

Northwest 121

Chapter 121

Lil handed Cesar the doorknob and entered the captains room. Julio didnt take a seat. Instead, he stood by the door and stared at Lil. Meanwhile, Cesar insisted on standing behind Lil, who was sitting alone in the captains chair, staring at Julio.

Most Southerners despise the Empire, albeit not as much as Julio. They hate the empire itself, as well as all imperial citizens and its products. Its in their past and present routine to steal, burn, and destroy flags from government buildings Anger, resignation, vengeance, and fear. These are among the variety of sentiments from the southerners, but Julios words and actions stand out because hes broken. Hes all too aware of his destruction and what had caused it.

Julios hand caught Lils attention. A few of his fingers were partly or completely missing, she could easily guess who made them that way. Despite that, she had no intention of preaching or babbling nonsense to Julio about controlling his anger or finding inner peace. On the contrary, she sympathised with him to some extent. She would have gone insane too if everyone told her that all of her resentment as a woman was nothing more than a mere illusion. So over the past few years when Lil was recruiting new crew members for the Bell Rock, she accepted men like Julio. As she had no right to control their plight in the first place.

Lil made the decision to face the agitators affecting this journey as quietly as possible. Their mission needed to be precise and quick. They couldnt afford to waste any more time or effort.

So she spoke calmly.

Julio, right?

No one saw your hit as courageous; it just turned into a laughingstock.

Personally, Im not sure what you hope to achieve by shoving me on the shoulder. If you want to rebel, find a more effective way. For example, your status could rise if you rationally refute my decision as Captain and come up with a ground-breaking alternative.

Im sure youre just one of those imperialists, proudly pretending to take the moral high ground. How clich.

You want more people to listen to you, right? Then you have to use your head, not your body. Thats your starting point. It might be easier to hit it with your body right now, but it wont work in the long run. Dont try to influence others in the same manner as the ones who vandalised you, did. Youll be able to see the futility of it if you take a step back and look at yourself.

Julio, who was crossing his arms, snorted. He shook his head and kicked the chair in front of him. Lil dismissed it as a childish act of provocation, but Cesar, who had been silent for a while now, took a step forward.

Youre arrogant. Dont think that the rest of the officers will let this pass just because the Captain goes easy on you this time.

Lil extended her arm to hold Cesar back.

In any way, Julios first act of rebellion has failed, so unless theres another big stimulus, I expected him to stay low for the time being. In addition, increasing the crews surveillance should buy us enough time to reach Serlio.

I hope you behave yourself while on board my ship. Let this be an agreement out of courtesy towards Valtano.

For quite some time, Julio only silently glared at Lil. This compelled Lil to add some more explanation, thinking that Julio was mistaken something.

I wont tell you to trust and follow me as your Captain. We wont be seeing each other after this voyage anyway, so lets just put up with it. I know your loyalty lies with Valtano. Similarly, I trust Valtano, so Ill treat you with the benefit of the doubt. At the very least, dont make a fuss on another Captains ship and ruin your Captains image

There were some Navies in the bar that day.

At his sudden remark, Lil stopped what she was about to say. She stayed still as Julio approached her table. He slowly reached out his hand and held it in front of the candlestick.

I was working there, and they called me up.

I heard them say that my fingers looked like something.

Lil had a hunch that Julio was going to be a tough guy to deal with.

What kind of caterpillars are that? I believe thats what they asked, adding that theyd never seen such disgusting fingers before and wanted to bring them back to the mainland.

Lil could only speculate as to what they might have meant or what made them say that, but there was a big chance it was due to the southern peoples thick bone structures.

Does that give them the excuse to be pathetic and childish? However, far too many people were dragged to the mainland in this manner to only dismiss it as a crude prank. Imperial citizens are crazed for rare items and seek the help of the Navy, merchants, or high-ranking nobles. Sadly, it also includes collecting various races too.

Lil let out a sigh of defeat and touched her brow.

At first, they offered me their silver coins and asked for only one each, but soon a brawl broke out between them because I only had ten fingers. They eventually decided to settle it by rolling a dice to see who would take what. I could only stand there and watch while peeing myself.

I know what youve gone through is unjust and wrong, but I dont and never have defended them.

When they asked my age and I told them I was only 10, they said theyd cut me carefully and hand me over to someone somewhere. I didnt know, but I guess there are places like that in the great Empire? Place where they sell out the little ones by making a spectacle out of them from inside cages. Right? I always thought the Empires culture was brilliant, so I could never fathom why they had to do that to me with my lowly mind.

Lil looked at Cesar standing next to her. He appeared to be on the verge of telling Julio that being a slave was unavoidable. That hed to stop whining and accept his fate. Julio, thankfully, wasnt looking at Cesar. He only stared at Lil, as if he only despised her.

Then they rolled the dice. Deciding whod get the most of my worm-like fingers, how they liked to call them. Not a single soul in the bar came to my aid, they were all as scared as shit as I was. Faces as white as ghosts, all looking down at me. I still cant forget it. In that place I realised for the first time what hell was like.

Julio clenched his fist. Some of his fingers were indeed cut and mutilated, but in the end he wasnt taken to the Empire. Lil could clearly picture a young child who had to run for his life. But she didnt dare to imagine what an unforgettable disgrace it must have been for him.

Thats why merely seeing your face makes me sick. I cant stand it. Its as if you were laughing at me there, too, a ten-year-old child peeing his pants.

If I were there, I would have helped you. Im working for the League to help people like you. You may not believe it, but there are good people like this. Besides, youre not someone I should be laughing at, but someone who should be accepted regardless.

Me? And why is that so?

Because youre a human being. If a child is in danger of having his hand severed, we have to help the child. Im not a strange or suspicious person. I believe its a shame were born in this crazy world that doesnt follow natural laws.

However, I cant help it if Julio wont accept me. The Empire exterminated the Southerners for their appearance, so its pointless to insist Julio to stop blaming me. For those who have been harmed, there is no shortage of vigilance and suspicion of the perpetrator group. Julios fitful hatred for me stems from a fear build-up over a considerable amount of years. Such mental aftereffects are not something I can easily help him with.

I know only one sentence in which your kind uses the word natural.

Its when you say its natural for us to be your slaves. Its actually a word that youre very fond of.

Yes, but I dont believe that slavery is just.

Ah! I see. Youre one of those lofty hypocrites, arent you?

Dont get me wrong. Its not because Im sorry for you or afraid of you. I simply stand by the righteousness and fairness that I prescribe and think and act according to them. Why dont you read the Bell Rocks code instead of having this exhausting argument with me? Do as the code says, and if youre still nauseous at the sight of me, I really cant help it. But as for you, do it for the sake of Valtano. Why would he put you on the Bell Rock if he knew you couldnt stand me?

Julio slowly turned without taking his eyes off Lil. At the same time, Lil looked at him and saw a ten-year-old boy. The face of a young boy that was trapped in a tunnel of fear and resentment.

Some wounds are difficult to heal or may never heal. For Lil, Julio didnt need to try harder. She knew that even being proud of himself for surviving such trauma was difficult enough.

She was partly resentful of Valtano for entrusting her with such a child while they were on their way to perform an important task. However Valtano, like Lil, couldnt have predicted that there would be an exhausting battle. Valtano let Julio board the Bell Rock with the intention of exposing him to the fact that good imperial citizens like Lil do exist.

While Im grateful for Valtanos goodwill, its only making my head hurt.

Ed thought he and Cesar had made eye contact before the captains cabin door closed.

No, now that I think about it, he did that on purpose, didnt he? It was with a very deliberate sneer.

It was a look that distinguished Cesar, whom Lil allowed into the captains office, from Ed, who remained outside. A sense of superiority against inferiority. It may have seemed childish at first glance, but it made Ed feel dirty somehow. In addition, it was a specific type of dirty. Its been a long time since their LeBrun days. With his naive lens, Ed couldnt even imagine that his insignificant palpitations back then were more than just a way to pass the time.

A shameless thought entered his mind.

If I had shown my face in front of Liloa back then, things would have changed dramatically.

But Ed was unable to. Blood and bodily fluids from numerous corpses, as well as lumps of life-threatening cells, covered the hand that he wanted to reach towards Lil. It had appeared to him that if Lils light hit him, his shameful past would be revealed. His ugly and shabby past. With such a chasm, putting Lil and himself on the same line was impossible. In that period, he had been satisfied with just the intellectual longing for the one who was preoccupied with the truth and a cautious sense of sympathy. But during those foolishly wasted years, someone else had a fruitful time by her side.

What he felt now was much more than mere jealousy. If envy was a blade, it would have torn the seat next to Lil in pieces. Had he known it would turn out like this, he would have done things differently in LeBrun

Ed turned around, gritting his teeth. He was already suffering enough even without Cesars provocation.

But he didnt hesitate to kindly remind me of it

He clenched his jaw even tighter and went downstairs.

With the way he sets up our boundary so openly, theres no way he isnt plotting something. The most important thing now is to find my missing oils and medicine bottles as they can be used against me at any critical moment. Im already in a dangerous situation because my threats against Liloas life have proven useless. Cesar must also have noticed that Im unable to reveal my identity. Of course, if Liloa discovers that Cesar knew my identity all along, he will suffer consequences as well, but I have far more to lose Thats why I need to find those bottles before one or both of them tries to kill me I came too far to end things with bloodshed

So during the anchorage, Ed had searched every nook and cranny where Cesar could have hidden his belongings.

Its impossible to believe that Cesar left them behind in Panichi because its his only weapon against me. Im pretty sure its in his cabin, but that doesnt mean I should ignore other possibilities

Ed had already spent several days searching the docks and warehouses, but it was all in vain. As a result, only the navigators cabin remained.

Ed pressed his hat down and walked quietly across the darkened sleeping deck. There was no time for everyone on board to truly fall asleep. A watchman must awake at all times, so even a minor movement could result in dozens of witnesses. That was why a day like today, when a quarrel occurred, was a lucky break not to be missed. Moreover, it was uncommon for even the captain to become involved in the commotion.

It created the perfect opportunity as the old and new crew were busy keeping an eye on each other.

The time to break into the cabin has come.

Because the situation on the upper deck was so tense, Ed was able to slip down unnoticed. The sound of snoring and sleep-talking was heard from the dim gun deck. All the murmurs he heard were cursing their fellow sailors, meaning no one was interested in Ed. Making the next steps simple. After passing through the sleeping area, which was surrounded by bulkheads, Ed moved between the dangling hammocks and the sleeping sailors on the floor. He passed another set of bulkheads, and eventually found himself in front of the navigators cabin.

There was no sign of life beyond the door. If no one was present, the inner bar, which works as a lock, wouldnt be hung. So Ed could gently turn the door handle and push the door open. With the shutters open, the inside was bright. He slipped right into the room. Even though it was an empty cabin with no owner, he wasnt planning on dragging on the search longer than necessary. He trod carefully, taking care not to accidentally step on the fragile parts of the floor. The cabin was quite spacious, with a bed, desk, and even a dresser. As expected, it was the personal space belonging to the person with power only second to the captain. It was probably even bigger than the cabins of the other officers combined. Because it was larger than expected, he needed to plan his search more effectively. He scanned the interior quickly and decided to open the dresser first.

Ed abruptly came to a halt as he approached the closet. His eyes rolled down like stiff hinges. He stood motionless with his gaze fixed downward. A chest that reached just below his knees stood next to the dresser. Ed could suddenly hear the sound of hasty breathing and felt a faint presence. In the plain square box similar to the one put under the bed and used as a closet, seems to be a person. Startled, Ed slowly moved the side of the chest and remained as silent as possible. Eventually, the chest opened rather smoothly and soundlessly, as if it had been well-oiled just recently. Then someone inside looked around the room through a gap thinner than the thickness of a finger. Ed could easily guess whom he was dealing with.

There arent many people on the Bell Rock who can fit into such a small space. No way that Liloa is inside, so that leaves me with only one person.

Shallow breathing could be heard through the gap that gradually widened.

I dont recall having seen him a lot these days, so he mustve been doing this kind of job.

Ed pondered, standing as close to the wall as possible.

What am I going to do with this guy?

Ed thought he could literally hear the observing eyes rolling. The rolling eyes that looked around the room gradually became more vivid. Eyes that would only stop after confirming the cabins intruder.

Ed stared into the air for a moment.

I cant believe Cesar has him hiding inside a chest instead of in the room. This is intentionally done to create a witness. A witness who saw something that cant be refuted. If Cesar has Courant to testify that I did something suspicious, he can get rid of me without getting his hands dirty. Simply the fact of searching Cesars cabin will be enough for Liloa to kick me off the Bell Rock Judging the situation, the bottles will be in the chest with Courant

Ed was thinking about closing the shutters and subdue Courant in the dark.

No, he will probably be taught to shout when he finds someone. Cesar, who has been preparing this in advance, and other well-trained sailors will then launch an immediate attack. That has to be the worst possible ending ever. It will be better to stab him through the middle of the lid, giving him no opportunity to scream. Even though Cesar wont give up so easily, he will need time to set something similar up again.

Ed promptly clutched the hilt of his sword, but then stopped.

Hes part of Liloas original crew A sailor who didnt leave even after Liloa offered their severance, and is still with her.

His fingers had given up the hilt and were clenched in the air.

Courant chose to stay on the Bell Rock. He made the decision to join Liloa in a possible naval battle against the Admiral Shit. So, what now? It will be a problem if Courant comes out of the chest, but it would be equally difficult if he remains inside it. If he comes out, I will undoubtedly be caught. However, if I leave him in this position, he can open the lid at any time while I continue my search. I also cant talk him out of it, nor can I appease him. Courant harbours nothing but resentment toward me.

Ed gradually lowered his arm. He gently pressed the gradually rising lid with the tips of his tense fingers, trapping the sound of faint breathing within the closing chest. He then gently closed the open ring, thereby locking the chest

Chapter 123

Ed could almost hear the sound of Courants heart beating nervously from anticipation.

But the boy cant yell too soon because nothing has been confirmed yet.

He knew that the fear of not being able to see anything wasnt one to be easily overcome.

While keeping an eye out for any potential movements, Ed took a quiet step back.

Things can get very complicated if he has the sudden courage to break the lid open.

Ed kept his gaze fixed on the chest right up until the moment he shut the door. When he passed the first bulkhead a commotion surrounded him. Ed walked right past them. The sailors he saw on the side were those of Jarles and Valtano.

Fortunately, theyre from the hired crew, which will make it easier for possible charges to be dropped. Even if Courant reports the incident to Cesar, theres no reason to associate me with the intruder who broke into the cabin. It could have been a simple robbery attempt on an officers cabin. And based on that crews recent behaviour, it would be a fairly credible accusation Anyway, it will be fine as long as I keep my face hidden.

Lil stared at the palm-sized jewellery box.

In it was a handful of pearls that shimmered in soft colours. Some were light pink, some were light yellow, and others were bright green. Although each colour was unique, the overall effect of them mixed together was quite elegant. Lil swept her finger across their surfaces, listening to the sound of the rolling beads. It felt good as if the sound was tickling her ears. After she placed some pearls in her palm and rolled them on her hand, her nerves that had been on edge due to Julio soon relaxed.

She slipped her fingertip through the pearls. As she repeated such action over and over again, her thoughts were sucked through those beads. Her eyes closed as she felt herself gradually calm down.

Since the day she met Bellus, checking the pearls was the first thing she did when she opened her eyes. Every time she touched them, their round and hard surface reminded her that their encounter was real, that the ecstasy she felt while meeting Bellus was no illusion. In that way, it was fortunate that Bellus had left her something. Since then, it became her habit to check the jewellery box whenever she had the time.

That has been the case for the past week. But today, after looking in the jewellery box, Lil made a fairly reasonable decision.

I received them as a token of appreciation, but Ed also contributed significantly to her release. But he didnt receive anything. It doesnt matter if the pearls are a rare find.

Lil felt guilty about monopolising Bellus gratitude as if it were only natural, so she made her way toward Eds cabin to get her daily dose of medicine and hand some of the pearls over.

While arranging his medicine box, Ed changed his mind shortly after responding initially with Its fine. He raised his head and muttered that it might be worth owning, and immediately picked one up. Lil stared at Ed as he rolled the pearl in his hand, it made her almost forget about her original plan. She intended to express her gratitude to him for helping her cross their language barrier and assist her.

Thank you.

What?

You helped me, so thank you Actually, it ended up with me watching you struggle alone as I could only wait on the side

I didnt just help because you asked. You know that, dont you?

And thank you for convincing me to follow you into the sea.

Ed took his gaze away from the pearl and cast a suspicious glance at Lil. He had a complex expression on his face before rubbing his ear lobe and pouting his lips. His tightly closed mouth moved in a spasm-like manner. At the same time, Lil noticed that Eds earlobe was turning bright red as he rubbed it mercilessly.

If youre going to be flattered about this, just accept it, I dont know what the hell youre doing now.

Captain, what did you eat today? Were at anchor these days, so the food should be good, but are you sure you havent picked up something that was spoiled?

Your contribution was great.

Well, Im glad you acknowledge it.

Ed pretended to be arrogant.

Its written all over his face that hes trying not to like it too much. There wasnt a time in the past when he hasnt been treated harshly by me, but now he seems embarrassed by the fact that I came here out of nowhere and told him this. I noticed this the other day as well but Ed has a rather cute side to his personality

Lil, who suddenly realised she found that fact amusing, bursted out laughing. Eds green eyes, which had been looking elsewhere like a curt child, unknowingly turned towards her.

Lil spoke while looking into Eds dazed eyes.

It was beautiful.

Uh really beautiful

Suddenly, Lil had the distinct impression that they were referring to different things as beautiful, so she raised her brows and made her intentions clearer.

After you pushed me into the water, you mentioned being curious about how beautiful the freedom would be that we gave her That freedom was indeed beautiful.

Ed blinked vigorously as if he had come back to his senses. He then nodded forcefully, remembering what he had forgotten.

Oh, that.

Yes, it was so beautiful that Ill never forget it, and I wouldnt have seen it if it hadnt been for you.

I see

As he lowered his head, his voice faded and eventually became inaudible. Lil lowered her gaze to Ed, who appeared to be interested in the pearl again. His hand holding the pearl was resting on a notebook containing a detailed drawing of Bellus. He seemed to have been in the middle of drawing her when Lil walked in because the lower part of her tail was still incomplete. It wasnt surprising to Lil that a curious researcher like Ed was good at drawing. Especially because Ed had studied medicine, so he was used to portraying complex bodies on a daily basis.

Even after Lil tilted her head from side to side while staring at Eds drawing, Ed himself remained silent. She was even more perplexed when he didnt so much as flinch when she thanked him.

I expected him to put up a silly act or pretend to be arrogant like he did a while ago Hm, Strange This isnt typical of him

With her interest piqued, Lil observed Eds current behaviour and noticed that he was refusing to make eye contact with her.

I havent really thought about it, but now that I do, I realise hes been looking elsewhere a lot lately.

Lil tilted her head again and spoke.

You really managed to capture her likeness with your drawing.

Oh, you think so?

Ed calmly fiddled with the pearl in his hand. Lil bent her head even lower, trying to meet his gaze. However, Eds eyes remained fixed on the pearl.

How strange. Ed is the one who has always tried to look me in the eyes or even stared at my face. So why is he suddenly acting like this?

She sensed some distance between them and Lil, who did her best to act friendlier than usual, suddenly felt awkward. When she eventually left his cabin and came back to her own, she recalled Eds flushed expression.

Lil rubbed some of the pearls with her fingertips.

It appears that Ed struggles to adjust to my more easy-going demeanour. Of course, things are already better than they were a week ago. There are good times, like when we were on the deck, and awkward times, like just now. However, I keep getting this faint sense of dj vu as if Ive seen such behaviour before

Lil followed her memory all over the place, and the answer came easily to her.

Yeah, Ive seen reactions like that in Sesbron. Half of the men who approached me were composed perhaps due to rigorous practice, while the other half hesitated to look me in the eyes. I havent seen it in a long time, so I almost forgot about it. But, if my memory serves me correctly

Lils eyes widened in shock.

What?!

She groped down her throat, making sure her necklace was still in place.

No, I dont think so

Unlike her previous experiences in Sesbron, Lil ruled out the possibility that Ed may be liking her as a man.

If hes really attracted to men, he would have been acting like that from the start. Besides, he looks at me so clumsily as if he hasnt seen me smile before. I guess hes just shy about finally being recognized. Yes, thats right.

Lil nodded with her hand touching her chin.

Getting to know Ed without any prejudice puts my mind at ease. He turned out to be a good and decent man. Im relieved to know that he is. Well, Im not really relieved, but

Lil clenched her fists, making the pearls surfaces grind tightly in her hand. In the corner of her mind, a stern voice started to bark incessantly.

Dont look for him. Dont think about him.

A desperate scream echoed through her head.

This is wrong. You cant follow him.

Ed was an outlaw who easily infiltrated Mortus castle. Despite no one telling him to do it, he kept visiting to talk about the world outside the castle. The landlord showed his displeasure every time Ed left the gates wide open when he walked out of the castle he allowed himself to enter without

permission. And as always after his departure, a strong wind blew in the open space Ed left behind. Even though Lil stood far away from him, his wind fluttered the hem of her skirt. It was a tickling breeze. A pleasant one that made her feel good every time it reached her. Lil had no choice but to stand still, hoping and waiting for Eds return. Thinking this would be the last time

Chapter 124

Liloa.

Lil raised her head.

You seem to be deep in thought. I knocked on the door, but you didnt answer.

She indeed failed to hear it. Lil looked up at Cesar, who was already standing next to the captains seat. Startled by their sudden closeness, Lil made a clumsy sound.

Uh

With her mouth open so stupidly, Cesar moved closer and took off her necklace. He leaned over the chair and licked Lils still open lips. With his actions, Lil soon came to her senses and reciprocated, gently touching and sweeping his lips with her own tongue.

Cesar let out a hot breath between her lips.

What were you thinking about?

Nothing

Cesars tongue became entangled with hers, stopping Lil from finishing her sentence. His big, hot palms wrapped around her cheek. Lil led his tongue in her mouth with much familiarity, knowing that sucking and rubbing it pleased him.

Are you still thinking about it?

No

The hand that was groping over her shirt eventually held up her waist, making Lil stand up from her seat without any resistance. She suddenly realised it had been a long time since she last slept with Cesar.

It seems like its almost been two weeks Yes, definitely more than a week So around two weeks.

Lil then recalled the bandage that was wrapped around her body.

Cesar might not have mentioned it because of my injury. And as he hadnt complained about it, I completely forgot.

In the midst of her thoughts, Lils body was carefully lifted and placed on the bed. Cesars lips dug immediately into the nape of her neck, making her giggle reflexively as it was her most ticklish part. His lips, which had been nipping on her neck repeatedly, bit her bumpy earlobe. The throbbing sensation was as loud as if thunder had struck her ears. Cesars tongue then followed the circular path along her auricle before raising its tip to pierce Lils earhole. As soon as he took off his tongue, her wet ear cooled down, causing a few of her hairs to get stuck on her skin.

She worried a little, thinking they couldn't sleep together given her body's current state. But, an idea came to mind.

There's no rule that states we should follow the traditional route. In addition, there's no other way to solve this since I'm on my monthly period

Lil skillfully complied with the procedure. A wife's duty was to satisfy her husband, rejection was immoral and impudent. In that regard, Cesar was very considerate of her.

This way, he won't have to deal with my period.

When they were mixing their bodies, he never told her to lie down on the desk or the floor. He never made any unusual demands either. And he wasn't the kind of man to stop after fulfilling his own desire only.

So what's missing?

Lil kept asking herself that one question. Cesar was the ideal lover, who did nothing wrong and didn't lack anything. She was being treated so well. It would be difficult to find a more caring man than he was to her. By all accounts, Lil might be the most fortunate woman in the Empire.

So at first, the fact that she couldn't love him back, drove her crazy. The thought that she might be a shameless and strange woman stressed her out every single day.

The problem isn't with Cesar, but with me. I'm giving him a hard time, while he's hoping that I'll change my mind. There's nothing wrong with Cesar. So why? A man who will only look at me in the first place isn't love supposed to be like that? All I have to do is appreciate and accept the love he's wholeheartedly giving me.

Lil pushed Cesar and rolled him over to her side. She got on his belly and swept her dishevelled hair. She then slowly lowered her lips and gradually made her way down his body. Meanwhile, Cesar's eyes, clouded by the burning heat, fixated on her.

Liloa, you don't have to.

Lil ignored his words while her hands were already taking off his pants. For Lil, this wasn't unfair. Cesar always wanted to do the same for her, but it was she who didn't enjoy it. She refused from the start, so she was never in a position to feel neglected. In some ways, she felt it was better for them to end their night this way. At the very least, she didn't have to worry about getting pregnant. She didn't have to wash her entire body, either. And considering how a ship was always running low on water, she thought it was rather fortunate.

Liloa

Cesar tilted his head backwards and grabbed the back of her head. Lil had no time to get her breath.

If I delay this even a little, he'll cool down quickly. Then we'll have to start all over again

A pair of black eyes kept staring at Lil. The gaze was so intense that it felt like it would pierce a hole in the middle of her forehead. Lil's brows continued to flinch and twitch. The eyes, hidden by a gloomy shadow, had dark red blood dripping from them and were horrifically sharp. Because of this, whenever Mortu watched over her, Lil couldn't sleep. Even when she managed to fall asleep, nightmares would hunt her, making that worse than not sleeping at all.

Mortu appeared to be visiting her almost every night now. He was especially tenacious and assertive on this voyage. As a result, Lil had trouble sleeping and was unable to close her eyes these days, causing her to develop symptoms of insomnia. The area around her eyelids stung as if vinegar had been poured on them, her eyeballs were sore as if they were about to fall out, and her nerves were jacked up as the dizzying thoughts in her head screamed at each other. In this state, it was killing to stay still in bed like this. Moreover, she was not alone, so she couldn't move freely and express her struggles fully for fear of waking Cesar.

While holding her breath, Lil carefully stood up and walked away from the bed.

If it comes to it, I can just say I just woke up after falling asleep.

Lil glanced back. Cesar tossed and turned, but he never asked her where she was going. Instead, a pair of dark eyes watched her quietly. Lil walked across the room, trying not to turn her head towards that gaze even slightly.

As soon as she left the cabin, Lil put the toothbrush she had brought with her into her mouth. Her throat was parched from thirst. She couldn't stop herself from washing her mouth, that tasted as if she'd been chewing on salt for hours. Rinsing it out felt not enough, so she scrubbed her teeth tenaciously with abrasive powder.

In the South, the bristles of a toothbrush were so harsh that they could sometimes irritate the users gums. Lil, on the other hand, appreciated them on days like today.

She spat the water she used to rinse her mouth over the railing and saw the frothy water vanishing among the calm waves. The remaining water was splashed across her face. Her facial muscles, which felt stiff due to frowning while trying to fall asleep, gradually loosened. Lil picked up the glass bottle containing some birch sap*. In an instant, her mind became clear after dipping some with her finger and filling her mouth with the refreshing taste. She pursed her lips and blew into the air, her breath swept through her mouth and tingled her tongue.

What are you doing?

Startled, Lil quickly closed her mouth as if she'd been caught doing something bad. She was all too familiar with that tone. It wasn't a young voice like Courants or a friendly voice like Jerichos, but an easygoing and mature one. Lil immediately recognized the owner of the voice. She knew, even though all she could see was darkness. Unknowingly, she twisted her body away from the voice, thinking it was fortunate that she met him only after she finished brushing her teeth. If it had happened sooner, Lil thought it would have been pretty awkward.

You don't have to know.

The still fresh scent lingered in her mouth.

Why did you come out late at night and wash your face like a cat?

A Cat?

Cats wash their faces like that.

Pat. Pat.

She couldn't see him, but she got the impression that Ed was imitating the way she washed her face earlier. At the same time, she felt water trickling down her forehead and temples. Lil wiped the remaining water off her face with her sleeve.

Her tired eyes got heavy once more, so she closed her eyes for a while. For Lil, this situation was no different from torture as she felt dizzy enough to fall asleep immediately, but she knew she couldn't because of the insomnia.

But why are you out here? You should go in quickly.

I don't want to.

There was no reason to force Ed to go since he already said no, so Lil just left him alone. She spoke to him with two sentences, but he responded only to one.

Not that it matters.

Just like that, their conversation got cut off. Ed wasn't as chatty as usual, and Lil wasn't naturally talkative either. So she fixed her eyes on the sky. When she got out of the cabin, she walked over the ship without a sense of direction, but somehow she found herself standing directly in front of the clear half-moon. Lil could only see the moon's upper body as the rest was obscured by clouds serving as its nightly curtains. Moonlight fell onto the sea, creating a long stream of light dancing on the waves.

After they stood there awkwardly and looked at the moon for quite some time, Ed suddenly muttered.

I'm feeling depressed

Lil guessed that this was his response to her first sentence. Ed muttered some more while resting his chin on the railing.

I've been a bit depressed these days

**Footnote:*

Birch sap: also known as birch sugar contains Xylitol, which is a natural sweetener and can also be used as an active ingredient for oral hygiene. Xylitol provides numerous benefits. For example, it protects against cavities and prevents the formation of dental plaque and gum disease. It also makes us secrete saliva, which helps to regulate the pH of the mouth, controlling acids and promoting the protection of tooth enamel [Lacernatur].

Chapter 125

Lil simply stared at Ed without responding. Although she couldn't see him clearly, she could tell that he appeared to be crestfallen. His face was pale, his normally neatly styled hair looked more like a bird's nest, and his cheeks had red marks on them like they had been scraped. Also, through those unkempt bangs, his bloodshot eyes could be seen.

With his chin resting on his hands, his lips drooped weakly.

Why?

Nothing is going well, and I dont see any signs of improvement. Its frustrating me, and I think Im going crazy

Is it because you have difficult patients? Is Marenzio drinking again? His arm must not have healed yet, but he already took off the cast

That only contributed to my anguish by an insignificant amount.

Then, whats troubling you?

Its all because of the Captain.

Why me?

Ed slipped down and crunched in front of the railing. He then wrapped his hands around his head and pulled his hair.

The birds nest on his head must have been formed by such actions.

Uhh No, dont mind me. Im saying a bunch of nonsense. Ha! My bad. My bad.

It was Lils first time seeing him so downcast, but she accepted it with ease. They had recently grown closer, so she expected to see a variety of expressions from him.

Eds a human being as well, and he cant go on with holes in his lungs.*

So she knelt next to him and held out her sap bottle. In this position, her toes got caught by the breeze blowing from somewhere.

Try this it refreshes your mouth, so its great to consume when youre in a bad mood.

Whats this exactly?

Birch sap was the first snack Lil encountered while living in the South.

The southerners said it was great for preventing cavities, so while its primarily used for hygiene, I enjoy its great taste and refreshing feeling.

Lil secured the sap in a glass bottle to keep it safe from the ships various small creatures. The fact that she was willing to go to such lengths to preserve it, proved how much she liked it.

So, if he tries it, hed most likely

Is this birch sap?

I was wondering what else it could be.

How do you know?

The people of the Western Continent also use this for their dental hygiene. Apparently, this originated from the South. Well, now that I think about it, the only continent that doesnt know about this is the Central Continent; perhaps thats why the peoples teeth there are particularly bad. Its due to the lack of this sap.

Is there at least something you dont know?

It was a sincere but serious question.

What on earth dont you know?

Ed stroked his chin slowly, clearly agonising over an answer. His face, which raised one brow, radiated an arrogant glow she had seen from him before. Anticipating what he was about to say, she wanted to withdraw her question, but Ed was faster.

Hmm, is there even such a thing?

Lil's face shrunk like the surface of a rotten apple.

How can he be so predictable?

Seeing her distorted expression that looked like a piece of fruit that had been stuck in the corner of a box for too long, Ed shook his head.

I'm only kidding.

Lil responded with a frown.

Seems like you're doing fine.

Don't judge it so easily, I'm still depressed.

You're looking fine.

I know.

Lil's sour expression persisted. She tried to retrieve the bottle from Ed, but he was much quicker.

But what can I do? Huh? Captain.

Before she knew it, Ed was holding on to the sap bottle.

What?

Lil immediately put more strength into her hand in order to retrieve her precious snack. As she was holding on like that, another hand suddenly came up and covered her cheek and ear, causing her left shoulder to flinch unconsciously. Lil stiffened up because she couldn't figure out why Ed was doing this. As if mocking her surprised expression, his hand that had rubbed her ear, proceeded to brush the hairs on her forehead away one by one. His fingertips caressed her cheek as he tucked the strands behind her ear. Lil flinched her shoulders again at the ticklish sensation she felt near her earlobe. It was only then that she questioned this unexpected physical contact.

Get your hand off me.

What on earth should I do

Now

Lil, who raised her eyes and glared at Ed, was taken aback. His green eyes were fixed somewhere on her forehead. Because their eyes didn't meet, it gave her the opportunity to examine his expression. Suddenly, she felt suffocated because she couldn't understand why Ed was looking at her so affectionately.

Your forehead. It's bleeding. I stitched it up some time ago and knew I needed to check on it now and then, but it seems they broke already.

Lil exhaled the breath she had been holding in. The man who appeared to have lost himself a while ago now appeared indifferent. He was still pulling her baby hairs from her forehead, but Lil realised

now that their physical contact was not intentional, it was to examine her wound. Knowing this, her tense shoulders loosened up.

If thats what he meant to do, he shouldve told me ahead of time. Why is he surprising people by not saying anything?

Ed let go of the sap bottle.

Lets go down together for a second.

After securing the bottle in her hands, Lil ramblingly asked.

Oh, where?

My cabin.

Now?

Well yeah, otherwise I have to bring my bag up.

Do you really have to see it now? Cant it wait till morning?

Its on your face.

But you said you were depressed.

Ed swallowed the words he couldnt utter.

Because its on your forehead You cant see it, so you dont mind it, right? I wish you would think of me the same way. Just let me follow you while you are you, moving without any reserve. If I could do that, I dont think Ill ever feel depressed again and to be completely honest, I want to go with you.

Well, yeah I know.

Lil stood up and brushed off the pants or her pyjamas.

But since youre the doctor, you know whats best.

Ed stayed silent and only looked up at her. Lil eventually looked down to ask him what was wrong, but Ed suddenly stretched out his hand towards her.

Youre the one who said that I needed to get my wound stitched. But now youre acting like a four-year-old.

Just humour me, Im still feeling depressed.

Are you really depressed? Or is that just an excuse?

Nonetheless, Lil took his hand and helped him up. Ed felt strange when Lil didnt put strength to her hand like one would do when shaking hands, but instead pulled him gently as she was helping up a fallen child.

So youre actually a nice person, huh? I thought Jericho was saying crazy things

What? What!

Nothing.

Ed remained silent and led the way down the stairs. Whenever he said something like that, she tried really hard to hide the fact that she was secretly a warm-hearted person as she obviously didn't want to show it.

Im not sure why, but even such an unusual reaction was lovely No, no.

He abruptly cleared his throat to cut off his thoughts. Even if he didn't look back at Lil, who was following behind him, he was aware of her dull expression. As a result, his nape began to burn. With his head down, he sped up his steps and opened the door to his cabin.

It's shabby, but come in.

He held out the door for her.

Lil squinted her eyes at her brightened vision. However, after blinking a few times, she came to the conclusion that it actually wasn't that bright. There was not a single light shining on the wall of the room. In fact, the only light illuminating Ed's cabin was the dim desk light he had just turned on when they entered.

Although moonlight came in through the open window, it was too weak. Lil glanced around, puzzled as to why she thought the place felt so bright.

Have a seat.

Ed pointed to the bed. While still checking if any of the lights or lanterns had been turned off recently Lil sat down on the bed. The room only had a desk and a chair, so naturally, her only option was to sit on the bed. Ed rummaged through his bag, took some tools, pulled his chair, and sat down right in front of her. Because Lil was sitting on a soft surface that sank in a bit, her knees and thighs got automatically pressed together with one of Ed's legs on both sides. Embarrassed by the situation, the two of them looked at their legs. For a moment, Lil attempted to lift and adjust her right leg, but in the end, she had to put it back in the position she started in. No matter how hard she tried, she was trapped between his thighs

Objectively speaking, this is the best option if I consider the alternative

Lil closed her legs obediently. Being surrounded by his strong limbs gave her the impression that she was about to be held in his arms. It was something she was aware of whenever she was in front of him. And Ed appeared to notice that as well.

It happens a lot recently.

She suddenly remembered his affectionate gaze a moment ago.

However, that was a misunderstanding and I already confirmed that he was only examining me.

Nonetheless, her thoughts persisted.

But his expression didn't appear to be an illusion. What the hell is going on?

**Footnote:*

Hole in the lung: We guess this is a Korean proverb, unfortunately our research didn't lead to a conclusive answer. Seeing the context in which it's used, we assume it means something in the range of; Everybody feels the need to vent their troubles./ Everybody can temporarily lose their composure due to their troubles/ etc.

Chapter 126

Hm First of all, Ill have to remove the stitches.

Lil nodded her head. Seeing her gesture of approval, Ed started to dig through his bag for something again.

What can it be?

Like someone determined to find some evidence, Lil examined the small space meticulously. However, the plain cabin gave her the same impression as when she entered it. In the dead of night, the cabin, where the use of open fire was strictly forbidden, felt strangely warm and bright. It was the same sensation she experienced when she came here to seek Eds help with the mermaid.

Despite the lack of a particularly bright source of light, the entire room appeared well-lit. There were no dark corners. No monsters were rising from the shadows, nor eyes piercing through the black smoke staring at her.

Its very strange. Normally, Mortu can appear anywhere and everywhere. He isnt limited to just the Captains room but it seems too bright here for him to enter

Lil smiled softly at her small victory and her tension gradually dissipated. She turned her gaze to Ed, who was focusing on her brow with a serious expression.

Looks like the scab is about to fall off. Be careful from now on.

Lil closed her eyes due to the soaring drowsiness.

Really, I dont know why

Eds voice could be heard in the background.

I was very careful so that it wont leave a scar

Its so bright here

But thanks to that

Weirdly bright

In the end, she didnt find her answer.

Ed lowered his eyes after applying a fine ointment along the wound. Unbeknownst to him, he was just in time to see Lils eyelashes fall into place and remain closed. His eyes, who witnessed the rare event, froze for a split second, not comprehending the situation. When Ed finally processed what had happened, he immediately held his breath, afraid that the sound of his breathing would wake her up.

After carefully attaching the cotton cloth, he slowly moved away from her. He took a brief look at the person who had unexpectedly fallen asleep. With her eyes closed, Lil looked like a stone statue.

You came out of your cabin, brushed your teeth, washed your face, and now youre back to sleep again I cant figure out what your intentions were

Ed actually planned to talk to her some more over the course of her treatment, so he regretfully smacked his lips.

But, this isnt a bad development at all. Im very pleased with the conveniences that come with being her doctor. When she noticed I was looking at her wound instead of her, her rising alertness immediately ceased and she even followed me down here without an inch of doubt. Her wholehearted trust in the effects of her necklace makes her actually more vulnerable than when she knows shes posing as a woman. Thanks to being her doctor, my relationship with her is definitely improving. She thinks her necklace is impenetrable and Im benefiting greatly from that belief But I never expected that she would fall asleep here.

Lil was already comfortably dressed for bed. Wearing a clean but wrinkled shirt and baggy pants of the same material. It seemed to be a combination chosen at random, making Ed wonder if she would have been more conscious of it if he had met her in such an unusual outfit under normal circumstances.

Then I would have teased her and had a good time.

Ed imagined her expression, with her wide open eyes and her cute mouth yelling at him. But his fantasy was cut short by the realisation that he was robbed of this opportunity and a bittersweet smile hung on his lips. Ed slowly shifted to a lonely mood. But when Lil, who was sleeping, dropped her head, he looked at her in surprise.

Lils head, which had bent to her left, stirred violently, causing her untied hair to flutter. Ed was terrified by the scene and tried to shake her out of it, however Lils violent nodding continued. He initially thought it was a joke, yet it wasnt.

Her willingness to stay asleep is incredible. Normally, someone whos uncomfortable would open their eyes at least once, but I cant even see the tiniest crack in her eyelids I thought I would wake her up if I breathed the wrong way, but seeing her sleep so deeply, those were some needless worries

Her neck, which had been swaying wildly, suddenly snapped backwards.

Crack.

Ed quickly raised the back of her head after hearing a crack. At this point, the fact that he hadnt put her to bed felt like a crime and he started to feel guilty very quickly.

Ed, trying to be gentle, laid Lil comfortably on the bed while assisting the back of her head. He then tried to cover her with a blanket, but he couldnt because Lil was sleeping on it. Realising this, he noticed her pyjamas clinging to her lying body. Her soft curves were revealed beneath the thin material. He bit his tongue several times before he hurriedly pulled out a cloak and covered her. However, to properly tuck her in, he had to bend over her.

Ed remained motionless for a moment, his head near Lils. He simply needed time to process what he had witnessed. He finally tried to raise his head after rubbing his eyes and cheeks with his hand several times. When he did, Lil moved her head and faced him. It had to have been an unintentional toss-and-turn, but it made him extremely happy and grateful. Lil could have turned to the wall, so Ed choked up as she instead faced him. He would never have seen such a sight if she had moved her head to the other side.

Ed stood up and turned on the bedside lamp. Her face, which Ed hadnt been able to see clearly, became brighter in an instant. It was then that he noticed that the hairs around her face were still damp from her cat-like washing from earlier.

I never really noticed it before and it doesnt fit the way shes behaving at all, but her cheeks are very chubby and cute. The round skin under her eyes and along her front cheekbones is full and elastic, making her smile more lively and fresher than anyone elses.

Ed desperately wanted to poke those cheeks.

I want to press my finger down her soft cheeks and surprise her or stretch them out to give her a plump face. Or maybe Ill rather bite or suck them

At that last thought, he swallowed his dried saliva and gazed at her from her head all the way to her toes. Her body, having expended the last of its energy, was buried in the bed.

Will she ever notice or remember

But that kind of nonsensical satisfaction wasnt what he wanted. Ed didnt want Lil to merely acknowledge him. He hoped that shed recognize his feeble mind. Give him a warm hug and whisper to him that he wasnt a bad guy and it wasnt his fault Even if it was just for a moment, Ed wished for Lil to remember him, miss him and wouldnt forget him

Just like I do now.

Ed squeezed his fingers and decided to put up with it. He knew that the guilt about his deception would come back to haunt him, but what he didnt know was how hed deal with it in the future.

Someday Later Not now, but in the near future

He quietly returned to his chair and sat down

Cesar looked at the empty spot next to him. After pressing it with his hand, it took some time for the hollow cotton mattress to swell back up again. For now, only the wrinkles remained. He swept his hand over them, but all that was left was a chilly spot, Lils temperature couldnt be felt at all.

Is her temperature the only thing I cant feel anymore?

Cesar, who tossed his legs for no reason, wondered how long it had been since he opened his eyes.

I remember that I woke up for a while when Liloa went out, but I fell asleep again. However, I only slept lightly and eventually woke up again, unable to overcome my sensitivity I know she finds it hard to sleep, but why isnt she back yet? Doesnt it bother her that Im here alone like this? Lately, shes been doing things she hasnt done in a while.

Cesar sat up in bed and stared into the darkness that engulfed the room from ceiling to floor. After some time he put on the shirt that was carelessly tossed aside

Lil had no sense of reality around her. Everything seemed distant as if it were a dream. A completely different world began when she awoke from her peaceful and refreshing dream. Lil rolled her eyes in bewilderment, then snapped back to the present.

She first noticed a back hanging over a desk. A man laid on his stomach in such an uncomfortable position that anyone who would see him would feel sore in an instant.

Lil yanked off the cover and looked at the hand which she thought was holding a blanket.

This isnt a blanket, but the one Im laying on is.

What she had in her hands was a big coat. Lil set aside the piece of fabric that appeared to be a fur coat, unsure about why anyone would need it in this type of weather.

No wonder that Im sweating so much, look at the thickness of this thing.

Lil wiped the sweat from her brow and rubbed her fingers together.

Ed?

Seeing that the shutters are closed, can it still be night? I have no idea how much I slept.

Suddenly, Lil was concerned about Cesar waking up without her being there.

Oh, God!

Last night, she only thought about blinking once, but it turned out she actually fell asleep. Still unable to believe what actually happened, Lil rubbed her eyes and noticed that her eyelids were puffy. In retrospect, it also felt like her memories were slashed with a knife. Lil stood up awkwardly, rubbing her eyes once more before tapping Ed on the back.

Chapter 127

Wake up. Go lie down on your bed and sleep there.

But the body, crumpled between the chair and the desk, remained motionless. It puzzled Lil how the guy even managed to close those green eyes of his in such an uncomfortable position. She shook her head and looked around the room.

Hm, his desk and bed arent that far apart but it will still be a hassle to drag his body as hes so tall, hes even taller than Cesar

It wasnt until her fingers that were scratching her head went down to her chin that she realised what had been going on.

Oh, this bothers me. Tall men like him need specifically designed beds. Im not sure why he never told me that his one is too small

In the meantime, her other hand never stopped tapping Eds shoulder.

How tired must he have been to not wake up or even respond? Its strange that a man who received swordsmanship training can be so unbothered while sleeping.

Are you sure youre not just pretending to be asleep?

Lil shook her head at the sound of her own voice. She hadnt intended to ask it aloud, but it wasnt a pointless question either.

A normal person would prefer to get back to their bed as soon as possible

Lil couldnt suppress her yawn.

I was the one who fell asleep in his bed, so I should be the one who takes responsibility.

Wake up.

However, Ed didnt budge and only mumbled inaudibly. The situation did seem to irritate him, evidenced by the wrinkles between his brows. In the end, Lil was forced to wrap her arm around his torso. She had just awoken herself and wondered if she had enough strength to lift him. Fortunately, the distance wasnt that far. Lil tightened the muscles in her abdomen and lifted Ed up. A grunting sound escaped from her lips. After dragging the giant barely close enough to the bed, she threw his body on it.

Ugh Youre so heavy Oh, come on.

Because Lil failed to get his entire body onto the bed, she had to push his still dangling legs up. Looking back at her handiwork, it appeared that Ed wasnt in a comfortable position as his head was bent unnaturally. Lil was about to give up when she noticed his frowning face and realised that the way his neck and legs were positioned was indeed incredibly uncomfortable.

But why arent you waking up?..

Lil shrugged her shoulders while muttering the useless question again. Her motivation to fix Eds position began to wane, so she calmly raised her body, thinking she had done enough. But her gaze, which was slowly moving away from him, stopped at his forehead. Foul language slipped through her lips.

Damn it. The wound on his forehead hasnt healed yet.

Brushing away his messy bangs, she could see the bruise that was initially covered by the cotton cloth he had whined so much about.

Its unsettling to see wounds Id inflicted on other peoples faces. Whats worse, when the wind blew, all the sailors who saw Eds forehead, asked him where he got such a hilarious injury. Of course, he couldnt say it was actually caused by the teeth and lips of their very own Captain.

That thought annoyed her even more.

I have to get rid of those marks as soon as possible.

Lil reached under the bed in search of Eds medicine chest. At the same time, the string of questions continued to flow through her mind.

How the hell did I manage to make it look like that? Its like I carved it out with my front teeth. In addition, its round and dark red, like I gave him a hickey!

Lil found some ointment and approached him. Standing still and stretching out her hand, her finger carefully landed on the remote island in the middle of his forehead. She looked at him, hoping he wouldnt wake up.

What she found rather strange was the fact that Eds sleeping face held no expression. He usually showed a wide range of emotions. Eyes full of curiosity, a grumpy childlike expression, or a mouth complaining about unfair treatment. At times it even made her dizzy due to her inability to keep up with his quickly changing expressions. This was the first time she was seeing him with such an expressionless face. Lil paused her finger and stared at him.

He doesnt look any different from usual, but at the same time, he does

With his small nose, smooth face free of bumps and curves, and clean, spotless skin, Ed met all of the requirements of a handsome young man.

Perhaps thats why I get a strange sense of freshness from him every now and then. But

Lil tilted her head a little.

Hes definitely not young. I thought he was only about twenty years old at first, but as time passed, it became increasingly difficult to guess his age.

Lil thought that Ed might be older than he appeared. Digging through her memories, sudden realisations dawned on her.

The alienation I feel from him whenever hes lost in thought, his detached eyes that look at me as if he knows everything, or whenever he uses sentences more befitting for an old man

In addition, Ed never told Lil he was twenty. It was just a wild guess on her part. In fact, she knew nothing about him.

Lil proceeded with smearing the ointment on the wound with her finger.

I dont need to know, I shouldnt even be curious.

After putting more pressure on her fingertip, she drew circles around Eds wound. Since a while ago, Eds brows appeared to be twitching occasionally. Lil dismissed it as a trick of the light, so she gathered the leftover ointment, which had been pushed to the edge of Eds brow, and spread it in circles once more.

His nostrils seemed to have flared once No way

Pfft

There was a crack of laughter coming from somewhere. Lils suspicious eyes slowly made their way down his face. Eds facial muscles were subtly distorted as if he was in the middle of holding himself back. When Lil paused her actions, his mouth composedly relaxed again. The process of returning to his peacefully sleeping face was so unbelievably natural, that it looked more like a well-executed play.

And just like that, Lil rotated her finger once more

Phwahahaha! Haha, hahaha

Lil looked blankly at the laughing face. What Ed was laughing about was apparently so funny, that he grabbed his stomach and rolled over. By the end of his laughing fit, he was gasping for air. Lil was so embarrassed that she was at a loss for words. Instead of yelling, she yanked the pillow that was being pushed into the corner of the bed and squeezed it. When her shaking shoulders finally calmed down, she looked back at Ed, who had turned around again. Eds smiling face was flushed red. He then started to shout, blaming Lil for his outburst.

Oh, really! Who the hell taught you that?

That

Do you really think its necessary to draw circles with the ointment? Huh? Ever since the last time

Thats how I saw others do it!

Lil whipped up the pillow and exclaimed with a flushed red face.

Who taught you to do such perverted things?

What?!

Instead of waiting for the moment the pillow would be flying towards his head, Ed simply pulled it away with his overwhelming strength. There was a clear difference in their power because he had been awake the entire time, whereas Lil had only gotten up. He grumbled as he threw the pillow over his shoulder.

What? Are you gonna throw medicine bottles at me again? Is that your new hobby?

Ugh!

Due to being forcefully robbed from the pillow, Lil lost her balance and fell forward. To avoid falling on Ed again, she stretched out her arms in a panic. Her body stopped just before she was about to touch him. She had saved herself in time by propping up her arms on the bed. But although she managed to stop herself from fully falling on him, she was caught by surprise at the closeness of their faces. While her hair fell around and covered his face, Ed muttered, forcing his eyes shut.

I want you to be a little gentler this time.

Lil hurriedly stepped back.

What?!

Werent you gonna slam into me again?

Ed sat up slowly and pointed to his forehead. He had that savvy look on his face she hadnt seen in a long time. Lil came to her senses belatedly and straightened her shoulders, thereby finally blocking the few into her cleavage.

Why did you pretend to be asleep?

Well, I lost the momentum, so at some point I couldnt get up anymore because it would have been embarrassing. And it probably made the Captain even more embarrassed.

Are you high or something? You were already awake on your desk?!

Youre the one who fell asleep in someone elses cabin and occupied their bed?

When he said it like that, Lil had nothing more to say. With her weakness stabbed, she could only bite her lip.

Why didnt you wake me?

Would you have woken up if I tried to? You didnt even open your eyes once when you were shaking your head like this

Ed imitated Lil by making grotesque movements of snapping his neck back and forth and left to right. Lil reflexively denied it.

Youre just making fun of me

Im sorry, its just my first time seeing someone who didnt wake up even after nodding their head like that. You looked like someone who laid down after a night of heavy drinking.

Wait. Did I do that? Me? I slept that deep?

Think back for yourself. You know that, dont you?

Lil tried to remember, but nothing came to mind. It felt like she had been to another world after falling soundly asleep, completely cut off from reality. And she was certain she had never woken up in the midst of it

Chapter 128

Lil couldnt believe it and muttered.

How could this be

Why? Do you usually have trouble sleeping?

Yes. I cant sleep well. But how much time has passed?

Um thats why?

One hour? Two hours?

Uh well, is that really important? But first, what are you going to do with this?

Ed pointed to his bangs smeared with ointment. In her absentminded state, Lil had covered the teeth mark with so much medicine that it was now completely buried by the salve. Frowning at her disastrous ointment application, Lil squinted at the door to avoid taking responsibility.

This is why I need you to cover it with a cotton cloth again.

Im sorry.

Thats it?

I need to go.

So you want me to fix the troubles you caused myself?

Im very busy.

Lil turned around and grabbed her doorknob, when

Truth is, I dont have a mirror so please give me a hand.

Damn it.

Lils face distorted in frustration.

I rather have Ed threatening me to inform everyone about the cause of his wound as I can easily ignore that. But what I cant ignore is someones helplessness, especially when Im apologetic about it.

Despite already gripping the handle, Lil gritted her teeth, let it go and returned to the bedside.

I should have gone out quietly after laying him down on his bed. How annoying, I just gave myself more work.

Ed, who had no idea what was going on in her head, sat meekly and stared at Lil. She didnt like his sudden docile behaviour either. Ed hasnt offended Lil with his eccentric speech recently, and he hasnt done anything intrusive. Moreso, he secretly assisted her and put his life on the line for her. As a result, Lil had no reason to be prejudiced and treat him differently than the other sailors. She

was a generous captain, always willing to help a crew member who asked for assistance and taking responsibility when she was the cause of the damage.

Where is it?

Ed pointed to the medicine bag on the desk. Lil rummaged through it until she found the cotton cloth, before wiping the white ointment from his hair. Her application appeared to be far worse than when she saw it from a distance. Lil tried to see the positive side of it.

If I had left it alone, he would have whined about it for weeks. Even if I set out to be that cruel, what I did was wrong, and I have to sincerely apologise.

Lil murmured with tense shoulders.

Look, Im sorry. This really is thick. I would have regretted it if I just left it like this

Ugh, I know I shouldnt be mean to you, but sometimes I cant help it. Youre acting strangely sly.

Well, I was surprised you even thought of applying the medicine yourself.

I was the one who hurt you, so I should at least do this much.

Isnt it because I keep getting caught by your eyes?

Lil frowned at Ed, who was talking nonsense.

Youre talking bullshit again.

Ed kept his mouth shut. When Lil caught sight of him, she soon resumed her work.

Ed licked his parched lips with his tongue.

It seems like now will be a good time to confess. In a place where were alone and no one can bother us. Theres no guarantee that another opportunity like this will arise. But Im still curious about the meaning and sudden change of Liloa that only I can see. Did she have a change of heart? Whats her opinion of me now? I can barely stand my curiosity. If I have to guess, its most likely a positive turning point. Theres no way she would show the person she despised, her true face she hasnt shown anyone else.

Time passed while he was thinking it over and he became increasingly nervous.

If I confess my identity here and ask for forgiveness, Ill most certainly be rejected. Its easy to predict how betrayed Liloa will feel. If that happens, our fragile relationship will be irreversibly damaged, and we might never speak again. Then, Ill never be able to figure out what this all meant or why the necklace stopped working

As a result, Ed desired their relationship to remain the same until he figured it out. He knew it was shameless greed, but he was afraid he would never know if their relationship ended here. It was a secret that felt too big to keep hidden from him, from Lil, or anyone else.

What does the Captain think of me?

Youre part of my crew.

Is that all?

Why are you even asking? Do you think you've become someone special because I've deemed you innocent? It appears that you're thinking incorrectly; I just recognized you as a sailor, okay? I had been watching you closely before because you were suspicious, but now I've decided to accept you without any reservations. Don't act like you're getting special treatment.

Her voice was exceptionally cold. Ed looked over Lils shoulder, some morning light streamed in through the wooden shutters.

Liloa thinks its still night. If she knows its already morning, shell leave the cabin immediately I dont have much time left. What shall I do? What words can I use to convince her?

Ed lowered his tingling eyes that became stiff from being awake all night. Through his vision blurred by fatigue, he could see his and Lils legs almost touching. As if they had brushed against each other, the muscles in his legs became stiff and hot. Lil, on the other hand, acted normal and was completely unaware of the loss of her necklaces divine power.

Her denial that he was just part of her crew was too much for Ed.

If Im really just another ordinary sailor in her eyes, then everyone should be seeing her like this. Right?

Really?

Huh, why? Do you think you're an exception?

A snort of laughter could be heard, mocking his expectations.

Is that what you have been thinking?

I thought you cared for me, though. In this brief period of time, we had good conversations and great experiences together, right?

If you really think what you're saying is true, then I have to distance myself from you again. I'm the Captain and the leader here, so I always have to be fair, but if you feel that way, my other crew members might also think you're my favourite. I have no intention of making that happen.

Don't lie.

Ed glared at the woman in front of him, with her long, undone black hair.

No one knows that her hair is this long, its something only I can see. Im not seeing an illusion or a hallucination. How can you dismiss me as no different from the other guys when Im seeing you as the woman you are, right in front of me? Why would you tell such an obvious lie to someone who knows this is clearly something else? How could you?

Of course, Lil has no idea how she appeared to him. However, it was appalling that she didn't even want to admit that she had a change of heart or an awakening that couldn't be ignored. Ed vividly recalled the moment Lil changed. And how happy she was at that very moment.

Time is running out. My heart cant take this anymore. I cant turn a blind eye to this any longer. If she refuses to acknowledge it herself, then Ill have to make her admit it.

Then why do you only look like this to me?

Lil asked with a completely unintelligible face.

What?

What do you mean, what??

What nonsense are you talking about?

Why do you think Ive been tailing you around for?

It was only then that Lil, who sensed something was off, tensed up.

Wait a minute, tell me again from the beginning. I dont know what youre talking about

It seems so obvious, why are you pretending not to know what I mean to you?

What are you talking about

Why on earth? Are you afraid that admitting it will make it irreversible?

The space between the bed and the desk wasnt wide. Lil, who was backing away from him, eventually bumped against the desk.

Are you out of your mind?

What are you so afraid of? What kind of immense feelings do you have?

What the hell are you talking about? If you want to have a conversation, get away from me and explain yourself properly.

Lil kept a straight face and started to shove him on the shoulder. Even as Ed was being pushed away, he didnt bother to stop her. He knew she was going to stop the moment she heard the crazy words from him anyway.

By any chance Do you love me?

Chapter 129

Lils whole body froze and she needed time to process Eds words.

What did he say? Just now, Ed Im sure

She felt suffocated.

Even in this situation, I know very well that Im treating Ed extraordinarily by not kicking him out of the cabin right away. The reason weve come this far was that I didnt want to go back to our old relationship. Apart from his occasional rudeness, I still care for him. Im aware of that. Hes the one who has been saying the words I have longed for throughout my whole life, so his existence is special to me But, what the hell, cant he be satisfied with the patience Im giving him? Doesnt he know how hard it is to forgive after going through so much humiliation? Or see how I still want to leave room for something? Isnt this enough?

Lil had no idea how much special treatment he wanted.

Are you implying that I have certain feelings for you and I cant admit them? I didnt answer your question, so you immediately call it love? How are you in the position to ask me this just because I applied some ointment on your wound for once?

Can those certain feelings be his own cherished heart? I dont know what hes hoping for. But hes clearly waiting for me to answer.

However, she never wanted to talk about how she felt about him and even if she wanted to, she couldnt. Cesar knew best how suspicious Lil was of Ed in the beginning. Thats why, whenever she and Ed clashed in an unusual way, Cesar would watch them closely.

A wave of guilt coursed through her stomach.

I could have stayed on the deck instead of following him to his cabin in the middle of the night I could have requested that he carry his bag to the upper deck.

She couldnt decide whether she was angry at herself for being careless or at Ed for insisting profusely. Lil raised her chin. Ed had already locked his gaze on her. Her eyes suddenly sting due to being pricked by his green needles. When she tried to clench her fists, her sweaty fingers kept slipping out.

Why does he feel the need to exaggerate the fact that my attitude has become somewhat softer? Who does he think Lil Schweiz is? Havent I already emphasised that Im the Captain over and over again? Great feelings? Love? This is unforgivable After thinking about it for a long time, I finally gave him my trust, but he takes my change as a joke.

How disappointing.

His comment was the final straw for Lil. Unable to hold back her simmering anger, she started to shout.

You!

Youre the disappointment!

I finally trusted you, and now youre going to say some nonsense like this in return? Let me be clear. Youre just a sailor, nothing more nothing less.

Yes, accepting you as part of my crew took time, but Ive been treating them that way since the moment they boarded the ship. Dont think youve gained anything just because Im being more generous now.

Are you sure about that?

The moment she met his confident face, Lil realised her mistake. The first and foremost thing she overlooked was the fact she should have denied it from the beginning. Still contemplating inwardly, Lil crossed her arms, trying to remain calm.

First of all, why would I like a man?

I should have said this first. How on earth did I miss this?

Ed, on the other hand, radiated a calmness that overshadowed Lils regret. As if her concern about gender was irrelevant, he indifferently moved closer. By instinct, Lil pushed him away. She recalled that her untied gun belt was lying on the edge of the desk. Moving her head slightly, she caught a glimpse of it in the corner of her eye and gave Ed a stern warning.

I dare you to touch me one more time. Know that when you do, the trust I had in you will be gone. Well go back to the way we used to be and I wont overlook any signs of sodomy anymore.

That story again? What do you gain by erasing the past and hiding in one of your shells?
Convenience?

Ed, who was standing in front of her, looked exhausted. It was Lil who was tired of her opponent, but Ed looked like he was too. This caused Lil to be increasingly confused because the person that instigated and upheld this troublesome discussion, was getting angry and fed up himself.

What are you so sick and tired of, exactly?

Lil couldn't overcome her frustration and asked.

What the hell are you hiding? What do you know and I don't?

I thought you would stop deceiving yourself in front of me, so why did you go back to being so stubborn again?

Don't just talk ambiguously about the things that you think you know. Explain it properly. Otherwise, you'll never get the answer you want.

At that time, you're the one who asked!

You asked if I wouldn't mind regardless of who you are. You wouldn't ask that if you didn't want to go back to how we used to be. So I gave you my honest answer.

And even though you only silently smiled. Were you the happiest you'd ever been? How can you say you don't care about me when you were so happy you nearly cried? There's no reason to hold back in front of me. You feel at ease, right?

You said you hadn't been sleeping well, but didn't you sleep so well just now?

Or, could it be that everyone else gave you the same answer, so there really is no difference between me and them?

Lil avoided his piercing gaze. Her heart pounded violently, and with her breath caught in her throat, she pressed down her chest.

Since when is it that easy for him to see through me? I don't remember. There isn't a single mistake in his words and he knows it. But I can't give him the answer. The moment I do, I'll lose the little control I still have.

It felt like a stiff wooden pole pierced her heart.

Your heart knows the truth so well that it shows you everything. So why can't you say it out loud? Are you afraid that it will all disappear once you open your mouth?

Lil fumbled with the necklace under her shirt. Its round curve touched her fingertips. Even though not a word was said about it, she somehow felt compelled to check it. The feeling that it could fall off at any moment, was terrifying.

The reason you asked me is obvious.

Their gazes locked. Ed had been staring at Lil for quite some time now as if he was waiting to get her attention.

You want me to see you for your true self.

Stop it.

But youre still living while deceiving yourself, whats this if not deception?

Whomever you are now and who you were in the past, you want to return to your original self. But right now, youre hiding in a different shell for convenience or whatever I know it all, so dont make those futile efforts in front of me. Tell me the truth.

Lil staggered back and muttered.

No. What the hell are you talking about

A gust of wind blew through Mortus tightly closed castle. In there, Lil was swept around aimlessly. She realised it was the kind of wind that didnt just tickle her heart, but shook her entire core.

What the hell Im I supposed to do? When Serlio is just around the corner If I agree with him now, what will happen to the castle? Wont it collapse? Wont the whole land be uprooted?

With Mortu as its owner, Lil had no authority to decide on such a grand ending. But Ed, who didnt know that, continued to talk.

Ill ask you one last time, dont you feel like youre overlooking something really, really important?

Lil hid her tongue away.

How can you put me in this position and not be aware of it?

She simply couldnt answer.

Admit it. You want to be yourself in front of me.

And you know you can do that. That feeling isnt something you have in front of an ordinary sailor. In one way or another, you think of me as special.

I dont love you

It doesnt have to be love. It doesnt matter. Its not like I want to be by your side in that form.

Lils heart raced toward her neck, making even breathing painful.

So far, theres only one thing Eds after. He wants my approval Approval, that I dont downplay his significance in my life. But I can never give it

Her and Cesars world would shatter if she did that. Lil was fully aware that shes already been shaken too much.

It doesnt have to be love? That may be the case for him, but not for me Even if it isnt love, his wind will always be blowing. Like a gust of wind. Even if I dont want to, being around him has an effect on me that I cant ignore Who wouldnt want to fully step into that wind if they had the chance? Wont my desire grow? Everything is self-evident

Lil bit her lip to retain herself from answering.

If this goes on any longer, it will become dangerous.

Were running out of time. I really want to know your feelings before this shallow relationship ends

Chapter 130

Silence fell upon them.

The more I dwell on it, the more stifled I feel.

In the end, however, it was Ed who couldn't stand the pressure. Lil on the other hand, was very used to this kind of thing.

So, this is it? To avoid it like this until the end

Ed's words flew away when he covered his face. His hidden expression appeared helpless as he let out an empty laugh. Still rubbing his cheeks, he raised his head and directed his bloodshot eyes toward Lil.

This may be the last time for the Captain and me.

Drooping his hands, Ed muttered, looking somewhere on the floor.

I just left him be. There was only one person, but I couldn't kill him or do anything about it. I had to do that to respect your beliefs. I stupidly blew my chance*

Lil couldn't understand a word he said.

What is he talking about?

She tried to grasp his meaning. But in the end, she was unable to comfort the man whose mood sank gloomily in front of her. All Lil was allowed to do was stand in the corner with her tongue hidden.

I can't believe that I was so naive. After all, a guy like me should live as he always had. I could have known that if I acted with someone in mind for no reason, I would end up like this. Now everything is ruined like this. What on earth could I've been possessed by? Where the hell did I go wrong? For a while not even for one night damn it. I'm such an idiot.

Lil widened her eyes in surprise. A terrifying thought caused her to come to her senses. She was reminded of Mortu, who would be waiting for her somewhere with eyes that pierced right through her forehead. She muttered half-fazed.

One night? Are you talking about today?..

As Ed didn't look at her, she bewilderedly stared at the lamp near his bed.

If the night has passed, it won't be dark anymore, but the lights are on. In the mornings we can simply open the windows to receive sunlight. So, why are the lights still on?

Are you saying that half a day has passed? Right now

This can't be. No matter how soundly I slept, it couldn't have been more than a few hours. Cesar also didn't look for me or is it because he couldn't find me? Because he never expects me to be here? Here, in another man's bedroom

When she perceived Ed as a man, she became concerned about what Cesar would think of the situation.

In an instant, Lil hurried to the window. The shutters were closed despite the fact that they need to be opened every morning. There were several reasons, but the bottom line was the same. The lower deck receives little sunlight, so it was necessary to use every inch of light they could get.

So, if I open the window now, it'll be night, right? Ed must be wrong

Lil reached out and grasped the wooden handle with both hands. Through the window, she could hear the sound of flapping wings approaching quickly.

Pudduck. Pudduck.

Since they were anchored near an island, it wasn't strange at all to have birds around. That was why Lil didn't even pay attention to it when she opened the shutters wide. Dawn greeted her. Before she could even be surprised about the brightness of the sky, a strange bird rushed at her.

Hmph!

When the bird almost pecked her face with its beak, Lil stuck herself to the wall in order to move out of the way. She clutched her startled heart and stared at the unexpected guest. It was a handsome pigeon. A breed that couldn't be seen nearby. Realising that fact, she immediately looked at it with different eyes. Lil knew the breed very well, which made her even more surprised to see it out here.

Well-maintained feathers attached to its long wings and a communication scroll hanging from its ankle!..

A rare breed exclusively used by government officers working under the imperial family. Bred for military purposes, so it was faster and twice as smart as a regular pigeon. The red-winged pigeon clearly recognized Ed's face and hovered above his head. It wiggled its beak as if asking for his arm and some food. Lil had no eyes for Ed. Her nerves were all focused on the container fastened to its ankle.

Small, round, and shiny

Lil immediately lowered her gaze. The window was right next to the desk and recalled that her gun belt was laying on it. There was no time to think, so without delay, she reached out and grabbed her gun. The metal clung to her sweat-soaked hand.

The bird is only circling Ed, not minding me in the slightest Its intelligent enough to recognize people

Given the obvious situation, Lil didn't hesitate and extended her arm as far as she could. When she was about to aim at Ed, she twisted her arm and aimed at the light bulb. She couldn't bear to aim at him directly.

You

Her already heavy heart ached more. Her heart has pounded as if she had been running for a long time and now the feeling of being stabbed by a knife was added to it. It was so painful. She needed to stay calm, but she simply couldn't. Her paling fingers trembled uncontrollably. The handle of the gun slipped due to her sweaty palm, causing the barrel to shake ridiculously. She had to put her other hand underneath it for support.

Her first syllable sounded like a scream.

You!

You think I don't know that this is a pigeon used by the Navy?

Never before was it this hard for Lil to find her words. Her head was tired and about to burn out.

Naval message!

It was a difficult word to grasp. Lil desperately looked at Ed, unsure if he would be able to turn things around.

Please pick up the message. Smile as if nothing was going wrong and try to get out of the situation as you always do!

But Ed just stared blankly at the bird.

If hes innocent, he would have been taken aback by the sudden appearance of this bird. If not, he should be embarrassed that he has been caught. But how come hes not surprised nor embarrassed?

Come on, explain this! Explain it now!

After everything, it has come to this

What?

His retaliation is pretty quick. But, of course Youve been here all night, so theres no way hed stay still.*

Lils frustration reached its peak when Ed started to talk about things she didnt understand again.

Ive had enough of your nonsense! Cut the crap and explain this!

Explain what? You already drew your gun.

Her momentum came to a halt. Lil was suddenly torn about whether or not she should put her gun away.

The moment I put this away, I am emotionally brainwashed. And I simply cant afford it. Giving my trust to Ed is separate from doubting suspicious circumstances

Lil muttered, unable to do anything.

This is

What kind of expression is that? Arent you doing the right thing? You should follow your instincts, dont be naive as if you never went to war.

Explain yourself, say something!

Are words even needed?

Ed extended his arm toward the pigeon. Slowly, as if to closely observe what was happening, he reached out his forearm toward its red wing while remaining as composed as he had always been.

I wonder whats in it.

Dont move!

Lils scream was completely ignored and the pigeon wandering around the bed tried to land on Eds arm.

Destruction of evidence!

A clear presumption entered her mind.

As soon as the pigeon lands on him, Ed will remove the message. And the message in his hands will disappear in one way or another. Hell simply and shamelessly destroy it. Ill then lose the most conclusive evidence right under my watch! No, I cant let that happen

Bang!

The sound of gunfire pierced her ears. It wasnt until the smoke rose from her gun that Lil knew she had pulled the trigger. In the end, she had aimed it somewhere in the air. The startled pigeon flapped around, but Ed had his arm still outstretched toward the bird. Seeing that Ed had no trauma, Lil was relieved and nervous at the same time.

Someone must have heard the gunshot. Soon, a crowd will gather in the front of the cabin

As such a scene unfolded as if it were drawn in front of her eyes, the door suddenly burst open.

Gunshot!..

Footnote:

I just left him be. There was only one person, but I couldnt kill him or do anything about it. I had to do that to respect your beliefs. I stupidly blew my chance = Ed is talking about Courant, hiding in the chest.

His retaliation is pretty quick. But, of course Youve been here all day, so theres no way hed stay still. = Ed is talking about Cesar.