

## Northwest 91

### Chapter 91

Lil came to her senses and caught a clue in her messy mind.

*Ed may not have the correct answer, but I cant think of any other approach than to work with others. Anyway, I know Orsay isnt well-known to others, so wouldnt he know it better than me or Cesar?*

Lil banged her fist on the desk, jumped up, and shouted.

Cesar!

Cesar, who rubbed his tired eyes, asked with a sigh.

Do we have to take it out?

What?

You think Im blind? From the moment you first saw the mermaid you seemed determined to free it.

So? You heard it. Theyll keep it in an aquarium and hold it as a pet.

Its not much different than slavery.

Thats why its a problem, isnt what Im about to do similar to freeing a slave?

I dont know why youre so invested in doing that either.

Cesars gloomy gaze shifted to Lil. His eyelids, which he had been rubbing for some time, were turning red. Lil noticed it at once. Cesar was exhausted.

*Who would have thought when this last expedition was mentioned, that wed encounter such a ridiculous battle? Amid my injury, I insisted on respect for the Bell Rock until the bitter end, and we even fought over it after a long period. In addition, I held back a mans arm in front of his eyes while telling him to leave. Given that Im now insisting on rescuing this slave, its understandable that his patience has worn thin. I havent consoled him at all in the midst of all of this, so now its my turn*

But Lil felt she was also running out of time and simply delayed the answer.

Okay, Im sorry. I wont ask for your help. You should head back to the Bell Rock first.

Liloa. Saying that doesnt mean I really can move back to the Bell Rock.

Anticipating another lengthy exchange of words, Lil nervously checked the sunset outside the window.

Were almost there. I dont want to fight over this till the last minute. Just let this go. Please, Cesar.

How can I just stay back when youre looking like that? Have you really decided to go to the principality?

Its not like that. My voyage doesnt end today. Until Serlio, Im still the Captain.

Can you even sever such a strong passion once we reach Serlio? I dont want to force it on you.

You never forced it. I do it voluntarily.

Cesar took a deep breath as his jaw muscles contracted sharply around his tightly shut mouth.

Lil knew the look on Cesars face was doubt. Although he doesnt believe in the word voluntarily, this time, he didnt ask if it was a lie. He wanted to try persuading her in a different way.

Liloa. The Imperial Law states that nobles can mobilise their own labour force they arbitrarily acquired from inside and outside the Empire to use for the public sector, labour, and military service. For cases where there are no regulations, nobles can use discretion. The Duke may be going too far, but the law is not entirely inapplicable because the Southern Islands arent within the Imperial Order.

Who made that law?

It was made by the founding Emperor and the courtiers who supported the Emperor up to the 5th generation.

Why do they want people who dont even consider the founding Emperor as their ruler to obey the law? No one agreed, and probably wont in the future.

If people personally choose the law arbitrarily with the means of consent, where is the order in the world?

Its not an arbitrary choice.

Then what?

Cesar. I

..?

Lil pressed her suddenly overwhelmed heart. If her heart had wings, its flutter would lead it to Cesar.

*I hope this will make him understand me. Ive been thinking this way for a long time, and Ive been waiting for this moment ever since. If I could see so much of a glimmer of hope, perhaps I can happily stay by his side.*

I believe that there are laws that humans cannot impose on nature. Those born with tails must be free to swim vigorously. Theyre not made to become someones pet. Its not right for us to defy natural forces. Even if humans specify it in their code of law, its not right.

Lil squeezed her eyes shut as if she were about to hear her sentence. Her heart was pounding like it was going to burst, and she couldnt bear looking at Cesar. She prayed earnestly, holding her shaky hands together.

*Please please*

Liloa. Those who can decide their own lives are different from those who cant. The Empire is also an achievement of humans belonging to the former. The Emperor is the one who reigns at the apex, not the individuals. You and I also lived our lives as imperial citizens, sometimes surrendering to the law and sometimes enjoying the privileges guaranteed by the law. So many of our predecessors considered the law sacred, and this is how the Empire lasted. Those who cant decide their own lives simply cant do anything, so theyll have to follow the will of the former. The law is the will of the highest ruler, who carries hundreds of millions of lives on his back. If that was wrong, how could the Empire have prospered so much?

The South, then, is likewise a human achievement, and what contribution did the imperial people make to it, not obeying the order they established?

They've lived their lives as they liked, and they haven't achieved any civilization as a result of that process.

Lil was met with Cesar's soft eyes as if he was soothing a child, but he added with conviction.

No matter what you say, the Southern Islands are impoverished and its inferior environment is not equal to that of an imperial civilisation.

When Lil tried to open her mouth to respond, her tongue, which was about to move, was cut off by Mortu. With the laughter of the reaper echoing in her head, the sunset was getting darker. There was only one thing left for Lil to say.

All right.

Lil left the desk as it was and headed towards the door. He followed her damp gaze, but he didn't say a single word. Lil didn't look at Cesar as she opened the door.

Im going to get some fresh air.

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After leaving the captain's room, Lil caught sight of the Bell Rock that looks reddish in the sun. Her long-held belief was reaffirmed.

*Cesar will never change.*

She crossed the bridge and boarded the Bell Rock.

*I also have no intention of changing.*

Alain followed her while mumbling something.

*All right. Lets see. You may chop off my legs and reattach them in the principality, but you can't cut my beliefs.*

Captain, are you listening? Were leaving in an hour

With the infirmary on the lowest deck, Lil went down the stairs. It wasn't that she didn't want to love Cesar. She only wanted to be loved unconditionally because she didn't want to live a life that brought her sadness and despair. Despair, the moment she realised it, the shadow got heavy in an instant as Mortu arose over her, giggling at her fate.

*Trying to get away from me? You're so cute whenever you try*

Mortu seemed to be clinging to the shadows, so Lil walked faster as chilling goosebumps ran down her spine. The piercing breath also penetrated the back of the head. Lil began to run as though being chased, squeezing herself through the sailors carrying supplies. When the bloodied operating room appeared in front of her eyes, Lil yelled upon dashing through the open door.

Ed!

However, someone faceless answered.

He was done here, Captain. I think he went to rest for a while?

Lil rushed over the deck and up the steps once again. Mortus searing breath was wrapped around her neck. She hurriedly shook her head till she noticed his cabin on the stern side. The hull had not yet been lit and was full of darkness. Full of Mortu. Lil simply stared in front of her, where she noticed the door. With light shining through the cracks in the door, a person seemed to be standing behind it.

*Bang! Bang!*

Lil suddenly knocked on the wooden door after realising that she had finally reached him.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

*Im going to keep knocking until you open this door*

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

What

As her vision brightened without a single shadow, Lil almost knocked Ed on the shoulder and hurriedly pulled her fist. However, Ed looked down at Lil before momentarily moving his eyes to his shoulder. His dark green eyes were cold, something she had never seen before.

Only then did Lil recall how their previous meeting ended, and her heart sank.

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Even though Ed remained quiet, she read in his eyes something that appeared to be pain.

*However, Ed served in the Navy. Hes also an imperial citizen No, witnessing a mermaid might change his mind as long as hes human or Im not sure if hed be motivated by greed or curiosity. He might even get the idea to hunt down the rest of the species.*

Distrust rained down on Lil like a barrage of bullets.

*I dont know anything about him, and Ive been wary of him since the beginning. I cant believe him*

She repeated the same few sentences in her head over and over again, like gunfire hitting her brain.

*I dont believe him I dont trust him I cant trust him*

Lil began to be buried under the deafening noise in her head and cried out to him with a roar.

Help me!

But along with his unchanged expression, his sharp answer shot back like a dagger.

No.

Without hesitation, the door started to close, so Lil hurriedly shoved her arm through the gap. The door, which was closing so fast it produced a gust of wind, came to a halt just as it was about to crush her arm.

A harsh voice came from behind the door.

Normally, I wouldve said Im a competent doctor.

I know. So if you snap my arm in two, Im sure you can fix it.

But didnt you say you wont hurt me?

Didn't you say that was a lie?

Lil closed her eyes tightly.

*Im going to have to listen to this. This is it*

She wasn't that concerned about his nagging as it was something she had expected anyway. But, she now had something vital to say. Words that were waiting to be said from her mouth.

Sorry, I was wrong.

After a moment of silence, Ed peeped open the door a bit, and his half-seen face asked sullenly.

Really?

Yes.

However, he sounded unenthusiastic. Lil knew she couldn't afford to be duped and stormed through the door. After Ed was hit on the forehead by the door's corner and he was forced to take a few steps back with a yell, Lil slammed the door shut as soon as she entered the room.

His cabin was as bright as how she saw it from the outside.

*No, in fact, it seems brighter.*

Feeling like that, Lil shrugged her shoulders and looked around his room. Despite the fact that there was only one lantern hanging on the wall, it was as brilliant as day, even the shades had no chance to appear. While checking behind her, Lil continued.

I don't have time to fool around. After hearing what I've to say, don't ask questions. I'm in the middle of a situation where I don't even know if you'll be helpful or not.

Nonetheless, Ed strolled up to the bed and lay down. He grabbed the blanket, twisted around to face the wall, and made incomprehensible snoring noises.

*Didn't he whine about the South being too hot? Then what's the deal with this blanket?*

Lil rushed to Ed's bed, removed his blanket, and hit him on the back of his head. Causing Ed to glance back at her and exclaim with an awful face that stretched his chin and philtrum.

Oh! That hurts!

I have a question for you.

Instead of answering, Ed grabbed the blanket that had fallen around his waist and rolled himself in it. Lil's agony peaked when she realised she had to entrust the fate of an unique race to a man acting like a five-year-old. She crossed her arms and paced for a moment, glaring at his back that looked like a silkworm cocoon. She concluded that she had no other option as she already came all the way down here. So she had to bet her last money on a terrible hand and spoke in a weak voice.

It's said that the Mother of All Things was originally a god named Orsay, so is a mermaid also a child of Orsay?

Ed wriggled and tightened his grip on the blanket even more. He then spoke in a murmuring voice.

Why are you asking that all of a sudden? Have you seen a mermaid?..

Yes.

..!

His wriggling abruptly stopped and he looked back at her over his shoulder.

So get up, we need to hurry. Theres a mermaid.

What?

We only have about 30 minutes left. We have to release it.

What are you talking about?

The Marian is carrying a living mermaid.

Ed, who had completely turned to face her, raised his upper body sporting an expression that was far from what she had expected. He didnt widen his eyes as if he couldnt believe it, he didnt laugh at her, he didnt say it was all nonsense, he didnt tremble in fear, and he didnt get excited with curiosity.

Instead, his face hardened fiercely.

You mean they captured a mermaid?

*Why do you look like that?*

Lil paused and chewed her lower lip.

*Yes, theres no going back now.*

Beating around the bush would be a waste of their time as they needed to get it out as soon as possible. However, she found the situation rather difficult to explain, so Lil began to speak in a gibberish way.

Its in a huge tank, and its its very deep Its chained and can rise to the surface for a while with the power of its tail, but it sinks quickly. Well, but if its shipped to the Empire, Im sure

Did you see it yourself?

Yeah, but its hostility was pretty evident, it tried to kill me no matter what I did. Its extremely afraid, probably thinking all human beings are there to attack it. I want to free it, but I dont know what to do. I got the key to open its chackle from Jacques Poussin, but he cant come up with a way to release it. You know the myth. Do you know anything else? Like when does it sleep? A weakness?

So youre telling me that theres a tank on that medium-sized sailing ship that isnt even a fishing boat? Was this capture planned?

The Duke of Mireille ordered it.

Who else knows?

The Marians crew, but on our side, its only Cesar and me.

Ed got out of bed and rummaged through the bag next to him as Lils gaze followed his back. Ed continued while intently looking for something in his bag.

Orsay hid the mermaids in a place where the wind lays down. I wonder how a small merchant ship managed to reach and escape that windless region.

Lil opened her mouth wide.

*Jacques Poussin did say the mermaid was captured from the windless zone, and it took them several weeks to get out of the area.*

She wasn't sure at first, but apparently, it was true.

How did you

I can see the Captain's face even if I don't look. Why are you so surprised? Didn't you come here for this?

Uh, yes right? Yes, but

Lil couldn't shake the feeling of being a fool, so she quickly slapped herself on the cheek. She had to be resolute. She couldn't show her bewildered side in front of Ed, so it was time for her to come to her senses.

You're going to help me, right?

Why would I?

Then what are you doing?

What are you trying to take out of that bag?

Lil moved to his side with hesitant steps and looked over Ed's shoulder. As he pulled out his head, she could see a little inside his dark bag, but she couldn't tell what he was looking for. For no apparent reason, Lil grabbed her gun.

*If Ed takes out a weapon, I must shoot immediately. I don't think he will, but I can't help but be prepared just in case. If the Duke was looking for a new race, anyone in Sesbron could have a similar idea. Judging from the precedents of the Western Continent, beautiful rare species were a luxury that had no comparison. This could be a huge incentive.*

Another possibility arose in her mind.

*Ed could be anyone's pawn. I'm sorry I don't have enough time to sort things out logically, I'll have to defend myself first.*

The water tank must be dark, right?

Lil answered with a startled heart.

That's right

You're going to need something to light it up.

But fire won't reach the bottom of the tank.

I know.

Ed turned around and held out a cloth-wrapped object in front of Lil.

*Maybe this is what he was looking for.*

Ed's gaze fell on the gun handle held by Lil, but she didn't notice as she focused on the object. Her eyebrows raised unknowingly.

Whats that?

Ed unwrapped the cloth without saying a word. Dumbfounded, Lil took a step back when she saw the spherical, elongated item that was shimmering weakly with a light shed never seen before. It was roughly the size of a palm and therefore could be handled with one hand. The item appeared green, yet its radiance was pure white as if it were illuminated by stars.

Lils eyes widened in surprise at the exquisite hue. Because the colour of fire was yellowish, humans always associate light with the colour yellow instead of white. Even though this was also unrealistic experience for Lil, she abruptly came to her senses after foolishly wondering if the dream shed been dreaming since seeing the mermaid had not ended yet.

## Chapter 93

Whats that?

Its the stem of a fluorescent plant thats hardened in balsam. Luckily for us, this process traps its light-emitting property. The darker the surroundings, the brighter the light gets. However, when it has absorbed all the nutrients from the balsam, it will wither and die. But as you can see, its still very much alive.

Balsam? Like tree extract? Where the hell did you get that?

Thats a secret.

At the same time as Lil narrowed her eyes in suspicion, Ed looked down at her gun again and furrowed his eyebrows. Lil flinched when she noticed, but Ed slipped past her and covered the stem with the cloth.

Anyway, lets go now.

Whats your plan?

I have no such thing.

Oh, wait!

Lil grabbed the doorknob after tucking Eds hand away when he was about to turn it.

What the hell are you saying you dont have a plan?

What? Dont you want to release it?

Well just have to get the mermaid out.

How are we going to do that?

Not that

Do you have time to delay this any further?

No



Lil knew it better than anyone else, so she pursed her lips and dropped her hand. Ed opened the door and took the lead. Lil followed him, looking suspiciously at the nape of his neck, her hand still resting on her gun.

I thought you would be flattered when I asked for your assistance earlier, I didnt expect you to respond with Why would I?.

It was a sarcastic remark in which she also imitated his accent. However, in response, only the back of Eds head moved up and down slightly, as if he was laughing.

When a modern man encounters an ancient transcendence, he can react in a variety of ways.

Lil didnt answer. She couldnt afford to respond to a monologue that wasnt an answer. Instead, she tried to figure out what Ed was planning to do with that light.

*Can you lure a mermaid with light? Is it like food for mermaids? But shouldnt we untie the chain first? Dont tell me he intends to kill me. If he takes it for himself, it would surely be worth the price*

Suddenly, Courant popped up from behind and ran forward with a lantern. Lil twisted herself to make way and greet him. However, Courant, who was already in front of her, deliberately struck Ed on the shoulder as he passed by. From Lils point of view, the blow from Courant seemed intentional, but Ed didnt respond as if he was used to it or he didnt bother.

But the Captain is the odd one. Why do you want to save it?

With his question, he broke up Lils train of thoughts and she focused on Ed again. But Lil didnt have the time to explain it verse by verse as she did with Cesar. And she didnt feel the need to. At least, she didnt think it was because Ed didnt know.

Isnt that obvious?

Yes.

..?

His answer was so simple that Lil uneasily pursed her lips.

*if you already know, why did you ask?*

Meanwhile, as the two climbed to the upper deck, the sunset spread further and further over the horizon.

What will you give me if I free the mermaid as you want me to?

Lils attention, which was directed at the hourglass on the stern, shifted to Ed. A refreshing but lukewarm breeze blew and without a hat, Eds hair fluttered lightly. Stained by the setting sun, his light brown hair turned reddish, like the leaves in autumn. He stuffed his hands into his pants pockets and lifted his chin, turning his upper body Lil. He was waiting for a response, but Lil simply waved her hand in front of his nose, asking him to move.

Ill give it to you.

What?

My full trust.

The full trust you speak of has already been earned. Before you spoke about the mermaid and even before you apologised to me. Coming to see me was an admission of what had happened. But saying full trust means in its totality. Are saying theres still some trust left behind?

You trusted me, thats why you asked for my help. So dont get that confused, Captain. We still need to talk about how youre going to pay for my help.

Dont be unreasonable.

Didnt you come to me to have your wish granted?

And wishes, as in any fairy tale, arent free.

Ed walked across the boardwalk, still facing Lil. Meaning, he climbed the wooden plank, hanging in the middle of the sea, backwards. Lil felt she actually wanted to laugh in vain at the audacity.

*HaNothing is going well.*

Lil sighed in desperation before inquiring urgently.

What do you want?

Take a guess.

Money?

Thats no fun.

Suddenly, Lil had the urge to give Ed a hard shove or to kick the boarding away. But she managed to control her impulses with superhuman patience.

*What does this rotten bastard want?! He might be hoping for an extraordinary answer because he has such a strange personality.*

Lil rubbed her forehead. She couldnt shake the feeling that she was getting played.

*He had been trying so hard to impress me, but now he is No, wait, maybe thats it*

When her confused thoughts faded away, Lil removed her hand from her forehead. Her vigorous eyes met his playfully bent green ones.

Then go.

What?

I have nothing to give, so go.

What are you going to do if I really go?

Lil stepped aside from the crossing to make way for Ed. Then, she chinned towards the Bell Rock.

I dont need you.

I dont want to see you, so get out of my sight.

For a brief moment, the sound of the waves filled the silence between Ed and Lil. The crashing of the water against the hull created a steady rhythm. Ed stood motionless, his mouth slightly open. If his hair and clothes werent blown by the breeze, it would have been safe to presume he had frozen stiff.

But soon enough, a curved smile was drawn on his bewildered face. At sunset, his twilight-stained cheeks grinned brilliantly. It was a smile full of satisfaction as if he had gotten all he desired, despite the fact he was given nothing. Ed took the rest of the steps just like that. Backwards, of course. Their strange interaction had long since become a spectacle for the sailors on the Marian. Lil flashed them a warning glance and stepped onto the crosswalk. She had said it without hesitation, but she couldn't help the fact she had gotten goosebumps.

*Hes such a weird guy. Even though I told him to go, he still continued. Is he a sadistic pervert?*

Ed turned, jumped off the board and turned around once again to face Lil. At the same time, Lil scurried down the crossing board, making a threat.

Didn't I tell you to go?

I can't help it because the Captain sounded so desperate.

At the same time, Ed bowed his upper body and spread his arms gracefully, mimicking a custom from a foreign country. The stone-cold Lil passed him and went down the stairs. When she noticed he was following her, she immediately increased her steps. Before they completely disappeared to the deck below, Lil met eyes with Jacques Poussin, who shook his head. It was an indication that he couldn't come up with a way to free the mermaid. Lil didn't think he was lying as Poussin clearly knew that the gun gates of the Bell Rock would open at her command.

With a pace close to running, they reached the warehouse with the tank. Lil gave an order to the two sailors stationed in front of the room.

You may leave now.

The men vanished in an instant, ecstatic with the prospect of finally returning to the Bell Rock after their tedious patrol. When they were gone, Lil dragged Ed inside and locked the door. As an extra measure, she also shoved some wooden crates in front of it. After struggling with the boxes, Lil turned around and found Ed already checking the tank lid. Once again, Lil grabbed her gun before approaching him.

What are you going to do?

We should talk to it first.

How?

Ed kneeled down and opened the lid.

*Screechhh*

An ominous sound pierced their ears, followed by the sound of clashing water. Lil warned him as she checked the tank's bottom from a safe distance.

Careful. It could come popping out.

Well, it seems to me that it has lost its strength.

With that said, Lil moved closer and looked further into the tank. The bright blue light was only a small dot. The constant swaying of the waves gave the illusion of it moving, but in reality, it stayed still. Lil repeated what she had already said like a parrot.

What are you going to do?

Ed stood up without answering. After loosening his belt, he jammed his sword between the lid and the floor to prevent it from closing. He then took off his shirt and boots. Lil, who was making sure the sword was a suitable support, noticed the scene halfway through. She widened her eyes and started to shout.

What are you doing?!

All sorts of irreverent delusions mingled in her head as she looked at Ed. She was about to draw her weapon when the only piece of clothing left on his body was his pants.

Are you crazy?

*What? Whats he doing?*

As soon as she thought about it she wanted to ask him, but Ed took the balsam out of the cloth and bit on it, leaving Lil too stunned to speak.

*Splash!*

She opened her eyes after being struck in the face by the upcoming water to find no one with her in the room. She looked around but saw nobody.

*No way*

Reflexively, Lil turned her gaze toward the tank. There she saw the pure white light sinking with the figure of a man. She exclaimed with a gasp.

Th that crazy bastard!

## Chapter 94

Lil tightened her grip on the edge of the tank. Because she completely missed the occurrence, her heart froze over.

*No, seeing that the light is receding, Its clear that he jumped in himself rather than falling in by accident And he was right, the darker it gets, the brighter the balsam becomes. The brightness is still clearly visible even though it keeps descending. If its so intense when viewed from above, then theres no way the mermaid couldnt have seen it*

Lils heart pounded as soon as that thought crossed her head. Sure enough, the motionless blue light wiggled visibly, a chill ran down her spine when she noticed movement from the creature they thought was asleep. Nevertheless, the white brilliance went towards the mermaid.

Did you get caught? Well, you jumped in so loudly Damn it!

All the blood from her fingertips seemed to drain away. In an instant, the pale hand chucked away the triangular hat she was wearing. When she looked around in desperation, she noticed a pulley hanging from the ceiling.

*Judging from the fact that its installed above the tank, the object they intended to move with it is probably the mermaid.*

Lil unhooked the ring of the second pulley connected to it and untied the bundle of ropes. Despite the intricate structure, consisting of various pulleys linked to one another, she knew that pulling the longest rope would elevate the pulley with the iron ring and letting it loose would lower it. It was a

tool that was widely used to move nets or boxes. When she studied the mechanism she noticed that the rope she had to pull was attached to a spool on the floor.

Upon pushing the pulley with the ring into the water, Lil measured Eds weight. She had only Cesar to compare, so he came to her mind naturally.

*Eds taller than Cesar, but his body is similar or somewhat slimmer. Obviously, his weight will be comparable to Cesars. Im not sure how many times I have to pull the rope to get him out of the water Regardless, its rather fortunate it will cost less strength because the water-resistance will make him lighter.*

As a test, Lil yanked the rope one time.

Damn it.

*At this rate, the only things I will recover are the remains of a ravaged body Wait, do mermaids even eat people? I dont really know, but I wouldnt insist on it being a herbivore seeing the way it attacked me earlier.*

When she thought the ring had sunken deep enough, Lil pulled the handle next to the spool to secure the rope. She then took off her vest and wrapped her hands around it.

*It would be much faster to pull directly with my hands But I have no idea whats going on inside the tank. Dont tell me its a friendly atmosphere?*

Lil held on to the rope, but when the silence prolonged, she hesitantly let it go and stepped toward the tank. Approaching the tank empty-handed felt a bit unsettling, but she had no other choice, with both her hands still wrapped in the vest, it was impossible to hold a gun. The fish tanks opening appeared ominous like it could spit out a monster at any time. Neither Eds nor the mermaids light were visible, so Lil clenched her teeth and moved in closer. At first glance, it seemed like a small ray of light ascended through the tank.

Huh?

Lil strode forward. Out of nowhere, the pulley rope, suddenly supporting weight became taut and vibrated as if it could snap at any moment. She looked up before quickly casting her eyes down again. However, Ed was still nowhere to be found. She could only see a cluster of froth rushing towards her. Beneath that, the blue ray of light was swimming at an alarming rate. With its mouth wide open, the figure roared towards the white light, ready to devour it. In a panic, Lil jumped, grabbed the rope hanging in the air, and ran to the opposite wall. When there was no more room left to run, she started yanking it with all her strength. Even though it wasnt heavy, there was a long distance to cover. Lil had long since lost her vest, so she had to deal with the chafing of the rope on her forearms. Still, she threw all her effort into it, knowing that if she stopped for even a second, shed lose all her chances of succeeding. Lil clenched her teeth, hoping it wasnt too late.

Soon the centre of the tank bulged up. The water broke like a condensed eruption before a large volume soared up. White light radiated from within the foam which slipped around the mass of water like a loose net. It was Ed. Lil pulled the rope with all her might. The wriggling surface became transparent like a thin film and slid down in the shape of a human.

*Schwaaaak!*

Ed emerged like a cub tearing away the amnion. He gasped for air while clinging to the iron ring, possibly out of breath. He then coughed forcefully to vomit all the water he had inhaled. The liquid that burst from his mouth poured down like firecrackers. The entire warehouse was flooded in an instant, as if it had rained heavily. Meanwhile, the sound of raging waves could be heard from the tank and it wasn't caused by the overflowing of the water.

When the face of the predator rose through the rubble, Lils vision instantly turned blue. It was only then that she realised how bright the mermaids light was. The intensity could be compared to the rising sun, spreading its morning rays over the world. Lil blinked due to the brilliance that remained like a dizzying afterimage before her closed eyes.

Upon opening them again, she witnessed a set of dense teeth, full of fangs, that sprang up to Eds knee and caused her to scream loudly.

Ed!

Its large mouth was extended so far that it made its cheeks hollow, while its blue tongue pierced through them moving like a snake.

Keeeeek!

Ed turned to the rising spray and shouted something in a hurry. To Lil, it sounded like a foreign language that was completely incomprehensible.

However, the monstrous cry ceased. Its hair, which had swelled due to the instinct of a beast in front of its prey, settled down. Even its tongue, which was wriggling like an independent creature only moments ago, froze. Unbelievably, the mermaid stopped all its fluctuations as if Eds shout contained some kind of magic.

The scene was so unrealistic that Lils mouth fell open, dumbfounded. When little drops of water dripped from her forehead and blocked her view, she thought time had stopped. But then

*Splash!*

The bluish light disappeared in an instant. Lil clearly saw a change in the mermaids expression just before it was swallowed by the water. If she saw it correctly, the mermaid displayed an expression of embarrassment before disappearing in a panic. Lil groaned and stood frozen in her place.

*Was it an illusion? A fantasy?*

Ed, still hanging from the pulley, looked down at the tank and smiled. On the other hand, Lil didn't even think about moving her widely opened eyes. Ed jumped to her side and brushed through his wet hair.

Droplets of water dripped from a single strand that wasn't swept back.

*Tuk. Tuk. Tuk.*

Time seemed to move slowly.

Lil barely reacted when Ed pulled the handle to secure the rope she was holding, before turning towards her. She muttered with the most dumbfounded face he had ever seen.

Ma Magic?..

Ed looked at Lil and started laughing.

Hahahaha! Captain! Your expression hahahaha!

Hey, did you use ma mamagic? It was just

The left corner of Eds mouth twitched. He licked his wet lips with his tongue and spoke.

Yes. That was magic.

When he said so, Ed extended his hand and waved it in front of Lils face. The fact that she didnt respond confirmed she was still in shock due to her reality being shaken. Her head felt dizzy, her stomach had turned, and her vision began to blur. She couldnt tell what was the floor and what was the ceiling. She had never experienced an earthquake, but for her, this appeared to be a much greater disaster than an earthquake. The floor beneath her feet and the ceiling above her, everything was falling apart. In the meantime, Ed turned his hand, palm side up and wiggled with his fingers as if he was imitating fire.

See?

But nothing entered Lils line of sight. She dropped the rope as she had no strength left in her fingers. For no apparent reason, her hand, that was now empty, touched the area around her neck in search of her necklace. In this absurd situation, she could only rely on the small jewel. Lil held it as if it were a lifeline. Because she was still lost, Eds face became more and more distorted.

Pffft

Ed suddenly bent forward and started to laugh, sounding like he was about to die of laughter.

Hahaha! Hahahaha!

..?

He grabbed his stomach while his whole body shook, but Lil couldnt understand what the hell was going on.

Youre so naive!

Finally, the realisation slowly hit her as she was still clutching the necklace.

*Did this crazy guy play along just for a joke? Magic? Magic*

Lil stammered with a red face.

You you!

There were tears in Eds eyes upon laughing so much. Ed wiped his eyes with his finger and chuckled. Lil, who started stomping her foot in anger, aimed her boot at the squatting body, but Ed simply avoided her by twisting his body with a rabbit-like jump. Lil couldnt stand it, so she turned to try stomping Ed on his other foot

Ahhh!

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She had completely forgotten. It was no exaggeration to say that the space around the tank was now awash with water like a lake that had overflowed its banks. It caused one of her feet to give way under her weight and she slipped. Lil floundered for a moment before falling towards Ed without

hesitation. Ed, who was still squatting, toppled under Lils body weight. Her lips and front teeth slammed Eds forehead so hard that it for sure had to hurt, but it apparently didnt matter to him.

What do you call this, a kiss of respect? Was I that commendable?

Lil struggled with a blushing face, trying to escape Eds arms, but her hands kept landing on his chest or shoulders. Eds upper body was bare, so whenever her palms touched him, she felt his damp skin, making it impossible for Lil to come to her senses.

Ed opened his mouth.

Goe.

Lils struggle came to a halt and she looked down at him, who, unlike her, was completely calm.

What?

Its Goe, Goe. An ancient language.

..?

*Of course, there were civilisations in ancient times, so they must have developed some kind of language as well. But that never crossed my mind actually. I didnt know there was an archaic phonetic language system, and I sure as hell didnt know that there were still humans in this modern world who could speak it*

Ed raised his upper body with Lil still in his arms.

Apparently, the mermaids still use Goe. It makes sense. Goe was the language that the gods used to communicate with the humans.

You what are you?

Im a Navy officer and a spy for the fleet who enjoys perverted behaviour. Im carrying out Admiral Retiros confidential orders, which by the way are to board a pirate ship and harass the Captain. And if the Captains in danger, this spy will take the bullet instead, also if the Captain meets a captured mermaid, this spy will do whatever the Captain wants him to do to free it.

Ed noticed that Lil couldnt give up the gun she grabbed halfway through his speech. In response, she only bit her lip and remained silent.

I tried sign language at first, but

Sign language?

Oh, its talking with your hands, like this.

Ed made motions with his hands in front of his chest. Lil actually wasnt unaware of the term sign language.

*I learned systematised sign language for military purposes in Lebrun, and there are also independent signs among sailors*

Lil yelled as she no longer wanted to be treated like an idiot.

I know that!



Ah, yes. Well, when you think about it, its rather absurd to imagine any other sea mammal with such meticulous hands, right? Take whales or sea lions for example; through time, their fingers and nails have long become vestigial. But mermaids are different. Orsay created mermaids out of envy of the children of the earth gods, us humans. Of course, she wanted them to be able to communicate with herself and the ancient humans. So, sign language evolved into a very natural way of communicating, because both races had wonderful limbs called arms. Mermaids and ancient humans could thus communicate through sign language and the ancient language Goe. However, mermaids couldnt speak outside of the water, and humans couldnt talk underwater.

So then the mermaids and the ancient humans werent able to communicate in Goe?

Oh, thats

..?

Ed stopped talking and glanced at her, raising his eyebrows toward his forehead and gently narrowing his eyes.

Well. I dont want to tell you now.

..!

Then, as if to block any response from her, he quickly added.

Anyway, I couldnt speak underwater, so I had to pull the mermaid out of the water. Seeing that it reacted calmly, it must have understood?

What did you say?

A hint of arrogance appeared on his handsome face. The way he wrinkled his lips when he grinned slowly revealed it. It was hard for Lil to accept, but this look suited him as if he was used to wearing it. When Lil suddenly realised his breath was touching her lips, she instinctively held her breath out of shock, causing her heart to throb. The discomfort in her chest felt like she had been beaten with a bat.

I delivered your message.

Lil hurriedly pulled back, discovering that the centre of Eds forehead was noticeably red. She recalled having her lips touch that part, so those were clearly the marks she had left with her front teeth. Lil pushed herself out his arm that was still holding her.

Let go.

Oh, Im afraid youll slip again. One kiss of respect is enough.

It was the Captain who tumbled upside down, so I dont know why Im the one being treated like this. I should be the one whos offended.

I was careless. Im sorry.

Lil flicked his exhausted arm away after her bland apology.

Youre telling me about respect again and again, but in the end you keep being attacked by me Doesnt your forehead hurt a lot? It looks like it.

Hurt by your soft lips? It was a very affectionate attack.

When Ed even tried to touch her lips, Lil jumped to her feet and brushed off her clothes, pretending not to have seen Eds gesture. Drops of water splashed from her wet clothes as she creased her brow.

*That guy speaks and acts like that without hesitation. He indeed shouldve been offended, but instead, he smirks as if he had been waiting for this moment.*

*Besides, I dont think his true personality is like this. When Im watching, he appears to be modest, but I know he doesnt even want his collar to be touched by the rest of the crew. Given his reluctance to make contact even in the slightest way, Im confident hes a young aristocrat from a respectable house. If Marenzio had put his lips on his forehead, would he act like this? No, they wouldve been at each others throats immediately. No matter how bizarre a bond was created between Ed and me, this is too much.*

Its disturbing when you talk like that. You keep saying two things with one mouth, so I dont know which one to believe.

Cant you even joke?

Hurry and get up. Have you forgotten what your original purpose is?

Yes, indeed.

Ed turned his gaze to the tank and held out his palm to Lil. Lil however didnt know what to do with it, so she looked down at the back of his head, speechless. Ed spoke without looking back at her.

Key.

Oh right.

Lil handed him the key that Jacques Poussin had given her. It was the key to unchain the iron ball. Ed, still seated, was handed the key, but suddenly grabbed her by the wrist. She was surprised and tried to jerk her arm since she thought it would be better for him to re-enter the tank instead of her.

What kind of

Before she could continue, Ed turned his head and looked at Lils arm. Lil followed his gaze instinctively. She had marks on her wrists and forearms as if she had been whipped. The next moment, Ed spread out Lils palm which was so red that they were even purplish. Ed soon got up from his seat with a strange look on his face.

Its the same for me, Captain, I also dont know what to believe, your words or the way your body looks.

However, Lil quickly pulled out her hand and completely ignored his words.

Are you sure that the mermaid understood you?

With Ed still having a strange look on his face, Lil turned her gaze towards the tank.

You cant ignore it. Mermaids intelligence is on par with humans. Besides, they know they have the upper hand in the water. It wont go out of its way to kill me anymore.

By the way, when I saw it, um it reacted strangely. After hearing you, didnt it seem like it was flustered?

Of course. Wouldnt you be surprised if the first mermaid youve ever seen speaks to you in the Imperial language?

Well, thats true.

Im not sure about this, but its highly likely that since ancient times mermaids have only lived in the places designated by Orsay. It might also be its first time to see a beast called a human, or to see a ship, and more so, to encounter another being that spoke its own language. Just as humans distinguish themselves from animals, a mermaid could also distinguish itself from this newly seen beast. They must only have seen us on murals, right?

Lil asked back as Ed went to pick up the balsam.

Murals? What murals?

Remember your arms, Captain? We humans have free arms, so we can do all kinds of things, such as using tools. Wouldnt the same be true for mermaids? What else would you hold if you hadnt held tools with that exceptionally delicate hand of yours? I wonder if theres a city under the windless nest and if so it probably has a longer history than human civilization. If you look at it that way, you can reasonably guess that therell be murals or rocks with writings on them. Of course, there may be other objects that can be written on with characters besides rocks.

Lil stared at Ed as he sat on the edge of the tank to re-enter. Ed continued as if he knew what her expression looked like without glancing back at her.

I told you, its not just medicine I learned from Imperial Clairaut. I heard these sorts of things, too.

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Its not like I havent met any other graduates of the Imperial Clairaut, but its the first time Ive seen someone who talks like you.

Its because the Clairaut has so many different fields, and there are only a few individuals who are interested in ancient times. As for me, Ive been going back and forth a lot because the history building was so close, thats how I picked up a thing or two.

Lil, who had her arms crossed, stroked her chin as she was agonising over something. There was one more thing that came to mind, so Lil pointed it out.

Your Admiral.

She stared intently at his calm side profile, but shortly after Ed frowned and grunted.

Why do you keep calling him my Admiral? We werent close.

Anyway, hes said to be passionate about ancient art.

Who cares?

If so

Then off I go.

When Eds tall body slid into the water, Lil reflexively knelt and shouted at the tank.

Hey!

But the only answer to her cry was a splash of water.

Damn it.

Lil watched Ed submerged into darkness while foreshadowing the possibility that just came to mind.

*The Admiral is said to be enamoured with ancient traces.*

Until now, Lil thought that the term ancient traces was referring to works of art or relics. But when she heard Eds words, it seemed to her that life itself could be a trace of antiquity.

When the white light suddenly faded, Lil leaned over the edge of the tank. And at that moment, she realised she was frantically concerned about Ed. While she was suspicious of him, her worry that he might get hurt invaded her doubts like an intruder. Two thoughts that shouldnt coexist were tightly intertwined. She couldnt figure out what she believed in or whom she wanted Ed to be.

*Just a moment ago, Ed wouldve been eaten had I failed to raise the pulley in time. He was reckless. Or maybe he knew I was trying to figure out a way to help him, and when he saw the pulley, he expected me to pull him up?*

Annoying bastard.

Lil sighed in frustration. Suddenly, a light spread into her field of vision. Lil raised the eyes she had fixed on the wound on her arm.

The mermaids eyes that had risen above the water surface were staring at her.

Lil was hit by the light in front of her and blinked her aching eyes before wiping them with her arm. She squinted. In front of her were innocent eyes, similar to those of a deer\*, emitting a brilliant light. The longer she looked into those eyes, the more the bright light faded. Without giving the time to panic, the light slowly went out. However, the pair of eyes were still on Lil, who suddenly realised that the mermaid was examining her.

Awkwardly, Lil repeated what Ed had said, causing the mermaids hair to swell once but soon calmed down again. She didnt know if she said it correctly or not, so she could only hope she did. Lil was so nervous that she couldnt feel her hands or feet anymore and Ed wasnt there yet. Suddenly, the fact that she couldnt tell whether he was alive or dead squeezed her chest. Lil looked at its hair, which was starting to swell again.

*Seeing that it can stay on the surface for so long, the chains must have been unlocked.*

The dry saliva she was about to swallow got stuck in the middle of her throat. When Lil rolled her eyes to search for Ed, she saw its tail pop up and vigorously sweep over the surface of the tank. Lil was defenceless against the pouring water.

Pfft!.. Cough!.. Cough!..

A shadow was cast over Lils head as she coughed towards the floor. She raised her head in a flash. The mermaid If they even have a bone similar to a knee stood on its knees, staring down at Lil. Lil wasnt sure whether she should be more shocked about the fact that the mermaid jumped out of the water, that its tail could support its weight, or that it was wearing clothes and trinkets.

It was also at this point that Lil realised the mermaid was a she\*\*. The mermaid was dressed in a sleeveless dress. It was a dress that hung just above its caudal fin, with a folded neckline and

decorated with lace around the waist. When put on a human, it would probably end around the ankles. The dress material seemed to be as slick as the body of a squid. While its top was pale pink, the bottom was dark green. It was an elegant and stunning combination with the mermaid silvery bluish skin tone. Lil suddenly grasped the concept of civilization that Ed had told her about.

Keeeeek!

Lil was surprised when the mermaid moved its hand in front of its chest.

*I dont know sign languagelet alone know how to make that clear*

Lil hesitantly raised her hands and shrugged her shoulders. The mermaid then turned its upper body to look back at the tank. Surprisingly, a voice popped up out of nowhere.

Hok im pugit.

Lil turned her head towards the voice and saw Ed, who had his chin propped up on the edge of the tank, smiling gently. Lil exclaimed, feeling her anger rise like a fever.

You! Ugh, since when

From the very moment you realised you were hopeless. It was fun to see you bewildered, so I was quietly watching. What a rewarding day.

Lil bit her lip and endured the irritation.

*In any case, the mermaid must be in a sensitive state, so its common sense that startling the mermaid by screaming at him will be foolish.*

Lil asked, squirming only inwardly.

What did you say?

That you dont know sign language.

Okay, now hurry up and come out of there.

Aye, aye.

..!

While staring at Ed, something damp touched Lils cheek. Upon feeling the cold sensation on her face, Lil slowly rolled her eyes and checked her side. It was the mermaid stroking Lils cheek. The mermaid was probably curious about her. It poked her cheek, then raised her arm, and held her hand. Holding hands with a mermaid for the first time, Lil realised its skin was smooth and scaleless.

*Is this what it feels like to touch a dolphin?*

Lil turned completely toward the mermaid.

The face she met right in front of her nose was a far cry from the legendary Bell Rock. Its facial features were not a perfect copy of those of humans, unlike how Bell Rock was portrayed. It has eyes, a nose, and a mouth, but its features had less curvature than those of a human. Above all else, its eyeballs were shining black with blue irises, followed by three thick hairs that rose out of the brow. It was what Lil thought kept moving like a snake. Unlike her other hairs, these three strands were thick and strong, and they were still swelling and wriggling over her head.

Those are sensory hairs. They help with touch, smell, and hearing.

Eds explanation suddenly came from her side. Lil gave her hair to the mermaid and nodded her head stiffly. In exchange, the mermaid gave Lil its hair. Lil was perplexed when she grasped the smooth, fluffy texture in her hand. At the same time, the mermaid kept smiling and twitching its mouth in surprise at the difference in texture between its hair and Lils.

Sensory hairs are like an otters beard. Well, hers are pretty long, though.

For Lil, this situation was very strange. Ed was watching the mermaid, but the mermaid was more interested in her than Ed, who could speak with it in both sign language and Goe. She couldnt figure out why the mermaid was so interested in her. The mermaid lowered its guard thanks to Ed, but Lil couldnt shake the feeling that she was putting her head in the maw of a beast that had tried to eat her not long ago. For a brief period, time passed slowly. Just as they were gasping for breath from their overabundance of curiosity, a trumpet could be heard. Lil and Ed immediately looked at each other. Lil, of course, rolled her eyes first.

Ed made himself their interpreter as he spoke both languages. The mermaid who was rubbing Lils legs gently raised its head while Lil, pulling out her legs, quickly stood up. The mermaid looked up at Lil as she stepped back behind Ed. Lil pointed to the window on the stern and looked at Ed.

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The mermaid turned around on its knees as Lil passed the puddle of water formed around the tank and pushed hard against the stiff wooden window. The window opened with a screeching sound and a burst of wind blew in. Fortunately, the window was rather large. Lil looked down, the sunset-coloured sea was very close. So close even, that when the waves hit the stern hard, foam would bounce up to the window.

Lil looked back.

Lets hurry.

The mermaid was now flat on the ground, supporting its upper body with its arms pressed on the floor while its tail was stretched behind it. Lil noticed that its upper body appeared larger than the body of a human.

She initially pondered whether to carry the mermaid with Ed or not, but seeing how the mermaid moved well, such worries became negligible. The mermaid seemed accustomed to moving with its tail and arms in a manner similar to that of seals.

Lil stood beside the window in a daze. As soon as the mermaid put its hand on the windowsill and checked outside, it slid into the sea. Its nimble tail fin whipped elastically through the air and disappeared into the sea with a splash. Immediately after, Lil, who had been clutching her chest, sat on the windowsill and looked around to see if anyone had witnessed it.

What are you doing?

Seeing if theres someone there.

At this angle, even the masthead wont see our position on the stern.

Thats true.

Lil, still sitting on the windowsill, smiled proudly upon checking the faint light in the sea. Full of joy, she asked contently.

Are there times when mermaids glow and times they dont?

I think theyll light up when its dark because they cant light their surroundings with fire.

Right.

Lil tilted her head while watching the blue light just in front of the stern.

But why is she still here?

Oh, thats probably

Ed, standing behind her, unbuckled Lils belt. No, to be exact, he disarmed her as her gun and bullets were attached to that belt. Lil, who held the window frame with both arms, was helplessly deprived of her weapon.

What what are you doing

Lil tried to quickly push her upper body back, but Ed was much quicker.

Shes waiting for us.

What?

Your feet. Kick them well.

Her pushed body flew in the air for a moment. Lil held her breath, not understanding what just happened.

*Splash!*

The cold seawater came rushing in, wetting her shirt and pants.

Although there was no blow because the altitude wasnt high, her body was taken aback by the sudden impact with the water. Lils head, wrapped in bubbles, soared up.

Phwaa!

Lil hastily wiped her face and took a deep breath.

*That guys obviously mad! He seemed to be getting crazier every time!*

She cursed and smoothened her shoulders. Suddenly, there was a splash beside her. Lil looked at her side with a fearsome mood as Ed moved near her and ruffled his hair.

*He looks so peaceful and relaxed as if he just came out to enjoy a good swim.*

Wary of someone hearing them, Lil screamed in whispers.

Whats this?!

Are your palms okay?

What?

Dont they sting?

Lil didnt know what Ed was talking about, so she showed an expression of frustration that couldnt be expressed in her voice.

Youre the one who pushed me into the sea. But now youre suddenly asking about my palms?

Ed just stared at Lil. Lil started swimming towards Ed with the intention of smacking him. She was annoyed, but she became even more enraged upon seeing his half-lying position with the back of his head on the surface of the water. Lil spoke as starkly as possible.

What are you doing?!

Dont you want to see it?

See what?!

How beautiful the freedom is youve given her.

Suddenly, a long blue light drew a parabola between them before blurring again. Lil stopped splashing water towards Ed. The bright, streamlined light hovered around them in elegant curves. The mermaids face they saw a while ago was reflected under the waves.

See you down there, Captain. The anchor line on the port side.

Ed left only those words and dived. She watched the tail approach Ed and swim away deeply. Lil, an ordinary human being, couldnt afford to be as reckless as Ed. Fear preceded her curiosity. The vast nature of the sea, predators she probably never seen before, and a new unknown civilization that felt unthinkable not long ago. She wasnt a coward, but she wasnt overly brave either, so her fear was natural. However, Ed gave her an unexpected treat to chew on.

*How beautiful is this freedom?*

The threat seemed too delicious to not be eaten. Lil had already strayed away from them a bit but was tossed and swept by the current. She quickly dived down.

*-Bubbling. Bubbling.-*

The sound of bubbling water was all she could hear. Lil opened her eyes. At dusk, the sea was a deep blue. Although it was still bright just below the surface of the water, Lil couldnt see anything from the waist down. The situation felt pretty bizarre to her, who has never dived after the sun went down. She tasted the horrors common to divers on their first night. In this darkness, one will never know when a shark will come by and rip off a lower limb. After reflexively bending her knees, Lil looked around the port side to search for the anchor line.

She could see the Marians anchor line nearby. As she turned to fully face the line, the current from Eds legs hit her cheek. He had already reached it. Lil stretched her arms and swam toward him. Although the water temperature was starting to cool, the tide flowing from the tip of her toe to her head was warm. Lil rode the forward flow and grabbed Eds ankle. Ed, who was holding the line with one hand, looked back at her. When Lil extended her hand with the intention to grab it herself, Ed pulled her wrist and put it on the rope for her.

When Lil grabbed the rope with seaweed and sparsely attached barnacles, Ed pointed down. It was a gesture full of excitement. She was envious of his reckless personality, he was someone who could just chase his curiosity in every situation. Lil was forced to follow Ed, who turned his back on her without waiting for a response.



The intense pressure clogged her ears, and her crushed hearing couldn't let her sense anything. The same was true for her vision. Lil didn't know if she had her eyes open or closed. In that state, floating without gravity, she felt like dust blowing around a huge world. Lil, thrown into stillness, traced the rope with her fingertips. The only thing she could rely on in this darkness was the rope she held.

Before long, the mermaid below them got closer and closer. Not because they were descending, but because it was rising toward them. The ascending light gradually spread. At some point, Lil came to a standstill, unable to go any further.

At first glance, the mermaid's movement, surrounded by a gentle glow, seemed holy. Making the pitch-black darkness bow its head and retreat. The closer the mermaid's body drew, the more intense it became. It was as if its power was driving out the darkness.

Lil stared at its beautiful movement as if possessed. Like a prisoner who has been imprisoned for a long time and getting intoxicated by the fresh air outside, the mermaid who had gathered a lot of seawater around her inhaled the seawater's essence in her arms. Its sensory hairs fluttered gently. Eventually, the mermaid released the water and gracefully wagged her tail, its movements comparable to a slow dance. It seemed to be able to hear music that Lil couldn't. Like a child in a flower garden dancing without paying attention to anyone's gaze, it came to the mermaid so simply.

Even if it wasn't possible, Lil felt like she could explode from amazement. The mermaid didn't just shine alone. Instead, it illuminated the sea's darkness like a sun under the sea. Its light slowly wrapped around Lil and Ed. Suddenly, something fluttered beside her temple. When Lil turned around, she saw a manta ray the size of a house slowly turning over on its wide belly. The flat rhombus-shaped creature passed over their heads, flapping its pectoral fins. Under its smiling expression, five pairs of gills opened and closed like bars.

Lil unwittingly pulled Ed's arm in front of her, making him raise his head along with her. A tail longer than its body passed through the water like a snake. This time, it was Ed who tugged Lil's arm. He tried to make eye contact, while pointing ahead with a smile. However, Lil was still distracted by the giant manta ray flapping its wings.

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Ed tugged her arm once more and they both looked ahead.

Lil almost screamed. Dozens of rays hovered over the mermaid, flapping their fins like flags.

*No, they aren't waving their fins like a flag. Instead, it looks more like they're dancing.*

The group dance that relied on one single light surrounded by a dark stage was truly spectacular. Dozens of wings fluttered back and forth and gracefully roamed the spotlight. In the midst of this, a swarm of sardines gathered like a whirlwind and one of the manta rays soared through the sardines. It opened its large mouth wide, revealing the inside of its stomach.

## *Miraris?*

A thin voice echoed from somewhere. The source of the sound was unknown, but Lil looked surprised at the mermaid. The mermaid's pale blue brilliance floated toward Lil as their gazes met. With the mermaid's movements, the scene gradually changed. As the light now illuminated a new background, coral colonies appeared and the sardines which shone brightly dimmed away.

Seeing the mermaids beautiful glowing eyes just a span ahead, Lil corrected her first thought.

*In the water, the mermaid is more like moonlight rather than sunlight. Im this close to her, but my eyes dont hurt, and my hands dont get burned*

It was a strange experience for Lil, who had only known luminous light from a torch or candles.

She awkwardly held the mermaids hand.

*Dei filia, miraris?*

The mermaid came close enough to touch the tip of her nose. Lil felt a sense of coolness, when a blunt nose, two pairs of nostrils, and smooth, blue skin approached. Lil shrank her body in a hurry to prevent herself from touching the sensory hair. Meanwhile, the mermaid pursed its lips together and blew her breath. Of course, that would have been the case if it was possible for the wind to blow in the sea. But in reality, it spouted water. Lil, not knowing what was going on, closed her eyes when the cold water rushed around her nose and mouth.

When Lil was still dumbfounded, the mermaid turned to Ed. Upon leaning towards Ed, the mermaid sent the same wave to his face. Lil looked at Ed strangely, he looked surprised in a different way than herself. Ed moved his mouth towards Lil. At the same time, a voice was heard.

Shes asking if you find it fascinating.

..?

It was a little muffled, but she could definitely understand it. Lil looked at the mermaid in bewilderment.

*Does the mermaid suddenly know how to speak the human language?*

Where are you looking at? It was me. Me.

You?

Lil grabbed her neck, startled by her reflexive voice.

*Water will come floating into my body now that I have spoken underwater.*

Lil closed her eyes and held her breath, bracing herself for death. Her entire body stiffened to the point of shaking. However, no matter how long she waited, she couldnt feel the current entering her airways.

Why are you so surprised? You have been breathing for a while now.

Lil opened her eyes.

*Ive been Ive been breathing*

But if I stop!

Eds breath created a small whirlpool. Lil pinched her nose and rolled her eyes toward him.

You dont have to hold your breath. Do you understand? Dont think about it too much.

Lil nodded without taking a moment to comprehend the situation.

*I can live without breathing*

However, there was no room for more shock today.

Her fingers that were clutching her nose slipped off. Lil suddenly realised she had already shown several clumsy expressions, so she awkwardly smiled at the mermaid, who was staring at her with innocent eyes. The mermaid then tilted her head and pulled Lils hair down, which was fluttering everywhere.

*Where did my hair tie go?*

Even though it was natural for hair to float freely in water, Lil was concerned about how funny she was looking. It was then that Lil realised that the mermaids hair was neatly flowing downwards. But before she could come up with an explanation, the mermaid turned around and placed Lils hand on its shoulder.

The mermaid stretched its arms and started swimming. Lils body began to move forward on its own. Ed, of course, was on the other side. Even with two humans hanging from its shoulders, the mermaids movements were light.

Descending further down, they swam past spectacular coral walls. It was like travelling through a cave with the mermaid as their torch. Lil looked around the mysterious tunnel and discovered corals flowering profusely, like a swarm of trees, growing along the caves walls. Occasionally, a fan-shaped coral as colourful as a bouquet of flowers appeared. It was the same for the floor of the cave. Coral colonies spread out in endless fields, with colours differing from pale green to brown. Among them, sea turtles were seen sparsely. Ed tapped Lil on her shoulder, then he put his hand on his cheek, and closed his eyes.

Do you want to sleep?

Ed laughed a little. Lil, seeing the sleeping sea creatures for the first time, looked carefully between the corals. When she did, she could see fish and crustaceans that remained motionless as if they were dead in the crevices of the coral leaves. The seahorses also seemed to be asleep with their tails wrapped around coral stalks.

After passing through a colony of sea anemones, a flat vacant lot became visible. There was a large rock in the centre of the sandy bottom. Lil regretfully looked back, but it was already dark behind her.

*Pone super petram manus tuas.*

Hold on to this rock.

Lil and Ed reached out to the rock. As their hands created a small flow, the swarms of clams attached to the rock closed their mouths one after another. After dropping them off, the mermaid began to observe the rock closely. Lil looked carefully at the rock as well. Eventually, a crack formed along the entire length of the stone and white flesh was exposed. The mermaid didnt miss the gap and put its finger in it. It was then that Lil realised that the crack was the mouth of a clam. The shell was covered with seaweed and sea anemones, which would normally grow on rocks, but it in fact was a clam.

In an effort to show off, the mermaid opened her fist in front of Lil. Several white and greenish grains were laying on the palms of its hand.

*Peloris cor.*

Lil understood the word without Eds interpretation.

*Pearls.*

Lil stared at the mermaid, who was giving her pearls, in awe. The mermaid picked up a bead, examined it, and attached it to Lils hair which was still soaring upwards. It then picked up a second pearl and repeated the process. Lil turned to Ed, not knowing what was going on. Eds eyes were slightly above her face.

*Hes basically buried in my fluttering seaweed-like hair.*

He spoke as he lowered his eyes.

Shes decorating your hair.

Lil wondered why Eds expression remained so calm.

*Decorating my hair? But why?*

As soon as she wondered about it, a few bundles of hair dropped next to her ear. Pearls were attached to the ends. It was only then that Lil thought about looking at the mermaids hair as well. Its hair didnt rise upwards but instead floated beautifully around its face. It was probably because of the pearls embedded on the rich strands.

*Gratias tibi ago pro salute mea, dei filia. Sume hoc in signum gratitudinis.*

The mermaid retreated with a satisfied face. It was like an artist admiring the work it had created.

Shes saying thank you Its her token of gratitude.

Lil looked at the mermaid.

*She seemed unwilling to decorate Ed. Againwhy?*

How come she isnt doing the same for you?

Maybe because my hair is short?

How do I say back, thank you?

Gratias.

Lil was tempted to ask the mermaid why it skipped Ed, but she decided to put up with it. Instead, she spoke with a gentle smile.

Gratias.

The mermaid laughed, revealing its teeth. Lil smiled awkwardly as she remembered her chilling memories of their sharpness.

*Mihi nomen est Bellus.*

Her name is Bellus.

Lil belatedly realised that they had not even introduced themselves yet. Still, it was surprising that in their culture they also have something like a first name. Except for the fact that it was underwater, the civilization of mermaids seemed no different from the customs of the empire. Lil and Ed each pointed to themselves and answered.

Lil.

Ed.

Bellus awkwardly pointed towards itself, trying to mimic their hand gesture. But because mermaids didnt use their fingers to present themselves, it flipped its hands about, trying to figure out how to introduce itself using its fingers. After a while, the mermaid succeeded in pointing its index finger toward its face.

*Bellus.*

*The same might be true for Bellus, whos attempting to learn about various cultures.*

Lil admitted to being overly narrow-minded. She couldnt envision mermaids wearing clothes until she saw Bellus, and she couldnt imagine mermaids intelligence until she spoke to one. Even Lil was an arrogant citizen in the face of a foreign species.

## Chapter 99

It seemed that helping the mermaid escape would be something that remains with Lil for the rest of her life.

*It may have started as a ridiculous idea, but now I think we might have changed the history of a civilization.*

While Lil was losing herself in her emotions, she suddenly heard the sound of a rattling chain. It was the ships anchor being winded up.

*Is it already this late?*

Even though they were underwater, Lil habitually looked up to the sky. However, there was no sun nor moon, only a large silver fish passing overhead. Its ventral fin that received the light of Bellus shined like jewel powder before it disappeared.

*Necesse est regredi.*

Bellus understood what Ed meant and opened its mouth wide, looking somewhere in the darkness. It seemed like the mermaid could produce high-pitched noises. Not long after, Bellus had them grab its shoulder again and swam upwards. Lil was disappointedly escorted by Bellus but screamed in astonishment at the huge mouth appearing from the front.

Aack!

As it approached the light, it became evident that it was indeed the mouth of some creature. The massive, circle-shaped black hole opened and closed. Little eyes looked like buttons on the edges of the broad front. Lil screamed once more.

Despite Lils fuss, Bellus twisted its body peacefully. The movement caused Lils body to rise a bit higher and smoothly adjust in the right direction. Eventually, Bellus swam in a curved line and climbed on the creatures back.

Its back, the size of a small island, was covered in a white spotted pattern. Bellus sat calmly, holding the creatures front dorsal fin. Even though Lil sat closely next to the mermaid, her heart kept racing. Water rushed down her cheeks as she tightly held on to its fin. It almost felt like she

was riding a horse. Her hair scattered when the current passed through it just like the wind would do. Only then did Lil raise her head a little.

Its a whale shark.

Even without looking, Lil could already guess what Eds expression was like. Still, she cast a peek at him. As expected, he was smiling as though he found her reaction amusing. Curiosity drove Ed to perform the bizarre act of caressing the sharks back before gripping its dorsal fin with one hand and moving to the side to examine its other parts. Of course, he didnt forget to look at the sharks gills, which gasped and breathed.

Lil only partly loosened her grip on the fin, still too afraid to fall off. However, the feeling was all too familiar. The water clung to her hands holding the sharks fin. The cool flow that ran up her arms from the back of her hand was similar to the wind when she would grab the reins of a horse. Lil squinted her eyes and looked ahead, feeling the water rushing past her body. A floating sleeping fish appeared but disappeared just as quickly. And when she thought she saw a creeping octopus, they had already passed it. It felt familiar but different. It was a scene similar to riding a horse while holding a lantern in the middle of the night. Lil looked at Bellus, who laughed while sweeping away her fluttering hair. The mermaid seemed to like this freedom, too.

*Orsayus sit tibi praesidium.*

Bellus spoke to Ed even though he hadnt fully climbed back up yet. Lil shook her head, not knowing what to do. Nevertheless, Bellus stretched out Lils arm and placed her palm on its chest. And it equally placed its palms on Lils chest.

*Orsayus sit tibi praesidium.*

Holding the fin with only one hand, Lil tightened her grip again.

*Ecce tibi benedictio Formae.*

Gr Gratias.

Lil didnt understand what Bellus said, but she nodded nonetheless. Bellus also didnt seem to be asking for a response as it already knew Lil couldnt communicate using sign language or Goe. When Bellus removed its hand from Lils chest, the mermaid smiled and slowly pointed above. When Lil noticed the shadows of the two ships, she squeezed Eds knee, whose legs were draped over the sharks caudal fin. Ed climbed back up and followed her gaze.

After a moment of contemplation, Lil gently embraced Bellus.

*Seeing that Bellus touched my body without hesitation just now, I guess that this kind of contact is okay.*

Perhaps the mermaid was a bit bewildered at first, seeing the bright light emitted from its body, but that faded quickly. Lil mumbled Gratias once more before letting go. This time, Ed asked for a handshake from the perplexed Bellus. As Bellus glanced at him, the mermaid placed its strangely twisted fingers on his forehead, then changed them into another shape, and brought them to his chin. Soon after, Bellus reached out its hand. Ed took the hand and shook it with a satisfied expression. Not knowing what to do with Eds gesture, Belluss arm fluttered like a mollusc.

As soon as the water turned lighter, Lil let go of the fin and swam upwards. Bellus remained motionless as they left. Lil waved her hand and gazed down one final time before raising to the water's surface. The last thing she saw was Bellus sitting gracefully like a lady on the back of a horse, waving its hand. A dense afterimage of light was still present along the movement of its hand.

When Lil raised her head above the surface of the water, fresh air tickled her nostrils.

Phwaa!

Lil spouted water and opened her eyes after wiping her face. The sea was almost blood-red, and the Bell Rock had already hung up its lanterns. Lil shouted toward the top of the main deck.

Jericho!

Jericho, who was pacing in front of the railing, looked down. When he found them, he made a fuss and grabbed the closest sailor by the collar. The sailor dully turned his head and confirmed their identities before disappearing from sight.

Captain! Doctor! What are you doing there? We were looking for you!

It just kinda happened. Are we that late?

Not really, but hold on! Where's the rope ladder Hey! Hey!

Jericho quickly moved from the railing. Lil and Ed had to swim against the current for a bit to stay close to the hull. Ed smirked as he caught up with her.

So, how was it?

Instead of answering, Lil flicked her finger to shoot drops of water at him. Ed laughed heartily at her gesture, judging it was a positive response. Lil ended up laughing along due to his contagious energy. Ed, noticing the change, became visibly excited.

Was it that great?

Lil replied with a broad grin.

Yeah.

I had no idea it would be like that! Really! Really. Not even in my wildest dreams.

Ed expressed his joy as freely as he did with his curiosity. He overtook Lil and turned himself toward her. They then began to move in this position. Lil eventually suppressed her urge to frown, when she saw Ed swimming backwards. He already did several bizarre things today, so she grew tired of reacting to each and every one of them. Instead, Lil decided to ask something she had been curious about.

But why was she especially nice to me?

Ed bit his tongue, almost answering instinctively. He carefully picked his words, making him speak with difficulty.

I guess she liked your long hair.

Lil looked at the pearls hanging from the tips of her hair. How Bellus managed to attach them to her hair remained a mystery. Ed, who was watching her, moved his gaze towards the open sea.

*Dei filia Bellus certainly called Liloa that. But those words mean the daughter of God. So she knew that Liloa is a woman.*

Of course, Ed didnt tell Lil that. He changed the subject by giving her a rough interpretation of what Bellus said. Ed told Lil that it was Bellus way of expressing its gratitude. The decision was inevitable because there was a good chance her identity would be revealed if Ed interpreted it truthfully. He didnt want Lil to know that he was well aware of the existence of divine abilities and artefacts.

*Just now, right in front of me, Liloa is beaming so brilliantly.*

He finally managed to make her smile, so he didnt think it was time for him to tell her the truth.

Ed pondered over the doubts that began when they were underwater.

*Apparently, Bellus felt the energy of Liloas necklace. I dont know how Bellus noticed the divine power, but she may have seen it as a power inherited from a God. In other words, Bellus regarded Liloa as a daughter of God and treated her particularly well. Her necklace truly was instrumental in dissolving Bellus initial hostility*

Hey!

A sailor threw the rope ladder over the railing. After Ed gestured for her to go up first, Lil accepted the favour without hesitation and asked upon stepping up her foot.

Are mermaids usually kind to humans? At first, wasnt she ferocious?

Its because she was locked up. In the old days, they often took humans to see the sea.

How do you know? Are there murals about that painted somewhere? Did you pick it up at the Imperial Clairaut?

Lil was the first to climb onto the deck and reached out to Ed. Ed took her hand, and after fully stepping on deck, dug water out of his ear when he answered.

Theres Bell Rock as proof, she

What?

But he didnt respond and Lil couldnt ask any further, because Cesar was discovered by the both of them at the same time. He was seen leaning against the main mast. Expressionless.

Chapter 100

Lil hesitantly looked back at Ed, who feigned ignorance and cheerfully waved his hand.

Good work, Captain.

Lil replied with a straight face as if all her excitement had been a lie.

You too. Go get some rest.

Lil side glanced at Ed when he first passed her and then Cesar. Cesar on the other hand didnt bother to look up at him. Going down to his cabin, Ed wiped his face with a towel given to him by Jericho. After drying for a bit, his wet face made way for one sporting a massive smile. Ed kept rubbing his face with the cloth, unable to hide his overflowing joy.



*It has been difficult to guess what the origin of Liloas necklace is, so this was truly an unexpected achievement. Its clearly an object that contains the power of Forma, the Goddess of beauty.*

Ed opened the cabin door and remembered Bellus last words.

*{ Orsayus sit tibi praesidium. }*

*May Orsay be your protection.*

*{ Ecce tibi benedictio Formae. }*

*Heres the blessing of Forma for you.*

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Heavy rain fell. The storm was quite strong. The cabin, which rode on the waves, was filled with humid air, making her damp shirt cling to her skin. In the background, the sound of bustling deckmen scooping out water could be heard.

When Cesar refused to take a seat, Lil awkwardly gazed at his feet. Water was dripping next to his boots, probably because of the rain. The blobs of water spread, painting the floor thickly. Lil was depressed that Cesar remained silent. The navigator seemed equally depressed, but his attitude also told her that he wasnt planning on opening his mouth first.

*Im not sure why Cesars so upset. I already apologised for not returning immediately after I left to get some fresh air. But he still seems to harbour a grudge.*

Lil squeezed her neck.

I dont know why youre being like this. What made you so upset?

Cesar looked down at Lil who was clearly dissatisfied. She was sitting on the bed, talking to him without making eye contact.

*Before, even if she was angry, she tried to remain friendly. But not this time*

It was a small change, but Cesar immediately noticed it. It didnt take him long to figure out why. Someone had stepped in between them and forced her to change.

*While it was nice to have solved the problem with the mermaid, it gave Edgar the chance to intervene in the process. I had already guessed that he had some sort of tactic.*

Cesars patience had reached its limit.

*What transpired after that was inexplicable and hard to believe. She not only enjoyed diving with him, but they also conversed in the water. Furthermore, when they climbed the rope ladder to the top of the Bell Rock, Liloa naturally reached out to him. Whats so great about him that she even cracked a smile?*

Why did you go to him?

What?

Did you go to Ed expecting him to have a solution, or did you just come to seek help?

Its the former; why would I cling to that guy arbitrarily?

What made you think he could help you?

That

Lil hesitated for a moment. She never told Cesar about the myth of Orsay. And she definitely couldn't convey to him the very conversation she had with Ed in Panichi.

*How can I say this? That it was the first time I met a person who understood me That I can't believe he has the same thoughts as me. Or that it was the first time that I didn't feel lonely*

Lil answered with something that wasn't a complete lie.

He often talked about myths. God of the wind or something I've heard him talk about it. He said he picked it up when he was at the Imperial Clairaut. So, I thought he would be helpful.

I was going to tell you, too. If you hadn't interrupted me by asking if we had to take it out, I was going to tell you, Let's go to Ed.

Why did he help you? What did he get in return?

There was no reward.

How could

Cesar was surprised by Lil's unexpected answer. Lil turned away from his red eyes, which were growing bigger and bigger.

*Again, how should I explain this? In fact, it was because Eds just like me that he accepted my request without getting anything in return. As he said in Panichi, it's because he also believes in innate authority. We both agreed that it's right to let a mermaid's tail swim freely on its own.*

Lil finally believed in Ed's sincerity and so she apologised for doubting him. That's why she said she wouldn't pay for anything.

*If Ed had been the first to find the mermaid stuck in the tank, he also would have been the first to think of a way to rescue it, just like me. Because both Ed and I wanted to help the mermaid at no cost. I'm convinced that Ed and I share the same stand on this. But how do I say this to Cesar?*

He helped me without that.

Cesar stepped forward.

Why do you think that was?

Because he knows I dislike him? Because he wants to impress me? I don't know, how should I know?

Is he more than just a member of your crew?

Lil, who thought Cesar's last question was ridiculous, frowned.

What's wrong with you? He only knows me as the Captain. He thinks of me as a man.

I don't need to know about his feelings.

Then what do you need to know?

Yours.

How do you feel?

The voice that asked that question sounded gloomy. Lil couldn't understand how he could ask such an absurd question so seriously. Nonetheless, Lil couldn't evade Cesar's query.

What do I feel?

Do you like him?

Lil was visibly taken aback by the sudden question.

Whether it was in writing or during a conversation, Cesar was always very proud. He would never say something that could harm his self-esteem, especially verbally. As a result, Lil was not only unable to come up with a quick response, but also to control her facial expression.

Cesar was serious and clearly suspicious of her. Lil felt her cheeks heating up, from miles away, anyone could recognise she was embarrassed.

What are you talking about?

Cesar stared at her face and said nothing. Lil tightened her facial muscles and denied it more strongly.

I've never done anything that I should feel sorry about. I never acted immoral.

But what about your heart?

What what about my heart?

You told me the other day. That one can't stop the heart. Even if the body can't, the heart is free and can fly anywhere. You said, Just because the body is there, doesn't mean that the heart is.

Why are you bringing that up?

You're here. But where's your heart?

Lil couldn't figure out what he wanted to hear.

*Does he want to confirm that my heart isn't here? What will he do after checking?*

Up to this point, Cesar either believed or pretended to believe. It was only for a short period, right at the beginning of their relationship that he doubted Lil's heart and her love. Lil was struck with horror and meant to ask him out of fear.

*Why are you asking? What have I neglected? Now, what else do I have to prove?*

Lil swallowed her questions by pressing her trembling lips together. She eventually answered him.

Here.

Cesar stepped back. He took a deep breath and sat down at the desk. Normally she would have hugged him, but the terrified Lil couldn't even approach him.

*What am I missing here?*

As her inner voice echoed in her chest, Cesar slowly wiped his face dry.

Liloa, you've been unusual today. You don't sound like your regular self, and I don't sense the will to work together to solve this problem. Because you act differently than usual, I became impatient and made a mistake. I'm not doubting you.

You and I had an argument, remember? In the Captains room of Jacques Poussin Am I not allowed to have some time to recover from the hurt I felt?

Why do you think that? Do you feel that youre only allowed that little?

Cesar stared at Lil who he thought was acting strange. His dark red eyes were looking for an answer.

*Does Cesar even know what hes talking about? Who, what, and how much is allowed?*

But that was meaningless now. Lil responded like a prisoner confessing her sins.

No.

She had already confessed once and right after, her punishment got determined. She was sentenced to the eternal prison called Lil. At first, it looked like the condemned prisoner received a lot of mercy, but when she entered through the open grate, the God of death blocked the entrance. When the bars were closed, the prisoner raised her eyes and looked around the prison. Inside the prison were fragrant fields, sparkling rivers, and a magnificent castle. She was in tears at the dazzling scene. This castle was very beautiful.

You can enjoy anything.

Yeah. Ill be able to enjoy a lot of what Im allowed to do. Very, very much.

Liloa. That makes me sad. Ive never taken the position of permitting you. When did I allow you to do this and not allow you to do that? I always make decisions with you in mind Dont think like that.

Yeah, you do Im sorry.

In that castle, Lil sometimes had sweet dreams. She dreamed that Cesar, finally fed up with her, would throw her away. An object that couldnt abandon its subject could only be freed once it gets discarded. Lil crouched on the floor of the cold castle.