

## **Northwest 331**

### *Chapter 331*

Mireille suddenly realised something.

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By the time the Clotilde had docked, sunset was already falling red on the Risch River. A gangway was crossed between the railings, and people, gathered with their belongings, hurried off the ship. The sailors shouted as they hoisted the sails and lowered the anchor. Amid the hectic commotion, Lil gave Levi a brief hug. The latter immediately held Lil's hand with an expression of regret.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

Lil smiled confidently.

"I'm strong, so don't worry, but please do me a favour."

"Anything."

"Edgar said he has his own laboratory at the Imperial Clairaut."

"That's right. Come visit me sometime. I'll show you around my lab and Edgar's as well, which is just rotting away in a dust pit."

"By any chance, may I ask you to wade into that dust pit?"

"..?"

Levi frowned playfully but still nodded. Lil's request stemmed from her recollection of the myths she heard from her Ed. When Ed returned to his duties as Admiral, Lil searched through his library, but she couldn't find anything related to her necklace.

"If that's a yes, can you find me a book? It's supposed to be a very old book. And since it was excavated, it's almost in a state of disintegration. The title is... History of Beauty."

"Don't worry. I'll find it and send it to you as soon as I arrive."

"Thank you."

"The original plan was Obernyu, but you're dropping by Sesbron first, right?"

"I think that's what I should do. Since the situation has reached this point, we should at least try to resolve it. The Duke has already contacted His Majesty, so it's not a good idea to evade him."

Linhardt, who had been quietly listening, joined the conversation.

"Then how about I accompany you to Sesbron?"

Lil realised a beat too late that her words could indeed invoke worries. She waved her hand sincerely.

“Why the generous offers? It’s so sudden. It’s fine. I can handle it on my own.”

“Your opponent is formidable. It could be dangerous.”

“Thank you for your concern, but everything’s going to be okay. Besides, Roahn has been without his Lord for quite some time now, right? It’s a busy time, especially with the upcoming monsoon season...”

Due to Lil’s words being true, Linhardt took a moment to choose his own.

“The reason Edgar asked me to accompany you up until this point on his behalf was because he didn’t know for sure if the Duke of Mireille would be on the same ship. If he had known beforehand, Edgar would’ve asked me to come to Sesbron as well.”

“Is that so?”

“I probably need to go with you.”

Linhardt appeared to be stubborn, so Lil briefly pondered on how to deal with this unexpected difficulty. Levi, on the other hand, was torn between who to side with, but soon made up her mind and grabbed Linhardt.

“It’s alright, Linhardt. If Lil says she’s going to be okay, then it should be fine...”

However, even though she just said that, Levi couldn’t help the worry creeping into her voice. She added with fading confidence.

“...And the guards will be following her too. Most of all, Edgar will be there soon...”

Linhardt looked sceptical. Contrary to Ed, the man was deliberate and thorough in everything he did, explaining the look on his face whenever he thought of Ed.

“The problem is that we don’t know when that guy will show up again. If, by chance, things turn out badly before then...”

“I just know it won’t go that far. I have some alliances even without Edgar next to me, and if things go wrong, it’s easy for me to get away with it. Because I have no background. If anything, having an ally like the Governor of Roahn by my side could make things more complicated.”

Linhardt nodded reluctantly after hearing her reasoning.

The couple then crossed the board with half of Roahn’s guards and Lil stayed behind on deck with Shail and four of the remaining guards. As much as she wanted to send all four of them away, she knew fully well how helpless she could be in court. No matter how thoroughly she prepared, it was better for her not to become too overconfident as she could never know when or where her limbs might be cut off.

Lil knew she was at a disadvantage because, in Sesbron's eyes, she surely would be perceived as a woman turned crazy. Despite knowing, she had no intention of playing 'the obedient lady who returned', so she had to prepare herself to have her whole body thrown around once again...

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On the other side of the deck, Mireille walked around trying to disregard the people's gazes.

He was especially aware of the old ladies looking at him coldly though. However, as Mireille walked around proudly, pretending to be happy to greeting noblemen whom he only knew by name, and meeting with the guests of the upper class who were enjoying drinks and games, the sharp looks from the passengers softened considerably.

He smiled, sensing victory.

Mireille knew this very well.

An old Count, who was smiling face to face with him, shook the hand eagerly extended by the Duke of Mireille. Even though this old count certainly didn't forget his harsh criticism towards the older Mireille for his humble appearance, saying that he was no different from a beggar, now, more than 20 years later, he was pretending not to remember anything about that incident and asked for money on his son's behalf.

"Please help me a little more, René. I will be able to repay you next month."

"Can you bear it? Even if the interest will be the same as last time?"

"As expected, I can only rely on you."

From the very beginning, Mireille was well aware of the fact that even if Liloa ever resurfaced, he and his position would never be overthrown.

*I was only able to become engaged to Liloa under the condition that I would help Robero with the Pontenbach deal. It was obviously excessive to have both the glory of a war hero and the hand of Liloa Obernyu, so Robero eventually gave Liloa to me. Of course, he pretended to still have lingering affections for her to pay for the deal, but I could tell that Robero could not even face Liloa's eyes after that... Although he was never equipped to swindle a great empire, it was a stroke of luck for him to be born into the imperial family.'*

Mireille, who was writing an IOU for the old Count, suddenly stopped his quill.

"Why... why, is there something wrong? René..."

"The deal was..."

Mireille looked down at the gradually spreading ink of the quill pen.

"...The artefact..."

The old Count, who couldn't hear his muttering, asked back.

"Pardon, what did you say?"

"No."

Mireille quickly took off his quill and signed a new note next to him. The old Count, noticing that he was acting differently, opened his mouth.

“Is there something wrong?”

“It is nothing. I just remembered something I had forgotten.”

“Oh, is it urgent? Then you should go quickly.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Mireille crossed the old Count’s cabin. It was a spacious and luxurious cabin that obviously didn’t fit the beggarly state of the family renting it.

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Mireille stepped out of the cabin and looked for Jean, but neither Enzo nor Jean were in sight. Their absence forced him to take the stairs one more level down to the cabin deck.

On passenger ships, the lower the deck, the cheaper the cabin, but also the darker and colder. Enzo, Jean, the coachman, and all his other servants stayed on the dimmer lower deck. The lowest deck, one level lower than the cabin deck and right above the dock didn’t even have separate cabins. Nonetheless, because even the lowest deck wasn’t worth the price, it was considered generous for a master to pay for his employees’ accommodation on a deck higher than the lowest.

The cabin deck where Mireille’s employees resided wasn’t unpleasantly poor. After all, it was still a floor with windows and sunlight. Still, Mireille didn’t want to stay longer than necessary.

“Enzo?”

Mireille searched for his butler half-heartedly, but soon gave up and thought about returning to the luxury of his own cabin. That was until someone caught his eye. A light-skinned man from the Northern Continent who had been standing next to Lil and served as her escort. However, it was actually the guy next to the northerner that looked more suspicious. Although he was wearing shabby servant’s clothes, his body was broad, like a skilled soldier, and his standing posture was extremely upright.

Mireille couldn’t properly see his face because it was covered by a hat, but strangely enough, he appeared like someone he encountered before. Based on pure instinct, Mireille’s first guess was Ed.

Mireille positioned himself against the pillar next to the stairs and waited for this suspicious man to turn his head. With the bottom of the boat shaking steadily as it cut through the shallow waves, Mireille held his breath until the man wearing an old-brimmed hat finally raised his head. It wasn’t Ed as guessed, but the face belonged to someone who had his own fair share of achievements.

Mireille recalled the name of the man he had seen at his mansion before.

“...Maxwell... Farin...”

As Maxwell pressed his hat down and took the stairs to the deck further below, Mireille quickly turned around and leaned behind the pillar, just in time to see Shail climbing the stairs leading up.

Mireille waited a little longer and then returned to his own cabin.

Not long after, Enzo and Jean entered their master's cabin and arrived at the sight of Mireille, sitting on a chair with his legs on the desk.

He spoke, swirling a glass filled with distilled liquor.

“Do you know who I saw today?”

Enzo smiled politely, trying to match his master's cheerful rhythm.

“Who did you see?”

“The Captain of the Prince Regent's royal guards. The same person who was given the mission to assassinate the Marquess of Roahn and died when said mission failed.”

Jean stepped forward and asked.

“Do you mean Maxwell Farin?”

“Yes. You said you were there in Kano at the time of his death. But if someone who died so publicly is still alive, it must mean there is more to the story.”

“Who was with him?”

Mireille grinned.

“You are sharp, Jean. Very sharp. He was with a Roahn Guard. It looked like he had converted to their side. But the guard... I think that escort's name was Shail, however, he did not seem to be friendly with Maxwell Farin at all.”

Enzo nodded his head in agreement.

“He is the one who tried to assassinate their Admiral, so there is no way he will favourably be looked upon in the eyes of the Roahn Guards.”

“Then there is only one reason why Maxwell Farin's life was spared...”

Jean and Mireille spoke at the same time.

“...For testimony.”

Mireille laughed out loud and took a sip of his drink.

“The Marquess intends to prosecute the Prince Regent. It is not a bad development at all. The more the two fight, the more advantageous it is to me. It would be even better if Venua gets kicked out of His Majesty's sight because of this matter, and once His Majesty picks the other side, everything else will go smoothly.”

Enzo spoke cautiously.

“But is the Prince Regent not His Majesty's nephew? What makes you think he will easily shun his own blood?”

“What makes me think so? If the Emperor officially turns a blind eye to the assassination of nobles, there will be no noble who will stay still.”

Jean looked pitifully at Enzo and elaborated.

“Is there an easier means of overthrowing a political opponent than assassination? If His Majesty implicitly condones assassination by ruling in favour of the Prince Regent, any nobles’ life will be immediately threatened as well. Because in Sesbron, someone is always someone else’s political opponent.”

“Ahem... Hmm! I see.”

“Furthermore, as threatening as this may sound, it also makes it easier to eliminate political opponents by the imperial family. It is not like there is no history of doing so. So, unless the nobles are fools, there is no way they will accept His Majesty’s ruling.”

With a nod, Mireille emptied his glass.

“No one can afford to tolerate something that sets a precedent of what can happen to them. In most cases, it is the only advantage of a crowd that is in a state of ignorance. When they speak as one voice, the ripple effect is huge.”

“That is a reasonable statement.”

“Yet I cannot let my opponent use his hand, which I barely know about now, only to his own advantage... I had been annoyed before, but I feel like luck is on my side once again.”

“What else happened before?”

“Do you remember the deal I made with the Admiral?”

Enzo furrowed his brows as he traced his memories.

“Yes, you didn’t tell me the details, but... I remember him visiting the mansion, but he did not look very pleased with Your Grace.”

“Yes. He ended up breaking the deal.”

“...What? How dare he?”

“Our deal was to bring ‘her’ to me, but he took her for himself instead. It is a miracle that he succeeded in bringing her to the Empire though, seeing how he has been so blinded.”

“...”

Out of habit, Mireille’s hand drew a circle with the glass, swirling the remaining content around. It wasn’t long before the glass stopped and he came to a conclusion.

“Since he didn’t meet our set conditions, I should get back what is rightfully mine in the first place, am I correct?”

“Yes, yes. That makes perfect sense.”

Nodding his head, Mireille turned his eyes towards Jean.

“Jean. Go and meet Maxwell Farin.”

“What do you suggest?”

“After his testimony at Sesbron, tell him that you can further reduce the punishment he has to originally serve. If you do that, he will keep his promise to testify but also receive a reduced sentence, so he will only benefit.”

Enzo was truly impressed by his master’s strategy.

“It is the perfect plan!”

Mireille himself was satisfied as well and smiled slightly.

“After all, it will be easier to commit a small act of theft than to betray someone like the Admiral.”

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The lower cabin deck rarely received any sunlight. And due to the waves hitting high, even the remaining windows had to be closed, causing a damp smell to permeate all the wood that made up the deck.

In the darkness, Jean, holding a lantern, began to look at the faces in the hammocks and the people sprawled on the floor. Even though he only saw Maxwell when he was basically a corpse, he was confident he could still recognize his face. And if he had covered his face with an old hat again, it wouldn’t be too difficult as his size was noticeable as well.

Eventually spotting him, Jean looked closely to see if there were any Roahn guards around and then approached Maxwell, who was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed.

“Maxwell Farin?”

A blade was pressed against his throat in seconds. Jean didn’t even see how it got there.

A voice full of caution asked.

“...Who are you?”

“The Duke of Mireille sent me.”

“...”

“Are you here as a servant?”

“I am Baron Farin of Obernyu.”

Jean’s mouth twisted at the introduction with clear intentions.

“I was rude, Baron.”

“I see that the Duke is interested in me, but I have nothing to say to him, so go back.”

“Please hear me out, we do not mean any harm to you, Baron.”

“...”

Maxwell closed his eyes again.

As the boat shook on the waves, the lantern that Jean was holding swung back and forth like a pendulum. The light momentarily illuminated the area around Maxwell’s face before moving out of the way.

Jean guessed easily.

“All you have to do is grant my master this one favour.”

“...”

“If you do that, he will commute the punishment you deserve after you’ve given your upcoming testimony.”

Maxwell slowly opened his eyes and muttered softly.

“...How can I trust him?..”

“It is the Duke of Mireille. In his hands are both the Council and the Supreme Court of Sesbron.”

“And what does he want from me?”

“The lady of Obernyu has a necklace with a red jewel the size of a fingernail. It originally belonged to the Duke, but she took it when she left his residence. The only thing the Duke wants is getting this necklace back...”

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A pair of red wings split the sky.

The bird’s thrusts were so powerful that it was noticeably getting closer to her with each beat of its wings. Lil, who had her elbows on the window sill, jumped out of the way just as the bird’s beak was about to lunge at her. The messenger pigeon flew through the guest room window and landed gracefully on the satin cushion. The very cushion that Ed had given her to use for his pigeon, yet it still amazed Lil to see how the creature immediately knew it was its seat.

The pigeon pecked at the food placed in front of it. To avoid displeasing the beast, Lil carefully approached the bird and pulled out the communication tube.

[ Two arches in place, heading to the third... ]



Lil scribbled down the ciphertext.

“The fourth arch is unknown...”

After that, all Ed said was nonsense, going as far as saying that he had suffered a fatal wound to his heart somewhere during the operation and that it would only get better if she were there to touch him. He also didn't forget to add some classical love poems, making his correspondence rather lengthy. Lil put a lot of effort into deciphering it, but in the end, it was really just full of chatter.

She eventually threw Ed's letter aside and wrote a brief reply.

Out of nowhere, a lot of noise was coming from outside the window and then the horn sounded for a long time, indicating that the ship had arrived at its final destination.

Lil inserted her response into the communication tube. The pigeon, who was still pecking at its water and food, glanced at her. The arrogant expression on its face reminded her, without a doubt, of the bird's master.

After she had tightly closed the stopper of the perfume, the pigeon spread its wings, circled the ceiling, and finally headed out of the cabin. In the meantime, Lil hung the bottle of perfume the size of her fingernail back around her neck and simply packed her luggage before heading out to the deck.

The upper deck and forecastle were already full of people who came out to see Sesbron. Lil mingled among the crowd to momentarily enjoy the view of Sesbron as well.

In front of the fortress, located on the flat land south of the river, were mansions of nobles, small blocks where the people of the empire lived, a market, and a square. The thinned river flowed into the city in various branches to further enrich the lives of its subjects. Trees grew all over the city, and wide fields and orchards spread out outside the walls.

Positioned in the centre of the castle wall, the palace was built on higher ground. The main building of the magnificent palace had a large garden in the front as well as the back. The garden, full of trees carved into certain shapes, was even visible from the ship. The tributary on which the Clotilde landed was narrowly divided again and sparkled as it led to the auspices of the imperial palace.

Workers waiting at the dock held the rigging and began tying up the ship as the sound of the anchor being lowered echoed through the floor. All the while, more and more people were being pushed out onto the upper deck. Before crossing the gangway, Lil called for two of the Roahn guards and handed them a letter from Maxwell to his family and a simple map of Obernyu.

“Head down this road to reach Obernyu and evacuate the people listed here. When inspected at the gate, tell them that your family is on a short trip, and if they ask about your identity, settle it with this.”

When Lil handed them the certificate of identity she had written, the two soldiers nodded and crossed over to the dock first.

Shail had observed it all from the side and finally opened his mouth.

“But My Lady, by doing this, this leads us to a shortage of escorts.”

As of now, they were only left with very few people compared to their original party. Two soldiers from the Roahn Guards and the servants and maids who had followed them from Roahn. In total, their number didn't even reach ten.

But as Lil looked down at the port, she gave up the idea of heading to Ed's residence first.

Lil answered Shail as she stepped on the railing.

"There's no need for any replenishment."

"What do you mean?"

"Follow me."

The port where the travellers arrived was crowded with people, but in the midst of this, there was one carriage vacant of people. That carriage had officers wearing Imperial Guard uniforms surrounding it, providing the necessary protection. Lil landed at the port and headed for the carriage. As she got closer, the curtains of the carriage lifted, and her eyes met a familiar face. A beat later, the carriage door flung open.

"Liloo!"

Annette got off the carriage and desperately called for her. Seeing Lil smile with delight made the older woman gasp and tear up.

"I am honoured that the Empress personally came to meet me."

The party behind Lil stiffened and immediately performed a salute one would only give when in presence of the imperial family.

Annette held onto Lil's hands, in a firm yet tender way.

"You, you just disappeared like that... you have no idea how much I..."

"..."

Her eyelids were swollen like she had been crying for over a long time. It also appeared as if her makeup had been reapplied but was dissipated by tears once more.

Annette leaned on Lil and touched the younger lady's face.

"It is really you, huh?"

"..."

Years had passed since Annette became the empress, but her wholehearted greeting made it feel like Lil met Annette again after meeting just yesterday.

"Why is your hair so short again? Just like back then..."

"..."

She bit her lip in shock, probably thinking she had made a slip of the tongue.

"Let's go in first."

"..."

Annette kept her firm hold on Lil's hand and led her to her carriage.

"Venua is here too."

The words that Annette said with a smile made Lil's hair stand on end.

"...As in my brother?"

"Yes, just when I was left confused after receiving your letter, Venua arrived at the palace and confirmed it. He said he came running non-stop from Obernyu after hearing that you were alive."

"...From Obernyu?"

"Yes. Imagine that cold-hearted kid, running to Sesbron to see you, how touching."

Lil came to her senses when she felt a presence approaching them from her right.

"Your Majesty, I am here too."

Before she knew it, Mireille bowed his head gracefully. Annette, her face frozen, turned around, still holding Lil's hand.

"You can walk."

Annette pushed Lil into the carriage and slammed the door shut before hastily tapping the roof in order to get the carriage running smoothly.

Lil was seated next to Annette. Across from them, the imperial maids were busy welcoming Lil to match Annette's rhythm, even though Lil actually had no idea what they thought of her. Lil sat upright and tried to stay calm because of it. However, the closer they got to the palace, the more Lil's spine stiffened with tension.

Annette muttered, leaning on Lil's arm.

"Back then, I had no idea what I could do. So, I made a mistake. I will never let you go like that again..."

When the carriage stopped, Annette's maids touched Lil's clothes and she barely managed to withhold herself from breaking their forearms.

"What..."

"You're going to have an audience with His Majesty right away. Even though your clothes look clean... I want you to change and get your hair done."

The carriage was large enough that the people riding it could stand on two feet, so Lil changed in there. She put on a chemise à la reine with the help of a maid. It was a thin, simple dress made by modifying the classic chemise, a similar one Ed had once gifted her.

Nonetheless, Lil obediently pulled it over her head. The pure white dress made of muslin had layers of frills around the neck and puffed sleeves. The hem of the skirt was decorated with a lot of pleats, but the muslin itself was a thin and light fabric, making it comfortable to wear.

Meanwhile, Annette had a serious look on her face as she pondered the colour of the sash that Lil should wear around her waist. After trying out several decorative bands,

“As expected, blue looks good on you.”

She personally wrapped the sash around Lil’s waist.

After getting her hair done in a considered short period of time, Lil found herself at the entrance to the palace facing a few people who stood around watching the Empress’s carriage.

Annette, with her hat veil down, crossed her arm with Lil.

“His Majesty is anxiously waiting for you.”

“Why do we not go in through the side instead of the main entrance...”

“Stop talking nonsense and follow me.”

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## Chapter 334

The central entrance and main building were mainly used by civil servants and courtiers, meaning they were always crowded. Artists and scholars searching for patrons abounded, and merchants seeking to promote their businesses set up makeshift podiums to deliver their speeches. People dressed in court uniforms gathered in the hallways and galleries to debate and discuss policies. Even imperial citizens holding petitions could enter and exit the main building as long as they wore formal attire.

In this way, court was always open, but of course, only a select few could actually get close to the emperor. As a result, the lowest courtiers and the middle class naturally harboured a competitive desire to become closer to the emperor. If it had been impossible for anyone to approach the emperor at all, everyone would have given up on the idea long ago. But because they were made to believe that they too could have the potential, they begin to long for it. And to get into the depths of the royal court, one had no choice but to become excellent or make themselves stand out.

The royal family, on the other hand, or those summoned by the imperial family, entered and exited through the transept, which was a much more private building. Therefore, it was rare for Lil to enter court through the centre entrance.

Naturally, the hallway connecting the entrance and banquet gallery was crowded. However, upon Annette’s entry, the crowd reflexively moved towards the sides and divided themselves into two. Lil followed, and Annette’s two maids followed behind Lil.

In the gallery, people, who appeared to have a unified agenda, gathered together, chanting slogans in one voice. At first glance, the group seemed to be a major trade route merchant association and a small merchant association.

A soldier standing in the wide open doorway struck the floor with his spear and shouted loudly.

“Her Majesty the Empress and the Grand Lady!”

Lil froze at the announcement of the unfamiliar title, one she hadn't heard in a while.

The voices shouting out civil complaints as well as the voices busily chanting slogans quieted down in an instant. When the audience's noise died, Annette began crossing the gallery. As she walked, the hem of her long dress spread, colouring the floor. She was as graceful as a fairy walking into the middle of a lake.

They passed the main building, entered the corridor, passed the central administrative palace, and finally reached the garden. By the time they entered the emperor's palace, Lil became certain.

Before arriving at the throne room, Annette looked back at Lil in the small gallery and gave her a warning.

“His Majesty is very sensitive these days because of the problems regarding the treasury, banditry on the major trade routes, and the complaints of the small cooperatives. Be careful not to offend him unnecessarily.”

Shortly after, the door to the throne room opened. Compared to the rest of the palace, it was small in size as it was intended to welcome only private guests.

Lil had been here a few times in the past, but the carpet and curtains seemed to have changed since then. The huge carpet with a spring scene, as well as the brightly coloured curtains, gave a more comfortable impression to the tense guests. About twenty people, either ministers close to the emperor or nobles who were related, all recognized Lil and lamented.

Annette, who had walked up with Lil, eventually took the last few steps up to the emperor's podium and sat down on the throne next to him.

Dozens of eyes scanned Lil.

It was assumed that a woman who had spent many years without belonging to any family had been crippled or damaged, so Lil straightened herself and looked directly at her audience, revealing that she was in good health.

“Liloa.”

The emperor held out his hand and smiled brightly. Lil approached Philip II and kissed his ring. After just the right amount of time, she backed away and took a stance in front of the podium again.

“I trust that Annette provided you with all the expected hospitality. She did not even get a wink of sleep because she was eagerly awaiting your arrival. I would swear she has never waited for me as anxiously as she has for you.”

“Oh, then Your Majesty, do you want me to cry and wait for you every night? How harsh.”

As Annette feigned tears while shrugging her shoulders, the Emperor placed his hand on the back of hers. His thick, plump palm completely covered the back of her delicate hand.

“Oh my, I should not have. I made a slip of the tongue.”

The emperor then chuckled and looked back at Lil.

“Raise your head.”

“Your Majesty.”

“You are still beautiful. It is like Henrietta herself deciding to pay me a visit.”

“...”

In reality, both Lil and Venua resembled their father, Joseph I, much more than they did Henrietta, but the emperor was particularly reluctant to admit that fact, especially when it came to Lil’s appearance.

The Emperor, who was sunk deep into his chair, placed his hand on his stomach and said.

“I am glad you came back. I am sure Annette has already given you a hug on my behalf, right?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Hehe, I want to hear everything that happened to you right now, but there is someone else dear to you who is waiting for you. We cannot be the only ones taking our time.”

The Emperor made eye contact with the Chamberlain, who then placed his hand on the wall next to the throne. The wall, depicting fairies playing harps in the garden, opened and Venua emerged.

Perhaps because of his dark green justaucorps or because of the distress he had been through, he looked more emaciated than he did in Roahn. Lil’s party may have experienced a delay in Kano due to Ed’s injury, it was clear that it had taken Venua extraordinary effort to reach Sesbron and therefore overtake Lil, who departed from Roahn first.

Lil only turned her head to pay her respect to him.

“Brother.”

“Liloo, it has been so long.”

Annette sighed at the stiff reunion between the siblings.

“Should you not hug each other at times like this? Even though you are Joseph’s children, you are so... so cold to each other. I cannot believe what I am seeing.”

“It does not feel like it has been that long.”

Venua only raised an eyebrow at Lil’s insincere words. They both knew she had no direct evidence that Venua had stayed in Roahn unless Mireille himself spoke out, since it was Mireille who had taken Venua out by pledging his identity.

He walked next to Lil and bowed his head towards the Emperor.

“Your Majesty, Archduke Joseph I, who is in critical condition, wishes to see Liloa. Please bestow upon us your generosity by allowing me to take Liloa to Obernyu as soon as possible.”

“Ah yes, that is right. Joseph is ill. Did you know that, Liloa?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am on my way to Obernyu after hearing the news about my father, but I stopped by Sesbron first as a courtesy to Your Majesty and to wrap up some complicated matters.”

“What do you mean, complicated matters?”

As if to answer the emperor’s question instead, the chamberlain interrupted loudly.

“Your Majesty, the Duke of Mireille requests to see you.”

“...Now?”

Venua snorted sarcastically.

“Oh please, do let him in. I am beyond curious about what he has to say...”

The emperor narrowed his eyes on Venua.

“I trust you will not argue in front of me.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Send him in.”

With Mireille placing himself in front of the podium, and therefore next to her, Lil was more than displeased. Especially as Venue remained on her other side.

In the end, she took a step back to express her dismay.

“René, do you remember the letter you sent me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Venua just expressed his curiosity, so why do you not share the content with this audience?”

Mireille immediately moved as if he had been waiting for this moment.

“Your Majesty, please approve the annulment of my marriage to the current Duchess, Jeanne Mireille.”

Everyone gathered in the inner room gasped in agitation. Venua, unable to hide his anger, instantly glared at Mireille and rebuked.

“The Duke developed a relationship with Jeanne Malibrand and even sired his successor...”

“From the very beginning, I was meant to marry Liloa Obernyu. I had no choice but to go against fate, but now I have the opportunity to make things right again. My marriage to Jeanne Malibrand is invalid as its foundation was based on the false death of my fiancée. No one in Sebron can imagine the pain I felt in my heart every single day as I was living the lie.”

Mireille’s shoulders were visibly shaking, but to Lil, he looked more frustrated than sorrowful. She evaluated his performance with keen eyes.

“I also felt uneasy after reading René’s letter. In Sesbron, except for Annette and me, only René commemorated the anniversary of Liloa’s death.”

Unable to remain still, Venua took a step forward and retorted.

“That is ridiculous, Your Majesty. In the first place, did the Duke of Mireille not force Liloa to live in the duke’s private residence during the engagement period? Is it not obvious that he did not take proper care of her? It is as clear as day that something too big to endure has happened to this poor woman’s body... Why else would Liloa run away from her so-called home?”

The crowd gasped again upon hearing the words ‘run away from home’. Their collective reaction resembled that of a play’s audience when their speculations were confirmed to be true. It was a matter that everyone had been avoiding till now.

However, Mireille refused to lose to Venua and stepped forward as well.

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“If so, why did Liloa, who allegedly ran away from my private residence, not return to Obernyu? That is most likely because she felt that Obernyu was not a place she could rely on. No one here truly knows how harshly the Prince Regent has disciplined Liloa.”

“And yet, you rush to resume the engagement as soon as Liloa returns to Sesbron in order to claim ownership. Would Obernyu have felt safe enough to stay away from your evil clutches?”

Mireille responded dejectedly, placing his hand on his chest.

“Your Majesty, I fully admit that I have been immature and maybe even immoral in the past. But this time, I can assure you, it truly will be different, so please give me a chance to make up for everything that has happened.”

Venua’s furious eyes glared at Mireille.

“Make up for it? It is your duty as the man of the house to protect the family you have already built. Do not dare to try to force the daughter of Obernyu into this dishonourable position.”



“My request is not to break off my marriage, but to annul it completely. My marriage to Jeanne will be as though it has never happened in the first place.”

Venua finally snapped and Mireille continued to spew out words as well. The men’s voices grew louder as they argued on top of each other. Even the ministers sighed and yelled, thereby adding to the commotion.

In the meantime, no one asked Lil for her opinion.

To shake off the familiarity of the situation, Lil took two steps forward, placing herself ahead of Mireille and Venua.

“Your Majesty, I do not want to go back to either.”

Even amidst all the turmoil in the room, her voice sounded clear. But the emperor chuckled insincerely.

“You are as bold as always.”

The short-tempered Venua quickly intervened.

“Your Majesty, please consider the wishes of the parties concerned.”

“If the situation is like this, how can I be concerned about anything at all? My head is hurting.”

Mireille began to claim ownership again, while Venua refused to remain silent and countered Mireille’s words. When the emperor didn’t budge even though Venua threatened Mireille with a criminal case, the ministers chimed in one by one.

Finally, the emperor, having decided that he had sufficiently assessed the situation, raised his right hand.

“That’s enough. It’s too noisy.”

Now that it had become quiet again, Venua stepped forward next to Lil.

“Your Majesty, but...”

“Venua. Did you not hear what I just said?”

The emperor’s tone was strict.

“...”

“A banquet to welcome Liloa will be held soon. At least until then, please do not bring this matter up again. I only want to celebrate the safe return of my niece.”

\*\*\*

As the wind blew across the estuary, the moon crumpled on its surface. Still, the black waves reflected the crumbled moonlight finely.

Somewhere in the distance came the steady sound of oars being rowed, breaking the silence of the night. A yacht moved through the light fog, causing small water droplets to form on the lantern hung on the bow and giving off a hazy glow.

The yacht reached the estuary's corner, moving towards a sailing ship hidden in the shadow of the cliffs. The ship's watchman went on high alert upon noticing the approaching yacht and discreetly drew his gun. Upon further inspection, he spotted a singing person on the yacht, and such a person's singing reached even the deck of the sailing ship. The closer the yacht came, the clearer the rhythm of the song sang to the beat of the rowing became.

A boatman dragging a yacht out into the estuary in the middle of the night was suspicious enough, let alone while singing a song. After the watchmen exchanged hand signals with the deck officer, the officer went up to the forecandle and stepped on the railing. He then too aimed his gun at the yacht. However, the yacht continued to pass alongside the sailing ship, and the boatman sitting in the middle of it was looking straight ahead, as though he didn't see the ship hidden in the shadow of the cliff at all.

In the end, the deck officer shouted to the yacht's boatman below the ship.

"Hey, what's up with you?!"

The boatman, who was rowing the oars, shuddered in surprise.

"What the hell!"

The boatman, clutching his hat that almost fell off, looked up at the sailing ship. He frowned and craned his neck to look more closely into the shadows. Although it was exquisitely hidden in the black shadow of the coastal cliffs, he was certain there was something resembling the shape of a sailing ship in the darkness.

The boatman, facing the ghost-like ship, asked with a look of fear.

"...Who's there?"

The watchman who came next to the deck officer added.

"He just asked you what you're up to..."

"Why is it so dark?"

"...And what are you doing this deep in the night?"

"I'm on an errand to the port ahead. I have something urgent to load on a ship that's leaving early tomorrow morning."

At first glance, it sounded like a valid reason, but the men on the ship still found it suspicious.

"What are you loading?"

"Snacks to be distributed to the merchant ship's sailors."

Hearing the word 'snack', caused both the deck officer and the watchman to pause. The watchman waved his gun and opened his mouth first.

“Open the sack.”

“...Uhh, here.”

The boatman opened one of the sacks and positioned the opening towards the sailing ship for the men to see. It seemed like the sack contained snacks made of hardened dried pulp and sugar, giving off a fragrant fruity smell that flowed all the way up to the deck.

But before they knew it, the boatman was looking at them with his hands raised.

“Are... Are you pirates?”

“...What? Pirates?”

The deck officer and watchman lowered their guns at the same time. One of them then put his arm on the railing and motioned for the boatman to come closer.

“Hey, sell that to us.”

“...What?”

The sailing ship’s crew had not been able to disembark for over ten days because their plans had gone awry. It was all thanks to the warships of the Mondovi Navy that have been diligently patrolling and conducting inspections in the Western Sea. As a result, it became impossible for the sailors of the ship to move around hastily. And because it had been difficult to satisfy themselves with meals consisting of only dry bread and beef jerky, they instantly felt lucky to encounter snacks such as this, so trying to receive them was a no-brainer.

The two men, desperately leaning over the railing till the point they were about to fall, tried their best to persuade the boatman.

“You don’t have to sell us everything. Just a little will do.”

“Come on. We’ll pay you generously.”

“Well... Still...”

Hearing the small commotion, the rest of the watchmen moved to the left railing and thus to the yacht’s side. They were initially confused as to what was going on but immediately became ecstatic when they saw the contents of the boatman’s sack.

About ten people crowded around the railing and bargained with the boatman. Loud and excited voices were hoping to get a taste of the different types of food. At the same time, however, hooks rose simultaneously above the right deck railing... As the ropes connected to the hooks became taut, the metal dug deeply into the wooden railing...

Nonetheless, on the left handrail, a quarrel started over how much money was worth just ten pieces of candy, as well as five pieces of dried fruit. The men argued about the right price of the snacks, completely unaware of the unidentified intruders climbing their ship’s hull from the right side.

The watchman suddenly spoke up as if a brilliant idea came to mind.

“First, let me get the rope...”

As he turned to the deck to look for a rope, he was instantly shot in the chest by an arrow and collapsed.

The rest of the gathered sailors belatedly realised the situation, but it was already too late. The boatman, who had been laughing brightly one minute, now quickly pulled out a crossbow from beneath a sack and opened fire, taking down one of the deck officers. In the meantime, twenty intruders had already crossed the railing from the right side of the ship and similarly shot out their crossbows, thereby eliminating the rest of the deck officers.

The large red-haired man standing in the middle of the intruders commanded in a whisper shout.

“...Capture as many as possible alive!..”

While the intruders dispersed all at once towards the forecastle, stern, and watchtower, a group of latecomers climbed over the railing and stepped onto the deck as well. In an instant, their numbers had doubled. They quickly went down to the lower deck, carrying the rifles strapped to their backs.

Actually, there was no need to call them latecomers because a steady stream of new intruders continued to climb over the railings...

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One of the ship's sailors was fortunate enough to come to his senses after being hit in the shoulder by an arrow. He initially fell dead on the deck but soon took advantage of the absence of nearby intruders, who were preoccupied with lighting up the deck with torches, and crawled on his elbows. The man knew he had to move before the deck got any brighter and successfully snuck through a door, crawling on all fours. Once inside, he jumped to his feet and rushed through the short hallway and into the captain's office.

The sailor threw open the door and shouted in a whisper.

“...Captain!..”

“...”

In the captain's office, the window behind the desk was wide open and welcomed the soft moonlight.

His captain had a calm posture, leaning back in his chair with his legs up on the desk. However, as he was backlit, the sailor couldn't see his face properly.

The sailor swallowed and urgently reported the situation outside.

“Captain! This isn't the time to lazy around. Intruders...”

However, his 'captain's' head merely tilted so calmly.

“...Intruders?”

“..!”

The sailor instantly realised that the voice didn't belong to his captain.

“Are you talking about me?”

The sailor stuttered, shaking his shoulders in shock.

“...W-who...”

Despite having the reflexes to at least utter that much, he didn't have time to think any further. Instead, the sailor immediately dashed towards a cage located in the corner of the captain's cabin. It was the birdcage his captain kept his messenger pigeon. He hurriedly opened the cage and reached inside, only to notice that all that was visible through the bars was his own hand. He initially thought it was because of the darkness, owing to the angle of the moonlight not reaching this part of the cabin, but still, that wouldn't explain why he couldn't get a feel of the bird at all.

Cold sweat began to run down the back of his neck upon hearing someone behind him.

“...Tsk, tsk...”

It was a sound similar to soothe an animal and the sailor froze before slowly looking back.

The man sitting in the captain's seat lowered his legs from the desk and turned towards the sailor.

Now, the face of the man was revealed by the moonlight. He was stroking the chin of the captain's pigeon standing on his shoulder, a shoulder that was wrapped in a leather pad. The sailor lowered his gaze a little further and ultimately spotted the real captain of this sailing ship, lying face down on the floor beneath the desk and the chair the man was sitting on.

His heart dropped.

The sailor slowly raised his trembling eyes and looked at the man sitting in the captain's seat again. The man's handsome face laughed heartily, but his eyes and the smile that tugged at his lips were extremely eerie, especially in the blue moonlight...

“Were you thinking of sending out a message? The Duke of Mireille ordered you to cut off all contact with him and go into hiding, right? Then you should heed the Duke's words carefully.”

\*\*\*

When a carriage stopped in front of the Mireille residence in Sesbron, the Mireille family came out to the front door to welcome the head of the family home. Jeanne, the Duchess, was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief as if she had already heard the news. Standing in front of her was her son, Armin Mireille, who had just turned three years old.

He let go of Jeanne's hand and approached Mireille.

“Father!”

Mireille noticed that his son's gait improved significantly during the time he was away. He didn't care about Jeanne, but he was particularly keen on Armin, who was intelligent and in awe of him. Even if his marriage with Lil pushed through, he intended to let Armin stay in the mansion as an extramarital child. And when the right time came, he would be formally registered.

“René, we need to talk...”

Mireille pretended not to notice Jeanne who called out to him. He had no intention of explaining the details of the marriage annulment suit, nor did he have any intention of soothing her discouraged

mood. What annoyed him even more was how this woman, who had been good at handling her emotions and everything else on her own, suddenly acted pathetic just before their marriage was about to end.

Mireille, holding Armin in his arms, quickly headed into his mansion. Enzo followed him and moved to his side.

“...Umh, Your Grace, the coachman is saying something strange. I think you should hear it.”

When Mireille looked around the entrance with Enzo, the coachman quickly got off the coach seat and took off his hat. Mireille thought it wasn't normal for this servant of his to stare at him with such a stiff posture and anticipation.

“Bring him in.”

“Yes.”

Mireille entered the study on the ground floor and sat on the sofa with Armin. Soon the coachman entered and Mireille asked politely.

“What is going on?”

His shabby appearance didn't suit the regally decorated study at all. Mireille frowned as he looked at the carpet the coachman was stepping on. The coachman, however, also seemed to be conscious about it, as if he had never expected that he would actually set foot in the study.

Enzo tapped the coachman on the shoulder.

“Go on, tell him.”

“Well... Your Grace. A while ago, at the Simena Port, didn't you order me to make a certain lady look your way?”

“You mean Liloa?”

“At that time, the young lady was seeing off two Southerners, accompanied by a tall gentleman.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Yes. Even back then, I instantly knew it was a wealthy young lady, but I didn't expect she was the Archduke's daughter. Because...”

“..?”

When the coachman's words faltered, Enzo nudged his shoulder again.

“Because the southerners who were seeing the young lady off called her 'Captain'. So, I thought she was just the hostess of a company or a daughter...”

Mireille frowned and then asked.

“...What? Captain?”

Meanwhile, Enzo urged the coachman to give specific details.

“Are you sure that the title ‘Captain’ was not addressed to the man?”

“Yes, the lady even told them to stop calling her captain and gave them a light beating. Until then, I thought she was just a precious lady of a merchant company...”

It may be an illusion, but it felt like the back of Mireille’s neck was getting cold.

“So, what did they call her instead?”

“...Pardon?”

“I was wondering what they called Liloa after she corrected them.”

The coachman blinked and answered.

“I heard them call her ‘Lil’... but as it’s a very common name anyway, I didn’t give any meaning to it at that time.”

“...What did you say?”

The coachman gave his master a puzzled look as if pondering if the unremarkable name was suddenly important. When Mireille urged him without words, he quickly looked at him and repeated the name.

“They called her, ‘Lil’.”

The hand that was stroking Armin’s head stopped and Enzo and the coachman instantly held their breath. The only sound that could be heard at that very moment was Armin calling out to his father in a slurred voice.

Mireille recalled the scene in which Liloa and those lowly Southerners interacted so brazenly.

“That is strange.”

Mireille took a deep breath to suppress himself from getting all worked up.

“First...”

“..?”

Mireille stroked Armin’s head again. The child’s plump face folded its eyes beautifully as he smiled.

“First, bring in a portrait artist. Make a montage of those Southern bastards...”

“...”

“Summon August Felini and Jacques Poussin, the captains of both attacked Garni merchant ships, and have them confirm the montage.”

\*\*\*

Lil washed and got dressed in Annette's boudoir. For the first time in a long while, she sat down at a dressing table, put powder on her face and wore a dress.

Annette spoke with excitement as she picked out Lil's headdress.

"These days, makeup is becoming lighter, and panniers and corsets are disappearing."

"I heard that chemise à la Reine has become the trend in Sesbron."

"I made it like that. Public opinion was outraged that the extravagance of the palace was excessive. However, considering the amount of capital that has flowed into this central continent, plus the sheer count of nobles who make it their business to compete for splendour, why should we hold back? So, I came up with a clever plan. I am Annette. Once I start something, everyone follows it. So, I came forward and created a new trend."

Annette placed several hats decorated with veils on Lil's head. As if she was determined to utilise Lil's ultimate weapon, she urged her maid to bring out more of the decorated boxes.

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"..!"

Annette placed her hand on Lil's shoulder and looked into the younger woman's eyes through the mirror.

"It is better to resolve complaints while they are small. If left unattended, they can become sources of trouble in the future. That is how the problem of bandits along the Great Trade Route has reached this point."

Lil gazed at the woman who was especially benevolent to her. As before, Annette gave her friendly advice and volunteered to be her helper. However, she also still had the same beliefs as before, that things would get better if she decorated Lil splendidly before sending her out.

"Your Majesty."

"What is wrong?"

"I have not changed. So..."

"..?"

Lil swallowed her words and refined her sentence a little better.



“I will keep making you uncomfortable...”

“Do you think I am doing this to make myself comfortable?”

“...”

“You really have no tact. It is frustrating for me to see.”

As Annette stroked Lil’s face, her fingers brushed over the makeup on her blushed cheek.

“How good would it be to use this weapon, even for a little bit?”

“I...”

As her delicate hand landed on Lil’s shoulder again, Annette let out a sigh.

“Thirty years, Liloa. Thirty years, from the death of my first husband until now. What kind of world do you think I have been through? The agony that you are obsessed with for so long passed me by twenty years ago. Are you still resentful that I told you to turn a blind eye to the difficult road and take the easier one?”

“...”

Annette and Lil were still looking at each other through the mirror.

“If I did not know how difficult it was, how could I have called this path easy?”

“...”

Annette pinned a small hat-shaped veil to Lil’s head.

“This is one of my favourites. Just use it.”

Lil couldn’t bear to refuse Annette’s favour.

Lil felt the familiarity of an old and deep feeling from the older lady as she rashly brought up her past and didn’t expect her to understand.

“Your eyes have become very hard, Liloa... Then shall I tell you what I think?”

“...”

Annette leaned down to Lil’s ear where she was sitting. However, as Lil was tall compared to Annette’s smaller frame, the gesture wasn’t a big move.

A gentle whisper soon rang in Lil’s ears.

“I am not the same person as I was before. And I know now that you are not bent nor broken, or ever will be. So will you give me a chance to make it up to you?”

“You do not have to, you have always been good to me. More than I can understand.”

“Really? I am glad you think so.”

The maids who had finished dressing her up stepped aside from the dressing table. Lil then got up from her seat and stood looking at Annette. Annette’s face, which had been smiling proudly, soon turned suspicious.

“But... Do you not have a partner?”

“...No.”

“I am not asking about your partner for tonight’s banquet...”

“..!”

Annette’s eyes bent mischievously, and her index finger poked Lil’s shoulder.

“Are you really going to let me say it first? I have heard it all. Even news from the far West comes to Annette first.”

“Ah, um...”

Lil rolled her eyes awkwardly, like a child who had been caught deviating from their parents. Even if Annette became upset and slapped her on the back, there was nothing she could say.

“Do not make me ask again. Where is your partner?”

“He... is a little busy right now.”

“What an elusive fellow. I have thought so for a long time. Even His Majesty was all that upset because of him.”

“Right...”

“Ah! But I cannot even imagine. You and the bastard of the Peninsula?”

Lil remembered Ed’s tag that she had almost forgotten.

“I guess you are finally going to tell me something interesting. I cannot help but wonder how that happened.”

“He is not as crazy as people think.”

“Oh, look at you. Are you taking his side already? Are you sure you are the Liloa I know?”

“I am not taking sides... No, actually, I have been a bit strange these days. It is like I am not my usual self. I do funny things and speak childishly. You have no idea how embarrassing it is when I think about it later...”

Annette threw back her head and laughed loudly at Lil’s honest display of self-awareness. The maids next to the dressing table also pursed and straightened their lips as they tried to suppress their laughter.

“You should have been dating hard 10 years ago. You missed your chance, so are you not all confused even if you are all growing up? How cute!”

“...”

Annette, who was still smiling lightly, wrapped her arm with Lil’s and led her out of the boudoir.

“Of course, I do not know what exactly is going on, but Liloa, the way I see it... you seem to put a lot of weight on the looks of the opposite sex, huh.”

Lil was about to say no, but when she remembered how often she looked at Ed’s face in appreciation, she quickly zipped her lips.

Lil answered without much confidence.

“...Not to a very large extent...”

Annette laughed hard again. As she continued to laugh, they passed through the corridors and gardens in the meantime. The night air was cool, water flowing from the fountain reflected the moonlight and a bug chirped somewhere in the grass.

Soon they approached the banquet hall, where people were chatting loudly. The soldiers at the entrance recognized them instantly and shouted for everyone to hear.

“Your Majesty the Empress and the Grand Lady!”

After parting ways with Lil, Annette went up to the podium next to the emperor. The trumpets sounded in unison, and the emperor stood up and gave a congratulatory speech expressing his joy at seeing Lil again.

And then, the music resumed.

Fortunately, since it was a banquet with hundreds of people, not everyone was focused on Lil. Men and women were looking for marriage partners, artists were looking to network and find sponsors, gourmets were eager to taste the delicacies of the banquet, and some people were even looking to be simply entertained by the dancers on stage. People moved for all kinds of different purposes...

“Miss Liloa.”

A man in a dark robe came next to her. He was a man whose scent and presence were all too familiar to her. Lil turned her head to look up at him and was met with his neatly swept-back blond hair, shining brightly under the banquet hall’s chandelier.

Lil’s eyelids trembled slightly.

She turned to him and bobbed her head.

“Sir Cesar.”

A crowd of ladies was about to approach Lil to inquire about her relationship with Ed, before turning their attention to Cesar with their young, yearning eyes. The officers around him, on the other hand, looked at him with respect.

Unknowingly, a corner of her heart felt stuffy.

“It has been a while, Miss Liloa.”

“Why are you being so formal?”

“...Have you forgotten? We first met at LeBrun, where we were both aspirants... And we remained as such...”

“You can be comfortable.”

“I am more comfortable this way.”

“...”

Nodding his head, Cesar held out his hand.

“Your favourite song has just started.”

Lil thought for a moment, but there were still many people taking turns looking at them.

Lil folded her hand into his. Both were wearing gloves, but the moment their fingers touched, Cesar’s jaw clenched.

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Pretending not to notice, Lil spoke as they walked towards the dance floor.

“I see you have been promoted to Commodore. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. How did you know?”

“I saw the epaulettes of the officers saluting you.”

“...”

After taking a stance, their right hands met, and they waited for the prelude to end before spinning in a circle.

The addition of wind instruments enhanced the music, while the people dancing next to them moved closer and farther away in waves. Likewise, the chandelier’s lights shaded and highlighted Cesar’s face.

During their movements, however, Cesar kept his eyes locked on Lil.

“...If you look at me like that, people will misunderstand.”

This time, their left hands touched, and Lil spun in the other direction.

Out of habit, Cesar let out a soft apology through a faint whisper in her ear. He then lowered his eyes and only saw her from his peripheral vision. They alternated between circles and semicircles, getting closer to the emperor's platform before returning.

Soon, the music slowed down, prompting everyone to pause neatly and look at each other. A moment later, the second theme began, and Lil and Cesar once again got closer until the two of them were face to face.

The silence between them lasted one turn, two turns...

"How are your injuries?"

"I am doing fine."

There was nothing else to say. Lil guessed that Cesar must've heard the rumour going around, yet he didn't ask anything else.

Silence filled the narrow space between them once more, a stark contrast with the banquet hall filled with chatter. The music heightened, exciting the attendees who laughed and chimed in. Those watching the floor also contributed to the overall mood by toasting their drinks and clapping their hands.

Lil and Cesar brought their hands together and kept the pace. This particular segment of the song suddenly felt boringly slow and became exacerbated by the deepening silence between the two.

At some point, Cesar started looking at her again. Lil, noticing his gaze, looked up at him as well.

"I..."

He swallowed dryly.

"...I am departing tomorrow. It was fortunate to see you before I left."

"You're going back quickly."

Cesar smiled bitterly.

"Yes."

"Take care of yourself."

Cesar distanced himself a bit and stretched out his right arm with his palm up. Taking his arm, Lil tactfully held the hem of her skirt with her other hand so that it flowed freely. She revolved around him in accordance with the angle of his arm until Cesar's arm slowly lowered. It sank to a halt as if his strength was draining.

"I think I now know what you meant."

Lil walked towards him as it was her next move and signed.

"Sir Cesar..."

"I'm not trying to repeat the same story."

"..."

“I admit it... I always assumed I knew everything, that was why I did not make an effort to find out more. I thought it was enough because I understood you a little more deeply than others. After all, I was the only one who experienced the side of you that others refused to see. That alone made me feel as if I had already accomplished something great... I was so absorbed in that privilege... no, I even considered it a favour, so I could not help but think perhaps I was only being stubborn. And because of that, I even told you I would do everything you wanted. But now that I see it more clearly, in the end, I actually did nothing...”

“...”

Cesar slowed his steps before coming to a standstill.

“I have come to realise that I will never know or truly understand what you want.”

“...”

His lack of movement prompted Lil to also stop her already slowing steps and let go of her dress.

“I am sorry, Liloa.”

“That is enough. I told you already, it is fine.”

“Actually, my numerous apologies up to this point were nothing but empty deceptions...”

“...”

Reaching the end of the song, the music ended and people poured out to various places.

“I am not looking for a chance to be with you again.”

“...”

In the crowd, Cesar offered her his hand.

“Rather, this is my sincere apology for the pain I caused you in the past.”

It was the same hand gesture as when he asked her to the dance, but this time, he was visibly shaking. Lil thought for a while before slowly putting out her hand. Beyond her thin gloves, the warm sensation gently touching her fingertips spread through her palm up to the backs of her hand.

Cesar lowered his head and kissed the back of her hand.

“Be happy.”

“Sir Cesar...”

“...”

Lil swallowed the lump down her throat.

“Be sure to be happy, too. Thank you for everything.”

The face she was facing was awkwardly smiling.

“Thank you.”

The hand holding hers suddenly gained strength. It held onto her as if it would never fall, but soon Cesar let go of Lil. Unlike their meeting in Roahn, Cesar was the one who turned his back first this time.

Many people greeted him and bowed as he joined the crowd, some people approached him and talked to him in a friendly manner.

Lil smiled in relief and soon turned around.

\*\*\*

“...Cesar Lemoine...”

Mireille leaned against the railing on the second floor of the banquet gallery and stroked his chin. His narrowed eyes parted from Lil and followed the man who exited the ballroom.

As soon as Lil turned her body after seeing Cesar walk away, other men, who had been waiting for her to be left alone, began to approach but hesitated upon Venua’s sudden appearance.

“...Cesar Lemoine, ah, you mean the Commodore?”

Mireille looked back at the owner of the voice. He was a petty officer of the Mondovi fleet, leaning on the railing with him. Mireille took two glasses from the tray of a passing servant and handed one to the officer.

“Commodore?”

“Yes, he was recently promoted.”

“Then did he stated that his body had completely recovered?”

“Yes.”

“But was he not said to have been recuperating at home for several years because of some chronic illness or injury? How did he land in Roahn with the Mondovi fleet that had been dispatched to the South?”

“From what I have heard, he went on a trip for a while because he was frustrated with nursing life. I guess the trip gave him the much-needed energy and he soon after rejoined the Navy.”

Mireille wondered if the recuperation was just an excuse and if the two had actually been travelling together, but at the same time, he immediately doubted this line of thought because doing so would have been an act too bold for such an upright officer to commit.

Mireille took a moment to recall his memories.

“Then, who was the patient the Admiral took great care of while the fleet returned to Mondovi?”

“Unfortunately, petty officers are not informed of such matters.”

“...”

Mireille intentionally frowned. He looked down at the banquet hall and drank his drink, soon enough, however, the petty officer added.

“...But an officer I know said he overheard that the patient was a woman.”

“Really?”

“She was aboard a merchant ship belonging to Viscount Noirmont, so the patient must have been someone from Sesbron. Someone high-profiled enough whose death could cause a dispute. That was why even our great Commodore Sagastar feared for his life.”

“I see.”

“Did I help you?”

Mireille, who had emptied his glass, nodded his head.

“That was very helpful.”

“If so, about the money for my uncle’s loan...”

Mireille took out a document from his arms and the petty officer hastily opened the documents handed to him.

“Of course, let us pretend it never happened.”

The officer, smiling brightly, lowered his head.

“Thank you.”

Mireille tapped his shoulder and motioned for him to go, and soon the man disappeared beyond the crowd.

Despite the scuffle with Venua, Lil was still surrounded by a lot of interested men. Mireille watched the scene for a moment with a cigarette in his mouth. Then, the duke eventually walked away from his spot, leaving a trail of smoke that followed his steps and mixed with the smoke from the cigarette pipe that an old woman was holding.

“A great bitch, indeed. Messing with all the esteemed gentlemen from this Empire.”

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With ease, Mireille was able to recite the appearance, body, speech, and handwriting of the infamous ‘Black Whale’, and it was no other than Mireille himself who placed that huge bounty on the head of that pirate captain.



While in thought, he observed Lil walking away from Venua.

Mireille descended the spiral stairs leading to the first-floor hall, down to where Lil was still surrounded by a crowd. As Mireille approached, people moved aside, their eyes glimmering with interest.

He greeted her with an orchestrated smile.

“Liloa.”

“Did you approach me to get hit again?”

Some people couldn’t hold back their laughter and hurriedly covered their mouths.

The duke placed his hand on his chest in a humble gesture and as a way to acknowledge that everything was his fault, shocking the onlookers with his theatrical attitude. As a result, the audience, while initially anticipating what might happen this time, burst into nervous laughter.

“I said I would not give up, so I am keeping my promise.”

Squinting her eyes at the people around them, Lil didn’t bother concealing her bored expression and turned away from him. People stood aside in surprise at her aggressive strides and Mireille took advantage of the crowd’s retreat, hurriedly chasing Lil’s back.

“What did you do in the South?”

“..?”

He then inched a little closer and whispered.

“...Do not even think about denying it. You came to Roahn aboard the Admiral’s flagship, right?”

Lil came to a halt.

The curve of the side profile that slowly looked back at Mireille was as beautiful as if it had been drawn and soon her whole face turned towards him.

Lil whispered with a wide smile on her face.

“...I was busy beating up your men...”

Still smiling, she opened the glass door leading to the terrace, causing the late autumn wind to blow in. For a moment, Mireille couldn’t process what he just heard, but a heartbeat later, he found himself following Lil out to the terrace.

As Lil threw the terrace door closed, Mireille muttered, still completely dumbfounded.

“...Lil... Schweiz?”

“I have been waiting for you to find out, but is it not a bit too late?”

“...”

It was only when Lil swatted his hand away with the tip of her fan that Mireille realised he had unknowingly reached for her shoulder.

“I heard that you built a fish tank in your mansion. But what should you do now? You lost the mermaid you supposedly caught...”

Mireille’s senses heightened upon hearing her say mermaid and his face became hot. The blood from all over his body rushed to his head, and the feeling of pressure tightened around his mind.

“...Lil! Schweiz!”

However, his voice didn’t come out as loud as he intended. It was as if he had been stabbed with a knife. His entire body tensed up, causing his voice to come out as if it were being squeezed out. His neck felt suddenly tight as well, so he tugged at his shirt collar and cravat.

Gasping for air, he stumbled and had to catch his hand on the railing.

“Was it not enough for you to capture healthy southerners and turn them into slaves or circus acts? You even went as far as going after mermaids? How more ugly can you get?”

“You... it really is you!”

Lil pointed the fan in her hand towards him.

“Now then, get down on your knees again and hold out the ring. You must keep your promise not to give up on me, right?”

“...”

Mireille couldn’t utter a single word and held onto the railing. His stomach was churning like a fireball.

“It was quite a sight to see you trying to court the very pirate whose head you put a bounty on. You have no idea how much fun I was having.”

“...”

The woman’s eyes, which were neither raised nor glaring, glowed eerily. Eyes that caught in the moonlight still managed to shine coldly.

“Go on. Keep chasing after my tail. I think it is now even more interesting that you keep on pursuing me even though you know who I am.”

Unable to contain his anger, his hand stretched out towards Lil’s neck without realising it. People behind the terrace’s doors shouted and pointed, causing Mireille to come to his senses and hurriedly put down his hand again.

Mireille, struggling to keep his cool, gritted his teeth and spat out.

“Even after the years since you ran away...”

“Do you think you will survive after this? You need to keep your image alive somehow. Now, you are nothing more than a comedian fixated on monopolising the principality.”

“Liloo Obernyu. I will make you regret this so much that you will want to rip out your own tongue for everything you said today. Make no mistake, His Majesty will take my side in the end.”

Lil walked over with a smirk and grabbed the handle of the terrace door.

“But who on earth would believe that I am an actual pirate?”

Even Mireille couldn't deny such words. If it wasn't for Lil's confession, he, himself, would have doubted it till the very end.

He unconsciously cast a glance at the gathering crowd behind the open terrace.

After Lil slammed the door shut, she was met with the people gathered around the terrace to watch the commotion. She stood with her back to the terrace where only Mireille was left and spoke loudly as if she were making a declaration to the audience.

“It looks like the Duke has not come to his senses yet. This time, he even tried to strangle me.”

“..!”

The people, who had no idea what to do with this atmosphere, laughed nervously once more.

“How far can that behaviour of his go? Is it not worth knowing?”

With leisurely steps, she parted the crowd of people, who were buzzing, and left.

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“Shit!”

Mireille, having returned to his mansion, slammed down on his desk.

“Damn it! That fucking bitch!”

As he fumed, his heart's pounding grew increasingly stronger.

“Felini August! Jacques Poussin! Bring them here! Now!”

Enzo was grovelling and sweating profusely.

“I have already received confirmation of the montage. I was planning to show it to you as soon as you had returned from the banquet...”

“Bring them in! Put them both in front of me this instant!”

“Yes, yes! Ah, this is the letter.”

Enzo lifted a silver tray. Mireille snatched and unfolded the paper with great force.

[ ...Looking at the montage, I didn't recognize them right away, but after we limited them to the Black Whale's pirate ship... they appear to be boatswain Alain Bolivar and first mate Jericho Armin... ]

The letter was crumpled before Mireille finished reading it. The piece of paper and his hands were crushed together in a lump and trembling.

He shut his eyes tightly and rested his forehead on the back of his hands.

A little while later, August and Poussin, now part of the Sesbron branch of the Chamber of Commerce, entered Mireille's study with Enzo.

Mireille managed to greet them in a much calmer manner.

"Tell me, do you remember Lil Schweiz, the Black Whale?"

"I'm reminded of him every damn day..."

"Is there any possibility that she is a woman dressed as a man?"

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August's face seemed like he just heard something straight out of a fairy tale.

Mireille suppressed his discomfort and urged them gently.

"Come on now."

Poussin answered on his behalf.

"I guess not. It never occurred to me that he could be a woman."

August agreed with Poussin.

"It's true that, for a man, his looks appeared more on the feminine side, but he was still definitely a man."

"In truth, I don't understand what made you think so. While I agree that in this world, gender may sometimes be confusing... Yes, such people exist, but that wasn't the case with the Black Whale at all."

"I agree with Jacques. Based on his appearance and body, a question of his gender never occurred to me. Just as it's natural for me to be a man, so was it for the Black Whale."

Mireille tried his best to maintain his composure and asked a question while thinking out loud.

"Then how could such a magical thing happen...!"

His eyes brightened. Like a man possessed, he repeated the words he just uttered.

"...Magic?"

Mireille quickly sent the men out of his study, especially now that they had begun to look at him with suspicion. He then nervously closed the study door without even letting either Enzo or Jean in.

Left alone, he wandered around the study deep in thought.

“Magic... it must be magic...”

Mireille rang the bell on his desk and Enzo immediately shouted from beyond the door.

“Your Grace, what is going on!”

“Call Jean!”

The sound that was getting closer became distant again.

“...Yes!”

Before long, there was a knock and the door opened. In the doorway, Jean bowed his head.

Mireille was sitting leisurely, snuggling into his backrest. When he had calmed down enough, he asked.

“What happened to your attempt to appease Maxwell Farin?”

“He said he would give me an answer, but I have not heard back from him yet.”

“Go find him again.”

Mireille explained the reason why he wanted to retrieve the heirloom, wondering if Jean might get the wrong idea.

“Liloo, she pissed me off immensely. No matter what happens, you need to bring me that necklace.”

“How do I appease him?”

“Any means necessary. Tell him I could grant him whatever it is that he wants.”

“...”

After Jean nodded and turned around without saying a word, Mireille spoke to his back as he disappeared through the crack in the door.

“And add that, through me, he will be able to see his family much sooner.”

“Yes, I got it.”

He took out a cigarette and questioned, sitting quietly amid the billowing smoke, collecting his thoughts.

*First of all, the Lemoine family is a difficult family to mess with. Although it is a traditional family, it has been actively engaged in business in recent years. Countless merchants and aristocratic families are indebted to Lemoine. Moreover, the head of the family, the Count, is not only an outstanding scholar but also has a great personality that earns him a significant number of followers... How annoying. There is no particular benefit of involving Cesar in this case... Plus, it is unclear whether he participated in this act of piracy or not. Considering my understanding of Cesar's character, he would never have participated. In addition, there is no one who does not know how much Count Lemoine cherishes his younger brother, Cesar, as if he were his own son...*

*For now, I have to be satisfied with catching the man's weakness, but nothing more...There is no point in concocting or investing in the path leading to Cesar.*

*So, in the end, I am only left with Liloa. Just like with Robero, she will probably put herself in a position where she can easily be buried, such that even if I leave her alone, she herself will make people uncomfortable and tire out her side. How easy it will be to deal with her... Or, it is not yet too late to have a son with her, only to snatch it out of her womb before handing her over to the Navy for execution. Actually, the process of having a son with Liloa would already be a disgrace for a woman like her. Now that I think about it, that is not a bad route to take either. The thought of seeing my 'little birdy' suffocating again is exciting me. Her figure from behind, sitting helplessly like a doll, wearing clothes that expose her shoulders, hair drizzled on the nape of her neck... her forcibly dolled up lips giving only obediently gentle answers... Her face, succumbing to me and swallowing humiliation was very beautiful indeed...'*

A feeling of heat surged to his lower abdomen, tightening his breath. As he closed his eyes, his imagination became instantly more lively. Mireille, who hung his cigarette from his lips at an angle, slid down comfortably in the chair, lifted his body and pulled his pants down from his waist...

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The afternoon sunlight was a much-welcomed companion. Despite the decreasing temperatures, the sky was clear and reflected on the blue water of the small river by the palace grounds. In front of the river, under a white awning with gold tassels, the Emperor, the Empress, Lil, and Venua all sat down for tea.

During their gettogether, the emperor had constantly eaten the white refreshments that were as light as a feather. His speed was so fierce that Annette didn't even dare to spare some for Lil, so she just explained.

"It is a snack made from ground coconut. His Majesty likes them very much."

Lil could sense that Venua, who was highly sensitive to table manners, was trying his best to avoid looking at the emperor.

Instead of answering, Lil gently smiled at Annette.

Only after eating all the refreshments, the emperor asked Lil.

"Did you enjoy the banquet?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you."

Slogans shouted by the small merchants' association gathered in the main building were heard all the way to their table. In fact, the chants had been loud since the beginning of their tea time, but all

four of them pretended not to hear. However, as it continued to the point where it got on his nerves, the emperor eventually sighed.

“I have a meeting with the union soon...”

“...”

The emperor then habitually touched his forehead as Annette gently placed her hand on his shoulder. He obviously pitied himself, folding his hand on the back of hers.

“I cannot even drink a cup of tea comfortably...”

He tried to smile and lift his teacup, but this time, the chants weren't even part of some slogan. The shouts were full of swearing and inaudible words, which continued for a long time.

“...Stop, just stop!”

The emperor finally slammed the table, got up, and headed towards the river. Venua, who needed to appease him, quickly walked next to him and matched his pace.

Annette leaned over and whispered to Lil.

“...In the last few years, a huge amount of money has been spent on securing a naval fleet and replenishing the Navy. Robero departing for the Monferrand Strait... You heard about that, right? Whatever you do, do not mention that in front of His Majesty...”

“Yes.”

Lil recalled a rumour she heard in Roahn some time ago\*.

“...At the time, no one expected it would cost this much, such that when it came time to pay, everyone was surprised that it emptied the national treasury. As the budget was being spent all over the place, the imperial army's salaries were gradually reduced. It unfortunately resulted in the imperial army becoming lethargic and unmotivated... They couldn't even properly suppress petty bandits. Even if they were ordered to do it, all they would do was go hiking as if they were enjoying an outing... So, there had to be some new means for capital to flow in, but this subjugation of pirates of the south ended in vain, right? In return for dispatching Admiral Retiro, the Merchant Guild brought treasury to His Majesty, however, since there was no result in the South, everyone is slowly withdrawing...”