The Pride of the Pirate King
by kayconn

Summary

In a world where the golden age of piracy is at its end, the once-proud Captain Kim Namjoon is content to drink away the proceeds of his ill-gotten gains. That is, until he discovers a stowaway aboard his ship, a mysterious courtesan with a secret and a pair of precious sapphire earrings…

The girl only came up to his shoulder, but she raised a single finger and put it under his chin, bringing his face towards hers. “I realise that it has been a while for you,” she said sweetly, “but you’re better off jumping ship. The sea, at least, would be wet.”

Cut-throat adventure, political intrigue, tempestuous romance and not one use of the word ‘swashbuckling’. Read on at your peril.
It was very much to his sorrow that Captain Kim Namjoon wasn’t drunk. The bright sunlight filtering through the cracks in the canopies overhead blinded him from one moment to the next as he passed through crowded alleys lined with begrimed market stalls. His vision went white, then dark, then white, then dark again, making his head ache. Despite the unattractiveness of the market, it was bustling with people, although using the word ‘people’ might be stretching the meaning. Rather, they were the outcasts of society, the flotsam and jetsam of civilised life. No one here was out for a leisurely stroll. The only people that came to this market were people with a purpose.

More for a pretext than any actual interest, Namjoon paused to look at a dented goblet that had caught his eye from of the many trestle tables. The gold might be dirty and scratched, but gold it most certainly was, and stamped with the Emperor of Japan’s sigil no less. The story of how it had escaped from the Emperor’s dining room and made its way to the market of Silmido was probably an interesting one, but not one Namjoon needed to hear. He could imagine it well enough - he lived that story every day of his life.

Without looking down, Namjoon flicked off a young boy who had been reaching for his wallet. Pickpockets were plenty here, and most young enough not to know who he was. The older ones, those who had heard of his exploits and recognised his face that was drawn on thousands of bounty posters across the seas, gave him a wide if admiring berth.

“Let’s move on,” Yoongi said impatiently from behind him. He was edgy here, as he was usually. The claustrophobic market of Silmido was no place to relax, even if you knew it like the back of your hand like Namjoon did. He often made stops on this dangerous, shabby island, the only place in Korea where you could buy anything and, more importantly, sell anything. It both stole from and fed into the glorious city of Seoul not twenty leagues away, the necessary cancer to the luxurious life lived by the wealthy and powerful.

Despite his confidence, Namjoon heeded Yoongi’s words and strode purposefully through the maze of market stalls and alleyways towards his destination. The sooner he concluded his business, the sooner he could go for a drink.

They arrived outside a decrepit shop whose only remarkable feature was the fact that its small glass windows were still intact. This was probably due to the presence of a large, scowling man stood outside, obviously ready to crack the head of anyone who might think to cause trouble. Ignoring the giant, Namjoon ducked inside the shop, followed swiftly by Yoongi.
Inside was no less cramped, the smell of dust and mould hanging heavy in the air. If the people outside were human debris, then the contents of this shop was their physical counterpart. Stained cloth, books with half the pages missing, shields with holes large enough to poke a fist through. Nothing of value, nothing worth the journey, it seemed.

But the seeming was part of it all, a charade in case the King’s justice came knocking. What was bought and sold in this shop was valuable enough to warrant a fake facade and dangerous enough to need a paid thug to guard it. Without hesitation, Namjoon went over to the wall where a cracked, gilded mirror was hanging and kicked the wall, hard.

“It’s me,” he said gruffly, and the wall swung inwards.

Beyond the mirror was a far more ordered room, but what it lacked in dirt was more than made up for with austerity. Rows and rows of glass vials filled with a clear liquid lined the dark stone walls, each with its own neatly written tag attached at the neck.

An old man stood behind a sleek, wooden counter, and behind him there were more vials, only these were far smaller, far fewer, and the liquid filling these was red.

“Captain,” the man said, bowing slowly. “How may I be of service?”

Namjoon waved Yoongi forwards, and Yoongi drew out a small glass bottle of his own, handing it over with great reluctance. The old man inspected it minutely, turning it into the light, uncorking it and giving it a sniff.

“Classification?” he asked.

“Class of Enhancement, physical division, as per usual,” Namjoon answered.

The man seemed disappointed. “But there is less than usual. Its source is not… ah… dried up?”

Yoongi glowered at the man, but he didn’t seem to notice it.

“No,” Namjoon answered shortly. “The source is fine.”
The man weighed the vial with a delicate-looking scale, then noted down its information in a ledger and placed it gently in a box behind him. Then, he counted out a considerable number of golden coins, which Namjoon gave to Yoongi to pocket.

“You wouldn’t be interested in sampling any such nectars yourself?” the man asked them. “I have just collected a nice little Enhancement myself, very fresh…”

He drew out a bottle, and Namjoon read “Accuracy” on the label. Smiling, he shook his head.

“Perhaps a taste of Stamina for yourself, good sir?” the man asked Yoongi, who did not take this offer well at all, scowling almost as if to make his face turn inside out.

“Just selling today, thank you Byungho,” Namjoon said calmly. He was almost tempted to ask about the little red vials, but with a shudder he turned away before the request could reach his mouth.

The man bowed them out of his shop, and Namjoon emerged out into the striped sunlight, his headache back in full force.

“What say you and I go for a drink?” Namjoon said to Yoongi. “Sangchul’s man doesn’t come until dusk.”

Yoongi shrugged, knowing that his Captain would end up at a tavern whatever his answer may be. They made their way back along the murky avenues without paying much attention to the wares on offer. Their role was to fill these stands, not empty them. In fact, there was an ornamental sword that Namjoon remembered handing over not too long ago. The face hovering near it wasn’t the same one that he’d sold the sword to, but no matter - when people spoke of trade being rough, when talking about Silmido, they meant it literally.

Nevertheless, they made it to a tavern without hassle. Namjoon found an uninhabited table in the corner while Yoongi went to get drinks. Although it was barely past midday, the tavern was fairly full, thugs and thieves and all manner of unsavoury types come to quench their thirst. And, of course, pirates.

Yoongi set down a tankard in front of Namjoon and he drank deep, savouring the bitter taste rushing down his throat. His headache began to lessen slightly in the cool murkiness of the tavern.
air. He and Yoongi didn’t speak, each drinking their ales, Yoongi slowly and Namjoon fast. Before long, his tankard was dry and he called over a barmaid to refill it.

“It’s a good thing you already negotiated the price with Sangchul,” Yoongi said, watching Namjoon make a start on his third round.

“It is,” Namjoon agreed. His headache was almost gone and the warmth of the ale was seeping out from his stomach in contrast with the lingering coolness in his mouth. Content to drink more slowly this time, he sat back and let the hum of conversation wash over him.

A group to his right were arguing loudly about the king’s assassination. One insisted that he had been poisoned by his own guard, and another argued that he had been stabbed by a prostitute during the very act for which he was paying her. Why else would the affair be so hush-hush?

“You’ve all got it wrong,” one of them declared. “Everyone knows that poisoning is a woman’s work. And why would a king eat with a whore?”

“Maybe it wasn’t with her that he was eating,” his companion suggested, and they all roared with laughter.

Another man, drunker than the rest, piped up. “I bet you it was the wizards.”

The first man snorted. “The guild of Mysticians couldn’t kill a squid if they had a knife in one hand and a skewer in the other.”

The second man leaned in. “Do you think… d’you think it was someone with a virtue?” he said in a hushed voice.

“Nah,” the first man said uneasily. “Virtue carriers is harmless, I reckon.”

“They ain’t harmless,” the drunk man said loudly. “My old nan said they could transform into wolves and bears and things. Kill a man as a wolf and then transform back into a human with his mouth still dripping with blood.”
“That’s a werewolf, Yoochun, your old nan was talking out of her arse.”

“She weren’t!” Yoochun said hotly. “She said she knew one, in the woods near our village.”

“Yeah?” the first man said. “Well, I knew one meself, back in Busan. Ate loads, never put on any weight. Straight-up lass, could hold her ale even after us lads were drunk as donkeys.”

“Really? You never said, Minkyu.” the second man said, sounding interested. “What was her virtue?”

“Virtue of digestion,” Minkyu said, to the amusement of the whole table.

“We had someone like that in our village too,” the second man said. “Strongest guy I ever knew, could lift a hay bale like it was nothing. Real useful around harvest time, he was. Then the Sect came round, wanted him to come to the city to learn to be a priest. But he was happy where he was, he didn’t want to leave. Told them to shove their offer up their holy arses. Never good with words, he was.”

“Did they burn him?” Minkyu asked in a hushed voice.

“Nah,” the man said. “That was after they stopped burning people in public. But they said that he’d suddenly been struck with the holy desire and gone to the city to repent his sins as fast as he could. In the middle of the night? Without any goodbyes? I reckon they drank his blood.”

“That’s a lie.”

A man who had not yet spoken suddenly sat forward. His flagon was untouched before him, and yet his face was flushed as if he’d had one drink too many.

“Ah,” Minkyu said guiltily, “didn’t mean to offend you, Sungsoo. I know you like going to their rallies.”

“Conflagrations,” Sungsoo corrected him. He turned to the second man, the man who had dared to criticise the Sect of the Burning Sign. “That man refused to turn his God-given gift to the glory of God, and all those who are not for God are against him. I pray he learned piety at the city to which he was called.”
“There’s nothing pious about that city.” The words were out of Namjoon’s mouth before he could stop them, gliding off of his ale-slicked tongue. The men at the table looked round at him, and deciding that if he was going to get a beating, he may well as well have deserved it, Namjoon added “And the only thing he’ll learn there is how to take it real good up the arse.”

Sungsoo stood up so fast that his chair clattered to the floor behind him, followed by another man at the table and then, more slowly, the slightly swaying Yoochun.

“Say that again, heathen.” Sungsoo spat.

Namjoon stood up and the alcohol rushed to his head, making him grab onto the table for support. “I said, the only thing he’ll learn there is how to take it real good up the arse, if he doesn’t get his blood sucked right out of him but that bunch of vampires.”

Too late, he realised that the tavern had gone quiet, and that quite a few other men were rising from their chairs, pistols being loosened from holsters and knives emerging from sleeves.

“And on whose authority do you speak?” Sungsoo sneered. “Are you an equal to the God above, to look down on those who serve Him?”

“God of destruction, at your service.” Namjoon meant to sweep off his hat, but found that he did not in fact have one on his head. Instead, he turned it into a flamboyant bow. Beside him, he heard Yoongi groan quietly.

Namjoon heard a murmur go up from around the tavern, but no man moved to take his side. Perhaps he had lived beyond his reputation now. The once great God of Destruction, famed and feared in the Eastern Seas and beyond, was about to have his pantaloons handed to him in a hovel-themed tavern on the cruddiest island to have ever existed. Still, let it never be said that Captain Kim Namjoon shied away from a fight, especially one that he had started himself.

“The Pirate King,” Sungsoo said derisively. “You’re no god. And no King, either. Kings are chosen by God to wear the crown and no god would choose you. Where is your crown?”

“Why, it’s right here,” Namjoon answered, pointing at the top of his head.
No one in the tavern got the joke. Even Yoongi, used to his quips, looked blank. Namjoon sighed. “It’s called the crown of your head. Everyone has one.” Religious fanatics obviously didn’t share his sense of humour.

There was a sudden sound behind him and Namjoon turned, too slowly, in time to see Yoongi smash a bottle over the head of a man who had been trying to sneak up on him.

The sound of breaking glass seemed to galvanize the tavern into action. With a roar, Sungsoo leapt over the table brandishing a cutlass, which Namjoon dodged just in time. Drawing his own sword, he saw that they were hopelessly outnumbered. They seemed to have wandered into the only tavern on lawless Silmido that the members of the Sect frequented, or maybe religious fanaticism had become far more fashionable than he had realised.

Yoongi had drawn his own sword and they stood back to back, facing down the suddenly hostile clientele. Namjoon deflected a strike from Sungsoo and kicked him in the chest, knocking him backwards into the table and spilling the drinks that had been resting there. This had the effect of angering Minkyu and his group, who until then had been hesitating on whether or not to join in.

Blows rained down on him and Yoongi from all sides, but luckily only Sungsoo seemed to be armed with a blade. He and Yoongi were separated briefly by an assailant throwing a chair at them, under which Yoongi ducked and Namjoon had to dodge entirely. This gave Namjoon an idea, who picked it up and was now armed with sword in one hand and chair-shield in the other.

Yoongi, in the meantime, was kicking and stabbing viciously. “How about we get out of here?” he yelled, holding off several angry attackers. He ducked under a blow and rolled over a table, sword in hand, cutting several gashes in exposed body parts along the way.

“Not a terrible idea,” Namjoon yelled back at him, and together they fought their way to the door, which Yoochun was blocking with all the determination his ale-addled brain could muster. Namjoon didn’t bother with fancy tricks - he just barrelled straight into Yoochun, bringing both him and the door down and out onto the filthy street.

Yoochun was feebly stirring under him, but Namjoon didn’t wait around to check if he was okay - not that he cared. He leapt to his feet and followed Yoongi out into the crowded market place, dodging between angry shoppers and bemused sellers. He could hear the yells of Sungsoo and his followers behind him, and concentrated on keeping up with his first mate, who could be fast as heck when he wanted to. But however fast, Yoongi was, he didn’t know Silmido nearly as well as Namjoon did, and twice he had to yank him back from alleys which would have most certainly finished off what Sungsoo had started, albeit with less clothes.
Eventually, Namjoon and Yoongi made it down to the docks, their lungs on fire but mercifully not too scratched up. Behind them, the angry mob had somehow grown even larger, doubtless having attracted other religious fanatics, drunks or just people who liked a good brawl.

“Cast off!” Namjoon yelled as he leapt up the gangplank hard on the heels of Yoongi. “We cast off now!”

“What about Sangchul?” Jungkook’s head poked out from the poop deck. “Did he not want to buy?”

“Forget Sangchul!” Namjoon bellowed, untying rope after rope. “We won’t have any goods to sell if they’re burned to a crisp!”

Either Jungkook had finally decided to listen to his captain’s orders or he had spotted the crowd of angry people running right at the ship, because he called the order up to Seongge, who repeated it so that everyone would hear. The deck was suddenly a hive of activity, executing a departure that was not supposed to have happened for another day at least.

Namjoon leaned over the gunwale and watched the distance between the ship and the dock gradually grow. Yoongi joined him.

“We could have beaten them with the help of the others,” he said. “We didn’t need to leave.”

Namjoon shook his head from side to side, dizziness overcoming him. “Why risk it? We can get a better price for the goods on Jeju.”

Taehyung sidled up to them. “What happened on Silmido? Did Sangchul not want to pay?”

Namjoon didn’t answer him. The alcohol, sudden exercise and now the roiling of the choppy waves made for bad bedfellows, and he retched up all of the ale that he had drunk, vomiting over the side and into the sea.

“I’m going to rest,” he told them. “Wake me up when we reach Jeju.”
“But Jeju is two days away,” Taehyung protested.

Namjoon ignored him, going straight to his quarters to lay his aching head down. Once in bed, the creaking of the wooden beams and footstep of his crew members wandering about on deck above his head began to irk him. He thought about asking Taehyung to fix something soft to everyone’s shoes so that he could get some shut-eye, but before he could finish the thought, he was fast asleep.

When he woke, his stomach settled but his head still feeling delicate, there was a pale glow filtering through his windows, rising and falling with the gentle movement of the waves. Judging by the quiet, it must be very early in the morning, with only one or two crew members tending to the ship. Namjoon got up and helped himself to some water, which was waiting for him on his desk. He didn’t remember putting it there - Yoongi or one of the others must have slipped into his quarters while he slept, knowing that he would be thirsty when he woke.

He thought of the events on Silmido and groaned. They had agreed on such a good price for the goods, Yoongi and Sangchul haggling like old fishwives over the haul that they had liberated from a merchant brig. But Sangchul’s man would have gone to the port to find an empty docking space - or maybe he had heard of the commotion before even setting a foot outside. So much for being paid quickly. Luckily they had enough supplies to make it to Jeju easily, and money to spare from their sale to Byungho.

Namjoon put a foot on the steps that lead to the deck, but hesitated. Once he emerged, he would once again be Captain Kim Namjoon. He just wanted to be plain old hungover Namjoon for a little while longer.

So he wove through the galley and the kitchen, taking care not to run into anyone, like a rat aboard his own ship. He made it to the front of the boat unnoticed, and entered his favourite place on board. It was barely even a room, just a small closet tucked away under the bowsprit, where he could look out onto the sea ahead. In fact, it was the space inside the ship’s figurehead, hollowed out at first for extra storage space, but in these last years they had never had enough cargo to warrant using it. So, Namjoon had made of it his little hideaway, a space to look out over the sea, safe in the company of the figurehead that guided their way.

Left to his own devices, he loved nothing more than to curl up with a book from his extensive library and listen to the sound of the waves wafting through the shutters that could be opened in the figurehead’s stomach. But today, that was impossible.

For where he usually sat, the small bench just under the shutters, was inhabited by someone curled up under a worn cloak, fast asleep. Namjoon stopped dead at the threshold, wondering who from his crew had decided that a wooden bench was more comfortable than a hammock. Never one for subtlety, he kicked the bench, and its inhabitant woke up with a shriek. The hood fell back.
It wasn’t one of his crew, that was for sure - there were no female crewmembers aboard the ship. Namjoon and the stowaway looked at each other in silence for the briefest of seconds, and then the girl - woman - whatever she was, cringed away from him, holding her hands up to her face.

Namjoon leaned forward grabbed her upper arm - the smallest arm he’d felt in a while. There was nothing of her, this girl. Scrawny and baleful, the only thing of note about her was her copper-coloured hair, long locks of which hung around her face, falling to her hips. Namjoon had seen such coloured hair before, but far to the west, and never in combination with Korean-looking features such as the girl possessed. It didn’t suit her.

The girl tried, unsuccessfully, to jerk her arm out of Namjoon’s grip. “I can walk unaided, you know.”

“I’m sure you can,” Namjoon said, not releasing her. He dragged her along behind him, yanking her up the stairs to the deck and then bashing the warning bell repeatedly with his fist.

Despite the early hour, it took the crew less than two minutes to assemble on the deck, Namjoon noted with approval. Some had even brought their weapons, thinking that there was an enemy ship in sight. Now, they stood blinking owlishly in the morning light, wondering what the hell the captain was doing with a woman on board the ship at this time of day.

Some looked at her appreciatively, but more looked at her with distrust, not trusting her meek appearance. The girl was shaking under the weight of their stares - Namjoon could feel it through her arm, of which he had still not let go.

But as if she had received a signal of some kind, the girl suddenly straightened up and looked up at him full in the face. Disconcerted, Namjoon turned his attention back to his crew.

“We were docked for a total of five hours, yesterday,” he said, in his dangerously low voice. “I was gone for four of those, as was Yoongi. That’s two of us. Then, Jimin and Taehyung were gone for the first two hours to restock our supplies. That’s four. That means that the entire crew minus four members were too blind to notice a random woman sneaking on board and then didn’t notice her presence any time after that.”

There was an uncomfortable silence from the crew.
“Or,” Namjoo said, his voice getting louder, “this woman was snuck onto the ship by someone who couldn’t wait for the evening, to visit a brothel at a reasonable time.”

There was a snicker from the crew, which was quickly silenced. Some of the crew were staring at their feet, some scratching their necks. No one spoke up.

“So which is it, then?” Namjoon roared. “Is my crew too stupid to notice a random woman boarding the ship or are they too lecherous to care?”

“My name is Choi Jangmi.”

Namjoon looked at the girl in disbelief, the girl who had dared interrupt his disciplining of his crew. “I’m sure that the sharks will be glad to know that,” he told her, and turned to Yoongi. “Throw her overboard.”

He saw some of the crew open their mouths to protest in the same moment that Yoongi raised his eyebrows in surprise and the girl yelled out, “Wait!”

“What is it?” Namjoon asked impatiently. He wanted her off the ship so that he could restore some order to the crew and make sure that the person responsible for letting her on board would not do so again.

The girl looked up at him, right into his eyes with her own dark ones. “I was told that this place could be a home for those who had none on dry land,” she said, with only a hint of desperation.

Namjoon opened his mouth in shock, his mind an angry mess. He let go of her arm as if he’d been stung. “You were told wrong.” He turned back to Yoongi. “How many times do I have to give the order? I want her out of my sight!”

“Wait!” the girl yelled again, sounding more panicked. She fumbled in her purse for something. “I can pay. I can pay to be a passenger.”

“If you have enough I’ll put you on a boat back to the mainland,” Namjoon told her brusquely. “We don’t take passengers.”
“Not even for these?” the girl held up something in the palm of her hand.

There, sparkling in the sunlight, were two earrings, gold twisted and engraved around two of the most intensely blue sapphires Namjoon had ever seen. They seemed to make the world around them washed out of colour, so bright was their glistening aura. Without even noticing, Namjoon took a step towards them, drawn by the power of their light. He made as if to pick one up, and the girl clamped her fist shut, winking out the light of the precious jewels.

The crew craned their necks to get a better view of the treasure. Namjoon, however, looked at the girl properly for the first time. It was as if she had been transformed by the light of the sapphires. Suddenly Namjoon could see under the superficial layer of dirt and shabby clothes. Her skin was pale, fresh, soft. Her lips were plump and smooth, her eyebrows painted with the faintest hint of coal dust. Her posture was that of one who had never carried a sack of flour over her back in her life.

“Who are you?” Namjoon asked softly.

“My name is Choi Jangmi,” the girl repeated. “Please let me take passage aboard your ship.”

“We don’t take passengers,” Yoongi said loudly, and the spell was broken. This person was back to being just a stowaway on his ship. A rich stowaway. A nice way to make up for the goods they hadn’t managed to sell on Silmido. Who knew that something of value would make its way onto their ship of its own accord?

“We can drop you off on Jeju,” Namjoon told the girl. “That is our destination.”

“Is Jeju far from here?” she asked. Somewhere to his right, Namjoon heard Jungkook snort in disbelief.

“Two days’ sailing, if the wind continues in this direction,” Namjoon told the girl, restraining himself from rolling his eyes with difficulty.

The girl bit her lip. “Are you not going any further? Osaka or Tokyo perhaps?”

There was a murmur from the crew. “We avoid Japan, wherever possible,” Namjoon said. “Jeju is as far as you’re going to get.” Seeing that the girl was hesitating, he added, “You’re not in any
position to negotiate. Just be happy that I’m not taking the earrings off you and throwing you overboard anyway, like any sane captain would do.”

“Fine,” the girl said, holding out a hand for a handshake. Namjoon didn’t take it, but instead held out his own, ready to receive his payment. Reluctantly, the girl handed over one of the earrings. “Just one of these earrings is worth more than your ship and all its contents,” she pointed out before Namjoon could say anything. He didn’t have anything to reply to that.

“So… someone take these and add them to the inventory,” Namjoon said brusquely, to disguise his turmoil. Yoongi remembered that he was the ship’s quartermaster and duly did so.

The deal concluded, Namjoon was surprised to see his crew still standing around on deck. “What are you all waiting for?” he asked them, irritated.

There was some muttering and shuffling of feet, then Deokwoon called out, “We were waiting to see whose hammock she was gonna be sharing, Captain.” He grinned roguishly.

Namjoon opened his mouth to rebuke Deokwoon’s lack of tact, but before he could do so, the girl skipped down to where Deokwoon was standing. Unused to female presence, the others parted like a clam shell to let her through. The girl only came up to Deokwoon’s shoulder, but she raised a single finger and put it under his chin, bringing his face towards hers. “I realise that it has been a while for you,” she said sweetly, “but you’re better off jumping ship. The sea, at least, would be wet.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, then the crew burst into laughter, leaving Deokwoon flushed and embarrassed.

Namjoon made use of the break in tension to roar out commands. “That’s enough chat, the lot of you! I want to hit twenty knots before breakfast or you’ll be eating it off the galley floor!”

“Aye Captain!” the crew chorused, and dispersed. Only Namjoon and Jangmi were left. “You’ll stay in your bunk for the entirety of the voyage,” Namjoon advised her, “leaving only for mealtimes. I don’t want you distracting the crew from their work.”

“It’s not my fault if they’re distracted,” Jangmi argued, “Five hours isn’t nearly long enough for all your crew to make use of a brothel.”
This girl had a wicked mouth on her, Namjoon had noticed - yet another reason to keep her away from the crew. A man with his reputation hanging by a thread didn’t need to be taking any more hits in front of his crew, and from a strange woman too.

Knowing that breakfast would be served shortly, he led Jangmi down to the galley, where Jimin was stirring the breakfast’s broth in a huge pot.

“Feed her now,” Namjoon instructed Jimin, who filled a bowl with a cheery “Aye, Captain!” The look on the girl’s face when she saw her portion was worth almost as much as the earring she had given him.

“People eat this?” Jangmi said, looking horrified at the brown soup, not daring even to stir it. “People that aren’t animals?”

“You’ll eat this or you’ll eat nothing,” Namjoon told her, and left her to wrestle with her lot. He made sure that she was back in her pokey little compartment by the time the crew had come down to eat, and had to deal with all of their questions and ribald jokes, asking if he hadn’t hidden her away in his quarters so that he wouldn’t have to share.

“Just forget she exists,” Namjoon said wearily to Taehyung, who wouldn’t stop pestering him for details of how she would spend her time on board. “We’ll be in Jeju by tomorrow afternoon and then we can go back to leading a normal, pirate life.”

“If such a thing exists,” Yoongi said around a mouthful of broth. He out of all the crew seemed the least interested in the new passenger, least interested in her personal well-being, that is. But Namjoon suspected that Yoongi was just as concerned about her effect on the crew as he was.

However, it was hard to forget that she existed at dinnertime, when Namjoon, wrapped up in calculations and maps with Jungkook, forgot to bring her out before the rest came down. He was planning to bring her food afterwards, but Jimin beat him to it, citing that it was his responsibility to feed everyone on board whether they were part of the crew or not.

Now, sat between Sejin and Taehyung, she was involved in a lively discussion with the crew about the ship, how it functioned and how they lived. Jangmi asked lots of questions but answered none, Namjoon noticed. Why was she so interested in the ship? Did she really wish to join their crew as she had professed?
The rum was passed around after dinner for those who wished to partake of it, as was their custom. Jangmi had apparently never drunk rum before, to the surprise of all those around her. They filled a flagon to the brim for her to drink in one go, but she barely managed a sip before retching, pushing it far away from her, to the amusement of the others.

“That stuff is awful,” she griped. “How can you drink it?”

Namjoon, in the privacy of his head, begged to differ. Rum or ale, those were the real pirate drinks. The spicier and bitterer the better. He himself had already downed three cupfuls tonight and was feeling pleasantly warm, a cosier feeling than the stress of the day’s decision-making. He felt a rush of affection for his crew. They were still here, still with him after all this time, all those adventures and, increasingly, misadventures. They had weeded out the chaff from the grain, now. The people who had left were people who didn’t deserve to stay. But the people who had stayed deserved better from him.

Namjoon stood up and banged his flagon on the table for attention. “Listen up, you lot!” he yelled, and the galley quietened. “I have words…. that need saying. Words to say. To be said.”

His crew waited expectantly.

“Earlier today, someone gave me something that they said was worth more than the ship and all its contents.”

A few heads turned to Jangmi and then swiveled back to him.

“I didn’t have a response to that,” Namjoon continued. “But I should have. I should have said, “the crew of The Second Star are worth more than the riches of China, Japan and Korea combined!””

The crew shouted their approval. Namjoon raised his flagon. “The crew of The Second Star!”

“The crew of The Second Star!” The roar went up, intermingling with the noise of flagons being banged on the table.

“The Captain of The Second Star!” Taehyung yelled, standing up.
“The Captain of The Second Star!” the crew repeated at volume. Then the banging of flagons on tables became more rhythmic. “Pirate King! Pirate King! Pirate King!”

Namjoon waited until the chanting died away, then raised his flagon for a final time. “The Spirit of Ah-Mi!”

The cheer that went up from the crew was colossal. Namjoon sat back down and downed what was left of his rum. Afterwards, the crew dispersed, some to their bunks and some to the deck to play cards. Namjoon was one of those that stayed above board, not wanting to go to the solitude of his cabin just yet.

He was surprised to see Jangmi sat opposite him, being dealt a hand. “Didn’t I tell you to stay in your bunk?”

Jangmi pouted, a wrinkle of displeasure forming between her eyebrows. “Let me play one game, Captain, please.”

“Please,” Taehyung urged him. “We need even numbers to play Stinkpot anyway.”

Namjoon relented. “Fine, one game. But you’d best guard that sharp tongue of yours.”

Jangmi grinned at him. “Why, afraid I’ll draw blood?”

Namjoon scowled at her and allowed himself to be dealt in without further discussion, drinking deep from his flagon of rum for consolation while Taehyung explained the rules to Jangmi. He teamed up with Jungkook first, and was promptly destroyed by Yoongi and Jimin within two rounds. Jungkook, annoyed with the extra chores he had bet the game on, teamed up with Seongge for the second game, leaving Namjoon to play with Sejin.

“It’s a good thing our captain is better at piracy than he is at Stinkpot,” Yoongi quipped as he destroyed Namjoon’s team yet again.

For the third game, they all switched partners, Yoongi with Sejin, Jungkook with Jimin, Seongge with Taehyung and Namjoon found himself paired up with Jangmi.
He laid down his gold Seer for the first go but all Jangmi had to match with it was a Beggar - one of the weakest combinations. It looked like he wouldn’t be winning in this team either. More chores for him to do, chores being the currency with which they tended to play.

“One for you, Yoongi,” Taehyung noted, as he placed his Judge on top of Seongge’s Pirate. “A black Quartermaster, prepare to weep.”

“Keep your handkerchief for yourself, Taehyung, this is the closest you’ll ever get to a Queen,” Jimin joked, placing the red card in front of him.

“Old Dongho would have something to say about that,” Taehyung snorted, “his plans for his daughter were so grand I’m surprised that it wasn’t the Queen he had assassinated.”

“Why would he assassinate the King?” Jangmi asked sharply, eyebrows raised.

Taehyung waved a hand dismissively. “I don’t mean that he actually killed the King. I just mean that he wanted his daughter to marry up. Someone powerful, or rich, from a good family. Someone like Jimin, for example.”

“I don’t think it would have been a very successful marriage,” Yoongi said serenely, laying down a gold Apprentice.

Taehyung poked a finger at the card. “That was me. Shoemaker’s apprentice. Made shoes for every noble in the city - that’s how I met Jungkook. I worked tirelessly for Shoemaster Dongho day and night, and I was like his adopted son, until his only daughter started to look at me a little too often.”

“So they chased you out?” Jangmi asked, saddened.

“They did more than that,” Taehyung said bitterly, lifting up his shirt to show a criss-crossing of scars across his ribs, which was met from cries of disapproval from the crew. “No one wants to see your scrawny body, Taehyung,” Jungkook scowled, tugging down the shirt for him.

Jimin and Jungkook won the round with their red Queen Merchant combination, but Yoongi as usual won the game with a Corrupt Magistrate and Mystical Purveyor in quick succession.
“I don’t know how he does it,” Namjoon complained. “He always seems to have the right combination at the right time.” He looked down at the remnants of his hand blearily, and spotted a gold Wizard that might have won him the game had he played it two rounds earlier. He threw his cards down in disgust.

“It’s not that I’m good,” Yoongi said smugly, “It’s just that you lot are all terrible.”

“We should pit our two worst players against each other,” said Jungkook, snickering. “Then we might finally get an interesting game.”

“Okay, final game then,” Taehyung said, gathering up all the cards. “Who’ll make up the teams?”

“Jungkook and Jangmi, then Namjoon and Yoongi,” Jimin said confidently.

“That’s hardly fair,” Namjoon objected, “Jangmi’s only just learned how to play.”

“You’re right,” Jangmi agreed, eyes wide. “Do you think I should play with someone worse, to even up the teams?”

The crew hooted in approval, and Namjoon downed the rest of his rum in order to avoid having to make a response. “Fine,” he said, seeing that he was cornered, “we’ll play how we are, but we should up the stakes.”

“Strip Stinkpot!” Taehyung yelled gleefully, and was instantly buffeted from all sides by objecting crewmembes. Then the noise died as suddenly as if they had all been dumped underwater.

Jangmi was holding out the other earring, the pair to the one that Namjoon had stowed safely in his pouch. “If you win, you get the other earring,” Jangmi said solemnly. “If I win, I get mine back.”

Namjoon stared at the precious stone in Jangmi’s palm as if mesmerised. In the darkness of the night, the colour was a lustrous black, contrasted with the shining gold that reflected the light of the torches. With a stone like that, he could buy a whole other ship. A whole island. A whole library.
“It’s not mine to bet,” Namjoon said, tearing his eyes away from the earring. “It was given in payment to the ship.”

“It’s fine!” Jimin shouted, hanging off of Yoongi’s shoulder excitedly. “We trust our captain!”

“Yeah, go on, take the wager!” Sejin hooted.

Namjoon looked at his Quartermaster and First Mate for confirmation. “We don’t need it,” Yoongi said, shrugging. “We have enough supplies to get to Jeju and then we can sell off what remains of our haul.”


“How many rounds do we play?” Jangmi asked as Taehyung dealt her hand.

“Two,” Jimin reminded her. “One round per team and then if needed, a tie breaker.”

“Okay,” Jangmi said, breathing deep. “Let’s do it.”

Namjoon suddenly felt nervous. There was a lot riding on this game, more than he should have allowed. But he wanted to defeat this girl, this woman who had disrupted his slow, comfortable descent into obscurity.

For the first play, Yoongi put down a red King’s Justice, while Jungkook placed a red Merchant in front of him. That was good - the King’s Justice was stronger than the Merchant. That meant that if Namjoon had something of equal or higher strength to the King’s Justice, he would win. He looked at his hand, and groaned internally. The only red card he held was a vendor, a weaker card. He could only hope that Jangmi’s hand was equally bad.

On the count of three, they both placed down their cards, and a cry of shock went up from the watching crew. Jangmi had played a red Seer, one of the stronger cards in the game. The round was hers. Nevertheless, Namjoon knew that she had made a mistake, playing her strong card first. If he won the next round, they would go to a tiebreaker.
“You can look at another player’s hand in the next round,” Jungkook told her, “because you played a Seer.”

Jangmi chose to look at Yoongi’s hand, her brow furrowed. Namjoon hoped that it meant that Yoongi had a strong one.

For the next round, Yoongi played a gold Judge while Jungkook played a black Magnate. For the moment, Jangmi’s team was looking stronger, but would no longer be so when he played his turn. Namjoon grinned as he placed a gold Druid in front of him in the same moment that Jangmi played a Thief.

The crew cheered, hooting and yowling his name. “Kim Namjoon! Kim Namjoon!”

Namjoon allowed himself a brief smile. They had gone to tiebreaker, which meant that Namjoon still had a chance of winning. He might even concede the prize, if it meant never seeing the disdainful, angular face of Choi Jangmi ever again. Then Namjoon remembered that he was a pirate. Of course he would take the earring.

The crew watched with bated breath as Yoongi played a black Assassin in the same moment that Jungkook played a gold Pirate. Namjoon suppressed a triumphant grin. He had a card in his hand strong enough that they might actually win. He prepared to play it, and watched Jangmi choose her own card, frowning. She had played a strong card early and a weaker card later on. Surely that meant that she had no high-value cards left?

Taehyung led the countdown to the final play of the game. “Three… two…”

“Wait!” Jangmi said suddenly. Namjoon sighed loudly. They always seemed to be waiting for this girl, and no good ever seemed to come of it. “What is it?”

“I played a thief in the last round,” Jangmi said slowly. “Doesn’t that mean that I can steal a card?”

“At random, yes.” Jimin explained. “You can choose a random card from the hand of another player to put in your own hand.”
Namjoon looked down at his hand. He had a card in his possession that might win Jangmi the game. He prayed that she wouldn’t get it. After all, it was a one in ten chance, right? Five cards in his hand and five in Yoongi’s.

“Please pick Yoongi,” Namjoon prayed. “Please pick Yoongi.”

But Jangmi had already seen Yoongi’s hand and apparently there had been nothing of interest in it, because Jangmi chose Namjoon. Namjoon spread out his cards in a fan, trying to keep his face as expressionless as possible. One in five. A chance of one in five.

Jangmi leant over, studying Namjoon’s face intently as her hand brushed over his knuckles, trying to gauge which card would be her best bet.

“Not the King,” Namjoon thought loudly in his head. “Anything but the King.”

Jangmi’s fingers touched the King on the far right hand side. “Move on,” Namjoon prayed. “Go away.”

But Jangmi’s fingers curled over the gold King, and Namjoon saw that he’d lost. She had now in her hand one of the most powerful combinations in the game. Nothing that his Killer Queen combination could possibly stand against.

Jangmi looked at the card and grinned, showing her white teeth. “On the count of three?”

The countdown was considerably less enthusiastic this time, the crew having realised that something was afoot by Namjoon’s sour expression and Jangmi’s contented one.

The final play was met with a groan of despair from the crew, but Namjoon, true to his word, handed over Jangmi’s earring with as much dignity as he could muster.

“You should have taken her offer of playing with a weaker partner,” Sejin yelled amongst the crew’s shouts.

“Defeated by your own namesake,” Taehyung said, half-laughing, half outraged. “That’s gotta
Jangmi’s mouth dropped open as she looked at Namjoon. “Wait a second. You’re the Pirate King?”

Namjoon shrugged sulkily. “The one and only. Please don’t feel the need to bow.”

“You were a participant of the legendary Pirate Mêlée?” Jangmi asked, aghast.

“Yes.”

“And you stole the Emperor of Japan’s crown?” she pressed.

“Yes.”

“You razed the city of Fukuoka to the ground?”

“Enough,” Namjoon said impatiently. “Why did you think that the crew were yelling out ‘Pirate King’ earlier if not for the fact that he was on board?”

“I just thought that he was an idol to you guys,” Jangmi confessed. She leant close, evidently searching his face for any hidden signs of age. “You don’t look old enough to have accomplished all that,” she added.

Namjoon felt his cheeks start to glow, unsure whether to take it as a compliment or an insult, and hoped that it would be passed off as being down to the large amount of rum he’d consumed.

“But if you didn’t know that our captain was the Pirate King,” Yoongi asked suspiciously, “why did you stow away on our ship?”

“Like I said,” Jangmi answered with a weird glint in her eye, “someone told me to.”
“Also, how did you get on board?” Sejin asked. “I was on the deck the whole time and I swear on the sea that I didn’t see anything.”

“That’s because I didn’t get in via the deck,” Jangmi grinned. “I paid a fisherman to row me up to the back of the ship and then climbed in through an open window.”

“Did you cheat the fisherman out of his payment as well?” Namjoon asked sulkily, still upset about losing the earring.

Jangmi gave him a strange look. “No, I paid him in full,” she answered haughtily, “though he wanted me to stay on as a crewmember.”

“Why, do you know how to sail?” Jungkook asked, surprised.

“No.”

“Do you know how to mend sails?” Taehyung asked hopefully.

“No.”

“Can you cook?” Jimin asked her.

“No…”

“Then can you fight?” Namjoon asked her, running out of patience.

“I can dance,” Jangmi answered confidently, as if that was helpful in any way, shape or form.

A shout of laughter mingled with disbelief went up from the crew and bounced off the sea around them, making it sound tenfold. Like a hundred people instead of ten had just heard the stupidest thing in their life.
“I don’t think it was his crew that the fisherman wanted you to be a part of,” Namjoon spluttered. “His family, maybe.”

“Although I fail to see who would want a wife who can’t cook,” Yoongi added with a touch of smugness.

“Can you imagine trying to dance away your enemies away?” Taehyung howled with laughter, tears in his eyes.

“Is your dancing so bad you scare them off?” Namjoon chortled.

“What have you been doing with your life so far if you don’t even know how to do any of that?” Sejin asked, snorting.

Jangmi stood up. “I’m going to bed,” she said abruptly.

Yoongi watched her retreating back. “Do you think we upset her?” he said, with something that sounded very much like complete disinterest.

Namjoon was of the same opinion. Jangmi’s view of him and his crew mattered to him exactly none. She may have the earring, but tomorrow afternoon, they would arrive on Jeju and it would be Namjoon who would be feeling like the richest man in the world - rich with her absence, that is.

He couldn’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

WELL. Our Namjoon’s had a great day. Let's hope tomorrow goes better... but this is an adventure story, so don't hold your breath :O

So here's the name of the game: Every Monday, as close to midnight as I can make it, a new chapter goes up. As a rule, I've tried to keep each one between 5 and 8k words so as not to kill y'all, but also this first chapter is 8.5k so that kinda gives away how I feel about rules.
Last thing, thanks a MILLION BILLION MANY LOTS to my BTS soulmate https://www.fanfiktion.de/u/LittleBambi who proofreads everything I post, without whom you'd have to put up with a lot more typos, repetitions, continuity errors and repetitions.
Well That Was Fast

Chapter Summary

Despite her fairly strong objections, Jangmi is ejected from the Second Star and put ashore on Jeju Island, and endeavours to evade those who pursue her. It does not go well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alone in her pokey compartment, Jangmi tossed and turned on the wooden bench, struggling to think of a way to make them let her stay on board. She had already used the only ace in her hand - her uncanny ability to win card games. There was no way that anyone on board would play her now, and even if they did, she couldn’t continue to win if she didn’t want to raise any suspicions.

Her best bet was probably to let herself be put to shore and then by any means necessary sneak back onto the ship. But she wasn’t sure that she could do it twice, and she had foolishly let slip her method for having done it the first time round.

It hadn’t been nearly as easy as she had made it sound. No boat in the port of Silmido had wanted to get close to the grandiose ship with the black flag, and it had taken all of Jangmi’s powers of persuasion, and money besides, to convince the young fisherman to row her out. For all his pretense at bravado, he had cowered in the shadow of the ship’s hull, terrified, as Jangmi might have been had she not been better informed of its inhabitants.

No sooner had she grasped the foot of the ship’s figurehead than the fisherman hurriedly began to row back to the harbour, nearly toppling her into the polluted water. Nevertheless, she managed to keep her grip and used all her strength to gain a foothold on the slippery wood. She had pulled herself up inch by torturous inch until she was able to balance, almost embracing the ship’s figurehead, coming cheek to cheek with the solemn, sorrowful face of a woman, though bizarrely, she was carved to be wearing trousers as might a man. In addition, from her intimate vantage point, Jangmi saw that the figurehead was not in fact holding a money pouch as she had previously thought, but a small, spherical bomb. There was even a small piece of gold cloth affixed to the end of the fuse, as if to give the impression that the bomb was forever seconds from going off. The cloth fluttered in the breeze, just like a real flame.

From there she had wormed her way through the small, shuttered window in the figurehead’s stomach, and thought herself safe, at least for a while. And now she was back in the darkness of the figurehead compartment, but she was no longer confident in her continued safety.
Stupid, stupid. She should never have told them how she had gotten on board, as she shouldn’t have won back her earring. You can only play a card from your hand once, she had told herself, but she had gone ahead and done it anyway. She had so wanted them to think that she was clever, that she could help them, that she wasn’t above low tricks and uncouth behaviour, behaviour worthy of pirates.

Captain Pirate King, in particular… the way he had looked at her over those earrings. It was like she was being seen for the first time, pierced by his dark eyes. It was like he was looking beneath her words, her actions, her clothes… what had he seen? Had he seen who she was? Was that why he was so adamant on getting rid of her?

She would just have to stow away again like she had the first time, if they wouldn’t let her stay. And if they found her, she would have to find another boat headed as far away as possible. Jeju port couldn’t be that small, Jangmi reassured herself. She was sure to find safe passage, or at the very least, passage.

Comforted with that thought, she patted the pouch at her waist that contained the earrings, turned around on her cold wooden bench one last time and tried to get some sleep.

Scarcely had she lain her head down than she heard signs of life, and saw light shining through the cracks in the shutters. Had she slept? She couldn’t tell.

She made her way down to the galley, determined to find a way to make herself indispensable. Cherub-faced Jimin was already up and about, and he was by far the least frightening person on board, so Jangmi tentatively asked if she could help. He accepted her offer without fuss, but even she saw that she was more hindrance than help. When she almost dropped a pan full of water for the fifth time, Jimin took it from her without a word and carried the heavy thing to the stove like it was nothing. Jangmi wondered if that was why his arms were so muscled.

There was no point trying to persuade anyone that she could be useful below deck, Jangmi thought to herself sourly. It wasn’t on a pirate ship that you were likely to be asked to balance two bowls on your shoulders while prancing across the room or what the correct way was to eat a crab without staining one’s clothes. So she sat between chatty Taehyung and silent Seongge at breakfast, deflecting questions about her past from one and trying to crack the seemingly impenetrable shell of the other. He wouldn’t even answer any questions about his name.

“Why are you called Seongge?” Jangmi asked him. “Like the sea urchin?”
Seongge just smiled ruefully at her and shook his head.

She had more luck persuading Taehyung to teach her how to mend sails. He had a couple of spare ones that needed fixing up, so he brought her to his workshop and he pottered around with his carpentry tools while she worked fastidiously on a piece of yellowed fabric.

“Heave you only done this much?” he asked her incredulously after half an hour. He took the cloth from her and inspected it closely. “It’s very neat,” he said, shaking his head, “but you haven’t left enough thread at the beginning to do the knot properly. It’ll fall apart after five minutes in the wind.” Before Jangmi could protest, he took a knife from his work bench and slid it across every stitch. The thread sprang open like a flower.

Once she had redone the entire sail to Taehyung’s standards, Jangmi flexed her hands to rid them of cramps and wandered up onto the deck to find someone who didn’t look too busy.

There was no one. Pirates were hurrying about like ants on a discarded pastry, left and right and up and down. Jangmi craned her neck to see Seongge swinging about the mast twenty metres above her head, pulling ropes, tossing down coils to other crew members without a word, like a well-practiced dance master. Yoongi, his expression as stern as ever, was stood at the helm, hand resting gently on the big wooden wheel as he gazed out across the sea.

Jangmi followed his gaze and to her horror saw a black mass in the distance, approaching at an almost imperceptible rate. Her fear was no less appeased when she realised that, far from being a beast of the water, it was the coast of Jeju that she was looking at.

Jangmi was drawn to the front of the ship as if to approach that much quicker exactly the thing she was so afraid of. It was still just a smudge on the horizon, but it signalled the end of her brief respite. She would once again have to watch her every move. She would once again be vulnerable.

A hand suddenly clasped her shoulder and Jangmi jumped a foot in the air. She had been so absorbed in her thoughts that she hadn’t heard anyone coming up behind her.

“I thought I told you to stay in your bunk,” she heard, and recognised the voice immediately. It was deep and might have been pleasant sounding if not for the irritation present in every syllable. And that voice always sounded irritated when it was directed at her.

“I just wanted to help,” Jangmi sulked, not even bothering to turn around. She didn’t want to see
the face that was responsible for depriving her of what might have been a safe harbour. Or rather, precisely not a harbour.

“From what I hear from Taehyung and Jimin, that’s not been going so well,” Namjoon said, sounding amused for once. At her expense of course. Of course Captain Pirate King could only afford to be amused when it was her wellbeing that was at stake.

“No one’s born with the ability to cross-stitch sails,” Jangmi pointed out, finally turning to face her antagonist, “and I’ve scarcely been given the time to improve.”

“I’m not planning to give you more time, if that’s what you’re getting at.” Captain Pirate King looked as smug as ever at the thought of being rid of her. His dark eyes were gleaming impishly and two dimples had appeared on either side of his mouth. Jangmi would have liked to wipe that boyish smile off his face. Preferably with a crowbar.

“I could be a valuable asset,” she pressed.

Namjoon snorted. “I’m sure of that. What was your speciality again? Flower-arrangement? Fan-painting?”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss the skills of others,” Jangmi told him, indignant.

“It’s not your skills I’m interested in, but your motives,” Namjoon said softly, appearing interested by her anger. “Why would a lady of the nobility need passage on board a pirate ship?” He moved to touch her chin as if to tip her head back, to examine the planes of her face in the way that one might examine a diamond. But Jangmi jerked away from him.

“I’m no lady,” she said sharply.

Namjoon gave her a disbelieving look. “A woman who can’t clean, or cook, and is in possession of a fabulous treasure. You have no strength, but you can sew beautifully, according to Taehyung. Like someone who is used to embroidery but not mending clothes. So tell me, why are you here? What is it that you have done?”

“I haven’t done anything,” Jangmi insisted, and though it was the truth it rang false even to her ears. A pair of smiling red lips danced before her eyes, but she pushed the thought away.
Namjoon shook his head, obviously disbelieving her. “Jeju is a lovely town. You’ll like it there.”

A thousand angry retorts came to Jangmi’s lips, but none of them were anywhere near adequate. She turned on her heel and stalked off, seeking the comforting closeness of her bunk. If only she could stay. If only she could be safe.

After lunch, the dark mass on the horizon had grown to a clearly defined coastline, with the outline of a mountain in the distance. She could even make out the verdant, rolling hills, the thatched roofs of the cottages, the masts of dozens of boats in the harbour. Jangmi began to panic. She had to play any card in her hand. Any.

She found Namjoon below deck, poring over some maps with some delicate-looking instruments in the company of the ship’s reserved navigator Jungkook, and begged of him in her sweetest voice the pleasure of a private audience. At his Captain’s cautious acquiescence, Jungkook left them to it, looking from one to the other with a suspicious expression on his face.

“What is it?” the Captain asked without looking up from a map in a valiant attempt to appear business-like. But Jangmi saw that his hand was gripping the shaft of his quill rather more tightly than was necessary. He was wary of her sudden change in attitude, she saw. Her plan to disarm him with a show of tractability would need a little sugar-coating.

Jangmi sashayed over to where Namjoon was standing. “Is that where we are?” she asked him in her best innocent voice, pointing to the large island off the south coast of Korea.

“Yes,” Namjoon said gruffly. “What do you want?”

Jangmi didn’t answer him immediately. Instead, she used the span of her hand to measure the distance from Seoul to Jeju, and then Jeju to Japan. The difference in distance wasn’t that great. “I’m only halfway safe,” she murmured. She used her hands to measure the distance from Jeju to Shanghai, on which Namjoon’s hand was resting. Her thumb brushed ever so briefly over his pinky finger. “Stop this,” she heard. “Stop this right now.” But she couldn’t. She had to try.

“You were right, beforehand, about my never having had to mend clothes or mop decks,” Jangmi sighed. “I’ve never been on board a ship before. I’m not used to manual labour. But I’m not a lady,” Jangmi confessed quietly, repeating her words from earlier. “And I never have been.”
She could hear Namjoon’s breathing from next to her, and tried to gauge its speed. Was he sensing the message she was sending out? Would he take the bait? Jangmi looked up off the map, and straight into the Captain’s brooding, understanding face.

“Before I came here, I was a courtesan,” Jangmi said softly, holding his gaze as long as she dared. He didn’t flinch away, didn’t step back, nor did he step forwards. He only repeated his question in a steady voice. “What do you want?”

“I want to stay,” Jangmi whispered. “I’ll do anything.”

She went onto tiptoes and slowly leaned forward until she could feel Namjoon’s warm breath dancing over her parted lips. He wasn’t leaning down, but he wasn’t leaning away, either. “Let me stay,” Jangmi whispered, her mouth millimetres from his. She could feel the heat emanating from his body just inches from her own. He hadn’t moved, but his lips were parted, his gaze clouded and unfocused. She slowly closed the gap and -

“Captain!” the shout went up, sounding remarkably close, and Namjoon jumped away from her like he’d been shot, hurrying up and out without another look in her direction. The tension in the air fizzled like a wet firework and Jangmi was stood alone in the map room, mouth still parted as if ready to embrace a ghost. She kicked a nearby chair in fury. She had been so close.

She followed Namjoon’s footsteps up to the dock in time to hear Yoongi explaining that Seongge had seen something strange in Jeju port. Two schooners, apparently. Jangmi wondered what was so odd about seeing ships docked at a harbour in the time that Namjoon took the eyeglass proffered to him.

She couldn’t see anything amiss with her own eyes and considered bumping into Yoongi to assuage her curiosity, but before she could do so, Namjoon swore loudly. “We’re not popular with either crew,” he muttered to himself, then called Jungkook over to ask him about a cove that was out of sight of the port town.

The coast of Jeju island suddenly started to slide round to the left of the ship, and Jangmi realised that they were headed away from the harbour. Captain Pirate King was ordering members of the crew around left and right, and Jangmi realised that this might be her last chance to make herself scarce, forgotten about until they left Jeju again. She could hide in the galley - Jimin might be persuaded to help her. Would he willingly go against his captain’s orders? Might she try with Jimin where she had failed with Namjoon?

But before she could sneak off, Namjoon pointed in her direction. “You!” He barked, making her
jump. “You stay where I can see you.”

He had a small row boat brought round and chose a select few to come with him to Jeju Port. “Yoongi, Jungkook, Jimin, with me. We’ll all keep a low profile, but Yoongi and I will be extra careful because even in a place like Jeju they will have seen our ‘wanted’ posters. I’ll be discreet and hope that no one recognises us while we try to sell our goods, because the last thing we need is a bounty hunter alerting the Navy to our presence,” he said matter-of-factly. “So that means no funny business, no brawls, no tussles and no arguments. And no taverns,” he added, catching Yoongi’s eye.

Jangmi saw that this might be her last chance to stay aboard the ship. “Please let me stay here,” she bargained. “I’ll scrub every deck. I’ll mend every sail. I’ll even give you an earring - both earrings. Just let me stay.”

Namjoon didn’t even deign to respond, gripping her upper arm as was his custom with her, tugging her towards the small rowing boat. Jangmi pulled herself out of his grip. “I won’t go!” she shouted, more for show than any real desperation. She would make it back on to this ship by any means necessary whether or not it was with the Captain’s permission.

“Don’t make me tie you up,” Namjoon threatened her. “Or I’ll sell you to the first slaver I see.”

“That’s what you said last time!” Jangmi whined, “I won’t make trouble, I promise!”

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth,” Namjoon told her, signalling to Seongge and Sejin to hustle her onto the row boat.

Jangmi sulked the whole way while Jimin and Jungkook rowed them to the port, seeing that the further away they got, the harder it would be to find her way back. There was no way that she could stow away on this puny row boat to wait for them to return to the ship, and she knew that she could never hope to find the secluded cove on foot in order to rejoin The Second Star before they set sail again.

That meant that she would have to take refuge aboard one of the two schooners currently docked in Jeju port. As the small rowing boat approached the port town, Jangmi could begin to see why it was odd that the two large ships were docked at the same time. They were by far and away the largest boats visible, anchored away from the modest harbour that was filled with fishing sloops and dinghies. Then Jangmi caught a glimpse of the flag hoisted on the nearest schooner to them and her blood ran cold. A crowned sun. All her panic returned to her. She would need to hide, and fast.
Jeju wasn’t a large port, as she had thought. The two large ships were very much out of place, as any stranger would be. And, amongst all the sailors from the Navy, any female stranger would be. Jangmi drew up the hood of her cloak over her distinctive hair despite the warm weather.

All too soon, the row boat bumped up against a wooden pontoon and Namjoon flicked a coin at a waiting harbour rat, a village boy with nothing else to do than to keep an eye on a rowboat until its occupants came back.

Namjoon and the others jumped off lightly, splashing into the shallow water without a care and marching purposefully up the beach. Jangmi followed unwillingly, drawing up the hem of her cloak so as to keep as dry as possible. Namjoon turned around, already twenty feet ahead of her.

“If you’re still here when we get back,” he shouted, “I’ll sail you back to Seoul myself.”

There was no need of that, Jangmi thought to herself sourly. There was already a ship here primed and ready for just that purpose. She walked towards the port town - or village, more like, hoping to lose herself amongst the people until she could find a way onto the second schooner - the one not blazoned with the King’s royal sigil.

Even with her hood up, Jangmi noticed, she was drawing attention. From what she could see, most of the women here were sturdy creatures, wearing roughly woven clothes suited to working the fields, or selling fish. Women vain enough to be wearing a cloak in the bright sunlight were clearly in short supply. Worse still, there was no obvious place of refuge where she could hide away, like a respectable tavern or inn. Every building was made of clay or mud and thatch or whatever people used to make their homes. There were no cobbles, just a worn, dusty track bustling with people and animals. And posters, Jangmi saw. In every direction, on every possible surface, dozens of posters painted in black ink were staring down at her. Jangmi avoided looking at them as much as possible. She knew what would be on there: the word ‘Wanted’, the reward being offered, and the face - her face.

Jangmi spotted a steeple in the distance and headed towards it, thinking that she might be able to better get her bearings. But she was suddenly forced to duck into the gap between two houses by the arrival of a group of smartly dressed sailors, the green of their uniforms contrasting with the brown of their surroundings. And the orange, Jangmi noticed. There were many people, many men, wearing orange robes, or some form of orange band on their arm. Jangmi wondered if these were these the people from the other ship. Should she try to wear something orange in order to blend in?

She waited until the sailors disappeared and then followed the group of orange-clad men to the
main square, still on the look-out for any mariners of the Navy. They arrived in front of the only stone building in the village, the tall townhouse with a steeple. A large gaggle of people were listening to a man clad in orange who was standing on an upturned crate. Curious and needing to find out more, Jangmi joined the crowd.

“We have been chosen by God!” the man was crying out. “We have been chosen to wield His holy light above all other of His creations and to spread His holy light!”

Oh, they were a religious organisation. Jangmi had very little experience with religion, knowing that her existence thus far had been largely one of sin. What was their stance on women, or more specifically women seemingly of virtue? Would they believe that she was a lady? Would they allow her onto their ship? Would they grant her safe passage to their destination?

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“Only humankind has been granted the Virtues of Above, holy powers meant to open our eyes to His glory! Do we need any more proof of His existence, of His bounty, of His love for us?”

People around her were nodding, Jangmi saw. Had they already heard this speech before? So far, Jangmi had heard nothing much to nod about. She could scarcely follow the line of reasoning at all.

“This world has known God,” the man continued, “but it has not known how to reach Him. Now we know - we must turn our Virtues to His glory. Only those most devoted in their praise of Him can benefit from His love. Only those who burn with love for Him can truly master their Virtue.”

“What is he on about?” someone next to Jangmi whispered. “Is he saying that if you join the Sect you get a Virtue?”

“Sounds like it,” another person replied in a hushed voice. “I could do with one. Super speed or something. Get the harvest in before lunch.”

“That’s dumb,” the first person replied, “I’d rather have super strength, milk the cows until their udders exploded.”

They both laughed until someone nearby shushed them. Jangmi turned her attention back to the speaker.
“We can hear our Lord our God’s voice in the crackle of the hearth, we can see our Lord our God’s intentions in the flames, we can smell our Lord our God’s breath in the smoke. Fire is the Virtue all humans share, the gift He gave to us, to bathe us in His light! What animal can boast of fire?”

More people were nodding now. Who had heard of a cow making use of a fire? Animals were scared of flames, everyone knew that.

“We must burn with our love for Him!” the speaker cried out.

“We must burn!” several people from the crowd called back.

The speaker was apparently not satisfied with the level of audience engagement. “We must burn with our love for Him!” he repeated at volume.

“We must burn!” The call back was more confident now.

“We must burn with our love for Him!” the speaker practically screeched.

“We must burn!” the crowd shouted back. Jangmi couldn’t tell if it was in agreement or just to shut him up.

“What’s all this commotion?” someone from the back of the square shouted.

Jangmi turned to the source of the voice and hurriedly ducked down. Not five feet away from her stood an obviously high-ranking sailor, judging by the ornamentation on his uniform and his supercilious tone of voice. His hand was resting on the shining pommel of his sword.

“The word of God is not a commotion!” the speaker bellowed from his upturned crate. “It is-

“It’s disturbing the King’s peace, is what it is!” the Navy officer shouted over him. Ironically neither of them seemed to have noticed that between the two of them, they were disturbing the peace to a greater extent than had been the case before
“There is no king!” someone shouted out from the crowd.

The whole square went silent. The Navy officer loosened his sword from his scabbard. “Who said that?” he asked quietly. His voice carried over the heads of the townspeople.

There was a rustle of movement from the center of the crowd and then someone either very brave or very foolish stepped forward. He was dressed in orange robes - a man of the Sect.

“The King is dead,” the man said confidently. “There is no king, there is only the word of Him until He sees fit to choose another king.”

“The King might be dead,” the officer said venomously as other sailors dressed in green began to gather around him, “but his peace lives on and you, sir, are destroying it.”

Jangmi didn’t wait around to hear the retort of the man in orange, pithy as it might be. Instead, she turned on her heel and fled, both to escape the naval officer and the brawl that was clearly about to ignite.

Scurrying back in the direction of the harbour, Jangmi noticed an increasing lack of people dressed in the drab colours of Jeju’s township. The only people wandering about freely were those in orange robes and the green uniform of the Navy. Elsewhere, doors were being barred and shutters were being slammed shut, like the town was preparing itself for a storm. Clashes between the naval and religious orders such as the one occurring in the town square were evidently a common occurrence, and the people of the town knew better than to get involved.

Jangmi spotted a naval patrol up ahead in the street and dodged between two houses, only to nearly walk into a trio of surprised but not displeased men, who had been in the middle of forcefully liberating a drunken sailor of his purse.

“Sorry,” Jangmi blurted out, backing away and drawing her hood more tightly over her hair. “I’ll let you get back to your thievi- uh, whatever it is that you were doing.”

But before she could escape, the nearest man grabbed at her and pulled her into their midst. The drunken sailor, now forgotten by the three men, scarpered.

“That’s a nice cloak you have there,” one of the men said, leaning uncomfortably close to her face.
“I wonder what’s underneath it.”

“Another cloak,” Jangmi replied coolly, then cursed herself for letting her tongue run away with her.

The men were taken aback for a second, but soon their hands were back, reaching for her, pawing at the folds of her cloak, seeking a way through. Jangmi struggled to remain in control of the creeping fear that was rising just as inexorably as the calloused hand on her leg.

“You need two cloaks to keep you warm?” the man snickered. “Because I could do a better job.”

“No thank you,” Jangmi said courteously, pushing the panic away along with the roaming hands. “My cloak is rather less pungent.”

Her assailants probably didn’t know what the word ‘pungent’ meant, but they hadn’t mistaken her meaning, judging by the anger apparent on their faces. The man closest to her slammed a fist into the wall just inches from her face, making her flinch.

“Do you reckon she’ll talk less if we knock a few of her teeth out?” one of them leered at her, exulting in her show of fear.

“She don’t need teeth for what I have in mind for her,” another agreed.

“But I’ll be much prettier without the bruises,” Jangmi smiled with as much charm as she could muster, realising that the situation was far, far beyond her control. She hoped the fear didn’t show in her voice. They seemed to like her fear.

“I don’t know about that,” the first man said genially, and then landed a back-handed blow across Jangmi’s face, making her cry out in pain. Her left eye teared up, making her vision go blurry, and she tasted blood from where her the inside of her cheek had been cut open from the impact against her teeth.

Incensed, Jangmi spat straight into the man’s face. Her bloody spittle got him straight in the eye and he let go of her briefly to rub it off, but not before she was slammed back into the wall by the other two men and struck on the face in exactly the same spot as before, making her see stars.
“Right,” the first man growled, his face still flecked with pink saliva. He yanked Jangmi’s cloak apart, nearly breaking her fingers as she tried to stop him. The other two pinned her arms above her head as she tried to writhe away from them, but there was nowhere to go.

The man’s questing hand had brushed her money pouch with the sapphire earrings, and Jangmi cried out in desperation, unable to push him away. She would fight tooth and nail before she allowed them to be taken off her. She would take these men down to hell with her. She would -

“Cease and desist in the name of the law!”

Jangmi twisted her head round in the direction of the mouth of the alley to see who had spoken, and didn’t know whether to be relieved or even more terrified. About a dozen men dressed in green, the naval patrol she had seen up ahead, were stood framed in the sunlight, the leader with his hand on his pommel.

Seeing that they were outnumbered, Jangmi’s assailants stood back from her hurriedly. They looked at each other in a panic, and realising that none of them were willing to fight, bolted out the other end of the alley before another word could be said.

Now liberated, Jangmi’s hands went straight to the hood of her cloak, which had mercifully stayed on throughout the struggle. The money pouch was also still intact - Jangmi could feel its weight on her hip.

The group’s leader was scrutinizing her, and Jangmi felt a flash of panic. She bowed low to hide her confusion. “Thank you, officer.”

The officer pointed at her face. “You’ll want to get cleaned up. You won’t attract many customers looking like that.”

“I- ah, yes.” Jangmi said hurriedly. She touched the left side of her face, and winced at the pain. It felt hot and swollen.

The officer was still looking at her intently, and Jangmi resisted the urge to pull her hood all the way down so that her features couldn’t be seen at all.
“Still,” he said carelessly, “the other half of your face isn’t so bad. Mayhaps I’ll see you later.” And with a wink he left her in the alley, taking the other men of his patrol with him.

Jangmi stood stock still, alone in the alley, unable to process what had just happened. Five minutes on dry land and she had already been assaulted by one group of men, nearly robbed, and then rescued by the very people she needed to avoid at all cost.

She should thank her lucky stars that her smart mouth had earned her a slap hard enough to distort her features, because otherwise the sailors would have recognised her immediately and hauled her back to Seoul City before she could say the word ‘but’.

Jangmi tried to check on her tender cheek but winced as her hand poked her face much harder than she had intended - and she realised that she was trembling. Throughout the whole of her ordeal in the last few minutes she had been able to master her fear, forget it in the place of a need for action, but now it overwhelmed her. She slid down the wall, clasping her arms around her knees, and took in deep, gulping breaths. She was more afraid now than she had ever been on The Second Star, even more afraid than the moment when she had been kicked awake and forcefully manhandled by a bearded giant with bloodshot eyes and an eye-watering aura of ale, who had turned out to be one of the most infamous pirates to sail the Eastern seas.

But Jangmi had been taught to read men, and knew that Captain Kim Namjoon’s roughshod treatment of her stemmed from a complete lack of interest in her wellbeing. Whereas the men just now… they had wanted to hurt her. Really hurt her.

Dusty and begrimed and curled up in an alleyway, Jangmi reflected bitterly that she was reliving her earliest days. How fitting, that she should fall from grace to the station in life from which she had been saved. And there would be no one to save her this time.

But this time, Jangmi was done with relying on other people. They cared about you when it suited them, and used you when it suited them, and then forgot you when it suited them. This time, Jangmi would save herself from this mess under her own steam and if she had to fight her way through the entirety of the King’s Navy, then so be it.

Jangmi realised that the anger had pushed out the fear, and she stood up and dusted herself off, gently wiping away the wetness from her weeping eye with the corner of her cloak. While the Navy and the Sect were busy fighting each other, she was going to go back down to the harbour, pay the first fisherman she saw to row her up to the religious order’s schooner, and stow away in the hold or something until they made it to a foreign shore. There. That wasn’t so hard.
And hopefully, as they were sailing away, Jangmi would be able to lean out of a porthole and demonstrate her rudest hand gestures in the direction of The Second Star.

With her breath finally under control, Jangmi stepped out into the sunlit street and strode purposefully in the direction of the port, but she hadn’t taken more than five steps when a hand reached out from a shadowy doorway and jerked her hood down.

“Why is it that today everyone thinks they can just grab at me as they please?” Jangmi complained, but the rest of her words died in her throat as she turned and saw the naval officer from before.

“Now I did wonder,” the officer said quietly, emerging from the shadows, “what kind of Jeju whore speaks with a Seoul accent.”

“I…” Jangmi’s throat had gone dry. She took a step back, and bumped into another mariner who had appeared behind her. More and more green-clad sailors were appearing. She was being surrounded.

“They told us to search for a whore with copper hair,” the officer continued, a loathsome smile appearing on his face. “A whore with copper hair and speaking in the tones Seoul City.” He took out a small roll of parchment from his pouch and stretched it out for his crew to see. Drawn on it was what was unmistakably her face. “I think we’re in for a reward, fellas.”

With a jubilant cry, the sailors surged forwards and bound Jangmi’s hands behind her back. She didn’t even struggle, knowing that there was no way out. So much for fighting her way through the King’s Navy.

The officer stepped in front of Jangmi, grasping her hard under the chin to bring her injured cheek forward. “There’s a lot worse than that in store for you,” he promised her, and then spat full in her face. “Murderer.”

“Take her to the jail!” he ordered his men, and Jangmi was hustled through the streets of Jeju that were empty of ordinary citizens. The only people left to witness her capture were men on the navy, and they were rejoicing.

“No corner of Korea is safe for you,” one sailor told her, grinning widely as she passed him. Jangmi could only growl her fury, bound as she was.

They were approaching the steepled building and Jangmi was steered towards the entrance. She
was nearly blind in the gloom of the townhouse after the bright sunlight of the streets, nearly falling down the stone steps that led off the side as a result. Having regained her balance and her vision, Jangmi saw that she was in a cellar, to one side of which was a couple of stools and a dozen barrels of wine, and to the other side of which was a heavy-looking wooden door with iron bars across its pitifully sized window.

“Is this the best jail cell that Jeju has to offer?” the officer behind Jangmi snorted, echoing her thoughts precisely. “I’ve seen better enclosures on pig farms.”

She was shoved unceremoniously into the cell and the door clanged shut behind her. “You wait here nice and quiet-like until we stock the ship,” the officer told her kindly through the window, “and then we can take you back to Seoul and execute you just as you deserve.” Then, over his shoulder to one of his men, “Mariner Byeong, keep guard here, and I’ll put the key-”

But the rest of his words were drowned out by the sound of a commotion on the stairs. Several men clad in orange clattered down the stairs, hustling a man with his arms bound and a cloth sack over his head between them. They stopped dead at the bottom at the sight of the mariners, and were nearly barrelled into by a man who was dressed well enough to be Jeju’s mayor and was sweating enough to water all of Jeju’s crops as he ran down the steps.

“We need this cell,” one of the men in orange said brusquely to the mariners.

“As you can see, my good sir,” the officer said with disdain dripping from every syllable, “it is already in use.”

“Now, now Flame Tak, Officer Ho,” the mayor-type said in a placating voice, placing himself between the two parties, “there’s more than enough space-”

“Don’t tell me you seafaring peacocks can’t handle a single, unarmed woman,” the Flame guy said derisively. “No wonder we have to do your work for you, like catching pirates. Not that I’m complaining, it means the reward goes to us-”

The Sect’s prisoner was a pirate? Jangmi craned her neck to get a better view of the man with the sack over his head. His features being obscured, all she had to go by was his clothes. They were exceptionally unremarkable, but something about the way the man held himself rang a little bell inside her head, saying that she recognised him…
“I’ll remind you that our work is of importance to the realm and takes precedence over your little religious squabbles with second-rate outlaws,” Officer Ho said haughtily.

“We can put them both in the cell,” the mayor said hastily before Flame Tak could retort.

“And the key?” Flame Tak said impatiently. “I don’t want to have to go running round the town of Jeju looking for a jumped-up sailor every time I wish to access my prisoner.”

“We’ll keep it in… uh,” the mayor said, glancing at Jangmi, “the usual place, accessible to both parties, how about that?”

Flame Tak and Officer Ho looked at each other belligerently, ready to argue if the other party voiced an objection. But neither of them did, so the man in the cloth sack was shoved into the cell with Jangmi, and the mayor locked them in carefully. With a significant glance, he led both parties back up the stairs, each of them leaving behind a member to guard their respective prisoners.

With Mariner Byeong and his Sect counterpart sat as far away from each other as the room would allow and using all their focus to completely ignore each other, Jangmi was free to appraise her new cellmate. He was tall, restless, his concealed head moving side to side as he quested for any noise that might give him more details as to his location.

“Hello?” Jangmi whispered, and the head turned in her direction.

“Who are you?” Jangmi asked as quietly as possible so as not to attract the attention of their gaolers. All she received for her trouble was a shake of the clothed head and an indistinct noise. Jangmi guessed that he had been gagged, hence his silence.

“Sit down,” Jangmi ordered in a whisper. “You’re too tall for me to reach the sack on your head.”

The man sat down obediently, and with a final glance at the orange-clad jailer who had clearly very little interest in anything she did, Jangmi pulled the sack off his head with her teeth.

If Jangmi hadn’t been so intent on staying quiet, she might have gasped. Sat in front of her, with one eye swollen shut and a nose still dripping blood onto a stained gag, was not Captain Kim Namjoon, as she had suspected.
It was the ship’s reserved navigator, Jeon Jungkook.

Chapter End Notes

I BET YOU DIDN'T SEE THAT COMING, EYYYYYY.

So many questions in this chapter. What is the Sect of the Burning Sign? Why is Jangmi afraid of the Navy? Why is the ship's figurehead wearing trousers?

And, y'know, also, that cliffhanger at the end.

Guess y'all gonna have to wait a week to find out -^(^)/-
Rescuing the Rose (or, A Lesson in Blackmail)

Chapter Summary

Making a friend in prison has its perks - especially for wrangling your way onto a rescue mission that *someone* very much didn't want you to join.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jungkook ?”

“Mmfph ?”

“Oh, right, sorry.” Hands unfortunately bound behind her back with an expertly knotted rope, Jangmi bent towards Jungkook’s face in an attempt to pull down the blood-stained gag with her teeth, and hesitated. “Uh, may I?”

Jangmi received an supremely insolent look from Jungkook’s only functional eye in response. Of course she may. When incarcerated by hostile forces, it was hardly the moment for niceties.

Trying to touch Jungkook’s cheek as little as possible with her lips, Jangmi angled her teeth to try and grip the cloth, to yank it downwards. She focused on the task at hand, blocking out everything else, and on her fourth attempt managed to glide it over Jungkook’s mouth and chin, where it fell onto his collarbones like a gory imitation of a necklace.

“What happened?” Jangmi and Jungkook asked each other at the same time.

“You first,” they added simultaneously.

Jangmi crouched down and held up her hands to break the stalemate before the situation descended into farce. “I’ll go first.” At a whisper, she quickly recounted her brush with the Sect, the three men in the alley, and then her rescue and consequent arrest by the King’s naval forces.

“But why are you here?” Jangmi asked as soon as she was done, mystified.
“Not a clue,” Jungkook said, looking equally bewildered. “Jimin and I went to restock our supplies like we usually do but within five minutes I was mobbed by a horde of guys in orange - it’s almost like they were waiting for me, and Jimin and I tried to fight them off, but there were so many of them, and I think Jimin got knocked out, I don’t know, I didn’t see-” He took a breath to calm himself. “I heard something about a bounty. But why were they looking for me and not Namjoon?”

“And why did they hood and gag you?” Jangmi wondered.

There was a moment of silence as they looked at each other, equally devoid of answers.

“Let’s just focus on getting out of here,” Jungkook said finally. “Got any weapons?”

“Only my killer smile,” Jangmi said grimly.

Jungkook snorted. “Unless you have the Virtue of the Medusa, I think we’re better off with something made of steel.”

“Sorry,” Jangmi apologised with very little sincerity, “I left my arsenal on the Second Star, along with my battering ram and lockpicking kit.”

“But I didn’t,” Jungkook said with a grin. “I have a concealed blade in my shirt.”

“That’s great Jungkook,” Jangmi sighed, “but how do we get it off of you? You can’t expect me to use the same method as the gag.”

Jungkook’s lopsided, guilty expression was the only answer she needed.

“Oh, hell,” Jangmi muttered.

Jungkook lay down and squirmed around on the dirty floor until the friction had lifted the hem up to his midriff. But there was no blade strapped to Jungkook’s ribs, as she had expected. In fact, the only things of note hidden under Jungkook’s shirt were a pattern of purplish bruises blossoming
over a set of well-defined abdominal muscles.

“I don’t see anything,” Jangmi whispered to Jungkook, and then paused. “Anything useful, that is.”

“It’s not under my shirt,” Jungkook whispered back, “it’s *inside* my shirt. The left-hand seam, about the level of my lowest rib.”

Jangmi bent down towards Jungkook’s side to nudge the material aside with her nose, and found what she was looking for - a small metal rectangle, no larger than her thumb, sewn into the lining of Jungkook’s shirt. Strangely, there was no pommel - there was only a kind of wicker pattern of intricately twisted metal strands that came together and flattened out to form a deadly-looking blade.

“Take it from the blunt end,” Jungkook advised her.

“Thank you, I hadn’t thought of that,” Jangmi huffed. She got as close to the knife as she dared, then gripped the lower end delicately between her teeth, tugging it out with care. It was a good thing she had a dextrous mouth - otherwise Jungkook might just end up with a hole in his side to go with his messed-up face.

One of the prison guards coughed from the otherside of door and Jangmi froze, nearly dropping the knife. If they were caught now, there was no way they’d be able to get their rope cuffs off. But there was no sound of movement that followed.

“Once you get it out, stick it into the knot behind my back,” Jungkook whispered, once they were sure that no-one was looking in from the outside. Jangmi did as she was told, and stood back from Jungkook, glad to be able to speak again without potentially swallowing a very sharp object.

Jungkook concentrated, rubbing his hands together behind his back to try and work the knife into the rope’s fibres. While he did so, Jangmi crept over to the door to see if there might be any weapons they could use to fight their way out with if they managed to escape the cell. There wasn’t much - just the musket gun belonging to the mariner, which he would certainly not leave unguarded. Jangmi suspected that he trusted the member of the Sect just as much as he trusted his prisoner.

She wondered if she might be able to entice one of them over to try and get the location of the key out of them, but seeing as she couldn’t go looking for the key without being released by said key, it
would all just be an exercise in futility.

Behind her, there was a soft thump, and Jangmi turned to see a small coil of rope, neatly sectioned, lying on the floor at the feet of the triumphant Jungkook. He carefully picked up his knife and wove it back into his shirt, before motioning to Jangmi to come away from the door so that he could untie her.

“I’ll unbind you and then just do a loose knot around your wrists so that if someone pokes their head in, they’ll think you’re still tied up,” Jungkook whispered. “And I can keep my hands behind my back and put the sack back on.”

Jangmi barely even felt the deft movements of Jungkook’s hands before the rope fell away from her wrists, which she quickly rubbed to return the feeling to them.

“Where did you get that knife from?” Jangmi asked in a low voice as Jungkook looped the rope back over her hands with considerably less force than had been used the first time round. “I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“It was a gift,” Jungkook murmured. “Someone I know is good with his hands.”

Jangmi suspected that it was probably more than that - but carrying a Virtue was not something to go around shouting about, so she didn’t probe any further.

“Okay,” Jangmi said when Jungkook was done, “what now?” She had decided to follow Jungkook’s lead with regards to their escape. He was obviously the more experienced outlaw, and he didn’t seem too worried. In fact, he seemed almost confident. Jangmi wondered why. Did he know something she didn’t? Was he routinely kidnapped and imprisoned every other day?

“Now we figure a way out of the cell,” Jungkook replied. He considered the regrettably solid door, displeased. “I’d break my bones before I could kick that down. But they have to feed us at some point, right?”

“I don’t know,” Jangmi said hesitantly. “The Navy officer said that I was only to stay here until they finished stocking the ship. That could be at any moment.”

“So let’s hurry the food up,” Jungkook suggested with confidence. “Go and tell the mariner that
you’re hungry, and when he opens the door I’ll rush out and kick the carp out of him.”

“But there’s two of them,” Jangmi objected. “Could you overpower both before they raised the alarm?”

Despite his rather battered appearance, Jungkook looked superbly unconcerned. “Yeah, probably.”

Jangmi didn’t know whether to believe him or not, but she wasn’t going to crush his self-assurance now - she was relying on it to escape. “And what then?” Jangmi asked, half afraid to hear the answer.

“Then we go back to the ship,” Jungkook answered, as if it was obvious.

“And you think we’ll be able to make it without being recaptured?” Jangmi said doubtfully.

“Sure,” Jungkook shrugged. “The crew will have our back.”

“The crew of The Second Star?” Jangmi wasn’t sure whether she’d heard correctly. “But they might have already left!”

Now it was Jungkook’s turn to look at her like she was crazy. “Don’t be stupid. The Captain wouldn’t leave anyone behind. He’s probably on his way as we speak.”

Despite herself, Jangmi looked towards the stairs, half-expecting to see the Captain come waltzing in, so strong was the force of Jungkook’s conviction.

Jungkook saw from her expression that Jangmi wasn’t convinced. “He’s coming,” he said reassuringly. “Didn’t you know that he destroyed an entire city in order to rescue our Quartermaster?”

“God of Destruction,” Jangmi murmured. She had known that this nickname had been born of the total obliteration of the city of Fukuoka at the hands of the Captain, but she hadn’t known that it had been in order to retrieve a member of his crew. In fact, she hadn’t even questioned that it had been destruction for destruction’s sake. Pirates burned, pillaged and thieved, everybody knew that.
“Right,” Jangmi said, saving the consideration of that piece of news for later, “but if you’re so certain that your precious Captain is on his way to save us, why are we trying so hard to get out?”

Jungkook’s expression became half rueful, half admiring. “If Namjoon arrives and sees that we’ve sat around waiting to be rescued, he might just leave us in here to teach us a lesson.”

“Some Captain,” Jangmi muttered under her breath, but so far, Jungkook’s plan was holding up to inspection. And they didn’t have a better one.

Jungkook stood back and gestured towards the door. “The stage is yours, milady,” he said, with an elaborate and slightly sarcastic bow, before putting the sack back over his bloody head and keeping his hands out sight behind his back.

Jangmi took in a deep breath and walked slowly over to the door. On tiptoes, she could see out into the cellar, where Mariner Byeong and Sect guy were still assiduously and conspicuously ignoring each other.

“Excuse me, my good sir?” Jangmi ventured in her most meek voice.

The two men jumped at the break in the silence, then looked at each other. The Sect man gestured towards the door as if to say to the mariner, ‘she’s all yours’. Mariner Byeong got up slowly and came round until he was directly in front of her. “What?”

“It’s just…” Jangmi allowed a little wobble in her voice to come through, playing the vulnerably despondent card. “I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday and I feel a little faint…”

“So?” the mariner said, more angrily than was needed. That was a good sign. It meant that he was struggling to not be affected by the plight of a seemingly docile girl, all alone in the world. If he had been indifferent to her, it would have been harder to manipulate him.

“I was wondering if you would be kind enough to… if it were at all possible… to perhaps bring me something to eat?” Jangmi asked, pouring buckets and buckets of hopeful sincerity into every syllable.
The mariner huffed, and looked towards the Sect guy, who shrugged.

“Fine.” The mariner snapped, and traipsed towards the stairs, taking his musket gun with him as Jangmi had suspected he would.

He had taken a lot less convincing than Jangmi had thought. Even in line to the executioner’s block, Jangmi knew how to play her cards right. Especially when it came to men. A little smug, she crept away from the door and tugged at Jungkook’s sleeve.

“I’ve done my part,” she whispered. “He’s gone to get some food.”

Jungkook nodded tersely, all frivolity wiped from his face in favour of concentration. He pulled the sack off his head and positioned himself flat against the wall next to the door, ready to leap out at the first opportunity. Jangmi prayed that she would be able to follow him back to freedom.

The sound of footsteps approaching sent a shockwave through Jangmi’s body and she nearly jumped a foot in the air. Any second now, Mariner Byeong would open the door and she and Jungkook would leap into action, hurtling through the air and out of this grimy basement before anyone could try to stop them.

The footsteps stopped, sounding very close, but Jangmi couldn’t hear the jangling of keys. She sent a confused look at Jungkook and he returned one in kind.

“I’ll stand back from the door,” Jangmi called out, making sure that her footfall backing away from the door could be heard from outside so as to make it believable.

“Do what you like,” came the gruff reply, and a piece of stale-looking bread dropped onto the floor in front of the door through one of the slats in the iron bars.

Jangmi and Jungkook stared at it, dumbfounded.

The mariner hadn’t opened the door. He hadn’t even attempted to open the door. He hadn’t gone upstairs to get the key, he’d just brought back the first approximately edible item he could find.
“What do we do now?” Jangmi mouthed at Jungkook, who was still stood next to the door as if ready to strike.

“Ask for more,” Jungkook mouthed back.

Jangmi went back to the door. “I’m very grateful for the bread, Mariner,” she said, which was exactly the opposite of the truth. “However, I’m worried about the man in here with me. He hasn’t moved in a while… I think he might need water.”

Mariner Byeong had already gone back to his corner. “Not my bounty, not my problem,” he told her.

Jangmi tried not to let her frustration with the mariner show, turning to the Sect man, whose bounty it was and therefore whose problem it would be.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how to address you…?” Jangmi said in her smallest voice.

“Follower Oh.”

“Follower Oh,” Jangmi said, encouraged. “I think the man may be in need of water. His breath is very raspy, and his pulse is very quick… I think he might have sun sickness…”

“The sun makes us sick only because we beings are too weak to handle the light of our God’s benevolence,” Follower Oh told her severely. “And some are more susceptible to it than others…” he added with a sniff. But he got up, stretched his legs and made his way over to the stairs. Hopefully, he would come back with a receptacle too large to fit through the iron bars of their prison cell door.

But as he began to climb the stairs, sounds of an altercation drifted down from the floor above. Jangmi looked across at Jungkook, across whose bruised and bloodied face a smile had begun to spread. He nodded ever so slightly.

Follower Oh, pausing where he was, had time to say “what the -?” and then he was flying across the room, where he hit the floor with a thud and moved no more.
Standing where Follower Oh had been just a moment before was Captain Kim Namjoon in all his dishevelled glory, breathing heavily and armed inexplicably with a one-legged bar stool.

“Sorry I took so long,” he said grimly, and strode across the room to grab the mariner by his lapels before the man could even think about raising his musket gun.

“Open the door,” he barked in the mariner’s face, who had gone all red and blotchy.

“N-no,” the mariner choked out as defiantly as was possible for someone whose feet were no longer touching the ground.

“No?” Namjoon growled dropped the bar stool in order to land a staggering punch to the man’s jaw.

“N-no… k-key…” the mariner said thickly, his eyes sliding in and out of focus.

“Then where is the key?” Namjoon snarled impatiently. Behind him, the sounds of commotion were getting louder - gunshots, cries of pain, the clash of steel.

“N-no… k-key…”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Jangmi snapped. “Bring him here.”

Namjoon turned at the sound of her voice. “You! What are you doing here!” he demanded, looking furious.

“Same as Jungkook,” Jangmi responded sarcastically. “Having a picnic. Now bring the man here.”

Namjoon scowled at her, his eyes heavy with suspicion. “Why?”

“Do you want to get us out today?” Jangmi asked him angrily. “Or do you want to reenact your antics at Fukuoka?”
Namjoon gave her a look darker than anything she could have ever imagined, but he dragged the man over to the cell door without another word. Jangmi wormed her arm out between the iron bars and cupped Mariner Byeong’s cheek.

“Do you know where the key is?” she asked him.

“No,” he said. Yes, she heard.

“Where is it?” she asked quickly.

“Don’t know,” Mariner Byeong insisted. In the wooden box on the desk upstairs, his voice said.

“Is there a back way out of here?” Jangmi asked.

“Gnnhhhh-” The hatchway for the wine barrels oh god why won’t she stop asking questions-

“Put him to sleep,” Jangmi told Namjoon, who for once evinced the greatest satisfaction in carrying out her command. One clean blow to the temple and Mariner Byeong was out like a candle in a tempest. Namjoon dropped him unceremoniously on the floor. “So?”

“The key’s in a wooden box on a desk upstairs,” Jangmi told him quickly. “We can get out via the hatch they use to get the wine into the cellar, it’s hidden behind those barrels.”

Namjoon’s eyes widened in shock, but to his credit he didn’t hesitate for a moment before running up the stairs, yelling for Seongge. Jangmi turned to see that Jungkook had backed away from her, what was visible of his face gone stark white. “How did you know all of that?” he whispered.

Jangmi shook her head, preferring not to explain, especially not in this moment. Luckily, she didn’t have to hold out for long, because the Captain was back within seconds with the key, which he shoved into the lock so hard it almost broke. He gave it one quick twist, and Jangmi and Jungkook tumbled out into the cellar - to freedom.
Namjoon hadn’t paused for a moment, heaving wine barrels out the way, and quickly joined by Jungkook, they managed to clear a path to the slippery stone slide that served to deliver wine casks quickly and easily to the cellar. Jungkook went first, scampering up the flagstones with ease, followed by Namjoon, who had his hands pressed to the sides of the chute in order to keep moving upwards.

Jangmi glanced towards the staircase. Someone was yelling ‘let’s get out of here!’ and the sound was echoing around the stones, magnifying the volume tenfold. Above the din, Jangmi heard the clatter of footsteps on the stairs and dove into the chute after the two pirates.

Whenever she paused in her upward climb, Jangmi realised, she began to slide back down, so she used her dancer’s footwork to keep propelling her towards the exit. She heard a crash of wood from above and realised that Jungkook must have opened the topside door to the chute - forcefully.

Jangmi skittered up the last few metres and emerged into the late afternoon sun, disoriented, blinking her tunnel darkness away. She spotted Jungkook and Namjoon entering an alley to her left and followed them at a run.

“The others will have gotten out by now,” Namjoon was saying, tugging Jungkook to the opposite lip of the alley. “All we need to do is rejoin them on The Second Star and we can get off of this disaster of an island.”

“Let’s just hope we don’t run into any Sect members on the way out,” Jungkook said grimly. For all his earlier confidence, he didn’t seem keen to be captured again.

Namjoon shook his head. “This town is crawling with them, I’ve never seen anything like it. We’ll dodge from house to house. Are you ready? On my count of three. One, two- what are you doing?” Namjoon asked Jangmi as she moved to follow them.

“Coming with you,” she answered, puzzled at his question.

“No you’re not,” Namjoon told her, “It was Jungkook I came to rescue, not you.”

“But Captain-” Jungkook protested in the same moment that Jangmi opened her mouth in shock.

“You’re free to go wherever you like,” Namjoon explained nonchalantly, with the air of someone
who was commenting on the weather. “I won’t stop you.”

“But they’ll just find me and put me back in jail,” Jangmi objected, outraged.

Namjoon spread his hands in a defeated gesture. His meaning was clear: ‘too bad’.

“I just got our asses out of prison,” Jangmi whispered fiercely as a naval squadron marched past their hiding place and they dodged out of sight.

“And you’re free to use your liberty as you please,” Namjoon quipped, crouched down, “preferably in the opposite direction to The Second Star.”

Jangmi gaped at him, at a loss for words. How could someone possibly be so pig-headed? He should be on his knees thanking her, begging her to join his crew.

She realised that her confidence in his character had been misplaced. Her vision had been skewed by the unfailingly positive opinion that Jungkook and the other crew members had of him. But Jangmi couldn’t look for the same treatment from the Captain. Kim Namjoon only looked out for Kim Namjoon.

So, he wouldn’t play nice? That was fine by her. If one thing a life of lies and manipulation had taught her, it was that there was no good or bad. There was just control. You either had it or were subjected to it, and in no way did Jangmi mean to fall in line with someone else’s plan.

Anyone could be controlled - you just had to know how.

“Okay,” Jangmi agreed, to the surprise of Namjoon and Jungkook. “I’ll go the opposite way. Inevitably, I’ll be recaptured by the Navy or the Sect, or by the townspeople who want to get rid of both the Navy and the Sect.”

Namjoon looked at her suspiciously, sensing a trap but not seeing what it was quite yet.

“But I’m not planning on being shipped back to Seoul without a fight,” Jangmi continued innocently. “And it just so happens that I have a bargaining chip to play with.”
Namjoon considered her, his eyes narrowed. “Spit it out,” he growled.

“Well,” Jangmi said, sighing, “it just so happens that I know the precise location of the ship that houses not only the prized fugitive Jeon Jungkook, but also the legendary Pirate King Kim Namjoon, along with sundry other pirates that I’m sure will be worth a pretty penny.”

If looks could kill, Jangmi would be dead ten times over, she thought to herself serenely, refusing to quail under Captain Pirate King’s glare. “You wouldn’t.” He spat the words out from between his teeth as if it was a wine gone sour.

“Wouldn’t I?” Jangmi asked of him, wide eyed. “Well, then, that’s that I suppose.” She stood up and dusted herself off, then sauntered out into the middle of the street, in full view of any naval patrol or religious mob that might turn the corner. She raised her arms and filled her lungs with air.

“H-” Jangmi hadn’t even got the first syllable out before she was yanked back into the shadows. “Ouch!”

“You win this one,” Namjoon told her venomously. “But I swear on the sea it is the last game I will ever play with you.”

“That’s fine by me,” Jangmi said nonchalantly. “There’s nothing more I want from you anyway.”

Namjoon shook his head. “I should have thrown you overboard when I had the chance.”

“I strongly disagree,” Jangmi said lightly, “but it’s a bit late for that now.”

“Captain?” Jungkook had finally spoken up. He was peering round the corner of the building in the shadow of which they were stood.

“What is it?” Namjoon asked, alert to the tone of unease in his navigator’s voice.

“There’s a mob of Sect Followers headed in this direction.” Jungkook said quietly, backing away
from the edge of the alley.

Without a word, Namjoon and Jangmi followed suit, moving as quietly as possible until they reached the other end. The coast on that side was clear.

“Let’s go,” Namjoon said quietly, and this time the trio of fugitives left the shadow of the maze of cottages in sync, darting from alley to alley, doorway to doorway. Namjoon seemed to know the place well - within minutes they were on the outskirts of town.

“Are we not going back to the port?” Jangmi asked, seeing that they were headed towards a large copse of trees away from the shore.

“The others will have taken the rowboat,” Namjoon explained. “We’ll rejoin them on foot.”

The long, dark shadows cast by the setting sun were perfect for a stealth mission, Jangmi reflected as they slinked from bush to bush, slowly distancing themselves from Jeju town. However, they were less than perfect for maintaining one’s dignity, Jangmi discovered, as she tripped over an unseen branch for the fifth time in as many minutes. At least Captain Pirate King was faring no better, Jangmi thought to herself complacently, as Namjoon saved himself from falling face first onto the ground in the nick of time. Only Jungkook was moving slowly but surely through the undergrowth, with the same apparent amount of ease as one who was strolling through the cobbled streets of Seoul City.

It was even worse once they reached the forest, however. Little of the fast-fading light filtered down between the leaves, and though Jangmi’s eyes were opened as wide as she was able, she still had difficulty distinguishing a path. Giving up, she kept her gaze focused on Namjoon’s broad back, and after what seemed like far too long, they finally made it out the other side and out onto a small strip of sand that was the rim of The Second Star’s hidden cove.

The light from the portholes reflected down onto the gently undulating water, giving the impression that the ship was floating above a sea filled with Chinese lanterns. There was a rosy glow on the deck, and the soft hum of dozens of voices speaking seriously. The last rays of the sun were disappearing into the sea, casting a soft purple blush over the sky. Jangmi had never seen a more lovely sight.

Jungkook put his clasped hands to his lips and blew out a sound much like that of an owl. The signal echoed out over the water and the voices from the deck stopped.
“It’s us!” Namjoon called softly, but his voice carried and was met with a flurry of activity from the people on board the ship. Within minutes, the small wooden boat had been lowered down and Sejin was rowing them across the water towards The Second Star.

Their disembarkation was met with muted cheers from the crew mingled with sighs of relief, and one of disapproval from the part of Jimin, who had spotted Jungkook’s battered and bloody face. He moved to take Jungkook to the infirmary, but Namjoon stopped him with a gesture.

“Not just yet,” he said in his gravelly voice. “We need to set sail and hit the open sea as soon as possible.”

His command was relayed quickly and efficiently, and all celebration was cut short in favour of a smooth departure from the beleaguered island of Jeju. There was a strong breeze, and the shoreline became vague and fuzzy in minutes. Jangmi gazed out to the receding beach. It was lovely, but she was not sorry to be leaving.

“What in the seven seas?” Jangmi turned to see Yoongi scowling at her. “I thought we got rid of her!”

“So did I,” Namjoon said in an aggrieved tone of voice. “But now’s not the time to tell that story.”

“No, you’re right,” Yoongi agreed. “First tell me the story of why we have to leave Jeju in the black of night without selling our goods, again.”

In answer, Namjoon pulled out a scroll from his belt and laid it out flat against an upturned barrel. On it were the words ‘Wanted’, ‘Dangerous Even When Unarmed’, and ‘Reward of Ten Thousand Gold Pieces’. Underneath it was what was unmistakably Jungkook’s face, but a Jungkook with rounder cheeks and more innocent eyes than the quiet navigator Jangmi had come to know.

“What in the world?” Yoongi said quietly.

“I know,” Namjoon affirmed. “It doesn’t say what he’s wanted for, just that he’s wanted.”

“Then it’s to do with the Sect, not the Navy,” Yoongi surmised. “The Navy always states the crimes: piracy, pillage, murder.”
“That’s what’s written under our faces,” Namjoon said with a wry smile.

“But what could the Sect want with Jungkook?” Yoongi asked, brow furrowed.

Namjoon shook his head. “I don’t know. Even the Sect can’t possibly believe that heresy is hereditary.”

Both he and Yoongi considered Jungkook, who was still staring at his own, ink-drawn lookalike as if it might solve the mysteries of the world. But neither face yielded any answers.

Endeavouring to make use of the distraction, Jangmi made the mistake of trying to escape unnoticed and tripped over a coil of rope that hadn’t been put away. The noise made everyone look round.

“And the reason why the stowaway is back?” Yoongi asked, disdain dripping from every word.

“That one’s easier to answer,” Namjoon said grimly, taking a second scroll out from his belt. He laid it on top of the first and stretched it out so that everyone could see her face, distorted into a cunning smile, and underneath it, the words ‘Wanted For The Murder of the King.’

The crew of The Second Star looked from the poster to Jangmi, and Namjoon folded his arms.

“I think you have some explaining to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Ngl, I had fun writing about Jungkook's abs. Maybe I've been watching Fake Love too much (as if that's possible). Also, revelation, Jangmi has a Virtue! Who saw that coming? I've been trying to hint at it but there's sooo much to hint at that chapters 1-3 are basically entirely subtext. Answers are coming, I promise XD

Also living for sassmeisters Jangmi and Namjoon - they're far funnier than anything I ever say irl :( 

Stay tuned next week for some actual answers finally yay!
A Long Story

Chapter Summary

Backed into a corner, Jangmi has no choice but to reveal how she ended up aboard The Second Star, along with some of her most precious secrets...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the first time, as the full weight of the sombre gazes of the crew was turned on her, Jangmi saw the inhabitants of The Second Star as the world saw them - a band of infamous pirates.

Yoongi’s face, always serious, had become sinister, almost ghastly. Silent Seongge stood tall, eyes narrowed and chin raised as his headband flapped in the wind. All traces of a smile were gone from Taehyung’s face, making him look as if he had been carved out of stone. Even Jimin’s usually cherubic expression had become forbidding. But most fearsome of all was the Captain. The orange, flickering glow of the braziers lit up Namjoon’s face from below, drawing out his cheekbones in black shadows, his eyes two pools of darkness, making him look like something out a nightmare.

He stepped forward and Jangmi realised how tall he was - he towered over her. Involuntarily, she took a step back. Heart racing, and mouth dry, Jangmi considered fleeing. And then she remembered that she was on board a ship. Their ship.

Jangmi realised that she had no more aces up her sleeve. She was on their turf now. She had to live or die by their terms. Or she could try to convince them to let her stay. It might be time to show the cards in her hand.

Still, Jangmi consoled herself, she was in the hands of a crew as anxious to avoid the Navy as she was. That meant that they might decapitate her, but at least they wouldn’t give her head back to the authorities.

“I’ll explain,” Jangmi acquiesced. “Do you want the long version or the short version?”

“Short version,” Yoongi said at the same time that Namjoon said “long version”. Jangmi looked between them in surprise, not understanding why the Captain would suddenly take her side. But she took courage in the fact that he wanted to hear her out. She might be able to talk him round to
“If we get enough detail, we might discover why there’s a ten thousand gold piece bounty on Jungkook’s head,” Namjoon explained in a low voice to his crew. “She might not know that she knows something.”

“She doesn’t know anything about a pirate bounty,” Jangmi said, eyes narrowed. “But long story it is.”

“Will you let us get settled first?” Namjoon asked, suddenly appearing weary. “I need a drink.” He stepped out of the light of the braziers and his face became human again, his cheeks full and his eyes gleaming with a soft radiance. And for a moment, Jangmi almost thought he looked like an angel. An angel who has had a very long day.

Some of the crew members disappeared and reappeared with blankets and cushions while the Captain brought out half a dozen bottles of rum to share out with the crew. He poured himself out a considerable quantity and sat cross-legged amongst his men, looking expectantly at Jangmi.

In a matter of minutes, Jangmi felt as though she had gone from being a potential sacrifice at the altar of the sea gods to a mother about to tell her wayward, alcoholic children a bedtime story. And what a story she had for them. She waited until all the crew had sat down and took a deep breath.

“I don’t remember my parents,” she began. “I don’t remember what happened to them, if they abandoned me, or if I ever had any parents at all. I just remember the streets of the city where I grew up. And I don’t even remember the city’s name. I just remember the markets I was chased out of, the ports that were my playground, the cobbled streets that were often my bed for the night. I lived from meal to meal, with no real future. I could have become a pickpocket, a serving-girl, or I could have just frozen to death one cold night has happened every so often to children of Fate.”

“Children of Fate?” Jimin asked curiously.

“Abandoned children, children whose lives are in the hands of Fate,” Yoongi answered him in a quiet voice.

Jangmi nodded her agreement and went on. “I was no different to the children who populate every city in Korea, except for one thing: the colour of my hair. I don’t know if I inherited it from my mother or my father, or if it was just a gift from the gods. But it marked me out from the start as
different. I was picked on by the older children because of it. Sometimes people, complete strangers, would just pull my hair as they went by, or spit in it as I slept. Some people used to threaten me with knives, cut hunks of it off. I don’t know what for - maybe they thought that it would bring them luck. I hoped that it would infect them with mine.” Jangmi took a strand of her hair and twirled it absently around her finger. It shined gold in the light of the oil lamps.

“I didn’t always mind them cutting my hair - sometimes a rich stranger would give me a copper coin for my trouble. But more often was the pulling, the spitting, the threats. And that was my life as a strange, forgotten child. Until the very thing that marked me out as alien became the thing that marked me out as valuable. I’m lucky that I was discovered by the Guild of Courtesans before I was found by slavers.”

A murmur of agreement went round the candlelit circle. Everyone there had seen slaver ships and knew exactly what kind of terrible existence was in store for those captured.

“So,” Jangmi continued, “I was taken to the Guild’s learning house and I was fed without having to steal or beg, and I slept on a bed that wasn’t meant for a dog or a horse. For the first time in my life I was treated with something approaching gentleness. I was cleaned, made acceptable, made beautiful. I was taught to dance and sing and even to read, to better memorise lines of poetry. I was taught grace and dignity and the nature of men. And everything I was taught, I excelled in.”

“I see they never taught you humility,” Namjoon muttered.

Jangmi shot him a dark look. “Did you want to hear an explanation or did you just want a chance to exercise your wit?”

Namjoon held up his hands defensively. “I’ll let you continue.”

“Thank you,” Jangmi said dryly, “your kindness is overwhelming.”

“My kindness is the reason you’re able to explain yourself here instead of a jail cell,” Namjoon retorted, “so you may want to forego the sarcasm.”

“If I remember correctly, my escape had very little to do with your kindness,” Jangmi responded coolly.
“Enough!” Yoongi interjected as Namjoon opened his mouth to argue. “If we wanted to watch you fight we’d have taken bets and armed you with crowbars. Get on with the damn story.”

Jangmi sent the Captain one last scathing look before settling down to continue her tale.

“As I was saying, I was the Guild’s finest student. I was treated according to my achievements. I wore silks and satins and was praised from dawn until dusk. I was happy.” Jangmi’s nostalgic smile became twisted. “Too happy, maybe. They say that you can never change the luck of the stars under which you were born. Mine must have been unlucky ones. My life was changed yet again after the visit of the King’s Advisor.”

Jangmi looked around at the pirates seated in a circle, listening impassively to her story. They were no more impressed by her contact with the royal court than they might have been about a meeting with the local baker. Jangmi supposed that royalty wasn’t sacred to pirates - after all, they robbed them often enough.

“He came to visit the Guild’s learning house and the mistress had us all lined up in a row for inspection. I was front and centre. I thought he was a potential client. I was right, but not in the way that I thought. He wasn’t searching for a fresh new courtesan for himself. He was searching for one for his King.”

Jangmi grimaced. “He chose me. Of course he chose me. I was unique, I was special. I was going to be a fruit that people would travel from far and wide to taste. I was perfect for what he had in mind.

I was bought from the Guild House that very night, packed up and sent away with my belongings to a house that I didn’t yet know was on Royal grounds. I wasn’t sad about leaving - I was excited to finally be shown off to the world. I was determined to become the most legendary courtesan that Korea had ever known. I was even more excited when I saw the house that was to be my new abode. I’d known luxury at the Guild House, but this was on a new scale. There was not one undecorated surface, not one screen that hadn’t been painted with the most intricate designs of birds and flowers. I thought it was paradise. And I had not yet lain my head down in my bed than I received my first two guests.

The first, I recognised. The King’s Advisor, the man who had chosen me out of dozens of beautiful women, but who had not laid a finger on me. The second was middle aged, tall, dressed in opulent robes. He sighed when he saw me.

“You have chosen well, Advisor Bang,” he said, tracing my features, twisting a strand of my hair.
around the tip of his finger. “She is exquisite.”

The two men conferred quietly while I watched, and then the second man told me that it would be a shame to never taste a fruit from such a divine branch of femininity. He wished to try it before it was too late.”

Jangmi considered her hands, which were twisted in her lap. She hadn’t realised how hard she had been gripping her fingers - there were wide red and white marks over her palms from the pressure.

“AAfterwards, the servants brought in dinner - the most sumptuous dinner I had ever seen. I don’t even remember what was served, I remember only that each dish was served on a golden platter, and that I was thinking that we must be waiting on more guests, so great was the quantity.

But it remained only us three, and before I was allowed to take a bite out of any of the dishes placed in front of me, I was given a chalice, into which was poured a thick red liquid unlike any wine I had ever seen before.

I would have been blind not to notice that this chalice held something of great importance. Both the Advisor Bang and his companion could not take their eyes off it, and yet neither had moved to taste it. They only waited apprehensively as I raised the chalice to my lips.”

“If neither of them were drinking it,” Jimin interrupted, “how could you be sure that it wasn’t poisoned?”

Jangmi looked at Jimin sorrowfully. “The short answer is that I couldn’t. But the truth is that if the King’s Advisor wishes you to die, refusing to drink the poison is of no use. I could have drunk it with dignity, or I could have it forced down my throat. That is the life of a courtesan - luxurious, prized, expendable.”

There was only silence from the crew, but it was a melancholy one. The life of a pirate, Jangmi reflected, was perhaps no different. Only Namjoon’s face was hard, his eyes flinty as if he knew what followed.

“So I drank the liquid,” Jangmi continued, “only it wasn’t wine in the chalice. It was something thicker, saltier. I think it was blood.”

Several of the crewmembers exclaimed in disgust. And yet some seemed to have caught on. Jimin and Yoongi had gone still, and Namjoon looked at her sharply.
“Whose blood?” he asked her, disquieted.

“I don’t know,” Jangmi confessed.

“What did it do to you?” Namjoon pressed.

“I-I don’t. . .”

“Tell me, Jangmi,” Namjoon shouted, “which one is it?”

“Oh which one is what?” Taehyung asked, looking confused at the Captain’s passionate reaction.

“Which Virtue did they give you to carry?” Namjoon demanded, not taking his eyes off Jangmi’s face.

An uneasy hush settled over the crew as the weight of their gazes pinned Jangmi to her seat. She swallowed. She had been told never to reveal her Virtue to anyone, at risk to both herself and the safety of the realm. But the safety of the realm was already jeopardized, and the only way she could stay safe was to entrust her secret to these uncouth, unloved pirates.

“They will sell you for your tears and kill you for your heart’s blood,” Jangmi could still hear the King’s advisor whispering in her ear from that very first night. “Our secrets are yours and your secret is ours. We must protect each other or we both will drown.”

Well, it was too late to protect each other now. Jangmi needed to protect herself now. And for that, she needed these pirates, and their trust. “Entrust a secret to someone, no matter how small, and they will consider themselves your guardian even while they stab you in the back.”

Jangmi had learned her lessons well. But she was about to break them.

“When I touch people, I can hear their thoughts,” she said finally.
A few crewmembers gasped; Namjoon sat back, looking satisfied. Now they knew. With this knowledge, they could sell her off to the slavers, and they still might do so. She had been worth a fortune as a courtesan; she was worth a kingdom as a Virtue carrier.

“How does it work?” Taehyung asked, half curious, half repulsed. “If you only touch someone for a second, can you only hear a word of their thoughts?”

Jangmi shook her head. “I generally hear coherent sentences. People tend to think faster than they can talk.” She glanced at Namjoon spitefully. “Most people, anyway.”

“And does it only work with your hands?” Jimin asked. “Or is it all over your body?”

“Any time I come into contact with someone’s skin, I can hear their thoughts,” Jangmi explained. “But it’s like hearing someone speak from the next room. I have better control when it’s with my hands.”

Namjoon was nodding thoughtfully. “Unclassified.”

Jangmi looked at him, mystified. “Excuse me?”

“It’s an unclassified Virtue,” Namjoon explained as if it was obvious. “It’s the rarest type.”

“There’s more than one type of Virtue?” Jangmi asked, nonplussed.

“Is there- yes, of course there is!” Namjoon spluttered. “Did they not teach you anything when they gave you that Virtue to carry?”

Jangmi looked at him blankly. “No. They just tested me to see if it worked.”

Namjoon sighed as if he was a guild teacher in front of a particularly dense student. “The Virtues are divided into four classes. In decreasing order of frequency and increasing order of power, they are the class of Enhancement, the class of Transformation, the class of Manipulation and the Unclassed. Virtues of Enhancement are defined by-”
“We know all this,” Yoongi interrupted, ever impatient. “Can you make it short?”

Namjoon looked at his First Mate, slightly miffed. Clearly, he enjoyed demonstrating his extensive knowledge in front of less informed parties.

“Fine. Virtues of Enhancement are things like speed, memory, agility. Things that already exist in normal people but just enhanced. Virtues of Transformation means being able to transform oneself - into an animal, into a material, depending on the Virtue. Virtues of Manipulation means controlling things outside of your body, so the weather, the elements, even other people. The last and most rare class of Virtues is the Unclassified, those that can’t even be properly categorised.”

Namjoon sighed. “They also can’t properly be controlled. Carriers of the Virtues of Enhancement and the Unclassified Virtues have to live with them perpetually, and it takes many years of study and practice to be able to diminish their potency, even just for a while. Carriers have to live with the consequences of their Virtue until the day they die.”

“Blood carriers, you mean,” Yoongi corrected him.

“Yes,” Namjoon affirmed.

“Blood carriers?” Jangmi asked hesitantly, never having heard the term before.

“There are three kinds of carriers,” Namjoon explained to her. “A blood carrier is someone who has permanent possession of a Virtue, whereas a true-blood carrier is someone who was born with the Virtue. The only way of gaining permanent possession of a true-blood carrier’s Virtue is to…”

“…to drink their heart’s blood.” Jangmi finished the sentence for him in a whisper, thinking back to Advisor Bang’s words.

“Exactly,” Namjoon confirmed. “But that’s not the only way of transferring a Virtue. A normal person can acquire the use of a Virtue for a few short hours by drinking the tears of a blood carrier.”

“Why their tears?” Jangmi asked him.
Namjoon shrugged. “No one really knows, but I have my own theory.”

“What is it?” Yoongi turned to his Captain, looking as astonished as Jangmi felt.

“I think that it’s because tears are water from the heart. That’s why the third type of carrier is called a water carrier.”

“Water and blood,” Jangmi murmured. All this explained why a Virtue carrier should fear for their lives. People would pay money to possess a Virtue for a while, but they would also kill to possess it forever. She shivered. She had drunk someone’s blood, someone who had carried the Virtue of mind-reading. Who had they been? How had their heart’s blood ended up in a chalice meant for a courtesan? “They will sell you for your tears and kill you for your heart’s blood…”

“How do you know so much about Virtues?” Jangmi asked Namjoon, unwillingly impressed.

“I was interested in it as an area of study in my youth,” Namjoon said shortly. “I can’t say that this field of knowledge served me particularly well.”

Jangmi looked at him quizzically, not knowing what that statement was supposed to mean, but Namjoon waved her forthcoming question away with one of his own. “Why would a King give a priceless Virtue to common courtesan?”

“I was getting to that,” Jangmi sniffed, choosing to ignore the word ‘common’ for the time being. “After they confirmed that I was truly carrying the Virtue, they finally revealed what my purpose was to be.”

The crew leaned forward as one expectantly.

“The King feared for his life,” Jangmi explained in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. “He suspected a plot to kill him or remove him from power. But court politics are complicated and going round accusing people of treason is no way to run a country. That’s what Advisor Bang said, anyway.”

Namjoon made a movement that was almost like the beginning of a nod, but then he seemed to catch himself and decided to fold his arms over his chest as if nothing had happened. Jangmi
ignored him.

“So the King and his advisor had come up with a plan to plant a spy at court, one who could discover people’s secrets without their even knowing. Someone with access to everybody of importance. Someone who was by definition meant to touch and be touched.”

“You,” Jimin said softly.

“I was to stay in the house on the royal grounds and receive the guests that Advisor Bang and the King suspected of political dissidence, listen to their thoughts and report back. No more, no less.”

“Hang on,” Namjoon said, eyes narrowed. “I thought that courtesans choose who they invite to bed.”

“Courtesans choose who they are told to choose,” Jangmi told him derisively, “To believe otherwise is nothing short of naive.”

“Says the courtesan who believed that she could be sailed across the sea, for free, by a bunch of pirates.” Namjoon snorted. “Right.”

“In all honesty, I wasn’t planning on being discovered,” Jangmi pointed out. “I was hoping to arrive unnoticed on a foreign shore and get the hell out of here.”

“And live off of what?” Namjoon asked her indignantly. “Were you planning to steal our food throughout the whole voyage?”

Jangmi shrugged. “You’re pirates. Who are you to complain about a little redistribution of property?”

Jungkook laughed and then closed his mouth abruptly at the scowl Namjoon shot at him. “She’s got a point,” he said defensively.

“But none of this explains why she’s wanted for the murder of the king, nor why she chose to hide away on our ship out of every bloody boat in the harbour!” Yoongi said impatiently. “How about
Jangmi held up her hands to deflect any further ire. “I’m getting there, I promise.”

Other than Yoongi, however, the crew seemed to be enjoying her tale, she saw. They were nearly down to the last bottle of rum.

“I noted down everything that could possibly be of importance and gave it to Advisor Bang in person, as I had been instructed. He usually came in the guise of a client, but in case of emergencies there was a secret passage under my bed that led straight to his quarters. Only he, the King and I knew of its existence.

Diplomats and government officials came and went, and Advisor Bang made the occasional visit to find out what I’d learnt, but other than that, it was a lonely existence. I wasn’t allowed to leave my gilded cage, and I had few visitors. There was only the servants, and occasionally, when her duties permitted, my closest and only companion, Son Heemi.”

Just saying the name hurt, even now. Even with the distance time had placed between them. Jangmi felt the tears rise to her eyes and swallowed them down forcefully.

“Son Heemi…” Namjoon said slowly. “Son Heemi, the only daughter of the powerful Son family?”

Jangmi shot him a surprised look. “That’s not how most people would identify her these days. What kind of pirate needs knowledge of the scions of the Great Families?” she asked, adding, “They’re all the same to you - potential targets.”

“How would most people classify her?” Taehyung asked curiously, before Namjoon had a chance to respond.

“Son Heemi became Her Royal Highness Son Hyeyong on the occasion of her marriage.” Jangmi said quietly.

A stunned silence greeted her words. So they were impressed by royalty, Jangmi thought to herself, feeling a little smug.
“You, a courtesan, were friends with the Queen?” Yoongi asked, astonished. Next to him, Jimin’s jaw had dropped open.

Jangmi nodded. “She first came to me a few weeks after I arrived. She was curious to meet me, she said, to meet this wonderful woman who was new to court. My name was on the lips of every government official for miles, and those lucky enough to meet me had spoken of my exotic beauty, my endless charms. And now, having met me, she knew that they had been speaking the truth.”

Jangmi felt the ghost of a blush rise to her cheeks, remembering the effect those words had had on her the first time she had heard Heemi say them. She had been so sincere, her eyes shining with fervour and admiration. Jangmi had felt her words slide away from her, her famed wit deserting her in the face of such frank adulation. But she couldn’t think of those words now without feeling her stomach twist. Some truth.

Namjoon opened his mouth to make what was in all likelihood a snide remark, but Jimin elbowed him in the ribs before he could do so. Jangmi gathered her thoughts and continued.

“She came as often as she was able, always apologising for not being able to stay longer, always bringing some gift or bauble, though I had plenty of jewelry already. I tried to repay her kindness as much as was possible. I painted her a fan once and she brought it with her for every visit after that, exclaiming that it was her favourite.

We spent hours talking - she had many cares and no one to share them with. The political ambition of her family, her worries about displeasing the King, her wildcard younger brother. I listened to her struggle with the weight on her shoulders, offering advice when I could and consolation when I could not. She like to hear me talk too - she often said that my voice was like that of a sparrow, bright and warming.

She worried that my love of life would dry up if the only company I had was that of old, dry men. She spoke of desire, too, how it would dry up in the face of boredom. She… she wanted me to teach her.” Jangmi’s face grew hot. “She wanted me to teach her how to discover her pleasure.”

Not a breath of air stirred on board The Second Star. Her audience was leaning forwards, hanging on her every word.

“She had come at dusk, and with a gift more lavish than any I could have ever dreamed of - a golden goblet embossed with the King’s very own seal. How could I refuse her?”

Jangmi opened her mouth, but no words came out. It was still the same as it had always been with regards to Heemi - she was left speechless. She didn’t know how to describe what had followed. The breathless intoxication of excitement, Heemi’s teasing laugh when Jangmi’s hands had trembled over her robe’s fastenings, the soft sigh of the fabric falling to the floor, the tenderness and desire in Heemi’s eyes, the tumult of sensation, their mutual hunger, her smiling red lips…

“Why isn’t she speaking?” Jungkook asked at a whisper, looking confused. “Did she not know how to explain the word ‘desire’? It’s not that complicated a word.”

“No, I… I explained it to her,” Jangmi said, her heart twisting in her chest. “But while we… while I was explaining, I heard her think of something. A secret.”

“What was it?” Taehyung asked, leaning forwards.

Jangmi took a deep breath. “She thought, ‘It is a shame that she will be executed for the murder of the King’.” Tears threatened to spill out from Jangmi’s eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Taehyung said, puzzled. “How did she know that you were going to kill the King?”

Jangmi shook her head. “I didn’t understand either, at first. But as she was running her fingers through my hair, she was thinking about how the loose strands would look on the King’s pillow, though I had never been to the palace. As she was tasting my lips, she was wondering if the King would be able to detect the poison in his wine as he was drinking it. As she was kissing my neck, she was thinking about how it would look stretched over the executioner’s block.”

“She was going to frame you,” Jimin gasped, realising.

The tears that had threatened now spilled over, painting glistening tracks over Jangmi’s cheeks. The only friend she had ever had, the only person to ever seek out her company… In many ways, Jangmi wished that she had never known the tantalising dream of Heemi’s easy smile. It had been easier before, alone and abandoned, not understanding what it was like to have a friend. Then she would have never understood how it felt to be betrayed by one.
Jangmi wiped her tears away forcefully with the heel of her hand. “I had to pretend that I didn’t know what she was thinking. I had to listen to her every thought describing my role in the assassination plot whilst still pretending to enjoy her… her. She had stolen the goblet from the King, knowing that it would be found in my house. She had ensured that the King was dining alone. She had found a way to bypass the King’s tasters.”

“When was she planning to kill the King?” Taehyung asked in a hushed voice.

Jangmi looked at him, the tracks of her tears still glittering by the warm light of the braziers. “That very night.”

There were gasps and exclamations from the crew, but Jangmi didn’t pay any attention. She didn’t want to have to relive that day any longer than she had to. Scrubbing at her eyes, she ploughed on with her story.

“For the first time, I wished that Heemi would leave as soon as possible. And when she finally did, I took the secret passage to Advisor Bang’s quarters, running like I’d never run before. When I told him, his face went white and he went straight to the King. But it was too late. The King was already dead and the guards had already been sent to my lodgings where I had left the golden goblet.”

“How did the Queen get back before you?” Namjoon asked intently.

Jangmi shook her head. “She couldn’t have. She must have had an accomplice.”

“Someone related to Jungkook, perhaps?” Jimin asked at a whisper.

Jungkook shook his head slowly, wincing at his bruises, the painful reminder of the beating he had suffered at the hands of the Sect that very morning. “Can’t be. The only family I have left is the one I made for myself on this ship.”

“Then what happened?” Taehyung asked eagerly.

“Then, Advisor Bang came back,” Jangmi said with a small smile. “I’ll forever be grateful that he
didn’t hand me over. He didn’t have to protect me, a courtesan with no family and no value other than the one he had given me.”

“He wanted to protect his investment, I suppose,” Yoongi murmured.

“Whatever the reason, he saved my life,” Jangmi said firmly. “He told me to leave Seoul immediately, and that there was a pirate ship docked in Silmido port that would take me to safety. That it was a home for those who had none on dry land.”

“How did he know?” Yoongi asked, his brow furrowed. “How did he know that we were in Silmido?”

“I don’t think that this Advisor Bang was just an advisor,” Namjoon said, his face dark. “This kind of subterfuge, close links to the King, the ability to acquire a Virtue that can’t be bought with money… I think that your beloved advisor was in fact the King’s master spy.”

“Spy?” Jangmi looked astonished. “But he never… he seemed so… he was normal.”

“And you were just a courtesan,” Namjoon reminded her. “Yet you can read minds.”

Jangmi bit her lip. It fitted, in an odd sort of way. The best way for someone to hide was of course in plain sight.

“So you snuck out of the palace, escaped the city and made it onto The Second Star, where you’ve been annoying us ever since.” Yoongi finished Jangmi’s story for her.

“In essence, yes,” Jangmi admitted.

“And in all your time as a courtesan spy, you never heard anything about Jeon Jungkook?” Namjoon asked, looking crestfallen.

“No, I’m sorry,” Jangmi said, and her apology was from the heart. The Captain of The Second Star might be an over-proud, alcoholic bully but its navigator had proved himself very much unworthy of a bounty of such epic proportions; Jangmi had seen that much when they had been imprisoned
together. When it came to reasons for wanting Jungkook dead, Jangmi was as much at a loss as the rest of the crew.

“So that was a heroic waste of time,” Yoongi commented, getting to his feet.

“Wait a second,” Namjoon said, halting the exodus. Silent Seongge had tugged on his sleeve, pointing at the pouch Jangmi used to carry the earrings. “Where did you get the earrings from?”

“Advisor Bang gave them to me,” Jangmi explained shrugging. “They were in the pouch along with the money I used to get out of Seoul.”

But Seongge was shaking his head, pulling at Namjoon’s sleeve more insistently. Namjoon looked between the two of them, confused, and then suddenly realisation spread across his face.

“Hell’s back entrance,” he swore, “you cheated at Stinkpot!”

“What?” Jangmi said hurriedly. “No I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did!” Namjoon insisted. “You touched me when you were using the Thief - you knew exactly what cards I had in my hand!”

Jangmi opened her mouth to argue, but she saw that it was a lost cause. Namjoon looked ready to pitch a tantrum and the others didn’t look too happy either.

“Fine,” Jangmi grumbled, reaching into her pouch. “You can have your payment.”

Jangmi drew out the sparkling sapphire earring and made to press it into the Captain’s hand, but he quickly drew it back.

“Don’t think you can get into my head that easily,” he warned her.

Jangmi scowled at dropped the earring into Namjoon’s hand from a distance of half a foot, just to make a point. “Does this mean that you’ll take me away from Korea?” she asked him hopefully.
“Nice try,” Namjoon told her. “But this is your payment for your passage to Jeju. We never agreed on a fee for our next destination.”

“That’s a good point,” Yoongi said, taking a swig of rum. “What is our next destination?”

Namjoon sighed. “We still haven’t sold off our stock from our last venture and we can’t risk the shores of Korea until we know what Jungkook is wanted for, so I guess our best option is Shanghai.”

“Shanghai?” Jangmi asked perking up. “We’re going to China?”

Namjoon looked at her askance. “I said I wouldn’t play any more of your games, so I won’t ask you for the other earring because I know you’ll only try to get it back. But this voyage isn’t for free, either. You’ll scrub the deck and take orders from the lowest of the cabin boys without complaint or I’ll throw you overboard, earring and all.”

“That sounds fair,” Jangmi shrugged.

“And Taehyung, find her something to wear,” Namjoon instructed his multi-talented carpenter. “She can’t swab the deck in that dusty old cloak.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Taehyung saluted and scampered off below deck.

Jangmi felt all the tension leave her body in one go and had she not already been sat down she would have fallen over. She was finally leaving Korea, had finally been permitted to stay on board. She might yet make it out of this nightmare alive.

“Is there any rum left?” she asked. “I think I’m in need of a drink.”

Jimin found a bottle that still had a slosh of rum left inside and handed it over, neck first. “Taste the sweetness with the tip of your tongue and then left it slide down your throat,” he advised her. “Don’t gulp it down like you would water.”
Jangmi did as she was told, taking the tiniest of sips and pulling a face at the taste nonetheless. But then a warmth started to spread out from her stomach, and Jangmi looked at Jimin in surprise, who in turn nodded approvingly. Jangmi took another sip. The taste was still too strong for her personal preference, but she could now see why the pirates enjoyed it.

By the time that Jangmi had finished what remained in the bottle, Taehyung had returned with a pile of clothes, which he dumped at her feet.

“We robbed a passenger ship,” he explained cheerfully, “so some of things things ought to fit you.”

Jangmi spotted a familiar shape amongst the bales of fabric and pulled out a corset, to the amusement of the entire crew. “A corset?” she said disgustedly. “You think I escaped the life of a courtesan, travelled halfway around Korea and threw my lot in with pirates just to wear yet another corset?”

“What’s wrong with them?” Taehyung asked, disconcerted. He clearly wasn’t used to having his fashion advice called into question.

“They’re torture devices,” Jangmi told him archly, “to prevent women being physically able to fight off a male attacker.”

“They can’t be that bad,” Taehyung said uncertainly.

“Oh yeah?” Jangmi challenged. “Let’s put you in a corset and see how you do in a fight.”

The crew roared with laughter at this, and though everyone thought it was a great idea to make Taehyung fight in a corset, it was clear that no way would he ever be able to fit one around his broad frame. Instead, as the slightest member on board, Jimin was chosen to be the sacrifice.

“What have I done to deserve this?” he protested as Taehyung steered him towards the cabin to get changed.

From behind closed doors, all that could be heard from the two of them was the rustle of fabric, a grunt or two from Taehyung and the occasional ‘ow!’ from Jimin as they wrestled him into the cloth contraption.
Finally, Taehyung emerged, grinning ear to ear. “Come on out!” he called.

“This is the dumbest idea you lot have ever had,” came the grumbling tones of Jimin from out of sight.

“Come on, show yourself!” Jungkook encouraged him mischievously, having seemingly forgotten any discomfort from his injuries.

There was a loud, heartfelt sigh and Jimin came into view, cinched into a corset, giving him the silhouette of a willowy young woman. The crew broke out into appreciative whoops and all-out laughter.

“I think the life of a pirate was wasted on you, Jimin,” Jangmi told him, grinning, and he scowled at her. Taehyung and Jungkook were collapsed against each other, weak from laughter, and Yoongi’s mouth had turned into a small ‘o’ from shock. Even Captain Pirate King was chortling at the sight of a disgruntled Jimin whose figure would be the envy of many a noble-born Seoul socialite.

“She’s right,” Jimin announced, “there’s no way anyone could fight in this.” He attempted to kick an invisible enemy and nearly tipped himself over, the stiff fabric not allowing him anywhere near his normal range of movement.

The crew laughed even harder, Taehyung wiping away tears of mirth. Sejin and Deokwoon were both on the floor, falling over each other. The sight left even the normally-cold Yoongi unable to retain himself - his mouth had perked up into something like an intrigued smile.

“Okay, okay,” Taehyung said, between gasps for breath. “I take it all back. Corsets are the worst.”

“You thought it would be hard to scrub the deck in a cloak. You had no idea,” Jangmi giggled. She was feeling a little lightheaded, probably from all the rum. She was a little giddy, happy to have inspired laughter that even Jimin could join in on. If only Captain Pirate King wasn’t such a stick in the mud, The Second Star might have been a pleasant place to stay.

And true to form, Captain Stick-in-the-Mud cut the laughter short, liberating Jimin and sending the others to bed or on watch, as they had yet a long way ahead of them to Shanghai.
Jangmi took the bundle of clothes and made to return to her little cubby-hole inside the ship’s figurehead, but the sound of a throat being cleared stopped her in her tracks.

“I’ve asked Jimin to find you a spare hammock after he sees to Jungkook’s injuries,” Namjoon said gruffly. “It’ll be more comfortable than that wooden bench.”

“Oh,” Jangmi said, surprised. “Thank you.”

“It’s about a week to Shanghai,” Namjoon warned her. “You had better earn your keep while you’re on board.”

Jangmi rolled her eyes. “Yes, Captain Pirate King, sir.”

“Excuse me?” Namjoon spluttered. “What did you just call me?”

“Uh…” Jangmi realised too late that she probably shouldn’t use her favourite nickname for him out loud.

“Get on with you to bed,” Namjoon shook his head, and as she left, Jangmi could have sworn that she could heard him chuckle and say, “Captain Pirate King... I’ve heard worse.”

Chapter End Notes

Ta-daaaaaaa. I've been sitting on eight thousand words worth of backstory since chapter 1, such a relief to finally explain what the hell has been going on. Courtesan spies, assassination plots, lesbian lovers, we got it all. Also sassy Yoongi, which you needed even if you didn't know you needed it.

If you're enjoying what you've been reading, please leave a comment! It's really useful to know what's going well and what's not, and also it's just such a boost for writing more chapters.

And speaking of more chapters, next week's is called 'Call To Arms' so obviously the crew of The Second Star is just gonna chill out on an island somewhere sipping pina coladas...
Call To Arms

Chapter Summary

Jangmi has a rude awakening. Things go downhill from there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Heemi’s face hovered in front of her own, her red lips parted in a smile that was for once not jesting or exuberant, but hesitant, almost shy. “Will you do it?” she asked. “Will you teach me?”

“Your Highness, I…” Jangmi couldn’t seem to speak. She could only take in the gloriousness of Heemi’s frame, silhouetted as it was against the golden sunlight pouring in through her window as it set. The brightness of her eyes. The heightened colour in her cheeks. The hint of tongue against white teeth.

Heemi slowly raised a hand to Jangmi’s cheek, but she didn’t touch it, instead hovering just over her skin. “I want you to teach me what it feels like… to find my pleasure. Please.”

The word made Jangmi’s stomach drop, a heat spread throughout her body. Heemi had never, ever used that word before. She was a Queen. She didn’t have to ask. She only had to command.

“I…” Jangmi tried again. “I want to.” She swallowed as Heemi’s mouth curved upwards, her eyes sparkling like the jewels she wore at her ears and her throat. Heemi’s hand drifted down to Jangmi’s waist, where she untied her robe in one smooth motion. It fell to the floor, leaving Jangmi only in her underclothes.

“You don’t have to undress me,” Jangmi said, confused.

Heemi tilted back her head and laughed, but it was without her usual assurance. Instead, it was breathy and excited. “My little sparrow. You can show me what it feels like to find my pleasure, but to really teach me I shall have to practice on you.”

Jangmi’s mouth went dry, but it was the only part of her that was. Her back was slick with perspiration, both from the summer heat and the nervousness. And as for the space between her
Heemi went to take off her own robe, but Jangmi’s hands darted out first, unclasping the fastenings that bound her clothes around her slim frame. There was a sigh of soft silk falling to the ground around Heemi’s feet, and Jangmi’s breath hitched as she beheld the Queen in only a corset and hose. There was nothing between the two.

Jangmi’s met Heemi’s unwavering gaze. She had never looked so beautiful. Slowly, Jangmi knelt in front of her until her face was level with her mound, the patch of skin blanketed in a dark down. She was trembling, as was Heemi, she realised. But neither of them were trembling from fear.

Slowly, Jangmi approached, until she could feel her own breath rebounding back to her face, laden with the scent of arousal. Somewhere above her, Heemi let out a soft moan. Level with her mouth, Jangmi could see a small flap of skin protruding from between the two lips. Slowly, ever so slowly, she pressed her mouth to it and-

“All Hands On Deck. All Hands On Deck.”

The yell was like a hunting horn that had gone off right next to her ear - Jangmi woke with a start and cracked her head on something very, very hard. Her eyes that had sprung open at the sudden roar were forced closed from the blinding pain and for a moment, Jangmi was completely lost as to where she was. All she had glimpsed was wood and rope, rolls of cloth swaying in synchronisation. Then it all came back to her; she was in her new hammock, the one that had been strung up in the crew’s sleeping quarters, and she had hit her head on one of the beams that criss-crossed the ceiling.

“Gah,” she gasped, massaging her head. “What in the world is going on?”

All around her, pirates were swinging down from their hammocks, pulling on breeches, buckling on scabbards. Jangmi tried to follow suit and nearly fell out of her perch, and by the time she had detangled herself from the rope ladder, the cabin was empty.

Still rubbing her head, Jangmi followed the crew at a far more sedate pace to the deck, where Namjoon was already barking out orders and several pirates were hoisting themselves into the rigging. It was only just dawn - the sky was still dark and the waves around them were foaming in the light breeze. The world around them seemed to be still asleep, but the deck was a hive of activity. Ropes, weapons, orders were being thrown about in a chaotic kaleidoscope of movement.
“What is going on?” Jangmi asked again to no one in particular.

As if to answer her question, silent Seongge swung through the air and landed not two inches away from her, absorbing the impact on the balls his feet as if he were a cat jumping down from a chair and not from the dizzying heights of the crow’s nest thirty feet above their heads.

He was gesticulating rapidly, and Jangmi turned to see Namjoon nodding. “How far?” he asked his rigger in a business-like tone.

Seongge held up eight fingers and then a fist.

“Okay,” Namjoon said, clearly understanding the sign-language. “We’ll try to outrun them.”

He barked out some more orders, and the largest sail unfurled in one smooth motion to its full length, swelling slightly in the breeze. Jangmi felt the wind on her face increase in intensity as the ship picked up speed, sailing directly away from the rising sun.

“What is happening?” Jangmi asked for the third time, feeling lost. “Can I do anything?”

Namjoon nodded at Seongge, and without another word the silent rigger took her by the waist and grabbed a rope. The deck fell away from them at an alarming speed, but Jangmi didn’t even have time to scream before Seongge swung them safely onto a platform high above the sails. He began to climb the ladder that led to the crow’s nest, and Jangmi, seeing no other choice, followed him up.

In the crow’s nest, the deck of the ship became as small as that of a dinghy’s, and the crew members became little moving figurines with no way to distinguish between them. Beyond the ship lay the sea, flat as a piece of satin and stretching out until it faded into the slowly brightening horizon. Jangmi had never been this high up in her life, and although the feeling of being up in the air with only a wooden pole to support her was exhilarating, she had never felt so small.

But she was not left to absorb the world from her new vantage point for long. Seongge tugged at her sleeve and pointed to something a little to the left of the sun. Jangmi squinted, but the light, faint as it was, made everything seem translucent. She could only make out a smudge on the sea that was slightly darker than the water around it.
Seongge handed her an eyeglass and the hull of a ship sprang into focus, crawling with little figures dressed in green. Knowing what was coming, Jangmi raised the eyeglass to find the ship’s flag, and sure enough, it was the crowned sun of the Royal Navy that was flapping in the early morning wind. With the naked eye, the ship seemed to be stationary, but through the eyeglass it was possible to see the prow cutting through the waves, pushing forward to its target - The Second Star.

“Can we outrun them?” Jangmi asked Seongge nervously. He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder, and then gestured to the ladder. Jangmi understood from this that the viewing session was over. “Thank you,” she said, and received a nonchalant shrug as a response.

No sooner had Seongge returned her safely to the deck than he was off again, leaving Jangmi to weave her way between various crewmembers to reach the Captain, who was stood at the helm. His chin was jutting out as he stared down the sea ahead, as if daring it to get in his way. Jangmi hoped that the sea would be more compliant that she herself had been. If a giant wave smashed the ship to smithereens, there would be no one to save her from the clutches of the Navy.

“Jangmi!”

Jangmi turned her head at the sound of her name being called and saw Jimin waving at her from the forecastle deck. She changed course and followed Jimin, who had ducked inside to make his way to the galley.

“Let’s leave the sailing to the sailors, eh?” he said cheerfully. “Come help me with breakfast.”

“Are you not a sailor?” Jangmi asked Jimin curiously.

Jimin shrugged. “My life is at sea, but I don’t tend to get involved with the ropes and the sails. If ever they needed another pair of hands, I could help out, but with our numbers, my talents are mostly required as the ship’s surgeon.”

“A surgeon who cooks breakfast,” Jangmi said suspiciously. “What exactly is it that you put in the soup?”

Jimin threw back his head and laughed heartily, slapping her on the shoulder. “We won’t get to cannibalism for a while yet, I promise. Our provisions might be low, but they’re not that low.”
“So, what is for breakfast?” Jangmi asked him as they arrived at the store cupboard. Jimin pulled out several sacks and handed them over to her. They were a lot heavier than they looked.

“Stew,” he told her. Jangmi tried not to groan out loud.

Jimin kept Jangmi so busy with breakfast that she scarcely had the time to worry about the Naval schooner that was probably rapidly approaching. In fact, the time flew by before the first half of the crew tumbled into the galley and exhibiting a reaction similar to that of Jangmi’s when they saw what was on the menu.

“Our speed must have doubled since Jeju,” Deokwoon shouted over the hubbub of spoons clanging on bowl and the good-natured jibes of pirates tussling over the middle slices of bread.

“Why’s that?” Sejin asked him, crumbs falling into his beard.

“All Jimin feeds us is beans!” Deokwoon replied, and the crew members around him laughed raucously. It was noisy and chaotic in the galley, far from the refined and quiet affairs that were a courtesan’s mealtime, but Jangmi found herself joining in with the jests and the raised voices. In fact, shouting was the only way to be heard above the din. But soon enough, the first half of the crew went to replace the second on the deck, giving the galley and Jangmi’s ears brief respite. Then round two commenced.

“How are we doing with the navy ship?” Jangmi asked Jungkook anxiously as he sat down. She noticed that he looked remarkably fresh-faced for someone who had taken a rather heavy beating not twenty-four hours ago. His bruises had already faded to yellow, and the swelling on his eye had gone down enough for him to open it. Wiping away all the encrusted blood might have had something to do with it, Jangmi supposed. His injuries might have been less serious than they looked, or maybe the attack on him and Jimin had been less vicious than he had described. After all, Jimin didn’t seem to have a scratch on him.

Jungkook waved one hand dismissively while the other went to steal a hunk of bread from under Yoongi’s nose. “We’ve already put two more leagues between us.”

“And that’s good, right?” Jangmi asked hopefully.

“Give it a few hours and they’ll be out of sight and out of mind, if the wind holds up,” Jungkook told her confidently. “The Second Star is faster than she looks and she has a few tricks up her
Jangmi looked around at the sanguine faces of the crew members and felt a little better. She knew that they were outrunning the Navy for the Captain and Yoongi as well, whose faces were well known to the law enforcement as dangerous pirates, but she preferred not to have to come to blows with any representative of the King’s Justice, lest it give away her position.

“What… what do I do if we do get boarded by the Navy?” Jangmi asked hesitantly, envisaging a hideaway even more secure than the compartment in the ship’s figurehead. This was a pirate ship, for goodness’ sake - it was made to hide clandestine cargo.

In answer, Yoongi drew a short knife and slapped it down on the table between them. Jangmi looked at it, wide eyed. “Are you being serious? The sharpest thing I’ve ever held is a knitting needle.”

“Did you hold it by the handle?” Yoongi asked her sardonically. “Then you’ve already mastered the basics.”

“Yes, but I think the men of the Navy will have mastered a little more than the basics,” Jangmi spluttered.

“We’re not sparing anyone to babysit you if we get boarded,” Yoongi told her condescendingly. “The last thing we need is to have someone get hurt protecting you, as if our surgeon needs someone else to fuss over.”

“All the more reason to hide me away,” Jangmi insisted. “Can’t put anyone else in danger if I’m not in danger.”

Yoongi narrowed his eyes, clearly seeing the logic in her argument. “I’ll talk to the Captain.”

After breakfast was cleared away and the dishes cleaned to Jimin’s standard, Jangmi went up onto the deck to see the distance of the Navy boat for herself. She hung off the back, the poop deck as everyone called it, squinting into the sun, but she couldn’t see any irregularities on the water, not even a dark smudge like the one that had given away the Navy’s presence some hours before.

“A few more hours and we’ll have put enough distance between us to make it to Shanghai with no sleeve.”
danger,” a deep voice said from over her shoulder.

Jangmi turned to see no one other than the great Captain Pirate King himself. “Good,” Jangmi said fervently. “I wasn’t looking forward to having a sea battle with the Navy all that much.”

“Not that you’d be participating,” Namjoon remarked. “Yoongi informed me of the extent of your fighting skills. Or rather, the lack of them.”

Jangmi shrugged. “Injuring one’s client was looked down upon in the Guild of Courtesans. Unless they asked for it, of course.”

Namjoon opened his mouth, then closed it again, clearly thinking it best not to inquire further.

“But what I don’t understand,” Jangmi asked him suddenly, “is how we’ve managed to go faster than they have. We’re going in the same direction, with the same wind. Is our boat lighter than theirs?”

Too late, Jangmi saw that there was a light in Namjoon’s eyes, the same light that had shone when he had launched into his detailed and encyclopaedic (not to mention boring) explanation of the Virtue classification system. Jangmi had a feeling that she was about to be subjected to the same treatment, only Yoongi wasn’t around this time to enforce brevity.

“Well,” Namjoon began enthusiastically, and let forth a barrage of words, gesticulating wildly, pointing at different parts of the boat and spouting many unfamiliar terms such as ‘starboard’, ‘point of sail’ and ‘leeward’. Jangmi tried to follow him, but it was a lost cause, so she dedicated her time instead to a minute inspection of the Captain’s face as he spoke animatedly. It was surprisingly expressive, his eyes lit up and eyebrows doing a little jig everytime he emphasised something, enunciating carefully and with great aplomb. But it wasn’t a handsome face - not by a longshot. His nose was too broad, his eyes too small, his cheeks too big. His hair could do with some grooming, even hidden as it was beneath a battered three-point hat, and his beard could do with a trim. And besides all of that, he was getting on Jangmi’s nerves.

“Hang on,” she interrupted after several minutes worth of fruitless explanation. “I thought that a jibe was a kind of insult, a tack was a metal pin to hold things up and that port was a fortified wine from the West.”

For a moment, Namjoon seemed to be speechless at her lack of knowledge, then he turned abruptly
on his heel and gestured for her to follow. He led her to the navigation room, where Jungkook was hard at work with a pile of charts and maps.

“Do you need the Astrosextant?” Namjoon asked his navigator. “I was going to show it to Jangmi.”

Jungkook shook his head without looking up, and Namjoon led her over to a glass cabinet from which he took out a handsome wooden box the size of a footstool. With great care, he placed the box on the central table and opened it reverently. And there, nestled inside the velvet lining, was a machine unlike anything Jangmi had ever seen before.

It was a wonder of shining golden tubes, perfectly circular glass lenses and delicate hinges. Every part seemed to move in independently from the rest, and yet the totality gave off the image of harmony, of cooperation. No matter how much she looked, Jangmi could not tell where the chain ended, where the links and joints came to a point. It was a closed circuit, a gently stubborn network of continuity.

“What does it do?” Jangmi asked, slightly in awe.

Namjoon looked at it proudly. “On any ship, you’ll find a rudimentary version of this machine, called a sextant, which is used to measure relative distances. Which helps with navigating,” he added, catching Jangmi’s bemused expression.

“But this little beauty,” Namjoon went on, fondness evident in his voice, “was dreamt up by our very own navigator. A work of art, designed by a genius.” He designated Jungkook, whose head was still buried deep in the pile of charts, but whose ears, Jangmi noticed, had gone slightly red. “It can do everything a sextant does, and more. You can input wind speed, wind direction, tidal variations, weight in the hold, a million different considerations, and it will tell you how long it will take you to reach your destination and how fast you’re sailing in comparison with another boat. It would almost make our navigator redundant, except only he really knows how to use it.”

“It just saves time with the calculations,” Jungkook mumbled, still not emerging from his books.

“It does far more than that, Jungkook.” Namjoon’s face was radiating pride in his young navigator’s talent. “It can tell you all about the angles with the wind, so how much time you should leave between tacking to get the optimum-”

“CAPTAIN.”
Jangmi would have mistaken the deafening cry for a siren of some kind if not for the clearly articulated syllables. She jumped, as did both Namjoon and Jungkook, but thankfully this time there was no wooden beam inches from her head to get in the way as there had been in the sleeping quarters.

Namjoon and Jungkook shared the briefest of looks before the former strode out without another word, and Jangmi followed him at a run to the deck, wondering if the Navy had caught up despite everyone’s confidence to the contrary.

But Namjoon was looking away from the sun, peering through an eyeglass at something in the distance. Seongge was stood next to him, his expression anxious. Jangmi felt her stomach drop. The look on his long and angular face, so different to the one from that morning, portended nothing good.

Yoongi appeared on the Captain’s other side. “What is it?”

“Hostile forces,” Namjoon said, still concentrating on the thing that was out of sight to everyone else. “Approaching quickly, I don’t need the Astrosextant to tell me that.”


“Worse,” Namjoon said grimly, finally putting down the eyeglass. There was a slight red mark on his nose from where he had been pressing the rim to his face. “Slavers.”

Yoongi swore. “Dead ahead?”

“Slightly to Starboard,” Namjoon replied. “Not that it’s much help.”

“But if there are slavers ahead and the Navy behind, then that means…” Jangmi said slowly.

“...It means that we’re caught between them.” Namjoon finished her conclusion for her.
“Can’t we just sail away from both of them?” Jangmi asked, pointing to the big expanse of blue to their left, the only direction from which no one was about to attack them.

“Would that we could,” Namjoon said darkly. “But the thing about slavers, is that they have something we don’t.”

“Slaves.” Yoongi said disgustedly. “Slave rowers.”

“So they could catch up?” Jangmi asked, horrified. She looked to where Namjoon had been gazing, and had the fleeting impression that there was a dark shape on the horizon where there had been none before. She hoped she was imagining it.

Namjoon nodded. “We can’t outsail this one.” A look of deep sadness cross his face, so quick Jangmi almost missed it, but replacing it was one of fierce determination.

“Yoongi, get Jangmi to the hold,” he barked without hesitation. “Seongge, sound the alarm.”

Yoongi hustled Jangmi below deck, but not before she heard the cry go up, louder than she she could have ever imagined emanating from a human’s throat. “ENEMY SHIP. PREPARE FOR BATTLE.”

“Who was that?” Jangmi twisted around as Yoongi pulled her inside, but she could only see the tumult of activity, the pirates jumping to their battle stations. “Was that Seongge?”

Yoongi didn’t deign to reply, merely yanking Jangmi deeper into the ship than she had ever ventured before. They arrived at the lowest level, where the curved beams of the ship’s hull were visible, where the bilgewater reached Jangmi’s ankles and the smell of mould was overpowering. But despite the distasteful surroundings, Jangmi couldn’t bring herself to complain. No one would come looking for treasure, human or otherwise, down here.

“The slavers will probably be on us in a couple of hours,” Yoongi told her, his face turning an eerie green in what little light there was. “But it’s best that you stay down here until the fighting is over. That way you can’t get in the way of our preparations, and you’ll be out of harm’s way yourself.”

He turned to leave, hesitated, and then pressed a small dagger into Jangmi’s hand, hilt first. “Here,” he said. “Just in case.” Their skin had touched briefly as he had handed her the weapon,
just for a second, but it was enough time to hear what he was thinking. *In case you don’t want to be taken alive.*

Jangmi nodded, her throat tight, but she wasn’t sure that Yoongi saw before he retreated back up to the main body of the ship and shut the trap door, leaving her in total darkness.

What followed was a strange hiccup in time for Jangmi, where every second passed as though it were a day, her ears strained to analyse every footstep and shout that floated down from above the door, waiting for a sign that meant The Second Star was about to confront the slaver ship. But whenever Jangmi paused to wonder how long she had been down there in the dark, it seemed to her that she had only been hidden in the hold for minutes.

As the time passed, Jangmi’s hold on the present began to loosen, and she wondered if she hadn’t in fact been down in the hold for a month. But just as she began to suspect that this slaver ship had just been a ploy invented by the crew in order to trick her into practically imprisoning herself, Jangmi heard the unmistakable war cry, “THE SECOND STAR!”.

Her breath suddenly came short, whistling out between her teeth like wind through a window left ajar, even more so when the war cry was closely followed by the booming of what Jangmi supposed were cannons. They sounded like raindrops falling on a puddle, so close in time were they fired. But a million times louder, a million times closer. Jangmi prayed that it had been The Second Star that fired them, and not the slavers who might conceivably tear a hole in the side of the ship. She was electrified, rooted to the spot. Happy as she had been to be safely tucked away, she now wished that she could see what was going on. The terror of battle couldn’t be worse than the images of total obliteration conjured up by her imagination.

Jangmi agonised, unable to convince herself to stay put, but not daring to emerge from her hideout either. She told herself again and again that to expose herself to danger was to endanger the crew. Just as Yoongi had said - someone might get hurt trying to protect her. She would just have to wait out this battle, wade through the mental torture rather than risk physical harm.

So focused was she on the sounds of the clash that she nearly screamed when a rat ran over her foot - not because of the rodent itself, having become well acquainted with them in her childhood - but because she thought a slaver had risen up from the bilgewater to grab at her calf.

In fact, Jangmi realised, the water level was higher than it had been. Was that normal? The creaking of the wood had also become louder, and she could hear it even over the sounds of battle. Was the hull about to burst?
Suddenly, the wood around her gave an almighty screech and panicking, Jangmi had wrenched open the trapdoor, escaping into the light before she could realise the gravity of her actions. The sounds of fighting were louder now, shouts and gunshots and metal clanging. Nervously, Jangmi peeked down the corridor, but she could see no people, neither friend nor foe.

She tried to think of where she was in the ship, not willing to go back into the hold but not wanting to be in the thick of the fighting either. Perhaps she might be able to sneak to the galley and make friends with Jimin’s store cupboard. Promising herself that if she made it through unscathed, she would eat bean stew without complaint for the rest of her days, Jangmi snuck through the seemingly unending corridors of The Second Star. She reached the crew’s sleeping quarters, on the other side of which was the galley, and was struck by how similar it looked to its state that morning.

The hammocks were still swaying all together, the floor a disarray of clothes, shoes and other personal belongings. Nothing from the view gave away the fact that there was a lethal battle going on just above the wooden beams on the ceiling. But the quiet hum that was the sound of dozens of pirates getting ready for the day had been replace by shouts, yells, screams. Muffled, as though Jangmi had bumped into someone for the briefest of seconds, her Virtue not having been wielded with enough concentration to catch distinct words.

There were, however, distinct footsteps, sounding so close above her head that Jangmi ducked instinctively. But the battle was raging on the deck, not down here. Unless the slavers managed to get past the crew…

She pushed through the maze of hammocks, trying to tread on as few things and make as little noise as possible. The wooden boards creaked slightly underfoot, but Jangmi didn’t think that anyone would be able to hear it from above. She had finally reached the other end of the sleeping quarters, but before she could open the door to get through to the galley, it had swung open of its own accord.

Stood on the other side was a man, swarthy and unkempt, his eyes almost disappearing into his face from the leer that revealed yellow and in some case missing teeth.

“Boo.”

A scream tore its way up Jangmi’s throat and a cutlass flashed in the air inches from her face, but her reflexes saved her just in time. She retreated back from the door but her attacker advanced on her, cutlass raised, a perverse grin plastered across his face. Jangmi’s foot knocked into a discarded pair of boots and she almost fell, but managed to save herself just in time by grabbing onto a hammock.
Her stumble galvanized the slaver. With a roar, he ran at her, and Jangmi turned and fled, out into the corridor from where she had come. The slaver followed at a gallop, chasing her through the belly of the ship. Like the rats with whom she had been closeted in the hold, her instinct told her to go upwards, up, up. But the way to the deck was blocked - Namjoon was holding off two assailants on the stairs, his sword flashing in the light, moving so fast that it looked almost like he was holding a dozen such blades. As she watched, one of the slavers pulled a pistol, but before he could raise it, Namjoon’s sword had sliced down the man’s wrist, making him scream in pain.

But Jangmi could hear thudding footsteps coming up behind her, so she dodged into the navigation room where she had been that morning and cast around for something heavy, anything. Her gaze landed on the handsome wooden box left on the table and she snatched it up, waiting by the door as Jungkook had done in their cell just the day before.

Just like Jungkook had, she would need to spring into action at exactly the right time. Exactly as her attacker, attracted by the fight on the stairs, would run right past her hiding place. Jangmi heard his pounding approach on the wood, getting closer, closer. She took a deep breath, counted to three, and flung herself into the corridor, swinging the wooden box at head height with all her might.

The corner hit the slaver squarely on the middle of the forehead and he went down like a sack of potatoes, only the tiniest bit of white still showing in his eyes. Jangmi looked at the dent in his head the box had made, disgusted, but she could not bring herself to feel remorse. After all, she-

“What the fuck!” Namjoon bellowed, and shoved her into the navigation room, where her back slammed into the table with a resounding crack that could be heard even above the noises of combat. The breath was forced from her lungs and tears sprang into Jangmi’s eyes from the suddenness of the pain.

“What is wrong with you-” Namjoon bellowed, and then a cutlass blade came out of nowhere, swinging through the air and catching him flat on the back. He cried out in pain even as he turned to parry with his own sword. He was sweating profusely, Jangmi saw, and was being slowly forced into the navigation room by the ferocity of his attacker. His boots skidded backwards on the wood as he parried a blow from the side, but he would not yield, grunting and forcing his attacker’s blade back towards his own body. The slaver knocked away Namjoon’s blade, slamming his hands into the wall. A particularly vicious blow forced Namjoon to his knees, and Jangmi spotted her chance.

While the slaver had his arms raised high to deliver a killing blow, Jangmi curled her fingers around the dagger that Yoongi had given her and slammed it into the man’s ribs. The man howled in pain but the dagger hadn’t sunk in like she had expected to, so she stabbed at him again, but the slaver was too quick for her, kicking her in the chest and sending her flying backwards.
Jangmi’s back collided with something hard for the second time in minutes, and she hadn’t even hit the floor before her vision went black.

Chapter End Notes

IT'S ANOTHER CLIFFHANGER.

I know it was a fairly short chapter (by my standards, anyway), but I'm afraid y'all are gonna have to make do with that for the week because that's just how it is. Originally this chapter and the next were supposed to be one but it got too long and there was this crazy moment right down the middle of it so it's two chapters now, whoo for dragging this out. When I said slow burn, boy did I mean it.

Also, don't hate on me for Jangmi hating on Namjoon and in particular his looks. I felt like a dirty low-down betrayer when she was like 'he was not handsome' but frankly her judgment is clouded and DON'T WORRY this will all be rectified later. Also, he basically called her ugly the first time they met so really, it's just making things even... but then again he did try to leave her in Jeju and then today slammed her into a table for no discernible reason so... Someone else keep count of who owes who, I'm tired.

Also, Jungkook is a nautical genius. Accept it.

Also, the next chapter is gonna be called 'Bedtime Stories and Broken Hearts'. Make of that what you will.
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the battle with the slavers, Jangmi learns some interesting things about the crew of The Second Star, not least about its sometimes brutal, sometimes sensitive Captain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jangmi slowly raised her head, her vision blurry and her back a blaze of pain. But she would not let the blackness crowd out her vision - they were still under attack. She shook her head as if to dislodge the fog and rose unsteadily to her feet. Strangely, the navigation room was silent and empty now. No sign of the Captain or his assailant. Or was there? Jangmi staggered over to where a pair of stained boots were sticking out from behind the table.

It was the slaver, dead as a doornail. Dead as a doorknob. But dead, definitely dead. It was hard to be alive with a wound in one’s pectoral area that the size of a fist. Blood was spreading out from it, that and the cut to the ribs that Jangmi remembered was the result of her own attack. The slaver’s clothes were absorbing some of the red, sticky liquid, but not nearly enough. Someone was going to have a hell of a job cleaning that up. Probably her.

Feeling more stable, Jangmi wandered over to the door, which was now inexplicably shut. Jangmi felt that it almost didn’t have the right to be. How dare a door through which she had been pushed through so unceremoniously be closed as if nothing had happened? There was barely a scratch on it, too.

No thanks to Namjoon. It was understandable to be surprised to see her, after she had promised to stay in the hold, but had the horror on his face really been all that necessary? And to use physical force to get her away from him - brutish and just plain rude. But Jangmi shouldn’t have expected anything better. Of course the Captain would be just as violent with his actions as he was with his words - he was just a damn pirate, a thief and worse. Forget his supposed honour and protectiveness - every time his willfully blind crew pointed out what might have been a merit, he would always turn back around and show his true colours.

She might have even refrained from saving his life earlier, only then the slaver would have been free to kill other people on board, beginning with her.

Still mentally abusing Captain Pirate King, Jangmi tried the door to the navigation room. It was
locked. Futilely, Jangmi tried again, to the same effect. Now, she was getting mad. Not only did he catapult her into the navigation room, but now he locked her in? What if the ship went down and she drowned in it? Did he really want her out of the way that much?

Abandoning the door, Jangmi turned around to take stock of the situation. There was a large window, out of which she might climb to the deck, but it would be wise to refrain if that was the side which pointed to the slaver ship. Nevertheless, Jangmi walked over to check, and then her foot crunched down on something on the floor.

It was something glassy, and around it was scattered little trampled golden tubes. It was the remains of what had once been the Astrosextant. Jangmi stooped to try and fit the pieces back together, but it was very obviously beyond repair. She wondered when its destruction had occurred. Had it fallen out of the box as Namjoon had flung her backwards? Had it been when the slaver kicked her in the chest? She couldn’t remember. She couldn’t remember much of anything, really. It was as if someone had put a hand in her brain and had given it a vigorous shake.

Jangmi heard an odd noise and raised her head to see the door to the navigation room creak open. She got to her feet, and realised that she didn’t remember sitting down. “About time,” Jangmi told the door, which had grown a head. “I might have died down here.”

The door’s head gave her a boxy smile, so Jangmi surmised that the body which was concealed behind the door was that of Taehyung. Relieved, Jangmi staggered over to him, nearly falling over in the process, but he grabbed her before she could. Thinking to herself that maybe the crew might be cute enough to negate their savage captain, Jangmi allowed herself to be led up to the deck, where the smile slid off her face like bean stew. “What happened?” She gasped, aghast.

Taehyung looked at her like she had taken leave of her senses. “We were attacked by slavers, remember?”

That explained the state of the deck, wooden planks cracked and a part of the gunwhale blown away entirely. There were bodies - or rather, body parts - scattered all around, all mixed up with slivers of wood and spent ammunition.

“Did we win?” Jangmi asked hopefully.

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if we hadn’t,” Jungkook said bluntly.
Jangmi jumped. “You scared me! When did you get here?”

Jungkook and Taehyung exchanged a look. “I’ve been stood next to you for the last two minutes,” Jungkook said in a measured voice. “I think we ought to go see Jimin, don’t you, Jangmi?”

“He’s very nice,” Jangmi said, agreeing.

“Jimin?” Jungkook called out, and received a replying shout from somewhere on the poopdeck.

Jangmi was sat down on a bed, and briefly wondered why there was a bed on the deck until she realised that she was in fact in the infirmary. Lying on the bed opposite her, with a gash across his forehead and his lower abdomen a mass of bandages, was Yoongi. His eyes were open and alert, but he was clearly in pain, gritting his teeth with every breath.

“I’ll be right with you,” Jimin called out. “I’m just finishing up here.”

Jangmi turned her aching head - how long had her head been aching? - to the direction of his voice, and had to scrunch up her eyes from the glare of the setting sun that was pouring in through the window. Silhouetted against the light, Jimin was perched on the ledge, a needle in his hand and a look of intense concentration on his face.

And facing away from the ship’s surgeon was Captain Kim Namjoon, bare to the waist and his hands clasped around his knees so that his back was exposed to Jimin’s ministrations. What was visible of his body was toned - his muscles stood taut, painting the sinews of his skin as clearly defined strokes, the swell of his arms far more substantial than could be guessed under the loose and flowing clothes that usually covered them. His shoulders were clearly broad, even hunched over as he was now, and his chest well-proportioned. His brow was furrowed and his jaw jutted out but he gave no other sign of pain as Jimin’s needle plunged again and again into his back.

The beads of sweat clinging to his skin glinted in the sun as if his skin was made of gold.

Mesmerised by the play of light across Namjoon’s back, Jangmi was drawn towards him. Stepping lightly across the infirmary, her hand stretched out in front of her, curious as to how the pressure of her fingers might make the glitter dance.

“Wh-what are you doing?”
Jangmi didn’t know who had spoken, but their voice broke the spell. Yoongi had his mouth open, Jimin looked worried. Namjoon’s face expressed nothing but pure shock. Jangmi’s hand dropped limply to her side. “Odd time to get a tattoo,” she said, to cover her confusion.

“Get back to bed, Jangmi,” Jimin said, shaking away his surprise. “I said that I’ll see to you in a second.”

“Why?” Jangmi asked him. “Nothing wrong with me, I’m right as rain.”

But on the way back to her bed, the floor slid around alarmingly and she staggered. Jimin was by her side in a flash, catching hold of her before her back hit something hard yet again. “I think you might be concussed, Jangmi. Just hang on in there, I’ll examine you in just a moment.”

He guided her back onto the bed and laid her down gently, taking care to lay her head flat. Jangmi’s eyes found the ceiling of the infirmary which was made of dark wood just like the rest of the ship, and watched the dust swirl around in the air from the late afternoon sun.

“How worried should I be about this concussion?” she asked aloud to the ceiling. She didn’t particularly want to die and she had never before witnessed proof of Jimin’s expertise in the medical field, contrary to his culinary expertise of which she had seen far too much. He did, however, seem to be doing a good job on the big old cut on Namjoon’s back. Jangmi hoped that it wouldn’t scar too much. It would be a shame to ruin such a nice back.

“Depends on how hard you were hit round the head, Jangmi,” Jimin’s voice came from somewhere to her right. “But we don’t know that you’re concussed yet.”

“I probably am,” Jangmi sighed. “But I wasn’t hit around the head.”

“Oh?”

“Your precious Captain practically pummelled me into the navigation room.” Jangmi told the ceiling, the anger suddenly coiling hot and heavy in her stomach as she remembered the Captain’s expression when he’d shoved her away from him.

“He did what?”
“I did no such thing!” came the Captain’s indignant reply.

“Don’t lie,” Jangmi snapped. “Just look at the colour of my back, I didn’t paint it purple!”

“You’re seriously going to pretend that it was me that kicked you around and not that slaver?” Namjoon snarled. “After I saved your life?”

“If I remember correctly, it was me that saved yours!” Jangmi yelled, struggling to prop herself onto her elbows so that she could better see the Captain’s lying face. “Of all the conniving, self-loving apes to ever walk this planet—”

“Stop!” Jimin ordered. His voice, usually so sweet, had become as sharp as a knife, cutting through the babble of voices.

“But she—”

“Enough!” Jimin interrupted, exasperated with his patients. “This is an infirmary, not a sumo ring. And if Jangmi really does have concussion, she needs to avoid stress and anger, which is exactly your speciality right now.”

Jangmi heard the rage in the Captain’s silence, but he heeded his surgeon’s words and swallowed his own. And soon enough, Jimin came over to her bed and sat her up carefully. From her new position, Jangmi could see the Captain’s back, bandaged heavily, curled up and facing the opposite direction. Jimin gently got her attention.

“Follow my finger,” he said, holding one up.

“How can I?” Jangmi asked, wide-eyed. “It’s too small to see.”

She heard a snort from Yoongi’s bed, but Jimin frowned, not seeing the humour. He put her through a battery of other tests, and by the time he was done Jangmi’s head was hurting more than ever.
“Light concussion,” Jimin concluded. “You’ll be fine in a few days, but I’ll keep you in the infirmary overnight for observation, just to be safe.”

“Okay,” Jangmi agreed, and looked around to see how many other beds were occupied. But there was only Yoongi and Namjoon. It wasn’t clear whether or not that was a good sign.

“Did you kill them all?” Jangmi asked, not daring to ask the opposite question. “The slavers?”

“No,” Jimin said sadly, “we didn’t get them all.”

“The cowards fled when they saw that they were outnumbered,” Yoongi said through gritted teeth. “Didn’t want us getting on board and releasing the slaves.”

“They fired cannons on us,” Jimin said disgustedly, “knowing that we wouldn’t return fire.”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Jangmi asked, confused.

“Captain’s orders,” Jimin replied simply. “We might have killed the slaves by accident.”

“But we won anyway?” Jangmi said hopefully, which Yoongi confirmed with a terse nod of his head.

“We fended them off,” Jimin nodded. “But we’ll have to watch our backs all the way to Shanghai in case they try to launch a surprise attack.”

“And we’ll be in Shanghai soon, right?” Jangmi asked. “If the wind is good and the sea isn’t too stormy—”

“If your words were wind we’d be in Shanghai tomorrow.” The growl came from the Captain’s bed, without the slightest indication of movement.

Jemin took this as a sign to end the conversation and held a finger to his lips. “I’ll bring some food down,” he whispered, perhaps having his own reasons for not wanting them to be in Shanghai as
soon as possible.

The rest of the evening was spent in silence, with Jimin watching over his patients carefully as they consumed their evening ration of bean stew - well, most of them did. Namjoon left his bowl untouched, his back resolutely turned, and it was only the absence of snores from his bed that gave away the fact that he was not yet sleeping.

Slowly, the darkness of the night penetrated the infirmary, and one by one the pirates drifted off to their dreams’ embrace, exhausted by the day’s events. Only Jangmi remained awake, her mind still active, perhaps because being knocked out counted as rest, or perhaps because the perfidy of the Captain’s behaviour still rankled her.

It was one thing to physically attack her, but then to hotly deny it? Well, Jangmi could now add ‘liar’ and ‘hypocrite’ to the increasingly long list of faults in the Captain’s name. A pirate who would throw someone to the sharks before asking their name, a pirate who would willfully leave behind someone who had helped him in a moment of need, a pirate who professed to avoid violence for the sake of his crew, and who then turned around and assaulted an inoffensive passenger. And who then denied it. Why would he need to hide it? Was his crew’s opinion of him that important? After all, they were pirates, too.

Jangmi had to remind herself of that increasingly often. In the beginning, it had been easy to set herself apart from the crew of The Second Star, tell herself that she was a temporary passenger who had to share the same space as those who had not had the privilege of comfort and education. That though they had seemed curious about her, rather than aggressive, they were still people who pillaged and plundered for a living.

Still, for the most part, they had treated her nicely enough, Jimin and Taehyung in particular. Jangmi supposed that it was in their character to be open and friendly - they seemed to be that way from the start, with her as with everyone else. And though Jungkook hadn’t addressed a single word to her at the beginning, their stint in Jeju’s jail cell had brought them closer - physically as well as emotionally, Jangmi thought to herself appreciatively, remembering her close encounter with Jungkook’s abs. He must have just been shy, and still was. Seongge still hadn’t addressed a single word to her, but of course that was for other reasons entirely. Looking back now, Jangmi laughed to herself slightly as she remembered her frustration with him for the first few days on board - why wouldn’t he talk to her? But of course, he didn’t talk at all. And Yoongi didn’t seem to like her any more than he had at the beginning, but Jangmi couldn’t forget how he had given her his dagger, revealing a sensitivity she hadn’t suspected of him in the least. There was only their Captain who truly deserved the name ‘pirate’. Frankly, it was bizarre, how human the crew was in comparison to the person that led them. Didn’t people usually learn by example?

Suddenly, Jangmi realised that the chorus of soft snores had lost a member. Someone had woken up.
“He’s a much better person than you think he is,” Yoongi said quietly, from his bed. Jangmi looked over at him, not needing to ask to whom he was referring. Yoongi’s face was pale but his dark eyes were glittering, and even as every breath he took seemed to make him wince there was a calm certainty radiating from him. Jangmi suddenly felt abashed, without quite knowing why. Maybe it was because she had never yet heard the stern First Mate speak with so much sincerity, nor with a complete absence of antagonism.

“It hasn’t been easy, these past few years,” Yoongi continued between soft wheezes. “The Seol House and Son House joining forces to eradicate piracy, all the outlaws we knew either dead or imprisoned… the Captain has had to make a lot of hard choices, most of them to keep us safe.”

“Or to keep himself safe,” Jangmi said, unable to keep the stubborn note of bitterness out of her voice. She couldn’t forget how he had violently attacked her, even if he had then gone on to save both their skins from the hands of that slaver. Protective of his crew he may be, but Jangmi knew that she could claim none of that care for herself. She was just an outsider, an annoyance.

“We keep each other safe,” Yoongi argued. “We are each other’s home.”

“Tell her about how we met Namjoon,” Jimin said sleepily from his bed.

Yoongi jumped ever-so-slightly and then winced, not having realised that the surgeon had been awake too. “Go back to sleep, Jimin, you’ve had a long day.”

“I should be saying the same to you,” Jimin smiled drowsily. “Tell her how we met, and how we met Namjoon. Like a bedtime story.”

“Only surgeons who behave themselves get bedtime stories,” Yoongi warned him, but with so much fondness in his voice that the threat fell flat.

“Story,” Jimin insisted.

“Fine,” Yoongi huffed. “Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, two men met a nerdy captain—”

“Properly!” Jimin called out from his bed. “Don’t make me get up and make you.”
“Fine!” Yoongi repeated, sighing. “But lie down and close your eyes.”

“Yes, mister quartermaster, sir,” Jimin said in a sing-song voice not unlike the one Jangmi used to address Captain Pirate King.

Yoongi shook his head ruefully at Jimin, then turned to Jangmi, clearly gathering his thoughts for a long tale. “Remember how you spoke about being a child of Fate, how you could have ended up as a pickpocket or worse?” Yoongi asked her. Jangmi nodded.

“Well, I was one such child of Fate, only I ended up where many of the nimblest ones did - I was adopted into the Guild of Thieves.”

Jangmi shivered. The unofficial guild that plagued every city was known throughout Korea for its brutality, both to its victims and to its own members. It was worse still for those who tried to leave it, as Yoongi must have done.

“You’ve probably heard of them, so I won’t describe my time there,” Yoongi said, looking distant. “But I never questioned the life I led, my existence in the world and my place in it, until the night I attempted to rob a rich merchant’s house, and stumbled across an angel.”

“No, you were the angel,” Jimin argued from his bed, having obviously disregarded Yoongi’s instructions to close his eyes and go to sleep. “A grubby angel that only visited at night.” He giggled slightly.

Yoongi shot him a look loaded with disagreement, but he chose to pursue his story instead of voicing his complaint. “A rich merchant’s sheltered youngest son should have been an easy target. There were plenty of things of value in that house - weapons and jewels and books. And yet, I was the one who got robbed.”

“Jimin scammed you?” Jangmi asked, not understanding.

“His heart,” Jimin said, rolling his eyes. “He means that I stole his heart.”

“Oh,” Jangmi said, finally catching on. The gentle teasing, the easy praise, the protectiveness of
both towards the other, it all made sense. Jimin and Yoongi were lovers - how could she have missed it? *The best way to hide something is in plain sight.* But Jimin and Yoongi had not been hiding - that much was clear from the easiness with which Yoongi told their story, from the eagerness with which Jimin had asked to hear it. Perhaps because they were so different - Yoongi cold and diffident, Jimin warm and trusting. But Jangmi could no longer describe Yoongi as cold - he seemed to radiate a warm pride as he spoke of his heart’s dearest.

Suddenly, the empty words that she had been taught to repeat at the guild’s teaching house over and over again no matter the listener suddenly took on a new meaning, a life of their own. A sincerity in and of themselves. Jangmi realised that she was witnessing true romantic affection for the first time in her life. There was no game, no manipulation, no power-play. Just something open and beautiful and fragile and strong.

Now, Jangmi felt a pang of embarrassment, remembering her little performance with Namjoon before they had landed in Jeju. She had thought herself in control, giving a seamless portrayal of desire and vulnerability, and yet Namjoon would have been able to see right through her. How could she hope to mimic what she had never witnessed? Especially when he himself witnessed its effects every day.

All of a sudden feeling shy in front of Yoongi and Jimin, as if the very act of being awake was an intrusion upon their intimacy, Jangmi drew up the blanket to her face, hoping to hide her burning cheeks. But she was safe - neither of them were paying any attention to her.

“He used to joke that I was the most terrible thief in the world,” Yoongi was saying, fighting a smile. “Because every time I came, he’d end up with more precious items, not less.”

“You didn’t need to give me all those presents,” Jimin grumbled. “I had plenty of junk already.”

“I didn’t know how to court you, at first,” Yoongi confessed. “I’d never had to court anyone, before.”

“He learned well, though,” Jimin said sweetly, and Yoongi’s cheeks reddened a little, shy despite himself. “But of course, the tale of a merchant’s son and a street-born criminal isn’t one for the storybooks,” Jimin continued, his smile fading. “My family would never accepted Yoongi and Yoongi didn’t want to expose me to his way of life.”

“So you ran away together?” Jangmi asked him, wide-eyed.
Jimin laughed, a little tinkling sound. “Exactly.”

Jangmi couldn’t imagine ever being brave enough to do what Jimin had done. Give up a life of comfort and privilege, by choice. Leave family and friends behind and pinning all hope for a future on one single person. Live for someone else. If she herself had left a life of luxury behind, it had most certainly not been by choice. And yet, there was no trace of regret in Jimin’s voice. Pain, perhaps, and nostalgia, but he gave every indication of wanting to be exactly where he was. He genuinely seemed to think that his life aboard The Second Star - lover, Captain and all - was preferable to his previous, comfortable existence on dry land. “But how did you meet Namjoon?” Jangmi asked curiously.

“That bastard Yoongi tried to rob me, how else?” The low grumble came from Namjoon’s bed.

“Captain!” Jimin swung his legs out of bed immediately to go and check on his patient. “How are you feeling? How’s your wound?”

“Hurts like the blazes, but if you try to cry on me I swear I will put you on nightwatch for a week,” Namjoon threatened.

Jimin gave the Captain a disapproving look, but he checked on the bandage without further comment. “Speaking of which,” he said when he was done, “Yoongi, it’s time for your medicine.”

“I’m fine!” Yoongi protested. “I can go a little longer.”

“But you shouldn’t,” Jimin said in a tone that brooked no argument. “You got hurt today, on top of everything else. Do you need a refill?”

“No, I’m fine,” Yoongi said, pulling out a vial filled with a clear liquid and taking a swig. “Keep your reserve for the others.”

Yoongi’s forehead cut, Jangmi noticed, had completely disappeared. There was no trace of the ugly scar which might otherwise have marred his features. In fact, he looked as if he’d just stepped out of a bathhouse instead of a battle. The colour was returning to his cheeks and even his breathing seemed less strained. Jangmi looked from him to Jimin to the vial, and suddenly it all clicked into place.
“Jimin has one too?” Jangmi yelped, and they all looked at her. “He carries-” she lowered her voice, “- a Virtue?”

So much for all her worries about being sold to a slaver or killed for her heart’s blood. There was a carrier right on board with her, two if she was correct in her suspicions concerning Seongge. No way would they risk contact with a human-trafficker if there was someone else they wished to protect.

Namjoon nodded slowly. “A true-blood carrier.”

“T ook us by surprise as well,” Yoongi said ruefully, indicating himself and Jimin. “First day on Namjoon’s boat and Jimin trips, falls hands-first onto a fishhook. But before I could find anything to soak up the blood, he stood up waving, looking right as rain.”

“I’ll never forget the look on his face when I pulled the hook out of my palm,” Jimin snickered.

“Out through your palm,” Yoongi muttered. “And you were just as surprised.”

Jimin shrugged. “That’s what you get for being the pampered son of a wealthy merchant. Talk about wasting honey on the bee.”

“He’d never even held a hunting knife before,” Yoongi snorted. “How can you tell if you have the Virtue of Healing when you never get hurt?”

“Thank goodness Jimin was a Virtue carrier,” Namjoon said quietly. “I thank my stars every day.”

“Yoongi got hurt,” Jimin said matter-of-factly, before Jangmi could ask as to what the Captain meant. “He got shot in the chest and the bullet became lodged in his heart.”

“It’s too risky to try and extract it, so my heart can’t heal - I’m forever moments from bleeding out,” Yoongi explained. “But Jimin stubbornly refuses to let me die.” He stretched out his hand to Jimin, who came over immediately and clambered onto the bed beside him.

“Because your funeral would be a waste of my tears,” Jimin joked, and though he tried to keep his
tone light, the tiniest tremor at the end gave away his anxiety, his fear of losing the man whose heart was stuttering just inches from where his head was resting.

Wordlessly, Yoongi took Jimin’s hand in his own. Watching them, Jangmi felt her heart squeeze. She would never be able to hold hands with someone as Yoongi was doing now. If her life as a child of Fate had robbed her of her innocence, the Virtue that had been forced upon her as a courtesan had robbed her of the chance to regain it.

“Sometimes, I think that they made a mistake,” Jimin murmured, his head on Yoongi’s shoulder. “That Yoongi should have gotten this Virtue instead of me.”

“That’s rubbish,” Yoongi told him angrily. “Keep your Virtue for yourself, never feel like you have to heal me. If I hadn’t-”

“If I hadn’t been so foolhardy,” Namjoon interrupted bitterly, “neither of you would need that Virtue.” He threw his covers off him and stormed out of the infirmary into the night.

“Your wound-” Jimin protested, rising, but Yoongi held him back.

“Leave him be,” Yoongi advised. “Let him find his peace.”

Jimin subsided back onto the bed, and soon his gentle snores were filling the infirmary. Unable to sleep, Jangmi watched the shadows glide across the ceiling as the moon ploughed its way through the starry sky, her mind inundated with new information. Every day that she spent on The Second Star revealed to her more and more about the world, about people. She had thought that she knew it all, was an adept in her game of men. But now she was slowly realising that she knew next to nothing. Had the men she had invited into her bed known of her ignorance? Or had they too known nothing of love? A band of fools, telling themselves that they were wise to the ways of the world, not having anything to measure themselves against.

Jangmi thought of Heemi, her laughing smile. Had Heemi known what love was? Had she been playing Jangmi from the start, seeing in her an easy target? The master of love tricked into falling in love - what a joke.

She tried to think of their brief moments together, but all she could remember was the wild beat of her own heart, and the cutting words she had heard but that had not been spoken aloud. Strangely, she remembered the fierce lustre in Heemi’s eyes, but she could not remember how her touch felt.
Like the Queen was an image, a dancing fire that gave off light but no heat.

Jangmi pressed two fingers to her neck, trying to recreate the moment when Heemi had placed her lips on her skin. Desperate to remember the moment as any normal person might have. But no - all she could hear was the Queen’s voice, revelling in her destruction.

Disgusted, Jangmi wrenched the blankets off her and swung her legs out of bed. It was no use, the shaky pain spreading through her limbs would not be repressed - she needed fresh air, to expend this restless energy. As quietly as was possible so as not to disturb the sleeping Yoongi and Jimin, Jangmi cracked open the door of the infirmary and slipped through the gap up to the deck. There, the cool breeze dancing off the sea cooled her cheeks, whispering a message she could not understand.

Jangmi threaded her way up the deck aiming for the bowsprit, careful not to make any noise that would alert the night-watch. But there was something odd already there that made her heart leap in fright - a strange shape silhouetted against the gentle sapphire sky.

Jangmi drew back behind a crate, and when her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw that the dark shape was in fact the Captain, hunched over and asleep, an empty bottle of rum discarded at his feet. There was something dangling from his hand in a slow pendulum motion. Curious, Jangmi began to approach, but the Captain moved and Jangmi quickly retreated back behind the crate. She realised that he was not in fact sleeping; his eyes weren’t closed, but glittering in the faint light of the stars. He raised his arm and Jangmi saw that he was holding a pendant, a golden chain that was outshone by the magnificent gem clasped at its center. It was purplish in the dark, so Jangmi assumed that its colour must be red by day - a ruby larger than any she had ever seen in her life.

Namjoon considered the pendant for a moment, then gently pressed it to his cheek, his eyes closing. His eyelashes seemed to sparkle - Jangmi wondered if he had been crying. Jangmi lowered her gaze, not wanting to invade his privacy. Silently, she stole back across the deck and into the infirmary, where she got back into bed with her heart just as heavy as before. The sight of the Captain vulnerable and hurt, mysterious as the cause might be, made her chest feel tight, as if his pain was calling out to hers. As her eyelids began to weigh down, Jangmi wondered if, on the subject of broken hearts, the Captain might be just as much an expert as she was.

Chapter End Notes

YOONMIN RIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIISE. Okay, who saw their relationship coming, hands up. Also, I woke up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night when I realised that I was going to put an untreatable bullet wound in Yoongi’s chest so that he has to drink Jimin's tears to stay alive which of course he hates because that means that Jimin must cry and aaaaaargh.
But the story of how they got together is so sweet, istg it's like every Yoonmin fic I've ever read.

Also, Yoongi "We are each other's home" I cried he's so wise.

ALSO CAPTAIN KIM NAMJOON IS SAD ABOUT SOMETHING WHAT IS HE SAD ABOUT HAVE I BEEN HINTING SINCE CHAPTER ONE YES I HAVE

Also Jangmi making fun of Jimin's hands. Wish I was sorry.
A Less-Than-Peaceful Interlude

Chapter Summary

As The Second Star approaches Shanghai, Jangmi decides to make use of what little time is left to her on board. And help comes from an unexpected quarter...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I want to learn how to fight,” Jangmi announced.

Taehyung looked up from the piece of wood that he was carving away at, his eyes wide over the cloth that he had tied around the lower half of his face to avoid breathing in the sawdust. He, Jangmi, and some of the other crewmembers were on the deck, steadily working their way through the hefty list of repairs Taehyung had deemed necessary after the desecration that the ship had gone through at the hands of the slavers. “Why?”

“Apparently, I’m very good at not being good at things.” Jangmi huffed, holding up a rope that looked like it had been braided by a toddler. “I can’t cook, I can’t mend anything, and I can’t even hold a mop the right way round.”

“This is true,” Taehyung said, grinning. The crew had witnessed Jangmi struggle for five hours yesterday, trying to clean the deck to the Captain’s standards, a job that would have taken anyone else less than half the time. But the Captain had ordered the crew not to intervene - they were all busy enough as it is. And, he had added, glowering, the members on board had suffered enough on her account.

Jangmi knew exactly what he was referring to. The bandages over his back wounds might not be visible, but the pained expression on the Captain’s face every time he moved too quickly most certainly was. Nevertheless, Jangmi wasn’t ready to apologise for having potentially contributed to his injury. She might have left the hold knowing that her presence could distract the crew members, but she had not knowingly thrown any of them into a wooden table, either.

That was part of the reason that Jangmi wished to learn to better protect herself. After all, she didn’t want anyone else getting hurt on her account - the next time the ship was attacked she wanted to be able to stand on the deck with everyone else, able to defend herself and others. And also, though she would never say this to the crew, because she knew that they would protest, Jangmi wanted to be able to fight so that the next time the Captain of The Second Star took it into his head to throw her around, she would be able to give as good as she got.
“So teach me how to fight,” Jangmi requested. “Please.”

“I don’t know…” Taehyung said hesitantly, putting down his tools. “Getting the ship back in working order is our topmost priority.”

“Afterwards, then,” Jangmi pressed. “The next time we get attacked I don’t want to have to defend myself with a knitting needle.”

“Or with a piece of priceless machinery,” Taehyung said severely.

Jangmi winced. The crew had not taken very well to the discovery of the Astrosextant’s destruction, least of all the Captain. He had been in a sulk ever since, muttering about how no one respected talent or ingenuity or hard-earned cash. Without the Astrosextant, the ship had lost one of its formidable advantages, meaning that escaping the Navy or any Sect ships would become much more difficult, especially if those ships were lighter and faster than the majestic Second Star. Apparently, they were incredibly hard to manufacture, the intricate network of tubes and lenses being the work of a virtuoso in the art of metallurgy, the only one of his kind capable of creating such a masterpiece. And they didn’t come cheap, either.

“I’ll have to sell the earring in Shanghai,” Namjoon sighed, looking over the accounts with Yoongi. “The goods that we sell at the market won’t fetch nearly as good a price as they would have in Jeju or Silmido, and we have to repair the ship as well as stock up on supplies. There’s no way around it.”

Although Jangmi had no say in it, she wasn’t particularly happy with this conclusion. She liked the earrings, liked their value, and she knew that they were worth even more as a pair. While the second earring was still on board, she still hadn’t given up hope of somehow regaining it. But if the earring was sold in Shanghai, it could be snatched up by goodness knows who and taken goodness knows where, far out of reach.

But Jangmi had to count herself lucky that she wasn’t asked by the Captain to give the other earring up too as payment for having broken the Astrosextant in the first place. In the way that he looked at her, it was clear that she’d compromised its integrity when using its box as a warhammer, while Jangmi maintained that it could have happened when she had been attacked by the slaver - trying to save the Captain’s own life. In any case, there was no way of knowing what had happened. In the furore of the battle, neither of them had any time to consider the Astrosextant, and the slaver that had been run through the chest with Namjoon’s cutlass wasn’t about to tell them either.
“Or that,” Jangmi conceded. “Who’s good at fighting?”

“We’re all pretty good fighters,” Taehyung answered, shrugging. “The proof being, none of us are dead.”

“Okay,” Jangmi agreed, “but who’s the best fighter on board? Someone must have been an assassin on dry land, or at least a paid thug.”

Taehyung gave a dry laugh. “You’d be looking for a long while if you were looking for a born fighter here, Jangmi.”

“Why? What about Sejin? Deokwoon?” She gestured at the two pirates, who were absorbed in their work sanding a new banister for the gunwhale that had been blasted to smithereens by the slaver’s canons. Bare to the shoulder, they were both well-built, muscled arms pumping to and fro in the bright sunlight.

“Deokwoon was a farmer by trade,” Taehyung snorted, starting on the next piece of wood. “And Sejin owned a tavern.”

“Really?” Jangmi said, looking astonished. She would have expected Sejin, unobtrusive as he was, to be the kind of man to grow vegetables quietly on the edge of town, not dealing with drunks and drinking on the regular. And as for Deokwoon, he gave her the impression that he had been the proprietor of a brothel, with his brash manners and shameless bravado describing women. In her private thoughts, Jangmi had always thought that he had been forced to leave his hometown for having slept with the mayor’s wife or something equally salacious.

“Then how did they end up here?” Jangmi asked, wrinkling her brow.

“Sejin’s tavern was burnt down by the Guild of Thieves,” Taehyung explained, sawing energetically. “He wasn’t even the target, they just wanted to frighten one of his more wealthy customers. And Deokwoon’s family lived on a farm, but they all died during a famine. And then, because he couldn’t pay rent, the debt collectors came and took everything he owned.”

The blasé tone of voice with which Taehyung described the tribulations of his crewmates made Jangmi think that this kind of tale wasn’t all that unusual on board The Second Star. “Is this a competition?” she complained. “Why does everyone need to have a sad life story? Why can’t
someone have just joined for the money?"

“No one here chose a life of piracy,” Jimin told Jangmi, coming over to them to check on her work. “I suppose that’s what makes us a family,” he added thoughtfully. “No one joined looking for fame and fortune. They joined because they had nowhere else to go.”

“A home for those who have none on dry land,” Jangmi murmured to herself. It was true enough in her own case, but she couldn’t see the Captain allowing her to join the crew of The Second Star. Not that she was sure about wanting to, knowing how he’d treat her.

“Everyone has a sad story,” Jimin said sombrely. “And Seongge’s is probably the saddest of all.”

Jangmi followed his gaze up to where the silent rigger was sat halfway up the foremast, serenely braiding a rope as thick as his arm as he gazed out onto the open sea.

“Why probably?” she asked in a hushed voice. “Was he not able to describe it in sign language?”

“He can’t describe it because he himself doesn’t know,” Jimin explained, sorrow marring his usually bright features. “We found him on a rock in the middle of the ocean, half-dead from exposure and dehydration. It took us five days to revive him, and when he finally regained consciousness he had no memory of how he had ended up on that rock, nor of his life beforehand.”

“Nor how he obtained that Virtue,” Jangmi said quietly.

Jemin looked at her sharply, as did the others. “No,” he admitted. “No, he doesn’t know.”

Jangmi cast her eyes back up to the silent rigger. Seongge’s story was indeed the saddest one she had heard yet, if only because the man would never know if he had been abandoned or lost, if he had been forgotten about or if there was someone still waiting for him on dry land. If not a family of his own, then friends, parents, acquaintances. A whole existence that he could never rediscover.

And to compound it all, if Jangmi had understood correctly, his Virtue of Volume was one that he could not control, forcing him to take a vow of near silence in order to preserve the hearing of those close to him. He would never be able to laugh freely, to shout his anger, to cry his sadness. If his day-to-day existence was facilitated through rudimentary gestures pertaining to his job on the ship, there must be a whole other side of him too complex to communicate. The man was a
mystery, to his friends and to himself. The saddest kind of riddle.

Jangmi could well understand what it was like to have your life ruined by a Virtue you had not been prepared for. The kind of Virtue that was not a blessing but a curse.

“So who is the best fighter on board, then?” she asked, coming back to her original point.

Taehyung and Jimin looked at each other. “The Captain,” they said simultaneously.

Jangmi groaned. “Just my luck.”

“He was a pirate before any of us even put one foot in the sea,” Jimin explained. “Well, other than Jungkook, I suppose,” he added.

“He’s not called God of Destruction for nothing,” Taehyung pressed. “You could learn a lot from him.”

“Like how to bleed out really quickly,” Jangmi muttered under her breath so that neither Jimin nor Taehyung could hear.

“Ask him,” Jimin insisted. “He’ll want to teach you how to fight. It’s in his interests to have another warrior on board.”

Jangmi wasn’t so sure about this, but Jimin chivvied her along, and anything was better than making yet another attempt at winding that rope. So she skipped down the steps from the deck and made her way to the navigation room where Namjoon usually was when he wasn’t at the helm, her fingers brushing along the walls. They were smooth now, but in the aftermath of the battle they had been covered in score marks from the blades brandished from both sides. The walls near the navigation room had been particularly crosshatched, where Namjoon had fought off those two attackers; Jangmi had spent a whole day filling in the gouges with a paste Taehyung had given her, and the entirety of the next day repainting it.

As Jangmi turned to enter the navigation room, her fingers encountered an unfamiliar bump in the door frame. She paused, looking for what had caused it, but it was impossible to spot with the naked eye. It was only when her fingers retraced their course that Jangmi realised that there was a bullet lodged in the wood, invisible because of how similar its colour was to the surrounding
Jangmi couldn’t remember a pistol being fired - it must have happened before Namjoon had cut the slaver’s wrist, making him drop the gun. Or maybe he had picked it back up with the other hand. Who knew. She made a mental note to tell Taehyung about the hole before it could crack the wood, and then knocked on the door as she entered the navigation room.

“What is it?” the Captain asked in a neutral voice, looking up from his charts, and then his expression soured as he spotted Jangmi hovering in the doorway. “Oh. It’s you.”

“Yeah,” Jangmi said, chewing her lip. She hadn’t had a face-to-face conversation with the Captain since the night of the attack, and she still couldn’t get his tear-stained face out of her mind, nor that fabulous ruby pendant that she had never seen before or since. Jangmi shook herself. Whatever had upset the Captain, he had probably deserved it. “Jimin sent me down here because he thought that maybe it would be a good idea if maybe you might want to maybe teach me how to fight,” she said far too quickly and with far too many repetitions of the word ‘maybe’.

The Captain looked surprised. “I’m busy.”

“That’s what I thought,” Jangmi said hurriedly, and turned to leave before their conversation could become any more aggressive.

“Wait a second,” the Captain said loudly before she could escape out the door. “We need to talk.”

Jangmi turned back around slowly, dreading what would probably be a demand or an accusation or continued denial of guilt. “Yes?”

“About Shanghai,” Namjoon said, looking uneasy for some reason. “We need to talk about Shanghai. We’re not far, now.”

“I know,” Jangmi told him, surprised by the subject matter.

“Do you have contacts there? Relatives?” Namjoon asked her.
Jangmi shook her head. “I know as many people in Shanghai as I knew on Jeju.”

“Then what were you planning to do once you got there?” Namjoon asked her, mystified.

Oh, so this was about getting rid of her yet again. It figured - of course that would be the uppermost concern in Captain Pirate King’s mind. And he would want to do it more efficiently than had been the case on Jeju - less jail time for him and his crew members, less rescuing, and less Jangmi, specifically. “I was planning to wing it,” Jangmi shrugged. “Pretend to be a rich widow until some old man came along and I could be a rich widow for real.”

Namjoon cast his eyes upwards to the heavens where he was undoubtedly asking for divine intervention. “You were planning on winging it.”

“Yup,” Jangmi nodded.

“And you saw how well that worked out for you on Jeju, didn’t it?” Namjoon said cuttingly.

Jangmi tutted. “That was on Korean soil, where my face was plastered on bounty posters every two feet. This is China, no one gives a damn about me here any more than they did in Seoul fifteen years ago.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Namjoon warned her. “Especially in Shanghai - it’s not called Port of the World for nothing.”

Jangmi shrugged. She’d never heard the name before and assumed that Namjoon was about to explain. Which he did. At length.

“In Shanghai, ships from across the oceans dock side by side with no reference to nationality, affiliation or legality. It’s as like to be moored next to an Indian merchant boat as a mongol warship. There’s an uneasy truce that exists between all parties while docked in Shanghai, in that anything may happen unless it’s ostensible enough to bother the authorities.”

“Which means…” Jangmi said slowly.
“Which means that the Korean Navy will probably have contacts there. And which means that a rich widow, especially one as young and as pr… provocative as you are, would be seen as an easy target. And the authorities won’t lift a finger to help.”

Jangmi bit her lip. Captain Pirate King had a point. “As much as I hate to ask this, do you have any advice?”

The Captain looked unsure. “The pirates have their own kind of consulate at Port of the World, just like any other maritime organisation. It’s a tavern called The World’s End, but I can’t imagine you’d want to do any husband-hunting there.”

“No, thank you,” Jangmi said sweetly. “I’ve had quite enough of pirates this week. Couldn’t imagine marrying one.”

Namjoon gave her a dark look. “Guess I can’t help you, then.”

“Guess you can’t,” Jangmi affirmed, and turned to depart.

“Wait,” Namjoon’s tired voice came again as she reached the threshold. “I’ll teach you how to fight.”

“Seriously?” Jangmi spun around, half excited, half dreading it. “Why?”

“Don’t want you getting robbed,” the Captain said bluntly, “or you might end up back here.”

Jangmi sighed. “I suppose I had that coming.”

“That you did,” Namjoon said smugly, shuffling his charts. “I’ll show you the basics when I’m done with these.”

The ‘when’ of the ‘done with these’ turned out not to be any time that morning, so it was after lunch, when the sun was at its hottest, that Jangmi saw the Captain emerge from below deck, dressed simply compared to his usual garb.
“Okay, let’s start with the basics,” Namjoon said without any kind of preamble. “Think of your attacker as a wall, a wall that you need to get past. And if you hit certain parts of that wall, it will crumble faster than if you hit other parts.”

“But walls can’t move,” Jangmi pointed out.

“It’s a magic wall,” Namjoon said without breaking rhythm. “Your aim is to make it past that wall and crumble with the least amount of strikes, so every hit matters.”

“Can’t I just jump over the wall instead of hitting it?” Jangmi asked.

“No. Otherwise the wall will hit you back.” Namjoon said shortly. “Your choice of targets—”

“But a wall can’t hit—” Jangmi protested.

Namjoon let out a frustrated huff. “I said to think of it as a wall, not to base your whole life’s meaning on it.”

Jangmi raised her hands defensively. “Fine.”

“When hitting the wall,” Namjoon continued, “you want to have the most choice of targets, so the best thing is to keep the wall in front of you, like so.” Namjoon placed himself in front of her, showing all the parts that were exposed: head, throat, stomach, crotch. There were indeed many targets, Jangmi thought to herself, eyeing up Namjoon’s broad frame. “The wall itself will want to minimize the target area, so will try to stand side on, like so.”

Namjoon stood with his shoulders perpendicular to her, and Jangmi realised with a shock that he was actually quite skinny - his broad shoulders and loose clothes disguised the fact, but Namjoon undoubtedly presented limited areas to attack from this angle. “You want your attacker to be face on while your attacker wants to be side on.”

“I thought my attacker was a wall,” Jangmi interjected, unable to stop herself.
“I feel like I’m talking to one,” Namjoon growled. “Stop cracking jokes and listen.”

Jangmi nodded, miming a needle and thread sewing up her mouth.

“Let’s practice trying to get your attacker face on,” Namjoon said. “I’ll try to keep side on to you.” He turned his side to Jangmi, who dodged round, but Namjoon had already turned. She tried again, but to no avail.

“Ah, the ‘attacker is a wall’ lesson,” Jimin said reminiscently as he emerged from below deck with a flagon of ale to watch the show. “That old chestnut. Feels like it was only yesterday I was the one trying to hit Namjoon with a broom handle.”

“You got to hit him with a broom handle?” Jangmi said indignantly, stopping. “No fair, I want one.”

“You can attack me with a broom handle if you can hit me before I can hit you,” Namjoon promised.

“But your arms are like orangutan arms,” Jangmi protested. “And your shoulders are like, here.” She raised her hand to a height some feet above her head.

“You think your attacker won’t be taller and stronger than you?” Namjoon asked her, unbothered. “Come on, try to hit me. I know you’ve been dying to.”

Well, wasn’t that the truth, Jangmi reflected as she dodged one of Namjoon’s flailing arms by a hairsbreadth.

More crew members were appearing on the deck, eager to watch the show, and soon enough, some of them were calling out encouragement to Jangmi as she tried her utmost to land even the lightest of hits on Namjoon’s body. Quick on her feet she might be, but the Captain had years of experience, fighting who knows how many people with who knows what weapons. He seemed to be toying with her, stilling for moments on end and leaving himself seemingly open to attack, only to twist round and swing a palm at Jangmi, which she managed to avoid in the nick of time. He didn’t even seem to be all that uncomfortable anymore from the huge cut on his back that must not yet have healed properly. He moved fluidly, assuredly, comfortably. Like he was going for a stroll along the boulevards of Seoul City.
And yet, despite the serenity on his face, he moved like a snake, moving here and there with no seeming reason or rhyme. Jangmi was searching for a rhythm to hang on to, while he seemed to revel in the chaos, his reflexes taking over his body while his brain seemed to be elsewhere. In fact, he began humming a sea shanty as he dodged around, even going as far as to warble some snatches of lyrics - something about a wooden leg.

Frustrated, Jangmi dropped any pretense at technique and kicked him. Or, she would have, if Namjoon hadn’t leapt lightly over her leg as a child would do with a skipping rope.

“Do you give up?” he asked, grinning.

“No,” Jangmi panted, clutching a stitch in her side. Attacking a pirate was heavy work, it seemed.

“Don’t give up, Jangmi!” Taehyung called out from the crowd watching them. Others yelled out encouragement, too. Taking heart, Jangmi straightened up.

“What am I doing wrong?” she asked Namjoon.

Namjoon looked surprised, and Jangmi couldn’t blame him. She rarely asked his input on anything, and that made two requests for advice in one day. But Jangmi had not been star pupil of the Guild of Courtesans for nothing - she knew how to learn. Learning to read, learning seduction, learning combat, it was all the same. Learning a skill wasn’t the right approach - learning itself was the skill.

“You’re fighting the way you think the fight should go, not how it’s actually going,” Namjoon told her. “Like answering a question I haven’t yet asked. You need to wait for me to ask the question, and then answer it.”

“So you’re saying I’m fighting backwards, in essence,” Jangmi pouted, to the amusement of the watching crew.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Namjoon grinned boyishly. His face was lit up by the grin - of course Captain Pirate King would revel in her incompetence.

But not for long - because Jangmi was, after all, a quick learner, and she now understood that without exactly saying the words, Namjoon had been describing the language of bodies. Every
glance, every movement, every twist and turn spoke volumes to those practiced in their decryption. And in that respect, Jangmi had been able to read people long before she came into possession of her Virtue. She could read bodies as easily as astronomers read the night sky.

“Okay,” Jangmi sighed theatrically. “I’ll try again.”

Namjoon placed himself side on to Jangmi, holding out an imaginary cutlass. Jangmi did the same. Surprised, Namjoon’s eyes flicked to her wrist and Jangmi saw that he was about to surge forwards in the way that his shoulders tensed. As Namjoon hurtled at her, Jangmi spun gracefully to the side and attempted to strike his back as he went past, but as soon as Jangmi had moved, Namjoon had changed tack, throwing a backhand blow that would have caught Jangmi in the neck had she not dodged back in time.


Jangmi didn’t wait for him to get a read on her next plan. Instead, she went forwards and sidestepped the palm that whistled over her left shoulder, feinting right and then thrusting her first through the air to meet-

-more air. Namjoon, apparently, could read her body just as well as she read his. He’d only half-fallen for her feint, and ducked just in time to avoid her attack. Put out, Jangmi put some distance between them.

“Don’t get cocky,” Namjoon warned her. “I could have tripped you up there because you left yourself open. But you’re only just out of the infirmary so-”

Jangmi ran at him, not even attempting to get him side on, and leapt into the air to bring the Captain down in airborne tackle. Surprised, the Captain didn’t go for the easy blow that she was expecting to have to withstand. Instead, he grabbed her at the waist and swung her round so that her momentum was used up harmlessly. Jangmi’s arms were around his neck but hadn’t hit him with nearly enough force to be counted as an attack - instead, it was almost like she was embracing him. Namjoon set her lightly down on her feet, and Jangmi prepared to back up for another attack, but suddenly the Captain spun her around so that one of her arms was twisted behind her back and the other was pinned to the side by the Captain’s own - at the end of which was clutched a knife. To her throat.

The crew gasped and then laughed at the expression on her face, and Jangmi jumped slightly, having completely forgotten their presence in her concentration on the fight. But luckily Namjoon’s dagger wasn’t pressing into her skin, otherwise she might have found herself in need of
a new windpipe.

“No fair,” she whined, trying to extract herself from Namjoon’s grip, unsuccessfully. “I thought we were doing open-hand combat.”

“Well, you didn’t seem to be abiding by my lesson.” Namjoon shrugged, and Jangmi felt the movement through her whole body, her back still pressed to his wide frame. His warm frame - he had been exerting himself as much as she had, and the heat was radiating out from his body. “So I thought I would teach you a new one.”

“Which was?” Jangmi asked sourly.

“Always be better prepared than your attacker.”

“Thank you for that,” Jangmi grumbled. “I would never have guessed by myself.”

“You’re welcome,” Namjoon beamed, suddenly releasing her. Jangmi took the opportunity to whirl around and punch Namjoon in his stupid, smug face, but his own hand shot out and grabbed her wrist an inch before she made contact.

“You nearly had me there,” Namjoon admitted. “But don’t forget, I still have the knife.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Jangmi said, blowing her hair out of her face. “A man with a short sword needs only a small sheath.”

“Well, why would a small sword need a large sheath?” Jungkook asked from his position atop a barrel, looking bewildered.

“No, Jungkook,” Taehyung said patiently, who was stood next to him, “she was talking about the size of his-”

“LAND HO!”
Jangmi and Namjoon stopped their bickering to look up to the crow’s nest where Seongge was hanging precariously off the edge, and then as one the crew looked towards the prow of the ship. Barely visible but certainly there was a dark smudge on the horizon, the approaching coast of mainland China and by extension, the coast of Shanghai, home to Port of the World.

“Well, I guess I’d better prepare for my departure,” Jangmi muttered into the sudden hush that had descended upon the deck.

“Don’t be silly,” Taehyung said quickly. “We won’t reach Shanghai until late afternoon. She can stay on board for the night, can’t she Captain?”

“No, it’s okay,” Jangmi protested, before the Captain could reply. “I’ll stay at an inn - there’s no reason for me to bother you guys any longer.”

Taehyung closed his mouth, clearly unhappy, and Jangmi hurried below deck to the sleeping quarters, not eager to make a scene. In truth, another night on board would have been welcome to her, but Jangmi didn’t want them to know how desperate her situation was. Her plan to find a rich man to marry was shaky at best, and who knew how rough the Port of the World could be after dark. However, it was best that the crew think that she was confident enough to make her own way in the world, whether that was the truth or not. They didn’t need to be worrying about her wellbeing - they had Jungkook’s fate to worry about. Maybe they would find answers for him in Shanghai.

Slowly, Jangmi untied the knots that supported her hammock, where she had slept soundly for a week. That berth was not hers to keep and she had known it from the start - but it wasn’t a happy feeling, giving it up. She folded the hammock up neatly and placed it on the side, then gathered up the few belongings that she had - the pouch with her one remaining earring and the clothes in which she had escaped, including the dusty cloak. And that was it.

Jangmi stood there, contemplating the empty space that had once been her bunk, until Sejin popped his head round the door. “We’ve just docked.”

Jangmi nodded. “I’ll be right up.”

When she emerged, the whole crew was assembled on the deck, waiting to say goodbye. For a moment, there was silence, and then everyone crowded around her, showering her with advice and well-wishing. Sejin and Deokwoon jostled her while Jungkook and Yoongi stood to the side, the former with a grin on his face and the latter with a grimace.
In the throng, Jimin handed her a large flask of rum. “Don’t drink it all at once,” he joked, but his smile was half-hearted at best.

“I can’t promise that,” Jangmi told him, “I learned alcoholism from the best.” And she was pleased to see his smile become a little more sincere.

Taehyung clapped her on the back. “I’ll miss you. The Captain’s more fun when you’re around.”

“More fun when I’m around?” Jangmi replied, pretending to be horrified. “What was he before, a sea slug?”

Taehyung snorted and threw a covert glance at his captain to check that he hadn’t heard, but he was stood to the side.

Then Seongge came forward and Jangmi suddenly had an idea. She raised her hand, and after sending her a quizzical look, he did the same until their palms were touching.

“Can’t believe it took me this long to think of this,” Jangmi said aloud, and Seongge jerked back in surprise, finally understanding, but then he slowly brought his hand back to hers.

_Can’t believe I never thought of this myself, frankly._

“Bet you’re sad to see me go now,” Jangmi joked, and Seongge grinned, though it was a slightly bitter one.

_You bet I am. You have no idea how hard it is to convey humour over sign language. No one ever laughs at my jokes._

Jangmi wished she could laugh, but strangely, she couldn’t bring herself to. The thought of leaving Seongge in his silent existence just as she had discovered a way around it made her heart feel heavy in a way that she’d never quite felt before. It wasn’t twisting and sharp, like it felt when thinking of Heemi’s betrayal, or that hot burn when thinking of the Captain’s hypocrisy. It felt like something new. Something like regret.
Finally, Jangmi turned to the Captain, but his attention was on the port, where he was studying the to-ing and fro-ing of its inhabitants with a furrowed brow.

Jangmi looked between the crew and the bustling shoreline of Shanghai’s port and felt another pang of regret, without quite knowing why. What had she done to regret? She’d done nothing more and nothing less than what was needed to survive, the proof being that she had.

But looking from face to face amongst the crew, each member so dissimilar in stature and build but their eyes all alight with the same troubled expression, Jangmi couldn’t help feel that she’d missed something. A chance, not for herself but for them. Something more she could have given them. Her time. Her attention. Her respect.

Jangmi wished that she still had time to cultivate all these things with them. But her time at sea was up. She had escaped Korea and the headsman’s blade. That was all she had ever asked of them and they had undoubtedly delivered. But between the crowded, vibrant, unknown Port of the World and the unusually hushed Second Star, Jangmi knew where she’d rather be. If only she could think of a reason for them to let her stay.

The silence between Jangmi and the crew dragged out, neither side saying anything. Jangmi’s eyes met the Captain’s. His face was still, but his gaze was piercing. Jangmi wondered what he was seeing. Was she still the same troublesome stowaway that had boarded unasked on Silmido? Was she the dead King’s pawn? The Queen’s fool? The Master Spy’s lackey? She wasn’t sure that she knew who she was any more than the Captain did.

But it didn’t really matter what the Captain thought of her. She was leaving, and leaving behind nothing more substantial than a memory, whether it be bitter or sweet. Even the earring, the only thing of value that she had given them, was soon to be sold off to an anonymous stranger and forgotten about.

Finally, Jangmi raised her hand in farewell, suddenly unable to speak. Then she turned her back on them and strode away into the unknown, blinking back the tears from her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

WELL. This wasn't even meant to be a chapter, but I wanted to focus on developing Jangmi’s relationships with everyone on board as well as this life of piracy as well as
the ambiguous antagonism going on between her and Namjoon and basically... it just became a chapter.

Speaking of unexpected things, I didn't expect Seongge's character to grow on me this much but his story damn near broke my heart, and it really got to me that Jangmi leaves just as they find a way for his voice to be heard... *sigh*

All aboard for the next chapter, which to no-one's surprise will be called 'Port of the World' (but that's not to say that there won't be any surprises...)

PS. Anyone got any constructive criticism?
Jangmi is left to her own devices in Port of the World and is inevitably buffeted by the winds of fate/whatever her unlucky stars have come up with next.

Port of the World was nothing like Jangmi had ever seen before. It was a far cry from the Imperial city of Seoul where the division between the homes of the rich and powerful and the abject poor was as easy as drawing a line. It was also a contrast to the rustic simplicity of Jeju’s harbour town, ringed by fields and forest, where the bucolic way of life had been disrupted by the arrival of the Navy and the Sect. It was different again to the noisy and cheerful but homogenous hubbub of The Second Star.

Shanghai’s port seemed to host dozens of nationalities, hundreds of occupations, thousands of faces. A chaotic blur of colour and sound, too noisy and too ephemeral to comprehend from one moment to the next. Jangmi’s head swiveled constantly, attracted by this strange language, that strange garb, those strange fruits. The buildings were as varied as their inhabitants as well. Cinnabar-painted Japanese structures stood next to Korean hanoks, which were nestled between Chinese diaojiaolou, which were surrounded by shrines denoting every religion from Egypt to Indonesia.

Jangmi made sure that she was out of sight of The Second Star before finding a wall to lean on, overwhelmed. The last thing she wanted was for the crew to see how lost and how easy a prey she felt she was. She needed a plan.

She caught sight of two men wearing loose billowy clothing, red-faced from rum and with jewels dangling from their ears, heading purposefully down the street. Clearly, they were pirates headed to the tavern Namjoon had spoken about, The World’s End. Having nothing better to do, Jangmi followed them at a distance. She still wasn’t planning on finding a pirate husband, but it was better to concentrate on a short-term goal than let the now-familiar taste of panic overtake her.

Concentrating on following the two pirates made Jangmi feel better - weaving her way through the masses of people on the streets of Port of the World, trying to keep them in her sights, gave her the comforting illusion that she knew what she was doing. She was slipping through a group of arguing merchants from the north, judging by their thick clothing, she was ducking under a beam of wood carried by two sweating carpenters, she was dodging this portly fruit vendor carrying a crate of waxy citrus fruits. Someone bumped into her shoulder and she caught the tiniest glimpse of
thought *way too expensive* as she nearly knocked the crate out of the fruit vendor’s hands. She bowed quickly in apology as the man’s mouth opened in a small ‘o’ under his grey moustache.

Jangmi looked for the pirates, but her view was obstructed by some Sect members in orange walking towards her, seemingly searching for something. Hoping that it wasn’t her they were on the lookout for, she dodged sideways to put a group of chattering women and their servants between them.

Then, Jangmi caught sight of the pirates up ahead, but in her hurry to catch them up she had to slide between a group of fishermen, hearing a babble of thoughts *net needs repairing could get three gold pieces for the herring wonder what the wife made for dinner what did I do with that hook did that man steal my purse* as her skin brushed their bare, sun-browned arms. Jangmi clutched her hands to her chest and scurried along, but she had lost sight of the pirates in the hubbub.

Then, the crowd thinned suddenly and Jangmi realised that she had entered a square, possibly the main square of the port, judging by its size. Stalls ringed the edges, but the middle was taken up by a large fountain, next to which was a fairly sizeable crowd, all craning their necks to see what was going on. Thinking that it might be another public gathering for the Sect, Jangmi hesitated, but when she saw that no one was wearing orange, she deemed it safe to approach.

She wove her way to the front, where a small boy was folding up a screen, the type found in a lady’s boudoir but much more frayed, stained, old. The crowd around Jangmi was clapping; obviously someone had just disappeared from behind the screen, judging by the pile of clothes revealed to be on the floor. Then, a girl not much younger than Jangmi popped out from behind the fountain, and the audience clapped again, this time with cheers and whoops. The little boy went round with a hat, into which some people dropped copper coins.

The girl bowed, saying something in Chinese that Jangmi couldn’t understand, then held up a small wooden box, no larger than a bottle of rum. The little boy came over and opened up the screen, in front of which he placed the box. And when he folded up the screen again, the girl had disappeared. The audience clapped again, certainly rife with discussions as to how the girl could have possibly escaped from behind the raggedy divider unnoticed. The little boy picked up the little box carefully, then dipped it in the fountain and placed it back in front of the screen. And when he folded back the screen yet again, the girl had reappeared - but this time, soaking wet.

The audience burst into applause. It was a neat trick, Jangmi thought to herself, making it look like the girl had been in that tiny box. But of course no human, however flexible, could fit into such a small space. Obviously, the girl had a bucket of water waiting somewhere so that she could recreate the effects of being submerged in water. But as for the disappearing act, Jangmi had no idea how it was achieved.
The next part of the show was a step up; the boy opened up the box, showing the audience as he painted the inside red with some kind of paste. But some of the audience seemed to be distracted from the spectacle. Turning, Jangmi saw some people clad in orange enter the square, talking to some of the vendors that sold their wares on the edges.

The boy called out in Chinese to regain everyone’s attention, and went through his process of placing the box in front of the screen, the girl disappearing. Jangmi glanced to the back, and saw some of the vendors pointing in her direction. She quickly pulled up the hood of her cloak, and slipped through the crowd, but not before the girl had reappeared, this time miraculously covered in red paint, to the tumultuous applause of the crowd.

But as Jangmi wove through the crowd, she came face to face with the stern face of a man dressed in orange robes, and she halted, ready to run.

“Out of my way,” the man said brusquely, and shoved her aside.

Relieved, Jangmi turned to see the men in orange converge on the red-painted girl. Her relief turned to shock as they grabbed her by the arms, pushing the little boy aside, indifferent to his screams. The girl shouted out, struggling against her attackers, and then her clothes fell to the ground, empty. She had disappeared.

Or rather, she hadn’t quite disappeared. A little mouse, somehow painted red, poked its nose out from the clothes, and before the men in orange could react, it shot off through the crowd, zigzagging through people’s feet and across the square. The men in orange set off in hot pursuit, and one turned to grab the little boy, but he was too quick, grabbing the hat full of money and slipping through his fingers, running in the opposite direction. The man swore but let him go. He turned to the crowd and pulled out a scroll of parchment.

“‘Wanted for crimes against the Sect of the Burning Sign, Wu Meng Lei, dangerous even when unarmed, reward of fifty gold pieces’,” the man read out, and then spoke in Chinese, presumably repeating the message for those who couldn’t understand the first.

The crowd murmured and dispersed, some presumably in search of the red mouse themselves, hoping to collect the prize money. The street vendors stopped staring and went back to their business of selling their products, calling out prices at the tops of their voices. Passersby continued to circulate, the impromptu street show all but forgotten. Meanwhile, the man who had read out the bounty started kicking over the moth-eaten screen, nudging the pile of clothes with his foot. To her horror, Jangmi saw a red-whiskered nose poke out from the wooden box that had been discarded on the ground, but luckily the man’s back was turned to it. However, that wouldn’t be for long. Before she knew it, she was hurrying over to the Sect man.
“Excuse me, sir,” she called out, hoping to distract him. “May I ask what type of crime that girl is wanted for?”


She had only been half-listening, still keeping an eye on the mouse, whose nose had been poking out of the box intermittently, but now Jangmi’s stomach dropped unpleasantly. “I saw the same kind of thing back in Busan,” she lied quickly. “Just wondering about how heresy could, uh... spread so far.” In fact, she was wondering nothing of the sort. She was, in fact, wondering how best to get herself out of this situation as quickly and as safely as possible. It seemed as though the Sect wanted this girl for no reason other than the fact that she appeared to carry a Virtue, something of which Jangmi herself was guilty of.

“A-heretical-act-is-heretical-no-matter-the-location,” the man said, frowning, as if it was obvious.

“Of course it is,” Jangmi said hastily, attempting to appear in some way pious. Perhaps she could pass herself off as a potential convert to the Sect. “And, uh... may she be justly punished.”

“May-the-fire-of-God-cleanse-her-soul,” the man answered reverently.

“You’re going to burn her?” Jangmi asked without thinking, taken aback. In her time as a courtesan of the royal court she had heard whisperings of burnings, political assassinations dressed as religious crimes, but she had never thought that it was so publicly practiced, nor on commoners.

The man looked at her askance. “There-is-yet-a-path-through-the-flames-for-not-all-those-who-sin-are-lost.” He made to turn around to examine the box in which the mouse was hiding, but Jangmi dodged round, recapturing his attention.

“No, yes, I agree completely,” she nodded vigorously, trying to think of something else to say. “It’s just that I heard that the carrier of the Virtue of Water was burned for heresy, so...” Jangmi’s meek voice trailed off under the furious glare of the Sect man.

“The burning of the Admiral was the greatest blunder on behalf of the previous Blaze,” the man said stiffly, obviously unhappy about being reminded of the incident. “Son Euigong did his utmost
to convince the Blaze that the Admiral could be brought back to the path through the flames, but he was unsuccessful. To this day he considers it his greatest failure.”

“Sure, sure,” Jangmi agreed. The name Son Euigong seemed familiar to her for some reason, but she couldn’t place it. Perhaps she had heard it back at court, an errant thought on the part of one of her targets, the parade of men that used to guest under her roof.

“Which is why he is concentrated on eradicated heresy at its root,” the man continued, more enthusiastically. “Across the seas and at every level of society.”

“Hence the bounty on Wu Meng Lei,” Jangmi surmised.

“Exactly. I have a feeling the city is going to have a few less mice in it by this evening,” the man told her conspiratorially. Behind him, the mouse had finally made it out of the box and darted into the sleeve of the discarded tunic.

“But why is the bounty so low?” Jangmi asked, hoping to squeeze one final drop of information out of this source. “I saw a bounty that was ten thousand gold pieces.”

“The bounty is proportional to the crime,” the man explained, but he would not explain anything further, other than that a bounty of that size must be based on a crime as atrocious as that of the Admiral’s. He bowed briefly and turned to examine the now mercifully empty box, so Jangmi made use of this moment to grab the tunic. The man turned back around and saw her arms full with clothes. He looked at her suspiciously.

“You don’t mind if I take these?” Jangmi asked as nonchalantly as possible while she felt the mouse’s tiny paws tickle her arm. “I was thinking of giving it to the orphans on the seafront.”

“The Sect will donate them where it sees fit,” the man said, and Jangmi dutifully handed the clothes over, the warm weight of the small mouse settled in the crook of her elbow, hidden by her cloak.

Jangmi bowed briefly in return, and left the square as quickly as possible whilst attempting to appear to be a complete innocent going about her business. Dangerous as it was for her to approach anyone from Korea in case they recognised from her own bounty poster, she was glad that she had. Maybe it was because she sympathised now with anyone who had a bounty on their head, or maybe it was because she couldn’t forget Jungkook’s beaten and bloody face when she had pulled the
cover off his face in Jeju’s prison. Whatever the reason, she found herself a secluded alley where she checked that the coast was clear before coaxing the small mouse out of her sleeve.

As gently as possible, Jangmi scrubbed away the red paint with her sleeve and a bit of spit until the mouse’s fur was white again. It was crouching, trembling, in the palm of Jangmi’s hand, so she whispered some words of comfort and laid it gently on the ground. And then, in the next instant, it was the girl again, naked, trembling from fear or cold. Clothes obviously didn’t survive the transformation, and the girl’s tunic was now in the Sect’s possession.

Quickly, Jangmi unclasped her cloak and placed it around the girl’s shoulders. The girl looked up at her, said something quickly in Chinese, bowed and then turned on her heel and fled. Jangmi hoped that she would be able to find the little boy, and then safety, far from the clutches of the Sect of the Burning Sign.

Jangmi wandered back to the square, hoping perhaps to find some more people who looked like they knew where they were going, but now without her cloak, her stained clothes and distinctive hair were attracting looks from the people of Shanghai. Port of the World it may be, but Jangmi knew that her hair colour wasn’t common in any trade route this side of the world, China or elsewhere. If she didn’t find a place to stay for the night, she might well find herself back in the conditions of her childhood, with strangers spitting or threatening her for her hair.

This gave Jangmi an idea. Approaching a clay pot seller, she mimed cutting off her hair, and was pointed back to the direction of the port. Jangmi assumed that many sailors fresh off the boat, in need of a shave, went straight to barbers on the wharves. And if she found a well-established one, one whose customers included nobles and their wives, she might be able to get a hefty amount of money for her hair. Enough to take a room at an inn for a few weeks until she figured out the next step in her plan.

Jangmi made her way back through the eclectic collection of buildings to the seafront, and emerged from between a shipbuilder’s yard and a warehouse, where she stopped dead. Just in front of her, having just docked, was a ship. And it was crawling with men in green. They were busy throwing ropes to each other, checking knots, bringing crates to the shore from on board, one of them barking out items from a list, another directing crewmembers to pile up stock, another pointing in her direction-

Jangmi swore, a particularly choice phrase borrowed from Yoongi, and ran.

Behind her, she could hear the yells of sailors on her tail. She was on the same trajectory as earlier, except in fast-forward, darting through crowds of vendors and fishers and merchants and carpenters, too quickly to dodge them completely, and a clamour too considerable to block out filled her head, thoughts in languages she couldn’t understand, snippets too brief to catch. Jangmi
clapped her hands over her ears as she ran, but it was no good, it just made it worse, blocking out the noise from the real world only amplified the voices in her head.

Jangmi realised that she had made it into the square with the fountain, but the sailors were still behind her, disrupting the inhabitants of the port, the vendors, pushing them and their stalls out the way with as little consideration as the Sect members had grabbed Wu Meng Lei earlier. Lungs burning, Jangmi chose an exit at random and pelted down the side streets, each narrower than the last, the people she dodged becoming mere blurs as she sprinted, but she couldn’t hear the sailors behind her over the noise of her own feet slapping down on the cobblestones. She went left, then left again, then right, and then hit a dead end and had to backtrack. She could hear yells but had no way of telling which direction they were coming from, or if they were coming from more than one. She was being hunted like a rabbit in a maze. Like a mouse in a trap.

She came upon a deserted alleyway lined with barrels, threw herself behind one, and collapsed, gasping for breath. She was tired, so very tired. Tired of running, tired of having to run. Tired of being the person she was in the situation she was in. She hadn’t asked to be born to the streets or to have strange hair, no more than she had asked to be taken in by the Guild of Courtesans or spirited away to the royal court to be a spy on men more rich and powerful than she could ever hope to be. She hadn’t asked to be given this Virtue, which put a target on her back from the Sect, or included in the assassination plot that put a target on her back from the Navy. She had run from the capital, she had run in Jeju, and now she was running, even across the Yellow Sea. All she wanted was to stop.

But if she was going to give up, it was sure as hell not going to be to the Navy, delivered right back into the hands of Heemi. No, Jangmi would rather give herself up to the Sect, go through whatever fiery ordeal they had in store for Virtue-carriers, than have to face the deceptively saccharine Queen of Korea again. Those wide eyes, those honeyed words, those smiling red lips. The face that summed up all she had ever wanted and could never have. A home. A friend. A love.

Her resolved hardened again, and Jangmi peeked round the corner of the alley, ready to make a run for the harbour. So, she would flee again. And she would continue to, until she found a place where they could never send her back to Korea. And if she had to live out in the rice farms of mountainous China, so be it.

There was still a group soldiers dressed in green gesticulating wildly to each other in the street, trying to coordinate the search. One of them looked in her direction and Jangmi leapt backwards, hoping that he hadn’t seen her. She slowly edged out again to see what was going on and saw the sailor making his way towards the alley, his hand on the pommel of his sword and a look of grim determination on his face.

Jangmi moved backwards as silently as possible, fear cinching her stomach tight. They would catch her, this time. She couldn’t evade them forever. She-
Someone grabbed her and slammed her into the wall, their body weight pressed against her so that she could not escape.

“What the-” she began to cry out, but before she could finish her sentence, a large and calloused hand clamped over her mouth, cutting her off.

“Don’t struggle.”

The voice was husky, low and familiar. Jangmi obeyed, and the hand was removed.

“Namjoon?” Jangmi whispered, looking up at the broad features of The Second Star’s captain. “What are you doing here?”

He was leaning forward, his arms raised and pressed to the wall so as to frame her head, preventing her escape. His face was only inches from hers. From this close, Jangmi realised for the first time that he might, by other people, be considered handsome. His skin was roughened by sea and stubble but held a dewy glow underneath nonetheless. His eyes, almond shaped but black as jet, held her gaze with a fierce intensity. His jawline and cheekbones were sharp, but in contrast his lips were plump, unbelievably plump. He brought those ample lips towards Jangmi’s ear and she shivered, feeling his warm breath on her skin.

“I need you,” he whispered. “I need you back on the ship.”

“E-excuse me?” Jangmi asked, stuttering for some inexplicable reason. Perhaps it was because no one had ever looked at her with the same force that Namjoon had - she couldn’t stop thinking about how close he was to her, his body caging hers, pressing her to the wall. Jangmi supposed that she must be uncomfortable. Yes. That was surely it.

Namjoon didn’t reply, but Jangmi felt his hair tickle her face has he brought his lips even closer to hers. Heat was radiating out from him - surely there was no more than a hairsbreadth between him and the bare skin of her cheek. Any closer and Jangmi would be able to hear what was going through his head… if she could gather her thoughts enough to concentrate. Right now all she could hear was her own heartbeat, strangely loud. And Namjoon’s breath, raspy yet gentle in her ear. Jangmi wondered why he wasn’t answering. Was he shocked by his own actions, his forwardness, his close proximity to her?
“...aaaaaand they’re gone,” Namjoon said, stepping back from her. “Whew, that was a close one.”

Jangmi squinted in the bright light that was suddenly flooding her vision - Namjoon’s height and breadth had gone a long way for blocking it out. Disconcerted, Jangmi stayed leaning on the wall behind her as if it might disappear. For a moment there, she had forgotten about the Navy soldiers on her tail.

“Thank you, I suppose,” Jangmi said, wondering if her cheeks weren’t just a little too warm from their proximity to Namjoon’s heat.

“It’s an old trick I learnt,” Namjoon said cheerfully. “Any sailor, lawful or unlawful, will give a man his distance if he’s with a lady.”

“I suppose so,” Jangmi murmured. She’d never had an opportunity to witness this - she usually dealt with men individually.

“I have to say, I’m impressed,” Namjoon told her earnestly. “You’ve been on dry land for less than three hours and you already managed to find some Navy soldiers to chase you. I’m starting to think you enjoy it.”

Jangmi scowled at him, but had no reply. What could she say? Every time she put a foot on the shore these days, it seemed that there was someone around to pursue her. She had terrible luck - she had always known that. It was just that her unlucky stars seemed to be that bit more powerful when she wasn’t at sea.

“So, back to business,” Namjoon said briskly. “We need you back on the ship.”

“Why?” Jangmi asked suspiciously. “You’ve spent every last moment in my company trying to get rid of me.”

Namjoon acknowledged the truth of this statement with an airy wave of his hand. “You were dead weight before. Now you’re useful.”

“What’s changed since I stepped on dry land?” Jangmi asked, still wary of his change in attitude. “I haven’t gotten any better at fighting, I can promise you that.”
“I’ll explain back on The Second Star,” Namjoon said, looking around furtively. “You’ll be safer on board than out here… unless you want to stay in Shanghai?” he asked hesitantly, looking genuinely worried that her answer might be yes. After all, she had declared that she was sick of pirates not one day prior.

Jangmi considered her position. She was alone in Shanghai, a big city whose language she didn’t speak and with a future which was all too uncertain, despite her bravado to the contrary, and eternally hunted by the Korean Navy who had somehow been granted entry to China. Contrasted with The Second Star, whose captain was suddenly taking an interest in her wellbeing, as well as free board, food and combat lessons. People she knew, people she liked, people that had looked out for her and shared with her and taught her how to drink rum. The choice was an easy one, really. The only thing missing, Jangmi thought with a pang of annoyance, was the other sapphire earring. But that was probably gone forever.

“I’ll come back,” Jangmi said firmly. “There’s no hospitality like pirate hospitality,” she added cheekily.

Namjoon snorted and bought her a shawl to cover her hair, but led her back through the tangle of houses and boats to The Second Star without further comment, which was a blessed relief - all of Jangmi’s concentration was needed to ease her breathing from the earlier tension.

It seemed her arrival had been expected. No sooner had Jangmi set foot on board The Second Star than she was met with cheers and whoops - fairly different from her reception the last time she had made a return to the ship.

“We knew you couldn’t stay away from us grumpy pirates,” Jimin laughed. “I want my flask of rum back - it was supposed to be a leaving present, yet here you are again!”

“It wasn’t my intention this time, I promise,” Jangmi told him, amused. “In fact, I still don’t know why it is I’m back here and not making love to a rich chinese merchant right now.”

“Ah, yes,” Namjoon said dryly, appearing behind her. “I’m sure that the rich chinese merchant was just waiting to rescue you from the Navy in the next alleyway along.”

“Well done, Captain!” Jungkook called out. “Knew you’d be the one to find her.” And he collected a silver coin from the less-than-happy Sejin.
“Who’d you bet on?” Jimin asked Sejin, handing Jungkook a silver coin of his own.

“Deokwoon,” Sejin grumbled. “I thought Jangmi would have gone back to her old place of work. But now that I think about it, Deokwoon may have gotten a little distracted…”

Looking around, Jangmi realised that certain faces were missing from amongst the crew - she had expected to see Yoongi’s scowling face, Taehyung’s cheerful one, Deokwoon’s bearded grin. “You sent out a search party for me?” she asked the Captain, astounded.

The Captain coughed awkwardly. “It turns out that we need a little favour from you. Which you owe us. I guess.”

“Right,” Jangmi said, narrowing her eyes. “I thought we were even.”

Here’s the thing, Jangmi heard, and looked round to see Seongge grab her wrist. The Captain and Yoongi went to The World’s End to get information, and quickly discovered that the only person in the world capable of fixing the Astrosextant is currently residing in Japan, which, as I’m sure you know, is literally the one place in the world where we can’t go.

“Because you stole the Emperor’s crown and destroyed the military base in Fukuoka.” Jangmi nodded.

Exactly, Seongge confirmed. The Captain, who hates to admit that he can’t do something for himself, needs someone to go to Osaka to make contact with the repairman and then collect the order, without anyone else finding out that ours is broken.

“And none of you can do that?” Jangmi asked, not really angry about the fact that for once she was able to do something that none of the crew were capable of.

Our faces are pretty well known in Japan, Seongge shrugged. It’s a risk the Captain would rather not take. Best to send someone unknown. Someone who has as much to lose from being captured as we do.

“So…” Jangmi paused, thinking it through. “It’s not even something illegal?”
“What isn’t illegal?” Jimin blurted out, looking exasperated. “What’s going on? Are you explaining it to her? I can only hear one side of the conversation.”

Seongge rubbed the back of his neck, grinning sheepishly. *Guess they’re going to have to get used to that.*

“He’s just filling me in on why you suddenly need someone who can’t mend sails, mop floors or defend themselves to do something you lot can’t do,” Jangmi said smugly. “But I’ll do it, because I’m so generous.”

The crew’s exuberant response was cut short by the arrival of Yoongi, who was pulling both Taehyung and Deokwoon along behind him. The two of them were grinning, their hair all mussed up and the laces on their shirts only half done up. Jangmi guessed that they had both gotten, well, distracted from their search for her. Yoongi, however, looked exhausted, his face pale and drawn.

“Good, you found her,” he panted, leaning against the gunwhale.

“Yoongi, have you drunk your medicine?” Jimin said immediately, coming over to check. Yoongi shook his head mutely and pulled out the small vial which he kept on a chain around his neck. After two sips, he looked better already.

“Ow!” he said indignantly as Jimin hit him round the head.

“Don’t - make - me - worry - about - your - health.” Jimin hissed, interjecting every word with another smack.

“That’s ironic!” Yoongi retorted as he covered his head, but it came out as more of a yelp.

“Oh come on,” Jangmi said, rolling her eyes. “Save the swordplay for later.”

“You mean when we get to Japan?” Jungkook asked her, his brow wrinkled. No one chose to enlighten him.
And as the crew filtered down to the galley for some dinner, Seongge paused and held out his palm to Jangmi, over which she placed her own. His face lit up, like the sun had suddenly come out from behind the clouds, the happiest she had ever seen him.

*It’s good to have you back, Jangmi.*

Chapter End Notes

Ngl, I'm not overly pleased with this chapter. Certain things needed to happen and I tried to make them as exciting as possible, but material in which Jangmi could display her sass was limited, so if you do have any suggestions or comments please let me have it!

In news of redeeming features, we have:

- Our very first NamJang moment! More to come, obv
- YoonMin blessing us all with their domestic
- Seongge twisting my heart into a million pieces

More on this mysterious Son Euigong figure next week! The chapter is called 'Revelry and Revelations' which means two awesome things:
1. you get some goshdarn answers (and about a 100 more questions, sorrynotsorry)
2. pirate party!
Revelry and Revelations

Chapter Summary

The pirates host a party because they feel like it, and certain things are revealed to Jangmi, both about the world around her and certain emotions within herself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The shore of Shanghai receded into the distance, and with it, Jangmi’s fears. Namjoon had listened seriously to her warning about the presence of both the Navy and the Sect of the Burning Sign in Port of the World, and had deemed it best to anchor off a small island a couple of hours sailing away for the night. They stayed just a few hours longer in Shanghai after her return to conclude their business transactions and stock up on food for the long journey to Japan (with both Jangmi and Jungkook well hidden, should anyone come looking for them), so by the time the anchor had been dropped off the coast of an unnamed spit of land, it was well past midnight.

And yet, no one was ready to go to bed. The crew were celebrating Jangmi’s return in their favourite way - with large quantities of rum. A pirate party was not like one she had ever experienced, not that she had experienced many parties at all. But she hadn’t expected paper lanterns to be strung up around the deck by the crafty Taehyung, nor the presence of actual food supplied by Jimin: doraji namul, goguma mattang, ssambap. She certainly hadn’t expected the small amount of rum she had forced down to go straight to her head, nor for the crew to strike up a rendition of their favourite song, ‘The Captain’s Wooden Leg.’

The Second Star’s Captain himself lead the choruses, swinging his arms in some vague resemblance to keeping time, while the crew raised their lusty voices together:

“*The Captain’s leg is made of wood*

*The Captain stays afloat just like a captain should!*

Deokwoon bellowed out the verses, standing tall and proud, gesticulating with a flagon of rum, depleting its level down his throat and over the boots of those around him between lines.

“*The Captain loved a maiden sweet and fair*

*A voice as soft as soft could be and auburn in her hair!*"
And the crew yelled back at him, “The Captain’s leg is made of wood
The Captain stays afloat just like a captain should!”

“The Captain took his maiden to the sea
But when she saw his floating leg the maiden tried to flee!”

Jangmi had by now caught on to the lyrics and raised her voice with the crew of the second star, her awful singing mercifully masked by the tenors of those around her.

“ The Captain’s leg is made of wood
The Captain stays afloat just like a captain should!”

“The Captain wept, for the maiden’s hand he begged
But her answer was: I’d dread to get a splinter when we’re in bed!”

The crew yelled out the final chorus and burst into applause, while Taehyung leant close to Jangmi. “We had to change the lyrics to the last line,” he told her, hiccuping slightly. “Namjoon didn’t want us singing about splinters between the maiden’s legs in front of Jungkook.”

Jangmi found this funnier than she should have, and had to be dragged away from the innocent navigator before she could explain to him the facts of life.

Shanty-singing was followed by a new game called ‘corset-fighting’, invented by Taehyung, where two members had to wrestle each other into submission whilst wearing corsets that restricted their movements, their usually fluid movements made stiff and inflexible. Jangmi cried laughing at the sight of Deokwoon lying flat on top of Seongge like an upturned turtle, unable to bend down to trap the latter’s arm, and Sejin accidentally breaking the boning in his corset when he fell backwards over a barrel. Jangmi herself faced off Taehyung, who complained interminably about the fact that Jangmi actually fitted into her corset, which gave her an advantage, but not so much that she actually won. One misstep on her part and Taehyung managed to hook a leg round her ankle, resulting in them both crashing to the ground. Luckily, the other crew members pulled Taehyung off of her before she asphyxiated under his weight.

The night wore on, and the singing died down along with the quantity of rum left in the bottles.
Dawn found scant few of them left on the deck, Jangmi amongst the survivors. The rush from the alcohol had gone, replaced by a gentle but persistent headache. She had an empty bottle pressed against her forehead, the cold glass refreshing to her brow. The others had just finished another game of Stinkpot - Jangmi had been banned from playing, for obvious reasons.

Opposite her, Namjoon threw down his cards, having saved himself from a crushing defeat by ceding to a merely embarrassing one. His head lolled back on a barrel behind him, eyes half-closed, and for once his face was free from any kind of worry, annoyance or anger. For once, he looked young.

Jangmi chucked the remnants of a lantern at him to get his attention, and he cracked an eye open at her. “How does someone so young end up being a captain aboard a pirate ship?” she asked him.

Namjoon looked at her seriously, apparently considering how to best answer her question. Finally, he opened his mouth. “How many fools does it take the hoist the sail on a dragonboat?”

“I suppose that depends on how big the dragonboat was,” Jangmi replied, puzzled, and couldn’t understand why the others roared with laughter.

Namjoon nodded to himself, smiling. “I see you haven’t learned much from your time on board this ship.”

“No,” Jangmi admitted, and then remembered. “But i’ll tell you what I did learn today. I found out that the Sect are hunting Virtue-carriers.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Namjoon said, closing his eyes again. “That bunch of snakes are no better than slavers.”

“But don’t you think that this could be why they’re searching for Jungkook?” Jangmi pressed.

“Jungkook doesn’t carry a Virtue,” Namjoon said firmly, his eyes still resolutely shut.

“Oh,” Jangmi said, disappointed. She had thought that she had cracked the mystery of Jungkook’s bounty, with a hidden Virtue of Calculating Wind Speed or something, but apparently the shy navigator was no more than he seemed - a bright young kid, good with ships.
“Don’t worry,” Namjoon yawned, as the others got to their feet and bade them goodnight. “I’m not about to invite the Sect on board The Second Star. If the Sect started searching for virtue-carriers on board, we’d be down by four.”

Jangmi counted off her fingers. “Me, Jimin, Seongge… who’s missing? Is it you?”

“With you on board, the only Virtue I need is the virtue of patience,” the Captain threw at her. “It’s no one, I miscounted.”

Jangmi threw him a withering glance, which he didn’t see, reclined as he was. “What kind of captain can’t count to three?” she snorted.

“The kind that will make you scrub the deck until he sees his face in it,” Namjoon growled, but without any real heat. His head resting back on the barrel and the gentle glow of dawn had begun to light up his face, turning his washed-out features golden.

Jangmi stretched her arms out behind her back, her limbs sore from being sat on the cold, hard wood for too long. “It’s too bad about Jungkook’s bounty still being a mystery to us,” she mused, stifling a yawn. “I really thought I’d cracked it - I thought that this Son Euigong guy might want a Virtue from Jungkook.”

“What?” Namjoon’s eyes flew open and he sat up sharply.

“What what?” Jangmi echoed dumbly, surprised by his reaction.

“Are you sure that Son Euigong was the name? Because his is not a one that is popular aboard The Second Star,” Namjoon stated with finality.

“Okay,” Jangmi shrugged, “but really, whose is?”

However Namjoon, now wide awake, pressed her for every detail of her encounter with the Sect, and Jangmi recounted the events as faithfully as she could remember: the magic show, the attempted arrest of Wu Meng Lei, the need to distract the Sect follower, Jangmi’s questioning of Sect doctrine.
“What was it the Sect guy said?” Jangmi wracked her brain for the correct wording. “The use of God-given Virtues for acts not directly or indirectly in aid of the glory of God is an act of heresy...” she trailed off. Namjoon had finished the sentence with her, word perfectly.

“How did you know what he said?” Jangmi asked him uncertainly.

Namjoon’s expression twisted into a bitter expression as he replied. “I once had dealings with the Sect of the Burning Sign.”

“Dealings how?” Jangmi asked suspiciously. If there was anyone she couldn’t imagine consorting with the pious, doctrine-spouting Sect members it was the lawless pirate captain Kim ‘Drunken’ Namjoon. Although they were similar in their inflated sense of self-importance.

“Believe it or not, I was once a member,” Namjoon told her, sighing.

“Not,” Jangmi jumped to her feet, scandalised.

“Sit down, sit down,” Namjoon made pacifying hand gestures. “It wasn’t always like it is now.”

Unconvinced, Jangmi settled back down, and allowed the Captain to elaborate.

“When I was young, it wasn’t unheard of for young boys to be given an education by the religious orders, for a fee, of course.” Namjoon explained. “I came from a poor village but my parents managed to put enough by to send me to one of these schools. They went to bed hungry every night to give their clever son, their pride and joy, the chance at a better life.”

Jangmi nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“I left home at the age of ten, and went to the city to learn my letters, my numbers and of course, the Sect’s Doctrine.”

“Which is?” Jangmi asked, curious.
“It’s a monotheistic doctrine,” Namjoon explained. “based on the belief that God’s will can be fathomed through the means of fire and that the pain inflicted by fire is holy, purifying the soul and bringing one closer to heaven. The Blaze - the highest religious authority, that is,” he added, catching Jangmi’s expression, “he preached renewal through the ashes of the flames. That the moment of ignition was a chance for redemption, for a new beginning.”

“Right,” Jangmi said slowly.

“There is also the belief that humans are chosen by God because they were given the Virtues over animals, and that fire is the most important Virtue because it is a tool that animals cannot use.”

This rang a bell in Jangmi’s mind, who remembered hearing something of the sort back in Jeju, where that Sect man had been preaching to the inhabitants of the port town.

“This is why it was so significant that the Blaze - Blaze Yook, he was called, carried the Virtue of Fire,” Namjoon added.

“He carried a Virtue?” Jangmi gasped, shocked. “Is that how you know so much about Virtues?”

“No.” Namjoon said shortly. “Anyway,” he said, continuing as though Jangmi hadn’t interrupted, “amongst the Flames - teachers and preachers of the Sect - there were other schools of thought, some of which were more influential than others. One of them, which was gaining a lot of popularity during my time there, was the doctrine posited by one Son Euigong.”

Son Euigong. Jangmi was sure that she had heard that name back in Korea, but she had next to no dealings with the religious orders of the country - not many religious men frequented the dwellings of courtesans.

“Son Euigong and I often went head-to-head on the subject of Sect doctrine,” Namjoon went on. “I thought that each person should be free to interpret it in their own way, a guide to encourage spirituality rather than a set of rules. But Son Euigong insisted on a more dogmatic approach. An approach where an answer could only be right or wrong. I guess people were attracted to the simplicity. And increasingly, that was how the Sect worked. They answered creativity with disapproval, opposition with violence and questions with anger.”

Namjoon’s gaze was into the distance, speaking as though from across the years. “I might have
been more subtle in my disagreements, but instead I chose to vocalise the shortcomings I saw in Son Euigong’s approach. It got bad. I was asked to leave. I didn’t go home. I was ashamed to tell my parents that I’d failed.”

Jangmi opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead, tears started into her eyes. If his disdain for her safety, his violence against her and his all-round unpleasantness hadn’t been enough of a reason to despise him, she now learned that Namjoon had been given all she had never had. A warm home, loving parents, a chance for a decent future. He’d been gifted with things that she had only dreamt about, had been tucked into bed at night when she had curled up on the cobbled streets, alone. And he’d thrown it all away. It wasn’t fair.

Jangmi might carry a Virtue that coveted across the continents, but in that moment, she would have killed to swap her life with that of the man sat opposite her.

“By the time I’d gathered my courage, it was too late,” Namjoon’s voice seemed choked, but Jangmi couldn’t look at him. The rage she felt burning in her chest was too hot, pricking her throat, her mouth, her eyes. “Son Euigong tracked me down and told me that if I ever set foot back in my village, he would destroy it.”

“Why?” Jangmi forced the word out from between her teeth. Another enemy that Kim Namjoon had made - Jangmi couldn’t help but sympathise with this Son Euigong character… barring the religious fanaticism and penchant for burning people.

“I asked him a question that he couldn’t answer.” Namjoon answered simply.

“That’s it?” Jangmi asked, disbelieving.

Namjoon nodded. “That’s it.”

“So you never went back?” Jangmi demanded.

“I…” Namjoon seemed lost for words, shaking his head. The answer was obviously ‘no’.

“Why not?” Jangmi challenged. “Is the great God of Destruction scared of this Son Euigong guy?”
“I don’t think they’d want to see me.” Namjoon said so quietly, Jangmi almost missed it. “Their prodigy son meant for great things, the promising boy they sent away with the money they worked so hard to earn… became a pirate.”

Jangmi didn’t have an answer. It wasn’t like he could even entertain the notion that he could hide his occupation from his parents - his exploits were known across the continent, let alone the country. Back in his home village, Namjoon was probably considered an object of shame.

“Anyway,” Namjoon cleared his throat. “It sounds like Son Euigong is running the show now.” He sat back against the barrel, his expression dark. “That explains a lot.”

“But not why there’s a bounty on Jungkook’s head,” Jangmi reminded him harshly.

Namjoon slammed a fist down on the deck, making her jump, but his anger didn’t seem to be directed at her. Rather, it was just frustration. Frustration at not being able to protect those he wanted to protect, frustration at having his actions dictated by outside forces, frustration at having to always be on the run. And although it was the last thing she wanted to do, Jangmi could sympathise with that.

In that moment, Jangmi truly, passionately hated the Captain. He couldn’t leave her to be jealous of him in peace, he had to ruin even that. In the same move, he had made her despise him and pity him. Despise him for carelessly losing what was most precious in this world and pity him for the same thing. Hating him for being too weak to go back home and respecting him for the consideration of his parents’ feelings.

She understood now why The Second Star was different to the tales she’d heard of pirate ships. It wasn’t only, as Jimin had explained, that people had been forced out onto the sea by necessity. The crewmembers hadn’t just lost their homes - they had lost their families. And his ragtag bunch of men were trying their utmost to recreate one. Likewise, their captain. He who hadn’t had his family taken away from him through forces outside his hands. He who had lost his family through nothing but his own blindness, his own pigheadedness. He who must regret the past bitterly every day of his life.

In that regard, Jangmi pitied him. She who had no family to begin with could not know what it was like to lose one.

Emerging from the maelstrom of her emotions, Jangmi realised that the silence had stretched out between the Captain and herself. Both of them lost in their own private thoughts. “So,” she commented, not without some acidity, “In the time I spent off The Second Star I discovered a
million things, and the whole crew spent that same amount of time discovering one thing that they weren’t able to do.”

“Alright, not all of us were trained as courtesan spies,” Namjoon growled. “So, we didn’t find out much about Jungkook’s bounty at The World’s End. Pirates don’t usually fraternise with followers of the Sect - they tend not to have anything worth taking.”

Despite herself, Jangmi felt a small grin tug at her lips. Both she and the Captain had that in common - due to their occupations, they had never really bothered with people they couldn’t steal from; her their secrets and him their money.

“So, this Son Euigong guy is hunting down people with Virtues,” Jangmi mused darkly, trying to distract herself from the animosity she felt towards the man opposite her by concentrating on another foe. “I suppose he wants to make money off the back of it.”

“It’s not money he wants, it’s power.” Namjoon grunted as he stretched out his limbs; he must be feeling sore, too. “I’m not surprised that he’s the new Blaze of the Sect - it was only a matter of time, what with his royal connections.”

“He has royal connections?” Jangmi asked, surprised. She had thought that religious power was quite separate to the court - other than those religious cover for those assassinations.

Namjoon frowned at her. “I thought you’d know who Son Euigong is. He’s well connected, son of a powerful house. And now part of the royal family. He’s the Queen’s younger brother.”

Jangmi’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

And now it all clicked into place. Heemi had often spoken of her issues with her family, in particular the youngest offspring of the Son House line. How impetuous he was, how demanding. How he often acted like he was the older brother, expecting everyone to fall in line with his wishes. He argued like dog with a bone, but he had logic to back his decisions up as well.

“That’s what’s so tiring,” Heemi had sighed, twirling a stray lock of hair as Jangmi brushed her cascading locks. “He’s always right.”

But it had always been ‘my brother’ this, ‘my brother’ that, rather than using his full name. And
Jangmi was sure that she had never mentioned that he belonged to the Sect - not that it would have meant much to her back then.

The sun’s rays were by now radiating over the whole of the deck, making it seem like The Second Star had been turned to gold. Its Captain likewise, his face smooth and burnished by the sun, who in its haste to return to the world from its slumber had let forth all its might. The only thing still in shadow would be Jangmi’s face, sat as she was with her back to the dawn. To the Captain’s eyes, she would be no more than a dark silhouette, her expression lost in the shade. A dark shadow in the brightening sky. Just as he was one to her.

Namjoon had put his hand up, to shield his eyes from the light. “Are you frowning at me? I can’t tell.”

The casualness with which he spoke to her threw Jangmi off. She had been so used to his unequivocal disdain with regards to everything that she said or did that his speaking to her as he would to anyone of his crewmates made her feel strange. More so because it was so at odds with how Jangmi felt about him. She despised him. She pitied him. She hated him. Or rather, she wished she could.

So how could he speak to her so naturally?

“So you really couldn’t see my expression then,” Jangmi joked half-heartedly, but her mental state had been anything but humorous.

Namjoon made a sound of annoyance. “You should show some respect. I am Captain of this ship.”

“But you’re not my Captain,” Jangmi pointed out sharply. “As you have made abundantly clear.”

Namjoon sighed, unable to argue. “I wonder why I put up with you.”

“I wonder that too,” Jangmi said softly to herself. Then, to Namjoon, she added, “because of my charming personality, obviously.”
Namjoon snorted. “I’m certain that it isn’t that. But we do need you for Osaka.”

“Lucky me,” Jangmi said darkly. “Seongge made it sound simple, but when it comes to you lot, nothing ever is.”

Namjoon gaped at her for a moment, then collected himself. “Sorry. Just not used to hearing about Seongge explaining things, you know, without deafening everyone.” He leant forwards, conspiratorially. “I’m so curious - what does he sound like?”

Jangmi considered his question, resisting the urge to lean forwards into an intimate confabulation as his movements suggested. “It’s hard to describe someone’s voice from their mind,” she said slowly. “Because people think they sound different to what they actually do. And it’s much faster than actual speech. So, I can’t tell you about what it sounds like, physically. But mentally, I guess… he sounds soulful.”

“Soulful?” Namjoon repeated, surprise illuminating his features.

“Yeah. Like there’s music in every syllable.” Jangmi chewed her lip. She wished she could explain better. But no one had ever asked her to describe the sound of someone’s mind before. Usually, they were just interested in the content. “Anyway, Osaka?”

Namjoon stopped staring at her with something approaching wonderment and shook himself. “Yes, Osaka. According to our source at The World’s End, our guy is working at the Historical Institute, but don’t worry about getting there, Jungkook will draw you a map. Once you’re there, ask for Gang Hyowon - he shouldn’t be hard to find, I doubt that there are many Koreans in Osaka. Don’t tell anyone other than Composer Gang what you’re really there for. If anyone asks, you have a manuscript he might be interested in.”

“Composer Gang?” Jangmi questioned.

“That’s right. Internationally, he’s known as the Composer, but he likes to keep a low profile in his day-to-day life, so I doubt that anyone at the Institute will know about his identity. Once you find Gang Hyowon, tell him that Captain Kim Namjoon of The Second Star needs a new Astrosextant. He’ll probably tell you that he will need at least a week to do so, and he’ll probably use the phrase ‘works of art cannot be hatched like chickens,’ or ‘even virtuosos need a day off’. But that’s okay, we can wait. You can give him the down payment straight away, and then we’ll give him the rest when we get the Astrosextant.”
“Hold on,” Jangmi said suspiciously. “You’re going to let me wonder around a large city in a country you can’t enter, with a large amount of money, alone?”

Namjoon grimaced. “You can probably tell that I’m not keen on that part of the plan. Entrusting information and money to someone who stole secrets for a living is not the smartest thing I’m ever likely to do. But what choice do I have?”

Jangmi bristled, but there was nothing she could say. After all, her only successes in life had been based on lying, manipulation and intellectual theft, and nothing she had ever done since could prove otherwise. When facts came to facts, she wasn’t anything other than a liar, a manipulator and a thief. She wasn’t good for anything else. And she had accepted that long ago, but that didn’t stop her wishing to have something that could prove Captain Pirate King wrong.

The sun was well and truly up by now, the magic goldness evaporated into bright colours in the late summer sun. Namjoon got up and stretched his limbs, and Jangmi did likewise. The Captain looked around fondly at his ship, which was beginning to show signs of life. “I don’t think there’s much point going to bed now, is there?”

“Isn’t there?” Jangmi groaned. She could think of nothing better in this moment than to sink into her hammock, if she managed to set it up first, that is.

“No, you’ll just feel worse if you sleep now,” Namjoon shrugged. “We should use the time before breakfast productively.”

“Productively how?” Jangmi closed her eyes in mock-prayer, hoping that the Captain wasn’t about to suggest deck-swabbing or rope-weaving. Her eyes sprang open as something hard poked her shoulder. The sight that greeted her was one of the Captain grinning and holding two broom handles.

“I think it’s about time for a rematch.”

Chapter End Notes

I know that nothing much concretely happens in this chapter, but that was also a lil bit
why it was so fun to write - I had a couple more things planned for their party that
didn't quite make it in, but rest assured that they'll make an appearance later on
somehow... but at least I got in the song about the Captain's wooden leg! In case you
hadn't realised, it's not actually his leg.

Also this chapter kind of brings to a head my treatment of religion in this fic because
I'm aware that it has come off pretty one-sided, but in case I haven't quite managed to
bring it across well through Namjoon, what I really want to be criticizing is an
institution where only one point of view is allowed, and it just so happens to be a
religious institution in this fic. Hopefully I'll be able to bring more nuances later on.

Also, when I said that everyone has a sad backstory boy did I mean it. So, if you've
been counting characters you might have an idea of who'll be next...

Also, google the name 'Gang Hyowon'.

Also, if you didn't get the joke about the dragonboats, look at a picture of a
dragonboat.

Also, NAMJOON AND HIS DARN FREUDIAN SLIPS.

That's it my lovelies, see you next week! x
A Fledgling Fight

Chapter Summary

Jangmi experiences her first taste of violence on purpose, and lots of other things happen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scarcely had Jangmi lain down her than she heard someone yell, quite close to her ear, “BOO.”

Jangmi jumped about a foot in the air and turned to see Seongge doubled over with silent mirth, squeaking sounds escaping his mouth as he tried to retain his laughter.

“What the hell?” Jangmi screeched, and Seongge held out his palm for her to touch, but Jangmi kicked it away from under the blankets. “No! Only well-behaved riggers get to communicate directly with me!”

But this only made Seongge laugh harder, nearly on the floor, his hand still waving around in the air like the tentacle of a beached octopus. Jangmi couldn’t help but grin, but she was safe - Seongge was too busy trying to catch his breath between bouts of the giggles to see it. She rolled her eyes and clasped his wrist on the armband to pull him up from his horizontal position.

“Why is it that I can never wake up naturally on board this blasted ship?” Jangmi asked him, groaning. Every muscle in her body seemed to be clamouring to make itself known in the most painful of ways, and there seemed to be muscles in places where no muscles should be. Her ankles ached. How could her ankles be aching? Jangmi was fairly sure that her ankles had been the one place that hadn’t been hit in the last week and a half. As for the rest of her body, it was definitely covered in bruises. Her skin was probably more mottled than a civet fur.

Namjoon had claimed to be taking her combat classes seriously and had trained her every single day before breakfast, but frankly Jangmi was certain that he just took pleasure in defeating her.

What’s more, how could he claim to be training her in swordfighting when he wouldn’t even let her touch a sword? Thanks to the broom handles, she had more splinters in her hand than a porcupine. It wasn’t like an attacker was likely to be poked to death. In fact, they’d probably just concede out of boredom.
Maybe that was Namjoon’s plan. Incapacitate her with stiff muscles and sore legs before pushing her off the ship, ensuring that she’d drown before any crew mate could rescue her.

The thought crossed Jangmi’s mind, but not with any conviction. Over the past week Jangmi had felt herself soften, however involuntarily, towards the Captain of The Second Star. Now that Namjoon felt that she was useful to the ship, he treated her with something approaching decency. Maybe even friendliness. And it was hard to remain angry with him over his past - because after all, he seemed to despise his past self as much as she did.

Seongge held up his palm again, but he didn’t reach out to touch her hand. It was an unspoken rule between them, that any communication should be voluntary on both sides. If Seongge wanted to talk he would present one of his hands for Jangmi to touch, which she would then accept, or in the case of mischievous wake-up calls, decline. But he would never presume to force his thoughts into her mind. Sighing, Jangmi pressed a single finger into the center of Seongge’s palm, to show her indignation.

*The Captain wants to see you on the deck.*

“What could he want with me at this time of night?” Jangmi moaned, and then realised that the sleeping quarters were mostly empty, and that sunlight was streaming in through the windows. Her plan of converting her afternoon nap into a full night’s sleep had been scuppered, which to her had felt very necessary - Jangmi had discovered on the very first day out of China that alcohol, a scant amount of sleep and an early training session made bad drinking buddies. Hence the attempt to get to sleep before the snores of the other crew members could keep her up.

Seongge’s only reply was a sly wink, and Jangmi tried to kick him again, an attack which he nimbly dodged.

“Fine, I’ll go and see for myself.” Jangmi threw the covers off her, pulled on her boots and padded her way to the deck, where the Captain was waiting for her. “If you have in mind what Seongge seems to think you have in mind, you can think again—”

Her words were cut short by the sudden weight of an eyeglass being pressed into her hands. Namjoon pointed. “What do you see?”

Jangmi followed the line of his finger. “Well, it’s big and it’s wet—”
“With the eyeglass, please,” Namjoon added in a long-suffering voice.

Jangmi followed his instructions and caught sight of a dark silhouette on the horizon, only just visible against the edge of the sky. As Seongge had taught her, she twisted the neck of the eyeglass and the shape slowly shed its blurriness to become the outline of a boat.

“It’s a boat.”

“Yes,” Namjoon said patiently, “and what kind of boat is it?”

“Uh…” Jangmi studied the ship more carefully. “Two masts, square mainsail… is that a brig?”

“Nearly,” Namjoon corrected her. “The mainsail is gaff-rigged so that means…”

“That it’s a brigantine.”

“Well done,” Namjoon said briskly. “What else can you tell me?”

Jangmi looked again. “Chinese flag, but we’re in Japanese waters, so it’s likely either a merchant or passenger ship. The foremast is a lot shorter than the one in the middle… hang on, I think that it’s broken. Yeah, the ship’s in bad repair. There’s no holes in the hull but the foresail is torn, so I don’t think it was attacked by pirates, but caught in a storm.”

“And what does that mean for us?” Namjoon pressed.

Jangmi lowered the eyeglass and grinned. “That means that I’ve been looking at a fruit ripe for the picking.”

“Right in one,” Namjoon said, sounding pleased. “So what would you call out from the crow’s nest?”
Jangmi glanced to the prow of The Second Star, which was to her right. “Ship-ho to portside. But why are you asking me all this? You’re not thinking of sticking me up in the rigging with Seongge, are you?”

Namjoon shrugged. “Would that be so bad? I’ve been trying to think what to do with you - I can’t keep living in fear that one of the ropes you wound will unravel and our mainsail will fly away.”

Jangmi threw him a dark look, but it was mostly just for show. “Although I would greatly enjoy disagreeing with you,” she sighed, “it seems that I’m very good at not being very good at things.”

Namjoon coughed into his hand, which might have been an attempt to hide a snort. “I want you to earn your keep, though.”

“How?” Jangmi asked hopelessly.

In answer, Namjoon pointed at the far-off brigantine.

“What?” Jangmi gasped “You want me to attack that ship?”

“We’ll be with you, of course,” Namjoon replied nonchalantly. “I think you’re ready to see a little action and there’s a good chance that their crew won’t be in good shape after the storm.”

“Did you want me to fight them with a broom handle too?” Jangmi asked him, not without some petulance.

Namjoon snorted, out loud this time. “Go and see Yoongi, he’ll have something for you.”

Yoongi did indeed have something for her - in fact, he had many things. In one of the many storerooms tucked away in the hull of The Second Star, he had weapons ranging from wooden blowguns to double-headed axes, scimitars from the Middle East to classic pirate cutlasses. At least, that’s what Yoongi told her - Jangmi wouldn’t have known what a saingeom was if someone ran her through the stomach with one.

“You’re not strong,” Yoongi said baldly over his shoulder to Jangmi while he rummaged through a
box filled with nunchucks and maces. “But you’re fairly fast, and more than that, you’re agile. So you need a weapon that won’t slow you down.”

“Oh…” Jangmi made the mistake of trying to sit on the edge of a workbench and nearly sent a pile of arrows tumbling to the ground.

“Don’t touch anything,” Yoongi added absentmindedly, as if Jangmi needed reminding. “Let’s try this. It’s a French blade we stole from some pirates coming from the west, called a sabre.”

“Oh,” Jangmi said, taking the curved sword from him and forgetting the name instantly. “It’s an upgrade from a knitting needle, I grant you.”

Yoongi considered Jangmi for a moment, who was trying not to hit anything with the sword in the confined space, and turned back to the pile of weaponry. “I should give you another dagger, as well, like the one I gave you. Namjoon told me about the little stunt you pulled, trying to get that slaver in the ribs.”

“Oh yeah,” Jangmi mumbled. The slaver attack seemed like it had taken place years ago. Had it really only been a couple of weeks?

“That was the wrong thing to do, by the way,” Yoongi added as he hunted through stacks of shields.

“I shouldn’t have tried to save the Captain’s life?” Jangmi asked sardonically, raising an eyebrow. “I’m so sorry - I’ll let him get stabbed next time. Which I should have done then, considering how he nearly broke my back moments before.”

“No, I meant aiming for the chest,” Yoongi said, turning back to her and frowning. “Next time go for the stomach or the neck - that way the rib cage can’t get in the way.”

“Oh,” Jangmi said, slightly abashed as Yoongi handed her two daggers - one to strap to her thigh and a smaller one for her waist.

“And I would be thanking the Captain for nearly breaking your back instead of bad-mouthing him behind his back,” Yoongi added severely. “He’d never tell you, but he pushed you out of the way of a bullet. I heard the shot as I came down the stairs to get one of the attackers, but I only put two
and two together when Taehyung told me about having to repaint the navigation room’s door frame. As I thought you would.”

“You really think that’s what happened?” Jangmi asked Yoongi, not expecting him to say anything other than an affirmative. Because Yoongi was Namjoon’s right-hand man. They had travelled the high seas together. They had each other’s backs. And Yoongi had never displayed the slightest bit of doubt about the fact that his Captain was the crew’s salvation.

“Do you remember a gunshot?” Yoongi asked her calmly.

“No,” Jangmi said confidently. “The only sound was when I hit the table…” She trailed off.

Yoongi didn’t labour his point. “You’ve got everything you need now. I’ll see you up on the deck.”

And he strolled out of the storeroom with the air of someone off for an afternoon ramble in the park.

Jangmi sulked to herself for a few moments - not because she had been proved wrong but because Yoongi had implied that she was dense. When in fact she herself had been the one to tell Taehyung about the bullet hole in the door frame, and she had even thought to herself that she hadn’t heard a gunshot…

It came to her that she was very glad that no one else on board had the Virtue of mind-reading. She didn’t want anyone else to know that for the first time, she was starting to doubt that the crew was prejudiced for the Captain to the point of blindness. She might have had it the wrong way round. Maybe.

“SHIP-HO TO PORTSIDE!”

Seongge’s strident tones echoed around The Second Star, and while she climbed the stairs back to the deck Jangmi wondered idly if that cataclysmic level of volume was his equivalent to speaking, or whether he felt like he was shouting.

Deokwoon and Jungkook joined her on the way up, both sporting weapons far more heavy and dangerous-looking than Jangmi’s comparatively thin blade. But then again, they had the muscles to wield them. Yoongi was right - Jangmi wasn’t strong at all.
The crew of The Second Star assembled on the deck, and Jangmi realised that she could now see the Chinese vessel in the distance without needing an eyeglass. Distances at sea were strange - things seemed both close enough to touch and far away at the same time. And things seemed not to become closer but grow bigger. A speck of dust transforming into a ship in less than an hour.

“Alright!” Namjoon shouted, getting everyone’s attention. “Our stores have been empty of shiny things too long, and this ship seems to be a fruit ripe for picking. They seem to have been ravaged by a storm so I’m not expecting much resistance, but be careful of any would-be heroes. Once they’re subdued, we’ll take whatever they have, but leave the food - we have plenty and we’ll be in Japan tomorrow.”

There were a few murmurs of assent from the crew.

“As for strategy, I don’t think we need to bother with cannons - their ship is in a bad enough state as it is and with a mast missing we can catch up with them easily. Seongge and Jimin will be up in the rigging, covering us with bow and arrow. Sejin will stay on deck to defend our backs. The rest of us will board their ship and drive everyone up to the deck. Any questions?”

No one had any questions - not even Jangmi, who had never even seen a real battle before, let alone fight in one. But she figured that she would follow the crew; do what everyone else was doing and try not to get hurt.

“Okay,” Namjoon said briskly, clapping his hands together. “We’ll be on them within the hour. Let’s stay safe, everyone.”

A ragged cheer went up from the crew. Jangmi joined in half-heartedly, but her throat seemed to have closed up slightly. She swallowed with some difficulty, and looked to the Chinese ship which was now discernibly a ship. How had it gotten so close so quickly?

She was stood next to Jimin, who noticed her jitters. “It’ll be fine,” he said encouragingly. “Stay close to me and concentrate on defending yourself. There probably won’t even be enough sailors to give everyone a chance to fight.”

“Then why am I coming?” Jangmi muttered. She had meant to ask the question flippantly, but somehow her jaw had locked shut and it was all she could do to get the words out at all.
“The more they think they’re outnumbered, the faster they’ll give up,” Jimin answered cheerfully. “Not that it’s going to take much - look, they’re already trying to run away.”

He pointed and Jangmi saw that the ship had somehow gotten smaller and lost its prow, and then realised that she was looking at the back of the Chinese ship. They were in fact trying to run away. And Jangmi saw that Namjoon had been right - there was no way they could escape. The back end of their ship was getting bigger by the minute.

“We’ll slide up beside them and then jump over to give them a good old scare, take anything valuable and skedaddle,” Jimin added. He didn’t seem to foresee any issues with this plan. Neither did the rest of the crew. But Jangmi couldn’t seem to forget that, heavily armed as The Second Star was, so would be the other crew. And Jimin should be the last one to forget that. His lover carried a memento of an attack gone wrong in his heart to this very day.

The Chinese ship seemed almost close enough to reach out and touch now, and The Second Star began to veer slightly to the right so as to glide by on a parallel line. By now, Jangmi was vibrating with nervousness. Jimin saw her pale face and went to squeeze her hand as a sign of comfort, then realised that he shouldn’t and changed course to her shoulder instead.

Jangmi tried to give him a smile of thanks, but it came out more like a grimace. It was one thing to defend herself from someone trying to hurt her, but it was quite another to join a fight willingly, knowing that she could get hurt.

She had expected a disciplined silence from the crew of The Second Star as they prepared to attack, but in fact the opposite was true. There was nothing like the silent synchronicity practiced by the guards at the royal palace. Instead, the pirates were running about on deck, yahooing, waving weapons around, leaning over the gunwhale and pulling faces at Chinese sailors who had finally given up trying to escape and were frantically trying to load bullets into their pistols.

A shot rang out, and Jangmi ducked - about five seconds too late. Nevertheless, the shot had missed and had hit the mast above Taehyung’s head by some distance. Taehyung stuck out his tongue at a sailor who dropped his gun trying to reload it.

All of Jangmi’s nerves seemed to be concentrated in her hands now. Her head was strangely clear and her breath came easy now, but her hands felt weak, like they would drop her sword if she tried to hold it now. Which was not ideal. She didn’t want to have to be rescued again.

To bolster herself, Jangmi thought back to the attack on the way to Shanghai - how she had taken down a slaver with nothing but a wooden box. How it had felt to be prepared, to plan, to act. The
power of swinging something through the air and eliminating a danger. She just had to channel that moment again.

The Second Star was nearly level with the Chinese ship. Namjoon stood at the prow, sword in the air. “Our soul!” He yelled. “Our spirit! Our star! AH-”

“MI!” The crew screamed.

“AH-” Namjoon shouted again.

“MI!” The crew howled.

“AH-”

“MI!”

“THE SECOND STAR!” Seongge’s voice drowned out all those around it, and with a deafening roar, the crew of The Second Star leapt over the gunwhale into the midst of the stricken Chinese sailors.

Jangmi followed, clambering on to the wood and leaping across the divide into chaos. All was whirling limbs and flashing blades, screams and shouts loud enough to blind her. And then she was in the middle of it, and then everything fell into place.

There was no more chaos - there was only her crew and her enemy. Light and dark. Us and them. The crew attacking any sailor not already being attacked. Eliminating the threat and moving on. Finding another threat. Eliminating it. Moving on.

Jangmi’s sword was up and ready in front of her face, but there was no one to fight. The crew of The Second Star was deadly efficient. Already the wooden deck was slick with blood, but the pirate’s numbers had not been depleted while the number of Chinese still standing was dwindling by the minute.

But whatever the crew’s confidence on the fact that the Chinese would give in quickly, the
Chinese themselves did not seem to be informed of this. They were putting up a fight, trying to surround them and contain them, then force them to retreat.

An arrow clattered to the floor by Jangmi’s feet, leaving behind a line of pain in her left calf. She looked up to see a sailor on a platform halfway up the main mast, nocking another arrow to his bow and shooting. But this one sailed over the heads of the pirates and plopped into the sea over the side. He clearly wasn’t aiming, or his hands were shaking, or both.

Strangely elated about having a target to eliminate, Jangmi wove through the battle, pausing only to parry a blow that might have cut into her shoulder from a sailor who was battling Yoongi, swinging his sword around viciously. Jangmi didn’t even have the chance to blink before Yoongi had run him through the stomach, taking advantage of his unprotected abdomen.

Jangmi reached the foot of the mast, but the bowman had spotted her and had swung his bow downwards to try and stop her from climbing. Jangmi dodged an arrow, and another, and then the sailor got bored and aimed into the crowd again, seemingly believing that she wasn’t a threat. He was alternating shots - one into the crowd of pirates, one at her.

Jangmi growled in annoyance - there was no way she could get close. Turning, she scanned the writhing mass of sailors and pirates to see if there was another way up, and ducked as the barrel of a pistol was pointed right at her face.

Jangmi hit the floor as the trigger was pulled, but there was no gunshot - only a click and a puff of smoke. The pistol had misfired - perhaps that was why Seongge and Jimin preferred bows and arrows.

The sailor swore, but before he could reload or pull his sword on her, Jangmi’s foot shot out and drove straight into his crotch. The man hunched over, and as his head went down, Jangmi drove her knee into his face. She heard his nose crunch and he went over backwards, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Jangmi stood over him for a moment, wondering why her right hand was heavier, and then realised that she was still wielding a sword - she had completely forgotten to fight with it. Nevertheless, it wasn’t a sword she needed now. The pistol-wielding sailor had given her an idea.

Not far from him was another Chinese sailor, lying prone on the floor, his right arm hacked off at the shoulder, which meant that he probably wouldn’t miss the pistol that Jangmi was about to steal from him. Hopefully, this one would work. She darted over to the body and drew the pistol from its holster, then checked that no one was about to attack her before squeezing her left eye shut and
aiming at the bowman shooting from the mast.

As she aimed, the bowman nocked an arrow, drawing the string back to his chin. Jangmi glanced to where it was pointing, and her heart dropped. Standing on the prow of the Chinese ship, doing battle with a sailor and completely exposed, was Taehyung.

Panic cut her breath short and she squeezed off two shots in quick succession, but they both missed and the bowman loosed.

“Watch out!” Jangmi screamed, but it was too late. The arrow sailed almost at an almost leisurely pace straight at Taehyung’s unprotected back. He didn’t even have time to turn.

And then the arrow exploded.

There was no better word for it - the arrow was literally dessicated, bits of wood and feather raining down harmlessly on the deck. Behind it, another arrow had appeared, had drilled so deep into the wood of the gunwhale that only the fletching was visible. Jangmi stared at it, uncomprehending, and then looked up to the rigging of The Second Star to see Seongge notch another arrow to his bow, his face stiff with concentration. As she watched, he loosed it, too fast for her to follow. But she saw its effect - a sailor near the prow dropped his sword, howling, his hand a bloody mess. Holy crow, Seongge was good.

Elsewhere, Taehyung had continued fighting, completely oblivious to his near brush with death.

“Seongge!” Jangmi screamed, waving her arms to try and get his attention. “Get the archer! Get the archer!”

But he didn’t hear her, and the archer was well concealed from The Second Star. So Jangmi aimed the pistol again and shot again and again until the chamber was empty. The very last shot clipped the archer on the ear but he was so surprised he lost his footing on the platform. He slipped, teetered and fell.

His body hit the gunwhale with a sickening crack, back arching into the shape of the weapon he wielded, and then tumbled into the sea.

After that, things went rather more smoothly - if it was possible to describe a pirate battle as
smooth. Jangmi stood with the others as the survivors were gathered on deck and tried to look as threatening as possible, even if her heart was still racing and her hands, now that they were no longer needed, had started shaking again, even worse than before. Jangmi clenched her fists to hide it.

She, Yoongi and Seongge kept an eye on the Chinese crew to ensure that no one made any trouble while the burlier members stripped the ship of anything that looked like it might fetch a pretty penny on the black market. Namjoon was up by the prow, conversing with the captain, who had survived, in Chinese. Namjoon looked sombre, but the Chinese captain was nodding vigorously as he spoke in a fast, stilted flow.

Once the ship had been emptied, Jungkook oversaw the tying of each and every crew member to the mast with ropes as thick as Jangmi’s arm. He then handed the bound Captain a dagger - by the time the man could cut himself and his crew free, The Second Star would be long gone.

“‘You see, Jangmi?’” Jungkook said, showing her the tightness of their bindings. “‘This is how you wind a rope.’”

Jangmi wished she could throw him a scathing look, or even just laugh, but the ability seemed to have deserted her. In fact, Jungkook had to help her over the rail back to The Second Star, and the moment Jangmi’s feet touched the solid wood of the deck, her knees followed suit with a loud thud.

In a flash, Jimin was by her side. “Were you hurt?” He himself had a scratch on one of his arms, but as Jangmi watched it closed up and healed, leaving behind only a smear of blood.

“That,” Jangmi said slowly, “was intense.”

Jimin and the others laughed, and he helped her to the infirmary where he wrapped her calf in a bandage - it wasn’t deep enough to need stitches. But although she hadn’t been badly injured, Jangmi still felt all wrong. Sick, weak, feverish. Cold all over. She could hear that crack again, the horrifying sound of that bowman’s back breaking over the gunwhale. The unnatural curvature in his back. The slack expression on his face as he had tipped over the side and into the sea.

Jangmi didn’t want to think about it anymore, but she couldn’t seem not to.

She felt something warm and moist on her forehead and realised that Jimin had pressed a humid
cloth to it. His face, concerned and angelic as ever, appeared in front of her own. “Do you feel guilty?” he asked quietly.

Jangmi looked at him as if through a fog. “No. I know he was trying to kill us. I know we attacked first. I know that I killed him - indirectly, but I did. I know…” She struggled to find the words. As if speaking them would expunge the poison from her system. “I saw him die.”

Jimin nodded, but didn’t say anything. His expression was open, waiting for more.

“I feel… I feel ugly,” Jangmi confessed. “Like I saw the ugliness and now it’s in me.”

Jimin sighed. “I remember feeling that way too. It’ll pass, with time. Just try not to think about it too much.”

Jangmi nodded, but it was easier said than done. She could still hear the crunch of bones breaking.

“And if it helps, you don’t look ugly,” Jimin said, smiling.

Jangmi tried to smile back, but it didn’t help. It didn’t matter what she looked like - she felt ugly, and that was worse. “Can I be released?”

“You’re all good,” Jimin agreed, and Jangmi got up on shaky legs, craving fresh air. She felt a little better in the brisk wind, but not much, so she leaned out over the side and looked to the darkening horizon, waiting for her head to stop spinning.

“You did good,” Namjoon’s deep voice came from behind. Still dizzy, Jangmi couldn’t bring herself to look at him, but she felt his presence settle to her right, leaning over the gunwhale with her.

Unable to speak, Jangmi nodded, and then all of the sickness seemed to concentrate in her stomach at once and she threw up over the side and into the sea. The heaving of her stomach seemed to bring her back to herself, and Jangmi realised that Namjoon was patting her on the back. Like a parent with a sick child. Something she’d only heard about, never experienced.
“If that’s how you react to compliments, I promise never to give you one again,” Namjoon said, and Jangmi could hear the laughter in his voice. She was glad it was laughter, though. Better than disgust. Or worse, pity.

Jangmi cleared her throat and dragged a fist across her streaming eyes. “I survived.”

“And that’s the most important thing,” Namjoon said, almost like he meant it. “But I guess you’re not used to seeing so much violence.”


“I sometimes forget that you were a child of Fate,” Namjoon said softly. “And all I can see is the courtesan. But not today.”

“I would rather be the courtesan,” Jangmi murmured. “I was beautiful then, and surrounded by beautiful things, expensive things. Now, all there is, is ugliness.”

“Violence is ugly,” Namjoon said quietly. “So a pirate’s life is ugly. But ugly doesn’t necessarily mean bad. And cost doesn’t necessarily mean value. I’d choose this ugly life a thousand times over your beautiful one.”

“Why?” Jangmi asked, coughing to get the vile taste out of her mouth.

In answer, Namjoon gestured around the ship, the crewmembers rambling on the deck, laughing, joking, throwing things to each other. The endless movement, uncoordinated and uncivilised, but alive. And in that moment, seen through Namjoon’s fond eyes, Jangmi saw its worth.

“There’s nothing to be done about the ugliness of violence,” Namjoon told her, a melancholy look hovering about his eyes. “Try not to think about it too much and keep yourself busy. Maybe ask Yoongi if you can help sorting the loot.”

Jangmi could have made a pointed remark about how obvious it was that the Captain wanted her to do more work, but in reality she was grateful for the suggestion. The best thing for her right now would be to keep her mind occupied, to try and drown out that dreadful crack that was echoing in her ears again and again.
In one of the storerooms, Yoongi was surrounded by piles and piles of objects, some shiny and some not, which he was busily sorting by category. Jangmi joined him without a word, and Yoongi made no comment. In fact, he seemed to have been expecting her.

“I take note of every item of value, estimate its worth and then figure out how much each crew member gets depending on their percentage of the cut,” he explained.

Jangmi looked at the long scroll of paper on which Yoongi was scratching out a list of every item taken from the passenger ship in spiky letters, and then another scroll on which every member of The Second Star was listed, starting with those who had the most responsibility and therefore the highest cut of the booty. Jungkook’s name, Jangmi noticed, was just below the Captain’s, even above Yoongi’s dual role of First Mate and Quartermaster.

“Why does Jungkook get so much?” Jangmi asked, curious.

“A good navigator is worth their weight in gold,” Yoongi said, with conviction. “And Jungkook is the best. He’s been sailing boats since before he could walk.”

To make things go faster, Jangmi helped Yoongi to inventory all the stolen goods and decide on their approximate value. They were generally in agreement about most items - painted crockery, ornate candlesticks, decorative rugs. But on the subject of books they differed greatly. Yoongi wanted to toss them overboard, saying that they were just dead weight, but Jangmi was sure that some of the texts might be of great value.

“This one, for example,” Jangmi said, holding up a book with what appeared to be silver engravings on every other page. “I can’t understand a word of it - it might be a lost scroll.”

“I can’t understand any of these,” Yoongi scowled, indicating the pile of books on the table. “But I won’t lose any sleep over them being thrown out.”

“You can’t read?” Jangmi asked, surprised. But of course, Yoongi had been born a child of Fate, like her, but unlike her had been raised by the Guild of Thieves, who had no use for education in the classical sense.

“I can, slowly,” Yoongi muttered without any confidence. “Jimin taught me.”
“Then how do you get on as Quartermaster?” Jangmi asked curiously. “Doesn’t it involve a lot of writing and numbers, to keep everything organised?”

“I get by well enough,” Yoongi shrugged, scratching his head. “I preferred just being First Mate, but we needed a replacement Quartermaster after-” Namjoon entered and Yoongi broke off.

“Ah,” Jangmi said, pleased to see the Captain. “What do you think of this book? Keep it or can it?”

Namjoon took the book from her with interest, but he hadn’t got past the cover page before he froze, his eyes wide with shock. “Yoongi…” Namjoon said, and Jangmi was surprised to hear his voice shaking. “Did you do this?”

He showed them an intricate symbol drawn in silver ink on the inside cover - a butterfly, but with no body. Only wings.

Yoongi gaped at it. “Isn’t that…?”

“The symbol of the Guild of Mysticians,” Namjoon completed. “Yes.” He snapped the cover shut and gave it back to Jangmi as if his hands had been burned. “Throw it out.”

“But-” Jangmi protested, and she must have been strangely persuasive, because Namjoon snatched the book out of her hands.

“On second thoughts, I’ll keep it,” he said. “I’ll add it to my collection. It has no value,” he added quickly, seeing that Jangmi had opened her mouth to argue. “You can sort out the rest tomorrow - dinner’s ready.”

Dinner was a cheerfully noisy affair, as usual, but Jangmi couldn’t bring herself to take part in it, nor could she force down more than a couple of spoonfuls of stew. She felt a lot better physically since she had thrown up, and Namjoon had been right - keeping her busy had helped. But now, with her mind no longer occupied by sorting and recording, the sight of the fallen bowman and then one-armed sailor came back to haunt her.

She knew that she wouldn’t be able to sleep either, so she volunteered for the night watch and
huddled up in a warm blanket on the deck, the gentle rocking motion of the boat and the hoarse whisper of the wind on the waves calming her. Lost in the rhythmic sighs of the night’s seas, dawn surprised Jangmi with how soon it came. At first, just the barest hint of grey in the sky, and then the deep inky blueness was slowly melted away to the east. But there was no sun to speak of - where the sun usually rose from the sea, casting off its watery resting place, there was now a thick dark band on the horizon. Japan.

As if summoned by the appearance of land, Namjoon appeared by Jangmi’s side, arriving so quietly she thought that he might be a ghost.

“I never thought I would see this coastline again,” he said faintly, and Jangmi saw an expression on his face that she had never expected to see - it was fear.

“Do we really need an Astrosextant all that much?” Jangmi asked, startled by his intense reaction. He had made it clear for so long that Japan was to be avoided, but she had always assumed that it was due to his natural wariness to anything that could put him in danger. Which made sense, because a country such as Japan would not soon forget the thieving of an Emperor’s crown, nor the complete obliteration of a military base. But Namjoon’s attitude made it seem like something more visceral than that.

“Yes,” Namjoon said sombrely. “These days, a pirate ship needs any advantage it can get. That machine has saved us countless times - from storms, from attackers, from starvation. But make no mistake, if you weren’t on board, there is no one on this ship I would risk sending out to get another one.”

Jangmi wasn’t sure how to react. Had she just been insulted, complimented or been given a pure statement of fact? “I guess your faces must be well known in Japan.”

“Drawn on thousands of bounty posters across the country,” Namjoon said quietly. “They never let us have a moment’s peace after we stole the Emperor’s crown.”

“Well, it’s hard to forget a thing like that,” Jangmi agreed.

The silence stretched out between them as they watched the coastline slowly approach. The sun had now risen over the land but had not yet reached its full power, still a pale disk. And then the coastline ended, and slowly moved round to their left. Jangmi guessed that they needed to skirt the southernmost point of Japan in order to reach Osaka on the other side.
Finally, Namjoon broke the quiet. “It’s ironic that the venture for which I am the most famed is the venture in which I was the worst possible captain.”

Jangmi looked at him quickly, but she had no words to respond. She had spent weeks arguing with him, criticising him, disliking him, despite everyone’s words to the contrary. And yet, the moment she had decided that he might be worth tolerating, he seemed to agree with her harsh words from the beginning. What a strange man.

The thought crossed Jangmi’s mind that she should say something, reassure him perhaps, but by the time she had gathered her thoughts enough to reply, the Captain had already walked away.

By the time The Second Star reached Osaka at midday, the ship was unrecognisable. Taehyung had spent the morning carefully detaching the ship’s figurehead from the prow and replacing it with a crude replica of a mermaid. Jungkook had painted over the ship’s name whilst hung precariously over the side, and put ‘SS Verity’ instead, in a fit of ironic humour. Anything overly piratey-looking was stashed away in the hold. Even the crew members had scrubbed up, wearing freshly laundered clothes as might a merchant crew and removing any particularly showy jewellery - not that any of them were planning to set foot on dry land. The charade was just in case any port officials decided to take an interest.

As they docked at the bustling port, Jungkook came over and handed Jangmi the plans for the Astrosextant, as well as a map. “I drew it from memory, so it might not be entirely accurate. But I think I got all the landmarks right.”

Jangmi took a quick peep at the drawing, impressed by Jungkook’s neat brushstrokes. It was pretty, even if it might not be a faithful representation of the city.

Namjoon and Yoongi joined them, looking grim. Yoongi reluctantly handed Jangmi a purse heavy with coins. “It’s the downpayment for the Composer. Keep it hidden while you’re in town - someone might try to rob you. Don’t let them.”

“Thanks,” Jangmi said sarcastically, pocketing the pouch deep in the folds of her cloak. “Any other advice?”

“Yes,” Namjoon said. “Don’t run away with it.” He said it with humour, but there was a tightness in his eyes as he spoke, betraying his anxiety that she might actually do so.

Jangmi considered cracking a joke to ease the tension, but somehow the possibility of her running away and the crew being unable to follow her without risking arrest and execution didn’t seem so
funny. Instead, she did something that surprised them both.

From her innermost pocket, Jangmi drew out her sapphire earring, the only one remaining to her now. The other was long gone, sold back in Shanghai, but this one was still worth a fortune. She considered it for a moment, watching the sunlight dance and sparkle across its surface, and then pinched the material of Namjoon’s sleeve to bring his hand up so that his palm opened. Then, she carefully placed the earring on to it. His jaw dropped.

“You told me that cost doesn’t necessarily mean value. So although the cost hasn’t changed, the earring has double the value, now,” Jangmi told the open-mouthed Captain. “This loan is proof that I won’t disappear. And also proof of my belief that you won’t disappear either.”

Leaving the stunned crew of The Second Star in her wake, Jangmi stepped off the ship and into the unchartered city of Osaka.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back and with internet! I'll post the next chapter tomorrow to pretend like I never missed six whole days...

We have return of Sassy Jangmi this chapter, but not for long because she's too busy fighting, vomiting and finally learning to trust Captain Kim Namjoon after everyone's been telling her to do so for literally 9 chapters.

That's all I got really. Off to Osaka tomorrow!
Hidden Gods

Chapter Summary

Jangmi explores Osaka and finally meets the mysterious Composer. She's not the only one with secrets...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was strange how quickly things could change. A week ago, Jangmi would have held her life against the fact that being on dry land could mean only bad things for her. The entirety of her childhood had been spent far from the sea, and goodness knows how enjoyable that time was for her. She had had a brief respite at the Guild of Courtesans, only to leave and be ensnared in a political plot far beyond her social ranking, one that nearly cost her life. Then in Jeju, she had been accosted by three lascivious men only to be rescued by the men from whom she had been trying to escape, taken to jail and nearly sent back to Seoul for her inevitable execution. And after all that, she had barely spent two hours in Shanghai, but most of it was spent tempting fate with a Sect man who was trying to round up her kind for unknown religious purposes, and the rest of it trying to escape the Navy who had somehow caught up with her from across the Yellow Sea.

And yet, Osaka was different.

In contrast to the mingled chattering of different languages, there was only a comforting wave of sibilant Japanese that wafted through the air. Instead of the motley assortment of cultures and outfits, everyone was dressed harmoniously, be they poor or rich, peasant or noble. And unlike the hodgepodge of buildings found in Shanghai that represented every corner of the unknown world, Osaka was filled with graceful Japanese structures, trees at every corner, vast expanses of intimate ornamental parks. All was open, all was light.

Maybe that was why she felt so safe. Or maybe, it was because she knew that this time, she had somewhere to return to.

She would have loved to wander the streets of Osaka all day, basking in the sun, browsing the wares on display in the market stalls, exploring the ornamental gardens, enjoying the feeling of freedom. Freedom from pursuit, freedom from abuse, freedom from vagrancy. And yet, the heavy purse of coins was burning a hole in the deep folds of her new cloak. She wouldn’t do anything that would risk her task of commissioning another Astrosextant for The Second Star, and the very act of being in the open constituted one.
So it was with regret, mingled with determination, that Jangmi pulled out Jungkook’s map, studying it for a route to the Historical Institute. As far as she could see, it was just across a square and then between two parks. Perfect.

The square was filled with neatly ordered market stalls, each one with a differently coloured awning, and each stand with its attractive display of wares. The vendors barely seemed to be shouting their products, their prices. It was more like singing to Jangmi’s ears, although that may have just been due to the fact that she didn’t understand a word of Japanese.

Jangmi kept one hand firmly on the money pouch as she wove through the stalls in case of pickpockets, but no one so much as bumped into her. They were all calmly going about their business, noble ladies with mincing steps and servants to carry their purchases as well as plump housekeepers with beady eyes, hunting for the freshest produce.

As Jangmi walked through the market, many people bowed to her, obviously assuming that she must be a foreign dignitary, to be so dressed and have such coloured hair, styled in such a traditional way - Namjoon had told her that she must attract as little attention as possible and to try and blend in. As much as was possible.

Not wanting to give them any clues as to her real identity, Jangmi acted as would a real dignitary, inclining her head gracefully at the people who stopped on the street to fold into deep bows, as well as the vendors who beseeched her to examine their wares. Tempted as she was to try the strange fruit proffered to her by that young fruit vendor, smell the incense sold by this portly candler, she dared not stop for too long.

Perhaps she might be able to enjoy the market in a more leisurely fashion on her return, Jangmi mused. On her way back from the Historical Institute she would have no money on her and so no reason to hurry along. In fact, she could wander Osaka for the rest of the week while the Astrosextant was being constructed.

Pleased with this idea, Jangmi almost walked past the imposing facade of the Historical Institute. Not that she could read the Japanese symbols inscribed above the door - it was just that it was the only building present between two ornamental parks. Men in stiff-collared robes were strolling in and out of it, and some unfortunate lackeys were hurrying after them around with armfuls of scrolls and bottles of ink.

Jangmi approached one such lackey, suddenly nervous. It was all very well to get to the Historical Institute without incident, but how on earth was she supposed to find one man amongst all these scholars?
“Excuse me?” she said timidly to the young man, barely more than a boy, with pimples to show for it. “I’m looking for a man - a scholar. Gang Hyowon.”

The lackey looked at her uncomprehendingly, then turned a deep shade of red and nearly ran away from her, stumbling over his robes as he went. Were scholars not used to talking to women?

She had more luck on her second try. Adopting a regal air, she asked a more elderly scholar directions, without hesitation. The man blinked at her and spouted a long string of Japanese until Jangmi pulled out her map. “Gang Hyowon,” she repeated clearly.

The man poked a finger at the map, pointing to the corner of the street they were on, then bowed and left her to it.

Gang Hyowon’s residence was a short walk away, in a regal-looking building that had nevertheless seen better days. Jangmi imagined that the building was inhabited by a wizened old academic, adept in the knowledge of metallurgy, having studied its secrets his whole life. He was probably venerated by the Japanese community here. The door was wide open, so Jangmi let herself in.

“Excuse me!” she called out. “Is Gang Hyowon here?”

There was a scuffling sound emanating from a screen to her left and the sounds of some muffled cursing. And Jangmi knew that it was cursing because it was in Korean. The screen slid back slightly and a youngish man appeared, not quite as young as the pimply student she had spoken to but certainly no wizened old scholar. He was wearing robes that were haphazardly tied, hanging off one shoulder, and a distracted air of someone who had been interrupted part way through something. Bizarrely, he was holding something that looked like a candlestick, but one that had been twisted into a loop. “Yes?” he said testily.

“Uh… Gang Hyowon?” Jangmi asked. “Is he here? I have some… scrolls he might be interested in.”

“Scrolls?” the man said excitedly, dropping the candle-loop on his foot in his haste to open the screen out further. “Ow, ow! Where? From what era?”

“Um…” Now that the screen had been pushed back, Jangmi could see into the room behind the man. It had clearly once been a nice room, but it was now filled top to bottom with scrolls of parchment, spilt inkwells and trampled quills. There was not a spare inch of surface without any
books or writing materials - even the only stool in the room had a pile of scrolls on it. But there was no other man in the room. “Are you Gang Hyowon?”

“Yes, of course I am!” Gang Hyowon said impatiently. “Now, about these scrolls-”

“I don’t have have any,” Jangmi apologised. “I was told to say that.”

“Oh.” All enthusiasm dropped from Hyowon’s face. “By who?”

“Captain Kim Namjoon of The Second Star?” Jangmi said, as if it was a question. She was having a hard time keeping up with this man’s mood swings. Maybe all academics were this temperamental.

“Reaaaaaally.” Hyowon said, stretching out his vowels and suddenly regaining interest in the conversation. “The Second Star has come to Japan? Does that mean that the navigator is here, too?”

“Who, Jungkook?” Jangmi asked, confused. “Yes, of course, he’s on the ship-”

“Tell him to drop by, you know, sometime.” Hyowon suggested, suddenly looking a bit shy. “If he’s going to be in town a while.”

“Uh, he can’t,” Jangmi told him apologetically. “Which is why I’m here.”

Hyowon smacked himself on the head. “Of course, that whole thieving and destruction thing. The Japanese live too much in the past.”

Privately, Jangmi thought that this was a bit hypocritical coming from a man whose living quarters seemed to have been dedicated to the analysis of the Goryeo Dynasty, or whatever the Japanese equivalent was. But she chose not to say this aloud.

“So, why are you here?” Hyowon asked her, seemingly disappointed.
“It’s about the Astrosextant,” Jangmi said. “It needs... um... re-composing.”

Hyowon’s face became serious in an instant. Motioning her into the room, he slid the screen shut behind them. “Of course,” he complained. “No one ever comes just to say hello.”

“I have a downpayment for you,” Jangmi said, hoping that would help. “And plans for the Astrosextant.”

“Yes, yes.” Hyowon threw a cursory glance at the money pouch and then took a longer look at the plans. “It will take a week. Don’t bother coming back. I’ll bring the Astrosextant to the ship, where you’ll have the rest of the payment prepared, hmm?”

“Um, okay,” Jangmi said, not believing how easy all this had been. “Thank you so much.”

As she turned to take her leave the screen slid open and a student sporting a proud attempt at a moustache appeared, looking excited. “Master Gang, the Hong Yu scrolls have arri...” He trailed off, catching sight of Jangmi. “Who is she?” he asked, like she wasn’t there.

“Cousin,” Hyowon said promptly.

“Oh, I didn’t know you had any female cousins...” the student mumbled, the blood slowly but surely rising to his face.

“The scrolls?” Hyowon reminded him impatiently. “You say they’ve arrived?”

“Yes,” the student said, his ears now the colour of gochujang. “They’ve just been dropped off at the archives.”

“Well this changes everything!” Hyowon shouted gleefully, rubbing his hands together. “You may go, Student Bok.” Turning to Jangmi, he said, “it seems that my schedule has suddenly become rather more crowded. I’ll have the Astrosextant for you by the end of the afternoon.”

“Didn’t you say that it would take a week?” Jangmi asked, bewildered.
Hyowon shrugged nonchalantly. “It takes a week when there is the company of cute navigators to
enjoy. It takes a couple of hours when there is a precious scroll to be examined!”

“And the payment?” Jangmi pressed. “I only have the first half.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine,” Hyowon said distractedly, picking up bits of metal from around the
room. “Namjoon won’t mind if some of it is copper instead of gold, right? It’s all I have to hand
and it doesn’t affect the readings.”

“I guess not,” Jangmi shrugged. She was sure that he would probably be happy not to have to
spend a minute longer in Japanese waters than was necessary. Jangmi pictured his grateful face
when she would return with the Astrosextant intact. It was hard to do, admittedly. ‘Grateful’ was
not an expression she had ever seen the captain exhibit.

Hyowon was scratching out some Japanese characters on the back of a piece of parchment which
he thrust at her. “Go to the glassblowers in town and give them this list. The lenses are the only
parts that I can’t do here.” He marked the shop on Jangmi’s map and then nigh-on shoved her out
the door.

Jangmi decided not to question this strange turn of events too much - after all, it was all in her
favour. Maybe her luck on dry land was changing.

Jangmi went to the glassblowers as directed and showed the man there the letter that Gang
Hyowon had written. He took it from her and disappeared into his workshop, so Jangmi sat down
on a stool by the window and watched the people on the street go about their business.

Now that her task of commissioning a new Astrosextant was nearly complete, Jangmi found her
mind wandering from her mission, wandering back to The Second Star, where the crew was
waiting for her. Jangmi imagined them sat around nervously, the usual boisterous atmosphere
muted by the threat of discovery. The atmosphere shared by all but discussed only through shared
glances. Not wanting to communicate their anxiety but not being able to repress it. Fearful of being
recognised, fearful of being discovered by the authorities. Each member feeling as though they
were being watched, as though they were being hunted. In short, how Jangmi had felt in Korea.

Jangmi wondered what would happen if they did happen to be discovered by the Japanese army.
Would they battle it out with the legion of navy forces until they were destroyed? Would Jangmi
return to see Osaka Harbour in flames? Or would they haul anchor at the first sign of trouble?
Jangmi couldn’t believe that they would. Namjoon had her earring. He needed her to return just as much as she needed them to have remained. But then again, Jangmi had seen how averse he was to taking risks, how much of his crew’s pain he took for himself. How gently he treated Jungkook. How he refused to drink Jimin’s tears. How his face darkened every time he heard Yoongi cough.

She was reminded of what he had said that morning, about how he was most famous for his worst moment as a Captain. Jangmi wondered what that was. What he had done. Maybe two weeks ago she would have believed someone who told her that he had abandoned a crewmember, or bartered the value of the ship, or gone missing when they needed him most. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

He loved his crew so much. He had shown her that, choosing a life of violence with them over a quieter life elsewhere. Despite the ugly things he’d seen, the ugly things he’d done. And yet, as he had spoken about The Second Star, he had become beautiful.

Jangmi wondered if she could ever be the same. The memory of the fallen archer still weighed on her, the colour of the armless sailor’s flesh becoming more and more vivid each time she relived that moment. She still felt ugly. Out of place in a beautiful city such as Osaka. The idea of spending a week strolling through the city’s parks suddenly felt uncomfortable. Maybe she could spend it on board The Second Star, with the rest of the crew. Maybe Jungkook could teach her to play Stinkpot without cheating. Maybe she could borrow a book from Namjoon’s library. Maybe Taehyung could teach her another bawdy sea shanty. That idea felt better.

And then suddenly, she felt a trickle of dread in her stomach.

A gut reaction, something she had seen with her eyes but not processed with her brain. Jangmi sat up straighter, scanning the street with attentive eyes. What had she been looking at? What had sent warning signals to her body?

There weren’t many people on the street outside the glassblower’s. A merchant and his assistant, striding along and soon disappearing out of sight. A nanny of some kind, trailing two obedient children behind her. A street rat, loitering outside a shop and scuffing his feet as he watched the two young charges with envious eyes. A plump man by a fruit cart, choosing a particularly succulent satsuma.

The man seemed familiar to Jangmi - had she seen him before? Perhaps he was a scholar that she had walked past on her way to the Composer’s dwellings? Or might he be a Navy soldier in disguise? Was he a simple bystander or could he be attempting to kidnap her for her bounty?
Then a strong smell of incense wafted through the open door and Jangmi relaxed, realising where she had seen him before. It was the candler from the market, clearly just taking a break from the hustle and bustle of commerce. The more she looked, the more she was reassured. Clean-shaven, unusually large nose, dusty robes of taupe - it was definitely him. Nothing to worry about.

A loud noise came from behind Jangmi and she jumped, only to realise that the glassblower had finished his work, closing the door to the workshop behind him. He showed her the glass spheres of five different sizes, then placed them all in a cloth sack and bowed her out of his shop. Across the road, the candler had replaced the satsuma and was now inspecting a green citrus fruit, testing it for any flaws.

Jangmi’s stomach dropped again, but she ignored it and headed back to Gang Hyowon’s abode. Maybe the candler just looked like someone she associated a bad memory with, like the Sect follower in Shanghai or the King with making her spy for him-

Jangmi stopped dead. She had seen the candler before. Holding not just one, but a crateful of citrus fruits. The fruit seller she had bumped into in Shanghai.

Jangmi started walking again, fast. She wasn’t certain that it was the same man, not having paid much attention to him in Port of the World, but there was enough similarity to make her body react. If it was just a similarity, then nothing would be lost by being careful. If it was the same person, Jangmi had to watch her step. No one changed country and changed profession from one week to another.

Jangmi didn’t dare look behind her to see if the man was following her until she reached the Composer’s dwelling, but as she knocked, Jangmi threw a glance over her shoulder. But the man wasn’t there. Maybe he was just an innocent bystander. Or he was really well hidden.

Hyowon opened the door for her and Jangmi did her best not to push past him in her haste to take cover from the open street.

“Did everything go okay at the glassblowers?” he asked her, looking slightly alarmed at the stress that must have been evident on Jangmi’s face.

“Fine,” Jangmi said shortly, handing him the pouch of glass spheres. She didn’t want to tell him about the suspicious man hanging around outside the glassblower’s shop. Knowing that he kept his own identity a secret, Jangmi didn’t want to drag him into her mess, too.
“Okay, I’m nearly done,” Hyowon said, leading her back to his room. And he nearly was. There was something on the desk that looked recognisably like an Astrosextant, albeit in several different parts and without the glass. Jangmi wondered how on earth he had managed to put it together so quickly. She looked around for a forge of some sort, something with which metal could be shaped, but there was nothing of the kind. Just endless papers and books.

“How…?” Jangmi began to ask, but she couldn’t even formulate an appropriately specific question.

Hyowon looked at her, eyes narrow, the corner of his lips pulled down. “You’re with Namjoon, right?”

“I’m… excuse me?” Jangmi spluttered.

“You’re part of his crew? You travel with him?” Hyowon said impatiently.

“I… yes, I travel with him.” Jangmi said carefully. No point in lying if she didn’t have to.

“So you understand the need for secrecy, right?” Hyowon pressed.

“Yes,” Jangmi answered firmly, even though she had no idea what he was on about. He could be referring to any number of things.

Hyowon looked relieved. “Good. So I can get this done quickly. I want to get a look at the Hong Yu scrolls before the Chancellor can get his greasy hands on it. It’s ridiculous how the higher-ups always have priority when it comes to source material, like Historical Assistants don’t do relevant and important research…”

He continued chattering away, but Jangmi wasn’t listening. She was looking at his hands. They were moving deftly over the metal of the Astrosextant, placing the glass spheres between two copper spokes and then pinching… and the metal became pinched, almost like it was made of wax. The glass sphere was now suspended by the spokes as if they had been molded to fit there from the beginning. He rolled a tube between his fingers and then spread it as one might do with a paper fan, twisting it round to meet another tube, and when his hands came away, they were fused together, the join completely invisible to the naked eye. Then, his hands came away completely and the Astrosextand stood suspended in middair.
“How are you doing that?” Jangmi gasped.

“Virtue,” Gang Hyowon said briefly, absorbed in the inspection of his masterpiece. “Manipulation of metal.”

It all made sense now. The secrecy that he required was for his personal safety, his Composer pseudonym a guard against all those who might wish to gain this magnificent Virtue for themselves. Jangmi had never seen a Virtue of Manipulation before, but she was glad to have seen this one.

“Jungkook’s knife,” she said, suddenly remembering. “Did you make it?”

“That I did,” Hyowon answered, finally putting the Astrosextant down. “Which reminds me…” He grabbed two metal chopsticks from underneath some scrolls and twisted them into the shape of a bracelet. “Do you think Taehyung would mind if you gave this to Jungkook?”

“Why would Taehyung mind?” Jangmi asked, nonplussed. She could never keep up with this man. He wasn’t particularly unpleasant, but she wouldn’t be sad about only getting to spend one afternoon with him.

“Oh, nevermind,” Hyowon said innocently. He put the bracelet in a box with the Astrosextant, which was wrapped in a swathe of material to keep it safe. “Would you tell him that I’ll be leaving Japan once I’ve examined the JinSong Scrolls, so if he wants to drop by any time…”

“Um… sure,” Jangmi said. She had no idea if this suggestion would be welcome to Jungkook. The young navigator had never spoken about the Composer, with fondness or without, nor had he expressed any interest in coming to Osaka other than to get his favourite toy fixed. Although, she could never recall Jungkook speaking about anyone not on board The Second Star. Maybe he just had a short memory.

In any case, the Composer’s role was now done. It was up to Jangmi and Jangmi alone to transport the Astrosextant back to The Second Star without any run-ins with the Japanese authorities or any suspiciously omnipresent market vendors.

Gang Hyowon clearly didn’t know how to read hesitation in other people - he was already hurrying Jangmi out of his quarters, eager to take a look at those precious scrolls of his. Jangmi stood on the doorstep, blinking in the sunlight, her heart pounding an uncertain rhythm in her chest. There were
only a couple of scholars loitering nearby, not counting the rapidly receding back of Gang Hyowon. The street was quiet, but for some reason it felt deceptive. Like at any moment she might fall headlong into a trap.

There was an undercurrent of indistinct chatter carrying over from the marketplace. Jangmi wondered if it was more of a risk to avoid it than to go through it. On the back roads, she might be able to spot a potential attacker before he reached her. But on the back roads, no one would be around to notice if he did.

Safety in numbers, Jangmi decided. A hundred or so shoppers couldn’t fail to notice a woman being abducted from their midst in broad daylight.

Jangmi felt better in the crowd. The Astrosextant was safe in her possession and she was safe as long as she was in plain sight. But that feeling of safety was stripped away in a moment when Jangmi passed in front of the candler’s stall. The portly man with the taupe robes was gone, replaced with a woman in blue. Something strange was definitely going on, and it wasn’t just down to paranoia.

Jangmi looked around wildly for her stalker, but it was impossible to keep track of any face in the throng. Jangmi hoped that it was the same for anyone trying to follow her, but she wasn’t optimistic - her hair made her easy to spot, crowd or no crowd.

Jangmi clutched the Astrosextant to her chest, not even bothering to keep up the charade of a dignified noblewoman. Who cared if some random people wondered who she was and what she was doing - the important thing was to make it back to The Second Star, haul anchor and make a quick getaway before she even had a chance to learn why someone would follow her all the way from China.

Jangmi reached the other end of the market. She could see the masts of the ships in the near distance - Osaka’s harbour was only a short walk away. But between here and there was a labyrinth of houses, shops and taverns - a far cry from the busy thoroughfare she would have liked.

As the crowd thinned, Jangmi caught a glimpse of taupe disappearing round the corner, and her stomach leapt into her chest. Quickly, she chose the furthest exit from that corner, but in doing so lost sight of the masts that were her guide back to the harbour. She would just have to head towards the sea and walk back along the shore, hoping that the pathway would be busy enough to provide her with cover.

The houses, which had seemed so quaint and inviting on her way here now seemed to loom over
her, threatening to collapse on her and keep her trapped until she was found by her stalker. Jangmi caught sight of movement down the end of the street and almost screamed, but it was only a cat rooting through an overturned barrel of fish. Nevertheless, Jangmi could have sworn that she heard footsteps coming from behind her - but when she whirled round, there was nothing there. Maybe it was just the over-loud beat of her heart.

When Jangmi finally broke out of the maze of houses to reach the sea, she could have sobbed with relief. To the right was the harbour, The Second Star, and safety. Between them was the sunlit walkway, bustling with sailors and merchants, and amongst them, Kim Namjoon.

What the hell was he doing off the ship? The port was teeming with officials - it would only take one man to recognise his face for him to be dragged off and executed. As Jangmi approached, she saw his face twisted with worry. As it should be - this was one of the most dangerous places on earth for him, and he knew it.

But he wasn’t hiding himself away, keeping attention from him. Instead, he had raised himself to his full and considerable height, craning his neck to see over the crowd. Jangmi waved, trying to get his attention. Over the sea of heads, Namjoon caught her eye, and his face broke into a relieved smile. Even from a distance, he suddenly looked dazzling, like the midday sun reflecting off the sea. Jangmi weaved her way through the crowd towards him, relief welling up in her chest strong enough to make her delirious, her eyes fixed on him. Was this what coming home felt like?

And then, Jangmi’s vision turned taupe.

Her mouth gagged by the cloth, struggling and scratching, she tried to release herself from the robed arms, but the hands that bound her were too strong. All she managed to do was drag the material off her face for the briefest of moments, enough time to see Namjoon’s smile turn into an expression of horror, him pushing through the crowd, trying to reach her, and then she felt the pinprick of a knife in her back and a soft voice in her ear, saying “His safety depends on your actions, so you will come with me without struggle.”

At once, all the fight went out of Jangmi. Defeated, she allowed herself to be led away from the harbour, material no longer covering her face but the sharp presence of the knife steady on the small of her back, betraying the seriousness of her unseen attacker.

Unseen, but not unknown. She recognised his voice. She did, she was sure. Jangmi strained her ears but they gave her no clue as to his identity. However, she could have sworn that she could hear Namjoon’s frantic voice over the noise of the crowd, but it was too faint to be sure.
She was lead away from the harbour, but instead of entering the maze of houses nestled up against the shore, she was directed to a wide boulevard going away from the town, leading to an imposing structure of wood and stone, stern guards stood at the entrance through which she was admitted without question. And in the courtyard, the assembled ranks of the navy, dressed in green and sporting the crowned sun of Korea’s royalty.

Jangmi’s pace faltered for the briefest of moments at the threshold and the knife dug into her back, forcing her into the midst of the Queen’s men. Every face hostile, every soldier poised to attack. She was surrounded. There was no way out. She was doomed. The knife in her back may as well be one in her throat.

A captain, distinguishable by his three-point hat, stepped forward. “Congratulations. I didn’t think you were capable, but you seemed to have upheld your end of the bargain.”

He wasn’t talking to her. Jangmi turned to see that he was talking to her kidnapper, the man in robes of taupe who was now sheathing his knife.

And then mysteriously, miraculously, the man removed his nose, extracted cheek fillers from his mouth and scrubbed the paint away from his eyebrows. Suddenly, it was no longer the hook-nosed candler, nor the plump fruit seller of Shanghai who stood in front of her, but Bang Sihyuk.

Advisor Bang.

Chapter End Notes

AND. WE. HAVE. CLIFFHANGER.

Admit it, you thought the guy in taupe was either Hobi or Jin... rest assured that they do make (and have made) appearances, but no, this is (as described by my proof-reading pal) Hitman Bang introduces how to kidnap a woman in broad daylight and betray her to the authorities you saved her from not 10 chapters ago!

In other news I feel like the week-by-week publishing isn't working too well for me so I was thinking of maybe publishing what I have written so far (up to Chapter 14) and then just posting as and when I'm happy with the chapters in future...? Idk, let me know.
The world fell away.

Bang Sihyuk, who had entrusted her with political secrets, who had found her a way out of the palace when her life was in danger, who had pointed her towards the ship that would carry her to safety, had delivered her into the hands of those from whom he had helped her escape.

His face was painted with an expression of intense concentration, but he wasn’t looking at her. In fact, he was looking anywhere but at her, his gaze flitting from the navy Captain to the high walls of the courtyard to the swords hung at the waist of dozens of green-clad mariners.

The coward. He could track her across oceans, he could kidnap her in broad daylight, but he couldn’t look her in the eye.

The Captain in green was clutching a scroll with her face painted on it and wore a satisfied expression on his face. He looked familiar - Jangmi was sure that he had been part of the same crew that had attempted to capture her on Jeju Island.

“We finally have you,” he said, smiling grimly. “You’ve led us on a merry chase around the Yellow sea but the Queen’s justice will always prevail.”

Jangmi did not - could not reply. The notion of pairing the Queen with justice was a laughable one, but humour was far from her mind at this point. All she could do was clench her jaw tight, eyeing up the man who would take her to her fate. She should have known that Osaka would be no exception to the rule in which dry land meant for her only sorrow. Her unlucky stars had not changed.
A shout came from outside the courtyard and Jangmi whirled round, as did every soldier present, levelling their swords at the gate. “Jangmi!” someone was yelling. “Jangmi!”

“No!” Jangmi screamed, recognising that voice. “Namjoon, don’t!”

But since when had Captain Kim Namjoon ever listened to her? The gate burst inwards, revealing him with a murderous expression and a sword in each hand. But even the great God of Destruction couldn’t defeat five dozen well-armed and well-prepared maritime soldiers in combat, and no sooner did he appear than he was engulfed, disarmed, and held at swordpoint.

The naval Captain stepped forward until he was face to face with his pirate counterpart. “It seems that I have slaughtered two seals with one spear. What are you doing here, Pirate King?”

If Namjoon realised that he was defeated, he showed no knowledge of it in his bearing. Standing tall and proud, he might have been flanked by his own advisors rather than adversaries. “None of your damn business.”

“Oh, I should think it is,” the naval Captain said slowly. “It would be quite a feather in my cap if I were to return to Korea with not one but two criminals in tow. However, I think that owing to your history with the Japanese, it were greatly strengthen diplomatic relations if I were to hand you over, you and your loathsome crew who are no doubt lurking nearby…”

Jangmi wanted to scream. Not only was she to be executed, but the whole of The Second Star arrested too? She realised that in the commotion of Namjoon’s arrival, she was quite unguarded. But that didn’t help her much - they were still surrounded by soldiers, and there was no chance that she would leave without Namjoon, who was being restrained by guards numbering too many to fight off.

Jangmi’s gaze landed on Bang Sihyuk, who was smiling grimly. He met her eyes, and it was at that moment that Jangmi finally snapped.

“You bastard!” she yelled, striding towards him. “You sold us out, you son of a bitch! What was the point of saving me, then? What was the point?” She swung her palm as hard as she could at his face, knowing that it was fruitless, knowing that it was too late. Knowing that her fate had been sealed by the one who had once been her protector. But the blow never made contact - Bang Sihyuk’s hand had shot out, grabbing her wrist mid-strike.
And Jangmi screamed.

A long, wordless scream. It hurt. It hurt so much. Her head was full fit to burst, her brain was on fire, and in the inferno, the words. They swallowed her up, consumed her entire being, drowned her out, ground her to pieces. All was words. All was thought. There was no space for her own.

And then, it stopped. Jangmi realised that she was on the ground, her hand falling to the floor in front of her face with a dull thud. Bang Sihyuk was being restrained by several of the Queen’s men. Her head felt muzzy. She wanted to cry.

“What did you do to her, you bastard?” she heard Namjoon shouting from somewhere to the side. “What have you done?”

Jangmi felt tears gather in her eyes, but she couldn’t move, not yet. If only she could tell him, if only she could explain…

“I have done what was needed to be done,” came Bang Sihyuk’s voice, from somewhere to the side. “It was merely a necessity.”

Necessity. The code word.

Her brain wasn’t properly engaged, but her instincts took over. Jangmi leapt sideways into Namjoon, forcing his face into the ground, squeezing her eyes shut as a blinding light, a deafening crack shuddered through the courtyard.

In an instant, all had gone silent, bar a ringing noise in Jangmi’s ears. She pulled Namjoon to his feet as the Queen’s soldiers shook off the effects of the stun-bomb, blinking away the stars in their eyes.

“Run, Jangmi!” Jangmi saw Bang Sihyuk mouth the words, his face screwed up in urgency, but the ringing in her ears drowned out the sound. However, she didn’t need telling twice. With Namjoon’s hand gripped in her own, his confusion sounding crystal clear in her mind even over her temporary deafness, they dodged between the slowly-reviving soldiers, and Jangmi twisted around for one last look at her saviour before they fled from the courtyard into the street.

Even as they sprinted down the wide avenue, their feet slapping against the cobblestones towards the wooden masts in the distance, Jangmi could hear the sounds of pursuit behind her, the
inevitable yelling and sounds of steel clanking against armour of the Queen’s Navy. But the comforting crush of sailors and merchants of Osaka Harbour soon closed over them, and the voices of their pursuers grew fainter. The surprised and sometimes affronted faces of the Japanese traders blurred into one, the sights and sounds dulled and confused, and over them all Bang Sihyuk’s soft farewell smile was burned into her eyes.

As they ran, little by little, Namjoon drew level with Jangmi and then overtook her, his hand still gripping hers, and then it was him pulling her through the bustling bodies towards the haven of The Second Star. Jangmi’s tears blinded her as they wove through the crowds at Osaka Harbour, and if it hadn’t been for Namjoon’s hand on her wrist, pulling her along in his wake, she would have been lost in a moment.

The noise, the urgency, the need to breathe, they all seemed to be coming from a long way away, as if someone was calling her name from across a chasm. She was aware of their existence, but somehow they didn’t seem relevant.

Bang Sihyuk was gone. The first person to have ever protected her, the first person to take her side, the person who had watched over her from afar, was gone. She would never see him again. And it was only now that she realised how much he had meant to her.

Namjoon was pulling her up the gangplank of a strange ship, strange yet familiar. Then Yoongi’s head emerged from a trapdoor and Jangmi remembered that they had dressed The Second Star up as a merchant ship, to hide the pirates’ identities. So much for that, now. The Japanese were on their way.

Namjoon was shouting, and Yoongi was replying, and then Namjoon grabbed a dagger from him and slammed it into knot after knot, the severed ropes that had tied them to the docks now floating in the water. The deck was suddenly awash with pirates, The Second Star’s rigging creaking and groaning at the sudden tension in the sails. They were moving away from the shore. There was a man’s voice in Jangmi’s head, but she couldn’t tell who it belonged to, neither could she tell what it was saying. Her ears were still ringing, and her face felt swollen, wet, hot.

“...Jangmi. Jangmi! JANGMI!”

Jangmi’s eyes focused, and she realised that Namjoon’s face was hovering in front of her own. She stared at it dumbly.

“Let go of my hand, Jangmi,” Namjoon said gently, and Jangmi realised that the man’s voice calling out a string of incomprehensible calculations in her head belonged to the captain, and that
his hand was still tightly gripped in her own. Quickly, she let go. It felt strange. She had gone so long without holding someone’s hand, and yet now it felt strange to be without one. Her palm tingled.

The other hand felt heavy. Jangmi looked at it and realised that through everything, she still had the bag containing the Astrosextant, the drawstrings clamped inexorably in her grip. She didn’t even know how to let it go, now. Her hand wouldn’t obey her. Dumbly, she raised her arm to offer it to Namjoon, and the look of confusion on his face disappeared as he felt the contraption that somehow was still intact through the material. Gently, he prised her fingers apart. What did that man do to her?

A blanket was being draped over her shoulders, and Jangmi looked up to see Jimin standing over her, a look of consternation on his face, matched only by the anguish on Namjoon’s as he looked her over one last time before striding over to the helm, taking control of his crew. The wind on Jangmi’s face picked up, drying her tears.

She watched Osaka Harbour recede into the distance as twilight stole over the sky like a thief better than any employed by the Guilds of Korea. Before she knew it, it was night, and the coastline of Japan disappeared into the darkness.

Jimin had left her side a while ago, Jangmi realised, but only when he returned with a bowl of stew. “Eat up,” he told her quietly. “It’s going to be a long, hard night of sailing.”

Jangmi did as she was told, and Jimin’s presentiment turned out to be correct. The crew took it in turns to operate the rigging, working in teams to catch every breath of wind in order to keep the ship sailing as fast as possible. Even Jangmi helped, tugging ropes and tying knots when instructed, though she was exhausted - by then she had been awake for more than a night and two days. She napped too, when instructed, curling up on the deck beneath a thick blanket beside Seongge and Taehyung in case there was need of an extra hand.

The only person who never rested was the Captain. Whenever Jangmi happened to glance towards the helm, there he was, his gaze unfailingly alert as his hand rested on the ship’s steering wheel as one might caress a faithful steed.

It was only when the faint pink glow of sunrise began to light up the eastern horizon that Namjoon finally relinquished his post to Yoongi, his face pale and swollen from the night’s exertions. Jangmi was sure that she looked just as bad.

“I think we might have escaped any chance of pursuit,” Namjoon said to the team who had just
woken from their naps, his usually velvet voice roughened through continual use. “I’ll rest for a
while in my quarters. Wake me if we sight any ship.”

“Aye, Captain.” Yoongi said briskly, but the dark shadows under his eyes belied his fatigue. The
Second Star’s trip to Japan had been kind to no one.

As he passed her on the way to his quarters, Namjoon placed a hand on Jangmi’s blanketed
shoulder. “When I wake, we should talk. Until then, go and get some rest in a real bed.”

Jangmi nodded mutely, but even tucked in to one of the bays in Jimin’s infirmary, she could not
follow the Captain’s orders to completion; sleep evaded her. There were too many words in her
head, not enough of them belonging to herself. The strands of description, of evidence, of
examples, were tangled up together like a spider’s web, and no matter how she tugged and tugged
at the threads, they would not line up into one cohesive story. She knew so much now that she
hadn’t known before, but she had no way of passing on this information in a way that made sense.
And yet, she knew she must.

Through the window, she watched the sun slowly rise into the sky, and it seemed as tired as she
felt. Its brightness was dimmed by the clouds, its ascent sluggish. She listened to the sounds of
footsteps above her head, the creaking of the mast, the snap of the sails, the hushed breath of the
wind on the waves. These sounds, once so frightening to her, a mark of how far from her homeland
she had been chased, now felt familiar. Jangmi savoured the sounds of The Second Star. The smell
of the sea. The scent of sweat and hard work. The sounds of laughter. The laughter was missing
today.

As the sun reached its peak, its struggle to rise finally over, there was the sound of footsteps
approaching the door to the infirmary. This was followed by a gentle knock, and then the door was
pulled open to reveal Jimin, holding a mug of something steaming. He smiled at her encouragingly.
“The Captain wanted to know if you were up yet, and if you were feeling well enough to talk.”

Jangmi nodded and swung her legs out of bed. It occurred to her that she hadn’t spoken a word
since yesterday. She wasn’t quite sure how to make the sounds anymore. If she opened her mouth
to speak, would it be her voice that came out?

Jimin handed her the mug. “This will make you feel better.”

“Just by holding it or do I have to drink it too?” Jangmi joked hoarsely, surprising both herself and
Jimin. It was reassuring to know that even if her head was filled with someone else’s words, her
voice remained her own.
Jimin’s face broke into a wide smile. “There’s the Jangmi we know and love.”

A warmth spread through Jangmi, and it had nothing to do with the hot drink in her hands. Bang Sihyuk might be gone, but there were still people on her side, people who would defend her and watch over her, just as she would watch over them. Which is why she needed them to listen, and to understand.

The Captain was waiting for her in his quarters, his expression sorrowful. He gestured for her to sit opposite him. “I feel that I owe you an apology. If I hadn’t sent you to fix-”

Jangmi stopped him with a gesture. “There’s no need to apologise. And I need to talk to the crew. I have information that concerns them all.”

“Information?” Namjoon asked, looking surprised. “From the Composer?”

Jangmi shook her head. “It’s best if I explain it all in one go.”

Up on the deck, one ring of the bell brought all the crew topside, emerging from the trapdoor or swinging down from the rigging. The sails hung slackly. There was barely a breath of wind. Jangmi took up a spot, cross legged on top of a barrel as the crewmembers gathered round to listen. This tableau had already been acted out once before on The Second Star, but this time it wasn’t her own story that Jangmi was preparing to tell.

Jangmi warmed her hands on the mug, then took a sip. The hot liquid soothed her throat, heated her core, lending her strength. Finally, she spoke. “There’s a lot to tell, and it’s all confused in my brain, so I’m sorry if I say things that don’t make sense, or in the wrong order. But what happened yesterday in Osaka wasn’t as simple as being hunted for a bounty that has been laid on my head by the Queen’s justice. It’s far, far more complicated.”

The crew watched her every movement narrowly, but no one spoke. They all recognised that something important, something serious had happened, and that for once, there was no way to joke about it.

“I’ll start with the identity of my kidnapper, because that’s the best way of explaining how I have come to know all these things, and how I know that they are true,” Jangmi started. “I… I knew him. He had changed his appearance but I recognised his voice as he threatened me. Which is why
I didn’t try to escape. I thought he had a plan. Which, as it turns out, he did. Bang Sihyuk.”

“*What?*” The crew burst into a chatter of disbelief. Jangmi had spoken of him often enough and defended him often enough for them to realise what his betrayal would mean to her.

“After the assassination of the King, Bang Sihyuk was arrested on suspicion of complicity by the Queen, a charade to keep suspicion away from herself. But he feigned ignorance of my escape and made an agreement with her that she would pardon him in exchange for my head. After the news of the fiasco on Jeju Island reached Seoul, he was able to convince her that I was too cunning to be caught by the Navy or by bounty hunters, that only he would be able to locate me.

So, the Queen released him, but not without placing him under heavy scrutiny. Every step he took, every word he spoke was spied upon in case his intentions were not what they seemed. In fact, Bang Sihyuk knew that as soon as I was found, he would be dispensed with and the Navy would ship me back to Korea. So he had to find me and make contact for long enough before the Navy could get there first.

He got close in Shanghai, but my encounter with the Navy meant that he was occupied with scuppering their attempts to arrest me, and I slipped through his fingers. It was only in Osaka that he managed to kidnap me, lulling his gaolers into a false sense of security, and then liberate me.”

“But what for?” Namjoon asked, bewildered, exasperated. “Why would he help you escape Seoul, only to abduct you, only to help you escape once again?”

“Because he had learned something. Something which I needed to know. Something that he was willing to sacrifice his life for. Something about Son Euigong.”

A stunned silence greeted her words. There was that name again, the one that was growing in distaste with each repetition.

“He managed to tell you all that before I arrived?” Namjoon asked, looking equal parts disbelieving and impressed.

“You saw him tell me.” Jangmi stated. “You saw him touch my bare skin.”

Understanding dawned on Namjoon’s face. “He didn’t tell you all of this out loud, did he?”
“I always said that I hear thoughts faster than people speak,” Jangmi explained sadly. “Bang Sihyuk knew how this Virtue worked. He knew that all he needed was a little time to transmit everything he had learned into my head. But he didn’t know how painful it would be to have a tumult of thoughts forced into my head in one moment. All the things I learned, with no time to process.”

“So…” Namjoon said slowly. “Bang Sihyuk didn’t betray you?”

“He betrayed the Seol King by serving his assassin. He betrayed the Son Queen by only pretending to. But he didn’t betray me, no. He never intended for my capture to be permanent.”

“So why were you crying?” Namjoon asked, confused. “I thought you hated him for nearly getting you killed…”

Jangmi’s lungs clenched, a ghost of the sobs that had wracked her only yesterday. But the pain felt old now, like the ache of a wound made long ago. She had made her peace. She knew that there was nothing that she could have done.

“Bang Sihyuk knew that he would be slaughtered on the spot for having helped us escape. He was going to hold off the soldiers for as long as possible in order to give us time to get away. But he didn’t know that his sacrifice was in vain.”

“In vain how?” Jimin asked, in the same moment that Yoongi called out, “go back to Son Euigong,” as Sejin sighed, “this is getting complicated.”

Jangmi rubbed small circles into her brow, trying to fend off a headache. She still had so many of Advisor Bang’s words floating around her head, with no cohesive order, rhyme or reason. There was only the picture that they painted, the entirety of a story that was awful from start to finish.

“I’m going to use Advisor Bang’s words as I heard them,” Jangmi decided. “Even if it’s not in the right order, even if I don’t understand them myself. So please listen.” She took another sip of her drink and closed her eyes, trying to decide which thread of the spider’s web she should tug at first.

“I suppose that the best place to start would be to depict the Son House’s political ambitions. The whole family is infected with it, and none more so than the father. The struggle for the crown between the Son House and the Seol House resulted in many deaths, at court, on battlefields, and
at sea. But with the death of the Son patriarch, there was hope for a reconciliation.”

“The wedding of Son Heemi to Seol Sooseok,” Namjoon murmured.

“Correct.” Jangmi confirmed. “But even having ties to the royal family was not enough for them. Heemi has many brothers and all of them have attempted in some shape or form to increase their influence, some with more success than others. The most notable of which is her youngest half-brother, Son Euigong.”

There was a low hiss of disapproval, but Jangmi couldn’t tell from whom it had come.

“I have reason to believe that it was Son Euigong who orchestrated the assassination attempt on the King. He and his sister are very close, and he must have realised that he had reached his political peak as head of the Sect of the Burning Sign. Now he wishes to rule by proxy, through his sister, something that would not have been possible before. But a man like Son Euigong is never content. Once he has control of the realm it’s not long before he looks to conquer other countries - we could be looking at war across the continent.”

“And the Sect of the Burning Sign has already gained him a foothold around the Yellow Sea,” Namjoon said darkly.

“And all the while, he fills his ranks with men loyal only to him, rewarding them with Virtues.” Jangmi added.

“So that’s why they’ve been kidnapping Virtue-carriers,” Yoongi deduced with a look of horror. Unconsciously, he put a protective arm around Jimin.

“That and because he fears them. He knows that amongst their ranks is someone capable of defeating him.” Jangmi told him.

“What do you mean?” Jimin asked, confused.

Jangmi sighed, feeling every minute that she had not rested. Her body was tired. Her mind was tired. But she was not done yet - nowhere near done. “In order to explain I must go back, again. But not to the history of Korea, this time it is the history of the Sect.”
“Go on,” Namjoon said, looking unconvinced. Perhaps he thought that he knew everything there was to know about the Sect and its inner workings. He was about to be proved very, very wrong.

“Son Euigong’s ascension to the position of Blaze in the Sect of the Burning Sign can be attributed to a number of reasons,” Jangmi explained. “Firstly, the influence of his family made his name one to be respected from the outset. Secondly, the dogma that he proposed was undoubtedly attractive, and the new followers of the Sect that he indoctrinated became loyal to him and him only. Thirdly, Son Euigong brought down the previous Blaze.”

“He brought him down?” Namjoon asked, surprised. “I thought he died of an illness.”

Jangmi gave a dry, humourless laugh, and it felt like Bang Sihyuk rang out in every echo. “His illness was power, and a disciple who coveted it. He was stabbed - but no one cared enough to investigate.”

Namjoon was visibly shocked. “Why?”

“Because Blaze Yook had apparently discredited the Sect,” Jangmi explained. “The execution of the Admiral, you remember it?”


Jangmi nodded. “There was a rumour spread that it was an assassination dressed as a religious execution, that someone wanted the Admiral dead and Blaze Yook went along with it.”

Namjoon’s gaze met hers. “I remember that.”

“Lies,” Jangmi said fiercely, just as Bang Sihyuk had said it in her head. “Lies and manipulation. The King had an implicit trust in his Admiral, in all his courtiers in fact, until the day he married Son Heemi.”

“You think Heemi convinced the King to kill the Admiral?” Jimin asked, wide-eyed. “What was
Jangmi shook her head, but she was marvelling at the fact that the Queen’s name no longer seemed to hurt as it did once. “The interest was not hers but her brother’s. Son Euigong wanted to be Blaze and he knew that his best way of gaining power was to discredit the previous one. So he sent whispers through his sister that the Admiral’s immense popularity was a threat to the King, that the Admiral wished to seize power for himself and that he may yet succeed. He poisoned the King’s mind. And despite my - I mean, Advisor Bang’s best efforts, he succeeded. The country’s beloved Admiral was burned by the Sect for heresy at the behest of the King, bringing scorn and hatred down upon the Blaze who seemed to be responsible.”

“So why would Son Euigong kill him then?” Namjoon asked. “If he had already discredited Blaze Yook?”

“Because Blaze Yook possessed something else that Son Euigong wanted. Something that he was willing to kill for.”

“His Virtue of Fire,” Namjoon guessed, correctly. *They will sell you for your tears and kill you for your heart’s blood.*

There was a short pause as everyone contemplated the idea of a Son Euigong power-hungry and powerful enough to burn cities. It was not an agreeable one. “And I’m guessing he told everyone that he inherited the Virtue because he was chosen by God to lead the Sect,” Namjoon surmised.

“But that’s not how it works, is it?” Taehyung asked, baffled. “You said that it had to be the heart’s blood.”

Jangmi searched herself, but even Bang Sihyuk didn’t seem to have an answer to that one.

However, Namjoon spoke up yet again, slowly, choosing his words carefully. “The most common forms of transmission are through tears and through blood. But true-blood carriers are born with the Virtues, not made. There has been some evidence to suggest that Virtues can be inherited biologically, but to my knowledge those cases involve only newborns, never adults. Though if Son Euigong claims that he was reborn through the fire…” he trailed off. “This is all conjecture. Very little is known about the Virtues, and even less can be proven. All we know for certain is that they exist. But we don’t know how, we don’t know why, and perhaps we never shall.”
Jangmi stared at him. It was moments like this when she wondered about Namjoon’s in-depth knowledge of Virtues and why he possessed it. Namjoon had always deftly evaded the subject. How many times had Jangmi asked him about how he knew so much about the Virtues and how many times had she been rebuffed?

The crew were staring between them, waiting for someone to continue. Jangmi took another sip and did so. “But Son Euigong has discovered, as have many others, that with power comes vulnerability. The Virtue that grants him legitimacy in the eyes of the Sect also makes him vulnerable to he who wields the force of nature that can fight fire.”

“You mean…” Taehyung said slowly, “he can be defeated by the Carrier of the Virtue of Water?”

“During his time at court, Bang Sihyuk heard whispers of a name, a name belonging to the person who would be be Son Euigong’s downfall. Son Euigong will never rest until this person is captured, confined, so that he can continue to ascend the political sphere unopposed and with no danger to himself.” Jangmi smiled thinly. “The irony is that Son Euigong himself was responsible for the loss of this Virtue. He so nearly had it within his grasp, but he realised too late that he had put it beyond his reach. Now he has to chase the next in line, a person of whom neither hide nor hair has been seen in Korea for over three years.”

“Who is this person?” Yoongi asked impatiently. “What was the name?”

“The name that Bang Sihyuk sacrificed his life to give me,” Jangmi said slowly, “was Jeon Jungkook.”

Chapter End Notes

Answers to questions! I finally answered some questions! I also did this in a way that I hope didn't feel like I just force-fed a large amount of information into your brains as one Bang Sihyuk did to our Choi Jangmi.

It's the second time a cliff-hanger involves the Golden Maknae, I am aware. Like Seongge, he's a character that I didn't plan to be so important but he just became attached to more and more storylines as I went in and who am I to stand in the way of character development so... (OT7 4EVA)

I'm posting early this week because I KNOW this time that I won't have wifi on Monday, so yay for being organised. But that does mean that you'll have to wait a week and two days for Explanation Part 2 (unless you ask really nicely)...
Also, the next chapter will be called 'The Pain of the Pirate Prince'. I will award a prize to anyone who can guess who this may be (prize may or may not be metaphorical).
The Pain of the Pirate Prince

Chapter Summary

The worst story yet - and Jangmi learns a few things herself...

Chapter Notes

WARNING FOR GRAPHIC GRIMNESS - if you are squeamish of stomach or of emotions, this chapter is best taken with a warm blanket and a mug of hot chocolate (no seriously there's some hardcore stuff in here, take it easy guys).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Say that again.”

Not a breath of wind stirred upon the deck of The Second Star. The sails hung slackly from the masts, the sea muted to a sullen hush. The sun shone blearily behind a thick layer of clouds, barely lighting up the sky. It was midday, but it felt like dusk. The expression on each and every crew member’s face was just as dark.

“Jeon Jungkook,” Jangmi repeated. “That’s why there is a bounty of ten thousand gold pieces on his head. We knew that Son Euigong wants Virtues, and this is not just any Virtue. This is the Virtue that could bring him down.”

Yoongi shook his head as if to dislodge bothersome flies from his presence. “So let me get this straight. Son Euigong convinced the King through his sister Heemi to execute his Admiral, and dressed it up as a religious punishment to discredit Blaze Yook in order to take his place as head of the Sect, and then assassinated him in order to steal his Virtue of Fire, which made him even more powerful, but then he realised that this made him vulnerable to whoever carries the Virtue of Water, which, stop me if this sounds too far-fetched, is our very own navigator Jeon Jungkook?”

Jangmi nodded. “That’s about the size of it, yes.” Her expression clouded. “It’s what Bang Sihyuk thought, at least. But there, it stops making sense. Why would Son Euigong think that Jungkook have inherited that particular Virtue, and who from…?”

She looked to the navigator in question, and her stomach did an unpleasant somersault. Jeon Jungkook was sat cross-legged on the deck amongst the crew, his head was bowed. But it wasn’t
bowed far enough to prevent Jangmi seeing the terrible expression on his face, nor the whiteness of his knuckles as he gripped Taehyung’s hand in his lap. His shoulders were quaking, almost imperceptibly, as if he was desperately, desperately trying to maintain control of himself.

“What’s going on?” she asked uncertainly.

No one answered her. The crew were exchanging uneasy looks, clearly unwilling to continue the conversation. Jangmi’s stomach did another somersault. Whatever it was that they weren’t telling her, it wasn’t good.

Finally, Jungkook looked up at her. His bottom lip had dark red teeth marks in them. “Taehyung can tell you,” he said hoarsely.

“Are you sure?” Taehyung asked his friend softly. “We don’t have to talk about this now…”

“It’s fine,” Jungkook choked out. “I want her to know. But I can’t… I can’t…”

Taehyung placed his other hand over Jungkook’s clenched fists. “If you’re sure.” He looked up at Jangmi, his face more serious than she had ever seen before. That, more than anything, scared her. “Do you remember the name of the Admiral who was executed?”

Jangmi wracked her brains. She had arrived at court some time after the Admiral’s execution, so she had never met the man herself in any… well, capacity. But she had arrived soon enough afterwards to hear the horror with which the whispers described the suddenness, the brutality, the less-than-convincing pretext. “The name was Ilseung, wasn’t it? Jung Ilseung? Or was it Jeon Ilseung…” Her hand flew to her mouth.

Jeon Ilseung. The Royal Admiral, Bearer of the Naval Crest of Korea, or to those who admired him, The King of the Seas. And he’d had a son. The son in front of whom he had been burnt alive.

Taehyung’s mouth twisted as though he had tasted something bitter. “Jeon Ilseung,” he confirmed, nodding. “He was a good man, and he deserved every title given to him. When I was thrown out by Shoemaster Dongho it was to him that I went, and him that gave me a place in his retinue… I had known Jungkook for most of my life, since the day he came to get his first shoes fitted, apparently, though I was too young to remember it. By then he’d already been nicknamed ‘Prince of the Seas’, already paddled his first row-boat, but over the years he came regularly, and we became as close as an apprentice and a nobleborn can be, closer even. Which is why I was trusted enough to learn a
secret that was only known to very few people in the country.”

“Which was?” Jangmi asked, leaning forwards.

“That Admiral Ilseung carried the Virtue of Water.” Taehyung said quietly.

There it was. The missing link in the chain that strung everything together. The reason that Jeon Jungkook’s face had been painted on thousands of bounty posters across the seas and why he was being hunted from country to country.

“To those who were in his confidence, it was never a big deal,” Taehyung said wistfully. “He would do tricks at the dining table, filling Jungkook’s glass from across the table, making the soup dance in its pot. Once, when Jungkook was trying to teach me to sail on the lake, I fell in, but the water formed a giant fist around me and put me right back on board. The Admiral was laughing so hard, I could see him standing on the shore…” He sighed. “I always got the impression that he was much more powerful than he let on. That the miraculous rainfall saving his crewmen from dying of thirst or the way any ship he captained seemed to sail faster than any other maybe wasn’t so miraculous. But I never witnessed any of these things for myself until the day the Sect came for him.” He gripped Jungkook’s hands tighter. “We had no warning, none of us. One day the Admiral was summoned to court and he never came back.”

There was a deathly silence on board The Second Star. Even the sea seemed to be holding its breath in respect of the memory of Jeon Ilseung.

“We were having dinner,” Taehyung continued, “just Jungkook and I in the kitchen where we always ate when not entertaining. There was a knock on the door, and I opened it. It happened so quickly. We were both unarmed. Why wouldn’t we be? We were taken to the Sect’s headquarters - well, Jungkook was, and we both struggled and fought our captors until they decided that it would be easier not to separate us. They brought us to their prison, and as we descended the stairs to the gaol, the floor seemed to get damper and damper as the air seemed to get drier and drier. By the time we reached the bottom, the floor was covered in puddles and the air seemed to burn coming in and out of our lungs. And then, we saw the corpses. But they weren’t normal corpses, bloody and broken. Their skin was withered and crinkly, like paper, their tongues hanging out their mouths like pieces of leather, even their eyes shrunked into their heads like old beans. They looked like they had been dried to death.”

Jangmi didn’t dare ask, and she was sure that no one would answer her if she did, about just how many corpses there had been. But if Jeon Ilseung had been powerful enough to propel ships through the seas, his ability to displace water from the air until his guards dried up like so many haunches of meat in a butcher shop must have been potent enough to cover a hundred square feet, if not more. Not all Virtues were harmless.
Taehyung swallowed as if the mere memory of that place was enough to make his mouth go dry again. “They put Jungkook in the cell with his father. So that he couldn’t… so that he couldn’t use his Virtue to escape. They kept them chained to opposite walls, close enough to talk, never close enough to touch. By the same logic, they kept Jungkook close by even as… even as they were tying him to the pyre.”

Taehyung broke off, and his face was distraught, his eyes wild, as Jungkook’s shoulders next to him heaved, wracked by dry sobs. Seongge, on his other side, stroked his hair softly. Tears were pouring down Jimin and Yoongi’s faces.

Taehyung gathered himself. “He must have known that it was too late for him, that even if he managed to put out the fire with his Virtue they would kill him. But he also knew that we were in danger, that the Sect wouldn’t want this story spread, not to the public who had so loved the Admiral. He waited until… until he was almost gone, to ensure that all eyes would be on him. But… his final act was to squeeze every drop of water from the clouds above us, to bring down a wall of water so potent and so finely controlled that it brought down every guard present. We ran.”

Droplets of water fell onto Jangmi’s twisted hands, and she looked up, expecting to see the dark grey of rain clouds. But the sky was unchanged. It was only her tears, flowing thick and fast down her face into her lap.

“We made it as far as Taean,” Taehyung continued. “Starving, exhausted, grieving… we saw fires in the distance, thinking that it was some kind of harvest festival and that we might be able to scrounge something to eat, sleep somewhere warm. In fact it was the crew of The Second Star, sacking the town.”

“I was having a bad day,” Namjoon said almost apologetically. Jangmi fought the hysterical urge to laugh. There was a long silence on board, but a slight breeze was picking up, lifting the loose material in the sails gently before letting it rest again.

“So Son Euigong is responsible for having lost the Virtue of Water?” Yoongi said finally. “He must be kicking himself.”

“But how did he survive?” Jangmi asked, brow wrinkled. “All that danger, all those attacks…”

“He must not have been present,” Namjoon scowled. “Typical, sneaking about behind the scenes, convincing others to do the heavy lifting for him so that he comes out looking like an angel.”
“Like convincing the King that the Admiral was a threat through Heemi,” Yoongi guessed, nodding.

Jangmi had thought that hearing that Heemi wasn’t the villain of the piece would make her feel better, but she could no longer bring herself to care. Schemer or not, Heemi was in the league with her brother, and that, Jangmi couldn’t reconcile with the bright-eyed beauty of her memories.

“You know,” Namjoon said thoughtfully, “all this makes me think that he had a hand in the King’s assassination too. It’s exactly his style - commit a crime and blame it on someone else.”

“Bang Sihyuk thought so too,” Jangmi agreed. His thoughts were still floating around her head.

“But what would he have to gain?” Yoongi pointed out.

“Well,” Namjoon speculated, “he can rule through his sister now without anyone else in the way, can’t he? He probably has control of the Navy now, too.”

This wasn’t a happy thought for anyone on board, not least because it meant that Son Euigong and his collective forces had it out specifically for three members of the crew of The Second Star.

“So that’s why Son Euigong thinks that Jungkook has the Virtue of Water…” Jangmi mused. “He might have heard about what happened and assumed that it was Jungkook who used the Virtue of Water to escape, thinking that the Admiral had already… passed.” But knowing didn’t make her feel any better. In fact, now she just had all the more pain for her to carry in her heart. Knowledge that Son Euigong and Bang Sihyuk had got it wrong, that Bang Sihyuk had sacrificed himself for nothing, and knowledge that Jungkook, who might have been the key to their salvation, would never be able to avenge his father.

“But I don’t!” Jungkook burst out. “I’m not the carrier of any Virtue, water or not!” He got to his feet and wrenched his hands away from Taehyung’s. “I’ve done nothing, and I can do nothing, and all I have done is put a mark on the back of everyone who is aboard this ship.”

“That’s not true,” Namjoon argued quietly. “The marks on our backs were there long before you arrived.”
Jungkook moaned, a long, drawn-out sound of pure anguish. “It hurts.”

One meaningful look from Namjoon and Jimin jumped up, leading the young navigator away to the infirmary. Jangmi was shaken - she had never seen anyone lose control like that. But then again, not many people had had to live through what Jungkook had. Although, Jangmi thought to herself, looking around, if there were any people likely to understand, it was the crew of The Second Star.

“Why don’t we tell him?” Jangmi asked quietly as she watched Jungkook’s retreating back.

“Tell who what?” Yoongi asked glumly, looking in the same direction.

“Well,” Jangmi said hesitantly. “I know that this isn’t going to be a popular suggestion, but Son Euigong is after Jungkook for a Virtue he doesn’t have, right? Why don’t we just tell him the truth, that Jungkook’s not a threat?”

The crew stared at her in shock. Clearly, it was not a suggestion that had ever crossed their minds.

“I didn’t think to hear that suggestion, especially not coming from you,” Namjoon told her, his brow furrowed. “After what he and his sister did to you…”

Jangmi met his gaze. “If I want revenge on Son Euigong, it’s not for myself. I… don’t miss it. My old life. I can’t hate him for taking it away from me. But I hate him for everything else that he’s done, and everything he’s going to do. I just think… that this way has the least risk for everyone involved. No one fights. Everyone stays safe.”

Namjoon was nodding slowly, but his expression dictated dissent. “If this was anyone else, I’d be inclined to agree with you. But if we tell Son Euigong that Jungkook isn’t a threat, what’s to stop him going after the real Virtue carrier? Or you? Or me?”

“Not to mention that now he has two fleets under his control,” Yoongi added. The others were nodding in agreement. “Everyone knows how tough it’s been to sail on the other side of the law since the Seol Navy joined forces with the Son merchant ships to eradicate piracy instead of bickering amongst themselves. If we come up against the Navy and the Sect, we’ll be blown off the face of the Earth.”
There was a murmur of assent. “Also,” Taehyung said quietly, “I think that Jungkook wouldn’t be able to stand being in Son Euigong’s presence without trying to kill him, Virtue or no.”

“But what else can we do?” Jangmi asked helplessly, spreading her hands. “We’re about as close to finding a way of defeating Son Euigong as Son Euigong is himself!”

This stumped everyone. The hopeless silence drew out between the members until Jimin returned, looking pale and drawn. “He’s asleep,” he announced, meaning Jungkook, sitting back down between Yoongi and Deokwoon. “I gave him something to keep him under for a while, until he’s able to find his calm. What have I missed?”

“We’ve ruled out the possibility of trying to convince Son Euigong that Jungkook’s not a threat,” Yoongi summarised for him, “and we have no way of fighting him face to face without the Virtue of Water. Which we don’t have.”

“So we run away?” Sejin said, but he seemed disgusted by the very suggestion.

“Unless…” Jimin said slowly.

The crew looked to him hopefully, but Namjoon, Jangmi noticed, had his eyes narrowed, as if he knew what was coming but that he didn’t like it.

“Unless we find the Carrier of the Water Virtue,” Jimin completed.

Jangmi sat back, disappointed, realising that she had been leaning forward in anticipation. “But how can we find them? We have no clues with which to even start a search. How do we even begin finding this person?”

“That’s a good question,” Jimin said carefully, “But we know someone who has all the answers.”

As one, every head on board The Second Star swiveled around to look at Namjoon. Jangmi mimicked them and watched the expression on the Captain’s face darken in an instant. “He might have the answers, but never to the questions you actually asked,” he said sharply.
“Also, we don’t know where to find him.” Sejin pointed out.

“We know with who he will be,” Yoongi said forcefully before Jangmi could interject with any questions. “We know where they were last. And that’s better than nothing.”

“Did it ever cross your mind that he doesn’t want to be found?” Namjoon muttered vehemently, standing up. “Especially not by us? Especially not by me?”

“I don’t think we have any choice,” Jimin told him gently.

“Screw this,” Namjoon snarled. “Screw them. Screw him.” He strode away from the group, as far away as he could, all the way to the wheel where he began to steer a little too vigorously.

The group went quiet. “I think the discussion’s over,” Yoongi murmured. “Once he’s calmed down, he won’t want to decide anything concrete until Jungkook can have his input.”

The crew began to get up slowly and dispersed, some heading to the sleeping quarters for a quick nap, some to the galley for some food, some up the rigging to take stock of the surrounding seas.

“Jangmi!” Namjoon barked.

Jangmi jumped, turning away from the steps down which she had been about to descend. “Yes?” she said hesitantly, approaching him. Strangely, she felt better than she had done this morning. Maybe it was the plan to have a plan that was reassuring. A way of ensuring that Advisor Bang would not have died in vain.

As he looked at her apprehensive face, Namjoon’s scowl began to fade, replaced by a sheepish expression. His mood seemed as changeable as the wind these days, but Jangmi couldn’t blame him. So many things had happened in such a short space of time, so much new information to digest. There hadn’t even been any time to tease him.

Namjoon reached inside his breast pockets and slowly drew out Jangmi’s sapphire earring. She stared at it in shock. Truth be told, between her kidnapping, escaping Japan and Jungkook’s story, she had forgotten all about it. Which was stupid - Namjoon was a pirate, after all. Although, an honourable one it seemed. The thought felt strange in Jangmi’s head. She had just described the Captain as honourable. For some reason, the thought didn’t please her.
“Thank you,” Namjoon said softly, gently placing it in her outstretched palm. “For not leaving us.”

Jangmi stared at the earring in her hand like she didn’t realise it was hers. It glimmered dully in the muted light, almost outshone by the deep blue of the surrounding ocean. “Well… A promise is a promise, I guess,” she mumbled. She closed her fist over the earring and the jagged edges cut into the skin of her palm. But that was fine- it distracted her from the uncomfortable sensation that had settled somewhere over her lungs.

“I mean it,” Namjoon insisted.

Jangmi nodded dumbly and turned to leave, but the quick touch of a hand on her forearm stopped her.

“Jangmi,” Namjoon seemed to be hesitating. “Did you mean what you said, earlier? About not missing your old life?” His dark eyes bore into hers, their intensity making her breath come short. Jangmi clenched her fist tighter.

“It’s true,” Jangmi told him, with as much certainty as she could muster. “I don’t miss it. It might have been comfortable, and lavish, but if you take away the setting, the props… I was lonely. And as for my only friend, well, we both know how that turned out.”

Namjoon nodded to himself, seemingly considering her words.

“Here,” Jangmi continued, “it’s different. I’m never lonely, even when I’m alone, which is rare enough. The only times I’ve truly been scared since I came were when I was on dry land.” She turned to him, and this time, the intensity was in her eyes. “I know I don’t contribute much, and that I’m just a useless strain on resources, and that I can’t cook or clean or fight… but I think, if we make it out of this mess… I would really miss… everyone. And I’d like to ask you to consider letting me stay.”

And this time, she meant the words. She wasn’t asking because she had nowhere else to go, or because staying was her best chance of safety. It was different to both the school at the Guild of Courtesans and her lavish rooms at the royal court, which had been places she had lived in and no more. It was just like Yoongi had said. She was asking because, for the first time in her life, she felt like she had a home.
Namjoon considered her, gazing intently until Jangmi couldn’t bear it any further and looked away. “I’ll consider it,” he murmured.

“Thank you,” Jangmi whispered gratefully.

Namjoon nodded. “Let’s go get something to eat. We’ve all had a long day, and I’m sure Jimin’s cooked us something nice.”

Jangmi nodded her acquiescence as she followed the Captain down to the galley. “Something nice would do us all good, I think.”

“And I’m sorry about Bang Sihyuk,” Namjoon added somberly. “I’m sorry for doubting your word when you said he was a good man, and I’m sorry that you lost your mentor as much as I’m grateful to him for passing on everything he knew-”

He stopped at the expression on Jangmi’s face. “What is it?”

Jangmi shook her head, but her eyes were fixed on a spot in the far distance. “It’s not important, I guess, after everything. It’s just…” She looked up at Namjoon, the look on her face ambiguous, as though she didn’t know how to feel. “I just realised… with the King assassinated and Advisor Bang gone, I’ll never know who I got this Virtue from.”

Namjoon sighed, melancholy. He touched her lightly on the shoulder as he went to fill a bowl. “I think, everything considered, that it might be for the best.”

Chapter End Notes

I like to think that this chapter can be split into three parts - Jungkook’s story, speculation on the consequences of said story, and the start of a new quest for the crew of The Second Star.

Also, in a continuing theme, guess who's The Person That Has All The Answers (and congrats to those who guessed Jungkook from last week)!

The next chapter will be called 'Ghost of Destruction' - see ya next week!
Chapter Summary

Sailing the high seas, the crew of The Second Star seems to be getting a bit... odd.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jimin, have you seen my-? Oh, never mind.”

Jangmi had walked into the galley trying to find the sabre she’d been looking for all evening and found Jimin, sat on a counter, head tilted back and naked to the waist with Yoongi on his knees in front of him.

It’s not what it looks like!” Jimin squeaked as Yoongi jumped up so fast his feet left the floor.

“Sure, sure,” Jangmi grinned with her back to them, having turned sharply on her heel at the sight so that she was facing the door rather than getting a rather intimate eyeful of Jimin’s nicely sculpted chest while they scrambled for clothes. “Consider me convinced by your im pecable logic.”

“I was helping Jimin to make the sauce and some got spilt on his shirt so I had to-” Yoongi said so fast the syllables blurred into one.

Jangmi held up her hands. “Hey, it’s not the first naked guy I’ve seen and it won’t be the last-”

“I wasn’t naked!” Jimin shouted shrilly.

“Sure, sure,” Jangmi said in a pacifying tone. “Listen, it’s nothing to me, as long as it’s nowhere near the broth. Soy sauce is seasoning enough.”

There was no reply other than an inarticulate sputtering sound coming from either Jimin or Yoongi or both.
“But if you think that I’m ever going to let this go, you are so wrong,” Jangmi added, smirking to herself. “Let me know if my sabre turns up!” she sang out as she exited the galley. If Yoongi wasn’t so distracted by his current predicament, he probably would scolded her for misplacing her weapon. She’d only meant to bring it up to the workshop to sharpen it and then she was sure that she had put it down next to her after dinner, and she had no memory of picking it up again. But the dining area was bare of any weaponry, sabre or otherwise.

Leaving the sleeping quarters, she heard a crash of metal coming from the navigation room and hurried towards the sound, telling herself that the traditional place for an enemy to hide themselves aboard this ship was not there but inside the figurehead, so there was nothing to worry about. Even if she had lost her sword.

The sight that greeted her was of Jungkook bent over the navigation table, Taehyung’s tall frame stretched out on top of him as he attempted to pin down Jungkook’s wrists. Their faces flicked towards hers, an identical expression of mixed surprise and sheepishness painting them both.

“...should I even ask?” Jangmi said, eyebrow raised.

“We were having a shuriken competition and we both wanted to go next,” Jungkook muttered as Taehyung leapt off of him, probably preventing Jungkook from sustaining any internal injuries.

“Oh, I thought you were just redecorating,” Jangmi said mildly, pointing at the telltale holes in the wooden panelling of the navigation room walls.

Jungkook sidled over to the wall and tried to subtly yank out a throwing star embedded in the wood. He succeeded with a complete lack of subtlety. “I guess we should return these…”

“You should,” Jangmi agreed. “Yoongi will get mad if you lose them,” she added, conveniently forgetting to mention that she herself was guilty of misplacing a weapon.

Taehyung gathered up the shurikens. “You helped Yoongi do the inventory,” he said, turning to Jangmi. “Where do you want me to put them?”

Jangmi grinned. “Would you like the sensible answer or the body part answer?”
Taehyung scowled at her while Jungkook looked blank. She sighed. “Weapon’s store, second box on the left marked ‘projectiles’. And let me know if you see a sabre.”

They promised to do so, and Jangmi continued her search, climbing the steps to the deck, trailing her fingertips on the railings as she went.

She was in a strange mood. She felt like she was on the cusp of laughing and crying all at once, of dashing about and lying prone on the floor, of wanting to be surrounded by people and wanting to be alone. Her chest felt heavy but her head felt light. Perhaps it was all this emotional upheaval. It would be enough to send anyone round the twist.

Up on deck, the moon was nowhere to be seen, the clouds hanging heavy in the air almost close enough to touch. The sky felt claustrophobic, oppressive. And yet the sea stretched out for mile upon inescapable mile. Briefly, Jangmi fought against the crazy urge to throw herself in to the water, to swim and swim until she could swim no more. But the compulsion dissipated as heard light footsteps behind her.

*Weird energy tonight, huh?*

“Yes,” Jangmi said aloud. “Definitely strange.”

*It’s been a strange week. How are you holding up?*

“I’m fine,” Jangmi nodded, and nodded again more emphatically when Seongge gave her a disbelieving look. “No really, I am. As long as we’re searching for the Water-carrier that can defeat Son Euigong, we’re making sure that Bang Sihyuk didn’t sacrifice himself in vain, we’re finding a way to take care of the danger safely and we’re staying out of Son Euigong’s way until then. I just… I just wish that I had a better idea of how we’re going to manage that.”

*We’ll find answers in Port of the World, I’m sure of it.*

“But how can you be?” Jangmi asked Seongge, exasperated. “We’ve been sailing to Shanghai for a week, but I don’t know why and either no one seems to know why or they don’t want to tell me, and to top it all off I haven’t seen the Captain for more than it takes him to filch another bottle of rum from the galley since we left Osaka.”
The Captain’s got a lot on his plate. He’ll fill us in when he’s ready to.

“But why is he in such a state?” Jangmi insisted. “Bang Sihyuk is nothing to him. He never knew Jeon Ilseung personally. And I’m sure that he’d like nothing better than to see Son Euigong wiped off the face of the planet.”

Seongge hesitated, and in that moment the sound of footsteps landing on the wooden deck came again, only this time, rather than the regular tap of Seongge’s purposeful stride, it sounded more like the stomping of a donkey with its two back legs tied together.

“It’s the Virtue carriers club!”

The loudness of his voice contrasted with the quiet of the night made Jangmi tense up momentarily. Namjoon appeared behind them, his face as red as the setting sun, a bottle of rum occupying each hand. He slung one arm around Jangmi’s shoulders and the other around Seongge’s, launching a mist of sickly-sweet alcohol that burned Jangmi’s nose, and proceeded to tug them both closer to him.

“I’ll pretend to be Jimin, okay?” He whispered. “No one will be able to tell.”

“I think Yoongi might,” Jangmi told him, unsure whether to be amused or worried. “The height difference kind of gives it away.”

That and the fact that Jimin has the face of an angel while our Captain currently looks like a tomato that’s been sat on.

Jangmi stifled a giggle and Namjoon squinted at her belligerently. “Are you laughing at me? Inebriation is no joke, I’ll have you know.”

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” Jangmi told him earnestly. “But Seongge was,” she couldn’t help adding, and Seongge fought to keep his face straight as he shook his head emphatically.

“And I bet he sounded so soulful,” Namjoon frowned, with something resembling a pout. Seongge looked at Jangmi quizzically, and she put on her best innocent face. “Well, I can be soulful too,” Namjoon said in a voice approaching a whine, not paying attention. “Just listen to this - The Captain’s leg is made of wood...”
Jangmi disentangled herself from Namjoon and his earnest attempt to keep both in tune and rhythm at the same time. “I bet you’d sound even more soulful if you’d just have a glass of water, right?” she suggested. “How about I go and-”

“No!” Namjoon’s hand shot out to her wrist, preventing her. Please don’t go don’t leave don’t leave me not again I can’t-

Jangmi yanked her hand back, shocked at the vehemence she’d felt. Hot and cold at once. “I’d be more careful about where I was putting my hands, if I were you.”

“You can’t go because I need to call a crew meeting,” Namjoon told her seriously. None of his inner turmoil showed on his face. Perhaps he wasn’t even aware of it. Jangmi had heard the thoughts of drunk people before - the space between thoughts and speech widened so much as to lose any kind of link between the two.

“Are you sure that’s the best idea?” Jangmi asked him. “You seem a little…”

“No better time!” Namjoon told her emphatically. “The consumption of alcohol decreases inhibition and leads to a more open channel of communication, as well as more honest reactions.”

Apparently, even when he was drunk he spoke like an encyclopaedia. Jangmi had opened her mouth to tell the Captain that open channels of communication would only work if both parties were drunk, but he’d already stumbled over to the alarm bell, missed twice, and then succeeded on the third go.

The entirety of the crew stumbled up to the deck, mercifully presentable. Their expressions ranged from tired to curious, but none of them seemed surprised. Their Captain seemed to have a penchant for crew meetings when he had been drinking.

“Right,” Namjoon said loudly, when everyone had appeared. “I’m in an open state of mind tonight. So if anyone has any suggestions, let me have it.”

“I want Jajangmyeon for dinner tomorrow!” Deokwoon called out.
“Done!” Namjoon replied, pointing as though he was the auctioneer of a very strange set of items.

“I want a new saw!” Taehyung shouted.

“I want a week off the night shift!”

“I want Yoongi to let me use his Shurikens!”

“Done, done and don’t pretend you haven’t been using them already, Jungkook.” Namjoon counted off his fingers, causing Yoongi to scowl at the young navigator.

“I want a raise!” Sejin called out, to the laughter of the others.

“Denied,” Namjoon said smoothly. Clearly, he was not quite that drunk. “Anyone else?”

Jangmi raised a hand. “I think we need to be feeding Yoongi better.”


“Well,” Jangmi shrugged. “He obviously gets hungry at night, judging by the bite marks on his pillow.”

Yoongi went bright red and Jimin buried his face in his hands as the crew burst out into laughter. After a couple of seconds of bewilderment as he tried to figure out the joke, Namjoon joined in. “Done! Seconds for Yoongi every day for a month!”

The suggestions both serious and jesting dried up, as did Namjoon’s two bottles of rum. He placed them neatly two inches off from the barrel top, causing Jungkook to leap forward and grab them before they could smash, and then turned back to the crew, obviously gearing himself up for a long speech.

“Some have you may of – wait, that’s not right,” Namjoon corrected himself, placing a finger somewhere over the vicinity of his lips. He started again. “Some of you may have noticed that I am a little deeper in the rum than usual tonight. And this is because we have agreed, through
common consensus… implied democracy… oh you know, the thing that we do that you let me do what I want because you know that I always do what you want me to do – that thing, due to that, we are going to be doing the thing that is exactly the opposite of what I actually want to be doing. Which is sailing to Honk Gong – Hong Konk – Hong Kong dammit, why did the Chinese pick such a hard word to pronounce? Wait, that’s not right, we’re actually going to Shanghai. To follow those Chinese sailors that we attacked. So we’ll be sailing there to find a way to find the Mysticians. Who are, as a rule, sneaky bastards up to no good and it is beyond me why someone would want to give up on an honest life of piracy in order to... well, I’m getting off topic. So, is everyone agreed?"

The sudden conclusion to Namjoon’s grand speech brought Jangmi up short. Cautiously, she raised a hand. “Um… agreed on what?”

“Agreed that we go and search out that bastard who abandoned me and my crew, of course!” Namjoon spat as if it was obvious, going slightly cross-eyed as he tried to focus on Jangmi.

There was an uncertain “aye!” from the crew, as if they weren’t sure whether their participation was required or not, but they wished to assert their agreement anyhow.

“Right, well, that’s that then,” Namjoon said, trying to clap briskly and missing his own hand entirely. “Go back to doing... whatever the hell you were doing.”

The crew milled about, obviously unwilling to go back into the stuffy confines of the ship while there was fresher air on the deck. Some sat around, sharpening weapons for lack of anything better to do. Jungkook whittled an absent-minded pattern into a piece of wood with his knife. Yoongi started a game of Stinkpot.

*Not his finest speech, perhaps,* Seongge mused, watching his Captain sit in a corner singing about a fisherman with only one pollock.

“I’m with you there,” Jangmi agreed. “Usually, at the end of his speeches I have a better idea of what in the seven seas is going on.”

*I don’t think anyone really knows what in the seven seas is going on, not least the Captain. But he has a way of finding answers. Or finding the way to finding answers.*

“Or finding the way to finding the way to finding answers,” Jangmi continued with a grin. “Or
“You two!” Namjoon said loudly, staggering over to where they were standing. He placed his palms together and put them in the gap between Jangmi and Seongge’s shoulders, then pressed outwards to separate them while making chivvying noises. “None of that on board! This is a decent and respectable pirate ship!”

“What, communicating?” Jangmi asked, genuinely baffled.

“No,” Namjoon said scornfully. He waved his arms wildly in the general direction of their proximity. “All this… this… closeness.”

Jangmi cottoned on. “Well, you’re not ready to hear about Yoongi and Jimin then,” she told him with some acidity.

“You know what I mean,” Namjoon scowled, making his eyeballs do their best to look at one another. “All that feminine wiles and courtesan mystique.”

Anger rose thick and heavy in Jangmi’s throat. She wasn’t quite sure why. All she knew was that she hated the words coming out of Namjoon’s mouth and she hated the disgust with which they were being said. “The only person I’ve used my courtesan mystique on aboard this ship was you,” she spat, “so you should know exactly how well it doesn’t work.”

Her face reddened under Seongge’s look of surprise in her direction, and Namjoon’s was no better. But his blushing was probably to do with the considerable quantity of rum that he had ingested rather than second-hand embarrassment at the memory of Jangmi’s attempted seduction.

“That’s not - I didn’t - you never -” Namjoon spluttered.

“You know what,” Jangmi said angrily. “I have a suggestion, seeing as you’re so open tonight. How about you stop drinking yourself into a stupor everytime you feel the slightest bit of emotion? How about you stop being angry for no reason at people who don’t deserve it?”

“And how about you stop taking advantage of my goodwill and generosity?” Namjoon spat. “I don’t have to let you be on board this ship. I don’t have to let you cosy up to my crewmembers until one of them gets hurt trying to save you, or until you get hurt trying to save them making them
“People get hurt!” Jangmi shouted into his face. “This is the reality of the so-called beautiful life you chose! Fucking accept it!”

The deck went silent. Namjoon’s eyes went flat. He turned and walked away from her without another word. The deck stayed silent, even as the a distant door slammed somewhere in the belly of the ship.

“What?” she asked Yoongi brusquely, seeing that he was looking at her.

“Nothing,” Yoongi shrugged. “I know you’ve already made your mind up about him, and nothing I say is going to change that.”

A thousand words lined up in Jangmi’s mouth, and none of them quite made it past her lips. She didn’t know what to tell him. Insist that her mind could be changed? Insist that she had changed her mind about the Captain, but that he was making her want to change it back?

“Change it,” she said finally, folding her arms.

Yoongi hesitated. “I’m not sure if...”

*You tell her or I will.*

Seongge’s touch on Jangmi’s wrist made her jump. “Uh...” she began lamely. “Seongge says that if you don’t tell me why I shouldn’t be mad at the Captain, he will.”

Yoongi looked at Seongge and the latter nodded firmly. *He might be too blind to see what is really happening, but I’m not.* The thought passed through Seongge’s mind like a flash, but before Jangmi could figure out what he meant, he had taken back his hand from her sleeve.

Yoongi sighed, frustrated. “It’s not that it’s a secret. We don’t have secrets on board The Second Star, but we all have things that we’d rather not talk about. Like you and your princess.”
Jangmi opened her mouth angrily.

“You see?” Yoongi snapped before she could retort. “You didn’t enjoy telling us about Heemi, but you did it because we needed to know. Well, now you need to know about Namjoon. So I guess he would be alright with me telling you…” Yoongi’s voice had lost its bite, lost its edge. Enough for Jangmi to see that he too was upset. He too didn’t like to talk about this, whatever ‘this’ was.

“There’s someone… someone we don’t talk about. Someone whose place is on board this ship. Someone who can never be replaced or forgotten… But he’s no longer with us. We have only the ghost of his presence.”

“Did he die?” Jangmi asked in a hushed voice.

“Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if he had,” Yoongi said with a trace of bitterness. “If everything would be… different. But I’ve learned that the past colours the present always, that we view the world through the lens of our experiences so… what happened, happened. I’ve learned to accept it. But Namjoon never has.” His tone was wistful, nostalgic, low. Drawing Jangmi in, forcing her to search for meaning in the muted cadences in his voice.

“Jimin and I were some of the first to join Namjoon’s crew,” Yoongi explained. “In fact, there was only one person before us. His name was Kim Seokjin. The thing about Kim Seokjin… the thing about Seokjin…” Here he paused, clearly struggling to find his words.

“I’ve met a fair few Virtue-carriers in my life. I know how much others covet their abilities, how vulnerable these Virtues make them,” he said with the briefest of glances at Jimin. “But I have never seen someone’s life as adversely affected as Seokjin’s.”

“Even worse than Seongge?” Jangmi asked him, shocked.

“Seongge, exasperating as his Virtue is for him, benefits from anonymity,” Yoongi pointed out. “He knows that he is safe with us and that we would never sell his secret… or sell him. Also, his Virtue is a struggle to live with, and is only a Virtue of Enhancement, so it’s not an attractive Virtue to outside buyers.

But Seokjin was a different case. As a child he was sold by his own family to the Guild of Mysticians. He was raised there but word got about his Virtue and he was abducted by some
military force hoping to gain favour from their ruler. They in turn were slaughtered by a rival force and he changed hands, and so on and so forth. He was passed around from master to master, in transactions of service, gold, blood, until he was taken by Mongol slavers and auctioned off to the highest bidder to do with him as they pleased.

That was how Namjoon found him, I’m told. He had gone to the auction to scout out some unwitting prey and spotted him bound, trussed up like an animal ready for the slaughter. Guarded along with the goods like he was no more than an artifact himself. Namjoon rescued him.

Slowly, over time, more members joined the crew, but Namjoon and Seokjin were the bedrock, the foundation. With them at the helm, we became a family. With them at the helm, we knew prosperity like we had never known it before. Gold, spices, fabrics… our names became feared throughout the oceans, but Namjoon wanted more. He became obsessed with treasure, fabulous jewels the likes of which were confined to rumour.

Namjoon hatched a daring plan, a scheme more ambitious than any that has ever been attempted by pirates before or since. We stole the Emperor of Japan’s crown as it was being transported from Saipan to Tokyo. The plan went wrong. Seokjin was captured.”

Jangmi found that she was holding her breath, and that she couldn’t seem to let it go. This is where it all went downhill – she could feel it.

“Not many witnesses are still around to describe it today, but I was there, and I saw it with my own eyes,” Yoongi’s gravelly voice was barely a whisper. “Namjoon truly earned the title ‘God of Destruction’. He liberated Seokjin in the only way his apocalyptic fear knew how – with gunpowder and steel. Fukuoka was laid to waste. I was shot. Deokwoon lost his ear. But we got Seokjin back. Well, we got most of him back…

Seokjin had refused to cooperate with his captors, had refused to use his Virtue to their benefit. So they punished him, tortured him, and finally, they took his eyes. The man we rescued from Fukuoka was broken and blind.

We were rich after having stolen the Emperor’s crown, but we didn’t feel it. Seokjin, never the most talkative or cheerful of people even before, became deeply withdrawn. Namjoon was distraught, wracked by grief and guilt. But we thought that it would pass. Because we were, after all, together. We were, after all, a family.

But… we were wrong. We had put out an anchor just off the coast of mainland China. That evening, a rowboat went missing, and with it, Seokjin. He had left only a note on Namjoon’s
pillow: ‘I’m going home.’”

Jimin’s eyes were shining with tears as bright as the stars, and Seongge’s face was no calmer. Only Yoongi seemed calm, but the over-measured tone of voice belied the intensity of emotion roiling just below the surface.

“After he left, things went from bad to worse. Namjoon became silent, like a ghost. We ran out of money and found no new ways to earn it. Namjoon didn’t want us to steal and plunder anymore – he was terrified that one of us would get hurt again. Things were hard, and they stayed hard. Because Seokjin couldn’t forgive Namjoon enough to stay for us and Namjoon can’t forgive himself for causing him to leave.

If Namjoon didn’t love Jungkook so much, he would never consider trying to seek Seokjin out. Seokjin probably embodies what Namjoon considers his greatest failure, and he thinks that every ounce of hate that Seokjin has for him has been earned. That’s why he’s struggling. He wants so much to do what is right even while he’s haunted by the things that went wrong.”

“But how could Seokjin leave, escape, survive, without his eyes?” Jangmi asked in a low voice.

“We think that the Virtue he carries guided him to the Mysticians.” Yoongi sighed. “I don’t think he even remembers where he was born, so it’s the only other place that Seokjin could possibly consider his home… He chose his words well. ‘I’m going home.’ As if his home wasn’t with us. I have no doubt that Namjoon thinks about those words to this day.”

“And his Virtue?” Jangmi pressed.

“Unclassified, just like yours,” Yoongi told her. “It was Namjoon that defined the different orders of Virtue that are used today, by the way. In our better days, he sought out information on Virtues as a hobby, trying to find anything that might help him understand Seokjin better, and help him lead a normal life. Because the Virtue that Seokjin carried is one that is impossible to control but coveted across the seas… It was the Virtue of Precognition.”

“Precognition?” Jangmi’s mouth dropped open as understanding dawned. “That’s why you think that he would know where the Water-carrier is?”

“Correct,” Yoongi confirmed. “He’s really our only chance.”
“But… what if Seokjin doesn’t know?” Jangmi asked slowly.

“He will.” A deep voice came from behind her. It was Namjoon, his head sopping wet as if he had plunged it into a bucket of water, but otherwise looking miraculously sober. “And if he doesn’t know yet, then he will remember it.”

“Captain,” Yoongi spoke respectfully, bowing his head as if a god truly did walk among them.

“We’ll reach Shanghai tomorrow morning,” Namjoon spoke clearly, somehow looking regal even as droplets ran down his face. “But for now, you can all take a rest. You’ve earned it.”

The crew filed one by one to the sleeping quarters, and Jangmi was the last to go. Hesitating at the threshold, she turned to look back at the Captain, the lonely figure stood at the helm of ship, raising his hand as if to loosen a chain that no longer lay around his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I TRIED to make this chapter a bit lighter than the chapters that came before it, I really did, but Seokjin's story is... uh, yeah, a bit of a downer. But now we know a little about why Captain Kim Namjoon allowed himself to slide into an alcoholic stupor lasting about two years... hooray?

I realise that this story is basically an iceberg, that the amount of story is about equal to the amount of backstory, but I think both as a writer and as a person, I find it difficult to separate the past from the present - in my mind, there's always a reason why people act the way they do (I think Yoongi says something similar at some point). So, even though collectively, the crew of The Second Star have had some pretty terrible things happen to them, they're still good people, because they found a family in each other. Like Actual Namjoon said in an interview not too long ago, they recharge each other's batteries. Can you tell that I'm a bit emotional? I'm a bit emotional.

Yeah, that's it from me. Next chapter will be called 'Definitely Not Courting.' Have a good week guys <3
Definitely Not Courting

Chapter Summary

The obvious thing to do when placed in a romantic setting with someone who you've recently taken a very vocal dislike to is to deny everything. Yup.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

If you’d have asked Jangmi one year, one week or even one day ago what her future held, it was very certain that her answer would not have included watching Kim Namjoon through the flames as a black Kraken bore down on them both.

Admittedly, the flames belonged to a single candle placed in the centre of the table at which they were seated, and the Kraken was made of wood, painted black and the centrepiece of The World’s End pirate tavern.

“It’s said to be the figurehead of the most infamous pirate ship of all time, The Ocean’s Dread,” Namjoon had explained, following her awed gaze. However, her gaze had not only been for the massive wooden creature that dominated the middle of the room, but the tavern around it, which somehow managed to be cavernous and secretive all at once. And filled with pirates.

Pirates of all different nationalities, colours, affiliations. Namjoon pointed them out as they passed by their table. “Those ones are from the North, you can tell because of the fur they wear. Those ones are from India, look at the pata they have - it’s a glove and a handle in one. Over there, that’s an African parrot, look.”

Jangmi looked. Her idea of her future wouldn’t have included a lesson in pirate identification either.

And what was she doing here? She wasn’t quite sure, but when Namjoon had said to her, “come with me,” she had somehow found it hard to say no. Especially because those words had been followed by a command to the crew, “stay here.”

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve brought you here,” Namjoon said after taking a sip from his tankard of ale, and his timing coincided so precisely with her own thoughts that Jangmi wondered for a second if it wasn’t him with the Virtue of mind-reading.

“Not at all,” Jangmi replied airily, staring into the heart of the candle flame that separated her from the Captain of The Second Star. “It was only a matter of time before you succumbed to the desire to court me.”

Namjoon’s reaction was halfway between a snort and a cough. “It’s only courting if there’s music… and wine.”

“Oh, is that the difference?” Jangmi asked sweetly. “So silly of me to have mistaken your intentions. If it’s not for pleasure, then it must be for business, I assume.”

“It most certainly is,” Namjoon said firmly, and leant forwards conspiratorially so that the left side
of his face was bathed in an orange glow while the right side was in shadow. “I brought you here because, useless as you are aboard my ship, you have some skills that might, in this situation, be useful to us.”

Jangmi rolled her eyes. “You could have said all that without insulting me.”

“I could,” Namjoon said comfortably, “but it wouldn’t be as fun.”

As he spoke, a four-piece band began to play from one corner of the room, a relatively slow ballad that permeated the atmosphere of the tavern and seemed to make the smoky air smokier. Jangmi and Namjoon caught each other’s eye for the briefest of moments and then looked away.

“I need to get some information,” Namjoon ploughed on as Jangmi’s stomach seemed to suddenly have an objection to ale, “from people who might not want to give it to me. Which is your speciality.”

Jangmi nodded. “Just point and say the word.”

Namjoon sighed. “It’s not as simple as all that. Let me explain: We need to find the location of the Mysticians, who don’t like to have their whereabouts advertised. The only clue we have as to their location is this book.”

Namjoon glanced around briefly before opening up the front of his frock coat, to reveal a small, familiar-looking book peeking out of his breast pocket. Before Jangmi could place it, he had closed his coat back up.

“Hang on…” Jangmi said slowly. “Isn’t that…?”

“The book with the Mystician’s sigil in it, yes,” Namjoon whispered, leaning even closer. “Now, the Mysticians are very secretive about their lair so I’m not all that hopeful, but finding out where the crew that we took this book from got-”

Both Namjoon and Jangmi stared at the glass of wine as it was placed in front of her by a barmaid.

“Compliments from that man over there,” the barmaid pointed to a man with a luxuriant beard who sat with two other asian men across the room. He waved enthusiastically and Jangmi gave him an uncertain smile. “Me next,” the man mouthed, and Jangmi felt her smile falter.

Namjoon, luckily, hadn’t noticed. He was still staring at the glass of wine. “It doesn’t count if it wasn’t me that bought it, you know.”

“I… what?” Jangmi asked hurriedly, brought back to the present.

“I’m not courting you,” Namjoon insisted.

“I didn’t… I mean, it was just… okay, you’re not courting me.” Jangmi said with as much flippance as someone who was caught between confusion and amusement and… annoyance?

“Let me get back to it,” Namjoon continued as Jangmi pushed the glass of wine as far away from her as possible. “We need to find the chinese crew that we took that book from so that they can tell us where the Mysticians might be. However, there’s a little snag. They might be in a less-than-compliant mood because of certain details pertaining to our previous encounter…”

“You mean that we boarded their ship, stole their belongings and attacked the crew?” Jangmi asked baldly.
“Not in that order, but yes,” Namjoon admitted. “I asked our crew to remain on board because I was afraid that if they ran into the Chinese crew, there would be bloodshed. This is a task that requires great delicacy, and frankly, I think only us two in combination will be able to achieve this.”

“You mean that if there’s only two of us, we can appear not to be a threat for long enough that I can steal even more from them, but this time it’s information instead of gold that we want.”

“Do you have to keep putting it like that?” Namjoon frowned. “Yes, that’s what I meant.”

“But how do we know that they’re in Shanghai?” Jangmi asked.

“Because I asked the Captain where they were headed to,” Namjoon replied, looking surprised.

Jangmi remembered him chattering away in Chinese after the attack, and wondered how he came to speak the language. Another mystery for another day. “And how will you find them here?”

“I put feelers out with the barman when we arrived, a little golden handshake,” Namjoon explained. “If someone knows their location, we’ll hear from them. Pirates help pirates.”

“Unless they’re trying to rob from the same person,” Jangmi pointed out.

Namjoon heaved a sigh of frustration. “You really are rather annoying.”

Jangmi smiled winningly. “It’s what charmed you from the beginning.”

Namjoon coughed. “I really wouldn’t put it like that.”

“No?” Jangmi asked, surprised. “Then how would you put it?”

Namjoon considered the question for a few moments. “I would say that your capacity for annoying me is one of your better qualities.”

Jangmi opened her mouth, speechless, as the meaning of his words fell on her. “You mean that the best possible thing you can say about me is that I’m annoying?”

Namjoon smiled smugly. “Smarts, doesn’t it.”

Jangmi had no answer for him, and it was not a feeling that she enjoyed. Sulking, she leant back and and looked around the bar while waiting for a pithy reply to come to her, though she knew that even if she did think of one it would be far too late to say it. She realised that Namjoon was staring at her with something like amusement in his eyes, but he quickly looked away when he saw that she’d noticed, fighting a smile.

Jangmi wondered if his plan might not be the wisest. Of course, keeping the rowdy and hotheaded crew of The Second Star out of the Chinese crew’s way was for the best, but Namjoon himself, even smartly dressed and scrubbed up as he was now, was far too close to the definition of ‘intimidating’ to be of comfort. Surely the Chinese crew would not take well to the Captain of the pirates who had ransacked their boat, turning up and asking them for a favour?

In truth, was he really needed in order to glean the information that they needed? It was Jangmi who carried the Virtue of mind-reading, and Jangmi who was practiced at veering the conversation to a fruitful path. One where one might think about something they were not supposed to tell anyone about. It was not often that Jangmi felt particularly grateful for her courtesan training, but today, if it could help the crew of The Second Star, she was.
“It’s a bit of a risk,” she said aloud, breaking the companionable silence between her and Namjoon. “Even if it is just us two.”

“Don’t worry,” Namjoon said reassuringly. “I’ll be there to protect you if anything goes down.”

“Oh, that’s not - I mean, I didn’t - I was thinking about it being a risk for you,” Jangmi said quickly. “I barely did any fighting against the Chinese, but you were in the thick of it, they might not-”

She was silenced by a look of disbelief from Namjoon. “We’ll be fine.”

Jangmi sighed. “That’s reassuring.” Apparently the Captain wasn’t even going to entertain the notion of her going alone. But that was fine; Jangmi had a plan brewing in her head, and the Captain didn’t have the Virtue of finding it. “So… will someone just wander over and tell you, ‘that Chinese boat you attacked is in mooring spot thirty-eight, good luck to you’?” Jangmi asked him.

“No! ...basically, yeah,” Namjoon admitted after a brief moment of indignation. “We pirates aren’t a subtle folk, and not everyone can read, and then you add in the different languages and... basically we’ll stay here for a couple of hours and if a barmaid doesn’t come over to give us what will probably be an ‘X’ on a badly-drawn map then we’ll come back and try again tomorrow. But I’m not sure how long I can keep the crew cooped up for - the sooner we find them the better, especially since they might have already left.”

“Ah, okay,” Jangmi nodded as if she wasn’t suddenly trying to keep an eye on every barmaid in the tavern simultaneously. She noticed that Namjoon’s tankard of ale was half-full, like he’d forgotten about it. On another day she might have encouraged him to finish it, to make his reactions that little bit slower, but it was only yesterday that she had berated him for drinking too much. She would have to distract him another way.

Jangmi wondered about which avenues of conversation might be worth exploring - in her experience, men enjoyed talking about themselves, especially if it cast them in a positive light. What was he passionate about? His life of piracy, obviously. She considered asking him about how he came to be a pirate Captain, but if Jangmi had learnt anything from her time aboard The Second Star, it was that there was always a sad story lurking in someone’s past, and she didn’t feel comfortable digging up any more.

He was also passionate about his crew, but there again Jangmi was trying to distract him from the task at hand rather than draw attention to it, so any conversation that might lead back to Jungkook was to be avoided.

As she cast her mind around for something else to talk about, Jangmi’s gaze settled on the dark blue velvet of Namjoon’s coat. Or more precisely, how well it seemed to suit him. His shoulders seemed broader his posture better, his honey-toned skin contrasting nicely with the deep colours. And the cut of the coat seemed to, if not suggest, then heavily imply the existence of well-developed pectoral muscles, smooth skin stretched from chest to waist, possibly with a dusting of hair leading down to...

“Is there something on my shirt?” Namjoon had caught her staring, seemingly discomfited as he stretched the fabric down to check for stains. The material pulled taught, Jangmi could definitely confirm the existence of a toned chest, exactly the kind one would expect from the back Jangmi had caught a glimpse of so long ago after that battle with the slavers...

“Jangmi?”
“Hmm?” Jangmi looked up sharply into Namjoon’s uncomfortable face. “Oh, I was just wondering about the book,” she lied smoothly, surprising herself with how easily it came to her. “What it’s about.”

“Oh.” To Jangmi’s disappointment, Namjoon released the fabric of his shirt to pat his chest pocket where the book was hidden, covering up the outline of his chest once again. “I’m not sure, to be honest. Mysticians always use a strange alphabet to communicate amongst themselves, that much I know. But as for the contents it could be a talisman to protect against bad luck or it could be instructions for a remedy for constipation.”

Jangmi burst out laughing. “Not something we need aboard The Second Star, then.”

“No,” Namjoon grinned. “To be honest, I only knew that the book was Mystician property because of the sigil.”

“What is it?” Jangmi asked curiously. “The sigil, that is.”

“They say it looks like something different to every person that looks at it,” Namjoon explained. “And that what you see is supposed to reveal a deep truth about yourself. What did you see?”

“I saw a butterfly,” Jangmi replied, wondering what that said about her. “A butterfly with no body. Why, what did you see?”

“I saw a door opening into a dark room,” he answered with a shrug. “I don’t know what in the seven seas that could mean.”

“It could be…” Jangmi struggled to come up with a decent explanation. “It could be an expression of hope. How, maybe… there’s a way out of the darkness, if only you remember to look for the door.”

Namjoon nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose. Although I don’t see myself as a very hopeful person.”

“I don’t think you are either,” Jangmi told him, and he raised an eyebrow. “Not in a bad way, just… I think that you think that you came off worse in a fight with life and that you have to make do with being defeated. But for what it’s worth, I don’t see you like that. You’re the Pirate King who would go to the ends of the world to protect what he loves the most, even if what he has to face at the end of the world is himself.”

There was a long silence as Namjoon looked at her without saying anything. Jangmi’s skin became hot under the radiance of his gaze, like she had spent too long in the sun. Namjoon’s expression was unfathomable. Finally, he said, “let’s do you.”

“Let’s - what?”

“Your meaning,” Namjoon elaborated. “A butterfly with no body. What do you think that means?”

“I don’t know,” Jangmi replied, discomfited. “I did yours, you start.”

“Fine,” Namjoon said, leaning forwards over the table and searching her face. “I have an idea. I think that you see yourself in that butterfly. All beauty, all spectacle, but no substance - nothing to hold it together. But I think you’re wrong, too. I think you’re resilient… and proud… and persistent… like a mosquito.”

“What?” Jangmi swatted at Namjoon’s shoulder. “I get demoted from butterfly to mosquito?”
Namjoon’s face had cracked into a wide smile. “Well, I did say you were annoying, didn’t I?”

Jangmi swiped at him again, but this time Namjoon was too fast for her and his hand shot out to grasp her palm before it could strike him.

There was a brief moment of silence as Jangmi realised that he was holding her hand. He looked as shocked as she felt. Oh crap I’m holding her hand I’m holding her hand my skin is touching her skin what do I do she can hear everything I’m thinking oh crap crap crap don’t think anything bad don’t think anything about her hand she can hear me thinking about not thinking about her naked is that bad is that good oh crap I’m still holding her hand like holding it holding it her skin is so soft wait why is it so soft clearly she’s not been working hard enough oh crap this is no the time to be thinking about her hands it’s so warm and so small and if fits so well like the last time she wouldn’t let go like she wanted to hold onto me forever why did that feel so good I was so worried but it felt so nice when was the last time I held someone’s hand was it Jinnie’s was it really that long ago wait she can hear all of this shit shit shit-

Jangmi slid her hand out of his. Barely two seconds had passed, but it felt more like two days. “Sorry,” she said quietly, surprised to be able to hear her voice over the sound of the music still playing on and the thump of her heart that suddenly seemed to want to join in with the drummer. “I should be more careful where I put my hands.”

“No, it was my fault,” Namjoon countered, and to reassure her slowly drew up a single finger and pressed it to the tip of her nose. Because it wasn’t on her hands, Jangmi had to concentrate until Namjoon’s thoughts came into focus. He was thinking, you’re slightly less annoying than a mosquito.

Jangmi laughed despite herself, brushing his hand away, assiduously aiming for the sleeve where she would not touch his bare skin “What have I been upgraded to, then?”

Namjoon considered the question seriously. “You’re a moth. Better looking than a mosquito but with a strange obsession with luminescent things.” Leant close to the candlelight as he was, Namjoon himself looked like a luminescent thing.

“I’ll take it,” Jangmi told him sourly, “but it’s not like I had much choice.”

“Exactly,” Namjoon sat back, looking smug. It was bewildering how quickly they seemed to move past the awkward moments - less than a minute ago they had accidentally held hands. Less than a day ago they had had a blazing argument. Less than a week ago Namjoon had patted Jangmi’s back as she threw up into the sea. Less than a month ago they had hated each other’s guts. And now, here they were in a smoky tavern, drinking and joking together like old friends while low voices and the clink of tankards on tables harmonised with a wistful melody to colour the air. When did they start getting on so well? When had they begun to use humour in order to amuse rather than antagonise?

“What do you think Yoongi would see in the Mystician’s sigil?” Jangmi asked Namjoon mischievously.

They both considered the question for a moment, then said at exactly the same time, “Jimin’s ass.” And promptly burst out laughing.

Laughing felt good, Jangmi thought, but she couldn’t seem to catch her breath. Something about the complicity, laughing together instead of at one another, seemed to be doing something strange to her chest. Or maybe the smoke wafting from the candle had gotten to her lungs.
“What about Jimin?” Namjoon pondered when they had calmed down and Jangmi managed to force some air into her system. “Surely not Yoongi’s ass?”

“Too bony,” Jangmi asserted.

“You’d be surprised,” Namjoon argued. “He’s landed on me a fair few times during bar fights and I never got any bruises.”

“I… don’t even know how to begin to imagine that,” Jangmi groaned, covering her eyes in exasperation.

“What, me brawling in a bar or Yoongi’s ass?” Namjoon asked, grinning.

“Both,” Jangmi replied, eyes still shut. “In combination.”

“You should join me in a bar fight one of these days,” Namjoon suggested happily. “I’ve still got a score to settle on Silmido and I think you’d be quite the scrappy fighter if we trained you up enough.”

“About that,” Jangmi said, eyes narrowing. “Weren’t you supposed to be training me? I haven’t had a session all week.”

Oops,” Namjoon said guiltily. “Guess I kind of forgot. But I’m the Captain!” he countered, rallying. “I can’t always be available to train the rookies!”

“You are if their names are ‘ale’ and ‘rum’,” Jangmi muttered, so quietly that Namjoon couldn’t possibly hear her.

“Promise me,” Namjoon said seriously, “that even if I’m not around, you’ll get someone to train with you, at least once a day. Your safety is important and to be honest, the crew could do with a bit of practice, too.”

“Sorry, go back a bit,” Jangmi spoke quickly. “Did I just hear you admit that my safety was important?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” Namjoon admitted sheepishly. “Don’t make me take it back,” he warned.

“Well, well, well,” Jangmi smiled smugly. “It looks like the civet can change its stripes after all.”

“Civets aren’t striped,” Namjoon objected. “East-Asian ones are spotted, while Indian-”

“So,” Jangmi said suddenly, interrupting his soliloquy on civet genealogy, “this ‘X’ on a map, would it be the kind to be on a grubby piece of parchment, probably on the back of a page ripped from an accounts ledger or something?”

“Yeah, why?” Namjoon asked.

“Oh, no reason,” Jangmi said innocently. “On a completely different note, can I tell you a secret?”

The only word that could possibly be used to describe Namjoon’s face as Jangmi slowly leant towards him, was ‘astonished’. However, as Jangmi’s hand landed gently on the velvet of his jacket and began to slide its way up towards his neck, it began to feature an array of other emotions: consternation, disbelief, anxiety… Jangmi could feel the vibration of his heart through the shirt’s material. It seemed to be speeding up, although to be fair this very close proximity
seemed to be making Jangmi’s heartbeat less than steady too. She felt hot. So did he. Slowly, she leant over until her lips hovered at his ear, and quite distinctly, heard him swallow. “What’s the secret?” he asked hoarsely.

Jangmi allowed herself a small smile, one that seemed to reach straight up from her chest, before whispering into his ear, “I’m about to be demoted back to a mosquito.”

And before the Captain had a moment to react, Jangmi had shoved him hard off his stool, vaulted over the table, snatched the map from the hand of the flabbergasted barmaid and sprinted to the exit of the tavern, dodging anyone or anything that might get in her way. The small silver book safely in her grasp, Jangmi turned at the door to glance behind her.

Namjoon was stood stock-still, open mouthed by the table at which they had been sat less than ten seconds ago, bar stool in his hand as if he might throw it at her. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments across the room, and the barstool’s leg came loose, falling to the floor.

The tavern door swung shut before the wooden leg hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was supposed to be one paragraph, but after all the sadness of the last few chapters I decided to let my inner sass-monster run free and get in some good, old-fashioned flirting. Because frankly, who can spend that much time with Kim Namjoon and not find him irresistible.

A heartfelt thank you to my proofreader, who came up with the ship name 'NamJang', because 'JangJoon' was all kinds of bad.

The next chapter will be called 'The Virtue of Necessity'.

V. v. grateful to everyone who has kept with me this far through! xxxxxxxxxxxx

P.S. A KPOP GROUP CALLED ATEEZ HAS DEBUTED WITH A SONG THAT IS LITERALLY CALLED 'PIRATE KING'. NOTHING TO DO WITH ME, BUT YES I AM CLAIMING THEM AS STORY CHEERLEADERS/MASCOTS/PROMOTERS.
Chapter Summary

Intent on getting the information necessary from the Chinese crew without anyone getting hurt, Jangmi uses her three favourite skills: mind-reading, manipulation, and a certain flair for the dramatic...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jangmi sped through Port of the World, hardly believing that she had managed to pull that off. He had been so unaffected by her ‘courtesan mystique’ the first time she had tried it that she had been expecting to get a smart-ass comment in reply whilst being sent back to The Second Star in disgrace.

But no - he had actually fallen for it. Jangmi wouldn’t dare let herself believe that Captain Kim Namjoon, Pirate King and God of Destruction had actually been affected, not in the normal way. He had made it quite clear from the start that she was not anything to him, much less a woman, much less an attractive woman. But maybe she had managed to remind him that she was female for just a moment, and that had been the distraction.

Jangmi found herself wishing that she had leant just a little bit closer, that her lips had brushed the soft skin of his neck just long enough for her to hear what he had been thinking. Had he been pleased? Disgusted? Had he felt her hand reaching into his breast pocket for the Mystician’s book or had his mind been elsewhere? Would he think that she was trying to prevent them finding the Mysticians or had he figured out the real reason for her actions?

Certain now that there was no way she could have been followed, Jangmi slowed down to look at the map. As Namjoon had guessed it would be, it was a crudely drawn map of Port of the World, a large X marking a mooring not too far from where she was now. In fact, Jangmi could see the Chinese flag from here.

Approaching cautiously, Jangmi could see that some bits were still under construction. A new mast had been erected but there were no sails to speak of and there were at least three men hanging over the sides, giving the wood a much needed seasoning. So they might be able to capture her, but at least they couldn’t sail away with her as prisoner.

Busy as the deck was, no one noticed a skinny young woman with bright copper hair weave between the crewmembers, making a beeline for the prow. It was only when she hopped onto the
bowsprit, drew out the little silver-bound book and dangled it over the murky water that the first sailor even turned around to wonder what the hell she was doing.

“Ya!” A shout captured her attention, a man with only one leg leaning by the foremast. He whipped up his crossbow but Jangmi saw the arrow coming and ducked neatly. Standing back up, she did her best to seem confident, even if her heart was suddenly hammering at the speed of a woodpecker and her back was pin-pricked with sweat. She forced her legs to find the rhythm of the waves. Her plan couldn’t possibly work if she fell off the ship.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Jangmi called out, holding the little silver book out for closer inspection. With great effort, she forced her hand not to tremble.

At once, a fearful hush settled over the crew. Deliberately, so that everyone could see, Jangmi selected a page at random and very slowly tore it out, the ripping noise seeming to echo around the deck. A moan rumbled around from the shocked crew members as Jangmi dropped the page over the side. It drifted briefly in the brisk breeze coming off the sea but dropped inevitably into the water, the silver encrusted onto its edges causing it to sink. It glimmered momentarily like a lost fish divided from its shoal and disappeared from view.

“That was for the arrow,” she said cheerfully. “Next time the whole book goes.”

Someone shouted something at her in Chinese, of which she didn’t understand a word. Ah. Maybe that was the reason why Namjoon thought he would be useful. As nonchalantly as she could with about a dozen weapons trained on her, shrugged. “I don’t speak Chinese.”

There was a mumble among the crew members and then a sailor who looked like he’d much rather be anywhere else was pushed to the front, closely followed by someone who Jangmi recognised as the Captain that Namjoon had spoken with after their attack.

“I am able to translate,” the sailor said in halting Korean. “What is it that you want?”


The sailor translated for the Captain. “How much?”

Again, Jangmi was forced to recognise that having Namjoon around might have been useful after
all. How much was too much? How much was not enough? She didn’t want to take all they had, but nor did she want to see them exchanging relieved smiles. The moment they relaxed, they would no longer fear her, and the moment they no longer feared her, her life was at risk. She was one person and they were many, and all that stood between them was a small, silver bound tome.

After a moment, Jangmi pointed at the translator, across whose face panic flashed clearer than lightning. “Empty your pockets.”

Slowly, he drew out a small spy glass, a slingshot and a handful of coins, placing them in front of him. Jangmi acknowledged him with a nod, and then pointed at another sailor. “You. The same.” The translator muttered a line in Chinese to explain, and the sailor scowled, but did as he was told.

One by one, the sailors came forwards and emptied their pockets, some calmly and some with great reticence, and the pile of coins grew. One sailor in particular hesitated long and hard, but Jangmi casually drew out a dagger from her waistband, and he jumped like a scared rabbit, dropping a considerable amount of shiny things on the deck in fright.

A shout of anger went up from the other crewmembers and he turned red as a beet before being grabbed by at least three members of his own crew. Clearly, the items in his possession had not been honestly acquired.

The furore might have distracted Jangmi had she not seen the Captain’s intentions written clear across his face. As his hand began to slide over to his holster, Jangmi launched her dagger in his direction. He was lucky that she had good aim - her dagger soared through the air and embedded itself in the mast, snagging his flamboyant hat on its way. The Captain froze.

In an instant, the deck went silent.

Thanking Yoongi silently for arming her so well, Jangmi drew out yet another dagger. “Translator,” she called out, “what is the Captain’s cut of any profits you make?”

“Uh… ten percent,” the translator replied, bewildered.

Jangmi nodded, and grabbed a sheaf of pages that looked to be about a tenth of the total. A groan went up from the crew. She hesitated, and then looked at the Captain, who had turned white. “Convince me not to.”
With a word from the translator, the Captain emptied out his pockets, took off every ring from his finger, every pendant from his neck, every jewel from his ears. The pile of valuables doubled. Jangmi nodded to herself. That looked like a respectable haul.


“I will do it,” the translator said hastily. “It is not fitting for a Captain.”

Jangmi flicked her wrist and the translator blanched, but she had only shifted the dagger from one hand to the other. “Tell him to do it,” she repeated calmly.

The translator, through gritted teeth, explained what she wished in Chinese to the Captain, who glared furiously but nevertheless bent down to do as she had ordered. While he was occupied, Jangmi turned her attention back to the translator.

“This book,” she said casually, “why is it so important to you?”

The translator pursed his lips. “We are giving you our money in exchange for the book, not information.”

Jangmi shrugged, unwilling to press for further details. She would get them, one way or another. “Fair enough. I was just curious.” She cleaned her nails absentmindedly with the dagger while the Captain finished his task, still on the look-out for any would-be heroes amongst the Chinese sailors.

She bid the translator approach her slowly with the now-bulging purse. With one hand, she took it from him and with the other offered him the book, which he took with great reverence. But before he could retreat, she raised her arm and gently caressed his cheek from temple to jaw. He flinched, but could not move. He was transfixed by the intensity in her eyes.


She could feel the adrenaline in her veins, that old excitement of knowing she had someone under her sway. It had burned away the fear, the unsteadiness in her legs. Instead she felt taut, ready, like
the string of a bow ready to let fly.

There was sweat on his brow, and Jangmi wiped it away with the tips of her fingers. His world had shrunk to the space between them. He was scared, he was feverish, he was nervous. In short, he was hers.

They took our memory. They said, “People do not find us, we find them.” They gave us a book that we had not asked for but had desperately required. We remembered the book but not the hands that delivered it to us. They said that our voyage would be cursed from the moment that we set sail but that our redemption would be in our ruin. We knew our destination and we knew that we would not reach it. We set sail from the city with no shadow.

“Where?” Jangmi breathed.

And the sailor whispered, “Saigon.”

Jangmi released her breath, only just realising that she had been holding it, and the spell was broken. In the moment that clarity returned to the man’s eyes, she shoved him back with all of her might before his crewmates could think to seize her, and dove backwards off of the bowsprit into the murky waters of Port of the World.

Just before she hit the water, she heard the distinct sound of a crossbow arrow whizzing through the air, and then the splash and following submersion drowned every worldly sound out. Not daring to resurface, Jangmi struck out wildly for the open ocean for as long as her lungs would allow her to.

When the burn became too much, she broke the surface of the water with a gasp, coughing out the salt from her mouth and nose. She had been pulled a good distance away from the Chinese ship, possibly by a tidal current, but that caused its own array of problems. She didn’t want run the risk of being dragged out to the open ocean.

The colour of the water was an unappealing greeney-brown, filthy with scum and detritus. Jangmi tried to keep her head out of the water as much as possible, but not much could be done about the water she had already swallowed. What she could do, however, was cling on to a discarded plank of wood that had been floating nearby, and paddle with all her might back in the direction of The Second Star.

When she was confident that the shore was indeed approaching, she allowed herself a more
leisurely pace, content in the thought that she had managed to secure that vital piece of information for the crew, and that her success meant that Namjoon might only put her on nightwatch for a week instead of a month. And with the contents of the purse that were currently weighing down her left wrist, she might even get away with no punishment at all.

Jangmi finally spotted the stern figurehead of The Second Star amongst the other ships and her stomach did a little somersault in delight, but that sensation was cut brutally short by the sight of several barges surrounding it, each bearing an orange crowned sun emblazoned on a green flag.

As she approached, the sounds of combat became more apparent - shouts and gunshots floated to her across the water. Jangmi redoubled her efforts, confident that no one would be looking in her direction. There was only one mariner left on each of the barges, so Jangmi chose the closest one and clambered aboard.

The mariner spun round at the sound of her embarkation, gun raised, but he relaxed when he saw that she was bedraggled, apparently unarmed, and female.

“Are you lost, love?” he asked her, grinning.

Jangmi’s foot caught him full in the stomach and he toppled into the water. A number of witty responses lined up on Jangmi’s tongue, and she went with the one that she felt most expressed the intensity of her disapproval. “Oh, fuck off.”

The barge had been tethered to The Second Star by means of a thick rope, which Jangmi lopped off with an energetic dagger manoeuvre. Apparently, her lack of rope-making skills did not prevent her from being excellent at unravelling them.

The sailor on the next barge along was still craning his neck to see what was going on aboard The Second Star, so Jangmi’s leap came not only as a surprise, but as a form of weaponised acrobatics which rendered him unconscious before he even hit the water.

The next sailor, however, had noticed the commotion and squeezed off two shots from his pistol that both missed Jangmi, hitting the piece of wood to which the rope was tied. Judging that she was close enough, Jangmi grabbed a discarded bucket, filled it with bilgewater from the bottom of the barge and then chucked it at the unfortunate sailor, dousing him. His next bullet didn’t even make past the end of his barrel. Wet gunpowder did that to a gun.
Jangmi slammed a foot into the side of the boat where the bullets had hit it and rivulets of water began to appear down the side. She slammed a foot again and the wood splintered, the rope now tethering only a twig instead of a boat.

Before the barge could sink, Jangmi jumped onto the next target where the mariner faced her off. He threw his now defunct gun at her, but she ducked, and he had already started to charge.

But before Jangmi could even raise her dagger, he fell over backwards, his eyes wide and goggling, an arrow sprouting from his collar. Jangmi turned to see Seongge waving at her from the mast of The Second Star, and she waved back, grinning.

Seongge had already nocked another arrow and expertly dispatched the remaining barge guardian, and now he gestured to her, telling her to come aboard. In the same moment, a sailor was heaved into the sea over the side by a sweating Deokwoon. He surfaced, only to have Jangmi launch a bucket at his head before he could cause trouble. It made contact with a loud ‘ding!’

She neatly sectioned the barge from the rope and then jumped over to the final barge, which was now devoid of life, and checked that her heavy purse was secure before shimmying up the final tether.

The deck of the Second Star was in complete disarray.

Men of the Navy were already in short supply, being pushed outwards from the centre, be it over the gunwhale into the water or being forced down the gangplank which linked the ship to the port. The pirate crew had given no quarter, and however the battle might have started out, they now clearly had the upper hand. The skirmish was not over, not by a longshot, but the men of the Navy had lost their courage, and once that happened there could only be one outcome.

Jangmi dodged a flailing sword wielded by a mariner caught between Sejin and the quarter deck, and the unfortunate mariner chose to jump ship rather than fight to the death. Jangmi hacked away at the last rope and watched all the barges float away with great satisfaction. She and Sejin saluted each other cheerfully and then he dove back into the fray to find another target.

Jangmi, however, was armed only with a dagger, and she didn’t feel like affronting any trained soldiers when she was so ill-prepared. She wove her way around the fight and attempted to drop through the hatch, thinking to check the belly of the ship for intruders and perhaps raid Yoongi’s weapons store, only to bump into an emerging Namjoon.
“Got the bastard,” he panted, wiping sweat away from his forehead. “Are you back already? We’ll take about it later. Here, take this.” He handed her the second of his two swords. “There’s got to be more of them about. This can’t be all there is.”

And yet, it seemed to be the case. The deck had slowly emptied of men in green as the shore and port waters had welcomed them. Soon enough, only the crew remained on board, a little scratched up and a little more than scratched up in the case of Jungkook, whose broken ankle was quickly healed by Jimin’s ministrations.

Certain that everyone was safe, sound and present, Namjoon ordered that they loose any moorings and get ready to set sail. Jangmi was sent to keep Seongge company up in the crow’s nest, to help him keep an eye out for any further attacks.

But other than the usual to-ings and fro-ings of small ships in the port that had been completely undisturbed by the scuffle, there was nothing to suggest an attack of any kind. The view out to open ocean was completely uninterrupted, no other naval ships sailing anywhere near The Second Star.

So Jangmi turned her gaze to the port, desperate to find the source of the attack, something that might give them a clue as to how they had been so quickly found by Korea’s Navy. As she was skimming the forest of masts that stretched out along the coast of Port of the World, a glimpse of green caught her eye. It was lowered, folded, nearly out of sight, but it was definitely the new flag of Korea’s naval force, the green flag with an orange crowned sun.

Carefully, Jangmi increased the focus until the details of the ship came into focus - the knots in the wooden planks, the fibres of the sails, the tense soldiers waiting silently in rank, the gleam of their pommels. Jangmi slowly scoured the deck from quarterdeck to forecastle...

...and came face to face with Heemi.

Only it was Heemi with hair attached at the nape, revealing a broad forehead, a square jaw, and an expression of brooding concentration that had never graced Heemi’s delicate features. The contrast between her and her brother was brutal.

“Captain!” Jangmi yelled, scrambling for a rope. “It’s him! I see him!”

“What?” Namjoon looked up from his intense discussion with Yoongi, alerted by the urgency in her voice.
“It’s Son Euigong!” Jangmi was already nearly down the mast, and she dropped the rest of the way, eyeglass still clutched in her hand. “It’s Son Euigong, he’s on a ship about two dozen moorings away from us, he’s not doing anything, he’s just standing there-”

Namjoon made the decision instantly. “We leave now.”

“But Namjoon, what if that’s what he wants?” Yoongi insisted. “What if he’s got a whole fleet waiting, hoping to catch us unawares?”

“He knows that won’t happen,” Namjoon growled. “It’s all mind games with Son Euigong: is he bluffing or is he double bluffing? What does he think I’ll do? What does he think I think he will do? There’s no end to it.”

“So what do we do?” Yoongi asked, shaking his head.

“We leave,” Namjoon replied resolutely. “There’s either a hidden fleet or there isn’t. If there is, we fight or we flee. If we stay, we will have to fight. I’d rather give us the chance of getting away unscatched, waiting for a day where it’s us that has the advantage.”

Yoongi bowed his head in assent; Namjoon’s logic was unassailable.

The crew hastened to set sail - it was a sloppy departure, confused and harried compared with their smooth exit from Japan. Namjoon barked out order after order, but it was only after Jungkook pulled out the Astrosextant to make a few quick calculations that everyone could properly settle into the rhythm, the push and pull of ropes performed like a well-practiced dance.

Seongge’s agility and sure-handedness was needed in the rigging, so it fell to Jangmi to keep an eye on the horizons, to see if they weren’t being pursued by Son Euigong’s ship, as well as spot any danger that might lurk ahead.

And yet, there was none.

As the brisk wind grew and grew, snapping the sails in its impatience to reveal its playful potency, the sun cast gentle shades of blue and white across the sky, the sea’s colour deepened to its full
richness, and the crew of The Second Star finally began to relax. There was no way any attack could be lying in wait for them this far out.

Jangmi, likewise, had stopped scouring the horizon for any sign of something that didn’t belong. She had been struggling to continue, in any case; her eyes felt like they were going to fall out of her head. She had also relaxed her grip on the money pouch without realising, to the point that it nearly fell out of the crow’s nest onto Jimin’s head below. It would probably not have had any lasting damage to Jimin, but it would probably have hurt like the blazes nonetheless.

Seongge clambered up to say hello, and Jangmi showed him the pouch of money with a mischievous grin. His mouth opened in silent exclamation, and he clapped her on the back approvingly. *Nice work there, little pirate.*

“Thank you,” Jangmi said smugly. “Can you keep an eye out for a bit? I should probably pass it to Yoongi before I drop it again.

*By all means.*

Jangmi slid halfway down the mast and hallooed to get Yoongi’s attention. He looked up from where he was stood with Namjoon by the helm.

“Here,” Jangmi called out, throwing down the heavy pouch which Namjoon snatched from the air with ease, his expression showing incomprehension. “Before I accidentally forget on purpose.”

“What the-?” Namjoon’s eyes grew large as he opened the pouch ever-so-slightly to see the tell-tale glimmer of gold inside. He weighed it in his hand appreciatively. “Did you *rob* them?”

“No,” Jangmi scoffed, adding, “No offense, Yoongi.”

“None taken.”

“...I asked them nicely,” Jangmi proffered.

“Wait, let me get this straight,” Namjoon broke in as Yoongi snorted in disbelief, “You ditched me
to get some information from a hostile crew and ended up selling them the book we stole from them in the first place?"

“Oh, and I got the information too,” Jangmi called down, tapping the side of her head with a knowing grin. “But we’ll get to that later.”

The dumbfounded look on his face was worth more than the gold in the pouch she had just handed him.

Evening come, they were anchored off the same island they had stayed by after their previous visit to Shanghai. But the atmosphere was different this time. After weeks of hard sailing, everyone was tense, everyone was tired. And the brush with Son Euigong, brief as it was, had shaken those crewmembers who had most reason to hate him. It was for that reason that after dinner, only Jungkook, Namjoon and Jangmi remained on deck for a nightcap, recognising that sleep was yet a while away for them.

“It’s been a strange day,” Jangmi remarked with a sigh.

“It has,” Jungkook agreed. “Have you noticed that it’s only when you set foot on dry land that things go wrong?”

“Yes,” Namjoon and Jangmi said at the same time. They shared a quick glance.

“It doesn’t surprise me, though,” Namjoon added. “There’s nothing but unhappiness where our ship can’t go. Do you know why?”

Jangmi shook her head while Jungkook stared at his Captain intently.

“It’s because on dry land, each man believes that he is capable of possessing absolute power,” Namjoon explained in his deep, rhythmic voice. “Of his house, of his business, of his serfs, of his subjects. So, each man fight for the power that he believes should be his. That’s why we have hatred, violence, war - it’s the eternal struggle of men trying to seize what can never be grasped by human hands: power.

However, each and every man who sails on open water implicitly understands that here, there can only be one absolute ruler, and that is the sea herself. Whatever conflict there is at sea is ultimately
decided by the one who can never be destroyed or subdued. The sea is the queen of every sailor, pirate and merchant, and not one of them could ever dream of taking her crown.”

“And that’s what Son Euigong wants, isn’t it?” Jangmi said quietly after a long silence. “A crown?”

“I have no doubt that he already has a scheme in place to somehow depose his sister,” Namjoon said darkly. “If I know him, he won’t see her as a threat, but as an obstacle to power nonetheless.”

“But she helped him,” Jangmi protested. “She can’t be in danger - she’s his family.”

Namjoon spread his hands. “This here, on this ship, this is a family. This is what it looks like when people trust each other, and sacrifice for each other and aren’t looking for a way to gain an advantage over each other. This is a family; Son Euigong has none. He’s too deep in his quest for power.”

“If he’s so deep,” Jangmi argued, “what is he doing in China instead of ruling Korea like he wants to?”

“I don’t know.” The expression on Namjoon’s brow clouded. “I don’t know why he was there, if he knew Jungkook was with us, or why he let us escape.”

“You think he let us escape?” Jungkook asked disbelievingly. “The soldiers in those barges were pretty intent on cutting us down. My ankle can attest.”

“That’s just it,” Namjoon pointed out. “Half a dozen barges? Son Euigong has the entire Navy at his disposal - he could have blown us off the face of the planet.”

“And start a diplomatic war with China?” Jungkook contended. “We know the rules - anything in Port of the World passes, as long as it passes unnoticed. Six barges is playing it safe.”

“I can’t see Son Euigong having an issue with starting a war with China,” Namjoon disagreed. “In fact, uniting Korea against a foreign nation would be in his interests. There’s a lot that can be accomplished through fear of the outsider.”
“Surely the regime isn’t stable enough for a war?” Jangmi interjected. “Heemi’s been on the throne for less than a year.”

Namjoon sighed. “As ever, with Son Euigong, there are layers to his layers. It’s impossible to know how deeply to examine him. He’s the kind of person that, knowing his adversary will expect him to take the cleverest option, will take the second cleverest just to mess with them. The only way I ever found to thwart him was to cut through all the mind games, focus on one element and take my chances with that. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t.”

“So what’s that one element now?” Jungkook asked.

“Son Euigong didn’t come at us with all his force, and it’s possible to justify that. He might have been ill-prepared, might have been aiming for subtlety, we can’t know. But the one thing that sticks out to me is that during that whole fight, he didn’t once use his Virtue.”

“So?” Jangmi asked. “He wasn’t fighting.”

“As per usual,” Jungkook muttered savagely.

“He started on us,” Namjoon insisted. “Why start a fight he intended to lose?”

“To not reveal his Virtue?” Jangmi suggested.

Namjoon shook his head vehemently. “He hasn’t been hiding it. He wanted people to know he carries it. Remember, it gives him legitimacy. It gives him power.”

A silence fell over the trio as they considered this. Namjoon was right - it was bizarre. But there was no way of knowing now what Son Euigong had wanted. They were far away across the ocean from him, and likely they would never find out the reasons behind the sudden attack. Either that, or they would find out all too soon.

“Well,” Jungkook said, stretching his legs, “that’s given me some nice material for my nightmares tonight.”
Namjoon placed a comforting hand on his shoulder as the young navigator took his leave. Jangmi wished she could do the same. But suddenly her arms had become glued to her sides. She was all too aware that this was the first time she had been alone with Namjoon since that morning, when she had leant towards him, looking him full in the eyes while her hand slid up his body to caress his neck, her lips a bare millimetre from his skin…

“‘I’m sorry,’” she blurted out.

“You’re- what?” Namjoon asked, looking bewildered.

“I’m sorry for, you know, um, tricking you and doing, you know, in the tavern, we, uh, I…” It was happening again. The words were unreachable, intangible. Where had her famed eloquence gone? Why did she sound like Namjoon after a good too many pints of ale?

Namjoon placed a hand on each shoulder, looking straight into her eyes. It was the world gone topsy-turvy, exactly the inverse of the tableau in The World’s End. Only, instead of a mischievous smile, Namjoon’s expression was serious. And, unfortunately, that only made him look more handsome. And it was Jangmi who was caught in his snare.

“I’ll only accept your apology if you tell me why you did it,” he said gravely.

“You, I mean I, I didn’t…” Jangmi bit her lips and rolled her eyes at herself. Ridiculous. She was babbling, speaking without any idea of what was coming out of her mouth. Like her mother tongue had suddenly become a second language. With great effort, she managed to stop, to breathe, and to order her thoughts. Only when she had thought through her response twice without any mistakes did she allow the words into the air between herself and Namjoon. “I knew that you wouldn’t let me go alone, but I didn’t want to let you come either.”

“Even though it was dangerous?”

“Especially because it was dangerous,” Jangmi affirmed.

Namjoon looked at her for a long time, his expression unreadable. Off-kilter, Jangmi wasn’t able to take in his whole face at once. Instead, she found herself focusing on little details. Like how sparse his eyelashes were. Like the beauty spots on his cheek. Like the roundness of his nose.
“Would you have done that for the anyone else here?” he asked her finally. Was that hope in his eyes? Was that trepidation?

“Without a second thought,” Jangmi answered firmly.

Namjoon nodded slowly, and Jangmi couldn’t tell whether he was pleased or disappointed in her answer. Finally he relinquished her, saying only, “we should go to bed.”

Jangmi couldn’t even find it in herself to come up with an innuendo. “We should,” was all she said.

That night, she tossed and turned in her bunk, her blankets twisted and entwining and as interminable as her dreams - in them, she was being pursued through The Second Star by a monster with two heads, tendrils like that of an octopus wrapping around her waist, trapping her. Heemi’s face loomed close to hers and crushed her red lips to hers, suffocating her, even as Euigong’s fangs bit into her flesh.

Then the monster folded gracefully to its knees, and it was not the Son siblings anymore but Namjoon’s face that was looking up at her, his open mouth smeared with her blood. “Take it all,” she was saying to him, begging him. Was she saving him or cursing him? The blood ran down his chin and pooled at the junction between his collarbones, where it began to harden and sparkle. Silently, Namjoon offered her the ruby pendant, even while his tears glimmered as deep and as blue as the sapphire ocean.

A hand on her shoulder wrenched her away from him. He receded away from her until the darkness swallowed him, and Jangmi gasped into consciousness, her heart hammering in her chest and sweat lining her upper lip. Taehyung’s concerned face swam into focus. “Are you okay?”

“I… yeah…” Had it been a nightmare? Did it count as a nightmare if she somehow wished that Namjoon’s face was still looking up into hers in a way that he had never done during her waking moments? “What’s up? Am I late for breakfast?”

“By a lot, but don’t worry about it,” Taehyung told her earnestly. “Jimin saved you, Kookie, and the Captain a portion for after the meeting.”

Jangmi struggled to her elbows, which wasn’t an easy feat with the blankets still tangled and her nightshirt stuck to her in all manner of uncomfortable places. “What meeting?”
“Captain called a meeting this morning, as soon as he woke up. He sent me to get you. Kookie just went up.”

“Oh, okay,” Jangmi said, surprised. “I’ll be right there.”

The entire crew of The Second Star was assembled when she emerged, blinking, into the bright sunlight. Her gaze went straight to Namjoon, stood tall and proud, every inch the Captain. His eyes found hers. Even with his eyes denuded of sapphires, they still seemed to sparkle.

The crew was looking at her expectantly, every single one of them. It was her and them. She hadn’t felt the division between them this strongly since the night she had revealed her Virtue.

“Tell them what you did yesterday,” Namjoon said clearly.

Was this her punishment for trying to manipulate him again? Make her recount in excruciating detail her exploits to the entire crew? Reveal just how far she had gone in her attempt to prove that she was a woman, that she could hold the Captain’s attention for even a second? Betray the intimacy that had flared between them for the briefest of moments, shine direct sunlight on it, ripping away the mystery, the mutual thrill, the emotion, until nothing was left? That was a level of cruel she hadn’t expected from him.


Oh. He wasn’t cruel after all; it was just her guilt complex talking.

Haltingly, Jangmi recounted what she had done aboard the Chinese ship, omitting certain details such as her complete ignorance of the Chinese language, how she had nearly fallen off the bowsprit thanks to her taste for the dramatic, how the sound of the crossbow arrow had sent a chill of death through her body so potent that she had almost lost her facade and given up there and then.

She also skirted the fact that she had gotten close to the translator, unleashing the same force that she had used on Namjoon earlier.

In fact, her recital was so short that the crew looked more impressed than they had any right to be,
like the entire exploit had been flawless from start to finish. Jangmi almost felt bad.

A hush fell over the crew when she finished, a general movement of heads towards the Captain as if expecting him to say something.

“I… uh…” For once, he seemed as at a loss for words as she was. He looked at his crew, seemingly for inspiration, and cleared his throat. “We’ve spoken a lot about family these past few days, what makes one, what makes us one, and although we’ve never had this much pomp and ceremony about it, we’ve never had such an eventful few weeks… well, I guess we have but usually it’s more pistol-and-cutlass eventful, less emotions-and-secrets eventful… well, the point is, usually I don’t have to make a point of it. But I guess that the start was difficult, and that may have partly been down to me but also the circumstances, but what is important is that we can put it behind us and…”

Yoongi gently nudged his Captain in the side.

“Right, yes.” Namjoon turned once more to Jangmi. “Jangmi, even though you’re useless and annoying, you’ve proven your worth as a… as a person, I guess, so I’d like to invite you to join the crew of The Second Star. Uh, if you want to.”

The words fell on Jangmi’s ears with the weight of a mountain. It had finally happened. Proof that they weren’t going to dump her on the next island they anchored at. Proof that she could stay with them. A reason for her to picture her future without fear. A way for her to picture her future at all. And that future was filled with smiling faces.

It was beautiful.

It was enough to bring tears to her eyes, and rip the words from her mouth.

“Oh, Captain,” Jimin said cheerfully, bringing the drawn-out silence to a thankful ending. “Why are you making it into an invitation? She’s already in the family - she hasn’t got a choice.”

At this, the tears really did spill over, and the sobbing Jangmi was swept up in a maelstrom of crewmembers, all anxious to confirm her acceptance with a hug, a pat, any sign of affection. Jangmi caught countless snippets of thought as her hands brushed through the tangle of bodies, but it didn’t matter - it was only an indistinct chatter of happiness.
When the crew members finally decided to give her space to breathe, laughing at her tearstained face, Namjoon spoke up again. “That’s not all.”

This time, the crew seemed as surprised as Jangmi was. Namjoon cleared his throat again. “We all discussed inviting Jangmi to stay on board, as was your right, especially as it’s something we’ve all considered over the past few weeks. But there’s something else that I want to bring up, and the reason that I’m doing it with you all now is because I want to have your gut reactions. Jangmi, you realise that whatever the outcome, you’re still welcome on board the ship, right?”

“Depending on the question, I might not want to stay,” Jangmi joked, and was punched in the arm by Seongge who seemed keen not to brook any notion of her departure. “What is it? Am I getting my own room?”

“Actually, that’s part of it,” Namjoon said, scratching his neck. “But really, it comes down to this. You’ve proved that you’re capable of organising and evaluating stock, and also your results on board the Chinese ship prove that you’re capable of bartering effectively. These are both essential qualities in a Quartermaster. I’d like you to consider becoming ours.”

Jangmi’s mouth dropped open. “But… Yoongi…?”

“The Captain’s already discussed it with me,” Yoongi shrugged. “I’m more than happy to resume my role as First Mate. I get my own room anyway.”

“There’s another thing you need to consider,” Namjoon added to his crew. “Technically, the Quartermaster is also in charge of discipline, and I know that she’s not been here long and that we’ve never had any issues with this, but I am obliged to point out that you would have to abide by any of her wishes in that respect. Has everyone understood?”

There was a general nodding of heads. Namjoon spoke to Jangmi. “What do you think? Happy to take this on? It’s a lot of responsibility.”

“If only to rub in your face that I’m not so useless after all,” Jangmi teased, and then nodded. “But I will take it seriously, I promise.”

“You only have ‘annoying’ left, now,” Namjoon grinned. “Fancy tackling that one?”
Jangmi stuck out her tongue at him. “Is that insubordination I hear?”

Namjoon rolled his eyes. “Don’t make me regret this.” He sighed. “Right, let’s do this. All those who wish Jangmi to become our Quartermaster, say aye.”

Taehyung raised a hand. “Will she use a whip for punishments?”

Namjoon nodded. “Well, that is the role of Quartermaster, so-”

“AYE CAP’N!” The shout rang out from the deck, as well as a very enthusiastic thumbs up from Seongge.

“Well, I guess that’s that then,” Namjoon shrugged. “Breakfast?”

The galley felt strangely quiet with only three of them alone at the long table, but the noise Jungkook made chewing almost made up for it. Their rice was still hot - Jimin had thoughtfully kept it on top of the stove for them.

“So,” Namjoon mused as they ate, “we need to plot a course for Saigon.”

“I’ve never been,” Jungkook noted. “But I’ll take a look at the maps this morning. Have you been there?”

“Once,” Namjoon answered, his brow furrowed. “In my very early days as a pirate. It’s a strange place. It doesn’t surprise me that the Mysticians decided to settle there afterwards.”

“After what?” Jangmi asked.

“After they were chased out of Korea,” Namjoon replied around a mouthful of seaweed. “They originally had a guild headquarters, just like any other guild, but the Seol King didn’t like them for some reason. They were outlawed shortly after he ascended the throne, hounded across the country as demon-summoners. Now their location is a closely-guarded secret. Only guild members know how to find them.”
“And us,” Jungkook pointed out.

Namjoon shook his head. “Saigon is a big city. With the Chinese crew’s memory gone, we have no way of getting more specific instructions. There’ll hardly be road signs saying, ‘Mysticians, this way.’”

“Well, the sailors say that the Mysticians found them. That they seemed to know that they were coming,” Jangmi pointed out.

“I suppose that simplifies everything then,” Jungkook sighed, with a touch of bitterness.

“How?”

“It’s simple,” Namjoon shrugged. The nonchalance in the movement didn’t quite mask the tension in his voice. “If Seokjin wants us to find him, we will. If he doesn’t… well, let’s hope he does.”

“Surely… surely he’ll want to help Jungkook?” Jangmi volunteered tentatively. “You were family…”

“He walked out on us,” Jungkook stated with finality. “It must have taken a lot to leave. Meaning that to stay would have been worse.”

Jangmi looked down at her lap. She didn’t want to see Namjoon’s expression. She had the fearful presentiment that she might just recognise it.

Jungkook sighed, getting up. “I’ll go and take a look at those maps. Captain?”

“In a second,” Namjoon told him. Jangmi looked up at him, and was grateful that his face was now neutral. He waited until Jungkook had left, and then tugged at Jangmi’s sleeve so that her hand was out, palm up.

Into it, with great care, he placed a sapphire earring, its intense blue ringed with gentle gold.
Jangmi blinked, not understanding. “But… my earring…?”

“This is the other one,” Namjoon confirmed. “Crewmembers don’t need to pay for transport. This is reimbursement in retrospect. For the journey from Silmido to Jeju. You don’t owe us anything.”

“I…” Jangmi didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t expected to see it ever again, had lost all hope of reuniting hers with its mate. It didn’t seem as important to her as it once had been; in fact, she had barely thought about it at all. Nevertheless, she closed her fist over the cold little jewel, understanding that this was part of her induction into the crew, every bit as necessary as its members accord. “But the money…” Namjoon had definitely returned from his trade richer in food and richer in gold, gold that had been used in the reparation of the Astrosextant.

“I sold something else,” Namjoon told her. “It was time.”

And that night, as Jangmi settled into her new bed in the small room between Jungkook and Yoongi’s, the sound of footsteps on the deck above, the smell of sea salt, the gentle rocking of The Second Star, were things she would not have traded for all the sapphires in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Awwwwww Jangmi's finally part of the family! I know that it has taken friggin AGES for her to be accepted officially by the crew, but to be fair, this chapter was originally chapter 9 (and chapter 16 was originally the epilogue). To say that I have been dragging this out would be a gross understatement. Hence why NamJang is not so much a slow burn as a kind of smoulder, but GOOEY SEXY STUFF IS COMING I SWEAR. Although I am having a bit of a shipping crisis at the moment. You'll learn why later.

That is it for the mo! Stay tuned for next week's chapter, which will be called 'The Vanquishing of Water'. Peace out x
The Vanquishing of Water

Chapter Summary

The crew of The Second Star stop on a remote island village for some necessary repairs. And it's not just the ship that seems to be undergoing changes...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We’re careening the ship.”

Captain Kim Namjoon’s announcement over breakfast was met with a heartfelt groan from the entirety of the crew, with the exception of Jangmi.

“What’s careening? Why is that bad? Guys?”

“Three days of tarring, scrubbing and removing barnacles,” Jimin scowled, ruining the effect with a little pout at the end. “Get ready for hard work, hot sun and very little else.”

“Is it really that bad?” Jangmi asked Seongge, who was sat opposite her.

Well, it’s only bad if you don’t enjoy suffering, he responded, reaching over with his other hand for a refill.

“We should have seen this coming,” Jimin sighed. “We haven’t done one in a while, with all the running about recently.”

At least we’re not doing it at midsummer this time, Seongge commiserated. That was heat from a new level of hell.

“It feels like midsummer,” Jangmi muttered. Even though autumn was slowly drawing closer, the sun beating down on the deck had been relentless of late. Since they had left Shanghai, there had not been one cloudy day, not one. Thank goodness for the wind - it gave a brief respite to the suffocating heat that never seemed to disperse from the cabins down below. They were also
running low on fresh water, which is why they were punctuating their long, southwards journey with a stop at one of the islands in the Chinese sea. And apparently, doing a ‘careen’.

‘Careening’ seemed to involve waiting for high tide, bringing the ship as far up the beach as possible, and then waiting for the waters to recede so that the hull became visible, accessible to the grumbling crew to clean. Then, the mast had to be attached to ropes, which were heaved by the crew until they could be attached to the treeline. The Second Star lay on her side, baring her hindquarters to anyone lucky enough to sail past the beach.

It was in the afternoon, when the tide had gone out and they could finally get started, that the sun decided to finally take a break from its marathon performance, and grey clouds were pulled over the sky like some kind of divine blanket. But this didn’t soothe the heat - instead, it became twice as oppressive, humid to the point where Jangmi felt like she was drinking the air instead of breathing it.

The crew spoke little, conserving their energy for the backbreaking physical exertion, sweat running down their faces, backs and legs. Jangmi’s headband needed wringing out every half hour. The only noise on the beach was the echoing of tools and sanding knives, against the backdrop of the waves on turf.

It was impossible to know when exactly the sun had set, but they all noticed little by little that the light had faded to the point where everything was a shade of bluish-grey, and that they could no longer see exactly what they were doing. Namjoon allowed them to stop and they all handed their tools to Taehyung and Jangmi, who up until that moment had forgotten that she was Quartermaster and was therefore responsible for inventories.

Namjoon, like many of the other crewmembers, had stripped to the waist, the band of his breeches a shade darker than than the rest from all the sweat. “Let’s go and cool off.”

The crew trudged to the waterline, but were quickly revitalised by the cooler temperature and frolicking waves. It was only minutes before they had all ganged up on Yoongi, lifting him high and flinging him into deeper water. Shouts and laughter echoed around the beach.

Jangmi stood where the water came up with her ankles, admiring the sight. This was a family; this was her family. And what a good-looking bunch they were, Jangmi had to admit. The physical activity of the day had served only to define their muscles all the more as rivulets of water ran down their bodies, and the sun had brought out the deep honey tones of their skin, none more so than Namjoon, despite the wide-brimmed hat he had been sporting.
It was possible to discern the warmth of Namjoon’s skin even in the blue twilight, even from fifty yards away. It would have been possible with her eyes closed.

“Are you coming in, Jangmi?” Taehyung yelled, and she quickly averted her gaze before the Captain could turn and see her staring. But it was too late - their eyes had met for the briefest of seconds, long enough for her stomach to jump from the contact.

She quickly dove into the water to join them, if only to hide the blood that had suddenly rushed to her cheeks.

The next day, a stiff breeze had picked up, chasing away the blanket of clouds until only a scarce few remained, scudding through the sky so that their welcome shadows were a fleeting respite from the sunshine. The mood was far more relaxed, Jungkook whistling to himself as he went from scratch to scratch with a bucket of tar, Jangmi and Seongge bickering over the better scraping knife, Yoongi sticking resolutely to his patch of shade as it circumnavigated the ship with the sun’s progress through the sky.

Jimin and Namjoon had struck inland to go to a village not too far from their site, and returned a little before midday with fresh fruit, a selection of berries and melons that Jangmi had never seen before. They were delicious.

“If we have time this afternoon,” Namjoon told the crew as he flicked a pip into the sea, “we should all go to the village. There’s going to be a celebration.”

“A celebration of what?” Sejin asked, surprised. “Is it a wedding?”

“No, it’s an annual celebration,” Namjoon explained. “As far as I could understand, this festival is celebrated at the onset of autumn. Loosely translated, it’s called the ‘Vanquishing of Water’.”

“Vanquishing?” Jangmi asked, sure she hadn’t heard properly. “Why would they want to vanquish water? They’re surrounded by it. They depend on it.”

“They would say the same of us and fire,” Namjoon responded gravely. “We need it to cook, and to keep warm, and yet we fear it. Too much of anything is harmful. This island suffers from tsunamis, torrential rain, flooding. So, to prevent the excess of water during the autumn season, they hold a celebration where they ‘use it up’.”
“Does it work?” Deokwoon asked around a mouthful of berries.

“Maybe the autumn rains would be worse if they didn’t do it,” Namjoon shrugged. “In any case, it might be nice to check it out. Take a break before we set sail again.”

Encouraged by the prospect of the festival, the crew redoubled their efforts in The Second Star’s recuperation. The popular favourite ‘The Captain’s Wooden Leg’ made a reappearance, Jangmi yelling out the chorus with the rest of them in good cheer, exactly as in tune as said Captain. The singing, or what could loosely be termed as singing, seemed to help them along, and despite the heat, the lusty cries of the crewmembers were as refreshing as the breeze coming off the ocean. The sun had not yet touched the treeline when Namjoon ran a fond hand down The Second Star’s hull, pressing his ear to her wood as if she had a living, breathing heart. Surreptitiously, Jangmi copied him, and for a brief moment the surface seemed as warm and as pliable as human skin.

“I think she’s good to go,” Namjoon said quietly to himself, and then repeated himself louder so that the whole crew could hear. “Everyone finish what you’re doing!”

A loud cheer went up, and faster than Jangmi thought possible, all the tools had been packed neatly away, all ropes coiled stacked, The Second Star was upright and untethered, and the crew was traipsing away from their ship into the bush, leaving their home to bake quietly in the afternoon sun, ready for their return.

With Namjoon confidently leading the way, they took a dusty path that wove between browning grass reaching over their heads, spiky bushes, trees that seemed to grow outwards rather than up. As they approached, the low and insistent sound of drums slowly grew stronger, as organically as if it was the very air around them from which it had been born. Following the sound, it took only a few minutes more to reach the outskirts of what, at a stretch, could be called a village. As far as Jangmi could see, the centre of civilisation on this island was nothing more than a cluster of hovels made from mud and thatch, the tracks nothing more than places where the grass had been worn away by the habitual traffic of the island’s inhabitants. In the afternoon heat, the huts seemed to tremble from the intensity in the sun. It was easy to see why a tsunami would be so feared - nothing here seemed able to resist a good thunderstorm.

The huts seemed to be grouped around a central space where most of the island inhabitants were stood, and it was this that was the source of the sound of drums. The crowd had their backs to them and were chanting loudly at something that seemed to producing smoke, which rose over their heads and was whisked away by the breeze.

The pirates stood unobtrusively at the back, and though Jangmi craned her neck, she couldn’t see a thing. She nudged Sejin, who was stood next to her.
“What are they doing?” she whispered.

“Fire eating,” he answered excitedly. Between him and Jungkook, who was stood on her other side, they linked hands to provide a platform from which she might be able to see over the heads of the islanders. From her new vantage point, she could see half a dozen men whirl flaming sticks as one might twirl a mace, while a single man lowered an incandescent baton into his open mouth. The chanting became louder and louder and erupted in cheers as his lips closed over the wood, swallowing the fire whole. Jangmi climbed down, thanking her helpers, and glimpsed Jimin nudging Yoongi with a wicked grin on his face.

“It’s part of the ceremony,” Namjoon explained quietly to the crewmembers who were stood closest to him. “Partly to appease the water gods in a show of their strength, and also a reminder that water is in us all. Thus, we can channel water for our own use but we can never destroy it.”

“What’s next?” Taehyung asked in a whisper.

“I’m not sure,” Namjoon answered, brow wrinkled as he tried to figure out a coherent translation. “My grasp of their language isn’t perfect. I think they’re going to… reenact a battle?”

“Ooh,” Jimin said keenly. “That’ll be fun to watch.”

And that was when a torrent of water got him clear in the face.

Yoongi’s hand had gone straight to his belt where his sword usually hung, and turned to see a matronly woman with dark skin, wearing some kind of woven tunic, holding an empty bowl and laughing so hard at the shock on the pirates’ faces that she was bent almost double.

She didn’t laugh long, however. Scarcely had the crew relaxed when she was hit in her turn by a jet of water launched by a boy who could not have been aged more than five years. She turned to chase him, and as the crowd dispersed into a quickly drenched chaos, they could see that there was a huge basin of water in the middle of the square, ringed with all sorts of receptacles obviously placed there for their benefit.

For the space of a heartbeat, the crew of The Second Star exchanged glances.
And Jungkook broke rank, running at full pelt at the basin, yelling “everyone get the Captain!”

The water fight lasted until sunset, although to Jangmi it felt like it lasted both a day and the space of a few seconds. Highlights included the crew’s youngest banding together to teach their elders a lesson, cornering Deokwoon in a crevice between two huts and dousing him with water from head to toe, which worked well enough until they ran out of water, and he chased them all the way back to the basin where he threw Taehyung right in, then shadowed Jimin until he managed to catch him and drag him by the ankle back to the plaza where he took his swift revenge. Jungkook had managed to disappear into thin air and only reappeared when the maknae’s tactical alliance dissolved, and it was everyone against Jangmi. Helpless with laughter, she found herself between the advancing crewmembers and the plaza, and decided to climb into the basin before anyone could throw her in by force.

Her suicide tactics earned a bout of hilarity from the crew, and they decided to drag her out of the basin, pouring bucket after bucket of water on her head until her hair was as soaked as her clothes.

Yoongi managed to stay dry the longest, employing defensive tactics to the point of inactivity, but finally Seongge and Jangmi tracked him down to the hammock where he had been camouflaged. He managed to evade them as far as an alley where Seongge advanced on him from one side and Jangmi from the other, turning his head like a rabbit in a trap, looking for a way to escape, but before either Jangmi or Seongge could make a move, Jungkook had appeared from a rooftop and emptied his jug of water over the First Mate’s head, then disappeared again like a street cat in a city.

Finally, it became a case of islanders versus pirates, and though the pirates had strength and military tactics on their side, they were vastly outnumbered. Namjoon ordered a tactical retreat to the plaza, where they put up a dramatic last stand against any islander with any water left. By the end, the basin was empty. Not a person dry amongst them, the pirates held up their hands in defeat, and the islanders broke out in cheers and whoops.

The matronly woman from before came out and spoke briefly with Namjoon, who translated for his crewmembers. “The islanders would like to thank us for helping them use up the water so that they can look forward to a more temperate autumn. They would like to invite us to their feast.”

“Free food!” Deokwoon high-fived Sejin.

“No cooking!” Jimin high-fived the nearest person, who happened to be Jangmi.

Torches were lit around the edges of the plaza, and mats were rolled out, leaving the central area
free. From the houses, the islanders brought plate after plate of food, food that Jangmi was unable to identify from sight. But it was all delicious, and she helped herself to some of everything.

More bowls were handed around, but they were filled with a strong liquor that smelled strongly of rice. Jangmi took a big glug and passed it on, as seemed to be the custom, but she never seemed to have to wait long enough to get thirsty - there was always another bowl on its way round.

When the sky was completely dark, some of the islanders struck up some music on instruments that again, Jangmi had never seen before. “What are they?” she asked Namjoon, who seemed to be the go-to person for anthropological concerns.

Namjoon leant over to an islander, who demonstrated a squeezing motion with his hands as he spoke. Namjoon asked him to repeat, Jangmi gathered, and had a little laugh to herself at the handful of food that the Captain was still holding, forgotten.

Satisfied, Namjoon scooted closer to Jangmi leaned in to her so that she could hear his explanation over the noise of the festivities. “It’s made with a very fine wood at the top that they blow on, and then the bottom, which is filled with water, is… I don’t think we have a word for it, he said it was a plant of some kind, but when you harvest it, it makes a material that can grow smaller or larger.”

“How can it do that?” Jangmi asked, and repeated closer to his ear when he gestured that he hadn’t heard her. “How can it do that? Is it alive?”

Namjoon shook his head automatically, forgetting that she was millimetres away from him, and the soft skin of his earlobe brushed over Jangmi’s lower lip. His voice arrived straight to Jangmi’s brain without bypassing her ears: “Like a clay that retakes its form automatically. The water rises and falls with the pressure of the players’ hands, changing the shape of the sound.”

Jangmi allowed Namjoon to explain in what was for her a repetition, preferring not to remind him of her Virtue, and also enjoying the vibrations that his low, velvety were sending through her body. He was so close to her.

Over his shoulder, Jangmi caught Yoongi’s eye and quickly jumped back from the Captain before quite realising why. She caught Namjoon’s look of surprise at her sudden movement and mouthed “there was a fly.” He nodded, with an expression that looked, to Jangmi’s eyes, a little like disappointment. The movement dislodged a droplet of water that had been hanging from the end of his hair and ran slowly down his forehead. Jangmi followed its trajectory down the side of his nose, around the corner of his mouth, and then hung stubbornly onto his chin, unwilling to lose contact with his warm skin.
Jangmi touched her index finger to the droplet to dislodge it and caught Namjoon’s errant thought: 
*Like after the battle.*

After what battle? Jangmi turned away from him, the question turning over and over in her mind. She wondered what he meant. She could never decipher his thoughts, even when she could hear them. Even back at the tavern, when his thoughts had flowed like waterfall into her mind, she had felt a sadness that didn’t quite match with his words.

Jangmi could feel Namjoon’s gaze on her, but she looked resolutely away into the centre of the plaza, unwilling - or incapable - of facing the intensity that so often came with it.

People had gotten up from the mats and had begun to dance along with music, which was a strange mix of drums and those strange plant-instruments. Its lilting beat suddenly caught onto Jangmi’s skin and she watched the dancing people with growing interest, feeling the feeling grow within her.

How long had it been since she had last danced? She could see that feeling on the people’s faces as they danced, pulled along by a power that was channelled through humans but that existed quite beyond them. That had been the feeling in Jangmi whenever she had danced - she was only a vessel for the sensation of music. She could live it, breath it. She could become one with it.

Without quite realising it, she had gotten to her feet, drawn to the pulsating bodies that populated the central plaza, men and women all moving to the same beat like plants swaying in the wind. She wove her way to the middle where she would not stick out quite as much, to where there was no outside, only the bodies all around, and let the music wash over her.

It was there, in the middle of people she had never met before in her life and would probably never meet again, that Jangmi finally felt the enormity of her situation slip away from her body like weights that she had not realised she was carrying until she let them go. She was no longer alone. She had a family with her. Whatever chased them from across the sea, they would face, they would face together. She had a home. They were her home.

The song ended, and the island dancers applauded the musicians with claps and whoops, joined by the crew of The Second Star with their hearty yells. The band struck up another song, faster this time, and the islanders joined hands in a big circle, Jangmi as just one link in the chain. The circle began to turn, and Jangmi quickly caught onto the footwork, moving round seamlessly, to the approval of those on either side of her. All of a sudden, everyone ran into the middle, let out a cheer, and then skipped backwards to their places, never once dropping hands. The circle began to turn again, this time in the other direction.
Emboldened by her success, some of the pirates joined in - Jimin and Seongge making light work of the steps, others slightly less so. It didn’t matter - they were dragged round the circle nonetheless, the momentum lasting as long as their hands were joined.

At the end of the song, everyone finally let go of each others hands and gave the musicians a huge round of applause. Then, all the women sat down and the island men danced a fierce dance, filled with kicks and jumps, the pumping beat driving them along, sweat mingling with the water that still soaked the clothes and the ground that their feet danced upon.

After the men, it was the turn of the women, a dance of twirling and spinning that was only emphasized by the beaded skirts that they all wore. Jangmi stood at the edge of the plaza, mesmerised, unable to prevent her body from trying to follow along.

A young boy noticed her admiration and pushed her gently into the center, but she shook her head, smiling. He disappeared for a second and Jangmi thought that he had given up, but he returned with a beaded skirt like the one the women were wearing.

“I don’t know the steps,” Jangmi protested, but the pirates noticed what was going on and gave loud, encouraging yells. A girl came over from the dancers to tie the skirt to Jangmi’s sodden clothes, and before she could say anything else, she was being pulled to the centre, to loud applause.

Shy, she allowed herself to be twirled around by the other women, who welcomed her with laughs and smiles, so she resigned herself to her predicament and allowed the music to flow over her once again. The rhythm of the drums and flute instruments blended seamlessly, filling her up, seeming to start with her chest and working its way out until the tingling feeling reached her feet, her fingers.

*Move as though you’re moving through water*, her dance instructor had always told her, and never before had she found it as easy to follow those instructions. Her bare feet spun through the mud as her skirt fanned out around her, her hair sticking to her forehead. Her eyes were closed, she was captive to the music, there was only it and her and the sensation of water burning her to her very core.

This was where she belonged - not on land, or on water, but the stasis which existed only as long as the music played on.
She could sense it as she could sense her own skin - the song would soon draw to an end. Opening her eyes, she saw that she was quite alone in the central plaza - the other women had retreated to where she had been standing not so long ago, encouraging her to keep going. For a brief moment, Jangmi caught sight of the crewmembers, whose mouths were all open, and then the song ended.

The thunderous applause that broke out was not only for the musicians this time, but for her. Jangmi felt her cheeks burn as she bowed a quick bow, but before she could escape to the edges of the square and obscurity, all the adults were rushing back into the center. The music began again.

The adults began to divide into pairs, dancing a dance that was as sensual as it was strange. It seemed as though the aim was to move as two sides of a mirror - joined at the hands, joined at the hips, the couples’ feet moved in perfect unison.

Partnerless, Jangmi wove through the crowd to the fringe, but a voice in her ear stopped her. “It’s the last dance.”

Maybe it was the adrenaline, maybe it was the music; but whatever it was, when Jangmi turned and saw the Captain there stood with his hand outstretched, she felt like her heart might burst out of her chest.

It was impossible to know whether or not Namjoon was a good dancer - the magic of the music somehow seemed less potent, muted by the rushing in her ears, the onslaught of sensation piercing her at every point where her skin touched his. If she had been standing still she would have been shaking. His hands were touching hers, but all she could hear was his breath, slow and measured. Jangmi wanted to look at his face, read his expression, but her eyes would not obey her - they were locked to the floor. Positioned as they were, she saw his feet stop moving.

The surprise achieved what force of will had not - she looked up.

“I’m sorry,” he said, that dark intensity in his eyes. “I thought you’d want to dance.”

“I did,” Jangmi said hastily. “I do.”

“But not with me?” The sensation of his hands in hers disappeared. The intensity in his eyes had gone flat.
“No!” Jangmi said quickly. “I just - I didn’t - I mean…” The words were gone again. What was it about his eyes on hers that always seemed to disconnect her mouth from her mind? She had no words - she did the first thing that came to her - she took his hand and pressed it to her chest.

The thrumming of her heart was reflected back at her by the pressure of Namjoon’s hand, so that she felt it twice over, twice as powerfully. She didn’t need to hear his thoughts to know that he had understood her meaning. All too clearly.

Jangmi took her hand away, and Namjoon’s followed suit, a second later than was necessary. Suddenly she was conscious of how her wet clothes had clung to her, revealing more of her body than had ever been bared to him before, the rivulets of water trickling from her hair leaving glimmering trails over her skin.

She could see herself reflected in his eyes, could see the desire light up as clear as a candle. And there, amongst the swaying bodies held in thrall by the languorous music, Namjoon cupped her cheeks in his hands, leant his head down and pressed his lips to hers.

The world stopped. Had the world stopped? There was only the gentle pressure of Namjoon’s lips, the warmth, the all-encompassing warmth. If his hand in hers had been a rush of sensation, then this kiss was that and more, powerful to the point of obliterating every other sense of existence. There was only this, and would always would be.

And yet, the world around them slowly came back to life, the dancers dancing on as if nothing had happened, as if the world had not briefly disappeared and then faded back in. The music went back to its original volume, the bodies moves at their original tempo, and Namjoon’ face slowly drew back from hers. As ever, his expression was unreadable. There was only the intensity. He opened his mouth to say something, and then the song ended.

Jangmi never found out what he had been about to say - the applause from the crowd was deafening, cheers and claps drawing on and on until not a lung was left with air and not a hand was left unclapped. Finally, it petered out, and the islanders began to disperse from the central plaza.

Namjoon and Jangmi looked around, but there was no one from the crew, no one in sight. “They must have gone back to the ship,” Namjoon shrugged. “Let’s go.” He held out his hand as if to take hers, and then quickly dropped it, hiding the movement with another shrug.

However long the walk to the village had taken, it felt like the return trip took twice as long. Jangmi wondered if Namjoon might not be trying to get them lost on purpose amongst the dark trees, to try and give them some more time alone before returning to the hubbub of The Second
Star, but then they came up upon the beach and the ship rose up from the sand like a some mammoth sea animal, quiet and dark.

“We must have missed them,” Jangmi surmised, not without a note of satisfaction. She didn’t want to share him with the crew just yet.

Namjoon pulled himself onto the deck and reached down for Jangmi after him. Jangmi stared at his outstretched hand as if it was something alien to her. She was so unused to casual contact. The only time she ever touched hands with someone was when she was delving into their brain, listening in to their innermost thoughts. Had Namjoon forgotten?

Namjoon saw her hesitation. “It’s okay… for me. If you don’t want to, I-”

Jangmi grasped his hand firmly in hers, and though she wished she was like any other person, there was no missing the words that had formed in Namjoon’s mind. *I want to kiss her again.*

So she allowed herself to be pulled up onto the deck of The Second Star, and before Namjoon could let her go she pulled him close to her, clasping her hands behind his neck to bring her face up to his. His eyes were fixed on her lips, and his own had parted as he brought himself closer to her, leaning down as she raised herself up -

And then a shout followed by laughter rent the quiet night air, and Jangmi and Namjoon sprang apart. But no one was visible - the sound of voices had come from within the treeline, growing steadily louder and more distinct.

“I swear on the sea, Jungkook, if you step on my feet one more time-”

“Oh, go easy on him, the kid’s had a hard night-”

“My clothes are still wet in places you do not want to know about-”

“We should throw a party like that some time - Seongge, you fancy doing some fire-eating?”

Members of the crew began to appear in twos and threes, Taehyung and Jungkook leading the way
arms around each other’s shoulders, Jimin and Yoongi bringing up the rear with Yoongi’s arm firmly around the waist of Jimin, whose face was buried in the crook of his lover’s neck.

“With women, just like boats, you need to take care of the fore sail so that the prow can glide through the water,” Taehyung was saying loudly, gesticulating expansively with his free hand.

“Shouldn’t you raise the mainsail first?” Jungkook asked, puzzled, and received a heartfelt sigh in response.

“It’s a metaphor, Jungkook, I’m just saying that you needed to ease the girl into it.”

“Ease the girl into what? She was the one who came and sat next to me, but it’s not like we could speak the same language-”

“Look, I’m not saying that you didn’t have a chance with her, but you came on too strong, anyone with a brain could see that-”

“Well thank goodness that there are two of you then,” Namjoon called out to his crewmembers, who gave a ragged cheer at the sight of their Captain. Judging by their generally inebriated state, it wouldn’t have taken a lot to get a cheer out of them. “What took you so long?”

“We stayed behind to clear up, didn’t we!” Deokwoon shouted back. “Leading by example and all that, isn’t that what a Captain should do?”

“I was too busy looking for you lot!” Namjoon retorted, which Jangmi supposed was half-true.

Jungkook, meanwhile, was half a step behind. “I don’t get it. Why should their need to be two of us? Do you think Taehyung had a chance with her?”

“He means you only have half a brain each,” Jangmi said loudly.

Taehyung gave her a sour look as he was pulled on board by Namjoon. “When did you two stop insulting each other and start ganging up on us?”
“I ran out of material,” Jangmi told him, grinning. “And it’s not like I can keep insulting him, now that he’s actually my Captain and all.”

Taehyung mimed fainting. “Son of the sea, you actually said it! Captain, I think this calls for another celebration, what do you reckon?”

“I think you should make friends with your bunk before I make you pull The Second Star back out to sea by yourself tomorrow,” Namjoon threatened.

Taehyung pulled a face. “Yes sir, Captain Pirate King.” He nimbly dodged Namjoon’s fist as it swung towards him.

Jangmi had hoped for another few moments with Namjoon on the deck, but in the hustle and bustle of settling down for the night, she became swept up in the tide of crewmembers heading to the sleeping quarters and found herself in her cabin without any legitimate excuse to go back up.

“Oh, well,” she thought to herself as she prepared for bed. It wasn’t like there wasn’t all the time in the world for all that later on. This ship was her home. She wasn’t going anywhere.

The small, quiet cabin had come as quite the change to the ship’s main sleeping quarters, but tonight, she was glad of having a room to herself. Although, with a grin that she did her best to bury deep in her pillow, she allowed herself to think that maybe in the near future she might not be needing it after all.

Chapter End Notes

TA-DAAAAAALAAAAAA. I'm sorry it took this long to get here, I really am. But we're here, and stuff. Yay :)

Yeah, that's it from me. Next week's chapter will be called 'To Fight A Fire'. DUN DUN DUNNNN.
To Fight A Fire

Chapter Summary

The Second Star approaches the City with no Shadow... and yet their future seems to be full of them...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As The Second Star approached the bay of Saigon, the mood of the crew darkened to match the weather. The colour of the sky ranged from light silver to threatening shades of coal, putting the crew on edge, but the rain refused to fall. With each passing day the tension grew more and more taut. Everyone was waiting for the inevitable advent of autumn storms. The world was holding its breath, and the crew with it.

Perverse as it was, Jangmi tried to console herself with the oncoming storm, and failed. If only she could put down Namjoon’s behaviour to the weather, a concern that could be fixed by a stiff wind and a bit of rain. But it wasn’t that. Namjoon was avoiding her - she was sure of it.

She had half-expected a soft knock on her door that first night, a chance to continue what they had begun at the Vanquishing of Water. She had awoken at every creak, every bird call, but dawn had come and the only person to have disturbed the bedsheets was Jangmi herself, restless and disappointed.

Should she have gone to him? The thought had crossed her mind a thousand times, and she had thought that Namjoon’s quiet, reflective demeanour over breakfast were the symptoms of the frustrated expectations that she was suffering from herself.

Looking over at his pale face, Jangmi resolved herself to go to him that night. She would find him alone and what would happen would happen. And if Namjoon thought that a bit forward, well, no one had ever described her as shy.

But that resolve disintegrated to dust in the space of time that Namjoon called her over after breakfast. “You’ll be with Yoongi today, making sure that you’re capable of handling your duties as Quartermaster. No one’s shown you the ledgers yet.”

Words that were friendly enough, but his expression belied exactly that. Not cold, as such, but
closed off, almost forbidding. Nowhere near the warm intensity that she had come to expect.

And that gleam in his eyes has not returned since. Uncertain and off-balance, she had aired her concerns about 'the crew in general, no one in particular’ to someone who she was certain would not repeat them.

*I'm sure he - I mean, we - are just worried about seeing Seokjin again,* Seongge reminded her when she had quietly confided in him atop the crow’s nest, high up where they were most certainly out of earshot of the rest of the crew. *There are a thousand things to worry about but I'm sure you’re not one of them.*

That had reassured her for a while, but she couldn’t help noticing that it was only her that Namjoon was being diffident with. Admittedly, he wasn’t exactly yelling out drunken confessions of affection at the crew, favouring a more neutral demeanour with them. But when it came to her, Jangmi felt like she was being held at arm’s length.

There was only one explanation: he regretted kissing her. It had been the dance, and the heat of the moment, and the water that had drawn glimmering lines down her body. It had been lust and nothing more that had brought his lips to hers. A desire to possess her body and nothing else. A momentary madness that distance and reason had neutralised.

Could she fault him for not succumbing to his baser urges? He was distancing himself from her so as not to use her and throw her away, consume her as a pleasure that was as tantalising and as fleeting as the taste of the fruits that they had shared on the island’s beach. He didn’t want to have her then hurt her.

Because it would not have just been lust for Jangmi, as much as she hated to admit it, even to herself. Somewhere along the way she had discovered the desire to hold Namjoon’s hand and never let go. To feel the warmth of his body as well as the warmth of his mind. She wanted to feel his soul.

And yet, she had nothing to offer him in return. Her soul was as empty and as shallow as her reflection in the gold framed mirrors of her palace dwelling. A pretty frame to hang pretty clothes on. And how could a reflection compare with a heart as deep as the ocean itself? She could hardly blame him for only wanting her body when there was nothing else to want.

If anything, his restraint showed respect for her, and Jangmi had to content herself with that. Respect was maybe more than she deserved.
It was with a deep sadness that Jangmi realised that the Captain Kim Namjoon was actually a good man. Rough, but good. Because she herself, liar, manipulator and cheat that she was, would never ask him to degrade himself enough to love her in return.

At least she loved something good, Jangmi told herself. That was a step up from her infatuation with Heemi, and tomorrow she would take another step, and another, and eventually maybe she would be worthy of the esteem that Namjoon had for her.

Lost in these kinds of thoughts as she stared out from the gunwale, Jangmi didn’t even realise that mist had slowly drawn over the ship, thickening until the entire world became a sphere that stretched as far as a stone’s throw into the water. It was only when a dark shape loomed out of the fog that Jangmi reacted, a scream tearing up from her throat before she could analyse the vast being that had come to attack them.

Her scream elicited a loud curse from behind the helm and the sound of footsteps as the crewmembers barrelled up to the deck. The foremast beam swung round, tipping the ship alarmingly, and The Second Star missed the rocks that had been jutting up out of the water by a handbreadth.

“I need eyes!” Yoongi’s stricken voice rang out as the crewmembers righted themselves, having staggered at the sudden turn. “Jungkook to the prow, Taehyung take starboard, Jangmi stay portside! I need you to yell out if you even think you see something, can’t be too careful!”

“Yes, First Mate!” The shout seemed to echo out over the water, stretching far further than the eye could see.

“There must have been an earthquake here.” Namjoon’s voice, though soft, carried through the air as clearly as if he had been standing right next to Jangmi. “The mist is usual of these parts, the rocks are not. I’m sorry. I should have been steering. I don’t know this place well, but I know it better than anyone else here.”

“Don’t worry, Captain,” Yoongi replied stoically. “I know you have a lot on your mind.”

But the Captain remained by the helm for the rest of the approach while the crew called out dangers as they approached the ship from all sides. And then the fog became darker by increments until it seemed night would come down and crush the ship, and Jangmi’s chest grew tighter and tighter, and then the port of Saigon solidified in front of them from inside the fog, and Jangmi
could breathe a sigh of relief.

“So we’ve arrived at Saigon,” Yoongi identified as they prepared to disembark. “Someone remind me of the plan we don’t have?”

“We have our instructions,” Jungkook disagreed. “We do what the Chinese crew did and someone will turn up.”

“And what exactly was it that the Chinese crew did?” Deokwoon demanded as he expertly knotted a rope to the jetty’s moorings. “Hang up a big sign saying, ‘yoohoo, we’re here’?”

The crew turned to look at Jangmi expectantly, or rather most of them did. Namjoon was suddenly very busy checking his compass.

The exact words took a while to dredge up from memory, but this was no time to get them wrong. “They took our memory,” Jangmi recited. “They said, ‘People do not find us, we find them.’ We remembered the book but not the hands that delivered it to us. We set sail from the city with no shadow.”

“‘People do not find us, we find them?’” Yoongi repeated, looking unconvinced. “So we just hang around and wait for them to show up? What if they don’t?”

“If by tomorrow there’s nothing, we’ll split up into groups and try to get the lay of the land, figure out some other way,” Namjoon suggested.

“We could lose weeks trying to break into the Mystician’s lair,” Yoongi objected. “Maybe we should use this time to think up some other leads.”

“It won’t come to that,” Jimin said encouragingly. “Seokjin will want to help.”

“Help you, maybe,” Namjoon said darkly. “But I’m not sure if he’ll be able to overcome his distaste for me.”

“It’s been two years, Captain, don’t you think he might be over it by now?” Yoongi argued.
“How can he be if I’m not?”

“Maybe he’s less stubborn than you are-”

The rising tone of anger drew in all the crew, echoing around the murky air of the port. It was only interrupted when Jungkook tugged at the Captain’s sleeve, cutting through the babble of voices.

“Namjoon… I think Seokjin might want to see you after all.”

The fog swirled around two dark silhouettes, immobile at the end of the jetty at which they were moored. The figures made no move towards them, but neither did they leave. They could only be there for them - no other ships were moored here.

“Who’s going?” Jimin whispered uncertainly.

“All of us,” Namjoon decided instantly. “If Seokjin only wanted some of us to come, he would have waited until tomorrow, when we would have been divided up.”

“Or he had a reason not to delay,” Yoongi murmured, but he followed obediently enough as the crew tied down the final ropes and prepared to approach the distant figures.

“Shall I stay?” Jangmi offered half-heartedly to no one in particular. She didn’t particularly want to miss meeting the mysterious Seokjin, but as the newest member of the crew, she didn’t want to intrude on their family moment if they didn’t want her to.

“No, come with us,” Taehyung told her firmly. “You’re the reason we found him, you have every right to come.” Namjoon didn’t say anything, so he must not have had any particular objection. Or maybe not one he could voice out loud - Jangmi saw his knuckles whiten as he pulled the straps on his sword belt.

With unaccustomed quietness, the crew of The Second Star made its way down the jetty. It was much shorter than Jangmi had previously supposed - the two figures had seemed farther away because they were adults in miniature. They were nothing more than children.
Jangmi looked at them, shocked, realising that the two figures dressed in black robes could not have been more than a dozen years between them. The roundness of their cheeks spoke of childhood, and yet the look in their eyes was intelligent, appraising and wise.

The two children bowed without a word and turned on their heel, leaving the crew to follow them through the eerie city of Saigon.

Finally, Jangmi could see why the Chinese sailors had called it the city with no shadow. Fog lay upon the ground here as thick as it had upon the sea, so that there could be no idea of its true scale. It was never possible to see more than fifty yards ahead, but there was never any need to. There did not seem to be any cart drivers around, speeding traffic that was the mark of a port city. Only a few people other than themselves wandered the streets, walking as aimlessly as wind-blown clouds such as could not be seen in this city where the sky was only a continuation of the mist that lay upon the ground. In contrast to them, Jangmi felt as if the purposeful crew of The Second Star stood out a mile.

Stranger still, trees languished on every street corner, adorning every plot of land, forcing the road to twist and skirt around them. But they were not the upright, elegant trees of Osaka or the fruit-bearing bushes of Jeju. They were dressed in enormous leaves, dark as jade, drooping in the still air. Vines hung from building to building, and the quiet of the city was interrupted only by bird calls and the sound of footsteps on cobblestone pavements. It was almost like civilisation had just been dropped into a jungle.

“I’m even more impressed with Seokjin’s Virtue now,” Jangmi whispered to Taehyung. “How he could see us coming even through all this fog.”

“He didn’t.” It was the first time in a while that Namjoon had addressed her other than when absolutely necessary, but obviously his desire to contradict her superseded his vow of silence. “Seokjin isn’t a seer, not in the true sense of the word. He cannot see the future in the same way that we perceive the present. That’s why we call his the Virtue of precognition. He doesn’t see things - he just knows, knows something before it even happens. He always said that it felt like remembering, a fact which he had known about all along but had only thought of now.”

Jangmi opened her mouth to reply, couldn’t think of anything, and then shut it. She would have liked to speak with Namjoon more, breaking through this icy barrier between them, but this was neither the place nor the time. And Seokjin was not someone to be spoken of lightly.

The land before them rose imperceptibly, and the children slowed their pace, though obviously used to the climb. The scenery, or what little of it that could be seen, began to be interspersed with
stone stairways, rising alleys that disappeared behind houses only to reappear at a higher point.

It was one such staircase that the two children led them up. Jangmi craned her head to see what was at the top, and nearly fell over onto Jungkook as he stopped abruptly. To the left of them was the roof of a house that they had just bypassed, to the right a wall covered in ivy. Then one of the children took Namjoon’s hand, and pushed his way through the ivy into darkness.

By some extraordinary instinct, Jangmi managed to latch on to Namjoon’s sleeve before it disappeared, and held out her own hand in turn for the next crew member to take. She didn’t see who it was that was holding her wrist - all light disappeared the moment she was inside. She had only a moment to glimpse dank, wet stone and the back of Namjoon’s head before darkness swallowed her up too.

The sound of their footsteps echoed down the tunnel, but it was impossible to know how long it was. A breeze came out of nowhere, making Jangmi shiver, and she guessed that there were other tunnels leading off of this one, probably snaking all the way under the city, but there was no way of knowing for sure. One hand was holding Namjoon’s and the other was being held by a crew member, and the rest was black.

With her eyes no longer useful to her, Jangmi let her other senses roam, and the sound of Namjoon’s deep breaths stood out to her as clearly as a searchlight. His wrist was warm even through the material, and Jangmi wondered to herself what it might be like to slide her hand up higher until it was latched onto the muscles in his upper arm.

She might have been able to do that and more, Jangmi reflected bitterly, had all gone well at the Vanquishing of Water. But it hadn’t and never would have, there or anywhere else, Jangmi told herself. Better to keep these thoughts inside her head where no one could see them, and retain just some of her dignity.

But still… the dark, and Namjoon’s breathing, and the warmth of his skin… if Jangmi concentrated on blocking out the damp smell and the presence of everyone else, it would be like they were alone. A place where only the other existed for them. A place where sensation echoed and echoed until sensation was all there was. Jangmi’s heart twisted. That would never be real.

She suddenly wished that she could let go of Namjoon’s hand.

No sooner had she thought that than Namjoon stopped, and she walked right into him, unfortunately grabbing on to first thing that could be grabbed, which happened to be the waistband of his britches. So much for dignity.
Panicking that he might take it the wrong way, Jangmi sprang away from him, which happened to be right into the person immediately behind her. This person halted no less gracefully than she had, and she caught a snippet of thought as she helped them get to her feet.

*Well that could have gone better*, Taehyung was thinking.

“Too damn right,” Jangmi almost replied, but then strange orbs began to flicker into light, and the room slowly illuminated to show a spherical cave, dark stone offset with glowing crystals, and stood across from them, a blindfolded man in silver robes, the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

Kim Seokjin.

If Jangmi had ever been asked to draw a specimen of human perfection, and indeed had been capable of doing so, she might have drawn someone very much like Kim Seokjin. His frame was tall and flowing, his shoulders broad even as the face that was perched above it was strangely androgynous. Nothing could be seen of his eyes under the blindfold, but his lips were plump, luscious, almost indecent. A straight nose led into a delicate cupid’s bow, and his chin came to a gentle point, funnelling a jawbone that could have cut steel.

Tendrils of hair framed his pale face, giving him the otherworldly appearance of someone who had just arrived from a land far more magical and far less real than theirs. In fact, everything about him seemed almost translucent, as if at any moment his body might just cede its integrity and disappear.

And then he spoke.

“Thank you, Eomuk, Odeng. That will be all.” Even his voice was exquisite. Not deep and velvety like Namjoon’s, nor high and sweet like Jimin’s, but plaintive, rich, emoting. Almost like he was on the verge of tears even though his voice was steady. If Namjoon’s voice was velvet, Seokjin’s voice was moonlight.

When the two boys had left, Seokjin spread his hands. “Welcome.”

“Are we?” Namjoon muttered, but Seokjin either didn’t hear it or chose not to as Jimin rushed forwards, throwing his arms around the seer’s neck, closely followed by Taehyung.
“We missed you, Seokjin.” Jimin mumbled into Seokjin’s chest, and the barrier was broken. The rest of the crew tumbled forwards shouting for joy until the room rang with echoes. Only Namjoon and Jangmi hung back, the former with his arms folded tightly across his chest.

“This is where you live now, Seokjin?” Namjoon asked when the noise had died down, and his voice was full of sorrow. “This… cave?” He was no doubt comparing this damp and bleak grotto with the warmth and laughter of The Second Star.

“Would you believe that it’s not all like this,” Seokjin leant forwards conspiratorially with a gleam of humour in his face, the frosty facade falling for just a moment. Long enough for Jangmi to see past the ethereal beauty, to see a warmer, more imperfect beauty underneath. “This is mostly just for effect.”

One by one, he greeted each of the crew members, identifying them through their grasp, their features, their voices. He pinched Seongge’s long nose between his fingers, poked Yoongi in the cheek, telling him not to eat so much lest he turn into a dumpling, and performed an elaborate greeting with Jungkook that involved slapping, neck chops and kicks to each other’s back side.

Namjoon was the last to go, and he seemed like he might not step forward at all, but Seokjin’s hands reached out for him, questing the air, and Namjoon looked from them to the blindfold before taking them both in his. “You seem well, Seokjin.”

“I’m well versed in the art of seeming,” Seokjin answered, and this time his voice really did tremble. Then he let go and his voice brightened again. “There’s someone else here! Please come closer, I’d like to introduce myself properly.”

Jangmi looked stunned. “How did you-?”

“My Virtue may reveal the future to me, but not for nothing have I practiced the arts of Mysticism,” Seokjin smiled. “Your presence here is as clear as daylight to me. Still,” he added, with a sigh. “I wish I could see your face.”

Nervously, Jangmi stepped forward until she was within reach of Seokjin’s delicate hands. “I wouldn’t touch me,” she warned. “I… I’m a bit peculiar.”

Somewhere behind her, Yoongi snorted. “You can say that again.”
“Peculiarity seems to be a prerequisite for this crew,” Seokjin opined. “As does a certain amount of tragedy. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Choi Jangmi,” Jangmi replied.

Kim Seokjin’s face, or what could be seen of it, froze. “And you’re a woman?”

Jangmi raised her eyebrows, unsure of where this strange question had come from. “I was the last time I checked.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t see that coming,” Seokjin said in a voice that suddenly seemed constricted. “Replaced by a woman.”

“To be fair, there’s not much you can see…”

“Thank you, Jungkook,” Seokjin said somewhat acidly, bearing an expression that would have certainly involved an eye-roll had that been a possibility.

“What does he mean, replaced?” Jangmi asked, surprised.

“Seokjin was our old Quartermaster,” Yoongi explained.

“That’s not what I meant,” Seokjin whispered.

An uncomfortable silence spread out through the cave. The crystals’ light seemed to falter momentarily. Jangmi looked from face to face, not understanding.

“No one’s replacing you, Seokjin,” Jimin said firmly. “You’ll always be one of us. Whether you’re here or with us or on dark side of the moon.”

Jangmi felt as though the crew were watching her with a new speculative light, one that she
couldn’t fathom the reason for. Only Namjoon was avoiding her gaze. Seongge was smiling sadly. A trickle of suspicion made its way into Jangmi’s mind.

“I’m afraid I can’t.” Yoongi said briskly, cutting in, “shall we get down to the reason for this little trip to purgatory’s sauna?”

“Yes, let’s,” Seokjin said somewhat reluctantly, his face still turned to Jangmi’s as if to fix her with a gaze from eyes he didn’t have. “I remembered that you were coming, but I didn’t remember why. I have to say that I’m quite curious.”

“Do you remember the name Son Euigong?” Namjoon asked him.

“That scheming son-of-a-bitch that drove you to a life of piracy?” Seokjin asked, eyebrows raised above the line of his blindfold. Of course they only added to his good looks. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, we need to kill him,” Namjoon told him bluntly.

Seokjin did not seem unduly worried. “It’s about time. I thought you’d never go home.”

Namjoon’s expression darkened in an instant. “That’s not- I haven’t - look, we need to kill him for other reasons. He’s after Jungkook.”

“So kill him,” Seokjin offered helpfully.

Namjoon huffed in frustration. “It’s not that simple. He’s managed to gain control of the entire Sect, as well as the Korean Navy, and what’s more, he carries the Virtue of fire.”

“Ah.”

“We think we’ve found a way to defeat him,” Taehyung interjected. “The carrier of the Virtue of water.”

“I see.”
“So can you do it?” Jungkook asked with something approaching eagerness. “Can you find a way to defeat him?”

“I can try,” Seokjin said doubtfully. “The art of Mysticism has trained me to hone my Virtue, direct my precognition so as to learn what might be of use to me… but it’s not an exact art. Does anyone have something of his, an engraving perhaps? It helps to jog my memory.”

There was a general murmur of dissent.

“Jangmi saw him last,” Jimin suggested. “What if she described him to you?”

“That might help,” Seokjin agreed. “Jangmi?”

Jangmi closed her eyes and concentrated, trying to picture Son Euigong as she had seen him through the eyeglass at Port of the World. “He has… black hair… almond shaped eyes…” She struggled to find more details, concrete features that might make him distinct, but it was no good. His face kept morphing into Heemi’s. “He has… a widow’s peak, a protruding chin, a…”

Seokjin held up a hand, halting her. “I remember something… I remember… I remember remembering.”

Namjoon threw up his hands. “Perfect. Do you remember when it is that you’re going to remember? We have plans, plans of the murderous and pillaging kind.”

Seokjin pointed at him. “You. Quiet.”

Namjoon sighed loudly, but didn’t utter another word. The silence stretched on and Jangmi wondered if she shouldn’t continue trying to describe Son Euigong, but something in the set of Seokjin’s jaw, the slackness in his hands told her he was concentrating, concentrating on a plane far beyond this one. There was only the soft lustre of the crystals, the muted breaths of the crew, and it went on and on. Seokjin’s head slowly sank onto his chest and it seemed as though he had fallen asleep. Jangmi didn’t even dare turn her head in case the very motion of her face caused a ripple in the air. She only watched, and waited. And Seokjin lifted his head.
“You cannot fight a fire,” he said, though his voice didn’t sound as though it had emanated from his mouth. Rather, it was the echo of a voice, the last reflection of sound before it died away. “You may attack it with hand and weapon but the flames will be where you are not, and all that will be achieved is the burning of flesh, the melting of metal.”

“What does that mean?” Jungkook asked at a whisper.

The mystical aura in the air dissipated. Seokjin shrugged. “It means just that: you cannot fight a fire.”

Namjoon, used to the riddles in which he spoke, let out of a huff of frustration. “Yes, but does that mean that the carrier is unable to fight the fire or that no one can?”

“These are the words that I remember,” Seokjin insisted. “You cannot fight a fire.”

“Seokjin, don’t play the Seer just because you’re angry with me. Tell us something concrete.” Namjoon pressed, his patience running out.

“You know I can’t,” Seokjin shot back. “And you wouldn’t ask me to do so unless you were the one who was angry.”

“Well, maybe I am.” Namjoon retorted.

“Why would you be angry?” Seokjin asked bitterly.

“You know damn well why.” Namjoon spat. “You left us. I know I fucked up and got you hurt and that it was all my fault but I’m still angry. Knowing I shouldn’t be doesn’t change the fact that I am.”

“Okay, let’s try a different tack,” Jimin said, interrupting them in a conciliatory tone. “Maybe we were asking the wrong question. Seokjin, can you tell us where the carrier of the Virtue of Water is?”

The wait for a response was considerably shorter this time, as was the tone of voice. “At the edge of the world.”
Namjoon’s patience, never good at the best of times, had run out. “Seokjin, don’t pull that mystical crap on me. This isn’t the fifteenth century, we know the world has no edge.”

“You need to learn to be more specific,” Jimin rebuked him. “Seokjin, how do we get to the carrier of the Virtue of Water?”

“Follow the birth of the sun to the edge of the world.”

“Oh right,” Namjoon snorted, “like that was any clearer.”

“For goodness’ sake,” Jimin snapped. “You sound like you’re bickering with Jangmi again. Grow up.”

There was a stunned silence. Jimin never spoke back to his Captain, and he most certainly never lost his temper. Yoongi touched his arm gently. “Jimin, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that I care about Seokjin,” Jimin retorted, giving his Captain a fierce glare, “and I care about Jungkook, and I care about everyone on this damn ship. So I’d really like to get to the bottom of this mess with minimal emotional and physical damage to everyone involved, excluding that fucking bastard Son Euigong who I hope is blown off the face of this definitely spherical planet. Save your anger for him.”

“Oh, don’t you worry Jimin, I have more than enough for him, don’t doubt that for a second.” Namjoon growled.

“And you have more than enough anger left for me, Namjoon, don’t you?” Seokjin interjected. “After all this time, you still can’t bear that I left?”

“You didn’t just leave, you left me, you left us! And what’s more, I can’t believe you went back to the Mysticians, after I saved you from the hell they had been unable to protect you from. Because even if they treat you better than all the others that ever thought they could own you, they’re still just the same. They still bought you!”

“And?”
“I never treated you as if you were an object, as if you were anything less than human. I never bought you! I only ever offered you your liberty!”

“Did that not include my liberty to leave?” Seokjin shouted. His voice sounded like the breaking of glass.

And then, silence.

Namjoon’s head had drooped. His expression was that of defeat. Desolation and defeat. “Of course it did,” he whispered.

“And do you not think I had reason to leave?” Seokjin demanded.

If possible, Namjoon’s head had sunk even lower, but even the change of angle couldn’t hide the tears that had collected at the corner of his eyes, glittering in the crystal light. The tremble of his lips as he pressed them tightly together. “You did,” he said finally. “But I hoped you wouldn’t.”

“I had reason to leave,” Seokjin told him. “More reason than you know.” He reached up behind his head and untied the blindfold that had so far hidden half his face. Jangmi felt a great fear take hold of her. She had the presentiment that he was going to reveal something horrible, something that would haunt her, something that would terrify her.

But no - the blindfold came down and revealed nothing more than two eyelids, closed as naturally as if he had been blinking. And tears just like those of Namjoon’s, gathered at the corner of his eyes. If possible, he was even more beautiful than Jangmi had previously thought.

Slowly, Seokjin stepped towards Namjoon and tilted his head up, dabbing at his eyelids with the blindfold. Namjoon caught Seokjin’s hand in his, pressing it to his face. “This is all my fault,” he said brokenly. “All my fault.”

“Why, Namjoon?” Seokjin asked, almost pleading. “Why did you have to go after the Emperor’s crown? I told you. I warned you.”

“I didn’t want it because it was a crown,” Namjoon whispered as tears slid down his face, only to
be absorbed by Seokjin’s blindfold. “I wanted the ruby, the heart of Japan, the most beautiful and valuable gem in existence. The only gem that might even slightly be worthy of being worn next to your skin. I wanted it for you. Only for you.”

Namjoon’s revelation went through Jangmi like ice. So Seokjin had been right, she had been his replacement. Replacement as Quartermaster, replacement as the crew’s carrier of an unclassified Virtue, and replacement as Namjoon’s lover. Only, in terms of the final aspect, she had failed miserably. To Namjoon, she would never be more than someone he had once kissed. She could never hope to compare with someone as beautiful, inside and out, as Seokjin.

Namjoon’s reticence to visit Seokjin compared with the rest of the crew now bore up to examination. The crew had found it easier to forgive their lost brother, because family was forever. But Namjoon had not been able to, because as Seokjin had so clearly demonstrated, romantic relationships were not.

“I wanted to give you a reason to stay with me,” Namjoon was saying, his voice muffled by the material of the blindfold.

Seokjin sighed. “This again. How many times do I have to say it, you were my reason for staying with you. That stupid ruby - did you think I wouldn’t love you without it?”

Namjoon’s answer was silence enough. “The richer we were, the happier you became,” he said finally.

“Because you were happy,” Seokjin said, exasperated. “Namjoon, do you really think me shallow enough to love you only because of a few trinkets?”

“I couldn’t imagine why else you would.”

The silence that ensued seemed interminable to Jangmi. It wasn’t a silence like before, the quiet of patient expectation, but the silence of those who had nothing to say, who had no idea of how to move on. The silence of those who knew that no word, however sincere, could bring them to a place where they might start to heal.

Jangmi herself had no words. She had only wanted a small piece of happiness for herself, tantalising as that dream might be, and now she felt colder than ever. The future seemed a little darker, knowing not only that Namjoon would never be hers, but that he wouldn’t even be happy in
his solitude. Blindly, Jangmi searched for Seongge’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

*I’m sorry we didn’t tell you. Memories are not a happy place for us. We were trying to live for the future even while the past still held us in our grasp.*

Jangmi squeezed his hand again and let go. More secrets, but Jangmi couldn’t pretend to have any right to them. The crew couldn’t think that the depth of Namjoon’s relationship with Seokjin would change anything, and so they hadn’t told her. Which was fine. But that didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt to find out.

And then Seokjin’s head snapped up, and his faraway demeanour was gone. “I remember. He is here. Leave now.”

There was instant uproar. Never had Jangmi reached so quickly for her sabre, never had the crew of The Second Star ignited into action so abruptly.


“He is here,” Seokjin repeated. “Leave now. We are all in danger.” As he spoke, figures in silver robes began appearing from side chambers that until then had not been visible, dividing Seokjin from them, pulling him away even as they pushed the crew back to the exit.

“We can stay!” Namjoon shouted above the noise. “We can defend you!”

“There are ways to conceal oneself that are open to those who practice the arts of Mysticism,” Seokjin told him calmly. “They will not find us here, deep in the tunnels of Saigon. But you are vulnerable, in particular, that which you need to accomplish your task. My old home.”

“The Second Star,” Namjoon gasped, understanding. “We left it unprotected.” Desperately, he grabbed the front of Seokjin’s robes before he could be pulled away by the Mysticians. “Tell me, Jinnie… for once in your life just tell me straight… is there any way, any way at all that I can persuade you to leave with us? To make your old home just ‘home’?”

Seokjin slid out of his grasp and touched Namjoon’s chest. “You no longer have the ruby.”
Namjoon’s silence spoke louder than words. It was deafening, even over the shouts of the crew.

“You called that ruby our promise of forever. I’m not the only one to have broken my promises then,” Seokjin said sadly, and his tone spoke of finality.

“You left the ruby behind,” Namjoon protested. “You left me behind. You left us, Jinnie.”

The tears ran freely down Seokjin’s exquisite face, as might a fountain stone carved by an angel. “I left because I wanted you to have a chance of happiness. A chance to live a life without slave traders dogging your every step. A chance to sleep undisturbed by the nightmares I suffered from. A chance to smile at someone who could smile back at you with all their heart.

And I knew it was more than just a chance - I remembered it. I remembered the tears of the ocean washing away the blood of Japan. I remembered a gold rose turning black. I remembered the Pirate King regaining his pride. I remembered... I remembered that you would break my heart from the very first moment that I saw you. And I’m glad that I was able to carry your love, even if it was only for a time, even if it wasn’t forever.

Now please, leave.”

Chapter End Notes

We finally met Seokjin!!!!!!!!!! So for anyone thinking of accusing me of not being OT7 (I'm sure no one was), put that in your pipe and smoke it! Yeah, we've been building up to this scene for literally the entire work. Not sure if it came out dramatic enough, but hey, drama is tiring.

Next chapter will be called 'A Flame That Casts No Shadow'. Can't imagine why.
A Flame That Casts No Shadow

Chapter Summary

With the appearance of Son Euigong, The Second Star's mission to find the Water Virtue carrier becomes that much more complicated...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was no time for goodbyes. The Mysticians pulled Seokjin into their midst as the crystal lights dimmed, placing a hood over his head so that he could no more be discerned amongst their silver cloaks than a moonlit tree in a forest.

“Wait!” Namjoon shouted. “How do we leave?”

Eomuk or maybe Odeng stepped out, a silver sapling from the luminescent copse. “Leaving this room, go straight for as long as possible. At the fork take the right hand side and from then on take only the left-most tunnel. You’ll reach the wall you entered by. Be safe.”

Jangmi had expected his voice to be that of an adult, such was his assurance, but it was the high tones of a child. Nevertheless, she did not have long to wonder. Barely had the crew joined hands than the lights dimmed completely, leaving them in total darkness.

Jangmi didn’t realise whose hands she was holding until their thoughts began to seep up into her mind, Taehyung’s determined thoughts and Yoongi’s wary ones. She tried to slide her grip up so that she wasn’t touching their bare skin, but neither hand would let her, holding on tightly. So it was with the juxtaposing sensation of safety and danger that Jangmi made her way through the tunnels, ears strained to hear any noise other than the soft footfall of the crew. She didn’t know who was at the front, leading them through the network of tunnels, but she knew that she trusted them. And admired them, for being the person who would ultimately be the first to encounter any obstacle, natural or human.

The tunnel stretched on and on, and then Jangmi felt herself be lead around to the right. So they were on track. Just some left turns and then they would be able to face Son Euigong and his forces in broad daylight. She strained her eyes to the front, hoping to see a glint of some sort, a hint of light to chase away the darkness, and was rewarded with the faintest outline of Taehyung. The next time they turned left, she caught a glimpse of someone from over Taehyung’s shoulder, meaning that the light was getting stronger. They couldn’t be far from the exit. They were nearly there. They turned the next corner, and the light turned orange.
Taehyung stopped dead, and before she was even conscious of it, Jangmi had drawn her sabre, the noise of metal on sheath echoing from behind her as the crew drew their weapons too. In the same instant, Jangmi had stepped out to Taehyung’s side, ready to face with him whatever had given him reason to pause. A chilling sight greeted her. Now visible at the end of the tunnel was line upon line of orange-clad men holding torches, and stood at the front, with his left hand holding a poker and his right hand a ball of flames, Son Euigong.

His eyes, gleaming amber from the light of the fire, fixed on her immediately. “I owe you much, Choi Jangmi.”

Struck by surprise, Jangmi’s face was locked stiff. She couldn’t do anything but stare dumbly at the man who had been the architect of so much desolation, who was about to create much more. The light from the fire in his hand made his face skull-like, the flickering flames making his waxy skin look like it was melting. And yet, despite his hellish appearance, the aura of mercilessness, he looked young - barely older than Namjoon. In truth, they were both too young to have accomplished the deeds to their name. But this was the world they lived in. Youthful looks might remain, but no one truly stayed young for long.

“Why?” Taehyung barked out. “Why would you owe Jangmi?”

“Choi Jangmi led me to Kim Namjoon,” Son Euigong explained calmly. “And so to Jeon Jungkook, and so to the Mysticians. Four targets, one weapon. Efficient, don’t you think?”

“Jangmi?” The look of hurt on Taehyung’s face was so palpable it felt as if the world had tilted on its axis. She could only stare at him, wondering if the floor hadn’t dropped away beneath her feet. But no - she had been elbowed to the side as Kim Namjoon pushed his way to the front.

“That’s a pile of horseshit, Euigong,” Namjoon snarled.

Son Euigong shrugged. “Believe what you like. But how else could Jangmi have spotted me in Port of the World unless she already knew I’d be there?”

Jangmi could feel the uneasy glances on her back. In any other company, she would have been certain that she was about to be stabbed in it, but this was The Second Star. This was her family.

“If Jangmi was a spy for you, why would she point you out?” Taehyung argued, and then shut his
mouth at the warning look his Captain gave him.

“Why, to be certain that you would run straight to the Mysticians without further delay,” Son Euigong answered easily. “I’m a patient man, but all that toing and froing from Jeju to Shanghai to Osaka… Student Kim was never one for decisive action, and the Captain is no different.”

The Captain in question did not reply, preferring to grip the hilt of his sword that much more tightly.

“In fact,” Son Euigong added with a knowing smile, “I should be thanking Kim Namjoon as well. Not only did you confirm that Jeon Jungkook is not in complete control of his powers by endeavouring to search out the experts on the subjects, but you also led me right to them! Bravo indeed!”

Something was fluttering at the edge of Jangmi’s vision. Tearing her gaze away from the sight of Son Euigong, she saw Namjoon’s spare hand not holding his second sword, as she might have expected, but opening and closing, trying to reach for something that wasn’t there. What was he reaching for? And then in a flash, Jangmi understood.

Inch by inch, so as not to attract attention, Jangmi moved her hand slowly behind Namjoon’s back, in a way that she could just about reach the tips of his fingers without moving her arm. Concentrated as she was, as used to hearing Namjoon’s thoughts as she was, she heard them instantly.

We’re going to run.

Gently, she squeezed his hand. Understood.

In the meantime, Son Euigong had grown bored of speaking to an unresponsive audience. “Jeon Jungkook? Did you learn much from the wizards?”

The navigator in question didn’t move, and Jangmi wondered why until she saw Deokwoon and Seongge’s hands gripping his arms, preventing him from moving. But the hatred in his eyes was movement, a flame even harsher than the one in the hands of Son Euigong. His teeth were gritted, but he would not say a word, not when his Captain had said not to.
“It doesn’t really matter if you did,” Son Euigong continued. “We are underground, there is not enough water to smite me with. And if you try to pull the same stunt as your dear deceased father, you’ll kill your friends along with me.”

Jungkook seemed to shudder, but he still would not speak, only stare unblinkingly with a loathing that Jangmi had never seen on a face that had lived so few years. Son Euigong had paused, evidently waiting for a response, but when none was forthcoming he sighed in impatience. “The girl I want alive, for services rendered, and the boy too. The rest you can ki-”

“RUN!” Namjoon roared.

The crew had instincts honed to the sharpness of the blades they carried, because he had not yet finished the word and they were already turning tail, fleeing. They had all been ready to, every single one of them. Hadn’t that been what they had been doing since Silmido? Running away to fight another day?

The fear was sharp in Jangmi’s soul, but it was a familiar one. The sound of an enemy in hot pursuit was no novelty to her. She followed the crew ahead as they dove into any which tunnel, not keeping track of left or rights, only trying to put distance between them and the soldiers on their heels.

But the light was coming only from behind them, and ahead was only blackness. The more they lost Son Euigong’s soldiers, the less they could see, the slower they had to go. However, being caught was not an option.

Jangmi ran as fast as she could, hard on the heels of the others, turning right and then left and then right and then right and then all of a sudden skidded to halt, causing Namjoon to nearly run into her. The crew had apparently disappeared.

For the space of one heartbeat, as she stared down the empty tunnel that seemed to stretch into an infinity of darkness, panic such as she had never known ignited in her chest, and then an arm reached out and dragged her into a crevice. What she had thought was merely an alcove was in fact the space around an enormous stalagmite, joined to the ceiling.

And as the orange glow from behind grew intensified, Jangmi saw that the tunnel was full of stalagmites and stalactites, needle-sharp rocks jutting from the floor and hanging precariously from the ceiling. The shadows they cast looked like so many teeth of a stone monster, and they were in its mouth.
The hand that had grabbed her clutched at her arm until it found her palm, and Seongge’s voice, urgent like she had never heard it before, blasted into her mind. *Stay where you are and put your hands over your ears. Tell the others.*

Jangmi twisted around and repeated his message at a whisper, and one by one the crew members clapped their hands over their ears, their expressions tense and serious. Jangmi did likewise, so it was without any sense of sound that she watched Seongge push his way to the front of their hideout, taking a small rock from the ground and tossing it as hard as he could down the tunnel away from them.

The brightness of the Sect soldier’s torches grew stronger and stronger, and then about a dozen men in orange carrying torches and swords rushed into the tunnel right past their hiding place.

Seongge opened his mouth.

Jangmi felt the vibration in her chest before her ears could fully comprehend. Even with her hands firmly over her ears, the sound was colossal and it only seemed to grow, louder and louder until she thought her head might explode. The ground was shaking, and then the screeching of stone that could somehow be heard above it all drilled right into Jangmi’s head, and -

Jangmi opened her eyes, not realising until then that she’d closed them. Something was wrong. Something had changed. And then Jangmi recognised, through the air that had suddenly become more dust than space, that the stalagmite they had been sheltering behind had fallen apart, leaving craggy, serrated rocks in a pile in front of her - where Seongge had been.

“No!” she gasped, but her voice was lost in the ringing in her ears.

As she clambered over the remains of the stalagmite, she saw why it was that she could see at all. A torch was lying on the ground just beyond the rockfall, the last smouldering embers glowing, fading, dying. Quickly, she snatched it up and blew as gently as her dust-filled lungs would allow her to, coaxing it back to life.

The light allowed her to see the prone form of Seongge lying just on the other side of the fallen stalagmite, seemingly none the worse other than having passed out. Hugely relieved, Jangmi knelt by his face, endeavouring to bring him back to consciousness. But even by the paltry light of the torch, she could see that he was deathly pale. As she patted his cheek, his head lolled over to the side and a thin stream of blood leaked out of the side of his mouth.
“Seongge!” she cried out, and coughed. Her shout had attracted more members, and by the light of
the torch they saw what she had not - the Seongge’s right trouser leg disappeared under the jumble
of jagged rocks that had previously been their hideaway.

“Quickly!” Namjoon’s voice sounded muffled, as though coming from far away, and for a moment
Jangmi thought that she must have accidentally touched him, hearing his thoughts, but then looking
at the identical expressions of the crewmembers she realised that it was just the ringing in her ears
that was slowly fading away.

“We need to get back to The Second Star, fast,” Namjoon panted as he and the others pushed,
carried or flung rocks from the pile over Seongge’s leg. “Son Euigong will have left soldiers to
guard it as an asset, but we need to reach the ship before he returns with his main force.”

Liberated, Seongge’s foot made a gruesome spectacle - less a body part and more a bloody
mimicry of a stocking dropped on the ground and forgotten about.

“Jimin,” Namjoon called, but the surgeon’s face was chalky with dust and frozen in shock, his eyes
wide and glassy in the torchlight. Jimin knelt by Seongge, scrunching up his face, trying to make
the tears come, but he was in too much shock. There was too much adrenaline for him to soften
enough to cry.

“We don’t have much time,” Deokwoon muttered anxiously as he looked on. At this Jimin
collapsed over Seongge’s prostrate body, giving up.

“I’m sorry!” he wailed. “I can’t, I just can’t, there’s too much pressure!” And he almost began to
cry then and there, despondent of being able to help.

“It’s fine, Jimin,” Yoongi said fiercely, moving him gently to the side. “I have some left.” From his
shirt, he drew out the glass vial that he always wore around his neck on a chain, and tipped the
contents into Seongge’s slack mouth.

“We don’t have time to wait for him to come to,” Namjoon ordered. “Yoongi, take his other arm,
we’ll carry him.” The colour slowly returned to Seongge’s waxy cheeks, and by the time his
eyelids fluttered open, his arms were slung over Yoongi and Namjoon’s shoulders.

“There’s not enough,” Jimin said anxiously, dancing along next to them as they made their way
back down the tunnel. “He needs more tears.”

And there was another issue. Sejin was stood in front of a fork, two equally unappealing tunnels stretching away into blackness. “...does anyone remember the way we came?”

Instinctively, the crew looked at Namjoon, but he shook his head. “I was watching our backs. Who was at the front?”

“It was Seongge,” Jungkook croaked. “But I doubt if he remembers. He was trying to shake them off, dodging corners so quickly it was all I could do to keep up with him.”

Taehyung said what they were all thinking. “We’re lost. Safe but lost.”

They were. Son Euigong’s soldiers might be on the other side of that rockfall, if they were still alive, but one rocky tunnel looked much like another and they had no way of retracing their steps. The Mystician’s lair was supposed to entrap the unwary. And trap them it had.

“I don’t know that we’re safe,” Namjoon groaned, hoisting the semi-conscious Seongge up. “That wasn’t even half the number of soldiers Son Euigong had with him. The other half are still out there, probably looking to flush out the Mysticians. It’s what I’d do if I were him.”

“Can anyone see what I’m seeing?” The unexpected question came from Sejin, who was pointing down the left-hand tunnel.

There was a glow up ahead, not the flickering orange light of fire but a steady silver light that was brightening by the second. Cautiously, Jangmi advanced, but there was no need to. The strength of the light grew until its source was revealed - a crystal like those that lined the Mystician’s cave, and it was in the hands of a young acolyte. If possible, this one looked even younger than the two the had led them here.

There was an audible sigh of relief from the crew members as they approached the child. They would not die in the tunnels, starved and lost. They might make it out in time to escape Son Euigong. And what was more, if the Mysticians were sending out acolytes to guide them, it was clear that there were Mysticians left to do the sending.

In silence, the crew followed the small figure who never seemed to jump at the shadows cast on
the walls by his crystal light. The only sound was the soft steps of the crew, the rustle of material, Seongge’s heavy breathing as he slowly came to. The tunnel led steadily downwards and the distinctive tang of seasalt wafted up towards them. Jangmi guessed that they were headed to a different exit, one closer to the sea. Just how many exits were there?

The ground beneath their feet slowly changed from stone to pebble to sand, grey in their one source of light. But slowly, more greys were beginning to appear, a slow brightening in the air around them until a blindingly white opening appeared. The sound of the sea seemed to applaud their every footstep.

As they approached and their eyes adjusted, Jangmi saw that that the sky wasn’t white, but dark grey, the sea even darker. It had only appeared white compared to the blackness of the tunnels. Nevertheless, it was a welcome sight.

When they reached the edge, Namjoon gave responsibility of Seongge’s arm to Deokwoon and knelt until he was face level with the acolyte. “Will you be safe? Son Euigong’s men might still be in the tunnels.” He reached out to touch the child’s shoulder, and stumbled back with a gasp as his hand passed right through the silver material.

The child bowed solemnly, and then walked out towards the exit, the stunned crew making a path for him. But in the same way that his crystal’s light seemed to dim in comparison with daylight, so did he, becoming more and more transparent until all that could be seen of him was a faint silver outline against the sky. And then he was no longer visible at all.

“Was that a Virtue thing or a Mystician thing?” Jangmi asked in a whisper.

“We’ll never know,” Namjoon said, shaking his head. “I heard all kinds of stories from Seokjin-” He stopped talking abruptly. It was clearly still too raw a subject. But, Jangmi noticed, at least he was talking to her again.

From the crew, Jungkook was the first to get his bearings. He pointed down the beach to the port where The Second Star was flanked by two schooners, orange and green flags snapping proudly in the wind. Against the backdrop of grey sea and bruised sky, they were the only points of colour. Jangmi had the shortest moment to wonder at the fact that the fog had lifted so suddenly, and then she felt a drop of moisture on her cheek, followed by several more on her forehead, nose, hands.

The storm was finally breaking.
“Quickly,” Namjoon said hoarsely as the rain strengthened and the wind picked up, but there was no need to press the point. The crewmembers hurried down the beach with no attempt at subtlety. There was nowhere to hide, and haste was the only thing that could possibly prevent a bloody battle turning into a massacre.

“Jangmi, take Seongge,” Namjoon instructed her as they approached the ship and a cry went up. “We need our best fighters in front.”

There was no way Jangmi was going to argue - Namjoon was deadly armed with his two swords and her short training was not even comparable. She ducked under Seongge’s arm and was rewarded by a smile lifting the corners of his wide mouth, though it was a pale reproduction of the sunshine proportions that usually graced his features.

*I think I can limp, if I need to.*

“I won’t leave you,” Jangmi told him firmly, and received a look of surprise from Yoongi for whom their exchange had passed unnoticed.

Jungkook, who had the best eyes, was right at the front, calling out dangers. “Pistols! Flintlock guns! Two crossbows, one up in the foremast and one on the prow!”

“They’ll target the gangplank!” Namjoon yelled as they broke into a run, the crunch of their boots on sand changing to a drumming on slippery wood. “Try to bottleneck us and pick us off!”

About twenty soldiers had formed a kind of barricade on the jetty, shields raised and muskets levelled at the pirates, but there were still more hanging back on The Second Star, ready to provide reinforcement.

“What’s our tactic?” Deokwoon shouted over the sound of their running.

“Bloody kill them!”

“Fire!” a soldier shouted and the muskets went off, causing the pirates to drop to the ground as the musket balls went whistling over their heads. But in a flash they were back on their feet, charging at the barricade while the soldiers were still fumbling for refills. And then they were on them.
Namjoon smashed through the shields first, laying about with his swords, the others not far behind him. Soldiers dropped like flies into the sea or onto the planks, too scared, too hurt or too dead to get back up again.

Injured as he was, Seongge didn’t hang back either, letting go of his human crutches to lurch into the fray and still somehow managing to be graceful. Jangmi caught up with him in an instant, her sabre out, and began jabbing wildly at any flash of green or orange. She didn’t know if she was having an effect - but if the extent of the damage was a distraction long enough for the soldier to be skewered by a more experienced pirate, that was okay by her.

The soldiers on the jetty had not been able to stand their onslaught of ferocity and desperation, and before long Namjoon had fought his way up the gangplank, cutting down soldiers and using their bodies as shields from the sharpshooters on board with impunity. Jungkook had managed to leap on to the side of the ship, finding purchase on who knew what rain-slicked surface, and had scuttled round like some kind of spider until he had reached the prow, thrusting his dagger through the crossbowman’s foot, who screamed in pain and toppled into the churning sea.

The rain hurled itself down, and lightning crackled through the sky as the fiercest of the fighting was on the deck of The Second Star, but there were more than enough soldiers at sea level to keep Jangmi occupied. As she pushed one away from her his sword windmilled and she felt a sting across the back of her hand, but there was no time to check on it because above the noise of the battle and rain and thunder, she heard the unmistakable sound of Seongge’s voice.

“HE’S COMING!”

White lightning out to sea, but the unmistakable glow of fire in the direction of Saigon city. A fire kindled in hate and fed with anger. And by the looks of it, it was no longer confined to Son Euigong’s hands.

“Get on board, now!” Jangmi heard Namjoon holler, and she redoubled her efforts to cut through the ranks of green-clad soldiers. But there were too many of them, and they weren’t planning on allowing her to. She danced out of the way of blades trying to cut her at her feet, her hands, her arms, but none of them were going for a killing strike. Which probably explained why she was still alive.

Slowly, she was being forced back to the end of the jetty, her feet skidding back on the wet planks with every parry and block. Soon they would have her. And then Jangmi saw The Second Star leaving.
Even as a battle was being waged on board, the crew were clambering amongst the sails, yanking ropes, coaxing the ship out to sea despite the barrage of waves carrying her back to shore. But there was no way she would be able to make it to the gangplank in time.

And the last chance was gone in a second, the gangplank crashing into the water as The Second Star left her berth. The sound registered with Jangmi even as she continued to defend herself, anything rather than be captured by those loyal to Son Euigong. And then a rope landed at her feet.

Both her and her opponent looked at it for a split second, but she had the quicker reaction, grabbing it and hurling herself out to sea with all her might. The salty waves buffeted her again and again, but she pulled herself up inch by inch until she was able to clamber aboard.

As she climbed over the side, she saw the last of the soldiers being thrown overboard into the unforgiving waters, and as she looked towards the coast of Saigon, it glowed orange. A gargantuan gout of flame erupted, so large that it seemed to take up the whole sky, and raced towards them.

“Cover!” she screamed, and as one the crew ducked down, hands over their heads. There was a crackling, roaring noise, but it dissipated in a moment, and when Jangmi got to her feet the only proof of its violence was a few singed ropes that hissed and smoked in the driving rain.

Namjoon got to his feet from where he had been crouched by the steering wheel and breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s no way he can reach us all the way out here from the shore. Someone take Seongge to the infirmary, where’s Jimin? We’ll need more of his tears before we can-”

But no one replied. The only answer to Namjoon’s question was the snap of the sails in the wind as The Second Star battled onwards to open ocean.

Namjoon repeated his question, his voice growing sharper with panic. “Guys, where’s Jimin?”

Jungkook’s face was white. Incapable of saying a word, he pointed a single, wavering finger back at the shore.

Yoongi staggered to the gunwale. “No,” he whispered. “No, no, no.”
A horrible tableau greeted them. Son Euigong stood on the edge of the jetty with his poker glowing red-hot against Jimin’s neck. Even at this distance, it was possible to see the tears shining in Jimin’s eyes.

“JIMIN!” Yoongi roared as Namjoon and Deokwoon leapt on him, preventing him from hurling himself overboard. “JIMIN!”

Namjoon’s eyes were wet as well, but he didn’t move towards the steering wheel like Jangmi expected him to. “Go back!” she shouted at him, puzzled. “Let’s go back and get him.”

As she spoke, a towering wave smashed against the side of The Second Star, sending the steering wheel into a spinning frenzy, which Namjoon leapt upon, leaving Deokwoon to pin Yoongi to the side. And she understood what all the other crew members had seen. That if they were to turn back now, they would be driven against the rocks by the warring waves. That if they weren’t, Son Euigong would burn them to a crisp where they stood. That Jimin was lost.

Yoongi hadn’t stopped. “JIMIN!” he screamed. “JIMIN! JIMIN! JIMIN!”

Then the sky above Saigon lit up again, and Jangmi dove to the deck, only to realise that Son Euigong hadn’t been trying to eradicate them this time. Instead, he had sent them a message. In bright fiery letters, Son Euigong had traced through the sky one word: SEOUL.

“He’s going to hold Jimin hostage in Seoul,” Namjoon said in a hollow voice as he gazed upwards. “It’s where the Navy is based, where the Sect is based, it’s the place he knows best. He’ll have us at an advantage.”

Yoongi had fallen silent as the the orange glow from the fire in the sky lit up his face, but when the light petered out he spoke up again, in a voice deadlier than any flame.

“We need the God of Destruction.”

A shiver went through the crew, and behind the hair plastered to his face from the rain, Namjoon paled. “What on earth are you saying, Yoongi?”
Yoongi’s voice was low, but there was no mistaking his words, said with the utmost sincerity.
“Destroy Seoul like you destroyed Fukuoka.”

Another wave buffeted the ship, but all attention was on Yoongi. Namjoon handed off the wheel to Jungkook and knelt by his stricken First Mate. “Yoongi,” he said gently, “you know that I would do anything to save Jimin. But you saw what happened last time with Seokjin, how we all nearly died, how you nearly died.”

“I – don’t - care,” Yoongi hissed between his teeth. He was shaking in fury, shaking in fear, shaking so hard Jangmi could feel it through the deck. But there was no holding him back. “I DON’T CARE,” he bellowed. “IF YOU HAVE TO RESCUE JIMIN OVER MY DEAD BODY THEN SO FUCKING BE IT. IF WE HAVE TO DESTROY EVERY LIVING SOUL IN THAT GODFORSAKEN CITY SO THAT JIMIN CAN WALK OUT SAFELY, THEN SO FUCKING BE IT. IF EVERYTHING IN THIS PLANET EXCEPT JIMIN IS BURNED TO ASHES, THEN SO - FUCKING - BE IT.”

“Yoongi, listen to reason,” Namjoon pleaded, “if we lay siege to the city, they’ll kill Jimin!”

“They can’t.” The grief-stricken man seemed incapable of forming complete sentences. “His Virtue. He can’t. Die. He can’t.”

“Jimin might heal, but his Virtue is just like any other,” Namjoon insisted. “If they hurt him, they’ll discover it. They’ll take his heart’s blood. He won’t survive.”

Yoongi began crying weakly as Namjoon’s words reached him. “Please.”

“We’ll get him back, we will,” Namjoon promised. “And we’ll get him back safely. You have my life on it.”

“What use is your life,” Yoongi whispered harshly, raising his tear stained face to look at his Captain. “The only life of any value to me is Jimin’s.”

Jangmi’s eyes stung and burned, and she turned away from the scene before tears could overcome her. There was too much to do to be overwhelmed now. As if to prove her point, a wave caught the edge of the ship, sending a torrent of icy-cold water onto the deck.
Namjoon, meanwhile, clearly had nothing more to say to his First Mate and straightened up.
“Jimin, go and check-” He stopped and checked himself. “Jangmi, go to the infirmary and check
how many vials of Jimin’s tears we have left. Take Seongge with you.”

“Aye Captain.” The rigger’s face had gone pale again from all the exertion, but he was able to limp
with her until laid on the bed, his leg elevated. Despite the rocking of the ship, Jangmi was able to
gently draw off his blood-stained boot, holding her breath for the gruesome sight. But she needn’t
have worried. Even the small amount of Jimin’s tears had worked wonders, Seongge’s foot looking
black and blue and every other colour to match the stormy sky outside, but intact.

She helped him to struggle out of his damp clothes, then hurried over to the drawer that he pointed
out to her. There was flask upon flask of Jimin’s tears, each neatly labelled “class of Enhancement,
physical division” in Jimin’s own handwriting. It seemed enough for a lifetime, but with the
injuries from today’s battles and Yoongi’s regular dosage…

Jangmi froze, flask in hand. Jimin’s life wasn’t the only one at risk here. Though it didn’t seem to
matter to him, Yoongi’s life was also hanging in the balance. If he went too long without the
healing power of Jimin’s tears, he would very simply drop dead. And if she had understood
anything from the set of the Captain’s jaw when he sailed out to open sea, that was a distinct
possibility.

She turned to Seongge, distraught. “What the hell do we do now?”

Chapter End Notes

...yup.
For three days and two nights the storm gave them no rest. They might have saved The Second Star from being obliterated by the rocks on Saigon’s shoreline by leaving so promptly, but Jangmi almost wished that they hadn’t when a wave lifted them up so high she could taste the stars and then flung them down to what seemed like the watery depths of hell.

Namjoon had ordered that each crew member attach themselves to the mast by means of a rope, and it had saved Jangmi’s life twice. Once when Jangmi lost her grip on the slippery hold of the rigging and nearly plummeted into the sea, and the second time when a renegade wave that not even Namjoon had seen came out of nowhere to smash into them sideways. Namjoon’s rope saved a number of lives in that moment.

For three days, the sky had been black as fury with only lightning strikes to briefly illuminate the petrified expressions on each and every crew member’s face. In fact, the days and nights blurred into each other so seamlessly that by the time the sun finally broke through the clouds, Jangmi had lost all sense of space and time. The waves slowly grew smaller and smaller but Jangmi found herself working just as tirelessly, unable to switch off.

She and Jungkook between them had taken Seongge’s job - he might be able to limp around with the help of a walking stick but he had nowhere near enough agility to climb, let alone jump. Instead, he had been shut up in the infirmary, unable to do anything except contemplate his imminent doom.

Which is why when Namjoon called the all clear, Jangmi hurried to see him to deliver the good news, though he might have already guessed, seeing as he was no longer being flung about the infirmary with the momentum of a divine pendulum.

She passed Taehyung on the way down who was wearing the same wild-eyed expression she was sure was painted on every face aboard the ship. For three days, he had scurried from deck to hold to forecastle to figurehead, plugging leaks and repairing planks any way he could. It was thanks to him that they still had a mast - he had cut away the mainsail in one fell swoop, seeing that the next screaming gust of wind might be its last.
She and Taehyung didn’t exchange any words, just nodded at each other as they passed. No one had any words left - not even Yoongi, who had screamed himself hoarse, raging to the point of almost outdoing the storm itself. And yet, he hadn’t spoken a coherent word since the coast of Saigon had disappeared from sight.

Seongge perked up slightly when Jangmi pushed the door open to the infirmary, holding out his hand imperiously for her to take. Captain needs to improve his steering - I can’t remember ever having a bumpier ride.

“Seriously, Seongge?” Jangmi complained, sitting on the edge of his bed. “I give you three days and that was the best joke you could come up with?”

Yeah, well, staring death in the face tends to have a dampening effect on one’s sense of humour. How about this one: I think it’s about time we start holding our own Vanquishing of Water.

“Even worse,” Jangmi told him. “Maybe it’s a good thing you can’t speak.”

Seongge glared at her, but it soon softened into a brooding gaze. Is everyone okay?

“As well as can be expected,” Jangmi said, trying to force down a huge yawn and not quite managing to. Now that the adrenaline had dissipated, it was all she could do to keep her eyes open, physically, mentally and emotionally drained as she was. “We’re all ex… ex…”

A loud bang jerked Jangmi awake, and for a moment she had no idea where she was, nor that she had even been sleeping. Contrary to her last memory, she was now horizontal, a pillow under her head and a blanket over her legs. Seongge was next to her, serenely braiding a long length of twine.

Jangmi remembered the bang and turned to see where it had come from, only to see the Captain framed in the doorway. From sheer force of habit, she hopped straight to her feet and the blood rushed straight to her head. Seongge managed to save her from tipping over by promptly sitting her back down again.

“Crew meeting in the Nav room,” Namjoon said gruffly, and closed the door with slightly more force than necessary.
Jangmi and Seongge looked at each other, nonplussed. Or rather, Jangmi looked nonplussed and Seongge rolled his eyes.

Having shaken some feeling back into her leg, Jangmi helped Seongge limp to the back of the ship, where the rest of the crew were assembled.

“Now that everyone’s rested,” Namjoon launched in without having given any sign of acknowledging their presence, instead choosing to speak to those already present “There are some things that need to be addressed. Firstly, getting Jimin back is our top priority.”

There was dead silence from the crew, but it was the silence of an agreement too strong for words. Jangmi for one had to blink back tears at the memory of Jimin’s frightened face growing smaller and smaller as they deserted him. She clasped her fingers together, hard. Tears would not do him any good, even if they did carry her Virtue.

The storm had been powerful enough to hold the crew’s emotions at bay, but now that they were clear, only the thinnest veneer of control remained before everyone lost their senses like Yoongi had. They were only holding themselves back for Jimin, knowing that to give in to their emotion would be a selfish act.

But still, the next words out of Namjoon’s mouth had better be a plan to rescue Jimin or all hell would break loose.

“The problem is that Son Euigong wants us to rescue Jimin,” Namjoon elaborated. “He has no doubt laid a cunning trap, knowing that he’s forced our hand.”

Everyone seemed to be in agreement over this, but a trap’s degree of importance was not spread evenly amongst them. Yoongi, clearly, would gladly throw himself into hell’s inferno it it meant Jimin’s safety, while Namjoon as Captain had been forced into considering the safety of all.

“What I am proposing,” Namjoon said slowly, “and remember that this is only a proposal and is subject to discussion,” he added, forestalling any complaint, “is that we continue to find the Water-Carrier as planned.”

All hell broke loose.
Protests of all kinds were shouted from each and every crew member, so thick and fast that not a single word could be picked out from the flood. Namjoon let them continue in this vein for several minutes, but when it showed no sign of stopping, he held up his hands to stem the tide. “I promise that after I’ve explained, I will listen to each and every suggestion you have to offer. But understand this - searching out the Water-Carrier is not any form of running away. On the contrary, it is preparation for a direct assault on Son Euigong.”

There was a restive quiet amongst the crew members, but Namjoon’s charisma had somehow cast a spell, leaving them hanging on his next words.

“No attempt at subtlety or treachery will blindside Son Euigong for even a moment. He is far too smart to be taken in by sneak attacks, false bargaining and bluffing. Knowing that we will come for Jimin, he will have laid every kind of trap for us. Equally, he knows that I will expect a trap and therefore will have prepared for an all-out battle. He will have anticipated this by drawing in every ship belonging to the Navy and the Sect, in a format that gives him near-invincibility. After all, we will be in his turf.

In addition, he has seen Jungkook with us and will be expecting some kind of resistance to do with the Virtue of Water, which means that he will have even over-prepared his resistance.

The only thing that might make it even close to an even fight is what we have been searching for all along: The carrier of the Virtue of Water. Son Euigong’s only weakness, and our only hope.

I realise that going and getting the Water-Carrier is a delay, the opposite of what everyone including myself wants to do, but Son Euigong is also canny enough to know that he’ll have more power over us if Jimin is alive. In the time that it takes us to get to Seoul, Jimin will be imprisoned, but safe.”

Namjoon looked at them all impassively, his gaze flitting from face to face to gauge their reactions, finally settling on Yoongi’s. “But we will only pursue this course of action with Yoongi’s permission.”

In one movement, every single member turned to look at the First Mate. His face was stark white and skeletal, but a fever animated his dark eyes, a rage so deep it made him look almost demonic. “So your plan,” he said quietly, shaking with suppressed emotion, “is to leave Jimin in a cell at the hands of a monster for weeks on end so that you have a better chance of saving your own sorry skin?”

Not many of the crew members may have chosen Yoongi’s exact wording, but looking around,
Jangmi read agreement in their eyes. Wasn’t this what Namjoon had been doing since the beginning? Putting off the inevitable in the name of safety? Ducking out of a fight to come back another day? But the stakes were too big now. The crew were not ready to suffer Namjoon’s defensive tactics while one of theirs was held hostage, and in the worst way possible. Jimin had seen them leave, seen them desert him. Every moment they waited was another moment Jimin had to wonder if anyone was coming at all.

“No,” Namjoon said with an impressive calmness. That one word carried no hint of justification or pacification or bargaining. It was a simple statement of fact. “I would give my life for Jimin without hesitation as I know anyone on this boat would. But this is for Jimin, too. What do you think happens to Jimin if we lose to Son Euigong? Jimin has no value to him other than to ensnare us. The moment we are dead, so is Jimin.”

Namjoon let his words sink in, and Jangmi saw the fire finally begin to fade from Yoongi’s eyes. “But Jimin—”

“Jimin is strong and capable and resourceful,” Namjoon interrupted him firmly. “I have every confidence that he will survive in the dungeons and that he will find a way of hiding his Virtue from his captors. No, Yoongi, the reason I asked your permission is because this plan has the biggest chance of killing you.”

Yoongi stared at his Captain. “You mean… Jimin’s tears?”

“We have just about enough,” Namjoon confirmed the unspoken question hanging in the air. “But if there are any delays, rogue slavers, another storm…”

Yoongi nodded to himself as the rest of the crew glanced uneasily at each other, awaiting his verdict. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully, but he did not possess Namjoon’s charisma. When he finally spoke, he spoke haltingly, not looking anyone in the eye. “I… I want to make it clear that I’m not prizing Jimin’s life over anyone else’s. I’m sorry if it seemed that way. I just… I can’t stand the thought of us being too late to save him. All along, I thought we should be sacrificing safety for speed. So… maybe I am prizing his life over ours. But that’s because we will have chosen to risk our lives. So that if we all die, and I know it’s a possibility… if we all die, it will be as a family. And if we die, it will be knowing that we did all we could.”

Yoongi raised his head, and Jangmi saw clearly on his face that he had made up his mind, one way or another. “That being said, better than dying as a family is living as one. And as for me, I would gladly trade my own life for both Jimin’s and all of yours. It seems like a fair trade, a good one even. And it’s not the same as risking Jimin’s life, because I’m choosing to give mine. I’ll give my life for my family.”
There had been a ring of space around Yoongi, the force of his emotion too strong to be close to, but now the crew crowded close to him, wordlessly stroking his hair, his face, his shoulders. Jangmi felt her eyes prick with tears again, but she swallowed them. Because she had a burning question.

Scared to puncture the new-found resolution shared by the whole crew, she slowly raised her hand as if she was back at school, learning the ways of the courtesan. “I… I think there’s a problem with the plan.”

Namjoon froze for the space of a half-second before forcing himself to turn to her, trying to speak as naturally as possible. “Yes?” Clearly, he was back to his old distant self. Which was somehow worse than hating her.

“We’re out of clues,” Jangmi pointed out nervously. “And we still have no idea where to find the Water-carrier.”

Namjoon looked at her, nonplussed, the surprise breaking through the cold facade. “Yes, we do.”

“Excuse me?” was the politest sound of surprise exclaimed by the collective crew. Jungkook put it the most succinctly: “In the Mystician’s cave was I listening to a different conversation than you?”

“Yeah!” Taehyung piled on. “You spent half the time arguing with Seokjin about not getting directions!”

“Oh please,” Namjoon snorted. “I knew exactly what he meant. He just likes dressing up his prophecies in flowery language to make them sound more impressive. It would hardly be in-keeping with his mysterious persona if he just said ‘here are the coordinates, there’ll be a westerly wind from day five, don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out’.”

“I think I need to clean my ears, Seongge told Jangmi with a subtle touch to her wrist. Did Namjoon of all people just call Seokjin a drama queen?”

Jangmi stifled a giggle, though not quite well enough, judging by the quick look of annoyance Namjoon threw at them.
“Well, it was pretty clear to me,” Namjoon sniffed. “Follow the birth of the sun to the edge of the world.”

“Yeah, we were all there,” Deokwoon grumbled. “Doesn’t mean we know what the hell he was on about.”

“Isn’t Japan the land of the rising sun?” Taehyung suggested.

There was a heartfelt groan from the crew. “Not again…”

Namjoon shook his head. “No, we follow the birth of the sun. We follow it to the edge of the world. Right?” He looked at the blank faces of the crew.

“We’ve already established that the world isn’t flat,” Sejin pointed out helpfully.

“Yes,” Namjoon explained patiently. “But this is.” He drew out a map of the world and traced a line down the Easternmost edge. “What comes with the sun? Daytime. We say that a new day is born, as in birth. We go in the direction of the dawn, as far as the flat world goes. Our destination is somewhere along here.”

The crew crowded round the map for a closer look. “That’s a lot of empty ocean I’m seeing,” Jungkook said, unconvinced.

“If we needed more precise instructions, Seokjin would have given them to us,” Namjoon informed them with supreme confidence.

“Would he?” Yoongi questioned sceptically. “He said himself he doesn’t have perfect control of his Virtue.”

“I think he has better control than he thinks he does,” Namjoon told him. “How else would he know exactly when to send down those two children to the docks to collect us?”

“Alright,” Yoongi said, unconvinced. “We sail to that line, and if the Water-carrier isn’t in that precise spot in all of the open ocean between here and the new world, what do we do?”
“Sail up and down that line,” Namjoon answered easily. “We have enough supplies to do so, don’t we... Quartermaster?”

Jangmi remembered that she was the Quartermaster. “Uh, I haven’t really checked in the last few days, with the... storm, and all. I’ll go now.”

“Wait,” Namjoon told her. “We still have some things to discuss. Your alliance with Son Euigong, for example.”

The temperature in the navigation room seemed to drop by about ten degrees. Or rather, that’s how it had felt to Jangmi. Since Saigon, she hadn’t given much thought to Son Euigong’s allegations, with nearly everything else going on taking precedence. And, because Namjoon had defended her with so much passion, she had almost forgotten that it was an issue. But maybe Namjoon had just postponed his judgement in order to annoy Son Euigong, which she could well believe of him. Was she about to be cast out? Was Son Euigong about to ruin her life once again?

Namjoon didn’t look at her, instead choosing to address the crew. “In case it’s been preying on anyone’s mind, I just wanted to put your worries to rest. Son Euigong is just being a shit-stirrer.”

Jangmi stared at him. That was it? She wasn’t even being asked to defend herself? Not that she wanted to - she wasn’t sure what defense she could offer that might possibly convince the crew. How could she give them a piece of proof of not committing a heinous betrayal?

Taehyung raised a hand slowly. “Not that I have any particular objection with that description, but how are you so sure? Sorry, Jangmi.”

“No offense taken - I’d like to know how, too,” Jangmi told him with a half-hearted smile.

“Instinct told me Jangmi was innocent and reason confirmed it,” Namjoon explained. “Aside from the fact that setting us against each other is classic Son Euigong, how did Son Euigong know that it was Jangmi that pointed him out? How did he know that we saw him at all? I kept on thinking about it, over and over. Forget Jeju, Shanghai, Osaka, where Jangmi was by herself and could have somehow passed along a message, from the moment we spotted Son Euigong at Port of the World she hasn’t been out of our sight.”

His explanation seemed to have convinced the crew as well as Jangmi herself. Thank goodness
they had a Captain who had such an analytical mind. It was just a shame that his emotional compass varied more than a weathervane in a hurricane.

“Alright, do you have another explanation?” Yoongi interrogated his Captain.

Namjoon nodded. “I do. We know that Son Euigong has been collecting Virtues for his followers. What’s not to say that one of those Virtues is good for tracking over long distances? Like telescopic vision, or a developed sense of hearing. Those would be my two guesses.”

Another win for Captain Brains Namjoon. His explanation fit perfectly.

“I think that’s everything I had in mind,” Namjoon said, after judging that no one was about to raise any more objections. “Does anyone have anything to add?”

“I do,” Sejin called out. “With no Jimin, who’s going to do the cooking?”

“Thank you for volunteering, Sejin,” Namjoon grinned, not missing a beat. It was hard to tell who groaned louder, Sejin or the rest of the crew. It looked like they would all soon be missing Jimin’s infamous bean stew. “Anyone else?”

No one else had anything else to say, no argument to put forward. A complete turnaround from the near-mutiny that had been bubbling only minutes ago. How had Namjoon manage to convince them so completely of his plan? Was it his supreme confidence, his unassailable logic, his certainty in himself? Half an hour ago Jangmi had been certain that they would be setting course for Seoul, and yet now she couldn’t seem to find it in herself to think that course of action wise. She almost felt tricked - and yet, she couldn’t see how. Namjoon had explained his reasoning every step of the way. And maybe that was what was so strange - from her life as a courtesan to Son Euigong himself, there was no room to question decisions. There was only those who gave orders and those who followed them.

But The Second Star was not like Seoul. Passionate as Namjoon had been, she was certain that had Yoongi continued to object to his plan, he would not have pursued it. His iron-cast morality would have ensured that. So why when it came to her did he seem to blow hot and cold from one minute to the next?

Jangmi paused with her quill hovering over the scrap of paper, realising that she had not paid the blindest bit of attention to her own calculations. There was plenty of food, because even in his
absence Jimin left behind nothing but goodness, but ‘plenty’ wasn’t an acceptable quantity for algebraic formulae. Sighing, Jangmi started again, this time with a conscious effort to get it right.

Still, when Jangmi had finished tallying up the reserves of flour, grains, rice, she sat staring at the piece of paper, hoping to find an error. It wasn’t that she loved counting or anything, it was just that the next step would be to hand the paper to Namjoon. Have a conversation with Namjoon. Spend the next hour or so analysing every glance and every gesture from Namjoon.

But the paper would not hand itself in. Dragging her feet, Jangmi left the pantry and climbed her way up to the deck, only to see that it was Yoongi at the wheel, not the Captain. Neither was he in the Navigation room nor his own quarters.

Typical, Jangmi sulked to herself. She had finally mustered up the courage to get it over and done with and of course Captain Pirate King just had to make it difficult. He always made everything difficult. It was too bad that he was worth it. Not that she’d ever tell him that.

Without registering, Jangmi realised that her feet had taken her to the little compartment hidden inside the figurehead. Where they had first met. Where she had stared up into that face, analysing it coldly for a hint of a threat, not knowing how much it would come to mean to her. She had studied it as a shape, as a sculpture, but now she couldn’t look at it without reading the emotions there, remembering their shared experiences. Objective analysis didn’t apply anymore. He would always be beautiful to her.

Slowly, Jangmi pushed open the door. Namjoon was sat on the wooden bench under the shutters, his long legs folded under him and his hands clasped to his stomach as he gazed out to the infinite sea. He looked round as she entered, his expression tired, wan. So different from the strong confidence he had exuded in the navigation room. He always made things difficult. Difficult for himself.

Jangmi held out the piece of paper in front of her like a shield. “I did the calculations. We’ll be fine for two months if we don’t go crazy.”

Namjoon took the paper from her delicately, his fingers pinching the edge furthest away from her as if scared to touch her. He studied her calculations carefully. “Thank you.” His tone added, ‘now go away’.

Jangmi nodded and turned to leave. But on the threshold, she paused, making up her mind. Going around on tenterhooks wasn’t her style. She had never hidden her feelings before - and what would be the point now? She couldn’t take back the kiss, couldn’t erase the memory from his head. He
knew about her feelings. But his trying to protect them was only making her feel worse. Abruptly, she turned to face him.

“I get why you’re being distant,” Jangmi told him, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice as she remembered Seokjin’s beautiful, heartbreaking face. “But… I just wanted to say that I get it. There’s no need to be distant.”

Namjoon looked up from the piece of paper, evidently surprised at her outburst. “Isn’t there?” he said in a tone of voice that was almost bitter. “It’s not enough to get what you wanted, now I have to pretend to be happy about it?”

“What?” Jangmi asked him, perplexed. That was not the answer she had expected.

Namjoon sighed, dropping his head into his hands. “I’m sorry. That’s not fair. I just… it’s too soon.”

“Don’t I get to decide how much time I need?” Jangmi asked him, beginning to get angry. She was the injured party here, so why was Namjoon acting like she should be apologising?

“Why should you need time?” Namjoon retorted. “Don’t tell me that you’re not used to the attention.”

“It’s the lack of attention that I’m referring to,” Jangmi corrected him harshly. “I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable but I won’t do it again so you can just forget about it and move on.”

“Oh, that’s easy for you to say,” Namjoon told her, his tone of voice rising.

“You think it’s easy for me to say that?” Jangmi asked him in disbelief. “You think I want you to move on?”

“You’re telling me you don’t want me to now? Is that it, you just want to torture me?” Namjoon spat. “Is this revenge for how I treated you in Jeju? Is forcing this conversation on me just another form of torture? How much more justice do you need? Just tell me, when will it be enough for you?”
Jangmi paused. “What?”

Namjoon paused too. “What?”

Jangmi looked at him askance. “I think we’re having two different conversations here.”

“Oh.” Blood rushed to Namjoon’s face, making it glow like a summer sunset. “What were you talking about?”

“I was talking about what happened on the island.”

“Me too.”

“So why can’t I understand a single thing you’ve said?” Jangmi asked with a small smile. “We were both there, as far as I remember.”

Namjoon snorted, a shy grin tugging at his lips. “Yeah.”

Feeling more confident at the calmer direction the conversation had taken, Jangmi approached Namjoon on the bench. “Budge over.”

Namjoon scooted over to one corner of the bench with his legs drawn up to his chest, leaving Jangmi the other side to sit on. She sat across from him, mirroring him so that their ankles were interlaced. “Speak clearly for once,” she told him. “Why do you need time?”

Namjoon stared at his lap and was silent for a long while. Maybe he was trying to find the right words. Maybe he was struggling to voice his thoughts. Maybe he was trying to think of a reason not to. But Jangmi waited patiently, not giving him the chance to derail the conversation elsewhere. And finally, Namjoon spoke up.

“I spend a lot of time, a lot more time than I’d admit to, trying to find logical justification for my emotions,” he said quietly, his head bowed. “I was angry with Seokjin even though I couldn’t blame him for leaving, I was hostile to you even though you had given me no reason to be, and I keep feeling jealous of Seongge even though I know I forfeited any right to be so.”
Jangmi looked at him, wide-eyed. “Seongge?”

“I… I admire how much restraint you have,” Namjoon ploughed on, “how much respect you’ve shown me by being subtle, trying not to hurt my feelings… I just… I wanted to say that you’ll find no opposition from me if… if you wanted to be more open about it. You’re right. I’ve had enough time.”

Jangmi’s heart had suddenly started beating faster, her body catching on faster than her brain. It was all the wrong way round. Namjoon thought she had been showing restraint. He thought she wanted to be with Seongge. “So why did you kiss me then?”

“I misread the signs,” Namjoon confessed. “I got caught up in the moment, I forgot everything. I forgot about where we were, who we were… for a moment, I thought I was good enough for you.”

It was all wrong again. Namjoon thought that she was too good for him? For a smart man he could be such an idiot. Jangmi fought a smile, determined to get to the bottom of everything, excited for the end result.

“But then the closer we got to Saigon the more I thought about Seokjin.”

Oh. The elation that had started to rise in Jangmi’s chest fell to the bottom of the Pacific. So much for Namjoon’s brief interest in her. They were back to where they were before; there was no way Jangmi could ever hope to compare to someone like Seokjin.

“I always felt the need to protect Seokjin,” Namjoon said, speaking to his hands rather than to Jangmi. “To shield him from danger and give him everything he could ever want so that he would never need to leave me. But I guess for him, that was only another kind of prison. I wanted him to be strong. But I was terrified that one day he would be strong enough to leave me. What he said was the truth. I fucked everything up because I couldn’t believe that he would stay with me for me.”

His words started coming faster and faster, losing their clarity. “And when I realised that, I realised about all the baggage I have, I realised that I wouldn’t be good for you, and then I started questioning everything, knowing that you see through people so well, that you would realise this, and then I was thinking about how you get along so well with Seongge, how you don’t fight with him and always go to him and laugh with him and then I realised that I might have just been projecting my own feelings onto you and that we never really talked about what happened and what if you just hadn’t run away from me out of pity and then what if you had feelings for someone else and what if that guy was Seongge and it wasn’t even the first time I suspected it and
then I walked in today with you two together and I just… I just want to say thank you. For considering my feelings. But you don’t need to. I’ll be fine.”

Jangmi’s emotions were guttering like a candle-flame in a stiff breeze. This was all so tangled. Now she wasn’t so sure that they might get to the bottom of this. The future had dimmed from bright to dark and murky. In vain she tried to clear a path. “So… Seongge.”

“He doesn’t carry around his past like I do,” Namjoon said bitterly. “He might have no memory of his past but at least he’s not haunted by it.”

His words revealed maybe more than he had meant to. Misguided though his actions might be, he was right about being haunted. Haunted by his past, haunted by being haunted. Even now, he still couldn’t seem to accept that he might be worth loving.

Namjoon sighed, head in his hands. “I thought I was better but I wasn’t. I push people away and then get angry when they leave. I did it to Seokjin and then did exactly the same thing to you… I did the same thing with the crew too, after Seokjin left. Barely managing to keep the ship afloat, living from one meal to the next… no money, no safety, no laughter… I kept wondering why they wouldn’t leave, too. And the more they clung on, the angrier I became, the more I tried to push them away. Didn’t they know that they deserved better than me?”

Jangmi studied Namjoon’s downcast face. Even tired, even angry, even broken, he was still beautiful. “There’s nothing going on between me and Seongge, you know.”

Namjoon slowly raised his head. “What?”

“You didn’t misread the signs on the island,” Jangmi told him. “I wanted you to kiss me. I still do.”

Now it was her turn to be studied. The old look of intensity was back. “Maybe you’re not as clever as I thought you were, then,” he said finally. “There’s no future with a man like me who drives away his friends and accumulates enemies by the day.”

“And your biggest enemy is yourself,” Jangmi told him.

There was another silence as they looked at each other, and then Namjoon broke eye contact, staring at his hands again. “If there’s nothing with you and Seongge, why didn’t you come to me
“You’re not the only one who misread the signs,” Jangmi said darkly. “I figured you just kissed me in the heat of the moment…”

“How can you have misread the signs?” Namjoon demanded. “You can literally read minds!”

“If I was able read minds as well as you think I can, then I would have known about you and Seokjin from the start instead of having to find out in Saigon, reading between the lines of the argument you decided to have with him,” Jangmi challenged.

Namjoon’s indignation deflated visibly. “I’m s-”

“Don’t worry about it,” she interrupted him before he could go off on a tangent. “I wanted to be mad at you for keeping from me the depth of your relationship with Seokjin but somehow I can’t find the energy to.”

“But still, I’m s-”

“And while we’re on the subject of Seokjin,” Jangmi interrupted again, “how can you ask me to make a move on you knowing that you had promised forever to someone like Seokjin? Someone who had his eyes put out rather than give information that might harm others?”

Namjoon’s mouth was open.

“And maybe I didn’t ever see the end results of my spying,” Jangmi continued bitingly, “but you can’t pretend to yourself that I didn’t know what would happen to the people I turned in. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed ferreting out people’s secrets using my body, proud of the names that I could pass on to Advisor Bang. I loved my life as a courtesan. What does that make me?”

“It makes you human,” Namjoon insisted without missing a beat. “It makes you strong and inventive and desperate to survive.”

Jangmi gave a hollow laugh. “Maybe you’re not as clever as I thought you were, either.”
Namjoon shook his head. “This is ridiculous.”

“You’re right, this is ridiculous,” Jangmi agreed. “Never before have I found myself trying to convince someone not to be with me.”

They stared at each other.

“We’re both fucked up.” Jangmi concluded. There it was, at last. The bottom. The ocean floor of a myriad of tangles and emotions, miles and miles of ghosts and memories to sink through, but it was finally there.

“We neither of us think we’re good enough for each other.” Namjoon echoed.

They were both still stuck in the past, repeating the same old mistakes. “We can’t rely on the other person to fix us,” Jangmi realised slowly. “We have to fix ourselves, first.”

“Or maybe the only thing that needs fixing is that we don’t know that there’s nothing to fix.” Namjoon added with a bitter smile.

Jangmi desperately wanted to reach out and touch Namjoon. He was there, so close to her. But their conversation felt like an ending. For a time, at least. The knowledge that they couldn’t be together, not yet. That the only obstacle in their way was themselves. But that to face themselves would be harder than facing the entire Navy fleet of Korea.

Jangmi’s chest felt heavy. It had been a hard few days. The future would not be any easier. Everyone was sad. Everyone was lonely. “Why do you think Yoongi and Jimin work so well together?” she asked Namjoon, the question springing from her lips.

Namjoon considered her words carefully, reading the meaning behind them. “I think it’s because both of them work hard to deserve each other. They don’t just sit around and mope about it like we do.”

Jangmi let out a wan smile. “Maybe you are smart, after all.”
“They should call me Captain Brains,” Namjoon joked, and despite herself Jangmi let out a burst of laughter.

“What?” Namjoon asked, half smiling, half annoyed.

“I already do,” Jangmi told him, grinning, as she got to her feet. The conversation was over, there was nothing more to say. There was just the knowledge that someday she might find it in herself to think that she might deserve a chance of love.

“Jangmi?” Namjoon’s voice came as she reached the threshold. Jangmi turned to see his hand held out. The compartment was so small she didn’t even need to stretch to touch him. Lightly, she pressed her fingertips to his.

*I can’t promise you forever,* he told her with a sad smile in his eyes. *But I can promise tomorrow.*

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry! I lost track of the days! Anyhoo, we have this interlude-y chapter where not too much happens on a physical scale other than several near-death experiences both from storms and then from heart attacks about NamJang's conversation which... honestly they were supposed to just get together after the island but while writing I realised that they're flawed characters living in a complicated world so... sometimes things just don't work out very well even if you're rooting for them to. And although Seokjin only appeared in pretty much one chapter, his influence is throughout the book and problems don't just go away after a conversation... yeah, didn't expect this much gritty realism for a fantasy fic about pirates, either :D

So, next week's chapter will be called 'The Water Cycle'. Expect things.
The Water Cycle

Chapter Summary

The Second Star finally reaches their destination. But things never go quite to plan...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Although it had previously been made very, very clear that the Earth was round, Jangmi couldn’t shake the feeling that they would soon sail right over its edge into nothingness. For almost three weeks, they had been sailing with arrow-shot straightness into the Eastern skies, with nothing in either sky or sea to indicate that they were making any progress at all. The same stars littered the sky every night, the same waves gently rocked them on their way. But it couldn’t go on forever. It just couldn’t. Sooner or later they would reach the rim of the world where the waters of the world dropped into empty space where no power, Virtue or not, could bring them back.

Would Earth one day run out of water? Would the rains of the heavens one day no longer be enough to fill the ocean and all would turn into a baking desert, devoid of life or love? Would that be the day that they would pray to the water gods, not to save them from the scourge of water but to bless them with it?

Faced with the sapphire-blue sea that stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could see, it was hard to think so. And yet, faced with the sublime sight of the eternal waterfall at the edge of the world, Jangmi may be forced to change her mind.

“Now there’s commitment to the cause,” came a voice from foot-level, and then the head and shoulders of Captain Kim Namjoon followed his voice into the crow’s eye. “If you stare any harder at the horizon your face might fall off.”

“That would be a useful trick,” Jangmi commented lightly as she handed him the eyeglass. “There’s no chance that I could be caught by Son Euigong, then.”

“True,” Namjoon agreed. “But you wouldn’t be as-” He broke off and coughed. “I’ll take over.”

Jangmi nodded and swung down out of the crow’s eyes before Namjoon could spot the redness in her cheeks. The past three weeks had been filled with those awkward moments as they tried to redefine their relationship, without the antagonism, without the tension, personal or emotional. It
wasn’t an easy path to tread. But they were both trying, and maybe soon they would be able to relax around each other. Maybe one day even search out the other person’s company without overthinking both before and after.

Today was not that day. Jangmi caught Jungkook’s eye as she reached the deck, all too aware of the cool air on her hot cheeks, and endeavoured to look as innocent as possible. But he was concentrated on steering and spared her only a friendly wave before turning back to his task.

Other people were not as easy to fool, however. A sudden clap on her shoulder made Jangmi jump. “You’ve caught a bit of sun,” Taehyung commented airily. “Either that or someone’s got you hot under the collar.” He shaded his eyes to see who was up in the crow’s nest and Jangmi shoved him.

“I’m not wearing a collar.”

“You’ve got me,” Taehyung conceded dramatically, hand pressed to his chest.

But Jangmi’s attempt to distract Taehyung from the identity of the crow’s eye inhabitant failed miserably, because it was that moment that the captain himself leant over the side to call out, “Land ho!”

“What?” Jangmi and Taehyung scrambled to the bowsprit, closely followed by the rest of the crew that emerged from their hidey holes around the ship. But they couldn’t see anything. The horizon was just as empty in that direction as it was in every other.

They were only just reaching the outskirts of their map’s outline. Namjoon had called them all over that morning to inform them that they were expected to reach the edge either tomorrow morning or in the late evening. But maybe the storm had shunted them further east than they had thought. Because after half an hour of waiting, the faintest of smudges began to materialise.

By midday, that smudge had grown into a spit of land, barely four boat-lengths across. Blindingly white sand and a smattering of palm trees. Nestled in their paltry shade, a wooden shack. Nothing else. It was barely an island. It was possible to look right out to its other side.

The ocean’s water had changed from deep, sultry blue to reflect the light colour of the sky, and it became possible to see shoals of fish moving through the water, seaweed waving languidly in the halcyon waves.
“We’ll have to stop here,” Namjoon decided when they were about half a league out. “The draft’s too shallow.”

“Is this really it?” Jungkook said quietly. “Is this really where the water carrier lives?”

It was impossible to imagine a less impressive destination.

“Let’s get the row boats,” Namjoon instructed, but despite his calm tone he also looked worried.

As they approached, it was possible to see signs of civilisation. Deokwoon pointed out a broken fishing net twisted up in some strands of seaweed. A rain trap floating on the waves was tethered to an underwater reef. But all was quiet.

It was only as they dragged the boats up the sand, out of reach of the waves, that the door to the shack swung open and a tanned woman wearing sun-bleached clothes emerged, a loaded crossbow pointed into their midst.

She called out some words which were in a foreign tongue, but her meaning was clear. “We have nothing of value. Leave us alone.”

To Jangmi’s infinite surprise, Namjoon replied in the same strange language, his palms open and empty, obviously endeavouring to soothe. The woman replied angrily gesturing with the crossbow. The conversation went on in this vein for a while, Namjoon gaining no ground despite his efforts and charisma. The woman would not let them take one step closer.

All of a sudden her expression changed to horror as a small child slipped out from behind her, evading her grasp and running, giggling, straight at the pirates. It was a boy, naked, brown from the sun, evidently excited to see new and strange people for what might possibly be the first time.

The woman chased the toddler, reaching him before he could get to the pirates, but as she picked him up the boy threw his pudgy hands out in their direction, starting to cry.

And then a wave emerged up from the sea and drenched them from head to toe.
“The boats!” Namjoon said hastily, and the crewmembers grabbed hold of them before they could float off to the sea with the retreating water.

But the child evidently seemed to enjoy their surprise, because he began to laugh from his mother’s arms, bringing another wave crashing down upon them, and then another. The woman chided him, and the water subsided. The woman’s face, tanned as it was, had gone white in fear. She began to retreat, slowly, slowly, as a prey might run from a hunter.

There was a creak as the shack’s door opened once again, and this time a man stepped out into the sunlight, supported by two wooden sticks that were his replacement for his left leg.

“Please do not take our child,” he croaked in accented Korean.

Jangmi stared at the miniature person watching them in the smug way only small children can, from the safety and comfort of his mother’s arm. This was the famous Water-Carrier, the one they had travelled hundreds of miles to beg the help of. And he was barely more than a baby.

Jangmi saw the hope drain from Yoongi’s face as he stared at the child, unable to comprehend that their headlong rush into the edge of the world might come to nothing. That they had left Jimin behind for nothing.

“The child carries the Virtue of Water?” Namjoon asked, something like horror appearing on his face.

“He is special,” the man answered. “He is our hope, our joy. Please… leave us be.”

This was not the hardened warrior, the wizened hermit, the mysterious figure they had imagined. This was not the saviour that might bring about the destruction of a grown man such as Son Euigong. Namjoon turned back to his crew. “We have no right to take him away.”

No one, not even Yoongi, argued. Because they had all spoken of choice, choosing to put their lives in danger in order to save Jimin, save themselves. A child could make no such choice. And in any case, would be no use. A child this young could not be disciplined, trained, taught the meaning of tactics. A child… a child deserved to keep their innocence. Every single member of the crew knew the pain of losing it.

“Now…” Namjoon looked entirely lost. They had banked all their hopes on this. Now, they had nothing. “Now we sail to Seoul. Exactly as Son Euigong wished.” He looked no one in the eye. He knew that he had just served them all a death sentence. And he knew that none of them would protest. He turned back to the island inhabitants. “We will not take your child. We ask only the hospitality of your island one night. Then, we will return whence we came.”

The man plainly did not believe them. “What would stop you from stealing him away when we are asleep?”

Namjoon thought for a moment. “We can leave our rowboats in your possession this night. Therefore we will not be able to return to the ship and leave.”

The man conferred with his wife in their tongue, and Namjoon watched them narrowly while they argued. Eventually, the woman give a tight nod, clutching the boy to her still more tightly while he squirmed in her grasp.

Namjoon bowed deeply. “We can repay your kindness. If you allow some of us to return to the ship, we have tools, weapons that may be of use to you in the future.”

“Thank you,” the man said, bowing also. “These will be useful to us. Please share our food this night. We have not been separated from the world long enough to forget the meaning of the word ‘hospitality’.”

Along with Taehyung and Deokwoon, Jangmi was sent back to where The Second Star was anchored in order to search out any spare items that may help the island inhabitants in the future. Nails, cloth, a saw, all things that Taehyung had lying around and plenty of. Speaking of other things that they had plenty of, Jangmi dipped into the ship’s supply of rum to take some bottles back. The crew might complain, but Jangmi privately thought that they might be all the better for a little less drinking.

By the time they had rowed back to the sandy beach, tensions had relaxed considerably. The child was now running around freely while the parents held a conversation with Namjoon, serious but not wary. Some of the crew had already been put to work gathering fish from nets, breaking open coconuts and emptying water traps. The heat of the afternoon had slowly receded and now a cool breeze caressed the treetops, as though the sea was breathing deeply over the island.
They dined at dusk, sharing out the simple fare that the islanders could afford them, passing dish from hand to hand as they had at the Vanquishing of Water. But there was no festivity in the air this time. The crew dined quietly, meditating over their failed quest.

Jungkook hadn’t spoken a word since he had witnessed the display of the Water Virtue. He was gazing at the child, transfixed, as the toddler played with the water from the ocean, casting a mist over them and making the fire hiss. After a while, the child got bored of his games and came back to his mother, where he noticed the tears running down the young navigator’s face. Clambering into his lap without a second thought, he touched a teardrop hanging off Jungkook’s chin and pushed it upwards, back onto Jungkook’s lashes. Surprised, Jungkook let out a sob and more tears fell down his cheek, which the child tried to push back to his eyes one by one. Frustrated, he tried again and again, not understanding why each time he tried to put the tears back from where they came from, more would fall.

A word from his mother and the child returned to her arms, still watching Jungkook as Jungkook was watching him, and waved a podgy hand as he was taken to the shack to be put to bed. Jungkook waved back, fresh tears painting his cheeks. Taehyung took his other hand.

“Why does he cry?” the man asked Namjoon, having watched the exchange narrowly.

“His father carried that Virtue before your child was given it,” Namjoon replied sombrely.

The man gave a sign of understanding. “It is a gift and a curse. It brings him joy and yet gives us many sleepless nights. I gather the world has not much changed since we left it.”

“It has not,” Namjoon confirmed sadly. “If I may ask, how did you come to leave it?”

“I was once a sailor aboard a slaver ship,” the man answered. “I fell in love with one of the slaves, so I stole her away in the middle of the night, and yet as we began to row away, a vicious storm struck that nearly drowned us. I am certain the slave ship foundered, but we were flung far across the ocean. When the storm calmed, we thought we would die of starvation and exposure. But then this little island appeared before us as a divine blessing, and we had the choice of whether to sail onwards or to use the wood from our boat to create a life here. We chose the latter, and have not left since.”

“It must be a hard life,” Namjoon mused.
“No harder than the work involved in trade of souls. I do not miss my old life.” The man gestured around the island. The small shack for shelter, the trees and waters for food, the family for love. “We have everything we need right here.”

“And you don’t wish to leave?” Namjoon pressed. “We could take you with us to Korea, leave you in Busan. What about the future? What about your son?”

“When I and my wife are buried, our son may choose to use the wood from the shack to build a boat much like the one in which we arrived. But that it his choice to make, when the time comes. I would not willingly bring him into the world which I left.”

Jangmi leant over and gently touched Namjoon’s sleeve before he could reply. “He sees no beauty in the world we belong to.”

Namjoon turned his gaze upon her, and she read the conflict there. To him, leaving this family here would be to abandon them. But he also understood that to take them away would be to take them from their paradise. Finally he nodded.

“There is not enough space in the shack for you all,” the man said in a more business-like tone. “But there is shelter beneath the palm trees and the night will be a warm one.”

It was indeed warm, despite the cool sea breeze. They had brought back furs and blankets from the ship so everyone made themselves comfortable before the light faded away completely while the family dragged the rowboats inside for security. Jangmi lay down, ready for sleep to take her, but somehow without the steady rocking motion of the ship beneath her and the creak of the mast as a lullaby, she couldn’t quite drift off. Instead she counted the stars between the leaves of the palm trees, but the glare of the moon soon outshone their delicate light.

Soft snores drifted into the night air from all around her, so Jangmi gently detached herself from the blankets and wandered off in search of something she couldn’t quite identify. Perhaps it was the sight of the vast sky, deeper and darker than the ocean, or perhaps the siren song of the waves that longed to touch the silver queen above them, but could never quite fly high enough. Or perhaps it was the dark figure that was stretched out upon the sand in the distance on the furthest part of the island.

Wordlessly, Jangmi lay down beside him on the soft sand, staring into the night sky, wondering if they were looking at the same star. If, a hundred million miles away, their gazes were meeting. If somehow, looking at the same thing meant that they were looking at each other. She wanted to look at him. She wanted to see his expression as he stared up into something so much bigger than
them. She wanted to see him marvel at the sky, because it was the closest thing she was allowed to have to seeing him marvel at her.

Ever so slowly, she turned her head to look at him, and with a thrill realised that he had done the same. The moonlight had painted him in shades of silver, but his eyes were as dark as ever as they held hers. In that moment, the sea seemed to go quiet but the light of the stars seemed to brighten, bringing out the planes of his face, the angular cheekbones contrasted with the softness of his lips.

Namjoon brought his face a millimetre closer to her, and Jangmi mirrored him, not breaking the gaze between them. Slowly, infinitely slowly, the distance between them grew smaller and smaller under Jangmi could feel Namjoon’s slow breath ghosting over her lips. There was the width of one grain of sand between them, and Jangmi was trembling, trembling as though she was standing on the edge of a precipice. She didn’t know if she had the courage to jump; she didn’t know if she had the strength not to.

Namjoon was gazing at her steadily, but there was hesitation in his eyes as well. He too was on the edge of the precipice. They would jump together or not at all.

In the same moment, they brought their lips together, the gentlest of touches, but the soft pressure of his lips on hers sent a lightning strike through Jangmi’s body. This was enough. This was too much. This was overwhelming.

And yet, her body was urging itself towards his, bringing them closer, until finally all semblance of control snapped and Jangmi brought her hand up to the back of Namjoon’s neck, securing his face to hers, their lips pressed together tightly. They had jumped. They were falling.

Slowly, Namjoon opened his mouth to deepen the kiss, and Jangmi felt a passion such as she had never felt before run through her - it felt almost alien. She realised that her hand was on Namjoon’s bare skin, that the thrill of emotion she was feeling didn’t belong entirely to her. It was Namjoon’s sensations echoing with her own, neither one of them thinking true words, only feeling, only sensing, only experiencing.

Surprised, she broke away for a moment, her hand still secure on Namjoon’s neck. “I can feel your feelings,” she whispered. “Is that okay?”

“Is it okay for you?” Namjoon whispered in response, and in response Jangmi brought their lips back together again, the sense of sense obliterating everything outside of their bodies.
Their bodies were curled against each other, Namjoon’s hand pressed into her back, pulling her towards him as if to deny the existence of space between them. Everywhere their bodies touched was alive with sensation, the material of their clothes twisting between them, suddenly rough and irritating. Jangmi’s hand searched for the hem of Namjoon’s shirt, tugging it up from underneath him, wanting only for the warm, smooth skin of his back to be released to her touch.

Namjoon broke their kiss momentarily to pull his shirt over his head, and barely had their mouths rejoined than his hands were at her waist, delving beneath the material to run his fingers up her side, her back, her breasts. Eagerly, Jangmi pulled up her own shirt, not wanting to waste an inch of his broad chest to her hands. To only touch a small amount of his skin at a time was not enough - she ran her palms down his body, wishing she could cover each millimetre of skin with her own.

Namjoon seemed to be suffering equally - he had one arm around her, pressing her as closely as possible to his body while the other hand roamed her bare skin, unable to settle one spot, to leave the others untouched. His fingers fluttered from her hair to her waist to her neck.

Leaving Namjoon’s lips, Jangmi pushed Namjoon onto his back so that she could trail her own down the line of his throat, nipping softly at the crook of his neck, covering his skin with slow, languorous kisses. But Namjoon was not to be outdone, his hand reaching for her breast and rubbing small circles into her skin, making Jangmi moan softly against him.

The sound of her pleasure seemed to galvanize him, and Namjoon found Jangmi’s mouth again only to gently turn them over so that his back was pressed into the sand while it was him that trailed soft kisses down her body. His moist lips traced a line across her collarbone, over her breasts, teasing her with a soft bite to her nipple, placing a gentle kiss on each line of her ribs, before sucking and worrying at her hip bone.

Gently, he tugged down the waistline of her britches until they were off, exposing her to the cool night air. His hand traced the whisper of a line up the inside of her thigh, which his mouth soon followed, guiding her legs open with the delicacy of one who was touching the petals of a rose.

Without warning, his tongue traced a line up Jangmi’s lips and she couldn’t withhold a moan, wanting to touch him, wanting more, wanting. But he chose to tease her, licking the inside of her thighs before returning to her entry where he placed his mouth flush against her, his tongue working inside of her.

Jangmi clamped her teeth down on her bottom lip as another moan escaped her mouth, unable to process the flood of pleasure. Namjoon’s fingers had joined his tongue, and she began to recognise that tightness of feeling, the sensation of holding her breath even as she exhaled that came before finding her pleasure.
“Namjoon!” she gasped, only just managing to get the coherent word out above her own lust. “Stop, wait, I-”

Namjoon lifted his head up, and there was a glimpse of mischief in his eyes mixed with the lust even as his sinfully swollen lips glistened. He gave her five seconds of peace while he pulled his own britches off, then lined himself up and pushed into her slowly in one smooth motion.

They gasped at the same moment, a paroxysm of pleasure crossing Namjoon’s face. But he stayed where he was long enough to press a gentle kiss to Jangmi’s lips, pushing her hair away from her face. Then he moved again, raising and lowering his hips into Jangmi like the movement of a voluptuous wave breaking upon the shore. Jangmi’s hands were pressed into his back, wanting him to increase the intensity but not wanting to end this, content with him inside her. It was so much; she wanted more.

With the next thrust, Jangmi felt a stutter in his hips, and then the sand grew moist around them as a gentle wave enveloped their legs to the knees and then receded. The next wave came a little higher, and the next a little higher, as Namjoon began to move a little faster, a little harder. The tide was coming in; the sea would not wait for them.

Namjoon was moving deeply within her now, his eyes on hers, taking in every flash of pleasure that raced across her face. Their breath was intermingled, sweat was beading on his forehead. A wave, more forceful than before, splashed across their bodies.

Jangmi placed a hand on Namjoon’s waist to steady him, and he gently rolled his hips into her one more time before stopping. A hand caressed her cheek as Jangmi read his confusion.

“Let’s go deeper,” she whispered, and Namjoon immediately understood her words - both senses.

Not even withdrawing from her, he picked her up in one motion, moaning in pleasurable surprise at how deep he was inside of her. Her thighs were clamped around his waist while his hands supported her, walking out into the sea until the water reached his ribs, and then, her eyes locked to Namjoon’s, Jangmi used the waves to rise up and then sink back down on him.

The moan that burst out through her lips was swallowed by Namjoon’s mouth has he pressed his face to hers, kissing her fiercely while she rolled her hips against his, feeling her skin slide over him, slowly building up the intensity. The waves lapped at them as Jangmi began to grind her hips harder, her breaths coming faster as chills rippled across her skin, as Namjoon’s hands moved with
her body, grasping at her thighs, as she rode him faster and moaned louder, as he said her name over and over again, as the caress of the water and the waves of pleasure melted into one, as Jangmi’s lungs began to burn and yet she was not capable of stopping, as she slammed herself again and again onto Namjoon’s length, as that tight feeling came back again, centered on the heat between her legs. Locking her in to her release.

“Namjoon,” she moaned against his lips, but the continuation was lost in the tempest of feeling. “Namjoon, I-”

Her pleasure came upon her suddenly and she cried out, bucking her hips wildly against Namjoon’s, drawing from him a deep moan as he felt his pleasure building up. “Jangmi… Jangmi… I- ah! ah! ah!”

Jangmi felt the muscles of his abdomen tighten beneath her, his hands gripping her tightly as she rode him once, twice more, coming to a stop while the waves continued to gently buffet them. The fog slowly cleared from her mind as she pressed her cheek to Namjoon’s, hot as the sun despite the cool water. She could feel his heart thrumming in his chest through her skin, his breaths becoming steadier, his thoughts becoming clearer.

_I hope that was good for her._

“It was,” Jangmi assured him, and a surprised smile lit up his features. She pressed her face into his shoulder before asking in a small voice, “Was it good for you?”

Namjoon gently turned her face back to his as he carried them back to the shore, leaving a single kiss on the tip of her nose. “Better than I ever imagined.”

A grin crept over Jangmi’s face and she squirmed to get down from Namjoon’s arms, landing with a small splash in the ankle-deep water. “Does that mean you imagined it a lot?”

It took a lot to get Captain Kim Namjoon to shut up, but Jangmi could practically hear him turning red.

However, it was Jangmi’s turn to be speechless when they got back to the dry sand, and Namjoon asked, “Where have our clothes gone?”
Jangmi looked out across the beach, but there was nothing to interrupt the smooth sand that suggested that two sets of clothes had ever lain there. “I think the tide washed them out into the ocean,” she managed finally.

They looked at each other, naked in the moonlight.

“Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

WELL. We finally got there, folks. The end of the proverbial journey. Except this isn't the end. There is SO much more. So. See y'all next week for the chapter 'The Pirate King Returns'.

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