

Northwest 271

Chapter 271

Lil clenched her fists so hard that her palms crushed. She felt an unusual sensation, as if her entire body was being tickled, even though no one was tickling her. Meanwhile, Ed traced the bridge of her nose with his fingertip, which was crinkled from the foreign phenomenon she was experiencing.

Then if you feel like it, write a book.

A book?

I've never considered writing a book. Actually, I never imagined I'd even be able to write one because I've only read a few books and most of them were about how to become a refined lady. I'm not sure if I'll ever want to write in the future, so if I want to do this, it feels like it has to be now. But I'm no academic nor a researcher either. Most of all, I've never heard of a woman writing a book. Is this even possible?

However, Ed seemed determined regardless of his awareness of Lils confusion.

Think of it as something you can leave behind as your legacy.

Looking into the eyes of a flustered Lil, Ed added.

in this world.

Later that night, a bird chirped beyond the window.

Ed fell asleep while wrapping Lil in an embrace from behind her back. Just a few hours ago, she couldn't overcome the exhaustion and fell asleep, but now that she had woken up, she couldn't get back to a proper sleep no matter how hard she tried. Lil was unaccustomed to such a pleasant state of excitement, so it wasn't until the third or fourth time that she woke up that she realised that what she was feeling now was the thrill of looking forward to something.

When she checked the clock, she discovered it was already dawn, and that if she waited a little longer, she would witness the sunrise. Additionally, now that she was aware of it, it seemed like the servants who woke up early could be heard making noises.

Despite the fact she didn't say it out loud at the time, Ed's suggestion shook her.

He's an emeritus professor at the Imperial Clairaut after all, so writing is probably part of his daily routine. The idea of me writing an entire book, not just a few pages, on the other hand, is completely foreign to me. Ed even said that if I decide to try it, he can connect me with the Imperial Clairaut or even recommend a professor.*

I have always asked myself what kind of life a woman like me can lead other than marrying and having children.

When I was younger, I believed that accumulating enough achievements as a soldier would allow me to live a meaningful life. After all, men, both nobles and commoners, gain honour serving as soldiers when going to war to fulfil their duties and gain esteem on the battlefield. I thought the

same thing: that there was nothing I couldnt do. But when that failed, I thought I could make money through commerce and joined forces with the Southerners to suppress the Empires violence But now, Ive been given the change to actually share my knowledge! Regardless of the outcomes of my endeavours, Im kinda excited to have another branch in my life. Its fun to see that I can accomplish more and more things.

However, just a day after Lil spent the night with her eyes open like that

You pathetic fraud!..

..!

Lils fist hit the surface of the water. Ed stood motionless like a convict being punished and received the full splash of water. He knew that if he dodged it, he wouldnt be able to avoid greater disaster later.

It wouldve taken less time to hear the words that werent lies!

No, Liloa. Thats really not

What?!

No, youre right. Im sorry for shamelessly trying to make excuses. I was wrong.

Her reaction was nothing to be surprised by because Eds crimes were way too many.

Discussing the Imperial Clairaut while eating breakfast, their conversation had naturally flowed to his ancient research, which led to artefacts and Lils necklace. Ed had decided to tell Lil everything, so he revealed even the smallest details. And because he said whatever came to mind, everything he had kept from her before spilt out unconsciously and his sins were endless After several failed attempts, Ed eventually managed to calm Lil down. He then suggested that practising moving in water would help her muscle recovery and improve her mood. As a result, they indulged in several acts of love disguised as rehabilitation training in the pool. Lil liked the spacious and luxurious pool, which felt more like a small lake, so the atmosphere between them became cheerful again.

That was until Ed, who was swimming next to Lil, remembered the mermaid.

Something comes to mind now that were swimming together.

What is it?

The mermaid

What about the mermaid?

It reminds me of what the mermaid said to you

..?

Tell me now.

In the end, Ed had no choice but to reveal everything. So, he told her that the mermaid already knew that Lil was a woman due to the influence of the necklace. That Bellus felt that Lil was under the protection of divine power and that probably was the reason why it treated Lil kindly. Or that it called Lil the Daughter of God and told Lil that it exchanged the blessings of Orsay and the

blessings of Forma. And because of that, Ed began speculating that the necklace most likely contained the divine power of Forma, the god of beauty in ancient mythology.

Oh, was that why she put those pearls only on me?

I guess you can say so. But Im not entirely sure

You said it was because of the difference in the length of our hair! You lied again!

I-it was like that

I couldnt trust you in anything!

But I faked everything for a reason

And now I have to second guess everything! Im all confused because there were so many times when you lied!

Lil glared at him as if she remembered a long forgotten grudge.

So, what about Admiral Retiros hobby of collecting scalps? Or feeding human fingers to his man-eating pet fish? Were those real? What are the chances I actually come across a display case full of scalps somewhere in this mansion?!

..!

Lil charged at Ed.

She aimed for his upper body, causing him to fall backwards, taking her with him. As they sank to the bottom of the bathtub in a spray of foam, Lil kept wrapping her arms around her opponents neck. Ed struggled reflexively, but Lil managed to come behind him and skilfully dodged him left and right.

Its perhaps because were underwater, but moving is much easier than outside the bath. If we repeat this for a few days, I will probably regain my strength a lot faster

The two repeatedly defended and attacked, slowly becoming surrounded by bubbles borne from their intense struggle. As much as Ed wanted to comply with Lils attacks, his first instinct was to fight back, so they tossed and turned while swinging their hands and feet at each other. But regardless of their serious efforts, their attacks didnt have much of an impact because of the waters resistance.

So, their impromptu game would only end as one of them rose to the surface first. That was why they were busy grabbing each others torsos and ankles to lower themselves until they both began to gradually run out of air. Thinking that Lil would go on till she actually died, Ed eventually hugged her tightly and immediately tried to stand up, making Lils shout break through and refract through the water droplets. Ed then had to plant himself firmly on the floor and held on to Lils body which was fiercely struggling to break away.

As soon as Ed reached above the surface, he took a deep breath while a stream of water fell from his head and hit the surface of the water. The belated realisation that they fought each other to death in a waist-deep pool, was kinda amusing to Ed.

Lil, who was still in his arms, screamed the moment she was lifted in the air.

Let go of me!

..!

As she was being held by her waist, her pride got hurt and she flapped her limbs wildly. Ed quickly put her down before one of them would get injured and Lil reflexively pushed his chest away while taking a step back.

After wiping her face, Lil looked back at him and began shouting again because Ed was clearly struggling to hold back his laughter.

Dont laugh!

Ed, immediately straightening his face, fumbled with his earlobe and tried to explain.

Well, I didnt mean to fight back

Was this funny? Was this funny to you?

No, its just that you are so

Shut up!

Unlike her irritated reaction, Lil also saw the irony in their situation especially when she looked at the water lapping at his waist. While Lil secretly had to bite her tongue, Ed contorted his face to hold back another fit of laughter. But even when he forced his eyes to glare, he couldnt help but smirk. In the end, Ed was only able to control himself by lowering his eyes.

I was in the wrong.

Lil sighed and glared at him. Both of them were out of breath, but for some reason, their breathing didnt ease even though it had been a while since they had been out of the water. Lil shook her head firmly as Ed slowly gazed up at her again.

Im sorry. I was really wrong.

Its Fine!

I didnt mean to take you lightly. If it seemed that way, it was my mistake.

I said its fine!

Despite her words, her face became serious as if it wasnt fine at all. Eds shoulders were still rising and falling, and it was the same for her. Lil eventually waded her way through the water and out of the pool, trying to act as serious as possible.

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Lils soaked nightgown clung to her body. Despite it being a fairly thick cloth, Ed could clearly see the outlines of her body because she wasnt wearing anything underneath.

From behind her, Lil suddenly heard a groan but decided to ignore it.

Right after she took off her wet, heavy dressing gown over her head, she once again heard the man behind her make a groaning sound, letting her know that he was still watching her. Lil, putting on a robe, turned around and fastened it in front of her. Before she knew it, only a troubled and bashful

face was sticking out of the water. Even though he was courteous enough to attempt to hide his lust, it was quite obvious what was happening under the water anyway.

Lil sat in the recliner next to the pool and admired Ed, who helplessly whimpered and was unable to come out.

I like what Im seeing.

Hearing those words, Ed raised his upper body in retaliation, but Lil simply raised her eyebrows and calmly crossed her legs. With her knee rising through her robe, she was slowly exposing more of her thighs. Consequently, Ed sank back down and wondered how such a small gesture could affect him like that.

So, whats the necklace?

Its Hmm, hmm!

..?

Ed cleared his throat for no reason.

Have I ever told you something about artefacts?

No. You said you didnt know when I asked you on the Bell Rocks upper deck.*

Lil thought she heard mere mutters while she waited for an answer without saying any words of forgiveness to the man who was getting to his feet. Even though Ed had still only his neck sticking out of the water, he was now also slowly moving forward. He eventually draped his arm over the pools railing and absentmindedly ran his other hand through his wet hair.

Lil thought to herself.

I wont fall for that.

The mysterious power of artefacts is normally thought to come from magic, but in fact, it comes from the divinity. If you ask me how such an unrealistic power still remains in this world, I cannot answer that. However, I hypothesise its simply too powerful to be extinguished. And the reason why I call it divine power is because, more than anything, I also have an artefact

What?

Well, of course, I have one too.

How? And why do you say it as if its something so obvious?

Thats a secret.

Why?

Ill tell you about it soon

Lil closed her mouth sourly.

When interpreting myths, there are passages that cannot be understood with todays common sense alone. For example, whenever Gromer, the God of Thunder, roared in anger, humans would perceive it as thunderstrike. However, whenever a human causes rain and lightning arbitrarily, its highly likely that that person borrowed his divine power. This is just my hypothesis, but when a

human borrows divine power, that power isnt manifested in the body of that selected human. Instead, its a specific object that embodies divine power in a way that humans would understand to use. The concept of using those objects preserved the artefacts that we have today. And when those artefacts are neither scratched nor broken, they can still exist to this very day.

So, my necklace is the embodiment of the divine power borrowed from the God Forma?

You can say so.

Why did the God of Beauty leave behind a necklace that changes gender?

I dont know that until I start looking up the related myths. But, I havent had time to pay attention to your necklace lately

This time, Im sure hes not lying. Before I woke up from my coma, Ed was preoccupied with keeping me alive. And even after I woke up, our focus quickly turned towards the jailbreak in Gualtiero and Venuas detainment. Moreover, these days, while were preparing for the journey to Obernyu, Ed attends to his naval duties. Its true that he hasnt even had the time to properly rest However, since I have relatively free time, I can look up books on Forma after Ed leaves for naval service today

As Lil was making plans for the rest of the day, Ed finally came out of the pool and grabbed a towel.

Speaking of myths, I want to show you something.

Water droplets flowed along the thick muscles of the man who had turned his back to her and was ruffling his hair and neck with a towel. They dripped into the scars he got from various battles, which had become darker over time. In the particularly bright sunlight, these droplets further seeped through his deep shoulder blades and shaded spine, straight down his narrow waistline But Lils view was suddenly blocked by Eds act of putting on his gown, making her unknowingly feel regretful before looking up at the man who now faced her.

Shall we go?

Where?

Lil got up from the recliner while wondering where else theyd go dressed like the way they were as both of them were only wearing dangly gowns.

Ed answered, opening the baths door.

My study.

No way. Are you telling me that were heading there dressed like this?

I didnt mean my cabinet.

So, theres another study?

Ed nodded and pushed the wall behind the bed on the other side of his bedroom.

Not surprising. A mansion of this size will have dozens of such passages that only family members know about.

Lil followed him silently as they passed through several rooms emerging from behind the wall one after the other. They passed rooms with white cloth-covered instruments and medical equipment,

ones with beds and couches, or others with tea tables and chairs. Lil even spotted a half-full tea cup on one of the tables.

Only the last room was lit by a candle above the fireplace.

Here it is.

Ed pushed the rose-patterned wall next to the fireplace.

This study is much darker than the rooms we have passed so far.

Lil felt the cold on the tip of her nose, confirming that also the temperature was different.

Meanwhile, Ed walked somewhere and pulled back the curtains of one of the windows.

Wait a minute

Looking around, Lil suddenly noticed what he wanted to show. There were thick red curtains, like those of a theatre stage, that covered the entire wall. Given the number of historical relics and artworks lined up in this mansion, Lil knew she shouldn't even touch the Retiro insignia on the fabric too hastily.

Both my own and Eds bodies are still dripping with water droplets

Lil asked after taking a step back to get away from the wall.

Whats this?

As Ed walked around the inner room, pulling back the curtains one by one, it gradually brightened up the dark interior and revealed the white lambris on the walls. With even the floor being of white marble, it became almost blinding when the last curtain was lifted.

Lil placed a hand in front of her eyes to block the sudden light.

You can sit there.

Ed pointed to the small desk behind her. Lil sat down on the desk without saying anything. She figured that perhaps he led her to that spot as it would give her the appropriate eye level to appreciate all of this.

In the meantime, Ed stood next to the curtain and held on to the thick rope made of golden thread. Just before pulling the rope, he smiled meaningfully.

The thick curtains were lifted left and right, revealing a wall. A mottled and yellowed wall. It seemed as if it had been restored by putting together scattered and splintered pieces. Black corroded edges and vivid cracks ran through the centre of the wall.

A wooden wall?

Those aren't just pieces of wood glued together. Take a closer look.

Just as he said, when she looked more closely, she observed a red stain. Noticing it formed some kind of shape, Lil tilted her head and muttered.

Are those wood engravings?..

I can see one or two red lines that flicker like rays of sunlight Below them its clearly land, judging from the combination of gold and green. Then theres blue a winding river flowing between them

Lil's eyes widened in surprise.

This is

the engravings left behind by humans who survived beyond the mountain range*.

Colours that had been adsorbed for centuries gradually emerged vividly. With the dye made from pulverised raw grass and smashed wild fruits, the colour that permeates through these survivors' fingerprints was crushed with their sweat to create a red line

It's the sun

Such pigment had been touched by exhaled breaths, dried, hardened, and faded over time.

The dark red sun is so intense that it heats the earth as if it were hell. But on the other side there's rain to cool the fiery hot land. It cooled down the entire earth.

Sprouting vegetation

A mountain range stands between the fertile land and the beasts, and this mountain range is covered in dark blue pigment. Meanwhile, a beast, wearing a persistent gaze that blindly puts his trust in the unknown land, cuts through the mountains' insidious vines

That strong will that transcended the times overwhelmed Lil. She stammered, unable to take her eyes off it.

This this is

Rebirth after destruction.

The sight of the ancient continent filled Lil with a surge of emotions. Her body trembled as it endured her union with the distant past.

With Ed reaching for her shaking hand, Lil barely moved her lips.

I can't even move

Any modern human who sees this for the first time would feel the same way.

Lil looked up to see Ed looking directly at her. Or rather, they were suddenly more like face to face. No, she had to look down. Her gaze was gradually going down with Ed's movements.

Liloa. If you write a book, it will become history. Future generations will be as thrilled and amazed as you're now and will become your willing subjects. I'm just saddened that you won't be able to witness that spectacle

Ed, who was now kneeling at her feet, gently took hold of Lil's toes. His hot lips soon fell on the instep of her foot. With the light pouring from all over reached the centre of the inner room, both Lil and Ed glistened vividly through the wetness covering them. Ed appeared to be pure as if he had just been born from that same light

I'll be the first subject of your history.

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Side Story 4 Liloa's Chapter 2: Mortus Castle

Piercing her silver needle through the white cloth, Liloa reached behind the embroidery frame and pulled the needle out. The gold thread slithered through the fabric like a snake.

The silence was suffocating. The six ladies gathered in the drawing room of Venuas wife, Marguerite, pretended to concentrate on their respective embroidery frames. But Liloa and Venua had an argument just a while ago in which he hit her cheek, so the ladies tried to avoid looking at Liloas face to the best of their abilities.

Liloa looked up at the sky behind the window and adjusted her posture.

It feels like half a day has already passed, but it isnt even noon yet.

Eyes observing her posture were drawn to the side of her dress. If her posture was found to be incorrect, even slightly, it would be passed on to Venua.

All the court ladies had been replaced by Venuas people after Liloas return to Obernyu following Henriettas death. Even the nanny who sided with Liloa left the palace despite being strict about etiquette. Archduke Joseph I didnt care at all whether his son slapped his daughter or if his daughter talked back to his son. Although he would occasionally take Venua hunting or oversee his sons lessons, the rest of their education was left to the new Archduchess, who, as expected, appeared to have no interest in Henriettas children.

Consequently, Venua tried to use his wife to control his sister. This was to dilute the impression that a nobleman like himself was too involved in womens education.

As if trying to break the ice, Marguerite opened her mouth.

I have something to discuss with Liloa. Could you please give us the room?

She then gave a picturesque smile. Liloa and Marguerites court ladies got up and left the room. It was only after they were all gone that Liloa turned to face Marguerite, who had already put her needle down. She was a woman with dark blonde hair cascading down one shoulder while wearing an Obernyu-style headdress.

She was the princess of Sassel, one of the empires vassal states, and the wife of Venua. Although she was only two or three years older than Liloa, her small stature made her look younger than her age. Regardless, she always had a nobleness to her bearing, with her lips tightly shut and her chin resolute but motionless.

Venua had openly neglected Marguerite after their marriage. People at the Obernyu court speculated it was because of Marguerite looking too young that she lacked charm. Rumours abounded, Marguerite remained calm, even after Venua gave her court chambers to two of his mistresses.

Whenever Liloa saw Marguerite, whom she knew as an upright woman, withering away, she couldnt help but be reminded of her mother Henrietta, who similarly began to lose her health as she indulged in drinking, gambling, and fortune-telling. And despite Henriettas vitality deteriorating like that, the people at the Obernyu court only blamed her personality.

Marguerite, glancing at Liloas face, sighed. Even her sighs were faint yet concise.

Please, stop it. Thanks to you, the library was almost closed down.

But more than anything, it is painful to see my dear friends face swollen so badly.

Liloa turned her head towards the window so that Marguerite couldnt see her swollen cheek.

Stop being stubborn and listen to Venua.

I just wanted to read a book, was that so wrong?

Marguerite shook her head.

How could that be wrong? But Liloa, that is not the problem.

Then what?

Why do you think Venua is so harsh on you?

Perhaps he is afraid I will grow to become an arrogant woman who does not know the subject?

Marguerite shook her head again.

Whenever Venua is drunk No, it is more accurate to say he only comes to me when he is drunk anyway. But when he does, he would mumble things, things so incoherent that I often wonder if he was actually talking in his sleep instead of slurring his words due to his drinking habits. Do you want to know what it was about?

Marguerite sat upright and muttered with her eyes fixed on the fireplace.

Father, I do not want it. I like these rabbits. I raised them Please do not tell me to kill them. I do not want to kill them Father, I am having a hard time. I cannot breathe Mother, please hug me as well. Why are you only hugging Liloa? I have seen it all. If I behave well, will you hug me, too?

..?!

Marguerites brown eyes turned towards the surprised Liloa.

Can you imagine? Venua also had a childhood where he just cared about rabbits.

Liloa, who had never imagined it, shook her head roughly. The fact that Henrietta hugged her, was only for a very brief period, so she had no idea what Venua claimed to have seen.

On the inside, he is a weak and timid person. He is also not in good health, so whenever he goes out hunting with the Archduke, he comes back half-fazed. The Archduke finds Venua pathetic and has never asked if he is okay. Of all of Venuas chronic illnesses, it seems the harshest one he is fighting right now is the one in his mind.

He never learned love from anyone. He does not even know how to love himself. That is why he indulges in alcohol and pleasures, and even I, his wife, have no intention of teaching him. He will never know love. A truly pitiful person. The Archduke will not change either. Now that the late Archduchess has passed away, no one else can fix him.

But my father thinks everybody is pathetic. It is not just my brother.

It must be so for you who are used to the conservative Obernyu ways. But to me, coming from a foreign country, I see that the treatment has been cruel.

Then, are you telling me to just bear it all for my poor brother?

It is better to be patient with someone who is already broken. This is all I can do as a friend. I have exposed my husbands secrets and his shameful side so that you will understand how much I care for you. Venua does not know how to fill the void. I know you, on the other hand, are full of something

extraordinary. So, do not try to stand out because he is too weak to tolerate you. Please, do not provoke Venua further

Liloa shook her head, unable to understand. The more Marguerite spoke, the more questions she had.

Until then, Liloa could only half-heartedly comprehend what Marguerite was saying.

People say to me that once I get married, I will become an adult. But now that Im looking at Marguerite, those people seem to be right.

Even though their age difference wasnt that much, Marguerite, as a person, seemed to be filled with love and solemnity, an insight that Liloa couldnt match.

What am I full of?

I do not know exactly, but you do not look as fragile as Venua.

Marguerite, do you know much about love?

Not much, but I do know that the feeling I will never be able to share with Venua is love.

How can you be so sure? Is it because your marriage is borne out of duty?

Marguerite pulled her chin and lowered her head. Her hands, neatly placed on her lap, trembled.

Because I fear the nights enough that I would rather wish for Venua to go to his mistresses. I do not even know how they hold up.

Those words were also too difficult for Liloa to comprehend.

Why are you afraid of the night? Can it be that Marguerite also sees Mortu?

But her questions didnt last long. As the days she spent with Marguerite increased, Liloa came to understand her words. She found out, to be precise, when she saw Marguerite with another man.

Hello, Miss Liloa. My name is Ricard.

The man casually brushed his long blond hair down to the back of his neck.

Marguerite introduced him to Liloa.

Hes a diplomat from Sassel. Hes staying at the Obernyu court.

I see.

He is also the teacher who taught me etiquette.

Ricard was too young to be Marguerites teacher. However, both Ricard and Marguerite had flawless and beautiful demeanours, so Liloa agreed without question.

Ricard will watch over your conduct for the time being. I have already informed Venua about it.

Based on dignity and elegance, no one could match Marguerite, so it seemed natural for her to personally tutor Liloa along with Ricard.

One day, while the three of them were taking a walk together, they were joined by another companion.

A man with his back to the sun introduced himself to her.

I am Maxwell Farin.

Liloa lifted her parasol and looked up at the huge man standing in front of her.

Why?

By the order of the Archduke, I have been entrusted with escorting the young lady.

She asked back with her eyebrows furrowed as if she had heard something strange.

Why do I need an escort?

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Side Story 4 Liloas Chapter 2: Mortus Castle

Why does she need an escort?

Liloa looked back at Marguerite, who asked the same thing at the same time. Her parasol passed Liloas parasol as she stepped forward.

Why does Liloa need an escort? Whats going on?

As Liloa looked at him blankly, Maxwell was having a hard time hiding his expression.

He seems dissatisfied with something, angry even.

Its because of the wild animals in the surroundings. I was told that there was a wild dog accidentally let loose on the hunting ground.

It sounded formal. So formal that it felt like the brilliant man who was just promoted to the Royal Guard wasnt happy about escorting a demure young lady. Truth be told, apart from walking in the garden or horseback riding, Liloa never had other reasons to go outside and Maxwells expression remained rigid throughout those days.

Venua thought he was using Marguerite to keep an eye on Liloa. But in reality, it was actually Liloa who was able to take advantage of her time with Marguerite. Whenever they were on a walk together and Marguerite headed deeper into the forest with Ricard, Liloa was given a chance to spend some time alone. In addition, from the moment Maxwell was assigned to Liloa and her safety was guaranteed, the time Marguerite spent in the forest increased over time.

Although Liloa was young, she was no fool. She knew that just as Henrietta had a lover, Marguerite also had a lover and his name was Ricard.

In that case, was it because of Ricard that Marguerite boldly declared she had no intention of teaching Venua what love is?

Liloa had a lot of questions, but she kept her mouth shut because she would lose her mind more if she wasnt allowed to tag along on their walks.

As expected, she was left with Maxwell again today as well. Fortunately, Maxwell took a firm stance that the complex love affairs of nobles were none of his business.

Liloa sat on a flat rock in front of the lake and closed her eyes, basking in the gentle breeze.

Given that an energetic young man like Maxwell couldn't bear the time spent standing next to a meditating child who was only a little over ten years old, Liloa quickly noticed that he was becoming extremely bored during their walks. It wasn't hard to notice either. Maxwell might've thought that he yawned or trimmed his arrowheads in secret, but Liloa saw all his shadows. She also knew that if she waited a little longer, he, who was unable to overcome his boredom, would attempt to take the first step. This excited Liloa because in her experience in Malus, the games she played with boys were those she deemed far more interesting than the ones she played with girls.

It was after a week had passed that Maxwell scratched his forehead and complained.

Miss, do you enjoy sitting there and breathing in air like some old man?

Do not disturb me.

You and my son are about the same age, so I can't figure out how you're so different.

..?

When Liloa turned around, Maxwell belatedly denied it.

I don't dare compare my son to the young lady. I said this because I was amazed that a child as young as my son could be this well-behaved.

I guess you married early?

Yeah, well

Liloa heard her maids talking about her new guard, Maxwell. He was a soldier with a great desire for success, but being suddenly assigned to the position as her escort felt almost like a demotion. She also heard that a lot of people admired Maxwell for his outspoken personality and his outstanding military skills. One of them was being able to do all kinds of crazy tricks with his crossbow.

Liloa crouched down in front of the lake and picked up a stone. She didn't even bother to look up at the shadow looming behind her.

Do you intend to play pong pong?

Pong pong? Don't you mean, the Fairys Lake Walk.?

Ah yes, that's how nobles call it. Regardless, do you even know how to do it? It's a boys game.

Do you think boys knew how to do this from birth?

Maxwell crossed his arms and stepped back, letting Liloa know he wanted her to show him how it was done. He apparently seemed to agree that it would be better for her to throw rocks than to sit still. Meanwhile, the young lady cocked her chin confidently at him, then tilted her body to the side and threw a flat stone. The rock bounced across the surface of the water and away from her. Perhaps because it was a calm lake, this rock went much further than her throws on the Malus beach.

Shrugging her shoulders, Liloa looked back at Maxwell.

It is easy, right?

..?!

But Maxwell had of course no way of knowing that for a whole month, she had been betting with her Malus playmates on whose fairy would walk farther.

Liloe chose a good rock and threw it at him.

You try it this time.

As Maxwell threw his stone haphazardly, it ended up flying at a distance about half of what Liloe achieved.

Nice try.

After hearing Liloas objective remark, it was almost natural for the guard to make excuses.

I havent done it since I was a kid

That is a pity.

Maxwell chuckled at Liloas stern voice.

If you want to join my fathers guard, you better get rid of your habit of making excuses. My father hates excuses.

It was not an excuse

Reading her countenance, Maxwell quickly picked up a good stone. He hastily threw it onto the lake, but this time, it didnt even make it half as far as his first attempt.

Liloe glanced at Maxwell, who kept grunting, and noticed the weapon attached to his waist. She already knew that her father, Joseph I, and Venua used the same kind whenever they went out hunting, but she asked nonetheless.

What is that?

Its called a crossbow.

It does resemble something like a bow.

Bows are a thing of the past.

If you think so, why carry a crossbow when we have guns now?

Because guns are too loud.

Liloe looked at him as if urging him to further explain, but Maxwell simply dismissed it.

There is no need for you to know about warfare.

However, after seeing Liloe continuing her habit of simply sitting there for the next few days, Maxwell opened his mouth first again.

Did you wonder why I carry a crossbow?

Liloas eyes lit up without her realising it.

Unlike the other guards, Maxwell was a soldier who experienced real war. He seemed to have volunteered for the Royal Guard because he needed to be close to the palace to achieve even greater success. His family had only recently acquired a title, so the next thing they needed to secure was a stable position at court.

Perhaps because Maxwells life at court was bland and uncharacteristic, he gave Liloa vivid accounts of his adventures, with her intently listening to them as though he were telling old, legendary tales. His son never sat still and listened, so Maxwell was impressed by Liloas attitude of listening with enthusiasm. Through their exchanges, he eventually found out about Liloas skill in shooting a slingshot and brought her his sons slingshot and toy crossbow. Of course, towards her escort, Liloa left out the part about how she had learned to use a slingshot while playing with the other kids in Malus.

Maxwells assignment of being Liloas escort eventually became irrelevant because the woods by the palaces estate were off limits to other people, let alone the possible presence of wild dogs. So, Maxwell began to think of his time with Liloa as a kind of childcare. Although his methods were a bit on the rough side as he only had a son, Liloa never complained. On the contrary, she liked it even though she never explicitly displayed her feelings.

It was a trend for the emerging nobles to directly participate in their childrens education to ensure that they were growing up properly and Maxwell was no different. He was used to dealing with children. Although he found it difficult at first because Liloa was a girl, seeing her act humble, he soon forgot about such awkwardness. He would even let Liloa join whenever he trained alone and while she could whine as she attempted to hit the fruit hanging from the branches, Maxwell grew to like her because she never gave up until she hit her target.

Recently, Maxel was training to shoot a crossbow while riding a horse, and Liloa followed along clumsily but almost fell because of her lack of leg strength.

Liloa, calming her pounding heart, raised her voice.

Why are you doing such a dangerous thing?

Its said that the Empire will soon create a Karabinae unit that fires guns while riding horseback. In effect, its an elite unit. The Pontenbach War is taking longer than expected, after all.

You mean there has never been a unit like that before?

We still have the cavalry of course, but they attack while their horses are standing still. Only very few people can shoot accurately from a running horse.

Ah, so doing that must be difficult

Liloa quickly realised that Maxwell was interested in being recruited as part of the Karabinae.

He seems to be agonising whether to enter a new war and gain greater glory, or simply solidify his hard-earned position. The first one is actually closer to a gamble. The risk is so high that the reward for his success will be difficult to estimate. In addition, he already has a suitable title in Obernyu, too. But knowing him, I think that hell still choose the former.

Just when Liloa was about to utter words of encouragement, something alarmed Maxwell that caused him to grab his crossbow.

Shh, someone is coming.

Maxwell, with his crossbow drawn, blocked Liloas path.

Maybe its because we were talking about war, but he seems to be acting so belligerently even though theres no way an assassin could be hovering around in this peaceful place

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Venuas horse strode out through the leafy shrubs. The bridle decorated with silk and gold sparkled on the horses face. Venua looked down at them coldly. The sunlight was so strong that his eyes looked particularly shaded under the brim of his hat.

What are you doing here?

Maxwell quickly redirected his raised crossbow. It was rather fortunate they were vigilant and dismounted, if Lil had been caught with the slingshot in hand, Maxwells head wouldve been blown off.

Liloa came out From Maxwells back and grabbed her dress while bending her knees.

Didnt you go for a walk?

The lake behind Liloa was the beginning of a trail through the forest. She quickly told a white lie.

I was resting because my ankle hurt.

What about Marguerite?

Marguerite went ahead first

Venua, who glanced somewhere in the forest, looked back at Liloa again. His navy blue eyes seemed to freeze over.

Her and Ricard the two alone?

Venua laughed sharply, thereby distorting his stoic face. It was the kind of laughter that lasted so long that it made Liloa nervous. Not a single soul in their surroundings dared to move during that time. Not Liloa, not Maxwell, nor the two guards who followed Venua.

Venua soon looked back at his guards with a face that plastered a smile.

Shall we hunt here today?

Huh? We cant release the prey in this part of the estate

The escaped wild dog may still be wandering around.

Venua muttered with his gaze focused on Maxwell.

I assigned you here to catch that wild dog*

And with that remark, a cold wind lashed between them. Venua turned his horses head to change direction before the three horses disappeared along the trail. Only then did Liloa and Maxwell understand Venuas meaning. On the outside, Maxwell was sent to serve as Liloas escort because he caused friction among the Royal Guards, but that reason was merely used for deceiving Marguerite.

Liloa quickly looked back at Maxwell and noticed his face becoming lifeless and weary. He was pacing around, not knowing what to do. He didnt dare look at Liloa again.

Maxwell

The guard grabbed his head. He blamed himself for being so caught up in the whimsical fun of playing with a young child that he hadn't been able to look at the situation keenly. Forget Karabinae, he doubted whether he could even keep his position in the Royal Guard.

Liloe instinctively knew that she would never be able to get along with him again.

Soon, gunshots were heard from where Venua had disappeared.

Bang! Bang!

A series of gunshots echoed throughout the forest. Birds on the trees flew up, and the sound of insects chirping reverberated in Lilo's ears for a while. As well as Marguerite's screams

Ricard died a cruel death. Because his position was that of a diplomat, friction with the Kingdom of Sassel was inevitable, but Venua maintained the disposition that he had only stepped on an ant.

Rumours circulated that Joseph had struck Venua in the face. As Joseph began to treat Venua coldly, his son's neurosis became more severe, and in turn, suffocated Lilo. Joseph appeared to have no more expectations from Venua. Tired of his son, his attention unfortunately turned to his daughter. Amid the drastic shift in their situation, Joseph wondered how he could make the best use of his only daughter. As a result, Lilo was dragged from place to place and went through several engagements, which were all broken off in the end.

Obernys was a traditional and conservative principality, but the world was changing. The number of wealthy people originally born as commoners and the emerging nobles, who bought titles from the imperial family, increased exponentially. Similarly, the social trend of going for gold rather than prestige gained prevalence. Public opinion was becoming less favourable to monarchical families such as Obernys or any other traditional clans, and even the imperial family couldn't avoid such a hubbub of public opinion. And with each broken engagement, Venua's became more harsh.

Venua, standing on the stairs of the ground floor hall, looked coldly down at Lilo.

Another engagement was broken off.

Venua was holding a letter stamped with gold. Lilo lost track of how many times her engagement had been broken off. Everyone at court, except Venua, knew that the breakup of the engagements was not her fault. Like Joseph, the other archdukes of the principalities belonging to the Great Lakes Union kept an eye on each other. The unstable atmosphere between the principalities piled up like fog, and at that time, breakups of engagements between monarchical families occurred as if it were the norm.

Even if I do not get married, I will do well. It does not matter to me whether it comes to fruition or not.

To be born a woman and think about growing old and dying alone? To know no shame, you are no different from an animal.

What do I have to be ashamed of? I have not done anything bad, I have not done anything that would haunt my conscience. So, I can simply live and die the way I was born.

How can you speak like that to your brother? Because of the way you speak so thoughtlessly, your marriage resolutions have never been fruitful. It is disgraceful to allow a girl to use her tongue. Next time, I will have to correct that habit.

From there on, the tedious process kept repeating. Venua tried to break Liloa, but she never broke. The maids who were unable to watch any longer asked her to obediently respond to the master, but she had no intention of giving in even if it meant her death.

Because even Liloa had her way of coping.

Koud Bhan.

Liloa petted her closest friend. She brushed its mane and rubbed her cheek against the animal's soft fur. Koud Bhan looked at Liloa, rolling its beautiful eyes.

Fortunately for her, the principality of Obernyu has been breeding quality horses born from excellent bloodlines since the time of its ancestors. The black horses of Obernyu were a renowned kind throughout the continent.

Top-tier horses certified by the royal decree of the emperor weren't something that anyone could just obtain. The more new nobles emerged in the empire, the more the old nobles wanted to obtain authority and dignity that would set them apart from the former. However, the emerging nobility naturally aspired to have the same privilege and prestige as the old noble families and an excellent horse was a powerful symbol of such class. Unfortunately for them, horses only gave birth to one foal at a time with a pregnancy period being close to a year, which meant that the demand for such special species was high and the price of those horses soared even higher than the sky.

Koud Bhan came from the bloodline of prestigious horses and had been with Liloa from the moment of its birth. Even the stern Venua tolerated the unusual affection and attention that Liloa paid to her horse. After all, in the Obernyu way of thinking, communion with a quality horse was one of the privileges granted to only a very few.

Liloa climbed the open hill with Koud Bhan until she could observe the Obernyu Castle from a distance. She couldn't only see the castle, but also the buildings gathered tightly around it, the large winding river, as well as the fields and groves.

Her rapid breathing let out a whiff of white air. Liloa closed her eyes, feeling the cloudy sky, the bright sun, and the wind blowing across the hills. Her sweat that hadn't cooled down yet was chilled by the cold breeze.

Liloa stood for a long time until her ears and nose felt cold. As she took a deep breath into her stomach, the wind flowed inside her body. It was refreshing.

Koud Bhan strolled around the surrounding grass, while Liloa loaded and lifted the crossbow from the saddle. As they entered the forest, fallen leaves and twigs crunched under her horse's feet.

In the beginning, Liloa practised running her horse without holding onto the reins. Next, she adjusted the reins with her left hand as she tried to hit her target with her right hand. Afterwards, she used both hands to operate the slingshot or crossbow. She needed to develop her overall strength, so she began training on her own. Although Liloa wanted to use a rifle, she would obviously get caught as gunshots would be too loud to use. So, all she could do for now was try out a long crossbow similar to a rifle.

There was no specific reason for Liloa to learn the technique used by the Karabinae. At first, she was only curious because it was said to be a skill that very few could do. As time went on, the more she practised, the better she got. That sense of accomplishment of achieving something extraordinary thrilled her and before she realised it, she developed a skill that she could now call a hobby as well. But above all, whenever she was concentrating on her target, her distracting thoughts disappeared. It seemed like everything that bothered her became meaningless and only her target and herself were left in her world. It became her refuge to erase her pain, and practising was the reason behind Liloa's ability to temporarily escape Mortus' hellish bondage.

The time when her daily routine of living each day like that changed when Joseph I, unable to withstand public opinion, turned his attention to the empire.

I'll send you to Sesbron's court.

Said Joseph, who stood up as if evaluating her, as usual.

I'm sure you can find a good partner there.

After much deliberation, Joseph chose the safest method. He hoped that Liloa would catch the eye of the prince at the court of Sesbron, mindful of her marriage to the imperial family.

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Of course, regardless of Joseph's plans, Liloa was excited to be able to leave the exhausting Obernyu and head to Sesbron, a cultural centre where nobles from all around the world gather together. Henrietta, her mother, also loved Sesbron and always spoke about how much she missed it.

From then on, Liloa sat by the window every day and imagined the city of Sesbron. All while the moon waxed and waned

There was an obvious reason why the people of the empire unanimously praised Sesbron. Even Liloa herself was astounded by the capital's palace, so much so that her jaw dropped. Large and small banquets were held every day, and operas and plays for the emperor were immensely popular. The people were excited and sensitive about the latest trends and exotic styles as if they were competing for extravagance.

The newcomer Liloa heard Sesbron courtiers' endless praise every day.

You are beautiful, Miss

You definitely stand out at today's banquet

Even the goddess of beauty will cry with envy when she sees you

Whenever she stood still in the banquet hall, people would come up, observe her, and praise her. Liloa, however, merely perceived them as a bunch of Josephs. Because anyone who came to see her, would first and foremost, check whether she was a worthy bride.

Liloa gradually realised that Sesbron was no different from Obernyu. No one truly cared about her, no one cared what she was thinking or how she was living. All these people were only obsessed

with whether she was beautiful, whether she would be obedient to her husband, and whether she would be good at bearing children.

Joseph constantly emphasised in his letters the need to win the emperors favour, and only after Liloa started visiting Annettes salon did she learn why her father mentioned the emperor and never the prince himself.

The emperor was still furious about the early death of his sister, Henrietta, and he blamed the harsh treatment of the Obernyu court. Such thoughts werent false, so Liloa felt a faint bond with the emperor.

Despite the fact that the emperor openly showed his hostility, Joseph I held his head high. Causing the people gathered at salons to chatter quietly.

I wonder if this will lead to the fall of the historic principality. As Obernyu is a royal family with a history dating back to the places name, changing their surname means its extinction

Dont pay attention to all the gossip.

..?

Annette, lying down on a couch, picked up a green grape and ate it. She was Philip IIs only mistress, wearing a white wig with her hair billowing out with an extravagant fondant on top of it.

Liloa was sitting on the chair next to her.

No matter how hostile His Majesty may appear to be, he cannot and will not attack Obernyu. The White Confederation is raging in Pontenbach and he cannot afford to have two battlegrounds. Besides, if we lose the battle with Obernyu, what will happen to the supply of officers and horses? It will result in us being unable to train the Karabinae unit, and we cannot let that happen. That is what is making him so angry

..!

Liloas shoulders shook upon hearing Karabinae. Annette placed her hand on the back of Liloas hand, perhaps mistaking it for fear.

It is okay. His Majesty cares about you. He appreciates that you grew up as a well-behaved child and he even told me to treat you well.

Liloa thought of herself as gloomy and broken rather than well-mannered. Lately, shed been seeing the dark undertaker or hallucinated so much that she doubted whether she was even sane. Even yesterday, she saw Mortus shadow in the middle of the ballroom.

Liloa couldnt bear her suddenly chilling chest, so she quickly grabbed one of the fruits and ate it. Not at all comprehending what it tasted like.

Henrietta was a bright and lovely child who made those surrounding her smile. When Henrietta danced, everyone at court would be mesmerised as if they were seeing a fairy. I guess His Majesty secretly hoped that you would be similar to Henrietta, as that is not the case, he must be feeling a little sorry as well. But do not worry dear, if it becomes known that you are treated well in a palace that has so many eyes on you, even the arrogant Joseph will crawl up soon, so there is no reason to escalate the situation. In addition, Obernyu is a powerful enough principality even to this day. Nothing can be won with an all-out battle. So, do not worry.

Although Annette was the emperors mistress, she was a skilful politician who reigned as a powerful figure in the court for many years. Even Philip II didnt hesitate to ask her for advice. And it wasnt because his relationship with the empress was bad, but because the empress chose to live in a separate palace and only showed her face during ceremonies or important banquets. When Liloa visited, she only outwardly welcomed her without displaying any real interest in the child.

It was even said that the empress herself had introduced Annette directly to the emperor, as she was not feeling well and tired of world affairs, and Annette was clever enough to assist the emperor in her stead.

This was also part of the adult world that Liloa didnt understand yet.

Annette held out a grape to Liloa. When she tried to take it, Annette shook her head. In her confusion, Liloa hesitated, but eventually, she opened her mouth as the other person had hoped. After Annette pushed the grape between the childs lips, she ate some herself while wrinkling her nose, causing the mole on the bridge of her nose to shake as if it might fall off.

Is it delicious?

Yes.

Looking around, Liloa saw the rest of the ladies gathered in the salon looking at her with envy. It seemed like she was the only one who was embarrassed. Everyone laughed when Annette jested that Liloas awkwardness was so cute. It was as if she had become a character in a play. Now, Liloa understood how Henrietta, who grew up in such a lively atmosphere, couldnt endure the Obernyu court.

Annette, still smiling with a fan covering her face, leaned towards Liloa.

Oh, the most diligent man in the Empire is coming in.

The third prince Robero and the Duke of Mireille.

Liloa couldnt tell which of the two Annette referred to as the most diligent. But Annette quickly elaborated, as if she had read Liloas thoughts.

Ren Mireille is truly an interesting person. During the reign of his father, an epidemic broke out on their estate that almost caused their bankruptcy. It was even said that the IOUs* handed to his father, when compiled altogether, could make up a book the size of the Great Law. So, can you imagine how much money had been borrowed? Anyway, the former Duke had to sell everything, including villas and farms, just to pay off the majority of those debts. Still, he must not have had enough money as later on, in a way of grasping straws, he even invested in a trading company. He ended up losing everything. But, do you know what makes this more interesting?

..?

Mireille was a prestigious family that even Liloa was familiar with.

I have heard that it isnt that rare for noble families to fall, but to think that even an old, established family like the Mireilles was on the verge of extinction due to debt And even now, the rumours going around the capital about them are no small feat

There is no debt left at all now.

How come?

Look at your cute face. Yes, I know what you are curious about, and I will give you the answer. The current Duke, Ren Mireille, personally took over the management of the ruined business. Sesbron was turned upside down when the news came out, no one could believe that the head of a prestigious ducal family would position himself as a sleazy merchant. But I was different. I was so amused that I even bought some of the Garni top bonds*. Why you may ask? Well, the current Duke has an unusual resourcefulness to him

Annette

Annette lifted the fan that covered her mouth.

The attention subtly focused on the unmarried prince and duke. Annette, still stretched out on the couch, lazily held out her hand holding her fan.

Robero.

While the two men took turns and kissed the back of Annettes hand, Liloa was rather amazed by Sesbrons tendency to allow such a close relationship between the empresss children and the mistress. Nonetheless, she held her breath because she didnt know what political intentions there might be.

Robero looked at Liloa and patted Mireille on the shoulder.

Liloa. This is the Duke of Mireille.

Mireilles impression was extraordinary. His hair was so light that it almost looked white.

Ive heard that people in the central and southern regions sometimes can have hair that colour, but this is the first time seeing it in person.

It was said that the more the colour faded from blond, the more unique it was. That was also the reason why flour-sprinkled white wigs came into fashion or why someone like Mireille, who has natural white hair, was so popular at the royal court.

Hello, Miss.

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Mireille also kissed the back of Liloas hand before introducing himself as a merchant, hence explaining why his appearance looked better than that of Robero, who developed a thick physique on the battlefield. He then smiled skilfully and charmingly. Liloa, who knew what it meant, calmly withdrew her hand.

Robero observed Liloa facing the duke, whereas Annette seemed to be observing not only Liloa but also Robero.

Annette spoke while she fanned herself.

Ren, be careful. Liloa is a very virtuous child. She was educated following Obernyu tradition, so do not do anything that will shake her heart.

But seeing Mireilles eyes, he seemed to have taken it as a challenge rather than a warning. It wasnt just Liloa who noticed it though, given that the formal smile had disappeared from Roberos face. As if he didnt seem to be impressed by the remark, Mireille sat across from Liloa and looked straight at her.

Have I been rude?

No.

I was just wondering because you did not smile. I think you will be even more beautiful if you smile, but your face barely shows any emotion.

Robero, who had been watching the two anxiously, intervened.

It is very rare to see Liloa smile. But you are not alone in this, every man in court is anxious to see the ladys smile, do they not?

I laugh every day. Do not embarrass me, Robero.

No, I have heard the rumour, Miss. You are already known for having a cold expression on your face. Actually, I can name more than a few gentlemen who got their hearts broken because of you.

Annette narrowed her eyes as she smiled.

Why, the siblings are the same. Venua was also very cold-hearted, making many ladies cry Well, the same was true for Joseph. He had an introversion and politeness that could not be matched by a Sesbron man. At the time, I understood Henriettas courageous choice.

What is wrong with us Sesbron men?

The two Sesbron men laughed heartily. In particular, Mireille seemed to be convinced of his own charm and even enjoyed the leisure of glancing at Liloa while he was smiling.

Picking up some glasses of wine from the tray held out by the servant, Robero held one out to Liloa while taking a sip himself.

Are Venua and Marguerite doing well?

Liloa answered formally.

Yes, they are. And they asked me to convey their regards to you.

I hope we can meet Venua soon. Since His Majesty and Joseph I are cold, we, as their descendants, should be able to come to an agreement. His Majesty cares about Venua just as much as he cares about you, so it would be good if Venua would put in a little more effort to meet us in the middle.

Liloa, who was about to take a sip, froze.

Because of the establishment of the Karabinae?

Did you hear about that?

Yes. Are you going to command the Karabinae yourself?

I am working hard to bring it under my command. I have put it into practice a few times as a way of testing it, and it is very effective. I am planning to add it to the regiment officially. And as word has spread, many young people are already in training.

Annette elaborated, showing that she knew about the situation in the military.

Because the unit will be assigned directly under Robero, the competition is fierce. It is nothing short of a guaranteed path to success.

Liloe nodded her head.

Gaining honour in battle guarantees a rise in ones status. And of course, its different from those who buy titles or earn wealth through commerce.

While thinking that, Liloe looked at Mireille.

He mustve known that he would be ostracised by Sesbron, but he seems somewhat admirable for boldly jumping into business.

Second and third sons of prestigious families are jumping in on the opportunity. Thanks to this, LeBrun's military attach is revitalised.

Of course, it is still not as good as the Navy.

The Navy, which paved the way for new opportunities in unfamiliar continents and seas, was regarded as the most profitable. When the topic of the Navy came up, Mireille spoke with a kind smile.

Your Highness, are you going to participate in a naval battle someday?

If I have the chance.

Annette and Mireille laughed out loud at Robero's confident answer, but Liloe was thinking about something else. When Robero met her curious gaze, she suddenly spoke.

I'm curious about that place.

Robero asked without even trying to hide his surprise.

Are you curious about LeBrun?

Yes.

Mireille shook his head, thinking Liloe must be mistaken.

Miss, LeBrun is a military school. A military school's purpose is to train officers.

I know.

Mireille quickly lowered his head at her firm answer.

Forgive me. I thought you might have misunderstood because you were interested in a place that does not suit your position at all.

He is quick-witted and quick to react, but still, I don't like how he treats me as if I'm clueless.

Is there anybody in the Empire who doesn't know what kind of place LeBrun is?

Haha. I made a slip of the tongue. So, are you curious what the officers being trained there look like?

Liloe. I praised your modesty just a little while ago. How can this be?

Contrary to Annette flapping her fan in embarrassment, Robero wanted to make a good impression on Liloa, so he took her with him to LeBrun. Naturally, Roberos close friend Mireille followed, and to keep up appearances, Annette also tagged along.

It was a day with fleecy clouds covering the sky.

Liloa was initially out on the road riding Koud Bhan when she entered the carriage, unable to overcome Annettes torch of boredom.

Annette laughed mischievously as soon as Liloa sat opposite.

Liloa, you sneaky little lady. What are you up to? I know you have other ideas.

What do you mean?

You do not like the Sesbron gentlemen who are dressed up to the fullest, do you?

What?

Well, they do look nice, but I see your point, they may appear weak. Then, I guess your taste leans towards the valiant men, like soldiers or officers, hmm?

It is okay. This is Sesbron. Unlike Obernyu, you can talk freely.

Liloa agonised for a moment.

I dont know what she wants me to say so freely. Can I tell her that carriages are boring and that I actually want to ride Koud Bhan?

Robero is very excited because he thinks you like strong men.

Robero, a general with outstanding military skills, was also the commander of the ongoing Pontenbach War. Even though he was a member of the royal family, he was popular among officers because he was a person who knew compromises. As the war continued for several years, he stayed in the capital to raise a new army, and during that time, there wasnt a fool in Sesbron who didnt know what it meant for him to see Liloa so often.

Ren, on the other hand, seems to be quite upset.

Why would the Duke of Mireille

Oh, what are you pretending not to know?

Liloa let out an audible sigh of her own.

I do not know why everything I say and do ends up being implied. When I say things, I do not have men or relationships in mind.

Annette, who was coughing lightly behind the fan, narrowed her eyes.

Hmm, how old are you?

Im turning fifteen soon.

You're still young. How cute. But you'll soon find out what a blessing it is to have attractive men competing to woo you. Especially, knowing that there are noble children out there who need to raise their dowry significantly to barely get one marriage proposal.

Liloa, not smiling at all, turned her head out of the window. But even as she looked away, she could still see Annettes high wig whipping about on the ceiling of the carriage.

Meanwhile, the Duke of Mireille adjusted his horses head and approached the carriage.

As the carriage turned left, bright sunlight came in. Liloa frowned, prompting Mireille to raise his hand to form a shade beyond the window. It was a kind act, but it felt somewhat contrived and made Liloa rather uncomfortable.

The coachman soon announced their arrival.

This is LeBrun.

The moment Annette folded her fan, the maid next to her quickly gave her a handheld mirror and powder. The maid next to Liloa did the same. Believing without a doubt that Liloa was going to choose a husband, the girls worked even harder than usual on her makeup.

Liloa got off the carriage and smelled the air in the yard.

The smell of grass nothing special

Liloa couldn't appreciate it as much. As if waiting for her, Koud Bhan approached and started showing off its charm. Out of habit, Liloas hand stroked her horses mane.

Because of the weather being clear and nice, the group transferred to an open carriage and took a wide tour of the Naval Attach building. Everywhere they went, Robero would kindly provide explanations about this and that.

The Navy often vacates LeBrun because it mainly trains on the Anatole Sea or the Risch River.

Annette, who was watching the naval cadets training, opened her eyes wide.

Oh my, speaking of the Navy, is Sir Edgar here by any chance?

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Robero, who had been following Annettes gaze, shook his head.

You mean the eldest grandson of the Marquess of Roahn? He is probably not here.

Hmm, that is a shame. He is an extremely attractive guy. But no matter how many times I sent him an invitation to the salon, he remained silent, so I thought I could personally invite him myself today.

Hahaha, even if you invite him directly, do you think it is enough to break his pride?

Why won't it be broken? I'm Annette.

Annette, who was leaning leisurely on the back of the carriage, lifted her arm and rested her chin on her palm.

As the heir of the Retiro family, his wealth must be overflowing, so why is he serving in the Navy? Do you not think there must be some interesting reason?

Well

I want to see that famous face up close, but I have never been given the chance so far.

No matter how vibrant they say that mans face is, you have never seen him yourself, right? So dont expect too much.

Liloea wasnt particularly interested in the navy, and neither of the two men was interested in the eldest grandson of the Marquess of Roahn. As Annette continued to talk about other men, Robero became more and more displeased, wanting to change the topic. But before he could do so, the party arrived in front of the army attach.

As if they had prepared in advance for the news of the princes visit, an awning and a long table were placed on the podium. The empty space in front of them appeared to be the lot used as a training ground.

Seeing the targets placed at regular intervals, Liloas hair stood on end.

After Robero completed the brief inspection, training began.

The prince, who was sitting next to her, leaned in and spoke.

The Karabinae must command their horse while simultaneously supporting their body and accurately hitting their target. Horses are sensitive and can keenly sense when the rider lets go of the reins and holds on with his legs. But there is not a single horse that will remain comfortable in a chaotic environment like a battlefield, that is why shooting must be done as quickly as possible.

Everyone knows that.

Liloea watched the energetic candidates train. The first rider leans low, steers the horse, picks up the rifle, aims and shoots.

Bang! Bang!

One of the two targets was a hit.

Liloea jumped up from her seat, her own confident voice echoing in her mind.

I can do better.

This was the first time her dulled emotions got an impulse at LeBrun.

Realising that she could do better than someone else, Liloas heart beat faster and louder than she had ever experienced before. It raced until it reached a strong desire.

I want to move I want to ride a horse and shoot targets If it were me, I would have hit both.

A realisation she had long forgotten came back to her. She was a person who could move wonderfully.

*There was a time when I was praised for moving brilliantly. A time when the rays of the sun shone through the fruit-bearing leaves**

Liloa tried to recall a little harder. Memories of Henriettas death crossed her mind, memories she had deeply buried.

Before the cold winter came, there was summer On a hot day, I moved brilliantly How did I feel at that time? It was exactly like today This overwhelming feeling, like Im going to explode

Annette, sitting next to her, patted Liloas shoulder.

Are you all right?

Liloa nodded and took her seat again. Robero and Mireille also said something, but she couldnt hear them properly.

It has to be the Karabinae.

That was what her gut told her, also probably because she didnt know how to do anything else.

I was never happy with all the compliments I received while I sat like a doll. Whenever Im still like that, my legs and my arms are rotting away, those praises only meant my bodys rotting so beautifully.

For the first time in her life, Liloa made a clear decision.

I cant live this rotten life any longer. It doesnt matter if I stay indecisive for the next hundred days or even a thousand more, it doesnt matter which man I choose or how big and magnificent his castle is, the fact remains that Mortu will encroach that castle too

It was the next officers turn to depart. He raised his upper body to aim the rifle.

Hes slow

Robero sighed beside Liloa.

He was slow this time.

As for the next one

That officers movements are too big

There were a lot of unnecessary gestures.

However, the next officers execution was perfect in both movements and speed.

Unconsciously, Liloa clapped just a split-second before the rest of the audience did when he hit the two targets. Because Liloas reaction was one beat faster, Robero turned to look at her.

Did you know it was a hit?

Liloa shook her head awkwardly.

I didnt.

Is that so?

The applauded officer bowed from his horse facing the podium. Even though she wasnt the one who had hit the targets, simply watching the soldiers already prompted a surge of vitality throughout her entire body. It was because she witnessed a greatly executed demonstration. Thinking that if she followed this example, she would be able to hold her posture more precisely.

You look like youre in a good mood.

..!

She looked back at Robero in shock. Robero, with a friendly face, smiled happily.

This outing was the first request you asked of me. I can do anything for you, as long as you keep on telling me.

It

It may sound strange, but I want to be a carabiner. I want to fight and win on the battlefield, achieve things, develop skills, and gain honour

Liloa suppressed her embarrassingly bold sentences so hard that she had to bite her lip painfully. But at the same time, she loved the idea of building herself up and the possibility of gaining honours. As her imagination grew bolder, her heart became filled with satisfaction.

The fire that was ignited that day didnt subside. As time passed, Liloa desperately hoped that that absurd sentence would become reality and she would be able to achieve it all.

In the middle of the night, Annette led Liloa to the fireplace after sending out all the maids. She had taken off her wig and makeup and was wearing light clothing.

As the fireplace was burning fiercely because Annettes maids just finished stuffing it with grass, Liloa sat down next to Annette, enjoying the warmth.

Your hair is so beautiful.

Annette stroked Liloas long flowing hair. She, herself, had worn a heavy wig for so long that she started to get bald and only a handful of sluggish black hair was covering her scalp. Liloa noticed that as Annette was looking at her, she was reminiscing about her old self.

The woman spoke in a dreamy voice.

Is there anything you want? Ill help you with anything

She spoke as if she was talking to herself in the mirror.

What do you mean?

You know, Liloa, I have made so many mistakes and missteps Who could a woman from a fallen noble family marry? The only thing I could do back then was marry an old wealthy man who lived near our territory that was losing everything. It was a terrible life, but fortunately, I at least had found a husband. He passed away early though. When he left behind a huge legacy I had just started menstruating The world constantly harassed me, and I had to survive on my own somehow. But it was not easy. Because I did not know how to survive in this tough world as a woman. No one taught me and it felt as if they did not want me to survive in the first place That is how I wasted away the brilliant prime years of my life Really such a waste

I mean to help you not do that.

I doubt that the Emperor asked her to take care of me to this extent

Despite intently listening to Annette, Liloa couldnt grasp it.

So, why?

Liloa, who was still young, couldnt understand Annettes intentions. All she knew was that Annettes words werent lies, so she tried to gauge whether Annette would accept her story if she told her the truth.

Its so unconventional that I dont even know where to begin. But maybe maybe with Annettes advice, Ill be able to devise a concrete plan

Annette, why are you so nice to me?

Sometimes I wonder that, too. Why am I so attached to you even though you are neither amusing nor flattering me

You cannot be more puzzled than me

Annette took a sip from a small glass of wine. A sweet smell wafted around the fireplace. As Liloa was unable to find the right words to form her sentence, Annette grabbed her hand as she struggled.

But I realised something recently Are you curious what it is?

Yes.

You have the same look in your eyes as I do. That is why I care about you as much as I care about myself. Shall I guess what that look means?

Liloas heart sank as if her true intentions had been discovered.

Did you really notice?

Liloa carefully faced the other person.

Annettes lips, pale after she removed her makeup, whispered.

Ambition

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Like gold, flames flashed across Annettes yellow eyes.

You are ambitious.

..!

Liloas mouth opened, but she couldnt bring herself to deny it.

Well, shall I tell you a secret?

Anticipating a great deal of wisdom, Liloa leant to Annette. Annette, in turn, whispered close to the girls ear as if she truly was about to tell a secret.

No matter how great a man is, he has no choice but to give in to the woman he loves. So it is important to find a great man who is desperate to crawl into your skirt. A person may harbour the world. Alternatively, one may harbour poverty. Look at me. I have the world. Since His Majesty is mine, then his world is also mine, is it not?..

Annette stroked Liloas cheek.

Keep this beauty for a long time. You were born so perfectly. You have everything, not just beauty. So dont worry.

Annettes intentions were clear. She meant to find a good husband and become a wife who controls her husband. Liloa was barely able to hide her disappointment.

This isnt the first time Ive heard something like this

Liloa didnt want to give up on her chances, even if such words came from a powerful politician at court. But the next moment, she thought it fortunate that she wasnt caught, for it was now clear that Annette wouldnt understand her.

Liloa looked away from Annettes gaze and lowered her eyes, perceiving the shadows of the fireplaces smoke flickering on the back of her hand.

Annette, there is this sentence that everyone wants to write when explaining their lives, right?

Yeah, that is right.

I was able to put those words together just a while ago. Perhaps it has always been on my mind, yet I only realised it now.

Of course. Listening to your heart is the key to happiness.

No matter how deep I had buried it, I do not think I can ignore it now that I have found it again

Annette squeezed Liloas hand as if she knew what Liloa was saying.

The emperor procrastinated his decision regarding Liloas husband. Rumours abound that the 3rd prince, Robero, begged for Liloa, but the emperor remained obstinate.

So instead, Liloa strengthened her resolve and requested an audience with the emperor.

Your Majesty, I have a request.

I would like to listen to anything you ask.

Prostrating herself before Philip II, Liloa had a hunch. The emperor may be fond of her, he also regarded her as a useful pawn. Being with Robero would give Obernyu too much power, but at the same time, he also knew that Obernyu would be too quick to reject any marriage proposal with another noble.

No one knows when the Pontenbach War will end, and the resources already poured into that war are enormous. At LeBrun, I can buy at least another two years This could be the luckiest moment of my life.

In LeBrun, I will prove that our alliance is solid and that Obernyus loyalty and dedication are unchanging.

The emperor, who was eating a bright yellow fruit from the south, wiped his hands on a handkerchief. The emperor initially gave off a sloppy look as his cravat was covered in yellow juice, but his small eyes shone brightly as he gauged Liloas intentions. After all, silent people were suspicious and cautious in everything they did.

The young daughter is smarter than her arrogant father.

Those are not empty words, Your Majesty. Give me a dagger and Ill prove it.

Liloe then cut her hair as she had nothing but her body to give. People usually told her that with everything she possessed, she would make the perfect bride, but in reality, what Liloe had to offer in her bargain wasnt property, not a peace treaty, but only her hair.

With the emperors permission, Liloe eventually left the throne room. Her long, luscious hair was cut messy above her shoulders.

In the gallery in front of the throne room, courtiers and nobles gathered as always to discuss the reign. And in the centre of it all was Annette, who let out a torn scream upon noticing Liloas hair.

A sudden silence covered the gallery.

Following Annettes wide-eyed gazes, people turned their heads one by one.

Liloe! What is going on!

Annette, who had thrown her fan somewhere, ran over and covered Liloas cheeks in a way to confirm she wasnt hurt anywhere. Liloe gently took hold of the hands and lowered them.

I do not think long hair suits a soldier.

What a so-soldier?

Im very greedy. The wider my skirt, the more cumbersome it becomes. I would rather have what I want instead.

Why on earth are you doing this? Why are you taking the difficult path instead of the easy one? Huh?

Annette clung to Liloas arms as if pleading with her wayward daughter.

Tell His Majesty that you made a mistake right now. Quickly!

Liloe stared at her fontanelle, which was high in the sky, and her pure white makeup.

Beneath the border of her wig, the inflammation on her scalp that makeup couldnt hide was red. Her eyes were always bloodshot from the flour dripping from her huge wig, and she was constantly coughing. The real reason Annette carried her fan was mostly because of those frequent coughs.

Is it really an easier path?

..!

As Annettes expression changed, the dot on her cheek twitched.

It seems too harsh to me.

..!

Liloe hugged Annette, who was a little smaller than her, with all her strength. Annette was so shocked that her body was shaking.

I hope it made you happy.

Liloe headed to Pontenbach to assist Robero in carrying out protocol and raising the morale of the officers. The emperor even bestowed her the title of Grand Lady, but that was mostly to further his own practical interests. It was normally a title given to the eldest princess, implying that Liloe should be considered the most noble woman in Sesbron. Liloas mother, Henrietta, also used that title before her marriage and because Philip II had no daughter, Liloe naturally filled the vacant position.

Despite the officers concern about whether a noble lady like her would be able to adapt to the battlefield, Liloe wasnt at all afraid. Being on the frontlines was nothing compared to her greatest fear of being trapped in Mortus castle forever.

I have no reason to be afraid of the battlefield. If I could die with honour, then I would prefer death.

What do you mean you dont mind dying? I dont think youre seeing things clearly.

Robero said with a sigh.

If you came here to play again, its better to head back.

Dont humiliate me anymore.

Then dont make me suffer like this. How can I how can I put you in danger?

Robero had been excluding Liloe from the roster for several months now. Even when she complained to her immediate colonel, the only answer she received was that her exclusion was due to Roberos will. They never told her the exact time of the meetings, so Liloe had to go find them out on her own. Thanks to that, she often missed emergency calls. Still, she couldnt focus her attention solely on meetings, so whenever she was free, she would roam around the barracks and encourage the officers and soldiers; The exact role Robero wanted her to play.

Liloe held the injured soldiers hand and said some hopeful words of encouragement. The soldier answered in a barely audible voice.

Grand Lady in person Im honoured

Certainly, the encouragement given by the most important woman in Sesbron went a long way in boosting the soldiers morale. The hopefulness in their eyes suddenly sparkled differently, especially when knowing the title of their encourager. It was rewarding in its own way, but of course, it wasnt enough for Liloe.

To make things worse, she had to wear a dress even during the war. And amid the negotiations with the White Federation, per protocol, Liloe only served as a flower on Roberos side, meant to alleviate the negotiations atmosphere.

The negotiations were held in temporary barracks set up in the middle of the cold field.

The ground was damp, probably due to frost last night. The nearby village head, who had been brought in to attend to Liloe, grabbed the hem of her dress, while Robero held her as if he were her escort. Liloe, on the other hand, tried her best not to walk comically with her shoes sinking into the ground.

The Federal officers were already seated across the central table of the barracks. When Liloe and Robero entered, all five of them stood up while chatting, with the man in the middle raising his chin arrogantly as he scanned Liloe with narrowed eyes. But Liloe didnt dodge his gaze and similarly

looked straight into his black eyes. Perhaps because of his brown hair and short-trimmed beard, in addition to his black fur-lined cloak, the man carried a wild and intimidating look. Robero, shaking hands with him, looked ridiculously dwarfed in comparison.

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Count Arthur was the enemys supreme commander in the Pontenbach War.

This was Liloas first time meeting him, as he had been away for several months possibly due to political issues. He had become his troops symbol as he led the long war such that during his absence, the morale of the Federal army had declined noticeably. Thanks to that, the Imperial army gained the upper hand, but that only lasted for a while now the count had returned. In other words, the situation has become more difficult for the empire again.

After everyone was seated, Arthur asked.

And you are?

I am Liloa of Obernyu.

The Archdukes daughter?

Count Arthur, leaning against the backrest, laughed out loud. The officers next to him chuckled as well.

I thought the only women on the battlefield were prostitutes

He looked at her and tilted his head. His all-too-familiar gaze scanned Liloas whole body, while his eyebrows twitched unpleasantly.

Perhaps, by any chance?

How rude!

As several imperial officers stood up from their seats

Hahahaha, it was just a joke, so please take your seats.

Arthur remained calm and waved his hand.

I guess the Empire is pretty desperate, seeing how theyre sending a girl to the battlefield.

The negotiation, in which neither side had any intention of reaching an agreement, naturally broke down. Since then, some of the officers grew uncomfortable with Liloas outer appearance.

Along with that, Liloa began to hear curses that she didnt deserve to hear. In fact, after Liloa showed up at the negotiation table, the imperial army was given the nickname the Witches Army or the Prostitutes Army, with the latter being mentioned more often, perhaps to inflict greater insult.

They have an insanely limited view.

Witches and prostitutes, it seems like there hasnt been any progress in womens history for a thousand years.

Liloe had no idea that she would become the witch she only read about in historical fairy tales.

Whereas the imperial officers felt humiliated and were at a loss, Liloe held her head up high, prompting Robero to similarly step forward to reprimand her. She was ordered to recuse herself because her presence had tainted the reputation of the imperial army. The emperor's noble army was suddenly reduced to an army of a prostitute, and as expected there were no officers who opposed Robero.

I am not a prostitute, so what is the problem?

Is it not a problem in itself that you followed me to the battlefield without laying low? Liloe, I had been lenient with you, but not anymore. If you disgrace the military's reputation any longer, even His Majesty will not be able to keep you here.

Liloe looked around the empty conference table where the meeting had just ended. Of course, she wasn't allowed to participate in the meeting. After the meeting was over, Robero, who couldn't contain his anger, called her in.

I'm going to the canyon too.

I just told you to keep quiet

Do you truly think they will stop talking about prostitutes and witches just because you keep me hidden? I predict they will only have more reason to say it because they became excited that everyone in the imperial army admitted to the humiliation. I will prove that I can help the military save face.

And what if you get hurt

LeBrun never trained us to be afraid of getting injured*. Moreover, I was taught that volunteering despite knowing the risks is tantamount to admirable courage, yet no one seems to think I am commendable.

You only need to do what you are assigned to do. You are already doing a great job.

But I believe the reason I have been given an aspirant uniform and a place in the platoon is because my real task is more than just encouraging the soldiers.

One day, when the imperial army's losses were deepened, a meeting was called involving the aspirants. Robero entered the barrack where cavalry officers were gathered together. Because there was not enough space, the junior officers stood in a circle around the conference table and Liloe quickly walked over to the table to find a place to stand.

Robero, sitting at the head of the table, rubbed his forehead as if he were tired.

The Jussin Canyon raid failed.

The atmosphere in the barrack immediately turned cold. A colonel spoke up in a gloomy manner.

The Federal cavalry is too overwhelming.

The senior officers sitting in their seats said one thing at a time. However, because it was early in the meeting, no meaningful discussions occurred. But then a young lieutenant colonel stood up and spoke.

We have to try again though, or the Midwest will

At that moment, an arrow hit the map spread out on the table, and the young lieutenant colonel, who was just about to give an impassioned speech, was suddenly hit by another arrow in his shoulder and collapsed

After a momentary period of silence, an officer shouted belatedly.

Its a surprise attack!..

Arrows pierced through the barracks tent like rainfall.

As officers drew their guns and swords, the sharp sounds of metal clashing against each other could be heard from all over. Suddenly the roaring of horns mixed with voices filled with a sense of urgency echoed all through the camp.

The commotion outside the tent confirmed the invasion of the federal army.

Take cover!..

..!

A large hand of an officer grabbed the back of Liloas collar and pushed her under the table with a force strong enough as if to throw her. A moment later that same officer fell to the ground with his eyes wide open, his motionless body immediately gave away that he was dead. Several more officers fell before the archers attacks finally stopped. By then, Liloa jumped out from under the table and pulled her pistol from her belt.

She was the only person still standing on her two feet in the barrack as the rest of the uninjured officers appeared to have gone out already. Sensing an acrid smell coming from somewhere, Liloa instinctively covered her nose and mouth and escaped the burning barrack.

The barracks were in chaos. Lancers charged through the camp and swung their heavy spears downward. They might have their faces covered with hoods, but there was no one who didnt know that they belonged to the Federation. Even civilian villagers, who had come into the military camp to cook and help out with the distribution of dinner, were struck one by one. No one was spared. Unable to even put on their shoes properly, soldiers rushed into defence, but they were still exhausted from the night march. To make matters worse, animalistic screams pierced the sky as if a fire had been set where the horses were tied up.

Night raids rarely ended successfully. And even if something was achieved, the losses to the troops would always be severe enough that their position could be compromised. Still, in this situation it was reasonable for the federal army to push through and think they could deal a significant blow, especially knowing that the Imperial army just came back from its long and tiring march.

Liloa quickly looked around.

The officers who had been in the barrack with her were already on horseback and confronting the enemy. Without time to think, Liloa ran toward her barrack before she felt a hot sensation on the top of her head. A lit fire arrow barely missed her.

Liloa quickly fired her gun at the cavalry charging from the side. His horse fell over after being struck in the neck and the soldier tumbled down with it.

When she arrived, Koud Bhan was already running rampant in front of her barrack. Liloa quickly cut the rope of the stake with her dagger and climbed on top of her horse. With hasty coaxing and snatching of the reins, her faithful horse eventually swerved.

As the flames surrounding the camp grew stronger, Liloa rushed through the screams and deaths.

When she pulled the reins and lowered her posture, Koud Bhan jumped over a burning object. In the middle of the continuing confrontation, the northern horn suddenly rang for a long time, prompting the attacking lancers wielding swords and spears to turn their warhorses in unison.

Retreat!

Catch up to them!

Archers! Take aim!

Karabinae! Where is 11th Platoon!

The second infantry!

Although the battle lines weren't organised, the soldiers who could still afford to fight rushed out to chase the enemy, with Liloa at the helm. The distance was still close, so she swung her long sword, aiming for the horses' hips and sides. Three or four had already fallen, but she didn't have the time nor luxury to count them all.

Koud Bhan jumped over the fallen beasts right in front of them.

The wind blowing from the mountain range hit Liloa's face sharply. Noticing the rest of the Karabinae surrounding her, rifles opened fire from both sides, piercing the lancers or their warhorses. Liloa didn't miss the timing and pulled the trigger as well. Her bullet had an accurate trajectory, but she missed because her target instantaneously tilted his body. It was amazing for someone to instinctively avoid an attack from behind so quickly, but it seemed like the bullet had at least grazed her target's ear judging from the blood that splattered around the edge of his hood.

The rider pulled down his hood and looked back. His shapely black eyes glared at Liloa as if they were devouring her.

Liloa recognised him even in the dim moonlit darkness.

The sound of Count Arthur grinding his teeth was surprisingly audible