

## Northwest 191

### Chapter 191

The journal was still on Lils lap. It may only be a leather cover with a few sheets of paper, but to her it was too heavy to ignore.

{ I listened to your breathing for two months! You didnt budge, even when I begged you to stop making me merely listen So why did you pretend to be asleep?.. }

*Ive been wondering how Ed knew something that even Cesar had never noticed But now that I heard it from Levi, it feels strange I didnt realise it myself. I can somewhat understand what made him so angry. Over time, he had grown sensitive to the sound of his patients breathing, anxious that my breathing would abruptly come to a stop.*

Lil could easily picture Ed sitting in the chair Levi had sat in.

*A person who suffers because Im not waking up, one who tries to withstand exhaustion but cant help but doze off from time to time Despite all that, he never left my side, needing the assurance that I was merely asleep, not dead, in front of him.*

{ Arent you like a couple?! }

From that one sentence Lil knew that Levi assumed that Ed had feelings for her. Lil once thought so too. Eds puzzling actions could be better understood if they were read through the lens of affection. He pretended to be cordial only to be by her side, and he managed to ingratiate himself with her in every way possible to avoid being booted out.

Lil felt foolish and blind to have dismissed it as a mere crush.

*Of course, back then it didnt answer all my questions, but I tolerated him because I was sorry for the life that he lost without being given the chance to defend himself. Im now paying a hefty price for it. I shouldve been suspicious till the end*

That was Lils conclusion.

*Or Ed shouldve confessed before it turned out this way. Can love without truth really be called love? Its selfishness, not affection, to force faith while committing fraud that couldnt be forgiven even if he told it with his own mouth Even if he had no intention of hurting the Bell Rock, Ed shouldve been more careful. Whether his rashness was intentional or natural, I cant forgive him too easily. I hate the idea of casually changing my mind, especially when it comes to the weight of lives and even if that weight becomes so light towards Ed*

*No captain has faith in the sea breeze that instantly fades right after pushing the sail heavily. A captain who blindly follows that kind of breeze will lose his direction, his position, and eventually his ship. A tailwind can always turn into a fierce headwind or disappear like a dead wind I still dont know what kind of wind Ed is I simply dont know*

Lil rubbed her throbbing temples. The thought of Ed exhausted her. She wasnt in a position where she could afford to waste her energy on minding her feelings, and she knew that better than anyone else. But whenever Ed was in the picture, she couldnt help but be drawn to him endlessly.

*No matter how hard I try to turn away, I always fail. It drives me mad to the point that all I want to do is curse, be furious, and despise, everything in order to sever my thoughts.*

It seemed as though a rush of wind had driven her into an unknown sea. No matter how many times she looked around, she was only met with unfamiliar sights. Lil had no idea if the route she was taking would put her back on track

Or sink her

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Levi waited for Lil, who went to wash herself after the treatment was done.

When Lil came out of the bathtub, she was immediately seized with a foreboding feeling after seeing several dresses lying on the chair, the hastily made partition and a dressing table.

*No, rather than merely wait, its more right to say she stayed because she wanted to dress me up.*

Levi, holding a crimson dress, turned to Lil.

Okay, so now we can finally change you into some decent clothes.

Levi hooked arms with Lil once again and led her behind the partition. Lil couldnt help but be dragged along in a daze. She hadnt had any sort of social physical contact in a long time, so it felt awkward, even though it had been a normal occurrence in her previous life.

Behind the partition, maids were already laying out clothes and accessories. Lils face, which was already pale to begin with, turned even paler and eventually hardened. Levi, completely unaware, rummaged through the pile of outfits in a cheerful manner.

I had some of my clothes altered in a hurry. It slipped my mind to get clothes in your size because every day went by without time to spare

What did you say your name was again?

Its Lil.

Lil?

Levi appeared to have realised it wasnt her real name. But she quickly covered her reservations as she accepted a dress given to her by one of the maids.

We called you Visha.

What?

No one knows why Edgar named the Visha, Visha, so we used to speculate that Visha might be his secret lover. But hearing that your name is Lil, I no longer think that Visha is the name of his lover.

..?

Lil couldnt bear to ask Levi why she no longer thought that Visha may be Eds lover. After all, this misunderstanding could be rather favourable to her.

I thought this kind of style would suit you, what do you think? I actually dont know if youll like the rest of my clothes because they only have simple designs

Levi held a dress in front of Lil. As Lil gazed at the light pink wrap gown, she sighed.

*I have no idea where to begin to remedy the situation*

Levi, of course, was correct. Without the usual ribbon embellishments, there was nothing more left to it than a classic look that added dignity only through gloss and creases. But the clothes Lil needed weren't anything with a skirt. However, she couldn't flat out ask for pants right away, and even if she did, she wouldn't dare to request to have Linhardt's or Ed's garments altered.

Oh, you don't like it? I picked it out with a lot of care

No. Thank you. I'll make sure to pay you back.

No, you don't have to pay me back

Awkwardly, Lil rubbed the rustling hem of her clothes for no reason. When Levi walked out of the partition, the maids were hesitant to approach. To comfort the women, Lil remarked to rid them of their worry.

That wasn't blood.

Yes?

It was ink.

Ah, yes I'm sorry.

Still, the maid's hand trembled in the air. Unable to bear it any longer, Lil took off her gown herself and put on a thin linen smock\*. A second sigh slipped from Lil as she noticed that the collar barely covered her chest.

*If I get caught in a surprise attack and move in haste, my chest will be exposed.*

A maid who joined belatedly put a wrapping gown over the white fabric. Her outer garment, the gown, was loose and had to be draped over her shoulders, but Lil pulled up the hem while looking at the maid who tried to lower her collar so that her shoulder line would be revealed. The gesture was small, yet its message was clear\*. The maid, who had arranged the fine wrinkles of her smock to stand out from under the gown and settled around her breasts, put a belt around her waist without saying anything.

Lil swallowed many words as she looked down at her clothes.

*This makes it impossible to operate a simple weapon, let alone fight.*

Still, she liked the flowing, wide sleeves. The smock's frill stuck out from the ends, which were only up to her elbow. Lil's practical mind immediately thought she might be able to hide a short sword there. While Lil was distracted by her thoughts, a maid put a green shawl around her shoulders. The wide, long cloth was wrapped around her body. Lil, who had held up well until then, squealed as the maid lifted a corolla.

Stop!

The startled maid shook her shoulders.

Pardon?

Not that. That's I don't want it..

But

This is enough, right? I'm going out.

As Lil hurriedly left the partition, the shawl somehow remained intact. Seeing Lil, Levi smiled brightly and clapped her hands. At this point Lils patience was running out, but she managed to smile faintly and pulled up the shawl. After hearing Levi muttering praises about her own discernment, Lil heard her sigh as she approached the door.

Where are you going? Im yet to do your hair.

Lil stomped her foot inside her skirt. She was in a hurry, so she didnt have the time to carelessly allow someone to decorate her hair. Lil realised that between Levis treatments, she wouldnt have much of an opportunity to sneak around in this mansion.

*In that case, I have to quickly steal Gualtieros blueprints and get out of the house immediately. Of course, I still want to confront Ed, but that will have to wait till after my crew has successfully escaped.*

Its all right.

Even now, a handful of hair is falling out. Are you prepared to lose all of them? Are you going to leave them like that?\*

In the end, Lil was pinned down and had to have her hair braided. Levi suggested that her hair be braided instead of tied up since it wasnt completely dry yet. Lils only response to that was for Levi to finish quickly. To Lil, it was a strange experience. Back in the day, such troublesome things were easy for her to ignore. But it seemed like she couldnt afford to turn her back on Levi.

*Well, how can I ignore the benefactor who took care of me day and night When the only thing she asks of me is if she could braid my hair?*

Lils heart ached while she was brushed by Levis humming.

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If you dont like a corolla, how about a fontange\*?

Levi held up a headdress. Even though Lil knew that her reaction could make Levi sullen, she adamantly refused it, terrified by the mound of lace she saw through the mirror. Perhaps due to seeing Lils deteriorating complexion, Levi quickly apologised and explained that she was simply excited because she was finally in the presence of another lady again after being surrounded by men for a long time. However, Levis explanation sounded more like her feelings were akin to regret than they were to an apology. She also only took a step back after delicately placing some flower buds from the corolla into Lils breaded hair.

Now the Admiral

Hmm?

Eh uhm, Ill go see Ed gar.

Will you?!

As if she heard some good news, Levi laughed excitedly. She then gently placed her hand on Lils shoulder and made eye contact through the mirror. Despite Lils struggles, Levi applied a bit of light makeup to her face. Levi thought it rather unfortunate that her patient lacked complexion, so the cosmetics were to compensate for the fact that she couldnt provide Lil with proper nourishment like meat for the time being.

Edgar will be amazed to see you like this, right?

Levi seemed to firmly believe that Lils tears from earlier were moved by Eds sincerity.

*She isnt completely wrong of course Right now, I wish I could deny it*

Lil stood up in front of the dressing table, shaking her head.

Hes probably in the music room by now, located in the east wing. Do you need someone to escort you there or can you find it on your own? Id love to take you there myself, but theres something I cant put off any longer

Levi pointed toward the bed. On the bedside table were different kinds of samples, including the blood that had been withdrawn earlier. Lil nodded, reminding herself dozens of times that shes been fortunate to have been given this opportunity.

Remember. You arent healed yet, youre still recovering. You must never be too greedy right from the beginning. If you arent careful, you cant go back to the way you were before.

Yes.

Even though she answered instantly, Levi keenly observed Lils reaction.

*Is this common behaviour among doctors? Ed used to make that expression often, too.*

Still, Lil calmly received the attention. After all, she had nothing to say, seeing that after waking up, the first thing she did was swing a sword and collapse.

Levi eventually sent Lil off, but not before lecturing her on not to run around recklessly.

When the oak door closed behind her, the hallway where she collapsed the day before revealed itself. There were portraits on the left and rows of windows on the right. This time, Lil actually looked up at the portrait she refused to look at back then. As she got closer, she slowly casted a dark shadow over the paintings. Contrary to her initial concerns, the portraits depicted completely unfamiliar faces. Among the men and women of all ages, Lil couldnt find a single face she knew. Eds wasnt there. Lil continued to walk while looking out the window on the right. The blue coastal waters of the Mondovi Peninsula and dozens of idle battleships sailing off the coast filled her view.

Eventually, Lil walked through the open door at the end of the corridor. While doing so, she didnt forget to observe the servants standing on either side. It was difficult for Lil to tell them apart because they were dressed in the same clothes and wore white wigs, looking like they walked straight out of a painting, but she thought it would be better to make herself familiar with them. So as she passed them, Lil deliberately decreased her pace. They appeared frozen, but Lil could feel their eyes following her silently. The same happened when she occasionally encountered other servants. The majority of them hadnt heard of her existence, while the remainder assumed she was the woman named Visha. Nonetheless, both the former and latter stared at her with interest.

While attracting attention here and there, Lil made her way through the galleries.

From the colossal ceiling paintings to the beautiful lambris

on the wall, the impeccably splendid galleries could easily be used as ballrooms. Lil looked around attentively to see if there were any armoured knights among the statues placed in the corners

*I feel so naked, walking around without a single piece of metal on me*

When Lil found a statue of a knight in armour in the next room, she took two of its daggers with glee. She tucked one of them into the belt on her backside, knowing that the shawl around her torso would cover it. The second one wasn't a problem either. Lil raised her right leg on a chair next to the statue and pulled up the hem of her skirt. She then tucked the dagger through the garterbelt that held her thigh-high white tights. As the blade was only a span long, it was easily positioned. Lil made sure it was secure before covering the lavish garter with lace and ribbon once more

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Ed got out of bed with his hair shaped like a bird's nest. Even though he had been asleep for a long time, his body felt unpleasantly heavy. The accumulated fatigue was formidable and not easily shaken off.

Ed rubbed his face and drank some wine from the bar. The rich taste helped in awakening his sleepy body. By the time he leaned back, emptying his first glass, Ed was somehow able to widen his narrowed eyes.

He then sighed and slid into his pants. He wore whatever he could find, but because he couldn't see his shirt anywhere, he opted for the nearest visible velvet robe. He tucked his arms in and wrapped it around himself.

But no matter how many times he rubbed his face, the drowsiness didn't completely go away, so Ed poured himself another glass. At some point, his worries about Lil snapped him out of his daze. Startled, Ed checked his watch.

*It's already mid-afternoon.*

Ed, who was suddenly wondering if Levi had gone to see Lil, soon shook his head. He was still in a bad mood. If he met Lil like this, he wasn't sure if their encounter would go any better than before, he even made the assumption it would go worse.

Instead of going to Lil, Ed decided to check his medical log. His hand, which started to rummage over the desk littered with papers and books, eventually came to a stop. A half-open drawer showing a whitish figure caught his eye. Ed was about to close the drawer, but slowly, put his hand inside it.

It was a portrait of a woman.

The portrait of Lil which the duke had pressed into Ed's hand when he asked him to find her. Of course, it was only natural to leave a wanted flyer while requesting a search. Thanks to that, Ed had been able to clear Lil's blurry face from his memory. With this, his association with the Duke of Mireille was undeniable. This portrait was proof of his indelible mistake.

*Lil already hates me enough But if she realises that even that isn't the whole story*

Lil's voice rang in his head.

{ But I have no intention to accept you. I'm so sick and tired of being tied down by acts of charity and favours. Please know that my feelings won't change }

*I used to think that it wouldn't matter where Liloa would go or what she would do, as long as she woke up. But I guess I underestimated myself too much When a critically ill patient, unable to even walk properly, finally wakes up after a long time and the first thing they think of is escaping How terrible must I've been for her to have thought of that That's right, how awful am I?*

Ed, repeating his petty rage, kicked the table's leg. He then covered his face with his hands as though he thought it was enough to cover up his shame. However, his deepest and most sincere thoughts had already come out at that very moment.

{ You can run away as much as you like. I'll just go and find you again. }

He could clearly remember Lils laughter and her reluctant face that seemed to be staring at something disgusting. Recalling how her tears flowed from her face, her dry cry rang in Ed's ears. To Ed, it did something strange to him.

*While there's irresistible anger and a clear sense of betrayal, why is my hatred erased altogether*

{ How could you }

*I wonder if her trembling meant she may never forgive me*

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Lil's smiling face Ed eventually got to see on the deck of the Bell Rock, quickly turned into one that rebuked him. Back then and due to his own efforts, Lil finally trusted him.

*It wasn't always easy and there were times when I got angry at her for not allowing herself to trust me so confidently, but it's all in the past. Now I so desperately miss the smile she gave under the blazing southern sun*

simultaneously, another memory came to mind.

{ Lock him up. We'll throw him on a suitable uninhabited island soon, let's discuss the timing later.\* }

Ed couldn't get the image of her turning away from him out of his head. She was so cold that he couldn't believe she was the same woman he had drawn while she was sleeping in his bed until dawn. When Ed remembered those moments, the sensation of his flesh being ripped and torn from all over his body returned. It wasn't easy, even for him, to get over the trauma of being plunged into the dreadful night sea. Compared to all that had happened to him, that part was the absolute worst, because it left a wound that didn't heal and left a pain that didn't go away.

Ed extracted a bottle of wine from the barrel. Because the ice that had filled the barrel had almost completely melted, he decided to just take the whole bottle with him. He then slid a glass between his free fingers and walked out of the room. As soon as he descended the stairs his unfastened gown began to fly wildly and servants on their way to and from the second level casually greeted the master of the residence as they walked by.

Without Ed noticing, one of his personal servants had caught up and outpaced him. Ed walked into the room, where the devoted servant had quickly opened the door. The servant then bowed the moment his master walked in before leaving and closing the door.

Several stringed instruments, including a harp and a cembalo, were arranged like exhibit pieces in the inner room\*. The organ, which occupied a wall corner, was wrapped in white cloth. Ed stood in silence, staring at the only window with its curtains drawn. He eventually lowered his gaze to match the angle of the sunlight, its gentle slope crumbled against one of the instruments' legs. Ed went over to the cembalo and set his round glass down on the frame of the instrument. He greedily poured the wine and took a seat.

When Ed opened the lid, dust sleeping on the black keys greeted him.

\*\*\*

The place where the knight statue was located resembled an art gallery. Marble sculptures and figures were arranged meticulously, and gloomy war paintings were hung on the walls at appropriate intervals for viewing. Retiros ancestors were collectors during the monarchy, so their collections had grown enormously over the years. As a result, Lil had the luxury to choose between a mace and a spear from a massive bronze equestrian statue. Those weapons had the most destructive power, but she needed her weapons to be portable as well. Naturally, they were much longer than her skirt or too heavy to carry under it, so Lil had to put them back despite feeling greedy. In the end, she had to be satisfied with just the couple of extra daggers she had already hidden on her body.

Upon hearing an unfamiliar voice, Lil quickly thrust the mace, she was still holding, into the saddle.

Is there anything I may help you with?

A middle-aged maid, seen between the statues arms and head, drew her neck towards Lil. Looking further ahead, there were several other employees gathered at the entrance. Lil smiled sloppily, knowing well how suspicious she must be looking.

Who are you?

I am Elodie, a maid.

I was looking for the library. Where is it?

Lil told Levi she was going to see Ed, but she had planned on going to the library from the beginning. Finding a map had her highest priority and most of all, she didnt want to face Ed just yet.

*Not only are my thoughts in disarray, but Im also afraid of what Ill say if I ran into him right now.*

Lil reasoned that it was for the best to find a map and leave the house as soon as possible.

Please, follow me.

When Elodie took the lead without showing any signs of vigilance, Lil brushed off her hands and followed the maid, but not before she glanced back. The moment she did, she saw that the people gathered beyond the entrance were all looking at each other with curious expressions. But as soon as Lils eyes met theirs, they scattered in all directions while nervously rubbing their aprons.

Elodie and Lil passed the billiard room and turned around the stairwell. Every time Lil passed through a door, it was the same scene. Two dressed-up servants would greet her. They also occasionally passed by maids carrying out their work, but that was about it. In other words, except for Lil, the only people walking around there were servants.

*As its a residence belonging to a Marquess, shouldnt it be crowded with vassals and people doing administrative work? Why is it so quiet?*

Why arent there more people here? Isnt there a lot of governance work to do?

Its because Sir Linhardt uses the southern building, all business transactions take place there.

Then this is



Sir Edgar is using this building.

Is the library here too?

Yes.

The seasoned maid was reserved. She could have gone into greater detail about how each section of the house was used, but she remained silent after her initial response.

*At first glance, it appears to be an old mansion in a complex style that has been extended and repaired over time. The art displayed in each room alone must be priceless, but the mansion itself is a cultural treasure whose worth cant even be measured. Normally, with a mansion this size, maids would proudly recite epic poems about every corner of the mansion to strangers This can only mean that Elodie is deliberately keeping her mouth shut.*

Lil took another look around. Even though it was a building away from business, she still found it odd that it was so quiet.

*floor is even less crowded This will allow me to move around discreetly But it feels like such circumstances arent without reason, so I first need to figure out whats going on.*

Even so, isnt it a bit too empty?

Elodie replied with a sigh.

This is essentially a place where outsiders cant come in.

Why? I would understand if its the third floor, which has the main bedroom, but I wonder why the second floor is like this as well.

Hmm! Well, Sir Edgar is very picky

..?

Lil tilted her head after hearing that.

*Ed is picky? He was indeed a bit shy and reluctant to mix with people, but well he ate the bread he picked up from the floor and the meat I tore off and passed on to him. Although he was sometimes obsessed with the fabric of his clothes even then, when I mistreated him, he would obediently follow my words. I truly cant reconcile it, no matter how hard I try. Who knew he would order to empty an entire mansions floor just because hes picky? Ed is someone Elodie has known for a long time. So she knows him better than I Im the one who has been deceived all along*

because he was born with a keen, sensitive and sophisticated temperament

As if she was stabbed in the side, Elodie immediately shut up. She shook her head with a guilty expression as if she had just cursed at her master. After all, that keen, sensitive and sophisticated temperament didnt seem to be used as a compliment. Lil never thought of Ed as a temperamental person or someone who wants to save face, but Elodies words made sense to Lil when she realised that his personality at that time was all part of his act.

Elodie didn't say anything after that, it was as though she had become wary of Lil. So Lil was back to follow Elodie in silence. Or at least she tried, but the shoes she had gotten from Levi were a size too big, so her heels rang loudly with every step she took.

It didn't help that the gallery appeared endless no matter how much she walked. It has been a long time since she visited such a large mansion, so Lil became impatient and was about to increase her pace. However, she had to slow down again when Elodie warned her with a stern look.

*Clack Clack*

The sound of her shoes echoed in the space as wide as a banquet hall. This gallery was also filled with paintings and sculptures. Within its centre, a series of masterpieces made by Chauvron, Alsene, and Tange were neatly lined up.

*Whether his ancestors loved art so much, or whether these were all collected because they were enthusiastic supporters, but this entire mansion reminds me of an art museum.*

Lil, examining the pieces in an alcove<sup>5</sup> with a tired face, suddenly heard a strange sound blended with her steps.

She paused. As her clicking feet stopped, a faint melody was heard. The melody, that had been mixed like a cacophony\* with the verbal noise, gradually became clearer. Elodie, who glanced back at Lil, eventually looked up into the air to intently listen to the music as well.

It's the ordre\* of Count Ior.

What makes him play the cembalo at this hour? Besides, it's not a joyful song

It was a song that even Elodie knew well. Love Song No. 5 was written by Count Ior right before he took his own life. It became one of his more famous songs due to the fact it was incomplete.

The library

..?

Lil scuttled back. As soon as she passed Elodie, the maid quickly caught up. Lil then rolled up her skirt and widened her stride.

Where is the library?

Oh, yes. Just past the gallery.

Even when Lil stumped her feet deliberately, the melody was louder than her footsteps.

Suddenly, her imagination\* took over and Lightning flashed above the melancholy tune. A window blew open, and its curtains fluttered so strongly that it appeared as if they were about to tear off. This happened all the while a monotonous rainstorm raged. The sound of thunder coming from her left and right sides struck at the same time. Between the spaces, the frames of the high windows creaked intimidatingly.

Lil ran out of the gallery.

The death of a musician, who was a master of the Watteau II era, came as a shock to everyone and creations depicting the end of the Count had overflowed society. Lil, too, had seen countless portrayals suggesting a hanged figure by a stormy window. Next to him were always his cembalo and scattered torn sheets of music

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The music that blended into the apocalyptic atmosphere resonated everywhere.

Oh, damn it!

Lil, who was walking and tried her best to only concentrate at Elodies back, suddenly changed her direction.

She turned left.

Elodie belatedly found Lils misdirection and shouted.

Youre not supposed to

Unable to raise her voice any further, the maid hurriedly followed Lil. But Lil had no time to care about the maid and quickly averted her eyes, looking for the entrance of the music room.

The quick strokes of music made a low hum of wind which blew ferociously against her left hand reaching for the doorknob. As if expanding the momentum, the sound gradually amplified.

The closer Lil approached, the harder the music slapped her on the ear. She grabbed the door handle and threw her body into the raging storm

*Dung!*

Eds left hand pressed down on the keyboard and stopped. It abruptly became quiet as if she had entered the eye of the storm. As it was the middle of the afternoon, Lil found it hard to adapt to the sudden dark interior for a moment and blinked rapidly. With almost all the curtains drawn, there was only one window that led in some brightness. Lil lowered her eyes to follow the beam of light, her gaze was eventually guided to the cembalo, standing out in white due to the swarm of lights wrapped around it.

Eds face was obscured by the lid, the tilted lid stick and the case of the instrument.

Lil, seethed with anger, raised her voice.

Was that a threat?

Are you threatening me right now?\*

Elodie, who had followed Lil from behind, quietly closed the door and went out as Ed gestured.

Ed gave Lil no answer. He seemed unwilling to show his hidden face. But to Lil, it was rather fortunate, for she didnt want to confront him yet. Her thoughts were unorganised, and she was afraid of what she would say if she faced him now. But above all, she wasnt prepared to negotiate with his eloquence. Lil was the one who had the most to gain; from the blueprints of Gualtiero to the release of her crew. In addition, she hasnt properly reflected on what to offer him in exchange for the lives of over a hundred people or how to fight if a battle would break out and where to draw manpower and resources. Besides, Ed wasnt even friendly with her and Lil couldnt get herself to be friendly with him either.

*No, Im not supposed to act friendly, to begin with. It would be premature to do so. But why is this jerk playing such a misfortunate song? What good will it do him to play Love Song No. 5, a song written by Count Ior, who lost his lover and then killed himself?*

Lil grabbed the hem of her dress with her sweaty palms as her shawl clung to her sticky back and shoulders. She had entered the music room impulsively, in the heat of the moment and hastily spewed her words. Otherwise, she didn't know what else to say, there was no other way to explain her behaviour. But, the fact that she was still here, right in front of him, less than a day later, indicated that she was being swayed by Ed's emotions. Linhardt's reprimanding gaze from the night before haunted Lil as well. That was why she came into the storm, unable to further ignore her guilt, hoping to talk with him about it in one way or another. And even though Lil arrived at this disaster, it felt surreal that she found herself facing Ed this very moment.

*I can't believe myself*

Im sorry.

The sentence she had been holding in all this time finally came out like a long-held breath. Lil shut her eyes tightly. Ed's lies enraged her, so saying this to him felt like betraying herself. And to Lil, betraying herself meant betraying her crew, who were waiting for her somewhere

I shouldn't have told you to hang me, too. I admit it was an unintentional slip of the tongue.\*

As the chair was pushed back with a grinding sound, the wine bottle hit by the chair's leg rolled over. The moment Ed stood up from behind the cembalo, it became clear to Lil that he wasn't wearing a shirt. He was dressed in a robe, but it was unbuckled. Although flustered at first, Lil soon found it rather funny that she took a step back for the sole reason of seeing the man's naked upper body.

Ed, standing in the dim light, glanced down at Lil. The latter instantly shuddered as she remembered her own appearance in a dress and her long braided hair with flowers attached to it. It might not be the first time he'd seen her dressed as a woman, but now it was unbearably awkward. Lil even felt a little ashamed that she had dressed up as much as she was when she came to see Ed. The situation could easily be misunderstood and explained in a way that she has dressed up for him.

Ed, who seemed aimless at first, started walking. Lil thought he would stop a few steps ahead, but he approached her without knowing the end. Even when he was close enough for the smell of alcohol to waft up, he didn't stop. As Lil contemplated whether to pretend to be calm or avoid it, the shadow cast on the nape of her neck already pressed her down. She felt suffocated. Sensing his intentions, Lil winced and quickly tightened the shawl around her shoulders. Unfortunately, his hand gripping her waist slid onto her back so smoothly that her efforts were in vain. His fingertips running up her spine were hard as if he was trying to push her into his arms. As his drunken body leaned towards her, Lil pressed his shoulders to prevent him from coming any closer.

Or to avoid getting caught.

But Ed was skilled. As soon as Lil's waist belt loosened and slipped down her skirt, he grabbed the dagger stuck between the knots.

Ed lowered his eyes to check it.

You were hiding something cute.

Are you going to kill me?

If only I could.

Was that apology just now only bait you threw at me to get my guard down?

The dagger that Ed let go of, fell to the floor with a loud thud.

No. But what can I do? I hate you. I might be sorry for what Im sorry for. But if I dont like you, Ill truly despise you.

Is that all you have to say?

Then, why did you come in?

I need to talk to you.

Then you should be polite.

Lil snorted and put her hand on her left forearm, taking out the two daggers she had tucked between her smock and her outer dress before throwing them behind Eds back. Ed raised an eyebrow. Simultaneously, Lil too raised her eyebrows and shot at him.

What?

Instead of responding, Ed waited patiently. The muttering Lil eventually pulled out another dagger which she had planted on her right chest and threw it away as well.

Theres one more left.

Theres none.

Should I throw it away for you, then?

From where?

Are you acting like you dont know?

I dont know what youre talking about

Out of nowhere, Lils body tilted. While trying to regain her balance by groping the wall behind her, Lil looked down at the leg Ed held up. Her shoe, which dangled dangerously from the tips of her toes, fell off after being tapped. Even though the only thing he had done so far was grab her leg, the action itself was enough to roll Lils dress up to above her knee.

As the flesh clenched in his damp palm became soggy, Lil gave a meaningless warning.

Do you want to die?

I dont have the hobby of getting hurt twice. So dont worry about me, you wont catch me off guard again.

Is that so? Are you sure?

It was a clearly pointless provocation. Ed, who ignored Lil, held her leg with one hand and used the other to lift up the hem of her skirt. His hand then crept up her stockings and passed her knee. Lil tensed and drew back, but at the same time, Ed drew closer and pressed against her body.

But if I do

Eds fingers wrapped around the dagger.

What are you going to do?

Groping for the garter, Ed pulled at it as if tearing it off. With the ribbon torn, the dagger fell to the ground. The sound of the metal colliding with marble broke the silence. Eds stoic face gradually began to heat up. A thick vein ran along his neck, from his collarbone to his chin, and the sound of grinding teeth was faintly audible through his tightly closed lips.

Lil thought to herself.

*If I get hit now, Im done for.*

When Eds body came closer, Lil considered getting out but quickly gave up on that. Instead, she flicked his hand away, which was still holding up her skirt.

Ed inadvertently lowered his hand, paused, and hardened his eyes. Lil assumed he was flustered by the lace-encrusted light pink garter ribbon in his hand. It was actually kind of amusing for her to see.

*Ed was probably expecting something like a leather sheath underneath my skirt, but definitely not a garter belt.*

Lil lifted the corners of her mouth into a sneer.

Do you like it?

Now that they were already in this position, Lil raised her leg a bit further and brushed Eds chest with her stocking-wrapped toes. The way she rubbed his bare chest clearly tickled him and he eventually lowered his eyes with an expression similar to when he discovered the garter. The touch of her white stocking drawing circles on his skin was stimulating.

Lil whispered to Ed, who was frozen stiff.

Do you enjoy rummaging through a womans skirt and finding something like that?..

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Their eyes met.

They both reacted, but Lil was faster. Concentrating all her strength, she managed to push her opponent away with her leg. Ed, whose stomach was kicked in, reflexively shrank his upper body. Lil then threw herself at him and aimed for his shoulders. Due to the counterforce, Eds body now staggered backwards as it could no longer balance its weight. The moment Eds body hit the floor, Lil quickly jumped on top of him, took a short dagger from her sleeve and stuck it down in one fluid motion. Eds hand immediately gripped the hilt and Lils wrist together. Everything happened so fast that they both barely had any time to catch their breaths.

A quick breath from Lil spread across Eds face.

You are terrible.

Ed simply looked up at her without attempting to push her away.

Youre making me want to kill you.

Its annoying how youre acting like youre the only one whos hurt!

Her hand was desperately resisting her opponents grip. However, Lils remaining strength had already converged to zero. Still, Ed didnt push her away or twist her wrist. On the contrary, he even brought the daggers tip to his own throat, in accordance with her inertia.

Then kill me.

What?

Isnt this a great opportunity? Ive had too much to drink, so I dont have the energy to fight This music room is far from all the other rooms, so you should have plenty of time to get away before my body is discovered.

Didnt you just say you dont have the hobby of getting hurt twice?

Well, to be honest, I think I prefer the version of you who wants to kill me over the version who doesnt seem to care whether I die or not.

That was exactly what Lil wanted. To not care whether Ed died or not. But it was so obvious even to Ed, that he knew that she would never be able to do that.

His green eyes, which didnt blink, were fixed on her. His hand remained wrapped around hers, pressing down the knife. Similarly, Lil glared at him with the tip of her blade brushing against his neck, ready to kill him. Their burning eyes slowly drew closer and even though they were about to touch Ed never stopped. Lil tried to resist his power, but Ed didnt let go of the hilt, causing Lils forearms and shoulders to become sore.

Lil eventually grabbed him by the throat with her left hand. She then twisted her right hand, which was still held together with the dagger, and pulled it out. The strangled Ed gave a short cough.

What the hell do you want, you madman?

Are you really asking me to kill you? Or is this another test\* of yours to make me feel dirty?

What if I pass this test, will you spare my crew this time? What kind of nasty thoughts are going through your head? Its revolting that you believe you have the right to test and evaluate me. Youre a self-centred bastard. You dont give a damn about how you betrayed others. Youre just a selfish, self-centred nutcase who only sees his own wounds and dwells on his own pitiful emotions. The rumours about the Admiral are all correct after all. Kind of ironic dont you think? You could confirm all those rumours because you know yourself so well!

Lil released Eds throat. Despite her strength being comparable to that of feathers, she had squeezed his neck long enough to leave a red handprint on his skin. While Lil slowly straightened her back, Ed remained lying on the floor without an attempt to move.

Im not killing you for the same reason I had in Panichi\*. Because you saved me Even though I never asked you to be shot in my place And now I feel dirty because to me it feels as if I begged you for my life. This is nothing more than the similar feelings I had at the time, so dont delude yourself.

Is that it? Youre the one who said that you wanted to talk, but after you said you wanted to kill me, you changed your mind again and now youre uttering something about sparing me because you will feel dirty?

No. However, I cant hold a proper conversation with a human who only knows self-pity. I was overestimating you.

*Originally, I came in because I couldnt stand it. Hearing that unfortunate song right after Levis explanation about why Linhardt asked her to come here, made me unable to shake that ominous feeling With things already turned out this way, I should try to compromise with Ed, but how? Should I use the words he wanted to hear? Words I couldnt even utter back on the Bell Rock? No For now, an initial apology and an attempt at a dialogue should suffice But the problem is that I keep forgetting what kind of guy Ed is. If I had known that hed been drinking and drowning in sorrow, I wouldnt have faced him.*

Lil started to repeat the same sentences over and over again to brainwash herself.

*This human isnt the Ed I knew. Ed is a fictional character who only existed in plays*

Even though Lil was now in an upright position, Ed was still lying down.

I

..?

Ed murmured as he grabbed Lils fingertips.

I was mean

Lil looked down at her fingers that were tenderly being held by Ed. He appeared very cautious and timid and when she didnt respond his nervous fingers even slid down to only hold on to her fingernails. Ed eventually let them go altogether when Lil watched him with disapproval.

*In the state hes in now, it looks like hell even grab my leg without hesitation.*

Lil kept her eyes on Ed, who didnt intend to get up and calmly admitted his guilt.

*Is he drunk? It wasnt that obvious before, but he might be hooked by the alcohol. Or is he plotting something else? Otherwise, theres no way that this noble Admiral would come out so docile.*

I know that expression. Are you guessing what kind of conspiracy this is? Im afraid theres no such thing. But I can understand its hard to believe for someone whos walking around with a weapon hidden on every limb.

Only easy-minded people would believe such bullshit. This is the Admirals lair, and Im a pirate captain. Besides, that Admiral is the second most insane person in the Empire

Do you really think so? I dont know why you still believe such absurd rumours. What about the me you saw? Why do you trust what you heard rather than what youve experienced yourself?

The Ed I experienced is someone who doesnt exist anymore. He died off the coast of the Ingres sea. Youre Edgar Retiro Why do you pretend to be Ed and act all pitiful? Its annoying and confusing You said that the rumours were true with your own mouth. I trusted the facts you said back then and I got deceived in the process, so why should I bother with what youre saying right now?

In order to get up, Lil momentarily rose above Ed, who till now never made an attempt to move from his position. The bare marble floor had made her knees and shins feel cold. She brushed down on her crumpled dress in the hope to smooth the wrinkles. Because there was only one window with the curtains opened, the doorway they were near was dark. The daggers that had been thrown were



scattered on the floor between the window and herself. As Lil looked at them with regretful eyes, Ed raised his upper body in the shade. But before he could say anything else, Lil turned around and grabbed the doorknob.

I was wrong.

..?

*Did I just hear that right?*

Lil paused and looked back at Ed over her shoulder. Ed was rubbing his face dry as if to chase away his drunkenness. The more he rubbed his face, the more her disdain towards him went away as well. Lil felt it. It had to be now if she wanted to get away from him. But she couldn't ignore Ed and she ended up staying.

*However, I still need to organise my thoughts. I haven't had the time for that at all, so this can only end in disaster I didn't want to face Ed yet because I feared being so pathetic. I made a terrible mistake by coming here*

I deceived you from the beginning and didn't admit it until the very end.

Lil's gaze returned to the door. Her hand gripping the doorknob slipped in sweat until it became a piece of damp iron.

*This door is thin and light, so it will open with just a little bit of force. It isn't difficult at all But can't I seem to leave this place just because I heard him say that he was wrong? Do I want to hear more about what he wants to tell me? Do I not want to miss this moment of apology? How is this possible?*

*Ignore it or listen to his apology? What do I want?*

*But for all I know, even this can be a lie told by Ed. He's a human being who could do this without any remorse. Then why? What the hell am I supposed to do with this madman*

Don't go.

His voice rang in her ears, making her throat sore and tight. Lil pressed her lips together. Ed came up behind her and stretched his arm to touch the door over her shoulder. When the door was pushed back, the latch clicked and snapped again. After doing so, he remained motionless. Ed's breath that was too close brushed past Lil's ear. She felt his intoxicated body temperature at the nape of her neck and the heavy wine scent prickled to the tip of her nose. Lil gazed at Ed's fingers pushing the door with the embossed arabesque pattern. As Ed was only touching it with his fingertips, Lil could easily open the door and walk out if she wanted to

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His plea was as small as a breath. It was the kind of breath that wouldn't even blow a wind, nevertheless, it was sharp enough to cut the rope that kept Lil's ship on course. In an instant, the bow, which had lost its support, tilted in a semicircle. As her ship became disoriented and turned around, Lil faced Ed. However, she was able to speak up easily. There were so many things she wanted to ask and say that she didn't know where to begin. That was why she paused and pondered for a moment before uttering her first words.

Since when have you known?

What?

Even without Lils answer, Ed seemed to realise what she meant. His gaze fell slowly. As he closed his mouth again, he touched Lils braided hair.

*Liloas hair is much longer than Lil Schweizs.*

His confident voice whispered.

You saw the drawing

In the hazy light, the admirals sober face seemed to smile.

Do you know how I was able to draw it?

I saw you, the real you. I was unbearably happy when I finally saw you for who you are while no one else did. I almost went crazy because of that extraordinary joy. But as the days went on, I had no choice but to be immersed in what couldve been the reason Do you have any idea about the betrayal I felt for you, who not only deceived me but also yourself?..

The voice, which had been getting louder, abruptly cut off.

What does it mean that youre still here, despite discovering that?..

His voice, which had slowed down as he tried to catch his breath, was muffled and sounded almost hoarse.

What does it mean that you havent run away yet?..

*.What does it mean?*

Lil was shaken and unable to get her mind together.

*I dont even know if its right that Im standing and facing Ed. Im completely off course now. Its as if the sea is turning Im not sure either I have no idea what Im supposed to think or what Im meant to do.*

Is this what it means?

Ed raised his arm and pulled Lil by the waist. His other hand cupped one of her cheeks before brushing his fingers over her hair and wrapping the nape of her neck. As Ed came closer, he looked her straight in the eyes. Although Lil avoided him by lowering her gaze, he didnt stop. For a moment, their breaths entwined till his lips touched hers and sucked her in.

A hot tongue licked her lower lip.

*Ed is embarrassingly soft. Its like it doesnt suit him, I cant believe this, but*

Suddenly, Lil came to her senses. The realisation of where she was, who she was, and what she was doing struck her like a bolt of lightning. Her body froze for a split second in embarrassment. With her eyes wide open, Lil looked up at Eds closed ones.

As she flinched and tried to jerk her neck backwards, Ed stopped. However, Lil wasnt satisfied with the small distance between them and pushed him away completely. Nonetheless, her perplexity persisted. She wasnt embarrassed by their unexpected kiss. Instead, she was embarrassed by the fact she didnt despise it. Lil expected it to be disgusting and creepy, but it wasnt.

Lil stuttered, her eyes still widened due to the belated shock.

You you! Are you crazy?

Thats what you always say to me, but is that not a fait accompli\*?

*Right. From the moment I first saw him, I thought he was a little crazy, but now I know hes definitely crazy. Meaning I have nothing to say, his mental state has always been consistently abnormal.*

Lil wanted to be the saner person and tried to recall what they were talking about.

Does the fact that Im still here, after seeing that drawing of me, give you the right to behave like this?

Then why are you here?

I

And why did you claim that the ordre of Ior was my threat towards you? Where did that confidence come from?

*Damn it.*

Lil realised she had made a huge mistake. Back then, she was still immersed in the story Levi had told her and all those suspicious events just happened right after, resulting in Lil drawing conclusions on her own. But now, after having made such a huge mistake, she had no idea how to get out of this situation, which started to resemble flowing water leaking everywhere. Lil had never been this embarrassed in front of anyone in her life.

*I didnt even say anything, but how did he freely define my feelings and even said them out loud? How did he do that? What do I do now? What am I going to gain if Im an open book from the start?*

While her thoughts wandered, Eds fingers approached again and gently swept over Lils cheek.

Did the song sound like a request for an ardent courtship?

The casual remark made her face flush. She wanted to dismiss it as nonsense, but Lils body reacted sensitively contrary to what she expected. Blood rushed all over the body, and her heart pounded with a throbbing squeeze.

Ed pretended to tuck some of Lils loose hair behind her ear only to pull the nape of her neck again. However, Lil immediately raised her hand to cover Eds mouth. She pushed it hard.

*A rejection or not, it doesnt change the fact that this situation is very, very undesirable. This is the admirals lair, and Im a pirate captain. This is a very, very immoral way to act.*

Lil wanted to speak properly, but her swollen mouth could only swallow air and not produce a sip of language.

*Until just now, it was obviously desirable for us to kill each other, so how did this happen? Courtship? What courtship? Im here to negotiate!*

The determination that had been spleen ended up scattered like waves crashing against a rock. White foam bubbled up in Lils head until the approaching water bubbles covered her eyes.

Ed spoke as he removed Lils hand.

You have such bottomless determination, but I have just as much.

He then brought her hand to his lips.

And this is actually my field of expertise.

Eds hot breath soaked her fingers. The sensation of his lips kissing them and his tongue licking them gave her goosebumps. His lips twisted, making a soggy sound as he bit her knuckles. Ed opened his closed eyes and looked at Lil. His eyes shone through the narrow gaps. The moment she met his gaze, Lil pulled her hand out. But at the same time, she realised it was too late. She still needed to save her face though, so she spoke quickly.

I made a mistake. Im sorry for misunderstanding. It has nothing to do with me whether you played the ordre for someone else to hear or because you simply liked playing it alone. So now

But what if it wasnt a misunderstanding?

So dont worry about it now, and dont refuse this anymore.

Ed only got closer. The breath he exhaled temptingly tickled Lils cheeks. He paused, as though searching for any signs of her refusal, but when Lil didnt avoid him, their lips immediately engaged again.

The sweet scent of his wine enveloped her tongue. It was so lukewarm it felt thrilling. Eds chest, which came closer upon embracing her body, swelled beneath her forearms, and the more he approached, the more their legs intertwined. Lil could feel his knee pressing between her thighs. The tingling of her keen senses flared her up. Her legs reflexively twitched upon feeling a tug on her lower stomach, and Eds grasp on Lils arm tightened even more upon noticing that it stimulated her. At a moments breathlessness, Lil suddenly realised that she was in Eds arms without any resistance

She then forcibly removed her arms from his chest, hit his shoulder and started to shout.

Get away!

Hesitating at first, Ed muttered as he pulled himself back.

I think your refusal came a bit too late

Every time Ed spoke, the languid aroma of wine flowed. It seemed that Lil, too, was getting drunk on the alcohol. The heartbeat she had barely suppressed showed signs of speeding up again. Lil clenched her neck whereas Ed smiled lazily as he opened his eyes.

*The madman in front of me is toying with me!*

Lil thought to herself.

*Hes nothing but a vicious bastard. A stranger I shouldnt deal with. This was only a trap! Its because of his handsome face!*

What are you doing? What the hell! Stop it! Stop!

Lil swung her hands wildly to slap him. She didnt have enough muscle strength, so slapping him was better and more effective than punching him with her fists.

Ed stepped back, raising his arms and pretending to block himself.

What?

But Lil advanced with her fierce offence.

You! You pervert!

Thats what you always say. But isnt that a fait accompli\* too?

Damn it! Damn it!

Still, I think it was a gentlemanly perversion.

Ed, ironically, never got hit right, so he didnt mind and answered back in a playful manner while dodging Lils palms.

Youre losing yourself in gentlemanly perversion, while my crew is back in Gualtiero?! How can you do this to me? Dont involve me in your shameless act! I! I came here to negotiate, not to rub lips with you!

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Ah, Gualtiero. Right. Thats a bit of a headache.

A headache? Is that all you can say?! You you have no conscience!

I was meaning to talk to you about this as soon as you woke up Ack!

Ed, who continued to step back, eventually hit part of his back on the cembalo. When he stumbled for a moment, Lil took advantage of the opportunity and landed a few successful slaps. Even though the force coming from her attack was in normal circumstances insignificant, it was now enough for Ed to almost fall backwards onto the chair belonging to the instrument, making the chairs legs screech briefly in the process. In a last futile attempt to regain his balance, Eds hand swung in the air and pressed hard on the keyboard.

High-pitched notes sounded sharp as if large and small pieces of glass broke apart.

Startled, Lil stopped. Ed, who was about to block her attack with his other arm, paused too. The sounds reverberation only faded after their gazes became tightly intertwined. With the cembalo standing close to the window, Lil and Ed were now both illuminated by the bright light coming into the music room.

*In the light floating with fine dust, this man appears so bright. His green eyes are exactly as I remember them. The man looking up at me in silence is like Ed. The Ed I knew was as bright as this, so theres no way Im mistaken, theres only Ed and no one else. Until he was thrown out of the Bell Rock, I had no idea what kind of gaze he had been looking at me. Previously, I couldnt figure it out. But now, this man in front of me is neither an illusion nor a delusion, no matter how much I try to deny it. He isnt an actor fresh from the stage. From the beginning until now, he hasnt changed*

Lil decisively lowered her hand as though she were under a spell.

Its been over a day since the first time I woke up, so tell me now. Come on, now.

Ed, who was observing the resolute Lil, adjusted his chair and sat quietly in front of her. Lil casually leaned on the cembalo, but because the keyboard made a loud noise, she hastily jerked up. As she stood there and fidgeted in embarrassment, Ed took her hand. No, he didnt take her hand, he grabbed her wrist. Lils fingers went up in a half-closed shape and landed on Eds cheek and temple.

Lils hand, controlled by Ed, passed his forehead and swept his head. Her fingertips broke through his soft hair over and over again. She watched the man moving her hand with his own and found it more upsetting than funny that he was sitting so carefree while basically stroking himself.

Theres still a lot left unsaid. I have a lot to ask and even more things to be angry about. So, dont act like a peaceful ending has arrived.

I have a lot left to say, too.

But then why are you like this?

Well

I mean. I cant do this I cant simply move on like this because Im still very angry

As if he couldnt already be more at ease, Ed relaxed even more. Lil bit her lip impatiently when he muttered something in an incomprehensible voice.

Hmmm

She couldnt stand it anymore and slapped him on the shoulder.

Hmm? Did the cat get your tongue? How can you take your time with a face like that? You know how worried I am. So tell me now!

Ed, who hadnt reacted once, continued to guide her fingers over his cheek. Then, he slowly let go of her wrist. Her hand now covered half of his face. Lil was about to lower her freed hand when

Only if you touch me

Lil frowned, not understanding what she was hearing. Still, Eds eyes were the same as he looked up at her. Lil tried to guess what he meant and glanced at the three bottles of alcohol rolling around the chairs legs.

I think youre out of your mind. I bet youll regret this once youre sober. So quit it, all right?

You dont seem to hate it now, but if you let me touch you

Ed didnt seem to understand her words either.

*He must be drunk or something Is he really waiting for me to touch his cheek? Will he really tell me about my crew if I do this for him?*

Lil rolled her eyes until she met Eds. The light from the window was gathering on his face, and a languid halo shone in his eyes. Lil swallowed her dry saliva and moved her hand clumsily.

She stroked Eds face for a while longer. In the meantime, she tried to put pressure on him by not closing or turning her gaze away. Her head was desperately calculating how long she would have to do this.

*Till now I only touched his cheek, but seeing no reaction, it doesnt appear that I only need to do that*

Her hand moved upwards and gently touched his temples and forehead. Nonetheless, Ed didnt appear satisfied. Lils obligatory movement came to a halt when she brushed against Eds brow. It was because of the rough scars she suddenly felt under her fingertips. Lil raised her eyes and took a

closer look. Eds scar, extending all the way to his scalp, tore the area around his forehead in several stripes.

*Theyre all different in size and length*

There was no way Lil didnt know what left them behind and she finally realised what he wanted her to touch\*.

*That night. When the waves were calm under a bright moonlit sky. When I collapsed and looked down at the sea\* Now that Im seeing this, I have no choice but to return to that very night It doesnt matter who Ed is, what he is, or what others call him. Looking back, it all feels so meaningless, all the reasons why I felt like I shouldnt be sorry for that incident and why I should stand by my decision All that matters is how Ed is doing. How much pain he was in, and how much it hurt, thats all that I care about now. If only I can soothe the pain that mustve been unbearable for him*

Lil muttered words she would never have been able to say if it hadnt been for this moment.

Im sorry

As her hand covered his forehead like a blanket, Lil repeated it over and over again. Her thumb caressed the rough skin tirelessly.

I shouldnt have left you like that

Lil squeezed her voice out with difficulty due to the lump in her throat. When she said what she wanted to say, Ed finally turned his gaze towards her after averting it for some time. He blinked quickly as if trying to calm his heated eyes.

I shouldve checked up on you at least once

His eyelashes appeared damp and his face remained still like he was holding back.

Thats why, Im truly sorry

Ed jumped up and wrapped Lil in an embrace. As Lil couldnt bear to push him away, she held still. Ed exhaled heavily, burying his face deep in the nape of her neck. Lil was at a loss for what to do with the man whose shoulders were bobbing up and down, and she eventually decided to brush his back in comfort.

Ed enjoyed the sensation of his body being held by Lil and holding Lil himself. Lil, on the other hand, didnt really know what to think of the situation.

*It has only been a few minutes since I uttered contemptuous vitriol about hating him, and it has only been mere hours when I thought of Ed as the horrifying man from the rumours. But in the end, it has come to this*

Perhaps Lil knew instinctively that she wouldnt be able to reject him. And that was what made her afraid to face Ed. She had the vague premonition that seeing him would cause her to turn away from the direction she had fixed herself on.

Lil let out a deep sigh and released the tension that had been stiffening her body. At some point, Ed remained still and stopped moving. But not long after he suddenly raised his head and pushed her shoulder.

Just so you know, Im not sleeping.

*I thought he had been shedding tears, but he looks better than I expected.*

Eds eyes werent swollen nor were there any traces of tears left. Besides the beginning of a straw nest on top of his head, his further clean face glared at Lil.

I cant believe I had to wait this long.

Ha, Well How how was I supposed to know what you were getting at?..

Lil lamented to herself how she possibly couldve known something that she only noticed a few minutes ago.

*I never expected for Ed to come out so vulnerable.*

Lil wasnt used to men digging into her arms and claiming to be hurt.

*All the men I know are either strong, believe theyre strong, or at least pretend to be strong.*

Regarding this subject, she had been raised the old-fashioned way. Men didnt show any weakness, only women did. So she had never had someone from the opposite sex asking her so openly for a hug.

I did it because I felt like it.

Ed laughed brightly. Lil instantly became dubious and questioned while frowning at him.

You didnt just pretend to cry, did you?

Well

Her mouth dropped open at how Ed said that so shamelessly.

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I was hurt here, too.

Ed took off his robe. Lil, however, wasnt too comfortable at the sight of a man pulling back his clothes vigorously in front of her eyes. She gathered her eyebrows even more as she noticed the robe hanging precariously on his elbow.

What are you doing?!

Here

His finger pointed to the area of his left flank where there were several scars from several cuts. Even though it made her feel a little uneasy, Lil caressed the spot. Then, Ed held out his shoulder, pretended to be pitiful and whispered.

And my shoulder, too

Lil spoke, rubbing his shoulder with an action that was more like a slap.

Oh, stop it now.

Not there. A little more towards the collarbone

Stop!

Ah, I just remember, but I injured my knee, too. Maybe I should take off my pants and show you



What are you doing?!

When Ed bowed slightly and grabbed his waistband, a head rushed forward.

*Bump!*

His face, which was headbutted, bounced back into the air.

Ack!

Ed clenched his forehead and crouched before completely falling down. Simultaneously, Lil pushed her shawl, which had been draped on her arm all this time, roughly forward with both hands. While Ed wiggled around and pretended to be dying, Lil successfully tied his wrists to the cembalos leg. Unfortunately for Ed, he found himself sprawled out, unsure whether he was lying or sitting. He frantically looked around before raising his eyes. When he saw his bound hands, he casted Lil a pitiful look.

If you keep this up, Ill tie you to the cembalos brace next. Then, when I close the lid, your wrist will be flying, wouldnt that be fun?

Lil turned away from Ed, who was still looking up at her with a grim expression on his face. On the other hand, Lil was already regretting the way she acted before.

*What did I believe that I started to care for him*

I mustve been possessed or something

Lil shook her head and buried her face in the palms of her hand. Despite standing still, she had the feeling that her body was staggering.

*At some point and without realising it, I was already drawn to Ed*

Lil was about to rub her face with the palms of her hands, but when she realised she was wearing makeup, she nervously lowered her hands. She never wanted to admit what she had just done.

*I cant believe I held him like that I cant believe I thought he was pitiful!*

This is the admirals lair and Im a pirate captain

I dont care.

Lil raised her head at the sudden sound of Eds clear voice.

What?

Whoever you are, whoever I am none of it matters.

Contrary to the whining tone he had been using till now, Eds voice was full of conviction.

*Ed is saying that because he doesnt know Because he doesnt know who I really am*

That realisation hit Lil belatedly.

*Just as Ive been angry at Ed for hiding his identity as an admiral, Ed also has the right to be angry at me for hiding my identity and pretending to be a pirate captain*

Fine. It doesnt matter. But things can only get complicated from now on.

Monferrand has finally heard what he wanted, but does that mean hell give up on Alvenis?

What bullshit

Even Monferrand mustve had some doubts. He mustve been anxious that Alveniss heart might have changed somehow. But in the end, what could he be afraid of when he was proven right? The thing he was afraid of the most shouldve already disappeared.

..?

Lil couldnt understand a single word, so shook her head to make it clear to him that she didnt get what he was saying. Ed, however, leaned his head against the cembalo and smiled lazily. Despite it only being a small smile, Lils face turned red. In an attempt to hide her flushed expression, she glared and frowned at him as hard as she could.

Untie me.

Ed then leaned his head against the pinned arm above him, his messy hair cascading down his brow. Lil winced and shuddered as if she felt it sweep down her own arm. She had a premonition that something dangerous was bound to happen and it didnt help that the sight of Eds bare upper body, seen through his open robe, gave off a sensual impression. Lil was certain that if she stayed any longer, she would become entangled with Ed.

No.

My arm hurts.

You can get yourself out of it anyway.

Let me go, please.

At first glance, Ed, who was whining like that, truly seemed pitiful. His frowns and pleads of pain sounded convincing too. So, in a moment of weakness, Lil almost fell for it, but she managed to pull herself together and retorted.

Thats enough!

Lil walked to the door and opened it, letting a rush of fresh air in. Her breath, which had been soggy and stuffy, was slightly relieved. She then slammed the door and left the music room

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Eventually, Ed twisted his hands a few times and easily untied the shawl. While turning his wrists around, he raised his head upon noticing something. Two objects that had fallen on the floor caught his interest. Ed writhed and snatched one of the shoes.

While tilting his head, he muttered

Isnt this a little too big?..

\*\*\*

Roahns dressmaker walked so fast that he almost ran through the residences hallway. As he turned the corner, two servants waiting in front of the Marquess cabinet threw open the oak door. After entering the cabinet, the dressmaker lowered his head and removed his peacock feathered hat. He then quickly grabbed his wig, which was about to fall off, and spoke in a pleased manner.

Oh, Marquess. Since when did you come back?

He had been so surprised that he was sweating profusely. When Levi called for him, he went in a hurry the moment he was told to come to the Marquess cabinet. After wiping the sweat from his brow, the dressmaker tucked his handkerchief under his wig. Behind him, a group of people, carrying various kinds of silk on their shoulders, came in one after another. Ed, sitting in the centre of the cabinet, gestured to the dressmaker and Eds personal servant, standing next to him, conveyed his message instead.

Come closer.

The approaching dressmaker was handed over a piece of paper with something drawn on it.

What is this Its a foot?

I want you to make some shoes first. As soon as a pair is completed, send it to the mansion.

Yes, I will start today.

The dressmaker pulled round glasses from his pocket and put them on the bridge of his nose. He squinted his eyes before looking away from the paper.

However, the instep size is missing. Its the circumference that covers the top of the foot from the arched part of the sole, a very important size that determines the fit.

Ah

With a quill between his fingers, Ed flicked his hand. When the dressmaker handed him the piece of paper, Ed thought for a moment and then wrote down the measurement.

Now, lets look at the clothes.

Ah, yes.

The quick-witted dressmaker unfolded silk typically used for womens clothing.

*Judging by the size of the foot he had just put out, and the fact that my visit is being conducted in secret like this, I can tell that a mistress has entered this mansion. Since hes a great man who puts extraordinary effort into his clothes, his spending towards his mistress will be no less than that!*

This thought made the dressmaker excited. Another reason was Levi, who only wore casual clothes of simple composition, so his business line for womens clothes wasnt good in this area. The man took out Sesbrons latest pattern book and put it beside the silk.

*Its been so long since Ive waited for the mistress of the Marquess to appear.*

Sure enough, Ed pulled out only the finest imported silk with his keen eyes. He even turned the pages of the pattern book one by one as if to carefully select the designs.

The dressmaker, who had been dealing with the marquess family for several years now, already knew Eds taste.

*Sir Edgar prefers beautiful fabrics but shuns overly sumptuous materials embroidered with gold or silver threads. He tends to use colours boldly and, occasionally, enjoys exotic colour combinations. For clothes, he mainly chooses elegant patterns and is picky enough to not rule out elegance even in costumes required for activity. However, thats still nothing compared to his hats, and among Sir Edgars collections, theres a gorgeous hat that even I covet. But because Ive never seen Sir Edgar wear it himself, I often ask myself if he only keeps it as a collectible Sir Edgars choice, by any*

*means, has always been outstanding and even led numerous officers and other prominent people in the land of Roahn to imitate his sense of style. Above all, his appearance is the epitome of beauty, so he can be described as a walking publicity flyer. Considering how the family style of the Retiro ancestry has been obsessed with aesthetics, they made trends and led culture as if it was their second nature, and Sir Edgar is a descendant who has inherited that well. I can surely use this opportunity to expand my influence on womens clothing. The mistress must also be of great beauty given the marquess taste.*

The dressmaker smiled indistinctly and called for joy inside.

Chapter 199

Ed alluded.

Put the order in Levis name.

*Does he mean I have to keep my mouth shut for a while?*

The dressmaker nodded his head knowingly.

*A mistress, indeed.*

He cleared his throat, hiding his wavy moustache behind his fist.

Im sure

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With his hat tucked to his side, Captain Long saluted. Ed, who was sitting at his desk flipping through a report, nodded to the chair across from him.

Any progress?

Taking a seat, Captain Long glanced at Ed. He then cleared his throat and responded.

No matter how hard I look, I cant find any eyewitnesses. No one knows where the first shot came from.\*

It was rare for Long to come to Eds mansion, let alone be called into his cabinet and report directly. Because till some time ago, Sagastar had been the one doing it.

*But from the moment the Admiral returned from the Sea of Ingres, he hated seeing Sir Victors face. No, now that I think about it, hate isnt even accurate enough. It might be more fitting to say that the Admiral would kill the Commodore if he was caught in his line of sight*

*Any officer on the Mondovi fleet knows about Sir Victors extreme devotion to Sir Edgar. After all, whenever he drinks, Sir Victor would bombard the officers with the story of how Sir Edgar saved him during one of their naval battles. The only person who would dare to cut off a drunk Vice-Admiral on the Mondovi fleet was the Admiral himself, someone who was rarely present at said drinking parties. Because of this, the officers have no choice but to endure the torture of listening to Sir Victors tale of resurrection, which they couldnt hear without tears. That was his level of devotion. However, from the moment we began our journey back, Sir Victor resided on another ship as if he had lost his spirit and tried to stay out of Sir Edgars eyes as much as possible. In addition, Sir Edgar didnt look for Sir Victor either.*

Everyone was puzzled by the strange atmosphere, but Long knew why.

*The source of the fallout was an incident onboard a merchant ship belonging to Viscount Noirmont, on which Sir Victor nearly killed a woman. The woman claimed she was merely a hostage, but the Vice-Admiral disregarded her claim and pierced her stomach. However, it turned out that her claims were actually true and she was even acquainted with Sir Edgar. Furthermore, Cesar Lemoine, who appeared out of nowhere, joined in on denouncing Sir Victor.*

Long was also familiar with Cesar.

*He was once a promising admiral prospect, and his family, the house of Count Lemoine, is an aristocratic family with a long history. Sir Cesar, the young master of such a family, sided with Sir Edgar in his fit of rage regarding the womans circumstances. No matter how ignorant I am of the state of affairs of high-ranking aristocrats, I could sense that the victim was a daughter of a noble family.*

*In that case, Sir Victor was truly unfortunate. Who wouldve thought there would be a hostage with a status as high as hers on such a small merchant ship, and on the remote waters of the South no less? Of course, she could simply be a pirate committing fraud, but our admiral isnt the merciful kind that will care about the injustice done to a single pirate*

Ed rose from his desk and sat on the couch adjacent to Long. He spoke, tiredly leaning on the couch while tilting his neck.

And what about the public opinion among the officers?

Well, theyre wondering why the execution ceremony hasnt taken place yet. His Majesty had said that if you catch southern pirates this time around, hell set an example at Sesbron first, but they havent even been transported yet. They said that the movement is too slow, way too slow. Isnt it the first time in several years no, decades that Navy officers have died in a battle in the South? There are a lot of officers who are getting angry.

Ed didnt give an answer, but Long had already come up with the possible reason for the sluggish disposal of the southern rogue boat that attacked the navy.

*The issue lies with her. Is she from a wealthy family? I guess so. Perhaps hes waiting for a statement from Sesbron regarding her disposition. There must be ongoing tabletop discussions about the young miss honour.*

*In any case, those wealthy families are all scumbags. A bunch of filthy, haughty, and gluttonous eaters who only care about their own privileges. With the arrival of the Empire, the administration of manors and territories became all managed by governors, local dignitaries or officials dispatched by the Emperor himself. The former nobility, who had held fiefdoms before the monarchys days, gradually backed away from local politics and administration. They continued their dissolute life by collecting taxes, but there was no longer any aspect of helping the Empires ecology.*

Long was an upcoming aristocrat whose grandparents bought a title.

*They were the pillars of the current Empire, who served in public service, entered the legal profession, and rose to Sesbrons offices to participate in politics. Nonetheless, the old nobility*

*mocked the new nobility as they were displeased that the latter imitated their lifestyle. At the same time, their outbursts are baseless as their own responsibilities fade and only their privilege remains.*

*In that sense, Sir Edgar, who ignores the sentiments of the old nobility and focuses on his own eccentricities, has always been the subject of support of the new nobility. Although the Retiro family has a long history, having been founded during the reign of the empires first monarchs, its founder is a foreigner from another continent. As a result, he had been treated as an outsider and was discriminated against while trying to mix with high society. Thats why the new nobles were eager to put the lofty foreign family into their frame for the same reason.*

Long also looked up to Ed because of that. Additionally, of course, neither Long nor Edgar ever identified himself with the old nobility.

Admiral. No matter where the first shot came from, the fact remains that sons of the Empire lost their lives. What does it matter who is responsible for that? A life must be paid with a life.

And as for Julio, didnt that young fellow confess that they were from the Southern League of Pirates? So, what else are you not allowed to do? Those gathered below deck claiming to be Julios hostage could be investigated, but those who ran amok with guns and knives face immediate execution.

Long spoke, being careful not to mention anything about the woman as much as possible. He had no desire to intervene in an incident involving the nobility.

Admiral, please appease the officers. Julio is the captain, so he should be taken to Sesbron and be executed there, but there isnt a law saying that you couldnt hang a few small fish in Gualtierio, right? At the very least, it will help lift the mood.

But that means that well be triggering an all-out Ingres Sea annihilation war in earnest.

Its something everyone else has been hoping for.

Did you forget our fleets power composition?

But you can requisition ships for shallow draft while preparing for this expedition, cant you?

Its not enough. Ive wandered around the southern islands for two months but havent seen a flock of birds or a human feeding a school of fish\*. However, if you look at the records of past battles fought on the Ingres Sea, you can see that such bizarre abilities are described in great detail. If we dont prepare for it, our graves will be off the coast of Amiaeng as well, Captain Long\*.

Ah! So you went ahead to check out the seascape? Haha. Sir Victor and I didnt even come up with that

At the mention of Sagastars name, Ed hardened his face. So, the captain quickly closed his mouth and looked up at the ceiling, avoiding Eds eyes.

Dont be too hasty. The Ingres Sea is different from Anatole.

*I guess hes going to let that slide for now.*

Relieved, the captain nodded his head.

Yes So, if we really want to subjugate the Ingres Sea, wed better study former southern naval battles. Unless its preceded, the southern expedition will only end in a dogs death\*.

Indeed. Thats the right way of putting it.

Long knew that his admiral was a commander who could see several steps ahead.

*Although he has an eccentric personality, his skills and insight are undeniable.*

Long was willing to trust and follow Eds command, just as he had done in the great war of extinction on the Anatole Sea. And so, he was determined to persuade his successor officers for a more prepared expedition.

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## Chapter 200

It was a cool evening. Ed looked down at the Devito Harbour from the terrace, pondering over his conversation with Captain Long.

*Long has leadership among his junior officers and is actively trying to stay on good terms with me, so I believe hell do well in shaping public opinion. This could help alleviate the dissatisfaction of the officers for the time being.*

As a salty hill breeze ruffled his hair, Eds shirt puffed up lightly on his back. Setting his wine glass down on the terrace railing, he tried to get a gauge on how far his movements have become known to the outside world.

*Although my residence is strictly controlled, I cant closely monitor the outside world because Ive been so busy that Im basically locked inside this whole time. The reason for my stealthy movements even within Roahn is simple. Its because the Duke of Mireilles henchmen are probably spying from somewhere right now. If my arrival had been made known, they would undoubtedly have started their search for Liloa According to current reports, the Visha returned without the Admiral. However, even asking petty officers for information would yield enough suspicious traces I still have no idea why Mireille is suddenly looking for Liloa. After all, I had little chance of leaving her bedside, so I didnt have the time to think about it.*

The night wind blew softly into his complicated mind and the glass that he set on the railing rattled. In the distance, the sound of waves hitting onshore could be heard. The port, covered with insidious darkness, hid black shadows everywhere. Ed had no idea who among them would set up an ambush or how involved they would be.

*I want to tell Liloa everything so I wont have to worry about this alone. But Liloa deliberately avoids personal conversations after our encounter in the music room She even acts indifferently as if we never kissed in the first place All that comes out of her mouth now has something to do with Gualtiero. Whenever I try to bring up a different topic, she only responds that I should tell her later*

Ed didnt know why Lil was behaving that way.

*Perhaps she fears that the more we express our feelings for each other, the more we would be wasting time.*

Nevertheless, he had no intention of forcing her to look at herself first.

*If Liloa wants me to wait, Ill wait.*

Raising his head and glancing up at the sky, Ed observed the bright moon ahead of him and the dense stars shining brightly around it. Such a clandestine view reminded him of Panichis night sky. It was the time when his sympathy towards Lil overflowed like pouring stars, in the midst of the canvas of the night that glowed with his desire to understand Lil, confidence that he could understand her, and expectation that she would eventually accept his awe\*.

He dared to be sure that not even Lil would ever forget the sky of that very night. And because he wanted Lils immeasurably brilliant light to continue shining inside her, Ed decided to delay discussing personal matters until later.

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As in many mansions, after dinner time passed and the servants came to clean up, a period of peace came around. The Retiro residence was no exception. When the maids made the bed and left, Lil pretended to lie down silently but threw the blanket off as soon as the sound of their footsteps receded.

She then put her slippers on and went to the window. Opening the curtains wide, Lil welcomed the chilly draft emitting from the cold window. No matter how much she has been advised to rest, her body was too restless to stay still the entire night. Till now, the only exercise she got throughout the day was circling the garden with Levi, so the only way she could further strengthen her body was to do it without Levis knowledge. Of course, she intended to do just enough to avoid going overboard.

Lil grabbed the girder between the beds posts and pulled herself up. She rested her chin on the crossbeam before lowering her body again. Thanks to solely eating vegetable stew and soup the whole time, her hungry abdominal muscles began shaking and eventually gave way. Her bony arms trembled, but the tension in her muscles was evident as she moved. Lil wanted to draw herself up one more time before calling it a day

Ack

Startled, Lils hands let go of the girder and she fell horizontally onto the bed. For a moment, she felt like not only her body but her heart had fallen too. Lil eventually lifted her thrashing upper body and placed a hand on her thumping chest.

The source of her shock was the man standing outside of the window. As Lil was pondering where he suddenly came from, the man folded his hands in two half circles, put them on the glass of the window and shoved his face between them. Apart from his eyes, her uninvited guest didnt move. He was clearly searching for something. It took Lil a moment to realise he probably couldnt see the bed from the outside. With his back against the moon, he appeared like a dark figure, but she obviously knew who it was.

Lil walked to the window. When Ed finally saw her, he enthusiastically waved his hand. But because Lil grabbed the curtains on either side of the window and closed them tightly, the bright smile on his face quickly disappeared.

Lil was about to turn around and go back to bed, when

*Knock! Knock!*

*Knock! Knock! Knock! Knock!*



The sound of knocking on the glass became annoying really quick. In addition, it sounded persistent, like it wouldn't go away unless she confronted him herself. So in the end, Lil went back to the window and pulled back the curtain a little. She expected him to look dejected, but Ed appeared rather confident.

*Whats he pointing at with his finger?*

Lil followed his fingertip and lowered her eyes.

There was a silver tray in his other hand. When Ed lifted the dome-shaped lid, thick meat, drenched in a delectable-looking sauce, revealed its majesty. In an instant, Lils mouth began to water and she swallowed her breath with a gulp. She then raised her eyes and glared at Ed, who was, predictably, looking at her triumphantly.

Even though Lil furrowed her brows, she did unlock the latch.

I heard from Levi that youre going crazy for some meat.

Ed came inside after answering a question that wasn't even asked. Lil sighed and trudged after Ed toward the table. It was hard for her to admit that she was a human trying to fill her stomach by selling her pride. But, the smell of the meat that was emanating from the tray was driving her crazy.

Lil stared at the dishes Ed had set down on the table with greedy eyes.

*If I ate all of that, I feel like I would get a surge of energy right away.*

Ed took out the tableware and muttered.

Actually, Levi changed your diet beginning today, so there was supposedly meat for dinner. But the kitchen staff made a mistake and your former menu was prepared again

What?!

...!

Lil slammed the table and inwardly cursed the faceless and nameless chef. Startled by Lils sudden outburst, Ed flinched his shoulders and looked her way.

Then why did you come through the window? I thought you were trying to sneak it in.

I don't want this to reach Levis ears. Otherwise, it will be annoying.

Ed took out a chair and sat Lil down. When she received the knife and fork handed to her by him, she became extremely hungry, like a person who hasn't eaten in days. She then cut the meat in a hurry and placed it in her mouth. Lil was as overjoyed as someone who had finally tasted water while on the verge of dying from dehydration, at the same time, she was reminded of having endured a multi-month journey while subsisting solely on dry bread, which elevated her mood even more. Lil savoured the meat on her tongue and eagerly munched it in her mouth as she listened to Ed explaining it was easy to digest due to it being a finely minced meat roast. Nevertheless, Ed didn't miss a beat when he nagged her about chewing it thoroughly.

Quite the nagging

Chewing and swallowing the asparagus in her mouth, she asked.

What are you going to do?

The situation isnt easy.

Tell me about it.

So far, opinions have been divided. Julios group claims that theyre from the League of Southern Pirates, so at this point, the side that wants to clear the South is the most dominant, especially with some officers dead and many injured. However, I just found out the real motivation behind their standpoint. Its been hard to commission navy soldiers nowadays because theres nothing to defeat in the Anatole Sea anymore, so officers who want to be promoted are turning their eyes to the South.

Lil, who grabbed her forehead, let out a sigh.

Julio, that guy until the very end

On the other hand, we have a prudent minority. Those are the ones who think the Bell Rock is a real merchant ship that, on paper, belongs to Viscount Noirmont. And the Viscounts influence cannot be ignored even within the Navy. But the problem is Julio. Hes openly declaring that theyre part of the League. Reasonable suspicion could arise from this and if it leads to a full-fledged investigation, the identities of all the crew members will be revealed, right?

But why hasnt a trial been held yet?

Sagastar is delaying it.

Lil seemed to hear his teeth grinding when he pronounced Sagastar. It bothered her. She knew that Ed wouldnt have let Sagastar get away with it. And obviously, because she had almost died she wasnt very pleased with him either. But the fact he was hated by his superior because of a personal grudge involving her, was another matter.

So, hes intentionally procrastinating?

Ed didnt respond, but it was a clear affirmation.

*I have no clue if Sagastar told Ed of my identity or not. Maybe Ed already knows who I am. It doesnt matter though. Its something to talk about later. The Bell Rock crew is about to be executed at the soonest possible time, so it doesnt matter whether Ed knows my real name or not.*

Lil, lost in thought, was turning the fork between her fingers.

*No matter how much I think about it, theres only one solution.*

Lil muttered as she stabbed the last piece of meat with her fork.

Ill have to break them out

Thats an interesting idea.