

Northwest 371

Chapter 371: (End)

Lil's eyes scanned the man before her. Ed was only wearing a wide straw hat and trousers, holding large straw baskets, one in each hand. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted all the way to where she was sitting.

Lil said sourly.

“...I see it's not a proposal, but a notification.”

Ed set the baskets down by the door and approached her, who was still half-lying on the sofa and clutching her book tightly. He soon crouched before her, staring at her like a puppy waiting for its owner. He tilted his head and the brim of his hat touched her wrist. Lil pretended to read her book, but not a single word caught her eye. Ed's face was as attractive as ever, distracting her from her concentration. She was also more than aware of the effort she had to wield in order to keep her eyes from rolling back to him. Normally, when he acted all cute in front of her, she'd stroke his cheek or kiss him, so now her hands and lips itched out of habit.

‘If he could just remember, I would cuddle him to his heart's content! So why did he have to commit such a serious offence by losing his memory, making things difficult for me as well?’

“You keep forgetting, you're a sinner.”

“But the punishment is too harsh...”

“The punishment is to my discretion.”

Because she didn't move an inch, Ed impatiently pressed his lips against her shoulder and her arm.

“Then I'll just keep bothering you.”

“...”

Ed rubbed his lips three or four more times before casting a glance at Lil's face again.

“I'm annoying, right?”

When Lil still showed no signs of getting up, Ed climbed on the sofa and lay down. He didn't care about his hat rolling off. All he wanted to do now was to hug her tightly, effectively trapping her between his body and the sofa's back. Lil grumbled, but Ed paid her no mind and instead showered her with kisses on her cheek and the nape of her neck.

“Ah... ugh... really...”

As she was caught off guard by his attack, which cleverly targeted her weak spot, Ed suddenly lifted her. Lil had no clue when he turned around, but by the time she came to her senses, she somehow ended up on his back. Ed was quick to stand, picking up his hat in one hand and holding her book in the other.

“Hey!”

Lil, who was easily carried, loosely grabbed his hair. Holding onto his brown locks with both hands, Ed looked like he had pigtails.

“Where are you taking me?”

“I’ll decide where I’d like to be punished. And it will be on the white sand beach.”

Full of energy, he hung the two baskets on both wrists and triumphantly left the study. The servants passing by in the hallway averted their eyes, and Lil hesitantly let go of his hair.

As Ed dashed down the stairs, Lil’s slippers fell. One on the landing, one on the floor below. But even with her footwear gone, he showed no signs of stopping.

“Now I can’t drop you off even if you want to.”

“Did you make that happen on purpose?”

“Well...”

“You truly are shameless.”

In an instant, Ed, after having passed through the ground floor hall, kicked open the back door leading to the garden. Lil was greeted by a sun so bright that she had to squint her eyes. Ed continued to walk the path alongside the garden.

Lil then remembered the garden, which was now reminiscent of an orchard.

‘However, I still hate the memory of the now-shameless sinner, giving tiresome lectures about red berries having disinfectant properties, how he had come to Malus to grow them in the right climate, but it was still hard to do so... Bla bla bla... I meant to join him here only after he regained his lost memories...’

But the sinner started explaining something Lil didn’t even ask about.

“The white sand beach in itself isn’t spectacular, but it has sea cliffs on both sides. So, people can only get there through this small forest. Meaning, it’s just the two of us.”

A beach awning made of white cloth had already been set up on the white sandy beach. Beneath it were two cots made of woven rattan and a table. It looked like it had been planned and prepared since morning.

Lil swept back her hair blowing in the sea breeze. While she was at it, she also tucked the sinner’s hair behind his ear. However, it wasn’t properly fixed, so she ran her fingertips along the centre of his head, parted it equally to both sides and tucked it back again.

‘It probably looks really funny from the front, it’s a shame that all I can see is the back of his head right now.’

The sinner laughed without even hearing Lil’s thoughts.

“What are you doing?”

“Your hair has grown a lot. I should cut it... But at this point, I might just cut something else.”

Lil pretended to flick her wrist in front of his neck.

“What kind of serious crime did I commit that you’re tempted to do that? What on earth could it be...”

“You don’t seem very motivated to find out...”

“No way. I always do my best.”

“I don’t think so. Look at you, you keep laughing.”

That was what she said, but seeing the ocean made her feel more generous. Despite their experiences at sea that pushed them to the brink of death, Lil and Ed still loved it.

Ed hummed along with the wind.

‘It’s nice to hear the sound of waves gliding through the pebbles, as well as the sound of Ed’s feet crushing the fine sand.’

Ed set her down on something that was either a bed linen or a giant cushion.

Lil never came out with the intention of actually going into the sea, so she just lay there. She curled up under the shade until she fell asleep while reading a book from the study. When she woke up, she ate a few green grapes and focused on her book again before glancing at Ed.

He had been diving for over an hour now, searching for seashells. After all, he had been looking forward to showing her the mysterious seashells that could be found exclusively on Malus beach.

However, the same seashells collected by Lil more than twenty years ago were already on display in a closet in the Obernyu castle.

“You’re having a hard time because you, apparently, aren’t as smart as you think you are.”

‘I never thought a day would come when I would say those words to Ed.’

Lil laughed to herself. But upon realising that thinking about a serious offender made her smile, her complexion dimmed again.

Ed swam the sea passionately, regardless of her expression.

His relentless pursuit made it clear why he brought her here.

‘While I can eat delicious bread and fresh fruit, and read lazily in the sun, I was also brought here to admire him trying to pick up shells. Like come on, what kind of sea otter doesn’t want to be praised?’

As she glared at him like that, Ed, who was sticking his face out of the water, waved his hand.

‘He seems to be under the delusion that I kept watching all this time.’

Lil’s focus was on her book.

‘I’m clearly reading and definitely not admiring his shoulders or back muscles visible through the small waves whenever he swims... Nor am I looking at his collarbones or chest rising above the water as he walks the sandbank...’

However, when he brushed his wet hair, Lil blatantly paid her full attention to the stream of water that traced the bridge of his nose. Annoyed by her own realisation, Lil shook her head and returned her gaze to her book.

A few minutes later, Ed walked out of the sea, water dripping down from all over his body. He roughly wiped his body with a large towel, but Lil paid him no mind. He then approached her in his robe, looked at her closely, and placed the shells he had picked up on her ears.

Malus’ seashells were known for producing a melodious sound. Not to compare to the sound of the wind or waves that were usually heard in sea creatures’ shells, but rather a song with a musical tune. The Malus locals claimed that this was the song of the Mother of All Things.

Of course, Lil had heard this song a lot while she lived in Malus. But Ed, who had no way of knowing that, asked excitedly.

“Can you hear the song?”

“...”

“...That’s strange... Why don’t you seem to be surprised?”

“...”

“This is a sound you can only hear on Malus Beach. Once you go beyond the coast, you’ll no longer be able to hear it...”

“...”

Seeing her still visibly upset, he finally bared its meaningful connection.

“Aha, you said you once lived in Malus, right?”

“...”

“Didn’t you?”

“I’m not saying anything, so why...”

“Didn’t you leave something behind back then?”

“..?”

Ed cut her off and pulled something out of the basket.

“Tada!”

Whereas Lil tried to identify the object that had appeared out of nowhere, Ed shook the glass bottle playfully.

“You left this behind, so I brought it for you.”

“What on earth...”

‘...No way...’

On the glass bottle, an old, torn piece of paper was hanging from a string. Lil snatched the bottle and unfolded the paper. There were visible trace marks of a very old ink. Upon taking a closer look, she saw that what was writing, was actually a sentence.

[Philly. This is the disinfectant I made from the fruit you picked. It’s effective, so use it when you need it.*]

“Oh my...”

Lil frowned to suppress her laughter.

“Who wrote this?”

She cleared her throat loudly to hide her excitement.

“Well, wasn’t it written by a young and handsome doctor from the past?”

“Who are you calling handsome?”

“You definitely looked at him and thought like that.”

“...”

“She left without finding the glass bottle. How upsetting must it have been for poor Philly?”

“...”

“So, when Philly ran away like that, wouldn’t the gardener, who only realised his mistake after the fact, become restless and confess to the young and handsome doctor? And wouldn’t the young and handsome doctor say that because Philly was a citizen of Malus, she could return to the mansion at any time? In that case, wouldn’t the oblivious but devoted gardener have kept the glass jar?”

Lil was doing her best to keep a stoic face and returned the bottle to him.

“Then what should I do with this? There’s nothing in there anymore.”

“Evaporated. It can’t be helped. It’s been more than twenty years.”

“When did you find out?”

“Of course, I knew from the beginning.”

“Again with your lies.”

“I just thought it would be nice to surprise you.”

“Come on, don’t lie.”

Ed laughed at her disapproving tone.

“You’ve been fuming ever since you first saw the mansion. So, I wondered if you’d been here before, and I realised it right away.”

“Then why did you pretend not to know?”

“Because it’s fun to see you grumbling for the first time in a while... ugh...”

Lil gently pulled his cheeks. Ed, now looking funny, apologised familiarly.

“...Have ...Mercy...”

As soon as she benevolently let go, Ed held up both hands for no reason. He said, rubbing his cheeks.

“I was wondering why you chose Philly. Turns out, it was one of your middle names.*”

“And now you know.”

“But why didn’t I notice this sooner? That kid stayed on my mind all the time.”

“We simply didn’t have the luxury to think about Malus.”

Lil nodded her head at her own conclusion.

‘That’s right. Malus is, after all, a peaceful and tranquil region. In other words, it’s a place with nothing to do but recreation, making it an unappealing destination for those, like us, who prefer to travel across the continent in search of adventure. I always said that If we ever needed to go south, I would prefer Amiaeng, but to get there we, of course, first had to pass the Gulf of Gardel. Even when planning the trip, Malus never crossed my mind. If it hadn’t been for the accident, I might’ve never returned. And I wouldn’t have remembered the young doctor unless I had seen the mansion again.’

“Hmm, so now...”

Ed slowly raised his upper body and untied the robe he was wearing. He then wrapped his arms around Lil’s waist and pulled her closer, leading her to naturally climb on top of him. He lay down on the cushion, folded his hands neatly behind his head, and closed his eyes. His lips twitched in anticipation.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s time to reap my reward.”

“...Really?!”

“You decided the punishment, so I can decide the reward.”

“Considering the seriousness of your crime, you weren’t even properly punished. And now, you think you can end it like this?”

“...”

To Lil’s dismay, Ed nodded his head with his eyes remaining closed.

“Who said you could?”

She wasn't even conscious about it, but her lips were pursed, ready to whine.

'You think I'm falling for that, huh?'

Instead of giving in to his request, Lil picked up the seashells lying on the cushion and placed them on Ed's eyelids one by one. The resulting sight made her burst out laughing.

Ed, who didn't understand what was going on, asked about the sudden change in her mood.

"What's this?"

"It suits you well."

He fumbled with his fingers and touched the area around his eyes. Immediately realising the objects resting on his eyelids, he laughed along with her. Finding it even funnier to see Ed laughing while leaving it as they were, made Lil grab her stomach. It really wasn't anything special, just a little prank, yet she somehow ended up laughing a lot. It was always like that whenever she was with him.

Their laughter intertwined and lingered for a long time without anyone knowing who it belonged to. After a while, Lil spoke, taking the shells from him.

"I really liked this song."

"Yeah?"

"I saw the sea for the first time in Malus, so this song is like a symbol of Malus. Actually, I took some shells to Oberyu as well. But once there, I was more than disappointed that I couldn't hear the song anymore."

"..."

Lil put the shells on her ears again. When she pressed them firmly with her palms, music of unknown meaning flowed out. It was like an instrument that was non-existent anywhere in the world, or perhaps it was the voice of a God, using the shells as a medium to speak.

When she opened her mouth again, her voice resonated and rang inside her body.

"Till I forgot. I never expected I'd hear it again."

With the shells still on her ears, Ed's voice seemed to come from far away.

"Then I think it was a good idea that we came to Malus."

Lil smiled brightly and nodded her head.

"Yes. I'm glad we did."