

Northwest 71

Chapter 71

Jericho had already gone into the other room, but he returned shortly after, holding an empty glass. When he poked Lil, she first filled her own glass, before pouring some of the liquor she brought into his. When he was satisfied with his drink, Jericho slipped out of the room again.

Jarles stroked his moustache and exclaimed in surprise.

Its the first time I see you drinking!

When did we see each other so often?

Lil gulped down the Qanyon and wiped her lips. A few moments later, Jarles also emptied his glass without leaving a single drop behind. Lil asked, refilling the two glasses.

You have three from the Navy this time?

Aye.

What do you think?

Theyre stupid.

Lils expression faltered at the totally unexpected answer.

What?

Complete idiots, all three of them were demoted to the central deck in a day At first, I put them all on the front deck because they were from the Navy, but guess what?

They cant even tie the rigging properly Theyre just cleaning the deck for now. When the opportunity arises, Id probably throw them into the sea or something. It wont be a surprise if it turns out that they cant even swim.

Thats not like the Navy at all.

I heard yours is a doctor.

Youre right, but

Lil tilted her head, sipping on her second glass.

Arent you suspicious of the possibility of them being spies?

What? Those idiots are spies?

Jarles, who was playing with the ends of his hair, snorted. The blatantly sarcastic Lil suspected him of being complacent.

They can simply pretend to be stupid, Jarles.

I thought about that, too, but you dont have to worry, Lil. Weve always been watchful of them, along with the Leagues leaders, so dont think Im complacent. The only thing to watch out for is their serious idiocy. They might break my lovely Rosannas bow sooner than later.

Rosanna was the name of Jarles ship, named after one of his old flames. In any case, Lil could no longer dismiss his insight. Lil had been a captain from the start because she possessed a ship, but

initially, the position of captain of a pirate ship was obtained by vote. To become a captain, one needed to be competent in politics as well as have a keen eye. Despite his occasionally petty side due to his hairstyle and moustache, Jarles was one of the most dignified captains.

Lil, youre suspicious of that doctor, arent you?

Aye.

Why?

I ran into him in Amiaeng before he boarded the Bell Rock.

Lil didnt elaborate further, fearing that Ed would become a target. Jarles stared at her, while twisting his hair around his finger, waiting for an explanation. However, Lil silently emptied the glass instead of answering.

You dont like that coincidence?

Yeah. We bumped into each other twice.

Huh, whoever hears you would think that Amiaeng is as big as the Empire. Besides, that doctor, didnt you say he got shot instead of you?

Except for when theyre detected, spies have to survive no matter what. And even if they die, they need to crawl their tongues to their fleet and report. That are spies.

Jarles filled his glass.

Lil. Having a keen eye doesnt mean your eyes are only filled with doubt. You have to put doubt in one and trust in the other. Both eyes need to be open for them to function properly.

While Jarles pointed alternately at his eyes, Lil glanced at his dark irises but eventually turned to her drink.

Why are you so stubbornly keeping only one eye open?

Ive seen your ships doctor today as weve been keeping an eye on him. I dont know, but Ive never seen anybody like that guy before. Every ships doctor was snooping around him, too.

Hey, dont abandon him.

Oh! Better yet, if youre going to throw him away, give him to me.

Lil chuckled.

It doesnt matter to me anymore. Would you like to make an offer to Ed tomorrow?

What?

Im quitting the captaincy, Jarles.

What?!

Ill go somewhere far away and make a living by ploughing the fields.

While Jarles laughed as if he had heard a very humorous joke, Lil just kept drinking her liquor without joining his outburst. The laughter that had been thundering beside her eventually subsided

and a few moments later, his movements stopped completely. After staying silent for a bit, Jarles jumped out of his seat and yelled towards the other side of the table.

Hey, Anunchio!

His voice was so loud that the other captains, who were hovering together with serious expressions, turned and paid attention to Jarles. While everyone was bewildered as to what was going on, Anunchio, sitting at the far end of the table, cautiously rose from his seat. Lil then poured the full content of the bottle down her throat.

..?

Jarles spoke, pointing at her head.

Lil said hes leaving the League?

What?..

The Black Whale?..

As they all climbed to their feet in surprise, the table in the centre trembled. Lil put down the bottle and looked around to see five or six guys standing tall. Despite the menacing sight, Lil merely wiped the liquor drops that ran down her chin.

Aye. Im done as captain.

Lil slowly rose, looking at the men whose eyes were full of scepticism. Lil took a big breath and laid out the explanation she had been working on all day.

I, Lil Schweiz, have miraculously survived because of my crews relentless act. While the crew of the Bell Rock may think theyve been given a fair price, Im ashamed to speak about it.

Still, no one sat down. Lil raised her chin more proudly and continued.

No one objected, so Lil clenched her fists and spoke her words without hesitation.

But what will my crew think of me if I stay? It would be said that someone whos in debt of thirty lives is sitting in the captains seat. Everyone has only one life. Thats the unchangeable truth. So, who can bear me? I became a precedent. Someone apparently worth saving, whereas others were not. I shouldnt be getting on any ship. Ill have to disappear.

Lil. Dont think like that

It was Jarles. He was constantly twisting his curly hair with uneasy movements.

No. Im leaving with the navigator. I have to show everyone that a life that sits on anothers life shouldnt exist in the League.

Dont be too hard on yourself. Isnt it a pleasure for a Captain to see such loyalty from his crew? No matter how much is paid, this kind of loyalty cant be bought with money. Now, why in the world are you thinking that you cant accept the noble hearts of your crew?

Besides, those sailors made their own choice. Please reconsider, to ensure that their decision isnt in vain.

But Lil shook her head firmly.

Since when has returning the captains position been so difficult? There will be a lot of people cheering just for me leaving this kitchen.

At times like this, The League needs an experienced Captain rather than a newly elected one

A captain, standing on the right side of Jarles, cut in. Lil gave him a look. It was a man with a deformed nose bridge, bent to the right side of his face.

Valtano. Thank you for your words, but there are more experienced sailors on the Bell Rock than I. I guarantee it.

Lil then turned to Anunchio. His elderly eyes were fixed on her. Soon, the enormous old man, who appeared to be taller than Cesar, began to sink. Lil dropped her gaze to match his lowered eyes. Anunchio sat silently for a while and then slowly opened his mouth.

The Black Whale is right. Everyone is so afraid of the future that they only want to see the approaching waves. But you should always look at the horizon to see if a storm is flying over. As Lil said, what happened sets a precedent. Dont let loyalty cover your wrongdoing.

I cant believe such a coward was a Captain of the League!

The complaint came from the captain that followed Anunchios lead and sat down beside him. Two more men lowered themselves to their seats. Their reactions were predicted as it was a situation that could easily be misunderstood. But Lil didnt want her name to be associated with a coward, so she devised a ruse to persuade them.

It would be foolish for me to convince you not to think of me as a coward. Instead, I hope you recognize my sadness that I can no longer be with you and my crew. That way I can prove my sincerity and leave.

Lil rummaged through the pocket of her pants and placed a golden certificate in front of him.

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Ill return all the profits that I received from the League. All my hard work throughout the years will be remembered as service without pay. I recognize that its only a small amount of money, so aside from this, Ill also include the share of the navigator who carried out his duties in the hope that his service would be spent on a place where it could be useful. Ill even add some more if that will ease your heavy hearts.

A captain hostile to Lil shouted.

Who cares about your and your navigators salaries?

Lil handed the gold certificate to Jarles on her right.

This is a gold deposit certificate from the imperial bank. Look at the amount.

As Jarles eyes widened, the captain next to him snatched the check. He eventually showed the same expression.

Now, you how did you even get this amount

The certificate is fake.

Fake?

This is a forged receipt, but I tested it out and exchanged it for gold at the Marchand Bank. The evidence is on the Bell Rock. You can go check it out right now if you want.

Lil kept talking while looking at their still rigid faces.

This is something Ive been working on for a long time. When Anunchio accepted me as a Captain in the League, he had a strategy in mind that could utilise my origin and appearance. Ive tried different kinds of ways to repay the League hospitality for accepting me, and this is the most successful one. Im glad to show it before I leave the League.

And lastly, Ill give you the Bell Rock.

There was quite a commotion at the table. It was only natural that the League not only needed funds but also ships to continue its operations. The Bell Rock was an imperial merchant ship and therefore strong and sophisticated. The captains began exchanging glances, they were probably all thinking the same thing, that the ship is most likely more appealing than the money. For now, its up to the others to debate about whether she would leave as a coward or resign with dignity. At Anunchios signal, Lil left through the kitchen door and went out to the living room.

In the living room, gambling under the pretence of playing cards was still in full swing. Besides the players, about ten other people gathered around the table and watched. Shouts erupted as soon as someone won a game, but Lil only walked past them and slumped on the sofa near the stairs.

Lil leaned against the backrest and drank the entire bottle of Qanyon shed brought with her.

For once, it doesnt matter if I become drunk or not as Im now finished being a Captain.

Shed never drunk much alcohol even before becoming a captain, so she had no idea how much she needed to drink to get intoxicated. Even after shaking off a whole bottle, she remained sober. Lils mind was racing with thoughts as she opened the second bottle.

Cesar and Liloa will settle in one of the Empires principalities, a long distance from Sesbron and the South. In fact, Cesar would wholeheartedly accept living with me in any far away land Yeah, I should be content as I could enjoy it to this extent Cesar mustve struggled as well. How difficult it mustve been for him

Lil vividly remembered their first fight after witnessing the reality of the South

{ This is unfair. The nobles of the Empire dont have the authority to exploit them. }

{ Islands are no exception, Liloa. This is similar to how the Empire conquers other countries, obtaining grain from their fields and controlling the people born on that land. }

{ Are they the same in your eyes? The Empires nobles are slaughtering them without any nationality or social checks. Theyre carrying out torture just for the heck of it. You said you mourned my tragedy, thats why you helped me. Why dont you also mourn their tragedy? }

{ Liloa. You were oppressed, you deserved that freedom. }

{ Are you saying they dont even have the right to be free in the first place? }

{ They are slaves, Liloa. }

{ Theyre free people! Have they been born as slaves? If someone with a gun comes and appoints you as a slave, does that make you a slave? Wheres the freedom that they once enjoyed? }

{ What the hell is even a free man in your opinion? }

{ Sir Cesar! }

Lil ultimately joined the League following her disagreement with Cesar. It wasnt easy at first as she had the appearance of someone from the Empire. However, there were already a lot of mixed races in the South, so when Lil acted like them, it made things a lot easier. And her good fortune in meeting Anunchio early on played a significant part. Cesar served Lil as her right-hand man as she rose to the position of captain of the Bell Rock. There were times when Lil advised Cesar to leave. But Lil suspected that Cesar stayed with her because he didnt want their relationship to be harmed by the variable called the Bell Rock. He probably never really understood what the Bell Rock meant to her.

After moving onto the Bell Rock, Lil began to feel more and more sorry for Cesar as the days went by. Thats why she was glad that she eventually got carried away with the thrill of exercising her free will. Obviously, she had been a free woman the moment she left the duchy, but leading the Bell Rock was a result of her first choice as a free woman. However, her guilt toward Cesar became so great, that she couldnt stand in front of him anymore. Lil told him carefully that they didnt have to be together. Only Cesar refused as he loved her. The guilt was slowly eating away at her, but whenever she thought about quitting as captain, it felt like her flesh was being cut all over again. Fortunately, though, Cesar also refused that offer and stated that he didnt want to limit her freedom.

Lil began to feel dizzy halfway through her second bottle of Qanyon. So she leaned her head backwards and gazed up at the ceiling. Suddenly, a face appeared in her field of vision, which was initially filled with grey-white tiles.

Captain. What are you doing here?

Lil rolled her eyes.

Captain?

Ed waved his hand in front of her nose. Lil, who became even dizzy by this act, smacked his hand out of annoyance. No, she tried to but she actually didnt and swung aimlessly in the air instead. Still, Lil thought she successfully struck it, because she couldnt see the hand gestures anymore. Ed lowered his hand and speechlessly looked at her from left to right. He then asked with a big smile.

Captain! Are you drunk?

What?

Are you drunk?

Ed put his face closer to sniff the alcohol. Lil watched curiously as green eyes transformed into the eyes of a fly.

No, now that I see it, its not a person, its a fly.

A fly

What?

Lil swung her hand swiftly as if she was about to catch a bug and hit Ed on the top of his head. However it wasn't really as fast or as hard as Lil fought it to be, so Ed could only laugh while grabbing his stomach. The still smiling Ed shook his head and lowered Lils hand, which was still resting on it. He then gave her the bottle of liquor he had grabbed and took a seat next to her, laughing uncontrollably.

Drink some more. I think its still a long way before youre drunk.

Huh?

Have more.

Ed was about to wrap his hand around the bottle to help Lil, but she pushed it away as if his interference was annoying and she drank the last of the Qanyon on her own. Meanwhile, Ed covered his mouth because it was about to tear from smiling so broadly and swallowed another outburst of laughter. Then as she put the empty bottle down, he asked happily.

Do you know who I am?

Lil looked blankly at Ed, who kept shoving his face back and forth.

You..? Youre a fly.

Im a fly?

So die!

Lil laid her hand on his crown again. Ed burst out laughing, and he immediately thought about taking her out of here because her drunkenness seemed a great opportunity for him. When Marenzio, who was also recovering from a severe injury, stated he was going to a drinking party, Ed followed him here. But now the guy was nowhere to be found. Looking around, it appeared that Cesar wasn't here either. So Ed crouched in front of the couch with the intention to put Lil on his back, completely forgetting his own injury. When he felt her hands on his head again, Ed chuckled as if he'd lost his mind and tugged Lils arm. Her heated body brushed up against his back.

Are you all right, Captain?

The question came from a slowly approaching voice next to them. Ed, who turned his head like a criminal caught red-handed at the scene of a kidnapping, confirmed his opponent. It was Jericho. After yawning loudly, the tired-looking Jericho asked earnestly.

What are you doing with the Captain?

Jericho. Are the old man, Marenzio and Joe also here?

Startled by the sound above him, Ed let go of the arm he was holding.

Well Yeah, theyre on the second floor.

Bring them down.

This time, it was a pretty clear voice. Ed, who began breaking out in cold sweat, carefully raised his upper body and placed Lil on the sofa again. Jericho couldn't help but give Ed an odd look as he walked up the stairs to the second floor. Slowly glancing over his shoulder, Ed was afraid about what kind of expression Lil was making. However, she sat perfectly still, without hurling any punches or kicks at him. He then turned around completely and looked at Lil, who was staring at him blankly. He knelt in front of her, met her gaze and before he knew it, her palm fell on his head again. Ed couldn't help but burst out laughing once more

Lil!..

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This time, the voice came from the other side of the living room. Ed looked irritably at the interrupting man that appeared. Jarles made his way through the living room and beckoned to Lil, completely ignoring Ed's stares.

Lil, the discussion is over. Come on in.

Lil, who was still sitting like a soulless person, suddenly shook her whole body and answered neatly.

Sure.

She got up and accompanied Jarles to the kitchen. Ed tried to follow, but he was stopped by Jarles stern look.

Judging from the fact that he called Liloa by her first name, he also seems to be a Captain. They're probably heading to some kind of meeting.

In the end, he had no choice but to sit tight and grind his teeth as he watched Lil vanish.

Lil. Are you drunk?

No.

She answered resolutely, but in the meantime, she had a hard time trying to correct her swaying steps. She had clearly been sitting on the sofa just now, but when she came back to her senses, she was already entering the kitchen.

Anunchio stood solemnly at the far end of the table. Slapping her cheek, Lil stood behind the chair she had previously sat on. Her legs trembled, either due to the tension or drunkenness. In the hopes to regain her balance, Lil applied some more strength to her toes.

Eventually, Anunchio bowed his head and opened his mouth.

We've unanimously decided to acknowledge the injustice of the Black Whale. On behalf of the League, I apologise.

All of the seated captains lifted their hats and gave a light salute. Lil, who was about to cheer for the long-awaited answer, managed to regain her cool just in time and instead responded with a big smile. As Anunchio left the table and began approaching, she did the same and met him halfway. They shook hands, hugged briefly, and acknowledged their decision by looking around the seated captains. After they made eye contact with each and every one of them, they returned to their seats.

One-tenth of the promised amount is on the Bell Rock, so we need to take the rest from the Marchand bank.

The gold Lil brought wasn't intended for this purpose, but she thought it was fortunate to use it for this.

I'll turn this certificate into gold.

Lil reached into her arms for the gold certificate and waved it around. In truth, it was a genuine gold deposit certificate with no traces of forgery. She and Cesar agreed to trade gold in exchange for their safe exit from the League.

When Lil left Sesbron, she converted some of the jewels she had taken with her into gold, then she and Cesar opened an account at the bank. As a result, there was no reason for the bank's gold conversion to fail.

Due to safety reasons, the League preferred cash over anything else. However, because they were unable to use the Imperial Bank owing to their looks and accent, they were forced to obtain gold.

Anunchio nodded.

You'd better not go west, Black Whale. There's news that the naval fleet is moving.

What? When did you hear the news?

Today at noon.

Where are they?

It was said that four days ago, half of the fleet remained in the Amiaeng, the other half began to depart.

Was there a battle?

No. I was told they were only anchored in the middle of the sea.

Then we'll go to the Serlio Islands.

For a long time, the Serlio Islands have been an imperial outpost. It existed independently because it was too far northeast to be connected to the southern islands, but it has a bank. She reasoned that Cesar would approve of their route there.

If you lend me your crew, we'll set sail straight away and come back with the gold.

Good.

Tomorrow, we'll depart as soon as we are ready.

Anunchio smiled kindly.

We'll do the retirement ceremony and other formalities after that. So, let's just finish this last task. You're still the Captain.

Of course.

Lil tapped her hat lightly, when she heard the mumbles from Jarles next to her.

I really couldn't help it, it was out of my control, so good luck

Lil shook hands with Jarles and left the kitchen. The living room was still noisy, and a few of the men were now running around in chaos. Witnessing such a mess quickly eased her tension.

Anyway, Im glad it ended as expected without any major problems. Cesar was in the position that he didnt mind disappearing at any time, but I dont want that. I always respected them, and they have always respected me, so I want to resign formally.

Lil stuttered and headed back to the couch.

Im dizzy

As she forcibly lifted her trembling eyelids, she saw six people attached to the railing of the stairs. Lils blurry vision witnessed Marenzio and Ed arguing. She then saw Marenzio making a scene and shouted.

What are you all doing?!

They were at each others throats but turned to Lil at the same time. Lil frowned her brows and approached them. As Joe and Jericho reached out to support her, Alain clicked his tongue.

Youre drunk! The Captains drunk!

So noisy.

Lil massaged her temples and sat down on the sofa. When she beckoned weakly, six men descended the stairs and surrounded her. Lil rested her neck on the backrest of the couch because looking up herself made her dizzy. When she adjusted her head a bit, about four or five people entered her line of vision.

Were going to sail tomorrow.

What?..

What? How?

Jarles and Valtano will lend us their crew. The League is directly involved, its not about looting Garni ships, but about procuring other supplies. The destination is confidential, however a safe route will be guaranteed.

So why exactly are we going?..

Theres of course a reason for that.

Despite her evasive response, they quickly agreed. There was no point in doubting her because of the benefits they get under Lils captaincy. With Lil being from the Empire, they could, for example, land safely in Marchand, which pays a fair price for their cargo. As a result, the Bell Rock has a higher income than any other ship.

Lils eyes moved to Marenzios arm.

Marenzio, go get some rest!

No need, Captain!

As to prove it, Marenzio rotated the shoulder of his bandaged arm. Ed, who was standing next to him, was irritated by his irresponsible behaviour and uttered a few words out of annoyance. But Marenzio ignored them all.

What if we run into a ship on the way?..

What ship?

We can take on any ship!..

He swung his arm again. Marenzio loved the gunner position since it suited his abilities and character. He even made sure that no one would take his spot, by sticking to his position on every voyage, and unexpectedly, by training on a daily basis. He may not have a talent for using his head, but he's remarkably good at finding a potential gunner protégé. For example, Courant's excellent aim was discovered by Marenzio.

Oh, okay. Suit yourselves.

It's gonna be a ride, Captain

All right.

A fun ride

Yeah, sure.

Her head was killing her. So when she said what she wanted to say, she waved with her hand, signalling everyone to leave.

Only the captains know that I'll be retiring at the end of this voyage. The election of a new captain can be done after. It would only raise a commotion if I informed the crew ahead of time.

With a sigh, Lil closed her eyes, listening to the sound of their footsteps fading away one by one. She began to feel stuffy and disoriented as if she was finally getting drunk.

Then somewhere in her subdued conscious mind, a sly voice was heard.

You're finally left alone.

Lil replied with a sigh.

Phew Aye

Seeing her drooping head, Ed smiled broadly.

When I decided to wait until the meeting ended, I was a bit worried that she would only come out at dawn. According to Liloa, they would depart tomorrow. Meaning Cesar will be sticking to her side again

Ed didn't want to blow this golden opportunity. Even Lils vigilance, which was a bigger obstacle than dealing with Cesar, started to vanish like snow melting in spring. And this spring will only last for a while.

Don't you want to go out? It's stuffy here, right?

Lil, who appeared to be sleeping, scratched the back of her neck without saying anything. It was the dull touch of a drunken man, which was a great response for Ed. It was now important to act swiftly before another hindrance, in either the form of a captain, the crew, or Cesar, appeared. Ed quickly looked around and slung Lils arm over his shoulder. As he pulled her arm, her droopy body touched his back without any resistance. Ed carefully took both her wrist in his one hand and stood up

slowly so as not to strain his wound. And even if he would get hurt later, he was so pleased with the situation that it didn't matter.

Finally, when she was fully carried up, the seemingly calm Lil began to kick. Ed was still immersed in a thrilling sense of accomplishment and was just in time to grab Lil, whose body began slipping. He did, however, miss one of her sliding legs and left the building with only holding one leg properly.

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As the evening wind blew, Ed looked to his left and right, wary of seeing Cesar's shadow. It wasn't very deep in the night, but without any street lights the road was quite dark. Upon confirming that his surroundings were clear, he slipped out of the street and walked in search of a remote place. Lil was a mess, like a monkey who fell asleep while climbing a tree, but she somehow remained attached to his back. Strangely, she assumed a sleeping position that wasn't only uncomfortable for the person being hoisted up but also painful for the one carrying her. Nonetheless, Ed didn't have time to correct Lil's posture, because

Ugh Captain, don't do that

Lil's breath kept pouring into his ear. Ed moved his neck convulsively, attempting to avoid the tingling breeze. However, his range of motion was limited and in the end, he still got tickled in some kind of way. Ed shrugged and twitched the nape of his neck.

Ah not there, just a little more up Yes, oh

Every time Lil exhaled, Ed opened his mouth like a fish. Eventually, a strange moan escaped his lips. Ed strolled around like a drunk who didn't know where he was going. The alley he intended to go to had long since vanished. At the same time, a gloomy voice pierced his ears like an awl.

Are you enjoying yourself?

Startled, he almost dropped Lil. It felt like his heart was about to stop. Out of nowhere Lil changed her posture and it suddenly became hard to breathe. He belatedly noticed that she was clutching his chest. After gasping for air Ed mustered up his response.

Cap captain!

Who are you?

Lil clamped her arm around his neck. As she was pressing his throat, Ed couldn't reply that it was him. The only thing he managed to do was open his mouth but not a single sound came out. Lil obviously knew how to effectively strangle a person. At the same time when his throat was forcefully squeezed, his tongue was pressed up and unable to move.

..!

Where are you taking me?

The struggling Ed raised his limp finger and pointed toward the sea. White foam occasionally spread through the darkness in the distance. When Lil lifted her head and finally let go of his neck after confirming it, Ed coughed and breathed heavily as if he'd been brought to life.

What's in the sea?

Cough! What do you mean?

Walk faster.

What?

No. Youd better run, I cant feel enough wind.

Captain, are you out of your mind?

I told you to run.

Click

A cold muzzle pressed hard on the tender skin between Eds chin and throat. At the same time, Lils forearm tightened around his neck again.

..!

Whos your Captain?

Terrified, Ed rolled his eyes sideways and glanced at the face resting on his shoulder.

This isnt looking good.

Ed stammered as he looked at Lil.

Hey, is this loaded? Are you kidding me?..

Run.

Ed, holding on to her one leg, started running with a limp. It was impossible to run properly due to his injury, so he had no other choice but to run like this.

It seems that Liloa has completely lost her mind. She mustve gone too far.

When Ed accelerated shortly after, the muzzle aimed at him shook dangerously but eventually fell off his skin. As soon as he was released, Lil held his shoulders and raised her upper body, her towering form made him stagger unsteadily. While he was bewildered by his changed centre of gravity, the pleasant sound of breathing mixed with a hum came from above his head. Even though he was struggling with keeping his balance, Ed found the sound that pierced his ears enticing. It was a pleasure to hear it for the first time. Feeling a little proud because hed never seen Lil enjoy something before, he asked her.

Do you like it?

Hahahaha!

Sounds good!

She appeared to be in a good mood, excited even. Her calves shook like she was kicking the stirrups, probably imagining that she was riding a horse.

Gust of wind!

She thinks Im a real horse.

Ed knew that Lil once had a horse named Koud Bhan which was named after the wind.

Hahahahaha!

Lil loved the speed that goes as fast as the gust of wind. In fact, she loved it so much that her laughter, sounding like that of a child's, flowed around and echoed through the quiet area. Ed began to estimate how painful it would be if he ran any faster than this.

Should I just re-do the stitches later? It won't be long before we reach the sea, anyway.

By nature, human beings are greedy for the backing of reason, so Ed made a reckless decision and started running faster even though he was in pain.

Ahh?!

Lil staggered from the sudden acceleration and fell over his shoulders. Her cold, soft earlobe brushed against his as Lil murmured incomprehensible words while holding his neck firmly. Ed, who only understood a few words among everything she said, shrugged and continued to run straight to the sea.

After a while, he reached the white sandy beach, grabbed his stomach and collapsed right after putting Lil down. Not only was the shock caused by running painful, but also the shortness of breath and his abdominal muscles hurt. Still breathing heavily, Ed lifted his shirt. Fortunately, his bandage was clean meaning the sutures didn't burst. He smiled and looked at Lil.

The knots were made very meticulously. It must've been a few years since she last embroidered, but she still seems to be familiar with the technique. Well, it isn't unreasonable, when she was growing up, she must've done it enough times to do it with her eyes closed at this point.

Ed tried to breathe as evenly as possible. As if she'd fallen asleep again, Lil lay down on the sand with her eyes closed. She rubbed her nape from time to time, as though the soft sand was itchy. Ed crawled up to her. Because the island itself was hidden, there was no lighthouse on the shore, so all the light came from a few windows of the closest houses. However, Ed was satisfied nonetheless, the light was enough to have a good look at her.

When Lil remained silent, only the sound of the waves crashing on shore could be heard.

Captain?

Ed gently touched her cheek and thought that her blush was rather cute despite the fact that it was on the face of a man.

Ed suddenly shouted.

Hey!

He shouted near her ear, but still, she didn't respond. Ed first took the gun that was in Lil's hand, then he leaned in a bit more and positioned his lips directly in front of her ear and shouted again.

Now I'll take your clothes off!

Once again, Lil remained motionless. Ed, who braced himself for a surprise punch from her, soon relaxed. He got up and put his ear under Lil's nose to check for regular breathing. Upon taking a closer look, her heavy, drooping eyelids showed no signs of movement. Reassured, Ed slowly lowered his hand. His fingertips that went over Lil's lips, chin, and neck landed on the collar of her shirt and touched the first button. Ed swallowed his dry saliva while lightly gripping the button using his thumb and index finger. Even though opening a button was normally inaudible, to Ed it sounded like thunder, making him constantly glance up at her.

Lil didnt budge, but Ed didnt take his eyes off her when he loosened another one of her buttons.

There are so many buttons on her shirt, is it to completely hide her necklace?

Whereas the first one was difficult, the next two were relatively easy. He then slipped his hand through the gap of her shirt, which fell below her collarbone and soon reached what he had searched for with his fingertips. Ed enjoyed the feeling of mystery that engulfed his whole body as soon as he came into contact with the jewel and drew the breath that hed been holding unconsciously.

The jewel was small and light, so Ed was able to lift it using only his thumb and index finger. Then, looking for the knot, he turned the necklace string around and found the knot entangled with Lils hair, making it difficult to unravel. After struggling for a while, Ed finally had the untied necklace in his palm.

When his eyes drifted back to Lil, she was suddenly in the form of a sleeping woman. He couldnt tell when and how she changed because it was his perception of her that had changed. His former view was blocked, and now his new one saw her in her normal appearance, although he couldnt pinpoint the turning point.

Because he had no time to lose, Ed picked up the jewel and illuminated it using the nearest light.

Its a shame to be observing it in this kind of light. I wish I had access to one of the microscopes at Mondovi or from the Admirals office. I cant help but show some deference to the gods majestic and marvellous works.

While constantly mumbling to himself, Ed studied the inside of the crystal. It looked like there were air bubbles inside.

No, maybe it just looks like that

No matter how many times he turned it over it was impossible to observe it in greater detail. Following his first analyses, Ed hung it over his neck.

He raised his hands and placed them in front of him, but it seems that nothing had changed. He turned his palms and stretched his ten fingers. Still, there was nothing to see but his rough and calloused hands. Upset, Ed peeked down at the most important place. He vividly felt the presence of what god had gifted him without having to touch it. He then placed both his hands on his chest and touched his face. His breasts, face, and hair length was also the same. Ed became a little desperate and turned his head to the sea. The water that used to be green was now very dark.

It doesnt look like Ill be able to see the reflection of my face in the water.

Ed started to roll his head.

Contrary to popular beliefs, artefacts werent made with magic. The reason they remained intact was because they were infused with the power of the gods.

Its said that theres no difference between magic and divine power, but as a scholar, Ed made a strict distinction between the two.

So, which god has left behind such a strange power?

Before looking down at Lil, Ed rummaged through all the vast mythology he had ever read seeking for an explanation how this could have happened. However, Lil was already peering up at him, expressionless.

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The sea breeze was fluttering Lils hair as well as Eds. Thanks to that, the cold sweat that formed on his nape cooled down quickly. It felt like his head was split in half by the blade of an axe.

Schwaaa

The sound of the waves crashing on shore came and went. Ed mumbled to himself.

Stay calm. She may still be out of her mind seeing she hasnt taken out her sword yet

The wind wasnt strong enough to sting, making it possible for them to look at each others clear eyes.

Koud Bhan?

Ed wasnt sure if hed appear like a woman or if Lil would recognize him through his voice, but knowing how strongly she smelled of alcohol reassured him that everything was still under control. Still, Ed was feeling uneasy, so he unwittingly tightened his throat to change his voice.

Hes just out to drink. When hes tired of grazing, hell be back.

Lies.

Ed swallowed a sigh that almost came out of his mouth. He didnt know what to do.

Does she want me to give her another ride?

Koud Bhan died a long time ago.

Its true. Hes gone.

Lils eyes slowly rolled towards the sky. As soon as he got out of her sight, Ed hurriedly ripped off the necklace.

But you came back to me. Is this a dream?

She slowly blinked her eyes.

Even if this is just a dream, Im grateful. I dont know any dreams other than nightmares When you were still alive, you lit up my world and when you died, you illuminated my dreams. You were the only thing that was bright in my life

That time, I couldnt go to the stables, thats why I didnt even know I had already lost you. No one said anything to me, so I didnt know where you went. I only knew that I could no longer hug or see you.

I was with you from the moment you were born, from the moment you slipped from your mothers body, covered in fluid. But life was cruel and you were torn away from me forever. Was it because I chased the wind that I shouldnt have gone after?

Ed responded to her dazed eyes that seemed to be wandering through a daydream.

Why are you saying you shouldnt have chased the wind? I told you, the wind favours you. As far as I can see, its always been like that, for a very long time.

Anyone can chase the wind. Even a newborn child can already feel the wind despite it being wrapped carefully. And when that child grows a little older and runs in a meadow to play, they'll undoubtedly feel a gust of wind. It's entirely natural.

Lil returned her glance to him, her eyes moving erratically in frozen movements. Ed used this opportunity to move his hand behind his back, hiding the necklace. Fortunately, Lil didn't seem to notice what he was up to at all. Ed, who'd been distracted by the ability of the relic only moments ago, now stared at her as if he was under some kind of spell. Her bloodshot eyes seemed to hold more tears than usual, he couldn't tell if it was because of the alcohol or Koud Bhan.

You

Lil slowly raised her hand. Ed knew what was going to happen, so he bowed his upper body awkwardly. A hand that felt much smaller and lighter than before rested on the top of his head.

Who are you?

He hesitated for a moment, debating if he should answer honestly or not.

It's me, Ed.

Oh

The fingers on his head relaxed and Lil began to stroke his hair. It was a pet-like gesture, but Ed found it a quiet heart-warming experience. In this unprecedented mood, he slowly changed his posture and lay on his side next to her while she was still rubbing his crown. Somehow, he had no intention of stopping her cute act any time soon, so Ed stretched his legs and rested his face on one arm. Lil then blinked and opened her mouth.

You are an interesting person.

Ed smirked while raising his eyebrows.

Am I interesting? Since when?

Well from today?

That's disappointing. I thought it was from a long time ago.

Lil snorted, finding it ridiculous. As a result, some of the grains of sand that had been attached to her chin and her lips fell off. Ed unhesitatingly brushed away the rest of the sand that had clung to her hair and cheek after rolling around in the white sand.

Just this morning, she was so angry because she was hit by a lump of dirt, but now she's lying on the sandy beach without a care in the world.

Ed recognized her drunkenness anew and slowly relaxed his mind.

What do you want to know? I'll tell the Captain everything.

Lil muttered hazily as if she was talking to someone in her dream.

Are you a farmer* too?..

As Ed's eyes were a little higher than hers, he had to glance down at Lil, who was still patting his temples with her fingers. He was amused to observe her when she was staring at him as if he were a

mysterious creature. Her eyes were filled with curiosity, forcing her brows to furrow and form creases between them. Ed thought about pressing those delicate wrinkles with his finger.

No. The Captains a farmer. Being a farmer for a guy like me doesnt make any sense.

Then what the hell are you?

Hm, well. A passer-by who wants to peek at the farmers seed?

What do you mean?

Im a lowlife, Captain. I want to hear the Captains story, not mine.

I never thought Im that great.

I never asked for something great.

A land breeze blew over them. Lil suddenly expressed a new level of interest. She rolled her eyes and tightened her lips in a cute manner. Ed was delighted to notice her wide range of expressions. With her petite face, concave eyes, nose, and mouth, all her facial muscles were moving so easily. Because hed only seen her stiff and anxious, he had never imagined she would show such emotions. While Ed gazed in awe at the stunning changes that renewed every few moments, Lil simply looked him straight in the eyes. Noticing her intense stare, Ed bit his lower lip.

Since a while ago, I have had the urge to suck in that irresistible innocent gaze After kissing those teary eyelids without leaving a single drop behind, I would go a little lower and kiss her mouth. Her lips look so sweet

Dont look at me like that.

Admittedly, it wasnt just intellectual curiosity that Ed desired from Lil. It may have begun as curiosity, but at some point, it had gone far beyond that. He was now fighting against his impulses and for Ed, who worships reason above everything else, it was a real struggle. His desire was stirring him up more and more.

At first, Ed grimley wiggled his body. But when his lingering feelings continued, he finally sat up with his back towards Lil.

He rubbed his earlobe hard enough to pull it off. He was insecure with himself, like when he experienced passion for the first time all those years ago. Ed sat for a while, calming his aching heart, and then straightforwardly spoke to the quiet Lil.

Tell me the Captains story.

Still, Lil didnt answer. Ed was dissatisfied with the silence, so he suppressed his passionate thoughts and he stretched out to lay down next to her again.

Captain. The night is dark, so I cant see you. Also, the waves are noisy, so I cant hear you well. What are you ashamed of? With the noisy waves, your clumsy words will be covered.

Lil was still dazed, it was hard for her to understand what Ed was saying. Although she comprehended bits of it like she shouldnt feel ashamed, she knew that if she didnt focus, shed quickly miss the context. It didnt help that each sentence she heard reverberated through her ears, adding to her headache. It was only then that Lil realised that she had drunk too much.

Was it just one bottle of Qanyon? Two bottles?

Nevertheless, she didn't know that her level of intoxication could rise this quickly. She deliberately wanted to get drunk, but her feelings didn't improve at all.

Who said that alcohol is the best way to forget loneliness and sorrow?

Doing something reckless like this had normally no place in her meticulous nature. But for now she was content with enjoying the experience she'd always been a little interested in. And although she was terribly dizzy, she felt fortunate to have had such a humorous experience. However, she'd never repeat it again.

It's my first time, but also my last. That's it. From now on, every moment will be the last for me. Helping this sad island, to be the Captain of a sailing ship, to climb on the stern and command the route. All this enjoyment will come to an end and a completely different life will begin. The voyage will take about 15 days at most.

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She grew anxious when she emphasised the time she had left. As Lil cast a hazy glance at the madman resting next to her, she noticed him spinning around. However, she understood that was most likely just a side effect of the alcohol. She also knew that this companionship she has with Ed will also be the first and last, giving her a reason to look at him a bit longer.

I've waited a long time. I waited and finally gave up, and it's been so long since I did. But then this pervert showed up out of nowhere and caught me off guard. I'm slowly realising that I want to keep Ed. As Jarles suggested, it may be time to give him part of my trust. It won't hurt to take him on the Bell Rock to Serlio Island and drop him off there. Panichi is still out of reach of the Navy, and we won't come across any on our way to Serlio. No matter how many guards we assign to him, it makes no sense to leave Ed in Panichi. I'll abandon my first intention to get rid of him.

She closed her eyes tightly.

I don't exactly know why Ed keeps asking me to share my story with him. He seems to know more about my circumstances than I do. And I'm a little envious of how easy it seems for him to interpret my thoughts and show them to the world.

Lil coughed forcefully to clear her throat and rolled her tongue in her dry mouth. She opened her eyes again and glanced up at the beautiful night sky. Like the sky that continually gives out magnificent starlight, she wanted to pour forth fragments of her identity.

Will the parts of my identity shine as brilliant? For the first and last time, I'd like to know.

I thought this many times before, but when I keep silent in a conversation with you, it feels like I'm losing. However, I'm not such a smooth talker as you are, so the right words don't come as easily to me as they do to you.

She wasn't trying to be eloquent, but she couldn't help but be concerned about her poor speaking skills, so Lil cleared her throat again as she looked at Ed.

A small interference can have a great impact if one allows it. Like how a snowball can turn into an avalanche.

Ed was as calm as someone listening to old stories around a bonfire. He wasn't overly excited to burden Lil, nor overly quiet to make her feel ignored. Even if he didn't chime in after every

sentence, she knew he was listening to her. Uncharacteristically, Ed seemed to have a knack for stabilising his opponent.

Thats why men are really afraid of others. Afraid of beings who look just like them and think the way they think, it threatens them.

Are those beings the slaves or the foreigners you talked about?

Women.

Oh, you didnt mention women before. Im sorry.

Dont overlook the opposite sex only because theyre being dominated in the guise of respect. When a woman holds a masters book, she gets ridiculed. Of course, while most women dont feel shame for such reproach still, it isnt her fault. An uneducated man would be treated the same way. But some women, like men, can comprehend any great work. What makes them all think that this is impossible? Do they believe intelligence is exclusively for men?

Are you saying that a womans ignorance is formed by a lack of education instead of a lack of intelligence?

Yes. All humans have eyes for a reason. Its the same with the ears, the mouth, and the legs. Just because a womans eyes are gouged out doesnt mean she cant extract the treasures buried in books. How about cutting off her ears? Obviously, no one deserves to have their ears cut off, but this world firmly believes that its fine to do so. Those who are defined as inferior are being put in their place without hesitation. To people and to Mortu. Ugh, Its something that is driving me completely crazy. However, I believe that in the future, there will be an end to this.

It will end?

Yes. All this abuse will inevitably stop. Is it right for the world to cut off the noses of humans who were born with them intact? A civilization built on innocent sacrifices is destined to fall ill. As this world is already full of madness and anger, it will soon collapse. It will explode due to their inability to bear their own sins. Any dynasty or country has a history of such an end, its amazing that they still cant predict it despite having failed so many times. Its self evident, a fact that cannot be questioned. The only thing Im not sure about is how far it will be in the future.

Even though her gaze was concentrated on the night sky, she could feel Ed staring at her with his chin resting on his hand. Its as if his gaze is fixed on her. When she thought about asking him to take his eyes off of her, Ed asked abruptly.

Why did you have to include the word future?

Lil frowned a little and bit her lip.

Because I wont be alive to see it. The continuation of life after death feels so far away, like the future.

But the farmer said theres no need to mourn for not seeing the buds, Captain.

Do you think that a farmer who is still only human can transcend the emotion of sadness?

Ed rubbed his lips.

So, is that why the grieving farmer built his own society on the Bell Rock?

Lil was momentarily speechless. She was so surprised that she didnt even realise she had fully understood Eds words. Her internal emotions and joy welled up like a fountain and let the water flow in beautifully formed arches. Had she been standing, she would surely have fallen over due to the amazing sight. Lil didnt notice that she was directly staring at Ed for a while now before realising they were looking at each other face to face. His green eyes laughed softly. She couldnt believe it and wanted to ask.

Are you real? How did you

She wanted to confirm that he was real by touching his skin. But as soon as she would confirm it, she probably wanted to hold him so he couldnt run away as she couldnt cope with the overwhelming emotions. However, that was only possible in a delusion. Lil retracted her outstretched hand and squished the hem of her robe into a fist. She had let go of all her desires a long time ago, so in the end, she turned around with a heavy heart. She stubbornly shifted her focus to the view above her. The vastness of the sky.

I wanted to see it happen with my own two eyes.

Can a group that doesnt abuse others thrive?

Her face lit up at Eds judicial question. Shyness accompanies anything unknown, but her delight bursts forth like a flowing fountain. Lil answered by looking to the left.

Of course.

When people live together a group will naturally form. This may sound crazy, but I thought it would be achievable with permission. Anger and abuse are actions taken by someone who is striving to influence others in ways theyll never want to. But obviously, it will never work. Its meaningless and ineffective. If you want to move others, you have to ask for permission first.

Permission is such a vague word. Can you clarify?

When Im making a legitimate request, Im making a promise that youll agree on. In return, youll show me respect, and occasionally use your skills for me.

Thats like a contract.

Ed, who was still resting his head on his hand, fiddling with his earlobe, murmuring to himself.

It isnt a ridiculous idea the Bell Rock itself proves it

Lil thought to herself without verbally answering.

But the Bell Rock is over now. I just have to be satisfied. Im grateful to have observed the possibility that such a group can exist and Ill now spend the rest of my life as a wife and a mother. All I was allowed to do was to hope that one day this idea would be sculpted into reality and that the finished sculpture would be indescribably beautiful and dazzling. I want to lie down and be a stepping stone for that great arrival, but in the end, Im left alone on this lonely path again, unable to contribute to that brilliant realisation

I cant stand it.

What?

Lil was startled by accidentally verbalising her inner voice and quickly turned to Ed. Although he was still lying in a relaxed and friendly posture, Lil swallowed her dry saliva as the cold sweat on her forehead evaporated.

Did I say it out loud?

You did.

At the small mistake, Lil clicked her tongue. Although, it was quite questionable if she did that correctly because there was no sound. Lil humbly teased her tongue in vain, so she added.

I must be drunk.

Whats it that you cant stand?

Even though he was submerged in the night, his transparent green eyes shone brightly as if he knew something. She didnt want to answer, so Lil turned away from Ed again. After a while, she heard a voice whispering carefully.

Captain. Dont make stupid choices

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It sounded like a warning, but also like advice. Lil wanted to ask what he meant by stupid choices but she bit her tongue out of fear for Ed giving the correct answer. Although she was just holding back her words, the corners of her eyes warmed up as if she was also holding back tears.

I must truly be out of my mind

Lil cried quietly in the hope that Ed wouldnt notice. Little by little, so there would be no tears to wipe away.

Did you hear me?

She tried her best not to sniff. If she made such a suspicious sound, Ed would definitely notice as their bodies were so close. Lil didnt want him to see her tears, runny nose, or any traces of redness on her face.

Her sorrow was a river that she would eventually drown in. She had no choice but to be submerged in a place shes never been able to escape from. It was nothing new for Lil.

Captain?

Stop calling me.

As she was drowning, she couldnt make a sound. She tried to calm down, but she couldnt stop her chest from trembling louder and louder. A racing heart and choking breath. Her shaking shoulders, unable to overcome her sadness, could be sensed even in her drunken state. When she couldnt calm her body down, Lil turned around and hugged herself. She wanted to curl up as small as possible, so no one would be able to recognise her.

Though shes unsure, it seems that Ed had called her again. Instead of answering, Lil kept repeating the same sentence over and over again .

Dont call me, stop calling me

Before long, her mind faded away as it usually does when she cries heavily. Lil was becoming more and more oblivious to whether she was getting overwhelmed by her drunkenness, or whether her body was drowning in the river and losing consciousness

Eds fingers that approached her round, curved shoulders, held back. He hesitated, not knowing what to do with the suddenly sobbing Lil. His anguish reached its peak and his hand went forward and backward dozens of times. Of course, Lil remained silent. Shes crying, but her screams didnt make it out. Like a person buried underwater. It was only natural that he couldnt hear her shouting with all her heart and soul deep below the surface of the water.

There was no sound or movement, making her even more pitiful.

How many tears have you already shed in order for your body to remain so calm and silent when you soak yourself in sorrow?

Ed withdrew his hand bitterly.

Comfort without depth will be nothing more than a hindrance

He gave up his clumsy attempt of consolation and sat back facing the sea. The waves were cold and raging. Ed buried himself in the sound of the waves rushing back and forth

How long has it been? Im slowly starting to worry about her. It mustve been about half an hour now, but I cant tell if she has fallen asleep or if shes still crying as theres no movement from her.

Ed could guess the reason for Lils sadness, but he shouldnt intervene too hastily. He was well aware of his careless personality. Also, he wasnt close enough to Lil yet. Despite the fact that she appeared to have opened her mind a little, it was still too early as she hadnt dropped her guard completely. However, Ed started to get concerned about Lils body temperature if he left her be like that. So he decided to make up a lie.

Captain, its high tide. Youll get your feet wet if you stay like this any longer.

Without getting a reaction, it appeared that another ten minutes had gone by. During that time, Ed had been staring at the hem of Lils shirt swaying in the wind. Her back looked extremely narrow. She was wearing a shirt that was larger than her body size, but instead of it concealing her body, it was emphasising it. Her thin arms left her sleeves almost empty, making her look even more petite.

The pitiful woman was being stroked by the nights touch, looking like an abandoned painting left behind in an atelier.

The night was drawn with black brushstrokes, covering the canvas in complete darkness. A handful of stars were thrown over the painting, creating a dense flash of light. It wasnt pure white, more like a duller ivory colour that fell endlessly across the vast night sky, exquisitely placed by the soft tip of the brush.

Its such a simple image, so why is it so sad? I feel the area surrounding my chest tightening when I stare at it.

Ed blinked his eyes and shook his head when Lil, who was like a dot left behind by a brush, flinched.

Captain?

Ed got on his knees and crawled towards the lonely painting. It was only when he got very close that he could see her profile. He wasn't sure about what he was seeing at first due to the darkness, but her black hair fluttered over her face. Ed lowered his torso and checked her silent breathing. Her regular, short bursts of breath indicated she seemed to be asleep. He then gently gathered her waving hair and brushed it over her shrunken shoulder.

Captain.

It seemed that she had indeed fallen asleep. Otherwise, such a level of closeness wouldn't have been allowed if she was awake. Ed lingered on her calm face until he himself lost some sense of reality. With the harmony of intricate curves, her beautiful face was near perfect. However, now that he'd seen the dreadful misery she was harbouring within, Ed could no longer see Lil as just an object of admiration.

Ed and Lil shared the same journey. But Ed had never been hindered in his search for enlightenment, something he now regarded as the truth. Numerous books and evidence passed through his hands, as well as historical materials and oral traditions dating back to ancient times, have shaped him into the man he's today. However, as Lil said, she had never earned a formal education outside of a woman's liberal arts and it didn't appear that she'd been allowed to read what she wanted.

Ed didn't know what kind of bone and flesh-cutting realisation there was until Lil, who had no tangible evidence in her hands, used the word self-evident for everything she believed in.

Its impossible for her to sound self-evident from nothing. The problem mightve started there, a person who speaks as naturally as breathing has lived throughout history without any words. Ones conviction could grow bigger with the day, but there was nothing to say. I cant even comprehend what kind of conflicting anguish Liloa is carrying. Im not sure if I should consider her lucky or pitiful that she hasnt gone insane yet. Can you even call it fortunate to be sane while going through such hell?

Ed also had the experience of raising his flag on the mountain peak of truth that he finally reached after a long journey. He roared with joy when he conquered the summit that no one had reached before.

I felt like my body would explode if I didnt shout it out loud somewhere. But Liloa is still, too still. Perhaps because her seeds were secretly planted in a land where they shouldnt be sowed. Thats why shes overly cautious, stoic and a bit clumsy. And although Liloa has earned the right to scream and get a little more thrilled, the way shes now is as if she were a nameless explorer, who returned without a mark, and it therefore would be regarded as if she had never climbed to the highest peak in the first place.

In fact, Im surprised that Liloa is still like this, even after becoming a pirate captain. I can guess that this patience is probably a habit from her past life because Lil Schweiz has no reason to be bound by any patience. But looking at Liloa, shes still enduring

There wasn't much he could cite as a cause, so Ed picked the only person whose connected to Lils past and present.

Captain Lemoine.

Ed didnt exactly know why Lil and Cesar were together. He didnt even know whether or not Cesar was involved in the incident that triggered the rumour that Lil was dead or missing without a trace. Nevertheless, what he does know is that in this situation Cesar is the one behind Lils stagnation.

Its frustrating that I dont know the whole story yet, but if I dig a little more, I may find out. Should I wake her?

As soon as he thought that, the pitting of sand could be heard. It was difficult to hide the sound of footsteps on a sandy beach. Ed looked up at his approaching opponent. According to the shadow, it was a powerful man walking with a terrifying momentum. He could even hear the breathing of someone who was clearly angry. There was no need to guess the mans identity. Ed leapt up in anticipation of a fist flying toward him, however, Cesar only gnashed his teeth like a furious beast.

What are you doing?!

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Well, I cant say I dont deserve this aggressive approach From his standpoint, it must look like Im lying on top of Liloa.

Ed raised both his hands as if to show he was innocent. Still, Cesar scrutinised his face for any signs of pleasure getting from molestation. Ed snorted exasperatedly at the behaviour shown by Cesar, who was rudely staring him in the face.

Lets just calm down. What if she wakes up?

They simultaneously lowered their eyes to the sleeping Lil.

Wait, now that I see it, her cleavage is visible through her unbuttoned shirt

Cesar and Ed both noticed the exposure at the same time. Cesars eyes became sharp like a sword, ready to kill. Ed, on the other hand, was starting to get tired of the constant suspicion when he was wrongly judged for the umpteenth time, so he decided to attack with a blatant remark.

What are you thinking? Im not so desperate to touch a sleeping woman.

However, the unconvinced Cesar kept his beastly stance. Although he had previously shown respect to Ed, he appears to have changed his mind after having seen so much.

Hes losing his reason

Ed raised his eyebrows as he watched Cesars right hand twitch over and over again. He didnt like this dead-end situation in which he had to explain something that had been taken out of context, especially since his opponent had an advantage in his relationship with Lil. As a result, he provoked Cesar with another twisted statement.

Come on, if I really wanted to do something, Id take her somewhere nice.

..!

As expected, Eds choice of words exacerbated the situation. Cesar drew his sword halfway but then thrust it back into the sheath again. His whole body trembled when he exercised his superhuman patience. In an attempt to calm his anger, he picked up Lil.

Ed continued with his blunt sarcasm.

What, are you going to hold her like that? Do you want everyone to know shes secretly a woman? What if the crew sees you?

Ignoring Ed, Cesar examined Lil from head to toe for any signs of coercion or harassment. Except for her unkempt clothes, Lil appeared to have been in good hands. However, the horrible odour of alcohol was vibrating.

Arent you waking up because youre drunk? Unbelievable.

Cesar returned his gaze to the innocent Ed.

How much

Dont misunderstand the situation. She drank heavily by herself. So dont talk nonsense about me forcing her in any way and dont ask me how much shes drunk, because I dont know.

Cesar wanted to ask for the whole story, but he couldnt because of his current opponent. He thought it would be much better to hear it directly from Lil. Cesar also reasoned that in order to separate Ed from Lil, he had to leave as quickly as possible.

Give me her necklace.

Ed looked renewed at the necklace he was holding. Of course, he had no intention of keeping it. He wanted to preserve the progress he made with Lil, who was finally lowering her boundaries a bit. However, just this one time, he didnt want to hand it over so easily.

Are you that easily convinced about my sanity? Dont be nave, Captain. Whenever Im getting bored, I always start doing the craziest things in secret.

Let this be a warning, if you force me in any way, Ill probably get bored very soon.

Winning someones trust is the most effective way to lead to romance, but dont ever think its the only way.

I know, how annoying.

Dont be so arrogant. How far do you think you can go?

Cesar asked back with his stern eyes maintaining their piercing gaze. Ed grunted displeased and extended the hand holding the necklace, only to snatch it back when Cesar reached out his hand.

Ah, right

Ed opened his eyes wide as if he had suddenly thought of something and hung the necklace around his neck.

How do I look?

As if evading the repulsing sight, Cesar turned his head away.

Raise your eyes. Im sure my beauty is comparable to Liloas, so what are you so reluctant about?

Youd better look at me quickly. Since Liloas body temperature is going down, shouldnt you bring her inside?

..!

Cesar, who placed the back of his hand on Lils cheek, reluctantly raised his head. It was just before their eyes met. Ed had never seen Cesars face so badly distorted. No, distorted or not, it was the first time he witnessed a change in Cesars expression. Ed asked, feeling the same pleasure as when one of his playful pranks were successful.

What do you think?

Cesars displeased face gradually turned into one that seemed embarrassed. Now Ed was the one with a distorted expression and asked.

Whats with that look? Did you fall in love with me?

Dont be ridiculous.

Theres no change none.

What?

Youre the same.

In disbelief, Ed put his hands on his chest and pretended to massage them. When Cesar turned his head to avoid seeing something he didnt want to see, Ed shot him with sharp eyes.

Are you serious?

Theres no point in telling a lie. Now give it back.

When Liloa wears the necklace, does she say she sees herself in her original form?

Yes.

In the end, it meant that Ed couldnt trust Cesar to speak the truth, leaving him with no choice but to hand over the necklace like an angry child. When he removed the necklace, Cesar was back to his expressionless appearance.

People in the present world generally ignore magic since its unpredictable and treacherous, Cesar appeared to be one of them.

Ed was one of the few who went out of his way to obtain and study magical artefacts.

Take it.

Just before Cesar received the necklace, Ed instinctively lowered his gaze to Lil who was calmly buried into Cesars broad arm as if it were a cradle. As soon as Eds eyes landed on Lils cheek, Cesar turned his shoulders.

How do you see her?

What?

No matter what your intentions are, if you express your desires so explicitly, it will be difficult for me to deal with it generously.

Have I already been that explicit? I dont think its that bad yet.

Ed gently patted Cesars cheek. Cesar looked at him with the desire to spit in his face, but in the end he turned and crossed the sandy beach.

Fortunately, Ed didnt go as far as chasing after them. However, Cesar still gritted his teeth.

Is he really falling in love with Liloa?

He looked down at his lover, who slept like a log. The same lover that for some unknown reason drank alcohol she never touched before. The ominous premonition that reached reality more than ever persistently bothered him. Cesar entered the inn, trying to overcome the awful scenario that occurred in his head. He felt sluggish as he climbed the stairs, passed through the hallways, and entered his room. Instead of holding Lil, it seemed he was carrying an intense fear.

He then laid her down and sat across her.

Being in a closed space, the smell of alcohol was overwhelming. As there were no clear eyes staring at him, no voice calling him and no arms embracing him, merely the odour of alcohol lingered. His heart felt like an anchor thrown into an endlessly deep sea. The heavy piece of metal couldnt find any rocks or floors to support it. Without support, it could only sink aimlessly.

Why?

Cesar had a hunch that Lil was going through a difficult time. He wasnt a fool. He knew that she was obsessed with the Bell Rock and how much she wanted to continue living the pirate life.

But the Bell Rock isnt the only symbol of freedom, right? Freedom can be enjoyed in many other ways. You can sympathize with slaves and fight against injustice through other means. In addition, sailing is dangerous and exhausting. Does it feel that your life is that meaningless that you dont even care about your own well-being?

Is that it, Liloa?

Of course, this was all part of a brief moment of self-pity. There are still times when he feels insignificant in front of the person he adores. In the first place, he never expected that Lil would value him so much. But Lil never once let Cesar look down on himself and she consistently assured him.

{ Im grateful to you, and I truly love you. }

She eventually devoted herself to him more than he could have imagined.

Nevertheless, there were times when Cesar harboured outrageous suspicions. The first few times, he expressed his doubt too hastily and Lil did her hardest to show her affections. Even though Cesar said she didnt have to, he didnt stop her from trying. Unlike Cesar, who genuinely loved Lil, Lil was unaware that love was an emotion that didnt require proof. No matter how tightly she was held in his arms or how deeply he touched her body, she couldnt understand how it felt to lose her body into that emptiness.

Cesar simply loves Lil that much.

Over time, Lil became more natural. Cesar wasnt sure if it was the development of real affection or the result of learning how to act. But he chose to stop doubting her so that Lil was no longer morbidly obsessed with proving herself. Also, he noticed that the less suspicious he was, the better their relationship became. Before he knew it, Cesar had completely buried the uncertainties from his immature days.

But on a day like this, when unexpected variables intervened, he couldn't help but feel uneasy. Suddenly his old doubts greeted him as if they only left yesterday.

As Cesar couldn't stand it anymore and shook the sleeping Lil.

Liloa.

hm

Liloa.

Lil couldn't open her eyes properly and just mumbled. Cesar tried to hand over the glass of water on the table. But when Lil raised her arms in the air and completely missed it, he directly put the glass on her lips and made her drink. Lil opened her eyes once she finished the entire cup. Or at least she tried to, they would barely open, looking as thin as thread.

Cesar?

Seeing him, Lil raised her hand and rubbed her eyes.

Why why wake me

Cesar felt sorry for a moment but got rid of that feeling right away.

Why did you drink?

Just I was just curious.

Why today?

Now that this is over

Are you that upset?

Hnggg no its just starting over

It was close to gibberish, but Cesar understood the meaning. However, what he was curious about was whether it was really just about starting over. When he brought up the topic of going to the principality today, he was happy that Lil agreed, but if it turned out to be something she disliked, he didn't want to force her to settle into that way of life.

Are you sure you're okay with that?

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Lil smacked her lips and nodded. Seeing her do that even when she was drunk made him hope she was serious.

I'll accept it if you say no.

Of course, if that happens, he must continue doing what he doesn't want to do. Just because Lil was sympathetic to the conquered, Cesar had to risk his life to rescue lowly slaves and loot Garnis cargo for their livelihood. Cesar had to admit that he was somewhat exhausted. And as a person with beliefs and values quite different from Lils, it was difficult to follow her wholeheartedly.

Lil wanted to pursue her ideal, but Cesar believed that her ideal was in vain. Despite being sufficiently free, Lil yearned for something unfinished, distant, and out of her reach. In his eyes, she was already living her best life, doing everything she wanted to do, like running the Bell Rock.

Cesar, therefore, hoped to use the Admirals voyage to the Southern Seas as a chance to make some compromises with her.

She agreed too quickly, though.

He wasn't aware of it earlier today because he was so happy, but seeing Lils current state, he questioned whether she truly wanted this or that she saw it as another obligation to show him her devotion.

If this is the case, it will be terrible and I need to let her know that I never intended to force her.

You can be honest. Don't hold anything back.

Cesar

Yes?

It's really okay

Lil, who muttered with her eyes closed, slowly rolled over to create space. She then pulled Cesar's arm, led by her touch, he laid down next to her.

We're leaving the port, so now

Lil covered her eyes with his hand and closed them tightly. The hand holding his then slid down to her collarbone and shoulder. Seeing her losing focus again made Cesar feel as though he should no longer question her any further, so he also closed his eyes.

Lil was relieved when Cesar stopped talking because she didn't want their conversation to turn into a war of attrition. They once got into a fight over the Bell Rock, it was then that Lil realised how uncomfortable Cesar was on the ship. At that time, no matter what he said, her relationship with him was clear from the beginning and the compromises they made turned out to be full of empty words. Either Cesar was going with her or Lil wasn't able to board the Bell Rock at all.

She pondered.

Isn't there a place between the sea and the land?

In her relationship with Cesar, Lil was an object*. And it became natural that she would never be a subject*. She was unable to speak out against it, it has been that way since Lil extended her hand in response to Cesar's invitation for salvation. She may be the object, but she was also the one to choose their current phase, so she couldn't bring herself to cross him. As a result, the man in power granted freedom to the object and the object was allowed to enjoy this limited freedom. There was no way back as Lil had already whispered to him when she reached her hand out.

{ Being a free object isn't as bad, so just give me a piece of freedom }

I was blinded at the time, if only I thought about it a little longer. Maybe I could've predicted this.

Cesar's love for Lil didn't start at Lebrun. As a Lebrun cadet, she was her most radiant and beautiful self, but he showed her nothing more than respect. Instead, he declared his love when

Feeling a burning thirst, Lil lifted her face buried in the pillow. For some reason her eyes were swollen and she struggled to open them. After rolling her eyes and wiping away some remaining sand, a piercing light permeated and stained her poorly opened vision.

its morning?

With no time to waste, she forced herself to open her eyes completely despite the tingling sensation. As a bright morning unfolded, Lil tried to get out of bed after kicking the white blanket.

Oh no, I need to get up What?..

A dizzy spell probably engulfed her when she raised her upper body too quickly because when she woke up again, her body had fallen backwards on the bed. Lil looked up at the cracked ceiling and pondered how she was in such a sorry state. With her throat feeling very dry and her stomach bloated, she recalled her memories from the night before.

I was drinking, and

{ Captain! }

Damn it!

Lil kicked hard on the bed, causing the blanket that was hit by her foot to fly into the air.

Who said you lose your memory after you drink?

Her memory which was moving through her head like a misty lantern wasn't vivid, but the parts she did remember were embarrassing. Lil banged her pitiful bed with her fist after rolling over and burying her face in the blankets. Needles in the form of her shameful memories stung her fingertips and toes in an annoying way, so she clenched and unclenched her hands and feet.

Lil, who was lying on her belly and chewing on each word she'd shared with Ed as if it were raw pieces of meat, suddenly dashed to the restroom. She raised her head over the earthenware in an attempt to get rid of the leftover alcohol that was still influencing her emotions, but all that came out was foul stomach juice. She then returned to the room, wiped her mouth violently, and drank the entire bucket of water that had been placed on the drawer next to the window.

Her thoughts seemed to calm down as soon as the cool liquid spread throughout her stomach. However, it didn't help with her fever. Lil moaned a sigh, resting her hand on her sweaty forehead.

Wh what should I do?

Lil pressed her cheek restlessly with the back of her hand. She felt troubled and opened a window, then returned to her bed, slamming her head on the mattress and started screaming. After some time, she gradually came to terms with reality, so she got up, although wobbling, and took a daring decision.

Okay. Ill pretend I dont remember.

After tying her necklace, she felt much more comfortable. It wasn't in her nature to evade the truth, but at times like this she had no choice but to utilise her acting skills. After a brief wash and packing her luggage, Lil checked her pocket watch. It was still early in the morning, so she had plenty of time to eat. When she was about to grab her room's door knob

Knock Knock

Lil opened the door to find Cesar standing there. He was carrying a light breakfast on a wooden tray. Lil awkwardly scratched her head and went back into the room.

Great. I have something to tell you.

I heard that we depart today.

When she heard the door click, Lil glanced back at him.

Isn't the sooner the better? With the fleet heading this way, the League will also feel relieved with their increase in resources.

Why did you have to offer the gold?

Do you want to be assassinated without knowing of rats or birds? I don't think the League will keep individuals labelled as traitors alive in this critical period.

All right.

We need to get rid of possible charges against us.

Yes.

Sitting on the bed, Lil stuffed the bread Cesar had brought into her mouth. Cesar moved a chair next to her and sat down, his face solemn. Lil asked as she sipped her milk.

What are you so worried about?

If that's the case, wouldn't it be safer to take our exit through the Serlio Islands?

Well, that's possible. But, I'm sure everyone, not just Jarles or Valtano, will send someone to keep an eye on us. Shouldn't we see what those guys will do first?

Of course, Lil didn't say that she wants a decent retirement. Since Cesar gave resources such as gold to the Bell Rock and sacrificed himself to run it with her, she couldn't or didn't want to refute him. Cesar was correct. It was beneficial for them to depart through Serlio, where the mainland of the Empire would come out a little further north. They won't be easily monitored there, and it was half suicide to return to the League with such a fact. However, even so, they will be exposed to extreme danger until their escape is completely successful, and Lil speculated that Cesar would've actually devised anything. Otherwise, he wouldn't have mentioned leaving the South.

All right.

After untying her necklace, Lil smiled and took his hand.

I think it would be fun to go to a foreign country, right?

Are you serious?

I am. The principality of Loti is famous for Lake Louise. I want to go there too.

Cesar, who was stroking the back of her hand, nodded. However, seeing Cesar giving the brightest smile she had seen in a long time made her uncomfortable.

There are numerous recreational villas around lake Louise, and I believe you can stay there during the summer.

Lil sat on Cesar's lap and softly swept up his long bangs which seemed a little longer.

Your hair is a little long. Do you want me to cut it for you?

Yes.

Lets see, the scissors

Lil looked around, muttering to herself. Naturally, there were no scissors in the room. As soon as she was contemplating whether she should go to the kitchen, Cesar kissed her temple.

Not now

Lil looked at Cesar. Red eyes stared at her from beneath a thick golden hue. In reality, his hair was as blonde as his eyelashes, but hes dying it darker for now. Lil recalled his blonde hair shining brightly under the Sesbrons chandeliers. Looking back, Cesar shone the brightest at that time, but his light has only diminished since then, never returning to its original state. Maybe its been difficult for him to love her in this phase of their life, but Cesar believed that after Lils wanderings in the name of freedom, his happiness would return.

Lil tried to look forward to it.

Maybe theres indeed happiness there.

The rewards and happiness that comes from caring for her husband and children. And, as Cesar mentioned, shell be able to ride and go out as much as she wants.

They hugged each other tightly. When she looked at him, Lil suddenly had a strange thought.

I wonder why so many people arent sure of their love. The eyes of a person in love glitter with such intensity. Even a speck of suspicion is not enough to wash it away.

Chapter 80

The Bell Rock was busy preparing to set sail as soon as the sun rose.

Cesar climbed onto the upper deck, breathing in the damp morning air. He wanted to stay longer at the inn with Lil, but he had to come out first because there was something he couldnt delay. Leaning on the railing for a while, he looked down at his hand that held her. The sensation of touching her still felt vivid. Her lingering breath from her gaping lips reverberated in his ears, and the memory of him pressing down on those lips, biting and sucking them dizzily went back and forth in his mind.

Were so close, but why am I still feeling anxious when I already have everything she has closer than anyone else in the world?

Cesar impulsively looked behind him, anticipating that Lil might already be on the dock. But much to his chagrin, she wasnt there yet. He longed to hug her right now, to bury his face in her shoulder and breath in her scent. Whenever he did, he was assured that they were really together. He was content but also anxious about not being entirely satisfied. He couldnt shake the feeling of missing something crucial in the happiness that seemed perfect at first glance.

Cesar took a deep breath. The smell of damp wood lingering on deck made his breathing hazy.

The last voyage with the Bell Rock.

At the end of this journey waited the life he always hoped for. It was his big wish. He wanted Lil to be happy and the excitement that he finally could comfort his anxiety.

Cesar went up to the forecastle and approached Courant who was mopping the floor.

Courant.

Yes?

Courant stood up, wiping his hands on his pants. Cesar looked around for a while and eventually looked at the boy.

Oh, uhm Navigator?

Because Cesar had never personally spoken to him before, Courants eyes widened in curiosity when he recognised the man calling for him.

Whats going on?

After confirming that Ed had not arrived at the dock yet, Cesar spoke.

I have a favour to ask of you.

Yes?

Courant scratched his nape and looked around. He seemed to be puzzled or even slightly annoyed.

Courants in charge of all the small chores that need to be done on the ship, so he actually hasnt enough time to keep an eye on Edgar

Nonetheless, Cesar had no choice but to go with Courant. A witness must be directly involved in the scene in order to establish credibility, and Courant was the best choice for avoiding Eds perceptive senses.

Lately, I feel like someone keeps breaking into my cabin.

..!

Cesar consciously lowered his voice. No matter how reasonable his purpose was to drive out Ed, a lie was still a lie. His voice that uttered the fabrication sounded foreign to him who has lived his whole life in sincerity. Cesar was so unfamiliar with it that he shut his mouth. He thought for a moment whether he should find another way, but the anxiety he had been suffering from all day long, engulfed his agony.

He rested his gaze on Courant, who immediately showed hostility toward someone. However, by the looks of him, Courant didnt seem to be thinking about anyone from the recently aboard crew. At first, Cesar was puzzled by his reaction, but not long after he recalled that Courant was from Marchand, so he could guess who he was suspicious of.

Things might be easier resolved than I thought.

Every time I enter my cabin, something is subtly different on my desk. It seems like the one breaking in was scouring for information.

Eds mouth fell open. Even someone like him, who had travelled all around the world, had never seen such mysterious formed sea cliffs. The dark stone walls that rose from the ocean, extended endlessly to both sides and formed an enormous circle. The majestic structure was so tall that it looked like it was piercing the sky. The cave-like space was filled with seawater, creating a hidden bay, and in the middle of it, a few ships with their sails removed were anchored. It looked just like any cave from the outside, but it revealed a hollow sea cliff on the inside. Ed bent his neck and gazed up at what appeared to be the entrance to a sacred temple.

Wow

Marenzio elbowed him upon seeing him standing so stupidly.

Look, Doctor. Are you just going to stand there like that? Hurry and load your stuff on the ship.

Alain shoved Marenzios shoulder.

You too, Marenzio! And when you first came here, didnt you drool and lose your mind, too? Why are you criticising him for being in awe?

You must be forgetting a lot of things since youre getting older, grandpa. When did I do that?

Ed boarded the Bell Rock, leaving behind the quarrel that the two had started. He didnt forget to occasionally take a look around the cliff that seemed to reach for the heavens. As he walked with half his mind elsewhere, busy sailors hit him from all sides, so Ed switched his gaze to the world of humans, leaving the infinitely huge nature behind. When he looked around, half of the people on the deck were new to him.

The strange feeling he had sensed from the moment he heard the news of their departure resurfaced.

Until yesterday morning, we couldnt board because there was no crew, so what happened all of a sudden?

He asked Alain, but the old man only said that there were indeed times like this and didnt seem to know further details either. Nevertheless, Ed couldnt get over the feeling of uneasiness.

Why did she drink so much when she knew we were leaving the next morning? She didnt appear to be aware of how much she had consumed.

Load everything within the hour!

Ed, who was standing far away next to the foremast in contemplation, raised his gaze to the rear deck where the command had come from. Lil looked down at Ed as she placed her feet on the deck railing. Because she didnt tie hair today, her black hair was flapping beneath her triangle hat. Ed took off his hat and nodded, but Lil didnt return his greeting, let alone acknowledge him. Instead, she raised her gaze to the watchtower.

Why is the watchtower empty? Courant!

Ed put his hat back on and grinned under its shade. Although Lils action appeared small, it actually signalled that he may board. Ed then noticed Cesar close to her and delightedly wondered how much Lil could remember of their conversations from the night before. Contrary to Ed, Cesar had been staring at him for quite some time. He was either dissatisfied with Lils acceptance of Eds existence or the fact that Ed was with Lil when she got drunk. Whether it was the former or the

latter, Cesar appeared clearly hostile, so Ed gave him the meanest, most gloomy smile he could muster and then walked down the deck.

Halfway down the stairs, Ed stopped at the thought that he could give him an even meaner smile. He pondered for a moment.

Should I come back up and smile one more time? Forget it, the momentum is gone now. When its funny, its funny, now it wont be threatening at all.

He reluctantly continued down while grinding his teeth.

When Cesar took Lil last night, he feigned indifference, but he asked me how I see her

Realising the answer, he hurriedly shook his head. In a means to distract himself from the subject, Ed thought about a book from his favourite scholar and recited it as if it was his bible.

Are you okay, Doctor?

Youre just recovering from your injury, right?

Many sailors asked him how he was doing as he passed through the artillery deck. But Ed, who has been through this every day for the past few days, didnt respond and simply waved his hand.

However, two other sailors appeared out of nowhere and followed him to his cabin to inquire about a remedy for lovesickness, but Ed shut the door in front of them, muttering that he was exhausted.

Finally left alone, Ed examined his bed first. The bedspreads were clean, but the wooden floor beneath them was blackened with bloodstains. He put down all his belongings, rummaged through the medicine cabinet, took a bottle of hematopoietic agent* and drank it. Since it was extracted from the spleen of a horse, the taste was quite fishy, so Ed quickly swallowed it with a frown.

While he was brushing his tongue, the case of his Surihe caught his eye. Ed opened the leather box, got his instrument, and decided to head back to the deck.

If I were to stay here, Ill only be accompanied by the smell of blood I probably can be a little more earnest in my contact with Lil because we already talked a lot yesterday, Im sure shell be more welcoming now

I dont remember. You were with me yesterday?