

## **Northwest 151**

### *Chapter 151*

Cesar showed no signs of backing down.

*If he truly lost the letter, then theres no longer any physical evidence left.*

Lil chewed her dry lower lip nervously.

*Im convinced that Ed wouldnt have harmed me. However, its no good to speak out about something thats only based on my feelings, for Cesar will easily refute me But why do I have to choose? Ed and Cesar are incomparable.*

Why should I pick between the two of you? This isnt a matter of choice. I just need an answer.

Youre only questioning me, so if its not a matter of choice, what else can it be? Does your heart lean towards him?

What kind of nonsense is that? I said I wanted to know the truth!

Cesar grabbed Lils shoulder. As it had been a few days before, his tight grip lifted her heels off the floor. The closer the flames in his eye came, the hotter the heat rose. But this time, Lil didnt lose and continued to face Cesar.

Liloa, you know this, dont you know? Faith takes precedence over material evidence.

Anyone can give and receive trust based on proof. But in fact, that kind of relationship isnt equal to a trustworthy one. The reason why trust is valuable is it stands even when theres no physical evidence. Its simply given despite the lack of tangible proof. Thats why trust is a privilege to those who share a close relationship.

I no longer have the proof of the doctors betrayal, so have you, perhaps, decided to believe in the doctor instead of me?

I said I only believe in the truth! You want me to give you a pass over the questionable circumstances regarding the disappearance of the letter and the pigeon, all in the name of trusting you? Is that how you expect me to act? I didnt even give Ed a chance to defend himself because I was only looking at you! I didnt even try to listen to him! In the end, I was the one in the wrong. Its like I destroyed the system Ive built with my own hands over the years in an instant But now that Ed is dead, you want to move on as you please?

You didnt come here to simply see the message. You came here because you started to doubt what I had read. You dont believe it anymore, and now its nowhere to be found. Thats how things turned out to be. Now the messages disappearance isnt what really matters, but your suspicions.

Think about it. The doctor was an impurity with no credibility. Im the only one who stood by your side until this day. The difference between the doctor and me is as clear as the sky and the earth. Therefore, your trust in him isnt based on reason but on emotions. Do you really want to know the truth? Or are you just harshly taking it out on me because you were deceived by him?

When Cesar hit the nail on the head, it made Lil confess the trigger that moved her to do this.

He told Alain that he was innocent. I deeply regret not even hearing his explanation. That's why I wanted to look into everything again. Even if it appears as if I'm doubting you, I can't help it even if you're upset. I won't repeat the same mistake again.

Cesar gave a rare sneer.

Is that all? How can you be sure that his claims of innocence are false or not?

I don't care if his claims were true or not. I'm going to do what I should have done back then. So, tell me, why did you lose the letter?

Why are you so concerned about the doctor?

What?

Do you find it a pity that he's no longer by your side? Don't you know what to do, now that his body is wandering the sea?

What are you getting at?

Lil shook her arms violently. When Cesar released her, her heels hit the floor with a thud. She quickly regained her balance and snapped.

Do you even know what I'm doing here on the Bell Rock?!

I do.

No, you clearly don't. Because to you, it's all child's play. Do you think I'll get sick of it if you wait a little longer? Like some game?!

Do you still not understand what I want to protect?

Lil's heart felt like it was going to burst from frustration.

*Cesar knows absolutely nothing. It's cruel of him to assert that he knows, despite the fact that he doesn't. Although he never imposed on me that what he believed was the truth, he also never showed any interest or asked me if what he thought was correct or not. Cesar is completely ignorant of the Bell Rock.*

I understand. However, you never reprimanded me when I broke the rules and rescued you. I know you felt sorry for the sailors you cared for the moment they were killed for the sake of rescuing you, but I guessed you let it go because you knew how I felt. I'm no fool. I know you were sad and mourned for them. And I know how much you care for the Bell Rock and how hard it's for you to decide to end this life and be with me.

Then why don't you respect me? Why do you always ignore what's important to me and trample the Bell Rock's significance to me?

Was my offence to you that grave that you had to resort to using the word trample? To me, Liloa, the Bell Rock is nothing compared to you. I only do what I think is right for you. So whenever my affection is belittled like this it breaks my heart.

Do you really think you're doing that for me? What you claim to do for me is limited to my safety, it has nothing to do with my happiness. In addition, I'm not someone you have to protect. I want to do something on my own and I want to make it happen. If there is a problem, I want to be the one to solve it. I want to experience that feeling of achieving it. I'm a person with a lot of different needs. I'm

not someone who can be satisfied with only staying comfortable in your arms. So, if you really care for me, dont ignore the various things that I want to do.

Do you think I dont know that? If I were truly overprotective of you, do you think we would still even be on the Bell Rock? You know how much I respect you, and I also know what you want to protect.

What puzzles me is why you, who have always understood me, are pushing me on this matter now. Even if there are some doubts, dont you have a moments certainty that I did it for you?

Cesar didnt give Lil any room to intervene, so she had to hear every word he said, motionless.

You seem more worked up about this than you were the time when you lost half of your crew. Dont you think thats enough grounds for me to be suspicious about the way youre acting?

Liloa. Do you know the reason behind that?

Of course, Lil knew the reason. It was a reason that was most painful to Cesar, but he couldnt help to confirm it.

It doesnt matter what you did in the past or present as Im the one who made the mistake. Its different from then. Im condemning myself for disobeying the code I created, because I acted as your woman, not as the captain of this ship. I was always proud of being fairer than anyone else, but in the end, I wasnt any better than the rest. I made an irrevocable mistake

Do you mean that if your two roles collide, you will choose to be the Captain?

Why should I have to choose between one of my many roles? Cesar, have you ever done that? Have you ever been made to choose between the you whos the son of a Count, the you from the navy, and the you whos someones lover?

I chose to be with you

Cesar didnt have to say more as Lil could fill in the blanks in her head.

*Because Cesar chose me, he can no longer stay in the Counts house nor become a Navy officer again.*

She had no way to refute it. Due to the circumstances surrounding their unusual relationship, everything Lil would say now would only turn her into a shameless woman. There was no other option but to be subject to Cesars choice because Cesar saved her from hell. Lil, who became this ungrateful, selfish woman in mere seconds, had to shut her mouth and be obedient.

Im sorry. I was wrong. Its not that I dont want to be your woman, it just pains me that I acted so unfairly. I really cant let go of a fault as big as this one

Is that really all there is to it?

Then what more is there

Arent you hiding another reason?

What are you trying to say?

His red eyes were so intense as if they were trying to penetrate something intangible. Cesar walked up to her. Lils resolve to keep the fragments of her soon-to-be-revealed feelings hidden tightened. She looked up at him while holding her breath.

*What the hell are you on about?*

Do you love him?

Chapter 152

Lil was rendered speechless.

*Why is everyone talking about love? It was already absurd when Ed inquired about love. But now that Cesar is talking about it too, it feels even stranger. Their reactions even appear as if theyre in some kind of competition. I got a similar impression from Ed before*

Memories of something Ed had said floated into Lils mind.

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

*Its like theyre fighting over me Anyone who hears this will think theres some kind of love triangle going on. But does that mean Ed knew who had his oils?*

The almost extinguished flames of Lils suspicion were being revived again.

*When Ed was caught, I had briefly doubted the message. However, at that time, I was so sure that Cesar had nothing to do with it*

Lil suddenly realised she found another clue.

*Lured by the oil How many men on this ship know how the Navys oils work? Ed mustve kept it disguised in one of his cabinets and in his position as a doctor everyone who might have seen it would immediately assume it was just another bottle used for medical purposes. Then how was it found? Was it by chance? In any case, the person who took it from Ed succeeded in luring the pigeon exactly to Eds cabin. The fact that the pigeon stuck to Ed and not to the person who applied the fragrance means that Ed was indeed the birds intended destination If so, Cesar mustve been the manipulator*

Lil identified Cesars motives relatively quickly.

Jealousy.

*So it was jealousy?*

Lil gasped, finding it absurd and surprising.

*I acted the way I did because I was afraid Cesar would misinterpret my defence of Ed as siding with another man. That was why I was unable to prevent his execution. I was afraid he would think that I wanted to overrule the sentence out of self-interest. Even back then I already took his jealousy into consideration. I could understand his shock to see his lover, whom he had been looking for all night, with another man However, the nature of jealousy as a motive is a different one than I expected. Was it really for that reason For that reason alone?*

Cesar.

There was an indescribable disdain attached to her voice.

*I never thought Cesar was someone who could kill others out of mere jealousy.*

Were you jealous of Ed?

Cesar stood there without denying it and only stared at Lil resentfully. With the confirmation she received from his silence, Lil collapsed. Her staggering body eventually found support when it slumped against the chair.

So its true? How

How can you stay so calm about this?

Lil grabbed the chair and let out a scream.

Are you crazy? How could you!

Stop it. I dont know what youre thinking, but I havent affirmed anything, have I?

However, Lils thoughts were already becoming a reality in her mind. Those same thoughts had always been overshadowed by the firm belief that this could never be possible. The image of Cesar manipulating the message filled her head with a mix of different emotions. Aside from his affection, Lil had always admired Cesars morality.

*His integrity, altruism, sincerity, and tenderness were the foundations of his life. Cesar is one of a kind. A person with a just personality, so I never thought that he could be such a slanderer. Because of that, I never suspected that the message could be fake in the first place I even felt sorry for doubting the message inevitably*

*Back then, everything was so unrealistic that I wondered if it was all part of some play Courant Cesar I couldnt fathom the extent of the fear and jealousy they felt. Apparently to them, it was enough of a reason for Ed to die But he isnt someone who can be erased by such a meaningless death There was only one man like him in this whole world, really, there was only one That admirable spirit it shouldnt have disappeared so quickly It shouldve walked this earth for a very long time*

Lil couldnt believe it.

*Was that precious life of his worth only this much? A life that was insignificant enough to be taken away from him just because of the combination of childish anger, sour emotions, and poor judgement?*

Its clear that the doctor was dangerous. Dont try to deny it. The fact that a crewmember communicated with the Navy without the Captains knowledge is sufficient reason for his isolation. We dont even know who sent him, right? In addition, we dont know if there were any special motives for him being here, but as in most cases, theres no need to go above and beyond to get to the truth. Dont let this confuse you. Whatever the reason behind the message, you only have to focus on the fact that it happened. Theres no need to investigate his circumstances.

But he never stopped insisting on his innocence. He tried to call for me and reach out to me so that he could prove his innocence. Why do you think that is?

Its nothing but love.

Cesar stood his ground. It felt like a warning for her not to lie anymore. Irritation and confinement exploded in an instant, and Lil shouted.

Its not love! Please! Stop this ridiculous misunderstanding!

Before you get so fed up, dont you feel any compassion for me who had no choice but to show such ugly emotions? Do you have any idea what kind of self-loathing Ive been suffering from and how long Ive been tormented by it? Rather than contempt me, why dont you comfort me when youre the one responsible for making me feel this way?

Im sorry if I misunderstood you! But I really

You think it will all be okay if you say youre sorry?

What are you talking about?

Cesar approached her. Confused, Lil wanted to take a step back, but her back soon hit the desk. Due to the impact, the scattered paper crumpled with a crisp sound. Cesar, who was now close enough to touch her body, cupped Lils face. Although she twisted her body momentarily, she couldnt get out.

Im the only one who can hold you and kiss you.

..!

As if to prove that he meant what he said, his thumb pressed her lips. Lil belatedly tried to turn her head away.

*No, dont force me to do this!*

However, her cry only reached the top of her throat. Cesar was unwaveringly stubborn. With the hand that covered almost half of her face, he made sure that Lil would face him straight.

So why am I jealous of someone who has never seen you like this or has he?

..!

At some point, the red eyes that had been burning like flames turned wet. Clear tears welled up against the bloodshot white background. Startled, Lil stopped the hand that she had stretched out to shake him off. But despite seeing such a shocked Lil, Cesar didnt back down.

Do you know that when youre surprised, you unintendedly avert your gaze? You always try to hide it, but do you really think I wouldnt be aware of all the times you are too stunned to speak? Can you truly apologise for all these things youre desperately trying to hide?

Even though his breathing became faster and faster, Cesar never attempted to control his breath. Lil grew uncomfortable by the sight she saw for the first time, the rising sadness pushed away the tension that had been in the air and suddenly, it poured down disastrously. A man named Cesar was on the verge of bursting into tears.

What the hell am I to you? Why do you neglect me like this? Sometimes you dont even seem to care what happens to me. Is that really true?

Cesar, no ugh, dont cry please dont be like this. Youre wrong.

It was unknown who moved first. Lil, who placed her other hand on Cesar's shoulder, or Cesar who removed the hand holding Lil's face. Cesar, torn down by Lil, buried his head on her shoulder. But even though she began to feel wetness on her shirt near the nape of her neck, Lil merely stood there, unable to hug him or push him away. Instead, she used this moment to prepare her explanation.

Ed He had a unique understanding of the world. That was new and I sometimes wonder about that kind of perspective. I found it all fascinating. Talking to him was like reading a book that I liked for a second time. How can such a simple motive of mine be love?

Why can't it be love?

Because

*Does love easily bloom like that? Then why is my heart still so quiet? Even after so many years*

Lil closed her mouth. She couldn't answer because she didn't know.

*I only know love as this complicated and grandiose thing*

Unable to explain the concept that she didn't even understand properly, Lil bit her lip.

Cesar slipped out of her arms as he pushed Lil away.

You really don't know anything

Chapter 153

Can people even clearly define love?

The fact that you think love is complex and difficult proves how ignorant you truly are. The only reason why you find it difficult is because you don't know what it is. Because you have constantly been imitating someone else's way of showing it

I'm getting there. It's just that I'm slower than you and end up out of breath when I try to keep up with your pace but you know I've followed you, right?

Cesar laughed in vain. Again and again, he let out empty breaths. Cesar looked up at the ceiling, over Lil's shoulder, down at the floor, and eventually matched her gaze.

You're not merely slow.

Then what

If you were ever to become jealous, I would reassuringly tell you how much I love you. I would want to relieve your anxiety and make you feel at ease. I would say I'm sorry and understand how hard it may have been for you, even though you probably looked a little cute. For me, those things come naturally to mind. But did they come to you too?

The whole time I have been anxious, you dismissed my concerns thinking I was being overly sensitive. You said I was acting strange and that I was just taking my irritations out on you.

Did you, even once, think about relieving my anxiety?

Lil shut her eyes.

*Whereas I'm still clumsy, Cesar already holds all the answers*

She felt an unbearable sense of shame at her own slowness and lack of understanding. She felt so sorry that she couldn't give Cesar what he wanted and what was even more heart-breaking was she could now only give him a belated apology.

Im sorry I didnt know I had to

When I asked you if you loved him, what answer did you think I wanted?

Lil really wanted to answer this time. She wanted to reassure Cesar by giving the obvious response, but her mind remained blank

*What on earth should I say or do*

Seeing Lil hesitating, Cesar started to shout.

That you love me! That the man you love is me!

..!

The moment she heard those words, she felt terrible. Guilt instantly engulfed her when she met his face distorted by unbearable disappointment.

*Why didnt I know? Ive said a lot of things over the years, so why didnt this confession cross my mind?*

And even if you didnt, wasnt there something else you could have said instead? Did you really have to tell me he was someone you liked to talk to over and over again? My question didnt require such a strong and lengthy denial, but I never wanted to hear anything like that! Why should I know the lengths of how much you care about him even if you dont call it love? Why would I want to hear how much you admire him, what draws you to him, and the qualities he has that I clearly dont?! All of that! I never wanted to know that!

I was just trying to explain I said it wrong, Im sorry.

You only needed to say one line.

I didnt know. Im so sorry. I didnt know

Why do you still not know?! Its been years!

As Lil shrank due to Cesars momentum, her eyes fell on the dark realm beyond him. She instantly sensed the black shadow wriggling in the corner of the cabin. It told her that at any moment, Mortu could emerge and wield his scythe.

Lil spoke pleadingly.

You know me, Cesar. You know Im clumsy and ignorant at this, but you can teach me.

Its not about being taught.

Then what?

Even I no one ever taught me.

Then how do I know what I am supposed to do?

I didnt know love before I met you. But I didnt have to learn anything.



Do you know what it means that you still don't know?

Lil shut her mouth tight. She knew it. What Cesar was talking about, she understood it. A piercing realisation stirred her heart and stomach.

Whenever I realise that you're still like this it saddens me, terribly.

How much more miserable do you need to make me before you're satisfied? Did I ever ask something from you? No matter how much I loved you and wanted you to feel the same way, did you even think I would force you to commit to me if you said no? Am I worth only that much in that mysterious mind of yours?

Cesar. You know that's not

When I first held you in my arms and kissed you, you said you loved me! But why do I worry every day that I appear to you as some kind of monster?

Shouldn't I have believed you in the first place?

I've never thought that. You've done nothing wrong. The problem is with me

Then why can't I feel that you love me? Whenever you said you love me, whenever you kissed me, you may have been thinking to yourself that it was love

Actually, I never liked it. What I want is for us to be happy together. I certainly don't want to enjoy this relationship alone. I stopped asking about your feelings because you always seemed to be struggling. I had no choice but to believe you. Who else on the planet wished to believe that as much as I did? That's how I lived, holding on to that belief. But in the meantime I was worried that a day like today might come. A day where I would realise how bad things have been for you

Still, I held out hope and kept quiet. Knowing you would try too hard otherwise. That's why I had you promise me one thing. To choose me. I thought that if I did that, things would be different and I could stop feeling so disgusted with myself. I thought that if you really loved me, you shouldn't be able to say no, right?

Cesar, who had been spewing out words nonstop, finally caught his breath. He started to cough as though he was having an upset stomach. Lil felt more and more sorry for him. It was unbearable for her to see the helpless side of this man who has always been upright and neat. She pitied Cesar as he was lost in his agony and struggled to pull himself together.

After a while, Cesar, who had his face buried in his hands, suddenly raised his head. The navigator's face looked as thin as a corpse. What was even more disturbing was seeing his clean shirt stained with blood. Confused by her sudden hallucinations, Lil looked around her. As soon as she did, Mortu disappeared from the corner. Startled, she looked around her some more in a hurry. But she could only find her own shadow falling over the desk. Her eyes quickly scanned the rest of the cabin before they reached Cesar

An inaudible scream came out.

The God of Death was standing right behind him. Black smoke tightened around Cesar's neck. Mortus' giant scythe dug through his chest, cutting out Cesar's heart. Flesh splattered and blood spurted. Then, a living, beating heart was pushed out toward Lil.

Ah N, No

While accepting the bloody lump, her hand slipped and the heart fell with a squeaky sound. Lil lowered her gaze. Pulsating hearts were scattered all around her feet and grotesque bloodstains dyed the floor red. So far, Lil thought she had only been looking at a pile of hearts, but it seemed now that Cesars flesh and blood were added to it. Seeing the skin getting torn off, Lil was made aware of the pain. It was a pain so intense it made the torn flesh spasm till it had no more blood to spurt and no more life left. Only then was the last beat finally let out

*I cant even fathom how painful it must have been I never thought hes been in this much pain. All this time, hes been bleeding and agony has been digging into his flesh. How could I not have noticed? Ive been so focused on taking care of my own wounds that I failed to see his I never knew that loving me would be so painful for Cesar*

*Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!*

Captain, Captain! Are you there? Its urgent!..

Lil, who escaped from her hallucination, reflexively shouted.

Wait a sec!

In the meantime, Cesar had taken a seat on his bed. He rubbed his face and wiped away the traces of his tears. His reddish face never looked her way.

Go ahead.

No. Ill send him away if its nothing.

As if the flow of their conversation had already been cut off, Cesar didnt answer. Lil walked up to him and stretched out her hand, but Cesar snatched away the hand that was about to land on his shoulder. After briefly thinking about it, he got up and led her to the door. Lil, who had been agonising about what to say, turned to Cesar while her hand was placed on the doorknob.

Ill stay here. Youre having a hard time right now.

You dont have to. You dont have to be so caring.

You are important to me.

Ive already spoken my mind. Whats the use of telling me this, now that this conversation is over?

I hurt you Im sorry. My thoughts were too tactless, Im always lacking, and its been hard for you. I feel so pathetic, frustrated, and hate myself for hurting you Seeing you break down like that it makes me go crazy

Cesar didnt accept Lils apology, instead, he muttered as if to brush off any remaining resentment.

It seems as if this one single mistake of mine has let you define my whole being, but how many times have his faults been forgiven?..

Thats not

Clearly exhausted, Cesar sighed and grabbed the doorknob. As soon as he opened the door, he pushed Lils back.

The sailor who was waiting in front of them shouted straight away.

Captain! We spotted Legardons sail!

## Chapter 154

Lil was about to say something to Cesar, but looked back when she heard the content coming from the sailor. The mans sweaty face was distorted with fear and agitation.

As I asked you before How many times have you forgiven him?

Theres a Mahin Royal mark on its mainmast! Its a battleship, a battleship!

Lil couldnt hear Cesar as the sailor started to shout again. That was why she wanted to turn her head to ask him to repeat himself, however, the swearing sailor grabbed her arm and began running. Cesar on the other hand didnt open his mouth nor held her back. Instead, he simply moved away and closed the door. As Lil was being dragged helplessly, she could only watch as the gap between her and Cesar disappeared.

Suddenly, the completely shut wooden door appeared to be as thick and heavy as a stone wall. Lil, losing herself in another hallucination, saw prison bars slamming down.

*Its as if Cesar is imprisoned somewhere A castle that he cant escape on his own*

The entrance of his cabin began to stretch upwards and to each side, several pointed towers with roofs rose. Lil looked up in horror at the citadel. The dark grey stone structure exuded an all-too-familiar majesty.

Upon seeing such a vision, Lil stopped abruptly in the middle of being dragged along.

No! What are you doing, Captain?!

The sailor forcefully yanked on Lils arm. As Lil stumbled along with him, she turned her head and looked up at the unbelievable figure. Cesars enlarged cabin was undoubtedly transforming into something similar to Mortus castle.

*Cesar will also be confined within those cold walls.*

Lil was reminded of the hand from her nightmares, the one that always reached out to her from the darkness.

*How come I thought I was locked up alone all this time? When, in fact, there was someone by my side who was also bleeding, losing flesh, and suffering. Ive always been there with Cesar, who tenderly held my hand and presented me his heart*

She never knew it was Cesar emerging from the darkness as Lil only saw a hand holding a heart. It became clear to her that he, too, refused to reveal more of himself.

Knowing this now, she couldnt bear looking up and facing him. The realisation that she had been repaying him with a mere pool of blood was too overwhelming. She had been obsessed with digging into her own chest and giving back as much as she got, but she couldnt reach her heart no matter how hard she tried.

That was also the moment where Mortu offered to help her. He cut off different pieces of her flesh and moulded it into a heart. Lil felt relieved when she was able to cheat in this way. However, she became so engrossed in it that she had no idea how much it was costing Cesar or how miserable he

became. She always thought he was far from feeling that way because he always dressed neatly, with a shirt buttoned up to his neck and a crisp, scented vest.

*Its strange. The sight of Cesar merely looking down on me as I was in a state of despair, doesnt suit him at all*

After passing several bulkheads Cesars cabin disappeared from view. The artillery deck, where sailors shouted and prepared for battle, was in a frenzy. Dozens of people passed by, but Lil couldnt see anything. Her consciousness was still in that castle, immersing herself in the darkness. For the first time since she began to have those nightmares, Lil raised her eyes and stared straight into the shadows.

Someone yelled aloud.

Captain! Their red flag is up! Theyre asking us to stop for inspection

The startled sailor pulled Lil to urge her to make haste. As her feet walked the stairs, the faint light on top of the stairs came closer and closer. With the midday sun at its peak, her vision became hot and bright as she made her way to the upper deck. The glaring light was intense enough to reveal Cesar who had been immersed in the dark.

Blood flowed from the place where his heart had been cut out. Although he stood on his own two feet, he clearly struggled with the excruciating pain. It looked like he couldnt breathe probably, seeing how he grabbed his empty chest with a distorted expression. Mortu, who shrouded around Cesar, found Lil and stepped aside. Blood dripped from the scythe that the reaper was holding. His gloomy voice chuckled. The god of death started polishing his scythe with a sliver of his darkness and then laughed at the woman who could only stand there dumbfounded and unable to blink.

*You silly customer. Why are you so surprised? What? Did you think that the heart came from the fields?..*

..!

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Sir Edgar. A telegraph arrived from the Ashtoro. Theres a galleon spotted a thousand morts ahead of our fleet. How do you want them to proceed?

Ed didnt look at the reporting Sagastar. When Ed remained silent, Sagastar cleared his throat in embarrassment.

Ed originally intended to leave Sagastar on that uninhabited island, but unfortunately for him, the commodore wasnt so ignorant. On the morning they would leave the island, Ed moved the Visha before dawn as he planned. However, there was one variable that Ed didnt take into account; at that point Sagastar had already boarded the Visha. Ed heard later that after their operating meeting was over, Sagastar took a boat straight to the ship.

Ed glared at Captain Long who together with Sagastar had tricked him. The captain, busy on the deck, noticed Eds gaze and flinched. After he followed the captain with his eyes for a while, Ed eventually opened his mouth.

The Ashtoro is one of the vassals in the scouting squadron that followed the Serlio route

Thats correct.

The Ashtoro belonged to the squadron that was assigned a scouting mission ordered by Sagastar. Even after the commodore found Ed, he didn't give up on his pursuit of solving the attempted murder and kidnapping of the admiral and dispatched patrol ships in all directions. For a change, Ed didn't consider Sagastar's stubbornness as useless, so the scouting squadrons continued to carry out their mission.

Upon review, we found out that it's a merchant ship departed from Marchand, the owner is Sir Mesonnier, and the captain is Well, he didn't write down the name of the Captain as they already found the owner. However, Durin, the pilot that was in charge of the ship, stated that the captain was a small man of mixed race. Unfortunately, that's how far the description of his appearance goes. Apparently, the man always covered his face with a hat, but it's said in passing that he was a fine looking man. I mean, the records say

Sagastar flipped through the papers and criticised Legardons poor reporting system. Nonetheless, Ed held out his hand while leaning against the wheel.

The ship's owner

It's Mesonnier.

Sagastar frowned in dissatisfaction upon handing over the report. He was never happy about having to present something crappy. Downcasted, Sagastar blamed himself for not reviewing all the records beforehand. However, contrary to Sagastar's concerns, the report contained just the right amount of information for Ed to work with.

*Mesonnier The pilot from Marchand addressed Cesar that way*

Is this the sailboat you were looking for?

No.

Then why

It's interesting to hear about a small, mixed-race man as a Captain.

Ah, yes.

Using the steering wheel as a pedestal, Ed placed the rapport on top of it. He then took out his glasses from his chest pocket and placed them on the bridge of his nose. His fingertips trembled slightly as he pushed up the thin temple of his glasses. Sagastar, who had already noticed those subtle actions from earlier, looked anxiously at Ed's complexion. As far as Sagastar knew, Ed only wore his glasses whenever he wasn't feeling well.

*It was usually when he stayed up all night for a few days in a row and devoted himself to some strange research. When that happened he would take out his glasses from the third or fourth day. But now, despite eating and sleeping well, his eyes seemed to be dim. In addition, his pale complexion feels ominous, as though it's a harbinger of disaster. Of course, Edgar is originally a bit pale, from his face to his hands and feet. Despite having spent many years on the ship, he hasn't tanned his skin even a little. Everyone assumes that's because of his Northern blood.*

Yet Sagastar has never seen this degree of severe paleness before. Not only was there no blood left in his face, but even the redness of his lips had completely disappeared.

Chapter 155

Previous

Sagastar looked back at Guiad, the navy surgeon who was standing behind him. Per Eds command, Guiad was solely responsible for monitoring the admirals words and actions. This meant he was no longer allowed to interfere with anything else and had to remain silent even if he had something to say. When their eyes met, Guiad nodded his head agreeably and Sagastar recalled the prior conversation he had with the doctor.

{ Its fortunate that the rate of blood loss was slowed down due to the seawater. But his survival can still be called a miracle, especially seeing his severe bleeding Hell suffer from terrible anaemia symptoms for the time being However, its rather strange. Under normal circumstances, the Admiral would be very cautious about the state of his body, but this time he keeps straining himself for some reason. He has always taken better care of his health than anyone else because hes a doctor hm, so whats different this time? }

{ That damned sword Ahem! Is it such a big deal? No! Anyway, what are those symptoms of anaemia you mentioned? }

{ Typically, complaints of headaches or chest pain }

{ Do you seriously think Sir Edgar is someone whos going to complain about pain? Tell me symptoms I can recognize. }

{ Oh, alright. Well First of all, he can look very pale in the face. He may feel tired or sleepy, and that can cause him to start talking deliriously. Of course, that wont come as a big surprise as hell have a hard time using his brain. After all, blood is needed for the brain to properly function, right? And theres a serious shortage of it. Even simply standing up can already be a struggle. If he forces himself to do that, his heart needs to take on that burden It certainly doesnt help that his lungs arent in great shape either Of course, the Admiral is more than capable of self-diagnose, but Im worried hes acting unprecedentedly reckless. He can receive status updates right from his admiral office, so why does he feel the need to go out there himself? Dont tell me hes in such a hurry that he cant stand the wait of a few seconds for the report to arrive? In any case, losing judgement in a situation where pain is involved is very dangerous. If you suspect him to be suppressing the pain, you must take him to his room immediately. }

Sagastar swallowed his dried saliva.

*Anyone can see that the Admiral is in a fragile state right now, looking unmistakably ill. His sunken eyes look no less of those of a corpse, and the side of his head is drenched with sweat. His hand holding the steering wheel seems to be trying very hard to act as support, barely keeping him from falling Even his uniform looks too heavy for a recovering patient to be wearing*

Sir Edgar.

Ed ignored Sagastars persistent impatience. He also didnt have the energy to intervene between the exchange of gestures and glances between Sagastar and Guiad. After reading the report till the end, Ed opened his mouth.

Tell them to return after checking the shipowner and captains descriptions

..?

Ed suddenly became dizzy and felt a sharp pain in his chest. His heartbeat became extremely irregular. However, instead of grabbing his chest, Ed tightened his grip on the steering wheel and blinked his eyes a few times as his vision blurred. He waited for his focus to return and kept staring at what he assumed was the back of his hand.

Tell them to return after doing that.

You mean the Ashtoro?

Instead of responding, Ed handed the report back to Sagastar in a way as if he were about to drop it. When he received the bundle of papers, Sagastar flicked his fingers and summoned the captain. Captain Long, accompanied by the recording officer, saluted while Ed tried to place his elbow on the steering wheel as naturally as possible. He then rummaged through his arms for the hematopoietic agent. However, there was none. For a meticulous guy like Ed, it was almost unbelievable to think that he had actually forgotten to take one with him. As he gasped in a panic, his lungs expanded against his chest, intensifying the pain. His breathing became erratic, and those disturbed breaths diverted his attention. In addition, and despite his best efforts to fight against it, his eyelids began to droop against his will. Ed ordered quickly, fearing that he would be unable to speak later.

Terminate all scouting missions. They won't be joining our Provisional Squadron, have them return to Marchand immediately.

Sagastar intervened with raised eyebrows.

Are you sure, Sir? No then, what are you going to do with your sword?

Don't bother, don't.

...!

Upon seeing Ed's unusual complexion, Sagastar shut his mouth.

Feeling he reached his limit, Ed leaned his forehead on his forearm resting on the steering wheel. Beads of sweat dripped from his damp bangs and fell on the tip of his shoes. Due to his bowing posture, his wheezing breath grew louder in his ears.

Ed took a deep breath and spoke.

The Ashtoro, where is it?

We just have to stay on course. But, Sir Edgar,

Sagastar's voice sounded urgent.

Then, the Visha, just like now, advance.

Ed, who could no longer afford to speak any further, pushed himself away from the steering wheel and struggled down the stern.

As they weren't allowed to stop him, Sagastar and Guiad could only follow their admiral with trepidation. In the meantime, it became harder and harder for Ed to hold himself together. In moments like this, he considered it fortunate to be using a cane due to his leg injury. Otherwise, he would probably have already fallen down the stairs.

After descending the last staircase, Ed made a turn and headed for the admirals office. From there on out it felt like the world had turned upside down. At some point, his vision became so distorted that the door to the admirals room he was approaching multiplied to three or even four. The excruciating headache made him grab his forehead. The inside of his head appeared to be hammered till it shattered. Nonetheless, Ed extended his arm and pushed the wooden door open. Relieved that he finally made it, he walked over to his desk. It wasnt until the sound of glass falling to the hardwood floor hit his ear that he realised he was falling himself. The hand that had quickly tried to pick up the vial, missed its target completely and instead swept across the table. As a result, several glass bottles rolled on the floor with a loud noise. Ed then fumbled in the air with his hand which he thought was still holding the cane.

*Thud!*

Sir Edgar!

Admiral!

Guiad! What is this?!

Sir, is it heart palpitations? Admiral? Admiral!

Sorry Please get out of the way, Commodore!

The footsteps that had been hesitating in front of the admirals office burst through the door upon the sound of disturbance. Ed listened to the alarmed voices of the two officers while trying to grab the hematopoietic agent that too had rolled on the floor, but unfortunately, he couldnt feel the vial anywhere and due to the slanted floor, it instead rolled further away with a rattling sound.

Eventually, darkness suppressed his vision that was staring at the dark red liquid

\*\*\*

The mainmast carried a large sail engraved with a naval crest. The red square flag hanging below it was a clear request for the Bell Rock to respond to the inspection. This was possible because the navy could request an inspection at any sea belonging to the emperor. The battleship opened all its gun gates from the stern all the way to the hull like a serpent puffing up its scales to look more intimidating. After some time, it lowered down a boat. The sailboat, seen only leisurely on the glowing water at noon, began to approach the Bell Rock.

*The nearest naval base is Marchand, so theres no reason for a single sloop to roam this far out. No other intelligence regarding this matter was heard either.*

In that moment, Lil witnessed a messenger pigeon flying from the deck of the battleship before its anchor dropped.

*There must be more vessels close by, maybe even a whole squadron*

The heavy feeling of fatigue fell over her body. From the situation with Ed until her confrontation with Cesar, Lil was left with no fighting spirit at all. Even in Cesars cabin just a while ago, her soul was about to fly out the window. And now, the burden of dealing with the Navy was added to it.

Lil looked down at the deck where the complete Bell Rock crew was kneeling with their hands behind their heads. Their rugged blades glistened in the bright sunlight as each of them had dropped their armaments beside them. Her dry tongue pointlessly traced her lips. Frankly speaking, Lil



wasnt confident in her control of this mixed crew of hers. She would have fewer problems if it was just her original crew, but now, half of the sailors who boarded the Bell Rock belonged to either Jarles or Valtano.

## *Chapter 156*

*Like Jarles, Valtano is also a highly regarded captain. Despite having his nose cut off and being abused by the Navy as a child, theres no one who doesnt look up to him Someone who grew up to become one of the captains of the League. Even now, anyone who sees the scar that distorts the centre of his face will be in awe and pay their respects Also, hes from Marchand As a result, Valtanos ship always attracts a large number of eager applicants. In fact, most of the Marchand natives boarded his ship. But not only men from Marchand, but anyone who had a rough past puts their trust in Valtano*

*What I told Ed in Panichi is true. The sailors from Marchand would definitely have come after his head. It was a fact, not a mere exaggeration. People from Marchand are just filled with repressed rage. And that uncontrollable ball of fire could consume them at any time. Exactly like Courant had a few days ago. But contrary to the young Courant, those who have already outlived their youth would possess much more destructive power*

Lil looked nervously down at Julio. Even from a distance, she could tell that he had an eerie expression.

*But for sure, he isnt an idiot wanting to die. Theres no way he will kill an officer with 20 close range guns aimed toward us at.*

Lil believed in Valtanos spirit more than Julios.

*He wouldnt have lent an out-of-control guy to another captain. However, the urge for an impulsive attack or momentary rage is beyond my control. Tragedies happen in an instant Just like what happened to Ed*

A flamboyant bicorne\* rose from Bell Rocks railing. With the help of an officer who climbed the ladder first, a young lieutenant stepped on the ship. After that, a group of petty officers followed him and went up to the Bell Rock too. But no matter how many members of the navy rushed up, Lil persistently examined the higher ranked officer only.

*In his late teens. Must be an aristocrat from Lebrun based on his age and attitude.*

Just looking at him gave her the creeps. Of course, there would be many Lebrun officers on that sloop, but the second lieutenants presence on board the Bell Rock made her feel heavy. Finally, Lil decided to accompany him. The second lieutenant adjusted his hat with dignity as soon as he stepped onto the deck. Lil respectfully bowed her head in front of him.

Mesonnier?

..?

Lil frowned beneath her wide-brimmed hat.

*Mesonnier is Cesars alias when travelling to and from Marchand. Did anything happen in Marchand while we were gone? Based on the fact that they intercepted us here, they mustve*

*deduced the ships information from the appearance of the Bell Rock and Marchand is the only place where such detailed records are kept. Whats the Navy looking for that they need to carry these Marchand records around?*

Are you Mesonnier?

The second lieutenant, approaching quickly, beckoned Lil rudely. Tilting his head, his gaze shifted from the report in his adjutants hands to Lil and back. Lil then removed her hat and rose respectfully. Because captains of merchant ships were normally dressed up fancily, the gold pieces jingled loudly when she moved.

No, Sir. My name is Captain Duphy.

Lieutenant Guerin from Legardon.

Lieutenant Guerin. Welcome aboard.

The lieutenant liked Lils accent first and foremost. Perhaps thats why he seemed to give Lil a passing mark, seeing he raised his brows more generously than before.

Are you of mixed origin? Your accent sounds just like the Empires standard.

Ah, yes. I was born in the Viscounty of Noirmont. Ever since I was young, I often travelled to and from Sesbron with my father.

Then he mustve been a capital merchant. Yes, well. It could be because its Noirmont.

When the lieutenant waved his hand, his adjutant held out a quill to him. The man with the eagle feather corrected something in their records. Lil saw this as a suitable opportunity to check the report.

I dont know what you have to check exactly, but would you like to take a look around? My sailors can be tough because theyre procured from the southern part of the region. Unpleasant things may happen, so let me take care of you.

Where is Mesonnier?

He controls the deck below.

Then have someone else call for him.

Lil glanced at Jericho, who was standing by her side. Jericho had been shivering throughout their conversation, but straightened his back to go down the deck. The arrogant lieutenant satisfactorily looked down at Jericho. Clearly enjoying the sight of a trembling sailor who was basically running away, the lieutenant raised his chin in gesture towards the gathered petty officers.

You guys spread out.

Leaving their superiors behind, the lower-ranked navies seized the deck in a frenzy. On the other hand, the second lieutenant intended to slack off in the captains office.

*I thought someone was gonna lose their composure, but now Im more relaxed. Judging from the quick change in his tone, it seems hes not here for the League. They might be after another group of delinquents. It feels like we just got excluded from the suspect list, which would mean the Bell Rock is now classified as a virtuous merchant ship. I just hope nothing turns into a headache when their inspection sweeps from the front to the back part of our ship. With Sir Mesonnier as its owner, the*

*Bell Rock is a highly trusted and well-identified merchant ship that even has access to the Imperial Bank As long as no one causes a fuss on deck, this should all go smoothly.*

Lil broke into a cold sweat, hoping no one would do anything stupid. She then looked across the lieutenant who was hiding his yawn behind his fanning hand.

Would you like some tea? I have some Sudesno leaves. Im sorry that I can only treat you this lacking because this is merely a merchant ship.

Despite having said that, Sudesno was among the more expensive specialties of the South due to the difficulty of its cultivation. The lieutenant, who tried to hide his delight, answered proudly.

Well, its better than nothing.

So, Lil and the second lieutenant ended up exchanging some small talk in the captains office. It was mainly about the business of the lieutenants family, which was unbearably standard, but Lil tried hard to listen attentively. The second lieutenant also tried to gauge her position among the top. Apparently, he wasnt the eldest son, and he had made an effort to establish a humble relationship with Viscount Noirmont. For some reason, she got the feeling that his family business, which he claimed was going well, was actually on the verge of ruin.

Lil, who was concentrating all her attention on the movements outside, felt strange for a moment.

*Why would an aristocrat who graduated from Lebrun try to look good in front of a Captain thats only in charge of one single ship?*

It suddenly reminded her of the changing of the world.

With a fake smile, Lil tested her luck and hinted.

By the way, can I ask what youre inspecting us for? I could save us some time.

Yeah. Weve been talking about business for a long time now, havent we? We can leak a bit of information to them. Am I right, Aspirant Rubens?

Yes! Lieutenant!

Yes, despite this being a waste of time, weve been given an order. We had a hard time coming here, so naturally, my wish is to return as soon as possible.

The lieutenant gave Lil a gentle glance. Lil leaned in as if she was about to be spilt a big secret. The man then gave a sloppy explanation of the situation while complaining to his officer. Meanwhile, Lil naturally picked up the information the lieutenant spilt.

\*\*\*

Ah, Sir Mesonnier. So, what happened was

After the petty officer suddenly stopped talking, Cesar looked at the man who was nervously looking around. As the officers eyes rolled, his arms clutched the bag of gold coins handed over to him by Cesar.

Theres no time for this. Youll have to escort me to your commanding officer soon.

Of course, Cesar already expected this to be a mission involving Ed. But he needed more information.

*If the fleet hasn't rescued Ed yet, he should be dead by now. In that case, Commodore Sagastar will be chasing the source of the message. But if they did find him, that would make for a whole different story.*

That's why Cesar hid on the deck around his cabin and searched for a suitable officer. There was only one guy who met all his criteria: a dissatisfied face because he hadn't been promoted despite his age, an attitude that showed no loyalty, lethargy, anger, etc.

Our fleet is looking for a noble person

I won't ask who he is, so go ahead. What I need is an explanation of how the Navy is doing, not classified information about someone's identity. That way, I can prepare supplies for the base

The petty officer was at least relieved to hear that Mesonnier wasn't curious about the admiral's identity and patted his chest. But he was still timid even though he had already received the money. Cesar crossed his arms like an impatient merchant. The officer approached, struggling to speak. Despite finding him pathetic, Cesar leaned in to give him his ear.

Anyway, he's safe, but the person under him was outraged and stepped forward. From what I've heard on the way here, what happened to him was absurd. However, I don't know what's going on on the Mondovi fleet. Whoa!

The embarrassed officer covered his mouth as Cesar held out another bag of silver coins which caught him by surprise. When he heard the sound of money, his eyes widened.

While the petty officer turned around to count the money, Cesar looked down at the floor, staring at his shoe prints on the wooden floor dirtied with rigging and dust.

*So he's alive.*

*Footnote:*

*The bicorne or bicorn (two-cornered) is a historical form of hat widely adopted in the 1790s as an item of uniform by European and American army and naval officers. Most generals and staff officers of the Napoleonic period wore bicornes, which survived as widely-worn full-dress headdresses until the 20th century. [Wiki]*

Chapter 157

An unknown feeling started to flood around Cesar's feet, causing him to brush the nose of his shoe on the wall for no apparent reason.

*I know I should be relieved, but I still experience this uneasy feeling. Survival or death? Which one do I want it to be? I never wanted Edgar to die, but I'm afraid Liloa will abandon me after learning of his survival.*

After stuffing his spoils inside a pocket of his clothes, the petty officer turned to Cesar. Cesar, not even looking at the navy, took the lead and trod across the cabin deck. After passing through a bulkhead, the sailors who were doing their own work observed them in silence.

Cesar suddenly had a gut feeling.

*The atmosphere isnt good. In particular, the momentum of the new crew is as tense as if they can explode at any moment.*

Like Lil, Cesar also harboured serious concerns about the other captains crew.

*With things turning out like this, I long back to the original Bell Rock crew. Liloa had set them up well, so its a pity that half of them are gone.*

Even Cesar acknowledged that, and thats the reason why he couldnt simply discard his lingering feelings. Perhaps thats also why being with Lil meant wasting his own leadership and ability as she clearly didnt need his help.

It made him look back on his relinquished glory.

*If I wanted to take it from Liloa, I could simply force it I know I shouldnt, but I cant help feeling sad about it.*

Cesar went up to the upper deck and washed his face dry. He was tired and exhausted. He had no intention of giving up on Lil, but there were days like this when he was close to reaching his limit.

*As much as I suffer, Liloa does too And this tug of war is something that will surely happen again unless either of us let go*

At times it got better, and sometimes it got even worse, but Cesar maintained a humble belief that things would definitely get better in the end.

*Thinking about the end, all the difficult things that are happening now will make up for it But does Liloa feel the same way?*

*Im not sure. Im at a total loss for words. I would have quickly tire if I didnt have such strong faith, yet it has been difficult even for me. I have no idea if my weary hand can ever let go of hers*

Cesar pushed through the door to the captains office. Lil, who was speaking with the officer, gave him a faint smile. Cesar leaned against the doorpost, unsure whether it was even appropriate to laugh or not.

After all, he struggled with the idea that he would never be the first to fall out between the two of them

\*\*\*

After Legardons battleship left, it felt ambiguous to even call it an early evening. Although it was the end of the sunset, the sky was roughly reddish. The gun deck, with the crew just having finished eating, was filled with smoke and the savoury smell of food. The sailors who cleaned up the seats opened the gun gates to ventilate the room.

The shift on duty was about to begin , so the sailors were split into two streams and moved out. It was then that reverberation of the trumpet buzzed through the ship. This time between day and night was also the time for someone to turn up the lights. Courant, who was hanging lanterns one after another on the gun deck, suddenly turned his head. Beyond the open gun gates he saw the Navys battleship, which had already become small. It blended into the upcoming darkness with only its white mast vaguely recognizable.

After lighting all the lanterns, Courant came down to the cabin deck. The person he sought for wouldve gone to the lower deck to sleep. Holding a torch, he found the man without much

difficulty. The small flame fluttered over the body that laid in its hammock. Sensing that the fire wasnt passing by, the limp body turned to Courant. Fierce eyes belonging to a young man suddenly stared directly at the boy.

What the hell!

..!

Courant was startled and bitten.

You little!

Whoa, Julio.

Courant wasnt thirsty, but his mouth felt like it caught on fire all of a sudden. Julio, who was only slightly annoyed, was already that intimidating. The dark lighting and the heinous atmosphere left by the navys inspection added to it all. Courant mustered up his courage with shaking legs. With Alain and Jericho remaining silent for some reason, it was up to him to inform the League of the gravity of the situation. At first, even when Ed was caught or when Lil summoned him to admonish him, he couldnt bring himself to do it. However, Legardon inspection of the Bell Rock changed everything.

*Ive been on the ship for years, but Ive never heard about the Legardon Navy inspecting civilian ships, including those of the League. Obviously, something is brewing beyond the sea No one knows about this important issue except for the Captain, the navigator, Alain, Jericho, and me. In addition, all of them are keeping their mouths shut I cant understand why everyone appears to be so relaxed Of course, except for me, theres no one among them whos from Marchand, so they must have no idea how evil the Navy truly is. If we take this matter too lightly, the Bell Rock will sink before we can even deliver the news to Anunchio Julio was born and raised in Marchand. And he looks strong and capable. He even confronted Lil, the Captain who till now couldnt be touched. If I tell him everything, he might be able to turn this ship around before its too late.*

Courant opened his mouth as he approached Julios hammock.

Julio. Theres something I need to tell you.

\*\*\*

If they had followed their original schedule, they wouldve reached Serlio by now. However, the setbacks and the rainy season delayed them.

Today started bright till the first rain fell. Raindrops started to pour down their sails. The dull sound of rain softened as the thick cloth slowly got wet. Sailors had to move quickly before the drenched sails became heavier, so they cursed to themselves as they climbed up the mast line. Along with the heavy rain, all kinds of swear words poured down from the crew.

The rain showed no signs of stopping. With Lil standing next to the wheel, the Bell Rock rode the rising waves and tilted to the left. Her body leaned over with it, causing the rainwater that had accumulated on top of her hat to trickle down, her left shoulder could do nothing but to catch such a waterfall. Gusts of wind rattled the wheel, so Lil squeezed her hand tightly. Nonetheless, the shaken steering wheel remained on course. Anxiety that they would lose their way forever if she slipped plagued Lil the whole time.

*Three days.*

Lil had been holding on to the shaking wheel for three days. In the meantime, Cesar pretended to spend his daily life as usual. They were used to that. Acting like the fight was no big deal and brainwashing each other that no conflict or difference of opinion could ever be fatal to their union.

But there were some subtle changes compared to former confrontations. Lil remained silent. It was the first time Lil stayed silent even though she usually spoke to him first. As the heavy sense of distance increased day by day, Cesar grew paler and seldomly came out of his cabin. She also noticed that he hardly ate.

Thunder rumbled loudly on the Bell Rock. It wasn't until after the roaring sound that Lil realised what was going on. When she came to her senses, the deck was crowded and boisterous. The undressed sailors took a bath and did their laundry on the main deck. They had crawled out one by one some time ago, and the sound of beating clothes was now louder than the rain.

Lil reflected on her incompetence.

*In the end, I still have no idea what Cesar has done with the letter, and I have no idea whether Ed was truly innocent or not. Hell, I can't even come up with a reason why the Legardon Navy did something they usually don't. This was supposed to be an easy voyage. Even the mission was lighter than usual. It only entailed retrieving gold deposits and loading them onto the Bell Rock. But I never felt this helpless before*

Misty air burst out with her sigh. She felt out of breath again.

Leaving the wheel to the helmsman, Lil went down to the stern. Dozens of eyes followed her as she walked on the deck, causing her rain-soaked body to turn cold

Chapter 158

*Those guys have been like this ever since I couldn't answer their shower of questions about why the Navy wanted us to open the Bell Rock for inspection*

Truth was, Lil also didn't know why the Navy suddenly had that whim.

*Clearly, even Anunchio isn't up to date on news concerning the Southern Seas, so how could I've known? In the end, I could only tell them that it was safe to assume they're seeking for a specific ship that's wanted. And emphasise the fact that the League should be wary of Mondovis fleet, not Legardons. As Legardon is still fixated on moving east. But although I told them that and tried to reassure them, there were many men who didn't want to hear it. At a time when the League's ships were rushing back to Panichi to prepare for the impending war, the Bell Rock had gone against that course. It's understandable why they're feeling uneasy.*

Till now, only Lil and Cesar knew their secret destination; Serlio, imperial land.

*Given the recent hostilities, it's natural for the new crew to think that a Captain unfamiliar to them, whom they even think is corrupt, would be someone they couldn't rely on. Or could it be that the crew noticed something? The lieutenant did say that their inspection was related to an unpleasant incident involving a high-ranking officer. As for Cesar, he only commented that there were two other*

*squadrons nearby before he disappeared again. The lack of information is more worrying than I thought. In addition, Cesar seems to be hiding something.*

Expecting this, Lil had been looking for a suitable opportunity to extract more information from a petty officer, but that opportunity never came as she was busy escorting the lieutenant.

*All this because of an event involving a high-ranking officer? The fact that the ship travelled this far indicates that he has to be quite important. Then how high-ranked is this officer? There aren't many important officers in the South, where there are no war heroes at all. But, if it was a mission involving such a person, why would the lieutenant be so sluggish in carrying it out? Why did he want to have it done quickly? Is it an internal feud or a political squabble? Could there have been an intervention from a third party? If so, what could they possibly want?*

*I have no idea I'm looking through the mere hole of a needle I can't see the whole picture*

Lil came to a halt next to the railing. Waves rose and faded beyond the railing, an act that repeated itself faster than anticipated. The insidiously dented waves were black beyond recognition, so Lil stared at them as if they were her adversary.

Suddenly, her body staggered when a stronger wave slammed their ship and showered the deck in white frothy water. Scared that her hat might fly away by the breeze, Lil snatched it and pushed it down on her head. But in that fleet moment that her concentration slipped, the sole of her boot slipped too. Lil, who was on the verge of falling forward, attempted to stabilise herself by grabbing the railing before her, thereby slamming her side into it.

Agh!

Whoa, Captain!

From somewhere, Alain sprang up and assisted Lil. As she lost her breath for a moment due to the impact, her heart skipped a beat. Lil eventually straightened her body and pushed Alain's hand from her shoulder. However, her irregular breathing continued. Simultaneously a dull throb of pain hit her side, making her bent over. It was one of her injuries she had forgotten about.

Looking at his captain, Alain opened his mouth.

Shouldn't you at least look for some medicine?

I don't need it.

Lil, who swallowed another groan, remained bowed forward. Her decision was hardly unreasonable in any case, given that she had no doctor to go to and no knowledge about medicine herself. As a result, she had no choice but to endure the discomfort and wait for her body to heal naturally.

How are you going to deal with this difficult situation when your body is out of shape and your mind is racing?

Just watch me.

Lil took small steps, deliberately trying to touch the railing as few times as possible. Slowly, the two of them made their way to the front deck. It was fortunate that the rain was loud enough to not only drown out the noise, but also mask their conversation. Holding back what he wanted to say, Alain gave Lil a troubled look before he spoke again.



Currently, the crew is divided into three groups: those who want to continue the mission as ordered, those who want to return to Panichi right away, and those who don't care.

The Panichi faction won't easily gain the upper hand; were carrying out direct orders from the League.

The Captain too, huh? So it's alright to sink, as long as we won't be captured? Is that what you're saying? Does that also apply to lower-ranked sailors? A Captain can be proud of that motto, but most of the guys here want to stay alive for a little longer. Ah, except for a madman like Marenzio, of course.

Then you will never escape being tagged as a coward. A guy like Julio will make sure of that.

They look busy over there.

What do you think they're up to?

If we knew, then that's like hitting the jackpot. The Bell Rock guys are keeping an eye on them, but there aren't enough people. A lot of the experienced sailors retired in Panichi, so now the remaining ones are spread too thin.

It shouldn't have been like this.

Come on! Don't blame yourself again. Who else could've predicted this, except for Mother Ocean?

Lil pushed her stooping waist up. Her skin ached, but there was nothing worse than to show weakness in a situation like this. Dozens of eyes were still following them around.

If I can find a reason to, I will be able to quit being labelled as a coward and turn the ship around.

The weather isn't good. This could be reason enough.

Hearing him say that, Lil looked around. Sea fog was making its way up to the deck. The shapeless mist curled around her legs closely representing her anxiousness. She then raised her eyes. Because there was no sensation of distance due to the horrible visibility, that sense of solitude could easily lead to madness. Even the most experienced sailors weren't confident about sailing blindly.

Not surprisingly, even Alain shuddered his shoulders.

Am I right or what? With this kind of sea fog I know we won't have enough supplies to go back. But jeez, on days like this, I do miss a destination that's familiar to us.

We already missed the timing. We just have to get this over with.

I guess I'll have to call Joe here and hear what he has to say.

Bring Cesar as well. Tell him to take the wheel.

Aye.

But

..?

While talking to Alain, Lil's gaze had persistently wandered the deck. Alain looked puzzled as she dragged out her words. Lil then muttered a fact that she was suddenly reminded of.

I can't find Courant.

What?

Where is he?

I dont know.

Isnt it strange that Courant isnt on deck on a day like today?

Alain turned his head and followed Lils gaze. Seeing the scene of men keeping their hands busy doing their laundry, Alain noticed the strange occurrence too. Its been one of the Bell Rocks principles to do ones own laundry, but eventually, some of the higher-ranked crew made the lower-ranked crew do their laundry in exchange for some wages, and for some time Courant had been taking on that job.

Its going to be a mountain of work for him to do, so Im sure he should be starting now.

That diligent child Hmm, Ill look for him.

Lil got a bad feeling about it as she remembered her lecture from a few days before. It irritated her that she couldnt shake these feelings off. It was difficult to deal with people who were neither a child nor an adult yet.

*Under normal circumstances, I wouldve been more lenient of Courant. But he now holds confidential information, so I cant help but be concerned about a possible leakage. I ordered Jericho to keep an eye on him. But when Jericho had nothing to report, I kept wondering if there was anything wrong at all. Or, he just didnt know*

Search the artillery deck. And call for Cesar along the way. Ill head to the cabin deck.

Lil headed down without delay. Streams of water fell from the deck and flowed down the wooden stairs like a valley. The deck below was noisier than usual. With water dripping from the ceiling, Lil asked herself if her crew could even sleep comfortably, but she couldnt ignore the thought that this problem might have some ulterior motive.

Lil looked around the darkened deck. The enclosed space was musty and gloomy. While standing there, tens of thousands of conspiracy theories breezed through her head.

*Hopefully, Alain will take care of it*

Chapter 159

Knowing she couldnt check all areas alone, Lil turned around. The cabin deck was much calmer than the upper deck. Except for a couple of exchanged murmurs, it appeared that most of the men were already asleep. Lil approached an eating man who looked like he was just done with his shift.

Have you seen Courant?

Huh? No.

How about during his shift?

I dont think so.

Get up and find him.

The sailor who was given an order alternately looked at his soup and Lil with a face of unfairness. Lil added as she looked down at his half-empty bowl.

After your meal.

Only then did the sailors eyes widen and he started to eat the soup in a hurry. Lil left him behind to scour the rest of the deck. However, no one was able to give her the answer she was searching for. They merely said they hadnt seen the boy at all. After going around aimlessly for some time, Lil finally reached the end of the deck.

*The officers quarters.*

The bulkhead was adorned with elegant territorial markings fitting the officers.

Lil continued to walk. When she knocked on the first cabins door, Jericho emerged, looking like he had just woken up.

Ca Captain? What brought you down here?

Looking down at the back of Jerichos hand, which had ceased scratching his stomach, Lil replied.

Courant has gone missing; he isnt in his hammock. Find him.

Cou Courant? Uh, uh I just saw him not long ago

How long ago was it? Hours?

It was probably around dawn

What if he lost it again in the meantime? I told you to keep an eye on him, not just to take a peek now and then?!

Jericho rejected it with a wave of his hand.

Nah. It seems that his sanity has come back, I even thought he was doing a good job. In the beginning, I was thinking about appeasing him, but that didnt seem to be needed anymore as he appeared to have gone back to his gentle disposition. So, I only told him, as long as you behave properly, the Captain will surely treat you more leniently soon. Then, he just smiled and walked away.

Isnt that even more suspicious? How can the feelings that were intense enough to kill a person be cleared in just a few days?

Why? Do you think something has happened?

Hes gone. It hasnt been long since hes caused trouble, but until now hes not showing up.

Ok okay? No, where the hell

Jericho tried to talk to Lil a bit more, but she resolutely passed his cabin. Soon, Jericho was heard rushing out of his cabin. Lil visited a few more cabins and summoned all the officers.

Eventually, their grumblings faded behind her back.

*Now, only one cabin remains.*

Without a single lamp, the darkness led to another door. And behind that door was the sour smell of death. No one had lit a lamp there, so the blackened space together with the evenly cracked grain of wood looked like a coffin lid holding a corpse.

Lil took her hat off her head as she pushed her thumb down to turn the doorknob. It was only when she saw the inside of the cabin that she was taken back. In fact, she didnt think she could ever open this door again.

*Is this the feeling of someone who cant merely pass by the tombstone of an acquaintance? Or, perhaps, the longing of a sick man wanting to be treated by a doctor*

Lil stepped inside.

The room was damp. She was unsure if it was moisture from the rain or his blood. Lil scanned the cabin. The window was right in front of her, with a bed on the left and a desk on the right. Once more, she turned her gaze to the left. She walked over there, struck a match, and lit the bedside lantern.

Inside the suddenly brightly lit room, her breath stopped.

She didnt realise it when she came to get the balsam, but Eds whitish blanket was covered with dark blood stains. The stains werent just on the bed and blankets. The blood that had been spilt, flowed and swept was entwined in various forms. It was cruelty that Lil couldnt fathom so quickly. She simply couldnt grasp how brutal it must have been for Ed that his blood left such gruesome traces. Her eyes hardened as she examined the floor. A round paperweight was lying between the stains. Lil only then realised what Courant had used to smash Eds head in.

In an instant, the fishy smell of blood hit her nostrils.

*All of this showed how desperate Ed mustve been before he helplessly shut his eyes.*

A sob boiled over as Lils throat was being torn apart.

*All the while, I had no idea I cant forgive myself for not knowing how horribly a person has been crushed while I was sitting in the Captains office, trying to hate him*

Lil picked up some of the charcoal crumbs that had fallen to the floor and rolled it between her fingers. She then took out the crumbling chair and sitting on it, staring at the empty bed right in front of her.

*Bang!*

Lil looked up in surprise as the door kicked open and someone tumbled in. Her eyes scanned the person from head to toe. His clothes were mud-soaked, his hair messy, and the exposed skin was covered with wounds. Their eyes met as the guy held his head wrapped between his forearms. Lil recognized the messed-up face in an instant.

As soon as Courant saw Lil, he grabbed her trousers hem and clung to it.

Captain! Cap

Seeing his swollen cheeks, chapped lips, sweat, and bloodstains, she could roughly estimate what had happened to him.

*You fool*

Looking down at him coldly, Courant twitched his shoulders. Eventually, Lil raised her eyes and glared at the man who had picked up the boy and thrown him through the door. Julio stood briskly in the opening with dozens of sailors lined up behind him.

*Perhaps Courant made the first move. Otherwise, this kind of situation wouldnt have happened.*

Julio pointed his finger at Courant.

Werent you looking for this guy?

Lil quickly examined Courants condition again. There were clear rope marks over his cheeks and on his wrists.

*Tying him up wouldnt have been necessary for a mere interrogation. In addition, they beat him up good So, if they tied him up and kept him hidden, it was done to buy time to spread the information they just gathered to sway public opinion and looking at the confident Julio, he seems to have ample support behind him.*

What did you do?

Nothing. He actually came to see me first, he then told me something very interesting.

She understood it without the need to hear the rest. It was easy to guess just by looking at Courant, who couldnt bear to meet her eye out of shame. Lils throat chilled. It felt like her head had been put on a guillotine and she was now waiting for the blade that could fall at any moment.

Julio roared loudly.

I heard there was a rat on board?

A sharp, piercing sensation sliced her spine.

Lil calmly examined the movements in front of her. The entrance to the cabin was crowded with sailors as Julio walked in with his chest puffed out like a sail pushed out by a tailwind. He was followed by a sailor who raised a lantern high, revealing the unconcealable scene of a tragedy. The sound of water dripping from dozens of clothes soaked the floor as thunder in the distant sky sounded like a warning. The conflict already ensued, so now there was nothing she could hide anymore.

Did I hear that right? What was it again?

Julio spoke again, while looking around the cabin.

There was nothing wrong with what the kid said, right? What the hell? A suicide attempt? Thats what I heard at first. But Im sure he couldnt have done all this by himself.

Julios feet that were pacing the floor kicked the paperweight that had fallen, making the blood-stained object roll to the other side. It reminded Lil of Eds forehead that had burst open and bled. Trembling with belate rage, she clenched her fists. However, she tried her best to ignore the dull sound of it rolling into the corner of the cabin as she simply couldnt lose her temper here.

Ed he has been dealt with. Didnt Courant tell you that too? It was over before we even determined the charges.

At the mention of his own name, Courant crawled behind her and hid. Lil shook his hands off her boots and brushed her legs.

Thats not the point, is it? Lil Schweiz

Call me Captain.

The point is Lil Schweiz here tried to conceal the fact that we had a spy on board.

I told you to call me Captain.

Lil Schweiz.

I never knew that Valtano was lazy enough to not teach his dog manners.

*Chapter 160*

Shut the fuck up!

Lil sighed at his pathetic tone.

*Although I want to take care of this nuisance right away, nothing good will be borne out of pressing the buttons of an outside crew. Its best to avoid situations in which they can relate to the same feelings. Anger, hatred, and determination are the kinds of emotions that will further aggravate this confrontation. The sudden hostility at the beginning of this strife is bound to wear off over time. After that, it will become a matter of determination. How far do they want to continue this confrontation and carry out their pride? Its the determination that will determine the extent of it. Even if Julios anger is unavoidable, theres a way to break the will of the sailors who agree with him. In the end, its the determination that may rise or fall according to the gains and losses of the situation.*

Lets cut to the chase, shall we? I didnt conceal the existence of a spy. I put a person suspected of being one in isolation. I did that to safely solve this uncertain situation. After all, the existence of a Captain is to guarantee the safety of the crew and prevent danger. So, thats why. However, I didnt know I had to report to you guys one by one even when the investigation was still in progress.

How can we be sure that he isnt in cahoots with the doctor?

Hes so suspicious! Looking at that face already makes me feel nauseous!

Thats your reasoning? Im with Ed?

Its quite the coincidence that there was a Navy spy on a ship with an Imperial bastard at the helm! Isnt this ships destination also a place with a naval base? The Imperial Serlio?! Youre going to hand us all over once we get there! Otherwise, why else did Legardon let us pass the checkpoint without any problems? This is clear evidence that the Navy is on the move!

Julio was cheered on by the men standing behind him.

I dont believe these pale bastards at all!

Ugh! Such cruel bastards!

Lets go back to Valtano!

If Jarles knew whats going on, hed be so shocked!

As she examined the spitting men one by one, Lil had already seen this coming. The majority of Valtanos crew often mixed with Jarles and today was no exception. Lil was relieved to see that none of them belonged to the original crew of the Bell Rock.

She eventually glanced up at the ceiling.

*Looks like there hasnt been any bloodshed between them and the Bell Rocks sailors having no confrontation between them so far is great. Alain or Cesar, one of them must be aware of the situation and is gathering the crew on the upper deck.*

If I indeed intended to hand you over, shouldnt I have done that the moment Legardon crossed us? Why would I go all the way to Serlio? It was obvious that after the encounter with the Navy, the atmosphere on deck would take a turn for the worst. Have you ever thought about why I have to keep sailing despite knowing such a risk?

You must be up to something!

You dont even know what Im up to, you all just want to go home.

The captain is suspicious, so follow me or The captains skin colour is suspicious, follow me instead. Thats what youve been spreading around, right? But you know it, dont you? That skin colour means nothing. All you feel is anger towards the futility of violence that has been committed against you.

Who the hell said that skin colour has anything to do with this? You hid the existence of a spy. And it doesnt matter whether or not you were in cahoots with him. Either way, youre suspicious enough.

So, you think Im up to no good? Is that what youre trying to say? That alone is making you want to head back? Or are you afraid of a man who might or might not have died as a spy?

What? You want to go home, but you dont have a good reason, so youre just taking it out on me? I feel sorry for the guys behind you. They clearly cant tell whats going on, so theyre just following your childish act.

Julio pulled the gun from his waist and moved closer with childlike thumping steps.

There are plenty of reasons why we simply cant head back to Panichi. First of all, our food storage is running scarce and its obvious that we cant find a nearby island in this fog. Secondly, the weather is no good. The wind is a headwind from the southwest where Panichi is located. And thirdly, its faster if we try to communicate with the League once we reach our destination. Theres also not much time left. It will only take us three days at most, so why are you telling me that we must go back to Panichi immediately?

Murmurs spread around, making Julio shout meaninglessly in order to take back control of the situation.

*The sailors are becoming increasingly uneasy about the Bell Rock. I sympathise with Julio, as we both care about the ship. But still, being on the ship is way better than drifting in the sea. The Bell Rock isnt a shipwreck At least not yet. For now, its best to get rid of these mens anxiety.*

The sailors here who lick imperial ass will believe you. But not me! Even if you try to win me over like this, I wont fall for it!

Lil leaned against the desk behind her and folded her arms.

Hmm? Then what, are you going to kill me?

If you do, my crew will never accept you.

You havent forgotten him, have you? The despicable Dato, who killed his Captain and half of the crew thereby became a captain by force. He was beheaded by Anunchio.

Shut up! Just shut up!

You want to live. Arent you doing all this because you want to live? And you think following me is leading you to your death? Of course, you have to guarantee your life the most. But, who will follow you if youre guaranteed to be beheaded once you get back? Being a Captain isnt as simple as you think now, is it?

Lil raised her torso and placed her forehead directly on the gun. The cold iron froze her skin.

Isnt the upper deck really quiet right now?

..!

At those words, a startled Julio looked up at the ceiling.

Theres been such an uproar down there. But why is it so quiet up there? Huh?

Whatever your decision may be, never kill off those who decide to follow my lead.

Julios thumb brushed against the pistols ball. Lils attention was solely on her opponents eyes. There was no conviction in his fluctuating eyes and his clenched jaw throbbed awkwardly. The way one expressed anger and fear could differ from person to person, but it was extra tricky with Julio. Lil hoped he wasnt overconfident.

*Although hes swayed by childish emotions as hes still young, I think he has enough conscience to not lead his comrades into a massacre*

Gnashing his teeth, Julio spoke.

Ill put up a vote.

At the same time, the muzzle broke off her forehead. Lil finally sighed down. Feigning the skill of an incumbent captain, she smiled leisurely.

As you should.

Ill definitely drive you out.

Lets see what you can do. Voting is possible with the consent of more than half of the crew and half of the officers.

I already have the majority of the crew. Now all I need is more than half of the officers.

You already have the majority? What kind of bluff is that?

Keep him under surveillance until then.

As he spoke, Julio hit a sailor on his shoulder. Lil realised the meaning of his words a second later. She murmured as if she had been hit on the back of her head out of nowhere.

What? Surveillance?..

Surprised, huh?

Youre going to detain a Captain in office?

Well, what else can I do about it?

Seeing his incredible guts to do so, Lil feared for the dozens of lives on board and started to shout.



Where will a ship sail without the Captains official command?! You have just decided to risk the lives of two hundred men because of your own recklessness. How are you going to turn things around with that mindset? Even if you receive punishment for this from the League, it wont be enough!

Julio made fun of her nagging remarks.

It doesnt matter because well have a new captain before we reach Panichi.

This isnt something you can simply decide on your own just because you dont like my way of doing things.

Theres a law against killing the captain, but theres no law against keeping him detained.

You crazy bastard! How are you going to get this ship out of this sea fog? Weve already come too deep into the area!

Shut up! Who needs to see the sky anyway?

At Lils warning, there was another buzz outside the cabin. Julio glared at the agitated sailors. Of course, there was no wonder why there were very few ships that went to and from the Serlio route, also the Bell Rock was the only one among the Leagues ships who did so. With just that in mind, anyone could tell that Julio was bluffing.

In the meantime, two people around Julio pulled out a rope and a gag.

Come on, tie him up!

Aye!

The men who approached with the rope grabbed Lils arm. She shouted amidst the mens struggle to hold her down.

Only the Bell Rock has travelled to and from this route! You have no idea what youre getting yourself into! You shouldnt downplay the dangers of this route just because its calm! By this time, the fog and the reef

Shut up!

It was then that someones fist struck her under her chin. Amidst the shock, Lil tried her best to come back to her senses, but the second fist to the side of her head knocked her out cold