

Northwest 81

Chapter 81

Ed was taken aback when Lil, whom he met while strolling around deck, said that. A stormy wind ripped over the ship and blew between them. Ed narrowed his eyes to see if this was a deliberate strategy by her or if she truly suffered from memory loss due to the heavy drinking.

What do you mean?

Lil shot sharply and pushed his forearm with the tip of the telescope she was holding.

Get out of my way.

As a result, Ed hadn't had a proper conversation with Lil until two days after their departure. She was even colder than before, so he immediately thought she was feigning ignorance. The first time they had a proper conversation was after Anunchio had left the recruiting tent back on Panichi.

At that time, Liloa was sober, and I bet our sincere conversation must've broken down her walls to some extent. However, the fact that she's hiding behind an even tighter iron wall now means that there's something she's hiding.

Ed made a wild guess.

Is it because she's embarrassed?

If that's true Hmm, I think it's rather cute? I really hope that's the case.

Ed chuckled with a strange laugh. He sat down against the main mast and started playing a lively tune. One of the sailors sitting on the lowest bow began to sing.

Tomboy Miss Bobo!

In the absence of a patient, Ed spent most of his time playing his Surihe on deck. Although he also jotted and scribbled sceneries on the ship in his notebook, he preferred performing with his instruments. That's why sailors who have never been treated by him called Ed the musician instead of the doctor. His performances were all very well received on the Bell Rock. Sometimes, the hard-working sailors on the bow also enjoyed playing the Surihe themselves. When someone from the bow hummed the lyrics of Miss Bobo, the whole deck suddenly began to sing the cute song with full commitment.

Ed listened to lyrics about a tomboy who crossed hills and streams as he watched Lil climb the stairs of the stern, coming his way. Of course, Ed had set himself up on the tailwind in anticipation of this encounter. When Lil got close enough to hear the singing sailors, she groaned and stared at Ed, who was excitedly holding the Surihe in his hands like a guitar.

Why are you playing this song? It's gross.

Ed chuckled, trying to ignore the lyrics, and glanced back at Lil, leaning on the railing. The chorus was repeated endlessly.

How cute she is, that tomboy lady! How cute she is, that tomboy lady!

Ed ended the performance only after all the voices that sounded like a long-play record had faded away. He then stood close to her. Lil straightened her spine and gripped the wood with her fingertips, unable to let go of her tension for even a second. It was the kind of tension she wouldn't have had to deal with if Ed hadn't come to this railing to obviously wait for her.

Captain. How are you?

Im fine.

I have something to ask today.

Let me guess, you will ask me that same thing you asked me yesterday or the day before. What do you remember from that night, isn't it?

No. Calm down first, you should loosen your fists.

Ed tapped on the back of Lil's hand, but she flicked his finger away with her other hand.

You're bothering me again, why are you always looking for me?

Looking for you? I was here first?

But still, you always come here, so stop it.

It's my spot, but you're taking it away from me. It's like I'm pushing away a stone using another stone.

That's strange. According to the Captain, you only need my permission to get me to leave. Why don't you ask for my permission?

Your permission can only be given after I make a request. However, this spot is like the Captain's seat. What kind of bum tries to take the Captain's seat in the first place?

Lil stared at Ed's beautifully curved lips and thought about how he must be a man who knows how to seduce women with his face.

He knows he's extraordinarily good-looking and knows how to sharpen and wield it like a weapon, especially with distracted opponents. Such a skilful and seductive smile. Was Admiral Retiro perhaps planning to conquer the Anatole Sea with Ed's beauty?

You remember that too, right?

Lil, who was analysing Ed's features, was startled and raised her voice.

What?!

That permission was the highlight of our conversation. For someone who doesn't remember, you understand me very well. I even think before that night, the word permission had never been uttered.

Lil fought to calm down her pounding heart. She had to answer gently, so she lifted her chin and rubbed it profusely with her thumb and index finger.

Is it? Is permission that special a word? Permission, permission, permission, permission, permission. I must say it at least ten times a day, I'm not so sure why you think I uttered such a common word for the first time that night.

When he didnt respond right away, Lil gazed triumphantly at her opponent. Only, Ed had inclined his head with an uncertain smile, waiting for a proper counterargument. His exposed bangs cascaded down the slope of his brow. He wore a narrow-brimmed, circular hat on top of his head like the lads currently do, so he didnt have to style his hair. Resulting that his bangs could flow naturally like that It was only then that Lil noticed his outfit. He wore a tight vest over his shirt and a sailors scarf. He appeared to want to give someone a cheerful and refreshing impression, it was a great combination that would work on anyone. Lil averted her gaze and pondered.

Why is he trying hard to dress up stylishly in a place without any women? Did this man really come from the Navy?

While Lil was thinking about such a trivial thing, Ed scratched his head and rubbed his earlobe, before placing his elbow on the railing and leisurely resting his chin on his hand.

Captain, you dont have to try so hard to deny it. If its not your first time saying it, how do you know exactly what Im talking about?

Do I? What a petty argument; dont you think thats an unduly subjective guess?

So?

Of course, when I told you about permission, what I meant was

...!

Ed grinned broadly and buried his mouth in the palm of his hand. Lil realised at the same time, or perhaps a fraction of a second earlier, that she had committed a grave mistake that cannot be corrected or covered up by other words.

She exclaimed out of desperation.

Damn it!

Ed was now laughing aloud. Lil thought it was ridiculous how joyful he was that even his brows were wiggling, it took all her strength to stay composed while her blood was starting to boil. Ed, who normally would have pacified her by saying things like calm down, didnt even flinch today as he started to push her buttons.

You were so ashamed of that?

Why are you looking at me so fiercely? What did I do wrong?

Then Lils eyes expanded even further, and her rage became unfathomable. With his tempted fingers, Ed wanted to stroke Lils hair. No matter how manly she looks, the way he caught her was incredibly cute, and her actions keep tickling his side. Ed bashfully scratched the side of his back.

Lil merely glared and pulled out her telescope from her waist. She first pointed the telescope towards Eds nose and then used it to slowly push his forearm as a gesture of giving a grim warning.

Youd better get out of here right now.

Ed took off his hat and bowed down deeply in an exaggerated move.

Well, lets call it a day, Captain.

Dont mess with me again.

Why is that?

As Ed tilted his head, Lil pretended to toss her telescope at him. However, Ed just pretended to be surprised and took no defensive action. Lil, who began to notice his increasing likability, became disgusted and clenched her teeth to the fullest. She clearly knew the difference in how she felt about him before going to Panichi and now.

Ed took a hesitant step back, bringing the Surihe he was carrying on his shoulder to the front. He then slammed the string hard and started the prelude.

Tomboy Miss Bobo!

Oozing with excitement from his victory, Ed scurried around among the busy sailors working on deck. As soon as the lyrics began and when several crew members sang along, Lil turned her head irritably.

There lived a very pretty girl next to the path of the yellow hill

She couldn't even tell him to stop singing, so Lil diverted her attention to the horizon, where she couldn't see anything. Naturally, there was a straight line separating light blue and dark blue, but nothing else. On the other hand, the sound of Ed's stringed instrument didn't go away, simply squeaking within audible range. Lil clenched her teeth.

How cute she is, that tomboy lady! How cute she is, that tomboy lady!

But was there really nothing?

Just before Lil lowered the telescope, she vaguely recalls having seen a whitish figure. She quickly raised her telescope again and checked the horizon. A few seconds passed. Then without hesitation, she turned to the deck and cried out at the top of her lungs.

There's a ship in the northwest!

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However, the music flowed into the chorus of the first verse, and the deck was entirely consumed by it. Only a few individuals in Lil's immediate vicinity heard her words, but the crew in the centre of the deck was all dancing and packed together.

In a single breath, Lil ran across the deck between them to find the man with the stylish hat who was playing a guitar-like musical instrument in the centre of the crowd. Lil pushed the front of her shoe into the back of Ed's knee.

Ugh!

Ed bent his knees and shook his legs, but managed to get back on his feet without fully kneeling down. Lil raised her eyebrows. When Ed's performance abruptly ended, the choir also squeaked and Lil took advantage of that quiet moment.

You guys must be the most easy-going people in the world! There's a ship in the northwest!

What? What ship?

The mob, which had been joined as a mass, all turned their heads to the northwest at the same time. Only the upper section of the main mast was visible from the opposing ship, so the flag carrying the ship's identity is yet to be seen.

Where are the watchmen and Alain? Bring that old man here and tell the others to obtain their battle positions!

..!

Lil pushed through a few people who were moving frantically and snatched the trumpeters back.

Blow the trumpet to wake the others off shift.

Yes! Captain.

Buuuuuuuu

The signal of the start of battle vibrated through the Bell Rock. Cesar, who was in a cabin, came out and caught up with her in an instant.

Cesar walked up to the stern with Lil and agonised for a bit.

I cant tell Liloa, but that ship can be one of the battleships that departed from Marchand to rescue the Admiral. In this short amount of time, the carrier pigeon cant have reached the fleet yet.

Cesar chose his words carefully and decided to wrap his warning in a reasonable conclusion.

It could be the Southern Navy or even a ship from the Mondovi fleet.

Lil answered, looking at the sea.

I know. In both cases, we need to be prepared.

Immediately after, someone from the watchtower shouted.

Captain! No flags! Unknown affiliation!

Lil ran up the steps of the stern and rechecked the ship full of sails without any flags.

Navy ships normally have a large mark in the middle of their sails.

Lil tilted her head in confusion.

It doesnt belong to Legardon? Its completely white. Merchant ship maybe? Why didnt they raise their flag?

Its rare and also pretty suspicious, but what if its indeed a merchant ship?

Hmm A merchant ship But why is a merchant ship sailing all the way to the quiet east? Its more likely to be a ship belonging to the League.

Nothing can be ruled out.

No, as far as I remember there havent been any ships going back and forth this way for a long time, and in this desolate area

Lil frowned, biting her lip.

If its indeed a merchant ship, it might be carrying slaves No, the Garni association doesnt have control of the East yet, so it might be searching for an island or sea to find new business. Then shouldnt we check?

Lil wanted to block any new business in advance.

But will that work? This time, we have a lot of sailors belonging to other captains, so if we fight recklessly, it will cause a headache later on. Also, Cesar will disagree with any future battles

Lil took a sharp look at the ship that was beginning to emerge.

In addition is there a ship like that in the League? I dont remember look, Cesar Ive never seen such a figurehead before. A mermaid with a sword? Isnt that similar to Garnis taste?

After removing the lens from her eye, Lil handed the telescope to Cesar. She fixed her gaze on the unidentified sailing ship and continued.

Since there is no information, lets move as safely as we can. Shall we stay out of range for now?

Wouldnt it be better to escape? Unlike Legardon, Mondovis spy ships often hang white sails

If we try to outrun it, we would only look more suspicious. And if thats a ship from Mondovi, youre saying it has overtaken us right? That can only mean its exceptionally fast*. So, we cant get away without being caught?

If we turn properly

Lil grabbed the telescope again.

But it doesnt appear like a ship with such speed. This one looks really pudgy. I dont think its a Mondovi ship. Legardon doesnt do strange things to conceal itself offshore either. I mean, what ship does that? Why?

Despite Lils great reasoning, Cesar couldnt shake the slightest bit of anxiety.

If the Navy indeed departed Marchand, they can very well know what the Bell Rock looks like. Its truly a shame that the message containing the statement that the Admiral is safe hasnt reached the fleet yet.

Cesar couldnt help but glance at Ed. He was standing on the forecastle, with his back towards them, also checking the opponents boat.

If Edgar can send and receive hand signals with the Navy, he can give some instructions to ignore our ship. If so, he should help. I dont like it though.

Cesar twisted his body to block Lils gaze from reaching Ed.

If she can see him move his hand, I will raise her suspicion in an instant.

I dont think we can avoid it. Should we go first?

Lil looked up at Cesar to ask for support.

No matter how bad the situation is, avoiding it isnt always the answer. On every voyage, saving supplies is the basic rule. Who knows how many days we will waste if we dont pass the strait on a windy day like this. In addition, we loaded just enough supplies to last this voyage to avoid any speculation from the League. No, I cant blindly count on safety, just because Im frightened by some slim odds Also, running away does not guarantee complete safety either.

With anguish tickling her forehead, Lil rubbed her brows out of frustration.

Normally, I could charge ahead easily, but I cant do that now, there are a lot of adverse possibilities. At a time like this, a ship without a flag On the other hand, since we have disguised ourselves the moment we set sail to Marchand, we can easily be mistaken for a merchant ship

The worrying Lil approached Alain, who was attached to the railing a little further away.

Double-check the Bell Rocks disguise with the other crew members, and call Ed over there.

It doesnt look like a Navy ship just by looking at it, have you ever seen a Navy without a flag? Those are the ones who have nothing to fear or to be afraid of under the sky. Why would they let go of their high-spirited pride?

..?

Lil just stood there staring at Alain as he brushed his front teeth with his finger. Alain clenched his nails and twisted his lips to get food bits out of his teeth. But in the end, he couldnt evade Lils stare and walked down the stairs.

Anyway, just be careful with everything. Hey, Jericho! Come here! And Courant! Bring the doctor to the Captain!

When Alains bald head moved away, Lil looked back at Cesar. He had a much gentler expression than before. Making her wonder.

Looking more closely, it doesnt look like Mondovi either.

Not having seen Cesars and Eds exchanged glances, Lil naturally asked.

How can you be so sure all of a sudden?

There are no traces of axes hitting the railings, no ropes tied to the rigging, no signs of remodelling the gun gates.

You mean a ship with no signs of battle?

Thats right.

Still, it could be a scout ship sailing for the first time Well, it looks too slow to be a scout ship. Besides, why would the Legardon fleet scout this place? The same goes for Mondovi. And werent they aiming for Amiaeng?

A voice cut through the serious atmosphere.

Captain! You called for me?!

Eds voice was undoubtedly cheerful. He was always frivolous whenever she called for him, but Lil simply ignored him and pointed to the distant sea.

Is that ship familiar to you?

No. Its not a battleship just by looking at it, so what are you so scared of?

Do you want to be hanged by your neck?

Of course, Ed knew it wouldnt happen, but he stroked his Adams apple anyway. He replied shakily, teasing the savage Lil who didnt return a single glance.

Well, if you wish.

Lil crossed her arms and pondered.

Theres no way hes lying unless he wants to kill himself, hes also standing on the Bell Rock after all. The blind spots we have now are his limited memory and lack of up-to-date information.

But there must be some sort of intention for that ship to hide its identity. Hmm, thats interesting. It wouldnt be a bad idea to assume battle.

The most advantageous thing for us to do is to maintain this speed and course¹. It would also be appropriate to engage and overtake the opponent.

Yeah, turn to starboard immediately after engaging and utilise the right canon. However, if our deck crew isnt quick enough, the stern will be hit even before we get to do the second shelling, but I dont think that unfortunate possibility will happen because the wind direction is in our favour when turning.

But there is a problem with our supplies, and half of the crew are borrowed, so we cant make a preemptive attack. Besides, our opponents nationality and affiliation are unknown. A preemptive attack is not allowed.

Its not the navy.

Even if it isnt the Navy, will it be okay?

The fact they lowered their flag could be for a different reason, completely unrelated. Its a strange case, but it must be taken into account. The ship could surrender too, however thats a hasty conclusion

After talking zealously, Lil suddenly shut her mouth and stared at Ed strangely.

Why am I talking about this with you? And why havent you left yet? Are you offering me your neck?

Ed: Yeah, turn to starboard immediately after engaging and utilise the right canon. However, if our deck crew isnt quick enough, the stern will be hit even before we get to do the second shelling, but I dont think that unfortunate possibility will happen because the wind direction is in our favour when turning.

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Lil swung her arms roughly into the air.

Turn to starboard²! Full speed!

Shouts reiterating the captains orders broke out sporadically.

Starboard!

Full speed!..

The crew of the bow adjusted the rigging in unison. Soon a loud noise filled the deck.

Koo-kkk-kkk

The strange sound of twisting wood rumbled over the top of their heads. It was the sound of the mast, thicker than a human body, swaying at the sudden change of course. Lil checked the sails with squinted eyes. The sails turning towards the tailwind flapped their huge wings, and the shadow

fluttering against the wind cast upon her face. Lils body suddenly floated as if the floor she was standing on disappeared. As not to fall, she tangled herself on the railing with all her might.

Were tilting! Grab something!

Ahhhh!

In an instant, the deck was swept to the left. Loose objects were thrown out of the hull. Wooden carvings, weapons, and even some people were thrown into the water. The sea swallowed them all.

Scattered over the decks, several rigging ropes with unfastened knots slithered through the air like snakes hanging upside down. The poop deck was no exception. One of the loose ropes charged toward Lil like a whip. She raised her head to the sound of air being torn, but there was nothing she could do. The moment she would move, chances were that she would fall. Lil had no choice except to crouch as much as possible, sacrificing her exposed cheek.

Shhkk!

Blazing pain as if she had been beaten by a whip warmed her temple. Lil opened her tightly shut eyes, not knowing where she had been hit. At the same time, blood was pouring out of her brow. Her right eye, which was covered in sticky blood, didnt open properly.

Nevertheless, Lil carefully studied the deck, witnessing sailors who couldnt find support being hurled overboard in a parabola. Bodies were flung wildly around like pieces of wood. The chaotic deck mixed with screams and shouts tumbled to the right. The shifting balance of their ship caused Lil to notice the other ships open gun gates.

She roared desperately.

Marenzio!

Not only the upper deck was in disarray, but the situation on the artillery deck was no better. However, this starboard turn was all the gunner needed to understand that the strategy that had been presented to him was being carried out. One could disregard the captains eagerness, but one shouldnt disregard the orders. It was impossible for Marenzio to neglect it. Lil screamed his name again when he couldnt hear her.

Marenzio! Now!

Then

-Tung! Tung!-

With several vibrations echoing under her feet, Lil took advantage of the moment the centrifugal force subsided and poked her head out of the railing. Under the wide-open gun gate, a black barrel was held with its head raised. She raised her head as soon as she saw the majestic piece of metal, and quickly checked the enemy ship. It was barely a few seconds before the shots were fired.

Marenzios voice pierced the gun gates.

Fire!

As soon as his angry voice reached the deck, smoke rose from the gun gates. Lil, lying flat, crawled across the poop deck and snatched the horn that had been tied to the railing. She blew the horn as hard as she could while standing on the floor still swaying from the recoil of the gunfire.

Buuuuuuuu!..

The confused deck crew looked at Lil for a moment as she shouted at the squad that would be hit the hardest.

Front deck! Get down!

The sailors who were holding the railing fell to the ground in a hurry. Lil sighed in relief

Boom!

Her ears were pierced by a roar and her body flew up. She didnt know when she lost her sense of gravity. But because she was worried about the deck in front of her, she momentarily forgot to prepare herself for impact too. With no time to blame herself for her stupid mistake, she lifted her arms and wrapped them around her head.

-Thud!-

A harsh pain rang through her body as she landed hard on her side. Nonetheless, she was relieved that her body wasnt thrown out to sea. After having rolled around the floor, Lil lifted her head toward what she thought was above.

A familiar voice shouted from somewhere.

Lilo Damn it, Captain!

Although the voice seemed to come from afar, it was already too loud for Lil. The sharp pain in her ears made her crouch down again. They felt like they were about to burst, so Lil covered them with her hand while straightening her legs.

Captain! Are you okay?!

As the voice was simply too loud, Lil closed her ears and crouched down again. It felt like two sharp fangs piercing her ear canals without mercy.

You almost landed on the steering wheel!

Where Where

As her eyeballs rolled around randomly, Cesars face appeared and disappeared in her flashes of vision.

Of course, Cesar is the only person on this ship who would be this concerned about my safety.

Youre next to the wheel! Did you hurt your head?

Cesar forcibly removed the hand that was covering her ear.

Theres no apparent damage, but why is your face bleeding

Im okay

Youll have to show it to the doctor right now.

Lil shook her head to focus her eyes that kept falling backwards.

Damage?

Captain!

Cesar how about the damage?

We only took one serious hit. Three or four hits left minor damage and the rest didnt reach. They hit the front deck, no casualties. Damn! Your face is covered in blood!

Cesar tried to cover Lil, but it was then that her mind quickly became clear. When she finally fixed her pupils, she could see their surroundings where the smoke was lifting. Lil spoke, placing her arm as far over the back of Cesars neck as she could.

The impact from the fall was so great that I couldnt breathe, for a moment I really thought I was going to die.

You may have been hurt internally. Its better to go see the doctor

Its okay. Do I look that reckless?

Just help me get up.

Leaning on Cesars shoulder, Lil stumbled to her feet. Because of the dense smoke, she coughed numerous times before lifting her head. The enemy ship was close.

If they die this easily they cant be from the Navy, also their warning gave it away, I think theyre Garni scumbags.

How can you tell

Remember the ones we robbed before? The guys who seemed to be looking for mermaids and set fire to their papers? They were just as stupid. They sent signals by reflecting light. Weve seen those kinds of idiots before, those who arent wary of the fire.

Even so, why would they attack us, a ship disguised as a merchant ship?

I dont know. Do you have any guesses?

Not at all.

During their conversation, Cesar anxiously watched Lils right eye, which started to contain blood clots. Knowing what his gaze meant, Lil placed her fingers on her upper and under eyelid, and with an uncomfortable moan, she forced her eye open. Cesars bitter attitude gave her the impression that it looked really bad. But she couldnt even begin to guess that the blood on her forehead had drenched not only her hair but also her clothes. Lil walked away from Cesar, who reminded her of the pain.

Dont worry, all right? I didnt hurt my eye, but I just cut my forehead, its nothing.

Boom!

This time, the hull swayed greatly as the accuracy of the shot increased with the closing distance. In an instant, Lil found herself lying between the deck and Cesar. She struggled in his arms as they tightened around her body.

Cesar!

It took a while for Cesar to answer, so Lil patted his chest to see if he was injured.

Cesar!

Im all right

Cesar let go of Lil and brushed aside the fragments of wood that had showered over his back and the back of his head. It appeared there wasnt going to be a second blow. Lil also brushed off the debris from her chest and rose first before reaching out to Cesar.

With the Bell Rock being completely in the wind, the losses on the artillery deck will be large.

As Cesar stood up on his own, Lil naturally retreated her hand and shouted over deck.

Its gonna be a hand-to-hand battle! Everyone in position!

Before long, she could see the enemys deck with the naked eye. Lil glanced at Alain, who was positioned in the middle of the deck. Upon receiving the captains signal, Alain immediately roared.

Throw the iron rakes!

Ropes with several rakes flew over the sea in unison.

Tung, Tung, Tung!

When a sharp rake clawed the opponents railing with a harsh sound, Alain pulled out his sword and yelled.

Pull those bastards in! Tighten the gap!

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Sailors in groups of three or four got together and pulled the ropes. While the starboard side of the enemy ship and the port side of the Bell Rock was rapidly approaching, their opponents were busy cutting off the iron rakes. Lil stood there curiously watching as they made a fuss and cut the ropes with their daggers.

Normally, a trained axeman can sever most of these iron rakes with one single blow, but this ship is so careless and apparently lacks axes. No matter the rank, for a ship this size its common practice to hire mercenaries

The starting squad is crossing over! Cover them!..

The starting squad, holding a rope each, swiftly ran across the deck. When they approached the opposite railing of the ship, they flew up in an instant and climbed their ropes. The sailors swung through the air towards the enemy ship, hanging in their ropes like monkeys moving between the trees in the jungle. The gunshots covering them then occupied the deck of the Bell Rock.

Position the crossing board!..

After that, everything else was a breeze. Bell Rocks sailors, angry about their opponents sudden attack, took over the deck of the enemy ship like a wave. Lil shouted at the back of Alains head as he crossed the board.

Capture the Captain alive! Dont kill him! We need to know his affiliation!

However, there were already people who crossed over to the Bell Rock too, so the deck started to be immersed in chaos. Lil had to swing her clenched fists in the jaw of someone rushing in with his sword. As soon as she tried to deal with the next one, Cesar intervened and escorted her. Cesar easily cut one of them and said while looking back at her.

Be careful.

As Lil pushed the sword she had pulled out halfway back into the sheath and backed away, Cesar stretched out his arms while holding his sword to block her. Lil looked up at his back and glanced at the relatively empty stern. As that seemed to be Cesars intention, Lil climbed up to the poop deck as if she were pushed back and turned her gaze to the other deck. The enemy ship was close enough to touch it, so it was clearly visible even without the use of a telescope. Lil saw a man running around. He had taken refuge on the poop deck like her. While she had been staring at the man involuntarily, she came to her senses when seeing the mans blue coat.

Its the idiot whom I exchanged greetings with using our telescopes a while ago. The one who waved his hand innocently was also wearing a blue coat.

Lil looked around in a hurry. Cesar was busy guarding the stairs. He wouldnt let the enemy reach her, but he wouldnt let her reach them either. As she lifted her head, she could see the rope that had hit her, dangling in the air. Without hesitating, she grabbed it.

We must capture the Captain alive

Lil ran towards the opposite side, both hands firmly gripping the rope. With her last step, she jumped up towards the railing and then pushed herself off the railing to gain more height, while leaning her weight forward. In the blink of an eye she soared across the Bell Rocks hull and aggressively lifted her clenched feet around the rope, climbing higher. When she was finally high enough, she rectified the angle by straightening her right knee.

The captain was an easy target, as he seemed to roam around with a gun that didnt have any rounds left.

Puck!

Lils knee struck the man in the ear. After letting go of the rope, she easily landed on deck. At her feet flopped a worn blue coat and the captains outstretched arms. He didnt even think about getting up. Lil walked up to his knees, climbed on top of him and grabbed his collar. With her other hand, she pulled her gun from her waist and pressed it against the captains chin.

Lil took a deep breath and started her interrogation.

Where are you from?

Tears welled up on the mans pallid face as he was clearly afraid of her. The man pleaded with his hands raised over his head.

Spare me!

I asked whom you belong to.

Spare me Please, please! We dont have any water left. Please! I have a wife and children!

If you dont answer, you receive no mercy.

This ship is The Marian from the Ga Garni Association.

And you are?

Captain Jacques Poussin!

Prove it.

..!

Jacques Poussin. A pale, skinny man whose face was covered with tears and a runny nose. The captain sniffed like a child as he searched his arms for an envelope. Possibly due to the gun still being wedged under his chin, but the hand handing Lil the letter was shaking like a prickly tree.

Take it out.

..!

Lil closely examined the power of attorney Poussin had placed before her eyes. She could see the Dukes family crest in the form of a rose decorating the top and Mireilles signature at the bottom. Lil said with a snort.

Hah. So Garni is attacking pirate ships now, is it a declaration of war?

Pi pirate what? Pirate ships?

As if he had just come to his senses, Poussin, who had been staring at her hands, looked up at Lil.

Youre a pipirate?!

Yes, your precious merchant ship just attacked a ship belonging to the southern pirates. I admire your bravery though.

..!

Lil held out her hand in front of the sobbing captain, asking for a handshake.

Nice to meet you. My name is Lil Schweiz. May I board your ship?

His eyes that had been pouring out tears widened as if struck by lightning.

Lil Schweiz? Amiaengs That ahhhhh! White flag! Raise the white flag!

That doesnt work for me. Blow the horn.

The captain nodded frantically and rummaged his waist. Lil stood up first and grabbed the back of the mans collar to raise him. He was so out of it, that it seemed he wouldnt be able to give strength to his legs on his own. She sighed, questioning how such a pathetic fellow could even attack another ship.

Buuuuuuu!..

The sound of the horn signalled the end of battle. The shouts and noises from clashing swords faded, those closest to the poop deck were the first to raise their heads to assess the situation. And, as if on cue, silence descended from the main deck to the forecastle. Followed by the sound of dropping weapons. Soon, the sailors who had been in a bloody battle only moments ago looked up at the tall stern. Lil stood behind the stern railing with Jacques Poussin by her side. Poussin could be seen trembling with his arms raised. His voice, filled with fear, broke the silence on the deck.

SStan! Are you still alive? Raise the white flag!

Woooooooh!..

Lil gently raised her hand to quiet the surviving victors as their roar resonated. At the same time, the crew of the Marian fell to their knees with their heads bowed. With joyful laughter, Lils crew aggressively snatched their opponents weapons. It used to be the moment where she would burst out laughing, but somehow it was difficult to even raise her hand. Lil tensed her toes to keep from falling over, unsure if it was just cold sweat or something else flowing down her face.

I, Lil Schweiz, the Black Whale of Amiaeng, shall take all this ships loot within the hour.

A burst of laughter erupted at the familiar declaration. The sailors of the Bell Rock praised one another for their efforts, shook hands, and raised their caps to mock the aristocratic way of greeting. Meanwhile, Courant climbed the stairs and wrapped a coat around Lils shoulders and put her triangle hat on her head. Jericho, who followed, took Poussin over from her. Now that her hands were free, Lil lifted her hat.

They better pray that this whales stomach is at peace. The disposal of this Garni barnacle that dared to attack the Bell Rock is to be decided after the official meeting.

As various hats flew up the deck and so did the roars. While the sailors rejoiced with their weapons soaring in the sky, Alain, raised himself on the shoulders of a large sailor and shouted.

Hurrah three times!

And, as usual, the three hurrahs that followed werent uttered in unison. In reply, Lil put her hat back on her head and cautiously descended the stairs of the stern. The dissonant Black Whale song then began to play on the deck. They were so enamoured with their recent victory that they didnt notice where their captain was headed and for Lil that was rather fortunate. She could enter Jacques Poussins captains room without drawing anyones attention.

Whereas the Bell Rocks sailors were busy seizing weapons and subduing prisoners of war outside the captains office, Lil sat firmly in the high-end chair sifting through the Hangyang Islands map on the desk. She tossed and turned her hips in search of a more comfortable position, still feeling disoriented from the blood loss from her head injury. She stretched her arm and grabbed whatever paper was on top of the desk. Fortunately, the first thing she discovered was the captains diary. Lil read the neat handwriting with dull eyes

Captain? Captain!..

As someones voice rang in her ears loudly, the last words she read floated through her mind.

Chapter 86

As she recounted those words, Lil flicked her eyelids open.

Captain! Wake up!

Lil recognized the face of the man that was approaching her.

Ed?

When Lil tried to get up, Ed placed his hand on her forehead and pressed her head down again.

Im glad you recognise me, but you shouldnt get up so quickly.

Whats going on?

Do you know where you are?

Did I lose my consciousness?

You did.

Lil laid her head on a soft, unknown surface. When the skin of her head felt like it was ripped off, she realised that her forehead had indeed been torn. She meticulously recalled her memories.

This must be the Captains room on the Marian.

Ed nodded his head.

Captain

A large hand grabbed hers as if it had been right next to her all this time. It was Cesars voice and Cesars hand. Because Lil feared that the intimacy would look suspicious to Ed, she pulled her weak fingers from his grasp.

How much time has passed?

Its been less than an hour.

Report to me the details.

Cesar intervened from the side.

It would be better for you to receive the report after taking a little more rest.

Lil sighed and gritted her teeth. She was annoyed by the fact that whenever she tried to do something, the only response that came back to her was to save herself. It has been like that for the last few battles.

Just because I dont receive the report now doesnt mean that I could rest in peace. Hes only focused on me again. I dont know why he keeps doing this. Of course, I know he cares about me, but I think he doesnt need to worry, and I dont want him to. I dont want to be an immature and imperfect being that burdens him.

Report to me the details.

There is nothing to report. The situation and the casualties havent been completely determined.

Then figure out the situation and come back. Or Ill have to go out myself.

Dont be so reckless.

Normally she would have endured it, but just as her body got injured, her patience had been weakened as well, so Lil revealed her annoyance.

Hah Cesar

Why do you call me like that? Are you upset because I advised you to take care of yourself since you were injured? What do you think Id think if you said this as soon as you woke up after losing consciousness?

Please, Im not ignoring you, of course I know I have to be careful, but Im not as weak and stupid as you think.

I dont mean it like that. Im not doing this because I think youre stupid, Im just worried about you. Dont mix those two up.

But Lil couldnt stand it and raised her voice.

If you really think that way, then help me fulfil my role as a commander. Im the Captain! Right now, Im lying down like a sick person, but knowing the situation would at least make me feel a bit more comfortable! I know youre worried, but it doesnt change my mind!

Why would you take such a risk? Youll only end up in a worse state than youre now.

Pushing myself this far wont kill me. Its my call, my body, my decision! I understand your concern, but I cant stand it that youre stopping me from doing my part No, wait Why are you even here? You have to act on my behalf!

Alain and Jericho are in charge outside.

How can you leave your position out there? Im Im going crazy!

How can I be calm when youre here like this?

Are you saying you left your position to worry about me? How can you disrespect me like this?

Did you just say that I dont respect you? Who else respects you as much as I do?

Woah, woah. Calm down, you two. Are you fighting?

As the last voice came from someone who seemed clearly amused by the situation, Lil and Cesar responded simultaneously.

Stay out of it, doctor

Ed, shut up

Doctor. Step out for a bit. After a while, Ill

Lil cut Cesars words harshly.

No.

..!

Lil pulled Eds sleeve closer to her. Ed was taken aback when he felt his sleeve tightening. However, Lil immediately continued, leaving him without a moment to worry about such trivial actions.

Dont go anywhere, Ed.

Lil!

Are you not only deciding my fate here but also what my crew should do? I wont allow any more worrying. You get out. Go out and do your job!

..!

Navigator. Im sorry to interrupt, but the Captain really needs stability.

The last words came from Ed.

Cesar couldnt believe his eyes. With dry saliva running through his rough throat, he stared at a calm Ed who didnt refuse Lils hand. Cesar retracted his hand that Lil had let go. His clenching fists trembled in anger and humiliation.

Although he was furious, Eds words couldnt be ignored. The captain needed stability, and their fight would only escalate in exchanging shouts between him and Lil. Cesar watched helplessly as he saw Ed naturally attached to her, then turned his back and walked out of the captains room.

Lil stared at Cesars back, wide-eyed. Her guilt had already taken over after she lost her patience and spouted those words. When his stiff shoulders caught her eye just before the door closed, all kinds of regrets poured in through the remaining gaps of the door. The door slammed shut with a bang. The regret that filled the room seemed as if it would crush her, leaving her feeling compelled to open the door and apologise to him right away.

But at the same time, she felt so angry that it drove her mad. It was almost inevitable that Cesar, especially on days when she got hurt, violated their code as he always put Lils safety first. On those days he treated her like her body was made of glass and she was forced to do nothing but rest.

Ignoring me, ignoring the Bell Rock Its always been like that, but today its harder to bear. Its our last voyage, cant he make an exception, even just once?

As she was pitifully staring at the door, Ed, who had been watching for quite some time, opened his mouth.

I intervened because the Captain really needs stability. May I start the examination now?

All right.

Do you have a headache or nausea?

No.

Move your right foot.

It was a routine procedure performed on someone who just woke up after losing consciousness. While Lil silently performed several actions according to his words, Ed looked at her with an ever more cautious look. As he stared intently and touched her body, her tensed nerves from her quarrel with Cesar began to react. Lils attention was naturally paid to Eds breath and gestures. She felt more and more like she was lying naked and struggled to remind herself that he wouldnt see her as a woman.

Theres no loss of disorientation and no signs of confusion, but Id like to wait a little longer. It isnt good that there was a gap between the moment of injury and the loss of consciousness. It would be fortunate if it was caused by the wound on your forehead instead of the fall.

I definitely covered my head when I fell.

Then why is your forehead like that? Its not hurt from the impact?

It got split open by a rope.

Ed wrinkled his face when he heard something he didnt know before.

I see, so thats why it had been torn in such a messy way. I tried my best to close it as neatly as possible, but it took me over 13 stitches

If youre going to nag, stop it.

If I wont nag like this, then Im not a good doctor.

I told you to stop. You're starting to annoy me now. What do you all think about me? Do I look that weak?

Calm down. Why are you so irritated? Relax and think happy thoughts. That's what you should be doing during an examination.

Lil couldn't get any angrier because Ed was so calm. At times like this, he looked a lot older. She tried, but eventually gave up on recalling good memories as she didn't have many to begin with.

When will you finish?

Just wait a moment.

Ed took out his notebook and pen and eagerly wrote something. His hand holding the pen between his fingers scratched his earlobe, then went down and held his chin. The feather pen, which she didn't know where it had come from, was beautifully curled up under his lips. Lil suddenly started to wonder if Ed had several personalities.

Whenever he exudes such literate vibes, I can't help but wonder if he's the same person as the usually cheerful and puppy-like guy

Please take off your shirt now.

What?

Chapter 87

Didn't you say you fell? If you were quick-witted enough to protect your head, you would probably have fallen on your side instead. I need to see what your ribs look like.

Whwhat?

I need to check them. What are you so shocked about?

Startled, Lil grabbed his hand as it moved toward the first button on her shirt. However, she didn't grasp it tightly enough, and it slipped through quickly. She convulsively raised her body in an attempt to strike Ed's hand, but when she suddenly moved, her side area hurt, causing her to scream in reflex.

Ack!

Her body, which was lying on its back again, let out a pitiful groan. She couldn't even open her eyes properly because of the water forming on her eyelids. Lil shook her head, scratching her way through the fog made from her tears.

Ugh oh damn it!

By the way you're reacting, it looks like something might be broken. Let me see.

And then the button came undone. Lil clenched her trembling fists. She had been examined by a doctor only once or twice and back then all she had to do was remove her jacket. It was nothing compared to this. Of course, even back then she was embarrassed, but it wasn't to the extent that made her as reluctant as she was now. Lil kept repeating that her perception of herself and Ed's perception of her would differ.

But a pervert is a pervert no matter how I look at it. My negative first impression of him is difficult to forget, and just because he has a brilliant mind doesnt mean he wont be lusting after others, regardless of gender.

Besides, if Ed really was a spy, Lil would be exposed and defenceless without wearing a single thread.

Of course, his mission could be non-violent intelligence gathering, but the possibility of assassinating the Captain couldnt be ruled out. But then again, if it had been the latter, I wouldve been killed by now.

She regretted belatedly that she had let Cesar go because he could have kept an eye out in such a situation. Lil closed her eyes shut. Soon after, she felt his hand touching her side. She opened her eyes to make sure her necklace was securely fastened around her neck and Ed wasnt making a suspicious expression or acting dubiously. Meanwhile, Ed was aware that Lil had opened her eyes slightly, but he remained calm. His neutral gaze looked down somewhere on her body. When she couldnt detect the slightest hint of perversion, Lil pondered.

Hes so good at acting, what a sly guy.

I will examine the middle rib first, so if you feel any discomfort, dont hold it in.

Lil nodded and rolled over a bit, letting out a small moan because her ribs were stiff. Ed made sure to carefully but thoroughly check her rib area. When the vexing procedure was finally over, Lils eyes were muddled with tears and sweat.

Lil wiggled her eyelids.

Just something in my eyes

A cool towel wiped her face. Lil felt ferocious upon opening her eyes but didnt have the energy to move even one arm. Ed was writing something in his old notebook. He seemed to have decided to ignore her doubtful expressions, giving her no choice but to wait for him.

Youve just strained your muscles. Its not a fracture, but you shouldnt overdo it. Lying down wont be the problem, but getting up and moving around will be painful. Dont ignore the pain, come to me if its too much.

Cant you just give me painkillers every day?

How much are you going to move?

When Lil bit her lip, Ed pressed a white handkerchief against Lils lips while giving her a doctor-like look.

Cough.

My lungs seem fine

Then Ill put my finger in your mouth and check.

What?

As she was caught off guard by his wild remark, Ed pressed her chin. Before she knew it, his index finger opened her lower lip and tried to invade.

What, what, what Ack! Cough! Cough!

Upon seeing the saliva Lil had spit out, Ed made a minor diagnosis.

Hm, sputum is normal.

Cough! You, you Cough! Ugh

Is there anything else I need to know? I heard that you attacked the Captain of this ship with great enthusiasm. Was that the impact youre talking about?

Well?

She felt threatened that he would do something else if she didnt answer properly, so Lil answered with a face about to cry.

Uh It was before that. During the first shelling, I rolled off the stern.

You mean you rode the rope after something like that? Are you crazy?

If youre going to nag, remember that I kicked Cesar out of this room for that exact reason. So stop it.

The navigator didnt say anything wrong. What would you have done if there had been any internal damage? Please take a break.

I got the feeling that no matter how hard I try, youre not going to listen to me if I say that you should rest for a month, am I right?

Then Ill fix you up as much as I can. For now, dont move too much. You understand?

Do you understand?

All right.

Ed looked through his medical bag after hearing her response. Reality hit Lil during this period of silence. When her opponent held her chin, she couldnt resist once, and she could merely make a nasty face in defiance. Amid the terrible situation and utter confusion, Lil banged her weak fist on the bed.

Damn it, I should have noticed it earlier

A humming voice, with his face stuck in a large leather bag, spoke.

We didnt know our opponent, so I guess its right that we were cautious. But the Captain wasnt late to react. It was good you realised their move before the shelling, but how did you know that they would attack first?

They used sunlight for communication.

What?!

I know, right? Anyway, we encountered a merchant ship before that was just as stupid as these guys. I was sure they belonged together.

So in their stupidity, they attacked a fellow merchant ship?

I mean. If they were running out of water, they should ask for help. What made them so afraid of doing so?

What do you think happened?

They were looking for something in the Sea of Ingres. They got distracted by their search and deviated from their route. Because its difficult to catch the wind in this area, their water must have run out in the meantime. When I get out of here, Ill interrogate the Captain right away.

Instead of responding, Ed swung his head halfway out of his medicine bag. As he approached her, he swiped up his sweat-soaked bangs. Lil looked at his forehead that was normally covered. It wasnt until then that she realised that Ed looked just as bad as she did. His shirt and nape were stained with blood. Fortunately for him, it wasnt his blood. Lil inquired cautiously.

Were there many patients?

Hm, are you asking how many fractures and gunshot wounds I have treated? Under twenty.

Were they serious?

There were two.

Then why are you here?

Because the Captain was classified as urgent. The navigator said you were unconscious after a head injury.

Classification? What classification?

There is such a thing. Anyway, Lets stop talking, so I can fix your torso with this.

..?

Ed held a wide cloth in front of her eyes. At first glance, it looked like a bandage, but when Ed noticed Lils suspicious gaze, he continued.

Its hard to think of it as a normal bandage. If youre going to be moving around again, youd better listen to me so that I can get you up.

Eds hands came at the same time as his last words and wrapped around Lils back. His broad, damp torso cast a shadow, and his palms holding her bare skin were warm and even wet. Lil felt defenceless and gasped for air.

Come on, wait! What are you doing

Getting you up.

No!

Lil arched her upper body and grabbed his shoulder. Due to the sudden movement, a sharp pain squeezed between her ribs. In her current state, she lacked the strength to push anyone away, so her aimless hand slipped and squeezed his forearm instead. Under his shirt, she could clearly feel his sweat-soaked skin and muscle flexion. Lil bit her lower lip, unsure what to do. She realised too late that she had let her guard down because she was preoccupied with the classifications of patients. In the meantime, Eds warmth wrapped tightly around her waist.

Whatwhat are you doing?

Im bandaging your ribs? The Captain cant get up yet, so if I have to bandage you while lying down, I cant help but make it feel like Im hugging the Captain.

Still, her heart pounded. Lil couldnt tell if it was because of discomfort or something else.

I was just surprised

What were you surprised about?

Somehow, he sounded offended and looked at Lil to wait for her answer.

Why are you acting so innocent all of a sudden?

Lil wet her parched lips with her tongue.

Should I take a guess at the possible options? One, the Captain suspects that Im a spy from the Navy, so whenever I get close to your body, you become afraid of being assassinated. Two, the Captain thinks that I You think that Im a pervert, so youre afraid of me potentially harassing you. Three, you might consider me both. That would be the worst case.

Isnt it about time you stopped thinking either way? Why would I do anything that could undermine the Captains trust? Its a great deal for me. Besides, were in the middle of the open ocean, you think Id be willing to risk my life by assassinating or harassing you? I can barely keep your attention, so why would I waste it?

Chapter 88

Ed was right. In anyones eyes, Lils suspicions were disrespectful. However, she couldnt forget their encounter in Amiaeng and therefore couldnt shake her doubts about him. It was only natural that Ed wouldnt understand Lils suspicions because she couldnt enounce it honestly to him.

You didnt think it was a big deal at first, so why are you being sensitive all of a sudden?

You really think that? No, back then I just let it slide as I could understand how you found me suspicious, but now that you know what I am, why do you keep doubting me?

Lil gave an indescribable answer.

And you think Im sensitive? I told you in Panichi. I feel honoured to meet you and I really admire you

YesYou did.

Ed told Lil on that gleaming beach on Panichi that he respected her thoughts and the existence of the Bell Rock. Doubting Ed now, implies that she thought his confession was a lie. Thats why hes asking her if she indeed heard it as a lie.

No, I heard it with my own ears. Besides, I didnt want to think of anyone as an enemy who could have such an affirmation. I should apologise

She then got the feeling something wasnt right.

Our relationship will spiral out of control once I apologise for mistrusting him

The only thing standing between Lil and Ed was her distrust.

However, Ed is captivating enough. Hes really fascinating. That admirable logic, mystical sympathy, and limitless potential If I break down my walls today, it will only be the beginning. If I trust Ed, I might open my heart to something I didnt even know existed.

Lil regretted putting Ed back on the Bell Rock because with him on board, her desire for freedom was again ignited.

Once more, I have underestimated my desire for freedom. If I was able to hold it in from the beginning, I thought I could endure it until the end. But why did I bring him with us on the ship when I purposely held back from embracing him on that white sand beach?

It was because her want for freedom had been reduced to whispers, she wasnt allowed such freedom. Cesar would never tolerate freedom that he couldnt understand.

How can you still believe that I would harm you? You think Im going to kill the Captain with my medicine or something?

Cant you empathise? Or are you only in denial because of your pride?

Lil didnt answer, keeping her mouth shut.

Its disappointing.

Still, the words were poignant, so Lil stared at Ed. When she finally opened her mouth she managed to say something she didnt even mean.

What else can I do if youre disappointed? I didnt ask you to look forward to anything. Dont be rude to me just because I wont accept you for what you do or what you think.

Ed sighed out in vain.

Dont tell me you mean those terrible words.

Get out.

Lil pulled her shirt down and rolled to the other side of Ed. Behind her back, he whispered lowly.

Captain

The Captain once said that pulling out the eyes doesnt necessarily make a person blind. Does that also apply when youre plucking out your own?

As Ed exited the captains room and closed the door behind his back, he felt like grabbing Lil by the shoulders and telling her;

How could you lie when you expressed your joy so passionately that I finally got to see your true self? I beg you to acknowledge my sincerity

Then suddenly, a thought occurred to him.

I just wanted to check before, but now I have confirmed it. If Liloa admits it as well, what will I do then?

Ed spun around and stood in front of the door. The Marians deck, which had been captured by the Black Whale, was bustling with weapons and loot. He looked up along the main mast of the Bell

Rock after glancing down at the laborious spectacle. It was completely bare, with all of its sails rolled up. He remembered the pledge he made during his first voyage with the Bell Rock while standing beneath that very same mast. At the time, all he wanted to do was ask Lil, whom he thought was dead, a question he had always wanted to ask and finally could because he had found her.

{ Are you still the same? Do you still carry those seeds from back then? }

What happened since that day was completely unexpected. However, the weed called desire could grow well without the need for any water or fertiliser. Ed could see them through the wriggling stems of the lush and dark flower bed, eager to wrap themselves around anything.

Lils strong desires inadvertently pushed her true feelings out of her mouth, which raised his hopes that she would finally put her trust in him.

I even tried to make her believe in me again by telling her how much I admire and respect her. But Im the one who is deceiving her. What do I want her to believe? I must be going mad

Ed rubbed his face with a hand covered in a mixture of blood and disinfectant. When he recalled the circumstances that made him join the ship, a sudden fear engulfed him.

What would she do if she later learns that Im the one holding the title of Admiral? Or if she finds out about the pursuit I took over from the Duke?

Finally, an even more desperate sentence crossed his mind.

Will I ever be forgiven?

Lil tried to move her arms up and down. It had been a while since she drank the potion that Ed had left behind. Moving her body seemed much simpler than before, possibly because it was a painkiller. Lil placed her foot on the floor and stood up. As soon as she slowly straightened her back, she heard the door open behind her. Lil carefully turned around, making sure not to twist her torso.

She could see Cesar standing there, leaning with his arms crossed against the door frame. He waited for her to fully face him.

Lil. Theres something you need to see.

Lil walked to the door and placed a hand on his chest. Looking over his shoulder and seeing no one in front of the captains cabin, Lil pressed her forehead next to her hand and immediately apologised.

Im sorry.

Its okay.

No, Im really sorry. How embarrassing it must have been.

Im sorry too.

Even though they apologised, the dreary atmosphere stayed intolerable. Lil lifted her forehead from his chest and peered up at him. He didnt say anything, but it appeared that his rage had not completely subsided yet. Lil felt the same way, so she changed the subject.

What should I see?

Cesar rotated his body to make room. At that moment, Lil realised how difficult it would be to reach their destination without the help of Cesar.

Be careful.

Cesar wrapped her arm around his shoulder. It was a soft touch, but it was awkward unlike usual. Lil sighed and asked.

Where to?

Do you remember Captain Augusts Garni merchant ship? We encountered them somewhere around April.

Yes.

Just as before, we found a water tank under the deck.

An empty tank?

Her question was simple enough to answer, but Cesar kept silent. Lil looked up at his chin. The fact that he didnt answer made her anxious. So, she made a wild guess.

Did they crumple slaves in there? No, these bastards were in the middle of a search. Its such a particular structure, so I have to associate my guess with it Hm, did they capture the spotted dolphin?

Its not a dolphin.

Then what is it that they captured?

See for yourself.

Cesar led the way down the stairs. As Lil followed him, she was greeted by her crew stationed in every nook and cranny of The Marian. The deck compartment had a lot of divisions, and they had to pass through some bulkheads and wooden doors before eventually arriving at the last one. When the Bell Rock deckmen standing guard on both sides opened the door, Cesar turned to Lil.

The other day Do you remember the information we found on that merchant ship?

Um? What?

Lil entered the room and looked around. A blanket that appeared to have covered the floor was pushed to one side. Similar to the ship they raided before, a square-shaped seam was hidden in the centre of the floor. Cesar inserted his dagger and raised a wooden plank resembling a tank lid.

The sound of clattering and splashing water could be heard.

The tank on the previous Garni merchant ship was empty, but this one is filled with water. It appears like they captured something. What exactly is it? Did they waste all their drinking water on a foolish attempt to capture it?

Lil held her breath, bracing herself for the terrible sight she was about to see.

The tank was dark without a single light.

Its deeper than I thought. Wait, is there a light? It looks like theres a glimmer of blue.

Lil crouched next to Cesar and tilted her head a bit.

Dont come any closer.

Cesar pulled her shirt from behind. Nonetheless, Lil was strangely intrigued and quietly looked into the water. She glanced at it for a while before noticing the light again. The light that began as a single dot gradually spread and gained shape, much like a bright jellyfish swimming upward. Lil thought the figure resembled something familiar.

A face?

In an instant, a bright blue face jumped out of the water with its mouth wide open, tearing the rippling waves like a rising curtain.

Kee-e-e-ek!

Startled by the sharp pointed teeth, Lil backed away. The mouth of the threatening predator closed directly in front of her nose, before its blue face sank with a splash. In a matter of seconds, it was hidden by bubbles and difficult to see again. Lil felt unsure about what she had just witnessed and leaned in unwillingly, seeing the rushing blue light again, making her fall on her buttocks. This time, its long fin broke the surface and raked the air above Lils head.

Now she saw it clearly.

Nails. Sharp, thick nails. Fingernails sprouting from tips of webbed fingers?

Lil uttered a feeble groan. The lengthy fins werent fins, but arms with fingers and nails just like a human.

Still sitting down on the floor, Lil muttered.

A mermaid?..

Chapter 89

Duke Mireille examined the Hangyang Islands on the chart that a craftsman was creating with a disapproving look. His gaze then went to August Felini, who was standing next to him, pointing out the route. As if they were already accustomed to such scrutiny, both men didnt respond to the complaints from the man of higher status. In fact, even after the duke sat down and smoked his cigarette with a fierce expression as if to blame them for something, the men didnt budge. In the end, the duke finally left the studio after an hour without saying a word.

What a bunch of fucking idiots.

In front of the building, Mireille graciously took a cigarette pack out of his arms and puffed out a long smoke. Capturing mermaids was a business he really looked forward to but till now constantly ended up in vain.

A mermaid.

Simply thinking about the wonderful word triggered a mythological bliss. Mireille recalled a well-known ancient mermaid whose gorgeous skin lit like fireflies in the sea and whose rich blue hair fluttered with froth. Bell Rock was its name. It was no exaggeration to argue that this gorgeous creature influenced the imperial peoples perception of mermaids. Mireille imagined it would be a

very unique pet, remembering how the rare race brought in from the Western Continent all those years ago had turned Sesbron upside down.

Mireille thoroughly prepared for this operation of capturing mermaids, whom he first heard about through the slaves brought from the Islands of the Anatole Sea.

Of course, when they first mentioned mermaids, I ignored them. But the more I thought about it, the more plausible it seemed. There are races on the Western Continent that employ huge birds as means of transportation, while humans in the South can command dolphins or pigeons. Then it shouldnt be impossible for a sea-based race to exist, should it?

Mireille first collected eyewitness accounts. Through them, he heard that this creature was different from the myth about mermaids taking out a sailors soul as soon as he sees it, which made him more convinced of its existence. He sent people to the Imperial Academy and the library to find out more about ancient tales. It wasnt long before he slapped his knee with laughter.

HahaHahaha, its really there!

Southeast of the Ingres Sea, close to the wind-free zone all year round. The only sea thats left untouched because no sailor dared to go there.

But how to catch them? No, more importantly, after catching it, how to keep it? In the past, rare races imported from the Western Continent all perished. It isnt a good idea to recklessly bring in minority tribes. To survive the mainland environment, it has to churn around in an aquarium

Mireille began studying ancient mermaids.

If even that mad Admiral can study ancient lore, then theres nothing I cant do

During the process, he also learnt about artefacts, and it was entirely coincidental that he came to assume that the heirloom Lil took was an artefact.

When his expedition team left, Mireille cleaned the mermaids aquarium every day while waiting for the return of his merchant ships.

It would be great if they caught a pair consisting of a male and a female so they could mate and reproduce. But as long as at least one of them is female, it doesnt matter.

Hed been thinking about it for months, but his spirit was now broken. It was all for nought. In addition to the fact that half of his ships voyages were unsuccessful, the pirates stole the cargo from the other half. Mireille clenched his teeth on his cigarette.

Yes, despite the pirates attacks, the mermaid must be caught no matter what. If a real mermaid can satisfy the Emperor and give me the assistance of the royal court, those bloody pirates can be wiped out as well. No matter how many flying and creeping bastards there are now, they wont be able to contribute much against my Garni association equipped with military power. Moreover, in that case, I no longer have to beg for Admiral Retiro, and I could crush that cheeky bastard Venua. The mermaid will be a very important turning point for my business

Your Grace! Your Grace!..

Mireille stepped on his dropped cigarette and looked up. A man was rushing in from afar.

Huff Huff Your Grace!

With both his hands behind his back, Mireille only chinned at him, but it was enough for the servant to understand and he bowed his upper body in response.

The Prince Regent of Obernyu is here.

Speak of the devil and he appears

Yes?

Where is he?

Hes in the portrait room.

The procession, which arrived behind the servant, took out a chair for Mireille to sit on and raised a parasol above his head. Mireille wore a gilded robe with gold lacquer and chose from jewels placed on a red cushion. Mireille, who had been putting on and off a few rings, angrily gave an order to the aide.

Bring the ring that I wore to the Tutt Banquet.

Moments later, a brilliant, transparent diamond sparkled from his hand. As Mireille walked down the hallway, he looked down at the ring with satisfaction. He went up the stairs and passed through the wide open doors. Before turning the corner Mireille smirked and clicked his tongue as it was obvious why Venua went to the portrait room.

He smiled brightly as soon as he turned the corner. In the large gallery filled with portraits, the party of the regent of the principality of Obernyu flocked in front of one particular painting. It was an unfamiliar sight. Venua himself was sitting on the couch, admiring the portrait from a distance. He had been like that ever since he started looking for her, even though he said he wasnt in a hurry. Meanwhile, Mireille walked along the carpet and pretended to be glad.

Oh! Venua! Its been so long.

Venua, resting a glass of wine on the armrest, looked back at the Duke. However, as if he was momentarily distracted by something trivial, his dark blue eyes immediately returned to the painting. His lips barely moved.

Thats right. Duke.

Im sorry to keep you waiting. Come on. Would you like a cup of tea?

Venua answered, bringing the glass to his lips.

Not with you. I look forward to the day when I can have one with Liloa.

Again, Mireille was captured by the urge to strangle Venua and pull out his tongue.

Whether its the Admiral or Venua, these blue-blooded men have no manners. I look forward to the time when all this humiliation I endured will finally pay off.

On the other hand, Venua remained calm while sipping alcohol, unaware of the internal turmoil of the duke beside him. Mireille naturally inclined his attention to the portrait to conceal any signs of emotion that would reveal himself.

A woman in a white satin dress embroidered with an ivory rose pattern had a gentle smile on her beautiful lips. The duke felt uncomfortable looking at this womans face. If Venua was fire, she was

oil, and the mixture of fire and oil made his stomach boil. The duke furiously lowered his eyes to the name engraved on a bronze plaque, glittering beneath a huge frame that occupied half of the wall.

[Liloa Filiver Shay Mireille]

Tung!

The lid closed with a dull sound when the creatures nails, aimed at Lil, smashed the wooden stick that had supported the lid instead. Although Lil wasn't shocked, she turned stiffly to the rubble of the shattered wood.

Are you all right?

Cesar held Lils shoulder while she nodded and wiped the water from her face. She couldn't believe what she just saw, so she rubbed her eyes three or four more times in astonishment.

A human face rising out of the waterwebbed hands

That's that

Lil crawled forward, mumbling something incoherent. The area around the joints was a mess caused by the nails digging and scratching the wood. Lil, who was examining the irregular grooves, opened the tank with a dagger. The waves breaking against each other generated a continual sound of water. She then leaned in a little.

After the storm died down, two dazzling lights could be seen beneath the rippling water surface. The outer corners of its eyes rose in a fierce shape, and its entire eyeball was blue without any white. Lil had never seen a mermaid before, but the creature was clearly staring at her. The lights burning with hostility were threatening.

A random thought entered her mind.

If starlight was blue, would it look like that? There's a subtle glow in its hair. Long and thin strands floating everywhere, just like the tentacles of a jellyfish. Its figure, which seemed to be painted with glowing paint in pitch darkness, is surprisingly beautiful.

Despite its growling sound and the bubbles of water forming between its exposed teeth, Lil couldn't think of anything else. She stared into the tank that seemed to be from another world and was at a loss for words.

A mermaid in the belly of a sailing ship built by reality.

The gradually fading of the dazzlingly bright eyes could only mean it was sinking deeper. It appeared to have an iron ball tied to its tail. The beast, filled with rage, could only sit still. Meanwhile, Lil silently gazed into the tank until the mermaid reverted to a dot, with only its foam rising and growing to the sparse surface.

Lil muttered to herself.

What should I do?..

Chapter 90

Whenever a slave is freed, the slave can decide whether to head to Panichi, return to their hometown or serve in the League. Theyre free to go anywhere. But in this case

Who else knows?

Its just me.

Then who opened the lid?

I looked around and found it. Its similar to the last Garni merchant ship, so I wondered if there would be any structures like that here as well.

Lil closed the tank lid and stood up. Still perplexed, she returned her gaze to Cesar, without a single thought on her mind. Cesars expression was the same as hers. This felt similar to the time they discovered the powers of the red jewel. The two stood around the tank in silence, attempting to understand this implausible reality. Lil made the most of what she knew.

Its skin is really glowing.

Yes.

How could that be possible?

Uhh And mermaids are an ancient specie. Theyre not capable of magic, are they?

If that were the case, it shouldnt have been caught.

After Cesars words, she realised her own ignorance. Lil walked past him and opened the door.

We need to see Jacques Poussin.

Not forgetting to search the captains office first, they went up to the captains room and read Jacques Poussins journals and books.

If one looks closely, one can tell that this merchant ship was looking for a mermaid. I wouldve laughed it off if I hadnt seen the mermaid first, but the evidence is very much alive. This wasnt an accidental capture either, it was archived by executing a detailed plan.

Before long, two sailors brought the imprisoned Poussin and tossed him to the floor. Lil sat on top of the desk and adjusted her hat.

When no questions came, Jacques Poussin opened his mouth first.

P please spare me. I did it to survive. Its been three days since we lost our way on sea and ran out of drinking water. Please understand

The course of merchant ships is set. Its been years since the Garni association cleared the southern route, and its been years since a Garni ship lost its way. So, whats your real purpose?

Well, theres no such thing

I heard that this ship has no loot. Wheres your cargo from the South?

We lost it even before you got here

Lil tossed the journal she had been playing with. A booklet with a thin leather cover fell in front of Jacques Poussins knees, causing his face to turn white upon seeing it.

Captain Poussin, do you think Im asking you this because I dont know? Ive already checked your journal. What were you guys looking for in the southeast? Youve been wandering around the region knowing that the wind is weak and the tide is quiet.

..!

What were you looking for? What is Mireille up to?

Hey, theres nothing like that Ohh! Water, please Give me some water. I think Im going to die

Well. Do you only want to dampen your throat?

Yes yes?

If youre the only one to survive, you wont be able to sail besides, you arent even a real sailor in the first place.

..!

Lil tossed the graduation plaque from the Imperial Clairaut displayed on Poussins desk. With a dull sound, the bronze plaque landed on the journal and continued to roll over to the floor.

You came from the Imperial Clairaut. So, did you just blindly believe in science over experience?

Jacques Poussins parched lips trembled endlessly. Each time his lips bumped into each other, the chapped skin on his lips crumbled.

He does look like someone suffering from a terrible thirst This ship has food left, we could give them just enough water to keep them from dying.

My goodness The dukes idea of putting a scholar in charge of a ship is brilliant, how could he not have anticipated chaos? There must have been some sailors who tried to stop your genius idea of sending signals with sunlight, but you have completely ignored what they said and this is the result. How are you going to plan the rest of your voyage alone now?

If you give me one No, if you give me two bottles of drinking water, Ill give you a gold bar!

What bullshit. Your gold bars are already mine now. Besides, you seem to have forgotten something, you tried to kill us. So, whats the use of doing charity? If you were going to buy our water with gold, you should have asked for a deal. Why did you attack?

Thats

Shall I guess? Perhaps you did such a foolish thing because you were terrified of a leak, or because you were afraid that some outsider would get on this ship and while looking around to set a price for drinking water, discovers what youve been hiding, and steals your merits.

Please mercy

Oh, how annoying. Im merciful, dont you see me sitting here and talking? Else, youd been publicly executed already. What were you so afraid of? What great achievements have you made?

My son has just been born but I havent seen his face yet

The pleading Poussin soon dropped his head and began to cry. The sobbing from his dry vocal cords sounded terrible. When Lil got off the desk and walked in front of him, Poussin started to stagger like a dried branch and screamed in fear. His limbs were tied, so even if he made a move, there was

no threat. Lil squatted in front of him and looked into his tearless eyes. Blue and lifeless. When their eyes met, Jacques Poussin inhaled a deep breath.

Im going to tell you one last time, so calm down.

..?

Only then did he finally closed his mouth, but he couldnt prevent his tightly pressed lips from trembling. He was holding on to his last bit of sanity, probably ignited by a personal desire. Lil thought it fortunate that the guy had still this much left.

Let me make a suggestion. Were tight on supplies ourselves, and our schedule has been delayed due to this battle. It has not rained these days, so we dont have a single drop of water to give you either. Instead, Ill tell you the location of this uninhabited island nearby. There, youll find a spring you can use. That area hasnt been touched in forever, so I cant estimate how much drinking water it has left. You should be able to arrive in a little over half a day. Hope is not far away.

So, wh wha what do you want from me?

Ive been asking you what I need to know since a while ago.

..!

Jacques Poussin stared down as Lil flicked through the pages of his journal one by one. She came to a halt in front of an image of a mermaid and pointed at it with her index finger.

Tell me about your and the Dukes intentions.

Lil then stood up as Jacques Poussin raised his head to look up at her, his bound hands covering his mouth.

You may not receive any honour for it, but at least you will be able to see your childs face

The sun began to set.

The fact that its getting dark soon creates a great opportunity to avoid unwanted attention I cant say anything to anyone.

Lil scratched her face as she looked up at the reddish sky.

Everything had been revealed by Jacques Poussin. He did, however, concede that he had no idea how to get the mermaid out. To capture it, they used a large dose of the blue powder anaesthetic, which was incredibly effective against the mermaids early rebellion. They then fastened a metal ball to its lifeless body and threw it into the tank. Although Lil threatened Poussin with a hole in Marians stern if he couldnt think of another means to liberate the mermaid, Lil herself couldnt come up with a solution. While she was pondering over this, she went to visit the water tank twice more. She tried to talk to it, but all she got back was growing anger and hatred. Lil wrapped her head and shoved her nose into Jacques Poussins desk.

What do we do?

Cesar, who was sitting on the bed, answered.

If you shell the stern, the ship will sink. You wouldnt do that, would you?

Um Of course not.

We cant pump the seawater out of the tank, and it makes no sense to use the blue powder again if we cant reach it on the bottom ahhhh what should I do?..

I dont know what to do

It seemed like she had gone over it a hundred times. Lil rummaged through the book next to her, closing and opening it over and over again. She couldnt ask the Black Whale crew. The announcement that they would release the merchant ship they just seized was already causing too great of a backlash. Lil only managed to calm them down by using supplies and deadlines as an excuse.

Would they lift a finger to release a mermaid, who is sure to become the talk of the town? There will be a ship revolt. So, it must be done quietly. I was thinking of asking Alain or Jericho for help if I needed extra pairs of hands. I dont want to even think about what Marenzio would say knowing hes always believed in the existence of mermaids. But, before I even ask for help, shouldnt I come up with a plan first?

Im going crazy.

A sigh came out.

In the first place, the appearance of a mermaid is enough to be completely overwhelmed by, but I never thought I would need to help one escape.

Lil ran through her messy thoughts. Although she thought only about how to release it, she couldnt overcome her unbearable curiosity, and a question popped up out of nowhere.

Even though they lived in a windless area, how could they not be discovered for thousands of years? No, have they been existing there ever since?

Then, an answer also came to mind.

After all, mermaids are said to be the children of the Mother of All Things. Ed claimed that the mother loved humanity and landed them on the main continent because she couldnt bear the thought of her own children becoming extinct. When you think about it, the existence of a species known as mermaids is not that absurd No, could it even be called natural? Should I ask Ed?