

Northwest 351

Chapter 351

The Emperor handed the forged documents back to the guard.

“Arrest those involved in this dossier and those standing up right now.”

The Emperor, risen from his throne, came down from the podium and crossed the centre of the court. After passing the testimony stand, he walked down the aisle between the audience seats. Annette hurried after the fast-walking Emperor, with Lil and the guards making up the rear. The rest of the audience similarly got up and left the courtroom.

The guards walked faster than the Emperor and quickly opened the double doors to the back garden, revealing cloud shadows sparsely staining the bright green garden. Behind the greenery came the tributary of the Risch River meanders where four large sailing ships and a smaller yacht cast shadows on the water’s surface.

As Lil was at the front of the crowd, she was among the first to see the yacht, carrying three officers from the deck of the first ship, on its way to the dock. As expected, it was no other than the Admiral standing on the yacht’s narrow bow.

Taking in the scene Lil was dumbfounded belatedly.

But even as she thought that she kept bursting into laughter. Making it seem that Ed wasn’t the only one who had lost his mind.

Holding onto his wig, the Supreme Court Justice came running out with a huff before pointing a finger at Ed.

“How impudent! How were you allowed to dock here? How dare you sail those ships right up the back of His Majesty’s palace grounds! This is treason!”

Ed got off the yacht and took off the bicorne hat he was wearing. He half-heartedly brushed his bangs back and bowed in front of the Emperor and Empress. It was actually Lil’s first time to see Ed’s etiquette and couldn’t help being surprised at how elegantly good he was. His gesture was so modest that it made Lil wonder if the Emperor might be offended.

But the Emperor merely cleared his throat and asked.

“You know that there is a perfectly fine dock in front of Sesbron’s walls, so why did you commit such a reckless act?”

“Your Majesty, there are so many nobles involved that I could not allow anyone to board or disembark until we reached you.”

“...”

Not even blinking, Ed effortlessly proceeded with an exaggerating way of speaking.

“Please bear my faithful desire in wanting to directly show you this tremendous plot of treason. If this desire to think only of Your Majesty went too far, you could cut off my head...”

“...Never mind. What is done is done. Now show me quickly.”

“Yes, of course.”

Ed quickly bowed his head again as he stepped aside. Lil watched him, finding his unusual attitude of undying loyalty more than absurd. But Ed, who had his head down at an angle, was looking at her as well and even quickly winked when their eyes met. Immediately, Lil’s eyes widened and she bit her lower lip. With Ed already straightening his face, she was the only one embarrassed after he just shamelessly gave her a look.

“Guide me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

In front of the Emperor was the dock where the yacht, on which Ed came, swayed with the waves. The yacht cast a slanted shadow across the surface. Compared to the ship, it was clear that the dock was small in size as it was only built for the royal family to enjoy water play with a small boat.

The Emperor stepped onto the dock.

“Supreme Court Justice and Congress, follow me.”

Ed refused firmly.

“That will not be possible.”

The Emperor dejectedly spoke again.

“Then the council follows me.”

Ed repeated the same thing as if he were a broken music box.

“That will not be possible either.”

The Emperor’s dejected rumbles continued for longer until he finally opened his mouth.

“Is it the Supreme Court justice or the Congress that is the problem?”

“I think it would be better for only His Majesty the Emperor, Her Majesty the Empress, some of the guards, and the accuser to look around first.”

The Emperor, understanding the meaning, suppressed his anger and asked.

“Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, that is the case. Please believe me when I say it is because I cannot mention each person involved here by name.”

Annette held the Emperor's shoulder to calm him down and glanced back at Lil, who then quickly went to the other side and was about to grab the Emperor's arm to support him. As Lil approached the Emperor, Ed's outstretched fingers slightly brushed with hers...

Empire – Obernyu border.

A man wearing a grey hood passed through the border walls. Riding his horse slowly, he looked back at the long procession lined up in front of the castle gate. It was the line to get through inspection, consisting of people who pulled carts, rode carriages, rode donkeys, or walked all the way from the farmlands outside the walls.

Young people from all over the continent flocked to the land of opportunity called the Empire. Above their lively expressions, black birds flew in circles to look for prey, while faceless imperial troops were watching the procession from a high watchtower.

A bell rang twelve times somewhere in the distance, signalling noon.

Maxwell sighed as he looked up at the cold grey castle walls.

“...The land of opportunity...”

Maxwell went against the flow of people. He was just thrilled to be leaving this empire. This time, upon his return to Obernyu, he would confine himself to his estate and not even be bothered to look at the court of Obernyu, let alone the empire. He also contemplated buying a villa in another principality near the Great Lakes. Lil declared she would stop Venua, but Maxwell couldn't fully believe it. It wasn't that he didn't trust her words. Rather, it was because Venua was still dangerous.

Because he was anxious about that, Maxwell took the deal with Mireille. No matter how much Lil sent the Roahn Guards, Maxwell, as the head of his family, couldn't afford to be punished and leave his family alone. And Lil couldn't do anything about that. So, on the day the Empress first left Lil's boudoir, Maxwell sought her out, taking advantage of her time alone. Since Annette never wanted to part with Lil, they had to meet very briefly, but it was enough to convey his situation.

As it was just before the banquet started, Lil looked very gorgeous. The white muslin dress and veil made her look like an ethereal being, one that humans could never reach.

Maxwell soon came to his senses and bowed his head.

“Servants of the Duke of Mireille came to visit me on the passenger ship.”

“How could they have recognized you?”

“The Prince Regent once stopped by the Duke’s mansion to pressure the Duke about finding you.”

“What did his servant say?”

“He asked me to bring him a necklace.”

“Necklace?”

“Yes. A necklace with a red gem.”

“..!”

Lil’s expression changed as if the necklace wasn’t an ordinary item. Since she didn’t answer, Maxwell continued, worried that he was losing her trust.

“On the passenger ship... I tried to meet with you by going in and out of the luggage compartment. It was my only way of avoiding raising suspicion...”

“Why didn’t you tell Shail?”

“Because that guard doesn’t trust me. He probably would’ve made a big deal out of it. If I got caught on the Clotilde, it would’ve made things even more complicated.”

Lil looked up at Maxwell for a moment and muttered.

“...Neither of you really trust the other...”

“Miss, I...”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to reprimand you. Come, sit down for a moment.”

Lil, who was sitting on the couch, offered him a seat across from her. While Maxwell walked to his seat and sat down, Lil was lost in her thoughts, looking somewhere into space. She was silent for a moment, then quickly came to her conclusion.

“Give it to them.”

Maxwell reflexively asked back at her unexpected answer.

“...What?”

“It was going to have to fall into the Duke’s hands anyway, so you’re lucky that you’re the one he contacted. So, if he calls for you again after the banquet, hand it over to him. Before that, I have something to check at the banquet first.”

Lil asked as if reading his thoughts.

“What did the Duke offer?”

Maxwell replied, hoping that she would rather decide for him.

“He promised me a complete... pardon...”

“As long as you give him what he wants, Mireille will keep his promise. For him, a pardon is nothing too difficult, you just have to keep your mouth shut until a certain amount of time has passed. Don’t worry about me, I’m in no position to blame you and even if I was I wouldn’t, not when I know the full story.”

Maxwell, still hesitant, sought her approval.

“...Is this really okay?”

“I’m not a judge, so don’t try to get confirmation from me. You apologised to Edgar and have suffered enough, so I don’t plan on being strict with your decision. The Duke didn’t demand that you shouldn’t testify, so I leave the decision entirely up to you.”

Lil didn’t test his loyalty. She had no expectations from him other than his human conscience. Maxwell knew that to prove his loyalty, he had to pay for his sins. But he didn’t have the courage. In his own defence, any ordinary human being probably would make the same choice. Rather than swearing his belated loyalty to Lil, he just wanted to escape the entire situation. He just wanted to quickly return to his family and protect them even though it was an unfair choice.

This tiresome, endless fight between nobles wasn’t something he should participate in.

As a result, Maxwell chose the pardon. And he had no regrets...

Suddenly, someone was captured by the imperial army while calling to abolish the social classes.

But Liloa...

From Kano to Simena, the two Southerners and I moved together with the servants while following her. The male servants’ quarters were always large rooms with several beds... The older one snored horribly, so I woke up a few times. At one of those times, I saw Liloa, looking after the

Southerners... I think it was the day before we arrived in Simena... She sat on the floor next to their bed and said a few words... She appeared to be reciting something. Wishing them smooth sailing.

How could Liloa, who had never knelt before the Prince regent of the Archduchy in her whole life, kneel before those humble Southerners and take care of them?

I can't seem to erase that scene from my mind...'

Maxwell pressed his hood down in an attempt to shake her off. He had to move before he became more caught up in his thoughts. He slammed down on the reins and steered his horse with his back to the Empire. The wind rushed into his face and chest while he kept mentally repeating the same sentence over and over again.

The atmosphere in Sesbron took a turn for the worse and everyone was walking on thin ice. After all, most of the smuggled goods were items ordered or tendered by nobles. Among the items were large numbers of artefacts belonging to fallen royal families and collections of bankrupt nobles. Ministers and nobles alike were busy denying that they knew each other. Most representatives of the families claimed that they thought the price paid to the merchant groups already included not only import tax but also toll tax. And that claim was actually not as farfetched as one would think, because more often than not, the smuggled goods sold for a price rivalling the price after customs. Obviously, the profit made from those false tariffs went into the pockets of the merchants.

To emphasise one's innocence against treason, condemning the traitor was needed. As was it in this case. The nobles joined together to criticise the merchant associations. The owners of the largest, the Duke of Mireille and the Count Lazilière, were immediately imprisoned.

This incident also solidified public opinion that the Duke of Mireille was an 'unworthy' match for Lil. Causing Lil to be finally freed from Mireille's clutches. Ed, on the other hand, made up for his lack of achievements in the southern expedition. The operation had such a large impact, with a loot so massive that the naval officers eagerly divided it amongst themselves, that it was only natural for the dissatisfaction to disappear like snow melting in spring. Seeing the situation of the officers, who participated in Operation Hideout, was like this, the rest of the officers couldn't remain still and began eagerly tracking other smuggling ships and locating smuggling bases scattered throughout the empire.

This resulted in the Merchant associations going in protest, questioning how the navy could possibly attack the people of the same empire, but in the end, this only further irritated the Emperor. Public opinion could also not be avoided, making the Emperor particularly merciless when it came to the smuggling incident. But anyone could guess that he intended to use this momentum to enrich the national treasury.

Of course, the Emperor tried his best to keep Ed in check as well, however as the person who benefited the most from this discovery was none other than the Emperor himself, he had no choice but to acknowledge him again this time. If the emperor, out of personal reasons, ignored his subject who made a significant contribution, it would be quite shameless of him to do so. He therefore commended Ed and raised the status of the navy on a large scale.

"His Majesty killed two birds with one stone."

Lil nodded at Ed's words.

“Indeed. Most of the smuggled goods were repatriated as imperial property, enriching the national treasury. In addition, the nobles who feared being classified as treasonous by His Majesty were kept in check. At first, we only thought of the documents as insurance in case Mireille took a hard line, but the results were truly behind expectations.”

The two finally met and talked about what happened during the time they were apart. Since Annette had been around Lil so much, Ed was only able to meet her by formally inviting her to his mansion.

As Annette threatened that she wouldn't let Lil's honour or reputation get damaged, Ed had to first receive permission from the Empress, who claimed to be Lil's guardian, before very politely inviting Lil to the residence. However, when Lil suddenly showed symptoms of a cold, Ed, — as expected, made a big deal about her accidental sneeze — claiming to be a renowned doctor, declared that he would take care of her all night. Annette could only laugh in vain when Ed sent such a message to the Imperial Palace with a big fuss...

It was almost dawn. As the light was just beginning to spread along the horizon, the bedroom at the Retiro's residence was still dark. Ed sat at an angle with his back against the pillow, whereas Lil lay in a crooked position with her legs up on top of him and her head resting on his chest. Ed had his gown undone and was as good as naked while Lil was just wearing a negligee. Their activity had been intense last night, so the area around the bed was devastated with fallen pillows and spilt clothes.

Lil glanced at Ed, who was sipping his wine.

“How did you come up with the idea to capture four ships? I mean four ships, how was that even possible?”

“I hate politics. To minimise my engagement, I knew I shouldn't give it any room.”

Ed put his glass down and smiled as he caressed her knee. With the hem of her negligee already way up, Lil noticed something suspicious in his smile, but chose to ignore it. She raised her upper body instead and asked.

“You knew roughly how they moved, didn't you?”

“Well...”

“Because you once boarded a smuggling ship.”

Edgar lifted Lil's knee, kissed it, and muttered.

“...You have me all figured out...”

“I know. But it's bigger than that right? Has it something to do with your collection back at Roahn?”

“...”

As Lil narrowed her eyes, Ed subtly averted her gaze. His action of pausing rather than answering straight away always made her more curious.

Lil urged him again.

“I heard you’re currently collecting items that are up for auction.”

It was an auction entrusted to the Sesbron Auction Company by government offices in the name of the imperial family. The imperial family auctioned off some of the confiscated smuggled goods in order to solve urgent financial problems. Now, the royal family’s artefacts, works of art, various alcoholic beverages, nobles’ collections, furniture, and real estate, which had become extinct under the imperial rule, came pouring out. Ed, never one to miss an opportunity, he sent his servants to bid on hundreds of pieces in the never-ending auction.

This auction was currently one of Sesbron’s most hottest topics, so there was no way it wouldn’t have reached Lil’s ears.

Ed slowly nodded his head.

“There were too many people involved to make a hasty move. It was just too much of a hassle. I was thinking about personally touching the topic about ‘pirates’ only after seeing the solution...”

“You were right.”

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“The timing worked in our favour and the evidence we found in the cabin made the job much easier. Also, the accusations I initiated turned out most effective, especially when they all stood up and caused a commotion, thereby basically implicating themselves.

Lil nodded to herself.

Rolling her over, Ed now hovered above Lil, his lips skimmed the skin between her knee and thigh before he bit into her flesh.

“But I have a question of my own, how did you know that Mireille was involved in the first place?”

“If the ‘Deer guys’ belong to the association of Count Lazilière, then the ‘guys from Rose’ belong, of course, to Mireille’s Garni Association. I’ve ridiculed him countless times with that rose, so there’s no way I would miss that.”

Ed recalled the report about the Southern League of Pirates that he had seen in the Count of Amiaeng’s residence. It contained a looting certificate from ‘Lil Schweiz’, who mockingly drew the Duke’s rose symbol... However, Ed’s recollection was cut short by a sound from Lil, unsure if it was an exclamation or a sigh.

“The looting certificate... It suddenly feels so far away...”

Ed, who adjusted the hem of her negligee, came up to Lil's face and lay down on his side to continue their conversation face-to-face.

The exchange of their stories, which was filled with faint whispers, loud laughs, occasional sighs of frustration, and exhilarating descriptions, eventually led to Lil even sharing her last encounter with Mortu.

By that time, the sun was already shining, brightening the room's interior.

Lil then remembered how strangely bright a room was when she was with Ed, even though she was still suffering from Mortu. She didn't know why at the time, but she knew it intuitively after that.

She smiled softly and opened her lips.

"I... I've always thought that I was locked up in Mortu's castle..."

Lil finally confided in Ed and told about her life with Mortu. She thought she could speak about it calmly, but at times, her heartbreaking memories were just too much to bear. When that happened, Ed would affectionately wipe away the occasional dripping tears. Annette, the shadow that covered the testimony stand, and the battle with Mireille were all unfolded before Ed... Until it all became distant like a chapter in Lil's life being shrouded over. The letters that closely recorded the past gradually lost their vividness as the ink dried and aged. Then, a blank page turned over, covering the old and signalling the beginning of the new...

Lil had been tied to Sesbron for a while to testify. By not letting her go straight to Obernyu, she could see how much the Emperor abhorred Joseph I. This gave her no choice but to demand a specific date from the Emperor before she provided her detailed testimony and records.

In the meantime, Ed followed Lil everywhere. He did this despite her frequent visits around Sesbron to convey her gratitude to the ladies of the court. Whether she went to a salon, a tea party, or for a walk, he would stay by her side without ever thinking of leaving.

Annette, who was lying on the couch, spoke from behind her fan.

"The Marquess does not know how to stay away from Liloa."

Ed, who was indeed right next to Lil the entire time at the salon, openly confirmed.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You never came to a single salon I have invited you to."

Ed merely laughed, but Annette wasn't about to let him go so easily.

"I sent you several invitations about 10 years ago, and yet it is only now that I am finally seeing your face."

Ed discreetly begged for Lil's help. However, despite her forearm being tapped, she simply continued to drink her tea without bothering to face him.

Knowing about the great bond between Annette and Lil, Ed couldn't treat Annette like he did the Emperor. Annette even appeared to be giving Lil some relationship advice. Of course, Lil would take the advice as it was, as only advice, but Ed didn't take anything lightly when it came to Lil.

Therefore, he had to respond politely to Annette's questions and try to appear decent in the Empress' eyes.

Lil, on the other hand, was still shocked by Ed's impeccably neat manners. Ed didn't participate in the other gentlemen's games or discussions, even during the salon. The young ladies constantly eyed him with envious eyes. Well, even to Lil, Ed looked dignified, dressed in fine formal attire with his hair slicked back respectably. With his mouth shut, he looked as perfect as a sculpted statue...

Surprised, Annette collected her fan and raised her upper body.

"...Jeanne?"

Lil followed Annette's gaze to the entrance of the salon and spotted a young-looking woman, who was pacing reluctantly in the doorway. When she finally dared to emerge from her hiding spot, the commotion that had been laughing and talking here and there subsided in an instant.

Lil immediately rose from her seat and approached Jeanne.

She had sent the younger woman a few letters, but not having heard back from Jeanne made Lil more cautious. Lil knew that any hasty action could hurt Jeanne, so she couldn't be more proactive than she had been. Annette also advised Lil to wait. In case Jeanne resented her, Lil was asked not to blame Jeanne for her desperation. Jeanne would definitely reply once she had recovered from the shock.

Lil looked down at the face that struggled to hold back tears. Seeing the corners of her eyes still puffy as she has been crying for a while, Lil called her as affectionately as possible.

"Jeanne..."

Jeanne, who had been standing frozen, approached without saying a word and grabbed Lil's hand. Her hands were undeniably shaking.

"Please forgive me... for not being able to respond..."

"It is okay."

The water droplets that had barely been held back fell. Jeanne covered her mouth and swallowed a cry. After hesitating for a moment, Lil eventually embraced her and patted her shoulder, allowing Jeanne to sob out her feelings.

"He was... René was... so horrible..."

Jeanne was younger than Lil when she became engaged to Mireille. Despite already having a three-year-old son, she wasn't even twenty yet. Lil didn't dare to assume to know everything Jeanne must've been through, but she had some idea.

"I only know so little. I just wished he had been a kinder husband to you..."

"Forgive me, even though I knew that René was a terrible man... Sometimes, out of overwhelming despair, I could not help but despise you. I should not have... I now know I should not have done that... I was still too young..."

Annette came over and rested her hand on Jeanne's back. As Jeanne hastily wiped away her tears and showed her courtesy, Annette simply smiled softly, took her handkerchief, and wiped Jeanne's tears.

"You must have hated Liloa and you must have hated the world. But shake it all off now. That is the only way to regain happiness."

Annette spread her fan and whispered in Jeanne's ear.

"And... if you do not wish to see René's face ever again, this Annette can help you."

[Forma, the god of beauty, had six children in the beginning. All six children were as beautiful as Forma, but Belle, the seventh child born between a god and a human, was not. Some said Belle was ugly, others considered her different, while the rest thought she was at least cute. Opinions on Belle were mixed, but no one called her beautiful.

Belle was overcome with frustration as she looked at all six of her beautiful siblings.

One day, Forma came up to her and asked.

"Child, why the long face?"

To which Belle answered.

"I am saddened that I cannot have beauty."

"Why, what do you think beauty is?"

"I am talking about the appearance of my siblings, praised by everyone they meet."

"I do not understand, please explain in detail."

Forma was confused after hearing Belle's explanation.

"I cannot imagine what that is like. Just because your siblings are praised for their beauty, you are obsessed with appearance?"

"Would you be happy if you could change your appearance to whatever you want?"

"Yes."

Forma shared her power with Belle with the help of her eldest child, Bonheur of Happiness, and her secondborn, Amour of Love*. Through that, Belle frequently changed her appearance in front of the mirror.

She pondered for years about what she should do to become the most beautiful in the world. First, Belle wished for her mane to disappear. Next, she wished for her hooves to disappear. Even her horn, she hoped for it to go away*.

Lastly, she wished her feathers would disappear as well.

So when Belle finally came back into the world, people of all ages knelt before her and praised her beauty.

As Belle was born between a god and a human, she aged slowly. Nonetheless, she worried every morning and every night that they might sense her withering. She was concerned that her true self would eventually be revealed. Every day, she wondered if she would be called ugly again. She was a slave to the thoughts of at least one person, who might suddenly act on a whim and refuse to praise her any longer.

The joy of being praised lasted for only a moment, and Belle soon became tormented by hatred. No matter how beautiful she became, someone always found imperfections in her.]

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[‘Does the kind of beauty that satisfies all people even exist? If not, do I have to constantly change my appearance? On some days, do I have to take off or attach my tail, while on others I have to tear or sew back my wings? Then, how can I ever call this appearance myself?’

At some point, Belle was overcome by an unbearable feeling of disgust every time she faced a mirror. Her beautiful appearance that gathered the praises of all humans was merely a skin lent by God, nothing had changed who she was from the inside.

Belle painfully scratched her cheek in thought.

Belle grew to hate any kind of praise for her appearance. The humans were praising her skin, but not Belle herself. Even if the Belle inside that skin disappeared, humans would seem to still kneel in front of the empty vassal while praising its beauty.

Forma, unable to watch Belle in pain any longer, spoke again.

“Why are you suffering?”

Belle cried.

“Forma, what you gave me was not a gift, but a curse! My heart is now full of disgust and hatred!”

“My child, human language was created to easily label what humans find beautiful and what they perceive as ugly. When humans did not have language, they ran across the grasslands for a long time to express Bonheur and shed tears as big as lakes to express Amour. You are suffering because I gave up on you at the mercy of a language that is lighter than the wind. Who do you want to be recognized by after obtaining what the language calls ‘beauty’? By others? Or, by yourself?”

Belle answered by wailing.

“The truth is, I want to recognize it by myself. I want to accept myself. I want to love myself.”

Forma nodded her head.

“Then do just that. Get back the wings you gave up on for mere language and fly in the highest sky. Get back your feathers and endure the harshest winter. Get your hooves back and run across the widest land. You will know the truth from the tips of

your wings that flutter in the sky, through the warmth that surrounds you, to the legs that bounce with all their might. It is a feeling that is only yours and no one else's, so you should never turn your back on it again. You should not be dissatisfied with the fact that you cannot reach that with mere language."

And so, Belle realised.

Belle fell in love with her own self forever. Because only she could give herself true happiness. Then, her appearance no longer changed.]

As Ed finished reading the last page and closed the old book, Lil also covered her jewellery box containing the necklace.

Lil reflected on what she had read over and over again.

Running her hand down the red velvet box, Lil declared.

"I'll never wear it again."

"..."

Even so, she didn't take her hand off the box for a while. When she finally moved her hand, she held it out to Ed.

"Use it for your research."

"Thank you."

Ed placed the jewellery box on the seat across from the carriage. Whenever he was alone with Lil, he always sat next to her. Like this time, they were sitting facing the direction the carriage was moving, and the seats across from them were littered with various documents and letters that they had to deal with.

The carriage had just passed the border and ran along the well-paved road. The road connecting the Empire with Obernyu.

On Ed's lap lay a combination of newspapers that had just arrived from Sesbron, foreign affairs, and reports from the Navy and the Retiro residence in Sesbron. All unorganised. Among them, Ed picked up the newspaper and handed it to Lil.

"This is yesterday's edition."

The newspaper contained the latest news about Sesbron. The first thing that caught Lil's eye was Count Lazilière's statement of penitence. Regarding the lawsuit for annulment of the marriage between Jeanne and Mireille, he expressed regret for tarnishing Lil's reputation and displeasing the judge with his unflattering words and actions.

But his statement was full of neat and refined sentences that Lazilière couldn't possibly have put on paper himself. It was as if someone had ghost-written it.

Lil said, pointing to the title of the statement.

“How could Lazilière write such a prestigious inscription? ...Do you have something you need to tell me?”

Ed, who was reading a report from his naval attaché, glanced at her.

“...What?”

Lil snatched another sheet from between his reports.

“This... looks like a counter statement from Mireille?”

Ed took out his glasses and answered with his eyes fixed on the report.

“He must have written it in haste, because if not, only Lazilière would be considered extenuating. His head is about to be blown off, so there is no way for him to be able to hold out.”

“You’re behind this, aren’t you?”

Lil clearly recalled the moment when Ed learned the specifics of the trial.

Ed looked back at Lil, who had folded the paper on her lap.

“You said you wanted an apology.”

“Rather than a personal apology, I wanted to set a precedent. I wanted to let anyone know that perpetrators can’t hide in silence if they commit something like that.”

“I feel the same way. But I couldn’t just ignore the fact that he publicly insulted you like that. Our encounter at the Simena Hotel was a different matter because there was just us. But for this, I took advantage of the newspaper’s power of publicity. If I hadn’t taken your intentions into account, I’d have crushed his knees to force him to kneel in front of you for the rest of his life. It killed me that I couldn’t actually kill him, so please allow me this much.”

Lil looked down at the page again.

Lil, whose gaze was directed outside, patted Ed’s shoulder.

“Okay. I forgive you for meddling with my affairs.”

Ed raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“Thank goodness.”

“But what did you do to get him so obedient that he would give this massive apology?”

He answered, turning to the report.

“I said I would rip off his scalp.”

Lil swallowed a laugh at Ed's unexpected answer.

"Like what you did with your enemies?"

"I told him I would peel off the back of his head to take out his skull and use it as a specimen to be studied in the field of phrenology."

"Phrenology?"

"..."

When Lil once asked Ed about this, he said that phrenology was an incredibly unscientific discipline.

"You hate phrenology."

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"Still, many imperials have blind faith and use this field to justify their wrongdoings. Lazillieré begged to write a statement from the moment the scalping was mentioned. Mireille, on the other hand, suffers from an inferiority complex, which he compensates by wearing flashy jewellery and mistreating slaves. I told that bastard that I was going to dismantle his superior façade by treating him the same way he treated slaves, layer by layer."

"..!"

Lil looked at him in shock.

Ed had been talking while his eyes fluttered like a madman. It wasn't difficult at all to imagine him suddenly dropping a knife covered in blood and hair.

Ed asked back in a peaceful tone, a complete contrast with his appearance just seconds ago.

"...Why? What's wrong?"

But Lil was still slightly disturbed by Ed's unexpectedly calm voice.

"Is that why you haven't cleared up those rumours till now?"

"I can't deny that they're useful at times."

Lil shook her head and turned her eyes back to the newspaper.

An article about Jeanne caught her eye.

Divorce itself was a supposedly difficult and tedious legal process, but according to the article, Jeanne tearfully reasoned with the Emperor that she couldn't possibly continue her marriage to the mentally unstable and violent René Mireille. The noble ladies who frequented Annette's salon supported Jeanne, and so, the Emperor also sympathised with Jeanne's unfortunate situation and granted her a divorce. Jeanne then filed a lawsuit for a huge amount of alimony and division of property, which the Emperor likewise treated generously.

Meanwhile, the problems of bandits and security along the Great Trade Route were gradually resolved as the Imperial Army began to operate smoothly. The Navy additionally actively captured smuggling ships with the full support of the Imperial Family. In the process, it became known that young boys and girls from fallen kingdoms and fallen noble families were sold as slaves and brutally exploited through smuggling routes throughout the Empire, causing a widespread public outcry once again.

Annette, who witnessed the condition of the children who had been escorted to Sesbron first hand, became furious and heavily criticised Mireille. The viciousness of the slave trade perpetrated by the Garni Merchant Association was revealed to the world, and voices calling for the rescue of the children rose loudly.

With an editorial by a scholar calling for the immunity of nobles from families like Mireille to be abolished, Lil covered Sesbron's uproar. Turning her head, she looked at the world outside the window. The withered tree branches shed their yellow leaves. It was late autumn, and the farmland that had finished the year's farming was wasting away.

"Edgar."

"Hmm?"

Lil placed her palm on the window. The glass with water droplets on it was cold and slippery.

Lil wanted to feel the world surrounding her more vividly. If the world was changing along with the people in it, she wanted to be the first to sense the signs.

"I want to know more about the world."

Feeling somehow impatient, Lil elaborated without being asked.

"You said that ancient times are in contact with providence, right? I want to know about those ancient times too."

"Then..."

"Once I'm done in Obernyu, I want to set foot on another continent and travel to a country I didn't even know the name of."

"That's a really good idea."

"I'll go with you to any desert or jungle you want to visit along the way."

"Are you for real?"

Lil only turned her head in front of the window and looked at him. His green eyes behind the glasses were already full of anticipation.

“Yes.”

“It’ll be my honour.”

Ed took her hand and placed his lips on the back of it. After a few more touches, he threw away the report he had been holding and stuck closer to her side. Ed hugged her from behind, resting his chin on the back of her neck where it met her shoulder while looking out the window as well.

“What have you been looking at so intently since a while ago?”

While waiting for Lil’s answer he bowed and raised his head slightly, causing Lil to become annoyed by the glasses that kept bouncing near her face. She pulled his glasses off his face, rested them on his forehead, and finally answered.

“It’s just that... I’ve decided I will give up my right to succession. So if you have any intention of taking Obernyu, you better say it now.”

When Ed laughed out loud at her joke, his melodious laughter tickled her earlobe. Lil shrugged her shoulders for a moment before Ed proceeded to bite her earlobe and whispered.

“...Does that mean there won’t be a penny left?..”

She snorted and shook her head.

Before long, the end of the road from Sesbron to Obernyu was seen. Lil pointed to the Obernyu Castle visible from their carriage window. The castle of the monarch who ruled for hundreds of years was as imposing as the giant trees surrounding it.

As Lil exhaled a nervous yet unconscious breath, a white fog formed on the window.

“This is where Mortu first found me.”

Joseph I’s boudoir was filled with the vigour of death.

It was a mix of an unknown moisture, an uncomfortable smell, and the acrid scent coming from the incense burner. The curtains on the bed were draped down, and it was the kind of scenery where one wouldn’t be surprised if there was some kind of horrible figure lying behind it.

As Lil and Ed entered the boudoir, Dr. Limue, the family doctor, stood up from his chair. Ed went to his side and said he would check in with the doctor. Limue, who knew Ed was also a doctor, handed him the medical log and began to explain. Lil planned to listen as well, but their conversation quickly became too difficult to comprehend, so she lifted the thin bed curtains with the back of her hand instead. The figure of a person covered with a thick blanket slowly emerged starting from the feet. Eventually, when Lil finally reached Joseph I’s bedside, her breathing stopped.

She looked down at him in sheer shock.

He was so lifeless that she thought he was actually lying in a coffin rather than a bed. His breathing was shallow, and his skin was as rough and grey as the bark of a tree. Perhaps due to that exact reason, it almost looked like he had already weathered away.

The Archduchess, sitting in the chair next to the bed, held Joseph's hand and whispered.

"...Joseph, Liloa has returned..."

As if he heard that, his eyelids twitched and his unfocused eyes were revealed. As was typical for patients with limited consciousness, it could take a long time for them to find someone with their eyes.

Even though Lil knew he was sick, she couldn't believe what she saw. The image of her father that she remembered was that of a strong ruler. When she was younger, she looked up to him as a powerful monarch. She had always been trying so hard to be acknowledged by him, even if only for a moment, and she remembered eagerly looking up at him, hoping he'd stroke her hair.

When Lil heard the news that a new mistress would be appointed, she was horrified. However, seeing his unfocused eyes now made her feel a strange sense of pity. He didn't even seem to recognize her anymore. He looked at her as if looking into space. His eyes that neither moved nor closed were as empty as an empty well...

But soon, someone trapped in the well called out to Lil.

"...Lilo..."

Startled, Lil stared at Joseph's lips.

When the Archduchess lifted her body in her seat as if she had seen it too, Lil spoke.

"I am sure, just now..."

Lil hurriedly looked at Limue. The doctor explained as he nodded his head.

"Sometimes he recognizes people."

She leaned closer to his bed, allowing his damp scent to assault her nose. The stench emanated from his breath. It was obvious that death was inherent in the most fundamental evidence of life.

"Father?"

"...Liloa..."

The voice was sparse like wind coming from a deep cave. It was desolate, without emotion or energy. His throat slowly moved as if he was about to speak again.

"...Child..."

It was an expression that Lil couldn't properly place. When Joseph spoke again, it was too soft to hear. Only the sound of dry scraping of vocal cords came out of his throat.

Joseph's eyes grew bloodshot as he exerted more effort, but the Archduchess grabbed his hand as soon as it emerged from the blanket.

However, Joseph brushed off the Archduchess and grabbed Lil's wrist. When Lil reflexively swung her wrist, his thin body jumped up. The raised face that appeared to push out his eyeballs came closer to hers in an instant. His trembling throat forced out his voice as if his vocal cords did everything they could.

"Where is the child?"

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It almost seemed like it wasn't Joseph who was speaking, but the terrible desire beyond the physical body. His fingernails, which had grown long from laying in his sickbed, dug into Lil's skin like he was holding onto the edge of a cliff. Joseph's face, with veins bulging on his temples, turned a moderate shade of red all the way to the tip of his nose.

"The child... where is it?"

As if those last words were spoken with his remaining strength, Joseph fell back onto the pillow and gasped. A fit of dry cough quickly followed. His half-submerged body beneath the blanket fluttered around like a fish out of water.

The scene was shocking enough for Lil, but it also surprised the Archduchess. Lil supported the staggering woman until she safely sat back in her chair. She then gestured to Ed, who was across the bed, that it was all under control before responding to her father.

"There are no children."

"..."

Joseph's fingers, which had been gripping Lil, loosened. Blood that was flowing from the corner of his mouth dripped onto the pillow.

Dr. Limue pressed down on Joseph's shaking shoulder.

Lil continued to speak to Joseph, who glared at her as if she had betrayed him.

"You overexerted yourself. It would be best for you to get some rest."

Dr. Limue shook his head at her, but Lil had no regrets left. Rather, she felt an inexplicable sense of desolation.

After leaving Joseph's bedroom, the Archduchess turned toward Lil. She was a woman wearing a dark blue dress with her thin blonde hair done up neatly. Lifting her fox-fur shawl, her calm blue eyes looked up at Lil.

"I prepared a simple dinner for you, so I will see you later."

In the past, the times Lil had mixed words with the Archduchess were very few and far between. But although the older woman was neither interested in Venua nor Lil, she never violated her duties as Archduchess.

Lil bowed her head and expressed his gratitude.

“Yes, Your Highness. Thank you.”

The Archduchess’s maid, who had been waiting in the hallway, greeted her and followed. Soon, the Archduchess turned and walked to the other side of the hallway.

As Ed thought Lil was thinking about the Archduchess, he stepped closer and whispered.

“...According to the reports, the Archduchess took control of the administration and household affairs of Obernyu while the Archduke came down with his illness. The Prince Regent will succeed to the throne, but the real power right now lies with the Archduchess. So, it won’t be easy to ignore her for the sake of the throne...”

“...”

Lil nodded slowly. But truth to be told, she was actually thinking about something else as she stared at the place where the Archduchess had disappeared.

Ed leaned over and looked at Lil more intently.

“Are you okay?”

He smoothed her wrist, which had red marks from the Archduke’s fingernails. Shaking her head, Lil rested her forehead against Ed’s chest. She couldn’t help but feel a tightness around her heart.

“I felt pity for a moment, but it was all a waste of emotion. My father doesn’t think of me as anything more than a useful means of reproduction. It’s been that way for a long time, and it’s still the same even as his end approaches...”

“It’s a shame he doesn’t know what an extraordinary child he has.”

“...He would’ve told me I was special had I given birth to a son... I’m so sick of this...”

Ed wrapped his arms around Lil’s shoulders.

Lil glanced back at the bedroom door and soon left the hallway with Ed.

The dinner to welcome Lil was held in the form of a banquet despite the unpleasant atmosphere.

Unlike Sesbron, Obernyu was Lil’s hometown where she had been born and raised. From the time she was young, she was surrounded by courtiers, servants, and relatives who worked at the castle. They welcomed Lil, who returned home after many twists and turns, with one heart.

Countless people shook hands with Lil as she made her way from the gallery entrance to the dinner table. Some kissed the back of her hand while others handed her a flower. Many people smiled or wiped away tears, but they all expressed their emotions in a restrained atmosphere, typical of the Obernyu court.

After receiving the flowers that were handed to her without hesitation, they quickly turned into a bundle. Lil shared some with Ed and walked inside the banquet hall.

At the long, horizontal table with seats only at one side, were the Archduchess and Marguerite. Of course, Venua didn't show up. And since Joseph couldn't attend, they were the only direct family left. Lil sat to the left of the Archduchess, who was in the centre of the table. Even though she was the host, neither she nor Lil had much to say to each other.

A calm ballet performed and a short play followed. Both were about praising Obernyu's tradition and praying for Joseph's health.

Then, music began in earnest. Some of the attendees stood and danced, while the rest gathered in small groups to talk. However, the musical selection that was chosen in consideration of Joseph was all slow and calm, so soon people lost interest in dancing. Instead, they turned their attention elsewhere, and, of course, the target was Ed. The courtiers and nobles of Obernyu found themselves scrambling to impress him. Lil was briefly concerned, but Ed didn't act unruly, at least not when he was next to her. He also didn't act as sly as when he was alone with her and instead showed off a level of sociability appropriate for Obernyu court.

Only after exchanging a few facetious words with the Archduchess was Lil able to approach Marguerite. Lil held out one of the glasses she was holding. Marguerite stood up and smiled dryly as she accepted Lil's offer.

"Long time no see."

"Marguerite."

"You probably have heard this countless times, but even I thought you were dead. Obernyu was so quiet."

The young women naturally walked towards the wall behind the table. Lil had grown much taller than her, so she had to look down at Marguerite.

"I only pretended to be dead."

"Was that why I did not get a single letter?"

"I am sorry."

Lil had no idea how Marguerite lived. Since Ricard's death, she had even stayed away from Lil, and Lil had been too busy carving out a life for herself in Sesbron. However, it wasn't hard to imagine that Marguerite would be unhappy living with the man who killed the man she loved.

"Then, when the palace became noisy again, that is when I thought, 'Ah, she must be still alive'."

"..."

Lil laughed bitterly.

"Venua went after you, did he not?"

"..!"

Before Lil could respond, Marguerite took her hand. She spoke, lowering her voice sharply in case anyone would hear.

“Be careful. He might try to steal your child. I wanted to tell you in advance, but I did not know where you were.”

“Oh, that is already...”

Suddenly, there was a ‘commotion’ at the entrance of the banquet hall. Small screams and sporadic shouts rose, and the people gathered in groups moved to either side as if they had been swept away by a wave.

“...Marguerite!..”

It was Venua.

“...Marie!..”

Even though he was still wearing a justaucorps, Venua’s cravat and shirt were both undone. His bloodshot eyes were sunken, and the areas under them were dark. Perhaps because he was drenched in sweat, the strands of wet hair were plastered on his forehead and ears.

“Who told you to come here!”

As Venua crossed the banquet hall, the smell of alcohol gradually lingered in the air. Ed, who was near, moved and stood next to Lil. Reaching the table, Venua swept his arms to topple a bowl full of fruit, a candlestick, and a vase decorated with flowers. The ceramics that fell to the floor shattered and splashed.

Venua then shouted and slammed down on the wooden surface.

“How dare you defy my words?”

“Venua, prepare yourself and join us.”

The Archduchess gently reprimanded Venua for the sake of saving face. But he refused to listen to what she said. He didn’t even give her a glance. His burning gaze was directed at Marguerite only.

It made Lil anxious, afraid that Venua might do something unpleasant to his wife. Glancing next to her, Ed seemed to be thinking the same thing. Lil stood as if to block Marguerite’s path. But at the same time, Ed’s shadow fell in front of her.

“Prince Regent. It has been a while.”

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Lil first looked at Ed’s back that was blocking her, and then at the staggering Venua. The Regent’s alcohol-soaked lips were tightly shut, but the sound of grinding teeth could even be heard by Lil.

“...Marquess of Roahn.”

“When the Duke of Mireille issued a public apology, somehow you remained mum. But I see now that you were busy drowning yourself in alcohol here.”

“How rude! Know your place! You crept into my house, indulged yourself in my wine, and now dare to mock me!”

“As you know, the reputation about my temper is not the best, and with Roahn having so much evidence for a trial, consider this my last act of mercy to personally come here to tell you this.”

Venua, who seemed to be quietly listening to Ed’s words, slowly burst into laughter. His slow and intermittent laughter that started like sobs gradually became louder. He looked around the confused audience and screamed.

“Now! Stop this!”

The banquet hall’s noise immediately died down like everyone was actually gathered for a funeral.

“This damned bastard does not even know who the owner of this castle is!”

Marguerite, who had been frozen like a stone statue behind Lil’s back, sighed. But rather than out of fear, her sigh was out of pity for Venua. After looking around the banquet hall where people were starting to gather, Marguerite spoke up.

“I have to go now.”

Lil grabbed Marguerite’s arm.

“If you need help...”

“No, it is okay.”

“Has my brother ever hit you?”

“Do not worry. He just needs someone to comfort him and cry to.”

For a moment, Lil thought she had heard her wrong.

“...Crying? My brother?”

“It is a relief that he only does that in front of me.”

“...”

Lil couldn’t read Marguerite’s emotions properly. After so many years, resignation, scorn, pity, and disgust appeared to have blended all together, so Lil didn’t dare to argue.

“The one to be pitied is not me, but Venua. You know that, right?”

Marguerite passed by Lil and looked up at Ed.

“Please excuse his manners, Marquess. May you and Liloa be happy.”

Marguerite stood next to Venua after her brief exchange of greetings with Ed. Meanwhile, Venua glared at Marguerite as if he were going to devour her. Everyone else had retreated and left a spacious circle around Venua, watching the scene with bated breath. It wasn’t hard to understand that this was a complicated situation. However, when Marguerite whispered something to Venua

while lowering her head, Venua quickly turned around and stopped complaining. People hurriedly cleared the way until Venua and Marguerite vanished from the gallery.

Soon the guests forgot about the uproar Venua had caused. No, rather than forgetting, it was more like they pretended not to remember out of courtesy. It didn't take long for the banquet to wrap up. By then, the sun was just starting to set, so the sunset was still deep outside the window.

After the banquet, Lil sent Ed to Joseph. The fact that Ed was an excellent doctor was widely known, so Dr. Limue was more than eager to discuss a variety of matters with Ed. Leaving the servants behind as well, Lil alone climbed one flight of stairs and walked down the hallway leading to the main building.

The Oberyu Castle has expanded over hundreds of years and formed multiple structures that surround the castle. The main building, located in the innermost part, housed private bedrooms and rooms used for personal purposes. Lil noticed that the marble floor she had walked all her life had been replaced with a wooden one. The wooden surface was still shiny as if the floor had only recently been installed.

Lil stopped in front of a door.

This was her bedroom before she went to Sesbron.

Grabbing the handle, she gave it a gentle push. She simply remained standing in the doorway after opening it. Inside, all of the curtains were open, allowing yellowish sunlight to stream in at regular intervals. It was as normal as any other boudoir.

Eventually stepping inside, Lil sat on the bed and swept the blanket. The thick winter blanket rustled beneath her hand.

Of course, no marks remained on the soft carpet material, but Lil found herself staring at the floor for quite some time.

But now, the sunset's bright silence felt warm, mixed with the refreshing sky-blue lambris with light green accents. Lil glanced at the furniture she had used since she was very young, as well as the furniture she used right before departing for Sesbron. The chairs and furniture made for little Liloa were small and dainty, with an old wooden horse standing in one corner.

Lil opened the drawer opposite the fireplace, revealing shells and pieces of coral she had gathered in Malus. The drawer also contained a pendant with a small portrait of Henrietta and Lil's hair tie, a dark blue beryl she had received as a gift for her eighth birthday. She touched the items one by one with her fingertips before closing the drawer again.

When she was so peacefully lost in her thoughts, her vision caught someone's shadow pacing in front of the boudoir. She tried to ignore it at first, but its presence was persistent. Lil eventually walked to the door and pulled the doorknob herself. The other person must've been holding the doorknob as well because when the door was finally opened, a small person was dragged inside.

"...Oh!"

Lil didn't open it with too much force, but the other person had to quickly correct her posture. It was a girl whose height barely reached Lil's waist. Lil tilted her head to look at the child shrugging her shoulders.

"Who are you?"

"I am..."

The stiff child lifted her head and looked up at her. For a moment, Lil thought that an afterimage from her past had come to visit her. But the next moment, she realised who the child was.

Relaxing her muscles, Lil let go of the doorknob.

"Constance."

Constance Obernyu was the current Archduchess' daughter and Lil's half-sister. She looked strikingly similar to Lil when she was a child. Her curly black hair was neatly tied down, and a blue ribbon tied her hair's thin braid. Her light blue dress suited her, as it always did Lil as well.

Constance soon came to her senses and bowed to Lil in courtesy.

"Miss Liloa."

The child was doing her best to act like an adult. She tried not to show any embarrassment and kept her back straight to avoid being intimidated. Constance's hesitation to approach the doorway and her choice to watch Lil from a distance reminded Lil of how she must've acted more than ten years ago.

Lil laughed at the thought.

Lil gently gestured as she headed to the tea table.

"Come in."

"...Yes? Oh, yes!"

"Did you come here because you were curious about me?"

"Yes, please forgive me. Even though I know it is rude..."

"Rude?"

The two sat across the tea table. Steam rose from the teapot's body as a maid brewed the tea briefly. For a while, Constance and Lil were just fiddling with their teacup.

"You look very... healthy and intelligent."

Meeting Constance was a bit awkward for Lil. She knew it shouldn't be much different from meeting the Archduchess, but it was. Because Lil was actually curious about how Constance usually lived and what concerns she had.

"What do you do in your free time? No, do you have free time?"

"These days, Madam Marguerite is teaching me embroidery."

Only the typical advice, such as not neglecting studying, reading books, and living intentionally, sat on the tip of her tongue.

While Lil was struggling, Constance looked at her and asked.

“Will you be leaving again?”

“...Yes.”

The child’s mouth tightly shut in disappointment. She seemed to be choosing her words for a moment, then she asked again.

“What are you going to do when you leave Obernyu this time?”

“Well...”

“..?”

After considering various complicated options, Lil decided to just be honest.

“I am going to learn more about the world. If I want to pursue research, I have to study first.”

“So, are you going on an adventure?”

“You could call it an adventure.”

Like any other child, Constance’s eyes glimmered upon hearing the word ‘adventure’. The look on her face, with her eyes wide and her mouth pursed out of genuine admiration, looked very cute. When Lil smiled, Constance finally mustered the courage to ask.

“...Would you write me a letter? Or, can I write to you?”

The child’s tone remained cautious, but her eyes were passionate. The little one appeared to have already formed a bond with her, and Lil felt the same. Although she hadn’t spoken much with Constance yet, Lil felt so close to her sister that she wondered if this was the mystery of being made with the same flesh and blood.

“My address may change frequently, but I will make sure to reply.”

“...”

Constance gave an ambiguous expression as if she wasn’t satisfied with Lil’s answer. So, Lil added more carefully.

“If you do not know where I am, just send it to the Retiro’s residence in Roahn or Sesbron. Write a letter whenever you want to. I will read it in droves every time I come to the Central Continent. Okay? Is that okay? No, will that be all right... with you?”

Lil was confused about what tone to use and tried to recall how Annette did it.

But when Constance finally laughed, Lil felt she must've done at least something right in her effort to try to make her words a bit softer.

Chapter 358

[Sesbron Newspaper, February Issue No. 9.

Last month, Archduke Joseph I of Obernyu passed away. Regent Venua Obernyu took the throne as Archduke while his sister, Liloa Obernyu, declared her abdication of her right to succession. As a result, Constance Obernyu now holds the highest right of succession. With great interest in her marriage, countless royals and nobles vying for the title of Archduke rushed to propose to her. However, as marriage proposals poured in, Liloa Obernyu devised a strategy to protect her younger sister. Liloa requested that Constance not marry before the age of eighteen unless she wanted to and that the Emperor considers Constance's wishes when marrying her off. This request was reportedly made just last week, but the Emperor has already willingly accepted this request today, out of consideration of the merits of Liloa Obernyu, who had recently reported large-scale treason.]

After Joseph's death, Lil and Ed immediately returned to Roahn. Ed resigned from his position as admiral, and the Emperor released Ed by edict, as promised years before. During the two months of winter, they busily prepared for their upcoming journey. Levi also briefly returned to Roahn to help Lil with preparations.

The bow of the Visha, which came around the Mondovi Peninsula, rose along the western coastline of the empire.

The waves rose and fell with rapturous excitement, while the horizon was clear without a layer of fog. In the cool early spring weather, Lil wore a thick justaucorps. Her flowing hair was tied up and pinned under her hat. The sea breeze that hit her for the first time in a long time was enough to overwhelm her.

After a while, the Visha reached the Saint-Viève Canal, the only canal on the continent connecting the Anatole Sea with the Gering Sea. It was dug out and expanded over several centuries, and one half was opened thanks to the enormous resources of the Retiro family. Now, it has been functioning as a complete canal for about 100 years.

Ed, who wasn't only the owner of the canal but also acted as the pilot, positioned the Visha in the first gate of the boat lock they needed to use. The heavy floodgates in the front and back of the ship closed and water began to rise. While looking at the canal that she had never seen before, Lil suddenly came to her senses and walked up next to Ed.

“...Wait, wait!”

“Why?”

“I just belatedly realised that we’ll have to cross the Monferrand Strait.”

“Yes.”

Lil said something that was expected from any imperial citizen.

“What if we die?”

“What’s there to worry about when you have me?”

Deeming that not a very trustworthy statement, Lil glanced at him with squinted eyes.

“So, is it true that the Strait of Monferrand only opens to Retiro’s descendants? You should tell me if that’s how it works before we cross.”

“That’s not completely wrong.”

“What does that mean?”

“This is what that means.”

Ed put his hand into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out something. When Lil tried to grab the back of his hand, he didn’t let her. He fooled around a bit more without stopping.

Eventually, Lil stamped her foot and complained.

“Oh, come on!”

Now that Lil threw a fit, Ed stopped moving. He slowly reached out his hand and spread it in front of her eyes. Lil looked with curious eyes at what he held in his hand, but the curiosity was soon replaced with disappointment.

“That’s it? It’s just a compass.”

“This isn’t just any compass.”

Lil frowned at him in disbelief, so Ed came closer and lowered his torso. He then whispered softly in her ear.

“...It’s Monferrand’s compass...”

“...What?”

The secret of the Retiro family flowed into her ears.

“...Strictly speaking, the Retiro bloodline alone cannot cross the Monferrand Strait...”

After saying that, Ed glanced around. But all the sailors were busily working on the upper deck and bow. Lil lowered her voice to a whisper as well.

“...This compass will allow us to cross?...”

“...That’s right. This artifact remembers the route of Monferrand, the fisherman who crossed the strait in ancient times...*”

Lil cried out at Ed’s revelation.

“Really?!”

Ed put his index finger to her lips. He found Lil’s astonished eyes more than amusing.

“...I told you, I also have an artifact...”

Lil scanned through her distant memories.

“So about the story of ‘Monferrand, the Foolish Fisherman’, didn’t he cross the sea in search of his departed lover?”

“That’s right. His lover’s name was Alvenis, the goddess of defence.”

“Alvenis as in the Alvenis Triangle?”

Ed nodded his head and Lil gaped.

“As you know, the Alvenis Triangle shines brightest in the northern sky. Monferrand sailed to reach that star, but his body washed ashore, in the land that modern people now call the Northern Continent.”

“He died?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Food was scarce and the sea was rough. But it wasn’t for nothing as he became a constellation before he finished his voyage. You know the one. The constellation that Monferrand ascended to was the Mariner’s Star.”

“The Mariner’s Star?”

Lil looked north to find the Mariner’s Star, which wasn’t visible in broad daylight.

“A man named Eichendorff, a local from the Northern Continent found a half-wrecked ship containing his body and buried him in an oak forest. It’s believed that because of that, oak trees began to grow wider in that area. Even in the fierce cold of the Northern Continent, the oak trees remain green all year round.”

“Oak tree? Eichendorff? Are you talking about your ancestors?”

Ed closed and reopened the lid on the relic. A blue light shone at the tip needle of the otherwise ordinary-looking compass. The small light, shining brightly like a firefly, remained floating in the air no matter how much Lil tried to touch or sweep it.

“This is the divine power of Alvenis, the goddess of defence. She gave this to Monferrand as a sign of her love and the compass would always show her location. No matter how many men and women she met and shared the same sign with, only the light in Monferrand’s compass never went out.”

“So it’s been...”

“It continues to shine to this day, allowing us to travel back and forth to the Northern Continent.”

“In that case, you don’t know the exact route either?”

Ed nodded in response to Lil’s astonished question.

“Just as you unconditionally believed in Forma’s divine power, so did I. I tried to figure out the route myself, but in the end, I acknowledged that this wasn’t an area that humans should delve into.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Nevertheless, it’s all because of this ancient mystery that the adventurous Retiro bloodline lived on. Moreover, aurora falls in the sky at night.”

Aurora was something Lil had never heard before.

“Aurora?”

“In the Northern Continent, people call it the hem of Alvenis’ dress. A curtain that falls from the sky.”

“How is that even possible?”

The more the explanation went beyond the realm of human understanding, the more Lil’s eyebrows furrowed. It was the first time she heard Ed say anything about it, so it was far passed the limits of her imagination. After being lost in such thoughts for a while, Ed, who smiled broadly at her, straightened her eyebrows.

“We’ll get to see the aurora in about four days. In the Monferrand Strait the aurora will get so thick that we won’t be able to read the stars. The waves will get stronger as well as if we’re caught in a storm, once you get caught up in them, it’s not unlikely to lose course.”

“...”

After his lengthy explanation, Ed hugged her and pressed his lips on her forehead. Because Lil became annoyed by his action, she smoothed out her frown.

“Anyway, as no one can read the sky, it isn’t uncalled for to name it the Sea of Death.”

While Lil was caught up in the fear of the unknown, the water level in the canal rose and the floodgates opened again. Ed, faithful to his position as pilot, grabbed the wheel...

It took them a full day to pass through the canal. Then, it took two more days to get out of the long Gering Sea. To the west of the Gering Sea was the northern part of the Empire, and to the east was the territory of the White Federal League*. Both lands were surrounded by rugged mountain ranges, and the sight of the separate mountains crossed by the sea was spectacular. In the Empire, spring was born, buds were sprouting, and the mountains were turning green, while in the White League's territories, grey rocks supporting the ice caps rose sharply.

Finally, the dark blue Monferrand Sea unfolded before Lil's eyes. A sea that was indeterminable whether it was an ocean or a strait. Even though the white sun brightly illuminated the water, the water remained so dark that it was impossible to guess its depth. A wind as heavy as that colour blew onto the deck. Lil leaned against the railing on the left side of the ship, oblivious to the redness of the tip of her nose, as she gazed endlessly at the horizon.

The boundary between sky and water seemed as distant as a mirage.

There was only one ship dividing the sea, the Visha. The white foam was abundant as if it were a tail attached to the stern.

Lil asked Ed, assessing the direction.

"So, where should we go from here?"

Ed held Lil from behind and lowered his head to whisper.

"...Where did you say you wanted to go?.."

"First of all, to the Eichendorff territory on the Northern Continent."

Having declared the first destination she had decided on, Lil felt refreshed and smiled brightly in the cold wind. Ed mirrored her smile and took out his compass.

Where the blue light points.

Lil, who crossed the deck and made her way onto the stern deck, caught the wheel. The stiff wooden handles fit comfortably in her hands. The wood had been worn down to a smooth surface after being touched by countless human hands for over a long time.

The refreshing tailwind swept past her.

Lil turned the wheel in the direction indicated by the goddess of defence.

The sailor who was hanging from the bow, the sailor watching through a telescope at the watchtower, and the sailor who was descending from the mast, all looked back at Lil.

Her heart was as full as if this were her first voyage. Lil shouted the destination that had been filling her throat.

"North-northwest!"

As a full and whole human being, Liloa's journey was just beginning.

She cried out as her whole body felt the cool Northern Sea breeze.

“Turn the course to north-northwest!”

Chapter 359

Weissland.

The northern continental people referred to their land in this way. For them, the Empire was located on the Southern Continent, therefore their continent was the Central Continent.

In Weissland, everything from architecture, attire, culture, and language differed greatly from the Empire. Perhaps due to the influence of snow-topped mountains and glaciers, bright turquoise, sky blue, and turquoise colours were frequently used on building roofs and towers.

It was here that Lil first saw a glacier. In a short time, the sight of icebergs floating like white islands in the sea off Ed's territory became her norm. Predictably, on her first visit to Weissland, Lil spent the majority of her time sightseeing. She would watch seals and walruses lie on flat ice to bask in the sun, then sail out on a yacht with Ed to step on an iceberg and touch ice sculptures.

The Eichendorff estate was located at the southernmost point of Weissland. While it was thought to have a more gentle environment because it was near a volcano, Lil couldn't agree. She had to wear fur-lined clothes even in the springtime. Nothing touched her body that wasn't covered in fur. Her hat, scarf, gloves, and boots were all lined with warm materials.

Ed, on the other hand, managed to get around just fine with only one thick coat. This was true not only for Ed, but for the rest of the Northerners as well. However, Ed appeared to be particularly insensitive to the cold. Even when they climbed the snowy mountain, he'd wear the same clothes, with the exception of an extra layer of lining on his outerwear. Meanwhile, Lil had to climb the mountain while wrapped in fur. It wasn't that difficult, but climbing the snowy mountain required effort this way.

Except when descending.

They faced a pure white snow field without any traces of life. The cold misty air that had been scorched by the mountains cascaded down like waves.

Lil screamed as she balanced herself on two wooden boards, in length as tall as her, bound on both feet.

“Aaaahhh!”

Her body, which was as tilted as the mountain's slope, was continuously being pushed downward.

Lil grabbed the wooden pole Ed was holding out in front of her as if it were her lifeline. Ed, too, had boards called skies strapped to both of his feet, but unlike her, he could sit, stand, stop, and move naturally.

Ed looked at Lil and did his best to explain calmly.

“Now, get your left foot back...”

“Why did you have to stick these under my feet?”

“You have to lean forward more.”

“No, that won’t work! Do I really have to do this?”

Her screams echoed through the snowy mountains.

It was amazing to sit on the hillside and watch the frozen Monferrand Strait, the glaciers breaking as they pushed out to sea, and pods of whales out to hunt. However, their way down from that very view was too steep for her; she had only learned how to ski on the village hill, but this one was almost at a right angle.

Despite stiffening her entire body, Lil’s knees still trembled.

“That’s it. I’m walking down!”

Lil, unable to control her temper, shook off Ed’s pole. The pole, which had the purpose of assisting her in navigating the snowfield, flew into the air instead. At the same time, Lil’s body, having lost the much needed support, descended rapidly as the smooth surfaces of the skies slid down the slope in an instant.

“Aaagh!”

Lil helplessly collapsed, unable to overcome the speed of being sucked down by gravity. She fell and rolled several times, but her accelerated body wouldn’t stop easily. It didn’t take long until Ed’s laughter could be heard from far above.

“Hahahahaha!”

Lil rolled like a scroll, her skis already fallen off halfway. Snow clung to her fur coat. She tried to stop her descent, but her body wouldn’t listen... More balls of snow clung to her body as she spun faster and faster, swelling her up like a snowman...

“...Liloa!”

Lil woke up from her vivid dream with a gasp. Her eyes, however, were still rolling, caused by the person who was shaking her violently, calling her to wake up.

“...Liloa!”

Ed’s face popped into view, but it was already too late as she had unconsciously kicked Ed’s side amid her struggles. As soon as his face disappeared from her sight, Lil sat right up in a flash.

“Hmm!”

The first thing that caught her eye was a blazing red bonfire. Looking around, the ice cap was nowhere to be found, and her body was buried under a warm blanket. Lil tossed her wool blanket around to see if there was any snow on her body.

Ed, who lifted his upper body, grabbed his side and groaned.

“...What the hell were you dreaming about?”

Lil slumped her shoulders with a sigh of relief.

“I dreamed about the time I first learned to ski.”

“That’s been a while. And you got the hang of it in just two days. So why were you groaning so much?”

“We were on the top of an unfamiliar mountain. Also, I was wearing a bundle of fur, so I looked almost like a bear, but when I fell and rolled in the snow, the snow began to stick to me more and more, until my body swelled up like a snowball and rolled all the way to the bottom of the mountain...”

“...”

Lil wiped away the cold sweat and pressed down on her pounding chest. She was as serious as she could be, but she sensed Ed wasn’t. His face was contorted as he tried to hold back laughter. Lil pushed his thighs with her toes. Of course, he didn’t move.

“And you were laughing like crazy when you saw me rolling down. Just like now!”

“No way.”

“It’s true, you were absolutely evil.”

“So that wasn’t a nightmare, but just a dream.”

She knew it was only a crazy dream, but Lil glared at Ed for no reason. He, on the other hand, thought her dream was funny and just laughed. Lil grumbled, unable to shake the feeling that she had been wronged for some reason.

“What you do to me daily is reflected even in my dreams.”

“...Me?”

“Because you’re always teasing me.”

Ed suddenly blinked his eyes as innocently as he could.

“When did I do that?”

He grabbed Lil’s waist and pulled her to sit on his legs. When Lil tried to resist, he quickly grabbed her hand and kissed it. The fight in her died when he playfully started looking at her through her fingers. Normally, at a moment like this, she would pinch her cheek to regain a bit of stability, but instead, she pinched his. Soon, as she realised it was just a dream, she took a deep breath.

“Still, it was awful.”

Lil relaxed in Ed’s arms.

When she turned her head, which was resting against the nape of his neck, she looked around the interior of the ice cave they set up camp last night. Since sunrise had already passed, the ice stalactites that fell from the ceiling shone dazzlingly, reflecting the sunlight. Water was already dripping from the thin icicles.

Halfway down the cave, the snowy carpet turned into a completely frozen floor. The ice pillars that rose from the floor and sometimes connected to the ceiling held a blue colour, looking almost

turquoise. Gazing deeper into the cave, the blue-green colour became increasingly darker. Lil suddenly thought the cave resembled the maw of a huge shark in a way.

Ed asked her as he had silently hugged her for a while.

“Shall we go for a swim?”

When Lil nodded, Ed began taking off her clothes one by one. She also unbuttoned his shirt and pulled his pants down. They felt like freezing at any moment because they stood naked in the ice-filled cave, but the two quickly wrapped a large towel around their bodies and exited the cave wearing only their boots.

Lil’s eyes narrowed as the sun reflected off the snowflakes.

The mountain wind blew, bringing an even cooler breeze. The cave was located in the middle of a snowy mountain, with a deep blue spring right next to the entrance. Lil was taken aback at first by a spring in the middle of a white snow field, but by now she had grown accustomed to it.

Lil kicked out her boots and threw herself into the blue water.

As soon as her body hit the surface of the water, heavy warmth enveloped her. The spring water was heated by the nearby volcano. Lil pulled her head out of the water and swept away her wet hair when Ed jumped in. With a spray of water shooting up in all directions and hitting Lil right in the eyes, Lil cried out, rubbing her face.

“You’re too big to jump in here!”

Regardless of Lil’s nagging, Ed whizzed his head. Lil had to again defend herself against the water droplets shooting from his hair.

“Oh, really. Because you’re like this, that’s why I had a dream like that!”

Chapter 360

Lil took refuge at the edge of the spring to avoid Ed, breathing in the cold air above her head and enjoying the only warm part of the snowy mountain on her body.

Lil kicked her feet and spun in the water.

The sound of her body, leisurely slicing through the water, flickered. When she turned over and looked at the sky, the sunlight was so dazzling that she couldn’t even open her eyes.

Quickly turning again, she started swimming.

The sight she saw as soon as she reached the other edge of the spring made her gasp. Everything as far as the eye could see was breathtaking. At the bottom of the mountain was a green forest with oak trees on one side, and a snowy mountain with white snow blowing down above the ridge. She also noticed a pack of wolves moving to the opposite peak and a large white bear roaming alone. When she turned again, the large port and shipyard on the coast of Eichendorff’s estate came into view.

Large and small merchant ships were neatly anchored, sailing ships with sails and rigging intact, and ships with half of their structures still visible. Beyond that lay the Monferrand Strait, where the ice was melting and turning dark blue, and icebergs were breaking into white pieces and floating away.

“...So beautiful.”

An intruder came up behind Lil and wrapped his arms around her body. He said as he bit the shell of her ear.

“There are no springs like this from the next peak.”

“Really? Is it the furthest end of the volcano’s reach?”

“...”

Ed kissed her wet nape without answering, so Lil pondered the answer on her own.

Ed grabbed Lil’s chest underwater. As his fingers gently rubbed her, Lil let out a low moan. Ed then pressed his lips along her shoulder, causing her to mutter under her breath.

“Ah... then that’s a shame...”

Ed turned her around.

Lil had to stand on her tiptoes, else she could barely hold her chin above the water. Ed didn’t have the same problem and easily lifted her into his arms. Lil’s shoulders shrank as her upper body rose above the spring’s surface. The water droplets on her skin appeared to freeze instantly. Lil shuddered in time with Ed’s warm breath grazing her skin, which was contracting from the cold. Ed lowered his head and licked along her breast, the warm moisture heated her again. His teeth, as if biting, nibbled the tip of her chest.

Lil shivered and sighed.

She then wrapped her legs around his waist and stuck close to him. Ed rested his cheek against her chest and let out another breath. Wrapping her arms around his neck as well, Lil hugged him even more firmly and completely surrendered her body to him.

Water droplets streamed down her hollow spine and her back muscles shone in the pale northern sunlight.

Grabbing her waist and lowering her, Ed gradually entered. As soon as Lil had swallowed him whole, their eye level became just right and Ed eagerly pressed their lips together, transferring their hot breaths between them. Lil gently rocked her waist while biting Ed’s lower lip. She was satisfied with the fact that she could freely move in the water. Her movements pushed the surface of the water, which slapped against Ed’s chest.

As Lil exclaimed in her breath, Ed caught her. He embraced her tightly and timed his thrusts with the movements of her hips. He knew exactly what she wanted. Lil’s fingertips trembled whenever they touched each other deeply. Ed let out a groan of defeat, and Lil grabbed his hair. Not long after, her toes curled. She hugged Ed if he was her lifeline during her contractions, burying her screams in the nape of his neck, her fingers digging into his shoulder blades.

Ed's movements also came to an abrupt halt.

For a while, they only pressed their bodies together and exchanged hot breaths. Then, his lips lightly pressed against her forehead, sweeping past her temples, the tip of her nose, around her ears, and onto her chin.

Lil shook her shoulders and laughed.

"It tickles."

Ed smiled at her as she wrinkled her nose. He tilted her head back towards him and pressed his forehead against hers. This time, it was her who found his lips and sucked them, making sure they could no longer tickle...

While drying their hair in the cave, they unfolded a map of the snowy mountains. It was reconstructed by Ed based on military maps and war history from the past.

Ed explained while pointing at the now familiar-looking map.

"This is Honai Peak, where we are at the moment. According to records, a kingdom used to exist within this vicinity. It's said to be a very old kingdom, but it's unclear whether it's as old as ancient times. Nonetheless, traces of war have been steadily discovered even in the present age."

"I'm always amazed when I hear about those wars because they had to cross mountains every time they fought. Makes me wonder if they also used skis to cross those mountains to initiate war? I can imagine they were continuously running out of food so they had no choice but to move..."

"Yes. But since then it's gotten better because the places where the bison herds have changed. The same goes for the reindeer herds. As a result, the places where foxes and wolves live have changed as well."

Ed packed their blanket and clothes into his huge backpack. Lil also got up and walked around the cave to check in case they'd forgotten anything.

"There are several legends surrounding the snowy mountains, too. The most widely known is the story of a herb that's said to cure anything. Ah, that herb even appears in the Weissland folktale."

"So, those herbs may not be real herbs, but rather plants or objects with magical powers, right?"

"Yes."

"What other legends are there?"

"There's a legend that says that the snowy mountains were once a flat plain, but one day the ground rose and transformed into a mountain range. Even though it rose as

high as mountains, the god of the earth was extremely dissatisfied that he covered it with eternal snow."

"What made him so angry?"

"That's something I don't know."

Ed and Lil stood side by side at the cave entrance, putting on their skis. Ed securely tied the wooden planks to Lil's boots. They would descend from a peak like this, and once they reached the canyon, they would have to carry their skis and climb up to the next.

Lil held a long pole in both of her hands. Ed's shadow stretched behind him as he went first. Soon, Lil descended the mountain as well, following the tracks left by Ed's skis on the white carpet.

Despite what her terrible dream might suggest, Lil actually enjoyed skiing a lot. With reindeer sleds and skis serving as the primary modes of transportation in Weissland, Lil was fortunate to enjoy both. Reindeer were as powerful as horses, and skiing provided her with an exhilarating sense of speed that exceeded running.

The wind from the north cooled her lungs. Lil deliberately took a deep breath of this air, and she felt as if her entire body had been refreshed.

She peered out from the gap between her fur hat and headscarf, rolling her eyes to find a snow-covered tree. Plants native to the snowy mountains didn't grow more than a fingernail per year. Meaning that any plant that was noticeable enough would've lived for at least several centuries.

When Lil got the hang of it and was able to look around more casually, she noticed something dark at a point where Ed had passed by. It looked like a shadow or a rock rising through the snow.

Lil turned her body and bent her knees to the fullest. Snow splashed along the path of her skis after she abruptly stopped. She waddled up a few steps with her skis on, taking a closer look. It was a rabbit burrow-sized hole, but Lil immediately concluded that no rabbit could live this high on the snow covered mountain. She took her pole and tapped it around the hole. The snow that had accumulated fell away, and the hole gradually grew larger. The wind hummed as if the black end was whistling.

In the meantime, Ed had stopped ahead of her and was now looking back up to see where she was.

"Edgar!"

"..?"

Ed lifted his fur hat with his gloved hand. He had also covered his face with a scarf to block the sunlight, so Lil couldn't see his expression clearly. Either way, Lil continued to peek into the hole and shout.

"It's a cave!"

Ed climbed back up using his poles until he reached the spot where Lil was. He then took the map out of his arms and looked at the sky to double-check their location.

“This is a cave I’ve never seen before. I guess it was revealed only recently when the snow melted.”

“Then we should go in.”

The entrance, which was initially the size of a rabbit hole, has since grown large enough for people to enter. The remains of the snow and ice that Lil had broken lay at her feet. Lil stepped forward using her poles. The air inside the cave was cold, and there was no noticeable odour of mould or moss. As they moved in deeper, the snow on the ground disappeared, thereby revealing a dark stone floor.

The pair took off their skis and placed them at an angle against the cave wall. Almost simultaneously, they removed the balsam from their pockets. Unlike the other ice caves they had explored, this one had black floors and walls. The stone walls were divided into square and pentagonal shapes, forming a distinct pattern, and the pillars connecting the floor with the ceiling had small geometric joints. Weathering, rather than ice or lime, appeared to be responsible for the formation of dark stalagmites.

“It looks exactly like a columnar joint.”

Even though Lil’s voice echoed throughout the cave, there wasn’t a single sign of a creature running away from the sound of human speech.

Ed spoke while examining a thick stone pillar.

“It’s not a man-made shape, but it’s also not something naturally forming on a snowy mountain.”

They went a little further inside. The temperature wasn’t as cold as outside the cave, but it was low enough to make the tip of Lil’s nose red. Beyond the sound of the soles of their boots crushing the gravel and sand on the floor, they could hear the sound of water from somewhere.

Drops of water trickled.

Lil muttered, flicking her balsam to the right.

“...Water?..”

After a few more steps, they arrived at a body of water directly in front of a high wall that was nearly as tall as a cliff. The high wall only contained traces of water that used to flow down from it, as if a former lake had become a puddle beneath a dried-up waterfall. Nevertheless, there was still water in the dug-out area of the ground.

Ed picked up the balsam and held it by the water.

The water was so clear that, while they couldn’t be certain of its depth, they could see straight to the bottom. Lil leaned her upper body to the side to determine the width of the spring’s bottom. However, the floor seemed too wide to be ascertained.

“This doesn’t look like a normal spring? That high wall seems to be a waterfall cliff... and it appears like the floor of this pool spreads further than the walls of this cave...”

“This is an underwater cave.”

