

R Cultivator 411

Chapter 411: Connecting to the 'NN'

In the vast, open sea, a luxurious ship glided peacefully across the glittering waves. From a distance, it looked serene — like a floating peaceful palace blessed by the heave. But within, it was anything but quiet.

The crew bustled with energy and purpose, each member attending to their duties with practiced ease. Whether polishing weapons, or navigating the ship's magical arrays, everyone was hard at work.

Perched casually at the edge of the deck sat Su Fei, fishing rod in hand, her long hair gently swaying with the sea breeze. Despite the flurry of activity on board, she had carved out her own tranquil corner of the world. But boredom still loomed like a lazy cloud over her head.

To keep herself entertained, a small, floating projection screen hovered before her, playing a romantic movie like Demon Fox falling in love with a mortal kind of story. She watched it with half interest while keeping an eye on the water.

"Here is your coffee, Ms. Su Fei," said a voice behind her.

An octopus tentacle extended from the side, balancing a fine porcelain cup and saucer, along with a small plate of steaming dumplings and spicy crackers.

"Thanks, Taka," Su Fei replied, taking the cup gracefully and sipping. "Mmm... cinnamon?"

"I added a little spice to suit your taste," Taka replied proudly, his tentacles curling.

Su Fei suddenly pointed toward the waves. "Looks like those are your people?"

Taka turned in the direction she indicated, squinting. "Hah... Miss Su Fei, stop teasing. I'm the only handsome octopus man in this sea!"

"No, seriously," she said, narrowing her eyes. "You forget your cultivation level isn't high. Look closely."

Taka adjusted his monocle-like lens and peered again. His expression shifted from amusement to surprise.

From beneath the waves, a pod of fishmen surfaced—some riding sleek dolphins, others swimming alongside. Several children, with glimmering scales and excited eyes, stared wide-eyed at the magnificent ship. The children waved enthusiastically.

Taka chuckled and waved back with two of his tentacles. "Must be a small fishmen settlement nearby."

Inside the captain's cabin, a few crew members had gathered around a glowing map table. Arrays flickered across the surface, displaying their current position and potential routes.

"There's a detour ahead," Tuman reported, pointing to a red-marked area.

"Should we really reroute again?" Lily asked, sighing as she studied the overlapping projections in front of her.

Tyler leaned over the map and nodded. "Yeah. I'd rather not risk entering the Valaria Subcontinent. The Abyss Breakout in Ixalaria was already a nightmare. Valaria shattered because of an Abyss eruption ten thousand years ago. The passage there hasn't closed—it connects to a deeper layer of the Abyss. One wrong move and we'll be caught in another disaster."

He paused before adding, "I don't want another Abyss Run nor another Vale Village."

There had once been two great continents: Valaria and Ixia. When the Abyss first erupted, it tore Valaria into fragments that scattered across the oceans. Ixia was nearly consumed as well, but through the combined might of brave cultivators and ancient immortals, the land was healed and the rift sealed—giving birth to what is now known as Ixalaria.

Serena's voice chimed in suddenly from a crystal orb in the center of the cabin.

"Tyler, I've made progress on connecting to the NN," she announced.

Tyler perked up. "Great. What's the update?"

A blue holographic projection of Serena appeared. Her figure was semi-transparent, dressed in a scholarly outfit with floating data screens around her.

"Before we connect, let me give a quick explanation," she began, her voice amplified for all to hear.

"In these chaotic seas, where Aura and Prana fluctuate wildly, stable communication is nearly impossible. But there is one network that transcends traditional boundaries—the Northern Network, or NN for short. It's essentially a digital newspaper system, maintained by the Federation."

"Only certain locations or ships with specialized arrays can connect to it. But even if not all crew members can access it directly, I've set up a terminal to print physical copies for distribution."

A gentle hum filled the cabin as a projection of a floating newspaper materialized before Tyler. The heading read in bold letters:

NN - Northern Network Daily

Tyler grabbed the projection like it was a physical sheet of paper. "This is surprisingly immersive."

He scanned the front page, eyes narrowing. "There's actually news about the fall of the Clown."

Lily leaned in. "Any names?"

"No, thank goodness," Tyler muttered in relief. "There's a photo of the burning circus, but no mention of us. If that Feng bastard finds out I'm still alive, he'll teleport to me just to kill me again."

"Still," Lily said, narrowing her eyes, "it's only a matter of time. News spreads like wildfire. If this is already out there, future leaks are inevitable."

Tyler sighed and nodded. "Looks like we'll need to keep a low profile."

Lily raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Correction—you need to keep a low profile. Leave the business and public affairs to me, Mathilda, Darla, and Mana. You should avoid drawing attention."

Tyler grinned, realizing she was right. "What about if we run into crazies like Clown again?"

"Then we wear our masks," Lily replied coolly. "We use our alternate identities, remember?"

Tyler's eyes gleamed with excitement at the thought. "Yeah... Mode Shadow Then"

"Oh... Captain, look at this." Suddenly Lily pointed at another section of the projection. "We haven't even made our official debut, and there's already news about us."

Tyler raised an eyebrow and leaned over. "Huh... Phantom Pirates? Pirate Challenge?"

Lily scanned the article quickly, her eyes darting over the glowing text. "In short, the so-called 'Phantom Pirates' don't like that we used the name Phantom before. They're calling us impostors and have issued a Pirate Challenge."

Tyler frowned. "They're betting their pirate name as the stake?"

"Yup," Lily confirmed. "They've gone so far as to ask other pirate crews to find us and deliver the message. They want us to show up at Veins Peak in six months for a formal pirate duel."

Tyler sighed. "Wow... the name of a pirate crew and their Jolly Roger flag are symbols of their pride. They really want to gamble that? We even changed our name already."

"True. We're the Blackwood Pirates now, technically," Lily said, folding her arms. "But they're still hung up on our first appearance being under the name Phantom Pirates."

Tyler went silent for a moment, tapping his fingers against the table. "Hmph. I actually liked the name Phantom Pirates more than Blackwood Pirates. It had a certain mystery to it. Also..."

He took a breath and narrowed his eyes. "How dare they say we're fake Phantoms."

A head suddenly popped down from the ceiling, hanging upside down like a bat.

"Yeah," Mana chimed in with a playful grin. "We even have a real phantom on this ship. That makes them the fake ones."

Lily rolled her eyes but chuckled. "Honestly, I'm kind of tempted. It's been a while since we stirred things up. What do you think, Captain?"

Tyler's grin slowly stretched across his face. "Let's do it. If they want to gamble their pride, I'm happy to crush it. Let's go and snatch the name back. We'll make waves as Phantom Pirates again."

"As long as we activate the Shadow Mode," Lily added, "we won't need to worry about getting tracked. We stay unpredictable."

Tyler nodded. "Exactly."

Lily turned toward the front of the deck. "Tuman!"

"Aye?"

"Change course. Our new destination is Veins Peak."

Tuman gave a sharp salute. "Aye, Vice Captain!"

"Serena," Lily continued, "There should be a way to send messages to the Northern Network, right?"

Serena's voice responded promptly. "Yes. There's a community board called 'Threads'—people use it to post rumors, announcements, and bounty updates."

"Perfect. Post this: 'The Phantom Pirates from the South are sailing toward Veins Peak.' That'll stir the pot."

"Message sent," Serena replied after a brief pause. "It's already gaining views."

"That was fast." Tyler muttered.

Tyler leaned against the railing, watching the sun dip low over the horizon. The sea stretched endlessly before them, calm and glittering with golden light. In the distance, seabirds cried out, and the ship's sails fluttered gently in the wind.

"So much for staying under the radar," he muttered.

Lily shrugged, arms crossed casually. "If we're going to be hunted anyway, we might as well do it in style. Besides, it's not us they're after—it's the Phantom Pirates."

Tyler chuckled, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "Sounds good to me."

Just then, the door to the CIC room slid open, and Su Fei walked in with her usual calm yet sharp presence.

"Oh? Fancy seeing you here," Tyler greeted, raising a brow.

Su Fei didn't waste time on pleasantries. "What is this 'Threads'? How do I access it?"

Serena materialized beside her in a soft glow, her projection flickering as she explained. "Threads is a message board under the Northern Network. Think of it like a place where pirates, merchants, and lunatics post rumors, updates."

As Serena spoke, Tyler and Lily exchanged a curious glance. Tyler turned back to Su Fei. "Why the sudden interest?"

Su Fei hesitated, then muttered under her breath, "...To get views."

Chapter 412: Tiger Reefs

After a Week...

"Oh, you can pay using your Bank Card, we also accept Cash" Darla said with a charming smile, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Or, if that's not your style, materials and treasures work just as well."

Three ships floated peacefully near the White Pearl, their sails fluttering gently in the ocean breeze. While the scene looked calm from afar, trade was underway in full swing.

Darla, Mana, and several other crew members had boarded one ship each, engaging in merchant negotiations. It was a routine they had mastered—swift, professional, and with a subtle air of mystery.

Mana flew back gracefully, her cloak billowing behind her as she landed on the deck. She whispered something to the crew, prompting a few members to begin storing barrels of wine, crates of fruits, and other exotic goods into enchanted storage bags. One crew member bowed and vanished with a storage bag, delivering the items with practiced efficiency.

Mana headed straight to the captain's quarters, only to find Tyler sprawled dramatically on a couch, sulking like a teenager denied dessert.

"Ahhh... I want to meet other people in the seas," he groaned, tossing a peach into the air and catching it with the same lack of enthusiasm a student might show during a boring lecture.

"You can't," Mana replied, crossing her arms. "That's the plan. You're the mysterious CEO operating from the shadows. If people start seeing your face all over, we'll lose the narrative. Also, make sure Immortal F doesn't hear any news about you."

"Immortal F... Pfft..." Tyler chuckled, rolling his eyes.

"Be serious," Mana sighed. "We can't say his name. What if he can sense it?"

Even though Feng Feiyan, the Immortal that tried to kill Tyler, doesn't have that ability yet, they are not taking chances.

Tyler waved her concern off with a smirk. "Still..."

"Yeah, yeah. Mana gets it. You're bored." Mana rolled her eyes. "And no, there were no beauties on those ships, Uncle Horny. Mana checked. So stop trying to flirt with every girl you see."

Tyler froze mid-peach bite. "Uncle Horny... It's been a long time since I heard that nickname."

The sea was vast, and for Immortal Practitioners, finding merchant ships was rare.

Also it's risky to approach an unknown ship in the sea. What if they attacked without warning.

Even the three ships they traded with today had approached cautiously, their captains on edge until reassured.

"Boring. Boring. So, what's our next route?" Tyler asked, tossing the peach core into a waste array.

"It's called Tiger Reef," Mana replied.

"Oh! We're already there, huh?" Tyler perked up. "I heard there are reefs under the sea shaped like giant tigers. Let's stop and dive underwater!"

Mana grinned. "Since we're stopping anyway, we should collect some Tiger Pearls and Orange Seaweed. They fetch good prices in the some floating cities."

Tyler nodded, the merchant side of him finally kicking in. Although he could replicate almost anything with his copper pot, he was too bored now to replicate everything he sees.

Once the trades wrapped up, the White Pearl resumed course, sailing smoothly through glittering waves.

Later That Night — Near Tiger Reef

The skies glimmered with starlight, but the true beauty came from above—three moons hung in the sky, but today it was the Purple Moon, the largest and closest, that bathed the sea in an otherworldly violet glow. The waters shimmered like liquid amethyst.

Nearby, a pirate ship was docked at a small island no bigger than a stadium. The Jolly Roger flying on its mast bore a grinning skull with an exaggerated, curly moustache. The resemblance to the captain was uncanny.

On the island, the pirates were busy. Some separated Aura and Prana stones into different sacks; others weighed and counted Lydia notes with greedy eyes. Bottles of rum clinked as a few drank to the spoils. Patrol boats circled the area, ensuring no surprise visitors.

"Hahaha! I like this spot!" the pirate captain bellowed, his thick moustache bouncing as he laughed. "Perfect view. Keep an eye out for passing ships! The sea gods might send us another prize tonight!"

"Aye aye, Captain!" his men echoed.

A Few Hours Later...

One of the smaller patrol boats floated lazily a short distance from the island. A pirate snored loudly, slumped in the boat, his fishing rod dipping uselessly in the water. The other, rowing absentmindedly, sighed in irritation.

Suddenly, two short whistles echoed from across the waves.

The rower straightened immediately, alert. "That's the signal! A merchant ship's been spotted!"

He glanced at his sleeping partner and frowned. With a grunt, he used the oar to smack him squarely on the forehead.

"W-what?! I'm the new captain?" the sleepy man mumbled, eyes half-closed and mind still in dreamland.

"Stop day dreaming during night time, you drunk sponge. Focus. I got the signal—two whistles. Merchant ship incoming."

A moment later, a long, loud whistle followed.

"Three-whistle code. Regroup." The pirate's expression turned serious as he turned the boat around. "Better get back before Captain rips us a new one."

As the small patrol boat cut across the glowing purple sea, the silhouette of a large vessel began to take shape in the distance—sleek, fast, and sailing silently toward the reef.

The ship heading their way wasn't just any merchant vessel.

It was the White Pearl.

"Captain, we're detecting multiple energy signatures approaching," Tuman reported, eyes fixed on the glowing console. "Looks like a pirate ship."

"Are they hostile?" Tyler asked, his voice calm but curious.

"Doesn't seem like it. No cannons or other weapon arrays are locked onto us," Tuman replied, adjusting a few dials. Just then, a small translucent window flickered open in the air.

Serena's voice echoed through the room. "The other ship is sending a transmission signal. Requesting communication."

"Patch it through," Tyler said, leaning forward.

A circular audio icon appeared mid-air, and soon a string of voices came through—chaotic, unfiltered, and clearly unprofessional.

"Huh? Is this thing connected or what? Why it is still red? Hurry up already—"

"Captain, wait—Red means disconnected—"

"What? They disconnected?"

"Captain, you're colorblind, remember? It's green. It's already connected!"

Tyler and Tuman exchanged a glance, both fighting back a laugh.

A rough cough followed, then the supposed leader spoke, trying to sound official. "Ahem. This is the Tash Sun Pirates. Don't worry—we're friendly. You just have to pay a tiny amount of Lydia as toll to pass through this stretch of water."

"Just a toll, huh..." Tyler replied with a sigh, clearly disappointed by the lack of drama. "I was expecting some action."

He was expecting some Pirates raids and all.

"Did they hear us? Why is there no reply?" one pirate muttered in the background.

"Wait, Captain. Maybe they're still thinking—"

Tyler waved a hand and said to Tuman, "Whatever. Pay the toll. And ask them if they know anything useful about the reef—good materials, rare resources, that sort of thing."

"This is Tuman," Tuman began, taking control of the conversation. "I'm currently handling operations—"

But Tyler was already gone. He went straight into the ship's internal Pocket Dimension.

Inside, the time of day and night mirrored the outside world. Simulated moonlight streamed through the clouds as Tyler walked through a lush garden path toward a regal castle-like structure. Maids in neat uniforms bowed as he passed, acknowledging their Master with grace.

He nodded in return and entered a quiet room adorned with silk curtains and floral incense.

There, lying on a bed like a slumbering princess, was Astrid.

"Astrid..." Tyler murmured, brushing her cheek gently with his fingers. His expression softened—until he suddenly paused, feeling a sharp fluctuation of energy beneath her skin.

"What the f—" Tyler blurted, his eyes wide in shock.

—

A few minutes later, Mathilda was beside him, scanning Astrid with a device that looked both magical and medical.

"Hmm... looks like the anomaly that merged with Astrid is accelerating her cultivation," Mathilda said thoughtfully. "She's right on the verge of reaching Grandmaster level."

Tyler blinked. "Just from sleeping?"

"Yup. Leveling up by doing nothing. Can you believe that?" Mathilda huffed, clearly jealous.

As she continued her examination, Mathilda's hand casually lingered—and then fondled—Astrid's chest.

Tyler narrowed his eyes. "Oi..."

"What? just regular check up." Mathilda said innocently.

"Wipe those drools on your mouth." Tyler said.

Mathilda smirked. "You know, if you dual cultivated with her while she's unconscious, it might actually boost her growth further."

"Absolutely not," Tyler said, grabbing her by the wrist. "This is why I don't let you visit her alone."

Mathilda pouted dramatically, then suddenly spun around and kissed him. "No fair. I'm already Horny. Help me calm, Captain..."

He carried her into the next bedroom.

Mathilda even shamelessly called some maids to join them. The maids blushed but didn't refuse. Tyler also had no reasons to refuse those beauties.

Back in Astrid's chamber, silence returned.

Except for one tiny movement.

Unnoticed by either of them, Astrid's eyelids twitched — just a little.

Chapter 413: Transparent Corals

"Even though we're merchants, business hasn't been great lately. How about we give half the toll and call it even?" a merchant pleaded, trying to negotiate with the Tash Sun Pirates.

"You guys are seriously haggling?" one of the pirates scoffed in disbelief.

Just then, a loud splash echoed through the sea. A massive anchor, shaped like the letter W, plunged into the water with a dramatic crash. The ocean rippled, drawing everyone's attention.

The White Pearl had arrived.

Standing proudly on the deck was a masked man surrounded by an entourage of stunning women in shimmering swimsuits, their confidence radiating as they posed without a trace of shyness. Each of them looked like they had just stepped out of a divine painting—elegant, playful, and dangerous.

It was none other than Tyler White, accompanied by Lily, Mathilda, Mana, Darla and Su Fei.

Without hesitation, the group leapt gracefully into the water, splashing into the crystal-clear sea one by one.

From afar, the Tash Sun Pirate Captain observed the scene, puffing up his chest with pride. "Now look at that ship. No haggling. No complaints. Paid the toll without a single groan. That's the kind of respect we expect! And remember, as long as you're in this territory, I swear on those orange clouds—no one will touch you!"

"Captain... those are white clouds," one of his crew members quietly corrected from behind.

The captain squinted at the sky, frowned, and waved the comment off. "Whatever, the point stands."

As the sun bathed the sea in golden light, the waters sparkled in vibrant hues of aquamarine and silver. The surface was calm, and the clarity of the water revealed shadows of reefs below—twisting shapes that hinted at the legendary Tiger Reef.

The White Pearl's group swam away from their ship, guided by what the pirates described as one of the most visually stunning spots beneath the sea. According to their intel, there were breathtaking coral gardens and reef formations that resembled giant tigers carved by nature itself.

Beneath the surface, Tyler and the girls moved gracefully. The girls were using Underwater Breathing Charms that shimmered faintly against their necks. Tyler, on the other hand, didn't need one. His Kunpeng Art granted him full water affinity—swimming with the ease of a mythical beast and breathing effortlessly in the depths. Mana, being something... well, a spirit, didn't need to breathe at all.

"Why the mask?" Darla asked through a Sound Transmission, her voice playful.

They were all connected through Divine Sense, essentially forming an underwater group chat.

"Because I'm the mysterious boss, remember?" Tyler replied, his voice echoing through the connection. "Gotta stay low-key. Don't want you-know-who accidentally sensing I'm still alive."

The group glided through the gentle currents. Shoals of fish darted around them, their scales catching the light like living jewels. Soon, they reached their destination.

In the heart of the reef's embrace, where beams of sunlight pierced the water like sacred lances, a breathtaking structure stood tall.

A solitary coral formation rose from the seabed—a masterpiece sculpted by nature. It stood like a glass tiger frozen mid-prowl, its transparent tendrils forming the elegant curves of a feline predator. Every twist of coral mimicked the outline of a tiger's limbs and body, and the way the light refracted through its form made it look almost alive.

The coral shimmered in tones of cerulean and turquoise, capturing the very soul of the sea. Petal-like structures flared out at its base, each edged with soft opalescence, reflecting dappled beams of sunlight that filtered from above. It was like gazing into a dream—both fragile and eternal, like a ghostly guardian watching over the ocean's secrets.

"This place is beautiful," Lily whispered through the voice transmission, awe in her tone.

"It really is..." Mathilda added. Then her voice perked up. "Let's take some pictures!"

She pulled out a glowing camera crystal from her storage device and tossed it lightly into the water. The crystal floated in midwater, softly humming as it activated.

Su Fei Fox ears perked up.

"Alright, everyone! Group photo time!" Mathilda squealed, grabbing Tyler's arm and dragging him to the center.

The other girls swam in close, practically hugging Tyler from all sides. He chuckled, finally removing his mask and storing it in his ring.

Su Fei also joined, she was held by Tyler in arms. She didn't resist though.

The crystal gave off a bright flash, then rapidly orbited them in perfect circles, capturing a 360-degree view. Everything—from the tiger reef in the background to the playful chaos of the crew—was recorded in exquisite detail.

"All done!" Mathilda grinned. "That's a 3D holographic picture. We can use it for display or even project it like a memory orb."

"That's cool." Tyler said, stretching his arms underwater. "Let's explore a bit more. I heard there's orange seaweed around here—supposedly sells for good price."

As they swam deeper into the coral forest, the reef became even more surreal. Giant coral fans swayed like underwater trees, schools of rainbow-colored fish darted between glowing anemones, and in the distance, Tyler could make out pearl-like orbs embedded in rock beds—likely the Tiger Pearls Mana had mentioned earlier.

Tyler slipped his mask back on with a sigh. "Just let the crew handle the collection. I'm in vacation mode."

"Got it, Captain Lazy," Mathilda teased, floating lazily beside him.

Tyler and the others took one last look at the mesmerizing reef below before allowing themselves to drift through the tranquil waters, soaking in the beauty of the vibrant underwater world. Schools of shimmering fish darted between coral towers shaped like tiger fangs, and a soft light filtered down through the ocean, giving everything a surreal, dreamlike glow.

Not wanting the moment to go undocumented, Su Fei turned to Mathilda. "Can I borrow the camera crystal for a bit?"

Mathilda tossed it to her with a wink. "Don't drop it. Or you have to pay with your body."

She wanted to take pictures of sceneries and upload it in NN.

After a long swim and enough laughter to fill a memory orb, the group made their way back to the White Pearl. As they climbed aboard, they noticed someone new waiting on deck.

A neatly dressed man stood at the bow, flanked by a few others wearing merchant badges. Their ship hovered nearby, clearly marked with a crescent moon symbol.

"We are from the Shade Merchants," the man said, bowing slightly. "May we speak with your boss?"

Tyler waved casually. "Darla will take care of it."

With that, he and the girls casually disappeared below deck, leaving the matter in more than capable hands.

A maid in a sleek uniform walked over with a formal coat draped over her arms. She handed it to Darla, who shrugged it on with effortless grace. Her long hair flowed like a waterfall as she adjusted the collar, her movements elegant and calm.

The merchant, Ruban Shade, found himself momentarily stunned.

Whoa... he thought, coughing awkwardly to cover the blush creeping up his cheeks. "Hello, Miss. I'm Ruban Shade, the branch manager of the Shade Merchants. We're fairly well-known in the Northern Waters."

He extended a hand for a handshake. Darla returned it with a firm but polite grip, her expression composed.

"Oh, I've heard of you," she said with a small smile. "Though I also heard that business hasn't been great lately. I even saw one of your men haggling over the toll fee earlier."

Ruban's smile faltered. His ears turned red with embarrassment.

"Ah... yes, well..." he chuckled nervously. "That's just how merchants talk! We always negotiate. Profit and customers are everything to us."

Darla nodded thoughtfully. "A good motto. Though I'd argue reputation comes first in these waters."

Ruban straightened up, trying to regain his composure. "Well, I must say, I'm surprised to see such a magnificent ship. Are you from an Immortal Family?"

Darla laughed softly, her voice like wind chimes. "Oh, no. I'm not the boss. I'm just the representative. But don't worry—you can negotiate everything with me."

Her tone was confident, professional. Gone was the flirtatious, bubbly Darla that the crew usually saw around Tyler. In her place stood a cool, sharp negotiator.

Ruban nodded. "Of course. We heard you were collecting orange seaweed, tiger pearls, and other rare items. If possible, we'd like to purchase some—preferably at a discounted rate."

He glanced away for a moment before continuing, "Our crew was recently attacked by a Mist Tortoise. A lot of our people are sick from the mist. We could also use healing potions, if you have any."

Darla's expression softened slightly, but her voice remained measured. "Let's discuss what you need and what you're offering in return."

And so, the negotiations began.

Meanwhile, in one of the lounge rooms aboard the White Pearl, Tyler and the girls hadn't bothered changing out of their swimsuits. They lounged on oversized cushions and couches, sipping chilled fruit nectar.

"So... what exactly is a Mist Tortoise?" Tyler asked, frowning.

Mathilda raised a brow. "Seriously? We studied them together."

Tyler scratched his head. "I remember... arrays and weapons. Not weird fog reptiles."

Mathilda rolled her eyes but explained anyway. "Mist Tortoises absorb elements from their environment and generate mist from them. If one lives in a lava zone, its mist burns like molten fire. If it's from a poisonous swamp, the mist will be toxic. Very dangerous. Not something you want to inhale."

"Oh..." Tyler muttered. "That actually sounds cool. Scary, but cool."

"You only think that because you didn't get sprayed by one," Lily deadpanned from the corner, flipping through a magazine titled Immortal's Digest.

Back on deck, the sun began to set, casting golden light across the sea. Ruban Shade wiped his brow. Despite his earlier embarrassment, he felt like the negotiation had gone well.

"You're really skilled at this, Miss Darla," he said earnestly. "If you ever consider a change... the Shade Merchants could use someone like you. With your talent, I promise, within ten years, you'd have your own ship. We'd make you a manager, maybe even a regional head."

He looked hopeful, maybe even a little smitten.

Darla, however, didn't miss a beat. Her eyes met his with a calm finality.

"I can't and I won't," she said simply.

Ruban's hopeful smile faltered.

"I belong to my boss," she added, voice cool as steel. "And He'd be miserable without me serving for him daily."

Then, without another word, she turned and walked away, her coat billowing behind her like the cape of a queen.

Ruban Shade stood frozen, still processing her words. His assistants hesitated before finally escorting their stunned manager back to their ship—specifically, the medical bay.

Chapter 414: Shadow Pearl

Transparent Corals from Tiger Reef — [Image: Crystal-clear coral]

These things are tasty! — [Image: Vibrant orange seaweeds swaying beneath the surface]

Oh what is that orange piece in the middle of the seaweeds?

Wait... Is that? OMG... @SilVixenBabe what the heck is your cup size?!

We came for seaweeds but found Dao Gold.

Step on me. Please.

"The post really went viral," Su Fei muttered under her breath, cheeks slightly flushed as she scrolled through the comments.

"Told ya," Mathilda said smugly, stretching lazily on the couch with a sly grin. "Hiding your orange bikini in orange seaweeds was a brilliant idea."

"Only you would come up with something so... perverted," Mana scoffed from her seat, arms crossed as her spectral form flickered faintly in the ambient light.

"Heh. Who cares if it's crazy or perverted?" Mathilda shrugged. "As long as it works, baby."

The girls were lounging in the lounge room of the ship, while Su Fei basking in the glow of viral fame. Su Fei's NN post was currently trending across several regions, especially after viewers zoomed in and discovered more than just coral.

"Next time," Mathilda continued like a veteran strategist, "try showing just the tip of your toe reflected in the shell of some sea creature. Or in the water's reflection. Always leave 'em guessing. Mystery builds obsession. You want future value, not a quick hit."

"Are you giving influencer lectures now?" Mana asked dryly.

"She's not wrong," Lily chimed in, striding in and tossing a towel over her shoulder. "But enough playing around. Girls' playtime is over. We'll reach Veins Peak by tomorrow morning. So prep for transformation."

Just then, Serena's voice echoed through the entire ship like a command from a deity.

> "Non-combatants, please remain in designated safety zones. Initiating Mode: Shadow. Full lockdown sequence engaged. All hands—prepare for Phantom Protocol. Countdown begins: 30... 29... 28..."

"What the—That's too soon!" Mathilda gasped, sitting up.

"I haven't even uploaded the rest of the pics yet!" Su Fei panicked, trying to connect her communicator again—but the screen flickered and disconnected from NN. Total blackout.

"Too late. You can thank Lily for the early trigger," Mana said, already floating toward her locker. "Now mask up."

One by one, the girls pulled out phantom masks from their storage device and slid them on. As they did, their shadows rippled unnaturally beneath them and merged upward—coating them like second skins. The once-cheerful girls transformed into their eerie pirate personas.

Darkness filled the corridor as Serena's countdown neared zero.

> "...5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0... -1... -2—Just kidding."

The entire ship shook—not violently, but with a sensation like falling into a deep slumber.

Outside, the White Pearl, once gleaming and elegant, began to sink—not into the ocean, but into its own shadow.

It vanished into the dark surface of its silhouette—and then slowly rose again.

But what emerged was no longer the pristine White Pearl.

A ship cloaked in midnight black and lined with glowing crimson runes surfaced from the depths of the void. Its hull shimmered with eerie energy. A new flag billowed in an unnatural breeze—a skull-shaped mask with hollow eyes.

The White Pearl was gone.

This was now the Shadow Pearl.

On the deck, Lily walked forward with her hips swaying, her form now wrapped in tight black leather sexy outfit. Her eyes gleamed behind a half-lidded mask shaped like a seductive smile.

"The Phantom Pirates are back, baby~" she purred, while taking her whip.

"Nope, nope, nope. Your outfit is still way too lewd," Mathilda, now fully dressed in a gothic military coat and thigh-high boots, said with a facepalm. "Seriously, you're going to give every merchant in the Northern Sea a nosebleed."

"Says the girl wearing fishnet under her corset," Lily shot back.

Mana floated beside them, now in her adult ghost form—long hair like silk, wearing a white yukata that glowed faintly under the moonlight. Her lower half trailed off into spectral mist. A cracked porcelain skull mask rested on her head like a crown.

"What kind of name is Malefic Catalyst anyway?" Mana grumbled. "Sounds like a discount villain from a teenage drama."

"Says the girl named Ghost Princess," Mathilda—now referred to only as MC—replied without mercy. "That's peak twelve-year-old syndrome."

As the girls bickered, another figure emerged from below deck.

A tall man in a black coat with silver runes, wide-brimmed hat casting a shadow over his mask. The edges of the coat fluttered in the phantom wind. His mask was expressionless—white with no eyes, just a thin crack running diagonally across it.

"Finally..." he said, his voice low and smooth. "I can show my face again."

"Technically, you're still wearing a mask," Lily—now The Temptress—quipped.

Tyler smirked beneath it. "Details."

With a final step, he stood at the helm. The crew gathered behind him one by one—each dressed in shadow-woven cloaks and ghostly armor. White and black masks, all unique, concealed their faces. The transformation was complete.

"From this moment on," Tyler said with a dramatic sweep of his coat, "we are no longer merchants."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a black trident with glowing red veins running across its body.

"We are pirates. Act like it."

The crew cheered—softly, eerily. It wasn't loud or brash. It was a ghostly agreement, a chorus of the damned.

The Shadow Pearl, reborn in darkness, glided across the waters like a phantom. Silent. Swift. Terrifying.

"Are you really going to use that as your main weapon?" Temptress asked, tilting her head, arms crossed under her chest as she stared at the black and crimson trident resting on Phantom's shoulder.

"Come on... You've been using the same whip with the same thunder attribute since forever," Phantom replied with a smirk. "At least this Abyss Trident matches my outfit. Style matters, you know."

Temptress raised an eyebrow. "There are tons of whip users. So no one would Find out. Besides, the only people who could even suspect the White Merchant Group is secretly the Phantom Pirates would be those who know us very well in our both Identity. And the chances of that happening? Close to zero."

She flicked her whip lightly, sparks dancing in the air.

"And if someone does find out... we'll just kidnap them." She said it so casually, it could've been about offering tea.

"Wait, wait—hold up," MC muttered, rubbing her chin with a finger. "So if I accidentally spill our secret to some random hot babes, I get permission to kidnap them?"

"Hey—keep your inner thoughts inside, MC," Phantom sighed, though a smile tugged at the corner of his lips behind the mask.

"What?" MC blinked innocently.

Darla, who had been quietly listening this whole time, finally spoke up. "Boss... What's my name again?" she asked, her voice gentle but almost trembling.

"Huh?" Phantom turned to her. "Underground... Cooker?"

"Absolutely not, Boss!" Darla wailed dramatically as she threw herself into his side, clinging to him like a child denied candy. She wore a gothic wine-red dress with black lace lining and small ribbons tied around her wrists, her eyes shimmering with betrayal.

"Fine, fine," Phantom said, patting her head. "You'd look cool with an umbrella."

"...Umbrella?" Darla looked up, puzzled.

"Oh! You've got an eye for rare loot, Boss," Su Fei chimed. "I saw a listing on NN—there's going to be an auction at Veins Peak. One of the items is called Shi no Kasa. It's a cursed umbrella with dark attributes—absorbs light, repels energy, and looks wickedly elegant."

Everyone paused and turned to Su Fei, staring in silence.

"...What?" Su Fei blinked.

"Why... why are you dressed like a bunny?" Phantom finally asked.

Sure enough, Su Fei was standing there in a sleek, black bunny girl costume. Her usual fox ears and tails had been replaced—thanks to her shapeshifting abilities — by long bunny ears and a tiny puffball tail on her backside.

"Oh, this?" Su Fei shrugged. "I just wanted to match with the rest of you. Let's be honest, you all look like you're heading to some bizarre, adult-themed cosplay party."

The girls blushed, eyes darting away.

"It's... It's a persona, okay?" Phantom coughed into his glove, turning around to hide his own amusement. "It's to project a sexy and mysterious attitude. It's all about psychological warfare."

"Right... totally mysterious," Su Fei replied, not buying it.

MC leaned forward, curious. "So what's your pirate name, Su Fei? Everyone's got one now."

Su Fei twirled a strand of her black hair thoughtfully. "Hmm... I'm thinking something cool. Like Reaper... maybe Lady Reaper. Has a nice ring to it."

As she spoke, she pulled out a sleek scythe with a silver-black blade etched with glowing runes.

"Now that's sexy and mysterious," Phantom Blackwood praised.

"Boss, stop hesitating and let's just eat this bunny before we reach Veins Peak," MC muttered, wiping the drool from the corner of her mouth.

Su Fei suddenly felt like a helpless rabbit caught between two hungry wolves. Her eyes widened as she took a cautious step back, clutching her scythe tightly.

As their laughter slowly faded into the cool, salty breeze of the sea, the shadow-cloaked ship continued its silent journey beneath the shimmering moonlight.

Far ahead, one of the adventurer ships drifting in the vast waters suddenly stirred. A gust of wind blew across the deck, and a drunken girl lounging near the mast rubbed her eyes groggily.

In the distance, a dark silhouette glided across the waves—silent, smooth, almost too unreal.

"Am I... too drunk?" the girl mumbled, blinking rapidly. "Is that a ship... or some kind of Dark Attribute Titan?"

She squinted again, but the phantom vessel had already vanished into the dark night —leaving only ripples behind.

Chapter 415: Veins Peak

Even before the sun had fully risen, Veins Peak was already alive with motion and energy. The skies buzzed with immortal practitioners soaring between floating platforms, while docks echoed with the clamor of goods being loaded and unloaded.

Dozens of ships—merchant vessels, adventurer craft, and even some infamous pirate ships—lined the massive port, giving the island an air of both chaos and importance.

Beastmen with fur-covered arms hoisted crates alongside fishmen carrying barrels with their slippery hands.

Birdfolk fluttered down from the skies with scrolls and supplies, and even a few elves moved gracefully between the crowds, their elegance stark against the noisy bustle.

At the heart of the island stood the tall mountain. From a distance, it looked like a divine monument cleaved by the heavens themselves. Cracks like giant veins ran down its stone surface, pulsing with an ancient glow. It stood as both a symbol of mystery and majesty. According to the Myth, the veins were created by a God from Ancient Times and brings Lucks to the person visits there.

"Do you think the fake Phantom Pirates will show up?" asked a young immortal practitioner, sweat running down his forehead as he carried a stack of spirit-infused crates.

"I don't know," his older friend replied while adjusting the heavy barrel in his arms. "There's only five months left until the real event. I just hope they appear before then. I could use a good show."

Their conversation was cut short as a sudden commotion broke out along the docks. People stopped mid-task, some dropping tools and cargo, and rushed to the shoreline. Even airbound practitioners paused mid-flight to glance toward the horizon.

Something was coming.

Fast.

A ship—black as night and seemingly shrouded in its own storm of darkness—was speeding toward the island at an incredible pace. The morning light had only just begun to break across the waters, but the approaching vessel remained cloaked in an ominous gloom.

It moved like a phantom adrift, cloaked in shadows — as if the very essence of night had taken the shape of a ship

The onlookers murmured in disbelief.

Many ships were equipped with movement arrays that allowed for high-speed travel, but those were rarely used except in emergencies due to the immense cost and strain they placed on the ship's structure. Also while using these types of arrays, they also had to activate many arrays to stabilize the internal of the ship which also burns money.

"That ship—! If it doesn't slow down, it's going to ram the dock!" someone shouted.

Elite-level warriors began backing away, though they kept within viewing range, unwilling to miss the spectacle. Dozens activated their spiritual communication devices, eager to record what could become the day's headline event.

Hovering in the air above the port, a Master-ranked mage on a levitating broom extended his staff and yelled, "Slow your speed immediately! You're violating port safety protocols!"

When there was no response, the mage conjured a wave spell, raising a massive surge of water to halt the vessel.

Suddenly, a glowing whip crackled out of nowhere—wreathed in lightning—and slashed through the incoming wave like butter. The mage was struck mid-air and sent hurtling back to the dock, where he crashed into a stack of cargo.

Gasps erupted from the crowd.

The ship—still not slowing—drew closer, now a blur of motion and shadow.

But just as impact seemed inevitable, something strange happened.

The ship began to sink—not into the ocean—but into its own shadow. The hull dissolved into the darkness beneath it, like a ghost vanishing from reality. Water rippled around the fading vessel, but no debris remained. No splash. No crash.

Then, with a gust of wind and a flicker of Auras and Pranas, several figures leapt from the shadow and landed lightly on the dock.

Beautiful girls in striking, diverse costumes turned every head — men and women alike. Their outfits radiated exactly what they intended: an aura of mystery and allure, equal parts dangerous and seductive.

At the center stood a man, calm and commanding, a trident slung across his back. His mask bore the haunting duality of black and white—a phantom's face split between shadow and light.

"It's them..." someone in the crowd whispered. "The fake Phantom Pirates..."

"No way. That's them? Are you sure that they're the 'Fake' one?" someone else asked.

"I have seen the bounty poster of Phantom Blackwood before. It's the same person."

The masked pirates didn't respond. In fact, they didn't stay at all. Within seconds of landing, the entire group disappeared—melting into the shadows like mist.

Everyone was left staring.

"They didn't even pay the docking fees," said one of the dock attendants, frowning at his fee ledger.

"Pay what?" another laughed, pointing at the water. "For a shadow?"

In the harbor, the only trace of the mysterious ship was its shadow floating atop the water— perfectly still and ominously intact.

"Is it invisible?" asked a man with duck-like features—webbed feet and a beak that clicked nervously. He bent down and poked at the surface where the shadow lay.

Nothing.

Another man nudged him forward with a grin. "Go check it out, then."

With an annoyed squawk, the duck-man cursed under his breath and leapt into the water, vanishing beneath the ripples.

For a few moments, the crowd leaned forward, waiting.

Then—

"BOO!"

The duck-man's head popped out of the water with a mischievous grin, sending a few spectators stumbling back in surprise.

"Hahaha! Gotcha! There's nothing underwater—it's just a shadow. No ship. No magic barrier. Just the freakiest damn shadow I've ever seen!"

Nervous laughter rippled through the crowd, though many continued to eye the water with suspicion and awe.

Within moments, the news spread like wildfire across the port:

The so-called Fake Phantom Pirates had arrived in the Northern Waters — And their debut? Anything but Ordinary.

And many couldn't help but wonder, — Are they really the 'Fake' Phantoms?

Many people tried to contact the Fake Phantom Pirates, hoping to make connections with the shadowy newcomers who had arrived in such a dramatic fashion. But no one could find a trace of them. It was as if they had vanished into thin air — disappearing like true phantoms in the night. Even though it's morning.

"Exactly as planned," a middle-aged man said casually, strolling through the lively streets of Veins Peak. "They know we're here now. That's all that matters. Let's enjoy some sightseeing and maybe attend the auction without anyone bothering us."

He looked like just another adventurer, surrounded by a group of seemingly ordinary girls. Their clothes were simple, practical. No flashy gear. No masks. No telltale signs of infamy.

They were none other than Tyler and the girls.

After their dramatic entrance, the crew had quickly changed appearances using the Phantom Masks — artifacts capable of suppressing their presence and altering their looks— to blend in with the crowd. From pirates to humble adventurers, just like that.

"Boss, why didn't you pay the docking fee?" Darla asked with a tilt of her head. For Tyler, that amount of money was barely pocket change.

"Oh, I forgot," Tyler replied with a shrug. "Also, wouldn't it be a bit anticlimactic if I disappeared in shadows, only to show up again just to pay some toll?" He chuckled. "Our goal was simple—make a bold

entrance, stir up the crowd, and let word spread. Now we wait for the real Phantom Pirates to show up, then steal their thunder."

Lily, Mathilda, Mana, and Darla all nodded in agreement. Su Fei, dressed modestly, followed silently, munching on some dried fruit. Mana also joined her.

"But I was hoping for a little action," Lily grumbled, hands in her pockets. "Tyler, can't you use your abnormal luck to find us someone to beat up? Something fun?"

"Do you think it works like that?" Tyler muttered.

"Just try."

"Hmph... I wish some idiots would show up so we could vent," Tyler said aloud, throwing his arms up. "See? Nothing happ—"

Before he could finish, a group of rough-looking men stepped into their path. Clad in mismatched armor, they had rusted metal chains around their waists and carried sticks lined with barbed wire. Clearly some local thugs, probably extorting newcomers.

The street around them cleared quickly. Vendors and travelers turned away, pretending not to notice. No one wanted trouble with Street gangs who bullies weak looking tourists.

"Follow us to the alley," the gang leader growled. "Now."

The Girls was dumbfounded and glanced at Tyler.

"...This feels staged," Tyler muttered.

Without protest, the group followed the gang down a narrow alley tucked behind a spice shop. Not long after, muffled grunts and loud cracks echoed faintly into the street. A few bystanders heard the noise, but no one dared get involved.

Minutes later, Tyler and his crew emerged from the alley looking unbothered, dusting off their clothes as if they had just come from lunch.

Curiosity eventually got the better of some onlookers. A couple of people crept toward the alley and peeked in.

What they found made them freeze.

The gang members were scattered across the ground, bruised and groaning. The gang leader himself was lying face down, one of his own barbed sticks lodged into his rear end like a flag of shame.