

Northwest 201

Chapter 201

As Ed turned slightly and rested his cheek on his popped-up fist, Lil frowned to express her burden. She had no choice but to do so as Ed wasn't sitting at a safe distance on the other side of the table, but right next to her.

Dont look at me like that.

Why, how am I looking at you?

Like that

Its the kind of look that will be the death of me.

Enough!

Once I start talking to him about nothing, Ill get entangled with him again.

In an attempt to regain her composure, Lil returned to their previous topic.

If they go to trial, Im sure everyone will die. The whole situation is already suspicious enough, so which judge will go the extra mile of taking any of it into consideration? I dont think theyll tell the rebels apart from the hostages. The crew will face judgement based on their identities alone as the viscount will have cut off his tail long before that. In the end, theyll all be executed without a single one spared. And from the moment Julio is executed as a member of the League, a war begins.

You want to save Julio too?

In the eyes of the Empire, theyre a group of aliens, so why would anyone try to understand that each one could come from different circumstances? Do they even look like humans through the lens of an imperial judge? Theyre all just a filthy island race with tanned skin. Dirty, savage, low-level, and violent. Will the Empire tolerate any of those made up characteristics? Will they understand that each ideology is different? If they did, then they wouldnt be able to justify their aggression. Its not for nothing that foreign people are savage, so we need to enlighten them is the proud motto of our Empire.

Lil brought a piece of meat, that she had mashed up with her fork in the meantime, to her mouth. Had she not preoccupied her mouth with eating, there was probably no stop to the fountain of words rolling over her tongue. The meat, which had been delicious until now, was chewed with a sense of foreignness, because for Lil, her situation was the same as the Southerners. They couldnt be perceived as humans or individuals. They were only regarded as the kind of beings who were cut out of a mould someone else had set, and therefore their individuality, symbols, and uniqueness were taken away from them.

It would be a precedent.

Lil felt an unfamiliar sense of stability from Ed, who answered with his chin still resting on his palm. It hasnt been long since she experienced it, but Lil was adapting to his attention.

Understanding without fighting is so fascinating. To the point where I dont want to let go of it

To savour such emotional comfort, it was only natural for Lil to want to hold onto Ed. And when he appeared as cute as he did now, Lils innocent greed for wanting to pinch him grew into a desire to hug him.

How comfortable would that be? I might even fall asleep without noticing.

The feeling of their embrace in the music room kept coming back to her.

If only I can hug and kiss Ed again I know it sounds a bit crazy, but if Im being honest with myself, thats the only truth.

Due to the sudden burn in her throat, Lil quickly emptied her glass of water, however the lukewarm liquid couldnt wash away her feelings at all. The remaining impulse was persistently climbing up her throat and further up her tongue.

Lil thought to herself.

I want you to hug me Or, I want to hug you this is crazy.

Lil gulped down the meat. She didnt want to tell Ed any of this. For Lil, it was most important they focused on the immediate goal. Until the sailors left the Imperial lands, everything else would be put on a side track.

Ed waited quietly for Lil to speak again. However, instead of opening her mouth, Lil held out her empty glass of water. After Ed picked up the water bottle, their silence was broken by the water gushing out. The moonlight shone on the neck of the narrow glass bottle. The light, which was spreading in the shape of a wave, illuminated his face.

The reason why Lil kept wanting to share her thoughts with Ed was because she had grown tired.

I still remember being tormented by the pressure of managing over a hundred sailors, the mental exhaustion and conflict with Cesar, and the guilt about it.

Two months might have passed, but she hadnt felt the passage of time at all, so to Lil, everything seemed to have happened just yesterday. And now, shes finally bearing the frustration of being defeated and deprived of her ship and her crew. All of this was added on top of her frail body and the perspective of an unknown recovery period. Her anxiety was being exacerbated by factors she couldnt have predicted.

Unable to overcome her nervousness, her fingers gripped the fork tightly. Sweat flowing from the palm of her hand slowly seeped onto the silver tableware.

Ed tilted his head curiously, but Lil averted her eyes and played with the remaining beans on her plate.

Those who advocate against the execution of the Bell Rocks must be thinking that they truly are the crew of some of the Empires nobles. But, if their real identities are revealed, it will be as clear as day that the southern pirates had hit the Navy. Whoever fired the first shot will become irrelevant. In fact, the mere truth that Julio is a Southern pirate gives us no excuse, so theres nothing else I can say here. I totally lost control of it

The captain was Julio.

It was me.

You're wrong. Julio is the official captain who was elected by vote. The sailors themselves put him at the helm of the ship. From what I heard, he was voted as the captain on the condition that he would bring back the navigator who was in captivity. I'm sorry, but even if you regret it, the responsibility lies with the crew. If they put him in the captain's position to escape the Navy, then they should've expected what would happen if their escape failed. If you're still considering yourself the captain, you're ignoring their judgement entirely. Or are you going to deny the code you wrote yourself?

The crew was threatened. It wasn't a normal process.

In order to prevent unusual outcomes, wasn't it necessary to get the agreement of at least 1/2 of the officers as well as half of the crew? To think that more than a hundred people were all frightened by one threat, that's crazy. It's clearly the system's blind spot.

No. I made the wrong choice to begin with. What you said was true. There were definitely clear signs that the Bell Rock was about to collapse, but I didn't notice it. I should have since I was in the position of captain. Now, I can't help thinking that that mistake resulted in all of this. Of course, my crew is probably reflecting on themselves by now. Being imprisoned like that, what else can they do but reflect, right? And it's not that I can't see my own blind spots, I actually blame myself for my blind spots and need to reflect on them too. Being outvoted is proof enough that I had been an incompetent captain. I admit that.

Whenever Lil thought about why this had happened, she only heard a strong self-loathing voice inside her head, telling her about everything that she was lacking till the very end. There was nothing to blame or accuse others of. But admitting a mistake in front of someone was difficult. To Lil, it felt bittersweet to hear herself say it in her own voice.

All my fault

Lil relentlessly chased the bean that kept dodging her fork.

Well even so. It's still my captain and I admire her greatly.

Hah. Whose your captain?

Lil lowered her eyes and made a modest face. They were sitting so close together, that if she only raised her eyes a little, his face was right in front of her nose.

Anyway, there can't be a trial, and we can't allow them to set a precedent by even executing one single person. There's only one answer to this, and that's jailbreak.

Count me in.

What?

In two weeks, when a large caravan from the Western Continent arrives at the Devito Harbour.

This time, Lil looked at Ed. As if his bright green eyes were waiting for hers, they made eye contact with each other eagerly. Looking at that clear face, Lil seemed to have heard it right.

So, what he just said truly meant that an incumbent admiral like him will break out about 200 people suspected of piracy.

Lil muttered in disbelief.

You're an admiral. You haven't forgotten that, have you?..

Ed answered, raising one of his eyebrows as if he was disappointed.

We agreed on a long-term deal. You haven't forgotten that, have you?

Ed barely managed to open his stiff eyes. When he did, a chill immediately ran over his body that for some reason wasn't covered by a blanket.

It seems to be morning, but where the heck is my blanket

As he groped around without feeling anything at first, his fingertips eventually reached the thick autumn blanket. He pulled it straight and slid himself into its warm temperature. Since his return to Mondovi, he hadn't been able to sleep properly, so his days were filled with fatigue. He did his best not to show any of it to Lil, but he could count the days, on which he slept as deeply as he did now, on one hand.

Uhm

..?

Even though it was true that he hadn't fallen back asleep yet, Ed was sure that he wasn't the source of the sound. He closed his eyes again, assuming it was merely the beginning of a dream.

Hmmm Mmm

However, Ed kept hearing strange noises and it came from a strangely familiar voice

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With the side of his head buried in the pillow, Ed could open only one eye.

This is clearly my pillow, so why do I see black hair? No, in the first place, my hair isn't long enough to be seen when I'm lying down

With a frown on his face, Ed raised his heavy head. His eyes opened wide directly after. The scene in front of him seemed so unrealistic, that he wondered if he was still dreaming. But no matter how many times he rubbed his eyes, the view remained the same. Finally accepting the fact that he was holding Lil in his arms, Ed froze, not knowing what to do. Lil moved in the meantime and made his arm her pillow.

The recollection of last night came back in bits and pieces.

We spent a long time discussing how to infiltrate Gualtiero And I remember Liloa getting a fever, so I put her to bed. I must've stayed near to nurse her before falling asleep myself. No, but how did I end up crawling all the way into the bed This can be misinterpreted in so many ways Even if I never intended to do such things, in Liloa's book I'm already mistakenly known as a pervert. It's clear that even if I claim to be innocent, she won't believe me

Ed peeked under the covers to check just in case. Both of them were still fully dressed.

He then moved the arm, on which Lils head was resting, with caution. Her hair slipped down the sleeve of his shirt until her head landed safely on the pillow. He had to get his body out next.

Fortunately, because only the edge of the blanket covered him, it was simple to remove. It was then that Lil reached into the air, grabbed the cover and pulled it towards her. For a moment, Ed assumed she had woken up and hardened, before exhaling a sigh of relief when he realised she hadn't.

I didn't know she had the habit of pulling blankets. She really has such a cute side to her. Then, from now on, I just need to prepare two blankets, right? No, what am I thinking?

Ed brushed off any disrespectful thoughts.

I have to get out of bed as quietly as possible.

He tried to move his shoulder subtly, but suddenly Lil grabbed him by the collar.

Hmm?

Startled, he made a sound without realising it. Amid his confusion, Lil started pulling on his shirt and Ed was helplessly drawn to her, pressing his lips tight to keep himself from making any more noises. He could have resisted, but if he did, he was sure Lil would wake up. Putting his head on the pillows next to Lil again, he realised.

It's because of this. She isn't just pulling blankets, it looks like she tends to pull everything her hands can grab.

It was because of this habit of pulling that made Ed, who had been sitting at the bedside and fell asleep last night with only his upper body resting on the bed, woke up in the middle of it.

Isn't that actually a very dangerous habit? Who knows who may be next to your bed?

Ugh

Lil, who would never know such concerns, was in the middle of a deep sleep while making incomprehensible sounds.

I could never be this cute if I grunt and frowned the way she's doing while dreaming. But why are her lips so tightly pursed? Shit. I was about to die from shock when she suddenly pulled me back down again. However, it's lovely to see her sleeping with her messed-up hair and mountains of blankets. Even if I need to move away now, I don't think I can.

Forsaking his conscience, Ed eventually stayed there.

The hazy morning illuminated Lil. Due to the curtains flowing softly back and forth, the brightening light occasionally hovered over her eyes. Ed had been watching Lil sleep for two months, but there had never been a day when he was as excited as today. The Lil in front of him was full of life even if she was sleeping. And it was self-evident that she would wake up healthier than she did the day before. Ed's chest tightened as he imagined the day she would finally be able to stand, walk, and run in the howling wind.

Eventually, Lil's eyelids twitched and wriggled till she finally opened her eyes to the world.

Ed greeted her, looking at her blue irises.

Hi.

Lil blinked dully. Every time she moved her eyelids, her lashes fluttered wildly, as though they were about to take flight.

Rubbing her still blurry eye, she muttered.

Uhhh Hello

The hand that had been rubbing the corner of her eye stopped abruptly.

Huh?

Lil dropped her arm. As she was laying lower than Ed, the first thing she saw was someones throat. Her wide-open eyes looked up at Ed, before going down the nape of his neck, checking for the presence of his clothes. Though she saw that he was still dressed, she appeared confused as to whether or not to be relieved and quickly opened the blanket. However, even after confirming she was wearing her negligee, her eyes were still wide open as if they were about to jump out.

What the hell is this?..

Lils voice, which had just awoken, had a mumbling tone. She tried to speak forcefully, but her pronunciation was not as loud as usual, which was rather endearing. Ed chuckled because of it, feeling like hed discovered something revolutionary.

Lil twitched her brows before drawing them together.

Why are you laughing? Do you want to die?

Look at your right hand.

Her hand holding Eds shirt twitched. Lil shook her head quickly, refusing to believe she was the one who had pulled Ed in. Still shaking her wrist. she shouted.

Didnt you make it like this?

Ed laughed out loud this time. It was a rare spectacle whenever Lil panicked from embarrassment and uttered gibberish.

Isnt that a bit far-fetched?

With a flushed face, Lil shoved Ed on the shoulder.

Get out of here, now!

Ed first thought about rolling out of bed and leaving the room right away, but Lils whines were so amusing that he decided to stay and lay down for a while. When Lil couldnt push him away with her hands, she pressed Eds side with her feet. Ed, however, couldnt stand the tickling sensation for long and twisted his body. He then grabbed Lils ankle in a reflex and she immediately started screaming and jerking her leg

Then, out of nowhere, the door burst open. The two turned their heads toward the entrance simultaneously, not knowing who between the two was the first to spot their visitor. Perhaps the three of them met their eyes at the same time.

Levi dropped the silver tray she was holding and yelled.

What are you doing as soon as you wake up!

Pushing Eds face away, Lil sat up.

Ah! No, its not like that!

Get out now!

..?

It appeared that Levi screamed at Lil. Confused that she was being ordered to get out, Lil pointed towards her chest. However, Levi continued her strides towards the bed and kept shouting.

Get out!

..?

Lil looked left and right in bewilderment.

Where did Ed go?

Lil then turned her head over her shoulder and spotted a man hiding behind her back. It was an absurd sight to see. A man as tall as him, laying on his stomach making himself as small as he could.

You need to get out of here.

Stop her.

I really think you'd better get out.

Ed made a pitiful face, but Lil simply shrugged her shoulders.

Levi threatened Ed, who suddenly insisted that he would take over the morning care from today, to have Linhardt escort him back to his hometown*. It was clearly enough a threat as Ed trudged out of the room, feeling sorry for himself. But even after he was kicked out, Levi could hardly calm down. She walked around the room with her arms folded tightly in front of her chest.

Levi even made Lil sit on the bed to scold her.

Ugh, what were you doing right after waking up?

It's a misunderstanding.

A misunderstanding?

Yes.

Do you think I'll let it go just like that? Last time too! Huh? Yesterday, I heard you let him tie you up and do things!

What?

I was going to let it go without mentioning it to you, but hah! I'm really, really baffled! I know he's an amazing person in so many ways, really. But I didn't know he would do this much.

Lil thought Levi was having a big misunderstanding. A huge misunderstanding that she couldn't even imagine nor wanted to imagine. Lil shook her head, not even knowing what she exactly was denying. Nevertheless, Levi continued to rebuke her with her sternness.

Lil, it's the same for you! No, no matter what, what if it becomes so rough as soon as you wake up? I told you to be careful and gentle with your body!

What the hell are you talking about

How dare you deny it? I heard it all! Elodie brought me that shawl!

Shawl?

She said you were tied on the cembalos brace! Oh my God! And your garter belt was found right in front of the door! No, was it that urgent that you two began as soon as the door closed? Ugh!

Really!

Levi covered her face with both hands in embarrassment. Lil, who finally understood Levi, closed her eyes tightly.

What kind of scandal is going around in this house?

Lil, who initially wanted to clarify that she was the one who tied Ed up, eventually shut her mouth, for the more she would try to explain, the more her soul would dry up.

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A week passed quickly. Contrary to Lils expectations of it being boring, the days flew by. During the day, she looked at different maps to figure out how to get from the Retiro mansion to Gualtiero, and then from Gualtiero to the Devito Harbour. In the evenings, she strategized with Ed or sparred with him.

After the day Levi finally allowed meat into her diet, Ed came knocking on her window once more but this time with a sword in hand. Lil couldnt help but let him into her room after that, especially when he offered to spar with her. Ed was simply a remarkable human being with numerous tricks up his sleeves.

And today is already the eighth day.

Lil rummaged through her clothes to prepare for her outing. Seeing she only had Levis more elaborately clothes cut, a sigh came out.

The dresses arent that uncomfortable for my indoor life, but when Im actively moving outside, they tend to become cumbersome enough that Id desire to tear them apart What can I do though? I probably just need to wear one of those and ride a horse to the market to buy some more suitable ready-to-wear

In the midst of her thoughts, someone knocked on the door.

Come in.

Ta-da!

At the childish sound that she didnt even find remotely funny, Lil turned her head towards the doorway. A fluttering dress was held up in the air. It was a dress thin enough that it could pass as an improved version of the chemise.

Why is he showing me that? Does he want me to wear it?

Are you crazy?

The dress, fluttering in the air, came to an abrupt standstill. Dropping the dress, Ed spoke sullenly.

This is said to be the latest and most fashionable style from Sesbron. Chemise la reine*. The Empress herself wore it and made it famous

Shut up.

How about this? If I remember correctly, I broke one the other day, I felt so bad about it that I ordered a new

The moment Lil saw what he was holding She screamed at the sight of the white lace garter dangling from Eds hand.

Throw it away!

Then, what about these?

..!

Ed, who smirked knowingly, showed a shirt and pants this time. In a way to tease her, Ed pretended to leave, but Lil followed quickly, kept his hand from gripping the door handle and closed it.

I ordered them because I thought you would need them, but should I just throw them away as well?

A trembling hand snatched the clothes from him. Ed might have a proud expression on his face, in Lils eyes he was just being annoying. Putting his hands behind his back, Ed fluttered out of the room. Shortly after, the waiting maids came in carrying boots, hats, justaucorps, and other mens clothes.

At first, Lil was irritated by the wind coming in the morning, but when she saw the series of clothes, her heart softened.

Despite all the fuss, Im really content with the newfound freedom of no longer having to wear a dress.

After changing her clothes, Lil pushed the door open and stepped out of her boudoir. She spotted Ed leaning against a window frame in the hallway. His gaze was fixed on the chemise dress in his hand, when he clicked his tongue.

Such a shame

Nonetheless, Lil extended her hand to Ed.

Give me some money.

Ed opened his mouth as if he was about to say something, but then paused. He furrowed his eyebrows and asked a question instead.

Why would I?

You took my necklace. Its priceless. A precious thing. There are many rumours that Kings around the world, including His Majesty, have been looking for relics from the past! You can sell it anywhere and receive dozens of gold bars for it And you just took it from me!

All the cargo from the Bell Rock is mine.

How is it yours? Strictly speaking, its the Emperors.

The laws regarding the Visha are a bit more complicated.

Im not interested in how you can have whatever you want regardless of the method you use; if youre not going to pay me, return my necklace.

I dont want to.

Well, wont you look at this! I dont even know who between us is the real pirate. Seriously! Oh, just pay the price and take it! Dont tell me you want me to believe that this shirt and pants are the equivalent of that. Arent you an outright swindler?

Ed, who was dumbfounded by her fountain of words, asked something completely unrelated.

Where are you going?

Im not going anywhere?

Lies. Youre going to the market, thats why youre asking for money.

Why dont you take me with you instead? Im like a walking cheque.

Ed opened his arms wide, but Lil gave him a sour look and then crossed her arms.

Never mind, I knew this was going to happen, so I already stole some in advance.

What?

I said I dont need you.

..?

Ed looked at Lil in bewilderment. Lil then took some paper bills with the Retiro seal from her chest and spread them like a fan. Even more amazed, Ed looked at the money fan fluttering under Lils chin.

Its nice to be treated like a mistress. All I have to do is act luxurious and ask for money, and theyll simply bring it to me.

Mistress?

Levi tried to make it sound as romantic as she could, but in the eyes of the servants, Im just your mistress as its your residence. So, I thought; why dont I give it a try, right?

What?

Seeing Eds protruding eyes, Lil realised how clueless he had been. It didnt make her feel any sorry for her sharp remarks, though.

Why such nonsense it cant be

Do you really think its impossible?

Ha Look at you standing here in front of me, acting all confused. Even if we disregard the fact that youre an Admiral, then this is still considered the mansion of a doctor. But this landlord, the doctor, is directly ordering clothes and shoes for his female patient? That means shes no ordinary patient, right? Theres no denying that. Even the clothes he ordered are all a perfect fit, so wouldnt it be strange if shes not his mistress?

That

Thats fine. You dont have to listen to me. You can always say that the patient was actually a corpse, and that someone else needed the change of clothes, cant you?

Lil said everything so calmly, but the situation Ed was trying to shake off already began becoming more and more vivid in his head. Lil avoided Eds eyes as naturally as possible. She organised the bills roughly and put them in her inside pocket.

Rather than following me to the market, Youd better use this time to sort out the scandal. Ill give you until I get back.

You are coming back?

When Ed raised his half-bowed head, Lil stopped poking him in the chest.

Yeah Why did I naturally think about coming back? I have some money now and my body can move around. I could have chosen to find an inn and have my lodgings there

Lil stuttered belated excuses.

The the maps and blueprints I need are here

The fret in Eds face immediately disappeared and was replaced by a sly smile.

Isnt this a little exciting?

And And Levi I cant ask Levi to visit me

Ah I just thought you were going to run away again. Who would have thought Id find myself waiting for you to come back Hmm

..!

Ed seems to be falling into some kind of mood

Passing Ed quickly, Lil began flapping her collar as a certain heat crept up her spine. When Lil descended the stairs, Ed didnt seem to be holding on to her on purpose, but Lil clearly felt his eyes stinging the back of her head. Belatedly ashamed of her pathetic stutter, she quickly pulled her hat down. A voice mixed with laughter called out as she walked through the front door.

What time are you coming back, huh?

Expectedly, Lil passed through the front door without answering

Down in the garden, the stable keeper held a horse that was rummaging in the ground while wagging its tail.

Lil stroked its gleaming brown mane. There were many healthy horses at the Retiro residence. It wasnt an important fact, but Lil appreciated it very much. The beast looked at Lil and blinked its eyes. After the stable keeper put on the saddlecloth and the saddle itself, Lil climbed onto the horse.

Due to the hill breeze swirling around the residence, the wind surged more and more as their speed increased. It was so refreshing that Lils nose began to open and she inhaled the cool air. With narrowed eyes, she surveyed Roahns landscape. There was a small forest and a hunting ground

along the slope of the hill, and at the bottom was a stream. The wind, relentlessly shaking the trees in the forest, made a low creaking sound.

They eventually reached Roahns bustling downtown where Lil dismounted her horse and loosely gripped the reins. The docile beast followed her meekly.

Entering the market, Lil stepped on discarded fruits and puddles of water. People with fruit baskets on their heads or in front of their aprons passed them left and right. As they made their way through crowded fruit shops, they, before long, reached an area full of food vendors and restaurants. The smell of freshly baked bread filled the streets. Signboards and flags decorating the top of the stands lined up overhead, and in every alley were unions affiliated with the navy located, so the Mondovi naval flag hanging on the outer wall was often spotted.

In wide-open windows of the buildings, were women wearing headscarves shaking laundry or watering potted plants by their windowsills. One happy young man sang a love song, and the woman in the window opposite of him listened to it with her chin resting on her palm.

It was a sight no different from the southern lands.

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When Lil found herself beside the edge of the road, she stopped walking and took out a map from her bosom. The moment a cart loaded with seafood passed by, giving off a fresh, fishy smell, she looked around her.

Due to it being lunchtime, the market was overflowing with people.

About three out of ten passersby are in uniform. Seeing that the men all have a lady hanging on their arm, it looks like they're going out to eat with their lover.

Lil, on the other hand, pulled her hat down like some kind of thief.

As expected, its a market that doesnt need additional security.

Lil walked according to the map. After finding a suitable sword at the blacksmith and a gun from an arms dealer, she intended to head for Gualtiero. She did so in preparation for the night of the jailbreak, Lil wanted to familiarise herself with the various routes. When she was suddenly reminded of the one-week deadline, her pace sped up unknowingly. And because she had left her horse in a nearby stable, she hurried her feet instead.

Someone seemed to be following her since a while ago.

Lil rubbed the nape of her tickling neck. Every time she changed directions, the shadow she saw from the corner of her eye did the same. Lil then calmly picked a quiet alley and entered. It was a space behind a restaurant devoid of people where wooden boxes were piled up everywhere. She quickly picked up a pebble from one of the piles of dry straw that covered the floor and let the man approach her.

One, two, three

Why are you following me?!

Lil threw a stone at the head that peeped into the alley.

Ack!

A familiar voice burst out and the man clasped his head.

The stone merely brushed his leather hat, so his reaction is rather exaggerated.

Lil squatted behind a wooden crate and began throwing more and more stones overhead.

Go back now! Get lost!

Why are you throwing stones?

For you to get out of here!

The more the voice ignored her, the more stones Lil kept throwing. But before long, stones were fired from his side as well.

When are you coming back?

Because Lil was still hiding behind a crate, the direct line of aim towards her was blocked off. In contrast, Lil only had to only slightly lift her butt to attack in return. This fact left her laughing in a mocking way. However, from some point onward, a stone slammed into her side and in an instant, more stones started to hit her thigh and shoulder. It was when Ed began throwing his stones towards the wall on the other side of Lil, causing them to bounce off the wall and rush at her.

Lil eventually had to jump up.

You sneaky man!

Whos to say!

Die!

What time are you coming back!

Ed attempted to block the stones by leaning close to the pile of straw. He had to, because Lil started to shout while throwing away the remaining stones she was holding.

I wont go back! Not in forever!

Five or six stones drew parabolic lines at once.

Ack!

Lil, who launched the stones with her eyes closed, instantaneously opened them as soon as she heard the scream. Ed wasnt seen behind the pile of straw anymore. When Lil moved away from the wooden crate, she witnessed a sprawling body on the floor of the alley. Walking a little closer, she recognised Ed, lying down with his eyes closed and his hat below his shoulders.

Lil pursed her lips and muttered to herself.

This is the same guy who can take on a couple of strong men alone

Without a sound, she straightened herself and exited the alley.

I obviously threw a fair amount of stones in a row, but its ridiculous to think he got hit by all of them. Hes faking an injury again because I told him Im not coming back. If I attend to him and fall for his tricks, I bet hell just get up and laugh at me until hes out of breath Despicable guy

Lil snorted and shook off her sand-stained hands.

Entering the noisy boulevard again, she looked around for the blacksmiths sign. However, as soon as she treaded a short distance to familiarise herself with the route again, she felt someones presence behind her once more.

Lil hurriedly hid in one of the alleys nearby and suddenly jumped out in a fit of frustration. A mans shadow was indeed in front of her.

Why on earth does Ed keep following me? And why does he have to hide?

Lil raised her chin and shot at her follower.

Hey! Why do you keep

Of course, she assumed it was Ed. However, this mans clothes were different from what Ed wore. On her way to see the mans face, her eyes passed a stylish green velvet justaucorps and a black cravat. It was an unfamiliar outfit. Eventually, Lil was met with a pair of shady eyes under a colourful hat.

Cesar?

Ed opened one eye.

I thought she just stepped out to get me some medicine, but she completely abandoned me. Now, this alley is only filled with noisy children and cries of soliciting customers

Ed jumped up and looked around him. Lil was nowhere to be seen.

I guess she cant be fooled anymore.

Hmm

Ed laughed, admiring Lils growing skills of perception.

Then it cant be helped.

Having followed her from his residence to the market, Ed became sure that she wasnt being tailed. Still, he wasnt relieved.

Its possible that the Duke of Mireille doesnt know of Liloas presence yet, or no one mightve recognized her because she isnt wearing a dress.

Ed pasted a fake white beard and white sideburns on his face.

Ill have to pry Mireilles potential movements as planned.

Ed had already informed the security forces, but because they had nothing to report yet, he decided to proceed directly.

I need to figure out where Mireilles base is and how hes going to move. Of course, knowing their purpose is crucial too, but I wont find that out unless I sit right in front of them and prod for answers.

Ed took out the paper handed over to him this morning by his butler Grits. It was a list of hotels and villas reserved for a certain period of time.

This is a lot.

Ed folded the paper impatiently and changed his mind.

There are also four buildings operated by Garni in Roahn. It would be much more efficient to look around there first.

Cesar?

When Lil lifted her head further, sunlight shone under the brim of her hat.

I followed because I thought I saw a familiar back, but seeing Liloa, my hunch was indeed right.

Cesar immediately grabbed her wrist after seeing her face and his heart started to beat painfully. The more his heart pounded, the hotter it became until he felt like burning. And as Cesars lingering feelings piled up with the ashes, he was unable to remain calm, even though he first thought he could.

Liloa.

How

Startled, Lil stepped back, leaving only her awkwardly clenched wrist in the place between the two of them. When she looked down at her wrist that was being held, Cesar let go. Contrary to his expectations, Lil didnt hide her hands behind her back or clasp her wrists in displeasure and he was relieved by her small but positive reaction.

When did you wake up?..

How are you here?

Their questions were ambiguous. They were basically asking each other how she didnt die and why he stayed in Roahn instead of returning to his manor.

Do you want to find a place we could go in and talk?

They werent supposed to be talking about any of this out in the open anyway. They were standing near a fancy restaurant, so carriages came and went. In addition, they were in the middle of the boulevard, so there was a lot of distraction. Cesar led Lil to a nearby restaurant. Lil, however, first looked around for a moment, before pushing her hat down and followed him.

Cesar eventually glanced back at Lil.

Despite the fact that shes following closely, it feels unfamiliar. Its awkward that Im now walking in front of someone who Ive never walked apart from before To be honest, I just want to hold her hand and walk with her, side by side Its a strange kind of agony to have to hesitate to do what Ive naturally done. I used to interlock our fingers and observe her gait. And had a lot of fun doing it I did it even though I knew she wouldnt trip or lose her way. In addition, Liloa always argued that she didnt need the support because she wasnt a kid and wasnt wearing her high heels. Shenever really liked my methods of caring for her, so when she strongly expressed her desire to not let me do the things I wanted, I quickly ran out of things he could do for her I wanted to give her my all, but I didnt know how because Id been rejected so many times. At the same time, I didnt want to give up. I knew that once I let go of her first, she would never hold out her hand to me herself. Thats why I

made sure to never hint about a possible end of our relationship, not by mistake and not in a fit of anger. Looking back on it, it was only natural. Because if it was Liloa, she could easily say she didn't need me any longer and simply walk away.

Chapter 205

Whereas Lil wasn't afraid of being alone, Cesar had a specific reason for not being able to separate himself from her. In that sense, Lil simply couldn't muster the same level of conviction.

That's why I always hoped that one day Liloa would feel the need for me, but till now she never needed anything. This has always been the most difficult part. Liloa is in that way an entirely different person than Carl.*

Cesar now wondered how he could ever have them considered alike when they were so dissimilar.

Carl found stability and happiness in his marriage, but Liloa doesn't seem to enjoy the idea of loving someone, let alone getting married. When I asked what she wanted, she only said she wanted to be treated like a human being. Of course, I immediately asked her how I could treat her like a human being, she replied she didn't know herself, but that what I was doing now, wasn't the way. To this day I still have no idea what she exactly wanted from me. I did learn over time that she had a problem with how I only saw her as a woman, which eventually got her really upset and angry. I had always been careful not to hurt her whenever we sparred until it one day came to the point when she threw her sword away. It wasn't hard to grasp the situation. I probably would've been similarly offended if someone hid their abilities and lost on purpose. But at the same time, it felt absurd that Liloa refused to acknowledge even the most fundamental differences between men and women. For Liloa there's only a very small difference between the two sexes, but in my eyes, there's a huge difference between femininity and masculinity. It was almost as if she yearned for the realm of masculinity.

Cesar wanted her to be free, which is why he insisted on respecting Lil's decisions no matter what they were. But some of the decisions she had made have been deemed too masculine for her by Cesar's standards.

Whenever she did, I always thought she didn't have to go that far. She could live her life however she pleased without stepping out of her female boundaries. I became disappointed with how her unconventional choices put us in an uncomfortable situation. From that moment I started to feel alienated from Liloa because she acted so bold and manly. I even had moments where I wondered if I was really with a woman. Now that I think about it, Liloa, unbeknownst to herself, was probably pursuing the realm of men to desperately prove her own ability.

My lord! Where? Hah hah! Where are you going in such a hurry?

While calling out to Cesar, an accompanying servant eventually reached their side. Apparently, as soon as Cesar saw a woman who looked like Lil, he ran towards her without saying anything.

Go to the villa and bring the Viscount's petition.

Pardon? The petition?

The envelope delivered by Viscount Noirmont.

Oh, that huge envelope. Where should I take it?

Cesar motioned towards the restaurant in front of him. A quick-witted servant immediately dashed to it to announce the arrival of their guest. One of the guards, standing upright at the restaurant's entrance, opened the door and the servant quickly disappeared inside.

A few seconds later, the manager of the establishment came out to greet Cesar.

Sir Cesar.

The manager accepted the hat that Cesar took off. As Cesar brushed his hair and stood at the door waiting for Lil, the manager held out his hand for her as well. However, Lil ignored the man and headed straight inside. After Cesar looked at Lil's hat, he stopped the manager from attempting to receive it.

As soon as they entered, loud buzzing and the sound of tableware clattering could be heard. The smell of gravy wafted in the air. The interior of the restaurant was gorgeous with light green lambris and gilded border decorations. The hall they walked through was equally adorned with various statues and replicas of the masters, probably collected by the owner of the restaurant, and frequently hung mirrors reflecting the images of guests eating.

Cesar and Lil passed through the crowded hall and eventually reached their designated seats in the inner room. Because Lil didn't take off her hat even after the manager had already left, Cesar similarly sent away the orchestra, who began preparing to play in the corner of the boudoir, for he understood that Lil wanted to hide her face.

When they were finally left alone, Lil removed her hat. Her hair, which had been rolled up in her hat, fell and gave off a lovely scent. Cesar was taken with the way her hair cascaded down her shoulders. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he had faced her with such a fragrance in her hair. Lil's skin, which hadn't been exposed to the onboard life for a while, shone smoothly in the light coming through the window. Her cheeks were a pale pink. It was the kind of sight he'd always desired; Liloa, sitting across from him in the VIP room of a fancy restaurant.

She isn't even wearing her necklace.

Despite wearing a vest, Cesar could clearly feel Lil's breasts sticking out under her silk shirt.

The necklace

It was taken away. It's been about a week since I came to my senses.

You look healthy.

Really?

Lil touched her face as if she was really surprised to hear that. Her face, obscured by her rich hair, was revealed little by little along with her touch. The movement itself looked so beautiful that Cesar couldn't take his eyes off her. The image of her that he wanted to see so much moved in front of his eyes like an illusion. Cesar always longed to see the feminine beauty of Lil. Out of nowhere, he even became worried that he was the one looking shabby in front of her. He had almost forgotten about his external tension, and now it had tightened up again.

Cesar brushed the collar of his coat for no particular reason.

Are you still hurt anywhere?

The doctor there is competent. I received a lot of help.

By doctor, you mean the Admiral?

No, theres another one. Her names Levi.

Are you comfortable living in the Admirals residence?

Well, you can say that.

An unknown feeling of discomfort spread inside his chest. Cesar was confused. Apparently, instead of hearing she was fairing well, he rather heard her say that it was uncomfortable or that she was getting fed up with Ed.

Did she forgive him? I know with Liloas temper that it could be for a completely different reason why shes still staying at his residence, but its hard to turn a blind eye to it.

Cesar tried to shake off the unpleasant fantasies that kept coming back to him.

I was very worried.

Im sorry It never occurred to me to contact you as I thought you

..?

Lil sighed hesitantly. The clear delay in her words made him nervous for some reason. Due to the anticipation, Cesar completely forgot that he could easily guess the next part, but instead, he remained silent and waited for Lil to continue.

I thought you were in Gualtiero.

You did?

I thought you were too, because Ed said the crew was brought to the prison.

I was pardoned for not participating in the battle.

Thats a relief.

As Lil drank some water, Cesar also raised his glass. The water seeping through her lips caught his attention, especially when she opened her mouth and moved her tongue through her wet teeth.

Where are you staying?

Cesar had the strange illusion that if they kissed now, they would be transported back to the past. It seemed that the past, which was marked with affection and intimacy, would explosively embrace them, and such a revived sense would vividly unite Lil with him again.

Theres a villa owned by my brothers company.

Ah. I see.

But Lils actions indicated that it was all just a futile fantasy. It appeared that her calm moving lips would never agree with the heat he was feeling.

Even though Lil already responded verbally, she nodded as well.

She doesnt seem to have any more questions Its as if theres nothing else to be interested in. I expected her to be curious about the time she was unconscious, but it appears shes just putting up

with her time with me by asking trivial questions. Maybe she already heard the whole story from Edgar no, no. She thought I was held in Gualtiero. So Liloas silence is more of a declaration of not wanting to begin a lengthy conversation Is there really nothing else shed want to ask? Is this really it?

Every minute that followed brought Cesar a new realisation of despair. He, himself, had too many questions; what was she thinking, how she was feeling or what did she think about him now.

I finally understand that Liloa feels no obligation to confide in me, so in her eyes, she doesnt have to tell me anything about how she feels Still, I want to know all of it

Arent you going to ask why I pretended not to know the Admiral during our encounter in the Counts mansion back in Amiaeng?

Its okay.

I dont resent you.

She sounds like she wont give me the indulgence

No matter how much water Cesar drank, he still felt thirsty. Just as he was losing himself in his distress, a waiter brought a tray in and Lil quickly put her hat back on, ending their conversation.

Behind the waiter came his servant holding an envelope.

My Lord, is this correct?

Cesar didnt answer and accepted the thick envelope handed to him by his servant. The servant, who squinted at Lil, left the inner room after saying that he would be waiting outside.

Cesar nodded without looking at the menu of the appetiser that the waiter was holding out, so the waiter put down the menu instead. When the waiter went away, Lil relaxed again, however she remained silent.

Perhaps she hasnt heard the entire story from Edgar yet.

Cesar was determined to explain himself. Lil didnt ask, but he didnt want her to hear it from anyone but himself.

So, he first held out the envelope

Chapter 206

This is a petition from Viscount Noirmont, it includes a promise to stand as a guarantee for the identity of the Bell Rock crew.

Lil put her fork down and accepted the envelope that was extended to her. She took the papers out of it and carefully read through them. When Cesar saw her seriousness gradually fading, he felt a bit more relaxed as he had been desperate to give her even the smallest favour.

How did you prepare all this?

Its what kept me here in Roahn. It was fortunate that this agreement with the Viscount was concluded before any trial could take place.

I had no idea you were planning something like this. Thank you.

However The sailors belonging to Jarles and Valtano arent on this list Because they werent part of the Bell Rock crew to begin with, even the Viscount, whos aware of the battle, cant guarantee for them as much as he did for the Bell Rocks crew. Also, the Navy will never let all 200 of them go, so only half of them can be saved

By the way what or how much did you trade for this?

If you got the Viscount willing to bear this burden, what did you pay for it?

Please just accept it.

I cant accept this without knowing.

The Bell Rock I feel deeply responsible for what happened. If all two hundred men belonged to your original crew, the battle would never have happened in the first place. I was the one who sent them off the ship with the deal of the severance pay. You never reprimanded me for what I did, but I know you resented me. I can acknowledge that much. Im not trying to put you in a position where youd be indebted to me. Its me whos trying to clear my debt. So, will you let me help you? Liloa

Lil put a hand on her forehead, covering half of her face. Her fingertips rubbed her skin meaninglessly. Cesar was quick to recognize it. He still remembered every single one of her habits and every single thing she would do to conceal whatever ailed her. During this agonising time, Cesar was drawn into all kinds of recollections and he opened his mouth awkwardly.

The battle ended while you were in surgery.

Lil didnt answer. Instead, she looked through the viscounts documents while absentmindedly rummaging through her food.

Cesar continued his story regardless.

At that time, I was in the Captains office, destroying any evidence that would link our identities to the Bell Rock. Right after I got rid of everything, I saw you being brought in as a patient. That Seeing your blood on the Commodores dagger it nailed me to my spot. Commodore Sagastar eventually recognized me, and I was dragged out of the captains room, which had become an operating room

*flashback**

After the battle ended abruptly, the Bell Rocks deck was in absolute shambles. The acrid smoke still lingered around and the mist that had gathered once more encircled everyone. Sagastars sudden order to stop the battle left the officers confused, however, the victory had already been handed over to the Navy.

Meanwhile, Cesar hadnt yet escaped the shock caused by witnessing Lils state.

She was covered in blood from head to toe, and a dagger had pierced her abdomen completely

His breath caught in his throat just by thinking about it again.

Out of nowhere, Sagastar grabbed Cesar, who was leaning against the entrance of the captains office and shook him wildly.

Sir Cesar!

What the hell is going on here? How can you possibly be here with her?!

Cesar didnt answer, instead Captain Long intervened in the, till then, one-sided conversation.

Sir Cesar? By chance, were you the one who sent the telegram?

What are you talking about, Julbert?

The coordinates were written in the Officers Mandus code, Commodore! Is there anyone on this ship besides Sir Cesar, who couldve sent that?

What the hell is going on Sir Cesar, say something!

None of their words reached Cesar though. He only breathed heavily for a while when suddenly letting out an inexplicable roar.

Who?! Who the hell did that?!

The sight of Sagastar holding the dagger flashed through Cesars exploding mind.

The fact that he was securing the hilt is a clear indication that he was the one who had stabbed Liloa

Cesar forgot his rank and grabbed Sagastar by the collar.

Why did you stab Liloa?!

..!

Sagastar was visibly startled upon hearing Liloas name and became equally distraught, causing him to not even think about stopping Cesar. Captain Long, unaware of the situation, came between them.

Hey, whats going on?!

Even though Long only barely managed to separate the two, Cesar couldnt attack Sagastar anymore and even if he could, Sagastar didnt have the energy to fight back as he knew he was at fault. It was all because of the navy surgeons hopeless tone right after coming out of the captains office.

The suturing has been completed, but there isnt enough blood left Even if she wakes up, she wont be fine. Shell either be crippled or live the rest of her life in a vegetative state. I predict it to be one of the other

Because Sagastar and Cesar were standing next to each other in front of the captains cabin, it allowed Cesar to overhear Guiads report to the commodore.

No. If that happens

Sir Victors nervousness only seems to stem from his concern about his soon-to-be-ending career It fills me with rage knowing that hes actually preoccupied with his own success at the expense of others dying. Its astounding that a man like him could bring Liloas demise I cant believe that this is truly the reality of the situation

Who the hell is that patient, anyway? The Admiral is completely losing his mind in there. With all due respect, I think this whole ordeal is just utter madness.

She has to wake up. Definitely, its a must.

What kind of situation is this, huh Im pessimistic, though. The Admiral, however, seems to be holding on to a sliver of hope

Hope? What hope?

Guiad lowered his voice and brought his face next to Sagastar.

Hes performing a blood transfusion. Hes doing it as we speak

What?!

Shh! This should remain an absolute secret. Im worried about it, too! Its been 20 years since this practice was banned because it meant saving one person while killing the other

Shouldnt you stop him?!

Who can stop him? Hes completely blinded. Even though his own blood is draining out, his eyes remain bloodshot and steadfast Its terrible! Ive never seen anything like this in the 10 years Ive served as a doctor in the Navy

No. There are so many corpses here, why bother with the transfusion himself

The infusion should come from the blood of a living person*.

Damn it! What a terrible idea!

Blood transfusion

In his time, Cesar had also seen dying sailors secretly receiving blood transfusions.

This madness is unbearable. A blood transfusion is a kind of treatment that provides no guarantee to be a cure and can even lead to sudden death within a few days if not immediately

His fingertips began to tremble at the thought of it.

Cesar then took advantage of Sagastars mental confusion and entered the captains office again. The smell of blood engulfed him as soon as he shut the door and turned around. Not only his nose but his entire body was pressed and pushed as if suffocating.

Cesar examined the captains conference table, which was lit by a few lanterns. A large pool of blood had formed on the white surgical bedspread. It was the same for the white cloth that covered Lils body. Blood stains painted the arms and her face above it a bright red. Cesar couldnt believe it was the blood of just one person.

Cesar stumbled his way towards the operating table. Lil looked more like the spitting image of a terrible tragedy than a living person. Clear marks on her abdomen indicated where the flesh had been torn open and sewn up again.

Nausea set in as his breath quickened. Cesar couldnt bear to look at all the black threads tied in tight knots resting above Lils dried blood.

Without looking at Cesar, Ed spoke.

Stay there. If you come any closer, she might get infected.

Cesar stood at a distance and looked for Lils face. However, as it was covered in blood, hair, torn pieces of fabric and intubation tools, it was hard to make out her features. So he turned to Ed, who

was standing across from him. Ed, too, stood with a blood-stained face and appeared as if he was on the verge of collapsing. He held desperately onto a chair and staggered occasionally, making it clear to Cesar that Eds body was becoming more and more difficult to control.

Cesar murmured while looking at the dark red tube connecting Eds arm to hers.

What what are you doing?

It was a question that had already lost its purpose.

Cant you see this massive bleeding? If I leave it as it is, shell die. With this, perhaps, by some miracle, shell survive. I have to take the risk.

Id rather do it.

No, you cant. The more people are involved, the lower the chance of success.

Cesars outstretched arm fell helplessly. There was nothing he could do now as the damage had already been done. He felt like a coward upon acknowledging that he confined himself to the captains office out of fear of being accused of something. An unforgivable feeling of disgust welled up within him.

Had I been on the deck with Liloa, I couldve prevented this accident where she would be stabbed by Sagastars dagger Simply staying by Liloas side wouldve been enough to save her. Why the hell didnt I realise what was truly important in that moment? Why did I waste my time in the Captains office, trying to create a trouble-free future?

Eds voice broke Cesars train of thoughts as he spoke calmly.

Theres only one reason Im keeping you alive. Liloa will definitely wake up, and when she does and youre not there, shell hate me. Thats the only reason. So, dont delude yourself and just focus on preserving your life.

Lil, however, didnt wake up even after several days

Chapter 207

Meanwhile, Cesar was ostensibly pardoned. The reason was that he didnt participate in the battle and had secretly sent the coordinates where Ed had been thrown overboard. Neither Cesar nor Ed ever admitted the latter, but it was an irrefutable fact nonetheless. From the Navys point of view, the authenticity surrounding the circumstances no longer mattered. They firmly believed that Cesar was innocent. Cesar was the son of a commander, the younger brother of a count, and a former officer of the navy. To say that he was a member of the Southern League of Pirates was something that couldnt even be said as a joke.

But most of all, their admiral didnt deny Cesars innocence. Cesar was free to move within the fleet with tacit recognition. There were many officers who recognized him. Most of them had been Cesars colleagues when he was stationed on the Mondovi Fleet. And several of them were even Cesars fellow junior officers just a few years ago, but in the meantime, they had been promoted to senior officers and in charge of battleships themselves. Cesar often stood by, watching them command the deck in their red uniforms fluttering with each swing of the baton. It was a big contrast to himself who wore a simple shirt.

Ed stayed by Lils bedside day and night. She was moved to the admirals office on the Visha before departing, so Cesar, who stayed on the Bell Rock, could only visit the admirals office and look at Lil when they were anchored. It was, especially in the beginning, a very difficult wait to helplessly watch a patient who didnt wake up. He had grown afraid that she would lie like this forever, but as time passed, another realisation hit him.

Even if Liloa opens her eyes, she wont look for me anymore. Liloa has broken us up before collapsing, and its clear as day that she wont reverse that decision merely based on some lingering fondness

More than anything, this fact exhausted Cesar the most.

To make matters worse, Edgar is a disgustingly perceptive human being for noticing all this.

Your eagerness to come by isnt what it used to be.

Cesar sat on the bedside chair and stared at Lil. Ed, who Cesar initially thought was dozing off sitting at the table in the admirals office, kept talking to him to the point of annoyance.

Do you think Im allowing you to visit because Im happy to see your mug every day? The only reason I put up with your daily presence is because of Liloa. But wouldnt she feel awful knowing that you visited her with such a grave expression on your face? I spared your life so you could talk to her, but seeing how you dont say a word and just sit there, looking at her face makes me wonder, how could that be?

Looks to me like you already broke up before this whole ordeal started

Cesar knew it would be ridiculous to deny it, so he remained silent and fixed his attention on Lil. Her wiped-clean face breathed peacefully.

I cant believe she has been unconscious for a month already. She appears to be sleeping. As if she could wake up any minute now. But every moment Im watching her is so frustrating and painful

When I think of what you did to me, I wouldnt mind tearing you to shreds, but

Unable to bear the provocation any longer, Cesar kicked out his chair, stood up and shouted towards Ed.

Damn it! Then just kill me!

Ed murmured, narrowing his tired eyes.

What a surprise

This life must be so pathetic in your eyes that its deserving of your ridicule, right? Is that also the reason why you play with it as you please?

Why are you angry with me when you and Liloa have broken up? She thought I was dead anyway, even giving the order herself. In that state, theres no way I couldve played a role in the collapse of your relationship. So, whats the point of blaming me?

Shut up. Whether Liloa and I are together or not, its none of your business.

Ed shrugged his shoulders.

Anyway

Edgar still has the knack of getting people, who try their best to remain calm, to be furious with him

Cesar didnt want to deal with Ed anymore, but the latters provocations were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. As time passed, Cesar found it harder and harder to stay patient. He eventually turned back to Lil, sincerely praying that the fleet would reach Mondovi quickly.

Hey, how long can you hold your breath underwater?

Cesar didnt answer.

He must be trying to get under my skin again with some nonsense.

Four minutes? Five minutes? Well, everyone can do that.

But, would you believe it if I said that theres someone who has to live underwater for the rest of their life? And theyre only allowed to breathe enough not to die?

Thats impossible.

Eds gibberish, of course, wasnt new to Cesar, so he simply ignored it and kissed Lils forehead. After whispering in her ear she should wake up quickly, Cesar calmly stood up.

Unless you acknowledge and be willing to endure that kind of pain, you can never get involved with Liloa again.

Cesar passed Eds table and headed for the door. Ed spoke behind his back, barely audible.

But even if youre lucky enough to realise it, itll only happen after you lose her

The last of Eds voice came through the crack of the closing door.

Thats the height of tragedy

Before long, the fleet reached Mondovi. Ed disappeared with Lil as soon as they entered the port, so when Cesar came to the admirals office, it was already empty. He knew they would head straight to Eds mansion, but somehow he didnt want to follow. He contemplated that not seeing Lil for a while would help clear his head.

After about a month, when his mind was far more stable, he thought about visiting her for the first time.

When he landed at the Port of Devito, Cesar stopped by the residence that was run by his older brother Carl to inform them of his arrival. Because there were no employees at the residence that didnt recognize Cesar, he naturally entered the villa and reigned as the owner of the mansion.

As the news spread that Cesar was staying at the property of the Lemoine family, his former colleagues and acquaintances flooded in to visit him. At first, Cesar immersed himself in contact with Viscount Noirmont and didnt take charge of the propertys affairs. However, as business continued in the mansion, it made him feel as if he had finally returned to his former self

end of flashback

Living without Liloa went better than I thought.

Cesar stared at the living, breathing Lil in front of him. There were no traces left that indicated that she had been lying down like a corpse not too long ago. Each gesture and each movement was full of vitality and life. Cesar was captivated and admired such beauty.

After a long silence, Lil closed the large envelope in front of her.

Okay. Ill take it. Thank you. But with this, I hope you dont feel indebted to the Bell Rocks situation anymore.

I wont.

Lil leaned back in the chair with a slightly relieved expression. As if it was refreshing to dissociate Cesar from the Bell Rock.

Cesar, on the other hand, began to feel a bit sad.

Most of the time Ive spent with Liloa was during our life on board the Bell Rock. I always resented that But now that both of us stepped on Imperial soil, it seems to be possible to lead a much more romantic life if we start over. Itll be too bad to miss this narrow opportunity now that weve returned to the Central Continent. As Cesar Lemoine, I can surely be more generous to Liloa than ever before. I can listen to whatever she has to say and maybe I can truly understand her then

Cesars hopeful gaze turned to Lil, but hers was looking out the window. Lils eyes shone with the colour of the water. Looking at her transparent, blue sparkling eyes under the bright light reminded him of the day they first met.

Going back to that memory is somehow always nice.

That day, the green meadows of LeBrunns yard blew away by the wind and rolled like a wave, Lil smiled warmly with her fine hair fluttering around her ears, her voice permeating through the sunlight, the smell of leather harnesses, and the sound of Koud Bhans neighs.

I always remember the vividness of it all, but I never have said anything about it in front of Liloa, so why do I want to talk about that today, on a day like this?

I

Hm?

I just remember the first time I saw you.

At LeBrun?

I was happy then. It seemed like an insignificant time at first, but we smiled at each other whenever our eyes met. If only that ordinary relationship had continued, there wouldve been no such thing as being cut off from Liloa forever. I cant believe that our more intimate days are about to disappear without a trace. It seems that neither the world nor she will remember how deep into her I was, and how much I loved her. If I knew this would happen, Id rather

Yes that day I was just reminded of it

I liked that day too.

Do you remember it as well?

Lil smiled for the first time. It was the kind of smile that Cesar only occasionally saw. A quiet but meaningful, earnest smile. When she smiled like that, he felt something close to affection. He never thought he would be able to see it again and was rather relieved that Lil seemed to assure him that he was neither bothering nor offending her.

Chapter 208

How can I forget, you were the only cadet who didnt call me Miss.

Cesar considered it fortunate that it was a meaningful reminiscence for Lil rather than a painful memory.

I dont want everything to remain shabby. But this alone isnt enough. This is but a very small achievement. Even if its for mere self-consolation, I need more conviction.

He was certain that he had made a certain impression on Lil and that no one else could do the same.

It cant be this trivial. Theres no way she only sees me as this much.

Cesar was terrified that he wouldve to go through the rest of his days with only this small confirmation of emotion to hold on to. He wanted more validation, so he added to his words.

I was afraid Ill live on in your memory as a regretful

Dont say that. I dont regret it.

Cesar nodded his head sharply.

Thats a relief.

To you always Thank you. Yes. Ill always be grateful.

Cesar was taken aback when Lil wiped her mouth with a napkin, indicating that she was about to leave and end their conversation. There were still a lot of feelings he wanted to know. Lils departure came far too soon.

Has it been difficult for you because I was lacking? It pains me to think that it must have been.

Youre not lacking. Theres a place where you can be perfect just the way you are. Its a shame youve been turning your back on it and now beating yourself up like this.

Im just sorry.

Then should I also say Im sorry?

Lil seemed to understand what Cesar was about to say, so her eyes turned to the window again.

If youre sorry

Im not sorry now. Im sorry for the past, which hurt you inadvertently and made you suffer. There were so many things I didnt know and looking back on it now, I wonder why I was so stupid, I really I guess I was just too young then Yes, you can call it young and inexperienced.

I had the same thought. Liloa. We can begin again

Cesar. Its too late.

No.

If you stay with me Ill only ruin you, Cesar, all this time, I I was breaking you

I might go south again. This conflict has made things worse in the South. Ill spend years there if needed. Thats what Im thinking. Ill live like that. No matter how much we regret the past and reflect on our mistakes, it wont change if we go back together.

No, I dont think so.

Cesar. Your salvation brought me here and made me who I am today. Although it wasnt how you wanted it to be, I care about you, deeply respect you, and am grateful to you. Just because it wasnt the kind of special emotion between a man and a woman, that doesnt make it any less precious. At least for me for me, it doesnt. Ill never forget you. I cant erase you and I never intend to

After a short silence, her determined voice spoke once more.

Im sorry I let you go so late.

..!

No, not yet. This isnt working. She wasnt moved at all. No matter how much she cares about me, no matter how grateful she is to me, in the end, I cant be with her. Those are all just shallow emotions that wont matter if we live as strangers from now on. What does it matter what kind of feelings we harbour? This resolves nothing

At least that was what Cesar felt.

I havent even explained my ignorance of Edgars identity in Amiaeng yet. However, Liloa seems to have already finished everything. No amount of explanation will affect her decision

One second passed and Cesars panicking thoughts quickly changed direction.

Shall I make a pitiful excuse now? Shall I ask for forgiveness? Shall I keep her here by asking her not to do this? Shall I repeat that pathetic and boring story that I will follow whatever she wants to go?

While Cesars mind was wandering around, Lil stood up without delay, murmuring that she had work to do. Too stunned to completely comprehend what was going on, Cesar made his way through the hall with Lil, not at all remembering how they suddenly got out of the restaurant.

When he came back to his senses, Lil was already waving her hand.

Goodbye.

If I dont answer back, maybe I can delay it even a little bit.

Cesar couldnt afford to even open his mouth, but Lil didnt seem to care, so he unconsciously accepted the hat that the restaurant manager handed over. Lil, who was watching, looked up at Cesar as she scanned his attire.

Its nice. It suits you well.

Smiling faintly, Lil put on her own hat, making it unable for Cesar to see her face anymore. Cesar guessed Lil would turn away from him anytime now, so he spoke in a hurry.

Liloa.

Yes?

Liloa no longer responds to anything but petty farewells. Even when I tell her that Ill gladly accompany her if she goes to the South, or that Ill accompany her anywhere else for that matter, she knows Ill eventually get bored and tell me to quit.

Cesar suddenly realised how many times he had repeated those words without heeding them. However, it was the only thing he knew how to say. He didnt know any other magical language capable of changing Lils mind, just as Lil was unable to tell him she loves him

Please take care.

Yes. You too.

And with that answer, Lil moved away.

Cesar stood watching her back for a long time. Until his servant who brought the carriage called for him, he imagined her turning around and coming back to him over and over again.

All he had to do was climb the stairs when the carriage door opened in front of him. But his body felt strange. Cesar lowered his gaze on himself. His feet were on the ground, he was dressed, and he was clearly standing upright, but he wasnt perceiving this as his reality. Only the past was fresh in his mind.

I only remember being happy. I always thought every moment had been difficult and exhausting, but looking back, it was overcome with joy. Every moment of being able to talk to Liloa, touch Liloa, and look at Liloa whenever I wanted overflowed with uncontrollable euphoria

{ Living without Liloa was better than I thought. }

I only thought I was fine.

Thats right

Cesar couldnt stand it and ran. It was very brief and he soon stopped again.

Lil had blended in with the crowd, with her blue hat with red feathers, her white shirt and black hair. Whereas she walked clearly while dressed in the bright colours of the world, Cesar was fading away and pushed behind to blend in with the crowds and noises, appearing to be gradually erased until there was nothing left of him. He backed away as the empty space permeated him. The meaninglessness of a life without Lil, that he seemed to have already forgotten, came crashing in like a tidal wave.

He had a faint sense of déjà vu. He experienced this feeling of emptiness before. It was when he longed for Lil while being surrounded by things that didnt mean anything to him. At that time, he thought he had gone too far to save her, but that became insignificant in comparison to her smile, because only Liloa, whom he adored, was meaningful in his life.

Did I truly save Liloa? Or was it nothing but a false sense of salvation?

A voice he didnt want to hear invaded his thoughts.

{ But even if youre lucky enough to realise it, itll only happen after you lose her }

Back then I couldnt understand it and didnt even want to understand it. But now, I dont even know what Ive come to understand

Hearing the dull voice of his servant urging him to enter the carriage, he stepped on the stairs but didn't really feel it. Even the cushions' soft feel and the ride's comfort were lacking. The grains of sand representing his senses began to fall into a vast abyss one by one. As his chest started to hurt, he untied his cravat and ruffled his shirt. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't shake the feeling of being sucked into the void. Caesar's tears began to fall along with his cold sweat as he removed his justaucorps and threw away his hat. Something kept slipping away, and he was perplexed as to what it was.

The sound of the wagon wheels crushing gravel was deafening and the interior of the carriage rattled with every rock they hit.

Cesar leaned forward, clutching his head.

The ground shook as if there had been an earthquake. The more he cried, the higher his fever and the worse his headache became. He screamed in agony. As the carriage rocked to the point of nausea, the sound of his heavy breathing filled the carriage. He couldn't sit still. Crouching like a dog was the most comfortable position for him in this situation, which was impossible to get out of. There was nothing when he looked down. Only a world filled with meaninglessness that was discarded in the distant past.

{ That's the height of tragedy }

Caesar's carriage rode steeply through the height of that tragedy. It shuddered violently as if it had been hit by a storm.

And at the pinnacle of which he couldn't escape, Caesar howled

Chapter 209

Gualtieri.

A prison, once infamously known as the western pirates' graveyard, continued its significance by catching administrative criminals and fraudsters now that those same pirates had been completely annihilated. And because Roahn was a port-based commercial city, head-rolling crimes were common.

The misfortunes of the Gualtieri prison began with the disappearance of pirates in the Anatole Sea. When the official route for merchant guilds became safe, the aristocrats who supported Gualtieri backed out one after another. However, due to the long history of pirates, the prison's significant growth had actually reached its peak and the sudden withdrawal of donations became a fatal problem for the inmates' livelihood.

The governor of the prison endured this headache for a while and eventually came up with a clever idea. He thought about taking some of the inmates as his clients as well. There were quite a number of intelligent criminals in Roahn, where dozens of merchants fought for major commercial powers, and most of them were nobles or wealthy people with influence. Given that, those men initially thought they could use their wealth as bribes to circumvent the law. But that didn't work, because the enemies who sued them were men of wealth too. It was the same for administrative offenders who took a lot of bribes from them. So instead, Gualtieri cleverly prepared a variety of prison cells. The more expensive the room, the more spacious and comfortable it was. If an inmate wanted to

bring in a servant from their house, they simply paid an extra fee. The room would be decorated according to the inmates liking and quality meals would be served.

Of course, heinous criminals such as murderers still existed and were also detained there, but they managed to help the rest of the inmates lead a comfortable life by locking them in one of the four towers, each located at the corner of the square building.

There was even a tea party every Monday. It was all part of the act of showing off towards the capital, showing them whom the man was with the most power and that it continued even after being imprisoned. The battle of pride was enormous, with or without a shack around their ankle. Wealthy inmates would invite not only their cellmates but also their children and household servants to laugh and talk until late at night. These men had no fear of punishment. After all, they were destined to get out of jail by merely paying some fines.

Whats all this?

Alains eyes widened as he entered the room where one of those parties was in full swing. In comparison to their place of confinement, this luxurious room was comparable to a room in any noblemans mansion. The sight of people dressed up and laughing made him question whether he was still in the prison. Alain, who had initially assumed he would be executed the moment the jailer ordered him to follow, looked around in a daze and discovered Marenzio devouring a goose dish on a long table.

Making his way towards the table, Alain was unable to hide his joy. He hadnt even fully comprehended if he was dead or alive for the two weeks he had been in prison. And the closer he got to the table, the more the rich aroma of meat stimulated his sense of smell. Servants passed among the people with fragrant champagne on their silver trays. Alain grabbed a champagne glass and drank it all at once. Because of his quick steps, the shackles around his ankles creaked, making the woman in the dress next to him look at him with contempt. Not caring about it at all, Alain stood next to Marenzio and grabbed the goose leg.

Marenzio. Right now what the hell is going on?

Although he spoke seriously, he remained faithful to his instincts and began eagerly gnawing at the goose leg. Even so, Alain didnt forget to check the situation by rolling his eyes around. Marenzio, sucking his finger clean, replied with equal seriousness.

Take the bones.

No, why?

So we can dig through the wall and escape. It doesnt really matter to me, but the youngsters in my cell are already going crazy, yelling theyre going to die if they stay like this.

Id rather steal the utensils you fool. And those are stone walls.

Isnt tableware subjected to body search?

What? You think the bones arent?

Then whats your idea?

Marenzio chewed on the cartilage while Alain lamented the fact that he couldnt think of anything else for the time being.

So even in Marenzios cell are talks about escaping going around

It was the same for Alains. About 30 people were locked together, and all they could talk about from the time they woke up in the morning till they closed their eyes at night was running away. However, contrary to his fears, the fact that he could scout the place as easily as he did now meant that prison life was not as harsh as they had anticipated in the beginning.

Gualtiero At first, thinking about being imprisoned in this notorious prison even made me want to pee my pants, but my thoughts changed as time passed. There was no decapitation or torture. The only strange thing is that there hasnt been a trial, even after such a long time

Alain had one of the best brains on the Bell Rock. So he tried his hardest to figure out why.

Perhaps our identification is delayed. I dont know about Julios side, but we were treated like hostages until we got here from the Bell Rock. Its all because of our Captain. He exclaimed that we were only Julios hostages. Whenever I remember Lil, my appetite goes away

In a complicated mood, Alain laid down the bone after eating all of its flesh. At the same time, Marenzio spoke without notice.

If only the Captain was here, we wouldve escaped by now

I cant believe he just died like that.

Marenzio. Stop talking about the Captain.

They didnt even return his corpse, Grandpa. These Navy guys know no respect for others.

Several sailors witnessed Lils death by the dagger of the Navy. Alain was one of them.

Though corpses that fell into the sea cant be recovered, Lil surely died on the deck. The corpses of Julios gang, who were despised by the Navy, were even collected and buried, but Lils body wasnt returned.

Alain had a good guess. He whispered, lowering his voice towards Marenzio.

Youre asking why they didnt return the Captains body? Perhaps its because hes been decapitated outside here in Gualtiero. The Black Whales bounty had been the best among the Leagues captains after all

What?! Those fucking Imperial bastards

If I were the Imperial Navy, Id want to brag about it to the whole city. The head of the Black Whale whom everyone feared, now rotting. Id put it on the highest window so they could all see it even from the sea off Amiaeng

Grandpa, the Captain

Quit it.

But where did they put his body, now that only his head is hanging?

After having said that, Marenzio squeezed out tears like chicken dung*.

I always assumed he was one of those who werent that close with Lil, but apparently, he cared about him more than others would think.

As Marenzios thick shoulders fluttered, Alain patted him on the shoulder in an equally melancholic mood but then turned around upon feeling a strangers hand on his own shoulder.

Are you the new guys from downstairs, the merchants from the South?

..?

A well-dressed man spoke to Alain, breathing out cigarette smoke as he talked. It was a man with a carefully trimmed moustache that extended to his cheeks. Several rings glowed on his hand as he tilted the teacup. Alain scanned the mans noble appearance and the guard who stuck to his side.

This is Sir Avar, the inmate of this cell and the owner of Cocoon. Pay your respect!

Alain bowed coldly.

Greetings. My name is Alain.

When Alain turned his eyes to where Avar had chinned, Jericho appeared in his field of vision, standing by the fireplace while talking to a few nobles.

It seems there was a reason why they called for one person from each prison cell.

Yes, thats right.

I heard that you were one of the officers of the ship belonging to the Viscount.

A flash of light shot through Alains head. Only then did he realise why he was brought to this tea party.

The fact that Avar mentioned Viscount Noirmont, not the League, means that he knows us as sailors of a merchant ship.

His history of working for a merchant of the Empire before he boarded the Bell Rock shone in unexpected places. Alain had a hunch.

Avar wants to expand his business to the South. But because management secrets are strictly maintained at an officers level, he needs to spend a lot of money and effort to find something out. And coincidentally, because of what happened in the South, he happened to find himself in the same prison as those Southern merchants This is all about buying information.

Alain opened his mouth wide and gently clenched his hands together.

Oh, Sir. Thats right. Is there anything youre curious about?

These days, southern spices are becoming more and more in demand. Im a little interested in them.

Chapter 210

Avar took a ring from his finger and threw it at Alain. Curses erupted within Alains thoughts almost immediately

Hes giving me jewels to pay for my bail when I dont even know if Ill live tomorrow the bastard. Id rather he give me meat

But on the outside, Alain wore a big smile and bent his body forward.

Although Ill take this precious jewel into account, and I dare to say this, Im hoping that youll understand that I have no choice but to think about the physical pain Im going through first. Despite our shabby appearance, were high-ranking officials hired by the Viscount himself. Over the years working for him weve grown accustomed to the dining culture of the Empire, where we ate food with a spoon and fork, but now its unbearably uncomfortable for us to pick up and eat food from a bowl without them. Everyone else in my cell shares the same sentiment as me. Ive no problem informing you about the situation in the South, but if its not too much of a burden, I hope you can consider these inconveniences and help us, then I will be able to help you even more.

Hearing himself talk, Alain knew what he just said was packed into some long-winded nonsense, but he was also well aware of the fact that imperial nobles often used words that went in circles like this. He assumed Avar would easily understand, so he bowed his head even more.

You mean, you need spoons and forks?

Yes, yes thats right.

Hearing you talk like that, it seems that you guys dont seem to use table utensils on your islands, or do you?

No, but we do use a stick that resembles a spoon

Then do you eat the rest with your hands? Like animals?

Yeah, yeah, Im ashamed to admit it

People around burst into laughter. Suddenly, men and women gathered one by one to watch. Avar looked mockingly down at Alain, who kept bowing his head. The crowd seemed to find it rather amusing that Alain was praising spoons and forks as if they were part of the great culture of the Empire.

Then try this.

With a sly smirk, Avar held out the teacup he was holding.

We just drink the water

I said try it.

Just when Alain was about to explain himself again, he raised his eyes upon sensing the strange atmosphere. Dozens of eyes were watching him with interest. All of them were dressed in flashy clothes and wore white wigs. They were men with peacock feathered hats and women with bouquets of flowers piled up like towers in their hair.

Alain lifted his hands which had been gathered on his belly button. As both of his hands were held together by an iron chain, he dipped them both into the teacup. Boos and shouts erupted as he licked his wet fingers.

A woman who was covering her face with a fan next to Avar clicked her tongue and spoke.

Oh, its so pitiful hes like an animal. I think you should help those poor fellows.

Should I?

Avar embraced the woman as though to shield her from something she shouldn't see. After Alain wiped the tea off his beard and mouth with his forearm, Avar replied, clapping satisfactorily as though he had been looking at an interesting play.*

Then I give you my word. I'll even include some knives

Because she had been wandering around the city all day, Lil was exhausted and soaked in the bathtub. The delicate scent of linden flowers rose from the surface of the water. The maids even added some incense for relaxation, but she didn't feel like she would get any rest anytime soon. It was because all kinds of different routes, possibilities and variations came to mind one after the other.

The markets bustling alleys, the corners of brick buildings, the round square, the city hall Roahn is unlike any other city I've ever visited. The cities I know consist of those typical old styled neighbourhoods, with a more relaxed and laid-back way of life. Outside those mansions, one could already see forests and hunting grounds, and people would walk leisurely on the road. Fields and orchards coexist with the city.

Roahn, however, has no view of the countryside at all. The only open spaces are the artificially landscaped parks and the vacant lots yet to be developed. Buildings are densely built as if several cities were condensed together. It has a high population density and the residents are diverse due to the mixture of various classes and nationalities.

The busy streets made Lil's head hurt.

The plan I can come up with so far is for us to cross the centre of this chaotic city with about a hundred people. Gualtiero is at the far end of the city, on the inland side, whereas the sailors have to board the ship from the port side. The variables and alternatives that come to mind are becoming more congested. When I was merely looking at the map, I never predicted it would be this much, so seeing the streets in person was quite a shock.

Lil sighed at her mounting worries.

Shortly after, a maid entered the room, carrying Lil's nightgown.

Sir Edgar has returned. He said he'll wait in the library.

Okay.

As Lil exited the bathtub, the maid wrapped a towel around her. Lil walked behind the partition, wiped her body and brushed her hair. It was then that she was given a glimpse of the side view of her naked body in the full-length mirror.

Lil turned her body to fully face it.

She was content with the fact that her body had swollen as a result of her overeating.

My muscles are still sluggish, but I appear much more human than when I first regained consciousness. I was nothing but skin and bones back then.

The gaze that attentively went down, paused just below her chest. Her fingertips slowly traced the wound that crossed her abdomen obliquely, beginning near the pit of her stomach. The scar was much longer than the original entry wound because a bigger incision was needed in order to locate

the penetrated artery. When her fingers brushed against the rugged stitch marks, her stomach felt tingling for no reason.

How I managed to survive something like that is still a mystery to me

Lil put her arms out in front of her.

Its strange to realise that someone elses blood is coursing through these protruding blue veins on my wrists Everyones life is valuable, regardless of circumstances, so I never expected the Mother of All Things to save my breath in particular. There are plenty of other women who are willing to bear children in my stead I have always felt like it was my fate to constantly need to prove my existence by making a fuss, or else I was doomed to vanish at any moment

However, someone broke the taboo and saved my life. And the Mother of All Things merely watched the hard struggle that followed afterwards from a distance. Why didnt the Mother just cut my lifeline, reasoning that, as a woman, Im not worth the effort anyway? Does this actually mean that my life isnt futile, but has special meaning?

Lil had seen countless people die from injuries way smaller than hers.

Many people have been way more unfortunate thinking about it now makes me just belatedly grateful that Im alive.

Lil walked slowly closer to the mirror. As her folded knees touched the ground, her pelvis locked and her shoulders tilted. Her arms and chest shook with the afterglow of sitting down. Even this simple gesture was thrilling. She grabbed her breasts out of habit. The lumps of flesh, which she once hated, were held by her hands in their organic wholeness. When she let go of her breasts, red handprints were left behind. Lil had to admit.

My body and vitality are inseparably mixed and beautiful. My body, with its smooth legs, bulging breasts and buttocks My body with weak muscles and soft skin I finally feel like it can simply be like this. I dont have to hide my figure with a necklace or grow my hair forcibly for that matter.

Is this really me?

Lil asked the invisible shadow in the mirror. Her old acquaintance, with his black mouth wide open, didnt seem to agree.

Shed more blood, give more flesh

Only a greedy echo was heard.

Lil rummaged through the clothes she had hung over the partition. She lifted her pants, took out a dagger and held it near her neck.

This seems too short. My hair should be at least long enough to be tied up or made into an updo

The tip of her dagger went down to her collarbone. With her other hand, Lil grabbed a bunch of her hair and pulled it down in front of her. Her hair, which reached her hips, could have grown till this length because Cesar told her not to cut it. The whole time she was on the Bell Rock, she had never worn a dress or make-up in front of him, so she thought she could heed his request this much. It was his reward for enduring her uncaring appearance. Compared to the physical appearance management she suffered all over her body when she was in Sesbron, Lil considered this a much simpler request and did feel a bit sorry for him.

This is all that I have to cut. Take this.

Mortu, who had been hiding in the dark, didnt answer.

As expected, hair is nothing to him. Mortu is a being who is greedy for flesh and blood He desires only human suffering