

VOLUME I

NO, KAPTEN

A ROMANCE OF THE NO SEAT



Hykarl Sufardi

PART I

THE TORN SAIL

A refusal is sometimes the first honest measurement.

CHAPTER 1

The Torn Sail

The sail arrived before the man did.

Four dockhands carried it uphill between them, bundled around a spar and bound with enough blue cord to moor a fishing boat. It struck the frame of Selina's door, shook dust from the lintel, and knocked the little brass bell onto the floor.

Selina looked at the bell. Then at the sail. Then at the four apologetic dockhands.

"Take it outside."

They obeyed with the relief of men released from testimony.

The sail loft had belonged to Selina's mother before it belonged to rain. Half the roof was new tile. Half was argument. One wall leaned toward the harbour as if hoping to hear whether the boats still spoke of it. Selina had spent eleven months making the cutting floor level, the windows watertight, and the west room private. She had not yet rehung the sign.

People found her anyway.

By the time Hykarl reached the top of the hill, the sail lay open across the sun-warmed stones. It was enormous. Cream canvas, indigo edging, twelve radial panels arranged around a lantern worked in gold thread. Each panel bore an empty cartouche for a name.

At the lower corner, the cloth had split along a seam.

Hykarl came up the hill as though the hill had been built to announce him. Long coat open, dark hair disobedient, one hand carrying a roll of diagrams and the other a cup that had once contained tea. A small brass transcription engine clattered behind him on jointed legs.

“Selina?”

She disliked questions that arrived wearing certainty.

“You brought a house to my door.”

He looked delighted. “A sail.”

“At this size, the distinction is political.”

The transcription engine clicked.

SAIL / HOUSE DISTINCTION — POLITICAL

Hykarl glanced down. “Alfred, not everything is minutes.”

The engine struck the line through, leaving it perfectly readable.

Hykarl turned back to her. “The Manor launches in thirteen days. Last departure tide of the season. We tore the foot during the test raise.”

Selina crouched at the split. “No.”

“You haven't examined it.”

“I examined the way it tore.”

He lowered himself opposite her, diagrams forgotten beneath one knee. Up close he looked less like a captain and more like a man who had misplaced sleep and considered the loss negotiable.

Selina put two fingers under the indigo edge. The cloth above it had been cut on the wrong grain. Not accidentally. Someone had forced twelve different pieces into a circular design, then hidden the strain beneath ornamental stitching.

She lifted the damaged corner. The rip continued inward.

“This seam didn't fail,” she said. “It reported.”

Hykarl's attention sharpened. “Reported what?”

“That your pattern is lying.”

The dockhands found urgent reasons to study the harbour.

Hykarl did not bristle. That was his first interesting quality. He leaned closer.

“Can you repair the lie?”

“Cloth doesn't care what you call it.”

“Can you repair the sail?”

“Not by mending that tear.”

She walked the perimeter, testing each join with her thumb. The twelve panels had been donated by twelve houses, guilds, or crews. Different weights. Different histories. The design forced all of them to pull as one without allowing any panel its own direction of strain.

Beautiful from the quay. Dangerous in wind.

At the seventh cartouche she stopped.

Someone had marked the canvas in pale tailor's chalk. A name, written lightly enough to pretend it was provisional.

SELINA – SEAMSTRESS

She looked up.

Hykarl followed her gaze. For the first time since climbing the hill, he had nothing ready.

“That,” he said, “is part of the invitation.”

Selina drew the little blade from the leather sheath at her wrist.

It was no longer than her smallest finger. Her mother had used it to open bad stitches without harming sound cloth. The handle was black horn, polished by two generations of impatient hands.

Selina set the flat of the blade beneath the first chalked thread.

Hykarl watched with the expression of a man seeing a door where he had expected a wall.

“What are you doing?”

“Examining the invitation.”

She cut the thread.

The season's last departure tide was thirteen days away.