

The endless blue waters of the open sea shimmered in the afternoon sun, heavy waves battered against the curved hull of a large ship. The chipped paint of its sides were emblazoned with a name, written out in the common language. "Saradihr". The dull red carrack glided along despite the ocean's churning, the sound of waves and gulls interrupted by a loud bellow. On deck, many men and women moved to and fro in sudden, hurried motion. The ship's crew visibly preoccupied with the various workings of their vessel, opposed to their languid state mere moments earlier.

A single, feminine figure stood alone near the ship's stern, paying the crew's movements little mind, eyes affixed firmly on the horizon. A stark contrast to the ship's raucous pilots, she was clearly a stranger. Foreign. Dressed in visibly well-made robes and rather expensive looking black platelets of armor in eastern design, her silken black hair blew lightly in the wind. A sigh passed through her lips as she looked back toward the empty sky being left behind. Her hand rolled a small object around nervously in its palm, clearly a habit to calm her mind.

"Looks like the crew's getting ready for landfall. A few more hours, and we're finally going to be taking our first REAL step out into the world." A man of rather androgynous features and build walked through the cabin that cut off this little stern-ward balcony from the rest of the ship. He was dressed in a simple, loose robe of similar make as the woman. His long brown hair was tied back behind him into a loose ponytail, and his fingers twirled around an intricately carved pipe.

Silence greeted the man back. Apparently he wasn't worth acknowledgment. A smile played across his lips, as if this was something he's used to.

"Having second thoughts, My Lady?"

"Perhaps so..." The woman grumbled, looking out to sea wistfully. "Though I suppose I don't have much freedom for second guesses now, do I? I'd liken it more aptly to homesickness."

The sound of wind and waves filled in the gap of conversation. The woman leaned against the ship's railing, face sinking down to the cool, varnished wood with another long sigh.

"Are you sure the head of the Hawatari clan should be standing around looking so pitiful, Mistress Eiko?" the grin on the man's face grew as he took a puff from his pipe, "Your mother would always greet an opportunity like this with a smile, you know? Traveling around the world..."

The now-named Eiko glared at her retainer, she stood straight as her hand flew defensively toward her breastplate. "Oh? Being away from home must be exacerbating your lack of manners, Atsuki." A scoff escaped her mouth as her face puffed into a pout, "We're barely gone from Teishin's shores for a month, and you already cease playing at titles and decorum."

Atsuki let out a small chuckle before joining Eiko at the railing. "You know I've never been much for manners My Lady." A half-truth. He mostly enjoyed poking at his noble employer for her reactions. "The previous clan head never much minded-"

"I'm not my mother, Atsuki." Eiko's hand still held tightly to her chest.

Atsuki's playful smile quickly faded. A long drag of his pipe and a break in eye contact with the lightning glare of the woman next to him. "I'm sorry, My Lady. I've crossed a line-"

“...It’s fine. I know you meant no offense.” she replied, side-ward gaze and a sigh. Eiko was rather used to this man’s attitude back home, but admittedly over the last month her patience for it has been whittled down considerably.

Once again the sound of waves. Wind. And the cries of birds. Eiko broke the silence this time.

“I cannot return home, Atsuki. You know this as well as I do.” she states, matter-of-factly. “It’s not a choice.”

Another small chuckle.

“That’s why I’m here to help, My Lady.” Already leaned back against the railing again, the retainer replied with another smug grin.

He took a long drag from his pipe, and exhaled with a sigh.

“Do you really think he’ll keep his end of the bargain, My Lady?” The two’s eyes met, as the man continued. “This self-proclaimed ‘Shogun of Swords’ has already cleaned out most of the old nobility back home. In all likelihood as soon as you return to Teishin to give him his prize he’ll just-”

“I’ll do what I need to do Atsuki.” Eiko interjected. She clearly had no intention of walking herself to her own death.

A strong gust of wind blew across the deck.

Eiko continued, meeting Atsuki’s incredulous gaze with a fiery glare. “If the artifacts he desires are truly capable of what the rumors say, then that man will be nothing to me but a blade of grass when we return.”

Atsuki could practically feel the hatred emanating from the female samurai. He didn’t want to ruin the mood, but she really reminded him quite a lot of a small, upset puppy when she got like this.

“He definitely doesn’t expect you to return at all, My Lady.” Atsuki continued the topic, after his employer had visibly calmed herself. “This isn’t the first time a little ‘expedition’ has been sent out to find the Ivory Swords. It’s a clear ploy to be rid of you.”

The Ivory Swords were a rather infamous legend in Teishin. Only one of them has ever physically existed in the country. Allegedly a blade given to man by the gods, carved out of the very bones of their kin. Hence “Ivory Sword”. Though no one’s actually seen the other pieces of the supposed set, and after many historical failures to track the rest down, most sane people accept them fully as myth.

“I suppose we’ll just prove him wrong then. Won’t we?” Eiko answered. No hint of hesitation or doubt in her eyes.

Atsuki couldn’t hide a smile at that. “Of course we will.” A puff of smoke broke up his statement. “I’ve already tracked down a handful, after all. Snatching them up is all you need to do.”

In the next moment, a loud bellow rang across the ship. Louder than earlier, a different tone. Atsuki's eyes narrowed as he quickly tucked his pipe away. Eiko's gaze shot upward at the sound of flapping wings.

“A WYRMGULL!!! ALL HANDS ON DECK! A WYRMGULL IS ON US!!!”

“A worm gull?” An image of a flying worm flashed through Eiko's mind. “What manner of beast is that?” Eiko further inquired as her and Atsuki hurriedly walked through their bequeathed cabin onto the crowded and bustling wood of the ship's main deck.

“They don't tend to fly as far east as Teishin huh? I'd liken them more to rabid monsters, if I had to be honest. Though I'd say the same of gulls in general, so that doesn't really mean much.” A brief memory of a rather violently clever seagull eating the man's pipe earlier in the week accompanied his words.

Stood at the door to the ship's interior, the two travelers peered out just in time to see the massive body of the gull pass overhead again. It's size almost dwarfing the vessel.

“Well, My Lady.” Atsuki spoke up, Eiko's eyes drew away from the sky back toward him. “I'm not much of a fighter, I'm sure you know. So I'm going to hang back for this one.”

A sigh escaped from the disappointed samurai's face. Her brow furrowing in response. “I assume you're not going to just be sitting around playing with your balls, are you?”

With a laugh, the man had already begun rummaging through the room, “Not today. I'm always a man of contingencies. Not that I don't have the utmost faith in you, Mistress Hawatari.”

“Don't forget to ensure that Himari's safe as well.” Eiko says before leaving the rummaging retainer behind in the dimly lit quarters. A nonverbal thumbs-up was her only reply.

Eiko walked unfazed through the organized chaos and took root in the middle of the ship's main deck. Orders were shouted, and curses were thrown all around her as the Saradihr's crew prepared for the swipes of the looming beast. The beast who's shadow stretched out over the entire ship, it's massive wingspan seeming to dwarf the vessel as it flew directly overhead.

“Wrymgulls like to glide over their prey for extended periods.” A large, tan woman stood next to Eiko, well over two head above her, with a wild mane of dusky black hair. The red satin bandanna she wore over her eye and the large, loose-fitted silk sleeves that blew in the wind reminded Eiko this was the Captain who welcomed her and her retainer onto the ship. “They tend to only have the chance for a single strike, when hunting their usual prey. So ensuring that it doesn't miss plays a large part in their caution.”

The mental image of an eagle swooping down and swiping up river salmon comes to Eiko's mind.

“If you're thinking it'll try scooping our ship up like a trout, no.” The Captain answered the girl's furrowed expression with a grin, eyes fixed to the birdlike silhouette in the sky with a hand on her blade. “Wrymgulls' usual prey range from whales to sea-aurochs. Things even larger, and much heavier than it. They love to wait and watch for food that don't dive below the waves at the slightest danger, and when they're sure they're on target...”

The large shadow covering the ship shifted away, as it's source began to outpace the seacraft.

"They move to strike. And to latch on."

Pivoting in the air, the bird turns itself to face the ship, before diving talon-first toward it.

"FIRE THE BALLISTAE NOW!" The Captain's voice rang out, as the ship's large rotary ballistae attempted to shoot down the wyvern-sized ornithoid. The few shots they were able to fire off barely grazed the beast, grazing it's massive flight feathers and going wide of it's abdomen.

"Thahira's Tits-" The Captain's curse was cut short. In the next moment the ship rocked forward under the Gull's considerable weight. Perhaps not as much weight as it's size would imply, but definitely considerable. It's long, hook like talons dug themselves deep into the deck and hull, splintering and bending the Saradhir's wooden body effortlessly. The ballistae fired off one final round, only barely grazing the beast's flanks, before being crushed by the impact.

"What are we supposed to do about this thing now?" Eiko yelled back at the Captain, watching the ship's main defense against this thing get crushed under it's scythe-like claws.

The Captain, still yelling orders to her men, looked back to the much shorter woman. "These bastards don't sink ships. Not usually." slowly unsheathing her absolutely massive, straight sword, the woman continued. "They latch on, preventing their prey's escape. And then begin eating them alive, bit by bit."

Sure enough, that's exactly what the monster began to do. It's large head quickly snapped and lunged at the wooden deck, tearing apart plank and flesh as it beak caught the panicked crew members before they could escape. It's strikes seemingly random, unpredictable.

Eiko avoided one of it's stray swipes in a panic, barely dodging a fatal peck as the strap of her chestplate was caught in the bird's razor teeth. Rewarding the gull's near miss with a lightning fast swipe of her own, sword finally unsheathed.

"Heyyyy! Nice bleeding hit, Samurai!" The Captain yelled and quickly gestured her head toward the more pressing issue. "I think you pissed him off!"

A large stream of red seeped down onto the ship, a large bleeding gnash was cut into the flesh of the wyrmlike Gull's head. Just barely missing it's large, yellow eye. It screamed out, clearly pained by the deep, red wound that now stained it's pure white feathers.

"You react fast Samurai." The Captain smiled, unloading a crossbow bolt into the gull's breast to no reaction from the bird, "Think you can handle this bitch?"

"Of course." Eiko fired back with a determined look of her own. Not a moment of hesitation.

The gull had begun enshrouding the deck of the ship with it's absolutely massive wings. It's white feathers blotted out the sun as it slowly reared it's head back. Unfeeling, golden glare meeting Eiko's. Eiko herself stood ready, hand on the hilt of her blade. Knowing she was it's target made this much simpler to her.

A second later, the beast pecked again. Air rippled around its beak like a vortex. Eiko parried it this time, the sharp blade of her sword barely chipping the beast's beak as it glanced her chest, her armor deflecting any real damage.

Without pause however, it went in for another attack, swiping the woman firmly across the stomach, sparks flying from the protective metal. The impact knocking Eiko backward, off balance, as the air was momentarily knocked from her lungs.

Firmly pushed on her backfoot, Eiko's ornate breastplate finally fell away, rather dramatically freeing the woman's large sea of cleavage from the confines of the enchanted armor. A light blush ran across her cheeks and a redness flushed her ears as the black metal sprung outward like a mechanical hatch, clearly having lost its small, unspoken battle with her prodigious bustline.

"Auugh... The seals broke again, Himari." Eiko almost groaned out. A small hint of frustration on her face as she glanced down at her open neckline of porcelain flesh now on fully display and completely unprotected.

The gull made for another strike as Eiko hurriedly prepared to block, before the loud whistle of a large bolt broke through the air, piercing the beast's eye and causing it to recoil in pain.

"Ahaa! Shoulda brought this bad boy out to begin with!" The Captain joyously exclaimed over the piercing sound of screaming bird. She tossed her heavy arbalest to the deck with a thud, gesturing to her nearby crew, before looking back to the eastern woman she just saved. An appreciative whistle left her lips, "Don't know how you were hiding those things, but don't get distracted now-"

An ear-piercing scream erupted from the beast, interrupting The Captain. The feathered wyrm's entire body tensed and its neck drew back. With another whip in the air its head snapped down toward its target with unbridled, life-ending force. It was well beyond pissed.

Eiko's partially exposed breasts almost seemed to glow, as time moved forward moment by moment. The pale flesh graced by a single beauty mark thrummed with a manner of unknown magic. The woman herself was more than used to this, a part of herself and her swordsmanship; her mother's gift. Sensually running her hand down from the curve of her collarbone, to the swell of her breast, she caressed her blade with the dull, thrumming light, fingers dancing along its length as she readied her stance. And with a final, gleaming slash of light, its edge met with the wyrm's beak.

The next moment the head of the beast was in two. Dead. Its large body fell over the deck, viscera and gore poured freely over the railings and into the sea. Eiko stood there awash in red as she flicked the blood from her blade. Appearing the very picture of a calm, collected warrior.

The Captain ran up to the girl and began to violently jostle her in thanks. Cheers and impressions of amazement echoed between her to her crew, as they fully took stock of the situation. "That was BLEEDING amazing Samurai! What even WAS that?"

Eiko refused to make eye contact, a look of raw stoicism graced her features. A smattering of meat on her face. Red, viscous blood dripped from her hair into her ample cleavage. She ignored the crew's bewildered gazes and cheers, and slowly walked over to the deck's edge. She leaned herself over the railing, looking out over the now calm sea in a posture of contemplation. Cold gaze locked on the horizon. Before proceeding to violently vomit into the blue waters below.

Eiko could never handle blood. Much less THIS much blood.

A familiar hand began massaging her back. Eiko looked over her shoulder at its source, Atsuki's face with an infuriating grin greeted her gaze as he patted her from behind. His gesture's reply was a haggard, sickly look from the noblewoman's usually dignified face, before she quickly began upending her stomach over the rails again.

The sun had set, and the ship had begun sailing again. They were to make landfall before dusk, but the earlier interruption with the bastard of a gull had put them far behind schedule. The ship's damage was mostly inconsequential for now, the prow was broken up more than slightly, but far above the waterline. One of the ballistae was already repaired, and the other disassembled and moved below deck. The crew had rather quickly skinned, and begun to package the gull's carcass up into various commodities. This seemed to be a rather common occurrence in these waters to Eiko, if their cleanup process was so visibly efficient. The Captain brashly made it seem as if they could've handled it, if Eiko hadn't. At least after the fact.

Eiko sat up in the steamy bathtub that furnished her rather large cabin. Another Teishin woman hummed behind her in a chair, black hair tied back into a loose bun, content smile graced her attractive face. The woman dutifully washed Eiko's hair, sleeves rolled up, hands moved with experience and care. This was something she'd done many times before.

"Feeling better My Lady?" She asked, smile never leaving her lips. Soap covered hands moved from Eiko's long, shimmering hair, to her lightly muscled back.

"Well, I definitely smell better, at least..." Eiko sighed, her stresses still in the process of being washed away. "I do feel much better... Thank you, Himari."

The aforementioned Himari sighed herself, though a sigh of relief more than anything. She often worried about Her Lady's many stresses, and general stubbornness. Though she admittedly admired how eager the noblewoman was to jump to other's aid. "You know, the crew were clearly very grateful for your help earlier-"

Eiko brushed off the topic with a wave of her hand, "They're just being kind. This is something they're more than experienced with. The Captain assured me they deal with this all the time. It was merely a bad day."

"Perhaps so, My Lady..." Himari's hands massaged the back of Eiko's neck, as the nude woman rolled it lightly in response, "But you apparently saved them a lot of time. And money. So they're rightfully thankful. They are traders, after all."

A small break in conversation as Himari's soapy fingers forcefully rubbed into Eiko's shoulders.

"...No one was hurt, I hope?" The sappy noble looked back over her shoulder with a pout.

Himari snickered stealthily, her mistress could often be surprisingly cute. "No fatalities. Some of the men came out with injuries of course, but nothing major. A few minor cuts and scrapes. A broken rib at worse it seems."

A relaxed sigh erupted from Eiko's mouth as she leaned back fully emerging herself in the bath's water. "I'm glad..."

A moment of warm, familiar silence drifted in. Himari wordlessly positioned herself toward Eiko's front as the girl continued to remain submerged.

"I assume Atsuki's down there enjoying the victory feast?" Eiko continued, languidly lifting her arm from her watery domain as her servant began running soap down the lightly toned limb.

Himari laughed. "Oh of course, that crass man's been friends with the Captain for years. He'd be down there getting drunk with her over anything! Remember when he got his pipe back from that bird last week? The two drank all night long together!"

Eiko couldn't hide a small laugh, she slowly sat back up as her eyes quickly roamed the room. "What was that fool's 'contingency plan' anyway?"

"The usual." Himari answered, "He vary haphazardly gathered together all of our stock of healing tinctures and scrolls, in case our lovely Lady ended up overestimating herself again."

Himari's hands quickly moved onto Eiko's prodigious boobs without missing a beat. Blush immediately overtook the noblewoman's pretty face.

"Hey! You know full well I can wash my own breasts, Himari!" Eiko pushed her retainer away with a small start. Her cheeks practically radiating pink, obviously sensitive about the aforementioned body part.

Himari giggled. "Oh come on! They're nothing to be ashamed of, Eiko. Allow me to ensure that they're un-wounded! Ease my troubled mind!" Himari moved forward and gave them a playful squeeze, eliciting a helpless yelp from her noble mistress. "Your mother sure left you with a heavy burden huh?"

"You and Atsuki clearly enjoy antagonizing your employer don't you!?" Eiko huffed, face beaming red. "I'll make you *regret* teasing me!" as she quickly answered her retainer's attack with a hard splash. Water meeting Himari's face. Both women began snickering at the exchange, and after a small contest of revenge, continued on to more small talk. Before soon being left with comfortable silence, Eiko's small bath coming to an end not long after.

Her body cleansed and mind soothed. Eiko donned a comfortable kimono with Himari's assistance. The two continued discussing the upcoming journey, the days events, the ship's crew. Before long Himari began readying the small group's belongings for their inevitable departure, as Eiko made her way back out onto the moonlit deck. It was quiet now, most of the crew being below deck in the dining hall. She made herself comfortable against the still-sturdy railings of the ship's battered prow. The cool night wind danced on her skin, blew the ends of her robe lightly in it's grasp.

Ahead, in the dark of night, the warm lights of an unknown city lit the distant shore. Eiko's eyes affixed firmly on the warm and welcoming scene, ready for whatever surprises her journey had waiting for her. Small piece of carved, white ivory pulsing warmly in her hand. Anticipation mounting.