

Northwest 341

Chapter 341

In the middle of Annette expressing her concerns, the Emperor and Venua returned from their walk along the river.

Soon enough, the emperor sat down again and rested his hand on his stomach.

“What would I have done with this heartache if not for Venua?”

“I am grateful.”

Lil took advantage of the emperor’s good mood.

“Your Majesty. I think I can ease your worries a little bit more.”

“What is it? Oh, Henrietta’s son and daughter are making me so happy.”

“I know that the bandits the Imperial Army eliminated in Kano were a mix of unidentified people.”

The emperor’s small eyes widened in a flash.

“...How did you know about this matter?”

“I saw and heard this while travelling from Roahn.”

“Oh, yes, I see. You indeed said you were there.”

Annette asked, following the emperor’s words.

“Have you seen anything?”

Lil briefly described what happened in Kano and meticulously provided her audience with a detailed account of the many different forces who attacked the village. She also added that revealing their identities as accurately as possible could not only help allay the union’s concerns, but also the emperor’s.

Annette, who was staring at her in awe, turned to the emperor.

“Your Majesty, what are you going to do?”

Venua burst into laughter and intervened.

“Your Majesty, how can you believe the words of this ignorant child? How can someone like Liloa differentiate mercenaries from bandits? Meeting with the Union is no child’s play.”

“If you are doubting me, Your Majesty, then you should make me come to the meeting with the Union alongside my brother of course. Then if I, in any case, talk nonsense, he is free to rebuke or scold me there.”

The emperor cautiously reaffirmed what he had just heard.

“Are you sure about the mercenaries?”

Like a spell, Lil said the magic word that would instantly dispel the emperor’s doubts.

“Yes. Admiral Retiro, who was with me at the time, personally confirmed this, Your Majesty. Since the Admiral is not here, I can tell you his conclusion on his behalf.”

“That daredevil himself? Then, I guess I should get up quickly.”

Annette spoke while supporting the emperor’s arm.

“I will attend the meeting with His Majesty first, then afterwards you can enter slowly.”

Lil and Venua stood up and bowed to the emperor’s back as he walked away.

As soon as the two rulers disappeared into the building, Lil gathered her belongings that she had left on the chair to make her own preparations.

Venua asked coldly from across the table.

“What are you up to?”

Lil grabbed the parasol and fan from her seat and leaned forward.

“Do you think I am clueless about how my own brother ordered Maxwell to kill Edgar?”

“You are talking nonsense. I came here from Obernyu.”

Lil snorted and came around the table to block his path.

“Did I not tell you before not touch the Marquess? Could you not have done me this simple favour? It would have been better for you not to have ignored my words because I will teach you that lesson today.”

Her opponent’s voice, conscious of the servants standing around the awning, lowered to a whisper.

“...What are you planning to do? Do not be foolish. You do not even have the Admiral with you, so who will believe your words?..”

“You asked me what I am planning to do because, in truth, you do not know what to do now, right? My poor brother. Since you made the most powerful move as your first

one, of course, you cannot think of the next. Showing all your cards at once is the fastest route to a certain defeat. That is the most cardinal rule learned in tactics..."

"..."

The anger Lil had buried, suddenly resurfaced; Ed's fall from the cliff, the sensation of falling into the sea with him, and the life-threatening battle in the forest flashed before her eyes like an afterimage.

Lil recited her next question with clear conviction.

"Why did you not study a little more?"

"How insolent!"

Lil stepped back to avoid his arm being swung towards her.

"Until now, you have only been killing people who cannot afford to fight you, right? But those cannot be counted as real battles."

"..!"

Venua, now fuming, swung his arm again. Lil directly caught and blocked his fist this time. Although his strength was waning, he was able to hold out for a while. His eyes flashed behind his trembling forearm, and Lil saw her face, filled with determination, reflected through the man's dilating black pupils.

"And in a real battle, you will never beat me."

When Lil let go of his arm with a push, Venua fell away.

"...Haha... Hahahaha! Have you forgotten? There was a time in the past when you acted so arrogantly confident as well. And what happened? Did you not end up crawling under that insignificant Mireille, begging for a living?"

"..."

Venua who still couldn't stop laughing, tilted his head before grabbing a cigarette.

"No, no. Please say such outrageous things in front of the dignitaries and ministers. That way, it will be much easier for me to drag you back to Obernyu."

Lil replied as she passed him.

"At least I escaped that hell. What about you? What progress have you achieved thus far, brother? It just looks like you are still struggling in our father's shadow, begging."

Venua raised his voice against Lil's back.

"You brat! Once you are back in Obernyu, I will make sure you spend..."

Venua's words were so consistent that they bored Lil, so she answered without even turning around.

“There are many eyes and ears around us. I do not think those are the appropriate words that should come out of the mouth of my brother, who claims to have personally come from Obernyu to Sesbron just to save me from the Duke’s evil clutches, right?”

“...”

After returning to the Empress’ transept’s inner room, Lil called Shail, who had been waiting. He was holding a small box in his hand.

“What is this?”

“This is a letter and package from Levi.”

“Oh, leave it for now. We have other things to do.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Get the witness ready.”

Lil thought of the man who was staying at Retiro’s residence disguised as a servant. Since the residence and the palace weren’t far from each other, she would be able to call him in at any time.

Shail’s expression hardened in an instant.

“Do you truly trust him?”

“He knows I already sent some men from the deck of the Clotilde to his family in Obernyu. So, he’ll at least testify... And even if I don’t like it, it can’t be helped. There’s no other alternative.”

“...”

Lil looked puzzled at Shail, who remained standing there instead of leaving right away.

“Why? What’s going on?”

Shail hesitated but soon opened his mouth.

“Didn’t you ask me to watch over Maxwell Farin?”

“Yes, I did.”

“I was hesitant to tell you, but I saw him snooping around the luggage compartment of the Clotilde a few times.”

“That doesn’t sound like anything special. So, I guess there’s more to the story?”

“He tried to get his hands on a particular load...”

“And you didn’t stop him right away?”

“Yes, because I had to know what he was after. That’s why I waited. But in the end, he didn’t touch anything and went back on deck.”

Lil deduced without difficulty.

“Was that luggage mine?”

“...Yes.”

“Then... I guess he was onto something.”

“It appears that was the case. Afterwards, we monitored more closely, and although he snooped around the area a few more times, nothing was tampered with. I’m only able to tell you this now because you immediately had an audience with Her Majesty the Empress. I had no chance to speak to you face-to-face.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Our surveillance was thorough, so it would’ve been impossible for him to steal anything...”

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“Indeed, I haven’t had the time to worry about anything else since I arrived at the palace, so make sure to see if anything is missing.”

“Yes, I understand.”

After Shail left, Lil stood in front of the mirror and took a deep breath to calm herself.

Lil left the boudoir and headed to the administrative building where the meeting was being held. It was only a short walk, but as she went, Lil’s steps became more nervous, well aware of the sound her shoes made on the marble floor, as well as the shadows of the pillars in the corridor appearing and disappearing at regular intervals.

In the hallway in front of the conference hall, union members, newspaper staff, and even onlookers gathered sparsely to await the results.

The guard at the entrance recognized Lil and opened the door for her. The emperor and empress were sitting on the podium in front, while the ministers, members of the council, and members of the small merchants’ union were all sitting at the long table in front of them.

As Lil came in unannounced, the conference room fell silent and everyone turned to look at her. Venua, who was sitting next to the Minister of Finance, glared at her.

Lil first greeted the emperor before looking directly at the attendants.

“Gentlemen, she is my niece who will soften your hearts.”

The union leader sitting closest to the emperor asked.

“What brings you here, My Lady?”

“I am here to help you at the request of the Imperial Army. I was staying in the village of Kano during the attack and suffered direct damage.”

One of the union members sitting at the table immediately affirmed that he recognised her.

“Ah, yes, I have seen you in Kano. You were part of the Admiral’s party, right?”

“That is right.”

“..!”

Only then were small exclamations heard sporadically, as though Lil’s presence suddenly explained itself.

“I came to understand that the suspicious unknown men mixing themselves with the bandit group is one of the main issues discussed during this meeting. I can assure you they are not actual bandits from another faction, but mercenaries hired by someone.”

“Even so, that does not change anything.”

“You may be right. How do we know who hired them and for what purpose? In this specific instance, these so-called bandits raided the village and attacked the people.”

“...”

Lil added while shaking her head.

“The reason they carried out the attack was to hide their true purpose and cause confusion among the witnesses. In other words, the bandits from Kano were being used by the person who hired the mercenaries as a mere front.”

“If that is the case, then who exactly hired them?”

Instead of answering, Lil simply glanced at Venua, causing people to turn their heads one by one to follow her gaze. When the majority of the eyes were directed at him, Lil declared.

“Venua Obernyu.”

Surprisingly, Venua found himself caught in the middle of the attention of dozens of people without batting an eyelid. The sight of him casually leaning back in his chair was an act worth watching. As a buzz started hovering around the table, he threw his hands in the air to express his bewilderment.

“Your Majesty, this is exactly what I was worried about. Whenever something unfortunate happens, it is me who is being blamed. It has been like this since we were little. Liloa is a child who has not yet grown up. She was originally inferior to her peers, but sadly, her judgement must have become blurred during the time she was away. She must have been misguided. Liloa, how dare you show such pampered resentment towards your brother..”

“...”

Venua shut his eyes and shook his head to display his frustration.

“You even went as far as to frame me in front of His Majesty, not knowing how much the Admiral’s name is worth. As your older brother, I feel responsible for this and would like to apologise on your behalf. I will take you to Obernyu where you will be educated properly.”

Even the emperor couldn’t hide his disappointment at Liloa’s seemingly absurd claim. Next to him, Annette, with her mouth pressed in a tight line, looked at Lil with anxious eyes.

But Lil bowed her head calmly.

“Your Majesty, I am not saying this in vain. Please allow me to call on a witness.”

Annette, grabbing the emperor’s arm, whispered. He then raised his hand to his temple and asked helplessly.

“And who is the witness?”

Lil looked directly at Venua and answered.

“His name is Maxwell Farin.”

“..!”

Venua’s eyes widened in an instant. His hand, which had been leisurely resting on the table, suddenly clenched into a fist. As Lil sneered at him, he unconsciously hid his fist below the table.

“He should have reached the front of the hallway by now.”

After receiving the emperor’s approval, the chamberlain went out of the conference hall. Venua, with his chin slightly trembling, glanced back at the doorway and when the chamberlain entered accompanied by Maxwell, he was unable to hide his reaction.

Lil, too, focused her attention on the entrance.

Lil looked back at Venua, who quickly masked his panicked expression, before asking Maxwell as he came to her side.

“What is your name?”

“Maxwell Farin.”

“What is your position?”

“I am the platoon leader of the Obernyu Royal Guards and a Baron of Obernyu.”

“Tell me what you did in Kano.”

“I...”

Maxwell’s parched lips trembled as he exhaled, perhaps feeling the pressure of exposing his survival, or perhaps afraid of the outcomes of his testimony. Either way, he couldn’t easily speak.

Taking advantage of his hesitation, Venua shouted.

“Maxwell! Are you holding a grudge against me and doing something foolish just because I reprimanded you? Do you not understand how much I cared for you?”

Lil refuted Venua’s sabotage.

“If the leader of the Royal Guards makes false revelations because of petty disappointment, then that speaks of problems with my brother’s quality as a master. What makes you proud to prove low in front of the audience?”

Venua, completely ignoring Lil, extended his hand towards Maxwell.

“Maxwell. It is not yet too late. I will accept you without asking anything, so just come back.”

Maxwell had been silent for a while before muttering.

“...What happens when I go back?..”

“What do you mean? I will reinstate you to the Royal Guards of course.”

“If I go back, will I have to endure the young master’s verbal abuse and assault again?”

“Be careful of what you say! Discipline is all about warning subordinates in the hope that they will follow the right path. Are you trying to frame me like this?”

Maxwell shut his eyes despite Venua’s shouts echoing throughout the conference room.

“Your Majesty, I...”

“Maxwell!”

Maxwell opened his eyes as if to counter Venua’s anger, but he was looking at neither the emperor nor Venua.

And so, his lengthy confession began.

“A few days before the incident, I received instructions from the Prince Regent of Obernyu to assassinate Admiral Retiro. I have lived with pride and honour as a baron of the Principality and leader of the Royal Guards, but... The Prince Regent forced me to obey, threatening my family in Obernyu. I admit that I made the wrong choice for fear of what might happen to my family when I refuse to carry out his orders...”

“...”

Thick streams of water fell from Maxwell’s eyes.

“It was decided that it would be appropriate to take advantage of the area where bandits were rampant along the Great Trade route. In order to trap the Admiral,

mercenaries were hired to stir confusion, and when the Admiral was spotted out on patrol outside the village walls, the order was carried out.”

After Maxwell’s revelation, he was out of breath as though he had been strangled. He bowed his upper body deeply and let out a weighty exhale. His shoulders and back were visibly rising and falling.

Lil saw his tears falling.

The emperor asked, clutching his armrests with all his might.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Lil answered calmly.

“It is all true, Your Majesty.”

“I did not ask you. Answer me, Venua.”

“Your Majesty, this is nothing but ridiculous slander. What reason do I have for trying to kill the Marquess of Roahn?”

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After wiping away his tears, Maxwell explained even that.

“It was because the Admiral and Miss Liloa being together greatly offended the Prince Regent.”

The Minister of Finance was surprised and asked sarcastically.

“You tried to assassinate a Marquess of this Empire just for that reason?”

“The Prince Regent was unbearably displeased that the Admiral’s ancestors came from a foreign land. I, myself, am appalled to say this outloud, but he deemed the Admiral’s bloodline too vulgar to be associated with the lineage of Obernyu...”

Displeasure crashed over the conference hall like a wave. Most of the ministers at court were intellectuals who belonged to the emerging aristocracy, while the merchants of the Union were commoners from the middle class. After all, the traditional nobles neither worked at court nor dirtied their hands by making money themselves.

The longer the silence lasted, the colder the atmosphere became. Union members whispered to the person next to them while casting disapproving glances. The ministers, on the other hand, showed their displeasure by clearing their throats.

The Minister of Finance opened his mouth again, addressing Venua.

“Am I right in assuming that in the eyes of the Regent, who thinks the Retiro family, which boasts history dating back to the monarchy, is vulgar, am I seen as nothing more than scum?”

Lil looked up at Annette on the podium.

The emperor looked down at Venua with stern eyes.

“Venua. Try denying it.”

“This is unfair, Your Majesty. I never said anything like that. The Minister of Finance should also excuse himself for being hastily provoked.”

Lil lowered her head and pursed her lips.

“I know why my brother is so obsessed with matters related to our bloodline, Your Majesty. I forgot to tell you, but the reason for his obsession over my bloodline is...”

Venua’s eyes shot at Lil, clearly wondering if she indeed knew the truth. In fact, it didn’t matter if she knew the truth or not.

Venua stood up from his seat and bowed his head towards the emperor.

“Please allow me to meet you alone, Your Majesty.”

“...”

He then glared at Lil as if warning her.

“I will speak to Your Majesty alone.”

Lil obediently shut her mouth.

In the end, as long as Venua cannot escape the shadow of our father, Joseph, he’ll never be able to progress on his own or stand up to others...’

After breaking up the meeting and sending Maxwell away, Lil waited for Venua to come out after his talk with the emperor.

Soon enough, the conference room door opened and a slender man walked out. He appeared even paler than he looked during the meeting and gritted his teeth upon seeing her.

“What do you think you know...”

Lil, who didn’t wait there to have this talk with him, got straight to the point.

“I know everything you are worried about.”

Lil initially spoke calmly as she walked towards him but hesitated halfway.

“Apologise to the Admiral first. If you do that, I might be more lenient.”

“...”

But Venua looked steadfast as though there was no space for any amendments. Therefore, Lil had no reason to show mercy either. So, she decided to accumulate his fear by aiming a cannon directly at him and light the wick with an uncertain length.

“Otherwise, leave Sesbron. And do not even think about turning on His Majesty and dragging me with you by force, because I may become light-mouthed if necessary. If you continue to misbehave in front of me, I also might bring shame to our principality. You do not expect that I will simply forget, do you?”

“...”

Lil moved a little closer to Venua and made her demands clear.

“Stay quietly in Obernyu and pray that I forget everything. Ah, and if you ever threaten Maxwell or his family, I might also be forced to open my mouth, so be careful.”

Murderous eyes stared at her. Venua, who was now trembling all over, screamed at her face.

“Aaaahhh!”

His cries persisted until his voice broke apart. Soon the exhausted man struggled out of breath. Lil waited for Venua to finish yelling and continued in a calm tone.

“Now that I think about it, is your voice not becoming a bit too... thin? Hm. No, I must be mistaken, right?”

For a moment, Venua didn't seem to comprehend what she was referring to, but he then hurriedly grabbed his throat. Instantly, he was too embarrassed to even think about expressing his anger any further.

“If I hear that voice of yours once more, I think I can conclude whether I was mistaken or not.”

Venua, unable to make another sound, kept his mouth shut while Lil left her seat in contented silence...

As dawn approached, dew formed on the deck floor and railings, prompting the deckhands to wipe various parts of the ship with dry towels.

Ed's messenger pigeon rested on his shoulder as he leaned on the railing. The bird, with its red wings neatly tucked in, stretched one of its legs, allowing Ed to deftly pull the paper out of the communication tube.

He then stared at his name that Lil had written. Reading it gave him the illusion of hearing her voice calling out to him.

[Edgar.]

Her letter today is too short. I have been curious about where she is, what she's doing, what she's thinking, whether the palace food is to her liking, whether she likes the weather, whether she gets to laugh a lot, whether she gets some fresh air, and whether she misses me, but the letter only contains serious information... The report I receive from my servants in the Retiro mansion contains even more details about Liloa's current situation... I knew that she had a close relationship with Empress Annette, as Liloa had told me all about her during our trip, but now that she's with her old friend, does she not even remember me? My servants mentioned she never visits the Retiro mansion and instead resides in the Empress's transept. Does that mean she could have forgotten me by now? People always say that when the body becomes distant, the mind becomes distant as well. Could that be true?'

Ed shuddered at the thought of that old saying. One he normally wouldn't have paid any mind to in the past.

"If she won't think of me, then I'll have to force myself to think of something else, too."

He folded the paper neatly and put it in his inner pocket before heading up the stern deck. Captain Long, who played the role of navigator, looked back at Ed curiously, his officer's shirt fluttering in the strong wind.

Ed took over the wheel with one hand, as his other was still wrapped in leather padding.

"Let's do it."

"Where to, Sir?"

Ed rested his forearm on his wheel and looked at the gently sparkling Risch River. The leisure river drew wide, flowing in curves while the wind pushed the surface of the water, creating wrinkles. It was a perfect tailwind. A very good wind direction for their purpose.

"Sesbron."

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As expected, the shocking news of Venua's murder attempt on Admiral Retiro spread wide and quick, for assassinations between nobles were never taken lightly. Loud clamouring voices, ranging from the old nobility to emerging aristocrats, called for Venua's severe punishment, but the emperor managed to quell the demands of the parties involved by ordering Venua to pay a large amount of compensation to Roahn. Following, the Prince Regent of Obernyu returned to the Principality in disgrace with an order to recuse himself. The small merchants' association was fortunate enough to have received compensation as the key party involved. The emperor wanted to silence the union by giving them Venua's money, and his plan was a success.

In addition, the incident was outrageous enough to cause a stir in various circles and Maxwell Farin, the crucial witness, was forgotten. No one knew where he had gone. Actually, no one even noticed the fact that he had disappeared.

In the end, court became quiet again as the emperor had hoped.

However, no matter how much Lil gained the emperor's trust, it was far from enough to sway him away from Mireille.

With Venua being taken care of and Ed's absence, Mireille had nothing to worry about. Rather, the overall circumstances gave him the advantage of being able to proceed with his annulment lawsuit without a hitch. In the meantime, he relentlessly bombarded Lil's residence, located in the transept of the imperial palace, with flowers and gifts. And even though Lil was adamant in sending back gifts from the duchy, another box of jewels would arrive the very next day. On top of that, Mireille's gifts for Lil were ordered from Sesbron's finest jewellers.

Slowly, opinions about Mireille's extreme sincerity began to circulate throughout Sesbron.

"...Miss Liloa is so cold for refusing to accept him after being courted like this..."

"...Being too arrogant can diminish one's charm. There are times when things have to be done in moderation..."

"...The Duke's sincerity is surely touching..."

But also on the other hand.

"...I feel so sorry for the Duchess..."

"...If she is going to refuse, she should make it clear. Is the lady not being a bit too careless by leading him on?..."

"...I heard she is already in a relationship with Admiral Retiro. The Admiral even risked his life by fighting against the wishes of Miss Liloa's brother, just to win the lady's heart..."

"...That is what I am saying..."

No matter who people defended or empathised with, Lil was the only one being criticised.

Yet Lil expected all of that. After all, people didn't hastily challenge power. And it wasn't something she hadn't experienced only once or twice, so she was entirely familiar with it by now. It didn't matter that she clearly expressed her stance to the emperor from the first day she set foot in Sesbron or that Annette kept representing Lil's feelings in the salon, the two sides continued to argue. The hottest topic in the court was still the lawsuit for annulment of Mireille's marriage, despite Annette's stern efforts to shut them up.

Meanwhile, the emperor pretended to care about Lil on the outside, but in reality, he didn't truly consider her feelings, for it was Mireille, not Lil, who could support the emperor economically and politically. To the emperor, Lil was nothing but a living, breathing reminder of his longing and affection for his sister. But in the end, a sister who died a long time ago couldn't fill the empire's treasury.

Annette, leaning on the couch, lamented.

“Who would have thought that Venua would commit such a heinous act? No matter how much he despised Edgar Retiro’s bloodline... it is unacceptable for nobles to attempt something like that against other nobles. It was such a shocking incident that it amplified our people’s concerns. And considering how His Majesty had been supporting Venua for the longest time, I suppose he will not easily forgive the Prince Regent.”

“...”

Annette would tend to talk about Venua to divert the noise. She would also barge into Lil’s boudoir pretty often and ask about her well-being in the middle of the current situation in Sesbron.

“Anyway, where the hell is that damned rascal? René is hastily pushing his agenda.”

At some point, Annette’s nickname for Ed had become “rascal”.

“I can handle it on my own.”

“But I do not like this. It came to my attention what you said to René on the ferry, about your past with him. It saddened me, really... You have no idea how much I regret not being able to stop His Majesty during your engagement... And that nightmare is about to repeat itself again... Does it even make sense that your partner is not here with you at this very moment?”

“As I said before, he is busy. We were supposed to travel to Obernyu together, but halfway something came up that required his urgent attention, so we could not come together. Whether it is related to matters in Roahn or the naval attaché, it is to be expected that he has to be away so often.”

“You indeed said that he is busy... But this Annette thinks that you two are actually plotting something together...”

“..!”

Lil laughed after hearing that Annette had hit the nail on the head. Annette’s eyes narrowed behind her fan.

“You still do not have any tact, but you have become a lot more meticulous. At least you did not come here to throw your bare body at Sesbron. You are not playing around without a plan.”

At that moment, the door to the boudoir opened and a servant came in.

“Someone from the Retiro residence has arrived.”

Annette joked, pretending to be surprised.

“Did he send someone because he knew I was cursing him?”

Lil responded with a light smile.

“Send him in.”

“There are a lot of them.”

“All right. Send all of them in.”

After a while, Lil realised just how many there were.

She instantly regretted having taken the servant’s words lightly as she blankly stared at the endless stream of servants of the Retiro family coming in. Each of them carried a chest, containing all kinds of items, ranging from crossbows and guns to jewellery, silk fabrics and shoes.

Annette excitedly opened the boxes that kept arriving in waves.

“Oh my! What is going on?”

Soon, her maids joined in and looked at the items piled up in the inner room.

Lil’s hand reflexively covered her forehead. But before she could do anything, Annette began taking command of the boudoir. Maids sorted the items that the servants brought in under the empress’ clear instructions. In minutes, the room was filled with scattered silks, dresses, and heavy ornaments. Just when a dazed Lil was wondering what to do about this, Annette found to have her own source of excitement.

“Oh my god, look at this incense burner.”

“..?”

Lil’s eyes were drawn to the object in Annette’s hand. The fist-sized incense burner was nothing short of a work of art, meticulously carved from gold and studded with jewels. Annette opened and closed the lid, unable to keep her mouth shut.

“Do you like it?”

The empress held the burner out to Lil.

Even though she grew up surrounded by treasures from a young age, this was the first time Lil had seen jewels like this set in an incense burner. She opened the lid and was met with a pointed candlestick made of gold. As Lil accepted the incense burner, Annette fussed over the rest of the items and held out a few more of them.

Lil secretly glanced at Annette.

Lil passed the burner to one of the servants. It was then that Annette’s maid held a necklace with an amber encrusted in a delicate glass decoration.

Lil, too, had a discerning eye and she never had shone away from jewellery. She did, however, find it suspicious why Ed suddenly showered her with gifts without prior mention.

“...But why?”

“Why? René sends you flowers and gifts every day, so Edgar must have gotten impatient. Do you really have no idea how he might be feeling right now?”

“Then just send one or two, there is no need to give me this much.”

Annette crossed her arms and shook her head.

“No, Liloa. It is a matter of pride. Think about it. What kind of man would not roll his eyes when his lover is away from him and constantly receives flowers and gifts from another man?”

“Even so, I feel like he went overboard on purpose... Could he be... grumpy?”

Lil made a humming sound because of what Annette pointed out. In the middle of her wandering thoughts, Annette ran her fingertips along the silk she had laid out on her chest.

“Maybe he went indeed a bit overboard. But it is Edgar Retiro we are talking about, so of course he had to do this much. Or maybe our cute little rascal just does not like people talking about you, especially those who are saying that you have to accept René. Edgar just wants to shut up those mouths.”

“...”

Annette, who was looking through the presents, suddenly opened her eyes wide.

“Oh my, look at this guy?”

“..?”

She took out her piece of paper from a box.

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“He did?”

“Let us see...”

“..!”

As Annette looked very happy, Lil instantly knew he indeed did.

[Thank you for your generous friendship.]

“Oh my, I guess he sent me this to ask me to look after you. This guy cannot be like this... When did he become so... human?”

“...”

Annette reached in the box with her hand, took out a large-brimmed hat and put it on. The decorative purple ribbon went well with the lightly dyed veil decoration.

“He has a great eye.”

“...”

She hummed, shrugging one shoulder up as if she was showing off her style.

“Shall we choose the dress you will need right now?”

As soon as two of Annette’s maids entered the boudoir and brought in several dresses, Annette took one and held it in front of Lil’s body. She and her maids then showed off their exquisite sense of style as they chose Lil’s dress and accessories. Lil had to act like a puppet for a while, with her limbs and hair being played with like a paper doll.

She helplessly let them put earrings, necklaces, and rings on.

Inwardly, however, Lil just wanted to take a closer look at the guns and crossbows, but she felt like she would have to wait once Annette left...

Mireille looked at the red jewel in front of him as he held it by the string and swung it from side to side like a pendulum.

He saw no change when he hung it from his neck and watched himself in the mirror. The same thing happened when he asked Enzo to do it. It was starting to frustrate him, but he couldn’t think of any other method other than to ask somebody else to wear it. He already threw it, hit it with stones, burned it, and put it in water. Yet, nothing happened.

Mireille recalled what Maxwell had said to Jean when he gave the latter the necklace.

Desperate for some answers, Mireille even sought advice from Imperial Clairaut, however, a reply wouldn’t arrive until much later.

Mireille sat down on the sofa and lit his cigarette.

“What shall I do next...”

Someone knocked on the door of his study.

Thinking that it could be urgent or new information that could help him, Mireille responded immediately.

“Come in.”

“...”

However, the person who opened the door and entered was someone he didn’t expect.

“Why are you not sleeping?”

“...”

Jeanne stood in front of the door. Mireille didn't want to face her because he thought she would only whine unnecessarily. He considered it fortunate she had confined herself in her room for the past few days, but he had no idea she would come to visit him so suddenly.

He shook his head with a cigarette in his mouth.

"I am a little busy right now."

"René, listen to me."

Her hands trembled slightly in front of her, but Mireille pretended not to notice. Lately, he simply despised hearing her speak or watch her move right in front of his eyes. He couldn't understand why she was so adamant about irritating him like this when doing so wouldn't change anything.

As Mireille stood up from the couch and approached Jeanne, he scanned her body with his eyes.

"Go back to your room."

But after saying that and grabbing the handle of the door, something was caught between the metal part of the handle and his palm. When he opened his hand, it was the red gem, shining with a sinister light.

Mireille looked back and forth between the necklace and the woman.

He snatched Jeanne's wrist and turned her toward him.

"Jeanne, look at this."

He held out the relic in his hand as if to show it to her. Jeanne looked at Mireille in disbelief before bursting into tears. Again and again, she had to wipe her eyes with her handkerchief. Jeanne, who was panting heavily, tried to calm herself down by placing her hand on her chest.

"René..."

Mireille, who initially wanted to send her away quickly, snapped back to reality and hastily poured out empty praises.

"I think it will suit you well."

He half-heartedly fastened the necklace on Jeanne's neck.

He stepped back and removed the cigarette from his lips. When he used his hand to fan away the smoke that had risen before his eyes, Jeanne became visible...

No, the person in front of him was an unmatched beauty whom he had never seen or heard of before.

Mireille froze and stared at the woman, unaware that the cigarette was burning up to his fingers. The woman, with tears in her eyes, was so evidently touched that she fell into his arms.

Unconsciously, Mireille dropped his cigarette and grasped Jeanne's body with both hands.

His heart raced like crazy as he witnessed a mystery of an era sealed by time with his own eyes.

Mireille traced the woman's back and enjoyed her unfamiliar curves. He then grabbed her hair, which was of a different colour, and held it up to the light.

He rubbed the woman's soft skin.

“Hahahahaha!”

The woman's face, despite smiling sadly at him, was so beautiful that goosebumps rose all over his body. Mireille laughed maniacally and turned Jeanne around. Not a single trace belonging to Jeanne's original and dull appearance could be found. He buried his face in the crook of her beautiful neck out of awe and allowed his lips to part uncontrollably as he couldn't stop laughing...

The hall used as the grand court was filled with people eager to witness the spectacle. The Supreme Court seats and council seats stretched out like wings on either side of the platform where the Emperor and Empress sat. In the testimony space prepared in front of them was Jeanne Mireille, the current duchess, who burst out in tears while asking for her marriage to be preserved.

Lil felt sympathy for her for being caught up in Mireille's desires and pity for being put in this situation.

Her mouth felt bitter.

After Jeanne, Mireille came out and stood on the witness stand, attracting stinging glares from the people. But Lil knew that he would soon foster an atmosphere where he would win the people's sympathy...

Chapter 346

The people of Sesbron were passionate about love stories till the point where they would publicly have lovers or mistresses in search of their one true love, even after marriage. And Mireille's pathetic plea consisted mostly of declaring Liloa as the only love of his life. The more pitiful he sounded, the more sympathy he won from the crowd. Even adding that he tried his hardest to combine duty and love, but unfortunately, he couldn't achieve it.

When her turn came, Lil recited the sentences that she seemed to have already uttered dozens of times.

“...I do not want to go back to being part of the Mireille household again. In fact, I do not know why the Duke is doing this to me. I have never felt even a single moment of affection or respect for me. I am sure he has other motives. This love he is referring to or whatever grand reason he is trying to sell us, is clearly a lie. Is going so far

worth doing so at the expense of hurting Jeanne and the rest of his already established family?"

Lil declared distinctly towards the emperor's podium.

"My reason for coming back to Sesbron was to definitively break off an engagement that ended ambiguously, not to renew it."

Afterward, Lil and Mireille exchanged a tedious battle of words. The world, however, seemed determined to ignore her words. Rumours even started circulating that it was no other than Lil herself who had seduced the duke, leading him into filing for annulment of his current marriage. To make matters worse, the emperor was slowly getting uncomfortable with the chaos caused by his niece. Like others, it was Lil rather than Mireille that the Emperor found easier to hate because there were no conflicts or lawsuits before she showed up.

"The Duke harassed me throughout our engagement. Some people here have heard what I said on the ferry. It was the truth without an inch of falsehood, and I do not want to be treated the same way ever again."

The Supreme Court justice, wearing a curly white wig, raised his glasses.

"Please specify, what was this harassment or molestation done to you?"

Yet Lil could only repeat herself like a parrot. But no matter how many times she repeated her words, there was no change of heart. The reasons that were of grave importance to her were trivial to the rest of the world. Mireille neither raped nor abused her to the point where she could actually die.

As Lil's testimony continued, more and more faces in the audience frowned behind their fans or hands. While closing their eyes, they turned away from her.

It was then that a shout erupted from somewhere in the audience lined up on both sides of the testimony table.

"How can this young lady, who is not even married, speak of travesties?"

"..?"

Lil looked back at the audience on her left. The afternoon sunlight poured in through the large windows behind their seats, causing her to strain her eyes. The speaker was Count Lazilière, who sat in the front row.

"In this case, His Grace, who is the source of this scandal, needs to take responsibility for the young lady!"

The audience was also there as a means to listen to public opinion, so anyone could express their thoughts. Lil stared at a middle-aged man wearing a fluffy wig and grey justaucorps.

"His Grace has defamed himself in front of so many people and declared that he has not been blameless. So who else could take responsibility but the Duke? We must

understand the feelings of the Duke of Mireille, with his heart full of atonement, who only wants to take care of the woman who suffered a terrible thing..."

Some members of the Council and the Supreme Court nodded at the Count's speech.

"...That is correct. A woman whose honour is damaged will have problems with her marriage in the future..."

"...I agree to that..."

Lazilière looked around the audience. His rough voice echoed through the hall again.

"I believe that consummating her marriage to the Duke of Mireille is the only way to protect the lady's honour!"

With this in mind, Lil strengthened her will, but then...

"...What nonsense are you talking about!"

A higher but clear voice rang sharply, however it was neither Lil's nor Jeanne's.

"I dare not praise you for your courage to hurl nonsense words..."

Annette's throat trembled.

"...but how dare you spout such filth, Count Lazilière?"

She grabbed the armrests of her throne and squeezed them so hard that it felt like she could tear them off. Tears hung on the corners of her eyes. Her raised upper body shook, ready to lunge at Lazilière at any moment.

"What you are suggesting is never a way of preserving a lady's honour, but it's trampling on it. Does this mean that if a man destroys a woman's honour, he will have the right to take that woman?"

"That is not what I mean, Your Majesty. What I am proposing is for the Duke to be held responsible for it."

"Count Lazilière, does it make you a responsible person if you took the things you have broken? No, let me rephrase it. If someone stabs a person and insults them, is responsibility shown by forcing them to your side? Is that the Count's idea of responsibility? Throughout the history of this Empire, no has ever taken responsibility the way the Count speaks of! It is easier to call a mere stone gold!"

The roar rising from her thin body echoed through the hall. The space became cold as if it had been frozen over. Annette, after having calmed down her intense breathing, spat out while glaring at Lazilière as if she were going to pierce him.

"I cannot agree with your terrible thoughts. If you set a precedent like this... countless innocent girls will be trampled on in the future."

Annette then turned towards the emperor and declared.

“Your Majesty, I, Annette, am against the marriage of Liloa Obernyu and the Duke of Mireille.”

“..!”

Although the empress was said to assist the emperor in his reign, she never expressed her own opinions in public. This was because even though she was the empress, she couldn’t avoid public opinion that might brand her as arrogant.

The crowd, who had witnessed everything, became silent as they waited for the emperor’s decision. However, it was the Supreme Court Justice who cleared his throat loudly, lifted his glasses, and spoke.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty the Empress, women do not have the right to raise their hands.”

Annette’s jaw tightened as she glared at the Supreme Court Justice. The back of her hands, which were holding the armrest, gradually became bulged with veins and joints. Finally, Annette rose from her throne.

Unable to overcome her anger, her body trembled slightly, but as her small figure stood upright with her chin held high, she looked bigger than anyone else.

The emperor straightened his back and faced her, but Annette didn’t look back. Even the smallest of murmurs stopped as the crowd froze once again.

“To sit me down, you will have to cut off my legs first.”

“..!”

The Supreme Court Justice dropped his quill. He visibly stiffened as his jaw opened wide. The faces next to him were not much different either. Even Lil was astonished to the point she couldn’t move. She could only roll her eyes to look at the emperor, who rubbed his forehead while staring somewhere in the distance.

No one dared to move... No one dared to make a sound... Until someone unexpectedly rose from the audience behind Lazilière. A tall shadow passed the testimonial and reached the bottom of the podium.

The noble lady raised her head towards the front of the seats and said.

“Sit me down, too.”

The woman’s gaze passed Lil and headed to the side of the podium. Her sad eyes were directed toward the Supreme Court Justice.

Breaking the silence, the elderly woman next to her also stood up, leaning on her cane.

“Please make me sit down too.”

Her cane struck the ground firmly as if it were rooted. And just before the echo that spread across the marble floor stopped...

“...I will not remain seated either...”

“...I cannot agree with the Count...”

“...I agree with Her Majesty the Empress...”

“...Me too...”

Shadows of people wearing veils, hats, and hair up or down stretched out to the witness stand. There was a woman who shook off the hand of the person next to her just to get up, while another who hesitated at first eventually stood up with her eyes tightly closed...

Chapter 347

The testimony stand was covered with the shadows of dozens of people standing up with Lil and Annette. When Lil looked around in shock, she noted countless women standing alongside them. However, not only Lil, but also Annette was visibly touched by the scene playing out in front of her as she stared at the crowd in disbelief.

Some of the women looked at Lil, some looked at the Emperor, some eyes were directed toward the Supreme Court Justice, while others glared at Lazilière or Mireille. Everyone’s gaze was different, but they all stood without wavering.

Lil’s heart, overflowing with emotion, rose and fell rapidly. The sensation, boiling in her stomach, was so intense that she almost couldn’t handle it. Water droplets that had been accumulating in her heated eyes began to fall.

Annette asked the Supreme Court Justice.

In unison, ‘half of its subjects’ turned their heads towards the Supreme Court Justice. The man, unable to find a place to divert his eyes to, looked into the air instead.

Annette then turned her attention to the Emperor.

The Emperor still had his forehead pressed against his hand as if to block her gaze when Annette started to step down the platform. Holding her crowned head high, she descended all the way to the bottom of the steps to face the Emperor.

“Your Majesty, I am also your subject. Please have mercy on my desire to protect the immeasurable honour that will be born, reared, and grow in this vast continent.”

One of the Emperor’s fingers, topped with a green ring, tapped his temple.

Lil looked at the small back standing in front of her. The back was stiff, clearly struggling to even breathe properly as Annette knew full well that the Empress’s power was only derived from the Emperor. Nevertheless, she decided not to stand side by side with the Emperor, but to confront him face to face.

In the meantime, the Emperor's eyes remained hidden beneath his thick hand. The only person who could tell with what expression he was looking down at the Empress was Annette herself, who was standing right below him.

Finally, the Emperor lowered his hand, looked down at half of his subjects, and smiled generously.

"I respect your wishes."

"..!"

Lil let out the breath she was holding. And it wasn't just Lil who had been holding her breath as similar sounds spread throughout the audience.

Annette slowly bent before straightening her knees.

"I am grateful for Your Majesty's benevolence."

When the Emperor reached out to her, Annette ascended the podium again and sat on her throne, holding the Emperor's hand.

Soon, someone started clapping their hands together. The slow but steady sound gradually became more and more mixed with other claps and cheers. In seconds, the sound engulfed the hall like a wave. Praise for the Emperor's wisdom and generosity spilt from lips everywhere. Although applause was a ceremonial procedure after the Emperor's ruling, Lil knew that such praises weren't solely directed at the Emperor himself.

As the disturbance didn't seem to stop, the Supreme Court Justice had to strike the gavel amid the chatters. After knocking several times, the crowd eventually quieted down and a stern voice descended upon court.

"Regarding the lawsuit for annulment of the marriage between René Lamartine Garni Mireille and Jeanne Adelisa Malibrán Mireille..."

The Supreme Court justice, who first adjusted his wig, stood up and recited the brief ruling.

"...René Mireille appealed to emotions and reason, but above all, Liloa Obernyu, his partner in the past engagement, does not want to resume the engagement, which was stained with harassment and violence. The credibility of the Duke's claims and emotional appeals are declared undermined. As there is no valid reason to resume the engagement, there is insufficient reason to annul the marriage, therefore the application for annulment is dismissed."

The Supreme Court Justice struck the gavel three times.

As her body still shook with heightened emotions, Annette stared at Lil. The smile that pulled at her trembling lips was deeper than ever. Lil also smiled back with her now dry eyes, when suddenly...

"This cannot be happening!"

"..?"

Without the need to check, it was clear it was Mireille. He burst into the testimony stand out of nowhere and knelt down in front of the podium.

He pleaded, lowering his head to the floor.

“No, Your Majesty!”

The Emperor touched his forehead again, closed his eyes, and turned away from the yelling duke.

“René. Please leave. Do not disgrace yourself any further.”

“Your Majesty! Please listen to me a little longer. Liloa should not be left alone!”

“My head is hurting so much because of you...”

“I was going to take on all of Liloa’s dark past and even take her as my wife.”

The Emperor and Annette questioned at the same time.

“...Dark past?”

“I was immature in the past, but I tried to live with a heart of atonement for neglecting my fiancée and causing her to run away from home...”

Mireille, who looked like he was getting emotional, staggered to his feet. He turned around and continued his speech, walking around the witness stand like a lawyer.

“...But is no one curious about what Liloa did during the five years she was away? I know. However, I wanted to protect the young lady’s honour, that is why I... I did not say a word about it. I wanted to protect her honour more than anyone else...”

His trembling voice sounded like he was truly on the verge of sobbing.

“But now that the lawsuit has been dismissed, I believe this is the only way.”

Mireille took a few steps towards the podium. The emperor, still covering his forehead, shook his head. From this expression alone, anyone could see how much trust Mireille had lost.

“Your Majesty. For the past several years, Your Majesty’s niece has been a member of a pirate group called the Southern League of Pirates...”

Mireille twisted his body and pointed at Lil. When her eyes met his, joy appeared on his unpleasant face.

“She operated as a pirate captain named ‘Lil Schweiz!’”

An embarrassing silence filled the courtroom.

After a while, people gradually began to murmur and express their doubts.

“...Lil Schweiz?...”

“...Pirate?...”

“...Does he mean the Black Whale?...”

Lil Schweiz, the Black Whale, was a notorious Southern pirate widely known to the people of Sesbron. He was, particularly among the nobles who invested in the Garni Merchant Association,

almost regarded as an enemy. But even for those who didn't have an interest in Mireille's business, the name Lil Schweiz was notorious enough to be familiar to any nobleman interested in investing.

When the low-pitched murmurs passed by, criticism poured in from all over.

"...The daughter of Obernyu? A pirate?..."

"...Duke! Are you crazy!..."

"...This is too much!..."

Amid the cries denouncing Mireille, a sudden metallic sound erupted.

Lil looked ahead and saw the crown falling down from the throne. The ornament rolled from the podium, hitting the steps one step at a time before finally coming to a stop on the floor. Following the trace of the crown's path up, she saw the Emperor's body falling from his throne.

Annette screamed.

"Your Majesty!"

She quickly wrapped her arms around the Emperor, whose head was completely bent.

"Your Majesty has collapsed!"

Ministers and guards in the council seats jumped onto the stage. Several people in the audience also stood up, while others covered their heads or their mouths.

Mireille took advantage of the momentary confusion among the audience.

"What are you doing?!"

He grabbed an imperial guard by the collar and shouted, pointing at Lil.

"Lock that pirate up right now!"

For fear that someone might steal it or he could spill it somewhere accidentally, Mireille carried the necklace tightly tucked away in his inner pocket.

He walked down the halls of the palace, relieved to feel the subtle weight beneath his robe.

There was no place in the palace to imprison criminals, but there were rooms for the temporary stay of royal family members or nobles who had committed a crime. Lil was detained in one of those rooms, a seemingly ordinary-looking boudoir. The only difference was that the windows and doors had wooden bars.

The guards standing to the left and right at the entrance to the boudoir blocked Mireille.

“I have been worried about my fiancée.”

“Your Grace is prohibited to enter.”

“It will only take a moment, so please leave your seats.”

No matter how much he lost in the earlier trial, he was still the Emperor’s closest confidant and a duke of the empire. There was no place in Sesbron where his funds hadn’t flowed in, and there was no nobleman who hadn’t borrowed money from him.

The two guards hesitated wordlessly but soon retreated.

Mireille pulled the doorknob. Beyond the wooden bars, the view of the simple room was darkened by the early evening. Lil was sitting at a table, resting her chin on her hand as if wallowing in agony. She was allowed to light a candle, but seeing there was no light in the inner room, she apparently refused to do so.

Lil lifted her head when she heard the door open, her dry voice whispered softly.

“...I am sick of the sight of you. Get out...”

Lil turned her chair away from Mireille.

Now all he could see was Lil’s ears, her low-tied hair, the nape of her neck, and her shoulders. Her back, void from any disturbance, was illuminated by slanted moonlight.

Mireille stood closer and took the necklace out of his arms. He then grabbed the string of the necklace, stretched it out, and waved the jewel in front of the bars.

“Do you know what this is?”

Chapter 348

Lil, who had been stubbornly ignoring him, turned her head when she kept hearing the sound of something bumping into the bars. The source of the noise was the red jewel, hanging on the end of the necklace, hitting the wooden poles.

Lil’s face, which had been full of hostility, suddenly hardened. She stuttered as if her throat was being strangled.

“...How... how did you...”

Her chair screeched as she jumped to her feet. She was dazed for a moment, but then she started moving. When she was running toward the bars, she tripped on the leg of the couch and fell forward.

Mireille leisurely observed the scene and grinned. Not even thinking about getting up properly, Lil crawled closer on her knees.

“Give it to me!”

As soon as she got a hold of the bars, her arm stretched out between them.

“...How?!”

Mireille easily dodged her desperate action with a quick retreat. Lil's gesture of reaching out her arms appeared so earnest that it made Mireille burst into laughter.

"Hahahaha!"

Yet Lil continued to catch the air with her fingertips.

"...How... How can this be? How did you get it?!"

"Converted people need careful management. They are mentally weak and you can never be sure when they might betray you again. If you used them to testify, you should have at least guaranteed a pardon, but instead, you told them to pay for their sins? Of course, they would betray you."

Lil's face turned pale. She blurted out a name, even though she couldn't believe it.

"...Maxwell?"

"After his testimony, you should have disposed of him so there would have been no other repercussions. That is why you can never touch me. I thought you were showing off some tricks, but as expected, in the end, you got carried away by your clumsy emotions and made a mistake. What a pity..."

"You despicable bastard..."

"I wondered why you were so confident and revealed that you were a pirate... You never expected that I would have guessed your usage of a relic, now did you? That was an amazing move I must say. I commend you."

"..!"

Mireille clapped his hands. The slow but strong clapping continued three or four more times before abruptly stopping.

"But was there not something you overlooked? The fact that I was the one who gave the Marquess of Roahn the information about this artefact? Did you think that I, who even managed to catch a mermaid, would not understand what this artefact could do?"

Lil could only helplessly sit on the floor and glare at Mireille. A situation with which Mireille was most satisfied.

"Beg His Majesty to let you be my wife after all. Tell him that you may have been crazy for a moment, but that you, in fact, still love me. This way, I will reconsider revealing your identity. There is no marquess to protect you now, nor a brother to take care of you as a blood relative. One is tied up in the aftermath of his failed southern expedition, and the other one has been kicked out by your own hands. The only reason why the southern expedition happened in the first place was due to the

Marquess' obsession with the relic. In the end, it is your own fault you got deceived and locked up all alone..."

"..."

Despite all odds, Lil didn't ask for her life to be spared or said that she would do as Mireille told her.

However, Mireille knew well that even that would be broken once she returned to his residence.

"You should have waited for the Marquess. A girl like you dared to jump into Sesbron without any support. I thought you would have learned from past mistakes, but it seems that nothing has changed."

"..!"

Lil's arm, still struggling to reach out, slowly lowered. Her lips tightened and her face hardened. A certain determination was visible on her face, and Mireille easily read the meaning.

"Why, do you think it would be better to die as a pirate? Your imagination surely runs wild. I will never kill you now. While it would be nice to see you executed, I will never let you off the hook so easily. You will live your life begging to be executed because instead of letting you go, I will take you as my wife for real this time."

Lil finally opened her mouth, affirming Mireille that his assumption had been right.

"No..."

Her screams rose higher.

"No!"

Lil shook the bars violently in a desperate attempt to break free but to no avail.

"You crazy bastard! I will kill you!"

Mireille contently looked down at her hands that gripped the bars. There were already tears in her eyes, and her body was shaking with rage. The redness of her face seemed to be a repayment of the anger that he had felt at the banquet, satisfying him greatly.

"I will save your life with a tearful appeal. Then no one will be able to complain or doubt my true feelings for you."

Lil screamed and cursed.

Lil, driven to the edge of a cliff, stretched out her hands and tried to grab her necklace as if she had lost her mind. Her eyes looked at Mireille harshly like he was an insect worth trampling on.

When the guards heard the commotion and returned, Mireille watched the woman's futile struggles a little longer before turning around with satisfaction...

The night deepened.

Darkness came over Lil, who was scattered on the carpet. As she listened carefully, she heard a familiar sound. The sharp sound of a knife being sharpened came from somewhere. Not long after, laughter mixed with the scratching of metal. Lil stared at the ceiling, motionless. The shadow of the chandelier hanging from the ceiling stirred in the moonlight while the growing darkness shrouded her vision.

...Black... Shadow... Darkness...

Suddenly a burst of laughter broke out.

"Hahahaha!"

Lil laughed louder than the sounds of her hallucination, and Mortu's breathing slowed down.

"...It's me..."

A woman answered, curled up in the past. A woman bleeding with her bones cut and her flesh falling away.

Lil stood up and walked over to her. She sat close to the woman and told her of what had happened today. The woman shook her head, not believing Lil. Still, Lil didn't give up on her. Lil steadily persuaded the woman that she no longer had to cut out her tongue, that she no longer had to tear off her limbs bit by bit and offer them Mortu.

Of course, doing so didn't mean that the wounds from the past were easily healed or her scars would disappear. But just because she was damaged didn't mean she had to be locked up in Mortu's castle forever. However, staying any longer meant permanent damage. So even though her ankle was cut off, she had to crawl out. If she didn't have elbows, she had to push herself off the floor with her shoulders.

No matter how broken with fear and despair the past was, the future to come was not. Because countless shadows would reach out to her to save her. Shadows, as vast as half of the empire, were strong and bold enough to conquer even Mortu's castle.

So she didn't have to suffer anymore.

Lil comforted her past self for a long time.

Till Liloa was no longer scared or anxious.

The shadows gradually appeared on Lil's ever-lonely road. Everyone was walking little by little on their own, some with hesitations on whether to move forward, nevertheless, there were already so many of them. Even if they didn't walk side by side, they were already together, even by simply standing on a certain street corner.

Her surroundings were bathed in immeasurable shadows. Shadows of companionship that she had been waiting so long for.

Lil quietly closed her eyes. As her auditory hallucinations slowly faded into silence, she became convinced.

Chapter 349

The imperial doctor's diagnosis wasn't as serious as expected. The emperor only briefly lost his senses due to a sudden fever. And feeling burdened by collapsing in front of so many people, he quickly resumed the trial to show off his health.

Lil was once again brought to the courtroom and made to stand in the middle of the witness stand.

The people in the audience, whose numbers had grown to twice their original size, sat more narrowly than before. The atmosphere was also colder than the lawsuit as this was a trial in which traitors were accused and executions were decided. That was also the reason why small units of the Imperial Army and Navy were standing in the gallery next to the audience.

The Emperor, despite his gloomy complexion, glared at Mireille and asked.

"René. Do we really have to continue? The reason the trial has been resumed is because I failed to finish the trial, not because I believe the absurd claim that my niece is a pirate."

"Your Majesty. When I found out that my former fiancée had lived a life of low fortune, I was so distressed that I could not sleep properly day after day."

The emperor shook his head and covered his forehead, which started to be his default gesture while dealing with this trial, but Mireille raised his voice as if he were preaching.

"The solution I came up with was to take full responsibility for this woman who was ruined because of me. You may think I am talking nonsense, but please look carefully."

Mireille slowly circled around, scanning Lil's face and body. In the middle of his actions, Lil cried and begged.

"Your Majesty, please stop the trial immediately..."

Mireille cut her off and exclaimed triumphantly after taking a necklace from his arms.

"Everyone will know how heinous this vicious pirate has been acting!"

The duke, whose face came close enough to touch hers, grabbed her chin harshly. Lil tried to avoid him, but her opponent's vengeful strength was too much for her.

Looking into his eyes, she noticed they were filled with both joy and madness.

Lil struggled, but it was already too late. Mireille put the necklace over her head. The string grazed her ears, cheek and chin until it finally rested on the nape of her neck. The moment she felt the red gem touch her collarbone, Lil lowered her head with all her might.

"Here!"

Mireille immediately grabbed her hair. As he yanked, Lil's neck snapped backwards and her face was revealed.

Gasping sounds were heard everywhere, but he shouted regardless.

"At last! Here he is! Lil Schweiz, the Black Whale!"

The spectators craned their heads and looked down at the testimony stand.

Yet in the centre of the witness stand, stood just a poor woman with her hair violently snatched by a man of power. Her delicate body was obviously frightened, visibly trembling from her head down to her toes. Her cheeks, all reddened due to the man's grip, made her look even more pitiful.

One sentence flooded everyone's mind.

"...What and who do you want us to see?..."

"...Of what use is the necklace? Why is it worn around the lady's neck? What does it prove?..."

"...Could it be that the Duke truly lost his mind?..."

"...Obsession is a terrifying thing, do you not think?..."

"...She is just so beautiful that even one man's inhumane obsession can be understood..."

Tears fell from Lil's eyes as the pain from her hair being ripped off her scalp became too much to bear. Meanwhile, Mireille grabbed her cheek and turned her face in various directions because her appearance remained the same...

The Emperor shouted a fiery command.

"René! Get away from Liloa right now!"

"No, no! It cannot be like this! Obviously..."

As soon as Mireille let go of her hair, Lil stepped away and touched her aching head.

She loosened her messy hair and tried to tidy it up, albeit roughly.

Mireille, who had paused for a moment, suddenly approached her again but this time tried to lift her skirt. As it was a completely unexpected move, Lil panicked and hurriedly grabbed the hem of her skirt.

The audience was now in complete and utter chaos. Boos and accusations filled the air like thunder.

The Emperor stood up as he gave his order.

“Seize him now!”

The guards quickly rushed over and separated Lil and Mireille. Annette’s body was shaking as if she was going to run down from the podium at any moment. Mireille, with his bloodshot eyes, looked around and shouted to an unknown place.

“He is a man! He is a pirate captain!”

Lil’s shoulders shook and she staggered so badly that she couldn’t hold up her body. Covering her face with her hands, she collapsed to the floor. There, she feigned sobbing, when in reality, she couldn’t stop laughing. She laughed so hard that her entire body shook, coincidentally helping her with her act.

Lil beamed, seriously hoping that her loose hair would hide her face.

Then, the cover of the ancient book Levi had sent her loomed before her eyes.

[Forma, the god of beauty, had six children in the beginning. All six children were as beautiful as Forma, but Belle, the seventh child born between a god and a human, was not...]

As she read the myth, Lil became convinced that wearing the necklace would no longer show her as a man. Because that was exactly what the last verse spoke of.

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

Lil repeated the last sentence like a spell.

“...Then, her appearance no longer changed...”

The audience rose to their feet and lashed out at him.

“...Duke! How can you inflict the shame of calling such a delicate woman a pirate!...”

“...You are out of your mind!...”

Mireille, however, fought back without surrendering.

“Do you not know?! Liloa was a soldier who participated in the Pontenbach War for many years and survived until victory! She wields a sword and can even shoot a gun with her eyes closed! She has the skills of a pirate captain!”

The seats buzzed again.

“...Have you ever heard of such a thing?...”

“...Well, this is the first time I have heard of it...”

People began to name facts they remembered arbitrarily. Lil’s fragmented life wandered around the court, complemented with distortions and lies.

“...Oh, I did hear that she performed several protocols in Pontenbach with the late Prince Robero...”

“...What about LeBrun? She was at the military academy once...”

“...Oh! Now I remember... Was it the Karabinae? I heard she was selected for that unit...”

“...Since the Lady is from Obernyu, she must have been an excellent horseback rider. But to be a carabiner? One needs to have unparalleled marksmanship while riding a horse. Is that not hard to do with a woman’s body? I guess it was just a necessity to bring her to Pontenbach as an attached unit because of the protocols? Considering her physique, she could never have passed as part of the elite cavalry...”

Nevertheless, there were times when the truth was added correctly.

“...I also participated in Pontenbach. I witnessed with my own eyes Aspirant Liloa roaming the battlefield. She saved my life several times. But to use her skills to become a pirate? That does not sound right. I heard the platoon leader speak of her as a righteous person. She was fearless in doing what she thought was right...”

But the truth was only as courageous as it had been in the past...

“...Uh-oh! No matter how hard you try to draw attention, no one will believe you. If you do not want to be called senile at such a young age, please refrain from saying absurd things that obscure the truth...”

...As the truth held no power.

Lil threw her life behind her. Twisted, torn, and drifting like a rag. No one could take her limbs apart anymore, regardless of what criticism or humiliation she might face. The time of being bound by darkness was over. All there was left to do was to run out of Mortu’s castle and enjoy her freedom.

It was then that someone asked the most important question.

“...Why did the Duke do this? It is such an absurd thing...”

Lil, who had calmed down her laughter, raised her head. She stood up on her feet again. Mireille glared at her, ready to tear her to pieces, but she equally wanted to rip his head off.

Lil’s purpose was to utterly destroy Mireille’s spirit and status.

“Your Majesty, if I may. I know the reason.”

The commotion gradually subsided. Lil waited for it to quiet down completely before proceeding.

“The reason why the Duke of Mireille wants to lock me back in his residence and why he frames me when that was not possible.”

The Emperor lowered his hand from his forehead.

“What is it? Please tell me the whole story behind this madness.”

“While Admiral Retiro and I were on our way from Roahn, we were attacked by bandits, as well as the Prince Regent’s hired men disguised as bandits. Your Majesty knows this much.”

“Yes. And?”

“The Admiral, injured by the assassin’s weapon, and I fell off a cliff and washed ashore. This shore belongs to a beach bordering the so-called ‘Smuggler’s Forest.’”

“That name stems from its old days, but I am aware.”

“While people still call it ‘Smuggler’s Forest’, nowadays no one suspects anything dubious about it. But at some point in time, certain merchant groups started using it as a smuggling route again.”

“...Certain groups?”

Lil nodded.

“While passing through the forest, the Admiral and I encountered gunmen who attacked us. We barely managed to escape before we were rescued, but the gunmen seemed too suspicious to be part of a regular bandit group, so a brief investigation was conducted...”

One of the council members shouted.

“You recklessly investigated land belonging to the Imperial Family?!”

“As the Admiral was almost killed, do we not need to know who was behind it? The Imperial Army’s investigation alone yielded nothing. And as a result, the Great Trade Route Unions, who witnessed the Imperial Army’s attitude, were enraged. It was not hard to imagine what kind of light His Majesty would be reflected in. The Admiral of the Mondovi Fleet had no choice but to exercise his discretion, fearing that our attackers could even be remnants of the Western Pirates...”

“But the forest...!”

The Emperor looked at the council member as if he was a nuisance, prompting him to shut his mouth immediately. The Emperor then looked down at Lil again and gestured.

“Go on.”

“We discovered a cabin used by a group of smugglers. There we found and secured evidence of their activities.”

“And where is this evidence you speak of?”

“Please allow me to call in the Roahn Guard from the waiting room.”

The Emperor gestured to the chamberlain.

Not much later, Lil was handed a small box by Shail, who was brought in by the Chamberlain.

“These are forged customs statements and precious pieces of jewellery confiscated from the cabin.”

The items in the box were displayed one by one in front of the podium. Among them were thick pearl earrings, bracelets, and accessories made with alternating amber and emeralds.

“They all come from Your Majesty’s colonies and imperial territories. As one knows, the more expensive the goods, the higher the tariff, yet these are believed to have been transported through smuggling routes. When inquired with the Imperial Customs Office, they will confirm that the goods have never passed through customs...”

Count Lazilière stood up and shouted.

“That is a lie!”

“Your Majesty, I know why Count Lazilière is quick to react like that.”

The Emperor held the forged statements. Most of the statements came from the huge merchants, owned by the Duke of Mireille and Count Lazilière. Their recipients were several nobles from various families, but the sellers were only three or four.

“And I believe Your Majesty knows now too.”

Mireille, who was being held by the guards, also shouted.

“Your Majesty, this... this is a setup!”

“At first, I was confused by His Grace’s obsession and possessiveness, but I came to understand that it was his way of attempting to hide the smuggling traces I found. Still, even if my reasoning is untrue, there is no doubt I found evidence of treason.”

The Emperor’s hand holding the document trembled. Annette watched him nervously out of concern for his health.

The Emperor's anger came out with the sound of grinding teeth.

"René... Mireille..."

At that moment, several people jumped up from their seats and shouted simultaneously.

"...Your Majesty! It is not true!.."

Unswayed by them, Lil remained steadfast and looked straight at the Emperor.

"Among all the fake seals in these documents, there is only one authentic mark. Those are the seals of the merchant groups. Only the party initiating the forgery could have used their real seal. By comparing each of the seals, I believe it can be easily confirmed that what I say is true."

Someone on the left quickly countered.

"...If the seal from the Customs Office is forged, then the seal of the merchant groups can be forged as well!..."

"...Anyone who can buy those items and forge statements, can use them including the Lady..."

Lil snorted.

"How can I purchase the necessities without any wealth of my own?"

A voice from an unknown owner viciously shouted.

"...Admiral Retiro! These are things that the Marquess of Roahn can afford! Compared to his assets, are those items not trivial expenses?..."

"...Yes, that is true! I cannot help but be shocked that the Admiral would frame his fellow noblemen!..."

Lil calmly continued with speaking the truth.

"I believe Your Majesty, more than anyone else, is aware of the fact that the Admiral is not interested in central politics. Those who are making a fuss here are the ones who are truly guilty."

The Emperor's chin trembled.

"Everyone, shut up!"

"...In addition, I never said that this is all the evidence I have."

Lil smiled contentedly. Mireille, who was sensing defeat at an alarming rate, looked at Lil in shock and despair, making the corners of her mouth rise even higher.

An old gentleman left his seat and grumbled.

"...This is unfair! If you want to make me sit down, you will have to cut off my legs..."

“...Your Majesty!!!”

The interrupting sound was closer to a scream, but in some ways, it felt like the voice was calling the Emperor for something urgent. And it wasn't a voice coming from the courtroom.

Catching everyone's attention, the crowd began to look around.

“...Your Majesty!”

This time, it was unmistakably 'Your Majesty' that had been shouted. More shouts came from outside the window and it became clear those weren't made by only one or two people.

Lil quickly reached into her sleeve as the Emperor gestured to the guards.

“Find out what is going on.”

While everyone was wavering, one of the guards ran to the window behind the Supreme Court Justice's seat.

“Your Majesty! Four ships are... wait, sailors are gathered on the deck of the ship and calling to you, Your Majesty.”

Four sailing ships that had passed the Sesbron dock were gradually approaching the royal patronage. Somehow, they had managed to breach through the palace walls and enter the palace territory. It was unclear who had willingly raised the iron bars of the palace walls for mere merchant ships.

The guard stuttered as he added.

“...But, the sailors... No, they are all wearing officer uniforms...”

Out of nowhere, a huge bird flew in through one of the windows. Its red wings fluttered around the chandelier on the vaulted ceiling. The guards standing throughout court took out their guns and aimed at the animal.

But an officer in naval uniform shouted, pointing at the bird.

“Do not shoot! It is the Admiral's messenger pigeon!”

While the guards were hesitating, the pigeon landed on Lil's shoulder. The creature bent its snout down and pecked at the bottle of scented oil hidden in her sleeve. Lil glanced at the Emperor seeking permission. When the Emperor nodded his head, she opened the communication tube and took out the letter.

“What does it say?”

Lil read the letter solemnly as if she were reciting a verdict.

[“Your Majesty, I, Edgar Retiro, in accordance with the mission that His Majesty has issued by decree, seized the pirate ships and hereby dedicate them to the throne.”]

[“Your Majesty's taxes were not stolen by Southern pirates, but by the Court.”]

Lil, who delivered the letter to the Emperor through one of the guards, cast a sideways glance at Mireille. He seemed to have realised what kind of ships Ed was referring to as 'pirate ships', given his fuming face.