

NORTH X NORTHWEST

Chapter 2

Lil crossed over to the merchant ship after the looting was done. The enemy's sailors, led by their captain, were kneeling on deck. Slaves were released from their chains and gathered on one side of the ship. Those who were still clinging in fear were comforted by the crew of the Bell Rock.

This was the reality in the south. The slave merchants of the empire seized the southern islanders and sold them to the mainland as slaves. Their faces would get scarred, making them recognizable as slaves everywhere they go. After being taken to the empire, they ploughed fields till they died, got used as training objects for war, or were taken to a circus or exhibition and became toys for the nobles. From the perspective of the south, the empire that invaded their peaceful daily lives and took over the islands and seas to capture people was far worse than pirates.

Lil walked past them and went down to the deck below, accompanied by Cesar. The lower decks were already empty because the Bell Rock's crew placed all the cargo and weapons on the upper deck. Lil glanced around the place as a last check and suddenly noticed something strange.

"Cesar."

"Yes?"

Lil stomped her foot a few times on the place she was standing. A hollow sound rang as if it was empty below.

"What's with this space down here? Why does it sound so different?"

Cesar squinted at the floor and found cleverly hidden seams.

“It looks like a hidden space.”

Putting a dagger between the crevice as a lever, Cesar used some strength to lift the wooden board. When Lil looked inside, there was nothing to see. She tilted her head in confusion.

“What is it? A prison?”

“I’ve never seen a structure like this.”

“It’s a water tank! A water tank used on fishing boats.”

A ragged voice sprang from behind. Lil glanced at Marenzio coming down with a leisurely pace.

“Why did you come down here?”

“When the captain didn’t come back, Alain told me to go see what’s taking so long.”

“You always seem to follow Alain’s orders, but never mine...”

“Come on, Captain. I only came down here, because I thought we were in a hurry, you said you wanted to sail to Amiaeng as soon as possible. Anyway, what kind of fish did they put in there?”

“It seems to be empty.”

“What?”

Marenzio approached them, wiping the finger he’d used for digging through his nose on his pants. Lil frowned and took a step back.

Marenzio put his ear on the floor next to the water tank and nodded.

“I can’t hear anything. Anyway, it’s strange to have a water tank in this location. Did they make it for something else?”

“If you say something, be clear about it. Is it a tank or not? Also, if it’s just a water tank, why hide it? It’s made of wood, so what’s with this weird echo?”

“Did they want to keep it a secret?”

“It could be on the bottom.”

“Let me see.”

Marenzio shook his head in a dull manner.

“Let’s torture one of the crewmen for answers. No need to keep guessing. Go up, Captain.”

Lil freaked out as Marenzio moved forward to push her back. She shook her head, trying to forget about his black nails as he approached her. Obviously, some foreign substances from his nose are still stuck between them. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be so dark.

While looking back at Cesar still standing on the deck below, Lil gave some orders.

“I’ll go to the deck first, so you can check the Captain’s room.”

“Yes, Captain.”

She then quickly climbed to the upper deck to catch up with Marenzio, dusted off her clothes, and fixed her triangle hat.

Standing in front of the waiting sailors, she looked sharply at a middle-aged man who was the captain of this ship till now. Lil lifted his chin with the tip of a colourful feather pen handed to her by Alain.

‘Slender eyes and a large nose, wide chin, short blond hair. It was indeed the man I saw through the telescope, giving commands from the stern.’

Lil snapped her fingers and a sailor with a broad build put his back in front of her. The tall and slender sailor next to them placed a piece of paper on the back and extended a pot of ink towards her.

“Name?”

Lil gracefully withdrew the pen and dipped it in the ink.

“August Felini.”

“Well, okay, Sir August.”

She began to write something with handwriting that seemed to be unrecognisable to everyone but herself.

[“I, the Black Whale, Lil Schweiz, have pillaged Sir August’s ship with grace and respect in accordance with Sesbron custom. Word of advice, next time we cross paths, please refrain from making a big fuss like you did today...”]

Her crew, occupying the deck, burst into frivolous laughter. Lil put August’s hat on the sailor next to her, who mimicked the etiquette of the nobles by bowing down ridiculously. It was hard to distinguish if the noise that busted out was that of booing or cheering. After a while, Lil calmed her crew down with a wave of her hand and gave Alain the looting certificate.

[“...and the crewmen fought bravely to defend the worthless name of Duke Mireille. As the Black Whale is both merciful and honourable, I take full responsibility for today’s events and am leaving this certificate with Sir August as proof of the looting.”]

“I praise the mercy of the Black Whale.”

“Hm, okay. Very good, Sir August.”

August received the document and seemed to be relieved.

'No wonder, the looting certificate's the only evidence proving that the disappearance of the cargo was due to the piracy of the Southern League of Pirates. And not the result of the Captain's plotting or rebellion on board.'

The looting certificate was first issued by Lil Schweiz and is now so popular that it has spread like a trend.

Lil watched August's relieved eyes mischievously.

'This'll be the best moment to intervene.'

"But..."

August's shoulders flinched in suspense.

Smiling leisurely, Lil pointed at the four heavy artillery that had been moved to the upper deck.

"I have one condition. Rather than have Captain August walk the plank, we demand all four 6-nwon cannons, which seem to have been borrowed from the Emperor, be thrown overboard."

This time, groans burst from the surrounding crew.

Satisfied, Lil raised a smile.

'The ship itself belongs to Duke Mireille, but the cannons are considered the exclusive property of the Navy, which would have cost an enormous amount of money to buy. It's self-evident that the top of the Garni association would be more disconcerted, than this Captain, being only hired by the Duke. The Navy will likely not provide another set of rare 6-nwon cannons to Garni, who lost them as soon as they were equipped. The resulting damage to the Duke won't be insignificant, both presently and in the long run.'

"Sure. Together, it would be worth a couple of mansions. But what choice do I have? I don't want those bulky cannons on my beautiful Bell Rock. And if the Black Whale can't have it, then we might as well offer them to mother ocean. Right, Alain?"

“There’s no doubt about it.”

“Marenzio?”

“It’s a wise decision, Captain.”

“Cesar?”

Suddenly, she turned to Cesar, standing next to Marenzio.

“Cesar?”

Cesar only opened his mouth after being hit on the shoulder by Marenzio.

“That’s right.”

As soon as the boatswain, the gunner, and the navigator gave their consent, the first huge cannon was about to be hurled overboard.

Several sailors rushed in and pushed it away, smashing the railing in the process. The rapidly falling object was silent for a moment, leaving the deck in a mixture of gloom and anticipation long before the heavy sound of it breaking the surface of the water could be heard.

“Did you check if nobody had a metal ball attached to their ankle?”

Marenzio’s joke signalled the start of the celebration. Everyone was excited, swords were raised in the air, sailors hugged each other, all while praising their Captain Lil Schweiz and singing the cry of hurrah.

Lil smiled in satisfaction.

After the festivities, Lil returned to the Captain’s room on the Bell Rock and received reports from the officers one after another.

‘The main purpose of this Garni merchant ship was the transportation of slaves. Just as the Empire enslaved the tribes of the West, the inhabitants of the Southern Islands were also turned into slaves and dragged to the mainland.’

The League of Pirates Lil belongs to – its official name is the Southern League of Pirates – has the main task to rescue the enslaved southerners and loot the imperial merchant ships.

‘This ship was a little different. Unlike the previous merchant ships, they didn’t load the complete deck with slaves, nor filled the rest of the space with loot. That wasn’t the only strange thing. They had twice the amount of supplies needed to travel the distance recorded in the captain’s log. The more reports I receive from the officers, the more uncomfortable I feel. Also...’

“Mermaids?”

Lil looked carefully at the piece of paper brought by Cesar.

Judging by the heavy soot stains on it. It seemed that they tried to burn down the captain’s room before being captured.

When Lil interrogated them about the water tank, she recalled the sailors of the merchant ship making excuses about failing to catch some dolphins they spotted.

“Most of the books belonging on the bookshelves were thrown out the broken window of the Captain’s room, also dozens of papers were burned.”

“They must have been in a real rush, considering they used fire to get rid of some pieces of paper. Especially on a ship.”

‘Because of their wooden floors, walls, and ceilings, ships are extremely fire hazardous. Therefore, the use of fire is strictly monitored. I can’t believe they did such a crazy thing. The man burning this must have been unfamiliar with ships. I already thought it was suspicious that some of the crew members looked as if they were more fitted for a desk job.’

“Did they bring scholars with them?”

“They seemed to be working together to find mermaids.”

“Nonsense.”

‘Mermaids are said to have become extinct in ancient times. In fact, documents and murals dealing with ancient times stated mermaids were just mythical creatures. And even if they existed, it’s all in the past.’

“As the number of adventurers and explorers increase, more and more people start to believe this bullshit. Mermaids. It’s more ridiculous than that mysterious southern island made of gold. I get that southern natives, like Marenzio, believe in mermaids. After all, it’s said that mermaids lived in the South. But I can’t believe people in the Capital actually fall for those silly legends too.”

Lil laid down the pieces of paper that Cesar brought and went out on the deck. After putting on her hat, she took a moment to enjoy the blowing of the warm wind.

‘We should be able to see Amiaeng soon.’

Standing next to the wheel of the ship, she held up her telescope, which was decorated with gorgeous golden ornaments. Sure enough, a faint dot appeared, and a smile rose on Lil’s face. After a while, the long terrain of the island spread over the horizon. The watchman was the first to shout.

“Land!”

Lil confirmed it herself.

Next