

## **Northwest 361**

### *Chapter 361*

Ed hid the balsam in his arms. Lil did the same and put it away, too.

Their eyes slowly adjusted to the dark cave without a speck of light when Ed perceived a glimmer. Ed took her hand and pointed at the spring.

“Look.”

Lil blinked, still adapting to the darkness. Turning her eyes toward where Ed pointed her finger, she spotted a bluish glow spreading from somewhere deep within the spring.

“I think there’s light on the other side.”

Ed put down his backpack and took off his outerwear and shirt. He only left his pants on and carried a small bag from his waist.

“Are you going to dive in?”

“We can see the light, so the other side shouldn’t be far away.”

“...The other side?”

Lil had begun to remove her fur clothes with hesitation while reflexively asking back. Taking her clothes off was challenging due to its bulkiness, but she somehow managed to remove it along with her backpack. She was about to put her hands to her boot when Ed stopped her.

“It’s our first time here, so it can be dangerous for two people to go in at the same time.”

“What’s an underwater cave anyway? Have you ever been in one before?”

“Think of it as a cave but then filled with water. I discovered one while exploring the Northern Island of the Western Continent. At the time, I noticed a lake in the middle of a forest and eventually realised that another lake was located a short distance away. It turned out that the two lakes were actually connected underground. So, that passageway would resemble a cave, right? That’s an underwater cave.”

“Then there can be a lake on the other side of this cave?”

“Maybe.”

Ed placed an hourglass on the stone floor next to Lil, triggering the yellow sand inside to start flowing down.

“If I’m not back before this runs out, wind the rope.”

Ed, who tied a thin rope around his wrist, handed Lil the skein.

“I won’t go further than this.”

However, Lil assumed the cord was long enough to cover a long distance, judging by its thin appearance and being coiled countless times.

“If this rope is all used up, it’s like you could’ve covered a distance comparable to reaching the Eichendorff Estate...”

Lil’s grumbling mouth was blocked by his lips.

“I’ll be right back.”

Ed slowly descended into the water up to the level of his chest. He initially appeared cautious because of a possible sandbank, but soon swam and disappeared beneath the cliff, as if it really was a passage leading somewhere. From then, the rope unrolled smoothly.

Lil waited for him as the rope continued to spin.

In the meantime, she had strange and frightening thoughts, such as whether the light on the other side of the spring belonged to a giant catfish, emitting light to attract prey, and whether Ed was swimming into the catfish’s mouth without realising he was said prey. Fortunately for her spinning mental state, the cord’s movements felt calm.

Just as Lil felt cold and decided to put on her fur coat again, the white light of Ed’s balsam approached. Lil took her gun from her arms and aimed it at the light. She reasoned that if Ed arrived with a catfish clinging to his leg, she needed to shoot it right away.

However, not a single strand of aquatic weed, let alone a catfish, was attached to Ed’s body. Ed swam out unharmed, so her concerns had been clearly unnecessary. He then came to the surface and shook his head. As soon as he opened his eyes, he approached Lil, who was aiming her gun and seemingly not paying attention.

“...Liloa!”

Ed’s chest was rapidly rising and falling, and Lil couldn’t tell if it was from exhaustion or excitement. Nonetheless, Lil sensed something from his wide smiling expression. She stood up and removed the rest of her garments, including her vest and leather clothes. Even so, as her curiosity was piqued, she was in a hurry and removing the rest of her clothes meant more time delays.

“What? What is it?”

“You won’t believe it until you see it yourself.”

“What did you see?”

“Come in quickly.”

Finally, Lil wound the rope around a stalagmite and tied it. She then dipped her feet into the water while standing in only a shirt and a pair of pants, because jumping straight into the water in only her underwear without knowing the temperature would be tantamount to suicide. The water in the cave was just as cold as that in the valley, and it provided the perfect temperature for a person to possibly die from hypothermia.

“You have to hold your breath for a long time.”

Lil took a deep breath as she held the balsam in both hands. Then they dove down at the same time. When she submerged her head in the water, she felt shiveringly cold. Cold water rushed through her hair, freezing her scalp. The unpleasantly cold sensation, however, was short-lived, as Lil was soon overwhelmed by the grandeur of the underwater cave.

A heavy pressure pressed her ears.

After passing the cliff, a limitless space, reminiscent of another world, emerged. She couldn't tell where the floor and ceiling were anymore. No matter how high or low she stretched the balsam, the depth of the water remained unmeasurable. Lil lost her sense of direction as if she'd entered a giant temple. The dark stone pillars of unknown origin stood tall like pillars of a temple. They were so thick that it was impossible to wrap them with just one pair of arms, and they were significantly larger than the stone pillars discovered in the cave above ground.

Around the stone columns were rock icicles that descended like stalactites, as well as large and smaller stalagmites\*. The sharp rocks extending vertically in a staggered manner closely resembled teeth. The entire passage appeared to be the mouth of a creature buried in an underwater cave and transformed into a dark fossil.

When Lil's imagination wandered to deep sea creatures, she unconsciously glanced at the dark back behind her. Because there were no light sources other than the balsams, everything outside the designated spaces was completely dark. Every time she stirred the balsam, she was terrified of the possibility of seeing a sudden set of eyes of a massive creature right in front of her nose. That was why she quickly kicked up her speed and caught up with Ed. Meanwhile, Ed had been busy wrapping his rope around each of the large stalagmites, so there was no need to worry about getting lost.

The more Lil progressed through the passageway lined with stone columns, the brighter her surroundings became. The colour of the rocks changed noticeably from black to grey, then from grey to white. The floor and ceiling could be determined since some time ago as well. Ed, looking back at her to capture her attention, beckoned somewhere.

Lil shined her balsam on the ceiling where Ed's finger was pointing.

Lil was surprised that curved roots could be seen beneath the ground. The end of the old tree's thick roots firmly protruded through the ceiling like coral. There were also parts where the roots descended in various directions as if they were stalactites.

Naturally, a question arose.

Ed waved his arm at her again. As she went next to him, he swept his palm somewhere on the white floor. A dense pattern underneath was revealed when the lightly laid gravel scattered.

They were characters that Lil couldn't read.

Goe.

Ed appeared to be finding his way while reading it. Lil lowered her head for a moment before noticing a blue light ahead of Ed, who continued forward. She quickly patted him on the back,

causing Ed to look at her and the blue light alternately, before silently giving her a hand signal to watch. Lil, who was suspicious, remained vigilant and swam forward.

The dot-like light gradually changed into a fluttering form, and a butterfly's wings shone blue.

Lil almost opened her mouth wide.

A blue fluorescent butterfly, like a glowing jellyfish washed up on the beach at night. More and more butterflies showed up as they moved. Soon, a dozen of them surrounded them and hovered around their balsams.

The ceiling rose again and soon disappeared from their view. Finally, light was visible beyond the waterline. The surface of the water cast a net-like shadow, illuminating patterns on their faces. Ed pointed up. With a nod, Lil soared to the surface after him.

Lil breathed deeply and wiped droplets from her face. She then opened her eyes after rubbing them.

At that point, they had reached and emerged from another lake with greenery everywhere.

The moisture emitted by fresh plants was thick, like the air from a green field. Similarly, the surroundings were warm, like the spring season on the Central Continent. The unexpected sight was followed by the sound of a birdsong as a sparrow-sized bird flew into the air as if to confirm that everything they were seeing wasn't part of a hallucination. Bright yellow wings fluttered above their heads, as though such creatures were watching humans reappear after thousands, if not tens of thousands, of years. The chirping birds had green crests on their heads.

Lil looked around.

After paying more attention to her environment, she realised they were floating in a moat, not a lake. A castle stood tall on an island in the middle of the moat, enveloped by vines that had grown there for who knows how long. The castle, which stood tall and sharp like a fortress, was entirely made of pure white stone, which appeared to be the same material as the white rocks they had seen in the underwater cave.

The vines were producing flowers. Flowers with open red mouths decorated the vines sparingly. Lil felt as if all of her strength was draining out of her body when she saw such a vibrant colour of life.

Lil barely managed to reach the land out of pure awe. The grass crumbled fresh under her palms upon her touch, giving her goosebumps. Ed held her tightly to support her. A castle surrounded by a moat stood in front of them, while high and low, square buildings rose behind them. Although the majority of the buildings were covered in vines, it was clear that they were man-made structures for residential purposes.

"This... this is..."

"Look at the sky too."

Lil looked up in the air. The air appeared more like oil mixed with strange colours than the sky they were familiar with. At its peak, brilliant light similar to sunlight shone on the earth, but the shape of the light couldn't be properly identified.

“Bonva Gloyoux...”

“..?”

Lil’s gaze, numbed by the dazzling light, turned to Ed. He answered with a smile on his face.

“It’s the name of this ancient kingdom. It’s what’s written at the bottom of the moat.”

Ed strongly held onto Lil’s hand as she stood blankly.

“The kingdom you found.”

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Off the coast of the Northern Island of the Western Continent, bordering the Anatole Sea was a vast grassland that could be reached after passing through a jungle full of sparsely rooted palm trees, vines, broad-leaved trees, and wetland plants. The grasslands of red rocks ended with massive cliffs that cut through the Northern Island itself. Through those island-splitting cliffs ran a river, a river that the pioneers from the Empire named the Leonard River, after their Emperor at the time.

A waterfall could be heard in the distance. Lil and Ed had recently passed through the jungle. The dense broadleaf forest gradually thinned, revealing a wide, slow-moving river and a sparse collection of short shrubs. Herds of horses and antelopes bowed down to drink water along the wide, multi-branched river. The sound of the cries of those wild animals mixed with the flapping wings of birds.

Lil uttered an exclamation.

“Finally...”

Ed said as he set his backpack down behind a suitable rock.

“This is a time when lions come out to hunt, so we need to be careful.”

The pair then threw the rest of their luggage off and jumped into the river, not thinking about who would go in first. The downstream river was shallow, allowing Lil to sink her feet into the fine sand. Although the water was lukewarm, it felt refreshing enough for the bodies that had just emerged from the hot jungle.

The shallow depth of the water, that didn’t even reach her waist, made it difficult for Lil to swim. Lil wanted to play in the water with Ed at first, but because they had been on a forced march through the jungle and were exhausted, she preferred to float around facing the sky instead. Not being able to avoid the bothering of the sun, she closed her eyes, but then a shadow quickly fell across her eyelids.

When she opened them again, there was a massive palm leaf above her head. Ed was beside her, gently swaying the leaf above her face. Lil couldn’t help but laugh at his smile, which was alternately visible and masked through the leaves.

“Why did you get such special things?”

“It’s useless in the jungle, but it’s very useful in the grasslands where there’s little shade.”

He pulled the now drifting Lil into the shallows. Leaning against a rock, he locked her in his arms. Neither of them had taken off their clothes properly, so their shirts stuck to their bodies. Ed shoved a small nut into her mouth, Lil chewed without knowing what it was before turning her head when she noticed the familiar taste.

“When did you get this?”

“I always gather them as soon as I see them because I know you like this fruit.”

Ed placed a bunch of purple fruit in Lil’s palm. She put them in her mouth one by one while observing a herd of animals drinking water in the meadow. Every animal on the Western Continent had a mysterious appearance. In particular, the skin of some of the horses was striped in black and white, and the pattern was as distinct as if it had been drawn with paint.

Lil asked, holding up a fruit.

“What’s this called again?”

“Little cherry.”

“Is this the same as the Western Continent cherries?”

“No, because this one has a bumpy surface.”

“Who named it that way, anyway? The naming is really weird. It’s confusing.”

Ed burst out laughing.

“You did!”

He wasn’t lying. All of the plants and animals on this continent lacked names for an imperial citizen like Lil at first glance, so she named everything she came across for convenience. As time went on, she found it increasingly difficult to identify some of them, so after a week, she began to use random words instead. And strangely, Ed remembered all of the names she had given.

Lil, who was leaning against him and eating a little cherry, raised her gaze upward. The clouds in the sky were torn apart as if on purpose. As she gazed at the deep blue sky, she noticed a tree standing out in the jungle.

“Do you see that?”

There were incredibly large fangs hanging on a tree. A rope made of teeth was wrapped around the trunk like decoration, no, more like a territorial mark left by someone.

“It’s the mark of the Northern Island warrior clan. If they’re here in the vicinity, our plans will be disrupted...”

Despite saying this, Ed didn’t appear to be troubled. He simply took out a blue fruit, similar to an apple, and bit into it. According to the name Lil gave it, it was a blue apple with sour flesh.

“Didn’t you say their territory was beyond the river?”

“It could be that they expanded their territory for defensive purposes.”

They rose from the river and approached the tree, where the sun shone brightly. Lil placed a hand on her forehead to block some of the sunlight and brushed the mark. She had never seen canines this size before. Some of the teeth were bigger than her palm. In addition, an elongated bird skull hung high in the tree with wing bones hanging in pieces from thick branches.

“What type of animal bone is this?”

“I’m not sure, but it looks like the bird used by the warrior clan here.”

“...This belongs to a bird? And it doesn’t have a beak, but fangs like these?”

Lil tried to estimate the size of the bird by looking at its skull. But no matter how much she tried, she couldn’t figure it out.

“Did we pick the wrong continent? What if we get killed by just one hit of this creature?”

“A lot of people actually died during the pioneering squadron era, they were basically annihilated.”

“What about you?”

Ed answered, biting into the blue apple.

“I didn’t participate in that battle.”

“You said they were flocking birds, right? There was a captain like that in the South, too, who used a flute-like instrument to attract and command birds...”

“This place is a little different. As you can imagine from its head and wings, it’s big enough to carry a person.”

“I guess you’re right. Even lion’s fangs aren’t this big...”

“Is there any way for us to quietly explore and quickly head back? Or should we just quit here?”

Ed said after swallowing the pulp.

“In any case, I guess we can only go this far for today.”

They explored the meadow and climbed a small hill. On the hill, a group of monkeys gathered to graze on the grass. When Lil and Ed went up, they stopped their busy hands and stared blankly at the humans. Their reddish-brown hair was short along their rounded heads. Some monkeys resumed eating grass, but when their gaze met Lil’s, their hands came to a halt once more.

Lil laughed as they climbed the hill.

“So cute.”

“These monkeys are herbivores, so you don’t have to worry about them biting your leg.”

The monkeys’ heights reached her knees or thighs. As Lil and Ed crossed the hill, the animals reacted quickly to avoid them. There appeared to be more than 100. They shrugged their shoulders and looked at the two humans with round eyes that closely resembled human expressions.

Nearby, were the remains of a lightning-struck tree, which was still tall enough to block sunlight and protect their heads from birds of prey. Ed lifted the burden off his shoulders and spread out the rolled-up cloth from his backpack to make a camp. While he was setting up the tent, a curious monkey climbed onto his back.

Lil was amazed by the animal clinging to Ed like a child on its parent’s back. But Ed paid no attention and focused solely on setting up the tent. She knew she was stating the obvious, but she wanted to point it out anyway.

“You got yourself a monkey.”

Ed glanced back and answered.

“It was like this the last time I came. At first, I didn’t know what was going on and tried to get it off me, but these guys actually enjoyed it that they rushed at me in groups. It was so annoying.”

Imagining Ed with monkeys hanging from his head, shoulders, and legs, Lil laughed so hard she almost fell backwards. But the next moment, her smile disappeared, for there was also one that had clung onto her arm. Lil held the beast like a child who was throwing a fit. She sensed the heat of life beneath its soft fur. Since she didn’t pat it nor shake it off, it snuggled rather comfortably into her arms and even appeared like it was about to settle for sleep.

Lil looked at Ed in confusion.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Just stay still for a moment.”

He turned away from the half-built tent and took out a drawing notebook from his backpack. Lil realised his intention and immediately complained.

“Oh, but I’m going hunting!”

“Just wait a minute, this sight is so rare.”

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“But you have one on your back, too?”

Lil couldn’t understand how someone could afford to draw such an unusual scene while having a monkey hanging from his neck and still wet from the river. Nonetheless, Ed smiled brightly and held out the charcoal towards her.

“It suits you well.”



“Are you going to keep on talking nonsense?”

Still, Lil didn't bother interfering with Ed's hobbies. So, she sat still until she yawned. It was similar to the times she ventured outside with Lumiere, Ed would follow her without even asking about her destination.

Monkeys flocked around her one by one. One sneaked up and ate the grass next to her. Lil ripped up some more grass and gave some to one of the animals. Its baby-like fingers picked it up and brought it to its mouth. She knew not to mess with wild animals, so she didn't take their interactions any further.

The sketch was finished just before the bored animal fled away. Lil looked up at the sky. The sun, which had just begun to turn red, was gradually setting.

“What do you think?”

On the right side of the sketch, Lil was depicted with a monkey in her arms. The monkeys who arrived later grazed leisurely next to her. On the left side was the sky with the setting sun and the river flowing across the meadow. She noticed that beneath the brim of her hat, she wore a smile that she didn't even know she had.

“I was smiling like this?”

“Yup.”

Drawings like these were often painted on canvas after returning to Roahn. While Lil looked through the album and reflected on her experiences in the jungle so far, Ed put together a complicated device to boil clean water. Lil then lay down on the grass, watching him finish his task, until she realised that she seemed to be lazing around too much. So she helped gather some hay for the fire before packing her gun and crossbow.

Just as she was about to depart to go hunting, Ed placed a leaf from a broadleaved tree larger than his face on Lil's hat and explained.

“Those birds can snatch people, so you'd better camouflage yourself.”

At the same time, Ed draped a plant stem over her shoulder. After adjusting her hat, Lil began to descend the hill, intending to hide behind a suitable bush.

Whenever they travelled, Lil would hunt while Ed cooked. The reason for this division of labour was simple. Lil was an excellent hunter, but she lacked culinary skills. Ed, on the other hand, had spent years wandering the wilderness, so he knew how to prepare his own meals. He could skilfully separate meat from bones and season an animal's organs in an incredible way. Furthermore, cooking was a laborious manual task. Ed would feel fine even after crossing the length and breadth of the jungle, but Lil, who was unfamiliar with the Western Continent, needed to conserve her stamina.

Lil concealed her presence as much as possible as she moved down the hill. The rivers in the grasslands were a gathering place for all kinds of animals from the Western Continent, so the types were very diverse, from birds as small as crows to animals with huge noses and ears.

Cries of various forms of life mixed together and howled.

All Lil needed to do was choose an animal she could transport without much effort. She cocked her crossbow from behind the waist-high bushes. She then crouched to her stomach and was about to fire the crossbow, when something suddenly grabbed her back.

“...Huh?!”

Lil was briefly perplexed as to what was happening. She didn't realise something had grabbed her until her toes were lifted off the ground. The hat and palm trunks she had worn to conceal herself fell to the ground. Raising her head, she could only see the beast's shadowy belly. Lil reached over her back and fumbled frantically for whatever was clutching her.

Lil realised it intuitively. What snatched her was the bird used by the warrior clan. As the bird soared, the land moved further and further away.

“Aaaahhh!”

Lil couldn't even open her eyes properly at the speed at which the creature cut through the air. The wind rushed in, chilling her still-wet body. The beast, carrying Lil, flew past the heads of a herd of antelopes, and the tall antelope horns were so close that they almost scraped against her legs. A shadow with both wings spread wide appeared on the red ground. The bird was much bigger than Lil had ever imagined. The animals below were startled by the appearance of the powerful predator and began to flee into the jungle, pounding the grassland like thunder with the sound of tens of thousands of footsteps. A group of monkeys screamed loudly and quickly ran away to the other side of the hill.

Lil noticed Ed running down the hill, flailing his limbs. He appeared to have moved quickly after spotting the bird and was searching for her.

Lil called out to him with all her might.

“Edgar!”

Ed, who was cutting through the meadow, suddenly raised his head.

“Liloa?!”

Ed aimed his rifle, but allowing Lil to fall from a bird in the sky was already dangerous enough. Not to mention the herd of large animals running wild beneath her. If she fell now, she would be stepped on or, worse, impaled by an animal's horn. Ed retracted his gun, slung it over his shoulder, and ran even faster.

“Liloa!”

He leapt towards a striped horse and climbed on its back. The wild horse neighed loudly and ran at full speed to shake him off.

Meanwhile, Lil aimlessly pointed her crossbow overhead before deciding to drop her weapon. She assumed it would be difficult for any creature, whether human or animal, to show her mercy if they were hurt first. So in the end, she pulled out her dagger, deciding it was better to rip her shirt and fall somewhere.

However, just as she had concocted the supposedly perfect plan, the dagger she was holding was hit by something and fell out of her hand.

Lil looked to her side, but while she initially couldn't see anything, another arrowhead instantaneously flashed before her eyes, serving as a warning that her next attempt would lead to her sudden death. Realising that her opponent wasn't just a lone warrior bird, Lil raised both her hands in surrender, facing the pouring wind.

“...Liloa!”

Ed's shouts persisted until she could no longer hear him. Soon, her body flew over the river. Leonard, the giant river that divided the Northern Island, was gurgling, carving deep into the terrain. The several waterfalls pouring in from the east and the west made the flow of the river more than rough. The water was almost white as it was joined by countless waterfalls. The splashing water droplets and thick fog over the river drenched Lil's face and body anew.

Beyond the river, another meadow came into view. What was different from the grassland was that Lil could see buildings and a temple. The low-rise buildings were all greyish-red and hundreds of them gathered together in a wide meadow to form a village. Smoke rose from the chimneys of the buildings, and children were playing in the fields.

People gathered in front of a tall building as if they recognized the bird holding Lil. The round building surrounded by stone columns was similar to the temples seen only in imperial tales. Incidentally, the bird was also turning directly toward said temple.

Lil eventually felt her ankles brush up against the leaves of a tall palm tree. The leaves skimmed over her knees, then her thighs, until she could tell the difference between the gravel on the ground and the grass. Just as she was about to crash, the bird quickly released her.

Lil immediately rolled on her side to reduce the impact.

Perhaps because the overall situation was unfamiliar to Lil, but even the feeling of grass sticking to her body was completely foreign. She quickly got up, took a deep breath, and frantically looked around her. She had to shake her head vigorously as her focus point wasn't clear. Meanwhile, her heart felt like it was going to burst due to nervousness...

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But even that stopped when the bird landed in front of her. Lil saw nothing but the bird. Its appearance, with no feathers and resembling a reptile, was so shocking that Lil, who had only imagined something as grand as a giant eagle or stork at best, didn't even blink as she stared at the bird—or rather, the monster. When the monster took a breath, its black scales shone brightly, and when it exhaled, the surroundings instantly grew hot. It had yellow eyes with vertically long pupils, black eyelids that closed sideways, and a long, thick tail that stirred up sand with every movement.

Someone slowly rose from the monster's back. The figure of the person with their back to the sun was entirely black. As the figure approached Lil, her forgotten breathing became even more ragged.

That was when she realised the person standing on the monster before her, had her life in their hands.

A woman glided down the beast's vast wings like a slide and stood in front of Lil. With her red hair trimmed short, she looked exactly like Ed had described their race. The villagers who surrounded Lil looked similar as well. Ed had also told her that most of the Northern Island warrior clan had pale skin and bright blue-green eyes, comparable to a peacock's feathers.

The woman covered her body with a long piece of pure white cloth, fastened with a leather belt. Her limbs already adorned with golden ornaments and leather straps, where daggers and throwing stars were secured.

Lil immediately lowered herself to her knees. A woman's voice fell over her head.

It was a sentence she heard from Ed. It meant to ask her who she was. Lil quickly scrambled to recall her memory and responded.

As the question crossed Lil's mind, several warriors rushed past her and placed a golden crown on M'jasiri's head. They garlanded her with various colourful gemstones around her neck and waist as well. Draped over one shoulder was a blue cloth that resembled a ceremonial sash, making it clear to anyone that she was their high-ranking leader.

As the black bird flew into the sky, the warriors of the clan stood behind M'jasiri.

Not only warriors with swords and bows but the seemingly ordinary villagers surrounded Lil, too. Their hair were mostly shades of red, though there were a few with golden or brown locks, and they all wore similar outfits: a white cloth draped around their bodies, leaving their knees and elbows exposed.

M'jasiri asked Lil in a deep, resonant voice.

This, too, was a phrase she had learned earlier. It was to ask where she was from. Lil also knew that if she was asked this, it was best to respond by saying she was from another continent.

Lil shook her head as politely as possible.

When Lil didn't answer, someone grabbed the back of her neck.

She was forced down, her forehead nearly touching the ground. A hand searched her waist and pulled out her gun.

M'jasiri muttered, twirling the gun around.

At that point, a commotion broke out in the crowd. Several people pointed to the sky, their voices filled with unease.

Both Lil and M'jasiri turned their heads in the direction indicated by the crowd, towards another monster approaching the village that resembled M'jasiri's black bird but was brown. On its back were two figures tangled together, but only one of them was struggling to keep their balance. The monster wobbled in the air, and then one of the figures fell to the ground. A man tumbled across the grassy field and, by chance or fate, came to a halt right beside Lil.

There was no way Lil couldn't recognize the man.

"...Edgar?"

Lil had no idea how Ed had managed to ride the monster, but she rushed to help him as he struggled to sit up. Despite her assistance, he could barely lift his upper body. When he looked up and saw the chief, he bowed his head in respect and began a rapid, elaborate speech before Lil could even intervene. She couldn't understand what he was saying, but M'jasiri, who was standing with her arms crossed, burst out laughing.

Ed looked at Lil, blood trickling from a gash on his forehead.

"She's asking if I'm yours."

As she wasn't mistaken, Lil nodded. M'jasiri's interest in her grew stronger, and she bared her teeth in a broad grin. It was only then that she realised how long and sharp M'jasiri's fangs were—two sets of canines easily two or three times longer than Lil's, gleamed menacingly.

M'jasiri tilted her chin toward Ed.

Ed slowly got to his feet.

M'jasiri appeared to be significantly shorter than Lil, as she didn't even reach her shoulder. With her hands clasped behind her back, she began to circle Ed, her gaze examining every detail. Lil looked at Ed's shirt, which was soaked with sweat and clinging to his shoulders and back. M'jasiri's attention was aimed in the same direction. The muscles beneath his shirt twitched with life every time he took a deep breath.

When it became clear that M'jasiri enjoyed looking at Ed, the mood changed. The female warriors began to murmur amongst themselves, while the male warriors began to stare at him suspiciously.

Lil then looked around nervously, her gaze darting from one warrior to another.

When their gazes met, M'jasiri smiled at Lil, her menacing fangs on full display once more.

Lil barely moved her lips and whispered.

"...What did she say?..."

"She said, your man is beautiful."

Ed remained calm even when he said something extremely embarrassing and even though the words hit Lil like a cold splash of water. Lil couldn't understand where he found the courage to remain so composed when her own heart was racing.

Lil stepped forward, determined to maintain control of the situation, and placed herself between Ed and M'jasiri. She then firmly shook her head.

M'jasiri's gaze remained fixed on Lil as she burst out laughing. But the laughter abruptly stopped, and M'jasiri's eyes bore into Lil with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine. Her blue eyes, like precious stones caught in the light, appeared otherworldly and unsettling. Lil held M'jasiri's gaze and remembered the dagger hidden in her waistband.

She subtly moved her tongue to speak to Ed while maintaining eye contact with the chief.

“...Tell her we didn’t mean to trespass and that we’ll leave immediately. We won’t set foot in the jungle if that’s what she wants...”

“...I already told her that...”

Anxiety tightened Lil’s grip into a clenched fist.

Lil and Ed had talked about minimising conflict if they were captured, but they had no idea what to do if the chief became interested in one of them. Worse, Lil had no idea what it meant for an outsider to be considered “beautiful” in this context, especially for a man.

Lil repeated herself.

M’jasiri’s lips curled into a faint, amused smile as she alternately looked at Lil and Ed. After a brief moment of tension, she abruptly turned and swept her hand through the air, sending a sharp signal to the warriors.

“She said she’ll spare us.”

Lil exhaled a deep breath of relief as if the weight of the world had been lifted off her shoulders. The warriors, however, appeared to have a different perspective, as discontent grew around them. M’jasiri quickly approached the rebellious warriors, her presence commanding silence. She easily put an end to their complaints with a few sharp words, and the crowd fell silent again.

M’jasiri returned to the couple, looking more at ease as she stood in front of them. Lil and Ed hastily expressed their gratitude together.

M’jasiri replied, nodding with satisfaction. Then she gave a lengthy speech. And before Lil could ask Ed for a translation, he already started to interpret the chief’s words.

“My men don’t allow other men to enter, but for yours, I’ve made a special exception. Men challenge power, after all.”

After Ed finished his translation, M’jasiri held Lil’s chin and turned her face around. Grabbing Lil’s shoulder-length hair, she rubbed it between her fingers. The chief, who was still looking at Lil’s face, then spread Lil’s eyelids with her thumb and index finger. She continued, examining Lil as if she were about to pluck out her eyeballs.

“I’ve been watching you, a strong warrior with mysterious eyes. You are worthy of entering the water dragon’s territory. You are welcome to see my kingdom. In return, describe the continent to the east. I’m curious about that reckless world. While their future may be different from their past, I need to know if we have to shed blood again.”

Having said that, M'jasiri shouted something toward the still-gathered warriors. Whereas the warriors generally opposed one by one, there was one among them who wore a crown similar to M'jasiri's and held a decorative staff like a sceptre. He stepped forward. He appeared to be of at least equal prominence, for M'jasiri seemed unable to ignore his words too carelessly, and her voice even softened.

Lil and Ed cautiously lifted their heads and observed the situation.

"...There seems to be a disagreement because of the Chief's impulsive decision to invite you in..."

"...You said the pioneering squadron was wiped out in the past, then why is she keeping us alive when she knows we're of the same race?..."

"...She wasn't the chief at that time. The variable seems to be you... I suppose I can have a rational conversation with her..."

Lil just rolled her eyes and looked at Ed.

"...Rational? Even when she looked at you like that?..."

He squinted his eyes and frowned as he gauged her expression.

"...Do you really think I'll be dragged into the Chief's bedroom or something?..."

"...Didn't you notice something when she looked at you earlier? I was so worried for you..."

"...Yeah, right..."

"...You're the first one the Chief snatched, and I only followed through climbing onto another bird. There were no women in the pioneering squadron... Who knows, maybe they have a tradition or custom here that is friendly to women..."

After a long standoff with the warriors, M'jasiri eventually raised her hand with a sigh and declared something while looking around at the crowd. The people nodded. The man holding the sceptre also remained silent in agreement.

Ed naturally translated M'jasiri's words.

"First, we need to prepare for your coming-of-age ceremony."

Lil responded by speaking to Ed.

"What is she talking about? Both you and I have already lived for more than 30 years.\*"

M'jasiri turned her gaze towards them once again. Ed conveyed Lil's words, but the man next to M'jasiri shook his head firmly. He wore a necklace and a belt as ornate as M'jasiri's, yet he bore no weapons at all. Lil assumed that he was their priest.

Ed re-laid the words spoken by the priest.

“Thirty-year-olds who have not had a coming-of-age ceremony are dirty, shameful, and should therefore die.”

Lil, wanting to live no matter what, asked earnestly.

“What do we need to do?”

Ed, who had been listening carefully to the priest, frowned and said.

“The unclean body... that has been brought into the water dragon’s territory, must be washed. You must quickly unite and capture the soul so that it does not wander...”

\*\*\*

The following morning, when the sun rose without fail and gently caressed everything in the grassland, in the midst of the quietly sleeping life that slowly awoke, Lil clung to a monster’s claws and screamed.

“Aaaahhh!”

Ed, who had taken flight with another beast, couldn’t be seen from her position. As the ground receded again, all her senses lost their touch with reality. Only the huge claws gripping her back, like a predator fishing for prey, felt vividly alive. The sound of wings flapping was as grand as the flapping sails of a sailing ship.

Lil clamped her lips together in an attempt to stifle her screams.

The wind rushed past her body. The speed was so fast that a heavy resistance was felt against her torso and the air was as cold as when she climbed a high mountain. By the time she entered the clouds and her vision became blurry, she could barely breathe.

Clouds floated beneath her feet as they cast a clear shadow on the ground. She lifted her head, forgetting her fear for that moment. The horizon holding up the sun in the distance looked like a curve.

The moment she was being sucked into the mysteries of heaven and earth, Lil’s body fell vertically.

“...Aaaaaahhh!”

Even though she didn’t want to open her mouth, it opened naturally.

Being in freefall, her stomach dropped and fluttered in the most miserable way, it was so bad that she, for a moment, feared that her intestines were truly being forced out from her body. Looking at her feet, she let out another long scream. It was difficult for her to keep her eyes open due to the speed at which she was being pulled by gravity, but fortunately or rather unfortunately, the Leonard River was already approaching below. Fighting against the heavy resistance, Lil tucked her head down. She filled her lungs to the fullest and held her breath. Droplets of water splashed down her face as soon as she entered the area beneath a cliff, and water soon hit her face like a shower of rain.



The whirlpool under the waterfall struck Lil's body from all sides. As if they were going to explode, pain filled her ears. Her arms and legs flailed, but she couldn't raise herself to the surface properly. Lil alternated her arms and teased her legs frantically. If she slowed down even a little and got caught up in the current, death was bound to happen.

But the water's power, which seemed to have been adamant about holding her down, was suddenly shaken off and Lil soared to the surface with all her might. She was in a panic, trying to catch the breath she had been holding. In her field of vision, a towering red terrain appeared in the middle of the river, a stream of waves leading up to it. At the same time, her body was sucked underwater again. Lil hastily struggled and popped her head back up. The moment she opened her eyes, she searched for that red. On closer inspection, it turned out to be an island crowded with people in the middle of the rough current.

Lil had to once more urgently hold her breath, as the current was so strong that she had to fight for her head to rise to the surface before being submerged so easily. With great effort, she eventually escaped the area of the falls and caught the current going midstream. The island she was approaching now looked more like an altar than an island. With an artificially created staircase and a flat surface above it.

She wasn't far, and she could reach it quickly just by adjusting her direction while being pushed by the flow of water. Still, Lil was constantly pulled under the surface.

Her body, which had been quenched again and again, finally reached the altar. Lil grabbed the bottom of the stairs, panting for breath, while the waves that hit the stairs were shattered into white pieces. She raised her legs with difficulty before her body could float away. At the top were countless people standing at the altar, but no one approached her to help.

She instinctively knew that even this was part of the ritual. Washing the body really meant washing the body of the outsider in the river. As she crawled to her feet, streams of water poured down from every inch of her body. The island-like altar was a perfect sphere, such that after climbing a few steps, a round and spacious site emerged. Lil managed to force her knees to climb the remaining steps. The few flights of stairs were exhausting, as if she was conquering a distantly high mountain instead.

Ed had already arrived at the safety of the site. Which was a great comfort to Lil. She shifted her heavy steps so that she stood braced next to him. Both drenched, Lil and Ed's appearance was nothing short of a complete mess.

With waterfalls pouring from all sides of the altar, Ed asked quietly.

"...Are you okay?..."

### *Chapter 366*

Lil shook her head helplessly.

"Don't even ask."

The sound of drums drowned out the splashes of the waterfall. Dozens of warriors from the clan surrounded and watched them till two of the onlookers stepped forward and wrapped red cloth around Lil and Ed's shoulders. A distinct pattern was embroidered with gold thread near the chest of the fabric. No actually, it was more like a seal than a pattern. Clasping their belts, they were led to

M'jasiri and the priest, who stood in front of a well engraved with a complex motif in the centre of the altar.

M'jasiri looked Lil up and down and smiled, baring her fangs. She then pointed to the pattern on their chest and said.

“Sawa.\*”

The priest bowed deeply toward the black well and repeated.

“Sawa.”

The word “sawa” echoed as if the well resonated it, leading Lil to grasp the pronunciation clearly. She leaned toward Ed and asked him under her breath.

“...Sawa?...”

“...It's the last name they're giving us...”

Lil, unable to hide her embarrassment, whispered again.

“...Why are they giving us a last name?...”

“...Because we're now adults?...”

“...Then why are we given the same last name?...”

Ed, who was silent for a moment, answered with a bit of uncertainty.

“Bonding... it's because we're going to do a ritual?”

“...A bonding ritual?...”

“...I suppose it's a ritual that unites two or more people into the smallest unit of society? A group of people who share the same roof to shelter from the rain, go hunting together, share grain and meals, and raise children...”

Lil continued in a whisper, feeling even more awkward now.

“Do you mean a wedding? No, are we getting married like this?”

“...It appears to differ from the Empire's definition of marriage... From what I can tell, the bond appears to have nothing to do with the number of pairs of men and women in that unit...”

“..?”

Lil glanced back over her shoulder and confirmed that what Ed said was true. She spotted people in groups of two, three, and five wearing cloth with the same seal.

“...When these clan people become adults, they're made to belong to a specific group where they perform duties as a member. And this ceremony is to signify their union...”

“...G-good. Then at least we should consider ourselves lucky that there are only two of us...”

“...I agree...”

Although she said she was glad, Lil actually remained a little flustered.

Ed, who had noticed Lil’s expression, spoke up first.

“...It’s up to you whether to continue this or not, but if you don’t want to, you better say it now...”

“...What do you mean? What is there for us to do?...”

“...Reject the ritual...”

Ed appeared serious, but Lil was so surprised that she laughed in vain.

“...Do you really think I would rather die than live with you?...”

“...We’ve already washed ourselves in the river, so they won’t kill us if we refuse the ritual. I can assure you of that...”

“...No, we’ve been living together for years; what is there to be afraid of? This ritual doesn’t change anything...”

“...”

“...And at the very least, the ‘ritual’ here isn’t as formal as in the Empire...”

“...”

Lil gathered her courage and declared.

“I’m already bound to you, in body and mind.”

“..?!”

Ed’s eyes widened in surprise, sending Lil a message.

The sight of Ed’s reaction hurt her a little.

“Just because I don’t plan on getting married, doesn’t mean I deny our relationship...”

Lil knelt in front of the well opposite Ed. The well was made of red earth and looked ordinary, but its edges and surrounding area were filled with ancient stones. Through the many years, the inside of the well had been stained and covered with moss.

The sound of the drums became increasingly louder, and the warriors chanted in one voice something resembling a prayer. Ed knelt in front of Lil with the well in between. The priest approached and slammed the sceptre into the floor, bringing the prayer to an end. M’jasiri took a step back, and the priest’s voice rang out.

Ed quietly translated the priest's words so Lil understood them.

"The descendants of the water dragon, newly born from the womb of the sacred beast, were transformed into bodies of the earth."

The priest crossed Lil's left and right hands and had her hold Ed's left and right hands respectively. He then lowered their hands, tightly clasped together, into the well, submerging them in ice-cold, black water of unknown origin.

"Be united like a river. Together, flow through the world and fill your path with the beauty of life."

Suddenly, a current was felt in the well. It was like a river falling violently in the upstream, bending in the middle, and flowing leisurely in the downstream. However, when a panicked Lil tried to look down at the well, the priest grabbed her by the chin.

Lil's gaze was naturally drawn to Ed, whose eyes had turned pale as the sun shone high between the cliffs. The water droplets on his hair and eyelashes sparkled. Lil knew that Ed didn't think this was 'just a ritual' because although he always spoke lightly, his actions were never rash. And her determination to push through with this was as strong as his. She just never liked the marriage customs of the Empire, but continuing her life with him was what she wanted for the rest of her life.

"Therefore believe that raindrops form rivers, believe in meeting when separated, believe in easing when times are difficult, and believe in the upcoming abundance when the ground seems to be frozen solid..."

The well gradually heated up, as if it were starting to boil, and Lil realised that this was indeed a 'not as formal as the Empire's' ritual that Ed referred to. She instinctively tightened her grip to not let go of Ed, and Ed's grip tightened on hers as well as he endured the pain. No one could be stronger at that point. Her nails dug into the back of his hand.

They could have easily escaped the pain by simply pulling their hands out of the well, but neither Lil nor Ed let go. In the next moment, the boiling water instantly cooled down, but it didn't stop there, for the water suddenly became as cold as ice. Their blood vessels, as well as their flesh, had frozen, and they were paralyzed from the fingertips down. They couldn't feel anything. The frozen sensation felt worse than the heat.

When Lil let out her pent-up breath, even her breath was cold.

The priest continued.

"Believe even if you cannot hold it in your hands or see it with your eyes because not only the rough waves are passionate and not only the calm waters are peaceful. Never lose faith without knowing the depth of the water beneath."

The priest struck the sceptre several times, causing the space to tremble as if the pole was pounding not only the ground but also the waterfall and canyon. The coldness quickly subsided, and the priest slowly drew their hands above the well. They looked at their hands, which were holding each other in the black water, and saw only clenching marks on the skin but no other wounds. Even when Lil and Ed tried to recall the pain from the past, nothing came to mind, as if the sensations had merely

been an illusion. Nonetheless, the shock lingered as an afterimage, and their entire bodies were soaked in cold sweat.

Lil and Ed released the breath they had been holding simultaneously. Their gazes were locked, but they were unable to say anything.

The drumming began again.

Ed's thumbs rubbed the backs of Lil's hands. It felt like he was touching her for the first time. As if a new connection had been made. Black water lapped over their hands as they checked each other's palms.

When the priest raised his arms and began reciting an unknown phrase, Lil grabbed Ed's hand.

It was the hand of someone she would never let go of, and who would never let go of her in return. The skin covered in droplets sparkled in the falling light, and an unchanging faith emerged from the fluid of the black well. All of their anguish and hesitations sank into the depths of the ancient waters, and a strange sense of mystery overcame Lil.

Ed's hands that were in concert with hers were as beautiful as ever.

Lil lowered her head and pressed her lips against the back of Ed's hand.

It was then that she realised that under any distant sky, and over any distant years, their bond would only grow stronger...

Chapter 367

[ Three hundred years ago, the Empire.

An era in which women could not publish.

The preceding sentence may seem surprising, but that was the case when this book was written. It is known that the author, Liloa Obernyu, did not want to publish under a pseudonym, so she worked tirelessly to have her work officially published during her lifetime. However, this book was not published at the time, instead, it was secretly transcribed and circulated as a forbidden book until it was discovered a century later.

Following Liloa Obernyu's death, countless manuscripts entered the world. Liloa Obernyu, who sharply presented the truth and demonstrated penetrating insight into providence in rough and unrefined language, was such a trailblazer that it is difficult to believe she lived 300 years ago. In particular, the 'natural laws' and 'natural rights' that she described were only refined by later generations and their meaning today is very similar to her early concepts.

But why bother recommending a book that is already famous?

Because surprisingly, the original manuscript was finally found. This is not a first edition but the original book, written in the author's handwriting and discovered in the snowy mountains of Weissland. Since the point of discovery was the snowy mountains of Weissland, we cannot go on without mentioning another person...

...There is no one who does not know who Edgar Retiro was. However, not many people are aware that the famous Edgar Retiro was the companion of Liloa Obernyu. Naturally, associating these two people is unexpected given that they worked in fields vastly different from today's divided studies.

Edgar Retiro discovered the secret of divine power in ancient artifacts and was the one who set loose those powers, thereby starting the era of magic. After the divine power contained in relics were shattered and spread throughout the world, magic soon came to dominate the sprouts and continents. Magic enabled people to cultivate fields, manufacture goods, wage wars, and establish countries. No longer through gold and power.

The term "genius" alone is not enough to describe a person who gave birth to a new era. However, when someone considered a genius calls not himself but someone else a genius, it can only leave us guessing how great of a mind Liloa Obernyu truly was.

Since Edgar Retiro's vast achievements were accomplished in such a short period of time, only a few know what he was preoccupied with during his later years – the last years of his life.

The truth is that he spent his life after Liloa Obernyu's death researching to preserve her works. In the end, as it was concluded, the original manuscript was enshrined in the snowy mountains to borrow the divine power of preservation, because, while he established the era of magic, humans at that time were unable to use it...

...In addition, Edgar Retiro created hundreds of works depicting Liloa Obernyu. But due to him not being active as an official painter and therefore made no significant contributions to the history of art, he has no reputation as a painter, nonetheless, thanks to his drawings, no one in the world is unfamiliar with the face of Liloa Obernyu, to the point where even someone who is not interested in history or ideology will recognize the face of the famous beauty hanging at the entrance to government offices and art museums. His refusal to further develop his style or paint other subjects demonstrates his hope that future generations would recognize the genius that his time erased. Because he had no idea whether future generations who supported Liloa Obernyu's ideas would appear hundreds or thousands of years later, we can easily imagine his desire to preserve every single piece of it.

As a side note, there is only one painting in which Liloa Obernyu and Edgard Retiro appear together. This work of astronomical value can be viewed at the Sawa family art museum...

...Back to the main topic, < Rage >, which came out at a time when outrageous discrimination was rampant, is a book of thought as intense and passionate as its title. The essence of the thoughts encompassing races, continents, and countries that existed at the time, is actually a book written by Liloa Obernyu after losing her long-time friend, Empress Annette.

The first humanist movement, the so-called Anti-Imperial Revolution, singled out Empress Annette as the mastermind behind the luxury and hedonism of the imperial and aristocratic classes. Her label

of widow who deceived the emperor into becoming the empress eventually became the noose that strangled her. As a result, Empress Annette's life ended more miserable than any other royal family member or imperial courtier.

Liloa Obernyu, who was out on the ocean at the time, belatedly took notice of the empress' death and harshly criticized the anti-imperial revolution. She particularly criticized the exclusion of women, minority races, and slaves from the definition of 'human being' declared by early humanism, and therefore argued that their revolution was a failure. From this time on, Liloa Obernyu lived in exile outside the eyes of the new government. However, it is said that Constance I, the Archduke of Obernyu at the time, took a strong stance and protected her, so much so that when she went into hiding in the southern archipelago, her traces were elusive and she did not face much difficulty...

...This book of thoughts discussed her most universal providence and yet could not help but be the most personal as well. Why is that so? Well, it is because readers can confirm that the accompanying excerpt was clearly written by a human being.

In the book's introduction, the author constantly asks who is the most enraged. Is it the generation that comes a hundred years later? Two hundred years later? At the very least, the generation that came 'three hundred years later' now faces the grieving question of a thinker who could never experience this kind of future\*.

We must now provide an answer to the woman who left her eternal voice through her writings.

Of course, we all know. In fact, the author had hoped that she would be the last, that she would be the most angry.

Perhaps she was right. Since Liloa Obernyu died just before the fall of the empire. No one can deny that the persecution of others was the most severe during the imperial era, which remains a stain on human history. This is because the magical power that appeared later played a significant role in breaking down class barriers and reorganizing the world. We can now name our proud heroes. However, it is also true that while magical power is stabilized and a new system is established, new anger is emerging.

So we can answer like this.

We are 'still' angry. ]

### *Chapter 368*

It has been three months since Lil left the Retiro residence and lived separately in Roahn. She said it wasn't because she had any other intentions, but because she wanted to focus on her research and writing. Ed was allowed to see her, but only once a day, either during lunch or dinner. While the whole arrangement frustrated Ed, he held on to Lil's promise of returning to his residence after her studies were over, otherwise, he might've lost his mind already.

Tonight, Ed just returned from their dinner. He didn't feel it when they were together, but he felt very lonely being alone in his huge mansion. In reality, however, he wasn't alone, for Levi and Linhardt lived with him, and hundreds of vassals came and went every day. On top of that, even Lil's half-sister Constance was staying there, too. Nonetheless, Ed felt lonesome.

Ed was well aware of this and attempted to avoid obsessing over her for years... but failed. In the end, he had no choice but to accept this fact about himself and therefore allowed himself to be deeply attached to her as long as he was never caught.

Of course, he had been holding up well so far... Well, until he saw the messenger pigeon that was used as their means of communication...

The pigeon flew to Ed as soon as he arrived at the mansion. This pigeon was only meant to serve him and Lil. As soon as he reached out his hand, something fell from the pigeon's leg. It was attached so quickly that it wasn't even sealed.

[ Edgar's gone. Come quickly. ]

It seemed like time stopped for a moment. Ed closed his eyes tightly, wondering if what was in front of him was merely a hallucination before opening them again.

[ Edgar's gone. Come quickly. ]

When he came to his senses, Ed found himself in front of the hotel where Lil was staying. The horse he rode was out of breath. Ed's thoughts spun as he went straight up the hotel stairs.

"No way."

Ed quickly decided that he could never show himself to her like this.

In times like these, he learned very well not to follow his impulses.

Ed pressed his forehead against the door he couldn't open.

"I'm going crazy..."

However, Lil's voice came through the door as if she had sensed a presence.

"...Who's out there?"

His heart was beating like crazy. He thought about backing out, but he was so anxious that he felt like he needed to see her face.

He paused for a moment to breathe. He then took a step back, ruffling his hair and adjusting his outfit. When he knocked, Lil answered lightly.

"Come in."

As soon as he opened the door, their eyes met. Lil looked perplexed. There was an unexpected look in her eyes upon seeing Ed suddenly come back. Ed, on the other hand, smiled brightly and walked over to her, pushing his head into her arms.

Lil, carrying his weight, collapsed towards the sofa. She then asked in a quizzical tone.

"...Why? Don't you have a meeting with His Majesty's representative later in the morning?"

"I came back because I missed you so much."



“You just left, right?”

“Let me just stay a little longer, please?”

“You’ll die out of exhaustion like this, really.”

Ed lay on top of her and discreetly turned his head to glare at the door.

With Ed staying in that position, Lil stroked his hair out of habit.

Ed mulled things over as he received her familiar touch.

*However, this is the first time that Liloa made the first move... That’s why I’m taking this seriously.*

*What should I do in this case? Thinking back, Liloa liked my appearance and brain the most.*

*Appearance? I don’t think someone else’s looks can surpass mine. If there was, then that man would’ve turned Sesbron over by now, but Sesbron has been quiet. If so, then how about someone smarter? Could it be somebody from the Imperial Clairaut? There are several studies that Liloa has recently shown interest in at the Imperial Clairaut. I may not know all of the professors there, but there’s a high chance that he could be one of them.*

*Did she invite him over to talk to him? But why leave me out? It would’ve been better if all three of us had dinner together...’*

Lil’s voice suddenly cut in.

“...Aren’t you going?”

A blunt answer suddenly came out of Ed’s mouth.

“I’m not going.”

“...”

“Why, will it bother you if I don’t go?”

“No...”

He wasn’t convinced by her answer, so he dug deeper into her arms for no reason. He shook his head back and forth to pet himself when her hand paused.

“I have nowhere else to go but here.”

“You have the biggest mansion in the West.”

“Then, if I have nowhere else to go, will you let me sleep here?”

“What nonsense...”

It seemed like Lil wouldn’t even bother dealing with him at all. Ed whined, trying to show as little doubt as possible.

“Why do I feel like you keep trying to send me away? Are you expecting someone else to come?”

“Yeah...”

Her answer was so simple that it made Ed’s entire body stiffen.

“What kind of bast... No, who is coming?”

“It’s a secret.”

Ed stood up in genuine shock. Lil looked up at the man whose hair was disheveled from his own excessive rubbing. While it seemed like her eyes were the same as usual, she seemed a little bothered. Ed became impatient and pulled her hand to confirm her affection for him alone.

Lil answered as she was obediently held.

“Constance.”

“Constance?”

“Constance should be here soon. I sent the pigeon, but why hasn’t she come yet?”

Ed asked back, feigning annoyance.

“She’s a princess, so you should just invite her over for dinner. Why would you have her come over after I was gone?”

“There are times when sisters just want to spend time together, and we decided to sleep together today.”

“Ahh.”

“So...”

Lil gestured towards the doorway. It was meant for him to leave.

“I see...”

Ed stood up mumbling something meaningless.

Feeling ashamed, he quickly thought of delivering the note to Constance. This matter had to go by naturally, without Lil finding out.

“Then I should take my leave.”

Although he didn’t wear a hat, he followed Sesbron’s etiquette and greeted Lil very politely. Since he had suddenly become a person who stole another person’s letter, he wanted to be polite. Lil, who was looking at him up and down, frowned a little.

“Why are you so strange today? Well, you’re always like that, but today you’re strange in a different way...”

“Can it be because I wanted to see you at night too?”

He slyly changed the subject, causing Lil to burst out laughing at his blunt words. She laughed often whenever she was with him, but still, every laugh she let out was precious to Ed. He grinned. Lil wrinkled her nose as if she was thinking, but then gave a generous answer.

“Okay, well. Anyway, see you again tomorrow night then.”

Ed went to the door as if he was going to fly and waved his hand eagerly. Lil couldn't resist his energy and similarly waved her hand.

As he was leaving, Ed smiled and thought.

### *Chapter 369*

[ “Sesbron Newspaper, July Issue No. 23.\*

Two nights ago, a passenger ship carrying about 50 people sank due to a shell explosion off the coast of the Gulf of Gardel. This accident appears to have resulted in the death of Liloa Obernyu, a wanted person whom the authorities are keen to apprehend. It is an open secret that the Council is keeping a close eye on her movements. Although the passenger list was filled with false names, authorities confirmed that one of the passengers was Liloa Obernyu. It was not confirmed whether her lover, former marquess and current professor at the Clairaut, Edgar Retiro, was with her. However, his whereabouts are unknown, so the authorities classify him as missing. Other famous personalities included in the fatalities are...” ]

Grinning, Ed lowered yesterday's newspaper.

“...Really?”

Lil, lying on the bow of a small yacht, muttered with her eyes closed.

“...How many times will they kill me?...”

Getting blinded by the sunlight, she picked up her hat. The sails of the yacht were all set, but their shadows didn't reach where she was. Ed watched silently as Lil placed her short-brimmed hat on her face. He watched her until he was sure she was completely asleep.

From three days ago until last night, they didn't sleep a wink. It began when they had to escape from a sinking ship due to an explosion followed by a fire. And to avoid the eyes of the authority's army pursuing them, they had to find a ship in a run-down harbour and flee immediately. It was at that point that they realised the explosion was no accident, and they couldn't relax until the city's coast was out of sight. They both were exhausted from staying up all night to keep watch.

Soon, Ed fell asleep as well.

When he woke up, he looked around reflexively, but all he saw was a solid horizon that didn't allow the establishment of any civilization.

As he raised his upper body, the hat he was wearing fell onto the deck.

The yacht that came a long way into the Gulf of Gardel Bay, off the southern coast of the Central Continent, parted the calm waves.

Ed came to that conclusion after experiencing years of goodluck.

However, Ed's reasoning went further than that.

*In that sense, like Lil, I, too, am fortunate to be in a place where the sea watches over me. It happened whenever I was injured or lost consciousness. But that's where the similarities end.*

*Of course, human effort is still required because injuries can't heal on their own. Nonetheless, the new government can't help but despise Liloa Obernyu, who seems to be invincibly reviving one time after another...*

*It has been years since the Emperor was dethroned and the council took control of state affairs. The sun of the Empire is now the people and all the people are equal. Thus, the traditional aristocratic system was abolished. However, those "all subjects" aren't truly inclusive of all human lives.*

*Discrimination and persecution still persist... Because everyone still tries to distinguish themselves from others just to fall within the scope of the "subjects"...*

Ed rubbed his tired eyelids. In that moment, memories that were painful to remember flashed by.

The watery voice in his recollection was still as clear as day.

{ "...This is... this is not how it should be..." }

When they were both still out on sea, Levi tried her best to collect Annette's body, but there was nothing she could do. Lil sobbed for a long time as she lay down on the fragments of a smashed tombstone where her friend's remains once lay to rest.

Shouts of victory were heard from down the hill. After the revolution of the anti-imperials, the emperor, who endured for a year and three months, was deposed, and the provisional president took the podium to announce the abolition of the aristocratic system.

{ "...Edgar. This is not the future..." }

As Lil once said, the future was distant. It was then that he slowly came to understand her, who was sad that she couldn't see it in this lifetime.

Ed exhaled a long breath.

He then stood and grabbed hold of the rigging to adjust the sail. He hoped that this trip to Malus would be a break for them.

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Before reaching the vicinity of Malus, Lil and Ed changed into the clothes they had prepared to look presentable. Fortunately, no one at the port suspected them as the two looked like mere tourists on a boat trip. Despite the many outsiders coming and going, Malus was a peaceful rural town without the need for security guards to carry out strict inspections.

They easily rented a carriage and rode through the quiet country roads. The open carriage was perfect for admiring the surroundings. The wind was lukewarm and the scenery nothing special, but it put Lil in a good mood.

While Ed was thinking of seizing a suitable day to go out with her to the market, Lil turned to him and asked.

"Did I ever mention to you that I once lived in Malus when I was young?"

“Yes. You did. Until the Archduchess passed away.”

“I still remember that time. When I was young.”

Ed had also stayed in Malus for a while, but since it was just one of his many travel destinations, his memory of it wasn't as impactful as it was to Lil. She seemed to remember Malus with great fondness.

That was, apparently, until they arrived at the mansion.

Lil, standing in front of the house, had her face crumpled in a way Ed had never seen before. Surprised by her sudden change, he stared at her, but Lil's expression didn't change as she carefully surveyed the mansion.

“What's this?”

Ed answered in confusion.

“...What's this? It's a mansion?”

Servants came out, opened the gate, and welcomed them. While Ed was exchanging words with the caretaker, Lil strode away towards some unknown place.

“Where are you going, the front door is open?”

“...”

Ed asked, but it was no use. He added, wondering if she might want to seek the backyard.

“There's nothing to see in the garden. It has almost completely turned into an orchard.”

After a while, Lil returned from the back and said something he didn't understand.

“It was you?”

“...What?”

“I'm pissed now.”

“Huh?”

“How annoying.”

“Huh?!”

“...”

Ed was momentarily confused and soon asked a stimulating question.

“After such a long time, what's suddenly going on?”

He had long been safely eliminating factors that could cause Lil to become irritated. His research was so thorough that he not only never made the same mistake twice, but even prevented potential mistakes. As a result, he hasn't made Lil angry in recent years.

Recalling that time, Ed smiled to himself.

“Are you laughing?”

Lil widened her eyes before looking back at him sharply. Ed quickly made a straight face.

“...No.”

“...”

“But why are you angry? It’s not like you don’t like the garden.”

“You...”

“Shhh...”

Lil tried to say something, but Ed raised his index finger to her lips. He slowly shook his head, horrifying Lil enough to slap his hand away.

“What are you doing?”

“No, don’t ever tell me. I’ll figure it out.”

“Or you don’t...”

Despite her sullen response, Ed just grinned.

“...Hmm, what made her so angry...”

He started singing in a strange tone. Lil turned around without even looking at him and headed back towards the entrance. Ed followed along, constantly bobbing his head.

### *Chapter 370*

On their first day, Ed and Lil were so tired that they fell asleep without any time to argue. Only by morning did Lil realise her mistake.

“Starting tomorrow, you go out and sleep somewhere else.”

Shocked by her harsh declaration, Ed immediately devoted himself to his investigation. As she remained cold all day, Ed, who had been passionately researching what he had done wrong until lunch, became increasingly discouraged.

Meanwhile, Lil couldn’t accept that fact.

*I, on the other hand, recall it so clearly... The young doctor I met in Malus... As soon as I saw the view of the mansion, I immediately remembered and realised the identity of that mysterious doctor from so long ago. A boy far too young, too rich, and too arrogant to be an actual doctor...*

*Turned out to be Edgar Retiro.*

*And he's still incredibly similar to when he was young. Self-indulgent, unruly, doing only what he wants to do without thinking about others at all... No, perhaps not anymore. A lot has changed since then. Now he's... No!'*

Lil battled her unconscious that started to be sympathetic to Ed's side.

After kicking out the bothersome Ed, Lil locked the study door and started writing the letters and diary she had been putting off. The letters slowly became monotone as there were so many people she had to inform that she was alive and not dead. As a result, the existence of the man struggling outside was naturally forgotten.

When Lil finished her last letter and got up from her desk, it was already evening.

"...Oh, gods!"

Ed was staring intensely at her from behind a bookshelf ladder. The study consisted of two stories, so Ed was able to enter through the door between the bookshelves on the upper floor. Lil was already planning on leaving the study anyway, so she just passed by the bookshelf where Ed stood. After living with him for so many years, such antics weren't surprising to her anymore. She became all too familiar with his tricks of hiding behind curtains, waiting at the end of a hallway and pretending to meet her by chance, or pretending to observe his shadow on a wall.

Lil sensed that Ed was following her from behind, but she didn't hold the door for him. He asked urgently through the closing gap.

"...What about dinner?"

"I don't want to eat. I'll just sleep."

Ed opened the door and followed her through the hallway and into the bedroom. Lil scolded his shameless act as she climbed onto the bed.

"Why are you coming in?"

"Aren't you going to sleep with me like you did yesterday?"

"Yesterday, I was so tired that it slipped my mind. Don't forget. You are a sinner now."

She pulled the blanket up to her head, leaving Ed standing alone in the dark. She could hear him pacing around the bed for a while and thought about kicking him out if necessary. She was grumpy for the first time in a long while and because he was so cheeky about it, it was hard for her to forgive him.

Eventually falling asleep, Lil began dreaming of two versions of herself appearing.

"...It's crazy if you forgive Ed. How can he not remember you?..."

“...It’s annoying, but what kind of heartless act are you pulling off to someone who went through the trouble of almost dying with you just a few days ago?”

Even Ed, who showed up out of nowhere, joined and started talking about how one of Lil’s versions was right.

“...How dare he...”

“...How shameless...”

“...It’s crazy...”

The bickering eventually got so loud that Lil woke up groaning.

By then, the day had just dawned, but the light coming through the curtains was already bright.

“It was just a dream...”

After tossing and turning for a while, Lil got up and came down from the bed. She opened the windows one by one starting from the bed and moved toward the couch. There she found a newspaper, a steaming teapot, and breakfast cookies set on the small table. As she unconsciously sat down on the couch next to the table, something hard touched her buttocks.

“...Ack! What the heck!”

She jumped up and turned around in haste, only to discover it was Ed’s leg. He, who had been sleeping pitifully curled up on a couch that didn’t match his height, opened his eyes.

“Liloo...”

The large half-naked man raised his upper body. He was wearing an open robe with only pants on.

“Did you sleep well?”

“...I’m speechless, really.”

As Lil sat down next to him, Ed leaned in and buried his face in the nape of her neck. Although she tried to shake him off, he merely pressed his lips against her wiggling shoulder. Lil gently jerked away the arm that was wrapping around her waist and spoke without taking her eyes off the newspaper.

“You said you were going to find out for yourself, what you’re doing now is obviously foul play.”

Ed sullenly moved away. Yet after just a brief period of moodiness, his head popped up again. He wriggled enough beneath the newspaper for Lil to look down at him as he lay on her lap.

“Are you going to act pitiful again?”

“...”

“Do you even know what your sin is?”

“If being born beautiful is a sin...”



When Lil attempted to lift her knees, Ed wrapped his arms around her legs as if he were holding onto a pillar while muttering to himself in a low hushed voice. He seemed to be saying that he disliked all the other rooms and that he shouldn't be kicked out.

"...Why didn't you go to another room, why did you sleep so uncomfortably here?"

Instead of answering, Ed merely rubbed his head against her thighs and held on tightly. The way she sat on the couch made the space for him even narrower, thus making Ed look even more uncomfortable. In the end, Lil just gave up and focused on the newspaper. She couldn't even touch the tea or cookies for fear of spilling them on Ed. When he seemed to have fallen asleep again, Lil unconsciously fiddled with his fine hair while reading the last few pages of the paper.

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She spent the morning lazily inside the mansion. In fact, it wasn't just the morning, Lil had no plans in the afternoon or even the rest of the week, so she spent all her time just idling around. About a week later, she thought it would be nice to visit the grave of Madame Autriche, who had taken care of her in Malus when she was young.

Lil selected a suitable book from the library and sat down. When she did, servants came in quietly and left her some cold brewed tea and snacks. She stretched her hand and took a bite out of a round cream puff.

*Of course, Constance and Levi helped a lot, but it was thanks to Ed's inestimable villas that I got to escape across the continent even as a wanted criminal. It's amazing really. Maintenance and repair costs for this mansion alone must be incredibly expensive. I have no clue who is in charge of hiring and management, but compared to Ed's own indifference, the management of his properties seemed to be going very well.'*

Thanks to this, Lil didn't have to use her own assets. Her inheritance, which was released when Constance ascended the throne after Venua's death, had no use other than being invested in a school that Levi would soon build.

Levi said she would establish an academy for girls who were excluded from the education of the empire's subjects. It was something said in passing one evening, but Lil shed tears endlessly. Everyone at the dinner table was shocked as Lil cried and laughed, immediately announcing that she would be the first investor.

Lil's eyes scanned the study.

After thinking about this and that, Lil concentrated on reading again. But just as she shifted into a half-lying position, Ed burst in and shouted ambitiously.

"Shall we go to the white sand beach? It's behind the garden."