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Thats why Im looking after Edgar as if Im taking care of a five-year-old child with everything I can.

Thank you for your hard work. Please continue to look after him.

You wont take over from now on?

Im sorry, but I dont want to

Why?

Linhardt looked at Lil in genuine surprise. In fact, for a while now, whenever Linhardt looked at her, a shocked face appeared to have become his default expression.

At this point, I figured that Levi had filled him in But judging from his reaction, she clearly didnt she probably assumed I kept my identity hidden for a good reason and chose to be oblivious to matters related to me

Because of this, Lil addressed Linhardts surprise unprepared.

Are you serious? Look at me. A few years after leaving home, my brother came after me to drag me back. Who can I take care of? Im too preoccupied with my own matters as it is.

Oh, so you ran away from home too

The backyard of the officials residence was full of bandits sitting on the ground tied with ropes. Considering the fact that there was no prison in a small town like this, this was actually the best they could do. Surrounding the backyard, the Imperial Army and the Roahn Guards were standing guard, their faces shaded in light and dark under the bright autumn sunlight.

As soon as Lil entered following the guidance of Shail, most of the tied-up men lifted their eyes and looked at her. The eyes of some were sharp, trying not to miss any clues about what may happen to their fates. Of course, those guys were a minority, and the rest were either watching her with pure curiosity, looking around trying to escape, looking scared and shaking or even sleeping peacefully. Among all the different groups, there was one man who stood out alone and aloof.

Lils eyes glided over the wall and eventually reached the side of the man sitting diagonally against it.

He once seemed infinitely dependable and strong I could never have expected to see him look so shabby years later

Lil shifted her gaze and noticed the tied hands behind his back.

Maxwell.

..!

Alarmed by the sudden tension tightening Maxwells back, Shail blocked the front of Lil, albeit slightly, and gripped the hilt of the sword. However, Maxwell just sat back.

As you can see Ive come back safely. Im assuming you figured out by now that the Marquess also made it out alive, right?

You mustve something to say.

I came to listen.

Still, Maxwell remained stubborn.

Ive expected this though. With the mercenaries around us watching, he has to save face in front of them.

I heard you moved with the mercenaries. Then theyre here too, right? Unfortunately for you, we can tell the difference between a band of bandits and mercenaries. I can let them go right now. I wonder what my brother has to say when they go claim their balance. And once my brother finds out that you are alive and that Ive caught you, things will truly become interesting.

Lil waited for his response out of consideration for their long friendship, but in the end, he was impertinent and made her wait too long.

Shail.

At her call, Shail immediately moved and grabbed Maxwells shoulder. The latter rose obediently as if he knew that any form of resistance would be futile. When Lil faced Maxwell again, she noticed that his left cheek and cheekbone were swollen dark red. Upon further inspection, there were many small scratches scattered over his body; clear signs of being on the wrong side of a beating.

Shail, who noticed Lils gaze, elaborated.

Sir Linhardt couldnt contain his anger

Ah.

Hes calmed down now. But he almost lost his mind on the cliff yesterday. Miss Levi barely managed to appease him, thereby saving this mans life.

No wonder. Who wouldnt lose their mind when their own flesh and blood fell from such a height, and the culprit was only a few feet away?

Nevertheless, Lil thought it fortunate that Linhardt had regained his senses.

In the officials residence, which occupied the entirety of the small three-story building, the drawing room was left empty for interrogations.

Its ridiculously cosy for questioning criminals.

Unsurprisingly, Shail looked distraught at the cushion embroidered with a light blue floral pattern. As Lil walked over to the simple but carved tea table, she guessed what a peaceful village this must be.

Shail sat Maxwell across from her. When Lil noticed Shail taking a stand behind Maxwell, she waved to him.

Tell them to bring some tea. And release him from the ropes.

Yes? But

Do you not want to bring us the tea or do you not want to untie the ropes?

Both.

Do both anyway.

This time, unable to talk back, he stepped closely behind Maxwell. He then untied the older man and called a servant to bring the tea. Lil watched Shails movements and spoke when the servant brought out the tea almost immediately.

Please give us the room.

Somehow, Shail never listens to anything I say at once. I warned him not to let me repeat myself thrice, yet he still seems to think its ok to push it for a second time.

..?

Lil was only able to endure it twice because Shail was neither her subordinate nor her soldier. Meanwhile, Shail reluctantly took his steps only after Lil raised her eyebrows.

Ill wait outside

As they sat by the window, dense shadows of leaves swayed on the glass next to them

But even after a while, his pale, dry lips didnt seem to want to move at all.

What could he possibly be thinking? Despite the many witnesses, he exposed himself in order to kill Ed. Only someone prepared to die would be that reckless Thats why I didnt kill him and shot him in the arm instead of the head. Theres no use for him to die if hes my only piece of evidence.

Lets have some tea first.

Maxwell remained motionless with his hands folded in front of his teacup. But whereas Maxwells tightly clenched fists showed how difficult it was for him to handle the situation, Lil causally put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands.

She then threw him a rather cruel comment in a light tone.

Oh, did you notice? That I actually had them put poison in your cup?

..?!

As if to check if she was telling the truth, Maxwell slowly raised his head.

After all, I promised my brother that I would take revenge on anyone who dared to touch Edgar.*

Maxwell remained sullen but opened his fists. His fingers, trembling in the air, grabbed the handle of his teacup.

Rattle. Rattle.

The pottery shook mercilessly and made a noise of friction against the base. Lil glanced down at his rough hands.

I guess you want to die more desperately than I thought..

Maxwell put the teacup down with a clicking sound. As his brooding eyes turned to Lil, she lifted her chin from where it was resting.

Finally, a voice flowed from his lips.

Dont mock me.

Seeing this as mockery means youre fully aware of the fact that you may actually die, right?

Yes.

But now that it has come to this, what will you do?

I dont know.

Lil noticed his cracked voice as he spoke, and unknowingly offered the tea again.

Oh, just drink it.

Honestly, theres nothing in it. After all, its my loss if you die.

Maxwell, who was looking down at his teacup, laughed helplessly.

Maxwell.

As he emptied the teacup in one go, tea water came out on the back of his hand as he wiped his lips.

Seeing him finally responsive, Lil decided to get straight to the point without further delay.

Was this why you came to see me at that alley in Roahn? To tell me that my brother was trying to kill Edgar?

Lil observed Maxwell as he looked back at the window for a moment while his breathing became increasingly heavy. He took a deep breath and spoke without looking back at her.

I definitely warned you.

That was just a warning? Cut the crap. Your mission was something you tried to avoid because you were afraid of what you were ordered to do. You tried to tell me that because you didnt want me or Edgar to get hurt.

Why are you doing this

Because I have decided who to love and who to be with. Dont you dare try to persuade me otherwise. Dont waste your time. If you go back to my brother and start talking to him about this, then this will be the last time I show you leniency. This is a warning to let you know in advance that you shouldnt make the wrong decision in front of me.

Still, Maxwells face showed only anger and despair. There was no hint of resolve or faith in her.

Somehow it appears that this isnt the only weight hes carrying

Lil vocalised the words that were just lingering on the tip of her tongue till now.

Is Venua perhaps holding your family hostage?

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I remember him intimidating his subordinates ever since I was young.

If you want to live properly, start telling the truth.

At first, Maxwell snorted and stubbornly ignored Lil, but then suddenly raised his voice.

Why, My Lady, are you going to promise that you will save my family if I testify at the trial?!

No?

His face became increasingly distorted. As his eyes grew red, his jaw muscles moved noticeably as he clenched his teeth.

Did I say that?

As Maxwells fist hit the table, eyes filled with thick water droplets looked directly at Lil.

Youre the same! So stop pretending youre not!

Your damn clan Were the ones who die in the fight between him and you! We were born with the same eyes, nose, and mouth, but you rule over us as if youre part of a heavenly race who have the right to treat us as if we are mere livestock! You, My Lady, are no different from the Master!

If only you had been a little more interested in what kind of person I am, then you wouldnt have said something like that in front of me. Apart from that, just because you scream that Im the same as him doesnt make it true, so stop. Dont come to me and take your anger you have for my brother out on me and dont make me repeat myself thrice.

..!

Maxwell, who had turned red to the tip of his head, shook his shoulders forcibly. He then took a deep breath, covering his face with both his hands as if trying to calm his emotions. A breath escaped between his fingers because he couldnt control his panting.

Whether you decide to cooperate or not, I wont stand by and watch Alicia and your children fall unfairly because of my brother. If I didnt know, I wouldnt have cared, but now that I do know, I wont sit by and watch. Of course, that includes your mother, too.

Maxwell put his hands down. Despite still struggling to face Lil, he opened his eyes.

How how can I trust you?

Maxwells heart is already turning. Although his loyalty may not lie with me yet, it seems certain that it has left Venua a long time ago. I had a hunch when I encountered him in that alley. If we only had a little more time back there, then maybe No, assumptions are useless now.

You have the absolute freedom to choose whether or not youll trust me. It doesnt matter to me if you dont. However, you already said it with your own mouth. That I care too much for those below me*. Maybe thats not the way I would put it, but whatever. It was when the Devito Harbour was just around the corner, that you threatened me with those words. So, are you truly asking me that now?

Lil raised her index finger and tapped her own temple.

Calculate and judge objectively. Are you willing to endure the shame bestowed on you by the family you hate so much and simply shut up about it? Are you going to allow Venuas shadow, which hasnt even been cast down in reality, to control you? Are you going to let your actions convince my brother that his way is right and that youll be his loyal subordinate throughout the years to come? Even worse, are you going to stand by and watch dozens or hundreds of people become the same victims?

Im Im just a veteran soldier from a family that bought their title. When I make decisions, I dont think about such a big future.

Of course, the decisions you make can have a big impact on your future, so why not make them?

His heaving shoulders gradually sank, and Maxwell soon let out a desperate sigh.

Sometimes, it feels like you treat the Master in an absurdly small way.

I dont treat him as big or small, I just treat him as I see him.

After all, we were born with the same eyes, nose, and mouth.

Maxwell smiled faintly.

Seeing him smile like that makes me think of Ed and I can feel the human compassion for this man pass over me. I know all too well how much trouble he mustve suffered while travelling long distances with Venua, and everything my brother mightve done

Ive always known that youre a person with a lot of pride. And you know what? I liked that about you

You said you hated searching for me and being treated like a hunting dog. In that case, dont forgive the person who destroyed the pride in your life. Dont become livestock by subjecting your life to the one who treats you as such. You know as well as me that theres a great way to cut off the leash, so why do you let yourself still be dragged around?

You make it sound like its easy

Easy? When did I ever say it would be easy? I never said that.

With Maxwell's deepening sigh, he grabbed the kettle from the trolley and poured himself another cup of tea. His hand gestures became much more polite than before and he drank from an angle prescribed by etiquette. He had even offered to pour Lil another cup, but with a simple head shake she had indicated that she was okay.

What are you going to do, My Lady?

What?

From here on out

My father is in critical condition, so I have to at least see him in person before he passes. How is he?

Im sorry to inform you, but Dr. Limue said it would be difficult to make it to the end of this year
I see.

Lil was reminded of the winter she spent with her mother, Henrietta.

I remember I could only cry without knowing exactly why. My heart had ached so much that I woke up every night. The pain becomes vivid every time I recall it, but I dont want to get sentimental in front of Maxwell.

In the end, Lil just finished her cooled tea in order to regain her senses.

Once youve made your decision, you can let me know through Shail. Ill face you with a decent amount of respect, but everyone except me will treat you as a criminal who attempted to murder their lord, so you need to be careful. Youll also need to prepare a few things to show your sincerity. And think about your answers to my other questions as well. For now, were done here.

Yes.

Oh, and just know that even if you testify in Sesbron, youll still have to pay for your crime. But Ill write you a petition.

Lil turned her body without further delay. Unbeknownst to her, the drawing room had a painting depicting an angel hanging by the door.

I cant believe I interrogated Maxwell with this door as the background

With a shaky heart, Lil grasped the handle carved with the symbol of angel wings.

My lady

Lil turned to face him.

Maxwell, now standing up, was enveloped by shadows of leaves swaying in the wind. His face was speckled with dark red bruises. By the constant swaying of the leaves, his face looked dark at times and bright at others.

Im sorry.

Lil stood there without answering. Instead, she was sizing him up.

Is he sincere or is he just trying to gain belated favour with his apology? No, it doesnt matter either way. Ill judge his sincerity when I look for him again in the future.

Nodding her head towards Maxwell, Lil slipped through the crack in the door.

Enzo Guetin, an old servant and confidant of the Duke of Mireille, walked quickly without taking a moment to wipe the sweat flowing from under his wig. In his hand was a piece of paper that had just been delivered and as though fearing he would lose it, he was holding on to it so tightly that the bones on the back of his skinny hand stood out.

When Enzo finally reached the front of the restaurant, he shouted loudly.

His His Grace!

The servant waiting in front of the door asked the purpose out of curiosity.

Mister Guetin? Whats going on?

Urgent its urgent. Take me to His Grace right away!

They passed through the hall where lunch was in full swing and entered a private room reserved for special guests. Next to the brightly lit window, the restaurant manager was standing close to Mireille, explaining a variety of wine and dishes. In one corner, a band was playing a gentle piece. When Enzo and the servant came in, the managers stern gaze directed towards them.

Mireille slowly turned his head. He was an attractive man with bluish grey* eyes under his neatly swept white hair. Although he didnt look too happy about having his supposedly satisfying meal interrupted, Enzo knew very well that Mireille wouldnt show his true personality to outsiders.

Mireille raised his hand to stop the band.

He mustve his reasons.

With a single glance, the manager and the orchestra left the inner room. As soon as the door closed, Mireille put his silverware down as if throwing it away.

What?!

I-I thought you needed to see this It happened just two days ago.

Enzo, who had belatedly straightened the crumpled part, held the paper out to Mireille.

Mireilles cold voice fell on the top of Enzos head.

What happened here?

Its literally like it says. It looks like the Imperial Army has invaded the forest.

..!

Reference:

However, you already said it with your own mouth. That I care too much for those below me It was when the Devito Harbour was just around the corner, you threatened me with those words = chapter 234 = Lil refers to the pursuit scene right after the prison break when she stayed behind so that the two carriages with crew members could escape. In the conversation between Lil and

Maxwell that followed, Lil said: Have you ever spared those you deem below you? We now think that we made a translation error and that this was actually Maxwell saying that her care for those below her, will be a weakness. We will revise the text of chapter 234 this weekend.

Footnote:

Mireilles eye colour: The people that read or are still reading the webtoon might remember that Mireilles eyes were green. We did a quick search through the past volumes and the colour of Mireilles eyes has never been mentioned before. Therefore we assume that for the webtoon they just picked a colour and decided to not stay true to the novel. We, on the other hand, will go with what the author decided and use the bluish grey colour.

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As his chair was pushed back roughly, Mireille jumped from his seat.

Why?

Bandits stormed into the village of Kano and wreaked havoc. I think the Imperial Army reached the forest while hunting them down.

Have they been caught?

Yes.

Mireille slammed the table.

Damn it!

As his anger didnt subside, Mireille struck the table with his palm a few more times.

The message probably reached Count Lazilire and others as well. Currently, Your Grace is the closest to the forest.

But Kano? Where even is that?

Its a small village at the entrance to the main road of the Great Trade Route. Its very close to Roahn. I guess I could meet up with the nearby Imperial Army and

And advertise my involvement? For now, isnt the only thing the Imperial Army is interested in the bandits?

Y-Yes, pardon me, I made a mistake

Our timid Majesty is sensitive to public opinion, so his main concern would be the bandits who have not been caught.

Enzo nodded deeply.

No matter how rampant the bandits are, large merchant groups like the Garni Merchant Association are safe because weve employed a large number of mercenaries to protect us. Therefore, the targets of the petty thieves are mainly small and medium-sized merchants, who either belong to emerging aristocrats or ordinary imperial citizens. However, as the capital-holding commoners are increasingly incorporated into the educational system, the voices of such people

become increasingly louder in these modern times. In addition, public opinion hasn't been friendly to the traditional nobility, including clan families, who are formed mainly around the new class*

Lost in thought, Mireille had unknowingly jumped to his feet and was now pacing around the table. It's better to lay low for a while. Tell those guys who are still in the forest* to completely cut off all contact for the time being and go into hiding.

Yes, I understand.

We also have to check the scale of the interference of the army, so send Jean towards that village first and have him report it.

Enzo knew Jean as the gloomy man who went around investigating various parts of the empire under orders from Mireille. And recently, he received a generous reward from the duke, after he had been asked for key information from Obernyu. Enzo didn't appreciate Mireille's fondness for Jean. This was because he was shocked that this idiot, whose origins weren't known, didn't know his place and was now imitating a Sesbron's accent instead of using his original accent as he did at first.

Enzo grabbed the back of Mireille's chair as his master was about to sit down again. He then gently pushed the chair in and rang the bell.

The manager who quickly returned, greeted Mireille politely as if he was seeing him for the first time while Mireille held his noble stance gracefully.

Bring in the meal again.

Lil, curled up on the blanket as she had dozed off, woke up to the sound of something rustling beside her. She habitually checked behind the window and saw that the sun was setting. The red colour of the sky was painting the entire room.

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When she looked next to her, she saw Ed frowning and squinting at her, prompting her to instinctively make a hand visor over his forehead.

Are you awake?

A dry voice asked in a whisper.

How long have I been lying down?..

Three days. How are you feeling? Are you feeling thirsty?

As Levi had taught her, Lil called for a maid, who in turn went to fetch the doctor straight away. Moments later Levi rushed into the room like a storm.

The prognosis is good. We don't have to worry about him being in critical condition anymore.

She quickly walked out again without adding anything, leaving the maid to gently close the door that she left wide open. In case he was wondering what she was up to, Lil explained to Ed.

Levi is the busiest here. She has a lot of patients.

Here as in

Were still in Kano. Lord Picard gave you his bedroom.

What happened?

Nothing much. Linhardt brought in the Imperial Army, who arrested and transported the remnants of the bandits. News is spreading that His Majesty has wiped out the bandits in the Risch Mountains on a large scale.

What about you?

Me? Thanks to you, Im not hurt anywhere, Im fine.

As she said that and shrugged her shoulders, Ed grabbed her left wrist. He looked intently at the cotton cloth wrapped around her arm while she answered.

Its not infected. Its recovering well.

Im glad youre fine.

Im not completely fine yet, but Im getting healthier by the day.

Rather, now that my whole body is brimming with vitality, the occurrence of having my stomach pierced by a sword feels like it has happened in a past life. Leaving only Ed and Levi still sensitive about it. In addition, the side effects of the medication no longer persist and my hair no longer falls out.

Lil had long since acknowledged that her doctors had a tendency to be hard to understand, so she didnt say anything else and just carried on with what she wanted to tell him.

The bones of your upper arm and shoulder were shattered.

Ed answered roughly.

Figured.

Lil had spoken calmly to suppress her worries, but in reality, she wasnt calm at all. So when Ed expressed his feelings as casually as he did, her temper flared.

What? You figured? Does it make sense that you still rode a horse? Are you crazy?

I couldnt help it.

You couldve just asked for a ride.

If I had done that, we wouldnt have been able to arrive on time

Hes right While Ed was lying unconscious, I tried to recollect my memories of that incident countless times, but there was no other way

Even though it made sense in her head, Eds loss of consciousness from excessive bleeding was a difficult matter to accept. Annoyed for no reason, Lil lifted her pillow and placed it next to him. Eds eyes remained fixed on her as he only moved his mouth.

Huh?

..!

There was no way she would hit him in his current condition, but the increasing annoyance compelled her to hit at least something. That was why she started grounding her fist in the pillow next to him.

Argh!

..?

It hurts

How can it hurt you when Im only hitting the pillow?

Just mentally

..?!

Ed pouted his lips pitifully.

I just want you to hug me

Ed then raised his good arm and made a rough round shape. Seeing how it seemed like his arm strength hadnt yet returned, Lil felt sorry for him and wanted to hug him back as well, so she lazily crept into his arms. Or she was about to when it suddenly occurred to her that even though it was Eds healthy shoulder, she shouldnt lean on the body of a seriously injured patient.

Lil pulled her arms, which were already wrapped around him, over his head.

Hmm?

Ill be the one to give you a hug.

..?

She then wiggled her arm between his head and the pillow. Bending her arm slightly, she leaned on the pillow next to him, intending to give Ed her arm as a pillow.

This is how it should be done.

They lay side by side in an awkward shape. Once Ed had to crumple his own shoulder inward to rest his head on her shoulder, he found it difficult to adjust his posture and stretched his neck toward Lil a few times before giving up.

If it were under more normal circumstances, I wouldve given him an earful about trying harder. But because our position was already bad to begin with, theres nothing I can do about it.

Ed grunted.

It hurts

Its too hard. Really

He kept making groaning sounds as if he was dying.

Its obviously just for show, but strangely enough, whenever he does this, it softens me and at the same time, it makes me want to join in on the rhythm.

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Lil removed her arm from the back of his head. But even that didnt go too smoothly. His head abruptly lost its support and fell straight down on the pillow.

Ack!

Even though his exclamation pricked her conscience for a moment, she chose to ignore it and went down to the bottom of the pillow to lie down. Instead of leaning on his shoulder, she placed her face next to his and wrapped her arm around him. As they were lying still like that, Eds body began to tremble more and more. Lil clenched her hand that was on his broad chest and grabbed the hem of his shirt.

Dont you dare laugh Im warning you.

Kkkk Hnnggh

Hold it in. Dont you dare.

Ha-ha Hahahaha!

I told you to hold it in

Her weak warning was only drowned out by laughter. Lil quickly raised her upper body and glared at him. Ed frowned as much as he could but continued to laugh through his pain. His laughter became so messy that at one point Lil didnt know if he was laughing or groaning. It went on for a while before Ed grabbed his head, his hair having become a mess on his pillow.

Look at this, your entire body is shaking.

Lil gritted his teeth tightly.

Stop it, really.

I think I need to ask Levi for some headache medicine.

..!

Aww!

Lil, unable to bear the shame, kicked the pillow that was rolling at her feet. Of course, in the meantime, Ed started laughing again.

This is why I never take the initiative to be affectionate first.

Alarmed by the blanket that Ed had lifted while half-rolling in laughter, Lil looked under it. His leg, which was at risk of bleeding again with excessive movement, was barely moving.

Hows your leg?

Levi told Lil that Ed would recover with time, but she still wanted to check for herself.

Ed, who was still smiling, stopped laughing when her eyes met his. Lil quickly glanced down at his legs that were exposed beneath the drapery. One thing stood out. It was the part in the middle protruding from his girdle.

Ed answered straightforwardly.

I think it will be hard to walk properly for a while.

Lil sighed, emphasising the seriousness of the situation.

This isnt the time to laugh like this. You almost died.

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Youre right. I wouldve died on that cliff already if it werent for you.

Did I just hear that right? Didnt you say you wouldve easily swam all the way to the shore?

Ed muttered while avoiding Lils eyes.

Truthfully, that was more of a bluff

What?

But in my defence, there have been countless times I survived

Did you or did you not actually know that you were the target?

I wasnt sure, thats why I decided to split up with you.

Lil glared at Ed while covering him with the blanket again. Although the blanket was pulled up to his neck, leaving only his face exposed, Ed tried to push the tip away with his chin, as if it didnt please him, but it was all in vain.

So, are you going to continue to make decisions like that on your own?

Ed, who was now completely buried in his pillow, shook his head.

No. I reflected a lot in the cabin.

Good job.

Lils lips touched his forehead. After she also stroked his head, Ed gathered his eyebrows together in a mixture of confusion and displeasure.

Why do I feel like Im being treated like a child right now?

Because you are. And since you wont be able to walk well from now on, Ill have to carry you on my back after all.

That doesnt sound as terrible.

Ed slowly reached out and wiggled his hand up her thigh. Lil, in turn, tugged at his cheek. Both his lips stretched to the side as he made a groaning sound.

Stop thinking about insidious thoughts for a while.

Why?

What do you mean, Why? Look at the state of your body.

Well only know for sure if we give it a try

There were a lot of times when I tried to initiate something during my recovery, but you always told me it wasnt possible yet.

Ed was sullen and downcast. Lil, who took her hand off his cheek, put her arm around him and laid down on the blanket.

Sleep a lot and recover quickly. This is what you always said to me.

Surely you wont turn your back on your own advice, right?

After rolling his eyes and taking a last glance at Lil, Ed eventually closed his eyes.

As the setting sun peeked through his eyelashes, Lil smiled mischievously and patted his chest.

On her way to the officials residence, now functioning as a clinic, to meet Levi, Lil encountered familiar faces carrying buckets of water next to a quiet garden. When she stopped, Alain and Jericho waved their hands.

Oi, Captain! Over here!

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Changing direction, Lil walked towards them at a brisk pace, putting her index finger in front of her lips. Her eyes widened and she whispered as if she was hissing.

Stop calling me Captain!

Jericho blinked at her blankly.

Then what?

Just call me Lil.

Aye.

Jericho smiled and smoothed out the servant clothes Lil had brought him before. His wild gesture, however, caused water from the bucket to splash and stain his vest.

But why fetch buckets? You should be lying down when youre injured.

Alain put the water buckets down on the ground and raised his upper body, sticking out his flat stomach in a deep stretch.

That doctors skills are so good that Im not even sure if Im sick anymore. That the people of the Empire have the privilege of receiving this type of medical care

Even if this is the Empire, this is not something for everyone to enjoy. You guys got lucky that Levi was nearby and offered to treat you.

Jericho intervened without notice.

Dont the women of the Empire just wear skirts as big as blankets and stay at home? But the Captain and also the Doctor, you all move around. Well, I know, the Doctor isnt originally from the Empire but rather from the Northern Continent

As you can see, that perspective isnt right, and again, Jericho, Im not the Captain.

Have you forgotten how high the bounty on my head is? Unless you want to have me killed, be careful of what you say.

Jericho, curling his lips, nodded his head.

I didnt think of that

Their expressions are much brighter than I expected, especially considering theyre on the land of an Empire they hate so much. I cant believe theyre even bringing water to treat the empires people.

By the way, why do you look so jolly? Isnt this the land of absolute evil?

Jericho scratched the back of his head and grumbled.

Well isnt everyone the same wherever you go?

That doctor doesnt treat us like were nothing, thats why we do the same. Just as there are people like Julio and people like us among the southerners, there will be a mixture of people in the Empire who cannot be grouped together as well.

Still, it cant be that easy.

Then what? Do we have to keep our guards up and point our guns at every imperial bastard? If we dont get noticed, well be able to return to the South safely, right? Didnt the Captain say there should be as little friction as possible between us and the Empire?

Youre right.

If so, then what more could you want?

Hes right. Theres no better way for them to lay low than this.

Lil lifted one of the four buckets they had set down.

Lets head in.

As they entered the side door leading to the kitchen, a rush of heat enveloped them. It seemed as if all the cauldrons in the mansion had been put to work, both large and small black cauldrons were filled with boiling water. One of the servants working in the kitchen took the bucket from Lil, while Alain and Jericho left, saying they had to chop firewood.

Everyone was busy in the ground floor hall where Levis maids held medical tools and ground cotton cloth with familiarity. The rest of the mansions servants were carrying trays and trolleys containing simple meals.

Seeing how each injured person lay on a blanket spread out at regular intervals, it also seemed like all the blankets from the village were brought here.

Injured soldiers and regular citizens were laying alternately next to each other, making it not only possible for the soldiers to keep watch, but also to tend to the more severely wounded.

Just a few years ago, even on battlefields with overflowing casualties, patients werent cared for in such a systematic way, but perhaps because of the small number of personnel or because of Levis excellence, the management of the wounded has become much more efficient.

Among the many people attending the patients, Lil found a familiar maid and approached her.

Naneta.

The maid, with her black hair tied up in a tight ponytail, looked up at Lil.

Oh, hello, My Lady.

Wheres Levi?

Shes in the boudoir upstairs. Just go up the central stairs and head to the living room on the left.

Thank you.

Naneta bobbed her head.

Levi has several maids who stick around as her entourage. Some of whom even boast almost the level of knowledge of a doctor, claiming that from the moment Levi settled in Roahn, they were brought with her in her rounds and were recipients of her knowledge. I even heard Levi say that after she completes her advanced medicine course, shell support them in earnest.

Lil was proud of Levi for no reason. As she was so happily walking around, she ran into Picard on the way to the main staircase.

Oh. My lady.

Lil gave a simple nod.

Sir Picard.

How is the condition of the Marquess?

He seems to be fine.

Oh, thank goodness. Hey! Our Admiral even survived a fall off a cliff! After all, he has won so many naval battles, so whats the big deal about a mere bandits bow? Hahahaha!

I know, right?

As Lil laughed half-heartedly, Picard stopped laughing upon seeing her expressionless face. It made him blush and roll his eyes away from her, looking uncomfortable and awkward. He clearly wanted to make a good impression on the woman who appeared close to the admiral, but he didnt know what to say.

By the way, My Lady, did I ever mention to you that you are truly beautiful

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But isnt it strange? He was attacked by a mere bandit, but that bandit was skilled enough to shoot him with a bow while riding horseback. In addition, no one among the rest of the bandits knows him. As for the Imperial Army, meeting whats expected of them is their highest priority, so it seems like they are trying to lump everyone into the same group, but Im not sure about that. I heard about the concerns that there may be a second group besides the group we thought we caught. What do you think, Sir Picard?

..!

The more Lil spoke, the paler Picards face grew.

Because of my choice of words, hes probably thinking that this small town could be attacked again.

Lil continued her half-hearted acting.

Ah, I overheard this when Edgar and Linhardt were talking, it left me speechless, too. It was a slip of the tongue, please pretend you didnt hear anything.

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She nodded again and walked past Picard to climb the stairs.

Its obvious that Picard will never pretend not to hear First, he will ask the surrounding soldiers about the authenticity of the speculations, then he will go out of his way in order to gather opinions from nearby villages. Next, he will post a petition to strengthen the troops stationed here. Nowadays, gathering public opinion isnt difficult because there are unions and federations everywhere. And if hes lucky, he might even set dinner with Linhardt and make his anxiety known. It might be possible. Then, just as Linhardt had pre-arranged, all he has to do is seriously recite his suspicions about this certain guy named Maxwell.

Lil turned to the left and peered into the open living room. As Naneta said, Levi was busy treating patients. As Lil entered, the brown-haired maid next to Levi nodded in acknowledgement. Lil was about to wait for the treatment to be over, when Levi asked first.

Whats the matter?

Oh, I know youre busy, but

Levi, who was stitching a patients upper arm, answered.

Go on, tell me. Im listening.

I want you to give me a diagnosis, but a fake one

Levis hand moved a few more times before the maid lifted her scissors and cut the thread. After finishing treating her patient, Levi approached Lil. Blood stains decorated the white apron that she wore.

What do you mean?

Its not too complicated, its actually quite simple. Please declare someone dead even though he isnt.

Levi, noticing that this wasnt a normal request, lowered her voice.

Who?

Its

Clouds flowed and obscured the sun, leading darkness to instantaneously envelop the ground like a veil. Beyond the cliffs of the Great Trade Route, waves crashed into the sea.

Normally, the main street where merchants and passengers came and went had a flow going back and forth between east and west, but now for some reason, people were standing still and not moving at all. They were standing in a circle as if watching an accident or a fight, and everyone was talking on top of the other.

Venua got off his horse and headed toward the crowd gathered on one side of the Great Trade Route.

After being released from Roahn owing to the Duke of Mireilles identity guarantee, Im now once again moving in pursuit of Liloa It shouldnt have taken this long It occurs to me that Mireille mightve been buying time to his own advantage by delaying vouching for my identity Perhaps Mireille has figured out my true purpose

Growing impatient, Venua had even abandoned his carriage and continued on horseback.

But before Mireille can get his hands on Liloa, I have to make the first move

However, it wont be that easy with the Marquess of Roahn next to her

He laughed lowly while muttering.

Its even more absurd that I have to put my trust in someone who has been nothing but a thorn in my eye

A long line of cigarette smoke came out of Venuas mouth as he trailed his steps. The closer he got to the passers-by, the more vivid their voices became.

Hey guys! Did you hear that the Admiral was injured?

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No, how come?

I heard he got like that while catching bandits?

Isnt it the pirates doing?

From travellers holding on to the reins of their donkeys, to merchants who abandoned their carts and gathered together, and even the middle class wearing formal hats and outerwear, they all listened intently to the news about the admiral.

Someone shouted something groundless.

Since hes the Admiral, wouldnt it be more suited for pirates to go after him rather than bandits?

You dont know that

What do you mean I dont know that? There are already hundreds or thousands of pirates with a grudge against him!

The royal guards came up behind Venua and escorted him, who then asked no one in particular.

What happened to the mercenaries?

They dont exactly know what orders Maxwell received or who gave them. They were only responsible for causing a disruption.

Venua briefly pondered it over before turning around. When he was some distance away from the crowd he gave his command.

Make sure Maxwell is dead before coming back.

Yes, Sir.

If that ungrateful bastard asks for his life to be spared, you know what to do, right?

Yes.

Venua looked back at Milo, judging that the answer was somewhat awkward. Milo was now Maxwells successor as platoon commander.

Why, are you worried about your former boss?

No, Sir.

Yes. Its good that you got promoted because he left his position vacated. That incompetent bastard Milo said while looking at his master.

How should I take care of the body

Venua, who was on his horse again, looked down at him. The new commander lowered his head as he met eyes that showed nothing but contempt.

Try not to disappoint me.

Yes, Sir.

Venua grabbed the reins. As his horse took the first step, five royal guards wearing black robes followed him and turned their horses while a man who was secretly watching them in the crowd rolled back his hood as soon as they turned. Although he had a shabby appearance, his eyes shone sharply.

Jean kept his eyes on Venua and his group until they disappeared from his sight.

Lil waited patiently for Ed to finish writing his letter.

Are you done yet?

Just a moment

She tried not to look at the encrypted letter Ed was writing. As a result, her gaze naturally turned to his messenger pigeon. When her eyes met, the pigeon raised its beak and squeaked.

Lil frowned and looked puzzled at that creatures arrogant gesture, but then shook her head.

What does a beast know?

All done.

Ed sealed the letter and motioned, prompting the bird sitting on the red satin cushion to lift its wings gracefully. Ed then tied a communication tube to its exposed leg under its wing.

As he stroked the birds head, the beast, which had closed its eyes for a while to savour the touch, stood up. It flapped its wings and circled the ceiling before it flew through the open window.

Lil asked, staring at the pigeon gradually turning into a dot.

He probably remembers me, doesnt he?

Why?

On the Bell Rock I shot the air around him. It seemed like he was glaring at me earlier.

Perhaps he might be smart enough to remember. Ill provide a venue for your reconciliation next time.

Lil nodded her head. After all, she knew full well that military pigeons were as smart as pet animals.

Ed said, standing up.

Lets get started.

Here.

Facing Ed, Lil held out her hands and let him grab them. According to Levis diagnosis, Ed needed some training until he got used to walking on his own again. Lil helped him take his steps, slowly backing away as if she were helping a child take their first steps. She smiled when she saw the expression on Eds face suggesting that he wasnt liking it.

Lil teased playfully.

This is like childcare.

Ed, who had been looking down at her legs, glanced up.

You couldve come sideways, youre the one who decided to walk like that.

Nah, this is more comfortable.

You look like youre having fun?

No way.

Although Ed has a slight limp, it isnt so much that he cant walk at all. Should I say that he has great resilience or that I have good patience?

When Levi had watched Ed, who was walking much better than she expected, she just disappeared like the wind again, only telling them he would be like that for a while, leaving Lil with no one else to ask for advice.

Lil said half-jokingly.

I wanted to carry you around, but apparently youre much too healthy

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After teasing Ed, Lil went to his side and put her arm around him for support, just as he wanted. However, as she got closer and walked with him for a few steps, Ed suddenly let out a laugh.

Why are you laughing?

It reminds me of Panichi*.

Ah, even then

Lil recalled that dawn. She carried Ed down the stairs, supporting the critically ill patient, who had been shot in her stead.

At that time, you didnt want to even touch me longer than necessary. I remember you pulling my arm a bit recklessly after I asked you to support me. I was so grateful that I looked like I would tear up.

Lil muttered.

But I never thought we would end up like this

Me neither.

Tell me honestly. Did you throw it on purpose then?

What?

The lump of dirt. The lump of dirt that hit me on the head back then.

Ed drew his eyebrows together as if he felt misunderstood.

No?

Lil widened her eyes before glaring at him.

Are you for real?

I swear its true!

Why does it sound like a lie?

I feel really wronged here!

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Eds rehabilitation session was completed in less than two hours. Lil was sceptical at first, but as she walked with him, she found him getting accustomed to his ebony cane very easily. The cane supported his body perfectly as if he was familiar with having an injured leg. However, since one of his arms was broken and wrapped with a bandage and a leather belt, its movements were restricted. So, the problem and therefore the real challenge was that Ed was left with no other free hand.

In case of an attack, can you defend yourself?

As if he found it ridiculous that he was even asked something like that, Ed snorted.

With this.

Lil watched the cane he was waving in front of him.

Does he mean to use it like a spear or something?

Nonetheless, it was clear that her worries were unfounded when she recalled the scars covering every inch of his body. She had always heard that Admiral Retiro had led and survived numerous naval battles, but to her, those abstract rumours had lacked vivid sentiment before.

Lil stared at Eds back as he was going down the stairs.

Now, after watching closely from the side, I finally understand. His physicality and incredible mental strength are tightly intertwined like weft and warp, contributing to his overall vitality. His resilience is simply incomparable to anyone elses.

After they went out the front door of the mansion, they rode down to Smugglers Forest. It was a sunny day without a speck of fog and their horses hooves crunched on the dry leaves. Alain and Jericho followed Lil and Ed. Since Jericho didnt actually know how to ride a horse properly, Alain had to ride a bigger one, so that Jericho could sit behind him. Jericho explained that he rode a horse

without any hesitation purely on instinct just so they could sprint out of the forest, but now that hes come to his senses, he couldnt ride one till his life depended on it.

Alain steered his horse beside Lil. When she looked behind him, she spotted Jericho leaning on Alains back and holding his waist tightly.

If you just help us with this, well be able to quickly send you on a boat from the next city. Ed is also in the clear now, so well leave town as soon as we finish our business here.

But whats with the forest? I heard that that nobleman from the Northern Continent had searched the entire area already. So why are we going back?

Linhardt Retiro.

Oh, Mr. Linhardt? Come to think of it, they have the same last name? They must be family, right?

Lil corrected the title again.

Sir Retiro.

S Sir Retiro?

As Jericho stammered and repeated Lil, Alain shouted while sitting in front of him.

No, you bastard! What usable thing can you do if you cant even pronounce his title right? Sir Retiro! Come on, repeat after me!

Jericho looked at Lil as if asking why this damn old man was being harsh on him like this. But Lil agreed with Alain and shook her head strictly.

Youre already standing out. To avoid suspicion and disguise your identities, its best to learn the imperial nobles titles.

Its not even an exaggeration. There are no Southerners roaming freely in the Empires lands. For now, the soldiers and villagers are still a bit puzzled when Alain doesnt show any signs of hesitation as he speaks directly to Ed. But the longer they stay, the more suspicious they will be.

Lil intended to have them return safely from the next port, Simena.

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Unable to resist Alains urging, Jericho began practising in earnest.

Sir Retiro Sir Retiro

Ed, who was far in the front for a while, slowed down until he rode shoulder-to-shoulder with them and spoke up.

First, lets go to the cabin you were trying to take us to.

Why there?

Linhardt said that the ship escaped, but by that time, some yachts had probably already been sent to the beach with unloaded cargo. Then, in a situation where the Imperial Army was in pursuit, it wouldnt have been possible for them to reload the cargo that had already been unloaded. So, how do you think they handled it?

They mustve burned it.

But according to the soldiers who came down to investigate, there were no signs of anything being set on fire.

So thats why you want to go to that cabin? Well, come to think of it, those cabins arent hidden from plain sight for no reason The trees get denser on both sides of the coast. We couldnt even find where they were for the first day or two

But what are you trying to do by looking for smugglers?

Insurance.

Insurance?

Lil intervened for Ed.

Ah, there are so many people who want to kill me and Ed. We collected a lot of grudges together, so it cant hurt to gather some insurance here and there.

Alain, with an expression of understanding, nodded.

Well, considering all the things youve done Ahem! Hmm! I just heard the rumours

Lil laughed upon hearing Alain belatedly remembering the rumours surrounding Admiral Retiro, which he had long forgotten. Her laughter was so loud that small surrounding animals ran away in order to avoid them.

Lil, who soon felt pain in her stomach and clutched it, answered.

Dont worry. Collecting scalps is not one of his hobbies.

Ahem! Hmm! Still, the man-eating fish

He also said he never raised anything like that.

Instead of Alain, it was now Jericho who replied with a mixture of relief and joy.

Thats a relief. Actually, I didnt fully believe it either. If it was true, then its not something a human being could do. Thats just crazy.

At those words, the three of them, except for Ed, nodded at the same time. As they continued to talk about trivial things, they made their way through the forest.

Just a few days ago, when we were struggling to get out of this place, the scenery was extremely gloomy, but today its just refreshing. Even the sound of the waves is pleasant to be heard from afar.

Alain pulled the reins at an angle.

To the right here. Where the trees are a little more dense.

Under Alains guidance, they found a few cabins, but unfortunately they were all empty. There were no traces of a fire or of anyone moving cargo.

After inspecting the last one, Alain turned his horse around and spoke.

This leaves us with one last cabin to search.

As the group didnt find the results they were looking for, the atmosphere became a bit more downcast than before. Feeling a sudden thirst, Lil took the water bottle from her saddle to drink.

Afterwards, she spoke lightly, worried that Alain or Jericho felt an unnecessary sense of responsibility.

We dont really need insurance. Its something we can do without, right? Itll work out somehow. Still, I cant believe you actually remembered all these places. Even if we didnt find anything, it was a great help especially since were running out of time

We understand the seriousness of the situation, so you dont need to appease us. We know that much. We saw for ourselves how the doctors life was hanging by a thread that day. If Jericho hadnt brought the herbs, he wouldnt have been able to walk that far

Lil nodded.

Youre right.

Ed also looked back at Alain as if he suddenly remembered something.

Now that I think about it, I didnt even get to say thank you for helping me.

What? You dont have to. People from the same boat help each other

Oh my! No need to say things like that, Doctor

Jericho waved his hand politely.

Whenever I remember that time*, I feel nothing but terrible and ashamed Although the situation was complicated, Im just sincerely sorry about what happened.

Of course, no one among them didnt know to which incident he was refereeing. Alain just nodded in agreement, unable to open his mouth.

Not long after the group moved in silence, Alain stopped.

This is the only one left.

Here?

After cutting through the forest, they found themselves in front of a coastal cliff. Geographically, it seemed to be the northern end of the forest.

Look over there, Captain.

Where?

Alain moved his horse along the cliff with Lil following close behind him, craning her head. At first glance, it seemed like one side of the forest was blocked by a gigantic iron wall, but upon closer inspection, that wasnt the case. A long time ago, when the sea level was much higher, a gap was formed and smoothed out by the waves. The arched gap acted like a door in the yellowish stone wall. It was large enough for about three to four people to enter and exit the forest simultaneously and continue on the other side.

Lil looked up at the high cliff.

How did you find this place?

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All the smugglers know about this. You are aware of how many of those guys frequent Amiaeng, right? Through them, Ive basically heard every trick in their books.

Ed followed Alain as he drove his horse through the gap.

You have a capable crew.

Lil smiled confidently at what he said as she glanced back.

Of course.

The place they passed was the most shallow part of the cliff. It was a tiny gap that had been chipped away over time. Lil looked around her with some curiosity, but after they passed it, nothing really changed. The landscape, with its towering trees lined up in a straight line, seemed just like a replica of the forest they had ridden through.

The ecology here is really consistent.

If you get lost in a place like this, its almost impossible to find your way back. Thats why smugglers were able to take advantage of it.

Well, it has all the perfect conditions to avoid the Empires surveillance. They really figured this out.

The remaining cabin was found soon after. It was a house made of crudely split trees, with green moss and unidentifiable fruits clinging between the rough bark. The stem of a vine, hanging down on one side, swayed faintly in the wind.

This cabin was larger than the one Lil and Ed had stayed in.

Its suspicious that they kept it hidden so well But since our morale is already low and theres nothing good about getting excited in vain, lets just keep our mouth shut.

The group quickly dismounted their horses and each took out a weapon they were most comfortable with. Because Lil was concerned that Ed couldnt properly yield a weapon yet, she sent him to the back.

When there werent any signs of human presence, Lil beckoned, and Alain and Jericho clung to a nearby tree trunk on each side of her. Having waited with her rifle raised next to her ear, Lil eventually jumped out and took aim in front of her, causing a creature to fly above her head and screech suddenly.

After reaching the cabin, Lil put her back to the wall and listened. The moment she nodded her head, Jericho kicked in the door.

Bang!

The latch was torn off and the door opened wide. They rushed inside all at once but started coughing when the interior welcomed them.

Puetch! What is this?

Soot flew around as if something had been burned inside. At that same time, the hinge of the door that Jericho had kicked in, fell off with a screeching sound, and the door itself began to tipple over. The four of them evacuated outside in unison.

Ugh!

Ash followed them outside and poured out like a swarm of bees.

Thud!

When the door finally collapsed with the floor inside, black smoke burst out the entrance like a cannonball.

Is everyone alright?

Alain and Jericho, who had entered first, had half their faces painted black. Meanwhile, Lil looked back at Ed and saw soot on his chin. She thoughtlessly rubbed her fingertips along his philtrum to create a beard, before chuckling while looking at his confused face.

It suits you well.

What?

Finally realising what his face looked like, Ed extended his hand towards her as well. Lil tried to dodge, but she froze momentarily as Ed threw away his cane and approached her. Ed, who took hold of her in an instant, rubbed the area around her eyebrows diligently. Lil struggled in her own way, but because her determination to break free was half-hearted, she couldn't escape from his embrace.

This looks good on you, too.

Even if she couldn't see it herself, she could easily imagine the shape of her now charcoal-stained eyebrows. Lil began to laugh frantically along with Ed but abruptly stopped upon recalling Alain and Jericho's presence. She looked back at them in shock, whereas Ed followed her gaze with a look of regret on his face.

A tall, slender man and a short, stocky man were standing and watching them from a distance. Although their appearances were different, their facial expressions were strikingly the same. It looked like they were about to vomit. It was obvious even though their faces were covered in ash.

Avoiding her gaze, Alain turned towards the cabin and blurted out.

Dont mind us, have your fun

Jericho, feeling equally as awkward, picked up Ed's cane.

Here you go.

Ah, ah, it looks like no one is here!

Lil changed the topic a little late. But in any case, the fact that the group was this loud and that there was no response from anywhere nearby meant that they were indeed the only ones there.

Lil belatedly entered the cabin after Jericho had already opened all the windows wide. Burnt wooden boxes, whose sizes were typical for cargo boxes loaded on merchant ships, were scattered everywhere. Some were even stamped with the seal of the Chamber of Commerce.

Lil began rummaging through a few. Fortunately for them, none of the boxes were completely burned down because only the exterior part was touched by the flames.

It was very humid that day. Else, it would have all burned down.

Thank goodness.

It looks like they retreated in a hurry.

With the Imperial Army rushing in, it would be the end of them if their merchant ship got caught.

Slightly off topic. But I wonder what the Imperials smuggle.

Seeing how they tried to burn it, it must be something flammable, so it might be silk or paper. Or it could be fruit or spices.

Ed spoke, passing between them.

If they gathered and burned everything here, there should be more evidence laying around.

He started tapping his cane here and there on the floor. Despite the moustache and full beard, he still managed to look dignified. Lil caught up with him and stuck her head over his shoulder.

I've been curious since last time, but how did you know these guys have a habit of hiding things beneath the floor?

Oh, I was once on a smuggling ship

..?!

When you were already the Admiral?

Without taking his eyes from the floor, Ed simply nodded. Alain and Jericho gaped, but Lil just shook her head. Jericho, who managed to close his jaw, muttered.

It shouldn't come as a surprise by now

Ed tapped the floor with the tip of his cane.

This spot looks a little suspicious

Step aside.

Lil drew her dagger and stuck its tip between the wooden planks. She pressed down hard on the hilt until the board popped straight out. Underneath the floor were white cloths, blankets, and

You found something, alright.

Lil took out a box from under the blanket. It was a jewellery box. Inside were necklaces boasting a brilliant light, pearl earrings as thick as eyeballs, and a bracelet made of amber and emerald.

Alain, who was standing behind Lil's shoulder, widened his eyes.

This is crazy. Absolutely crazy!

Lil searched further to see if she could find anything else down there. Sure enough, there was a bundle of documents in the bottom compartment. It had the stamp of the Imperial Customs Office, but anyone could tell that it wasn't real. Jericho imitated Alain from the side.

It's fraud. Fraud!

Lil tilted the paper towards the window. As the page became brighter, the writing came into view.

It's a forged customs statement?

It's our insurance.

After concentrating on the content for a bit longer, Lil looked up at Ed. He still had his sooty beard, but this time, he was smiling contentedly through the blowing ash. Lil also raised her charcoal eyebrows happily as she held out the papers to him.

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With Eds recovery and the completion of the bandits arrest, work progressed steadily. Moreover, Levi isnt constrained to this place anymore as another doctor was brought in from a nearby town. And since Levi had already taken care of those who needed urgent care, the doctor who came to visit only has to keep an eye on the prognosis.

As a result, the group had no reason to delay their trip any longer. However, there was one problem that couldnt be resolved until the very last day of their departure.

Lil keenly watched the situation from a distance. She thought it wouldve been taken care of by now, so she came to get Lumiere out, but because the scuffle seemed to unexpectedly last for a longer time, she sat down on top of the wooden fence near the stable.

The front yard of the official residence was in a frenzy. The older man standing face to face with Linhardt was Major Gaspard, the commander of the Nior garrison, a unit of the Imperial Army dispatched to this region. Surrounding them were the imperial army and the Roahn Guards, as well as ordinary citizens who came out to see the commotion despite their fears.

Picard, who was standing closely next to Linhardt and trying to intervene, had also brought along some influential locals.

Linhardt has done a pretty good job in throwing the bone.

Lord Linhardt, we reserve the right to interrogate everyone involved.

Gaspard spoke sternly to Linhardt, even though Linhardt was much taller than him. In a way to make up for the height difference, the Major consciously straightened his back and puffed out his chest, causing the imperial military insignia on his dark green uniform to clang against one another.

I heard there are some people that even the bandits couldnt recognize, and they presumably look like mercenaries. Have you figured out their identity yet?

Picard shouted upon hearing about this unidentified mercenary.

Thats thats right! If you continue to ignore the mercenaries identity like this, then I I mean we, the Great Trade Route Village Association, the Great Trade Route Small Merchants Association, and the Grand Trade Route Workers Association, will not stand still! Who hired those mercenaries to destroy the village? Who is behind the attack? Even so, the damage caused by the bandits alone is severe enough, and with a new, unknown force joining in, we can no longer wait in vain for the military to solve the problem!

The Merchants Guild huddled behind Picard shouted.

Hes right Thats right!..

Linhardt was wearing a navy blue justaucorps under his travel robe. So compared to the tall and slim Linhardt, the fussing Picard was like a cicada on a tree. Gaspard spoke without even trying to hide his annoyance.

If there are indeed other forces behind the attack, we will figure it out.

In any case, in order for the Imperial Army to save face, its impossible to ignore multiple civil complaints to this extent. This comes as no surprise, really.

Picard was still distrustful, and Linhardt asked in a monotonous tone.

Then, if the bandits are the ones involved, why do we have to hand over the belligerents, who attacked Edgar here in the forest, to the Imperial Army?

As I have said repeatedly, no other military force has the investigative authority that takes precedence over ours.

Its so strange. Whenever something is bestowed upon them in the name of privilege, people never seem to intend to let it go. This is especially true of those who became the new middle class through officer commissions and advancement into public service. Of course, none of these privileges are given for free, but while the old clan families enjoyed privileges as merit, the new forces have always criticised that. But at the same time, the emerging class desperately wants to behave in the same way as those clan families

These people have nothing to do with the bandits of the Risch Mountains, so it is not a matter for the imperial army to resolve.

The forest beneath the cliff is His Majestys land, and His Majestys land is within our jurisdiction.

Then how do you explain Edgars massive injuries due to your failure to properly protect this land? If you claim that even the forest is an unofficial garrison, you will not be able to avoid responsibility for this.

That

Besides, there are a lot of rumours in this area that smugglers favour this forest. Did you ever bother to further check up on that?

The issue of smuggling is a thing of the past, dating back to the old days.

If youre going to claim the land as the Empires garrison, you should at least be aware of the latest developments. Have you been given all this responsibility without knowing anything? Pride wont protect your life. If I were you, I would be more careful, Major.

should be more careful before carelessly mentioning such a grave felony.

Thats not the point Im trying to make, we were talking about Edgars injuries.

We must first inquire Admiral Retiro for trespassing on His Majestys land without permission. Dont forget, we helped him. Without our help, he would never have been able to get out of the forest alive, and yet youre trying to hold us responsible. Im not happy about this.

Linhardt, appalled by Gaspards shamelessness, pressed his chin.

While this is a unit of the Imperial Army that clearly isnt involved in the smuggling, that man doesnt seem to have any intention of solving the problem.

At that time, someone approached from the backyard and the spectators split to two sides. Even though the man who came through the crowd was limping while using a cane, he appeared incredibly refined.

Aha!

It was a dramatic exclamation from an all-too-familiar voice and soon Eds cheerful smile came into view.

Its at least a good thing to know that you are aware that smuggling is indeed treason, Major.

Admiral Retiro?

With Ed standing next to Linhardt, their appearance looks even more threatening. Their elongated, solemn, and dark outfits accentuated that. Its a shame though, the Roahn Guards standing behind them are wearing civilian clothes, but if they were also in uniform no

Lil frowned at her realisation.

We already stand out a lot Is it too paranoid of me to assume that Ed can still be a target?

Amid Lils thoughts, her target of interest spoke.

Thank you for the advice. You can trust that I will be careful from now on, Major. However, I dont have to go into details about how many traitors I caught in your stead, right?

The right to investigate

Ah! Now I understand, you greedy people should have had the sole right to investigate, thats right.

..!

When Ed spoke those words and indulgently waved his one good arm, Gaspards face contorted. Both Lil and Linhardt sighed at the same time, and Linhardt could even be seen touching his forehead from afar.

Ignoring all the reactions around him, Ed started walking into the centre of the crowd.

Of course, I will not hold you responsible for my injuries. From now on, I will even personally spread the word so that all the citizens of the Empire will show the utmost level of courtesy to the imperial troops, even if they encounter a criminal on the Great Trade Route.

Ed had one arm wrapped in a leather pad, and the sleeves of the robe on his empty shoulder fluttered as he walked. Even his leg was limping Lil noticed that he was limping more than usual as he used his cane. All the people gathered there noted that Ed looked heavily injured and was walking uncomfortably.

After all, the areas and shade of the trees where merchants rest next to the Great Trade Route are of course His Majestys land. His Majesty has allowed the Merchant Association to use the Great Trade Route, but he has never allowed them to use His Majestys shade. Even by mistake. Apparently, he also kindly added that if citizens happened to be attacked by bandits in such spaces, they must first pay for the crime of trespassing on royal property before complaining about the bandits atrocities.

Eds remarks drew mutters from the crowd. As the commotion grew, more and more onlookers came out of their houses. Even people who wouldnt come close out of fear were now paying closer attention to the square through their wide open windows.

Ed stopped tall beside Picard and tapped the shoulder of the merchant union member next to him.

Please make this guideline widely known throughout the Guild. Any subject who was attacked unexpectedly may initially think it was okay to hide in His Majestys land, but if they do, they actually should take responsibility first.

Gaspard took a step forward and held out his hands as if to dissuade Ed.

Dont misunderstand. I just

Just?

If he retracts his words now, he will be forced to deal with an unidentified mercenary and smuggling suspects. Although Gaspard himself may not be involved in smuggling, he couldnt have been unaware that the forest was a place for nobles. He probably thought of taking the easy way out by taking over the bandits problem from Linhardt after helping rescue the Admiral, thus solving a few open issues, but he probably never intended to start an all-out large-scale investigation.

I was just telling them the procedure again because it was executed recklessly.

Linhardt stood between Ed and Gaspard.

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Its obvious what the villagers are thinking; If even the great Admiral is treated like this, then what about us? There would be no fool who could not infer that.

Ed spoke, sticking his head over Linhardts shoulder.

Okay then, lets get this over with. Im glad it all worked out well.

No, Admiral Wait Just a moment

At that moment, another commotion could be heard from behind the building.

Major! The prisoner is dead!..

..!?

It looks like he was killed with poison!..

Panting, an imperial soldier came out of the backyard. Gaspard, who put his hands on his waist in annoyance, let out a heavy sigh.

Couldnt you take care of that properly?

Rather than being angry at the fact that his soldiers failed to properly manage the prisoners, Gaspards frustration stemmed from their open display of incompetence in front of a crowd of people. The same was true for the imperial sergeants who were stationed behind Gaspard.

Turning around, the Major seemed to have decided to vacate the area quickly, leaving the silent Ed and Linhardt behind.

Figures, the prisoners belong to the Imperial Army, so theres nothing to complain about from our side.

While watching the scene with interest, the men dressed as servants next to Lil craned their necks.

What? Captain

Lil punched Jericho on the back.

I keep telling you! Lil!

Ah, yes.

Sitting on the stake next to Lil, Alain squinted to look at the distance.

Whats the use of demanding you take all the prisoners with you when theyre just letting them die like that? They wont give up even one man, but at the same time, they also freely let one die. What do they want exactly?

Its a territorial issue, a battle of pride.

You mean the Imperial Army is this childish and sloppy?

The Imperial Army is a bit different from any regular army. Theyre a centrally selected security force, but thats actually in name only. In reality, the units of the Imperial Army are dispatched throughout the vast Empire to monitor suspicious movements.

Suspicious movements of whom?

Shouldnt someone be watching nobles with private armies, possible rebellious forces who disrespect the crown or those who are moving their armies without the emperors knowledge or worse, plotting treason?

Oh my

But since they are officially the Empires security force, sometimes when something big like a bandit attack breaks out, they have to at least pretend to take care of it.

Alain gave a level-headed assessment.

This piece of land is too big for its own good, it cant be properly managed anymore.

Lil agreed.

But its too early for you to be disappointed, dont you think? I bet youll see a lot more on our way to Simena.

Lil jumped off the fence and looked back toward the official residence. Levi, who had received the call, hurriedly headed to the backyard. Perhaps to attempt resuscitation or to pass a verdict.

After all, the Imperial Army is too preoccupied with managing the overflowing number of prisoners, so instead of dealing with dead prisoners as well, theyll simply fail to collect the bodies of the dead. It will be the responsibility of the council members and villagers to take care of the mess.

Keeping her gaze fixed on the front, Lil tilted her head towards Alain.

Alain. Didnt you receive another set of clothes this morning?

How do you know?

Take that and go through the kitchen door of the official residence now.

What are you planning?

Hurry. Levi will be waiting.

Are you telling me to put a shroud over the dead prisoner?

Well, youre not completely wrong.

Lil slapped Alain on his shoulder.

Come on, get a move on it. Well be leaving soon.

Jericho, who as usual didnt balk at her commands, quickly responded first.

Okay.

I understand.

As Alain and Jericho disappeared toward the wagon where the rest of the servants were, Lil jumped over the fence and stepped on the grass in the front yard of the stable. The strong smell of hay and animal fur filled the air. When the young man working in the stable saw her, he took out a harness and placed it on Lumieres back.

After Gaspard left, the Roahn guards also came into the stable to take care of their horses. Lil climbed onto Lumiere and passed through the open fence gate. As she was passing in front of the officials residence, Ed, who had approached her without her noticing it, placed his hand on Lumieres mane.

Lil asked, feeling somewhat ominous.

Why are you coming to me?

Give me a ride.

I knew it.

Lil lowered her eyes and glanced at his injuries.

It will be too painful for your wounds. Why dont you just get on the carriage.

Will I be that much of a bother?

I also want to go and look around the Great Trade Route.

Ed spoke fussily and leaned his cheek against her thigh. He looked like a pet wanting to be patted, so Lil also almost stroked his head naturally.

You probably saw it more than once or twice, so why are you whining like this?

But its my first time seeing it with you.

A moment later, Ed climbed up behind the saddle and wrapped his arm around Lils waist. He apparently felt so good about it that his face, placed on Lils shoulder, was full of smiles. Contrary, Lil just felt like something brown and fluffy suddenly was attached to her.

Lil gradually drove Lumiere toward the entrance of the village. Among their group, the only horse that had set off was Lumiere, so with the rest of the people still gathered in the square and the officials residence, their surroundings were quiet.

Judging from the way Ed looked right now, Lil said the first thing that came to mind.

You look like a dog.

A dog? Did you really compare me to a dog?

You're too big to be a puppy.

Well then, since you're calling me a dog, I'll make sure to be a loyal one.

Out of nowhere, Ed bit Lils shoulder. Lil glanced at him in bewilderment, but he just rolled his eyes at her, still biting the hem of her dress.

You claim to be a loyal dog, but here you are, biting your owner.

I'm urging you to play with me.

You're so unruly

The lips that were talking nonsense shortly touched the lips that were complaining. The arm that was wrapped around Lils waist squeezed her tighter. Ed bit her lip this time, causing a faint pain to spread tingly and made her body tremble. As Ed quickly pulled back again, it made Lil feel sorry somehow. Just as she was about to feel empty, Eds lips came in contact with her earlobe, prompting Lil to twist her shoulder for no reason and push him away without much sincerity.

Why do you keep biting me? If you keep doing this, I won't give you a ride.

That's too much

Ed looked pitiful as he put his head on her shoulder again.

Even though Lils saddle was much higher, the way Ed was leaning on her looked so uncomfortable that when she looked down at their shadow, she saw a large mountainous figure with its back bent.

No, to be more accurate, my shadow, buried in his, can't even be identified

Lil said in a complaint.

I've been thinking about it, and I think this group stands out too much.

Why?

First of all, the people from your continent are all ridiculously tall, so even alone, they will already stand out. And then with the addition of the royal guards, you're just a bunch of ridiculous tall people. If we cause some trouble along the way, we'll never be able to get away with it.

Hm, is that so?

Yeah, especially you.

Me? Aren't you just saying that because I always catch your eye?

What? That doesn't make any sense

Lil, who was about to deny it immediately, suddenly came to a realisation.

He may be right. It can just be my illusion that Ed stands out to me more than his band of exotic northern continental soldiers

When Lil couldn't answer, Ed lifted his chin confidently.

You know, I can recognize you even from a moment away

Dont be ridiculous.

Thats why Im glad you similarly think I stand out so much.

Come on. Its not just me.

Lil regained her composure.

From experience, Ed always attracts attention whenever he passes by. Not only is he tall, but hes also good-looking

Well, it doesnt matter. I have no intention of avoiding it anyway.

The Prince Regent wont have a second chance. Nor Im I hiding for anyone else.

Okay, well

Are you worried because were behind schedule?

Its not like that, just dont overdo it.

Lil couldnt deny she felt a vague sense of uneasiness because their bad luck had been continuous so far.

A situation that has been hit by major misfortune becomes from there on forwards more vulnerable to even minor misfortunes and thus is likely to collapse completely. Situations like this make people think that whenever bad things happen, they happen all at once

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It would be nave to think that Venua is the only player whos making a move. After all, he, unlike me, isnt someone who can leave without a trace. Some people will wonder about his absence and track down the cause for it.

Lil passed through the village entrance, wondering who else could disturb their supposedly peaceful journey

Simena.

The second largest port city in the western Mondovi Peninsula after Roahn. Nevertheless, its scale was no match for Roahn. Ships passing through Simena were mainly passenger ships for travel, making the number of trade ships here minute. Still, because many ships were sailing between the empires mainland and the Imperial Western Alsace Islands, Simena was a naturally well-equipped city with accommodations and conveniences for travellers.

The reason why Mireille wanted to spend a day in Simena was so that he could stay in a proper lodging. After passing Simena, Roahn would be the next stop as there was nothing in between those two cities that was worth staying at. He refused to sleep in those so-called luxury inns in small towns any longer.

The port, crowded with travellers, finally gave him some room to breathe. For Mireille, who was someone who conceptualised prospective business ventures every day, touring Simenas port was an activity he even found pleasant.

As he walked around the harbour, he entertained the idea of launching a ferry service onto the southern Ingres Sea. However, his immersion in this idea didn't last long.

Because he spotted a very familiar woman.

Amidst the busy travellers and porters, his sight got fixed on her as though they were destined to meet each other.

But this said woman was accompanied by a very familiar man.

A man so tall that even with a hat on, it would be impossible not to notice him. And due to his injured arm, his black justaucorps is merely draped over his shoulder, making him look even bigger.

Every young woman passing by glanced at the man. Mireille knew that under normal circumstances, every gentleman passing by would have glanced at the woman as well. However, at the moment, half of her face was covered with a large hat.

Enzo had no idea as to what Mireille was referring to and asked back.

Who?

Ignoring him, Mireille focused on the scene on the other side of the port. He could mostly only see their backs, but from time to time, they would glance to their sides, making Mireille unable to take his eyes off of them.

The two seem to be out at the dock to see someone off. No, this someone is already standing next to them. Two Southerners with very tanned skin. What a strange combination. I sent this man to get the woman, but now, the man is standing next to the woman as if guarding her. Meanwhile, this woman is displaying hearty affection to slaves who don't deserve the least bit of her attention. This is like watching a poorly-written comedy.

But it's strange how kind this woman's attitude toward the Southerners is. It seems to me like her feelings for them run deeper than her usual pity for slaves. She's even tapping the shoulders of the stocky one, and he does the same to her.

Mireille's brows frowned.

I might be seeing it wrong. I definitely hope I'm seeing it wrong.

He then nodded towards the coachman next to him.

Make her look this way.

Huh? She seems too immersed in her conversation, so how could I

Do not tell me you cannot even make her move her head this way?

Raising his hand, Enzo intervened.

Shall I? Your Grace

Not you. She might remember your face.

Quickly.

The coachman handed the luggage he was carrying to Enzo and walked away hesitantly. He cut through the crowd and took off his hat. Fortunately for Mireille, his balding head sparkled under the sunlight, helping him avoid losing sight of the short coachman.

When the coachman finally reached the woman, a black cane popped out of nowhere, and the coachmans outstretched hand was flicked away. The man, who only looked sideways in the beginning, eventually turned towards the coachman completely and thus turned towards Mireille.

The mans cool gaze fixed on the coachman. At the same time, the black cane pointed threateningly at the coachmans neck. No one saw how he moved it so quickly, and even the coachman realised it belatedly and started trembling. The coachman, who had been looking up at the man with his head bent backwards for a moment, quickly bowed his head.

With the coachman continuing to grovel, the woman also turned around.

Blue eyes. Diluted pale blue like the ocean Black hair peeking out from under her hat Smooth skin and flawless features belonging to someone who has stepped out of a famous painting

Enzo.

Yes?

Who do you think she is?

I apologise, I cannot seem to follow, who are you talking about?

Enzo followed Mireilles imprecise chin motion and turned his head. It was a port bustling with people, so he couldnt tell who Mireille was asking him to see. As he frowned and looked around, there was one woman who eventually caught his eye. As she was dealing with Mireilles coachman, her gaze had turned towards them.

Uh Huh?

The coachman, who was waving at her to repeatedly apologise, soon disappeared to the other side. Shortly after that, the man and woman turned to face the two Southerners again as if nothing had happened.

That, that person

Shh. She might hear her name even from this far away.

Oh yes, yes!

The man then leaned close to the woman and whispered. Mireille knew all too well that the woman despised this kind of contact with men since she was young, so allowing herself to just have that much distance between them meant that they were very close.

The woman who received the whisper laughed out loud and even clapped her hands in delight. Similarly, the man laughed alongside her.

They appear to be very, very intimate.

What a predictable ending

..?

Whats even more surprising is that that man can even laugh like that. Whenever I saw him, he was always full of contempt and indifference. His treatment towards me didnt even differ from his attitude towards the Emperor.

No matter how crazy he is, he is just a man after all

Mireilles gaze shifted back to the woman.

Although its disappointing to see that womans body in mens clothing, Ill have to admit she still looks good.

Well, I guess he wanted to have a taste of her at least once. What kind of man would not want that? But judging from their intimate display their shallow affair has not ended yet.

Enzo still had his jaw dropped and his mouth open. Mireille lit up a cigarette and exhaled a long puff of smoke.

For now, let us pretend I have not seen them yet. After so many years our first meeting should be a surprise.

He glared at the back of the womans hand, which naturally held the mans arm. Beneath the brim of her hat, the womans lips spoke softly.

Those red and plump lips of yours

Im looking forward to our reunion

He chewed the end of his cigarette and without realising it, his jaw clenched.

After pressing down on his hat, Alain held out his hand. As Lil took it, a smile formed beneath his moustache.

Take care of yourself, Captain. No, Lil.

Lil nodded and answered humbly.

You guys. If anyone starts a fight on the ship, make sure to show them the documents I gave you.

No, I didnt mean that as a simply generic goodbye. I really meant that. You must stay alive until we meet again.

What do you mean?

I figured that the Captain must also be a noble from this Empire. Wasnt someone risking his life to pursue you? Im also talking about the prisoner who was thought to be dead but is actually alive, and the doctors shattered shoulder. I have a sense of whats going on, so I am keeping quiet. Once these pressing matters are resolved, we should all go for a drink in Amiaeng.

Of course.

Lil tapped Jericho on the shoulder and shook Jerichos hand just before they started walking. It was a pity she had to let them go as there wasnt much time left before the Southerners departure. And even though she truly wanted to have a drink with them, in reality, she might never see them again.

Lil impulsively called their names.

Alain, Jericho

The two people who were stepping on the gangway leading to the merchant ship turned around. Their faces were the faces of the people she had always known, but Alain in particular seemed much older than when she first met him. Now, wrinkles stood out on his sweat-free face. Lil took off her hat and placed it on her chest, leaving her sweltering hair to blow coolly in the wind. Not minding her dishevelled hair, she spoke.

It was an honour to have worked with you.