

Northwest 281

Chapter 281

Side Story 4 Liloas Chapter 2: Mortus Castle

How dare you

With Arthur exposed, several horses quickly blocked his rear. As their speed increased, so did the distance between them and her. Still, the range was close enough.

Liloa soon came to her senses and fired one final shot.

Bang!

Her bullet hit the back of one of the enemies who blocked the Count. The rider bent his upper body, lost control of the reins, and fell off the horse.

At the same time, the sound of the imperial troops horns could be heard from somewhere beyond the lines.

Stop!..

Retreat!..

The cavalry unit pursuing the raiding army gradually slowed down and the federal cavalry quickly disappeared into the forest dimly lit by the moon. The surrounding Karabinae officers then looked sideways, as if they had belatedly noticed Liloa. Nonetheless, she continued to steer Koud Bhan towards the last fallen enemy. This man's war horse had already run off somewhere, so there was only a body lying on the dark forest floor between the sparse trees.

Glancing back, Liloa saw the rest of the officers dismounting from their horses and starting capturing prisoners. Still on Koud Bhan, Liloa looked down at the face of the man lying in a foetal position, grabbing his sides. His dishevelled hood exposed his eye and nose. It was an officer named Yousef who was often seen next to Count Arthur.

I remember him taunting me at the negotiating table. Hell, he probably is a useful prisoner.

Get up.

However, the man remained motionless, even going as far as holding his breath. Liloa, who had no choice but to dismount and crouch down to his level, grabbed his shoulder and rolled him over, revealing the gun held closely to Yousef's chest. The muzzle of the obviously loaded gun was pointing directly at her. Liloa, however, was unsurprised and quickly slashed his wrist with her dagger.

Aaaaagh!

She then picked up Yousef's gun and fired it into the ground till it was empty.

It is suspicious if you are curled up like that when you were actually hit on the back.

..!

Liloa took out a rope and moved behind him.

Not wearing her gloves anymore, her bare hands chafed as she tied the mans wrists. Yousef seemed pissed and made remarks about her being a prostitute, but Liloa only wanted to laugh at him.

When her knot was tightly completed, she took off his hood and lifted him up by his hair. Lifting his heavy upper body was a challenge, but Liloa gave it as much strength as she could.

Go tell the Count

Yousef, whose upper body was raised at an angle, was shaking in humiliation, but Liloa twisted his head even more to show him the corpses strewn across the forest path his comrades had run down.

Look at what a woman can do.

Liloa lowered her body further so that her voice could penetrate Youssefs ears clearly.

You will be defeated by the woman whom you called a prostitute.

Pontenbach was a fertile strategic point located between the Risch Mountains and the Risch River. And due to that sole reason, the White Federation, located in the northern part of the central continent, coveted Pontenbach because the area was located along the waist of that long river.

The Risch River has several tributaries, but its main stream extends from the east of the Risch Mountains, through Sesbron, all the way to the lower regions of the Mondovi Peninsula into the Anatole Sea. Naturally, the river became the main sea route to reach Sesbron if the wind was right. If the land route connecting the Anatole Sea to the heart of the empire was seen as a major trade route, in terms of waterways the same could be said about the Risch River. The number of ships using that river crossing the continent was countless.

The White Federations purpose wasnt to occupy Pontenbach per se. Through negotiations, it became clear they wanted to guarantee the rights to the Risch River near Pontenbach. Since the upper reaches of the river were located in the Risch Mountains, which was already federal territory, the Federation spent several years building a dam in the valley of the Risch Mountains to force the agreement. It was even said that the dam was built using a surprisingly strong material made by mixing lime and sand.

But the empires misfortunes didnt end there. During the recent spring and summer, extremely rare rainfall had occurred in the Midwest, causing the mid-lower reaches of the Risch River to dry out rapidly. As a result, a great famine broke out, and the vast midwestern plains of the empire turned barren.

People starved to death. In addition, the waterways used to transport grain were also dried by the dam, so relief ships couldnt travel.

Since the number of people dying from starvation had increased to an unbearable level, the imperial army was ordered to capture the dam. It was a temporary occupation that would only be proven effective if the dam was sufficiently destroyed.

After the Federations raid, no one else told Liloa to go around the military camp to give words of encouragement again, except for Robero. He was stubborn until the end. He even attempted the tedious process of persuasion, but Liloas platoon joined the regiment and headed to Jussin Canyon

anyway. At that time, her prime responsibility was to snipe from the rear, but she was confident she could handle that as well.

A month later, the dam in the Jussin Canyon collapsed. The river that had accumulated upstream burst out explosively, such that the stream of water flowed to the middle and lower reaches and seeped gracefully into the plains cracked by drought

Rumours about Liloa circulated in Sesbron. But they were completely different from before her battle in Pontenbach.

Liloa felt humanised as though she could change the world if she continued like this.

Moreover, since Liloa was at Pontenbach, Obernyu faithfully supplied war horses at half the normal cost. Because of this, the Emperor had no intention of letting Liloa go. All the circumstances were in her favour.

There, where she had to move roughly to survive, some people speculated that she would eventually be commissioned because of her credits from the Jussin Canyon. However, the opinion that her impact was merely a small part of a larger battle was still stronger. Nonetheless, Liloa felt life vividly in a place where she could shout in triumph as if she wasn't different from the rest.

Liloa eventually came to Sesbron on leave, but she felt rather stuffy in the capital. She was more energised on the battlefield and thought of returning to Pontenbach ahead of schedule.

Before heading off again, Annette, who was seeing off Liloa, touched Liloa's face and asked.

Are you not hurt anywhere?

Yes. I'm healthy.

Annette clasped Liloa's hands near her own mouth.

You are trying to take a very difficult path

But I like it.

The world will be harsh on you.

Liloa spoke out the words she had been pondering for a long time.

To begin with it was never that kind. So, I have no reason to be afraid.

Annette's expression changed in an instant. After briefly peering at Liloa, she stepped back as if to face a traitor and spoke firmly in a tone that almost sounded reproachful.

You talk as if you are fed up.

No matter how much you feel have I not been truly kind to you?

No, you have been really good to me.

But?

But

..?

Liloe lowered her head and swallowed dry saliva. She didnt have the confidence to express her long-winded truth. After all, she knew very well that the woman in front of her would never accept it.

Im sorry. I made a slip of the tongue.

Annettes face, full of disappointment, flashed before her eyes. At the same time, she also heard people talking about themselves, but Liloe didnt doubt that her glory would come at the end of this momentary loneliness. This was because the honour given to victorious soldiers was an extremely common and traditional reward. She would be recognized for doing her part, and no one would dare to deny it.

When I can focus, I can forget those thoughts

As a result, Liloe participated in as many battles as she could. Her position started from the rear and gradually moved forward.

Whenever the enemys cavalry rushed out, the imperial armys frontline split sideways, allowing the Karabinae to race forward.

Unfortunately, there were so many horses in the North that there seemed to be a constant stream of new enemy cavalymen on horseback. And considering the fact that the imperial cavalry had less than half of the enemys soldiers, holding out was an astonishing figure. However, federal cavalymen used spears or swords. So no matter how powerful their cavalry was in terms of number, it would be useless if hit by a bullet outside the range of their weapons.

The colonel in front of Liloe shouted.

Not the breastplate! Aim for the head!

Liloe glanced at the uniforms of the charging cavalry. The federal cavalymen were wearing breastplates now, possibly to counter the Karabinae. So instead of their torsos, Liloe redirected her guns muzzle beneath her opponents red fur-trimmed helmets.

Someone around her shouted.

Fire!

But Liloe had already pulled the trigger before that.

Once more

Bang!

After she finished firing, she grabbed another gun. Steering the reins to the right, Liloe turned and fired, resulting in another bullet lodged under the enemys helmet. The carabinieri split behind both wings and the infantry regiment advanced.

Kill them!

Aaaah!

A battle broke out, consisting of a mixture of cavalry and infantry*.

Side Story 4 Liloas Chapter 2: Mortus Castle

The Karabinae Regiment, which had moved away from the centre, made a detour to cover the flanks of the federal troops.

Liloas whole body became tense, because, like the rest of the carabinieri, she had to secure her accuracy despite moving at maximum speed.

The colonel of her battalion shouted.

Aim!..

The moment she grabbed the gun barrel again, an unexpected swarm of arrows shot out from the side of the federal army.

Damn it! Archers!..

They have archers behind their shields!..

Look up! Look at the sky!..

Liloa looked directly at the arrows gently rising into the clear sky. The objects that peaked at its parabolic path soon rushed at her at an alarming rate.

Liloa slammed the reins down harshly. Koud Bhan started to gallop at a speed that was close to a full sprint. When an arrow approached her left shoulder, Liloa adjusted the reins to the right. With another one to her right side, she steered left. A third arrow, that almost hit the top of her head, forced Liloa to lower her upper body.

As she soon was within range, she quickly wrapped the reins in one hand, lifted her rifle, and loaded it.

Aim!..

But something was strange. Gaps gradually began to form between the enemys infantry formations, which were initially densely covered with shields As the distance between the shields increased rapidly, huge shadows appeared behind them

Liloa instinctively grabbed the reins again. At the same time, war horses with thick horns attached to their bridles rushed out among the federal infantry. The fierce federal cavalry surged toward the waist of the Imperial armys line, which had just been disrupted by the attacks of the archers.

The colonel of her battalion roared.

Its the Counts cavalry!..

Its a trap!..

Hold your positions! Damn it, aim!..

Fire!..

However, despite the attempt to reorganise, chaos had already broken out. The battalions guns fired, but their accuracy was extremely low. Meanwhile, the federal cavalry successfully broke through

the Karabinaes line. Even Liloa, who had been dodging arrows by lying down flat on the agile Koud Bang, fell off her horse when an arrow grazed the beasts side.

The grassless, muddy ground rushed in front of Liloas eyes.

She reflexively placed her hands lightly on the ground and rolled at an angle to reduce the harsh impact. Her hat flew off somewhere. Seeing a federal cavalrys sword aimed straight toward her neck, Liloa quickly lowered herself and crawled on her stomach, instantly covering her uniform in both mud and blood.

Liloa stood up after ripping a rifle out of the hand of a corpse near her. She aimed at the back of an opponent fighting the colonel and fired. With the elimination of his enemy, her colonel turned to her and nodded.

Liloa then looked around, but Koud Bhan seemed to have run away in surprise and was nowhere to be seen. There were also no suitable warhorses nearby either. She had no choice but to pick up a random shield and put it on her left arm.

Then suddenly, a voice behind her cried out.

The prostitute of Obernyu!..

It was a voice Liloa knew very well. She quickly turned and threw her dagger.

Arthur!

Arthur swung his spear and struck down the dagger.

Hahahaha! Not bad!

Liloa groped around her waist, but there was no gun left. The distance between them was also too short to waste more time searching another dead body for a loaded one. As such, the only thing she could do was raise her shield against the charging black warlock. Her tightly clenched fists were slippery from the mixture of mud and sweat.

As Arthur rushed toward her with his back against the setting sun, Liloa squinted her eyes and tried to gauge his movements. She knew that whether it was the horn-adorned bridle, the front hooves of the huge warhorse, or Arthurs spear itself, a single blow by one of those would instantly kill her.

Arthurs magnificent spear drew downward in a semicircle. The blood-caked metal reflected the orange sun from time to time. Liloa opened her eyes to pay attention to her opponents tracks. If she missed even a moment, her body could be split in two.

Soon, the blade of the spear struck her shield. At the moment of impact, Liloa twisted her shield and deflected the spear.

Arthur, who was now charging to the other side after going past her, turned his horse towards Liloa again while still managing to kill three infantrymen with the spear he swung. Liloa threw down her broken shield and frantically searched for a gun among the corpses around her, but the damp bodies were soaked in puddles of blood.

Rushing forward, Arthur shouted.

I dont intend to kill you, so dont worry!

The mouth beneath the helmet grinned, revealing his teeth.

Because I would like to have a taste of you as well!

Not too far away, Liloa found a rifle slung over the shoulder of a sprawled out soldier. Liloa ran towards him and grabbed the barrel of the gun. Reaching the man, Liloa got down on one knee, reloaded the gun and aimed the muzzle at Arthur.

How dare you!

Arthur threw his spear at her.

Zeng!

The long barrel of the gun got hit by the blade of the spear, which was thrown with incredible force. Liloa, unable to withstand the impact, had to let go of the rifles grip plate, causing both the spear and the rifle to fly into the air.

Arthur repositioned himself and was already holding his drawn sword high. Now that Liloa was facing him away from the setting sun, Arthurs entire body appeared to be stained red. His steed raised its front legs as if to trample Liloa, while Arthur, confident of an imminent victory, raised his chin.

However, just like the count, Liloa also had a second weapon. And a sword raised above the mans shoulder couldnt be faster than a pistol. Without hesitation, she took out the gun that she had hidden in her arms as a last resort.

She stretched out her arms towards her opponents forehead. Aiming wasnt difficult as the bright glow of the sunset made a sharp contrast between the metal of Arthurs helmet and his bare face.

Bang!

When the faint smoke blowing before her eyes cleared Arthur seemed to have frozen in the same position in which he was swinging his sword. But the puzzlement only lasted for a moment, and the sword slowly fell from his raised hand.

Although the huge weapon fell, Liloa heard no sound. The horses body, who still had his front legs raised, sank slowly, while the commotion and cries of the battlefield became increasingly distant.

Liloa could barely breathe.

Slowly opening her left eye, which she had closed to take aim, the hole on Arthurs forehead became clear. A trickle of blood flowed from the dark red hole. The face that met its death relaxed and fell apart.

It was then that Robero came in front of her.

Liloa! Are you all right

Liloa shook off Roberos outstretched arm while he still rode horseback. She caught one of the wandering horses by the reins and climbed into the saddle. Soon, words came out like her exhaled breath.

Arthur

Liloa found herself increasingly out of breath.

Where is Roberos gaze directed at?

She turned her head in the same direction and saw a horse roaming around the battlefield, carrying its dead master. The federal supreme commander, who was lying face down, wasn't even given the chance to close his eyes. His helmet covered in red fur rested precariously on the head but eventually fell to the side of the horse.

Liloe cried out with a pounding heartbeat that was too much for her to handle.

Arthur is dead!

The rest of the cavalry, who had come after Robero, surrounded her as well.

Liloe shouted again.

The Count is dead!

Liloe cried out until her throat felt like it would tear apart and threw her arms toward the sky. The soldiers around her began shouting as well. With the sporadic shouts turning into cries uttered in unison, the federal infantry around them were the first to lose their fighting spirit, laid down their swords and fell to their knees.

But further away, battles were still in full swing. After all, victory and defeat couldn't be noticed in an instant. So, Liloe waited.

When the sounds of the clashing blades subsided, the rain of gunfire stopped, the thick smoke dispersed, and the slash-and-burn fire cooled down

After the murderous movements stopped, the survivors took a second look.

The federal flag was raised to declare a cessation of fighting.

Against the backdrop of the peaks of the Risch Mountains, covered in perpetual snow, red flags fluttered miserably

After a ceasefire dedicated to mourning, the federal army suffered a crushing defeat in another major battle. The imperial army advanced with momentum until the White Federation was eventually defeated and signed an agreement to end the war.

The advance party, which included Robero and Liloe, departed Pontenbach for the triumphal march. Liloe was so excited that she was unable to sleep properly. The officers' mood was strange, however, as if they were hesitant about her, but she paid it no mind as she thought it would only be for another day or two.

Oddly, it remained the case till Robero called for her a week after leaving Pontenbach.

Liloe listened with no sense of reality as the Robero in front of her spewed out insane words. No matter how many times she thought it over, his meaning seemed to remain the same. Liloe was so shocked that she reacted dumbfounded.

What

Robero cut her off firmly.

It is all for you.

I beg your pardon?

Who will believe that you killed the Count? If you don't want to be accused of being a witch, listen to me.

Witch? Why are you suddenly bringing up a fairy tale from a thousand years ago?

Then how should I explain this? Is this something that can be explained by common sense? A noble lady, who was chaste, all of a sudden mounted a horse, fired a gun, and defeated the enemy commander?

Chapter 283

Side Story 4 Liloas Chapter 2: Mortus Castle

Unable to stand it anymore, Liloa raised her voice.

What do you mean, all of a sudden? Did no one see me train myself to death in LeBrun or roll around in Pontenbach for years?

Robero, disgusted by the response he received, grew increasingly frustrated. His eyes widened before a hint of suspicion flashed over them.

You are you truly that blind? Why are you so stubborn?!

Then, are you expecting me to simply concede when I am about to be commissioned?

There will be no commission. That decision is mine to make, so I am letting you know in advance. It will be best for you to give up voluntarily now.

Why on earth

You cannot easily quit being a soldier once you are commissioned. Do you not have to get married?

I never expected that marriage would be brought up here.

Liloa jumped from her seat out of amazement.

Do you think I went through so much trouble just to get married right after this?

For a lady like you, this is the right time in your life.

I choose my own time!

You are arrogant. Even I cannot do as I please without His Majesty's mercy, so what makes you think you can?

It was an indisputable statement. Liloa gritted her teeth and took a step back.

At least allow me to complete the task I have accomplished. I will live with the consequences, whether I will be branded as a witch or whatever they can come up with

Are you crazy? This is a huge mistake in your judgement. War has ruined you. The cruel sights you witnessed have made a delicate woman so ruthless that she cannot recognize what is right and what is wrong anymore.

Robero left the room as if he couldn't bear to further face Liloa like that.

Liloe applied for an audience several times after that but was turned away on the grounds that her presence troubled him. Liloe knew very well what had caused those troubles. She also knew why he had become mum about marrying her as soon as the war concluded. Because he found it humiliating, the great commander who intercepted her exploits would never be able to look her in the eyes. Until his death*, he would know better than anyone else that he wouldn't be able to be proud of himself in front of Liloe.

But no matter how much Liloe ground her teeth, the audience with Robero was never granted.

A doctor was sent by Robero though, but he simply prescribed medication that was said to be good for a woman's mental health. Liloe was extremely suspicious of the strange medicine, so she was wary right from the beginning. Sure enough, even after taking just a sip, she felt dizzy and didn't drink a single drop from then on.

Before long the imperial army's triumphal procession arrived at Sesbron.

Just as Liloe undoubtedly predicted, Robero had become the hero of the empire, with his story being widely spread as the commander who pierced the enemy's supreme commander's head with a single bullet, thus ending a seven-year war.

The streets of Sesbron were filled with songs praising him. Banquets celebrating his victory were held on the palace grounds and lasted for a month. Ships anchored on a tributary of the Risch River behind the palace fired congratulatory guns and to top it all off, the lords of the Midwest came rushing in to bow before Robero.

The whole empire rejoiced. It was almost like a festival.

Liloe also had to attend the imperial banquet because she participated in the Pontenbach war.

But as she entered the spacious gallery, she heard voices that weren't even lowered.

Did you hear that? The Grand Lady was talking about how she defeated the enemy commander

Oh my, that is strange. Is she so blinded by her will of achieving something as a woman, that she cannot even be bothered to lie. What is wrong with her?

That is true. Now that I think about it, she has often said strange things in the past. Have I told you about how she used to say that slaves should be treated as human beings?

Yes, I recall. Why, back then, when she saw the rare race circus she suddenly freaked out and started shouting. She did that without an ounce of shame as well!

The emperor, unable to see Liloe wandering around the banquet hall any longer, called for her.

Her skinny lips barely moved as she talked.

Your Majesty.

Are you okay?

I heard from Robero. You had been unwell, right? Rob how could he be so indifferent? He left a weak-hearted woman on the battlefield for too long. I have consistently received reports that you faithfully followed protocol. Thanks to your contributions, the soldiers' morale had risen

significantly. We have received plenty of help from you. Now, get yourself a good husband and find peace. I will find you a partner quickly.

I do not want to get a husband yet. I am going to be commissioned.

Uh huh Just like I heard, you are saying strange things. What should we do about this?

From her seat next to the emperor, Annette constantly wiped away tears, making Liloa belatedly understand her insight. She took Annettes words about the world becoming harsh on her too lightly.

I didnt know that the cruelty would become even worse than during my childhood, so I ignored Annettes warning. No, I ignored Annette, who has lived twice as long as me and survived the world Im experiencing right now So, was Annette like me? Did she live like this, piling despair upon despair?

But even if I could turn back time, would I go for the easy path that Annette talked about?

Liloas mind flooded with the assertion that she never would.

So, what should I do?

Liloa couldnt come up with an answer. She only felt like she would continue living miserably in an incomprehensible loop till just before she died.

The emperor smiled as if he felt sorry for her and held out a red fruit from the Western Continent.

Would you like to try it?

Liloa gradually fell apart.

No matter how hard she tried to correct them, the people never believed her. Actually, the more she tried, the more crazy she was perceived to be. As if she were an uninvited guest in a set play, people wouldnt respond or approach her in conversation unless she recited the set lines.

The world denied her with all its might. It hadnt been easy for her to be pushed around by Venua, but now, even the larger society called Sesbron, or rather, the whole Empire, tried to push her over the edge.

With nowhere or no one to support her, Liloas body fell and was thrown into pieces as she was sprawled out in a daze, a shadow fell over her head its mouth grinned in the dark

I knew this would happen, so I waited

The delighted Mortu cut off her legs.

Ah your despair is amazing! You wont be able to recover for a while!..

In an instant, there was no longer any tongue for her to groan with She tried to close her eyes, but her eyes werent there either Liloa just lived in dazed darkness

Following Roberos recommendation and Mireilles strong will, the emperor himself pushed through with the engagement of Liloa and the Duke of Mireille. Joseph I sent letters of protest, citing Liloas mental problems that sprung from her experience on the gruesome battlefield as a lady, and the

atrocities from LeBrun cadets, but his protest was dismissed. Even Venua, who came rushing to Sesbron, had no choice but to admit that his sister was left scarred. Although he admitted it with his head, he was unable to accept it in his heart and even made a fuss to somehow get Liloa up, who was no longer willing to eat or walk.

Venua wasn't someone who could be easily ignored either, so the Emperor, who was troubled by all of this, quickly sent Liloa to the Duke of Mireilles private residence. It was disguised as a merciful act for Liloa to regain her health in the care of her husband-to-be before the wedding. In addition, Liloa also needed to learn the etiquette and traditions of the Mireille family in her spare time and prepare to become the houses hostess, yet all of that would only be nominal. Meanwhile, because Venua couldn't invade the Dukes mansion, the emperors plan was a success to some extent.

Liloa stood blankly, waiting for the portrait to be completed. It was the first portrait that would bear the name Liloa Mireille. Mireille stood behind the painter and looked at her appreciatively in the cream-coloured dress she would be wearing on their wedding day.

You were truly the perfect wife. You were the best duchess candidate worthy of Mireilles revival. But now that things have turned out this way, you are no longer interesting. Your price has plummeted too much.

That was what he said, but Mireille had already hung her nameplate under the spot where her portrait would go. He seemed to think that with his resourcefulness in reviving his crumbling family name, he could similarly rebuild Liloas reputation.

For one thing, purchasing promising items at a low price is the basis of commerce. Hm, how can I bring you back to being the Grand Lady who grew up beautifully under strict Obernyu education?. First of all, I need to change your habits. Everyone at Sesbron will agree that you need to be corrected.

Yet Mireilles seemingly perfect plan was ambushed, for Obernyu made every effort to postpone the wedding. In the end, Mireilles wedding to Liloa was even postponed indefinitely as a result. And when Obernyu, who had contributed greatly to the supply of war horses, took a strong stance against the marriage, it was too hasty for the emperor to issue an edict. Mireille, on the other hand, refused to give in to Obernyus pressure when asked to hand over Liloa and instead pointed out how Venua, who went to court, committed cruel acts against the sick Liloa while Mireille pretended to protect her.

Over time, Mireille found a way to even move Liloa. For whenever the erring slaves were brought out and flogged, Liloas face would harden as if she was being beaten herself.

This was all part of Mireilles uncanny ability to see how to move and use people.

At Mireilles orders, the gardener and stable keeper tied six slaves to wooden posts in the back garden. Mireille looked up at the third-floor window and saw the blurry figure he had expected to open and close the curtain. He was excited to see how long Liloa would hold out and thought that today might be the last day.

And so the whipping began. Thick ropes wriggled like snakes. The whips flew through the air and cracked the skins that hadn't yet healed. Suppressed moans and sobs resounded in the patronage. The slaves who were watching the corporal punishment also stiffened and began to cry.

Stop.

Before the second round of whipping could begin, a skinny woman walked out the back door of the kitchen. The servants and the slaves gathered in the backyard turned to look at the woman who was approaching Mireille precariously as if she could fall at any moment. Her hair, which she had once cut short, was now long to her waist again.

Liloa blocked the slaves torn backs. Mireille, who was sitting under the red awning, curled the corners of his mouth.

Stop whipping them.

..?

The woman who seemed to be nothing but a shell of herself opened her mouth once more.

If you promise not to whip the slaves from this house, I will become the woman you want.

Liloa stood in the garden, staring at Mireille, the dukes residence rising behind her. Darkness rose like smoke from the shadow of the building and enveloped the garden.

Mireille smiled greedily.

Good.

With a clang, Liloas ankles were shackled so she couldnt run away.

Mireille stood up from under the awning, came towards her, and wrapped his hands around her shoulders. Goosebumps appeared on the skin he touched.

First of all, let us head inside and talk.

Liloa walked towards the blackened building after hearing those words.

Walking to the castle where Mortu was waiting, and from which she would never be able to escape

Chapter 284

The maids were preoccupied with putting clothes and books into a chest, while Lil, all prepared and dressed, went down to the ground floor with Levi. They set foot outside of the building and saw Ed and Linhardt already out at the bottom of the front stairs. A carriage, servants, wagons, and carts surrounded the two men.

Lil briefly looked up at the sky. The weather was clear and the feathery clouds were vivid. The cool autumn wind blew slightly.

Descending the steps, Lil put on her riding gloves and looked at Ed, who was holding the reins of a horse with large, clear eyes. It was the first time Lil had seen it at the residence.

Isnt it pretty?

..?

Ed handed her the reins.

I mean, you of course.

me?

It took some effort to bring him here on time for today.

The animal blinked meekly as Lil stood to its side and stroked its mane. Its short fur was very soft and shone along the curves of its strong muscles. Lil, who had been soothing the animal for a while, belatedly looked back at Ed.

Thank you.

Seeing Lil being preoccupied with the horse and Ed caught up in his gaze towards Lil, Levi smiled and approached Linhardt.

Aren't they so cute?

However, Linhardt seemed to have a different opinion.

Maybe that's not Edgar, but some other guy wearing his skin.

After some more harsh words, Linhardt escorted Levi to the carriage. They were tailed by two of Levi's maids who also entered the carriage after her. The coachman soon walked around to inspect the carriage, while Linhardt saddled his horse and tightened the strap.

Lil climbed onto the saddle and held the reins tightly. Ed rode up beside her as he adjusted his hat.

What do you think?

He has good posture and seems pretty strong, too. I like him. He reminds me of Koud Bhan.

I carefully selected him based on my memory.

No wonder!

Lil laughed out loud. It felt to her as though she had reunited with Koud Bhan. Whereas Ed's focus was still on Lil, Lil was absorbed in getting to know her horse. She was so into it that she was unconsciously pursing her lips while tucking a strand of its hair that had fallen to the side behind its ear. Lil then decided to pace the horse back and forth in front of the main entrance while the last pieces of luggage were being loaded on the wagon.

I'm going to name him Lumiere because he has a lot of brilliance, whether it's in his eyes or his mane.

But you look more brilliant to me

Ed mumbled something quietly, but Lil didn't hear him because she was alternating between pacing and trotting. She soon got used to Lumiere and suddenly drove her horse beaming in joy as if she was unable to control her emotions. When Ed followed suit, Lil sped up their pace.

With the sound of the hooves of two horses galloping through the garden growing more distant, Levi opened the carriage window. Resting her arms on the frame, she smiled happily. Meanwhile, Lil and Ed raced along the garden and passed through the iron bars of the main gate. As the tails of the two horses swayed cheerfully, dust rose beneath them.

Levi said to Linhardt as they followed after them.

It's all so new to us, isn't it?

Linhardt's face exhibited that of pure shock with his mouth falling wide open.

I can't believe I'm looking at Edgar engaging in such an unexpected chase of love.

Why, it's a bit childish, but also pleasant to see.

No, it's absolutely disgusting.

Love is inherently childish, Linhardt.

Linhardt looked at Levi with suspicion.

It isn't

Levi squinted her eyes while she smiled.

It is. You're like that, too.

Levi rested her chin on the window frame and stretched out her arm to him. Linhardt then let go of the reins and held Levi's hand. Levi shook his hand as she held it. The shadows of the garden trees passed over the backs of their hands at regular intervals.

I told you to just head back. How far are you going to follow me?

I won't be able to see you for another few months, so I have to follow you as far as I can.

As they neared the residence's main gate, Levi let go of his hand, and Linhardt reined his horse downhill.

There was a small forest down the hill where the Retiros private residence was based, and passing through it was the beginning of a residential and commercial district. The city, lined with five and six-storey stone buildings, was located along the lower reaches of the Po River, which sparkled with waves.

The procession passed a small stone bridge. As the horses, carriages, and wagons passed one after another, children playing ball on the side of the road raised their heads and looked at Lil, who cast a shadow on the children's cheeks, their ball made of cloth, and their guns carved from wood.

The fountain in the central square spouted water that dazzlingly reflected the sunlight. Merchants starting their business walked up and down the streets, and carriages and horses moved in their own order. Patrolling guards stood upright, and the people had bright expressions.

The procession decided to stop to pick up fresh ingredients from the market and soon the servants pulled a cart into the market alley. Linhardt disappeared off to somewhere, saying he had to stop by the government office, and Levi, upon stepping out of the carriage, happened to come across an old patient.

As Ed got off his horse, he opened his arms wide towards Lil.

Liloa!

Lil looked down at Ed and laughed.

What? You want me to jump into your arms?

Exactly.

What kind of nonsense is he playing at in a square during broad daylight?

Lil completely ignored Ed and landed on her own two feet. She looked back at him to implicitly tell him to behave, but he sneakily put his arm around her from behind.

What are you doing?

I just want to hug you.

Lil struggled, but Ed didnt release her. As a result, her entire body was slowly buried in his coat. Knowing she couldnt beat the citys lord in a square populated by his subjects, Lil gave up and approached a boy selling newspapers with Ed still clinging to her back. As she walked, Ed waddled in time with her steps.

Lil made a groaning noise before speaking irritably.

Im going to die from discomfort this way.

Why do you say that? It feels good.

Im telling you because Im afraid you may have forgotten, but all these people who pass by and look at us strangely are all your people.

Who would recognise me as their lord when Im acting like this?

Hm thats true

Being at a loss for words, Lil simply handed the boy a coin.

The boy looked surprised at Lil and Ed, who was resting his chin on the top of Lils head, before handing them a copy of the newspaper.

It surprises me that Sesbrons newspapers can even be found in this far western land.

I cant believe this newspaper is available here.

Thats because trade information needs to circulate quickly.

Its amazing that theres so much literacy that there is a need for papers.

Emerging aristocrats live together in Roahn. Prominent figures from the southwest who have bought some land come and live here once their income stabilises.

So, your tax revenue isnt small then?

It depends on what kind of tax it is.

Oh, I see.

Lil shrugged her shoulders. She wasnt particularly interested in the details of other peoples financial circumstances, so she lowered her eyes to the newspaper. She read the headline article at the top of the first page.

I received a report about this a while ago. Not much is known about them at this point.

Lil and Ed had planned to travel inland via the Great Trade Route for now, so Lil asked back with mild concern in her voice.

So, you knew?

Thats the reason why well have more escorts this time around.

..?

Just then, Ed pointed to their procession. Lil glanced sideways at the young men in casual clothing crowding around Levis carriage. Judging by their posture and atmosphere, they were definitely soldiers. They were busy checking the wagons and carts, and seemed to be dividing responsibilities and arrangements among them.

Ed, noticing Lils gaze, let go of her and explained.

Theyll be our guards. While its rare for me to be escorted, theres also Levi. Theres no harm in being careful.

With the addition of the escorts, the procession became larger than expected. One of the escorts, a man with short-cut black hair, approached Levi and said hello. Levi greeted him warmly as if she knew him, before he proceeded to approach Lil and Ed.

Shail Lehmann, my lady.

Lil just nodded and turned her eyes back to the newspaper. Sensing the other persons gaze still fixed on her, Lil rolled her eyes to look up at Shail again. When their eyes met, he cried out in embarrassment.

Oh oh my, uhm, hmm you are so beautiful, I have to ask you to please excuse my rudeness!

He then quickly looked ahead again. For some reason, it seemed like his earlobes were turning red. Shail then cleared his throat audibly and spoke to Ed.

Sir Edgar, Sir Linhardt is looking for you.

Chapter 285

Ed, however, didnt answer. As he remained silent, Shail swallowed his saliva as he looked at his master.

Ill be over there.

Shail nodded and walked away. When he disappeared beyond the carriage, Ed turned his head so fast that a slight gust of wind blew out. Lil, on the other hand, pretended to concentrate on the newspaper.

What do you think?

About what?

The way that kid blushed when he saw you.

..?

I normally pass that off as pure innocence.

But Lil didnt bother to say that.

But we have to keep moving together with the guards

Ed, who was now standing in front of Lil, stroked his chin and made a humming sound.

So what should I do about this problem?

What do you mean, what should you do? You should go to city hall. He just said Linhardt is looking for you.

Ed narrowed his eyes and glanced at Lil. Nonetheless, Lil remained oblivious.

Why dont you try using this in case any other guys talk to you while Im away?

As soon as Ed pulled out his gun and held it out, Lil was dumbfounded and sighed.

Are you being serious?

This is my subtle way of telling you that I can be the only man you love.

Lil wrinkled her nose at Eds casual mention of love. She couldnt get used to such unfamiliar words yet.

Thats enough. I understand.

What if they make you feel uncomfortable?

What do you mean? Ill take care of it

It must be bothersome.

Just go to city hall.

Lil pushed Eds shoulder.

Ed pretended to hold out, but Lil didnt find it amusing anymore, so she had no choice but to slap the citys lord on the shoulder in the square where his subjects passed by. Ed, who had been beaten, looked sullen as he dragged his feet towards the city hall.

Lil momentarily felt sorry for the people walking peacefully down the streets.

Those people have no idea to what kind of lord they have to pay taxes to

As Lil was thinking such random thoughts, her gaze met with Shails, who was on the other side of the carriage. The young man quickly looked away, not knowing what to do. Contrary to the inexperienced guard, Lil expertly ignored him and walked toward the market.

Even though it was a small alley, the surroundings were quite noisy, perhaps because there was a market. Lil had packed everything she needed and didnt really have anything to buy, but she snooped around from stall to stall anyway.

Of course, that doesnt mean that there cant be something interesting popping up and catching my eye.

Without realising it, Lil made her way down the street thinking about what Ed might need. After passing through the market alley with stalls and sacks lined up under the awning of tents, she reached a shopping street with more prosperous-looking shops.

A clothesman passed by her, with several hats and canes hanging from his arms.

Lil looked at the clothesmans hats with a mixed impression. This was because she became nervous when she remembered Eds collection of hats, which were reminiscent of a hat museum. Of course, she knew he would be happy with anything she would give him, but she still wanted to match his

assortment. She also knew though that there was no way she would find something worthwhile if she searched for it in such a hurry. In addition, even Lil had never used ready-made products while she was at court.

How can I choose something like that for Ed, knowing hes extremely picky?

Then suddenly,

What the hell am I even doing

She realised that she had been unconsciously picking out a gift for Ed. Lil couldnt understand her actions. But just when she was about to turn around in confusion, a heavy metal object touched her lower back. Her senses were heightened in an instant. Lil lowered her eyes to see a shadow and realised it came from a large, hooded figure who was standing close.

A voice behind her whispered sternly.

Go into the alley on the right

Lil stopped from moving her hand to the sheath of her sword at her side, recognising the voice.

Maxwell?

Now.

Lil obediently entered the alley between the clothes shop and the shoe store while a stray cat heard the footsteps and ran away.

Facing the wall, Lil raised her hands, feeling the rough stone bricks making contact with her skin. Maxwell took a step closer, still pointing his gun at her.

What is this?

Stop being foolish. What are you doing with the Marquess as someone from the house of Obernyu? You two cant be together anyway.

What the

It isnt too late yet. Ask the Prince Regent for forgiveness and come back. He is very angry, but hell accept you generously as youre his only sister.

After strangling and kidnapping me, whats up with his persuasive stance now?

Lil was more suspicious of Maxwells attitude than of what he was saying. She turned her head over her shoulder and looked under his hood. Maxwell wore an anxious and gloomy expression. It was as if he was suffering from something. There were even wounds around one eye and near the cheekbone. It seemed like he alone was enduring Venuas temper. It wasnt hard for Lil to imagine how violent Venua mustve become after being imprisoned in a villa when he had travelled all the way from Obernyu to Roahn.

Lil slowly lowered both hands and turned to face Maxwell.

Whats Maxwell afraid of? Death? No, thats too abstract. Failure? But he already has too many. Even not successfully keeping me in the villa can be considered a failure. But was that enough to scare him this much? I better figure it out

Why are you trying to persuade me out of nowhere? Instead of knocking me out and taking me away like last time.

I wont fight back, so why dont you give it another try?

A lot of eyes are watching.

Lil pulled her eyebrows together.

Of course, a lot of eyes are watching, but if you look at it that way, he shouldnt even have approached me in the first place. Just two blocks behind this square is where the guards are gathered.

Lil was suddenly on to something.

If its neither death nor failure then, is it success?

A chill ran down her spine.

What did my brother do?

No, what did he order you to do?

Lil raised her hand and pushed the barrel of the gun to her side until the muzzle, which was obediently pushed away, slowly sank downward.

Is it something you cant handle?

If someones life is on the line, you should tell me!

Maxwells lips twisted. The jaw that was clenching its teeth wriggled as if it would open at any moment. But exactly then, the sound of several peoples footsteps drew nearer. Maxwell, sensing their presence, ran by Lil and jumped deeper into the alley. When he passed her, however, he bumped partly into her, causing her shoulder to be slammed onto the wall of the building.

Shit!

Maxwells shadow turned and disappeared behind the building. At the same time, Shail entered the alley. When he saw Lil slumped on the ground, he ran toward her in panic.

Are you okay?

Behind Shail, young men in similar clothing quickly rushed into the alley. Lil spoke to them as they tried to pass her.

Its okay. Hes someone I know.

With a flushed face, Shail asked back.

Really?

The guards, who attempted to run after Maxwell, suddenly hesitated with equally confused faces.

Its true. I just fell on my own.

How can anyone whom you know

Shail slurred the rest of his words. After all, it was fairly understandable. The sight of Lil sitting like that in an alley didnt seem like she simply talked with someone she knew.

Lil grabbed her left shoulder and tried to get up

Allow me, my lady.

Huh?!

Out of nowhere, Shails arms stuck out from behind Lils back and below her knees, causing her to freak out and push away the young man who tried to carry her.

No, wait!

As expected, his sturdy body wasn't pushed away but merely paused.

Yes?

I can walk alone.

But

Stand back.

Still, Shail didn't seem to understand, so Lil spoke low and slowly as if giving off a warning.

Step back. If I say it one more time, that would be three times already.

S-sorry.

Shail hesitated before backing away.

Lil lifted herself up halfway by using her right hand as support. Just then, Ed appeared in front of the alley. His face was obscured by the hat and backlight, making his expression difficult to see. When Lil roughly held out her hand towards him, he came to her without delay and caught her.

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Chapter 286

Who was it?

Maxwell.

Where did you get hurt?

On my left shoulder, but it doesn't hurt that much

Walking out of the alley with Ed, Lil flipped her head from side to side for no reason. When they rounded the corner, Ed gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Lil found it more comfortable to walk with her weight leaning on him since she was in pain.

Not only did Maxwell show up all of a sudden, he also acted a little strange.

What do you mean?

Should I say it felt like he was being chased by something? He kept telling me to come back and that my brother would forgive me. He looked very anxious too. It seems like my brother planted something in Maxwell's mind, but what could it be?

He went through all this effort to sneak out of the villa and find you just to say that?

Lil shrugged her shoulders.

My brother shows no hesitation when dealing with his subordinates. Hes probably giving everyone a hard time right now.

Ed said cynically.

If its Maxwell, wasnt he the one who strangled you? Whats he up to now?

Im sure its something related to my or your safety.

So that Maxwell guy knows what will happen to you if you come back, but recklessly harasses you to warn you about our safety?

I almost managed to squeeze it out of him, but that guard named Shail

..?

Lil unconsciously glanced at Ed, not exactly knowing why she sought his gaze.

suddenly popped out.

I see. Then I wonder if that guard named Shail displeased you in any way.

Not really. It isnt his fault to be immature.

Really? If so, Im glad

Not completely understanding what he was on about, Lil noticed Ed held her hand as they walked side by side. When Eds fingers, interlaced with Lils, tightened, Lil looked down at their locked hands and rubbed her thumb against Eds hand several times more.

Lil lifted her head again and looked at Eds face, but only his chin was visible from her point of view.

But for some reason, I dont really feel reassured.

..?

Ed muttered while looking sideways.

When someone keeps staring at you, tells you youre beautiful, fumbles whenever hes around you, and even tries to hold you although you insist youre okay

He took the hand he was holding and brought it to his lips.

I cant help but feel unhappy about it.

Ed rested his cheek on the back of Lils hand after briefly nuzzling his lips against it.

I mightve said that Im glad, but if Im being honest, Im also unhappy. At the same time, Im afraid you wont like this attitude of mine, so Ill just be unhappy alone.

Thats very considerate of you.

Lil unlaced her fingers from his and moved them from his cheek to the back of his head and stroked him as if to tickle him. From her experience, she knew Ed liked it whenever she did this. True enough, he almost immediately let out an inaudible groan and wrinkled his brows.

Upon reaching the square, the passers-by glanced at them as they came out with a bunch of escorts. Levi, who was pacing in front of the carriage, approached in surprise. Her wide eyes alternated between Lil and Ed.

What happened?

It was nothing. Just a hit on the shoulder.

Oh, then I guess you'll have to go by carriage. What if you make a mistake while holding the reins?

Of course, Lil could easily ride her horse with only one hand holding the reins, but Levi was her doctor. And since ancient times, the words of a doctor had to be respected as if they were the will of heaven.

Lil frowned in disappointment.

To see the Great Trade Route from inside a carriage

Well, if you don't like it, you can ask Edgar for a ride.

..?

..!

Lil's eyebrows were brought together even more when she heard something she thought she'd never hear. Ed, on the other hand, had trouble controlling the smile that crept on his face and cleared his throat.

Finding their reactions amusing, Levi covered her mouth as she laughed.

That's the only way, right?

The Great Trade Route consisted not only of the main road connecting Sesbron and the Roahn Territory on the Mondovi Peninsula, but also the Saint-Vive Canal, and several longitudinal roads linking the South to the North. In particular, the section of the main road that bypasses the Risch Mountains from the Mondovi Peninsula was paved along the coastal cliffs, and this coastal area was widely known to bear some of the most spectacular views in the empire this time of year.

Even Lil, who rarely openly expresses admiration, let out an exclamation.

Wow

Lil and Ed got off their horse and approached the cliff.

Admiring the white swells that crowded into the fjord, the rest of the procession also stopped and looked around like a bunch of tourists.

Waves flooded in and covered the earlier ones. The rocks that have been eroded over the years appeared smooth as if they had been carefully cut with a knife, and the waves' delicate layers flowed gracefully along those rocks' curved surfaces. Seawater calmly seeped into the bays with rocks and the narrow passageways of the fjord, before its white waves swelled up the rock wall and poured down again.

Look over there.

Ed, who was standing next to Lil, pointed his finger to a rock with an arch-like opening in the middle. It stood out even among the numerous strangely shaped rocks outside the fjord. The sea passed through the open middle of the strangely shaped stone as if casually entering and exiting an arched door.

Whats that?

Its called Johns Gate or some call it Johns Arch.

Who was John?

He was a famous tax collector, and according to the legends, he was extremely vicious.

So, why was it named after him?

Smuggling ships used to often come and go in this area particularly. However, whenever they got close to that arch, they were suddenly swept away by the current and shipwrecked. It was said that it was his way to punish ships that didnt pay customs even after his death. Thats the story behind it.

Ah, then is this the forest where smugglers are said to hide?

That part of the forest is a little further east.

Lil subconsciously looked east, but she couldnt determine where such area of the forest would start yet. Lil soon followed Ed and settled down on a flat rock facing the sea. They both watched the waves beautifully shimmered by the midday sunlight.

I presume one would want to rest in the afterlife, but why is he being put to work even after his death? Were his tariffs that harsh?

Who knows, it was more than a hundred years ago.

Lil was handed a cup of boiled tea and snacks by a servant who suddenly appeared.

Looks like a bonfire has already been lit.

When she glanced back, the group had already gathered in smaller groups and were having a quick meal. Their group found their spots at the edge of the main road, so from time to time, other people and wagons could be seen steadily moving on the road.

Lil took a bite of the warmed bread. It was soft and the fruit was fresh. After all, there were plenty of market stalls and inns run by merchant associations near the Great Trade Route, so there was no need to worry about sleeping on the streets or breaking open hardened bread or beef jerky.

Lil brushed her hair which had become dishevelled by the wind.

She then tried hard to focus on her food, but Eds persistent gaze kept distracting her. In the end, Lil had no choice but to say something.

Do you keep looking at me like that to keep me from eating?

Of course not, just eat comfortably.

Yet at the same time, Ed propped his chin up as if he wasnt feeling any remorse. Lil grumpily shoved a large piece of bread into his mouth.

You eat it yourself.

Your gaze makes it feel like my heads getting pierced, so please stop.

Lil nonetheless knew that her warning was of no use. Still, she pondered on this strange feeling that overcame her. Whenever Ed looked at her intently like that, it felt foreign. Even though he didnt touch her or anything, something was itching Lil and worrying her for no reason. It wouldve been easier for her to simply reject him, but she couldnt do that either.

Ed chewed on the piece of bread that was half sticking out of his mouth and swallowed it before he opened his mouth again.

I cant take my eyes off you especially when you blend into the wind like this.

Ed grabbed her hair, which was fluttering in the wind, and brushed it behind her ear.

It suits you very well. The sky the wind and you right now.

Lil felt Eds palm cupping her cheek. Soon, her lips were lightly caressed by his thumb before falling off. Sunlight passed over Eds face as he opened his slightly closed eyes, creating a soft glow that spread across his forehead and cheeks while his green eyes sparkled beautifully towards Lil. Like a man feeling sorry for something, Ed then rested his forehead against hers and playfully rubbed the tip of her nose.

Every time the hard bridge of Eds nose brushed against Lils, her heart tightened

Chapter 287

I wouldve drawn you if it werent for mealtime. Its a shame.

When Ed pressed his lips on Lils, she felt her chest throb before he fell away.

How am I feeling this way when we are only an inch away? Love is complicated I dont feel happy or excited all the time. Rather, its more like an unknown, tingling sensation thats close to pain Its not even funny. If my heart is squeezed this often, I seriously think I might die young?

Lil looked at Eds side profile. Seeing the wind ruffle his hair, Lil found that the wind suited him as well.

You look really good too.

Of course I do.

Ed even said that in such a nonchalant manner that it sounded sincere.

Yeah, right! I forgot that this guys a narcissist

The chest pain Lil felt only seconds ago was instantly subdued.

She gulped down the cold tea, the awkward coldness seemed exactly like her heart.

While drinking, Lil pondered about her awkwardness.

I want to express my affection towards Ed too, but I cant think of anything else to do other than lead on to go to bed together every night None of the affectionate words that Ed usually tells me are returned All I do with Ed instead is kiss him and take off his clothes when I cant overcome those intense emotions But if I look at Levi and Linhardt

Levi was in Linhardt's arms. With the latter wrapping his arms around her waist, Levi's lips were close to the man's chin while she was constantly saying something. She then giggled and stamped her feet in joy. Lil could tell that on her part, she could never find herself rubbing her cheek and stamping her feet in Ed's arms.

To put it bluntly, maintaining her relationship with Ed was more difficult than any relationship she had ever experienced. The reason probably lied in the fact that her emotions had always been repressed and never expressed.

Ed asked Lil, who was blankly tightening the hold on an innocent piece of bread.

What are you thinking about so much?

I'm wondering if I can ever learn how to be flirtatious.

Ed spit out the tea he was drinking and coughed. He was so surprised by Lil's answer that his face turned red from embarrassment. After coming back to his senses he quickly wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Why ask why are you thinking about that?

Well, I was thinking about how normal people express their feelings.

Aha. Courtship. So, you've been thinking about courtship.

Most people use sweet words or do silly things. I'm not good at either of that and at this rate, I might die first before I even get to learn how to do that.

Ed suddenly sat with his head bowed down. He appeared to be clutching his stomach, but because he was wearing a coat, Lil couldn't be so sure. It was only when his shoulders began trembling that she realised that Ed was indeed laughing wildly. She didn't even need to see his quirky grin with her own eyes. She could simply picture it.

How could you laugh at what I just said?!

Despite her outburst, he went on with his laughter without listening.

Lil quietly put down the bread and teacup before dusting off her hands. After putting Ed's meal aside as well, she pushed the man, still preoccupied with laughter, with both hands as hard as she could.

Why are you laughing?!

He wasn't pushed away altogether but only staggered. Lil, however, was determined and pushed him again.

Oh, really you're so

When Ed turned his head to face her, Lil noticed that the area around his eyes was moist, probably because he had actually shed tears. Seeing him that way made her feel as if he had become infinitely younger. Of course, they had a four or five-year age difference, but she usually didn't feel such a gap in their ages at all.

This is so cute, what should I do with you? Liloa

...!

Ed attempted to embrace Lil as he said that, but Lil saw through it and pushed him away.

Hey?

Ed lost his balance and fell beside the rock they had been sitting on, landing on the grass. Despite his situation, he couldn't help himself and the laughter continued. If being kicked off the rock hadn't caused any damage to his pride, he calmly sat down on the ground, placed his elbow on the rock, and rested his chin on his hand.

I'm really curious about the kind of feelings you want to express.

Tell me, hmm?

I'd be a fool if I tell you now.

I might be able to help you? If it's about being flirtatious, I'm quite confident.

As if to prove his words, Ed smiled. He then slowly winked and indeed, the sight of him doing so made Lil swoon immediately. No matter how tightly the bars on her chest were fastened, Ed melted them even without touching.

It's exactly like that

Getting giddy, Lil shook her head.

Well, no matter how much I think about it, I can't.

You can start with words.

But I've never said such unfamiliar words

Ed gently grabbed Lil's waist. With both of his hands almost completely wrapping her torso, Lil's body naturally followed him down. The scent of wildflowers and grass became closer. As soon as she felt the moisture on the ground, she landed on Ed's thighs.

She absentmindedly brushed her palm over a handful of the rough grass, however, when she noticed she got close enough to touch his face, her face was slightly flushed.

Come on, just try it.

What?

It doesn't need to be expressed in a flowery language. What matters is that you are honest.

What on earth do you want to express and do? You're making me so curious that I can't even finish my meal.

But this rock isn't even high enough to hide the top of our heads

Lil, who was sitting on Ed's legs in the open space, twisted her body in embarrassment while he held her in his arms.

As long as you stay still, the rock will cover us just well.

See, there are some shrubs, too. That should be enough.

Lil looked around at the surrounding bushes before lowering her gaze. Meanwhile, Ed's fingers patiently and gently brushed her lips.

I can't stand it

Ed pulled her by the waist. The hand that wrapped her shoulder went to the nape of her neck and into her hair. Lil naturally overlapped her lips with his and slid her tongue inside.

The bright afternoon sea breeze stirred their hair and swirled the hem of their coats.

It felt like the sea was rushing in. It gave her the feeling of sinking under the current, drowning, and being submerged from the feet down. When Eds heated body hugged her even tighter, a moan escaped her as she felt suffocated, not knowing whether it was pain or pleasure. Nevertheless, she couldnt get away from him.

Both were out of breath right after breaking their kiss. Lil then rested her forehead on Eds rising and falling shoulder and turned her head away from him. Her view was filled with the swirling sea below the cliff and the sky touching the horizon.

Lil spoke, her voice entangled with the sound of the waves.

I like you. Its strange

Lil felt compelled to speak up as she looked at the world. On one hand, the world appeared stunningly beautiful and distant. On the other hand, her words seemed small and insignificant.

In the end, I really cant give up* and I keep falling deeper. I wonder if this is what love is.

Eds body stiffened. Lil thought his reaction was related to hearing the word love, but his response was about something entirely different.

When did you decide to give up?

Im just saying

I thought you decided not to do that.

Lil expected to hear some dissatisfaction, but the tone of Eds voice came out colder than anticipated.

Ed hugged Lil even harder so that she couldnt turn to face him. After all, he wasnt sure if he could afford to show her his face full of messy desires and obsessions. Embracing her tightly, he buried his face in the crook of her neck. Ed then rubbed his cheek against Lils warm, throbbing neck, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It felt so peaceful. He eventually bared his teeth and nibbled just above her collarbone. As Ed sucked in, her wet, swollen skin stuck to his tongue.

For a while, Ed indulged himself in licking Lil.

Well, thats right Ugh

Lil, who let a moan escape, bit her lip hard. She twisted her shoulder, but Ed wasnt pushed away. He kept on kissing her gently, moving up and down along her neckline.

Then tell me again.

What how

Lil, who was particularly sensitive near the nape of her neck, flinched due to Eds actions. But the more she shrugged her shoulders, the more he crushed his lips against her nape and bit the area below her earlobe to get the words out of her.

Liloa, again.

Its just that I love you.

Chapter 288

The trip went smoothly. From the time they set out early in the morning till they settled at night, no one encountered any inconvenience or accident. Even the clear weather seemed to be in their favour.

The procession had now reached the Mondovi Peninsulas isthmus, with the forest at the foot of the Risch Mountains on the left and a sheer cliff and the sea on the right. From a certain point, villages were only encountered once every half a day along the Great Trade Route. Therefore, if travellers skipped a village past the afternoon, they would find themselves having to camp out on the road instead.

Long before the sun started setting, the progression began passing sparsely located houses, until finally a village and market came into view. Even though there was time till sunset, the party decided to enter the town.

Among the dense greyish-white one-story buildings, several stone buildings stood out.

The sun was still bright.

Its a little early

Lil got off the saddle and looked back at Ed, who was handing the reins of his own horse to a servant coming from the inn. She then took a big look around the village and sighed.

Im getting tired of acting like a leisurely tourist.

Already?

I have never travelled this peacefully in my life.

Even if she knew that such serenity might not last long, Lil was getting wary about her sagging body. In fact, her biggest fear was her posture becoming poor and her senses turning dull. She felt like she would relax without end if she continued like this.

Lil thought she should move her body and use a weapon for a change.

Maybe I should ask one of the guards to stab me or something

What?!

The trip is so leisurely that Im getting too comfortable.

Since when did you start to notice that? How do you know youre getting too relaxed? And why bother with a guard when Im right here?

I need a new training partner.

..?!

Standing sullenly without answering, Lil passed by him.

I want to go for a walk.

Alone?

Ed sneakily hugged Lil from behind. When Lil reflexively put his arms away and slapped his shoulder, Ed quickly reached out to her again but this time held her hand instead.

Lil looked back in astonishment.

Their party, who was initially busy unloading the luggage in front of the inn, glanced at Ed with looks of confusion. Linhardt, in particular, looked like he would vomit at any moment, but when his eyes met Lils, he cleared his throat and looked away.

Lil suppressed a groan and continued her steps.

Everyone thinks youre weird.

Thats their outdated mindset. And Ive grown tired of thinking about it now.

They probably assume youre so crazy about a woman that you dont care about saving face.

Thats true. If you want, I can even kiss the top of your foot right now.

Shall I do it?

Ed asked eagerly, but Lil watched him with a disgusted expression and slowly shook her head. Ed grinned happily upon seeing Lils contorted face and playfully waved their clasped hands back and forth.

Its surprising to me, who has suffered from stares all my life, that Ed can ignore the gaze of those around him so casually. He seems to have zero concern at all about being seen by others

What are you thinking about, leaving me out?

..?

Lils mind was preoccupied with such thoughts before she was brought back to reality by Ed, who took the back of her hand and rubbed his lips against it.

When youre with me, you should only think about me.

What kind of bullshit is that?

Now, youre just making me sad

Hes acting like a big puppy again, refusing to even leave me out of his sight

She wasnt exaggerating; he never left her side during the trip.

Now that shed confessed her love for him, she couldnt make excuses any more, so Lil had to hold hands with him, hug him back, or become the subject of his sketches.

In the beginning, I assumed it was just a hobby he enjoyed when he was on the Bell Rock, but Ed is drawing frequently these days Especially me.

Ed began rubbing his cheek against the back of her hand. Lil raised her head at his action, but after checking what he was doing to her hand, Lils gaze left Ed again and inspected the village instead.

The buildings huddled together at the foot of the mountain were simple. Leaves, faded yellow due to fall, shook desolately. Children were playing small pranks with each other around the well and

people were lined up on the other side to draw water. The stone floor of the square, felt through the sole of her shoes, was much rougher and bumpier than the one in Roahn.

Ed, noticing Lils wandering gaze, spoke up.

This small town is called Kano. As winter is approaching, hunting season is in full swing. If youre itching, how about we go hunting?

That sounds good. Where can we do it?

Well, Smugglers Forest is down there, but I wouldnt recommend that area.

Oh, is that the forest we saw when we went out on the boat?

Thats right.

Lil recalled the mysterious forest.

If I remember correctly, its an old hunting ground that turned into the home base for smugglers throughout the years didnt I see lights flashing from it that night?

Let me first look for the village chief

Ed muttered while looking around. At the same time, a respected person from the village recognized Ed and came up to greet him. When Ed brought up the topic of hunting, the man appeared delighted and asked them if they wanted to help with the hunt. He explained that the harvest hadnt been good this year and that they were in desperate need of food for the village in order to survive the winter. Because during winter time, fewer merchants were moving along the Great Trade Route, so if things continued like this, they might even starve to death.

Having heard all that, Lil nodded with Ed, despite thinking it was probably an exaggeration to say that a village located in the middle of the Great Trade Route would starve to death.

The moment the couple mentioned they would go hunting, Linhardt and the guards eagerly joined, causing an uproar in the village as all the hunting dogs were brought out.

While preparations were in full swing, Lil checked on both her crossbow and bow. She also took a rifle with her just in case, but since the place they were heading to wasnt an official hunting ground, she had no intention of using it. Curious eyes followed her movements when she climbed onto her saddle. It made her reminiscent of those long-forgotten gazes she used to receive a long time ago. Fortunately for her, no one here actually opened their mouths to whisper about it.

As the group was finishing up, someone shouted from not far away.

There arent enough people here!..

We just need one more person!..

Lil nudged Eds side with her elbow.

I think you should go over there.

Why?

Youre good at hunting.

Judging by his stories so far, I know that Eds someone very familiar with hunting for survival. After all, hunting skills are essential to survive alone in the middle of the jungle.

That was why Lil reasoned there was no need for both her and Ed to be on the same team.

Otherwise, the power in our group will be too concentrated. We initiated this to help the villagers, so it would be best to move efficiently.

Ed looked at Lil, wondering how she could so casually send him away like that.

Bye now.

Without a shred of sympathy, Lil pushed his shoulder, leaving Ed with no other choice but to trudge his horse to the side. Slumping his shoulders it was obvious that his energy had gone somewhere. Lil soon took her eyes off him and looked around her. When she spotted herders trying to keep the dogs apart, Lil asked the man standing by one of the well-trained dogs.

Are we going deer hunting? Or, roe deer?

Shail, who was next to her, answered in confusion.

Yes, right? I heard well mainly catch roe deer and deer. Of course, we may also spot and catch some rabbits.

What about wild boars?

It was the herder who answered this time.

I scouted the area this morning, but it was all in vain

Lil nodded her head.

Since she didnt know the terrain very well, she planned to wait in the canyon and shoot her crossbow when the herder drove the deer down with the dogs.

After a while, their hunting group moved. The herders went ahead with their hounds, and Lil followed behind with her horse. At the rear were attendants who pulled the carts and donkeys.

During their ride, Lil found out that Shail had been assigned as her escort.

Back then, you shadowed as my guard whenever I left the mansion, right?

Yes.

It mustve been a lot of trouble for you. I appreciate it.

Thank you.

When you followed me, did you perhaps notice any suspicious activity?

Shail seemed taken aback by Lils choice of words, so he answered a beat late.

No one seemed suspicious when I followed you.

This means that the Obernyus Royal Guards moved with extreme caution. Well, Maxwell already knew that I was getting escorted, thats why he mustve been tailing me behind the escorts.

Lil wracked her brain about his possible intention.

What on earth did he want to warn me about?

Chapter 289

Lil's wandering mind was interrupted by Shail's question.

Have you been hunting often?

No. It's been a while.

I think it would still be too much for you to hunt with a rifle.

For the first time, Lil actually looked at Shail. The young man, whose appearance was close to those of the Northern Continent, had light brown eyes, probably due to being mixed race.

His face was slightly flushed despite his attempts to conceal it. Meanwhile, Lil responded casually, pretending not to notice.

How do you know that?

Because I saw you practising every day back in the residence.

..?

Shail quickly added after realising his words might be wrongly interpreted.

Even the servants talk a lot about the lady.

Lil nodded calmly. She agreed that guns were still too difficult to use regularly due to the recoil. She then drove her horse, cursing her body for healing so very slowly.

Hunters led by hunting dogs soon climbed the mountain, Lil glanced at the people gathering around her and Shail. Shail was a beat faster and asked before she could.

Are you going to lure them with a flute?

A middle-aged man who introduced himself as Turrage nodded his head.

Yes, our flutes sound exactly like the males. To be honest with you, the hard part of the hunt isn't attracting them, but we simply lack the manpower to catch them. If it hadn't been for this year's famine, we wouldn't have needed more catchers or go as far as to ask our noble guests to help us out.

Turrage noticed Lil. The way he anxiously alternated between her and Shail, revealed that he had something more to say.

It's Turrage, right? Whatever it is that you want to say, it will be better to keep it to yourself. Let's not ruin the mood, okay?

Even though he didn't seem like a very discreet person, Turrage, fortunately, began to explain the habits of the roe deer in this area and the formation of the canyon instead.

Listening to his explanation they eventually reached the canyon.

The forest that covered along the ridge became sparse, and the ground became filled with rocks and moss-covered pebbles instead. With a nearby creek flowing along the valley, Lil found herself standing near the sound of a stream running under the friction of falling leaves.

It was then that the sound of the flutes of the herders, who climbed up the mountain, reverberated downwards and faintly mixed with the wind. At first glance, it seemed like they were exchanging signals by whistling among themselves. That was until the dogs barking gradually intensified, and the sound of something moving quickly down the mountain was heard.

Its coming this way.

Lil quickly fired her crossbow at the shadow emerging from the piled-up leaves. She never confirmed what it was because her shot was done on instinct. It wasn't until the shadow fell on the leaves that Lil realised it was just a rabbit. However, before she could recite a prayer dedicated to her prey, another shadow darted out. A much bigger one this time.

It was a roe deer.

Lil didn't have the time to reload her crossbow, so she couldn't fire anything. Instead, the hunters around her fired their crossbows without break. They needed to aim for their target's heart, but the flying arrows only grazed the front of the beast. In the end, all arrows fired by the hunters ended up in the river or between rocks, and the roe deer was now beyond their range.

It's so fucking fast! It's already so far away now!

Damn it, we're going to miss it!

We'll indeed miss it if we keep shooting from here

Lil suddenly exchanged Turragos crossbow with hers and kicked the stirrup all the while shouting to the people taking positions with their bows.

Move!

Lumiere and Lil split the crowd, who cast themselves aside upon the horse's sudden presence. The horse's hooves galloped along the shallow part of the creek, causing water to splash up to Lil's calves. The beast, scuffed by the hunters' arrows, jerked up and headed towards the ridge as Lil wrapped the reins around one arm and held the crossbow with both hands.

However, because horses couldn't endure the uncomfortable posture of their riders for too long, Lil instantaneously turned her body to the left and aimed the crossbow. She felt the wind and her hair flowing sideways against her cheek. Lumiere was already getting unstable, so Lil tightened her feet's grip on the stirrups.

Come on. Just a few more seconds.

The roe deer was fluttering in her sight. Beneath its shiny brown nape was its heart

Lil pulled the trigger.

Pang!

Without taking the time to check on her target, Lil lowered her stance and grabbed the reins properly. She slowed Lumiere down and turned to gallop away from the creek. The sound of its iron horseshoes hitting the pebbles echoed through the air. Lil then gently stroked her horse's mane. After all, it must've been displeased with her movements.

A little out of breath, she checked on the roe deer for the first time, which had already fallen and died. Looking at the sky, Lil recited a short prayer.

When Lil drove her horse back to the party, she was met with stares alternating between the roe deer and herself. Those stares were all accompanied with wide open mouths. Lil looked at the servants astounded faces and ordered.

Get it.

Coming to their senses, the two attendants rushed to the animals carcass. As soon as Lil handed the crossbow back to Turrigo, he muttered absentmindedly.

No how can you on a running horse not even a ghost can

But Lil merely asked when she was handed back her crossbow.

So, whos going to get that rabbit over there?

Only when the sky turned red did the herders descend from the mountain with their dogs panting from the constant activity. Through the chilly and humming wind that swept through the valley, the smell of blood and animal skin flowed along the river.

Shail held out a white cloth after rushing to Lil, who took the handkerchief and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

I heard there were cavalymen trained in LeBrun who shoot while mounted.

I recall they were called the Karabinae. I felt like I was seeing them when I saw you up there.

Thats right.

Pardon?

I participated in the war as part of the Karabinae Unit.

Shail paused for a moment, trying hard to comprehend what she was saying and nodded belatedly.

Oh, I didnt realise. That was rude of me.

I was a cadet at LeBrun.

Lil wondered why he wasnt mocking her.

Is it because the world has changed over the years, or is it because he doesnt dare say anything against the woman who appears to be Eds lover? Or perhaps, he wants to look good in front of me?

Even though you havent fully recovered yet, your horsemanship and marksmanship were both excellent.

Youre quite talented yourself. You werent that bad either.

When the group came out of the canyon and walked into the field, white smoke already rose from chimneys everywhere. As they were heading toward the village, Lil saw Ed stop by. He tilted his head to look at her while lifting the brim of his hat. Thinking that the face appearing at an angle underneath the hat looked wonderful, Lil was shocked at her own thoughts and frowned for no apparent reason.

Did you enjoy hunting without me?

I did.

What?!

Eds voice was raised because he never expected Lil to respond so affirmatively. Lil smiled regardless.

Its been a while since I stretched myself like that. It made me feel good.

It seems like you got good results.

Ed looked back and gestured with his chin. Lil followed suit and looked behind her. Attendants following suit were carrying carts full of todays game.

You know, if it was me. I wouldve hit a bird too.

When Ed gestured his chin arrogantly towards the sky, Lil snorted sheepishly.

Ah yes, that amazing escape story of yours. As I havent seen it with my own eyes, how would I know?

Among the many adventurous stories Ed told her, there was one about escaping a primaeval forest that he narrated with such passion. He almost died of starvation, but survived by desperately slinging stones, catching a bird, roasting and eating it.

Ed asked with a laugh.

You dont believe me, do you?

No, I believe you.

You look like you dont believe me at all.

Fine. You caught me.

Glancing at Ed, his dumbfounded expression couldnt look any funnier. Eds look made Lil laugh out loud, causing Ed to laugh along with her like a mirror. His reactions always made Lil become more comfortable about expressing herself

Chapter 290

The group was welcomed by the sight of villagers preparing for a feast in the square. Exclamations rang out from all around when they noticed that the first cart they saw was stacked.

Wow!

..?

Lil turned at the sound of a familiar voice.

Did you catch all that stuff?

Levi snooped from behind them, holding an unfamiliar little girl. Lil glanced at the child, who was clinging in Levis arms.

Who is this little lady?

Her name is Marie. I treated her last year.

Oh, hello?

The child, with her red hair braided into two pigtails, lifted her head. Lil smiled as sweetly as she could, while Ed, standing beside her, tried his best to suppress his laughter when he saw the artificial smile plastered on her face, before greeting Marie as well.

Hi.

Marie, this is Lil. Shes a hunting genius.

Really?!

Maries eyes lit up instantly. Lil thought the reaction was pretty cute, but at the same time, she still found it difficult to interact with a small creature known as a child. Especially when it was their first meeting.

What should I do?

After pondering about it, Lil answered.

Thats right

Thats so cool! Huh? Mister!

When Marie spotted Linhardt walking towards Ed, she waved her hand eagerly. Linhardt, now only a short distance away, looked at them and said.

Sir Picard just told me that because of todays successful hunt, hes planning on hosting a feast and inviting us.

Lil, not wanting to stand out, shook her head. Ed similarly declined by saying he wasnt keen on attending such events. As a result, it was quickly decided that only Levi and Linhardt would attend in their stead.

When Levi exclaimed she had to get ready, she held out the child she was holding towards Lil and Ed. Lil just stared at Ed, not having the confidence to look after children. Noticing her stares, Ed, even though embarrassed at first, eventually accepted his fate.

I guess it cant be helped.

Ed awkwardly took over the child. It seemed like he was holding her up with strength rather than with skill, nonetheless, it probably looked ten times better than what Lil could have done. Also, it didnt seem like Marie intended to leave them either. It actually amused Lil that the child behaved without hesitation even though Eds attention was directed towards her.

They strolled around the square where preparations for the feast were in full swing. An increasing number of people were gathering in the square, and a few of them settled down to play music. The smell of savoury food also began to intensify.

Miss, how did you learn how to hunt?

I learned it when I was young, a royal a soldier taught me the basics.

Wow. Thats amazing. I cant even hold a bow yet.

Ed struggled to carry the child properly when Marie pretended to shoot an arrow and wiggled her legs.

You can learn it if you want. Its not that difficult.

Wow. Does that mean I can become a hunting expert like you, Miss?

It may be hard at first, but if you dont give up, you will achieve it in the end.

Seeing Maries eyes gleam even more, Lil tilted her head and whispered to Ed.

It seems like the world truly is changing. This is a big deal

You simply amaze people. You were already great in my eyes, so how much more so in this little ones?

It was then that Marie started moving wildly in Eds arms.

Oh? Mom!

As soon as Ed put her down, the child ran into her mothers arms without even looking back. Marie then turned to face them, eagerly waving her hand as she was carried by her mother. Lil waved her hand in unison, but upon realising that Ed had merely nodded his head, she grabbed his wrist and forcefully shook it from side to side as well.

Ed muttered, looking at his helplessly swaying wrist.

Finally, liberation

Why? It suited you well.

You must be joking, right?

Even though he says that, Ed did a great job taking care of her.

The two could finally walk hand in hand. The town, which had a festive atmosphere, became increasingly noisy and due to the smell of meat being cooked over a fire, Lil felt like she was getting hungry.

Looking for a suitable restaurant for dinner, Ed suddenly asked.

By the way, who was that soldier you knew and taught you how to hunt?

Lil responded with a sigh.

Maxwell.

Yes. Even though he seems drained of life now, when I was young, he was a generous and cheerful person. He even gave me a bow and taught me how to shoot a crossbow just for fun. He probably did it because he was getting bored with having to escort a girl and that was what he came up with to spend the time. Even though that was pretty obvious, it was actually helpful to me. It stopped when we almost got caught by my older brother But to be honest with you, if being able to hit my target didnt make me feel that good, or if Maxwell never told me that I was talented, I mightve never even thought about joining the Karabinae. I would never have known it was possible

But now, hes threatening one or both our lives? It must be a complicated situation.

I dont know if hes going through so much trouble since he became the captain of the royal guards, but it wouldve been nice if he just confided in me. Im no longer the helpless little girl that I used to be

Ed gently wrapped his arms around Lils shoulders and kissed her forehead. While resting her head against Eds shoulder, she looked up at a completely dark sky like someone who was about to dwell on the past.

Maxwell must be resenting his past self. He probably never realised before that he was the one who put the key to freedom in my hands.

The more she spoke, the more bitter her mouth became. Lil swallowed the familiar taste down her throat.

Im grateful to him, but I know that this gratitude is only a mockery to Maxwell

As the night wore on, the village, which had been in a festive mood, quieted down.

Similarly, Lils energy, which had been at its peak for the first time in a long while, even causing her to barely be able to control her excitement, died down as well.

She turned towards Ed, before stretching out in exhaustion. For the past hour she had been talking about her childhood with a mix of both enjoyment and weariness. As Lil became bored during their journey, she naturally opened up to Ed about her past, which she had been keeping to herself for so long.

Lying down next to her, Ed had been listening intently with a serious face, as if blinking even once would be a waste of time.

Lil, who had been talking for a while now, muttered as she raised her sluggish upper body.

Why dont we stop here and go out for a walk?..

This very night? Its almost dawn why, are you suddenly feeling stuffy?

Lil vigorously nodded her head.

Then, out of nowhere, her body, along with the blanket, was lifted up just when she was about to lie down again. Lil shrugged her shoulders as the cold wind seeped through the blankets.

Why are you doing this?!

She asked, squinting her eyes after Ed set her down on the window sill. Lil eventually leaned her head against the open window frame but kept looking at him.

Because the moon is beautiful.

Well the crescent moon is indeed pretty

Lil looked up at the sharply curved moon before noticing that Ed had picked up a blank canvas. He apparently felt that the nights serenity made a perfect setting to draw her.

No, what is this? Are you trying to draw again this early in the morning?

Itll just take a moment. Didnt you say you were feeling stuffy?

Well thats true.

Lil swallowed her words upon seeing Ed sharpening the charcoal with such anticipation.

It does feel refreshing especially with the gentle breeze blowing in

Lil yawned unconsciously and adjusted the blanket.

Holding his charcoal vertically to proprotting his composition, Ed muttered.

You look really good with the moon behind you right now

When does something not suit me? Every time you draw me you say I go well with something.

Well

Why are you suddenly drawing so often?

I cant tell you that its a secret.

Why?

After saying it was a secret, Ed kept his mouth shut. Judging from the twitch in his mouth, Lil knew that he was up to something, but not having the energy to interrogate him any further, she simply leaned her head against the window frame again.

The reason behind everything you do seems to be a secret

Despite her complaints, Ed kept his head down towards the canvas.

The wind was chilly. It wasnt cold enough to pierce through her nightgown, but it caused the light of the lantern to sway, as well as the shadows on the hair of Eds forehead. The moonlight illuminated the armrests of the chair Ed was sitting on and if she stayed completely still, she could hear the sound of charcoal grazing the paper. Eds eyes fell on her legs hanging under the blanket as the strokes he created through the moonlight slowly moved down her thighs, knees, calves, and toes.

Although his eyes were always so blatant, Eds face remained stoic whenever he drew or wrote.