

Northwest 291

Chapter 291

Hes even more handsome whenever hes immersed in his craft like this

Her heart throbbed again as soon as that thought passed her mind. By now, it was a familiar occurrence, but pain was still pain.

Ed stopped his hand when he saw Lils frown.

Why? Are you cold?

No.

Then?

At first Lil thought about concealing it but then remembered Eds advice to be honest about her feelings.

Its just that When I think of you, my heart aches Why am I like this?

Is your heart pounding that strongly?

Lil put her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. When she felt Ed approaching, she looked up at the sky and said,

When I was young, I was really curious about what love was, but now that Im experiencing it, Ive come to realise it isnt always as beautiful as I thought.

Is it not beautiful?

Im selfish. And although I know Im selfish, I cant seem to change that.

What do you mean?

Ed grabbed her waist and made her face him.

I didnt understand a word of what you just said.

Im

At that moment, someone knocked harshly on the door.

Sir Edgar!..

Lil and Ed looked at the door at the same time. Even though Ed already responded by asking what was going on, the banging on the door didnt stop.

Is everything alright? Sir Edgar?!

Ed assisted Lil down from the window before turning around to head for the door.

Whats going on?

Lil instinctively stepped away from the window. Listening with her back against the wall, she gasped as the soldier explained the reason for his visit.

Its said that assailants have invaded the village.

Are they bandits?

Were not sure yet, but if so its better to avoid them.

But if theyre bandits, they wont enter buildings and kill people, right?

Well they ran into the patrolling soldiers. There was friction, and several of them are on the run.

Are there any injuries?

Yes.

Ed nodded his head. As soon as the door closed, he looked back at Lil, who was already picking up her clothes from beyond the partition and getting dressed.

Lil asked, putting her gun to her waist.

What kind of guys do you think they are?

I dont know yet.

Then lets find out first.

Yeah?

Im all good now.

Just a little while ago, you were acting all tired

Ed glanced at her suspiciously. However, Lil only reacted by pointing to the partition to imply that Ed should change into his clothes as well. Ed sent her another disapproving glance but then picked up his pants and disappeared behind the partition.

Their escorting soldiers had already gathered on the ground floor of the lodgings. Levi and Linhardt were seated at one of the tables normally used for dining, while the others were standing around them.

Lil walked down the carpeted, plush stairs. As dawn was approaching, the air on the ground floor, where the fire had just been lit, was still cool.

Lil asked, sitting down next to Levi.

What happened?

Linhardt said theyre most likely bandits, but were not sure yet. Apparently, a certain kind of group has been running rampant at the mouth of the Risch Mountains as of late.

Levi frowned and adjusted her shawl. Meanwhile, when Linhardt was talking to the soldiers and Ed came down the stairs as well, Picard burst through the door of the accommodation and rushed in, wearing nothing but his outerwear.

Sir Edgar! Sir Linhardt!

No one stopped the man who was sprinting towards the table. He hurriedly looked around him, not paying any attention to the few strands of hair plastered to his face.

Are you all okay?

The moment Linhardt nodded his head, Picard flopped down on the chair next to him as if his legs had given out, but upon remembering something, he looked out at Levi.

There are casualties. They broke into my mansion. They even brandished a sword when my maid tried to scream. They're bold people. How dare they come to my house. Anyway, my butler went to fetch the doctor. However, if the situation at the mansion was like that, I cannot even imagine the damage they caused to the rest of the village. I'd like to apologise for the disturbance as well as ask for your help.

How severe is the injury?

Her shoulder was cut. It's bleeding a lot.

All right.

Nodding her head, Levi was about to get up when Linhardt held her down.

No.

What?

It's too dangerous. There are a bunch of people out there harming civilians, how are you planning to get there?

I can take a few escorts with me.

Still

Feeling a strange sense of déjà vu, Lil looked up at the bickering Levi and Linhardt, who by now were standing. Levi was firm in her stance despite Linhardt's strong persuasion. Picard anxiously watched their confrontation as his question seemed to have led to an unexpected conflict.

In the end, it was resolved when Linhardt decided to accompany Levi himself. Picard, who had been impatiently waiting for their argument to end, quickly added.

That's not the end of it. The Paradis Inn, where a group of merchants are staying, was completely trashed, too. They said they were robbed of all their belongings. From what I briefly heard, the game that was caught yesterday is also gone.

The Roahn guards who had helped catch the game sighed.

How could they take all of it? Looks like only the bandits will be well-fed now.

Everyone nodded at what that soldier muttered.

As Linhardt had put himself on escort duty, Ed unintentionally became the conductor and stood up with half his will. He wanted to bring justice to the village that hosted him, so he felt the need to somehow help resolve this tragedy. In addition, this luxury inn was left vacant by the villagers specially for them. And as everyone naturally thought that way too, not a single soldier complained about the atmosphere.

Ed asked as he pulled up a map depicting this area.

Where are His Majesty's troops stationed?

Picard, with a relieved smile on his face, pointed at the edge of the map.

The nearest place is Niord.

Please deliver an accurate damage report to Niord. It would be best to leave for the city immediately. Since there are casualties among the civilians, we'll use your mansion as a temporary treatment centre and move the patients. Levi will be stationed there.

Yes, yes! I will order my servants to open the hall. By now, the village's vigilante group is chasing them, but it's difficult because the bandits normally appear sporadically. The bases currently identified are here, the eastern forest, and

Lil looked carefully at the spot Picard pointed. Since the map was unfamiliar to her, she instead visualised the terrain while listening to Ed's instructions.

There's a forest encompassing the northeastern part of the village, and beyond that, the Risch Mountains begin. To the south and west is the Great Trade Route along the sheer cliffs.

Lil decided to tag along with Ed to patrol the border of the village, while the others split into smaller groups to join the vigilante group to search for the assailants that escaped within the village walls.

Picard let out a huge sigh, feeling extremely relieved to receive help. He wiped his forehead as though he finally had the chance to do it.

It's fortunate that the Marquess is here at a time like this. If it were just us I don't even want to think about it. Those shameless people act so boldly.

There's no time to waste. Let's get on with it and keep moving.

Oh, yes!

As soon as the order was issued, the noise of weapons being prepared roared. About ten soldiers moved in unison. Lil quickly tied up her hair and put on her gloves. From outside, she could already hear the sound of neighing as the horses were brought to the lodge.

Stepping out the door, Lil felt the near-dawn chilly air. Her ears, exposed by her tied hair, felt cold all over again.

Lil quickly got on top of Lumiere. Meanwhile, Ed asked after turning to look at her.

Are you going to be okay?

Lil nodded her head.

Without asking a second time, Ed rode his horse straight forward, Lil and Shail following his lead.

Torches were lit all over the village. The vigilantes were knocking on doors in order to evacuate the residents to the square. The square was filled with crying children, adults holding them, as well as people yelling and arguing with the vigilantes. Some were even holding pickaxes and torches to guard those who were gathered in the square. The dark tension looming around the place was in stark contrast to the festive activities from only a few hours ago.

Their group first headed to the border of the forest. Because Ed needed to receive constant reports, they followed a set route. Shail, who followed, updated them about the current situation.

Identity verification wasn't thoroughly carried out due to the many merchants passing through the village.

Lil, who was looking around the square, suddenly asked back.

Does that mean this group of bandits couldve infiltrated the village beforehand?

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Thats right. It wouldve been very easy for them to sneak in as merchants. This might be a small town, but there are so many people coming and going on a regular basis that a few unfamiliar faces are usually not considered suspicious.

But werent bandits becoming more rampant recently? Why were they so negligent?

This place is still relatively close to Roahn. One could reach the city in just a few hours on horseback. On the Great Trade Route, the closer a village is to a big city, the better security it has. So normally, one wouldnt have guessed that bandits would come all the way here. In fact, bandits are expected to target rich merchants who camp on the road. They wouldnt come and loot a humble village. This is actually the first time that this village has been plundered.

If they really started this from inside the village, its unbelievably bold and meticulous of them. Plus, they wouldve known that we came here yesterday.

Ed slowed down and moved next to Lil before he opened his mouth.

So, its one of two things, either they didnt actually infiltrate the village in advance, or they had infiltrated but were unable to get in touch with their base. But its strange if its the latter. Assuming that they had infiltrated in advance, weve been out of the village for quite some time to hunt, but they didnt take advantage of that time and the way they caused havoc tonight was sloppy rather than meticulous.

But even if it wasnt through advanced infiltration, that still leaves us with a lot of questions. I heard that all the luggage at the Paradis Inn has disappeared. How on earth did they move it? They couldnt have carried it with a cart, much less moved it by horse or donkey. Assuming they moved the luggage all the way to the Risch Mountains, they needed at least a few dozen men. Since no one knew that that many people had gone into hiding, its best to assume that theyre still hiding somewhere in the village with the stolen goods.

Were still in the middle of the investigation, that would mean that those people are bold enough to think theyll be able to get out of any identification or interrogation process. If thats true, they truly are something else. Now I understand how they have dodged being caught for months.

According to the reports, their methods and scale are becoming increasingly bolder compared to the beginning. And in any case, people who believe the culprits to be bandits arent going to look into their fellow neighbours houses for stolen goods.

Their party came out of the forest and headed towards the Great Trade Route next. Even while they were on the move, soldiers on horseback kept coming and going to give them updates.

It was now clear that there were six wounded in the whole village so far. And because the terrain was unfamiliar to the group of vigilantes and their opponents were so quick that they missed any traces of them, the vigilantes and soldiers decided to split the group and climb the Risch Mountains as they couldnt wait until daylight.

By the time they discussed whether it would be better to hunt down and interrogate the possible remaining assailants in the village or set an accurate route to climb the mountain, Linhardt came up from behind them, galloping at high speed.

He shook his head after calming down his stressed horse.

Its still too dark.

Lil asked, moving her horse aside for him.

What about Levi?

She insisted she would see patients at the mansion. She said she want continue to provide treatment, so I assigned her an escort.

When Lil nodded her head in understanding, Linhardt stuck his head between her and Ed to attempt to further his opinion. His coursers mane ran across the side of the Lil, shining with lustre.

What about the interrogation of visitors?

The backlash is too strong. The villages lord is said to be away, so a governor or another highly-ranked person needs to step in to resolve the issue but it appears that Sir Picard doesnt have enough authority to make the upper-ranking officials of the merchant top compliant.

That doesnt sound good. Our sweep on the other hand isnt fruitful either No, wait.

At the same time as Ed spoke, Lil spotted shadows snooping at the entrance to the trade route. Three figures riding donkeys were gathered together under the thin glimmer of the moon. It appeared they were having a chat.

Lil consciously tightened her grip on the reins.

For a moment, the shadows stopped and looked back at them.

Shail spoke from within earshot.

Were patrolling the village. Get off your donkeys and identify yourself.

Their opponent didnt answer. There wasnt even a bit of movement from them, as if they werent breathing.

With the strangely silent surroundings, only the waves beyond the cliff could be heard.

I repeat

At that time, an unnatural noise passed behind them. It wasn't the sound of the wind moving through the trees, but more like the sound of a person walking through the forest. It was so obvious that no one could not have noticed it. Shail closed his mouth and slowly raised his hand to his waist. Lil did the same.

But then, out of nowhere, a tree branch broke behind them.

Were surrounded!

Everyone kicked their stirrups in unison. Shail fell back whereas Lil and Linhardt moved forward.

Bang!

As soon as Shail's gunfire broke out, a flock of birds flew in haste, and the leaves that were ruffled by their wings buzzed.

Lil pulled out her gun and aimed it at the fleeing donkeys.

Bang! Bang!

As the two running donkeys collapsed helplessly, their riders fell forward as well. Linhardt, who was ahead of Lil, chose to capture the two fallen men rather than to chase the third one. After seeing both opponents injured, Lil, who had stopped next to them, quickly deemed that Linhardt alone would be enough to deal with them and proceeded to take the reins to change her direction. But the moment she did, she saw an arrow splitting the air next to her ear.

Shit!

While instinctively dodging the arrow, Lil lost her balance and fell from her horse. After hitting the ground, she tried to crouch behind Lumiere, but the startled beast began to struggle, making it difficult for her to hide. She eventually managed to grab the reins and skilfully steer Lumiere to the other side.

Lil quickly hid behind a thin tree and loaded her crossbow when Ed caught up with his horse. She grabbed his outstretched hand in a hurry and leapt up behind him. Lil then attempted to take aim in her current position but found it impossible as she had to keep one hand wrapped around Ed's waist. Giving up on her crossbow, she groped Ed's arms for a gun and fortunately for her, there was one left.

Shail rode towards them while shouting.

Backup is on the way!

The sound of horses hooves hitting the ground from the forest resonated like thunder. Roahns flags and torches closed in at an alarming speed. As if noticing the incoming support, all attacks stopped at once.

Finally having the time to take a breather, Ed muttered.

It's suspicious

What is?

I thought the attackers would've wanted to save their companions over there, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

Indeed, as Ed said, there were no arrows fired towards Linhardts side, who had been capturing the men.

Lil reflexively looked back at the forest and muttered.

Then am I the target?

Lils thoughts were unconsciously spoken out loud, but it was enough for Shail to reflexively use his body to block off any potential attacks. Ed handed Lil the reins while digesting the situation for a while and came down from his horse.

Shail, take her.

Yes.

The soldiers who arrived just in time began scavenging through the forest in an instant, filling the air with threatening shouts and blades cutting branches. Some of the men rushed towards them in order to provide escort.

As the attack hasnt yet resumed, if we wanted to make a move, it has to be now.

Lil couldnt think of a reason to delay any further.

Ed looked briefly up at her as she shifted in her seat and sat on the saddle. But before she could say anything, Ed expertly struck the side of her horse, prompting the horse to take off against her will.

..!

Lil tightened her feets grip on the stirrups, feeling uneasy about potentially missing something

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You need to go a little faster

Shails advice, however, fell on deaf ears.

How strange. Something is definitely wrong here. Is it really me theyre after?

My lady, please speed up a little more

Who would try to kill me? Who on earth? Who would want to do this?

Who?

Pardon?

No. No one wants to kill me.

What?

If that person wanted me dead, he wouldve left me dead. He wouldnt drag someone who has already been dead for several years back to the Empire just to try to kill me again

What are you talking about?

As if possessed, Lil kept looking back.

Before long the attack resumed, but not a single arrow flew in her direction. The realisation that it was so safe, turned her blood cold.

Im not the real target

The moment Lil verbalised her conclusion, she recalled Venuas words through an auditory hallucination.

{ Do you think I will simply leave the Marquess alone? }

Lil, who had stopped talking mid-sentence, followed this Marquess with her eyes.

But Edgar

A rain of arrows poured down on Ed, who had mounted a new horse. He similarly counterattacked with a bow, but the treeless terrain put him at a great disadvantage given that the battle was at long distance. With several guards in front of him already fallen while trying to block the attacks, Ed lowered his torso and steered his horse towards a cliff outside the trade route to get out of the attackers range. It wasnt a high cliff, but it looked incredibly precarious as he stood at the edge.

{ His Majesty might not want to give him up, but theres always a way for me to avoid the eyes of even the imperial family. }

The reins in Lils hands interlocked with her leather gloves and made a tight sound. She turned her horse at once and kicked the stirrups like crazy.

As the cool wind grazed her ears, Venuas voice pierced her mind again and again.

{ Sooner or later, I will cut off his head and shut him up for good. }

Lil shouted a name, almost hysterical.

Edgar!

Leaving the well-paved main road and riding towards the cliff, her horses hooves hit the dirt and couldnt help but slow down. Even though she tried to push her horse harder, the situation didnt improve, so Lil had no choice but to grip the reins and look anxiously at the forest.

At that time, the forest shook noticeably as several horses fled to the other side. It looked like the assailants began retreating as though they had finished with their last wave of attack. However, Lil couldnt rest assured.

The reinforcements havent even reached this part yet. And I dont think assailants would miss an opportunity like this What? Who? Who on earth could do something crazy like this? To assassinate a Marquess?

Lils mind, which had gone completely blank, spewed out a different voice this time. It was her own voice.

{ What did my brother do? No, what did he order you to do? }

She remembered Maxwells expression. At that time, she had made a guess based on his clearly distressed face.

{ Is it something you cant handle? }

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

What made Maxwell come to me, and why did he show up in broad daylight to warn me?

Lil lifted her head in realisation.

Someone rode out of the forest. It was a person who could aim a huge crossbow without losing his balance even on a moving horse. A person who seemed to have given up on everything and had no qualms even when several guns were pointed at him. Lil also took her gun from her pocket. Unfortunately, she still had a long way to go.

Ed, on the other hand, was already within Maxwells range, and Lil knew too well the ridiculous range of that huge crossbow. She hoped that Ed could dodge it properly, but she soon noticed that one of his legs was limping, like his whole body was slowly sinking beneath the ground. He could barely maintain his balance, let alone hold on to the reins.

Lil called to him like a scream.

Edgar!

It will be too late

Lil took her foot out of the stirrups and positioned it onto her saddle.

Bang!

Simultaneously with Lils gunfire, a thick arrow escaped Maxwells bow and flew towards Ed.

Ed had his back turned against Maxwell, fighting another opponent, when the arrow struck his left upper arm with terrifying force. At the same time, Ed bent down onto the saddle to avoid his opponents sword when another arrow pierced the side of his horse. Lil couldnt tell who lost their balance first, Ed or the horse, but Eds body started falling next to the beast nonetheless. A third arrow grazed through his hair and scattered in the air.

Lil stepped on the saddle, leaned, and stretched her hands forward. She barely managed to grab Eds limp arm, but her body was unable to withstand Eds weight and similarly fell down. Lil hugged him in a panic as they both fell and rolled down the tilted ground. Lil tried to protect Eds head with all her might. Although they were approaching the edge of the cliff, there was nothing else she could do and in the next moment, her body had lost its touch with the ground that had been grazing them.

They were falling.

Lil instinctively stretched out one arm in an attempt to grab at least a clump of grass. However, her left hand, which couldnt support the weight of two people, only slid along the ground at a high speed. It felt like her palm and wrist were being torn apart. All she could do was graze a rock and a few blades of grass.

The earth wasnt on her side. It threw her hand away from the cliff. As soon as her pain stopped, she knew that death came next. The pain had been paradise. Yet as the power of gravity forcefully coiled around her legs to suck them into an unfathomable pit, the fingers of her left hand suddenly twitched

Shit!

Someone overhead tugged her left hand. Raising her head, Lil embraced the raw pain that came with the feeling of her arm being ripped off with joy.

The newly risen sun dimly illuminated Linhardt's face. Whereas Lil exerted her best effort into her right arm that was holding onto Ed, Linhardt shouted as if hoping for a response from his cousin.

Edgar!

Lil, who found it difficult to speak in this position, answered intermittently.

He's unconscious

Damn it, there's no safe place to lower you!

...!

From the corner of her eye, Lil saw Linhardt's other hand barely holding on to the edge of the cliff.

Hold on. Soldiers are coming.

Please just a little longer

But gravity was too cruel and rendered Linhardt's wishes meaningless. In fact, it was a miracle that Lil hadn't dropped Ed yet. Not only was her right arm unable to pull Ed's body up, but Ed was slowly slipping through her grasp as well. Their arms were shaking convulsively. If Linhardt couldn't pull them up right now, the outcome was expected to be grim.

My right hand I think I'm going to lose him

No!

Lil initially thought it was just her arms that were shaking, but no, her entire body was trembling. It was obvious she couldn't last for a few more seconds. Lil closed her eyes tightly and gritted her teeth.

I cannot lose Ed again How many times have I not regretted this before That I should've followed him and saved him

After making up her mind, Lil opened her eyes with newfound determination. Linhardt sensed something and shook his head instantly.

We tried, but there seems to be no other way.

Listen carefully. Down here in the Smugglers Forest there are buildings

What crazy talk!

Linhardt, unable to bear it any longer, grabbed her with both hands. However, the speed at which Lil was losing Ed was faster than the speed at which Linhardt could pull them up.

On the beach the nearest hut

Come to your senses! What on earth are you planning to do?!

Find us

Lil shook off Linhardt herself.

Time, which seemed to have been stopped till that very moment, instantaneously ran again. Lil tightly cradled Ed with her arms in their crushing fall.

I can't lose him this time.

Burying her face in the crook of Eds limp neck, a strange feeling of relief welled up in her, even though her hope about their survival was faint

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Lil glared at the surf rushing over Eds shoulder. As soon as she held her breath, the cold water pressure wrapped her whole body. Pain pierced her eardrums as if they were being torn. This fact became even more evident when she saw a thin stream of blood flowing out of Eds ears.

Lil quickly overlapped her lips with Eds and blew air into his lungs. From this close, seeing his face showing no response made her heart ache.

Unable to stand the cold, she clenched her trembling jaw and kicked her feet. The water temperature in Mondovi was colder than she expected. It robbed her of her senses to the point where she wondered if she had already become a corpse.

Already running out of breath, Lil impatiently moved her head upwards and turned her body over to find their way to the surface. Their drifting bodies were being pushed and pulled by the surging waves. They were shoved before briefly falling flat and then dragged away again. Lil held on to Eds body which was getting swept away by the current. If the sun hadnt risen, they wouldve died from hypothermia before she was even given the chance to determine which way to go.

Lil soared toward the sunlight beyond the water while hoping that it was the direction of the shore where they were being drawn.

With her oxygen severely deteriorating, Lil was fighting the urge to open her mouth and swallow everything in order to breathe. Although the water above her head seemed to steadily get shallower, it could very well be her own illusion.

Lil, who began to become disorientated, suddenly strengthened the knuckles holding Ed.

Stay focused. Please, just a little bit. Just a little bit more

Lil stretched her other arm upward. It cut its way through the ocean current, till at some point it suddenly caught the air. Her arm flailed wildly as her head rose above the water. Lil reflexively let out the breath she had been holding when a rising wave invaded her mouth.

She gulped for a while. But whereas she began to regain her steady breathing, Eds skin remained pale, even bluish.

Swimming with someone unconscious wouldve been straining enough already if she had been physically in perfect condition, but now Lil had to move her legs on instinct after having lost her momentum. Still, they were lucky that the waves brought them to the beach.

When her crawling feet finally touched the sand, she felt nothing. Anything was useless until she saw Ed breathing again. Lil laid him flat on the sandy beach and quickly pressed his chest, unsure where the remaining bit of strength came from.

Wake up.

Seeing Eds white lips that might never turn red again prompted Lil to press her breath against the coldness. But no matter how many times she repeated it, Ed still looked alarmingly the same.

Lil gradually lost her temper and screamed.

Wake up!

I cant take this This is so unbelievable, it can only be a dream, right? Not being able to face Ed, hear his voice, or hug him? Is this reality? This isnt a dream, its a nightmare! No dream would be this cruel! And none of what happened even makes sense, from the start

You knew, didnt you?

I shouldve noticed sooner.

You knew!

If the target had indeed been me, Ed would never have sent me back with only Shail as my guard

Looking back, she became unbearably angry at the fact that she had been so blind when it was so obvious.

You madman!

Lil clasped her hands and pounded his chest with her fists.

Wake up! You can only die by my hands!

As she put all her strength into it, her body staggered every time she struck down. She pounded her fists hard, as hard as she could, not controlling her force anymore. Even when Lil reached the point of exhaustion, she didnt know what kept her going.

At that moment, Eds throat moved and water gurgled in his mouth. Lil quickly pushed Eds shoulder to lay him on his side, allowing his body to breathe heavily after he coughed for a while.

His arm, which had seemed to hang down indefinitely, touched the white sand. Lil sat down blankly and looked at Ed slowly raising his upper body. Sea water dripped from his hair and the tip of his chin. Ed looked around him as if trying to guess where he was, before turning to face Lil.

Lil was met with Eds wet eyelashes and his watery eyes. She was looking at the strangely pale face of a person whose heart stopped.

Lil lifted her hand and cupped Eds veiny cheek.

I

Ed, who was staring at Lil with his puzzled eyes, laid his hand on the back of hers.

How did this happen? How are you here?

Ed looked at the sea over Lils shoulder. His eyes eventually climbed further, up the cliff. Perhaps he hadnt yet fully come to his senses, his eyes appeared more lethargic than ever and it seemed as if they would close again at any moment.

Where are you looking?

Lil put some force on her palm and pinned his face to hers. Despite their eye contact, Lil felt it wasnt enough. The desperate feeling that she had experienced couldnt be filled with touching his cheeks alone. And because of Eds low body temperature, it felt like she was clutching a mere corpse.

Wanting to feel that Ed was alive and breathing, Lil wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. Only when his slow heartbeat weakly vibrated through their overlapping bodies, did relief sink in.

Ed wrapped his uninjured arm around her and buried his face in the crook of her neck. His breath was cold as it spread across her skin

Linhardt looked down at the sea where Lil and Ed had fallen. He witnessed Lil rise to the surface while dragging Ed somewhere. But he couldn't see any further than that owing to the topography of the sea cliffs.

Nonetheless, one thing was certain; Ed was unconscious. And it was impossible for an unconscious person to properly hold their breath underwater.

Linhardt hit the dirt floor with his bare fist.

Shit!

Soldiers who came up belatedly were shocked while staring at the bottom of the cliff. Shail tried to calm the soldiers fussing over Ed's fall.

Linhardt, on the other hand, couldn't overcome his anger and ground his teeth.

Where's that bastard?!

We tied him up after he tried to commit suicide, but he might die soon anyway.

Why?

The bullet that the Lady fired went straight through his upper arm, causing severe bleeding.

Take him to Levi. Tell her that he must be kept alive at all costs.

Yes.

And for the rest of them?

The other soldiers are tracking them down. They probably can't have gotten far.

Linhardt muttered as he looked at Maxwell, who was lying nearby.

He's a trained soldier. A very skilled one at that

Yes. He didn't even sway on the horse.

Someone who can freely use a crossbow on a running horse like Lil.

Could he be from the Karabinae? The Lady said she was once a member of that unit.

The Karabinae is part of the imperial army. Why would the imperial army commit a dishonourable act here?

That was what he said, but he still felt the need to analyse their suspect's side.

Although Edgar has done some unsavoury things that may have displeased others, he rarely has incurred a grudge that could cost him his life. Edgar is indifferent to most things, and indifference cannot be a justification for revenge. Thinking about it that way, the Emperor is the only person

who ever showed overt hostility toward Edgar. If the people who attacked Edgar were truly carabiners, then its reasonable to think that the Emperor is indeed behind it. But why would the Emperor go that far? Whether Edgar intended it or not, public opinion about his unique talent and incredible wealth is quite positive. If Edgars presence was uncomfortable to the Emperor, it wouldve been better to charge him with treason. Assassination is a cowardly act But what will happen to the Empire if the Emperor punishes nobles he didnt like for treason?

This was clearly plotted carefully. Perhaps even the bandits attack was part of it in order to distract us.

As reported, this so-called bandits attack was distinctly different from their normal methods. They dont attack people.

When His Majestys army arrives, ask them to blockade the village. I will send a dispatch to Roahn, so prepare some horses.

Yes. But as for Sir Edgar

Hopefully, Lil will be able to save both of them.

At the very least if theyve ridden the waves properly, theyll have washed ashore by now Safely

Linhardt was optimistic since Lil didnt seem to resist the sea when viewed from above.

Secure a map of the forest down below. If you have to, search through whatever has been taken from groups of smugglers in the past. And there are sure to be some who settled in the village after working as smugglers, so bring every one of them.

Yes.

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The biggest problem with Eds injuries werent the wounds themselves, but the bleeding caused by them. And because an arrow also struck his leg, he was losing blood rapidly. After ripping up her clothes and roughly stopping the bleeding, Lil supported his icy frame. Fortunately, Ed remembered the location of a nearby cabin, but they had to reach it as quickly as possible because they had no idea when he would lose consciousness again.

They carefully moved along the path that someone had secretly paved through the bushes. When Lil looked at this place from the sea a few weeks ago, she remembered man-made lights flickering, making it plausible that there were remnants, smugglers or other intruders lurking around.

Lil was keeping a close watch on these potential opponents when she stopped as her steps with Ed staggered.

Are you okay?

Ed nodded as he leaned against her. He tried not to show it, but his skin was still extremely pale, and his steps were getting slower and slower. Lil did her very best to warm his body, but that was near impossible until they found the cabin. They couldnt take the risk of taking off his wet clothes and staying in one place in the forest without knowing who was out there.

Lil asked nervously.

What am I supposed to do?

Ed had no response at first, so Lil pressed him a little more.

It would be helpful if you answer quickly.

Because I lost a lot of blood, I need to raise my body temperature.

Lil lifted his slipping arm and wrapped it firmly around her neck. She then held Eds waist tightly, despite having exhausted her stamina when dragging him to land.

The cold forest beneath the cliff cried eerie, it was like it warned them that they werent welcome here.

At some point, Lil found it difficult to hide her increasingly heavier breathing. But she had to, because the tighter her breathing became, the less Ed tried to lean on her. Until,

I can walk alone.

Save the nonsense.

What kind of absurd bluffing is this from someone who had his limbs pierced and lost consciousness due to excessive blood loss?

Lil swallowed her frustration and rustled up a pile of leaves.

Approaching Eds imminent collapse, they finally found the log cabin through a thicket of trees. The cabin was situated in a relatively sunny location, so its surroundings were bright. The late morning was coming to the forest and birds could be seen chirping and moving between the trees.

Lil and Ed lowered their position and hid behind a bush. Ed then grabbed her shoulder and whispered.

Someone could be in there

I know.

Lil pulled Eds arm from around her shoulder.

His lips quivered, probably due to the cold. That alone was a dangerous enough symptom. Out of impatience, Lil decided to inspect the cabin first, but Ed caught her by her coat.

Me too

Lil turned around and glared at him.

What can he do if he cant even control his body on his own? Who knows what kind of danger is out there?

Dont be a bother.

Ed muttered, letting go of the fabric he was holding.

Youre angry

Lil stood up without responding and took out her wet, useless gun just for show. Fortunately, the closer she got to the cabin, the more confident she became that no traces of people remained.

However, based on the firewood lying around the house and the freshly cut grass in front of the door, it appeared that the inhabitants had been in and out recently.

Its definitely a place where people stay

But despite knowing that the cabin wasn't a suitable place for them to hide, there was nothing else they could do.

Eds temperature needs to be raised as quickly as possible.

Sensing no movement inside, Lil made a bold choice.

Whoever resides here seems to have gone somewhere early in the morning, so we can use the time to at least dry our clothes and raise Eds body temperature before they come back.

While thinking so, she was about to get Ed, when a figure stuck close behind her. His voice made a shiver go down her back

There's no one nearby.

Lil looked up, unable to believe the sight of him standing on his own two feet as if he suddenly wasn't knocking on death's door anymore. Lil made a funny face with her mouth wide open.

It's okay. Stop worrying.

What crazy

I've been through worse than this.

Ed's carefree attitude even went as far as brushing Lil's wet hair away from her eyes.

He then pulled out the flimsy hook and opened the door. Lil absentmindedly followed him in. The small living room space felt cramped and because the house was made of logs, it was draughty and didn't feel easy to heat.

After looking around, Lil came to her senses. She put Ed in front of the fireplace and lit a fire.

Funny how it's suddenly fortunate that someone occupied the cabin. If it were an empty one, it would've taken some time for me to get the firewood.

Lil looked back at Ed while working on the bellows.

What the hell are you doing?

Even though the fire was now burning quite a bit now, Ed seemed to have no intention of coming near the fireplace. Instead, he walked around the living room with a very distinct limp and even stamped his foot a few times.

Dumbfounded, Lil grabbed his arm.

How can you? Why can't you feel pain? What are you doing?

The floorboard here is ripped.

What's up with this all of a sudden? No, let me do it.

When Lil tore up the floorboard Ed pointed to, it revealed white objects piled up in the hidden space. Reaching for them with her hand and pulling them out, a rolled-up piece of cloth fell down.

A blanket? Why is this there?

Its common behaviour among smugglers to hide cloth or blankets as they like to conceal their whereabouts.

Ed took a clean cloth from Lil.

Meanwhile, she started undoing his buttons as he stood. The soaked shirt slid over his skin as if it were being peeled off.

Ed, who was staring at Lil, spoke up.

Did we fall off the cliff together?

When she didnt answer, his pale hand lifted her shirt.

You dont seem to be hurt.

Instead of responding, Lil simply shook off of his hand.

Thank god.

Whats to be relieved about in this shitty situation?

Ed lowered his upper body to look at Lils lowered head and muttered as she turned her head away to avoid his gaze.

Just as I thought, youre angry

Ed wrapped Lil in an embrace. But as Lil hadnt wiped her own body yet, Eds body, which was barely dried off, became damp again.

What are you doing!

Despite Lil struggling, Ed didnt move an inch. This made her wonder where a dying person like him could get such strength from. Ed held onto Lil as if he was picking her up and Lil had to lift her heels.

He then whispered, rubbing his forehead against the crook of her neck.

Im just happy to see you again, so why are you so angry?..

Im not mad at you.

Before she knew it, his lips moved up her neck and left small kisses. When Ed tried to hold back Lils struggles, she noticed the smell of blood coming from the wounds that hadnt yet stopped bleeding. In the end, Lil had no choice but to give in.

Please dont get angry. I was wrong.

After a lengthy sigh, Lil responded by shaking her head.

Thats not it.

Lil unconsciously adjusted the crossbow slung over her shoulder, wrapping its rough body with her palm in a familiar way.

I've been best suited for being stuck in this kind of mud this exhausting kind of life. I know that better than anyone else. So, why did I invite him into it? Despite knowing it would be dangerous, why couldn't I give him up?

The excuse that I had no idea Venua could do something this crazy is worthless. Of course, I knew that the Emperor and Ed weren't on good terms and that Venua could use the failure of the southern expedition as an excuse to seek political retaliation, but I didn't expect that Venua would actually make an attempt on Ed's life. The way I downplayed Venua's determination is just a lazy excuse now.

Even though Lil initially managed to get out of the mud, she found herself trapped and unable to escape from danger again and out of the two people in this precarious cabin, she was the only one who could come to her senses.

What provoked Venua? What made him this reckless?

Judging by his crude behaviour, it appears Venua doesn't have much time. His impatience resulted in his recklessness. And this recklessness caused him to get his tail caught. I didn't kill Maxwell, so if Linhardt captures him in time, he will be able to interrogate him.

Lil muttered as she looked at Ed, who was covered with a shroud-like cloth.

Rather than being angry at you

The shadow of the fireplace flame flickered across Ed's eyelids.

I can't forgive myself.

Lil saw the colour slowly returning to his lips.

I should've given you up, and now I can only regret it.

I'm tired of my life going so predictably astray

Suddenly, the lips she had been looking at began to move.

In that case, I'm the one who should be angry.

...!

Ed's green eyes wandered in search of Lil. He turned his head, but his darkened vision made it difficult for him to make out her shadowy figure. Nonetheless, he didn't bother to get up. As Lil was sitting on the floor, holding her crossbow, and Ed was still lying down, their eye contact was slanted.

Her eyes were darker than Ed's because she was farther from the flames, warming her face and chest, but rendering her back cold. She heard his voice from the place with warmth.

Are you going to break your promise?

What promise?

You said you wouldn't leave.

Ed didnt sound angry or nervous as he was rather good at hiding his emotions and expressions. However, Lil noticed the subtle change in his tone. It wouldve been better if she was oblivious to it, but she couldnt help but be familiar with it.

You made your choice, so dont think about running away now.

How can you say something like that even after something like this has happened?

It was me who was too complacent. I shouldve known what was coming when I received his warning.

Only after saying those words did Ed lock his gaze with Lils. Lil quickly realised why he looked a bit nervous all of a sudden and asked slowly.

Warning?

Eds eyes glanced past Lil and down to the floor.

The Prince Regent said he would kill me. But I didnt expect him to kill me in the dictionary sense

When? When did he tell you that?

The second time we met.

When you sought him out for the trial? Why didnt you tell me?

I thought it was just the usual cliché statement someone would utter out of anger. Even you said at some point you would kill me

Now that I think about it, I guess he was sincere.

Lils face grew hot as Ed spoke so lightly about dying.

But to indeed commit it, he has to have a less political sense than me

Tell me more about it. This instant.

But you already know.

Lil spoke sternly this time, emphasising every word.

In. More. Detail.

flashback

Ed had a hunch that Venua would soon be released from the villa due to the number of nobles in Roahn who would willingly step forward if the Prince Regent of Auvergne asked them to guarantee his identity.

Ed deemed it useful in its own way if Venua secured an identity guarantee from someone, that was why he didnt mind stopping the one or two guards from sneaking out of Villa Somemei.

Apart from that, Ed had a desire to meet Venua personally. Ed knew him already as a loathsome man despite ever meeting him, but after seeing Lils swollen cheek, the hostility bordering on hatred solidified. If he had the chance, he would want to make Venuas life as miserable as possible.

However No matter how much Liloa hates her brother Venua, there might be a bond that she cannot sever because hes her family. I havent had the chance to discuss it in depth with her yet, so Im not sure But upon learning of the illness of the Archduke of Obernyu, she declared without hesitation that she wanted to see him on his deathbed. It seems shes more civil with her family than I initially thought

Above all, what Ed feared most was Lils resentment, so he decided to keep his personal hostility for himself.

It would be best not to strangle Venua hastily or lay a hand on his body.

Ed passed through the main gate of Villa Somemei thinking so. He arrived with a clear name, so no one dared to stop him like last time. Also, there had been no need to hide his identity anymore because he had returned to his duties at the naval outpost. His landing, however, automatically meant his required presence in Sesbron, but he would only have to stop by on his way to Obernyu along with Lil anyway.

Ed walked through the peaceful garden and stopped in front of the front door.

The royal guard, who had been beaten by Venua last time, took the lead as if he was also serving as a butler.

Apparently, his name is Maxwell and when they kidnapped Liloa, he was the one who strangled her

Knowing that made Eds fists shake, but he feigned calmness as he studied Maxwell.

Its easy for subordinates who are abused to convert, so he can be a good card to hold on to. Liloa herself fell victim to Maxwell, but instead of getting angry, she explained to me the benefits we would gain by accusing Venua and Maxwell together. I still cant fathom her cool-headedness. Considering carefully the gains shes been counting on, even after her life had been put at risk, ranging from Sagastar to this demoted royal guard. But what else can I do if Liloas personal decision is to not retaliate?

Ed learned, step by step, like a newborn child, that planning the next move together with someone was a tricky ordeal. And in order to faithfully carry out their agreement, the only thing Ed could do was quietly follow Maxwell up the stairs to the drawing room.

Sir. Admiral Retiro has come to visit.

A faint answer was heard through the door. Meanwhile, Ed couldnt read a single ounce of loyalty on the grim face of the soldier who opened the door.

As soon as Ed entered the room, he was engulfed by the strong odour of cigarette smoke. It was that bad despite the window being open and the wind blowing through the sunlit room. The light reached all the way across and reflected the empty spirit bottles above the fireplace.

Venua sat on a chair with ornate arms, hiding his slightly trembling hands. However, his attempt was in vain as Ed, who had seen countless patients, easily noticed.

Venua beckoned for the opposite seat. Ed sat down and stared at Venua as though he was examining him.

I felt it the other day too, but the Prince Regent isn't in good health. I don't know what kind of chronic illness he's suffering from yet, but drinking this much hard liquor and smoking this heavily can cause enough burden on his body alone. No surprise his demeanour is this harsh and sensitive

Ed could see at a glance that Venua's body couldn't hold out.

Venua smiled with a cigarette hanging from his lips.

I never thought you'd show me that shameless face again.

Ed put up a brazen smile himself.

This is indeed me being shameless

You dare come back after behaving like that. Why, did you feel like apologising now?

Venua stroked his arrogantly raised chin and placed one of his shoe soles on his opposite knee. The man, leaning deeply in his chair, clearly seemed to enjoy authority. It was obvious that he thought that the other person had come to apologise, so Venua already basked in this preemptive victory.

Where do you want me to start?

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At Ed's question, Venua raised his eyebrows as if to gauge a lie. Ed felt a strange sense of discomfort because the movement resembled Lils mannerisms so much.

Venua answered without much thought.

Let us discuss the detainment first.

The frustration in his voice made Ed deem Venua a man who was easy to understand.

The way he has lived his entire life without the need to hide anything signifies his privilege. Since politics and administration are handled by the courtiers of Obernyu, Venua never has to wonder or examine the minds of others. Those who inevitably have to engage in fierce psychological battles in order to survive court are the emerging nobles and courtiers, while Venua, who is close to royalty, reigns with his mere presence. He never had to move his body or his mind. With dozens or hundreds of people under his authority, the only time Venua directly needs to exercise his body and mind are the times when he travels to and from Sesbron. So, the fact that Venua came this far on his own is already a feat. But because of all this, Venua is actually not that difficult to deal with. The problem lies with me. I keep fighting this incredible urge to grab Venua by the collar

Ed opened and clenched his fist without realising it.

I'm sorry to hear that the Archduke is in critical condition.

If you are sorry, then what is your intention for keeping me here?

You caused a disturbance, Prince Regent. What will the citizens of Roahn think if I simply release a kidnapper?

Is the Lord trying to worry about the sentiment of his subjects? How pathetic.

A renowned lord doesn't become a lord in vain.

Hahahaha! That is ridiculous. I did not know that was how you gained your reputation.

Likewise to Venua, Ed also felt the urge to burst out laughing, but for a completely different reason. It was Venua's extreme self-confidence that left Ed dumbfounded.

But since I need to keep Venua locked up, this atmosphere is for the best. It will be nice if I'm able to find out Venua's true intentions while he's detained, but realistically speaking, the chances of that happening are near impossible. It's not for nothing that Venua himself travelled this far, that's probably because he couldn't entrust his intentions to his subordinates. In such a case, the best option is to keep Liloa in the Retiro estate as long as this man is in Roahn

Ed started his interrogation off with the usual greeting.

How is the Princess of Sassel?

It was a casual way of asking how his family was doing. Ed, however, didn't expect Venua's face to harden when confronted with a question regarding his wife. The cigarette Venua was bringing to his mouth stopped. He then snapped back, staring at Ed as if he were assessing something.

Do you know Marguerite?

No.

Venua resumed taking a puff from his cigarette. The smoke that came out between his lips gently dispersed as his gaze on Ed remained in place. For the second time since entering the room, Ed was at a loss for words.

Let me send her your regards.

Is it Othello syndrome? No, he wouldn't have been able to stop himself if he had suspected his wife's infidelity. Such people won't tolerate delusional or implicating questions. It's highly likely that Venua, who is having a hard time controlling his emotions, keeps silent for another reason. Perhaps I'm on to something*

Ed quickly grabbed hold of the clue, hoping that it wouldn't disappear without leaving a trace.

Oh, I heard that her health significantly declined a few years ago.

Has she recovered well?

She has recovered well.

Now that I think about it, I've seen the princess at Sesbron's court

Leave the story about Marguerite at that, Marquess.

As far as Ed knew, there had been no children between Venua and the Princess of Sassel for over 10 years now. Rumours abound that the child they barely conceived a few years ago was stillborn, and Ed had recently learned that the princess's illness was quite severe at the time. Butler Grits even added that Obernyu was running out of precious time.

The Archduke is nearing his death in his 40s, and Venua, the only heir, is being eaten away by a chronic disease And without any children. I now, too, see why Venua is so sensitive about the issue of succession in Obernyu, like Liloa said. But why is he so wary about the mention of the princess? There are rumours that the Prince Regent loves the Princess of Sassel so much that he only wants her as the mother of an heir and not some mistress. But Liloa said those rumours were absurd

because Venua has had countless mistresses since he was young. Im now convinced that hes rather obsessed with the perfect lineage and only insists on having children with the princess Still, its an incomprehensible response to order me to stop asking Hes clearly being overly sensitive about the princess.

Ed decided to pry a little more.

Im sure you havent forgotten that Im also a doctor, Prince Regent. If the princess is looking for a doctor, Im willing to visit at any time. Even if its not me, theres a doctor I know who is good at treating women

A visit? A house visit? You are talking nonsense. Why would I let you?

Acquainting a well-reputed doctor is no waste.

Are you kidding me?

Its true. If you want, I can make a diagnosis right away.

What?!

Ed observed Venua without answering. After examining the complexion of the face, eyes, lips, and cheeks, Venua adjusted his posture when Eds eyes fell to the area around his neck.

You mean you are going to treat me?

If you want.

Someone ranked Marquess is trying to act like a lowly doctor

First of all, looking at your eyes and lips, I can tell that your liver is in bad shape.

Venuas hand unconsciously went to the corner of his eye. Then, the moment he put his hand down, his insult-covered face shouted.

How dare you!

But whereas Venua looked like he would jump out of his seat at any given moment, Ed simply shrugged his shoulders. He was much more worried whether Lil might also have this chronic or hereditary disease or not.

Do you drink alcohol to forget the pain?

You!

If thats what your doctor recommends, it would be better to fire him immediately.

Venua snatched his glass from the table and threw it onto the carpet. What little content was left spread to the carpet and created a stain.

I am serious.

The reason why Venua merely clutched the armrests and didnt jump up to kick his seat, was because he knew he wouldnt be able to hold himself up properly. Ed watched his opponents eyes turn red.

It cannot be helped if my sincere recommendation as a doctor comes off as offensive.

You will never set foot on the land of Obernyu alive, so know that.

I doubt that. Perhaps we'll be able to meet again soon in Obernyu? Liloa said she wants to watch over the Archdukes deathbed.

What did you say?!

Ed didn't answer. He knew Venua didn't ask him because he didn't understand. After some murmurs, Venua started chuckling which quickly evolved into laughing.

Hahaha! Your line of reasoning is hilarious! Have you decided to become that girl's loyal dog? With whom and where do you think you are going? It is pathetic that you are wagging your tail so hard, but you are mistaken for deluding yourself into thinking that you will be able to achieve your hopes with that girl. No matter how much she sleeps with rootless people like you, she knows the importance of marriage. Considering Retiros ancestors, she would never dream of marrying you even for a single day.

Are you serious? How are you trying to force her into marriage when you couldn't even detain her for a few hours? Who on earth do you think you are dealing with? Liloa's a skilled soldier. Do you honestly think that she was bluffing when she held the trembling likes of you under gunpoint?

What the hell

You should forever be grateful that Liloa didn't pull the trigger and painted the walls with that brain of yours. But if you bother her any further, you truly might end up with a hole in your body, so you would better be careful. I even feel threatened too sometimes. No, actually I feel it quite often.

You you are completely insane.

That's something I hear quite often.

After being bewitched by some woman, you clearly lost your sense of shame. It would be wise for you to kneel before me and ask for forgiveness.

The moment I do that will probably be the moment I receive a hole in my body myself.

So, you did not come to ask me for forgiveness.

Looking back on our conversation so far, I cannot come up with anything for which I need to apologise. Rather, you should ask for my forgiveness for causing a stir in my territory.

How dare someone who doesn't even know the matter

Or should I apologise for loving Liloa?

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As you know, I'm impudent, shameless and proud of my origins and how I treat my subjects. On top of that, I have no qualms about loving Liloa. I'm amazed that you still act surprised and even get angry by facts that you already know to begin with, it makes me believe that you're in an even worse condition than the Archduke.

Since when can such hideous desire for an unrivalled woman be called love? That girl should at least become the mistress of a monarch's family. The reason things went astray to this point was because of her wrong entanglement with the Duke of Mireille! If she had secured a relationship with the imperial family from the very beginning, things wouldn't have gone this far!

The Liloa I know wont be interested in being the mistress of a monarchs family. Better yet, she couldnt care less if she was the damn monarch herself or not.

This time, Venua didnt laugh. Ed was taken aback when his half-joking remark hit the other person right on the head. Paradoxically, Venua seemed to consider the possibility of Lils ascension to the throne more realistic than anyone else.

Ed saw deep-rooted emotions on his stiff face: long-standing anxiety, tension, uncertainty and denial. For a moment, his opponents eyes were distracted, but Venua then quickly turned his head and twisted the topic along.

I know people like you well. Those who campaign as if they are kings just because they have a title to back them up.

Dont be hasty, my real campaign hasnt even started yet.

..?

Venua raised his chin.

First of all, I hope youll ask for forgiveness for doing something unsavoury in my territory.

You are asking to die.

No, Im just trying to give you a chance.

If you dare to humiliate me, I pay you back with death.

Hiding behind immunity is useless when you refuse to disclose your identity.

..?

Ed stood up, walked to the door and opened it, prompting the people, who had been waiting, to enter the drawing room. Among them was a solicitor for probate and a jury representative from Roahn. Ed knew all procedures had to be done properly because if Venua was provided with a rightful excuse, the situation with Lil would become very difficult.

As the Lord of Roahn, I demanded an apology, but it was not provided. Out of respect for the criminal, I tried to persuade him first without your presence, but he refused. Since he moved a private army and even kidnapped someone in Roahns territory, a territory thats been granted with the right of denying entry, his offence will be treated as a felony.

Oh come on

If you want to avoid trial or claim immunity, it is in your best interest to reveal your identity first. From here on out, all interrogations will be recorded and used as evidence for future trials.

Hahahaha! How cute. Were you scared to face me alone? How dare you invite a ragtag group of people to play a so-called game of trial!

However, no one was swayed by Venuas provocation. The solicitor, who raised his glasses, began his questioning.

Who are you, Sir?

Why did you come to Roahn?

Why did you carry out the kidnapping?

Venuas index finger tapped the sofa. His lips trembled at first, but soon he smiled. His fingertips traced his lips as if he was unsure of the nonchalance look he tried to fake.

Kidnapping? Thats nonsense.

Who did you kidnap?

I dont know.

There is an eyewitness who saw this gentlemans private soldiers kidnapping someone. Even if that were not the case, it is already a grave disrespect of you to bring in private soldiers without informing the Lord or Governor.

Venuas eyes looked out the window.

How harsh Roahn must be that I cant travel without being accompanied by a few escorts. All I wanted was to travel quietly, but I wasnt given sufficient leisure time. From my detainment to the trial, Im completely embarrassed about what this is all about.

If you dont want to be misunderstood, then you should reveal your identity. We also dont feel comfortable interrogating the gentleman. However, since citizens of so many different nationalities and origins live in Roahn, and considering the humble number of nobles residing here as well, we put a lot of effort into security. You have no choice but to adhere to the rules here. If an unidentified person causes an incident in the territory, a trial must take place.

Ill just wait for my identity guarantee.

And who would you like to ask?

Ill take care of it.

There isnt much time left before the trial. At this rate, you shall be punished by flogging.

Flogging?

Venua tilted his head like a child who had heard such a word for the first time. The stern solicitor stepped forward to explain the process.

Flogging is a corporal punishment executed by hitting the criminals bare buttocks with a wooden stick. Usually, the criminal loses consciousness after about ten strokes, thats why flogging is carried out parallel with medical treatment and spans over several days

Hahahaha!

Venuas sudden laughter made the solicitor look at Ed, who motioned his chin to ask them to step outside. But regardless of whether the solicitor and the jury went out or not, Venuas laughter dragged on, even going as far as to bang his hand on the armrest. For a while, the living room was filled with the sound of his laughter when he threw his head back and curled his arms around his stomach.

It wasnt until only the two of them were left that Venua, who finally stopped laughing, gritted his teeth.

Youre doing something interesting, Marquess.

You're about to become the interesting one, Prince Regent. Since you're sentenced to flogging, what could be a bigger spectacle than that? Thinking about all the citizens of Roahn coming to watch, I'm already dying of laughter.

You vulgar bastard. Now I understand why the two of you got together.

Ed merely shrugged his shoulders at the insult. Since he had more to say, he continued his momentum.

I must say I'm surprised that you would rather risk showing your noble buttocks to the whole of Roahn. You truly must be afraid of it coming to light that you're looking for Liloa.

Why? Why are you so secretive about this?

It's said that the Archduke of Obernyu is in critical condition, and the regent, who hasn't been able to receive the title, is hiding in this far western land during those difficult times.

Ed stroked his chin. Unlike Venua, creating this facial expression came quite naturally to him.

Is there anything else other than the topic of succession that would make the noble Prince Regent so impatient?

Shut your mouth, Marquess.

Did the Archduke leave a will stating that he would abdicate the title in favour of Liloa? Well, I can't blame him, there's no one more suitable and worthy for the title of Archduke than she is.

Marquess!

Why do you keep shouting for the person who's already in front of you? It's a rather pointless action.

Venua hit the armrest and jumped up from his seat.

That mouth! I'll make sure it can never jest again.

Ed looked at his opponent's trembling shoulders before lowering his eyes to the knees that tried so hard to suppress the spasms. It was an outrageous threat to Ed, who had crossed an immeasurable line of fire.

Intimidation is a trick used only when one wants the other person to back down. If someone truly intends to kill his opponent, it's more efficient not to have his murderous intent discovered.

In essence, threats are most frightening when they're done in silence, Prince Regent. You will have to eliminate that clumsy trait of yours if you want to deal with me.

end of flashback

Ed rolled his eyes and looked at Lil, whose eyes narrowed as she let out a sigh.

You were so childish.

I didn't tell you because that's what I thought you would think.

and timid.

I admit that.

Lil stopped herself from smacking him, considering his condition was comparable to that of a critically ill patient.

I knew I would pay the price for my childish and timid behaviour.

Lil clasped her head and groaned.

But this situation is different from what I expected, now were both suffering I shouldve been more careful

And you realise this only now?

I

As Ed blurted out his words, Lil raised her eyebrows.

I never thought that someone would save me because I was always the one who had to save myself

What on earth were you planning to do? What were you going to do when you fell off your horse like that?

I would try to hold on to the cliff.

But werent you already unconscious when I got there?!

If I had fallen into the sea, I would have come to my senses. It wouldnt have been difficult after that. I would just be washed ashore and find a place to hide

Lil ended up hitting the floor instead of Ed.

Are you going to insist on talking back to me like that?!

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Ed feigned being downcast. It amazed Lil that he was able to afford such a useless act even while he was dying. His shrunken shoulders twitched before his hand took Lils wrist. Her skin was torn from her palm to her elbow with minor wounds densely spread along the arm. They were the wounds she sustained when trying to grab something while falling off the cliff.

Sensing his guilt, Lil frowned at him.

Its nothing.

Not to me.

Lil tried to pull her wrist away, but Ed gently pulled her towards him. Lil, who was guided by her waist, slid into Eds arms as he sat up.

Ed muttered while hugging Lil from behind.

I shouldve been more careful

Ed dipped a piece of cloth in rainwater and wiped the affected area along Lils arm. Because they didnt have alcohol for disinfection or herbs to help hasten the wounds recovery, Lil had to suppress her groans as Ed cleansed her wound with only water. After, he skilfully wrapped the cloth around her wrist as if it were a bandage.

I wouldve died if it werent for you

Thats right. Are you finally realising that now?

so thats one more reason on my list to stay by your side.

What?

Its about what you said back then. Whereas I saved your life and told you things youve always wanted to hear, you havent done anything for me. You even asked why I did all that for you and you thought it was strange.*

Why are you suddenly bringing that up?

At that time, I thought, This is a confession. Thats why I didnt interrupt you, I didnt want you to lose that momentum by commenting on it.

Ed pressed his lips against Lils cheek. For some reason, it felt like she could hear faint laughter coming from between those lips. Lil grunted, tilting her head to avoid him.

How could that have been a confession?

Well, werent you listing reasons why you liked me?

I wasnt.

With a low chuckle, Ed wrapped Lil in his embrace to prevent her from moving away any further. His wet hair spilt over her shoulder and tickled her cheek. For a while, they both just sat in silence, breathing, rising and sinking together. The lips that occasionally kissed her gently on the shoulder were soft.

Liloa.

Im sorry. But I have no regrets.

No matter who wants to kill me, Ill never regret not giving up on you.

Lil stared at the fire inside the fireplace.

What about you? Are you going to give in? Are you going to prove him right?

The damp firewood was billowing a pitiful fire and futile smoke. It was only a small handful of light, but without it, Eds survival was difficult to guarantee in this shabby, dusty space.

The red light flashing between the fallen firewood was like a thin light of life.

No.

As it had stopped raining, the only sound filling their eardrums came from the burning fireplace, where tiny sparks bounced endlessly in the damp darkness. In reality, Lil didnt think their situation now was that shabby anymore. The unquenchable flames beauty proved strong enough that not even the god of death dared to dwell in it.

The sound of life filled the forest where the rain had ceased. The sound of tiny creatures crawling out from under leaves, from their bases in trees or the tunnelled ones in the ground. Their lively steps bounced on the muddy soil.

Realising the forests strength that withstood the downpour, something inside her leapt toward the bright sunlight as well.

Lil replied, leaning her cheek against Eds ear.

I dont regret it either.

Lil observed Ed in his deep sleep.

Mentally, hes holding on, but he had to wade into the surf and walk all the way here, so his physical strength has been drained. In addition, his wounds arent properly tended to Although the arrows in his upper arm and thigh have been removed, and his limbs are compressed with a towel, hes still at risk of infection due to the poor conditions. His forehead is also covered with cold sweat as a sign of a beginning fever

My mind had been filled with a strange sense of conviction before, but objectively speaking, things arent looking well. Theres so much more Ed needs; uncontaminated water, firewood to keep the fire burning, materials to disinfect his wounds, clean cloths to protect the affected area, not to mention properly cooked food The problem is that I cant move hastily. My patient is unconscious, and the smugglers may return at any given moment. Especially now that the rain has stopped, they might decide to return to their nook

Lil pondered while holding the hilt of her sword.

Should we leave now to resolve this situation, or should we wait for Linhardt, hoping he finds us here sometime soon?

..?!

But at that very moment, the sounds surrounding the cabin changed. The leaves on the trees were swept by the wind and shook off rainwater. Amidst was the sound of footsteps stepping in small puddles of fallen rainwater.

Shit.

Lil quickly looked back at Ed, who was fast asleep without a care in the world.

If I wake him up, the two of us could fight together, but I dont want to do that to him. His complexion is already gradually becoming paler I can see that even in this darkness

Lil unconsciously rummaged through the pockets of her pants. Obviously, she had no money or goods to negotiate, leaving her with no choice but to stand close to the door, holding the hilt of her sword. The wet, bumpy log wall pressed against her back.

Lils nervousness even prompted her to take out her damp gun. Lifting the gun barrel to her temple, the smell of wet metal wafted up.

Somehow, the gun feels more reliable than my sword

Footsteps continued to approach, alternating between stepping in mud puddles, and on leaves and fallen tree branches.

There are two people But why does it seem that theyre cautious about returning to their cabin? Perhaps theyre not the true owners of this lodging as well.

Even with those doubts, Lil nonetheless remained faithfully vigilant.

One of the intruders grabbed the door handle. The hinges of the front door folded before Lils eyes, and a short man pushed open the door and entered. Like her, the man was also holding a gun.

If he moves just a little bit more, hell discover Ed

Holding the hilt of her sword tightly, Lil aimed at the back of this mans head, where his hair was balding in an oddly familiar manner

Huh?

The balding head began to turn towards her in full swing, revealing a face she knew so well.

Lil blurted out this persons name like a groan.

Alain?

Alain turned and looked at Lil. The rainwater that hadnt yet been wiped away shone from between his wrinkles. His eyes were filled with nothing but confusion, probably not realising her identity. Suddenly, someones hand stuck out next to Alain. A sharp finger grabbed the door. Not wanting to be outdone, Lil quickly grabbed the door and pulled it wide open.

Lil recognised the second intruder as soon as he faced her with his back to the forest.

Jericho?

Lil was so perplexed that she even lowered her sword. Jericho, on the other hand, didnt miss the opportunity and immediately pointed his gun at her.

Who are you?

Lils shock rendered her speechless. As she stood there blankly, Alain grabbed Jerichos gun barrel and lowered it. The old mans eyes, which were pressed against his voluminous eyebrows and eyelids, narrowed as his lips covered in a thick beard moved.

Captain?

Without even taking the time to think it over, Lil grabbed Alain by the collar.

What are you doing here!

..?!

Jericho similarly stood wide-eyed in confusion, looking at Lil from head to toe. Ignoring him, Lil gritted her teeth at Alain.

What happened? Its been a while since the Bell Rock left port, so how come youre here?

After his initial shock, Alain came to his senses and responded to Lils interrogation naturally.

The Bell Rock did set sail, but we chose to head back No, the real question is, whats the Captain doing here what the hell is this?

I kind of fell off a cliff But what do you mean you headed back?

Well, that damned Lil Schweiz had been taken somewhere, but were we supposed to just head back south by ourselves? Do we look like such bastards? No, but thats not the point

Jericho, who opened his mouth for the first time, muttered after he scanned Lils appearance.

Youre a woman, right?

Alain looked at Lil and rolled his eyes.

Yeah Shes definitely a woman What the hell is going on

Lil placed her hand on her forehead, massaging her temples with her thumb and forefinger while processing the hundreds of thoughts that passed by in just one second. The fact that her gender was revealed was the smallest of her problems. Her topmost concern was that Admiral Retiro was lying behind her, dying.

Shit.

Lil couldnt let go of her sword, but at this point she didnt even know anymore why she was holding it.

Captain?!

Jericho shouted, his face revealing the fact that he still didnt understand.

Did you fall off a cliff and become a woman?!

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Alain quickly hit him on the back of the head. He then asked, raising his gun back towards Lil.

Really, who are you?

Lil Schweiz.

As Alain had no answer and Lil had nothing more to prove, she let go of the doorknob and turned around.

Come in.

Her eyes instinctively fell on Ed, who lay in front of the flickering fireplace.

Chances of survival were already slim to begin with, but to make matters worse, there are now two more people with enough justification to shoot him

Alain seemed to have noticed that Lil couldnt let go of her sword, so he asked nervously.

Who is that?

Before Lil could answer, Jericho walked ahead of them and tilted his head as he looked down.

Doc tor?

Lil immediately rushed past Jericho and blocked Ed from their sight. Her mouth dried as she swallowed dry saliva. Watching the two, she elaborated, hoping to ease the rising conflict a little.

Thats right. But hes close to dying.

Alain bent his upper body to examine Eds complexion.

Then what are you doing here instead of doing anything about it

We cant leave because were being chased.

Who is chasing you? No, that doesnt matter. What do you need?

Clean water and a clean cloth

You can find that much from a cabin near here.

And dry firewood, food, as well as herbs for disinfection

Firewood and food aside, I dont know much about medicinal herbs.

Me neither What about distilled liquor?

There are a lot of people smuggling alcohol around here, so that should be easy to get.

Okay. But

Just when Alain and Jericho were about to turn their backs, they stopped upon hearing Lils hesitating remark. Making eye contact with them, she knew each of them had a lot to say, but their quick actions implied that they had silently agreed to save Ed first and talk later.

Since Ed helped them escape from the Gualtiero prison, they may perceive this as an opportunity to make amends. But for them to consider this as their way of showing their gratitude, its better for Alain and Jericho to know this vital piece of information first

Before you leave, theres something you need to know.

What is it?

Alain and Jericho were watching Lil blankly when the latter moved her foot slightly to further block Ed from their line of sight, sensing his weak breathing coming from around her calf when she scoot closer.

Eds real name is Edgar Retiro.

Why say his real name all of a sudden? Whats the point in knowing his name when hes dying?

Jericho asked indifferently, but Alains reaction was different. He turned fully towards her. He might be called Grandpa by the Southerners due to his age, but Lil knew that his eyes had never lost their zeal. And those intelligent, powerful eyes, shining beneath his wrinkled eyelids, looked straight at her.

What? Edgar Retiro?

Lil spoke clearly to their confused faces.

Yes. As in Admiral Retiro.

It came as no surprise that Alain and Jericho immediately drew their guns, so Lil quickly got down on her knees and shielded Ed from the muzzles pointed at him. She explained, slowly, while spreading her arms as if to stop any potential bullets.

You met him at the Devito Harbour, right? He helped break you out.

Instead of Alain, who kept his mouth shut, Jericho shouted.

Captain, what are you talking about? How can the doctor be the Admiral?

I know it sounds absurd, but take a moment to think this over.

..?

Werent we believing that Admiral Retiro was a complete lunatic? In reality he turned out to be a little different from what we thought

Alain intervened.

And why are you telling us this now?

Im giving you a choice. If you want to help, you have to know this first before deciding if you indeed want to help. I cant have you helping Ed without knowing anything. If you dont want to do that, then just pass by.

Since when did you know?

On the deck of the Bell Rock, just before I got stabbed, the Navy Commodore addressed Ed as the Admiral.

Oh my, oh my!

Jericho stomped his foot, while Alain just stood there slowly lowering his gun.

You can just pretend you havent seen him, so there is no need to kill him. Currently, the entire Navy believes they should attack the South. Ed is the only one who is opposed to it. Its obvious what decision the Navy will make if the admiral changes.

Is that why youre trying to keep him alive?

There will be no end if I start telling them the truth. So what should I say? Do I actually need to make the ridiculous confession that Im in love with him?

No, but if Ed really was on the Bell Rock to target the South, I promise you that he would already have died by my hands. Im getting tired of explaining. Its simple. If you want to help, help, and if you want to pass, pass.

Jericho swept through his hair as if he were going to rip it out.

Id rather you said nothing! Am I the only one who is confused by this?

Now that I know the truth, I cant pretend to be deceived either.

Jericho looked at Alain, who looked down at Ed without moving for a while. He then raised his arms as if he were dumbfounded.

I wonder if hes still suffering from mysophobia when hes dying?*

Lil laughed before criticising them for making a joke during such a critical time.

Why are you smirking like that in a serious situation like this? You crazy people. Decide quickly.

Alain tucked his gun back into his belt.

What else can we decide?

What does that mean?

What does it mean? It means that we have to save him first!

Jerico grabbed Alains shoulder after his loud remark and headed toward the door. It was clear that he was worried that Alains thoughts might differ from his own.

As the door closed and the damp silence returned, Lil staggered and exhaled. Her relief mixed with her tension so heavily that she couldnt figure out which was the bigger emotion.

She ran her cool fingertips down her face.

I did it with my true appearance With this face, I confronted the sailors. And on top of that, with the Imperial Admiral right behind me

Through the years, Lil developed a habit of not having expectations in any situation, so she wouldnt be surprised if they decided not to come back.

However, contrary to Lils prediction, Alain and Jericho soon returned bearing the materials she had mentioned.

Lil gradually relaxed as she checked the fabric several times for stains. They all knew basic first aid as all three of them had been through a lot on the sea. So while Alain poured strong liquor on Eds wounds, Jericho wiped them with a wet cloth and Lil tied a bandage.

After finishing all the treatments, Lils head felt dizzy. She thought she should go hunting, as both she and Ed had to eat. However, she still couldnt take the risk of leaving the place alone and thus leaving Ed alone with them.

Lil returned to her spot after making a decent fire and took a seat on the floor.

The three of them were sitting in a huddle when Lil asked, feeling like she was dealing with disobedient children.

Why on earth did you come back to the Empire?

We had to find out whether the Captain was alive or dead.

Tears formed in Jerichos eyes, but when his gaze met Lils, he cleared his throat and turned his head. For the first time since they were reunited, Lil could finally take a deep breath, feeling the tension instantly draining away.

You fools

Alain blurted out.

But thank goodness youre alive.

With you guys here, whos the Captain?

Marenzio.

That hot-tempered one?

After us, he has the most experience.

And what if he gets into a fight with Julio?

That other guy has lost a lot of his spirit.

Thats a relief, but still

No, rather than lost, I guess its more accurate to say that his spirits completely broken. Our Captain who came back from the dead risked his life to set us free, so why would he remain stubborn and hold on? Didn't you see that he, himself, threw his dagger into the horse that was chasing the Captain?

I saw that. But

What but? You have seen it yourself. Hes no different from the other guys who first boarded the Bell Rock and in the end, accepted the Captains methods as well. Even if he kept barking like a dog, the rest of the crew would no longer listen to him.

Lil recalled the last time she saw Julio.

I initially deemed it as nothing but a hasty decision, but remembering Julios accurate aim, causing one of the horses chasing me to fall down, tells me that perhaps his anger has indeed softened. In addition, if Julio was still a threat, Alain and Jericho would never have left the ship.

Lil, deciding to trust their judgement, turned her arrow towards Jericho this time.

Then, with Grandpa gone, you should've been the one to protect the Bell Rock, Jericho, so why did you follow him here?

I couldn't send Grandpa alone. Hes all old and can't even see well at night, so who else can take care of him if not me?

Jericho grinned, baring his teeth. Still, Lil couldn't afford to smile back, as her ears were still perked up at any possible changes outside.

Despite what he says, I saw firsthand that Jericho was as scared as Courant when they executed Ed. So, what on earth made him decide to remain in enemy territory where both geography and people are unknown?

references:

I wonder if hes still suffering from mysophobia when hes dying?

= This was a bit of a hard one. When translated as a sentence (.) the mysophobia also translated as tuberculosis, sclerosis, mycelia, kyphobia and the list goes on when we only translated the word (), we found mysophobia. Seeing that Alain is supposed to make a joke and that Ed was a bit of a neat freak (also remembering the part where he was particular with his food) during his time on the Bell Rock, it seems that this makes the most sense. We do sometimes see some Korean views, so if anyone wants to clarify, we always appreciate it!