

Northwest 251

Chapter 251

Hearing those words, Lil already wanted to change the subject. She hated when people evaluated her most difficult times, even if that person was Ed. Past events had torn her body, opened wounds, and left her with scars. So now, not even another person's comfort would entail the disappearance of her scars nor alleviate her pain. To Lil, only the future mattered, for she was the only one who could decide and shape how she would live in that future.

So when Ed actually changed the subject himself, Lil was finally able to relax her body again.

It was the same when you found the portrait.

What?

I expected that moment to come. I knew that me not bringing it up first would lead to you finding out about my dealings in one way or another. But the funny thing was, right up until the moment when you turned the portrait over, when you asked me if I knew the woman in the portrait. Until that moment, I had been confident I could convince you. Of course, I expected you to get angry, but I thought I could explain it in a way that you would deem acceptable. Looking back on it, I know now that it was very arrogant of me, however, I was used to thinking that way that I could do it and that all I had to do was to deliver it well. Even though I didn't know how to change a person's heart, I came up with such a plan. But

But?

But I couldn't

As Ed intertwined his fingers with hers, Lil looked down at their joined hands.

Ed shook his head because he couldn't really explain it.

At that moment, it had seemed as though Lilo's feelings were passed on to me. I had been unable to utter any of the words I prepared, and although I was awake, it felt as if some entity had taken me over. It had been a distant and indescribable sensation of being consumed by some volume and at that dark moment of resonance, I was overcome with emotion

As much as it sounded like an exaggeration, it sparked a realisation in Ed.

That's when I finally realised What on earth had happened?

What happened?

I fell in love with you.

Did they all sing and praise? Not just one or two, but all the hundreds of thousands of people who have faced such a mysterious experience? Maybe they called it love because there was no other way to describe it. It's a strange thing, really. I've never wanted to love Lilo, or thought I should love her, so why did this happen? How was I left with no choice but to love her?

It kept me thinking when we were planning for the prison break in Gualtieri. At some point, I thought that perhaps it would be better for me if I got out of your sight. But that thought drove me

even crazier, so I couldn't do it. I wanted to make it up to you, but I quickly realised there was very little I could do. All I could do was to not upset you more as I saw that you were already struggling enough. I didn't want to repeat such a terrible thing. I didn't want to cause you more pain or make you feel uneasy for even a moment I don't want it to happen ever again

Ed, who was hugging Lil, kissed her forehead. When her clouded eyes didn't turn away from him, Ed felt reassured.

From now on, I will never deceive you, cause you trouble, or make you sad

Okay, that's enough. You can stop

When you said I already knew everything, you were right. I already knew everything about you and that's how I was able to deceive you

But I swear, I don't want anything else. I just want to be by your side.

Lil bit her lip without Ed noticing.

It's me who doesn't want to leave your side. I'm the one who can't breathe without you.

I'm not leaving.

Hmm?

I will never run away from you.

..!

Before Ed could express his joy belatedly, Lil wrapped his face with both hands. Ed's eyebrows twitched upon Lil's unexpected action that even held his face with a bit of force. Thanks to this, Ed couldn't smile broadly or say anything for that matter. He was frozen in place and could only listen to her words.

So, keep your word. You said you wanted to stay by my side, right? In that case, if you betray my trust one more time, then.

The hands that had cupped his cheeks moved down his chin to the nape of his neck. Lil's hands, which held no malice, had, nevertheless, a strong grip as they wrapped around Ed's neck.

Ed's pulse throbbed diligently between his skin and Lil's warm palm.

I won't forgive you.

Lil's fingers reached the back of his head and stroked him menacingly. The subtle sound of her fingernails dragging against his skin crept up Ed's throat and to his ears. It was a stimulating sensation and goosebumps ran down his spine, causing his pulse to pound even more strongly.

With her face coming closer, it seemed like Lil wanted to hear something from him, so Ed asked excitedly.

Could this be a lifetime contract?

Lil responded by brushing her lips past the tip of Ed's nose and pressing them down on his cheek. Ed thought she said something he didn't hear clearly, so he focused on her breathing instead. Soon, Lil lowered her eyes to avoid his persistent gaze and whispered against his lips

Yes. Its our lifetime contract.

It was a book that was too cruel and difficult for a six-year-old to read, so Liloa couldnt bear to flip to the next page and closed the book.

A scary book like this truly exists in the secret library I shouldve listened to the nanny.

Liloa wiped her cold sweaty forehead.

She was confused as to whether she was sweating because she was covered in a blanket or because she was terrified of what she just read. But either way, she was sweating profusely.

Liloa pushed the thick book of mythology with her foot, causing it to fall under the bed, for she didnt even want to look at the cover of that book anymore.

So, was it from then? Sometimes in the darkness, I see shadows that are even darker than the darkness itself

The shadow watched Liloa from under her bed, from behind the curtain by the unlit window, and from the other end of the hallway

Liloa had never understood the concept of something she couldnt do, for she was Joseph Is daughter. Everyone at the Oberyu court bowed their heads to her and listened to the short words of her tongue.

Liloa was well aware of her own status even as a young child.

As the only princess at court, she easily obtained everything wished to possess. Therefore, her understanding of the word impossible was bound to be limited. That was until she was eight years old, completely unaware that a childs definition of everything was absurdly narrow

One day, Liloas mother, Henrietta said.

When did my lovely daughter grow up like this?

When the Archduchess said so, other ladies followed suit and immediately praised Liloas beauty. Liloas cheeks blushed bashfully at the compliments of these beautiful and prestigious ladies. The mischievous Madame Celot even wrapped Liloas little body in her shawl.

Oh my, look at you. You already look good in dark purple. Like a true lady!

Children usually wore light-coloured clothes whereas dark-coloured clothes were a sign of maturity.

The remark caused Liloas whole face to turn bright red. Henrietta watched the scene and muttered lazily.

Youre becoming more like a lady every day. But youre still so small

The truth was that Henrietta was never very interested in raising her children, Venua and Liloa. Instead, she missed the free life of the imperial court and grew tired of the indifference of her husband, the Archduke. In addition, the people of the Oberyu court valued strict formality and considered loud laughter frivolous, so they made up countless afterwords about the princess from Sesbron. They even dubbed her as the most unsuitable woman for the Archduke in this world. Meanwhile, Henrietta heeded no attachment to the court of Oberyu and rather spent her time

roaming the palace with her closest ladies-in-waiting, gambling with young, handsome noblemen, and calling in fortune-tellers, who were in vogue during those days.

Because of this, Liloa was delighted by this rare attention her mother showed her for a change.

Over the next few days, the Archduchess ladies-in-waiting continued to tell Liloa how all grown up she had become, Liloa was delighted at first but eventually grew tired of hearing everyone's comments about how she'd become a lady. It didn't feel bad though. After all, becoming a lady entailed becoming an adult. It also meant finally breaking free from her childhood and being able to stand before her parents as a person. Liloa knew this and wished for nothing more than to be recognised by her parents.

What should I do to look more like a proper lady?..

Thoughts as such occupied Liloa's mind for a while.

Of course, despite all her worries, it was entirely up to her father, the Archduke, to determine whether she had become a proper lady.

When Archduke Joseph I came to her for that judgement, Liloa stood by her room's window with slightly shrunken shoulders. The maids who had been playing with her, the governess*, and the nanny had left the room one after another.

Joseph glanced at his daughter with indifferent eyes.

As for Liloa, she wanted to hold his hand or at least smile, but she didn't dare to do so. Joseph took a slow turn with Liloa in the centre. Under his penetrating gaze, Liloa had to give her whole body a tight grip so that her shoulders would not slump more than necessary. The child intuitively knew that if her posture was even slightly disturbed, the day she would face Joseph again would be far away.

Like his father, Archduke Joseph I was most preoccupied with public affairs and his hobbies. Obviously, neglecting his wife, Henrietta didn't mean that he was insensitive to women. But it meant that he was enjoying secret relationships with his lovers and mistresses. He came nowhere near a family-oriented image. Joseph I found it disgusting when children crawled on all fours like animals and never said a single word of kindness to them. As far as Liloa remembered, she and Joseph had less than ten proper conversations.

Still, Liloa liked her father for no reason just like how she liked her mother for no reason. Although she was disappointed that her parents didn't care about her, it didn't affect the attachment she felt to them. All the other noble children were similarly raised by their nannies from infancy and were considered immature and dishonourable until they became adults. Liloa, like all children she knew, just hoped she would grow up quickly.

That was why Liloa couldn't forget the trembling and nervousness she felt when her father first came to judge her.

Liloa took advantage of the moment Joseph was whispering with the chamberlain to look at her father's face.

I look just like him.

Liloe didnt have Henriettas dazzling blonde hair or her rich complexion. Liloe knew that even compared to Venua, she looked more like her father because of the long hair Joseph had. He always wore his long hair loosely tied, because of this, whenever she gazed at his profile, it was like looking in a mirror. Liloe often couldnt hide her curiosity and looked at him in wonder.

Anyone at court even those who saw Liloe for the first time knew that she was the daughter of Joseph I. Liloe felt proud of the fact that she resembled the monarch whom everyone admired.

Someday, I will become someone who is as benevolent as Joseph, and everyone will look up to me.

I can see she has grown up well. She doesnt cry loudly or run around frivolously like she used to. In other words, she knows how to behave properly now

Yes, Your Highness. You can see the deep dignity of the young lady, like a true princess

Right

She is now at an age where marriage is considered acceptable as well

Really? How about the Duke of Lacroix?..

They will be a perfect match

Good. I think so as well

Having said that, Joseph turned around, leaving Liloe bowing to his back as he left the room. She correctly figured out that what she heard was something that would seal her fate, but she couldnt quite understand what it meant.

While she was wondering whether this was a good thing or not, the maids waiting outside her room forgot about their places and rushed to her.

Miss, did you hear that?..

The Duke of Lacroix has proposed to you!..

Does this mean that youre getting married soon?..

I heard theyre on their way to Obernyu to formalise the engagement!..

The maids couldnt hide their interest in the young attendants that the Duke of Lacroix would bring and continued their conversation in a squealing manner. Meanwhile, Liloe stood by the window away from them and looked outside. But no matter how hard she craned her neck, she couldnt see the Duke of Lacroixs procession.

Liloe rested her forehead weakly against the cold glass window.

Strange. I thought I would be happy to know Ive grown up, but this all feels just strange to me. Am I getting married? All I know is that marriage is when a woman moves into a mans castle, lives with him, and gives birth to his children. Like how my father and mother also got married and gave birth to me Everyone talks about marriage being a very romantic and happy thing, but for some reason, I dont like it

Liloe was bothered by those thoughts as the only couple she had watched closely were her parents. She didnt know much about Joseph, but Henrietta didnt look happy at all. Whenever Joseph and Henrietta were together, Liloe had never seen them treat each other with affection. On the contrary,

it was Madame Drieux who Joseph treated with utmost kindness. Liloa reasoned that if there was such a thing as love between a man and a woman, then the treatment Madame Drieux received from Joseph was that of love.

Thats what I mean, Miss Liloa. Marriage is not done out of love.

Then why are you all so curious about the Duke of Lacroixs entourage? Why do you already like them and are fantasising about marrying them?

If a man is a member of the Dukes entourage, it means he also has a lot of wealth. He will make a good husband

We'll be together for the rest of our lives, so imagine what it would be like if we did love each other!..

It was what the lively maid Ann said. However, Liloas tutor, Charlotte, who was five years older than her, shook her head.

Ann is just an idealist.

No, Im not! How happy it is to live chastely while being loved by your husband. Not only me, but everyone wants that too.

Love is not something you have with your husband. A husband and wife are only in a relationship out of duty and responsibility. True love, on the other hand, is something you do with your lover. Just look at His Highness the Archduke and the Archduchess

Charlotte!

..!

The nanny who was embroidering by the fireplace shouted.

Thats not something you should be saying in front of the young lady!

Chapter 253

Side story 3 Liloas Chapter 1: The Fruit

Realising her mistake, Charlotte immediately lowered her head, but Liloa generously pretended not to hear her subordinates unsolicited remark. Charlotte, a tutor in charge of Liloas education, was an open-minded woman from the empire and was brought to Obernyu as Henriettas maid when the latter got married.

Liloa understood her tutors point.

She never thought that her mother, Henrietta, was bad. The people of Obernyu used to suspect Henrietta of being mentally ill because of her lively personality, but now that her energy had waned, she began displaying symptoms bordering on depression. That was why Liloa was particularly fond of Charlotte, for her tutor reminded her of her once free-spirited mother, whom she admired.

But What Im getting from Charlottes words right now is that just like father has Madame Drieux, mother has a lover too?

Normally, people consciously refrain from speaking about it in front of her. Thus Liloa didnt know much about her parents private lives, but there were times when she heard someone spill something like this.

She wondered if Henrietta would be happy if that was the case. After all, Joseph looked happy whenever he smiled at Madame Drieux. But Liloa couldnt imagine Henrietta smiling like that.

Breaking the silence, Ann muttered.

If true love is only for lovers, then why do children born between them become illegitimate children? Everyone criticises illegitimate children. Theyre even considered dirty. But shouldnt the proof of love be thought of as a blessing? Why are they thought of as children of the devil though?..

Having children and carrying on the family line is a duty. Children are not proof of love, but rather proof that their duties and responsibilities have been met. Being distracted by this great love and giving birth to a child outside the family who is supposed to carry on the family line means succumbing to the devils temptation. So, if a child is born from that, is it not the devils?

Ann burst into tears at Charlottes harsh words.

Then, I will love my husband. I will meet a loving husband and we will be blessed with children.

I dont blame you for your naivety.

Charlotte merely laughed at Ann. Because of the obvious disdain in her voice, Ann became even more discouraged.

Even though Liloa was a smart child, she was still too immature to keep up with the conversations of women whose breasts were already grown and fleshy. At the very least, she understood that marriage was a process of fulfilling responsibilities and duties as an adult. Liloa, who was willing to perform her part by marrying, asked Charlotte for a book detailing the traditions of marriage. However, the book she received only contained romantic descriptions of marriage and praise about the wonder of how two human beings meet and become one. This just made Liloa even more confused.

Dont trust books too blindly. How can someone capture the entire world in such a thin piece of paper?

Although Charlotte sneered, Liloa didnt put the book down. She was determined to find out who between Ann and Charlotte was right.

Time went by, albeit slowly for Liloa and in the end she had to face Duke Lacroixs procession without obtaining any answer.

Duke Lacroix was a young man about ten years older than Liloa. It was only after Liloas disappointment in him that she realised that she had been expecting something from her husband-to-be.

First of all, he looked even older than Joseph. And it wasnt just in Liloas eyes. As soon as they saw his face, the maids began whispering among themselves.

The Duke of Lacroix has a lot of wealth

What makes a husband desirable is his ability, not his looks

Liloa accepted the information coming through both ears at the same time, but her disappointment didnt improve.

Who on earth painted the Dukes portrait? Had the portrait been done to resemble him properly, there probably wouldnt have been such an embarrassing disappointment

Who knows? He might have a charming speech that will make a woman happy

Her nanny whispered belatedly.

Liloa was devastated, but she couldnt openly show it. This was because the courtiers of Obernyu were already lined up on both sides of the garden where Lacroix was walking towards Liloa. They were all watching the first meeting between Liloa and the Duke with interest. Liloa slowly raised her head and looked up at the Archduke and Archduchess. Joseph was expressionless as always, but what surprised her was that Henrietta shared the same look on her face.

After being surrounded by gazes pouring from all directions, Liloa prepared for dinner and entered the hall where the banquet was in full swing.

The Duke of Lacroix was as tall as Joseph.

Miss Liloa.

Liloa held his rough hand and followed his lead for a dance. It wasnt difficult for her to dance with someone much taller than her. At court banquets, there werent many opportunities to dance with anyone shorter than her anyway. The boys and young men of the palace, regardless of their age, were willing to dance with their backs bent just to match Liloas height.

Liloa deliberately refused to look at him. Even without looking at the Duke, she already strangely disliked him and felt that she would dislike him even more the longer she stared at his face. Moreover, what came as a shocking realisation to her was that she tended to treat people differently based on their appearance. Still, this didnt deter her from being willing to soften up should he speak kind words and show her his gentle personality. In fact, she wasnt completely sure where this dislike had come from. It might not be because of his physical appearance. Rather, it could be a fabricated emotion caused by the stress and anxiety of a child about to marry.

Lacroix, however, rarely spoke and simply looked down at Liloa with unwavering eyes.

Actually, among all his physical features, Liloa hated his eyes the most. This was because of how he gazed at her. Even though he seemed to be looking at her, it wasnt her face he was looking at. Instead, Lacroix was staring at her parts. As his infinitely large shadow cast over the top of her head, his gaze crawled down from her neck to her unswollen chest.

Liloas vague feelings of disappointment towards him gradually transformed into discomfort. She stiffened, not knowing what to do. With his eyes not looking like that of a human, it reminded her of the story she read about the God of Death when she was younger.

Is this the gaze of the undertaker?

As her vision darkened, Liloa kept blinking while a chill ran down her spine.

Lacroix was holding Liloas damp hand tightly when he suddenly let go of her fingers and gradually wrapped the back of her hand instead of pressing their palms together. For the first time in her life, Liloa felt uneasy as a result of someones unwanted touch.

No one has ever touched me like this before.

Liloa glanced to her side every time their position and movements changed and saw how the rest of the guests simply watched her and the duke while they drank, laughed, and clapped.

Is this what others call a blessing? Is this what marriage is like? It feels so strange is this the sense of duty and responsibility I should feel towards the person who will be my husband? But this serious matter shouldnt be something that makes me uncomfortable right?

But even if Liloa tried to think about it that way, she couldnt convince herself. Her throat was drying up until there was no moisture left in her mouth. Her head felt dizzy, and her fingertips turned cold. She became thirsty as if she hadnt had water in a long time. Liloa hoped that the music would end quickly, but the more she hoped, the longer the melody went on. In the meantime, the background became more and more a blur, till she was only left with those two eyes attached to a large man, towering over her. From some moment on she could even hear him breathing and a foul smell seemed to come from his breath.

Liloa felt sick.

Ah, becoming an adult is really difficult. Do I have to endure feeling like this every day? I guess thats what maturity means, doesnt it?

Liloa tried hard to keep her body from touching Lacroix, such that whenever their movements changed, she would twist her body awkwardly. But without hesitation, he pulled Liloa into his arms. Because Liloa didnt respond anymore, a force wrapped around her and lifted her up, causing her body to move involuntarily. It wasnt her first time dancing, so it surprised her at how it felt so different from the other times. At the same time, Liloa wondered if she had hardened her expression too much towards him that it triggered her partner to treat her so rudely.

But to confirm it meant that she would have to look up to see Lacroixs complexion. Yet Liloa didnt want to see that face again. She couldnt bear to look up at him. She thought that if the face she saw before still wore the same triggering expression, she expected herself to burst out in tears.

What on earth is that face? Why on earth is the Duke looking at me with such a strange expression?

Chapter 254

Side story 3 Liloas Chapter 1: The Fruit

Liloa ran to her nanny like a child running away from someone she despised as soon as the dance ended. Because she hid her body behind the hem of her nannys skirt, the people around her burst out laughing.

The young lady must be feeling shy

No, thats not it!

But Liloa didnt know how to convey her feelings properly. She was also afraid that people might misunderstand that she actually liked the Duke. No, for a long time now, they had already been misunderstanding everything. Someone in the crowd even praised them as an unusually well-matched pair. Hearing such words, goosebumps appeared all over her body and she felt nauseous.

Perhaps theyre right. Why are you acting like this today? Youre usually well-behaved.

Liloe suddenly realised that her nanny couldnt help her. She had no power. So Liloe looked around for her mother instead. The best Liloe could do for now was to hold back her tears that were about to burst out.

I will go see my mother.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Liloe forced herself to straighten her back and hold her head up high. While the gathered courtiers looked at her as if they were proud that she had overcome her shyness, Liloas bloating stomach kept making her sick.

She cast her eyes over the podium.

Mothers not there. Father neither. Only the Duke of Lacroix is sitting alone among the empty seats

When the Dukes eyes met Liloas over his glass, she quickly looked away and pretended not to see him.

With Liloas dance ending, and the Archduke and his wife away from the main hall, the people who were gathered at the banquet began to chatter noisily. As the music got louder, the guests dancing to the lively music stamped their feet.

Liloe eventually found Henrietta among the rushing crowd and ran after her. Noticing Henrietta moving somewhere without her ladies-in-waiting, Liloe followed her mother more diligently. When Henrietta left the main hall and entered the transept gallery, Liloe didnt encounter a single person along the way. But it was only natural, for the eastern transept was her familys private residence.

Liloe narrowed her eyes at the two figures she caught a glimpse of across the gallery.

Henrietta was walking quickly towards them.

Archduke.

Along with the sound of her shoes echoing through the empty gallery, Henrietta repeatedly called Joseph. As soon as Liloe realised that the man across from her was her father, she hid behind a statue.

Archduke Archduke!

What is going on?

Henrietta didnt answer. So, Liloe held her breath and watched the sight of three people frozen in place. Henrietta, unable to bear it any longer, raised her voice.

Joseph!

A sigh was heard from Joseph.

Wait in the inner room.

Then the sound of shoes, much slower than Henriettas, moved closer towards Liloe. She turned out to be Madame Drieux. But without the gallerys lights on, Liloe almost mistook her for Henrietta. The more she looked at the woman, the more she saw Madame Drieuxs resemblance to her mother. Peeking between the statues legs, Liloe noticed the womans dishevelled makeup and clothes.

Even after Madame Drieux completely left the gallery, Liloas parents remained frozen in their spots while facing each other in silence.

This is Your Highness child. Please show mercy.

Liloe couldnt understand the first words Henrietta uttered after a long while.

The child is not even ten years old. Marriage is not yet suitable for her. Did you see her frivolous act with her nanny as soon as the dance ended? That is immaturity!

Only then did Liloe realise that Henrietta was talking about her. Normally, she would tend to feel bad about her mothers criticism, but for some reason, she wanted to be criticised more. Her mother judged her to be too immature and wanted her father to punish her by saying that marriage was not something that should be considered yet.

Did you barge in here just to tell me that?

After all these years, you came looking for me just to say that?

Quit with the useless sentiment. Do you want me to believe that you were truly counting the years?

Henrietta!

Was it not Your Highness who refused to leave the arms of Drieux even when I kept calling you just a few moments ago? How can the monarch of a country be this shallow? Now, if you try to act all sentimental, you will only be making a fool of yourself. So, stop it.

Joseph, unable to overcome his sudden anger, wrapped his arms around Henriettas waist and pulled her to him. Liloe closed her eyes in horror.

What? Are you planning to kiss me?

Henriettas tone remained consistent. Indifferent yet languid. It became clear that the only one who was angry was Joseph. Liloe could feel it just by hearing his voice. It felt strange to her that her father could be this angry.

Even without your sarcastic tone, I know very well how terrible you think of me.

Good.

In that case, before I feel even more strongly against you, heed this request of mine. Turn down Lacroixs marriage proposal. As I said, the child is not even ten years old. And the Dukes eyes when he looks at Liloe are abominable. Do not tell me you believe your subjects jokes and flatteries about Liloe being ladylike. And do not even try to sell my daughter per your agreement with Lacroix

What do you mean sell? Liloe is my daughter too.

Then act like it. Otherwise, I will tell His Majesty the Emperor about you. I will tell him how poorly you treat me here. Even though His Majesty enjoys his own fairshare of side romances, I am sure he will not be able to stand his in-laws rich personal life.

What would you have done without the backing of His Majesty?

Who knows?

There are plenty of other effective threats

Joseph brought a strand of Henriettas hair to the tip of his nose, but Henrietta didnt budge, despite Josephs open display of his desires.

only to be defeated by betting on the most insignificant His Majesty.

So, are you going to do anything about this? I want to see if Your Highness is still the man who falls for my absurd threats.

Although Liloa couldnt fully understand her parents conversation, she did vaguely feel that the popular rumour that Joseph was indifferent to Henrietta might not be true.

At least one thing became clear to her. Her father gave in to her mothers complex and difficult threat, hence why her engagement was immediately cancelled after that day. Thanks to this, Liloa was able to avoid having to face Lacroix again.

Instead, Henrietta made other plans for Liloa.

I will send you to Autriche.

Madame Autriche was said to be Henriettas former nanny. So from that brief description alone, Liloa already felt a sense of closeness and favour towards Madame Autriche.

Try to learn from her the manners of being a good lady, Liloa.

On such a rare occasion, Henrietta even held Liloa in her arms. Liloa enjoyed the sudden stroke of luck she received. As she wrapped her short arms around her mothers body, she rubbed her cheek against her mothers soft embrace and smelled her sweet scent.

You are still so small and young. You still have a lot to learn and master, all right?

Yes, mother.

Good. Youre a good child.

After meeting the Duke of Lacroix, Liloa became very afraid of her fate of having to become an adult one day. Because of this, she fully trusted and followed Henrietta, who was trying to somehow keep her away from court life and the politics of marriage. Of course, the child was still perplexed as to the motivation or reason for this sudden whim. But it was enough.

Liloa even purposefully acted foolish and impatient for a short period of time, it touched Henrietta, who, despite despising such behaviour under normal circumstances, accepted Liloas tantrums even if they were only half-hearted at the time. It was like a puppet show, with only Henrietta and Liloa knowing the full story. And although Liloa had never felt her mothers affection as a child, she felt that Henriettas new plan was the result of her mothers inexplicable motherhood.

Autriche was a gentle and generous woman. Because she wasnt young anymore when she became Henriettas nanny, her body was even more unwell and limped now. However, despite her limited mobility, Autriche lived the next phase of her life more prosperously, for when she left the palace after her days as a nanny, Philip I arranged for her to be matched with the Lord of Malus.

Malus was a small resort town in the southern part of the empire. It was a place where imperial nobles sought recuperation or exiled nobles from other countries mainly reside, so it was an area with a considerable income considering its small size.

The Lord and his wife welcomed their precious little guest from Obernyu.

Madame Autriche was said to have been both warm and stern when she was younger, but now she seemed to be unable to take great care of herself. Nonetheless, she couldnt afford to refuse Henriettas request though, so she accepted Liloa. Yet at the same time, she couldnt afford to chase after the lively child and teach her the culture and knowledge of a lady. As a result, Liloa began her country life with a freedom she had never known before.

Chapter 255

Side story 3 Liloas Chapter 1: The Fruit

Ann and Charlotte accompanied Liloa, but the child learned to keep them at a distance. Which wasnt hard at all. All day long, they were either stuck in a corner of their room reading a storybook or running around the garden looking for a cat before they would eventually disappear somewhere on their own. Gradually, the time they left Liloa alone to go to the market or spend time visiting someones house increased.

As time passed, Ann and Charlotte became more absorbed in pastimes such as going to small banquets rather than actually attending to Liloa. But Liloa didnt blame her nanny and governess. Rather, she hoped that they would get married quickly so that they could leave her side. After all, the stories Ann and Charlotte talked about all the time were about the foreign nobles of Malus, and those were neither interesting nor curiosity-inducing to her. The topic of marriage kept reminding her of the Duke of Lacroix, so it was worse than boring. It was irritating.

Consequently, Liloa sought out Madame Autriche more than the maids who had taken care of her since childhood. Every time she saw Liloa, the older lady made similar remarks.

How could it be that your personality resembles the Grand Duchess tomboyish one so much, young lady?

In response, Liloa would go on and on about how much she preferred to hear about becoming a dignified and mature young lady. Madame Autriche, who found the young ladys constant denial endearing, held Liloa in her arms while telling her stories about Henriettas childhood as she noticed that Henrietta had a lot in common with Liloa when she was younger. It delighted Liloa to hear about her unexpected commonality with her mother and often burst into laughter in the safety of Madame Autriches arms. Autriche frequently hugged Liloa. In fact, far more frequently than her own nanny did. While Liloas nanny used to hug her back in Obernyu, she eventually stopped making direct contact with Liloa unless she was experiencing extreme sadness or happiness. The people of Obernyu believed that such close contact, or for example having the child in the same bed with them, would ruin that childs habits and limit their independence.

But Liloa, like all children, instinctively craved warmth. Even though it felt embarrassing at times, Autriche didnt refuse the childs request to be held, in the end she would always give in and embrace Liloa whenever she liked.

The person who is to be an Archduchess should not be so childish

Liloa knew it wasnt a remark to be taken too seriously though, because Autriche, whose own children were all grown up, was also glad to take care of a child in her later years. And whenever Liloa sensed that Autriche was having a hard time, she would read poetry in a cheerful voice at her

bedside. At one time, when Autriche fell into a deep slumber during one of Liloas lullaby readings, Liloa sneaked out of the private residence.

The people who came to recuperate far away from the fierce imperial capital were generally relaxed and careless. So while banquets and salons were constantly held in every household, the children would wander around Malus.

Because Malus was a city populated by nobles from all over the world, the exotic atmosphere could be felt simply by stepping outside ones door. The sight of the city, adorned with patterned carpets and materials, as well as the scent of flowers and the sea, were sights and sensations that Liloa had never experienced before in her short life.

Liloa followed some children down to the beach.

Of course, they were all children of either the nobility or wealthy merchants, so they were tailed by escorts and attendants. Even so, the attendants, who were accustomed to Mother Nature themselves, didnt mind whether the children touched the dirt or got their feet wet in the water.

White sandy beaches and the sea were both new to Liloa, but no one else noticed her awe. Whereas the children played with the salty sand as if it were a normal part of their day-to-day lives. The sight of the Maluss sea was the best of all wonders that Liloa experienced for the first time. She felt like she could watch the spectacle of sunlight shimmering over endless waves all day long without getting tired of it.

But beyond that, what does the world look like?

The Obernyu court had been Liloas whole world. And that day, she first realised how small it had been.

She was right What I heard from Charlotte, that this wide world cannot be contained in a small piece of paper, was true

Liloa opened her mouth and took a deep breath, sucking the humid sea breeze into her body. She then patted her stomach for no reason.

My belly looks thicker than a few sheets of paper.

Why do you read so much?

The Lord of Malus looked at Liloa as if he were seeing something unusual. His wheat-like eyes sparkled with curiosity behind his small glasses. It annoyed Liloa to hear the old man asking the same questions over and over again, but because he was the owner of the study, she had to answer politely.

The world is wide and paper is narrow, but I am neither wide or narrow.

And?

I want to put both the world and the paper in me.

The lord burst into laughter in exasperation.

After the high-ranking princess peeked around his study, her eyes had been fixed on reading The Maritime History of the Oceans and Empires for hours in one sitting.

Do you understand it?

Liloa licked her lips and grumbled.

It is difficult I do not understand a thing

I think it is because the world is so big, but they tried to pack it neatly into a piece of paper the size of my palm.

Ironically, the palm of even a fully grown Liloa would never be as big as the book she was holding, but the lord didnt bother to point that out.

But I will be able to understand its meaning if I read until the end, right? If I make it to the end, even the most difficult words from adults will eventually make sense to me. So, I need to endure this until the very last page. Ah, reading is hard labour

Completing a book is the reward at the end of hard work and the will to endure that hardship is a virtue a good reader must have. You already possess that virtue.

Really?

Liloa felt good and wobbled her legs, causing her small feet to flutter in the air.

But women have no reason. Therefore, no matter how much you read this book, you will not be able to grasp it.

The lord approached her gently and held the copy of The Maritime History of the Oceans and Empires. Liloa never permitted him, but the lord casually took the book from her and closed it.

What is reason?

It is the ability to think.

I have the ability to think.

It is a different concept from thinking through intuition. It is the ability that allows humans to distinguish between right and wrong and to pursue rightnesses.

But I know what is right and what is wrong?

No, you will make many mistakes and misjudgements in the future. Ah. But, of course, it is not your fault. Who can blame the disasters caused by the innocence of a child?

Are you pouring evil words into my face right now?

Even if you are misunderstanding this old man, I will not retract my words. I am just telling you the truth with the best intentions. After all, the bitter truth is better than a sweet lie.

Still, I am not happy that the Lord feels so sure about knowing who I am.

Oh my. Conceit is one of the causes of great misfortune. A lady must be modest and humble. This alone shows that this old mans eyes are correct. A young lady like you requires culture and housekeeping training first. How can someone who has not even finished that properly discuss reason? There is an order for everything.

But, I just want to know about the sea!

How can you say you have reason when you anger so easily due to such light remarks? You are a woman and a child at that, so your small body is completely run by emotions. You have to learn refinement and good manners first to be able to imitate reason. I will tell my wife to pay more attention to the young ladys education.

For the first time in her life, Liloa didnt know what to do about the insults she received. She had no idea how to respond to it. Her rebuttal would inevitably be dismissed as a childs childish sensibility, so she had to keep her mouth shut to prove that she was at least a little rational. But at the same time, that meant that she would be unable to defend herself

Chapter 256

Side story 3 Liloas Chapter 1: The Fruit

If you are so curious about the sea, then read this book first.

The lord then placed Monferrand, the Foolish Fisherman in her hands. Looking at the illustrations, she could tell it was a fairy tale specially created for children.

This book provides an excellent description of the capricious nature of the sea.

Unfortunately, Liloa could only prove reason through silence.

But if I cannot speak, how can others know of my ability to think? What is this stuffy feeling?

Liloa nodded her head exaggeratedly so as not to reveal her true thoughts. When the lord realised that Liloa had obeyed him, he was finally satisfied.

That same night, Liloa crept into the study. However, the Maritime History of the Oceans and Empires was on the highest shelf, which she couldnt reach even with a ladder. It was placed far enough that even if Liloa reached the top of the ladder and stretched her hand out, the light from the candlestick would barely reach the book.

Liloa looking up at the tall bookshelf.

Its impossible for me to pick up the book and read it again not only now but also in the future It isnt because Im short. It also isnt that I dont dare to step on a ladder either

Liloa knew. Even if she grew as tall as the bookshelf, and even if her courage was as endless as the sea, she would never be able to read that book again. It was the first thing she realised that she wasnt allowed to do.

While blankly gazing up, Liloa felt something eerie behind her and quickly turned around. She was clearly the only one in the study, but nonetheless, she heard a faint laugh from somewhere. Liloa initially assumed the sound was coming from the garden outside but soon realised it was coming from the darkness on the other side of the bookshelf.

Liloa held the candlestick up to her eyes.

Who goes there?

However, the being wasnt standing in the dark. The being was the darkness itself. Such darkness had neither lighter or darker parts, but Liloa was able to distinguish its mouth.

The black maw smiled sinisterly and muttered.

Hello? Its been a while since I last saw you, my dear little customer

Who

I came to take your eyes

..!

Liloe reflexively raised her hand to cover her eyes.

Taking a step back, the bookshelf hit her from behind, causing the candlestick to shake, and the fire to flicker. As she moved, the darkness also shimmered forward.

The voice spoke much softer this time.

Why cant you give me those useless things? I promise that I will dig them up carefully, so it doesnt hurt

No!

With her eyes still closed, Liloe yelled and sprinted to what she assumed was the doorway. It took her only a few steps before the candlestick went out completely. When her source of light and warmth extinguished, a rush of cold air hit her. However, even in a room without a lit fireplace, she was still sweating profusely.

Liloe groped for the door with her vision impaired. But no matter how far she reached, all she grabbed were bookshelves, bookshelves, and more bookshelves. Liloe hurriedly moved her feet as the darkness crept up on her ears and gave her chills. She instinctively knew. The moment she would open her eyes, the being would be right in front of her.

Her frantic groping in the air eventually led her to find the doorknob. Liloe pushed the door open without hesitation. A thick chilled sensation hit her as soon as she went out into the hallway. Liloe finally dared to open her eyes a little and started to run in a panic. Faint moonlight shone through the open windows, but it wasnt enough, for the darkness was too overwhelming. Liloe ran into her room without even once thinking about looking back, jumped into bed and pulled the covers over her head.

The following day, the study became strictly monitored by servants and could no longer be accessed by her. All Liloe was told was that if she needed a book, it would be brought to her room without her having to enter the study. Madame Autriche, too, believed that if Liloe continued to enter the study at such a young age, it would undermine the strict distinctions between male and female education.

In order to suppress feeling helpless and sorry for herself for not being allowed in the study, Liloe began to frequent the salon. In that place, she could hear everything going on in the world as well. But because Madame Autriche wasnt physically fit, Liloe was often accompanied to the salon by her nanny and her governess, Ann and Charlotte. The two had been chastised by Autriche for failing to properly supervise Liloe and this was their attempt to play their parts, albeit belatedly.

At Maluss salon, nobles who had been pushed out of the power struggle or those who wanted to spend their final years in peace gathered and complained about the recent trends in the empire. They

were outspoken about how power began to shift to the middle class and how easily the imperial family sold noble titles. The emerging aristocratic power was said to have taken complete control of the Sesbron court and administrative affairs, and were not afraid to do things their way.

Liloe thought that the world was going haywire based on what she heard from the adults.

In a subtly lowered voice, Liloe asked Charlotte next to her.

Is there trouble in Sesbron?..

Charlotte snorted in a cynical tone.

Call it what you want, my lady, but if you ask any of these people to take direct charge of administrative work, it would be as if no one had done it. At the very least, these new nobles act as courtiers, so the Empire can continue to function through them. The old nobility, on the other hand, does not want to lift a finger because they regard work as something vulgar.

So, who do you think should run the Empire?

It is a contradiction. That is what this is.

As Charlotte clicked her tongue, an interjection came from the other side.

Yes, someone has to do the work, but is asking for a title not a little too much? I think that getting a title is beyond what they deserve. People need to have a certain identity, and it is funnily unpleasant when they are overly greedy like this.

Do the rest of the people from Obernyu share the same opinion? You are such a conservative, Ann.

Charlotte replied sharply, but the truth was, neither Ann or Charlotte had a deep enough reason to engage in a further debate. Liloe was frustrated by her limited access to information. One time, when she asked a question out loud at a salon, she was later scolded by Charlotte for acting undignified. If a child acted recklessly or showed excessive interest in one of the topics, they could even be banned from entering the next salon.

For the time being, Liloe had no choice but to keep the image of a young girl visiting the salon, who was taking her time to emulate the manners of the ladies of the salon. Those same ladies all sat upright as they nodded their heads in agreement with the men's passionate speeches. And the only time they opened their mouths was to praise the speaker.

Liloe even learned how to use a fan as instructed by Ann, and it wasn't until much later that she was finally able to reap the rewards of her diligent practice of precociousness. Over time, when Charlotte and Ann had gone off to enjoy their brief love affairs again, Liloe had her own means to utilise her free time and often joined a group of kids her age at the entrance of the alley where the villas were located.

Today, she stuck next to a girl whose face she was already familiar with.

Where are we going today, Louisa?

Louisa, a girl with curly red hair, greeted Liloe warmly.

Ah, Liloe! Why haven't you come lately?

I've been going to the salon

Why did you go to such a boring place? I was sad because I couldn't see you. And you have no idea how proud Charles was that you didn't see him snoring!

I wasn't there because I was having fun either

Louisa wasn't interested in salons, so she shrugged her shoulders once and hooked her arm with Liloa's. With Liloa tucked to her side, Louisa held her head up high. The reason? Liloa was a wonderful friend who knew how to deal with boys.

Louisa then purposely quickened her steps and approached Charles, who was in the lead.

Hey, Liloa is here.

Charles' eyebrows flinched upon hearing Liloa's name, whereas the latter stuck her head out from behind Louisa and waved leisurely.

Hello, Charles.

After Liloa came to Malus, sudden rules were established among their group. Before that, even when simply playing games, the rules could be twisted and changed by a specific person, but since her arrival Liloa never hesitated to protest and raise the issue that such practice was unfair. Of course, in the beginning, there was some backlash against the newcomer named Liloa. But because Liloa argued in earnest, there was no other child who could properly refute her

Chapter 257

As Louisa walked out with Liloa, Charles, who was a year older than Liloa, glared at them. Charles knew better than anyone that Liloa's sudden appearance had been undermining his authority as alley leader.

Feeling Charles' eyes on her back, Liloa shrugged her shoulders with a strange sense of victory.

After a while, Liloa found herself standing in front of a villa along with the other children. She was the only one confused, so she had no choice but to speak up first.

Where are we?

Louisa whispered, squeezing her arm.

This villa has been empty for several years. But a few days ago, someone was suddenly seen digging around the villa's ground

Whoever that is must be a madman

Maybe he was trying to bury a body?

So how many people has he killed so far?

Kyaaah!

The girls screamed in suppressed tones. It tempted the rest of the kids, who found the girls' reaction interesting, to say something even scarier.

Charles approached Liloa amidst the noisy children.

Now, Liloa. It's your turn.

Liloa looked up at the boys triumphant face.

What?

The boy then stepped on the railing of the fence surrounding the villa.

We all went in there. You're the only one left.

Are you telling me to go in there?

Why, are you scared?

No.

Liloa's quick response was fuelled by her anger towards Charles' sarcasm, but the truth was, she was indeed a little scared. Although the villa looked neat, it was also undeniably desolate as no one had lived in it for several years. Looking up at the magnificent blue-grey mansion, Liloa felt a chill creeping down her spine even though the sun was still shining.

Etienne, who was next to Charles, chuckled.

Louisa was so scared that she struggled and dropped her bag. So, get in there and find your best friend's bag.

Louisa sharply retorted.

That's not fair! We all went in and came back together! How can you ask Liloa to go in alone?

Then go. Join her, just the two of you.

Louisa flinched her shoulders and looked at Liloa. She held onto Liloa's arm tighter but couldn't hide the fact that her hands were shaking.

Liloa spoke out loud as she felt uncomfortable for no reason.

Well, I'm not a coward like anyone else, right? I can go as far as I want on my own.

What? Who is a coward?

I guess the one who gets the most upset by what I just said.

Charles gritted his teeth and glared at her.

Hmph!

Liloa snorted and lifted her chin haughtily.

She then went to the railing and pushed her body between the rods. Her palms were sweating as she held onto the railing, and the further she squeezed herself through the fence, the colder her body became. When she finally made it to the villa's property and looked back at her friends, she felt like she had been transported to another world.

She straightened her back while clutching the hem of her dress.

Everyone stared blankly at Liloa, not expecting that she would actually enter the villa completely alone. Meanwhile, Liloa only repeated to herself.

I only need to find the bag and then I can run out of there.

Liloa knew what Louisas bag looked like. So, even if there were no lights in the villa, she was convinced that her friends white bag would definitely get noticed.

If I come back with the bag, Charles damned nose will flatten out. And once he gets discouraged, he wont be unruly or bother the girls anymore.

From the other side of the fence, Louisa stammered with a frightened face.

I, I dropped it in the ground floor hall.

Liloa nodded her head and turned her body again. Although the weather was clear, the villa appeared to be shrouded in unknown mystery. The main building was a typical southern-style villa with three stories and a protruding faade, but its size was unusual. There seemed to be additional two-winged buildings and a garden with a lake in the back. And because no one had been to this mansion for several years, it was clear that whoever owned it was hiding something big.

Liloa swallowed her dry saliva.

She walked across the lawn cautiously enough not to let her steps falter. Meanwhile, Louisa was yelling at her from behind, telling her to stop and come back. But Liloa was determined and continued to move forward.

I cant see anyone, not even a shadow of a person can be seen in any of the windows.

Liloa similarly hoped she wouldnt have to get any closer, but when she came to her senses, the entrance was suddenly right in front of her. As she calmly climbed the front steps, the sound of her shoes hitting the stone floor rang eerily clear in her ears.

Liloa pushed the huge door open. In contrast to what one would think of an abandoned ownerless house, the door opened smoothly without a single sound of the hinges.

As she had expected, it was pitch black inside. The only source of light came through the opening of the door she was standing in and the weak light split the floor of the hall in a straight line. Liloas eyes scanned the floor for Louisas bag, yet no matter how wide she opened the door, she couldnt find it. In addition, as she didnt want to step inside and her arms were short, there was a limit to the light she could take in.

Liloa realised she had no choice but to go inside.

What should I do?

She was tempted to run away.

It feels like my legs can give out at any moment. But I said I would bring the bag back. I didnt say I would go in because I wasnt scared I knew it would be scary But I shouldnt run away just because its scarier than I thought. I cant become an adult if I easily back down like that. My mother and father will be disappointed in me if I do, and it will be hard for me to accept that Anyway, theres no one here. Its actually safer if theres no one around, right?..

Liloa held on to the doorknob before stepping into the darkness. As the wind blew through the gap of the door, the white cloth covering the massive chandelier swayed like a ghost. The window shutters were all closed, so if Liloa took her hand off the door and it closed, everything around her would be pitch black again.

Liloa quickly removed her two shoes and placed them between the door and the frame.

She then tread into the hall, tiptoeing little by little. She thought she had to be cautious because if the bag truly fell there, it could make her trip any moment. The marble floor without a single carpet made the soles of her feet cold. As the cold spread beyond her toes up to the tip of her nose, she heard a rustling sound from somewhere Beyond the darkness In a remote, invisible space

Liloa suddenly raised her head. As far as she knew, there was only one being that could wander casually in the dark.

Could it be Mortu? Could it be that he came to scold me for coming into someones house without any manners? Will he cut off my leg?

At that moment, a candle suddenly burst out from the darkness. The faint light illuminated the face of the person holding it.

Whos there!..

..!

Because her opponent was sprinting towards her, the face illuminated by the flickering light appeared distorted. Liloa couldnt even scream and remained frozen in place till a shattering shout rang in her ears.

Why did you come in again?!

She felt like all her blood drained out of her body and she couldnt breathe properly. It was as if someone was strangling her. Her opponents strangely crushed face was approaching fast, but Liloa couldnt run away or scream. Glued to her spot, she could only think to herself

Its Mortu! Ahhh! Im going to die Im going to die

Liloa came to her senses when she heard someone muttering.

These kids I cant understand them

It was followed by someone clicking his tongue.

It came from a person with an unfamiliar yet beautiful voice. Liloa suddenly realised she was still inside the mansion. She felt the texture of the blanket covering her and smelled a strange scent.

Why am I lying here?

Even while she was asking herself this, she continued to hear the constant complaints from her side. Liloa tried to slightly open and squint her eyes to try to look around her, but in less than a second, she was discovered.

Hey, where are you squinting your eyes like that? Cant you open your eyes right away?

That someone tapped the bed with an annoyed voice.

It isnt Mortu. More like a regular person, a very young person at that.

Liloa raised her upper body as a surge of relief flooded through her

Chapter 258

The boy in the chair next to the bed was staring at her. His posture was poor as he sat crookedly, a book in one hand and resting his chin on the other. Because of the afternoon sunlight filling the room, Liloa was able to distinguish his features clearly. The sun was shining down on his unkempt brown hair and despite his young appearance, his fierce green eyes didn't make a good first impression. His smooth skin and arrogant expression made it clear that he wasn't just a servant here.

Liloa opened her mouth, but no words came out. After all, she was extremely nervous. Although she didn't know if such nervousness sprung from being trapped in an unfamiliar mansion where a murderer was rumoured to live, or because of the handsome boy that appeared out of nowhere.

Liloa tried to calmly catch her breath.

I've never heard any rumours of such a handsome person in Malus. Judging his looks, Ann or Charlotte would surely have said something about him, but no matter how much I think about it, I have no idea who this boy can be

After having sorted out her thoughts, Liloa finally spoke in a dry voice.

Who are you?

Dumbfounded, the boy burst out laughing.

Who are you to ask me that?

You're the one who snuck into my house. You're still so small yet unafraid.

Small? But the boy also looks quite young. Although he's not my age, I can tell he's not much older than fourteen

Your house?

Mhm.

Then

does this mean you are the murderer who digs land every day?

Liloa quickly swallowed the sentence down her throat. No matter how she looked at him, the boy didn't look like the killer she had imagined.

I can tell that the kids who came here last time told you that I'm a murderer, based on the look on your face.

..!

Liloa curled her toes tightly due to the fear that suddenly overtook her. Perhaps sensing the movements under the blanket, the boy's eyes glanced over the bed.

Then why did you come into the murderer's house? Did you want to die?

Oh, no

The boy sighed as Liloa spoke in a meek voice. He closed his book with a loud thud, then got up and poured some water into the glass on the nightstand.

Now that you've come to your senses, drink some water and leave.

Apart from being frightened, Liloa was also thirsty, so she gulped down the water. However, halfway through the glass, she suddenly recalled the simple rule of not drinking water from just anywhere and abruptly stopped herself from drinking any further. When she began coughing as a result, the boy took his handkerchief and wiped her splattered chin and hands. Liloa reflexively tried to pull her body back, but she was already leaning against the headboard and had nowhere to go.

He seems to be used to taking care of someone.

If you're so scared, why did you sneak in? I also want you to disappear quickly, so don't keep lying around making trouble. Get out now.

Liloa looked at the boy, who was now standing in front of his desk with his back to her. But even after turning around, the boy continued to mumble something that sounded like a series of complaints.

Really who would've thought that you would faint so suddenly ah

It was because you looked so strange.

The boy asked back with his eyes wide open.

What?

It appeared to be the first time he had ever heard a negative remark about his appearance. And because it was clearly a look of judging her answer as absurd, Liloa hesitated to elaborate.

You looked really scary because of the candlelight. The flame was flickering and

Hah!

..?

After the boy burst into laughter again, he shook his head at her and pointed to the door.

Get out quickly. You're annoying me to no end.

Even though the boy ordered her to leave as soon as possible, he never dared to lift the blanket covering her or push her away by pressing her body. Because of that, Liloa was able to take her time quite comfortably. And even though she drank water in an unfamiliar place, nothing was wrong with her body in fact, her vitality even began to return and because the boy wasn't threatening at all, both curiosity and relief snuck up her head. Still, there were remnants of fear, so Liloa's desire to run away quickly collided with her desire to get to know the boy who was the owner of the mansion.

Liloa's heart pounded.

Could he be a prince who came into exile from a fallen country?

I'm sorry for coming into your house without permission.

So the kid knows how to apologise? At least you know.

What do you mean, kid? You look like a kid, too!

The boy who had half-heartedly been looking at the books on the desk got pissed again and turned his head.

What? You small little crab!

Liloe didnt want to lose to him and fought back harder.

Why do you keep calling me small? I have a name too! Im..!

Oh no Oops.

Liloe didnt want her whole neighbourhood to know that she was roaming and trespassing a house without permission, so she forced herself to hide her real name quickly.

I have a name! Philly!

Thats a funny name.

What?

So, you do understand the situation you got yourself into. You crept into someone elses house without permission. Seeing how youre hiding your real name, at least you know that much.

No!

Okay.

..?

One corner of the boys mouth twitched up like a sneer. Under normal circumstances, such an expression would have put Liloe in a bad mood, but for this boy, she thought it suited him amazingly well. Because at first glance, it just seemed like a smile. Liloe forgot to retort and looked at the smiling boy leaning against the sunlight.

The boy similarly remained glancing at Liloe while stroking his chin.

It will be difficult if you fall in love.

Hearing those words, Liloe came to her senses immediately. Her face turned red as she screamed.

I wont!

Are you sure?

I said no!

All right, I get it.

The boy waved his hand and took out a pocket watch. After checking the time, he frowned and looked up at the sky outside the window.

All jokes aside, its been half an hour since you came in. Dont you think theyre starting to get worried outside?

..!

Liloe looked out the window.

Now that I think about it, its really time for them to come find me.

Liloe wanted to rush out as she was afraid that Ann or Charlotte would find out about her adventures. The thought of it made her heart anxious. But when she pulled up the blanket and was about to get out of bed, she found that she had no shoes on.

Huh?

Only then did she remember that she had left her shoes at the door of this mansion. Seeing Liloas hesitation, the boy inadvertently looked towards the bed and saw her feet sticking out from under her dress.

surprised, he turned around again.

Why is that?

Oh, you see, I left my shoes at the front door.

The boy touched his forehead and sighed.

Oh, come on. Really

The boy left the room before Liloa could say anything more. Only after the boy left was Liloa able to look around the room. It looked like an ordinary guest room in any mansion. The lambris, decorated in light green and grey, seemed cosy.

Liloa picked up the book the boy had been reading on the nightstand.

Medicine?

The cover was worn so she couldnt read the entire title, but Liloa could tell it was some sort of medical book as it was full of pictures and explanations that seemed to depict medicinal herbs.

Is he a doctor?

But even if hes a doctor, its still strange

Because Liloa had never heard of a doctor as young as the boy.

He looks younger than Venua. Also, doctors are normally not wealthy enough to own such mansions

Liloa tilted her head as she thought about the boy whose identity was becoming increasingly more difficult to guess.

When the boy reappeared with her shoes in his hands, Liloa asked impatiently.

Whats your name?

Why should I tell you?

The boy put her shoes down at the foot of the bed and stepped back. Liloa found it strange how he respectfully displayed his manners to her.

His actions and the way he speaks are extremely perverse, like when he was surprised to see my shoeless feet earlier, and the way he refuses to look at me putting my shoes on now, its all strange. He seems to have strange standards for practising his manners.

As soon as Liloa got off the bed, the boy gestured towards the door.

Now, get out.

Chapter 259

Whats your name?

Are you really not going to tell me?

Thank you for taking care of me, though.

Now that they were standing side by side, Liloa looked up at him and realised that he was surprisingly tall, like a boy who had already entered his growth phase and his limbs had been beginning to lengthen.

As Liloas gaze remained fixed, the boy reluctantly responded to her silent urging.

Call me Doctor. Be polite.

..?

I guess that makes it fair, right? As both of us didnt say our real names?

The boy laughed at his own remark. Liloa, however, who had a deeper reason for not disclosing her name, could only nod her head in agreement. The boy then proceeded to step away from her and cleared her way to the door.

Liloa inadvertently began stepping forward, but then stopped and looked up at the boy again.

Im too scared to go out alone.

The boy reached for his forehead. This time, it was with two hands, almost like he wanted to bury his face in his palms. Meanwhile, Liloa tried her best to drag the conversation.

But why do you live in this mansion with all the lights off? Its so strange and scary.

Then why did you come in the first place?

I had to find my friends bag.

Bag?

That day, Liloa triumphantly returned, holding the bag that the strange boy had found after searching the ground floor hall. She appeared as majestic as a victorious general. All the children, except for Charles and Etienne, greeted Liloa enthusiastically. In a way to tease Charles, Liloa even claimed to have lost her hairpin while looking for the bag, so she dared him to find it for her. But as expected, Charles couldnt bear to enter the mansion alone. And that wasnt all. He could never again bully the girls, including Louisa and Liloa, or boss them around in their games.

A few nights after meeting the boy, Liloa sat down with her blanket wrapped around her and looked out the window. The stars in the deep night shone like a whisper. It was as if they were speaking to her and among the immeasurable amount of voices was the voice of the boy who called himself doctor.

{ Ill find the bag for you, so dont ever come back here again. }

However, his cold words were the complete opposite of his generous actions as he eagerly crawled on the floor to look for the bag. At that moment, Liloa had no choice but to ask back in confusion.

{ Why? }

{ Because youre annoying me. }

{ }

{ Im already very busy as it is, but I got held back for an hour today just to take care of you. }

At first, I believed that the actions of the boy who took care of this fainted tomboy, brought her shoes, and even found her friends bag were done out of kindness. So even though it was my first time seeing him, I felt strangely excited. But after, he suddenly told me not to come back I know I should tend to feel bad to hear that even though I was an undeniably uninvited guest. But strangely, I didnt feel bad about it. Instead, I just felt sorry for taking up his busy time with my sudden intrusion. Maybe he really is a doctor And when this trespasser became his patient, he couldnt simply ignore me. But still

{ Because youre annoying me. }

Was I bothering him that much? Me?

Liloa was used to kindness. Everyone, except her family, was kind and affectionate towards her. Even Charles and Etienne were kind to her at first. The bullying only became more frequent after Liloa started rebelling against their rules, but in the beginning, they treated her just like everyone else did. As a result, the strange boys unfamiliar attitude towards her kept lingering in her mind.

{ Because youre annoying me. }

In my whole life, Ive never heard anyone say that to me. No one ever dared to tell me that my presence bothered them. I have always tried to act like a decent and mature lady, and people normally saw that. Everyone at Obernyu praised me for it

It annoyed Liloa that the boy apparently thought of her as an annoying child.

It was just that I was scared of Mortu. Thats all. And Ive been seeing him more and more these days

But at the same time, Liloa knew that her ability to keep her resolve was rather poor. She made a promise she couldnt accomplish. On her own, she couldnt have retrieved that bag, but she strutted out as though she had recovered the bag herself.

This thought made Liloa feel so ashamed of herself that she kicked the blanket a few times. It seemed to her that if she couldnt somehow make up for this shame, she couldnt continue living with herself.

So the very next day, Liloa found herself standing in front of the mansion again. The high sun of early summer brightened the building. It had been easy for her to come here without anyone knowing as she had fulfilled her role at the salon quite well, causing Ann and Charlottes surveillance to relax again.

Liloa stroked the railing of the front gate. It was a style that was popular while the Empire was still a monarchy. She tried to ask Ann and Charlotte, but their only response was that no one in Malus knew the owner of the mansion. All they said was that this place was a kings villa a long time ago, more than a hundred years.

Despite being wary of having to go through the terribly dark halls again, Liloa comforted herself with the thought that she would eventually reach the room filled with sunlight*. After the mental pep talk, she grabbed the doorknob with a gold lion carved into it. However, unlike the last time, the door didnt budge. She tried again, but the result was the same.

Its locked.

Liloe pursed her lips after backing away from the door.

Its because Im annoying, right?

The boys grumbling voice seemed to linger in Liloas ears as an auditory hallucination. She paused and pondered for a moment, then decided to go around the main house and explore the garden instead.

They said he digs land every day, so who knows, maybe Ill run into him in the garden.

Sure enough, as Liloe walked along the huge main building, she began to hear the sound of spading soil until she spotted him. From a distance, Liloe stared at the boy who was digging into the beautiful garden as if it were a mere field. Around the trees, which had been neatly trimmed in oval shapes, was grass that had been carefully trimmed, neither too long nor too short. In the middle of that scene, where the grass was stained with soil, the boy indeed appeared like a madman.

However, Liloe soon realised that he was planting seeds And that he had noticed her presence Nonetheless, he carried on and completely ignored her

Liloe carefully approached the boy. When she had gotten closer, the boys straight eyebrows gradually wrinkled more and more. When she was finally standing in front of him, the boy looked up at her and let go of his pouch of seeds.

I told you not to come back again.

Im sorry

You say youre sorry, but you keep doing things youre going to be sorry for. What do you want this time?

The boy didnt even attempt to hide the irritation on his face.

Maybe I made the wrong decision to come back, but

Liloas mouth had dried, but she managed to bring up what she had been thinking about.

You told me that you lost an hour because of me. Im here to pay you back.

With what?

The boys squinting eyes scanned Liloas outfit. Liloe realised a beat too late that her dress was of no help in planting seeds or ploughing fields. She hesitated at first, but then soon steadfastly suggested an alternative.

Is there perhaps anything else I can help you with?

Nothing. So please go away. Dont become any more annoying than you already have been. I only took care of you after you lost your senses because I thought I was the one responsible. Dont mistake it for anything else.

The boy, turning away from Liloe, picked up his pouch again. Meanwhile, Liloe looked around him and found a small shovel-like trowel. She held it and plopped down next to him. She remembered what the boy had done earlier and began to similarly dig a furrow of a certain width. Sure enough, the boy glanced over his shoulder and jumped up.

What on earth are you doing!

I have nothing else to do, so I have to do this.

Oh, really! Its annoying!

Liloe quickly hid the trowel the boy was trying to snatch behind her back. His approaching hand hesitated and was withdrawn in the air. As expected, the boy didnt try to take the trowel away any further so as to not touch her body. Liloe spoke quickly, wondering what he was going to say next.

Why dont you give me a chance to make up for how I annoyed you? I already told you, Id pay you back for wasting an hour.

You say that, but in reality, youre just making me do more work.

Chapter 260

Side story 3 Liloas Chapter 1: The Fruit

Why? If you just stop being annoyed, we dont have to waste any more time either. Unless you think Ill never be able to make up for it? I know its hard to do big things, but I have my arms and legs. How can you be so sure I cant give you back even just a minute? Or, do you not consider a single minute worth the effort? How could someone who cant spare a minute whine about his wasted hour? All your words are a mess! Youre an ill-tempered and incoherent little crab!

What? Little crab? Youre the one who doesnt even know how to do it right!

If you think my digging is wrong, you can tell me! Why are you getting so mad without telling me anything? Of course, I do it the wrong way because youre not teaching me! How about you, were you born knowing how to dig a furrow? If you think Im useless, then someone pretending to be an adult should teach me. Do you want me to live as a useless being forever? Do you want me to remain as an annoying child who only knows how to keep her mouth shut? Is this your way of showing off because youve been so useful since you were born? Its not me whos annoying, its you!

At the end of her speech, Liloe shouted out her most honest feelings.

I dont ever want to hear people say that sitting still is the best thing I can do! I wasnt born to stay still!

Silence fell over the garden when Liloas shouting came to a halt. The two locked their eyes on each other as their shoulders moved up and down with their breathing. The boy then swept his sweaty bangs using the back of his hand, soiling his smooth forehead. The look of irritation slowly disappeared from his flushed cheeks, and he asked a serious question.

Are you sure?

What?

You want to do ones part? Is that what you mean?

Liloe snorted and lifted her chin.

At least your brain is smart enough to understand! I guess being a doctor isnt nonsense after all, right?

Now that the boy became impressed by Liloas boldness, he was no longer annoyed.

He quietly looked down at her and turned himself around.

Follow me.

Liloa quickly stood up and followed him, not even bothering to shake off the dirt from her skirt. Liloa looked up at the boys tall physique as she grabbed her dress and caught up with his steps. Under the Malus early summer sun, his sweat-soaked shirt clung to his back and glimmered. The cicadas* that woke up to welcome summer were chirping loudly.

Liloa hastily moved her feet and stuck next to him.

But what kind of seeds were that?

Cant help being curious, huh?

Yes! So tell me, what kind of seeds were that?

Its the seed of a herb that has pain-relieving properties. It grows well in hot climates, so I brought it all the way to Malus to grow it.

Oh, youre trying to grow herbs.

I cant believe he grows herbs by himself. Perhaps he really is a doctor. If thats the case, his actions have been misunderstood

The thought upset Liloa, so she muttered to him.

You were actually doing something good, but you were misunderstood The others saw you digging every day and it made them think you were burying a body. Thats why they called you a murderer

I told you to be polite and call me doctor.

But you were rude to me from the very beginning. So I dont have to be polite to you. Youre actually the first person to treat me so arrogantly.

It looks like you grew up being treated very well.

The boys remark was accompanied by a peek at her. Liloa felt a peculiar, incomprehensible emotion whenever he narrowed his eyes and gazed at her like that.

Liloa scowled and pursed her lips, attempting to suppress her feelings.

After a while, they reached the entrance of a small forest on one side of the garden. The dense mesh-like tree branches draped coolly over their heads and shoulders. The cool and refreshing scent of the trees spread along the wind, and the wings of birds could be heard intermittently through the leaves.

The boy soon pointed to a tree that wasnt very high. It was full of fist-sized red fruits that were easily reachable by adults.

Pick the fruits of that tree. I know you cant use a ladder because youre wearing a skirt, so try this instead.

..?

He demonstrated the action using a thin wooden pole. At the end of the pole was a sharp metal bar similar to a hook, which was used to cut off the upper stem of the fruit, causing the fruit to fall down.

Hold it like this and hold it firmly, once you hit the fruit lightly, it comes off easily. Its not difficult. Can the fruit fall directly on the ground?

It doesnt matter, Im going to juice it anyway.

Liloa watched closely what the boy was doing. When he handed her the pole, she roughly imitated his actions and made the fruit drop. Just like the boy said, it didnt take that much effort.

When Liloa moved her feet in search of the next viable fruit, the boy spoke from behind.

Good. Youre a good observer and have sharp eyes. Actually, you also dug a decent furrow earlier. ..?

At his unexpected compliment, Liloa jerked her head around to look at the boy, but the latter was trying his best to not look embarrassed.

Im not trying to be friendly, so dont get me wrong.

Then why?

I just figured that what you said was right. Its unfair to be criticised without even being given a chance to make up for it. I apologise for belittling you.

The boy turned around with a stiff expression on his face as if he was also embarrassed to apologise.

Now, pick up the fruit and put it in the basket over there. This much will be enough.

Liloa thought as she grabbed the fruit.

The boy is so strange. There must be dozens of servants to manage his mansion, but he moves and sweats his body as though its ordinary for him. And even though I volunteered to do it too, he had no qualms about putting me to work.

Liloa was then reminded of the rising nobility that the people visiting the salons had criticised.

They earn by working, and they take pride in it So, could he be an emerging noble?

Liloas thoughts slowly turned defensive without even realising.

If a person does something good, such as growing medicinal herbs for healing people, they should be recognized for their work and rightfully rewarded with a title. However, the people in the salon simply and unreasonably criticise the new nobility for being vulgar.

Liloa couldnt follow those adults reasoning at all.

That night, Liloa covered herself with a blanket and reflected on her day. Although her shoulders were sore, the joy and satisfaction of jumping around eased her discomfort. She was indescribably proud of herself. The boy told her that the red fruit that she picked today could help disinfect wounds. He also explained that disinfection was a technique to clean the wound and prevent it from getting worse. It was truly rewarding for her to know that her own labour would help someones

treatment. From that point on, she became even more detached in her comprehension of the grownups who labelled individuals, who utilised their bodies for labour, as vulgar.

But at the very next moment, Liloa suddenly became downcast and weakly pulled her blanket. She exhaled a frustrated breath. Her change in mood was because the boy told her that her harvest had been enough and that there was no need for her to come again. He said her work was equivalent to more than an hours worth of help, and that she did better than expected. Those praises came from the very doctor who had a high opinion of himself. And even though she was happy with the compliment, it also made her a bit disappointed, because she wanted to work there again. Picking up fruits felt much more meaningful than learning how to use a fan at the salon. Although she had to keep holding the pole while looking up at the tree, her whole body felt energised enough that she didnt even notice that it was physically tiring. The moment she could help someone was nothing short of brilliant.

Moreover, the boys praise made Liloas heart flutter more than any praise she had ever heard. She never truly appreciated the compliments that were showered on her when she stayed wonderfully still. But the boys compliments were different. He didnt find Liloas movements strange or rude, but rather praised her when she moved brilliantly. He didnt hold back in predicting what her arms and legs could accomplish, and indeed, Liloa achieved it. For Liloa, the series of experiences she had with the boy were unfamiliar and overwhelming. But at the same time, it made her wonder why people kept telling her to stay still and maintain such a beautiful figure when she could move so well.

Liloa was tempted to ask the boy those questions.

He looks very smart, so maybe his answer will be unique and refreshing