisted. There are also black scorched marks, indicating the body had suffered some sort of severe burn during the years.

The body sat quietly on the throne, seemingly unresponsive to Vanna's visit.

Remembering what she had studied, the lady quickly took out her parchment and quill the moment she saw the "unknown king". Part of her was getting ready to record what she was going to hear, and the other part concentrated on repelling whatever mental pollution that might—

Then Vanna jerked open her eyes again.

She didn't know why or how, but she's currently outside the tomb on her back and staring upwards. There's the familiar crumbling pillars, the chaotic sky, and the gathered group of shadows of her peers in the distance coming over.

"You're awake, leave now."

The hoarse and deep voice of the gravekeeper suddenly came from the side, causing Vanna to swing her eyes over to see what was happening. The tall mummy-like figure started to walk inside the tomb again, followed promptly by the loud sound of the mausoleum sinking back into the ground.

Before Vanna could even begin comprehending, several of her peers had already made it to her side. The most obvious was Bishop Valentine, who helped the lady up by the waist: "Vanna, are you all right? I saw you come out of the mausoleum and directly faint at the entrance..."

“I...” Vanna stammered as she stumbled to hold herself upright. The feeling of having her body drained of strength remained, but life was quickly returning so it didn’t take long for the mind to clear up. “How long have I been in there?”

“Only an instant,” said one of the shadows of another saint, “you entered the tomb, then the gate closed shut, and you came out again immediately.”

Vanna appeared startled and looked to Bishop Valentine for confirmation, which was reaffirmed by the old man’s question: “What about the parchment? Did you write down what you heard?”

“Oh yes, parchment!” Vanna was now fully awake and quickly realized she was still holding onto the parchment. But the next second later, her expression froze as she read the content.

The original piece of parchment now only had a corner left due to being shredded – about a few centimeters long – and there’s only a few words scrawled on it: “Anomaly 099 – puppet doll.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 105

Chapter 105 “After the Dissolution of the Assembly”

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Anomaly 099 – Puppet Doll.

This was the only information on the parchment after Vanna returned from the tomb of the unknown king.

The moment she saw those scrawled letters, the lady’s expression visibly slowed to a crawl due to how lacking it was. On top of this, she could feel Bishop Valentine and several others beside her appear stunned as well.

After a short silence, the black shadow of one of the saints suddenly spoke in a deep voice: “An existing ‘anomaly’ has been changed... Out of the civilized world’s awareness.”

“It fell into the hands of the Vanished,” the other saint nodded afterward, “It could be that the ghost captain did something...”

“But what kind of change will this produce as a result?” The saint who spoke before looked worried, “The difference between puppet coffin and puppet doll is not just a few letters... This change directly alarmed the tomb of the unknown king, and even caused the gravekeeper to summon the listeners to convey this information...”

Several saints solemnly discussed this in low voices, their eyes converging on Vanna, who had gradually recovered by now. She got up with the help of Bishop Valentine and eyed the only piece of paper left in her hand: “... I don’t remember anything about what happened in the tomb. I only remember walking through the tomb myself.”

“It is normal to forget the experience of being in the tomb. This is the reason for the parchment and quill from the gravekeeper, to record useful information from the experience,” Bishop Valentine said slowly. “But there are only these few words on the remaining parchment... it’s abnormal and not right...”

Vanna looked at her hands stunnedly, and for a long time, she didn’t know what to say: “Was the parchment torn by me...?”

“Theoretically, it could only be you,” Bishop Valentine firmly looked at his peer, “there will be no one else in the mausoleum. The gravekeeper never interferes with the listener’s communication with the tomb owner, and the tomb owner will not do anything superfluous except to convey the intended detail.”

Vanna’s heart was full of confusion, but before she could continue speaking, a low and solemn feminine voice suddenly interrupted from the edge of the square: “The time for the end of the assembly is approaching.”

The saints immediately stood rigid and turned at the source. Likewise, Vanna swiftly corrected her mindset and took on a formal stance at the woman wearing a gorgeous dress.

The female figure was not followed by any entourage, instead she stood alone with an air of authority. In addition, this person wasn’t just some shadowy silhouette like the other souls present, rather her image was condensed and faintly showed the outline of her face.

Vanna respectfully bowed in awe at the leader of the Storm Church, the papal crown of the main Storm Cathedral. Not only was the lady the representative of the storm goddess in the mortal world, her very soul had undergone qualitative changes, hence the ability to take on the complete human appearance here.

“Well done, Saint Vanna,” the pope nodded and spoke with her majestic but gentle voice that soothed the lady’s frustrated mood. “How much information a listener can bring out of the tomb has always been an

uncontrollable thing, and many times, the information that listeners bring out is not limited to the parchment.”

“You mean...” asked Vanna with a bewildered but curious face.

“The less detail that remains on the parchment, the more dangerous the conveyed message must be from the tomb owner. It is your soul’s instinctive drive to protect yourself and everyone here. Do not blame yourself for this outcome.... The pieces of information are sufficient for the Storm Cathedral to use as a reference for charting the next voyage and to pray for guidance from our Lord.”

Sure enough, Vanna’s heart and mind gradually settled down after listening to the pope’s soothing words.

She knew that this was not an unintended effect, rather it was the pope’s deliberate act of helping herself through the power of words and blessing.

“Disperse first,” the graceful lady said softly, “and this gathering is over. The Storm Cathedral will carefully assess the message conveyed by Vision 004 this time. If necessary, I will issue a parable order or re-summon the saints at a later date.”

Vanna quickly bowed in gratitude before dissipating into the chaotic space, followed promptly by the others who disappeared one after the other from the square.

In the huge assembly ground, the only one remaining now was the Storm Pope Helena and the crumbling pillars supporting the chaotic skies. She did not move, only standing there motionlessly until a rippling effect occurred to her side – a tall, thin figure appeared in her line of sight.

The new arrival seemed to be wearing a robe. Like Helena, his appearance was faintly recognizable and not just a vague shadow. It’s that of an old and serious old man.

Immediately afterward, another figure appeared next to this old fella, a short and old gramps as well with a kind smile.

“Banster,” Helena nodded at the tall, thin, serious old man, then looked at the smiling and chubby old fella, “Lune—what, when did the two of you get so free? Don’t the Death Church and Academy of Truth have to patrol the border?”

“The border has been stable recently, with reliable surveillance.” The tall, thin old man known as Banster said succinctly.

“For the time being, we have entrusted the task of patrolling the border to a reliable person to do it for us,” the short and chubby old man named Lune also nodded. “This time I mainly came to see the situation on your side... It seems that the civilized world is not very peaceful.”

“The last time a similar situation occurred in the mausoleum was also when the Storm Church was in charge of the tomb,” Banster said expressionlessly, “about a hundred years ago?”

“That’s obvious,” Helena said lightly, “the last time would of course be a hundred years ago. That time I was the listener who entered. I wasn’t helming the Storm Cathedral yet so I remember it very well.”

“Yes, I remember it very well too when you went in,” the short and chubby Lune stroked his beard and recalled with emotion. “You were also ‘thrown’ out of the mausoleum immediately after you entered, and it took a long time to wake up just like the little girl today. The parchment you brought out of the tomb was only a small note too, and there were only a few scrawled letters on it... Helena, remember what message you brought out of the tomb a century ago?”

The helmsman of the Storm Cathedral went silent for a moment before replying softly: “I remember it very well: Vision 005 – the Vanished.”

Lune nodded: “That’s right, you were the first to bring back news that the Vanished turned into a vision... The few letters you brought back at that time were confirmed in just one month when the phantom ship whistled past the necropolis of the Death Church. Poor Banster here had to watch his newly built ships back then be swallowed into the void without getting the chance to cut the ribbon for their maiden voyage....”

The leader of the Death Church, Pope Banster, glanced at Lune expressionlessly after having the sore subject brought up.

Helena didn't seem to hear Lune's last words, only standing there in deep thought before speaking: "Whether it is 'puppet' or 'puppet coffin', it is just an 'anomaly' ranked in the lower hundred, there's no comparison with something ranked fifth on the list."

"Yes, there is no comparison between the two, but you also know that the crux of the matter is not the information left on the note – but the parts that were left out." The expression on Lune's face finally became serious, "The name of Anomaly 099 changed from being puppet coffin to doll puppet is nothing special in itself, but we all know it's never that simple. The details that are missing are always the most fatal..."

"The clue to go on is that the matter's related to that phantom ship," Helena said, "but the other day when I asked the Lord for enlightenment..."

Speaking of this, she suddenly stopped and shook her head, seemingly not planning to continue the topic.

"Why didn't Frem come today?" She looked at the two figures in front of her, "Isn't he always the nosiest of us here?"

"Frem and his Church of Flame Bearers are busy with a very important matter," the short and chubby Lune said with a smile, "The leaders of the four Orthodox Churches can't all come here at the same to make a splash..."

"Something important?" Helena raised an eyebrow, "What is he doing?"

"Patrolling the border," Banster said succinctly.

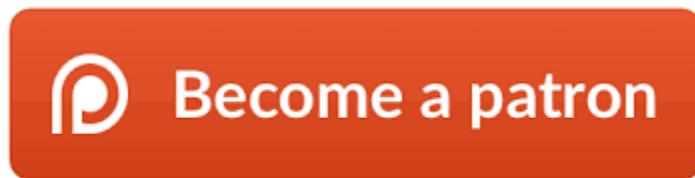
Helena: "..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 106

Chapter 106 “Duncan’s Gift”

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The illusory sea water quickly dissipated like a dream at dawn when Vanna’s spirit returned to her physical body. After a deep breath, she opened her eyes and saw that she was still standing in the rock chamber that looked like a cave under the sea, the magical flame still burning before her eyes.

Looking to her side, the lady saw that Bishop Valentine was also coming out of it, evidence that she had truly attended the psionic gathering. Subconsciously clenching her hand, she wanted to confirm if the parchment was still there. But of course, that’s not possible since the item only existed in the spirit world and couldn’t be brought outside.

“We have just issued a notice informing the captains that the ‘puppet coffin’ is out of control,” Bishop Valentine sighed, “and now we will have to reissue a new notice to correct the mistake.”

Vanna rubbed her wrist and looked at the bishop thoughtfully: “The question is... how will we write the announcement. We don’t know anything except the name change for Anomaly 099...”

The old bishop did not speak for a while, apparently he also believed this to be a difficult problem.

Vanna brought back the news from Vision 004, but the news only pertained to the name change. Perhaps she had indeed heard more detailed information from the tomb owner, but that’s been deliberately left out so it’s never coming out.

“At this stage, we can only first announce the situation that Anomaly 099 has been renamed from ‘puppet coffin’ to ‘puppet doll’. At the same time, modify all the characteristics of Anomaly 099 to ‘there may be changes,’” Valentine said after a long silence. “It is an anomaly within the hundred ranks. There will be a chain reaction once triggered. Likely, the sealing conditions are also different now. If we continue to treat it as the old version, something bad and big will surely happen...”

Vanna nodded silently.

For a while, the watery chamber grew eerily awkward without any of the two speaking. Eventually, after an unknown amount of time, the lady finally broke the tension: “... All visions and anomalies are numbered from Vision 004’s messages, right?”

“Of course,” Valentine nodded, “why did you suddenly ask this?”

“I was thinking... the unknown corpses in that mausoleum, the gravekeeper who always remains quiet during the venture, who the hell are they...” Vanna pondered thoughtfully, “They are clearly not humans, nor of the real world. I know they’re not gods or foul creatures of the subspace either... so why can a vision interact with the outside world and help us this way? And the lists, how is the owner of the tomb able to determine the criteria?”

Valentine waited until the lady finished her questions before issuing a long sigh. Then with an old and solemn face: “This is your first time entering the tomb, and like many others, they too would have similar questions after they leave it. Unfortunately, we have no more answers than you after all these years.”

“I remember that you also entered that mausoleum.” Vanna turned her head and stared at the old bishop curiously, “What information did you bring out back then? Is it also related to anomalies or visions?”

“Not really,” Valentine shook his head, “although most of the time the mausoleum announces things related to the supernatural, but in actual fact, the owner of the tomb will occasionally convey meaningless messages. No one knows for sure what the message will be, and the only way is to enter

the tomb. But one thing is certain, what the tomb owner says will always be true...”

Vanna didn’t remove her gaze because she knew there was more to this juicy story: “Then what information did you bring out that time....?”

The old bishop got all troubled and tied inside: “It wasn’t something useful, just... just a prediction...”

The old bishop’s evasive intention was obvious, but Vanna was a persistent lady. She could smell the prize: “What exactly is it, the specifics?”

Valentine shot a helpless look at his younger compatriot and spread his hands: “On the seventh month of the twenty-fourth, Pland’s weather will be sunny with a six degrees difference in the southeast...”

Vanna: “...?” ”

“Don’t look at me like that. Sometimes it’s like that,” Valentine facepalmed in embarrassment, “anomalies and visions are unpredictable, and this ‘unpredictability’ will manifest itself in all kinds of places. I happen to catch one of those unpredictability... If you’re going to laugh then can you turn around at least? I’m getting too old...”

“I’m sorry,” Vanna’s face stretched into a tense line of contorted laughing muscle. Quickly turning herself away from the old bishop, she silently giggled to her heart’s content. “But to be honest, I’m a little envious of you. At least your turn got enough information to know it’s a sunny day. I, on the other hand, don’t even know if the news is bad or good.”

.....

On the edge of the upper city, in an older single-family house, Heidi, the psychologist, looked at her father with a slightly cramped expression. “... So, you visited the student’s home two days ago and spent several hours chatting with the student’s parents. From that meeting, you spent a total of 20 minutes talking about the student’s situation, then when you left, you

paid more than 3,000 solas to buy an old dagger and a fake crystal pendant made of glass?!”

Morris sat behind the table with the fake pendant sitting on top with the tag removed. He’s sweating like a little child that’s made a mistake. “But the pendant didn’t cost money, it’s a giveaway...”

“..... Isn’t it more problematic for you to treat it as a birthday present for me?!” Heidi couldn’t help but facepalm herself, “You even pretended that you carefully selected this...”

Morris thought about the issue seriously before spreading his hand helplessly: “I really can’t find a second real thing in that store, so I had nothing else to pick...”

Heidi: “...”

After confronting each other for a few seconds, the daughter finally deflated: “Forget it, it’s not the first time anyway... Why do you always fall prey to scammers?”

“I didn’t suffer a loss this time! It was Mr. Duncan who suffered!” Morris protested immediately, “I bought that dagger for twenty percent cheaper than the market price...”

Heidi was shaking her head and sighing when she suddenly showed a stunned face after hearing the name: “The owner of that antique store is called Duncan?”

“Ah, yes, his name is Duncan,” Morris said casually. “It has always been rumored that he is an alcoholic plus gambler, but after actual contact, I found that it was really just a rumor. That harmful gossip is outrageous. The man is clearly a humorous and knowledgeable person.... Huh? Why do you have this face? Is there something wrong with the name?”

Heidi opened her mouth and hesitated for a moment before speaking: “Aigh, I have been in contact with a very tricky ‘case’ recently, which happens to be related to this name. I got a little nervous when I heard it.”

“This is a very common name so don’t fret,” Morris nodded, but then he grew a little concerned. “What kind of case is it?”

“It’s not your specialty, don’t ask. It certainly can’t be the same person anyway.” Heidi waved her hand, “Can a frightening ghost captain and a store owner who runs an antique shop in the lower city be the same person?”

“Well, if you say it like that,” Morris sighed with relief when he heard this. He knew his daughter often assisted city hall and even the church in dealing with some dangerous cases as an advisor. Sometimes even related to the transcendent in rare occasions where her skill was needed. Relaxing his posture, he gazes down at the crystal pendant on the table, “Then do you still want this pendant...?”

“Yes! Of course I want!” Heidi snatched the pendant on the table, “It’s not easy to get a gift from you, even if it is a giveaway...”

Morris pondered the issue again and suggested: “... Actually, you can pretend that I bought you a pendant for more than three thousand solas, and that dagger is a giveaway, if that helps~”

Heidi glanced at her father while putting the pendant around her neck: “If you really did spend three thousand solas on this scam, I will tie you to my treatment room for therapy!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 107

Chapter 107 “Super Contagious”

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The gentle waves slowly rose and fell while the Vanished sailed across the surface of the Boundless Sea. After many days of this, the ancient ghost ship remains lost and can't find a beacon or island to pinpoint its location.

There seems to be no end to the long, arduous journey; nevertheless, its captain still has many things to do despite the woes.

Duncan returned to the captain's bedroom, where the golden sun mask still lay quietly on the table. Alice's affair could come later since the Frost Rebellion happened half a century ago – it's not like he could investigate the topic at a whim either. Rather than chase a distant issue, he has a more pressing matter closely related to himself that he wants to attend to.

Duncan raised his head and looked into the mirror hanging from the wall.

The green flame that once coated the reflective surface has long since dissipated, and the distant scene that once appeared in the mirror was gone. However, Duncan could still faintly feel the faint and vague “connection”. It's still there, the channel pointing to the magnificent cathedral in the center of Pland.

This connection gave him a similar feeling to his “connection” with the “Antique Shop Owner” and the “White Oak”, but far weaker, more ethereal. He had to admit, this was more like some secondary channel that was indirect and not under his whim.

Duncan closed his eyes, allowing his consciousness to return to that dark space filled with countless starlights. At the same time, the brass compass hanging from Ai's neck also opened a gap, revealing the faint green flame inside.

Unlike in the previous ventures, he did not perform a "spirit walk" and maintained the critical state of entering and leaving to observe the flowing rays of light shooting across his view.

Firstly, he immediately noticed the brightest "star" among the sea of lights, which pointed to the antique store and represented his other shell. That body was currently cleaning the warehouse and counting the goods in the inventory.

Then through the hazy invisible mist of light, a much larger than normal starlight represented the White Oak appeared. That's a connection he created by colliding with the steamboat with the Vanished.

Lastly, he found the faint and distinguished "star" that represented the newest addition.

Duncan leaned over curiously, wanting to take a closer look at the cluster of stars surrounding it.

But as soon as he got closer, he felt a subtle repulsion spreading out from the cluster of starlight.

The force of this repulsion was not very strong. It seemed to be just a pure firm will to protect itself. Duncan believes that if he forcibly extends the ghost fire, he should be able to burn this subconscious protection down. But he immediately dropped the idea and kept his distance.

The master behind this starlight should be the inquisitor named "Vanna", a storm saint, a powerful transcendent being. Reckless contact may alarm the owner, or worse, even the "god" standing behind the saint.

Without knowing much about the gods of this world, Duncan was not yet ready to take the risk.

On the other hand, this faint sense of rejection may also be a reminder to him that these stars have their differences.

He didn't feel repulsion when he first occupied the shell of that "sacrifice", and he didn't feel repulsion when he occupied the shell of the newly dead cultist "Ron", so why was there such repulsion around Vanna's starlight now?

Is it because she is still "alive"? Or is it that everyone has an instinctive drive to resist erosion from outside forces? Or perhaps... her faith and blessing are sheltering her?

Duncan stepped back a little, pondering the meaning of this discovery while trying to slowly extend his hand to the other cluster of starlight nearby. But he stopped at the last moment.

There was no sense of rejection.

Then he tried many more times at the other clusters, and each star never rejected his approach. Sometimes, he even sensed something new... an "element".

It's a vivid form of life, the instinctive trembling that cowers before the shadow of irresistible death.

Returning to a corner of the dark area where the stars could not shine, Duncan rubbed his finger to summon a faint spark of the ghost flame.

From the look of things, the increased number of times he spirit walked, the control and perception of this world increased as well. Now, he could even sense the existence of life from those starlights!

Duncan frowned, then looked off into the distant darkness where mystique and wonder awaited.

Out of caution, he had never explored beyond his means before, hence the misnomer that the starlights are all representations of corpses that had just died. But now, that's clearly not the case.

There were not only the dead but also the living in these starlights.

The “Inquisitor” named Vanna was also among these stars, and she was certainly a living person without a doubt.

That... does the countless starlight here represent all the living and dead in the world?

Duncan furrowed his brow at the theory, wondering if that was plausible. But then he quickly shook his head to dismiss such an idea. It’s too early to draw such a conclusion.

Although there are a lot of stars here, although the population of this world is far less than on Earth, but within the scope of the eye, those starlights should not be able to match the population of this world. Besides, how would the stars define the number of the dead? There’s also the White Oak here, a ship without the essence of life.

But regardless of how the starlight here connects to the real world, one thing is clear: the vast majority of starlight will not show repulsion to Duncan’s approach, only the light of Vanna, the “saint”, has the self-protective response to him.

Perhaps this is due to the god she believes in.

Duncan now got interested in the power of “faith”. It’s a powerful force no doubt, but it also had a loophole he could exploit.

Now then, there was only one question he had left to answer: when and how was this connection established?

Duncan pondered carefully in the dark, thinking about what encounter he might’ve had with the inquisitor to create this channel. After some elimination and speculation, he soon arrived at one extremely bold idea.

Could it be that the first sacrifice that I possessed?!

Duncan recalled back to the first time he set foot on the land of Pland. He made a fuss at the venue and promptly left the scene shortly afterward. The

event made it to the news as well. As it so happens, the paper reported that it was Inquisitor Vanna who oversaw the captured cultists who remained at the scene.

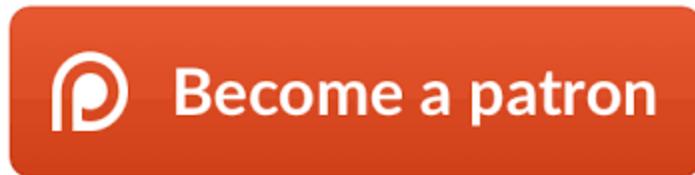
“This... is that how?!” The more Duncan thought about it, the more plausible the theory got. He couldn’t help but stare at his hands in amazement, stunned by how easily he managed to penetrate into someone of such authority. “I might as well call myself the master of infections at this rate... I’m worse than those apocalyptic zombie films on Earth....”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 108

Chapter 108 “The Illusory Scorching Sun”

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Duncan was now beginning to understand why the world would be so afraid of the Vanished. Because, in a sense, this “mobile natural disaster” that was him and the ship really was like a plague.

In a dark and chaotic space, Duncan quietly stared at the dancing flames in his hands, feeling the power contained in the fire that remained extremely docile to him.

Fire is the most special existence in the world – it's not only a carrier of light and warmth but also a guarantee for the development of mortal civilization amid crises. The gods' blessing on the poor souls living in this challenging world.

And like in most fields involving the supernatural, “fire” occupies a unique position and role. In this case, his ghost flames seem to faintly carry something exceptionally dangerous... a characteristic even the transcends of this world couldn't defend against.

From the currently known information alone, the ghost fire has the property of polluting and distorting supernatural items, could also be used to occupy the shell of the dead, and could hide in the souls of the living. Even the power of saints cannot completely remove it – as long as the right time is right, the flame will burn in the soul and establish a secret passage to the Vanished

This was equivalent to a plague that's almost imperceptible and incapable of being eradicated. At least for now, the power of the so-called “saints” has

little effect in the face of this flame.

Duncan exhaled softly.

Now he doesn't know when this weak connection between himself and Vanna would come in handy, but at least for now, it seems that with just the right "medium" and some kind of "opportunity", he could directly see and hear the situation around the saint. This was something he deduced after peeping from the mirror inside the lady's room, a scum and perverted move, but who's looking?

As for what exactly would be the appropriate "medium" and "opportunity"... The former could temporarily determine that "mirrors" and "flames" are suitable carriers of projection. (or in the "professional term" of the transcends, they're called "ritual props")

"... Instead, it may connect them with the Vanished..." Duncan recalls the words he heard when the connection suddenly became established.

"The word "Vanished..."

Duncan had limited knowledge of the transcendent's world, but when it came to names, it always held a special place in all the stories. And as it so happens, the name Duncan Abnomar and the "Vanished" had power in this world.

There was no need for further speculation. He's got the answer he wanted. The carrier was Vanna, and the activation key was the ship's name Vanished. So long as there's a mirror or flame when the criteria are met, he would instantly get strengthened feedback from the inquisitor and one-sidedly peep at the lady.

The thoughts in his heart gradually calmed down, and Duncan also withdrew his gaze from the "stars" in the distance.

He had no friction with the Storm Church or the young lady inquisitor; therefore, he did not intend to use this connection to harm the other party or

do nefarious acts. However, if this connection could bring him some valuable information every so often... then it's not a bad thing either.

The dark and chaotic space and the sparkling light faded like flowing water, and Duncan opened his eyes again to find that he had "returned" to his bedroom.

The golden mask, modeled after the sun, remains quietly there on the table with Ai napping next to it.

He did send the bird to chat with the bored goat head earlier, but it appears the latter didn't like the company and sent her back.

After a slight hesitation, Duncan reached out and picked up the sun mask.

Although he had some hiccups and unexpected encounters along the way, but things are now finally back on track. It's time he studied this sun relic.

He first flipped the mask back and forth several times to confirm the details of the shape and the specific material used. While examining the item, he suddenly noticed that a corner of the mask seemed to be chipped.

The broken part faintly reveals a dark color.

Duncan frowned, and in the next second, the pigeon that was still napping on the table before suddenly jerked open its eyes. With a flap of her wings and a loud chirp: "Copper-plated! Copper plating on metal!"

As soon as Duncan heard the words from this dove's mouth, the chipped part on the mask instantly became more of an eye-sore. Quickly picking the spot with his nail to study it further, he finally came to a conclusion that left his face defeated.

It really is goddamn copper plated on iron! This thing is not even gold-plated!

The proof was the green spots in some areas. The mask has been rusting after spending time against the salty air.

“Isn’t this a scam!?” The psychological gap between fortune to misfortune made Duncan lose his cool and mutter in disgust. He felt frustrated at the value of this mask. Whatever plan he had of reselling the sacred relic afterward just went out the window. “Can they even do this? Isn’t a sacred relic of a cult supposed to be precious and important? Even if it is a mass-produced one, but still....”

Ai rolled her eyes at Duncan’s muttering, fluttered her wings and shouted, “Are you daft? How can you be so shameless?”

Duncan took a long moment to arrive at an understanding of what the bird meant this time. She’s clearly referring to the antique shop where it’s filled with nothing but fakes.

“You shut up....” The ghost captain mopes and deflates.

After that, he stopped paying attention to the bird next to him and instead focused on the golden mask. Once confirmed the item was nothing but a worthless mass-produced thing of modern factories, he intended to go all out in his following tests.

A cluster of faint green flames rose up at the fingertip, covering the surface of the mask-like flowing water once he touched it. Then gradually, the ethereal green flame penetrated and seeped into the iron relic.

Mass-produced holy relics are still holy relics. Even if the real material of this thing was iron and copper, the runes inscribed inside it aren’t. Since the sun priests could use this thing to communicate with their “god”, it means that he too could analyze the secrets according to the properties of a supernatural item.

Duncan has considerable experience in the field of transcendent objects, and his main experience was setting fire to Alice’s coffin box—the most recent test proved to be most effective.

Feeling the flames gradually invading the mask inside, Duncan also concentrated his mind and begun to perceive the information that this item might contain.

This was a mass-produced thing, and its “characteristics” would certainly not be comparable to Alice’s puppet coffin. Nevertheless, Duncan believes it wouldn’t be long before he understood its function and secrets. Perhaps even reverse engineer the product and usurp it for his own use.

With this thought, he spied deep into the mask for the truth. But in the next second, things quickly spiraled beyond his expectations!

A thunderous explosion suddenly rocked his mind as if his intervention blew open a passage. As he pushed open the door, vast overflows of searing pictures poured outwards, causing him to wince in pain at the feeling.

It might be just a second, maybe even shorter, but eventually, flashes about a fiery fireball appeared. It hung in the dark space alone, dead and unmoving like a corpse that’s been forgotten for eons.

This was a real burning sun constantly releasing a huge gravitational force of a stellar body.

In the astonishing heat and tearing gravity, Duncan faced the scorching star. He did not burn under its might because what he saw was nothing more than a phantom of the past, a bygone era that’s no longer relevant or dangerous to the present world.

Duncan stared at this round burning orb in amazement until it eventually spun to the other side. Then, he saw it, the grotesque truth of this star.

On the back of the sun, there are billions of dark, pale fleshly tentacles curled up and withered together. They made up the outline of a pupil that was partly closed in the manner of the deceased. Whatever living creature this false star was, it’s obviously been dead for an unknown amount of time.

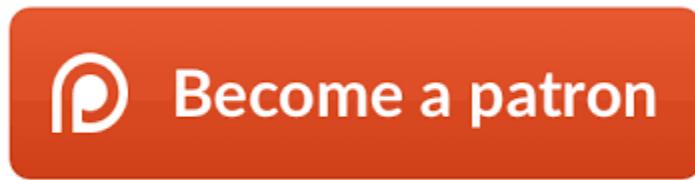
“Usurper of the flame... Extinguish me... Please...” A faint, ethereal, even hallucinatory voice sounded in Duncan’s ears.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 109

Chapter 109 “The Fire Usurper”

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A sudden sensation of a violent fall quickly stripped Duncan’s spirit from the scorching creature. He didn’t get to react at all when the grotesque giant left his view, but eventually, he found himself back in the chair of his captain’s bedroom.

The man’s trembling, shaken by the sea of bloodied flame that’s still fresh in his mind.

After a few more seconds of silence and loss, he finally managed to calm his unsettled head to mutter the echoing words.

“Usurper of the flame, extinguish me, please...”

Duncan frowned, sure he had not misheard the whispering words.

This is..... that round “sun” conveying his wish to me? That thing detected my snooping and sent an SOS for help?

Duncan rubbed his temple, contemplating the implications of this distress signal.

Undoubtedly, that “thing” was what the followers of the “Ancient True Sun” worshipped, what they called the “real sun”.

To be honest, in the brief moment when he first saw it, Duncan really felt a stir in his heart at how incredible the star appeared. However, no matter

how amazing and incredible it looked from his angle, it was still not the sun he remembered from Earth....

Sure, the front end appears exactly like the cosmic-powered stars he knew as an earthling, blazing and burning, but the back side was a darn eyeball!

Then Duncan recalled back to the pale and dull tentacles withered around the pupils.

The “creature” wrapped in the sun’s shell does not seem to be in very good condition....

In truth, Duncan had no question of the creature being dead. There’s an intense breath of death oozing out of the body. Even from a distance, the sense of lifelessness was undeniable.

It was simply a burning corpse of an ancient god.

And the corpse of the ancient god was asking him for help, hoping that someone could come and extinguish the flame on his body.

It’s a truly contradicting and horrific notion, but in a world without logic, this somehow seemed fitting.

Duncan sorted out his confused thoughts little by little, recalling in that brief moment of voyeurism that he performed, another interesting point had popped up. That was, the sun called Duncan the usurper of the flame.

Is that indescribable mass of flesh really calling out to me? Did it really sense my approach? Or is it just randomly murmuring out?

If the cry for help was really addressed to himself though, then the intent and meaning couldn’t be anymore obvious.

Duncan lowered his head and gently rubbed his fingers, watching a cluster of green flame burning quietly at the tip, ready to usurp the other paranormal powers out there.

In the next second, he dispersed the ghost fire in his hand.

Regardless of whether the “sun” was really speaking to himself, this was not something he could tackle as of now. The group of cultists in the Pland city-state are still hiding in the shadows, and he has no ability or position to deal with the “sun god” behind the gang of cultists.

What’s more, how could he know how to “help” that burning sun? Rely on this little ghost fire to burn that big piece of thing? He couldn’t burn it even if he exhausted himself! Besides, the other party was just asking for help from himself, which does not mean the thing was “his own ally”. God knows what will happen after extinguishing the fire on the sun’s body. What if the flame was some kind of seal? What then? The giant creature wouldn’t necessarily return the favor like a human would. In fact, based on the way the cultists acted, he’s more worried the creature would destroy him after the act.

It’s simply not wise to casually deal with a god-like thing without knowledge.

Duncan shook his head and sighed in his heart over how little he knew.

Perhaps, I will never see the real “sunshine” in this world again.

The golden mask, modeled after the sun, still rested quietly on the table, its surface a little dull after his little venture. Picking it up, he traced the shape’s outlines with his fingertip until a faint cracking sound hit his ear.

The item was made out of iron with a layer of copper on the surface. Yet, it had started to corrode and decay like it had been through a million years of weathering. Before Duncan knew it, the mask in his hand had disintegrated to dust.

Ai jumped over, spreading her wings in front of Duncan and gesturing: “Happy, pop, gone!”

Duncan didn’t care about the bird’s nagging behavior because he had a vague understanding over the outcome.

This mask was just a fake after all, a “mass production holy relic”. There’s no way it wouldn’t have side effects.

“Maybe I’ll have to find a way to get the real thing in the future...”

Looking at the ashes floating in the air, Duncan said thoughtfully. “This thing can’t even burn for three seconds at this rate...”

He didn’t really plan to “save” any sun god, but he was still quite interested in the secrets kept by the sun cultists. Moreover, he was also curious about the history before the Great Annihilation since he believed some extraordinary answer awaited him there.

But as all researchers know, science requires great funding, and these cult sheeps should be able to provide him with plenty of wool to sell.

After a short break and regaining his spirit, Duncan left his bedroom.

The goat head, who was in a daze at the mapping table, immediately turned his head when he heard the movement from the bedroom. He first confirmed whether the dove had come alone or not, then when he saw Duncan, the statue noticeably heaved a relieved sigh. “Ah, great captain, your most loyal first mate is here at your service and has kept a firm grip on the helm on your behalf. May I know if your long journey has gone well? I sensed your soul going off to a faraway place again, but it doesn’t seem to be a city-state of humans. If you want to go far next time, you can actually in advance....”

“How much do you know about the ‘true sun god’ that those sun followers believe in?” Duncan waved his hand and asked bluntly.

After getting along with this goat head for a while, he has become more and more graspful of the other party’s temperament. Not only was Duncan more confident in his “captain status”, but he was also no longer as cautious when speaking with the statue unless it’s directly related to the Vanished. Everything else could be casually asked like now.

“Real Sun God?” The goat head became startled for a moment and then hesitated, “Honestly, I don’t know much. I only know that those followers

of the Sun God are crazy and stupid. As to the god's identity behind them... I don't have a clue. However, the blessing those mad fools get is indeed real. It does exist. It's the main reason their religion can spread so widely and far throughout the years....”

While speaking, the goat head gradually noticed the oddity: “Ah, why did you suddenly mention this? Did you just...”

“I was just thinking, what would those believers do if they found out the so-called god they worshipped was in fact being roasted by them. Their effort and overtime to get the blessing is nothing more than the byproduct of the corpse oil that leaked out.... Wouldn't that be ironic?” Duncan leisurely and confidently states, “Talk about one hell of a sadistic joke.”

A long silence swept across the mapping room, with the goat head not daring to follow up on that shocking subject. In the end, it was Duncan who broke the calm with an inquisitive look at the response: “Why aren't you talking? Normally you would be commenting on this and that by now.”

The goat head spoke with defeat: “The topic is too intense... I don't dare to add my opinion to it. I can only say the captain is wise...”

Duncan grew quite happy at one-upping the statue.

He didn't know if it was an illusion on his part, but this goat head's evil and dangerous image no longer seemed so strong. In fact, everything on the ship was changing according to his perception. How to say it, more lively and better?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 110

Chapter 110 “Coincidence”

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In the antique shop of the lower city, Duncan sits behind the counter with a weekly newspaper in his hand while reading the content. Suddenly, his eye blinked. Then from the somewhat dull eyes came a focused glint, followed by the fast flipping of the newspaper to the front page.

The headlines on the front were marked by the recent events in the city-state—His Excellency Valentine, Bishop of the Storm Cathedral, would soon preside over a large-scale prayer. The other branches will also partake in the prayers and ring the bells and whistles to bless the city.

And as a warm-up to this event, Administrator Dante Wayne congratulated the church on behalf of the city and offered various gifts last night...

There's also the man's picture printed in the newspaper. It's a serious-looking middle-aged man with gray hair, tall and thin figure with a noticeable scar on his face. One of the eye was also replaced with a prosthetic one. That's clearly a mark of a near-fatal accident.

Duncan's gaze slowly scanned the newspaper further and instinctively shifted the image in his mind to that of Inquisitor Vanna's face instead. The lady also had a striking scar on the face near the eye, which didn't effect the sight thankfully.

According to what he knew, the city admin Dante Wayne was the uncle of the lady, and that both scars were the result of what happened eleven years ago. That's when the riot by the cultists happened and the factory leak at the sixth block. It's also the main reason both uncle and niece became such avid

supporters of the Storm Church and actively fought to quell cult activities. They're also victims of those filths.

This information wasn't a secret in the city-state, something that could be found in official records and folk rumors. That's how Duncan learned of it, by casually inquiring the neighbors and strangers.

Another eleven years ago, and again the “factory leak” in the sixth block...

Duncan silently turned the newspaper to the next page, gathering and combing through the various details he had been collecting in the recent period.

Fragments of the sun, the fire in his niece's memory, Nina's recent nightmares, the accident that happened to Inquisitor Vanna and Admin Dante, and the girl "Shirley" who seems to be investigating the truth and has an unknown origin... All these things revolved around the "factory leak" in the sixth block eleven years ago, and now the Sun Cultists are in the city again. He also learned of the sun god being a god-like creature that imitates a sun... and the thing was still seeking help from the outside!

Duncan didn't intend to deal with the sun god yet, but he did get a little worried that this nameless fire might end up catching Nina and burning his niece when he was not watching.

To remedy this, he had ordered Ai to scout the city early in the morning today, so it would be a while before the bird returned. As for Nina, the girl was busy packing her books upstairs right now to leave for school. It's getting lively in the morning with people passing his shop every second, a vitality he enjoyed.

"Uncle! I'm going to school!" Nina rushes down the stairs while carrying her schoolbag over her shoulder. She also has a piece of bread prepared for lunch based on the wrapping he's able to see.

"Run slowly, don't fall. It's still early you know." Duncan glanced at the girl helplessly and then remembered something, "By the way, today is your day to visit the museum?"

“Yes! I made an appointment with a classmate!” Nina turned to face him with a bright smile, “I won’t come back to eat lunch and will go directly to the museum with my classmate. You find something to eat on your own Uncle.”

“Got it,” Duncan smiled and waved his hand, “and slow down. Don’t rush and pay attention to the cars on the road...”

“Okay, goodbye, Uncle!” With the girl’s crisp shout and brisk footsteps, followed by the jingle of the bell at the door, Nina’s figure was gone and out of Duncan’s sight.

She crossed the road in front of the antique shop and raced into the morning light of Pland.

Alone again, Duncan recalled back to the previous “home visit” made by Mr. Morris and what was discussed: Nina had few friends at school, and most of her classmates didn’t like to deal with her.

But even if she has few friends, it seems that there are one or two classmates who have a good relationship with her. They’re willing to invite her to the museum so that’s good. Nina also seems to be happy right now, which is of course a good sign.

He inquired yesterday, and the classmate who was going to the museum with Nina was a quiet girl who also lived in the lower city. The two had only recently become friends and had a good relationship.

Duncan put the newspaper in his hand down and mused about what to do next. There won’t be anyone home until the evening, and today was another weekday so there shouldn’t be any business in the shop.

It’s a bit of a waste to stay here and look after the place when no one’s going to visit. Maybe I can go around the city, and perhaps.... investigate something.

First sending an order to Ai’s location so that the bird would continue her search while he went out, Duncan put on his coat and hung the temporary

rest sign at the door before locking up the shop.

There were many people at the bus station when he arrived due to the peak hours for people traveling to work and school. Mixing in easily with the crowd, he first looked up the routes at the map hanging from the wall. His destination today would be the sixth block where the factory leak occurred according to official records.

Once he was sure of how to get there, Duncan withdrew his gaze and waited patiently in the crowd. Buses came and went, and several steam-powered buses took half of the people on the platform by the time his ride came around. The rumbling and bustling steam contraption didn't give him much sense of reassurance in case of a fire, but he's not one to judge.

Duncan followed the large crowd into the car and quickly found himself squished between others. He didn't get a seat of course. Those were mostly reserved for the kids and ladies. Ultimately, he pushed his way into a corner near the backdoor and waited patiently for the bus to start.

The severely overloaded car started with the hoarse and laborious roar of the steam mechanism, a signal for the conductor to begin the difficult job of collecting the fares from the riders. By the time the conductor got to Duncan, the poor fella had already been through the washer in how messy his dark blue uniform had become.

"The sixth block," Duncan flashed a friendly smile to the conductor.

However, the conductor was visibly stunned after hearing Duncan's answer and asked again to confirm, "Huh? Where are you going?"

Duncan frowned: "The sixth block. I see the line is going that route. Isn't the bus going there?"

The conductor was stunned again and then looked up at the road map posted on the carriage next to him. Quickly nodding like a dream: "Oh, oh, of course, we are going there. It's just that no one usually goes there so I forgot... Four solas."

Nobody usually goes to the sixth block? Eleven years have passed since the incident, and the area around that factory has not been rebuilt?

Duncan had some doubts in his heart, but he quietly bought the ticket and watched the conductor squeeze through the army of passengers like a warrior again.

The next step was to wait silently for the bus to arrive at the destination.

But at this moment, he suddenly felt a pair of eyes spying on him. It's brief and hardly more than a glance, but Duncan's sure it's not an accident. There's fear and a desire to dodge him based on his perception, which makes the ghost captain even more intrigued.

In the next second, he saw a small figure trying to flee to the back of the sea of riders.

Both of their eyes met in that instant, the latter freezing on the spot like a wooden statue.

It was a girl in a black dress, who looked about the same age as Nina, and wore a peculiar collar around her neck with a small bell hanging from the collar....

It's Shirley.

Duncan slowly came to the other party like this and greeted the girl with a smile: "We meet again. This time, are you going to school?"

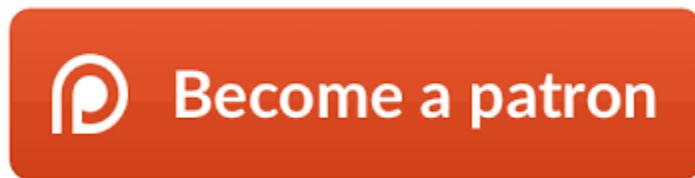
Shirley somehow dared to squeeze out a smile there. Although she once said that she wanted to hug the big guy's thigh in front of the dog, but after realizing Duncan's horror, her smile had become uglier than crying. "You... Hello..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 111

Chapter 111 “Big Boss’s Preaching”

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The bus during rush hour had always been crowded. If one’s lucky then you might be able to stand at a spot without being squished, but in this occasion, there’s hardly any space left to maneuver at all. As a result, Shirkey’s pipsqueak like stature were forced into a pinch like a helpless hamster caught inside a trap. She’s teary and sobbing inside at her inability to flee.

If Duncan hadn’t seen with his own eyes on how she smashed a room of cultists with a dog in hand, he would surely have bought that innocent and harmless act.

He slowly squeezed over to Shirley’s side and used his own adult figure to loosen a corner for them both to talk. Sadly, this didn’t get repaid with a look of thanks, only further shaking and fear in that face.

“What are you so afraid of?” He asks while glancing down, “I’m not going to eat you alive.”

Shirley cried: “You... actually want to cook me first?”

Duncan: “...”

He could probably guess why the girl was so afraid; after all, Dog had seen through some of the “real him” under his human disguise. No doubt the other party had passed on the terrifying discovery to the girl and left a deep impression on the latter.

Duncan had no idea what sort of demon lord type of image he had in Shirley's mind, likely the same type a boat captain would have when meeting the Vanished out at sea. Usually it's about writing a will in haste to leave some last words for the family, but even that was a wishful desire because such a will would normally sink to the bottom of the sea.

"Is that dog with you now?" Duncan asks after recalling about the dark hound that should be somewhere.

"Ah... Dog usually hides in a place where others can't see..." Shirley gulped and replied uncooperatively, then lowered her voice again, "But he does know about what's happening here with me..."

"Oh, I'll say hello then," Duncan nodded, "I still had a lot of questions when you departed last time."

As soon as these words came out, he felt Shirley shudder some more like a frightened rabbit...

"Relax," Duncan sighed helplessly. He seemed to have vaguely sensed a stressed gaze coming his way from the girl's shadow, "There's no need to be so tense around me when talking. I have no ill will towards you and Dog."

"That... That's good to know..." Shirley nodded stiffly. Then as if to deliberately appear more relaxed, she tries to find a topic until her gaze falls on Duncan's shoulder, "You... You didn't bring your dove with you this time?"

"Pets are not allowed in the car," Duncan said casually, "and I let her go hunting."

"Let the dove out to... hunt?" Shirley looked at Duncan dumbfounded. Broken for words, the girl nodded vehemently, "Ah right, you're absolutely right. The dove is quite suitable for hunting since her eyes can see so much while flying..."

Shirley's train of thought had started to wander off in weird ways to the point where she didn't even know what she was spouting anymore. Eventually, it was the conductor's voice from the front of the carriage that interrupted the rambling: "Sixth block! Who is getting off the bus?"

When the conductor's shout came, Shirley was obviously relieved as she jumped to her feet at the rescue. She shouted back to answer the conductor and squeezed forward while making sure to bid farewell to Duncan. "I'm getting off here. It was great seeing you again today..."

Then before she could finish speaking, the poor child saw Duncan also squeezing over with a face that was like a demon toying with a soul.

"I'm stopping here too," Duncan said expressionlessly.

Shirley instantly took on a twitching expression on her face. Knowing that it would be inappropriate to say that she didn't want to get out of the car now would be impossible. The big guy might be playing a prank on her, but she really didn't want to test the theory.

The girl filled in the missing parts on her own and grew more fearful than ever. When the conductor started to urge them to get off after the delay, she actually shrunk her neck in and began to march towards the exit with a look of demise.

"Wait a minute, kid, did you buy a ticket?" The conductor suddenly asks out of the blue.

Shirley was stunned for a moment, looking at the conductor in the dark blue uniform with some disbelief. Clearly, the lass never expected someone to ask her for a fare, which didn't go unnoticed by the conductor. "You didn't buy a ticket, I remember now...."

"I know this child. She may have just lost the ticket," Duncan's voice suddenly came from the side, "I'll buy one for her."

The conductor turned her head to look at Duncan suspiciously, then back at Shirley with a skeptical face. In the end, she just nodded and accepted this

arrangement since it's none of her business to pry. "Okay then."

Duncan took out a few coins to make up for Shirley before following the other party out of the carriage to an empty old station.

The entire bus was packed with passengers, yet only the two of them got off in the sixth block.

Duncan first scanned the surroundings, but what he saw was only the most ordinary scene of the downtown neighborhood. Although the surrounding buildings were older, and there were not many pedestrians on the pavement near the station, it was nevertheless not as completely dilapidated as he had imagined. The old frontage shops were also opening as one would expect normally, and the sparse pedestrians were also walking the streets with an infrequent vibe.

Overall, it's a secluded, underdeveloped neighborhood, but nothing strange or out of the norm.

The factory leak accident that happened here eleven years ago seems to have left some residual effects. Still, the extent of the impact is not as serious as I thought...

After taking a general look around the surroundings, Duncan withdrew his gaze and shifted it to Shirley again. The girl didn't try anything after leaving the car, only motionlessly standing there like a small trapped animal in a cage. Truly a person that's given up on resisting and leaving it up to fate.

Duncan couldn't help but want to chuckle when he saw the other party's well-behaved and harmless appearance. If he hadn't been baptized by the fighting heroism of this violent girl, he might really have been blinded by her harmless appearance.

He shook his head to dismiss the humorous thoughts: "So why are you visiting the sixth block?"

Shirley immediately straightened up: "I... I heard it has a great view!"

Duncan eyed the girl up and down: “I’ve wanted to ask since earlier. You’re... pretending to be well-behaved, right?”

“I... I’m not pretending!” Shirley stood even straighter than she had just now, “I’ve always been very well-behaved!”

Duncan shook his head, not wanting to point out how poorly the child’s acting was. Turning to look over at the distant street, he spoke in a seemingly casual tone: “Eleven years ago.... There was a factory leak here. They say that cultists were behind the accident.”

Shirley blinked with confusion: “Why did you suddenly mention this?”

“Enough. Why play the fool? You were inquiring about the event from eleven years ago during the gathering with those suntists.” Duncan shot a sideway glance to check her reaction before starting forward, “This is the place where the leak occurred, according to the official records anyways.”

Shirley was stunned for a moment, then quickly kept up with the man’s pace from the rear with those short little legs, “Are you also investigating the matter from eleven years ago?!”

It seems that after confirming the big guy really doesn’t eat people (at least not for the time being), and the two sides have the same purpose, she had also grown a little more bold.

“That’s right, I’m a little interested.” Duncan nods noncommittally to only stop a few steps later. Turning to look at Shirley with a curious light, “Do you often evade bus fairs?”

Shirley literally dropped her jaws: “I...”

Duncan knew what was going on as soon as he saw the girl’s expression. Shaking his head: “It’s not good to avoid paying your fares.”

Shirley almost cried when she heard this. She’s been lectured by Dog in the past, by the neighbor’s uncle and aunties, and even by the police of the city, yet she never would’ve imagined one day she would be lectured by an evil

god-like entity about a bus fare! When did bigwigs of the shadows become so high and mighty this year?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 112

Chapter 112 “Rundown Street”

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The temporary calm as the two walked together did not bring any peace to Shirley's mind; instead, it only caused more fear and depression. The girl knew the emotion wasn't entirely her own, but instead it was from Dog, who remained hidden in the shadow.

Dog's scared, and as a result, his emotions are interfering with the host body in a symbiotic manner.

In order to alleviate the oppressive feeling in this silence, she muttered in a low voice: “Actually, I wouldn't have been caught in the past for dodging my bus fare.... Dog will help me hide and get past the conductor...”

“You mean the ‘disguise’ that dark hound made for you?” Duncan raised his eyebrows, remembering that Shirley had used some kind of “disguising” power during the venture into the cult den. From the looks of things, that ability has the power to confuse one's cognitive perception. “It doesn't feel reliable at all. The last time you got caught too, and now this time, the conductor saw through it as well.”

Shirley immediately wanted to protest over the opinion but knew better than to argue. Under normal circumstances, she and Dog's disguise wouldn't fail, but when near a terrifying and horrifying being like Duncan, it's only natural something goes wrong from the immense interference.

Stuffing the resentment of being told her powers are unreliable, Shirley forces a dry laugh and nods: “Ahaha..... you're right, you're absolutely right....”

Duncan shook his head, not caring what thought the child had in mind. Changing the topic again, “Why are you paying attention to the accident from eleven years ago?”

Shirley suddenly fell silent as if not wanting to respond out of instinct. Then pursing her lips, the girl realized there was no point in hiding the truth before this being from subspace. “Actually, it’s nothing special. I’m only trying to understand… things related to my parents…”

After speaking, she quickly added: “An existence like you must find this topic boring. I know, mortal attachment is stupid in your eyes...”

“No, I understand,” Duncan interrupted the girl before she could go further. “Having ties to your family is important.”

Once said, he grew more serious in his face to emphasize he was not lying: “So your parents were involved with the leak back then? Or did they get drawn into the mess by being attacked by the cultists?”

Shirley looked at Duncan with some surprise, not quite understanding why such a boss like him wouldn’t just eat her and show so much compassion. Giving an honest nod: “They went missing eleven years ago… Okay, saying they’re missing is a bit pretentious, they actually died, they died in vain.... Afterward, it was only me and Dog left....”

The girl’s voice weakened into a murmur at recalling these unpleasant memories. Thankfully Duncan had a better sense to let the atmosphere deteriorate further: “How did you and Dog meet? Those sunists say you’re a follower of the Annihilation Sect. Do all believers like you summon shadow demons?”

“I’m no follower of that sect or any sect! I only believe in myself!” Shirley reflexes shouted in denial but quickly corrected her volume to a cultured and polite level again. “Me and Dog… we met eleven years ago.”

Duncan suddenly stopped and stared into Shirley’s eyes: “Eleven years ago? So...”

“It was after the so-called ‘factory leak’.” Shirley quickly stopped, lowered her head and explained, “I can’t remember the specifics, and Dog also said he can’t remember either… He may have been summoned by some annihilation disciple, but the person who summoned him must have been killed by the guardians of the Storm Church. Then before I knew it, I was inexplicably ‘tied’ to Dog as partners…”

Shirley definitely hid a lot of details in how vague she made the story out to be. Even so, Duncan didn’t intend to pry for more since it’s normal to be self-preserving. In the face of an irresistible force like himself, it’s already asking a lot to have the child confide so much without torture and the like.

Duncan shook his head to dismiss the unpleasant feeling inside over the sad story and turned to look around. According to what he noticed, aside from the fact that there are very few locals in the neighborhood, there’s a striking detail of lacking children and young adults. “There are no kids playing on the road at all, only seniors and middle-aged folks are walking about....”

“These old districts are all like this,” Shirley took it for granted and didn’t find it depressing, “those who have the ability have all moved to the Crossroad area. Those that remained were either too old or too poor to afford better housing. On top of that, there’s no school in these parts, so children wouldn’t stay here unless they want to spend an hour or two commuting to the other districts every morning.”

Listening to Shirley’s thoughtful analysis, Duncan just nodded noncommittally.

He could fully relate to the situation. Back on Earth, many parents would leave their kids in the countryside while working in the city to save on expenses. Commuting long distances to attend school was a norm for those without financial backing.

While in thought, Duncan’s gaze suddenly noticed a gray-haired old man sitting in front of a shop closest to them. The old timer was basking in the sun and didn’t bother to hide his intrigue at the strangers who decided to visit his neighborhood.

“Good morning,” Duncan greeted the old man after coming over, “we are from the fourth block. Mind if we ask you a few questions... How do we get to the local church?”

He didn’t really care where the church was. That’s merely an excuse to start a conversation.

“Church? The church has been closed for a while. God knows where the nun ran to,” the old man basking in the sun sobered up a little from his laziness and straightened his back. “It’s strange and rare to find an outsider willing to come here... What is your purpose for this visit?”

“We’re here to see a friend,” Duncan said casually, “is it that rare for someone to come here? Why is that?”

“It’s that damn factory of course.” The old man complained indignantly, seemingly dissatisfied with the deserted state of the neighborhood. “How many years has it been?! The factory is still in that dilapidated state so it’s obvious everyone would avoid this place. Nobody is going to take a chance on a polluted area.”

Duncan and Shirley exchanged a look with each other, surprised by the clear-cut reply. “But I read in an old newspaper that it’s been cleaned up, did it not?”

“That’s what the newspaper says... The city admin also said they will revitalize the industrial zone here as well!” The old man huffs and puffs with discontent, “And the results? The city’s west side is getting worse by the day, and our factory is still in ruins... Let me tell you, this area used to be bustling with life when the factory was still running. Our sixth district was among one of the richest neighborhoods you can find in the lower city, and now things are in the gutters...”

As soon began his rant of complaints, the old man didn’t want to stop because it’s rare to find a pair of strangers willing to listen. Thankfully Duncan didn’t intend to sit around and wait. “By the way, I noticed there are no children at this place.... Did all the young people move away?”

“Move? No one has moved from here in years, you think the rent in the other districts are that affordable?” The old man shook his head, “There are no young folks around because we haven’t had any new children at all, and all the youngsters from back then have grown up....”

The old man sighed, lamenting how far his home had fallen.

“This place hasn’t had a child born for eleven years?!?” Shirley exclaims.

“Eleven years without a newborn?!?” Duncan’s eyes finally widened slightly in surprise, “You’re certain?”

“Do you think I’m lying? I’ve lived here for most of my life,” the old man rolled his eyes, “if I say there’s none, then there’s none. This is all because of that factory leak... the land near it is polluted...”

Duncan didn’t speak and slowly straightened up his posture with a new light in his eyes. He’s certain something’s off about this place now.

Next to him, Shirley was still growing warier of the place and pressed for more information about the factory.

However, the old timer seems to have run out of patience. Waving his hand irritably, he mutters another slew of complaints while skipping around the girl’s desired answer.

“It’s time to go,” Duncan said to Shirley suddenly, distracting the cranky girl from attacking the old man due to the runaround. “Thank you sir for talking to us.”

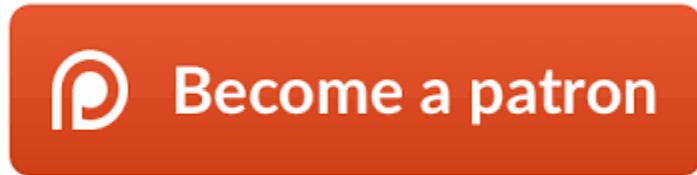
“Oh, you’re welcome,” the old man waved his hand, “be careful and walk slowly.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 113

Chapter 113 “Looking for a fire”

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Shirley seemed a little resentful walking on the road: “Why didn’t that old man answer my question! When I spoke to him, he acted like he hadn’t heard me... Is being short so unvalued?!”

“I think the main reason is not that you are short but that you keep chasing others to ask about the factory.” Duncan slightly turned his head and glanced at the girl, “Instead of wasting time on a local who is unwilling to cooperate, wouldn’t it be better to see the factory with your own eyes?”

Shirley pursed her lips and said nothing more because the factory that had been abandoned eleven years ago was already looming into view at the end of the street.

In the lower urban area, many factories are located near the residential areas or separated from the residential areas by only a wall. The limited land mass and the blockade of the Boundless Sea doomed the city planners to being unable to spare enough land for the placement of industrial facilities. As a result, the concept of “industrial relocation” and “suburban resettlement” doesn’t exist in this world.

Besides, most people in this world have no time to consider what health risks industrial pollution brings. For the general public, the improvement of city-state safety brought about by the development of modern technology was obviously more important compared with the risks brought by factories – gas lamps, heavy firepower, steam networks, potions, and mechanical ships. These things have increased the population of the new city-state era

by nearly three times compared to the old era. Anyone who understands the operation mechanism of the modern world could clearly realize the fact that factories are the foundation and blood of modern civilization. It has long been impossible to separate from the city-state.

In fact, according to Nina's textbook, these factories and facilities were not even clustered in the lower city. Although the city planners are doing their best to move those facilities that are too dangerous to the edge of the city-state, some things still have to be set up in the heart of the city. Take the bell tower and central steam core for example. They're all essentially huge machines, containing terrifying energy and great risk, but they still have to be placed next to the main cathedral.

In Nina's engineering and mechanical textbooks, the authors of the textbook have a special explanation for this: people have to "endow the sacred steam with sanctity", and "rely on the power of the cathedral to ensure the timing of the clock tower". Machines are not just machines, they are also the sacred and pure heart that supports the operation of modern civilization. People should place these pure steels where the gods watch to prevent the shadows of subspace from polluting their oil and bolts.

As Duncan recalled what he read in Nina's textbook, the man couldn't help but sigh inside.

This weird and outrageous world... is constantly challenging my worldview.

Eventually, he and Shirley had arrived outside the grounds of the abandoned factory. There's nothing more than a collapsed wall acting as a barrier between the residential housings, but more striking than that, the perimeter around the factory was a barren wasteland. Nothing was growing here. No grass, no plants, not even the signs of insects crawling about in the dirt.

In a place where every inch of land was worth its weight in gold, it doesn't make sense to leave this plot of land uncared for. The scar from eleven years ago should've been repaired after so long. It's strange that it's been left in this decrepit state.

“The land in the city-state should be very precious,” he said thoughtfully while standing at the edge of the barren land, “it’s unreasonable to leave it like this....”

“Didn’t that old man just explain why? The pollution hasn’t been cleaned up yet...” Shirley didn’t seem to notice how wrong this was, “Some pollutions can only be healed through time and patience.”

“Maybe...” Duncan shook his head, not fully agreeing with the opinion. Then he shifted his gaze between a series of pipes and tanks on the edge of the factory, trying to restore the “original appearance” of the accident that had erupted here in his mind.

He saw several sections had ruptured, and the base of one tank had collapsed, giving the scene an impression of a beast crushing the buildings.

Judging from these images alone, it seems pretty likely that there was a leak here.

But Duncan still furrowed his forehead.

The old man basking in the sun said the residual pollution around the factory had tainted the sixth block, causing there to be no newborns in the past eleven years. Yet, there were no warning signs around the factory nor patrols and guards in place.

That didn’t make sense if the pollution posed that much danger. Although it was not a significant abnormality, these little details still puzzled him.

“Are we...really going in?” Shirley’s voice sounded from the side, and her face seemed a little nervous, “There may be real pollution here...”

“Can’t Dog give you some advice?” Duncan glanced at Shirley, “This place is deserted, and you can let that dark hound come out to breathe. I don’t believe that you are really afraid of the so-called ‘pollution’ here—the tension in your eyes is too fake.”

Dodging Duncan's inspecting gaze, Shirley raised her hand and agreed: "Okay, okay...the main reason is that Dog's condition is not very good..."

As soon as the girl finished speaking, the crackling sound of the flames rang out, followed by a pitch-black flame spreading along her arms until it covered half the body. The flames condensed into chains afterward, and the figure of a hound materialized from the smoke and flames at the end of the chains.

Duncan watched the process curiously, and only after Dog showed up did he smile and nod to the hound: "Long time no see Dog, you ran away quite fast last time."

"We were in a rush, in a rush, don't take it to heart." The hound clamped his tail as soon as he appeared, and when he heard Duncan's voice, his whole body became half an inch shorter. He's carefully lowering his head while trying to contract his limbs, "Do you have any orders? I'm good at many things: grabbing a plate, sweeping the floor, and coaxing a child. I can do a lot...."

Before the dark hound could finish speaking, Shirley had already covered half of her face next to him. It's as if she's implying that finding someone else more cowardly than herself here is embarrassing. On the other hand, Duncan couldn't help but chuckle at this amusing display. Raising his hand, he points to the factory in front: "I don't have any orders. I only want to borrow your eyes for a bit. You're able to see what others can't, right? Take a look at that factory and tell me what's wrong with it."

"Oh, my eyes are enough to warrant your attention, hehe..." Dog immediately went off on his flattery while not forgetting to explain his findings. "I've actually been observing the factory for a while now, and I didn't see anything.... the same as before, an abandoned..."

Dog's voice abruptly stopped, and then he changed his stance into a threatening one while issuing out a low growl. But as quick as he was alarmed, Dog looked back up with a confused shake of the head. Sounding all puzzled: "Huh?"

Seeing this situation, Shirley was a little nervous: “Dog, what did you see?!”

“I... I don’t know. For a moment just now, I seemed to see... a fire? It seemed to be a huge fire, rushing out of the factory like a huge wave, but... it disappeared in the blink of an eye...”

The hound’s voice was full of doubt, but Shirley flew into a rushed excitement: “Are you sure you saw the fire?! Really a huge fire!?”

Dog shook his huge skeleton head: “It’s just a fleeting flash of an image. Maybe it’s an illusion. I’m a shadow demon. It’s normal to occasionally have a little hallucination and be mentally abnormal...”

“But the fire is different!” Shirley said hurriedly, “We searched for so long and finally found the clue leading to that ‘big fire’. There’s no doubt about it Dog, it must be here...”

In the middle of Shirley’s exciting words, she suddenly felt a large hand press down on her shoulder. Tensing into a stiff rock, she slowly turns to face the source, where Mr. Duncan is quietly watching her.

“Why did you react so strongly to the fire?” Duncan looked into Shirley’s eyes and asked slowly.

“I...” Shirley opened her mouth, “It’s nothing...”

“You’re also looking for a fire from eleven years ago, aren’t you?” Duncan didn’t care about the girl’s attempt to change the subject. He had already thought of something due to Shirley’s abnormal reaction just now, “A fire that doesn’t exist in any official records, but you have personally experienced it, right?”

Shirley’s body stiffened some more while she gulped: “You... how could you...”

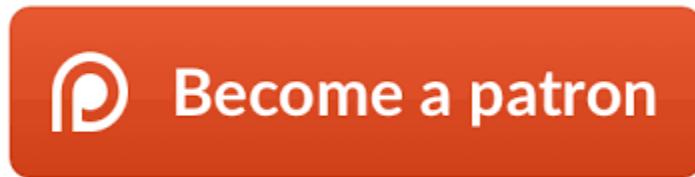
“I’m looking for it too,” Duncan smiled, “it seems I have come to the right place.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 114

Chapter 114 “The Erased Traces”

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In front of the dilapidated and abandoned factory, the dark hound “Dog” gazed at the collapsed factory with those empty eye sockets as if trying to observe the ruins in the real world from another dimension.

Shirley stood beside her partner with a nervous face. It wasn’t until she was confident Duncan wasn’t going to eat her did she ask the hound: “Dog, is there really no ‘residual pollution’ here?”

“If you’re referring to ‘chemical leaks’ in the general term of what people think, then don’t worry, there’s none of that. The pollution was washed away long ago...” A hoarse and deep voice came from the hound’s throat, “But if it’s ‘pollution’ in the supernatural sense of the field, then I can’t say.”

“Did you find anything?” Duncan asked on the side.

“..... No, not really,” Dog lowered his head slightly, “I just saw a moment’s ‘fire’, but now there is nothing. It might just be some kind of ‘reverberation’, a memory left over by the ruins and frozen in time... Many supernatural powers leave similar traces in the real world, but to find out what kind of supernatural power it is... I’m afraid we will have to go in and take a look.”

“Then let’s go in,” Duncan nodded and walked towards a gap in the abandoned fencing, “you two follow behind me.”

Shirley hesitated but still stepped forward to follow. On the other hand, Dog shook his head from side to side to tell himself this was real. Then, as he followed as well with the chains rattling due to the motion, he curiously asked with caution: “You... why are you also interested in what happened eleven years ago? Ah, of course, I’m only asking out of curiosity. A big person like you must have his own plans in mind...”

“Because I’m interested,” Duncan interrupted the hound, “don’t be so nervous in front of me. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Aigh, okay, okay, we’re not nervous, we’re not nervous...”

Hearing the obviously nervous answer from the other party, Duncan just shook his head helplessly. Then shifting his sight to Shirley with a curious look of his own: “You have a big fire in your memory, but only you can remember this fire, right?”

“Mhmm....” Shirley nodded. She had already realized something by this time, “Based on your attitude... you also know about that fire, right? So that fire really existed, didn’t it?”

“..... Yes, I know, so I’m even more curious now about who erased the traces of that fire’s existence.” Duncan lightly nodded in confirmation.

At the same time, his mind was also full of thought – he never thought that things would develop so coincidentally, nor did he expect that there would be a third person in the city-state of Pland who knew about the “fire” besides himself and Nina. His chance encounter with Shirley, the joint investigation between the two sides, the fire that was erased, the hallucination of Dog just now... All these things seem to be pulled together by invisible forces, just like planets revolving around the sun.

This feeling of being manipulated by invisible forces has already made him vigilant.

Nina’s textbook has roughly described some “common sense” in the transcendent field and mentioned that powerful anomalies or visions often have the power to interfere with the development of reality. For example, it

could even lead to certain events like weaving scripts in a play. Also, if there are too many coincidences, then it's no longer a coincidence. All these clues are omens to be wary of, which often means a person involved has been affected by an anomaly or vision without their knowledge.

In the face of this invisible push and influence, my “ghost fire” is effectively useless.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but sneak a glance at Shirley.

The girl and Dog are currently carefully watching for any movement from the ruins of the factory. She seems to have no superfluous and complicated thoughts at all, or maybe it's because of the “big terror” next to herself that's causing this. Regardless, Duncan had no idea why.

“..... This looks like an ordinary ruin...” Dog's low voice interrupted Duncan's thinking, “I don't sense any sign of supernatural power present.”

At this answer, Shirley raised her head and looked up at the crisscrossing pipes and distorted ceiling beams above their heads.

This was the first “room” after they entered the factory, which had been badly damaged in an accident from eleven years ago. Most materials had either been snapped or ripped; now, all that remained was the skeletal structure of the building.

However, except for these traces of an explosion and collapsed structures, there's no trace of a fire though.

“It doesn't look like a fire happened here. I can't find any scorch marks or melted metal,” Shirley muttered thoughtfully.

“Yes, this is the biggest problem,” Duncan's deep voice suddenly came from the side. He had also been watching the environment and found the destruction unfitting. “These damages don't look like they've been through high temperatures, more like a sudden release of a huge force that blew everything apart. All elements of the fire have been erased somehow. It's far too clean to be normal.”

Dog immediately follows on Duncan's deduction: "Yes, the way it looks here now, it's like... all elements related to 'fire' were deliberately erased, but because they were removed too cleanly, they left a more striking mark of a blank."

"Erased...." Duncan muttered softly, then slowly walking deeper into the factory building, eventually finding a twisted hunk of machinery next to a hole in the wall. Immediately, his eyes jerked wide in shock.

Fire! A monstrous fire!

A raging sea of red had risen from the opposite side of the hole connecting to the barren waste outside the factory. Everything was burning, from the air to the ground, nothing was spared. Not the factory, not the streets, and most definitely not the housings. Everything had flared into a billowing smoke of cinder with frenzied crowds fleeing for their lives. Truly a scene straight out of hell itself!

This terrifying and fiery scene caused Duncan to flinch due to the intensity, but in the next second that he blinked, it was gone....

Dog picked up on Duncan's unusual behavior and immediately asked, "What did you find?"

"I saw the fire just now," Duncan replied quietly, "but it's gone again."

"It seems that the reverberation here is very strong," Dog analyzes. "it reproduced again in such a short time period. Only a powerful supernatural force can achieve something like that. If I had to guess, the sun fragment those suntists are looking for did appear at this place before... I wonder what is the rule in triggering this reverberation...."

Duncan didn't say anything. He just slowly returned to the position where he had seen the "echoing remnant of the past" and stared thoughtfully into the hole.

There seems to be nothing here.

After a moment of thought, Duncan suddenly raised his hand and gently rubbed his fingertips, summoning a cluster of green flames from nothing.

Dog reacted instantly at the sight of the green flame. Shrinking his neck in, the hound took several steps back with the chains shaking due to the shivering bones. Likewise, Shirley also backed off with her companion and looked in horror at what Duncan was doing: “You... you’re really planning to cook us?!”

“What are you afraid of?” Duncan glanced at the pair expressionlessly, “This is not for roasting you.”

He then points his fingertips downwards to allow the green flame to trickle down to the ground, causing a rippling effect on the concrete floor. In the next second, the entire area of several meters under Duncan’s feet had fallen under his control!

Shirley looked at this scene in disbelief: “... AH!?”

Wherever the flames swept over, something would suddenly appear from the originally empty spot.

It was ashes, patches of greyish ash that could be vaguely made out to be human form!

Suddenly, Shirley thought of something, and she raised her head and looked around at the empty factory.

Under Duncan’s conscious control, the green ghost flame swept through the entire factory like a fresh breeze.

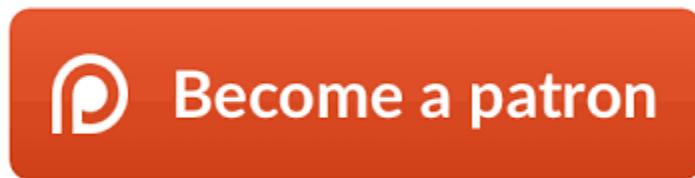
As a result, the traces that had been erased finally reappeared briefly in the eyes of the visitor.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 115

Chapter 115 “The source of the invisible curtain”

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The dark green flame was like a floating light and shadow, sweeping across the entire factory in mere seconds. The disturbance was like a gust of wind, blowing off the curtain veiling “reality” to reveal the secret’s underneath.

Ashes, humanoid ashes, shapeless ashes, scorched walls, melted roofs, distorted and brittle machine shells after being scorched by the molten flame. The entire factory area was like a fiery purgatory that had cooled down not long ago.

Shirley stood blankly in the center of the wreckage, her eyes a little dazed while Dog quietly scurried over to comfort the child by supporting the unstable figure.

Soon, the green ghost fire faded, and everything in the factory returned to what it was before.

Duncan stared down at his hands with some regret. This was after all just an “ordinary” body, there’s no way it could be compared to the real one on the ship. The fact that it could invoke such a wide radius was enough, he’s not going to expect anything longer than a few seconds of casting.

But even so, such a small “reappearance” was enough to reveal the crucial truth.

“I knew it. There was a fire... I knew I wasn’t mistaken...” Shirley murmured, “I’ve been looking for it for eleven years, and it turns out to be here...”

“But this fire was wiped out,” Dog whispered, “and there is some kind of force that’s woven a curtain around the reality here, filtering out the traces of the fire from the world.... This curtain can even block the sight of a shadow demon like me...”

“Is it the sun fragment? Or the guy who brought the fragment to the city-state in the first place?” Shirley frowned in thought, and then she suddenly noticed that Duncan had been unusually quiet. “What do you think of this...”

“This is still not the same fire scene I remember,” Duncan shook his head without waiting for Shirley to finish. Slowing sweeping his gaze over the facilities in the factory, he tries to recall the details of the fire that’s in his memory about how he carried Nina in his arms. “Not here.”

“Huh?” Shirley was startled, “The fire you remember... is not here?”

“The details are too different,” Duncan said quietly. Calmly walking out of the factory, he observed the dilapidated street in the distance with a sharper glint, “or more strictly speaking, the entire sixth block... none of this seems quite right.”

Shirley subconsciously glanced at Dog and asked her partner: “What do you think is going on?”

“How do I know? I’m just a dark hound,” Dog shook his head, “and eleven years ago, I was more confused than you.”

Duncan heard Shirley and Dog yapping in the back and turned his head: “Is this factory the only suspicious location?”

“Maybe... perhaps...” Shirley said unsurely, “Anyway, according to what I’ve found, this factory was the center of the chaos eleven years ago.”

Duncan didn’t fully believe that’s the case. Over the next two hours, the three of them inspected all the still accessible areas of the abandoned factory.

Strangely, apart from that “curtain” that covered reality, they found no traces of other powers or transcendent objects in place.

“This is quite strange...” After completing a rough inspection of the last building, Dog finally voiced the suspicions in his heart. “The ‘curtain’ that covered the first site must be the handiwork of the supernatural, but we searched the entire factory area and did not find the ‘source’ at all... This is unreasonable.”

“Does there have to be a source?” Shirley asked curiously.

Duncan was also curious in his heart, but he didn’t show it. Instead, the guy maintained his sullen face while quietly waiting for the hound to explain.

To think the only one among the three of us that’s an expert in the supernatural field is an undead dog....

Dog didn’t have too many thoughts about himself being the star of the show. As a shadow demon, much of the knowledge regarding the transcendent realm was nothing more than common that everyone should know. So, he explained without putting on air: “The power that hides the fire is obviously a power that’s continuously running, meaning there must be a power source to fuel this veil. We can be certain of this point after witnessing Mr. Duncan’s flame lifting the curtain on reality earlier. The source may be an anomaly, or a powerful transcendent being, regardless whatever or whoever, it must exist somewhere within the city-state...”

As he spoke, the hound raised his head and scanned the distant streets with those empty red eye sockets.

“We didn’t find the source of the curtain within the factory grounds, suggesting the thing supporting the veil is projecting power to this side from a distance, or... we might have only lifted a corner of the curtain, that the entire phenomenon is at such a large scale that....”

As Dog went on his rambling, he suddenly stopped like he’s afraid of what the answer might imply. Sounding nervous now: “If it is the second

situation, then this is not something an anomaly can cover! It might even be a vision, an unknown vision...”

“The sun fragment is certainly not an ordinary ‘anomaly’. According to the suntists, the fragment is the corpse of the sun god,” Shirley cuts in suddenly. “This may be a means for the sun fragment to hide itself.”

“..... So an anomaly that has the ability to think for itself? In order to prevent being controlled, the fragment took the initiative to erase its own existence from the surrounding environment.” Dog mused with a look of a scholar, “That can happen. We can’t rule out that possibility. If it really is the remains of a god, the ability might be due to it awakening...”

Shirley rubbed her chin in thought over the theory, seemingly in agreement with the dark hound. But then the girl suddenly exclaimed after realizing something: “Wait a minute Dog, when did you become so knowledgeable? You freaking can’t even read...”

“I’m a shadow demon! A shadow derived from flesh and blood of the Nether Lord from the shadows! This knowledge has been imprinted in my memory since birth, okay?” Dog rattles the chains impatiently to emphasize to his partner that he’s not useless, “And speaking of not being able to read... how can you call me out when you’re in the same boat as me?!”

While Duncan watched the pair quibble like a true family, Shirley eventually remembered where they were and stopped. It’s not the right place, and most certainly not the right timing after noticing the angle of the sun overhead. Exclaiming out of the blue: “Oh no! It’s noon!”

Duncan raised his eyebrows: “Do you have other arrangements?”

“I...” said Shirley nervously, “I have to get home before noon!”

Duncan skeptically eyed the girl in silence: “Didn’t you say that your parents are no longer around? Who else will lecture you when you get home late?”

“Not a curfew... I have an appointment with someone else!” Shirley quickly waved her hand in defense. After the experience of exploring the factory with this great and terrifying being, her daringness seems to have been bolstered: “We.. can we continue next time?”

Duncan glanced at the dark hound next to him, who immediately cowardly shrunk his neck back and spoke: “You have the final say. If you want to continue exploring, Shirley and I can...”

“No need,” Duncan shook his head, “we won’t get anything by continuing on this spot anyways. Wait until I find some new clues, then we can keep going.”

Shirley suddenly showed surprise in her eyes as if not expecting how easygoing this person was at heart. “Then... me and Dog can leave first? But how will you find us in the future....?”

Duncan just showed a friendly smile: “If we are fated, we will meet again.”

Unlike the frank and kind appearance the man portrayed, he didn’t like to leave things to something as elusive as fate. Between the chains of Dog and Shirley, there’s an elusive and hidden spark of green flame quietly burning in secret.

This was the result of his deeper understanding of the “ghost fire” after accidentally establishing contact with Vanna last time, which could be considered a small attempt despite being an accident.

Now, this mark released on his own initiative was stronger than the flame that remained on Vanna’s body but gentle and harmless.

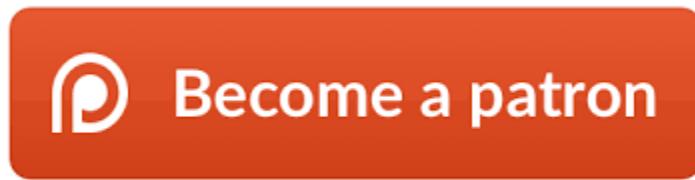
Shirley suddenly felt a chill inexplicably run down her back. But she nevertheless controlled her facial expression and said goodbye to get out of there.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 116

Chapter 116 “Everything is normal”

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Shirley left quickly with Dog while Duncan shifted his gaze from the distant intersection and landed on the factory’s ruins again.

After the ghost fire faded and the invisible curtain closed, the factory had returned to its previous “normal” appearance – the traces of the fire were completely erased, and the ubiquitous ashes also gone, hidden into the nothingness like it had for the past eleven years.

Duncan’s gaze slowly shifted upwards, past the factory roof until it reached the sky. He imagined, picturing a veil like a blanket, quietly covering the surroundings and obscuring the truth under reality.

Although there are not many residents remaining in the sixth block after the incident, there are still thousands left. Yet, under the eyes and noses of thousands still living here, the invisible curtain obscured the truth for eleven years.

Thinking of this, Duncan suddenly furrowed his forehead.

The truth in the factory is a fire, and Dog also confirmed that there is no chemical pollution residue around the factory. Since there is none of the so-called “pollution”... then why did the entire sixth block not have any newborns for so long?!

If the real problem isn’t due to chemicals leaking, then it must be a different contamination.... Is it some force from the transcendent realm preventing the birth of new babies?

Duncan looked thoughtfully at the sky.

Looks like..... the invisible curtain is bigger than I had imagined.

.....

“We ran out... Really ran out?” In a leaky and dirty alley some way out from the sixth block, Shirley carefully poked her head out of the alley, cautiously observing whether there were police patrolling the roads nearby.

“It’s not that we ran out. It’s the big boss letting us go.” Dog replies while hiding underneath a corner of the wall where the shadow was at its thickest.

“It’s all the XXXX same meaning,” Shirley waved her hand, then plopped her ass down on the ground without caring about her own image. “That XXXX scared me to death... I was so scared that I almost couldn’t breathe. I had to not swear, pretend to be good, and.... Dog, can you say something?”

“I know, I see more than you can, did you forgot?” The voice in the shadow spoke faintly in a squirming manner, “How does it feel, isn’t walking with a smiling shadow of subspace more tiring than dealing with a group of vicious policemen?”

“..... Don’t say it, I’m getting the shivers just remembering.” Shirley rolled her eyes and shot a blaming look over, “It’s all your fault for scaring me so badly last time. If I had known nothing, then I definitely wouldn’t have today.... Hey, why do you think a big boss like him is walking about pretending to be a normal person? He even squeezed onto the bus like everyone else, and even bought the bus ticket! I never thought we would bump into each other again in this fashion!”

The hound was silent for two seconds: “... Maybe it’s just a hobby, or maybe it’s been staring at you. This is what I’m most afraid of... We have now dealt with that existence so the connection will only get more deep and entangled...”

Shirley shuddered some more and asked cautiously, “You mean... we will really meet again? Please spare me....”

“Have you forgotten what he said when you parted?” The hound sighed, “He’ll find us.”

Shirley went mute there, only lowering her head in silence like she didn’t know how to take it. Then after a good full minute, it was Dog who broke the silence: “What? Scared now? Regret it? That’s a little too late now... I reminded you there’s nothing good in dealing with the transcenders and the ones they fight. Look at us now. We’re stuck dealing with a force beyond human imagination. If you had listened to my advice a few months ago and didn’t investigate the old stuff, you would still be living peacefully...”

“Regret my XXXX!” Shirley lowered her head some more and viciously interrupted Dog’s voice, “I regret nothing, and I won’t into the future! Don’t say such annoying stuff again!”

“Okay, okay, I won’t say it. Have you rested enough? It’s almost time for us to leave, didn’t that ‘new friend’ of yours make an appointment with you?”

“I... I’ll wait two more minutes,” Shirley pulled her hair while muffling the next sentence, “my legs are a little weak, wait a bit...”

Dog was left speechless. Instead of bashing her partner for being more cowardly than him now, he issued out a hoarse purr and wriggled out of the corner and into her shadow.

.....

At lunchtime, Vanna took a huge bite out of the jam-coated bread and took no time to finish off the rest of the slice. She choked due to the fast eating, but nothing a large glass of wine wouldn’t solve.

“Vanna, eat more elegantly, and don’t drink wine as water.” Uncle Dante’s voice came from across the table, his tone helpless and pleading.

“Heretics don’t wait. Shortening my meal time will help in sending those heretics to meet the goddess.” Vanna glances up and retorts while already stuffing her mouth full of another item, which only makes it worse in the eye of her uncle. “And this is not a banquet outside....”

“You should also pay attention to etiquette at home. Sooner or later, you will not be able to get married.” Dante looked at his niece, who was already of marriage age, with worry and urgency. Most would’ve at least brought a boyfriend home at some point, yet their family had none of that. “Aigh, it is better to say you’re already unable to get married anymore...”

Vanna’s ferocious eating finally slowed down after that. The young female inquisitor looked all embarrassed while objecting: “I... the duties of the inquisitor...”

“The Storm Church does not prohibit priests and nuns from marrying, and the inquisitors also have normal families. I have also read and recited the Storm Codex.” Dante shook his head, “Seriously, are there really no suitable candidates?”

Vanna lowered her head and poked the bread on the plate with a dinner knife like a meek child: “The main problem is that there’s no one capable of beating me...”

“..... When you go back, ask if you can take the oath back.” Dante sighed deeply, “You never should’ve sworn those oaths in so casually, especially the first one about must having a strong man as a partner. Why didn’t Bishop Valentine stop you back then...”

Vanna’s head drooped a little lower again until it’s on her shoulder, but due to her tall stature, even her defeated posture was enough to be two heads above her uncle’s. Sounding muffled and weak: “There is no way to take back the oath easily. It is a sacred agreement made in front of the goddess. Besides.... I am not someone who makes an oath so casually. Almost all female guardians have taken one. It’s a symbol of our bravery bestowed upon us by the storm, proof that the goddess...”

Dante silently stared at his niece, who was two heads taller than him: “Then have you ever imagined that you will one day become invincible in the world by training so much?”

Vanna: “... Isn’t this for the second and third articles of the oath...”

Dante: “Aigh....”

This topic had been discussed countless times over the past few years, which always ended awkwardly for both or in a stalemate. Unfortunately, this time was no exception.

However, Vanna had never been one to get dragged down for long. Quickly adjusting her mood, she solved the battle on the dinner plate with amazing speed before getting up to leave: “I’m done eating, Uncle... Huh? ”

Vanna jerked to a stop, staring at her uncle with surprise and shock while pointing to his prosthetic ruby eye: “Uncle, the wound near your eye is oozing blood... You okay?”

“Huh?” Dante was stunned for a moment but quickly reached up and touched it. After confirming it was blood, he ran to a mirror to see for himself. From the round ruby making up his fake eye was indeed a trickle of blood slowly seeping down his cheek, the scar around the eye more striking and frightening now than ever.

“Don’t move,” Vanna hurriedly approached from behind, placed her hands around Dante’s forehead and whispered the words of the Storm Codex. “May the sea breeze moisturize the body and make this flesh and blood heal.”

Under the action of the divine prayer, Dante felt a slight itch near his wound before the small bleeding stopped. Sounding a little helpless: “Don’t make such a fuss. This is not the first time anyways; after all, a cold metallic ball with rubies is bound to cause irritation when rubbing against the skin.”

The expression on Vanna’s face did not relax at all. On the contrary, she continued to stare into Dante’s ruby eye, and only after a long time did she

ask: “Do you feel anything else? Is there a burning tingle? Or see some illusions through this ruby eyeball?”

Dante blinked without flinching or fluctuating emotion in front of his niece. Through the ruby eyeball that’s been blessed to clearly see the truth, what’s happening was unlike anything that should be – flames burning behind Vanna, ashes and scorch marks filling up the dining hall and the disembodied and molten deposits of the roof.

Gradually, the hot sensation returns to normal after he absorbs the phantom truth.

“Of course not, everything is normal,” Dante replies nonchalantly like nothing’s wrong as he always did in the past.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 117

Chapter 117 “Museum”

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Getting out of the car and stepping onto the stone square in front of the museum, Heidi, the psychiatrist, couldn't help but sigh deeply. It was her day off today, and the salty sea breeze blowing against her skin had washed away the fatigue accumulated through long hours of work in recent weeks.

Like many of those in her profession, being affected by their patients was a common theme, especially when your patients are mad-shit crazy in the occults. It's the main reason her spirit had been so low in the past few days. She's likely suffering from insomnia from listening to so many cultists.

Fortunately, today she finally did not have to think about those crazy believers and their deformed hearts.

Another sea breeze blew across from the end of the street then, ruffling the hem of Heidi's skirt as she grappled with the risk of flashing her panties and losing that wide-brimmed hat she wore. Looking after the struggle, her eyes beheld the grand white building with the streamlined dome and beautiful wings.

This maritime museum in the Crossroad neighborhood was by far one of the largest museums in the city-state of Pland – and one of the most legendary.

Huffing a puff at the naughty wind, Heidi strolled towards the museum entrance, where a tour guide was introducing a crowd of visitors to its colorful history outside.

“..... This large building, built in 1802, was originally the property of the Parr Brothers Ocean Trading Company. At its height, it had amassed a staggering fortune to become the largest storage center in Pland. It was seen as a symbol of the commercial prosperity of the city-state. However, a drastic tragedy in 1822 completely changed the fate of the building...”

Someone duly asked, “What happened?”

“It is said – only rumors though – at that time, an ocean-going cargo ship under the name of the Parr Brothers encountered a strange thick fog on its way back. In the white thicket, the poor hapless cargo vessel encountered a burning ghost ship and passed by it...”

“But fret not, the cargo ship eventually escaped the fog and even returned safely to port. But sadly, the shadow of madness remained in the hearts of the crew member. From then on, the bad omens quickly spread throughout the entire fleet of the Parr Brothers. In the following months, all the ships under the name of the Parr Brothers began to suffer terrible disasters. There were constant mutiny among the crew members, disappearances, and even bloody sacrifices to please unknown gods...”

“..... Ships on distant voyages encountered storms on supposedly calm seas, hit icebergs in warm waters, mutinous sailors detonated explosives on board, destroyed boilers, and even hunted their colleagues... Such strange disasters were repeated again and again, finally burying the business of the Parr Brothers for good. Their marine trading company filed for bankruptcy restructuring at the end of the same year...”

“After that, the Parr Brothers divided the remnants of their company’s property and donated part of it to the city-state authorities, including the building in front of us... It underwent several transformations and changes in function until 1855 when it was finally transformed into a maritime museum, which continues to this day.”

“It is said that even now, the shadows of those from a century ago still linger in this maritime museum... And if you are lucky enough.... You might even find the shadow of the Parr Brothers occasionally wandering the museum to visit their former offices. But don’t worry my dear guests, most

likely, the shadows you find are no more than the employees that once roamed these halls. In their century-old uniforms from the Marine Trading Company, they may just come over to the confused you asking where the offices are....”

“Of course, of course! These are just rumors! The museum has taken plenty of precautions to inspect the museum. We even have a team of guardians from the church on standby.

So, dear visitors, please be at ease knowing you are safe. However, suppose you do want to experience the bizarre legends and have a thrilling trip. In that case, I suggest heading over to the ‘adventure room’ on the side wing of the museum. Remember, you will need to receive a temporary baptism from the local chapel to test your will before entering. The cost is a measly two solas by a cleric....”

The voices of the tour guide and tourists eventually faded away as Heidi strolled past the group, but then her feet suddenly felt heavy, and she didn’t want to budge.

The warehouses of maritime trade from a century ago, the thick fog of the far-off seas that brought disaster, the cursed fleet, the shadows that lingered in museums...

Heidi, who dealt with cultists every day and heard a lot of “blowing wind” through various official channels, suddenly felt that the idea of visiting a museum as a sightseeing project for vacation wasn’t such a good idea... She could’ve wandered the lower city where cheap goods are snagged or visited the antique shop her father mentioned.

But after less than two seconds of inner struggle, the young psychiatrist made up her mind and continued.

Telling the right thriller stories when introducing attractions was a common means of tour guides to get business. Actually, more than half of the world’s horror stories are inseparable from sea fogs, ghost ships, and renegade sailors. If there are ghost stories in museums, then why wouldn’t there be more scary things in an antique shop? She’s a psychiatrist who deals with neuropathy all day. Why should she be afraid of this?

No one can stop me from enjoying this hard-awaited holiday! The evil gods of subspace can stuff it!

Determined, Miss Psychiatrist headed straight for the ticket booth and entered the museum like a warrior.

There were fewer visitors to the museum than expected. Perhaps it was due to not being a public holiday, but the lobby on the venue's first floor seemed a little deserted.

Currently, several venue guides were busy leading some of the tourists through the main exhibition area, where the walls were decorated with a huge whale skeleton and various beautiful sea ships. There's even a costumed captain introducing the story to the kids in the hall.

However, the most eye-catching to Heidi wasn't the kids or tourists, but a pair of girls who looked to be about sixteen to seventeen. They're probably still in school and were laughing and having a good time.

Heidi sighed, slightly relieved that the museum wouldn't be a bore with these two around. So, she decides to walk behind the two ladies to brighten up the atmosphere during the visit.

Then, she smelled something weird.

That smell... it's as if something was burning...

.....

Near the Crossroad, Duncan emerged from a steam bus and bought a pastime paper at a nearby newsagent to waste his time.

After Shirley and Dog left, he wandered around the sixth block some more and asked the locals about something, but it was clear that ordinary citizens could not spy the truth behind the "curtain". The residents of the sixth block only remembered the information officially disclosed by the government and believed the decline of their home was due to the chemical pollution.

Of course, there are a few that said it's the neglect by the authorities, but that's not much different from what he heard from the sunbathing old man.

The truth was covered by a curtain, the actual record had been tampered with, and the city-state authorities had only disclosed the tampered information. Still, Duncan cannot conclude that the "curtain" was set up by city hall or the church based on only this. In the world of the supernatural, a powerful anomaly or vision could blind everyone.

In the face of powerful anomalies and visions, even the so-called "reality" was nothing more than a canvas that could be smeared and changed.

Duncan sat down on a bench on the side of the road, casually reading the contents of the pastime while thinking about the future.

Now it seems that the source of that "curtain" was not in the factory, maybe not even in the sixth block, and if this so-called "source" was the sun fragment, then it should be hidden somewhere deeper.

Until there are more clues, the investigation cannot continue.

The Sun Cultists are looking for the fragments of the sun, and they have stirred up the city-state for that end. Nina's memories and dreams faintly point to the fragment and are likely connected to this. Through the sun mask, he managed to glimpse through to the real sun that inexplicably resembled an evil eyeball god asking him for help....

Before I knew it, I seemed to have fallen into a messy ball of thread.

Duncan sighed and shook his head slightly. It's then at this moment, out of the corner of his eye, he suddenly saw a strange smoke rising upwards from a block nearby.

There was also a faintish red blooming out from the bellowing smog.

Duncan paused and immediately got up from the bench. Like himself, many of the pedestrians on the street had stopped their current task and looked upwards. Some were frozen and unsure of what to do, and a few had started

to run through the streets in a panic while shouting: “It’s on fire! The museum is on fire!!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 118

Chapter 118 “The Field of Fire”

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As the thick smoke billowed into the sky with the faint firelight, Duncan's eyes widened slightly after hearing the exclamations of the fleeing pedestrians.

Museum... The Oceanographic Museum near the Crossroad... Nina!

Nina was visiting the Museum near Crossroad with her classmates this afternoon, precisely in the direction of the rising smoke.

Duncan was about to rush to the rescue but promptly realized that running from this block to the museum was unfeasible. Even if the smoke was visible to the naked eye, the winding roads would waste a lot of time. On top of that, it was not realistic to take a taxi – not to mention no sane taxi driver would willingly drive towards a fire.

He was very urgent, not stupid. After quickly going over his options, he suddenly found himself coming up with a new idea, a bold one at that.

“Ai!!” He summoned in his heart and quickened his pace to dodge into the shadowy ally of a nearby building.

The green ghost fire sparked into existence, and Ai, who was patrolling nearby, appeared out of thin air. First flapping her wings to show her joy at not having to search for the cultists, she promptly lands on the man's shoulder.

Can she really “bring” me to the museum?

Duncan stared at the bird a bit, seemingly wondering if he should do this. But then the indecision shifted to firm determination. He had no room to choose otherwise. He had no live cultists to test his idea, and it's already proven the bird could shuttle items without damaging them. And if worst comes to pass and he loses control of this body in Pland, who's to say he couldn't repossess it a second time?

"I want you to do a delivery," Duncan caressed Ai's wings, "send me to the museum in the crossroad. It's near the large white building you flew over this morning."

Ai tilted her head in a humanistic fashion and glanced at the bellowing smoke in the sky: "A shotgun trip?"

"Just say you can or cannot."

"Make some..."

"Deal."

Without saying a word further, the dove flapped her wings vigorously and burst into a puff of green flame that shot out of the street.

Near the Crossroad Maritime Museum, the firefighters who rushed from the fire station have already begun to fight this emergency. Thanks to the relatively good infrastructure of the neighborhood and the special nature of the museum itself as a public establishment, there are not only permanent fire units stationed nearby but also sufficient emergency pumps and evacuation ports. Therefore, it wasn't too difficult for the firefighters to rescue some of the trapped tourists inside through the side wings.

Unfortunately, the story these folks brought out wasn't so positive though. They discussed the horror of how the fire started. According to their own words, the flames came out of nowhere, whistling fireballs throughout the depths of the museum. Some even say they saw a strange and distorted figure crawling out of the flame in distress, a clear sign that corruption from fear has begun to take hold.

But professionals are professionals. Some priests and resident guardians of the chapel swiftly charged into the fray to light incenses around the victims. This would calm the most agitated and reduce the risk of further contamination.

Meanwhile, in the shadow of the building dozens of meters away from the Museum Square, a ghostly green flame lit into existence and rose up from the grounds. It swirled and condensed, then merged into the shape of a human until Duncan finally materialized in his form.

As he expected, Ai arrived at the museum by “flying” rather than “instantaneously” as she usually does when going from the Vanished to the shop.

Duncan glanced at Ai, who had landed on his shoulder, noting in his mind the new experience and the feeling of “teleportation”.

This shows that there must be an anchor point for the bird to use if she wanted to teleport. It wouldn’t work otherwise.

As for the feeling of being “carried” by Ai during the flight … It’s quite the wonderful experience.

He did not lose consciousness during this process, but he could not smoothly observe the surroundings either. How to describe it, it’s similar to someone watching the perceptual view through a screen.

Maybe…… this is because Ai’s body structure is very different from that of humans, or it may be because Ai has her own will and cannot be completely taken over.

But these are all minor issues, and Duncan doesn’t care about it now – unlocking Ai’s “new features” in a hurry today was already a huge gain. He could figure out the details at a later date. Right now, the most important thing was confirming Nina’s situation and her safety.

Of course, the flight was not as fast as teleportation, and it took him a few minutes to “fly” over from the nearby street. Though it was already very

fast compared to running or taking ordinary transportation, the man still didn't want to delay it any further.

From where he stood, Duncan saw the large burning building that was divided into three floors. The first and second were burning the most ferocious with billowing smoke gushing out of the windows. If there are any safe spots left, it would have to be the roof.

Thankfully, firefighters knew this as well. They've activated several hydrants on the edge of the square, and huge high-pressure water jets are now spraying the museum's main structure in an attempt to suppress the temperature on the exterior walls to prevent further collapse. This would not only bide time for the authorities to rescue more victims inside and bring them to the square, but also to prevent the fire from engulfing those who manage to flee to the roof.

Duncan ran straight towards the survivors at the square as his first point of contact, checking to see if Nina was among them. There, he overheard what the victims were saying in their description of the flame.

“..... Fire suddenly came out of the air! It really appeared out of thin air! It's as if it has been burning for a long, long time, but no one has seen it, and then it popped into existence!”

“I also heard a whistling sound, a sharp whistle like that of the devils!”

“..... I definitely saw a scorched man crawling out of a room. Oh goddess protect me! The guy was wearing clothes from decades ago... He crawled out of the room, but that room hadn't even caught fire yet! The fire started after he climbed out!”

The survivors at the edge of the square were extremely anxious and hysterical, many of them describing the terrifying scene in erratic manners. By the time Duncan came over, the storm priest with a thick black beard had already been at the scene and frowning.

“The panic rate is too high. One-third of the people are mentally unstable, and these people are showing signs of being contaminated by supernatural

powers...” The storm priest took on an ugly expression and quickly said to the guardian next to him, “There may be unclean things in the museum... When will the cathedral support arrive?”

“At least half an hour.”

“..... No, it’s too late. If there is really something unclean, I’m afraid it will get out of control in less than ten minutes looking at this scale...” The black-robed priest turned his head to stare deeply at the museum. Then swinging his head over to an attendant beside him, “Ask the police force to take control over this location too.”

After saying that, he pulled off the priest robe he was wearing to reveal the black shorts and trousers underneath. Then raising the “Storm Codex” in his hand, he began praying loudly and with power.

“Please bear witness! Our bravery be our strength!”

The rest of the guards joined and shouted in unison: “Please bear witness!”

After the prayer, a faint layer of water mist had floated around several storm faithfuls, wrapping around their bodies like the shelter of the waves. In the next second, they charged towards the building that was still burning without falter in their expressions.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 119

Chapter 119 “A Pair of Friends”

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From judging that there may be an out-of-control supernatural power in the museum to completing self-blessings and leading the charging team into the fire, these faithful belonging to the storm church only took ten seconds in total.

At the same time, the firefighters in the square also cooperated like well-trained warriors. They used their water cannons to open up a path among the inferno. This not only gave the first team room to charge in but also time for the second team of clerics to bless the much-needed equipment to bring inside.

As for the police force who remained at the edge of the perimeter, they've already begun to clear out the bystanders and contacted the closest chapels on the dire situation.

Well-trained and closely coordinated, this wasn't something that could be gained by a few sessions in the training barracks, but rather through actual repeated combat experience.

That's what it means to survive in this world of paranormal activities. Unless both citizens and government react quickly and decisively, the consequences wouldn't be only a few deaths like that on earth but the death of an entire city-state.

Duncan saw it all from the rear, but he didn't have much time to applaud their bravado and sacrifices. He's too busy looking for Nina among the crowd of victims in the square, and sadly, he can't find his niece.

Then he froze, turning to stare at the museum still burning in the distance with a somewhat familiar aura.

He tried walking towards the building, but as soon as he took two steps forward, a policeman stopped him: "Sir, there is danger ahead. Please leave it to the professionals."

Duncan glanced at the policeman, nodded and turned away.

Getting mixed up with the officials at the scene would only waste time and delay the rescue efforts. So, he simply abandoned the main entrance and resumed somewhere in the shadows near the square. In the next second that he's out of sight, Ai flies down and shoots right into a window that's still burning ferociously.

Some people in the square saw this abnormal scene but only took it as the poor bird losing its senses due to all the smoke. It took no time for the bystanders to ignore this incident.

Inside the museum, smoke, fire, and heat waves hit Duncan instantly the second he stepped out of the green vortex.

He's not afraid of these things, but he could feel the functions of his flesh and blood being affected by the high temperature. The soul may be fine, but it won't be long before this body becomes unusable.

But he wasn't acting recklessly, and he knew what to do long before he rushed in.

There are flames everywhere here, and flames... was a very obedient thing.

Duncan held his breath, then a little green flame quietly flowed under his feet to spread along the floor to make contact, just like how he subdued the flames during the assembly of suntists in the warehouse basement.

Even the scorching air began to change, no longer affecting the breathing of this body.

“Stand down,” he orders, forcing the burning red to extinguish behind him to reveal a corridor full of smoke and char.

Duncan glanced back and looked at the markers on the nearby wall, judging he had “landed” in an office on the edge of the main exhibition area.

As he walked and snuffed out any flame that crossed his path, the guy also made sure to concentrate on locating the girl. But to be honest, he was completely unsure of whether it would work in finding the other person.

Although his perception was now beyond ordinary means, and the goathead has also said that “the captain’s intuition is the most accurate pointer”, this high-end operation of sensing someone’s energy from far away was still unfamiliar territory.

He’s trying like this all for the reason of that vague split second of familiarity he felt at the square, which was the source of this idea to begin with.

Duncan walked through the halls, through the flames, and still couldn’t find Nina anywhere. However, he did sense something else....

“Huh?”

Duncan muttered suspiciously, his gaze turning in the direction of where the perception was coming from – not far ahead, on the floor below the stairs, there’s a stronger reaction.

The owner of the imprint was definitely bouncing around and alive!

Duncan only hesitated for a moment, then quickly ran in the direction of perception. He bolted down the stairs, snuffed out any flame that crossed his paths, and finally came closed enough distance to hear a faint yippy yappy voice through the mark.

“..... Hand? Eeee~ these are all minor injuries on my hands, it will be fine once I rest for a few days....”

“No worries, my muscles have always been quite good...”

“Don’t worry, the door is closed, and the smoke can’t come in for the time being... You are so clever, you actually know there’s a water room here... Huh, you read the exhibition map in advance? The professor mentioned it in class? Safety education... Uh.... I probably didn’t listen and dozed off, ahaha....”

“You said you saw a dog just now? Must be your mistake. Where would a dog come out from this place, ahaha....”

“..... What are we going to do with this one that fainted? You don’t know either? All right..... At least she’s alive... It’s okay, we will definitely be rescued....”

Duncan didn’t hear it wrong, that’s definitely Shirley’s voice, the same gothic little girl that he met at the sixth block this morning.

The familiar aura he felt in the square before seemed to be brought about by this mark – he did not actively contact this connection but passively perceived its existence due to the close proximity.

This “mark” was Duncan’s first active release, so there were still many characteristics that he was unfamiliar with, but for now, it seemed that the connection between the ghost fire was even better than he thought.

While feeling a little emotion in his heart, he also had a hint of doubt: Shirley was talking to another person, and it sounded like her friend... Who is she with?

.....

The closed water room became a temporary refuge as the narrow and claustrophobic space blocked the approaching disaster outside by allowing the running water to overflow. Aside from that, there’s no light source, so Nina could only take comfort by huddling next to the water pool with her heart beating wildly!

Meanwhile, her new friend, a girl named Shirley, was checking the closure of doors and windows. This resulted in her hands being slightly burned by

the heat, yet the girl behaved like there was nothing wrong. She continued to be busy throughout the venture.

As for the lady who was unconscious next to Nina, neither girls knew who she was. The poor person was walking near them when a falling brick fell atop her head, knocking the lady out cold, hence the reason they dragged the unconscious patient along.

Judging by the dress though, this lady was clearly not a poor person in the lower city like themselves but a decent lady living in the upper city... Unfortunately, in the face of calamity, there was no difference between decent people and the poor.

Suddenly, the sound of water in the sink subsided and gradually stopped.

“..... The main pump is down,” Nina, who had been listening to the sounds around her nervously said, “The fire is very big.”

The “new friend”, who was a head shorter than her, came over and crouched down to ask in a low, comforting voice: “You’re scared?”

“I’m afraid of fire...” Nina hugged her legs harder, feeling the voice tremble a little, “I’m especially afraid of fire.”

“..... Actually, I’m quite afraid too.” Shirley went silent for two seconds, “Alright, I’m actually most afraid of fires...”

“I can’t tell at all,” Nina shook her head, “You just went on a rampage.”

“It’s because I’m afraid that I went on a rampage.” Shirley squatted down with a big grin, “If I had stopped, I likely wouldn’t have the courage to get up again.... But now, both of us are stuck in here without anywhere to run. We will need to XXXX wait and be rescued at this rate...”

Nina grasped Shirley’s arm in the dark, and sure enough, the other party was also shaking.

“You cursed,” Nina muttered, “I thought... you are a very cultured and good student.”

“We’ve already come to this, don’t XXXX pretend you don’t know I’m like this.” Shirley said with a big smile on her blackened face, “And… oh forget it.”

She seemed to want to say something to Nina but swallowed it back down in the end. Then glancing at the doorway, “Quickly use your good brain to analyze this. How long can we stay here?”

Nina glanced up: “I… I don’t know, but as long as it can block the smoke, it is safe for the time being. This room is very strong, and at the corner of the stairs, it should not collapse for a while.”

Shirley snorted nonchalantly, then she hesitated for a moment before slowly speaking again: “By the way, if… if, I said there’s a way out of here, but it’s very scary, will you want to try it?”

“A way out?” Nina looked at her friend in confusion, “What way?”

“It’s just… ” Shirley stood up but suddenly sat back down again, “Ah, forget it, let’s wait for a now. We still have time, there’s still time… ”

Nina: “…?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 120

Chapter 120 “Chapter 120 “Rescue”

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Time seemed to slow down suddenly. In the darkness and the approaching scorching heat, Nina felt her mind running uncontrollably—She seemed to recall back to when she was a child, recall running up and down the antique store with her uncle to “help”, then making a mess of everything, recall her uncle explaining to herself the stories behind those “antiques”, in the end it was all made up, recall the first time she went to school, the first time she saw the steam engine in a textbook, the first time she got praise from a teacher, the first time she made friends... and lost friends for the first time.

Her mind was a mess, and her consciousness became increasingly more confused as the smoke seeped into the room, causing her a shortness of breath as well.

And those disturbing memories, they all started to burn, engulfed by the terrible flames. Even now, Nina was staring at the ground expecting it to burst into a pillar of red and yellow. Then a cold hand snapped her out of the illusion by pressing it against her forehead.

“Are you all right?” Shirley looked at her “friend”, a little worried over the weird behavior.

“I... I’m okay,” Nina quickly shook her head in denial and grabbed Shirley’s arm, “Thank you... I just suddenly remembered my family.”

“Family...” Shirley was startled when she heard these words, “Who is in your family?”

“There is only one uncle... My parents passed away many years ago, and I grew up with my uncle.” Nina briefly recalled the faces of her parents and uncle before slowly burying that head into the knees, “I promised my uncle to go home early today...”

“You... You have a good relationship with your uncle, right? Shirley seemed a little uncomfortable with this kind of topic and did not know how to comfort her friend, “What does he do?”

“He’s just an ordinary person. Our family opened an antique shop in the lower city, and he’s managing it alone...” Nina said slowly, then quickly flailed her hands up after noticing Shirley’s surprised expression, “It’s not what you think. There are no real things in there.”

“That sounds awesome too!” Shirley quickly complimented, “Shop owner! If you have a store of your own, even in the lower city, then your life at home should be pretty good, right?”

“Actually, it’s very average.” Nina continued to wave her hand frantically in panic, “Uncle’s health wasn’t very good a few years ago, so the business in the store hasn’t been good. He didn’t save much money... But I think Uncle is really amazing. He can even chat with Mr. Morris for a long time! He knows a lot of things, and Mr. Morris said he is a profound person...”

Shirley listened to Nina’s narration and pretended to understand by nodding: “Then after we go out, I must get to know your uncle...”

Nina laughed. She was about to open her mouth to say something, but suddenly heard a loud noise coming from the direction of the door—the next second, the door to the water room, which was not very strong at all, got kicked open from the outside. It fell with a bang!

The moment she saw this scene, Nina’s first reaction was that the fire in the corridor had blown apart the door from the intensity. But the next second, what she saw was a familiar figure walking through the doorway, and the expected flames were nowhere to be seen.

Shirley was also startled by the loud bang of metal hinges nearly snapping apart. She looked back in astonishment, and her whole body froze the moment she recognized the figure at the doorway.

But before the gothic-dressed girl could take action in cowering before the shadowy avatar of subspace, the voice of the new friend she made had cut in and interrupted.

“Uncle Duncan?!” Nina looked at the figure with surprise and disbelief. Right now, it seemed that all the fear and depression had disappeared in that instant, and nothing could ever harm her.

“Nina?” Duncan also looked at his niece with some surprise. He actually didn’t expect this. The man only followed the mark because he wanted to make Shirley into a helper to find Nina.

So what I heard was Shirley talking to Nina, and the new friend and classmate was none other than Shirley?! What are the odds??

Quickly reorganizing these thoughts, Duncan took only a second to get the story straight. Then he noticed the gothic girl’s expression. Not going to let the little summoner spill the bean, he took the initiative in leading the conversation: “Looks like you’re all right.”

Then before he had time to say more, Duncan noticed a third person in the room: a young woman in a long skirt who was unconscious on the floor. She seemed to be alive at least.

Shirley finally regained her ability to think by then and recalled what Nina had said about her family. By connecting one and two together, she froze into a statue and looked like she’s seen a ghost. “Nina… he is… your uncle?”

“Yes!” Nina said happily and threw herself on Duncan in a few steps, “Uncle, why are you here?! The fire outside has gone out?!”

“Not yet, but the fire is under control,” Duncan replied casually. He knew that this ambiguous statement must have seemed suspicious under normal

circumstances, but now Nina was clearly in a state of confusion, so there's no harm. "This is awesome. I thought I was going to..."

"It's okay. Let's wait until we get out first. This is not the place to talk," Duncan interrupted Nina, then his gaze swept over to Shirley and the lady who remained on the floor, "We have to take this lady with us."

"Ahhh... Right!" Nina reacted belatedly and hurried over to pick up the lady with Shirley running over to help from behind. But due to the height difference, this was not easy for both girls, so Duncan had no choice but to step in and do it himself.

But then, right when he was about to reach down, Duncan saw a slight flickering movement that caused his gesture to stop.

It was an amethyst pendant that looked somewhat familiar.

Duncan was stunned, slowly recalling the previous home visit of Mr. Morris and some of the things revealed in the other party's words.

"Uncle?" Nina's voice came from the side, interrupting Duncan's thoughts.

Quickly shaking his head to lose the unnecessary thoughts, he glanced at Nina, then casually at Shirley before smiling humorously: "The world is really small."

With that, Duncan and the girls left the room with him acting as the main carrier while the two served as support.

There was no flame in the corridor once they got out, and even the thick smoke had dissipated for "unexplained reasons". Shirley observed the dark passage ahead and hesitated before speaking: "Which direction are we going?"

Duncan raised his head and was about to point out the direction when he suddenly sensed something through the "power of flames" that permeated the museum. Getting an idea, he changed his finger to another exit from the original: "This way."

Shortly after their retreat, another group suddenly circled the corner of the corridor ahead and appeared near the water room – it was the guardian squad of the Storm Church that had charged into the flames earlier.

The squad was a mess, but the blessings of the sea had not yet dissipated on all of them. They had charged in with the determination to die, but the unexpected receding of the fire caught them by surprise and made the rescue effort safer than planned.

“The fire here is also extinguished...” the priest who led the team slightly frowned, muttering as he observed the surroundings, “Even the smoke has dissipated.”

“It’s good that the fire is extinguished, isn’t it?” A guardian murmurs.

“It’s indeed a good thing, but under normal circumstances, a fire of this scale would not be extinguished so easily,” the priest said in a deep and concerned voice. Suddenly, he noticed the violently damaged door of the nearby water room.

“Someone has been here...” A guard immediately stepped forward to check. After confirming the traces near the doorway, he skillfully took out the incense burner and prayer book before putting on a special set of lenses on his head.

The set looked like a half-sided helmet made of copper tubes, cranks, and a series of lenses, some of which had intricate runes etched on the edges.

The guardian placed an incense burner on the ground, then adjusted the lens set on his head and began observing the remaining clues.

“There is no supernatural power remaining... just a few ordinary people that passed through. The exact number can’t be determined, and the aura is very chaotic,” the guard quickly reported. “It should be the tourists who were trapped before... The door was vandalized inward. Likely someone from the outside smashed it in to save those trapped.”

“Are you sure there is no supernatural power?”

“No.”

“..... Continue searching upwards.”

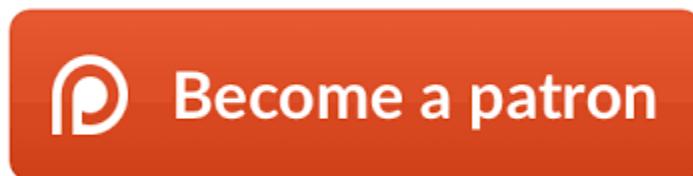
“YES SIR!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 121

Chapter 121 “Miss Psychiatrist”

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When the fresh air and bright sky finally hit Duncan and his party after they exited the museum’s west wing, it was Shirley who cheered first: “Awesome! We’ve run out!”

Duncan originally wanted to comment on her quick change of attitude when the lady on his suddenly stirred—the woman finally woke up under the stimulation of the fresh air and the bumps along the way.

Without delay, he rapidly placed the person down.

As Heidi slowly came to, the first sensation that came to her was the severe pain on her forehead, followed closely by the incessant coughing caused by the small amount of smoke she inhaled. Eventually, the lady did clear up and realized she’s been rescued. There’s the bright sunlight and fresh air, a cue that she’s not trapped inside the museum.

“You’re awake.” Nina knelt down next to the lady and looked on with concern, “How are you feeling? Does it hurt?”

“Headache… It was you who saved me?” Heidi’s eyes finally managed to focus and adjust to the bright outdoor light, “Ah, it’s the two girls…”

“You know us?” Shirley was taken aback and subconsciously said.

“We don’t know each other, but I remember seeing you in the museum,” Heidi shook her head, sitting up and looking around, “Ahem… this is…”

“You were knocked out. Me and Shirley dragged you to safety, and then my uncle rushed into the fire to save us, so we brought you out too. You’re safe now,” Nina said quickly.

“Uncle... Ah, is this the gentleman? Thank you...” Heidi’s eyes quickly fell on Duncan, and then she stood up vigorously while speaking as if wanting to give her gratitude. However, that didn’t work because she nearly fell over again.

“You’re welcome,” Duncan swiftly caught her by the waist and helped her up.

“Thank you.” Heidi stood weakly, bowing her head in thanks, “If it weren’t for you, I would have been burnt to death inside... This fire is too terrible... ...Thank you so much, I really don’t know what I should do...”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Duncan smiled back at the polite woman, “we actually have some connection... Mr. Morris, do you know him?”

Heidi froze for a moment, then looked at Duncan with some doubt: “That’s my father...you know him?”

“Your pendant,” Duncan gestured to the amethyst pendant on Heidi’s chest, “he got it from my shop.”

Heidi dully glanced down at her jewelry: “... Ah?!”

“The world is so small, right?” Duncan laughed and stretched out his hand for a shake, “Let me formally introduce myself. My name is Duncan, and I am the owner and manager of an antique shop in the lower city. Next to me is my niece Nina, and this one over here....”

“My name is Shirley!” Shirley immediately took the initiative to speak. In her mind, being late would somehow cause the terrifying existence that was Duncan to say her name, which might curse her or something. “You.... Just call me Shirley!”

“Heidi, a pleasure to meet you all.” Heidi grabbed Duncan’s hand, her head still a little dizzy but adjusting quickly, “I’m a psychiatrist.”

“Psychiatrist?” Duncan subconsciously raised his eyebrows, “You are a psychiatrist?”

“Ah, yes, maybe I look a little young… but I’m a full-fledged psychiatrist with a senior license,” Heidi said proudly, then fumbled with her body until she found a crumpled business card. She hands it to Duncan with both hands, “This is my business card. If it can come in handy, I am ready to provide you with a free consultation…”

A senior licensed psychiatrist from the upper city, this one might come in handy with her connections.

Duncan took the business card and scanned it. There’s the address of the clinic, the doctor’s full name, license number, and a five-digit code consisting of numbers and alphabets.

There’s also a note before that line of code: express courier code.

Duncan’s gaze lingered on the line of “express courier code”. He remembered it to be part of the Pland postal system based on his inherited memory. However, this was no ordinary code, it was the special service tier that costs ten times as much as the ordinary one. And since Duncan’s host body didn’t have other relatives around aside from Nina, he never did find a need to spend that much money to contact someone.

Duncan only roughly knew that this special “mail” relied on high-pressure steam pipes and standard capsule silos to achieve rapid delivery. Not only for sending letters but also for delivering small packages. Even if you take into account the manual processing at the end and the possible delivery time, it only takes a few hours at most to deliver from one corner of the city to the other.

How should he put it… Duncan could only sigh at the upper city’s frank expenditures.

Putting away the business card fittingly, he then heard Heidi speak again: “By the way, do you need to conduct... a post-disaster mental assessment?”

The young psychiatrist quickly explained after noticing the peculiar look she was getting: “Of course it’s free. I don’t mean anything else. The main reason is that people’s spirits are prone to problems after encountering an accident, especially in places like museums where there are many historical objections. Severe mental pressure plus the influence of certain relics... can easily leave a shadow on the spiritual level.”

Heidi seems to be trying hard to pick the proper vocabulary so that it’s easy to understand such high-level knowledge. Unlike her, who’s been trained in the field, those living everyday normal lives would have trouble understanding her concerns. In most cases, such questions may even appear offensive.

Of course, Duncan himself wouldn’t have minded and didn’t need a mental assessment. When the captain of a natural moving disaster arrives on the scene, any evil spirit or demon could move aside because he’s the genuine thing to be scared of.

As for Shirley... This strong girl who could fight the dark demon and cultists by herself using that dark hound as a meteor star needed no evaluation. That’s obvious enough. If anything, it’s her victims that needs help after going through the beatdown she dishes out.

But Nina, on the other hand... Nina may really need the help of a psychiatrist.

Not only because of the fire today but also because of her poor mental state these days and those ominous dreams.

This needs professionals to deal with it, and his own strength was useless in this field. As for the deal of making a trip to the church for therapy, that’s no longer needed since we have a perfectly good doctor that’s willing to service for free!

“Nina may need help,” Duncan glanced at his “niece” and reached out to ruffle the girl’s hair, “but not just because of today’s fire—she’s been having weird dreams lately, and she’s in a bad mental state.”

Nina immediately muttered in protest, “Actually, I’m fine...”

“It’s free,” Heidi smiled, pointing to herself, “my usual consultation fee is... Oh, it hurts!”

She accidentally poked at the place where she had been hit by a brick. The swelling made it easy to touch if not careful.

“It’s free anyways, no need to hold back,” Shirley, who had been quiet for a long time next to her, also joined in, “She still owes us a favor...”

“Then... okay,” Nina hesitated and finally nodded in agreement. “Is there anything I need for a mental assessment? Is it okay here? Need to answer some questions? Or fill out the form?”

“We need at least a quiet environment, and I need to be in a better state — at least not with this big bump on my head,” Heidi explains with a smile. “I’m a professional, unlike the crappy doctors who only ask you a few questions and write you a diagnosis. Let’s do this. Tomorrow is a school day, and if this Miss Nina has time, I will visit your home in the afternoon. I will ask my father for your address.”

Speaking of this, she paused and touched the wound on her forehead again.

“As for now, I have to find a place to treat the wound first... Hiss...”

“There are policemen on the other side of the square and medical personnel,” Duncan suggests after a moment of thought, “do you need us to accompany you? Your current state is...”

“No, I’ve completely sobered up,” Heidi waved her hand to show she’s fine. Then glancing back at the museum that was still smoking, she showed a look of fear and pity, “Aigh... my long awaited vacation... it’s all up in smoke now. ”

“Vacation going up in smoke is indeed a sad thing,” Duncan said casually, “but the good thing is that we just survived a disaster, didn’t we?”

“Well... you’re right,” Heidi said with a smile. Then sighing and muttering, “Aigh, I only hope that some heretics and mobile natural disasters will stay quiet for a bit longer. At least this way, my days off will come sooner... Ah, sorry, I shouldn’t have complained to strangers about this. That was inappropriate.”

Duncan: “...?” ”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 122

Chapter 122 “The figure on the edge of the square”

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After asking where the rescue point near the square was, Heidi covered her head and left on her own since Duncan didn't want to deal with the officials at the scene. To him, having a girl and dark hound around clergies was a terrible idea no matter how he thought about it.

Watching Heidi's figure gradually drift away, Duncan exhaled softly and turned to Nina: “You're not hurt anywhere, are you?”

“No,” Nina was still a little shocked. She had been subconsciously grabbing Duncan's sleeve, and only now did she realize this fact and let go. “You haven't said it yet; why did you appear in the museum?”

“I happened to be running an errand nearby,” Duncan said with a smile, “and then I suddenly heard the news of the fire in the museum. That's why I came.”

Then before the other party could question further, he reached out and ruffled the girl's hair to comfort Nina: “Okay, it's all over now. I'm happy that you're not hurt.”

“..... I'm not a kid anymore!” Nina shook her head, and then her eyes caught sight of Shirley standing next to her. She had wanted to say something when her mind abruptly noticed some inconsistencies in their friendship. “Shirley... how come I suddenly... feel like you're...”

The gothic girl's attention was still focused on Duncan when this came out of the blue. Realizing things were turning bad, the panic she tried so hard to

suppress was now visibly showing on her face.

Duncan didn't miss this change of course. The reason? The panic-looking appearance from Shirley was exactly the same way from the bus fare incident earlier today. Then, as he thought about the two girls' behavior and personality, it told the ghost captain that something was definitely amiss in the story of them being classmates. There are too many loopholes....

Duncan rubbed his chin, then tapped Nina's shoulder and pointed to the other: "Do you really know her?"

"Yes, her name is Shirley, and she is my new friend, but..." Nina frowned, "But for some reason, I can't remember when she appeared at school..."

Duncan turned and eyed the nervous-looking Shirley, who was already trying to reduce her presence to a minimum. Softening his tone so the other party wouldn't flee: "There is still a chance to explain it yourself, or I..."

As soon as those words came out, Shirley cracked and jumped to defend herself: "I'm sorry, I'm wrong. I just wanted to investigate something, so I mixed into the school. But I never intended to hurt Nina! I even blocked a piece of falling wood back in the museum for her. Please believe me, I really didn't know she was your kin. Please let me go..."

Duncan didn't mean anything by his last sentence, so this bombardment of an apology caught him completely off guard. Coughing awkwardly to clear the air: "Not kin, she is my niece."

As he spoke, his gaze also noticed Shirley's hands.

There were traces of burns still lingering on the skin. Although the scar was faint and healing, it does add to her credibility of meaning no harm.

Of course, Shirley didn't know what Duncan was thinking and was running empty in the brain: "If you say... a niece... then a niece..."

Nina only faintly reacted at this. Showing a surprised face at her uncle, she then shifts her attention to the "friend" in front: "Wait, you two... know

each other? And Shirley, why are you...”

“We met by chance,” Duncan said lightly and didn’t let Shirley speak. He didn’t want to expose Nina to their secret just yet either: “Looks like we have a lot of things to talk about, Shirley?”

Shirley was about to cry and showed a sad face: “If that’s what you say...”

“That’s right.”

“Okay...”

“Uncle, don’t be so mean to Shirley,” Nina was still confused at this time, but she could see that her new friend and uncle weren’t on the friendliest terms. The former was scared silly, and the latter was rude to some extent. “My brain is a mess right now... Can someone explain what’s happening to me?”

“Let’s go home and talk about it slowly.” Duncan exhaled softly as he watched the smoking museum in the distance. “It’s too chaotic here, and you two must go back to shower and change your clothes.”

Shirley stammered, “I... I’m going too?” Then she nodded vigorously without waiting for Duncan to speak: “You’re right!”

Duncan sighed like he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He doesn’t recall ever torturing the girl or threatening her. Yet, she’s treating him like the evilest demon god in existence.

But then, the corner of his eyes caught a glimpse of something on the edge of the square.

It was an individual drenched in a black trench coat facing away from this site. Judging from the rearview, the person should be quite tall and thin. However, the most notable feature would have to be the large black umbrella the person used on this sunny day.

In this weather, where there’s no wind or rain, a tall and thin man in a long trench coat with an umbrella would seem off no matter what. But since so

many people were gathered on the square's edge, no one bothered to notice this strange oddity.

"Uncle?" Nina noticed how Duncan suddenly stopped and looked curiously in the other direction, "Is there anything over there?"

"There's a guy playing with an umbrella over there. It's strange on this sunny day." Duncan said casually.

"Someone playing with an umbrella?" Nina was startled, "Where? I didn't see it..."

"I didn't see it either," Shirley also rubbed her eyes, curiously following Duncan's line of sight, "Are you sure you didn't see it wrong?"

"Didn't you see it?" Duncan frowned instantly. He glanced at Shirley and Nina, but after he turned his gaze back to the direction of the square in the next second, the figure with the umbrella somehow disappeared.

"Uncle?" Nina looked at Duncan with concern, "Did you inhale too much smoke and not feel well?"

"..... I'm fine. Maybe I've mistaken." In order not to worry Nina, Duncan just shook his head and said indifferently.

But nevertheless, his gaze remained on the other side of the square with deep concern.

If it's just an umbrella weirdo, it's not a big deal.

But if it's a figure that only I can see, it's a different story.

.....

Vanna brought a team of elite guardians with her after getting news of the fire in the museum. However, when she arrived, the flames had already been snuffed out.

“The fire has subsided on its own, and we have no evidence of a supernatural power being behind the incident.” The brave grizzly-looking storm priest came to report.

“Subsided on its own?” As soon as she heard the priest’s report, Vanna’s expression became serious, “... When you led the team into the fire, did you find any clues?”

“There was widespread excessive panic, visual hallucinations, and whispering among the citizens fleeing the scene. I suspect that there was a strong likelihood of corruption in the museum,” the priest nodded, “but as we searched, we found nothing inside... The only anomaly was that the flames suddenly subsided on their own.”

Speaking of this, the priest made another gesture of prayer to the goddess, adding: “But it is precisely due to this that the guardians and I can exit unharmed.”

Vanna nodded lightly over the safety of those involved: “Okay, when the fire is completely over, I will arrange for others to thoroughly scrub the museum again. We need to ensure there are no signs of abnormalities in the collection...”

After a brief command, the young inquisitor swept her gaze over the citizens who were being rescued and comforted. The way she’s behaving, it’s as if the lady’s looking for something in the crowd.

But at this moment, a voice suddenly came from nearby: “Vanna! I’m here!”

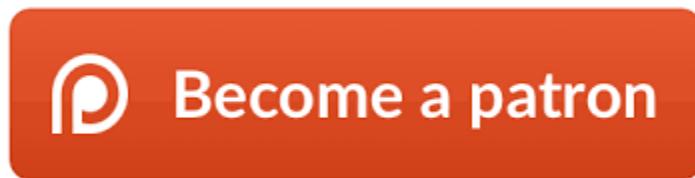
Vanna looked up and saw Heidi waving hard at herself from the crowd. The doctor was a mess but safe nevertheless.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 123

Chapter 123 “Sealed in Memory”

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Heidi ran up to Vanna panting. There were guards nearby who subconsciously tried to stop her when they saw the lady approaching, but they soon recognized this distraught and disheveled lady as a advisor to the church and city hall.

“I didn’t expect you to personally lead the team.” Heidi looked at the heavily armed Vanna in surprise before eyeing the church elites behind her, “And you brought so many people?”

“It’s not an ordinary case for a museum to go up in flames,” Vanna said before eyeing Heidi up and down several times. Then sighing in relief at her friend’s safety, “Looks like your vacation is up in smokes again.”

“Mhmm, it’s ruined again!” Heidi said with a sad and resigned face, “Why am I always so unlucky... uuhuuu....”

It’s then Vanna noticed the uniquely large bump on Heidi’s head. Stepping forward, she reaches out with a finger to gently caress the wound with a blessing of her own: “Did you just get out of there?”

“I was saved... Whew, that feels so much better...” Feeling the pain on her forehead gradually subside under her friend’s power, Heidi’s attention slowly focused and turned fearful. She’s remembering something, which she promptly passed the news onto her friend: “Vanna, I need a quiet and blessed environment right away, preferably in a church or chapel.”

Seeing her friend's suddenly serious expression, the inquisitor didn't waste a second of time and promptly turned to call for a priest: "Take over the scene for me. Block off the museum and raise the corruption level to spirit class..."

But before she could finish speaking, Vanna heard Heidi cut in with a low and hurried voice: "Isolation class."

"Adjust to the isolation level, and expel all uninvolved citizens to two hundred meters around the square!" Vanna was inwardly shocked but swiftly issued the order regardless. Then turning to the regional priest with the grizzly beard: "Take us to the nearest chapel. We need a separate prayer room with #16 incense candles lit."

The priest, who had just escaped from the fire, immediately bowed his head: "Yes, please come with me. It's near the square."

Vanna quickly left with Heidi and drove to the community church a street over. Before arriving at the church, Vanna noticed that Heidi's face had started to flush abnormally.

"What's going on?" Vanna's brows furrowed and touched Heidi's forehead. The high temperature of the fingers instantly changed her tone: "Why is it so hot?!"

"I may have been exposed to something in the museum," Heidi said quickly, "I used self-hypnosis to block some information in the depths of my memory. Just now the effect ended... I'm gradually starting to recall the memory."

Listening to Heidi's story, Vanna's eyes widened slightly as she quickly made a judgment call – severe corruption of a supernatural anomaly or vision.

"Stop recalling immediately and slow down your thoughts!" Vanna reached out and pressed Heidi's shoulder, "Look into my eyes and turn your attention elsewhere! If you really can't, hypnotize yourself again!"

“I’ll try.” Heidi gently inhales and stares deeply into Vanna’s eyes, seeing the ocean waves as a reflection of the power bestowed upon those blessed with the storm goddess’s power. Unfortunately, try as she might, the doctor couldn’t do it. Gradually, the waves were replaced by waves of burning flame, a sea of searing heat that erupted from the dark void and oozed through her wound.

This was dangerous, a critical junction point that none wanted to reach. But then something unexpected occurred. A slight coolness from Heiti’s chest broke the illusion, sending the doctor into a sobering shudder.

Subconsciously glancing down, she realized it was the fake crystal pendant given to her by her father from the antique shop. It’s faintly glowing at an imperceptible level... However, it was enough to subdue whatever foulness at play.

The next second, she heard the priest’s voice coming from the front: “We have arrived at the chapel!”

Under the personal escort of Vanna, a powerful saint, Heidi was quickly sent into the sacred building and into an isolated prayer room, the incense candles already lit and sheltering the room from corruption.

“The Goddess is watching...” Vanna gasped after she entered as well. In that split second, she heard the illusory sound of waves ringing in her ears, a direct sign they were being protected by the goddess herself. “It’s okay now. You’re safe. Go ahead and release your memories and let me see.”

The doctor didn’t speak, only slightly nodding as she carefully took off one of her earrings. There’s a little mechanism at the end, which she pressed with her fingernail. A tiny spike popped out as a result of her action.

Without hesitation, Heidi clenched the item against her palm, allowing the blood to seep out from the tiny wound.

This was the most profound psychological impression she made on herself after beginning her career – when the spike pierced the palm, all the impurities sealed in the memory would be released.

In the next second, the illusory and cascading sound of waves in the prayer room suddenly became very obvious. As the burning candles became dim and flickering due to this change, the entire room took on a fuzzy and dark air like it's been shrouded under a veil. Layers upon layers of veils swayed around the statue, and a vague mirage began to reflect over it——

It was a scene that Heidi had urgently sealed in her memory, a glimpse of the momentary truth.

In that shaking illusory veil, Vanna saw what Heidi had seen: in the pitch-black void, a stream of sky-rushing flames erupted. More intense than any flame in the world, more thrilling than any great power created by humans, and like a massive wave of purgatory wave, it swept through all things in sight. Even for a saint like Vanna, her muscles had tensed up involuntarily!

How far did that flame reach inside the void? Hundreds of thousands of kilometers? Millions of kilometers?

But what is that exactly? Is it merely pure flame? Or is it more primitive, some sort of power that can touch the ancient truth?

Vanna didn't know when she was watching. It's too out of this world. Even so, the illusion eventually subsided, allowing her to relax as the sea breeze moisturized her mind. Again, it's the power of the goddess activating and a much-needed help in this situation.

“This... is what you saw in the museum?”

“Probably...” Heidi felt her heart pounding. Even though it was a picture extracted from her own memory, it was still beyond her imagination due to the effect of self-hypnosis, “But this thing... it's not like a ‘collection’ that can be placed in a museum...”

“This can't be an item from the ‘collection,’” Vanna said quickly. “Even if I can't tell how big it is, intuitively, I know it can't be stored in any building... You can't see something like that in the real world.”

Heidi was stunned, her brows tightly furrowed until she eventually spoke unsurely: “I may have seen it during my unconscious state... and the self-hypnosis was performed during that time. Perhaps what I experienced isn’t a direct encounter but a projection on the spiritual level.”

“Are you sure?” Vanna looked at her friend worriedly, “I’m not questioning your abilities as a psychiatrist, but... it is not easy to complete the temporary containment seal when you’re unconscious.”

“I have confidence,” Heidi nodded slowly but firmly, “I have received rigorous training in this area at the Academy of Truth. However, the containment of dangerous information will cause me to forget important key details due to my main consciousness being down. I cannot tell or show you more than this.”

“..... Okay, I trust your professionalism.” Vanna stared at Heidi for a moment longer before exhaling softly, “It seems... you’ve seen something amazing.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 124

Chapter 124 “Projection Of The Fragment”

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In the prayer room, where they’re being watched by the goddess’s statue, the two longtime friends fell into silence after the shocking scene.

“What exactly is that I saw?” Heidi asks after being the first to come out of that shock.

Vanna hesitated briefly before speaking softly: “Perhaps… that was exactly what the sun heretics had been looking for.”

“What the sun heretics have been looking for?” Heidi froze for a moment, “You mean…”

“Sun fragment, a shard from their god…” Vanna nodded lightly without waiting for Heidi to finish, “Perhaps only the sun fragment is worthy of the power in your vision.”

While saying this, Vanna slowly raised her head and stared at the icon of the storm goddess: “After all… the heretics claimed that the fragments came from their real sun…”

Heidi was stunned, and her expression suddenly changed for the worse: “If something like that really appeared in the real world, then Pland would be in immense danger. There’s no way it can be as it is now…”

“My theory is that it’s been sealed,” Vanna nodded in agreement, “intel from the church indicates the sun fragment appeared eleven years ago. But

now, it appears the event back then is nothing more than a leak from the real thing. The actual relic is still slumbering somewhere inside the city..."

"And now those sun heretics want to wake that thing up?!" Heidi looked horrified, "Are they trying to destroy Pland entirely?!"

"This is not the first day you've dealt with those crazy nutcases," Vanna shot a sideway glance at her friend, "you should know about their mental state better than anyone. For those suntists, anything is worth it to resurrect their black sun. What are a few city-states in their eye? If they can use the entire world as timber to fuel their god's revival, I'm sure they would do it!"

Heidi gawked her mouth for the longest time before gurgling out an incoherent mess as the frustration gripped the doctor's mind.

"The most crucial question now is what happened when you saw that vision. What happened to you, what happened to those around you, and what happened to the museum itself. Only by understanding this will we understand where the sun fragment is sleeping."

"..... No, I can't remember the details," Heidi tapped her forehead lightly, "but now I'm sure I saw its projection when I was unconscious. That's when I performed the emergency hypnosis on myself to preserve important clues... Let me think about it. At that time, I was rescued and temporarily placed in a certain room on the museum's first floor... According to what they told me after coming out, that room is close to the main exhibition area..."

Heidi struggled to remember, so she turned to her friend for help: "Can't you conclude that the clue is in the museum based on this?"

"It's difficult. Merely from the occult perspective, what you saw isn't the main body, so we have no way of knowing where the main body is. For all we know, the museum is merely an exhaust valve that happened by accident. What's more, a human's consciousness is fragile when not in control. You could've crossed paths with it by accident, and now the connection has already moved somewhere else."

Vanna explained patiently and then suddenly shook her head: “Of course, we will still conduct a search of the museum at the highest level and maintain monitoring afterward. After all, anomalies and visions are always irregular. Maybe the fragment will really remain in the museum in another sealed form. Even if not, we may still be able to find some clues in the fire to explain why the ‘rift’ happened to appear in the museum...”

“But the follow-up search has nothing to do with you. From a security point of view, you’d better stay away from that museum for the next month.”

“Of course, I can’t wait to keep my distance from this,” Heidi nodded vehemently, “I’ve had enough bad luck!”

Vanna silently looked at her friend, who had been unlucky since she was a child, with a face of wanting to add something, but in the end, she kept it inside. Then out of nowhere, the inquisitor remembered something else on her mind: “By the way, who were you rescued by?”

“Two girls who are still in school and a man who looks to be in his forties.” Heidi thought for a moment, “And coincidentally, one of those two girls happened to be my father’s student whom he made a home visit the other day. The man is her uncle... didn’t I mention it to you? His name is Duncan, and he’s the owner and manager of an antique store.”

“..... I’m a little allergic to the name ‘Duncan’ right now,” the corner of Vanna’s mouth visibly twitched, “although I know it’s definitely not the same person...”

“I had the same reaction as you when I heard this name from my father for the first time.” Heidi spread her hands out, “Speaking of which, I also promised that gentleman I would go to his house tomorrow for a mental session with his niece. I intend to use the visit to give a formal thanks for saving me tomorrow.... Today is such a mess, and me leaving in such a hurry is improper and bad manners.”

“Strictly speaking, it’s not just the ‘niece’ who needs to do a psychological assessment.” Vanna’s expression suddenly became serious, and her eyes stared straight at Heidi, “All three of those people need it.”

“Why...” Heidi subconsciously spoke but then reacted, “Ah!”

“Yes, they were all around you, and you saw the sun fragments in your coma.” Vanna stared into Heidi’s eyes to pass on her meaning, “If it was really the remains of an ancient god, the pollution might have spread to them along your consciousness. Perhaps the scale of this spreading pollution is small, but it can also be fatal for ordinary people.”

.....

Inside the antique shop in the lower city, Duncan had closed the door early and was sitting in a relaxed position behind the counter. Meanwhile, Nina and Shirley sat opposite of him after they finished showering and changing into new clothes. However, Shirley still wore her black gothic dress since she refused Nina’s clothes due to the size difference. It couldn’t be helped; both girls were too different in stature.

Of course, it’s not known if there are other reasons for the refusal. For all they knew, Shirley only refused because she didn’t want to accept a gift from an evil god’s family.

In the middle of the counter was the Ai the dove, who was pacing leisurely around the table happily while enjoying her dish full of fries – Duncan promised, and so shall it be done!

Ai got her precious fries, and Nina returned home safely, what more could Duncan ask for today aside from further mastering of his flame? Oh wait, he did learn something new, so he got everything he wanted!

The only one that’s not happy was Shirley though. The gothic girl was about to cry again, that’s several times in one day.

“So... Shirley, you’re not actually my classmate... You’re just using some kind of... ‘detective skills’ to sneak into the school to investigate something.” Nina looked at her hard-earned friend with a complicated expression, “You don’t like steam and machinery either...”

“I can’t even read those textbooks...” Shirley spoke cautiously, answering Nina’s question while making sure to sneak a glance at Duncan for his reaction, “I’m sorry, I... I’m sorry.”

Nina didn’t seem to notice Shirley’s apology and continued to frown in confusion: “But how did you do it? I... looking back now, you always did appear in my classroom out of the blue, and then often next to me without anyone noticing you...”

Shirley quickly glanced at Duncan again. After confirming that the other party’s expression was still calm, she muttered in a low voice: “It’s actually a little supernatural ability of mine...”

“Ability?” Nina’s eyes widened in surprise, “Could it be that you are an investigator for the church?”

“No, no, I’m not from the church, I...” Shirley glanced at Duncan again for the third time already, recalling what those priests like to call people like herself: “I’m what you would call a wild transcendent...”

Nina looked surprised: “... Transcendents in the wild?!”

“If we’re not registered...” Shirley spoke as if she’s given up on something and lashed out when the topic was brought up, “Those dogs from the church are always acting so high and mighty. Just because people like me don’t want to be monitored, they give us these derogatory titles.”

Nina listened to Shirley’s explanation with an astonished face and eyed the gothic girl repeatedly. Finally, the gesture left the more petite girl uncomfortable: “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re amazing!” Nina suddenly exclaims.

Shirley was immediately overwhelmed by that remark: “... That’s all you have to say?”

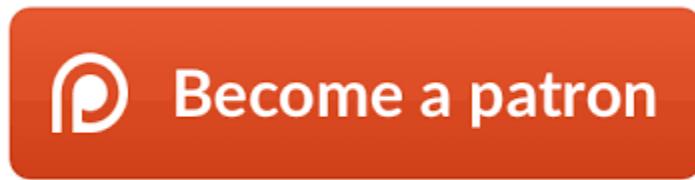
“Yes!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 125

Chapter 125 “Get to know each other”

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For Shirley, the fact that Nina was so focused on subtleties was a good thing. From the bottom of her heart, she has regarded this innocent and ordinary girl in front of her as kin of the subspace god, and not just any kind, but a relative at the daughter level. Therefore, her chance of surviving could only go up if she pleases Nina’s antics.

On the other hand, Nina didn’t know how much was hidden under Shirley’s awkward and stiff smile. To her, this merely represented an excellent opportunity to learn more besides the textbooks’ regular stuff. Sure, she’s met transcendent from the church, but those trips didn’t count.

“Where do you usually live? Do you have your own secret base or something? Or is there a very mysterious organization?”

“Do you usually hide in caves? Or somewhere like a sewer? Is there a warehouse-like place to store all kinds of ceremonial items?”

“Were you born with special abilities? Or is there some sort of supernatural item you use? Are you one of those legendary mages? I’ve heard that this ancient profession is where they can unleash spells without relying on any gods, and their power is said to come from the bloodline....”

“What do you usually eat? Do you ever want to drink herbs or strange animal blood? Yes? No? Do you normally eat too? Is it all true?”

Nina’s questions came one after another, crackling endlessly like a tape recording on rewind. About halfway through, Shirley had already broken

out into cold sweat on her forehead. Not because she couldn't answer the other party's questions, but because there was a Duncan next to her!

Meanwhile, Duncan had been silently watching Shirley from his seat with a cordial smile. From the surface, he looked no more than a parent supervising his children during a play date with a classmate.

"You seem to be afraid of my uncle...." Even if Nina was denser in this regard, she could still notice Shirley's strange behavior towards her uncle. "Between you two... did something happen?"

"Noth... It's nothing! It's truly nothing!" Shirley almost jerked up from her seat and started waving defensively, "I... what can your uncle and I have between us? I'm still just a kid...."

As soon as Duncan heard this, he felt as if something was wrong with that comment. Nevertheless, he knew better than to stop the fun between the girls. Making a cough to clear his throat, he interrupts to keep Shirley from going on a tangent: "Actually, it's nothing. We merely bumped into each other on the bus when she tried to dodge the fare."

"Just because of that?" Nina looked at Shirley in surprise, "That shouldn't have left such a big trauma... But my uncle is right. Dodging your bus fare is bad."

Shirley's tears were about to fall: "I really won't skip the ticket in the future!"

Nina nodded, then seemed to remember something else and stared at the petite girl: "Then... can you tell me what exactly are you investigating? You befriended me because of your investigation?"

Shirley's body jerked straight, her gaze wandering to the side where it met Duncan's ominous stare that left her soul half departing for the afterworld.

"I was investigating the fire eleven years ago," Shirley lowered her head and murmured in resignation, "the official records mentioned the factory leak happened in the sixth block..."

“The fire eleven years ago?” Nina’s eyes widened suddenly, her tone filled with astonishment, “Wait...you also know about the fire eleven years ago?!”

“..... You know it too?!?” Shirley was also surprised and shot up from her chair, “You also experienced that fire?”

“Of course I know, my parents died in that fire. I was six years old when Uncle Duncan rescued me from that incident,” Nina said in a hurry, gesticulating with her hands subconsciously. “But everyone always said I was confused by the toxic fumes on the street. They all claim there was no fire at all, and even later, the newspapers printed that it’s a factory mishap...”

“That year... I was also six years old, and my parents died in the fire. I remember it clearly,” Shirley looked straight into Nina’s eyes, “but the people around me also told me there was no fire at all... No wonder Dog said that he smelled something familiar on you...”

As soon as her words fell out, Duncan’s voice suddenly cuts in from the side: “So, it was Dog who guided you to approach Nina by sneaking into the school? You don’t know why either, and that’s why you’re so surprised by Nina’s words just now.”

Shirley quickly nodded while meeting Duncan’s eye.

“Dog? Who is Dog?” Nina gave a somewhat puzzled look.

“Dog, he...” Shirley grew hesitant and didn’t know how to go about this. Shifting her gaze to Duncan for help, she then turns back to Nina after getting no signs of rejection. “Dog is my friend. He’s currently next to me, but his appearance may be a little scary...”

As soon as Shirley said this, her heart instantly flew into turmoil. Despite there being an obvious shadow of subspace sitting here with them, she still has to go with this weird, humorous act of pretending Dog is the scariest existence in the room. That’s just ridiculous no matter how she thought about it.

Nina looked around curiously for signs of this “Dog”; however, after not finding the individual that was supposed to be beside Shirley, the girl figured it was better to just ask. “Then can you let me meet Dog since he’s your friend? What is so scary about him if you’re both friends?”

Shirley was still a little hesitant, so Duncan stepped in by tapping his finger on the table to get their attention: “Then you have to be mentally prepared. I have seen Dog’s appearance. It is quite scary looking.”

“..... Then I’m even more curious,” Nina became even more excited after getting confirmation from her uncle. “Oh please, let me meet him~ I’m so curious about why her friend has such a strange name....”

“Well, since you want to see it,” Duncan shrugged and gave Shirley a helpless look, “Let Dog come out and say hello; after all, he is also today’s ‘guest’.”

Under normal circumstances, Shirley would never expose the secrets of herself and Dog to strangers. Walking with a shadow demon in the city-state of order was a highly taboo thing. The priests of the storm church would storm her with a six-barreled machine gun if they ever caught wind of this fact.

“Uhh, alright....” She nodded, then slowly raised her arm.

In the next second, in Nina’s astonished and slightly nervous gaze, pitch-black flames and smoke suddenly rose beside Shirley!

Chains extended from the flames, and at the end of the smoking blackness, the figure of a ghostly demon condensed and materialized.

To the dismay of his mistress and Nina, the dark hound appeared as quickly as he shrunk into a ball. Talk about embarrassing. For a skeletal demon dog, he was posturing with his paws cusped over his hollow red sockets like a baby pup.

Duncan shot a WTF look at Shirley right away: “To be fair, seeing Dog like this isn’t as shocking as knowing a skeletal dog can move and talk. He’s

actually quite cute if you ask me.”

On the other side, Nina was flabbergasted and didn’t speak for the longest time until she gawked a word out, “AH!”

Shirley quickly spoke: “I did say you would be scared...”

But before they could go further, Nina suddenly exclaimed gleefully: “This is so incredible!”

Shirley: “...?”

“He... Hello?” While Shirley was lost in confusion, Nina had already begun to tentatively greet the hound, “Mr. Dog? Um, are you a ‘sir’?”

“Dark hounds have no gender, but you can call me that if you like,” Dog replied sullenly while glancing around at the room. “You’re... not afraid of me?”

“No, not really. Although you do look a little scary,” Nina thought for a moment, but then formed a big smile on her face, “but I’m quite bold too~”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 126

Chapter 126 “What did you see”

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Seeing Nina’s expression of excitement and curiosity after a moment of astonishment and nervousness, Shirley couldn’t help but mutter a complaint: “You can’t be described as bold anymore....”

Nina didn’t hear what Shirley was muttering at all. Instead, her attention was entirely attracted by the black bone hound in front of her. After she jumped off the chair, the girl strolled around Dog for two full circles while eyeing the creature up and down. Then when she finally saw Dog’s reddish eye sockets, the girl finally showed a startled look, but that’s it, only a little shock and nothing more.

“So amazing...” she repeated again. Nina even looked like she wanted to reach out and touch Dog’s bony skull like she was petting an animal. But at the last second, the girl withdrew her hand and looked up at Shirley, “This is the first time I’ve seen such a supernatural existence with my own eyes... What is Dog? Is he a creature summoned by a magical spell? Or...”

“He’s a demon,” Shirley replied frankly as if to scare Nina and make the other party slightly aware of the dangers. “He’s the most dangerous kind of demon.”

Nina was really taken aback. She probably didn’t expect this polite-looking skeletal dog to be a demon. Then, showing an incredulous face: “Is he... really a demon?”

“Strictly speaking, I’m a shadow demon.” Dog partly raised his head and snuck a peak at Nina by lifting one of his paws from his face, “Miss, this

may be the first time you've seen a shadow demon, but do not get the false impression about my kind. My compatriots are very diverse, but they are usually all fierce and ruthless..."

"Shadow..." Nina was stunned by the explanation. She finally woke up from the novel tension of seeing a supernatural being for the first time and recalled what the textbooks had said, "Shirley, you..."

"As you can see, I'm tied to a shadow demon," Shirley raised her arm and showed Nina the chain that's fused with her body, "so I don't want people to know my secret, do you understand? If the members of the Storm Church find out, they will not hesitate to throw me into the fire or open sea."

Shirley's expression was particularly grim, which was passed onto Nina on how severe the consequences are if true.

".... I've read from the books that the deep sea is full of crazy and evil creations, that they are the residual discharge of dark and unholy gods. But from Mr. Dog's appearance..." Nina stopped and hesitated to continue since it's rude to be so presumptuous.

"Dog is special," Shirley replied lightly. "Unlike a normal shadow demon with no heart and emotions, Dog does. Even though I can't explain why he does and how this came to be, this allows him to survive outside the deep sea."

Nina was stunned and nodded half-understandingly: "Oh."

While speaking, she fell into a short silence while scratching her head. Then turning to her uncle for help due to the distress, "Uncle, I feel like my mind is getting dizzy again."

Going through the chaotic encounter today, then the knowledge of Shirley's secret, any normal school girl would get dizzy by the absurdity of it all. It's already a blessing she's not crashing down and raising the white flag.

"You've been through a lot today," came Duncan's gentle and calming words, "some confusion is normal."

Nina blinked, finally realizing that she had ignored something crucial since the start of all things: “Uncle, do you know Shirley from before? How about her secret? Do you also know about Dog?”

“I did,” Duncan smiled, “but I didn’t know she was the ‘friend’ you mentioned the other day.”

“Then...” Nina hesitated, “are you also investigating what happened eleven years ago? Are you investigating together?”

“Sort of. We’ve worked together once or twice by chance,” Duncan nodded.

“..... Why do I feel like I’m the only one in the dark?” Nina muttered belatedly, “And you are investigating what happened eleven years ago... Is there any secret about what happened eleven years ago?”

“We don’t know yet, but we all agree that there was a fire that had been erased back then,” Duncan said quietly, his gaze falling on Nina. “I’m sorry, I’m not hiding it from you because I mean to keep you in the dark, but this is a field out of your knowledge. It’s too dangerous.”

“Uncle, what about you?” Nina grew slightly angry, “Uncle, aren’t you in danger too?!?”

While the man himself didn’t comment, Shirley on the side had begun to mutter in complaint: “Of course your uncle is in danger, your uncle is the most dangerous....”

Duncan instantly shot a warning look at Shirley, silencing any chance of the truth from coming out. “I am an adult, and as your uncle, I have a duty to keep you safe. Besides, I’m more powerful than you think.”

Nina’s gaze kept wandering between Duncan and Shirley, her expression repeatedly changing due to the mess inside her head. However, of all the fuss and stubbornness of an adolescent teen, it all ended with a sigh.

“It’s getting dark,” she glanced out the window and saw the dimming light, “I’ll go get dinner ready. Shirley, you can stay here too. It’s not safe when

it's dark."

"Ahhh... Yes?" Shirley was stunned and didn't react at once. But soon, she understood what Nina meant and frantically waved her hand, "Ah, no need! Dog and I can make it back..."

Sadly, Duncan's voice had cut in from the side before the gothic girl could reject the goodwill: "Stay, the sun will go down in a few minutes, and the streets will be full of guardians. Are you sure you want to tangle with the curfew set by the city?"

Shirley froze with a visible shudder, her eyes glancing out the window as well. Eventually, her expression deflated into a whimpering frown at knowing she could no longer escape the antique store tonight.

"That... alright," the girl sat down dejectedly, barely holding up a smile to face Nina, "is there anything I can do to help?"

"No, I always cook at home," Nina giggled with delight as she strolled towards the staircase. Then suddenly, she swung around and eyed Shirley sternly, "Shirley, are we friends?"

Shirley didn't expect this, so her first reaction was to look at Duncan, but the latter only looked away like it was none of his business. Finally, after a short and uncomfortable silence, she shook her head: "No..."

But then she nodded again: "But I can try."

Nina squealed over the second part. Although she didn't get the answer she so dearly desired, Nina was nevertheless pleased and jogged up the stairs with brisk fluidity.

Shirley stood motionlessly on the first floor, only coming back to reality when she heard Duncan's voice again. "Thank you."

Popping her eyes from surprise, Shirley quickly sat back into her chair nervously: "Why are you thanking me?"

“Nina has no friends at school.” Duncan has become accustomed to the overly antsy reaction of the other girl, so he doesn’t mind it. “The fact that you’re willing to try is a wonderful thing for her. She’s been so happy in the past two days when she told me about a new friend at school.”

Shirley blinked in confusion, somewhat not understanding.

“I... I still don’t quite understand,” Shirley appears troubled by the gratitude from the man.” Your role here is to play an ordinary person, right? Nina, she... doesn’t seem to know about how special you are. It’s the same at school. Her existence was so small that if it weren’t for Dog guiding me, I wouldn’t have found her at all. But as a kin favored by you, she...”

“Not kin, she’s my niece,” Duncan repeated and then looked at the other with an extremely serious expression. “Now that Nina is gone, I have a question for you.”

“Uhh, go ahead, I’m ready...”

“Dog guided you to get closer to Nina, right?”

“..... Right. ”

“Because Dog ‘smelled’ a specific aura on Nina, right? Based on this, he judged that Nina had something to do with the fire eleven years ago?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of aura is it? Is it the same energy signature as that factory? Or is it something else?”

This time Shirley didn’t answer; instead, she shifted her sight to Dog in the corner of the shop.

Under Duncan’s gaze, Dog hesitated for a few seconds before finally crawling over to the table.

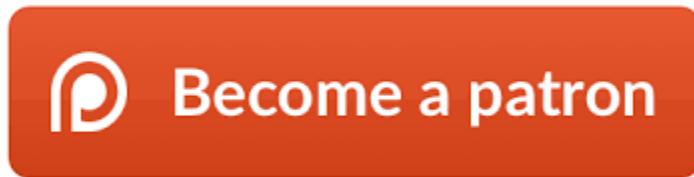
“There are countless ashes floating around her, Mr. Duncan.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 127

Chapter 127 “Dinner Together”

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Duncan’s heart literally skipped a beat after hearing Dog’s description.

Ashes are floating around Nina? A lot of ashes... What does that mean?

Turning his gaze towards the staircase, an uncomfortable feeling gripped the man’s mood as he listened to the faint sound of cooking in the kitchen. It’s the same usual clink and clank of the pots, the normal optimistic girl preparing dinner, yet something’s changed in his opinion with this new discovery...

Withdrawing his gaze to stare at Shirley to ensure there was no lie: “So let me get the facts straight. After Dog told you about a very suspicious target inside the school, you snuck in and approached Nina. Meanwhile, you also started to approach the suntists in the city in search of clues to unlocking the fire from eleven years ago...”

Shirley nodded in confirmation: “Yes.”

“I’m assuming you’re not actually interested in the sun fragment then?”

“..... What’s the point of looking for a fragment of some dark god?” Shirley counters, “So a flame can tell me why it burned the city back then? What I’m looking for is the one responsible for setting things into motion back then.”

“But it’s no ordinary fire,” Duncan met the gothic girl’s gaze, “if it was really a fragment of the dark sun... It would be more powerful than what

burned the factory. Shirley, you're doing something very, very dangerous.”

“I'll speak bluntly, so don't be angry.” Shirley thought for a moment before heaving heavily, “I think sitting here with you is already dangerous enough...”

“..... Haha, probably,” Duncan was slightly startled by the frankness and couldn't help but chuckle. Getting up from behind the counter to slowly walk towards the stairs, “I'm just making a kind reminder. Of course, how to go about it is your business.”

“Wait a minute,” Shirley bolted from her chair as if wanting to say something, “from the way you're speaking... you didn't know that Nina was special?”

Duncan halted, and after a slight hesitation, he raised his finger and pointed to his eyes: “It seems that this body's 'eyes' are not very good. That's why I haven't noticed it.”

This body...

Shirley keenly picked up on those words and came to a conclusion. She didn't dare to point out her discovery of course, but she did watch the other party walk up the stairs with her jaws wide open: “What are you going to do now?”

“What am I going to do? Go upstairs and have dinner, of course,” Duncan said rightfully as he glanced down at the girl. “And you two, aren't both of you coming too? It's dinner time.”

It's dinner time.

Eating food at the home of a shadow of subspace?

Shirley didn't know how to describe the many strange thoughts that flashed into her head, nor did she know how her legs managed to follow the boss's trail. Regardless, she did end up going upstairs to the second floor, where she saw for the first time the cramped kitchen.

There's nothing special here, merely a table, a few plates of heated hard bread, and a huge pot of soup in the middle. This arrangement was typical of every household in the lower city.

However, there was something special here that caught Shirley's eye. Unlike most families in Pland, this pot had a few pieces of fish floating in the white broth.

"I made the soup with the remaining half of the salted fish," Nina said to Duncan with a smile and then looked at Shirley. "Uncle bought the fish the other day. You need to taste it! It's so good~!"

Shirley rigidly sat down at the dining table as instructed, her eyes still slightly confused as she scanned the assortments.

"You're thinking why is the food so ordinary, right?"

"Ah, no, no, no... This is much better than what I usually eat...", Shirley replied subconsciously, then added, "but I really didn't expect it to be such an ordinary assortment."

"This fish looks a little strange," Dog poked his skeletal head up from the side and glanced at the food on the table. Then, with a perplexed voice, "Why am I getting a familiar feeling from this?"

"What do you know?" Shirley glanced at her friend, "You who usually gnaw at stones as cookies shouldn't comment..."

"Doesn't Mr. Dog eat?" Nina looked up in surprise when she heard this.

"Shadow demons don't eat human food. In fact, they don't eat at all," Shirley nodded ahumphly, "aside from occasionally nibbling on some stones to grind their teeth, they don't consume anything."

When Dog heard this, the dark hound promptly swung his head to the side in a huff, "That hurts. Do you know how hard it was for me to find ways to feed you? I foraged and stole food to raise you. What's wrong with me occasionally eating some stone..."

As he spoke though, Dog didn't forget to take another look at the soup pot by leaning over the table. Then after a good half minute, the dark hound suddenly shuddered and retracted his gaze.

"Dog, what's wrong with you?" Shirley was stunned by her partner's reaction.

Dog shot a look at Duncan first, then back at Shirley. Finally, he just sat there like a statue with an idiotic smile.

"What? You don't like fish?" The indescribable swirl of light and shadow (Duncan) asked with a smile.

Dog immediately shook his head like a rocking drum, acting all innocent and clueless.

What FISH!!! That's a bloody offspring heir of the deep sea! You chopped it up and stewed the guy into a soup! How can you even ask if I want to eat it?! Sure, you changed it somehow, and now it's a fish, but that's not the point!

"I... don't like to eat fish," Dog answers robotically.

Duncan didn't know why Dog would behave so weirdly before the soup. To him, this must be some sort of habit of a shadow demon. Instead, the man had shifted his attention to Nina.

Nina looked no different from normal. Although she may have a little more on her mind, the sensible child gave no impression that something was wrong. However, Duncan understood the veiled curtain that shrouded the factory in the sixth district had already taken his niece. The issue was how deep the infection was...

"Uncle?" Nina finally noticed Duncan's gaze and asked with a look of confusion, "What's wrong?"

Duncan didn't answer, only reaching out to gently stroke the girl's hair like a good elder.

“I’m not a child anymore!” Nina exclaims in defense, surprised by the sudden gesture.

“I know, you’re not a kid anymore,” Duncan laughed, a tiny green flame lingering on a strand of Nina’s hair, “but you’re still a child to me.”

Nina puffed out her cheeks grumpily.

“Uncle, are you going to investigate things with Shirley again in the future?” She finally couldn’t help but ask.

“Within the limits of safety,” Duncan replied casually.

“..... Can you not go?”

Duncan shook his head: “Can’t.”

Nina grew silent for a moment, “Then what can I do?”

“Eat well,” Duncan smiled and pointed to the table, “then sleep well, study hard, and finally protect yourself while your uncle I work.”

Nina stuffed a piece of bread into her mouth, “Okay...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 128

Chapter 128 “Changing Course”

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The second floor of the antique shop was not big by any means. Except for the kitchen and the bathroom, there were only two other rooms. One for Duncan and the other for Nina – Shirley, who was temporarily staying overnight, could obviously only sleep with Nina.

“Actually, I can sleep in the hallway...” Shirley seemed a little embarrassed watching Nina busy preparing for herself, “Or I can sleep on the ground on the first floor...”

“That’s not okay,” Nina said, glancing toward the door. Uncle Duncan had gone back to his room, so it was just her and Shirley, plus Dog who was napping nearby. “How can we let a guest sleep in the corridor, and on the first floor... the first floor, they’re all my uncle’s ‘babies’. He wouldn’t agree anyways.”

“His baby?” Shirley was stunned for a moment, recalling what she had seen on the first floor. Due to how nervous she had been, the gothic girl only assumed those things were piles of rags and garbage used to trick the folks in the neighborhood.

But she quickly realized something again: here, the “Mr. Duncan” was just an ordinary person, and Nina in front of her did not know about her “uncle’s” other face!

Thinking of this, Shirley’s expression became a little strange under the bright light brought by the electric lamp, “Are you really not angry?”

Nina stopped making the bed and raised her eyebrows: “Angry? Why?”

“..... I actually lied to you for a long time,” Shirley whispered. She had rarely been so embarrassed and quiet in her life. “I only approached you at first because of Dog’s reminder, but I didn’t expect you to believe me so easily and become my friend. I even... I assumed you would be a little angry with me if you ever found out.”

“..... No one had spoken to me at school for a long time, and I thought...” Nina muttered but quickly shook her head, “But I’m really not angry. No matter what the reason, at least you actually talked to me, went shopping with me, and went to the museum together.”

Shirley wasn’t accustomed to Nina’s calm reaction, or rather, she had long been accustomed to a colder interpersonal environment, hence the awkwardness. “You are such a strange person.”

“Am I?” Nina tilted her head after making the bed, “I think someone said that to me as well a long time ago... I think their words were, ‘how can this kid be so frank inside’.”

While speaking, she beckoned to Shirley: “Come sit. Why do you keep standing there?”

Shirley froze for a moment, hesitating if she should do as told. But then a strange and bizarre feeling flowed out of the gothic girl’s heart, and that was a sense of warmth.

“The light is so bright...” As if to break the tension, or maybe just to find things to talk about, Shirley whispered after crawling into bed.

“Don’t you have electric lights where you live?” Nina was a little surprised.

“I live in... in an older neighborhood where there are no electric lights,” Shirley blushed, “I still need to use candles when the night falls.”

“Ah...” Nina opened her mouth, feeling a little awkward at not being more aware of the other party’s situation. Stiffly changing the subject, “Do you

want to change into pajamas? I still have one from two years ago, so the size should fit.”

“Okay....”

“Sleep early tonight. Tomorrow we can go around the neighborhood and get you some new clothes. Your skirt is already burned.”

“..... I have no money.”

“Then it’s my gift to you.”

“Okay....”

.....

Unlike what others would have expected, Duncan hasn’t fallen asleep in his bed yet. Instead, he’s been sitting in front of the windowsill and quietly staring into the distance.

Closing his eyes, Duncan allowed his powers to activate. From where he sat, two clusters of green flames were flickering nearby in his dark field of vision – they’re the marks he left on the girls, one for Shirley and the other for Nina.

He still doesn’t know what the ashes around Nina meant, what secrets are buried in the city, where the veiled curtain came from, or who’s manipulating everything from behind the scenes, but one thing’s certain, he’s getting closer to the truth from eleven years ago. Little by little, he’s going to pry apart the fog.

As to why he’s leaving a “mark” on Nina, that’s insurance on his part. Today was a warning to him. If he hadn’t acted in time, who knows what might’ve happened. He won’t permit another accident like that of the museum to occur.

Opening his eyes again after confirming the marks were secure, Duncan looked down at his hands.

This body is still too weak for my liking. The power transmitted through the connection limits my perception. If Shirley hadn't come along, I never would've known about the ashes around Nina.

Taking a small breath, Duncan shifts his focus back to the ship where the main body lies. Immediately, the ghost captain shot open his eyes and left the captain's quarter.

“Oh how wonderful Captain! Your most loyal and faithful first mate is here to....” The noisy yapping of the goat head came the second he walked out the door.

“In what direction is the city-state of Pland?” Duncan glanced at the statue and interrupted the other quite skillfully.

“Pl... the city-state of Pland?!?” The goat head was caught off guard. Showing a moment of astonishment from the wooden face, the statue suddenly got all excited in his voice: “Pland! A human city-state! Oh the great Captain Duncan is finally willing to embark on a plundering expedition?! Is this your attack target? Are we going to directly hit the port, or are we plundering the merchant ships on the coastlines? Maybe the naval force of Pland will...”

“Shut up, don’t make any extra arrangements.” Duncan went straight to the mapping table and knocked on the table to get his orders through, “I want to know which direction leads to that city-state.”

“Oooh, right, okay, as you wish—” As the goat head’s voice became low and drawn out, the fog-filled map suddenly started to show a flashing dot at the edge of the chart.

“The Pland city-state you’re looking for... It shouldn’t be too far off,” the statue said respectfully. “Ah, it’s a pity that the mapping chart has been asleep for too long. It can only mark the approximate location of Pland right now, and the sea conditions and markers along the way are still shrouded with the unknown...”

“It seems very far away,” Duncan glanced at the bright spot in the fog and judged the journey wouldn’t be a short one, “how long will it take if we go at full speed?”

“Half a month? Maybe a month? In fact, it’s already very fast. We haven’t really reached the boundary of civilization yet,” the goat head confessed. “You can also choose to let the Vanished go at full speed in the spirit world, but that method isn’t very safe. Although the spirit world itself is not a big threat to us, many daring entities of the deep sea may find trouble with us...”

The deep sea...

Duncan subconsciously thought of “Dog”, but quickly shook his head: “Then sail in the real sea first while approaching Pland. Another question, are we able to remain hidden from the city-states?”

He had to be wary of asking this question because it posed a risk to his identity. Nevertheless, Duncan did so anyways since it was a chance for him to test the statue’s limits again.

There was no emotion in the obsidian eyes of the goat head. He just looked at the captain quietly before speaking as usual: “... We can hide in the fog, and if necessary, briefly dive into the reflection of the broken waves. That way, we may be able to come up to fifteen miles of the shore without being detected. But not closer – the eyes of the gods will perceive us, and the cathedrals of the city-state will issue the warning.”

“Your experience is from a century ago,” Duncan said calmly, “does it still work now?”

“Of course,” the goat head said lightly, “a century is nothing to the gods. They wouldn’t have changed much in this duration.”

Duncan breathed a sigh of relief: “Very good, then let the Vanished approach Pland. Be sure to keep us hidden the entire time.”

“May I ask something?” The statue asks again, “Umm... what do you plan to do there?”

“A test,” Duncan thought for a moment, smiling as he formulated his plan, “Let’s see if the wifi will be better.”

Goat head: “... wi... What does that mean?”

“Go and let Ai explain it to you.”

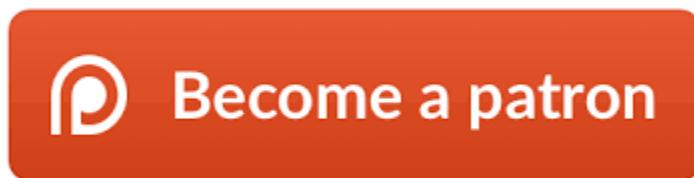
“No! Your most loyal first mate does not need or care of the meaning!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 129

Chapter 129 “Dark Night”

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Duncan didn't know why, but he got this sensation that something had changed with the ship. What's the word? Satisfaction? Yes, that's the word best to describe the mood of the Vanished as it sailed at top speed against the waves.

Strolling the deck as he watched the ghostly sails drumming against the nonexistent wind, he raised his head and looked up at the towering mast. Then he knocked on the railing and said thoughtfully: “You are also bored with the aimless drifting, right?”

The Vanished did not answer him, only slightly creaking under the stress of the waters from below deck. But the ship didn't need words; instead, it had ropes that slithered across the deck like a snake to dangle beside Duncan.

“..... That's not cute you know, it's even a little scary,” Duncan glanced at the snakish cable in front of himself, “is this how you scared Alice the last time?”

The cable swayed in place twice and quickly slipped away like a guilty child.

Heaving a small breath, Duncan wanted to enjoy the fresh breeze at night when a sudden jerk of his power hit him. It's from afar, much further away than what's on the ship. At first, he didn't react but realized it was directly coming Pland. In the city-state, there are only several individuals that he's marked, and this time it's in Nina's room next door.

Without hesitation, he allowed his consciousness to float into the darkness, feeling his way to the source. He assumed it may be his niece's mark calling for help, but it turns out it wasn't – it's actually Shirley's....

What happened to Shirley?!

Without a second delay, Duncan shifted the main focus of his mind back to the second body inside the antique shop. Rushing up, he lightly knocked on the girl's door to no avail. There's no movement inside.

After a brief hesitation, the man knew he couldn't wait any longer as Shirley's mark cried out again. So he pushed the door open and entered – just like when she was a child, Nina always slept without locking the door.

The bedroom was dark, with only the shimmering light of the street lamp from the window illuminating the outline of things. As far as Duncan could tell, there was nothing abnormal here.

Shirley and Nina were sleeping quietly on the bed, one head facing the other end, and the other had her leg up against the former's belly.

The sleeping position is very artistic....

Of course, Duncan wasn't interested in paying attention to the sleeping positions of the two girls. Instead, he's more worried about the crumpled forehead on Shirley's face and the squirming black line swimming around the girl's arm.

Duncan didn't like what he saw. Activating the mark he left on Shirley, he intends to use the special properties of his ghost fire to find the source of "erosion" in the room.

Immediately, a tiny green flame rose up beside the bed to illuminate the surroundings. However, the flame only flickered a few times before eventually staying in place.

There is no erosion in the room....

Duncan's brow furrowed even deeper, and he moved closer to observe Shirley's pained expression.

Because he wasn't sure how much the ghost fire affected the living, he couldn't directly release a large area of flame to "scan" the entire room like in the factory. Still, even a little spark from his ghost flame should draw a reaction if there's anything here.

The erosion.... is not in the real world? Then the spirit world? Or is it something else?

Duncan swiftly went over the possibilities, thinking up what options he had to choose from. Then quickly running back to his own bedroom next door, he yanked the dove who was napping by the windowsill.

"Wake up, we're spirit walking."

After a series of "cooing" protests from Ai, Duncan once again entered the dark tunnel with the endless starlight. He first calmed his mind, then allowed his consciousness to fly towards what he wanted. Unlike the mark he left on the White Oak steamship and Vanna, Shirley's mark was intentionally made by him, meaning it was far more stable and easier to connect in here.

.....

Shirley shot open her eyes and found herself sleeping in a familiar yet unfamiliar bedroom.

Touching her temple to get the lightheadedness from her mind, she slowly crawled up from the sleeping position to scan the room. Gradually, memories of where she was surfaced, sending her eyes into a wide angering shock.

Jumping in a fury, she got out of bed and swore a long verse of curses in the air: "Damn, damn it, damn it...! XXXXX it's this again, it's this again!!"

Unlike in reality, where she's wearing Nina's passed-down pajamas, Shirley had on a light pink pajama here, and her voice had devolved into an immature version found only in her memories....

"Don't XXX torture me anymore! Don't XXX torture me anymore!"

Shirley roared the phrase over and over again in the darkness, her limbs punching and kicking at the mottled planks of the wall. She even tried to bite at the doorknob to force it open. Sadly, try as she might, the younger version of the girl could do nothing but whimper at the doorway, watching painfully as the morning light slowly seeped through the crack.

Eventually, a series of faint footsteps reached her ears from the other side of the door, then came a gentle and familiar voice: "Shirley, Shirley? Are you up? Still angry?"

Shirley's body visibly trembled at her mother's voice, those eyes drawing beads of tears as she greedily clung to the door like it would allow her to see the other person.

"Shirley, your dad and I are going to buy you a cake. It's our baby's birthday after all... When we come back, you won't be angry anymore, okay?"

"Don't go..." Shirley cried out, then the crying turned to desperate yells, "DON'T GO... DON'T LEAVE!!! DON'T LEAVE ME! I BEG YOU, DON'T LEAVE MEEEE!!!!"

She finally lost it and started wailing like a baby that she was in this dream: "DON'T XXXX GO! DON'T GO OUT! DON'T GO OUT THERE!!!!"

However, time continued to flow as it did in the memory engraved inside her mind. Eventually, the folks outside left, followed by the rustling sound of the woman grabbing a purse, then the gearing turning sound of a key turning inside the front door.

Shirley crumbled to the floorboard after hearing the final click of her parent's departure, signaling the start of the countdown.

When her heartbeat reached one thousand and two hundred times, the exclamation of fire came from afar.

When her heartbeat reached one thousand and six hundred, the pungent smell of smoke penetrated through the cracks in the door.

By the time her heartbeat reached one thousand and eight hundred, the streets were filled with the frenzied lights of red like the entire city had been thrown into molten magma.

When her heartbeat finally hit two thousand, a heavy, muffled bang smashed through the front door – the same kind of sound of a giant beast crashing through the entrance and prowling about inside her home.

Afterward, the door to her own room finally fell down as well – the very door that Shirley couldn't make a dent in. It's now shredded apart like paper.

A terrifying creature had appeared there. Pitched black and oozing with dark miasma around the bony structure, this was a dark hound that was not her Dog, and right now, it has found the six-year-old girl in front of it as the perfect target to kill.

Shirley calmly stared at the dark hound that had appeared in front of her. She knows this wasn't her friend but the perfect replication of the past she experienced.

The hound stepped into the room, followed closely by the crunching sound of meat and flesh....

Despite having one of her limbs being devoured, Shirley didn't move, nor did she scream at the piercing pain. In fact, her entire existence had become a numbing blob of nothingness as she recalled how long it took for the dark hound to become her Dog. Was it a day? Or a week?

Gradually, her consciousness gradually faded until the dark dream started to blur inside her peripheral vision. But suddenly, her eyes picked up on a figure next to the bed, a deeper shadow that's not supposed to be there!

From what she could tell, the figure seemed to have been there the entire time and didn't just pop out suddenly. This shouldn't be possible, at least not according to the countless times she had endured this torturous nightmare.

"I did not intend to pry." The gloomy and majestic figure finally spoke as a spark of green flame came to life, revealing the face behind the shadow.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 130

Chapter 130 “Everyone Knows Your Bad Name”

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Almost at the same time as the voice from the shadow came, an illusory “boom” rocked Shirley’s head. It did not exist inside this dream, nor was it outside in reality, but an explosion within her soul. Instantly, the burning flames and the echoing cries of panicking crowds were gone, dissipating like the fog was cleared from her mind.

In the next second, Shirley found that her body had changed as well – she had returned to her seventeen-year-old appearance. Her body was no longer in the familiar pajamas she remembered but rather in the black dress she wore on weekdays. As for her arm that’s been devoured by the dark hound, it’s also back to normal with a pitch-black chain extending outwards to Dog lying quietly in the corner.

Shirley sat up at once, looking at the figure sitting on the bed in amazement and nervousness.

She didn’t know who this person was, but she knew it was a powerful existence that directly penetrated the curse of the shadows and invaded her dreams.

“You... who are you?!”

Duncan stood up slowly. In this world of dreams, he had taken on his original appearance as “Captain Duncan”, which was oppressively daunting and enough to make Shirley flinch back subconsciously.

“You haven’t seen me like this. It’s normal,” Duncan said quietly, “I noticed you were having a nightmare, that’s why I came to check.”

“Noticed... so come to check...” Shirley blinked, a little puzzled by the meaning, until she popped her mouth in understanding, “Wait, you are...”

“Let’s get acquainted again. I’m Duncan,” the gloomy and dignified man smiled, “Duncan Abnomar.”

He said his name because he wasn’t worried about Shirley running off to tell the authorities – even if she did have the courage, the savvy hound would be wise enough to make her eat those words until she died.

“Duncan... Mr. Duncan? Are you Mr. Duncan!?” Shirley’s eyes widened in amazement, and a feeling of calm quietly permeated her heart, “But, but, aren’t you Nina’s uncle? How come your last name is Abnomar?”

Duncan: “...?”

The girl’s reaction caught the man off guard there. After a few seconds of processing, he finally spoke with a strange expression: “You... haven’t heard of this name before?”

Shirley thought about it and shook her head honestly: “No.”

Then she reacted again, but with a look of fear this time: “I... should I have heard of this name?”

Duncan suddenly realized that this girl really had no idea about the natural mobile disaster of the boundless sea, meaning her reaction couldn’t be faked. Apparently, even a reputation as big as his couldn’t reach the likes of Shirley, who has a limited cognition of people. This actually left him a bit hollow and dispirited inside at not being famous enough. “... Are you illiterate?”

Unexpectedly, Shirley actually lowered her head and went mute.

“Forget it. It’s not important,” Duncan immediately ended the current topic when he saw the other party’s reaction. At this point, the noise and flames

on the street outside had subsided, so he could take his time observing the small room here. “This is what you experienced back then, isn’t it?”

Shirley kept her head lowered: “Mhmm....”

“..... I didn’t mean to pry just now, but I discovered your secret while entering here,” Duncan said sincerely, “I’m sorry.”

Taken aback by the frank apology, she hurriedly took two steps back: “No... No, it’s okay. How can you apologize to me...”

“In any case, it’s not polite to spy on a ladies’ dream—even a ‘little’ lady like you.” Duncan smiled, then his gaze fell on the dark hound, “When will he wake up?”

“I don’t know...” Shirley looked slightly confused. Turning to face the sleeping dog in the corner, “This nightmare has never changed like this. I don’t...”

As soon as she was halfway through her sentence, she heard a slight sound of bones grinding against one another. Dog, who was still asleep seconds ago, suddenly jerked his skull up and glowed with a reddish hue in those eye sockets. Not waiting at all, Dog jumped up like he too had just woken up from a nightmare.

“Shirley...” Dog spoke with a hint of panic after recognizing the girl, “I...”

“It’s okay, it’s just a nightmare,” Shirley laughed and stepped forward to hug the big hound’s ugly skull, “You were having a nightmare too.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” Dog just kept whimpering the apology, the chain rattling due to the trembling bones from the hound. “Does it hurt? It must’ve hurt a lot...”

Shirley turned her head a little awkwardly: “Don’t go all soft on me... There are outsiders watching...”

“Outsiders?” Dog was stunned by the news. Only then did he notice the third party in the room with them. Without difficulty, the dark hound’s

reddish eyes saw the cascading green flames floating behind Duncan's gloomy appearance.

"Holy XXXX!" Dog exclaims out of the blue and reflexively drags Shirley behind himself for protection. He's trembling to the point that others might think he will fall apart if anything so much as touched him. "You... you are that ghost captain!?"

Duncan pricked his eyebrow at the reaction: "Oh? You're able to recognize me despite Shirley not knowing?"

"Dog?" Shirley also picked up on this fact, "Dog, have you seen him before?"

"Do I even need to have met him? Any shadow demon who happens to meet him would've been sent into subspace by now!" The black smoky miasma around Dog's bony figure rose and swirled in intensity, the signal that he preparing to fight despite the horror. "The natural mobile disaster of the boundless sea... why is he in your dream!?"

"The boundless sea's mobile disaster?" Shirley was still cluelessly blind to the title, "Why have I never heard of this from you?"

"No Shit! I have plenty of things I never told you. There are so many natural disasters in this world, as if I would go over every one of them with you under normal circumstances? Who in their right mind would expect a ghost captain of the sea to be on land!?"

Shirley seemingly wanted to ask another question when Duncan broke the conversation. "I thought only the people of the real world were afraid of me, to think my reputation has reached even the shadow demons."

Dog cowered back another step over the comment while maintaining an unfocused defensive posture: "You may have underestimated yourself. Your infamy is known to everyone. From the darkness of the deep sea, to reality of the mortals, and even the demons of the shadows like me, we have all heard of you. If my kind had a heart to begin with, we would use your name as a charm to frighten the young..."

Duncan felt the analogy was a bit off and weird, but he's not going to doubt Dog's story. In fact, it's quite the compliment to be feared so heavily after learning his reputation had no effect on Shirley.

At the same time, Shirley also heard Dog's mental whispering through the chains: "Shirley, in a bit, I will find a way to hold off this shadow. You try and wake up. This is only a dream so he likely can't follow you out to the real world..."

Shirley didn't react right away, only wondering what her partner meant: "Ah... and then what?"

Dog continued hurriedly: "Then you hurry to the next room and find the big boss for help. Just say that you are entangled by the Vanished. Make your words sound earnest, and even take the initiative to ask to be the other party's kin if you can. This is too dangerous to consider the consequences. Rather than being dragged into subspace, it's better to be barely alive by following an evil god..."

Shirley didn't respond at all now.

"Shirley?" Dog became increasingly more anxious, "Shirley, don't daze out now! Hurry and find a way to wake up while I distract this shadow! The only way to fight a big boss is with another big boss..."

Halfway through Dog's desperate plea, Shirley finally replied through their spirit link: "Dog... the big bosses you are mentioning are likely the same person..."

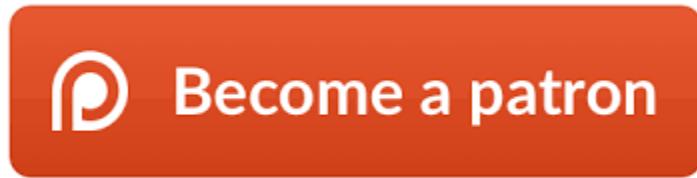
Dog: "...?"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 131

Chapter 131 “Breaking free from the dream”

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Duncan watched the nervous hound with a friendly smile. He could tell there was a misunderstanding between himself and the other party. In that case, it was better to resolve this issue as soon as possible.

But just before he was about to speak, he suddenly saw the flickering blood light in Dog's eyes. Although he could not see any emotional changes from the bone skull, he seemed to be able to feel the fierce and turbulent mood of this dark hound.

In the next second, he heard Dog's stammering voice come out: “You... You're the ‘Mr. Duncan’ we've been dealing with these past two days?”

Duncan was taken aback by the comment since he didn't introduce himself to the hound. Glancing down at Shirley and the chain connecting the pair, he's sure they didn't speak just now. So, that leaves only one answer: they're able to communicate through some sort of information-sharing ability.

“It's me,” Duncan said gently, “do you need me to explain anything? Or do you have something you want to know?”

“No!” Dog almost screamed, and his whole body was squirming, “We don't need to know any ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’. We have no intention of prying into your secrets!”

“..... I always feel that there is still some misunderstanding between us, but it appears to be getting more difficult to clear things up.” Duncan

sighed, shaking his head in a helpless manner, “Forget it, let’s use time to build up some mutual trust between us. As for now, I have something I want to know.”

Dog hung his head down: “You... please speak.”

Duncan frowned. He was actually very curious as to why his main body, who was famous in the real world, had such a great influence among demons. In his impression, the deep sea was a “place” that’s very close to the subspace. If going by that logic, a shadow demon shouldn’t hold such intense fear towards him, the mobile natural disaster of the sea.

However, it now seems that the demons, who are themselves “dangerous existences” to humans, are just as afraid of losing their homeland as humans do, which puzzled him.

However, before he figures out this problem, he must first resolve this nightmare inside Shirley’s dream world.

“I want to know about this dream,” Duncan said, his gaze falling on Shirley, “I know it’s a painful memory for you, and if you don’t want to say it, you can refuse.”

“..... There’s nothing I don’t want to say,” Shirley just shook her head slightly, “I should thank you. If you hadn’t interrupted this nightmare, I would’ve kept suffering.... As you can see, that’s what I went through eleven years ago.”

“Fire eh...” Duncan nodded, then shifted his attention back to Dog, “What I saw was your first ‘encounter’ with Shirley, right?”

Dog flinched sideways to avoid contact: “I was just a common shadow demon at the time.”

“Then how did you suddenly gain a ‘heart’?” Duncan asked curiously, “As far as I can tell, you almost killed Shirley back there.”

“..... I don’t know,” Dog fell silent for a few seconds, shaking his ugly skull in a loss. “When I first became self-aware, Shirley was already dying on the ground.”

Duncan took in a deep breath and deepened his gaze at the hound, then eyed the chain linking the guy with half of Shirley’s body.

“After that, both of you became fused together?”

“Sort of,” Shirley murmured, hanging her head and hiding the expression under her hair.

“Actually, I don’t remember exactly what happened during this period. I was only six years old at the time, and then I spent a long while afterward just surviving through each day.... If you’re really curious about how I got into this relationship with a shadow demon who almost killed me, you can grab a psychiatrist and hypnotize me. Maybe...”

“You don’t have to.” Shirley’s words were suddenly interrupted, and then she felt a large palm resting on top of her head.

It felt so warm to the touch....

“Sorry, I’m not trying to reveal your scars. I just want to know the details from eleven years ago.” Duncan gently soothed the girl’s head, understanding the question may be unpleasant for the child. “You should know that it wasn’t just the sun fragment that appeared eleven years ago, but also countless cultists that ravaged the city. Theoretically, it should have been a member of the Annihilation Sect who summoned the dark hounds.”

Shirley raised her head in a daze, only to be brought back to attention by Duncan’s continuing deduction: “A demonic creature from the deep sea suddenly acquired its own consciousness, which in itself is a mutation. Have you ever considered this mutation might be the inducement of a certain thing back then?”

Shirley blinked, a little slow in grasping the meaning, “The sun fragment?”

“I’m not sure… No one knows what form or power the sun fragments have, but in the teachings propagated by the suntists are that it doesn’t give humanity to other items or things.” Duncan shook his head, “So what caused Dog to gain a sense of awareness may be something other than the sun fragment… something else entirely.”

“You mean that there may be more than just the sun fragments that appeared in Pland eleven years ago?!” Shirley finally woke up from her confused daze, her eyes widening in shock.

“Just a little theory,” Duncan patted Shirley lightly on the shoulder before withdrawing his hand, “I always felt that something was wrong with the whole story. A big contradiction in the matter. If the sun fragment is a holy relic pointing to the Suntists, its power should be straightforward according to the descriptions of those lunatics. But the chaos eleven years ago didn’t fit into that box. According to the documents leaked by the officials, the cultists they captured included Annihilators and Enders. Why would members of the other cults get involved if the incident was caused by the Suntists?”

“Of course, it can also be explained that the power of the sun fragments is so great that even people who do not believe in the sun god are affected, making them go crazy on the same day. But this can’t explain the strange phenomenon like Dog here.”

“Now, let’s go further than that. Looking at it from the above angle, there are too many suspicious points that we’ve overlooked. This includes the veiled curtain hanging over the ‘fire’ and the fact that the memory remained inside you and Nina’s mind. How can only a select few remember the weird phenomena in the sixth block.... We’ve always attributed the cause of all things to the sun fragment, but is that really true? Can you honestly believe the sun fragment is that omnipotent?”

Duncan expressed the doubts in his heart, and some of the doubts actually arose before today’s event. However, it was only after seeing the change in Dog from eleven years ago that he’s become firmer in his theory.

The fire eleven years ago may have been caused by the sun fragment, but there was definitely something else at play in the whole event!

Shirley still didn't fully catch onto the whole theory. She was actually not very good at thinking about these complex things. In her stunned state, Dog's voice rang rapidly: "Shirley, are you okay? Did he just touch your head to release a curse? Are you still sane? You..."

"I'm okay," Shirley replied with a whine, "Dog, you're too nervous~"

"Nonsense, how can I not be nervous! You had direct contact with a source of corruption that can turn any sane person mad!" Dog's mental voice flew into dread, "How are you feeling?"

Shirley thought about it and touched the top of her head unsurely. From as far as she could remember, the last time someone stroked her hair like this was when she was still a child. Back then, her mom used to do this a lot before putting her to bed.

"It's warm...." She spoke softly in a trance.

Dog was dumbfounded: "Shirley, something is really wrong with your brain now."

"..... You shut up!"

Duncan didn't know what Dog and Shirley were talking about in their internal link, but he had something else he wanted to check out. Glancing up at the dim window with the reddish hue, he asked: "What's out there?"

"Huh?" Shirley didn't react in time and blurted this out.

Duncan raised his hand and pointed to the window: "Outside the room, what's out there?"

"I... I don't know," Shirley blinked, suddenly realizing that she's never once stepped outside this room where the nightmare haunted her. "I never thought about it. Every time I dream, I am stuck in this room..."

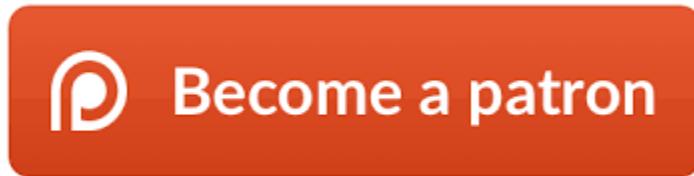
“But now you’re free,” Duncan walked to the door and swung around. To the girl, his words were no different from a temptation, “Don’t you want to try, see what’s at the edge of your dream?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 132

Chapter 132 “The Edge of Dreamland”

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Do you want to take a look at what the edge of your dream looks like?

Duncan’s words undoubtedly tempted Shirley, yet she couldn’t resist. From the deepest part of her heart, she does want to know, which manifested in the form of an irrepressible urge.

In this nightmare that has tormented her for eleven years, outside this locked room, on the streets she had not seen for eleven years ago... what exactly awaited her?

She subconsciously took a small breath, then turned her sight to the window that was nearby.

In the past, all she knew was the hazy darkness shrouding the outside world, but now, she could finally peer into what that chaotic light stood for...

“Can people really walk around in their dreams,” Shirley couldn’t help but mutter, “I don’t know what’s out there... Could it be nothingness outside?”

“Dreams are a reflection of the human subconscious, and the human subconscious tends to remember some ‘details’ that even one cannot perceive.” Duncan’s voice came from the direction of the doorway that had already been pushed open, “Maybe you were stuck in this room eleven years ago, but the light, shadow, and sound outside the window were all part of the things you memorized. These details are clues that will allow us to glimpse into what happened.”

“Of course, the decision is up to you. If you refuse, I will not continue to spy on your dreams – I will stay here, and don’t worry, as long as I’m around, this nightmare will not continue. You can sleep in peace, and tomorrow there will still be a clear morning.”

Shirley bit her lips lightly and then seemed to expend tremendous strength to make up her mind: “I... want to go out and have a look.”

“Okay,” Duncan nodded, leaning sideways to make way for the girl, “I’m with you.”

A subspace shadow, a mobile natural disaster, took the initiative to say that he wanted to walk with her – this should have been a terrible invitation, but for some reason, Shirley only felt relief from the words. To her, Duncan represented a warm light that suddenly barged into the endless dark nightmare.

It was sort of crazy to think that way, but that’s just how it was. The girl was gradually getting accustomed to living with an evil god now.

Duncan followed behind Shirley as the two stepped into the living room in Shirley’s memory.

Dog also followed them from the rear with a rather nervous appearance. He kept watching his surroundings, and he would prick his skull up from time to time like he was searching for any abnormal movement from the streets.

“Dog, what are you doing?” Shirley asks after getting a little confused.

“Scouting,” Dog said in a deep voice, “we are entering the unknown zone in the dream... Further on is the area that doesn’t exist in your memory. In theory, the things in front will become more and more twisted to fit your subconscious imagination and emotions. In the case of fear acting as the dominant emotion, the environment may generate something... that’s not so friendly.”

Shirley was amazed: “Dog, you actually know so much!”

“Only a little bit,” the dark hound cheekily raised his skull high, “I’m also a proper shadow demon...”

Duncan didn’t care about the conversation the pair was having mentally; instead, he was watching for any clues in the living room.

A kind of chaotic darkness had enveloped this slightly shabby living room from what he could perceive. Nevertheless, he could still see the shelf placed against the wall, a table and few chairs in the middle, and a clock hanging with its dial unmoving.

Everything appeared to be in order, except for the deep claw mark on the floorboard.

That’s the mark left behind when Dog broke inside the home.

In addition, there was no blood, no corpse, no scorch marks in the living room – the “fire” seemed to be confined to the streets outside, or simply because in Shirley’s subconscious mind, the fire never spread into the home.

They walked through the place and eventually came to the front door where there’s a huge hole through the middle segment. Aside from the door frame and a few loosely hanging pieces of wood, the entire thing had been smashed apart.

Further out, there are streets currently engulfed in fire.

Shirley stopped here. The girl didn’t realize it before, but she’s truly afraid of going into the streets where it’s burning.

“Shirley?” Dog glanced up at his partner with concern.

Shirley tightly bit her lips as if she didn’t hear Dog’s voice. She was having second thoughts, and her mind had started to wonder what might’ve happened to her parents that night. They also stepped through the front entrance here, and afterward, they never came home...

But then the soft clatter of chains brought the girl back to attention. It was Dog taking the initiative to walk outside, slightly tugging at the girl to join and break her trance.

“Shirley, it’s okay. There’s nothing scary outside, and if there is... I can’t tell.”

Shirley looked at the hollow eyes of the dark hound with some surprise. Then pursing her lips: “Thank you.”

Then she stepped out with her feet after so many years of being confined.

The streets are still filled with a thin layer of misty smoke, so it was quite difficult to get the full picture of the carnage. Even so, the thin, darkishly red fuzz in the distances told them the houses and street lamps were still there, but burning...

Duncan frowned at this view.

The fires on the street they’re walking on had already been extinguished, leaving only traces of the flames behind in the form of shapeless ashes and molten metal in the corners. All of this pointed to a huge tragedy, but he couldn’t find any signs pointing this to the sun fragment.

But on second thought, this seems normal – after all, this was just Shirley’s dream, a stage woven by her memory and emotions, so it’s not genuinely bringing back everything from eleven years.

With this understanding in mind, he followed Shirley slowly through the streets that had been burned by the fire.

Suddenly, his footsteps halted.

“Mr. Duncan?” Shirley looked back in surprise.

Duncan frowned and waved his hand to silence the other two while focusing his ears on movement sounds.

Just now, his ears definitely picked up something, a faint voice crying out somewhere.

After carefully keeping still and listening, he eventually pinpointed the source to a pile of ash by the roadside.

It was a twisted pile of black ash mixed with some charred black fragments. It appears whatever, or whoever this was, they've died and left nothing behind. There was even an ember still burning next to the ash. If observed long enough, one could even partially make out the shape of the individual who died here by the way it's curled up....

Duncan stared at the ash for the longest time until he slowly bent down to investigate.

“..... I..... I don’t want to die...” The cloud of ash murmurs.

Duncan popped his eyes, while Shirley on the other hand blasted her true thoughts out: “What is this XXXX thing?! ”

Duncan swung his head back immediately, causing the gothic girl to quickly adjust her wording again: “Um, I mean this is terrible...”

“..... I prefer the straightforwardness you showed just now,” the corners of Duncan’s mouth twitched as he said this. In fact, he was also frightened silly by the murmuring from the ashes here, but that got entirely overshadowed by Shirley’s outcry.

“I don’t want to die...”

“Help...”

“Go home...”

“Who will help...”

A creepy numbness had started to spread across the girl’s heart, causing Shirley to clutch her hands against the hem of the dress. Despite having the

courage to fight with a dark hound in hand, the girl clearly lacked resistance to these purely weird occult evils.

But at this moment, the surprise quickly turned to confusion: Is this really her own nightmare?

In this “edge of dreams” that has long drifted beyond her own memory and recognition, these cries for help shouldn’t be here. It shouldn’t be possible if she never came into contact with such a thing back then.

Shirley subconsciously looked to Duncan for the answer but saw that the latter was also looking her way with a scrutinizing gaze.

“It may not be just a dream,” the man said in a deep voice.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 133

Chapter 133 “The Strange Shadow”

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To be fair, Duncan wasn’t an expert in the supernatural field and lacked knowledge of the subjects related to dreams, but he still vaguely judged that the scenery presented on this street shouldn’t be normal inside Shirley’s mind.

Why? Because the ashes that murmured for help gave him a wonderful sense of déjà vu of what he saw in the factory and those piles of ashes hidden behind the veiled curtain.

Of course, the ashes in the factory did not call out for help – the ashes gave him a more intuitive and stronger signal, allowing him to see firsthand the “echoes” of the fire eleven years ago.

Subconsciously, Duncan believes that the ashes here in Shirley’s dream and the factory are somehow connected.

Raising his head, he scanned the surrounding environment covered by the fire’s dim red light. There were countless piles of ashes strewn across various places, falling sparks, dust debris, and imprinted shadows of those who once walked these supposed streets, a tragic scene.

“You were only six years old back then. No matter how many things you subconsciously observed, it probably wasn’t enough to support such a huge dream. On top of that, I do not believe such a young mind can create illusions like these weird ashes calling for help.” Duncan said softly, his voice calming the girl’s unsettled nerves.

To be honest, the ghostly captain still gave a frightening and intimidating impression to Shirley, but in this nightmare, that's growing increasingly freakier by the second, the man was the only reassurance she had to rely upon.

"Let's keep going forward and see where the scope of this dream lies."

Shirley was hesitant to agree but promptly dragged Dog along after noticing the ghost captain already moving forward.

Amidst the murmuring cries for help from the countless piles of ashes, the two of them and a dog continued to walk through the embering streets. Duncan made sure to take in every change he noticed, but to his surprise, the streets were unusually safe and calm aside from the ominous vibe.

Then Duncan suddenly jerked to a halt, his brows furrowing slightly at realizing something.

"Mr. Duncan?" Shirley cast a curious gaze, "Did you find anything again?"

"..... How far have we been walking from the 'point of origin'?" Duncan looked up and down the embering street. To him, the houses and buildings all looked no different from a hazy blur of red due to the buildings still smoldering in the distance.

"Point of origin?" Shirley showed a confused face, "Oh, you mean the room where we started? Should be.... It's already quite far, at least half a block away by now."

"Shirley, the situation is not right." At this point, even Dog had realized the weirdness and nervously eyed the reddish haze around them with wariness, "Let's stop for a moment."

Still not picking up on the freakiness of the situation, Shirley shot the man and hound a strange look: "What's wrong? Can you two tell me first?"

"Dreams are 'centered' around the cognitive perception of the dreamer. Your basis is that bedroom from your childhood memory." Dog explained

swiftly and to the point, “Going by that logic, the area outside of the room is no more than supporting ‘supplement’ for your dream. The farther we get away from the center, the more absurd and twisted everything should become. I wouldn’t even be surprised if a cliff suddenly appeared in front of our feet. Yet, we’ve come this far without incident....”

Duncan faintly nodded in agreement. His theory was pretty much in the same league as Dog here.

Shirley finally woke up and gasped: “So... where are we now? Is this still my dream?!”

No one could answer Shirley’s question, and Duncan could only watch the surrounding smoldering structures with thought.

Everywhere he could see, there were burnt buildings and scorched roads. The urban area after the fire was like an ugly scar, deeply engrained onto the body of the city and extending out to parts beyond their visual perception. At this rate, who knows how many more of the city was affected.

He then turned to face another direction. From what he could tell, there were some tall buildings near their location. It’s a distillation tower of one of the factories. It pierced straight into the sky amidst the smoke and dust and had countless coiled pipes snaking around the skeletal structure that remained after the flames. To describe the current picture, it’s like a strange mountain that’s been carved out.

Duncan involuntarily stared at the tall distillation tower, thinking that if he stood on that tip, he might be able to overlook the entire fire scene. Then his eyes froze....

The scene that Nina once described to him, it’s suddenly starting to match up: a very high place overlooking the city after the fire, the streets scarred by the heat running through the entire city-state...

That’s what Nina saw in her dreams, just from a different perspective!

He promptly turned his head to face Shirley due to this astonishing discovery: “We...may have entered another dream.”

“Another dream?” Shirley popped her eyes in shock, “Whose dream?”

“Nina’s... follow me,” Duncan said briefly, and then took off for the distillation tower.

He did not summon Ai to “spirit walk” over in this dream world because he didn’t know if the bird could even come inside this weird place. Secondly, he needed Ai to keep tabs on the outside if something dangerous decides to make a home visit.

Luckily, the distillation tower wasn’t far from where they were, only a few alleys and two streets away.

Shirley didn’t understand why the ghost captain would suddenly bolt for a place that they had no clue if it was safe or not, but if this was Nina’s dream like Mr. Duncan said, then it would not be wrong. If anything, they might even find Nina there!

However, Duncan didn’t find anything like he thought after arriving at the factory site. This left him doubting his own deduction until he got a strange notion of being watched. Swinging his head around to seek the source of this discomfort, that’s when he saw it: a tall and thin figure wearing a black trench coat with a large black umbrella in hand!

“There’s someone over there!” Shirley exclaims after catching up.

“Do you see it too?” Duncan subconsciously asked, only to be interrupted by a weird and harsh sound from the weirdo.

It wasn’t any language Duncan knew of. In fact, the overly complex and overlapping echoes in the voice made him suspect that it wasn’t a “language” at all, but rather an animalistic growl.

The “weirdo” with the umbrella also seemed surprised at the uninvited guests wandering about. After the initial pause, the strange figure suddenly

made a move!

Duncan couldn't see what the other party had done precisely in that second, but the afterglow from the corner of his eye keenly caught the slithering of several black shadows coming out from beneath the hem of that trench coat. Those pure "shadows" swam across the walls and streets; eventually, even the weirdo had disappeared from thin air. In the next second, before Duncan could react, the black figure had teleported right beside Shirley!

Thankfully Shirley had never once relaxed her muscles since entering this dream world. As fast as the umbrella weirdo moved back there, the gothic girl and her partner had already reunited and ready to strike down with the meteor hammer of doggy death!

"Screw this!!!" She yelled with a hint of excitement at finally being able to vent the nerves, which showed in the way she swung that doggy chain around like a barbaric weapon.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 134

Chapter 134 “Feast in Fire”

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Shirley's fighting style was the same as always: simple, crude, and effective, with a sense of freedom. She's truly wielding Dog like no equal.

The strange figure who jumped through the shadow didn't seem to have expected the “summoner girl” with a shadow demon was essentially a melee combatant. According to normal logic, it's safe to assume a spell-casting profession disliked close-quarter fighting and would do everything to keep their distance. However, the result was the opposite with the caster taking out a meteor hammer for the brawl.

The chain creaked as Shirley smashed down with Dog, and the black shadow was hit solidly on the spot. With a loud “bang” as it whistled out in a somersault, the shadow eventually crashed into a nearby burning building and caused a large plume of smoke and ember to rise from the impact.

“That's it?” The smooth progress of the battle was unexpected to the point that even Shirley herself didn't know how to take it. Nevertheless, she kept Dog close in one hand with a constant guard up, “Why do I feel like...”

But before her sentence could finish, Dog's exclaiming warning had come from the other end of the chain: “WATCH OUT!!!”

Shirley's muscles strained with stress, and in the next second, she finally noticed that the shadow under her feet had become a little viscous looking. But before she could take evasive maneuver, a blurry “whip” had ejected from the shadow beneath her leg!

The attack came straight for the girl's neck with a lethal slicing sound. Fortunately, the latter was barely able to keep herself from being beheaded. Even so, she still got knacked on the arm, causing a huge splatter of blood to spray from the gaping wound.

Shirley huffed a grunt and retreated without caring for the pain. Only then did she notice that part of her own shadow didn't move, remaining in the same spot where she once stood.

This shocked the girl of course, but then it soon dawned on her why as the umbrella man creepily emerged from the ground. To say she's disgusted was an understatement. Not only did she suffer an injury at the hand of the other party, but the very black whip that sliced her arm was in fact a grotesque tentacle squirming out from the hem of the other party's coat!

To think something from a monster like that actually touched her was enough to make Shirley puke!

Without giving any time for questioning, the umbrella man issues out a low and vague howl before launching himself at the target again. This time, there were multiple black tentacles firing out in multiple angles like an octopus.

Subconsciously, Shirley lifted the chain in her hand to defend herself, only to be distracted by a beam of green flame that shot over from the side of her peripheral vision.

At the same time, the umbrella man suddenly froze in that split second, remaining in place using that pouncing posture of a predator as if gripped by fear itself. Then without delay, the shadowy figure suddenly leaped backward. It retreated under a surge of black miasma coming out of the umbrella. The creature roared and howled in anger, but the green flame didn't relent and continued to pursue. It had a homing feature, and whatever the ghostly flame touched, it burned with a ferocity that not even the dark miasma could contend with.

This caused Shirley to glance in the direction of the source, which she saw Duncan standing there quietly like an actual ghost. However, she couldn't

say the same lack of emotions was happening in the surrounding environments. Everything in sight, with the man as the epicenter, the buildings and streets were giving off a ghostly green glow like they were being overtaken!

What's the word? Infected? Yes, the dream world was being infected!

This is the power of this big boss? Or is it just the tip of the iceberg of his power?!

Shirley exclaimed inside, shocked by how incredible Duncan's powers were. However, she didn't have time to dwell on the matter because the attacker who quickly retreated had obviously been suppressed and deterred. Knowing this was her chance, she lopped Dog out with the greatest strength she could muster in those petite arms!

She landed a hit on the first try. The umbrella man had clearly grown sluggish at whatever power's hindering its movement. Yet, the girl didn't feel any cheeriness from making an impact. The reason? It felt like hitting a mass of rotten flesh. At least that's what Dog's mental feedback was telling her.

Then in the next moment, perhaps it had finally lost its temper from Shirley's interference, the umbrella man suddenly tore its own limbs apart like a glob of slime.

It was an absolutely terrifying and bizarre scene. The scorched and twisted alien limbs were squirming about, splitting, and fleeing in every direction of the streets where the embers had not burned. The shouts that seemed to pierce mortal sanity rose and fell one after the other until the splitting and dissemination melded the creature into the very dream world.

Shirley got creeped out to the core for sure. She gripped the chain in her hand with even more strength, not knowing what tactic this creature might use by melding into the environment. However, she soon noticed something odd: the pieces of flesh didn't continue the fight. They were swarming away to evade Duncan's ever-spreading flame!

It's like watching a colony of roaches fleeing across a dumpster pile on the street. The flames were the pesticide, and the lumps of bloodied flesh were the pests being killed. Of course, some of the lumps did get ahead of Duncan's attack, allowing them to flee into the neighboring streets and buildings. Nevertheless, the lumps that were captured by the green pyre were promptly enveloped by the ghost fire and consumed!

Everything happened so quickly that Shirley barely managed to catch the initial carnage. At first she assumed the flames would incinerate the lumps of flesh, but turns out it wasn't, it's corrupting some of them! About a minute or two? That's how long the open zombie banquet lasted as the lumps of flesh turned on their former compatriots and started gnawing at each other.

It didn't help either when Duncan decided to up the game by creating a wall of flame around the area after optimizing his hunting ground. It's either they died by cannibalism or died by running into the wall of flame...

"Don't be afraid," Duncan soothed Shirley after noticing the shivering girl, "bugs are most afraid of fire."

Shirley's shoulders shook some more, yet there was a strange feeling of peace and calm in her heart after hearing that remark.

"But I do agree, it is a little disgusting." Duncan didn't bother to hide his displeasure at the weird crunching sound that just hit them from a crumbled building: "I didn't expect things to turn out like this."

Who are you trying to kid!

"In-Indeed..." Shirley said forcefully despite crying foul inside, "it is a little disgusting..."

"Fortunately, it's almost over," Duncan said in a slightly relaxed tone.

As the ghost captain said, the sound of flames and predation gradually subsided, with both predator and prey eventually exhausting their vitality.

What remained were piles of ashes scattered about in the breeze, the substance the result of certain creatures being burned alive.

Gulping at realizing this fact, Shirley took a step back to avoid getting some of the dust on herself: “Is... is it over?”

Duncan shook his head: “... Not necessarily.”

Shirley looked at Duncan in surprise and confusion but then saw the other party walking forward towards the last blob of the attacker in a nearby corner. The abomination squirmed shakily, seemingly wanting to escape to only stop after Duncan blocked its path with a spark of ethereal green.

“I’ve heard a lot of scary and bizarre stories in my past, and those stories have taught me an important lesson,” Duncan said slowly so Shirley could follow. “If you suddenly find that your enemy has the ability to splinter off into smaller pieces, then you’d better assume that the first enemy you encounter is just another splinter of the original. This way, the crappy author will have an excuse to write a sequel to the first book.”

With a tap of his fingertips, he lit the last blob aflame.

“I don’t like sequels very much because I hate knowing masterminds are lurking in the shadows and controlling the scenes. The trope is always the same, with the protagonists being tricked and then stabbed in the back.”

The green flame violently crackled there. Like an insect being burned alive, the blob of flesh squealed in agony until the flame suddenly dispersed and left the thing staggering to upright itself. The way it’s swaying, it’s exactly like those zombies in a horror flick.

Pleased by what he’s done, Duncan slowly stood back and quietly stared at the last remaining piece of the attacker.

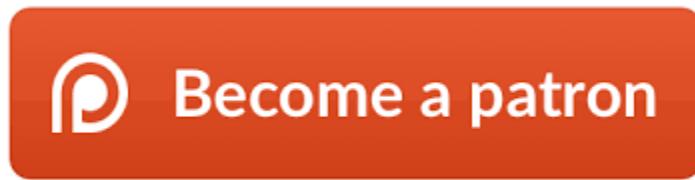
“Go home and bring my gift to your master.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 135

Chapter 135 “The End of the Dreamland”

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The fire-contaminated lump trembled and climbed up, then crawled faster and faster until it went off to the end of the street. It's there that it disappeared in a puff of smoke like it had entered some sort of portal.

This mass of flesh and blood, which has stopped thinking, has embarked on its way home. Whether it could really return to some “body”, or whether it would exhaust its vitality and dissipate halfway there, that's not coming Duncan could control. Heck, it might even be intercepted and purified by something along the way as well. Nothing was certain in life. All he could do was take precautions to remove the hidden danger within the scope of his ability.

When Shirley fought the weird shadow back there, he had been analyzing the origin of the “assailant” who appeared in the nightmare. It's the reason he shot the fireball at the other party, a test, and an experiment. The result was that the thing was no more than a splintered-off “Pathfinder”. That's right, the umbrella man they fought was no more than a scout in his opinion.

Duncan looked thoughtfully at the direction in which the clump of flesh disappeared. Not only was the attacker who suddenly appeared more familiar with this dream than himself and Shirley, but they also had a more convenient means of traveling through the spaces. It's also the reason the umbrella man managed to close the distance without Duncan noticing beforehand.

In contrast, he and first-time “explorers” like Shirley and Dog are like headless flies in the dreams here. Tracing someone lurking in the shadow would be difficult under these circumstances.

But it didn’t matter. The fire had begun to spread under his will. Through the faint connection looming over his perception, Duncan believes that the flames will eventually return with some gains until he finds the hidden lurker. By that point, Nina and Shirley would be ridden of these nightmares.

“Mr. Duncan...” Shirley looked at Duncan, who had gotten quiet again, with a slightly scared face, “You know what that is just now...?”

She was referring to the attacker with the black umbrella.

“.....” Duncan thought for a moment and shook his head. Then he suddenly recalled something after watching the burning streets, “No, but do you remember the person I mentioned standing on the edge of the museum square?”

“The one that only you can see?” Shirley immediately recalled, “Ah, the one that attacked us just now is the one you saw...”

“I’m not sure it’s the same,” Duncan unsurely shook his head, “but it’s certainly the same species. I suspect it’s related to the cultists who believe in the Sun God since both times are related to a fire. That alone is suspicious.”

“It’s related to those cultists...” Shirley blinked and quickly realized, “Could it be the ‘Sun Heir’ mentioned by those cultists?!?”

“Although there is no evidence, let’s assume that for now.” Duncan exhaled softly, “But compared to the attacker’s identity, I care more about why it’s inside yours and Nina’s dream.... What is the connection between the museum site and your dreams?”

As he spoke, he swept his gaze over to the tall water tower.

Nina was still not visible at the top, but Duncan was almost certain that it had to be the tall structure in Nina's dream.

"This is really Nina's dream?" Shirley also looked around curiously, her face full of disbelief, "How do you know?"

"She mentioned this dream to me before, and in the dream, she was standing on the tallest distillation tower overlooking the burnt city," Duncan said while pointing to the nearby tower. "This location is about two blocks away from the hut in your nightmare. Although I don't know the reason, your dreams are obviously connected to each other on a deeper level."

Shirley was surprised but still wanted to ask something. However, right as she was about to do so, Dog found something and cried out: "Hey Shirley, look over there! The umbrella that guy was holding is still over there!"

Shirley and Duncan snapped their heads over to the pointed location, and sure enough, a large black umbrella was quietly lying on the side of the street!

Their attention was so focused on the attacker that they ignored this fact.

Duncan quickly walked over and examined the item up close. After seeing the inner makings of the umbrella, he couldn't help but make a gawking sound of a "huh?" with his mouth.

He had imagined what the umbrella might look like after being wielded by the attacker. It could be a supernatural item with grotesque makeup as well, or it could be a cursed object with terrifying abilities, but under no circumstances did he expect something in this direction.

The layout was an extremely complex arrangement of hexagonal lattices. Like a solar panel, it's a device of extremely fine calibration. Then looking at the center skeletal handle, it's something he only ever sees in a sci-fi movie. It's far more complex and high-tech than anything a steam engine could ever compete against. To say it's space-level technology was no understatement.

Duncan stared at the thing dumbfoundedly.

This came from a civilization that is incomprehensible to modern society!

“What is this?” Shirley looked at the inner structure of the umbrella in astonishment and confusion. She couldn’t understand what it was at all, and she lacked Duncan’s cognition from another world. She only felt that this thing was a hundred times more complicated than she imagined and became a little dazzled. She stretched out her hand subconsciously, “It looks like...”

“Don’t touch!” Dog yelped with urgency and interrupted Shirley, “This looks like some kind of blasphemous prototype.”

Shirley looked stunned: “Blasphemy prototype? What the heck is that?”

“Some kind of forbidden historical creation that shouldn’t appear but was forcibly stranded in the real world,” Dog solemnly whispered. “I don’t know how to explain it to you... because I don’t know what the principle behind this is either. Anyway, you only need to remember that some parts of the history in this world are ‘locked’, and the things behind it are all taboos. This item is one of those taboos. Its very existence is harmful to those living in the real world... so don’t touch it!”

Shirley shrunk her hands back with the rigidity of a robot.

“Is this also the inherent knowledge of a shadow demon?” Duncan asks thoughtfully.

“Sort of,” Dog shook his head, “not all shadow demons know this, but I was born closer to the head of the Ether Lord, hence the reason why I have more knowledge in my head.”

Duncan snorted noncommittally, his gaze resting on the strange black umbrella. As if due to the loss of some kind of “support”, the umbrella had began to disintegrate and collapse rapidly before his very eyes.

The delicate lattice structure gradually became transparent, the skeleton and wiring faded and turned into grayish debris under the breeze, and the

complex device acting as the core also melted down like heated wax. But before the thing wholly melted away, the corner of Duncan's eye had noticed a few words printed on a certain part.

It wasn't the common words used by modern society, nor the other languages he was familiar with—but the meaning of the text still came to mind:

"K-22 spectral filtering nuclei." In the next second, the entire umbrella had crumbled into dust, blowing off into nothingness.

"Ah! What is... MY HAND!!!" Shirley suddenly exclaims from the side right when the man got back up.

Duncan looked at Shirley's arm and found that not only the arm but even the entire body was gradually becoming transparent and blurred.

Shirley flew into a panic: "He-Hel-Help..."

"Save your butt!" Dog directly cuts off the screaming girl, "You're waking up soon! The first time you ever woke up normally from this dream. Hurry and tank Mr. Duncan for that."

Shirley blinked and quickly got it. Facing the ghost captain, she saw that the other person was also starting to fade from the dream.

Duncan smiled and waved his hand at the girl in front of him: "Good night and good morning. Don't forget to wake up Nina for breakfast later."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 136

Chapter 136 “An Ordinary Morning in the Antique Store”

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As the morning ray gradually illuminated the slumbering giant that was Pland, those who hid in their homes for the night finally began to stir.

Shirley shot open her eyes as soon as she came to. In front were an unfamiliar ceiling, a clean window with light shining through, and a low cabinet next to the bed. Everything was so tidy and cozy that it gave her a sense of surrealness.

She tried to remember what was going on, but the faint aroma of food suddenly hit her nose and caused the girl to freeze – it was coming from the direction of the kitchen. Finally, it clicked in her brain and part of what happened yesterday quickly returned.

Looking around, the gothic girl saw Nina soundly asleep in a weird, awkward position. Normally, it's only proper to wake the friend up, which she did so by stirring the slumbering maiden. “Nina, get up... it's time for breakfast.”

Nina responded groggily: “I'm still sleepy... just a little longer...”

Shirley appeared taken aback by the answer and didn't know how to respond.

It's been many, many years since someone said something like that to her. As a result, it didn't click with the orphaned girl that it's possible to sleep in and not get out of bed when the sun rises.

Out of habit, she slowly climbed out of bed first, then changed into her own clothes while listening to the various movements outside. Make no mistake, Shirley hadn't forgotten this was a nest of some subspace shadow and his kin. It may look homely, feel warm, and smell oh so good to the nose right now, but it couldn't be real. Yet, she also couldn't deny it felt more like a home to her than the one she and Dog lived in....

Exactly then, while Shirley was a little distracted, Nina had jerked awake like a clock and crankily cried out: "AH!! It's already so late?!"

Swinging her head around after being caught off guard, Shirley watched in awe at how robotic Nina moved. First, the latter glanced at the bright window to confirm the hour, then turned back to ask the standing girl in confusion: "Shirley? How did you.... Oh right, you stayed overnight... Ah, I need to make breakfast..."

But just as quickly as she awoke, Nina suddenly stopped partway through in removing the blanket when she smelled the aroma of food from the kitchen. "Oh, Uncle is making breakfast today... oh right, Uncle has been in good health recently... Ah no! School! I'm going to be late for school!"

Then before she could finish her antics, Nina rushed to her desk and packed her things up for the trip. However, as she did before, Nina jerked to a halt and glanced at the calendar hanging beside the bed: "Oh right, it's a day off today...."

Without missing a beat, the innocent young maiden spun around and plopped her head right back into the pillow, this time not even bothering to curl back into the blanket this time. "Just two more minutes, two more..."

Shirley watched the whole scene in silence, overwhelmed by the dazzling comedic operation of someone so.... so innocent? From her view, only a sheltered individual could possibly produce such a habit; otherwise, they wouldn't survive out in the wild. But then as quickly as she assumed Nina wouldn't pounce up again, the slumbering maiden did it again!

"Ah, I'm awake!"

Shirley: "...?"

"Shirley, what's the manner?" Nina turned her head and looked at Shirley energetically, "Why are you making that face?"

Shirley: "Uh... do you do this every morning when you're waking up?"

Nina got all confused: "Huh? What you mean?"

"It's just..." Shirley gestured around frantically as if the act would help her get the idea through, "you jumped up first, then this, then that, then back again..."

"Oh, that's because I'm still in a daze when I first wake up in the morning." Nina somehow magically read through the exaggerated body language and nodded vehemently, "But I'm fully awake now! Oh right, did you sleep well last night? I'm usually a rowdy sleeper, did I disturb you?"

"I...." As soon as Shirley was about to speak, a series of memories suddenly came to her. It's about the sealed cabin from her childhood, the sound of a dark hound breaking in, and of the incredible adventure she had while exploring the dream world.

A little weird, a little scary, but... also pretty awesome.

"I slept well," Shirley laughed a little, "actually, I'm a rowdy sleeper too. Dog always said that I will one day tear my bed upside down."

"Uncle used to say that about me too." Nina swiftly changed into her day clothes and led her friend out of the room with a yawn, "Let's go eat first, I'm a little hungry."

As hesitant as she was, Shirley got dragged out the door in confusion and finally met with Duncan inside the small kitchen. The man was wiping down the table in an apron, which gave quite a refreshing look to the ghost captain.

"Mr. Duncan...." Shirley once again grew a little nervous. Although she saw it with her own eyes of how the man saved her in that dream world, it

was still difficult to remain calm. Hanging her head while trying to suppress the tension in her muscles: “Good morning.”

Just like the big boss ordered, treat this place as an ordinary home and behave like a normal guest.

“What are we eating Uncle?” Nina was already walking towards the kitchen table with a drooling face, “It smells so good!”

“I fried some sausages that I bought yesterday,” Duncan said casually, then pressed Nina’s head to turn her around for the bathroom, “First wash your face and hands!”

Immediately after that, he turned to face Shirley and stabbed his waist like a nanny: “You too Shirley. Don’t stand there in a daze. Hurry and wash up for breakfast!”

Shirley froze like a clueless doll but quickly followed Nina’s footsteps for the morning ritual. After returning by herself first, the gothic girl even made sure to spread her hands out as evidence: “...I washed them.”

After saying that, the girl instantly flushed up with embarrassment due to how silly the gesture was. As a person that’s about to become a full-fledged adult, her behavior was no different than that of a little child being lectured by a parent. Something must’ve broken inside that brain of hers last night, otherwise she wouldn’t have done this. Shirley was sure of that!

But Duncan didn’t care and just nodded. Then walking back to the stovetop, he casually asked: “How did you sleep?”

Shirley lowered her head again: “Umm, it’s okay... better than before.”

“Did the injuries in the dream affect reality?” Duncan asked again.

Shirley was stunned, but then quickly understood the meaning behind it. The whiplash from the umbrella monster left quite the impression, which she checked by raising her left arm with a faint scar!

Due to the strong self-healing ability, the scar had almost healed by this time. It didn't hurt or tingle in the slightest, but there's no doubt the injury from the dreamworld had crossed over!

Duncan didn't miss this of course. Once he confirmed there was indeed a mark on Shirley's arm, his gaze deepened with a glint of severity.

An abnormal phenomenon, but not beyond expectations.

That weird dream... is not just any dream.

"It seems my speculation is right. If you're injured in that dream, it will also affect your real body outside." Duncan deepened his voice to get the point through, "In the future, do not explore that world on your own without me. Your combat power is strong but ineffective against that splintering monster."

Shirley quickly nodded: "Mmm, I got it."

Duncan then added after a brief thought, "Also, if you're stuck in that nightmare again, you can call me directly."

Shirley froze for a moment as if unable to process the message: "Call you?"

"Call my name," Duncan said lightly, "or call the Vanished – preferably next to a medium with reflecting properties like glass or mirror. I can hear you better that way."

"Are you... intending to make me your kin?" She raised her eyes and asked nervously after getting an alarming cry from Dog through the connection they shared.

"I don't know what kin you are referring to, nor do I intend to offer such a request. However, you are Nina's friend and acting alongside me now, so this is my way of looking out for you."

Shirley took a breath but did not dare to answer rashly. Exactly then, Nina's cheerful voice had come through the kitchen door: "What are you two talking about?"

“You don’t have to answer me now,” Duncan whispered to Shirley, then glanced up at Nina, “how come it took you so long to wash up?”

“I couldn’t get the eye poop out of the corner of my eye.” Nina rubbed her eyes, “It hurts a little....”

“Drink more water in the following days,” Duncan spread his hands helplessly at the girl’s antics, “by the way, did you happen to dream again last night? The one where you’re overlooking the fire at night?”

“No,” Nina thought for a moment and shook her head, “but I did dream about my tummy getting pressed by a horse, then a cow. How come you’re asking me this Uncle?”

“Nothing much. I’m only asking because the psychiatrist is coming to visit today,” Duncan shook his head, putting away his thoughts for now, “Let’s eat.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 137

Chapter 137 “Two Descendants”

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From the city-states of Pland and Lansa to the north, crossing the busy “Great Cross Route” of trading merchants, the frosted weather was eternally entrenched over this mass of water known as the “Cold Sea”. As a result, these parts presented a different set of challenges compared to the warmer climates in the south.

Here, fine ice constantly drifted between the current lines, and large icebergs often rose from beneath the depths without warning. This not only created a danger for unsuspecting ships, but also created a barrier for the seafaring ships that’s trying to cross the islands.

But compared to the large iceberg that’s controlled by the laws of nature and the visions that only exist in legends, the captains who make a living in the Cold Sea had something far more dangerous whom they feared. Who was it? The name was Tyrian Abnomar, the infamous son of Duncan Abnomar and pirate captain of the undead fleet roaming these waters. They’ve been raiding the trading routes here for the past half-century and would continue to do so in the eyes of those sailors.

On the edge of an island blocked by special currents and fogs, a steel warship with iron-gray paint, rigid lines, and a towering bow was quietly moored in the dock. Right now, suppliers and sailors are busy adding fuel and replenishing the supplies on board.

If anyone standing here had even the slightest knowledge of the history regarding the Frost city-state, they would surely notice the naval uniforms

worn by the sailors are not right – the designs are from half a century ago. In addition, they're also wearing white emblems on the chest, a tradition that's only used when there's mourning.

In the captain's room on the upper floor of the metal battleship, a man in black naval overcoat was currently flipping through a document in his hand. The guy was tall and thin, with a towering nose and deep eye-sockets. Yet, despite the unhealthy appearance, he's well kept aside from the eyepatch on the left eye, his signature piece of piratehood.

At the same time, a large parrot with colorful tail feathers rested on a nearby wooden frame, staring intently at the brass device beside the emaciated man—a complex set of lenses surrounded by a circle of rocker arms and small lenses. The center was a large crystal ball, which looked luxurious and mysterious.

“Perley, if you touch it, I will send you to the Bright Star next month to accompany those puppets and ghosts next month.” The emaciated man said without lifting his head.

“Ah, cruelty!” The large parrot immediately cawed, shaking the wooden frame like a child, “Ah, cruel! What a cruel captain Tyrian is!”

“..... I should have asked which bastard taught you this,” Tyrian Abnomar frowned, “Can't you say something else?”

The large parrot flapped its wings triumphantly: “Perley learned it himself! Perley learned it himself!”

Tyrian rubbed his vexed temple: “Damn it, and that sentence too...”

Exactly then, a knock on the door interrupted the antics of the pair.

“Come in,” Tyrian turned his head and spoke.

The door to the captain's compartment opened, and a tall, bald man rigidly strolled in.

His skin was pale, like a long-dead corpse, and his eyes were encircled with an eternal cloudy haze. Even from the side, a faint smell of the sea permeated his body like it's been soaking in a watery grave for years.

A moving corpse, a dead body stranded in the living world.

Tyrian looked at the “living dead” who walked into the room: “Aiden, how much fuel did we get so far?”

“We’re about full Captain,” the tall, bald man known as Aiden lowered his head slightly, his voice hoarse and rough like a zombie. “The boiler is already warming up.”

“Very good,” Tyrian nodded in satisfaction, “and is there any movement at Cold Port?”

“Quiet as a stone,” Aiden said with a hint of contempt in his tone, “they dare not offend our territory. Even if only half of the Sea Mist Fleet remained in the Cold Sea, those cowards would not have the courage to trespass our route.”

“They’re smart and good at calculating the trade-offs between interests. They’ve been like that since we started raiding their ships.” Tyrian laughed with disdain, “Go and prepare, we’re departing at the arranged time.”

“Yes, Captain.” The first mate, who exuded the aura of the dead, pushed open the door and left the captain’s sight.

Tyrian’s first mate was a “living dead”, in fact, all members of the Sea Mist Fleet are aside from himself.... But in a sense, he too was no different from the dead, a man cursed by the powers of subspace and continued to live to this date. Thankfully he had his loyal crewmates with him for the past half-century, making the ordeal not so lonely in these times.

Tyrian quickly shook off the weird sentimental thoughts after realizing he’s fallen into a daze. At the same time, the brass device next to him suddenly clicked with a mechanical sound, followed by the movement of the rocker

arms and lenses spinning rapidly. Soon, the crystal ball in the center began to emit a faint glow, revealing a blurry image from the globe.

A young lady with long black hair appeared. She wore a silky black dress and gave off a mysterious air that one would assume to be a witch.

“Lucretia,” Tyrian glanced at the lady in the crystal ball and nodded slightly, “I didn’t expect you to remember. How nice of you to send a greeting before your brother sets out on an expedition.”

The young lady in the crystal ball was about to speak, but after hearing Tyrian’s words, she immediately showed a surprised face: “You’re leaving today?”

Tyrian frowned: “Aren’t you here to send me off today?!”

“No,” the mage-like mysterious lady shook her head calmly, “my deep-sea detection device exploded.”

The corners of Tyrian’s mouth visibly twitched, and then he heard his sister continue: “Everything else is easy to repair, but I can’t find a crystal lens to replace the core.”

Tyrian continued to be deadpan at her sister’s rambling.

“Do you have a new one over on your side? I’ll trade you one with a mineral sample from the border.”

“..... Only two city-states can produce spirit lenses that meet your accuracy requirements, and the main trading channels are controlled by the Truth Academy. You know full well how little and limited those are in circulation...” Tyrian finally couldn’t help but sigh, “It’s only been two months since you last broke your detection device...”

“I found a very interesting sample, probably floated up from the deep sea,” Lucretia said.

“..... Samples from the deep sea aren’t good enough. Although those things can be sold to the Truth Academy for a high price...”

“I also collected some phantoms left behind after a border-collapse.”

“This is not...” Tyrian covered his head due to the headache, “The main thing is I really don’t know where to get you a new set of lenses now...”

Lucretia thought for a moment: “How about robbery?”

“I can’t always rely on robbery,” Tyrian sighed, “and the Sea Mist Fleet is preparing its transition to normalized operations. Our main income now is based on protection fees...”

“Oh, forget it.” Lucretia finally shrugged like she didn’t care anymore. However, her latter half of the sentence instantly sent the infamous pirate up the walls, “Then I’ll ask again tomorrow.”

“You... forget it, I know I can’t stop your exploration plans.” Tyrian finally deflated and sighed helplessly (he really didn’t know how much he had already sighed in these few short minutes), “Tell me about you, my ‘respectable’ great explorer sister... Have you been wandering the frontiers of the civilized world again? How goes the search for signs of our world coming to an end?”

“I can hear your teasing, Brother,” Lucretia said expressionlessly. “You’ve always been dismissive of my sense of urgency and never even really cared for the things I find at the border. However, I can understand that you like to focus on more practical things, so I’m even more grateful for the help you’ve given me. But don’t forget, our father... the warning he made back then.”

“Our world is just a pile of extinguishing embers...” Tyrian leaned back in his chair and murmured as if sighing, “I still don’t know exactly what he saw that day, but it’s an obvious fact that he was crazy when he made that warning. What you’re doing now is no different from following in his path. Even if you try harder, the truth that you uncover will only drive you mad as it did to him.”

Tyrian shook his head and looked squarely at the figure in the crystal ball: “Lucretia, it’s bad enough to have one Vanished in this world. I do not wish

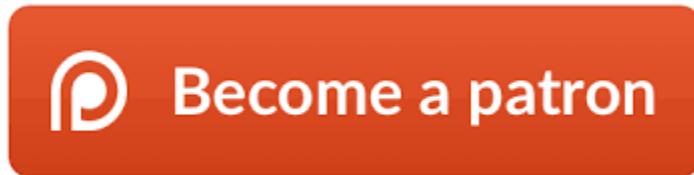
to see a second.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 138

Chapter 138 “The Bright Star”

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So it's bad enough to have one Vanished in this world...

Lucretia sat quietly in a high-backed chair covered with velvet cushions in the divination room illuminated by dim candlelight. She couldn't focus while gazing at the crystal ball because the image of that afternoon from a century ago kept coming to mind....

“Our world is just a pile of extinguishing residual embers...” The figure from the past had already blurred from her memory, but she could never forget what she heard from that depressed voice.

Now, of course, she knew that her father had already been infected with madness at that time, that he would completely abandon his humanity shortly afterward and choose to actively embrace the “blessing” of subspace. Nevertheless, Lucretia still believed that if she had taken some time back in the day to speak to her father, then perhaps... he might've chosen a different path instead of crossing the world's border.

Maybe it's just a whimsical desire on her part, and perhaps the Vanished being lost forever was a fact engraved in the annals of time. However, she still wants to know the truth of what happened back then.

“Lucretia, are you still listening?” Tyrian’s voice suddenly came from the crystal ball, which brought the lady back from the daze.

“Brother,” she looked squarely at Tyrian in the crystal ball, her tone becoming a little serious, “do you remember what our father said before he

last sailed to the border? That time he didn't let us follow...”

“Of course I remember,” Tyrian nodded, “he said that he had found a clue to Anomaly 000, the cure for this world. He refused our request to follow and even ordered the other escorts at the time to turn back. That’s the last time we saw the Vanished in its normal form. Afterward, everything started to change.”

“That’s right Brother, all the crew members on the Vanished stopped talking from that point forward as if cursed with the spell of silence. Father could still communicate with us, though, saying he did not find Anomaly 000 and that even if it did exist, the origin of the world’s distortion isn’t with it. The so-called cure that he sought never existed. This continued until the evening on the upper deck, where he revealed that the world was nothing more than a series of dying embers....”

Tyrian did not speak for a while. Then after an undetermined amount of silence, it was Lucretia who broke the awkwardness: “After that, I specifically contacted the fleet of the churches patrolling near the border, including the Flame Bearers, the Storm Priests, the scholars of the Truth Academy, and even the gloomy Death Church, I asked them about anomaly 000, but they all said that there couldn’t be an anomaly or vision numbered zero...”

“I also inquired about the matter too,” Tyrian said in a deep voice, “and got the same reply as you... There are no anomalies and visions numbered zero in the world. Not that there are none, but that there are no corresponding ‘vacancies’ at all in the list.”

“Yes, the list that flowed out of the nameless king’s tomb, the very list that held all the visions and anomalies of the world. If it says there are no vacancies for that spot, then there never will...”

“That’s why I said that Father was probably already infected with madness before he left for the border. He couldn’t have known about this information.”

Speaking of this, Tyrian suddenly stopped and eyed his sister through the crystal ball with a wary look, “Why did you suddenly bring up this topic? We haven’t talked about this for half a century. What are you planning to do?”

“..... Don’t worry, I won’t plunge headlong into that magnificent wall of fog like our father did,” Lucretia rarely showed emotions on her face, so the fact that she was smiling was something strange. “I’m looking for clues left by our father, but I don’t want to follow his old path.”

Tyrian fell silent for a moment and nodded slowly: “... That’s good to hear.”

Now it was Lucretia who did not know how to continue the conversation, leaving the siblings staring off into the air for a relatively long and uncomfortable minute. This continued until a whistle from the Sea Mist suddenly blew from the outside, thus breaking the awkward atmosphere.

“Are you really going to Pland? Because of the invitation from the administrator?” Lucretia asks.

“The ‘invitation’ is not important. I don’t care about the safety of the city-state. However, the admin said in his letter that the Vanished has reappeared in the real world. If true, I must go and investigate the matter in person,” Tyrian said with a serious face. “That ship has not been in the world for almost half a century. It worries me why it would reappear so suddenly.”

Lucretia thought for a moment and asked, “You had an encounter with the Vanished half a century ago, and I remember that you were still with the former Frostbite (Frost) city-state... Was it really the Vanished that you saw back then?”

“..... It’s true. Although it’s difficult to believe, it’s indeed the Vanished,” Tyrian said in a deep voice. “I can still remember the exact location of each mast and the distribution of cables.”

“Then... was it really our ‘father’ who stood on the deck at that time?”

Tyrian lowered his head slightly, his face hidden by the shadows: "... It's him alright, even though I'd rather that thing not be him."

Lucretia watched her brother through the crystal ball with hesitation and worry: "Be careful. If it is really him, it will be very dangerous."

"I know," Tyrian sighed softly, "that's not him anymore, but a crazy ghost corrupted by subspace. I won't take things lightly..."

Lucretia shook her head expressionlessly: "No, I meant, if that's really our father, he will definitely get more ruthless in the beating after learning what you turned the Sea Mist into."

Tyrian visibly widened his eyes in shock but quickly picked up on the meaning: "Hey, what do you mean by that just now? This is the fruit of modernization! What's so bad about steam boilers and rapid-fire guns! Besides, how can you even mock me? Compared to the Sea Mist, which part of the Bright Star is still the same..."

The crystal ball blanked out at that part, leaving Lucretia the room to finally issue a soft sigh of relief as she got up from her chair.

Big Brother is still so high-spirited. A little stimulation, and he's back to normal. It's good that he's keeping a strong interest in modern things, that will help maintain his soul and keep it from decaying.

A series of light footsteps then came from a darker part of the room, accompanied by the friction of mechanical parts and the clockwork of something walking over. Lucretia followed the sound with her eyes until she eventually came face to face with a doll that was the same height as her own, the moving metal and ceramic joints slightly scary under the dim lighting.

"Mistress, please have some tea." The doll maid offered a teacup from the tray she was holding.

"Thank you," Lucretia took the teacup and asked casually, "Luni, where are we now?"

The clockwork puppet, known as Luni, replied like a true maid with a curtsy bow: “The Bright Star has just crossed the ‘Cape Island’ and is currently sailing on the edge of the eternal curtain. Do you want to enjoy the view from the window?”

“..... Open the dome then,” Lucretia took a sip of black tea and placed the cup back on the tray in Luni’s hand, “It’s dawn. I should bask in the sun to help with my skin.”

“Yes, Mistress.” Luni hung her head slightly and stepped backward.

At the same time the words of this magical doll puppet spoke, a slight vibration started to take hold in the divination room.

The creaking of mechanical devices sounded continuously, and the humming and crunching of the gears formed a sort of weird concerto in the air while things moved. First, the walls began to recede, followed by the blooming of the roof like a flower on stage.

This was the upper deck of the Bright Star, where Lucretia the “Sea Witch” lives. From her post at the top, her view overlooked not only the sea but also the entire structure of her vessel that’s been visibly split into two parts.

The first half of the ship has been completely transformed with countless runes and magical creations making up its hull. Instead of calling this segment a ship, it’s more suited to assume it’s a beast reconstructed with magical materials and runes as its core. It’s both grotesque and beautiful like an object from the legends.

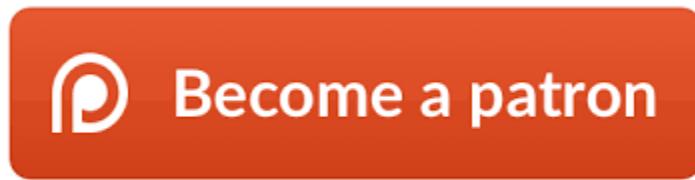
In the second half of the ship though, this was not so friendly looking. Its hull had been transformed into a ghostly translucent form, constantly shrouded in a veil of light. If perceived hard enough, one might even be able to make out its original appearance that’s similar to another – a certain warship built a century ago by the name of the “Vanished”.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 139

Chapter 139 “The Frontier Keeper”

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A century ago, the Bright Star, like the Sea Mist, was an escort vessel of the Vanished.

However, few people knew what happened to these two legendary warships after breaking away from the main flagship, nor the process of how they became what they are today.

The Sea Mist, helmed by “Steel Vice Admiral” Tyrion, was once part of the naval fleet of the Frostbite City-State after many twists and turns. Back then, the people called it the “unsinkable ship” or “breathing wreckage. A well-deserved nickname of course. Not once, but many times did the ship suffer severe damage to its hull, yet it survived the ordeals like a cockroach after repeated overhauls that violated shipbuilding principles. Nowadays, it’s better to call the Sea Mist a steal behemoth than a ship.

In fact, the legends say the metal ship could even feed on its victims, absorbing the metal composites to grow its plated body and weaponry while no one was watching.

As for the Bright Star, inherited by the younger sister Lucretia, also known as the “Sea Witch”, had a much more mysterious past. She doesn’t interact with the civilized world at all. In fact, only a small number of members from the Explorer’s Association and patrolling church fleet would ever have the opportunity to encounter this witch.

Now for those lucky enough to see the Bright Star in person, their description was as follows:

“It obviously doesn’t belong to our real world anymore. The ship sank at least once in its lifetime and got partially taken by the Boundless Sea. Half of it is a ghost ship, the other remaining half a composite of distorted and magical items. There’s no crew aboard either. They’re all ghosts now, living only in name inside the clockwork puppets that runs the vessel.”

“There is no doubt that the ship is a sailing corpse, or rather, a half-deformed corpse dragging half of its soul along.”

Lucretia’s gaze slowly swept over her fine ship, slightly nodding only after being satisfied by what she saw.

The Bright Star is in good condition, and her crew is happy.

She knew about how the world viewed her precious vessel, and how the world saw her brother’s Sea Mist. The lady also knew how the captains feared their entire family in fact. But she didn’t care about it.

There are few humans she had any connection with to begin with, and after so many years out on the sea alone, the experience of caring for the views of others had diminished to the point of non-importance. As for the ones that she does talk to from the Explorer’s Association, they’re all level-headed veterans with plenty of experience in life. They know her and respected her for it.

Simply said, she and her brother are still members of the mortal world, on humanity’s side. Even if many of her kind thought differently, it won’t change this fact. Besides, so what if they’re cursed? There are too many things in this world that’s cursed. What was an extra strange vessel or two going to matter?

Slowly walking down from her mechanical flower, Lucretia was heading for the bow of the ship when a shrill voice caught her from the front. It’s a ragdoll pushing aside two clockwork puppets that’s busy cleaning the deck. “Mistress! Mistress! Good morning! Good morning!”

“It’s about to hit noon already,” Lucretia said casually. Then she bypassed her companion and looked off into the distance where a magnificent wall of

fog blocked her view. It's like staring into a giant screen at the edge of the world, both majestic and spectacular.

That's the "border".

The magnificent divider had many names – World Border, The Great Mist, Mist Barrier, and its most formal name should be "Eternal Curtain".

But Lucretia prefers to call it the "border".

That's what her father used to call it.

Under normal circumstances, this eternal curtain would not expand or shrink and covered all the known seas in the world like a fixed natural phenomenon. However, on rare occasions, part of the barrier would suddenly appear inside the territory of civilization. When this occurs, the outcome could only be described as a disaster. The reality in that area would collapse in on itself like a blackhole, and all living matter dragged into the depths of the sea. In some instances, eye-witnesses even say they saw the door to subspace opening. They called this disaster the "border collapse".

For captains who often sailed the boundless sea, a collapsed border was a scarier thing than the turbulent storm. Thankfully this doesn't happen often.

Lucretia spent most of her time in the border area, observing it, studying it, and trying to summarize the fog's movement to find out why it would suddenly collapse inward—something her father had done a hundred years earlier.

But to this day, no one has been able to unravel the secret of this curtain.

What did my father discover back then? What did he hear? What caused him to suddenly decide to enter the fog in search of No. 0?

Lucretia withdrew her gaze towards the border.

In the border lands, one mustn't stare at the eternal curtain for long. Although there was no clear evidence that the dense fog had the properties

of devouring the mind and influencing one's thinking, there's an inherent risk of staring at anything for long out at sea, especially when one's far away from civilization.

God knows what would spread as a result of the "gaze" here.

Unexpectedly, a melodious whistle broke the calm in the waters here.

Lucretia followed the sound and saw some tiny silhouettes appearing on the edge of the thick wall of fog. It wouldn't be long before they made contact with the Bright Star at the pace they're moving.

It was three ships after their shapes came into view, the latest steel models powered by a surging and powerful steam core. A chance encounter and not an attack since they sounded the horn, a sign of goodwill and a greeting to those sailing in these waters.

"Mistress," Luni walked over and spoke with a dull voice coming from inside the clockwork maid, "it's the patrolling fleet of the Church... Visual confirmation indicates they're part of the Flame Bearers."

"..... Only the Flame Bearers and the Storm Church would be so close to the Eternal Curtain while on patrol," Lucretia sighed softly, "a bunch of crazy rash fellas."

"Do you wish to respond?" Luni asked.

"..... Honk our horn," Lucretia said softly, "show them we're continuing the work of civilization."

.....

There were no customers in the antique shop today, except for a pair of unremarkable ornaments that were sold in the morning, no one has stepped into the store again.

Nina was sitting at the counter with a textbook in hand and studying the subject of a mechanic. Meanwhile, Duncan had also been studying,

curiously flipping through Nina's history textbook while casually making notes in his own notebook.

This left only Shirley with nothing to do. She wanted to go home, but she didn't dare to go unless she offends the great shadow of subspace here. Then the girl tried to start up a conversation about the subject with Nina. Sadly, the illiterate girl didn't have a clue about the higher learning. For several times now, she's been pacing around in boredom: "Is reading really that interesting?"

"Of course it's interesting!" Nina looked up, "And the final exams are almost here, I have to hurry and review my books."

Duncan also looked up at Shirley: "If you're really bored, you can also find a book to read... I have a brief history of the city-state over here, do you want to read it?"

Shirley glanced at the few books in Duncan's hand, dropped her mouth, then flushed away in embarrassment: "I... I don't know how to read..."

Duncan suddenly froze to a standstill, his eyes widening like a disapproving parent.

"Why are you so surprised," Shirley looked at the uncle and niece pair like she's being judged for something beyond her means. Moping like a hurt child, "I... I've never been to school, is that so strange? I've... I've been raised by a dog...."

Duncan was indeed a little surprised, but after seeing Shirley's reaction, he sighed at how difficult life must've been for an orphan: "You don't know how to read words, yet you can calmly blend into a school. I really don't know whether you're overconfident or too reliant in Dog's ability to interfere with a person's perception."

"Dog's interference ability is very reliable!" Shirley immediately defended, "It's just... It's just..."

The girl's face had gotten slightly red again as she struggled to form a proper retort without offending the other party. Of course, Duncan wouldn't miss this improvement in their conversation and spoke with a smile: "See, you're already getting better. You're even able to argue in front of me now. Is that so bad?"

"That's right, that's right, see how kind my uncle is?" Nina, a silly girl who didn't understand anything here, also chimed in to make things worse: "Although he used to be very irritable for a while, but he's much better now!"

"I..." Shirley opened her mouth and found herself not knowing how to communicate with the "uncle and niece" in front of her.

Seeing this, Duncan merely shook his head with a pleasant smile, but just when he wanted to say something more, a slightly familiar aura had come into his perception!

Duncan was slightly stunned by the signal, and in the next second, he could tell who this aura was coming from.

Vanna! The young inquisitor is approaching this antique shop... and it's fast!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 140

Chapter 140 “Two Guests”

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According to Duncan’s perception, Vanna’s aura was rapidly approaching the antique shop and in a weird zigzagging line.

What is an inquisitor from the upper city suddenly running down to this antique shop in the lower city? And the trajectory is so eccentric?

Duncan subconsciously glanced at the gothic girl sitting opposite of himself.

Did she come for Shirley? The Storm Church finally discovered that there was a wild “summoner” hiding in the city? Or is she coming for me instead? But I’ve been very careful in my actions thus far. They shouldn’t be able to trace the events back to me. If there’s anything that might cause a leak, it would be this body’s identity as a sun cultist.... That shouldn’t be enough to alarm an inquisitor to personally make the trip, right?

Many theories fluctuated in the ghost captain’s heart, causing him to stop reading and get up to the door.

“Mr. Duncan? Something happened...” Shirley was the first to notice the strange behavior and subconsciously asked.

“Stay in the shop.” Duncan glanced at Shirley, then back at the door before peeking through the glass front window.

Finally, he understood why Vanna’s aura was approaching so quickly – she had driven here with a car.

A dark-gray car powered by a steam engine had parked outside his shop with two fine ladies stepping out of the vehicle. First was the tall and imposing Vanna, and second was Heidi the psychiatrist.

Duncan: “...”

In that instant, Duncan realized he's been overthinking matters. This needs to be corrected immediately. Acting like an overly sensitive crackpot that's constantly worried about being caught was not a good thing. At the very least, not to this degree.

“Mr. Duncan!” The doctor was the first to wave at the man peering out the shop window.

The corners of Duncan's mouth visibly twitched after the neighbors all looked over his way. It's already quite eye-catching to have the inquisitor visit his store. He doesn't need the locals to think he's two-timing both ladies or something along those lines.

“This is...” he quickly ran out and asked with an astonished face like he wasn't expecting them.

“Ah, you must have recognized her. There is no one in the city who doesn't know her. Lemme introduce my friend, Miss Vanna Wayne.” Heidi backhands her friend by the waist to push Vanna forward, “Today is her off day. That's why she's here with me. After hearing about the event at the museum, she wanted to come in person and meet you as well...”

“Friends?” Duncan's surprise this time had a bit of realism, which he didn't expect to have, “I really didn't expect that you would bring such a big person along...”

“Calling me a big person is a bit of a stretch Mr. Duncan.” Vanna seemed to have been silently assessing the store owner when she finally spoke up, but for Duncan, this was not the first time he's heard her voice. “Just treat me as a normal guest. As Heidi said, today is my off day, and I am here mainly to thank you for saving Heidi from the fire and to inquire about something... Don't worry. This is not a formal inquiry.”

Know something?

The expression on Duncan's face didn't give off any change as he turned to one side and beckoned the two special guests inside: "Then don't just stand there. Please come on in. Today the store is deserted, so it's great to have guests."

"Keep your cool, do not fret," Duncan whispers to Shirley, who was probing her head up from the table.

Shirley blinked in confusion: "Calm down...?"

In the next second, she knew why she had to calm down.

The young inquisitor, the apex of power in the church of Pland, had stepped into her view. She's a petite dwarf compared to Vanna so the visual oppression wasn't just noticeable, it's enormous!

"Oh... wah, so tall!" Shirley subconsciously blurted out these words.

Vanna jerked to a halt, her eyes glancing at the petite girl with a strange expression as well: "Hello~"

"Her name is Shirley," Duncan said casually, "she's helping out in my shop. Oh right, Miss Heidi might've mentioned this to you, but she was also at the museum when the fire broke out."

"Are you Shirley?" Vanna connected the description from the report to the girl, "She's indeed a cute little sister."

Nina, who was reading a book next to the counter, had also heard the movement from her spot. First looking up in amazement at how tall Vanna was, then she quickly exclaimed after recognizing the female inquisitor.

"..... That's why I don't like going out with you," Heidi sighed and mumbled, "You attract attention just by standing there. I'm the main show today, you know?"

“But I don’t want to attract attention like this either.” Vanna shot a deadpan face to her friend like she was troubled, “I’ve been trying to look as ordinary as I can today too.”

“..... Forget it, I’m used to it.” Heidi sighed even harder and turned to greet the girls with the gifts she had brought along.

“I don’t know what you like, but I can’t visit empty-handed so these are my presents for the young ladies. My father also asked me to pass a gift from him to you as well Mr. Duncan. He said you will like it since you’re into history and the occult.”

“You’re too polite. What we did is no more than a helping hand.” Duncan may say that, but his hands were far more honest in how quickly he accepted the gifts. However, as soon as he opened the box and saw the thing inside, he became puzzled, “This is...”

It was a tome, beautifully bound like you see in those museums. Any scholar with an eye would know how valuable this must be based on the beautiful floral lettering: (City-States and Gods)

“This is a book from my father’s collection. You will be hard-pressed to find a print like this in the market nowadays. The author is supposedly very famous from a century ago. I think the author was called Mr. Mardaino Victor or something,” Heidi said with a smile, “and he likes to write about the history of various city-states and how the gods and church effected society during the ages. My father said you will definitely like this gift.”

Duncan silently studied the exquisite tome and gradually formed a smile. Indeed, he’s very pleased by this gift. “Of course, do give my thanks to Mr. Morris for his kindness.”

After some courteous formality and chitchat, Duncan went ahead and directly closed shop for the day. Business has been slow anyways so the man figured it’s better to clear out the area to entertain his guests.

While Nina brought two chairs out for the ladies, Duncan had started to brew the best coffee in his cabinet. As for Shirley, the nervous girl

pretended to be busy sorting out the shelves to reduce her existence.

“Let’s get straight to the point. I heard that you have been plagued by nightmares during this period. You’re also often falling into a trance?” Heidi asks after pulling out her med kit.

“Ah, it’s actually not a nightmare. It’s just a continuous strange dream...” Nina didn’t expect Miss Heidi to be so professional and so quickly: “I always dream that I am standing in a very high place, like a tower, and then under my feet are several streets that have been burned to ash. Ah, but nothing terrible was in it though...”

“Stop!” Heidi gestured for a halt with her palm out. Then opening the medical box, she recited the key points: “So recurring scenes, a high place, a fire, and no scary things. You’re mentally exhausted because of the frequent dreaming... hmm, let me see...”

At first Nina didn’t think much of the session, but after seeing the stuff inside Heidi’s medical box – chisel, axe, saw, various potions, and sprays – her neck instantly shrunk back in fear: “That... Miss Heidi... can I not treat it? In fact, I don’t think I’m in that of a bad state...”

Duncan also saw the contents of Heidi’s medical kit, which caused his eyebrows to jump: “Forgive me, but is this really what is needed for a psychiatric treatment?”

The elegant and gentle-looking doctor in front of me is a psychiatrist or a veterinarian?!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 141

Chapter 141 “Honest and Reliable Mr. Duncan”

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It turns out that in this world full of strange and supernatural things, the skill of “spiritual healing” was much more hardcore than Duncan had imagined – it’s to the degree of exceeding the world “skill” and went straight for “craft”....

Fortunately, Heidi’s box of “things” wasn’t prepared for Nina. The psychiatrist could see the horror on this uncle and niece’s faces, which brought a smile to her own since this was one of the perks she had when doing her job.

“Fill this out first,” she hands a printed form over to Nina.

Breaking a sigh of relief, Nina visibly eases up: “I thought these... tools were for me.”

“This is what I use for my job while working for the authorities and the church,” Heidi grinned, “I often have to deal with extremely bigoted and dangerous people whose brains are filled with heretical ideas. These tools are one of my means to pry open their minds.”

The more Duncan listened, the more he felt that there was something wrong with this.

Likewise, Shirley, who was trying to reduce her sense of existence while unable to stop eavesdropping, subconsciously shrunk her neck back. She quickly hid further away while pretending to be dusting the shelves.

“So scary, it’s so scary... this place is so scary... Mr. Duncan is scary as it is, why did an inquisitor decide to pop up here.... And that Heidi...”
Shirley mutters to Dog using their mental connection.

Dog’s voice sounded equally as weak and frantic: “How am I supposed to know why she’s here?! How could I have expected to be caught by a ghost captain on land? How do I know why an inquisitor is coming down here to be a guest? Who would believe any of this if told? I’m just a dark hound, a dark hound dammit!”

While secretly paying attention to the movement next to the counter, Shirley muttered some more with a sad face: “Who can believe this? If you tell a fish they will die in a car accident one day, I bet they won’t believe it either...”

“..... Don’t mention ‘fish’, I’m afraid of fish...”

Shirley was stunned, but asked anyways: “When did you start being afraid of fishes?”

“Stop talking to me for now. I don’t want the inquisitor to notice anything. Although in theory I’m hidden from her sight, I keep getting the feeling my abilities are out of touch when Mr. Duncan is around...”

Nodding in agreement, Shirley quickly put away her thoughts and hid herself behind the other end of the shelf cabinet. There’s nobody around this area so it’s the perfect spot to be inconspicuous.

At the same time, Nina had taken a look at the form placed into her hand. It’s the typical routine of a psychological evaluation, which was no different from the forms that she usually filled out before taking occult classes at school or visiting museums. The difference here was that there were a few extra questions that were not often asked.

While filling it out, she curiously asked: “I heard you say your treatments are more professional, so I thought you wouldn’t use this kind of form that ordinary doctors use...”

“Filling out forms is just the basic part of psychometrics. What differentiates me from those half-buckets is that their diagnosis often ends after filling out the form,” Heidi smiled as she removed the amethyst pendant from her neck and fiddled with it, “mine on the other hand has only just begun when you fill out the form.”

Vanna’s gaze unconsciously fell on Heidi’s crystal pendant there, eyes growing curious as well: “I always see you wearing this new trinket recently... do you like it a lot?”

Apparently, Heidi got taken by surprise over the comment. Looking down at the pendant in her hand, she shook her head as if seemingly remembering something: “Not really, it’s just that it’s rare for my father to bring me a gift. Guess what Vanna, this pendant was ‘bought’ by my father from this very store.”

She specifically emphasized the word “buy”, as if to forcibly deny that this was just a free giveaway.

“It is indeed a store product here. I hope this pendant brings you good luck.” Duncan nods from the side to confirm the story.

This got Vanna even more intrigued. From her view, this item was clearly an imitation so it baffled her.

How can someone as well learned in history as Morris fall for this?

Thankfully the inquisitor had more brains than to blurt that out before Duncan. Exactly then, Nina had finished checking the form and handed it back to Heidi: “I finished filling it out. Can you see what the problem is?”

“I’ve done reading it while you were filling the page out, including the small, subtle changes in your expression during the act.” Heidi stored the paper and said bluntly, “You have a psychological trauma for many years? Has a lot of recent stress in your life caused it to resurface? Your strange dream eased up in the past two days because of the stress letting up... or did it get shifted somewhere else?”

Nina couldn't help but widen her eyes due to how much the doctor picked up. Then subconsciously, the girl glanced in her uncle's direction, her face a little hesitant due to the subject.

"We need a quiet and private environment for further spiritual relief and release," Heidi said, looking up at Duncan. "Of course, this will first require the consent of your guardian and Miss Nina's own cooperation."

"Go upstairs," Duncan nodded and looked at Nina, "is that okay with you?"

"I'm fine with that." Nina nodded very obediently and without objection. However, the tension in her eyes remained, which didn't go unnoticed by the doctor's keen observation.

"Don't worry Nina, it's just a simple mental relaxation technique. You have nothing to worry about because there's nothing wrong with you. Only a little stress and anxiety that everyone has." Heidi gave off an aura of reassurance and confidence that easily elevated the tension, "I don't think we will need any of my tools today. I'll start by asking you a few questions."

Nina was completely relieved now. She nodded to Duncan before being led up to the second floor by Heidi.

Finally, only Duncan and the Miss Inquisitor remain sitting across from each other at the counter while Shirley remained hidden behind the shelves.

Today was the first time the ghost captain had met this lady in person after he left a mark on her by chance. He could perceive his mark growing stronger and stronger due to the close proximity, a sign that the flame inside Vanna's soul was being replenished.

After realizing this, Duncan consciously controlled the growth of that imprint – he did not want this mark to be detected by the mysterious goddess behind her, which would cause him to lose this special "node".

While the ghost captain was curious about the status of a nun in this city, Vanna was actually also curious about this "Mr. Duncan" sitting across

from herself.

Without question, she was indeed here to accompany Heidi today. However, there's also another reason: there are too many suspicious points about the museum fire.

Theoretically, it would be impossible to extinguish a fire that quickly. Heidi also saw a projection of a suspected sun fragment. Then there's Duncan, an ordinary person who rushed into a fire to save others without getting hurt in the slightest. Vanna didn't have tangible evidence to connect the clues together, but her intuition pointed toward this antique store.

"Mr. Duncan," Vanna broke the silence first with a calm expression, "I have something I want to know about the fire in the museum, can I?"

"Of course," Duncan nodded calmly, "I was on the scene at the time and should be able to provide some information."

"Thank you for your cooperation," Vanna nodded slightly. "When you rushed in to save everyone, the fire in the museum was still burning, right?"

"That's right," Duncan nodded without hesitation because he didn't know how much information the inquisitor in front of him had. A little bit of truth linked to some omitted details. "There was a lot of fire, especially in the direction of the corridor leading to the main exhibition hall. Almost all of it was burning."

"But you ended up coming out unscathed," Vanna asked, "can you tell me what happened after you entered the museum?"

Duncan showed a contemplating face, and after two or three seconds of silence, he said unsurely: "I also think it's incredible that I can come out alive... But the fire in the museum suddenly died down, can you imagine that? It was not extinguished by the water gun outside, nor was it extinguished after the combustible material was burned, rather the fire itself just disappeared all of a sudden. Even the smoke was gone..."

He appeared amazed as he recited the lie in his voice, stretching out his hand to gesture here and there: “This must be the blessing of the goddess, right?”

As soon as he finished that sentence, he heard a commotion from Shirley’s side – it was the girl accidentally knocking down a wooden carving in the corner.

“Be careful!” Duncan immediately turned his head and shouted like a real store owner reminding his employees, “The base of that thing has been dropped by me more than once so it’s just glue holding it together. Don’t let it shatter!”

“..... The goddess watches over everyone in the city-state,” Vanna’s expression subtly changed for the worse, her eyes meeting Duncan’s, “I can see that you really are... an honest person.”

Duncan’s expression was serious and calm: “That is of course, we can’t be in this business unless we are honest.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 142

Chapter 142 “Inquiry and Treatment”

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The expression on Duncan’s face was very sincere, the kind that’s filled with confidence and resoluteness that if I open the door to sell imitation fakes, then I will have you die clearly with this truth in mind. Vanna was obviously shocked by this level of calmness and remained stunned for the longest time before reacting: “Your honesty... is impressive indeed.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to ask about that fire?” Duncan didn’t care about the strangeness in the other party’s tone and bluntly asked with a relaxed expression, “I heard afterward that the entire museum was blocked off that same day?”

“Actually, we highly suspect that there are supernatural factors related to the museum fire.” Vanna did not hide this from the man. In fact, she didn’t need to because the news had already been spread publicly by City Hall, appealing to the citizens not to approach the Museum Square in the near future. For those living in Pland, the existence of supernatural things wasn’t a secret at all, only that some truths and details are omitted when deemed necessary by the authorities. “The fire subsided very quickly, far beyond common means... Mr. Duncan, can you please recall what you experienced that day. Did you really not see or hear anything unusual after entering the museum?”

“..... No,” Duncan frowned, “in fact, I didn’t have the energy to pay attention to what was happening in the fire at all. I was just a normal person, not a trained guardian after all.”

Speaking of this, he paused and raised his eyebrows: “Does the church suspect that a few of us who escaped from the fire may be related to the supernatural factor behind the fire?”

“It’s my personal suspicion,” Vanna got all serious in her face. “I beg your pardon, but it is my duty as an inquisitor to be wary of all uncontrolled transcendent dangers hidden in the city-state. I am not implying you are the main culprit behind the fire, but whether the common individual like it or not, supernatural powers can contaminate a soul regardless of their will or awareness. My main concern today in coming is your safety.”

“I understand,” that made Duncan more at ease and frank now. To be honest, he couldn’t be angry, for the young inquisitor was only doing her duty. “Then have you noticed anything unusual from your observation? Any clues?”

“..... I didn’t find anything,” Vanna shook her head, “there is no remnant of unwanted powers here, and the distribution of auras flowing inside and outside the building is quite normal. I think... you should be just some ordinary people who got mixed up with that event.”

Duncan thought about it and couldn’t help but add: “If not... why don’t you check carefully again? What if there’s a shadow hiding in some obscure spot and you didn’t notice? This is for our safety after all....”

“I have confidence in my judgment,” Vanna said without waiting for Duncan to finish. Then straightening her chest with extra confidence, she firmly spoke: “I have received the grace of the goddess, and my eyes are the most effective means of detection, especially during the day when no heretical power or shadow can escape my sight. Even the most adept evil gods and demons are unable to escape my eyes during these hours!”

As soon as Vanna’s words came out of her mouth, she heard another loud bang, the signal that Shirley had finally dropped the carving at the cabinet and shattered it.

“I... I wanted to see if I could put it in a safer spot...” Shirley meekly cried out from an out of sight place.

“Just spare those things for now! It’s okay if you just wipe the windows!” Duncan said helplessly, his hands spreading out like some pained boss lecturing a worker. Then turning back to Vanna, “... You’re right, I guess there isn’t anything more to investigate.”

“This kid looks like a hairy one,” Vanna said casually as she glanced up at Shirley’s skirt that was sticking out of a corner, “and seems... she seems a little nervous?”

“This is her first day at work today,” Duncan said truthfully, “not a formal clerk yet, but a friend of my niece coming here to learn and to subsidize her family’s income. Children of the lower city must earn their keeps at a much younger age.”

Vanna nodded in agreement, thinking that this was normal. Then she seems to have remembered something else and landed her gaze on Duncan again: “In addition, I want to confirm another thing. After you all left the museum, did you feel any discomfort or have a nightmare?”

Duncan didn’t answer immediately because someone did have a nightmare. In fact, it wasn’t just Shirley, but he too because he had dived into that dream world to explore with the girl. Sure, Vanna was an upright lady with a positive image, but there was no way he could reveal this fact. In the eyes of the church and authorities, they’re all heretics that must be burned at the stake.

“No, everything is fine,” Duncan shook his head, “but may I ask? What kind of nightmare will it be? If something similar happens to us in the past two days, I would like to confirm it as soon as possible and ask for help from the nearest church.”

“It should have something to do with the flames,” replied Vanna, “and the scale is immense, with huge arcs erupting violently from a dark void. Considering the fact that you narrowly escaped from a near-death experience, it’s likely you have suffered a short-term trauma in some way or form. The shadow may manifest itself in the form of your dreams. Ordinary folks cannot judge the difference, but as a transcendent, I advise you to seek help as soon as you dream of something similar.”

Duncan frowned.

Erupting violently from the dark void, spectacular arcs of flame...

It didn't sound like Nina's dream, nor was it Shirley's dream they experienced.

If I had to connect it to something, her description is more like something I know of.... The sun fragment?

Duncan pondered for a moment, carefully adjusting the wording within the framework of an enthusiastic citizen. "Let me get this down... so this thing... is it related to the sun cultists that's been plaguing the newspapers recently? Those cultists seemed to be engaged with something related to the sun and such. I wouldn't put it past them to set the museum ablaze in their crazy rituals."

Vanna didn't think much about the question since it's common knowledge the church was tracking down the suntists after the recent sewer rituals. Then nodding: "We can't rule out this possibility... but knowing is your limit, do not inquire too much about the matter. It's dangerous for ordinary folks to dive deep into this topic."

As a high-ranking member of the church, Vanna knew all too well the dangers that came with forbidden knowledge. Merely knowing was enough to open a channel for those evil gods to seep into their world. By then, the host would become nothing more than a walking bag of flesh to infect others regardless of one's will.

Naturally, Duncan did not take the initiative to mention his original reporting behavior if the suntists to the church either. Merely through their conversation here, he was already able to discern the truth and confirm his guess about that being the sun fragment.

Is that how a sun fragment is supposed to look? A huge arcing flame, erupting violently in the dark nothingness...

This was completely different from what Duncan had in mind. In his original draft of imagination, something like a “Sun Fragment”, which was chased by the suntists, should be something similar to an anomaly, a tangible and physical object or item that could be wielded.

Duncan tried hard to match the description to anything he knew from Earth. Eventually, he came to the conclusion it mostly resembled what he knew as a “solar flare”.

The expression on his face did not change much there, but his thoughts were riding high in waves.

HOLY SHIT?! A SUN FRAGMENT IS LITERALLY A SLICE OF THE SUN!!!

At the same time, in Nina’s bedroom on the second floor, Heidi had completed her regular questioning and guidance of the “patient”.

She has roughly confirmed that Nina’s dream was not an ordinary nightmare or a continuous dream caused by pure mental stress, but whether this dream could be harmful requires further determination.

“We may need a short and moderate hypnotherapy,” Heidi picked up the amethyst pendant in her hand and said to the girl in front of her with a gentle voice. “Don’t be nervous, just follow my guidance and answer some questions.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 143

Chapter 143 “Hypnosis”

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Nina faintly gulped as she watched the crystal pendant swaying in Heidi's hand. Although the other party said to relax, this was her first time receiving hypnotherapy; therefore, it was always difficult to control her reaction.

While her eyes were attracted by the swaying crystal, she also noticed that Heidi was wearing a seemingly simple stone bracelet on her wrist, which was woven together with tough silk rope and strung with many colorful stones. She also noticed many rune-like marks on the stones, something strange for a female trinket.

Noticing Nina's gaze, Heidi jiggled her wrist with a smile: “I am a ‘student’ of the Truth Academy, following and serving the god of wisdom, Lahem. Although I don’t seem like it from the outside, but from a technical standpoint, I am a registered clergy.”

A clergy... not just a psychiatrist, but also a member of the Truth Academy?

Nina has certainly heard of the Truth Academy since she's a student at one of their schools. Although its name sounds like an academy, but in fact, the real body of this “academy” was one of the four orthodox churches in this world. Together with the Storm Church, the Death Church, and the Flame Bearers, these four organizations maintained the civilized order of the Deep Sea Age. But unlike the other three major churches, the Truth Academy did not have a strict faith system and was more inclined towards pure knowledge. They are the backbone of research and scientific progress, so

they're the promoters of schools and universities instead of cathedrals and chapels.

In addition, these scholars are by far the smallest in terms of numbers compared to the other three faiths, and the ones that do wear a marker that registered them as a true wisdom clergy was, to say, rarer than a diamond.

At this moment, Heidi appeared glowing like a halo to Nina's eyes. This finally allowed the nervous student to ease up like a junior meeting a top honor graduate of the same school. Bluntly said, Nina went into full idol ogling mode....

Of course, Heidi wouldn't miss the change in Nina's expression, but she didn't care about it. To the doctor, her status as an idol in the eye of her juniors didn't even register because that's how her brains worked.

Continuing to fiddle with the crystal pendant in hand, she started to speak slowly, cooing with a hypnotic note: "About your childhood. Just now, you mentioned your parents passing in an accident. Can you tell me about the details? The incident may have left a looming shadow over your heart..."

"Actually... it's nothing I can't talk about." Nina thought and figured it was not worth hiding, "I've told many people about this before, but everyone assumed I was hallucinating and mistaken as a child.... Eleven years ago, there was a factory leak in the sixth block, and many cultists destroyed the area before being arrested. Did you know that?"

"Of course," Heidi nodded, "I was only in my teens when it happened. Our family was staying near the Crossroad when it occurred, and we happened to witness the first crowd of people flooding the streets and running over each other...."

"Then do you remember a fire as well?"

"Fire?" Heidi tilted her head slightly and unconsciously stopped fiddling with the crystal pendant, "What fire?"

"See, you don't remember that fire either, but in my memory, a huge fire killed my parents. Yet, everyone says I am mistaken..."

Heidi silently listened to Nina's story until the end, not once did she reject the version contrary to her own. Then with a faint nod, she took a good minute before continuing like she was also contemplating what to do next: "So this should be the hidden shadow inside your heart. The fire you're so afraid of is the catalyst of your dreams. You've been suppressing the emotion, but you're afraid the flames will appear again and take away the people around you. This is the cause."

Nina slowly nodded, not rejecting the assessment.

"Have you been under any pressure lately?" Heidi asked, "Academically, in life? Recent pressures may have amplified the long-standing haze in your heart..."

Nina fell silent for a moment before she replied with some hesitation: "Maybe it's because my uncle's body has been unwell before. It's been getting worse and worse for a while, which worried me a lot..."

Speaking of this, she paused and quickly added: "Ah, of course, his health is better now. I feel that I have also relaxed a lot, and I haven't had that strange dream in the past two days..."

"Are you worried about your family's health...?" Heidi cooed thoughtfully, listening to the whispers of the now partially hypnotized girl across from herself.

She didn't need to keep swaying the tool of her trade anymore because Nina had fallen down on the bed in a dreamy state. The crystal pendant was merely a distraction, while her words were the true source of the hypnosis.

"I can see that you have a hard life... You've kept the tension and anxiety in the back of your mind all by yourself. You don't want to burden those around you and ignored your own needs. But it's okay now. Relax and sleep. When you awake again, you will leave behind the stress in that dream and be refreshed..."

In a half-dreamy state, Nina's voice sounded softly: "... Thank you..."

Heidi grinned at getting some result. Then in order to further improve Nina's state of deep relaxation, she casually brought up another question: "By the way, your uncle was not in good health before, right? What disease did he have? I just saw that Mr. Duncan seemed to be in good health."

Nina was silent for a much longer time this round before she spoke softly: "It's just that his body is weak, he is now... totally fine..."

However, Heidi could no longer hear Nina's response.

The moment she had asked the last question, the doctor was already lying at the end of Nina's bed, falling into a deeper dream than her own patient.

On Heidi's right wrist, the hand-woven stone bracelet was faintly glowing due to one of the runic symbols activating. These symbols are often worn by the followers of the Truth Academy, representing the blessings from Lahem, the God of Wisdom and Foolishness. They may not have strong powers to fight the supernatural, but the scholars had other means, like using these runes carrying their god's power.

After a few seconds of flickering, a red agate in the string of stones suddenly made a slight cracking sound and quickly disintegrated into dust before disappearing with the wind.

.....

After being left alone, Vanna continued asking Duncan several more questions. One to learn if she had missed any key details about the museum fire, the second to ensure Duncan hadn't been affected by the sun fragment.

During the conversation, the rustiness and embarrassment of the first meeting gradually dissipated, and the scene's atmosphere became friendly and familiar. This allowed Duncan to sense the genuine concern of the female inquisitor sitting across from himself. It's not the feeling of an investigator trying to crack a case but the heartfelt emotion of caring for others. Whether this emotion was due to Heidi's connection or if it stretched to everyone in the city-state, his impression of the lady couldn't be any better despite their stance.

“Speaking of which, Miss Heidi and Nina have been up there for a while now, right?” During the conversation, Duncan noticed the time and subconsciously glanced up at the stairs leading to the second floor.

“Indeed,” Vanna also reacted to such a reminder and faintly frowned, “usually Heidi’s treatment process is very fast...”

“..... I don’t think you can use Miss Heidi’s usual treatment model as a standard. Physical hypnosis and kinetic anesthesia are very quick indeed, but I don’t think she would go that path with my niece.” The corner of Duncan’s mouth visibly twitched at remembering those tools in the doc’s med kit, “But the two of them are taking quite a long time... nothing will happen, right?”

Vanna shook her head: “No, Heidi is a professional who has been strictly trained by the Truth Academy. She won’t mess things up in a typical hypnotherapy and is mostly talking to Nina for treatment. I do admit she can be a bit eccentric when it comes to dealing with the paranoid cultist. You know, her attitude towards work is the same as someone going on holiday despite the criteria of her job....” After saying the last bit, the inquisitor suddenly got less confident about the matter and grew worried, “Maybe it’s best we go take a look ourselves.”

Duncan and Vanna both went up to the second floor together and came to Nina’s room. But before they could knock on the door, their ears perked up on the same unexpected noise – two snoring sounds of the ladies inside.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 144

Chapter 144 “Vanna’s Vigilance”

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“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I don’t know how...” Heidi apologized with embarrassment. As a senior psychiatrist and a professional who could complete all her studies under the strict standards of the Truth Academy, her embarrassment at the moment was indescribable. Seriously, when Vanna woke her up, Heidi almost fell over backwards, believing her professional life was over...

However, at this time, Nina, who was sitting on the bed and had just woken up, was also confused. She didn’t know what happened at all, only looking at the doc in confusion due to all the apologizing. “Uncle, what happened? Why is Miss Heidi...”

“The psychiatrist hypnotized not just you but herself as well and fell asleep.” Duncan sighed with a helpless note and pointed to the bed corner that was still imprinted with the shape of a certain lady in the room, “Her drool ran down to the floorboard.”

Despite saying it with a straight face, the comment literally sent Heidi into a spiral of shame. Poor her. She couldn’t even lift her head anymore.

Under this awkward and chaotic atmosphere, only Vanna managed to maintain a serious face. She glanced around the room for the first time, looking for and sensing something. Eventually, she sets her eyes on Heidi: “Are you really okay? How did you end up falling asleep yourself during a therapy session?”

Listening to her friend's serious tone, Heidi gradually returned to her senses and picked up on the hidden meaning. Immediately frowning, she tries to recall the last moment: "I.... I don't believe I have a problem. It should be due to all the workload recently. Perhaps the relaxing atmosphere affected me more than I thought just now."

"But the treatment is complete, right?" Vanna still seemed a little uneasy and asked again.

"Oh of course," Heidi nodded without hesitation, confident in her own work. "I asked Miss Nina some questions, and it was after she answered that I fell asleep."

Duncan noticed Vanna's solemn expression and couldn't help but ask, "Is there something wrong?"

"..... No, just a little worry from me about Heidi's condition. She's never done something like this before." Vanna shook her head, "But I suspect it's like she says, she's too tired due to the recent extra workload. Her day off did get ruined by the museum fire after all."

When Nina heard this, she immediately apologized to Heidi out of reflex: "I'm sorry, it seems that I took up your precious resting period..."

"No, no, there's no need to apologize," Heidi quickly waved her hand, "and if we think about it differently, I did get a good night's sleep here. I haven't slept so soundly in a long time."

Vanna confirmed this by eyeing her friend up and down. Then turning to peer out the window for the color of the sky, "It's getting late, I believe we should also take our leave before night arrives."

"Don't you need a break?" Duncan expressed concern as the owner of the place, "Miss Heidi still looks a little tired."

"I'm much better," Heidi corked a flushed smile when she heard this, "it's not safe to stay outside at night. I have to get home before the sun goes down, otherwise my father will be worried about me."

Hearing this reason, Duncan didn't try to keep the ladies around. He first helped Nina out of bed, then turned to face the two guests: "Then I'll see you two out."

Keeping his promise, he sent Heidi and Vanna to the front door, where he saw the looming evening sun getting ready to rest for the day.

Vanna started the steam core of the vehicle she drove over with. Apparently, the engine needed preheating like a boiler before it would properly run, which intrigued Duncan. However, before the ghost captain could inspect the machinery, Heidi had gotten closer and whispered a series of concerns.

"You are now a very competent guardian, but you seemed to have neglected to take care of Nina for a while before. Her mental tension and anxiety arose from this reason," said the psychiatrist sincerely and directly. "Of course, now that her condition has been greatly relieved after this counseling, the situation will get better. But even the best treatment needs to be consolidated, and the best psychological healing can only come from the care of loved ones."

Nina had mental tension and anxiety? And for some time too? Was it before I took possession of this shell?

Duncan accepted this and nodded back to the doctor. He's sincere and thankful for the help: "Thank you for coming today. I was indeed in a bad state for a while and neglected her health."

"Actually, I should be discussing this with you in further detail after the treatment. Sadly, today doesn't seem to be right timing." Heidi sighed and took half a step back, "I will sort out the findings I discovered and write it all down in a letter. It will also include the follow-up suggestions for her care."

The two special guests finally took their leave and left.

Watching the eye-catching car that's not commonly seen in the lower city drift away in the orange-colored street of the evening, Duncan exhaled a long deep breath he's been holding in. Out of his expectations, the first

face-face encounter with the church went far more smoothly and peacefully than he could imagine.

And after Vanna and the two left, Shirley finally came out from the corner of the first floor. The girl looked nervously in the direction of the door, only daring to come up after seeing Duncan and Nina return: “Are they really gone?”

“Yes, they’re gone, they’re gone.” Duncan glanced at Shirley, his tone sounding helpless at how cowardly this girl had gotten: “Also, your behavior is too obvious. What are you thinking by hiding the entire time? To draw attention and arouse suspicion? Thank goodness the inquisitor didn’t overthink the matter.”

“Because I’m scared! That’s the inquisitor! The strongest fighting force working under the church in this city!” Shirley’s eyes popped as if unable to comprehend how Duncan could remain so calm and unfazed. “The highest ranking clergy can order the guardians and patrols on a whim. If she gets even the slightest whiff of Dog’s scent, she can have the entire city swamp down on our heads in an instant...”

Speaking of this, she paused and sighed again: “Aigh, of course, it is normal that you don’t understand my mentality. In the eyes of an existence like you, the inquisitor is probably not much different from the priest in the community chapel...”

Nina looked at Shirley, then turned her head in the direction where Vanna and Heidi had left. She frowned at the strange conversation: “Shirley, will you really be arrested by the church? You obviously didn’t do anything bad, and Lady Heidi and Vanna are also very good people...”

“It doesn’t matter if I do bad things or not,” Shirley sighed, “the church won’t arrest all of the wild transcenders because there are always going to be those exposed to the supernatural for various strange reasons. However, that doesn’t mean they won’t keep tabs on these wild ones like me after discovering my existence. I don’t want to lose my freedom.”

Nina frowned and couldn't grasp Shirley's logic. To her, reporting to the authorities was normal, even though she hadn't done it herself.

"Nina, how are you now?" Duncan asks from the side, interrupting the thoughtful girl.

"Me? I'm fine," Nina answered immediately, "I think Miss Heidi's 'treatment' is quite effective. After chatting with her for a while and taking a little nap, I feel much more relaxed!"

"Is that so? Then I'm relieved."

Duncan nodded slightly and did not say anything else. Walking towards the stairs, he only then noticed Shirley, who seemed to react suddenly by glancing out the window.

"Ah, I had wanted to go home today..." She cries with a sad note.

"Keep that idea as a thought only," Duncan didn't look back, "do you really plan to fight with the guardians of the church at night?"

Nina also chuckled and stepped forward to pat Shirley on the shoulder: "Just stay here for another night. We can even take this chance to chat at night!"

.....

On the way back to the upper city, Vanna held the steering wheel firmly while Heidi yawned in the passenger seat.

"Uoomph... that nap was so good..." Heidi yawned again and said casually, "So, how did things go on your end? Did the store owner show anything wrong with him?"

"..... There is nothing out of the ordinary," Vanna replied while keeping an eye on the road ahead. "The store owner is just an ordinary person. The same goes for that little girl named Shirley. I couldn't sense anything from the shop or the presence of supernatural power or will. They should be fine,

and it's you I'm worried about. Did you discover anything while talking to Nina?"

"Everything is normal on my end too," Heidi nodded as well. She then raised her hand to stroke the crystal pendant that was hanging around her neck and noticed that one of the beads around her bracelet had gone missing, "But Nina mentioned something when she was under my hypnosis. It's a little weird."

"Weird? What do you mean?"

"She mentioned a fire when she was a child, a fire related to the factory leak eleven years ago," Heidi said casually. "But you know it too, there wasn't anything eleven years ago..."

As soon as she was halfway through speaking, a sharp braking screech accompanied by the vibration of the body interrupted her words. Vanna had stomped on the brake and turned to face her friend with wide eyes: "Fire?! Nina said she remembered a fire eleven years ago?"

"..... Yes," Heidi was a little stunned by the strong response, "why are you making such a huge reaction?"

Vanna didn't speak for a while, only her face showing the swirling emotions running inside. Heidi naturally sensed the change and got worried: "Do you want to turn around and go back now? We can ask..."

"No." Vanna shook her head abruptly after pondering the idea.

The car started again, and in the darkening sky, the scenery on both sides of the neighborhood gradually accelerated and receded away.

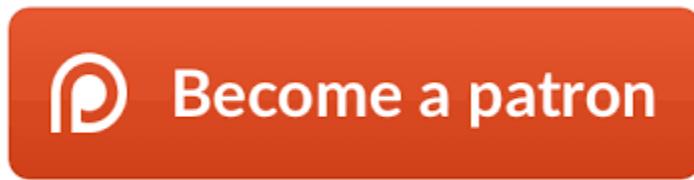
"I know you're confused and curious, but until I say more, don't mention this to anyone. I need to confirm something first." Vanna paused for a moment and then murmured as if she were talking to herself: "Perhaps... we came in a bit of a hurry today."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 145

Chapter 145 “Heidi and Her Family”

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Heidi wisely didn’t pursue the matter.

The doctor knew she was different from Vanna. Although they’re both “clergy” in name and even had a registered certification from the Truth Academy, she was better at research than confronting those dangerous forces head-on. Sure, this technically fell into her field of specialty, but her work was all conducted under controlled conditions. Unfortunately, this here... that wasn’t it.

Vanna, on the other hand, was well suited for this matter. She’s been confronting the heretics for many years. She knows the ins and outs of what’s permissible during tense situations. If Vanna says not to ask, then you don’t ask.

Towards the last stretch before home, Heidi finally threw out a question she assumed safe: “... Is there a problem with that antique shop?”

“..... Everything is fine in the antique shop,” Vanna controlled the car to slow down, her face still thoughtful, “but in our city-state... something abnormal may be taking place.”

The sky had entirely darkened by then, and the bells and whistles that alternate between day and night had started to ring from the central steam core. It’s also the signal for the street lamps to come on. When Heidi arrived outside her home, Vanna’s car had already started to depart and was quickly out of earshot.

Unlike her friend, that's limited by the curfew, the inquisitor doesn't rest at night. Not only did Vanna have to make another trip down to the cordoned-off museum and meet the guardians, but she also had to return to the main cathedral for paperwork. Even on her days off, Vanna's never truly resting.

Heidi sighed again at recalling her own day being ruined.... But a sigh was a sigh. She was not going to wait to enter her home. With a click of the lock, the doctor entered the spacious living room that was lit with electric bulbs at the ceiling.

It's quiet as usual, and the day maid had retired to her own place after finishing the dishes. Bluntly said, the vast house seemed a little deserted right now.

But Heidi has been used to this. Her father was someone that's hard to pull out of the study once he's invested, and her mother's health hadn't been good, so expecting a warm welcome was out of the question. Even so, that doesn't mean there's no human scent in this big house. Their family relationship has always been good in fact.

Changing out of her coat and storing away the med kit, she glanced around and found the study room to be lit. Her father was likely reading something. Without disturbing the master of the house, Heidi came to her parent's bedroom and knocked on the door: "I'm back, are you inside?"

Her mother's voice came from the other side of the door with a sense of helplessness and a little pretended anger: "Why did you come back so late tonight!"

Heidi stuck out her tongue at the door and quickly sorted out her expression. Then pushing it open, she strolled inside while muttering her excuse: "I went out with Vanna so you don't have to keep worrying about me. She can easily best the entire city with one hand behind her back..."

The lighting in the room was dim here because strong lighting would irritate her mother's eyes, which had been in poor condition after being injured by chemical fumes from the factory leak eleven years ago.

Heidi swiftly adjusted to the dim lighting and saw her mother sitting on the head of the bed. It's a very kind old lady sitting there in a pair of soft pajamas and weaving a unique craft of Pland.

"You're always running around with Vanna. Sooner or later, you won't be able to marry like her. I know it, you can't fool me. She's been running to the marriage center every weekend, hoping to get paired with a man that fits her requirements. The church has been getting complaints every day because of that..."

The expression on Heidi's face visibly stiffened: "This... don't say that... Vanna is an inquisitor now..."

"So what if she's the inquisitor? She's still the same lass that's been eating at our house for several years. It's all because of her uncle after he became the city admin. All that man cares about is the city's affairs. That's why Vanna didn't get the right upbringing of a proper lady." The old mother babbled on and on as usual, her hand gesturing never once stalling. "If I were Vanna's uncle, I would've run to the church and demand they remove the oath placed on his niece. Most nuns only make one oath during the baptism ceremony. How could Vanna do three big ones?! It's all because of those three oaths that she can't marry anyone even at this age..."

Listening to her mother's string of moaning and ranting, Heidi could only chuckle with embarrassment. Finally, after the old lady managed to catch her breath and stop for a bit, the daughter knew it was her chance to change the topic. "You're almost finished with the weaving?!"

"Yes and no. I've weaved and disassembled it several times already. It's always something that I can't get right." The old mother smiled, showing Heidi her splendid ribbon woven with fine silk. The intricate workmanship was embellished with colorful stones and beads, a gift one wouldn't find in just any shop for it's rumored to ward off evil spirits. "I wonder if I can find a good young man for you once I'm finished..."

Heidi glanced at the nearly completed knotted ribbon and cautiously suggested: "If not... why don't you dismantle it again? Maybe it'll be time by then..."

“You’re upsetting me on purpose!”

Heidi quickly changed stance and skedaddled out of there, all the while her mother’s nagging chant continued to echo out from the rear. She’s used to having her mother press for marriage so it’s nothing new. Nimbly closing the door before leaving, the doctor was ready to grab something from the kitchen when she bumped into her father in the hallway.

“I heard the sound of you coming home earlier... did you upset your mother again?” Morris asks, his elegant demeanor of a gentleman showing again.

Heidi quickly waved her hand: “No, no, just some small talk.”

“And about my gift, did you hand it to Mr. Duncan?”

“I delivered it. Mr. Duncan is very happy,” Heidi nodded and then couldn’t help but cast a peek at her father across the hallway, “but I really didn’t expect that you would be willing to give away your beloved collection...”

“It’s just a collection. He did save your life after all,” Morris lightly states. “In fact, I don’t even think it’s enough. I’ll have to go back in two days to thank him.”

The reference promptly caused Heidi to flush with embarrassment due to the reminder of giving Nina hypnotherapy today: “Umm... is there really a need to be so formal?”

“It’s not a matter of being formal or not. Mr. Duncan saved your life, and I am not only your father but also Nina’s teacher. What’s more, Mr. Duncan is also an antique dealer who is eager to learn. From a social point of view, this relationship is worth nurturing,” Morris casually explained. “I like the word that Mr. Duncan often says: it’s a kind of ‘fate’...”

“Okay, okay, your idea makes sense, it makes perfect sense.” Heidi suddenly had a headache coming after hearing her father’s reasoning. To her, socializing has never been a skill of hers, and now she’s being stuffed with a bunch of social etiquettes that were of no use in the therapy room.

“Then at least keep your visit to just a visit, don’t buy random things again, okay?”

“It depends on whether there are any items that appeal to me,” Morris said casually. Then he thought for a moment and asked as if the question only came to him now, “So, did you go with Vanna today?”

“Ah yes, she happened to be off today. We took her car.”

Morris mused for a second like he’s hesitating on his next words: “I get... the feeling you’re getting very close to Vanna.”

“Am I? I’ve been close to her for many years, haven’t I?” Heidi felt that the question was a little inexplicable and random, “We’ve known each other since childhood...”

“No, I’m just...” The old gentleman gulped and recalled the quote from Mr. Duncan during his last visit: “It’s also possible for an all-girls school...”

“Father?” Heidi made a weird look, unable to comprehend the bizarre behavior of her father.

“Ah, forget what I said.” Morris jolted back to attention, realizing how outrageous his inner fantasy was behaving. Quickly changing the topic to avoid any misunderstanding, the corner of his gaze suddenly fell upon Heidi’s wrist.

On the bracelet, which represents the protection of Lahem, the god of wisdom, a red agate was missing.

The old man’s expression instantly got paler. However, as a well-learned scholar, he knows better than to panic in this situation. Forcibly controlling his mood, he calmly asks again like it’s a casual question: “Umm, Heidi, did you accidentally drop a bead from your bracelet? I notice there’s an open spot on the string.”

“My bracelet?” Heidi blinked, then raised her wrist and took a look for herself, “Isn’t it supposed to be like this? I thought it was always missing

one.”

Always missing one?

Morris pressed his heavy panting down. Right now, there’s a surge of hard emotions overwhelming his mind for the worst possible outcome had just come true.

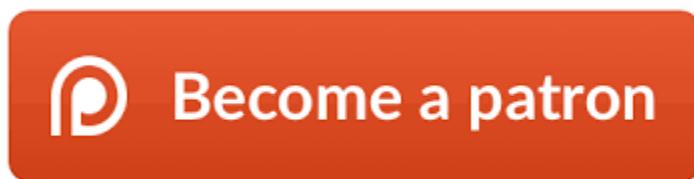
“By the way, you only went to that antique shop today, right?” He asks again with his usual tone, trying hard to get any information he could without alarming anyone, friend or foe.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 146

Chapter 146 “Ashes”

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Heidi didn't notice anything unusual in her father's tone.

“Yes,” she nodded calmly, “me and Vanna went to Mr. Duncan's antique shop today. I managed to have a nice chat with him and performed hypnotherapy for Nina. We returned right afterward.”

The doctor hesitated briefly at the end, wondering whether to tell her father about the fire she had heard from Nina and Vanna's strange reaction over it. However, after recalling her friend's abnormally serious expression in the car, the lady halted this idea.

There may be dangerous hidden forces involved behind this incident, and it may be so serious that if she speaks of it, it may attract prying eyes.

Although her father was the same as herself – he was also a follower of truth who serves the god of wisdom – they're both more of a scholar than a true transcendent fighter. It's not good for a person of learning to deal with those dangerous things directly.

Morris still had a gentle and calm expression on his face when he nodded slightly. Then speaking casually like it's not intended: “So you stayed over there for quite a while... did you lose track of time by chatting with Mr. Duncan? See, did I not say he's a person thirsty for knowledge?”

“Oh... that's not it,” Heidi's face suddenly grew a shade of blushed red, “it's just that... I wasted a little time when I hypnotized Nina.”

“When hypnotizing Nina?” Morris heard his student’s name and timely raised an eyebrow, “Did it not go well? Is her mental state that terrible? Was it affected by the previous fire at the museum?”

Heidi couldn’t help but roll her eyes when she heard her father’s long series of questions: “You really care about that student of yours... Don’t worry, she’s doing well. That girl was just a little anxious, and after my counseling, she’s completely fine and won’t be affected during the final exams. The delay I’m referring to is about... something else.”

Morris now sounded curious: “Oh?”

“Aha, maybe I’m a little too tired lately,” Heidi dryly laughed with more embarrassment. “I fell asleep as well when hypnotizing her and slept until the evening...”

“You fell into a deep sleep yourself while hypnotizing Nina?” Morris’s expression finally changed slightly, but he quickly regained control as per his protocol, “It’s not like you.”

“Everyone can be negligent at times, not to mention I have been deprived of a proper vacation in a long while.” Heidi waved her hand impatiently, “Aiya don’t ask, I’m already an adult. You and Mother are always like this when I come back late. I’m not a kid anymore you know. There’s no need to always act so worried...”

Morris kept staring at his daughter for several seconds more before breaking out his usual polite laugh of a scholar: “Of course, of course, I won’t keep asking like this the next time. Come, dinner is already waiting for you in the kitchen. Hurry and go warm it up. I still have to go see your mother.”

“Okay,” Heidi nodded and scurried for the kitchen, only to swing her head around before the hall corner, “by the way, are you planning to visit the antique shop later?”

“Yes,” Morris was already standing in the doorway of the bedroom, the dim light from the wall of the corridor casting a mottled shadow on his old face,

“is there something wrong?”

“I left in a hurry today so I didn’t get to discuss things properly with Mr. Duncan. If you’re going to visit, help me pass on a letter of assessment to him about Nina, okay?”

“No problem,” Morris nodded, and then as if speaking to himself, he muttered softly, “I definitely need to visit again...”

Heidi had left, but the gray-haired old historian remained standing quietly at the doorway. He seemed to be deep in thought, and after nearly a dozen seconds, he finally exhaled a long soft sigh and pushed open the dull wooden door.

The bedroom was still dimly lit, with only a small wall lamp to act as the light source. Morris carefully turned the lock behind himself, ensuring no one could come inside during this moment.

“Beloved, are you okay?” He slowly paced over to the bedside and softly asked the pile of wriggling ashes with a human-shaped outline.

As if to respond, a subtle static buzz came from the blurred ashen human outline, constantly floating and wriggling as it did so.

“Yes, how beautiful. Your craft has always been very good,” Morris replied in a small murmur and praised his wife’s weaving skills as he watched the nearly completed ornamental ribbon. “The one you made for me is still hanging in my study room.”

For the next while, no words were exchanged, only a silence that would drive any occupant into a discomfort daze. Eventually, after a few minutes of this awkwardness, Morris broke it and spoke his woes: “Heidi went out today. When she returned, I saw that one of the red agates on the bracelet was gone...”

The ash on the bed suddenly came to a frozen standstill, followed by a low static buzzing of a troubled squirming.

“It’s not certain what happened exactly. If it was a protection from Lord Lahem then it could only mean Heidi encountered a danger that could penetrate her inner sanity,” Morris slowly explained his reasoning. “But from the way things look, I suspect she only passed by ‘something’ without being aware of it. The bracelet likely activated without intention...”

Morris abruptly stopped and listened to the static buzzing that cut in.

“Mmm, yes, I reminded Heidi about her bracelet. But when she saw the problem, she assumed the agate was always missing in the first place.” Morris nodded in agreement with the ash as it wriggled around, “It’s a self-protective measure, perhaps from her mind or the blessing of Lahem himself. In any case, this protection prevented her from learning about something...”

Another burst of static buzzing came from his wife’s ashen form, this time more agitated and frantic.

“Me? I want to investigate of course. I must find out for myself what’s going on.”

The last sentence brought an uncomfortable silence to the ash on the bed.

Morris shook his head: “I understand, my love. There may be a little risk involved with my decision, but this is our daughter. I have to go. Don’t worry, I will pray for divination in advance. In fact, I had already visited that antique shop before and met the owner. The man is diligent, and his niece is a studious child and one of my students at school. There was no malicious evil hovering in there....”

“So, if the risk factor was in the shop today when Heidi visited, then the owner of that shop could also be threatened. My students live there. As a teacher and servant to the God of Wisdom, I must.”

Morris stated in a wistful voice that was so full of emotions that it hurt. Then the pair listened to each other’s suggestions and various ideas on what to do.

“No, we can’t alarm the cathedral about this matter… While they may be more effective, their overly aggressive style could also hurt my student. The priority of suppressing heresy and eradicating evil is too high for the guardians of the Church, and...”

Speaking of this, Morriston let out a soft sigh before continuing: “And, I really don’t want to attract the attention of the cathedral, after all… I am a heretical accomplice who has been shaken in my belief.”

His voice fell into a depressing low, those eyes never leaving the mass of ash that was his wife, who died eleven years ago in the fire.

In response, the human-shaped ash slowly rose upward and reached out, forming a tentacle-like form that’s supposed to be an arm to gently brush the old gent’s face.

“I know… I know…” Morris lowered his head and spoke in a confessing manner, “I am a man whose faith has wavered. I’m a coward who refuses to fully fall into degeneration… Lahem gave me the eyes to see through delusions, but I closed them on my own will to make an unrealistic wish come true. I wanted to keep you in this world, but couldn’t fully deceive myself… instead, I forced you and I into this shameful situation…”

He raised his head and gently gripped the fluttering wisp of ash, only to have his fingers bypass the dust.

“I wish I knew nothing like Heidi. This way, I could at least see you again, touch you again.... I haven’t been able to see how you look for eleven years now~”

This time, only a soft rubbing of particles came from the ash, the version of the woman weeping.

“I understand, I understand… All this will eventually end; after all, every show has an ending at some point. No matter what it is that responded to my wish, it will eventually come collect its price. I am ready for that. When it comes, I will ensure my clean disappearance from this world. Even if it’s

a shadow of subspace, I won't allow it to invade reality through this wish....”

Morris raised his head and stared at the silhouette of ash in the dim light.

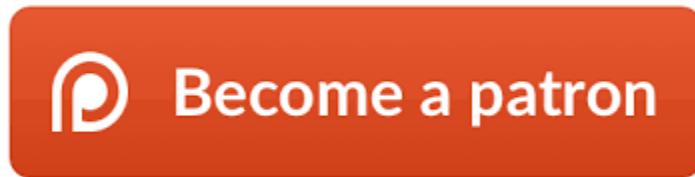
“But until that day comes, just stay with me for a while longer....”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 147

Chapter 147 “Appeared in the real world?”

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“Uncle Duncan, I’m going to school!”

Amidst the cheerful greeting, Nina sprinted down the stairs, turned around and waved in the direction of the second floor before going towards the main doorway.

The off days are over, and today was another day to go to school again.

But before she reached the door, Nina suddenly stopped, noticing a shaking, shivering figure hiding behind a shelf not far away. It’s Shirley who came out of hiding.

“Ah, Shirley,” Nina stood there happily and beckoned to the girl, “I was wondering where you were. Do you want to go together?”

“Together?” Shirley blinked in confusion, “Where together?”

“School of course la. Today is...” Nina said subconsciously, only to realize her blunder halfway through. Making a slightly embarrassed expression, “Ah, sorry, I forgot...”

Shirley wasn’t her classmate nor attended the school, and the pleasant experience of spending time on campus was just an act. Nina knew it herself, yet the girl would still occasionally forget this fact.

The expression on Shirley’s face also became weird for a while, and her eyes showed an apology again. However, she quickly recovered and shook

her head slightly: “I won’t go with you. My investigative activities have been completed at that school.”

“I guess so,” Nina pursed her lips, quickly returning to her usual smile, “sorry, I forgot. So I’ll go first?”

“Mmm,” Shirley nodded, but then remembering something, she added, “By the way, Nina, I… I’m going home today.”

“Going home?” Nina was stunned for a moment. It seems that in the span of only two days, she has taken Shirley as a member of this place for granted. Therefore, when the young lady heard this news, she had to take a good moment to process it, “Are you not staying here anymore?”

“I have to go home. My stay here had always been temporary,” Shirley waved her hand, saying what she had long wanted to say. “I told Mr. Duncan too, and he agreed.”

Nina didn’t say anything for a while, acting like she’s fallen into a shocked daze. Eventually, after a few seconds of spluttering, she managed to come out of it: “That… will you come back in the future?”

As long as it is possible, I really don’t want to come in the future. If possible, I want to steal a boat ticket and hide over at the Frost city-state.

The idea of running away flashed within Shirley’s mind, but then she seemed to sense a gaze falling on her body from the second floor. Shrinking her neck, she quickly corrected her train of thought: “I… I will come and find you if there’s an opening in the future. My home isn’t far away anyways,ahaha…”

Nina tilted her head, finding the behavior strange. Nevertheless, she quickly dropped the notion and got all happy again. To her, it’s good enough with the promise. Waving her hand cheerfully, she turned and ran out the front entrance, disappearing from view after turning around the street corner.

Shirley watched the other girl zooming off with a sort of daze at how quickly the attitude changed. Then suddenly, her instincts brought her back

to attention after noticing the certain figure standing at the stairs behind herself.

“Cap... Good morning Mr. Duncan!” She jerked to rigid attention, greeting the owner of the shop with a rarely used polite greeting in her repertoire.

“You’re much more polite now. This is what a girl your age should look like,” Duncan said lightly, slowly walking down the stairs as he did so.

“Did you finish explaining it to Nina yet? Are you going home today?”

“Yes.... I explained it to her clearly,” Shirley lowered her head, her voice not daring to be too loud. “You also agreed, I can leave today.”

“Why are you nervous again? Yesterday you were fine. Do you reset your tension every morning or something?” Duncan shook his head with a helpless smile and stepped forward to pat Shirley’s slightly thin shoulder, “Relax, I never said that I wanted to imprison you somewhere. I invited you to be a guest here so you can naturally go back when you want to go back. Of course, you can also come here any time you like.”

“I... I know,” Shirley nodded repeatedly, then deflated in a frustrated manner, “It’s... truth is, I am not that nervous inside like you think. This is all Dog’s doing. Whenever you get too close to me, he will instinctively tense up and transmit the emotion to me.”

“Oh Dog... Well then, guess there’s no way around it then. Perhaps it’s due to a shadow demon’s keener sense of perception.” Duncan shrugged and looked down at the petite girl, “But why don’t you think about it? You can really stay here if you like. The place where you and Dog is living sounds to me a bit rudimentary and unsafe at night.”

A subspace shadow claiming his lair was a safer place to live was simply unfathomable, borderline outrageous even. In the end, Shirley could only start giggling like an idiot after losing her vocabulary: “Ah...ahaha... that...”

“Forget what I said then, I’m just mentioning it to you. Don’t get riled up over it.” Duncan knew his words alone wouldn’t be able to change the girl’s

mind, especially with Dog's emotions being so negative. "If you want to leave then go ahead. You already know how to contact me anyways. Be sure to call me whenever you find new clues about these suntists."

Shirley nodded silently.

After two dreamlike days of this life, she finally got permission to leave here, got the chance to escape this terrifying being, but when this opportunity really appeared... she suddenly found herself at a loss.

Chatting and frolicking with a "friend", living under the care of an "elder", warm bedroom, bright lights, delicious food, and a peaceful life without fear of nightmares or hiding from the guardians.

Now, she's allowed to leave. Yet, for some reason, she got this ridiculous idea that.... that the bright world which she sought was having its door closed to her again....

"Our lives are going back on track, Shirley." In the midst of the spiritual connection, she suddenly heard Dog's low muttering:

"Yes, it's time to get back on track," Shirley muttered softly in her mind. Then she looked up and wanted to say goodbye to Mr. Duncan to find the man's expression getting serious.

In the dark, Duncan had sensed a flash of aura in the distance. This signal... was one of the marks he left behind!

"Mr. Duncan?" Shirley nervously asks.

"I sensed an aura," Duncan spoke softly without waiting for Shirley to finish. He stared off into the direction, "It seems to be coming from that direction."

Shirley didn't react at once: "An aura?"

"It's the small fire I left for that little bug." Duncan lowered his head slightly and looked into Shirley's eyes, "Do you remember the umbrella freak who attacked you on the edge of your dreams?"

Shirley was stunned for a moment, and her eyes widened suddenly: “Is it the piece you sent ‘home’?” But..... but wasn’t that in the dream world...”

“Yes, it was an attacker who appeared in the dream world,” Duncan’s tone grew meaningful, “but now I perceived that mark in the real world.”

Shirley’s eyes widened, and she suddenly thought of what Mr. Duncan had said to herself in that nightmare: perhaps, it wasn’t just a dream.

“Shirley,” Duncan’s voice came suddenly, interrupting the girl’s memory. “Before you go home, do you want to take another adventure with me? Of course, if you don’t...”

“I DO!” Shirley replied immediately without waiting for the other party to finish speaking. Her attitude was so firm that even she was startled. Then, as if to ease the embarrassment, she explained, “That... that ‘thing’ appeared on the street after the fire, it must have something to do with the event eleven years ago...”

Duncan pressed Shirley’s shoulder: “Then we’ll go together.”

“But how do we get there?” Shirley took a soft breath, “Can you be sure of the exact location of that thing? We’re not going to take the bus like last time again, right...?”

Duncan smiled and shook his head: “I have a more convenient mode of transportation now.”

Shirley was stunned for a moment. But just as she was about to ask what kind of convenient transportation method, a small shadow suddenly swooped down from the staircase of the second floor and perched itself on the man’s shoulder.

“To the Erxian Bridge, walk Chenghua Avenue... Big seat! There’s a big seat in the back... Melon seed snack and mineral water! Keep your feet on your side!”

Shirley nearly fell over backward after hearing that sharp chirpy rambling. Then after a quick stumble, she finally recognized who it was: the strange dove that could eat French fries the size of herself in one meal!

Under the girl's shocked gaze, Ai circled in the air again, unleashed the burning green flame around herself, and transformed into her undead skeletal form.

Shirley: "...?!"

She rigidly turned to face the man, only to be silenced by the flash that took her by surprise in the next...

Under Ai's express delivery service and belt buckling yapping, the tiny vortex of flame dashed out of the antique shop and flew off into the distance.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 148

Chapter 148 “Superimposing?”

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A swift shadow swept through the old and dirty streets of the lower city, through the pipes and pressure relief structures crisscrossing the factory cluster, through the desolate stations and deserted streets, and finally into a narrow alley.

The green flames bloomed, spreading wantonly in the air like a door until they swelled big enough to allow Duncan to step through the portal.

She was promptly followed by Shirley, who was still a little blindsided by what's occurred.

Duncan glanced back at the girl behind him, looking up and down before he spoke in a deep voice: “How does it feel? Is there any discomfort?”

“I’m... okay,” Shirley was still dizzy, but this dizziness was more of a disorientation caused by being abruptly carried by the big boss than physical discomfort. She looked up at Ai, who had returned to the form of a white dove and landed on Duncan’s shoulder. After a long time, she suddenly used her spiritual contact to communicate with Dog hiding in her soul, “Dog, can you beat this dove?”

“..... Don’t ask, even if you ask, I can’t beat it.” Dog’s voice sounded muffled, “Forget the bird raised by this big boss, even the fish stew is out of my league...”

Shirley was stunned: “Why did you suddenly mention fish stew?”

“Because I can see that there is probably nothing in line with common sense around this being...”

Duncan didn’t know that Shirley was muttering to Dog in secret. First confirming there was nothing wrong with the girl using the mark he placed on her, the man eventually sighed in relief after confirming she was alright.

He didn’t use the girl as a test subject. In fact, he’s already tested the transportation with various live animals beforehand, all of which were perfectly fine afterward. Even so, he didn’t want to wantonly ignore Shirley’s health.

Once done with the health check, Duncan shifted his attention to the surrounding environment.

At the end of the street, he could vaguely see the dilapidated streetscape. The plumbing facilities that have been in disrepair crisscrossed along the houses on both sides, and some of the pipes have tiny steam coming out of their connections. It’s hissing and leaking.

This was a common sight in many parts of the lower city.

But Shirley still recognized this place right away.

“This is... the sixth block?” Her eyes widened in some surprise, “Mr. Duncan, did you sense that mark here?”

“That’s right, Block Six, we’re back here again, but...” Duncan exhaled, then frowned slightly, “but the imprint faded a minute ago.”

“..... Faded? Is it extinguished?”

Shirley asked with a look of surprise, but Duncan didn’t answer, only staring thoughtfully in a certain direction.

In Shirley’s “dream”, he had implanted a cluster of flames into the remaining blob of the attacker. The order was to return to its main body. Then soon after, the connection ended until now with the mark reappearing in the real world.

If there are many coincidences, then it's no longer a coincidence. Nina's dream, Shirley's nightmare, the mark appearing at the sixth block, all these clues pointed to the invisible curtain here.

There must've been something they overlooked the last time they visited

Narrowing his eyes, Duncan didn't believe the flame he had left behind had been extinguished. Although he couldn't pinpoint the exact location, the faint feedback told him it was still burning.

Since the flame was still burning and growing, it meant that its "mission" wasn't over – it was still chasing, devouring, and assimilating the attacker. Perhaps, it may have even grown into a huge fire outside of reality.

He wanted to find this gap that was out of his view, the gap that seemingly connected dreams and reality.

"That abandoned factory is in the other direction..." Halfway through, Shirley raised her arm and pointed to a large building in the distance.

"We're not going to that factory," Duncan said quickly, "let's go this way."

"Oh..." Shirley answered, jogging her short legs to keep up with Duncan.

The withered and yellow leaves drifted with the wind and fell at Shirley's feet. As she stepped on the fallen leaves, she heard a slight crackling sound that was similar to a burning ember. Around them were nothing but ordinary streets. The old houses lined up along the sides, standing in the wind and facing indifferently at the uninvited guests who intruded here.

But then, Shirley noticed something was wrong – there was no pedestrians on the street.

The sixth block was indeed deserted compared to the other parts of the city. In fact, it's borderline listless, cold, and withdrawn. But by no means should it be like this without a single soul in sight!

A very uncomfortable feeling permeated from the bottom of her heart. This gave Shirley the exact same sensation of being trapped inside her nightmare

again. Out of a desire for protection, she subconsciously got closer to Duncan until she accidentally bumped nose first into the man's waist.

In the next second, Shirley drew up the full text of curse words in her dictionary.

"It seems that we have arrived." Duncan's calm voice interrupted the girl's momentary crankiness.

"I'm very, very sorry. I really didn't mean to, please... Wah?" Shirley subconsciously popped up a string of begging mercy when she came back to attention, only to realize they had stopped before an abandoned building.

It was a chapel.

A community church, which could be found everywhere in the city-state of Pland, stood at the end of the path.

It has all the hallmarks of the Storm Church: an elongated spiraling structure with black roof tiles and white stone bricks. However, the hanging vines and decaying dirty attachments told a story of abandonment.

It was once a sacred building, but now the smell of decay and forgottenness filled every crack in its brickwork.

"..... This is the 'church' mentioned by the old man near the intersection last time?" Shirley recalled the last time she visited this place, "I remember he said there was a nun living here, but that nun was often not in the church..."

"It's not a 'frequent absence' that can be explained by the level of ruin like this," Duncan said casually, striding toward the church gates. "It's not so much that the nun goes out often, but that this place seems to have been forgotten for eleven years."

Shirley watched as the other party walked towards the church, instinctively resisting the building and not wanting to follow. However, she eventually followed suit after overcoming the momentary hesitation.

The next moment, Duncan pushed open the half-covered church door to reveal the scene inside.

Warm and bright candlelight fell into Shirley's eyes, and the clean chapel was brightly lit, unlike the forsaken appearance outside. At the end of the neatly arranged benches, the statue of the goddess of storms, Gomona, stood quietly in the light.

A nun kneeling in prayer had stood up after hearing the noise.

"It has been a long time since anyone visited this church," the nun smiles warmly with arms spread open.

"Oh... It looks like this is indeed the spot," Duncan said softly with a calm expression as he observed the smiling nun in front. "The gap in the curtain."

He blinked. In his eyes, the smiling nun maintained a living appearance at one moment but turned into a bunch of humanoid wriggling ashes at the next. Meanwhile, the church behind her showed a strange superposition state – the flames were burning on the intact benches, ashes and sparks drifted from the roof, and the fire scene had interlaced with this calm reality.

It was as if two very different realities had been forcibly merged in this church.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 149

Chapter 149 “Behind the Curtain?”

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This gave Duncan a feeling that two diametrically different histories had once existed here at the church. The inside remained frozen in the past while the outside continued to move forward with time. It was neither destroyed nor survived that fire.

So.... does the nun here know anything?

“It’s been a long time since anyone visited this church,” the nun in a black priest’s robe repeated softly. She raised her head with a smile, but her gaze seemed to pass through Shirley and Duncan: “Where do you come from? Unfamiliar faces... you are not residents here?”

In front of the bright and warm scene, Shirley shrank her neck back the nun’s smiling gaze. She felt a chill for some reason and whispered nervously to Duncan: “I...why do I think this place is weird...it looks so dilapidated from the outside, but the inside...”

Duncan didn’t answer, just casually patting Shirley’s shoulder. Based on the girl’s reaction, he had guessed that the other party could only see one side of the picture and didn’t see the other. In this case, it’s difficult to explain his findings. Of course, there was Dog, who had a better perception of reality, but until he figured out the nun’s identity and threat meter, it was best to keep Shirley from summoning the dark hound.

“We’re passing through only,” Duncan said calmly to the nun with an unchanging expression, just like a normal visitor to the church. “Have you been here all this time?”

“Me? I have been living in this church,” the nun nodded lightly, “I have been praying here, praying to the great existence.”

“But the people on the block said that the nun in the church hadn’t returned for a long time,” Duncan added, observing the nuns’ reaction in front of him. “They said that the church was neglected and seemed abandoned.”

The nun listened quietly to Duncan’s words, but there was no violent reaction as if her heart had eternally fallen to rest.

“Oh yes, but I’ve always been here... Probably they forgot the day of prayer and thought that the church was not open.”

Duncan did not comment, but he’s got enough to confirm the problem stretched far beyond the church, but to the entire sixth block.

This deserted church was deep in the neighborhood. Just from the appearance alone, it has been abandoned for more than ten years! For ordinary people in this world, churches are not only a place of spiritual solace but also a functional facility for maintaining regional security, defending against evil forces after nightfall, and healing for many civilians after suffering from mental problems or nightmares... Such a critical facility has been abandoned for eleven years! Yet the residents of the sixth block did not feel the need to report this?

Imagine if a community has been cut off from water and electricity for eleven years, but the locals do not find anything wrong with it. Then when outsiders speak about the matter, they would only comment about it being strange. Now, how freaky does that sound?

As for the nun in this church... Duncan still had no idea what sort of intention this humanoid ash had in mind. Was she dangerous? At least from the conversation thus far, it’s not hostile. In fact, it’s so far off that it’s strange. It’s like the nun had fallen into a state of derision. He confirmed this by asking several questions back-to-back and got the same answer repeatedly.

She’s sane – but not much.

“Do you want to pray? Or do you need help with calming your mind and driving away evil spirits?” The nun asked with a smile and a soft voice.

“Thank you, but there’s no need.” Duncan shook his head, then looked around, and asked casually, “By the way, where are the guards of this church?”

Every church should have guards, even the smallest community church in the ghetto does to deal with general threats.

“The guardians … they are resting in the church, and they won’t show up until after nightfall,” the nun’s smile remained unchanged. “Are you looking for the guardians for something?”

Duncan didn’t answer, but his gaze slowly swept over the benches beside the nun.

In his field of vision, the phantoms of the fire burned everything, and the ashes and ruins were superimposed on the brightly lit church like overlapping films. In the other dimension of that superposition, there was no shortage of… scorched bodies.

“Are the guards resting there?” Duncan raised his hand and pointed not far away, but in Shirley’s eyes, there were only two rows of empty benches.

The nun froze for a moment, looked in the direction of Duncan’s finger, and only spoke after a moment of delay: “Shh… They’re sleeping.”

Duncan hummed and continued asking, “Can we look around?”

“Of course, the church is open for visits,” the nun nodded lightly, “please take care of yourself then. I will continue to pray here. If you need anything, do call me.”

After saying this, the strange nun actually turned around and walked towards the statue of the sacred goddess not far away, completely leaving Duncan and Shirley to their own bidding.

It wasn't until the nun left that Shirley, who had been nervous the entire time, suddenly breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn't care less about being afraid of Duncan at this time because the ubiquitous weird atmosphere in the church had already made Dog restless and agitated. A strange sense of tension was directly passing into her mind through the spiritual connection, making her subconsciously move closer to Duncan: "What the hell is going on with this place... Why does this nun feel so creepy? She obviously looks normal, but nothing seems to be normal..."

"There seem to be two churches here," Duncan explained simply, "one has burned down, and the other is still intact. They are superimposed on this time and space together, and the nun in the church... she's neither dead nor alive."

Shirley was stunned, and after half a minute, she whispered in confusion and astonishment: "What do you mean?"

Duncan glanced at her: "When we get back, you better read some books. If you don't know how I can teach you."

Without waiting for Shirley's answer, he marched straight for the depths of the chapel.

As the nun said, the church was open for visits, so of course he will "visit" at will.

Shirley blinked in shock but quickly hurried after seeing the man leaving her behind. They bypassed the benches and swung around the goddess statue. During of which, the praying nun never one raised her head like a devoted servant of God. It's as if she's completely forgotten the visitors here, maintaining the same posture of eleven years.

This caused Duncan to pay closer attention though. He watched the humanoid ash wriggling around as the tiny embers fell from the domed roof, just like fallen leaves from a tree. Then, a spark jolted in his heart out of the blue, causing him to flick his head up at the statue and blink.

The icon of the storm goddess, there's a rift at the head!

In this brief moment, Duncan finally caught a glimpse of the truth behind this superimposed fractured world. Through the rift in the head of this sacred statue, there's a faint light coming through. It's chaotic, mad even, just like a terrifying slit of a mad god's pupil peering through from the void. Whatever holy aura that lingered in the statue had long disappeared, replaced by the dark, vile powers of whatever evil that lurked here!

In the next second, the terrifying scene disappeared without a trace, and the icon of Gomona continued to stand quietly on the pedestal, her majestic image exuding the reassuring glow of a goddess.

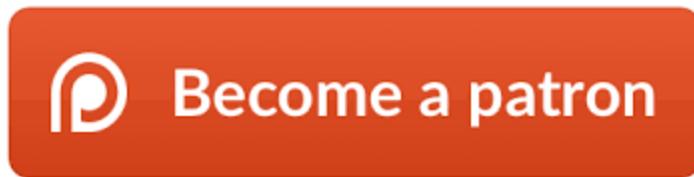
“Are you going to pray to the goddess?” The nun, who was kneeling and praying, suddenly opened her eyes and asked the man.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 150

Chapter 150 “The Secret in the Underground Sanctuary”

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“Are you going to pray to the goddess?”

Truth be told, in this instant, Duncan’s instinctive reaction was that there was something wrong with the storm goddess Gomona. The cause must be because of the sinister side of the god, which led to this terrifying shadow taking hold inside the city-state. This distortion was the evidence.

But the next second, he had another suspicion: if there was really something wrong with the storm goddess Gomona, then why were the other churches in the city normal?

It wasn’t that he had seen other storm churches – there were community churches near the antique shop and churches next to the original maritime museum. Even if he hadn’t gone in to check it out, he had wandered around the neighborhood, and the aura released by those churches... It was obviously different from this eerie church in front of him.

He also had contact with other clergies, including the most low-level priests and guardians, as well as the inquisitor like Vanna, who was at the apex of the city-state. From what he could tell, these people who served the goddess of the storm were all normal, even more determined and clear-thinking than most.

He ignored the nun and looked up at the statue.

After the glimpse just now, the strange rift in the head of the statue did not appear again. Even in the other picture of the church, the spot was nothing

more than a charred mess. He couldn't find any evidence of that rift anywhere again.

Duncan frowned.

The weirdness of this church was obviously a special case. Assuming the fault didn't lie with the storm goddess herself... then what he saw could only be interpreted as an evil force trying to use this chapel as a node to invade reality.

But what exactly is that?

The shape of that rift seems to have nothing to do with the evil sun god, and it is completely unrelated to the sun fragment. If I had to say it.... the swirling chaotic light reminds me of the bottom levels of the Vanished.

“Are you going to pray to the goddess?” The nun’s voice came again. She was neither impatient nor urging, but as if some keyword was triggered, she began to repeat this question over and over again when Duncan and Shirley stood beside the statue.

Shirley seemed a little overwhelmed and instinctively looked to Duncan, who finally responded at this moment: “Are you praying to your goddess?”

This should be an unquestionable question, and any normal believer would give a clear and affirmative answer at this point. Yet, the nun’s reaction made Shirley’s eyes widen in shock.

“I... I don’t know,” the nun shook her head calmly as if she didn’t feel anything wrong with her response, “I’m just praying, and he told me to pray here.”

Duncan immediately frowned: “Who is he?”

“The great existence,” the nun smiled.

Shirley felt a chill running down her back due to the nun’s gentle smile.

“I don’t pray to any gods,” Duncan said lightly, quietly pulling Shirley back half a step from the range of the prayer table, “including the goddess from your mouth.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” The nun sighed softly, then bowed her head again, ignoring Duncan and Shirley.

Duncan stared at the wriggling mass of humanoid ash for a few seconds, confirmed that the ash had stopped paying them heed before turning elsewhere.

The chapel was limited in size and had few areas to hide, except for the main hall dedicated to prayers and service, there were only a few rooms connected to the main hall aside from the underground crypt.

Duncan first took Shirley to check the surrounding rooms but found nothing worth caring about. Finally, they came before a staircase to the basement at the end of a corridor outside the main hall.

“Are we really going down there?” Looking at the dark stairs in front of her, Shirley was obviously a little uneasy and glanced backward at the brightly lit hall, “Will that strange nun suddenly charge over?”

“That ‘nun’ is obviously trapped in the main hall and can’t get too far from the statue,” Duncan shook his head. “But if she does charge over... then we can only fight back. That thing can hardly be called a living being anymore.”

Shirley gulped. She was usually very bold and courageous, but no matter how bold she was, this was the first time she had ran to a chapel of the Storm Church and did something so “exciting”. It’s more than what her heart could accommodate.

But she knew better than to refuse – she still had no idea which was more dangerous, a nun who had mutated from a mortal or a shadow from subspace.

At this time, Duncan suddenly said something again, which made Shirley's hard-earned determination to sway again: "By the way, summon Dog out."

Shirley's eyes widened instantly: "Huh?! Summon Dog? In the church of the storm goddess?!"

"I'm afraid this is no longer the storm goddess's territory," Duncan shook his head. "It's hard to say what exactly is in charge of this place now, but don't worry about summoning Dog. You see? Even though I am standing here, nothing is happening to me. In fact, I suspect this 'church' is more suited for Dog than anywhere else in the city right now."

When Shirley thought about it, she felt that this was quite a reasonable theory. Of course, the main reason was that she did not dare to disagree, so she obediently raised her right arm and summoned her partner out into the real world.

Pitch-black flames swirled upwards like smoke, forming and taking on the shape of a dark hound in an instant.

As soon as the summoning process was over, Dog skillfully bowed under Duncan's feet, his skeletal tail wagging at a mark-five speed of a fan.

"Greetings, your great..."

"Okay, okay, you don't have to perform this set every time." Duncan interrupted the undead hound and waved him off. It's bad enough he had to deal with a noisy goat head back on the Vanished, he doesn't need another on land. "You should be able to feel it too already. Take a look. Tell me what you see in this church with that eye of yours."

Dog properly got up from the ground and turned to peer down the dark staircase leading to the crypts.

"It's really an evil place..." The hound's voice was hoarse and low, "It's dizzy to even look at..."

After speaking this, he paused as if making a further judgment. Then turning back to face Duncan, he explained his findings: "It's somewhat

similar to the situation of the abandoned factory from before, but it's much more distorted here. I'm afraid the distortion is already approaching the threshold of what reality can bear.... There's no mistaking it. The source of the veiled curtain must be here."

"So the distortion is already approaching the threshold of the real world... No wonder I can observe it directly with my eyes too." Duncan nodded nonchalantly, and his gaze fell on the stairs up ahead, "The entire church has been checked. Now all that remains is the basement... According to the layout of most storm churches in the city, the area is what the clergies call the underground church."

"I'm starting to get excited," Dog shook his ugly head, the chains around his neck rattling, "for the first time in my life, I broke into the forbidden land of the Storm Church... I wonder what's down there!"

Shirley shot a weird look at Dog's drooling expression: "Can you XXXX stop acting like a pedophile who's ready to break into the women's bathroom?"

Dog: "..."

Duncan ignored the combination of these two. He had already bypassed Dog and started going down the stairs. Eventually, he came to an entrance, which should lead into the underground sanctuary.

As a small community church, the so-called "underground church" here was nothing more than a spacious crypt, and the door to the underground area was an oak door reinforced with steel frames and sacred runes.

Duncan placed his hand on the door, pushed it slightly, and found that it was not locked. However, when he continued to drive forward, he felt some resistance, like something had blocked it from the other side.

"There's something across the door." Duncan stepped back slightly, observing the dark oak door in front of him.

For some reason, when he came to the door of the underground sanctuary, the strange “superimposition” scene subsided, and all he saw in front of him was this door.

It seems that the “two branches” of reality have completed their convergence here, leaving only the one “reality” as the truth.

“Do you want to smash the door open?” Shirley followed from behind. She had already picked up the chain in her hand with Dog ready by her side. Specifically, the pair had taken on the meteor hammer stance like they used on the suntists during that gathering.

“..... You may spoil the clues,” Duncan stopped the dog-wielding girl who was about to use traditional arts to solve the problem. Instead, he put a hand on the rune-strewn door and ignited a small flame between his fingers to follow the grooves, “Theoretically, this door should be some sort of supernatural item...”

In the next second, the blessed temple door had turned into firewood for the ghost fire. With the green flame burning rapidly, the gate faithfully carried out the “master’s” order.

It burned itself.

And as the door was wiped out, the thing that was against the door on the opposite side had revealed itself to the party by falling to the ground with a plop.

It was a nun in a black gown—scarred, still holding a sword in her hand, and glaring angrily at something in the darkness even though she had died.

Shirley saw the other party’s face clearly, and a chill instantly rose from the bottom of her heart.

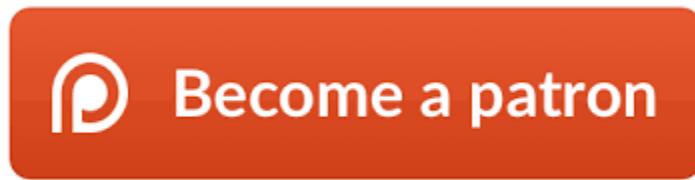
“WAH! That nun we saw just now?!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 151

Chapter 151 “The Fear of the Demons”

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Duncan bent down to check.

It was indeed the nun—the one who had been talking to Duncan and Shirley not long ago and was currently theoretically praying in the main hall.

But now she had collapsed here, dead near the entrance to the underground church. Even until the last moment when Duncan pushed the door open, she was, in fact, physically leaning against the door.

From what he could tell, the nun was trying to block something from invading the underground church and had endured fierce fighting before falling.

“It seems... It’s like she just died...” Shirley had dared to come over and poked her head out from behind Duncan’s figure.

“Yes, it looks like it’s not been long since she died, and even...” Duncan said, reaching out and putting his hand on the nun’s arm, “even the temperature is warm.”

The body at the entrance to the underground sanctuary was still warm, and the blood stains on the scarred body had not dried up yet, which gave even Duncan the feeling that the battle was still going on when he and Shirley had just stepped into the church.

Perhaps, the nun was still breathing during their exploration.

But that's impossible....

The church had been abandoned for eleven years. Whatever vision caused its destruction must've occurred back then as well. There's no way the nun could've been alive for all these years!

Duncan took on a grim face as he slowly stood up and looked around.

The underground chapel of this community church was just a spacious basement as he thought. There were no lights here, and even the oil and gas lamps that were supposed to ward off evil spirits were extinguished. If not for the faint light coming down from the stairs, it would be complete darkness here. Nevertheless, he could still make out the faint outlines of the goddess statue at the end with various scriptures hanging from the wall.

Duncan stepped over the nun's body, looking for traces of battle in the basement. He saw the dents on the walls and columns, the potholes made by bullets, and the traces of being burned by flames. They should all be left over from the battle.

But he did not find the "enemy", the "invader" that the nun had fought desperately before she died in battle.

He then turned his head and looked at the dark hound, who was following behind Shirley and cautiously watching the room as well: "Dog, what can you see?"

"Traces of time and space being severely distorted... It doesn't seem to have the 'overlapping reality effect' like on the surface levels. However, the truth is, time and space are far more distorted here than anywhere else in the church," Dog's tone was particularly grim when speaking. As the only supernatural expert in the three "person" squad, his analysis was obviously much more organized than Duncan's blind guess, "The entire underground sanctuary in my eyes is shrouded in a layer of mist, and the wrong time and space have completely replaced reality. But... I didn't find anything other than the phenomenon of space-time distortion."

“What about the ‘intruders’ who attacked here?” Duncan frowned, “That nun can’t be here to fight the air, right?”

“..... There are no intruders,” Dog sniffled—though it had no respiratory system, “no scent of the living, nor the scent of the dead or demons.”

Speaking of this, he paused and added: “Please believe my judgment in this regard. The best thing that we hounds are best at is hunting. Distinguishing the scent of prey in the environment is the basic ability of a predator, unless...”

Duncan raised his eyebrows: “Unless?”

Dog quickly looked around as if suddenly becoming very cautious and alarmed: “Unless something from subspace came out from here... I can’t track such a thing, but if it’s something from subspace, you should be more familiar with this subject than me...”

When Duncan heard this, his face immediately stalled due to how out of the blue this was: “Sorry, I’m really unfamiliar with this.”

Dog quickly lowered his head: “You... if you say unfamiliar, then it’s unfamiliar....”

Duncan thought for a bit and understood the dark hound didn’t believe his denial. Unfortunately, he had no excuse otherwise because he really didn’t know a thing about subspace!

He recalled the rift he saw when he observed the statue in the church’s main hall, the chaotic light and shadow leaking out of the rift, and the strange visions he saw at the bottom of the ship.

Subspace... is it really something from subspace that came out?

“If it’s really something that ran out of subspace...” Duncan frowned as if talking to himself, “How did they manage to break directly into the main prayer hall of a storm church? Shouldn’t a place like this be the safest?”

Judging by the traces and clues, the intruders did not attack from the outside but appeared directly inside the building...”

“That’s beyond me,” Dog shook his head, “the secret of the four major churches is a knowledge blind zone for us shadow demons. We don’t know much about subspace, and it’s you humans who are crazy enough to study that taboo....”

“Humans have always been a very bold race,” Duncan casually added and looked at the hound, “but I’m a little surprised now. The deep sea is closely adjacent to subspace. How could you demons be more afraid of subspace than us humans? Isn’t that place supposed to be the same thing as your home’s front door?”

“It’s the same logic as those who live near a volcano. You wouldn’t expect them to drink magma, right?” Dog curled his tail behind his butt after making that remark, afraid the offensive language would anger the great ghost captain. “We live near the edge of subspace, so we know better than any mortal not to dabble with that place.”

Duncan mused over this detail, figuring out a new question that just came to him: “... Is that the reason why your kind is so afraid of the Vanished that managed to return from subspace?”

Dog shrunk his neck and nervously glanced up at Duncan. Normally he wouldn’t answer such a question, but since it’s coming from the owner of the Vanished itself, he decides to be honest on the matter. “Actually.... if the Vanished had just returned from subspace once, then it wouldn’t be so terrifying. The key is that the ship kept dropping back and forth between reality and subspace. It’s like witnessing something oscillating between the two dimensions.”

Duncan didn’t expect much initially, but after hearing this new and important piece, his heart jerked to attention: “Oscillating between the real world and subspace?”

“Yes, everytime the ship would directly penetrate the spirit world and the deep sea, dragging everything it encounters along the way like a rampaging

cannonball.” Dog obviously felt uncomfortable speaking of this and curled up on the floor, “I still remember the terrible scene when the ship dropped down from the upper levels like a meteorite. The flames that wrapped around the ship were screaming with twisted souls of you humans. Even us demons were caught up in the carnage and had to flee everywhere....”

“This happened many times. It smashed through all of the dimensions until it fell into subspace. Then it would pop back out several days later. Imagine seeing this occur on a rinse-and-repeat cycle, going up and down, up and down. Even us demons were traumatized afterward....”

Dog gulped with great difficulty after spelling out his woes. Oddly enough, it felt good for the dark hound like he just went to therapy.

“I want to emphasize something. Prior to that event, we demons didn’t know what fear was. Our instincts were always about fighting and fighting, but afterward, our kind learned what fear meant as an emotion. And I... I am one of the parts from the Nether Lord that had the deepest ingraining of fear due to that event.”

Duncan almost became lost for words after hearing the story: “That... I see. I now understand why you have such a big psychological shadow hanging over your head.”

“You... don’t you know this?”

Duncan almost broke his façade and blurted out: how the XXXX am I supposed to know what the original captain did? Why am I always the scapegoat for all the blame?!

But no matter how big the complaint was, he could only stuff it in his heart. “I probably didn’t pay attention at the time....”

Dog: “....”

Seeing the devastated appearance of this dark hound, Duncan sighed and added: “I’ll pay attention next time.”

His tone was very sincere, which left Dog to the point of being touched and unable to move.

On the other hand, Duncan himself was briefly stuck in deep thought.

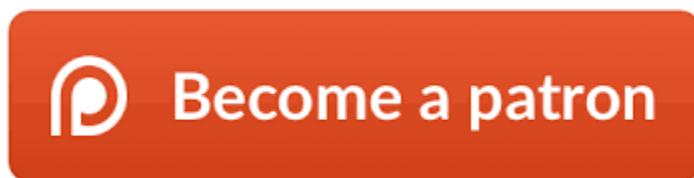
If what Dog said is true, that's to say the Vanished had at one point completely fell out of control. It kept returning and going from subspace.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 152

Chapter 152 “Undecided...”

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Duncan did not expect his casual question to reveal so much about the Vanished from a hound's mouth. Although he had heard this description before, but who would have thought that this infamy was “smashed” into existence using such crude and simple methods?!

A ghost ship that constantly oscillated between subspace and reality was like a cannonball shuttling between the roof and foundation. Every vibration damaged the spirit world and deep sea, leaving a trail of carnage by dragging everything along with it into subspace.... As a cherry on top, the incident occurred over a long period as well!

It's no wonder a shadow demon like Dog would have its fear engrained into his bones. Who wouldn't be traumatized if they had to witness something that crazy?

But compared to the shocking mess that the Vanished once made, Duncan was more concerned about the ship itself and the real Captain Duncan.

Was that “shock” intentionally done by the real ghost captain? Or some kind of uncontrolled trek caused by madness? Did the goat head know what was going on back then? If all this was intentional, then what purpose fueled this crazy venture?

The Vanished... Will it get out of control again?!

For a long time, the Vanished has been Duncan's biggest backbone, his safest hiding harbor. The safety of that vessel was equal to his own safety.

It's the reason he explored the ghost ship and took control. It's to ensure his own safety in this weird and dangerous world. But now he learns the greatest threat was in fact that very ship?

Will I be able to pull a ghost ship back from subspace if it plows straight into it?

After the idea of being unable to control the vessel started to sprout, the man was shaken to the core. He's not delusional enough to believe a story merely based on hearsay, but there's that door down at the lowest cabin on the Vanished.... And the way the goat head reacted after learning there was an open crack.... There's no question about it. The subspace had never stopped calling out to the Vanished. It's always been trying to convert it back into madness like Dog said.

Taking a small breath to forcibly calm his irritated mood, the man clenched his fist and felt powerless.

No matter how much he thought about it, he didn't have the ability to meddle with issues related to subspace at the moment. He knew far too little and lacked manpower. Perhaps the four main churches could help, but that's for another date.

"Let's focus on what's here first," Duncan shook his head to dismiss the trap he made himself. "If something from subspace really invaded this underground church, then things from eleven years ago are far more complicated than everyone had assumed...."

He raised his head and looked at the door that's no longer there.

"The nun here barricaded herself here before dying in battle, probably to prevent the thing from running outside. But can a simple door prevent an invader from subspace from leaving?"

"The invasion of subspace is also situational," Dog said thoughtfully. "In most cases, the real world is protected by the gods.... Alright, I admit I don't like them very much, but they've effectively protected the mortals from many dangerous beings. Like a shadow of subspace, they must first

locate a medium before influencing the real world. It could be a polluted item, a fleshly body, or even the human heart...”

As Dog went on, he suddenly halted and glanced up at Duncan nervously.

What invading shadow of subspace? In my view, you are the greatest threat of all here dammit!

“Go on, and then what?” Duncan, the walking subspace invasion, cluelessly pressed the dark hound without knowing what he represented.

“I... I mean, subspace invasions can normally be blocked off by the sacred facilities in the churches... And since the invasion is not from the main body, one only needs to cut off the connection to stop it. Of course....” Dog gulped when reaching this part, “the price needed to do this is another matter entirely on its own....”

“I see, so that’s what happened,” Duncan nodded nonchalantly. When he faced the nun who had fallen to the ground, his eyes now showed admiration, “She must’ve done everything she could to prevent that disaster from further exploding.”

“But she probably didn’t succeed, right?” Shirley’s voice suddenly came from the side. Due to the discussed subjects being too high-end or too scary, the girl hadn’t found a chance to interject herself until now. “Eleven years ago, the fire still happened...”

“The fire eleven years ago was caused by the sun fragment, yet we found traces of a suspected subspace shadow in this church. It is not clear how these two things are related,” Duncan shook his head, then he seemed to have thought of something and slowly came to the goddess statue at the center of the underground sanctuary. “But... I am suddenly quite curious about something.”

He raised his head and peered at the slightly different stone face to the one on the main floor.

“What are you curious about?” Shirley followed, glancing cautiously at the weird statue as well.

“This storm goddess, what was she doing during all this?” Duncan raised his hand and pointed at the statue, “The church was invaded, the priest died in battle, and only a phantom soul remnant was left outside. Why did the gods here not react at all? At the very least... she should’ve warned her believers of the dangers and threats here. Why not send help?”

“I don’t know much about the gods, but this matter is indeed a little suspicious,” Dog grumbled when he heard this. “Although the connection between the gods and the earthly world is not close, they are indeed always concerned about their respective ‘sanctuaries’. These buildings where the followers gather are like the ‘anchors’ of the gods and the earthly world. Now that one of the anchors has been silently unplugged for eleven years.... It’s weird that nothing has been done.”

Duncan mused again before raising his right hand. Rubbing his finger, he summoned a small flame from the tip to illuminate the statue.

“You... what are you going to do?” Dog started to shiver and rattle his chain while cowering backward.

“If one can’t make a decision, just make a little fire.” Duncan forms a mischievous grin, “Maybe the burn will drag out something that’s hiding here.”

Dog was shocked by what he heard. Wanting to remind the boss that it’s the church of a god, the dark hound stopped at the last second after recalling the situation. He had no right to stop a shadow of subspace. Besides, the church had already fallen. What’s there to protest about?!

Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean Dog wouldn’t take protective measures. He had quietly distanced himself from Duncan and dragged Shirley along. If there’s really divine punishment coming down from overheard, he and Shirley wouldn’t be able to bear it!

Duncan noticed Dog’s movement, but he didn’t care.

Of course, he didn't want to attract the attention of the storm goddess either, but in the church's main hall just now, he had already confirmed that this "sanctuary" had already eroded to the point of no return. So if something was watching the church, it could only be some evil force.

The ghost fire silently burned as it fell to the ground like a droplet of water. It's hazy and illusory, quickly rippling along the sanctuary floor to instantly fill the entire room. However, just as quickly as it spread, the flames silently extinguished itself once it hit the end.

Shirley and Dog exchanged a weird look with each other, and after a long while of this eeriness, Shirley finally broke the silence: "You... what did you find?"

With some surprise, Duncan looked at the little flame that was still jumping on his fingers.

Is there really nothing here? Or to say... the power of the flames is not enough to pry apart the "curtain" that shrouds here?

He frowned, and at this moment, a very slight, almost hallucinatory murmur suddenly entered his ears-

"Who's there?" Duncan was startled and suddenly looked up in the direction of where the voice came from.

It's the statue of Gomona, standing quietly in the darkness as usual.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 153

Chapter 153 “Time and space lock”

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Within the darkness, the statue of the storm goddess Gomona continues to stand quietly at the center of the underground church, covered with tulle and overlooking the earthly world.

Of course, according to strict doctrinal distinctions, the “goddess” in the underground sanctuary was the other side of Gomona – it should be called the “Maiden of Tranquility”.

Duncan stared at the cold stone sculpture, certain he had not misheard the voice. It sounded like a whisper from a dream, illusory yet real.

However, Shirley and Dog, who were close at hand, had not responded at all. Apparently, only he had heard the voice somehow.

“Mr. Duncan?” Shirley had picked up on the man’s strange behavior, causing her body to shiver and cling to the hound, “Did you find something?”

“Say, did you hear anything just now?” Duncan casually extinguished the flame at his fingertips and asked. He drew closer to the statue to look for oddities.

“Hear something?” Shirley and Dog exchanged looks, then both shook their head in unison, “No.”

The goddess did not respond to Duncan’s approach and left him worried he might’ve been a little reckless this time.

He assumed the goddess's connection had been severed from this church due to nothing happening when they summoned Dog. It's the main reason he loosened up and went wild. To think he would actually attract Gomona's attention was something he didn't expect.

I need to keep a better guard next time. This is too reckless.

And while he reflected on the blunder inside, the ghost captain had other questions that popped up.

Looking at the situation of this church, this place was obviously abandoned and forgotten. At least before Shirley and I came in, Gomona's connection was also blocked since she didn't react to my flame. So what's going on? Instead of completely erasing the goddess's connection with the church, my flames instead strengthened the connection after it burned?

The more Duncan thought about it, the more confused he became. Nevertheless, he didn't dwell on the issue for long.

In the end, he couldn't be sure whether the vague whisper just now was genuinely Gomona's voice or not. It's just speculation on his part, and the priority remains to be on what to do with the church here.

After so many findings, Duncan has gotten enough information to conclude this to be an important node for the veil shrouding over the sixth block. He would love to pry part the curtain, but neither he nor Shirley had the power to do so. Well, he technically could, but the power transfer was limited due to the distance from the Vanished.

After weighing his options, Duncan got a faint idea of what to do.

It's time to be the "Enthusiastic Mr. Duncan" again!

This church has been hidden to this day, and some inexplicable force blocked prying eyes from looking inside, but what if... he forcibly lifted the lid off?

He's curious about how the Storm Church would react and even more curious about what the Storm Goddess would do. Since he couldn't open the curtain here, why not blow it up in the news and let someone else do it?

Of course, it may not be enough to merely find a few patrolling night guardians to make the report. The shadow here may simply kill off the first batch of investigators who come in. Now, what's the most reliable and effective method to slap this onto the news.... That's something worth deliberating.

After thinking over his options, Duncan unconsciously formed a grin. This was the smile of a happy person planning something fun. Unfortunately for Shirley and Dog, this smile didn't escape their eyes, especially the latter, who had clamped his tail behind the butt.

"Mr. Dun-Duncan, do yo-you have something in mind?" Dog stutters this out.

"It's nothing much. I'm only planning to make a contribution to the order of the city." Duncan waves his hand like it's nothing special.

Dog gurgled like he just ate a lemon, thinking not a single demon in the deep sea would believe this saying. Just now, the big boss was obviously planning sinister. He's sure of it based on that creepy grin....

"Okay, there's nothing else to see here now." Duncan didn't care about the reactions of Shirley and Dog and turned around to give one final glance at Gomona's face. After leaving a meaningful look, he ushered the two to begin going, "This place is not suitable for staying any longer."

The group quickly moved, but just before leaving the underground room, Shirley couldn't help but stop and ask: "Mr. Duncan, this... what about this dead nun?"

Duncan also stopped and quietly eyed the lady that died in battle.

She was still very young, so young that it's a pity to have such an ill-gotten fate befall her.

But then Duncan suddenly realized a problem.

Nun..... Why is it a nun who guards the church? Under normal circumstances, shouldn't there be a team of specially trained guardians stationed here?

He recalled what he had seen in the main hall.

The group of guardians seemed to have died in the main hall of the church... they weren't killed in battle, at least not in a struggle. Instead, they just suddenly died while praying on the bench. Then nun here. Instead of overseeing the prayers, she's down here alone and fighting a battle on her own with a huge sword. None of this made sense....

"I'm sorry, I can't put you to rest. You will have to stay here for a little longer. Maybe someone will come to investigate and figure out the truth later." Duncan said softly to the nun's body.

In his view, a professional's hand was necessary in this matter.

With his mind made up, Duncan didn't give any more room to stall. Placing his hand on the girl, he began to push Shirley out with the girl protesting: "AH, are we really going to leave her here?"

"It's called preserving the crime scene," Duncan didn't look back, "let's go, the investigation here is not over yet, but we don't need to do it ourselves either."

Shirley merely nodded and followed the ghost captain's direction. The party of three quickly made their way up the stairs, but just before they exited, a slight creaking sound suddenly came from behind them.

Duncan abruptly stopped and returned his head to the source.

It's a dark wooden door with reinforced steel and rivets. Sacred rune patterns were also faintly etched on the door handle.

Shirley also glanced back after they stopped, which caused her eyes to widen in horror.

“The door... The door...” Shirley raised her finger and pointed at the door, her mouth ajar at not knowing what to say.

“I can see it.” Duncan interrupted the girl, then walked back to the dark wooden door that should’ve burned away due to his ghost fire.

He tried gently pushing like in the first round. It’s locked, and there’s clearly something holding the door on the other side too.

Duncan didn’t know exactly what’s happening, but after a few seconds of contemplation, he resisted the urge to light another fire. They already got the general idea of what happened inside, and the strangeness here made him give up any desire to keep trying.

“The warped space here is really strong....”

At the same time, in the main storm cathedral of the upper city, Vanna had just finished her daily routine of praying to the goddess with her subordinates. Following this would be to do some paperwork inside the church’s archive. In a sense, the library not only contained the administrative works of the church but also the history of Pland.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 154

Chapter 154 “Archives”

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The church's archive was managed by an elderly priest in his later years. Due to the nature of his profession, the senior had somewhat of a hunchback due to past injuries and a constant smell of oil and gears.

Right now, the old priest was sitting behind a dull circular table and concentrating on a mechanical creation in his hand. It was an item that looked like a Rubik's cube, and with the help of some ingenious tools, he disassembled it into a pile of parts for further examination.

When Vanna approached, her tall body had blocked the lamp light next to the old priest, causing the latter to look up at the person coming over: “Oh, it's Your Excellency. What help can I offer from these old bones today?”

“I like to know where the records for the various disasters and accidents of 1889 is.” Vanna nods to the old senior as her way of saying hello.

“Disaster records from 1889?” The old priest hummed as he knocked on the wide circular table. In the next instant, a slight mechanical friction sound came from beneath, followed by the retreat of the table board to reveal a machine with many round digital dials and paddles.

Accompanied by the creaking sound of the machine running, the old priest began to operate this delicate machine with the help of those paddles and digital dials. After inputting the necessary information, Vanna heard the low characteristic noise of larger machines running beneath her feet. Through the vibrating floorboard, where countless gears and rods were happily running with steam, she then heard the expected crisp “ding” from the

mechanical device from the front. With this sound, a printed tape was then spat out of an opening next to the operator.

“From this path, turn left in the third aisle of bookshelves, then take a right at the end. One of the lit isles is the one you seek. The records aren’t organized though so it’s a mess. Everything from big events to small steam accidents was recorded there. Ring the bell if you need more help.” The old priest said as he handed over the note with his prosthetic hand. It’s a brass construct with delicate working parts that reached up to the shoulder.

Vanna of course didn’t miss the guardian’s missing hand that had been hidden away from view until now due to the long sleeves. Such veterans weren’t uncommon in the civilian department of the Storm Church.

Those who fought at the frontline against the shadows of this world are all like this. More often than not, they have to sacrifice their flesh and blood in battle. When they could no longer serve the church as a combatant, the best home for these old servants was the backlines in the civilian departments. In this case, the old priest had clearly lost a limb and now uses a steam-powered magical prosthetic on his job.

In a certain sense, this would of course be considered preferential treatment for old soldiers who could use a relatively relaxed and high-paying job; however, in another sense, it’s also an excellent use of allocating talents. Their bodies may be unfit for battle, but their wills are strong, and the work of guarding books and archives... always required a strong will.

A trace of respect appeared in Vanna’s heart as she took the paper with both hands: “Thank you.”

“Remember to pack up the books after reading them, and don’t touch those books that are not on the list,” the old priest waved his hand. “There are many books here that haven’t been touched in a long time. Best not to touch them.”

After that, he returned to his “work” and subtly ignored Vanna.

The female inquisitor didn't care and just took the paper tape with the long list of books printed on it. She walked towards the depths of the archives, where she quickly found herself confronting a series of bookshelves that were tall enough to be described as majestic on both sides. For a moment, Vanna even imagined herself running through an initiation gauntlet of guardians here, the shelves being the guardians and her being the new recruit.

Before long, the lady had found the bookshelves mentioned by the old priest—a row of small light bulbs lit the shelves to indicate the files that she could flip through.

The files were not low either, but fortunately, Vanna was a very tall woman herself so she didn't need a ladder. This brought great relief because running around with a ladder in such a huge library was no easy feat.

She took a light breath, found the beginning of the file on the shelf, pulled out the numbered book, and quickly flipped through it.

What she's looking for was simple: the fire from eleven years ago or the fire packaged as a factory leak.

In fact, this was not the first time she had investigated this matter – as an inquisitor, she was already sensitive to all “unusual phenomena”, including what happened to herself. After finding out that only she remembers the fire in her childhood, she has privately investigated some more on her own, but those superficial investigations have not yielded anything.

Before long, she had quickly put the matter behind her and thought nothing more.

Because no matter what, she was only twelve years old when she encountered the accident. She was neither a believer in the goddess nor a person of outstanding brains. It was not impossible to have some false memories in the mind of a child who panicked and inhaled poisonous smoke. Therefore, it didn't take long for her to put the matter down after consulting some public files.

But now, she suddenly discovered that there were still people in the city-state of Pland who had experienced the fire like herself.

The doubts and countless speculations that had been put in the back of her mind instantly surged up, and her “professional vigilance” as an inquisitor was frantically blaring in her mind.

It was precisely because of this professional vigilance that she rejected Heidi’s suggestion to “return to the antique shop” and quietly waited until today. Here, she could investigate the original documents that are sheltered by the goddess and not made public.

The reason was simple, there’s a dangerous atmosphere in this matter. Erasing a fire sounds easy, but in fact, it involves the cognition and memory of thousands of people at an enormous scale. What’s more, there are cultists involved as well back then with the sabotages that year. If all this was really done by a hand hidden behind the shadows, then this hand would never sit idly by and watch someone detect the truth.

The memories that remain in her own mind, the memories that remain in the mind of the girl named Nina... These “residues” are most likely the omissions of the masterminds behind the scenes. The “person” hidden behind the scenes may not have discovered these omissions yet, but if he did... She herself wasn’t afraid, but Nina and her uncle, and the girl named Shirley, they’re only ordinary people.

So, she rejected Heidi’s suggestion at the time and asked her friend not to mention the matter again. On the one hand, she did not want to startle the snake while investigating in secret; on the other hand, she wanted to avoid involving the innocent.

Until I have more information, I mustn’t show any more attention to that antique shop than necessary.

Slowly flipping through the file in her hand, Vanna’s mood kept fluctuating.

For some reason, there’s this inkling sensation that something was spying on her while she’s here, a ubiquitous eye of unknown origin. Naturally, this

left her irritated and uncomfortable since this was the goddess's realm. No shadow could invade this place, at least according to her own perception.

Under this atmosphere, she placed the file down and picked up another one next to her while going over the recent happenings in the city.

Currently, many active suntists in the city have been captured. It seems that the resolute action of the city-state has effectively deterred those heretics, or it may be that the channels they infiltrated have really been completely destroyed. In any case, the numbers have been significantly reduced, and the prisons under the cathedrals are filled to the brim.

Better yet, the purpose of those sun heretics operating in the city-states has long been ascertained: look for the “sun fragment” that appeared briefly eleven years ago and may still be hiding somewhere.

Sun fragment... The fire of eleven years ago...

The “vision” that Heidi had glimpsed into at the museum before.

Vanna stopped flipping through the pages, and some clues that hadn't caught her attention suddenly joined together, becoming more and more prominent as she began to examine the fire in her memory again.

“There is a connection behind these events ... The fire of eleven years ago is definitely real...” The young inquisitor lightly gasped, and at the same time, her gaze inadvertently swept over some words on the file:

“..... On X day of X month, block XX, a vicious heretical worship incident occurred. Three residents built an altar in their home, sacrificed blood, and prayed to some evil thing that's not on record. This caused panic and nightmares among a large number of nearby residents. The sacrifice ceremony was eventually reported and destroyed, but the clues left at the scene could not point to any known evil god or spirit....”

“In theory, the sacrificial ritual should not have been effective since blind worship doesn't yield effects. Nevertheless, the ritual worked and caused panic and nightmares among the local population. Follow-up investigations

confirmed that the area had indeed been affected by supernatural forces at that time...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 155

Chapter 155 “Suspicion”

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Vanna's gaze lingered on the record for several seconds more as her keen nose picked up on the whiff of a plot.

Heretical sacrifices suddenly appeared among ordinary citizens, the target of the offerings pointed to an unknown existence, and the ritual eventually attracted the attention of supernatural forces despite not meeting the criteria. Yet, despite all these abnormalities, no follow-up investigations were taken....

It's then a flash of clarity hit the woman. Putting down the file in hand, she hurriedly opened another record she had just read before.

It was also in 1889, but a little earlier than the factory leak – an armed attack had taken place in the lower city, which was handled by the police force during the day. Such case files wouldn't usually be kept in the church's archive since they only dealt with the supernatural, but here we are.

According to the record, the victim was a customer who suffered a mental breakdown inside the shop. The suspect insisted he saw the shadow of blasphemy on the window and fought back with a knife. This caused the officials to search the shop. There, they found sacrificial symbols etched along the basement walls. However, no one could figure out who the offerings were meant for. Then through interrogation, it was later learned that the shop owner carried out sacrifices in private due to some unknown guidance.

This was also a random sacrificial ritual, which was theoretically impossible to take effect since it had no proper worship target. Despite this crucial factor, small-scale insanity did occur in the neighborhood afterward.

Vanna frowned at the similarity between the two events. From the surface, it may appear to have little to do with the factory leak eleven years ago, and they did not correspond at all in terms of timing. However, her instincts are telling her otherwise. As a leading inquisitor of the Storm Church, her instincts are an extension of her holy powers. If it's blaring an alarm, then she must trust it.

After finding nothing more, she returned the two files and continued rummaging through the subsequent documents on the shelf. This time, she deliberately paid closer attention and actively searched for records related to heresy worship.

After an unknown amount of time, she suddenly stopped.

There's a third record. It occurred at the edge of the upper city limits and before the factory leak as well. According to what's written in the report, a maid working for a wealthy man's home suddenly went berserk and attacked the household, injuring three other servants and the master of the house. Afterward, the maid locked herself in the warehouse when the church guardian and police arrived. Unfortunately, by the time the authorities broke down the door and barged in, the maid had already committed suicide with a dagger used to carve heretical symbols along the warehouse walls.

They later found evidence in the deceased's room to back the claim that she was a heretic. However, the investigators found something amiss though and left an important note in the document – the offering was pointed at an unknown existence that's not on record.

That's already the third one....

If Vanna was only slightly concerned when she found the first two cases, then now, she's completely sure she's onto something serious.

She quickly arranged the information in her mind, analyzing them according to when and where they occurred.

The events were scattered, independent in time, and unrelated in location. Therefore, there should be no theoretical relation between the parties or the factory leak from eleven years ago.

Vanna continued to rummage through the follow-up files, and it didn't take long for her to find the documents about the factory leak.

It was a major event with a wide-ranging impact, and the number of heretics captured in the follow-up sweep was almost the highest in the past twenty or thirty years. Therefore, a separate book file was used to record the whole thing. The thick document was quite heavy, and it included a large number of pictures and interrogation reports from back then.

Such a large volume would take ages to get through, but Vanna had no trouble skimming through everything. She had read this many times in the past in other places.

It seems that even in the church's archives, there is no more information about the factory leak than what's made public....

Vanna placed the document back and rummaged through the other stacks of papers until she noticed something peculiar at the end. Aside from the three cases that occurred before the big event in the middle of the year, nothing else happened afterward. It's like the strange events were all just building up to the grand finale. Then poof, it all mysteriously disappeared.

Of course, this could also be explained by assuming the authorities had captured most of the cultists in the huge sweep afterward. But for some reason, she got this inkling sensation that it couldn't be that simple behind these seemingly unrelated events.

With the seed of doubt planted in her heart, Vanna knew she couldn't let this go until the truth came out. Stopping, she quickly returned to the front to start anew.

But just as Vanna was about to pick out the first documents again for a second read, an unhurried sound of footsteps caught her ears. She could pick up the faint scent of gear oil and incense in the air.

Stopping to look up, the lady noticed it was none other than the old priest charged with overseeing the archives. The man was limping over. Apparently, his leg had also been changed to a prosthetic one.

“There are no people around this time so came to take a look,” the old priest said with a smile, “have you found the information you wanted?”

Vanna gave a soft sigh and placed the file in her hand back on the shelf: “I found some information, but I didn’t find the answer I wanted.”

“Answer?” The old priest now sounded curious, “What kind of answer do you want?”

“..... How long have you been here?” Instead of answering directly, Vanna suddenly asked a seemingly irrelevant question.

“Ah, it’s been a long time. Lemme think.... It’s been almost twenty years,” the old priest chuckled, “I’ve been in this place since I was blown up by a homemade bomb by those heretical maniacs.”

Vanna mulled over the pain that must’ve caused before asking more: “Is it always this deserted here on weekdays? Will anyone else come like I did?”

“Most of the weekdays, yes, it’s like this. However, some do come on occasion, but not many,” the old priest replied frankly. “The files here are the memories of the past, and the archive is the deepest part of that memory. Once sealed, they are no longer suitable for public disclosure. Besides, new things are happening every day in the city. Nobody is going to have the free time to flip through old documents and sealed files.”

The old priest suddenly paused when he said this, then raised his head to peer up at the dome overhead like he was reminiscing the past.

“And sometimes.... the archived files are not just records of the past, but the actual history sealed within those pages. The past, the present, and the future of our world, it’s all built on a precarious foundation. It’s not good to meddle with such a frail thing.”

“..... The way you speak, you sound like one of those Flame Bearers.”

“Yeah, the Flame Bearers always did preach in this fashion. They guard our history and constantly worry about ancient beings spilling over to contaminate our modern world. You know, some even suspect the Enders are the byproduct of a Flame Bearer being polluted by subspace. They’re always so sensitive.”

The old priest smiled and shook his head at the silly thought: “When I was young, I had a close relationship with several friends from the Flame Bearer Church. It’s how I ended up speaking like them. Although their teachings are different from the Storm Church, everyone is still a follower of the light. It’s not bad to learn from them when possible.”

For some reason, Vanna’s heart felt a little calmer while listening to the old man’s story. “Are you still in touch with those friends?”

“No, not anymore.” The old man shook his head slowly like he was lamenting a fact, “One morning, I suddenly found myself unable to remember their names. I suspect they were probably martyred on the job...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 156

Chapter 156 “The Year That Disappeared”

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The old man’s tone was flat in the same manner as someone telling a story. The fact that he’s also a character in it was a mere coincidence.

“Sorry, it’s easy to talk too much when you’re old,” the old priest apologized with a smile at Vanna. “Do you have friends from the other churches too?

“..... I have a good friend who is a member of the Truth Academy,” Vanna thought for a moment, “but she doesn’t tell me much about the teachings of Lahem, the god of wisdom.”

“Oh, a believer in the god of wisdom... This is normal. Their creeds usually require a university degree or higher to understand. Sometimes they even need to pass an advanced mathematics test as well.” The old priest nodded his head as a matter of course, “In contrast, it is the followers of death who are easier to deal with—after all, everyone has to die eventually one day.”

Speaking of this, the old archivist paused and eyed the neatly arranged files behind Vanna: “Your Excellency, mind telling me what you are looking for?”

Vanna suddenly grew hesitant.

She didn’t know whether telling the old priest the details was a good idea or not. The erased fire could potentially be a point of great danger to all of them. Alarming the secret entity wouldn’t help anyone, especially those who learn the truth without being prepared.

But after a brief hesitation, she decided to reveal something.

This was the deepest part of the church, the sanctuary of the storm goddess. This priest may be old and unfit for battle, but she has no doubt that his determination as a warrior of the light remains true.

“I’m looking for a file. Actually, calling it a file is inaccurate because I don’t know if it exists in the first place.” Vanna began to slowly explain her reasoning, “Strictly speaking, it’s a clue that happened in June of 1889, probably pointing to a great fire, but the information has been erased.”

“A great fire of 1889?” The old priest pondered, “I don’t remember any fires...”

He stopped abruptly and gave Vanna a thoughtful look.

“So, the erased material also includes our memories, right?”

“Likely yes,” Vanna nodded solemnly. “Aside from my own awareness, I don’t have anything else to prove the fire’s existence, nor do I know who’s manipulating things behind the background. This is all based on my own suspicion.”

She suddenly felt a little embarrassed. As an inquisitor, she was used to questioning and investigating cases, but the situation was completely different this time. Not only did she not know who or what’s the target, but she also didn’t even have enough to confirm whether it was a ghost or the living. Furthermore, she launched this entire investigation based solely on her own whim, which was very different from her usual rational style.

However, the other party in front only nodded calmly in acknowledgment: “Your faith and character are evident in itself, Your Excellency.”

After saying that, the old priest quickly limped over to a column between the nearby bookshelves. Then, tapping several specific bulges on the pillar with his mechanical prosthetic hand, a low rumble of pistons and cogs came from beneath the floor.

The doors to the archive promptly swung closed while many shelves started to interchange in various ways to make space for the pillars of runes from below. During this mechanical transformation, the subtle sound of the waves echoed softly in Vanna's mind, a sign that the barrier had been activated.

“..... There is no need to be so alarmed,” Vanna was a little confused by the old priest’s actions, “I’m only conducting a preliminary investigation...”

“Past experience tells me that there is no ‘preliminary’ investigation of a great threat,” the old priest said as he limped towards Vanna. Then raising his mechanical brass hand to point at the records, “And I believe what we are facing is worthy of my security measures. Something that can interfere with the cognition of an entire city isn’t just some small variable.”

“..... But your hasty blockade of the archive may cause concern to many.”

“No, it won’t. The archives are randomly rearranged several times a month. This is to keep the sacred blessings from being corrupted.” The old priest guffawed like a hearty old man with those jagged teethes of his, “Don’t let these old texts stay quiet for too long. That’s the rule, remember?”

“Then I have no more objection.”

“You have checked many reports just now, and judging by your expression, you must have discovered something, right?” The old priest nodded, “I can help.”

“Mhmm, I found some records about ‘heretic worship’. Although it is not directly related to the incident I want to investigate, and the records themselves are scattered, I believe it’s not so simple,” Vanna said frankly. “Those heretics had a common characteristic: they all happened in the first half of 1889. Then when the factory leak occurred in the sixth block, they all came to an abrupt halt....”

The old priest listened carefully to Vanna’s description and then found the corresponding archival materials under the guidance of the other party.

“That’s it!” Vanna pointed to the documents that were dug up, “The sacrificial rituals that should be invalid, the substantial mental damage, and the small-scale madness, are all real acts of heresy worship. The closing reports all look normal too.... But I keep getting this sensation that the investigation wasn’t done properly....”

“For a case of this scale, capturing and trying those involved is already tantamount to an investigation. But you are right. When several similar incidents are compounded together in such a short period, then it’s no longer a coincidence.” The old priest frown at the documents, “All of the individuals who held a sacrifice were ‘inexplicably bewitched’, but the source of the temptation could not be identified....”

He muttered and suddenly raised his head like he had just caught onto something crucial.

“Your Excellency, you only examined the archives of 1889, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Vanna nodded and immediately caught on as well, “You mean...”

“The incident you are concerned about did happen in 1889, but have you ever wondered if these strange cases may not necessarily start in 1889?” The old priest quickly acted on his suspicion without waiting, “The earlier records are here. You can read them all from the bottom to the top three rows.”

Vanna immediately went to the indicated shelf and examined the record files.

Moments later, both of them found similar records of heresy worship in the documents they examined.

1888, 1887, and even backward until 1886.

“There’s also a case report here... The sacrifice that took place in the port area. Here too, it’s only two months apart from the last!”

Vanna quickly flipped through the pages in hand, her heart pounding from the excitement and thrill of discovering something crucial. However, it's precisely then that she noticed the old priest next to herself acting weird by staring up at a bookshelf.

"Did you find anything?" Vanna frowned and asked with a hint of unease.

"There is no record of 1885," the old priest murmured, "it should be here, in this row, after 1884... But after 1884, it directly goes to 1886..."

.....

"Let's stop here," Duncan said as he glanced back in the direction of the freaky church, "there should be no more to investigate here, so you can go home."

They stayed in that chapel for far too long. If they want to make another breakthrough in the case, they must search for outside help since none of them could break the time-space distortion.

"I... can I really go home?" Shirley nervously eyed Duncan, her tone apprehensive and unsure.

"Of course, I have never restricted your freedom to leave," Duncan smiled and ruffled the other's hair. Although Shirley was about the same age as Nina, the girl's too petite and thin, so he couldn't help but treat her as a little kid. "Today's investigation is over. You can go home."

Shirley subconsciously turned her head to look in the direction of home, only to pause after taking two steps forward, "Then... will we continue to investigate in the future?"

"That's a given. This matter is far from over." Duncan raised an eyebrow, "What? Are you reluctant to leave?"

"Ah, no, no, no!" Shirley quickly waved her hand in denial, "I just... the next time we investigate..."

“I will find a way to contact you, or you can take the initiative and come to me.” Duncan smiled again and rubbed Shirley’s head some more, “And not just to investigate, you can also call for help if you encounter other difficulties.”

Shirley blinked, thinking it was odd to nod reflexively at the offer. Then, as she was about to turn and leave, the girl suddenly threw out one last question: “So... what is your next plan?”

“Me?” Duncan was stunned as he mused over the question, “I’m going to buy a bike in the afternoon.”

Now it’s Shirley’s turn to be stunned: “Huhhh?”

“Buy a bike,” Duncan earnestly repeated, “I’ve promised Nina before. It’s been a few days already so I better hurry if I want to keep my promise. Something wrong?”

Shirley dropped her mouth for the longest time before blurting out a reply: “D-Dog thought you would do something like invading the subspace or something....”

But before the conversation could go further, a burst of black flame suddenly materialized into the air and shouted next to the girl: “I didn’t say that!!”

The next second, the black flame went poof again without giving them a chance to retort. Apparently, Dog was so afraid that he would be seen that he didn’t even dare to pop his head out.

Duncan: “....”

Unable to hold back the inner laugh anymore, the man decides to play along: “Okay, okay, this one here is going off to buy a bicycle for his niece within subspace. Let’s leave it at that.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 157

Chapter 157 “The Captain’s Big Purchase”

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Duncan was telling the truth — after saying goodbye to Shirley, he actually went to the store near the crossroad to buy Nina a bike.

At the same time, he also managed to tick off a task he’s been putting off for a while due to various reasons: opening a bank account for himself.

Inside the Pland city bank, Duncan was waiting for the clerk at the front desk to prepare the last form for him. The waiting process was boring of course, so he humored himself by paying attention to the surroundings instead.

Perhaps it was because it was a work day, and not many upper and lower city citizens needed to handle business with the bank in general. The small lobby, which was not large in itself, seemed quite deserted, with three of the five service windows idling. The staff in black uniforms were busy chatting behind those unoccupied windows, and the bright electric light shone on the glass counter gave off a lazy and comfortable haloing effect.

Following the light, Duncan’s gaze moved upward and saw long casting pipes protruding out from the counters. They went straight to the ceiling like tiny pillars and extended somewhere to the halls behind the front. He didn’t know what their uses were, but the low rhythmic click from beneath the floor indicated a mechanical device was likely running the whole operation underground.

“After confirming everything is correct, sign with your name and seal at the end. The handling fee is six solas and five pesos.” The clerk confirmed the

last item and handed the form back to Duncan while pointing to the last line.

Duncan took the paper and quickly skimmed through the content. He's no expert in the banking world so it didn't take long for the muddled lawyer talk to confuse him. After a short and painful read, he signed his name and handed the form back with the fee attached.

The clerk took the form and glanced at it casually. Then putting it into a large punching machine next to herself, she stuffed the document into a metal cylinder she had prepared before throwing it into the pipes.

The sound of metal colliding, the closing of the pipe connections, the hiss of steam pressurization, and the sound of objects sliding rapidly through the tubes promptly reached Duncan's ears. One of the bent pipes even shook slightly at a bending corner when it slid off to some far-off place.

"Wait a bit," said the clerk behind the counter casually, "if the steam pipe doesn't break down today and the machine on the other side happens to be in good condition, you'll get the receipt in half an hour. But if the blinker next to the pipe lights up, you'll have to come back tomorrow."

The man inwardly thought the process was incredible. It may not be very efficient in his eye, but for this world, this could already be called advanced technology due to the limitations they had to work with in the deep sea age. Besides, what's so bad about waiting? He could eavesdrop on the conversation of the employees, who were chitchatting about various topics not discussed on the streets.

"I heard the Truth Academy is in contact with the head office. Words going around that they're going to install a new machine to increase the processing efficiency of the head office several times over..." A younger female clerk says.

"That's called a large sorting machine—the city-state bank in Moco has long been using it. There are a few smaller ones on the side of the tax office and the Institute of Mathematics, but I heard there's an even bigger one in the main storm cathedral. It's supposedly very good at sorting the

documents inside the archive,” the older clerk sitting across from Duncan mentions to her peers after the topic was brought up. “If you ask me, the sorting machine in the head office should’ve been replaced ages ago. It’s always breaking down and slow.”

“Well, that’s not up to us to decide,” another clerk from an idle service window joined in, “that thing is expensive and bulky. Just counting the steam cores used to support the punching boxes is enough to fill the entire hall here...”

“But didn’t they say the Truth Academy is developing a newer generation of sorting machines? They say the size is half as big, and the performance is on par with the big ones. Oh, it’s also rumored to be powered by electricity instead of steam....”

“Electricity? Are they not using a steam core? What are they supposed to do if the machine is corrupted by evil spirits? That thing goes through so much information at once. Without the divine blessing of steam, it’s going to attract dark things to its gears and bearings, right?”

“How am I supposed to know... Maybe they intend to put a priest next to it and constantly purify the gears every day?”

“..... If that’s the case, it doesn’t feel all that useful. Aside from making it smaller, it also occupies the work of a clergy....”

“Ha, what do you know? How much space can a single priest take up compared to a single steam core? Do you have any idea how expensive the current housing marking is at the city center?”

It seems that no matter which world one is in, the gossiping nature of office workers never ceases to amaze. From the bank’s aging machinery to the city’s housing price, these bank clerks were all over the place to the point that Duncan had lost track of time due to how fascinated he was by their conversation.

But the small talk didn’t last long. With the banging sound coming from a nearby transmission pipe, everyone’s topic of “which one was more

expensive, the housing price or the priest”, was finally interrupted.

The clerk opposite of Duncan popped open the pipe and took out a small cylinder. This small metal tube was obviously not the same model as the one sent away before. Instead, it looked thicker, and the seal had a complicated locking feature. It took a little fiddling with a special tool, but the clerk eventually popped the lid and took out the contents.

It was a rectangular metal plate half the size of a palm, with letters and symbols stamped on it like a regular bank card. However, one side of the card had holes punched into it like those old punch cards used by ancient computers on Earth.

“This is your ID card,” the clerk lady handed the metal plate over to Duncan, “it can be used within any bank of Pland and the branches belonging to the Chamber of Commerce. However, if you use it outside of Pland, it will take three to seven days to process the transaction.”

“Thank you.” Duncan took the metal plate and examined the creation that seemed to represent the current technological level of the city.

There’s no picture and such, only a few punch holes with his name mainly at the center. A simplistic form of identification, but effective nonetheless. At the very least, it represented a different type of advancement from that of Earth.

“Is there anything else we can do for you?” An inquiry came from behind the counter.

“Ahhh... no, nothing else. Thank you.” Duncan woke up from the little stupor and got up from his seat. But before leaving, he seemed to recall something and asked the clerk, “By the way... can machines really be possessed by evil spirits?”

“Of course it will. What’s so strange about that?” The clerk behind the counter immediately replied, as if the question was something she didn’t need to think about at all. “Isn’t it common sense that everything in this world can be polluted except for subspace?”

Duncan was startled by the quick response, but at the same time, it triggered something inside his heart. A new idea....

After a moment, he nodded lightly: "Indeed, everything in this world can be polluted except for subspace."

He then left the bank.

According to the plan, he still has a big purchase to make today – in addition to buying Nina a bicycle, he also has a lot of things on his purchase list that could scare Nina into a mess.

The income from the dagger sold to Mr. Morris, plus the bonus for reporting cultists, added up to a number that's capable of supporting a family of three in the lower city for two to three years. Since most of the money had not been touched yet, Duncan felt it was time to put them to work.

So for the next half day, Duncan almost swept through every market and shop near the crossroad...

At about four o'clock in the afternoon, in the shadow of an alley near the crossroad, Duncan dropped the luggage with a dunt sound before issuing a long, heaving breath. He's very satisfied with the mountain of things he bought.

Flour, vegetables, seeds, spices, fresh meats, pickled ingredients, various dried mushrooms, drinks, and cheese~

Edible, normal, cheese that's younger than him.

In addition, there were even a whole bunch of pots and pans and a lot of things that Duncan thought might be useful.

After transporting these things to the ship, the living environment of the Vanished would surely take a drastic change for the better.

At the very least, the kitchen could produce edible food.

Duncan nodded gleefully and called out: “Ai!”

The sound of fluttering swiftly came from a nearby building, followed by Ai landing firmly on his shoulder.

In the next second, this dove glanced at the things on the ground and exclaimed: “Are you messing with me!”

Before her words could stop ringing in the air, the bird had tilted her head and dropped dead towards the ground. Although Duncan hadn’t said what he intended to do, it’s clear as day to the witty creature.

Duncan just smiled and grabbed the free-falling dove in mid-air: “It’s okay. If once is not enough, you can go for several trips back and forth....”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 158

Chapter 158 “Rose’s Doll House”

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Truthfully speaking, there are not that many things piled up in the alley; after all, Duncan was only one person. Even if he bought a bicycle in advance to carry the goods over, there’s a limit to the things he could bring at once. As for Ai’s reaction, it’s even easier to understand – she wanted to bargain for more fries. From a certain point of view, this bird was so easy to read.

“Do you know what this is?” Duncan grabbed the dove and brought her to a basket of potatoes, “This is called potatoes.”

Ai blinked her green beany eyes, staring down at the basket of things until she finally connected the dots. Then stretching her neck up and chirping vigorously: “It’s so fragrant! It’s so fragrant!”

“If you know then work hard. This basket is for you. The fries we can make from this batch are enough to fill you dozens of times.” Duncan tossed the dove down so she could get a good whiff of paradise, “Send these things back to the ship and leave them on the deck. I will pick them up over on that side.”

Ai flapped her wings in glee and promptly wrapped herself in the green flame, turning into the undead form in the process. She needed no more persuasion now and was about to transport the goods when she suddenly stopped the act. “Do I need to memorize more web addresses?”

Duncan was stumped by the odd phrase before realizing what she meant.....

The thesaurus of this bird is too large and weird. How did the internet ever come up with these verses back on Earth? I'm probably guilty of it too, but trying to guess the meaning is such a brain tumor. Can't she learn some proper language for once?

But the bemoaning quickly died down as he gave a confirming nod that there's more to transport: "Send these away first. I still have more things to buy...."

This time Ai was really frightened and took off into the air, sweeping the grocery away along with her powers. "Terrifying! How terrifying!"

Shrugging at the bird's antics, Duncan turned and rode the bike back to the main street.

It was an ordinary bike with a black frame, shiny silver wheels, a bell, and a sturdy basket in the rear. Nothing special or good-looking, but not ugly either. If Duncan had to point out its good points, it would be that it's built well.

Duncan originally wanted to handpick a beautiful and feminist bike for Nina, but after taking a look around the shops in the lower city, he abandoned the idea because there weren't any.

In the lower city, bicycles are bicycles, a tool for assisting production. There's not going to be any design in mind for different sexes or road use if they're meant for work. Aside from the adjustable seating and handles, Duncan couldn't find anything else he could change.

In this "Deep Sea Age" where life was hard, there are bound to be limiting factors in the pleasure of its people. It's also a constant reminder for Duncan that he's not on Earth anymore and that this world has its only way of doing things.

He pedaled harder after accepting this truth. There are still many things to buy in the commercial district, and there's not enough time if he dallied around.

Leaving the Crossroad district to head up, he cycled past several streets until he was in the upper city where it's considered to have a higher standard of living.

Unlike Duncan's initial imagination, there were no physical barriers between the lower and upper segments despite the clear administrative division. Well, there were police posts at the intersections, but that's obviously not meant to prohibit the citizens from passing through.

Of course, this was only the setup during the day. According to Duncan's inquiry, there will be a strict ban on passage after nightfall. Even with a permit, there are extra administrative procedures if one wishes to pass.

Duncan went straight in for his first visit to the high society of Pland, and he had to admit it was very different from the poorer sectors of the lower city.

It's reflected in almost every aspect of life here—cleaner and wider streets, taller buildings, more advanced urban facilities, and a clear outnumbering of street lamps and "night shelters".

Evenutally, Duncan stopped the bike in front of a small kiosk near the first intersection he came across.

This was a nighttime shelter to help citizens unable to return home in time for various reasons after nightfall. The description sign at the entrance read as follows: "Night shelter with gas lamps, sacred oil, and the Storm Codex inside. Please lock the door after entering, wait for rescue, and the night guardian has a safety key."

In the lower city, Duncan had seen similar facilities near his home, but there were only one or two in almost an entire block that looked mottled and old to the point it was questionable if it was still useable.

Duncan withdrew his gaze, got on his bike, and continued slowly up the street that's filled with shops and display windows. It gives him a good idea of their goods without the need to enter.

He still had a lot to buy, and buying supplies for the Vanished was a matter that had been delayed for far too long, and...

Duncan suddenly hit the brakes after finding the shop he wanted.

Some things cannot be bought in the lower city – only the “decent people” of the upper city have the energy and wealth to spend on luxury goods.

Locking his bicycle, he stepped forward and went inside following a crisp chime from the bell as his entrance.

“Welcome to Rose’s Doll House... Oh, a gentleman. Are you here to choose a present for your lover or junior?” The chubby older woman who was actively reading the newspaper welcomes him with a kind and friendly smile.

“Just taking a look for now,” Duncan replied and examined the goods on display inside.

Everywhere the eye could see, there were dolls littering the shelves – exquisite ones, elegant ones, mysterious ones, cute ones, and playful naughty ones....

When he was outside on the street, he apparently only got a glimpse of what the shop had to offer. There were more than just dolls here: dresses, shoes, skirts, trinkets, things that Duncan couldn’t even fathom.

This extensive array of goods bedazzled the poor man.

Naturally, since Duncan was the only visitor right now, the owner would of course be drawn toward the strange customer that’s getting overwhelmed.

It’s not uncommon for men to visit doll shops; many decent men in the upper city had this habit of gifting such items to their partners or juniors. In fact, it’s not unheard of for men to collect dolls as a hobby. However, what really piqued this shop owner’s curiosity was the plain-looking outfit the customer wore. It didn’t look like someone that’s financially capable of making a purchase, and dolls weren’t cheap in these parts.

However, the woman only glanced at the clothes for a second before quickly withdrawing her gaze.

Judging what customers are by their attire wasn't a polite thing to do. As a mature and experienced businesswoman, she had better judgment than to commit such a blunder. Besides, everyone has the right to appreciate the goods in her store!

Duncan finally retracted his gaze from the shelves after getting blinded by the amount of inventory. He knew a doll, but he never knew there could be so many accessories for one. It's exceeded his understanding.

Turning to face the chubby woman and giving a humble bow with his head. He knew better than to tackle this problem on his own. When you don't know what to do for a hair transplant, ask a professional.

But before he could speak, Duncan was suddenly startled by what he saw. The reason? It's because the woman had long, pointed ears coming out from the side!

Not missing a beat at the astonished look from the customer, the elvish woman merrily advanced the conversation: "I understand, elves are indeed a rare sight in Pland."

Duncan: "...."

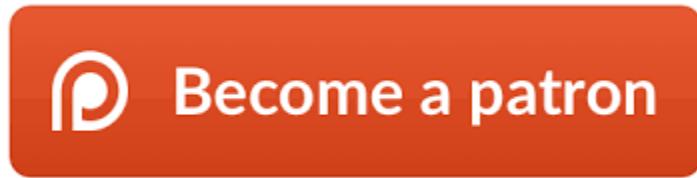
He admits that elves in the city-state of Pland may indeed be rare, and yes, it's his first time meeting one, but the bigger reason for his shock was that he didn't expect a blessed elf to be an old lady! What happen to the super hot model stereotype of elves?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 159

Chapter 159 “Who’s Forcing Who?”

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Humans are not the only intelligent races that survived from the old world when the Deep Sea Age arrived. Take elves, beastkin, and orcs to name just a few.

This was the knowledge written in Nina’s textbook that Duncan had read a while back. Of all the races though, he’s most interested in the elves since they are described as a species with a high visual standard and an exceptionally long lifespan.

However, he apparently didn’t factor in the part of them aging just like humans do on the surface. Talk about a soul-crushing reality check.

The owner of “Rose’s Doll House” was an elf, a chubby, smiling elvish oldish lady – apart from her signature pointed ears and turquoise pupils that faintly indicated at her youthful beauty in the prior years, she’s no different from the friendly old lady next door.

Duncan quickly realized he’s been staring and swiftly withdrew his overly curious gaze. Scratching his cheek with some embarrassment: “This is the first time I have seen an elf.”

He was not worried about what his “rudeness” would bring, because elves were rarely seen in the city-state of Pland.

The major races had their own city-states, and due to the inaccessibility of the Deep Sea Age, most commoners rarely left their homeland during their lives with only the brave daring to do so for trade and such. In the rare cases

that they do, they are usually only passers-by and almost never do they stay in one state for long.

“This is normal,” the old elvish woman giggled in delight, “I am afraid that there are no more than a hundred elves in this city, including the dozen or so who have been squatting in the mathematical institute for two hundred years without going out. Is there anything I can help with?”

Listening to the old woman’s reminder, Duncan reflected on his original purpose and glanced around the shop. “I want to buy a few things for a doll, and if I can, I want to ask some questions as well... But as soon as I came in, I was overwhelmed.”

“Oh, it looks like you’re a novice,” the old woman nodded, “is it a female doll? Is it your own collection, or...”

“Female, it’s a part of my own collection,” Duncan replied casually. But as soon as he finished speaking, the man regretted it because the words left a weird taste on his tongue. “This hobby isn’t strange, is it?”

“Of course not. Collecting and caring for dolls is a tasteful interest,” the old woman didn’t tease him and unleashed her century-old knowledge in the field. “Do you want to buy some clothes or accessories for your doll?”

Duncan thought for a moment before nodding: “Let’s get a wig first...”

“Over here,” the old shopkeeper led Duncan to the corner of the shop, “how big is your doll? Four points? Or three points?”

Duncan: “... As big as a real person.”

The old woman’s pacing faltered for a second before peeking around: “This is quite rare... a life-sized doll, hmm... Is it worth a lot?”

“..... Actually, I’m not sure how much she’s worth,” Duncan tried to keep his face straight while enduring the awkward feeling in his heart, “It was sent to me by someone else...”

“Then it seems that you have a friend who is quite wealthy,” the old woman broadened her grin as she circled around to open a wooden box on the counter. “Large-sized dolls are rare, and there are even fewer accessories out there for them. Thankfully I kept a few in storage just for these occasions.”

Duncan coughed dryly, muttering as he leaned over to see: “I don’t know if they’re rich or not, but they’re a captain.... It’s complicated.”

The items shown were beautifully crafted and well maintained, evident that the owner has gone through great effort to keep them pristine. However, as soon as Duncan imagined Alice wearing some of these fine trinkets and realistic wigs, he would inadvertently imagine her also going bald in the future. No matter how calm and experienced he was, Duncan still gave a shudder at the picture.

Oh screw it. If I’m going to buy something then let’s make it nice. Watching a bald headless doll walking around me is too creepy no matter the circumstances.

Immediately, Duncan’s gaze fell upon a gorgeous blonde wig with matching silvery hair accessories in the box. According to his biased perception, a western noble should always be a blonde, and not just any blonde, but a blonde female with fine accessories, just like in the old western chick flicks from Europe!

“By the way, can I inquire about how I should go about maintaining a doll?” He casually asks while picking out the items.

“Of course,” the old elvish woman smiled kindly, “dolls need to be cared for with a fine touch.”

“Then... what should I do if the joints of the dolls are often coming loose?” Duncan gestured at his own neck while organizing the language, “The main part is around the neck where the ball bearing is. It always comes loose and the head pops off.”

“The wear and deformation of the connecting ball bearing is either because of neglect or mishandling by the user in the later stages. If not, the only answer would be that the original design or material is not up to standard,” the old elvish woman explains. “If it has reached the stage where the head is constantly falling off, then ordinary repairs are pointless and ineffective. I recommend replacing the joints entirely to solve the issue.”

Speaking of this, she thought for a while and added: “But replacing the joint bearing around the neck area wouldn’t be easy if it’s as big as you mentioned. If you can’t figure out how to do, our business here can also offer that service. The parts used will be at cost with a little extra as the service fee.”

Duncan contemplated the feasibility of the suggestion and found it not possible.

It’s one thing for an ordinary doll, but Alice was Anomaly 099. Could her parts be easily replaced? What’s more, there’s a strong chance that Alice would openly make a run for it if told she’s going under the knife.

So, Duncan quickly dropped the topic and inquired about making a hair transplant instead.

The old shop owner patiently explained many things to him, and after the brief lesson, she added: “After listening to what you said, I want to make a different suggestion. Dolls are a difficult thing to repair. If you wish to transplant a new wig onto the head, it will be hard to achieve a perfect job unless the doll maker themselves personally do it. In addition, you also mentioned the head joint to the body is constantly dislocating. That implies the tear is already at the last stage of acceptable furnishing. I suggest you re-order a new head sculpture instead....”

Duncan: “....”

The old lady grew quite enthusiastic after seeing the reaction: “Judging by your face, you are unsure if you are willing? Don’t worry, I can reassure you our business here can perform such an operation. We have a hundred

years' worth of experience and reputation to our name. No complaint has ever come from our regulars so far."

Despite the reassurance, Duncan didn't feel the same way. In his view, the elvish lady probably didn't have much regulars to begin with, and if they were, those people had likely gone to the grave by now.

Showing an awkward smile: "But... if I changed the head, it wouldn't be the same doll anymore, right?"

Unexpectedly, the remark only made the old lady's enthusiasm grow stronger. Lighting up in her eyes: "Ah, that is quite the way of viewing things. Most people would only treat their dolls as an object. Even if they like it, they won't think about it in such a manner."

Duncan was a little embarrassed all of a sudden: "Ahem, I'm a little embarrassed if you say it like that...."

"I'm merely stating the truth," the old lady sighed, "dolls need to be taken care of, and the moment they are given a human form, they should no longer be treated as inanimate objects. There is a saying among puppeteers – puppets that are carefully treated have their own souls, and you should even think of them having their own joys, sorrows, and anger..."

Duncan's mind immediately brought up the image of Alice's harmless "hehe" act. Nodding repeatedly in agreement: "You're right, you're right."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 160

Chapter 160 “The Most Outstanding Puppeteer”

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On the Vanished, the bright sun shone hard on the scrubbed upper deck as a swirling green flame gradually dissipated over the surface. Alice watched the clearing with stunned silence as many items appeared before her.

“Th-This..... What is this!?” The puppet lady exclaims.

“You’re stuttering as if your head is going to pop off again. Haven’t seen pots and pans before?” Duncan teases from the side.

Alice stiffly swung her head around and faced the ghost captain who had just come out from the inside. “No, I haven’t seen these things before!”

Duncan: “...?”

“I haven’t seen them before,” Alice continued reasonably, “I’ve been in the box for so many years, where can I see these things?”

Duncan was shocked for a moment and then facepalmed himself: “... I forgot, okay, in some ways, you’re better than Shirley.”

Alice was about to step forward at this time to study the large number of things when she picked up on the name: “Shirley? Who?”

“Someone I met in the city-state. Maybe one day you will have the opportunity to meet her,” Duncan thought for a moment, “I think we’re quite relatable.”

“Oh?” Alice hummed merrily and quickly forgot the matter after circling around the pile of items.

“This is flour... Is this meat? It’s really different from the jerky on the ship... Is this vegetable? It feels so fragile, and it’s cold... What is this round... Ah, it broke...”

“Don’t crush the eggs!” Duncan realized how chaotic this puppet was once she started crushing an egg. Without delay, he stepped forward and swatted the lady’s hand back, “These things are supposed to improve the living condition on the ship!”

“Hehe...” Alice let out her signature giggle and withdrew her hand, “I’m just a little curious. It’s my first time seeing so many things.”

Duncan glanced helplessly at the puppet and understood what she meant.

Alice’s brain (if she really has this organ in her brain to begin with) has a lot of “innate knowledge”. She knows how to communicate with people, knows things that exist in the world, and even accumulates the first impression of the world by “listening” to the voices outside the box. However, she had always been in a sealed state. Strictly speaking, her real contact with this world only started not long ago, and as soon as she came out, she contacted the Vanished, a ship that’s absolutely not suitable for a novice who’s just starting out.

She lacks knowledge of the real world to the point a single piece of leafy green is an incredible object to Alice.

“The human city-state is such an incredible place...” Miss Doll issued a sincere sigh after taking in the colorful packages on the deck, “It must be much bigger than the ship, right?”

“..... Large, but much smaller than the Boundless Sea,” Duncan replied casually, remembering what he promised Alice after seeing the anticipation in those eyes.

He said he was going to take Alice to the city-state.

“I will solve the trouble on the city-state side as soon as possible and figure out your secret,” he said seriously to the puppet in front of him. “Until then, be patient.”

“Okay,” Alice showed a bright, carefree smile.

Being carefree does have its good points. Duncan had been accumulating a bunch of negative vibes from the things he discovered in Pland. With the doll’s interference, he’s finally able to relax for a moment. “Come help me move them into the kitchen. This pile over here can go into my personal quarters.”

“Oooh, OKAY!!” Alice immediately agreed with a salute of a proper sailor for some reason. “Will you use them for tonight’s dinner?”

Duncan turned his head and narrowed those eyes suspiciously: “It can be... but are you able to use them?”

“Nope!” Alice said of course, “But I can ask Mr. Goathead for help. He said his skills are better than 90% percent of the cooks in this world....”

“And you dare to believe him?!” Duncan popped his eyes in disbelief, like he was hearing the most insane comment, “You better not touch the ingredients until I go over there. I’ll make dinner instead. If you want to seriously learn how to make something edible, don’t learn it from Goathead. He doesn’t even have a digestive tract.”

“Oh...” Alice nodded meekly, then glanced at Ai who was pacing on the deck next to them. “Will Ai still go over to that side later?”

“Of course, there’s more stuff for her to transport later.”

“Are you still shopping?” Alice asked curiously, “What else do you want to buy?”

Duncan raised a raised eyebrow at the puppet’s face before forming a smile. Based on the glint in those eyes, he could easily guess what Alice wanted.

“I’m buying you something.”

Alice: "...?"

.....

The city-state of Pland, inside Rose's Doll House.

Duncan thought that the kind elven old lady might have misunderstood him, but no matter, he didn't intend to explain in this case.

The main thing was that there's no way to explain it – how was he supposed to tell her? Say that he really has a doll with a soul? That it could jump with joy and cry with sorrow? Say it's balding, and now he needs to change out the old wig? In the best case scenario, the shop owner would only run to the church and report him. Worst case scenario, she might lash out with some elven magic or something and exorcise him like in the fantasy books.

So what exactly was the old elven lady thinking right now? To her, she's found a confidant who loves dolls and is willing to devote a lot of energy to this area. In Pland's high society, many people buy dolls, and many are really keen on collecting, but few showed such heartfelt affection and concern for dolls as this gentleman today, which gives her a feeling that it was as if the other party was not talking about "objects" when they mention their "dolls", but a living person and a friend.

Even many puppeteers don't necessarily have this attitude.

The two talked happily from that point forward, and Duncan finally got a lot of knowledge about dolls from a professional (although he doesn't know how much of this knowledge could be used on Alice). The owner obviously hasn't met such a close customer for a long time. After some conversation, the old lady couldn't help but laugh and sigh: "I have lived in this city for up to four hundred years and survived seventeen city admins, but none of them really understood dolls.... Alas, it may not sound right for me to say this, but it seems to me that humans are a much more indifferent species than us elves."

"I don't know much about elven society," Duncan said, trying to guide the other party to say more about her kind, "but I heard... the Wind Harbor is

gathered with the world's most outstanding craftsmen? The elves' unique craftsmanship is world-famous..."

"Elves are indeed good at elaborate crafts, and we are a race that is naturally sensitive to mathematics and art – so most of the famous puppeteers in this world are also elves," the old woman said frankly with genuine pride in her tone. However, it quickly changed in the next second, "But when it comes to the profession of a puppeteer, many peers from the other races have a prejudice against us elves... It is often said that elves are not so talented in craftsmanship, and the reason why we can produce so many puppet masters is entirely because of our life span being long enough to grind it out..."

Duncan suddenly didn't know how to pick up from there: "This... well, I guess everywhere is the same. They're your colleagues and peers but also your competition. So, what's your evaluation of their opinion?"

The old woman bellowed out a laugh: "Me? I think they're right!"

Duncan: "...?"

"I think they're right," the old woman repeated with a pleasant smile on her face, "every year on the Day of the Dead, I have to go to the graves of a few of my old colleagues to say hello. I would always tell them they were right, and if they have the ability, come up and beat me!"

Duncan: "..."

Are all the elves of this world like this! Why do I feel like there is something wrong with this trajectory of the conversation?!

"Aigh... I'm just joking," probably noticing the expression on Duncan's face, the old woman shook her head and moved on. "There's no way we would have that many people to hate. The idea only came to be because everyone in our field likes to talk humor when we meet during our brief encounters. If you ask me, the most outstanding puppeteer is not among us elves but a human."

“A human?” Duncan asked casually.

“Yes, not many ordinary humans know this name now...” the old woman said slowly with a slight emotion, “Her name is Lucretia Abnomar, the daughter of the famous ‘Captain Duncan’, the most outstanding puppeteer I have ever met...”

Duncan: “?!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 161

Chapter 161 “Another Connection”

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In the eyes of the owner of this doll house, the world's most outstanding puppeteer was a human named Lucretia Abnomar, the daughter of the famous “Captain Duncan”.

As soon as the old lady uttered these words, the entire store had fallen quiet for several seconds. It wasn't until Duncan issued an earth-shattering cough did it break: “Oomph, oomph...”

“Customer, are you okay?” This reaction took the shopkeeper by surprise. Just like every elf who has been dealing with short-lived races for a long time, her face instantly showed an expression of worrying about the sudden death of the human in front, “Do you need me to ask for a doctor?”

“Ahem... I... oomph, I'm fine,” Duncan finally stopped coughing, but it took a while before he could finish the sentence. “I accidentally choked on my own saliva. What did you just say? Lucretia...”

“Lucretia Abnomar, the mistress of the Bright Star, one of Captain Duncan's children,” the shopkeeper said with an expression of someone not understanding the big fuss. “The world's most outstanding puppeteer...”

It was very hard for Duncan to regain his breath, but after this second burst from the old lady, he choked hard to the point that his face went red.

At the same time on the deck of the Vanished, Alice, who had just been frightened by Duncan's violent coughing, was now startled by the other party's sudden and chaotic cursing.

“Are you okay, Captain?” Miss Doll asks with a worried face.

“I’m fine,” Duncan gasped, trying hard to calm his swirling mood that’s been flipped upside down. Managing two bodies at once was not a simple thing. If he suddenly gets hit with a shock, it does affect his ability to control their bodily functions. “Go to the cabin first with the grocery. I have something to deal with.”

“Are you really sure you’re alright?” Alice still looked skeptical and didn’t feel right to leave the captain alone, “Do you want me to check your body or massage your back or something?”

“Do you know how?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then go, go, go, go!”

“Oh, okay~”

Finally sending away the unreliable puppet away, Duncan quickly refocused his mind back to the city where he was facing an incredible adversary of innocent ignorance. “You mean that famous Captain Duncan… The legendary captain of the Vanished?”

“Shh, don’t just say the name!” The store owner quickly interrupted Duncan’s words, “Ordinary people like you don’t know, but just pronouncing the name of that great horror will bring a curse upon yourself! You better be careful, otherwise that ship might just visit you in your dreams!”

“..... You’re right,” Duncan choked again, trying to endure the strange feeling in his heart, “That captain... not only does he have a daughter named Lucretia, but also a son.”

“Yes, I met them a hundred years ago. The son is called Tyrian Abnomar and later became a general under the Frost Queen. Sadly, it wasn’t long before the Frostbite rebellion took place and pulled that kid into piracy. The

daughter did better though. Lucretia Abnomar eventually became known as the most outstanding puppeteer back then...”

The old lady chattered and finally paused to sigh again: “But this is some old story now. Many humans wouldn’t even remember such a thing. Few in Pland like to discuss affairs related to that ship, let alone the children of that captain. But in my opinion, that’s just wrong. Those two kids are doing fine and living a life of the sea as their own ship captain.”

“Wait a minute!” Duncan immediately widened his eyes, “You said they are still alive?!”

“Alive, yes, alive.... It is said that they were cursed by subspace and became immortals,” the old lady heaved another sigh, “It is estimated that they can live longer than me...”

Duncan: “...”

“Are you really all right?” The old lady of the shop finally couldn’t help but ask again, “I see that your face has not been quite right since I brought up the topic. Maybe I should drop the matter and talk about something else?”

“NO! Please go on. I love to hear more.” Duncan immediately cut in and pushed himself to regain his composure with burning heat in his eyes, “Tell me more about those siblings. You said you met them before?”

“A century ago,” the old woman said slowly with a tone of reminiscence, “I had only just opened shop on this street back then when the brother and sister came in. Lucretia bought a three-point doll from me, and Tyrian paid for it when they were young. Their father at the time was still normal too. Oh my bad, we mustn’t mention him, no, no, no....”

“Then more than ten years later, I met Lucretia alone again on my way to Lansa to communicate with my colleagues. By that time, she had already become an outstanding puppeteer and mechanic... Her clockwork-driven puppet is something that even I can’t make...”

The shopkeeper chattered again, talking about life stories that were history to most of humanity.

It seems that regardless of race, older people have the habit of reminiscing the past like it's some fond memory.

Duncan's choppy mind still hadn't calmed down, but his expression had flattened out to avoid giving the wrong impression.

"Tyrian Abnomar was loyal to the Frost Queen. About half a century ago, not too far back. Some of the older humans still remember the event you know," the shopkeeper said casually, "but it is only hearsay at most. Back then, the northern states were relatively closed off so the information we got down in Pland is limited..."

Duncan felt his heart pounding. Of course he knew who the Frost Queen was, and he even had a one-to-one Frost Queen doll jumping up and down on his ship. Still, he never could've imagined that the queen who had been executed by the rebels half a century ago would make another connection with him in such a way – through a "firstborn" who even he had just learned of their existence.

"The Frostbite Rebellion half a century ago..." he pondered, trying to appear like an ordinary gossip-loving guest, "I've seen it in the history books, but it's not clear..."

"That incident is a mystery to begin with," the shopkeeper waved her hand, "It is said that it is related to 'that ship'. Who would dare record it clearly?"

"Tyrian Abnomar went on to become a pirate after the Frostbite Rebellion?" Duncan asked again, "He's still active on the other side of the Cold Sea?"

"It seems to be," the shopkeeper recalled, "anyway, I only heard this saying from a peer twenty years ago after they conducted business in the north."

"Then... are the siblings still speaking?"

“How do I know?” The shopkeeper waved her hand, “I’m just an ordinary old lady who opened a shop on the streets of Pland. At most, my connection with those two is that I met them earlier in my years.”

“This... you’re right,” Duncan grumbled at his own silliness. He’s clearly assuming too much.

“Ah, by the way, speaking of Lucretia, I suddenly remembered something. It has been here for many years. Maybe you’re interested?” The old woman says after getting a lightbulb.

Without waiting for the man to speak, she promptly walked behind the stairs and rummaged inside the storage room. From it, she pulled out a half-meter-long box from the deepest parts and placed it on the counter.

“This is...” Duncan looked warily at the old dusty box.

“A doll,” the old woman kindly answered as she carefully opened the lid, “her name is Nilu. Remember what I just said? Many years ago, Lucretia and her brother bought a doll from my shop during their teen years. The doll actually came in a pair, and this is that one’s sister.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 162

Chapter 162 “Nilu”

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Duncan quietly stared at “Nilu” who was placed in the box.

It was just an ordinary joint doll, very much in line with the “court girl” style that was popular in the city-state a century ago. With beautiful golden curly hair and a lace-encrusted dress, the joints of her arms were more pronounced in an old-fashioned spherical structure than Alice’s. Her face was made of ceramics, and her mouth and eyes showed the signature seam structure of old-fashioned dolls.

To be fair, the doll was so delicately crafted and well-kept that it’s hard to believe it’s been lying in a box for a century. Although it’s far from being a life-like “doll” like Alice, the little one named “Nilu” could also be described as beautiful.

A hundred years ago, Lucretia once bought another doll called “Luni” who was paired with this little one from this store, and now, “Nilu”, had come before Duncan. He didn’t mean to make this encounter, but it just happened.

Destiny was a wonderful thing...

“It doesn’t look like it’s been preserved for a century,” Duncan said thoughtfully, “she’s only a little bit old.”

“Elven products have always been known for their durability; after all, we usually use them for a long time. My puppet-making skills should be beyond many of my peers, and I don’t want my carefully crafted children to be separated from me after only a century or two.”

“..... I understand, but it’s an antique in terms of human years.” Duncan raised an eye only to realize this well-preserved doll wasn’t some simple commodity, “I don’t think I can afford this.”

He hasn’t forgotten about the profit he earned from selling the dagger to Mr. Morris and reporting the cultists, but in comparison to this beautifully crafted piece of craftsmanship, he knows it couldn’t be cheap.

“Antique? I wasn’t thinking about that until you mentioned it,” the shopkeeper smiled with a pleasant expression on her chubby face, “it’s not expensive. In fact, if you buy that wig and matching silver hair accessory, I can sell you for a hundred and forty-two solas.”

This time it was Duncan’s turn to be surprised: “Why?”

“Maybe it’s just fate,” the shopkeeper said slowly, “Nilu has been lying quietly with me for so many years. I do not want her to remain lonely forever like this. Then you came along. It’s rare to find someone who loves dolls as much as you do these days. So consider this fate’s guidance...”

“Fate...” The corner of Duncan’s mouth visibly twitched. He usually liked to use this word to fool others in his own store, but he didn’t expect to have this phrase used on himself! “So the real situation is that you can’t sell it, right?”

Shopkeeper: “... Its fate.”

“Because it’s more or less connected with the cursed ‘Abnomar’ family, so it can’t be sold at all, right?”

“..... It’s really just fate.”

“Does this doll have other traits like curses? For example, will it come back if you toss it away? Or they will go to the kitchen while you are sleeping and grab the kitchen knife...”

The old woman’s eyes finally widened, and her voice now sounded an octave higher: “I specifically asked the priest to exorcise any evil spirit

from it! I kept all the certificates too...”

Duncan chuckled: “See, it’s really because people suspect this doll is cursed. That’s why it can’t be sold, right?”

Old woman: “...”

“I opened an antique shop in the lower city,” Duncan exhaled, “an antique shop in the lower city, you get what I mean~?”

“..... That’s why I don’t like dealing with businessmen, especially those like you,” the old woman grumbled and sighed. “Alright, fine, it’s exactly because of that reason. She keeps getting older and older. Eventually, Nilu can only sit in my storage room. If you really want her, I’ll forget about giving a discount and sell you at cost for seventy-five solas. At least let me recover the fee for calling the priest to perform an exorcism.”

“Deal,” Duncan didn’t wait for the other party to finish and agreed.

In any case, he did have a huge interest in the doll. So even if there was no evidence of any connection between the little one and Lucretia, he figured he should buy her merely based on the “fate” factor alone.

This was his knee-jerk reaction after learning he actually had a pair of children in this world. Perhaps the kids would one day pop up from god knows where. At that point, bringing out this twin doll would help get the conversation going. In addition, he might even be able to find a connection using this doll. After all, the supernatural of this world often delivers itself in the strangest fashion. It’s not in his interest to assume too much otherwise.

“Then ‘Nilu’ is yours,” the old lady was a little stunned by Duncan’s quick response. She’s probably regretting why she didn’t keep a higher price and shoved the doll box forward. “You have to take good care of this child... Although I can see that you are a gentleman who really loves dolls, I still want to warn you not to think of Nilu as a cheap commodity.”

“Of course,” Duncan took the wooden box, closed the lid, and then looked up at the wig and hair accessories he had just chosen, “How much do those two add up?”

“425 solas, upfront price.” Duncan now got a toothache.

In the lower city, this was the living expenses of a whole family for two months! But in the upper city... It was only enough to buy two “accessories” for the luxury of the rich. To be honest, to say Duncan wasn’t shaken was a lie. But before his wavering heart could falter, he steeled himself to pay the price.

It was a gift he had promised Alice, and considering the gain he got from this doll shop today, the price seemed acceptable.

After comforting himself, Duncan exhaled softly and prepared to pay the money obediently.

It’s just that when he was paying the money, he suddenly remembered something again and couldn’t help but ask: “By the way, why did Lucrecia only buy Luni back then? Did she know about ‘Nilu’ as a sister?”

“..... Do you really want to know?” When the shopkeeper heard this, she showed a slightly unfathomable expression, “This matter... is another secret related to the Abnomar family.”

Duncan subconsciously inched closer: “Then I’m even more curious.”

“Then settle the bill first.”

Duncan was taken aback by the demand but quickly adjusted his face into a smile while handing the money over: “Can you tell me now?”

“Oh, it’s actually nothing,” the old lady said casually while collecting the money, “those two children didn’t have enough money back then. Lucretia was in tears when she left and said she would take Nilu with her when she had the money in the future. But from the way things look, it seems the lady had forgotten the matter...”

Duncan: “...”

Is this old lady in front of me just special, or are all the elves in this world sick like this?

.....

Back on the Vanished, which swayed slightly due to the undulating sea, Alice had returned to the upper deck after transporting the last of the things to the cabin.

“Captain~” Miss Doll happily leaned over at the thoughtful-looking ghost captain, “I sent everything to the cabin! Ingredients and kitchenware were delivered to the kitchen. Everything else I’ve left to the captain’s quarter!”

“Well done,” Duncan returned to his senses and sighed softly. Then focusing his eyes on the doll, “You’ve worked hard.”

“Captain... how are you now?” Alice peered up at Duncan and asked hesitantly, “Your face suddenly became very strange before. Are you really okay?”

Duncan shook his head: “Don’t worry, just some small problem.”

His mind was actually still a little bit troubled over the troubles that might arise from Tyrian and Lucretia’s existence. Then looking down at the cursed puppet in front of him and the connection she has with the Frost Queen, he couldn’t ignore the sheer coincidence of it all. As the old saying goes. When there are too many coincidences then it’s no longer a coincidence.

Heaving a long sigh, Duncan forcibly calms himself to stop the irritation. Then he turned to the resting bird on the deck and summoned her. In a flick, Ai burst into flame and disappeared from the ship again.

“Did Ai go to ‘deliver goods’ again?” Alice eyed the spot where the flame was mere seconds ago.

“Mhmm, not much this time,” Duncan nodded slightly, then looked at Alice with a hint of a smile, “It’s a gift for you.”

Alice's eyes lit up: "Gift? A gift for me?! Captain, you really..."

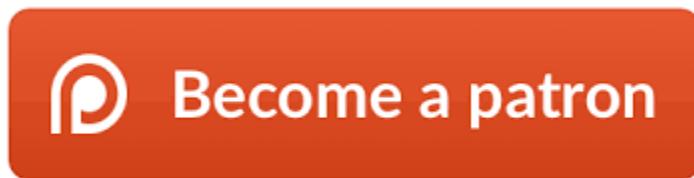
Before Miss Doll's voice could finish, a green vortex of flame suddenly appeared above the deck to cut her off. Ai had completed her teleportation from Pland with a new batch of materials. This time, she's carrying a wig that instantly enraptured the doll's eyes...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 163

Chapter 163 “Exhausted Communication”

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Seriously, Duncan almost thought Miss Doll was about to cry and run away based on her stoned expression.

“Thank you!” Alice cries in astonishment.

Duncan: “...?”

“You really bought me new hair!” The next second, Alice’s face was full of smiles as if she had received the most heartwarming gift. “I thought you were just saying it and didn’t mean it last time! Mr. Goathead said the wig used by dolls are very expensive...”

Duncan: “...”

What he had been waiting for did not happen. No jumping with horror, no fainting from shock, not even a weep from the doll. There goes his anticipated fun.

“Captain? Captain, why are you in a daze again?” Alice’s voice suddenly came from the side, bringing Duncan back to reality. She’s so close now that it’s only inches between their noses, “You’ve been in a daze many times today...”

Duncan blinked and retreated a little to gain distance. Then showing a weird and strange face, “I didn’t expect you to have such a carefree heart. Weren’t you quite upset when I told you about the wig? I thought you would put up a fight about using a wig.”

“I’m frustrated with my hair loss, but why should I be frustrated with getting new hair?” Alice blinked her eyes as if something was wrong with Duncan’s view, “I’m a puppet!”

Duncan finally knew what the problem was.

He had taken Alice as a human being since she looked so much like a person. Of course, there’s the occasional head popping here and there, but that’s dismissible due to her carefree attitude. When in reality, he should’ve viewed the doll as a genuine puppet. What does it matter to a puppet if they changed a wig out? Heck, it might not even matter if she changed an arm or leg!

“Forget it, I was overthinking this too much.” Duncan facepalmed and waved his hand for her to continue. As the natural moving disaster on the Boundless Sea, he’s no match for this wacky doll. “Anyways... it’s good that you like it.”

“I like it!” Alice held the wig happily and jumped around like a child, “And what about the rest...?”

“They’re for you too.” Duncan sighed, trying hard to suppress his inner complaint after seeing how visually impacting it was for an elegant gothic doll to behave like a child. “Open it and take a look.”

Alice curiously opened the delicate wooden box. In there sat a set of silver hair accessories made of diamond-shaped flakes lying quietly in the velvet lining.

“Last time, I took away the feather pin you found in the cabin,” Duncan said lightly, “this is my present for that. See, I kept my promise.”

Alice was stunned for a long time. Eventually, she revealed a wide smile that overshadowed her childish antics, “Thank you, Captain! Captain, you are so nice!”

“Don’t be so loud,” Duncan couldn’t help but shush her due to all the buzzing glee in his ear. “It’s just a hair ornament, no need to be so excited.”

“Not only hair accessories but also a wig!”

Duncan faintly flushed with embarrassment, “.... Don’t mention it.”

Alice did not notice the delicate mood of the captain and fully immersed herself in the new gifts. Eventually, she finally found her eyes landing on the last wooden box on the deck.

The container was about half a meter long with an elegant yet simple decoration of brass lock and hinges. In addition, the doll kept getting this strange sensation that it reminded her of her own “coffin box”.

“What is this?” Alice put the wig down and curiously peered down at the thing.

“I bought it from the doll house, but this one is not for you,” Duncan said casually. “If you want to take a look, go ahead and open it.”

Alice nodded and lifted the lid with a curious face. Immediately, the lady came face to face with her own kind inside the container.

Alice: “...?”

“You can call her Nilu,” Duncan’s voice came from the side, “but unlike you, she’s just an ordinary doll. Probably...”

Alice froze for the longest time. Eventually, after nearly ten seconds, she suddenly moved with a click-click sound before her head fell into Nilu’s box...

“He-Hel-Help...”

Duncan sighed and lent a hand by picking up the head. With a shameful expression while screwing her back on: “Do you have to behave like this every time?”

Alice, however, reacted much more strongly, with her face showing disbelief and sadness: “Captain, you... you have a new doll...”

“What nonsense are you going on about!” Duncan instantly picked up on the weird vibe from those words. Without waiting, he lashed out: “Didn’t I say Nilu is different from you? She doesn’t run or jump like you, and what do you mean by a new doll? You make it sound like I have some sort of weird fetish or something.”

“Then why did you bring a new doll home...”

“There’s a very special reason for this,” Duncan exhaled softly and got up to stare off into the sea. “This doll Nilu has another sister called Luni. My daughter took Luni with her many years ago and left Nilu behind. As it so happens, I visited that shop by coincidence today, so.... I figured its fate that I bring Nilu back with me.”

Duncan did not hide the information he had just learned and said it naturally. He’s playing the role of Captain Duncan of the Vanished anyways, so there would be a time when they would learn of his kids. In that case, he might as well be the one to break it out.

Without surprise, Alice popped her eyes in stunned shock at the captain.

“Ca-Captain, you have a daughter?!” The doll cusped her mouth in utter shock, “I... this is the first time I’ve heard it!”

Duncan inwardly sighed, moaning that it’s also his first time as well...

“Is this strange? I also have a son, and I haven’t seen them in a century.” He kept a straight face without breaking character.

“You still have a son!?” Alice nearly fainted at the repeated shock. Her eyes now widened to a tangerine size as her tongue stuttered: “Then does that mean you also have a wife?”

Duncan: “...”

At this moment, both occupants of the ship were staring wide-eyed without anyone to answer them.

“I kind of regret opening this topic with you,” Duncan finally broke the awkwardness and grumbled, “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Oh... Oooh! Okay!” Alice didn’t know what to say so she just kept nodding her head. Then looking down at the new doll named Nilu, she suddenly made an enlightened face like a lightbulb just went off, “AH! Does that mean the feather hairpin I found is your daughter’s?”

Duncan didn’t answer her. Honestly, he wasn’t sure either. But based on the speculation, it’s most likely as Alice said.

Then he noticed the sneaking peek from Alice, “Go ahead, tell me what you’re thinking. I don’t like it when you’re acting all weird like this.”

“Ah, it’s nothing, it’s nothing. I just...” Alice waved her hand and grew hesitant, “I’m just.... I get the feeling you’re more humanistic now.”

Duncan: “... Are you praising me?”

Alice was stumped for a moment until she recalled the lesson from the goat head, which caused her to make an apologetic bow: “Ah, I’m sorry Captain, I shouldn’t have scolded you by calling you humanistic...”

“I... thank you...” Duncan twitched in the mouth before shooing her off due to the exhaustive conversation. “Take the gift and go have fun. I want some alone time.”

“Oh, okay.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 164

Chapter 164 “Call No Answer”

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Duncan watched in silence as Alice merrily pranced off the deck. After confirming he was alone, the ghost captain shifted his main consciousness back to the second body inside Pland. He needed to get it back to the shop to work on this side.

Of course, Duncan made sure to get as much information out of the shopkeeper as he could. From what he learned, those two fell out with their old man at some point in the past. But what exactly was the issue? An argument? Or something much worse? At the moment, he had no way of knowing.

That leaves the issue of how he should behave when they meet. Act as a kind and gentle father reuniting with his kids, or behave indifferently like in the tales?

Duncan sighed softly at the options.

Regardless of the real situation, one thing seems certain though – it’s unlikely they are on good terms.

He bent down and picked up the wooden box containing “Nilu”, the newest member of the Vanished.

Is “she” really connected to Lucretia? In fact, does Lucretia still have the twin sister doll after a hundred years?

Duncan mused over the possibilities of that happening. He didn't think much of it when he first bought Nilu, but the speculations were running wild now that he's begun. With the box in hand, he returned to the captain's quarter.

As usual, the goat head inside was waiting for him on the mapping table. "Ah! The great captain has returned! You seem to have brought a lot of supplies back from the city-state. Your loyal first mate here is very concerned with the food and health of the crew. If you don't mind, I would like to personally guide Miss Alice into being a qualified..."

"Quiet, don't mess with that puppet with any more of your recipes. I don't want my next meal to look like a pot of ghostly demonic vomit," Duncan glared at the goat head to warn him. "Where are we now, and how far are we from Pland?"

"Oh, we're still moving towards Pland at full speed, and we've had several successful spirit world accelerations in between. It's like 'floating in the water' on the edge of the real world, and now the Vanished is only ten days away from that city-state," Mr. Goathead immediately answered with a chirpy note. "It is estimated that it will not be long before you can feel a noticeable power-up as you walk through the spirit world. The influence of the Vanished will be the biggest help for your activities in the city-state..."

"Very good," Duncan nodded in approval. With the wooden doll box in hand, he was about to head into his bedroom when he paused to ask, "Hey, how will Tyrian and Lucretia react if they see me again?"

It was a test by him after careful deliberate consideration. This was the most normal, least suspicious, and informative question he could come up with.

The goat head was visibly stunned for a moment, and his voice grew hesitant before answering: "You mean... your children... I'm sorry Captain, I don't know if I should talk about your family affairs. You rarely mention them to me, but if I have to say it..."

Despite usually being particularly sharp-mouthed, the goat head gulped and finally continued: "If I have to say, I think there may be another battle

between Tyrian and us, just like that time near the Frost City-State. He does like to use artillery fire to solve his problems. As for Miss Lucretia... She'll probably get away and watch from afar..."

Duncan kept quiet but realized two things from the conversation!

First, the goat head mentioned a battle near the Frost City-State with his son!

Second, he specifically emphasized that Duncan rarely mentioned the brother and sister to him... Judging from this sentence, it would indicate the statue wasn't around when the siblings were still on good terms with the father, meaning the goat head's not an original member of the Vanished?!

In light of the shocking revelation, Duncan's appearance showed nothing as he continued into his bedroom. Once the thick oak door finally closed with a dunt, he heaved a long deep sigh and pulled Nilu out from the box. After placing it on the table, he finally greeted the new member of his ship:
"Hello, my name is Duncan."

The doll, of course, did not respond.

She's really just a joint puppet.

Duncan found it silly for him to speak to a lifeless object. Fortunately, no one was around to spy on him, at least not in his personal bedroom aboard the vessel. Then with one hand, he popped open the drawer and rummaged through the content.

It was a small and delicate hairpin with the shape of waves and feathers that he pulled out, the item Alice found in the lower cabin.

Duncan quietly stared at the small hairpin. Like before, he got a strange sense of nostalgia permeating his heart.

"From the looks of things, it's really Lucretia's," Duncan whispered. "Is it a gift that she didn't take with her, or is it the only memento she left on this ship after she left..."

He slowly picked up the hairpin and flipped it gently against the limelight shining through the window. Then with a summon, a small cluster of green flame spread from his fingertips, wrapping around the trinket before extending itself to Nilu the doll as well.

Using these two items, Duncan wanted to see if he could connect with his daughter remotely. However, the flames quickly faded after trying to create a line. Neither the puppet nor the hairpin reacted to his power as well.

Is it because they are really just normal items, or is it due to Lucretia being too close to the border of the civilized world that my power is ineffective?

Duncan frowned, spreading the flames out again and calling out with his voice this time: “Lucretia?”

Nothing happened again.

This brought a wave of disappointment to Duncan.

At the same time, in the distant borderland near the eternal curtain, the clockwork doll “Luni” who was busy wiping the table abruptly froze. Then her gears and bearings started to rotate wildly, followed by the grinding sound of something going terribly wrong inside before the key behind her back popped out of the keyhole with fizzled green smoke spewing out of the seams.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 165

Chapter 165 “Lucretia’s Pressure”

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Accompanied by a series of weird noises, the clockwork figure completely stiffened and stopped like a rusted machine without a soul. Almost at that exact moment, Lucretia, who was in a nearby cabin, noticed the abnormality of her creation and became alarmed.

Without delay, the door slammed open with stacks of flying paper whirl winding out of the room. It eventually found its way over to the clockwork doll and reformed into the form of the Sea Witch.

“Luni?” Lucretia leaned down and picked up the key, plugging it back into her clockwork doll. Then after a quick winding, she asks: “What happened?”

A series of intermittent cranking noises came from Luni’s body, and after a while, some of her parts finally resumed function. “Old Master... is looking for you...” The doll answers with a very out-of-tune voice from the chest.

With a “clunk,” Lucretia dropped the wind-up key due to shock.

Luni turned her head following the sound, instinctively trying to reinsert the key to no avail because her limbs had stiffened again.

Lucretia’s complexion turned dreadfully white after hearing the word Old Master. She’s an absolute mess, but she still has enough wits to pull herself together after hearing Luni’s failure. Shaking it off with a shudder, she hugged the doll to suppress the chaotic thoughts and muttered: “Luni, standby mode.”

The clockwork doll slowly closed its eyes: “Command received, Luni going on standby mode.”

Minutes later, deep in the cabin of the Bright Star, Lucretia was busy at the workbench inside this brightly lit room.

This laboratory could be evaluated as “complete and advanced” even by the standards of the Truth Academy’s headquarter. It’s equipped with intricate mechanical devices and pressure pipes used to power various equipment. One could even see magical runes, crystal containers, and reactors shimmering with light among the countless machines. Currently, more than a dozen automatic dolls were currently taking care of these pieces of equipment, allowing Lucretia to focus on the work in front of herself.

Right now, Luni was lying quietly on the large workbench in front of the Sea Witch, dissembled for repair.

“Re... Repair...?” From Luni’s chest came a somewhat out-of-tune voice.

“Don’t worry. The transmission device jammed suddenly, causing part of the bearing to warp.” Lucretia busied herself without lifting her head, “It will require a lot of time to repair the area, but the repair itself is simple. Your heart isn’t damaged.”

Luni slowly rolled her eyes sideways to look at the “heart” placed at the center of the workbench.

It was a delicate floating brass ball made of countless intricate metal pieces set together. From time to time, the surface would change positions to reveal the inner structure, and if watched from the right angle, one could even see the shiny engraved runes swirling around the tiny thing at the center.

Well, calling it a tiny thing was a stretch. It’s in fact a finger, a very slender and fragile finger. About a toddler’s size that’s been elaborately crafted by a certain puppeteer a century ago.

That's the true core of the clockwork puppet known as "Luni", the true essence – the final proof that a puppet born a hundred years ago remained in this world.

Lucretia noticed Luni's gaze and followed it, causing her hands to stop as well.

After a while, she resumed work and spoke as if without intent: "I changed you into this. Have you ever resented me?"

"Luni... resent?" The head of the puppet on the workbench made a dull voice, "Mistress... gave Luni life, for this... Luni is happy..."

"But all this was originally done on my own whim, and for that whim, I destroyed your original body," Lucretia said lightly. "For a long time, I didn't realize you had developed a real ability to think because of the influence of the border. Back then, I only thought you were a machine and carried out many reckless 'experimental modifications' on you."

Luni took a moment to reply: "Your emotions are tense. You have something on your mind. Under normal circumstances, Mistress wouldn't suddenly say such inexplicable words."

Now it was Lucretia to go silent for a while: "... Do you remember what you said just now? After I just arrived at the deck and woke you up."

"..... Memory retrieval failed. Luni doesn't remember."

"You told me that the 'Old Master' is looking for me."

A series of strange noises came from the chest cavity of the clockwork doll again, but not due to a malfunction, it's confusion.

"Do you really not remember?" Lucretia raised her head and quietly peered into Luni's eyes.

"Memory retrieval failed. Luni doesn't remember."

“..... It seems that my terrible father didn’t want me to have any chance of reverse spying on him,” Lucretia had a complicated expression as she said this. “He just sent a unilateral signal, telling me...he knows where the Bright Star is, and he knows how to find me...”

“You’re afraid.”

“I’m scared to death, but more than scared, I’m more saddened...”

“Sad? Why?”

Lucretia stopped and met Luni’s gaze before shaking her head dismissively: “This emotion is too complicated for you right now. You won’t be able to understand.”

“Okay, Luni will try to understand in the future,” replied the clockwork doll. “Do you think Old Master is giving you some kind of warning?”

“..... I don’t know, but it does feel like a warning,” Lucretia said softly. “In fact, it feels like some sort of declaration before a hunt. He’s back from subspace and even more elusive than the last time he returned. Maybe I should remind my brother...”

“You should indeed remind Mr. Tyrian. He had already set out for Pland, and the admin of that city-state mentioned the Vanished is near their island.”

Lucretia nodded lightly and didn’t say anything more to continue her work.

.....

Duncan carefully put “Nilu” back into the antique wooden box before putting the feather-shaped hairpin into the drawer as well. Once done, he kept staring at the wooden box with a worried face.

As a grown man, he always felt something was wrong with putting a girly-styled doll in his bedroom.

But apart from putting it in his bedroom, he couldn’t think of a better place.

Although the first test failed to achieve any results of Nilu being a supernatural item, this was still something related to “Lucrecia”. If he’s not careful, it might open a passage to the other party without his knowledge.

After some struggle, Duncan sighed and temporarily placed Nilu’s box at the end of his bed.

“If you really have something special about you, then hurry and show your hand.” He glanced down at the box again, “Don’t be like Alice. I don’t want to throw you overboard and see another wave surfing fiasco.”

The wooden box certainly didn’t react, but Duncan didn’t care about it either.

He came to the window and glanced at the sky outside.

Night had fallen today, and the pale and dim glimmer of the giant crack in the sky gave the ocean a shimmering appearance.

The mighty exorcism power brought by the sun has subsided in the real world, and those distorted, ominous, and corrosive forces are gradually rising in the world. At this time, humans will enter their dreams to avoid the world’s corruption in their sanity.

But for Duncan... he had never felt any discomfort in the night, nor had he seen the shadows that frightened the ordinary people.

The night was his realm, the time when he’s at his sharpest.

Returning to the desk, he quietly spread a blank piece of paper out and grabbed a pen from the side. These are things he bought today from the city to write down what he found.

After a little hesitation, he begun once he sorted through the details:

In 1889, a sun fragment appeared, triggering the Pland great fire.

Through Dog and Shirley’s help, I found the veiling curtain of the factories inside Block 6. It hides a different reality destroyed by the flame back then.

The origin of Dog's "humanity" is still unknown, but it is clearly not the influence of the sun fragment's power.

There is also a distorted space-time in the neighborhood church of Block 6. It's causing two opposing realities to lapse and superimpose upon the chapel grounds.

I suspect the statue of the goddess inside that church is corrupted by subspace, and the nun discovered in the underground sanctuary had likely died fending off the invasion back then.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 166

Chapter 166 “The Captain’s Waiting In Your Sleep”

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Duncan went over all the clues he had discovered recently. Then through the connections they each had with one another, he reorganized them into various chart groups that are interlinked together.

First and foremost, everything inside this world can be corrupted. The only exception is subspace.

Second, the reality of this world is built on unstable foundations. The space is unstable, time is unstable, and even reality itself is not necessarily as unshakable as people perceive.

Third, the forces of subspace have invaded Pland! The vision in the chapel of the sixth block is proof of this. The sun fragment from eleven years ago is probably not the most critical link in the whole event. In fact, the likely culprit is subspace!

Duncan placed the pen down and reviewed his three main conclusions. Eventually, his gaze shifted back to the first point, which caused him to recall something he had heard at the bank. Without hesitation, he jotted down the details about the corrupted church in the sixth block on a separate paper.

Pollution began with that church, causing two different realities to lapse over one another. It’s so strong that even the goddess’s monitoring is affected... It’s unsure how this was achieved or happened. Was the church itself first contaminated, or was something else inside the cause?

At this point, Duncan suddenly remembered what he had told Shirley about blowing this up across the city. With a grin, he turned to the dove pacing around the windowsill and narrowed his eyes.

In response, Ai abruptly froze at the added attention and swung her bird head over: “Murderous intent!”

Not minding the wacky phrasing, Duncan snapped his finger and caused a flame burst from the compass hanging around Ai’s neck. The pointer spun and spun, shifting the room’s occupants from reality and into the spirit world.

As usual, Duncan had come into the dark void that’s filled with a billion starlights. Taking a small breath, he calmed his mood and allowed his subtle perception to guide him toward what he wanted.

In no time at all, he had come before a small starlight. Even without touching it, he could tell this belonged to the female inquisitor, Vanna.

Compared to when he first discovered this star, Duncan could clearly tell his connection with Vanna had become much stronger—her last visit to Heidi’s antique shop had strengthened their bond, and those strengthened connections would now come in handy.

Turning his head to face the ethereal Ai, the ghost captain didn’t even get to say anything before the bird cried out: “Who is calling the fleet?”

“Remember the last time we connected Shirley’s mind?”

Ai thought for a while and tilted her head: “Gotta add money!”

“This time will indeed be a little more difficult; after all, the other party is a devout saint. Her mind should be stronger than Shirley’s, and it may also attract the attention of the Storm Goddess,” Duncan nodded slightly but still slowly stretched out his finger and approached the cluster of starlight little by little. “But now that the connection between Vanna and me has been strengthened, it should not be a big problem if there is only a shallow communication without causing damage.”

“After all, this is just a righteous complaint from an enthusiastic captain.”

In the next second, his fingertips touched the starlight.

The layers of illusory waves seemed to come from an infinite distance, but they were fleeting, and Duncan didn’t even have time to notice the presence of the waves when his mind connected through the line.

.....

Vanna rubbed her eyes as she looked down at the thick file in her hand. By the time she looked up again, she was already sitting in front of the dresser mirror inside her room with a tired face.

A momentary trance floated up from the bottom of her heart, but she soon shook it off and recalled what she was doing.

After leaving the archive with some borrowed documents, she had been investigating the heretical cult materials predating 1889. While there, she and the old priest had discovered some anomalies regarding the lack of information from 1885. Sadly, they could not find the missing materials, which alarmed the inquisitor here. As the leading figure in the combat against heretical entities in Pland, Vanna had every reason to pursue this matter at the highest level.

Firstly, the lady had already arranged for civil priests to search for the files inside the other archives around the city, hoping to extract any information from other sources since the church wasn’t the only entity keeping records of the past. She also ordered a guardian team to monitor the heretical places that were affected back then. Of course, she also informed Bishop Valentine of the matter and requested he acquire further instruction from the goddess...

That’s about everything Vanna had done thus far on a surface level. Until she finished reading through every document between 1886 to 1889, the inquisitor had no other leads to go on.

Sighing at the heavy burden on her shoulder, the lady glanced at the window and toward the giant crack in the sky. The faint glow was soothing to her senses, something she desperately needed under the recent discoveries.

Then she glanced back down at the thick files in her hand to find the words starting to blur and become unreadable. Perhaps it was due to fatigue, but she wanted to look away and stop like something's nagging at the back of her head.

Wait, no!

Vanna jerked to attention. Slamming the document closed, she swung her head like a bat and glared out the window.

It's midnight, the most influential time for the World Creation and the most dangerous time to read any book or document. There's no way she would take a dangerous historical text out of the archive and read it in the middle of the night when she's so tired!

Professional clergies do not make such a mistake... This is not reality. It is your own dream, a dream that is being influenced!

Vanna's eyes widened with blood filling those veins. She realized her dream had been invaded by some unknown intruder!

As if on cue, the oval-shaped mirror in front of her suddenly started to ripple. From within the reflection came a majestic figure standing quietly in the darkness, the illusory green flame quietly burning on the edge of the mirror.

The figure calmly observed Vanna through the mirror, and after finding Vanna had noticed him as well, the being faintly smiled and greeted her in a deep voice: "Good evening Vanna, I believe this is our first meeting, but I have been watching you for some time now. You can call me..."

"Captain Duncan!" The words did not even get the finish when the female inquisitor leaped into action. As a trained fighter, she jumped several meters

into the air and kicked the dressing table back to put distance between them both. Then without hesitation, the lady drew her giant broadsword out and slashed down in a somersault!

Duncan: "...?!"

With a loud bang, the entire dressing table split into two, the mirror directly shattering into pieces by the huge force. Duncan's phantom was also scattered with the mirror shards that went flying.

However, this wasn't enough for the lady. Like a finely tuned machine, she clutched her giant broadsword in hand and vigilantly scanned the room like a prowling lioness. She's also whispering the prayers she learned from the main church to awaken herself from a corrupted dream, as per protocol.

"Your reaction surprised me a little."

Vanna's eyes widened as she followed the source of the voice. From what she saw, it's coming from the mirror shards littering the room.

"Relax, child, I just wanted to talk to you about something," came the voice of the infamous Captain Duncan. "It's about Pland..."

"Is it the mirror?" The young inquisitor suddenly muttered to herself.

Duncan: "Huh?"

Without replying to the man, Vanna raised her broadsword into the air again and smashed down with crushing force. Under the loud explosive impact, a shockwave reverberated across the room, sending every mirroring item in the room to dust!

Now that silence returned to the room, Vanna spent another minute scanning the room before issuing a long sigh. But then she froze due to what's in front of her. Instead of hiding behind a mirror, the infamous Captain Duncan was now standing openly in her field of vision.

"Your guess is not exactly correct. It's not just the mirrors, but everything smooth that has a reflective surface." The ghostly captain's voice directly

entered her ear, “Now, I’m inside your eye lens.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 167

Chapter 167 “High Standard Report”

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To be honest, Duncan regretted it as soon as he said this sentence – he was terrified that Vanna, a straightforward girl, would rip her own eyes out on the spot after his explanation...

“What do you intend to do,” the young inquisitor began, her voice cold as a piece of steel, “how did you invade my dreams?”

Her attitude was hostile, but Duncan only found it funny because it contradicted the polite and peaceful character she used inside the antique shop.

I wonder what her reaction will be if she ever learns the truth.

“Nothing much, merely to tell you one thing,” Duncan said bluntly and without nonsense. “If you really care about the safety of the city, you might want to go visit the sixth block and investigate the chapel there.”

After speaking, he closed his mouth and stood quietly with the flames burning around him, maintaining a mysterious and majestic aura.

As if something pierced a curtain to reveal the hidden truth, Vanna fell into a faint trance over those words. But compared to this momentary lapse, the reality that the dream was polluted by Captain Duncan touched her heart more strongly. She tried to pray to the goddess in her heart for help, but the power of the goddess could not penetrate this layer of the dream.

After a few seconds, she finally gritted her teeth and tried to act calm: “You invaded an inquisitor’s dream just... for this?”

“It’s up to you to decide,” Duncan said lightly, “I’m looking forward to what you will find out there.”

After saying this, he began to feel his connection to this dream rapidly diminishing. A strong repulsion was at work here.

Vanna may appear quiet and willing to listen from the surface, but this high-level female clergy of the church was not one to give up. Instead, she’s been mustering her willpower to repel the intruder, and now, she’s at the critical point of awakening!

This made Duncan realize that the exchange must end as soon as possible. There’s no need to give more than what’s necessary, and leaving now could keep his mysterious image.

As the ghost fire converged to fade away with the captain’s figure, Vanna suddenly cried out at the last second.

“What are you planning for Pland?!” In the end, the lady couldn’t resist the temptation.

Duncan looked up in the darkness as a sudden devious desire flooded his heart.

“Make some fries.” He utters the most outrageous sentence he could think of before the dream completely collapsed.

In the dark space of the void and chaos, Duncan took half a step back to watch the twinkling starlight in front of him.

“Whatever she’s going to think about next, at least one thing is certain,” Duncan glanced at Ai, who had landed on his shoulder, and muttered softly as if to himself. “The sixth block, chapel, these two key pieces of information have entered the sight of Pland’s storm cathedral... Whatever

the reason, they will definitely conduct the most intensive investigation there.”

Duncan’s idea was simple and effective—he just needed to lift the lid off the chapel in the sixth block. As long as he could draw the attention of the Storm Church, it didn’t matter how Vanna and the priests behind her worked. After all, he’s the largest mobile natural disaster on the Boundless Sea. Those poor clergies would be frantically searching for him. Until they figure out it’s nothing, they would pour all their resources into digging up the secrets of that chapel.

Finally, thinking back to the last comment he made to Vanna, Duncan couldn’t help but grin like a naughty child.

“Make some fries?” Ai tilted her head in confusion after noticing the odd smile, “Carefully mince the meat?”

“..... Your language is getting more and more fragmented,” Duncan frowned, “but we can make you some fries tomorrow morning. This is a good chance to teach Alice how to make some normal food.”

.....

Vanna suddenly popped her eyes open.

There was no light in the room, only the pale and cold glow of the World’s Creation spilling through the window as she glanced around. The nightmare had clearly taken a toll on the inquisitor’s state of mind. In fact, even the nightgown she wore had been drenched in cold sweat, leaving her all uncomfortable and sticky.

But these discomforts were nothing compared to the sudden intrusion in her dream.

Vanna pulled herself up, looked around very cautiously, blinked her eyes slowly, then closed them again before repeating the action several times.

Each time, her heart would beat violently as if the ghost captain would suddenly reappear in her field of vision. It wasn't until she finally confirmed the terror wasn't returning that she could breathe properly. It's been a long time since Vanna became so nervous.

Getting up from the bed, she swiftly came to the dressing mirror. Unlike in her dream, it's still intact and unbroken. After several seconds of staring, she shook her head vigorously to pull herself together. Then pulling the drawer open, the lady takes out a small dagger with runes depicting the storm and waves engraved on the blade.

It's not a weapon meant to harm others but more of a ceremonial item used in prayers. First, she cut a tiny hole in her thumb and allowed the droplet of blood to soak into the runes before praying to the Storm Goddess.

During the brief prayer, she heard the gentle sound of the waves ringing in her ears, and the protection of the goddess, as always, soothed her restless heart.

After reconnecting with the goddess, Vanna now truly relaxed—and then she neatly changed out of her sweat-soaked pajamas and into the church uniform. She also picked up the giant broadsword next to her bed before departing the bedroom.

Moments later, a private car powered by a steam core broke the tranquility of the upper city downtown area. It's Vanna driving her car to the cathedral.

She had to tell Bishop Valentine as soon as possible what had occurred in her dream. The complexity of the matter had far exceeded expectations, and it was no longer an incident that could be solved by her alone. It may even require their branch in Pland to contact the main Storm Cathedral patrolling the Boundless Sea if necessary.

Vanna's gaze was firm on this, her breathing steady and her thoughts clear. But suddenly, a little hesitation came to mind.

She recalled the strange scene near the end of that dream.

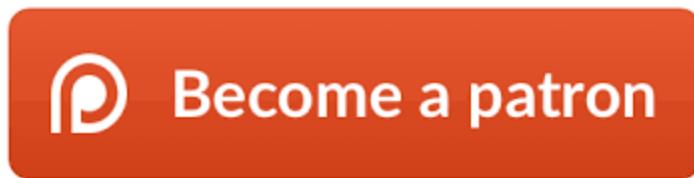
Make some fries... What the hell does it mean?!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 168

Chapter 168 “The Warning Signs”

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The sleepy-eyed Bishop Valentine did not expect to find Vanna making a visit so late into the night; however, his drowsiness was instantly wiped away the second he heard the first sentence out of her mouth.

“Captain Duncan entered your dream?!” The old bishop dumbfoundedly gawked at the inquisitor. He’s even doubting his own sanity like he’s still in a dream of his own, “That ghost captain took the initiative to seek you out... just to tell you about a location to investigate?”

“That’s right. I know how it all sounds, but you must believe me,” Vanna nodded vigorously and didn’t beat around the bush. She knew how the old bishop would act so she readied the story while driving over. “The sixth block chapel... the interaction was short, but the most important piece of information is that.”

The old bishop fell silent for a while. He turned around and looked up at the goddess’s statue like he’s remembering something. “Vanna, do you remember the pollution you suffered at the cult site in the sewers? Afterward, we carried out a purification, but now it seems...”

“I get what you mean,” Vanna took a soft breath, her expression still flat, “it seems that our purification has never succeeded. The Vanished is still chasing me, and the ghost captain... has extended his power to my dreams.”

“Is clarity still with you?” Valentine turned and stared into Vanna’s eyes.

“Absolutely. I tried reciting my name, and the goddess’s during my drive here. I also managed to recite the quotes from the Storm Codex.” The lady nodded firmly, “At present, the pollution is still shallow, and only my dreams are affected.”

“The pollution is shallow but cannot be completely removed like an irretrievable countdown...” Valentine’s tone sounded grim, “You are still the inquisitor of Pland, and no one can take your place at such short notice...”

Vanna knew what the old bishop was trying to say.

She has been polluted by the powers of a supernatural force. As an inquisitor of the Storm Church, showing weakness could prove fatal for herself and others in their ranks. Of course, no one would question her faith. That’s not a variable in this matter.

“..... I can’t leave my post,” Vanna shook her head after a brief thought, knowing she was giving the old bishop a problem that he didn’t want. However, she still had to continue to perform her duties, “I have a very bad feeling that we have a real crisis on our hands. It may not necessarily be caused by the Vanished or sun fragment but by a bigger shadow lurking within the city.”

Valentine definitely picked up on the seriousness of Vanna’s tone. Immediately frowning: “Crisis beyond the Vanished and sun fragment. Have you discovered something lately?”

“..... I investigated some materials inside the archives, which should have been told to you the next morning, but now it seems the situation is more complicated than expected. The urgency needs to be adjusted upward,” Vanna nodded and said with a particularly grim voice. “I became suspicious of the timing of the sun fragment’s appearance all those years ago. After consulting some materials from 1889 and earlier years, I found a large number of less urgent but strange and dense... heretical worship reports... Most importantly, the yearly report for 1885 is missing”

As Vanna spoke, Bishop Valentine’s eyes finally widened a little.

“These materials were just sitting in our archive?” The old priest exclaimed in disbelief, “And no one noticed 1885 is missing...?”

“That’s right. It’s as if someone had stolen that part of reality from the city, removing it from the eyes of everyone.” Vanna’s expression now got dark, “And I can be somewhat certain this phenomenon isn’t caused by the sun fragment.”

Valentine tightened his grasp around the scepter in his hand, causing the knuckles to go faintly white. “Then what is your take on Captain Duncan’s message?”

“Uncertain, but the records show no indication the Vanished is capable of stealing reality from us. Secondly, if this is the work of that ghost captain, then there is no reason for him to invade my dreams and tell me this crucial clue. This is not in line with the chaotic and mad style he portrayed a century ago.” Vanna calmly analyzed what she knew and deduced the most plausible answer, “Unless... he had a sudden change in his character and became more vicious and devious, or...”

“Or?”

“Or become an enthusiastic person concerned about the safety of the city-state,” Vanna spread her hand in the fashion of someone that’s unsure, “he did come and report his findings after all.”

“Oomph! Please don’t make such a horrible joke,” Valentine coughed vehemently at the sad attempt to lighten the mood. “You always had such poor humor you know Vanna. It really makes me doubt your mental state sometimes even on a good day.”

After complaining, the old priest smashed his chest and straightened that back to prepare for the next step, “So who else knows about the abnormality in the archives?”

Vanna thought for a bit and shook her head: “Only I know. I went to investigate the matter myself...” But as she said that, the lady paused as if a

cog had just malfunctioned. Shaking it off like it's nothing, "That's right, I found the files myself."

"That's good to hear... If there is a black hand pulling the strings behind this matter then they won't know about us being aware yet." Valentine exhaled at some good news, "Do you have a plan for those archives?"

"Yes, including actions with City Hall as well."

"Starting immediately tomorrow, I will provide you with the church's assistance as well," Valentine immediately nodded. "I will also report what happened here to the Her Majesty the Pope. Let's hope the Grand Storm Cathedral can provide us with some assistance from their end out at sea..."

While speaking, the old man thought for a few seconds and asked, "Can you still pray to the goddess as usual?"

"Yes," Vanna replied immediately, "my connection with the goddess was not affected by that dream."

Valentine frowned: "But the goddess didn't make a revelation or warning about the spiritual pollution you suffered?"

"..... That's right," Vanna hesitated but nodded in acknowledgment, "the goddess did not warn me."

Valentine rubbed his chin, and after a moment of deep thought, he suddenly looked into Vanna's eyes: "... During this time, you must return to the church at night to rest. Do not fall asleep outside the church, and be sure to carry the Storm Codex with you at all times when you are outside. Also, if you ever feel unusually sleepy or tired while moving outside, head to the nearest chapel immediately, understand?"

"Absolutely."

"..... Alas Vanna, I hope you don't think poorly of me for making such harsh demands of you." The old bishop somehow appeared slightly older like he's stressed by the matter, "There is no priest or nun capable of

replacing you at the moment in Pland. As the inquisitor and leader of the guardians, you mustn't fall at any cost. Perform your duties as per your vow.”

“As per my vow, always!” Vanna faintly smiled but also grew firm in her face like a warrior confronting combat, “I know full well how dangerous of a thing we are facing. I will not commit the same mistake my predecessor did when fighting the dark evils in the world.”

Speaking of this, she paused before continuing: “But what about the chapel in the sixth block...”

“We have to investigate. There’s no question about it. No matter the purpose of that ghost captain’s visit, we must leave no trail untouched.” Valentine grimly nodded at the image of the infamous pirate, “And... I somehow can’t remember who is in charge of the chapel in the sixth block. It’s as severe as we imagined...”

“I’ll personally lead a team over there tomorrow,” Vanna states.

“Very well,” Valentine bowed in gratitude to his peer, “but is there anything else that ghost captain mentioned besides the chapel?”

It would’ve been better if the old bishop didn’t ask, but Vanna’s expression had turned weird the second he did.

Valentine: “... Why do you have this expression?”

“He... did. It’s a very strange message,” Vanna’s face now looked hesitant and unsure, “I don’t know if we should take it seriously...”

“What’s wrong with it? The more bizarre the content, the more likely it is to be the key to everything!” Valentine’s eyes grew sharp, “What did he say?”

Vanna hesitated for a few seconds before sighing heavily, “Make some fries.”

Valentine: “...”

After a moment of silence, the old bishop finally spoke up again: “Really?”

“It is absolutely true, as true as my belief in a goddess.”

“..... Ah, then this is indeed... a bit too weird...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 169

Chapter 169 “Stepping into the Curtain”

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“Do you see? Make the fries like this. It’s very simple. Just be careful not to over-fry the potatoes or undercook them. You don’t need to stick your head in the oil or taste it either, okay?”

On the early morning of the Vanished, Duncan was busy pointing out how to cook up a batch of fries to Alice, who was seriously trying her hardest to learn inside the kitchen.

“Remember... Remember!” She’s obsessed with the sizzling pot of oil, ready to make her move at the slightest signal while clutching the kitchen knife in one hand.

Duncan looked at the oil pot and then back to the doll next to himself. With a slight nod, he was ready to go do something else when he noticed the gleaming knife in Alice’s hand. “Um... can you put the knife down first? You don’t have to keep holding it unless you’re cutting something.”

A cursed puppet standing in the kitchen with a knife staring murderously at some potatoes. The picture was unlucky and frightening no matter how he thought about it. The only missing thing now was a spooky BGM in the background. That would be the perfect horror flick.

“Oh... Oh!” Alice came to her senses and quickly hid the kitchen knife behind herself. Waving at the captain confidently, “You can go back now Captain! I’ve learned how to do it now! You and Ai will get to eat in no time!”

Duncan stared at Alice for a long time, trying to confirm the doll really won't mess this up. It's no longer boiling water anymore, but oil. If things go to hell, the pot would actually explode and cause a genuine kitchen fire. But as insecure as he was about leaving, everything has to begin somewhere. Heaving a light sigh, he waved goodbye and departed for the deck.

Good, I can finally have some decent food on the ship!

.....

On the second floor of the antique shop, Nina watched her uncle with a curious gaze while keeping a medicinal bag on her forehead: "Uncle, I wanted to ask this before, but why do you keep frowning in the morning...? And just now, you sighed like you're suddenly relaxed or something..."

"Huh? Was I? I wasn't paying attention." Duncan was startled by the attention and quickly adjusted himself. Smiling at his niece to keep a face, "It's nothing. I merely remembered something about the account books. I'm fine now that I've solved it."

"Oh," Nina nodded, "that makes sense then."

Duncan didn't comment and left it at that. He's been careless about how observant Nina has become and didn't want to rock the ship.

"Shirley didn't come today..." It's then Nina said something unexpected as she glanced out the window.

"..... Everyone has their own place to live," Duncan almost wanted to laugh at how readable the child was. She's clearly lonely and wants her friend by her side. "And you still have school today. Where are you supposed to find time to go out?"

"I should have inquired about her home address," Nina added, "that way I can visit her instead of just having her come here."

Now that's something Duncan didn't think about. Softening his voice to be more relatable: "Do you like this new friend a lot? I know you haven't known each other for long."

"Shirley is a nice person and saved my life in the museum," Nina said immediately, "and... and..."

"And what?"

"And the place she lives in... I asked Dog about it at night and their living conditions. It's in a small alley inside the slums. There are no night street lamps, and the house leaks when it rains. I..."

"Nina," Duncan cut the girl off right away and made a stern face, "friendship cannot be based on sympathy, especially for a child like Shirley."

Nina was startled by the harsh wording. Raising her head to meet Duncan's gaze, she didn't speak for a good while before uttering a random remark: "Uncle, how come your words are so philosophical lately...?"

Duncan: "..."

"But you're right Uncle. I do feel a little sympathetic towards Shirley after hearing about their background." Nina instantly returns to her old self, "But I merely... want her to live better. I can feel it without her telling me. Although she was always inexplicably nervous when she lived with us, I could tell she was very happy. Am I... being too presumptuous by judging her like this?"

Now it was Duncan's turn to be startled. Honestly, he didn't expect Nina to be so thoughtful at her young age. Shaking his head: "It's not our place to decide that, so let's not worry about the matter. Actually, let's ask Shirley where she lives the next time she visits... Now hurry up and finish your breakfast. It's almost school time."

"Okay!" Nina immediately nodded obediently, and then she seemed to have thought of something else that caused her to grow excited, "By the way, can

I... ride the bike to school?"

"Absolutely not," Duncan pricked his eye and answered without hesitation, "Have you forgotten how bad you fell last night?"

As he spoke, the scene of what happened yesterday instantly returned to him. As soon as the girl saw the brand-new bike, she jumped with glee and wanted to try it out. Then thirty seconds later, in front of the shop, she fell over, hard...

Now she still has a medicine bag on her head for the bruise.

"I... I thought it would be easy to ride a bike," Nina lowered her head and moped, "I saw my classmates..."

Duncan sighed.

He should have thought of that beforehand. Nina doesn't have many friends outside this antique shop, so where would she have the opportunity to learn? That's a failure on his part.

"Take the bus to school today, don't run. Our family is not short of this little bit of money now." Duncan rummaged through his pocket for a few coins and put them in front of Nina, "I'll teach you to ride a bike when I come back. It's really not difficult. With your cleverness, you will learn it in a few days."

At first, Nina was a little frustrated but soon became happy again and nodded happily: "YAAA!!!"

After a while, Nina happily jogged out of the antique shop while Duncan watched from the small shop window on the second floor. He could see her turning at the corner and towards the bus stop not far away.

It's a beautiful morning. He had to admit this despite the various shadows lurking at night. The glistening light of the sun and the permeating noise of bustling life in the form of burning embers through his senses gave the impression of a thriving city with a golden curtain blanketing it. But then

Duncan's expression froze when his sight skimmed over a row of houses in the distance.

"Ai!" He beckoned to the air and summoned the undead bird from the ship. Next second, a tiny burst of flame materialized in front of his eye and transformed into the dove.

"Hiccup... Who's calling... Hiccup... Fleet?" Ai flaps around in a circle to land on the man's shoulder.

Showing a weird face, Duncan turned and raised an eyebrow at the bird: "How much did you eat aboard the Vanished?"

Ai flapped her wings and cooed vigorously: "The time to eat has come... Hiccup!"

Duncan blandly eyed his partner with a face of incomprehensible nature: "No wonder Alice was in the kitchen for so long. You cleared out the storage room, didn't you? Forget it... at least you didn't waste the food. Can you still fly to the sixth block?"

The dove issues out a roaring chip of a commando, making sure to salute with her wings as well: "Mission will be achieved! Mission will be achieved!"

A fireball shot out of the small window in the next second and flew staggeringly toward the sixth block.

At the same time, two dark gray steam cars were driving through the empty streets deep in the sixth block. Sitting in front of one was none other than Vanna, who had brought along a small team of elite guardians for the investigation. She didn't want to ride a steam spider walker for this trip because that would be too eye-catching. So until she gives the signal, the main battle force would remain outside the block and await her command.

Frankly, that's a good idea on her part. She didn't realize it at first, but after coming here, she immediately picked up on the abnormal atmosphere in this area. It's very wrong and creepy – a neighborhood that's too lifeless, a

population that's sporadic and unresponsive to outside stimuli, and old facilities that have fallen into disrepair to an unacceptable level.

The best way to describe this place would be a world frozen in time and forgotten by its people.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 170

Chapter 170 “Loosened”

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It took a long time for Vanna to withdraw her gaze from the car window after witnessing the weird state of the sixth block.

The main purpose of her coming here today was to investigate the chapel, but now, it appears she might have to increase the investigation radius.

After a little hesitation, she stretched out her hand and picked up the thick stack of materials placed on the seat next to her.

These were the files she asked for from City Hall before the operation—using the authority as Pland’s inquisitor and the relevant provisions of the Special Enforcement Regulations for Unusual Events, she obtained all the municipal records related to the sixth block for the past few years. She’s finished reading part of the records along the way here.

These documents from City Hall are not top-secret documents, nor do they involve any high-level supernatural events or unsolved cases. On the contrary, these documents only contained the most basic of things regarding daily life.

Gas meter records, electricity bill payments, shop taxes, water supply, heat supply, garbage disposal, security patrols...

If the life as an inquisitor had taught her anything, then it’s that daily life often hid the most obvious clues pertaining to supernatural events.

All of the mortal civilization was surrounded by the Boundless Sea, and there was the constant threat of anomalies and visions, so merely being able to enjoy daily life was in itself a treasure worth protecting. Like bathing in the morning sun, eating a hot meal on the table, buying a snack from a street stall, and having a warm bed at night, were all evidence of this continuous miracle only achieved through 10,000 years of mortal efforts.

If a supernatural force had done something to this collective miracle, it would definitely leave a mark on this world to be found.

“Did you notice anything?” The voice of the guardian who was driving interrupts after noticing the lady’s frown, “Is it a missing file?”

“On the contrary, all the municipal files are all here,” Vanna shook her head slightly. “The plumbing and sewage records are all here and maintained at a very balanced value, which is very reasonable.”

“Then your expression...”

“There are no police cases,” Vanna raised her eyes slightly, “the public security files are blank. In addition, the newborn record is also blank, and the residents’ death records here are also empty.”

The driving guardian nearly lost his wits after hearing such a review. This didn’t go unnoticed by Vanna, who had managed to see the shocked face through the rearview mirror.

“An obvious abnormality,” Vanna said softly, “a neighborhood that hasn’t had a population change for multiple years. There’s no fighting or crime reported by the security forces either. Even in the wealthiest district of Pland, such a low crime rate is impossible to achieve. And then the utility bills, they’re too normal...”

She paused and peered out the car window: “It’s as if all the inhabitants here are nothing but a bunch of tamed phantoms... They live quietly in this encircled space, neither increasing nor decreasing, with no internal conflicts, no external communication, just quietly carrying out their normal ‘resource consumption’ to provide feedback to the authorities. Everything is

business as usual, so don't look here... Something is clearly wrong in this place, yet no one ever paid any attention to this area."

Only the dull sound of the steam core running could be heard now, and after an unknown amount of time, Vanna felt a sudden jerk to her body as the vehicle came to a halt.

"We've arrived at the chapel," the driver states.

From the outside, the chapel looked as if it had been abandoned for more than a decade.

Vanna's mind couldn't help but recall the burning ghost flames and the majestic figure through her peripheral vision at the deplorable state of the church branch. She gasped out of reflex, reflexively whispering Gomona's name as she pushed open the car door to get out.

Immediately, a cold, bleak wind swept over from the other end of the street, rolling up the dry leaves beside the roadside as it did so. The black-clad guardians promptly followed the inquisitor too, cautiously approaching the abandoned chapel from each side in a circling formation

As the team moved under the crunching sound of dry leaves under their feet, which sounded strangely close to burning embers, a series of flapping wings could be heard from above. Vanna's gaze followed the sound, finding a white dove perched atop the spire and curiously eyeing their group.

"A white dove... An auspicious omen for calm weather..." For some reason, this strange thought suddenly crossed her mind before she gently pushed open the chapel's door.

Immediately, a warm and bright light met her eyes, and a nun with a gentle smile on her face appeared in front.

"Hello, sister, it's rare for a visitor here..." The gentle voice of the nun reached the ears of the guardian that sounded spookier than warm.

.....

Gas lamps lined up neatly between the behemoth shelves of the archive, the bright light dispelling any form of shadow between these ancient files. During this, only the old priest's slightly heavy and slow footsteps gave any form of life to these inanimate objects.

“Seventh row of the sixth columns, seventh row of the sixth columns... The record of 1885, it should be here... it should be here...” The old archivist mutters as he went over the files again and again.

“Finally found it!” His voice was filled with unconcealable excitement, “It’s actually hiding here... But how did me and Inquisitor Vanna miss this before after searching for so long?!”

In the second his fingers touched the books.

“Seventh row of the sixth columns, seventh row of the sixth columns...”

The scene repeats itself over and over again until it suddenly doesn’t. Raising his head, the old archivist stiffly looked around at the familiar yet distant bookshelves lined around him. It’s the same old oil lamps lighting the texts, the same old domed building, but the protective pillars that depict the pattern of waves were shimmering with light.

A sobering calm swept over the older man’s chaotic mindset at that very moment.

The protection barrier? Who started it? Why did it activate? Did I do it? What was I doing again?

The old fella instinctively raised his hand to grasp onto the large-caliber revolver around his waist, only to discover something unusual with his body.

The originally flexible arm that he used had become so stiff and heavy that the gears inside were now grinding against each other. It’s only possible after years of neglect and rust.

Astonished and shocked by his mechanical arm's deplorable state, he also looked downwards towards his mechanical leg. There, seeping black motor oil was dripping down the sides. There's no doubt about it. They're all rusted and unmaintained, as if he's been trekking through this archive for years on end.

Finally, the last barrier keeping him from seeing the truth was lifted like a curtain. He could remember everything with clarity: how he and Vanna searched the archives, how she left with the documents, and how he continued to search for the missing 1885 record by himself...

He may be old, but he's no fool. The priest instantly realized what might've happened. A supernatural force was at work here, mostly a vision! Pland was at the center of a huge vision!!

“SHIT!” The old priest exclaimed and dragged his now ragged body towards the main desk.

However, his movements froze the second he came out of the shelved aisles.

A strange black figure had appeared inside the archives main area without his awareness, and it's holding an ominous black umbrella as if to block out the ubiquitous sunlight.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 171

Chapter 171 “The Crossroads of History”

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The person was tall, even taller than Inquisitor Vanna. However, the person had a thin, scrawny build with the appearance of dried flesh wrapped around a dark trench coat. Even with only a glance, the old archivist could tell the blasphemous distortion oozing out of the other side’s existence.

“Remnants of the Black Sun?” He mutters, astonished and outraged by the intruder, “You dare to step into this sacred ground?!”

Without a second of delay, a loud bang shattered the tranquility within this domed structure. It’s the old priest drawing his large caliber revolver and firing off the blessed bullet from within. Unfortunately, this came as no surprise to the umbrella man. In exactly the same moment, two shadowy tentacles had whipped out from underneath the trench coat – the first deflecting the bullet, the second lashing out to smash into the old priest’s shoulder and sending the guy flying across and into the nearest bookshelves.

Seemingly pleased with his deed, the dark, gloomy umbrella man proudly stomped towards the mound of books that had dumped over the priest from the impact. But that was a mistake. In the following second, a deafening roar of a battle cry blew up from beneath the pile as the old priest jumped out – he had drawn his vibrating sword at some point and used this opening to slash down at the invader.

The intruder didn’t fret though. Instead of jumping aside to dodge, the person only tilted that black umbrella slightly and met the blade head-on.

This caused a series of screeching sparks to fly between the two weapons of choice as they clashed together from the force.

But a veteran of light wasn't one to be fended off so easily within his own realm. The old priest expected his assault to fail, so he promptly flexed his arm and swung sideways in his follow-up attack. He kept going and going, leaving arcs of silvery grey in the air as he continuously slashed at the foe like the battering waves of the ocean.

That's how storm priests fight, wave after wave, slash after slash, without giving up a second of momentum they've built to increase their blade's strength.

Unfortunately, the black umbrella in the intruder's hand was more durable than it seemed. Aside from being pushed back due to the sheer physical force of the exchange, the umbrella suffered no damage at all. Even so, the mere fact that he's been forced into a corner enraged the shadow.

Issuing a long gurgling growl of incoherent murmurs, this heir of the Black Sun was obviously mustering a counter-offensive with whatever spell he's conjuring.

But this didn't matter to the old priest though because he had already closed off any unnecessary perceptions within his sight. He didn't care about the noise emitted by this intruder, nor did he care about his own safety for that matter. As the only defender of light here in the realm of the Storm Goddess, he had the duty to defeat this blasphemous entity to regain his honor for today's failure.

Nevertheless, the old archivist couldn't deny the swirling doubts sprouting from within his heart at the moment. For example, how did something like this thing infiltrate the grounds of the main church? This was the epicenter of Gomona's influence within Pland. Even if the goddess herself didn't detect it, the patrolling clergies outside should have. On top of that, countless protective wards are also in place to signal the alarm. The fact that it all failed pointed to a fundamental weakness in their defenses, a flaw that would be fatal if left unchecked.

Can it be... this remnant didn't enter the church through normal means?

Exactly then, a sharp whistling sound broke through the air. Before the old priest could react, his lower thigh muscle had tensed up out of reflex due to years of experience in the field. He slightly adjusted the angle of his vibrating sword and readied it for the assailant's sneak attack.

But then severe pain came from under his ribs, a spot he least expected because he had readied his posture for that area.

He stopped his pose, glanced down, and saw a black squirming tentacle poking through the front of his stomach from the back. He wanted to touch the wound to confirm its true, but even that little maneuver was deprived from him as the rusted gears inside the prosthetic limbs grinded to a crawl from overheating.

Finally, things dawned on the poor veteran – he's gotten too old

He and these gears on him are too old...

With a disgusting squishy sound, the ugly tentacles retracted back into the intruder's trench coat as he approached. Now, all that remained supporting the old defender was the longsword that could barely remain upright due to those shaky arms.

“Go tell your God~ That this disgusting era is over and that the sun will rise again from history...” The barely recognizable flesh that was the face of the shadow finally spoke.

“History...” the old priest’s body shuddered at the word. His physical body may have failed, but his brain’s not broken yet, “You polluted history?!”

Somehow, despite the warped, twisted face, the intruder still managed to show a devilish grin with those crooked teethes: “On the day when the fire rose, the wishes of us all were granted.”

The remark didn’t reach the old priest’s ears at this point though. The wound had been lethal, and it had caused the poor fella to begin his

departure into the afterlife. His time was near...

This outcome bored the intruder due to losing his only audience. Then, as he's about to re-hold his black umbrella and leave, something unexpected occurs with his back turned. A loud roaring grind of metallic friction had suddenly ramped up, followed by the pressuring noise of oil pumping and steam whistling. Swinging his head around to check, the intruder was taken aback by the blistering sword coming down over his head!

"Goddess, please bear witness!" The old priest yelled with a look of absolute devotion.

His entire body felt so weak right now, but his soul burned with the ferocity that no evil could tarnish. He's the sword and shield of mortals. When the darkest moment befalls his realm, it's his duty to shine at his brightest, right up to the last second of his life. No matter the cost, no matter the price, he will pay it!

Due to the abrupt nature of this turnaround, the old priest finally landed a critical blow to the shadow, slicing him from the head down and into two. This should be lethal to any ordinary foe, but this was a sun heir, the vilest and most evil of those out there. The severed halves suddenly emitted a disgusting sound of flesh and blood squirming together. Afterward, tiny tentacles shot out from the wound and merged the body back together like he was never harmed.

This dashed the last glimmer of hope in the poor defender's eye. That's his last struggle, the last glorious fight for the light, but he could do no more. The goddess did not abandon him and blessed him with strength for the last blow there, the proof of another miracle. But even so, it frustrated him to no end knowing he couldn't fell this abomination.

After several seconds later, the intruder was now up again and ready to exact revenge for the insolent struggle. Extending the tentacles out, the umbrella man barred his teeth and was ready to rip apart the opponent for good. He didn't like surprises, least of all from a storm clergy.

.....

Unbeknownst to the assailant though, something else was occurring beyond the boundaries of the archive. In this twisted and warped reality, clusters of green flames had engulfed much of the crumbling ruins of Pland, seeping into every facet of the city. Now, the only parts left untainted were none other than the church grounds, and even that wouldn't be true for much longer.

That's the sort of picture the old priest saw in his final moment before moving onto the afterlife – the green flame driving up from behind the unaware assailant. How should he describe it? It was like a hound finding its prey, and its head was now baring its fang at the perfect moment to strike.

This confused the old priest dearly of course. He didn't know if this was real or just a hallucination on his part, but if it was real, he could only applaud with satisfaction. The umbrella intruder thought he had won today, but no... the serpent-like green flame had silently bit down with such a force that it trapped the twisted man in it like a cage – a burning hell as he melted away. If the old priest could still hear his surroundings, he would be covering them from the horrific screams of panic and terror due to this execution.

And then, everything went quiet again....

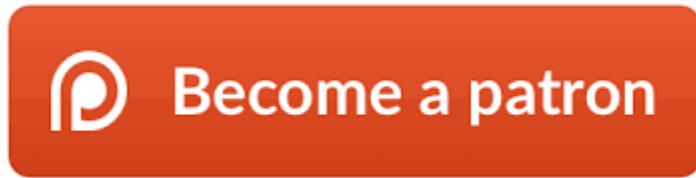
The sea of fire faded like it never came, the polluted history temporarily returned to the depths of the curtain, and the archive, located between the crossroads of two different histories, fell into a dead silence. No one visited, and no one knew. Whatever happened today, it's gone forever...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 172

Chapter 172 “Vanna’s Discovery”

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Vanna stood quietly in front of the stairs leading to the underground sanctuary, her eyes locked onto the black door that had just been restored before everyone’s eyes.

Three hours earlier, she had led the team to the deserted chapel and examined the interior. It was business as usual. Warm with bright lights, a silently praying nun, and a clean and tidy pulpit.

Two hours ago, she got rid of the nun who was obviously abnormal before leading the guardians to the underground sanctuary here. After prying open the black door, that’s when she saw the truth—a dark underground space, a sword-wielding nun who seemed to have died in battle not long ago, traces of combat all over the walls and floors, and the missing intruders.

Two minutes earlier, she had completed a detailed investigation of the underground chapel, and together with her subordinates, they had taken the deceased nun out of the underground chapel and prepared to send the corpse for autopsy and burial at the main cathedral. However, right as the body had left the chapel grounds, it crumbled into dust in plain view. In addition, the basement door, which had been violently broken two hours earlier, returned to its original state as if mocking the explorers still standing at the staircase.

“Inquisitor...” a bearded guardian approached Vanna from the side, “there seems to be some kind of space-time closed loop here...”

Vanna nodded lightly and said nothing.

What came to her mind then wasn't how freaky the chapel was, but rather the words she heard from the terrifying "Captain Duncan" who invaded her dream last night.

If you really care about the safety of the city, then why not go to the sixth block and check the chapel out...

I'm looking forward to what you will find there...

Is this what that "Captain Duncan" wanted me to see? A locked space-time loop, a chapel polluted and isolated by some unknown force, a nun who fought to the death against a mysterious invader? And what does everything mean here?

The frown on Vanna's face had deepened. When she set out this morning, she only had the Vanished and its ghost captain in mind, but now, she's starting to doubt her own judgement at being so wrong.

Could it be... is that ghost captain really just trying to give me a clue? Like an enthusiastic passerby... reporting heresy when found?

The thought was meant to be as a joke with Bishop Valentine before, yet she couldn't shake off this notion that it might be true.

In the next second, the young inquisitor shuddered as her expression froze in horror. It finally dawned on her how ludicrous the idea was in the first place. As a nun of the Storm Church, such an idea should never have even crossed her mindset.

"Inquisitor?" The subordinate's voice came from the side again, waking Vanna from her distraction, "You are... did you hear or see something?"

"..... No, I'm sane." Vanna shook her head and said to the seemingly reliable subordinate. She knew that this subordinate had been in contact with Bishop Valentine before departure, and most likely charged with supervising herself during these trying times. Naturally, the lady didn't have any complaint about the arrangement. In fact, if she was to be shackled during the operation, it would still be normal in her eye.

“The time and space here have been reset, shall we go down and take a look again?” The subordinate asked again.

Vanna faintly sighed and shook her head: “What is the situation with the fake nun inside the main hall?”

“She’s still praying,” said a guardian who had just returned from the main hall, “as if any of our activities outside is unrelated.”

“I see,” Vanna nodded slightly, her gaze falling onto the black door leading to the underground sanctuary. “We’ll go take another look.”

She led the guardians to the entrance again, stepped forward and once again felt the familiar resistance from the black door—the body of the nun was barricading it from the opposite side.

Last time, she had to order her subordinates to pry it open with a crowbar.

This time though, she intends to do things a little bit different. First pressing her hand against the door panel, she takes a gentle breath before clenching her hand and starting knocking rapidly.

Within a hundredth of a second, the entire door vibrated at a speed imperceptible to the human senses. Next thing they knew, the solid barricade had crumbled into a pile of dust like its magic. This was the easiest and quickest method of removing the obstacle without damaging the nun’s body on the other side, which did the job as the nun fell over from the lack of support.

Only after all this was done and finished did the guardians hear the hum of the vibration. a sound that penetrated into their brain and dissipated in a flash. This drew a series of reverent glances from the guardians present here because it’s not easy to perform such a skill.

Not minding the worship coming her way, Vanna unsheathed the broadsword from her back and strode forward with the lamp in hand. The glow of the lantern once again illuminated the dark underground space, and

the scene was exactly the same as when they remembered. As expected, time and space here have returned to the original point.

After another meticulous investigation, Vanna and the guardians returned to the dead nun lying next to the doorway.

Not long ago, Vanna had tried to take the nun out of the underground sanctuary, but now she had realized that the body might have become part of the “circular loop”. The nun could no longer leave this place...

Quietly gazing at the nun’s blood-stained face, Vanna didn’t know how long she had been pondering before she suddenly whispered, “Are you still fighting in this cycle...”

A brief silence fell over the underground sanctuary over her words, that was until the voice of one of the guardians suddenly broke the silence:
“Inquisitor, what do you think... she was fighting against?”

Vanna contemplated the possibilities, and after a long while, she raised her head and analyzed the existing information one by one:

“The underground sanctuary is a perfect sealing environment, and when the gate is closed, it becomes the perfect cage.”

“The whereabouts of the church’s guardians are unknown, but it is clear that they did not participate in the battle in the underground church.”

“The nun locked herself here and came in with a weapon, which shows that she foresaw a battle before entering.”

“There are no traces of the intruders left here. Considering that the space-time here is a closed structure, the intruders should also be constantly looping along with the nun. If this is true, the intruders should’ve been inside when we entered regardless of their speed...”

The guardians next to her listened to the analysis before one of them suddenly reacted: “Only under one circumstance will the priesthood take

the initiative to block themselves off and prepare for the ‘final battle’ like this...”

“Yes, there is only one situation that can warrant such drastic measures,” Vanna said softly. Slowly standing up, her expression turned grim: “When the priesthood discovers that a subspatial door is about to open from within their soul.”

“Subspace invasion!” Another guardian exclaimed in a low voice, “She’s here... to fight the shadow from within?! Bu-But how is this possible? This is a church, and...”

“And no one has ever received an alarm from this branch,” Vanna finished the sentence for her subordinate. Of course, she knew how wrong that sounded, “The priesthood who is completely polluted by subspace will become a carrier and open the door for evil to use; however, there is usually a process, especially in an environment like the church. Even if the matter is urgent, the watchman here should have had the opportunity to sound the alarm to those outside. However, it appears the contamination progressed so rapidly that it... she couldn’t do anything else aside from grabbing a sword to lock herself away...”

Speaking of this, she paused and added another theory that just cropped up: “... It may also be that the alarm was issued, but due to the interference of subspace, the alarm never reached the main cathedral outside.”

“..... But this is not a sailing ship out on the sea,” the guardian next to her muttered in disbelief, “This is land, and the church is under extensive protection. How can the power of subspace corrupt a priest so quickly and cut off external communication of the entire region?”

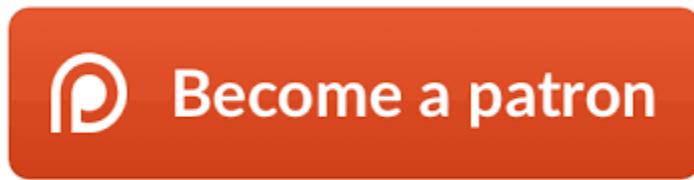
“You’re right, something terrible occurred here. I can sense this the second I entered...” Vanna glanced around the underground room by using the lantern’s light. Even from her distance, the walls and pillars making up the space was oozing with sinister secrets that she couldn’t fathom, “If subspace did pollute this chapel at some point, where did it all go now?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 173

Chapter 173 “The Fire Is Spreading”

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The pollution of subspace does not subside on its own, just as justice does not assert itself. After so many years of fighting the distorted shadow of the deep sea, Vanna knows this all too well.

If this chapel had been polluted by subspace, and the nun on duty in the church had already lost in the event, then what invaded here would never have died on its own. Considering the weird “remnants” of the nun in the church’s main hall and the atmosphere that was not quite right in the entire sixth block, the door to the underground sanctuary obviously failed to block the intruders inside. In that case, where did the invading subspace forces run off to?

Vanna raised the lantern in her hand that’s filled with the whale grease containing divine power. Wherever the light shone was what she saw: blade marks and bullet holes. It’s as if someone had a story to tell by writing down these markings.

Writing...?

Vanna furrowed her forehead as a jolt zapped her brain.

If the nun had foreseen her death when she closed the door, wouldn’t she have tried to leave a message to those coming to investigate later? That’s the basic taught at the priesthood!

“Examine everything here again,” she raised her head abruptly and instructed the guardians beside her in a loud voice. “Check all the details.

Sword marks, bullet holes, blood stains, all of them. This sister probably left some kind of message before she died!"

"Yes Inquisitor!" The guardians moved with swift familiarity. They each carried a lantern of their own so it didn't take long to cover most of the underground sanctuary.

Vanna herself was certainly not idling either. After realizing that the fallen nun might leave a message somewhere, she returned to the place where the other party had initially died. Her first point would be the ground and walls near the main doorway beside the stairs. As to why she doesn't believe the message would be on the destroyed door, it's rather simple. The runes used to put up a protective ward were also on the door. If the deceased nun had written something over the runes, it would only decrease its potency.

Vanna crouched down next to the nun and carefully examined the whole body. Then going by the posture and orientation of the body's position, she's able to figure out the angle at which she was leaning before they came inside. Using this knowledge, she crouched down to the most likely spot to investigate.

Suddenly, her movements stopped at a spot next to the nun.

There's a series of small sword marks, which at first glance seem to be just a messy depiction made by a dying person holding a sword unsteadily.

In previous inspections, Vanna and her subordinates had dismissed these findings as nothing, but this time, the young inquisitor finally realized that these seemingly messy scratches were actually a "message" that had been repeatedly carved at after failing to get an imprint on the first try.

"Here!" She raised her head and shouted to the guardians who were searching around, "1885..."

Turns out the message was just a string of numbers.

The gathered men all stood beside Vanna right now, their faces obviously unable to figure out why the nun would go to such lengths for this number.

Eventually, it was the bearded guardian who asked with a confused voice: “Inquisitor, this string of numbers... Inquisitor?”

He saw the stunned look on Vanna’s face then—the latter’s eyes had widened the moment she saw the number and couldn’t contain the shock of what the message implied.

Vanna did eventually wake up to the cries of her subordinates. Taking a sharp gasp, she promptly recalled back to the memory of her rummaging through the archives alone. She remembered finding strange records of heresy worship, remember taking out the files of 1889 and earlier, and the missing 1885 records...

“It was 1885... she’s reminding us that she actually died in 1885...” Vanna muttered softly and caused a series of weird looks among the subordinates.

“But why did she emphasize this specifically?” The bearded guardian still didn’t understand.

“In order to prove that she didn’t die in 1889...” Vanna said subconsciously, but as soon as she was halfway through the sentence, the lady realized something was terribly wrong with that theory. Showing an incomprehensible expression, “Yes... why did she emphasize that year specifically ... If she had died in 1885, she wouldn’t have known that there would be a catastrophe in the city four years later...”

The young inquisitor was so confused now. A large number of clues had emerged through the investigation, and it seemed to be faintly conjoining in one place, yet a huge ravine had appeared in the middle to prevent the crucial connection line.

If the number left by this nun is to illustrate the year of her death, then this year must have a special meaning. It must hold the warning she wants to convey, but... what kind of warning that it must correlate with 1885?

Was it because the nun saw something before she died? Had she foreseen the 1885 record would disappear from the cathedral’s archives? Or does she know why the record disappeared?

Unfortunately, the truth has long disappeared into history with this cold case. All that remained was this series of difficult-to-understand numbers.

“I have been to the cathedral archives before,” Vanna explains to her wary and concerned subordinates. “In the archives, all the materials from 1885 are somehow missing, and now it seems that this year is absolute...”

She stopped suddenly.

For some reason, the scenes of rummaging through the archives had cropped up again. Then, the sound of gentle waves hit her ears, causing the lady to widen her eyes in astonishment.

She still couldn’t recall anything other than going through the archives alone, but she realized that something may be wrong with her memory – her spiritual gifts were warning her, and the goddess was warning her!

“Back to the cathedral,” she suddenly orders, “I’m going to the archives!”

The guardians all looked at each other, not knowing what could cause the inquisitor to become so alarmed. Even so, it won’t hinder them from following orders.

Just as these guardians were about to leave, one of them glanced down at the ground next to him, which caused him to exclaim: “The numbers are disappearing!”

Vanna immediately followed the directed voice and choked at the sight of a subtle green spark vaporizing up into the air. Imagine a pencil mark being erased from a piece of paper. That’s exactly what’s happening right now. The pencil marks are the numbers left by the nun, and the eraser would be the ghostly green flames.

At this moment, endless speculations appeared in Vanna’s mind, including the theory about the Vanished and its captain being involved. However, she still couldn’t figure out why the flames would erase the clues in her face like this. She’s already seen it, so what’s the point in doing so now?

I must return to the main cathedral immediately! This place is too dangerous to linger around!

“Don’t go near that plot of the floor, and keep your distance from that flame if you ever encounter it.” Vanna reminded her men, “Now evacuate this chapel this instant. The second team will stay outside the church and set up a blockade until further notice. The others will return to the cathedral with me.”

“Yes Inquisitor!” The guardians all replied in unison.

Vanna nodded before issuing another order: “In addition, inform the standby troops in the neighboring block to... barricade the entire sixth block.”

Done with the arrangement, the lady began leading her team back outside. First, they went up the stairs, then through the chapel’s main hall. However, right as they’re passing the goddess statue, one of the more youthful guardians had subconsciously glanced to the side out of reflex. Immediately, the guy exclaimed in shock and caught everyone’s attention: “The praying ‘nun’ is also gone!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 174

Chapter 174 “Before the Storm”

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The nun praying quietly in front of the statue had disappeared, leaving only the bright gas lamps illuminating the empty hall.

Of course, Vanna knew that the nun was probably “non-existent” from the very beginning – the other party’s body had obviously died in the underground sanctuary many years ago. The one praying in the main hall was likely a phantom, an echo still lingering due to the corruption.

“There’s nothing in the corridors and rooms either!” The last two guardians who had gone to search returned with this finding.

Vanna’s brow furrowed as she pondered what this implicated.

The phantom disappeared, but when did she disappear?

Was it the second time we entered the underground church? Or was it after we discovered the string of numbers beside the body? Or... the moment when the green flame erased the message?

The former likely mean we disturbed the illusion by seeing through to the truth. If it’s the latter, it may be... it must be that ghost captain making a move.

Enough! I need to get out of here and inform Bishop Valentine of the current information I have. Afterward, investigate the archives to confirm why I’m getting such a strong warning from the goddess.

Vanna quickly led her team out of the church and came before the steam cars. But right before entering, she glanced back and saw the dilapidated church and the white dove perched atop the spire. For some reason, she couldn't take her eyes off of that bird, the only sign of life in these parts.

Why is this dove still there?

Vanna couldn't help but mutter in her heart. However, she quickly squashed that doubt and arranged for everyone to depart. Overthinking something so small was unlike her, especially when she's been compromised.

Meanwhile, the white dove had also taken to the air with the rumbling of the steam cars. She did not fly far though, only to a nearby alley that was out of view from the guardians.

Following a swoosh of green flaming vortex, Duncan stepped through the burning door that Ai created for him.

It was the right call to pull the lid off this matter. Compared to Shirley and Dog's investigative abilities, having professionals take a look is far more yielding.

When close enough, Duncan could directly monitor the movements of those he imprinted beforehand. In the case of Vanna, he's already reinforced the connection during the last visit to the shop; therefore, he could hear and see everything she did within the chapel earlier. Right now, the man's sorting through the information he obtained in his head.

So the nun likely didn't get attacked by an intruder, but instead she had to fight against her own doppelganger from subspace? And a clergy can become a direct gateway into the real world if corrupted? That's something new...

The last bit was the most concerning for Duncan amongst all the intel he had obtained thus far. It surprised him and confused him because it didn't really make sense.

Duncan didn't know much about the gods of this world and their churches. But nevertheless, he could confirm the position of these religions was on the side of order and light based on his observation. The fact that a clergy of such a righteous faction could fall so deeply if they slipped was worrisome. But most of it begs the question of why?

It appears the connection between the subspace and the real world is more complicated than I first thought...

In addition, there is the number "1885" left by the nun.

If Vanna's judgment is correct, the nun died not in 1889 but in 1885, and the chapel should have been consumed by the distortion since that year!

What does this all mean?

Duncan's thoughts process was getting muddy by all the contradicting new information. Heaving a long sigh, he rubbed his fingertip and summoned up a cluster of green flames.

He could clearly feel the ghost fire spreading beyond the curtain on the other side due to the constant feedback.

This was his third puzzle.

Unlike Vanna's theory of him interfering and wiping away the string of numbers from the floor, he didn't. In fact, the guy was more confused than the lady in this regard. The reason? It's because the feedback he's getting wasn't from the present but from 1885 itself in the past!

Duncan fell into a sudden stupor at what this hinted.

Maybe... it's not an illusion...

For some reason, he suddenly recalled the first time he studied Alice's coffin box and how the Frost Queen spoke to him.

"... Please don't pollute history..."

Duncan's face sank like a murky puddle at remembering another sentence he heard not long ago: Everything in this world can be polluted except subspace.

.....

Vanna made it back to the cathedral in record time. She wanted to confirm what was going on in the archive and why her memory was in discord; however, she still made sure to meet Valentine first to give the old man her report.

After listening to the inquisitor's story, Valentine didn't comment and only furrowed his forehead in deep thought. After a good long minute, he finally spoke like he's getting a toothache: "Subspace... is truly the most troublesome type of trouble."

"As we prepared to leave, the string of numbers pointing to 1885 in the chapel and the nun praying in the main hall was gone. It's possibly related to the power of that 'Captain Duncan,'" Vanna added, "but we did not stay in the church for fear of the contamination spreading."

"..... You are right to be cautious," Bishop Valentine nodded slightly. "We cannot be certain of that ghost captain's attitude, and now it seems that although he did provide us with an important piece of information, he also erased some clues at the end... In any case, he is not our friend."

Vanna pondered for a moment and met the old bishop's gaze: "Is there any reply from church headquarters? Have you reported the situation to the Pope?"

Valentine nodded firmly: "I have reported all the situation here to the central Storm Cathedral, and Her Majesty the Pope has said that she will send support as soon as possible. As you know, the church's ship is still far from Pland. It is difficult for even the fastest clipper ship to arrive in a few days, so... Be prepared to be on our own if worst comes to pass."

As he spoke, the old bishop sighed softly and turned to gaze at the statue of Gomona.

“Disaster is brewing, and we do not know when it will break out. Whether or Pland can wipe away the haze will depend on our ability.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 175

Chapter 175 “Dark Clouds Overwhelm the City”

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The sky had become overshadowed by thick clouds at some unknown point; therefore, it's uncomfortably gloomy as the cold air poured into the city, piercing into the bones of the citizens on this island.

Old Captain Lawrence first noticed this weather when he walked out of the church's doors. Shuddering as he shrunk his neck in, he glanced up and mumbled: “Darn it, what back luck. My observation period just ended, and I’m going to get soaked during my walk home...”

Like the old captain of the White Oak assumed, other pedestrians are hurrying back to their homes due to the impending rain. They had clothes to collect, children to pick up, and storefronts to pull in. However, Lawrence was different. In his mind, he only had his grumpy wife waiting at home to scold him. For a moment, he’s not so sure if he wants to go home anymore.

Rubbing his arm to get the cold out, he was about to depart when a church guardian ran over to him with Heidi, the psychiatrist, in the rear.

“It can’t be...” Lawrence groaned subconsciously, then greeted the man with a stretched hand for a shake.

“Sorry, Captain Lawrence, I just received an urgent notice that you are to temporarily stay for further isolation. Therefore, you cannot leave yet.”

“Isn’t the observation period over?” Lawrence’s friendly expression visibly collapsed, “You have to at least give me a suitable reason.”

“I cannot give you the fine details, but...” the young guardian also seemed slightly apologetic, “it is a direct order from the inquisitor. The situation has changed. All folks who have had contact with the Vanished are to be kept within the church grounds.”

The corners of Lawrence’s mouth twitched profusely at the name. He didn’t need to be told why after hearing that infamous ship’s name. Keeping his poor mood down so it doesn’t show: “I get it, I get it, but who will explain this to my wife? I’ve...”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Heidi’s voice came from the side before the old captain could finish, “Do you have any concerns?”

Lawrence turned to look at Heidi. During the quarantine, he’s dealt with the young psychiatrist several times, so she’s not new to him. Softening up in his voice: “I have been away from home for far too long, and my wife is not a gentle person. I denied the last shipping order to take a vacation. You can’t expect me to spend half of it in isolation within the church and the other half in bed for rest...”

“..... Indeed, no one wants to encounter such a thing,” Heidi sighed, showing empathy due to her own vacation being ruined. Then pulling out a glass tube of something from her medical box, “But now things are more complicated. It is better to follow the instructions of the cathedral first. Don’t worry, someone from the church will contact your family in your stead.”

“What is this?” Lawrence took the potion tube and glanced at the liquid inside with some suspicion. No matter how often he goes through this, having someone pull out weird stuff from their suitcases will always creep him out.

“Something to calm, soothe, and enhance your mental protection,” Heidi said casually. “It’s to help you with your next stage of quarantine.”

“..... Damn, there’s no getting out of it then...” Lawrence felt a toothache coming when he heard the next stage of quarantine. Then popping the plug,

he chugged the bitter potion down in one full swing before returning the bottle.

The effect of the potion came fast, causing the old captain's gaze to dilute several times like someone taking a drug. Of course, he's not high or anything, but he's definitely calmer in viewing things.

"Do you need me to send you back?" Heidi observed the old captain's expression and asked in a soft voice.

"..... No, I know the way," Lawrence's mood was a little low, but he quickly shook his head to remove the damp air. "Aigh, it's not too bad to sit around. At least I have a few sweet nuns to talk to back inside..."

Without batting an eyelash, the old captain swung around and began heading toward the two guardians already waiting at the door.

"Mr. Lawrence, as a psychiatrist, I still have to advise you that it's about time to retire. The Boundless Sea is not good for your mental health." Heidi's voice sounded from the rear before the old man could step inside.

Lawrence did reply to that though, only waving his backhand to indicate he got the message. This drew a series of respect from the doc and guardians in the square. They have read the reports and know about Lawrence's family situation.

"Miss Heidi, do you know what happened?" A guardian eventually couldn't resist asking.

Rolling her eyes: "You are a member of the church. If you don't know then how am I supposed to know? I'm merely the 'external consultant' sent by City Hall."

"But you and the inquisitor..."

"She didn't tell me anything, and I haven't seen her since yesterday," Heidi shook her head before showing a curious face at the guardian in front. "But I did hear she suddenly issued a large number of orders for an investigative

operation? This morning, a team of priests even went to City Hall to request a bunch of files..."

"Yes, a lot of investigative tasks," the guardian sighed, "old files, visited communities, checked a lot of old accounts, and went to the port to set up monitoring on twelve fries sellers..."

Heidi: "...?"

"So now even we're guessing," the guardian sighed before looking up at the clouds, "gee, this damn weather."

.....

Morris, the old historian teacher, sat at his desk while brushing the rough edges of a heavy book with his fingers. He's trying to calm down his head, which he did to the point of being able to hear his own heartbeat.

Seeing the timing was right, he looked down and flipped open the scriptures belonging to the God of Wisdom.

After completing the most basic self-hypnosis and mental reinforcement by reading from the page, he lit the candles and incense on the table. Then through the mirror on the altar, he could see his reflection that showed a no longer young version of a charismatic man with a self-deprecating smile.

"I've gotten old... good thing I could still perform the fine details of this ritual."

The crackling sound of the candle fire gradually faded, and the smoke rising from the incense slowly condensed into an undispersed cloud above the mirror. This blocked the senior's vision, making him unable to accurately see his own shadow in the mirror.

"I turned my back on you for eleven years... yet you're still willing to take care of me," Morris sighed when he saw that the ceremony had been completed so smoothly. "Do you still have any expectations for me..."

The room remained quiet, with only Morris talking to himself. Nevertheless, the next reaction from the old historian showed he's received the divine guidance that he sought – he had opened the drawer and pulled out a bracelet made of twelve colorful stones.

Morris hesitated initially, but then he steeled himself and put it on. Immediately, as if washed over by clarity, he felt the curtain shrouding his head for so many years finally lifting. He glanced at the layering smoke in the air, then huffed a grunt before pushing the door open to leave his study.

Heidi wasn't home, and the empty mansion seemed exceptionally desolate. Of course, his 'wife' was still in the bedroom down the hallway, but he didn't dare to look in that direction in his current state. With a gulp, the old historian practically fled the estate and dashed into the steam car parked outside the courtyard. His destination? The lower city where he visited the antique shop!

Meanwhile, a white dove was speeding over the low, old buildings of the lower city. Eventually, the bird flew into the second floor of Duncan's antique shop, where she bloomed into a plume of green flame to form a gateway.

Duncan had returned to his abode through Ai's teleportation again. First glancing out at the bad weather through the window, he shifts his gaze to the clock hanging on the wall showing the hour. Since he still had some time before Nina came home from school, this gave him room to think about what to do next after the large harvest.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 176

Chapter 176 “A Warm Family”

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A while later, Nina’s figure appeared in Duncan’s sight – the girl trotted over with a pleasant smile after seeing her uncle sitting in a daze in front of the antique shop.

“Uncle, I’m back!” She waved her hand to say hello.

Waking up from his musing, Duncan put his thoughts aside for the time being and got up to greet his niece. However, he was startled by the girl’s panting appearance and frowned: “Didn’t I give you money for the bus? How come you still ran home instead?”

Nina kept panting until she finally gathered her breath. Then scratching her head in embarrassment, she rummaged through her bag and pulled out a small paper bag: “I... was passing by Dr. Albert’s clinic when I came back...”

Duncan took the package and squeezed it, realizing it was a couple of pills inside.

“Dr. Albert said you have been using alcohol for a long time to relieve pain. Although your physical condition is improving and you have successfully quit drinking, people who drink for a long time are prone to adverse reactions once they forcibly quit,” Nina explained in a low voice. “This is a drug used to reduce alcohol withdrawal. If you are not feeling well, you can take a tablet... In addition, Dr. Albert also said if your health has not deteriorated lately, you can stop taking the medicine from before. But it is still recommended that you visit his clinic for a thorough examination...”

Duncan silently listened to Nina's whisper that's borderline cautious. He knew what she was trying to do, so he waited until she finished before placing a hand on the girl's hair and ruffling it.

"Uncle?" Nina raised her head suspiciously but saw Duncan's expression had grown considerably more severe. This left her a bit uneasy inside: "You... what's wrong? Are you not feeling well? Or..."

"I'm fine," Duncan suddenly laughed and bent down to eye level with his niece, "but don't use your bus money to buy me medicine in the future. There is no shortage of money at home now, and you can keep more pocket money in case you want to buy something... If you don't have enough, come tell me."

Nina showed a stunned face at this. She's always felt something was different with her uncle and couldn't figure out why, but now she's starting to understand. With a nod: "Oh, okay..."

Then she thought for a moment and poked her head towards the inside of the shop with a hopeful face: "Uncle, then... can you teach me how to ride the bike? You said I can after school..."

"It's not a good time right now," Duncan raised an eyebrow, "it might rain soon."

"But we're right at the door," Nina muttered but didn't give up, "We can go right back inside if it does..."

Duncan chuckled at the girl's insistence and nodded helplessly: "Okay, put away your bag first before we begin. We can only practice for a little bit before stopping. I haven't prep dinner yet."

"OKAY!" Nina immediately jumped cheerfully and ran inside. Casually tossing her schoolbag aside, the girl struggled to push the brand new bike outside due to how unfamiliar she was with the vehicle.

"..... Actually, I think you have to learn to ride from scratch," Duncan sighed at Nina's clumsy appearance and stepped forward to help by

controlling the handlebars. “We can start by teaching you how to keep your balance. Don’t worry, I will keep my hands in the rear so that you won’t fall.”

Nina nodded obediently. After Duncan helped onto the seat, she grabbed the handlebar and clumsily pedaled the wheels like she was tackling the most challenging thing ever. “Uncle, you must hold it! Don’t let go!”

“Okay, okay, just trust me...”

A slightly salty and cold wind blew through the old streets of the lower city, rolling up fallen leaves and flying dust among the low, dilapidated buildings. Matching this dreary mood were the dark clouds looming overhead, giving this neighborhood an ominous and heavy atmosphere. Yet, despite this, the jingling bell and giggling here brought a ray of life to the street.

Nearby, a black vintage car had just stopped in the open space around the corner when this was happening. Mr. Morris had just stepped out of the vehicle in his short top hat and long overcoat. At first the old historian only had the antique shop in his eye, but as the uncle and niece were practicing out in the open, his attention was soon drawn toward the sound.

It’s such a warm scene, a child and her guardian spending time together as a family. As an outsider, he shouldn’t be involving the innocent. However, he also remembered his own daughter after she visited. Heidi only spent an afternoon here that day, and the protection had been activated. As a father, he couldn’t turn a blind eye when something posed a danger to his only child.

“May wisdom give me insight, enlighten my mind, see the truth, and see through the fog...” Morris whispered this prayer after pulling out a monocle from his pocket. He placed the item over one of his eyes to let the blessing work.

Immediately, Morris fell into a trance as he stared in the direction of the antique shop, the runes on the frame glowing due to the magic.

“May wisdom give me insight...”

He whispered the chant again and clamped the monocle onto one of his eyes...

This scene repeated again and again for several times until a gush of the cold wind changed the sequence.

Shivering, Morris rubbed his shoulders out of reflex to warm up. That's when he finally noticed, the bracelet on his wrist. It should have twelve colored stones when he brought it out. He remembered this clearly. However, the bracelet now only had eight stones left. Four were missing!

Freezing as if struck by thunder, Morris found his heart pounding in fear as his blood turned cold and numb. He knew what this meant, and as if on cue to his horror, the giggling delight of a girl's voice caught his ear.

“Uncle, you mustn't let go! Ah, it's crooked... The bike is going to fall!”

A middle-aged man with a gentle voice replied happily: “I'm holding it, don't pedal so hard. You can straighten it back if you keep the handlebar straight. Now slowly pedal while keeping your posture. See, you're not falling.”

“You mustn't let go! I'm going now!”

“Don't worry, I'm right behind you.”

Unlike the two voices, Morris's ears were hearing more than just a simple conversation. In addition to the niece and uncle's, he also heard the static sound of countless murmurs mixed within.

Rigidly turning his head, the old historian's gaze eventually fell upon the open space in front of the antique shop.

Strong warning signs welled up from his soul, and the bracelet of the remaining eight stones made a low and strange rumbling as if whimpering. Then each stone became scorching hot, trying vainly to pull a drowning

man back to the surface. Of course, Morris also fought the temptation to look, but his body was having none of it.

That's when he saw it. The madly wriggling vortex of light and shadow, a crumpled mirror that seemed to reflect all of time and space simultaneously. It's a giant, a huge being comprising of starlight in the form of a human carefully bent over to support a certain...

Honestly, if Morris hadn't seen it himself, he would certainly not believe it. Right now, that being was helping an arc-shaped flame ride a bike!

Then, the whole world went quiet for the old historian as his consciousness faded into darkness.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 177

Chapter 177 “Critical Point”

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After a loud bang, the whole world fell silent.

Morris felt his consciousness drifting as if he had completely detached from his body. He didn't know where he was, what year it was, and even for a split moment, he had even forgotten his own identity. In his mind, the old scholar only saw endless nothingness that's surrounded by a turbulence of light and shadow.

It took Morris a very, very long time to reassemble his fragmented soul. Then, he remembered everything – his name, place of living, job, and why he's visiting the antique shop today after learning something had nearly corrupted his daughter.

The answer was right in front of him: this family was from subspace!

Countless roars and harsh noises gushed forward like it's tearing the earth apart at the thought. He had just mended his soul, and now, he's about to be torn asunder just as fast. However, it's at the critical moment that a swirling mass of fog swept over him from every direction, shielding his senses from the chaos.

This layer of fog was called ignorance and stupidity. One of the blessings bestowed upon him by the God of Wisdom Lahem. Using this breathing room, Morris finally had the time to think and look around. From the act, he saw it, a flickering glimmer beyond the endless fog.

It was a glimmer of light formed by many large and small light sources. In the center was a red light, which was the size of a human head surrounded by dozens of small blue, green, and red lights. It's like some kind of matrix, flashing rapidly without order. Yet, it somehow contained some logic and rhythm to it..."

These regularly flickering gleams became the anchor point that completely stabilized Morris's mind among the countless turbulent flows of light and shadow. Eventually, he also realized what these flickering gleams were after a moment of astonishment – he's confronting Lahem, the God of Wisdom himself!

Every university and laboratory of the Truth Academy always has the exact identical depiction of Lahem within the sacred codex. It's described that the God of Wisdom doesn't take a human form; instead, he's a series of shimmering lights beyond the boundaries of the fog.

"Lord!" Morris stirred with intense emotions as he quickly kneeled in servitude, "Are you here to guide me?"

Those flickering "lights" did not respond to the old scholar; instead, the lights issued a low sonic tremor that directly entered the old historian's head.

"Return, contact, understand, pass on..."

"You..." Morris stared at the light in astonishment. He couldn't understand Lahem's will, but the elusive god of wisdom did not allow him to inquire further.

A strong sense of rejection swept over his soul in the next second, bouncing him right out of this chaotic and terrible space.

His body shook, and his brain seemed to boil due to the overload of information that entered his senses at once – traffic sound, distant bells, blowing wind, and the bicycle chime. Then there was the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, the concerned voice of a girl that sounded vaguely like his student's.

“Mr. Morris?! Why are you here... Are you alright?”

Morris raised his head in a daze and saw Nina standing in front of him, but in the next second, the girl transformed into an arcing flame surrounded by ashes swirling around the figure!

Realizing it's no dream, Morris stiffly turned to the side and met the twinkling giant's gaze. The being was as chaotic as he recalled with those eyes exuding the power of subspace, but the facial outline had turned into a friendly middle-aged man showing concern for him.

The streets in the distance weren't normal either – they were shaking like an earthquake. The ground under his feet also squirmed like that of flesh. The door and windows in the antique shop had all become swirling black holes. Then there's the sky... Morris had no idea how it's possible, but the entire dark weather had become a sea of flame, constantly burning, churning, and spewing occasional amorphous limbs of screeching banshees bound within that hellscape.

Nearly fainting again at what he's seeing, Morris lowered his head with great difficulty and looked at his wrist. He's still wearing the protective bracelet from the God of Wisdom, but this time, there's only four beads left!

Of all the unfortunate things to befall him today, there's one good news: the beads had stopped crumbling into dust. Whatever madness invading his soul had been kept at bay so far, and now, he's able to perceive the truth. At least, until the beads all crumbled into dust and the madness took his soul away.

He's an old scholar so Morris didn't take long to judge his current condition – he's at the critical junction point of order and madness thanks to Lahem's protection. He may recover afterward, or he may find himself corrupted beyond repair and transform into an actual monster. Whatever the case may be, Morris had no say in it, that much he knew.

While Morris was thinking hard and slowly, Nina and Duncan were also eyeing the old historian with concern. It's clear the school teacher wasn't in a good state.

They were practicing with the bike earlier when they suddenly saw Morris standing in the clearing next to them. Originally Nina wanted to run over to say hello, but when she was halfway over there, she noticed that the expression on the old gent's face had gotten weird and freaky.

Dullness, trance, unresponsiveness to the outside world, like falling asleep while standing with your eyes open.

"It couldn't be... Did he suddenly come down with dementia?" Duncan muttered without confidence. Then reaching out with a hand to shake Morris back to reality, he turned to Nina after getting no response: "Has your teacher ever fallen into a daze like this in school?"

"No," Nina shook her head and said as she stepped forward to support the old historian's arm, "Teacher has always been in good health, so how could he suddenly develop dementia!"

"We can't be sure about old folks," Duncan grabbed Morris's other arm, then glanced up at the sky, "and let's not talk outside. See, the sky's about to rain. Let's help your teacher inside first before he gets soaked."

Nina agreed by nodding. First bringing the dazed Morris inside, the girl swiftly trotted back out and got her bike inside as well. Meanwhile, Duncan had helped the old historian onto a chair next to the counter. The old gent was still stiff, but some light had returned to those eyes that had focused on Duncan's figure.

"Return, contact, understand, pass on..." Morris's last surviving sanity seemed to understand these words as they echoed in his ears.

Is this the will of the God of Wisdom? Have me continue contact with this... existence?

At this point, Duncan's figure had temporarily stabilized into human form through Morris's eye. Although the scene around the old historian is still shaky and squirming like a cave of flesh, it's at least less chaotic than the nothingness he fell into initially. Here, he could still think and feel fear...

This seemingly ordinary “antique store owner” was something that shouldn’t exist in the real world.

His own “student”, the girl who always smiled gently and was always sunny and optimistic, was not a normal human being either.

And he, ordered by Lahem himself, was to continue to stay here and communicate with this “family” despite being on the cusp of falling into madness.

Despite his woes, another crazier and bolder idea was propping up in this historian’s heart: he’s able to peer into subspace, the forbidden zone of mortals!

As someone that’s verse in history, Morris knows all too well what the great of knowledge seekers did in the ancient Kingdom of Crete. Through a lifetime of preparation, potions, and ritual, these brave souls would use their last flicker of life to reach this equilibrium state to peer into the forbidden zone. It’s both a sacrifice and a gift of knowledge to those still living.

And now, Morris was standing on this “battlefield” where countless sages died in eras past.

Slowly, the dazed look of the old gent changed from dullness to determination. Morris was no longer fearful but brave and strong, as all of those sages before him did when confronting evil. They are warriors of the book. They don’t brandish swords or guns, but with knowledge and the book.

He will fight!

“Hello, Mr. Duncan...” The old historian spoke with force as his hand formed a tight ball to subdue the urge to tremble.

Contrary to the combative stance of Morris, Duncan, on the other hand, didn’t know what’s going through the guest’s head and only got creeped out by the powerful gaze that seemed to pierce his flesh.

This old gent... Why is he making such a scary smile?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 178

Chapter 178 “Friendship”

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Duncan kept a careful observation of the old man’s face in front of him right now. He didn’t know what’s wrong with the other guy since he’s no doctor, but even he could tell Morris wasn’t in a good state of health.

“Do you need me to find a doctor?” He asked with concern, “How do you feel now? Is there any dizziness or nausea? Or is it mental trance?”

Morris rubbed his forehead in pain due to Duncan’s voice. Unlike what the shop owner was saying, the old historian was being blasted by tens of thousands of overlapping roaring noises between those words. Like a patient being overloaded, he could only dully nod his head in reply: “I’m fine, just... need a little rest...”

The “existence” in front of me... the being that has its main body in who knows where, was expressing concern for me?

Regardless of the truth, Morris did not dare to think about what was actually under the surface of this concerned being. Maybe there’s a thousand pairs of eyes staring at him, or densely wriggling teeth and tongues ready to chew him apart. In fact, are those words of concern even words of a human being and not murmurs from subspace itself?

At the same time, the old historian had been trying to close his “True Eye” after getting out of the car earlier. It’s the ability granted to the those who followed the God of Wisdom when exploring the supernatural, and now... Morris finally got to experience why they say this blessing was called the greatest and most dangerous of all the blessings given by the four gods.

He failed of course. After opening his True Eye, it cannot be closed for the next while. And what if he closed it? What would that do now with his mind in this messed up state?

Morris dazedly thought for a bit before slowly speaking, “I... just came to take a look, give my thanks... yes, give thanks, for my daughter. Thank you again for your help in the museum last time. She had me...”

He suddenly got stuck like he didn’t know if he should bring up his daughter. After hesitating for several seconds, he somehow came to a decision: “She asked me to deliver a letter over. It’s in my pocket.”

Fumbling around, the old man took out a carefully sealed envelope from his pocket and handed it to Duncan, who promptly received it and opened the package to find a greeting and the report regarding Nina’s mental health.

This was what Heidi summed up after the last hypnotherapy for Nina, which the doc did mention the results would be mailed over at a later date.

“You don’t have to be so polite. In that kind of a situation, giving a helping hand is merely my instinct at work.” Duncan puts away the letter and got all formal, “Do thank Miss Heidi on my behalf. Nina is much better now after the last treatment, and she haven’t had that strange dream lately either.”

Morris nodded, pressed his fingers to his temples, and organized his language while guiding himself not to stare into Duncan’s eyes: “You... are you okay these days?”

“Me? I’m fine,” Duncan felt a little baffled by the question. In fact, he’s finding it strange that the old scholarly gent would open the topic in this fashion, “Healthy, full of energy, and in a good mood – except that today’s bad weather is a little depressing, there is nothing bad.”

Weather?

This small change in the weather can still make an evil god feel “depressed”? Is this a new joke that has recently become popular in subspace?

Morris found his mental state gradually getting better and could even mutter the protest in his head.

“Uncle! I put my bike away and closed the shop door! It’s getting windy outside... How is Mr. Morris?” Nina’s yelled over the corner where she was busy with the bike.

“He’s much better now, but he’s unable to tell me where he’s feeling unwell.” Duncan leans backward and saw his niece trotting over, “Why don’t you stay with Mr. Morris for a bit. I can send a telegram or something to Miss Heidi later...”

“No, no, no, I’m fine,” before Duncan could finish, Morris had raised his voice and waved his hand. “Don’t let her know. I’m just a bit old and need a little rest.”

Duncan was taken aback by the old gentleman’s sudden and somewhat intense reaction. He eyed Morris up and down. After confirming the other party’s state and attitude, he nodded: “Okay, then I won’t go. Nina, go upstairs and make some soup, a hot meal might make Mr. Morris feel better.”

Nina blinked, a little confused as she glanced between Duncan and her teacher. For some reason, she got this strange vibe hovering in the room that she couldn’t put words into. Nevertheless, she still obeyed like a good girl: “Okay!”

The girl ran briskly up the stair and quickly faded from their ears.

After Nina left, Morris felt the mental pressure slightly receding. Although this relief was almost insignificant compared to the huge pressure brought on by Duncan, he still breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the old man, who deals with history all day, was quiet again to organize the wording in his voice: “Was my performance just now out of place?”

Duncan's gaze never left the old gent's figure. At first he only assumed the other party wasn't feeling well, hence the odd behavior. However, he's starting to get a hint of familiarity in the old man's behavior... He couldn't quite put it where so replied casually: "Yes, just a little bit. So, what's going on?"

Morris hesitated for a few seconds again before speaking in a low and cautious voice: "In my profession, one is often more sensitive to the spirits due to what we work with."

He merely wanted to test the water, to see what type of attitude this being from subspace held. Was he coming with kindness, or malice?

Duncan frowned immediately after hearing the other party's seemingly meaningful words, then suddenly, he knew what that familiarity was all about!

Morris's strange behavior also manifested in another acquaintance he knew... it's Dog, the dark hound!

The undead hound was a demon gifted with the ability of seeing the truth. It's also the main reason Dog would act so nervous and scared of him, and now, Morris was behaving in the exact same manner!

Faintly guessing at what this meant, Duncan promptly peered into the old historian's eyes for the answer: "You see something you shouldn't, right?"

Morris hissed at being caught.

But in the next second, the expected end did not come. On the contrary, he once again felt that the mental pressure he was under rapidly decreasing to the extent that's bearable even for a mortal without Lahem's protection!

This was the doing of Duncan. Without a word, the ghost captain had transferred his master consciousness back to the Vanished. What's controlling the shell inside the antique shop now was merely a wisp of his true essence, just like a remote-controlled drone.

“Is it better now?” Duncan’s low, gentle voice sounded from the side, waking Morris up from the momentary relief trance.

The old gent quickly raised his head and saw Duncan’s stable, clear, and harmless human form. In addition, he also noticed that the surrounding environment had stabilized through the corner of his eye.

The chaotic light and shadow are gone, the noise gradually subsided, the torn houses back to normal, the flowing flames gone, and the creeping and distorting darkness nowhere to be found—his mind was rapidly recovering, and the dangerous critical state of madness in his head was showing signs of improvement.

He looked at Duncan in disbelief, who nodded apologetically: “Apologies, I really didn’t expect a human to have such ‘good eyes’. Before this, the only one to ever see the true me was a shadow demon, and that’s only because he had a gift.”

“I... I’m much better,” Morris gulped as allowed his senses to return to normality. He could feel his heartbeat ready to explode due to the rush of the confrontation. Regardless of his woes, the fact that he’s capable of thinking was a boon to analyze the situation from a logical standpoint. “I... alas, I didn’t expect to see your true appearance. These years of living away from my faith have left me careless...”

Duncan didn’t pay attention to the muttering behind Morris’s words. Instead, the ghost captain was running his brain on how to handle this meeting and the way to end it. This great historian wasn’t Dog that he could just muscle into submission. That’s not only rude and impudent on his part, Duncan also didn’t want to go that route.

“I’m curious,” he said suddenly in thought, “why are you able to see me?”

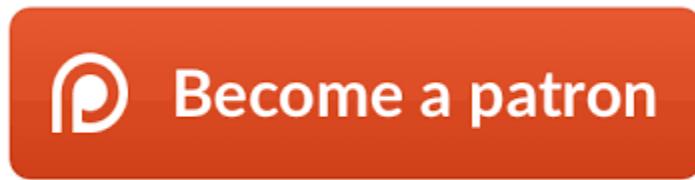
“I...” Morris opened his mouth, hesitated, then decide to speak the truth, “I am a follower of Lahem, the God of Wisdom.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 179

Chapter 179 “Feeling Guilty”

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Duncan recalled back to what he saw in the books.

Lahem, the God of Wisdom, one of the four gods who sheltered the world in the Deep Sea Age. Like the Goddess of Storms and the Lord of Death, this god also wields two contradictory powers at the same time – he’s the giver of wisdom and also the overseer of foolishness.

The number of followers in this religion was small, and they often needed to undergo a rigorous examination to qualify for conversion. However, once they do, the believers would instantly receive both blessings after converting to this deity.

One was wisdom, which enables a mortal to gain insight into the truth, to acquire knowledge, to understand the workings of all things more easily, and to detect truths that may interfere with their own fate.

The second was foolishness, which could hold up a barrier called “ignorance” to keep the pollution and temptations of subspace away. Bluntly said, it’s a blessing to keep the user from the other world since foolishness couldn’t understand danger.

With Nina busy working in the kitchen upstairs, the sound of passing cars and horses on the street outside, the antique shop became particularly comfortable under this quiet atmosphere. It’s under this mood that Duncan sat behind the counter and crossed his arms to study the old scholar in front of him.

The protection of the God of Wisdom is indeed a good thing, but it is clear that his followers face greater dangers on a daily basis because of their professional habits and instinct for knowledge.

“I’m afraid only those who are the most outstanding and favored by the gods of wisdom can...” Morris rubbed his head as it ached due to the shrill voices from Duncan’s presence, “You might find this a bit ironic... but most of the Lahem believers do not meet the qualifications of being taken away by you...”

“Oh, so you’re exceptionally blessed,” Duncan muttered with a slightly strange expression, especially when he said the word ‘blessed’ due to how awkward it sounded. “The blessings you people have here is truly terrible... Hold on, how come you were alright the last time you came?”

Morris was a little surprised and taken aback. He didn’t know if Duncan was truly in the dark or playing ignorant with bad taste, but in the current situation, he didn’t dare to diverge his thoughts.

Answering directly to avoid being tempted: “Even the blessed Lahem believers don’t always open the ‘True Eye’. I didn’t use any of my powers when I came before, and this time...”

The old man smiled bitterly and pointed to his eyeballs – the monocle used to enhance the ritual effect had been removed, but one of his eyeballs remained faintly white with a floating halo seen between the whites and pupil.

Now this intrigued Duncan: “... So you can’t stop this effect at will?

“..... I tried to no avail,” Morris shook his head, “and even if it is successfully terminated, what does it matter at this point. I have already seen it... what you look like.

“..... Apologies, actually, I didn’t mean to cause you the pain.” Duncan was still feeling sorry and lowered his stance, “Will you be able to recover after you go back? Or do you need some special treatment?”

“I...” Morris opened his mouth, feeling very much conflicted due to the interaction. In his earlier years of studies, he had imagined himself one day encountering a shadow of subspace at some point due to all his research. The difference though was that he didn’t expect the shadow to be so intense and strange.

“I’m fine,” the old gentleman finally shook his head, “I’m much better now that you retracted your aura... I think I should be fine.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. It seems I will have to be more careful in the future. If there are more good-eyed individuals like you in the city then things will get very troublesome.” Duncan nodded, and then asked with more curiosity, “Then it’s safe to assume you didn’t visit today only to deliver the medical report? What are you looking for?”

A rocking thud hit Morris inside.

When he met Duncan’s gaze, all he saw was an ordinary middle-aged face with a little curiosity and concern, but around that face though, between the shelves and such, the environment was starting to twist and warp little by little.

It wasn’t until the other party’s voice suddenly sounded again that the distortion in Morris’s vision returned to its original state.

“You’re hesitating, you’re having concerns, and you don’t want to answer this question.” Duncan was able to read the other person’s emotions from the eyes alone, “Is it related to Miss Heidi?”

“How do you know...”

“Miss Heidi is a psychiatrist and seems to be a believer of Lahem. Though her experience doesn’t seem to be as deep as yours,” Duncan replied lightly. “Now that I think about it, the last time she left with Miss Vanna, she did act a bit strange... Considering your reaction to my question just now, it’s not hard to connect the dots.”

“..... It’s indeed as you said,” Morris sighed, knowing that he could no longer hide it. “After Heidi returned that night, I found that her mental protection had been bypassed. At that time, I only thought there was something dangerous in this antique shop, I didn’t expect...”

He sighed again and looked at the already frowning Duncan on the other side.

Heidi... The young psychiatrist merely gave Nina a hypnotherapy in the antique shop, yet her mental protection was pierced? I didn’t know about it at all, and Heidi herself didn’t seem to have found out either!

There’s unease in Morris’s face as he watched the other man across the counter. He didn’t know what the ghost captain was thinking to be so lost in thought, nor did he dare to ask so casually.

Taking advantage of this short but quiet moment to repair his damaged mind, the old scholar also took the opportunity to secretly glance at the stone bracelet on his wrist.

There are still four colored stones, the sign that Lahem’s blessing remains intact.

This gave a breath of relief to the old scholar.

“She doesn’t know anything, right?” It’s then Duncan looked up and asked.

“That’s right, Heidi doesn’t know anything,” Morris said immediately. Only when it came to matters related to his daughter did his mind became clear, “She didn’t even find out that her protective charm was damaged, let alone that I am here today...”

“Then I won’t bother her. As my apology, consider the debit with the museum settled between us,” Duncan said politely.

Speaking of this, he paused, and then thought of another question that roused his curiosity: “So, can you describe it to me in detail? Describe what you just saw, if it’s not too troublesome of course.”

Morris didn't react for a while, forcing Duncan to explain further: "I'm curious about what I look like in the eyes of a different 'observer'. Looking in the mirror will not solve this problem."

Duncan was really curious about this matter, and understanding his "true form" in the eyes of different people may also help to master his special powers and uncover the secrets of this body.

Morris hesitated for a moment. The inhuman horror he saw at the door of the antique store once again appeared in his mind, causing the sanity that had quelled to loosen again.

But under Duncan's direct gaze, he gulped and slowly spoke in a low voice: "I saw... that you are a giant filled with chaotic starlight, standing on the twisted and grotesque street while supporting Nina. She's an arc-shaped steam of flame constantly erupting..."

Duncan originally nodded slowly when he heard the first half of the sentence, thinking that his image was indeed worthy of his reputation in the Boundless Sea. However, the second half of the sentence sent him into shock as his eyes popped. "Oomph! What are you talking about? What did you say Nina is in your eyes?!"

Morris got taken aback by the strong reaction, but didn't bother to think about why: "I... saw an arcing flame that was erupting violently... Is there anything wrong with this?"

Duncan: "..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 180

Chapter 180 “Historians Talk About History”

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What's the problem? This is a big problem!!

Duncan glared at the old gentleman in front of him. However, he soon realized that Morris did not understand what the gushing flame meant or what it implicated. In fact, the old teacher most likely regarded Nina as another “transcendent being” that ran out of subspace and nothing more.

“Nina, she...” Morris sounded a little hesitant due to the worry for his student.

“Nina is different from me. She’s an ordinary person, always has.” Duncan shook his head and slowly grew severe in his expression: “She doesn’t know what is special about her. As for the flame you mentioned... that could be ‘something else’.”

“I... don’t quite understand.”

Duncan eyed the old gent some more. Once he’s confirmed there’s no lie, he finally decides to drop the subject and go around the sun fragment. “Do you know anything about the so-called ‘real sun god’ worshiped by the Suntists?”

“Real Sun God?” Morris frowned, not knowing why the other party would suddenly lead the topic here. “Of course, there are quite a few texts about this subject. Those cultists existed for far too long, so many have tried to research this topic.”

“The true sun god is what they call their God, but the rest of us don’t call it that. We usually refer to it as the Black Sun or Dark Sun God. Actually, there’s a third name for it from some older texts by ancient scholars. They called it the Creeping Sun Wheel.”

“Creeping Sun Wheel?” Duncan raised an eyebrow. He had heard of the Black Sun, but the name “Creeping Sun Wheel” was the first time. Also, this name made him recall the incident with the sun mask – a glorious dead eyeball covered by dead limbs constantly roasted by flames.

“Yes, outside the professional field, this name is rarely mentioned because this is a record handed down from the ancient kingdom. Its original manuscripts were written in Cretan script, which tends to draw certain mystical tendencies from unwanted shadows.”

Morris nodded like a lecturing teacher and seemed to have forgotten he’s still talking to a great being like Duncan. In fact, the buzzing interfering with his brain had stopped as well.

“The ancient kingdom of Crete...” Duncan was surprised, “Those cultists actually have such a long history?!”

“..... Yes, while this is unbelievable, those heretics do date back to the heydays of the ancient kingdom, surpassing even Vision 001 when it rose from the sea....” Morris paused to ponder if he should continue, “Actually, the four main churches have always been reluctant to discuss the subject, but when you consider the age of Vision 001, the Black Sun is in fact older...”

Duncan didn’t say anything for a while because he didn’t expect to get this bombshell so suddenly. Turns out the four churches are the blasphemous ones, and the Suntists are the actual righteous cause if going by status and age...

After half a minute of silence, Duncan suddenly spoke up, “..... So, the preaching from the Suntists is true. Before the Deep Sea Age, it was their ‘Lord’ who was shining on this world.”

“There are many factions and theories in academia, and this is the most divisive of all the deviant claims. You can even say it’s half a foot on the border of heresy,” Morris sighed, “but the existence of many manuscripts in the Kingdom of Crete makes it impossible to avoid this question.”

“Let’s just assume those cultists held some truth and leave it at that.” Duncan shook his head slightly, “But that doesn’t change the fact that their beliefs are now very dangerous to the current world. After all, no matter what their Lord was like before the Deep Sea Age, his current state is...”

Morris pricked up his ear at the last bit and grew sharp: “Hold on, your meaning...”

“I happened to meet it once,” Duncan felt it was necessary to come up with some weighty information to get this gentleman’s attention. He had already gained so much knowledge from this scholar. If this friendship were to last, he must also give something in return.

“How to say it... That thing was so miserable that I couldn’t bear to watch. There’s no hope of recovery for sure, and whatever act these Suntists are doing, it will only push their Lord toward a crazier and twisted direction.”

He paused and glanced at the old gentleman opposite to him: “Do you want me to tell you what he looks like now? Maybe it will...”

Morris instantly exclaimed and cut Duncan off: “No need!”

Immediately afterward, he noticed how offensive his behavior was and quickly coughed to clear the air. “This is not a knowledge I should be exposed to.”

“..... Oh yes, apologies,” Duncan returned to his senses and quickly waved the subject off. “Then let’s not discuss this topic in the future. So, about the Black Sun faith, what achievements have they made throughout history? Have they ever succeeded anywhere after performing so much human sacrifice?”

“The Suntists caused a lot of damage. There’s no question about that. As for resurrecting the Black Sun, I can only recall a few records with wide-ranging effects.”

“The earliest records are at the end of the chaotic era. Due to the long-term accumulation of a vast number of historical legacies after the collapse of the ancient kingdom, several city-states continued to break out into fighting and famine. The Suntists took advantage of this void to create a big blood rite within a city-state called ‘Charon’. They summoned a huge fireball that hovered over the island for five full days. At the end of it all, the entire city had become one big piece of glass.”

“Another time occurred in the era of the classical era. The exact cause is no longer known, and the result was that several smaller city-states on the edge of the civilized world disappeared overnight. Witness records show huge luminous fissures in the sky, in which the Creeping Sun Wheel rose and stripped the ocean of these islands with gravitational force.”

“The most recent one occurred at the beginning of the new calendar, and it was also the strangest one because there was no evidence left of the incident. In fact, no one even remembers what exactly happened and where...”

Duncan listened with a stunned look and couldn’t resist asking for more: “No one can remember its occurrence? Then how did everyone know the Suntists were behind such a large-scale event?”

“That’s the weird part. This is already beyond the field of what most scholars could dabble in. However, my status within the Truth Academy allowed me to peer into some relevant information within the library.” Morris nodded and then made a grim face, “That event did occur. There’s no question. Because on one random morning, a message suddenly appeared on the most sacred artifact of the Flame Bearers – the ‘Chronology Pillar’.”

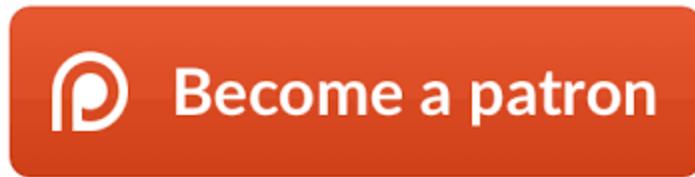
“The line refers to a city-state that does not exist at all, and there is only one sentence in total: Wilheim’s last message – they finally summoned the Black Sun from history. We’ve failed.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 181

Chapter 181 “History, Pollution, and the Black Sun”

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A message that suddenly appeared on the “Chronology Pillar”, a city-state that no one knew about, the battles that no one remembered, the defeats and sacrifices that no one saw, a history that did not exist in anyone’s memory, and after its demise, there was only a trace of its existence left in the world.

And even if the message amounted to nothing more than an extremely short sentence, it’s likely at the cost of countless lives from those Flame Bearers to transmit this message.

After listening to Morris’s explanation, Duncan fell into deep thought due to the shock.

He’s got a general idea of what this faith did according to the Flame Codex he read.

Unlike the storm, wisdom, and death church, the Flame Bearers followed a teaching that’s much more ethereal and harder to grasp: its history.

History was the memory of civilization. If history becomes corrupted, so does the memory of civilization itself. When that occurs, even reality itself could be bent to the corruptor’s will. Control history, control the world. To combat this threat, Flame Bearers are constantly working behind the scenes to fight against those who pose a threat. They are often forgotten, often never seen, and often perished within history itself. Nevertheless, their impact continues to be felt today in the form of everyday living.

So who did they worship? The “Eternal Flame” Ta Ruijin, a giant who guards against the corruption of history, the embodiment of civilization’s memory. According to the Flame Codex, the giant integrated the first flame created by mortals into its body. Through this flame, it records the correct history and grows with it in size, and once Ta Ruijin grows big enough, he will be immune to corruption and safeguard history in its entirety.

Of course, the origin story was nothing more than bullocks in Duncan’s view. He wouldn’t dismiss the Flame Bearers did work to combat the corruption of history, but the flame giant was a whole different matter.

“So they did something like that before already...” Duncan muttered thoughtfully.

“What did you say?” Morris didn’t process the comment and asked, “Did what before already? What do you mean...”

“It’s nothing, just talking to myself.” Duncan shook his head and met the old gent’s gaze with a certain severity, “The intel you brought is very important.”

“The intel I brought?” Morris now got really confused, “You mean the message? The one that appeared on the Flame Bearer’s pillar?”

Duncan nodded with a frown: “But there’s one thing I’m curious about, did the Black Sun have the power to corrupt history?”

“This...” Morris hesitated, obviously unsure due to this not being within the scope of his expertise. “I am not very clear about the authority of the Black Sun, which is probably only understood by those experts who specialize in fighting against evil gods. But as far as I know, the Black Sun should theoretically not have this ability...”

While Duncan nodded and continued to dwell on the issue with unease plastered all over his face, Morris took the time to observe the subspatial shadow sitting opposite of himself.

This “Mr. Duncan” has always been polite and patient. He likes to discuss academic issues with me and ask questions from time to time, just like the last time I visited the antique shop. Now, he seems interested in the Flame Bearers and their mission of preserving history. But why though? Does he suspect someone’s polluting history? Is this the reason why Lahem ordered me to get into contact with this being? What is his relationship with Lahem? What is his stance on the order of this world? Am I stuck in the middle of games between gods?

The chaotic thoughts rose and fell in Morris’s mind, forcing him to become more cautious in what he should do and what role he might be playing in this mission. In fact, Morris got this inkling sensation that Lahem was watching the conversation through him as an avatar right now. He didn’t know why, but that’s what he’s getting.

While the old gentleman was having wild thoughts, Duncan finally ended his musings and looked up, half curious and half lamenting: “I say, those Suntists have done so many bad things in the past. Doesn’t anyone want to do something about them? Like eradicating the group?”

“How can it be that easy to eliminate an evil god’s faith?” Morris subconsciously shook his head, “Heretical beliefs are like mercury entering the body, pervasive and permeating. No matter how much they are eliminated, new ones will always be sprouting. In the end, the main source of the problem remains with the evil god. Until we remove the core of the problem, the branches that spawn from it will keep coming.”

As Morris explained, he sighed harder at the situation: “Most individuals are good people at heart. They work hard and live to their fullest, but because of a single unexpected setback in their life, they would fall from grace and touch upon forbidden knowledge. You see? Any ordinary citizen can become a heretic by donning the black robe of the evil gods. How can the authorities clean them out when you have an open invitation like that?”

Speaking of this, the old gentleman subconsciously glanced at Duncan again with a strange glint in his eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Duncan appeared offended at the accusing look.

“With all due respect,” Morris took a gentle breath and plucked up the courage, “but shouldn’t you know this all too well? About a mortal being corrupted?”

Spreading his arms out, Duncan shakes his head in denial: “How am I supposed to know? I’m a law-abiding citizen. Even in my free time, I will report on the closest heretic to the authorities.”

Morris: “...?”

The older man obviously didn’t buy it and nearly choked.

Not minding the accusation, Duncan figured he better shift the conversation back on track less this spiral out of hand. “But I understand what you mean. Unless we can directly target the evil god, their influence will never wane. However, something is bothering me. Is the Black Sun’s influence really that strong? I’ve seen its lifeless state. Even when it communicated with me, it had to do it through a mental echo instead of speaking. How does a being that’s so weak able to pollute the world?”

The corners of Morris’s mouth visibly twitched: “No matter how bad the state of the Black Sun is, it is only weak in your eye... Unfortunately, we, mortals, are not so durable...”

Duncan felt an indescribable urge to rebuttal that claim and say he’s human too. However, he reconsidered the idea after taking the mental and physical health of the old historian into account. Besides, spouting something like that would only make him look weird and awkward when the other side already saw his true appearance.

It’s then Morris seemed to think of something else. After a pause, he added: “But your doubts may also point to the crux of the matter. If the state of the Black Sun is really as bad as you say, his pollution of the world really shouldn’t be so strong, at least it shouldn’t make the Suntists this tricky to

handle... All this may perhaps have something to do with the existence of those sun ‘heirs’.”

“The offsprings of the sun...” muttered Duncan thoughtfully. His mind couldn’t help but think of the tall, thin black shadow that had appeared in Shirley’s dream before.

Although there was no clear evidence, he always felt that the thing was probably related to the legendary Sun offsprings.

The Black Sun has long fallen and can no longer shine on this world, but the heirs of the Black Sun continue to this day. If there’s any power causing the influence, it would be the next of kin.

But another key problem remains unsolved: the Black Sun doesn’t have the power to pollute history, and its descendants most certainly couldn’t.

Yet, the forgotten city-state of “Wilheim” did send a message that the Black Sun has returned from history. That meant history has been polluted at least once. In that case, who’s helping the Suntists to resurrect their god?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 182

Chapter 182 “A Peaceful Tomorrow Will Still Come”

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The atmosphere in the shop had fallen eerily silent after the last exchange. Morris was still seated in the chair, but his mind was a fluctuating mess of reverberating murmurs like a broken record. Sadly, he couldn’ just flee before this Mr. Duncan. Until the subspatial shadow was satisfied with the conversation, he must endure!

“Last question, if something is really polluting history, how do we solve this problem?”

“Is there really someone... contaminating history?” Morris raised his head sluggishly and faced Duncan in confusion, “Who are you referring to?”

“No matter who it is,” Duncan said lightly, “it could be subspace, it could be the Black Sun, it could be other heretical gods, in short, if something is trying to pollute history, how can it be solved? How do the Flame Bearers cope with such a crisis?”

Morris was stunned for a moment, shaking his head hesitantly: “This... I’m sorry, I can’t answer you. This is beyond my knowledge, and even the Flame Bearers, I’m afraid only the most powerful saints or chosen ones know the secrets of history. Most of the Flame Bearers, like the guardians of the Storm Church, are only doing daily work such as eradicating heresy and purifying pollution; after all, real historical pollution is almost impossible...”

“..... You’re right, my question is too in-depth so it is difficult for you to answer these questions,” Duncan sighed softly. He realized that his

curiosity had spiraled out of hand, and he might have unintentionally caused harm for the old gent by adding psychological pressure. “Then let’s stop here today.”

An unprecedeted sense of relaxation suddenly swept over Morris’s mind, allowing the poor fella to heave a sigh of relief.

His mind has been groggy since just now, his thinking intermittent, and there are many questions lingering in his head that couldn’t be organized. At this time, Duncan’s willingness to end the conversation was a godsend.

Meanwhile, the shop owner had turned away to glance out the window.

In terms of hour, it was still a while before sunset, but the gloomy sky had made it completely dark outside. Even the gas street lamps had lit up in advance, illuminating the gloomy streets in contrast to the dark clouds overhead.

“It’s a bad day,” Duncan withdrew his gaze and looked at the old gent, “do you want to stay? Nina should have finished prepping dinner.”

Morris’s heart suddenly pounded as he recalled a popular phrase in the Truth Academy, which was used to describe those scholars who chased the most crazy and legendary knowledge – swimming in subspace, bullshitting in front of evil gods, watching the gods fight, and rubbing the soup bowl together at the dinner table.

Let’s pretend this antique shop was subspace, and let’s pretend Mr. Duncan’s rank was equal to the gods, as let’s pretend this subspatial shadow was having a bout against the God of Wisdom, then Morris most certainly has now achieved three of the four wonders from that popular phrase…

All that’s missing was an exchange of the soup bowl!

“Actually...” Morris carefully watched his phrasing.

“Actually, you want to leave, right?” Duncan nodded without waiting for the old man to finish. He’s not so clueless to be this blind, “Although I want

to say that the weather is bad and you should stay for a bowl of soup, I'm sure you much prefer to get some relief from the pressure of being in my presence?"

Morris quickly got up and nodded: "Frankly, every minute is torment. Of course, I don't mean to offend, it's just..."

"No need to explain, I understand," Duncan waved his hand with a slightly helpless expression on his face. "If we can change to a more relaxed environment of meeting, then I would love to chat some more about history and the gods. I'm very interested in knowledge. Of course, there is no malicious interest on my part. But from the look of things, this meeting won't work."

"Truthfully, I had fallen into a trance several times already and nearly forgot the truth I saw... Your curiosity and friendliness are true like a friend, and the first time I ever met someone as friendly as you..."

The old man felt honestly tied inside. He wanted to find more positive points to say, but he didn't have the vocabulary in his mindset that's fitting.

"If you can't find the right wording then don't, there's no need to force yourself. Just don't report me after leaving, okay?" Duncan chuckled at the troubled historian.

"No, no, no! I would never do that!" Morris waved his hand again and again when he heard this, "You did save Heidi's life regardless of the truth, and you have always showed a friendly attitude, I have no reason to report it. Not to mention..."

The old man suddenly hesitated, smiled bitterly and spread out his hand: "Looking at your appearance, I don't think you're afraid of anyone reporting you..."

"It would make me feel troubled though," Duncan said casually, "but it's probably not a big problem."

Then he paused and glanced up in the direction of the second floor: “If the weather improves tomorrow, Nina will go to school as usual.”

“Nina...” Morris blinked, causing the old historian to remember the flaming arc he saw. With a vague guess of the truth, he decides to muster up the courage and ask, “Nina, she... is she part of what those Suntists worship...”

He didn’t get to finish because Duncan had started shaking his head.

“Nina is Nina, you don’t have to be curious about the secrets behind her,” Duncan said softly. “Just treat her as usual. That way nothing will happen.”

“..... I see,” Morris lowered his head slightly and felt a sense of great relief after hearing Duncan’s statement. “Then it’s time for me to leave. Please say goodbye to Nina on my behalf. My current state... is not very suitable for ‘seeing’ her again.”

Duncan nods and got up to personally see the old gent out as proper etiquette.

There are almost no pedestrians left on the streets, only the glow of the street lamps illuminating the cloudy city that’s starting to pick up wind and frost.

Morris tightened his coat at the cold temperature and pressed the top hat he was wearing, but before walking to his car, he couldn’t help but glance back at Duncan. It’s still the peacefully smiling man of the shop, and this time, the streets were no longer twisting and warping in the terrifying manner as it was in the beginning.

“Mr. Duncan,” Morris said suddenly, “you actually like this place, don’t you?”

“Yes, I quite like it here,” Duncan laughed and waved his hand at the old man, “so go home and go safely. Pland will be safe tomorrow, and every day after that.”

Morris tipped his hat off for that as gratitude and immediately entered his parked car on the side of the road.

Duncan didn't turn and go back inside right away; instead, he watched the vehicle depart until it's completely out of sight. He's pondering something in his head after this unexpected meeting.

The first question was whether the old man would report him after he went back...

The conclusion he got was the possibility being extremely small. If he's just an ordinary cultist, or even a slightly more advanced Suntist priest, then Morris would have one hundred percent reported back to the authorities. But today, it seems that his image in the eyes of the other party wasn't an ancient god, but a friendly shadow that just wants to live in the city. This pushed the odds down to zero.

Of course, Duncan had a very good logical reason for that thinking. Unlike the required manpower to exterminate a few cultists or a priest – merely a team of guardians – who could defeat an evil god of subspace? The bishop up in the cathedral? Forget it!

In fact, Morris had better odds of succeeding by reporting this to his God of Wisdom than to the church.

And even without considering all this, Duncan actually didn't care if he's reported.

After all, Vanna the inquisitor, who was at the apex of the guardians in the Storm Church, was honestly quite weak in his eye.

Now, compared to this trivial question, Duncan was actually more concerned about Nina's current state.

A flaming arc that's constantly gushing out fire... This is the “truth” that Morris sees in Nina with the True Eye given to him by the God of Wisdom.

“Sun fragments...” Duncan raised his head and peered up into the dark sky,
“What exactly is the sun in this world...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 183

Chapter 183 “The Invasion After Nightfall”

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“Did the teacher just leave?” Nina came to the first floor and immediately moped after finding Morris had left, “Why didn’t you ask him to stay Uncle? The weather is so bad, and you still let Teacher leave...”

“Any later and it will get dark,” Duncan casually said as he turned to lock the door. Then walking over to the stairs, “He drove over so a little rain won’t hinder him anyways.”

“But Teacher doesn’t seem to be feeling well,” Nina protested as she went upstairs, “he should have rested a little longer...”

Duncan contemplated the idea, thinking that if the old man really rested here for a while then he might’ve felt even worse. But he couldn’t explain it to Nina, so he could only say a few pointless words to fiddle through the subject.

Once inside the kitchen, the pair quickly seated themselves for dinner – Nina had prepared beet soup, toast, vegetable rolls, and sliced ham.

Clearly, the assortment was meant for more than one person.

“If we can’t finish then save the leftovers for the morning,” Nina muttered, then looked up at Duncan curiously, “what did you tell Teacher? I couldn’t hear your conversation while upstairs, but the noise was quite lively...”

Duncan eyed Nina’s lively appearance. As always, she’s bright, happy, and full of life without an ounce of negative air. No matter how he looked at her,

there's no hint of a supernatural entity possessing the girl.

Sun fragment... what exactly is that thing?

Duncan originally thought the item was something tangible, but now, it appears he's jumped to conclusions. Whatever the sun fragment was, it's slumbering inside Nina's body...

"Uncle Duncan?" Nina noticed the weird gaze coming from across the table and squirmed uncomfortably, "Is there something stuck on my face?"

"..... No, nothing." Duncan shook his head and decided to change the topic by ripping a piece of bread, "By the way, have you been feeling any discomfort lately? That weird dream from before... did you reencounter it?"

"No," Nina waved her hand, "I stopped having that weird dream after Miss Heidi gave me that therapy session. I'm feeling full of energy every day."

She paused, then looked at Duncan a little worriedly: "Uncle, what's wrong? Why do I suddenly feel like... you're acting weird? Did you and Mr. Morris talk about... it can't be about my last exam grade..."

"No, don't get weird thoughts. Your teacher didn't visit just to complain about your grades. Eat first."

Nina nods and readily agrees since she's not going to be lectured. She could see something was bothering her uncle but didn't know what.

.....

In the lower city, deep in the dilapidated and dim alleys, the hastily lit gas lamps finally dispelled the surrounding darkness before night completely enveloped these streets. Under this condition, Shirley lay next to the windowsill and stared out into the dark streets with fascination.

"You're looking outside again. What's there to see?" Dog's voice sounded from the side as the chains connecting the pair rattled due to the movement.

“I can’t sleep because it’s early, and there’s nothing to do. It’s boring...” Shirley muttered.

“..... Do you want to go out tomorrow and continue to make trouble for those cultists?”

“.....No, I doubt we will get anything out of it,” Shirley shook her head after thinking about the idea. “I don’t know if the church people really improved their skills, but the cultists in the city seem to have been cleaned out recently. I can’t even smell their stench...”

“The Suntists are indeed mostly gone. Maybe they really have been caught by the authorities.” Dog leaned over and lazily lay at Shirley’s feet, “But I don’t think you’re like this because you’re bored...”

Shirley suddenly rolled her eyes: “Then what else could it be?”

“..... Are you thinking about that side?” Dog raised his head, the shimmering red light flickering from his hollow eye sockets, “Thinking about that warm home, the bright room, and the hot meal. You miss how someone is willing to wake you up in the morning for breakfast, and... maybe you miss spending time with that Nina? Or perhaps, you’re thinking about him?”

“XXX Shut up! You’re so annoying!” Shirley tugged the chain with her right arm and rudely interrupted Dog, “I’m not a crying little baby anymore. How can I be so weak!”

Dog didn’t care about Shirley’s rough reaction: “... Longing for light and warmth is not a weakness. It only proves that you are still human.”

“Eeee~” Shirley suddenly froze, followed by a look of disgust, “Why are you XXX acting so mushy with me all of a sudden? You’re sounding all scholarly as well. I’m still human? Are you praising me or insulting me by saying I haven’t grown bigger after so many years?”

“..... Don’t think that after fusing with me that you’re actually a demon yourself. There is nothing wrong with admitting your human side.” Dog

shook his ugly head, “Besides, don’t forget, it’s not just this chain that connects me to you. I can feel any emotional changes you experience, remember?”

“..... Shut up,” Shirley turned her face away like she’s irritated at being read like an open book, “you don’t have to keep pressing me like this. If you do, I will really go visit Nina tomorrow and bring you along. I’m sure Mr. Duncan will have fun talking with you until you wet your bones!”

Dog finally stopped talking, which only roused another light kick from the girl at the awkward silence.

“Quit fretting about me. I have you don’t I?” Shirley teased.

“You’re mushier than me when you start.” Dog moved away and caused the chains to rattle, “Any more and I might vomit – then there’s going to be a new hole in the floor from the acid.”

Despite their innocent quibbling, the pair obviously enjoyed each other’s company, especially Shirley, who was feeling slightly down from having her life scrambled recently.

It’s good like this. Everything is back on track, and everyone can go back to their lives like before. That warm and peaceful place isn’t for you Shirley, it doesn’t belong to you and is dangerous...

After comforting herself, Shirley heaved a soft sigh to only freeze in the next second.

She sensed something, an ominous and dark-natured presence that’s fast approaching. It’s sending her alarm bells ringing.

Dog also jerked up from his position and took an aggressive stance toward the darkness inside the house. He’s vigilant and ready to strike at anyone or anything that might pop out.

Due to the need to save money, most of the rooms here were dark due to Shirley turning off the oil lamp on the table. Usually, this wouldn’t be an

issue since the light from the street lights would faintly spill over and hit the window. Unfortunately, that seems to have been a mistake tonight – foulness had started to ooze from the cracks in the walls.

“Dog!” Shirley subconsciously tightened the chain in her hand.

“I know,” Dog lets out a low growl simultaneously, “I’m watching! Something is coming... They’re surrounding us... Grooor! What the hell are these things! My eyes are going blurry!”

Before the words from the dark hound could finish, Shirley had noticed the faint light from the street lamps warping and disappearing as if a thick layer of fog had barricaded this room from the outside. Sure enough, even the picture from the window had disappeared, replaced by a murky darkness of swirling nothingness. Once completely isolated, the shadows finally pierced through and converged into several figures opposite of the two occupants inside.

They were dressed in tattered black robes that exposed their thin, wood-like arms, and their waists hung a pitch-black bible that seemed to be drenched in a suspicious dark liquid that’s constantly dripping. But that’s not all though. On each of their chest hung a spiked iron emblem that embodied a pale and creepy white flame.

“Thou shall perish...” The leading black robe raised a finger and pointed it to the stunned-looking girl in the room.

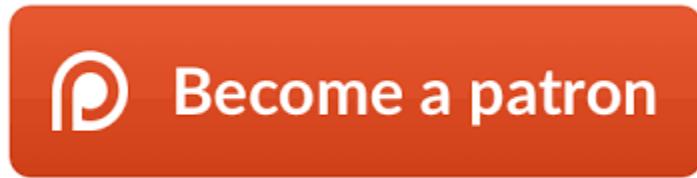
“XXXX He’s an Ender Missionary!!!” Dog’s exclaiming cry was so loud that it knocked Shirley straight back to reality.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 184

Chapter 184 “The Final Attack of the Ender Missionaries”

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The roar of Dog’s broken recorder voice exploded like thunder, echoing in the dilapidated hut and shocking the assailants by sheer magnitude of its shockwave. Then in the following second, something even more shocking occurred with Shirley flipping the chain and pulling the dark hound into her hand to commit a meteoric smash at the nearest Ender!

The girl actually didn’t know much about these Ender Missionaries and only had vague idea that they’re cultists. However, what she did know told her they’re crazier and more extreme than the Suntists by worshipping subspace itself. As to why they’re here for her, Shirley honestly didn’t have a clue. But it didn’t matter. If they want to fight then so be it!

The huge dark hound whizzed through the air like a cannonball and instantly smashed into the nearest “Ender”. After the muffled sound of flesh and blood colliding with bones spilled into the air, the attacker flew out and crashed into the nearest wall, making an audible splat at impact.

Not missing this chance, Shirley promptly pulled the chain back and dragged Dog back to her side and swung at another. Sadly, a sneak only works if it’s done without the foe knowing.

In the ensuing fight, the black robes scattered and avoided further damage – they obviously had more combat experience than those grunts from the Suntists.

“Thou shall perish!” One of the black hood’s point and shout at Shirley after narrowly scraping past Dog’s skeletal head.

“How about you eat my XXX meteor hammer!” Shirley was extremely irritable at the moment and wanted nothing less than smashing the foe into mush.

The girl did just that by taking another swing with a more focused attempt. However, it’s through these new swings of her weapon that she noticed something terribly wrong with her body.

Shirley felt tired, not in a severe manner, but the exhaustion did start to get noticeable. Not only that, there’s also a strange buzzing sound plaguing her head, causing the girl to grow irate and a urge to charge at the enemy regardless of the cost to her own safety.

“My brothers and sisters, the curse of flesh and blood will not take us!” The first Ender that had taken a direct hit suddenly cried out with a chant. His body had started to make a hair-raising crunching sound from the ground as if the bones were being bent and snapped while he crawled up.

Then, as if blessed by the divine prayer, the surrounding Enders all stopped their evasive maneuvers and raised their arms in worship. The way they’re behaving was no different from someone gaining infinite courage and strength.

This shocked Shirley because she was witnessing the changes of these freaks in real time – their skinny figures had begun to expand, twist, and crunch from being bent and extended. First it was the arms that grew longer with the nails turning into wolverine like claws. Then secondly, those legs had bent into an animalistic shape, similar to Dog’s back hind legs to give it more jumping power. Lastly, that face had turned feral with vampiric fangs that extended past the lips. They’re truly more beast than man at this point.

“What kind of thing is this XXXX!” Of course, Shirley did not sit around to let them finish their transformation. Almost simultaneous to their change, the girl had flung her chain in a wide arcing whip at the nearest foe. It made a perfect hit, fracturing bone and snapping tendon at the impact. Although the Ender in question wasn’t killed on the spot, it did interrupt this one’s mutation, meaning one less foe to deal with afterward. Unfortunately, the

drain on her strength had also increased, as well as the urge to violently charge and die with the enemy.

“These Enders are crazy XXXX who voluntarily embraced subspace! Both their words and presence are carriers of pollution!” Dog’s unprecedented impatience suddenly sounded in Shirley’s mind, “Don’t let them continue their prayer! Smash whichever bastard that speaks! And don’t look them in the eye!”

Between the electrifying moment of life and death, a cold glint suddenly shot out from the edge of Shirley’s peripheral vision. She instinctively wanted to dodge, but the bone spear came way too fast and stabbed her right in the arm. This directly hindered the girl’s ability to swing the chain and counterattack, which only got worse by the ever-increasing drain on her stamina.

Taking advantage of this opening, another Ender spread open his arms again and chanted a vicious prayer: “Thou shall not heal...”

“Bang!”

“Get lost you XXXX!” Shirley rounded the crazed bastard’s head with Dog’s own skull, causing a huge splat of brain and blood to smear across the nearest wall. But then in the succeeding exchange, a sharp stinging pain speared into the girl’s back and made her hiss.

A spike made of pure bone had stabbed straight in from Shirley’s back and out through her chest. If the girl’s body hadn’t been toughened up by Dog’s demonic symbiosis, she would’ve surely died right on the spot.

Still, Shirley’s body didn’t fall and involuntarily stumbled forward instead. Alarmed and horrified, Dog promptly got in front of his partner to block the attackers who wanted to pursue, opening his mouth to spew a blast of corrosive black acid. This forced the Enders to back off, leaving Shirley to lean in against the nearest wall for support.

But that didn’t matter for the enemy. The contamination was done on their part. Although a shadow demon’s ability to resist corruption was high,

Shirley was still mortal at her core. First, the muscle tissues would convulse and lose control, then it would be her mind's awareness until everything turns to darkness.

“..... XXXX With so much effort, I only killed three of them...” Shirley spat the excess blood and groaned at her pitiful state.

“It’s not bad already,” came Dog’s equally pained and sluggish grunt. As the first line of defense for Shirley, the dark hound’s condition was far more severe and effected, “These Enders are priest-level bastards, not the rabbles we mowed down in the basement of those Suntist gatherings. Us fighting them is equivalent to sieging the Storm Cathedral... It’s not a loss at all.”

“What XXX not a loss? They’re a bunch of adults beating a harmless little girl and her dog. They’re shameless bastards that only knows how to fight with numbers.” Shirley still wanted to beat the enemies to a pulp if she could.

There were three Enders still standing in the room, all of them had turned into bloodied deformed monsters that’s more beast than man. And like a hunter to a prey, they most certainly wouldn’t respond to Shirley’s taunt.

Knowing her words were useless, Shirley looked around the wrecked-up home with a sad face: the table got flipped, the cabinet smashed, her few pieces of clothes now ruined. Even the oil lamp, which was the only valuable piece of item in the home, was now destroyed!

“I only had this much and you’ve destroyed it all!” Shirley deflated at seeing her only possessions ruined. Sliding down painfully against the wall, the girl started to tear up and sob: “Bastards, I’ll make sure to pummel you all bloody later...”

No answer came though, only a volley of bone spikes.

Then, everyone slowed to a crawl as the projectiles flickered with phantom images in mid-air. A ball of green flame had suddenly materialized in the middle of the room, putting up a wall between the girl and her assailants.

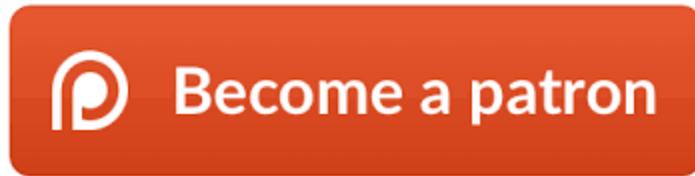
“Our fighters are at war with the enemy... Teleportation successful!” From the intrusion came a hideous undead bird and a shrill voice that sounded oddly familiar.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 185

Chapter 185 “Safe and Sound”

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The undead bird circled around the room before blowing up a vortex of flame with her body. Through this ethereal door, Duncan stepped through and came before Shirley.

“I remember telling you to ask for help when you are in trouble.” Duncan lowered his head and quietly spoke to the girl covered in blood, “Why didn’t you look for me?”

“I... I forgot,” Shirley blinked, feeling a sense of relief as the buzzing noise evaporated from her head. Then showing a tangled expression, “I was very confused just now... that’s right, these guys won’t stop screeching in my ear with their weird prayers. It made me all dizzy...”

Slowly turning to glance at the attackers frozen in stasis, Duncan could fault the girl for losing her cool. It’s the first time he had seen something this strange as well. They’re more beast than human at this point. If not for the tattered clothes on their body, Duncan had every reason to believe they were actual monsters from a horror flick.

Then Duncan frowned after recalling another detail, “Were they the ones who hit you? Where did they all come from?”

“They hit me!” Shirley immediately proclaimed like a distraught child running home to tell her parents. It’s weird, but that reaction came to her out of reflex. “I don’t know where they came from. Dog said they’re Ender Missionaries, the crazy bastards that worship subspace...”

“Ender Missionaries... people who worship subspace?!” Duncan didn’t expect an encounter like this on a random night. Looking over to Ai, who’s still flying around the room, “Don’t zap them yet.”

As he ordered, the few surviving Enders had already shown signs of being erased by Ai’s powers in how they’re flickering like a shoddy tv signal.

“The network is connected! The network is connected!” Ai flutters back to reality and lands on Duncan’s shoulder, her beak pecking the ghost captain in protest of interrupted work.

“Alright, alright, I get it. More fries for you later. First, send them to the ship instead,” Duncan nodded to the dove, “I’ll pick them up on deck over there.”

“Mission accomplished! Mission accomplished!” Giddy with joy, Ai took to the air with hurricane speed and swept the Enders up with a green vortex that instantly spirited them away.

Shirley was stunned to see what was happening in front of her. In fact, the battle ended so abruptly and strangely that it didn’t feel real at all.

Mr. Duncan didn’t make a move at all. In fact, the man didn’t care what tricks or special curses the Enders had from beginning to end. He just showed up here, and then, as if he had a slight interest in the group, he plucked them away like someone casually picking up a stone from the roadside.

He may not have even realized that those cultists have “combat power.”

“How is your injury?” At this moment, Duncan’s voice suddenly came, interrupting Shirley’s cranky thoughts.

“XXX it hurts like hell...” She grinned and waved at the guy, only to have her wound pulled and relapse into pain.

Duncan made a concerned face: “Do you want me to take you to the hospital?”

“Don’t!” Shirley cried out instantly, “I don’t have any money...”

Duncan was dumbfounded: “Is this a time to worry about money? You’re already in that state!”

“I didn’t finish,” Shirley finally sat up after much struggle, “my physique is different from ordinary people’s. I will definitely be discovered when I go to the hospital. If I attract the church’s attention, I won’t be able to explain it. You see~”

The girl raised her right arm to show Duncan the healing wound. After the curse was dispelled, the healing ability returned and quickly closed the gash. As for the heaviest injury on her back, it’s healing too, but slowly and hurts like hell.

“As long as those Enders stop yapping then I’m not afraid of them,” Shirley glances down at the blood soaking her dress, “they wouldn’t have stood a chance otherwise... EEEE~! It hurts so much...”

A slight crackling sound suddenly came from nearby, interrupting Shirley’s muttering.

She and Duncan followed the noise simultaneously and found it’s coming from one of the corpses in the room. The body had already been deformed and mutilated, but the grayish-white smoke fuming out of the corpse was alarming. Imagine a burning ember crackling and turning red from the heat. That’s exactly what’s happening to this corpse. Before they knew it, the entire body had disintegrated into a pile of ash before suddenly sinking into a black hole that manifested on the ground.

“..... The Enders dedicated themselves to subspace, and now it is their time to pay that price.” Dog’s hoarse voice answered the question from the side, “Not even their ash will remain in this world.”

“..... Hmm, at least they’re environmental when they die. No one has to clean up after them like the mess made by those Suntists.” Duncan throws out his thought without considering how poor of a joke his sentence was.

Then looking down at the palish-looking Shirley: “Are you feeling better now? If you are, come with me.”

After he said that, a cluster of dark green flames emerged out of thin air.

“Go with you?” Shirley took a second to grasp the meaning, “Where to...”

“You’re not going to spend the night here today, are you?” Duncan raised his finger and pointed to the mess in the room, “Do you think this place can still be inhabited?”

Shirley looked around the hut that she and Dog called home for many years. Everywhere she looked, it’s smashed furniture and debris from the fighting. There’s nothing of value left in this place.

The girl didn’t say anything for a while and only glumly looked down at the ground.

“The patrolling guardians don’t seem to have noticed the commotion here. We can still pack your things if you want,” Duncan sighed. He knew Shirley’s mood couldn’t be good, but there was nothing he could say to comfort her. “But regardless, you can’t stay here anymore. Even if you don’t mind the broken furniture, we don’t know if those Enders will revisit this place. You’re a target to them now...”

Duncan didn’t have the heart to continue. He knows Shirley was a child that’s far more mature for her age due to the harsh environments she grew up in.

“I... will pack some stuff,” Shirley said sullenly.

“Need help?” Duncan asked.

“No need,” Shirley shook her head, “I have... very little.”

Indeed, the girl had very little to pack.

Duncan only waited for a short while before Shirley finished the task: a small tin box for carrying, a rag doll, and a few tattered clothes she had

salvaged from the former closet.

“We’re taking all these... so we’re not coming back in the future?” Dog peeks up at the small tin box and sullenly asks, which doesn’t get a response at all.

Duncan knew he had to do something now after hearing that. Coming over to Shirley’s side, he lowered himself to eye level and patted the girl’s head in a comforting manner.

“Let’s go, let’s go home.”

A green fireball promptly shot out of the old-looking hut and soared through the night sky. Its destination, Duncan’s Antique Shop.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 186

Chapter 186 “Local Products from the City-State”

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On the first floor of the antique shop, Nina sat anxiously in a chair next to the counter. From time to time, she would get up and peer out the window, searching through the empty streets with those eyes for signs of her uncle.

“Ohhh~ how can Uncle be like this... Why did he go out so late into the night? There’s a curfew out...” Nina sat back down and moped, “If the guardians on patrol find out, he will definitely be detained again...”

That’s already not the first time she’s muttering to herself like this. But then, the slight sound of movement came from the door, followed by the doorknob turning.

Nina perked up immediately, looking up in the direction of the entrance with anticipation. Sure enough, the familiar figure had come into her view.

“Nina, I’m back,” Duncan said as he met his niece’s gaze with a smile.
“See? I’m not too late.”

Nina practically threw herself at Duncan’s chest as she complained: “It’s not too late?! What time is it? Do you know how dangerous it is to go out past curfew? You just suddenly got up and said you’re going out. You left me home alone...”

The girl’s chattering complaints came out like a storm on the sea, forceful and continuous. However, her barrage swiftly halted after noticing the small figure hiding behind Duncan’s leg.

Shirley, carrying the small tin box, had peeked out with her head and waved at Nina nervously: “Nina... it’s me.”

Relieved that he’s found an opening, Duncan promptly closed the door behind them and slid to the side so the girls could speak.

“Shirley?! You..... Why are you here so late with Uncle... Wait, how come there’s so much blood on you!” Nina’s eyes widen in shock at the terrible state of her friend.

“Ah, don’t worry, don’t worry,” Shirley hurriedly waved her hand to indicate it’s nothing. Although the injury on her back hasn’t completely healed yet, she still tries to portray a bright smile, “I encountered a small little problem. I’m perfectly fine.”

“That’s not a small problem at all!” Nina hurriedly took the small box from Shirley’s hand and carefully examined the blood stains on the girl’s body. Growing shocked at the number of wounds: “You... you got so many injuries, we must find a doctor quickly! You...”

“I’m really okay. But, uhh, calm down!” Shirley quickly grabbed Nina’s hand and showed a helpless expression, “Have you forgotten I’m not an ordinary person...”

Nina wanted to say something, but her attention was interrupted by Duncan’s following cough.

“Ahem,” Duncan interrupted the increasingly chaotic communication between the two girls, “don’t ask so much Nina, Shirley’s injury shouldn’t be a problem. Go take her upstairs and shower and change out of her clothes. I’ll explain the specifics later.”

Nina’s gaze flickered between the two before the girl nodded in confusion. Meanwhile, Shirley was rubbing her stomach with a flushed face, “Umm... is there anything to eat? I’m really hungry.”

Normally Shirley wouldn’t have such a craving in the middle of the night, but perhaps it’s due to the effect of her rapid recovery, she’s feeling empty

in the belly and drastically needs sustenance.

“Ah, yes!” Nina took a second to respond, but once she did, she promptly got to work, “I overcooked today so there’s still plenty of leftover from dinner. I’ll go warm it up!”

Quickly running up the stairs, Nina’s footsteps soon faded away from their ears as Shirley stood at the doorstep with a stunned face. She turned left and right, then up and down to see the familiar shelves, the familiar merchandise, and the smiling Mr. Duncan.

“I’m back again...” Shirley mutters softly after accepting this was her home from now on.

“Yes, you’re back,” Duncan smiled and bent down to pick up Shirley’s small tin box. “We’d better discuss how to explain your injuries while we have the chance now. We also need to come up with a reasonable excuse to have you stay here permanently. But don’t fret about it. I believe Nina would love that arrangement so you don’t have to worry about her opinion.”

It took a good second for Shirley to realize what just happened with her possession: “AH! It’s okay, I can do it myself...”

.....

Meanwhile on the Vanished, Duncan, the infamous ghost captain, was staring at the three surviving Enders. They still hadn’t regained consciousness, but the monstrous form they took had started to revert back to their human state.

These twisted guys can become normal people again?

Suddenly, a series of light footsteps rushed over from the rear. Alice was crying out happily in her gothic dress: “Captain, Captain, I just heard Mr. Goathead say you are sending something to the deck again? You bought more things from the city...”

Alice came to a jerking halt halfway through her sentence. Whatever excitement she showed had turned into puzzlement.

“Captain... is this also a native product of the human city?”

“..... Sort of,” Duncan thought for a moment and shrugged, “I haven’t encountered anything like them before at least. They like to pop up in the city-state like sprouts during the spring season.”

Alice nodded in confusion, then scratched her hair again with even more confused. She didn’t know what the man meant by sprouts growing during spring because she’s never seen it.

“Umm... they should be human, right?” The puppet muttered, “Captain, what are you doing with three of these things? You probably didn’t buy them, right?”

“I didn’t buy them. I picked them up from the roadside.” Duncan casually coped with the fragmented thinking of the puppet while also paying attention to the three “subspace believers” who had almost completely returned to their human form.

It seems that Ai’s teleportation process is as reliable as ever. So... does this mean I can use Ai to transport ordinary people to the ship in the future?

Duncan contemplated the idea’s feasibility and gradually grew happy at the other possibilities this opened.

Aside from testing Ai’s ability, Duncan had other plans in mind for other projects. Like what the Vanished’s environment would do to others and what Alice’s guillotine ability would do to living people if they got into contact now.

What other better test subjects were there than these cultists, who just happened to drop into his lap tonight?

He could only thank nature for the plentiful gifts he’s gotten...

While Duncan relishing at the good harvest, one of the Enders finally showed some movement. First, it was a slight twitch, then came the groan from the one that sat up.

“You’re awake,” the gentle voice mixed in with the sea breeze stimulated the nerves of the alienated captive.

“Here is...” The cultist slowly turned his head, finding Duncan and Alice already staring down at him. Due to the sluggishness of his brain, the guy had to take a second to process the image, but once he did, the hostility instantly showed. “Who are you?!”

“Oh right, you haven’t seen me before,” Duncan laughed as he watched the other two Enders slowly recover as well. “Welcome to the Vanished. You can call me Captain Duncan.”

“..... The Vanished?!” The first cultist was stunned because he obviously knew the name. “This is... this is the ghost ship that returned from subspace?!”

“That’s right, it seems that you understand the situation, then our communication will be simple.” Duncan nodded, “First of all, I have some questions...”

His words did not get far because the cultist opposite to him had already raised both hands into the air, those eyes filled with ecstasy and madness. With a loud shout: “O subspace! You have finally opened the door to me and the others! Eternal life in the last days! Redemption in disaster! Annihilation for rejuvenation! The ark of promise has come... The ark of promise has come!”

Duncan’s face visibly twitched after that proclamation.

What illness does this cultist have in his brain?!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 187

Chapter 187 “Ender Missionaries”

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The newly awakened subspace believers fell into an inexplicable state of ecstasy after learning they were on the Vanished. It's so wild that they even scared Alice with their fanatical behavior. Fortunately, Miss Doll had kept those hands on her head during this so that part didn't fall off like usual.

“The souvenirs this time are so scary!” Miss Doll stared and kept hiding behind Duncan, “What's wrong with him?”

How would Duncan know? He hasn't even finished asking this yet!

Immediately afterward, the other two final Enders also woke up, and after they figured out the current situation, they fell into the same ecstasy as the first person. They began to yell frantically, saying stuff like the promised Ark! The gatekeeper of the subspace has come! Regardless of what Duncan and Alice said next to them, they remained unable to communicate.

But by this time, Duncan had vaguely guessed the reason why these Enders fell into ecstasy – the Vanished was a ghost ship that returned from subspace. In the eyes of such madmen, the vanished was likely a miracle.

But isn't this fanatical energy a little too much?

The three cultists kept hugging each other, both crying and laughing simultaneously. On occasion, they would even say something that should've been impossible to produce with a human throat before kissing and licking the deck!

Their last action annoyed Alice, who was watching the excitement from the side. Without delay, Miss Doll grabbed the nearest mop and smashed one of the cultist's head: "I just washed the deck!"

Alice's fury did not go unnoticed. The two buckets and mops nearby also got into action and started to beat the fanatical lunatics on their own accord. Before long, the rowdy ruckus of mops and buckets was flying all over the deck.

Duncan naturally became stunned as he watched this weird and chaotic scene. He knew Alice had built a good relationship with the items on the Vanished, but he didn't expect her one battle cry would be enough to raise an army! She's absolutely a boss with a bunch of henchmen!

"Stop!" He stepped forward and ordered before this farce got out of hand.

The buckets and mops stopped, leaving only Alice to continue with a mop in hand. It's only after she gave one last kick before she huffed indignantly and walked away: "I just washed the deck, and now it's dirty from all their licking..."

"Although I also think their action is a little disgusting, we still shouldn't do this..." Duncan glanced at the doll helplessly and turned his attention back to the few cultists who had just been beaten to a pulp, "Calm down yet?"

Despite the beatings they just endured, the Enders did not flinch in the slightest and were still energetic with their creepy grin. For individuals with such thin and scrawny bodies, they sure have an astonishing level of tolerance for pain.

"Haha... Gatekeeper of the Promised Land, Ghost Captain at the helm, Navigator of the Ark!" The first Ender to regain consciousness seems to have come back to reality and spoke, "I can see... I can see your heart! How sad... You have received the greatest blessing, yet you rejected His gift... You had the right to enter the Promised Land, but you rejected it! You... FOOL!!!"

Duncan slightly frowned while Alice immediately came over from the side: “Captain, do you want me to beat him up again?”

The bucket and mop next to her also jumped over and swayed behind Alice to support the idea.

“All of you just behave over there for now.” Duncan shooed them to the side and focused back on the Ender, “It sounds like you know me very well since you called me the Ghost Captain.”

“Subspace whispered your name... whispered your foolish refusal...” the cultist grinned as the blood trickled down the corner of his mouth. “You have the qualifications to be the most blessed being. Why did you have to flee? Don’t you know that subspace is the eternal and ultimate destination of all things? You’ve reached the end... so why did you turn back when you reached the end!?”

Duncan just quietly stared at this fanatic with an unwavering expression. However, his heart wasn’t so calm though. Instead, it’s rising up and down like a tidal wave at the information he’s just heard.

This group of fanatics knows a lot; perhaps, they might even be right in some parts of their religion... And he mentioned Captain Duncan escaping from subspace. Rejecting the blessing? Could it be... the real Captain Duncan actually didn’t fall into madness and escaped at the last moment? So the rumors were wrong? If that’s the case, when did the real Duncan lose his mind and die?

Duncan suddenly remembered the goat head’s attitude towards subspace – wary, resistant, and faintly unnerved.

This seems to confirm what this Ender mentioned about the great escape from subspace.

Afterward, the Ender fell back into a daze, muttering something that couldn’t be understood and laughing wildly in the next. As for the other two captives, they never regained their sanity to begin with. This told Duncan

he would have a hard time talking with these individuals. Likely even harder than the Suntists.

Is it because of the influence of subspace? Or did they actively destroy their sanity to embrace subspace?

After getting no further response for a while, Duncan figured he had to take the initiative and provoke a reaction. “Why did you attack Shirley?”

Sure enough, the three cultists reacted to the question. One of them raised their head in confusion and began swaying as he answered: “Attack? Attack whom?”

“What you just did,” Duncan’s voice was cold and heavy, “you attacked a girl with a hound. Why did you attack her?”

“The attack … Oh, attack…” The confused fanatic suddenly started to shout, “We are merely setting everything back on track so that the correct history can progress smoothly! Loopholes, flaws, a little hidden danger… Hidden dangers must be ruled out… She should’ve died in the correct history! As long as she lives… loopholes will continue to sprout…”

“The correct history?” Listening to the crazy nonsense of these cultists was definitely having an effect on Duncan’s brainpower. Nevertheless, he’s able to capture the key detail and press for more, “There is a problem with the historical line of Pland. Were you people responsible for it?!”

“Something went wrong? No problem, no problem at all… We’re just getting everything back on track!” The madman raised his face with martyrdom in his eyes, “The world should get back on track! The fate of destruction has been postponed for too long, and everyone has rebelled against the gift from subspace, against the destiny that should’ve come! We are correcting history to the right trajectory!”

“Correct history to the right trajectory!” The other two Enders began to shout feverishly as if being infected by their peer’s worship, “Only when we return to the right history line will everything be destroyed. Through the end comes renewal! Subspace will devour everything, and subspace will

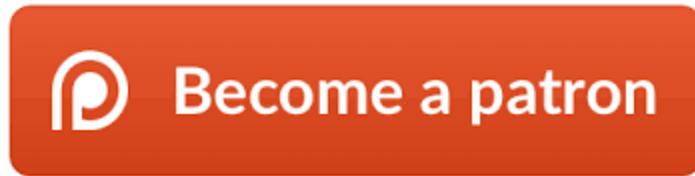
reshape everything anew! The fire has been extinguished, but the embers are ready for ignition... Only by lighting a second bonfire can the world survive in that gift!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 188

Chapter 188 “The Crazy Man”

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The clues seem to have all connected now.

There are traces of pollution in the history of Pland, distorted and closed space-time junction points in the chapel of the sixth block, and a subspatial rift hidden in the statue head of the Storm Goddess...

Shirley was one of those who remembers the fire from that year. She should have died like everyone else when it burned, but she merged with a dark hound and survived. As a result, the girl escaped the historical pollution and retained her true memory.

Now, a group of Enders has attacked Shirley to correct the flawed loophole.

Of course, Duncan wouldn't believe the absurd “truth” from their mouths, and even listening to their crap about correcting history was only to lure out more information. However, there's one thing he's certain of – these fanatical Enders are definitely the culprits behind the whole false history.

But not all problems have been explained yet though.

How did these madmen suddenly discover Shirley's “loophole”?

What does historical pollution have to do with the Black Sun, and what role did that sun god play in this matter?

And most importantly...

Will Nina, the carrier of a suspected solar fragment, also be targeted by these cultists?

Duncan observed the three crazy fanatics with cold eyes as he raised a finger – a cluster of green flame ignited upon one of the Enders. This flame burned the cultist’s body, which could be regarded as a “transcendent object”, causing him to curl up in agony as he screamed. This also had the direct effect of silencing the other two cultists.

“Fire... blasphemous fire...” The cultist’s eyes widened with a fanatical frenzy crazier than before. This subspace follower, who never showed fear before, had finally learned what terror meant. “Blasphemy, blasphemy... O blasphemy!”

“If you don’t want to get burned then cooperate with my questioning,” Duncan orders the flames to ignite all over the deck, intertwining into a web of flame to surround the three cultists. “Answer me, how exactly did you people pollute history? Did it start in the sixth block?”

“We are putting history back on track!” Even though they were intimidated by the ghost flames, the Enders did not forget to retort and even shouted defiantly, “The sixth block... was just a failed attempt, but that’s nothing, nothing...”

The sixth block was just a failed attempt?

Duncan immediately frowned at this word. The other party did not answer honestly but still revealed some vital information!

First of all, the fire that year was indeed the doings of this group of subspace fanatics. It wasn’t simply a fire caused by the sun fragment as he had thought at the beginning. Secondly, these cultists’ attempts to pollute history did not seem to have gone as intended, or at least not yield the full result they wanted.

Immediately after that, he thought of another key year number, 1885.

Vanna found the number under the chapel, pointing to the year when the nun died in battle. So in theory, it should also be the year when the church was invaded by subspace forces.

Then there's the 1889 great fire. Between the initial corruption and the outbreak, there's a four-year gap in-between. It took that much time for the Enders to produce that "failed attempt".

Things are starting to make sense for him with a clear picture of the truth.

"You actually failed twice," Duncan said, gazing down at the Ender, who was being burned by the ghostly flames. "In 1885, you guys invaded a chapel and tried to use it as an anchor point to spread the pollution of history, but a nun ruined your plans with her life, sealing up both that year's 'invasion' and her own 'death' in the underground church."

"Four years later, in 1889, you carried out a second plan to create a fire in the sixth block where the chapel is located, trying to blanket reality with a historical branch of the city-state being engulfed by a huge fire. But that failed as well because an unknown force erased that reality. It did not continue to burn..."

"Then you guys lurked in the city to this today, looking for an opportunity to continue the plan until you discovered Shirley's loophole. You believed the plan's failure back then was related to her survival, so you wanted to get rid of this 'hidden danger' first, correct?"

Instead of answering or lashing at Duncan's speculation or truth, the burning Ender only made a creepy grin under that intense searing pain.

"You don't have to answer. I can see the answer in your eyes, the resentment, which means I'm right." Duncan didn't care about the other person's provocation and calmly continued, "Next question... What is the connection between you and that 'Black Sun'? The fire of 1889 was sparked by a sun fragment... You made that fragment?"

The Enders remained silent and didn't answer.

Duncan became even more forceful and spread his flame onto the other two Enders. He watched as they curled up and twitched from the pain that could burn even their souls.

“If you won’t speak then I can only guess,” Duncan sighed, waving his hand to disperse the flames. He had realized that this simple torturing method wouldn’t work on these subspace fanatics. Their spirits and flesh are no longer human, meaning the simple definition of pain no longer applies to them. “I guess you have some sort of cooperation with those Suntists... No wait, maybe there is a partnership with the heirs of the sun? They promised your group something in return for the collaboration?”

Duncan paused, hoping for a response and got none: “In the early days of the new city-state calendar, there once existed a city-state called ‘Wilheim’ that no one knew about. The name left on the Flame Bearer’s Pillar was its only evidence of existence. You guys summoned the black sun from history and succeeded there... So, the process to summon it is to pollute history, right?”

Duncan’s imagination and memory were at their greatest when all the trivial clues and lines were put together. Things that were once incomprehensible and bizarre before now looked like concrete facts, and he’s now certain he’s getting closer than ever to the whole story.

Ordering the ghostly flames to converge, he forms a circle to jail these three as he peered down at them menacingly.

“There should be more than a few of you who have infiltrated the city-state. Where are the others hiding? What are you going to do next? Continue to eliminate what you call ‘loopholes’? Or is it waiting for an opportunity to set off more pollution?”

“Still refusing to answer?”

Duncan’s questions were thrown out one by one, and finally, one of the cultists caved. The skinny maniac slowly flicked his lips into a snarling grin while slurring the words: “We aare nnot hidding in thee so-calledd ccity-state... We aare hidding in this cuursed, ttwisted, loong-overduue

hhistory... Wheen it beegins, it woon't endd... What thee Flame Bearers ccan't do, you can'tt do, 'Mr. Captain'..."

The grin on this cultist's mouth became deeper and deeper to the point it's derogatory: "I just saw it now, your humanity, it's really dazzling. Where did you pick it up from?"

Duncan's eyes immediately got ugly as he stomped forward: "What do you mean?"

"..... Have a nice day, Mr. Captain," the Ender seemed to have flicked a switch there and became a well-mannered citizen instead of the bat-shit-crazy fanatic from earlier. "Ah... The Promised Land, the Promised Ark..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 189

Chapter 189 “Alice’s Test”

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After that, Duncan never heard anything of value anymore from these Enders. All he got was their idiotic grin and silence while they took in the fresh salty air of the Boundless Sea.

Nevertheless, the damage was done, and Duncan could no longer forget the last comment made by one of the captives about his humanity.

Did they figure out the original Duncan is gone and someone else had taken over this shell?!

And these cultists mentioned they were not hiding in the city-state... But in a cursed history? What does that mean? Could it be that these crazy Enders are not usually in the normal time and space but rather hiding in another dimension?

Duncan stared uncomfortably at these delirious fanatics, his mind rising up and down as he checked his ship for any changes. He’s worried something might’ve happened without his knowledge.

The goat head was still honestly driving the helm in the captain’s room. That’s good news. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention to the deck so it’s unlikely the statue overheard the conversation.

As for the other parts of the ship, everything’s operating as usual without any strange anomalies.

Now that leaves only Alice sitting on a large wooden barrel not far away with her head in hand. Miss Doll was obviously a little bored before and had taken the liberty to comb her hair.

After an unknown amount of time, Duncan finally exhaled a soft sigh after finding nothing. He's obviously wasted enough time on these cultists and was starting to get affected by their crazy words.

I have already obtained a lot of useful information from these people. Any more time will only be wasted.

Exactly then, one of the Enders froze again as if a switch got flipped. He looked up into the illusory sail above and spoke in a hallucinatory voice: "Is it time to disembark?"

"There is no place for you on this ship to begin with," Duncan glared at the captive with a deadpan expression, "but you can still come in handy before I throw you overboard."

Instead of unsettling the three Enders, the ghost captain's words only excited them with that creepy grin. Honestly, it unnerved even Duncan, who's fully in control of the situation.

"Alice, come here."

Skillfully popping her head back on, Alice trotted to the ghost captain's side: "Captain, you called me?"

"..... Can you not pull your head off in the future? Your joints aren't good to begin with. If you keep removing your head, the connection will only get worse with time. Also, your intellect drops whenever you do that." Duncan lectures with a frown, "I'm going to conduct a test now so stop it."

"Test?" Alice was stunned for a moment, "What test?"

"To see if your uncontrolled guillotine ability is still there," Duncan raised an eyebrow, "don't tell me you've forgotten about it."

“I forgot!” Alice nodded reasonably, “I just remembered it as soon as you reminded me!”

Then she ignored the subtle changes in Duncan’s expression and greeted the three Enders: “Hello, I forgot to introduce myself just now. My name is Alice, and I’m the ship’s... cook?”

“You should tell them about your other identity,” Duncan said lightly. But as he spoke, he didn’t forget to catch the reaction from the three cultists, “It’s Anomaly 099.”

The eyes of the three Enders finally showed a huge change, and not for the better either.

“I thought you were all numb to the point of not being afraid of dying.” Duncan smirked mischievously, “I hope you madmen can enjoy my next arrangement for you all. What I want is simple: stay near Alice and survive, or die by beheading.”

Alice suddenly leaned over and muttered after hearing that: “Captain, you really look like a villain when you speak like that...”

In amazement, Duncan faced the puppet: “... Which side are you on?”

“Death means nothing to us...” One of the final Enders finally spoke while the two were discussing, “It’s just one more pause in the long journey. You stupid fools who have rejected the gift of subspace, obsessed with the obstructions of the real world, can never know the truth beyond life and death...”

Duncan quickly tugged at Alice’s arm: “Did you hear that? This is what you call a villain...”

Alice nodded: “Oh~”

Duncan then looks up at the glowing rift in the night sky: “How long have these guys been aboard so far?”

“It’s been hours, right?” Alice thought for a while, “My sense of time is quite accurate!”

“A few hours... In other words, the guillotine’s effective timing must have passed at least once.” Duncan mused over what this implied, “But no matter, we can conduct the next round of testing.”

“The next round of testing?” Alice blinked in confusion, “How are we going to test them?”

“Well, we can roughly be certain your guillotine ability has not taken effect yet. Whether that’s due to the Vanished or me being present is another matter,” Duncan said as he swept his gaze across the three captives. After confirming their heads were still in place, “In a few hours, after confirming another cycle had passed, I want you and these three to leave the Vanished for a while.”

Alice became shocked at the plan: “Temporarily leave the Vanished? Where to?”

Miss Doll promptly looked around the terrain and saw nothing but endless water around them. There’s not a single piece of land in sight.

Duncan didn’t actually iron out that detail in his grand scheme. His initial plan was to have the group keep some distance from the ship and from a populated landscape to avoid unintended casualty.

“There are a few lifeboats on the side, and they’re all in good condition. I’ll put one down and you can ride aboard one of them during the experiment.” Duncan stared into Alice’s eyes, “Don’t worry, all you’re doing is floating out at sea for a while. I’ll have the Vanished waiting nearby and won’t leave you behind.”

Miss Doll immediately shrunk her neck at the unreliable arrangement: ” Do I have to drift across the sea again?! I had psychological trauma for the first time! And the view of the sea is so poor at night. What if you lose me? What if a gust of wind causes a wave to sweep the lifeboat away? What if the boat capsized...?”

Duncan didn't wait for the humiliating puppet to finish before interrupting her: "Stop, stop! As if there are so many what-ifs? I'll have Ai hover overhead to keep an eye on you, okay? But then again, what are you afraid of? When I threw you overboard the first time, you actually used your box as a raft to row back aboard. Even eight cannonballs couldn't keep you away back then!"

Alice's nagging immediately sauntered at the reminder. Nevertheless, the doll kept peering out at the Boundless Sea with worry, "If that's what you say Captain, but don't lose me!"

Duncan: "..."

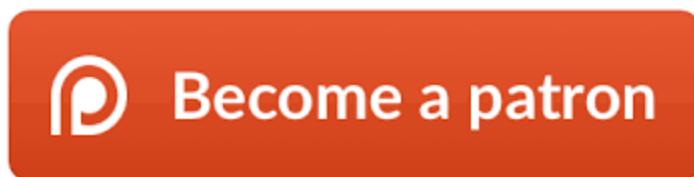
Why do I get the feeling that this doll is getting more and more useless the longer she stays aboard the ship? She's nothing like the wave-riding surfer the first time we met...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 190

Chapter 190 “Gone Like Yesterday”

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With the giant rift known as the World’s Creation hanging overhead, the cold breeze of the ocean blowing against her skin, and the constant waves finely battering against the rowboat’s side, Alice felt like she was in a dream. Of course, she didn’t really know what a dream was since she had been asleep for so, so long. However, if she had to guess, this would be how it would feel to her if she were human – floating in a big, big place, her thoughts drifting away with the currents driving her to a different world.

Oh, there’s also the three Enders sitting across from her in the vessel, but that’s unimportant since they’re tied up like dumplings at the moment.

From her view, these are very bad people, the worst of the worst. Alice didn’t know any humans so far, but if she did, Miss Doll most certainly wouldn’t want to be friends with these folks.

“Are you afraid?” After holding back for a decent amount of time, Alice finally couldn’t resist starting a conversation. She’s really uncomfortable sitting here by herself without anyone to talk to. Although she knew this was a “safety test” that had to be done before she operated in the human city, it’s still unsettling to be off the Vanished parked not far away in the distance.

“Stupid filth, clumsy shell...” One of the Enders responded to the puppet’s voice, his thin skeleton-like head slowly raised and stared into Alice’s eyes, “Your soul is pale and empty, and subspace will not take in...”

Alice was stunned by the rude response and took a moment to react: “Hey, don’t be rude to others!”

Unfazed, the Ender on the opposite side only let out a mirth of hoarse and ugly laughter that frightened Miss Doll even further.

Sulking at being disrespected, Alice shook her head to get rid of the bad mood: “I’m not angry anymore.”

This caused the second Ender to glance up inquisitorily.

“I shouldn’t be angry since you can only protest like this. After all, it is you who is tied up and not me, and it is you who have to do this head-dropping test, not me. Captain said, one mustn’t get carried away when you are riding the wind, otherwise you will capsize in the end...”

Despite the Enders acting all quiet and indifferent, the doll still managed to catch the subtle changes in their body language – they were exchanging silent looks and moving their necks from time to time.

This gives the impression that they’re wondering why their heads are still intact. At least in Alice’s eyes, that’s how they were behaving.

“Actually, I am a little afraid,” Alice said suddenly. “I’m afraid your heads will suddenly fall off. Captain said I could decapitate people, which startled me because humans don’t have the same ability as me. Their heads can’t go back on afterward...”

Suddenly, the sound of flapping wings came from above and caught Alice’s eye. She could tell its Ai who had come to check on her. Next thing the doll knew, Ai had dropped a gorgeous wooden box next to the boat.

“My box!” Alice cried out in surprise and immediately imagined the picture of being swept out of her home. However, she quickly noticed a small note sticking to the top.

(The guillotine ability may also be related to your wooden box. Sent it for resting. Also, stop imagining you’re going to be kicked off the ship again)

Alice flipped the note up and down and couldn't understand what's written there.

She's illiterate...

But soon, she saw something else on the back of the note, a scrawled stick figure of her rowing back to the Vanished with a smiling face at the end. That she understood.

At ease now, Alice casually fished the wooden box out of the water with her hand and threw it next to herself. Then turning to face the cultists sitting across from herself: "Are you hungry?"

Naturally, Miss Doll didn't expect a response and only asked out of courtesy: "Although Captain said that you are people that deserve to die, he also said that he won't kill you if you can complete the test. He will instead send you back to the city-state, and then... what's it called?"

The puppet lady was a little stuck as she tried to recall the wording: "Oh, to show the concern of an enthusiastic citizen worried for the city's safety... He said you're worth at least seven bikes. What is a bicycle?"

"Subspace will feed us... Subspace will give us peace... Subspace will bless the perished after all life comes to the promised end..." One of the Enders muttered randomly as if to answer Alice's rambling. "We are walkers of the end, abandoning our cursed flesh and blood for the promise. Our minds are open and await the new world..."

"Huh?" That confused Alice, "What are you talking about?"

No response came though, only a boring one-person conversation between Alice and her box. She couldn't be any happier when dawn finally came. Best of all, she didn't behead anyone!

"YAAA! It's dawn! You are still alive! We can go back now!"

The celebratory words didn't affect the three captives, but the glimmer of light did. They looked up and made a creepy grin.

“Oh, our day is over...” the madman sighed softly and slowly turned his head to meet Alice’s perfect jewel eyes. “Doll, we will meet again someday.”

“Huh?” Alice was stunned, “What do you mean by that? You can’t just escape into thin air...”

Unfortunately, Miss Doll had spoken too soon. As the morning glow spread, the Enders bodies were silently disappearing, fading into nothingness like phantoms of yester years.

“...” Alice popped her eyes in literal bafflement, “Did they really just escape into thin air?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 191

Chapter 191 “Alternate History”

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After listening to the messy description of this embarrassing puppet, Duncan widened his eyes in astonishment.

“Disappeared? Just disappeared out of thin air before your eyes?” Duncan stared at Alice dumbfoundedly. Then shifting his gaze onto the rowboat that had just been hoisted up, he saw the ropes still left from the Enders just lying there on the plank.

“That’s right! They were gone all at once! Not even a sound!” Alice gestured to Duncan about her bizarre experience, “The moment the sun’s light hit them, they disappeared as if they never existed...”

“The moment the sun shines on them...” Duncan frowned. He had imagined countless ways for those Enders to escape or resist, but he didn’t expect the other party to disappear out of thin air, which made many of his preparations useless. “I can understand them even if they jump into the sea. At least they are soluble in water, but how are they able to dissolve in sunlight...? Could it be related to the sun? Does the sun’s exorcising ability make it impossible for them to survive in the real world?”

“I don’t know,” Alice righteously states with her head held high.

“I wasn’t asking you,” Duncan glanced at the doll, “then what happened before they disappeared? What did they all say? Or did they do some weird ritual?”

“They... just kept chanting weird stuff about subspace, the promised land, the destined reincarnation of the last rebirth or something.” Alice rubbed her head before abruptly recalling another detail, “They said ‘another day’ is over?”

Duncan’s brows instantly furrowed up into a knot. He hadn’t forgotten what one of the Enders said to him before on the deck – they hid in a cursed history.

He’s had some outrageous theories before, but compared to his own theories, the world’s truth seems to be even more outrageous.

“Captain?” Alice got worried after seeing the expression on Duncan’s face, “Do you have something in mind?”

“It’s nothing,” Duncan shook his head as if talking to himself. “It’s just that I got this crazy idea. What if... those Enders are from a different historical timeline?”

“Different timeline?” Alice was stunned despite having limited brain capacity and knowledge. “What does that mean?”

“..... Don’t ask. It’s hard for me to explain to you clearly with my intelligence,” Duncan glanced at Alice, hesitated for two seconds, and shook his head. “It’s just that I suddenly understood one thing, why the book that Morris gave me said that the Ender Missionaries are the most mysterious cultist in this world and the most difficult to discover and capture... This is so outrageous.”

Hiding in the offshoot branch of history, removing themselves from reality during the day and night cycle. If both points are true, how was one supposed to ever capture these fanatics? One night you could arrest them by setting a trap, the following morning and they’re gone like a phantom.

Is it because they’re followers of subspace? That they can remove themselves from the main timeline? Blessings of subspace...

“Captain, you’re in a daze again...” Alice eyed the captain with a nosy face.

“I’m okay.” Duncan sighed softly and ditched the jumbled thoughts. Brainstorming too early wouldn’t do him any good.

“Did you see the note I gave you?” He said casually to the doll.

“I did!” Alice nodded happily, “I was shocked when I first saw the box. I thought you were telling me not to go back, but then I was relieved when I saw the note... I couldn’t read the words on it though. Good thing you drew some pictures in the back...”

The corners of Duncan’s mouth visibly twitched as his heart cried: “You... really can’t read.”

“That’s right, I can’t read!” Alice was as straightforward as ever, “I have been lying in the box for so many years, it is already good enough that I managed to have some common sense. How am I supposed to recognize words...”

Duncan: “...”

“Captain, what are you thinking?”

“I suddenly had an idea... I wonder if it’s feasible to run a cram school on the Vanished or the antique shop,” Duncan sighed. “Counting you, I already know two illiterate people, and if we count Dog, there are three, enough to form a study group.”

Alice mused over the idea: “What is cram school? What is a study group?”

“..... I’ll explain it later.” Duncan waved his hand, then his expression became slightly more serious, “Let’s talk about the previous ‘test’.” Those three cultists were all fine before they disappeared, right? Including after sending the box over, they were not affected in any way?”

“I think so, their heads were still on their necks.”

Duncan rubbed his chin in thought after getting the confirmation.

Although the characteristics of those Enders are strange, they certainly do not have the strength or “extraordinary resistance” of saints; after all, Shirley can smash three people at once when she swings with Dog as a weapon, which shows that their flesh and blood are also “conventional substances” that can be destroyed. At most, their tolerance to pain is far beyond ordinary people’s.

And now, the three Enders managed to survive Alice’s company. Does this mean her guillotine effect is really gone?

Alice watched the change in Duncan’s face. No matter how slow she was, the doll was still smart enough to know what this implied for her future: “Captain… did my ‘test’ pass? Can you take me to the city-state?”

“The test… Hmm, should have. Although the weird characteristics of those final Enders still make me uneasy, the results though…” Duncan spoke slowly because he was still thinking and deliberating, but he finally nodded, “Alright, the test is fine, your guillotine ability seems to be under control.”

He paused, and before Alice could celebrate, he added: “I will take you to the city-state, but not immediately. This is because you seriously lack an understanding of what humans consider common sense. Also, there are still exposed spots on your body, such as your fingers and wrist joints, the former will need some more, but the latter needs a disguise.”

“Mhmm, I know, I know!” Alice nodded vigorously. She didn’t seem to be frustrated by the difficulties and problems mentioned by Duncan, but rather motivated instead, “Mr. Goathead also told me about this. He said that the human world is very complicated. Even going out to buy a vegetable has a lot of rules. I will work hard and make up for my deficiencies by learning a lot and asking a lot of questions.”

“Don’t ask him!!” Duncan didn’t wait for Alice to finish and cut her off. He’s sweating just merely at the thought of Alice learning from that statue. Who knows what sort of knowledge the goat head might install into this clueless doll if he’s not looking!

“He’s just as bad as you when it comes to common sense. You learning about human society from him? Where’s your brain?”

Alice looked all innocent: “I don’t have one!”

Duncan almost couldn’t breathe at that answer. For the longest time, he couldn’t must the energy to speak: “You... I admit that you are right.”

“Hehe...”

“In short, don’t learn anything from that statue in the future. He can’t teach you anything good.” Duncan sighed at the lack of helping hands aboard the ship. “I’ll put aside some time aside to teach you in the future. I’ll also come up with a plan to disguise your joints. Now that there’s nothing for you to do, let’s cook something up for breakfast.”

“Oooh,” Alice nodded vigorously, but just as she was about to walk away, she seemed to recall something. “So what are you going to do, Captain?”

“I have something to discuss with Goathead,” Duncan tiredly waved his hand, “something that has nothing to do with you.”

Alice nodded and turned in the direction of the kitchen in a good mood. Her steps were brisk and dignified after a whole night of work.

She’s so elegant when she doesn’t open her mouth. Pity her character is so silly... Duncan sighed at the doll’s back.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 192

Chapter 192 “The Promised Ark”

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As always in the mapping room, sunlight from the Boundless Sea spills into the room through the portholes, reflecting the old objects that have experienced a century's worth of time as they sit here. Mr. Goathead was no different, sitting in the corner of the table and driving the Vanished towards a projected route with Pland as its final destination.

The door swung open then and Duncan's figure appeared at the doorway, causing the wooden sculpture to immediately creak its neck in that direction.

“Ah, it is Your Excellency, the Great Captain, who has come to his loyal first mate! Are you still doing well? You've been busy since yesterday. Are you in a good mood today? The weather...”

“Stop and stop. Similar greetings don't have to be repeated several times a day.” Duncan raised his hand to interrupt before the other party could finish speaking. Then his gaze seemed to inadvertently linger on the face of Goathead for a moment.

The fella was, as always, expressionless, and the obsidian eyes were still strangely cold. However, they no longer gave the ghost captain the evil presence as it watched this side from the mapping table. In fact, the sculpture behaved well and gave him the impression of a hardworking sailor driving the ship.

“Your Excellency, Captain, you seem to be preoccupied?” The voice of Goathead sounded again with a familiar bootlicking enthusiasm, “You seem

to have taken some captives and returned... But they don't seem to be on the ship anymore?"

"They disappeared as soon as the sun rose," Duncan said lightly as he plotted down behind the mapping table, "a few Enders."

"Ah, the Ender Missionaries... Troublesome and dangerous fellows they are. Difficult to catch and always scurrying within the shadows." Goathead immediately started rambling after the topic got opened. This wooden sculpture had never been one to stay quiet for long despite Duncan's vexation. "But how did they provoke you? Those crazy Enders don't usually show up in the open. At least compared to the Suntists and Annihilators, they are low-key and rare..."

"They attacked a human I was keeping tabs on and captured them to test Alice's ability," Duncan said casually as he observed Goathead's reaction. "They also said a lot of things related to subspace... How much do you know about these cultists?"

"If you may permit me, Captain, but I advise against paying too much attention to their crazy 'preaching,'" Mr. Goathead advises immediately. "Just frequently calling out the name of subspace may attract dangerous attention, let alone dealing with the kind of madman who worships subspace. Of course, such a great being as yourself may not be affected, but it is still not a good thing regardless..."

Then it paused and spoke more cautiously: "I can tell you this though, I don't know much about those madmen, and not many people in this world know about them either. The Enders should be regarded as the most eccentric group among all cultists. They are good at being elusive, their thinking is fragmented, and they don't have a large number of low-level rabbles like the Suntists – they are much fewer in numbers and no one can properly communicate with them..."

Mr. Goathead went on and on until the conversation started to get off-topic. Nevertheless, Duncan still got enough to pick up on the key details from the barrage.

According to Mr. Goathead, the number of Enders out there was far less than that of the other two big cult forces (i.e., the Suntists and Annihilators). And judging from the current records, their number may only be a thousand or even less.

There are a large number of ordinary people in the general cult forces as “bottom believers”. These rabbles have little power but everyday social life, except that their thinking has been corrupted. Bluntly said, they are basically no different from ordinary folks. On the contrary, the Enders do not have such a bottom structure – as long as they appear, they must be “priests” with great power.

No one knows how a cult group operated and survived to this day without the support of the bottom ranks, just as no one knows the specific conversion process of those Suntists and Annihilators among ordinary folks.

In addition, the Enders may have the word “missionaries” in their name, but by no means do they spread their teachings. Sure, they like to chant about the “truth” of subspace and all that, it’s unheard of for anyone to be converted to become an Ender. At least, not a case that’s been recorded.

In other words, it was theoretically impossible for Enders to increase their number by “preaching.”

Lastly, the Enders are extremely difficult to catch. In this regard, Duncan has already experienced it firsthand.

“A group of Enders who are so insane that they can’t ‘preach’...” Duncan muttered thoughtfully as he rubbed his chin, “where did the original Ender Missionaries come from then?”

“Who knows?” The neck of Mr. Goathead creaked and swayed, “Maybe they grew directly from subspace...”

Duncan didn’t mind the obvious joke there, nor did he want to mention the alternate timeline theory. Right now, he’s wondering why no one has come up with this theory besides himself, or maybe, there has been people within

the city-states. It would explain the weird coming and goings of those Enders.

“Captain, you seem to be very concerned about those Enders?” In the silence, the voice of Mr. Goathead suddenly broke the silence in the room, “It’s rare to see you showing such a serious expression...”

Duncan raised his head and glanced quietly at the wooden sculpture.

“You say, if the history of an entire city-state is polluted, can it still be saved?” He said suddenly with the frank and casual tone of someone discussing an academic subject.

The wooden sculpture was stunned for a moment (although it’s hard to tell with a face that’s expressionless), and it took two or three seconds before he responded: “Historical pollution? Oh, this is a high-end topic, it sounds like something that can only be done in subspace...”

“Can only be done in subspace?” Duncan raised his eyebrows, “Why do you say that?”

“Except for subspace, which is a dangerous thing that is chaotic in its own time and space, what else can casually pollute the history of a city-state?” Goathead said casually, “There is nothing in the world that has such power... Oh wait, I can’t exactly say there’s nothing actually. If you consider the thing hanging in the sky, then that’s another...”

Duncan’s heart literally jolted at the new info.

The space-time continuum of subspace itself is chaotic?

That’s the first time I’ve heard of this! No book from Nina’s school ever mentioned such a fact!

Then a vivid picture once again popped up in his head, it’s the words the Frost Queen said to himself during that trip into the past – Please do not contaminate history.

He frowned and suppressed the complicated thoughts in his heart for the time being. Then returning his gaze to the wooden sculpture, who also noticed the captain's gaze, stopped yapping and reacted: "Ah, no wonder you suddenly paid attention to those Enders... Could it be that they..."

"They're probably doing a big job," Duncan said darkly, "and it's making me a little... annoyed."

He looked quietly into the eyes of Goathead, and the wooden sculpture did the same with that obsidian bead eyes. However, no information was gained by either partner through this visual contact.

"The city-state has its own protectors, and the Flame Bearers are constantly watching the context of history," Mr. Goathead began, "anyways, those Enders can't threaten you no matter how much commotion they raise. Even if they pollute history, they can't pollute the Vanished or you..."

Duncan raised his eyebrows: "Can't pollute the Vanished and me?"

"..... We returned from subspace, Captain," said Goathead slowly, "everything in the world can be polluted except for subspace. We've.... been in subspace long enough."

Duncan frowned harder, and for some reason, some crazy words that the Enders had said suddenly appeared in his mind.

After a moment of silence, he couldn't help but mumble softly: "The promised ark..."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 193

Chapter 193 “Captain”

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Listening to Goathead’s words, Duncan started to ponder some more. However, he doesn’t get to think long before the wooden sculpture interrupts him: “Captain, you are beginning to be interested in things within mortal civilization. Before this, you had always been focused on sailing beyond the borders. Is there something in the city-state that might’ve interested you?”

Sailing beyond the border?

Duncan’s heart slightly thumped, but the expression on his face remained unchanged as he replied casually: “It’s just a simple concern. No reason is needed.”

“Ah, well, you’re the captain. You have the final say,” Goathead replied immediately. Then it went quiet for several seconds before whispering as if hesitating or thinking about something, “Umm, just in case, I want to ask you a question.”

Duncan raised his eyebrows as he heard the deep, menacing voice from within the wooden sculpture: “Name?”

“Duncan Abnomar,” Duncan was expressionless as he replied. Then out of reflex, he actually chuckled at the rhetorical question, “Actually, I’m curious, what would happen if I said something else?”

It was the first time he had asked this question, and it was his darest “overstep” to date. The life he’s had on the ship, his many encounters with

Goathead, and his growing understanding of his own powers and characteristics, are all the things that propelled him to take this tentative step.

Goathead fell into a long silence after this question, and it was only after a full minute before its low, hoarse voice sounded again in the captain's room: "Then try not to tease me so much, Captain. The Vanished still needs you to steer it."

Duncan bellowed out a laugh. As he thought, Goathead had seen through his camouflage long ago and only remained ignorant. Being the first mate that's been with the real Captain Duncan for the past century, this wooden sculpture likely knew more about the captain than the man himself. Under those circumstances, how could a newcomer that just came out of nowhere fool someone that close?

There must be a reason for not breaking the thin sheet of ignorance, but what?

Was it a necessity?

Or a rule aboard that must be followed?

Perhaps, the Vanished merely needed a Captain Duncan, and whoever played this role no longer mattered?

Duncan didn't bring these questions to the forefront of course. He's just a little curious about why it would be himself and... whether the fact that he's here was unplanned. According to the general assumption, wouldn't it be better to find someone that's actually cursed to be helming a cursed ship? A person like that would surely make a better candidate as the captain, and clearly, he's not cursed.

"You still need your loyal first mate to serve you, and the Vanished still needs a great captain to steer itself. What do you think?" The voice of Goathead came from the side, sounding a little expectant and even eager.

Duncan turned his head and stared into the other party's obsidian-bead eyes.

“Of course,” he said with a smile.

Then he stood up and walked to the door of the captain’s room: “I’m going to leave first. You take care of the ship.”

“Of course, your loyalty first mate will wait for you here. I wish you all the luck...” Goathead had returned to his bootlicking attitude as before with that cheerful tone.

Duncan had pushed the door out of the room, blocking out the words behind his back.

Here, standing on the aft of the deck, he sighed softly and swung around to read the letters inscribed on the frame of the door – Door of the Lost. A sense of calming ease filled his heart for the first time ever. He’s no longer worried about being exposed, fearing being expelled from the ship, and no longer worried about losing his life.

Reaching out, he grabbed the handle and gently pushed forward, stepping through and into the murky fog.

Back inside the captain’s room, Goathead had sensed Duncan’s departure at the same time. He didn’t make a scene, only silently sitting on the mapping table while subtle creaking sounds were coming from the ship and its items aboard.

“Oh momma, he didn’t get angry, right? He shouldn’t be angry... he definitely didn’t get angry... he shouldn’t be...” Eventually, Goathead broke the silence with a rather nervous and anxious voice.

The various subtle noises in the room became more pronounced.

“I know, I know... It’s not that I have to ask for the name three to five times per day! But isn’t this for the safety of the voyage?! What if we suddenly fall back into subspace? At least we will be prepared that way... Quit arguing, quit arguing, I’m still a mess inside... if not, you ask! If you guys won’t then quit making a ruckus... You also know it, on the entire ship, only I have a mouth...”

“The doll? You’re not sick, right? How could she know about the situation... Wait, when did you guys get so good with her? Is it because you’re all constantly fighting and bullying her too much? That’s why you guys are feeling guilty?”

“Okay, okay, everyone back to work. Focus on the voyage. Who knows when the captain will return. He may ask about the progress when he returns... Anchors, can you learn to paddle? Whipping around will somewhat provide some power. Maybe you can imitate a propeller found on those steamships? Okay, fine, pretend I didn’t say anything... If not, have both lifeboats jump down and push? OKAY! PRETEND I DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING!”

The various noises in the captain’s room gradually dissipated, and the wooden sculpture returned to its focused state of driving the ship towards Pland.

Meanwhile, on the foggy mapping chart, the city-state’s shimmering point of light was gradually getting closer and closer.

.....

Zhou Ming pushed open the door of the bachelor apartment and walked back into his original world again. The window was still shrouded by fog outside, and everything remained the same as he had left it. There’s nothing out of the ordinary, only the computer screen shimmering with the prompt “network not connected” popping up repeatedly in the lower right corner.

He sighed and walked to the shelf at the end of the room.

The miniature model of the Vanished was still lying quietly in the lattice where he had last placed it.

Zhou Ming picked up the vivid “model” of the ghost ship, opened the door of the captain’s room, and peered inside.

The sailing table was still empty, and Goathead could not be seen inside.

Zhou Ming thought for a while, placing the Vanished back in its place, then turned to sit at the desk. He needed to sort out the information he had learned.

But suddenly, his gaze was drawn to something on the desk.

Strictly speaking, not “something”, but a... phenomenon.

He saw some very, very tiny flames constantly jumping on the empty table. The flames were like tiny sparks; under the outline of these faint and light green flames, some faint images were flickering in and out.

Gradually, his expression grew serious because he recognized some of the outlines portrayed by the dancing flames – that’s a neighborhood of Pland!

He could even discern some details of the coastline.

The fire was burning, and Zhou Ming remembered the order he gave to the flame when he sent it out to hunt and chase that “thing” with the black umbrella.

Now it has spread to almost all corners of the city-state.

Prey... is everywhere!?

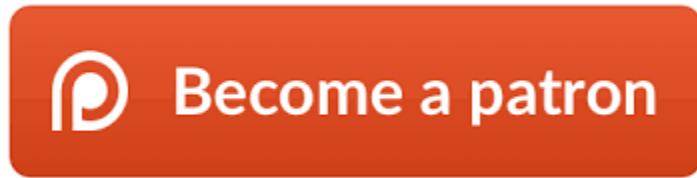
Zhou Ming’s brows furrowed a little. He thoughtfully tracked and distinguished the trajectory of the spread, looking for the law of their gathering and the direction in which they might converge next, just like a hunter tracking the smell of his prey.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 194

Chapter 194 “Transmit”

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Vanna had returned to the archives yet again. Although she didn't know why she even wanted to return here in the first place, an inexplicable sense of discord and crisis urged her to recall the details of rummaging through the materials here. She's forgotten something crucial, and she didn't know what.

Of course, another reason for returning was that there's nowhere else to go anyway.

Due to the growing connection with the Vanished, she was now effectively in a state of constant surveillance – she's still the inquisitor of the city-state of Pland, but only because there wasn't anyone to replace her important duties at the moment. Therefore, she must always remain within the cathedral except for the essential required attendance outside.

Under these circumstances, Vanna's only option was to look for a distraction. As it so happens, the archives were an excellent way to block off the outside variables.

As she stepped through the empty archives, only the rows of lumbering bookshelves accompanied her footsteps. However, she's not alone here though. Not far behind her, a middle-aged priest had kept tabs on the lady with the lantern in hand, exuding a warm and soft glow to repel evil.

Finally, Vanna stopped at the section supposedly containing the materials pertaining to 1889 and 1885. She had rummaged through the records before, found the suspicious clues of sporadic heretical sacrifices, and

eventually discovered the missing files. All of these memories were groomed into her mind over and over again. Everything was flawless in the saga, but the inquisitor's instinct told her something was wrong. Enough to make the lady doubt her own memory.

"Your Excellency?" The middle-aged priest's voice sounded from behind after the extended lingering.

Something is wrong, something is wrong ... I definitely didn't come here alone the last time. Someone did accompany me... but who was it?

As if she didn't hear the voice behind her, Vanna just focused on the problem. Once again, the memory of the sixth block chapel and the deceased nun came up.

Everyone had forgotten that area ever existed, hence the reason why it went unnoticed for so long.

Is this the same "forgetting" that I'm experiencing? Everyone forgot the same thing about that chapel so no one could fill the hole. But what did I forget like everyone else? When did the forgetting happen?

"Your Excellency?" The voice of the middle-aged priest sounded from behind but with more force.

Vanna felt the storm's power converging, and the middle-aged priest's hand had quietly approached his waist where the gun was holstered.

"How long have you been an administrator here?" Vanna asked suddenly.

The storm's power dissipated, and the middle-aged priest lowered his guard before bowing his head slightly: "It's been seven years. I've been here since I retired."

"You shouldn't be the only administrator here, right?" Vanna asked again.

"There are two of us. The other is an older lady in charge of the night duty. We're both retirees from the Guardian Force."

As if chatting casually, Vanna continued to stroll between the bookshelves: “Two people... do you ever get overwhelmed with work?”

“Not usually. The work of an archivist doesn’t have much to do. Trainees are usually the ones to fill and organize the files according to our instructions. Aside from the rare case of transporting dangerous materials over for storage, we rarely need to move around.” The middle-aged priest didn’t beat around the bush and explained his workload, “If there is anything worthy of note, an archivist must be on constant watch for any irregularities. After all, we are the ones with the most experience, so those younger than us would often come to request our insight.”

Speaking of this, the middle-aged priest paused before adding: “Of course, having only two on a work rotation isn’t the best arrangement. If an unexpected matter arises, we will usually be in a bind and must wake the other up to cover the shift. I’ve always felt that the ideal staff number should be three.”

“Three...” Vanna muttered to herself, then asked, “are the files of 1885 still unfound?”

“Yes, it still hasn’t been found yet,” the middle-aged priest said, shaking his head. “After you mentioned the abnormal situation here, we immediately organized staffing to check the entire archive, utilizing hundreds of trainees and clerics for the job. Sadly, we found nothing.”

Vanna nodded and said no more. She only stared at the priest in silence like she’s in deep thought, which roused a nervous smile from the other party.

“Don’t worry, I only met with that ghost captain once. I’m not at the point of delirium yet. However, warn me if there’s any odd behavior with me, and I will do the same. I still haven’t lost my professionalism.”

“I beg your pardon,” the middle-aged priest sighed, “I’ve seen too many comrades-in-arms disappear from this world due to one’s carelessness.”

Vanna didn’t object to that advice and circled the aisle as if searching for something. Then, in a trance, she saw an imaginary glimpse of a fleeting

figure standing at the desk near the entrance.

The young inquisitor's eyes nearly popped out at this sight, only to have the figure disappear in the next.

"Your Excellency, what have you discovered?" The middle-aged priest noticed this sudden behavior and asked.

"Maybe I was mistaken... No, let's go over and see."

Vanna hurriedly began walking without waiting for the other man to reply. She had already taken several steps before she could be followed, and soon, she was practically jogging over to the curved desk. There was no one at the table, only a mechanical machine left in plain view that's used for administrative purposes.

Vanna went around and behind the desk to investigate. There, she found a few scattered parts randomly discarded behind a baffle on the table's edge. The pieces had rusted, and it looked as if they had been discarded for an unknown number of years. Judging by their shape, it seems to be part of a mechanical cube.

For some reason, Vanna had a strange smell hitting her nose when she saw these items... it's the scent of mechanical grease mixed in with incense that's been burned together.

"These things... Who left them here?" A puzzled voice belonging to the middle-aged priest said after catching up from behind with the lantern.

"There are traces on the table." Vanna had already found other clues next to the parts, which looked like some oil that's vaguely resembling a drawing.

She felt her heart pounding. Then out of the blue, a harsh noise echoed in her head, causing the lady's vision to blur between light and shadow. However, this discomfort not only didn't bring panic to the inquisitor's heart but made her go wild with excitement.

Vanna knew why this was happening – it's her blessings from the goddess activating, warning her! Whatever clue or truth she's searching for, it's here, in the archive!

Silently chanting the name of Gomona, the Storm Goddess, Vanna stretched her hand to the side: "Lend me the lantern."

The middle-aged priest immediately handed over the "lantern" that's been inscribed with runes and fueled by divine grease as fuel: "Here you go."

Vanna took it and carefully brought the light closer to the greased tabletop. Under the light, some fine smoke or mist had appeared out of thin air before fading quickly. Then, she saw it between the crimps of light and shadow – the "smudge".

It was written in dark red blood, like a dying man's last ditched effort to mark something on the table as a message. It looked like a cluster of bonfires with a cylindrical thing standing at the center of the flame.

It was not any kind of sacred symbol used by the Storm Church, nor a blessing given by the Storm Goddess Gomona.

Yet Vanna still recognized the symbol – it turned out to be the mark of the Flame Bearers.

Flame Bearer? Why is the mark of the Flame Bearers doing inside a storm church?

Vanna wondered in her heart. Although the four righteous gods are indeed in the same camp, and there are many cooperative relationships between the four churches, they're still part of different religions.

The Flame Bearers... The chapel in the sixth block... The forgotten nun... The forgotten event... Another Plan hidden under the real world...

Vanna's breathing became rapid as she instantly connected the dots.

This symbol was a warning, the only message left behind by the forgotten defender on this lonely battlefield.

“Someone polluted history!” The young inquisitor exclaimed and jerked around to face the administrative priest.

Yet, the archives were empty. From the beginning, it was as she’s the only person here the entire time.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 195

Chapter 195 “Disappeared”

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With a clang, the silver fork in Dante Wayne’s hand fell onto the plate. This startled the maid that’s standing on the side of this partially empty dining hall.

Quickly stepped forward to inquire about the situation: “Mr. Dante?”

Dante did not respond to the maid’s inquiry; instead, he sat in his seat in a daze, acting like his soul had been sucked out. But the admin suddenly blinked, and his consciousness seemed to abruptly return to reality with the paleness of someone on the brink of drowning.

“Mr. Dante, are you okay?” The maid’s voice came again, thundering in the ears of the city admin.

Dante Wayne stared blankly at the fork on his plate, seeing not only the tableware, but also flashes of images from the past. It came so strongly that the prosthetic ruby eye had started to burn and sting with pain.

Out of the blue, the man swung his head towards the maid and broke the silence with a deep, heavy voice: “Did Vanna send any news over?”

The maid was stunned momentarily before responding to this respected city admin: “... Who is Vanna?”

In the next second, the maid was startled by Dante’s livid face and gloomy aura.

The man's face had changed so suddenly that even the air around him was cold and ominous. But after several seconds of this, the city admin finally clawed back his rage and maintained a calm air before waving the maid away. "You can leave me. I won't need any service for the time being."

As the slightly nervous and confused maid left the dining hall, only Dante Wayne remained seated at the table. He didn't move or budge as if he's been here for the past eleven years using only this posture.

Layers of intricate memories were floating through his mind, and "reality" from a different dimension seemed to overwrite his perception through this, but Dante didn't flinch or fret. Instead, he only softly muttered the following words as if he were praying: "Vanna is still alive... Vanna is still alive..."

But the man jerked his head in the next after catching the sight of another figure sitting across from himself.

It was another him – at least it looked like another version of himself.

The thing was a grayish-white entity, wearing the same clothes as Dante Wayne, with the same appearance and hairstyle, and even the wrinkles on the back of his hand were the same. However, the facial features of the figure were slightly blurred, and its eyes were nothing more than two sunken sockets that were filled with endless emptiness.

Dante quietly stared at the gray version of "himself", and the other party also stared directly back at him with a taunting smirk.

"Ah, a hole finally appears in your heart, my other me'." The thing spoke with squirming lips.

Dante Wayne froze to a halt, his eyes now glaring at the reflection opposite himself: "What did you do?"

"Frankly, I don't know. It just happened so suddenly that even I was caught off guard. A loophole took the initiative to eliminate itself," the thing across the table shook his head. "But don't you want to see how it plays out? You

no longer have to bear the pressure of the truth, and you no longer have to worry about the responsibilities of the future... Everything is back on track, and eternal liberation and tranquility await us all. Just as the wish you were granted, everyone's wishes will be granted too..."

The thing spoke weirdly but clearly as it slowly stood up with a broken grin: "I know your heart better than anyone..."

Dante Wayne also slowly stood up. There were no weapons in the dining room, but he always carried a short dagger with him just for these occasions. He gripped the handle and glared ferociously at the grayish figure: "You're just a hollow shadow of nothingness... What right do you have to judge the heart of humanity?"

"I am the reflection in your soul brought to life by subspace..." The gray figure spread his hands out despite the hostility shown: "Subspace knows everything, including the shallow and ridiculous human heart... Come on, kill me, see what happens. We've done this many times already in the past. It doesn't hurt to try again when things are coming to a close soon..."

But then, the gray shadow's words ended abruptly at a sudden cluster of dark green flames wrapped around its body. This not only caught the shadow off guard, it also dismayed and shocked Dante across the table.

A harsh howl and a strange whistling sound came simultaneously, and the sharp shockwave instantly shattered the glasses within the dining hall. However, this noise never got transmitted to the outside as the space here had become confined to another dimension. The more the phantom resisted, the more the echo reverberated within these walls. Until.... Until everything started to glow green.

"The Vanished!" These were the last words from the phantom's mouth before it was extinguished.

Dante Wayne watched it all in awe until a burning pain pierced his own flesh. It's the inverse effect of having his reflection killed.

He dropped the dagger to the floor and curled up, feeling the intense heat devour his own existence. The pain was soul-wrenching, but he didn't lose consciousness as his vision caught sight of the spreading flames roaming around his body instead of eating him.

He was confused, rightfully so. However, he's more confused than ever at the animalistic behavior of a flame. It's behaving like a predator that had caught something revolting, the revolting thing being him.

Then a wave of intense shock smothered his senses, pulling him into dimming darkness as the consciousness faded away. But before then, he could vaguely hear the exclaiming cry of a maid and many chaotic footsteps running inside the hall.

.....

After realizing she's been caught in something, Vanna calmly searched the empty archive for traces of the priest.

For the first two minutes, she didn't move anywhere, didn't rush or try to flee, and didn't touch anything in her field of vision.

This was to prevent herself from accidentally being polluted by the source of this illusion.

It wasn't until she confirmed the items in her sight were normal entities and finished shielding her mind that she came to the back of the curved table. There, she decisively reached down and pressed a button under the desk.

That's the bell to sound the alarm, and it rang with a sharp and deafening harsh ring.

Done, Vanna lowered her head again and stared at the lantern in hand.

The middle-aged priest had disappeared, but the lantern he lent her was still here – radiating a warm glow with that haloing light. Although it was not dark in the archive, the flame that was created with grease still carried the divine properties of repelling evil.

This gave Vanna the confidence to circle around the area again, finding nothing but herself within this building. Finally, her sight fell upon the scattered parts and blood marks left on the table. No one came inside still despite the alarms going off.

Now, the young inquisitor understood why – it's not the priest who disappeared, it's herself!

The moment this thought emerged, Vanna felt a veiling curtain finally lifting from her chest. Reality and lies, both versions have now collapsed into one, revealing the truth of what this world truly was – a flaming inferno as far as the eye could see!

And in the raging sea of fire, a thin, scrawny figure holding a black umbrella was standing in the near distance from the lady.

“You...” The umbrella man raised an arm to point at Vanna and spoke hoarsely.

Vanna only listened to one syllable before she took off with her giant broadsword at the foe. The inquisitor did not hesitate in the slightest and swung down with one hand while carrying the lantern in the other. By the time her attack was about to come down, she's already closed the gap to three meters.

“HERETIC!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 196

Chapter 196 “Reckless Player”

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Vanna didn't immediately recognize the origin of the figure that suddenly appeared in front of her, mainly due to the other party's whole body being covered by a long black trench coat and a big black umbrella. Moreover, her own consciousness was briefly stunned by the glimpse through the curtain, causing the momentary loss of sharpness.

But when the monster made its hoarse and low growl, when the other party's dirty and profane breath was revealed, and when the polluted and corrupt outline showed between its raised hands, she finally recognized it.

It was heresy, the heresy of the Black Sun.

Things became very simple then, and Vanna loves simple things.

The heavy greatsword whistled terrifyingly through the air with a smooth grace, and the sacred lantern dispelled the unclean breath as Vanna's tall figure jumped up like a mountainous wave. When she finally came down, the assault had brought with it the power of the tsunami, which caught the foe by surprise due to how sudden it came out.

Then, like a broken boat hit by a huge wave, even the umbrella and person were split in two down the middle.

The dregs of the sun heir got blown off into the distance with an audible splat, leaving a trail of blood and gore in its wake. But unlike the flesh of the heir, the broken umbrella had dropped on the spot, expelling a series of

crackling blue flints and a splutter of blue crystals from the disconnected segment.

Vanna crushed the umbrella with her foot the second she got the opening. She must remove any unknown variable from the fight when she could because the split body of the sun heir had already begun to reform. It didn't take long, only a few seconds before her foe was standing again.

This time though, the mangled flesh that made up its head was even uglier than before, and it squirmed ferociously with those grotesque tentacles. Even its growling roar was more pronounce, bringing a shockwave that could knock a regular person out.

Yet, Vanna was smiling at this behavior.

Regenerative ability did not equal invincibility. She could tell, this thing had gotten weak and in a lot of pain after losing the weird black umbrella.

Casually strapping the lantern to her waist, Vanna adjusted her sword stance and strode towards the monster with her weapon in hand. But suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a momentary distortion of the flames next to a bookcase.

Years of combat experience and intuition told her to stop, which her body did by swinging around. In the next second, a squirming tentacle had launched out of the fire, whipping a sheet of metal at her like a cannonball!

Simultaneously, the injured sun heir had just finished its regeneration when it trans morphed into a glob of oozing black shadow, firing off two tentacles of his own at the lady's neck and back, effectively creating a pincer attack with its hidden companion.

Vanna clicked her tongue at the annoyance. She snapped around and raised her sword to lance it out as a projectile first, spearing the shadowy glob directly in the center as a result. It pinned the foe into the nearest wall from the sheer force of her sword and caused another splat. Simultaneously, Vanna didn't forget to catch the steel plated projectile that's already in her face. With a pinch that's so fast that it left an afterimage, the lady caught the

scorching metal with two fingers and left only several inches of space between her skin!

“It seems that you are the ones responsible for this.” As if there was no pain, Vanna casually tore the piece of steel in half and threw it aside. At the same time, she beckoned to her sword to return, summoning it with an invisible force that had also brought the squirming blob of blackness over.

With a flick of her right hand, Vanna casually threw the monster nailed to her sword into the ground. Then without looking back, she left the rapidly regenerating monster and walked forward, leaving only one sentence to her rear: “You stay here and regenerate, I will purify your accomplice first.”

The creeping flesh and blood that was pierced by the giant sword had lost the protection of the black umbrella. Even if she left the monster to do its own thing, it would be far weaker and too slow to do try anything. Knowing this fact, the inquisitor now shifted her focus at the burning bookcase that launched the sneak attack in the distance – a second sun heir.

Seeing its position discovered, the second shadow had stopped hiding and stepped forward from the flames. It’s just like the first, tall and thin with a series of tentacles squirming out from the long trench coat. The thing was growling disgusting words at the inquisitor, cursing her to not get any closer.

“Fear, anger, confusion… It seems that they also have emotional reactions, not just a group of ‘split bodies’ who lack a complete mind as many people thought,” Vanna said calmly as she walked forward. She didn’t forget to watch out for more sneak attacks, and as a mean to combat the blasphemous roars from the monster that might affect her mind, she started to speak to it as well as a counter. “The dregs of the sun heirs… Since you are here, it means that at least one of the sun heirs are nearby… Where? In the depths of the sea of fire? Outside the church? Or…”

The monster launched into an attack before the lady could finish, sending a tentacle out from the side to slice off Vanna’s neck.

Of course, this didn't work since the inquisitor's ready for it. With a simple side step, she casually avoided the hit and grabbed the thorn-riddled tentacle to unleash a skill of her own – a vibrating shockwave that she used in her dream with Duncan to.

“..... Is it in that fire of 1889? Or in that chapel of 1885?”

The tip of the tentacle in Vanna's hand exploded into a cloud of blood first, then the main branch of the appendage exploded as well, spreading like a plague into the main body of the shadow. It wasn't until one-third of the shadow's figure were gone did it get halted, which was fine for Vanna since it's enough time for her to charge forward.

Raising her giant broadsword, she swung it down like a club at the monster's head.

With a loud bang, the monster's roar abruptly stopped and flew into the distance like a filthy lump of meat. It landed next to the remnants of the first sun heir that had partially finished regenerating into its thin, scrawny self. And like before, the tentacles had mimicked the shape of a black trench coat that's essentially being used as a form of protective shell.

Pleased with herself, Vanna casually came before the two attackers and peered down condescendingly over them.

“Although I don't know why the Black Sun managed to mix itself into the pollution of history, and I don't know what your main body has prepared for me, but one thing is definitely true. I'll fight you all here to see if you're truly endless. Either I kill all of you, or... I will prove my loyalty and faith to the goddess.”

With a raised greatsword, the sound of meticulous chopping continues...

Vanna's idea was simple – the heirs of the sun have powerful regenerative abilities, but no matter how powerful their regeneration was, it's not invincible. As long as their recovery consumes their strength, then it's not a problem to solve.

It's okay to make small careful cuts, if it doesn't work... she could always cut twice.

.....

Shirley opened her eyes after a heavy slumber, finding an unfamiliar ceiling and the faint sunlight streaming through the nearby window.

The bed under her body was comfortable, and the quilt had a fresh and dry smell to it. This kind of dryness was difficult to come by in the slums because the oldest pipes and silted sewers were always gathered in those guttered alleys. Even if one did hang the quilt out to dry, it would only soak in more of the sewer smell into the fabric due to how proliferate it was in the damp air.

Shirley lay quietly in bed, reluctant to even turn due to the comforting sensation. But in the end, she propped herself up with both hands to look around.

Nina was no longer in the room, and based on the angle of the sunlight coming through the window, it's likely already noon...

"Dog," Shirley called softly, "how long have I been asleep?"

Dog's voice immediately sounded in her heart: "It's at least half past ten now, maybe eleven. You fell asleep directly in bed after eating and taking a bath yesterday. So, at least for twelve hours... that's normal after expending so much energy."

Shirley was still a little dazed right now. What happened yesterday felt like a dream, floating in her head with segments popping up without intent, which would take time to sort out and confirm what's real and fantasy.

Then she raised her head and looked into the corner of the room.

A simple little box sat quietly there.

That's her all for the past ten years... She and Dog's everything.

“We really... moved here,” Shirley muttered, “it’s like a dream.”

“Don’t say it, I’m still panicking right now. Mr. Duncan is cooking in the kitchen, and I don’t even dare to think about what he might serve to the table later...”

“Dog, why do you have such a big opinion about the food here. You have been uttering that more than once already...”

“Ah, don’t ask...”

Listening to Dog’s complaints, Shirley suddenly broke out into laughter.

The sun is so nice today...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 197

Chapter 197 “Sunny Day”

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The sun shone brightly outside the window, and the previous horrible weather seemed like a distant dream now. The only traces of that rainstorm would be the water left on the windowsill and the wet ground out on the streets. It's a good day to take an afternoon nap. But Shirley had slept enough. In fact, she had never slept for so long in one sitting, and her stomach was growling a little, the signal to get up.

Unlike a normal child, Shirley had some pretty unpleasant memories of lying in bed with a hungry stomach. It was when she was still extremely young after losing her parents, the first winter of that year. She had no one to help but Dog. The weather was cold and snowing outside, and the tiny hut she found to cuddle in for the night leaked. As a hungry child desperately needing sleep, she would've died from the frost without help. Thankfully Dog was there, keeping her company and awake. Falling asleep while hungry during such a cold winter night would've left her dead.

“Shirley! Are you awake? I heard movement!” It was Nina’s voice that came from the hallway after Shirley had just finished changing out of her clothes.

“I-I’m awake...” Shirley stammered for a reply to the voice.

The door got pushed open, and Nina, wearing a white shirt and light brown skirt, came waltzing inside with a smile: “You slept for so long! How are you feeling now? Does your back still hurt? What happened to the wound... Let me see, let me see...”

“I expended a lot of energy, so I slept for a bit longer than usual... I’m okay, really,” Shirley tried to dodge the overly enthusiastic Nina to no avail. In front of this infinitely energetic girl, it’s better to submit than to resist.

“It’s just a small injury. I... am very resilient, and... ah, you’re tickling me, don’t be... Itchy, haha...”

“It’s really healed!” Nina finally let go of Shirley, who had jumped to the side with a look of fleeing a predator. “It was still such a big wound last night, and now it’s not only gone but not even a scar is left... How did you do it?”

“Didn’t I tell you before? I live in symbiosis with a shadow demon. The characteristics of Dog are a strong body and regenerative ability,” Shirley straightened her dress – the one she wore yesterday had been destroyed in the battle – so the one she had on was a different one rescued from the rubbles. “Actually, my regenerative ability can be a little stronger, but Dog said I am malnourished, so my regenerative ability is reduced...”

“Then you have to eat plenty here. Uncle’s cooking is excellent,” Nina said immediately. Then making a curious face, “Umm... are you all like this... I mean, is everyone with a shadow demon so powerful?”

“Specifically, it depends on what kind of demon symbiosis they have. The powers of a dark hound are strength and regeneration, as well as a certain increase in perception. We’re also more resistant to spiritual pollution... Anyways, there are many types of shadow demons with different abilities. I don’t know all of them, just that they’re all unique in their own ways...”

Shirley suddenly paused at the mention, her expression growing more severe while meeting Nina’s gaze: “Speaking of which, I suggest you don’t get too involved in this field... You should already know that under normal circumstances, those who coexist with the shadow demons are the madmen of the Annihilation Sect. They are different from me, and their demons are not the same as Dog.”

“I know, I know, I’m not a child,” Nina waved her hand quickly, still unable to hide her curiosity, “but have you seen any other demon symbiotes? I mean those annihilation believers...”

“I haven’t seen any, and I don’t want to see meet any. It’s disgusting enough to listen to the description given to me by Dog, and if I do meet them, I will definitely bea... I will report them to the authorities,” Shirley said with a frown. “Nina, you have a lot of questions today... You didn’t ask so much when you met Dog before, so why did you suddenly change your heart? What happened at school today?”

“You will live in my house from now on. Of course, I must know more about you. Uncle said your home was destroyed by a gas explosion, so you don’t have anywhere else to go...” Nina said with a serious face. Then snatching Shirley’s hand to bring her out: “In addition, school is on holiday. I have two months of vacation time now, didn’t you know?”

“How do I know. I haven’t been to school before...” Shirley muttered subconsciously while already being dragged out the door. Even from their distance, the girls could smell the intoxicating scent of food wafting through the air. “Isn’t Mr. Duncan there?”

“Uncle went down to the first floor. He said he needed to entertain someone first, so let’s eat on the second floor first,” Nina explained while pulling Shirley toward the kitchen door. But then she quickly turned towards the bathroom after remembering something, “Ah right, wash your hands and face before eating; otherwise, Uncle will nag again.”

“Oh... Oh.” Shirley literally became a doll at this point, being dragged around left and right without a say in her choosing. It’s borderline abusive if one watches their antics. Nevertheless, it’s a good type of abuse, the kind that’s only found in a warm bodily home with people around.

At the same time, next to the counter on the first floor of the antique shop, Duncan was explaining something to the person opposite of himself. It’s a young lady wearing a delicate and elegant long dress. She had long blonde hair with a dignified and beautiful appearance.

Dignified and beautiful blonde lady (No)

Alice in a wig (Yes)

“..... That’s pretty much it. There is a lot of common sense that you need to know about in human society, but the most basic part is what I’ve told you. With your current scope of activities, it should be enough. Just get familiar with the store and its occupants first. Like cleaning and greeting the customers when they come in.” Duncan finally finished explaining what to pay attention to but still looked uneasy at the smiling blonde girl sitting across from him. “... Do you remember what I taught you on the ship before?”

“Remember, I remember!” Alice nodded vigorously. Then just as quickly, she reduced the speed of her nod to portray an elegant lady, “Don’t worry, I remember it clearly!”

“Yes, the nod should be small. It seems that you remember this part at least.” Duncan exhaled and reviewed Alice’s appearance to confirm the last few details.

The original long silver hair had been covered with a golden wig, slight makeup applied to adjust the details in her appearance, and the lower half of the face covered with a veil to keep others from recognizing her. As for the joints, she also had a neck ring to cover that area while wearing long white gloves to hide the arms. That effectively camouflaged any joints that could possibly show up.

Of course, it’s still possible for someone to notice the oddity in Alice’s appearance if they knew the Frost Queen personally, but the odds of that happening was negligible. Ray Nora was a queen from half a century ago. For the odds of someone from Frost visiting Pland, then coming to the lower city and visiting Duncan’s antique shop, that’s effectively impossible in terms of odds.

Duncan couldn’t help but sigh at his own ingenuity.

Truthfully, he had initially planned to wait a little longer to let Alice come aboard the city and see the “world”. But when he last checked up on this doll, he had seen her constantly mourning along the deck of the Vanished, peering out into the distance like a bored child with nothing to do. No

matter how firm he was on staying safe, forcing someone to do nothing was equivalent to torture. Duncan was no monster.

So, taking the opening while Nina and Shirley were still eating upstairs, he grabbed Ai and had her transport Alice over from the ship for the first time. And just as quickly, he regretted the decision right away. The doll had instantly jumped to the shop window and pressed her face against the glass like a buffoon, constantly asking this and asking that over whatever she saw moving about outside. Even now, while conversing, Alice fidgeted and turned side to side without meeting his eyes like a nosy kid.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 198

Chapter 198 “Alice’s First Day In The World”

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Duncan was a little creeped out with the way he was being stared at by the puppet. Then after calming down for a few seconds, he finally couldn’t help but ask with a frown, “What are you looking at?”

Alice was honest: “Looking at you.”

Duncan now got confused: “What’s so interesting about me?”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen you talking like this,” Alice said in disbelief. “Although you said before I have another body and identity here, I still find it incredible when I see it! Captain, your appearance is completely different from that on the ship, not so tall or gloomy, um... you look like a good person...”

Duncan’s eyes widened when he heard this, and before he could speak, Alice hurriedly added: “Ah, I shouldn’t slander you, Captain...”

“How many times have I said it? Don’t learn random stuff from Goathead! Praising others as good people is not slandering – it’s the same for me too!” Duncan stared at the idiot in front of him, feeling a brain aneurism forming, “And you forgot the reminder? You can’t call ‘Captain’ on this side. You have to call me Mr. Duncan or Mr. Shopkeeper, understand?”

Alice shrunk her head: “Ah... AH! I remember Ca... Mr. Shopkeeper!”

“..... Why don’t you just call Mr. Duncan,” Duncan sighed wearily, “at least you are still familiar with this name, and the probability of calling it

wrong is relatively low.”

“Oooh, okay, Mr. Duncan.” Alice hurriedly bowed her head and agreed, only to hear Duncan helplessly reminding her halfway: “Don’t bow your head; otherwise, your head will fall off again. If you drop your head in full view, your journey to the city-state will end.”

Alice agreed with a hum but then frowned in the next: “I seem to have heard Ai mutter a similar sentence to what you just said. What did she say...? The head, the crown will...”

“Do you have a crown on your head?!?” Duncan glared, “You have a wig on your head, and it’s stronger than your head!”

Alice thought for a while and giggled: “Hehe...”

Then, after two seconds of silence, the doll began to act out again: “Captain... Can I touch your face?”

Duncan looked puzzled: “I don’t mind, but why?”

Alice had already started on him when she heard the words “don’t mind”. It seemed that after leaving Captain Duncan’s majestic main “shell”, the doll’s boldness had swelled unprecedently. She stepped forward and pinched Duncan’s current cheek, making eyes of surprise as she did so. “So amazing! It’s real! When I was on the ship, you looked like you were carved out of stone with that face!”

Duncan was extremely taken aback inside and wanted to break free from those hands: “Are you done yet?”

Before his words could finish, he heard two brisk footsteps coming down from the direction of the staircase. It’s Nina and Shirley, with the former calling out pleasantly: “Uncle, I’ve finished eating with Shirley! What are you doing here...”

Duncan turned his head like a robot, showing the awkward face of someone being caught in an embarrassing situation. So what’s so embarrassing?

Alice still had her hands on the man's face, thus creating a rather fluttery scene of two partners having a go at it.

"Ah, why did you stop suddenly?" Shirley asks after bumping her head against her friend's back.

Alice immediately withdrew her hands over the interruption, folding both hands in her lap to put on a dignified posture of a Victorian-era lady.

Meanwhile, Nina had become so shell-shocked that she couldn't process the image. There's a gorgeous lady in her home and an elegant blonde that's likely from the upper city at that!

"Dog, Dog, quickly look, who is that sitting across from Mr. Duncan... Is she human? Can you beat her?"

Dog's voice hesitated for a long time before coming through, sounding extremely cautious: "I can't see clearly through your eyes, but the more you look at her, the less she looks like a person... I don't know if I can win. Regardless, definitely don't fight her."

Now Shirley got shocked: "Why? You can't even see what she is, so why are you so afraid?"

"Are you dumb! She actually dares to pinch Mr. Duncan's face!" Dog's voice sounded so cowardly that it was painful, "Just that fact alone is enough to put her on the level of being able to stew us, and not just any stew, the type where I will go chop the firewood for the stove..."

"..... Dog, you are too embarrassing, you know that?"

"I call this knowing when to be the dead dog. Do you know how many human beings spend their entire lives mastering the art of survival?"

Shirley didn't want to talk with Dog anymore because it's too humiliating.

While the pair talked through their mental connection, Nina had already arrived before her uncle and the blonde lady.

“Uncle, who is this lady?” Nina asked curiously and subconsciously looked at Alice on the side with surprise and speculation in her heart.

“Oh, good timing. Let me introduce her,” Duncan coughed lightly to alleviate the embarrassment just now. Then with a calm face, he raised a finger, “Her name is Alice. Remember what I said before about getting help at the shop? She will be working here.”

After that, he immediately pointed to Nina and Shirley: “This is my niece, Nina, and this is Shirley, who will temporarily live here for the time being.”

“Hello,” Alice immediately took the initiative to greet the girls.

This time she remembered Duncan’s reminder and stopped goofing around. However, her gesture only made the doll appear more noble-like, showing an indescribable level of elegance found only in those with a high upbringing.

Girls first meeting (epic misunderstanding)

“You... Hello,” Nina gulped nervously, nodding to Alice as if her lax manner would offend the other side, “nice to meet you.”

Shirley didn’t dally around either and closely followed by saying hello. She was also a little nervous, but her nervousness came more from what Dog said earlier: “Hello, I too am... glad.”

Then the scene froze, with faces tense on both sides.

Shirley and Nina didn’t know how to continue. In their mind, whatever they said would only displease this elegant character that’s clearly not from the lower city.

Meanwhile, Alice had even simpler ideas – her mind was blank in this case. Thankfully it’s not mush like on some occasions.

Fortunately, Duncan had expected this situation. When he saw the cold scene on both sides, he knew what was going on and immediately broke the silence with a light cough: “Ahem, Shirley, how is your injury?”

“Inju... Oh! My injury is completely healed!” Shirley took a moment before reacting, then quickly stood up and answered Duncan’s question like a report, “And I ate a lot just now. I’m not hungry at all anymore!”

“I didn’t ask you this... But if you like today’s meal, that’s good to hear,” Duncan smiled and nodded. “Spend the next two days replenishing your body. I will make something nutritious to restore your vitality. Nina, do you have any plans for today?”

“I’m going to take Shirley out to shop in the neighborhood,” Nina said immediately, “she needs some new clothes and shoes.”

Speaking of this, she turned back to explain her meaning. This was to prevent her friend from being offended: “This is a meeting gift for you, and it is rude not to accept it.”

“I...” Shirley didn’t know what to say for a while. Ultimately, the poor child could only nod, “Okay, thank you in advance... and Mr. Duncan.”

Duncan nodded with a smile: “Then don’t go too far and come back before evening. Shirley, you are in charge of protecting Nina.”

Shirley immediately straightened her back and replied with a military voice that startled Nina: “Yes, Mr. Duncan!”

Afterwards, both girls bid their farewells to Duncan and Alice, heading for the main doorway with Nina still muttering as she walked: “Why did you yell so loud. It scared me... Uncle? My uncle is not scary.”

“I... I’m being polite. I’ve been learning politeness lately...”

Listening to the fading muttering of the girls, Duncan couldn’t help but smile before turning back to Alice.

“Why are you staring at me again?”

“Mr. Duncan... You’re very different here than on the ship,” Alice looked at Duncan very seriously, “much more cordial than on the ship!”

“Okay, don’t fret about unimportant stuff,” Duncan smiled helplessly. Of course, he knew why Alice would feel this way since he had actually been tensed on the ship. Even if he had relaxed in the recent period, it was not at all as free as on the city-state’s side. But he didn’t bother with this matter and quickly moved the topic elsewhere, saying, “Let’s talk about you first. You don’t have a legal identity, so it’s best not to go to the upper city to attract attention. I will first have you help in the antique shop during this period. It will allow you to adapt to the environment, and on the other hand, you can also help me do something while I’m out. Like taking care of customers behind this counter… Wait, I suddenly thought of something!”

With a strange expression, Duncan stopped and stared at the puppet before him: “You… Know about money?”

Alice’s face was full of curiosity: “What is money?”

Duncan: “…”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 199

Chapter 199 “The Vigilance of Historians”

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Duncan felt that he had been careless.

He only thought about Alice’s lack of common sense to live in the human world. What he didn’t take into consideration was the extent of this ignorance.

To think Alice didn’t even know what money was... In that case, how is she supposed to help around the store?

But then it’s quite reasonable if he thought about it.

After all, the lady doesn’t need to spend money while lying inside the coffin box.

“Aigh... while Shirley and Nina are away, I’d better continue to make up lessons with you,” Duncan sighed at being forced to give up his afternoon plans. “First of all, I must let you know the most basic things in the human world, such as currency...”

He paused and sighed again: “Aigh, now that I think about it, I really have to open up a study class with you and Shirley.”

“Oh, oh, Shirley, the short girl just now, right?” Alice immediately showed a face full of joy, like she was happy to meet someone new. “I heard you say she is just like me... What’s it called again? Illiterate?”

“It’s not something to be happy about!” Duncan knocked on the table, “And even Shirley is better than you. At least the girl knows how to evade the bus fare when taking a ride!”

Alice: “What is fare evasion?”

Duncan: “...”

.....

Heidi sneezed hard after feeling a chill run down her skin.

Getting up to close the living room window, the doctor sniffled her nose and muttered in complaint at the fluctuating weather. Then, with a worried look, she peered over at her father, who was sitting in a daze at the coffee table nearby.

School had been out for the holidays. Normally, her father would spend the next two months visiting the major libraries to kill time during the autumn months, but Morris had been acting strange and lethargic today for some reason.

Father's been acting this way since he returned from Mr. Duncan's antique shop. He didn't even go to his study when he returned. Did something happen during his visit?

“Are you all right?” Heidi finally didn’t hold back and bent down to ask with concern, “Are you not feeling well?”

After asking twice in a row, Morris finally heard his daughter’s voice. Quickly raising his head, the old historian felt the buzzing subside slightly before waving his hand: “I’m okay... Oh, you didn’t go to church or city hall today? Didn’t go to the clinic either?”

“I’ve already completed the work from the church and city hall. And the clinic is closed today,” Heidi’s furrowed brows did not loosen after the response, “I remember you asking me that this morning already.”

“Oh right, I forgot.” Morris lightly tapped his temple and said with some hesitation.

He knew he wasn’t in a great state. The man knew this. However, he couldn’t explain it to his daughter either. After all, revealing the existence of a subspace shadow lurking within the city was a huge matter. It might anger Mr. Duncan and pollute Heidi’s mind in the process.

The low buzzing sound sounded in his head again at Duncan’s name, which interrupted Morris’s train of thought. But soon, the noise subsided after a sting, allowing his train of thought to stabilize for the second time.

Static noise, the consequence of returning from that antique shop.

Morris knew that he should be thankful for being able to keep his life and sanity. Yes, he’s got some symptoms of “critical madness” lingering, but after some self-assessment, Morris was sure the problem would subside on its own after some rest.

But before the symptoms disappear entirely, he will have to keep worrying Heidi like this.

Morris frowned suddenly, remembering that his daughter was a brilliant psychiatrist – she could not be allowed to continue to notice his mental state.

“Did you talk to Mr. Duncan about anything yesterday? I feel like you’ve always been absent-minded when you come back...” Heidi’s voice came again.

“Some... topics in the field of knowledge, very profound knowledge.” Morris couldn’t suppress the information about the “Creeping Sun Wheel” in his mind, recalling the news of what Mr. Duncan revealed about the current situation of the Black Sun. The information acted like it had a mind of its own, wandering through his head like a parasite that’s trying to devour his brain. “It’s quite consuming of my brainpower, so I couldn’t figure it out yet. Don’t mind me... Anyways, let’s not talk about this matter.

What happened to the appointment with your friend? Didn't you say you're going to the theaters on your day off?"

Heidi was stunned: "... Friend? I don't remember... Which friend did I make an appointment with? Are you sure you?"

"Did I make a mistake?" Morris rubbed his temples. For some reason, he suddenly felt his temples throbbing as if a trance had overtaken his mind. "But I clearly remember you saying that there was a friend the day before... What's their name? A very tall one, and someone I'm familiar with..."

The throbbing in his temple started irritating Morris, causing him to gently pound his head with the fist instead.

Her father's action naturally alarmed Heidi, who was initially only puzzled, but now, she's downright panicking. Squatting down to grasp the old historian's hand: "Are you okay? Is it a headache? Do you want..... shall I give you a hypnotic relaxation or calming? Or find another doctor..."

"I don't need a doctor, I don't need it," Morris waved his hand vigorously. The noise in his head had returned again, but this time, it was different from the last. Unlike before, the sound seemed to be desperately trying to convey some information, desperately waking up something. It's as if another consciousness had awakened in his mind – that consciousness was still his own, but it had a subtle deviation from his current thinking. "I just need to recall something, recall a very important thing... Heidi, you have a friend, listen, you have a friend, a very important..."

The worry and nervousness on Heidi's face became more and more severe. She squeezed Morris's other hand hard, and her words were already filled with calming power out of reflex: "Of course I have friends, but which one are you talking about..."

Morris could no longer hear Heidi's words.

A sudden bang roared within his head, which was the momentary release of all the compressed noise at once. Then, the static plaguing his thinking had disappeared entirely, with many strange memories pouring into the depths

of his consciousness. He had fallen into a trance and saw things – a giant, full of starlight, twisted and fused by crushed mirrors, and then he saw the green flames... it burned away the fog clouding his head.

This time, he did not lose his sanity by witnessing the giant; on the contrary, the impression gave him the strength to break through the invisible curtain blocking his vision until now.

“Where is Vanna?” Morris suddenly raised his head and stared into Heidi’s eyes.

Heidi was stunned: “... Who is Vanna?”

“Inquisitor of the city-state, one of your best friends, niece of Admin Dante...” Morris said slowly. His breathing had stabilized, and his eyes returned to their former depth and sharpness. Right now, two very different memories existed within his mindset, one clearly identifiable and recognizable, the other distant and unfamiliar. Imagine two historical scrolls laid out side by side, that’s what’s happening with him. “You don’t remember, do you?”

Heidi hesitated: “I... I don’t know who you’re talking about, but your state worries me...”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m in very good shape right now. Also, it’s not me we should be worried about, it’s Vanna.” Morris suddenly stood up, his expression more serious than ever, “Heidi, a big problem may be happening within our city grounds. We have to take action.”

Heidi subconsciously followed by getting up, and she could feel her father’s spirit returning again. As to why? She still didn’t know what. “Action? What action?”

“Go to the main cathedral, go to Bishop Valentine, tell him...” Morris said quickly but stopped halfway through. After weighing what should be said, he nervously shook his head, “No, Vanna’s accident may also be because she realized the truth... Find Bishop Valentine. Tell him you are seeking asylum, the highest level of asylum. Tell him I made you do this, that the

most eminent historian of Pland made you do this. Do not say anything else other than that...”

Heidi listened in a daze. She sensed that something dangerous and urgent might be happening, things that could not be said in the open. Controlling her urge to ask, she readied herself according to her father’s instructions.

“What about you? What are you going to do Father?” She asks after getting surprised by Morris taking the coat up from the hanger.

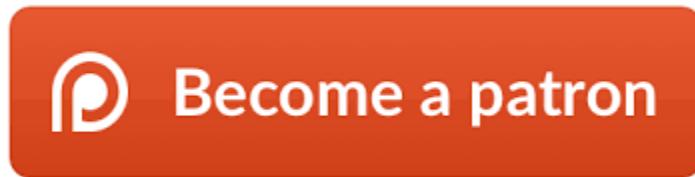
“..... Go to the antique shop,” Morris said in a deep voice.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 200

Chapter 200 “Interception”

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It was obviously still sunny in the morning, but now the sky had turned gloomy for some reason – gray clouds and fog blanketed Pland from top to bottom, leaving the bell towers and chimney in the distance looking like structures of black ink.

Two cars drove out of the Underwood’s family mansion under this weather, one heading straight up the avenue and towards the city center while the other swerved onto the side street to the lower city.

Morris sat in the driver’s seat and cautiously steered the vehicle along the roads while constantly keeping track of the weather outside.

The sky had grown even darker than just now, and the chaotic downdraft caused everything to flap and howl with a sense of eeriness.

This unsettled the old historian inside. From what he recalled, the last visit to the antique shop was exactly like this – bad weather.

Raising his right hand and patting his head to refresh himself, Morris glanced at the string of stones on his wrist using the corner of his eye.

Between the intricately structured knots, only four colored stones remained. These divinely blessed stones shimmered faintly in the groggy skylight, carrying an atmosphere that calmed his soul.

Lahem’s protection allows scholars to temporarily save their lives in the face of incomprehensible knowledge, but the usage had limited utility in the

face of truly dangerous entities. Morris didn't know what awaited him at his final destination or whether the stones could protect him like the last, but he still decided to go.

As long as you control your curiosity, as long as you don't open your "true eyes", as long as you don't observe Mr. Duncan and all the things around him, you are safe Morris. The subspatial shadow is friendly. As long as you don't cross the line, he will not harm you and may even offer help.

Morris took a gentle breath and let his pounding heart to slowly calm down.

He knew that he had touched upon some terrible truth beneath the peaceful surface of the city-state, but instead of choosing to report it to the church himself, he rather go meet an unspeakable being from subspace.

This was undoubtedly a rebellious or even heretical act.

But he still made this bold decision.

Heidi had already gone to the cathedral to seek refuge with that cryptic message he ordered her to convey. If Lahem's will permits and prevails, it should raise the vigilance of Bishop Valentine. That's all he could do in that regard. Right now, his duty lies in reaching the antique shop down in the lower city. He's already certain something has happened to Vanna. If the foe could take down the inquisitor, it implies even the church itself may not be enough to handle the enemy this time.

As a man of wisdom and knowledge, Morris couldn't place all the eggs in one basket. He must seek reinforcement!

A thunderous bang suddenly rumbled across the sky, jolting Morris back to attention as he drove. The noise startled him of course, but he was even more surprised by the faintly rising smoke in the distance.

It seemed that the falling thunder had set a roof ablaze somewhere.

Grumbling irritably after realizing the flame would hinder his route since it's up ahead, the old historian cursed and drove into the closest turn for

another path.

However, he did not get far before several crazed dogs suddenly sprang out of an alley and caused him to stomp the brakes. This wouldn't be so bad since it only gave him a light scare, but another man had suddenly stomped out of the shadow with a club in hand. The person was clearly drunk in the way he was cursing at the stray dogs and waving his weapon like a maniac.

"What a madman..." Morris frowned, honking the horn hard to get the drunk out of the way. However, the other party didn't seem to hear his horn and ignored it. In fact, the noise seemed to anger the drunk, who suddenly smashed the front of the car with that club.

Morris was surprised by the hit, but the shock only lasted a second before his eyes locked onto the drunken man's frothing gaze. Immediately, he recited in a low, harsh voice: "The geometric law of Modazzoro!"

Huge chaotic knowledge suddenly poured into the drunken man's head, sending a brief but substantial informational storm inside the consciousness of the drunk. Without a fiddle, the reckless and drunk man issued an agonizing roar of pain before running off in the opposite direction.

Morris restarted the car immediately and pumped the gas to ditch the barking dogs in the rear. He's grown edgy and alarmed now, which he rightfully should since a ditch pipe in his field of vision suddenly popped out of nowhere. The escaped steam instantly blocked his view, sending the car to swerve wildly at the lack of vision.

He's sure of it now. It's not the bad weather, poor luck, or his bad state of mind, but rather someone's trying to stop him from moving forward!

This was not a strict blockade, nor was it an outright lethal threat, but a series of unexpected events akin to a "stress response", like an alarm rule set by the creator.

How does this alarm rule come into effect, and how did "they" find out? Is it because of our awakening? Or a specific action?

I only vaguely glimpsed into the truth and did not even have the chance to confront the shadow in the background yet, and the response is this strong? Then what about Vanna? What did she discover to be erased from reality itself?

Morris silently recited Lahem's holy name, catching a glimpse of the colored stones still shimmering on his wrist. Then, once confirmed he was not under anyone's influence, he cranked the gears and changed course toward the main street of the fourth block, knowing various obstacles may come out of nowhere at any second.

What will they do if I go out in the open?

Morris blinked after that thought, suddenly catching a figure sitting directly behind himself through the rearview mirror.

It's a "man" dressed in tattered ascetic robes with a thin and shriveled build like that of a skeleton. Currently, this individual was making a grotesque smile at Morris.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Morris," the shriveled figure spoke suddenly, still polite but creepy, "where are you going?"

"I should have known... When I discussed the 'Wilhelm Summons Affair' with Mr. Duncan, I should have thought of your kind, Ender Missionaries...!" Morris slammed on the brakes and swung his head around to confront the intruder in the back seat, "... When did you get inside my car?"

"It's hard to say, it could have been yesterday, or maybe it was 1889, or even the day when you and your wife bought this car." The thin man seemed to be pleased by the hostile glare from Morris and showed a wrinkled grin from that shriveled-up face, "Is there something of importance to be in such a hurry?"

Morris replied with silence, but the thin Ender was unimpressed and continued to speak politely: “Apologies, but I cannot allow you to reach your destination. I won’t take your life though; after all, you did pray to subspace during that great fire too. From a certain perspective, you’re also a partial compatriot… Oh forgive me, you didn’t know, did you? You didn’t know who you were praying to?”

Morris’s face became ugly and white before finally showing a wry smile: “So that’s why…”

“As we always say, subspace is the Promised Land, which will respond to all wishes of the living…” The Ender raised a hand and said reverently before gazing at Morris, “What will you do next? Try to expel me? I have learned about the power of the God of Wisdom. His believers are given the power of the word, right? You can turn your knowledge and memory into power, shooting out words like bullets. I would love to see…”

“Bang, Bang!”

A series of six deafening gunshots exploded within the car, and before the Ender could finish speaking, he was already turned into a corpse by a large-caliber revolver. Two bullets had made a hit, one entering the heart while another landed in the forehead.

As the shriveled body quickly turned into pale fragments and scattered like dust against the wind, Morris raised his right hand with a smoking revolver gun in hand.

“I have all the bullets I need here. Why should I waste words on you…” After muttering those words, he casually reloaded the bullets and started the car again.

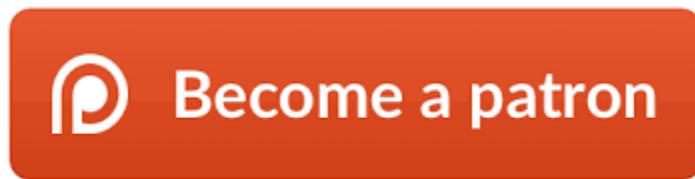
He knew his journey was still difficult, and something might still be blocking him ahead. Therefore, killing a single Ender would not end everything. In fact, this same one might just return tomorrow and continue pestering him. He knows this because the fact that the other side dares to show up in his car means his death meant nothing.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 201

Chapter 201 “Penetration”

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Fire, raging fire as far as the eye could see. The church grounds, the city, everything had been engulfed in a sea of red. Yet, Vanna stood stoically with her weapons in hand – a sword on the right and a machine gun she pillaged from a spiderwalker on the left.

The hot wind blowing across the church grounds scorched the inquisitor's nostril whenever she breathed; nevertheless, her sharp senses were unhindered. She's scanning the premise for the heresy, for signs of the enemy to slay in this twisted history where Pland had been destroyed.

The fire that began in 1889, the flint that started it all and evaded the Storm Goddess's awareness, had finally shown its claws. Vanna never liked complex problems, but she had never been one to cower away from them either.

Where are those heretics...?

A low, hoarse murmur suddenly came from the shadows of a nearby building. This murmur carried the power of blasphemy and malice, constantly warping the scorching air into a twisted picture of delusional illusion. But Vanna didn't look that way, only raising her barreled machine gun, turning it towards a seemingly empty spot, and pulling the trigger.

The deafening roar of the bullets ripped through the air, and the yellow casings of the depleted bullets scattered out of the gun's cartridge with magnificent speed. Whatever was hiding in the gap between light and

shadow was now forced to show itself by defending with that black umbrella and tentacles.

Smirking at her own deed, Vanna launched the giant broadsword in her right hand out and nailed the monster to the ground several meters out. This wasn't enough though. Once she had succeeded, the inquisitor promptly grabbed the deformed lamppost nearby and slammed the metal rod to the side.

There's a second hidden attacker, and they just got smashed into mush by Vanna's monstrous strength. Its remnants were struggling and wriggling violently on the ground in an attempt to reform. But Vanna was having none of it. Turning her huge machine gun, the lady loaded a new ammo clip from her backpack and unleashed a barrage of bullets into that mess.

"Sneak attacks in groups of twos... That's the limit of your tactics." Vanna mumbled, casually tossing away the lamppost that had been severely distorted by her swing just now.

Then raising her right hand, Vanna summoned her storm sword and continued with the execution. Yet, something was off after she got no response from the blob of blasphemy.

"No regeneration?" She frowned and got closer to confirm the thing had indeed stopped squirming. It's even shriveling up like a prune before her eyes.

What's going on? Why are these dregs losing their ability to regenerate? Is it because their main body is weakened? Or is it because these dregs have already been abandoned?

Vanna watched this scene in confusion and vigilance, then jerked up and gazed ahead.

Further away, a stream of green flame had appeared from within the darkness, quickly gathering and spreading throughout the square. The way it behaved was predatory, slurping up the corpse of these dregs!

Burn, devour, grow; these were the first words that came to the lady's mind. She's wary of this new intrusion, but it didn't matter, for the green flames seemingly ignored her presence entirely. Before she knew it, the wave of the green had wandered past the square and out of sight.

.....

Torrential rain poured down on this day, washing away the sky and blanketing the city in a long-conspired conspiracy. And when the power of the rainstorm could not stop Morris, the doom of fate came into play again – his car finally broke down.

The old scholar decisively gave up the idea of restarting the car, knowing that the force of obstruction would only intensify. Moreover, the Ender had already announced his declaration, meaning the curse wouldn't allow him to fix this car.

But the "curse" wasn't an unsolvable spell. Generally speaking, that thing could only guide or interfere with the "event" of reality to a varying degree.

Morris popped open his car door and bit his lips as he braved the torrential rain that instantly drenched his entire body. Even standing there was staggeringly hard as the wind knocked him off balance.

No matter though. Morris was a determined fella. Reaching up to keep his hat on, he clenched his coat and continued to trudge through this chaotic rainfall.

He didn't have an umbrella, and there was little point in doing so in this weather when there's only half a block left. Before he knew it, Morris could even see the shop's sign through the raindrops with the faint outline showing through his vision.

Finally, the curse placed on this scholar had lost its strength as the wind weakened around the streets. The raindrops no longer hurt when they hit Morris's face, and the biting cold didn't cause him to shiver.

A few more steps, only a few more steps and you're there! Keep going!

But just as he's about to make the final stretch after cheering himself onward, Morris suddenly heard another faint echo hitting his ear.

"Stop, you'll regret it!"

"There is no salvation ahead... Pland will only be devoured by another catastrophe!"

"History is about to complete its displacement... What you're saving is no longer the real reality, but a reverberation on the wrong path..."

Morris's footsteps did not stop though; instead, he subconsciously quickened his pace until he's only several feet from the doorway. Here, the influence completely dissipated, evaporating into nothingness due to the power of the shop's owner.

Morris found the weight lifting off his shoulder in that moment, causing him to lose balance and stumble through the door.

Even in his partially dazed state, the old scholar could still hear the faint voices of two girls conversing upstairs.

Shirley: "It's raining so hard!"

Nina: "Ya, it started all of a sudden... Good thing I listened to Uncle and came back early. Oh my hair is all wet... Shirley, can you help me dry my back!"

Morris shook his head, letting his mind recover as the warmth cleared away the biting chill over his skin. Then, he noticed someone sitting behind the clerk desk – a blond lady in a purple dress curiously gazing over.

The old scholar's first impression was that she's very beautiful. However, Morris wasn't captivated by this feature; rather, it's the transcendent and elegant temperament of the other party. He's never met someone carrying such a mysterious and unique air around themselves, at least not anyone he's known within the upper class of Pland.

For a momentary second, Morris found himself falling into a trance, hallucinating the lady sitting in a garden of flowers. He knew this was wrong, but he just couldn't help it.

Suddenly, a weird thought had crept into the older man's head – that she might not be human. But this notion only lasted for a second before Morris dismissed it. This was Mr. Duncan's antique shop. If he has a new worker here, then it's not his place to pry into her identity.

Then, he heard a greeting coming from the opposite side: "Old Sir, it's raining a lot outside. Do you need help?"

"Mr. Duncan... I'm looking for Mr. Duncan," Morris hurriedly answered after being startled, "It's very important that I speak to him! Is he in the store?"

"He is," the mysterious and elegant woman smiled, "he said he's suffering from a little high blood pressure, so he's currently resting on the second floor."

Morris looked stunned: "Blood pressure... A little high?"

The blonde woman behind the counter shook her head, looking all confused as well: "I don't know what's going on either. After we discussed the issue of history and fakes, his mood suddenly turned very poor."

History and fakes?!

Morris's heart suddenly jumped, and as he's about to ask, Duncan's voice cut in from the stairs: "Alice, are there guests?"

"Yes, Mr. Duncan! An unfamiliar old man!"

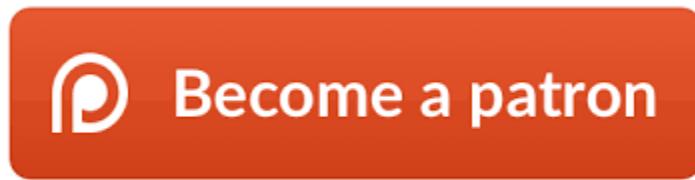
Morris looked up and saw Duncan standing on the stairs, half of his body illuminated by the light, half of his body hidden in the shadows.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 202

Chapter 202 “Finding People”

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Duncan looked at old Mr. Morris in surprise due to how much of a mess the person was in.

“Good day. What happened? You look like you ran all the way through the rain to get here.” He slowly came down the stairs and greeted the old scholar:

“Dun... Mr. Duncan,” Morris replied and took off his already-soaked hat, “I need your help... I don’t know how to explain this to you, and I don’t know if you’re willing to take action, but... I found that Ender Missionaries are operating in the city. They’re tampering with the history of Pland, and I...”

The older man stopped after getting stuck on finding the next word.

He seemed to realize how presumptuous his act of asking for help was and realized that asking for help from a subspatial being with an unclear position was in itself irrational.

Would Mr. Duncan help with this?

Why should he do this favor?

Did the survival of humanity and the survival of the city-state matter to him?

What threat do the Enders pose to him?

Morris just stood there in a stunned state until Duncan broke the air with a nod, “I know.”

The chaotic starlight, the broken mirrors, the giant of light and shadow with mortal skin just answered his query like it was nothing.

“You... know?” Morris was stunned but returned to his senses fast, “Ah, yes... Of course, you wouldn’t need me to tell you, I...”

The older man threw his hat to the side, raised his hand, and patted his head like someone that’s committed an idiotic mistake. Muttering: “I’ve really grown senile to think you wouldn’t detect the abnormality in the city. Then you must also know about Vanna...”

Duncan immediately frowned: “Vanna? The one who has a good relationship with Heidi? What happened to her?”

“Vanna, she... disappeared,” Morris was shocked when he got such a reply and took a second to process it. Then adding quickly: “I’m saying Heidi forgot Vanna’s existence, and no one else remembers her...”

Duncan became much more serious in his face: “Sit down and speak slowly. Alice, go prepare some hot tea for us...” Pausing there, the shopkeeper turned to the blonde and asked something weird, “Do you remember how?”

“Yes, Mr. Duncan.” Alice chirped with a tone of glee.

Morris watched from his spot as the elegant and mysterious blonde ran up to the second floor. In his view, Miss Alice’s movements were bizarre. Not in a bad way of course, but rather it’s too smooth and elegant, which was reminiscent of ancient nobles with excellent upbringings. Unfortunately, that’s something difficult to find in this modern age.

But his curiosity quickly gave way to the current state of affairs.

After sitting at the front counter, he immediately told the “shopkeeper” in front of him about the abnormality he had noticed and the obstacles he encountered along the way.

Duncan listened with a grim expression, only to speak after getting the full story: “Ender Missionaries... A bunch of troublesome guys indeed.”

“Yes, this group of lunatics who exiled themselves out of reality since ancient times often makes a return through the cracks in time. They are committed to destroying the continuity of history and threatening the stability of the real world... But they rarely have the opportunity to make such a big ruckus like this,” Morris said in a low voice. “Under normal circumstances, the protection of the gods will block the penetration of the Enders before they step through, and the Flame Bearers are constantly working to strengthen the historical ‘barrier’. Those madmen must have sought outside forces to help them if they managed to break through the blockade...”

“Your tea, old sir.” Alice came over and placed the hot tea on the counter.

“Thank you,” Morris hurriedly thanked her and reached over to receive the beverage. After being drenched by the storm, the old scholar needs something hot to warm his soul. However, the second he took a sip, he yelled and spat it back out.

Conversely, Duncan remained indifferent to the outburst: “Try to endure it. She’s at least managed to find out where the tea is. Although the amount she used is debatable.”

Morris turned his head in amazement at the mysterious lady, who was already wandering back over to the stairs daydreaming.

..... *What is the origin of this mysterious lady?*

Meanwhile, Duncan carefully took a tiny sip of his brew, confirming another detail he had just learned.

The transcendent beings of this world have discovered the “nonlinear” nature of the Enders and the countermeasures needed to fight that group. But now, it seems that these countermeasures are not always effective.

He closed his eyes slightly, allowing his perception to reach out and connect with the mark he left within Vanna's body. It's still flickering with life, a good sign.

Morris looked curiously at the shopkeeper, who was behaving oddly. "Mr. Duncan, you..."

"Don't worry, Vanna is still alive," Duncan widened his eyes again and showed a calm expression, "it's just that... she's currently existing outside of the normal Pland."

"Can you confirm her location and status?" Morris's eyes widened in amazement. He was actually mainly here to pass on the news of "historical pollution", and the mention of Vanna's situation was only in passing. After all, from his point of view, Duncan and the city-state inquisitor should have nothing to do with each other. To think this great being already had his sights on Vanna.

"I'm paying attention to her. She's a good inquisitor," Duncan didn't explain anything and just nodded indifferently. Then without indication, he got up from behind the counter.

"What are you going to do?" Morris promptly followed and got up as well.

"I'm going to bring Vanna back and take a look over there." Duncan strode towards the stairs and said without glancing back. But then he paused after remembering he still had a guest around. "Do you want to go upstairs and take a hot shower? My clothes are longer than yours, but they should still do the job."

Take a bath in this subspace lair and change into the clothes of the evil god?!

Morris almost fainted at the idea. Even the four great achievements of scholars wouldn't ever dare to imagine such a feat!

With tingling skin, Morris quickly shook his head: "No, no, no, no need, I'll just wait here..."

“Then please take care of yourself.” Duncan nodded and walked upstairs to find Nina and Shirley eavesdropping at the edge.

The expression on Shirley’s face was a little uneasy as she greeted Duncan: “Mr. Duncan, is it... did something happen?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just now... we heard movement from the first floor,” Shirley rubbed her hands, lowering her head as if she had done something wrong. “Actually, it’s Dog who heard it, saying that the Enders had appeared again and polluted history or something. Someone named Vanna is missing? Sounds like a very important person...”

Nina also looked over with an uneasy look. She was obviously more confused than Shirley: “Uncle, what’s wrong?”

“..... Some small things,” Duncan looked at the two girls who had vaguely sensed the turmoil approaching and felt nervous. After a little hesitation, he attempts to soothe their unease, “You can rest in the house, and if you are bored, you can go to the first floor to chat with Mr. Morris. It’s okay, don’t worry.”

Shirley nodded, but Nina still looked worried as she grabbed Duncan’s sleeve: “Uncle, I think... I feel a little scared. Is it really all right? And you... What are you going to do?”

Duncan stopped and quietly stared into Nina’s eyes.

Just like he had noticed before, Nina’s senses were actually very sharp – she was not unaware of anything; she was just too sensible.

But now the situation was slightly beyond the boundaries of her “sensibleness”.

“Nina, your uncle here is actually a very powerful person,” Duncan suddenly laughed and reached out to press his hand on the top of the girl’s

head, “but I can’t explain it to you yet... You stay with Shirley for a while, and when it’s over, I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

Just this level of reassurance still wasn’t enough to calm Nina’s unease. Nevertheless, as usual, the girl nodded obediently, just that her voice had grown softer: “Okay....”

After Nina and Shirley went downstairs following his instructions, Duncan collected his emotions and hurried back to his room, to which he summoned Ai. The bird had been munching on fries back on the Vanished.

“We’ve got to find someone,” Duncan said with a serious look when he saw the pigeon appear, “Serious and important business, double the ketchup when it’s done.”

Ai suddenly jumped on the spot with delight: “Loyalty is indescribable, loyalty is indescribable!”

Duncan exhaled slightly, letting his mind sink again to link up with the flickering mark he left on Vanna.

What happened to the female inquisitor was an accident for him, but it also brought unexpected gains. Like the flames he released in Shirley’s dream before!

Although he didn’t know how all this happened or why Vanna could get into contact with his ghost fire, one thing’s certain though – Vanna had arrived on the other side of the curtain.

And now, this powerful inquisitor, carrying Duncan’s “mark”, has become a passage for Duncan to intervene in that curtain world.

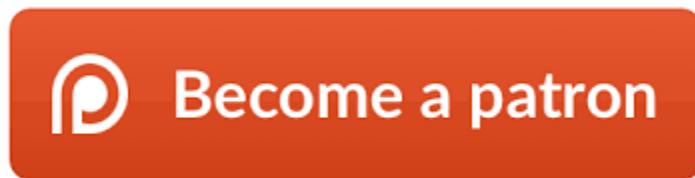
“Spirit Walk.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 203

Chapter 203 “Both Sides of the Curtain”

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Torrential rain poured down, blanketing the entirety of Pland in an unprecedented heavy rainstorm. From an onlooker's standpoint, it's as if the endless abyss had overtaken the world, covering the sky with blackish ink and battering the city structures with its waves. It's a siege, a hidden invasion of the city.

Even the dullest of folks would've noticed something was amiss under this strange atmosphere: students rushed home, commoners closed their shops, the homeless rushed into the nearest shelter for relief, and the security forces activated all of the protective measures in place for any signs of attack.

It's under this ominous atmosphere that Heidi barged into the square of the main cathedral with her car. Perhaps it's due to the goddess's protection, but the rain here was slightly weaker than elsewhere. This didn't relax Heidi though; on the contrary, this marginally lighter rain only worried the doctor more because it's proof that the rainstorm was caused by supernatural powers.

The church guards promptly opened the main door after recognizing who it was, allowing Heidi to rush through the triple-spired door of the cathedral. In light of the small trek, her body was already drenched in the cold rain.

But she had no time to care about this little discomfort. Heidi had felt the restless atmosphere in the air around her the second she stepped into the

cathedral, which was a warning of the soul, a reminder that an invisible “conflict” was gradually unfolding around these sacred grounds.

A silent cleric received her at the entrance, and at her strongest request, the cleric promptly notified Bishop Valentine, who was praying in the church’s main hall. Heidi waited for another three minutes in anxiety and restlessness before finally getting an audience with the respected bishop.

To the doc’s surprise, Valentine had come out in full ceremonial garb: a heavy three-pronged crown on the head, a long holy staff in hand, and the Storm Codex hung around his waist.

This was by no means the wardrobe of an ordinary day, but only in the most important ceremonies will the bishop be formally dressed in this fashion. These heavy and luxurious decorations are a huge burden, enough to make the able-bodied adult feel tired just by walking. Yet, Valentine remained steady and majestic in his steps, those eyes seeming to be brewing up a storm within those irises.

“Child, what happened?” Valentine asks the psychiatrist with a serious expression.

“I... I need asylum, asylum of the highest rank!” Heidi replied immediately, recalling her father’s particularly stern order before leaving. “I want the entire Storm Cathedral to guard me, the child of Pland’s most outstanding historian.”

“The most outstanding historian of Pland...” Bishop Valentine recited the sentence and met Heidi’s eyes directly. There are literally bolts of lightning flashing within those eyes, a manifestation of the goddess’s blessing on this high-ranking bishop. Then he closed his eyes slightly and nodded as if receiving guidance, “I have received your request, child. The cathedral will provide shelter, and you are safe.”

“Thank you so much,” Heidi took a deep breath, her gaze not once leaving Valentine’s figure due to how solemn the air was. She didn’t know what’s happening, but in her view, the cathedral had clearly entered a state of imminent battle even before her arrival. “Excuse me... What happened?”

“It’s war,” Valentine said calmly, “someone has gone to war against Pland. An unblessed storm has descended on our city-state. This is the signal for war, but it wasn’t until your arrival that I finally learned who the opponent was.”

“War?!” Heidi was stunned, “Who is the enemy? Where are they?”

Valentine silently eyed Heidi for a long time before softly answering: “It’s Pland, a Pland that has been annihilated in history.”

With a thunderous explosion, the entire church seemed to be violently shaken by the rumble. Heidi was startled as she raised her head in horror, looking at the stained glass still clinking and clanking in the aftershocks of the bolt. Then, as she ogled at the dangerously swaying chandelier up at the center, she suddenly felt a huge tremor under her feet.

It was the roar of a large number of spiderwalkers as they assembled in the square, followed closely by the roar of the steam tanks driven by the guardians from the armory.

Heidi turned her head in shock and looked at Bishop Valentine, who remained quietly standing in front of the sacred statue like a reef in the sea. Then sputtering her words out of panic: “Is the enemy coming?!”

“The enemy has already arrived,” Valentine said softly, his whisper still clearly in Heidi’s ear amidst the constant noise of thunder, “they arrived many years ago...”

.....

Vanna slammed her sword down, blowing apart the rubble on the street and taking in the desolate scene ahead: collapsed houses, roads covered in rubbles, and various piles of humanoid things slowly wriggling among the thick layers of embers. It’s unbearable to watch this miserable sight for she knew what they were – citizens of Pland.

They died in this history and were shaped into these abominations by the twisted powers of darkness.

The young inquisitor pursed her chapped pale lips as emotions ran wild. However, the burning sensation from the lungs and the throbbing pain of the muscles told her this wasn't real, not yet anyways if she could do anything about it.

Then something caught her attention as the lady stood at the intersection. A ghostly green flame could occasionally be seen between the wriggling ashes and the crackling embers, which was the imprint of some terrible ghost captain left in this false history.

The ghost captain's position in this incident was strange and difficult to understand, and Vanna could not see the purpose of the other party at all, only that the mysterious power had mixed into the back of this curtain at some point. It's spreading around in this destroyed version of Pland and opposing the distortion.

Finally, after several minutes of jogging over the rubbles, Vanna had arrived at her "goal" in this timeline – a chapel that remained intact during the fire.

She had walked through a small chunk of the city to reach the sixth block. Well, strictly speaking, she had slaughtered her way across the city.

Vanna took her sword and crossed the last of the obstacles, pushed open the charred metal gate, and entered the long prayer hall illuminated by the embers from the outside. Making her way through the place, the lady soon found the staircase leading down to the underground sanctuary where the dark wooden door stood.

Vanna exhaled softly, relieving the pain and exhaustion in her various joints before taking the first step. She had already scrapped the machine gun she pulled off the spiderwalker, leaving her with only the trusted and reliable broadsword from the church.

Once downstairs, the lady promptly tried pushing the dark door for resistance; sure enough, it was locked with a latch. However, she also noticed something else from her attempt. Though faint, Vanna could hear the rhythmic breathing of the other sister inside. There's no need to hesitate

anymore. With force, she blew apart the metal hinges holding up the blockade with a shove.

“You mustn’t open the door!!” A shocked and nervous young voice, seemingly mixed with a third echo, sounded after the commotion.

“I’m your junior,” Vanna strode in with the tip of her greatsword scraping the ground, causing a series of sparks to fly from the weight. Then, out of precaution, since it was too dark, the inquisitor reached down to her waist and lifted the tenacious lantern up for help, “Your battle sister.”

A nun armed with a long sword stood cautiously at the foot of the statue, watching warily at Vanna, who had just barged through the entrance. She was still young and wearing the old nun robe from 1885.

Vanna looked at the wary nun on the opposite side and sighed softly.

As she had suspected, it was only within this polluted curtain that she could step into the true enclosed underground sanctuary before the nun died in battle – this chapel in the sixth block was the first branching point.

“Sister?” The nun holding the long sword adapted to the sudden light, seemingly unaware that the sanctuary’s brightness had long been extinguished. In fact, if Vanna had taken a closer look, she would have seen the sister’s shadow acting strange and different, predatory like it was ready to attack at any second. “The main cathedral? Hurry and leave! The corruption here is already out of control. While I can still...”

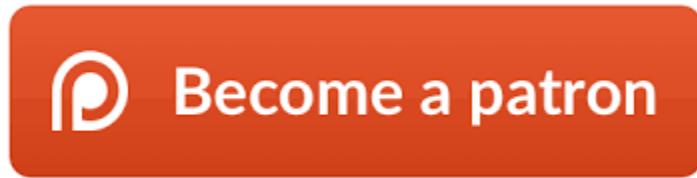
Vanna shook her head and slowly stepped forward: “I’ll help you.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 204

Chapter 204 “Teleport Out”

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“I’ll help you.”

“Help me?” The young nun frowned in confusion upon hearing Vanna’s words. Gradually, her eyes fell on the other party’s wardrobe and weapon.

It was indeed the equipment and markings of the Storm Church, but it was not any of the formats she was familiar with, nor had she heard of a high-ranking female nun in the church who fought with such an exaggerated greatsword – the weapon was clearly specially made and by no means available to ordinary guardians.

The unusually tall “Battle Sister” in front of her, who looked as young as herself, came from an era she was not familiar with.

After a moment of silence, the young nun suddenly asked: “... Where are you from?”

“The year 1900.”

“I died today, right?”

“Yes,” Vanna calmly said, “it seems you already know what happened.”

“Ender Missionaries... I don’t know how they did it, but they chiseled a subspatial rift in the chapel here. I sent an alarm to the outside but received no response...”

A subspatial rift was chiseled in the place where the gods sheltered?!

Vanna's heart shook at the news. It's an unheard-of situation that definitely left the inquisitor puzzled at how it's achieved without alerting anyone beforehand.

"Did I succeed today?" The young nun softly spoke again.

"..... At least in this invasion, you blocked it." Vanna raised her head and peered into the nun's eyes, "You sealed their invasion in 1885 with your own death."

"Oh, that's good," the nun sighed in relief and slowly raised her sword. At the same time, a low, crackling sound had come from the nearby darkness, which sounded like some slippery and sticky limb was crawling on the floor and coming out of a puddle of sticky liquid. "Then the rest is simple."

Vanna also raised the broadsword slightly: "This is my field of expertise."

"By the way," the nun suddenly turned her head again and asked, "are they ready over on that side?"

"..... We didn't receive your warning, so there were no extra preparations in place," Vanna said calmly, allowing her breathing to slowly adjust to her best form, "But... the guardians are always ready."

A roar came from the depths of the darkness at the signal, and the creepy thing from subspace finally materialized its malicious projection in this closed-off space.

The lantern on Vanna's waist was instantly stimulated, crackling and bursting like a firework. It's burning all of its holy fuel to fend off the corruption. At this rate, the light from the lamp would only last for a few minutes before it's completely depleted.

In return, Vanna finally got her first look at the hideous abomination, which looked like an amorphous mess of sludge with the appearance of the young nun at its core. The hands and feet were deformed and grotesque, and the

disgusting tentacles growing out of its back were evidence of its clumsy imitation of humanity.

“Sister, I’ll leave the rest to you,” the young nun’s voice sounded from the side when the wriggling monster was ready to pounce. At the same time she said this, the poor sister had pierced the silvery longsword into her chest, giving off an indescribable flash of baptizing light.

Agonizing screeches roared out of the monster’s mouth in the second the nun’s heart stopped. It wriggled and rolled around ferociously, struggling to cling to life until it went limp in the next.

The battle was over...

Vanna flinched to the side and hadn’t the heart to watch, only muttering a solemn and devoted phrase for her fellow battle sister: “Please bear witness... Your sacrifice won’t be forgotten.”

What appeared in the underground sanctuary was only a projection of the invasion against reality. Still, for this low-level nun who became a host of subspace, her life had already been lost when it merged with the monster. So long as she lives, so does the monster. And now, it’s finally ended.

Unfortunately, to Vanna’s shock and horror, the nun’s body didn’t remain in place as she expected. Everything had reverted back to its original state before her interference. The scars of battles on the walls, the bloodstains, and the shadow lurking in the darkness. The cycle of abomination continued!

“How...” Vanna stood there in stunned disbelief, her face distraught at the futility, “But this is just a polluted...”

Her words did get to finish though. From the corner of her eyes, a flash of green flame had flickered into life, quickly growing and expanding into a huge cyclone to form a doorway. From it, a tall and majestic figure emerged, stepping through the barrier and into this world.

“Because the pollution is too deep, and the culprits have detected your awareness by now. Vanna, what you need to correct isn’t just this chapel and the nun, but the entire city-state.”

“..... Captain Duncan!” Vanna’s eyes widened instantly. She knew that the power of this ghost captain had invaded “this side” when she saw those green flames spreading around like a plague, but she didn’t expect that the other party would appear directly in this place and at this timing. Subconsciously, the lady clenched the broadsword in her hand and almost reflexively jumped for a hit. Thankfully, logic won out in this bout and subdued the impulse. “What do you want?!”

“Take you back to the real world,” Duncan looked at the other party indifferently, “I thought you would behave like the last time and make a somersault slash on my head.”

“..... I know this attack is useless to you, and what’s here is not your main body anyways.” Vanna’s muscles adjusted themselves for combat again, “You said you want to take me back to the real world? What do you mean by that?”

“Is it so hard to understand? Don’t you need help now?” Duncan raised an eyebrow, “Or do you have a way to get out of this world by yourself? Like running across the entire city?”

The corner of Vanna’s eyes twitched unconsciously due to the mockery. She had to admit that going around the entire city was her initial plan, but she won’t say it aloud.

This dangerous natural disaster of the sea... What does he want with me?

Duncan didn’t bother to explain further at this point. Raising his right hand, he summoned up a flickering green flame at his fingertip.

Vanna was taken aback and promptly took a defensive posture: “What are you doing?!”

“Send you back to the real world. What else?” Duncan said casually. “But I haven’t done this before either so let’s give it a try. If it works, then great. If it doesn’t, then we will need to come up with something else.”

“..... Try?” Vanna gawked at the famous ghost captain with a stunned face. For some reason, she always felt that the other party’s actions were extremely inconsistent with the records in the archives. “Stop, otherwise I will...”

“Vanna, your fight lies in the real world where the battle has already begun. A storm is ravaging the city. Don’t waste your time here where the enemy is already aware of your vigilance.” Duncan interrupted the young inquisitor to avoid wasting time. “The battlefield outside needs you more than you acting alone here. Touch this flame, or I will do it for you.”

Vanna stared at the flame in Duncan’s hand, not moving a single step as the bells of danger rang through her head.

To be fair, even if she didn’t know who Duncan was, normal people would definitely not touch something so creepy.

Of course, Duncan himself knew this so the asking was only politeness on his part.

Taking advantage of the lady’s contemplation, he suddenly shot the flame out and wrapped the inquisitor within a firewall. Then in a swoop, Vanna was gone following a roar from her mouth.

“Heret...!” On the streets of Pland, where rain poured down like a waterfall, a tall female figure suddenly emerged out of thin air and swung down with a giant broadsword.

The poor garbage can in place was split in two by Vanna’s chop, leaving a deep gash on the ground as a result.

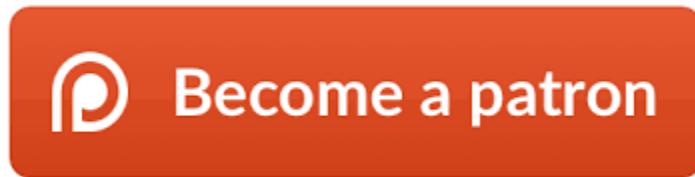
Caught off guard by the abrupt teleportation, Vanna had to take a second to organize her brain at what had happened. Then with a blank stare, she looked around her surroundings in amazement after realizing she’s back!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 205

Chapter 205 “Acceleration”

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Morris sat on the first floor of the antique shop, waiting for time to pass with great nervous tension.

It was still pouring rain outside, and the cold wind had grown uncomfortably unsettling as it whistled against the outer walls of the store's structure.

Nina and Shirley were the most affected after they came downstairs following Duncan's advice. Like the old scholar, both girls kept peering out the glass window due to how thickly dark things had become on the streets. They could hardly make out the shape of the closest building, let alone see who's still walking on the street or not.

“The scenery in the city is fascinating.” Alice suddenly joins in on the group, abruptly interrupting the uncomfortable atmosphere and bringing new air to the mix, “But I see you're all very nervous... Is something scaring you all?”

“Miss Alice, aren't you afraid?” Nina swung around and asked in astonishment at how chirpy the lady was.

“No, I think it's quite fun actually,” Alice smiled and shook her head reservedly, “and Mr. Duncan will solve the problems if there is any.”

“Does that mean you know what's happening?” Nina bit her lip and asked boldly. She still had reservations about her uncle knowing a lady as

beautiful as Alice without her own knowledge. “You sound like... you trust my uncle a lot?”

“I trust him, mhmm,” Alice said of course. “I don’t know what’s happening, but Mr. Duncan will solve it anyway.”

Her overly calm and straightforward attitude had left Nina speechless. For a while, only silence hung in the air until a loud bang of thunder shook the window. This startled the occupants. The most notable was Shirley and Nina, who had covered their ears and shrunk their necks back out of reflex.

“Vanna is back...” Morris peered out the window and muttered this before raising his voice at the realization, “Vanna is back!”

“You mean the inquisitor?” Shirley heard Morris shout and turned her head in surprise, “What’s wrong with the inquisitor? What do you mean by she’s back?”

Morris didn’t respond to Shirley’s question because he didn’t know where to begin.

Instead, he sighed long and hard before crashing down on the nearest seat. It’s been a dreadful day, but after having his chaotic and divided memories merge, he knows the long-awaited ray of sunshine was about to break through on this dark, gloomy day.

.....

The green firewall faded, and the dim underground sanctuary returned to its previous appearance, leaving only the last cluster of flame to float quietly beside Duncan as his light.

Vanna has left “this side” and returned to the other side of the curtain. He could tell by the striking outline of the beacon he left on the inquisitor.

“..... I got to say, that jump strike sure is scary,” he muttered softly. Then turning around, the man marched over to the closed door of the underground sanctuary.

History has been solidified here, and Vanna's intervention didn't stop the cycle from continuing. The lady's indeed powerful, but her expertise lies with defeating heretics, not mending the distortion in time-space.

Duncan stood quietly beside the deceased nun, then slowly stretched out his hand to only stop as the nun's body suddenly moved. The poor girl had looked up with those dying eyes and asked in confusion.

"..... Oh, as I had suspected before, you weren't dead yet while holding up the door." Duncan met the nun's gaze and calmly said, "Is there anything you want to say?"

"..... I had a brief dream. I dreamt of a battle sister appearing here. She tried to help and lay me to rest from this cycle. But she failed..." the nun said weakly. "She was really here, wasn't she?"

"She's done her best, but it's not her area of expertise. Now, she's back where she belongs." Duncan bent down and lightly placed his hand on the nun's longsword, allowing his ghost fire to swim along the surface and encompass both the weapon and owner. "I'll take over from here."

"..... Are you also a guardian of the city?" The nun seemed to have no strength left to fully open her eyes as she murmured, "I haven't seen you..."

"I'm not," Duncan shook his head slightly, "but for the time being, I can be."

The nun seemed to have stopped listening to him as the last ember of life left her for good. She's fallen into a dream, the dream of the afterlife.

"Please bear witness..." These are the last words of this devoted follower of the storm.

"I witnessed it."

The green flames soared into the air, sweeping everything up within this underground sanctuary in a blazing hurricane of power from the man's will. Whatever curse and manifestation of subspace will be destroyed at this

point, and any soul trapped in this room will be freed. All shall succumb to the ghost captain's will.

Duncan waited for the last remnant of corruption to be destroyed here before finally stepping up to the main floor of the chapel.

For the first time since 1885, the door was opened from inside the underground church. Here, in the prayer hall, there's no longer the devote phantom of a praying nun, no lit candles, and no neatly arranged benches for worshippers, only broken glass windows and a collapsed main hall littered with rubbles.

Duncan had dispelled the curse and turned this domain into his territory, his property. But he didn't need it. Once he was out of the premise, the ghost captain turned around and watched as everything burned for good, wrapped in a devouring pyre that would finally put everything to rest in this small property.

He's done here and could do no more for the lone defender.

Then with narrowed eyes, he allowed his senses to spread, connecting with every flame cluster across the city. They also sensed Duncan's arrival and activated, growing and becoming torches instead of mere small flames in this curtained world.

Simultaneously, Duncan also felt something awakening in the depths of this twisted reality. It's a roar, an outrage of anger that burst forward in the form of ash and red fire. It's imposing to look at with his mind. Nevertheless, the ghost captain wasn't afraid, only amused at the belated reaction to his arrival.

“A bit late to be taking action now, don't you think?”

.....

On the Vanished, Duncan had pushed open the door of the captain's bedroom and strode over to the mapping table. With a low and imposing voice, he stared down at the blinking dot: “How far are we from Pland?”

“Oh, Captain, there are less than two days left before our arrival,” came the Goathead’s reply at once, “theoretically, we may now run into merchant ships or patrol vessels of the various islands in the vicinity...”

Duncan did not interrupt the report, only silently calculating something within his mind at what’s plausible. Then with a huff, he straightened himself and marched out of the captain’s room.

“Ah, what are you going to do, Captain?” Goathead’s echoing voice could be heard crying out from the rear before the door slammed shut.

Duncan had already marched out of the captain’s room, crossed the aft deck, walked up the stairs, and came to the steering wheel before replying with his mental connection: “I will be personally driving the ship.”

“..... YES! Captain!”

After hearing the loud response, Duncan grabbed the steering wheel and felt a surge of power riding over him. The Vanished was overjoyed at his touch and a signal that something had activated with the ship’s structure. Everything was coming alive, much more so than usual.

Sure enough, the sails instantly formed a translucent film, the cables shook in the air with life, and the hull constantly creaked against the battering waves with energy. There’s power manifesting around the body, propelling and breaking the tide like magic!

They’re picking up speed at an incredible rate!

Feeling the distance between himself and the body in the antique store getting closer, Duncan softly exhaled.

Suddenly, an inexplicable feeling emerged from the bottom of his heart – it’s a subtle perception that he’s being targeted from afar.

How should he describe it? Imagine a sonar radar. In the split second when he grabbed the steering wheel, his position was given away to the opponent due to some connection they shared.

Duncan frowned and looked toward where that subtle discomfort was coming from.

Almost simultaneously, Goathead's urgent ringing had come into his head: "Captain, the Sea Mist has appeared nearby."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 206

Chapter 206 “Encounter”

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A steel warship with a towering bow was sailing across the vast open sea. There's constant fog lingering around the metal monster, just like the cursed frost of the frozen north.

On the deck of this steel battleship, six triple-barreled giant artillery guns acted as its main arsenal, with secondary turrets of smaller sizes acting as support. In this state of readiness, no mortal vessel would dare challenge this behemoth because it's not only operated by the undead, but its captain was also an infamous pirate known worldwide.

But don't assume they're just rabbles that only know how to pillage and rob. The battleship was a tight vessel, and everything ran with swift precision below deck.

And that's not all. In the tail end of the Sea Mist, a tiny church with its own independent broiler had also been performing a prayer.

The gloomy undead priest overseeing the ritual had lit the incense candle used to repel evil, allowing the blessings of the goddess to course through the steam pipes that stretched across the entire vessel.

Like the rest of the undead crew, the priest was also an old watery corpse with half of his skull smashed in on one side. However, one unique feature that differentiates him from the rest – those white eyeballs were mucked by two dark clouds, reflecting the faith of Gomona that's still watching over him.

This was how a fully functioning ship worked in this modern age: utilizing a miniature church that endowed the vessel with the goddess's blessing through the steam pipes created a vein-like structure that shields the ship from corruption. Truly a technological marvel that's been tested in 1835 when a major event nearly destroyed an entire fleet if not for this structural design.

And from a certain point of view, the era of naval technological innovation could also be traced back to the 1800s, when the "Vanished" incident occurred. The most advanced exploration ship in human history directly plowed into subspace by losing its way, a piece of news big enough to warrant anyone's attention.

The undead priest finally withdrew his gaze from the goddess's statue after making the blessing. After half a century of not having beating heart, his numb and cold body was surprisingly restless at the thought of encountering the Vanished.

"May you shelter us from the darkness," the priest bowed his head and prayed reverently for a second time, "we will confront the shadows of subspace head-on. Please bear witness..."

The electric bell on the side suddenly rang the second the prayer ended, and a small light flashed in front of the communication desk.

The priest came to the communication desk and turned on the copper tube corresponding to the small light: "This is the church... Yes, the grease and steam are ready, and the blessings have come."

On the bridge, the captain of the Sea Mist, Tyrian Abnomar, stood quietly in the captain's spot, overseeing the seemingly calm sea in the distance.

His eyes were aching with pain as a disturbing murmur echoed in his head. Tyrian knew why he's suffering from this. Sitting beside his right hand was an intricate brass machine comprising many intermeshing gears, compass dials, and a small bowl at the center with the man's blood.

First Mate Aiden came over from the side then, nodded to Tyrian, and reported: “Captain, the units are ready, and the church has reported in the goddess’s blessing is activated.”

“..... The Vanished is just ahead,” Tyrian whispered as if to himself and then glanced back at the brass machinery next to him, “I think ‘he’ must have sensed me too.”

First Mate Aiden’s gaze also fell on the brass machine, especially the boiling blood.

The pale-skinned bald man spoke with a low voice: “The blood compass will guide the reunion of those connected by blood, but this item never brings good luck and reunion... It points only to slaughter and desolation.”

“Fitting in this situation,” Tyrian said lightly. At the end of his field of vision, an ethereal black spot seemed to have loomed into view, “... It really came, pointing straight at Pland.”

“We can fire,” the first mate couldn’t help but remind, “actually, we could’ve done so just now.”

“..... No, keep getting closer until we’re in close range,” Tyrien shook his head. “We already tried it once half a century ago. The shelling from long distances will never fall on the Vanished. That ship is affected by some kind of distorted space-time, and anything outside of it will get warped by the distortion.”

Aiden lowered his head: “... Yes, the Sea Mist will continue to move forward.”

.....

Duncan put down the binoculars in his hand, re-hung them around his waist, and then continued to hold the steering wheel tightly.

He saw the ship as well.

As its name suggests, the Sea Mist was surrounded by a thin layer of ice fog, which does not look like a normal phenomenon.

But what really surprised him though was not the layer of fog that seemed to be related to supernatural powers but the state of the ship itself.

It was a very advanced-looking steel battleship with heavy armor, towering chimneys, a well-structured and stylish bridge, and an advanced multi-mounted battery reminiscent of modern-day naval warships.

None of the Sea Mist resembled anything like the wooden galleon of the Vanished. In fact, he couldn't even see a sailing mast on it, let alone a wooden hull.

This made him recall some rumors about the Sea Mist and Bright Star.

For example, Tyrian's warship was a monster that grew and transformed by devouring metal alloys. As to where it gets the metal? That's simple, the ships it vanquished and the alloys found on the seabed.

Now it seems that these rumors were born with a reason...

Duncan shook his head, temporarily putting aside the thoughts that were out of tune with the situation.

The Sea Mist had no intention of backing down and seemed ready for battle. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to make a detour either, meaning a confrontation was inevitable.

Duncan didn't know much about naval warfare, but in theory, he didn't have to worry about combat – the cannons on the Vanished could handle everything independently. Even so, it doesn't mean he could remain calm like an experienced pirate. He's still, what's the word? Excited? Nervous?

Tyrian Abnomar, captain of the Sea Mist, is one of Captain Duncan's children. Theoretically, Duncan's current identity meant he's the father of the pirate leader, and no father would want to confront their children in this manner.

Isn't that ship supposed to stay in the cold sea?

Shouldn't you be busy looting homes and collecting protection fees?

What's the deal in coming here?

Tyrian looking for Daddy? Father and son reunion?

"Captain," came the voice of Goathead suddenly, sounding a little... excited, "The Sea Mist has begun to enter its firing stance. Shall we adjust our positioning?"

Adjust the orientation, avoid the first direct fire coverage of the opposing weapon, and enter the combat position with the least hull projection while bringing as many of their own weapons into firing angle – Goathead was clearly ready for an artillery battle.

Duncan raised his eyebrows: "You sound like you're looking forward to it?"

"The Sea Mist is a good opponent. First of all, it can't beat us. Secondly, it dares to fight us," the wooden sculpture sounded pleased. "Finally, the Sea Mist is very durable regarding a beatdown. That ship is full of the living dead. Even if the ship itself is tainted with a little 'unsinkable' characteristic, it's still a far cry from the dominance of the Vanished. There's no better practice board for us."

"..... In short, you want to give the kid a beating lesson, right?" Duncan said blandly.

Exactly then, the ghost captain had caught sight of the fog dispersing apart from the Sea Mist. Then shortly after that, a sharp whistling sound sounded from the metal beast, followed by the chugging of the mechanical engine of the Sea Mist running at full throttle. It's declaring war!

As expected, the Sea Mist fired first. As a steel ship that's technologically more advanced than the Vanished, its weapons range could walk circles around the old wooden galleon under Duncan's control.

This preemptive strike instantly sent the ghost captain into a nervous wreck inside, which any normal person should be in. Numerous water columns rose up from the sea over the bombardment, shaking even the hull of the Vanished from the recoil.

Yet, none of them fell on the Vanished itself. The Sea Mist's first round of shots had all been missed!

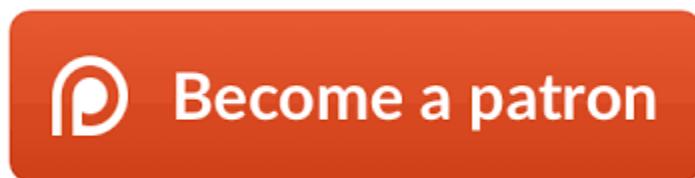
Now, this left Duncan wondering, wondering if this was how ancient naval battles ensued. Since there are no guided missile weapons in this world nor highly complex computers to help handle the angles, it would be safe to assume the hit rate to be only at this extent.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 207

Chapter 207 “The Encounter Has Begun”

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The encounter began with the first round of shelling being thrown by the Sea Mist, which roared over the sea like a thunderclap as the shells whizzed across the air, only to miss and stir up columns of water in the chaotic volley.

Like the first, the second round all missed as well, and it wasn’t until the third round of shelling that the Sea Mist finally swiped at the Vanished’s side.

As the monstrous ghost flames burned blazingly between the seams and mast of the Vanished, Duncan tightly gripped the steering wheel as the ghost ship slid across the sea like a flaming mountain. Nothing could hinder his vessel, not the waves and most certainly not the columns of water that blew up from the cannonballs. But then, the corner of his eyes caught sight of a black shadow swiftly blasting over at the rear deck.

It was an iron shell from the Sea Mist. After multiple misses in a row, the steel battleship finally calibrated its guns, and a cannonball whizzed impartially toward the second half of the Vanished. This time, it’s truly unavoidable since slamming the rudder wheel to avoid enemy fire doesn’t exist in reality. Even the Vanished must follow the most basic of physical laws when sailing in the real world... Probably.

The ship was about to be hit!

But the next moment, Duncan suddenly felt his vision growing extremely sharp. He could even capture the complete trajectory of the shell when it

fell slightly off base, see the twisted heat wave around the cannonball, know the airflow pushed back by the shock wave, and see the red-hot grooves of the iron ball – the cannonball was answering his stare.

At the last second of hitting the Vanished, the surface of the shell from the Sea Mist suddenly rose up with a faint green flame, as if it was instantly infected and assimilated by the ghost fire around the Vanished. Then, it quietly turned into a green meteor and gently fell into the sea of fire encompassing the Vanished in a slow and strange arc.

The shell landed on the deck of the Vanished and caused the ship to shake, but that's all. The Vanished didn't sustain any damage.

“A beautiful catch!” The voice of Goathead suddenly sounded from his mind, making Duncan come back to his senses, “Captain, how did you do it?!”“

“..... Subconsciously, I didn't think much about it,” Duncan replied casually. Immediately afterward, more howling whizzes zoomed across the sky and came straight in for a second round.

He instantly tensed his nerves and controlled the massive hull of the Vanished to slightly adjust its course to avoid the incoming black objects. In the next second, one green “meteor” after another appeared overhead over the ship.

But Duncan's capture was not without limits. As the distance between the Vanished and the Sea Mist closed, the latter's shelling became more accurate and ferocious. Worst of all, the many secondary artilleries the foe carried finally reached the effective range as well and began barraging the Vanished. This finally caused Duncan to lose sight, allowing several shots to pass his defenses.

The first part of taking damage was the side of the front hull, pierced by a black ball through the plank and tearing a hole that splintered off shrapnel into the air. However, the pieces didn't fall into the ocean as expected; instead, they were suspended in the air, synchronizing with the Vanished's speed as it continued to move.

This was an extremely bizarre scene as if the hull structures shattered in reality are still one with the Vanished in some higher dimension!

This instantly reminded Duncan of the bottom of the ship and the broken but still fully functional bulkhead soaked in subspace.

In the next second, he saw the debris slowly returning to its original state like a clock had rewinded itself.

Duncan finally retracted his gaze from the side of the ship.

It was the first time he'd seen the Vanished damaged and the first time he'd seen the ship recover after being injured – the ship could heal itself so quickly! And that "healing" process looks like it had directly returned to the state of prior damage?!

He finally understood why an extremely advanced, heavily armed steel warship like the Sea Mist could not defeat a century-old ghost ship.

Subspace has completely transformed the Vanished, leaving the entire ship in a weird structural state... It simply cannot be defeated by ordinary firepower in the real dimension!

"Captain, the Vanished is the best ship in the world, right?" Goathead's voice sounded in his head again, this time with a sense of pride.

"..... It's as you say, indeed."

"So what's next course of action?"

Duncan raised his head slightly and stared at the Sea Mist: "... Give the kid a beating lesson, of course."

.....

"Captain! That ship sped up!" First Mate Aiden's voice sounded on the bridge nervously, "Something is not right... Our attack is much less effective than the hasty confrontation half a century ago! More than half of

the artillery shells have inexplicably disappeared into the fire of the Vanished!"

"I can see that," Tyrian stood upright on the bridge, staring fixedly at the ghost ship accelerating towards this side and beginning to adjust its course slightly.

"He's become even stronger than the last encounter we had..." With a gloomy face, his hands unconsciously gripped the guardrail.

"So are we still fighting?" The first mate asked loudly, "From the way things look, it may not be easy to expel the ghost ship back to subspace like before! And I think your father must be very angry right now... The speed of that ship now is simply XXXX fast!"

Tyrian went darkly quiet for the next few seconds before speaking in a deep, low voice: "... Keep fighting."

As he uttered these words, his eyes were still fixated on the upper deck of the giant burning ship.

He knew that's where the helm wheel was located and that his father would always stand there in those distant and yellowed memories.

Is he still there? Was he looking at the Sea Mist?

Large clouds of smoke rose from the sea then, followed by a faint roar in the ear.

"The Vanished has fired!" Some undead sailors exclaimed.

Tyrian still stood firmly in the captain's spot like an iceberg standing in the cold sea, but then he frowned.

The Vanished did not fully adjust to the appropriate angle before shooting its weapons; instead, it cut into a slightly inclined arc and shelled along the way toward the Sea Mist.

This meant that only about a quarter of the ship's side guns would be functional.

Is it just symbolically fighting back? He has no intention to fight with the Sea Mist to the end?

This is not my father's style, nor is it consistent with the experience of the encounter half a century ago. In that battle, the Vanished and the Sea Mist fought to the bitter end until both ships were so badly damaged that any ordinary vessel would've sunk.

Indeed, the Vanished reached the limit of its repair ability and had to temporarily retreat to subspace after that battle, while the Sea Mist had to be towed back by its escorts for a three-year-long repair.

But the current situation does not allow Tyrian to continue thinking.

The Vanished's return fire has arrived, and every shelling shot from the ghost ship after it came into effective range was chillingly accurate.

More than a dozen blazing green fireballs streaked over the sea and smashed onto the steel battleship's hull. In an instant, explosive roars and ghost fire rose from the impact one after the other.

Layers of light floated around the Sea Mist, and the ship's church and various holy relics spontaneously activated to resist the spread of pollution caused by the flame. Unfortunately, a large number of terrifying holes still appeared on the hull of the steel battleship in an instant – the burning cast iron cannonballs were like fire hitting the snow. Everything it touched, whether steel or wood, melted away and was swallowed away in a flash.

Under such circumstances, no amount of armor would matter when the enemy's attack completely disregards the principles of matter. The flames didn't care about the protective barrier, nor did they care about material substance. All it cared about was what it could devour and erase. Before long, large chunks of the Sea Mist were gone instead of merely taking a few hits. If not for the unsinkable characteristic of the undead ship, it would've also long sunk by now.

However, unsinkable doesn't mean unstoppable. The Sea Mist had lost its power to fight back and continue moving forward.

Tyrian's eyes widened.

Wrong..... It's different. It's completely different from the last time!

He didn't know this ship! This wasn't the ship he remembered!

And in the midst of his dismay, he noticed that the Vanished had suddenly stopped shelling.

The ghost ship inflated all its sails, engulfing the huge waves of the entire sea, and sped up to the limit as it rushed past the Sea Mist.

“..... Full turn on the left rudder! Move! Move!” First Mate Aiden suddenly roared, sending the already frantic helmsman to turn the wheel with all his undeadly might. Sadly, the efforts failed because they were now on a collision course with the ghost ship!

“The rudder has failed!” The helmsman shouted in horror, “It's turning on its own!” We are taking the initiative to meet the other ship!”

As the helmsman said, the Sea Mist was actively meeting the ghost ship.

Tyrian had already sensed the movement. First, he had heard the abnormal hissing from the machine under his feet, rattling and rumbling with a hair-raising tune. Then came the standing down of the guns and cannons on his own ship, which had obviously never occurred half a century ago.

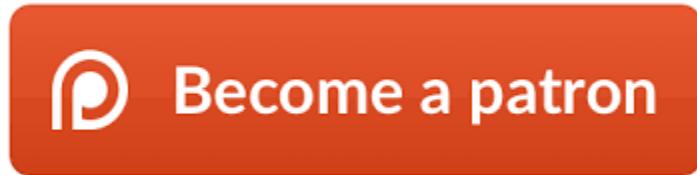
The worst possible nightmare had become true – the Sea Mist recognized its flagship!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 208

Chapter 208 “A Verbal Exchange After a Hundred Years”

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On the vast and Boundless Sea, two powerful warships carrying curses were currently on a collision course for each other, magnifying and expanding their respective field of influence as the distance closed.

The Sea Mist had its chilling effect, creating large and small ice floats around the water that spanned several nautical miles. Even the original calm sea had started to churn into a whirlpool, wrapping and competing with the Vanished’s volcanic explosive green flames. It’s a magnificent display of ice and fire, assuming one ignores both vessels’ ghostly and corruptive nature.

Unfortunately, the Sea Mist only looked strong from the surface at this point. Its engines were grinding with dying roars, and of course, the church’s blessing still worked.

Under this helpless state, the undead sailors watched as the battleship under their feet rushed towards the burning ghost ship, towards the bowels of the most terrifying existence in the open sea. For Tyrian, though, this wasn’t some entry into the devil’s mouth but the long-awaited reunion with his father, whom he could vaguely see by now on the towering stern of the Vanished.

He recognized the towering man standing on the ship like a reef in a storm, steering the creaking wheel with both hands and making an indifferent yet commanding face like all those years ago.

Then, without accident, the two ships “collided”.

The expected devastating impact and disintegration did not come; instead, the crew of the Sea Mist was fortunate enough to experience the same terrifying and strange “spectacle” as the original White Oak – the burning ghost ship rolled over like a colossal mountain. The boundaries of all things became blurred within the flame, turning the Sea Mist and its crew into ethereal ghosts themselves. This scene appeared to the outsider as if a phantom had crashed into another phantom.

First Mate Aiden’s eyes widened in horror. First, he saw the bow and mast of the Vanished rushing towards him, and then he staggered and directly went through the wooden planks before entering one of the cabins on the other ship. After a brief stint of meeting the quaint pillars inside the vessel, and the burning green lanterns, he was back outside, where he’s confronted by the open deck of the flaming ghost ship.

Tyrian subconsciously took half a step back as well over the spectacle, but in the next second, he straightened his chest again as if a certain teaching of his father was still in his ears.

“Don’t back down or bow to the wind and waves!”

So he held his head high and confronted the wind and waves before him.

Then, at a very close distance on the bridge, they faced each other, Duncan being only a few steps from the son’s spot.

It’s here at this moment that the whole world has quieted down.

“I’m busy,” a majestic and deep voice reached everyone’s ears.

Tyrian’s eyes widened in amazement when he jerked to face the direction of that voice.

However, this temporary rendezvous was over in mere seconds as the two phantoms sped past each other at full speed, leaving the dazed undead crew in the rear.

The steel battleship eventually came to a halt little by little though as the invisible force agitating the ship subsided, and now it returned to the hands of the helmsman again. Thanks to the sailors' efforts, the severely damaged engine had shut down with an unlikely chance of it operating for a while.

“..... What just happened? Aiden scratched his bald head dazedly, “That ship... just left like that? Isn’t it going to fight us to the death?”

The boatswain spoke with lingering fear: “...it seems that it didn’t intend to fight us to the death from the very beginning. It didn’t slow down much, and it just came and ran over us...”

“It’s so terrifying. For just a second there, I felt like my heart was beating again...”

The commotion of the crew had reached Tyrian’s ears, but he was not in the mood to listen to their squabble because only two words were echoing in his head – I’m busy.

It was what his father said – there were no emotions, and it was not at all a “hello” to a family member, borderline estranged. Yet, it was indeed a sentence that humans could understand. Clear and reasonable.

“Captain,” First Mate Aiden came over from the side, looking at Tyrian, who had fallen silent with unease, “what should we do next?”

Tyrian promptly woke up from his thoughts and raised his head: “Can the ship still move?”

“Not quite. The engine is stalled now. It will take a while to repair, and many of our men were injured in the battle just now... It’s quite a serious injury, the kind that we will need to use the shovel for a whole day to clean up,” Aiden shook his glowing bald head. “But the most incredible thing is that those who suffered a direct hit from the Vanished were all fine. Main guns No. 1 and No. 3 are completely gone, but those manning it are still in good health when they fell through the hole with the ball...”

“So you mean, the ones hit by the aftershock were seriously injured, while the men directly hit by the cannon fire came out unscathed?” Tyrian surprisedly confirmed it, then frowned again, “How could this be... ...”

“Perhaps... Your father didn’t intend to kill us?” Aiden glanced at his captain and said cautiously, “Judging from the shelling of the Vanished, it seems that it just wanted the Sea Mist to stop...”

“This...” Tyrian said subconsciously but then closed his mouth at what this implied. After a few seconds of silence, he shook his head lightly, “Hurry up, get the ship back up and running. At the same time, send a report to Pland, saying that we have tried our best to intercept it and failed. The Vanished is still heading towards them... The rest is up to the naval forces protecting that island. We have done our part.”

Aiden immediately took the order and left, but he hurried back again after a while: “Captain! We can’t get in touch with Pland’s side!”

“Can’t get in touch?” Tyrian’s frown deepened, “Were the signals disturbed by the battle just now?”

“No, we can still receive signals from the sea patrol hub, but we can’t receive Pland’s or any signal from that island!” Aiden said quickly with a puzzled expression on his face. “The whole city-state seems to have disappeared from the radio... At this distance, this is simply impossible. Even the psionic call from the church side did not respond!”

“Psionic calls didn’t respond either?!” This time, the expression on Tyrian’s face had turned grim and dreaded. The fact that the Vanished was heading straight for that city-state, plus the lack of communication, it doesn’t take much for the man to connect the dots and know something has happened. “When was the communication interrupted? Did anyone monitor the telegraph stations?”

“The last call was yesterday when we had a routine briefing with the port authority. Everything was working properly back then,” Aiden recalled, sputtering as he went. “Do you want to head back instead?”

Speaking of this, the bald sailor paused, and his expression was a little hesitant: “This matter... This is a bit beyond the original plan.”

Tyrian’s face tensed, and he didn’t speak for several seconds before finally exhaling deeply.

“Let’s go to Pland – we will leave after the Sea Mist is restored.”

Aiden was slightly surprised, but after a brief stint, the loyal first mate immediately straightened his chest and saluted: “Yes, Captain!”

.....

The turbulent sea around gradually returned to calm, and only the sound of waves could be heard in the ears. Nevertheless, Duncan still scratched his ear as the loud echoes of artillery fire lingered in his mind – he was obviously not comfortable with the sudden encounter just now.

“I thought you wanted to speak with Tyrian just now when you accelerated straight towards the Sea Mist. After all, this is a meaningful reunion,” Goathead’s voice rings within the captain’s head.

“That was my initial intention,” Duncan replied casually, “but I changed my mind at the last second.”

“Why?”

“..... I didn’t know what to say after I greeted him,” Duncan said frankly. After the partial coming clean “showdown” with Goathead, he no longer felt threatened or in danger of being exposed by the wooden sculpture, “We’re not that familiar in the end.”

“..... Well, you do have the final say,” the Goathead has no opinion, “but you’d better think about how to get along with your ‘children’ in the future. Everyone is quite alive, so you must meet them sooner or later. Good family relationships are very important to one’s destiny. I think there was one back then...”

“Shut up,” Duncan interrupted the other party’s divergent topic. Then as if he suddenly thought of something else, a strange and mischievous grin appeared on his face, “Speaking of which, it’s a pity that there are fewer people on board right now.”

The Goathead hesitated a little: “Fewer people? You mean...”

“Alice isn’t here. She’s helping to watch the shop over in the city side,” Duncan said in a leisurely and even cheerful tone. “I just suddenly remembered that Tyrian had been working under the Frost Queen back then, and Alice is wearing the face of the Frost Queen. Imagine her being aboard the ship when Tyrian passed us. I wonder what sort of ideas he would have in the coming days...”

Goathead: “...”

“Why are you so quiet? Aren’t you usually very talkative?”

“I don’t have a good comment regarding your family affairs,” Goathead replied, “but after listening to what you said, I think that scene would be worth looking forward to... If not, why don’t we make a round trip? This time with Miss Alice aboard?”

Of course, Duncan ignored this whimsical offer: “I didn’t know you were such a humorous person.”

“What is a humorous person?”

Duncan didn’t answer the other party again, only raising his head and staring off into a certain direction.

Just now, he clearly sensed his other body in Pland and even the flames spreading everywhere on the other side of the curtain.

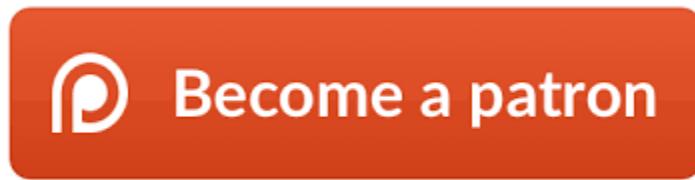
As he had expected, after getting close enough, the connection between the two sides are strengthening!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 209

Chapter 209 “Reality Invasion”

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The rainstorm did not stop, and there were even signs of intensification while the frenzied wind and rain battered the towering walls of the Storm Church.

Spiderwalkers and steam tanks had already assembled in the main square, their heavily armed drivers silently blocking off the city intersections for any suspicious targets.

Meanwhile, on the bell tower at the back of the cathedral, a special brazier was lit with a special mix of purified whale fat and sea wood. The flame acted as a beacon for the ships coming home, and even from afar, its visibility was unmatched in its grandness.

Taking this as a signal, the more remote chapels across the city had also lit similar flames in their own towers, effectively creating a grand spell circle to protect the entire island.

Everything was moving and coming along: the boilers of the church turned on, the bells ringing, the protectors on full alert, and the inhabitants taking shelter. However, this brief façade of safety wasn’t enough to blind the transcendent tonight, for even the most mundane had detected the unsettling creepiness lurking within this storm.

Deep in the admin’s mansion, Dante Wayne, who had just awakened from his coma, immediately turned towards the window when he heard the bells and whistles outside. He could see the lighthouses lighting up from afar.

After getting up with the help of his attendant, he promptly asked: “The main cathedral activated the reality stabilizer... a disaster of reality invasion level occurred?!”

“We are still investigating the situation,” an assistant came to Dante’s bed and answered, his tone slightly nervous and worried. “The situation happened very suddenly, so the main cathedral had no choice but to take action by blocking off the various sectors without your permission. Bishop Valentine used his emergency authority since you were in a coma...”

Dante did not respond to the aide’s words as if he was preoccupied with something else: “... Vanna is back.”

“Miss Vanna?” After hearing this, the aide caring for him turned his head in confusion, “Miss Vanna has not returned to the mansion yet. She should...”

“I know,” Dante knew the others wouldn’t understand his words and waved the subject off. “Are the city forces still under the command of City Hall?”

“Yes, Bishop Valentine has only taken over the police forces and a small number of the city army responsible for emergency response,” the aide nodded immediately. “Most of the city-state soldiers are still waiting for your orders.”

“Okay, except for the First Division, have all other divisions follow the church’s arrangement.” Dante felt the grogginess in his mind coming back and quickened his words,

“In addition, the entire city is to enter the highest level of martial law. Activate all the alarms, and if anyone appears on the streets... it doesn’t matter who, treat them as heretics.”

The aide was immediately taken aback by this order: “Mr. Dante, this...”

“Carry out the order,” Dante fixed his gaze on the aide with that blood-oozing ruby eye, “we’re in a state of war.”

“.....YES, SIR!”

The aide promptly left following that order, leaving Dante to cough violently in the back until it eventually subsided. Then turning to the second aide in the room, “Take me to the cathedral.”

“Mr. Dante, your body...”

“My body doesn’t matter. I have something important to tell Bishop Valentine.”

“Yes, Sir.”

.....

Nina tightly grasped Shirley’s hand as they sat behind the window and watched the fierce weather outside. The continuous rumble from the thunderstrikes had left the girl uneasy and scared.

“I XXXX, what the hell is up with this XXXX weather...” Shirley complained after finally losing her patience.

“Shirley, you can’t... can’t swear,” Nina was also scared but still straightened her face and lectured her friend, “Uncle said you...”

“Okay, okay, I won’t swear. I swear I won’t curse anymore. Please don’t tell Mr. Duncan,” Shirley said quickly. Then out of the corner of her eyes, she noticed the figure that had appeared on the stairs. “Ah, Mr. Duncan is coming down.”

“Uncle Duncan!” Nina stood up abruptly and almost ran to her uncle, “You... are you done?”

“Mhmm, it’s over for now, but it’s not completely over yet,” Duncan said, casually ruffling Nina’s hair before turning to Morris behind the counter. Then he gave the old scholar an affirming nod, “She is back now.”

“I know, I just felt it too,” Morris said immediately. “I don’t know how you did it, but... thank you very much for your help.”

“This is just the beginning; it’s too early to thank me,” Duncan said while turning his head to look out the window. “The conspiracy has been revealed, and they have started to take action ahead of their schedule. The invaders are attacking the other side of the curtain as we speak... I estimate it won’t be long before they also come to this side.”

Morris looked worried, while Nina appeared confused: “Uncle, what invader? What you said...”

“Nina,” Duncan interrupted the girl directly and got all serious, “do you believe me?”

Nina barely hesitated: “I believe.”

“Very good. Then you must firmly believe that this storm will end safely. No matter what happens, don’t panic, and no matter what I do, don’t be nervous or afraid.” Duncan stared into Nina’s eyes so his words would get through. Then glancing over to the doll at the counter, “Alice can be trusted. If there is a real emergency, you stay with her.”

Nina nodded dully as Alice chimed in with her own piece, “Don’t worry, Mr. Duncan, I will protect Miss Nina.”

“Honestly, I’m really not assured by your combat power,” Duncan frowned and sighed helplessly, “but there is no one else to entrust.”

Another burst of thunder caused another flicker through the window again, then came the deafening sound of a collapsing building in the distance, followed by the sharp ringing of bells across the entire city.

Then abruptly, the lights in the antique shop flickered a few times until they finally snuffed themselves out.

The power had been cut, and darkness instantly enveloped the entire neighborhood like night had fallen...

Shirley’s timid voice sounded in the dimness: “I’ll light the oil lamp! I know where the oil lamp is!”

Duncan didn't object and grabbed Nina's hand after noticing the increased heat next to himself.

"Uncle..." Nina whispered nervously and urgently, and soon, even the airflow around the girl had turned hot, "I think... it's a little hot..."

Duncan's gaze became grim and ugly in the darkness like he wanted to murder someone. However, the man did not panic and kept a cool head since he was prepared for something like this.

He gently held Nina's increasingly hot hand, and between his palm and Nina's fingers, a little green flame had flickered into life in the imperceptible crevices.

Ai flew down the stairs with her wings flapping as if on cue and firmly landed on the counter. She had gotten the message through the mental connection and came as summoned.

Likewise, Shirley had also returned with the lit oil lamp, dispelling the darkness in the shop with that shaky flame from the candle. However, the outside was a different story. It's grown much darker than before, borderline grimy black, and impossible to see beyond the initial few feet.

"Nina, remember what I told you just now?" Duncan's voice pierced the darkness and into Nina's ears.

Nina nodded slightly: "Mhmm."

"Don't be afraid. Something will happen in a bit... something very amazing," Duncan smiled and said softly.

The man had started to look off into the distance, past the window, past the stormy streets, and past the projection taking place over the island. Instead, his gaze had crossed the waters to where the Vanished's shape was coming into view.

.....

Heidi subconsciously shrunk her neck the moment the last thunder sounded.

She's currently nestled on the bench in the cathedral's main hall, subconsciously grasping the crystal bracelet with both hands and silently chanting the holy name of Lahem, the god of wisdom.

"The goddess... shouldn't mind, right?" She muttered softly after pausing, then continued to chant the name of Lahem.

But suddenly, she stopped again, and a strange thumping in her heart made it difficult for the lady to concentrate.

Getting up from the bench, Heidi looked around for the source of this sensation.

Nothing unusual about the place: a bunch of guards at the main entrance, a group of civilians taking shelter in the church due to being late from work, and several priests walking around the hall for comfort. Yes, aside from the burning trinket she got from her father, there's nothing wrong with this situation.

Everything's definitely fine... That was until she glanced at the stained glass!

"Fire... Fire!" She exclaimed with horror, "It's raining fire!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 210

Chapter 210 “Rain of Fire”

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This seemingly illogical and confused cry was the only description Heidi could think of at the moment – she couldn’t understand what she was seeing or what was happening. All she knew was that flames were literally raining down from the sky!

Everything happened without warning. One second it’s still raining water; the next the water had turned into droplets of fire, immersing the entire city in a hellscape of red! It didn’t matter if it was the trees, houses, towers, or churches. Everything had turned red. Worst of all, deafening explosions are blowing up across various points on the island. The whole place had turned into a war zone, shaking like its being pummeled by artillery shells.

It’s a true apocalypse that has draped over reality.

Heidi nearly crumbled to the ground at the horrific sight. Thankfully, the sound of the church bells had begun to ring nonstop then, bringing some semblance of sanity back to those fortunate enough to hear it.

That’s the reality barrier at work. Through the powers of the goddess brought forward by this melodious chime, the pouring flames couldn’t penetrate the church’s protection when they touched the cathedral. Unfortunately, it also meant the various chapels are now effectively isolated islands within this hellscape, each becoming its own anchor point for the grand barrier.

“The enemy has attacked... Destroy all the targets that try to get close to the bell tower!” Bishop Valentine broke the frightening silence and returned the

doctor to her senses.

Heidi swung her head and was about to ask something when another explosive bang interrupted her vocals. It came from the square, and the noise was not friendly at all.

She ran to the window and peered out, seeing what she feared the most. The assembled defenders were desperately firing their guns off at the enemy, with the spiderwalkers and tanks unleashing the full might of Pland's army.

The enemies came in the form of wriggling humanoid ashes. They were truly an endless horde, crawling and squirming out from under the barrage of bullets and shells.

Heidi reflexively shuddered. She could see the agonizing roars and screams from those things. They may take a humanoid form, but make no mistake, the doctor knows full well they're nothing more than mindless beasts at this point. Furthermore, there's only one reason they're attacking the cathedral: to destroy the stabilizing eye within the bell tower in the back. Once that falls, the other spell matrixes in the smaller chapels would also fail, effectively destroying Pland in one blow!

The warriors all knew this, the citizens knew this, and the clerics knew this more than everyone. They did not hesitate to fight the enemy with everything they had in this battle: bullets, bolts of holy light, and any weapon the abled citizen could find. They threw everything at these monsters, including their own body as a human wall!

This world was a cruel one. From childhood to adulthood, the system has ingrained into its people that if you want to live, you must fight for it. Nothing in this world came without a cost; here was the price. If they want to live, they cannot fall less the entire reality comes falling down over their heads and be replaced by this burning hell.

So, with guns blazing and swords slashing, the warriors of mortal kind brought their full might upon the darkness. It didn't matter to them if the swarming horde was endless. They would fight, even if it meant dying today.

No one gives up in this world!

“Hold the bell tower!” Valentine’s roared with mighty authority that echoed across the entire city-state. “As long as the spell eye remains ringing, they cannot twist our reality! Faithful ones, the time has come to show your strength! FIGHT! HOLD THE LINE AT ALL COSTS!!!”

Heidi watched the huge chaos that ensued from numerous points outside the main cathedral. Most of the forces had already gathered here, but many survivors still managed to escape the initial wave from the monsters. It didn’t matter if they had no training or fighting experience; if the person could swing a club or metal rod, they came and fought.

“Is there anything I can help with?” After seeing how desperate everyone was fighting, the doc quickly approached the head bishop and asked.

“Go reassure the young and elderly inside. We need to avoid a breakdown in order within the main cathedral,” Valentine said in a deep voice, “and then wait with them for the storm to end.”

As Heidi immediately nodded at the order, Valentine instead raised his head and peered upwards at the sky like he was staring off into the distance. Sure enough, the entire city’s situation was now reflected in his eyes from a bird’s eye view.

Everything had ignited into flames with countless dead strewn across the streets. Through his eyes, he could also see the chapels across the entire city, each sheltering as many helpless citizens that managed to escape in time before the initial slaughter. They’re also feverishly fighting to fend off the evil that has descended upon them, but likewise, the enemy is also as feverish in their attacks. It would just be a matter of time before those anchor points fall if nothing was done.

Eventually, Valentine’s sight locked onto a set of dark shadows hiding in the rear of the biggest horde attacking the main cathedral. These were no normal heretics, that much he was certain.

The minions of the sun heirs?!

Valentine's expression changed for the worst. In the face of this devastating disaster, he suddenly remembered a small matter that had supposedly been resolved long ago and was almost forgotten.

He jerked and swung his head to a high-ranking priest next to himself: "Are those Suntists still in the underground sanctuary?!"

"Suntists?" The high-level priest didn't catch on and took a second to react, "Ah, yes, they are still detained in the underground sanctuary. There is a whole brigade of guardians watching them. They can't escape..."

"They never wanted to escape from the start!" Valentine said quickly, "They wanted to be locked up in the church from the very start!"

"What..." The high-ranking priest's eyes widened instantly, and then, before his words could finish, a dull loud bang suddenly rocked the entire cathedral.

It was like some giant beast had awakened in the underground sanctuary.

Like Valentine, several priests in the cathedral who had experienced the Suntist crisis four years ago had also connected the dots through this noise.

Back then, hundreds of Suntists had gathered in their foul den and summoned a brief and terrifying force through a massive blood ritual. It's a fake sun that nearly brought catastrophe to the city.

But before they could succeed, their plot was discovered by Vanna, who had just become the new inquisitor, and vanquished their plot.

"It was a test..." The high-ranking priest muttered to himself with great shock.

.....

A sea of fire rose, bells chimed, sirens whistled, and countless ash monsters emerged from all directions, rampaging across the earthly world.

Vanna has experienced many dangerous and sinister battles in her times. She had faced cultists, taboo monsters created by their foul deeds, and even out-of-control ghostly demons and crazy Enders, but no battle could compare to this purgatory at this moment.

She was no longer facing a battlefield but a sudden apocalypse.

In other words, the end has already come, an end that has been postponed by the curtain until today.

But she was still alive, carving a bloody path through the sea of fire. It's a hard struggle, but it won't be long before she arrives at the main cathedral.

Every breath brought a burning pain, and her physical exhaustion was almost to the point where an ordinary person would be crushed several times. Worst of all, the armor on Vanna's body had also been severely damaged, and her body's recovery could no longer keep up with the speed of the damage, leaving her injuries to get worse little by little.

But the young inquisitor still kept moving forward.

The cathedral's bells are still ringing, indicating that Bishop Valentine's defenses have not yet been breached – perhaps the defenders are unaware of this plot to pollute history, but they are always prepared for all intrigues and battles.

Since the battle for the cathedral continues, she has no right to give up. Furthermore, the lady wasn't just mindlessly hacking and slashing at everything that moved.

She noticed that Bishop Valentine had initiated reality stabilization measures, showing that he also sensed part of the truth. So at least this part of the response was fine, and as long as the bell tower did not fail, the heretical plot to overshadow the "true history" with a "pseudo-history" would not succeed.

They need to interrupt the coverage and strip the source of this pollution. Only by doing so would the destruction be halted and the city saved. All in

all, it's not too late to do something.

As if cheering herself up, Vanna tried not to think about the possibility of the church branches being lost or the mysterious and terrible Captain Duncan lurking in wait for herself. In her mind, she only wanted to destroy the obstacles blocking her path, which she did so by mechanically stepping forward and slashing down the monster that got in her way.

But suddenly, she stopped at an intersection not far from the cathedral.

A dark-gray car had tipped over on the side of the road. Several bodies were thrown out of the vehicle, but only one had caught her attention – the one still inside the vehicle.

Vanna instantly recognized the car and the bloodied arm that's showing through the cracked window.

It was her uncle, Dante Wayne.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 211

Chapter 211 “Blessing”

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Vanna's already somewhat dazed state of exhaustion instantly tensed up at the recognition. She rushed over to the side and noticed the arm coming out of the car window twitching, which instantly brought a wave of relief to her heart.

Uncle is alive!

Vanna reacted instantly, stabilizing the car's posture with one hand and pinching the deformed door frame with the other. This allowed her to check Dante's vitals and injuries before taking him out of the vehicle, which she promptly did after confirming he's safe to move.

“Ahhh... Vanna... You're back...” These were the first words Dante said after opening his eyes and getting medical help from Vanna.

“Yes, I'm back,” Vanna didn't notice anything wrong with her uncle's phrasing and subconsciously held his hand, “How do you feel now? Can you still get up? I'll take you to the cathedral...”

“No... don't bother with a burden like me,” Dante shook his head and grasped Vanna's hand hard. “I should have thought of such a day... They will come and take the price... You leave now before they find you... Leave Pland and go to a place where no one knows you...”

Her uncle's plea startled Vanna as she realized something was amiss here. With a slightly trembling voice: “What do you mean? Who are you

referring to? What is the price to take? You... did you already know what was happening in the city?!"

Dante struggled to keep his eyes open after the ruby prosthetic eye shattered somehow. Blood flowed down the wound from the socket, and only the remaining human eyeball reflected any of the flames occurring outside Vanna's barrier. "Ender Missionaries... and the subspace they worship... Vanna, do you remember that fire eleven years ago?"

"The fire eleven years ago..." Vanna's eyes widened slightly, "You actually remember that fire?!"

"How could I not remember... It burns before my eyes every day," Dante smiled wryly, "but I thought I could lie to myself for the rest of my life."

Chaotic thoughts boiled in her mind, and Vanna seemed to forget her exhaustion and pain at this moment. Instead, she stared closely at her uncle's eyes, which had begun to turn murky from recalling the past in his mind. "But what does this have to do with subspace and the Ender Missionaries...? And me, what does this have to do with me? Why are 'they' coming for me? What 'price' are they going to take!?"

Vanna instantly regretted asking the questions in this manner because it's the same tone and attitude she used when interrogating a prisoner. But Dante was no prisoner. He was her uncle, her only family member in this world whom she's lived with for eleven years. She had no right to behave this way before him.

"When that fire burned, I glimpsed... into a projection of subspace. When that extremely dangerous truth descended, I made a wish to subspace."

"You made a wish to subspace?" Vanna stared at Dante in disbelief, "What wish?"

"I wished that nothing happened; I wished for your... life's return."

All the expressions on Vanna's face instantly froze.

Dante quietly looked at his niece in front of him, the expression on his face seemingly sobbing and bittersweet. Then, with a raised hand, he gently stroked the lady's hair: "Vanna... You grew up... I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. Uncle is useless back then... I couldn't save you..."

"But I remember you taking me out of that fire..."

"All I brought out of the fire was a pile of ash," Dante whispered. "It was only a momentary thing, and before we had time to react, you were turned into a pile of scorched ash... I was desperate to escape that nightmare and get everything back before the catastrophe. I cried out to anyone that would hear my plea, gods, demons, and even subspace... Then, something responded to my wish, and it took me many years after that to understand what it was that responded to me back then..."

As she peered down at her hands, Vanna no longer seemed to hear what Dante was saying. She couldn't believe this body of hers wasn't real, or at least, not the original...

After an unknown amount of time, she finally broke the silence: "So, in a sense, my survival is actually the result of the blessing from subspace?"

Dante closed his eyes, for he couldn't answer the question like this.

"That... How did I become a saint then?" Vanna asked incredulously. She was asking her uncle but also asking herself this. "How could the Storm Goddess allow a person who survived because of the blessing of subspace to become her own follower? She even blessed me with great power!"

"I... I don't know," Dante shook his head slowly, "maybe only the goddess herself can answer your question..."

Vanna fell silent again, her thoughts more chaotic than ever. The belief that had supported her life for so many years had just shattered into pieces, and even her own existence was a blasphemy. No matter how strong-willed this female inquisitor was, such trauma could break her mind at its core.

But after a long while of uncomfortable silence, she slowly stood up and whispered as if trying to convince herself: “In any case, someone must stop this invasion of reality. I must bring everything we know back to the real world.”

“Vanna, you will die,” Dante’s eyes widened in shock, and he tried to pull himself up from the ground. “You can’t stay here. The foundation of reality here is breaking, so you must leave Pland, leave this vision until it completely disappears from your memory. Listen, if your survival is the result of the blessing from subspace, then correcting history will likely lead to your own demise. This paradox conflict cannot be fixed by ordinary people...”

Vanna, however, just stared at her uncle quietly, her gaze gentle and calm.

“Uncle, didn’t you say that you love this city and everything in it?”

Dante nearly cried before making a resolute face: “... Of course, that’s why I will stay here and face the same fate as the city. Whether I survive or die in the end is something I’m willing to meet. But you’re different, Vanna, you can’t...”

“Me too,” Vanna interrupted softly, “I love this place and am ready for everything... Just like how you taught me since I was a child.”

Dante watched his niece with awe, feeling both proud and guilty at the failure on his part to protect her.

He knew that words would no longer work in persuading this child.

So, he sighed and used the last of his strength to stand up, using the nearest street lamp as support.

“Then go,” he said softly, “I will wait here, wait here for you to come back.”

Vanna lowered her head and met her uncle’s gaze.

In her memory, he had always been tall and resolute like a mountain, yet the person present here had become so small and frail that she now had to peer down to meet his gaze.

“... If all goes well, the familiar Pland we know will return to the real world. When that happens... don’t forget me,” her voice now low and gentle like she’s leaving a will.

Dante didn’t say anything more and just nodded lightly.

With a straightened posture, Vanna knew it was time to go. However, a disturbing vibration suddenly rocked her feet that originated elsewhere the next moment. Immediately looking towards the source, she saw the dust cloud rising up into the sky created by a collapsing building.

Vanna had never felt more frightened and uneasy than she was at this moment, and the next second, her eyes had confirmed the source of this unease.

From where the cathedral should be, the smoke had abruptly dispersed following a blinding light rising up from below. It’s as if a miniature sun had manifested in that area, devouring everything within its vicinity.

But that’s not the worst of it; something even more terrible has happened.

More explosions came, more shrill noises, and more soaring fireballs rose into the air across the various branches of the church.

The bells that had never stopped even when the city burned had finally ceased!

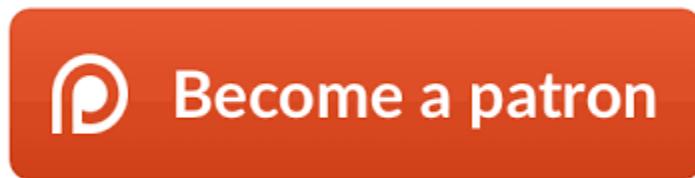
Vanna’s mind almost became a blank there, and for the next while, she couldn’t think and only charged towards the largest flash of light at the Storm Cathedral.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 212

Chapter 212 “The Different Ending”

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All the churches fell in a short time after this as round after round of fiery “fireballs” rose from the grounds across the city-state. It only took a moment for the various anchor points to disappear, effectively turning this sea pearl into an ash island.

Vanna rushed through the burning intersections and streets like a gust of wind, plowing her way toward the burning cathedral that had finally entered her field of vision.

The thousand-year-old structure had already been destroyed, melted away like wax due to the intense heat. As for the flanking structures, they’re still standing but distorted and red-hot, with only the skeletal frame remaining. And the cause of all this? The dark red “sun” quietly suspended over the corpse of the church overhead. It’s like a terrifying eye from the abyss, peering down at its victim while oozing droplets of red magma blood.

What can you do now by rushing over? Kill the culprit? Reverse history that has overlapped? Or do you want to prove your faith by dying in vain?

Vanna didn’t know why she was having these thoughts when her legs instinctively ran at the cathedral. All she knew was that she must go, and that’s all it mattered. Well, that was until a majestic voice sounded in her head: “Go to the bell tower in the back~”

The sound came so abruptly that Vanna subconsciously came to a standstill. Looking around for the source, the lady found no signs of the ghost captain; instead, all she saw was the raging sea fire.

But then another sound broke Vanna's brief hesitation – she's picked up a melodious ringing that's coming from the ancient bell tower. This shouldn't be possible since the flames had already destroyed the church.

Abandoning all hesitation and concerns in her heart, Vanna pulled her legs and rushed towards the direction of the source.

She no longer cared about the ghost captain's intentions, nor did she care what the consequences of following the other party's arrangements would be – with all the churches falling in an instant, whatever scheme that captain had couldn't possibly be worse than this reality.

Soon, she had come before the square in front of the church.

The defense forces assembled here had been completely destroyed, and in the rolling heat wave, only countless twisted and scrapped spiderwalkers and steam tanks remained. There's nothing left but piles of ashes that's squirming about.

Enraged by the death of her peers, she cut through the enemy with relentless determination and charged into the rubbles of the main hall. Once inside, she continued into the open courtyard by following her memories. There, she finally saw the bell tower still standing tall and in one piece but covered in soot and ash that was raining down.

This reminded her of what she saw on the other side of the curtain – the other Pland destroyed by the fire in 1889.

It's a false history, and that falseness has now replaced the truth.

Yet, the bell continues to ring, meaning there's still hope.

The gate to the upper floor of the bell tower had collapsed, and the internal stairs broken apart in various segments. Vanna quickly deduced going up using the normal means was impossible. So, with her arms and legs ready, she began to climb the outer walls.

The exterior seared her skin at the touch. Imagine holding onto plates of molten steel; that's exactly how Vanna felt with each pull. Nevertheless, she's done it and found herself staring at the mechanical clock dial that ceased functioning. Thankfully, the lady could still see the bonfire and bell inside through the cracks.

Without hesitation, Vanna punched a hole through the walls and indirectly broke several bones in the process. Even so, she was in, and to her shock and surprise, a figure... or rather, a pile of embers that's barely able to maintain its human form was clinging to the mechanical rod next to the bell and continued to rotate the gear.

"Protect... the bell tower..." The pile of embers said hoarsely.

Then the pile completely crumbled to the ground, vaporizing into dust particles as it perished. Its only mark left in the world now was the charred blackness on the floor and an emblem symbolizing the Storm Church.

"Bishop Valentine!"

Vanna recognized the eyes just now and rushed forward, trying to save her friend and peer from disappearing. But soon, she stopped as a powerful and oppressive force came down over her shoulder.

A tall and thin figure dressed in a tattered gray robe stood quietly on the edge of the stage, watching her and smiling compassionately like some sort of savior.

"You struggled as hard as you could, child. All of you struggled as hard as you could. You even managed to drag this out for far longer than it should have. But there is no point in delaying and holding on anymore... No one will come to your rescue, and no reinforcements can come in this closed-loop historical vision. Pland is doomed to reach this ending..." The thin black shadow said slowly, raising a bony hand to point at the reddish sun behind his back. "Now, embrace this new future, child born from the ashes... Your survival and return did not change anything."

Vanna didn't respond to the rant; instead, she unsheathed the broadsword from her back.

"Oh, breakdown of our negotiations, I see..." The Ender saw Vanna's actions and continued to show a sympathetic look, "Of course, you can easily kill me, but it's pointless... The heirs of the sun are ready for the coming of their lord. And as for me, I am only a witness to this event. I will witness this moment and take back the knowledge... And you, do you see that sun?"

Vanna raised her gaze slightly and bypassed the Ender's figure and onto the round orb of red suspended in the air. It's the blasphemous sun wheel from the books, the embryo of corruption, a heart waiting to resurrect.

She finally realized the truth. The oppressive force from earlier didn't come from the Ender, but rather from the dark sun behind him!

Something was waking up from within the depths of that thing!

"There have been many twists and turns in this plan, nor did we expect an outside force to repeatedly interfere with our revision of history." The Ender slowly explained like he's retelling a story, "It brought a lot of eyes onto us. Like you, for example. You and the others nearly perceived the truth... truly, you were so close to the truth. Alas, fate is like this."

"Child, fate is so unreasonable sometimes..." He sighed compassionately and slowly walked forward toward Vanna. "But you are blessed. You have risen from the dead and will be born anew after death, because you have received the supreme blessing. Embrace your fate, child."

Vanna didn't flinch or cower and clenched the hilt of her sword. For the first time in her life, the lady was motivated by pure hatred. She didn't care about justice or duty anymore. All she wanted to do was murder this bastard. But at the last second, before she could strike, a stream of burning flames shot out of thin air behind the Ender, and out stepped a majestic figure shrouded in green flames.

Still unaware of the third party, the Ender spread his arms and proclaimed: “Blessed child, do not resist. As you can see, times have changed...”

But then the madman froze as an unspeakable fear inexplicably burrowed into his chaotic mind when a hand tapped his shoulder.

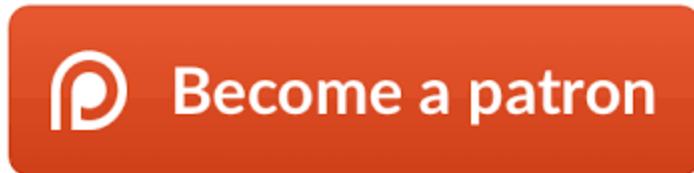
“Get lost,” the calm voice said.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 213

Chapter 213 “The Promised Ark”

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“Get Lost.”

In the moment when Vanna heard these words, her mind instantly shook as a static tearing rippled within her mind. It could not be described in words, nor could she pinpoint where the source came from. All she knew was that it's mixed into the flames and surging forward across the island.

Then, she met the gaze of that “Captain Duncan” standing behind the Ender. Unlike the one she had met in the dream; this one was completely shrouded in flames like a true ethereal ghost.

It only took a split second for Vanna to judge that this was not the main body, but another projection brought forth by herself as a “medium”. She could sense the power flowing out of her, sense something burning from within, and sense the second voice echoing from her body.

Out of reflex, the inquisitor raised her hand and peered down. There, in the palm of her hand, a small green flame had attached itself to her flesh and spreading along the arms to the legs of the man. Here, the truth finally dawned on her. Since long ago, the ghost captain had turned herself into a “node”, an anchor point to project himself into this city. The erosion and corruptions had been far deeper than she and Bishop Valentine could've imagined, and the reason was all for this day...

In the next second, the whole world in her eyes changed abruptly.

The green flame spread into the other reddish one, into every pile of ash, into every rising smoke, it's bursting out of the seams and across the entire city after lurking for an unknown amount of time!

It happened way too fast to react, or rather, it had been done long before this “real invasion” began. Vanna recalled what she had seen on the other side of the curtain, and suddenly, realized that the fire created by the Enders and the Suntists had unknowingly become the carrier of the ghostly flame... Their act of burning the entire city only furthered the ghost captain’s plan!

A mournful cry suddenly sounded, waking Vanna up from her daze. She confronted the source of the noise and saw that the emaciated Ender had also burst into a pyre of green.

He twisted and howled after witnessing the sudden turn of event: “Stupid fool! Foolish idiot! Be destroyed! You rejected the gift of subspace! You will suffer eternally in this suffering world... Foolishness!!”

However, in contrast to the curses and howls of this madman, the scene around Pland was a whole different matter. Everything touched by the ghostly green flame was recovering at an incredible speed!

Buildings destroyed by the fire quickly returned to its regular form, roads torn apart by the melting heat are healed, the flaming rain has stopped, and the doomsday clouds hovering overhead dissipated, returning the sky back to the blue open ceiling.

Then, at long last, the chimes of the other bells begun to ring again.

As Captain Duncan said, he told them to get lost, so the false reality did.

Vanna’s eyes widened into utter shock as she watched this incomprehensible scene unfold in real time. But just as quickly, she soon realized what in essence this “repair” was – the corruption caused by the Enders and Suntists are being stripped away, and the false history expelled by the captain’s power!

She gawked at the towering figure standing in the near distance, the latter only calmly gazing down at the Ender, who was still preaching his nonsense despite being roasted.

“Everything can be polluted, except subspace...” Vanna muttered softly.

Despite being twisted into a creature that’s no longer recognizable as a human, the Ender didn’t die yet of course: “You... turned the city-state into part of the Vanished?!”

“The Vanished is the promised ark, I think we can expand upon the idea of the ‘Ark’,” Duncan smiled and bent down slightly to meet the creature’s gaze. “If a ship that encounters the Vanished at sea can be assimilated and absorbed, then... why can’t Pland be the same? What differs Pland from any other ship?”

As if exactly on cue, a loud gong of the mentioned ship’s arrival had arrived from the ocean.

Vanna subconsciously looked up into the distance, and in the next second, she saw a scene that was enough to shock her for the rest of her life – it’s a big black ship.

The Vanished has appeared from the Boundless Sea, burning with its monstrous ghost fire that stirred the ethereal sail.

The ship crossed the coast, over the port that was rapidly recovering, and directly into the city-state of Pland through illusory waters, which had already been covered with green flames. Yes, it’s no longer sailing on water, it’s actually levitating over land now!

“You... you may have saved the city... but you can’t stop the sun from falling...” came a faint sound from the pile of twisted ash on the floor that had once been the Ender. “Even if it is only a small fragment summoned from history... it’s enough... to destroy... end...”

The sound eventually faded after the Ender’s vitally became exhausted, forcing his already crumbling body to shatter into the wind.

Vanna, on the other hand, got quite nervous and worried after hearing that dying whisper. She stared up at the “Black Sun” that looked like a mouth from the abyss, swallowing the world and the city with its presence.

The flames of the Vanished have removed the historical pollution suffered by Pland, but the desecrated sun... It was never a part of Pland from the start, rather a projection of history summoned by the Enders with the support of the Suntists. It's an independent existence!

“Something is awakening in the black sun!” Vanna loudly reminded “Captain Duncan” despite their opposing position, “It will...”

Duncan just waved his hand at her gently.

Then, Vanna saw the ghost captain turn and face the blasphemous sunwheel hanging in the air. With a raised hand as if beckoning someone to come over, he spoke softly in a cooing voice: “Come to this side... that’s right, don’t worry, you won’t fall, just move forward like we practiced. Remember how you ride a bicycle? Just like that... Yes, keep moving and I’ll hold you.”

In the next second, a bright golden arc of flame suddenly stung Vanna’s vision as she witnessed a gap being torn open from the edge of the sun. It jumped over to Captain Duncan’s presence, and with the departure of this flame, a mournful roar suddenly sounded from within the blasphemous sun!

As if some kind of giant beast had suddenly suffered a blow through the heart, the black sun’s core was promptly riddled by countless eye stinging cracks. Then in a blink of an eye, a swarm of dark green flames rushed forward and rapidly invaded the sun wheel through this wound.

The agitation in the dark core dissipated following this invasion, and the faint vitality that could be felt seconds ago almost died off completely. In fact, one could actually see a gaping hole in the thing, leaving the wound to drip forward a constant stream of boiling substance that was instantly devoured by the green flames before it touched the city ground.

Accompanied by continuous screams, roars, and crackling explosions, the deformed and desecrated sun eventually disintegrated, leaving only a few residues and debris falling into the ripples on the edge of the Vanished.

The huge ghost ship had sailed to the center of the city by now and gradually approached the cathedral bell tower with its towering structure.

It's here, in this second, Vanna heard the bells ringing next to herself – the bell tower at her feet also broke free from the pollution of history, and the device charged with ringing the bell now ran automatically.

The figure of Bishop Valentine also gradually reappeared in the air – the bishop who guarded the city-state until the very last moment successfully returned to reality, proving that the branch of history that pointed to destruction has completely disappeared.

Vanna's gaze did not rest on the bishop though; instead, she was still staring at Duncan not far away, who had now turned around – he was surrounded by the jumping arc of flame, and the warmth and brightness brought by said flame softened even his gloomy and majestic face.

"I thought you were going to come up with a jump strike," Duncan smiled, as if chatting with friends, to Vanna, "just like the last time."

"..... I'm not a brainless person."

"Really? I thought you loved jumping; after all, every mature warrior can't resist the urge to make a jumping chop on the opposite side," Duncan casually joked and stretched his hand out to sooth the slightly restless flame around himself. Then giving Vanna a nod, "I'm done, see you next time."

Vanna was startled and subconsciously stepped forward: "Wait! You can't just..."

Duncan had already turned away, waved his hand, and strode into the air beyond the platform of the bell tower – the towering stern of the Vanished slowly moved past the tower as well, and next to the rudder on the deck was the captain who was personally at the helm.

Here, Duncan's projection wrapped in ghost flames directly stepped onto the ship and became one with his own being.

He stood on the helm, holding the steering wheel in his hand, smiled and nodded to Vanna.

Then the huge ghost ship gradually accelerated, sailed over the sky of Pland, and sailed to the coast on the other side of the city-state for the Boundless Sea.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 214

Chapter 214 “After The Vanished Left”

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The Vanished left as dignified as it had descended in Vanna’s eyes. Before she knew it, the hull of that ghost ship had disappeared from her sight like a mysterious phantom. Likewise, the flames that had engulfed the city also left with it, extinguishing and snuffing out like it had completed a mission.

All that remained was a clear sky, a normal city-state, and beings who had just experienced a nightmare. Oh, right, there’s also the continuous ringing of the church bells, but instead of fighting against a reality invasion, these chimes now sounded like some farewell to send off the infamous ghost ship.

This startled Vanna, who quickly turned to Bishop Valentine after seeing the elderly man coming over with the scepter in hand.

“I feel like I had a very long, long dream...”

“You should know it wasn’t a dream,” the lady replies.

“I mean, I just dreamed about twenty rabbits in dresses dancing in circles around me...”

After that remark, Vanna indeed looked startled: “Then you are indeed dreaming. Maybe that’s the process of recovering your spirit... Do you have to tell such a bad joke now?”

“But this can make you recover faster and get back to work from the mess in your head,” the old bishop said indifferently, his expression calm as if he

had just told a great joke. Then he lowered his head and looked toward the church square, “We have a lot of things to do afterward, and this time, it is not just a White Oak that encountered the Vanished on the ocean.”

Vanna followed the old bishop’s gaze and saw that the soldiers had fallen into dazed confusion as they’d just awakened from a big dream. Sure, the city returned to normal, but the memory of their experience remains stuck in the polluted history and battle. Trying to bring them back to normal would take a lot of work from the doctors.

Valentine’s voice continued to sound next to Vanna: “... Let the guards restore order first, and then start investigating the current situation around the entire city. We need to confirm whether everyone has ‘returned’ and what is missing and what is added...”

Valentine paused and met the young inquisitor’s gaze beside him.

“And prepare to report to the Grand Storm Cathedral. Vanna, the most challenging paperwork of your life is coming.”

Vanna’s breathing choked like she was ready to suffocate at the thought.

A catastrophe had just passed, but not everything was over. When everyone survives... the real investigation has only just begun for the authorities.

.....

The sun was just right as the heavy door to the cathedral creaked open, and out came Heidi with a somewhat dazed expression. She glanced around the street under the clear sky as usual, but her mind remained on the previous horror of that hellfire.

How did it end?

All she remembered was that a ghost ship rose from the fire and cruised through the city-state. During this, her consciousness kept drifting between reality and illusion before the ghost ship’s course crushed the false one into dust.

Heidi still didn't understand any of this, but the slight heat coming her chest wouldn't stop nagging for her attention. It's the cheap necklace her father bought from that antique shop in the lower city. Bringing it up for a closer examination, she found it weird and glowing for some reason before it abruptly cracked and shattered.

Heidi was startled, but soon her stunned thoughts were interrupted by the noise from around the square.

The guards were putting order back in place, and the soldiers from the army had started roll calling under their commander's supervision. Some priests were also running up to Bishop Valentine for orders, while most were busy placing wards wherever they could.

“..... As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw that thing floating over my head as if sailing in some transparent water...”

“It's scary to watch! Those flames grazed the spire of the cathedral! But it seems to have left just like that...”

“It was the Vanished, no doubt ... Don't doubt me, I definitely saw the vanished!”

A loud voice shouted in the square, swearing that the ghost ship that had just passed through the city-state was the legendary ship of legends. Heidi immediately looked toward that voice and saw a familiar old captain.

“Captain Lawrence,” Heidi walked over and greeted her patient talking to a few civilians, “are you okay?”

“Me? I'm perfectly fine, though I can't figure out what's going on,” the old captain smiled back when he saw Heidi, “It's good to see that you are safe and sound, Miss Doctor. The raining fire from before was too scary!”

Heidi casually nodded before asking, “You said the ship that left is... the Vanished?”

“Yes, it must be,” Lawrence nodded immediately, “I’m all too familiar with it! I’ve seen this scene before!”

Next to him, a citizen who had previously taken refuge in the cathedral couldn’t help but speak: “You’ve seen it before?”

“Yes! Why do you think I’ve been isolated within the church for so long?”
Lawrence’s eyes widened, and then he turned to Heidi, “I know you can speak to the upper echelons of the church. I’ll give you a suggestion. Go back and check what is missing in the city-state. The Vanished usually takes something with it when it passes by... I have experience!”

Heidi listened in confusion and nodded equally as lost by the end of it. But after a while, some memories did return to her.

What’s the situation on Father’s side now?

.....

Morris didn’t feel very good right now. He was dizzy, and his stomach churned with discomfort as if he had drunk an immense amount of wine. Simply said, he wanted to vomit but didn’t dare to.

Why? Because the mops and buckets in front of him had invisible death glares on their bodies, and Miss Alice next to him was also showing signs of slapping him if he tried.

In any case, Morris was sure he was seasick after being brought over to the Vanished by the dove.

Meanwhile, Ai was roaming about on the deck with a mountain of fries in her possession after hauling a mountain of potatoes aboard.

On another note, Shirley was sitting nearby with a dark hound next to her, the latter trembling profusely after being summoned to this side.

Recalling what he had witnessed and experienced thus far, Morris was sure he’s achieved what scholars could only ever dream of. He not only boarded the legendary ship, he also witnessed the incredible power of the green

flames transforming a burning world back to a normal one. No matter which one it was, that's a feat worthy of being in the history books.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Morris understood he mustn't get too excited. As an elder, caring for his health was necessary after surviving one catastrophe.

Exactly then, a voice suddenly came from the other side. It was the dark hound known as Dog: "Ol-Ol-Old Sir, yo-yo-you see... am I-I a cultured dog like this...?"

"Oh... frankly, I don't think a dog needs to show off his upbringing by reading the newspaper. But you are a dark hound, so I can't judge your standards according to human logic." Morris was startled by the question and felt weird that he even needed to dabble in this topic, "There are two issues to begin with. First, the newspaper is upside down in your paws, and second... why are you stuttering?"

Now it's Dog to be startled. He quickly swapped the newspaper around before replying: "I-I... I don't stutter. I have... right... I'm a little nervous..."

"Dog, I don't think you need to be nervous like this," Shirley muttered, "and what's the point of reading a newspaper? Mr. Duncan already knows that we are both illiterate..."

When she uttered that sentence, Alice promptly raised a hand in support: "Me too!"

Shirley gawked her mouth in surprise, while Morris only facepalmed himself due to the strange conversation.

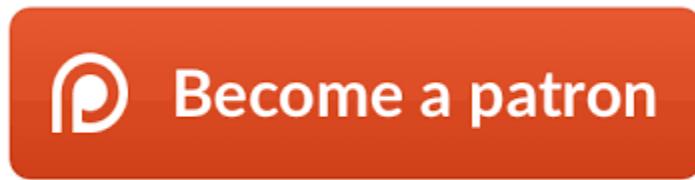
For the first time in this old scholar's life, he didn't have words to describe this outrageous scene.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 215

Chapter 215 “The Well-Behaved Sun”

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“Say, what do you think is going on over there in Pland?” After a long silence, Shirley finally asked the old scholar in front of her.

“..... I don’t know, but I think Mr. Duncan may have solved the problem already. Though I can’t imagine how he solved it,” Morris rubbed his forehead as he pondered the matter. “But compared to that, I’m more concerned about this place...”

He raised his head and glanced around at the flaming sails that were stirring against the wind.

“This ship makes me think of that legend, the legend about the Vanished...”

“Yes,” Alice’s voice joins in from the side after Morris’s remark, her face proud and joyous, “This is the Vanished. Welcome aboard!”

Morris’s forehead rubbing stopped as his eyes widened in shock: “Is this really the Vanished?! Then Mr. Duncan’s identity...”

“Obviously the captain, Old Sir, you are too slow in catching on,” Shirley pouted from the other side. After being a nervous wreck for so long, she finally felt a little giddy knowing she’s in the know while others are not. “He is called Duncan, after all. What did you expect?”

“You already knew about this?” Morris stared incredulously at the petite girl in front of him, “I thought you were on this ship for the first time like me...”

“I am, this is my first time aboard, but it’s not the first time I’ve seen Captain Duncan’s true face.” Shirley puffed up her chest triumphantly, “I met Captain Duncan with Dog way back... Earlier than you, at least!”

Morris doesn’t care what Shirley has to offer in the latter part of the sentence because he’s already preoccupied with the “true face” part.

“If possible, I would like to never see his true appearance...” He mutters strangely to himself.

Shirley blinked: “Huh? Old Gramps, what did you say?”

“Nothing... some things are best left unspoken. It’s better for one’s mental and physical health.”

“Tsk, you bunch always talk so cryptically,” Shirley pouted some more, but that didn’t last long before she began commenting on the open deck. “Hey, do you think Nina will be okay? She suddenly disappeared from our eyes earlier...”

Alice’s soft and confident voice sounded from the side, comforting Shirley, who was a little worried: “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. The captain did say it’s only temporary.”

Shirley raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar lady. The gothic girl didn’t understand why this unusually beautiful and mysterious lady would follow Captain Duncan’s orders so closely. It’s as if she had insider information or something. “Why would you say that? You know where Nina is...?”

“No, and didn’t the captain say it already?” Alice smiled, “He said not to worry.”

Shirley couldn’t argue with her on that. In addition, she also got the perception that Alice wasn’t very smart at all after the interaction...

.....

Simultaneously, Duncan was busy watching the bright flaming arc floating around himself in the rear of the deck.

Right now, he was one hundred percent sure that this flame was a sun fragment, at least morphologically. Ignoring its erupting properties that one would find in a solar flare, the intense heat radiating off of its surface was enough to cause harm to Duncan. In fact, the power here alone had already surpassed that Creeping Sun Wheel he met when he donned that golden mask.

Naturally, Duncan had no idea how a small segment of a star could break off from the main body and still exist in this form. All he could speculate on was that the phenomena had something to do with this world's weird nature.

Just like how he couldn't understand what caused the great destruction to bring upon the Deep Sea Age, he won't dig any deeper into the subject. Besides, none of that matter for the time being.

Inhaling deeply, Duncan concentrated his mind again and tentatively extended his right hand, allowing the flicker of green flame at the fingertip to guide the arc.

"Nina, try again," Duncan said, "and remember what it was like to 'come back' to the moment of transformation. We were very close to success just now."

The flame jumped in the air a few times at the guidance of his ghost fire. Finally, the surface of the sun fragment bulged, and then a golden flame rose and entwined into a human-shaped figure that's still burning.

Nina lowered her head and seemed intrigued by her own body's blurred shape. But in the next second, the flame that had just gained form shattered again, gushing and erupting back into the flaming arc.

"Don't be discouraged. Let's try again." Duncan did not lose patience and continued to support the girl gently with his guidance. "I will 'support' you. Since you can recover to this extent, it means the idea is feasible..."

The flaming arc swelled again, and a crackling sound came from the golden flames that transformed into Nina's figure but with more clarity.

Unlike his own reassurance, Duncan watched this scene with much nervousness. Similar attempts had been made several times before, and they always failed halfway through. Nevertheless, he's sure the procedure could work based on the feedback from the ghost fire he implanted in the sun fragment.

Exactly then, the flames in front of him instantly shattered and blew into a blast of light. A familiar young girl had jumped out through this portal with radiant hair still sparkling against the light.

Nina smiled and looked at her “Uncle Duncan,” who was completely different from her memory, yet it was undoubtedly him. “Uncle, I’m back!”

Only then did Duncan finally breathe a sigh of relief. With his eased tension, the entire Vanished also reacted by loosening the cables and creaking boards.

It was as if the whole ship was cheering and celebrating with the captain.

“Calm down,” Duncan said to no one specific, and immediately, the entire vessel quieted down. “You still recognize me?” He turns to the nice and asks curiously.

“Yes, you’re Uncle Duncan,” Nina said as a matter of course, but then scratched her face – a habitual move she used to disguise her embarrassment and confusion. “But... I don’t know how I’m able to recognize you. Regardless, I just know it’s you. It’s the same as when you beckoned for me to come down when I was floating up in the sky.”

She hesitated and stopped, examining the man up and down with narrowed eyes.

It’s not at all like how she remembers her Uncle Duncan in the antique shop, but nevertheless, her instincts told her this was him and without fault.

“This is good too,” Duncan exhaled softly, “I was wondering how I should explain this ship and my other appearance to you.”

Nina quickly dodged the hand that tried to ruffle her hair like it always did. Unlike the uncle back in the city, this Uncle Duncan was much taller and bigger than she's accustomed to, especially with that huge hand. The calloused fingers are making her head itchy.

After a while of this silliness, she raised her head and stared straight into the other party's gaze, "I actually have two 'uncles'... right?"

Duncan did not dodge the eyes. Although this moment came quite suddenly, it did not surprise him. From long ago, he already knew this moment would come sooner or later.

If any force in this world could resist the power of "Captain Duncan", then the "sun"... no matter which sun it was, would be an expected option.

He quietly met Nina's gaze. "You noticed?"

"..... Mhmm."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 216

Chapter 216 “Hospitality On The Vanished”

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The sea was calm, with a pleasant breeze as the waves gently flowed along the surface. One may even consider the view nice if one excludes the horror that lies under the depths of these waters.

On the high platform at the stern of the Vanished, the dark steering wheel automatically rotated its angle as the sails slowly adjusted its bearing. Nina sat on the edge of the deck under this atmosphere, her upper body lying lazily against the guardrails with her leg dangling outside.

“..... This is such a strange feeling. I know you’re my Uncle Duncan, and I also know you’re someone that I can rely on and trust. However, I also know about the other facts clearly...”

She seemed to be talking to herself in a soft and slow mutter.

“I have an uncle who was an ordinary man. He used to be a very good, honest, and hardworking person, but then he became... not so good anymore. He got sick, started drinking heavily, gambled money, and was cranky. The situation got worse every day. Back then, I felt going home in itself was a tortuous thing...”

“But suddenly, my uncle got better again. Like a dream, his body got better, his temper got better, and even the atmosphere at home seemed to return to the better times... Actually, it wasn’t even that good in the past... I often wondered how nice it would be if you could really be my uncle forever.”

Duncan frowned slightly, “You already noticed it back then?”

“Sort of... But I wasn’t sure, and I couldn’t figure out some of the things.” Nina turned her head and tilted her face slightly, “If it’s really the kind of ‘evil spirit’ mentioned in the book that occupied my home, then why are the evil spirits still so good to me?”

Duncan peered into Nina’s eyes, and after a while, he burst out laughing. “I’m much more powerful than evil spirits.”

“I can see that now,” Nina giggled broadly. Then she lazily rested her head against the guardrail, “You’re Uncle Duncan, right?”

“Yes, and I can always be.”

“That’s great... I’m much more relieved now,” Nina exhaled before she fell quiet for a moment due to the hesitation. “My other uncle... Was it peaceful for him when he left?”

Duncan recalls the night when he truly stepped into the city-state of Pland.

An irreparable cultist, taking his last breath in the cold, damp sewers, his dark compatriots planning to throw the corpse into the depths of darkness, and his muddled mind containing only a twisted and fanatical worship of the dark sun.

Nevertheless, there was still a little bit of humanity left in the man, the part where he remembers Nina and how he will leave her. For that little bit of humanity, Duncan’s going to make a white lie.

“He left peacefully,” Duncan said softly, “and he didn’t have much to worry about in the end. Of course, you were the only attachment he didn’t want to leave behind.”

“That’s fine then,” Nina sighed as if letting go of the last bit of burden on her shoulders. She stretched her arms vigorously before plopping down on the deck and looking up at the translucent ghost sail of the Vanished. “A lot has happened recently, especially today... Can you tell me about it? Including the things you haven’t told me yet. I want to know about this ship, about you, and... about myself...”

Duncan got up from the barrel and took a seat next to Nina: “That’s going to be a long story. I’m a person of many stories...”

.....

“All in all, Captain Duncan is that powerful...”

On the wide deck of the Vanished, Alice was happily going over the great deeds of the captain to the “visitors” she had. Well, at least two-thirds of the words coming out of her mouth had come from the wooden sculpture known as Goathead. Whether or not those stories are true or exaggerated, only the storyteller himself would know.

But regardless of the truth, Shirley and Morris had listened intently to the details for they are not versed in the odd makeup of the crew. In fact, the only one still smart enough to avoid being nosy was Dog, who kept up with the façade of reading the newspaper.

“As expected of the Vanished,” Morris stroked his chin in admiration. He studied all his life and only now realized how lacking he was in front of Alice. “I have seen many articles about this ship in books, and never could I have imagined how incredible the truth truly was. It’s nothing like the stories from the books...”

As soon as the old gentleman’s words came out, a majestic voice suddenly sounded from the side: “I strongly recommend you not take Alice’s words for facts. Her imagination is far more outrageous than those books you read.”

Dog was the first to react and scrambled behind Shirley, who also jumped up like a police officer in salute at the captain’s return.

“Ah-Ah, Du-Duncan... Captain, you’re finished with your business?” Shirley stutters in response.

Duncan nodded and stepped down the stairs, followed by a petite figure coming down behind him.

“Nina!” As soon as Shirley saw the person, she jumped and happily ran over for a hug, “It’s wonderful that you’re okay!”

With this gesture, the black chain on Shirley’s arm also directly dragged Dog along, pushing the poor dark hound directly in front of the captain by coincidence. As a result, Dog was now face to face with the main body of Duncan, who looked more menacing and imposing than his avatar within the city. If looks could kill, then Duncan’s intimidating face could definitely achieve that.

“Ah, I, Cap-Captain Dun-Duncan... A good day isn’t it?” Dog robotically greets the ghostly man after being dragged into the bind.

“Shirley!” Returned the hug with a warm embrace of her own, but hers had more vigor and strength than the gothic girl’s. Then leaning down, she pats the skeletal dog’s head: “And Mr. Dog, it’s good to see you. I’m back!”

Morris also greeted his student before asking the doll: “Miss Alice, what you just said... was it all made up?”

“I didn’t make it up! That’s what Mr. Goathead told me!” Alice’s eyes immediately widened like she’s shocked, “He told me he has served on the Vanished for a century, and he knows better than anyone about this ship!”

Morris looked confused: “Mr. Goathead?”

“My first mate. You won’t like dealing with him,” Duncan said casually. Then he looked around at the few people standing in front of him like he’s doing a head count.

Morris, Shirley, Dog, all unscheduled boarders of his ship due to the situation in Pland.

Although Duncan already planned to use the Vanished’s special nature to strip away the pollution in history, he still urgently teleported the “guests” who had taken refuge in the antique shop just in case. But now that things have calmed down on the city-state’s side, it was necessary to consider the future and what to do next.

At the very least, Mr. Morris still had relatives in the city and probably didn't want to stay on this ghost ship forever.

After a brief thought, he withdrew his gaze.

"I think you already know where you are, and you already know who I am. As you can see, this is the Vanished, and I am the captain of this famous ship. At least half of the horror legends told in pubs, and bedtime stories are about me and this vessel..."

"I will not comment on the veracity and exaggerated descriptions of these legends, but one thing is true: after boarding the Vanished, it is difficult for you to cut off your connection with the ship. In a sense, you are already considered a part of the crew after Ai's teleportation and 'spiritization' from the Vanished."

"Unfortunately, this process is neither reversible nor avoidable." Duncan got straight to the point. This was something he's learned recently about the Vanished and his own power. The earliest example of this would be the White Oak, and the most recent one being Vanna.

Morris and Shirley reacted calmer than Duncan had imagined, leaving only Dog to shrug and mutter something no one could hear.

It seems they have long thought of this situation and had a certain preparation in place...

Duncan deliberated for several seconds before shaking his head with a wry smile.

"But there is one difference from the legend," his tone becoming lighter, "this ship is not just a one-way ticket. I, the captain... as you can see, is not a wild and out of control natural disaster like the legend says."

"You all boarded the ship because of the emergency; therefore, I won't restrict your freedom."

This time, Shirley and Morris showed a stronger reaction by popping their eyes.

“That is to say... we can go back?” Morris was the first to speak after comprehending the sentence.

“Of course,” Duncan smiled, “Pland’s crisis is over. You can come and go as you please, but...”

Morris tensed up again.

“Let’s go after eating,” Duncan said casually, “this is my way of showing hospitality. The food on the Vanished is simple, but there are also some specialties that we have, especially the aquatic products. You will have a tough time finding it in the city-states...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 217

Chapter 217 “The Doubt Of The Devout”

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Heidi suddenly sneezed, startling the young cleric taking notes opposite of herself.

“Are you okay?” The young cleric looked at the psychiatrist with some concern, “Is it because you’re unwell? Do you feel unusual anywhere...?”

“I’m okay. Maybe I got the chill from the cool breeze just now.” Heidi waved her hand without waiting for the other party to finish, rubbing her nose and saying, “Where were we at?”

“We were discussing the two ‘realities’ that collapsed together and of how one was stripped away following the Vanished’s arrival.” The young cleric glanced at the clipboard in his hand and read the notes he wrote, “You also mentioned the crystal pendant you have may be the key to the phenomenon.”

“The pendant is already shattered,” Heidi thought for a moment and nodded, “my father obtained it from an antique shop, but I suspect neither my father nor the store owner knew it’s a special item. It’s just a giveaway, even... the label from the factory is still on the back.”

“So it’s an object with supernatural power but was concealed by some unknown means. Then it eventually landed in your possession from the lower city,” said the young cleric as he jotted down another line in his notes. “Can you tell us about the antique shop and the details of the pendant? It may help us trace the item’s origin and why only you remember the final moments of the event we all experienced.”

“Of course, it’s no problem,” Heidi immediately nodded and explained all she knew. However, the doc soon grew hesitant after reaching a topic, “Everyone... is everyone back?”

“From what we know so far... Yes,” the young cleric nodded. “Although nobody can remember the entire event with the burning flames, everything should be back to before the disaster struck. According to the head bishop’s explanation, we suffered a historical invasion of our reality. The details are kept private, but it won’t be long before everything is made public.”

He paused as if wondering if he should add: “But your situation is the most special. We all remember how the disaster began with the raining hellfire, but only you remember the Vanished ever appearing and sweeping away the flames with it. What you saw is likely crucial to resolving the puzzle.”

“I understand,” Heidi sighed, suddenly thinking of something else, “then is it better for me to inform my family first? From how things look, I won’t be returning anytime soon...”

“We’ve already sent someone,” the young cleric smiled, “you don’t have to worry.”

“Already notified them? That’s good to know,” Heidi mused momentarily before nodding. “Then let’s continue. What else do you need to ask?”

“Okay, next question, do you remember the specific details of the ghost ship that floated in the two histories, and do you recall those details as a trance or auditory hallucination?”

.....

Vanna came to the main church and broke the peaceful atmosphere inside.

This empty and sacred place was tranquil at the moment. Except for the necessary guards at the entrance, only Bishop Valentine stood silently in front of the statue in the main hall.

Turning around at the noise, Valentine smiled at the inquisitor's arrival. The old bishop had already removed his fancy wardrobe and only retained the scepter representing his status within the city.

Vanna calmly reports: "Order in the church district has been restored, the garrisons are returning to their barracks, and the high-ranking priests have gone to the main factories to pacify the steam cores. At least until nightfall comes, we can keep the entire city supplied with gas and fuel without interruption."

The old bishop was visibly relieved: "You've worked hard, Vanna."

"I'm only doing my duties," Vanna said softly. "The remnants of mental and cognitive confusion after the disaster still linger on everyone. The untrained may still be panicking and locking themselves within their homes and shelters. Even City Hall is a mess right now, leaving only us professionals to take charge for the time being."

Valentine nodded and reminded: "After nightfall, in addition to ensuring the supply of gas and candles, we must also send more night patrol personnel in various urban areas. Ensure they bring enough lanterns and candles along, and beware of anything lurking in the night... We have just experienced a reality invasion, and the foundations are crippling weak at the moment. Anything can topple it over if we're not careful. Also, some citizens might still be hiding in the various shelters along the island. They may not know what's happening and will refuse to come out. Once their holy oil is exhausted, panic will ensue and become a problem."

Vanna agreed and nodded in return: "I understand. I will arrange for a team to scout the shelters with me leading the inspections this evening."

"..... You should leave it to your deputy," Valentine showed concern at the young inquisitor, "go rest. You've done a lot already. Besides, you're still injured."

"No need. My injuries are basically healed already after returning to the cathedral," Vanna said promptly. Then she eyed the old bishop repeatedly, "Your previous 'injury' is more serious than mine..."

“You can’t compare our situation,” Valentine grimaced at the thought of dying. “I have recovered from the pollution and been killed twice over after the curtain landed. But even then, I can still see your fatigue.”

Vanna, however, said nothing and silently turned around. She’s now looking up at the goddess statue.

“What are you thinking?” Valentine eventually broke the silence after the atmosphere got very strange.

“I’m thinking about what to write in the second half of my report,” Vanna sighed, “and how we should explain this disaster to the Pope.”

The expression on Valentine’s face also grew into a show at once.

“In a sense... Well, there is no need to make sense,” the old bishop eventually sighed after holding back for a moment. “The fact is that the Vanished’s arrival extinguished the historical pollution brought forth by the Enders and prevented the Black Sun from being born. Although we don’t know why that ghost captain did all this, there is no doubt about this fact...”

The old bishop paused, and after nearly half a minute of silence, he continued grimly: “Pland survived due to the arrival of the Vanished.”

“Perhaps, he came for the ‘sun fragment’?” Vanna thought about the issue a lot but didn’t say everything that came to mind. “Do you remember the ‘White Oak’? The ship ran into the Vanished head-on, and only Anomaly 099 was hijacked by the encounter. Perhaps, Captain Duncan’s purpose is simpler than what everyone assumed.”

“Stealing the sun fragment and robbing an anomaly is not the same,” Valentine shook his head, “but you are right. This is indeed the only explanation that can be thought of now. If Her Majesty the Pope needs an answer, this is the only answer we can give... All that remains is to truthfully report everything that happened here and see what conclusions the priests from the Grand Storm Cathedral can come up with.”

Vanna faintly nods before turning her head towards the goddess statue.

“Your mind is still unsettled,” Valentine could undoubtedly sense that Vanna’s state was not quite right. “Vanna, we have discussed the affairs of the city-state and the church; what else is shaking your will now?”

“I... I’m fine.”

“We’ve known each other for many years,” Valentine shook his head, “Although you are on the same level as me in terms of the clergy, you have always regarded me as an elder you can trust. I can see that you are bothered by something since you came back. What happened?”

Vanna didn’t answer and continued to stare at the statue of the veiled goddess, and after a good minute, she lowered her gaze and looked at her own body.

Dante Wayne’s words still seemed to echo in her ears as she did so.

In the fire eleven years ago, in the “fire source” where the Enders used to open up the pollution of history, her uncle didn’t actually manage to save herself.

That’s to say, she should’ve died back then, on that night... The only reason she’s still alive was thanks to the blessing of subspace...

“You were reborn anew and will die for being renewed...” The Ender’s words still echoed in the lady’s head.

She has come back from the dead but hasn’t died yet from being renewed. Everything was interrupted thanks to the appearance of the Vanished.

Now, she still stands well, breathing the earthly air and enjoying the warmth of the living.

Even the Storm Goddess continued to bless her with power, allowing her body to recover from the previous battle’s injury.

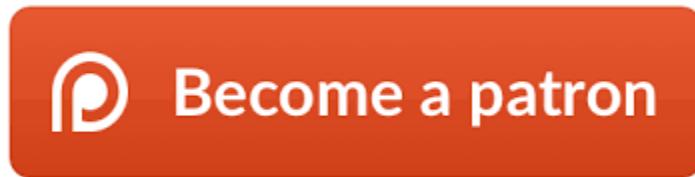
This confused Vanna, who had always wholeheartedly believed in her faith and herself. Yet, she’s starting to doubt herself and the goddess for keeping a being of subspace alive like herself.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 218

Chapter 218 “People Who Survived”

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The statue of the Storm Goddess Gomona stands quietly in the cathedral, majestic, mysterious, and silent as always.

That veil covered not only the face of the goddess but also the connection between the two realms. For the first time, Vanna discovered that she didn't understand or even what kind of god she worshiped.

All this time, she had taken everything she knew about the storm and the Deep Sea for granted. Never in her mind did she ever question the teachings or the relationship mortals shared with the gods.

With a sudden shudder, Vanna jerked awake from the pounding, leaving her back drenched in cold sweat.

Thoughts give rise to heresy, and questioning gives way to darkness.

She couldn't believe that those near-deviant thoughts would come out of her own head – she began to question the “behavior” of the gods, which was almost no different from heresy.

However, in the next second, she felt the gentle sound of waves ringing in her ears, and the gaze and comfort from the goddess emerged as usual, further alleviating the accumulated pain in her body and soothing her spirit.

Even in this holy ground of the church, even when such wavering thought appeared in my head, the goddess is as always watching me...

“..... You sure you don’t need a break?” Valentine’s voice suddenly came from the side, interrupting Vanna’s wandering mind again. After watching his peer staring at the statue for so long, the old man showed concern, “You look like you fell into a trance... Physical injuries are easy to heal, but mental exhaustion can be troublesome.”

“I...” Vanna’s expression hesitated, “maybe I’m a little tired.”

“Then go and rest. I’ll handle the rest here,” Valentine said immediately. Then just as quickly, the old bishop added before the other party could say anything, “Just now, I received news that Mr. Dante has returned to the mansion safely. I think your family would also like to have you by their side.”

“Uncle...” Vanna became startled as she recalled the scene of saying goodbye to her uncle before. Then, a strange feeling surfaced from within, dispelling her hesitation about leaving, “Okay, then I’ll leave first.”

“Go with your mind at peace,” Valentine nodded slightly, “may the storm shelter you.”

“..... May the storm shelter,” Vanna said softly.

A dark-gray steam car drove out of the church square, and after crossing the intersection of the central district, which had been checked, it went toward the admin’s residence.

Vanna sat in the car’s passenger seat, and the driver was none other than Heidi, who had just finished being questioned inside the church.

“Thank you, and sorry for troubling you in giving me a ride,” Vanna whispered to her friend while staring out the receded car window. “You could have left earlier if not for me.”

“You don’t have to be so polite with me,” Heidi casually said as she held the steering wheel and observed the road conditions, “and I couldn’t have left early because the cleric had a lot of questions for me. Besides, the

safety measures weren't in place, so there was no way they would've let me leave before then."

Vanna didn't comment and continued to stare out the window. She saw the city-state police and guardians patrolling the road together and frightened citizens scurrying about quickly after coming onto the streets – some clearly just coming out of the shelters.

Even so, Vanna still felt an indescribable warmth and happiness at this chaotic scene. Fear and tensions proved they're alive, and only those who have survived the disaster are entitled to be anxious.

"Are you alright? Your condition doesn't look very good," Heidi noticed Vanna's exhaustion and asked. "It's the first time I've seen you so unenergetic since childhood. I thought you were forged from a piece of steel."

"..... Would you believe me if I told you that I alone fought through the entire city-state when the hellfire rained down?" Vanna glanced at her friend and grinned. Her spirit has been getting more relaxed after getting into the car with Heidi, so the worry was unnecessary. "I'm exhausted."

"Of course I do; after all, it's you. I will still believe you if you tell me you fought your way back from subspace," Heidi's expression didn't so much as flinch after hearing her friend's story. Then eyeing her friend up like she's examining a patient, "It's no wonder you are like this then..."

Vanna was confused by the other party's gazing up: "You... why are you giving me such strange looks?"

"I just got an idea," Heidi now looked serious, "would you like to go to the marriage help center now?"

"..... Why?"

"Well, you might actually find someone stronger than you now since you're so exhausted. This way, you won't violate your oath and can find a partner." Heidi's train of thought seems to have warped unexpectedly: "Otherwise,

you will keep sending your pairings from the center to the hospital every other day...”

That instantly brought forth a series of crunching sounds from Vanna’s fist.

After several seconds of silence, Heidi muttered again: “If you are not happy, then just say it. You’ve always picked on me during our childhood. All my lunches are in your tummy because of that...”

The car then quieted down again until Vanna broke the silence this time: “Thank you, I’m much calmer now.”

“Humph, I am the best psychiatrist in Pland after all. You must keep yourself in good shape when meeting Mr. Dante; otherwise, you will worry him.” Heidi grinned and successfully parked the car before the mansion, “We’re here. Go now, Miss Knight. Cheer up because we all managed to pick up a second life today.”

A second life...

Despite the casual remark from the doc, Vanna’s head couldn’t help but recall a phrase often spoken by the members of the Death Church – survival is not an innate right but an item that has been paid for in advance.

Vanna lowered her eyes and breathed gently, thanking her friend before leaving the car and heading for the front door.

Heidi watched her friend’s departing back, and only after a good moment did she restart the car, leaving with her own woes in mind.

Is Father safe now? If he is also safe, then... what is he doing now?

.....

Lightning and thunder ran rampant outside the cabin, and the wind’s continuous battering of the Vanished was enough to sink any ordinary vessel. Imagine an indescribable beast that had awoken from its slumber. Its rage was enough to destroy any ordinary interloper that dared to trespass into its domain.

The ship's crew watched in horror through the porthole as the flaming giant outside wrestled with its catch through the burning chains extending from his hand. Whatever behemoth this was beneath the waves did not like it, for it was thrashing violently with those tentacles and dragging the ship in the wayside.

Shirley and Dog, the latter with the keenest eyes of them all, trembled the hardest at the terrifying scene unfolding before them.

"Yo-Yo-You sure this is the captain fishing?!" The gothic girl asked the doll, who had been smiling like it's nothing special.

"Mhmm!" Alice nodded firmly, her expression somewhat confused by the fuss from these city folks. "Fishing is the captain's greatest hobby!"

"I finally know why you react that way whenever you talk about Mr. Duncan's fish..." Shirley sobs to her partner, "I... If I had known what I had eaten..."

Before she finished speaking, Morris, who kept his eyes closed out of fear, also yelled in horror at what the girl meant: "You... ate Mr. Duncan's catch... Eh, 'fish'?"

"How am I supposed to know!" Shirley exclaims defensively before turning to Nina, "You... You didn't tell me how your uncle got his fish..."

"I don't know either," Nina shook her head. The girl's expression wasn't as exaggerated as the others, but she did appear quite excited, like she's found a new hobby. Of course, the youthful girl had been watching through the porthole the entire time and didn't once leave it. "Hey... do any of you know how those things become fishes?"

To be fair, Nina's current behavior was actually no different from when she was in the city-state, as cheerful as ever and as lively and sunny as ever. However, this attitude definitely didn't fit in on this vessel that's currently wrestling with a sea monster.

"You... both uncle and niece are absolutely terrifying..."

Nina scratched her hair like she didn't understand why her friend would say that. "Are we? I think it's okay..."

Out of the blue, Alice suddenly stood up and walked out of the cabin, causing Shirley to jolt up in fright. "Ah, what are you going to do?"

"Go get dinner ready, of course!" Miss Doll answered while glancing back, "Captain is about to finish reeling in the big fish."

This left the unexpected passengers sharing looks between themselves, all showing faces of confusion and distraught.

"I... I want to go home..." Shirley hugged Dog hard, her eyes already dripping droplets of tears.

The red light in the bloody eyes of Dog flickered on and off over the pressure: "You're about to strangle me... let go~"

Morris sighed as well.

"Teacher, why are you sighing?" Nina quickly asked after seeing this.

"I think I can write a book when I go back," Morris said while spreading his hands. "I'm just worried that my daughter will think I have a mental problem like her patients though..."

Nina: "...?"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 219

Chapter 219 “New Crew”

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Duncan eventually returned to the cabin with the bounty of his hunt in hand. He tossed the giant down with a muffled thud due to its weight and scattered a bunch of small ugly ones from a net he commandeered beforehand.

“The fishes are struggling real hard today. Fortunately, I am better in arm strength,” Duncan explains with a smug grin that somehow fits his achievement. He also wiped his forehead to remove the sweat – although there was none. “Let’s take a look at the catch today. You all mustn’t miss out on this opportunity. It’s not often the specialty of the sea is displayed like this. Oh, don’t judge because of their ugly appearance. Looks can be deceiving. The taste is actually quite good... Um, why do you all have that expression on your faces?”

Duncan’s gaze then shifted away from his “catch” and onto the shivering trio of Shirley – Dog, and Morris – hiding in the back corner of the cabin. Except for the dark hound’s difficult-to-understand skull, the other two were obviously not quite right.

“Uncle Duncan!” As usual, Nina ran over and greeted her uncle.

Then the upbeat niece looked at the fish with a curious glint. In her view, these are indeed fish, only uglier and weirder than the ones brought home by her uncle.

“They’re really so ugly,” Nina sighed in amazement, “even worse than when they’re dried. Are these the same fishes we had before? How did they

end up like this...”

“Why do they all look like that?” Duncan points at the trembling trio.

“They were frightened by the way you were fishing,” Nina explains with a chirp. Then, recalling another thing, she got all embarrassed, “Actually, I was also taken aback by your commotion... your way of catching fish is huge...”

“Do I make a lot of noise when fishing?” Duncan frowned suspiciously, seeming to catch onto the truth that’s been evading his perception. “Did something happen just now?”

Only then did Morris carefully get up from the chair and cautiously approached. After eyeing up the creature and confirming it’s dead, he hesitantly spoke: “Mr. Duncan, you... do you have a bad relationship with the heir offspring of the Deep Sea? So much so that they can be twisted into this form...?”

Duncan was stunned momentarily and finally realized what was happening with this situation. He slowly turned to Nina and asked: “So... what I caught isn’t a fish in your eyes?”

“Now it is, but not earlier,” Nina stuck her tongue out like a kid. “You were wrestling with a huge thing just now, like this and this...”

Nina stretched out her hand vigorously and waved it around to demonstrate what they saw. According to a human’s eye, the monster resembled a squid with numerous tentacles. The only difference would be the countless eyeballs planted across the body, making it look creepy and hideous.

“That’s pretty much it,” Nina finally finished and turned her sight onto the strange fish again, “we never expected it to really become a fish...”

Duncan got quiet for a while, muttering what he could relate to in the animal kingdom: “That sounds like a huge octopus...”

Shirley, who had hidden on the side without interjecting, finally poked her head over and boldly asked: “Octopus? What is that?”

“Actually, you can eat it too,” Duncan explains. “It may look scary, but it tastes okay and can be stewed due to its chewy texture.”

As soon as these words came out, Shirley and Morris’s expressions got all wonderful again.

Duncan didn’t care about their fireworks reaction; he was occupied with the new knowledge. This needs to be taken into account for future ventures.

So I didn’t catch a “fish”, but an heir offspring of the Deep Sea, the kind that brings fear to a sailor... But why did it change to a fish after I caught it? What caused it to change?

Duncan felt like he’s catching onto another truth, but with so little detail, he soon converged the questions into one fundamental point: Can this fish still be eaten?

Duncan felt tied inside. A part of him want to keep eating the bounties of the ocean, and the other got weirded out, knowing he was consuming some sea monster. However, the fact remains that these ugly fishes tasted good, and he’s already eaten some on the dining table before the truth came out.

In the end, the desire to fill his tummy won out. If worse comes to worse, he could always have Alice cook the flesh longer.

Just like that, Shirley and Morris watched as the expression on Duncan’s face go from unhappy to happy again: “Anyways, I’ll first send these to the kitchen.”

Shirley couldn’t be cautious anymore and cried: “Do you really want to eat these?!”

“Haven’t you eaten them before? Why act so strongly against it?” Duncan glanced at the girl with a strange expression, “It went well last time, didn’t it?”

Shirley: “...”

No matter what the mentality of the visitors, the special dinner of the Vanished was finally served on the table, and for Duncan, today was destined to be a special day.

After being deserted for so long, the Vanished finally ushered in a day that could be considered “lively”. In the cabin in the middle of the deck, the long-closed dining room was reopened, and the bright whale oil lamp dispelled the darkness in the room. It was dim, and a long table was wiped and shining with the most decadent meal this ship had to offer displayed before it – freshly baked bread, vegetable soup, pea stew, jam with mashed potatoes, two low-alcohol liquors, and one spirit. There’s also FISH!

Oh right! Let’s not forget Ai’ fries and ketchup hauled over from Pland. The bird’s literally in heaven right now.

Duncan sat at one end of the long table, Nina sat beside him, Alice on the other side, and Shirley, Dog, Morris, and Ai each took a seat along the table as they pleased.

To be fair, compared to this huge room, the few people dining here could hardly be called “lively”. Strictly speaking, there’s not even a normal human in here either, the only exception being Morris, but even then, the old scholar was a cleric of knowledge.

Morris stared down at the dinner plate before him as Alice hand-cut the grilled fish. The heir’s flesh and blood smelled fantastic in truth, and the terrifying elements were gone, giving the dish a true aroma.

I’m sitting on the Vanished, coexisting with a shadow of subspace, and sharing a meal comprised of the meat from a Deep Sea heir...

Out of reflex, Morris almost started to chant the name of Lahem, the god of wisdom – he only stopped because he was more afraid of seeing something he didn’t want to see again.

The atmosphere at the table appeared a little strained, and Duncan noticed this of course. So, he raised a glass for a toast like any good host would: “First of all, I want to welcome all of you. Although the process is a bit unexpected, you are now members of the Vanished. So, let’s use this glass of wine as a welcoming ceremony.”

The entanglement and nervousness in his heart quickly gave in, and Morris hurriedly raised his glass, followed by Shirley and Nina, who were quick learners – but Duncan quickly glanced at the two girls: “You two can drink juice.”

“I’m almost an adult!” Shirley protested subconsciously.

“I... I’ll just take a sip,” Nina muttered, “fruit wine is okay...”

“..... Then you two are only allowed to drink a little,” Duncan looked serious, “I’ll have Alice watch over you two from the side.”

“YAA! Uncle is the best!”

Morris watched the exchange between Shirley, Nina, and Duncan with a hint of surprise. Nevertheless, the scene seemed so grounded like any ordinary family, which relaxed his tense nerves somewhat.

Then came the coughing fit from Nina after she took a sip from the wine. The silly behavior instantly dispelled any gloom and doom in the air, bringing the party into full swing.

Pleased by the good mood, Duncan began to go over his plans. “After dinner, I’ll arrange for Ai to send you back to the city-state,” he said in a relaxed and calm tone while looking around the table. “Mr. Morris, you can go straight home. As for you three, Shirley, Dog, and Nina can return to the antique shop.”

Nina was still recovering from the coughing fit when she heard this:
“Umm... Uncle... what about you?”

“Of course I’ll be waiting for you over there,” Duncan chuckled, his gaze falling on Shirley. “Actually, it’s always been like this – I’m both here and in the city-state.”

“Eh...” Shirley was a little dazed by the news, blinking her eyes before connecting the dots. “I thought... After solving the matter in Pland, you will stop paying attention to the city, just like in the stories. The captain will continue his adventures...”

“You’re right, the captain will continue to embark on their adventures. The Vanished is still sailing on the Boundless Sea, you see?” Duncan spread his hands to point at the vessel, “But the captain still pays attention to the civilized world, and as the crew of the Vanished... you will get to return to your familiar land life. The only difference now is you may be required to re-board the ship when the situation requires it.”

“..... We still have to come back?!” Shirley was shocked and blurted this out.

Nina also reacted: “Can we still come back!?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 220

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Chapter 220 “Team”

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Morris and the others were brought on board because of the urgency of the disaster in Pland, but even if they did not board the ship today, Duncan already had plans to expand his “influence” eventually. In his opinion, the few people gathered on the Vanished now actually happened to be good candidates.

Morris, a distinguished historian, a polymath, a believer in the God of Wisdom, possesses valuable knowledge, which was currently in short demand for Duncan. At the same time, the old gentleman was also part of “high class” with certain connections and status in the human world, which could also come in handy at the right time.

Shirley and Dog, controlled shadow demon and summoner, shared a symbiosis relationship together. Their knowledge and combat power about the shadow realm meant they were able to perceive subjects beyond the wisdom of Morris.

Finally, there’s Nina, his well-behaved and cute niece – the current carrier of the sun fragment.

Duncan’s gaze slowly swept over the long table, and around this feast, several faces were nervous, some restrained, and some with simple curiosity.

None of them seem to realize that a very special “group” has taken shape in this dinner, and what binds this group together is their common identity at the moment: The crew of the Vanished.

“My previous promise is still valid, that the status of the crew of the Vanished does not restrict your personal freedom. I do not need coercive allegiances, nor sacrificial offerings or anything like that—all of this means nothing to me,” Duncan said slowly, his voice low and soft like the waves coming from the porthole nearby. “But given the connection between you all share with me now, this connection can be regarded as a... loose organized team.”

“Frankly, I’ve been away from the civilized world for many years. Morris should know very well about this point and how long the Vanished hasn’t been sighted within the past century. I also know about the many terrifying and frightening stories about me, about this ship, and I admit that these stories have a factual basis to go upon. Truth is, for many years... the ship was out of control.”

“But as you can see, I have regained my humanity and re-stabilized the state of the Vanished, and now... I am interested in the civilized world that’s a century ahead of my time.”

Duncan said unhurriedly. This speech was something he came up with during his fishing venture. He needed to recruit a new crew, and considering the doom and gloom history of the Vanished, coming out as a gentle and kind captain who regained his sanity was a good starting point. Minimally, it wouldn’t send the newcomers fleeing for their lives in the first notion of being recruited.

As for the newcomers believing his story or not... That’s a problem only the other side could resolve.

It has to be said that fishing was indeed a leisurely activity suitable for the mind and body. Duncan feels that he really should thank the gifts from nature... thank the heirs of the Deep Sea.

Hearing Duncan's words, Morris's face immediately showed a thoughtful expression. He still had trouble believing what he heard was the true voice and not a fabrication of his illusions. In fact, he also had trouble believing the Vanished actually looked like this and not something else entirely. However, he didn't dismiss the friendly attitude of the captain shown thus far. Finally, and gradually, he's starting to be convinced...

At least, if this statement were to be true, the friendly performance of this subspatial shadow would become a little more plausible.

On the other hand, Shirley was still thinking and not fully comprehending the situation. However, Dog, who was sitting beside the gothic girl, had already understood everything: "That is to say, you need us... to be your kin and do something in this world?"

"It's just a possibility," Duncan said with a smile, "when I require the help, I will ask. Also, you've misunderstood something about being my kin – you are to be my crew member. So, it's okay to call me Captain or in the same manner as before."

"Then how will you contact us? Ah, of course, I know you have an avatar in the city-state of Pland, but I mean..." Morris asks after giving it some thought.

"I know what you are thinking," Duncan nodded lightly without waiting for the other party to finish. "If I want to find you, I will naturally get to you all, and if you need to contact me in an incident, you can call my name or the Vanished near a smooth mirror. I can hear it through that medium. In addition, flames can also increase my strength, and if you are in danger, you can light a flame after calling my name."

Morris listened, the expression on his face growing a little troubled by the news. He still believed in the God of Wisdom at heart, yet now, he's semi-actively joining a "heretical group". Then to top it off, he's also learning knowledge from a subspatial shadow, a being equivalent to a god.

Out of reflex, the old scholar rubbed the colorful bracelet enchanted with blessings on his wrist.

The Lord didn't see it, the Lord doesn't mind, and the Lord believes you're doing the right thing.

Meanwhile, Nina's eyes widened slightly after listening to Duncan's words, her face a little excited: "It sounds so amazing!"

This gleeful reaction actually caught Duncan by surprise: "Nina, you don't need any additional flames..."

Nina didn't catch on: "Huh? Why?"

Then without waiting for Duncan to answer, she answered her own question: "Oh, oh I understand, I understand, I can..."

"Don't transform here!" Duncan saw the air around Nina faintly flaring up and quickly cut her off, "Until you can master the power brought by the sun fragment, you are not allowed to try switching to your other form in an enclosed or crowded place!"

Nina instantly deflated her head: "Oh..."

Duncan became relieved after seeing the air calming down again.

So far, Nina has been able to keep the sun fragment's power at bay thanks to the properties of him being a "flame usurper". Until the girl fully grasps the magnitude of her newfound flames, it's imperative she does not try anything beyond her control.

"We may be adding new members in the future, too." Duncan mused for the right words before continuing, "So, let's use today's dinner as a standard process for new members when they join. I think it will also help in strengthening the relationship between team members."

Morris subconsciously glanced at the dinner plate before him, feeling as if he's glimpsed into the truth.

But what else could the scholar say? He's already a member of this ship, has accepted the protection of Mr. Duncan, and the meat of the Deep Sea

heir has been placed in front of him as dinner – though more like a ritual offering – it's obviously too late to quit.

Then glancing to the gluttonous dove that's diving head first into the mountain of fries, the old scholar could only sigh inwardly. He's always been a man of learning, and now he's gotten his chance to become legendary. What more could he ask for?

But before he could continue this spiraling self-inflicting comfort, Miss Alice had suddenly stood up and broken the silence by speaking to the captain: "Ah, Captain, are there going to be more crewmembers aside from me in the future?"

"You just realized?" Duncan glanced at the puppet casually, "Of course you are no longer the only crew here, and before they leave, you will have to teach them the crew code, just like how Goathead taught you back then."

Alice dumbly blinked for a second before getting the point. Then out of habit, she clapped her hand and giggled like a kid: "Okay! Then I'll later..."

In the next second, perhaps due to the excitement, a familiar pop suddenly sounded in Duncan's ears. Next thing everyone knew, a blond head had rolled onto the middle of the table in plain view, causing a momentary silence to hang over the air.

"AHH!!! Her head is off, her head is off!" Shirley's frantic scream was the first to break the awkward mood.

Chaos promptly ensued within the room, mainly Shirley and Nina running around and losing their minds. Meanwhile, Dog and Morris were busy trying to calm the kids down without losing their own cool.

And that's how the new crew members of the Vanished started out their meeting...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 221

Chapter 221 “Reunion”

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The familiar house stood silently at the end of the quiet neighborhood, the bright and warm lights shining through from the windows when Heidi peered ahead. It's already dark outside, and only the street lights now brought light to the city. The doctor didn't know what awaited her at home, but she knew it's not possible to keep avoiding the issue. Slowing her vehicle down, the lady takes in a deep breath before continuing forward.

The scene of saying goodbye to her father still lingered in her head as if it only happened moments ago. Back then, her father had obviously noticed something terribly wrong with the city, and him sending her was his form of protection.

Father told me to seek refuge in the cathedral, yet he went to that antique shop in the lower city... why?

A wisp of doubt suddenly appeared in Heidi's mind but quickly subdued this thought for the time being – the light in the foyer of her home was on, and it's beckoning her to go in.

She drove the dark gray car smoothly into the courtyard and stepped out of the vehicle. To her surprise and astonishment, what awaited Heidi inside wasn't Morris, her father, but her mother at the dining hall.

The old lady wore a woolen shawl with dark blue stripes and sat in a chair with a backrest. She also wore a delicate brown rimmed glass that gave the senior a rather scholarly look while she read the pile of newspaper stacked atop of the table.

Heidi froze at the door, unable to comprehend the picture for a while.

The doc couldn't remember the last time her mother left the bedroom. Of course, they always kept an empty seat at the dining table just in case, but no one ever sat on it.

Naturally, Heidi found it strange why her mother wouldn't come out, but after so many years, she's gotten used to her mother's condition and habits... Yet now, she's finally able to witness her mother sitting in that perennially empty chair. It's almost surreal.

Heidi subconsciously took a couple of steps forward, and the sound of her feet finally caught the attention of the old woman at the table.

"Ah, Heidi, you're back." The old lady smiles and beckons greets her daughter with a wave.

"I..." Heidi wanted to say something and discovered she's unable to come up with a proper greeting. Despite going to her parent's room daily to converse, this was the first time they had done so outside the bedroom. The last occasion happened more than ten years ago! "I got held at the main cathedral, are you... okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm right here," her mother answered happily. Those eyes now gave a sense of energy that Heidi never saw in them before, which showed in the form of the old lady getting up from the chair and slowly coming over. "Let me take a good look at you... I haven't taken a proper look at you in a long time..."

"Don't we see each other every day?" Heidi said subconsciously, only to realize her mother looked worried while caressing her hair. "How come you came out to the dining room? Are you feeling better today?"

Her mother's smile deepened some more: "It's okay now, it's okay now... By the way, why hasn't Morris come back yet?"

"Father hasn't come home yet?" Heidi was shocked when she heard this, causing a faint pang of worry to sprout inside. "He should have arrived

home earlier than me. The place he went to isn't as far as the grand cathedral."

"Maybe his car broke down partway," her mother said slowly, "and his driving skills have never been worthy of a compliment. Come, let's wait for him together."

Heidi nodded hesitantly and followed her mother back to the table. Then she noticed the sumptuous meals on the table—they were not the usual dishes made by the temporary maids hired at home.

"You did this?" Heidi looked up, slightly surprised, "You haven't cooked in a long time."

"Oh, you noticed? I haven't cooked for a long time so I had to ask the maids for help a lot. There many ingredients that I didn't know where. Maybe the taste will be a bit off because of that." Her mother faintly smiles, "Fortunately, I remember the general process."

Heidi eyed the food on the table and couldn't resist picking up a fork to try. However, her mother's familiar voice stopped her: "Wait for your father to come home and then we can eat."

I haven't heard those words for many years...

Then catching the doc off guard, a faint flapping sound of wings suddenly came from outside, followed by the sound of a key turning.

Father is back!

Morris unlocked the door to his own with a dazed appearance. The aftereffects of traveling with Ai's teleportation was no joke, it's both nauseating and dizzying. Nevertheless, he eventually managed to come out of it and saw his wife and daughter sitting at the dining table, the dinner prepared and set.

It finally dawned on the old scholar this was no illusion but a miracle that became a reality after years of waiting.

After standing like a sculpture for who knows how long, Morris finally stepped forward, walking faster and faster with each stride.

The shock of sharing a meal with the owner of the Vanished paled in comparison to finding his wife alive and well. The burden of making a wish years ago has left him, and now, he could finally enjoy life again!

Likewise, Morris's wife rose from the table, allowing the couple to share a long overdue hug.

"I finally get to see you..." the old scholar's whispered, seemingly afraid Heidi would overhear his words, "I..."

"Okay, that's enough. Our daughter is watching. You still have a lot of time to explain what happened. Don't rush it."

"Oh... Oh, you're right, you're right."

Morris responded with some panic. He let go of his wife, turned his head around, and saw Heidi staring right at him with surprise.

"Ahem... I'm sorry I came back late. The car broke down on the way... I needed to find someone to tow it back tomorrow," Morris explained unnaturally and then quickly changed the subject. "Are you alright? Over at the cathedral side... is everything fine?"

"Except for being frightened and confused, I'm just as unscathed as everyone else," Heidi replied, inspecting her father up and down. "But you... why do I feel like you're acting weird? Did something happen on the way back?"

"What can be wrong with me?" Morris said immediately, afraid Heidi would lead the topic to his past arrangement. Then he noticed the hearty meal on the table, causing the old scholar's face to turn troubled.

"I... I've already eaten before coming back," he said hesitantly, "on the shi... I ate at Mr. Duncan's place."

Once again, those ugly and scary "fish" came to his mind again.

At the “Subspace Feast”, he was as nervous about the fish as the eccentric dark hound, but under the gaze of Mr. Duncan, he still ate the meat. As to what exactly happened next, he honestly couldn’t remember. The only aspect that remained was how fragrant it smelled and tasted.

But his wife’s voice came from the side, interrupting his thoughts: “I made it myself.”

“Mother hasn’t cooked in years,” Heidi followed, “she feels better today, so...”

“Then I’ll eat some more.” When Morris said in a hurry after hearing the detail. Then not waiting for his daughter to guide him, he dived right in with the soup bowl as a starter.

“How does it taste...?” The wife asked expectantly.

“Sort of... salty,” Morris said hesitantly, but then picked up the bowl again and took a few more gulps. “Salty, too salty... You always made it salty...”

“If you don’t want to eat then don’t eat it!”

“I didn’t say it didn’t taste good...”

“Then shut up and eat. Why are you talking so much at the table?”

Heidi glanced back and forth between her parents. She hadn’t heard a conversation like this in years. Yet, after so long, nothing seemed to have changed. So, the doc burst out laughing and cut off a piece of fried meat for herself.

Indeed, it’s a bit salty...

.....

When Vanna was finally home, she didn’t need to act like the strong and powerful leader that she was; therefore, her woes about the subspace blessing didn’t go unnoticed by Admin Dante during their conversation.

However, the man was keen enough to avoid the subject as well, just like how the powerful lady didn't want to touch the subject.

But Vanna herself knew that the burden in her heart didn't just revolve around the truth about her own existence being the blessing of subspace. In fact, it had nothing to do with her own life and death.

She returned to the bedroom, closed the door, and went to the dresser to take out an ornamented ceremonial dagger from the drawer.

This was a sacred relic of the Storm Church and a gift personally blessed and given to her by Bishop Valentine after the baptism.

This relic symbolizes the beginning of her faith for Gomona, the Storm Goddess.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 222

Chapter 222 “Shaken”

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As usual, Vanna calmed down and silently recited the sacred passage from the Storm Codex in her heart. Then she took out a half-burned candle inscribed with runes from the drawer and placed it at the side before lighting it.

A small bright flame jumped into life on the tip of the wick, and the calming aroma slowly spread around the room with the volatile compound of the oil it's made of. Vanna wasted no time breathing in the smell, allowing the dagger blade to slit a small opening in her hand.

The blood soaked into the fine lines inscribed on the dagger due to this, as if absorbed by whatever mystical power this object wielded. There's a brief sting from the gesture, but that's only for a few seconds before the goddess's blessing healed the lady's wound.

She stared down at the ritual dagger, not moving an inch. Vanna knew her indecision was silly when performing a ritual, but she wanted to see for herself it was not her illusion that it's working. So, once done and confirmed it's going as planned, she placed the blook-soaked dagger over the flame and allowed it to burn.

“Please hear, Goddess of the Storm, Gospel of the Deep Sea, Maiden of the Quiet Sea, hear me, your faithful follower needs guidance...”

The flames crackled, and the blood on the dagger suddenly ignited with unsettled sparks- the signal that the channel had established.

Using blood as a guide, a saint could create a communication line with the higher realms. In a way, this could even be seen as talking directly to the gods.

The gentle battering of the waves sounded in her ears as she expected. Then Vanna felt the air around her becoming moist, followed by a saltiness hitting her nose before the entire scene changed around the room.

The familiar bedroom disappeared, and the surroundings turned into an endless body of water. It's faintly glowing from beneath the surface, and hundreds of mysterious light sources continuously swam around like one could imagine a swarm of jellyfish carrying out their life cycle.

But that's not what she's here for. Before long, Vanna had noticed the blurry image of a lady coming into existence within the waters.

From the initial impression, it looks like a lady in a long white dress with numerous hazy shadows spreading out behind her in multiple directions. Vanna couldn't see past the veiled face, but there was no doubt in her heart that this was the avatar of the storm goddess. It's a small sliver of the Gomona's power, and it's been condensed into human form so a mortal like Vanna could seek an audience during troubled times.

Unexpectedly, despite being the one to initiate a ritual to seek help, it was the goddess's avatar who initiated the desire to speak – not verbally, but an urging directly into the mind of the inquisitor's head.

"I..." Vanna slightly hesitated before seemingly making up her mind to speak bluntly, "I have survived to this day because of subspace. Why did you choose me as a saint and send me your blessings knowing this?"

The hazy and blurry avatar did not move, but Vanna did not dare to force a reply. She knows that although what she saw was only a projection, this projection was indeed a direct link to Gomona. Her very question was a risk, an offense to the goddess.

Eventually, after an unknown amount of time in this spatial dimension, an idea suddenly entered the inquisitor's brain – similar to an implant.

“..... It makes no difference...”

“It makes no difference?” Vanna was stunned. This confusing answer was even more challenging to understand than obscure and broken prophecies given to the faithful. She instinctively felt there should be some other “context” in this answer, but she failed to understand the information and could not find the next clue. Finally, out of desire and reflex, she asked: “What makes no difference? I don’t understand why you would choose someone like me knowing I’m tainted by subspace...”

However, Vanna’s sentence didn’t get to finish before the illusions around her started to warp and twist violently, followed closely by a different soft bright light coming up from the depths of the sea. It pulsated like a beating heart, causing the goddess’s avatar to weaken to the point of collapse. This new entry pushed the connection between the two out; however, Vanna did catch a few broken words before then: “Time is limited... Soon... Critical...”

The connection completely broke after the last word.

Vanna found herself rudely thrown back to the real world, heart pounding and breathing suffocating as she convulsed for air. She looked around, finding the illusions gone with the dagger she assumed was still in her hand gone, dropped to the floor without her knowledge. The only undisturbed thing was the runed candle still quietly burning at the table, the flames beating restlessly.

After an unknown amount of time, Vanna’s gaze finally withdrew from the candle flame, and she picked up the dropped dagger and slowly put it back in the drawer.

Her mind was swirling with the only information that had entered her mind during that brief exchange.

“There is no difference” and “time is limited, about to hit critical”.

She still couldn’t understand what the former meant. As for the latter... it had a clearer meaning, but what exactly was about to hit critical that’s still

out of her grasp.

Is the goddess telling me that something major is about to happen? Are you warning me that I have limited time to prepare for something important? What does critical mean? What's critical? Another crisis? Another reality invasion-level disaster?

Is it related to the crisis that Pland just lived through?

This prayer did not calm Vanna's mood and caused her to become even more unsettled than during the day.

But suddenly, a strange color appeared in the afterglow of the corner of her eye, making her chaotic thoughts stop instantly.

The flame jumping on the runed candle had turned green at some point.

In the next second, she jerked, looked up at her dresser's oval mirror, and met eye-to-eye with Captain Duncan.

“Are you alright?” The gloomy and majestic figure spoke and inquired.

“It’s you?!” Vanna jumped and distanced herself from the mirror, “You disrupted my ritual just now?”

“Ritual? I think you misunderstood,” Duncan shook his head, “I suddenly sensed your aura growing extremely chaotic. That’s why I came to check on the situation. I might’ve missed some enemy hidden in the city without realizing it. It seems I’ve been reckless to come unannounced.”

Sensing my aura... that's why he came to check?

Question marks popped up over Vanna’s head due to her doubt regarding the answer and the meaning behind certain words. If she didn’t know better, the lady might’ve assumed the ghostly captain was actually a pervert and stalking her in bed.

“Don’t worry, you’re still in the real world,” Duncan said casually, “so I strongly recommend that you don’t jump chop me like the last time. You’re

really going to make a mess of your room.”

“..... I’m not a brute who only knows how to jump,” Vanna suddenly found communicating with this ghost captain was really tiring. The other party’s words and deeds would always exceed the records in the archives, and whenever he appeared, it would always catch her off guard like now. It’s becoming exhausting. “What else are you planning besides coming to check? I thought... you’ve left completely.”

Duncan in the mirror frowned as if a little troubled by the overly wary and hostile attitude of the young inquisitor in front of him: “You can relax a little, preferably a little more polite too. I have indeed left, but the distance in time and space does not mean much to me. Besides, I just protected your city-state. Don’t you think you should at least say thank you?”

Vanna stared intently at the ghost captain, and after a few seconds of deliberation, she suddenly took a step forward and actually lowered her head: “Thank you very much for your help. At least in this matter, Pland owes you a huge debt.”

This blunt thank you exceeded Duncan’s expectations. He thought this girl’s brain would be as solid as her muscles, but she’s apparently more than just bronze: “It’s fine... No need to be so serious. I was just mentioning it.”

“We may have different positions, but your act of sheltering Pland cannot be denied,” Vanna raised her head with a serious expression. “Countless people have survived the disaster today. For that, I must thank you as the inquisitor out of duty.”

She paused and then spoke with a straight face: “But this does not mean I have relaxed my guard against you and the Vanished. We still can’t determine what your purpose is for the civilized world... At least until I confirm this, I’m all...”

“Okay, I see what you mean,” Duncan interrupted Vanna, who smiled at the young inquisitor like an amused senior. The other party’s words and attitude were far from polite, but this kind of overly straight personality was also

not dislikable, “Then let’s speak about something else… You seem to be in trouble?”

Vanna met Duncan’s gaze and took a few seconds before taking a small breath: “Sorry, it has nothing to do with you.”

“..... Irrelevant, but I’m curious,” Duncan said lightly, “whether you want to admit it or not, you can’t dispel the imprint I’ve left on you. Vanna, I can sense your bad state at the moment. Maybe I can help you.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 223

Chapter 223 “Enhance Understanding”

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To be fair, Duncan was being genuinely sincere on this topic. He admired the tough-willed and straightforward inquisitor, admired her performance in that disaster, and even if he put aside this admiration, he cherished Vanna's existence as his special “node”.

If there's not a sufficient level of coincidence, placing such a “node” among the top brass of the church wouldn't be an easy task, let alone forming the most basic level of friendship with them.

In addition, Vanna's straightforwardness determined that she wouldn't deny Duncan's merits in sheltering Pland. He couldn't say for certain about others in the church who are wholeheartedly against heretics and the likes.

Of course, Duncan's sincerity still remained more or less scary to others on the receiving end, that much he knew.

Imagine an unbreakable connection similar to a curse, a subspatial shadow that could invade one's mind at will, a superior being powerful enough to reverse the pollution of history but with an unclear purpose. If it weren't for Vanna's indomitable will, the latter would've had a mental breakdown several times over by now.

“..... What exactly do you want?” Vanna took a small breath, reluctant to show any form of weakness despite already swaying inwardly. “And don't say ‘make some fries’ anymore... I want to hear something serious.”

“..... Actually, ‘making fries’ is serious,” Duncan looked helpless, “and a lot of ketchup if you can.”

Vanna: “...?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m improving the food situation on my ship,” Duncan suddenly bellowed a hearty laugh because none of Vanna’s reactions exceeded his expectations. Then he strolled around in the mirror to seek a comfortable spot for sitting. “Vanna, what do you think a captain like me usually does on my off time?”

“What you usually do?” Vanna blinked in bafflement. Unknowingly, the conversation had shifted from a tense atmosphere to one shared between two friends on an afternoon. “I... never thought about it...”

“Yes, you haven’t thought about it. Nobody ever thinks about these problems. Who would? I’m the infamous ghost captain that has committed heinous acts of subverting the mortal world, right?” Duncan said, spreading his hands helplessly.

“I have a very, very big ship to take care of, and there are a lot of headaches on that ship. My ‘crew’ often makes a mess, and every time I look around, they’re either running around and causing trouble or giving me a headache. But my biggest problem isn’t that; it’s my water supply. I’m recently considering installing a boiler aboard. Do you have any recommendations?”

“I don’t know much about boilers... Wait, no, this isn’t right!” Vanna subconsciously cried out, her voice and eyes showing shock and disbelief. Then, for a brief second, she realized how ridiculous the conversation had gotten. “Why are you suddenly telling me this? And... uhh, are you serious?”

Duncan adjusted his posture and met the inquisitor’s eyes, his expression serious: “Vanna, have you noticed – I am not as scary as you think? The unknown brings fear, and now, you are starting to know more about me.”

Vanna didn’t comment because she struggled to keep up with the captain’s rhythm.

But after a moment of silence, she slowly exhaled and tried to change the subject: "... By taking the sun fragment, you have also cleared another hidden danger in the city-state of Pland. I should express my gratitude for this."

The corners of Duncan's mouth quivered imperceptibly: "... There's no need for thanks. I have a hobby of collecting."

But what he actually wanted to say was that he just sent the sun fragment back to Pland. Although Nina was initially excited to spend the night on the ship, she soon discovered that she couldn't sleep right without being in her own bed...

Naturally, Duncan was afraid that when he said this, the person on the opposite side would do a jump chop...

Vanna didn't notice the instantaneous change in the other party's expression; instead, she just nodded slightly and continued: "Now that order in the city-state has gradually been restored, the aftermath of the pollution caused by the Enders has completely subsided. Those cultists who summoned the Black Sun... as they wished, became firewood for their own cause. I hope you are satisfied with this result."

"Good enough, but they'll pop up sooner or later again anyway," Duncan said casually, "heretical worshippers are the byproduct of evil gods, and as long as those 'roots' are not eliminated, cultists are going to continuously sprout up."

Vanna listened thoughtfully to everything Duncan said, causing her expression to grow curious: "It sounds like... you have a bad relationship with those heretical worshippers."

"You want intelligence?" Duncan beamed a smirk, "I get it. This is a rare opportunity to know how 'Captain Duncan' and the Vanished operated after nearly a century. But it's okay; you can be blunt and ask me."

Vanna was a little speechless there, and her expression visibly flustered with embarrassment at being caught.

“I don’t like those cultists, both Suntists and Enders. As for the annihilators who worship the Nether Lord… I don’t have many details, but most should be crazy individuals who annoy me.” Duncan spread his hands and shrugged, “So, you can directly report this matter to those above you. Just say that the Vanished and the three major cults are enemies, and if conditions permit, Captain Duncan will happily destroy any cultist who appears before him. This information should be useful.”

“…… Thank you for answering.” Vanna hesitated but nodded with a rather heavy note.

“Is there anything else you want to know?” Duncan asked again.

Vanna pursed her lips.

Of course there were more, but she didn’t know if it was the right choice to ask the ghost captain about her faith wavering and the truth about subspace.

Ultimately, she abstained from touching the topic of her wavering and focused on questions related to subspace: “… I’m wondering if subspace will respond to mortal wishes, and at what cost does one need to pay to learn this information.”

Vanna specifically mentioned the “cost” at the end because she knew very well how grave the topic truly was. She’s not afraid to pay the price.

“Don’t be so nervous because there is no cost.” Duncan laughed wildly in the mirror, “Unlike what everyone thinks, I’m not familiar with the subject either.”

Vanna: “… Wah?”

“Why does everyone think I will know a lot about the secrets of subspace?” Duncan rubbed his forehead a little helplessly, “It’s true I’ve been to that place, but I’m not doing population research in subspace either. Would you know everyone who lives in your neighborhood block?”

Vanna nodded: “I do.”

Duncan: “...”

Vanna quickly realized her folly and showed a flushed face, this time deeper and redder like a child. “Of course, there may be some that I’m less familiar with... Uhh, I see what you mean.”

“Although I can’t answer your question, I can see that this question is related to your current bad state.” Duncan resumed his serious voice, “Something from subspace is bothering you?”

Vanna only stared at the ghost captain in the mirror, her face saying it all without words.

“I mean, besides me...” Duncan quickly added.

“I don’t know.” Vanna shook her head and opened her mouth again as if she wanted to say something, only to stop at the last second.

“It’s fine. It seems that you still have some concerns. I can understand why,” Duncan didn’t care and shrugged, “but if something in subspace bothers you, you can ask me for help. At least in this area, I can help you.”

Vanna fell silent, and after nearly ten seconds, she suddenly broke the silence: “Why?”

“You’re asking why I’m willing to help you?” Duncan’s voice sounded from the mirror, still majestic and even a little gloomy to Vanna, but it seemed more gentle and sincere at the moment, “Maybe it’s because I fought alongside Pland. Vanna, I admire your fortitude and bravery.”

The figure in the mirror stood up, indicating the ghost captain was ready to leave.

This brought a wave of relief to Vanna. She couldn’t tell whether she was vigilant and cautious or simply nervous, but the other party’s intention to leave lifted a burden off her shoulder.

But when Duncan’s figure was about to completely dissipate from the mirror, she seemed to remember something else and spoke up: “Wait, there

is one more thing.”

Duncan turned his face slightly: “Huh?”

“In the future...” Vanna froze a little, organizing her language again before speaking with a slight hesitation, “I mean, if you’re still going to ‘show up’ in the future, can you not always be so sudden...”

Duncan didn’t respond, his face shrouded in shadows deep within the mirror, leaving the lady unable to make out his expression.

After a few seconds, Vanna heard the other person’s voice come into her ears: “Next time, I will knock on the door.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 224

Chapter 224 “The Captain Never Left”

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The figure in the mirror really left without doing anything extraneous as he said at the beginning – he just came to check on the situation.

Vanna stared at the mirror with a vigilant face for a while longer before finally letting herself deflate. Then immediately afterward, she fell into a short period of self-reflection and paranoia.

The paranoia was due to her professional habit as the inquisitor – it’s tough for her to trust a “person” who has been carrying out a century-long string of horror legends. As for self-reflection, that’s even simpler. Unlike her usual sharp demeanor regarding the supernatural, she had gradually weakened her vigilance in communication with the infamous ghost captain. This was an undeserved sign of weakness; she didn’t like it since it shouldn’t be happening to her.

At the end of it, Vanna could only give herself a slap to get out of this slump.

In any case, the city has survived, and she would inform Bishop Valentine about the events of this evening’s interaction by tomorrow morning. Also, the part about her own wavering faith...

The young inquisitor sighed, fading into the darkness after extinguishing the light in her bedroom.

.....

On the second floor of the antique shop in the lower city, Duncan withdrew his gaze towards the main cathedral and instead shifted it toward the city's night scene.

He didn't know what had happened to Vanna, but it was clear that the young inquisitor's mental state had just experienced a brief and dangerous shakeup. This unstableness even directly alerted his awareness, forcing him to make a projection directly into the real world to see what was happening.

Looking back at things now, the aura he felt on Vanna before was faintly familiar – the aura had been hidden in the depths of her spirit. If he would describe it, the sensation would be like the bottom of the Vanished... the area where he confronted the weird, chaotic light show and that creepy door. Again, it's the sensation of engaging subspace.

Then there's the question Vanna asked him at the end of the conversation, so it's very possible she's being harassed by something related to subspace.

Duncan's fingers unconsciously tapped the windowsill, guessing the truth with the clues he concluded.

Unlike before, he had strengthened his imprint on the other party. This force should be able to help the lady resist the erosion that might arise, but the crux of the question was, why did a hint of subspace suddenly appear on Vanna, a high-level saint?

Duncan's thoughts began to wander, and he suddenly recalled another detail or "knowledge" he had learned a while back. Under certain circumstances, the souls of believers in the four gods are more likely to be eroded by subspace than mortals, and their souls will even directly generate a rift connecting the real dimension to subspace. For example, the chapel on the sixth block was a perfect example, where the presiding nun became a catalyst for the evil creatures within the void.

Could something similar happen to Vanna? If so, what is behind this counter-intuitive phenomenon?

After a minute of contemplation, Duncan exhaled and turned away from the window. In any case, he should pay more attention to this special “node” in the future. Currently, Vanna still lacks trust in him, meaning she wouldn’t take the initiative to tell him any of her secrets.

Along the way back to his own bedroom, Duncan unexpectedly heard the giggling voices of two young girls coming from the next room over – Nina and Shirley.

Despite returning to the city-state from the Vanished, they seemed rather excited, especially Nina.

The child didn’t seem to have suffered any psychological trauma by visiting the eerie ghost ship, nor did she have any apprehension about the future. In fact, Nina was as cheerful as ever to the point it’s disturbing.

Is it the influence of sun fragment? Or is it because she has a strong receptive personality?

Duncan mused, discovering some unexpected “talent” of Nina’s.

.....

As night fell, the cold, pale glow of the rift that was the World’s Creation hanging overhead eventually blanketed the Vanished’s deck.

“Captain! Where are we going next?” Alice, in her rush, came barging up to the bridge.

“There is no destination for now, so let’s leave the busy route between the city-states,” Duncan glanced down at the doll staring at him with those glowing purple eyes, “You seem to be in a good mood?”

“Yes, yes!” Alice nodded chirpily. No matter how elegant and noble her appearance was, it’s all been destroyed when she’s nodding cheerfully like right now. “The ship is so lively today! For the first time, I finally know what it’s like to spend time with so many people!”

“It’s not always ‘fun’ to bring people together, you know? But it’s probably a little harder for you to understand my meaning,” Duncan said casually, “plus, keep your nodding under control. You freaked the daylights out of them when your head popped off.”

“Oooh~” Alice hurriedly held her head, then got a little worried, “Then they... Won’t you stop coming because of this, right?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Don’t worry about it.”

Alice hummed a nod and then remained quiet for a few seconds before asking again, “So... will I be able to go to the city-state in the future? I didn’t even get to see the world properly this time. Things got so messy and dizzying...”

Duncan’s gaze swept over the sea before shifting it back to Alice: “Of course, tomorrow I can ask Ai to send you to the antique shop. I still need your help at the store.”

“Really?” Alice’s eyes visibly lit up with surprise, “I thought... we won’t return to the city-state for a while... you are finished with the business over there, right?”

Duncan did not answer the other party immediately; instead, he kept his mouth shut briefly before replying: “So you think I only went over to Pland because I have business there?”

Alice blinks in confusion, scratching the back of her head: “I... I don’t know.”

Duncan shook his head with a faint smile before letting go of the steering wheel.

There was a slight creak from the Vanished due to this action, and the mast’s sails tightened a little, signaling the ship had gone into a “cruising state” where Goathead took over.

“We’re just solving the trouble made by a bunch of cultists,” Duncan said casually to Alice as he stepped down from the helm and walked toward the captain’s room, “As for Pland... I believe that city-state is fated for me.”

“... As expected of being the captain, his words are so profound...” Alice mutters alone in the rear after being left behind.

Eventually, Duncan arrived back at the door of the captain’s compartment, where the words “Door of the Lost” were inscribed on the frame as always. Inhaling deeply, he calmed his spirit and pushed it open with a huff.

A hazy and distorted mist appeared promptly in front, devouring Duncan’s existence as he fell into an empty, weightless space. Then, in the next instant, he was through, back in the familiar and quiet environment of the other world.

Zhou Ming opened his eyes and surveyed his bachelor apartment.

As usual, the first thing he did when he returned was to confirm the general situation of the entire room. Everything was as he left it. Whether it was the dense fog outside the window or the string of scraps he left around the windowsills had ever been moved.

Despite knowing there was no point in doing so, he treated this series of “confirmations” as some task that had to be done.

After Zhou Ming was done, the second thing he did was to come to his desk, where he found a miniature sculpture with an appearance similar to Pland sitting quietly in place.

Exquisite and restored, every detail was vivid to the eye. In fact, he’s pretty sure every floor tile of every street had been perfectly replicated on this model. Or, to put it another way, this was the “projection” of the real Pland presented in another form within his bachelor apartment.

It’s here, as expected...

Zhou Ming exhaled softly, sat down at the table, and examined his newfound exquisite “toy”.

Compared to the “model” of the Vanished, the size of this “city-state” was obviously much more extensive but also obviously not scaled in equal proportions. From the initial assessment, it seems to fit into a separate shelf compartment as if it were specially tailored for that spot.

And, of course, no shadow of any inhabitants exists in this vivid city-state model.

It looks like the “people” living in the city-state are omitted...

Zhou Ming wondered, repeatedly examining the model before picking it up entirely and bringing it over to the shelf with both hands. Once done with putting it away, he took two steps back and silently admired his new collection.

The Vanished has moved away from Pland, but the captain never left his precious city-state.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 225

Chapter 225 “The Late Sunrise”

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After putting away his new “collection”, Zhou Ming did not leave the room directly as usual; instead, he sat on the chair opposite the shelf and fell into deep thought while staring at the models.

He was trying to summarize and understand what these “collections” represented.

For a long time now, this bachelor apartment and the world opposite the door were isolated from one another. Aside from the door itself, only he could pass through the two worlds.

In a sense, the “models” of the Vanished and Pland that appeared in the room are equivalent to breaking this rule – they are clearly related to the world opposite the door, and their properties clearly carry “supernatural attributes”.

Supernatural attributes should not be a concept on this side...

In addition, the emergence of these two collections had a common rule he could see – they are things that have, at some point, completely burned by the ghost fire and “controlled” by his own consciousness.

Zhou Ming quietly pondered, summing up the rules little by little, and finally, he believed that “burning” and “control” should be the two necessary conditions for the emergence of these collections.

For example, the original White Oak had also been burned by the flames of the Vanished, but he didn't take the initiative to control that ship back then. To be precise, he did not exert any influence or "instructions" on the White Oak, so after the burning, the ship did not form a corresponding "model" in the room except for leaving a strong marking.

Meanwhile, he had actively controlled and purified the city-state after it had burned, effectively meeting the two requirements of producing a model on this side.

So... what use can this transformation provide me? What's the meaning behind these models and this collection?

Zhou Ming's gaze fell on Pland's "model", slightly closing his eyes to perceive what he suspected.

The breeze blowing through the port area in the southeastern parts of the island, the delicate waves battering the beach, and the rumbling noise of the steam factories in the upper city.

Then, he reopened his eyes with an understanding light.

It's as he theorized. Unlike in the past, he's now able to see and feel everything within the city-state. In essence, this model had given him the authority to control the entire island at will. The same authority as with the Vanished and its properties.

Zhou Ming rubbed his chin thoughtfully, realizing what this implied and the possibilities this included. For example, he could order all the bells to ring at will or sink into the sea at a whim. If worse, he could even tell the island to enter the spirit realm...

Zhou Ming subconsciously stopped rubbing his chin when his brainstorming reached this point. Reason? He just got another idea, a very terrifying idea.

What if I ordered the city-state to sink into subspace?

Zhou Ming's eyes locked in place, shuddering at himself for even having such evil thoughts.

Make no mistake, he wouldn't actively send an entire city into a plane of existence that's feared even by demons. But what if? Let's say he did it by accident. At a whim? A careless remark if he somehow got drunk? A person without control wouldn't know what they're doing!

Zhou Ming started to gasp heavily, finding it hard to breathe at the immense authority he suddenly found himself with. Then, with wobbly legs, he slowly stood up from the chair and stared at the two models on his shelf with a look of fear and awe.

It's no wonder the world feared the Vanished. How can any single person wield such power?

Zhou Ming took one last deep look at his collection, gripped the desk's corner, and swung around. He needed to get away from this suffocating room and calm himself.

Back over in the mapping room of the captain's room, Goathead was still controlling the vessel when he overheard the movement from the forbidden door. Creaking its head in that direction, the wooden sculpture saw the familiar figure of Duncan appearing: "Ah! The great captain is back for his loyal first mate! Your exploits are known to everyone, and your great power makes the Boundless Sea..."

Duncan did not say anything; instead, he sat down at the mapping table and silently stared at the poor sculpture.

This eerie awkwardness actually managed to shut Goathead up for a bit. However, a blabbermouth will always be a blabbermouth. After a minute of calm, he couldn't resist and asked: "Um... Captain, aren't you going to tell me to 'shut up' like usual?"

Duncan continued to look indifferent: "I suddenly got an idea: how long can you babble for if I don't."

Goathead immediately got all energetic when he heard this and ignored the mocking undertone of Duncan's words: "Then you've come to the right place. Your loyal first mate is well-versed in the various recipes of the Boundless Sea. I can go from day to night just on this one topic if you like, and if you are interested, I can also classify the one hundred and thirty-seven butter biscuits..."

"Okay, shut up," Duncan quickly interrupted the other party, shaking his head helplessly, "I thought you would at least have the concept of shame."

Goathead shook its head, creating a crunching sound around the neck as a result. Its dark face had now completely locked onto Duncan's with those obsidian bead eyes: "Captain, you seem to have something on your mind? We've just accomplished an unprecedented feat. What else can affect your mood?"

"An unprecedented feat," Duncan muttered softly, then shook his head. "You can feel it too, right? The connection between Pland and the Vanished now."

"Of course!" Goathead immediately replied, not forgetting to tout about the feat, "I never thought there would be such a day – your greatness is astounding, and your hunt this time is an entire city! So what's next? Are we going to Lunsa first or Cold Port? Or Frost is good too..."

Duncan waved his hand, silencing the wooden sculpture.

"I'm not interested in 'hunting' for the time being. I only want to tell you that I don't have the energy to continuously stare at such a large place. If you sense something that shouldn't be in that city, warn me and provide me with the details. Of course, your main job is still to man the ship."

"Gladly!" Goathead immediately said, "This is a breeze for me, and I will definitely live up to your expectations..."

Duncan nodded slightly, then swept his gaze over the wall and the window port.

Before he knew it, the night had passed.

After a few seconds, Duncan suddenly jerked around: “What time is it!?”

Goathead was startled, unsure of why the captain was acting out: “It should be... morning. It’s time for the sun to rise.”

“..... The sun hasn’t risen yet,” Duncan said in a deep voice, his expression unusually serious. Then he turned his head sharply and stared at the ticking clock hanging on the wall, “... Sunrise should’ve happened fourteen minutes ago.”

Goathead momentarily fell into silence as Duncan stared daggers at the mechanical device that might’ve been misaligned without his knowledge.

The “sun” of this world, the super vision 001, rose and set with a precision unseen in any other object of this world. As far as Duncan knew, this had never changed since he came to this weird and dangerous world. Yet, today’s sun did not rise in time...

Ordinary people may not have noticed this change, but Duncan definitely did, and this disturbed him...

“Perhaps... we only need to wait a while...” Goathead voiced his opinion then, seemingly apprehensive about the subject. “You see, the weather at sea is always elusive. Maybe something had blocked it...”

Duncan ignored what Goathead was saying. He was still looking at the clock, but in the next second, a subtle golden light appeared at the edge of his field of vision – it was coming through the porthole.

He promptly swung around, walked up to the round window, and pushed it open to stare off into the distance.

The sun has risen, and the huge light body bound by the double runed ring gradually rose into the sky as usual, dispelling the cold and pale atmosphere left by the rift during the night.

Today’s sunrise is fifteen minutes later than usual.

Why?

Is it the aftermath of Pland's disaster? Or is it related to the Creeping Sun Wheel? Worse, related to Nina's awakening and control?

Duncan returned to the table and grew cranky at whatever was eluding his knowledge. He knew these emotions were uncalled for, but after experiencing the historical pollution of Pland, he couldn't just ignore a sign like this. It's definitely a prelude to something bigger, but what...

“Maybe it’s just the weather at sea. You see? Isn’t the sun still rising?” Goathead chimed in from the side after noticing the poor mood of the captain, “Sometimes a wide area of dense fog can refract the light, resulting in...”

“The sun is also fifteen minutes late in Pland,” Duncan interrupted Goathead, but softer in his voice since he knew he was being harsh. “It’s sunny over there, and the sea is calm. The late part isn’t the light, but the sun itself.”

“Damn it...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 226

Chapter 226 “The Wavering Faith”

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Hurried footsteps broke the tranquility in the cathedral. Bishop Valentine, who was assigning affairs to the priests at the side, raised his head and saw Vanna walking over.

“I thought you would rest at home for two more days.” The head bishop waved his hand to have the assistants and attendants leave, giving the two room to speak.

“Unfortunately, it seems that I don’t have this spare time,” Vanna shook her head with a slightly serious expression. “What happened? I saw many priests running about, and I heard that a group of ascetic priests was sent into the stargazing well... Does it have anything to do with today’s sunrise?”

“Yes,” Valentine nodded, his expression looking solemn, “today’s sunrise is fifteen minutes later than usual—and it was not due to abnormal weather conditions. I received reports from other city-states and sea contacts confirming this fact through the psionic communication channel. Like us, their side also observed the abnormal sunrise.”

“This world has been illuminated by the ‘World Creation’ for fifteen more minutes...” Vanna frowned slightly, “Are there any reports of damage?”

“No, just postponement of dawn is not a problem. Fifteen minutes of more nighttime is still within the redundant range of the city-state’s safety measures,” the old bishop said. “The real disturbing part is that the same

phenomenon is observed worldwide, which shows that the problem is not with the land surface or the sea.”

“The operation of Vision 001 itself has changed.” Vanna knew what the old bishop was worried about, “Is there no word from the Nameless King yet?”

Valentine shook his head slightly.

“There is no movement from the tomb, so this may just be a minor ‘change’. I’m terrified of what the people will do when they find out. At the moment, most aren’t aware of this fact, and those few that did notice aren’t making a fuss yet. Until we can be certain the sun is back to normal, we can’t rest.”

After a minute of thought, Vanna finally asked, “So what measures have you taken thus far?”

“Nothing much. Aside from informing City Hall and asking them to pen a reassuring notice and guideline for the public when news breaks, we are going to keep monitoring Vision 001. It’s not a good idea to issue an overly positive announcement after experiencing a disaster of this magnitude. People will think we’re lying and trying to cover up the truth.”

Vanna silently listened to the old bishop’s analysis and didn’t interject anything. As an inquisitor who devoted most of her energy to combat missions, she knew she was not a professional in these arrangements.

“Do you have something on your mind?” Valentine asked with a worried face after noticing the lack of energy from the lady.

“I’m only just a little emotional,” Vanna sighed softly and shook her head. “Every time there is a great disaster, the more I’m aware of how fragile the world we live in today is… The city-states, the churches, the fleet, everything we are proud of, seem to be built on a thin, fragile layer of ice. Any crack not discovered in time will cause our world to disappear…”

“That’s why we’re always vigilant and tenacious,” Valentine said quietly, staring into the young inquisitor’s eyes, “Vanna, you rarely speak like

this... What happened?"

Vanna fell silent again, seemingly in turmoil over what to say: "There are two things, the first one... I saw 'Captain Duncan' again yesterday."

Valentine's eyes were initially hard and serious, but they softened as he sighed: "Actually, it is expected." He paused, then continued explaining why, "We still haven't done anything about the mark that ghost captain left on you. Even now, the entire city-state of Pland may have established a connection with that captain. I knew it was just a matter of time before he came to you again. What did he tell you this time?"

"..... Mostly small talks," Vanna said in a slightly strange tone.

"..... Small talks?" This time Valentine finally raised his eyebrows due to the unexpected answer, "Are you saying that the captain of the Vanished, the shadow who returned from subspace, the 'Duncan' who reversed the pollution of history and took away the sun fragment, specifically found you just for a chat?"

"I knew you would react this way. I couldn't believe it either. Seriously, I would have believed him if he had told me he planned to conquer the world. But..." Vanna heaved a long sigh, and over the next ten minutes, she went over the conversation she had with Duncan last night.

Valentine rubbed his forehead as he listened to Vanna's report. The old bishop, who had never faltered in the face of the doomsday crisis, finally couldn't conceal the exhaustion and distress he felt inside.

But after a brief look of confusion, he raised his head and said in a somewhat complicated tone: "Vanna, actually, I have been thinking about a problem since last night."

"What problem?"

"..... You had two direct exchanges with Captain Duncan. In your opinion, that 'ghost captain'... does he feel like an invader from subspace?"

“You... what do you mean?” Vanna’s face got weird as she grew cautious, “It is a definite truth that the Vanished fell into subspace and returned...”

“I’m not denying that fact or questioning it. However, don’t you find it odd? In your own opinion, how should a person that has somehow returned from subspace behave? Are they supposed to be sane and able to converse with you like a sensible individual?”

This time, Vanna hesitated as if unable to give an answer to the posed questions. “Judging by past cases and basic knowledge of what subspace does to those people... that’s impossible.”

“That’s right, normally it’s impossible to converse with those lost to subspace. The pollution is too severe and cannot be saved.” Bishop Valentine nodded, “To us mortals, subspace is deadly poisonous, capable of polluting any blessing or protection provided by the gods. Yet, here we are, a ghost captain that’s been to and back from subspace conversing with you... if we apply some simple logic to the matter, perhaps...”

“You mean... that ‘Captain Duncan’ has most likely regained his humanity?”

“Not regain, taken back...” Bishop Valentine corrected the lady, “In the early records, there are clear reports of the indiscriminate attacks carried out by the Vanished following its sighting. Captain Duncan back then had clearly fallen into madness.”

Vanna mused over the information, and the more she mused, the more incredulous her expression became: “Is this possible? After being completely taken by subspace... one can still retrieve their humanity?”

“How else are we supposed to explain Captain Duncan’s current state? That person coming to have a small chat is not some small feat.” Bishop Valentine softly interrupted Vanna to remind her about a critical fact, “Don’t forget about that ‘law of zero’.”

Vanna made a stunned face, then got it: “There will always be anomalies and visions that do not conform to the regular parameters...”

A long silence fell over this great hall of the cathedral, leaving the two high-ranking clerics to mull over their next course of action. Eventually, it was Valentine who broke the air: “But we still can’t treat the Vanished and its captain as harmless on this basis alone, you understand?”

“In the end, he still went into subspace and came back. Regardless of him taking back his humanity, it’s difficult to say he wouldn’t suddenly go berserk one day on us mortals.”

“In addition, we can’t just make our own judgments on this matter. We must report all this to the Grand Storm Cathedral out at sea. Then, her Majesty the Pope will decide on what to do next.”

Vanna’s posture straightened to attention as she nodded solemnly in agreement: “Of course, I am very clear about this.”

Then she paused as her expression became a little strange again: “You know, it’s kind of weird knowing we’re discussing this topic within the sacred buildings of the church… If it was in the past, I would probably define myself as a heretic by now.”

Valentine sighed noncommittally, “You just said there are two things to report. Besides meeting that ghost captain, what is the second thing?”

This time, Vanna fell into an even longer silence, seemingly tied inside as to whether or not she should say this part. Eventually, the lady summoned up the courage and gazed at the goddess’s statue: “I… should repent…”

“Repent?” Valentine looked at her in surprise, “Why are you repenting?”

“I was shaken in my belief. I couldn’t stop my wavering.” Vanna took a deep breath and confessed dryly, “After that fire, I questioned my faith and if I should believe in her…”

She spoke out about her doubts and blamed the goddess for not doing more to save them.

On the other hand, Valentine didn't comment and simply stood there for a good while, which in turn roused an odd look from Vanna.

"Vanna, if you came to me to repent... then where should I go to repent?"

A hint of surprise finally appeared in Vanna's eyes.

"You are one, and I am the second. We're both wavering followers of the faith here." After that confession, the old bishop suddenly got older as if years had been tacked onto his skin. "Vanna, can you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"..... The goddess is still blessing us."

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 227

Chapter 227 “Faith Remains”

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There are usually two points at which a devout waver. The first when questioning their beliefs, and the second when they questioned their faith and the gods still blessed them with power.

Right now, a densely overlapping static noise had begun to ring within Vanna’s mind. Like a distant recorder in disrepair, the inquisitor no longer accepted the goddess’s message without questioning them. For example, the weird words she received during the ritual in her room. She’s wondering what they meant at the moment, or were they even words to begin with. The more she thought about it, the more pronounced the static noise in her head became, making it difficult for her to concentrate.

Then suddenly, all the noise snapped away, allowing her to escape that trance.

“Are you okay?” The old bishop asked with concern and worry after seeing his peer in a daze.

“I think so...” Vanna tapped her forehead lightly and then looked at the elder with some strangeness, “You too...”

“When the last bell rang, I faltered... There is nothing to hide; after all, I do not have the immaculate will of those saints who have been installed in the temple,” Valentine shook his head and said calmly to Vanna. “I wondered why the pollution and penetration of those Ender managed to reach such an extent, why the shelter of the cathedral still cannot stop the sacrifices of

those Suntists, why the goddess has not warned us even once after the crisis spread for more than ten years...”

He listed his woes, then turned around and stared quietly at the statue of Gomona. It’s as cold and quiet as ever despite the divine glow coming down from the ceiling glass.

“When I woke up again, I was ashamed. I knew I had made the biggest mistake in the Storm Codex, using the gods’ protection as an omnipotent medicine, thus shaking my will. But even so, these doubts still took root within me.”

“..... The enemy has infiltrated and broken through the barrier from within. They planned this for many years, making this sneak attack difficult to resist,” Vanna calmly countered after a moment of silence. “Heresy will always take advantage of an opening, but that does not mean the authority of the goddess can be easily overthrown.”

“I understand this truth,” Valentine laughed, “that’s why I’m still faithful even if I wavered a little. Because the goddess’s blessing is still sheltering our world. We know this, and we know their love is real, but... on top of that, I have some extra thoughts.”

“Questioning is heresy, Bishop Valentine,” said Vanna with a serious look. But then sighed as if to herself, “The same is true for me.”

“Then consider this a test upon us,” Valentine said softly.

Vanna added nothing more, only stepping over to stare at the statue and praying with her peer.

But the tranquility here didn’t last for long. A series of footsteps had entered the great hall only minutes later, causing Vanna to look back at the source, finding a middle-aged priest in civilian robes walking over.

“Head Bishop, this is the report you wanted.” The person quickly handed some sort of document to Valentine.

Nodding to give his thanks, the old bishop took the document, and after quickly flipping through a few pages, the expression on his face became visibly weirder.

“What’s that?” Vanna grew slightly intrigued and asked, “What is written on it?”

“..... It is an initial investigation of the current events after what happened to the city. The civil department sent it over from City Hall.” Valentine frowned after explaining, seemingly unsure of what to make of it. “See for yourself.”

Vanna took the document and warily read the title. Immediately, she understood why her peer would make such a face. The preliminary damage report has all been included in this document. Everything had been reset to the moment before the disaster struck, the only exception being a select few merchants near the docks.

“..... There are merchants in the dock area reporting a large number of potatoes and fries have mysteriously disappeared from their stocks. There are also reports of ketchup losses...” The young inquisitor raised her head with a wooden expression at Valentine, who also had a wooden expression in return, “... Serious?”

“How about you personally lead the team over and ask?” The corners of Valentine’s mouth twitched, “Theoretically, no one would dare falsify such a report.”

Vanna held the document in her hand and remained quiet for a good while. Finally, she heaved a long sigh and said: “Why did this kind of content appear on such a serious report...”

Valentine remained unemotional: “A whole squadron of guardians have been monitoring the fries at the pier. What is their opinion?”

Vanna: “...”

“..... All in all, the ‘thing’ mentioned in the report is the only known loss in the city-state thus far.” Valentine sighed and then hesitated again before looking into Vanna’s eyes, “If not, why don’t you ask him directly next time you meet?”

Vanna was stunned: “Ask? Ask who?”

“..... You tell me?”

Vanna: “...”

After a while, the young inquisitor finally couldn’t help but rub her forehead as a throbbing pain struck: “I feel like my thoughts are getting more and more difficult to sort. Are you sure we should be discussing such matters here?”

“I don’t know. At least I can’t connect this to anything other than him,” Valentine grimaced.

Suddenly, another priest had barged in through the front gate, rushing over with a frantic face.

“Head Bishop! Inquisitor! News from the port area...”

“It’s okay. We already know about the fries, so there’s no need to report it twice!” Vanna quickly shut the guy down, thinking it’s a repeat of the document when she heard the word “port”.

“..... French fries?” The priest was a little stunned as he glanced around, unsure of what she meant. “What fries?”

“Ah... You’re not here to report about the fries?” Vanna awkwardly coughed after realizing she had jumped the gun. “I thought it was another report about... Never mind, please go on. What’s the matter with the port area?”

The priest who came to report nodded and looked serious: “There is news from the port area that the Sea Mist is applying to enter the harbor. Tyrian

Abnomar requests contact with the church as soon as possible. He brings news related to the Vanished.”

Vanna immediately burst into an earth-shattering coughing fit, catching the unaware priest by surprise as he jumped back from the sudden movement.

“Inquisitor...?”

“I’m okay,” it took Vanna a long while to finally get herself under control. Then, as if to play off her antics, she huffed and puffed up her chest to look imposing and strong in order to hide the embarrassment inside. “The Sea Mist? I know we did send a letter to its owner, but we never got a reply...”

“The Sea Mist did come, and it seems to have arrived in the surrounding waters before the disaster struck,” the priest nodded and explained what he knew. “According to the Sea Mist’s message, they encountered the Vanished in the eastern waters, where a vicious batter broke out. As a result, they suffered immense damage and requested docking permission for repairs.”

“A battle broke out with the Vanished?!” Try as she might, Vanna instantly lost her composure again and dropped her jaw as she turned to face Valentine, “I have to go there myself.”

“Yes, that would be good,” Valentine nodded immediately, “the Sea Mist is a special ship after all. Although it belongs to our people, the members of that ship are still likely to cause a stir on the dock. You personally lead the team to greet them. That should keep things calm.”

Vanna agreed and quickly left the cathedral.

The Sea Mist arrived without incident. Although a little later than expected, the huge warship, shrouded in legendary auras and fearful curses, arrived at the city-state of Pland as promised. Now, the formidable steel warship was slowly approaching the pier for mooring large ships under the instructions of the docking guide. While some people who received the news gathered near the pier to get a closer look at this legendary warship, more were showing nervous glances at the steel behemoth.

But soon, the people near the pier realized that the majestic steel warship didn't come with malicious intent but came after a vicious battle.

It was scarred, with three of the six main guns destroyed, the side of the ship dug out with holes, and the bridge damaged up to two-thirds of its body. Under such conditions, most normal ships would've sunk by now since the seeping water would've kept the hull below the waterline.

However, the Sea Mist was no ordinary warship. It was still stubbornly lugging along the sea, and there seemed to be life in its belly, constantly pumping out the seawater through its structure regardless of a pump nearby.

Soon enough, the arrival of Vanna and her team with the spiderwalkers silenced the nosy crowd.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 228

Chapter 228 “The Great Pirate Who Entered the City-State”

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The steamspider stopped in front of the trestle bridge as Vanna peered out of the machine, staring up at the legendary ship in front of her, also known as the “unsinkable battleship”.

The ship may be difficult to sink, but it was not invincible. Just like everything in this world, the ship could be bruised and battered.

It was evident to the naked eye that the Sea Mist had experienced a vicious battle... Of course, if one recalled the intact state of the Vanished when the bell tower rang back then, then compared it to the current beat-up state of the Sea Mist, it's not hard to understand how one-sided the battle must've been. Vanna didn't know much about naval warfare, but even she could tell it's a true feat for the steel ship to make it to port.

This was also because the Sea Mist used its powerful “unsinkable” ability to repair itself for an entire day.

Recalling the story of the Vanished and the cursed connection between herself and Captain Duncan, Vanna could already feel the headache coming. She rubbed her temple and jumped off the spiderwalker, then saw the springboard extending out from the Sea Mist in the distance. Several figures were already disembarking.

At the head was a one-eyed man wearing an imposing captain's uniform. With slightly curly black hair and an eye patch, his face looked similar to Duncan Abnomar. However, compared with the oppressive ghost captain,

Captain Tyrian, who was walking towards the trestle at the moment, looked quite tired and haggard.

Behind the famous pirate captain were several attendants, their complexions pale and the expressions on their faces stiff like a plastered statue. But overall, they weren't as terrifying as the many thrilling stories made them out to be.

Vanna has heard a lot of rumors about the Sea Mist and its crew – due to its nature as being part of civilization still, the stories were naturally less terrifying compared to the Vanished. And among those rumors, the most mentioned were the undead sailors under Tyrian Abnomar.

Legend has it that these sailors were all men taken when Tyrian fled Frostbite during the rebellion. Some of them were even veterans of the Vanished fleet a century earlier. They, like their own captain, had been influenced by subspace – the curse that entrenched the members of the Abnomar family also effected their followers, turning the latter into the immortal living dead.

They could not die in the dimension of reality nor enjoy the warmth of the living. All these poor souls could do was wander the world, hoping that Bartók, the God of Death, would finally allow them passage to the afterlife one day.

But that's not the only version. In other rumors, it's mentioned that these undead sailors had no attachment to the earthly world and their former compatriots. The only reason they're still around was due to the powerful oath they swore to the eldest son of the Abnomar family.

Vanna stared at the figures, watching them step onto the land of Pland, then turned towards herself under the leadership of Tyrian.

The living dead... By strict definition, are already the subjects of Bartók, the God of Death. Bartók belongs to the same camp as the other righteous gods, so these undead sailors are also allowed to set foot on the city-state's land. However, this does not mean ordinary people could accept these creepy "former compatriots", and considering these undead sailors are also

inextricably linked to the “curse” of the Abnomar family, Vanna must always keep a vigilant eye on their movements.

It's just that... what differences were there between the current Pland and the Sea Mist's undead crew?

“Greetings to you, Miss Inquisitor,” Tyrian took off his captain’s hat and slightly bowed his head as a greeting. He was surprised by Vanna’s youthful nature and tall height. Nevertheless, it doesn’t hinder his desire to show his manners to the lady, “Thank you for personally greeting us.”

“Nice to meet you, Captain Tyrian,” Vanna quickly sobered up from her mind wandering and nodded to the man in front of her, who looked no older than thirty by appearance. Out of reflex, the lady had compared the son to his father, Captain Duncan, and realized the son wasn’t as tall nor imposing as the latter. “You answered Pland’s call for help, and for that alone, we must show our gratitude.”

“But we didn’t come in handy after all.” Tyrian sighed strangely and subconsciously raised his head to glance around the port as if looking for something.

“What are you looking for?” Vanna could vaguely guess what the other party was doing so her tone was calm and casual.

“With all due respect, have you received our message before we docked?” Tyrian nervously said while his eyes rolled around the area, “We encountered the Vanished on the way. Although we tried our best to intercept it, the ship still...”

“Your father came,” Vanna sighed, “but he left yesterday.”

As soon as these words came out, the big pirate opposite of her, Captain Tyrian, immediately stood straight like a stone sculpture. Even the cold and stiff faces of the several attendants behind him trembled slightly as if hearing a horror story.

“I... I didn’t hear clearly,” it took a few seconds for Tyrian to react, looking at the young inquisitor in front of him with a ghostly expression, “Miss Inquisitor, you said that my father was here yesterday...”

He deliberately emphasized the word “father”, as if afraid Vanna would play some joke with him on this fateful issue.

“The situation is very complicated and will need some explaining,” Vanna sighed again. “The Vanished has indeed appeared, but it is very different from the situation described in the letter we originally sent you. Pland has just experienced a huge... change. Please come with me. Bishop Valentine is already waiting in the cathedral. We need to go over some urgent details, and I presume you also have countless questions that need answering.”

Feeling that all the plans he had conceived on his way had been disrupted, Tyrian appeared almost confused and dazed when following Vanna’s footsteps. Eventually, they were in front of a black steam car with the church’s insignia parked on the side of the road, a vehicle specifically prepared for them as the church’s guests.

“..... To be honest, I thought you would stop me in the pier area,” Tyrian said in a self-deprecating tone. Perhaps it’s to break the awkward atmosphere or relieve some kind of unprovoked pressure, the dreary captain actually cocked a joke for once due to his inner turmoil. “After all, under normal circumstances, the city-state authorities will reject a pirate to dock or simply prepare a noose for the pirate.”

“It’s not Frost here, and the arrest warrants from the northern city-states do not apply in Pland. Well, that is unless you commit something huge and are jointly wanted on the entire Boundless Sea one day,” Vanna said casually, spreading her hands like she didn’t care. “But until that day comes, you are just a captain who is eager to help Pland and...”

While speaking, she turned her head and glanced at the Sea Mist that still exuded a majestic aura even though it was battered and scarred.

“And seriously, even in the northern seas, who would dare bring a noose to place on your neck?”

Tyrian thought about it and laughed.

“When I land, the city-state guards would politely call me the boss of the ‘Sea Mist Ventures’ and advertise my visit as a business deal between the city-state and the Sea Mist Fleet when doubts arose. Did you know that pirates have this proverb about warrants: the small pirate will be unable to sleep when they’re wanted, and a big pirate will feel like they’re stepping on needles when they see their poster, but a top-level wanted warrant will be used as table cloths in a pub?”

The big pirate paused, then spread his hands out helplessly: “Except for Frost, I can calmly step on the land of any northern city-state at my leisure.”

Vanna raised her eyebrows: “Except for Frost?”

“..... Her Majesty Ray Nora ordered me to leave the former Frostbite Kingdom,” Tyrian retracted the smile on his face, “she never withdrew this order.”

Vanna glanced at the other party and saw that the expression on the big pirate’s face became solemn. As a smart lady, she didn’t comment on the subject, knowing there’s a history behind the man and that city-state. Instead, she stepped over to the black steam car and opened the passenger door: “Please take a seat in the car, Captain Tyrian.”

After that, she turned around and jumped on a spiderwalker next to the vehicle, leaving the captain and subordinates to enter the vehicle independently.

“Captain,” one of the attendants noticed his boss’s behavior and couldn’t help but look over curiously, “Are you alright? Just now, I felt that you were a little tense... You have never been so nervous when dealing with other famous captains or city-state officials.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but when I talk to that young inquisitor, I keep feeling an... indescribable pressure.” Tyrian did not hide what he had just felt in front of his closest subordinates and heaved a long sigh. “This feeling is completely different from when dealing with those city officials

in the past, and I never felt this strange pressure even when I brushed by the Death Temple during a cruise.”

“Was there?” The subordinate frowned suspiciously, “Why didn’t I feel it... Although the inquisitor is indeed a little tall, she does look quite powerful...”

“It’s not that type of pressure,” Tyrian shook his head, “okay, let’s drop this discussion. The power of a Saint is extremely strong. She can likely hear you from this distance.”

When the subordinate heard this, he immediately shut his mouth and nervously glanced around, afraid the lady might pop his head off for the tease.

Tyrian didn’t say much during the ride, only peering out the car window as the vehicle drove through the streets and showing him the skipping scenery.

During their childhood, he and Lucretia had stayed on this pearl of the sea for a brief while. Though that part of his life was already a century ago, he couldn’t shirk off the reminiscent emotions swirling inside. Those were some fond memories he could never get back...

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 229

Chapter 229 “Blood Compass”

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No one else disembarked from the battleship after the famous pirate captain left with his entourage, leaving the Sea Mist moored in the dock like a silent iceberg and overseeing the city-state with its imposing presence.

Of the ones to stay behind, First Mate Aiden had been left in charge since he's the most experienced of the crew.

“Those city-state policemen sure look nervous,” muttered a sailor, “are they expecting us to go ashore and plunder? I thought the officials of Pland would be better than the countrybumpkins in the north.”

Aiden didn't look back at his companion: “If they don't come forward and maintain order, you will start blabbing about them not daring to come block the road next. Seriously, if they bring out the tanks, will you dare fight them?”

“..... I'm not going. I don't want to be carried back to the deck in a bucket,” the sailor hurriedly shook his head, then glanced up toward where the spiderwalkers had left. “The captain left with them... will he be okay? That tall woman doesn't look easy to mess with. I don't think the captain can beat her...”

“We're not here to fight. We were invited to come here, do you understand?” Aiden finally shot a glance at the sailor, “And you, can you adjust your mentality. Have you forgotten the captain's usual teachings? We are now the Sea Mist Venture Capital Company – pirating is not long-lasting, and doing business brings in more money.”

“So when are we going to pirate again?”

Aiden thought for a while as a ray of sunlight reflected on his shiny bald head: “That’s obvious, when the opposite side is unwilling to do business...”

Several undead sailors nodded to that one after the other, indicating that the first mate was well-regarded among his peers. Then after several seconds of calm, another sailor with the entire half of his head sunken in muttered: “Can we go ashore and take a look? I heard in Pland you can...”

“Don’t even think about it,” Aiden interrupted the subordinate directly, “Captain ordered that none is to leave the ship without permission. Crooked dates like you lot will definitely frighten the locals to death if you go ashore. Pland is not the north; few here are acquainted with the living dead and its culture.”

“I get it now. So that’s the reason Captain only picked a few guys who looked the most normal. He needed to fit in without causing a commotion,” the sailor with half his head missing said resentfully at himself for missing a piece of the body. “Actually, I think I will look okay too if I cover my head with a turtle shell and a hat...”

“Shut up. No one is allowed to go ashore without the captain’s order!” Aiden glared viciously at the stupid sailor because he could already imagine the mess of disobeying the order, “If you really have nothing to do, go to the cabin to see if the few unlucky bastards who were blasted apart are still moving. If they aren’t, put them back together...”

A slight clicking sound suddenly came from nearby, interrupting Aiden’s orders.

Everyone on the bridge also heard this slight clicking noise, drawing their attention to search for the sound. Eventually, it was the half-missing head sailor who discovered the source.

Next to the captain’s seat, a strange machine made up of gears, connecting rods, and compass pointers, had quieted down again. However, the slightly

shaky pointers were still moving, indicating it was running just moments before.

“Did this thing just move?” One of the nearest sailors cautiously approached the elaborate machine and stared at its few compass pointers.

Aiden also walked over, his gaze falling on the small hemispherical bowl in the center of the machine—where a little bit of dried-up blood remained. The captain last used it to know where the Vanished was heading.

The bald first mate’s brow furrowed a little.

As the captain’s most trusted confidant, Aiden knows the device well.

Anomaly 203, the Blood Compass, was a brass machine with a complex structure and unknown principles. Once in possession of the Frost Queen, but now the property of Captain Tyrian.

This machine should be regarded as an anomaly with a more “positive” effect. By using the small bowl at the center, the user could fill it with some of the user’s blood to activate its homing powers. Of course, the effects only work between the next of kin.

Compared to most anomalies that are directly malicious and could be fatal just by improper storage, the Blood Compass was relatively safe in terms of “safekeeping”. It does not require any special sealing conditions – but in contrast, this device would show a sinister side once activated.

First of all, once injected with blood, the user would be constantly tempted by the compass, generating the urge to continuously inject blood until the user’s mental health fractures or they die of blood loss. Secondly, although the blood compass could indeed help the user find their “blood relatives”, it would often “carry bad luck” in the process, constantly leading to things of unfortunate nature for those involved.

As far as Aiden knows, Anomaly 203 once guided a father to find his long-lost son, but the ultimate result was the parent and son murdering each other in the encounter.

However, these negative effects have always been of little importance to Captain Tyrian – the captain’s will was strong enough to resist the “blood donation lure” of the Blood Compass, and as for the bad luck tendency incurred during the process...

First of all, the captain and Miss Lucretia would never meet during the effective period of Anomaly 203. Second of all, the father and son of the Abnomar family have always been “filial and good” towards each other.

That’s right, no matter how cursed and bad luck the Blood Compass was, it could not create a more disastrous first encounter of blasting each other with firepower from their respective ships.

Therefore, Captain Tyrian had often used the Blood Compass as a sort of “warning device” to determine whether the Vanished had returned to the real world for the past half-century.

Aiden and the other sailors gathered around Anomaly 203, their eyes fixed on the brass device’s numerous pointers and intricate gears – they’ve all quieted down now.

“..... Maybe it just wanted to move,” a sailor with a hole in his head said carefully as if to ease the atmosphere. “After all, this thing is usually motionless...”

Aiden glared at the sailor: “Quit joking!”

“If not... we can wipe off the remaining blood in the middle?” Another shriveled sailor began, “Otherwise, I can’t keep calm knowing it might wake up at random.”

“No,” Aiden shook his head, “Captain told me beforehand the blood cannot be removed manually and must be absorbed by the bowl on its own for seventy-two hours.”

“..... What happens if you wipe it in advance?”

“No one knows. It’s hard enough to summarize the correct use of an Anomaly. Who will dare test what happens when you operate it improperly?” Aiden shrugs, “Or do you want to try? I can consider it your contribution to humanity.”

“No, no, forget what I just said.”

Aiden snorted coldly at the idiot.

“ClickClick—” At this moment, the gears in the Blood Compass suddenly started to run again, interrupting the conversation between the sailors.

Aiden, the most alarmed, immediately shuddered and stumbled back a step. Nevertheless, the first mate never took his eyes off the compass pointers. He saw it clearly this time. All the arrows pointed at Pland for a few seconds before it spun again and went dead....

Sharing looks among themselves after the brief silence.

“I still say this thing just want to move a bit...”

“Shut up,” Aiden interrupted the sailor, recalling what exactly happened just now.

Although all the pointers had turned away to other spots before dying off completely, they did, for a brief moment, point directly at Pland. He’s sure of it.

It’s just that the moment was so short that people might suspect it to be a mere coincidence. But in Aiden’s view, it was as if the compass’s “eyes” had just looked at their target and diverted their gaze in a panic to “cover-up”.

So why would he think this way? Simple, Aiden had spoken with Tyrian about this Blood Compass. According to what the captain mentioned, the thing would occasionally portray characteristics of a living creature, just like how a human does.

This thing can be scared...

“Something is wrong... There is something wrong with this city-state!” Aiden snapped to attention, “We’re going to tell the captain about the situation here.”

“But didn’t the captain order that we are forbidden to go ashore?”

“We will pass a message first,” Aiden said quickly, “go bring Perley over!”

The sailor sped away and returned from the bridge area shortly after. The guy had brought over a huge parrot with a colorful tail on his shoulder – the blasted thing was repeatedly grinding its beak shell against the poor man’s exposed skull.

“Perley, I need you to send a message,” Aiden said loudly.

The parrot stopped bullying the sailor, raised his head, and stared at the first mate: “Perley can send message.”

“Go to the city-state cathedral. Look for the captain, and tell him – the blood compass points to Pland. The city-state is not safe!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 230

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Chapter 230 “Warm Daily Life in the Subspace Lair”

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The large, colorful-tailed parrot flapped its wings and left the Sea Mist at astonishing speed, flying towards the middle of the city.

“First mate, what should we do? Should we wait here?” a sailor on the bridge of the Sea Mist asked after Perley disappeared from sight.

“...We have no choice but to wait,” Aiden said, lowering his head and glancing at the ground under his feet. He quickly weighed his options and said, “We can’t reduce the number of sailors on the ship, especially after sensing the strange situation in Pland. The touch of the crew coming into contact with the city-state could awaken the ship’s soul and drive it to madness. Similarly, we cannot let the Sea Mist send a direct signal to the city or contact the city-state authorities by telegram, as it may alarm the hidden factors hiding within the island.”

Letting Perley the parrot pass on the message posed the least risk in this case. However, Aiden hoped that the captain would return soon and wouldn’t be trapped or taken by something else. In the worst-case scenario, he would wait a day before sending a crew team ashore.

.....

While sitting at the shop counter and flipping through the newspaper, Duncan suddenly stopped and looked up at the window.

“Mr. Duncan, what are you looking at?” Alice noticed the gesture and stopped flipping through her own paper.

“...I thought I sensed something looking in this direction,” Duncan said, frowning unsurely. “But it’s gone now.”

“Oh, I know. This is called the ‘senses of the strong’! Mr. Goathead told me about this before!” Alice said, excitedly. “He said that strong people are instinctively aware of their surroundings. Even a gaze will alarm their instincts if directed at them, so a powerful person like you will constantly get this...”

Duncan put the newspaper down and looked at Alice blandly. “Did he really say that?”

The smile on Alice’s face instantly stiffened. “...The last sentence was deduced by me.”

“Don’t make useless deductions,” Duncan said, then concentrated to begin his search for the source of the “stirring.”

He didn’t take that fleeting sensation as an illusion – having spent so much time in this weird world, he had gotten into the habit of paying attention to any “sudden intuition” and digging into the bottom of it.

Among the many details he obtained was one important piece of information: the southeast port.

“... Tyrian’s ship?” Duncan was a little surprised after recognizing the source of that aura. “Why is he here?”

He then recalled his previous encounter with the steel battleship, the ship’s position at that time, and the intentions shown in the battle. After a short thought, the expression on his face became slightly weird.

The Sea Mist appeared near Pland and took the initiative to attack the Vanished. Could it be the “reinforcements” called by the authorities? Are they here to intercept him?

Vaguely guessing the cause and effect of the matter in his mind, Duncan only wanted to laugh and cry simultaneously. He didn't know whether he should first lament the relationship between father and son or Tyrian's professionalism as a reinforcement. Despite almost being sunk in the fight, Tyrian still steered the steel behemoth over.

What kind of unwavering spirit does he have? This can't be the reason for the Sea Mist's unsinkable nature, right? Or does he have a superhero tendency to maintain world peace?

"You're in a daze again Mr. Duncan. Do you want to go outside?" Alice asked.

"No," Duncan shook his head while maintaining his perception of the Sea Mist. Since it had not yet become his "collection" like the Vanished and Pland, he could not perceive the details of its contents. But considering his "connection" with the Sea Mist and Tyrian, he had begun to search for the location of his "eldest son." Alice wouldn't understand these complicated things, so he kept his mouth shut. Instead, he frowned at the doll that was tilting her head. "Don't tilt your head. Your head will fall off."

Alice quickly nodded: "Oh, okay."

A rustling noise suddenly sounded from the storage room as a petite figure strolled out.

"Mr. Duncan," Shirley patted the dust off her skirt and greeted Duncan with an inviting look, "the storeroom has been cleaned! All the clutter you pointed to has been packed and organized on the shelf!"

"Mmm, well done," Duncan kept some of his attention on the other side of the harbor while turning back and nodding at Shirley. "You have a little ash on your shoulder."

"Oh," Shirley turned her head and patted the dust away before making a slightly nervous face again. "Mr. Duncan, wh-what should I do next?"

When talking to Duncan here, the expression on her face was obviously not as apprehensive as on the Vanished, but there was still some obvious nervousness. It seemed that this tension could not be entirely eliminated despite knowing the truth. Nevertheless, it was far better than when they first met.

Obviously, from an intellectual level, Shirley knew Duncan treated her kindly and didn't warrant such behavior from herself. The main issue was resolving Dog's nervousness that was bleeding over to Shirley.

Duncan nodded and then swept his gaze over to Alice, who was rummaging through the newspaper but didn't actually know a word.

Illiterate.

He then glanced back at Shirley on the other side.

Also illiterate.

There was also Dog hidden in the shadows next to her. Although the dark hound had never appeared in the open right now, his aura was becoming more and more impossible to hide.

Still illiterate.

Sighing inside, Duncan really wondered how fate could be so cruel. He got himself three helpers, yet not a single one could read, write, or do the account books. But then, an idea struck him. Specifically, he just remembered his old profession as a teacher.

"Come on, all of you sit here. Shirley, you sit to Alice's right." Duncan casually pulled a chair from the side and placed it next to the counter. "Dog, you squat behind the counter. Quit hiding, I can see you behind the shadow. Come here, I have an arrangement for all of you."

Shirley quickly sat down on the chair obediently, and Alice on the side finally put down the newspaper she couldn't understand. "Ah, what arrangement?"

“Well, since Nina hasn’t come back from going out to buy things, and I’m free, I’ll teach all of you to read,” Duncan said, then got up to pat his chest. “You can’t be illiterate forever.”

Shirley never expected Captain Duncan’s “serious arrangement” to be like this. She was immediately stunned on the spot, while Alice was curious to the point of brightening her purple eyes. As for Dog, he was squatting behind the counter, honestly looking back and forth between Duncan and Shirley, with question marks clearly visible in his skull: “But I’m just a dog...”

Duncan glanced down when he heard this, and before he could say anything, the dark hound had straightened up: “But I can try to be a cultured dog. I have the enthusiasm and confidence...”

“That’s good,” Duncan said in a pleasant tone. Then, while keeping an eye on the port, he reached under the counter and pulled out a few blank notebooks, which he distributed to his “students”. “This will be your alphabet book. Let’s start with the most basic letters...”

Shirley took the book that Duncan handed over with a confused look.

Then, she became even more confused.

Letters, spelling, a completely incomprehensible new world.

After only a few minutes, Shirley confirmed one thing: it’s easier to fight Dog and cultists than to learn!

But Duncan didn’t seem to pay much attention to Shirley’s distressed expression, or rather, he was already accustomed to it.

On the contrary, he felt only happiness, the joy of suddenly encountering something familiar while wandering in a foreign land.

However, this happiness did not last long. Just as Shirley was struggling with the fourth letter, a crisp bell rang, followed by brisk footsteps coming from the front door.

“Uncle Duncan! I’m back!” Nina’s cheerful voice sounded at the door.

Duncan looked up from his pleasant teaching and saw Nina rushing in, but then he noticed something flying in behind her.

“I saw Ai on my way back,” Nina said cheerfully, “and it seems like Ai brought a friend!”

“Friend?” Duncan frowned slightly and saw Ai flying into the store after Nina, followed by a large parrot with colorful tail feathers...

Duncan: “...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 231

Chapter 231 “The Reliable Messenger Perley”

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Ai flew into the store and stood on the handrail of the stairs with her breasts propped up, those green beady eyes scanning around the store.

The big parrot with colorful tail feathers also flew into the store, landing on the counter next to Duncan, and jumped around with its head held high as if it was in his own home.

With a stunned expression, Duncan looked at this guy who flew in from nowhere. The big parrot also raised its head, staring up at the man without finding anything wrong with this situation. Then after a long while, it suddenly flapped its wings, making a loud and harsh sound: “Ah! Perley!”

“Your name is Perley?” Duncan asked curiously. He didn’t expect this parrot to really answer him, after all, the essence of parrot talking was just mimicry of the tongue. Yet, not only did the parrot nod to him, but it also flapped its wings after hearing his question: “Perley! Called Perley!”

Duncan’s expression froze for a moment, and he turned his head to look at Ai, who was looking at the first floor on the handrail of the stairs: “Where did you find this... ‘friend’?”

“The friend came from afar,” Ai immediately flapped her wings, one eye looking at Duncan, the other eye drifting out the window, “Already here!”

“What does she mean?” Nina asked curiously.

After learning the secrets of the Vanished and Duncan, Nina of course also knew that Ai could talk. She was surprised initially, but now she's calmed down and taking it well. Like everyone else, she had difficulty understanding the strange words popping out of the dove from time to time.

"Maybe it doesn't know where this parrot came from," Duncan used his imagination to translate for Ai, then turned his head to look at the parrot before glancing back and forth between the pair. "Ai... I'm not against you making friends, but did you realize that you are different species? You should look for a dove friend..."

"There is great tolerance among the vast stretches of rivers, for they all run into the ocean!" The dove tilted her head and shouted this stunning phrase, "There is great tolerance!"

Duncan: "..."

As he talked with Ai, he often pondered about life and questioned himself. It's truly miraculous how a bird with such a pea brain could converse with him and vice-versa. In fact, he wondered if they're even conversing on the same wavelength.

Shirley, Dog, and Alice were also drawn to the commotion and came to the counter to see the fearless big parrot. Alice tried curiously poking the bird's wings, but it quickly dodged and glared at the miscreant doll for the offensive gesture.

"What is it?" Alice asked Duncan, "It looks completely different from Ai."

Shirley clarified, "Of course it's different. This is a parrot, and Ai is a dove."

"What is a parrot?" Alice asked soulfully. "Can you eat it?"

"No," Shirley shook her head and turned to the puppet, "Why do you always ask about eating when you don't even need to eat?"

"I'm responsible for the cap... cooking for Mr. Duncan!"

The chatter continued around the counter, but Duncan remained pensive, observing the big parrot that called itself “Perley.” He had a vague sense of familiarity with the bird as if he had seen it somewhere before.

“Where are you from? Why are you here?” he suddenly asked.

From their conversation earlier, Duncan sensed that this parrot could communicate with people, indicating that it was not of ordinary origin.

“Perley! Go, send a message!” The big parrot turned its head and tilted it to the side.

“A messenger?” Duncan was taken aback, and his expression grew serious, “What kind of message?”

The big parrot seemed to ponder for a moment before opening its beak to speak, but it was interrupted by Ai, who suddenly fluttered and shouted, “Make some fries!”

The big parrot was startled, “Ah! Perley!”

“Make some fries!” Ai landed in front of the big parrot and nodded seriously, “Make some fries.”

“Perley?” “Make some fries!”

The two birds communicated in this manner until Duncan had to intervene, “Stop! Ai, quiet down. Perley, what message are you delivering, and to whom?”

The big parrot seemed stunned momentarily, hesitating before shaking its body repeatedly while uttering, “Make some fries.”

Duncan didn’t say anything, realizing that no matter what message the parrot had before, it was forgotten now.

As if trying to remember something important, the parrot suddenly jumped up and flapped its wings vigorously, shouting “tell the captain, tell the

captain!” while repeating “make some fries”. It then flew towards the door and out of sight before anyone could react.

Nina wanted to stop the parrot but couldn’t move fast enough. So, in the end, she could only watch it go regretfully. On the other hand, Duncan became serious upon hearing Perley shout to tell the captain. He suddenly remembered where he had seen the parrot before – in a certain cabin of the Sea Mist when the Vanished and the Sea Mist overlapped.

“Ai, chase after that parrot.”

.....

“That’s pretty much it.”

In a secluded reception room somewhere in the Cathedral of Pland, Valentine, an old bishop in civilian clothes, spoke to Tyrian, who was sitting across from him on a sofa.

“The Vanished finally took the sun fragment away, prevented the Creeping Sunwheel from descending, and eliminated the impact of historical pollution on the city-state. Although we still can’t be sure of... your father’s intentions.”

Tyrian’s expression was subtle and stiff. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt so bewildered. Of course, he could understand every word the old bishop said, but even in his wildest dreams, he never imagined it would happen like this.

“Did the Vanished really leave like that? Did someone come to rescue them?” Tyrian spoke in disbelief, “It took away the sun fragment... and then what? Is that all? Didn’t do anything else?”

Valentine and Vanna exchanged a look, both showing helplessness and hesitation in their expressions. It was still hard to say the phrase “your dad robbed half of the city’s fries” in front of Tyrian.

“...Nothing else,” Valentine hesitated, “I know you are confused, Mr. Tyrian. We are as confused as you are, and if you don’t even know what your father wants to do, then we don’t know either.”

“Since a century ago, he could not be considered my father,” Tyrian slowly shook his head and said in a deep voice. “It’s just an imitation that was torn apart by subspace and then put together by clumsy means. There is no trace of humanity in that empty body...”

Tyrian stopped abruptly, suddenly remembering the seconds when the Vanished and the Sea Mist overlapped and passed each other. He thought of the cold and distant words he heard, “I’m busy.”

The big pirate hesitated.

Inside that shell on the Vanished, was it really inhuman? The voice that spoke to him at that time, and the aura he felt from that figure... Was it really just an echo of the empty frenzy of subspace?

As Tyrian was distracted, the young inquisitor’s voice interrupted his thoughts: “The question of whether Captain Duncan has ‘human nature’ is exactly what we will discuss next.”

“Huh?” Tyrian looked at Vanna suspiciously, “What does that mean?”

“Actually...” Vanna hesitated, then turned her head to exchange a look with Bishop Valentine before nodding slightly, “We have communicated with your father more than once recently.”

Matters related to the Vanished were classified information, especially the conversation with Captain Duncan, which should not have been disclosed to anyone outside the church. But Tyrian’s identity was so special that these questions were clearly no longer a problem.

“Communication? You and my father?! Tyrian was really taken aback and almost got up from the couch, “This is a very bad joke if it is!”

“Please calm down, this is a very serious question—no one would joke about this kind of thing after the city-state has almost collapsed.” Vanna looked at Tyrian calmly, then paused slightly, “Strictly speaking, I had a few exchanges with your father, and according to my observations... ‘Captain Duncan’ no longer seems to be as described in the records.”

Tyrian noticed the other party’s solemn attitude, causing him to quickly calmed down and show an extremely serious expression: “Miss Inquisitor, how did you establish communication? Why did he find you? And... what did he say?”

“It started as an accident... No, now that I think about it, it may also be your father’s intentional arrangement.” Vanna collected her thoughts and recalled as she spoke, “I came into contact with the ‘flame’ he left behind and made a connection with it. As for why he chose me... Unfortunately, no one knows...”

Vanna omitted the details of her “imprint” and “contamination could not be removed”, instead vaguely summed up the process as “making contact”, and then told the “pirate captain” in front of her the details of several exchanges with Captain Duncan.

The man who theoretically knows Duncan Abnomar best.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 232

Chapter 232 “Tyrian’s Memory”

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After listening to Vanna’s story, Tyrian fell silent for a moment. Without witnessing things in person, he couldn’t analyze from her words alone what plans the returned ghost from subspace had or how he had changed, but one thing was certain: the “Captain Duncan” Vanna described was not the crazy monster that the Sea Mist had encountered half a century ago. However, the man didn’t quite resemble the great explorer father he remembered from a century ago either.

“Captain Tyrian,” Vanna suddenly spoke, interrupting Tyrian’s thoughts.
“What do you think?”

“I... can’t believe this is really happening, but since it has already happened, I can only admit it for the time being,” Tyrian said thoughtfully, furrowing his brows. “From your description, it seems he is in a state of clear thinking, sanity, and with humanity, but his power... that cursed flame, is correspondingly more powerful.”

Vanna nodded in agreement. “I don’t know if that green flame is a curse, but it is undoubtedly powerful.”

“That flame is related to subspace,” Tyrian said, “and he acquired this strange power after falling into subspace, so it’s no problem calling it a curse.”

“... So, that flame is more powerful than what you saw half a century ago, which means Captain Duncan’s connection to subspace has become deeper,” old bishop Valentine pondered. “He did not break free from the

influence of subspace but fell deeper. However, he also recovered in the process?"

"This is not consistent with what we know about subspace," Tyrian shook his head.

"The believers of Lahem often say," Valentine continued, "the only thing we know about subspace is that we never know enough about it. For thousands of years, no person or thing from the real dimension can enter subspace and return to this world. No one knows what is really in subspace except for some indirect observational records and the words written by the mad scholars of the ancient kingdom of Crete in madness... Our 'summary of the rules' of that place is meaningless in itself."

The learned old man paused, then sighed. "So much so that we can't even be sure whether subspace is a 'place' or not. Sixteen hundred years ago, the mad scholar Bairmin was swallowed by invisible forces in full view of everyone because he read an ancient scroll. Before he disappeared, he shouted 'subspace is a shadow on the back of the world,' and his words at that time drove one hundred and forty-two witnesses to madness. But with the madness of those witnesses as a 'sacrifice,' this information has become the biggest step in our understanding of subspace in thousands of years."

"Until now, scholars have tried to construct a theoretical model of subspace based on Bairmin's dying cry... And your father, not only did he really enter that place, but now he is even returning to our world sane."

"That's right, every year of research, every year of death, then the dead are quickly replenished to continue this study... So I really admire the desperate scholars of the Academy of Truth, completely in the sense of admiration," Tyrian sighed and shook his head. "So, now my 'father' may have become a valuable sample? A sample that has really been to subspace and is sensible and communicative?"

Valentine spread his hands and said, "This is just wishful thinking. We cannot expect Captain Duncan to cooperate with mortal research. Moreover, even if he now has a reason, we cannot assume that his reason is biased

towards the human side. If he is a sane subspace invader, it will be far more terrifying than those chaotic projections that cannot think.”

Tyrian remained silent for a while, lost in deep memories and thoughts. Eventually, he spoke up abruptly, “He exhibited signs of anxiety before his last expedition. In fact, he had been anxious for a long time and made extensive preparations for something ominous.”

Valentine and Vanna exchanged serious looks. It had been a century since anyone had heard these crucial secrets from the descendants of Captain Duncan.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Vanna asked, “What was he anxious about? And why was he preparing?”

“He believed it was the end of the world,” Tyrian replied calmly.

Valentine frowned, “The end of the world?”

“I know it may sound like the rantings of doomsday prophets that we hear every year, but it’s what the greatest explorer of his time was concerned about a hundred years ago,” Tyrian explained.

Tyrian sighed and continued, “After Lucretia and I took over the command of the Sea Mist and Bright Star, he would occasionally bring it up. He seemed to believe that something like a countdown or a time limit was ticking away in our world. Although the earthly world appeared to be stable and peaceful on the surface, this countdown was drawing closer to its end. And when the time came, everything would quickly collapse and end. He believed that our era was the last part of the countdown.”

Valentine furrowed his brows again, “To be honest, I don’t think our world is ‘stable’...”

“But in my father’s words, he called the current earthly world ‘the last pastoral age’,” Tyrian replied.

Vanna pondered momentarily and asked, “So, to find a way to stop this ‘countdown,’ he went to subspace?”

“No, he wanted to find Anomaly 000. He believed that Anomaly 000 could end the distortion of the world and halt that countdown. To do so, he had to pass through the ‘eternal curtain’ at the end of the world.”

Valentine was taken aback, “He passed through the curtain of eternity?”

“Yes... But I can only confirm that he did enter the fog, and I don’t know if he actually succeeded in ‘penetrating’ it,” Tyrian said. “He refused to be accompanied by any escorts, and all I can confirm is that he returned alive but insane. As for falling into subspace... that’s what happened after that incident.”

Valentine and Vanna fell silent, and after a while, Vanna spoke up again, “Did he find the so-called Anomaly 000? You know, in theory...”

“In theory, there is no such anomaly or vision numbered zero. He knew that and did not find it,” Tyrian replied softly. “So, I always thought that he might have been unstable even before he decided to search for Anomaly 000.”

Vanna thought for a moment and asked, “Do you know what your father originally thought was the reason for the existence of the ‘countdown’ in the world? When did he realize this? Was it due to contact or... did he discover something?”

Tyrian hesitated momentarily before speaking uncertainly, “I’m not sure. It was too long ago, but I vaguely remember that my father received several visitors on the Vanished and talked with them all night long. He first mentioned the apocalyptic issue to us after that day.”

Valentine’s expression became grim as he pressed for more detail, “How many people did he receive? What kind of people were they, and what was the situation at the time?”

Tyrian spoke slowly, “They all wore gray-white coarse cloth robes and were barefooted. From my memory, the group appeared thin and scrawny, as if they had traveled long distances and worked hard. They came aboard during a voyage like they had made an appointment with my father in

advance. They talked throughout the night, and then my father said they had left in the morning. But I didn't see the visitors go. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air."

Valentine's expression changed as he asked, "The Enders? It sounds like them..."

"Your Excellency, after living for a century, I know the Enders well," Tyrian replied, shaking his head. "But these people were different. They were sensible and friendly, without any trace of madness."

"Sensible and friendly?" Valentine's surprise was evident. "I've never heard of such a thing. Did they have any other distinguishing characteristics?"

After a few minutes of thought, Tyrian remembered, "One of them spoke to me. I can't recall exactly what he said, but I remember that they called themselves 'lowly seekers'. Also, one of them wore a talisman with a hexagonal emblem and a fragmented cross in the center. He wouldn't let me touch it and said it was their way of seeking guidance and shelter."

Tyrian paused and drew the emblem on a piece of paper, hesitating slightly as he sketched the cross. Vanna frowned at the drawing and asked her peer, "Do you know what this is? You're more knowledgeable than me."

Valentine studied the pattern for a while before shaking his head. "I've never seen it before. It doesn't resemble any religious symbol or classical city-state emblem that I know of."

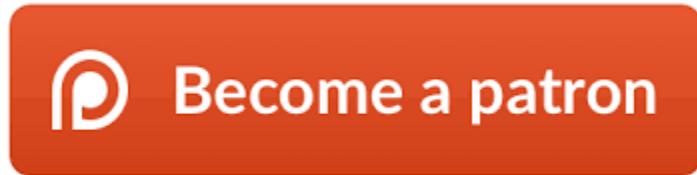
Vanna murmured in frustration as she gazed at the emblem, which appeared to be reflected in her eyes along with a faint green flame that was barely visible.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 233

Chapter 233 “The Curse of the Family”

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After Bishop Valentine put away the piece of paper with the unfamiliar emblem, he remarked, “None of us are familiar with this pattern. It’s possible that it comes from an ancient era or a secret society that remains undisclosed.” He set the paper aside and added, “We can check the archives to see if there are any corresponding records, and I’ll reach out to my academic colleagues to see if they can provide any insights into this matter.”

Turning her attention back to Tyrian, Vanna inquired, “Did your father exhibit any unusual behavior before he spoke with those strange visitors? For instance, did he acquire any mysterious texts or visit secretive places?”

Tyrian shook his head as he responded, “It’s hard to say. You have to understand that a century ago, my father was one of the most renowned explorers in the world. Dealing with strange artifacts and hidden places was part of his everyday life. My sister Lucretia and I were just starting to learn from him and explore his ‘collection,’ so we didn’t have many opportunities to discover more.”

He paused for a moment, letting out a soft sigh. “And back then, neither of us considered the consequences of what was to come. My father often received various unusual guests, so those strange ‘visitors’ were not necessarily out of the ordinary. By the time we realized that something was wrong though, almost a year had passed since that ‘secret conversation,’ so there was no way for us to investigate anything further.”

Vanna nodded in agreement, but their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a loud chime and siren that emanated from the window. Bishop Valentine looked up and observed that the sun had set, casting a faint shadow of the World's Creation in the sky. "The twilight bell strikes," he remarked before suggesting that they conclude their discussion. Turning to Tyrian, he offered the hospitality of the cathedral for the night, with dinner and undisturbed rooms provided.

"Thank you then," Tyrian expressed his gratitude, "I plan to stay in this city for a few more days. I did live here briefly a century ago, so I'm interested in seeing what changes took place."

"Of course," Valentine smiled, "the Sea Mist is already a friend of Pland, and we are always ready for friends. You can stay here as long as you want."

"You are welcome to stay here as long as you want," Bishop Valentine warmly responded, acknowledging the Sea Mist's relationship with Pland.

Vanna stood up from the couch and offered to show Tyrian to his guest room after gathering the sailors from the room nearby.

As Tyrian and Vanna walked towards the guest room, Tyrian expressed his surprise, "I never thought the Inquisitor would personally escort us. It's quite an honor for a mere 'pirate' like me."

Vanna turned around with a smile and corrected him, "You're not just a 'pirate.' Your lineage is impressive – son of Captain Duncan, the Frost Queen general, and the Sea Mist Fleet commander. If all the pirates on the Boundless Sea are of your caliber, then we won't need any city-state authorities."

"... 'Pirate' is simply a convenient cover that allows me to cause trouble for certain individuals in the Cold Sea. Some people even prefer to label me as such to increase the bounty on my head, giving them the illusion of being useful," Tyrian explained nonchalantly. "But as you mentioned, those titles belong to the past, Miss Inquisitor."

After a moment of silence, Tyrian added, “I’ve never shared so much about my past with an outsider before. I hope you understand.”

Vanna nodded in understanding. “I can imagine it must be difficult,” she said sympathetically. “But sometimes, in order to find a solution, we must confront the things that make us uncomfortable or uneasy. And that is what we are trying to do here in Pland: uncover the truth and find a way to help your father.”

Tyrian nodded in agreement, “I understand. Thank you, Miss Inquisitor, for your understanding and willingness to help.”

As the man spoke, he glanced at Vanna’s eyes but quickly averted his gaze. Again, he felt a faint yet palpable pressure that was even stronger than what he had sensed earlier on the dock. Then recalling the recent experience of the inquisitor communicating with that man, Tyrian suddenly got some terrible ideas of where this discomfort came from.

Vanna picked up on Tyrian’s unusual behavior and asked him directly, “Captain Tyrian, you seem a bit tense. Is there something that’s making you nervous?”

“No, Inquisitor,” Tyrian responded by hesitantly shaking his head. “You mentioned having communicated with my father multiple times. Did he, by any chance, impart any gifts or powers to you during those interactions?”

Vanna abruptly halted her footsteps at this remark. “Why do you ask this?”

Tyrian quickly clarified, recognizing that his question might be overwhelming for someone as devout and resolute as Vanna. “I don’t intend anything else,” he explained. “I simply wanted to bring to your attention the power that my father brought back from subspace. It’s highly unusual and challenging to remove, and it’s extremely polluting, much like other chaotic erosion from subspace. If you accidentally delve too deep...”

Vanna took a deep breath and expressed her gratitude. “Thank you for reminding me,” she said sincerely.

However, in reality, Vanna couldn't help but feel that Tyrian's reminder had come a bit too late. The influence of Captain Duncan seemed to be more severe than anyone had anticipated, and now all she could do was hope that he would actually knock when he sought her out...

Although Tyrian was unsure of what was going through Vanna's mind, he sensed a palpable awkwardness in the air. However, the discomfort was short-lived, as Vanna took the initiative to break the silence.

"I have a question," she said. "Your father mentioned a 'countdown' before he lost his sanity. Do you know anything more about it? Did he mention any other details?"

As Vanna posed her question, her mind couldn't help but recall her previous communication with the goddess of storms, Gomona, and the cryptic message the deity had conveyed to her – "Time is limited and about to reach the critical limit."

The sentence that Vanna couldn't comprehend at the time now seemed to be intricately linked to the "countdown" mentioned by Tyrian.

Tyrian locked eyes with Vanna, and the two remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, Tyrian spoke in a deep voice, "During his last moments, he said something to Lucretia. He said, 'our world is just a pile of extinguishing embers.'"

As the corridor came to an end, Tyrian turned to Vanna and expressed his gratitude, "Thank you for leading the way. I'd like to spend some time alone with my subordinates for a while."

Vanna nodded in understanding. "Of course, I understand. Please feel free to reach out to me if you need anything," she replied before heading back the way they came.

As the door closed behind her, Tyrian felt a wave of relief wash over him, now that the surroundings had quieted down.

As Tyrian thought back to his conversation with the inquisitor, he couldn't help but feel the pressure he had sensed from the lady. It was a palpable sensation that left him feeling uneasy. If he had to relate it to anything he experienced, it would be the sensation he got whenever his father gazed down at him! The memory sent shivers down his spine, and he couldn't help but wonder what it all meant.

"Captain, is everything all right?" A trusted sailor looked at his boss with concern, "You seem tense ever since we landed."

"I'm alright," Tyrian reassured his sailor with a wave before casually walking over to a nearby table, "Could you bring the items over?"

Without delay, one of Tyrian's trusted sailors approached the table, carefully placing a suitcase from the Sea Mist on its surface. With a key, Tyrian unlocked the case and revealed its contents.

In the suitcase was a complicated lens apparatus comprising multiple small lenses and curved connectors, featuring a large crystal ball at its center.

"Watch the door, don't let others disturb me," Tyrian instructed his men to keep watch at the door and ensure that he's not disturbed.

It was only after several sailors had departed that he directed his attention towards the crystal ball. Then, delicately adjusting one of the lens angles, he murmured the name "Lucretia."

Eventually, there was a slight tremble in the lens assembly, and the crystal ball positioned at the center started emitting a glimmer, coupled with an unsettling sound, until the vague outline of Lucretia materialized within the crystal ball, saying "I am present."

"Why is the image so blurry?" Tyrian furrowed his brows, "Where are you currently located?"

"I... am at the border," Lucretia's voice crackled through the crystal ball amidst the static: "The surrounding... environment... is causing more interference, and I'm trying to adjust... Is it better now? Can you hear me clearly?"

Eventually, the interference dissipated, and Lucretia's form gradually became more distinct.

"The environment around me has shifted slightly, and the spirit realm is creating an unusual disruption in reality," the voice from the crystal ball explained. "Is everything alright, brother? The Bright Star is traversing through turbulent waters. If this isn't urgent..."

"I'm currently in Pland," Tyrian got straight to the point, "The Sea Mist suffered significant damage during the battle with the Vanished, and the situation in this city-state seems unsettling."

The figure on the other end of the crystal ball was taken aback by the news.

After a few moments, Lucretia's slightly anxious voice spoke up: "Did you truly come across the Vanished? Are you safe now?"

"..... Frankly, I was beaten up, but it's okay now," Tyrian said in a low voice. "The problem is... 'his' situation seems a little wrong."

"His situation isn't right?" Lucrecia frowned, "You met him up close?"

"Mhmm."

"Then..." Lucretia opened her mouth, seeming hesitant, "So this time you saw our 'father'?"

"..... Not exactly."

"In all honesty, I took a bit of a beating, but I'm fine now," Tyrian whispered. "The issue is... there's something off with 'him'."

"His situation isn't right?" Lucretia furrowed her brow. "Did you meet him in person?"

"Yes."

"In that case..." Lucretia hesitated before speaking up, "So, you met our 'father' this time?"

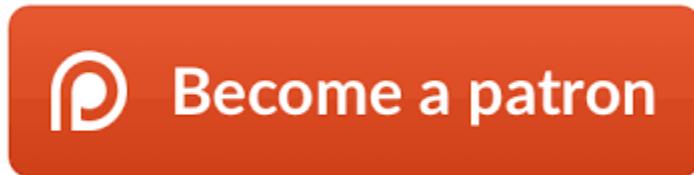
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Deep Sea Embers chapter 234

Chapter 234 “Harmonious Family”

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Tyrian found it challenging to clarify to his sister the peculiar transformations that had occurred with their “father” and his extraordinary actions in Pland.

“I sense he’s not the same erratic and disorderly subspace entity he was half a century ago. Now there appears to be a sense of ‘humanity’ and ‘rationality’ within him. However, it feels unfamiliar to me,” Tyrian spoke with a furrowed brow, “Although he still recognizes me, I’m uncertain whether he remains the same father we’ve always known… The transformations are significant.”

The woman with black hair on the opposite end of the crystal ball remained silent for a few moments before commenting, “Well, at least it sounds like an improvement from what it was like half a century ago.”

“You can say it like that… Half a century ago, I stood at the bow of the Sea Mist and gazed upon that silhouette, wishing it wasn’t him, and now I’m face to face with him again, only to wonder if it’s truly him… Either way, the Vanished hasn’t caused as much devastation as it did before.”

Lucretia remained silent momentarily, pondering over something before bringing up a topic, “Do you recall what I informed you during our last conversation? Luni unexpectedly broke down and mentioned that the ‘old master’ was searching for me… It appears that our father is genuinely plotting something.”

“What could he be planning?” Tyrian furrowed his brow, “Is he intending to resume his previous unfinished expedition? Or perhaps reassemble the Vanished Fleet?”

“I’m unsure,” Lucretia admitted.

Suddenly, an obscure interference materialized in the crystal ball, and several automated magical devices behind Lucretia appeared to malfunction, emitting a faint crackling noise. A group of automatic magic puppets scurried over to investigate the equipment, appearing flustered.

“What’s happening over there?” Tyrian became apprehensive, “Do you need to tend to the equipment behind you first?”

“Don’t worry, the puppets can handle minor issues, and they’re insignificant compared to the major storm brewing at the border,” Lucretia reassured Tyrian calmly without glancing back at the frenzied commotion. “I’m almost through this unstable sea.”

“What are your plans for exploration?” Tyrian asked, “This time you won’t directly rush into that fog, right? I must remind you, the border is not a safe place...”

“I was tracking something, and it suddenly emerged near the border with tremendous energy, plunging into the sea, but the onboard equipment failed to capture its exact image,” Lucretia explained composedly. “Don’t worry, I’m still within the Eternal Curtain and haven’t ventured into the dense fog yet. Once I locate that object, I’ll forward you the image. If it’s something that can be extracted, I’ll cut a piece for you as a souvenir.”

Tyrian waved his hand dismissively upon hearing this, “No need, I don’t want any ominous souvenirs sent my way, and I’d rather catch a few peaceful hours of sleep.”

Lucretia didn’t seem to mind and continued casually, “By the way, did you purchase a spirit lens for me?”

Tyrian was taken aback, and his voice sounded a bit unnatural as he replied, “Um... It might have to wait a few days. You know, that item requires some luck to obtain...”

“Did you forget?” Lucretia inquired.

“Of course not, I haven’t forgotten. Several suppliers I know are currently out of stock, and the four major churches do have the goods, but the procedures to obtain them are too complicated,” Tyrian explained.

“You did forget, didn’t you?” Lucretia repeated her question.

“I’m doing my best,” Tyrian said solemnly, “There must be another way to acquire it without resorting to theft.”

“It appears that you did forget,” Lucretia responded calmly by nodding, as if she had already anticipated the situation. “It’s alright, I understand you’re occupied, and it’s difficult to request such a favor.”

Tyrian’s face visibly relaxed upon hearing his sister’s understanding tone. However, he became tensed again when he heard the second half of the sentence from the opposite side of the crystal ball: “Then I’ll ask the day after tomorrow.”

Tyrian: “...”

The burly pirate wiped his forehead, appearing as though he had something to say, but before he could utter a word, the sound of flapping wings emanated from the window, interrupting his movements. This was followed by the sound of pecking against the glass.

“Wait a minute, something is happening on my end,” Tyrian said hurriedly, his expression turning to one of surprise as he looked up. “Perley?!” he exclaimed.

Tyrian immediately rose from his seat and opened the window, allowing the large, colorful-tailed parrot to enter. Perley flapped its wings and landed on the table, squawking loudly, “Perley!”

Tyrian settled back into his seat at the table, eyeing the large parrot suspiciously. “What are you doing here?” he questioned. “Did you escape from the ship? Or did Aiden send you?”

“Ah! Aiden sent Perley!” The large parrot spread its wings and exclaimed, bobbing its head back and forth. “Perley has a message, an important message!” Aiden said... Aiden said...” it continued squawking.

The large parrot appeared to be struggling for a moment, causing Tyrian to look at it with bewilderment. After a prolonged pause, the parrot suddenly screeched out loudly, to Tyrian’s surprise, “Make some fries! Make some fries!”

Tyrian: “...?”

Lucretia, on the other side of the crystal ball, also heard the commotion on Tyrian’s end, and her voice sounded doubtful, “Brother, is Perley hungry?”

“...No, Perley was supposed to convey some other information, but it appears that the message was intercepted,” Tyrian reacted promptly. As the owner of Perley, he was well-acquainted with the parrot’s behavior and Aiden’s personality. His expression quickly became grave. “Perley, has something happened aboard the ship?”

The large parrot tilted its head to look at its master, repeating the phrase “Make some fries” several times with no apparent meaning. Suddenly, it stopped and appeared to recall something, and then it excitedly screeched out, “Blood Compass!”

Tyrian furrowed his brow slightly, “Blood Compass?”

“Point to the city-state!” The large parrot flapped its wings vigorously and shouted excitedly, “Blood Compass points to the city-state!”

Tyrian was taken aback for a moment, and then he reacted swiftly. His expression changed, and he looked up at the crystal ball before him. “Lucy, he’s...”

“Brother, you must leave Pland immediately,” Lucretia spoke urgently from the other side of the crystal ball, not waiting for Tyrian to finish. “This could be a trap!”

Tyrian remained frozen and unresponsive to his sister’s warning. Instead, he sat there motionless like a statue, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

“Brother?” Lucretia sounded puzzled. “Did you not hear me?”

“Lucy, he’s...” Tyrian’s voice trailed off as he broke the silence. “... Opposite of me,” he finally whispered.

The voice from the crystal ball fell silent.

Across the table from Tyrian, a decorative mirror with an oval frame was suspended in mid-air, surrounded by a faint green flame. Within the flickering of the flame, a majestic figure stood within the mirror, calmly observing him on the other side.

“First and foremost, this is not a trap,” the figure within the mirror began to speak, “and I am as surprised as you are for being here.”

“The second thing is that I am finished, so now I’m here to see what you’re doing.”

Tyrian remained silent and motionless while Lucretia grew increasingly uneasy on the other side of the crystal ball. She could not see what was happening on Tyrian’s end, which added to her anxiety. Finally, she whispered, “Is he really there?”

Tyrian’s expression remained impassive as he reached for the box on the table and rotated the crystal ball and lens group towards the other side. “Say hello to Father,” he said flatly.

As Tyrian made his move, Lucretia’s voice became more urgent, and she spoke more loudly. “No need, there’s no need to turn around,” she said hastily.

Unfortunately, it was already too late as the crystal ball and lens group rotated, exposing the image of their father. In addition, Duncan was also peering through the mirror, observing the woman inside the crystal ball.

This was their initial encounter, and within his own mind and body, he had no recollections of having a strong relationship with the other person except for a vague and sentimental impression.

He experienced a similar sensation when he encountered Tyrian before, but now, standing before Lucretia, there appeared to be another emotion... guilt and remorse.

Is it because the father owed her more? Or is it because of the last gift that couldn't be delivered?

Duncan didn't know which, after all, he's only assuming this identity for the moment and not actually the real Duncan.

"It's been a while, Lucy." He gives the lady a nod as a formal greeting.

"Uhh....." Lucretia's countenance was typically composed and enigmatic, earning her the "Sea Witch" nickname. However, the current circumstance seemed to baffle her more than even the unpredictable "border". She nervously stood there as though she was transported back to the distant past, to the afternoon when she first destroyed her father's navigational equipment. "I... It's been a while..." she stuttered in response.

Subsequently, the atmosphere in the room lapsed into a melancholic silence, with Duncan wordlessly gazing at the two "siblings" before him. This tacit pressure appeared to travel through the crystal ball and into the vast expanse of the Boundless Sea. Lucretia struggled to find a topic to alleviate the tension, but after some hesitation, she eventually blurted out, "You... the frame suits you rather well..."

Duncan: ".....Huh?"

"I am referring to the patterned frame. It matches your personality quite well," Lucretia hastily clarified, sensing the need to explain herself. "It

exudes a sense of restraint and modesty, which suits you perfectly.”

“.....Huh?”

“Especially when you’re hanging on the wall...”

Duncan was dumbfounded: “What exactly are you trying to say?”

Finally, Lucretia shifted her gaze away from Duncan and looked towards Tyrian as if seeking his guidance. “Help me...” she mutters.

Tyrian sighed and pushed the suitcase containing the crystal ball aside. He then rose to his feet and approached the frame, “What brings you to us?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 235

Chapter 235 “Across Time and Space”

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Separated by a mirrored layer and flickering flames, Duncan closely observed Tyrian and Lucretia’s reactions throughout their entire encounter. He discerned their unease, vigilance, and mild apprehension.

Though the atmosphere was far from ideal for a family reunion, Duncan had expected this outcome and didn’t mind. Meeting Tyrian on his terms fulfilled his purpose for the day, and establishing a foundation now could avert unanticipated conflicts in the future. He was also glad to find Lucretia present.

Moments before, Duncan had eavesdropped on their conversation from behind the mirror without their knowledge. He learned that his earlier attempt to contact the siblings using the twin doll “Nilu” had not been futile. Although he received no feedback, Lucretia’s side had shown activity, granting him unexpected information and insights.

Composed, Duncan maintained his usual calm demeanor, scanning Tyrian and the crystal ball beside him. “A father doesn’t need a special reason to seek his children,” he said.

Tyrian’s eyes briefly widened before he regained control. Speaking softly, he continued to eye Duncan suspiciously through the mirror. “You should be aware that this is the cathedral. Even you should tread carefully so as not to offend the gods who dwell in this sacred place,” he warned.

“Yes, this is the cathedral,” Duncan replied calmly, “and I have witnessed it burn down and rebuild from its fragmented past. If the goddess behind this

church is watching, she owes me a thank you.”

Tyrian found himself at a loss for words, a familiar sensation when conversing with his father. A century ago, before the Abnomar name was cursed, Tyrian had always struggled to articulate himself before his father, who was perpetually dignified and engrossed in enigmatic and ominous affairs.

“Has your sanity finally escaped the influence of subspace?” inquired the “Sea Witch” from the crystal ball. As she had done a hundred years ago, she eased the tension between her father and brother as the middle person.
“Have you returned this time to continue your exploration plans?”

Duncan glanced at Lucretia, panic hidden beneath his calm exterior. He aimed this critical meeting at laying the foundation for his future plans, cover or clarify the many “flaws” he might reveal, and, if possible, normalize the changes involving him and the Vanished.

Fortunately, the man had prepared a draft in advance.

“Subspace has left a deep impact on me, and perhaps I’ll never fully shake its influence,” he spoke slowly, modulating his speech and expressions. “I can’t remember many things clearly, even my understanding of the real world. I’m attempting to rediscover the world, and knowing you exist, I think this may be a crucial step in rebuilding my cognition.”

He paused before adding, “But as you said, Lucy—at least, my sanity has returned.”

This was the most effective statement he could devise to resolve hidden dangers and prepare for the future.

To maintain the Vanished’s stability, he had to play the role of “Captain Duncan.” Even with a tacit agreement with Goathead, he couldn’t abandon this identity, so he had to continue this “performance” in front of Lucretia and Tyrian. However, no matter how clever the act, there would always be loopholes. And given that he knew almost nothing about the siblings, the

most effective solution would be preparing a scapegoat in advance—specifically, a scapegoat connected to subspace.

In any case, all the world's evils were linked to subspace, a scapegoat among countless others. Adding one more from his perspective wouldn't hurt.

The rest was left to Tyrian and Lucretia's brain to supplement.

Upon hearing Duncan's words, Lucretia in the crystal ball appeared visibly startled. She seemed to be intently observing her father's face for any signs of insincerity, while Tyrian, who stood beside her, asked after a brief pause, "So, your actions in Pland were merely to save this city-state?"

Duncan smiled, replying, "Entirely out of goodwill."

"...But the head bishop and inquisitor in the city don't seem to trust this," Tyrian said in a deep voice, "particularly the inquisitor... She is extremely cautious around you."

"I can tell," Duncan nodded, "she tried to cleave me twice in a row, but failed both times."

Tyrian was at a loss for words.

Unfazed by Tyrian's silence, Duncan shifted his gaze to his "daughter" in the crystal ball, seemingly asking nonchalantly, "Is Luni with you?"

"She's here," Lucretia nodded before motioning to her side. Soon, a clockwork figure dressed as a maid appeared in the crystal ball.

Duncan was surprised by the clockwork puppet in front of him, as it didn't seem to fit with "Nilu": "...Why does she look like this?!"

"I made a few modifications to Luni..." Lucretia explained, wearing a somewhat awkward expression while trying to guess her father's reason for changing the subject. "Why did you suddenly ask about her?"

“...I found Nilu,” Duncan said softly, “in a doll shop. You didn’t take her back then, so she was never sold.”

Lucretia couldn’t help but exclaim, “Ah...”

Distant memories seemed to fill the “Sea Witch’s” mind, and her expression grew complex.

Duncan noticed the subtle change in her expression and decided that it was enough for now. Further probing might have an undesirable effect.

“I’m leaving,” Duncan announced through the mirror, signaling his departure.

Both Lucretia and Tyrian were slow to react, and Tyrian, in disbelief, asked, “You’re leaving?”

“I still have unfinished business,” Duncan responded nonchalantly, his gaze resting on Lucretia. “I’ll hold onto Nilu for now in your stead. If the chance arises in the future, I’ll return her to you.”

As he finished speaking, his image rapidly faded, and the green flames at the edge of the mirror disappeared like a phantom, leaving Tyrian and Lucretia with no time to respond.

The room grew quiet once more, and neither Lucretia nor Tyrian spoke for several minutes. Finally, Lucretia broke the silence, asking, “Did that really just happen?”

Tyrian offered a wry smile and shook his head, confirming, “It wasn’t an illusion. Could you ever have imagined something like this?”

“Not in my wildest dreams,” Lucretia admitted, her voice tinged with nervousness. “What do you make of it all?”

“You mean...”

“Do you believe what he just said?” Lucretia asked with a mix of seriousness and concern. “Father mentioned losing most of his memories

and having to relearn the world due to the profound influence of subspace. He also said this influence couldn't be fully eradicated but claimed to have regained his senses. What do you think?"

"To be honest, I find it hard to believe everything he said, including 'regaining his senses,'" Tyrian replied with a deep voice. "Without further evidence, I'm inclined to suspect a conspiracy related to subspace."

"Conspiracies don't exist in subspace," Lucretia countered softly, "only humans perceive such things."

"What about a human who's been influenced by subspace?" Tyrian sighed softly before continuing, "When chaos in subspace gains consciousness, it becomes more terrifying than pure chaos. However, things may not be as dire as they seem, and we can only hope for a miracle. In the meantime, we must remain vigilant and watch from the sidelines. You, who have served on the border for several years, know the importance of such caution."

"I understand," Lucretia agreed after a brief pause, then looked back at the oval mirror. "Is he really gone?" she asked nervously.

Tyrian considered for a moment before stepping forward. He removed the oval mirror from its place and laid it face down on the table.

"This version of Father makes me more nervous than ever," the famed pirate muttered.

Lucretia's voice came from the crystal ball, "It's no surprise you're uneasy after being defeated by him. It must have left a deep impression on you."

Tyrian glanced back without expression, replying, "Let's stay alert. We might suddenly hear Father's voice instead of Luni's."

The crystal ball abruptly went dark and ceased functioning.

.....

In the captain's quarters, Duncan let out a long sigh of relief, reflecting on the recent conversation with the pair of "children."

Once confident he had accurately remembered the discussion, Duncan took a pen and paper from a nearby surface and started recording the details based on his memory.

As he wrote, an unusual hexagonal emblem emerged on the paper, taking shape under his pen strokes.

Duncan's hand hesitated as he recognized the symbol forming on the paper unintentionally. It was the same enigmatic emblem Tyrian had shown to Bishop Valentine and Vanna earlier—the mark of the mysterious “ascetics” the true “Duncan” had encountered a century ago.

Putting down the pen, Duncan stared thoughtfully at the cryptic hexagon and its fragmented cross structure, wondering where to begin unlocking the emblem's secrets.

Suddenly, Duncan's eyes froze, focusing on a specific detail of the emblem.

A wet imprint had formed on the edge of the paper as if an invisible stream of water had seeped into the corner. As he continued to observe the damp spot, a faint, blurry line materialized at the center of the mark.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 236

Chapter 236 “Secret Contact is a Local Custom”

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“Thank you.”

A simple phrase, but it made Duncan catch his breath instantly.

He was sure that the word hadn’t been on the paper earlier, nor was there any sign of it being dampened by water. It had appeared before him out of nowhere!

He stared intently at the imprint on the paper, as green flames began to surround him. In a flash, his consciousness swept through the entire ship to verify if there were any uninvited “guests” on board, but he found nothing.

How did this word come to be? Who was sending me a message? Why?

To be honest, in that moment, he could somewhat relate to those he had frightened, like Vanna who had done a jump cleave in front of the dressing mirror in a dream, or Tyrian and Lucretia just now. Yet, he still couldn’t resist doing the same thing again.

The pressing question now was why this word had suddenly appeared on the paper.

Duncan’s brow furrowed. Then, he recalled a detail – while speaking with Tyrian earlier, he had joked, “If the deity behind this church is watching, then they owe me a thank you.”

Duncan's expression grew pensive. His initial reaction to this thought was that it was too far-fetched. How could such a joke be taken seriously? But after this instinctive response, he couldn't help but further explore this notion... and the more he considered it, the more restless he became.

He lowered his gaze to the damp corner of the paper. After hesitating for a moment, he picked up a pen and wrote a few words on the relatively dry edge near the watermark: "Storm Goddess?"

After writing it, he patiently waited, watching the damp area like a commander awaiting a response after pressing the big button. But no reply came, even after the water had nearly evaporated.

It seemed the other party had left a message and departed... or maybe they had deliberately left it unread?

Duncan's mind raced with absurd and bizarre thoughts. Despite his time in this strange world, the current level of strangeness far exceeded his prior experiences. Even his usually composed mind struggled to hold on, but after waiting for an extended period with no results, he slowly put down the pen and attempted to regain his composure.

After contemplating for a moment, he stood up and pushed open the wooden door leading to the chart room. At the navigation table, Goathead continued to stare at the foggy chart, turning its head upon hearing the door open.

"Did you notice anything unusual on the ship just now?" Duncan asked without waiting for Goathead to speak.

"On the ship? No, nothing out of the ordinary," Goathead replied instinctively, then caught on, "Did something happen? I can search the entire ship..."

"No need, I've already checked. I just wanted to confirm with you," Duncan waved his hand, then collected himself and decided not to mention the mysterious writing on the paper, "I just saw Tyrian and Lucretia – they happened to be in contact with each other."

Goathead sensed that the captain's current state was somewhat odd, but since he didn't elaborate, it wisely refrained from asking. "Many people speculate that Tyrian and Lucretia have a distant relationship as siblings. Evidence lies in Tyrian being a pirate in the heart of civilized territory, while his sister is engaged in the great adventure of exploring the borderlands, and they never meet... But now it seems the world's wild guesses are just that, wild guesses."

"In my view, their relationship remains strong, especially when they confront me together. Their sense of unspoken understanding has been nurtured since childhood when they both suffered at the hands of their father," Duncan said, shaking his head, "As for now, they're merely pursuing different paths in life."

"Ah, the sentimental musings of an old father," Goathead exaggeratedly proclaimed, "Are you still communicating effectively with your 'children'?"

"... I think it's going well," Duncan thought for a moment and nodded slightly, "I believe I have fully expressed my goodwill and partially implanted the notion of reason and 'returning to humanity' in their minds. I have also made some preparations for future interactions; at least the next time we encounter the Sea Mist, we shouldn't need to engage in a firefight. This is the first step towards a harmonious family."

For a moment, Goathead remained silent, which struck Duncan as odd. "Why aren't you speaking this time? Aren't you usually quite talkative?"

Goathead changed to a softer tone, "Even without an exchange of gunfire, calling it a harmonious family seems overly optimistic. I find it difficult to assess..."

Duncan didn't know how to respond and could only shrug in silence. After a moment of quiet, Goathead asked, "It sounds like you're already preparing for the next meeting with Tyrian. Why the sudden enthusiasm?"

"Because he once served the Frost Queen," Duncan said lightly, "And now, I'm curious about that part of his past."

“Is it because of Miss Alice?”

“Partly,” Duncan replied nonchalantly.

He then shook his head, turned around, went back to his room, found the piece of paper he had been scribbling on earlier, and tore off the corner that had revealed the mysterious writing when it became wet. He then returned to the navigation table in the chart room and placed the unusual hexagonal pattern in front of Goathead. “Have you seen this before?” he inquired.

Goathead’s neck creaked as it turned to focus on the pattern, then shook its head inquisitively. “Never seen it. What is it?”

“You’ve never seen it?” Duncan frowned and only spoke slowly after he was certain that Goathead wasn’t hiding anything. “Over a century ago, a group of ascetics visited the Vanished, and one of them had an amulet with this pattern on it.”

Goathead fell silent for a moment, then spoke softly: “Oh, then it’s beyond my ‘insight’.”

Duncan immediately grasped what the wooden sculpture meant.

Back then, Goathead wasn’t aboard the Vanished yet because this guy wasn’t originally a crew member of the ship – he appeared after the Vanished enter subspace and returned.

In truth, he had always been curious about how Goathead ended up on this ship, why it had become the “first mate” here after the real Captain Duncan had gone entirely mad, and... curious about its connection to subspace and the countless secrets it knew.

Unfortunately, Goathead never discussed these matters with him – even when Duncan attempted to probe the subject, it always changed the topic quite noticeably.

This was an attitude and a hint – it couldn’t speak, or it would cause significant trouble.

Duncan snapped back to reality then, momentarily setting aside his tangled thoughts. After pondering for a while, he nodded at Goathead: “You keep steering the ship; I need to handle something.”

“Of course, always at your service!” Goathead responded.

Duncan put the paper away and turned to walk towards his cabin. However, halfway there, he suddenly heard Goathead’s voice behind him: “Captain.”

Duncan stopped in his tracks and turned slightly: “Hmm?”

“You can always trust your loyal first mate.”

Duncan didn’t say anything, but he nodded slightly, then proceeded to his room.

...

Morris tossed and turned in bed for a while before finally getting up. His wife was still beside him, sleeping peacefully with her light and steady snores punctuating the silence that’s brightened by the glow of the World’s Creation shining through the window.

Everything seemed like a dream, yet everything was real.

Morris rarely struggled with sleep, but ever since his wife “returned,” he found himself unable to drift off, and he knew precisely why.

Fear.

He feared that if he slept, this dreamlike reality would truly become a dream and that all the miracles were merely his own wishful thinking, like eleven years ago when he prayed to subspace and received only a fragile illusion.

Driven by this fear, he dared not even pray to Lahem casually. Over the past several years, even though he deliberately distanced himself from the church, he never stopped his daily habit of prayer. But now, because of the

subconscious avoidance of the “Eye of Truth” blessing, he even forcibly restrained himself from praying.

Morris took a deep breath, allowing his slightly foggy mind to awaken in the cool night air. He then got up, put on a coat, and silently stood beside the bed, watching his sleeping wife.

He had been doing this for the past couple of days.

But this time, after only a short while of watching, he suddenly felt a momentary confusion in his mind, followed by a vague call and an indistinct majestic figure appearing in his thoughts. Morris immediately shuddered and realized what had occurred.

The captain was calling him.

The elderly scholar took two deep breaths, fully awakening, and quickly walked to the storeroom connected to the master bedroom. He turned on the light in the storeroom and looked at an antique mirror placed in the corner.

The mirror’s edge was slowly engulfed by ethereal ghost flames, and the captain’s figure gradually materialized within it.

For some reason, what should have been a scene that terrified ordinary people filled Morris with an inexplicable sense of calm.

He found a “sense of reality” in the floating flames and the majestic figure —just as pain can prove one is alive, they confirmed that a miracle had indeed occurred, and that all the evidence before him was genuine.

Morris approached the antique mirror and slightly bowed his head:
“Captain, what are your orders?”

Duncan saw Morris and the cluttered room behind him, momentarily imagining a middle-aged salaryman sneaking into the storage room to play games, fearing his wife’s discovery...

The next instant, he composed his face, brushed aside the unsuitable association, and spoke seriously to Morris: “I need you to investigate

something that may be related to history or a secret organization.”

“What kind of thing?” Morris inquired.

“A mysterious pattern found on the amulet of a group of ascetics.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 237

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Chapter 237 “People with Insomnia”

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The flames in the mirror vanished, and the majestic figure gradually faded into the darkness, but the mysterious symbol that Captain Duncan showed him remained vivid in Morris’s mind.

Morris left the storeroom and glanced at his sleeping wife before heading to the writing desk under the window. He took out a pen and paper and carefully sketched the peculiar symbol from memory using the bright, cold night light from outside.

Afterward, the learned scholar furrowed his brow as he examined the pattern on the paper. Even scholars who had aced the most challenging exams at the Truth Academy would be baffled by this symbol. Morris could only be certain that it was not a symbol used by any cult, church, or official organization, nor did it adhere to the runes and symbols of mysticism.

According to the captain, this emblem had been carried by several ascetics who visited the Vanished a century ago, and he had suddenly taken an interest in it.

As the captain’s “kin,” Morris had no intention of delving into the captain’s secrets, but he was immensely curious about these enigmatic ascetics. What kind of “people” would bear such an unusual charm and suddenly pique Captain Duncan’s interest a century later?

After contemplating for some time, Morris exhaled and carefully locked the paper in the writing desk's drawer. He planned to visit the study the next morning to peruse books about ancient cities and secret societies. Although the God of Wisdom had granted him an exceptional memory, there were still gaps, and perhaps he had a record of this symbol in his own library?

Then if he couldn't find any clues in his library, he would search the city's major libraries and the upper city university archives. Though he had left his university position years ago, his connections and influence remained, and borrowing rare books wouldn't be an issue.

And if worse came to worse that there were no records in all of Pland, he would write letters or send telegrams to old friends in Lansa and other places who were well-versed in history and mysticism. Even if they couldn't help, their universities and research institutions could.

In any case, this was the first task the captain had entrusted him, and he had granted him the miracle of resurrection. The least he could do was offer some assistance.

As Morris silently mulled over this, his insomnia-stricken mind unknowingly settled. He seemed to rediscover the spirited enthusiasm he had when he first entered the academy, imbued with determination for a specific goal. And with this resolve, his long-lost drowsiness returned.

...

Tyrian had been restlessly tossing and turning in bed for several hours, still unable to sleep.

He couldn't recall the last time he experienced such severe insomnia. As the commander of the Sea Mist Fleet and the captain of the Sea Mist itself, he had always maintained strong self-control and healthy sleep habits. He could fall asleep and wake up like clockwork—except for today.

Various thoughts and images rose and fell in his mind, interwoven with countless faded, trivial memories: the flames in the mirror, his somber and

imposing father, the exploration ship setting sail amid cheers and praises, the ship's silhouette returning from subspace...

Even the battle against the Vanished and the Frost Queen's words to him when the "Abyss Plan" was launched, "There are terrifying things beneath the deep sea, but all the answers must lie beneath it as well."

Tyrian sat up in bed, turning over.

He glanced at the nearby wall, where the mirror that once hung lay upside down on a table. A light oval mark remained on the wall, and the case containing the crystal ball and lens set was placed at the foot of the bed, locked up once more. Meanwhile, other parts of the room with mirrors or smooth surfaces were covered with cloth.

However, those white cloths draped over the mirrors only made the room seem eerier and more sinister. In the cold light of the World's Creation, the room appeared to be a gathering place for ghosts.

But Tyrian wasn't afraid of ghosts. He had a crew of undead sailors, a cursed living battleship, and several secret bases prone to strange and frightening illusions. Compared to his father, ghosts were hardly frightening.

After pacing in the quiet and unsettling room for a few minutes, Tyrian's gaze fell on the handheld case at the foot of the bed. After some hesitation, he picked it up.

Perley had already flown back to the ship to report. As the captain, Tyrian couldn't very well go to the next room to wake up his subordinates and play cards to pass the time, so he decided to see what Lucretia was doing.

Perhaps she was experiencing insomnia like him.

He turned on the electric light, placed the case on the table, and opened the lid. The crystal ball, surrounded by complex lenses and curved connecting arms, was revealed. Tyrian reached out, but before he could activate the lens, the device buzzed, and the central crystal ball quickly lit up.

After a moment, Lucretia's figure appeared in the crystal ball.

The "Sea Witch," dressed in a veil with black hair cascading over her shoulders and exuding a mysterious aura, looked at her brother with a weary expression.

"Brother, I can't sleep."

"If you can't sleep, you can find your dolls to pass the time, or do your magic experiments," Tyrian said sternly. "I'm in the middle of planning the future development of the Sea Mist Fleet..."

"But your hair looks like you've been rolling around on your pillow for four hours," Lucretia said calmly. "Is this the new posture for planning development?"

"..."

Tyrian fell silent for a few seconds, looking exhausted. "Do you have any good suggestions for treating insomnia? Use your 'witch' knowledge... forget it, pretend I didn't ask."

The two siblings lapsed into an awkward silence, but gradually, the conversation inevitably shifted towards a specific topic.

"I made some 'modifications' to Luni earlier," said Lucretia. "I strengthened her joint protection and added a small container for storing holy oil and protective runes next to the soul sphere."

"Do you think that can stop Father from contacting you through 'Nilu' again?"

"No, but maybe it can prevent Luni from directly attacking me next time," Lucretia said, a hint of helplessness in her tone. "She actually still has lingering fears from the last time she attacked me. We discussed it seriously just now."

"What did you discuss with your puppet?" Tyrian asked curiously.

“She advised me not to be nervous, and I advised her to be more open-minded.”

“...”

They fell silent again, but not for long.

“Actually, I was thinking about something just now,” Tyrian suddenly said.

“What were you thinking about?”

“Do you remember Father’s last words today?” Tyrian went slowly, “He said he found Luni’s sister ‘Nilu,’ and that the doll had never been sold...”

Lucretia’s expression shifted uncomfortably, “What are you getting at?”

“This means that the doll shop is still there – do you remember the location of the doll shop in Pland?” Tyrian’s expression grew serious. “I only remember that it’s in the city.”

Lucretia frowned as she tried to recall, while Tyrian continued, “If Father really ‘bought’ Nilu from that doll shop, it reveals a vital piece of information: he had already visited this city before it was historically tainted in some way, and even acted openly here...”

“Have you considered that Father deliberately gave us this clue to investigate?” Lucretia suddenly asked. “Now that you’ve thought of this possibility, maybe it’s what Father intended for you to look into.”

“I have considered this possibility,” Tyrian paused for a few seconds before speaking again. “But even so, you know I won’t ignore this clue.”

“...I vaguely remember the shop’s location,” Lucretia said. “It should be on the edge of the upper city, near an intersection in the southern lower city. The shop owner is an elf lady...I saw her a century ago, and she looked quite old, but considering the lifespan of elves, she should still be the owner of the shop now.”

Tyrian nodded slightly, silently noting the information provided by Lucretia.

...

The sea began to stir slightly, and the Vanished swayed gently in the waves. Duncan sat at the navigation table, studying the mist-covered map in front of him with some boredom.

His physical body in Pland had already fallen asleep, but this “original body” on the Vanished hardly needed rest. As a result, night sailing had become a somewhat dull affair, especially with the double restrictions of not being able to read at night or at sea. He couldn’t even bring the entertainment books he bought in Pland to pass the time here, making this boredom even more acute.

After all, he couldn’t treat exploring this ship as a pastime every day – no matter how large the Vanished was, there was a limit to its exploration.

“I’m almost tempted to wander around the spirit realm and knock on Vanna and Tyrian’s glass to invite them to play cards,” Duncan sighed, feeling bored. “But with Vanna, it’s hard to say, and Tyrian probably won’t be able to sleep tonight...”

“If you really do that, he’ll be sleepless tomorrow night too,” Goathead immediately said. “But honestly, your idea is quite appealing, with a mix of horror and entertainment value – who do you plan to knock on first?”

“I was just joking,” Duncan glanced at Goathead, then returned his gaze to the map. But suddenly, he seemed to remember something and raised his head abruptly, “How long until sunrise?”

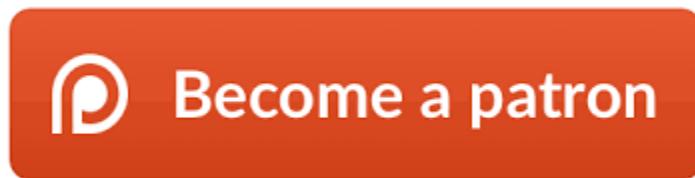
“...About three hours if it rises on time,” Goathead estimated roughly.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 238

Chapter 238 “Tracking of the Bright Star”

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In another three hours, the sun was expected to rise from the distant horizon, bringing the relatively safe and stable daylight to replace the unsettling darkness of night—if the sun indeed rose as anticipated.

Duncan glanced at the nearby mechanical clock, its hands ticking steadily.

“Do you plan to wait for the sunrise?” Goathead’s voice suddenly inquired.
“There are still three hours left.”

“Waiting idly for three hours is even more tedious than sitting here, staring at a mostly empty map,” Duncan replied, shaking his head. He stood up to stretch his shoulders and slowly walked towards the bedroom. “I’ll rest for a bit. If I don’t come out before the sunrise, wake me up.”

“Of course, Captain.”

Duncan nodded, returned to the bedroom, and casually tossed the paper with the mysterious emblem on the table before heading towards the nearby bed.

Though his body hardly required rest, he would occasionally take a short nap before dawn—not to relieve fatigue, but simply to “wake up and greet the sunrise.”

This practice allowed him to maintain a sense of being “alive” on the Vanished, preventing him from losing his humanity on this ghost ship. He didn’t know if there was a hidden danger in this regard, but ever since

realizing that the Vanished's condition was not as stable as he had initially thought, he consciously maintained this habit of "living a human life on the ship."

Duncan lay down, closed his eyes, listened to the whispers of the waves, felt the gentle rocking of the ship beneath him, and gradually relaxed.

...

In the captain's bedroom of the Bright Star, adorned with a feminine touch, Lucretia, wearing a silky nightgown, suddenly sat up in bed.

Her hair slightly disheveled, her expression weary and irritable, she clutched a half-human-sized, comically shaped yet eerily unsettling giant rabbit doll as she got up.

The doll, made of pink and blue fabric, had a scar across its face and a saw-toothed mouth painted with a blood-like, eerie red. As Lucretia rose, the rabbit doll shifted slightly, then turned its head. Its button eyes gazed at its mistress, and a little girl's voice emerged from its cotton-filled body: "Mistress, I thought you had managed to fall asleep..."

Lucretia glanced at the nearby clock and spoke with a hint of annoyance, "I slept for a few minutes, only to be awakened by a strange dream... What time is it now?"

"Two hours before sunrise," the rabbit doll said, hopping out of her arms and onto the floor. It bounced over to a cabinet, opened the door with its seemingly floppy plush paw, retrieved a bottle of the captain's prized wine, poured a small glass, and handed it to Lucretia. "You can still sleep for a while—this will help calm your nerves."

Lucretia downed the glass but still rose, "No need, lying down will only add to my irritation... Start tidying up."

"Very well, Mistress."

The rabbit doll, speaking in a little girl's voice, responded crisply. It took the wine glass from its mistress and put it away, then hopped and bounced around to tidy up the bed, seemingly skilled and efficient.

Meanwhile, Lucretia snapped her fingers, and the room's lights turned on. She took a slow breath, dragged her feet to the dressing table, and tapped a drawer under the mirror with her fingernail, causing it to open in response.

A wooden toy sailor, carved from wood, leaped out, adorned in a classic naval uniform and clutching a small command knife. He first bowed to Lucretia, then stood atop the drawer, waving his command knife and issuing sharp orders.

A large group of toy soldiers emerged from the drawer, quickly forming ranks and calling out names before running to the side to pick up a comb, hand mirror, water cup, and toothbrush. They swiftly and nimbly lined up, moving to Lucretia's side or the back of her chair, and commenced assisting her with her morning grooming.

Lucretia sat dispiritedly in front of the dressing table, allowing the dolls to bustle around her as she grappled with the fatigue and stress induced by a sleepless night and rampant thoughts. She contemplated matters concerning the Vanished, and after some time, she inhaled deeply, forcing her mind to regain clarity.

At that moment, a faint golden gleam suddenly streamed in from the gap in the curtains nearby, catching the "Sea Witch's" attention.

Lucretia noticed the golden gleam, initially unresponsive, but after a mere two or three seconds, her eyes abruptly narrowed, and she glanced up at the mechanical clock beside her.

There was still an hour until sunrise.

It wasn't time for the sun to rise!

She abruptly stood up.

The toy soldiers momentarily fell into disarray, then efficiently commenced cleaning up and reassembling their ranks. The rabbit doll, having already tidied the bed, observed her mistress's movement and hopped over: "Mistress, it appears to be getting light outside!"

"It isn't time for daylight yet," Lucretia responded quickly, striding towards the window, "Where are we now?"

"We're still following the course set last night," the rabbit doll answered promptly, "We're already close to where the 'big thing' is supposed to have fallen!"

As soon as the rabbit doll finished speaking, Lucretia flung open the thick curtains and thrust open the window, reinforced with a fine metal mesh.

A thin, hazy fog lingered on the sea surface outside the window, a common sight in the border area. Within that thin, hazy fog, a vast, faint golden glow floated quietly on the sea surface, its distance from the Bright Star still uncertain.

A massive, glowing object floated on the sea surface.

Lucretia gazed intently in that direction, inhaling deeply, and her body suddenly transformed into a whirl of colorful paper fragments. The colorful fragments swept out the window, soaring across the deck, through the stairs, and into the cockpit situated in the upper middle part of the ship.

Inside the cockpit, the clockwork puppet Luni, dressed as a maid, was navigating the ship. She instantly sensed her mistress's approach, and as the colorful paper fragments flew in, she relinquished the steering wheel. The following second, Lucretia's figure materialized from the paper fragments and took control of the wheel.

"Mistress, I was about to send someone to summon you," Luni said, stepping aside, "That golden light suddenly emerged from the fog, and it appears to be the 'fallen object' we've been tracking."

“Increase to full speed, have everyone on standby, and prepare the rear of the ship for entering the spirit world at any time,” Lucretia commanded swiftly, “Do we have enough spirit dust and magic oil reserves?”

Luni responded promptly, “Reserves are sufficient, and your orders have been relayed.”

Lucretia nodded, and then the Bright Star sprang to life at the captain’s command.

A large number of clockwork sailors, magical dolls, and ceramic soldiers hastened to their respective workstations. The specially designed paddle wheel structures on both sides of the ship started spinning faster, and the seemingly outdated engine gradually unleashed power surpassing that of modern propeller engines, rapidly increasing the ship’s speed. In the rear half of the ship, the ghostly “original hull” became more ethereal and blurred, with black hair-like stripes extending from the stern to the surrounding waters. From a distance, it appeared as if a dark tail trailed behind the Bright Star.

Under Lucretia’s direct control, the entire ship showcased a blend of magic and machinery, a fusion of beautiful elegance and terrifying grotesqueness!

As the Bright Star’s speed further increased, the enormous golden glowing mass floating amidst the mist and the sea became increasingly apparent to Lucretia.

The true scale of the object grew more immense as well.

Even the clockwork doll Luni gradually widened her eyes and couldn’t help but utter in a low voice, “My goodness... Mistress, what is that?”

Lucretia didn’t respond, but continued to stare intently ahead, concentrating on the massive golden apparition emerging from the mist, now resembling a small mountain.

It was too colossal to discern its complete outline from a single perspective, and its majestic, flawless appearance seemed beyond human construction.

A vast, intricate golden geometric body silently floated on the sea's surface, emitting a soft, alluring pale golden light. It was nearly three times the height of the tallest mast of the Bright Star, with walls extending on both sides. The upper half of the structure leaned slightly outward, like a terrifying cliff, and its surface bore no visible protrusions, appearing entirely natural.

As they approached, Lucretia and Luni began to notice more details of the colossal object.

"It looks semi-transparent?" Luni curiously leaned against the wide viewing window, "It looks... like a glowing piece of colored glass?"

"No, it seems to be more than just transparent..." Lucretia shook her head, her eyes unwaveringly fixed on the enormous glowing geometric body. It seemed as though she had detected something unusual about the edges of the structure when a small black dot suddenly emerged from the nearby mist and entered her field of vision.

It was a seabird—even in the vast ocean and even in this border filled with strange phenomena, such creatures persisted.

If anything, these "wild animals," lacking the complex intelligence of humans, fared better in the bizarre border seas than the brave and strong adventurers.

Lucretia's attention shifted to the seabird, which appeared to be disoriented by the golden light on the sea surface and frantically flew straight towards the glowing "mountain."

However, the next moment, the anticipated tragic collision did not transpire—the bird flew directly into the slightly tilted "cliff."

After a while, from the corner of Lucretia's eye, she saw the bird reemerge from another direction, seemingly unscathed.

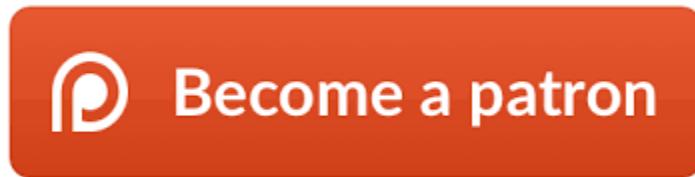
Luni also witnessed this scene and was taken aback, "Is it an illusion?"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 239

Chapter 239 “Falling Object”

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The Bright Star’s speed gradually decreased, eventually coming to a cautious stop hundreds of meters away from the faintly glowing, semi-transparent “cliff.”

However, in comparison to the colossal scale of the structure, a distance of hundreds of meters seemed insignificant. Visually, Luni felt as if the Bright Star had drawn near to the “cliff.” The impressive geometric structure, resembling a towering mountain, loomed with an overwhelming presence that could easily overwhelm and suffocate an ordinary person standing there.

“It’s truly magnificent,” the clockwork doll couldn’t help but exclaim, looking up, “And beautiful.”

Indeed, it was both magnificent and beautiful. If one could overlook its oddity, it might even be considered a wondrous sight, capable of inspiring a great masterpiece from a talented artist or countless poems from a poet.

It looked like a peak sculpted from pale golden, translucent amber with sharp angles or an exceptionally regular geometric iceberg. Emitting a hazy golden light, it floated in the water, encircled by a thin, slowly drifting mist that lent it a dreamy aura.

Various signs suggested that it was indeed dreamlike—it lacked a physical form, despite its apparent existence. It seemed more like a giant shadow.

“Mistress,” Luni couldn’t help but turn around, “What do you think this is?”

“I don’t know. I only know that it fell from the sky,” Lucretia admitted her lack of knowledge. She remembered the scene when the Bright Star first tracked this object—just two days prior, during the last hours of daylight, the Bright Star observed a massive, hazy, glowing body suddenly falling from the sky, tearing through the clouds, and disappearing into the depths of the border seas. From that moment on, she and her ship had been pursuing this object.

However, aside from the evident fact that it had fallen from the sky, she knew nothing about this phantom-like celestial visitor.

Lucretia carefully observed the base of the massive geometric structure, confirming another fact:

It was incredibly light, floating on the surface of the sea with only its lower half slightly submerged in the water. This slight submersion indicated that the seemingly illusory object possessed some mass and wasn’t merely a shadow.

Possessing mass meant it could be bound by physical materials... Could they use the Bright Star’s power to tow this object away? Could they bring it back to the civilized world’s territory and assemble a truly professional team to study it? The Explorers’ Association would probably be eager to help...

While it may work in theory, the practicality of this idea remained uncertain. How could they transport such a massive, penetrable illusion? Or was there a solid core within the glowing geometric structure that provided its mass?

As Lucretia quickly pondered these thoughts, Luni’s voice rang beside her: “Shall we investigate its interior?”

“Let’s proceed cautiously,” Lucretia said, biting her finger and drawing a drop of blood. The blood drifted forward and suddenly burst into an exaggerated puff of smoke.

When the smoke cleared, another “Lucretia” appeared in the control room —like a ghostly illusion, wearing a pale, tattered dress, her face cold and gloomy, and her body semi-transparent, hovering in mid-air.

Lucretia nodded at the illusion, which then silently turned around and flew toward the “mountain” hundreds of meters away.

Luni watched this scene nervously, witnessing the ghostly illusion swiftly cross the foggy sea surface and silently vanish into the “mountain.”

But nothing special happened.

“Mistress?” Luni turned to her master, “What’s inside?”

“Light and warmth fill the space, neither scorching hot nor blindingly bright... There is an absence of wind or waves inside, and the sea below appears even calmer than the ‘outside’,” Lucretia said slowly, carefully processing the information from her phantom clone, “For now, at least the shallow area of the ‘mountain’ seems safe. I’m moving further inward.”

Luni nodded. Although she was a clockwork doll, her “soul” was closer to human than any crew member on the ship. At this moment, her nervousness increased, and she reached behind herself to wind her key a few times, using this method to alleviate the slight tremors in her body caused by tension. After waiting for some time, she suddenly saw her mistress’s expression change.

Lucretia furrowed her brow and looked forward.

“I’ve reached the deepest part,” said the “Sea Witch,” “There is a core.”

“A core? What does it look like?”

“A massive stone sphere,” Lucretia said with a somewhat puzzled expression, “or at least it appears to be made of stone. It’s grayish-white, with many regular grooves on the surface, about ten meters in diameter, floating above the sea...”

As she spoke, Lucretia furrowed her brow and concentrated, as if issuing a command to the ghostly apparition that had already ventured deep into the glowing geometric structure. She continued, “It can be touched. It’s solid.”

“Solid...” Luni paused, her years of experience with her mistress quickly helping her understand, “You want to... bring it back?”

“The elven scholars in Wind Harbor should be interested in this,” Lucretia said calmly, “The patterns on the surface of the stone sphere display an obvious regularity, suggesting a complex geometric structure. I suspect... those proficient in mathematics may discern something from it.”

“How are we going to ‘drag’ this thing back?” Luni looked at her mistress, somewhat bewildered, “With a sturdy rope or chain? We have spare anchor cables on the ship, but they might not be long enough – the projection of the glowing body is too large, and the distance from here to its core may exceed the limit of the anchor cable...”

Lucretia silently stared at the glowing “mountain” and seemed to make up her mind after half a minute, “We’ll go in and pull it out ourselves.”

“Are you serious?”

“My curiosity is piqued.”

“...Alright, you’re serious.”

...

Duncan slept in the captain’s quarters of the Vanished, experiencing a brief and peculiar dream.

This was remarkable, as his body scarcely required sleep, let alone dreaming. In fact, since he came aboard this ship, he had never experienced a “dream” – he had some fragmented dreams in Pland’s body, but none were as clear and memorable as this short, strange dream.

In the dream, he saw a meteor, one that appeared suddenly during the day.

He stood at the bow of the Vanished, and the ship was quiet. He could not hear the noise of the goat head in his mind, nor the daily commotion of Alice battling with the bucket and mop on the deck, and even the entire Boundless Sea was silent, with no waves or wind.

The whole world seemed to have fallen into silence, and in this quietude, massive glowing objects fell from the sky – also silent.

One after another, luminous objects fell, gently landing on the placid surface of the Boundless Sea. Despite their massive size, they created no disturbances, as if they were phantoms falling upon one another. Gradually, the objects descended like rain, transforming into a terrifying and peculiar meteor shower. Countless glowing objects filled the sea, enveloping the Vanished in a sea of brilliance.

As the numerous luminous objects continued to fall, the sky gradually darkened. By the end of the dream, the meteor shower had dwindled, leaving the sky pitch black.

Duncan lifted his head at the dream's conclusion, only to be met with a dark red, blotchy, and frightening void in the sky, reminiscent of a dying eye silently observing the world.

Duncan's eyes snapped open, the vivid and bizarre dream leaving a strong impression on his mind.

He was amazed that he could dream aboard the ship, even more so by the strange scenes his dream presented—

A quiet world, silent meteors, a dark and lifeless sky, and the terrifying void like a dying eye gazing upon the world... Why did he dream of such peculiar sights? What did this dream symbolize?!

Duncan slowly caught his breath, sitting up in bed and rubbing his forehead in irritation.

On the eerie Boundless Sea, aboard the Vanished, he couldn't accept that the dream was just ordinary—something must have influenced him, or his

“intuition” sensed something, prompting the dream’s scene.

As he pondered in frustration, his brow furrowed.

Did it have any connection to the “World Countdown” he had recently learned about? Was it related to the “truth” about the world’s end that “Captain Duncan,” who had gone mad a century ago, had faced? Had learning this information triggered the dream, or had the residual memories of this body suddenly stirred? Was his interaction with Tyrian and Lucretia linked to the dream?

Duncan gently tapped his forehead and reached for the bottle of alcohol on the side cabinet, intending to use its power to calm his emotions. However, as he extended his hand, his gaze fell upon the nearby wall clock, and he paused.

The clock’s hands had stopped.

They had come to a halt one minute before sunrise.

The darkness outside the window was not illuminated by the break of dawn or the cold radiance of the World’s Creation.

The oil lamp’s flame in the bedroom was the only “living thing” still burning steadily, but its light appeared somewhat dim, casting a peculiar glow throughout the room.

Duncan’s gaze calmly surveyed the scene, taking in all the abnormal occurrences.

The situation was clearly not normal... Was he still dreaming?

He quickly dismissed this possibility—his clear consciousness allowed him to discern whether he was dreaming.

Suppressing the urge to open the window and investigate the situation outside the ship, Duncan got up and headed for the bedroom door.

His first destination was the chart room to see if Goathead knew what was happening.

Upon opening the door to the chart room, he looked at the navigation table where the sea chart and Goathead should have been.

The wooden sculpture was missing.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 240

Chapter 240 “There is a Breathtaking View”

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The goat head was nowhere to be found.

This sight was even more astonishing than that absurd and surreal dream!

Duncan stood at the doorway, dumbfounded for a while before finally regaining his composure. He promptly drew his sword from his waist and cautiously advanced.

True enough, the goat head had vanished. The familiar navigation table only had a sea chart and a few assorted items on it, while the spot where the goat head should have been was merely an empty table.

Duncan stared at the empty table for a few seconds before slowly looking around.

His eyes met more incongruous scenes.

All the furnishings were aged and worn, with cracks of varying depths appearing on the walls and pillars. Numerous items were absent from the shelves, leaving them almost bare. A dark, dubious stain had replaced a decorative tapestry that once hung on one wall, beside a grimy window. The view outside was dim and disordered, with faint, evasive flashes of light occasionally visible.

It was as if swift-moving shadows were rapidly darting through the air outside the window.

The entire chart room felt as though it had been deserted for innumerable years. Time had damaged most of the furnishings, while some unknown, even more hazardous force had left irregular, dark stains on the walls, ceiling, and floor.

Duncan couldn't help but pinch his thigh again, attempting to verify whether he was dreaming or not.

The sharp pain and clear thoughts reassured him that this was not a dream but a reality – a reality that felt foreign.

The sensation of stepping foot on the Vanished for the first time resurfaced, as the tension of being surrounded by boundless peculiarity caused Duncan's brow to furrow.

However, compared to his initial experience on the ship, it took him only a brief moment to adjust and regain his composure after taking a few deep breaths.

After all, he now had numerous bizarre encounters he never could have imagined in his previous life. His cumulative experience dealing with this strange world and the proficiency and confidence in his own abilities meant he was no longer the disoriented beginner he had once been.

The only thing causing him unease now was the concern that the Vanished being unstable and destined for issues seemed to be materializing.

Something had transpired on the ship.

Duncan walked around the room again, inspecting the now vacant shelves, the grimy walls, and the corner where two wooden crates used to be. Most items had disappeared, and aside from the navigation table, the room had become an old, decrepit empty space.

But one thing remained in its original position – the oval mirror with an ornate floral-patterned frame.

Duncan approached the mirror and cautiously peered into it.

Nothing horrifying materialized. The mirror didn't reflect a gory inferno or twisted faces, it was merely filthy. Dark stains covered the surface, but in areas with less dirt, reflections were still discernible.

Duncan didn't linger in front of the mirror for long. He returned to the navigation table and examined the sea chart.

The next moment, his gaze abruptly froze.

The sea chart had altered! The fog that had almost entirely obscured the map had disappeared, unveiling precise and intricate navigation routes on the parchment!

Duncan instinctively leaned in closer to make out the contents of the map, but he immediately realized something was amiss.

The paths on the map intersected, with overlapping navigation routes, but there were no meaningful labels or locations. It seemed like a disorganized tangle of lines drawn haphazardly, documenting a confused sleepwalk. Among the lines, there were no islands or city-states – nothing.

He couldn't find Pland, Lansa, Cold Harbor, or Wind Harbor... Although he was admittedly unfamiliar with most of the names of these city-states, he at least knew they existed and should definitely be present on this sea chart now that the fog had cleared!

Duncan's brow furrowed deeper as he realized there were no reference points on the sea chart. He slowly straightened up, tilting his ears to listen for sounds outside the window.

There was no sound beyond the window, no wind or waves, silent... just like his peculiar, brief nightmare.

The lines on the sea chart indicated the Vanished's trajectory, which would update itself as the ship drifted. So the lines marked on this fog-free, intersecting sea chart... were the records of the Vanished's voyage in which dimension?

Duncan took a gentle breath, and as if making a decision, he held his sword and turned to walk towards the captain's cabin door – in theory, the deck of the Vanished was just beyond the door.

He gripped the handle, took a deep breath, and pushed the door open.

The Vanished was sailing in a dark chaos, and the deck and structures on the ship were in ruins, long abandoned.

At least, the deck of the Vanished was indeed outside the door.

Duncan stepped out of the door, treading on the pitted and damaged deck that seemed on the brink of collapse, hearing the harsh creaking sound that suddenly shattered the stifling silence.

Duncan cautiously advanced, making sure the deck was only seemingly broken but not truly at risk of collapsing, and then he walked a bit more boldly. He then raised his head to assess the situation surrounding the Vanished.

What he saw was a vast and infinite chaotic space filled with desolation, dim shadows everywhere, and among those shadows, dark and indistinct light and shadow turbulence would occasionally emerge and gradually fade away. From time to time, peculiar flashes or light streams would suddenly brighten, illuminating the void in the distance like blind lightning. In that fleeting moment of brightness, one could vaguely see something enormous floating in the void, as if slowly rotating and contorting.

Upon witnessing those dark shadows and turbulent flashes, the only thought in Duncan's mind was "holy crap."

This scene... seemed familiar.

It was the same as the view beneath the Vanished – it was subspace!

Duncan almost cursed out loud, his mouth twitching twice, thinking that the thing he dreaded the most was bound to happen. He had recently considered avoiding contact with the mysterious and seemingly alluring subspace, but

he never anticipated that he would suddenly experience subspace drift with the blink of an eye – how did he end up here?!

However, after the initial panic, he quickly composed himself and restrained the urge to return to the captain's cabin.

He couldn't yet determine if this place was truly subspace; he only felt that it resembled the view outside the bottom of the Vanished. And if this place were indeed subspace... then retreating back into the captain's cabin would be futile.

In addition to this point, he also quickly noticed something... peculiar about his own situation.

He stood here, observing the scenery of subspace (suspected), without experiencing any discomfort, nor did he feel his spirit being eroded, or hearing any strange noises – but according to the “common sense” of this world... shouldn't humans go mad just by glimpsing subspace, let alone entering it?

But he hadn't felt any discomfort.

Not only did he not feel any discomfort, but he could still clearly perceive his body in Pland, as well as the “imprints” of Nina, Morris, and Vanna, who remained in the real dimension.

Even if he, the “ghost captain,” had some unique properties and some resistance to subspace, he shouldn't have been so... unaffected here, should he?

Duncan was baffled by his current state and even began to question whether this place was really the legendary “Abyss of World's End.” He then steadied himself and walked towards the railing at the edge of the deck.

As expected, there was no water beneath the Vanished – the ship seemed to be floating in the universe, enveloped by the same void on all sides.

Standing at the edge of the deck, he gazed at the distant, indistinct, colossal shadows and the occasional bursts of light, carefully contemplating how to escape this predicament.

First, he needed to determine if this place was genuinely subspace, and secondly, find and establish if there was still a connection between this place and the real dimension.

Since he had arrived here, it meant that there must be a place to “reconnect” with the real world, but this place might not be in the bedroom where he woke up – he had already examined the bedroom and the chart room, and found no signs of a “passage.”

After a moment of thought, he had a rough idea and turned away from the ship’s side, heading towards the cabin entrance in the middle of the deck.

Just then, something caught Duncan’s attention, and he instinctively stopped.

He looked up in the direction of the faint light, and a slightly brighter arc of electricity was slowly dissipating in the darkness. In the gradually dimming light, it seemed as if something enormous was slowly drifting above the Vanished.

Duncan watched intently as another “flash” appeared at that moment, like a winding and relentless lightning bolt, illuminating a vast expanse of “sky” in an instant.

Duncan finally saw the massive object’s outline – his breath caught in his throat.

It was a piece... of land, or a land-like fragment of shadow, of immense proportions, large enough to invoke a fear of gigantic objects. Its irregular outline resembled something ripped from a planet by some immense force, then violently hurled here.

On that suspended land, one could faintly discern mountains, rivers, and some more dubious, disquieting lines and shapes, all lacking color and life

– the entire “continent” was a monochrome gray-black, with rivers frozen in the gorges of the earth, making it resemble a coarse, colorless model, sealed in unchanging amber.

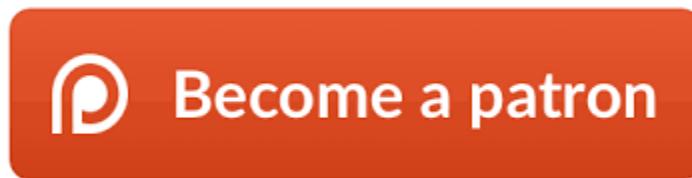
This vast celestial wreckage slowly moved above the Vanished, presenting Duncan with a desolate, ancient vision of an apocalypse.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 241

Chapter 241 “Other Side”

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An entire continent hung inverted and gradually drifted overhead, casting a vast and gloomy shadow that obscured four-fifths of the view. The overwhelming sensation it produced was astonishing, so much so that even Duncan felt smothered in that moment, fighting the urge to look away.

But he resisted the temptation to avert his gaze and instead compelled himself to continue observing the suspended celestial fragment.

Duncan was unsure of what was happening, how he arrived here, or how to return – but it was precisely for this reason that he needed to scrutinize any unusual scenes and collect useful information.

Was the suspended celestial debris real? Or merely a horrifying illusion? Was it the remnants of a shattered world? Or just an object deformedly projected in the warped spacetime of subspace?

The floating landmass glided slowly on an inclined path, drawing nearer to the Vanished. Duncan grew anxious as he realized that the ship beneath him seemed to be moving along the edge of the “continent,” with the potential for a collision!

As the landmass approached and the stern of the Vanished was about to graze the edge of a fractured mountain, Duncan suddenly felt a quiver beneath his feet on the deck.

Soon after, he thought he heard a faint, ghostly wail emanating from somewhere, accompanied by eerie creaking and groaning sounds from

various parts of the ancient ghost ship, breaking the silence of the Vanished. The next second, the massive hull beneath him began to turn slightly – narrowly avoiding a collision between the Vanished’s upper structure and the jagged mountain peak.

Astonished, Duncan observed the movement on the ship, listening as the spectral cries and creaking noises gradually faded into silence. Suddenly, he spotted something in his peripheral vision and looked up at the fractured mountain peak at the edge of the inverted continent.

It was a cliff, a jagged cliff as if violently torn apart, and a colossal humanoid creature leaning against it – “he” was nearly as tall as the mountain, with slender, pale limbs and a misshapen, swollen head. A single, large eye was set in the pockmarked face, half-open and half-closed, with an opaque liquid seeping from it, solidifying into amber-like droplets midair.

This one-eyed giant had clearly been dead for an indeterminate amount of time, but “his” remaining body still seemed to radiate an entralling aura of power and oppression. There were no visible injuries on “him,” as if “he” had perished from exhaustion, and up to the moment of death, “his” hands were pressed against the cliff behind him, fingers deeply embedded in the rock.

The colorless black continent and the pale, one-eyed giant who died on the cliff’s edge, in this disordered, dim subspace, under the lengthy “lightning” illumination, left a deep impression on Duncan’s mind.

Eventually, the persistent flash of light started to fade – it traversed the center of the continent and gradually dissipated. In Duncan’s view, the floating landmass slowly retreated into darkness.

However, he continued to gaze upward, knowing that the continent had not entirely vanished, and its last bit of structure was leisurely floating over the Vanished. He felt as though he could hear the low rumble of the heavy and massive object slowly compressing overhead – even though he knew it was merely his imagination, the rumbling illusion still echoed in his mind, like the final lament of a dead world lingering in subspace.

Duncan finally shifted his gaze, taking in the vast chaos beyond the ship's rail.

Occasionally, flashes of light and turbulent currents cut through the darkness. In this dark and chaotic void, those flashes and currents sporadically illuminated various shapes, ranging from large to small indescribable shadows.

Duncan took a gentle breath, glanced down at the ship beneath his feet – the Vanished, which was entirely different from the one he knew, exuding a sense of brokenness throughout.

He closed his eyes briefly, attempting to communicate with the ship, just as he had connected with the intact Vanished in the real world, in order to understand this ghost ship floating in subspace.

But in the next instant, his eyes snapped open.

He couldn't sense the ship – it wasn't that he couldn't communicate, but rather that he couldn't feel the ship's existence at all!

The moment his perception expanded, it felt as though the ship beneath his feet had vanished, leaving no deck, mast, or cabin. He even felt as if he was adrift alone in this vast chaos, the intense feelings of emptiness and disorientation that followed disrupting his focus.

Duncan stared at the ship's structure in disbelief, stepping on the deck as if he couldn't accept that the ship carrying him was merely an illusion.

Or... was he the "illusion"?

Duncan's mind raced for a moment, then he shook his head and walked towards the hatch leading to the lower deck.

He resolved to carry on with his initial exploration plan.

Regardless of the ship's true nature or why it appeared "non-existent" to his perception, it was still transporting him and had demonstrated no intent to

expel or harm him as the “captain.” This provided Duncan with the motivation and confidence to continue exploring.

He descended the steps and entered the spacious cabin below the deck.

After opening several cabins in succession, they all revealed the same dilapidated scene, with dubious black stains covering the walls and ceilings, and all the rooms were empty – some rooms were distinctly filled with items in Duncan’s memory, but now only broken walls and pillars remained.

He even specifically sought out Alice’s cabin, which, naturally, was also empty – for some reason, this actually gave him a sense of relief.

He would rather not encounter familiar people or objects in this eerie and terrifying place.

After leaving Alice’s room, Duncan proceeded through the crew area and dining area, heading deeper into the cabin.

When he reached the central warehouse, he hesitated for a couple of minutes in front of the stairs leading to the lower levels.

In the real-world Vanished, he had explored those areas, knowing that the cabins of light and shadow inversion lay below, and even deeper, the “broken bottom” – but during that exploration, he had a special lantern with him.

That lantern could help him extend his perception and reveal the twisted and dangerous corners of the cabin in advance.

But here, he hadn’t found that lantern.

Nevertheless, after a moment of hesitation, Duncan decided to press on.

The situation here had changed so drastically compared to the real dimension that even if he found the lantern, it might not prove useful in the rooms below. Moreover, the primary function of the lantern was to enhance

his perception. However, in his perception, this ship didn't exist at all, so what would be the point of expanding his perception further?

Duncan simply raised his sword, lightly running his finger through the air above the blade. A faint green flame ignited along the edge, casting limited light.

Using the sword as a source of illumination, he cautiously descended the stairs and moved forward.

A dark, expansive cabin came into view.

This was the “light and shadow inverse” cabin. In the real dimension, this cabin was filled with oil lamps, but the relationship between the light from the lamps and the darkness in the cabin corners was inverted. The brighter the light, the darker the corners became, and vice versa.

Duncan looked around.

There was no light and shadow inversion here; only a uniform, chaotic dimness. The spiritual flame burning on the sword’s blade didn’t activate any light and shadow inversion mechanism, but instead illuminated the surroundings normally.

“...This place is much more normal.”

Duncan couldn’t help but murmur softly as he cautiously navigated the empty space, moving forward until another staircase came into view.

This staircase led to the bottom of the Vanished, a place filled with shattered fragments.

Duncan took a deep breath and stepped down, coming towards a door that appeared at the end of the staircase.

He instinctively glanced up at the door frame, remembering that a phrase had been written on this door, signifying that it was the last door to the bottom of the cabin.

Yet, there was nothing on the door frame.

No warning for future generations, no guidance for the path ahead, just an ordinary wooden door, slightly ajar, as if inviting visitors to enter.

Duncan wasn't overly surprised, simply looking away as he gripped the burning sword in one hand and slowly pushed the door open with the other.

Beyond the door was another dim area, an old and broken cabin.

But it was intact.

Upon entering, Duncan immediately noticed the complete cabin walls surrounding him. Although worn and shabby, there were no gaps in the walls, and the scene outside the walls was invisible.

The bottom of the ship in the real dimension was fragmented, but the bottom here was still intact?

Duncan felt an odd sensation in his heart as he continued to walk forward. After a few steps, he suddenly halted.

In the dim depths of the cabin ahead, an ancient, weathered door stood in midair.

Duncan's heart raced, and he quickly approached, the door's appearance becoming clearer.

It was identical to the door at the bottom of the Vanished in the real dimension!

Duncan reached the door, observing at first glance that it was slightly open, revealing a small gap.

Through the gap in the door, he could vaguely see the scene on the other side.

It was a fragmented cabin, with dim lights hovering within.

Duncan abruptly turned his head, examining the place where he was standing.

An ancient, broken cabin, dim and dusty, abandoned for who knows how long – it was just like the scene he had glimpsed through the door's gap when he first explored the bottom of the Vanished with Alice.

Duncan finally confirmed his initial suspicion:

He was on the “other side” of the door.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 242

Chapter 242 “Zhou Ming”

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Now on the opposite side of the door, Duncan couldn't resist approaching the narrow opening to cautiously examine the situation beyond it. This brought back memories of his previous experience after exploring the cabin's depths when he had first returned to his single apartment to verify what was happening through the door's gap. The scene and his mindset were all too familiar. However, unlike before, no other “Duncan” was wielding a sword, ready to attack from the other side.

Duncan's brow furrowed slightly over the thought and his current predicament.

He had made it to this side of the door and personally observed the situation. Moreover, he had scoured the entire ship without encountering anything unusual.

So, what was the entity impersonating him from this side when he was peering through the door from the bottom of the ship?

Duncan's brow creased as he turned to survey the vacant, dimly lit cabin as if attempting to locate the imposter that had masqueraded as “Zhou Ming” here. He recalled giving the other side a sword then, but if this were truly subspace, a mere sword shouldn't have sufficed to vanquish the foe. There should have been some residual traces.

Yet, there was none – not a single trace.

After an exhaustive search, Duncan started to question his initial assessment.

Perhaps what he had seen through the gap had been a mere illusion conjured by subspace, an illusion solely visible to him at the time, which was consistent with the notion that “subspace reflects the mind.”

Nonetheless, it didn’t explain why the illusion had left his own mind unscathed, even dissolving with ease.

Duncan gently shook his head, setting aside his perplexities for the time being, but he couldn’t help marveling at the enigma that was this weird shadowy world.

His focus shifted back to the door.

On this side, it was slightly ajar, leaning towards the door frame, while in the real dimension, at the ship’s bottom, it was outwardly open with a gap. The two were aligned perfectly, meaning he had found the portal connecting the two.

A faint smile graced Duncan’s face as he grasped the door handle.

Then, with a gentle tug, he shut the door.

Remarkably effortless – he didn’t forget how unyielding this door behaved when he had attempted to close it from the other side with Alice as company. Despite their efforts, they couldn’t budge it even slightly. Yet, on this side, all it took was a gentle pull.

With a soft click, the door sealed shut. Duncan silently gazed at the closed door, and after a few seconds, his expression briefly tensed before gradually relaxing again. His heart, however, lagged behind, suddenly pounding a half beat later.

During the brief two seconds it took to shut the door, Duncan had cleared his mind, not dwelling on the consequences of being trapped and unable to return. Instead, he only allowed himself a strong sense of the door’s danger

and acted without hesitation. Once the door was completely closed, he released the suppressed emotions and took a deep breath.

This place might have indeed been an “exit” connecting to the real world, but he couldn’t actually push the door open!

Despite the lack of concrete evidence, a powerful intuition told Duncan that returning to reality wouldn’t be as simple as pushing the door open from this side. This was temptation, a trap. He had already faced a similar temptation in the real-world dimension at the ship’s bottom, but this time it was more concealed and unexpected.

Duncan gazed intently at the door and then used the sword in his hand, ablaze with otherworldly flames, to swipe across the door panel. The eerie green fire surged and almost instantly engulfed the entire door. However, after a burst of intense burning, the door remained standing, seemingly unscathed.

This caused a furrow across his face.

Confronted with something that clearly belonged to the supernatural realm, the otherworldly flames failed for the first time. However, it wasn’t because the door was too resilient because he didn’t sense any resistance from the feedback of the flames.

In fact, he couldn’t even perceive the door’s existence.

It was like the ship; the door didn’t exist!

Nonetheless, the door couldn’t be non-existent. Even if the ship genuinely “didn’t exist,” the door had to exist because it could exert such a complex influence as “enticing oneself to open the door.” This thing definitely existed here!

Duncan strove to organize his thoughts as his mind brimmed with immense confusion. He first inspected the door and the entire cabin once more but found no clues to answer his questions. As time passed, he reluctantly decided to abandon his search for now.

He couldn't squander all his time in this peculiar place. Since the ship's bottom "exit" harbored significant hidden danger, he needed to seek alternative escape routes.

As he pondered, an idea struck Duncan.

He immediately pivoted and made his way towards the stairs leading to the upper cabin, swiftly navigating the dark, vacant cargo hold and the crew cabins above. Finally, he traversed the shadowy wooden door connecting the upper deck to the cabin and emerged on the open deck.

The weathered, ancient ship continued to drift in the chaotic darkness reminiscent of outer space, occasionally surrounded by light and shadow turbulence. These disturbances sometimes cast enormous, terrifying shadows of broken fragments that floated by slowly, at varying distances. Some fragments resembled shattered land, others twisted creatures, and some were utterly unidentifiable, merely piles of formless, colorless "accumulations" that were horrifying to witness.

Yet, Duncan's focus was not on these colossal floating objects. Instead, he strode across the empty deck, making a beeline for the captain's cabin door.

The door to the captain's cabin stood there silently, just as it had been when he left.

Duncan's gaze shifted upward, and on the door frame, in the faint light, he could discern several familiar words—The Door of the Lost.

As he had anticipated, the unique marking on the door remained!

Collecting himself, Duncan placed his hand on the doorknob.

Of everything on this ship, this door held the most significance for him because it was this very door that first brought him to this profound and mysterious world.

Duncan applied gentle pressure to the doorknob, pushing the door inward. Accompanied by the soft sound of the door hinge turning, the "Door of the

“Lost” opened easily, just as he remembered. On the other side of the door lay the dense fog he knew all too well.

After a brief hesitation, Duncan stepped forward.

The sensation of passing through the thick fog engulfed him, followed by momentary weightlessness and disorientation. But soon, these feelings subsided, and Zhou Ming slowly opened his eyes.

He hadn’t returned to the single apartment he had occupied for so long. Instead, he found himself in complete darkness.

Glancing down, Zhou Ming saw his familiar human form. Then swinging around, he spotted the door he had just passed through, silently standing in the dark, still open.

As he surveyed his surroundings, he saw only boundless darkness, an absolute, pure blackness, as though everything had ceased to exist, as if the universe had been eradicated.

Zhou Ming quickly deduced the new experience: on the “ancient and decrepit Vanished,” opening the Door of the Lost did not transport him back to his familiar single apartment but led him to a strange, pitch-black space.

This extreme darkness could induce immense anxiety or even fear in most people. Zhou Ming knew this, yet for some reason, he felt no resistance standing there. On the contrary, he experienced an inexplicable sense of relaxation and relief.

He couldn’t understand why he felt such an unsettling calm, but rationally, he knew something was amiss with his state. This clash between reason and sensation made him more cautious, and he attempted to take a step forward.

Although it was pitch black here and seemingly devoid of anything, the solid ground lay beneath his feet – when he stepped, he felt it.

Zhou Ming gazed down at where he had stepped, and at that moment, he suddenly noticed ripples forming beneath his feet, as if colors other than

darkness were emerging in this pitch-black place – the ripples disclosed some familiar text.

“His age?”

“About thirty-five.”

These two lines of text appeared as a question and answer.

Zhou Ming’s eyes shifted slightly, and then he tentatively took another step forward. As expected, when he stepped, new ripples surfaced from the darkness, still in Earth text and still in a question-and-answer format:

“His occupation?”

“A high school teacher, teaches language, and loves to read in his spare time.”

Zhou Ming felt his heart race. He subconsciously changed direction and took another step into the darkness.

“His height?”

“About 1.8 meters – not very muscular, but very healthy.”

Zhou Ming halted and silently watched the ripples beneath his feet expand. The gray Earth text became clearer in the ripples, then faded and dissipated as the ripples spread.

After an indeterminate amount of time, he took a deep breath and slowly, yet resolutely, stepped forward once more.

The text rippled and emerged from his footstep:

“What does he look like?”

“Like this.”

Abruptly, a light emerged in the darkness, and something seemed to manifest within the illumination. Zhou Ming saw a figure materialize before him, a figure that was his exact duplicate!

His heartbeat nearly faltered, and he reflexively stepped back. This backward movement made him recognize that the figure was actually his reflection in a mirror.

He glanced down at the fresh ripples that appeared as a result of his half-step back and saw the text materializing within them:

“What’s his name?”

“Zhou Ming.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 243

Chapter 243 “Return”

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Zhou Ming stood before the mirror, gazing silently at his reflection.

It appeared so vivid and lifelike that, if not for his hand reaching out to touch the cold, rigid surface, he might have questioned whether the person opposite was genuinely an “alternate self.”

After a considerable time, he finally averted his eyes from the mirror and peered into the expansive darkness that enveloped him.

How vast was this space? Could he walk endlessly if he proceeded outward? What was the essence of this shadowy expanse? Why had it materialized here, behind the Door of the Lost? What was the relationship between the Door of the Lost in subspace and the Door of the Lost in the real world? And, most crucially...

What was the text materializing in the darkness?

Zhou Ming stepped away from the mirror. As he did, the mirror quietly vanished, and the figure within it dissolved into the shadows. With each stride he took, more faint text appeared in the darkness, outlining everything related to him.

It resembled an in-depth personal record... documented in a vital database, the purpose of which remained a mystery.

Zhou Ming felt his imagination was insufficient. He attempted to rationalize everything he saw but acknowledged that, no matter how he contemplated,

it all seemed like wild, unadulterated fantasy in the end.

He even started to believe in the existence of a “Doomsday Shelter Plan” and that he was someone who had unknowingly taken refuge within it. His solitary apartment served as his haven, and the text manifesting in this dark expanse was his registration file prior to entering the shelter.

In the darkness, his thoughts raced unrestrainedly. However, after an indeterminate amount of time, he abruptly collected his scattered thoughts.

“...I’ve wasted enough time.” He murmured softly.

No more clues could be found here, only illusions that could unsettle his mind. Regardless of whether this dark space genuinely concealed a monumental secret or if it was simply another ploy and enticement by the subspace, he should not squander any more time here.

Zhou Ming inhaled deeply, steadyng his thoughts, and resolved to conduct one final examination and exploration of the dark space before departing.

He headed towards the distance, prudently and cautiously moving away from the door.

More text materialized beneath him—similar to what he had seen earlier but more precise and formal, resembling registration data used in official circumstances.

While quietly observing the text, Zhou Ming occasionally glanced back to verify the distance between him and the door, ensuring he hadn’t become disoriented in the darkness.

His caution increased with each step, and ultimately, he advanced only a few centimeters with every stride.

Suddenly, he realized that the text emerging beneath his feet had altered –

“?#% situation &... % whether @#?”

“?@* approximately between 355 and *& potential presence of &... % % & ...”

The text grew disordered, and the sentences became peculiar and incomprehensible to the point of being unreadable compared to the formerly fluid text.

Zhou Ming felt a stirring within him but did not cease advancing, only growing more vigilant. As he continued walking towards the fringes of the darkness, additional text surfaced in the shadows.

The strangeness and chaos escalated, and the frequency of disorder increased exponentially. At first, he could still discern a few meaningful words in each sentence, but soon it reached a point where not a single coherent character appeared across several sentences. Later on, he couldn't even see the “garbled” text anymore.

What emerged from the darkness was no longer text and symbols but a series of contorted, leaping lines, restless points of light, and even quivering projections that appeared to defy geometric principles.

He pressed on, and the tumultuous light and shadows that emerged in the darkness transcended ordinary comprehension. It was as if indescribable reflections from the universe's edge had transformed into a path extending beneath his feet.

Eventually, even the chaotic, leaping lines and points of light vanished, and nothing new materialized.

Zhou Ming promptly stopped.

He hadn't lost his sanity, nor had he become fixated on continually exploring the unknown.

He glanced back, and the door he had entered through had been reduced to a faint point of light yet still stood silently in the darkness.

Zhou Ming resolutely turned around and headed back. No matter what lay hidden within the depths of the darkness, the moment the information emerging beneath his feet reached its conclusion, he knew he couldn't proceed any further.

He returned at a swifter pace than before, rapidly traversing the void of darkness and arriving back at the "Door of the Lost" leading to the Vanished.

He placed his hand on the handle, and the solid sensation reassured Zhou Ming, who had been roaming and investigating the darkness for an extended period. Then, he took a deep breath and stepped through the door.

The refreshing sea breeze met his face, and the sudden bright daylight in his field of vision made Duncan feel slightly uneasy. The subtle swaying beneath his feet and the sound of waves crashing against the ship registered in his perception with minor delay – perhaps after spending too long in silence, the sudden crashing of waves seemed like thunder.

Duncan abruptly froze, looking around and taking in the familiar visage of the Vanished, the vast ocean, and the sun suspended in the sky, encircled by dual runes.

He had returned to the real dimension.

This unforeseen situation left him somewhat bewildered because, just a moment before stepping through the door in the darkness, he had been contemplating how to continue exploring the "damaged Vanished" to find a way back. He never imagined that simply passing through the door would transport him directly back to reality... what was the pattern here?

To return from the "damaged Vanished," presumably in subspace, to the real dimension, all he needed was to use the Door of the Lost as a transfer point?

He thoughtfully glanced back and saw that he was standing in front of the captain's cabin, and the Door of the Lost stood silently in the sunlight, with a few words on the doorframe shining brightly in the daylight.

Duncan's thoughts immediately sprang into action.

There were numerous doors on the Vanished, but only three were unique. The first was the "Door of the Lost," the second was the somber wooden door leading to the lower cabin that's marked with the "Final Door" label, and the third was the floating door at the bottom of the ship connecting to subspace. The last one could perhaps be called the "Subspace Door."

On the "damaged Vanished," whether it was the "Final Door" leading to the lower cabin or the "Subspace Door," the markings on their frames had vanished, while only the "Door of the Lost" in front of the captain's cabin maintained a consistent appearance.

Looking back, it seemed that this "consistency" might have indicated the true "exit" from the beginning!

With a vague answer in mind, Duncan sighed with relief and then proceeded to push open the door to the captain's cabin.

After stepping through, he confirmed that the opposite side was not darkness, but his own bachelor apartment – everything in the room appeared normal.

Then he returned to the ship, this time pulling open the door to the captain's cabin.

The familiar chart room, the exquisite furnishings, the familiar table, and the familiar Goathead on the table all provided a sense of solidity for the first time in his life.

Upon hearing movement at the door, Goathead immediately turned his head, its neck producing a creaking sound from the friction of the wood: "Name?"

"Duncan Abnomar, it's me, I'm back," Duncan instantly replied, guessing that the other party would certainly ask for confirmation – this Goathead could sense whether he had left the Vanished and might even be able to detect some kind of "change" in him to a certain extent. Its "name

confirmation” seemed somewhat random on the surface, but there appeared to be a pattern to it. “I’ve been to a distant place.”

“Ah, Captain! You’re finally back!” Goathead immediately let out an exaggerated and attentive voice that’s as boisterous as ever. “You suddenly vanished from the ship, and I was really shocked! At least when you travel to the spirit realm, you usually leave your body here! But just now, all your aura was gone... And you came back from the deck? Where have you been?”

“All my aura was gone? Completely left the ship?” Duncan’s eyes shifted subtly with that thought.

He had indeed entered the suspected subspace with his physical body, not the “conscious projection” he initially thought!

He met Goathead’s dark gaze, hesitated momentarily, and spoke: “Don’t be scared when I tell you this.”

“Ah, don’t worry, your first mate is not only loyal and brave but also courageous and loy...”

“I went to subspace.”

Goathead: “...?!”

It took a full half-minute before the creature suddenly made a crunching sound as if its neck was about to snap: “Ca...Ca...Captain?! You said you...”

“I went to subspace if I didn’t go the wrong way,” Duncan said as he walked into the captain’s cabin and picked up the lantern on the shelf next to him. “Wait for me for a moment.”

Without waiting for Goathead to respond, he left the captain’s cabin with the lantern and hurriedly traversed the deck and multiple cabins, heading straight for the lowest level of the Vanished.

He passed through the “Final Door” and arrived at the broken lower cabin.

Between the fractured hull of the lower cabin, it was still the same dim and chaotic scene, with limited visibility revealing few details. It only showed turbulent light, shadow streams, and occasional flashes dancing and flowing in darkness.

And the most dangerous “Subspace Door” stood silently in the cabin’s center.

The door was tightly closed, without a single gap.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 244

Chapter 244 “A Glimpse of the Truth”

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Duncan cautiously approached the door after feeling a sense of unease. He needed to double-check its status.

The “Subspace Door” was indeed shut – he had previously been on its other side, and its near-effortless closure had completely sealed off the door that was almost unbreakable in the physical realm.

Issuing a gentle sigh, he gazed up at the top of the door to find the enigmatic ancient text clearly etched on the doorframe: “This door leads to the Vanished.”

“To the Vanished...” Duncan couldn’t help but reminisce about the situation on the other side of the door, recalling the abandoned and decaying Vanished traversing subspace for many years. He suddenly gained a deeper understanding of the words on the doorframe.

The inscription on the door was true, and the other side truly led to the Vanished – another Vanished, the distorted reflection of the real Vanished in subspace.

Duncan picked up the lantern and turned to leave the lower cabin, quickly navigating through the contrasting light and shadow of the cargo hold and the upper structure, eventually returning to the captain’s quarters.

“Ah, Captain! You’re back!” Goathead was still there, puzzled, and the first thing he did when he saw Duncan was to blurt out, “Why did you suddenly

leave? You just said you went to subspace? You can't joke about that!
You..."

"I closed the 'Subspace Door' at the bottom of the ship," Duncan casually mentioned as he set down the lantern, "I went back down just now to inspect it from 'this side.'"

Goathead's speech was abruptly cut off, accompanied by another "crack" as his head hit the table.

Duncan couldn't help but glance at him: "Take it easy, don't develop the same problem as Alice."

Goathead didn't mind the captain's playful tone, and he didn't conceal his amazement either: "You closed that door!? You mean, you shut the door from the subspace side?"

"What else?" Duncan retorted, "Isn't that door impossible to close from 'this side'? Why else would I bother going there?"

"You... you did it just for that?" Goathead stammered, "You entered subspace and returned to the physical dimension solely to close that door from the other side? That's... that's not an ordinary wooden door for a storage room or a junk room. You just... closed it?!"

Duncan's mood improved somewhat as he delightfully observed Goathead, who usually talked so much it could make people's brains boil and become inarticulate.

But then Duncan realized he hadn't explained the situation clearly, leading Goathead to have some misconceptions – but primarily, he wanted to witness how Goathead's mouth would contort, which was the ultimate entertainment on the Boundless Sea.

Amidst the joy, the residual unease from exploring the "wrecked Vanished," and that dark space significantly diminished.

However, Duncan eventually spoke up. After all, the matter involved subspace, and clarifying certain aspects could help avoid future hazards. Additionally, Goathead possessed a wealth of hidden knowledge, and his insights might prove helpful: “I know you’re anxious, but don’t worry, just listen to me first – I did close that door, but entering subspace was unintentional, and I need your opinion.”

“An... accident?” Goathead was caught off guard, and his tone instantly shifted from astonishment to extreme seriousness, “Please tell me, what exactly transpired?”

Duncan recounted to Goathead how he had entered subspace after awakening from a light slumber – naturally, he left out the details of his exploration in that dark realm, focusing instead on the door at the bottom of the ship and the various scenes he witnessed while observing the chaos from the deck.

After all, aside from his own “true name” and “origin,” there was little else he needed to conceal from Goathead. Hiding his true name and origin was primarily because the stability of the Vanished had to be based on the “anchor point” of “Captain Duncan.”

Goathead listened intently to Duncan’s narrative without uttering a word.

Then he conceded that he was uncertain about the situation as well...

“According to your description, that was indeed subspace,” Goathead said candidly, “but I have never encountered a case like this, where you directly... ‘entered’ there in your sleep and then returned unharmed... You should be aware that although subspace poses a significant threat to the physical dimension, it doesn’t mean that it is an easily ‘accessible’ place. Its danger lies more in the fact that its contamination is unstoppable.

“Mental vulnerabilities, shaken faith, and misguided sacrifices can all result in the infiltration of subspace forces, but ‘infiltration’ and entering it like you did... ‘exploring’ are entirely different concepts.”

At this point, he paused, then turned his head, his vacant, pitch-black eyes staring directly at Duncan: “Captain, were you truly unaffected by anything over there? Do you genuinely... not feel any lingering effects in your head?”

“No,” Duncan spread his hands, appearing utterly sincere, “Do I look like I’m out of my mind? I’m perfectly normal.”

Goathead was at a loss for words.

Duncan then said thoughtfully, “I’ve always seen you worried about the Vanished falling back into subspace, and I assumed it was easy to fall in...”

“This... is a relative notion,” Goathead explained awkwardly, “Falling from the physical dimension is perilous, but even the Vanished wouldn’t just ‘fall’ easily. ‘It’s dangerous to fall’ and ‘it’s easy to fall’ are not synonymous. Furthermore... how can I explain it to you? Typically, the victims who tragically plummet into subspace... their process and experience of entering subspace are entirely distinct from yours. It’s an excruciatingly painful and horrifying process, and it’s often challenging to simply end with death...”

Duncan listened attentively and pondered for a moment before shaking his head: “I genuinely didn’t feel anything...”

Goathead hesitated for a while and sighed, causing Duncan to be taken aback by the behavior. This chatty creature had nothing to say for the first time in their relationship!

He considered momentarily and then asked earnestly, “...Should I be more concerned?”

“...You are truly deserving of the title ‘Mobile Catastrophe of the Boundless Sea’...” Goat’s voice lacked emotion, merely reciting mechanically like muscle memory.

“Let’s not discuss this matter,” Duncan waved his hand, shifting the topic, “What were those immense shadows I saw in subspace? The shattered

lands, debris, and that pale one-eyed colossus... What are they?"

Goathead suddenly became quiet. After nearly half a minute, he spoke slowly, "...As you saw, they were merely debris."

"Merely debris?" Duncan frowned, "That's not much of an explanation. Whose debris? Where did it come from? When did the wreckage...?"

"The wreckage of worlds," Goathead said, "All those that didn't endure until today have transformed into distorted shadows in the ancient past of subspace."

Duncan appeared taken aback, then repeated gravely, "The wreckage of worlds?"

Goathead grew silent once more, seemingly hesitating and weighing something. Ultimately, he raised his head slightly, "Do you believe the Boundless Sea is immense? Do you think... our current reality is still expansive?"

Duncan blinked, then suddenly realized, "You mean, everything in the current physical dimension..."

"... Yes, what remains after the fall," Goathead whispered, "A trivial remnant, with a few tenacious settlements clinging to it."

Duncan paused, then suddenly thought of something, "Is this the truth of the Great Annihilation?"

"It's merely an insignificant portion of it," Goathead said in a low voice, "The entire truth of the Great Annihilation has been buried in the river of time, and reconstructing its full picture is pointless.

"In your words, there lies a 'cosmic horizon' where all information exists beyond the unfathomable and undetectable realm. Unless a truly omniscient and omnipotent being could instantly uncover the secrets of all the planes of existence: subspace, deep sea, spirit realm, and the physical dimension, then there's no way of knowing what transpired ten thousand years ago?"

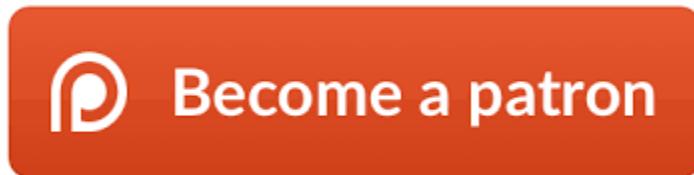
“I know what you wish to ask, but I regret to say that this is all I know, and I don’t guarantee that it’s entirely accurate. I do know some parts related to subspace, but even the so-called ‘truth’ might not necessarily remain unchanged after being influenced by subspace. Cause and effect, the sequence of time, all are meaningless there, and as for my fragmented knowledge... I can’t even determine how much of it is genuine memory and how much is residual shadows left over from my separation from subspace.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 245

Chapter 245 “There’s a big problem”

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Duncan fell silent as he pondered.

This was the first time Goathead had shared so much about the secrets of subspace with him, and it was also the most candid conversation they had ever had.

Before today, the wooden gargoyle sculpture had always shown great reluctance towards the topic and always diverted the subject over his indirect inquiries. The main reason was related to the Vanished’s stability and the stability of “Captain Duncan.” Yet, things changed today – the attitude had softened after he entered the other side and returned unharmed.

After pondering for a long time, Duncan looked up and thoughtfully stared into Goathead’s eyes: “...You knew so much.”

“I knew a little... but I never meant to hide it from you,” Goathead’s voice sounded a bit tense. “When it comes to subspace, the less you know, the better because sometimes knowledge itself is pollution. But it seems that the great Captain Duncan doesn’t have to worry about this...”

“Let’s just assume you’re sincerely praising me,” Duncan said casually, then looked Goathead up and down, unwilling to give up, “Is that really all you know? Are there more details, like the identity of that pale, one-eyed giant...?”

“You’re really putting me on the spot,” Goathead seemed helpless. “To be honest, my memory... has had some issues. I’ve forgotten many things

‘over there,’ and all I have left are these vague impressions.”

Duncan silently stared into those obsidian black eyes, and after a long while, he looked away.

Though unintentional, Goathead had indirectly admitted to another thing—it wasn’t an original “passenger” on the ship but came from “the other side,” from subspace! Was it something the Vanished had “brought” with it when it escaped from subspace, which then transformed into Goathead? Or did Goathead consciously hitch a ride to escape from subspace? Was this some kind of trade?

For some reason, Duncan couldn’t forget the image of the pale giant who had died at the edge of the celestial debris.

Subspace was filled with the wreckage left after the old world shattered, but those pieces seemed to be more than just debris... Goathead seemed to come from subspace, and it was intelligent, capable of thinking and even communicating. Were there more things like it in subspace? Or would Goathead change into something else if returned to the other side, into something... similar to that pale giant? Was that why it was so resistant to “going back”?

Many theories arose in Duncan’s mind, but in the end, he didn’t ask them directly because he knew Goathead would never answer questions that directly pointed to itself or to “Captain Duncan”—this involved the stability of the Vanished in the real dimension.

So he sighed gently, stood up, and signaled a temporary end to this topic.

Bright sunlight poured through the window, casting a hazy glow on the simple yet elegant furnishings in the captain’s quarters.

“I missed the sunrise today,” Duncan suddenly said. “Did Vision 001 rise as usual today?”

“Yes, the sun rose on time as usual,” Goathead immediately replied. “It seems that the previous delayed sunrise was just an accident, and Vision

001 is still operating normally.”

“...For an existence like Vision 001, as long as there is one problem, fear will forever be etched in people’s hearts. Those who noticed the ’15 minutes’ will probably never greet the sunrise as easily as before,” Duncan shook his head gently, then seemed to suddenly remember something, “Wait, do you remember when the sunset occurred yesterday?”

“Sunset?” Goathead recalled for a moment, then spoke uncertainly, “The sunset time should have been on schedule, without any impact. Is there any question... Ah!”

“You’ve realized it,” Duncan took his gaze away from the window. “Yesterday, the sun rose 15 minutes late, but it set on time. This indicates one thing.”

“...It traveled across the sky faster than usual yesterday,” Goathead realized belatedly. “Vision 001... can consciously adjust its operating mode?”

Duncan spoke solemnly: “At least it consciously accelerated yesterday to ensure that ‘sunset’ occurred at the correct timing.”

Goathead’s tone grew hesitant: “Is this... a good thing? This shows that Vision 001 has a certain self-repairing capability, and even if there is a small problem, it is consciously ensuring that the world runs smoothly...”

Duncan, however, did not comment after that. Unlike Goathead’s optimistic view, he felt even tenser than before after confirming the acceleration.

There’s a truth he knew—when a vast, ancient, and unguarded system suddenly begins to use its reserve resources for self-repair, it often means the accumulated problems have reached a dangerously critical point!

Duncan couldn’t help but come to the window, push it open completely, and look up at the enormous light source illuminating the world.

The light emitted by Vision 001 was very bright but not dazzling, and Duncan could barely look at it directly.

But suddenly, Duncan's gaze became fixed.

He stared intently at the sun, at the runes on the edge of the ancient vision, and he finally confirmed he wasn't seeing things after careful observation.

On the outer ring of the double runes, hidden beneath the brilliance, there was a slightly dim spot. Upon closer inspection, it seemed like there was a faint... gap.

.....

In Pland's antique shop, Duncan, who was sitting behind the counter supervising Shirley, Alice, and Dog copying letters, suddenly raised his head. He then quickly walked out of the shop under the astonished gazes of the three "students" and looked up at the sky outside the antique shop.

After a while, when his fragile human body began to feel a little dizzy, Duncan closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"Uncle Duncan, what's wrong?" Nina, who had been helping Shirley and the others learn to read, came out and asked worriedly.

Duncan raised his hand and gently tousled Nina's hair: "It's nothing, I just came out to check the weather."

"Check the weather?" Nina looked up at the clear sky with confusion, "You could just look out the window from inside the shop. It's such a sunny day... Ah, is something going to happen again?"

As she spoke, Nina suddenly lowered her voice and approached Duncan nervously. Grabbing his sleeve, "Did you think of something on the ship? Are we going on an adventure?"

"...Adventures, adventures, are there so many dangers to face?" Duncan looked helplessly at the girl, who had constantly been thinking about a "thrilling and exciting new life" since learning about the Vanished. "Don't create chaos. Isn't world peace good enough?"

Nina stuck her tongue out sheepishly when Shirley, who had come to the door out of curiosity, seemed a bit stunned after hearing Duncan's words. She stared blankly for a while before turning to whisper to Dog, who was hiding in the shadows, "The captain said he likes world peace."

Dog had no reaction.

Shirley frowned and repeated her words, then pulled the chain fused to her arm at an angle blocked by the door frame, "Dog, didn't you hear me?"

Dog's voice finally came from the shadows, "I'm learning the alphabet, don't disturb my studies."

Shirley: "...You're really into it, huh?!"

"Of course, Mr. Duncan will check our homework later... Miss Alice is taking this more serious than you!"

Shirley was taken aback, "Homework? What homework?"

However, Dog did not answer her because Duncan had already returned to the door with Nina in tow.

"Homework is something that if you don't do, I'll get upset," Duncan said with a smile, looking at the suddenly stiff Shirley, "Go and copy the alphabet ten times."

Shirley almost burst into tears, "Then... why don't you hit me instead..."

"Really?"

Shirley immediately shuddered, "No, no, no, I'll go copy the alphabet right now!"

Duncan shook his head, then temporarily arranged for Shirley, Dog, and Alice to study on their own, leaving Nina to supervise them. He took one last look at the sky outside before standing in front of the display window and sinking into deep thought.

Vision 001... was really in big trouble.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 246

Chapter 246 “Warm Day”

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Vision 001 emerged after the ancient kingdom of Crete vanished, rising from a sea of blood. It replaced the sun of the previous era, illuminating the world of the deep-sea era.

For ten thousand years, this colossal light source functioned like an eternal force, providing light and warmth and the stable order of daylight. Without Vision 001, there would be no city-state civilization today, and the entire world would be engulfed in a terrifying, never-ending darkness. The mortal beings who lost the protection of the ancient kingdom of Crete might have faded away silently in some bygone time.

Therefore, nobody could've imagined that Vision 001 would one day encounter a problem, just as no one thought the vast ocean might eventually evaporate.

However, it now appeared that this “eternal” sun was not truly everlasting.

Initially, the sunrise was delayed by fifteen minutes, followed by an almost undetectable gap in the rune circle. These unsettling pieces of information all pointed to one conclusion: Vision 001 had a finite lifespan! Duncan stood by the window, silently observing the bright daylight illuminating the street while his thoughts swirled like a tempest in his mind.

Of course, he wasn't the only one who noticed the changes in the sun. There were many intelligent people in the world. Ordinary individuals might not notice the changes overhead, but the authorities and churches of various city-states must have someone monitoring the world's largest Vision. What

would they think? How would they respond? Did anyone know what happened?

Duncan also thought of the zealous sun worshipers, those heretical devotees who venerated the ancient, real sun. They murmured all day about Vision 001 being the evil “false sun” and that the sun would ultimately fall. Did they know that the sun was genuinely experiencing issues? Or, were the changes in Vision 001 somehow connected to these sun worshipers and their sun heirs?

To be honest, Duncan didn’t hold those sun worshipers in high regard. In his eyes, whether they were ordinary heretics or slightly more powerful sun heirs, they were all similar, like combustible materials. However, the fire in the city-state of Pland reminded him that he shouldn’t be complacent. Ordinary Suntists may not be a significant threat, but the Creeping Sun Wheel behind them definitely was. Coupled with the elusive Enders causing chaos and employing strange, unpredictable tactics like historical pollution and reality overlays, who could say nothing would happen?

After much contemplation, Duncan decided to reach out to Vanna when the opportunity arose. As a high-ranking member of the church, she would be well-informed about the church’s activities. He could discuss the matter of the sun with her.

In doing so, he could also demonstrate his friendly attitude and concern for the city-state’s safety.

Of course, he should remember to knock the next time.

As Duncan thought about this, he also monitored the situation at the cathedral, and suddenly, he froze.

He sensed that Tyrian had left the cathedral... heading toward the southern part of the upper city district.

After roughly determining Tyrian’s direction, Duncan’s brow furrowed slightly as he remembered another aspect of his plan.

After some thought, he glanced towards the counter.

Alice was leaning next to Shirley, holding a pencil and diligently writing something on a piece of white paper.

At this moment, radiant sunlight streamed through the antique shop's glass window, casting its light over the charming displays on the shelves and bathing the interior in a warm glow. The sunlight touched the golden-haired doll's shoulders, enveloping Alice in a tender, soothing aura. It also graced the counter and the doll's pencil tip, bestowing the entire scene with an indescribable softness and an enigmatic atmosphere.

If this were a painting, it would be titled Beautiful Doll Writing Quietly in the Warm Afternoon Sunlight.

Duncan found himself captivated by this perfectly orchestrated interplay of light and shadow. Unable to resist, he walked over and peeked, observing Alice diligently copying an unfamiliar letter—no one knew where she began making errors, but now the entire paper was filled with interconnected small circles drawn by her...

"Mr. Duncan, look what I wrote~" Alice gleefully showed the white paper.

Duncan: "..."

After restraining himself for a while, and considering Alice's innocent, joyful smile and the lingering memory of the picturesque scene, he couldn't muster the courage to express his doubts directly. Instead, he managed a nod with a straight face, "There's... progress."

Although he couldn't discern what she had written at all.

Alice, on the other hand, was overjoyed. It seemed that a single compliment was all she needed. Then, she curiously peered into Duncan's eyes, "Do you have any instructions?"

Duncan hesitated for a moment, "How do you know I have something for you to do?"

“Whenever you have something to instruct, you always have this look,” Alice mimicked on her face, attempting to illustrate Duncan’s expression earlier, but her demonstration was indecipherable, “What do you want me to do?”

“Go with Ai to a place, and bring someone here,” Duncan adjusted his expression, gazing at Alice’s lighthearted smile. As he thought about the task at hand, his mood involuntarily lifted, “Guide someone here.”

“Guide... here?” Alice appeared puzzled, “What does ‘guide’ here mean? Do I need to knock them out and tie them up?”

“Where did you learn that?!” Duncan instantly glowered at the doll, “Come with me, and I’ll tell you what to do...”

.....

Compared to a century ago, the city had undergone significant transformation.

Electrical lines, modern gas streetlights, broader and smoother streets, taller buildings, and innumerable factories and pipes—the scholars and engineers had harnessed the power to advance civilization, enabling the city-state to evolve at a pace far surpassing the past. This transformation... even astonished Tyrian, who had witnessed many highs and lows.

However, within this city-state, there remained a few elements that faintly echoed the ones from his memories.

Upon disembarking from the carriage, Tyrian expressed his gratitude and bid farewell to the church staff who had accompanied him. Alongside a handful of sailors from the Sea Mist, he strolled through the streets bordering the upper city district of Pland. As he observed the simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar roads and shops on either side, his face couldn’t help but reveal a wistful expression.

“Captain,” an inquisitive sailor inquired of his leader, “What are we searching for here?”

“A shop,” Tyrian casually replied, scanning the street-side buildings that strongly reflected the central city-state’s style, “A doll shop with an elven-style sign.”

“Dolls?” The sailor was taken aback, “You’re into that as well?”

Tyrian silently glanced at his subordinate, “I have my reasons.”

Another sailor nearby interjected, “Captain, why not just eliminate him first... If you don’t trust us, you can take us all out after you’re done shopping and then clean up...”

“...I somewhat regret bringing you guys along.” Tyrian shook his head, helplessly observing the subordinates he had brought.

The sailors laughed over that remark. While jesting, their eyes persistently surveyed the nearby buildings, seeking the shop that matched their captain’s description.

In settings outside of battle, this was how he and his subordinates interacted —few could likely imagine that the legendary “Iron Admiral” would be such a tranquil figure among his subordinates, but Tyrian understood the reason.

These individuals had accompanied him through life and death for half a century—no bond in the world could surpass the loyalty and trust forged over fifty years.

Suddenly, a sailor’s voice interrupted Tyrian’s thoughts from the side.

“Captain, is it that one? The one across the street, the... doll house... it has a unique name.”

Tyrian looked up and instantly spotted the familiar name amidst a cluster of old street-side shops: Rose Doll House.

The sign had been replaced, the door had been altered, and even the exterior decor had been modified, but the shop’s name persisted—nostalgic elves,

even when residing in the rapidly evolving human city-state, rarely changed their shop's name with ease.

Tyrian suddenly felt slightly disoriented as faded memories welled up within his heart. It seemed as though he could glimpse that long, long-ago afternoon when his father departed for the port on business, and he surreptitiously slipped out of the house with his younger sister. Back then, the siblings had roamed the bustling city until they accidentally discovered that shop...

And in a hasty decision, they used the coins they had taken from their father's money box to make a purchase—his sister reveled in a full day of joy because of that, while he... couldn't recall whether he had been punished or not.

Regardless, it was one of the scarce, uncomplicated, and heartwarming moments within Tyrian's century-spanning frigid memories.

“That’s the one,” the formidable pirate murmured, “‘Doll House’ is the elven-style designation for a doll shop.”

With that, he advanced towards the shop that appeared to hold a unique place in his recollections.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 247

Chapter 247 “Revisiting an Old Place”

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The clear chime of the bell accompanied the opening of the door as the afternoon sun poured into the ancient shop that's brimming with an assortment of dolls. The elf shopkeeper, attentively adjusting a doll's frame behind the counter, heard the sound, glanced up, and saw a tall, black-haired man with an eyepatch entering her estate.

The elderly elf woman appeared puzzled by the “customer,” who didn’t seem to be there for doll shopping. However, after a brief moment of confusion, she greeted him with a smile, unaware that the towering, one-eyed man before her was the same boy who had purchased something from her shop alongside his sister a century ago: “Ah, welcome to Rose Doll House, feel free to browse.”

Pausing briefly, she casually remarked, “We don’t often see customers like you.”

Tyrian’s gaze slowly swept over the environment.

Assorted dolls, aged shelves, ornately carved stairs, the warm and tranquil ambiance, and the smiling elderly woman.

Faded shards of memories gradually assembled, creating a familiar scene that melded with the current view. It was only natural that the elf shopkeeper wouldn’t recognize him – he had changed significantly since a century ago with a hardened appearance from pillaging the frigid sea.

Tyrian subtly altered his expression, attempting to soften his features. He's aware of the intimidating aura he exuded, which made ordinary people uneasy merely by being in his presence.

"I'd like to ask about something," Tyrian didn't know if he had successfully modified his expression. He had lost the ability to remember how a typical person should behave and speak when entering a store, "Have you ever sold a doll named 'Nilu' here?"

After a moment's thought, he added, "A one-third scale doll, about this tall – adorned with a classical court style and an exquisite dress."

The elf shopkeeper hesitated before replying uncertainly, those eyes glimmering with bewilderment: "Yes... we did have such a doll. It had been in the store for many years before someone bought it not too long ago. But why do you ask?"

"What kind of person purchased it?" Tyrian felt his pulse quicken. He hadn't anticipated finding a lead so effortlessly and that his father had actually procured the doll from the shop so openly, "When did this occur?"

The elderly shopkeeper, taken aback by Tyrian's overly enthusiastic response, grew even more cautious, "I apologize, but I cannot divulge information about our customers. It's a rule of doing business."

Tyrian was momentarily taken aback, not anticipating this answer. He quickly considered his options, hesitating for a few seconds before seemingly making a decision, "You don't recognize me, do you?"

"Recognize...?" The elderly shopkeeper furrowed her brow, scrutinizing the unfamiliar human before her with confusion, "I don't remember serving a customer like you – most people who come to buy dolls from my shop are women, young men selecting gifts for their partners, or fathers choosing presents for their daughters."

"It's because the last time I was here was a very long time ago," Tyrian unveiled an unusual smile, "Do you recall, a hundred years ago, a brother and sister who took away a doll named 'Luni' from here?"

The elderly shopkeeper paused, then slowly widened her eyes, gazing at Tyrian in disbelief, “Ah, you are...”

“I know you might not believe it, but I have something to prove my identity,” Tyrian quickly thought of an item, retrieving it from his pocket as he spoke, “Elves like you are well-informed, so you should have heard about me... Take a look at this.”

As the elderly elf woman listened and accepted the piece of paper handed to her with bewilderment, she unfolded it to reveal a large portrait at the top, accompanied by the text of a wanted notice, a bounty, and the official seal of the Frost City-State...

“I should have some notoriety,” Tyrian stated earnestly, “Technically speaking, our family is quite famous... although perhaps not for something commendable.”

The elderly shopkeeper: “...”

After some time, the elderly elf woman managed to compose her expression, looked at Tyrian, and uttered a peculiar sentence, “It really is you.”

Tyrian seemed to sense that something was off and smiled sheepishly, “It’s me.”

The old woman contemplated for a moment, “So many years have passed... there’s so many zeroes after your name now...”

Tyrian tugged at the corner of his mouth, “The bounty... is indeed substantial, but it’s just for show. They add a zero every four or five years anyway, and no one will claim the reward.”

“I’ve never met someone who carries their own wanted notice as proof of identity, let alone a notorious pirate,” the elderly elf woman’s expression finally returned to normal as she refolded the wanted notice and handed it back, murmuring, “I did hear about the Sea Mist docking in port and

wanted to go see the excitement. I didn't expect you to come here first. How is your sister?"

"She... is living more carefree than I am," Tyrian replied, then glanced at the elderly woman with an odd expression, "I thought you would be frightened. Most ordinary people have that reaction when they meet me – even in places beyond the Cold Sea."

"I've encountered my share of peculiar things, and you're not the only pirate I've met. Besides, the city-state has declared the Sea Mist is a guest invited by Pland, so whatever happens in the northern seas is not our concern," the old woman muttered as she walked toward the counter, her mutter transforming into a scolding, "But I must say, being a pirate isn't a proper job, it's not sustainable, and it doesn't sound good. Look at your sister, at least she has a lifelong honorary title in the Explorer's Association. Of course, I've also heard that your relationship with the northern city-states is rather complex..."

Tyrian's mind buzzed, and he felt that he had just witnessed the poise and composure of a long-life span race. He had to quickly interrupt the old woman's rambling, "The Sea Mist fleet has already changed; the retaliation against the northern city-states and plundering are things of the past. Now, we mainly rely on collecting protection fees..."

Not waiting for the old woman to respond, he decisively concluded the topic and forcefully redirected it, "Can you tell me now who bought the doll?"

"Oh, it was a middle-aged man around your height... perhaps even a bit shorter, and quite thin, as if he wasn't in good health," the old woman didn't hesitate this time and spoke, "But I don't think you'll be able to find him; there are so many people in Pland. Were you planning to reclaim the other doll you couldn't buy for your sister back then? Ah, that's such a shame, if only you had come earlier... Wait a minute, I just realized, how did you know someone bought 'Nilu'?"

Tyrian didn't answer her question but frowned involuntarily.

Someone shorter than him, thin, and in poor health... It couldn't be his father.

Could it be... one of his father's subordinates?!

After regaining his humanity and reason, had he already started recruiting new subordinates? What was his goal? To rebuild the Vanished fleet?!

Tyrian pondered many things for a moment, only coming back to his senses when the elderly elf woman called his name twice. Then he thought of something and immediately inquired, "Besides purchasing the doll, did the customer say anything else? Did he take anything else?"

"He said... We just had a normal conversation," the elderly shopkeeper recalled, "He seemed like a customer who genuinely loved dolls, and he was very concerned about the dolls' repair and maintenance. He learned a lot from me; oh, that's right, he also bought a wig and matching hair accessories, seemingly for his own doll."

Tyrian's expression froze, "...A wig? What kind of wig?"

"A golden, long, straight hair, life-sized wig, I remember it quite well," the shopkeeper said, and suddenly thought of something else, "Oh, I have a similar one here; you can take a look."

As she spoke, she turned around and went to search through the storage room under the stairs.

Tyrian wanted to say it wasn't necessary, but he didn't have time, and at that moment, another peculiar knocking sounded from nearby, capturing his attention.

It sounded like someone tapping on a window from outside.

Tyrian looked puzzled and turned his head towards the source of the sound, finding a beautiful woman with waist-length blonde hair standing outside the window, gently rapping on the glass.

The admiral didn't react at first, but when he saw the woman's face clearly, he instantly froze in place as if struck by lightning.

The woman's appearance... was identical to that of the Frost Queen, Ray Nora, from half a century ago!

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 248

Chapter 248 “Invitation”

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The owner of the Rose Doll House had been searching in the storage room for quite a while before she finally found what she was seeking. However, when she emerged, she realized that the “guest” who had been at the counter earlier was already gone.

“So impatient...” After confirming that Tyrian had indeed left, the old woman muttered to herself, “No wonder one sibling became a scholar, and the other went off to war...”

But Tyrian would never learn of what the elderly elf lady had to say about himself back there as he had already dashed out of the doll shop and onto the street outside. Unfortunately, he found no traces of the blond woman after surveying the open area outside the shop.

“Captain, we’re here!” The crew members noticed their captain’s searching gaze and promptly gathered around.

“I wasn’t looking for you guys,” Tyrian responded quickly, his eyes still scanning the nearby streets, “Did any of you see a blonde woman standing by the window? She’s about...half a head shorter than me, wearing a purple dress.”

The sailors exchanged glances before looking back at Tyrian, astonishment in their eyes.

“What’s with those expressions?” Tyrian furrowed his brow at the weird faces coming his way.

“Captain...” one sailor hesitantly began, “Love at first sight is wonderful, but I think cross-city-state relationships are...”

Tyrian calmly stared at his crew member, “If you utter another word, I’ll stuff you into the six main cannons of the Sea Mist and fire you in separate directions.”

The sailor immediately fell silent as Tyrian’s mind raced.

He was certain he hadn’t been mistaken earlier; a woman bearing a striking resemblance to Queen Ray Nora had indeed been tapping on the window outside.

In the midst of a vast crowd, Tyrian wouldn’t have reacted so strongly to someone with a similar appearance to the Frost Queen – he had seen many lookalikes throughout his half-century-long life. However, the fact that she had been knocking on the window outside made a difference.

Someone nearly identical to the Frost Queen had shown up near the doll shop as if anticipating his arrival, tapping on the window to catch his attention and then disappearing when he emerged. This sequence of events sent a clear message – she was clearly targeting him.

Tyrian’s brow furrowed as if he had an inkling of why the lady fled. He glanced at the people he had brought along, “All of you, head back to the cathedral.”

“Eh?” The sailors were taken aback, and one hesitantly replied, “But...”

“No buts,” Tyrian dismissed them with a wave, “I have some matters to attend to, so you all go ahead.”

Another sailor couldn’t help but interject, “But Captain, the few of us...”

Tyrian’s expression turned stern, “This is an order.”

“But we didn’t bring any money,” the third sailor finally completed his thought, “We don’t even have money for the bus fare—it’s quite a long way from here to the cathedral.”

Tyrian: “...”

Moments later, the “Iron Admiral” had tossed a pouch of coins to his subordinates, his teeth clenched as he forced out a few words, “You guys, just leave.”

The sailors departed, and Tyrian finally allowed himself a small sigh of relief. He then surveyed his surroundings, and after a brief moment of consideration, he headed towards the most secluded corner of the street in his line of sight, quietly awaiting the other party to reveal themselves.

If his hunch was accurate, the other party would surely make themselves known willingly—he had just sent away his crew on the street to convey a “ready to meet” signal.

Indeed, the situation unfolded as he had anticipated.

After waiting for a short time in this tranquil alley, he suddenly detected footsteps approaching from nearby. He looked up at the source right away, and as expected, the blonde woman resembling the Frost Queen emerged from the shadows.

Although he had glimpsed her once through the window earlier, Tyrian was still astonished at this moment—the resemblance was just too uncanny! He had indeed encountered people with similar faces before, but this degree of likeness far exceeded the norm and surpassed his imagination.

Because of this striking similarity, Tyrian’s initial reaction after his surprise was caution and wariness—he focused intently on the enigmatic blonde woman, treating her as a potentially dangerous figure who required his full attention. Yet, as he scrutinized her closely, he also observed some peculiarities.

Her movements were graceful and composed, unlike those of ordinary people, and her delicate features lacked the certain... “vitality” of living individuals. While the average person might not detect anything amiss at first glance, as the captain of an undead army, Tyrian gradually sensed a certain... quality about her that was profoundly discordant with the living.

“Remarkable,” the blonde woman spoke just as Tyrian grew increasingly vigilant, “You actually came—enticing someone out really is that straightforward.”

Even her voice matched that of the Frost Queen?!

Rather than feeling pleasantly surprised, Tyrian became even more guarded, “Who are you?”

“My name is Alice,” the blonde woman smiled, answering honestly.

“I wasn’t asking for your name,” Tyrian frowned, “I wanted to know your identity and your intentions—why did you specifically want to meet me?”

“The captain wants to see you,” Alice replied earnestly, addressing each question, “He said the area around the cathedral is too crowded and noisy, making it difficult to discuss confidential matters. So he wanted to lure you to a quieter place for a more private conversation.”

A mysterious captain desired to discuss secret matters with him and had someone draw him out? Tyrian furrowed his brow, but for some reason, he felt more at ease—having been a pirate on the freezing sea for half a century, he had experienced countless situations like this. Compared to the sudden resurrection of Frost Queen Ray Nora seeking him out, a covert meeting between captains was a scenario he was more familiar with.

However, he had no intention of meeting the other party.

“I’m not interested in those who conceal their identity,” Tyrian’s expression relaxed after confirming that this was a familiar situation. “Tell your master that if he wants to meet with the captain of the Sea Mist, he can come to the cathedral and find me openly—if it’s something underhanded, I’m sorry, but the Sea Mist only engages in legitimate business outside of the freezing sea.” He casually responds.

Having said that, Tyrian intended to turn around and leave, but the blonde woman who claimed to be Alice suddenly spoke up, “Don’t you want to know who the ‘captain’ I mentioned is?”

“Hm?” Tyrian frowned, “Who is it?”

“Your father,” Alice said earnestly.

Tyrian’s expression shifted slightly upon hearing her words, “I’m sorry, but that joke isn’t funny. Excuse me then.”

Alice considered for a moment before going to Plan B, “Ah, the captain also said that you might react this way, so there’s an alternate invitation plan...”

Tyrian was about to turn around and depart, but upon hearing her words. He hesitated involuntarily, “Another one...”

He had just mumbled a few words when he suddenly sensed a change in the atmosphere around him. A feeling of alarm surged within, and he quickly turned his head towards the source of the discomfort, only to see a young girl who had appeared at some point, swinging her arm and hurling something at him.

It appeared to be a dog.

For less than a second, Tyrian thought he had a chance to evade, even if it was a surprise attack, even if the assailant’s strength and speed were evidently exceptional. However, when he tried to dodge, he found that all his limbs had lost their responsiveness—as if countless invisible threads were tightly binding his bones and muscles, causing him to lose control of his own body.

All he managed to do was barely turn his head and look at the blonde woman, who now wore an innocent smile—the next moment, an unsightly dog head rapidly grew in size at the edge of his vision.

With a loud crash, the formidable pirate was sent flying several meters before stopping motionless on the floor.

Shirley looked somewhat surprised by the outcome of her attack.

“...That’s all it took to send him flying?” She glanced at the chain in her hand, then at the thrown Tyrian, murmuring as she walked over to assess the situation, “I thought there would be at least a big fight. Is this really the legendary great pirate?... Did I kill him?”

“Probably not,” Alice also approached, observing the unconscious Tyrian and whispering to Shirley, “The captain said that Tyrian is a resilient kid.”

“Why didn’t he dodge just now?” Shirley squatted down, picked up a wooden stick, and prodded Tyrian’s face, “The Enders from earlier could at least dodge a few times...”

“I don’t know,” Alice shook her head, “I can’t fight.”

Shirley thought for a moment and expressed a new concern, “If the captain sees his son’s head swollen like this, will he get angry?”

“Probably not,” Alice continued shaking her head, “The captain said that if he doesn’t cooperate, you should use Dog to hit him, making him spin like a topspinner...”

“Did he spin just now?”

“It seems... he did, spinning numerous times in the air.”

Finally reassured, Shirley clapped her hands, “That’s fine, I’ll call Ai over to carry him.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 249

Chapter 249 “The First Step of Honesty”

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Tyrian felt engulfed by darkness, his senses wavering as though drawn by an unseen force, navigating a realm between reality and illusion.

He attempted to open his eyes multiple times during this experience, only to be met with a dim green glow and rapidly shifting shadows. After some effort, he recognized the sight of the city-state below him.

Had something transported him into the sky?

This thought flashed through his mind before he lost consciousness once more.

When he regained sensation in his body, he found himself in a stable location – lying on a cold, hard surface reminiscent of a cement floor. The dim light surrounding him was reminiscent of the poor-quality electric lights used to illuminate warehouses. Meanwhile, a blurry figure sat nearby, seemingly peering at him with curiosity.

Tyrian finally awoke.

However, he didn't immediately open his eyes. Instead, he feigned unconsciousness while carefully assessing the environment, attempting to deduce his location from the humidity in the air, faint sounds, and slightly parted eyelids.

As he picked up on the distant sound of carriages, confirming he might be near a street, a familiar voice from before he blacked out suddenly rang out

beside him, “You’re awake; your eyelids are moving.”

Startled, Tyrian knew he could no longer hide and reluctantly opened his eyes.

Afterward, he felt stiffness throughout his body, and the sight before him left him bewildered and amazed.

He saw the Frost Queen, Ray Nora – the same one from his memory, not the blonde woman with a distinctly different hair color he had seen earlier.

The silver-haired “Frost Queen” sat calmly beside him, her expression tranquil as she gazed at Tyrian on the ground. It took him several seconds of staring before he abruptly came to his senses and quickly rose.

However, the sudden sting from the head nearly forced Tyrian back down as he groggily tried to dispel the blur. He first verified that he was indeed awake, then quickly surveyed his surroundings, attempting to discern his location.

All he saw was a warehouse stocked with shelves and wooden crates – the neatly arranged shelves held antique items of uncertain age and origin, while the slightly disheveled crates were stacked against the wall. No windows were visible, and naturally, he couldn’t see outside. The sole door was located behind the chair where the “queen” sat.

It appeared to be a simple storage building, providing no clues as to its location within the city-state.

Tyrian’s attention then returned to the “Frost Queen.”

However, after the initial shock and excitement, the composed pirate’s first thought was suspicion. He recalled the blonde woman he had encountered earlier and her words, prompting him to furrow his brow, “You are not Her Majesty Ray Nora. Who are you?”

“I’ve told you, my name is Alice,” the silver-haired woman in the chair replied with a smile, “Ah, if you’re referring to my hair... I disguised it

earlier because the captain said my appearance might cause trouble in the city-state.”

She mentioned the captain once more.

The first time “captain” was mentioned, Tyrian had felt only slight confusion. But hearing it again, he was filled with intense wariness and a sense of crisis. He had ruled out the possibility of a cruel joke or an absurd trap set by a resentful captain. Instead, his formidable father might truly be involved.

Tyrian cautiously stood up, eyeing the silver-haired woman who called herself “Alice” as he spoke in a deep voice, “Is it really him?”

“Yes, he wants to see you,” Alice rose from her chair and approached an antique mirror, “Captain, he’s awake.”

The following moment, a faint green flame flickered along the mirror’s edge. Tyrian seemed to hear an eerie crackling sound, and then the mirror turned black as a familiar, imposing figure gradually materialized from the darkness.

“Tyrian, we meet again,” Duncan’s voice emerged from the mirror.

“...Yes, we meet again,” Tyrian hesitated. Although they had met previously, speaking with his sober and rational father once more felt exceedingly awkward, “Why this way? Didn’t you say you didn’t mind communicating with me in the cathedral?”

“In the cathedral, we can reminisce but not discuss more private matters. There are some things I don’t want Gomona to overhear,” Duncan replied leisurely, glancing at Alice, “You’ve met Alice already. You must have many questions.”

Tyrian’s expression turned peculiar upon hearing his father mention the Storm Goddess’s name. However, his focus soon shifted to Alice, who bore an uncanny resemblance to the Frost Queen. After furrowing his brow and pondering, he suddenly recalled something and his expression changed

dramatically, “Recently, the Explorers Association issued a warning to all captains in the Boundless Sea, stating that Anomaly 099 has lost control...”

“As you can see,” Duncan smiled, “She’s right before you.”

Tyrian immediately looked at Alice, whose face appeared innocent. He seemed to just now notice the inhuman features concealed in her overly refined and perfect face, and the ornaments on her body that clearly hid her joints. The next moment, he instinctively touched his neck.

As one of the most seasoned captains in the Boundless Sea and having a keen interest in information related to the Frost Queen, Tyrian was well acquainted with the attributes of Anomaly 099.

His actions didn’t go unnoticed by Duncan’s eye.

“Relax,” the voice from the mirror reassured him, “Anomaly 099 is now under control.”

“... You consider a puppet in a container waking up and roaming freely ‘under control?’” Tyrian carefully watched Alice’s movements while addressing Duncan, a shiver running down his spine, “How did you manage to employ such an early-numbered ‘anomaly’ and even suppress her beheading instinct?”

“Alice is a friendly puppet, not as fearsome as people believe, at least when she’s with me,” Duncan replied casually, “As for you, I thought you’d inquire about the Frost Queen first. After all, as far as I know, your days of loyalty to that queen even exceed your time with the Vanished Fleet.”

Tyrian slowly regained his composure, warily observing the figure in the mirror, “Do you want to extract information about Her Majesty Ray Nora from me?”

“Are you resistant to discussing it?”

“...I still don’t entirely trust your ‘humanity’.”

Duncan was silent for a few moments before speaking in a deep voice, “Do you know what my original plan was?”

“Your original plan?”

“I intended to have Alice impersonate Frost Queen Ray Nora directly, either pretending to be resurrected, creating a ghostly projection, or even entering your dreams – it would have been very easy for me,” Duncan gazed into Tyrian’s eyes, “I can assure you that you wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference and would have unwittingly divulged a lot of information. I could have easily obtained the information I wanted that way.”

Tyrian suddenly felt another shiver run down his spine.

He believed his father’s words, trusted that he could do it, and knew he would have fallen for it – even if he could detect inconsistencies in some details, he would have been deceived into revealing much information before that!

Because even just now, after seeing the “blonde Alice” earlier and knowing the person before him couldn’t be Ray Nora, he had almost believed that the opposite figure was the resurrected Frost Queen!

Tyrian instinctively lowered his gaze slightly, as though trying to avoid direct eye contact with his father, and asked in a deep voice, “Then why didn’t you do it?”

Duncan calmly regarded Tyrian.

What else could it be? Because Alice couldn’t memorize such lengthy lines or perform in such an extended act, she would panic and call for the captain to rescue her as soon as she forgot her lines... a staggering seventeen saves per second.

Unbelievably inept.

“Of course, it’s because I don’t want to deceive my children – even though I’ve already forgotten many things,” Duncan said gravely, his voice deep.

He paused and added, “I also don’t want to dishonor the monarch you once served with such a ‘farce’ – although I’m not acquainted with her, from my brief encounter with her, Ray Nora seems to be a commendable person.”

“Clap clap clap clap -”

Upon hearing the captain’s virtuous response, Alice immediately applauded from the side, even though she barely grasped what the captain was saying.

Duncan and Tyrian both stared strangely at the puppet.

“...Should I not clap?” Alice shrank back, cautiously glancing at the captain in the mirror, “I just think the captain is right...”

Feeling exhausted, Duncan sighed, “...As long as you’re happy.”

Simultaneously, Tyrian suddenly noticed a detail in his father’s words and was taken aback: “You’ve met Her Majesty Ray Nora?!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 250

Chapter 250 “Underwater”

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A few seconds belated, Tyrian didn’t miss Duncan’s mention of briefly encountering the Frost Queen, and his astonishment was evident on his face.

Duncan wasn’t surprised by this reaction; he just gently shook his head: “My ‘meeting’ with her was quite unique, outside the normal timeline. Think of it as me intervening in historical gaps, witnessing Ray Nora from a bystander’s perspective – while in regular history, I had no connection with the Frost Queen.”

Tyrian frowned, attempting to comprehend these profound words. Then his eyes flickered slightly, looking up at Duncan with restrained emotions: “Why are you interested in the Frost Queen’s matters? Is it due to that ‘brief encounter’? Or because of... this puppet named ‘Alice’? What did she tell you?”

“Alice knows nothing about the Frost Queen; her memory is as pure as a blank sheet of paper,” Duncan stated indifferently. “I am intrigued by the Frost Queen because people claim that the Frost Rebellion occurred due to Ray Nora’s collusion with the Vanished, and her plot was revealed – isn’t it natural for me to be interested in this rumor?”

“Colluding with the Vanished,” Tyrian’s voice was low as he looked down, making his emotions unreadable at the moment. “Yes, that’s how they framed Queen Ray Nora.”

“Based on your reaction, it is indeed a fabricated charge,” Duncan’s voice emerged from the mirror. “So, was the Frost Rebellion merely an elaborate conspiracy, with the accusations against Ray Nora entirely unfounded?”

As he spoke, he observed Tyrian’s reaction.

But Tyrian didn’t answer immediately; instead, he slightly furrowed his brow and asked, “Does this truth matter to you?”

“Yes,” Duncan replied earnestly, “after all, from a certain viewpoint, I am partially involved.”

Tyrian was clearly taken aback and seemed unable to counter his father’s response. He then laughed helplessly, sighed, and shook his head: “The rebellion did involve a conspiracy, but to be fair, the pretext used by the rebels wasn’t entirely fabricated...”

“Oh?”

“The Frost Queen never conspired with any Vanished, but she did... delve into some forbidden research. Once this research became public, it would have been difficult for her to retain her position as the ruler of the Frostbite Kingdom even without the rebellion.”

Duncan’s gaze was intense, and after a few seconds of silence, he abruptly said, “It’s called the ‘Abyss Plan,’ right?”

Tyrian looked up in astonishment.

“I know much more than you think,” Duncan remarked casually.

“But all the documents related to the Abyss Plan have been destroyed, and even the traitors who disclosed the project back then have been eliminated and executed by the rebels...” Tyrian expressed disbelief, “everyone believes that the project’s name itself has been cursed and tainted, and the last knowledgeable individuals from that time have long since passed away...”

“Oh? All the materials have been destroyed?” This time, Duncan appeared somewhat surprised. He had thought the matter might be highly confidential, but he hadn’t anticipated it to be so exceedingly concealed.
“Even all the knowledgeable people are dead?”

Tyrian hesitated for a moment. He was more familiar with the situation than anyone else and naturally knew the reasons for the project’s burial. After a brief silence, he finally spoke:

“This prohibited project involved too much related to curses, subspace, and mental contamination, to the extent that even the rebels back then didn’t dare to casually discuss the materials they discovered.”

“In fact, the project’s name was revealed only once. It was during the final execution when the rebels announced the Frost Queen’s crimes and uttered these words. On that day, an unprecedented catastrophic collapse occurred at the Sea Cliff of the Frost City-State. The entire cliff, along with a quarter of the city, plunged into the vast sea. All those who heard the words ‘Abyss Plan’ perished, becoming lost souls in the Boundless Sea.”

“Back then, the rebels had prepared a series of follow-up propaganda campaigns targeting the ‘Abyss Plan.’ They intended to publicize the matter on a large scale without exposing the forbidden aspects, in order to completely eradicate the Frost Queen’s influence in the northern seas and emphasize the rebellion’s righteousness. However, after the Sea Cliff’s great collapse, these propaganda plans were immediately abandoned – as I just mentioned, they firmly believed that the ‘Abyss Plan’ name was cursed and tainted, so they simply destroyed all materials related to the project, including its name.”

“So, I’m particularly curious... how did you learn about the ‘Abyss Plan?’”

Tyrian finally stopped avoiding the question, looking directly into Duncan’s eyes. After hearing the project’s name from half a century ago, his thoughts were tumultuous and difficult to calm. For a moment, he even began to suspect that there was some sort of “collusion” between the Frost Queen and the Vanished.

“As I said, I have ‘witnessed’ some things in the gaps of history,” Duncan admitted openly, and asked again, “So, what exactly is the Abyss Plan? Why is it so secretive and forbidden, and why do even you... seem to still have a trace of fear when mentioning it?”

Tyrian’s face was grave, and after a lengthy silence, he finally spoke slowly and solemnly: “In simple terms, it is an exploration project – but unlike those adventurers exploring new routes at the edge of civilization, the Abyss Plan explores the deep sea.”

“Exploring the deep sea?” Duncan furrowed his brow. “Are you referring to one of the planes of existence from the World Standard Model? But if it’s just research in these areas, it shouldn’t involve the word ‘forbidden.’ Although it is indeed dangerous, the study of the occult has always been legally conducted in various city-states, and the Academy of Truth even has dedicated research groups...”

“I’m not talking about the ‘deep sea’ in the occult sense of figurative speech,” Tyrian gently shook his head. “I mean the deep sea in the true sense, the underwater ocean in the natural world – a ‘deep sea’ that is right in front of us all, yet everyone pretends to not see it. We don’t touch it, nor do we dare to touch it.”

Tyrian suddenly posed a question, “Father, have you ever considered what lies beneath our city-states, beneath these islands in the waters that support our entire civilization?”

Duncan remained silent. However, beneath his composed exterior, a wave of turbulence had unexpectedly emerged in his heart.

He had never truly pondered this question, or rather... he hadn’t even realized that it was a question that needed consideration! In this world, people were accustomed to using terms like “spiritual realm,” “deep sea,” and “subspace” to represent the “depths” of the occult world, and this structural model could indeed explain the current functioning of the world to some extent. However, in reality, this model was only an interpretation based on “theoretical concepts.” Strictly speaking, it described the “dimensional” structure of the world, not the “physical structure”! What

Tyrian was discussing at the moment was clearly not this dimensional model based on occult concepts but the body of water in the physical sense that's descending from the sea surface.

In terms of the World Standard Model: reality, spirit, deep sea, subspace, the “deep sea” level Tyrian was referring to was actually located in the first layer beyond the surface world of reality. However, this “deep sea,” situated directly below the surface, seemed to be a complete blank in human understanding.

Duncan had never considered this question because he held a set of preconceived “common sense.” He naturally assumed that beneath the city-states must be geological structures raised from the sea, such as underwater mountain ranges or elevated volcanic vents, and further down, of course, there should be things like the seabed. However, when he carefully recalled the various knowledge he had encountered since coming to this world, he realized... there has never been any research on the underwater world deeper than 200 meters!

“Clearly, you haven’t considered this question either,” Tyrian’s voice suddenly interjected, interrupting Duncan’s thoughts. “Before I knew the Frost Queen, I had never thought about this question either – the Boundless Sea covers the entire world, our city-states are islands floating on the sea surface, the gods’ protection establishes a firm foundation for the real world, and Vision 001’s radiance provides us with a safe and stable daytime. As for what’s beneath the water surface... why should we care? Spiritual realm, deep sea, subspace... these ‘areas’ are already enough to give us headaches.”

Tyrian gently shook his head.

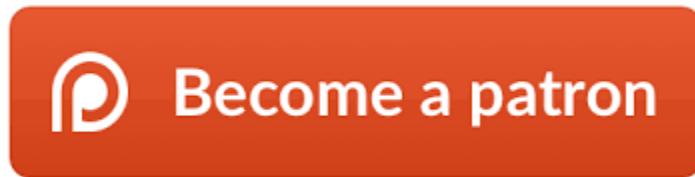
“But Her Majesty Ray Nora informed me that this question is crucial, as important as the secrets of the ‘spiritual realm,’ ‘deep sea,’ and ‘subspace.’ Right beneath our feet, beneath the city-states and the sea surface, there exists such an immense unknown area in our real world. She is a person filled with the spirit of exploration; she cannot accept that such a vast region within her domain is enshrouded in mystery.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 251

Chapter 251 “The Deep Sea”

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Listening to Tyrian’s account, Duncan became lost in thought for a brief moment. After about thirty seconds, he lifted his head and spoke pensively, “So, she initiated the ‘Abyss Plan’ out of curiosity, but its true nature isn’t about exploring some lower planes, but rather… a literal ‘dive into deep water’?”

As he said this, he paused, sensing something peculiar about the situation. “But if that’s all there is to it, how is this project connected to the Vanished? Subspace where the Vanished disappeared and the deep sea the Frost Queen aimed to explore are two distinct concepts. The rebels shouldn’t be so muddled that they can’t even differentiate between the two…”

Tyrian didn’t reply directly but instead posed a question, “Don’t you find it odd? If it’s merely about diving into the water to investigate the underwater conditions of the city-state, what’s so ‘taboo’ about it? Harbor builders and offshore fishermen in the city-state frequently dive for work purposes, and it’s common for them to descend safely to tens of meters. Why has the Frost Queen’s ‘Abyss Plan’ become taboo?”

Duncan’s expression grew serious, “…How deep did you go?”

“Extremely deep, incredibly deep. I’m unsure of the exact depth the Queen reached because I’m not a scholar myself. I only participated as a naval commander, offering some peripheral support, and I wasn’t directly engaged in the actions during the latter half of the project. However, as far as I’m aware, before the project began to go awry, their manned

submersible had descended to at least 1,000 meters underwater, and they consistently broke that record.”

“One thousand meters underwater...”

Duncan rapidly processed the information in his mind – on Earth, this seemingly insignificant number is, in fact, the limit for many advanced military submarines, with most capable of diving only to depths of 400 to 500 meters. Records of extreme deep dives reaching several thousand or even close to ten thousand meters are typically achieved by specially designed deep-diving equipment in a short duration, requiring high-quality equipment and often unmanned.

At the time, the Frost Queen’s manned submersible had already reached the “1,000 meters” threshold. Given the industrial level of this world half a century ago, this was already a remarkable feat, even with the aid of some supernatural powers.

And behind this remarkable number... it appeared to have brought something even more “astounding.”

Tyrian previously mentioned that the project gradually went “wrong” in its later stages, and Duncan didn’t miss this detail.

He gazed at Tyrian, his eyes intensifying, “I want to know the specifics of the entire exploration project – whatever part you were involved in, tell me about it.”

Perhaps because he had already answered numerous questions and grown accustomed to this kind of conversation, Tyrian didn’t hesitate for long this time. He delved into his memories and began to recount slowly, “... Apart from the Frost Queen’s Abyss Plan, the recorded human conventional diving depth, or ‘safe water depth,’ is 150 meters, restricted to nearshore areas. Our project initially started at this depth, and everything proceeded smoothly until we reached 300 meters.”

“At that depth, it was already incredibly dark. Sunlight from the surface couldn’t penetrate such a thick layer of water, and the high-powered lights

on the submersible could only illuminate a small area. To investigate the ‘structure’ beneath the city-state’s islands and avoid dangerous ‘creatures’ in the open sea as much as possible, like deep-sea offspring heirs, we had the submersible dive along the coast and moved close to the island’s nearshore areas. I still remember the description provided by the explorer when he resurfaced…

“He said that beneath the island was something like a rough and unsightly pillar, covered with thick calcareous deposits, and some peculiar creatures lived in the pits of the deposits. Other than the ‘pillar,’ there was nothing else, just darkness.”

“A pillar beneath the island?” Duncan couldn’t help but interrupt Tyrian, “Not a gradually expanding support structure, but a pillar?”

“Yes, at least that’s the case for Frost,” Tyrian nodded, “Is there an issue with that?”

Duncan shook his head, “...No issue, continue.”

Tyrian gathered his thoughts and resumed sharing his past experiences, “That was the scene at a depth of about 300 meters, which was the limit of the first submersible. After realizing that this depth wasn’t sufficient for deep-sea exploration, the Queen instructed the scholars to construct a second submersible. This one was highly successful, reaching a depth of 800 meters in a single dive. And through half a meter of high-strength glass, the explorer still observed... a pillar, a straight pillar.

“Of course, in comparison to the city-state’s radius, this ‘pillar’ of at least 800 meters in length was still relatively short in proportion. Instead of a support column, it was more like a normal, disk-shaped base supporting the island.”

“Subsequently, we built a third submersible – due to technical constraints, the advancements of this submersible were much more modest than the second one. It had to carefully dive and challenge the record set by the second submersible. It was during this gradual descent, meter by meter, that we discovered something.

“The ‘pillar’ beneath the city-state was actually only 850 meters ‘tall.’ Beyond that, there was nothing.

“The entire structure was floating in the seawater.”

Tyrian paused and looked into Duncan’s eyes, “Now do you understand why I said earlier that it’s more like a disk-shaped base than a pillar?”

Duncan furrowed his brow. He remained silent but quickly visualized the entire structure in his mind based on Tyrian’s description—

In the deep-sea era, people “lived in cramped conditions” in the city-states. Initially, Duncan believed these maritime islands were crowded and narrow, but in reality, as functional, self-sufficient living spaces, these city-states were certain to have a sizable “foundation.” Although there were some smaller islands, the “foundation radius” of most large cities that had a name spanned tens or even dozens of kilometers. As the largest city-state in the Cold Sea, Frost would not be smaller than this number.

Corresponding to this massive maritime structure was its underwater “base” that was “only” 850 meters deep. When the explorers first glimpsed the underwater part of the city-state at a depth of 300 meters extending straight into the deep sea, they instinctively imagined it as a pillar reaching the “ocean floor.” However, in terms of proportion, the shape of this “pillar” more closely resembled a thin floating disc in proportion to the radius of the island that’s resting on it.

As Tyrian described it, the entire structure was floating in the seawater.

Nevertheless, when Duncan envisioned this model, a significant question arose in his mind: was every city-state like this?

If every city-state was like this, all being foundationless “floating objects,” then how could they be so stable? If the city-states’ own “stability” was due to their large size, then how could the stable relative positions between the city-states be explained?

Despite the endless rolling waves, these “floating islands” never changed position. Why?

Duncan expressed his doubts, but Tyrian merely shook his head, “We also had doubts about this, but in the end, we couldn’t figure it out. And compared to what happened later... the question of ‘how the city-states float on the sea’ became insignificant.”

“What happened later?” Duncan couldn’t help but feel curious, “What exactly did you see in the deep sea?”

“Later... the third submersible continued to challenge the extreme depth. We spent nearly two years pushing the record from 850 meters to 950 meters. As you can imagine, during this diving process, the submersible gradually moved away from the city-state’s ‘base.’ Do you remember what I mentioned earlier? To avoid problems in the open sea area, we had the submersible dive in the ‘nearshore safety zone’ close to the coast. Throughout this process, the submersible was actually always near the city-state and the underwater ‘structure’ of the island. But as the dive continued, the explorer moved away from the ‘base,’ and things began to go awry.

“Audio and visual hallucinations, mysterious lights appearing in the seawater, feeling someone tapping on the hull, and even sensing someone turning the hatch handle outside. The deeper they went, the more severe these situations became. Even specially trained, strong-willed explorers started to feel immense pressure during each dive, and the protective effects of the holy oil, sacred books, and scripture cloth they carried grew less and less noticeable.

“Of course, up to this point, this was still within our expectations. Exploring the unknown inherently involves confronting challenges of willpower. Scholars investigating the spirit world and the deep sea often face such difficulties, so we continued, only enforcing the strictest standards for strengthening the explorers’ mental defenses.

“The problem occurred when attempting to reach the 1,000-meter depth from 990 meters.

“The third submersible suddenly sent an emergency surfacing signal, then, as if it had gone mad, emptied its ballast tanks and raced to the surface. The explorer inside seemed not to care that this rapid ascent would cost him his life. After reaching the surface, he had gone mad. The hatch opened, and he screamed and shouted in the sunlight, as if frantically attempting to describe something horrifying to us. After a lot of incoherent, chaotic speech, he uttered the only comprehensible sentence: ‘We all died there.’”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 252

Chapter 252 “The Underwater Silence”

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Duncan paused for a moment in deep thought. He suddenly realized that the dangers and mysteries concealed within the Boundless Sea were no less formidable in this world’s “reality.” After pondering briefly, he inquired, “What happened to that explorer later?”

“He passed away quickly. The rapid ascent and decompression took his life. He screamed and shouted for some time before succumbing to a blood clot. At least that’s the cause in the real world.”

“Was he the only crew member in the submersible?” Duncan questioned further.

“It had room for just one person. While this undoubtedly amplified the explorer’s mental pressure, it was also an unavoidable decision. The technology was limited then, and such exploration was ill-suited for multiple people to undertake together. In the ocean, one could never be certain what might take your companion’s place at any given moment or whether the sounds you heard were genuine. So diving alone was preferable, at least to avoid doubting the presence of others in the submersible.”

“Deep sea, darkness, solitude, and confronting the enigmatic unknown waters far from civilization—all these factors might have contributed to the explorer’s descent into madness,” Duncan shook his head slowly, “but this is not the crux of the matter. What’s essential is... this still doesn’t explain why the Abyss Plan later became a highly forbidden topic.”

He locked eyes with Tyrian and continued, “So far, all you’ve recounted is an accident during an exploration. Similar endeavors occur every year. The Academy of Truth even actively supports and encourages scholars and adventurers to participate in these pursuits. This has nothing to do with taboo, nor should it be connected to the Vanished.”

“Yes, if the plan had halted at 1,000 meters, the subsequent events would not have transpired,” Tyrian shook his head, his emotions stirred by the memories. “After the incident with the third submersible, Her Majesty Ray Nora temporarily suspended the exploration, but a few days later, something occurred that made the situation… progressively eerie.”

Duncan furrowed his brow, “Something?”

“The third submersible resurfaced at the edge of the temporarily sealed-off test area.”

Duncan was momentarily taken aback before responding, “A second third submersible?!”

“Yes, a second one,” Tyrian confirmed, nodding, “It emerged right in front of the naval soldiers and began sending continuous light signals for assistance in opening the hatch. The well-trained soldiers, albeit momentarily bewildered, quickly adhered to standard procedures to haul the submersible onto the work platform and aimed twenty-seven rifles, two rapid-fire cannons, and a flamethrower at its hatch. Then, a courageous priest stepped forward, sprinkled holy water, and unlocked the hatch.”

Tyrian paused momentarily before continuing, “The hatch opened, and a person… strikingly similar to the explorer emerged.”

Duncan’s expression grew serious, “Strikingly similar?”

“The facial features were similar, but there were differences in height and weight. He was dressed in a Frostbite Navy uniform, but there were many inconsistencies in the clothing details. More importantly… the person who emerged from the submersible only lived for a brief time on land before passing away. He didn’t even have a chance to utter a word. Once the

soldiers undressed ‘him,’ they discovered that his flesh appeared to be ‘fused’ with the clothes, and there were large and small, inexplicable wounds all over his body.

“Afterward, doctors and church scholars collaborated to examine the body, and Her Majesty is said to have personally inspected the autopsy scene as well. However, the results of the examination were never disclosed—or rather, before they could announce anything, a third ‘third submersible’ appeared.”

At this point, even Alice, who had been attentively listening without speaking, couldn’t help but interject, “There was a third one?!”

Tyrian instinctively glanced at Alice, his expression somewhat peculiar. He seemed unaccustomed to seeing someone who looked identical to the Frost Queen standing there, exclaiming in astonishment. But he quickly adjusted his expression and nodded gently, “The third one, and not just three—in the following days, a ‘third submersible’ would surface every twenty-four or forty-eight hours...”

Alice listened in awe to this strange and remarkable “story.” She pondered for a moment and suddenly blurted out, “So, you just need to wait there, and you can have an endless supply of submersibles? By the way, is that thing called a ‘submersible’ very valuable? Is it more valuable than cultists?”

Tyrian, who had been lost in his memories just a moment ago, suddenly found his train of thought interrupted by the doll lady. He opened his mouth for a while but couldn’t quite recover his emotions, “We... hadn’t considered that at the time...”

“Don’t mind her; her thought process is unconventional,” Duncan glanced at Alice and said gravely to Tyrian, “Please continue, what happened later?”

Tyrian collected his thoughts and proceeded, “After the third submersible surfaced, it also sent out light signals requesting the hatch be opened. This time, the soldiers were more experienced. They towed the submersible to a more secure containment area, and only after the priests had established

numerous supernatural safeguards did they open the hatch. This time... what emerged was a grotesque, swollen, and deformed humanoid creature, utterly unrecognizable as the 'explorer.'

"That monster also couldn't survive in the air for more than three minutes.

"From the fourth submersible, a continuously writhing mass of flesh slithered out, devoid of any human characteristics.

"When the fifth submersible's hatch was opened, nothing emerged. The soldiers at the scene investigated and discovered only a suspicious dark red sludge in the cabin, which exhibited faint signs of life.

"The sixth submersible contained only a small quantity of black fibrous dry matter, resembling an undeveloped neural structure or desiccated blood vessel specimens..."

As Tyrian continued recounting the story, Duncan's expression grew increasingly serious. Even Alice, sitting beside him, seemed to perceive the shift in the atmosphere and began to sit up straight.

Amid the progressively somber ambiance, Tyrian slowly stated—

"The seventh submersible, the last one I'm aware of, was empty."

"Empty?" Duncan raised an eyebrow, then shook his head, "That's even more disconcerting."

"Yes, empty, and thus even more unsettling. The situation spiraled out of control, and we needed to find a way to stop it," Tyrian said gravely.

"Fortunately, the 'fourth submersible' was eventually completed—it was the successor to the third submersible. After the 'thousand-meter' incident, the project was put on hold, as was its construction. However, as one 'third submersible' after another emerged, the Queen ordered the 'fourth submersible' to be assembled as quickly as possible and decided to use it to investigate what had happened at the one thousand meters depths."

Tyrian paused, seemingly struggling with gaps in his memory. He gathered his thoughts before slowly continuing, “I can’t recall the specifics of the fourth submersible. It was hastily finished, and the Frostbite Navy was only responsible for part of it. I only know that it was larger than the third, could accommodate three people, and had a sample chamber—scholars had initially planned to use it to gather specimens from the deep sea if any were found.

“The day after the seventh ‘third submersible’ surfaced, the Frostbite Kingdom’s fourth submersible was launched into the sea. Onboard were a scholar, an officer, and a powerful priest—at this point, we could no longer care about the risk of having ‘multiple people exploring together.’ Preventing the appearance of the eighth ‘third submersible’ was the top priority.

“The fourth submersible quickly descended and soon reached a depth of one thousand meters. The priest onboard maintained contact with the surface using psychic power. Perhaps due to the enhanced capabilities of the new submersible, their journey was smooth, and they confirmed the city-state’s ‘base’ scenery as previously observed by the explorer. However, the connection became intermittent soon after, and when the depth reached one thousand meters, the small church on the surface platform could barely hear any sound coming from the deep sea.”

“Nevertheless, fifteen minutes after losing contact, the priest on duty in the small church suddenly heard sounds from the deep sea again. They first heard the onboard priest scream in terror, warning the others, ‘Don’t look! Don’t think!’ Then came the officer’s voice, bellowing, followed by a deafening explosion.”

Tyrian looked up, gazing into Duncan’s eyes.

“The fourth submersible detonated the explosives,” the pirate slowly said. “They had filled the sample chamber with high-energy explosives to be the last contingency plan.”

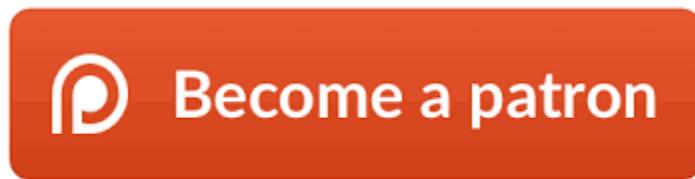
“And then, it was all over. The fourth submersible never resurfaced, and no more ‘third submersibles’ appeared before anyone afterward.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 253

Chapter 253 “The Frostbite Rebellion”

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Tyrian’s account finally concluded, but Duncan felt the strange tale ended far too suddenly.

“Is that really it? Just like that?” He couldn’t help but glance at the pirate in the mirror, his voice laden with doubt. “A submarine, loaded with explosives, went a thousand meters deep and resolved the ‘uncontrolled supernatural phenomenon’ that was worsening? Let’s not even discuss the power of those explosives at that depth—simply from a supernatural standpoint, could such an explosion even destroy a supernatural phenomenon?”

“We can only speculate,” Tyrian seemed unfazed by his father’s skepticism. “In truth, nobody knows what occurred a thousand meters below the surface, nor what the fourth submarine witnessed down there. Our only link to the depths was the partial perception the priest shared through psychic resonance... a scream, a roar, and a rumble. These brief fragments revealed little truth.

“However, after the fourth submarine’s explosion, no more ‘third submarine’ replicas emerged from the deep sea. Thus, we can only assume... the issue was resolved.”

“The issue was resolved...” Duncan furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Fine, let’s say it was resolved. What happened to the Abyss Plan afterward?”

“The Abyss Plan didn’t end, and that’s the oddest part,” Tyrian stated bluntly. “After such a costly event that finally resolved the third submarine’s mysterious crisis, one would think we should have reevaluated the Abyss Plan and halted this perilous endeavor. Yet, Queen Ray Nora disagreed, not only announcing the project’s continuation and the construction of a fifth submarine but also... elevating the Abyss Plan’s priority to the highest level, employing an exceptional amount of manpower and resources.”

Duncan’s expression grew serious, as he realized that the truly “uncontrolled” element of this tale might have only just begun. The “charges” against the Frost Queen and the rebellion half a century ago all originated from this.

He looked intently into Tyrian’s eyes: “It appears you didn’t support your queen at that time.”

“We had heated debates, which is why I mentioned I was no longer directly involved in the ‘Abyss Plan’ after the ‘thousand-meter’ depth. I believed things were headed in a dangerous direction,” Tyrian spoke slowly, his voice subdued. “But looking back, I should have done everything in my power to stop the Frost Queen, not avoid her... I had too much faith in her and didn’t realize she was fallible too.”

“Do you believe the Frost Queen truly made a mistake?”

“The Abyss Plan led to a series of crises under the Frost Queen’s reign and provided her adversaries with opportunities to take advantage. This increasingly extreme exploration eventually cost Queen Ray Nora her life. At least from this angle, it was definitely a mistake.”

“...What transpired after Ray Nora insisted on continuing the Abyss Plan?”

“After that point, I was no longer directly involved with the project and didn’t know much about it. However, from what I occasionally heard, the project faced numerous difficulties, and increasingly strange and terrifying incidents began to occur,” Tyrian said calmly. “The fifth submarine, built with the most advanced engineering technology and durable materials of

the time, experienced various accidents during its dives as if something tried to stop humanity from exploring deeper into the ocean.

“Those involved in the project started losing their minds, experiencing mysterious injuries, or vanishing, only to reappear disoriented in the city center. The explorers who participated in the dives became suspicious and irritable, transforming from disciplined and respectable scholars and soldiers into eerie fanatics. It was even rumored that the ‘fifth submarine’ itself underwent inexplicable changes during its dives, with its internal workings increasingly resembling a... ‘living creature.’

“Despite all these changes and the increasingly alarming atmosphere surrounding the project, the Abyss Plan persisted. Those involved, including those plagued by madness, accidents, and injuries, neither had the courage to withdraw nor question or defy orders from above. It was as if...”

Tyrian hesitated, struggling to find the right words to describe the situation.

Observing this, Duncan gently added, “As if the underwater ocean was calling them.”

“Yes, as if the ocean was calling them,” Tyrian agreed, nodding and giving Duncan a peculiar glance. “A very... accurate description.”

“Don’t overthink it. Please continue.”

Tyrian looked away, gathering his thoughts: “It felt as though the entire project was driven and guided by an unseen force, or perhaps the ‘project’ itself had developed its own will, relentlessly pushing further into the deep sea. Those involved in the project became like individual cells within this vast will.

“In this atmosphere, the fifth submarine unknowingly reached depths beyond one thousand meters. I’m not sure how deep it ultimately went, but I heard... it was an astounding number, truly remarkable. From an engineering, materials, and technological standpoint of the time... it was an unattainable achievement.

“The deep sea embraced the Abyss Plan and welcomed the fifth submarine. The increasingly peculiar machine and its equally bizarre crew seemed to effortlessly navigate thousands of meters deep in the dark ocean as if returning home. Meanwhile, around the Abyss Plan’s vicinity... strange occurrences began to multiply.”

“Merchant ships frequently reported seeing ‘reflections’ identical to their own vessels near the sea surface. Dense fog often enveloped the eastern Frostbite, with shadows resembling ships or enormous creatures drifting within. In the kingdom, a substantial number of ‘strangers’ appeared, congregating near Abyss Plan-related facilities, claiming to be project participants, even outnumbering the actual project members.

“Under these circumstances, rumors – or rather, they could no longer be considered mere rumors – began to spread everywhere. At first, people claimed that the Frost Queen was conducting suspicious research, but soon, the narrative shifted to her studying subspace. Eventually, it was said that the Frost Queen was colluding with subspace and had already reached an agreement with its mastermind – Captain Duncan...”

Tyrian took a breath, gesturing with his hands: “And then, as you know, the Frostbite Rebellion that shocked the North took place.”

For a moment, the small warehouse filled with “antiques” fell into silence, only to be broken again by Duncan’s calm voice that emerged from the mirror: “It’s understandable that people connected this with subspace, but linking it to the Vanished is a bit too far-fetched.”

“Actually, it’s quite a reasonable connection, and it even involves me,” Tyrian said with a wry smile, shaking his head. “Who would have thought that I am your son — while also loyally serving the Frost Queen and participating in this terrifying project during its early stages? You know, conspiracy theorists always have the wildest imaginations.”

Duncan neither agreed nor disagreed, and after a brief moment of thought, he said: “In that case, the outbreak of that rebellion wasn’t entirely unfounded. The Abyss Plan that Ray Nora insisted on carrying out was too

dangerous, and based on your description... her mental state at the time was indeed questionable.”

“This is precisely what I wanted to mention,” Tyrian interjected. “I know that all signs pointed to the Frost Queen losing her sanity at the time. She seemed like a madwoman being enticed by something, stubbornly following her own path, but I know that she... was always clear-headed, highly rational, and fully aware of her actions.”

“Really?”

“I argued with her, but I was still a trusted general. I could approach her — in fact, other high-ranking city-state officials could too. They all knew that the Queen had never gone mad nor intended to destroy the kingdom or endanger the world. Yes, they knew... but they were afraid, hesitant, and some had been bribed and misled. They weren’t as resolute as I was.

“But I know that perhaps the other participants of the Abyss Plan were indeed gradually being influenced by something, but she... evidently withstood this influence and exploited it to her advantage.”

“You mean that the Frost Queen actually had a coherent and ‘safe’ plan, and she was confident about accomplishing it, but she didn’t tell anyone — she didn’t even explain it to you,” Duncan looked thoughtful as he gazed at Tyrian. “And you still trust her unconditionally? Because you believe that, even if there is something threatening the city-states deep in the sea, everything is under Ray Nora’s control?”

“From your perspective, this trust is probably too blind.”

“Whether it’s blind or not is up to you,” Duncan shook his head. “I just want to say that the Frost Queen evidently couldn’t keep ‘everything under control’ — she ultimately died at the hands of the rebels, and the Abyss Plan was entirely buried. Things didn’t unfold as she had planned.”

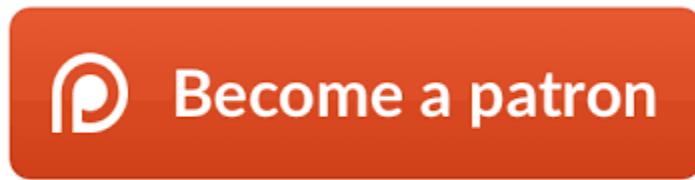
“...I really can’t argue with that,” Tyrian sighed helplessly.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 254

Chapter 254 “Maybe It’s Not Over”

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Up until now, Duncan had comprehended the intricacies of the long-lost “Abyss Plan,” which had been concealed for fifty years. He understood its taboo nature and the reason even the instigators of the Frost Rebellion feared it – and rightfully so.

Despite unfolding in the real world, the situation escalated beyond its boundaries. An unknown terror lurked deep in the ocean, and ultimately, no one discovered its nature. People continued to lose their sanity, and the entire plan hastened as though plummeting into the abyss.

The never-ending descent, the increasingly unsettling atmosphere, and the Frost Queen’s almost autistic behavior in the later stages... Objectively, even Duncan would instinctively assume that Ray Nora, the original Frost Queen, had been manipulated and controlled by something, suspecting a conspiracy with subspace.

Under these conditions, it was worth noting that there were already adversaries of the Queen within Frost, and several city-states in the frigid sea held animosity towards her rule. Even if the northern situation was initially stable, it would eventually escalate over time.

Nonetheless, Tyrian consistently maintained that Ray Nora was never influenced by anything, and he firmly believed that the Frost Queen had been lucid until the end, always safeguarding the city-state.

Duncan couldn’t determine if Tyrian’s assessment was accurate, but he inclined to trust it because he, too, had seen the “Frost Queen” in historical

fragments.

She had once calmly and logically asked him not to “tarnish history.”

At least from that single encounter, the Frost Queen of that era didn’t appear to be a horrifying madwoman under subspace’s control.

But because of this, Duncan’s curiosity grew. He couldn’t comprehend what motive would drive a lucid leader to make such extreme and autistic decisions, continuing to push forward the project at any cost despite knowing the issues with the Abyss Plan, and what reasoning led her to keep every secret to herself, not even confiding in her most trusted naval commander.

After extensive reflection, Duncan realized all questions ultimately converged on one issue: what “mystery” did the Frost Queen uncover in the ocean’s depths?

“...After the Frost Rebellion, did you ever return to that city-state?”
Duncan raised his head and questioned Tyrian.

“No, Her Majesty Ray Nora commanded me to depart from Frost with my own direct troops. By then, the rebels had already conspired with other northern city-states, assembling an entire fleet in the open sea,” Tyrian’s tone grew especially somber, as he was clearly reluctant to discuss this past, “...But if I had defied her and remained, the Frostbite Kingdom would have retained a loyal force to the Queen, and those rebels could never have easily breached the port defenses...”

“Thus, subsequent generations have speculated that you took part in the rebellion. Some even claim that you deliberately allowed the rebels into the Frostbite Kingdom,” Duncan said, shaking his head, “Have you ever considered why the Frost Queen issued that order initially and whether she provided any further explanation to you?”

“...I’ve been perplexed by this for many years,” Tyrian confessed openly, “The Queen gave me no other directives, only to depart with my troops. I thought she might have intended to preserve a force for potential future

retaliation, but... it didn't add up. She prohibited us from returning to the city-state, and with the rebels in control, how could we exact revenge without going back?"

"You could raid the rebels' fleets in the open sea and intercept all merchant vessels entering and leaving Frost. You did this for several years."

"Yes, that was the only course of action I could conceive at the time, and it was also the sole means for the Mist Fleet to endure... We didn't even have a home port back then," Tyrian shook his head, "But we have gradually ceased these raiding activities."

"Why?"

"...Because the last rebel leader passed away, from old age," Tyrian said with a wry smile, spreading his hands, "We persistently sought to apprehend those rebel leaders in every possible manner, hanging them from the mast when captured, then hurling their corpses onto the merchant ships bound for Frost. So they became crafty, hiding in the city-state, never venturing outside the city for decades. I could only watch them die peacefully, one by one, until all those involved in the rebellion had departed this world."

Duncan remained silent for a while, deep in thought. Eventually, he abruptly asked, "Your soldiers, they're all 'living dead,' correct?"

Tyrian casually replied, "Yes, it's common knowledge."

"They all directly or indirectly participated in the 'Abyss Plan'?"

"I was involved in that plan, and as my direct troops, they naturally took part as well," Tyrian said nonchalantly, then furrowed his brow, "Did you come to a conclusion?"

"You were part of the Abyss Plan but didn't succumb to madness like the others in the later stages. After 'one thousand meters,' the Frost Queen disagreed with you and removed you from the plan. Then, on the eve of the

rebel assault, your queen specifically instructed you to lead your direct troops away from Frost...”

Duncan spoke deliberately as he thought, finally fixing his gaze on Tyrian, his voice low, “You’re correct. The Frost Queen might indeed have wished to retain a force, but it seems she didn’t preserve this force for her own vengeance...”

Tyrian gradually displayed a somewhat surprised expression, but before he could inquire further, the figure in the mirror gently shook his head, “Don’t ask me, I can’t comprehend something you don’t understand yourself – I’m merely an observer, voicing my thoughts.”

A brief quietude settled in the room. After an indeterminate duration, Duncan’s voice emerged again, “Tyrian, we’ve conversed long enough this time.”

Preoccupied with his thoughts, the pirate instinctively raised his head, gazing at his father in the mirror with a hint of astonishment. It was as though he suddenly grasped something, a complicated expression of confusion materializing in his eyes.

It seemed as though he had just recognized how much he had shared with the other party, realizing that he had unknowingly adapted to the conversational atmosphere entirely – even a century ago, he seldom had such lengthy discussions with his father. As for his initial wariness upon awakening here... it had long since dissipated.

“I...” He instinctively wanted to say something, but a sharp pain on his forehead made him touch his head involuntarily, “Ah, that hurts...”

“...The child was not gentle. I hope you don’t hold it against her,” Duncan’s voice came from the mirror, “Do you need ointment?”

“No... no need,” Tyrian waved his hand with a somewhat odd expression, recalling the last scene he remembered before arriving here, the peculiar little girl, and the creature that flew in like a dog... Then suddenly realized, “Wait, I remember now, that wasn’t a dog, that was a dark hound!”

He looked at the mirror, his eyes filled with disbelief, “Is she also one of your subordinates now? An… Ender cultist?”

He seemed hesitant when uttering the words “Ender cultist,” clearly uncertain of Shirley’s true identity – after all, he had encountered beings like Enders before, but he had never seen one wielding a demonic pact weapon…

“She is indeed carrying out some tasks for me,” Duncan said with an enigmatic smile, “But if you have the chance to see her again, I suggest you avoid mentioning the term ‘Enders’ in her presence. She doesn’t appreciate it.”

Tyrian made a puzzled sound, then instinctively glanced around, his gaze eventually settling on Alice, who appeared to have begun daydreaming.

Alice quickly noticed and curiously looked at Tyrian, “Why are you looking at me?”

“Nothing,” Tyrian averted his gaze, his complex eyes concealing some indiscernible emotion. Finally, he looked at the mirror still ablaze with flames, asking somewhat hesitantly, “So, can I… leave now?”

“Would you like to stay for dinner?”

Tyrian quickly waved his hand, “Ah… no, that’s not necessary…”

“Very well, I’ll arrange for my messenger to escort you…” Duncan in the mirror nodded, but suddenly, he furrowed his brow as if recalling something, “Wait, I just thought of something.”

Tyrian instinctively became a bit uneasy, “Something?”

“Strictly speaking, it’s two questions regarding one matter,” Duncan’s expression turned serious again as he fixed his gaze on Tyrian. “Do you recall what you mentioned earlier about several ‘clones’ of the Number Three submersible surfacing one after another?”

“Of course,” Tyrian nodded, “Including the first original and the subsequent six clones, a total of seven ‘Number Three submersibles’ surfaced.”

“I have two inquiries,” Duncan organized his thoughts and slowly began, “First, was the initial submersible that surfaced at that time... genuinely the original?

“Second, was the seventh submersible that surfaced truly empty inside?”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 255

Chapter 255 “Farewell For Now”

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Today, half a century after the conclusion of the Abyss Plan, Tyrian once again felt a lingering chill from the long-past scheme. The “Number Three Submersibles” resurfaced in his memory as if appearing right before his eyes. Alongside them were the cautious soldiers, solemn priests, and the cold, silent Frost Queen. It was as if he were witnessing the hatches of those submersibles opening once more, revealing the insane explorers, humanoid figures, grotesque deformed creatures, writhing masses of flesh, the eerie, silent mud, the dried and suspicious black fibers, and... the empty cabin of the seventh “Number Three Submersible.”

“Back then, the platform was heavily guarded by numerous priests and protectors,” Tyrian said with a frown, recalling the past. “But... I must admit, your question is somewhat unsettling.”

Duncan remained silent for a few seconds before suddenly asking, “What happened to those ‘Number Three Submersibles’ in the end?”

“Except for the first ‘authentic’ one that surfaced, the other six duplicates were thrown into a furnace, melted into ingots by sacred flames, and then cast into the sea. Despite being valuable metal resources, no one dared to keep them,” Tyrian explained hesitantly. “But if, as you suggested, even the first one wasn’t ‘authentic,’ then the situation would be...”

“Where is the first one?”

“I don’t know its current location,” Tyrian shook his head. “The rebels should have destroyed everything related to the Abyss Plan, but no one

knows how they disposed of those materials. Maybe they simply disassembled and recycled them? But before the rebellion... The Number Three Submersible was stored in a warehouse at the port after being decommissioned.”

After a brief silence, Duncan sighed. “I understand... Tyrian, thank you for sharing so much with me. Regardless, this information has greatly satisfied my curiosity.”

However, Tyrian appeared burdened by his thoughts. Reflecting on the “Abyss Plan” after all these years, he found too many chilling details. Although the plan itself was strange, this retrospective view brought an even more unnerving feeling than when he had experienced it firsthand. Especially considering the recent question his father posed about the Frost Queen’s final command, Tyrian felt that this old case, which had supposedly concluded fifty years ago, might not be truly over.

But, for now, their conversation had reached its end.

His father did not intend to keep him there any longer.

A sudden sound of flapping wings came from the side, and Tyrian saw a bird-shaped phantom engulfed in eerie green flames darting through the air. Immediately after, where the phantom had passed, a surge of green flames erupted, spiraling into a vortex gate in an instant.

His father’s voice emerged from the nearby mirror: “Go inside; you’ll be transported near the cathedral. I believe you won’t tell anyone about what transpired here.”

“Of course, I’ve never been one to tattle,” Tyrian responded. He glanced at the blazing portal, hesitating for a moment before making up his mind and moving forward. Just before stepping through the gate, he paused and couldn’t help but look back at the Gothic doll standing quietly next to the mirror.

“Anomaly 099...” he murmured to himself, “She looks exactly like her...”

“It’s said that Anomaly 099 first emerged in the icy sea near where the Frost Queen was executed and fell into the water,” Duncan’s voice came from the mirror. “I share your suspicion, but even Alice herself can’t explain her origins. As you just mentioned... there’s too much in the deep sea that we can’t comprehend.”

Tyrian appeared thoughtful. After a moment of silence, he suddenly spoke up, “It seems this doll really enjoys being around you.”

Duncan responded indifferently, “Initially, she stayed out of persistence, but later I found she could be useful.”

Alice’s answer was much simpler. She laughed happily and said, nodding, “I like being with the captain! He’s incredible!”

Tyrian looked at his father’s emotionless face in the mirror and then at Alice, who resembled the Frost Queen but was entirely different in every other way. After a while, he suddenly laughed.

It was a genuine sense of relief and happiness.

He then turned around and confidently stepped through the flaming gateway, leaving the warehouse silent again.

Alice looked in the direction where the flame had vanished, then turned to gaze at the mirror beside her. It took her a moment to suddenly blurt out, “Captain, why did he laugh at us just now?”

Duncan replied casually, “How should I know?”

Alice, puzzled, asked, “What you discussed earlier, about the Frost Queen and the Abyss Plan... Does it have anything to do with me?”

This time, Duncan didn’t quickly concoct an answer to deceive the doll. He thought about it seriously before saying solemnly, “It might be connected.”

“Can I understand it?”

“It’s likely very difficult.”

“Well, then I won’t think about it for now,” Alice scratched her head and smiled at Duncan in the mirror. “Regardless, if there’s anything I need to do or help with, just let me know.”

“I will.”

“Great!”

...

A burst of fire flashed through the dark alley, and moments later, a groggy Tyrian appeared, spotting the grand doors of Pland Cathedral nearby.

“It really did bring me close...” The pirate muttered, raising his hand to rub his drowsy head, but accidentally touched the swollen area and immediately winced in pain.

That little girl’s strength was a bit too frightening... She was a demonic creature heavier than two or three adults combined! Remembering the cause of the injury on his head, Tyrian couldn’t help but grumble internally. Yet, simultaneously, he couldn’t help but feel curious.

Indeed, his own father was assembling a new crew. From what he had observed so far, he controlled Anomaly 099 and had a mysterious, powerful girl who could summon demonic creatures at his service. However, this was obviously not the full extent of his crew.

Even if this had happened yesterday, it would have made him extremely cautious, and he might not have been able to resist alerting the city-state and the church. But at this moment, he had no intention of “tattling” to the church.

Now, his mind was preoccupied with thoughts related to the “Abyss Plan.”

Tyrian then approached the Storm Cathedral, and within a few steps, he noticed several figures rushing towards him at the entrance.

They were the sailors he had sent back earlier.

The captain had vanished for an entire day after leaving just a message, which had clearly made his crew anxious.

In no time, the sailors reached Tyrian. One began speaking without pause, “You’re finally back! The sun is about to set; where have you been?”

Another sailor noticed Tyrian’s disheveled state and exclaimed in surprise, “Captain, the wound on your face… and how did your head swell up so much?!”

Tyrian knew he couldn’t conceal his disarray. He had hoped his faster-than-normal healing ability would help him recover before returning to the cathedral. However, it turned out that despite the girl’s questionable use of demonic creatures, the injuries they inflicted were still problematic. Half a day had passed, and his head remained swollen.

“…I tripped along the way.”

After hesitating for a moment, Tyrian could only offer a feeble excuse.

He was too embarrassed to admit to his subordinates that this was the result of “fatherly discipline.” Furthermore, it wasn’t even his father who had directly inflicted the damage, but a young girl who was only about as tall as his chest.

“You tripped?” The first sailor to speak looked at his boss in confusion, “This seems like quite an… exaggerated accident. It’s as if you violently smashed your head against the walls of Pland and the ground…”

Tyrian stared at the sailor with an intense gaze, emphasizing each word, “I tripped.”

The sailor shuddered and instantly understood, “Oh, right, right. You clearly just tripped accidentally. When we get back, I’ll help you apply some medicine…”

“Enough, I don’t want to discuss this issue for now,” Tyrian sighed and walked towards the cathedral’s main entrance. “Let’s go back. I need a good

rest today, and then we'll set off to return to the North.”

“Return to the North? Weren’t we staying here a few more days? You had planned to...”

The words “Abyss Plan” resurfaced in Tyrian’s mind, and he waved his hand, “Enough, it’s time to go back. There are still matters to attend to in the Cold Sea.”

The sailors exchanged glances and finally nodded, complying with the captain’s decision.

Tyrian suddenly stopped in his tracks.

He hesitated for a moment in front of the main entrance of Storm Cathedral and touched the swollen areas on his face and head.

“Let’s use the side door.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 256

Chapter 256 “Rapid Ringing”

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Tyrian instructed his subordinates to leave upon returning to his room, but the silence did little to soothe his unsettled mood.

The lengthy discussion with his “father” continued to linger in his mind, and memories of the Abyss Plan swirled around his heart uncontrollably. Periodically, images from half a century ago flashed before him—rudimentary diving gear, perpetually rain-soaked cliffs, silent platform guards, the low prayers of priests on rainy nights, the eerily illuminated coastal laboratory, and the Frost Queen’s gaze, forever fixed on the sea, concealing all secrets.

Tyrian shook his head. For some reason, he suddenly thought of the puppet who called herself “Alice”— Anomaly 099 who had entirely broken free from her seal and moved unimpeded in the human world.

A “controlled” anomaly, a puppet who could think and communicate like a human, even possessing her own emotions...

She bore a strong resemblance to the Frost Queen, but she was not the Queen herself—though her existence and presence evoked thoughts of some kind of “return” of the Queen, Tyrian could sense that Ray Nora’s will was absent within the puppet.

If anything, Tyrian considered “Alice” to be more like a... perfect exterior replica, yet utterly distorted inside, just like the “Submersible Number Threes” that emerged one after another back then.

A shiver ran down Tyrian's spine as his mind made these connections.

Out of restlessness, he poured himself a glass of potent liquor. He needed the warmth of the alcohol to chase away his chilling thoughts. Then after a while, he felt somewhat better and glanced at the elegant case beside the bed.

Hesitantly, he brought the box to the table, opened it, and activated the intricate lenses and the crystal at the center of the lens assembly.

The crystal sphere illuminated with countless flickering points of light appearing inside, accompanied by irritating noises.

Gradually, he saw Lucretia's figure emerge amidst the flickering lights and her indistinct voice. After another couple of minutes, the sound and image finally sharpened, and his sister's voice reached him: "Can you hear me?"

"Now it's clear," Tyrian nodded, "The interference on your end is even greater than before... What's around you? Is that sunlight? It looks a bit odd..."

He observed that behind Lucretia, the backdrop seemed to be bathed in a faint golden glow, akin to a radiant sunset streaming through a window. However, the light's warmth and brightness surpassed that of a sunset, and its distribution and diffusion felt somewhat different from sunlight, drawing extra attention.

Tyrian knew that his sister frequently operated at the border, where unusual phenomena often occurred, many of which were hazardous. However, Lucretia always managed to transform danger into safety—still, he couldn't help but worry slightly.

"Ah, I discovered something peculiar at the border, but I've thoroughly examined it, and there's no danger," Lucretia responded nonchalantly, "The object might have fallen from the sky, casting a vast range of brilliance... I'm using the Bright Star to tow it back for analysis."

Tyrian involuntarily frowned, “You always find peculiar things at the border. Have you forgotten the incident when you were pulled into the spirit world’s depths by that human-shaped smoke?”

“I’ll be cautious, I always have been. But as you know, unavoidable accidents will occasionally occur during adventures,” Lucretia waved dismissively, then appeared to suddenly notice something. Staring at Tyrian’s face, “Brother, what happened to your face and head?”

“... I fell.”

“It looks more like you violently collided with a wall,” Lucretia’s brow furrowed, “You wouldn’t have these injuries without a 200-meter run-up and a deliberate headbutt. You were attacked.”

Tyrian’s expression tensed briefly, and then he helplessly shook his head after a moment, “Sometimes I wish you weren’t so perceptive.”

“Who attacked you?” Lucretia ignored Tyrian’s attempt to deflect; her expression was stern, “You’re in the Pland City-State, where you have no enemies, and the authorities there wouldn’t stand by if a ‘guest’ was assaulted. Ah, you just denied being attacked and claimed you fell...”

As Lucretia spoke, she suddenly halted as if something dawned on her. Her expression shifted dramatically, and she glanced around the crystal ball, her eyes flickering.

Tyrian understood her concern upon seeing her reaction and shook his head before she could speak, “Don’t worry, he’s not here.”

“Really... Did he hit you?” Lucretia’s eyes widened in shock, “Wait, wasn’t he supposed to be absent from the city-state? And why would he...”

“He’s not, it’s one of his current underlings,” Tyrian said, rubbing his forehead with mild annoyance, “Relax, we didn’t have any conflicts. These injuries... are just minor accidents. He wanted to discuss some matters with me, and I was overly cautious.”

“A ‘subordinate’?!” Lucretia was startled and instinctively wanted to ask how powerful this underling was and what weapon could reduce the “Iron Admiral” to such a state. But then she caught Tyrian’s latter statement, and her eyes shifted, “... He’s talking to you again so soon, what happened?”

“He’s become intrigued by some old matters involving Frost,” Tyrian replied casually, “But you don’t need to concern yourself with that. I contacted you to ask about something else – Anomaly 099, you’re aware of it, right?”

“Of course, I also know the Vanished hijacked it. This incident has spread throughout the Explorers Association. Soon after, the Storm Church issued a notice, and Anomaly 099’s name changed from ‘Doll Coffin’ to ‘Doll’... Many people harbor uneasy suspicions about this.”

Tyrian lifted his eyelids and gazed intently into Lucretia’s eyes, “Do you know why its name changed from ‘Doll Coffin’ to ‘Doll’?”

Lucretia knit her beautiful brows as if she were sensing something.

“I met her,” Tyrian exhaled without prolonging the suspense, “That ‘Doll,’ she calls herself ‘Alice,’ and she has awakened from the coffin. She now serves at our father’s side, and just like the rumors, the doll bears an uncanny resemblance to the Frost Queen, but her personality... is quite astonishing.”

“This revelation is quite surprising,” Lucretia said softly. In the inexplicable golden light, her eyes seemed to shimmer faintly. “So, you’re saying Father... ‘liberated’ Anomaly 099 from the coffin, allowing the hazardous anomaly to wander freely outside, and she willingly follows Father? She can even converse with you?”

“It’s hard to believe, but it’s true,” Tyrian confirmed. “She can speak, think, and feel emotions like a human. In fact... I sense she has a good rapport with Father, but I can’t be certain if it’s a ‘connection’ humans can comprehend, considering one is a ghost returned from subspace, and the other is an ‘anomalous object’ ranked within the top hundred.”

Lucretia remained silent. After a brief pause, she looked up: “What do you want to ask?”

“About the circumstances when Anomaly 099 was first discovered; you were present at the scene,” Tyrian gazed at his sister. “I want to hear the most genuine details from you. As you know, my fleet and I never approach Frost; we weren’t there back then.”

Lucretia hesitated for a few seconds: “That year... I was indeed in the area of the incident, but it wasn’t the Bright Star that first retrieved Anomaly 099; it was a coastal fishing vessel named ‘Charlwin.’ Strictly speaking, by the time I received Charlwin’s distress signal and located the out-of-control, adrift fishing boat, it was already the second scene, so I can’t confirm what the initial scene was like when Anomaly 099 was first recovered. I can only tell you what I observed on Charlwin.”

Lucretia paused momentarily, recalling the events she had witnessed.

“When I discovered the boat, nearly all the crew had perished. Of the twelve members, including the captain, eleven had been decapitated—only a semi-deranged sailor remained, describing the ‘cursed wooden box’ they had salvaged.

“He claimed they couldn’t discard the box because it was alive, moving around the boat. Nor could they destroy it since it was incredibly resilient and sturdy. The sailors with self-defense weapons were no match for it...”

“As for this part, you can essentially find it in the Explorers Association’s public records, but there is one detail... not documented in the files, which might pique your interest.

“Within half an hour of initially salvaging Anomaly 099, the sailors aboard Charlwin heard a series of faint clicking sounds emanating from the box. It was as if... something was assembling itself inside.”

“Faint clicking sounds...” Tyrian murmured, furrowing his brow. He appeared to want to inquire further, but just as he was about to speak, an

abrupt and slightly urgent bell rang from outside the window, interrupting him.

Surprised, he looked up, listening to the distinct and pressing bell chime in the gradually darkening sky. Then, after carefully discerning it for a moment, he uncertainly murmured to himself, “Not the evening bell... it sounds like rapid rings.”

“Rapid bells...” Lucretia’s voice came from the crystal ball. “I heard seven short rings. If I recall correctly, that’s the bell signal representing the ‘Tomb of the Nameless King,’ isn’t it?!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 257

Chapter 257 “Courteous”

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The urgent bell rang rapidly, sounding seven short rings in succession, followed by a brief pause and another seven rings before repeating this pattern thrice.

Tyrian listened closely to the sounds coming through the window. He could hear conversations echoing in the corridor and hurried footsteps from the open space. These were the commotions caused by the senior priests running around to establish protection at crucial spots for the night watch. At the same time, the highest-ranking individual in the cathedral should have already retreated to a hidden sanctuary, getting ready to participate in the saints’ gathering.

Although Tyrian wasn’t a church member, he had lived for half a century and was well-acquainted with its rules. He could deduce vital information from the frequency and repetition of the bell sounds. It signaled a “listening” assembly, an invitation sent directly from the Tomb of the Nameless King, and it seemed quite urgent.

“Could there be an issue with an anomaly or a vision? Is it a new discovery, or has an old one changed significantly?” Lucretia pondered aloud, “It feels like it hasn’t been long since the last ‘call’...”

Tyrian listened to the commotion outside for a while longer before refocusing his attention and shaking his head, “This is the Storm Church’s own affair; we don’t need to interfere.”

“Mhm,” Lucretia nodded gently, then looked at her brother, “Do you have any more questions about Anomaly 099?”

Tyrian considered for a moment and shook his head, “No, that’s all. Besides, with the urgent bell ringing this evening, the cathedral will soon enter a state of night watch, so it’s best not to continue discussing matters related to anomalies.”

“Alright, then I’ll carry on with my own tasks,” Lucretia promptly said. The crystal ball on the table began to flicker slightly, and her figure started to fade. But just before the connection was severed entirely, she recalled something and suddenly said, “Oh, there’s one more thing, about our father.”

Tyrian hesitated slightly, “Go ahead.”

“Did he appear... normal when he came to see you this time?”

“He was very lucid, clear-headed, and even somewhat...” Tyrian hesitated but ultimately continued, “I can’t be certain, but he seemed almost affectionate.”

“Ah, that’s good.”

...

Vanna rushed into the cathedral and spotted Bishop Valentine already waiting for her in front of the goddess’s statue. She hurriedly approached and asked, “Why is there another call so soon? This has never happened before.”

“I don’t know, but this time the bell ringing is directly controlled by the Storm Cathedral, so it must have a reason,” Valentine nodded at Vanna, and as they walked toward the passage leading to the “Flooded Cave,” he spoke quickly, “Like last time, it might be due to direct changes in the list of anomalies and visions, with the tomb keeper sending out a summons.”

Vanna followed the elderly bishop's footsteps. As she passed the statue of the goddess, she hesitated for a moment but soon bowed respectfully as she had always done before continuing toward the passage's entrance.

Before long, they were at the flooded cave used for constructing the "psychic channel."

The scene in the secret chamber remained unchanged, with the ancient stone walls perpetually damp and the fire basin in the center burning with an ethereal flame. It's tranquil in here, masterfully created by the sounds of trickling water and echoing waves.

Then, the door to the secret chamber slammed shut.

Vanna took a deep breath, paused before the fire basin, and lowered her head to gaze at the flames that burned without fuel.

She attempted to calm her thoughts, gradually synchronizing her spirituality with the guidance of the goddess as the leaping flame filled her vision.

This process should have been routine, but Vanna found it quite difficult this time as she tried to not imagine the flames turning a ghostly green or the possibility of Captain Duncan's eyes hiding behind the shadows.

Wanting help, she glanced at Bishop Valentine, who had already closed his eyes and breathing steadily, a sign that he had already entered the assembly.

Vanna reluctantly looked away, took a deep breath, and tried to concentrate her spirit once more, synchronizing her spirituality with the guidance of the goddess.

Fortunately, she succeeded this time.

Ethereal seawater swirled around her, gently enveloping her senses as they detached from the mortal body. Vanna momentarily felt disoriented before finding herself in the mysterious ancient assembly hall. The familiar boundless square, the ancient broken pillars surrounding it, and the vague human-shaped shadows gathered between the pillars filled her sight.

One of the shadows quickly approached her; it was Bishop Valentine, “Vanna, did you have trouble? It took you longer this time.”

“My mind wasn’t focused enough,” Vanna replied casually. She then noticed a striking figure standing at the edge of the square—a clear and beautiful woman dressed in a magnificent robe, quite different from the other blurred shadows of the saints.

Vanna, of course, recognized the figure.

“Pope Helena is here in person?” she asked in surprise. “I really picked a bad time to be late.”

“It’s alright; you’ll get used to being late,” Valentine said nonchalantly. “She was already here when I arrived. She might even have been the first one here. I suppose she might have some special arrangements...”

Vanna listened half-heartedly, feeling as if the clear and elegant figure was casting an almost imperceptible gaze their way. This kind of attention made her feel uncomfortable and even...nervous.

Just then, Pope Helena turned her head. She looked at Vanna earnestly, and a hint of a smile appeared before she nodded gently.

Vanna was momentarily stunned. She was about to return the gesture when a sudden, deep rumble interrupted her.

Looking in the direction of the sound, she saw the stone floor in the center of the square rapidly rise. The shattered ground rippled like water, and within moments, an ancient palace made of pale giant stones appeared before the saints.

The Tomb of the Nameless King had emerged.

The saints, who had been whispering amongst themselves, quickly fell silent, and an atmosphere of solemnity enveloped the square. Vanna also hurriedly collected her thoughts, ignoring the pope’s gaze, and focused

intently on the pyramid-shaped main building of the ancient palace and its entrance.

The entrance opened, and the towering tomb guardian stepped out.

Wrapped in burial cloth, with half of its body burned and the other half entwined in chains, the horrifying creature made of flesh, steel, and deadly curses strode straight towards the saints gathered in the square, just as it had the previous time.

The chosen one had been decided.

The next moment, without any hesitation, it bypassed every shadow in the square and stopped directly in front of Vanna.

The tomb guardian lowered its head, its single eye calmly staring at the saint before it: “You may enter the tomb.”

It raised its hand, offering a quill and parchment, awaiting Vanna’s response.

Vanna was stunned—as were almost all of the saints.

The tomb guardian had chosen the same saint to enter the tomb twice in a row!

This had never happened in the past thousand years!

Of course, there were no explicit “rules” preventing the tomb guardian from choosing the same saint consecutively. However, over the years, the guardian had always chosen different saints to enter the tomb during nearby assemblies, which had become an unwritten “rule.” Even if a saint who had previously entered the tomb attended the assembly again, it was merely to follow orders and ensure the completeness of the “listening” ritual.

No one expected Vanna to be chosen again.

Vanna hesitated for several seconds, and the tomb guardian patiently waited with an outstretched hand. At that moment, she felt someone’s gaze again.

The lady instinctively followed the sensation, only to meet Pope Helena's deep eyes.

Vanna's heart tightened, and she guiltily looked away, only then noticing that the tomb guardian was still waiting. The ancient, seemingly terrifying guardian calmly lowered its head and extended the parchment and quill a little further.

"Me again?"

Vanna asked subconsciously but immediately regretted it—why would the tomb guardian answer such an irrelevant question?

However, she then heard a hoarse, low voice coming from in front of her:
"Yes, you again."

Vanna was taken aback, and she looked up at the tomb guardian's slightly fearsome face before taking the parchment and quill.

The tomb guardian seemed to nod slightly and said as it straightened up,
"Please write what you heard on it."

Vanna nodded instinctively but suddenly felt that something was amiss.

It seemed... that the tomb guardian had become considerably more courteous?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 258

Chapter 258 “No Number”

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Not only did Vanna vaguely sense something was off, but the nearby saints also detected a disturbance. Their ethereal soul projections unconsciously glanced at the ancient being enshrouded in cloaks, its appearance ghastly and horrifying. In their memories and the church's records, all descriptions of this “tomb guardian” were accompanied by terms like “cold, dutiful, indifferent” – never had any record mentioned that he would utter “please” to the chosen listener!

Nonetheless, Vanna had no time to dwell on this. She saw the tomb guardian waiting patiently for her, so she quickly collected her thoughts and nodded: “Alright.”

The tomb guardian turned and guided Vanna toward the grand, ancient tomb palace, leaving the saints in the square to watch the pair vanish into the distance.

Once the massive tomb doors shut behind them, seemingly sealing off the sounds of the outside world, Vanna’s heart steadied within the chilly, silent corridor.

This was her second time entering this tomb. In contrast to her initial apprehensive and tense emotions, she had now somewhat acclimated to it.

She knew the path: to continue straight, traverse the corridor filled with messages from her predecessors, enter the innermost chamber, and behold the body of the Nameless King. Then, she would forget everything she had seen and heard before being transported outside the tomb – while the

parchment in her hand would hold the notes she had personally documented.

The secrets forbidden to leave the tomb would be stripped away, while those that could be shared with the world would remain. The corruption she experienced while acquiring knowledge would be safely left behind in the tomb chamber, accompanied by her “forgetfulness.”

Vanna composed herself and took a step forward, only to halt in surprise upon hearing heavy footsteps following from behind.

Under normal circumstances, the tomb guardian would depart once the listener entered the tomb, but this wasn’t the case!

“Is there... anything else?” Vanna couldn’t help but inquire, her tone cautious and defensive.

The tomb guardian looked downward, his single exposed eye exuding a murky gaze, and a raspy voice emerged from his chest: “No, just escorting – do you require an escort?”

Her unease intensified. Although Vanna had only entered the tomb once and was not well-versed in all details related to “Vision 004,” she instinctively sensed that the tomb guardian’s behavior seemed somewhat off... a stark contrast to the records.

Nevertheless, Vanna remained composed. She was acutely aware that she was in an ancient vision of high rank, and every detail here was vital to her survival. Consequently, she exercised extreme caution and did not impulsively accept the tomb guardian’s “additional service”: “I think... I know the way.”

The tomb guardian silently gazed at the “visitor” before him, his single eye revealing no emotion. After a few seconds, he merely nodded and slowly retreated: “Alright, please proceed, and I will escort you out when you are finished.”

The tomb guardian's figure vanished into the corridor, leaving the lady dumbfounded for a moment before Vanna realized the guardian had used the word "you" at the end.

"Why was this cold and aloof ancient guardian so courteous today...?"

She shook her head, striving to dispel all distracting thoughts from her mind, worried that this ancient vision might induce some mental disturbance. Focusing on her task, she proceeded through the lengthy corridor and entered the tomb chamber deep within the palace.

Inside the chamber, the enigmatic headless corpse continued to occupy the towering throne, with ghostly fire basins burning on either side. Facing the Nameless King's body was a chair that had evidently been moved there recently.

Vanna's eyelids flickered.

In that instant, the typically serious and disciplined inquisitor entertained a rather absurd notion – would a fruit plate be added the next time she visited?

She approached the chair and cautiously sat down, then raised her eyes to the headless corpse on the throne.

The following second, she opened her eyes to find herself standing in the vast, open stone square. The turbulent sky filled her sight, mysterious lights emanating from the shattered pillars in the distance, and a rumbling noise originated from behind her – Vision 004 rapidly descended back into the ground.

Still somewhat dazed, Vanna noticed the saints in the square had swiftly gathered.

An ethereal saint, carrying the familiar aura of Valentine, approached Vanna with urgency: "Quickly, see what's recorded on the parchment."

Vanna snapped back to reality, hastily picking up the parchment in her hand – as anticipated, this parchment was still incomplete, but compared to the previous one, which had only a small fragment remaining, the situation had improved considerably.

Only half of the parchment was missing, while the remaining portion contained legible writing.

Vanna's eyes scanned her own handwriting:

“Shadows in the deep darkness have begun to rise.

“The day of setting sail.

“Vision – Pland.”

The saints exchanged glances, and Valentine's saintly apparition gazed at Vanna in astonishment, instinctively wanting to ask something but uncertain how to phrase it.

There was a significant issue with the parchment's content. However, the listener couldn't recall her experience in the central tomb chamber, and the text that could be brought out on the paper was the only information available. Vision 004 wouldn't provide any further answers; the sole guarantee was the accuracy and truthfulness of the parchment's content.

“Shadows in the deep darkness... the day of setting sail...” a saint couldn't help but murmur, looking perplexed at his counterparts, “The information conveyed from the tomb in the past was relatively precise and unambiguous; rarely were there such vague metaphors...”

“Perhaps this is precise and unambiguous information, just that the key part was torn away,” another saint mused, “Rather than that, the content of the last sentence is...”

“Vision, Pland,” someone whispered softly.

Vanna's gaze was also fixed on the last sentence of the parchment. Among the three sentences, only this one had completely captured her attention.

She naturally thought of the great fire, the ghost ship, and the ghostly flames that eventually engulfed the entire city-state. But then, she noticed something else.

“No number...” she said in surprise, then looked up at Valentine and repeated, “No number?!”

At this moment, she didn’t even know which point to be more surprised at first – whether to be surprised that Pland had been identified as a “vision,” or to be surprised that this vision had no number!

The saints were somewhat restless. Although they were high-ranking clergy from various church regions with strong wills and powerful forces, they couldn’t help but fall into confusion and bewilderment. The low, uneasy discussions echoed around them, and some more familiar saints approached Vanna and Valentine, inquiring about the recent situation in Pland.

This made Vanna feel somewhat helpless – compared to the experienced Bishop Valentine, she was still too young.

Fortunately, the commotion lasted only a short while, and the saints gathered in the square suddenly quieted down. Vanna looked up and saw the shadowy figures retreating to the sides while an elegant lady dressed in a luxurious robe walked toward her and Bishop Valentine.

They immediately bowed at the newcomer: “Your Holiness.”

“No need for formalities,” the ruler of the Storm Church, the storm goddess’s representative in the mortal world, Pope Helena, looked at Vanna, then at the parchment, “May I take a look?”

“Of course,” Vanna quickly handed over the parchment, “Here you are.”

Helena took the parchment, her eyes scanning the text, then looked up at Vanna with a faint smile: “The handwriting is quite nice – much better than the writing in your report.”

Vanna was taken aback, not expecting the Pope to suddenly bring this up, and then she felt a little embarrassed: “That report... I wrote it in a hurry. The city-state was in a bit of chaos at the time...”

“I understand. When I first wrote such a long report, I almost wanted to eat the pen,” Helena said with a smile, “So the typewriter is a good invention, why not use it?”

Vanna replied with a strange tone: “I always accidentally break it, and I’m not used to it.”

Helena’s smile became even more evident, and then she handed the parchment back to Vanna, casually saying, “I’ve already read all the reports you submitted about the historical pollution incident in Pland, including the part about the Vanished. Frankly, after experiencing such a drastic change, it’s not surprising that the city-state of Pland has become a place similar to a ‘vision.’ Although the birth process of this vision is extraordinary, being ‘extraordinary’ is the nature of anomalies and visions.”

She paused for a moment, and her expression gradually grew serious.

“However... having no number is a bit too extraordinary.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 259

Chapter 259 “After the Coin Flips”

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Ever since Vision 004 introduced the first “list” to the present world, all anomalies and visions had been assigned numbers. Despite changes in position, evolving characteristics, or the disappearance or transformation of some anomalies and visions, there was always an empty space on the list to account for them. For millennia, this rule remained unaltered.

Thus, people believed that Vision 004 served as a “focus” transcending the order of time and space. All anomalies and visions, whether from the past or future, had left their marks within this focal point, even if they had not yet come into existence; their positions were preordained.

However, this longstanding rule was broken today with the appearance of an unnumbered vision that emerged before everyone.

Adding to the unease, this vision was known as “Pland” – the pearl of the Boundless Sea, the most thriving stop on the ocean trade network, and the largest gathering place of Storm Church believers.

Yet, for some reason, Vanna sensed that the pope, who maintained a serene and introverted demeanor, didn’t appear overly concerned. When Pland became a vision, she exhibited only mild surprise – she seemed less concerned with “Pland becoming a vision” than with “Pland being unnumbered.”

Anxiously, Vanna glanced at the pope, who seemed lost in thought. Following a few minutes of heavy silence, she suddenly inquired: “What has become of Pland since the ‘disaster’?”

“Order is being re-established in the city-state, and all who perished from historical pollution, as well as damaged locations, have been restored, save for those who truly died eleven years ago,” Bishop Valentine promptly replied. “We have inspected every nook and cranny of the city-state, including every sewer, factory, machine, and even each pipe, and found no signs of supernatural distortion. The city-state is in... an incredibly ‘normal’ state. Well, except for...”

“The french fry issue, correct?” Helena interjected indifferently, “I saw it in the report.”

Vanna’s expression turned somewhat awkward: “I know it’s a bit odd to include that in the report...”

“It’s not odd. Following a supernatural event, all leads must be taken seriously,” Helena calmly asserted, her gaze landing on Vanna. “So, what about you, Saint Vanna? Have you sensed anything amiss?”

Vanna grew subconsciously uneasy, anticipating that the pope would eventually ask her this question since she had documented everything in the report, apart from the shaken faith segment. “I... actually don’t feel anything unusual. No spiritual pollution, no mental distortion. Bishop Valentine specifically conducted several tests on me, and the conclusion was that it’s merely a ‘connection.’”

Helena slightly clenched her fists, resting her chin on her fist, appearing to ponder for a moment before addressing the saints gathered nearby.

“Everyone, disperse for now – I have matters to discuss with the two saints from Pland.”

Upon hearing this, the shadows assembled in the square paid their respects to the pope and disappeared one by one. In under half a minute, only Helena, Vanna, and Valentine remained in the expansive assembly area.

“You appear slightly anxious, young saint – relax,” Helena said, smiling at Vanna after the area had quieted. “You are on the right path, and the Goddess’s approval and favor remain as steadfast as ever. Don’t be uneasy merely because you’ve encountered some ‘dangerous’ powers – as

defenders of order, isn't it our responsibility to handle all sorts of dangerous powers?"

Taking a gentle breath, Vanna tried to keep her voice steady: "...Indeed, as you said."

Helena nodded and shifted her gaze to Bishop Valentine: "I saw in your report that you believe the renowned 'Captain Duncan' has regained his sanity and humanity, and there's potential for communication?"

"Technically speaking, it's not just the potential for communication; we are already establishing communication – though the beginning was unplanned," Valentine nodded slightly and stated solemnly. "For some reason, the ghost captain is particularly interested in the situation in Pland and has chosen Vanna as the contact. So far, he has shown no hostility towards the civilized world."

"Did the fire from the Vanished engulf the entire city-state?" Helena inquired immediately.

Valentine nodded in affirmation: "Yes, the fire expelled the historical pollution created by the heretics and reset the city-state to its pre-pollution state."

"...Alternatively, one could argue that the fire tainted the entire city-state and rendered it untainted," Helena calmly remarked, locking eyes with Valentine. "In this situation, the distinction between 'polluted' and 'unpolluted' has become rather ambiguous."

Valentine subconsciously exchanged glances with Vanna beside him.

They then heard Helena continue: "This might be why Pland became a 'vision' – the parchment doesn't detail the specific attributes of this new vision, but we can venture a description: Vision Pland, the city reduced to ashes by subspace flames, was reshaped into a normal appearance by Duncan Abnomar's power. Its distortion lies in distorting its own distortion. The entire city functions as though it had never been polluted, and the sole remaining evidence of the pollution is its existence."

Helena paused, silently studying the two saints before her.

“A coin with its head side up, flipping through the air, and still landing with its head side up.”

Vanna seemed about to say something, but the pope gently waved her hand, stopping her.

“However, there’s nothing wrong with that, Saint Vanna – compared to the twisted states of most places in our world, what does it matter if a coin still shows its head side up after flipping?” Helena said lightly. “At least, in reality, Pland continues to exist, whether the coin flipped once or countless times... It’s not something we mortals should be concerned about.”

For some reason, Vanna sensed a hidden meaning in Pope Helena’s words but couldn’t yet comprehend it. She simply furrowed her brow: “So, how should we announce this news? And how do we explain to people that they live in an immense vision – while still enabling them to maintain a normal life after learning this fact?”

“A startling revelation resulting from an abrupt change should either remain undisclosed or be announced when the aftershocks have yet to subside. People are most receptive during the initial aftershock,” Helena asserted solemnly. “At present, the citizens of Pland have not fully escaped the disaster’s aftermath and have not entirely immersed themselves in the return to normal life... so proceed with the announcement as usual.

“However, exercise caution in guiding people, helping them understand the distinctiveness of this ‘vision’ – not all visions are dangerous, and always remember that our world is still sustained today by the illumination of Vision 001.”

“Yes,” Bishop Valentine bowed his head. “I will consult with the city hall on this matter, determining the most prudent way to announce this news.”

Helena nodded, her gaze inadvertently drifting over Vanna before adding, “There are a few more things.”

Vanna and Valentine immediately responded: “Please instruct us.”

Helena hesitated momentarily: “...It’s not that urgent; we’ll discuss it in greater detail when we meet.”

It took Vanna a couple of seconds to suddenly understand Helena’s implication: “Meet... are you going to...”

“The Grand Storm Cathedral has been touring for many years; it’s about time to make a stop,” Helena said, smiling at Vanna. “Prepare yourselves; the Grand Storm Cathedral will arrive in Pland within a week – by then, I can witness for myself the posture this coin has taken after flipping.”

The two saints departed, leaving only Helena’s figure standing in the vast assembly hall.

But merely half a minute later, quivering shadows emerged from the nearby darkness, and the tall, thin, elderly leader of the Death Church, Banster, along with the kind-faced, slightly overweight leader of the Truth Academy, Lune, materialized from the shadows and stood before Helena.

Banster glanced in the direction Vanna had left before shifting his focus back to the Storm Pope: “Is it her? She seems... ordinary.”

“But the ruler of the storm chose her,” Helena replied calmly. “It is the will of the Goddess.”

The plump, kind-faced Lune contemplated for a moment before speaking with inquisitively: “But why did the ruler of the storm choose her?”

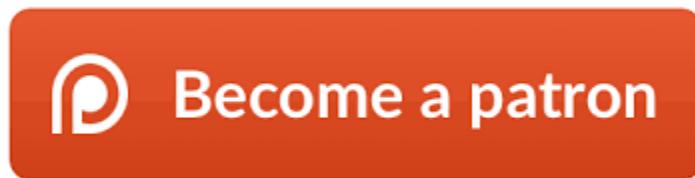
“...No one can decipher the intentions of the storm,” Helena gently shook her head before changing the topic. “Let’s not dwell on this; let’s discuss the information revealed by Vision 004 this time – an unnumbered vision, which is far more perplexing than the vision itself.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 260

Chapter 260 “Church Ark”

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After an indeterminate period of silence that hung over the air, Pope Banster of the Death Church finally broke the air, “Anomalies and visions that diverge from the norm will always arise as irregular occurrences.”

“Eternal Zero is certainly useful, but it shouldn’t be employed recklessly,” said the short, plump, and affable Lune. Then shaking his head, “We can’t apply the Eternal Zero law to everything we don’t comprehend. Doing so would make us complacent when a genuine crisis arises, causing us to miss crucial opportunities.”

“Are you implying that the information provided by Vision 004 is unreliable?” Banster asked, tilting his head slightly. “Is it not that Vision-Pland lacks a numerical code, but rather that it’s concealed?”

“It might be an entirely new naming scheme,” Lune mused. “Vision 004 and Vision Pland might both be accurate, but we have yet to grasp this new vision naming method. Pland has undergone some highly unusual events recently – a city-state tainted by history but ‘rescued’ by subspace power, something unprecedented.”

“I don’t appreciate ‘new mechanisms’,” Banster shook his head, his voice low. “New mechanisms imply new uncontrollable factors. We’ve sacrificed so much to understand the world, and yet it continues to change.”

“No one enjoys it, but the world is consistently cruel,” Lune shrugged, turning to Helena. “I hope you can learn something in Pland and witness firsthand what has transpired in that city-state.”

Helena remained quiet for a moment, nodding slightly, seemingly deep in thought. Eventually, she broke the silence, “There’s another issue – you must have noticed it as well – the problem with Vision 001.”

Lune’s expression grew serious, a rare occurrence for the elderly man who served the god of wisdom: “Yes, the Solar Observation Tower has verified that the rune ring on the sun’s periphery has indeed sustained damage. Although the missing section represents only a small fraction of the entire rune structure, that portion is undeniably gone. I am still monitoring Vision 001 closely, but there’s no further damage to the rune ring or any indication of self-repair.”

“No unusual activities have been detected among the Sun worshipers,” Banster added promptly. “Initially, I suspected their involvement, but based on the information we’ve gathered, the Sun heretics themselves don’t seem to have noticed Vision 001’s changes.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s unrelated to the ‘Creeping Sun Wheel’,” Helena stated gravely. “The Creeping Sun Wheel is among the oldest entities in this world, and the Sun heretics are merely mold spots that have grown under its influence. Their connection to their deity isn’t as intimate as they believe.”

“We’ll continue monitoring those cultists and the sun’s heir offsprings behind them,” Banster declared slowly. “As well as the doomsday Enders... In any event, what occurred in Pland must not be repeated.”

Helena nodded slightly, watching as the shadows of the two popes faded and dissipated into the darkness, vanishing into the void.

She turned her gaze towards the spot where the tomb of the nameless king had sunk, and soon, her figure gradually disappeared from the assembly hall as well.

The next moment, Helena opened her eyes to the physical realm, stepping out of the secret chamber when two attendants approached. Helena waved her hand, signaling for them to leave, and proceeded alone down the lengthy corridor towards the upper deck of the cathedral ship.

A grand cathedral sailed upon the vast, boundless dark sea, with the cathedral's three spires and towering pinnacles and bell towers reaching for the heavens. Their tops were enveloped in mist, while the lower half of the cathedral ship consisted of heavy armor, enormous pipes, and the rugged mechanical structure connecting to the deck area.

A colossal ark, the lower half a steel fortress and the upper half a sacred cathedral – this was the true headquarters of the Storm Church, the “Grand Storm Cathedral” navigating the Boundless Sea.

Helena emerged from the corridor that's adorned with sacred runes, and arrived at the terrace on the upper deck, quietly surveying the magnificent feat of engineering below her.

This cathedral was relatively new; in fact, its hull had been finished a mere thirty-five years ago, and its upper structure had been completed only twenty years prior. Scholars from the Academy of Truth had aided in designing the cathedral ship's immense power system and intricate control mechanisms, and thus far, everything had operated seamlessly.

Before the cathedral ship's completion, the “Grand Storm Cathedral” was smaller in scale and spent less time sailing the Boundless Sea. For the maiden of storm and tranquility, she didn't object to her followers seeking assistance from other religions to construct their temple, and neither did the other gods.

In truth... the gods were indifferent to anything that transpired in the mortal world.

Helena took a gentle breath, observing the thin mist surrounding the cathedral ship – this layer of mist and the chaotic darkness of the nearby seawater signified that the entire ark was currently navigating between the realms of reality and the spirit world. In this position, most ordinary ships sailing on the Boundless Sea could not detect the Grand Storm Cathedral's presence.

After quietly savoring the cold breeze for a while, Helena reached out, grasped a hand-carved wooden piece shaped like a wave, and took it from

her side. Once she's done invoking the name of the Storm Goddess, Gomona, she casts the wave amulet made of "Sea Breath Wood" far into the sea.

"The faith of the saint you're concerned about has started to waver," Helena looked in the direction of the plummeting amulet, speaking softly as if to herself, "But her humanity seems to remain unblemished – she is still human."

The waves gently rippled as if invisible whispers were softly echoing through the waters. Helena listened attentively for a long time and nodded gently, "That's good... Yes, I understand."

After having floated on the water's surface for a while, the Sea Breath Wood amulet eventually tumbled and silently sank into the Boundless Sea.

....

Inside the antique shop of Pland, the morning sun was brilliant today as the light poured through the freshly cleaned windows and onto the scattered shelves housing the faux relics.

As cheerful as ever, Nina hummed an upbeat tune as she dusted the merchandise, occasionally peeking out to watch the figures near the counter as she did so.

Alice and Shirley had been sitting there, their brows furrowed and holding a stack of alphabet cards, while Dog hid in the shadows near the counter, trying to write words with a pencil grasped in his paw.

Truthfully, Nina found it amazing that Dog could even hold a pencil with his skeletal paw. From her view, it would be challenging to keep a grip.

On the brink of falling asleep for the third time, Shirley yawned widely, placed the alphabet cards on the counter, and looked at Alice, who was entirely focused: "Aren't you sleepy?"

“No, not really,” Alice raised her head and replied honestly, “I don’t know what it feels like to be ‘sleepy’—I only sleep when it’s time to sleep.”

“I wonder what it’s like to be a living doll with a soul,” Shirley mumbled, then cautiously looked around and stealthily glanced upstairs before whispering, “Hey, why hasn’t Mr. Duncan come down today... and when I saw him this morning, he seemed preoccupied.”

Alice put the alphabet cards she had just memorized to the side, picked up a clean one, and began to recite again while saying absent-mindedly, “He’s pondering the mysteries of the deep sea.”

“Pondering the mysteries of the deep sea?” Shirley was puzzled, “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, that’s what he said,” Alice shook her head slightly, “Why don’t you go ask him? He should be happy to teach you something...”

Shirley opened her mouth, about to say something when suddenly, she heard the sound of Dog panicking from the shadows near the counter: “If you want to court death, don’t drag me with you!”

“I didn’t say I was going to ask,” Shirley glared in the direction of the voice, “I still have to...”

She had just gotten halfway through her sentence when she suddenly heard the crisp sound of a bell from the direction of the door.

Dog instantly vanished, while Alice gracefully set her alphabet cards aside and looked up towards the door: “Welcome, may I... oh? Mr. Morris?”

The person who had arrived early in the morning was Morris—the elderly scholar wore a dark winter coat, a thick round-topped felt hat, and carried a hefty, old tome under his arm. After entering, he greeted Alice and Shirley by the counter and then glanced at Nina, who was tidying up the shelves nearby: “Is Mr. Duncan here?”

“He’s upstairs,” Nina nodded, looking curiously at the old man, “Do you need him for something?”

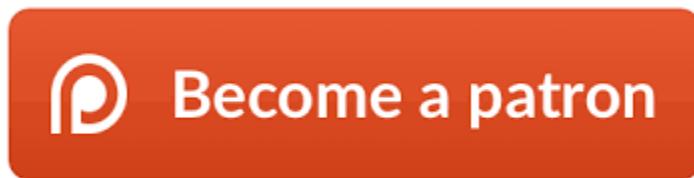
“I think I found the origin of that symbol,” Morris excitedly waved the ancient book he had brought with him, “It’s unbelievable that it appeared in a document about the ancient kingdom of Crete—and so inconspicuous!”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 261

Chapter 261 “Mysterious Symbol”

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As Nina was about to rush to the second floor to summon her uncle, Duncan appeared on the stairs, having heard the noise and come on his own accord.

“Mr. Duncan,” Morris approached the stairs, gazing up at the “Captain” who was looking down, “I found a symbol similar to the one you showed me in a document about the ancient kingdom of Crete.”

Duncan noticed the faint redness in Morris’ eyes and the slight swelling of his eyelids. It seemed the old scholar had exerted great effort to find this information. There was a hint of excitement in his eyes, and he appeared unusually energized – the kind of spirit that arises from being immersed in research and making progress.

Duncan glanced at Nina and Alice downstairs and gave a slight nod: “You all keep an eye on the store.”

He then looked at Morris: “Let’s go upstairs and talk.”

The old man, holding the large book, stepped onto the stairs. The ancient wooden steps creaked as he followed Duncan to the master bedroom on the second floor – his first time in this location.

By the standards of a subspace shadow dwelling, the bedroom was somewhat plain, but given Mr. Duncan’s unusual “hobby” of “playing a mortal,” the simplicity of the room seemed quite fitting.

Morris carefully controlled his actions, indulging his curiosity without being overly intrusive before being told to sit after Duncan pulled two chairs from the side, gesturing for him to place the large book on the desk by the window.

“Tell me about your discovery,” Duncan said after sitting down, “What does that symbol represent?”

“As for its meaning... I have no clue yet. I just found its most likely origin,” Morris composed himself, opening the valuable-looking document, and turned to the page with a bookmark, “Take a look at this spot. It appears here.”

Duncan frowned slightly as he saw a drawing on that page, a rather exquisite hand-drawn illustration, depicting part of a large building that resembled the main entrance of a palace. The symbol, framed by a hexagon with a broken cross structure, appeared in the relief above the main entrance, taking up the center of the entire image.

As for the content of the scribbles... it seemed to be just some patterns with no discernible meaning.

As Morris had mentioned earlier, the symbol was in a very inconspicuous place – it was merely a small decorative element of an illustration, occupying less than a tenth of the entire image, without any special emphasis.

It was astonishing that Morris could find this book among a stack of documents and this tiny detail within the book.

“I have a vague impression that I saw it a long, long time ago. Thanks to the blessing of the god of wisdom, this ‘impression’ still works today, allowing me to find this ‘little thing’,” Morris explained, “This illustration is a copy, and its original first appeared in a document about the study of ancient Crete architectural relics. That document is not currently in Pland, but I believe some of my academic friends should be able to help...”

“Of course, even without the original, the content recorded in this book is useful. It mentions that the hand-drawn illustration portrays a lost ruin that once stood in a bordering sea area. The ruin was situated on an unnamed deserted island, which mysteriously vanished into thick fog around the year 223 of the new city-state era. Before its complete disappearance, several expeditions successfully landed on the island and verified the structure and age of the ruin, confirming that it was from the ancient Crete era. Based on the surface patterns and reliefs of the building, the entire structure likely had both academic and religious significance...”

As he spoke, Morris pointed to the text on the adjacent page of the illustration. Between the slightly yellowed pages, one could see the annotations written by the old scholar in his earlier years.

“The bold, deep lines of the symbols and the abundant rhombus elements in the patterns are characteristic of ancient Crete architecture. They revered a strong and powerful architectural style, with the main body of their palace buildings mostly in various rectangular or pyramid shapes. This building aligns perfectly with these characteristics...”

As Duncan listened to Mr. Morris’s interpretation, his gaze slowly scanned the drawings and sentences. His attention returned to the hexagonal pattern in the center of the main entrance relief, his brow furrowing slightly, “Regarding this symbol, is there no specific interpretation?”

“Unfortunately, this document is only a general introduction and does not involve a detailed interpretation of the various details of the ruins,” Morris shook his head. “But this is an inevitable situation – the ancient Crete kingdom is ten thousand years old, and the remaining ruins are few and most severely damaged. With the loss or ‘contamination’ of various materials, the knowledge available for later generations to analyze is fragmented, making it difficult for us to find an article specifically studying a pattern on a particular gate of the ancient kingdom...”

“Academic or religious facilities, entrance symbols...” Duncan thoughtfully stroked his chin, “Why would a group of ‘ascetics’ ten thousand years later carry a charm from the time of the ancient Crete kingdom?”

He turned to Morris: “Do you think it’s possible that there is a ‘Crete Remnant’ that has survived for ten thousand years?”

“...Some people say that a rigorous scholar should not blindly dismiss any possibility, even if the probability is extremely low, but from my personal perspective, I genuinely think it’s improbable.” Morris cautiously said as he pondered.

“A group resembling ascetics, possibly very few in number, extremely secretive in their activities, enduring the great chaos after the collapse of the ancient kingdom, the age of strife, the Old City-State wars, and preserving their lineage for a full ten thousand years without either breaking the line of descent or being discovered... If this possibility were to be true, I would rather believe they are a secret religious group established in modern times who happened to discover some ancient documents or similar ruins and adopted a symbol from the Crete period as their own emblem. This possibility seems even more likely.”

Duncan listened to the old man’s thoughts, humming noncommittally, and his gaze swept over the text once more.

In the materials, some paragraphs were clearly quoted from the records in the original manuscript, describing the fragmented words left by the explorers more than a thousand years ago:

“...It stands in the center of the island, the main building and surrounding auxiliary buildings almost occupying the entire island, as if the island was specifically created for this building...

“...The main material of the building appears to be stone, but stronger than stone, with a pale color. Soldiers tried to chisel open one of the wall bricks with an ice pick and succeeded only after much effort... The collision between the ice pick and the wall brick produced exaggerated sparks, and the broken part of the wall brick had a silvery-gray texture.

“There are several small islands nearby, all desolate with sparse vegetation and few insects... No remaining buildings, perhaps there were some, but they were too small in scale and had already been devoured by time...

“...On the third evening, a small boat patrolled around the island and found that a collapsed point that had previously been above water was now submerged, but there was no sign of a rising tide... Fog began to form in the nearby waters, the priest had a bad feeling, and after praying to the god of death, Bartok, and seeking guidance, he advised us to leave the island immediately.”

Duncan looked directly at the end of this quote, where the author of the document recorded: “On the seventh day after the exploration team withdrew, the fog dissipated, and another team arrived in the vicinity of the area, but the nameless island could no longer be found.”

“So it was swallowed by the thick fog...” Duncan sighed softly, unable to suppress his regret, “It sounds like the result of a border collapse.”

“It does seem that way – but at that time, there was no mature Sacred Emblem navigation technology or sufficiently accurate observation methods, so several abnormal phenomena, including border collapses and ‘fog devouring,’ were easily confused.”

“Fog devouring phenomenon...” Duncan recalled briefly and found the corresponding knowledge in his mind – he had been learning about this common knowledge through books lately, “If it really was a fog devouring phenomenon, then this island might reappear briefly in a similar dense fog in the future, but it seems that there are no records of such an occurrence.”

“Indeed, but it is also possible that the relevant materials were lost.”

Duncan hummed in agreement, his fingers involuntarily brushing over the illustration, touching the tiny broken cross mark on it.

“This drawing... There shouldn’t be any possibility of the copyist ‘taking liberties,’ right?” he suddenly asked uneasily.

“I don’t think so,” Morris immediately replied, “This is a very rigorous documentary material. The original manuscript’s illustrator and the compiler are known for their rigor as academic authorities. When they copy these materials, they would rather leave the unclear parts untouched for

future generations than make any ‘supplementary adjustments’ without evidence. In other words, even if they made adjustments, they would certainly explain the corresponding situation in the notes.”

“It’s authentic and verifiable...” Duncan murmured thoughtfully.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 262

Chapter 262 “Captain Duncan’s Gift”

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In the extensive collection of literature provided by Morris, only a small portion was related to the enigmatic symbol – and that symbol was merely an unassuming element of this tiny section, as the author hardly dedicated any effort to explaining the symbol or its associated relief patterns.

Duncan and Morris were limited to examining the details displayed in the manuscript illustrations, cautiously concluding that the shattered cross encircled by a hexagonal border was probably a religious symbol or scholarly emblem from the ancient kingdom era.

From a logical standpoint, Morris doubted that the ascetics who visited the Vanished a century ago could be descendants of the ancient kingdom. The odds of a group of hermits surviving and preserving their lineage for ten millennia during the tumultuous and perilous deep-sea era were virtually nonexistent. From a rigorous academic perspective, he couldn’t make such a claim without additional evidence.

Nonetheless, Duncan instinctively felt that a powerful link must have existed between those ascetics and the ancient Crete kingdom. They possessed the mysterious emblem and attached great importance to it, suggesting that they were aware of its meaning.

Of course, in the absence of proof, all conjectures were mere speculation. At this point, unless the ascetics reemerged before Duncan, their origins would remain undetermined.

“...How many well-preserved Crete artifacts have been discovered and still exist in the world?” Duncan inquired suddenly after shutting the large tome book.

“Very few artifacts have been unearthed, so few that you could count them on one hand. As for well-preserved... it depends on your definition of ‘well-preserved’,” Morris replied. “For those researching the ancient kingdom, discovering a large pit confirmed to be connected to Crete, finding intact wall bricks longer than ten meters, or even just a couple of toppled stone doors on the ground would be considered well-preserved.”

At this point, the elderly scholar couldn’t help but lament: “Normally, relics within a city-state’s jurisdiction aren’t likely to be conserved. We attempt to document them through text and images, capturing every detail, and then gather the artifacts for examination in research institutions. Ultimately... the relics themselves are flattened, buried, and integrated into the city.”

Duncan contemplated for a moment, murmuring to himself: “Land is as valuable as gold.”

Morris agreed: “We study history, preserve history, and endeavor to remember the past as it fades, but we can’t let the past encroach on our living space.

“The new city-states have been in existence for nearly two millennia. During the height of the exploration era, new islands were often discovered, bringing forth uncharted wildernesses and ancient ruins to light. However, over the past century or two, such ‘discoveries’ have become almost nonexistent.

“The initial ‘new islands’ eventually evolved into city-states, and there’s only so much land to be found in the vast ocean. The remaining relics are either on barren islands with inhospitable conditions or concealed by extraordinary forces, or situated on the fringes of dangerous anomalies. As a result, even the Church of the Four Gods can only briefly investigate them before marking them as sealed on their maps.”

Duncan remained quiet for an extended period, his thoughts still on the symbol and its underlying literature: “You mentioned earlier that your academic friends might be able to uncover more information related to this symbol?”

“I have a friend in Lansa who is an expert on the ancient kingdom’s history, and he was my classmate when I studied at the Academy of Truth,” Morris confirmed, gesturing to the large book on the table. “He gifted me this book many years ago, and I recall he mentioned relevant literature back then. I’ve sent a letter, but I’m unsure when I’ll get a reply.”

Duncan sighed: “We’ll wait patiently and let things unfold naturally.”

Subsequently, he and Morris discussed various aspects of the ancient Crete kingdom – the scattered discoveries, the enigmatic and peculiar legends, and the partially true, partially fabricated ancient scrolls that blurred the lines between reality and myth.

After an engaging conversation, it was time for Morris to bid farewell and depart.

“I promised my wife I’d be home for lunch,” the elderly scholar said with a smile. “If I return too late, I’ll face scolding from both my wife and daughter.”

Duncan laughed: “It seems you find joy in it.”

Morris chuckled, nodded, donned his hat, and carried the large book under his arm, leaving with Duncan.

Nina was counting a few banknotes behind the counter, with Alice observing curiously, and Shirley was nowhere to be seen, likely out playing.

As Duncan descended the stairs, Nina patiently educated the bewildered Alice about currency: “You see, this one with the golden corner is a Sora, and here’s the denomination… These coins are ‘Pesos,’ and the number on the front is the denomination… Don’t bite it, it’s dirty!”

“Business seems to be thriving today?” Duncan eyed the money in Nina’s hand, raising an eyebrow. “Usually, it’s not this busy.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure why, but business has been booming today,” Nina cheerfully waved the banknotes at Duncan. “It appears to be related to Alice?”

Duncan was taken aback: “With Alice?”

“A kind elderly woman who left earlier mentioned it,” Nina explained with a grin. “She said that having an employee like Alice in the store makes the items on the shelves seem more authentic...”

Duncan: “...?”

He gazed silently at Alice, who returned a puzzled look.

However, Miss Doll was oblivious to the situation – she was still trying to memorize the banknotes’ appearance and learning to count money.

“I didn’t anticipate Alice serving this purpose here,” Duncan pondered for a while before abruptly turning to Morris. “Would you like to take something with you when you leave?”

“Ah?” Morris was slightly surprised. “I hadn’t planned on it when I left home...”

“No charge, think of it as a token of appreciation for your efforts in searching for the literature,” Duncan smiled and approached the counter, selecting a crystal pendant from the shelf – identical to the one he had previously given Morris as a “gift” since he had an entire box of them. “I recall you mentioning that your daughter’s pendant was damaged. This one is for you.”

Morris observed the pendant in Duncan’s hand, watching the magnificent crystal, a symbol of modern industry, gently sway in midair, its surface casting a kaleidoscope of colors. His thoughts turned to the extraordinary experiences Heidi had recounted upon her return: the sobering events

during the city-state's disintegration, witnessing the divergence of two historical paths and the erasure of one, and the protection provided by the amulet.

Only now did he understand that Captain Duncan had offered his goodwill so early on without his awareness.

"I hope this amulet continues to bring good fortune to Miss Heidi," Duncan said with a smile. "Take it, you've earned it."

Morris solemnly accepted the crystal pendant and expressed his appreciation. But Duncan seemed to have another idea and pondered, "If you bring this pendant back, you'll undoubtedly be nagged by your daughter, and this time your wife will join in. Wait a moment; let me find you an authentic item to take home and appease your wife and child."

Hearing this, Morris immediately protested: "No need, no need, you don't have to go to such lengths for me..."

Nonetheless, Duncan had already turned and started rifling through the assortment of items next to the counter, murmuring without looking up, "No more objections, we understand each other... Ah, found it."

As he spoke, he retrieved the "authentic item" he had discovered and placed it on the counter with a resounding "thud."

The sudden noise startled Alice, who instinctively raised her hands to cover her head.

"What is this...?" the old man was somewhat perplexed at the object placed on the counter.

"An antique," Duncan stated earnestly, looking at the elderly gentleman. "There aren't many genuine items in my shop, but this one is unquestionably authentic."

"It appears to be a cannonball?"

“Exactly, from the Vanished, in superb condition. If you locate a compatible caliber muzzle-loading cannon, you could even fire it,” Duncan enthusiastically patted the large iron ball on the counter. “More importantly, the projectile retains the complete steel stamp of the cannonball foundry and the personal mark of the caster. In truth, it’s rarer than the dagger I gifted you last time. Consider it a present.”

Morris glanced between the cannonball and Duncan, his expression growing increasingly baffled. For a moment, he was unsure whether bringing home a cannonball or a glass pendant would be more likely to agitate his wife and daughter. However, confronted with Mr. Duncan’s radiant smile, he eventually conceded and graciously accepted this... “gift.”

“I am deeply... grateful for your generosity.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 263

Chapter 263 “Door Knocking”

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Morris departed, his expression peculiar as he held an antique artillery shell in hand while Duncan stood behind the counter and observed his departure with a delighted grin.

“You really gave Mr. Morris that artillery shell,” Alice muttered to herself.

“Actually, he handed the artillery shell to Mr. Morris...” Nina mumbled similarly.

“I’m not fond of artillery shells,” Alice whispered, “not in the slightest.”

“Why?” Nina inquired with curiosity.

“Because the captain once gifted me eight artillery shells,” Alice replied gravely.

“Enough with the complaints,” Duncan interjected from the side. He glanced helplessly at the disgruntled Alice and the obviously fascinated Nina beside her, “Where’s Shirley?”

“She mentioned feeling dizzy and nauseous from memorizing the alphabet, so she stepped outside for fresh air,” Nina stuck out her tongue, “But I bet she’s already made her way to the next block.”

“Figures,” Duncan sighed, “Considering Shirley’s cultural background and personal refinement, it’s quite impressive that she manages not to curse in my presence every day...”

Sighing, he turned his head to peer out the window. Through the transparent display, the familiar and serene streetscape of Pland came into sight.

The streets teemed with people, and the townsfolk were preoccupied with their daily tasks. Nothing out of the ordinary had transpired in the lower city today—the brief glitch of Vision 001, the nearly imperceptible flaw on the solar rune ring, the long-abandoned deep-dive mission in the distant north, and the enigmatic symbol left by the ancient Crete kingdom—all appeared far removed from this sunlit neighborhood.

He squinted for a moment, and after some time, he murmured to himself, “As I thought, Tyrian left early...”

...

At the city-state’s southeastern port, the colossal steel warship Sea Mist was preparing to embark.

The ship, which had sustained substantial damage from the Vanished, had undergone several days of “self-healing” and was now more than half restored. The numerous gashes and fissures on its armor belt and deck had fully mended, leaving no trace of harm. The undying sailors bustled between the pier and the warship, loading provisions and parting gifts generously offered by Pland.

“We didn’t anticipate your departure so soon,” Vanna said, arriving to bid the captain farewell after hearing the news, “The Archbishop had arranged for the Sea Mist to remain as a guest for at least a fortnight.”

“Truthfully, I assumed I’d be here for quite some time too, but unforeseen circumstances arose,” Tyrian rubbed his forehead lightly, “There’s an issue in the north that requires my attention.”

Though this seemed like a mere pretext, Vanna had no interest in probing into matters others preferred to keep private. She merely gazed at Tyrian with a hint of concern, her eyebrows slightly furrowed, “Please forgive my intrusion... Captain, is your face swollen?”

“Just a minor mishap, a small accident,” Tyrian hastily waved his hand, grateful that he had already undergone another day of recovery. If the inquisitor had seen him yesterday, he wouldn’t have known how to justify his head, which had swelled to a significantly larger size.

Subsequently, he promptly shifted the conversation to avert further awkwardness: “I’ve genuinely enjoyed my time in Pland and am grateful for your gifts.”

“I’m pleased you appreciated them,” Vanna said, smiling as she glanced up at the towering hull of the Sea Mist and the main gun turrets visible from the side. “Even though I’ve heard about it, witnessing it firsthand is truly remarkable... this ship actually ‘healed’ itself, and those main guns that were utterly destroyed have... ‘regrown’?”

Tyrian looked back at his warship, his face beaming with pride at the newly restored guns: “The Sea Mist is aware of its intended appearance and constantly strives to maintain itself in peak condition. However, those few main guns aren’t quite functional at the moment. They’re still small and require several more days to grow before they can fire standard caliber shells like the other main guns.”

Vanna was taken aback, sensing something odd about the way Tyrian observed his ship’s main guns and the tone of his voice, but she couldn’t pinpoint it...

Luckily, she wasn’t one to fixate on such minutiae.

At 3:20 in the afternoon, accompanied by a melodious horn, the towering steel warship gradually accelerated and departed the city-state.

Vanna stood on the dock, watching the warship recede into a barely discernible silhouette on the horizon, before sighing and boarding the black steam car that had been waiting nearby.

The driver glanced at the visibly fatigued inquisitor through the rearview mirror: “You seem worn out?”

“Handling paperwork is far more mentally taxing than battling heretics with a sword,” Vanna replied, stretching her neck and casually reclining in the back seat. “Additionally, I’ve been struggling with insomnia lately.”

The steam core rumbled, and gears and linkages sprang into motion. Listening to her superior’s complaints, the driver couldn’t help but smile: “At least the city-state has been peaceful recently—no heretics, no monsters, no unfortunate souls trapped in the night. The night guards haven’t encountered any twisted sightings in the darkness for several consecutive days... There’s always sunshine after a storm, right?”

Vanna considered her subordinate’s comments, then slowly responded after some time, “True, the nights have been more tranquil lately than ever before. Even in the darkness that frequently envelops the lower city and sewers, there’s no longer any commotion.”

“Isn’t that a positive development?”

“...Certainly, it’s a positive development,” Vanna murmured softly, adjusting her position in the seat and closing her eyes. “I’ll take a brief nap; wake me when we arrive at the cathedral.”

“Understood.”

As her subordinate replied, Vanna already felt herself drifting into a light slumber, with the mechanical sounds of the car and the noise outside the window progressively fading away.

She was, indeed, quite exhausted, having been unable to rest well for many days.

The city-state’s order had been fully restored, and all the follow-up work was systematically nearing completion. The paperwork had been handled, and there were no issues with the reports for the cathedral or the various negotiations with city hall—behind this “smooth progress” lay days of fatigue.

After bidding farewell to the unique “visitor,” the Sea Mist, she could finally catch her breath.

At least before the Grand Storm Cathedral arrived in Pland and prior to meeting Pope Helena, she should have a few days to recuperate.

A gentle night breeze suddenly caressed her cheek, bringing with it a cool, invigorating scent and the sound of waves colliding with a ship’s hull.

Vanna’s eyes snapped open, and she found herself in an unfamiliar room.

Her surroundings included elegant, classical furniture, intricate tapestries from the previous century adorning the walls, dark-hued shelves and wine cabinets tucked in the corners, a thick woven carpet occupying the room’s center, and a carved coffee table and chairs atop the carpet. At that moment, she was seated in one of those chairs.

Vanna abruptly stood, assuming a defensive posture like a cautious animal, ready for anything around her.

The next instant, she spotted a window nearby—the window was wide open, and though it had been daylight when she dozed off, the scene beyond the opening was now enveloped in darkness. A chilly night wind blew into the room through the window, casting a cold, luminous glow over the windowsill. Within the glow, she could faintly discern the rolling sea in the distance and the glimmers of light upon the water that resembled liquid silver.

Vanna’s gaze was involuntarily drawn to this scene, and then, as if she had made a sudden realization, she rushed to the window and peered up at the sky outside.

An... incomprehensible entity appeared there.

It was a glowing, circular object reminiscent of the sun’s core, yet it was neither blinding nor searing. Instead, it resembled a radiant disc with a cool sensation, silently hovering in the sky while exuding a tranquil and serene aura.

Vanna gazed blankly at the peculiar light, and for a moment, she felt as though her thoughts had been lulled into a serene state by the radiance. After an indeterminate amount of time, she pondered sluggishly:

“What is that?”

“Could it be the cooled sun?”

“Where did the fissure in the night sky vanish to?”

“Where is this place?”

Then she glanced back at the unfamiliar room.

The exterior was a rolling sea, the room was strange, the sky beyond the window was eerie, and the bizarre celestial body... Given her recent experiences, the answer didn't seem difficult to deduce.

But this occasion appeared different from the others; this time... she didn't encounter that horrifying ghost captain.

Vanna thought as much, but as if to contradict her thoughts, the next moment, she suddenly sensed a presence drawing near.

“Knock, knock, knock.” Someone rapped on the door.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 264

Chapter 264 “Captain’s Warning”

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To be fair, Vanna had rarely been afraid of anything throughout her life, but Captain Duncan Abnomar always seemed to bring her a variety of “unexpected situations.”

In the dream-locked room, there was a boundless dark sea outside the window, an eerie light hovering high in the sky, and beneath the quiet night, someone knocked on the door.

Almost instinctively, Vanna wanted to summon her broadsword in her dream and charge toward the door – luckily, she managed to control this impulse just in time.

“Knock, knock, knock.”

The knocking continued at a leisurely pace, with great patience and politeness.

Taking several deep breaths, Vanna wasn’t sure what expression to wear, so she could only try to make her voice sound normal while keeping a straight face: “Come in.”

With a click, the handle turned, and the dark wooden door was pushed open from the outside. A tall and imposing figure appeared before Vanna and stepped into the room.

Behind this figure lay pure darkness as if it were the edge of the dream – beyond the edge, there was no existence, only the “void.”

“Good afternoon, Vanna – this time, I knocked.” Duncan entered the room, giving Vanna a friendly smile.

Vanna silently watched the ghostly captain walk to the nearby liquor cabinet, taking out a bottle and two wine glasses before taking a seat on the chair with the backrest.

“Why don’t you come sit?” Duncan raised his eyebrows and glanced at the young inquisitor still standing near the window, gesturing to the empty seat across from him. “You don’t look too happy.”

After hesitating for a moment, Vanna finally sat down across from Duncan with a peculiar expression, cautiously observing his every move as he poured the drinks. After a while, she sighed, “Don’t you think this is even scarier?”

“Is it?” Duncan looked at Vanna with some surprise, then glanced around the dream he had painstakingly created – the cozy, everyday décor, and the friendly glass of wine in his hand – and furrowed his brow uncertainly.
“Then next time, I’ll try a brighter color scheme...”

“I don’t think it’s the color...” Vanna’s eyebrows twitched, but she sighed with mixed emotions immediately after, “Well, at least I do feel your ‘good intentions’... They’re somewhat scary, but I can more or less confirm their authenticity.”

Duncan pushed a glass of wine toward her, “Seems like a good thing.”

“Thank you,” Vanna took the glass, hesitated as she looked at the clear liquid with a hint of golden red, and after a long pause, she set it aside. Then she looked up at the captain across from her, “Is this another dream – a room on the Vanished?”

“It’s partly based on that, but not entirely. I’ve arranged it according to my personal preferences,” Duncan said unhurriedly. “Actually, I’m not very good at weaving dreams. I prefer entering existing dreams directly, but since you were sleeping restlessly, with shattered and chaotic dreams, I prepared a place for you to rest properly.”

Vanna didn't pay attention to Duncan's last sentence; she simply turned her head to look outside the window and asked her biggest question, "What is that glowing thing in the sky outside? Is it also your 'personal preference'?"

Duncan fell silent for a moment, his gaze shifting to the window. Illuminated by the moonlight, he pondered for a while before sighing and shaking his head, "I suppose so. I don't really like the pale, cold glow of the World's Creation; it's not gentle enough, and it feels full of malice. As for the one you see now... you can call it the 'moon.'"

"'Moon'..." Vanna repeated the unfamiliar word, which seemed to be a direct transliteration from an unknown language, "It's a peculiar name."

"Are you interested in it?" Duncan asked with a smile, "I can tell you the story behind the name..."

Before he could finish, Vanna suddenly interrupted, "No! Thank you!"

"...Alright, it's always like this," Duncan shrugged, not seeming to care, "It's actually just the most ordinary thing, with no connection to subspace at all."

"I'm sorry, I believe you're friendly, but... just consider me cautious," Vanna said awkwardly. After numerous encounters and a series of events, her caution and wariness towards the ghostly captain had somewhat evolved, but in any case, even from a logical and rational perspective, she didn't dare to casually learn "knowledge" from this subspace returnee, "Let's talk about something else. Why did you come to see me?"

"Two things," Duncan looked into Vanna's eyes, "First, thank you for taking care of Tyrian these past couple of days. He seems to have enjoyed his time in Pland."

"Captain Tyrian?" Vanna felt a jolt in her heart, suddenly realizing something, "Have you been watching all this time?"

"Yes, I've been keeping an eye on this matter," Duncan said with emotion, "He's been wandering in the north for years, picking up some bad habits

from the pirates, and only has a group of undead sailors for company, making his social habits extremely unhealthy. Add to that the old matter of Frost, it's hard not to worry about his mental state. To avoid becoming a reclusive, eccentric, and cynical weirdo, he needs some healthy and orderly interpersonal relationships..."

Duncan was essentially improvising to further solidify his image as someone who had regained his humanity and clear-headedness, to facilitate his dealings with Vanna and the "orderly civilization" she represented. However, Vanna didn't dismiss it as nonsense. She listened intently to the ghostly captain, who sounded like a concerned father, and after a while, she managed to say, "You... really care about him..."

Duncan said solemnly, "Caring for family members is the first step in maintaining harmony within the family."

"...But you almost blew the Sea Mist into a pile of scrap metal," Vanna cautiously reminded him.

Duncan remained serious, "Appropriate education and guidance is the second step."

Vanna: "..."

The conversation was strange, discordant, and full of peculiarities. Vanna increasingly felt that her interaction with Captain Duncan was imbued with an indescribable sense of oddness. Yet, inexplicably, it was within this bizarre and incongruous exchange that she actually began to see the ghostly captain as more "human."

She couldn't help but shake her head, setting that sudden thought aside for now, "What's the second thing you mentioned?"

"The second thing," Duncan's expression immediately became more serious, "is about the sun. Have you noticed the changes in it?"

The sound of waves outside the window gradually softened as if they were distant whispers, and the breeze that drifted into the room became barely

perceptible.

Upon hearing the mention of “the sun,” Vanna’s eyes shifted slightly: “Are you referring to the sunrise that was delayed by fifteen minutes, or...”

“There is a gap in its external rune ring,” Duncan said, “Judging by your expression, you should have noticed it as well.”

Vanna fell silent for a couple of seconds before nodding gently, “It’s hard not to notice – although the gap is difficult to detect with the naked eye, vigilant eyes have been watching the operation of Vision 001 for centuries. The church noticed this unsettling situation right away.”

“Guardians never let their guard down, huh... My impression of you has improved slightly,” Duncan said, then suddenly asked, “So what’s your take on this?”

“...That would depend on the feedback from the Grand Storm Cathedral,” Vanna said in a matter-of-fact tone, “All we can do in Pland is report what we’ve observed. We are not a research facility, and we can’t think of any way to intervene in the operation of Vision 001.”

After pondering for a moment, she shook her head uncertainly, “Perhaps even the Grand Storm Cathedral won’t provide clear feedback. Vision 001... its operation affects the entire world, and its abnormalities have alarmed more than just one church.”

As she spoke, Vanna seemed to suddenly realize something and looked up at Duncan, “You’ve come to talk to me about this. Do you know something? Do you know what’s wrong with Vision 001?”

Duncan didn’t answer immediately.

He couldn’t help but recall the brief, strange dream he’d had.

In the dream, massive light bodies fell like a meteor shower, and the entire world gradually turned dark. In the end, all that remained in the sky was a horrifying, dark emptiness, like a void or a dying eye.

At the time, he hadn't gleaned anything from this dream, but now, he seemed to get a glimpse into the omen hidden within it.

"I can't be sure, Vanna," he finally broke the silence, calmly staring into her eyes, "But I think this is just the beginning."

A chill spread slowly down her spine as Vanna discerned some extremely unsettling information from those words, "Just the beginning?"

"Right now, I don't have enough evidence, but my guess is that Vision 001 actually has a 'lifespan,'" Duncan said seriously, "What the ancient Kingdom of Crete left for future generations is not eternal protection but temporary peace. The sun above our heads... is likely about to fail.

"As for when the evidence will arrive..."

Duncan paused, then continued:

"Perhaps huge fragments will fall from the sky, and that will be the ticking of the countdown.

"More likely, the first fragment has already fallen, just out of sight of the civilized world."

As the chill and unease spread in her heart, Vanna's eyes drooped, hiding all the changes in her gaze, while her hand slowly picked up the wine glass beside her, unconsciously bringing it to her lips, seemingly trying to calm herself with alcohol.

She took a sip, frowned slightly, and looked up at Duncan, "It has no taste..."

"Of course there's no taste," Duncan laughed and raised his glass slightly to Vanna, "Because you're about to wake up."

Vanna abruptly opened her eyes, finding herself still sitting in the moving steam car with the high tower and main building of the cathedral appearing in her view.

Breathing a bit heavily, she heard the subordinate's voice from the front,
“Ah, you're awake. Perfect timing, we're nearly at the cathedral.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 265

Chapter 265 “The Sea Witch and the Border Relic”

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Lucretia stood at the prow of her ship for some time, overseeing the operations of her vessel in its “blossomed” state as they navigated through the luminous waters. This location provided her with an unrivaled view of the entire ship, making it her preferred spot.

At the moment, two sturdy chains extended from the Bright Star’s midsection, winding around a massive stone sphere at the rear.

At first glance, the sphere seemed to hover just a few meters above the ocean, appearing weightless from a distance. However, the intermittent creaking of the chains and the slow progress of the Bright Star, despite operating at full capacity, suggested that towing this object was far from effortless.

Lucretia observed the sphere for an indeterminate amount of time before eventually averting her eyes, rubbing them due to irritation.

The endless soft glow emanating from the stone sphere was not blinding, but prolonged exposure to this continuous radiance caused minor eye discomfort. Still, this was insignificant compared to the disorientation created by the enigmatic indentations and protrusions on the sphere’s surface.

Moreover, she could not detect any other harmful effects from the sphere. Gazing at the patterns did not damage the mind, nor did it produce any unsettling noises when approached. Discovering such an unusual artifact on the border was quite uncommon.

Having explored the borders for many years, Lucretia had encountered numerous dangerous objects that could easily drive ordinary people mad. However, this stone sphere, which projected immense geometric illusions, was the most harmless anomaly among the various border relics.

“Mistress, the engine room reports that we cannot increase the machine’s power any further. We’ve reached our top speed.” Luna eventually approached from the side and reported.

“We’re not even achieving a third of our usual speed,” Lucretia sighed. “This massive sphere appears so light and insubstantial, yet it’s so challenging to tow.”

“It’s truly peculiar,” Luni tilted her head, mimicking a human’s puzzled expression. “We’ve attempted various methods, but we’re unable to determine its precise mass.”

“Fortunately, we can still tow it. The progress is slow, but we’ll reach our destination eventually.”

As Lucretia spoke, she turned her gaze toward the ship’s bow. Due to the limited length of the chains, the Bright Star now sailed within the “massive geometric figure” projected by the stone sphere. As a result, beyond the bow was only infinite radiance, rendering the normal sea surface invisible.

However, she wasn’t concerned about the ship getting lost or colliding with islands or reefs.

That’s because the stern of the Bright Star traveled in the spiritual realm, unaffected by the stone sphere. Her spectral sailors could monitor sea conditions and direct the course from the lookout tower and chart room at the stern, ensuring the Bright Star remained on the correct path.

For ordinary vessels, this would be unfathomable, but for the mistress of the Bright Star, it was a masterful maneuver.

“Did Wind Harbour receive our message?” Lucretia inquired, turning slightly. “What was their response?”

“They received the message, and a research team comprising of mathematicians, rune scholars, and supernatural experts is prepared at the port, along with representatives from the Explorers’ Association,” Luni answered promptly. “However, I also informed them that the Bright Star is sailing very slowly, so they’ll have to wait a bit longer...”

“It’s not just about waiting,” Lucretia said, observing the omnipresent golden glow on the sea and pursing her lips. “Tell them that what I’ve discovered this time is no mere trinket. Although its ‘main body’ is indeed not large, its area of influence is extensive.

“Ask them to locate an appropriate transfer point along the coast, at least two or three nautical miles from the port; otherwise, they must be ready for the entire port area to be engulfed in perpetual daylight.”

Luni bowed slightly: “Yes, Mistress, we’ll pass a lighthouse facility in fifteen minutes, and I’ll send another telegram to Wind Harbour then.”

Lucretia nodded, then appeared to recall something and shook her head with a self-deprecating smile after a few moments of silence.

Luni looked at her with curiosity: “Mistress?”

“It’s nothing; I just suddenly remembered something from long ago,” Lucretia said softly. “Luni, did you know that I used to scold my father when he returned from his adventures?”

“Old Master? You scolded him?”

“Yes, I scolded him for always collecting peculiar items from his journeys,” Lucretia seemed immersed in memories, speaking slowly as she pondered. “Sometimes, he would find a broken stone in the border area and excitedly study it for a week or a month, even involving my brother and me in the research.”

She turned around, staring pensively at the chains extending from the stern and the stone sphere at their end.

“Now, I’ve also picked up a ‘large stone’… I wonder what he would think if he knew.”

Luni didn’t know how to respond to her mistress, and after a moment of silence, she finally said: “…You rarely discuss the old master’s matters.”

“It’s probably because of recent events,” Lucretia shook her head. “Let’s not dwell on that. I’m somewhat tired. What time is it now?”

“It’s already quite late,” Luni nodded. “You should indeed get some rest.”

“Is it really late already?” Lucretia exclaimed, surprised, then waved her hand. “Dragging this object along makes the entire day feel like daylight… Keep an eye on the ship; I’m going to rest.”

Before her words were finished, her figure suddenly disintegrated into countless colorful paper flakes carried by the wind toward the captain’s quarters.

...

Until she returned to the cathedral and evening prayers were concluded, Vanna remained preoccupied, and her heavy-hearted state couldn’t be concealed from Bishop Valentine.

When the bishop inquired, she didn’t hide her “dream communication” with the ghost captain during her journey back from the port.

In a small prayer room connected to the side hall, Valentine listened quietly to Vanna’s account.

“… I’m not surprised by ‘his’ visit,” the elderly bishop said calmly. “The entire city-state of Pland has experienced some kind of… transformation. Whether we like it or not, we and the land beneath our feet are now inseparably connected to the Vanished. I’ve discussed this matter with your uncle; do you know what he said?”

“… What did he say?”

“Behind today’s Pland stands a shadowy ‘master,’ reminiscent of the ‘Ten Cities’ described in the Golan Psalms. In the shadows, there’s a crownless king, an unnamed archon, an invisible but very real ‘owner.’ This ‘master’ hasn’t declared authority over the city-state, just as you haven’t declared to the coins in your pocket that you’re their master – but when you take out the coins, you don’t consider consulting their opinions.”

Vanna appeared thoughtful: “... The Ten Cities, said to be the most chilling part of the Golan Psalms, depict the process of ten city-states gradually being taken over and transformed into shadows by an unseen ruler. Until the end of the lengthy poem, the author never described the ruler himself, merely hinting at the existence of an ‘invisible king’ through descriptions of the atmosphere, customs, and environment in the city-states. I’ve read it, but I was too young at the time to understand the horror that adults spoke of when discussing this poem.”

With that, she gently shook her head.

“However, at least Captain Duncan doesn’t seem to be trying to transform the city-state into some sort of... indescribable breeding ground, as the ‘Ten Cities’ poem suggests. At least for now, he hasn’t shown any malice.”

“Indeed, he hasn’t shown any malice and even went out of his way to warn you,” Bishop Valentine nodded gently. “The matter of Vision 001 has attracted the attention of the Four Churches, but as far as I know, the prevailing opinion among the various churches is still to wait for Vision 001 to ‘return to normal.’ But if Captain Duncan’s warning is true...”

The old bishop paused, and after a moment, he sighed softly.

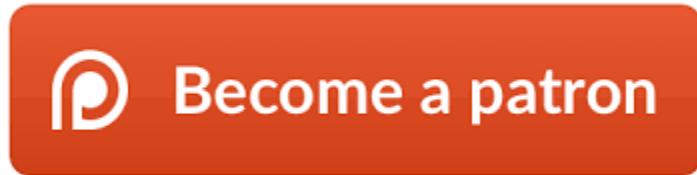
“Then the trouble facing our world will be much greater.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 266

Chapter 266 “Spreading His Thought”

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Vanna rose and approached the goddess's statue in the intimate prayer room. The figure was positioned on a tall platform, surrounded by gently flickering candles.

“We must relay this warning to the Grand Storm Cathedral, and ideally to other churches and city-states,” Bishop Valentine remarked from behind her. “However, the origin of the warning is crucial. To be convincing, we must provide a reason that will sway the other three churches. Simply saying ‘a saint had a revelation in a dream’ will not suffice.

“Her Holiness knows of your association with Captain Duncan and has not issued any admonishments. It appears she tacitly approves, but if the other churches learned the truth... their response would be unpredictable, particularly the Death Church.”

“The impact of the Witherland Thirteen Islands...” Vanna murmured softly, “The Death Church is exceptionally vigilant when it comes to the Vanished.”

“Indeed, the Witherland Thirteen Islands, once the largest archipelago city-state under the Death Church’s control, were pulled into subspace by the Vanished a century ago. For followers of the God of Death, those islands hold a significance comparable to Pland for the Storm Church today,” Valentine sighed. “It’s troublesome. After a hundred years, it’s not just about resentment, but also the innate human distrust toward an

‘uncontrollable catastrophe.’ If they discovered the source of this warning, they might suspect a conspiracy.”

Vanna remained silent for a moment before suddenly suggesting, “The Grand Storm Cathedral is convening soon. Perhaps Her Holiness will have her own thoughts.”

“Let’s hope,” Valentine muttered, lacking confidence. “Regardless, the Four Churches have already taken note of Vision 001’s situation. It seems our level of concern has been inadequate. If the Storm Church could take the initiative and elevate the importance of this matter, it would at least achieve the intended effect of this ‘warning.’”

Vanna nodded slowly, gazing up at the statue of Storm Goddess Gomona, and whispered a prayer, “May you protect us.”

...

At the stern deck of the Vanished, Duncan had just finished a full-ship patrol and was preparing to retire to his quarters.

Periodically, the Vanished required a thorough inspection, particularly its submerged chambers, which demanded the captain’s presence to maintain stability.

During this examination, Duncan also verified the “Subspace Door” at the ship’s bottom, ensuring it remained securely closed.

This brought him some relief.

However, along with that relief came lingering uneasiness: he still couldn’t understand how he had managed to cross to the “other side” of the door after falling asleep in his room the last time.

He had entered subspace in a stupor and spent half a day aboard another Vanished. Although he had ultimately found a way back safely, he could never be fully at ease without knowing the mechanism for entering subspace.

Moreover, his entry into subspace occurred just after Vision 001 experienced issues.

Issues with “The Sun,” peculiar dreams, and entering subspace – these three events occurred in such close succession that it’s difficult not to suspect a hidden link between them.

Duncan stood before the captain’s cabin, clutching a lantern in one hand, inhaling the cold night air deeply.

This sense of unease may have prompted him to issue a warning during his prior “dream communication” with Vanna. Although he was uncertain how much his strange dreams mirrored reality, his numerous encounters with supernatural phenomena taught him one thing: ordinary people might dismiss dreams, but for him, “Captain Duncan,” having a dream should not be taken lightly.

Now he hoped his warning would bring the Four Churches’ attention to the matter of Vision 001.

He was aware that he wasn’t an expert in the supernatural realm, and even if he wished to investigate the Vision 001 issue, he wouldn’t know where to begin. His role was to draw the attention of genuine experts to the problem.

A warning from “Captain Duncan” would undoubtedly provide a compelling reason for many to take it seriously.

Gathering his thoughts, Duncan placed his hand on the doorknob of his cabin. Before opening the door, however, another thought crossed his mind.

The Abyss Plan that Tyrian had mentioned to him.

Duncan furrowed his brow, pondered for a moment, and then pushed open the “Door of the Lost” directly.

A whirl of fog emerged from the doorframe as he stepped through it.

After brief dizziness and a sensation of spatial displacement, Zhou Ming opened his eyes to find the familiar bachelor apartment, where everything

remained as it was.

He steadied himself, checking the windowsill, desk, and other areas to ensure that everything here was unchanged. Then he walked to the end of the room.

On the modest shelf, the intricate “models” of the Vanished and Pland still sat quietly in their original positions.

Zhou Ming approached, picked up the “model” symbolizing Pland, and held the neither light nor heavy “collection” in his hand as he sat at the nearby desk to scrutinize its “base” structure.

Previously, he had never considered this issue – he had to admit that “beneath the city-state” was not only a blind spot for many people in this world but also for himself.

He observed an extremely smooth bottom surface.

The portion of the model corresponding to the sea level below the Pland city-state ended abruptly, leaving a smooth surface as if it had been sliced by a sharp blade.

Zhou Ming stared at the base of the model, deep in thought.

If it were merely a “model,” this neat and even bottom surface would, of course, be perfectly normal. However, he knew that this “collection” was no ordinary model; it should be the “mapping” or “projection” of the actual Pland in this room. What this object depicted should be the complete appearance of Pland!

Regardless of what was beneath the city-state – an infinitely long pillar or a thin base – there should be a structure, not the abrupt ending of the portion below the sea level as it appeared now.

Was it because he hadn’t been thorough enough when he set the city-state ablaze? Or because... he had “overlooked” this part? Zhou Ming furrowed his brow slightly, his fingers tapping the edge of the desk absentmindedly.

He then composed himself, placed his hand over the model, and allowed his spirit to gradually expand.

Within Pland City-State, in the antique shop, Duncan had just bid goodnight to Nina and Shirley. He silently returned to his room, approached the window, and gazed quietly at the tranquil nighttime streets illuminated by lamps.

The night was deep, and nearly all the city-state's residents had gone home. The streets and alleys were incredibly quiet, with only a few points of light moving in the dim depths of the alleys. Those were the night patrol guards and the lanterns they carried.

Duncan closed his eyes slightly.

The entire Pland City-State's landscape was directly projected into his mind with a clearer and more intuitive perspective.

Crowded residential areas, bustling steam factories, peaceful commercial districts, damp coastal streets, roadside gas lamps, and the city-spanning pipeline system...

Somewhere in the city, a squad of guards exited an alley, preparing to inspect the next gas and steam node.

A young team member, holding a lantern, looked at the quiet street ahead and muttered admiringly, "It seems to be another peaceful night... To be honest, I'm not used to these quiet nights."

"Don't let your guard down," the squad leader glanced at his subordinate, "Anything can happen in the darkness. Keep an eye on the darkest corners."

"Yes, I understand," the team member straightened up but couldn't resist adding, "But don't you think it's been really quiet these past few days? I heard that there hasn't been a single incident in the city's recent night patrol records..."

A faint green glow suddenly flashed at the edge of their vision, causing the team member to stop involuntarily.

It seemed that the light emitted from the distant gas lamp had momentarily changed, but it was extremely brief and elusive, almost impossible to detect.

“Did you just see something flash by?” The team member instinctively pressed his hand to the rune steel sword at his waist and spoke softly, “It looked like the gas lamp flickered.”

“I saw your lantern flicker too,” another team member chimed in.

The team members instinctively turned their gaze to the squad leader.

However, the squad leader only furrowed his brow, seemingly deep in thought. After several seconds, the experienced guard shook his head, “Continue the patrol – report the situation to the church afterward.”

Similar incidents occurred throughout the city as the guard squad departed, with the green light shadows overtaking the usual flames tonight.

In that transcendent and clear “perception,” Duncan allowed his consciousness to descend bit by bit, investigating the city-state’s structure below sea level.

Back in the apartment room, Zhou Ming abruptly opened his eyes when he heard a faint friction sound.

He picked up the “collection” in front of him and stared intently at the bottom of the Pland City-State.

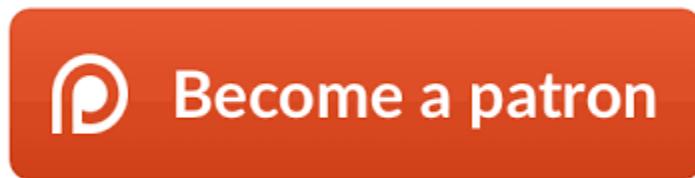
A rough and intricate new structure was slowly “forming” at the base of this “model.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 267

Chapter 267 “Under the Darkness”

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The base of the “model” was growing.

As Zhou Ming-Duncan’s thoughts spread, the structure representing the underground world of the Pland City-State gradually took shape in his mind. The sections that appeared in his cognition were transformed into corresponding new parts on this “collection.”

It was rough, resembling a rocky disc, growing at a visible rate and encompassing the entire underground portion of the Pland City-State. Gradually, it began to reveal more bizarre and intricate details—layers of sediment from thousands of years, tiny spike-like growths, and strange protrusions winding between the layers.

It looked like the coarse skin of an echinoderm or the grotesque outer layer left by a rock corroded in strong acid.

Finally, the growth process ceased.

The bottom of the “model” representing the Pland City-State now included an additional disc-like base.

However, what came next caused Zhou Ming to frown.

He could sense that his consciousness spreading within the Pland City-State didn’t stop. Instead, it continued to extend “downward.”

In darkness and cold, beyond the reach of normal senses, he felt his spirit seep and flow downward like mercury sinking into the soil. He distinctly felt his “gaze” passing through thick concrete, soil, and rocks, through an extremely dense but non-metallic, non-stone “shell,” sinking into the icy seawater and continuing downward, ever downward!

How much further did it extend? A hundred meters? Two hundred meters?

Zhou Ming couldn’t be certain. All he knew was that his perception continued to spread downward, even though he was already beyond the boundaries of the Pland City-State, and no new structures appeared on the “collection” in his hand. His thoughts still flowed along an invisible “medium.”

His initial reaction was anxiety, and he subconsciously wanted to control this thought of “falling” into the deep sea. However, the continuous “fall” suddenly halted before he could react.

It was as if he had abruptly hit an invisible “limit” or reached the end of the “medium.” His perception finally settled at a certain depth in the deep water below the city-state and stabilized there.

Zhou Ming felt his heart pounding, experiencing the ups and downs of a sudden fall, only to be abruptly halted by a rope halfway down. It took him nearly half a minute to calm down and regain control of his breathing and heartbeat.

After steadying his mind, he slowly picked up the Pland model in front of him, observing the thick “rock stratum” extending from its base.

The rough and grotesque structure was overall quite orderly. The bottom was a jagged fracture surface, giving the impression that it had been forcibly broken off from somewhere or that it had been disturbed during the “generational” process from top to bottom, resulting in an ugly fracture.

As for the structure inside the disc, it was utterly chaotic, difficult to perceive, and impossible to probe.

Zhou Ming's attention was not drawn to the disc-shaped base; instead, he focused on the space beneath it.

A part of his "consciousness" extended and hovered in that position.

Zhou Ming gently closed his eyes again and was hit with an intensified perception.

He felt as though he was submerged in the dark, frigid depths of the ocean, with immeasurable seawater surrounding and compressing him layer by layer. The sensation of pressure was so vivid that it seemed as though even his consciousness was constrained and confined. He attempted to open his "eyes" in the darkness but only saw an infinite void.

Gradually, however, it appeared that tiny specks of light emerged within the emptiness.

Could they be deep-sea plankton? Bioluminescent fish? Or something else entirely?

Zhou Ming endeavored to identify them for a while before realizing... it was the base of Pland.

He was "looking up" at Pland and observed the underside of the rough disc-shaped base adorned with minuscule, glowing structures amid the profound darkness.

Yet, he couldn't decipher what it was... his pure conscious perception, separated by such an immense distance and dense seawater, delivered information that was simply too indistinct.

Then, Zhou Ming gradually adapted, attempting to shift his focus to another direction: deeper into the ocean floor.

All he felt was an infinite void and darkness.

In the deep sea... there seemed to be nothing.

But after some time, he suddenly sensed something indistinct.

Something immensely vast, lifeless, and possibly as large as Pland itself, lay dormant within that boundless darkness.

Zhou Ming couldn't see or hear it. The extreme darkness and silence concealed every aspect of that massive entity, but he was certain that something was there, quiet and hidden, as though it had existed since the dawn of time.

After an indeterminate period, Zhou Ming returned, having failed to achieve his goal.

Ultimately, he couldn't "see" what lay in the deep sea directly beneath Pland.

However, he had a suspicion—

The enormous structure concealed right below the city-state likely motivated Queen Ray Nora of the Frostbite Kingdom to initiate the Abyss Plan half a century earlier!

It was beneath Frost, Pland, and probably other city-states too!

Zhou Ming inhaled deeply, stood up, picked up the Pland city-state model, and slowly walked to the shelf at the room's far end.

The model now had an additional "base," but it could still fit into the storage slot on the shelf—as if from the outset, the model and slot had allowed for ample space.

But before inserting the model, Zhou Ming's gaze fell once more on the space below the base, and a trace of uncertainty arose in his mind.

His consciousness could spread within the city-state, but in the deep sea, it had clearly surpassed the physical limits of this city-state model... its bottom structure ended abruptly at 850 meters, yet beyond that, his consciousness had extended another one to two hundred meters downward... How did it stretch that extra one to two hundred meters? What was that unseen medium?

Zhou Ming slowly returned the model to the shelf with more questions than answers.

.....

As usual, the sun once again ascended into the sky.

In Pland's lower district, in the small open area in front of the antique shop, Duncan observed Nina joyfully riding her bicycle in circles, then up and down the street, before coming to a steady halt in front of him.

"Uncle! I've become really skilled!"

Nina had one foot on the ground, her face beaming with excitement and pride.

Duncan's face revealed a faint smile, "Not bad, you're indeed riding quite adeptly—but your bike is resting on my foot."

Nina glanced down quickly and hastily moved the wheel away, "Ah! Sorry!"

"It's alright." Duncan smiled and waved his hand, then took a deep breath and looked up at the sunlit street.

The city-state remained the same.

Beneath the sunlit streets, the deep darkness and immense shadows felt like elements from another realm, not impacting people's daily lives in the slightest.

However, since completing his exploration of Pland's "underneath," he couldn't help but think about the cold, dark depths of the ocean and the enormous structure he had sensed there.

It caused him to lose focus occasionally.

He even wondered if the Frost Queen from fifty years prior had experienced similar feelings. Had she also caught a glimpse of the deep-sea secrets

through some means... or perhaps discovered even more than he had?

“Uncle, you’re daydreaming again?”

Nina’s voice suddenly intruded, interrupting Duncan’s wild thoughts.

“Are you okay? You’ve been daydreaming since this morning.”

“I’m fine,” Duncan quickly waved his hand and then looked toward the end of the street as though trying to change the subject, “But on that note, Alice hasn’t returned yet.”

“She hasn’t been gone for very long,” Nina casually remarked, “And you don’t need to worry so much. She’s just purchasing a newspaper; it’s not like she’s traversing half the city. She shouldn’t get lost, right?”

“I really can’t be certain,” Duncan sighed, “This is her first time venturing out alone in the true sense—even if it’s just to the newsstand on the corner.”

“I think it’s okay,” Nina pondered for a moment and confidently stated, “I rehearsed with her multiple times before she left, including how to communicate what she wants to buy, how to give change, and expressing gratitude after receiving the item... She’s learned it all.”

“Ah, hopefully,” Duncan sighed, “It’s just that when she initially started in the ship’s kitchen, even fetching a plate would result in a collision with a frying pan.”

Nina stared blankly, “I don’t think these two situations can be compared...”

While they conversed, Alice’s figure came into view.

The doll-like girl clutched a newspaper in her arms, her face displaying a bright smile as she ran toward them with her head held high, calling out while running, “Mr. Duncan! I got the newspaper!”

Nina chuckled, “See, I told you Miss Alice would be alright!”

On the other hand, Duncan was alarmed by Alice's running action and immediately rushed forward to intercept her, yelling loudly, "Don't run! Slow down!"

As if to confirm their concerns, while they spoke, he watched in disbelief as Alice stumbled and fell headfirst less than five meters in front of him, crashing to the ground.

However, in the next instant, the doll-like girl rose as if nothing had occurred, dusted off her skirt, picked up the newspaper that had fallen to the ground, and approached Duncan with a grin, "Newspaper!"

Rather than immediately accepting the newspaper, Duncan gazed at the unscathed doll-girl with a disbelieving expression. After a moment, he managed to ask, "...How did your head not fall off after a tumble like that?"

Alice maintained her confident stance, neck held high and face adorned with a bright smile, "I discovered an excellent method to reinforce it!"

Duncan examined the doll skeptically, "An excellent method?"

Alice: "I used glue!"

Duncan: "...?!"

Taken aback for a few seconds, he couldn't help but inquire, "Who taught you that?"

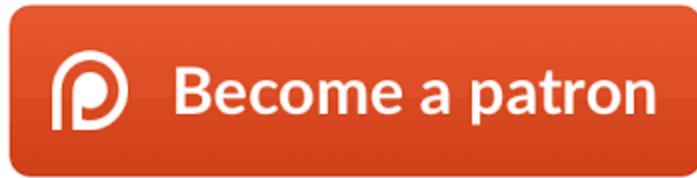
"Shirley!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 268

Chapter 268 “Alice With A Steady Head”

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Observing Alice with her seemingly confident posture, her neck held high, Duncan’s mood abruptly shifted to confusion. He quickly realized that her awkward stance was not due to confidence or pride, but rather, she had become completely stiff and unable to move.

Miss Doll, however, appeared oblivious to the gravity of the situation and maintained a smug expression. Giggling, she handed the newspaper to Duncan, obviously pleased with herself for managing to shop alone: “Here’s your newspaper, and I even remembered to get the change!”

Duncan accepted the newspaper without expression, and after a brief pause, reminded the awkward girl, “Alice, try nodding your head.”

“Huh? Why?” Alice was caught off guard but promptly chose to obey the captain’s order. Consequently, her head barely moved, accompanied by a peculiar noise from her neck, leaving her immobilized.

Following a moment of bewilderment, the doll finally reacted, exclaiming, “Mr. Duncan! I can’t move! Please help me, help me!”

Duncan, both mentally and physically drained, glanced at the doll and headed towards the antique shop, “Stop yelling outside, we’ll figure it out indoors.”

Alice quickly trailed behind Duncan, joined by a perplexed and helpless Nina. The trio entered the antique shop, where Nina carefully closed the door and hung a ‘temporarily closed’ wooden sign.

Duncan set the newly purchased newspaper on the counter, intending to assess Alice's situation, when the front page caught his eye and instantly drew his attention.

The headline, printed in bold, black letters, read: The Grand Storm Cathedral will arrive at Pland in the hour of noon tomorrow – the glory of the Storm Lord will protect us all.

“The Grand Storm Cathedral? The mysterious Storm ‘headquarter at sea’? The envoy of the Storm Goddess Gomona is coming to this city... for the prior historical pollution event? Or for the Vanished? Or both?”

Duncan frowned, picked up the newspaper, and quickly scanned the front-page article.

In a state of panic, Alice sought Nina's help upon realizing that the captain was preoccupied: “Miss Nina, please help me, save me, save me...”

Nina, too, was somewhat rattled. She grabbed Alice's head and shook it side to side, discovering that the glue had entirely hardened: “This... this can't be removed! It's clearly a fast-drying glue!”

“Find a solution,” Alice pleaded, on the verge of tears, clutching her head with both hands, “Miss Nina, you study mechanical repair and such, right? You can fix complex steam cores, so fix me!”

“I don't know how to repair dolls either!” Nina was equally frantic, ultimately turning to Duncan for assistance, “Uncle, please think of something! Miss Alice's head is totally glued...”

Duncan finally set the newspaper aside, glanced at the two distressed girls beside him, and directed his attention to Alice: “How much glue did you use, and what type of glue was it?”

Holding her hand up, Alice indicated the size, “I found one bottle about this big in your room, a small brown glass bottle.”

“You poured the entire thing in?!” Duncan’s eye twitched noticeably. “How did you manage to do that?”

“I just removed my head, turned it upside down, poured the glue in, shook it slightly, and then put it back on,” Alice said, her voice trembling as if she was about to cry. “Shirley told me it would be secure that way...”

Duncan stared at her, dumbfounded. He could sense the beautiful doll’s despair, but as a doll, she had no tears to shed. All her sadness could only flow through her hollow heart – it would have sounded poetic if the detail “the doll’s despair was caused by her head getting glued” were disregarded.

Duncan sighed, set the newspaper aside, walked over, and untied the lace decoration around Alice’s neck. He examined the hardened super glue around the edges of her joint and, after a moment of silence, turned to Nina: “Where is Shirley?”

“She... said her head hurt from memorizing words an hour ago, so she went out to get some fresh air,” Nina replied, shrinking her neck. “Did she run away because she felt guilty?”

“I doubt she thought that far. The only thing on her mind these days is skipping class,” Duncan sighed and shook his head. “No, it’s completely dried. It’s fast-drying glue, so brute force won’t work.”

“What should I do!” Alice looked helplessly at Duncan. “I... I need to take my head off when I comb my hair. I can’t comb it with my head on.”

“Is that your only concern after your head got glued?” Duncan glared at Alice, then waved his hand wearily. “Alright, don’t look so miserable. This glue is strong, but it’s not heat or water-resistant. Soak it in hot water, and it’ll come off in no time.”

Alice immediately looked relieved, and Nina, who had been worried beside her, quickly reacted, rushing over to hold Alice’s hand: “I’ll take you to the bathroom. I can heat water very quickly now!”

The sun fragment that was Nina led the glued-headed doll upstairs, leaving Duncan to sigh in the rear and focus back on the newspaper at hand.

According to public information, the Grand Storm Cathedral's docking in Pland was merely a routine maintenance stop. Pope Helena would briefly visit Pland's local cathedral during this time and discuss church matters with the archbishop and inquisitor. The newspaper made no mention of the previous historical pollution incident or any connection to the Vanished.

But even if the newspaper didn't mention it, it was clear to anyone with eyes that the Storm Pope was here for those two significant events.

Duncan wasn't concerned about the faith of the Storm Goddess, but he couldn't help but wonder what impact this event would have on him.

Or, could he seize this opportunity... to gather some intelligence?

He still remembered the message "Thank you" that was supposedly from the Storm Goddess, and even without that event, he was curious about the deities of this world. He was also interested in the Grand Storm Cathedral, which was said to have been sailing the Boundless Sea all year round.

On the other hand, he was also curious whether the highest representative of the Storm Goddess, upon her arrival, would notice any abnormalities in the Pland City-State or discover his hidden "Subspace Shadow" within the island.

Things were getting interesting.

Duncan set down the newspaper, sat at the counter, and thoughtfully stroked his chin.

The antique shop was very quiet, with the faint sounds of Nina and Alice in the upstairs bathroom. The clearest sound was Nina's exclamations of surprise:

"Wow! These joints are truly amazing... and so beautiful!

"Miss Alice, can your wrist really rotate 360 degrees... it really can?!"

“Miss Alice, there’s a keyhole on your back, huh? You don’t know what it’s for either?”

“Is it okay if the keyhole gets wet? Oh, then I’m relieved...”

Duncan rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on.

He began to suspect that the two upstairs had completely forgotten about their task.

However, soon the voices upstairs quieted down, followed by hurried footsteps running to the stairway entrance, and Nina’s voice called out: “Uncle Duncan! It’s not working! You come and take a look, we can’t get it off at all!”

Duncan: “...?”

He went upstairs, puzzled, and saw Nina standing helplessly in the hallway. He looked up to see Alice peering out from the bathroom at the end of the hallway, appearing embarrassed.

The doll lady then emerged, soaked from head to toe, wrapped in a towel, her head still firmly attached.

“Captain, it still won’t come off,” Alice said with a mournful face.

“It hasn’t loosened at all,” Nina mumbled quietly. “We tried hot water for a long time.”

Duncan looked at Alice, then at Nina, who was clutching the corner of her clothes, and finally sighed after a long pause.

“Use boiling water.”

“Huh?” Nina was taken aback. “Really... really?! Can Miss Alice handle it...”

“She once deep-fried her own head; she’s not afraid of this temperature at all,” Duncan spread his hands. “It seems that using hot water won’t work

now. There's still hope with boiling water."

Nina's eyes seemed a little dazed. She thought hard about the process and hesitantly said, "It's easy to get boiling water; I can do that quickly, but... we don't have a pot big enough for that, nor a bathtub that can fit her whole body. If we want to soak her head in the water, Miss Alice will have to crouch down in the water, right?"

As she spoke and gestured, even though she was academically excellent at school, Nina still felt her imagination was struggling to keep up with reality.

But Duncan didn't have the same limitations in his thinking as Nina. He just looked at the pitiful gothic doll wrapped in a towel nearby and turned to Nina, saying, "That's easy. Just find a big pot, and let her dive in headfirst... I can even hold her on the side."

Nina imagined the scene and had a picture in her mind, but her tone became even more hesitant, "I feel like it's a bit pitiful for Miss Alice..."

"Pitiful my ass!" Duncan finally lost his patience and swore unprecedently. "She let an illiterate fool fill her joints with an entire bottle of glue; this is to teach her a lesson!"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 269

Chapter 269 “Spreading”

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“Are you truly certain this will be effective?”

As she observed the large basin of water on the dining table, Nina couldn’t shake her uneasiness. She glanced between the apprehensive Alice and the stoic Duncan, murmuring quietly.

“If this fails, we’ll need to use a solvent, but that stuff is caustic, and I’m unsure if it’ll harm Alice’s body,” Duncan said, frustrated as he looked at the gothic doll who had changed back into her usual attire but still had an immobile neck. “Or maybe she’ll just remain like this indefinitely.”

Alice became alarmed and quickly waved her hands, “No, let’s attempt boiling water first!”

Nina’s eyes darted between Alice and the basin several times before she finally exhaled, hesitantly reaching her hand into the tepid water.

She was exceedingly cautious, as though attempting to single out a lone grain of sand from the desert, channeling the intense flame from her inner core to the external world. For a sunny girl with a passionate core of 6,000 degrees, such precision wasn’t easily achieved. However, she had been diligently practicing this level of control at every opportunity and had made significant progress. In no time, she succeeded.

The water started to boil.

Alice looked at Duncan, who returned her gaze.

Without any hesitation, they submerged the doll's head into the boiling water.

"Allow it to cook for some time," Duncan advised while holding Alice's shoulder, "but if you experience any discomfort, stop immediately."

Alice promptly replied, "Glug, glug, glug... glug."

Duncan considered for a moment and then glanced at Nina, "I suppose she isn't feeling discomfort."

Nina stared at the unfolding scene, unable to resist muttering, "I can't help but find this situation so bizarre..."

Duncan sighed, acknowledging that her statement was an understatement; he too found the scene incredibly odd. In the dimly lit, cramped antique shop on the second floor, the pair were boiling a gothic doll's head in a basin of hot water. The doll continued to gesture, raising her hand and giving a thumbs-up to signal that she was alright.

Any first-time observer of this scene would report it to the authorities, and upon a second look, they'd contact the church's guardians.

Suddenly, footsteps and Shirley's voice approached from the stairway: "I've returned! Mr. Duncan, old man Morris is here again. I told him to come right up..."

Shirley appeared in the doorway the following instant, and her voice abruptly cuts off at what she saw.

In the dimly lit room, Duncan and Nina stood silently beside the basin of boiling water, with the latter's hand still submerged, maintaining the heat. Meanwhile, Duncan gripped Alice's shoulder, pressing the gothic doll's head firmly into the container with the constant bubbling sound of boiling water.

As it so happens, Morris also arrived right after Shirley, catching the scene in the dining area with his own gaze. But instead of freezing in shock, he

only nodded as if comprehending the situation like it's a typical day in the antique shop – ah, it's the subspace shadow and sun fragment stewing Anomaly 099.

“HOLY CRAP!” Shirley’s belated exclamation finally resounded as she nearly leaped in terror at the scene. She hastily covered her mouth as though attempting to force the curse back in, mumbling unintelligibly.

“What on earth are you shouting for?” Duncan glared at the startled Shirley. “Was it your suggestion for Alice to pour glue into her neck?”

Shirley abruptly grasped the situation, and her initial impulse was to flee, but under Duncan’s watchful eye, she dared not move.

“I... I mentioned it offhandedly; I didn’t think she’d actually go through with it,” Shirley’s voice quivered. “No sane person would believe that...”

Duncan was about to retort when he suddenly felt Alice’s body sway. He promptly released her, only to see Alice rise straight up from the basin.

But only her body did so as her head remained boiling in the basin.

“Ah, it worked,” Nina exclaimed, surprised.

Alice’s body stood motionless for a few seconds, then started to grope for her head that’s gurgling in the water, pleading for help: “Help... gurgle... help... gurgle...”

Nina quickly retrieved Alice’s head and awkwardly helped her reattach it. Hearing the familiar “pop” sound, everyone present breathed a sigh of relief.

Alice rotated her head from side to side, discovering that although her neck was slightly stiff, she could indeed move it. She immediately faced Duncan with a joyful expression: “Captain! I can move again!”

“Dry her hair and collar; they’re both wet. Help her dry them,” Duncan sighed and looked at Nina. He then glanced at Shirley, who appeared

panicked and wanted to flee but didn't dare to, and said irritably, "Write the alphabet twenty times and each new word twenty times as well."

After saying this, he disregarded Shirley's crestfallen expression and looked directly at Morris: "What's going on? Did you uncover anything new about that symbol?"

Morris, possibly still reeling from the peculiar and disordered scene, hesitated for a moment before replying: "Ah, not about the symbol. I received some information from a friend at City Hall today, and I think... it may pique your interest."

"News from City Hall?" Duncan furrowed his brow. "Proceed."

A few minutes later, Morris relayed the situation he had discovered that morning.

"Vision Pland..." At the dining table, Duncan repeated the phrase with a somewhat serious expression before looking at Morris. "When will this news be made public?"

"It's not determined yet, but it should be within the next few days," Morris nodded. "Logically speaking, since the City of Pland is still grappling with the aftermath of the previous calamity, most citizens likely still possess a strong capacity for resilience. Suppose the city is transformed into a vision as part of the post-disaster conclusions. In that case, it may not incite too much turmoil – but if they wait until the city is entirely tranquil and everyone has been living peacefully for a while before announcing it, it might trigger a fresh wave of chaos."

Duncan nodded slightly, remaining silent, but couldn't help reflecting on the news he had just read in the newspaper – the Grand Storm Cathedral was scheduled to arrive in Pland.

The updates in the records of anomalies and visions were disseminated by the major churches, so the Grand Storm Cathedral must have been among the first to be aware of this situation.

“A city-state transformed into a vision while continuing to function as usual is quite unusual. What’s even more peculiar is that this new vision doesn’t have a number,” Morris added. “What are your thoughts on this?”

Duncan had, of course, noticed the issue of the new vision lacking a number, but what could he think? His knowledge of the supernatural realm was actually inferior to that of a skeletal dog...

However, he couldn’t admit that, so he could only contemplate for a moment before shaking his head indifferently: “I have no opinion. The ‘codes’ of anomalies and visions published by the major churches are unfathomable and meaningless to me.”

“This...”

Morris opened his mouth but then recalled the green flames that had engulfed the entire city-state, the disintegrating Black Sun, and the Anomaly 099 that had just obediently been submerged in the basin.

All these matters seemed to be the same for Captain Duncan, merely some... mildly bothersome “daily issues.”

There was no need to worry about what every speck of dust cleaned daily was called.

“Alright, this indeed holds no significance for you,” the elderly scholar looked at Duncan with a touch of awe and then hesitated before slowly formulating his words. “Also, although there should be no uncertainty, I still want to confirm that Pland was indeed turned into a vision by your actions, correct?”

Duncan turned his face slightly: “Is there any doubt?”

“No, I have no doubt. I’m merely curious about your plans for this city-state in the future,” Morris stated, organizing his words to convey his thoughts as clearly and unambiguously as possible. “You transformed it into a vision to...”

“I have no intention of controlling the fate of this city-state or interfering with anyone’s future,” Duncan interrupted Morris with a gentle shake of his head. “If I must say...”

He paused, gazing out the window at the tranquil scene on the street.

“I quite like this place, so I hope it can remain peaceful in the future.”

...

Within the local cathedral, Vanna, who was conversing with Heidi, suddenly stopped and looked back, puzzled.

“What’s wrong?” Doctor Heidi inquired curiously, observing her friend.

“I thought I just heard a bell ringing and someone whispering to me,” Vanna frowned. “It seems I must have misheard.”

“You certainly misheard. I didn’t hear anything,” Heidi dismissed the idea. “You must be under a lot of stress lately. Do you need me to...”

“No need!” Vanna interrupted Heidi quickly. “I feel like my mental state is quite good, and if I do encounter any problems, I’ll handle them myself. You know, priests are part-time psychiatrists.”

“Alright, if you don’t need it, you don’t have to be so anxious,” Heidi muttered helplessly. “By the way, where was I?”

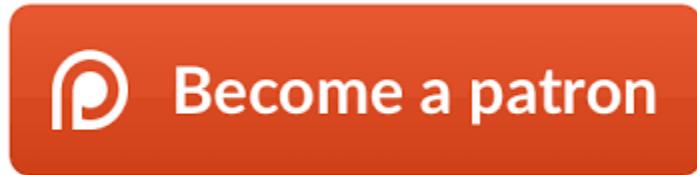
Vanna thought for a moment and reminded her, “You were just talking about your father purchasing an artillery shell from an antique shop, and now you’re concerned about his mental state...”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 270

Chapter 270 “Staggered”

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Her father once visited an antique shop and spent a significant amount of time there. Upon his return, he held a cannonball in his hands and placed it on the prime spot within his antique shelf. Then from time to time, he would meticulously clean it from top to bottom.

Whenever she recalled this fact, Heidi couldn't help but worry about her father's mental well-being.

“I'm serious, it was so bizarre,” the psychiatrist sighed, “He treated it like a prized possession, claiming it was an extremely special antique. He would clean the cannonball every day before washing his face. My mother was indifferent, and if I ever mentioned it, she would say ‘don't bother your father with his hobby’.”

Vanna was unsure how to respond, as she had no expertise in antiques. Her most vivid memory of an antique was accidentally breaking her uncle's vase with a toy sword as a child. Recalling the subsequent punishment, she cautiously said, “Mr. Morris is a renowned historian and collector. I assume his collection must hold some unique insights.”

“Still, I've never heard of anyone treating a cannonball like a treasure, even if it's genuine,” Heidi sighed.

Vanna remained quiet for a moment, seemingly deep in thought. Then she suddenly asked, “Regarding the pendant, did Mr. Morris get you another identical one?”

“Yes, this one,” Heidi nodded and pulled out the “crystal” pendant from her chest, “You’ve seen it before. I had an identical one, but it was destroyed during the prior ‘disaster’. The cleric who documented it at the time surmised that it might be an object that inadvertently gained supernatural power while typically hiding its uniqueness.”

Vanna studied the “crystal” pendant Heidi revealed, her expression contemplative.

“Do you suspect something is amiss?” Heidi inquired.

“After the disaster, the cathedral faced a shortage of manpower, but we still sent people to investigate the antique shop, and everything appeared normal. From the shop’s supply chain to the owner’s background, there were no red flags. The pendant incident seemed to be merely coincidental,” Vanna said slowly, her eyes fixed on the pendant, “But I can’t shake my concern… Heidi, do you recall when I accompanied you to that antique shop?”

“Of course, I remember,” Heidi nodded, “Now that you mention it, I do have some ties to that shop. The shop owner once saved my life at the museum, his niece is one of my father’s pupils, and my previous pendant came from that shop… But as you pointed out, the church conducted a covert investigation and found nothing amiss.”

Vanna didn’t respond, but after some thought, she reached out, “May I take a closer look?”

“Sure, here you go,” Heidi casually handed over the pendant.

Vanna took the still-warm crystal pendant, inspected it closely in the sunlight, and after a while, she murmured to herself, “There’s no supernatural aura.”

“Yes, it is just an ordinary pendant, and it’s even made of glass,” Heidi said, looking at her friend earnestly, “Vanna, you’re a bit too tense. I know it’s an occupational hazard for an inquisitor, but I think… the shop owner is really a good person. You shouldn’t doubt him.”

“I’m paying attention, not doubting. I always feel that there is something off about that antique shop, but I’m not looking at this matter with the same attitude as an inquisitor towards heretics,” Vanna said, returning the pendant to her friend. “But you’re right, I might be a bit too nervous.”

Heidi put the pendant back on and then glanced at the mechanical clock hanging nearby, “Ah, it’s already this time?!”

“Are you leaving?”

“I have to go,” Heidi said as she stood up and picked up the small case she had placed nearby earlier, “I have an appointment this afternoon – it’s with the captain who was under observation at the cathedral for quite some time.”

Vanna frowned in recollection and quickly found the corresponding memory, “The captain of the White Oak? I remember his name is Lawrence... Did he run into trouble?”

“It’s normal for a captain sailing the Boundless Sea, especially at that age, to need the help of a mental health professional,” Heidi said, her expression slightly complicated as if she thought of something, but she quickly shook her head, “Actually, compared to most captains his age, Mr. Lawrence’s situation is not bad. I can’t say more, as it concerns the patient’s privacy.”

“Alright, I hope your work goes smoothly.”

...

The first thing Morris did upon returning home was to hug and kiss his wife, and the second thing was to carefully wipe the artillery shell placed on the antique shelf.

Although he felt a bit strange when he brought it home, he knew that this seemingly peculiar “collection” had its own special meaning.

It represented the connection between him and the Vanished, as well as Captain Duncan’s “benevolence” towards his dependents.

The incredible ghost captain would always convey his goodwill in various odd ways, including but not limited to soup made from deep-sea heirs, a shell with a century-old seal, and tutoring the less educated among his dependents in reading and writing. At first, Morris found it strange, but now he has perfectly adjusted his mindset.

What Captain Duncan said was right, and what he did was normal.

With this mindset, Morris felt that he had completely adapted to the atmosphere of the new team.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded from behind.

Without looking back, Morris knew it was his wife.

“You’re almost polishing it to a mirror finish,” the elegant old woman laughed as she looked at her husband, “Didn’t you say before that antiques shouldn’t be wiped too often?”

“But this is no ordinary ‘antique,’ Mary,” Morris turned to his wife and smiled, “It’s part of a miracle.”

The old woman looked up and carefully examined the two special items on the antique shelf – a dagger and a shell. After a moment, she suddenly spoke, “Will you tell your daughter some of the truth later? About this ‘miracle,’ and about... your new ‘identity’.”

Morris stopped what he was doing with his hands.

There were some “miracles” that could be hidden from others but not from the witnesses of the miracles themselves.

As a product of an incomplete “subspace prayer” in the past, his wife had laid on the bed in the form of human ash for eleven years. She was well aware of this. However, now that she had truly survived due to the influence of the Vanished, she naturally had doubts about her own survival.

There was no way around this.

So after getting the captain's permission, Morris told his wife about the Vanished, but he did not tell Heidi.

"... There's no need for it now," Morris said, "Heidi doesn't have to get involved in this matter, and whether to tell or not... it depends on the captain's opinion."

Just then, the doorbell rang, interrupting the conversation between Morris and his wife.

As the old scholar was about to open the door, his wife stopped him with a smile, "Let me go – I haven't moved for many years, and I need to exercise more now."

She turned around and went to the entrance. Then after a brief conversation, she returned to Morris.

"It's the mailman," she handed him a letter, "It's for you."

"A letter for me?" Morris was a bit surprised. At first glance, he noticed the large denomination stamps and several special postmarks on the envelope and frowned, "I did write to a few distant friends, but I didn't expect a reply so soon... Huh?"

His action of opening the letter suddenly stopped as his gaze fell on the first postmark on the envelope, which represented the place it was sent from. His expression was a bit strange.

"Where is it from?" His wife's curious voice sounded beside him.

Morris was silent for two seconds and said softly, "Frost."

"Frost? That's a very distant place," his wife said, recalling a bit uncertainly, "I remember you had a friend in Frost, named Brown or Bren?"

"Scott Brown," Morris said slowly, his tone becoming unusually somber and serious, and the movement of opening the envelope with the letter opener became even more hesitant, "Like me, a scholar of history, and also passionate about the field of supernatural."

“Oh, right, Scott Brown. I remember him being quite thin and giving people a very meticulous impression,” his wife recalled, “Are you still in contact with him? I remember he moved to Frost years ago, but before moving, his relationship with you was indeed...”

“He’s already dead,” Morris suddenly said, “He died in a shipwreck accident six years ago.”

As his words fell, the room became quiet in an instant.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 271

Chapter 271 “From Frost”

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Morris cautiously opened the letter with an opener after taking note of the collection of stamps on the envelope, along with one symbolizing “purified” that’s only used for something that’s taken an incredibly long journey.

As the paper unfolded with a soft rustle, neat and elegant rows of handwriting appeared before Morris, unmistakably the penmanship of a friend:

“To my cherished friend and scholarly collaborator:

It feels as if several years have passed since our last correspondence, and this estrangement is unjust. These years seem to have been spent in a haze, constantly engaged in trivial pursuits. It was only recently that I realized how much time I’ve wasted....

Many remarkable events have occurred lately, and words cannot capture the transformation in my life... Frost is a phenomenal place, offering not only cold, enduring winters but also a wealth of subjects worthy of our earnest exploration...

Do you recall the ancient legends of the frigid Cold Sea we discussed during our last encounter? These subjects have recently re-emerged in my thoughts, and I feel as though I’ve grasped certain clues that may help us unravel numerous unanswered questions, such as the existence of city-states within the frigid region and the origins of many enigmatic local customs in Frost...

My friend, Frost is truly an extraordinary place, and this notion has become increasingly evident to me. The Cold Sea harbors a plethora of mysterious pasts ripe for investigation. I plan to meet esteemed experts in history and folklore and intend to visit Cold Harbor soon. Most importantly, though, I would like to extend an invitation for you to join me in this adventure...

We haven't seen each other in many years, Morris. You've mentioned your aversion to the chilly northern air, but I believe you'll appreciate the warmth of my hearth and my assortment of exquisite wines. Please give it serious thought. We can revisit those captivating secrets by the cozy fire once more. Trust me, Frost is genuinely a remarkable place...

Won't you come and witness this wondrous city-state for yourself?

Your most reliable friend and scholarly collaborator, Scott Brown, 1900-12-2, penned at 42 Fireplace Street."

Morris's gaze silently scanned the letter's final line, remaining quiet for an extended period until several minutes later.

"It's his handwriting, and the discussions he referenced did indeed occur," he murmured.

"Today is December 17th, and this letter was sent a fortnight ago," his wife noted, her voice laced with apprehension. "Considering the distance between Frost and Pland, that's a reasonable timeframe."

"Yes, the timing and postmark are both ordinary, but the author of this letter passed away years ago," Morris said slowly. "I vividly remember the day I received the obituary—a letter from Frost, penned by his favored pupil, who informed me that her mentor had tragically fallen overboard en route to Cold Harbor. Unfortunately, his body could not be recovered."

"...I don't recall that happening; those were the years when I was in a haze," the wife said, moving closer to hold Morris's hand. "We should report this to the church. The content and phrasing in the letter may appear normal, but upon closer examination, it's rather disconcerting."

Morris gently held his wife's hand and breathed deeply, "Indeed, it should be reported to the church... but not only to the church."

...

Inside the captain's quarters of the ship named Vanished, Duncan hunched over the navigation table, his hands supporting him as he studied the mist-shrouded nautical chart and its slowly extending route.

Vanished's phantom was gradually moving at the chart's center, and the dense fog surrounding the ship dissipated as it progressed. At one end of the route, the Pland city-state they had temporarily left behind was visible, and just beyond the route in the thinning fog, another faintly glowing point could be seen.

Duncan's gaze focused on this bright spot representing the Sea Mist.

Ever since their last exchange of artillery fire, the Sea Mist's marker had appeared on this chart, and he could vaguely sense the Sea Mist's current direction and even the ship's general condition.

This perception was imprecise, but it seemed unaffected by the increasing distance between the two ships.

Clearly, like the "marked ones" who had been tainted by the spiritual flame, the Sea Mist, having been hit by Vanished's cannon fire, had also established a connection with itself.

However, this connection was not the same as the complete control he held over the Vanished.

"Are you determining our next course?" Goathead's voice unexpectedly came from the edge of the navigation table. "In that case, I have about a hundred and forty valuable suggestions. I can..."

"No, you can't," Duncan expertly interrupted without waiting for Goathead to continue rambling. "I don't need any advice; I have my own plans."

Goathead shook its head, seemingly wanting to say more, but just as it was about to open its mouth, footsteps approached from outside the door. It swung open, and Alice entered to only pause in the next before she hastily turned around and closed it again. This time though, the Miss Doll made sure to knock before barging in.

“...You don’t need to knock once you’re already inside. You should knock before opening the door,” Duncan said flatly, glancing at her. “Have you finished tidying up ‘that side’?”

“Yep,” Alice nodded immediately. “The shelves on the first floor have been cleaned, as well as the counter and stairs. The kitchen is also tidied up!”

“Hmm,” Duncan casually responded. “What about Ai?”

“After dropping me off, she went to the kitchen,” Alice explained. “She kept shouting something about Crazy Thursday as she flew away...”

“She’s rather carefree,” Duncan shook his head, smiling. He then noticed Alice’s neck movement seemed off when she nodded and unconsciously furrowed his brow. “Your neck movement feels odd... Has the glue in the joints not been cleaned properly?”

Upon hearing this, Alice shook her head from side to side, displaying a noticeable lag and stiffness.

“It seems... there was a bit,” Miss Doll admitted, appearing somewhat embarrassed. “I feel a bit stiff.”

Duncan’s eye twitched as he helplessly observed the doll, who held her head in hand. After a moment, she let out her signature giggle: “Hehe...”

“Don’t hehe,” Duncan sighed. “Come here, I’ll help you clean up. If the residue isn’t removed, it will further damage the joints, and it’s quite uncomfortable watching you struggle to nod.”

“Oh.”

Alice obediently approached, and once by Duncan's side, she grabbed her own head, twisted from side to side, and then removed it with a "pop."

The headless doll held her own head with both hands: "Captain... captain... captain, for you."

An odd sensation inevitably welled up in his heart. However, Duncan still accepted Alice's head, retrieved a scraper, brush, and soft cloth from a small drawer beneath the navigation table, sighed, and inspected the doll's joint condition.

Despite his attitude, Duncan was honestly somewhat moved inside by his own composure for being able to adapt, anticipate, and handle these situations.

Human adaptability was truly remarkable.

Picking up the scraper, Duncan gently removed the remaining unstable glue marks from the joints, then glanced at Alice's face.

Her silver hair lay strewn across the navigation table, and the doll blinked, gazing at him.

She was undeniably beautiful, possessing a delicate and flawless face. Even in the strangest circumstances, it seemed people could overlook the oddity and couldn't help but admire her beauty.

However, it was unfortunate that this individual was typically too comical, causing Duncan to regret that she had a mouth while appreciating her stunning appearance...

"Does it hurt?"

"No, no, not at all, just a little, a little itch, but very... very mild," Alice stammered.

Then she fell silent, as did the goat head beside her, leaving only the faint sound of the scraper's friction and the soft lapping of waves outside the window.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Alice hesitantly spoke up with a stammer, her tone sounding defeated: “Captain, captain, captain, am I very, very foolish?”

Duncan’s movements abruptly ceased.

He was astonished that the doll could possess such self-awareness and insight.

But then he simply shook his head expressionlessly: “What makes you suddenly lament this?”

“I, I always struggle to grasp, grasp what you teach, and consistently, consistently, consistently make a mess of things, and also, also, also waste your, your time.”

Duncan was silent for a moment before resuming his work with the scraper.

“I don’t think you’re wasting my time,” he said gently, “and besides, you are a bit clumsy.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

“But it’s not a big deal. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and we’re all just a little ‘clumsy’ in areas where we lack skill. Perhaps you just have more areas where you’re not proficient,” Duncan glanced into Alice’s eyes, “does that bother you?”

“I-I-I don’t know, I haven’t thought, thought, thought about it, but I worry, worry, worry that I might hold, hold, hold you back...”

“Then set aside those needless concerns and continue living happily,” Duncan shook his head, “if you come across something you can’t learn, simply try learning it a few more times.”

“W-W-Will you teach, teach, teach me again, again, again?”

“...If I have the time.”

Alice blinked, seeming to contemplate for a moment before gradually breaking into a smile.

“Hehe...”

Hearing her signature laughter, Duncan couldn’t help but smile as well. He then picked up the brush and cloth to clean the dried glue scraps he had scraped off.

At this moment, a distant yet distinct call suddenly surfaced in his mind.

It was the voice of Morris.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 272

Chapter 272 “Turning to the North”

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Duncan paused momentarily in assisting Alice with the residual glue as though he was intently listening to a distant sound. After some time, he lowered his head once more and used a soft cloth to remove debris from the table.

Alice blinked curiously, gazing at the captain: “Cap-cap-captain, what-what-what just happened?”

“Morris received a letter from a distant friend, and he’s uncertain about the situation it describes,” Duncan replied with a smile, continuing to help Alice with the layer of residual glue on her neck joint. “He asked for my assistance in assessing the situation.”

“Distant fri-friend?” Alice’s head stuttered on the navigation table, “Is-is-is there danger? Do we need to-to-to rescue them?”

There was little glue left on the neck joint, and it was much easier to clean than the recessed head joint. Duncan quickly removed the dried glue, carefully completed the final wipe, and then bent down to hold Alice’s head, gently returning her to her original position as if she were a delicate piece of art.

“We might be going to rescue them,” he whispered, rotating the puppet’s head from side to side, “but it’s also possible that we’ll help them find peace. Either way, we must travel to a far-off place.”

As the puppet's head was secured, Alice's previously dull eyes became lively. She gently shook her head as if a soul had entered the wooden puppet, and her speech became fluid again: "Ah, where are we headed?"

Duncan put away the cleaning supplies and examined the foggy sea chart.

On the chart, the small light representing the Sea Mist was slowly moving, already far from Pland.

"North," he murmured, his gaze focusing on the goat head, "Raise the jib and the foresail, turn northward—follow the Sea Mist."

"Aye, Captain!"

...

Heidi placed the small brown bottle on the coffee table – around three-fifths of the transparent medicine was visible inside. The liquid reflected a faint golden light in the waning sunset, and within the shimmering golden circles, tiny bubbles seemed to continuously separate and dance near the surface.

"This is the final dose, more potent than the medicine you've taken previously. You can take it when you set sail, just three drops each time—of course, I also recommend starting now," Miss Psychiatrist lifted her head, gazing at the white-haired old captain before her. "As a captain who has spent half a lifetime on the Boundless Sea, you should be more mindful of your health."

"Thank you for your advice, Miss Heidi. I understand my situation," Lawrence responded without impatience or excessive enthusiasm. Instead, he curiously picked up the bottle, examining the constantly bubbling liquid through the glass in the sunlight. "... A beautiful potion. Does it taste bitter?"

"It will be somewhat bitter but with a more prominent herbal aroma. I've also added honey to mask the bitterness," Heidi explained. "It won't be difficult to swallow."

As she spoke, she glanced at the sky outside the window.

The sun was slowly setting, casting a slightly orange-red light through the glass window into the living room.

This was Captain Lawrence's home away from the White Oak. As an experienced old captain, he had arranged numerous displays in the living room that showcased his sailing adventures: coral specimens gathered from shallow waters near the shore, models of ship's wheels and ships, totem decorations from far-flung city-states, and a large shelf against the wall filled with awards and mementos from the Explorers Association, city-state authorities, and the four major churches.

Now, these emblems of glory and memory were bathed in the slanting sunlight, covered in a golden hue, and gradually fading in the radiance.

It was time to depart, as the setting sun was not conducive to continuing psychological assistance.

"I should be going," Heidi sighed softly as she stood from the sofa, her eyes resting on the medicine bottle in Lawrence's hand, "Please remember to take the medicine – it can effectively help you withstand the mental strain of the Boundless Sea."

"Thank you, you've already been a great help," the white-haired Lawrence also rose, wearing a genuine smile, "Allow me to walk you out."

Heidi was escorted to the door by the old captain, but before leaving, she couldn't resist taking one last look at Lawrence and said, "I have one final piece of advice – although your current condition is still considered favorable among captains your age, you have truly reached the age of retirement, and you should think about entrusting the White Oak to a reliable successor."

Having expressed her thoughts, she didn't anticipate a response from the old captain and instead politely bowed in farewell. Heidi soon got into her car that was parked at the intersection, leaving Lawrence to sigh and return

to his living room. Here, the old captain's wife stood nearby, leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed and looking somewhat displeased.

She was a very tall woman, and although age had caught up with her, one could still see remnants of her youthful elegance; standing there, she resembled the famed female explorer on the Boundless Sea from years past.

But now, the explorer's mood was less than stellar.

"Day after day, if it's not a church review, it's a mental health physician visiting. Just what kind of trouble did you find out there?" she glared, her voice raised, "And what's with that medicine bottle – you never mentioned that your mental state had declined to the point where you need medication to maintain it."

"I didn't ask to encounter that ghost ship," Lawrence glanced at the medicine bottle in his hand and shook his head helplessly, "But now it's fine; the entire city-state has faced the Vanished, so no one cares about what happened to the White Oak. As for this medicine... it's nothing; after all, being at sea for extended periods, one might occasionally experience hallucinations and illusions."

His wife didn't join the conversation; she simply stared intently at him for a while before sighing, "Aren't you planning to retire?"

"I want to keep searching..." Lawrence said with some hesitation, "After all... there was no definitive news of death back then..."

"You're going to die doing this!" his wife's voice escalated, pointing at Lawrence's nose, "What do you think amounts to death? After a storm, if a ship veers off course and its crew loses contact, that's the same as death! Do you understand?"

"You look at yourself; how many years have you spent searching? You've long surpassed the retirement age, and those captains who started with you, the sensible ones, have already retired. At least now they can enjoy the savings they've accumulated over half their lives. Those who lack sense are

stubborn like you, and what's become of them now? Drooling in bed? Lying in the graveyard? Locked up in a madhouse?"

"I suggest you take this medicine now, then go straight to handle the transfer tomorrow. Pass the White Oak on to a trustworthy person you've mentored from a young age, and honestly go home and live out the rest of your days on a pension. Don't wait until one day you die in some storm. I can't bear that burden..."

Listening to his wife's increasingly stern reprimands, Lawrence just smiled mildly without arguing. In the end, he placed the small brown medicine bottle on the tea table: "Let's search one last time."

His wife finally stopped, staring at the medicine bottle on the tea table. After an unknown amount of time, she sighed with lingering anger and muttered as if resigned: "Where are you going to search this time?"

"North," Lawrence said calmly, "the original place where the 'Black Oak' encountered the storm. I just accepted an escort mission to Frost..."

His wife didn't say anything, she just silently waved her hand.

...

The morning sun spread across the streets, and Pland was gradually awakening from a night of deep slumber.

Vanna bent down and stepped out of the car, squinting slightly in the sunlight. At the end of her sight was the familiar sign of the antique shop she had visited once.

The shop was already open. A thin, black-haired, black-skirted girl was sprinkling water at the door, and another girl of similar age was hanging the "open for business" sign on the door.

If she remembered correctly, the two girls were named Shirley and Nina—the latter being the shop owner's niece.

Vanna rubbed her forehead, recalling the last time she visited the antique shop. For some reason, she felt that some details were quite hazy when she remembered them now.

This only reinforced her determination to take a look today.

The voice of her subordinate came from the car: “How long will you be away?”

“Within an hour,” Vanna replied. “Just wait here.”

“Alright,” the young guard responsible for driving nodded in the car but still reminded her worriedly, “Please be mindful of the time. Today is the day the Grand Storm Cathedral arrives in Pland. You need to personally attend the welcoming ceremony. Bishop Valentine specifically reminded us. Also, this visit wasn’t in our schedule...”

“Alright, alright, you’ve already nagged about it several times,” Vanna waved her hand, looking somewhat helpless. “I know everyone is on edge about the Grand Storm Cathedral’s arrival; I will pay attention to the time.”

“...Okay, I’ll wait here for you.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 273

Chapter 273 “Amulets”

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Shirley, who had just finished watering the barren ground in front of the shop and held an empty basin, was momentarily startled by the looming shadow blocking the sunlight.

“Holy crap!” She exclaimed involuntarily but quickly caught herself. Coughing twice, she nervously attempted to gather her thoughts after recognizing the inquisitor. “Um, you... you...”

Vanna’s brow furrowed slightly. For some reason, she felt that this petite, fragile girl seemed overly anxious in her presence. This was true when she and Heidi had previously visited the antique shop, and it remained so now.

Regardless, Vanna didn’t dwell on it, as she was already quite used to others reacting nervously when meeting her for various reasons.

“I remember you’re Shirley,” Vanna said with a smile, attempting to ease the short girl’s tension. “Don’t be so nervous; I’m just here to browse.”

Shirley straightened up quickly and nodded rigidly, “Uh... right! Welcome...”

Vanna shook her head, walked past the tense Shirley, and nodded to Nina as a greeting before heading straight for the antique shop.

The crisp sound of the bell shattered the silence on the shop’s first floor as she opened the door. Vanna entered, her gaze focused on the figure behind the counter.

The next moment, her eyebrows lifted in surprise at the occupant. A blonde woman was sitting behind the counter, and the individual had a stunning and mysterious air under the morning sunlight. In fact, it's the type of elegance that's not suited for this era.

"Ah, welcome, feel free to look around." The blonde gave a faint smile and greeted her after noticing the noise from the entrance.

Vanna paused, momentarily stunned by the surreal reception. For some reason, she got this sensation that the other person shouldn't be working here and should be some noble lady in high society. But then again, the shop was filled with all sorts of seemingly ancient and enigmatic items, so having a lady with a mysterious and elegant aura behind the counter seemed fitting in that angle.

But all the items in this antique shop were fakes...

"Excuse me..." Alice, somewhat puzzled, looked at the customer, who had entered and abruptly stopped to stare blankly. The situation seemed to deviate from the usual "standard guest reception process" the captain had mentioned, leaving her uncertain of how to proceed. "Is there something you'd like to buy?"

Vanna snapped back to reality over that call, and a chaotic numbness and dizziness filled her mind, disjointing her thoughts in the process. She vaguely recalled seeing or thinking of something moments ago, but the sudden confusion completely obscured everything she had seen and understood in that instant.

Moments later, gentle ocean waves echoed in her mind, and amid these waves, she entirely forgot the prior chaos, numbness, and dizziness.

It felt like she had just entered the store, and the young woman behind the counter was speaking to her.

"Ah, is Mr. Duncan not here?" Vanna looked around the first floor curiously, unable to find the antique shop owner's figure, "I know him."

“Mr. Duncan? He went upstairs to put something away and will be back soon,” Alice disregarded Vanna’s previous distraction, thinking everything was fine as long as the conversation continued, “Do you want to buy something? Do you have a reservation for an item? I can help you search for it, although I might not be able to find it...”

Such a candid statement.

Vanna sensed something peculiar, instinctively feeling that the beautiful young woman before her seemed slightly out of place. But each time she tried to concentrate on the issue, she immediately forgot her thoughts, making her speech slower than usual: “I... am just browsing. I’ll wait for a moment. Excuse me... Are you new here? I didn’t see you when I came last time.”

“Ah, I’m new here, my name is Alice,” Alice promptly said with a smile, enjoying introducing herself to others, “Mr. Duncan asked me to help watch the store.”

Vaguely, Vanna seemed to detect something unusual, concealed within Alice’s restrained yet somewhat rigid movements, within her flawless yet overly perfect smile, and even within her breathless speech.

The inquisitor frowned but didn’t genuinely notice anything out of the ordinary.

It was just a new shop assistant, nothing abnormal.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the nearby staircase, interrupting Vanna and Alice’s conversation.

Duncan had appeared on the stairs.

Earlier, he had sensed Vanna’s presence but deliberately waited a few more minutes on the second floor to confirm the inquisitor’s intentions. When he realized she didn’t have any specific purpose, he descended.

“We have a special guest,” Duncan said to the puppet lady behind the counter, “I’ll take over from here since she’s an acquaintance. Alice, go make some tea.”

“Alright, Mr. Duncan!” Alice happily stood up and, after agreeing, walked toward the small stove on the other side of the stairs.

Duncan approached Vanna, smiling and greeting the inquisitor he had seen several times before: “It’s been a long time, Miss Inquisitor.”

“Just call me by my name,” Vanna rubbed her forehead, “Sorry for the sudden visit; actually, I have some questions I wanted to clarify.”

“Questions?” Duncan raised an eyebrow, “What questions?”

Vanna collected herself, contemplating how to begin.

Vague hints pointed to this unremarkable shop, and some intuitive guidance led her here. The inquisitor’s experience and instincts seemed to subtly pulse. However, previous official investigations by the church found no anomalies. The only reason that could justify her investigation this time appeared to be her friend’s “amulet.”

“As far as I know, Heidi had an amulet from here,” Vanna said slowly, “Before the reality pollution disaster, she always wore it.”

“Oh, I remember that,” Duncan nodded with a neutral expression and a slightly enlightened look, “I gave that amulet to Mr. Morris, and I’ve given out another one recently.”

As he spoke, he turned and took another amulet from the shelf behind him, presenting it to Vanna.

“It’s this kind.”

Vanna looked curiously at the antique shop owner who casually treated the store’s “collection” as mass-produced goods: “Do you have many of these amulets?”

“I have a whole box of them, and so far, I’ve given away or sold a total of twenty-one,” Duncan nodded earnestly, “Are you interested?”

While speaking, he unconsciously glanced at the young inquisitor.

Vanna seemed peculiar to him today, appearing somewhat dazed, her speech slightly sluggish. But beyond these visible abnormalities, even stranger was her unstable “aura” at the moment.

Duncan couldn’t quite pinpoint it, but the feeling the young inquisitor gave him now... it was as if there was another person hidden in her thoughts, another pair of eyes concealed within her gaze. She was conversing with him here, but it seemed as if something else was buried deep within her consciousness.

Vanna seemed not to notice Duncan’s scrutiny. She was just a little unaccustomed to his candid business approach – although she knew from the beginning that there was nothing authentic in the store: “Um... no, I’m just here to investigate some situations. I want to ask about the specific source of these amulets and whether they have exhibited any special characteristics, or if the people who bought them have reported any unusual circumstances?”

“You mean...”

“Heidi believes that the amulet she wore at the time had a genuine protective effect, even helping her maintain her consciousness during the initial ‘disaster’,” Vanna explained briefly, without delving into too much detail. “I think the amulet you gave to Mr. Morris may have been influenced by... supernatural powers, so I came to investigate. Of course, you don’t need to be nervous; as far as the current information is concerned, this is not a negative influence.”

She may say this, but there was one more thing she didn’t mention: while she was here to investigate, she hadn’t expected Duncan to have an entire box of similar amulets and had already sold so many!

Duncan was slightly taken aback upon hearing Vanna’s words.

Did that thing... really have an effect? The “gift” he casually gave away actually protected the self-consciousness of the psychiatrist?

Why did this happen?

What was the key?

Was it the act of “giving the gift” itself, or was it because the psychiatrist’s “inspiration” was too powerful?

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 274

Chapter 274 “A Pleasant Meeting”

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At that moment, Duncan quickly recalled all the similar amulets he had recently sold. After some consideration, he finally sighed with relief.

As far as he could recall, the only special amulets he had given away were the two he had gifted to Morris. The rest were ordinary items, and after such a long time, no amulet purchasers had reported any unusual occurrences.

With a sigh of relief, Duncan couldn’t help but become lost in thought.

Although the reason for the amulet’s transformation remained unclear, Vanna’s information undoubtedly served as a wake-up call, heightening his awareness and mental readiness for any “strange phenomena” that might transpire around him.

In the future, it seemed he couldn’t casually give things away or make promises without careful consideration.

Duncan’s momentary silence captured Vanna’s attention, and she looked at him curiously, “Did you remember something?”

“After thoroughly reflecting on recent events, nothing appears to be out of the ordinary,” Duncan shook his head, speaking sincerely and calmly, “Could Heidi have been mistaken?”

“It’s unlikely. She’s an experienced psychiatrist with some knowledge of the supernatural field, and she’s well aware of her mental state,” Vanna

shook her head, “But the issue with the amulet might indeed be something else... Maybe it’s just an extraordinary item mixed in with ordinary products, or perhaps something happened during the production process...”

As Vanna spoke slowly, it seemed as if she was not explaining to Duncan but instead hypnotizing and persuading herself.

As an inquisitor, she should maintain her vigilance against potential supernatural events, but her focus eventually shifted away from the amulet as gentle waves resonated within her mind. The sound brought relaxation to her mind, causing the lady to gradually forget the initial purpose of this visit.

In this state, Vanna began to carefully observe the shop in silence as if she were in a stupor.

Shirley and Nina had both returned from the outside and were stocking the shelves by themselves.

The blonde woman named Alice was busy near the small stove and readying the tea.

Then there’s Mr. Duncan, who sat behind the counter, his face wearing a friendly smile.

Everything appeared so warm and cozy from the surface, with the kettle emitting a sharp whistle from the boil just then. However, the shadowy corners and the second floor gave off an eerie vibe of murmuring whispers. It’s not inviting, especially the second floor, which felt like a tunnel into some perilous realm.

“The tea is ready,” Alice’s voice came from the side as she brought a cup of hot tea to the counter and pushed it towards Vanna, “Please enjoy.”

Vanna silently picked up the teacup, took a sip, and then chewed on it before expressionlessly swallowing the piping-hot liquid and leaves.

Seeing this, Duncan was amazed—he had never witnessed anyone so composed while drinking Alice’s tea before. Miss Vanna was indeed an extraordinary woman, far beyond comparison to ordinary people.

After a while, realizing that Vanna was just observing and had no intention of speaking, Duncan finally couldn’t help but break the silence, “Is there anything else besides the amulet?”

“Ah, apologies, I got lost in thought for a bit,” Vanna suddenly snapped back to reality and then abruptly coughed violently as if choking on something. She frowned at the empty teacup in front of her and shook her head, “No, that’s all. I just came here to inquire about this matter.”

“If you’re interested in the amulet, I can give you one,” Duncan chuckled, pushing the amulet he had just taken down towards her, “You can examine it when you go back.”

Vanna looked at the “crystal” amulet before her with surprise, and after a moment asked, “How much?”

“Let me offer it to you. It’s not worth much anyway; I usually bundle it with other sales,” Duncan said with a half-smile, “Or should I create an impressive-sounding product description? Do you prefer the historical artifact version or the health and wellness version?”

Vanna was taken aback, “Are… all the items sold here like this?”

“Legitimate business,” Duncan spread his hands, “If it were for sale, the base price is eight sola, with a health and wellness narrative, sixteen, and with a historical account, twenty-two. For twenty-five, you can have a black walnut box—the box guarantees no fading for half a year, and I can also provide a receipt for two hundred.”

Vanna, who had grown up in the upper city and joined the church before adulthood, had never encountered anything like this before and appeared somewhat bewildered, “Two… two hundred for a receipt?”

“It’s suitable for gifting to colleagues,” Duncan said earnestly, “and also for young people to give to their partners...”

After considering it, Vanna shook her head, “I likely don’t need that—but I can’t just take your items for free.”

With that, she rummaged through her pockets and pulled out two ten-sola banknotes, placing them on the counter.

“The original price is eight sola—the rest is for your cooperation and the tea you served earlier.”

Duncan wanted to say more, but he saw Vanna had already stood up and picked up the crystal pendant.

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” she smiled slowly, then suddenly spoke with an unusually serious expression and tone, raising her hand and placing the crystal pendant around her neck, “I look forward to our next encounter.”

Duncan sensed something was amiss about her and subconsciously furrowed his brow, but ultimately, he didn’t say anything more, just nodded politely, “Alright then, you’re welcome back anytime.”

Vanna nodded lightly and turned to leave.

She walked directly through the shop, out the door, and stopped in the open area in front of the antique shop.

A series of “beeping” horn sounds suddenly came from the nearby roadside.

Vanna blinked and noticed the car parked by the road, remembered the Grand Storm Cathedral’s arrival in Pland today, and hurriedly walked over and got in.

“You finally came out,” the young subordinate waiting in the car said as he quickly started the car, “It’s been almost an hour and a half. I was thinking if you didn’t come out, I would go in...”

“An hour and a half?” Vanna was somewhat surprised, “I thought... it had only been forty minutes.”

As she spoke, she tapped her forehead lightly, feeling as if she had forgotten something and couldn’t help but mutter, “I left in such a hurry, I don’t think I said goodbye.”

“Next time will be the same, after all, the shop is right here,” the young subordinate casually remarked. Then, he noticed the crystal amulet around Vanna’s neck through the rearview mirror and couldn’t help but be surprised, “Is that a new pendant you bought? It’s unexpected, you usually don’t buy these things.”

“Pendant?” Vanna looked down at her chest in confusion and hesitated for a couple of seconds before speaking, “Ah, yes, I bought it...”

She shook her head, seemingly fully awake now.

“Enough about that. Hurry up and head straight to the port.”

...

Inside the antique shop, Shirley was the first to run to the counter. She looked back uneasily in the direction Vanna had just left and turned to Duncan, “Why did the inquisitor come here? Was she here to arrest me?”

“You’re overthinking it,” Duncan looked at the anxious girl with an expression of helplessness, “She came to investigate something else, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, as long as she’s not here to arrest me,” Shirley sighed in relief, but then couldn’t help but mutter, “She seemed strange today, her conversation was disjointed.”

“Maybe it is work pressure,” Duncan said casually, standing up from behind the counter, “After all, her boss is coming.”

Nina joined in at this point, and after hearing Duncan’s words, she quickly realized, “Boss... you mean the news on the newspapers earlier? The Grand

Storm Cathedral?”

Duncan nodded with a smile, his gaze sweeping over Nina, Shirley, and Alice before suddenly asking, “Are you interested?”

“Interested?” Shirley was startled for a moment, then looked astonished as she realized what he meant, “Wait, are you going to...?”

“Today, there won’t be much business anyway. Most people will either go to the church for Mass or the port to visit. We’ll just be idling in the shop,” Duncan said matter-of-factly, “Let’s go see the grand arrival of the Grand Storm Cathedral. It’s not something you can witness every year.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Nina was already jumping with joy, “Great!”

Alice, on the other hand, didn’t know what was going on but seeing Nina so excited, she began clapping along. Only Shirley looked as if she had seen a ghost, “But... but... that’s the Grand Storm Cathedral! If we go there, won’t we...?”

Duncan looked at her with a half-smile, “Won’t what?”

Shirley looked up at Duncan, thought for a moment, and then shook her head vigorously, “Nothing at all!”

Duncan nodded in satisfaction.

He then looked up, his gaze passing over the streets outside the door, over the city, and towards the port of Pland.

In his transcendent perception that covered the entire city-state, he could already sense a majestic... “presence” gradually approaching Pland.

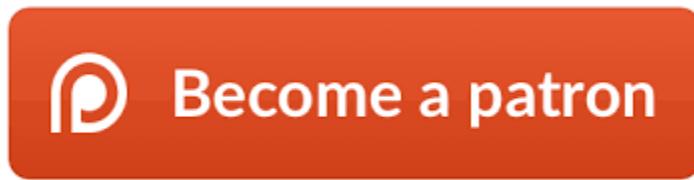
The Grand Storm Cathedral had arrived.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 275

Chapter 275 “The Grand Storm Cathedral”

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In Duncan’s view, an entity radiating an immense presence was gradually nearing the city-state of Pland.

In truth, his perception was unable to extend beyond Pland’s physical limits. However, as the entity with the immense presence continued to draw closer, he could still indirectly detect a kind of “radiance,” akin to a heat source or a brightly shining object, slowly becoming more distinct over the vast ocean.

A mere large ship would not evoke such a sensation, nor would a group of influential priests.

Duncan narrowed his eyes slightly, and the glowing and warm object progressively took form in the “darkness” beyond the city-state of Pland.

“Could what it emitted be... the so-called power of the gods?”

Moments later, a green flame suddenly sprang up from a second-floor window of an antique shop, and a plump white dove emerged, swiftly traversing the sky.

...

By now, a massive throng had assembled both within and around the southeast port of Pland.

The Grand Storm Cathedral, which patrolled the seas year-round and seldom docked, was set to anchor in the city-state. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event for any follower of the storm goddess Gomona. Whether it was to display their devotion or merely to marvel at the grandeur of the Grand Storm Cathedral, the citizens of Pland were determined not to miss this monumental occasion. Starting at sunrise, when the curfew had just lifted, residents living near the port began congregating, and by nearly noon, virtually all the available vantage points around the port were occupied.

Subsequently, traffic control was implemented near the port. The city hall no longer permitted additional spectators to approach the harbor from that point forward, collaborating with the church to disperse the crowd to various sanctuaries because numerous masses would be conducted concurrently in various churches when the Grand Storm Cathedral docked. This ceremony served not only to “welcome the glory of the goddess” but also to alleviate congestion in the port area and redirect the faithful.

Beyond the layers of the crowd, the inner section of the port area was temporarily designated as the “ceremonial area” by the church’s guardians and the city-state’s security officers. The local church hierarchy and Pland’s senior officials gathered here, already prepared to greet the Grand Storm Cathedral.

Vanna hurried along and ultimately reached the port just in time.

“You almost arrived late,” Admin Dante, waiting at the port to greet them, glanced at his niece who had hurried over, a trace of helplessness in his one eye. “On such a significant day, you, as an inquisitor, were the last to arrive.”

“There was a minor accident,” even in front of her uncle, an inquisitor could feel somewhat inadequate, Vanna’s face displaying mild embarrassment. “I had planned my time well and would have arrived at least half an hour early...”

“The goddess will forgive,” spoke Archbishop Valentine, the elderly man dressed in full regalia, holding the staff symbolizing the city’s bishop, a

faint smile on his face. “There’s still some time before the scheduled moment.”

Vanna nodded, took a deep breath, and surveyed her surroundings.

The area surrounding the pier was open and expansive, with guardians and security officers having cordoned off a sizable “ceremonial area.” However, beyond this open space, one could see countless spectators in the distance, their heads bobbing in a sea of people.

Nearly three-quarters of Pland’s entire population were baptized followers of the Storm Church, and the remaining quarter, even if not baptized, still maintained a shallow faith in the Storm Goddess Gomona under the city’s influence. This city-state was the largest gathering place for deep-sea believers in the vast ocean, and the grand spectacle at this moment powerfully demonstrated this fact.

“The arrival of the Grand Storm Cathedral can actually help us resolve numerous issues,” Dante’s voice reached Vanna’s ears. “With this grand event, the unstable atmosphere in the city-state can be quickly pacified, and news about the ‘visions’ can be disseminated more smoothly. To be honest... I am truly relieved.”

“For believers, being ‘under the gaze of the gods’ is a more effective comfort than anything else,” replied Archbishop Valentine. “With the protection and witnessing of the goddess, we can display the greatest unity and resilience, and we can calmly accept all kinds of extreme situations, including the ‘city-state becoming a vision.’”

“The arrival of the Grand Storm Cathedral may be to aid us through this challenging time,” said Dante, “although Her Holiness did not explicitly mention it.”

“Her Holiness has her own reasons – not to mention that the information she shares with the outside world is guided by the gods...”

As her uncle and the elderly archbishop conversed, Vanna’s attention gradually shifted away from them. She gazed at the Boundless Sea in the

distance, waiting for the towering cathedral to appear in her line of sight.

The appointed time was almost upon them, but there was no indication of the astonishing colossal ship on the serene sea.

However, in the next moment, the corner of Vanna's eye suddenly caught a glimpse of the distorted scene on the sea's surface.

The seawater swirled, the sky quivered, and the light reflecting on the sea abruptly rippled, transforming into layers of cloud-like curtains. A massive structure nearly the size of the entire port area suddenly materialized on the sea's surface as if it had directly traversed dimensions to appear in Vanna's field of vision!

It had not yet fully manifested, still exhibiting a faint, illusory quality at this moment. However, the overwhelming presence had already swept over, leaving the soul stunned.

Despite being the city-state's inquisitor, this was Vanna's first time witnessing this ark-like giant ship with her own eyes.

In an instant, emotions of excitement, joy, and admiration welled up within her.

She subconsciously held her breath, then glanced to her side.

The high-ranking officials of the city hall eagerly awaited the arrival, and Archbishop Valentine and her uncle stared intently into the distance with wide eyes.

Was it the immense astonishment and awe that made them momentarily forget to make a sound? She didn't know, nor could she ask.

After another two or three seconds, Archbishop Valentine's eyes lit up. He raised his staff high and forcefully struck it down, the sound of the staff's end hitting the ground echoing like a thunderclap throughout the entire dock square.

"Praise the name of the Storm!"

The high-ranking priests gathered near the pier echoed in unison, “Praise the name of the Storm!”

The salute cannons boomed, followed by majestic music, and cheers thundered throughout the harbor, creating a fervent atmosphere wherever they were heard!

Vanna looked towards the sea beyond the harbor, noticing that the previously swirling seawater and the shimmering light had subsided. The majestic Grand Storm Cathedral had removed all of its camouflage and was slowly approaching the coast of Pland.

The gathered crowd was ecstatic.

Loud prayers and cheers filled the air – even the uninformed children in the crowd were excited. Along with the sound of the salute cannons and music, the noise was deafening.

On the roof of a tower near the wharf area, Duncan, who had stepped out from the flaming doorway, quietly observed the bustling celebration scene and the enormous cathedral ark, which was beyond the concept of a “ship,” making it difficult to comprehend how it could function.

Nina and Shirley were extremely excited at the side, debating the structure of the cathedral ark – the former basing her arguments on the mechanical knowledge she learned in school, while the latter fully utilized her imagination and unwavering confidence in her inventions.

Alice seemed a bit nervous, having never seen such a colossal moving object on the sea. When the steam pipes on the side of the cathedral ark suddenly released pressure and a loud steam whistle pierced the sky, she instinctively covered her head.

Duncan’s gaze moved slowly between the gathered crowd on the pier and the towering three-tiered spire of the cathedral ark. Then, closing his eyes and opening them to refocus his perception, he discovered countless gray phantom-like figures extending from the Grand Storm Cathedral like invisible tentacles or floating ribbons of smoke. These floating shadows

spread from every door, window, and mechanical crevice of the cathedral ark, enveloping half of Pland's sky like a rolling, dark cloud.

Unbeknownst to the crowds, the smoke swept over the people and buildings, gently brushing over the cheering heads like some enormous creature that had just entered this realm from the unknown.

"What are these shadows? What are these intangible tentacles emanating from the Grand Storm Cathedral?"

Duncan's eyes gradually became more serious as the immense question formed in his heart. He instinctively reached out towards the space beyond the platform as if trying to grasp one of the illusions.

At the same time, a gray, smoke-like phantom drifted over, slowly approaching his palm.

The smoke gathered slightly, wrapping around Duncan's fingers. In the next moment, he actually felt a faintly cool sensation, as if he had touched some tangible entity!

Then, the gray "tentacle" jolted and quickly withdrew, leaving only a cold, hollow touch behind.

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 276

Chapter 276 “Quick Judgment”

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The fleeting contact with the “smoke” quickly vanished.

Nonetheless, more smoke kept seeping from the Grand Storm Cathedral, wafting and twirling, occasionally amassing, then dissipating, resembling a dark cloud imperceptibly assembling above Pland and progressively enveloping a larger expanse, ultimately covering half of the city-state.

A lingering trace of coldness remained on Duncan’s fingertips. He furrowed his brow slightly and peered at the sky above the city, his thoughts consumed by uncertainty.

The gray-white fog evoked a sensation... as though a colossal creature had lost its shape, its essence ascending and dispersing within the real dimension, morphing into this unrestrained form. It was as if something behind the real dimension was gradually extending its awareness, utilizing the fog as tendrils, “sensing” the outline of the real world.

This second sensation was particularly pronounced when he made contact with the strand of smoke.

“Uncle Duncan?” Nina’s voice abruptly sounded from beside him, interrupting Duncan’s daydream. “Why is your hand out?”

“...Nothing.” Duncan blinked and murmured.

It seemed that Nina couldn’t see the smoke nor Shirley and Alice next to her, or the common people gathered inside and outside the dock.

But could those in the Grand Storm Cathedral perceive it? Could the female Pope, who sat within the cathedral and was considered the “Storm Goddess Gomona’s” mortal emissary, see it?

Silently, Duncan observed the magnificent “Ark,” almost as vast as the entire port area, as it decelerated near the edge of Pland. He watched its side mechanism gradually transform, extending a lengthy mechanical bridge like an elongating appendage, connecting it to the dock.

The indistinct and unseen smoke had evidently expanded during this procedure.

Feeling no hostility or threat from the fog, Duncan refrained from taking any action for now.

...

Adhering to ceremonial protocol, after firing a salute and playing music at Pland’s port to greet the Grand Storm Cathedral, a long mechanical bridge was extended, linking the pilgrimage ark to the city-state. Subsequently, a second solemn and harmonious steam whistle resounded from the ark.

The massive steam valves revolved open, and pressure relief pipes and steam whistle apparatuses all around the pilgrimage ark were activated concurrently. White plumes of vapor erupted from the cathedral’s walls and spires, soaring into the sky amid the steam whistle noises. This signaled the clock towers of both the city-state and the cathedrals to ring in unison.

Vanna inhaled deeply—standing in such a solemn and dignified location, even as an inquisitor, she couldn’t help but feel slightly apprehensive.

Moments later, she spotted several colorful flags emerging at the edge of the cathedral ark. A contingent of knights in bespoke armor then appeared on the long mechanical bridge. They rode steam-powered walking machines and reached the dock. One of them advanced and approached the high-ranking priests.

“Bishop Valentine, Inquisitor Vanna, may the glory of the Storm Ruler be with you.”

The knight commander bowed his head. He donned black alloy armor, and the arrangement of the boost pipes and steam valves was visible on his breastplate and armguards. A sturdy steel mask hid the knight’s true visage, and Vanna could only discern the dim red glow in his goggles and hear the air hissing, mingling with his voice.

Steam represented the breath of the gods, while steel served as the bridge connecting humanity and the divine. Beneath the face armor, the holy air hissed as though preaching in the knight’s speech.

“May the glory of the Storm Ruler be with you,” Vanna bowed her head back and said with Bishop Valentine standing beside her.

“The Pope invites you both to board the Ark,” the Knight Commander of the Inquisition declared amidst the air’s hissing, “Everyone else, please wait for a moment.”

Vanna raised her head in surprise and instinctively glanced at Bishop Valentine, only to find him looking equally perplexed.

Unsure if this was part of the ceremony, the Knight Commander clarified, noticing the confusion of the two high-ranking priests, “This is the Pope’s provisional arrangement. She has some matters she wishes to discuss with you.”

“We shall adhere to the Pope’s plan,” Bishop Valentine promptly hid his bewilderment and bowed his head respectfully.

Vanna, standing next to him, also swiftly recovered and bowed her head to demonstrate compliance.

“Please ask the priests and city officials to wait for a while, or they can rest on the side,” the Knight Commander addressed Dante and others, nodding slightly. “Don’t worry, you won’t wait too long.”

Vanna and Bishop Valentine proceeded onto the mechanical bridge leading to the Grand Storm Cathedral. The imposing cathedral drew nearer in her view, emanating an increasingly awe-inspiring, even somewhat oppressive, aura of authority.

Just by nearing it, Vanna felt her heart race.

Bishop Valentine noticed Vanna's hesitant steps as they walked together. The elderly man gently shook his head, "Relax, this isn't your first encounter with the Pope."

"...Yes, I understand."

Guided by a group of Inquisition knights, Vanna and Valentine traversed the lengthy bridge, strode across the dock-like expansive connecting platform, and ultimately were led into a massive elevator.

Vanna assumed the elevator would transport her to an upper level of the Ark Cathedral, but instead, she felt the entire car descending.

The sinking persisted for an extended period, long enough for Vanna to begin doubting whether the elevator was plunging directly into the ocean before the steel cables' creaking noises finally ceased, opening the door in the next.

The Inquisition knight's voice emerged from the side: "Please proceed on your own – the Pope awaits you ahead."

Slightly bewildered, Vanna followed Valentine out of the elevator, hearing the gate behind them shut with a grinding sound. They gazed ahead and noticed an area almost entirely engulfed in darkness.

They could barely discern a figure garbed in extravagant robes standing in the dimly lit chamber.

Vanna hesitated for a moment before advancing.

As she did, the soft sound of a flame igniting abruptly shattered the silence in the shadowy space.

In rapid succession, several fire basins were kindled one after another. The sudden illumination banished the darkness near the elevator, enabling Vanna to spot Pope Helena standing not far away. To Vanna's amazement, the light also revealed that the space was far larger than she had initially perceived.

Vanna could not see the end of this "room" despite the illumination from the basins; she could only observe the gray-black, slightly rough ground extending before her eyes, reaching all the way to the edge of the darkness. Around the periphery of the brazier's light, she could vaguely make out some massive "pillars" and numerous intersecting shadows connecting them, resembling either the pipe system at the bottom of a church ark or a support structure.

Was this the lower hold of the pilgrimage ark?

Why would the Pope receive her and Bishop Valentine here?

Questions surfaced in Vanna's mind, but before she could speak, a gentle yet authoritative voice from the front said, "You have arrived—Saint Valentine and Saint Vanna. Welcome to the Ark."

"Your Holiness," Vanna quickly stifled her doubts and, after adjusting her expression, paid her respects alongside Bishop Valentine. After the ceremony, she cautiously inquired, "You summoned us here because..."

However, Helena interrupted Vanna with a somewhat enigmatic question: "Do you know where this is?"

"Isn't this the Grand Storm Cathedral?" Valentine looked up, his eyes blinking in confusion, "The bottom of the Grand Storm Cathedral?"

"This is indeed directly beneath the Grand Storm Cathedral, but strictly speaking, this place has already left the main body of the cathedral," Helena revealed a slight smile. Under the reflection of several braziers, her smile seemed to conceal a deeper meaning, "You are standing on the lowest level of the pilgrimage ark, the 'belly' of this behemoth."

She looked up, her gaze slowly shifting between Vanna and Valentine.

“Here, under the watchful eye of the Storm Lord and also closest to the deep sea, the blessings and judgment of the Lord coexist.”

Helena’s gaze settled, but she was not looking at Vanna or Valentine. Instead, it was as if she was addressing the void in the darkness.

“Has it become more challenging to continue fulfilling your duties after your faith has wavered?”

Vanna and Valentine both froze over that question.

An unbearable oppressive atmosphere enveloped this vast, dim space for the next while. Eventually, it was Vanna who broke the silence after taking a deep breath. “My faith...”

“I didn’t inquire about your faith,” Helena shook her head, “I asked if, after your faith has wavered, continuing to fulfill your duties has become more difficult than before?”

Vanna hesitated momentarily, seemingly not comprehending the deeper meaning of Helena’s words. On the other hand, Bishop Valentine displayed a sudden realization after brief astonishment. He immediately responded: “I have always carried out my duties, protecting the city-state and guiding the believers with sincerity...”

“Very well, Saint Valentine, your steadfastness moves me—you should continue to fulfill your duties as the protector of the city-state of Pland until the end.

“Saint Vanna, I see your confusion, and considering your situation, I have no choice but to announce the temporary suspension of your duties as the inquisitor of Pland.

“This decision is effective immediately.” Helena spoke rapidly, finishing before Vanna and Valentine could react.

The two saints exchanged puzzled glances.

Valentine: "...?"

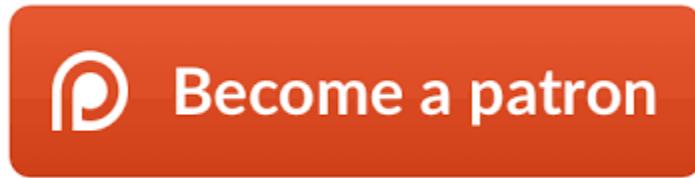
Vanna: "...?"

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 277

Chapter 277 “A New Storm”

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Both Vanna and Valentine were taken aback by the unexpected turn of events. Pope Helena’s “judgment” seemed less like a solemn religious decree and more like a calculated step towards a predetermined outcome—the conversation they just had appeared to be nothing more than a formality.

Vanna, the inquisitor, found it hard to accept the hasty “judgment,” and Valentine was struggling with it as well. They both began, “Your Holiness...”

“It’s alright, it’s alright. There’s no issue. Life is full of ups and downs, much like storms being the most unpredictable forces,” Helena waved her hand, interrupting Vanna and Valentine. “And don’t succumb to despair too easily, Saint Vanna—being relieved of your duties as an inquisitor is not necessarily a punishment. It’s simply that you’re not suited for this role right now. Maybe... the storm has other plans for you?”

Vanna hesitated, sensing a hidden meaning in Helena’s words. But before she could inquire further, she saw the Pope shake her head.

“That’s enough for now. I need to see some things for myself before I can make a decision,” Helena said nonchalantly. “Pland... it’s been many years since I last set foot on this land.”

She paused briefly.

“You two head back to the upper level first. The elevator is waiting. I will finish a prayer here. It won’t take long. We’ll meet on the upper deck.”

Before they could even make sense of what was happening, Vanna and Valentine were “escorted” back into the elevator. It wasn’t until the elevator reached the top, exited the cabin, and walking down the corridor to the upper deck, that Valentine finally broke the silence in a whisper, “Vanna, how are you feeling now?”

He couldn’t think of a better way to ease the awkwardness.

Vanna stopped in her tracks.

Valentine took a step back.

“Are you seriously stepping back like that?”

“I’m afraid I am.”

“Still able to crack a joke, it seems you’re aware of the odd nature of this event,” Vanna shook her head, speaking softly. “Honestly, my first reaction was disbelief and difficulty accepting this hurried, careless ‘judgment,’ which felt more like a cruel joke than something that should come from the Pope. But as I reflected on Her Holiness’s words, I can’t help but think... she might have an ulterior motive.”

Taking a deep breath, she added, “I believe I should be patient and wait for the ‘storm’s favor’ the Pope mentioned.”

“Your composure and rational thinking truly surpass those of most people. Not many would be able to remain so calm after such an event suddenly befalls them,” Valentine moved forward again, speaking as they walked. “However, I’m more concerned about something else right now.”

Vanna furrowed her brow, “What else?”

“To replace an inquisitor, a new one must be appointed, and the Pope herself must ‘test’ and appoint someone to such an important position as a city-state inquisitor. You should be well aware of this process,” Valentine said slowly. “But Her Holiness didn’t mention this at all. This ‘necessary

matter' should have been announced at the same time, or even earlier, when the dismissal was made."

Vanna unconsciously furrowed her brow but remained silent for a moment. Valentine continued, "Furthermore, she chose to announce your dismissal in an unknown secret chamber. According to the doctrine, the Pope's secrets shared in the secret chamber must not be disclosed to others, no matter the content of the secret. This is a sort of 'safety code'."

Vanna had to concede that her younger self was not as well-versed in the Storm Codex as Bishop Valentine, a senior clergyman. She hadn't considered these crucial points at the time!

"Do you mean..."

"Your dismissal will remain unknown to anyone," Valentine said calmly, looking into Vanna's eyes, "and there won't be a new inquisitor to assume your responsibilities."

Vanna paused, furrowing her brow slightly, "Then how can I continue to carry out my duties in Pland?"

"I don't know," Valentine said softly. He looked up, gazing towards the corridor's exit. After a moment of contemplation, he continued, "But I suspect that you might not need to continue fulfilling your duties in Pland for much longer."

...

In the vast expanse, Pope Helena stood silently amidst the dim flames. After an indeterminable amount of time, she finally raised her head and gazed into the darkness ahead.

This was the bottom of the Pilgrimage Ark, an area rarely visited or even known to ordinary people. She referred to this place as "the belly of the beast," which, in a way, wasn't an inaccurate description.

Helena took a step forward, passing the blazing basins, and reached a spot previously untouched by the flames.

Flames spread with each of her steps, gradually illuminating the entire dark space and unveiling the previously hidden objects.

The intertwined structures on the ground, the massive tumor-like formations or nerve nodes suspended from the high dome, the nerve fibers and vascular pillars dangling from the dome, and the colossal, pale supports resembling skeletons.

Originally concealed in the darkness, these things were now exposed to Helena as the flames spread.

She finally halted in front of an enormous “pillar.”

This pillar was composed of a multitude of intricate, intertwined structures. Its surface was uneven, with numerous nerve channels and vascular systems wrapped around it like bas-relief. Deep within the nerve systems, one could barely discern the intricate metal wires and gleaming silver needles seemingly extending from above.

At the top of this pillar, on the dim dome, even more densely clustered hanging organs could be seen, their surfaces covered in grooves, resembling... a brain.

Helena stared at the pillar for an extended period before reaching out and gently touching the grooves formed by the nerve fibers.

“The Academy of Truth... truly remarkable technology,” she whispered in admiration, “Who would have thought that the deceased Leviathan could ‘resurrect’ in this manner...”

A deep rumble suddenly emerged from the pillar as her words trailed off. Then, a raspy, ancient voice resonated from an unknown structure, “First of all, I was never truly dead, and secondly, I don’t believe I’m ‘alive’ now either. Using life and death to describe the Leviathan is a rather imprecise way of speaking, young lady.”

“...I thought you were asleep.”

“I do sleep most of the time, but today you prayed to Queen Gomona with particular solemnity and brought a stranger here, so I thought I should be awake.”

Helena’s mouth seemed to twitch, “...Did you witness a satisfying scene then?”

“I think you’re being quite unkind,” the raspy, ancient voice replied, “She’s performed quite well, hasn’t she? No one in the comprehensive evaluations of the inquisitors from all the major city-states can surpass her, and you dismissed her just like that, not to mention the reason being wavering faith... We all know that as long as one can continue to perform their duties, this reason is the least important.”

“It’s the Storm Ruler’s arrangement,” Helena said indifferently.

The raspy, ancient voice hesitated noticeably before speaking again, “...Oh, well, then I have no objection.”

Helena shook her head helplessly, “I thought you’d at least inquire a little more.”

But this time, the raspy, ancient voice did not respond at all.

He had fallen asleep.

...

Cutting through the ocean waves with relative ease, the Sea Mist had mostly healed itself and had engaged its powers by creating a thin layer of fog around the ship.

At the moment, Tyrian stood at the bow gazing out over the open sea ahead.

For some reason, he felt an inexplicable sense of unease.

At first, he thought it was the aftermath of the “fatherly injury he suffered” at Pland. The pressure from the incident must’ve built up from the several encounters, but as he moved further away from that Pearl of the Sea, the unease only got worse and didn’t diminish in the slightest.

This irritated him.

It seemed as if something was about to happen, or... had already happened, and this matter was very likely related to him.

He trusted his intuition as a transcendent in this regard.

Tyrian took a deep breath, placed his hand on the railing in front of him, and frowned in thought.

Just then, as if to confirm his growing unease, hurried footsteps suddenly came from behind.

Tyrian turned abruptly and saw his First Mate Aiden approaching him.

The usually composed first mate wore a look of tension on his face.

Tyrian immediately furrowed his brow, “What happened?”

“Just now, the small chapel received a psychic message from the home port. There’s been an incident in the seas near Frost...”

“Near Frost?” Tyrian felt his heart skip a beat and asked, “What’s going on?”

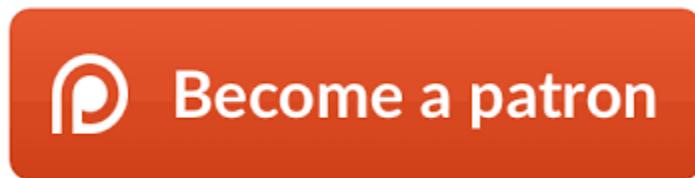
“...An ancient diving device suddenly appeared in the waters near Frost,” Aiden said, unable to help but take a breath, “It’s Submersible Number Three—the eighth one.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 278

Chapter 278 “Reasonable Arrangements”

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The night deepened gradually, and the frigid world's celestial body hung high in the night sky. Beneath its pale glow, the entire city-state fell silent as Duncan took in the scenery. He's currently standing on the second floor of the antique shop, quietly observing the streets and taking in the undulating rooftops of the neighborhood.

In the distance, he could also see the Vanished sailing across the vast, turbulent sea, heading north through the night as it followed in the Sea Mist's track.

From here, he watched everything using his all-encompassing “perception” to scan every corner of Pland. This included the invisible “smoke” floating overhead.

The “smoke” resembling “souls” released by the Grand Storm Cathedral had stopped expanding after nightfall and was now large enough to cover three-quarters of the city. It drifted gently in the night sky like a thin veil, as if leisurely strolling about for a walk...

Duncan withdrew his gaze then and focused on the massive shadow at the city's edge.

That was where the Grand Storm Cathedral had docked, and the pilgrimage ark clung to Pland's southeastern port. In Duncan's perception, he could clearly sense the outline of this massive structure, but that's all he could do – he couldn't penetrate into the cathedral's interior.

The cathedral's interior was like a vast, dark black hole to him.

Ordinary ships docked at the port couldn't block his perception – nothing could escape his “touch” within a close enough range of Pland, but now this cathedral seemed to be an exception.

Was it due to Goddess Gomona’s “protection” or the special protection technology of the Storm Church?

Duncan was curious but refrained from taking any excessive actions. He had indeed considered whether using his green fire could break the protection, but it was just a thought. After all, there was no need to set fire to someone's house just to satisfy his curiosity.

At that moment, Duncan suddenly felt something in his heart, quickly withdrew his perception, and looked up in the upper district's direction. Eventually, his gaze landed on the local cathedral at the highest peak.

...

In a brightly lit room at the top of the church's grounds, Pope Helena lit a ceremonial candle mixed with spices and placed the candlestick in front of a full-length mirror on the wall's corner. She then tilted her head slightly and looked at Vanna, who had been standing by her side for quite some time.

“I heard the first time you saw ‘him’ in your dreams, your initial reaction was a sacrificial leap – what were you thinking at that moment?”

Vanna's face revealed a hint of embarrassment: “At that time... I didn't think much.”

“When you say ‘didn't think much,’ it usually means ‘didn't think at all,’” Helena laughed, “Actually, that's good. Exceptional warriors often act faster than they think, which is very useful when fighting heretics and evil spirits – after all, ‘thinking’ itself can easily become our weakness.”

“...But I’m just relieved that my recklessness at the time didn’t lead to any consequences,” Vanna sighed helplessly, “In hindsight, he didn’t seem to care about my ‘offense’ at all.”

“He doesn’t care, they don’t care,” Helena whispered, “The higher beings are concerned with more expansive, long-term matters... The good news is that their concerns do include our survival, to some extent.”

Vanna didn’t respond for a while, so Helena looked at the former inquisitor with a half-smile: “Vanna, you must have many questions, right?”

“I want to know... your plans for me,” Vanna hesitated for a moment but spoke up, “You secretly relieved me of my inquisitor duties and didn’t assign a new city-state guardian. I’m somewhat at a loss and unsure how to fulfill my responsibilities next.”

Helena listened calmly, with no hint of surprise on her face. After Vanna finished speaking, the seemingly young Pope simply smiled and looked out the window.

Through the wrought iron-patterned window panes, one could see the peaceful and serene city streets illuminated by numerous gas lamps.

“A very calm night, Vanna,” the Pope said, “How many incidents of supernatural pollution or evil invasions do you think the night patrol guards will report today?”

Vanna paused, hesitating to answer: “I’m not sure... The city-state has indeed been safer lately, with few incident reports, but...”

“Zero,” the Pope interrupted her, “Tonight’s incidents are zero, just like yesterday and the day before, and it will be the same tomorrow.”

Vanna opened her mouth.

“You’ve clearly noticed this but haven’t dared to draw a conclusion yet?” Helena laughed, “A city with no longer dangerous nights, where shadows no longer breed even in the temporary darkness after the gas lamps go out.

The most dazzling pearl on the Boundless Sea now truly deserves its name.”

Vanna gradually began to understand: “You mean...”

“Vision-Pland,” Helena nodded gently, “It appears that within this large-scale Vision, no supernatural ‘pollution’ phenomena will occur other than ‘Vision-Pland’ itself.”

“Is this your observational conclusion?”

“Do you think I came here just to be ‘admired’ by the citizens in the streets and greeted by priests and officials in the cathedral?” Helena looked at Vanna with a half-smile, “I have my own ways of observing and assessing the changes that have occurred in this city-state.”

Vanna’s mouth hung open as if she had countless things to say but suddenly didn’t know where to begin. Chaotic thoughts filled her head, and she felt that the events happening now had once again surpassed her worldview. It took her a long time to blurt out: “So... Pland doesn’t need an inquisitor anymore?”

“I’m not sure,” Helena’s answer somewhat surprised Vanna. The Pope shook her head, seemingly uncertain, “Since this has never happened before, we can’t be sure. However, at least one thing is clear: as long as the nature of Vision-Pland remains unchanged, you indeed no longer need to work as you did before, and the duties of the city-state guardians will change significantly.”

At this point, Helena paused, then added thoughtfully, “Even so, the city-state still needs the protection of its guardians. I can only confirm that no ‘natural supernatural pollution phenomena’ will occur within Vision-Pland, but our threats are not limited to those phenomena. Heretics, ancient offspring heirs, evil creations, and fanatics who actively seek to destroy the civilized order won’t become law-abiding simply because Pland has become a Vision.

“But one thing is certain: Pland has become much safer.”

Helena stopped and looked calmly into Vanna's eyes for a few seconds before continuing softly, "Vanna, we are on a very new path; no city-state or church has ever faced a situation like this.

"On the other hand, our world... seems to be experiencing some unsettling changes. Whether it's Vision 001's 'failure' or the activities of the Vanished, they are breaking the fragile balance that the city-states have maintained for thousands of years. In this situation, the Goddess has provided only limited revelations... I can only act upon these limited revelations.

"Vanna, you have great talent, and this talent should be utilized... somewhere more valuable. Pland is now in its safest state, but I presume you're not someone who indulges in comfort, are you?"

Hearing the Pope's words, Vanna instinctively straightened her body: "I am always ready to sacrifice everything for faith and righteousness!"

"Sacrifice everything?"

"Of course, sacrifice everything!"

"Never hesitate in doing anything?"

"As long as it's the will of the Goddess!"

"Even going to the Vanished?"

"Including going to..."

Vanna instinctively spoke loudly but choked on her words. After two seconds, she stared at the Pope in astonishment: "What... did you just say?"

"As I just said, our world is experiencing many unsettling changes, and among these changes, the Vanished is at least the only one that has shown the possibility of communication and goodwill," Helena said seriously. "We need to establish a stable communication channel with the master of the Vanished, preferably with some official nature. You can consider yourself

an envoy, or you can think of yourself as a ‘hostage’. Of course, I personally suggest you adopt the first explanation, but it’s up to you.”

Vanna listened in amazement, and it wasn’t until the Pope finished that she finally found an opportunity to speak: “But... but... is it reasonable? Going to the Vanished... is it the concept I understand? Is it possible?!”

Helena looked quietly at the somewhat flustered young “Inquisitor,” who had anticipated this reaction. After a while, she smiled and replied, “It’s reasonable.”

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Deep Sea Embers chapter 279

Chapter 279 “Agreement Reached”

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Pope Helena's attitude was calm throughout compared to Vanna's current helplessness. She had a smile on her face and even seemed a bit pleased.

However, Vanna couldn't be happy at all, nor could she be more “reasonable.”

“I think... this is too sudden,” the young inquisitor racked her brain, completely clueless as to why the topic had suddenly shifted in this strange direction, and was now trying her best to catch up with the rapid pace of the conversation. “I understand the need to establish communication with the Vanished, but I think it should be gradual. Besides, if it's just for communication, we already have channels for that, like Captain Duncan...”

“He visits you in dreams or talks to you through a mirror, right?” Helena gently interrupted Vanna, “I know, you mentioned it in your report.”

“But...”

“That's not enough,” Helena shook her head with a smile, “That's just ‘conversation’ – private talks between you and Captain Duncan. Such communication lacks both uniqueness and binding force. It's far from being an official channel between the Storm Church and the Vanished. Vanna, you should understand the difference.”

Vanna's lips moved a few times, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

She was now sure that this was not a joke, nor was it a whim of the “spokesperson of the gods” before her. From Helena’s attitude and gaze, Vanna sensed something well thought-out and... some feelings that she couldn’t understand for now.

After a while, she suddenly asked, “Is it the goddess’s will?”

“You can understand it that way – if it makes you feel better.”

“...I understand,” Vanna took a deep breath, finally calming herself down, and resumed her usual serious demeanor, bowing her head. “Then I will obey this arrangement.”

“Go and rest first,” Helena nodded gently, “There’s still a lot to do tomorrow.”

Vanna bowed again before leaving the room.

Watching the young inquisitor’s tall figure disappear outside the door, Helena took a long time before looking away. She suddenly laughed and shook her head helplessly, “This child... didn’t even ask me how I plan to send her to that ship, yet she’s trying to appear calm...”

A calm and dignified voice, mixed with the crackling of flames, spoke up, “I’m curious too, how do you plan to send her to the Vanished?”

In the corner of the room, in front of a full-length mirror, the flames on several candlesticks suddenly turned dark green. The dim firelight illuminated the mirror’s surface, which showed a dark and deep abyss where Duncan’s image emerged and silently stared at Helena.

The Pope didn’t turn around. Even though she heard Duncan’s voice behind her, she continued to gaze out the window, “Ah, I knew you were watching.”

“I had no choice, your plan was too loud, and the beads even hit me in the face.”

“... What are beads?”

“This is a subspace joke,” Duncan said seriously. After all this time, he had grown accustomed to occasionally fabricating stories while conversing with people, and observing their puzzled reactions was his greatest joy in the process. As for how the other party would make up for it afterward...

In any case, people in this world usually came up with their own explanations for what he said.

Helena wisely didn’t inquire further. She still didn’t turn around and concealed her emotional fluctuations, her tone remaining calm and gentle: “Although you probably don’t need it, I’ll introduce myself anyway – Helena, a humble servant of the Storm Goddess Gomona. It’s nice to talk to you.”

“Duncan Abnomar, captain of the Vanished,” Duncan replied casually, “I prefer honest communication, so let’s be open – what is your purpose, or rather, what does the Storm Church truly intend to do?”

“We are focused on maintaining the order of the civilized world and responding to all unsettling changes within it,” Helena answered indifferently, “You must have heard what I just said to Vanna. This world is undergoing some changes – in fact, the situation is far more serious than what I told her.

“Many shadows are approaching our reality; the anomaly of Vision 001 may only be the beginning. The Enders’ destructive actions in Pland may also be part of a larger conspiracy. Some city-states have reported disturbing news in the north, and at the border, the ‘curtain’ is becoming increasingly unstable. Within civilized territory, border collapses are happening more and more frequently. Among all these changes, the Vanished may be the only one with the hope of communicating through rational means.

“We hope to establish stable and effective communication with you. Just as you want to know the purpose of the Storm Church, we... also want to know about the Vanished. So, why not build a bridge?”

Duncan frowned, “So you confidently arranged for Vanna to be that bridge – it’s a good idea, but how do you know I’ll agree?”

“You care about her and have helped her before. From your intentions, you seem to be very interested in the current civilized world,” Helena said, “You’ve regained your reason and humanity, so you need to reconnect with the civilized world. In my opinion, Vanna is suitable for this role – or would you trust a ‘strange messenger’ randomly selected by the Storm Church?”

“... Indeed, Vanna is at least an ‘acquaintance’ of mine. From your perspective, sending her over can ensure the safety of the messenger to the greatest extent,” Duncan said slowly, “But even so, aren’t you really worried that sending Vanna to the Vanished would be like sending a lamb into the mouth of a tiger? Given the good reputation my ship and I have in the civilized world, if your actions were made public, it would seem more reasonable to be regarded as a bloody sacrifice.”

Helena was silent for a few seconds, finally slowly turning around to face the mirror with flickering green flames.

“So, this matter will not be made public. After all, apart from the people of Pland, most people in this world still can’t discuss the Vanished without changing their facial expressions. Vanna will become a secret envoy, and only the high-ranking members of the Storm Church, a few city-state governors – or those who need to know when circumstances require it – will be aware of this.”

Helena raised her gaze and stared at Duncan’s figure in the mirror.

The shimmering and distorted starlight filled her vision.

“As for the ‘lamb entering the tiger’s mouth’ you mentioned... I’m not worried.”

Indescribable flowing starlight surged on the mirror’s surface, as if trying to break free from the fragile glass, presenting a sense of swelling and writhing. Fine black cracks spread from the mirror’s edge, filling the entire

room, and a low, chaotic roar filled her mind. Within each roar, it seemed as if infinite knowledge from subspace was intertwined.

“I can hear your voice, and it’s full of calm rationality. I believe you have indeed regained your humanity, and this humanity is clear evidence that you stand in the camp of civilized order.”

The mirror seemed to transform into a vortex within her field of vision. From it, the starlight giant within the mirror had lost its form completely, and all Helena saw was endless starlight. The fragmented light and shadow exploded in her mind, but in the next moment, gentle waves echoed in her mind as a counter, reshaping her thoughts on the brink of disintegration.

“You are friendly and reliable. My deity has guided me, and I believe unconditionally in my deity. If she commands me to cooperate with you, I will do so.”

The writhing starlight in the mirror overflowed, a stream of light and shadow extended in the air, pulsating, slowly swaying in front of Helena as if observing prey or sniffing the scent in the room. The writhing starlight formed a light and shadow less than half a meter from Helena’s face, and within its tiny light points, countless eyes seemed to fill them.

Duncan carefully observed Helena’s expression through the mirror, trying to analyze her true intentions from the details of her words and actions. In the end, he found only calmness and honesty in her eyes.

After a long while, he looked away.

“Agreement reached. I’ll reserve a spot for Vanna on the Vanished, but in return, once on the ship, it means she becomes my crew member. She will follow strict rules, and her priority will even be higher than her status in the Storm Church. I hope you understand.”

He tried to speak formally and dignifiedly, making the matter seem official.

But in reality, he was overjoyed.

From a very early time, he had thought that Vanna was destined for the Vanished. He had been planning how to bring this high-ranking cleric onto the ship as a helper but had no suitable opportunity or reason. He never expected this chance to fall from the sky.

The Storm Church needed an official communication channel to understand the Vanished's intentions, which would alleviate their unease. The Vanished also needed a bridge to communicate with the Church's powers in the civilized world, which would aid Duncan in his future activities. This was a win-win situation.

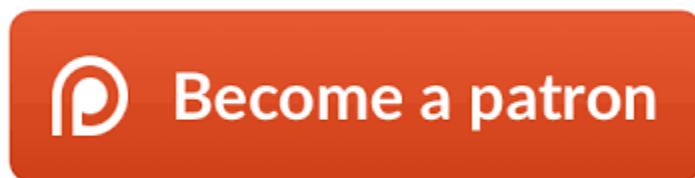
"I understand," Helena nodded slowly, "So, the agreement is reached."

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