

Northwest 161

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As the night had arrived, a swarm of stars twinkled frantically. The irritated Sagastar shook his head while looking up at the sky. After adjusting his expression several times as if he was adjusting his clothes, he spoke in the most polite tone he could possibly muster.

Sir Edgar, you must go in now.

However, Ed had long treated Sagastar as if he were a mere parrot. One that could only say You must go in. The pitiful commodore sighed deeply while looking at Ed, who didnt budge this time either.

During the day, he only stares at the Eastern horizon and by night his attention is solely focused on the Northern sky

After observing him for a few days, Sagastar finally concluded.

Somewhere along the line, he must have gone mad in one way or another It suddenly feels like the truth that when you think a man cant become any stranger, hell eventually take it up a notch

After receiving the uniform jacket from the captain, Sagastar placed it around Eds shoulders without saying a word. Beneath Eds colourless face, the brilliant crimson uniform looked like paint that was accidentally spilt on him.

At this point, anyone can tell that he isnt searching for a mere sword anymore

Sagastar consciously lowered his eyes.

The symbol of the Admiral three stars embroidered with golden thread, adorned by epaulettes. He must be the only human who can make those blissful stars fade this much What can be meaningful enough to become such an obsession for him whom even the highest honour is meaningless?

Sagastar couldnt help but wonder.

Apologies, Sir Edgar, but may I ask where were going?

Whats exactly on that ship? And dont give the excuse that its not the ship youre looking for.

Even though he asked, Sagastar didnt really expect his question to be answered as Ed was naturally reticent.

It actually isnt because of his serious personality. Rather, other people simply annoy him He only gives conclusions, and usually, theyre in the form of an order. I have long given up on the hope to receive an explanation of his thought process Theres one exception Hell talk a lot longer when its about something ordinary men dont usually understand, such as relics, artefacts, and things associated with ancient history.

When Ed finally opened his mouth, Sagastar knew his hunch was right.

Look at that star, Sagastar.

So, its indeed about something historical again?

Which one do you mean?

The most beautiful star shining over there.

Yes. The Mariners Star.

Sagastar, noticing subtle injustice, immediately corrected himself.

If not, its the Alvenis Triangle.

Only then did Ed let out a deep breath from affirmation. Sagastar stretched his neck forward and a bit to the side to give Ed the feeling he was playing along with his story. Whenever a dying person came to talk about something, Sagastar was naturally compelled to respond. For him, it was doing that person a favour by pretending to be interested in the topic.

Do you know the story about the ancient goddess Alvenis and a human man?

No, but Im very curious.

Despite Sagastars enthusiastic response, Ed remained aloof and sighed. Then, out of the blue, the admiral looked back at the aspirant who was rubbing his hand with a hot towel, and spoke to him.

Do you know?

The aspirant who was working hard on his assigned task, raised his head in a daze. As if he couldnt believe that the admiral spoke to him, his red-hot face glanced around, and he could barely answer.

Oh, no. Admiral.

Ed clicked his tongue while narrowing his brows as if their responses were deplorable.

Alvenis is a goddess. In fact, shes the youngest child of Gromer, the god of thunder. But she had a story of her own.

Sagastar nodded excessively and pretended to understand.

She went around in the form of a human woman, but other than being beautiful, it was said that she didnt really have anything special about her. She was in charge of defence, however she had barely any work to do. From the East to the West and from the North all the way to the South, peace was spread all over earth. Unable to overcome her boredom, she came down to the human world to satisfy her curiosity. Obviously, the rest of the story is pretty much a cliché; she fell in love with a human fisherman.

Ed pulled out his hand wrapped in the towel and touched his forehead. Cold sweat had broken out above his deeply sunken eyes. Annoyed, Ed whisked away the hairs that stuck to it. Even while only taking light breaths, his uniform kept slipping off his shoulders. Sagastar had nervously watched the scene before carefully lifting the jacket again.

Despite all this, Ed persistently continued his story like a dying person who was stating his will.

Alvenis had a beauty that transcended humanity, so a lot of men courted and seduced her. And the goddess, who didnt know the principles of human fidelity, only sought pleasure. It was even said that she had seduced humans all over the earth in her travels as the goddess of defence.

That makes me feel sorry for the fisherman then.

Yes. Eventually, the fisherman, who was abandoned by Alvenis, became angry and ended up catching a whale. You may wonder why he wanted to catch a whale all of the sudden, but it was

said he tried to weave a net with its toughest tendons. It seems like a terrible idea now, but at that time it was the limit of his own imagination Anyway, apparently his intention was to catch her with it. How do you think that turned out?

She was caught?

No. It was because her father felt sorry for her and helped her. Remember? Her father was Gromer, the god of thunder. He took his daughter to heaven and put her in a star. He then told her to never wander the human world again.

Slightly embarrassed, Sagastar couldnt stop himself from finding the story absurd and snapped back.

What?! So it didnt go well? Is that it?!

In response, the fisherman built a huge boat. He loaded it with water and provisions and set sail. Watching her shine in the Northern sky, he got closer to her day by day. But as you know, the sky is not a realm that humans can reach. Also, isnt the ocean much wider than humans initially thought? After a few months, he ran out of food and waited for the day he would die That was not all. Gromer hated the man obsessed with his daughter, so he thundered the sea every single day. The god of thunders friends, heavy rain and gale, also answered his call. Even Orsay of the sea, the goddess that everyone loved, danced for them.

So, did he die?

And yet he survived.

Yeah, well, I guess he did

Ed looked at Sagastar disapprovingly.

Dont you sound a bit too sour?

Am I? Well, Gods and stars isnt it a typical mythological story?

On top of that, youre being very naive too.

Those who believe such absurd stories are more naive.

Despite Sagastars sarcastic remarks, Ed looked at him as if he truly were the nave one. The commodore always felt a sense of disconnection instead of blindly believing in the myths told by Ed, who seemed to see them as the incarnation of reality, rather than reality itself. So, it felt too distant and unfamiliar whenever Ed told him such stories.

That was mens first voyage, Sagastar.

At that time, humans only rowed boats to catch fish near the coastal area. They didnt think of crossing the ocean, not even once. But because of what that fisherman started, humans began to imagine the possibility of long ocean voyages. Ironically enough, it were the same humans who got out there on the coast, laughing at the fishermans foolish love and mockingly questioning if he wouldnt sail right over the edge of the world Anyway, not only inventors are curious. Its curiosity that tends to create inventors.

What? Is that true?

Captain Long couldn't help himself and ended up intervening unintentionally. Ed, of course, went on in complete disregard of him.

The fisherman's survival was truly incredible. Gromer, who gave him all sorts of trials at first, eventually admired the fisherman's love. When the life of the fisherman eventually came to an end, he was placed in a position where he could see Alvenis' seat anywhere in the moving sky. That spot is the Mariners Star that rises in the North.

..!

As if possessed, the Captain and the aspirant both looked up at the Northern sky at the same time.

From then on, navigators wandering around in Orsay's bosom measured their positions by looking at the distance between the Alvenis Triangle and the Mariners star. Although there was a lot of inaccuracy before various tools were developed, it was still a useful indicator. Even now.

Sagastar was the only one still holding on to a sceptical attitude.

Why are you talking about this nonsense?

The Central Continent as we know it now, was once actually the Southern Continent. There's a story you don't know about the original Central Continent.

There's more?

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The fisherman might have died and become a star, but his boat kept crossing the rough sea while carrying his body. One day the ship arrived at a place we now call the Northern Continent. A kind-hearted local who found him, buried the fisherman in the middle of an oak forest. Not long after something strange occurred, perhaps it was due to the body being from the South, but the oak trees in that region became green all year round.

Really?

From here, this tale passed on to become one of the legends of the North. However, on your continent, only the story of a foolish fisherman who fell off the edge of the world and died in the midst of sailing while looking at the Alvenis Triangle remains.

The captain was the first to realise, suddenly made a fuss.

Oh oh Sir Edgar. Could he be the foolish fisherman?

My ancestors came to know the fisherman's name when they landed on the then-called Southern Continent. Before that, the man was referred to as the Fisherman of the South.

You mean Monferrand! It's the story about Stupid Monferrand!

Ed truly hated his reaction. It was as if he were seeing an inferior student who suddenly became impudent because he knew a small piece of insignificant information, when in reality, his knowledge was extremely limited.

Yeah Anyway, the point of the story isn't that the name of the fisherman is Monferrand

Recalling the story of Stupid Monferrand, Sagastar shrugged shoulders. He then cleared his throat, realising that he too had unknowingly become absorbed with the subject.

But the fact that an enraged Monferrand sailed towards Alvenis with a huge ship full of food and water.

Why?

Why do you think he did that?

Perhaps it was because he was an idiot who didnt know that humans couldnt reach the sky?

Ed ignored the captains unsolicited interruption.

Alvenis left him something.

What?

It was said to have been a round glass inside a square box. A strange magical device with a needle on it. The needle, which could rotate a few laps, was fixed in the centre with the tip always ending up pointing toward the Alvenis Triangle anytime, anywhere.

So that must have been

A compass?..

Sagastar and Captain Long answered in unison. Ed nodded without looking at them.

From what I heard, it looked like our modern-day compass.

a compass from those far-fetched olden days, huh

So, thats why Monferrand didnt forget Alvenis

What else?

The fisherman wasnt the only one who received a magical object from Alvenis. Alvenis was said to have sprinkled other tools to mankind, to men and women alike, leaving them a piece of her heart out of love and affection. However, theirs lost its light as soon as the goddess left the earth, only the fishermans one shone until the moment he died.

Then, what he got was a little different, Admiral.

Yes. Thats what Monferrand wanted to ask her too.

The captain smoothened his lips in wonder.

Then why did she abandon him

And why was the piece of her heart still glowing?

Even though it could clearly cost him his life, all he wanted to do was ask her because he was so curious about it. Perhaps it might have been better if he could have squeezed her neck with both hands just to get an answer. I can imagine that her voice crawling out under the pressure would sound like music to his ears

What?

And if she refused to answer, he could even pull out her tongue himself and rip it off.

What?!

Sagastar asked back with a frown.

Wont that make him a madman?

Isnt that how revenge is normally done? You have to go a little crazy.

You mean to say that he didnt fall in love, but instead, he pursued her for revenge?

Sir Edgar must be joking right?

Ed looked up at Sagastar with a smile on his face. However, seeing Sagastar looking extremely serious made him laugh out loud.

You are being very nave now too, arent you?

If all he wanted was to love, he could have simply waited for her. Believing that Alvenis herself would come to realise that she gave him a fragment from her heart that would never fade thats love, Sagastar. But sailing toward her is revenge. Knowing that she would never come back, the fisherman never even considered forgiveness. Alvenis deceived Monferrand and also deceived herself. And yet, she gave Monferrand some hope when his piece wasnt the same as others How angry must Monferrand have been? When he clenches her throat in such rage, what else is left but revenge?

Unsurprisingly, the vision of violence cooled their surroundings. Sagastar struggled to find the words to continue their conversation.

He might have wanted to ask her to love him again, to give him another chance? To do that, he shouldnt just wait quietly, right? He needed to go and catch her. Who knows. Maybe Alvenis, who might eventually realise the feelings she had overlooked, would be impressed by that?

I guess you could be right

It was the first time ever that Ed reacted positively to what others speculated, so Sagastar asked out of surprise.

Yes?

That it could be. In fact, the best ending for Monferrand was to get back to Alvenis.

Yes. Thats what I mean.

But that changes everything, right?

Well, Im not sure about that.

Then what did he want to do in the first place? Do you know?

How can I understand Monferrands inner feelings?

Ed turned away from him as if he were no longer worth talking to. It left Sagastar feeling wronged to be treated like he didnt know what love was, but he couldnt say anything. Feelings and actions leading to obsession, fights, and pursuit must be true for love and hate, but Sagastar only had a peaceful relationship, so he was simply unfamiliar with that feeling.

Is it too far-fetched to admit that its love?

Sagastars suspicions suddenly arose.

Can it be that what Sir Edgar is looking for is love? But come to think of it, I cant imagine Sir Edgar giving normal affection to anyone.

Sagastar stared down at his admiral who had taken a seat. Although the traces of his anaemia and injuries were glaring, his characteristic baby face remained the same. When he caught the impression that Ed appeared like a young man, a realisation dawned on him. Ed was still single. Looking at Eds face, Sagastar thought he should offer him some advice as the head of household with two young children and 10 years of marriage. He wondered whether or not he should tell Ed to put aside his thoughts on revenge or love-hate, if at all possible.

But but Sir Edgar

..?

Ahem! Hmm!

..?

Thats Love

Lightning flashed through the cracks of the hull. A roar of thunder followed. As if they were trying to break it down, the crashing waves pounded and clawed at the stern countless times. Lil watched anxiously at the foam splashing through the wooden planks. When the current became more and more violent

Bang!

the grain of wood began to crack

Boom!

and seawater seeped through the gaps

Dung!

The waves broke through the wooden walls. When the baptism of water was pushed in, a gale like the breath of a giant hit her. But just as quickly as it entered, the wind was swept away again and another raging wave broke through the hole and tried to grab Lil who was tied to a pillar.

The cabin was flooded in a flash. The heavy stern sank and plunged into the sea. Lil suddenly had to hold her breath, not even given the time to fully come to her senses. Her airless mouth flitted when the foam wrapped around her. Her whole body seemed to be crushed by the huge swirling waters. Lil had to fight the urge to breathe, but her mind was desperate to suck in something, anything to live. Eventually, Lil couldnt stand it any longer and inhaled the water that filled her mouth. When the cold stream rushed down her throat She opened her eyes wide.

Hwaaa!

Lil not only struggled to breathe, but she also struggled with her body due to the shock and despair. However, she couldnt move. Lil slowly became aware that she was in the middle of the cabin, not drowning deep below the surface.

She caught her breath like a newly resurrected man.

Dream It was just a dream I dreamed of the Bell Rock sinking

As soon as the feeling of relief fell over her, lightning struck. The cabin became bright as the thunder roared.

When the tension finally left her stiff shoulders, Lil eventually lifted her head. Rainwater seeped into the hull and intermittently dripped from the ceiling. Opening her mouth a little, she tasted the salt water falling on her forehead and around the bridge of her nose.

When her mind grew clearer, Lil listened desperately to the movements on the upper deck. However, she could only hear vague noises, making it impossible for her to gather any useful information about the current situation. Becoming obsessed with the inaudible voices, she lost track of time and the more dull her reality got, the more vividly her dream came back

People who generally held easy-going dispositions in life might be exceptions, but those who don't, were naturally drawn to fantasise about their own catastrophes. Lil fitted the latter category perfectly. She could clearly imagine how her life would end and as a living and breathing creature, the stopping of the heart was fundamental to it. To get there, the first steps she would need to take were to land on the principality of Loti and enter the mansion where she would live with Cesar. Followed by carrying Cesar's child in her stomach.

However, it never occurred to her that her death would entail the Bell Rock being overturned. It was more shocking than the end of any imagination she has ever could come up with.

Lil was clearly brainwashing herself.

No! Alain must be trying to figure something out. Everything might still be good up there

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Because the mutiny on board isn't caused by starvation or abuse, it will go moderately. Of course, it's different from land rebellions. Manpower and supplies are limited due to the size of the ship, and there's also the constant threat of nature. In addition, if they were to kill each other, it wouldn't be unheard of for us to all go down together. Because of this, the League has politically established its organisation to prevent such mutinies.

Still, an ominous feeling pierced Lil like a needle.

Anybody there? Alain! Jericho!..

Thunder covered her pathetic screams and a crackling sound hurled around the room. The waves were so strong that the objects that couldn't find any grip fell to the floor and rolled around. As a matter of fact, the only thing that remained fixed in the cabin was Lil.

The ropes around her torso and shins pressed her back against the wooden pillar in the middle of the cabin. Her hands were equally bound behind her back, caught between her body and the pole and as time passed, her wrists were becoming sore due to the scuffing of the rope.

Lil twisted herself to try to make it out somehow, but the girdle only grazed through her skin painfully. As her skin began peeling, it felt like she was getting burned. Ironically, this particular type of pain reminded her of Ed.

Well, of course, I'm thinking about him he was our doctor after all

However, in reality, it was unclear to Lil whether it was her body that was exhausted or her mind that was suffering. Because the pain in her chest was something that didn't seem to have been caused by any injuries

How funny Ed was a doctor who only treated physical injuries. So, it's amusing how it seems like I'd beg him to ease this pain in my heart which can't even be seen. It's terrible and beyond shameless that I'm thinking about someone whom I pushed to their death with my own two hands

Lil kicked her heel against the pole.

Thump Thump

Perhaps I can loosen the rope if I keep kicking my feet. Thinking about Ed is distressing. The situation I'm in is already hard enough to deal with, but on top of that, I'm starting to lose my mind. I need to think about something else like how I can get myself out of here

After her foot hit the pillar a few times, her toe touched something. Lil recognized it at a glance. It was that weird-looking object from Ed's bag. A wooden face made of ebony with white-painted eyes, nose and mouth. Lil couldn't fully understand the expression it held, but she got the impression it was laughing at her.

When lightning stung all over the hull, the brightly-lit sculpture seemed to open its eyes and smile.

What's so funny?

Of course, the sculpture remained silent.

Is it funny that I threw him overboard and ended up like this myself?

After spitting out sharp words, Lil shut her mouth as if she had made a slip of the tongue. The ghastly face, caught in the gap between the boards and covered in filth, moved with the heaving of the ship, making it appear to be nodding. Flashes of lightning beamed and illuminated the black bloodstains surrounding it. Traces that pierced Lil's chest immediately.

Punishment?..

Is this my punishment?

The face was no bigger than the palm of a hand, and the two white dots for eyes looked just like the green eyes she knew so well.

How strange. I can't even stop myself from associating those white eyes with green ones

Lil bit her mouth painfully. Although she knew she mustn't get agitated, the wooden sculpture's face cast a bizarre shadow, laughing silently at Lil.

It was its gaze on her miserable situation that further heightened her sense of shame.

Stop staring at me.

Lil felt strange. It felt like facing a resurrection. An ominous foreboding that it would soon talk to her in the form of a living thing with a mouth that held no expression, no liveliness, and no breath made her unable to stand it.

Stop looking at me.

But its torn mouth whispered softly.

Look at you

Lil tried to turn away from the sculpture, but her movements were limited. From the corner of her eye, the unrelenting jilting continued to disturb her.

This is entirely your fault. Its because you made the wrong decision. You are aware of this, arent you? You shouldve listened to Ed What if he wasnt a spy? Then there wouldve been no mutiny, and the Bell Rock wouldve arrived in Serlio long ago But you didnt attempt to listen. You assumed there was no need for you to hear him make excuses. You only had to look at Cesar to convince yourself that Ed was in the wrong. How cruel He probably called out your name even when he was dying

As lightning struck again, Lil shouted, glaring at the sculpture with resentment.

I know!

Her irregular breathing sprang out like someone who had been stabbed in their vital organs. Even Lil had speculated that Eds last hope was herself. From the circumstances so far, she could only conclude that Ed was attached to the Bell Rock because of her.

He took on such a ridiculous risk by not running away even when he was caught by Cesar Why did you do that?..

She realised it only after asking her opponent dozens of times. Someone who was not there anymore. It was a question that Ed had already answered. The slow one was Lil. His answers had overtook her questions, and she simply couldnt keep up.

{ Then why do you look like this only to me?.. }

He told me so directly.

{ What do you mean, what? }

She continued to hear the voice that she couldnt understand the first time.

{ What do you think Ive been tailing you around for?.. }

If I hadnt seen the sketch, I wouldve never known till the very end.

{ What do you gain by erasing the past and hiding in one of your shells? Convenience? I thought you would stop deceiving yourself in front of me, so why did you go back to being so stubborn again?.. }

Lil looked back on those incomprehensible sentences with more meaning this time. Standing there, in the middle of that room, she stared pathetically at her terribly slow comprehension. Answers to her barely articulated questions found her all too fast. She lowered her head as she gasped for breath, and her all too familiar body came to view. Her slender waist and bulging chest were visible from under her shirt.

She suddenly realised.

From a certain point, Ed could see the real me Perhaps, since then

{ At that time, youre the one who asked! You asked if I wouldnt mind regardless of who you are. You wouldnt ask that if you wanted to go back to how we used to be. So I gave you my honest answer }

That was the moment when I asked Ed if he wouldnt mind regardless of who I was. At the time, I was so overcome with joy that I didnt get to closely look at Ed. But, patching the pieces of my memory about Eds face together, I think he was actually very surprised. It was the first time I saw that always smirking face so bewildered. Ed usually expressed his bewilderment when his curiosity was sparked or whenever he found himself in a new and interesting situation. Just like an explorer or researcher. But at that moment, I saw Ed genuinely surprised, even with a sense of rigidity, as if he was seeing a ghost. A pure look of embarrassment that went against his usual personality. Still, he didnt make any sly comments upon seeing my true self. His plainest response is actually the most suspicious.

I completely misunderstood the change in his behaviour. I got confused because it overlapped with the time I told him that I finally accepted him as part of my crew. But now I know, it was because Ed was looking at a woman. And when he caught me with my birch sap on deck, when he complained he was feeling depressed and blamed me for it, he was definitely facing me as a woman. He had those exceptionally brilliant eyes

Lil has always been instinctively sensitive to the lustful gazes of men whose unspeakable emotions flowed like a well. After all, that was the reason for her existence as a woman. Lils life had been a constant journey of finding the best bidder to whom she would give her womb. As she has been doing it for years, there was no way she wasnt aware of it. Seeing his embarrassing emotions overflow despite him wanting to suppress them couldnt be denied as Lils mere intuition alone. Lil knew well that his feelings were so pure that he didnt even know how to hide them.

But Ed didnt seem to have let his emotions overcome him. He confirmed that to others I was still a man. Soon after my appearance changed from his perspective, he immediately tried to separate Marenzio from me. Although Ed frequently commits crazy acts from a sane persons point of view, it has never been without good reason. So, his attempt to hide me from Marenzio was a judgement purely based on his own perspective.

Thats why Ed had no choice but to obsess over why I looked like that only to him. After all, its the same for me now too.

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{ By any chance Do you love me? }

Suddenly, the storm hit the Bell Rock on the cheek, causing the hull to heave from left to right. Mother Ocean held the ship in her grasp and shook it wildly. All kinds of bottles poured down, cracked open on top furniture and scattered across the floor. The sculpture, still caught between the cracks in the wood, shook its head madly. While laughing, it pointed its finger at her when the flashes of lighting beamed.

{ Your heart knows the truth so well that it shows you everything. So why cant you say it out loud? Are you afraid that it will all disappear once you open your mouth?.. }

Lil struggled to twist her body. Despite the ropes scuffing on her sore skin, she wanted to get away from the sculptures gaze somehow

{ You want me to see you for your true self }

Glass bottles clattered sharply, and the wooden boards squeaked

{ Whats this if not deception?.. }

The entire world seems to be shaking

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

Kung!

Eds leather bag crashed into the window frame and spewed out its contents. Amidst various medicines and tools pouring out, one object caught Lils eye. That one white bead. Somehow, it looked a bit strange like it didnt belong there, like a child who innocently wandered onto a battlefield.

Lil stared blankly at it.

*Peloris cor.**

In her memory, the voice of Bellus, who was holding up the pearl, rang vividly, as well as Eds voice and face shining brightly in Bellus blue light.

{ Shes decorating your hair }

Lightning broke her out of her flashback. Startled by the thunder, Lils eyes widened before she anxiously looked back at the lingering pearl. All alone in this lightning-striking hell, that innocent little grain appeared lost. She wanted to pick it up, but she couldnt even stretch her arms, let alone move her feet.

I know it all too well

When the floor bounced like it was at the verge of breaking and all sorts of things sprang up in front of her, a world-like shock hit Lil.

I wont be able to find a little treasure like that ever again and Ill never meet someone like Ed ever again

In his eyes, she became a completely different person. Those beautifully sparkling green ores of his not only reflected wonder and respect, but also Liloa Lil had never faced someone as full of life as him.

Im sorry

The frustration and emptiness of losing Ed were suddenly hard to overcome.

Im so sorry

Again, that deserted road

A terrible sense of loneliness grabbed Lil. It bit and tore her entire body apart with its sharp teeth. Like an endless stream of piranhas enjoying their prey all at once. And her audience, who survived the storm that turned the cabin into chaos, booed the fool who killed the only person who understood her.

Dont pretend to be all pitiful. The guy you feel so guilty about is already dead anyway

She felt like she was going to be chewed on until there was nothing of her left. In the agony of her body being crushed, Lil let her consciousness die too

Feeling dulled, Lil slowly opened her eyes. As the sun had already risen, it was bright in the cabin. However, the light wasn't the reason for her to open her eyes. It was the sounds of several voices and footsteps drawing closer. Lil held her breath while wondering if something major might have happened.

The door of the cabin slammed open.

Fucking bastards. They are determined to die, I tell you

Im just a watchman, I cant just take over all their tasks at once

Are you complaining? They didnt manage to do anything about it anyway

Well, in the end we did stop sailing, didnt we? Is it their plan to make us run out of food here?..

Let them try, it doesnt matter anyway. Since it rained, theres enough water. So its all good for now

Lil tried to turn her head, but her vision didnt go beyond her shoulder. Whimpering, she tried hard to turn her face either left or right, till someone grabbed her chin.

Captain.

Who

Lil recognized the face that popped in front of her. Joe, the helmsman, pushed a cup against her jaw that he was still holding. Lil managed to swallow half of the water that was suddenly pouring into her mouth, however the rest of it trickled down her chin. As Lil started to cough, Joe pretended to tap her on the back while whispering.

Four sailors died in the storm last night, so the rest of the crew refuses to set sail. Its becoming a bit of a nuisance now that theyre starting to beat people up I even saw some getting dragged away But dont worry too much. Those who remained on the Bell Rock are much tougher than those who retired, and Julio cant do anything to Alain anyway

Get off!

..!

A sailor jumped out from the side and kicked Joe.

I told you to give him water, but it seems youre feeding him something else instead.

Joe tried to stand up but hesitated when his opponents gun stabbed him in the stomach. Julios subordinate laughed and poked Joe again.

Seeing the sailor threaten Joe with his gun, gives me a pretty good impression of the situation on deck apparently fighting with mere fists isnt enough anymore.

Lils eyes rolled back, writhing unseemly.

Hey! What are you doing!

Once more, Lil was reminded of the fact that being tied up was a ridiculous hindrance. So instead, she spat on the sailors approaching face, however he retaliated quickly by swinging his gun at Lil.

When the gun hit the pit of her stomach, her eyes flashed white, and the water she had just drank came back up again. As Lil bent over, the sailor dragged Joe out.

Come on, tie him up

Another voice was heard.

Even when she was about to lose her mind, questions kept filling it.

Who are they tying up? Are they leaving me like this? What are they going to do with Joe?

I never liked this guys pale skin either. Its like these two imperial bastards got bored on land and tried out their luck on water

Get your hands off. I walk

Lil immediately recognized the answering voice.

Those bastards

The clear sound of fists hitting someones face was heard.

Unbelievably. Theyre even beating Cesar.

Lil tightened her grip anxiously. A shard of glass she got during yesterdays mess sharply stung her palm, nonetheless she had been holding on to it just in case she got a use for it.

Getting tied up myself was kinda expected, but I cant believe Cesar got caught too.

Lil shouted to stop the fists from beating Cesar up.

Stop it, you crazy bastards! Do you think a navigator who was treated like this will cooperate with you guys?

If not, well just cut off his ears. Just like you did to us.

Imbeciles. You cant make people move like that.

You think we cant? My brother crawled like a dog because he didnt want his ears to be cut off With an imperial on his back.

Cesar was tied to the other side of the pillar to which Lil was tied. When they were done, the sound of spitting was heard. Lil, having a hunch about what just happened, twisted her head to the side.

Dont tell me they just spit Cesar in the face

Lil didnt know what to do and waited for them to disappear from the cabin. As soon as the room became quiet, Lil took out the piece of glass.

If I want to do anything, I first have to loosen the ropes on my wrists.

It was a very slow task compared to how easily her finger was cut, but Lil was determined to do it. Not long after, it suddenly hit her that Cesar remained too quiet. Lil tried to look back at Cesar. Of course, in reality, she only twisted her neck a bit.

Cesar?

Cesar, its you, right?

Feeling the warmth behind her back, she heard the man sigh. Lil confirmed that the sound of breath was without a doubt Cesars. Relieved, Lil scratched the glass blade again and muttered.

Im sorry. Wait a minute. Ill untie you soon

I was detained for refusing to change my testimony.

Her fingers stopped abruptly. Cesars voice alone already gave an awful lot of information. Lil chewed over the sentence. She felt a combination of remorse, resignation, and resentment even though she didnt want to acknowledge it.

Because, in the end, it felt like everything had failed

Chapter 165

Im sorry.

No, Liloa.

This happened because I fell too short. I should have cracked them down sooner, but I couldnt. Its driving me insane Did anything happen on deck?

Its all my fault that they can go on a rampage like this. Half of the old crew retired due to the offer I made them

Didnt you get hit? Did you get injured?

Lil didnt bear to ask if he had been spit on. She thought shed better free herself quickly and see for herself, so she moved her hand again. But even in the midst of worrying about Cesar, she was tempted to ask who was commanding the helm.

The two people who know the route best are tied up, so who the hell is going to move the ship? This is insane, but I have to ease Cesars mood first

Alain took the helm.

Huh? Oh, okay

Of course, Alain didnt agree with Julio. After I refused, the old man took over for everyones safety, and an officers meeting is currently in progress. One of Julios conditions was to vote while you were still being detained. In a fit of rage, one of our men broke one of his crews arm. The atmosphere got worse after that, three more were injured when they demanded to release you. They wanted to isolate me as well, thinking I could influence the decision of the crew, so I came down voluntarily.

Lil couldnt help but question why Cesar came down here himself.

Why did you do that? And why do you let them treat you like this? Theres no way youre pleased with something like this I dont want you to be humiliated too. Im sorry Im so sorry I cant stand it I would rather have you on deck right now, whats the point of being here? They still follow you I dont understand this at all

Lil suddenly realised something and breathlessly swallowed her words.

The sailors up there arent the sailors from the Navy he swore to lead and protect

Because youre here.

Im more concerned about you than the crew.

Her hand, which had continuously scrubbed the glass shard against the rope, stopped. At that point, she had already cut halfway through the straps around her wrists, and they would be completely undone with just a little more. However, instead of finishing the job, the shocked Lil opened her mangled palm and the shard of glass she had been holding tightly fell down helplessly.

She could hear his stable breathing behind her back. With her hair most likely touching his shoulders, they were close enough to reach, but their position made it impossible for them to look in the same direction. Ironically, she thought that this fact really reflected their entire relationship.

Lil struggled to lift her head when her eyes began to fill with tears.

When I was young, I had a doll. She was so pretty that I always carried her with me

I dont know why I liked dolls back then. Maybe because I was so young? Or perhaps it was because I was only allowed to have dolls, and not allowed to like other things

Anyway, I introduced the doll to anyone I came across. I named it Philly, that way her name was close to mine. But people didnt seem to think of Philly as anything special. When I talked to them with a proud heart, they didnt get amused or even faked their interest. I didnt realise it at the time

What are you trying to say?

I was sad that no one else thought she was pretty except me. No one else loved her as much as I did. Why didnt anyone else think she was precious? It was devastating Even though I boasted about dressing her up, they never acknowledged her. Slowly, my perspective started to change and I questioned myself that maybe she was indeed really ugly. Maybe I just liked weird things. Maybe I was wrong. I struggled with such thoughts till one day, Philly appeared shabby to me too

The process of losing her confidence was excruciating. Lil remembered her younger self starting to run around anxiously in her round-toed shoes. It was only now that she realised she hasnt changed much since then.

And so, in the end, I threw her away

She felt so pathetic that she broke out in tears. Feeling stuffy inside, she wanted to grab her chest, but her body still couldnt move.

You have no idea how heartbreaking it was. But as I spent every day regretting it, in my mind Im throwing Philly away over and over again.

She ran out of breath as she knew she had a decision to make.

With everything thats going on, how can I ever run away once we reach Serlio? I simply cant leave my anxious crew behind. I cant turn a blind eye to the sailors who defended me and endured Julios violence, even though their fears reached its peak due to the naval inspection. It will be terribly irresponsible of me If I dont want to go, Cesar will listen to me. But can I even muster up the courage to tell Cesar that? Going back to Panichi will put us in a very dangerous situation But whereas I have a sense of responsibility and attachment as a Captain, for Cesar, it will be like returning to a living hell

How should I tell him this? Once I tell him that hes going back alone, I state more than just a simple will. Its me revealing the kind of life Im choosing. A life that Ill never give up for him

Lil didnt want to tell Cesar that. To be more specific, Lil didnt want Cesar to come back with her to Panichi. But regardless of whether she wanted to go back alone or not, Cesar would follow Lil the moment she mentioned Panichi anyway

Then shall I begin to cut off his leg?..

She heard the all too familiar hallucination from somewhere.

Oh. Or will it be more convenient if I cut off your tongue so you will not be able to speak in the first place?..

The god of deaths voice was mixed with laughter.

Lil wasnt surprised to see Mortu in Eds cabin. The grim reaper, who received her grave gaze, slit her mouth while smirking. Her mouth was ripped open from ear to ear. As her chin fell open onto her chest, Mortus silent sneer became thicker. With his black mockery drawing closer, Lil looked around. It was incredibly dark even when this cabin used to be a place of brightness despite the lack of a lamp, and such darkness made Mortus appearance even clearer.

I think I now know why I fell asleep here so peacefully. There was no Mortu. There was no God of Death in the cabin where Ed was Perhaps because it was too bright.

At that time, the shadowless God of Death did not dare to hold out his scythe. But after that day Mortu was like a bat that flew into every crevice its owner had disappeared to.

Lil looked straight at her uninvited guest.

Its amazing that I finally thought of looking at a face I didnt even know where it was attached to.

There was no specific appearance for the hideous monster that lived in fantasies. The black shape Lil saw in mythology books when she was a child was only the start of her abstractions. Later, when her maddening mind created a shadowy stain, she became more and more terrified of it. And the more frightened she became, the more terrifyingly clear the shadow became. Lils fear and despair were the chisels and hammers that carved Mortu.

The voice of the god of death penetrated her head.

Did I not tell you? Among the things I brought to the other guest, were sometimes bones and flesh that did not belong to you But, in the end, he still accepted them

I know Now I know

Then, should you not make sure this will not happen again?..

Okay, it wont.

Pretending to like it without actually liking it That is no fun, my dear regular customer

The darkness opened its arms temptingly and made room for Lil. Usually, she slipped under his arm and hid. But no matter how well she thought she was hidden away, Cesar consistently found her and held out his hand. When that happened, Lil had no choice but to repay her saviour with the weight of her own heart, moulded from only the best pieces of flesh. And of course, Mortu was there to help them with exchanging their rewards. It was so painful, but no matter how hard she tried, she simply couldnt give him the same thing. She only hoped that the meaningless mass of flesh could be made into an illusion and be accepted.

However, now it was clear to her that Cesar had been locked up with her all along, crawling and rolling on the floor of the same cold castle. She couldn't make his days, chased by the darkness, fearful and painful at the sight of flowing blood, carry on into the future.

Lil wasn't pretending to like it but not actually liking it. Even though she had never thought of taking his flesh for granted or that she could ever turn a blind eye to Cesar's sacrifice, she still felt sorry for realising it too late.

If you're as sick as I am, then how much pain have you been enduring? No human is born for the sake of others. No matter how much Cesar tries to go with me, he's not supposed to. I can't allow it any longer. Of course, I also

Without saying a word, Mortu opened his arms wider.

How long have I been in that hellish nest? For far too long, I've been searching for some peace and quiet in a place I shouldn't. Did I really believe that the darkness, which is infinite in volume and depth, would excrete a peaceful ending

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Chapter 166

Do not be mistaken. I came to see you today to tell you that you cannot have just anyone's flesh anymore

No answer? I guess I will just rip it off his body then

No. Definitely not Cesar's. Don't you dare rip it off. Even if Cesar offered to take it off himself, I won't let you have it. No, I won't even give you a chance to take it off.

Lil had always been unsure of what was best for Cesar and herself. But now, she realised that this place was no longer their home. They had to get out. Perhaps Cesar would insist on staying inside the castle, however, Lil had decided. She would hold his hand and run away.

A giggle pierced the darkness.

Do you think he wants that?

I don't care anymore! It's what I've decided!

Away from the castle, her bare feet stepped on the grass. The blades of grass lying in the wind and tickling the soles of her feet startled her. A world of bluish-green crunched between her fidgeting toes. Not used to looking directly into light, her sour and cold eyes were eventually directed to the sky. The sunlight illuminating the fields didn't allow for darkness. The scenery looked like the decor of a big stage, with the spotlight turned on them, making her feel like she could run everywhere.

The wind blew fervently. The wind, her old friend, seemed to cheer for her return.

Like that, she looked up at Cesar, someone who might be hesitating.

She completely understood his hesitation.

I know how it feels to hesitate due to lingering feelings. But he's a human being who shines in a different way than me. Just as my light is meaningless in front of him, I also can't see the purpose of his. And together we lost sight of each other's light and sank into darkness. But even despite that, I

always thought we would be happy if we shared everything in the dark against the beauty of the world.

But Cesar thrives in a world where he is the main subject. Thats also the way he should have lived. Im just sorry I realised it too late. This life already left a scar that I cant hope to heal in this lifetime, its just something I cant do. I always thought I was capable of it, but in the end, I have been killing him, him of all people.

Now I know I cant fill his holes. Wounds that can only be healed with light. I simply cant be that person because I dont understand his light

As Lil stared at the presence in the invisible darkness, Mortus laughter slowly died down. No, she was unsure if Mortu was really disappearing or if reality was coming back to her.

Cesar called her in a low voice.

Liloa

Lil opened her eyes and completely broke from her delusion.

You wont change, Cesar. You wont ever call Philly pretty. What saddens me the most and what upsets me the most is that even though you love me so much, you dont even have the will to take a closer look at Philly, whom I value more than anything

Thats nonsense. You just said that youre upset, but arent you the one whos always angry at me? Sometimes, or in some ways, it really feels that way

Cesar was still of the opinion that Lil should deny her anger. It made her patience explode. Her whole body burned as if it were about to go up in flames. She knew that Cesar treated her better than anyone else. However, Lil never felt grateful for any of that. To her, it was highly questionable if his treatment could even be considered as good. He treated her like a glass doll that would shatter when touched, which convinced him that he must protect her at all times. However, such behaviour only reminded Lil of the fact that she wouldnt be able to survive on her own.

Cesars ways continued even when Lil rejected him, and he never gave up on what he thought was right. Just like Lil.

Yes. Im angry. Why wouldnt I?

Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?

Why cant you take it for granted that not only slaves but also I can be angry? Because Im merely your property? Because I was made for you and your children? Because Im an imperfect human being who cant do anything except for standing by your side and feel lucky enough to be loved by you?

You know what, whenever you do this, I feel offended. Youre putting words in my mouth. I never thought of you that way. You can do so much, and I believe you have such power.

If that were true, why do you think I cant live without you?!

Liloa. Im sorry to say this, but in reality, the world is a dangerous place for women to live alone.

In a civilised society, are rankings still based on physical strength or skills? Is the person who can carry the heaviest rock also the one to climb the throne? As you said, if the Empire is such a proud

civilised society, then those who are thinking about doing something to me must be seen as barbaric. If the Northern Island tribe of the Western Continent is still considered as savage for worshipping power, why is our great civilization not ashamed of the same thing? Civilization needs to step up and get rid of barbarism. Why should I carry the burden of saving myself? The era of brute strength passed the Central Continent, and the Empire now defends its bloodline and gold. Yet, still only putting the weak into this physical logic is a malicious and crude tactic

The things Lil had been suppressing and enduring until now came pouring out like vomit. She fired her words without giving Cesar a chance to intervene.

Im so sorry for needing your permission to go somewhere I might or might not get beaten or raped, whether its dangerous here or safe there, Ill decline. Ill go the way I want to go. I wont lose Philly anymore.

Stop talking about such horrible things. How can you talk about those ideals when you know the reality of it? Only a few people live by the perfect ideals youre mentioning. Accepting the goodwill and protection of others is also a form of courage. Of course, I know your pride. I know how noble your blood is. I also know how great your contribution was at Pontenbach. I have never denied your excellence, rather I respected and admired it.

Thats hypocrisy. This cant be fixed by merely wrapping everything up with words of recognition. After all, you still think of me as an immature child, one that needs to be taken care of and pampered. All the while you whisper to me that Im a queen. Your goodwill and protection are things that make me feel so flawed. Of course, no human being is perfect, but someone like you, who says that no one is perfect, does not even seek my protection. In your head, only youre the perfect one and only Im the flawed one. So you never once, even when you fell down, took my outstretched hand. Why?! Why is that?

If I tell you that I want to be the Admiral. Youll be the first to say; Yes, you can. However, youll also immediately add that its impossible in reality. Have you ever thought deeply about why its realistically impossible? If you think about it, can you still say that? Its impossible to make this a reality because there are too many people who think like you!

Hear me out, please. Its frustrating whenever youre like this. Why dont you calm down first? Anger is just an outburst of temporary emotions. Dont you realise that arguing in such a heated state is exhausting? Theres no reason for us to be doing this.

Dont talk about reason in front of me when I witnessed your anger countless times. When youre angry, theres always a stern and valid reason, but if Im angry, its because of my irrational temperament. Im so tired of hearing that from you.

Lil, you shouldnt speak so recklessly. If you think Im biased, please calm down and point it out. Then Ill look back on my past behaviour.

How long have I remained calm and how long have I tried to talk to you? But when I did, you never listened. Nevertheless, you still tell me to calm down? Im done with that. If I calm down, the world wont change. If you, the one person who cares for and loves me, dont change. Why would the world listen to my whispers?

Cesars irritated sigh could be heard. His patience, like Lils, had reached its limit. But this time, she didnt care as she still had something left to say.

Rage changes the world.

Chapter 167

Thats enough. I dont want to talk to someone who insists on staying angry.

How ridiculous! This anger of mine is nothing more than a tiny spark. Its a match destined to die out by being trampled under a shoe!

As Ed said, if I were a real farmer

Someone like me will definitely be born after I die!..

if I can really sow seeds

This Empire will conceive, give birth, and nurture more and more hatred. Children who crawl out of wombs without knowing anything will be angry beyond comparison to me. Theyll find their comrades and grow in strength.

They hold no power. How do you expect those people to move history? Theyll be swept away by the years and eventually live their lives quietly. People have lived thousands of years without that kind of purpose or will. Only a few leaders can do their part in life that can lead the times with them.

Dont get it wrong. Everyone can do their part. Its just that Ive lived without knowing it, but actually, everyone is given the same amount of power as everybody else without lacking in anything. When they all realise that themselves, do you think the authorities can handle it?

Even if so, theyre mostly just commoners.

If you want the Empire to last, you have to acknowledge it. Fear it.

What do you mean? Fear what? Their anger and awareness?

Ed told me that a farmer doesnt need to mourn over what hasnt sprouted. Their mission will be passed on to future generations, and young farmers in the new world will treasure their seeds. Valuable fruits will be borne and splendid flowers will bloom eventually.

Lil affirmed, imagining a future in full bloom.

You should fear that the angriest of them all may not have been born yet.

Liloa. I cant follow your ideals at all

The world changes. I deeply believe in that. And I wont ever give this up no matter how much you dismiss it as nonsense. Its simply the kind of person I am.

Lil gradually calmed down. Thinking about that future made her feel relieved. However, that relief wasnt caused by her pouring out her anger. Rather, she wanted to go back to the moment before she said anything about it. She felt it wouldve been better if she had simply said that she would go her own way, but for some reason, she wanted to feel a little bit of understanding from him. Right from the start, she knew that Cesar would only look at it like one of her outbursts anyway, but still, she gave in to her impulse. Hoping that she would truly break free from Cesars grasp.

So, you want me to give analytical meaning to all reality and explore why? This is tiring. Loving you is so hard and difficult.

You once told me. You think its difficult because its unknown to you.

It was cruel to twist it like this, but it was inevitable.

But you know what, youre not the only one who doesnt know. Me too. I dont know and cant understand it whenever I see you talking about building a happy family. Its like seeing a person who is happy with a bunch of piled-up rocks. Im glad that it makes you happy, but I dont know why youre particularly happy about it. I cant understand the kind of happiness youre talking about because I dont know how happy I will be if I have to let go of my dreams and become your wife.

Youre talking about this grand future, but does that automatically make me ridiculous for simply dreaming of having a family? Now Im ashamed of how I dared to ask you for a child. You whos dreaming of such a big continental plan How dare you tell me that mine is insignificant!

As Cesar raised his voice, the pillar where they were tied to shook. Lil felt his soaring body temperature and his rising and falling shoulders behind her back.

You dont have to get mad. Dont you understand it? Isnt it the same for you? Dont you look at me and see some crazy woman hugging a rock while saying she wont give it up no matter what? Hearing her say that it doesnt matter if it would cost her her life. That it doesnt matter if she dies, as long as nothing happens to her rock. Doesnt that sound insane?

You dont have to speak so cruelly. Are you dismissing my feelings?

Im not dismissing anything. Im just sad. I want to see you happy, but your happiness isnt the same as mine.

Theres no reason to remain a couple when we cant see each others brilliance All these years, we were just drowning in the depths of ignorance, longing for understanding.

After meeting Ed, Lil, for the first time in her life, knew how brilliant she was.

Im finally convinced that the things I so desperately hold on to arent stones, but seeds. I still remember how happy and overwhelmed I was. Back then, my first thought was to let Cesar know, letting him see how amazingly beautiful it was But now, I can only feel sorry for Cesar, who was dragged by this strange woman and had to degrade himself Hes just not that kind of person. When I think of his true self, those dazzling lights of the chandeliers of Sesbron come to mind

Lil could only hope that Cesar would accept the fact she wasnt the one who could acknowledge his brilliance.

Im not going to the Principality of Loti.

What is that

This ship is bound to go to Serlio anyway. Im sorry. Youll be the only one who gets off there.

What do you mean?

I cant possibly make you happy.

Cesar answered as if hed lose his breath at any moment.

Why

Why on earth

Were different. Its insurmountable.

A watery voice shouted.

Please! Stop saying were different!

Were vastly different, and our likeness is too little I cant go with you

So, after everything, this is it? Were you waiting for an opportunity like this? Have you always believed it wouldnt work out and that it would end on day? Did you decide to quit, now that I wanted for us to leave this life?

No! I imagined a future with you too! That I would join you in the Principality the moment I was ready, and that living like that would be rewarding in its own way!

Then why cant you get over it? I dont know why youre saying that we should stop here. You talk like its such a big deal if were different from each other.

I told you. You wont be happy I will never see your light.

How many couples do you think share the same thoughts? Having grown up in their own environment for over 20 years, they would inevitably have different values. But if theres acknowledgement and respect, will it even be desirable to persuade, appease and force the other party to share the same values?

Youre the one trying to persuade and appease values! Youre the one whos forcing the thought that if youre born a woman, you should feel happy in starting a family!

I swear I never forced you! I dont understand why you think that beliefs are such a hindrance to love.

Have I ever cursed at you or told you the Bell Rock was a mistake? Have I ever stopped you from rescuing slaves? Or are you dissatisfied that Im not motivated like you? Did you think that I would become the same?

Cesar moved his body in an attempt to loosen the cumbersome rope. He twisted his shoulder fiercely as if trying to sever his wrist.

And how do you think this persuasion is happening in the first place? Persuasion presupposes disagreement. Youre dissatisfied and so am I! I want to keep my place as much as you want to keep yours, and I dont want to be dragged as much as you want to pull me with you!

And thats exactly why youre going to the Principality and Im going back to Panichi!

Frustrated, Lil regretted she dropped those shards as she violently twisted her wrist. The rope was already half broken, so she could be freed with just a little more strength. In her imagination, she had already thrown off all the ropes and ran somewhere.

Equality! God damn it I know I know its the right thing to strive for.

Yeah, equality, that great word. But for you, its a mere ideal. To you it doesnt matter if it comes true or not, because it wont affect you anyway, right?

I wont deny that Im only contemplative of the ideology.

Its not the same for me. Its an ideal that I would sacrifice my life to if that means it might come true. Do you really want me to adapt to this world? Just live like this and die? Isnt it a waste of my eyes, my mouth, and my hands to live like that? Its a complete waste. Its driving me crazy. I feel like Im going insane. I want to speak up so badly, I want to shout that the world is terrible and that every moment feels like hell!

Theres no reason for you, who is already free, to yearn for freedom and cry for equality. Did I say you should stay at home? You are obsessed with the thought of being victimised.

I can go outside the house because you allow it, but I cant do other things because you dont allow it, right?

Liloa, please. Do you really want to advent national equality? How can I understand such an ideal that can merely be seen hanging from the horizon?

Lil tossed her fully unravelled rope into the wall. She felt pain for a moment and shrugged her shoulders. Her palms were tattered by glass shards and her wrists were covered with red marks.

If you dont understand, then stop. Stop questioning it!

Chapter 168

Lil angrily now swung her arms to loosen the ropes around her torso.

Dont you ever downplay why Im doing this. Dont even dare to guess. I know your sympathy and your pity for me. But even if it looks bad, just be sorry. Dont offer your solution for a better life.

What did you

Realising that her tongue kept slipping out of line, Lil bit her lip hard.

Im sorry. I said too much.

Do you have any idea how much I love you? How can you return those words? So you dont give a damn even if I get hurt?

No, Im not taking your efforts lightly. Thats why Im really sorry

Dont be hypocritical! If youre truly sorry, you wouldnt be able to say this. I dont even want to hear any of your empty apologies!

There was nothing left to say. In fact, Lil did feel sorry for Cesars sadness, but she wasnt sorry for her decision to leave him.

Im sure Cesar will meet a sense of fullness thats incomparable to what he has right now. It may be a presumptuous thought, but I clearly feel it. And I believe that Cesar is feeling it, too.

After all, Lil has always been confident that Cesar was a great man.

First, Im going to Panichi. But as I said, I cant continue being a Captain in the League, so Im going back.

What do you mean back? To where?

Sesbron.

Are you talking about Mireille?

Yes.

Was I worse than that Duke?!

Dont get me wrong. This is because I want to take off this shell and go back to being Liloa. I want to live as I was born. Ill go there, and no matter what happens at least Ill be able to live as myself.

Cesar kept quiet for a long while. He simply didnt seem to believe it. Meanwhile, Lil waited for him. She kept quiet even though she knew that Cesar was trying hard to suppress his sobs. Neither Lil nor Cesar was accustomed to tears, so Cesar held back his tears as clumsily as Lil did. His tears, that couldnt be wiped away, fell steadily like sands in an hourglass. After what seemed like an eternity, a drop fell, and after another eternity, a second drop followed. Just like that countless eternities poured down.

I was wrong

Ill follow you in whatever you want to do

I was wrong. Please

I only have you

Cesar took a deep breath.

You

But his breath crumbled

Out there

With his breath tightening, it became difficult for him to utter even a single word. Whenever Cesar caught his breath, the pillar swayed, and Lils body shook along with them. His pain echoed through her chest. He continued to mumble, but it was only intermittently audible. Even though he knew Lil wouldnt understand, Cesar impatiently repeated his words.

Dont leave me, dont

Im really, really sorry. I should have realised sooner. Im sorry for making you suffer all this time. Thank you for everything

Ah, no

Cesars hands suddenly groped Lils arms out of nowhere. Lil, who didnt know when Cesar had untied himself, caught his hand in a moment of surprise. Feeling that his sleeves were all wet with blood, he seemed to have freed himself in a hurry. When her palms became slippery from the blood that flowed from his wrists, she strengthened her grip on his hand again and again, fearing she would lose it.

I will try harder more If only I try it will work, wont it? You do whatever you want

No, its not going to work.

Liloa please It hurts so, so much

Lil placed her other hand on the back of his hand. When Cesar urgently exerted a bit of strength in it, the back of his hand, desperately bulging, had never felt as weak as it did today. His wrist, which had always been firm, was now trembling uncontrollably. Unable to stand it, Lil began shedding

tears as she listened to the sound of his enduring sadness collapsing between his teeth. His grip, feeling hopeful, softened with relief. It was only then that Lil twisted her wrist out between his loosened palms

The Bell Rocks watchtower floated through the fog. Not only the bottom of the small wooden barrel but also its surroundings were covered with the whitish mist, it even clouded the sun.

The watchman, who sat in the tower, fidgeted with the telescope tucked between his legs. He came here in an attempt to avoid the bloody confrontation on the deck. His position as watchman was especially convenient in a time like this. In addition, he was part of Marenzios men. And Marenzio didn't really care about his whereabouts, so no matter how many fights were happening right beneath him, nobody would be interested in finding him, giving him the freedom to merely hum a dull song. Sitting in the watchtower with only his head sticking out in the fog, he felt like he was a god ruling above the clouds. The sailor stretched a little and crossed his ankles on top of the railing.

The Bell Rock has remained stationary for a while now. When even the sun couldn't be observed due to the obstruction of the thick sea fog, looking for islands they could use as reference was impossible too, making their charts useless. Moreover, the captain and the navigator, the two most experienced sailors who memorised the sea route to the extent they could sail it with their eyes closed, were detained, so the rest of the crew were helpless until the fog cleared. That was exactly why the watchman felt that all the shouting down there was useless. No one could even guess the direction they should head. At this rate, it could be considered mercy and luck if they wouldn't starve to death.

The watchman was thinking of a way to pass the time leisurely and decided to go for a nap. The song he hummed was like a lullaby, and he sang it continuously as if it were endless. However, at some point, the lyrics of his song, which had been heading to an unspecified place in the fog, stopped.

The hand of a ghost wadded through the veil of thin air. The watchman clearly saw it and in an instant, a chill ran down the back of his neck. He quickly straightened his posture and pulled out his telescope.

Thinking it must have been the hand of the mist ghost, he recalled that the number of ships stranded in the belly of the fog, led by that hand, was countless. It was a familiar myth about a ghost who would remain hungry no matter how much it ate and therefore would constantly stretch out its hand to grab boats that snooped around in order to fill its stomach with another prey.

As sailors were people who feared ghosts more than death, the watchman hurriedly looked through his telescope. At glance, something was stirring the fog. It was far, far away, but the eyesight of an experienced lookout could catch even the slightest movement. He soon realised that it wasn't the hand of the ghost. Rather, it was an object that shouldn't be around here. The watchman suspected that he was looking at something in vain. But there was no doubt that

Is that a flag?

A flag. It was a flag he had never seen before and its fluttering made the pattern incomprehensible. The watchman knew it wasn't one of the Southern Leagues flags and the imperial merchant ships had no way of travelling here during the rainy season.

Time was running out for him to confirm his conflicting speculations. One would think that the watchmen on ships tend to compete as if they were racing to finish a meal, starting with a duel on who has the better eyesight, but those kinds of shows of pride only took place in pubs. In reality, overconfidence and arrogance alone were enough to endanger an entire ship. Therefore, the assumption that their opponents watchman couldn't spot the Bell Rock wasn't even worth considering. There was no time to contemplate this alone.

In an instant, the sailor looked down and started to shout.

There's a ship!

The constant yelling on deck came to an end at once as silence swept away the sailors' voices. Then, all their voices came together like dust forced to clump on a broom.

It's the Navy!..

Insane screams were heard followed by terrifying cries.

The Navy! We're all going to die!..

Aagh! Why is the Navy here?! Why the hell again?!..

Shut up, you bloody buffoons! Stop making a fuss about it!..

Suddenly, the rigging tightened as if someone was climbing the mast line. The watchman had been studying their opponents' flag without moving before he glanced at his uninvited guest who poked his head over the railing. It was Alain, coming up to see the situation for himself. When the anxious watchman handed over the telescope, Alain immediately snatched it.

The sailor informed Alain nervously.

They have a lot of ornaments on their lines, so I can't figure out which one their official flag is. Do you think it's the Navy?

Alain was adept in his identification. Everyone, including the watchman himself, knew this. Alain had worked several years at an imperial merchant company, so he was familiar with anything related to the aristocracy. Thanks to that experience, his fellow sailors could now also easily distinguish the marks of an aristocratic ship they didn't know about before. But this time, their opponents' ship was a little strange. The watchman, who agreed that Alain's knowledge was as good as the captain's, tilted his head uneasily.

But I normally recognise the shape of Legardon well.

The Imperial Navy Flag, the Mahin Royal flag, and the Legardon Flag were the three flags that symbolised the Southern Navy and they were also the three patterns that every watchman needed to know.

Alain muttered his next sentence like a groan.

It's not Legardon

Is that so?

The watchman was so relieved that he didn't look at Alain's expression and for a moment, hope flashed across the brightened man's face. He also regained his composure, thinking that there was indeed no way he wouldn't have noticed Legardon's sails.

However, Alain lowered the telescope with trembling hands. Fearful eyes confronted his comrade. Facing the contemplative boatswain, the watchman quickly hardened his smile. And as if to ridicule the mans premature optimism, a much more cruel declaration was soon heard

Its Mondovis naval flag

Chapter 169

On the rear deck of the Visha, three men were huddled together, each peering through a telescope. One was seated in an ornate chair, one was standing solemnly with one arm behind his back, and the last one had his back hunched over his telescope as if it wasnt working properly.

Standing most dignified among them, the man in the middle spoke first to his left and then to his right.

Did you see it?

Hmm.

And you?

Uhhh.

Tak!

Sagastar hit Captain Long on the head with his telescope, making the captain jump up while holding the back of his head.

I see you finally lost it.

Commodore?!

Did you begin to have this absurd delusion of becoming an Admiral yourself since youre sticking close to Sir Edgar all this time? You dare to Uhm me?

Ed hung his arms over the railing, leaving behind the two men who started fighting. Two of his fingers went up his chin and then fiddled with his ear lobe.

Thats strange I think its anchored.

The storm already passed and the day has been calm for a long time now, so theres no reason for the Bell Rock to remain stationary

Ed picked up the telescope again. Because of the sea fog that drifted around like a cloud, the Bell Rock swung between being visible and invisible. It seemed to be motionless at first glance, but he wasnt sure.

Ed gestured to the waiting aspirant.

Raise the red flag.

Yes, Admiral.

Sagastar, who was still in a small scuffle with the captain on the deck, turned to Ed.

Are we going to conduct an unannounced inspection?

Thats right.

Well switch to combat positions then.

We dont need armaments. Just have our guns ready and go.

But isnt that the pirate ship youve been trapped in?

Its a merchant ship.

A merchant ship?

Ed understood what Sagastar truly wanted to say.

You probably want to ask me why this merchant ship beats people like mere dogs.

There was a misunderstanding.

Ed smiled crookedly with a face that implied there was more to it than just a simple misunderstanding.

The tingling feeling of anticipation stirred his stomach. He felt like a predator who had locked his prey in a corner and was ready for the catch. As his heart beat wildly, Ed massaged his chest. He couldnt possibly stay calm and licked his lips with his parched tongue.

Misunderstanding his Admirals gesture, an aspirant standing to the side, eventually handed him some wine-flavored water. Ed accepted the glass, took a sip of the sweet water and gave the order to advance

The touch of the pure white mist stuck close to all the men on deck like a curious child. In addition, it was almost as if they could hear the giggling of a ghost from somewhere. The Visha, which hadnt dried up from the heavy rain the night before, was still damp and gave off the smell of a forest. As the ship cut through the mist, it moved heavily as though it was wearing a damp shirt that slowed it down. The officers clasped their collars in frustration. They werent allowed to take their uniforms off and because the sea, where the sun couldnt reach, was extremely cold, they were left with no other choice than to endure the fog while suffering from a strange sense of strangulation. It wasnt just them who were soaked in tension. Sailors were reminded of various ghost stories. There were those who shook their shoulders, saying that it was because they had entered the skirt of the Ghost of Mist, whereas others spoke of the fragrant cigarette smoke of Mother Ocean. Having his thoughts lingering on it, Ed suddenly covered his nose, wondering if he was being possessed by the smell as well

After a few hours had passed, the Bell Rock was nowhere in sight. That fact alone made Ed laugh broadly enough to show his teeth.

She ran away.

Sagastar hit the railing with his fist.

Didnt they run away after seeing the naval flag? As expected, its definitely a pirate ship.

That rat

Cesar came to mind. Knowing Lil, there was no way she would evade a naval inspection, so it was clear to Ed that Cesar had the final say in this matter. Ed pulled out the telescope covered with water droplets and checked the front again. However, all he could see was only a thick layer of fog.

With the support of this cane, Ed stood up.

Thud! Thud!

The sound of his cane making its way down the stairs was deafening.

Sagastar and Captain Long had followed him to the admirals office. The nave captain, unable to read the room, asked cheerfully.

Is it true that were looking for a sword? The sword of the Admiral, which is said to be one of the national treasures of the Empire?

As expected, nobody answered.

But the other day, you said you would capture them alive So, will you retrieve the sword without killing anyone?

Captain. Call a senior officer from Legardon.

Ah yes, Commodore.

The captain, finally feeling the unusual atmosphere, quickly escaped from the admirals office. Left alone, Sagastar looked at Ed, who was staring down at models around the Hangyang Islands.

Once their ship reaches Serlio, Ill lose them

..?

Hearing him muttering to himself, Sagastar became convinced that the Admiral was looking for someone.

Even though its true that he lost his sword, it feels like he has a much more important purpose than just that. He instructed us to capture them alive, that we dont need to be armed, and above all, he keeps talking about Alvenis and the fisherman Is he, perhaps, searching for a woman? Now that I think about it, that can be a very plausible assumption.

Somewhere along the line, Sagastar started to depict an adventure novel in his mind. He often thought about what the admiral would do during his outings, and his idle time during the training in the Gulf of Gardel aggravated that.

Yes, a beautiful woman kidnapped by pirates. Shes so beautiful that even the Admiral couldnt help but fall in love with her. When he went to rescue her, did he witness a pirate and the woman being happy together? Was he caught sneaking in and then beaten? Sir Edgar and the woman? Could it really be like that?

Sagastar continued to glance at Ed. Ed was still so haggard, that the aspirant standing next to him had to wipe his cold sweat from his forehead every now and then. The whole sight made him look human and downright pitiful.

The sloops will move along with the flow of the current around the border of the mist. If a ship comes out, it should be reported immediately. Have the Baor, the Simon, and the Clida turn around the border and join us here, then push it from there.*

Sagastar frowned and nodded his head.

Yes, I understand.

And

Yes?

Call the carpenter.

Yes?

Wrap the mast with a white cloth.

Sagastar looked at Ed with hesitant eyes. When the admiral glanced at him and realized how clueless his commodore was to his intentions, Ed stared at him with familiar eyes. Eyes that were clearly saying, what a pitiful sight.

Were going to play the part of ghost.

Hence the white mast?

White mast and white bow.

Sagastar suddenly remembered the days of the Western Sea battles. The man in front of him managed time and time again to stealthily approach the pirate ships due to various outlandish camouflage techniques and then defeated them without mercy. So, he knew Ed was being serious. It was his intention to cover the Visha with a cloth and hide in the fog as if it were performing as a ghost in a childrens play.

Mhmm isnt it great?

Its going to be a lot of fun.

Ed hummed his next words like they were part of a song, but Sagastar had no idea for whom they were meant for.

You better hide

With all of its sails swelling tightly, a ship cut through the sea fog at full speed. On its central deck, everyone was aiming their guns or knives at each other. Dozens of weapons crossed and threatened their opponents. But among all of them was a clear sense of uneasiness.

Kriik, Drrrreuk, kkik!

The sound of the keel being scraped rang constantly. It was because they ignored the rocky bottom of the reefs and continued to advance.

Kung!

The bow of the ship rattled downward. As they caught the sea floor again, foam splashed from both sides and hit the deck.

Alain, seized by two pairs of hands, shouted.

You little brat. What are you doing!

Shut up!

Julio, who was holding the wheel, responded nervously with shaking legs. The young man, who had refrained from moving until he caught sight of the Mondovi warship, had now found himself in an impasse.

These men are all sailors of the same League. What youre doing isnt for Captain Valtano, nor is it helpful to the League. Its nothing more than a tantrum of a four-year-old! Lower the sails now!

So, what? You crazy old man, are you suggesting for us to crawl into the mouths of those Navy bastards then?

Nothing like that is going to happen. There hasnt been any conflict between the Mondovi Navy and the League for over two months. They mustve stood by, gnawing at nothing else but their two months worth of food because they had other purposes besides us! Running away is far more dangerous, you damn bastard!

What side are you even on, Grandpa?

What?

Chapter 170

Courant said that the bastard doctor served in Mondovi, so doesnt that make all of this add up perfectly? He stole intel on the Bell Rock and fed it to the Western fleet, thats why the Mondovian Navy has been tracking us!

Or are Lil Schweizs words still clogging your ears?

Alain gritted his teeth at the mocking remark.

The Black Whales dedication to the League is deeper than anyone elses. And you certainly arent someone who can say those words about the Captain so lightly.

You must be fucking kidding me.

Look at the mess youve made. What is this? Comrades from the same League are pointing guns at each other!

Ha! Comrades? Were you guys even born in Marchand?

The South isnt divided. There is only one South

And you! An old man, who used to earn his living by licking the imperials asses

Julio raised his left hand. His fingers, which had been cut to different lengths, wriggled in disgrace.

Who are you to talk about comrades?

Julio.

I was only 10! 10 years old! But those people rolled dice among themselves to decide which finger and how much they would cut off. Those bastards arent people, theyre demons!

His face flushed red as if he were about to shed bloody tears. When Julios subordinate placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him, Alain spoke with a softer tone.

Think about it. Even when there was an inspection from Legardon, you guys almost lost it. Everyone claimed they were about to die, but what happened? Huh? Did anyone get hurt?

Even if youre afraid of the Navy, you need to keep your head cool.

Julio stamped his foot.

Who says Im scared!

He stomped and grabbed Alain by the collar. He stretched his fist out as far back as he could to threaten the old man.

Id rather die. But first, Ill kill them all, and then we can all go to hell together.

Julio. Theyre your comrades.

Stop this. Dont look at me, who is merely an old man, look at your comrades.

..!

The eyes that were burning with anger suddenly froze. Julio could easily beat anyone in a game of fists, but sailing was different. Sailing was a mission directly related to life. As many lives were at stake, Julio had no choice but to be cautious. So, Alain calmly rebuked Julio.

We need the Captain and the Navigator.

Ill never approve of those bastards.

Julio. If we dont manage to get out of here and get caught by the Navy, well surely die. Not just you, but 200 people will all die together. 200 Sailors who committed to remain in the League even after knowing a real war was approaching. What about their families?

But Alains passionate speech was interrupted by someones loud voice.

Julio!

Courant, standing on the deck below, took off his hat and looked up at him. Julio first hesitated to return the gaze, but when their eyes met and he recognized the boy, he lowered his head and smirked. Julio then motioned for Courant to be dragged away, but Courant resisted the hands that were trying to restrain him.

Wait! Im a witness!

His remark made Julio pause.

What?

The Navigator had me watch his cabin! He kept saying that someone was breaking in and he told me to stay in the room so that I could catch the culprit. He said it was suspicious that there were signs of a break-in, but nothing was missing.

So are you saying it was the doctor?

No. Its not like that, but but if he was in some sort of collusion with the doctor, why would the Navigator entrust me with such a task? Its ridiculous to accuse the Navigator of being in cahoots with the spy when he ordered me to catch him. Theres nothing wrong with the Navigator!

Julio, who had been rolling his eyes for a while, suddenly nodded his head.

All right. Then lets just bring the Navigator.

Finally free, Alain replied while sweeping down his chest.

What about the Captain? It takes a Captains eyes to read the sea route

Unfortunately for you, I have to become the Captain if you want to bring the Navigator.

What?

Not the Lil Schweiz guy..

Alain squeezed his chin and bit his lip. Thinking that he couldve known that the kid would use this opportunity to threaten the officers with their vote.

It will be better if you decide quickly, wont it? Hurry up and raise your hand.

Splitting through the surface of the water, the Bell Rock waddled again. When a shower of water splashed to their left, everyone had to hold on to either the railing or the rigging.

You must guarantee the Captains life.

Ill guarantee it. Actually, theres nothing much to guarantee, as his life is going to be nothing more than a flys life now.

The officers exchanged glances. In the midst of their agony, the sound of the ship hitting a stone beak echoed through the floor.

Alain was the first to raise his hand, then two, three and eventually more and more hands followed. One of Julios men counted.

The total is 16.

Julio opened his mouth and laughed.

Congratulations on your inauguration, Captain Julio!

A crowd that had gathered in a circle, clapped and cheered among themselves. Seeing that, Alain cast a silent gaze on the other officers.

The new captain then approached Alain and patted the old man on the chest.

Now bring the Navigator.

Yes.

Captain. Wont you attach it?

Yes Captain.

Alain clenched his fists and disappeared to the deck below. Julio slowly laid each of his fingers on the wheel. As if it was an affectionate meeting, he stroked it several times. Relaxing his shoulders, he ordered, proudly holding the wheel with both hands.

Lil Schweiz will be demoted to a third-class sailor. Have him clean the floors.

The men leaning against the railing burst into laughter.

Hahahaha!..

Meanwhile, the Bell Rocks sailors shook their heads while sharing grim glances

A while ago.

Cesar had talked about memories, but Lil could only half-heartedly sympathise with Cesars stories. His voice mightve grown calmer as time passed, there were still moments when he couldnt stand it and shed tears. Whenever that happened Lil felt weak. Even though she didnt love him, that didnt mean she was completely devoid of feelings for him. Cutting off those feelings was also for her a hard thing to do. Lil too sobbed, but bit her lip to make sure Cesar didnt notice.

How many hours have passed with us being like this?

Suddenly, in the background, was a dull sound constantly rambling through the hull. Lil was familiar with it, it was the sound of the anchor being lifted. A chill ran over her spine.

Whats the point in raising the anchor of a ship that cant be moved?

But soon, before she could even fully deduce the situation, the Bell Rock already staggered greatly.

Kkiiiiik

Reefs scratched the keel and hull. The ship made its way through various seaweed bushes that grew under the surface and the rough-shaped coral colonies left numerous scars on the bottom of the ship. Lil looked around anxiously. She sensed that the fog hadnt lifted yet.

Im sure they wont be able to read the maps

I think weve entered shallow waters.

I think so too. Damn it, who the hell would do something so reckless?

Although she asked that, both of them knew it was Julio. It was clear that the madman was attempting to drag hundreds of their colleagues into the underworld with him. With no time to think, Lil resumed the struggle she had given up. She pushed her arms outward with all her might. However, and perhaps in a way to mock her, the rope felt even tighter than it did before. Still, Lil gritted her teeth and gave it her all.

Then, urgent footsteps drew closer and closer. The door opened and someone burst into the cabin. Still struggling, Lil shouted.

Why is the ship suddenly moving!

Captain, its me.

Alain?

Naturally, Lil stopped struggling, thinking that Alain would release her. But Alain seemed to be preoccupied with something else. She could definitely hear the sawing on a rope, but it wasnt hers. Lil panicked and looked back as far as she could.

Grandpa! What are you doing?

I need Cesar.

Free the Captain first, Alain.

No. I cant do that.

Alain whispered something in Cesars ear.

Mon

He was clearly saying something more, but after that, Lil could no longer hear him well.

What kind of information do you need to keep hidden from me?

Lil pressed Alain, widening her eyes.

What were you whispering?! Alain!

Im sorry, Captain. The situation is very urgent. Even now

Bam! Kkiikk

After impact a sound similar to wood being scraped over the teeth of a saw could be heard. Lil was still tied up and thus only wobbled, but due to the shock Alain fell down and rolled two laps.

Goddamn it! That crazy Come on, mate.

Alain wasted no time. He got up from his fall and quickly led Cesar. Similarly, Cesar stormed out of the cabin without delay. Lil was stunned to see that he had left her behind. Not because she was saddened by his action, but because she had a hunch that some huge disaster was bound to happen.

Lil soon screamed like a madman. However, her body, which was full of injuries and hadn't eaten a single piece of bread, had no strength left.

After catching her breath, Lil yelled at the ceiling again.

Is no one there?! Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!

She shouted three or four more times.

Captain? Captain!

Her tightly closed eyes flashed open.

Jericho?