

Northwest 321

Chapter 321

“It’s a pity it was cut short.”

Whereas Alain’s eyes were starting to become red, Jericho was already sobbing. The rough back of his hand wiped his wet eyes. Shortly after, Lil put her hat back on and motioned for them to go quickly, so they both turned around.

With Ed standing behind her and waiting patiently, Lil waved her hand for a long time towards the ship that was sailing away. When the distant ship eventually reached the horizon, leaving only a tail of white foam behind, Lil wrinkled her nose and looked back at Ed.

“I’m feeling heartbroken.”

“What you had with those guys was closer to camaraderie if anything. You shared life, death, and ups and downs for many years.”

“Really. I can’t even count the times we almost died...”

“...”

She turned towards the water again, taking in the humid sea breeze that blew gently. As if feeling unable to leave it all behind just now, Lil, leaning against the wooden railing of the dock, opened her mouth.

“One day...”

Nodding, Ed leaned in to hear her better. He then placed his elbow on the railing and rested his chin on his hand, eagerly waiting for Lil to tell her story...

Lil suddenly came to her senses and looked around. She hadn’t noticed the passage of time when she began to talk about the Bell Rock, so it was only now that she saw that the sun was already painting the sea yellow. The long body of sea birds crossed the sky, and the anchored boats rumbled every time the water gently shook. A trumpet could be heard, signalling that another ship was about to set sail.

Lil and Ed were sitting on a bench next to the railing with an empty bottle of wine rolling around next to them. Lil sipped the remaining wine in the glass she was holding.

“When did it become so late?”

“Time passed steadily.”

Ed was sitting facing Lil with his arm resting on the back of the bench. Of course, what was in his glass wasn’t alcohol, but grape juice. After all, apart from sleeping well, a patient could only drink juice for the time being. As he poured the remainder of the wine into her glass, Lil realised belatedly that Ed’s part in this long conversation was less than a few words.

At the realisation, Lil shook her head in bewilderment.

"I can't believe I talked this much."

"I think this will happen more often in the future."

"How do you know?"

"I feel like you still have a lot left to say."

Lil readily admitted.

"It's comfortable talking to you."

"I'm honoured."

"..."

Ed turned his head towards the calm horizon to share the view with his partner whose gaze was fixed as if she were still looking at the ship that had left a long time ago.

"I'm glad things didn't end too badly with Alain."

"...Why?"

"This way, I'll be able to recall good memories of him with you. That will be convenient for you too."

"Oh, I never knew you were thinking that far..."

"You become so affectionate whenever you share tales about your sailors, but I... am not nearly as close to them as you, so I was worried that you would be hesitant to talk about them in front of me."

"When did you even think of that?"

"I was reflecting on your amicable relationship. But, truth to be told, I never expected them to turn up in the forest. That scenario bypassed all the possibilities I had anticipated."

"Right? Those brainless bastards."

"They showed amazing courage, especially Jericho, I thought he would be too scared."

As Lil smiled proudly and nodded her head, Ed smiled upon seeing the feathers of her white hat fluttering in the wind.

“Is it like captain, like sailor?”

“You could say that.”

Her hat’s feathers began to flutter at a much greater angle. Ed looked at Lil, whose gaze was still focused on the sea.

“Don’t you want to go back to the South?”

“Well... First of all, the reason for my resignation was obvious... But now that the war is becoming more imminent, I don’t think it’s such a bad idea to have a former captain like me infiltrate the Empire. The Bell Rock can take care of the rest.”

“...”

Lil added, her complexion darkening a little.

“However... What I’m most worried about is what name that bastard Marenzio will use. I hope he’ll honour my legacy, but I wouldn’t be too surprised if he’s planning to use black chest hair or something like that as their flag...”

As Lil was laughing to herself, Ed adjusted his jacket and asked.

“Do you truly think so?”

“..!”

At that time, a man in civilian clothes approached. Lil put her hand to her waist out of habit, but Ed stopped her with his eyes.

“He’s an officer of the Visha.”

The young officer’s name was Julbert Long. Captain Long took out a letter from his pocket and bent his upper body toward Ed.

“Admiral. I waited so as not to disturb you, but time is running out... I apologise.”

The captain bowed his head to Lil as well, but Lil waved her hand to indicate that he didn’t need to. Ed took and quickly read the letter before he wrote a few more words himself and handed it back to the captain. After bowing again, the captain quickly disappeared into the alley.

Ed started explaining as if he had anticipated Lil’s questions.

“It’s about the smuggling ship, we’re tracking it based on the map we found on the floor of the hut, but it doesn’t seem to be that easy.”

“Are there only one or two forces involved? I guess everyone is busy trying to hide their tracks now.”

Lil suppressed her worry and got up from her seat.

As the sunset was getting darker, seagulls swarmed the coastal waters. Surrounding vendors began organising their carts and covering their materials with a thick cloth. Children carrying wooden carved swords chased each other through the alleys.

Lil and Ed started walking along the dock that was left quiet after the people left.

“It’s a shame.”

“I liked being the captain, but... in the end, he wasn’t the real me. I know it’s a paradox, but if I knew I had to live with the necklace until I die, I wouldn’t have started from the beginning.”

“...”

“I started knowing there would be an end...”

Lil, who kept walking forward on purpose, glanced sideways at Ed. Ed, however, was already looking down at her as if he knew.

“Do you still think I’m jealous and unable to be generous?”

“...Well, am I mistaken? You said it yourself, that you aren’t generous*... and I think you’re right.”

“...What?”

“What’s wrong? I remember you saying something like that.”

“Yes, but this is the first time I’ve heard you think of me that way.”

“...”

Hearing his somewhat complaining tone, Lil found herself speechless.

“Have you thought of me that way since long ago?”

“...”

“...You thought of me as such a narrow-minded person?”

“No, no. When did I say that?”

Her rebuttal was so strong that the justaucorps resting on her shoulder shook. Now, Ed walked with his body completely turned against her. He looked conflicted for a moment, but then he smiled suspiciously as if he was trying to portray a generous man.

“Hmm, before we began planning the Gualtiero escape?”

“...”

“...Ah, but that was when you hated me the most. My mind was also a mess back then.”

“So, you’ve become more generous now?”

“Of course.”

Lil snorted to herself.

“Really? Okay, then.”

“You said that you’d rather fall with me than ever let go of my hand, so who else could I be jealous of anymore?”

Lil looked up at his smiling face.

“Who told you that?!”

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Lil asked that question, but she already knew that it was Linhardt who had told Ed. Because she clearly remembered saying this to him on their walk back from the forest, before entering Kano’s inn*.

“He said you would never let me go. That you would risk your life even if you could end up like me.”

“...”

“Isn’t that right? So, why did you let go of my hand now? Hold me.”

As Ed couldn’t afford to hold out the hand holding the cane, he fidgeted with his injured hand instead. Two of his fingers, which weren’t covered by the padding, stuck out of the sleeves of his shirt. His index and middle fingers twitched.

Out of astonishment, Lil questioned him.

“Oh come on, it’s closer to a lump of bandage. How can I even hold them properly?”

“...”

No matter how much she thought about it, the sight of her and Ed walking side by side while holding onto his knuckles was too weird. She didn’t want to do such strange things on the street.

“Just get better quickly. I’ll hold you as much as you want by then.”

In fact, the promise to hold hands on a busy street was actually a huge step forward for Lil, but Ed’s fingertips only shrivelled sullenly...

“Well, that’s it.”

Lil put down the barber scissors and looked at Ed in the full-length mirror in front of them. Now that his hair has gotten a little shorter, his otherwise scraggly face has become clearer.

Lil smiled, feeling satisfied with her work.

“I may not be as great as Butler Grits, but my skills can be considered pretty good, right?”

“...”

At her nod, Ed ruffled his hair with his habitual hand gesture. Lil then took off the cloth Ed had been wearing while cutting his hair.

“But is it okay to have short hair like this? From what I remember...”

“What are you talking about? Are you saying it’s awkward? Even after you’re the one who just cut my hair?”

“Well, I just trimmed the parts I roughly gathered...”

“...”

“Oh, forget it. Just go in.”

“..?”

Lil waved her hand and pointed to the bathtub. Although Ed glared at Lil disapprovingly when she suspiciously cut off her own words, Lil nonetheless continued to remove his gown and unfastened the belt that held his arms in place. She, however, didn’t hesitate to take a moment to admire his body which wasn’t covered with a single piece of cloth except for a thin pad supporting his arm.

“Go in.”

She nudged him on his back, and he reluctantly went into the bathtub.

There were several hotels in Simena for wealthy passengers, and they were built to mimic the same luxury as mansions, with private bathtubs in the bedrooms. The place they were staying was one of them.

As steam rose from the well-maintained, shiny white bathtub. Ed, submerged in the water and lazily leaned back. Lil sprinkled scented oil on the surface of the water and wiped his shoulders with a damp cloth.

Ed, who was watching each of her moves, opened his mouth.

“You don’t have to do this every time.”

“You broke your arm because of me. This is my way of taking responsibility.”

He raised his upper body and moved his head diagonally toward Lil.

“And how long are you going to take responsibility?”

“...”

His eyebrows quirked playfully.

“Could it be... forever?”

Lil dipped her fingertips into the water and snapped her fingers at him. Ed, hit by the tiny drops of water, flinched and blinked at first, but then quickly retaliated by splashing the surface of the water toward Lil. As a result, Lil was splashed with an amount of water that was much more than what she initiated.

“Ackk!”

“Oops! Now you’re all wet, too.”

Lil swept her drenched face and looked down at her dampened shirt.

“Do you want to die?”

“Why don’t you come in too?”

“...Did you do this on purpose?”

Ed placed his arm on the edge of the bathtub and rested his chin on it. He answered confidently without any signs of revealing his true intentions.

“Who knows.”

“How treacherous.”

“Your judgement of me is getting harsher by the day. It’s becoming a big problem.”

When her expression remained the same, Ed’s hand reached from the bathtub and pulled on Lil’s shirt.

Lil unbuttoned her shirt while fixing her gaze on the drops of water sliding from Ed’s forearm to his shoulders bathed in the midday sun and down his body submerged in water.

When Lil stepped in and sat down facing Ed, the water level in the tub rose to the point where it almost overflowed. The water in the bath was warm, but perhaps because of the scented oil, her muscles felt cool and relaxed.

Leaning back comfortably, Lil stared at Ed's upper arm, which was secured by the splint. The skin where the arrow had pierced him was stitched up, leaving a mess not only on the affected area but also around it.

"Your tattoo is completely ruined."

Ed glanced down at his arms.

"It doesn't matter. Rather, it's even better this way."

"Why? Because you're going to quit?"

"Everyone has their own shameful history. And usually, it cannot be completely erased or proudly looked away from."

"Why is it a shameful history for you?"

Lil recalled the admiral's epaulettes.

The pirates of the Anatole Sea, whom Ed had eradicated, had a different approach from the League of Southern Pirates, which has a strong defensive nature. The western pirates plundered merchant ships travelling to and from the Western Continent and, above all, ravaged the western plains of the mainland and the Western Alsace Islands. Sailing up the river in a sailboat, plundering villages, and exterminating civilians were their most notorious crimes.

Of course, I know that Ed had his own separate motives. However, even though it was a complex of incalculable interests, his history, if one would ask, is a glorious one. The history of victory that even I wanted to achieve.'

"Well... I don't think you'll ever understand."

"Why?"

"The misunderstanding between a genius and a killer is not one or two."

"So, who is the killer and who is the genius?"

"Of course, ..."

"..!"

Both Lil and Ed looked back at the door simultaneously. This was because the sound of someone's footsteps was getting closer, followed by a knock on the door that confirmed it.

"Excuse me, Sir Edgar."

"..."

It was Shail. When Ed didn't answer, he spoke again.

"Someone would like to see you."

"Me? Who?"

"Yes."

Ed looked at her and asked with his eyes if she had the same thoughts as him.

"Who is it?"

The familiar polite voice of Shail announced the name of the uninvited guest.

"It's the Duke of Mireille."

Lil muttered with her eyebrows pulled together.

"...How does he know we're here?.."

Shail added as if he had heard her voice through the door.

"He wanted me to convey to you that it has been months since you signed an important contract, but he hasn't received any news. He also said he's going to request for His Majesty's mediation."

Ed asked Lil.

"What do you want to do?"

"Go meet him."

"Really?"

Lil nodded her head and Ed responded towards the door.

"I'll be out soon."

“Yes.”

They heard Shail walking away. As soon as his presence disappeared, Ed wrapped his arm around Lil’s waist. As Lil was led by him, the water’s surface fluctuated. Lil stared blankly at the floor, leaving Ed rubbing his lips against her cheek.

Of all that could’ve bothered her, she was most concerned about the rumour the Duke would hear first.

I stayed at the residence of the Marquess of Roahn and went on this trip all without a clear identity. Anyone who heard such rumours of a mysterious unnamed woman would be curious about this mistress’ real identity, but since even Sagastar kept his mouth shut, no further information became known...

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Lil could only be described that way.

And so, the rumour spread quickly. No matter if Lil moved rooms to stay away from the crowd or how much Ed and Linhardt threatened those who could possibly spread such rumours, the scandal had already become ugly.

Mireille’s evil laughter sounded like an auditory hallucination and Lil heard him clearly.

{ “...You could make a fortune by smiling sweetly and selling your body*...” }

Suddenly, as if he were waiting for Lil to recall that memory, a cold being made a screeching noise in Lil’s ear.

As his chilly breath enveloped her entire body, someone grabbed her shoulder. The sudden warmth made Lil lift her head.

“Liloo?”

“...”

But before she could even face Ed, he already embraced her. When she naturally placed her chin on his shoulder, the sunlight shining behind him fell on her as well.

He spoke while wrapping her tightly pressed back.

“What are you thinking?”

“...”

“As expected, I should’ve made your name public.”

“Back then...”

“...You were thinking of running away if things got worse, right?”

Lil shut her mouth.

“You already told me you won’t ever leave, so I guess I can announce it. Although I think it’s a little too late.”

“Let me think about it for a moment.”

Lil pushed herself out of Ed’s embrace and got up from the bathtub. She felt slightly dizzy when she got out of the water, so she paused, but quickly resumed putting on her robe and soon assisted Ed with putting on his as well.

Ed’s gaze persistently followed her anxious face.

“I know, that was irresponsible of me...”

“...”

“But, you agreed to a lifetime contract.”

“...”

“Did you think I wouldn’t know that you intend on running away?”

“...”

Ed kept blocking her as she tried to leave the boudoir.

“Is that what you’re thinking? Still? You said you would never let go, but am I still supposed to believe you?”

Lil sighed and looked at the floor next to Ed. Water dripped from his sleeves.

“I told you not anymore.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I just... I need time to get my head straight. I stand by that decision, but right now I want to be alone. Besides, I need to dry this first too.”

Lil lifted her wet soggy hair. Ed, who had kept his lips tight at first, soon asked back.

“...Alone?”

When Lil nodded her head, Ed could no longer block her path. Lil walked past him, opened the door, and went out.

Having rented one of the empty guest rooms, the Duke of Mireille found himself sitting in the middle of the spacious room.

He kept smiling at the thought of the coming and the probably highly amusing situation.

“Sir Edgar. Finally!”

“...”

Mireille spread his arms wide.

“It has always been so hard for me to meet you even just once.”

“Duke. I didn’t know you could be this rude. I thought I was the only one who was rude enough to act like this.”

“How am I rude? That is not something for you to say when time passes and you have not contacted me at all. How many months has it been? I have been patient enough. Even now, if I had not come to you, the news of your arrival in Roahn or your passes through Simena would have reached me even later. It makes me feel sad because it seems like you are taking our promise lightly.”

Ed found it difficult to hide his murderous intent and turned away from him.

After adjusting his expression, Ed sat down on the sofa opposite Mireille and placed one of his legs on his other knee.

“I met the Prince Regent of Obernyu not long ago. From what I heard, he was the one who instigated you. Was it really necessary for him to contact you? Well, he would have done it anyway...”

“Prince Regent?”

“I see. Keep pretending you don’t know. Venua Obernyu asked you to vouch for his identity.”

Actually, Ed wasn’t sure about this.

Mireille, who didn’t answer readily, walked towards the fireplace. His fingers flashed as he poured whiskey near the table due to the huge ring he was wearing. It prompted Ed to take a look at Mireille’s outfit.

Mireille pretended to think while holding a glass of wine, then easily admitted.

“As expected, there is nothing the Lord of Roahn does not know.”

“Even so, you arrived too quickly considering you came from Sesbron. In the first place, were you already on the way to Roahn? Why were you in such a hurry?”

“It has been a while since our agreed date passed, so of course I was starting to become anxious.”

“If you knew that the Prince Regent was in Roahn, you could’ve just gone back the way you came, so why bother coming all the way here and even visiting my place of residence? It makes me think you have a purpose other than the reunion of the siblings.”

“You’re asking the obvious.”

“What?”

Mireille drank the remaining drink with a happy expression and the ice clinked in his glass.

“Because I want to meet Liloa. What other reason could there be?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Liloa is my fiancée. Her fiancé wants to meet his fiancée. Do you need any further explanation?”

Ed barely managed to keep an expressionless face.

“When will you be getting married? I’m sure the Duchess and your son will be very happy to hear this.”

Mireille put down his glass and leaned against the sofa in a relaxed manner.

“Are you avoiding the fact that you rolled around with her a few times?”

“...”

“How funny. A mere marquess trying to own a woman of her status. It even came to my attention that she is known as a mistress called ‘Lil’. To think Liloa is being treated like that...”

“...Mistress?”

“No need to act all surprised, I already know about it. Not only the ignorant people of Roahn, but even your own party considers Liloa to be a mistress... His Majesty cherished his sister, Princess Henrietta, very much. Such that when the princess died young, he was so upset that he fell out with the Archduke of Obernyu. If he finds out

that the princess's daughter, his niece, who was thought to be dead, is being treated like a mistress of a marquess from the periphery..."

"Who said that?"

"..?"

"Who said that? No one..."

"..."

Ed grabbed the handle of his cane as if he were going to break it. He was so enraged and disgusted by the fact that the word 'mistress' was attached to Lil, that it almost drove him mad. Only by tightening his chin was he able to suppress a voice that didn't tremble.

"Should I go out and ask right now? Who on earth dared call Liloa Obernyu the mistress of a bastard like me?"

After returning to her room, Lil stood blankly and dried herself.

To her surprise, she wasn't okay. She was more nervous than when she met Venua, and her fingertips had all turned cold. She couldn't stop it even though she knew why. It was because the time she spent at Mireille's mansion was full of acceptance, not resistance. Her body and her mind were remembering that terrible humiliation.

Lil said to herself as she looked in the mirror.

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Her head knew it, but her body, which had been beaten for so long, had developed a high sensitivity for the shadow of the god of death. So much so, that Lil even thought it was tiring for Ed to deal with her.

And she couldn't blame him, for even she was exhausted.

Lil placed her hand on her chest and pressed down until she gradually calmed. She then laid down the towel and put on her shirt and pants. Her still-wet hair smelled like Ed. As she was watching the water droplets fall from the ends of it, there was a knock on the door.

"...Lil? Are you in there?.."

Lil responded to Levi's voice. Levi opened the door and came in after hesitating in the doorway.

Lil buttoned her shirt and called out to Levi.

"Levi?"

"Uhm..."

"What is it?"

"Well, um... perhaps... are you..."

“..?”

In response to Levi's uncertain attitude, Lil asked with her eyes. As she came around the partition, Levi approached her with awkward movements.

“By any chance, Liloa... is your last name Obernyu?”

“...”

Levi then shrugged her shoulders and raised her index finger to point to an unknown location.

“Obernyu as in the Grand Principality over there in the East... that Obernyu?”

Lil stroked her damp hair halfway up her face and asked back.

“Didn't Linhardt tell you?”

“No, but in that case, you're almost like a princess, right?”

“It's been a while since we became a principality. If you announce my title's like that, you could get arrested, Levi.”

Levi covered her mouth with her fingertips. But rather than being surprised by her possible arrest, Levi was more surprised by Lil's admission.

“The imperial troops stationed at Simena just stormed the hotel. They declared they were here to escort the 'Grand Lady'*. They yelled at me, asking where you were, and then started asking around as if they were looking for a traitor, but no one could answer. They made such a fuss that Linhardt went down. I went... No, wait... Since when did Linhardt know about you?”

“From Kano. Didn't you overhear our conversation back then?”

“Ah... there were quite a few wounded soldiers, so I was busy taking care of them.”

“...”

Nodding in understanding, Lil lifted her belt and sheath from where she had left them on the couch.

As Lil tried to get out with her gun holstered, Levi grabbed her by the shoulder.

“But the Imperial Army caused a commotion and people gathered around. There are even ambiguous rumours being spread. Are you going to be okay? You were hiding your name till now.”

“...What rumours?”

“Some claim you died a long time ago and even had a funeral, some say you were resting in Malus, and others say you were attacked by a group of bandits a few years back... But none of them are making any sense.”

Levi rolled her wide eyes. The look of concern was evident, so Lil placed her hand on the back of Levi's hand and smiled.

"I am fine.."

"Even if..."

"I know."

When Lil opened the double doors of the guest room, the servants waiting at the door holding clean cloths and towels stepped back left and right while bowing their heads. In the hallway and the hall below the stairs, people looked at her one after another and the murmurs stopped. One by one, people turned around and raised their heads. They were in a hotel catering wealthy clientele and so all the guests looked extravagant as if they were at a salon. Eyes met through feather-fluttering fans before lowering in greeting. Everybody acted overly polite. Occasionally, some people even took off their hats.

The imperial army and Linhardt looked up at her from the hall downstairs. Lil, who was standing next to the railing, looked down and immediately saw three uniformed officers climbing the stairs. Even though they walked on carpet, the thudding sound of military boots got audibly closer, and the metal medals and scabbards hanging from their uniforms clattered. The three men walked fiercely as if they were racing to see who would reach her first.

The blond officer who took the lead held out his hand and bowed slightly. The gesture was obviously meant to ask for the back of her hand, but when Lil stayed put, he quickly raised his upper body.

"Miss Liloa. My name is Major Buford. It is truly an honour to meet you. The Duke of Buford is not only my uncle but also my Liege..."

The officer behind him then stood ahead of Buford's shoulder. He spoke, running a hand through his oiled black hair.

"My name is Eloi, yes, as in Eloi of Central Eloi. A dispatch has just departed from the Simena government office for Sesbron. We will escort you until we receive a reply from His Majesty."

"I am in no need of your services."

"Pardon?"

"I will contact His Majesty separately."

The middle-aged officer who arrived last spoke politely.

"His Majesty will be pleased to know that his niece, who was involved in such an unpleasant incident, has returned. However, lodging with unidentified passengers is dangerous. You must stay at the castle of the Lord of Simena."

“I can take care of myself.”

With one single glance, the officers who were climbing the stairs behind them stopped as if they were ordered to. Lil simply tried to walk forward to pass the hallway they blocked.

“We cannot allow that.”

Buford blocked her with his sturdy body and when Lil turned to her left, he raised her arm to block her path again. Lil snorted and looked up at him.

“Are you going to lay your hands on me?”

“..!”

Lil took a step further, causing the startled Buford to take a step back.

“What exactly are you going to do?”

He clumsily withdrew his outstretched arm. Lil passed between Buford and Eloi, and glanced at Shail standing tall on the steps. His expression was no different from the rest of the other audience members.

“Where’s Edgar?”

Shail must’ve come to his senses after hearing those words because he immediately climbed the remaining two steps.

“This-this way.”

Shail led the way toward the stairs leading to the third floor. The people, who had gathered on the landing, stood aside but still followed her with their eyes. There were constant murmurs behind the fans and hats that were taken off.

As Lil rounded the landing, Shail leaned over and whispered.

“...Sir Edgar is still with the Duke of Mireille...”

“All right.”

Shail turned to the left hallway and pointed to the guest room on the left side. Lil was about to head straight to the door but glanced up at him who looked at her with curiosity in his eyes.

“...Apologies, My Lady.”

Shail lowered his eyes as soon as their eyes met, clearly not knowing what to do. The pinna of his ears had turned red. Shail would often stare at her in fascination, but he also knew how to listen to her silent warnings and keep himself in line. To that extent, he could be referred to as a gentlemanly young man. Lil nodded back to the stairs. A rude onlooker who didn’t know manners, was still standing behind the wall and peering their way.

“I will handle him.”

After Shail left, Lil headed to Mireille's guest room. Even now, where no one could be seen from the hall on the ground floor, it seemed as if countless eyes were still glued to her back.

Lil sighed and grabbed the doorknob of the guest room...

"...Why? Liloa is a woman so precious that one cannot discuss her value..."

It was clearly Mireille's voice. Feeling disgusted, she reflexively took her hand off the handle. Ed's retort was immediately heard.

"...Last time, didn't you say you wanted to kill her?.."

Mireille laughed. It was so loud it rang beyond the guest room door.

"...The love and hate between a man and a woman cannot be explained by reason alone. Truly, there is no reason other than my personal affection. As it became clear that she was truly alive, I felt ashamed of myself for not finding her sooner. She must have suffered so much... I am sure she resents me, so I would like to apologise..."

Lil turned the knob.

Upon opening the door, she saw Ed's back sitting on the sofa. He looked at her and stood up after reaching for his cane. Meanwhile, Mireille stood in front of the fireplace, holding his drink.

His eyes, sharp at first, sank when he saw her. His gaze, tracing her body, groped around her like a reptile crawling down. A purposeful gasp escaped his alcohol-soaked mouth.

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Lil spoke as she walked towards the centre of the room.

"What bullshit are you talking about?"

"..."

The face that was blankly looking at Lil flinched and narrowed its brows.

"What is there left to say? I already met my brother in person, so my future has nothing to do with you. Get out of here."

As if Mireille had decided to turn a blind eye to Lil's tone, his frown was soon masked by a smile.

"You are still so beautiful that I cannot take my eyes off you. It is truly amazing."

His lusciously lifted lips swallowed his drink, while his eyes were still fixed on Lil like a man appreciating his woman. Savouring the liquid in his mouth, Mireille suddenly snapped his fingers.

The door to the side room burst open, and both Lil and Ed looked in that direction at the same time. People who appeared to be Mireille's attendants entered the reception room with hands full of flowers. And it wasn't just one or two people, but a complete entourage. The entire scene looked like a procession as they brought in the flowers and placed them near Lil.

"...What the hell?"

She was surrounded by pure white flowers in no time. Lil remained frozen in place, not understanding the sight at all.

"I prepared your favourite lilies. Do you like them?"

The corners of her eyes twitched.

"Liloa..."

"..?"

Mireille pretended to be moved and placed his hand on his chest.

"Do you have any idea how much I missed you?"

"Stop making such a disgusting noise."

In fact, Lil felt more than just embarrassed by Mireille's attitude, to her, it was completely absurd.

"My little birdy."

It was only when she met Mireille's gaze, who was still staring at her, that she realised that the 'little birdy' meant her. Soon, he reached out to her like he was about to kiss the back of her hand, but Lil reflexively flicked off his hands in disgust.

Mireille pretended to hesitate and then proceeded to smile bitterly.

"You have every reason to be mad at me."

"..?!"

Lil swallowed her screams.

"But please know my true intentions, I never meant to let you go. It was just that I was too young and didn't know any b..."

"I don't want to know, get out."

“Yes. I knew you would say that. I guess it will be too much for you today, but I will keep trying until you change your mind.”

Lil glanced at the basket of lilies surrounding her. The sight of them caused goosebumps to appear on her arms and legs.

Reason screamed that she should ask, but her instincts shouted that she should get rid of that guy immediately.

Lil closed her eyes tightly before opening them.

“Why are you doing this crazy thing?”

“Because I want to be forgiven by you.”

“Don’t talk bullshit.”

“You will soon come to realise how sincere my feelings for you truly are.”

“Crazy...”

“But like I said, this is enough for today.”

Mireille bowed to Lil and turned his body. He put his glass down on the table and put his hat back on. The simple movements felt slow as if they were taken a very long time. At that moment, Lil’s heart was already pounding so strongly it felt like bursting in time with the steps he took. This encounter with Mireille gave her the chills more than any prediction she had imagined.

“By the way, Liloa...”

“..?”

Like a dance, Mireille gracefully turned slightly towards her again and calmly glanced at Ed, who was sitting in a chair across from them. Lil tried to follow Mireille’s glance at Ed, but he blocked her path, thereby cutting off her gaze.

Lil glared at her opponent.

“No matter how carefully I think about it, I feel like I have to ask this.”

Mireille leaned toward Lil and took a deep breath. He puffed out his chest like a predator savouring a certain fragrance, then let out his breath, slowly but steadily. He then opened his eyes at an equally slow pace. Mireille’s exaggerated movements overwhelmed Lil with anxiety.

“..?!”

Suddenly, the violent pounding of her pulse increased again, but Lil tried to assess the situation calmly...

"Perhaps... Did you take a bath with Sir Edgar?"

"..!"

Mireille lifted his nose and sniffed the air in an exaggerated manner. It was nothing short of theatrical. Like a man trying to enjoy a perfume that didn't exist. But to Lil, it wasn't funny at all.

"You both smell the same."

He approached Lil for the second time.

"Am I correct?"

Lil looked up at the Duke, who stood tall and strode closer with great strides.

"It would be very sad if that was the case..."

Mireille stretched out his hand to Lil. Of course, Lil took a step back, but he caught up with her nonetheless.

"...because I still love you..."

Lil tensed her limbs, ready to attack at any opportunity. But his finger only slowly cut through the air and drew circles along her cheek.

Unable to bear the gesture, she swatted away his finger...

"...very much."

The back of Lil's head was suddenly grabbed. She reflexively tightened her neck, but it was too late.

Without even having time to look for an answer for her own question, her body was pushed forward, and Mireille's other hand roughly grabbed her chin just as she was about to respond to the strange attack. Lil tried to escape by lowering her upper body, but her torso was lifted upward until her face ended up right in front of Mireille's nose. Only then did Lil realise what Mireille was trying to do.

At the same time, the man's lips approached.

Lil clenched her fists and raised them without even thinking. As she was locking her lower jaw, a black object thrust between her and Mireille. The ebony cane hit him hard on the throat, and the man's body was instantly pushed back, causing the hand that grabbed Lil's neck to fall off. The golden heel of the cane then struck Mireille's remaining hand, holding on to her chin.

Staggering herself, Lil wiped the corner of her mouth with her crooked sleeve. Even though he never reached her lips, she felt an unbearable discomfort.

Lil reflexively glanced to her side and saw Ed looking down at Mireille like he was looking at trash. Lil then followed Ed's line of sight and lowered her gaze as well...

To the man lying at their feet.

René Mireille.

"Duke. You, on the other hand, smell like sewage."

Mireille's entire face turned red. When his emotions got the better of him, he opened his shaking eyes. His chin was hit, and so was his collarbone, causing him to temporarily lose his mind. His carefully brushed hair was dishevelled, and through his strands of hair, Lil met his bloodshot eyes. She reeled and thought she was being sucked into them. Right into the dirty memories writhing in those red orbs...

"Liloa."

"..!"

Just before she was overcome by impulse, someone grabbed her fists.

As her vision was blocked by the man who came to stand in front of her, she looked up and realised it was Ed.

"If you kill him here, things will get worse."

Roahn's soldiers stormed into the guest room after hearing the commotion but Mireille's servants tried to stop them from coming any nearer. Amidst all this, the Imperial Army just stood there awkwardly. Behind the Imperial Army were people standing close to the stair railing to watch the situation unfold with interest.

"...Your Grace!"

Lil recognised the face of the man who ran into the room.

"...Enzo?"

"Oh, Miss... Ah, uhm, how have you been?"

As if his voice couldn't come out yet, Mireille pointed his finger at Ed in raging anger. Ed merely stood aloof and tilted his head.

"...What? Do you have something to say, Duke?"

Enzo, who had been staring at Mireille without knowing what to do, looked up at Ed.

“H... how did this happen?”

Lil, however, intervened before Ed could answer.

“He tried to molest me. How filthy. I thought the Duke of Mireille had a wife and son, so I am completely baffled as to why he did this to me... What are all those flowers for? It is making me uncomfortable.”

Enzo’s eyes widened so much that they seemed to almost pop out.

“...Really?!..”

Before they knew it, the rest of the onlookers, who had been passing the stairs and stood in front of the door, were now buzzing. Even Ed seemed surprised by the fact that she publicly declared that the Duke had tried to molest her. Lil then lifted the red, swollen back of her right hand as if to show it to their audience.

“I only hit his chin lightly when he deliberately pressed his lips towards me. I never expected that he would fall to the point where he could not even speak. If I had known that the Duke would be this weak, I would have held back a little.”

As panic struck him, drops of sweat appeared on Enzo’s forehead like rain. Meanwhile, his master was still unable to regain his voice.

“Oh, no... what to do...”

“Enzo, take good care of him, for your master seems to have gotten a bit old.”

Lil grabbed Ed’s arm and walked out of the room. Roahn’s soldiers surrounded them, but the audience’s curious eyes remained persistent.

Lil scanned the crowd to see if she could spot a familiar face, but there was none. She was in a hurry to leave this sight as quickly as possible, but she couldn’t hasten Ed’s pace. She could only support him as best she could.

The moment they reached their room, the door was slammed shut, making it impossible for the soldiers to follow any further.

Initially, Lil wanted to shoot at him right away when they entered the door. However, taking his condition into consideration, she first pushed him towards the table, knowing that his leg wouldn’t hold out if he had to stand for too long.

Ed, walking backwards as she pushed him, eventually sat down on the table. In retrospect, her action also benefited her, as they were now on eye level. Lil crossed her arms and began her interrogation.

“What did you do?”

“...What?”

“Did you announce my name to the government post here in Simena?”

“Liloa, you said you wanted to live as you were born. The reason you’ve kept your name hidden is because of me. You’re worried that I might get caught up in something...”

“You almost died because of me... you!”

“And as a result you have to bear the disgrace people bestow upon you. I never wanted you to just stand behind me while you’re being exposed to shame in the first place, how long do I have to stand back and endure it? Do you think I have no clue about how hard you’re trying not to leave any traces of yourself on me? I won’t allow this anymore. It’s okay.”

“I said I would think about it. Couldn’t you have been a bit more patient, why did you decide this on your own?”

Ed looked away from her and exhaled calmly.

“If you’re going to get angry, go on get angry.”

“..?!”

Unlike Lil, who was enraged by his words, Ed’s expression remained collected. It was the attitude of someone willing to endure anything. Ed had never been this persistent in front of her. Moreover, there was nothing to gain from questioning a man who openly declared he was proud of what he did. Lil’s heart was filled with inexpressible frustration.

“But before we fight, I want to know if you’re okay.”

“...Why?”

“Because that bastard did something preposterous to you.”

Lil touched her forehead.

She spoke honestly.

“It’s annoying. I actually feel really dirty.”

“What do you want to do?”

“What do I want to do? What can I do? It’s not like I can just kill him... Luck is on his side somehow... Still, I chipped his chin, so it’s okay for now.”

“Is that really enough?”

“Enough? You also hit his neck and wrists. I don’t think he’ll be able to use his hands for a while.”

“So, should I say it’s a good thing that your hand is a bit swollen right now? Or...”

“I’m fine. It’s actually the first time I could hit him as hard as I did today... Rather, I’m just more appalled by his words and those creepy bouquets...”

Ed, who was still looking anywhere but her, nodded.

“It was certainly different from what I expected.”

“That’s what I was going to say. That bastard comes out of nowhere and does something absurd, and we don’t even know why, right? So why would you expose me when we don’t even know what’s going to happen from this point onwards?”

As Lil tried to get back to the point, Ed gave an unexpected answer.

“I’ll tell you why. The Duke said he’s still your fiancé, hence the flowers.”

“...What?”

Her narrowed eyes looked straight at him.

“I guess he was planning to propose marriage.”

“What the hell? What were you two talking about exactly?”

“..?!”

Lil gasped before pursing her lips. She couldn’t get her voice to come out.

“I think...”

Ed stopped talking after seeing Lil’s shocked face. Lil was clearly beyond embarrassed and barely managed to keep up with the absurdity.

“...Say... it.”

“...Perhaps the Duke intends to apply to His Majesty for an annulment of his current marriage. He may be planning to use the engagement he had with you four or five years ago as an excuse to reason with His Majesty. Saying that he could make you a duchess.”

In her daze, Lil suddenly remembered something and said the first thing that came to mind.

“...Because Venua is looking for me.”

“Exactly...”

“For a child.”

“Is the Prince Regent infertile?”

“I... don’t know.”

Although Lil said she didn’t know, deep down she could affirm Ed’s words.

Ed looked at her again as though their problems hadn’t ended yet, so Lil asked out of desperation.

“What else do you have to tell me?”

“...Just know that I never intended for our conversation to flow in this direction, nor that I’m happy to discuss this topic with you...”

“What is it?”

“According to the news that came through Sesbron, the Archduke of Obernyu, who is said to be ill, is strangely frequenting mistresses...”

Lil frowned reflexively.

“Then, what about the Archduchess?”

“The Archduchess has only given birth to a daughter.”

“Why on earth is everyone like this? Is there something going on in the family? Just tell the Archduchess’ daughter to take over!”

Lil couldn’t overcome the psychological burden and rubbed her face roughly. Her cheeks and nose were crushed in her palms and pushed up and down. After waiting for her to calm down, Ed continued.

“Liloa. Do you remember the second time I met the Prince Regent?*”

“What you told me in the forest?”

“That’s right. At that time, I casually mentioned the Princess of Sassel, but the Prince Regent snapped. I said I was just concerned about the princess’s health, and when I told him that I knew a good doctor specialist in treating women, he cut me off so hastily that I couldn’t even finish the sentence. Of course, it may be because he simply wasn’t comfortable talking about it, but it made me think of something else.

Maybe he thought I might be able to find something out about the princess's physical condition..."

"...For example, the fact that, contrary to popular rumours, she is not the infertile one?"

As she finished her sentence, Ed, grinning, nodded at her.

"Furthermore, I personally let him realise the humiliation he would suffer if he didn't reveal his identity right away. I told him he had to undergo a trial with flogging as a possible outcome, but even so, he didn't budge. How can a person as proud as the Prince Regent remain quiet when being threatened with flogging? It's probably because he's preoccupied with something even more shameful than that."

"That's right, he's not the kind of person who just endures something like that. Also, even after his identity was revealed to both me and you, he didn't make a fuss and instead just accepted he was being locked up. He could've used the royal guards to kidnap me again or something like that. In other words, Venua travelled to Roahn discreetly and without telling anyone for a reason. Why? ...Because if it became known that he had put in this much effort, people would definitely wonder why..."

Lil and Ed nodded at the same time. Their reasoning gradually interlocked like clockwork.

The long-winded story that began with Ed being sent to the southern Sea of Ingres and ended here in Simena was finally unravelling.

"With Mireille making a move today, declaring he wants to resume your engagement, it's clear that the Prince Regent is infertile. And since he has probably received an official diagnosis, the Archduke of Obernyu is belatedly trying to have another child. The Archduke doesn't seem to have any intention of abdicating to his infertile eldest son. That's why your brother was trying to find you. And Judging from his obsession with pure bloodlines, he might be..."

"...Planning to adopt my child as his own..."

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"Even if you would conceive right now, he'll have to wait for at least nine months, so time is running out."

"That's why he tried to get rid of you."

"And besides, your child would have the right to succession."

Lil looked down at her empty stomach.

"That madman Mireille... is he planning on marrying me to take Obernyu?"

Ed nodded slowly.

Lil weakly turned and sat down next to Ed. Fatigue overcame her body as if she had run all the way to Sesbron herself. To make it worse, her heart pounded rapidly with nervousness.

Lil tried not to dwell on those dirty feelings for too long, but she couldn't easily shake off the fact that she wasn't treated as a full human being, but rather as some kind of organ.

Ed put his arm around her shoulders and Lil leaned her body in until she was half buried in his arms.

"They're all crazy... One would think you would get used to this kind of treatment, as this nonsense didn't happen to me just once or twice... But every damn time they'll come up with new methods to cause my disillusionment..."

"..."

Ed waited until she stopped sighing. Then Lil muttered like a lament.

"...I'm in this damned mess just because the Archduke can't give the title to an underaged girl..."

"Do you plan to abdicate?"

Lil seriously thought about it for a moment.

"In the past, I vaguely wanted to gain fame and authority, but that was mainly because that was all I grew up with, and I thought that was the only way to fulfil one's role. But now... I want to live more freely."

"How?"

"You've been to the West and the North, even to the South... I, on the other hand, feel like I've been living too narrowly, which is a shame. I belatedly realised there's a wider world out there. I just thought that what I saw and heard growing up was everything. And the narrower my perspective became, the more frustrated I was. But the more I met new people and gained new experiences, the stronger I felt."

Ed agreed without difficulty.

"I get what you mean."

"Besides, the Archduchy is not just a fiefdom. The principality is comparable with a country. If the choice really comes down to me, I'll have to give it some serious thought."

"Didn't I once hear you say you were getting more greedy?"

“That’s why I said I’ll think about it.”

“..!”

Lil asked, wrapping her arms around Ed’s waist.

“And you? What will you do if I abdicate?”

“Well, perhaps become a court musician? Or your personal doctor? What do you want me to be?”

“...”

Lil swallowed her laughter as she imagined herself making Ed a court dancer.

“If you want me to sacrifice my land for you, I will offer it. And if you want me to give you my body, I will offer it as well. The Archduke is a monarch, after all.”

Lil groped his chest over his shirt.

“...Your body?”

Ed nodded with a serious face.

“Gladly.”

“I really like the sound of that.”

“Ah. Now that I think about it, just don’t make me the Minister of Finance. I hate public affairs.”

“I actually think you would make a fine Minister of Finance.”

Ed looked down at her disapprovingly, but Lil found his dissatisfied face so cute that she pressed her lips on him. The short kiss wasn’t enough though, so Lil decided to climb up onto his thighs and sat down on them. His ebony cane landed dully on the carpet floor when Ed wrapped his arms around her back.

Lil asked, resting her forehead against his.

“Then, have you no intention of taking over Obernyu?”

“I have no interest in the Archduchy.”

“..?”

Lil frowned like his response wasn’t enough to reassure her. Ed rolled his eyes before looking her straight in the eye and added.

“And I don’t want to let you go through childbirth, and marriage... no, as for marriage...”

“...”

Ed unconsciously reached for his coat pocket but stopped when he noticed that Lil's face was still serious. In the end, he blinked his eyes innocently and answered.

"If you don't want it, then I don't want it either."

Mireille raised his hands in front of him and tried to clench them into fists. Unfortunately for him, his wrists only trembled and he couldn't exert enough strength, he ended up only curling his fingers in a sloppy manner.

"Sh... Shit!"

He kicked the chair instead.

Enzo and the doctor he brought with him looked at Mireille, not knowing what to do. Enzo pushed the doctor's back, who then cautiously approached Mireille and guided him towards the bed.

Mireille eventually calmed down after the doctor lit an incense burner to soothe his anger, all the while Enzo was fanning him.

Finally, his voice came out properly for the first time.

"I want to kill him."

"Who... who are you talking about?"

"Edgar Retiro."

"..."

Mireille lifted the blanket and sat down on the bed. Just when Enzo came close next to him and pretended to support him, Mireille gnashed his teeth and swung his arms, not bothering to check if Enzo would be hit or not.

"And Liloa, that bitch, she has to work on her habits this time."

Mireille recalled the familiar scene of her pleading, crushed beneath him.

The heat that had been gathering in his head immediately descended to his body's lower region. As his imagination became more physical, more blood rushed to his crotch, and he started to adjust his pants, which had become uncomfortable.

"Since she may have been mixing bodies for years, even the Emperor will not be able to refute this time. But how dare she punch me like that?"

Mireille stamped his feet while still sitting on the bed. Enzo, who was bowing his head right next to him, flinched and took an extra step back. As Mireille tightened his grip on his jaw, his swollen muscles from being hit by Lil began to feel sore again.

A cold voice fell.

“Enzo.”

“Yes?”

“Find Jean.”

“He arrived a while ago and is waiting to report to you. He said he was successful.”

“Let him in. And get ready to leave this damn room.”

As Enzo pulled the tassel next to the bed, a small bell rang outside the guest room door. The door opened instantly, and Jean, Mireille’s investigator, walked up to the bed.

“My apologies, Sir. I am a little late because of the navy warships that have come into several ports, including the Simena harbour.”

Mireille, who was only wearing a shirt, asked as he put on a waistcoat with Enzo’s help.

“That is enough... What happened? No, first of all, what about our business in the forest?”

“Everything has been sorted out. The Chamber of Commerce has finished talking with the Imperial Army. All those caught in the forest were cleared of charges and released. Although Roan’s governor, Linhardt Retiro, protested, it seems that it will all blow over soon as he made a deal with the Imperial Army on the condition that he could take over the bandits.”

“...Deal? What deal?”

“It is said that he asked the Imperial Army’s assistance in finding Admiral Retiro. With the deal, the army would receive all the credits for subjugating the bandits.”

“You mean Edgar Retiro went missing?”

“Yes, while engaged in a firefight with bandits along the mountain range, he was hit by arrows and fell off a cliff.”

Mireille recalled Ed holding a cane in one hand.

“That was why his arm was wrapped in pads and he walked with a limp.”

“Correct. He fell into the sea and was washed ashore on the forest’s beach, where the Imperial Army aided in rescuing the Admiral. Of course, Count Lazilierè protested, saying he could not possibly be held responsible because the investigation did not reveal anything.”

“That is good.”

“But... the movements of the small Merchants’ Guild were unusual.”

Mireille asked, choosing a ring from the jewellery box held out by Enzo.

“Why?”

“There were unidentified mercenaries among the bandits. The Small Merchants’ Association seems to believe that another bandit group, to which the mercenaries belonged, is located in the Risch Mountains as well. I still wonder where they got this idea from... Anyway, the Imperial Army’s extermination of the bandits was only a small retribution compared to the overall damage, so the dissatisfaction in the area has not subsided. There was even an uproar as to why the Imperial Army didn’t sweep the entire mountain when they could have, and why they didn’t launch a larger suppression operation when it was obvious that these bandits’ damage would continue.”

Mireille, now fully dressed, looked at Jean for the first time. He smiled with a gaze full of trust.

“Jean, I trust you. I’m sure you found out the identity of those mercenaries, right?”

Jean smiled triumphantly and replied.

“The mercenaries were hired by Maxwell Farin, the platoon leader of the Archduke of Obernyu’s elite royal guards...”

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“...Maxwell?”

“...”

Mireille knew the face of the Captain of Obernyu’s royal guards.

After briefly recalling the man’s appearance, Mireille nodded his head.

“Go on.”

“The Prince Regent ordered Maxwell Farin to assassinate the Admiral, but his attempt resulted in a failure as the Admiral miraculously survived after falling from a cliff. The mercenaries, on the other hand, were simply hired without knowing the specific circumstances. Maxwell Farin died from being poisoned.”

“What is your source?”

“I personally overheard the conversation between the Prince Regent and one of his royal guards, who witnessed the death of Maxwell Farin in Kano.”

“...Haha. Hahahaha!”

“...”

Satisfied, Mireille laughed for the first time in a long while. However, as his laughter continued, his jaw became sore again, so it quieted down just as quickly.

“Even if I loathe that damned Marquess just as much, the Prince Regent actually went as far as to execute some reckless plan to assassinate him! Did he think this is Obernyu, where no one has a say if he kills someone? What a fool!”

When he finished talking to himself, Jean spoke up.

“May I express my humble thoughts?”

“What is it?”

“Judging from months of research, it is obvious that the Prince Regent of Obernyu is keen on a pure bloodline. I came to this conclusion based on the fact that he does not hastily adopt children, despite being heirless. That is why he hates the possibility of the blood of Admiral Retiro, whose lineage is rooted overseas, mixing with Miss Liloa’s.”

“Yes, that is right, that guy even looked down on the Mireille bloodline. But, in the end, he is the one who cannot even plant his seed? What a pity, how desperate he must be... Ah, this is going to be so interesting...”

Despite Mireille’s cheerful mood, Jean still reported seriously.

“Thanks to Your Grace’s guarantee of identity, the Prince Regent could move quickly.”

“If I had known that he would commit such a clown’s act, I would have sent him that guarantee of identity much sooner. What a shame. Apparently, the sooner Venua makes his move, the better it is for us. We should set up a chessboard so that the two of us can play better together. If Venua truly can get rid of the Marquess...”

Enzo smiled sinisterly next to his master.

“Then Your Grace’s long-held goal would be granted without getting our hands dirty.”

Mireille patted Jean on the shoulder and smiled contentedly.

A small yacht carrying six to seven people left the port of Simena. Its white sails puffed taut as the yacht moved quickly, gliding away from the shore. The water in front of the harbour wasn’t deep due to the bottom being speckled with reefs.

In the sky, a flock of cackling geese flew over. Ripples continuously washed over the yacht and broke into pieces. The farther the yacht moved from the dock, the darker the colour of the sea became. Soon, when a huge sailing ship cast a shadow over the smaller boat, thick ropes were thrown from the deck of said ship.

The yacht's crew jumped to their feet and grabbed the ropes. When the ropes were tied to the bow and stern of the small yacht, the sound of winding pulleys was heard from the deck above until the yacht's hull was dragged up onto the ship. Once the deck height of both the ship and yacht lined up perfectly, the pulleys stopped.

Ed stood up from the yacht and crossed over to Visha. Visha's senior and junior officers, as well as the rest of the crew aboard the ship, gathered on the deck to salute their admiral.

The admiral's uniform draped over his shoulders rustled in the wind. Putting on his hat, Ed faced his crew and Captain Long, standing behind him, spoke loudly.

"From now on, the Mondovi fleet will carry out 'Operation Hideout!'"

Through the sea breeze scattering the officers' epaulettes and gold tassels, Captain Long added as he looked around the deck.

"According to His Majesty's long-standing edict, we are to root out the pirate groups who are stealing His Majesty's taxes and squandering His Majesty's resources. They will be held accountable for attempting to murder the Admiral, the symbol of Mondovi's 40,000-strong navy. To achieve effective results, all operations will be carried out in secret, so do not plan on disembarking for the time being."

"Yes, Sir!"

Officers and petty officers quickly dispersed. In the middle of the upper deck, where instructions and orders were exchanged, there was one person who remained still. It was Sagastar, stiffly standing there and unable to lower his hand from his salute. When the wind fell quiet, he looked even more like a stone statue.

Ed calmly approached Sagastar and placed his hand on his shoulder strap, the touch, however, was so light that his golden tassels didn't even shake.

"Live the rest of your life in gratitude for her generosity, Sagastar."

Sagastar let out the breath he had been holding and finally answered.

"Yes...yes, Sir."

Lil smoothed over the edge of the card in her hand. She checked the picture again and lifted her eyes slightly. Her opponents, Levi and Linhardt, watched her with sharp eyes. Levi's eyes narrowed even further the moment she met Lil's gaze. When it was Lil's turn, she laid down the card she had carefully chosen and slowly turned it over, causing the lovers to sigh simultaneously.

Levi's eyes widened and shouted.

"How can this be!"

Linhardt, on the other hand, muttered and threw his remaining cards on the table.

"...This is ridiculous..."

With a big smile on her face, Lil quickly snatched up the wine bottle in the centre of the table. And it wasn't just some wine bottle, this wine was older than herself. Lil spoke with a grin after smelling the scent around the wine's plug for no reason.

"Let's drink together when Edgar comes back later."

"Including me?"

Lil nodded her head in response to Levi's question. At that time, the floor shook violently as if the ship had hit a wave, causing the people who had gathered in the spacious cabin to play cards as well to groan in unison. From somewhere, a voice was heard grumbling harshly, complaining that their board game was completely overturned.

It seemed quiet for a moment, but not long after, the floor shook again. Linhardt opened his mouth after shuffling the cards.

"I think it's time to head up?"

Lil and Levi opened the cabin door first and went out. The deck outside the cabin was a space used for dining or resting. It was completely different from the pirate ships and merchant ships Lil had seen so far. From the wooden walls to the floor, and to the pillars, they were all neatly finished and coated with a glossy solution. The cabin doors were also carefully carved and decorated. But above all, the people walking around the deck were dressed glamorously, as though they were attending a banquet.

The women walked up the stairs, passing chattering and drinking people at tables fixed to the floor. After going out on the upper deck, they were hit by a rush of crisp air.

A huge bell was hung above Lil's head, spreading out its white body. Without realising it, she lifted her head and looked at the mast. A flag was raised on the central tower above the square sail.

[Clotilde.]

The Clotilde, which departed from Simena, was a luxury passenger ship that sailed the waterway running up the Risch River to Sesbron.

This route was even the fastest way to get from the western part of the empire to Sesbron, especially if the wind was right. Levi decided to get off at the halfway point to head to the Imperial Clairaut, and Linhardt was to see her off. Meanwhile, the Roahn soldiers were to escort Lil to Sesbron and then to Obernyu.

Levi, with her parasol opened, was staring somewhere to the southeast.

"The Imperial Clairaut is not far. I'll probably reach it as early as today."

Lil followed Levi's gaze and leaned against the railing of the deck. Next to the lower reaches of the Risch River, which was as wide as an ocean, the farmland of the fertile western plains stretched endlessly. The stream of the river flowed into various parts of the plain and she could see the walls of a lord's castle in the distance. And contrary to what men might expect, there were almost no mountains to be found, only gentle hills forming curves.

A villager aboard a small boat spotted the large passenger ship and waved.

Lil remained still, but Levi eagerly waved her hand. Levi looked so cute that Lil smiled quietly, but then, from somewhere, she suddenly heard a voice that she had heard many times before.

“...Liloa?”

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“..?!”

Chills ran over Lil’s back as she turned her body in despair.

Mireille was already looking at her with a pretentiously surprised look on his face. His attire, adorned with sparkling accessories, stood out even on such a luxury passenger ship, making passersby glance at him from the side.

“What a surprise to meet you here again.”

“...”

Mireille took a step closer and spread his arms. The rings on his approaching hands reflected in the sunlight.

“Is this not fate rather than coincidence?”

Lil put her hand onto the gun holster on her back.

“Why do you keep coming closer? Are you asking for a broken jaw? Because I will truly break it this time.”

When Mireille noticed Levi’s gaze, he bowed politely.

“I would like to ask for My Lady’s understanding. Can you spare us a moment please?”

Levi took her hand away from her mouth and raised her chin while looking down at Mireille.

“No.”

“...Pardon?”

“It worries me that a so-called gentleman like you could molest Liloa again.”

“..?!”

Whereas a laugh escaped Lil’s mouth at her companion’s unexpected answer, Mireille’s face hardened and glared at Levi. But Levi remained steadfastly serious, even blocking Lil’s path. Seeing that Levi was as tall as Ed, Mireille actually had to subtly look up at her.

“...What’s going on?..”

Linhardt joined belatedly after coming up to the deck and took a stand in front of Levi. With two people as tall as Ed standing in front of her, Lil could no longer see Mireille. She could only see Enzo standing diagonally behind Mireille, his eyes downcast.

Lil tapped Levi on the shoulder.

“It’s okay. I’ll talk to him.”

Levi looked back at her and asked.

“No. Why would you?”

“We have something to talk about.”

Lil’s answer made Levi and Linhardt retreat without another word. However, Levi continued to express her hostility against her newfound opponent by persistently glaring at Mireille. Mireille, who was normally adept at hiding his facial expression, seemed to find it difficult to overcome the blatant hostility of the woman.

Nonetheless, after clearing his throat several times, his mood appeared to brighten again.

Linhardt and Shail deliberately watched from the railing on the other side so that they could move at any moment. Meanwhile, Lil faced her nemesis, a few strands of his oiled hair fluttering in the breeze.

In front of her, Mireille clearly feigned nervousness.

“...Liloa.”

He got down on his knee, causing people passing by on the deck to look at them in astonishment. Lil snorted her laughter as she looked around at the people who had stopped to observe.

“Is this your plan? To draw attention and start rumours that will quickly reach Sesbron? Knowing the amount of wealthy passengers here, the speed of the rumours must be incredibly fast.”

“What are you talking about? I’m just trying to resume our engagement.”

“...”

“I know you hate me, but I am different now. In the past, I was so immature and young that I made things difficult for you...”

“...”

Mireille hesitated as he finished his sentence and took a small box from his coat’s pocket.

“Ever since the day you disappeared, I have been carrying this with me, so that I could propose to you again at any time. From now on, I will live with a penitent heart, atoning for all the hurt I caused you.”

“...”

When he opened the lid, Lil was greeted by a ring with a shining transparent gem.

“Our engagement ended because you disappeared. His Majesty, worried that I would grow old waiting for you indefinitely, advised me to welcome a new duchess. That is how our engagement ended. Even though it was simple, we held a funeral even without finding your body. However, now that you are back, we can start over. Our engagement has never been terminated. All we need to do is to have a wedding ceremony at Sesbron.”

“And His Majesty will give his permission?”

“Of course. He often witnessed me missing you.”

“..?”

Mireille, full of confidence, held out the ring box.

“His Majesty, who felt sorry for me, will definitely be lenient.”

Lil also knew that the emperor cared for Mireille.

Lil looked around at the crowd gathered as if watching a play and decided to reveal her first revelation in front of them.

“Your Majesty will approve? That is ridiculous. Why do you think I decided to live in hiding? During the engagement period, did you do anything good for me other than mock me for being a prostitute?”

When the shocking words came out, the audience forgot who they were and collectively booed.

“..!”

The bewildered man’s face gagged because what Lil said was true without a whiff of a lie. Mireille made Lil wait on the guests who came to his residence and openly belittled her by calling her no better than a prostitute. He also used to say that if she dolled herself up and sat down with him while he was signing contracts, he would be able to negotiate more favourable terms for himself.

“Didn’t you use to tell me that the number of your business partners increased because you made me serve those who came to your mansion?”

Before she knew it, Lil’s face turned red from anger.

Lil let out her anger by crushing her palms with her clenched fingernails.

“How can you say you have changed from your self when you just molested me not long ago just like you have always done before?”

“...”

She swung the back of her hand and hit the ring case hard. Mireille missed the jewellery box and it rolled on the deck.

“How can you ask me to marry you again? You want me to live through that harassment again? You devil!”

“...”

Lil struck Mireille’s cheek with her palm.

“Devil! You are no better than a devil!”

“..!”

Lil tried to create a situation where she would appear to slap him with a feather-like hand gesture, but when Mireille’s head visibly shook, Lil felt embarrassed, for it wasn’t her intention to cause harm. She hurriedly relaxed her hand and repeatedly hit him on the head, cheek, and shoulder.

“Just leave me alone!”

Chapter 330

As soon as Lil let out a scream, Levi came running and wrapped her arms around her. Enzo and Jean, who jumped out from the crowd as well, grabbed Mireille’s shoulders and pulled him away from her.

Lil buried her face in Levi’s shoulder before glancing up towards the crowd.

The people from Simena’s hotel and the people on the ferry all behaved similarly. They politely covered their faces with fans or hats but proceeded to stir discussions behind the scenes. The mess of being beaten by his former fiancée wasn’t something anyone could handle. Everyone in the audience was intrigued, their eyes shining with excitement. Lil knew, the more shocking and immoral the rumours were, the more Sesbron liked them.

Lil curled up in Levi’s arms. The latter probably noticed that Lil was acting quite different from what she was used to, but she nonetheless made her way through the crowd and headed to her cabin.

“Get out of the way!”

As Levi used her long arms to weave through the crowd of people to reach the stairs, Shail followed behind and cleared the way from the pursuit of possible onlookers. It wasn’t until Levi sat Lil down on her cabin’s bed that she finally caught her breath, but not forgetting to glare at the entrance to see if Mireille followed them.

Shail, standing guard in front of the door, gently closed it.

“Are you okay? He’s even crazier than I thought.”

“...”

Levi handed over a wet handkerchief and Lil wiped her flushed cheeks. The woman, clearly hesitating, soon asked cautiously.

“...Was that all true?”

When Lil nodded her head slowly, Levi’s eyes widened. Her bulging eyes then blinked to take in the truth. Lil thought Levi’s eyes were like those of a deer’s, widening mercilessly as she was startled.

“That’s disgusting. I’m beyond appalled. Really!”

With Levi’s remark, Lil burst out laughing.

“Don’t worry, I don’t feel anything now.”

“How can you say I don’t need to worry when you held my hand so tightly? Also, you’ll be haunted by your past again and be affected negatively! Maybe I should go to Sesbron with you.”

Lil was overwhelmingly grateful for Levi’s reaction.

Of course, it was out of the question for Levi to get involved, so Lil quickly waved her hand.

“You don’t have to. I’m fine.”

“It’s not fine. I know how the Empire only cares about a woman’s reputation. So many people have learned about your past now, but will those people, the same ones who are fond of scandals, leave you alone?”

“They won’t leave me alone. But this is what I wanted to happen.”

Levi sat down next to her and held her hand.

“Why did you do that? Why do you want that...”

“Because no one knows how vicious and dirty Mireille is. They only know him as the level-headed and successful businessman. Even though he already hails from a wealthy family, he’s favoured even by the new aristocrats because he went into business on his own. The traditional aristocrats initially thought of him as shallow and criticised him. But at the same time, those same people have benefited from investing in his merchant fleet. Moreover, his money lending business with nobles is only growing, so he’s enjoying having the best reputation in Sesbron for the longest time. In this case, don’t you think he’ll be the one most harmed by those new rumours?”

“Still, you’ll take a hit, too. Since he’s a Duke of the Empire, anything that happened in your relationship in the past will be dismissed as a minor flaw only.”

“Even if it’s a minor flaw, a flaw is still a flaw. What good would it bring if it’s kept hidden?”

Levi sighed in frustration, her eyes full of gloom.

“People tend to be judges. No, they’re obsessed with becoming one. They’ll demand obedience and sacrifice from you without having the right. What makes you believe that this will end with the ending you have in mind?”

“Because this way, everyone will become an accomplice. There’s a difference between praising Mireille without knowing anything and praising him while knowing he tramples on his victims behind everyone else’s back.”

Levi finally nodded after a long time despite sporting a tearful expression that clearly showed her disapproval.

“All right then, if that’s what you’re after, there’s nothing I can do about it, but you... do you know that you’re showing such terrifying courage that it puts the people who see it into fear? Take me, for example, I’m so scared right now.”

“Actually, you gave me the courage. Thanks to you, I’m now able to do this.”

“...Me?”

When Levi’s curious finger pointed at herself, Lil turned to face her and nodded her head.

“Yes. It’s been that way since we first met.”

Linhardt paced in front of the crowd with a ferocious spirit. Every time he took a step, the deck that supported his weight made a dull thud.

“...Do you see them?..”

His large body, pale white face, and long horizontal eyes were more than enough to let him exude a threatening aura. Not only Linhardt was commandingly tall, but all of the Roahn Guards were as well, causing the people gathered on the deck to finally slowly disperse.

Mireille’s face looked so contorted that it was impossible to tell whether it was from being beaten by Lil or his actual anger.

He took a deep breath and pondered on his shocking defeat.

Mireille spat out angrily at his increasingly unpleasant speculation.

“...That beastly bitch!..”

His voice could only be heard by Linhardt, who immediately turned his head over his shoulder.

“From what I’ve heard, you were supposed to be a decent person. But seeing you like this, I can’t say that I agree...”

“Governor of Roahn! No matter how generous I am, this matter cannot be tolerated. I will definitely point it out. I will report it to His Majesty right away...”

“Why? I have no involvement here. Rather, I was busy chasing away the bystanders.”

“..?”

Linhardt waved an insincere hand gesture and looked down at Mireille. He then muttered.

“...Or did you mean to report the young lady, not me?..”

“Well, of course...”

“But what will you be telling His Majesty?”

“..?”

Linhardt pretended to think deeply and tilted his head.

“Duke, are you really planning to file a complaint with His Majesty for being hit by a woman you molested?”

“..!”

The buzzing people stopped at the sound of the complaint. Linhardt crossed his arms and looked closely at Mireille’s flushed face.

“You must be in a lot of pain. To the point where you can’t even think about saving face.”

Linhardt then tapped his own cheek.

Mireille, who was clearly losing his temper, looked around the gathered audience. People stood still as if they had heard an incredible story. And even when the Roahn guards motioned for them to be

on their way, the gazes remained the same. Some noble ladies even dared to look at Mireille with contempt.

Enzo and Jean, who were standing behind him, grabbed his arms to prevent him from doing anything sudden, hoping he would calm down and step back...